

D d ' L D

MICHAEL C. J. PUTNAM, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1996, is the W. Duncan MacMillan II Professor of Classics and Professor of Comparative Literature, Emeritus, at Brown University. His books include *The Humanness of Heroes: Studies in the Conclusion of Virgil's "Aeneid"* (2011) and *A Companion to Virgil's "Aeneid" and its Tradition* (edited with Joseph Farrell, 2010). He has recently translated *Jacopo Sannazaro: The Latin Poetry* (2009) and *The Complete Poems of Tibullus* (with Rodney G. Dennis, 2012).

... sic fata gradus evaserat altos,
semianimemque sinu germanam amplexa fovebat
cum gemitu atque atros siccabat veste cruores.
illa gravis oculos conata attollere rursus
deicit; insum stridit sub pectore vulnus.
ter sese attollens cubitoque adnixa levavit,
ter revoluta toro est oculisque errantibus alto
quaesivit caelo lucem ingemuitque reperta.
Tum Iuno omnipotens longum miserata dolorem
difficilisque obitus Irim demisit Olympo
quae luctantem animam nexosque resolveret artus.
nam quia nec fato merita nec morte peribat,
sed misera ante diem subitoque accensa furore,
nondum illi flavum Proserpina vertice crinem
abstulerat Stygioque caput damnaverat Orco.
ergo Iris croceis per caelum roscida pennis
mille trahens varios adverso sole colores
devolat et supra caput astitit. 'hunc ego Diti
sacrum iussa fero teque isto corpore solvo':
sic ait et dextra crinem secat, omnis et una
dilapsus calor atque in ventos vita recessit.

—Virgil, *Aeneid*, book 4: lines 685–705

A — — — — —
 A — — — — —
 H — — — — —
 B — — — — —
 A — — — — —
 J — — — — —
 A — — — — —
 I — — — — —
 E — — — — —
 H — — — — —
 A — — — — —
 D — — — — —
 A — — — — —
 A — — — — —
 I — — — — —
 I — — — — —

— English translation of Virgil,
 by John Dryden (1697)

In handbooks devoted to the history of Western literature, Virgil's *Aeneid* is usually bracketed between Homer's two masterpieces, the *Iliad* and the

queen, events that culminate in her suicide. The story of Dido has exerted a profound influence on Western literature, from Virgil's younger contemporary Ovid, in the seventh of his *Heroides*, to the recent poetry of Louise Glück. Its potency is felt in music, in masterpieces such as Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Hector Berlioz's *Les Troyens*. And various scenes from book 4 have elicited powerful depictions from painters as diverse as Claude Lorrain, Tiepolo, Reynolds, and Turner.

The paradox remains that the tragedy as it evolves is built on Aeneas's forced renunciation of private passion in order to embrace the impersonal destiny that fate has cast his way. The ending of the poem suggests that the titular hero could act quite differently from how he behaves toward Dido. From one angle of interpretation, the poem's conclusion is discomfiting because Aeneas gives in to personal emotion when he should least do so, which is to say, at a crucial turn of events where he should function as a model of forbearance and where Virgil's text itself, at its finale and climax, should most serve a didactic purpose, for us as well as for its initial readers. We leave the poem having just witnessed, for a final time, how the specifics of human emotionality are ever at odds with more general, idealizing aspirations. We hope for a cathartic display of mercy through an act of pardon, a scenario similar to the conclusion of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Virgil fails to gratify our wishes, leaving us for contemplation only a manifestation of rage leading to a violent killing. His lesson reinforces a constant in the chronicle of human history, that revenge regularly breeds further revenge.

Though in book 4 Aeneas suppresses his feelings in favor of an impersonal calling, Dido, by contrast, turns her own deep sensibility first verbally against her absconding lover, then physically against herself as she resorts to suicide, so as to end all

feeling. It is in projecting her road to death that Virgil's virtuosity is most apparent. Here, his text has had its profoundest influence on later artists, and it is where I felt its power most when I first read the poem's twelve books in Latin as an undergraduate in college. I would like to devote the remainder of this essay to watching closely a few of the ways by which the text works its magic upon us. I am interested in particular in the means by which

while still reminding us of time's extent as a marked feature of his presentation:

A *... ..*
... ..
 (4:1 2)

B *... ..*
... ..
... ..

But it is only at lines 169 to 172, with an authorial intervention in the narrative, that we begin to realize to the full Virgil's intent of *metaphorically* dilating the duration of the queen's agony:

... ..
... ..
 D *... ..*
 (4:169 172)

... ..
 ; D *... ..*
... ..
... ..

The demonstrative *hoc* brings home the fact that the narrator is commenting on the action, presenting its meaning directly to us, but it is especially the initial phrase, *ille dies primus leti*, that captures our attention as we follow out Dido's emotional history to its conclusion. One of our *best* Virgilian scholars, Roland Austin, minimizes the effect of *primus* here by making it adverbial (he translates: "That day in the beginning was the cause of death, that day in the beginning was the cause of sorrow").³ But such a reading tends to diminish the horror of Virgil's implication that Dido's dying takes place over a stretch of time. We have been prepared for this by the earlier metaphoric implications of poison, wound, and *metaphor*. We are now wit-

nessing the commencement of the death that will ultimately come about from their imminence.

As the plot progresses, Virgil uses *metaphor* regularly to draw the reader into Dido's emotional world. Let me offer one salient example. At line 401, the narrator, in an unusual gesture within what is ordinarily third-person delivery, addresses us in the second person. We are asked in our mind's eye, as individual students of Virgil's text, to imagine beholding the Trojans as they flee Carthage:

... ..
... ..
... ..

And, with only the intervention of a simile, that "you" shortly becomes Dido herself:

... .., D *... ..*
... ..
... ..
 ! (4:408 411)

... .., D *... ..*
... ..
... ..
... ..

Dido's Long Dying

But, if we have been witnessing her death over the length of four books of an epic, Dido's actual moment of dying is itself also powerfully protracted in its exposition. Take the word *vulnus* (wound), for instance. It occurs in the singular earlier in book 4 at lines 2 and 67, as metaphor for her love's destructive aspect. When she actually stabs herself with Aeneas's sword on her funeral pyre, Virgil turns singular to plural (*vulnera* [4:683]). Literal wounds have now been added to a single, metaphorical hurt, forcing us to contemplate the arc of this very development as one type of suffering leads to, and is piled upon, another during the approach of death.

Virgil employs a complementary technique shortly after as the goddess Juno at last frees her suffering devotee from the body's trammels:

I

 (4:693-695)

Let me point out two details in this extraordinary resolution of life into death. The first is the echo of *longum amorem*, whose poison we have seen Dido drink in book 1 when the banquet's literal wine becomes the venom of destructive, extensive passion. Long love now yields place to *longum dolorem*, the grief brought about by unreciprocated passion over time that both complements and then becomes the pain of a prolonged demise. We have followed this metamorphosis from book 1 to the end of book 4, engaging with the anguish of the queen during the transmutation of metaphoric wound into literal.

A second detail is the striking phrase *difformis obitus*. It has been a subject of debate by students of Virgil as to why the poet chooses to use a plural, "difficult deaths," instead of the more straightforward singular to describe Dido's passing. In his commentary on the phrase, Austin feels that the plural here may be "'intensive', marking the slow agony of Dido's death, the tortured moments one by one," but then underestimates the force of his insight as "highly subjective."⁴ Surely, however, he is absolutely correct and his judgment should be expanded. Through a single word we endure the final minutes of Dido's drawn-out passage from life to death, hurt by hurt, grief by grief, with mental pain combined with physical in a concatenation of suffering.

But Dido's final instants are but part of the larger history of dying. Her death began for the reader long ago, with the poisoned draught of love and with *ille dies primus leti*, the day when the lovers consummate their desire. In the case of Dido, death is implicit in love and marks its beginning. And it is a sign of Virgil's virtuosity not only to spread this aspect of her tale out over narrative time, but also to give it particular concentration at the actual moment of her demise, where the plural *obitus* implies a multitude of deaths both now and in the past.

Her deaths stay with us throughout the rest of the poem.⁵ When Aeneas meets Dido's ghost in the Underworld, it is of her *dolor* (6:464) at his departure that his words tell. Or, for another example, Virgil opens the poem's eleventh book by repeating a line from book 4 that introduces the tragic hunt and storm:

. A

 (4:129)

 D

This repetition is tantamount to advising the reader that he should sense a connection between Dido's passing and the burgeoning war in Latium. The poet suggests a reason for such a link some seventy lines later, when Aeneas prepares the

both Pallas and Turnus, which are in turn strategically intertwined.

So the influence of Dido permeates the action of the epic long after her own passing and until the very moment of its conclusion. It is this influence that has reached out to all sensitive readers of the poem and has made its mark on literature and the fine arts ever since. There is no better way to experience her hurt over the imagination's time than by listening

to her dying words as conveyed by commanding composers like Purcell and Berlioz, the latter a lover of Virgil from his youth. In "When I am laid, am laid, in earth" and in "*Ah, je vais mourir*," music's extent in briefer, more trenchant compass, movingly echoes the sorrow that Virgil, over a stretch of epic narrative, has so brilliantly conveyed to us in perhaps the most affecting portrayal of his final masterpiece.