

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



# VIRGIL

*Edited by Charles Martindale*

UT BELLİ SIGNUM LAUREN  
TI TURNUS AB ARCE EXTU  
LIT, ET RAUCO STREPUE  
RUNT CORNUA CANTU;  
UTQUE ACRES CONCUSSIT  
EQUOS, UTQUE IMPULIT  
ARMA; EXTEMPO TUR  
BATI ANIMI, SIMUL OM  
NE TUMULTU CONJU  
RAT TREPIDO LATIUM,  
SAEVITQUE JUVENTUS

THE CAMBRIDGE  
COMPANION TO  
VIRGIL

EDITED BY  
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## ILLUSTRATIONS

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Simone Martini, Frontispiece to Petrarch's Virgil manuscript, 1340. Biblioteca Ambrosiana (Codex A.49.inf), Milan. Photo by courtesy of the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana. (This photograph is the property of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. All rights reserved. No reproductions allowed.)

The picture is an allegory showing Virgil seated beneath a tree composing one of his books. The figure drawing aside the muslin curtain is the fourth-century grammarian Servius, whose commentary on Virgil was an influential source for later writers and readers: he symbolically 'reveals' Virgil to posterity. The other figures personify Virgil's books: Aeneas stands beside Servius, while below them a farmer pruning a vine represents the *Georgics* and a shepherd symbolises the *Eclogues*. The two Latin inscriptions make the meaning of the image clear: 'Italy, benevolent country, nourishes famous poets. Thus this one [Virgil] enables you to achieve Grecian genius', and 'This is Servius, who recovers the mysteries of eloquent Virgil so they are revealed to leaders, shepherds and farmers.' The miniature was painted for Petrarch when he recovered his prized manuscript copy of Virgil's work in 1340 after losing it twelve years earlier.

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## PREFACE

cui fidus Achates  
it comes et paribus curis vestigia figit.

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines a *fidus Achates* as 'devoted follower, henchman'; and one of the aims of this *Companion* is to be as helpful as possible to its readers. It is devised for anyone, whether a classicist or not, who is seeking guidance and orientation for a fuller understanding of Virgil. We have assumed that most of those who consult this volume will have read parts of Virgil's poetry if only in translation – for those with Latin the best introduction is to read some of the texts with a good commentary, of which there are many. We certainly cannot attempt to replicate the work of the commentators here; rather we offer a series of essays on topics which can constitute useful entry-points for the devoted student of Virgil. And though we aim to help and to provide what is sometimes called 'basic information', we do not seek to simplify or to offer any sort of bland orthodoxy. We assume that our readers (even if not expert on the subject) are seeking intelligent and sophisticated comment, and we hope that the book will prove exciting as well as useful, and will point to the shape of Virgilian scholarship and criticism to come.

This book is very much a collaborative endeavour; and I am grateful to all the contributors for responding so positively to the various demands made upon them. Genevieve Liveley took time off from her PhD to assist me most efficiently in the editorial work; she is also responsible for the 'List of works cited' and for the 'Dateline'. I would particularly like to thank Pauline Hire of Cambridge University Press who gave patient help and advice throughout to a sometimes recalcitrant editor. Finally I would like to express my general pleasure in the task; all those who have helped to produce this book, whatever their differences of view about particulars, would surely be happy to be described as devoted followers of the poet whom Dante hailed with the words *tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore*.

Charles Martindale  
Bristol, October 1996

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# I

CHARLES MARTINDALE

## Introduction: 'The classic of all Europe'

The Irish poet Seamus Heaney's *Seeing Things* was first published in 1991, to immediate acclaim. The collection is framed by translations of two passages of canonical poetry, Virgil's account of Aeneas' consultation of the Sibyl and the instructions he receives from her about finding the golden bough, often read as a symbol of wisdom and initiation, prior to his descent into the Underworld, and Dante's meeting in *Inferno* 3 with Charon the ferryman of Hell, itself inspired by another episode in *Aeneid* 6. The first original poem in the book, 'The journey back', describes an encounter with a more immediate poetic predecessor, Philip Larkin, whose shade quotes from Dante and describes himself as 'A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry'; the piece resonates with earlier poetic meetings, T. S. Eliot's with the 'familiar compound ghost' in part two of 'Little Gidding' and – one of Eliot's intertexts here – Dante's with the shade of Virgil at the outset of the *Divine Comedy*. In his new pursuit of the visionary Heaney was also coming home to some of the most influential traditions of Western poetry. Five years later Heaney is a Nobel Laureate, and *Seeing Things* is already in Britain an A-level set text. Successful canonisation can be achieved with surprising rapidity – the *Aeneid* itself, greeted (according to some with a degree of irony) by the elegist Propertius in advance of its publication as 'something greater than the *Iliad*', almost instantly became a school text, and part of the furniture of the minds of educated Romans. And for Heaney, and therefore potentially for some of his readers, even at this late hour when Latin is no longer the object of widespread study, there is seemingly still power in the canonical name. We could say, following the argument of Colin Burrow's essay on translation in this volume, that Heaney, coming from what some might see as the 'margins' of Europe, seems to be laying claim to a share of the dominant cultural authority of the 'centre'.

There has recently been vigorous and often acrimonious debate about the status and significance of the canon, regarded at one extreme as a conspiracy of the ruling elite and at the other as a collection of masterpieces that

transcend history and constitute, in Matthew Arnold's terms, 'the best that is known and thought in the world'.<sup>1</sup> In this connection Heaney's success, which hardly suggests a world in headlong flight from the canonical (whatever the fears and hopes of contestants, conservative or radical, in the contemporary culture wars over the future of the curriculum) can be used to make two observations. First, it illustrates how writers frequently themselves take the lead in canon-making. In *Inferno* 4 Dante, a great lover of lists of the famous dead, recounts how in Limbo he mingles with the *bella scuola*, the excellent school, of five great classical poets, 'masters of exalted song', Homer (whom in fact he had never read), Virgil hailed as '*l'altissimo poeta*', Horace, Ovid, Lucan, and by implication claims equality with them: 'They made me one of their company so that I was sixth among those great intellects' (101-2). Authors elect their own precursors, by allusion, quotation, imitation, translation, homage, at once creating a canon and making a claim for their own inclusion in it. So Virgil himself in the *Georgics* gathers into a single work features of the various strands of non-narrative *epos* (Hesiodic, technical, philosophical), thereby in effect making his own work the climax of a Graeco-Roman 'didactic' tradition. Secondly, the case of Heaney reminds us that canonical flourishing is always and necessarily sustained by and within institutions which enable dissemination (which include in this case publishing houses, the media, schools and universities), with the consequence that such flourishing is never simply a matter of intrinsic aesthetic merit (whatever quite that is taken to mean) but is necessarily also implicated in a range of socio-economic and (in the broad sense) political factors; we cannot wholly separate great books from the wider culture in which they have been, and are, embedded. The great medievalist E. R. Curtius begins his discussion of the canon thus: 'The formation of a canon serves to safeguard a tradition . . . the literary tradition of the school, the juristic tradition of the state, and the religious tradition of the Church: these are the three medieval world powers, *studium*, *imperium*, *sacerdotium*.'<sup>2</sup> A canon established which texts were to be accorded authority and also ensured an authorised interpretation of them. Quintilian, who, in Book 10 of his *Institutio oratoria*, listed the 'best' authors both Greek and Latin in all the major genres for the practical benefit of the rising orator (with Virgil providing 'the most auspicious opening', *auspicatissimum exordium*, for the Latin writers), uses the phrase *ordo a grammaticis datus*, 'the corpus of accepted writers given by the scholars of literature' (10.1.54); significantly *ordo* is the word for a social grouping within a hierarchy (thus the senatorial 'order'), just as 'classic' was first used by Aulus Gellius to

<sup>1</sup> Arnold (1964) 33.    <sup>2</sup> Curtius (1953) ch. 14 'Classicism', 256.

denote 'a first-class and tax-paying author, not a proletarian'.<sup>3</sup> The connections between the literary and the social and the political are thus inscribed within the very vocabulary of canon-making.

It is highly appropriate that Virgil should be the first classical poet to obtain an entire volume in the Cambridge Companions series, since, if we look at the whole of the last 2,000 years, it is hard not to agree with T. S. Eliot's description of him as 'the classic of all Europe'.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that he is the greatest European poet (many would argue for the rival claims of, say, Homer or Ovid or Dante or Shakespeare), rather that he occupied the central place in the literary canon for the whole of Europe for longer than any other writer (Shakespeare today holds a similar position but mainly within the Anglophone world). As a result Virgil's significance extends far beyond his influence (massive as it is) on other writers and artists, itself something that can only be gestured towards in this book. For example as the poet of empire – given the importance, for worse or better, of the European imperial project – he speaks, at least on the most influential readings of his works, for many of the values and attitudes that have shaped the West. When Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800, the *translatio imperii*, the transfer of the Roman empire to the Franks, was accompanied by an analogous *translatio studii*, the scholarly appropriation of the Roman past, with Virgil at its core; the two acts of succession are indeed profoundly implicated in each other. Similarly Camoens turned to Virgil for the *Lusiads*, his poem justifying Portuguese global expansion. In that sense poems like the *Aeneid* have effects beyond the literary, can even, in Mandelstam's memorable words, 'get people killed'. Analogously a piece of landscaping like Henry Hoare's garden at Stourhead (discussed here by Michael Liversidge) is not Virgilian merely in the sense that it alludes to events and persons in the *Aeneid*; rather this whole way of seeing and shaping the 'natural' world is profoundly informed by a particular response to Virgil's texts. The traces of Virgil are everywhere in European culture whether recognised or not; and in that sense Virgil should be of interest both to traditionalists who espouse the timeless value of great poetry and to radicals alert to the ideological work performed by 'literature' within history. Not without reason the Austrian Catholic writer Theodore Haecker, socialist and staunch anti-fascist, called his popular and influential book on the poet first published in 1931 *Virgil, Vater des Abendlandes, Virgil, Father of the West*.

Eliot – like Curtius – saw the link between Dante and Virgil as central to European civilisation, a link which thus became, in Frank Kermode's

<sup>3</sup> Curtius (1953) 249. <sup>4</sup> Eliot (1957) 70 ('What is a Classic?').



words, 'a sort of key to his historical imagination',<sup>5</sup> with Roman culture as a prefigurement, a *figura*, of Christian culture. This view of Virgil as *anima naturaliter Christiana* and a bridge between pagan and Christian Europe has of course a venerable ancestry; the Fourth Eclogue was early read as a prophecy of the Incarnation, while Aeneas became 'the prototype of a Christian hero'.<sup>6</sup> Eliot did not suppose, any more than Dante himself, that Virgil was in any way conscious of these things. Virgil's works can be read under the aspect of time, but also under the aspect of the timeless; neither reading excludes the other, and neither reading is adequate without the other. One can argue that what Eliot does here overtly is what any interpreter of past texts does – and must do. The Christianising interpretation of Virgil is thus not less historical than any other, it is simply *differently* historical; all historical narratives, it can be claimed, depend on teleological structures, however occluded, as a very condition of their possibility, and all historical narratives involve a simultaneous double reading of the past, backwards and forwards at the same time. If the Eliotic narrative seems different from other, 'secular' narratives, that is only because the ideological entailments of that teleology and that double reading are made explicit and because, in this explicit form, they are no longer acceptable to the majority of Eliot's readers. Frank Kermode argues that there are two ways of interpreting the revered texts of the past, the one philological and historiographical, the other accommodatory, accommodation being effected by various forms of allegory (even if not recognised as such).<sup>7</sup> However the distinction may all too easily be dissolved, since even the most austere philological scholarship can be represented as involving accommodation (for example, in the translation of terms), while even the most unconcealed allegorisation usually contains, at some level, an appeal to inherent or originary meaning.

In this respect there is an important connection between Virgil's status as a classic and his imperial vision (visible even as early as the *Eclogues*): as Kermode observes (quoting from the final section of Eliot's 'Burnt Norton'), 'The classic, like the Empire, must be thought of as "timeless . . . except in the aspect of time"'.<sup>8</sup> Both classic and empire exist within history, but also transcend history, evincing both permanence and change and enabling us to grasp, or at least to experience in practice, the relationship between them. This shuttle between the aspect of time and the aspect of the timeless is operative at some level within any act of interpretation, and constitutes, we might say, an organising principle of the *Aeneid* itself.

<sup>5</sup> Cited Reeves (1989) 1.    <sup>6</sup> Eliot (1957) 128.

<sup>7</sup> Kermode (1983) 40.    <sup>8</sup> Kermode (1983) 60.