

## II. Achilles as Model for Aeneas

L. A. MacKAY

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

In the most delicate, and some of the most important problems of literary influence, it is seldom possible to say what happened, or even, if we are careful of our language, what must have happened. We can guess at what probably happened, but what seems overwhelmingly plausible to one man may seem extremely unlikely to another. What look like echoes may be mere coincidences. We must be wary of implying that no poet has had an original idea since Orpheus.

The game of looking for models in Virgil, however, is peculiarly justifiable; he liked to work from models, he enjoyed pitting his poetic imagination and his gift of expression against those of his predecessors. His contemporaries, and the early commentators, were aware of this, and did not always approve;<sup>1</sup> their diligence, reflected in the Fifth and Sixth books of Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, has stimulated rather than inhibited the search for parallels. Some of these are obvious. In the first half of the *Aeneid*, the role of the hero, the situations into which he is cast, and the response he makes to these situations, obviously reflect some of the predicaments and responses of Odysseus; in the second half, some of the predicaments and responses of Achilles; through the whole poem the heroic memory of the ill-fated Hector broods over his kinsman and successor. Homer's Aeneas is a figure too lightly drawn to fill the role of a central epic hero without further development, too lightly drawn to hamper such development. For the creation of his hero, Virgil had at his disposal all the Greek epic that we know, and much besides, in Greek and Latin, in epic and tragedy; but his main stay was Homer;<sup>2</sup> and in Homer he found what he needed.

As models for Aeneas, neither Odysseus nor Hector could supply much of use for Virgil's purpose, which was to make Aeneas successful, and yet as interesting as a tragic hero. Odysseus, except for his powers of endurance, had the wrong kind of character. The heroic figure of Hector,

<sup>1</sup> Suet. *Vita* 45-46 = Donatus 183-93 (Brummer).

<sup>2</sup> This emerges clearly from Macrobius' examples. Virgil's use of his predecessors is admirably discussed in the introduction to Volume II of Conington's *Virgil* (4th ed. London 1884, xix-xliv).

champion and defender of the Trojan people, a figure transmitted by Roman tragedy as well as by Greek epic, could hardly have failed to affect Virgil's Aeneas. But Hector is not sufficient. Hector failed in precisely what he had to do — the defence of Troy. That his failure was due not to his own fault, but to the will of the gods, makes it more pathetic, and indeed more tragic; it is not any the less failure. Virgil has high respect for noble failure — the figures of Turnus, of Nisus and Euryalus, are evidence enough of that — but he does not confuse it with success. Perhaps one of the qualities in Virgil that particularly attracted Dante, though it has disconcerted others, is the core of hardness that underlies his gentleness, a hardness that springs not from brutality or incomprehension, but from the joy of facing reality at its hardest. He would have understood and approved Seneca's phrase, *Verum gaudium res severa est* (*Epp. Mor.* 3.2.4). Aeneas failed to deliver Troy. That is true, but in his case almost irrelevant. What he had to do was not to deliver Troy, but to found the Roman race, and in that he did not fail.

There is also another point, more important than perhaps at first glance it appears. Hector is purely mortal. Aeneas, like Achilles, is the son of a goddess. One of the reasons we find Hector more sympathetic than Achilles is that he is completely human, he is one of us. Perhaps it takes a man like Alexander, with a conviction of semi-divinity, to feel with Achilles thoroughly.

Beyond the superficial and tradition-based resemblances between Aeneas and Achilles, of which even a casual reader is aware, I believe one can trace more profound, more fundamental, and more deliberate similarities, whose study may enrich our understanding of both heroes. The main reason why we have failed to recognize Homer's Achilles in Aeneas, is that we have been looking at the wrong Achilles. For those who claim to trace the activity of several poets in the composition of our *Iliad*, it is not incredible, indeed it is almost inevitable, that there should be differences from mind to mind in the conception of Achilles. For Virgil, we may be fairly sure, Homer was a single poet. But even if one prefers to stress in the *Iliad* the activity of a single mind, the character of Achilles cannot be regarded as static; no one could pass through the experiences that Achilles passed through and remain unchanged. Later readers of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* may, however, have been unable to appreciate adequately Virgil's use of Achilles because they were not intending, as Virgil was, to use aspects of this character in the creation of a new character; their attention has been dominated more than his by the first three-quarters of the *Iliad*. The Achilles Virgil used could not be the ardent,

confident young warrior of the early books; he must draw rather on the Achilles of the last six books to shape a conception of what such a hero might be at the age and with the experiences of Aeneas.

The subject of the *Iliad* is, as Homer said it was, the Wrath of Achilles. The impact of that wrath upon others is an integral part of the story, but it is not the heart of it. The heart of the story is not what happens to Patroclus, or what happens to Hector, or to the rest of the Greeks and Trojans, but what happens to Achilles. This is what gives the poem its central meaning and its unity. We may well believe that the poem, as Homer himself recited it, was never twice the same.<sup>3</sup> What remained constant, we may suppose, was the general structure of the action, particularly as regards the main actors, and certain lines or passages so perfectly phrased that they are uniquely memorable in their own right. The incidental details, the secondary action, the phrasing of passages of less intensity, almost certainly varied in Homer's own performances, with the nature and response (aesthetic or monetary) of his audience, with the time at his disposal, and with the variations of his own health and temperament. It is the grand structure of the poem, not simply the things the characters do, but the things they must do because they are what they are — this is what constitutes the poem's essential unity, and, for some readers, bears witness to the creative originality that made it a unity.

The death of Patroclus, which entails the death of Hector, is the centre of the action, and the death of Patroclus is the unintended but inevitable result of the wrath of Achilles. It is at this point that Achilles changes, and the change is dramatised by the terrible and pitiful scene of the killing of Lykaon (*Il.* 21.34 ff.). The death of Patroclus is the turning-point of Achilles' life. From that time forth, for him,

There's nothing serious in mortality;  
All is but toys; renown and grace is dead;  
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees  
Is left this vault to brag of.

The essential shaping purpose of the *Iliad*, as a work of art, is to display, not by description or abstract analysis, but in action, the trans-

<sup>3</sup> Unless we suppose that 'Homer' first wrote out the poem and thereafter read from manuscript; though even then particular circumstances of performance might call for 'cutting'. If we suppose a dictated text, 'Homer' is here used to mean the poet, trained in an oral tradition, who spoke the words, not the scribe who wrote them down. See Lord, A. B. "Homer's Originality: Dictated Texts," *TAPA* 84 (1953) 133.

formation of Achilles, first from a brilliant, successful, confident, generous young man to a ruthless and obsessed fighter, intent only on vengeance for the friend whom he felt he had failed, and lastly to a man of mature and tragic insight.<sup>4</sup> The death of Hector means the death of Achilles, not simply in terms of prophecy, but because Achilles has no longer anything left to live for. He has lost the savor of life. Less coldly savage than Macbeth, he is equally pitiless, until the meeting with Priam. That is why the Twenty-fourth book is essential to the *Iliad*. It is what happens to the soul of Achilles that matters; his wrath is the central theme, and it is only in the Twenty-fourth book that his wrath comes to an end. Achilles, in his meeting with Priam, has grown up to the tragic sense of life, and it is too late, for we know, as he knows, that he has little time left to live. Whatever else may befall the Achilles of legend or saga, the story of the *Iliad*'s Achilles must end where it does, for Achilles' life, in any meaningful sense, is now over. He has done what he had to do.

Virgil, one may guess, understood this, when he ended the *Aeneid* with the death of Turnus. Not because, like Achilles, Aeneas had avenged his friend; that was almost incidental. That was not what he had to do. He had to make possible the establishment of the Trojans in Italy, and with the death of Turnus there could no longer be any serious opposition to that. The action is complete; there seems no reason to suppose that in any subsequent revision Virgil need have chosen any other point at which to end his story.

Achilles in the last six books of the *Iliad* is a man in the grip of an obsession, a man overpowered by his mission.<sup>5</sup> Self-appointed though this mission may be, it is not merely the satisfaction of a personal whim or caprice; it is prompted by a sense of what he owes to Patroclus' memory. He is not avenging Patroclus because he wants to, but because he has to; it is not for him a matter in which choice is possible.

Is not this, in essence, what we find in Aeneas? In essence, though not in exact copy, for Virgil was not a slavish copyist.<sup>6</sup> Aeneas is a man for whom most of what had made life worth living had perished with the fall of Troy — most, but not quite all, for his father and his son shared his exile. He is a man dedicated to a mission whose accomplishment will bring him no personal satisfaction, except the satisfaction of having

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Robert, F. *Homère* (Paris 1950) 227; Owen, E. T. *The Story of the Iliad* (Toronto 1946) 179, 208–9, 236 ff.; Post, L. A. "The Moral Pattern in Homer," *TAPA* 70 (1939) 175–79; Méautis, G. in *REG* 43 (1930) 9 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Robert (above, note 4) 219.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g. Conington's discussion (above, note 2) xxxvi, of Virgil's use of Apollonius Rhodius.

accomplished it. At times he seems to anticipate the sober conclusion of William the Silent, that "it is not necessary to hope in order to undertake, or to succeed in order to persevere". Virgil, a subtle and varied artist, diversifies his picture by presenting Aeneas at Carthage as attempting, and for a moment almost successful in the attempt, to recapture the enjoyment of life; but it is no use. Surely it is almost with a sense of relief that Aeneas abandons this self-indulgent interlude, and reverts to the role of instrument; it is not possible for him long to sustain interest in his personal fortunes. He has none of the sanguine resilience of Odysseus; when, in response to prayer, almost all his ships were promptly and miraculously saved from the women's attempt to burn them in Sicily, *pater Aeneas, casu concussus acerbo / nunc huc ingentis, nunc illuc pectore curas / mutabat versans* (*Aen.* 5.700–702). How does he receive the encouraging prophecies of Evander, and the prospect of help not only from the Arcadians, but from the successfully rebellious subjects of Mezentius, representing all Etruria? *Multa dura suo tristi cum corde pulabat* (*Aen.* 8.522). The personal appearance of Venus and the gift of divine arms make him for a moment, as even Achilles had been, *deae donis et tanto laetus honore* (*Aen.* 8.617; cf. *Il.* 19.18); he was not *laetus* for long. He is surely one of the most consistently gloomy heroes that ever enjoyed the overt favor and protection of the gods. "Cet Enée qui réussit toujours, à qui les dieux confirment qu'il est en train de bâtir la plus grande merveille de l'histoire, Virgile a osé lui faire dire, et au moment de son succès suprême, qu'il n'avait jamais eu de chance: *Disce puer uirtutem ex me uerumque laborem, fortunam ex aliis* 'O mon enfant, apprends de moi le courage et l'effort qui ne biaise point; d'autres t'enseigneront le bonheur' (XII, 435–436)."<sup>7</sup> The sentiment is natural enough in the mouth of Sophocles' Ajax (vss. 550–51) and appropriate to Hector in the Sixth *Iliad*<sup>8</sup>, but it is surprising here. It cannot be taken directly from the simpler Homeric passage; indeed Macrobius cites as its direct antecedent a verse from the *Armorum Iudicium* of Accius (Macro. *Sat.* 6.1.58). This is on the face of it a strange origin. We know that Ajax is doomed to die in failure and at least apparent disgrace; we know that Aeneas is doomed to win, and establish a race that shall be lords of the earth. If Aeneas does not know it, it is not for lack of telling. Unless we must ascribe to Virgil a simple passion for working in familiar

<sup>7</sup> Perret, J. *Virgile, l'homme et l'oeuvre* (Paris 1952) 138.

<sup>8</sup> In this passage, from which the Sophoclean and Virgilian uses of the motif presumably stem, the later developments are implicit in the situation, though not fully expressed.

tags, however inappropriate, we must assume that in employing, just here, this easily recognised echo, he intended the apparent incongruity to be significant for our understanding of Aeneas' character, as that of a man who had outlived the sense of personal achievement, almost the sense of personality. The ill-disposed may retort that if Virgil was trying to portray a zombie, he succeeded beyond intention. That would be an exaggerated way of putting it, but still closer to the truth than to suppose that Virgil was trying, and failing, to portray a hero of more conventional type.

It is part of the genius of Virgil that without making his hero in any sense a copy of Achilles, he was able to catch the same note, almost of self-survival, of hard and active hopelessness in the service of an over-mastering loyalty — the great virtue of Achilles too, was *pietas* — and present it not as he found it in the *Iliad*, but as his imagination conceived it in a much tried and emotionally outworn man, older by years of responsibility and effort than Achilles was at his death, a man with a public, not a private mission, but a devotion to it no less single, and that he caught too in this son of another goddess something of what disconcerts us in Achilles — that sense of impenetrability, of something august but incomprehensible, even repellent, because of its literal inhumanity.

And if we still feel in Aeneas, as we do not in Dido and Turnus, or in Virgil's lesser characters, a certain stiffness, one reason may be that in these characters Virgil's imagination kept a freer hand; Aeneas is moving in armor too heavy for him; not even Virgil could with impunity borrow the Achilles of Homer.