The Man of Authority
Images of Power in Virgil’s Aeneid, 1.50-156

Virgil’s political outlook, and in particular his opinions on the principate of Augustus, has been subject to debate since at least the 1960’s. Unchallenged for about nineteen centuries was the opinion that the Aeneid, the European classic par excellence according to T. S. Eliot (see below),¹ was an apology and a propaganda piece, written at least partly for the purpose of vindicating and glorifying the Roman rule of Augustus. The foremost Virgilian critic in antiquity, the Roman grammarian Servius (fl. c. 400 AD), stated ‘the intention of Virgil’ in words characteristically prosaic and matter-of-fact: intentio Vergili haec est, Homeri um imitari et Augustum laudare a parentibus (‘The intention of Virgil is this: to imitate Homer and to praise Augustus by praising his parentage’).²

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and well into the eighteenth century this was taken as the plain truth, and no one had any complaints. Virgil was the greatest poet and his subject, too, was the best: war, and an eulogy of the polity that was the earthly analogue of the Divine Government, Absolute Monarchy. (And if Virgil was a heathen, that was all right, too, for he was an anima naturaliter Christiana, a Christian before Christ, as it were. It was agreed that, in his fourth Eclogue, he had foretold the birth of the Saviour.)

Things, however, started to stir in the Weltgeist towards the end of the eighteenth century. Enlightenment, romanticism, and liberalism were the names of some of the strange new patterns of thought that were to change the ways of Europe, and by extension the world, for good. The romantic opinion of Virgil is well-known: he was a mere imitator of Homer, and ‘artificial’ and ‘mannered’, not ‘natural’ and ‘simple’ like his great model. But apart from this aesthetic judgement, there also arose for the first time now the rudiments of what two hundred years later was to become a paradigm of academic criticism: the Left-wing critical perspective on literature. In the case of Virgil, this states that propaganda for tyranny (i.e., Augustus’ imperial rule) is a disgrace, and not a subject worthy of a real poet.

As long as Virgil was regarded as an inferior poet, this was not a problem: inferior poets do write courtly poetry and eulogies to their masters. In the twentieth century, however, a re-evaluation of Virgil’s poetical stature begun to take place, in part perhaps related to the reaction against romanticism among
English and American poets during the first decades of the century. At least it was one of these poets, T. S. Eliot, who definitely was to establish the position that Virgil has kept during most of the twentieth century: for better or worse, Virgil was the Western literary classic. Absorbing the entire world of Greek mythology and literature (Virgil was extremely well-read in the Greek classics) and incorporating it into the history of imperial Rome, the state that was to form Europe in its entirety, Virgil, and in particular the Aeneid, influenced art, thought and literature throughout the Christian era.

**Virgil: a crypto-liberal?**

When after World War II liberalism definitely took over the American universities, even the Classics departments, Virgil must have become something of an embarrassment. So great a poet, and such an unworthy subject: not only the eulogy of a tyrant, but unvarnished militarism and imperialism as well. The ‘solution’ to the dilemma was discovered, one could say, at Harvard University in the early sixties, and published in a couple of articles which were to have a huge impact on Virgilian scholarship throughout the rest of the century.³

The revolutionary idea was that Virgil had been speaking darkly, with a ‘cloven tongue’, as it were. On the surface the Aeneid was what it had always seemed to be, a eulogy of Augustus and the glory of war and conquest. But Virgil’s heart was not in it, we were told: between the lines of his poem another message was to be found, a ‘private voice’ opposed to the ‘public’ one celebrating the empire: a voice of regret, of sadness, of subversion, even. While a certain inclination to melancholy had long been noted in the poet,⁴ this was now taken as proof that Virgil was not the propagandist he previously had been imagined to be. Beneath the superficial laudatory phrases, the real Virgil loomed, dark, pessimistic, and critical of the Augustan monarchy, indeed of imperialistic Rome itself. “The imperial ideology [...]”, David Quint writes in a characteristic statement, ‘is not identical to the “meaning” of the Aeneid, which devotes a considerable part of its energy to criticizing and complicating what it holds up as the official party line.’⁵

This notion of a ‘subversive’ Virgil was supported by intricate close readings of certain passages of the Aeneid. While there is no room here for a detailed review, I shall quote a typical example of this way of reasoning from what perhaps became the most influential article of its kind, written by Adam Parry:

> In the third book [Aeneas] visits his kinsman Helenus in Epirus, and there he sees a copy of Troy, laid out in miniature. Aeneas is at first hopeful as he asks the prophetic Helenus for advice [...]. But a little later, when Anchises enters, and he must set sail again, Aeneas falls into despair: “May you live happy, for your destiny is accomplished; but we are called from one fate to another ... You have peace, you have no need to plow up the sea and follow forever the forever receding shores of Italy.”

_Arna neque Ausoniae semper cedentia retro Querenda_  
[3.495-96]

What this and other like passages impress upon us is something subtly at variance with the stated theme of the poem. Instead of an arduous but certain journey to a fixed and glorious goal, there arises, and gathers strength, a suggestion that the true goal of the Trojan and Roman labors will never arrive.⁶

In a like manner several expressions of doubt, melancholy and tragic sensitivity in Virgil have been interpreted as evidence for a doubtful, critical attitude to the Augustan project, pervading the entire Aeneid.⁷ This critical approach was dubbed the ‘Harvard school’ by W. R. Johnson,⁸ as most of its original advocates were in one way or another affiliated with Harvard University.⁹ Its counterpart, the ‘conservative’ order of critics who maintained that
Virgil on the whole was positively inclined towards Rome and Augustus, Johnson called the ‘European school’, since it was seen to follow the tradition of pioneering twentieth-century German scholars like Heinze, Norden, and Pöschl, as well as adhering to the decisive critical declaration of T. S. Eliot (for all practical purposes an Englishman).

The followers of these two ‘schools’, as well as several scholars trying to take an intermediate position, have produced quite a large amount of scholarship throughout the late twentieth century pertaining to the subject of Virgilian politics, without however taking much notice of each other’s arguments – ‘two voices’ talking past each other, as it were.

I shall add this article to the number. Its purpose is to clarify the meaning of an ‘ideological allegory’ at the beginning of the Aeneid, in a passage which seems to me hitherto to have been insufficiently understood, although it has long been considered to be of central importance for the understanding of the Aeneid as a whole.

The Statesman and the Storm
The Storm (Aeneid 1.50-156) has been one of the most discussed passages of the Aeneid. It may be summarised as follows. Troy has fallen and Aeneas is on his way to Italy. Juno, his sworn enemy, calls on her vassal king Aeolus, lord of winds (cf. Odyssey 10.1-76), and orders him to release a storm to hinder Aeneas on his mission. As a reward for his services he is promised the fair nymph Deiopea in marriage. Aeolus raises the storm, letting the winds out of their prison. They cause havoc among Aeneas and his crew. Neptune takes notice and stills the storm, furious at this attempt to usurp power over his domain, the sea.

The actual description of the storm (1.81-123) is framed by two passages of fairly equal length, in which Aeolus (1.50-80) and Neptune (1.124-56), respectively, are described. It has been noted that a contrast between the two gods is implied, perhaps first explicitly stated by Michael Putnam:

The chief contrast ... is that between the characters of Aeolus and Neptune, the one impelled by base motives to misuse his royal power, the other filled with piety, capable of quieting the mob once it is out of hand.

Putnam is referring to the famous simile towards the end of the Neptune passage, in which the sea is likened to a riotous mass of people (1.148-54):

ac veluti magno in populo cum saepe coorta est
seditione saevitique animis ignobile vulgus
iamque faces et saxa volunt, furor arma ministrat;
tum, pietae gravem ac meritis si forte virum quem
conspexere, silent arrectisque auribus astant;
ille regit dictis animos et pectora mulcet:
sic cunctus pelagi cecidit fragor.

Just as when disorder arises among the people of a great city and the common mob runs riot, wild passion finds weapons for men’s hands and torches and rocks start flying; at such a time if people chance to see a man who has some weight among them for his goodness and his services to the state, they fall silent, standing and listening with all their attention while his words command their passions and soothe their hearts – so did all the crashing of the sea fall silent.

This simile is extremely striking: it is quite unique in that the forces of nature are illustrated by the behaviour of humans, not the other way around, as was usual in ancient literature and the convention of Homeric similes."The reader is meant to notice,” as J. H. Bishop rightly puts it.

Many critics have wished to see in the image of the statesman a reference to Cato Uticensis, the famous martyr for the free Republic, whose appearance at a riot in 54 B.C. was well-known (see Plutarch, Cato Minor 44.4-6). Viktor Pöschl’s discussion on this matter is rewarding, taking into account some of the political implications that such an allusion would have, and stressing the ideological force of such an obvious portrait of a Great
man of the Republic (see my discussion below).19 Two of Pöschl’s followers have developed the ‘political allegory’ further: Oliver Phillips, who stresses the fact that Aeolus had no legal authority over the sea, which was the domain of Neptune;20 and John Sarkissian, who suggests that in overstepping the bounds of his legal jurisdiction, Aeolus symbolises that same trend among magistrates of the Late Republic.21

Two studies, however, of conclusive importance for the interpretation of the simile, as well as for understanding the over-all ideological significance of the passage of the storm, have been published in later years.

**Virgil: a critic of monarchy**

Jean-Luc Pomathios, firstly, has made a ground-breaking observation concerning Virgil’s portrayal of Aeolus.22 The Lord of Winds, he sees, is depicted as a full-fledged rex (1.52, 62, 137, 10.37, 1.78 regni, 141 regnet),23 with sceptra (1.57, 78), residing in an aula (‘royal palace’, 1.140; also found pejorative in *Georgicon* 2.504). ‘On retrouve,’ Pomathios writes, ‘concentrée sur sa personne, la vieille suspicion romaine à l’égard de la royauté, si fréquemment observée dans l’*Énéide.*’24 To this picture we may add that Aeolus’ reign is obviously that of a tyrant: (1.54, cf. 1.141) *imperio premit ac vinculis et carcere frenat* (‘he spurs with command and curbs with fetters and prison’); his subjects are (1.55) *indignantes* (‘angered’). The image of Aeolus’ cave as a jail is (in all likelihood) an innovation of Virgil’s.25 P. R. Hardie also notes that Virgil’s King of Winds is ‘a far more authoritarian functionary than the Homeric Aeolus, described as *tamièn anémôn,* “steward of the winds” (*Odyssey* 10.21).26 For *vinculum* (the absence thereof) in the context of governmental policy, cf. *Aeneid* 7.203.

Neptune on the other hand, is never called rex. ‘Neptune,’ Pomathios continues, ‘dépourvu de tout titre officiel, est le symbole de l’homme d’État idéal, que recommandent sa piété et les services rendus à la collectivité, capable de maîtriser dans la sérénité une populaire déchânée ([I 151 sq.]).’27 As we shall see, however, this picture of Neptune may be significantly concretised.

**The concept of auctoritas**

A good distance towards that end has been covered in the other important study on the matter, presented by Karl Galinsky in his recent monograph.28 Without taking Pomathios’ work into consideration, Galinsky still manages to offer one of the most rewarding studies on the simile in later years. He does so by associating the image of the ideal statesman with the concept of auctoritas. In this he is indeed following Servius, who explained the words *pietate gravem* (‘heavy with piety’) with *quia illi auctoritas ob pietatem est gravis* (‘since his authority is great by virtue of his piety’). The significance of the concept, however, has been studied and specified many times over since Servius wrote his commentary on Virgil.29 Galinsky, for all his merits, is still somewhat vague in his interpretation of its meaning in this context:

[T]he simile shares a deliberate multiplicity of meanings with the concept of auctoritas that it expresses. Auctoritas, as we have seen, could mean different things to different people; its prevailing connotation depended on the recipient and the context. [...] Virgil’s simile is easily applicable to various Roman leaders, including Augustus and for that matter, Aeneas: the programmatic characterization of Aeneas as *insignem pietate virum* (1.10) is echoed by that of the statesman as *pietate gravem virum* (1.151). The simile does not express one simple equation, but is generic and paradigmatic, and it calls for the reader’s involvement.30

While Galinsky certainly does justice to the always many-layered and complex Virgilian imagery, I believe it is possible to give the concept of auctoritas, if we are to introduce it here (and I think we should), a more precise meaning, especially in the light of the obser-
vation of Pomathios. If we return to the sim-
ile, we may observe that the conduct of 
Neptune in one very important respect is 
the exact opposite of that of Aeolus: in the exer-
cise of power. While Aeolus as a traditional
monarch enforces his will by imperium (‘com-
mand’), and like a tyrant curbs his indignant
people with vincla and carcer (‘fetters and
prison’), Neptune’s methods are the oppo-
site: regit dictis animos et pectora mulceit (‘with
words he rules the spirits and softens the
hearts’).

By simply showing himself and talking to
the crowd, Neptune (at least as pictured in the
simile) takes control, just like Cato and Men-
nius Agrippa. Galinsky adds Popilius Laena, a
priest calming a crowd in the fourth century
B.C. (cf. Cicero, Brutus 56), as another exam-
ple of what obviously was commonplace in
Republican political discourse.

The essential message of the image, then,
is that the great statesman relies on natural
authority rather than royal command; and this
is also what the concept of auctoritas, ingen-
iuously invoked by Galinsky, should mean in
this context: natural authority, the unofficial
power given to a great man who has earned it
honestly, through his virtue (pietas, clementia,
iustitia etc.) and his accomplishments (meri-
ta). Auctoritas is the positive antithesis of the
absolute power of the sovereign, which was ab-
horred by the Romans (and declined, in the-
ory, by all absolute rulers from Julius Caesar
and onwards): it denotes the power belong-
ing to a great man of the free Republic. As
used in ideological and juridical contexts, the
concept of auctoritas is the opposite of potestas,
imperium and vis, the absolute powers of the
sovereign, since it spares the libertas of
those hearkening to it: the Romans were free
men, only guided by the auctoritas of their
betters.

Augustus

Examples of Great Men of Authority from the
history of the Republic abound: Cato Uticensis
was one; in earlier Roman history we find
men like Cato Censor and Appius Claudius
Caecus. Following this tradition of Repub-
lican Men of Authority, Virgil created his im-
age of the ideal statesman, elegantly contrast-
ing the Republican virtues of the man in the
simile to the impotent royalty of Aeolus. The
image finds its exact counterparts in official
Augustan propaganda. Pictures on gems and
coins show that Augustus after the battle of
Actium identified himself with the sea-god
Neptune. It is also clear that he made use of
the popular Republican ideals: he maintained
that he had restored the free Republic, that his
power was subject to its laws, and that it was
through his auctoritas, not his potestas, that he
held his position. Thus in the Monumentum
Ancyranum (Res Gestae 34):

...per consensum universorum [potitus rerum
omnia] rem publicam ex mea potestate in
senat[u]s populique Romani arbitrium transulat.
qu[o pro meo senatu[s consulto Augustus
appe]llatus sum ... [et clupeus aureu[s in ]curia
Iulia positus, quem mihi senatum [populumque
Romana]m dare virtutis clem[entiaeque] iusti-
tiae et pietatis caussa testatun] est pe[rc]CLUS
clupei [inscription]em. Post id tem[pus au-
toritate omnibus praestiti, potest]atis au[tem
n]ihilo amplius habui quam ceteri qui mi]hi
quoque in ma[gistratu]s conlegae [fuerunt].

...at a time when with universal consent I was
in control of affairs, I transferred the republic
from my power to the dominion of the senate
and people of Rome. For this service of mine I
was named Augustus by decree of the senate, ...
and a golden shield was set in the Curia Julia,
which, as attested the inscription thereon, was
given me by the senate and people of Rome
on account of my courage, clemency, justice,
and piety. After this time, I excelled all in in-
fluence [auctoritas], although I possessed no more
official power than others who were my col-
leagues in the several magistracies.

The ideological outlook and vocabulary are
the same as in the Aeneid. Pro merito meo (‘for
this service of mine’), Augustus says, Augustus
appellatus sum (‘I was named Augustus’); and among the virtues for which he is rewarded we find pietas. These are the epithets of the man in Virgil’s simile, who is pietate gravis ac meritis (‘heavy with piety and merits’).

Virgil then, at the beginning of the Aeneid, elegantly combines two major images of Augustan propaganda: the mighty Lord of the Sea, and the pious Roman statesman in the old Republican tradition. The latter image we saw in the Monumentum Ancyranum; for the former we may recollect Georgicon 1.29-31, where a Virgil at his most servile asks Augustus what sort of god he would prefer to be, a god of the earth and the winds...

an deus immensi venias maris ac tua nautae numina sola colant, tibi serviat ultima Thule, tecte sibi generum Thetys emat omnibus undis

...or will you come as a god of the endless sea, and the sailors will worship your powers only, outermost Thule serve under you, Thetys acquire you as son-in-law with a dowry of all waves...

Virgil goes on to suggest, for the sake of completeness, divine authority over the air and the underworld.

Virgil: an Augustan mouthpiece
On a final note, we may ponder the possibility that using the image of the troublesome little King Aeolus, Virgil has hinted at Augustus’ defeated arch-enemy, Mark Antony. There is no way of proving that such was his intention (and we should of course never speak of clear-cut, logically consistent Allegorien in Virgil, only intricate webs of hints, allusions and symbols), – but apart from the kingly attributes (cf. Plutarch, Antonius 54.6-9), the focus on Aeolus’ libido (1.71-75, cf. Cicero, Oratio Philippica 2.105, Plutarch, Antonius 9.5-9, 24.1) may suggest as much; also, Aeolus’ subservience to Juno may just conceivably be a reminiscence of the picture of Antony as completely in the hands of his Egyptian queen, Cleopatra. We may also compare the picture of Augustus and Antony on the shield of Aeneas, which seems to be envisaged as a parallel to the conflict between Cato and Catiline (i.e., between Republic and Tyranny), and the cameo on which Augustus is pictured as Neptune, with his horses trampling an enemy who is struggling in the waves – probably Antony. In the very overture to the Aeneid, and in a passage which has been agreed to be of central importance for the interpretation of the work as a whole, Virgil combines two major images of Augustan ideology. While I would hesitate to claim that he was a simple propagandist, there is little doubt in my mind that Virgil was a very sophisticated and accomplished propagandist, and that he as a professional took his commission from Augustus (if such it was) very seriously. This will not in any way diminish the complexity and profoundness of his poem, or exclude multifarious symbolism in the passages, even the present one. Nor does it rid the Aeneid of its tragic qualities: the melancholy sorrow of things disappeared forever is certainly there, but it should not be seen as diminishing the glory of the present age, and the Augustan achievements: it functions rather as a precious backdrop, whose faded images only serve to accentuate the splendour of the main picture.
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2. The translations offered of Latin passages are my own, unless otherwise noted.


5. D. Quint, 'Epic and Empire', Comparative Literature 41, 1989, p. 3.

6. Parry (n. 3), p. 75.


16. As such, the likening of a mass of people to a stormy sea (i.e., the opposite of Virgil’s simile) goes back as far as to *Iliad* 2.144-49; in Roman literature see Cicero, *Pro Cluentio* 138, Livy 28.27.11. See R. G. Austin (ed.), *P. Vergili Maronis liber primus*, Oxford 1971, pp. 68-69.


23. Contemptuously stressed by Neptune in his speech to the winds: *regique haec dicite vestro* (I.137).

24. Pomathios (n. 22), p. 276. His claim for a discernible Virgilian anti-royalism is substantiated in pp. 25-83. For a radically different opinion, see Cairns (n. 13), pp. 1-84, on the present passage pp. 27, 94-95.


tual realities: Neptune is of course a de facto sovereign of his domain (with imperium, see 1.138-39), but he certainly carries himself like a magistrature of the free Roman Republic.


41 Pöschl (n. 11), p. 21.

