

## A Guide to the Aeneid

Ross (D.O.) *Virgil's Aeneid A Readers' Guide*. Pp. x + 155. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Paper, £17.99, US\$29.95, Aus\$54.95 (Cased, £50, US\$74.95, Aus\$165). ISBN: 978-1-4051-5973-9 (978-1-4051-5972-2 hbk).

Ross' book is both a guide for non-specialists, and a critical essay. As a guide, it has no footnotes or bibliography, and it has an affable and enjoyable style, wide coverage of themes and sections of the Aeneid (including appendices on Virgil's life and works, and on metrics), and excursus on anthropological aspects of the Roman world. As a critical essay, it includes no discussion of topics or passages where the author does not have a specific critical point.

Ross (R.) declares that he has not meant to write an introduction, but a guide, his aim being to indicate "what really matters... at least as I have come to read it" (p. vii). What really matters in R.'s reading of the Aeneid is human suffering, divine cruelty, and deception; every aspect that could be read as a glorification of the Augustan 'ideology' is consistently questioned (see pp. 116-119, where the "crucial question" about Augustus emerges openly). Along the journey on which R. takes us, hardly any light of hope shines upon Virgil's work. Aeneas is doomed to suffer personal loss and to be deprived of any human contact (Chapter 1: "Virgil's Hero"). Many of the other characters are violently drawn into the heroic world where the Homeric values have been inverted, and are unnecessarily destroyed by it (Chapter 2: "The Victims"). The Romans did not have any religion – at least in the sense of a personal and heartfelt spirituality; therefore, the gods in the poem are heartless actors, intended "to show how pure power and control function" (p. 72), the worst being "the chilling perfection of Venus' inhuman indifference" (p. 73). Even fatum in the Aeneid represents no supernatural providence, but simply an "intellectual commonplace [...], a powerful poetic shorthand denoting what we know is going to happen" (p. 75, italics of the author; Chapter 3: "Fate and the Gods"). The images of the past (Troy) and of the future (Rome) are equally deceptive (Chapter 4: "Virgil's Troy", and Chapter 5: "Rome, the rerum imago"). The Eclogues and the Georgics are the stages of a progression from

a magic transfiguration of reality through poetry to a more realistic representation of the world where knowledge can impose order on chaos; but both poetry in the *Bucolics* (with Gallus) and knowledge in the *Georgics* (with Orpheus) will eventually reveal their unreal nature, and fail (Chapter 6: “Virgil, His Life and Works”).

The issue of the general interpretation of the *Aeneid* (‘optimistic’ and ‘Augustan’ vs. ‘pessimistic’ and ambivalent) is so well known that it is not necessary to recall it here. Personally, I do not always agree with R.’s strictly ‘pessimistic’ interpretation of every passage he analyses, and maybe a more balanced approach, not contesting any ‘Augustan’ opening in the poem, would have been useful to the readers who will approach the *Aeneid* for the first time through this guide. Nevertheless, R.’s work is rich in stimulating close readings of single passages and episodes, all consistent with his general interpretation. Many scholars tend to focus on a technical analysis of small portions of literary texts while avoiding wider questions on the whole work, or on the author. This book is an antidote against this temptation. Its close readings are understandable by a non-specialist reader, yet deep and philologically grounded. At the same time, they show most naturally how an interpreter should walk down the path from the “finer strokes” of the text to the general interpretation of the work, and *vice versa*.

R. often enriches his arguments with lively discussions on general aspects of the Roman world. These discussions will probably be among the most interesting parts of the book for specialist readers: R. helps us to get a fresh glimpse of anthropological concepts familiar to scholars. Also, they are always functional to a specific discourse on the poem. The discussion of *ingenium* (‘inborn character’; pp. 26-31) expresses the core of R.’s view of Aeneas and Turnus, and returns *passim* in many other interpretations of characters and passages. The overview on Roman religion (pp. 62-67) founds his discourse on the gods in the *Aeneid* (67-73). The discussions on the ancients’ vision of past (pp. 57-58) and future (pp. 105-106) are the grounds of R.’s acknowledgement of the role of ignorance and deception in the poem.

Even in the final section (“Appendix: The Latin Hexameter”), which one could expect to be no more than a scholastic exposition of the basic metrical issues, the author aims to make a specific and interesting point: the music of the Latin hexameter is given by “the wonderful interplay between the ‘ictus’ wave and the tension and release imposed upon it by word accent – not just one rhythm, but really two” (p. 145).

Whatever one’s agreement with his general viewpoint on the poem, Ross’ intelligent book has the courage of asking the fundamental questions, and will provide both non-specialist readers with a good first guide on the *Aeneid*, and undergraduate students with a valuable textbook that their instructors will read with pleasure and interest.

University of Palermo

PAOLO MONELLA