



Aeneas in Baghdad

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Aeneas in Baghdad

Richard F. Thomas

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To pick on just one favorite bit of bull, anyone who deplores ‘Two Voices’ criticism of the *Aeneid* as anachronistic liberal projection of 60s Vietnam *Angst* is handing out 80s Reagan/Thatcher ‘One Voice’ politics of righteousness: it’s not hard to hear *republicanism* in G[alinsky]’s appeal to contemporary U.S. analysis of ‘leadership’ as underpinning for his version of Augustus: incarnation of the consensual will of the community spliced with the authority to shape the future of Rome.

Henderson 1998: 112–13

We need to strengthen our ties to democratic allies and to challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values.

We need to accept responsibility for America’s unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles.

From ‘Statement of Principles’ of *Project for a New American Century* (June 3, 1997), select signatories:

Elliott Abrams, William J. Bennett,

Richard B. Cheney, Donald Kagan, Zalmay

Khalilzad, I. Lewis ‘Scooter’ Libby, Donald

Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_for_the_New_American_Century#Statement_of_Principles

The current study is best seen as a brief appendix to my book, *Virgil and the Augustan Reception* (Thomas 2001), written and published soon before the events of September 11, 2001 led, justly, to the US- and then NATO-led war in Afghanistan (from October 7, 2001),¹ unjustly, to that in Iraq beginning on March 20, 2003. Specifically I thought it might be interesting to consider Virgil in the context of the neoconservative movement that since (and somewhat before) September 11, 2001 has been anxious to find, particularly in the texts of classical antiquity, justifications for what neoconservative public intellectual Niall Ferguson has himself embraced as his own ‘neo-imperialism’. I further thought it might be of interest to see whether there was any pushback against possible neoconservative readings of Virgil in the years since the US-led alliance started bombing Baghdad in 2003. As throughout the reception of Virgil, in this context too both sides are to be found.

The ‘Pessimists’

Google ‘Virgil Iraq Rome’ and the first thing you get is *Sortes Vergiliana*, part of a self-published weblog, the *sortes* performed with commentary by William Harris (d. February 22, 2009), at the time of writing an Emeritus Professor of Classics at Middlebury College in Vermont. It is one of many generally informal and often stimulating papers by Harris under the heading *Humanities and the Liberal Arts* (<http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/>), a site permanently preserved in the Middlebury digital archives. The brief reflection is indexed under the heading ‘Vergil the Prophet: ON IRAQ’ (<http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/sortes.html>):

Sortes Vergiliana

¹ By the end of 2013 the war in Afghanistan had come to look less just, with only 17% of Americans questioned in a CNN/ORC poll (December 30, 2013) saying they support the 12-year-long war, down from 52% in December 2008. Opposition to the war stood at 82%, up from 46% in December 2008.

Georgics IV ad fin.

I am not in the habit of opening the pages of my well worn copy of Vergil to see what I find doing a Roman style I-Ching. But I was surprised this afternoon when the words of the poet Vergil leaped off the last page of the fourth book of the Roman 'Old Farmer's Almanack':

'Haec super arborum cultu pecorumque canebam
et super arboribus, Caesar dum magnus ad altum
fulminat Euphraten bello, victorque volentes
per populos dat iura, viamque adfectat Olympo.'

*I recited these things on agriculture and animals, and on trees, while
mighty Caesar flashed lightning on the broad Euphrates, as victor giving
Laws to willing peoples and paving a highway to Heaven.*

Footnotes:

lines 1-2 refer to Roman agriculture, which had not yet received definitive greenhouse warnings, despite centuries of reducing of silver ore by burning lead into the atmosphere. How warming will affect agriculture is still not proved, hence ignored as hypothetical by those whose logic says: 'Wait and See!'. Decline of agriculture in the 7th c. is an example of what can happen.

Caesar . . . magnus is not the historical Julius but like the Kaiser just official terminology, the head man or President of a country, whether imperial Rome as concerned with the source of the all-important olive oil, or the Administration of another age holding a desperately serious grip on another oleaginous supply.

Euphraten. Formerly a much broader river hence altum like the Amazon, which was the scene of various foreign invasions, and now the Roman.

fulminat. Shock and Awe are suitable drip down terms for the lightning blast of . . . Jupiter? Sorry that was just Caesar, acting officially as the President, calling himself in wartime the ‘Dictator’, where another would say ‘Decider’.

volentes Happy and dancing in the streets, this is always the way victors like to see conquered tribes, now aspiring to a higher level of civilization. When they do not comply, another war is the standard cure ending in a Masada like victory.

Dat iura, the usual prophasis for civilizing inferior peoples who will inevitably revert to Anarchy unless protected from their own tribal ignorance, and instituting a mock-Democracy.

Viam. . . *Olympo* is the high road into Heaven or what we would call ‘A Great Legacy’. It is otherwise known as political immortality in the history books of future generations. But not all Romans trod this route or ‘via’, which a few said was nothing more than Cemetery Avenue or the Via Appia on which you went out of Rome, as a lame duck Claudius found out somewhat later to his dismay.

Sunt aliquid sortes Virgilianae. . . ?

William Harris

Harris reads the end of *Georgics* 4 as an apt description of the events of 2003 and later, with George W. Bush (‘The Decider’) replacing Caesar as he brings ‘shock and awe’ to the Euphrates. That Google search will also take you a little lower down to a five-page essay you can buy on ‘Justice for Iraq?’, which at least when it was on sale in early 2013 suggested that ‘The relationship between the US and Iraq is like Aeneas and Turnus in Virgil’s *The Aeneid*. Aeneas sought revenge from Turnus for killing his ally’s son. . .’ The snippet breaks off but the essay, for those who choose to buy it, presumably aims to

make a causal connection between what happened on September 11, 2001 and the US attack on Baghdad.

I begin with translation, and with the impulse of translators to insert contemporary events into their versions. John Denham's 1650 *Destruction of Troy* dispenses with *Aeneid* 2.559–804, ending in mid-book at 2. 558, with the beheaded Priam's corpse on the beach: 'On the cold earth lies th' unregarded King, | A headless Carcass and a nameless thing'—with clear allusion to the beheading of Charles I the year before.² Denham had been an advisor to the king, and went into exile after the execution, which was for him tantamount to the fall of his Troy. Similarly Dryden's 1697 translation of the *Aeneid* showed its own Royalist tendencies by taking on the essence of Denham's version: 'On the bleak Shoar now lies the abandoned King, | A headless Carcass and a nameless Thing' (*Aeneis* 2.762–63). And Dryden, as Erskine-Hill has demonstrated,³ was channeling his Aeneas through the experience of the deposed and exiled James II: Aeneas is 'expell'd and exil'd', a meaningful expansion of Virgil's *profugus* (*Aeneid* 1.2). Dryden's doubling and his introduction of the passive voice would surely have suggested an identification with James II, expelled in 1688, and set up in the court of Louis XIV as pretender to the throne of England.

The American Civil War produced a similar instance in the person and poetry of William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), translator of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. As I have noted elsewhere,⁴ Bryant in 1861 wrote 'Our Country's Call,' on the war between the States that got under way in that year. It adopts a voice that is reminiscent of that employed by Horace in *Epodes* 7 and 16, in essence an harangue of the Union farmer, who is to turn ploughshare to sword:

Lay down the axe; fling by the spade;
Leave in its track the toiling plough;
The rifle and the bayonet-blade
For arms like yours were fitter now.

² See Thomas 2001: 133

³ Erskine-Hill 1996: 203–5.

⁴ Thomas 2010: 303–4.

Bryant in the same year published a translation of Horace's seventh *Epode*, to my knowledge the only poem of Horace he ever translated. Although it is a precise translation, and therefore never explicitly introduces contemporary material, no contemporary reader of the translation, whether or not familiar with "Our Country's Call", could in 1861 have failed to apply its message to contemporary events:

Ha! whither rush ye? to what deeds of guilt?
Why lift the sword again?
Has not enough of Latian blood been spilt
To purple land and main?

Not with proud Carthage war ye now, to set
Her turrets in a blaze;
Nor fight to lead the Briton, tameless yet,
Chained on the public ways.

But that our country, at the Parthian's prayer,
May perish self-o'erthrown.
The wolf and lion war not thus; they spare
Their kindred each his own.

What moves ye thus? blind fury, heaven's decree,
Or restless guilt? Reply!--
They answer not; upon their faces, see,
Paleness and horror lie!

Fate and the wrong against a brother wrought
Have caused that deadly rage.
The blood of unoffending Remus brought
This curse upon our age.

As for Iraq, I start with the event that George W. Bush used as one of the pretexts for the war, namely the al Qaeda attack of September 11 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. In the immediate aftermath of those events, Seamus Heaney published a translation of an ode of Horace in the November 17 2001 issue of *The Irish Times*. The poem, *Odes* 1.34, records the surprise of Horace—‘reluctant and infrequent worshipper of the gods,’ as he calls himself in the opening line (*parcus deorum cultor et infrequens*)—at Jupiter’s lightning bolt striking through the ‘clear blue sky’ in Heaney’s translation (of Horace’s *per purum*) that so well evokes the sky of that September morning that changed forever the way the world worked. Horace’s poem came back to Heaney’s mind, in the process of the human ‘craving’ and ‘urgent quest’ ‘for poems that would be equal to that moment’: ‘so I was fortunate to remember a work from the past that seemed up to the brutal realities of those days and to the tender mercies they evinced.’⁵ Originally entitled ‘Jupiter and the Thunder’, the translation also came out in *The Times Literary Supplement* of January 18, 2002, and again in Heaney 2004, now as ‘Anything Can Happen,’ and finally in the 2006 collection *District and Circle*. The later title came to seem appropriate: ‘Obviously, in the three years since the attacks, there have been terrible consequences, propelling everyone into an increasingly callous and endangered world where “anything can happen.”’

Between 2001 to 2006 Heaney made slight changes to the sixteen-line poem. ‘Thunder-cart’ lost its hyphen, ‘kettle lid’ gained its; ‘esteemed’ became ‘regarded’; ‘stropped-beak’ became ‘hooked-beak’ in 2002 but reverted in 2006; ‘boil away’ went to ‘darken day’ then back to ‘boil away’; ‘heavens’ went to ‘heaven’s’; and ‘tearing off | Crests for sport, letting them drop wherever’ was greatly improved to ‘tearing the crest off one, | Setting it down bleeding on the next’. Finally, in 2001, 2002 and 2004 Heaney, in the weeks following the attacks, had closed the second stanza ‘Anything can happen, the tallest things | Be overturned’, a fairly obvious allusion to the collapse of the towers in New York. In 2006 however, as the poem took its place in *District and Circle*, the allusion became unavoidable as ‘the tallest things | Be overturned’ became ‘the tallest towers | Be overturned’. The poet perhaps wanted to secure for the future the allusion to the historical context, and to prevent the poem’s becoming no more than a translation of

⁵ Heaney (2004) 14.

an ode of Horace. Even before he made this change, Heaney put it well himself: ‘I believe the poem is a fair register of the sense and emotional import of the original, while operating as some kind of answer to what has happened in our own times.’⁶ The back jacket of Heaney 2004 includes a quote from his essay: ‘Stealth bombers pummelling the fastnesses of Afghanistan, shock and awe loosed from the night skies over Iraq, they all seem part of the deadly fallout from the thunder cart in Horace’s clear blue afternoon.’⁷ The thunder cart, at the time of this writing a decade later in America’s longest war, would now include the drone killings that have under Barack Obama not diminished in the clear blue skies of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and—again—Iraq.

The same early years of the twenty-first century found another translator thinking about the connection between his original and the events of his own time. The entire cover of Stanley Lombardo’s 2005 translation of the *Aeneid* is a photograph of one of the panels of Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC. This image among other things connects the new translation back a generation to 1971, when Allen Mandelbaum’s *Aeneid* became for most teachers of Virgil in translation the version of choice. Mandelbaum’s preface reflects on the fact that he worked on Virgil in Italy in a sort of exile from the USA. His reading of Virgil is formed in good part by contemporary events:

The years of my work on this translation have widened [my] personal discontent; this state (no longer, with the Vietnam War, that innocuous word ‘society’) has wrought the unthinkable, the abominable. Virgil is not free of the taint of the proconsular; but he speaks from a time of peace achieved, and no man ever felt more deeply the part of the defeated or the lost.’⁸

While Mandelbaum clearly thought via the events of his times, his actual translation seems to have no allusion (as in Heaney’s ‘tallest towers’) to current events,

⁶ Heaney 2014: 19

⁷ Heaney 2004: 18.

⁸ Mandelbaum 1971: xiv–xv.

for Mandelbaum the Vietnam War. Lombardo on the other hand allowed himself an allusion, as unmistakable as that of Heaney, to the Iraq War that was the backdrop of *his* translation. On the shield of Aeneas Vulcan forged the terrified flight of the eastern Egyptians before Augustus and the gods of the West (*Aeneid* 8.705–7): ‘In shock and awe, | Egypt and India, all Sabaeans and Arabs, | Were in full retreat’. ‘Shock and awe’ (Virgil, *Aen.* 8.706 has *eo terrore*) had of course been used famously—and wishfully—by Donald Rumsfeld in run-up to the bombing of Baghdad and attack on Iraq.

So Lombardo’s cover has the Vietnam Wall on its cover, and for Aeneas’ victory over the forces of Cleopatra and the east his translation has a Virgilian version of the clash of civilizations, the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld battle cry in the ‘crusade’ against the latter-day versions of those same enemies of the west. Appropriately the introductory essay of Lombardo’s translation is by W. R. Johnson, whose 1972 classic *Darkness Visible* is a true post-Vietnam reading of Virgil that remains a central work of Virgilian scholarship.

The year 2006 saw Robert Fagles’ version of the *Aeneid*, itself introduced by Bernard Knox, who read Virgil through the lens of WWII.⁹ In an interview with *The New York Times* on October 30, 2006 Fagles seemed to eschew the process that led Lombardo to include his phrase, but Fagles also embraced the proposition that translating the *Aeneid* necessarily resonated with the contemplation of the world inhabited by the translator:

To begin with, it’s a cautionary tale,” Mr. Fagles said. “About the terrible ills that attend empire — its war-making capacity, the loss of blood and treasure both. But it’s all done in the name of the rule of law, which you’d have a hard time ascribing to what we’re doing in the Middle East today.

It’s also a tale of exhortation. It says that if you depart from the civilized, then you become a murderer. The price of empire is very steep, but Virgil shows how it is to be earned, if it’s to be earned at all. The poem can be read as an exhortation for us to behave ourselves, which is a horse of relevance that ought to be ridden.

⁹ On this see Thomas 2000: 167–68.

The 'Optimists'

What about the other side? There were also in these years readers who would have no trouble seeing “what we’re doing in the Middle East today” as constituting behavior within the rule of law. Just as Thucydides was enlisted during the rise of the neoconservative imperialist *Project for The New American Century* as a justificatory text for imperialist adventures in Iraq, Iran and beyond, so Virgil, in a quieter way, was put to similar service. The works of Victor Davis Hanson or Donald Kagan have received greater fame and greater notoriety, but Eve Adler’s 2003 monograph *Virgil’s Empire. Political Thought in the Aeneid* fits, or was perhaps supposed to fit, into the same orbit. The blurb by Harvard neoconservative scholar Harvey Mansfield (‘This is a major work, of a kind one does not often come across’), is somewhat surprising from a scholar not often associated with the poet Virgil. Mansfield it should be noted is acknowledged ‘for his princely support and encouragement in bringing this work to publication’ (Adler 2003: vii). Mansfield’s enthusiasm makes sense as one reads Ch. 11 of *Virgil’s Empire*, entitled ‘World Empire’—to which I will return. The blurb helps explain why the book, uniquely I believe for books on Virgil, was reviewed in *The Weekly Standard*, the neoconservative magazine edited by Mansfield’s erstwhile student William Kristol. The reviewer, Robert Royal (Royal 2003), is founder and president of the Faith and Reason Institute, a Catholic think tank in Washington, DC. In September 2003 he backed the war that the US initiated six months before publication of the deeply incompetent review in question.¹⁰ That war, along with its neoconservative imperial underpinnings, was clearly on his mind:

Vergil’s *Empire* draws heavily on Leo Strauss for the political analysis of the ‘Aeneid.’ Something of a secret teaching may be glimpsed behind the imperial screen, she argues, which emerges most clearly near the center of the text, where Aeneas’ descent

¹⁰ <http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/1846>

into the underworld signals the shift from wandering to battles. But her sensitive and penetrating reading of many passages in the 'Aeneid' does not reduce Virgil to a Procrustean bed of Straussian proportions. This book is stunningly original. Indeed, Adler's account of Virgil's views on universal empire has urgency not only for literary studies but for our reflections on empire in the current global situation.

So it is that Leo Strauss is brought into play, and that leads to interesting associations. On May 1933, Strauss, contemplating his impending departure from Germany, wrote from Paris to the Heideggerian Karl Löwith, also about to be exiled by the Nuremberg Laws. Strauss himself thought, as those interested in empire have always thought, of the words of Anchises from *Aeneid* 6:¹¹

the fact that the new right-wing Germany does not tolerate us says nothing against the principles of the right. To the contrary: only from the principles of the right, that is from fascist, authoritarian and *imperial* principles, is it possible with seemliness, that is, without resort to the ludicrous and despicable appeal to the *droits imprescriptibles de l'homme* to protest against the shabby abomination. I am reading Caesar's Commentaries with deep understanding, and I think of Virgil's *Tu regere imperio... parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*. There is no reason to crawl to the cross, neither to the cross of liberalism, as long as somewhere in the world there is a glimmer of the spark of the *Roman* thought.

Anchises also exhorted Aeneas, where Strauss has his ellipsis, to 'transform peace into a way of life' (*Aeneid* 6.852 *pacique imponere morem*), a notion in which Strauss, and his

¹¹ Translated from the German by Scott Horton:

http://balkin.blogspot.com/2006/07/letter_16.html

followers in recent years, seem little interested.¹² I am not concerned here with the question, much debated in recent years, of Strauss' apparent admiration for Nazism or fascism, and it is easy to fall into unreasonably judgmental hindsight. What concerns me here is the Straussian admiration for authoritarianism and Caesarism, that is, for the principle of Roman imperialism which, in the thinking of neoconservatives and Straussians (Mansfield, Wolfowitz),¹³ survives its involvement with those mid-twentieth century regimes and returns intact in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as an admirable quality for the United States of America.

And that is why, particularly in 2003, it was important to *The Weekly Standard* that *Vergil's Empire* be reviewed.¹⁴ Adler's book is generally concerned with Epicureanism and its shortcomings, and on the need to reject Epicureanism as a system that takes attention away from public life and potentially discourages political action. Chapter 11, 'World Empire' treats the pragmatics of this claim:¹⁵

Human happiness in both its forms, the felicity of the few and the fortunateness of the many, requires peace. But the secure maintenance of peace against the ineradicable incursions of immortal furor and divine anger into souls and cities can be achieved only as universal peace; and universal peace can be achieved only through the unification of all nations under a single regime.

And so:¹⁶

¹² For the ways in which these lines were activated under National Socialism as a model for imperial expansion and domination see Thomas 2001: 240, 246, 251–53, 261–63.

¹³ Adler herself translated from the German Strauss' *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and his Predecessors* (Albany 1995)

¹⁴ Adler's wikipedia entry, created in 2008 four years after her death and for the most part makes claims about the modern lessons to be learned from *Vergil's Empire*.

¹⁵ Adler 2003: 193.

¹⁶ Adler 2003: 195.

According to the myth of the *Aeneid*, as against the science of Lucretius, the victory that ‘makes us equal to heaven’ is not comprehensive philosophic insight but comprehensive world empire.

This was all neoconservatives need or cared about—in fact, Adler’s book is more interesting than this would imply, though essentially flawed in its understanding of Epicureanism, wrongly equated with atheism.¹⁷ Royal, Mansfield, the editor of *The Weekly Standard* were only interested in using Adler to drum home the justice and even necessity of extending American imperial reach (emphasis added)

she is worth reading very carefully, not only for what we can learn about a step in the development of the West, but what we can learn about our time as well. *It is no accident that the modern equivalent of Epicureans—materialistic, disdainful of religion—tend to be overly optimistic about human nature and to resist the idea that we need war or other forms of coercion to restrain vice. It is equally no accident that the modern equivalent of Virgilians—with a religious vision about the need for the right kind of piety in the human city—are more likely to view both arms and religion as essential to the good of the United States and the restraint of evil in the world.*

An empire, even a benevolent one, may overreach, of course. And Virgil hints that there are, humanly speaking, perhaps even seeds of self-dissolution in the most providential and perfect of empires. And so we oscillate between force and restraint, unmindful of their deeper meaning—still caught in the dynamic perceived by Virgil and brilliantly revived for us by Eve Adler in ‘Vergil’s Empire.’ *The time has come to restore Virgil’s epic poem to its place at the center of Western literature both for its poetic qualities and because we have not surpassed the ‘Aeneid’ or the world it portrays. In many*

¹⁷ See Gale 2004.

ways, we are still living in it.

This has nothing to do with Virgil, everything to do with the propaganda that editor Kristol and the rest of them were peddling in his weekly magazine as on Fox News in the months leading up to and then following March 20, 2003.

In contrast to the hype around *Vergil's Empire*—the Wikipedia entry: ‘Prior to her death, she published her monumental and authoritative work called ‘Vergil's Empire: Political Thought in the Aeneid’—the book in question received only three reviews in actual scholarly series, and only one by a substantial scholar of Lucretius, Virgil, and Epicureanism (Gale 2004). Monica Gale, a scholar from the UK, teaching at Trinity College, Dublin, treats the book simply as a new book on Virgil, with some interesting things to say, though with insufficient knowledge or acknowledgement of those who had already said many of the things in question. Gale was apparently unaware of the Straussian and neoconservative connections, or of the purpose to which Adler was being put in the US organization of opinion. Her closing judgement may be allowed to have the last word, based as it is on the scholarly merits of Adler’s case.’¹⁸

In short, though A(dler) deserves some credit for attempting to say something really new about the *Aeneid*, a hypothesis which rests on such fundamental misconceptions about Epicurean philosophy and Augustan culture is likely to find few adherents. Indeed, so very unappetizing is the ‘message’ which A. attributes to Virgil—essentially, that rationalism is accessible to only a few, and that, since a little learning is a dangerous thing, political authoritarianism sanctioned by fear of the gods is the only route to the good life—that it is almost a relief to find that her supporting arguments carry so little conviction.

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¹⁸ Gale 2004: 378

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