

ON THE SO-CALLED "ABRUPT ENDING" OF THE *AENEID*

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It is often suggested, that considering the length of the whole epic, the end of Virgil's *Aeneid* comes to the end in an unexpectedly sudden way.

The final scene is as follows:

Turnus, his thigh pierced by the spear Aeneas has thrown at him in their duel, begs for mercy (12.919-38). Aeneas, hesitating for a moment before killing him, catches sight of Turnus's sword-belt, which had been taken from the body of Pallas, the young warrior on Aeneas's side (12.938-44). In a fit of rage, he kills Turnus, declaring that it is Pallas who slays him (12.945-52).

ille, oculis postquam saeui monumenta doloris 945
exuiasque hausit, furiis accensus et ira
terribilis: 'tunc hinc spoliis indute meorum
eripiare mihi? Pallas te hoc uulnere, Pallas
immolat et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit.'
hoc dicens ferrum aduerso sub pectore condit 950
feruidus; ast illi soluuntur frigore membra
uitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras.

The other, soon as his eyes drank in the trophy, that memorial of cruel grief, fired with fury and terrible in his wrath: "Art thou, thou clad in my

beloved one's spoils, to be snatched hence from my hands? 'Tis Pallas, Pallas who with this stroke sacrifices thee, and takes atonement of thy guilty blood!" So saying, full in his breast he buries the sword with fiery zeal. But the other's limbs grew slack and chill, and with a moan life passed indignant to the Shadows below⁽¹⁾.

One might say that this ending is very abrupt from two points of view. First, the poet does not mention anything of Aeneas's reaction to his enemy's death. (This is contrary to the similar case in the *Iliad* Book 22, where Achilles, in response to the warning of his imminent death, which Hector gives at his last gasp, says that he is also ready for death⁽²⁾.) Second, he omits to tell of the aftermath of the war between the Trojans and the Rutulians, during which the fight between two heroes, Aeneas and Turnus, occurs. Thus, this long epic lacks any sort of epilogue. The very last line does not focus on the triumphant hero, but on one of the fiercest antagonists defeated and dying in agonies ('cum gemitu,' 'indignata'). The *Aeneid* does not end in a calm atmosphere as the *Iliad* does, with the detailed description of Hector's funeral in Book 24 forming the natural fading out of a story full of pathos.

Scholars have tried to explain in various ways why the *Aeneid* has such an abrupt ending.

The simplest of all the theories is that the *Aeneid*

is left incomplete because of the poet's sudden death. This theory can be supported by other features of the epic; for example, dozens of half-lines and several passages inconsistent with one another. But how could it be that the poet, who was so careful in writing the proemium of the *Aeneid*⁽³⁾, should have failed to provide it with its proper ending by the time he set about the versification of the prose draft of the poem⁽⁴⁾? Another, more radical view is reported in the so-called 'Donatus auctus.' It is that Virgil had the intention to continue his epic up to the time of Augustus in another twelve books⁽⁵⁾. However, this seems less credible.

If we reject these simpler explanations, it is argued, we will have to accept the brutal image of Aeneas, such as one who mercilessly kills a suppliant warrior. S. Farron is probably the fiercest proponent of this argument⁽⁶⁾. She sees in the 'abrupt' ending of the *Aeneid* Virgil's conscious intention to express his own negative sentiments against the Augustan values. In her words, 'the end of the *Aeneid* must have struck Vergil's contemporaries as extremely jarring and disturbing.' 'It must have been very shocking to a Roman reader and seemed much more brutal to him than it does to us.' Many other scholars, less poignantly, speak of the poet's compassion for those who fell as victims during the rise of Rome. This is probably true. But the end of the *Aeneid* can be interpreted as less astonishing than is generally accepted.

First, the death of Turnus is foreshadowed

repeatedly so as to make the reader convinced of its realization in advance⁽⁷⁾. Already at 7.596f., in King Latinus's grief over the imminent war between the Italians and the newly arrived Trojans, a hint at the fate of Turnus can be heard:

te, Turne, nefas, te triste manebit
supplicium, uotisque deos uenerabere seris.

Thee Turnus, thee the guilt and its bitter punishment shall await, and too late with vows shalt thou adore the gods.

The second prediction of his death is spoken by Aeneas, who, observing a sign that his mother Venus sends from heaven--a flash with thunder and a vision of arms she has promised to give him--is convinced of the victory of the Trojans (8.537-40) :

heu quantae miseris caedes Laurentibus instant!
quas poenas mihi, Turne, dabis! quam multa sub undas
scuta uirum galeasque et fortia corpora uolues,
Thybri pater!

Alas, what carnage awaits the hapless Laurentines!
What a price, Turnus, shalt thou pay me! How many
shields and helms and bodies of the brave, shalt
thou, O father Tiber, sweep beneath thy waves!

It is noteworthy that in the above passages both Latinus

and Aeneas think Turnus guilty of starting the war.

In Book 9, there is no such prediction. Rather, through the aid of Juno, Turnus gives full play to his valour against the Trojans and, although pushed back by them, he falls into great danger, nevertheless he manages a narrow escape. The final lines of the book depict his safe return to the comrades across the river (9.816-8)⁽⁸⁾. Thus the end of this book forms a remarkable contrast with that of Book 12. However, Virgil expressly inserts into the closing section of Book 9 a brief mention of the divine supervision in which Jupiter sends Iris to Juno with the command that Turnus should withdraw from the Trojan camp (9.802ff.). Here, for the first time, Turnus is rejected by Jupiter himself.

The tenth book contains the famous duel between Turnus and Pallas. When the former slays the latter and steals the sword-belt from his corpse, the poet interrupts and foretells the doom of Turnus, also a famous word (10.501-5) :

nescia mens hominum fati sortisque futurae
et seruare modum rebus sublata secundis!
Turno tempus erit magno cum optauerit emptum
intactum Pallanta, et cum spolia ista diemque
oderit.

O mind of man, knowing not fate or coming doom or how
to keep bounds when uplifted with favouring fortune!

To Turnus shall come the hour when for a great price
will he long to have bought an unscathed Pallas, and
when he will abhor those spoils and that day.

This, and Jupiter's consoling words to Hercules for
the loss of Pallas before the duel (10.471-2), combine
to make a decisive pointer toward the death of Turnus:

etiam sua Turnum
fata uocant metasque dati peruenit ad aeu.

For Turnus too his own fate calls, and he has reached
the goal of his allotted years.

So it has become unmistakably clear that Turnus cannot
be saved from the violent death. Hereafter, an ominous
tone accompanies Turnus, growing more and more in its
intensity: Aeneas, raged at the news of Pallas' death,
seeks Turnus alone, firmly resolved to take vengeance.
He slays whomever he encounters, and shows no mercy on
the poor victims who entreat it. It is easily foreseen
that this violence, unbecoming to the hero, prefigures
the outcome of the last fight between Aeneas and Turnus.
On the other hand, the rejection of the entreaty for
mercy is familiar in Homer. In the *Iliad* there are
five of such cases (6.46, 10.378, 16.330, 20.463,
21.74)⁽⁹⁾. In relation to the *Aeneid*, the most
interesting among these are that in Book 6. Adrastus,
captured by Menelaus, pleads for his life. Menelaus is
inclined to spare him, when Agamemnon hastens there and

dissuades him (6.55-60) :

ὦ πέπον, ὦ Μενέλαε, τίη δὲ σὺ κήδεαι οὕτως
ἀνδρῶν; ἦ σοὶ ἄριστα πεποιήται κατὰ οἶκον
πρὸς Τρώων; τῶν μή τις ὑπεκφύγοι αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον
χεῖράς θ' ἡμετέρας, μηδ' ὄν τινα γαστέρι μήτηρ
κοῦρον ἐόντα φέροι, μηδ' ὄς φύγοι, ἀλλ' ἅμα πάντες
Ἴλίου ἐξαπολοίατ' ἀκήδεστοι καὶ ἄφαντοι.

Dear brother, o Menelaus, are you concerned so tenderly / with these people? Did you in your house get the best of treatment / from the Trojans? No, let not one of them go free of sudden / death and our hands; not the young man child that the mother carries / still in her body, not even he, but let all of Ilion's / people perish, utterly blotted out and unmourned for. (R. Lattimore's translation)

Surely this episode must have been in Virgil's mind when he composed the final scene of the *Aeneid*. In Homer it is the speech of his brother that changes the victor's mind into mercilessness. Virgil did not need such an adviser in his epic, because there the loser, Turnus, has been destined to death. After that, that the poet lets Aeneas hesitate at Turnus's plea, should astonish us rather than that Aeneas kills Turnus in the end. We may add this question. If Turnus's pleading were acceptable, for what should his sister, Juturna, lament so bitterly (12.872-884) ?

Second, the description of Turnus' death is shorter and simpler than those of other principal figures in the poem. Aeneas wounds Turnus at 12.926, but this is not fatal. Only at 12.948 'Pallas . . . Pallas' Aeneas deals Turnus "two death strokes"¹⁰. After that, no more than four lines are left. Although Turnus's death agony fills the very last line of the epic, this verse-- as well as the preceding one--is not so gruesome as those depicting Mezentius's end in streams of blood (10.908 : 'undantique animam diffundit in arma cruore'). In the case of Dido, however, 'sic, sic' in 4.660 marks "two suicidal strokes"¹¹, (note the similarity in two actions, Aeneas's and Dido's) and her death agony lasts more than forty lines until, in 4.704f., Iris, sent by Juno who pities her longlasting pain, cuts off her lock 'to release her struggling soul from the imprisoning limbs' (4.695). And then at last (4.704-5) :

omnis et una
dilapsus calor atque in uentos uita recessit.

therewith all the warmth ebbed away, and the life passed away into the winds.

Or, compare those of Pallas (10.487 : 'by one and the same road follow blood and life,' ; 10.489: 'with blood-stained mouth'), Lausus (10.819 : 'blood filled his breast'), and so on. Virgil depicts the end of Turnus rather indifferently.

Thus, the end of the *Aeneid* is neither 'violent' nor 'astonishing.' That is only a superficial impression and we might call it misdirected to try to detect Virgil's anti-Roman sentiments in these aspects of the poem.

NOTES

- (1) Translations from the *Aeneid* are those of H. Rushton Fairclough in the Loeb Classical Library series.
- (2) On the contrary, the last line of the *Aeneid* is an imitation of the following lines in the *Iliad* which are used twice in depicting the deaths of Patroclus and Hector (16.856-7 ; 22.362-3) :

ψυχὴ δ' ἐκ ῥεθέων πταμένη ἄϊδόςδε βεβήκει,
ὄν πότμον γούωσα, λιποῦσ' ἀνδροτῆτα καὶ ἥβην.

and the soul fluttering free of the limbs went down into Death's house / mourning her destiny, leaving youth and manhood behind her. (R. Lattimore's translation)

- (3) See Michio Oka, On the Prooemium of the *Aeneid*, *JCS* 26, 1978, 1-22.

- (4) There exist two obviously unfinished epics in Roman poetry, Lucan's *De bello civili* and Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, ending on a sudden at 10.546 and

8.467 respectively. It is clear that those poets composed their works one book after another. Virgil's method was different. Vita Suetonii (Vita Donatiana) 23: Aeneida prosa prius oratione formatam digestamque in XII libros particulatim componere instituit [sc. Vergilius], prout liberet quidque, et nihil in ordinem arripiens.

(5) 'Donatus auctus' (ed. by K. Bayer), lines 59-63: Alii eius sententiae sunt, ut menti habuerit [sc. Vergilius] quatuor et XX libros usque <ad> Augusti tempora scripturum atque alia quidem percursurum, Augusti vero gesta diligentissime exequuturum.

(6) S. Farron, The Abruptness of the End of the *Aeneid*, *Acta Classica* 25, 1982, 136-141. (Recently rejected by: C. P. E. Springer, The Last Line of the *Aeneid*, *CJ* 82, 1986/87, 310-33.)

(7) Just in the similar way, the war in Latium which is to begin in Book 7 is repeatedly foretold in Books 1-6, see W. H. Semple, War and Peace in Virgil's *Aeneid*, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 36, 1953/54, 211-227.

(8) 'ille [sc. fluuius] suo cum gurgite flauo / accepit uenientem ac mollibus extulit undis / et laetum sociis abluta caede remisit.' (9.816-8). Cf. 12.952: 'indignata'.

(9) See B. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad: Studies in the Narrative Techniques of Homeric Battle Description*, Wiesbaden 1968, 83-4. The same word of begging to be spared utter Pisandrus and Hippolochus in Iliad 11.131-35, this time to Agamemnon himself, to

no purpose, of course.

(10) M. Owen Lee, *Fathers and Sons in Virgil's Aeneid: Tum genitor natum*, Albany 1979, 103.

(11) Id., *ibid.*

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