

Some 'Asides' in the Aeneid

A PART from the main tragedies of Dido and Turnus (and Amata who is closely linked with him) there are two tragic events in the Aeneid which are of special interest. They are the deaths of Palinurus and of Euryalus. Neither of them was, like the deaths of Dido and Turnus, necessary for the main theme of the Aeneid. Yet Virgil dwells on them at some length, thus compelling attention to them. It is not enough in either case to point to Virgil's compassion for an explanation, nor is it enough to say that the Palinurus episode is accounted for by the connection between his death and the naming of Cape Palinurus or that the Nisus-Euryalus episode fills in an awkward gap between Aeneas' visit to Pallanteum and his return. If this was all that could be said for them one would have to admit that they have no place in the Aeneid and seriously impair its artistic unity. But is this all that can be said for them? May not the clue to their explanation lie in the fact that they both have two characteristics in common? Firstly, they are both reminiscent of episodes in Homer (a fact already sufficiently recognised) and secondly, they are both instances of men of good will, who, despite their good will, are driven to disaster. Thus it is possible that they are both criticisms of Homeric ideas and comparisons of the goodness of other men with the goodness of Aeneas. In this way both of them are organically related to the theme of the Aeneid in so far as they illuminate the nature of that 'pictas' which was the special attribute of Aeneas.

The Palinurus episode corresponds to the Elpenor episode in the Odyssey. Yet it presents some striking differences. Elpenor's death is easily accounted for. He had been drinking more than was good for him and he went to sleep on the roof of Circe's dwelling. In the morning he woke up, and, in the midst of the bustle of departure, forgot where he was and stepped off the roof. Elpenor, as Odysseus relates the incident, had only himself to blame. Yet when Odysseus meets his ghost in the regions of the dead he attributes his death to 'the malice of some power and the accursed wine'.¹ Everyone will recognise here the characteristic tendency of Homeric heroes to attribute to external supernatural agencies the promptings of their own inner nature.² Elpenor's attitude is just the same as that

1. Od. XI. 61.

2. As Whitman, *Sophocles*, Chapter 4 remarks, commenting on double motivation in Homer, "Both methods of divine operation, the external assistance and the internal motivation remained dear to the Greek soul."

of Paris who will put the blame for the havoc he has caused on the gifts of golden Aphrodite. Virgil, in his handling of the Palinurus episode, seems, almost pointedly, to reverse the Homeric relationship between external agency and inner impulse. As he tells the story,³ Sleep, twice referred to as a god, assumes the shape of Phorbas, tempts Palinurus with cajoling words and overcomes his resistance by waving over his brows a bough dripping with the waters of Lethe. He then pushes him off the boat. Here, clearly conveyed in powerful and symbolic language, is the suggestion of a malicious power overcoming, by a combination of cunning, force and magic power, the will of a good man devoted to his duty who struggles hard, though fruitlessly, against the god. Yet when Aeneas questions Palinurus' ghost by the banks of Acheron he answers 'nec me deus aequore mersit'. Is this a contradiction of the story as related in the earlier book?

At this stage an initial difficulty about this passage has to be solved, namely, the well known contradiction between the version of Palinurus' death given by his ghost in Bk. VI and the version given by Virgil in Bk. V. There are two main contradictions. In Bk. V the god of Sleep pushes Palinurus into the sea, in Bk. VI Palinurus' ghost says "it was no god that drowned me". Servius, aware of the contradiction, sought to avoid it by punctuating after 'nec me': i.e. he would read

neque te Phocbi cortina fefellit,
dux Anchisiade, nec me, deus aequore mersit.

This would get rid of the contradiction, but the effect is so clumsy as to be quite un-Virgilian and, in any case, there would be no point in Palinurus' saying that Apollo had not deceived him 'either'. Aeneas had only accused Apollo of deceiving him, Aeneas. It is almost certain therefore that the 'nec me' goes with the 'deus aequore mersit', i.e. that Palinurus says "it was no god that drowned me".

There is in addition a second contradiction. Book V describes the accident as taking place in calm seas, while in Book VI Palinurus' ghost refers to rough seas and swelling waves. There is good reason to believe⁴ that Bk. VI refers to an earlier version in which Palinurus had been swept off in a storm, that that earlier version had been replaced by the account which now stands in Book V and that Virgil at the time of his death had not had time

3. Aen. V. 835ff.

4. see Crump, *Growth of the Aeneid*, Chapter 2.

to revise the detail in Book VI to reconcile it with the new version. The important question for my purpose is the question how much of Book VI would have to be altered to reconcile it with Book V. I venture to suggest that the only detail that needed altering was the detail of rough seas and swelling waves and that the 'nec me deus aequore mersit' could (and would) have been allowed to stand. I think one may adduce good reason for this. If Virgil altered the earlier version of Palinurus' death it was because he was dissatisfied with it. What was he dissatisfied with? Perhaps he was dissatisfied with the idea of Palinurus being lost in a storm. Palinurus was a good man, 'pius' in his way. Virgil believed that 'pietas' was recognised by the gods. Why should Palinurus then meet death in this arbitrary and unaccountable manner? The Greeks, like Elpenor, attributed these things to the gods. But Virgil found it difficult to accept the view that gods could be malignant.⁵ Virgil solved his problem in the revised version of Palinurus' death which he gives us in Book V. There, in addition to the god, there is also the element of human weakness which contributes to the fall. If, as I have suggested, Virgil's mind was engaged on the problem of human and divine responsibility he was not likely to have forgotten that his earlier version (referred to in his account in Book VI) held the gods responsible. On the contrary, it was precisely this fact that raised the problem and set his mind working on a solution. In other words Palinurus' statement that it was 'no god that drowned him' which, in regard to the earlier version, meant that it was not a god but the storm that drowned him, would still be true in regard to the revised version though with a different and indeed deeper significance. In it Virgil would seem to have corrected the Homeric interpretation of life. Comparing it with the Elpenor episode it will be noted that Elpenor's ghost sees things less clearly than the living Odysseus. Odysseus had no doubts that Elpenor was the cause of his own death. Elpenor's ghost thought it was the god. That ghosts should see less clearly than the living is perfectly in accordance with Homeric ideas about ghosts. They are mere empty shells void of substance and creatures much to be pitied. Achilles would prefer to be a slave among the living rather than a king among the dead. In *Odyssey*. XI they throng eagerly to drink the blood, almost as though they were yearning to reach the earthly shore once again. As their bodies are more feeble after death,⁶ so also perhaps, their vision is more dim. It is significant that the only soul who can help Odysseus with information about the future is Teiresias. But Teiresias

5. cf. *Aen.* I. 11. 'tantaene animis caelestibus irae?'

6. n.b. Servius on *Aen.* VI, 340 mentions a belief that the bodies of the dead, until they are cleansed, are only dimly seen.

was a divine seer who already possessed that power when he was amongst the living. Being divine he retains his power in the other world. Odysseus' mother Anticleia, on the other hand, is surprised to see him. She does not know how he has come there and that he has not yet reached Ithaca. She can only tell him of the state of affairs in Ithaca as she knew it, presumably, at the time of her death.⁷ Compare this with the corresponding scene in the *Aeneid* and the situation will be seen to be completely reversed. The soul of Anchises (who was no prophet in his mortal life) has after death evidently received enlightenment. He knew that Aeneas would come to see him, he reveals to him the future greatness of Rome and even explains to him the mystery of life. In fact Anchises gives Aeneas more help than any prophet or oracle ever gave him, more even than Teiresias gave Odysseus. In Virgil's scheme human beings after death have their vision clarified. So too in the case of Palinurus. After his death he knows that it was no god who caused it but something more complex than that and infinitely more tragic. Virgil's elaborate account of Palinurus' death in Book V is an account of what the living Palinurus saw, or thought he saw, in an experience which was half dream, half vision. It is a symbolic representation of Palinurus' state of mind. He longed for sleep. Hence sleep appears to him in the guise of a friend, Phorbas. Yet, while longing for sleep, he feared it and struggled against it. Perhaps, at that moment he was vaguely conscious that this being he saw was no friend, but some dangerous power, a god. When one has reached that stage of consciousness (or rather delusion) one is already vanquished. The will no longer resists effectively, one accepts the inevitable. This is symbolised by the god's waving over his brows a bough dripping with the waters of Lethe. It was only after his death that Palinurus realised that what he saw as a god was not a god, saw, in fact, that he had made a god out of his own desires and fears. Nisus later was assailed by doubts whether this might not be happening in his case too:—

"dine hunc ardorem mentibus addunt,
Euryale, an sua cuique deus fit dira cupido?"⁸

This brings me to the other tragedy, that of Nisus and Euryalus. This is the Virgilian equivalent of *Iliad* X where Odysseus and Diomedes make

7. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey*, Chapter 2. uses Anticleia's ignorance to show "how little this poet knew or cared about the central theme of the *Odyssey*," supporting thus his argument for multiple composition. I think the poet both cared about the central theme and knew what he was about. Anticleia could only say what she knew.

8. *Aen.* IX. 184/5. Jackson-Knight, '*Roman Virgil*' points out that this recalls *Iliad*. XII. 310-28. But how different is the spirit!

a nocturnal raid upon the Trojans and their allies. The differences here are no less striking than were the differences between the Elpenor and Palinurus episodes. But before we come to that, an initial difficulty has to be met here too. The tenth book of the Iliad has long been suspected of being an interpolation. It is hardly possible here to review all the arguments for and against that view. I myself incline to Lorimer's view that Books VIII, IX and X hang together, that IX is an organic part of the Iliad which could not be an interpolation, and that VIII is a bridge between VII and IX just as X is a bridge between IX and XI. I would add a further reason for believing that X is a natural sequel to IX. I think the Homeric episode may be said to achieve its specific purpose within the framework of the story. Agamemnon is distraught by Achilles' refusal to return to the combat and by the knowledge that the Trojans are now encamped just outside the Greek tents. He wants action, the outposts at least might be visited. Nestor, who comes to his assistance takes matters in hand. He rallies the outposts and suggests the idea of sending spies to discover the Trojan plans. Nestor is, as usual, wise. He knows that action in itself is an excellent tonic for nerves (and the Greek leaders were suffering from a fit of nerves); if the action turned out to be successful it could well revive the morale which had been shaken by Achilles' rebuff. In the event the action was crowned with a success that went beyond even the dreams of Nestor. The plans of the Trojans were discovered by the spies, but, more important still, the capture of Rhesus' horses had an exhilarating effect on the Greek leaders. Homer in fact dwells on this second aspect of it more than he does on the first. The book which began on a note of despair ends on a note of laughter :—

ὡς εἰπὼν τάφροιο διήλασε μώνυχας ἵππους
καρχαλόων· ἄμα δ' ἄλλοι ἴσαν χαίροντες Ἀχαιοί.⁹

Whether Book X was an interpolation or not, this, I would suggest, was the light in which Virgil, reading his Homer, saw this episode. His own counterpart to it is not quite so straightforward. It is not so easy to see what purpose is achieved by the adventure of Nisus and Euryalus. The ostensible purpose—namely, to convey to Aeneas news of the Trojan distress—is certainly not achieved, since Nisus and Euryalus are both killed. It is true that for a moment the drooping spirits of Ascanius and the Trojan warriors are revived by Nisus' proposal,¹⁰ but they are revived only to be completely dashed the next morning when they see the impaled heads of

9. Il. X. 564/5.

10. Aen. IX. 246ff.

the two young men paraded before them by the Latins.¹¹ One is naturally tempted to wonder whether Virgil was doing no more than filling in the interval between Aeneas' journey to Pallanteum and his return. Yet if that were all why would Virgil so pointedly challenge comparison with the Homeric original? Its significance must lie in the differences between original and copy. They are :—

1. that the Homeric adventure is undertaken on the sober advice of the aged and experienced Nestor, while in the Aeneid it is spontaneously undertaken by two young men on the impulse of the moment. Virgil might almost be saying that it is the kind of lark that goes better with youth than with sober old age.

2. Nestor has no misgivings about his suggestion for a raid upon the Trojan camp, Nisus has :—

‘dine hunc ardorem mentibus addunt,
Euryale, an sua cuique deus fit dira cupido?’

Young though he is, he appears to be more mature than the aged Nestor. The Homeric heroes in general were not given to introspection.

3. When Diomedes and Odysseus attack the camp of Rhesus they go beyond Nestor's original suggestion, which was to discover the plans of the Trojans. This they had already done when they captured Dolon. The rest of their adventure was a gratuitous indulgence of their greed for a pair of horses and their lust for blood (n.b. Athene has to warn Diomedes when he is about to continue the carnage).¹² When they return triumphant even the aged Nestor is thrilled—especially because of the horses.¹³ Virgil could not see mature men behaving like this. He could understand it in the case of impulsive young men, though even they, as we have seen, have their doubts about the wisdom of their venture. Still less could Virgil see how heroes who indulged in greed and wanton carnage could return unscathed. It would somehow be wrong. His heroes pay a price for yielding to such temptation. Euryalus was tempted to forget his immediate objective (of getting through to Aeneas) and loaded himself with spoils. These were in the end the cause of his death. He was betrayed to Volscens' party by the gleam of Messapus' helmet which he had foolishly clapped on

11. Aen. IX. 465ff.

12. Il. X. 507ff.

13. Il. X. 540ff.

his head.¹⁴ When he attempted to run he was prevented by the weight of his spoils.¹⁵

The contrast between the two episodes intensifies the tragic quality of the fate of Nisus and Euryalus. One would have thought Euryalus' little lapse deserving of pardon in one so young. Homer's heroes got away with much more than that. The way in which Diomedes killed Dolon was particularly brutal,¹⁶ but he got away with it. For Euryalus, on the other hand, there is no pardon, just as there was none for Dido or for Turnus, both of them equally worthy of pardon.

There is one other aspect of the tragedy that gives it added poignancy. As in the case of Palinurus, so also in the case of Nisus and Euryalus, their intentions were good. Their plan was even approved by the aged Aletes, a man of mature judgement.¹⁷ It was the sort of thing that might have been expected to turn out well. What then went wrong? Firstly, there is a hint of selfishness in the motives of Nisus and Euryalus which taints their purity :—

aut pugnam aut aliquid iam dudum invadere magnum
mens agitat mihi¹⁸

says Nisus, and of Euryalus Virgil says :—

obstupuit magno laudum percussus amore
Euryalus.¹⁹

Nisus' uncertainty (already referred to)²⁰ about the source of his inspiration was itself a hint of danger. But Nisus did not heed the warning. Aeneas, one feels, would certainly have behaved otherwise. He would have wanted to make sure, by prayer and sacrifice, in which direction the will of the gods pointed. Nisus has not done that, nor has he prayed to any god before he started on his adventure. Even Odysseus in the Homeric episode prayed to Athene before he and Diomedes fell upon the Thracian

14. Aen. IX. 373/4.

15. Aen. IX. 384/5.

16. Il. X. 446ff.

17. Aen. IX. 246ff.

18. Aen. IX. 186/7.

19. Aen. IX. 197/8.

20. on page 4.

camp.²¹ It was natural therefore that Athene should stand by ready to warn Diomedes when to desist. There is no god at hand to warn Nisus and Euryalus. They have in fact made gods out of their passions. Palinurus, likewise, had made a god out of his longing for sleep, and there was no god to save him either. Aeneas, on the other hand, even when he forgot his duty (as he did in Book IV) was reminded of it by a special message from Jupiter. Virgil underlines that fact through Dido's scornful comment on Aeneas' plea. Palinurus, Nisus and Euryalus are, all three of them examples of a 'pietas' that is incomplete. They were good, but only on the natural plane. In Virgil's scheme of things there is no guarantee that natural goodness will see you through. There are too many pitfalls on the way. The only guarantee of a safe journey was to possess that supernatural goodness which Aeneas alone possessed, of being always in communion with the gods.

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21. Il. X. 460ff.