

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF MEZENTIUS

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In three major scenes of the *Aeneid* Aeneas shares center stage with a character in some sense antagonistic to him: in Book 4 he must abandon Dido, in Book 12 he must kill Turnus, and in Book 10 he must face and vanquish the most formidable warrior of the opposition, Mezentius. While Dido, historically, and Turnus, more recently, have been the focus of a great deal of critical attention, the complexities of the drama that takes place between the Etruscan tyrant and Aeneas have not received their due.<sup>1</sup> In all three places Aeneas succeeds in accomplishing what the situation demands; in each place, it may be argued, he seems, to a degree, to be diminished by his success. Dido is so sympathetically portrayed that Aeneas' leavetaking, with its tragic consequences for Dido, is painful for the reader and for Aeneas himself. While we may not subscribe to one modern view that reads in the death of Turnus unresolved

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of literature on Virgil's Mezentius to the date of its publication, see H. Benario, "The Tenth Book of the Aeneid," *TAPA* 98 (1967) 23 and notes. The following works are cited by author's name alone: Paul F. Burke, Jr., (1) "The Role of Mezentius in the Aeneid," *CJ* 69 (1974) 202–9; (2) "Mezentius and the First Fruits," *Vergilius* 20 (1974) 28–30; W. V. Clausen, introduction to *Virgil: The Aeneid* (New York 1965) vii–xv; J. Conington, *P. Vergilii Maronis Opera*, fifth edition revised by H. Nettleship and F. Haverfield (London 1895); P. T. Eden, (1) "Mezentius and the Etruscans," *PVS* 4 (1964–65) 31–40; (2) *A Commentary on Virgil: Aeneid VIII*, Mnemosyne Supp. 35 (Leiden 1975); Justin Glenn, (1) "Mezentius and Polyphemus," *AJP* 92 (1971) 129–55; (2) "Mezentius, *Contemptor Divum*," *Vergilius* 17 (1971) 7–8; (3) "The Fall of Mezentius," *Vergilius* 18 (1972) 10–15; R. Heinze, *Virgils Epische Technik* (Leipzig 1915<sup>3</sup>); J. Henry, *Aeneidea* (London 1889); C. G. Heyne and G. P. E. Wagner, *P. Virgiliti Maronis Opera* (Leipzig 1830–32<sup>4</sup>); G. N. Knauer, *Die Aeneas und Homer*, Hypomnemata 7 (Göttingen 1964); W. R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1979); L. de la Cerda, *Virgili Opera* (Lyons 1612–19); A. La Penna, "Mezentio: una tragedia della tirannia e del titanismo antico," *Maia* 32 (1980) 3–30; B. Otis, *Virgil, A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford 1963); T. E. Page, *The Aeneid of Virgil Books VII–XII* (London 1900); Michael C. J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965); G. Thome, *Gestalt und Funktion des Mezentius bei Vergil—mit einem Einblick auf die Schlusszene der Aeneas* (Frankfurt 1979); Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., "Mezentius: A Virgilian Creation," *CP* 64 (1969) 219–25; R. D. Williams, *Virgil Aeneid VII–XII* (London 1973).

savagery on the part of Aeneas,<sup>2</sup> Virgil does direct the reader to wish that somehow Turnus might have been spared, a notion that had occurred to Aeneas as well. When Mezentius first appears in Book 7, it would seem that no such conflict will attend the inevitable victory of Aeneas over so threatening and unsympathetic a character. Yet, by the end of Book 10 Mezentius has become a tragic figure; his death makes demands on the sympathy of the audience and leaves Aeneas speechless.

Very good Victorian critics of Virgil have lavished praise upon the final scenes of the tenth book, representing, at least in part, the response that Virgil intended them to have. Thus T. E. Page, still in many ways the best commentator on the *Aeneid*, referring to Mezentius:<sup>3</sup>

Hated he is justly by men and abhorred by gods; but, nonetheless, as he lies wounded and propped against a tree, with his great white beard sweeping over his chest, while he sends messenger after messenger to bring tidings of his gallant son, the grim soldier is a pathetic figure, and the delineation of him as he mounts his old war-horse for the last time is unequalled in Latin, perhaps in any, literature.

James Henry, author of the indispensable *Aeneidea*, offers an even more extravagant observation:<sup>4</sup>

Except for David's passion of grief for Absalom, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!", I know of no father's grief for the death of a son, no parental pietas to be compared with Mezentius' for Lausus.

Beyond Page's opening qualification, there is no acknowledgment that the object of these understandably admiring assessments is also the stridently impious, hateful tyrant who, in Virgil's early presentation, can reasonably be described as a villain, the only villain of the *Aeneid*. Why did Virgil choose Mezentius, previously established with so much art as the embodiment of evil, to be raised so in the sympathy of the reader?<sup>5</sup> More important, what effect does the audience's sympathy and admiration for Mezentius, epitomized in the eloquence of the critics just cited, have on its feeling for Aeneas? Readers, especially modern ones, have had great difficulty describing or defining the "heroism" of Aeneas. W. B. Yeats's anecdote about the plain sailor man who read the *Aeneid* and understood Aeneas to be a priest sets that difficulty in sharp relief.<sup>6</sup> Still, it cannot be doubted that Aeneas, besides giving his name to the poem, is Virgil's sole main character. Would Virgil have created major

<sup>2</sup> The thesis of Putnam, apparently endorsed by Johnson 175, note 117.

<sup>3</sup> Page xxii-xxiii.

<sup>4</sup> Henry 4.136.

<sup>5</sup> See Glenn (3) for a good attempt to focus on this question.

<sup>6</sup> Clausen ix quotes the anecdote from Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading*.

scenes for Aeneas to share with a second character and then deliberately played down or denigrated Aeneas in the disposition of those very scenes? If so, then why?

Mezentius is prominently displayed at the head of the catalogue in Book 7 (648) comprising the Italian enemies of the Trojans. The appositive there attached to him, *contemptor divum*, is virtually repeated at the beginning of Book 8 (7), thus raising it to the level of an epithet. He is singled out by the good king Evander as the subject of an impressive, rhetorical *vituperatio* in the high style, complete with *praeteritio*, and *anaphora* in the rhetorical question:

quid memorem infandas caedes, quid facta tyranni  
effera? di capiti ipsius generique reservent! (8.483–84)

The curse is uttered in the form of a prayer to the gods from an old man of unquestionable *auctoritas*. This is powerful declamation, characterizing an evil man. Evander, through Virgil's invention, goes on to attribute to Mezentius a particularly gruesome and atrocious form of punishment, elsewhere associated with Etruscan pirates of historical times.<sup>7</sup>

mortua quin etiam iungebat corpora vivis  
componens manibus manus atque oribus ora,  
tormenti genus, et sanie taboque fluentis  
complexu in misero longa sic morte necabat. (8.485–88)

Echoes of the *Thyestes* of Ennius have been noticed in this description and perhaps even the hint of a perversion of sexual union that may or may not have been Virgil's invention.<sup>8</sup> Either way, this vignette does much to further the picture of Mezentius as a figure of unmitigated evil. Dramatically it is clear, as Evander describes the just revolt that ousted the tyrant but could not destroy him, that Aeneas will have to stop Mezentius.

This is only a part of the complex character of Mezentius, the strongest opponent Aeneas will face. Unlike Turnus, he will not be seen looking vulnerably young and pale, offering sacrifices to the gods (12.219–21); unlike Turnus, he will never be characterized as a plaything and victim of divine providence. The identification of Mezentius as an impious *contemptor divum* suggests that Virgil is contemplating a confrontation of good and evil between *pious* Aeneas and the brutal and remorseless, almost inhuman figure of Mezentius. Yet, before the confrontation can take place, Virgil makes substantial changes in his characterization of Mezentius. His martial exploits in the general mêlée of

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Contra Pelagian*. 4.15, preserving the information from Cicero's *Hortensius*. The ultimate source is Arist. *Protrept.* fr. 10b.

<sup>8</sup> Ennius, *Thyestes* 362f. Vahlen. In a suggestive comment, La Penna 11, note 13, observes that the Ennian passage is twice quoted by Cicero (*In Pis.* 43; *Tusc. Disp.* 1.107). The sexual overtones are maintained by Burke (1) 203 and note 6.

battle in Book 10, especially 689–761, have recalled to readers a Homeric *aristeia*.<sup>9</sup> This is no mere bully, but an epic warrior whose prowess on the field of battle invites comparison with an Ajax or a Diomedes. By combining in the same figure Homeric *aretê* and moral opprobrium, Virgil goes further in the direction of melodrama than the reader of Homer might expect. In the *Odyssey*, the suitors have not the stature of Mezentius; it is their sheer number that makes their slaughter in the great hall epic. And while it has been convincingly argued that the description of Polyphemus in both Homer and Virgil contains points of similarity with the figure of the Etruscan tyrant,<sup>10</sup> Mezentius is no fabled monster from the imagination of sailors, no mythological symbol of incarnate evil, like Virgil's Cacus,<sup>11</sup> but a dominant military and political reality within the context of the narrative. These are the characteristics of Virgil's creation: partly Homeric, partly evil. Virgil has set up a situation in which for Aeneas to dispatch a villain would bring "Romantic" satisfaction, for him to kill an Etruscan Diomedes would bring Homeric satisfaction. But by the time Virgil finishes manipulating the situation, the death of Mezentius will bring Aeneas very little satisfaction of any kind.

Yet to argue that Virgil developed the character of Mezentius as he did in the course of Book 10 precisely in order to create an opponent worthy of Aeneas<sup>12</sup> and to avoid the melodrama of a black-and-white confrontation is to miss the larger question of why Virgil created the problem in the first place and tantalized his audience with the expectation of such a confrontation, if he could not and would not follow through with it. The answer to this question requires us first to analyse what Virgil did in the tenth book to change the terms of the final encounter between Mezentius and Aeneas, and then to incorporate that more complex perception into a consistent interpretation of the poem.

<sup>9</sup> See Conington ad loc. and G. Williams *Technique and Ideas in the Aeneid* (New Haven 1983) 171.

<sup>10</sup> See Glenn (1).

<sup>11</sup> It should be noticed that Virgil's Cacus is more monstrous than Livy's. In Virgil, Hercules' victory does represent the triumph of good over evil. But the story appears in Evander's legendary narrative; in the "real" world of Aeneas, distinctions will not be so simple.

<sup>12</sup> See Burke (1) 206: "The poet's efforts to portray Mezentius as a huge and irresistible giant emphasize the heroism of Aeneas when finally he kills the man." This misses the fact that when the battle does occur, it is brief and anticlimactic, though in anticipation Mezentius did seem more than a match for Aeneas (see below, p. 207). Burke 204 and 209 feels that we should discount the pejorative description in Book 8 as Evander's political propaganda, thus destroying the pathos of Evander's speech and ignoring the carefully wrought reconstruction of Mezentius Virgil effects in Book 10. See Heinze 214 on the narrator's avoidance throughout of τὸ μαρόν. That vituperative passion is put into the mouth of Evander is dramatically significant, but not of his disingenuity.

It is my intention to concentrate on the invention of Virgil, to consider the scenes, vignettes, and nuances that he introduces into his story and the effect that they have on the audience. Whether these are wholly the creation of Virgil or adaptations from Homer or other earlier writers is not always certain, nor does it much matter. The ancients on the whole preferred imaginative re-creation of older stories and themes to imaginative creation *ex nihilo*. What matters very much is the realization that with few exceptions the components of Virgil's plot are present because of Virgil's deliberate choice. In discussing what he perceives as the paradoxical character of Mezentius, Brooks Otis says, "Virgil's *humanitas* does not in any sense negate his moral realism; he will not let Turnus or even Mezentius die without a tribute to their heroism, but he will not spare them."<sup>13</sup> But his observation takes no account of the fact—indeed, inevitably ignores it—that Mezentius' heroism, if, in fact, it is his heroism and not the loss of his son that recommends him to us, is not a historical reality with which Virgil had to deal, but rather, like virtually every other situation in the poem, a figment of Virgil's imagination. In a similar way, the age-old practice of commentators which consists solely of identifying allusions in Virgil to Homer and other authors exacerbates the problem. Virgil tested and displayed his genius for invention precisely in his alteration and re-working for his own dramatic reasons of the scenes to which he alludes. In no substantial way did he allow his "models" to impose restraints upon him. In fact, the only imperatives forced upon Virgil, by and large, are imperatives determined by his own choice and manipulation of the material.

Of the legend of Mezentius we may say that it was, in Virgil's time, both well-known and popular.<sup>14</sup> As with the legend of Cacus and Hercules,<sup>15</sup> it is found in both Livy (1.7.3–7) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*R.A.* 1.42). As is the case with the other legends Virgil utilizes, the components were not canonized in tradition; and what was available, Virgil felt free to embellish, alter, and delete to suit his needs.

The basic story, going back to the *Origines* of Cato,<sup>16</sup> as reconstructed from citations in Servius, is that in the first round of fighting on Italian soil both Latinus and his people and the Rutulian prince Turnus opposed Aeneas. Latinus was killed; and Turnus, in defeat, appealed to the Etruscans and their king Mezentius for alliance. In return for his help, Mezentius demanded from the Rutulians the first fruits of their harvest. In the second stage, both Turnus and Aeneas died; in the final

<sup>13</sup> Otis 393.

<sup>14</sup> Heinze 172–73 gives a full account of the evidence with appropriate references. See also Eden (1) 31–40 for an interesting and intelligent discussion on the possible anthropological evidence in Virgil's account. Finally, see Eden (2) 141.

<sup>15</sup> See above, note 11.

<sup>16</sup> Collected in *HRR* 44–47.

round of fighting, it was Ascanius who fought and killed Mezentius.

In Livy 1.2.3; 1.3.4–5, Trojans fought side by side with Latins against the Rutulians and Turnus. Latinus was killed; but the Rutulians were defeated, and Turnus sought an alliance with Mezentius and the Etruscans. Mezentius, fearing Trojan success and expansion, and with no special demands, agreed to join Turnus. Only later, after the death of Aeneas and the accession of Ascanius, did a final encounter between the Trojans and Etruscans force Mezentius to sue for peace.

Dionysius, *R.A.* 1.57, also records an end to the fighting that did not entail the death of Mezentius, though his earlier demand for the first fruits of the grape harvest is mentioned. Dionysius also attests a son of Mezentius, Lausus, whose death in an indiscriminate *mêlée* influenced the Etruscan king's decision to capitulate.

In the extant sources, then, there is no confrontation between Aeneas and Mezentius; Mezentius does not consistently make the impious demands for first fruits that earned him, according to Macrobius,<sup>17</sup> the epithet *contemptor divum*; nor is he inevitably killed. Nowhere in the sources is he described as an exiled tyrant, pursued by the just hatred of his people. Lausus is mentioned in only one source, where his death is distinguished neither by his filial piety nor by the fame of his killer; though it affected his father's decision to halt hostilities. Even if the details that seem to begin with Virgil did exist in a now-lost source, the fact remains that Virgil used them only by choice. More probably, Virgil wanted, for reasons that will become clear, to establish Mezentius as an isolated figure, an exile. He also wanted to distinguish him as impious; but as an exile who could not muster an army for alliance, Mezentius could not reasonably demand first fruits. Therefore Virgil omits that detail, leaving open the suggestion of more general and extensive impiety. The legend of Mezentius, then, rather than providing a narrative story to which Virgil had to conform, instead offered him scope for the most wide-ranging and serviceable invention.

We return to the question of why Virgil chose to make of Mezentius the archetypal tyrant, a figure, initially, of unrelieved villainy, isolated from the gods by his scorn for piety and from men by his cruelty and the hatred they understandably return. It has been suggested that Virgil decided to include an episode in the manner of a Greek tragedy on the

<sup>17</sup> Macrobius *Sat.* 3.5.10. Virgil creates a speech for Mezentius that reflects his impiety without reference to his demand for first fruits that is the basis for the charge according to Macrobius. He shows his knowledge of the other tradition by mentioning *primitiae* at 11.16; see Burke (2) 28–30. It is instructive to see how Virgil works the story: he knew the “first fruits” tradition and wanted to show that he knew it, but he needed a different symbol of impiety to emphasize in Books 7, 8, and 10; see Glenn (2) 7–8. For a rather different account of the impiety of Mezentius, see Henry on 7.648.

subject of tyranny and political excess.<sup>18</sup> Why he should do so, proponents of this view neglect to explain, aside from vague references to Sulla and Antony or allusions to Greek tragedy, extant or lost. Of the need for, or at least the presumable expectation of, dramatic integrity they seem entirely unaware. It is true that the episodic, Alexandrian epic gave a poet more scope for bringing in scenes and interests not entirely demanded by the narrative (though, as is usual with features of Alexandrian poetry, there is ample precedent in Homer); nevertheless, commentators who are content merely to discover other literary genres in the text of Virgil, like those who merely record literary allusions, fail to credit the poet with his genius for adaptation and application. The reader of such commentaries gets the impression that for Virgil the introduction of such allusive material was more in the nature of a self-indulgent display of erudition than an integral part of the texture of his narrative.

In another explanation of the Mezentius episode that seems to me *ἔξω τῶν δράματος*, G. Thome<sup>19</sup> suggests that Virgil has so adapted the Mezentius tradition and so presents the narrative in order to isolate the Etruscan people from the unlovely character of Mezentius and thus to overcome a contemporary animosity between the descendants of Mezentius and the Republican *epigoni* of Aeneas. I am unable to convince myself that Virgil would insert half a book into his poem to show a putative Northern audience that they had no legendary cause for resenting the Romans. They had sufficient historical reasons, as Virgil well knew.

It seems beyond question that Virgil created Mezentius as he did because he anticipated, and had something to gain from, changing his character. It would be a mistake to discount the technical challenge Virgil would have felt in effecting the metamorphosis from incarnate evil to an object of admiration and sympathy. As a craftsman, and an Alexandrian craftsman at that, he may have seen his ability to contrive his extreme reversal, to manipulate our responses, to force sympathy where he had earlier elicited fear and horror, as an artistic tour-de-force.

<sup>18</sup> So La Penna. Other scholars have looked to Greek tragedy for models to inspire the loathsome, awful character of Mezentius, again usually unable to explain why, dramatically, Virgil would have been thinking of an Ajax or a Creon. See V. Pöschl, "Virgile et la tragédie," *Présence de Vergile, Actes du colloque des 9, 11, et 12 décembre 1976* (Paris E.N.S., Tours) (Paris 1978) 73–79, esp. 74. For Ajax, see Sullivan 221–22, with the counter-arguments of Glenn (1) 130–33. For Creon, see La Penna 19 and note 27. But Creon never had the grandeur of Mezentius; his fall is piteous, not pitiful. Glenn (1)—see above, p. 194—found striking parallels for Virgil's description of Mezentius not in tragedy but in Polyphemus. But the scholars who seek a model for the evil Mezentius ignore the paradox that this is the same Mezentius who, in the manner of his death, becomes a forerunner of Turnus in a scene where the justification for execution by Aeneas is tempered by the poet's insistence on a measure of sympathy for the victim.

<sup>19</sup> Thome, esp. 199.

Poets of Virgil's persuasion, himself not excluded, are known to have viewed technical challenges in just that way. In the portrayal of Mezentius we find, quite beyond any other figure in the *Aeneid* and perhaps uniquely in the poem, "character development." We should not, of course, think of character development as we do, say, in reading a modern novel. That occurs neither in Virgil nor in any classical author. Indeed, Mezentius alters his character very little from the first to the last. Dido shows many more facets of personality, though they are all to be found in the characters of Hellenistic women in love, if not previously in any single persona. In the case of Mezentius it is the audience's response that is changed, both disappointed and broadened. Virgil effects this change deliberately; and there should be a discernible reason for it, beyond achieving a technical tour-de-force. I shall suggest that reason later. I should like first to suggest how compellingly, and with what rhetorical agility, he brings about the change.

From the legend, as we have seen, Virgil takes Mezentius' lordship of the Etruscans and the existence of a son; from his own alteration of the legend, he introduces the isolation resulting from political overthrow and exile; with these details he fashions his emotional metamorphosis. Lausus is introduced early at the side of his father in the catalogue in Book 7 (649-54). Though he is not mentioned in connection with his father in Evander's description (he would be rhetorically out of place in the *vituperatio*), the element of drama and the forebodings of tragedy are present from the first. There is a sharp contrast between the handsome, virtuous son and the brutal *contemptor divum*, the comment that the boy was deserving of a better father, and the explicit statement deliberately introduced by the prescient narrator that Lausus was leading his men from Agylla in vain (*nequiquam*).

The very mention of Lausus in the seventh book is enough to prepare the audience for some poignant evocation of the parent-son relationship in the future. Aeneas has already lost his father (3.710) and in a highly contrived encounter felt the rejection of his mother (1.405-9);<sup>20</sup> Virgil has already adduced the problematic figure of the liberator, Brutus, forced by responsibility to execute his sons;<sup>21</sup> he has made the elder Marcellus the grief-stricken, anachronistic witness to the tragic death of his Augustan kinsman (6.860-66); he has shown us Daedalus arrested by grief from representing the loss of Icarus.<sup>22</sup> Lausus, with Euryalus and Pallas, will later follow a pattern of pathetic family loss

<sup>20</sup> See below, p. 217.

<sup>21</sup> Infelix utcumque ferent ea facta minores:  
vincet amor patriae laudumque immensa cupido. (6.822-23)

This states the dichotomy that is at the heart of the *Aeneid*.

<sup>22</sup> 6.30-33, where the narrator intrudes to heighten the pathos.



broken only by the necessary exception of Aeneas and Ascanius. There is every reason to expect the death of Lausus and to anticipate that it will have some dramatic effect on Lausus' father and on *pater* Aeneas.

On a technical level, the isolation that Virgil created for Mezentius was, as the author well knew, a double-edged sword. It would contribute to the loathsomeness of the character only so long as he was in other respects detestable, invulnerable in his hatefulness. But it also had the potential for eliciting compassion. Virgil will tap that potential later; for now, his preparation is made.

The more immediate expectation is for a fight to the finish between Aeneas and Mezentius. The unremittingly evil side of the Etruscan, developed by Evander in Book 8, no less than his Homeric military prowess, described in 10.689–761, make the encounter dramatically inevitable. Virgil's treatment of that encounter is what brings about the change in our response and the transformation of Mezentius.

Fewer than 150 lines separate the moment that Aeneas and Mezentius face each other in single combat from the death of Mezentius at the end of Book 10. The encounter is interrupted for thirty-five lines in which Aeneas dispatches Lausus. Of the remaining 112 lines, thirty-five lines are devoted to no fewer than five speeches Virgil puts into the mouth of Mezentius, each of which calls for a different response on the part of the audience.

The Etruscan comes on the scene like a giant, compared to the constellation Orion, sprawled against the sky (763–67). He is given the first speech, one to which Aeneas, significantly, does not reply:

dextra mihi deus et telum quod missile libro,  
nunc adsint! voveo praedonis corpore raptis  
indutum spoliis ipsum te, Lause, tropaeum  
Aeneae. (773–76)

These lines sum up the character of Mezentius as seen to this point, awesome and magnificent in his pride and self-reliance, unreticent in his impiety. With this speech Virgil justifies the epithet *contemptor divum* for his own Mezentius. There are antecedents in Greek literature for a warrior boasting of his prowess independent of, even in spite of, the will of a deity; none for his making a god of his own right hand.<sup>23</sup> Parthenopaeus, in *The Seven Against Thebes*, says that, relying on his spear, he will take Thebes even against the opposition of Zeus; Idas, in the

<sup>23</sup> Apollonius, *Arg.* 1.466–70; Aeschylus, *Septem* 529–33; cf. the description of Capaneus, 422–31. See also Soph. *Ajax* 762–70, where the seer critically recalls the impious boastfulness of Ajax. See also above, note 18. Virgil may have had all this and more in mind. As to the specific speech, Virgil is accounting for the epithet, *contemptor divum*, without reference to the first fruits which, in his treatment, Mezentius as an exile cannot demand. See Heinze 213 and above, note 17.

*Argonautica*, claims that his spear wins him more glory than Zeus can. Mezentius goes a step beyond. In his indiscriminate scorn and his isolation the gods are no more than an irrelevancy. He does not even have the religious involvement of a defier of Zeus. As he will later say, *nec divum parcimus ulli* (880).<sup>24</sup> His fancy of setting up his son as a living *tropaeum* to the defeat of Aeneas is a Virgilian *color*, a conceit that deliberately perverts a commonplace and shows Mezentius' utter contempt for religious convention as well as his hybris as a warrior and the scorn he feels for Aeneas as an opponent. But for his audience, his mention of Lausus is also a signal, not of his affection for his son, but that the father-son associations are present, with tragic consequences, though Mezentius is totally oblivious and unconcerned. The religious emptiness of his vow, indicative of his contempt for the prerogatives of divinity, will take on meaning later when, standing over the corpse of his son, he mutely extends his hands toward heaven: *ad caelum tendit palmas* (845). For now, the audience's awareness of his vulnerability is to a degree intensified from the first introduction of the name of Lausus in Book 7, because now the words come, if uncomprehendingly, from Mezentius himself.<sup>25</sup>

Mezentius' next speech begins at 846. It is one of half a dozen lamentations for the death of a young man in the *Aeneid*. Anchises addresses the shade of Marcellus in the Underworld (6.868–83); Evander and Aeneas both bemoan the death of Pallas (11.42–58, 142–81); Aeneas' tribute to Lausus earlier in this book (825) bears some similarities; and the mother of Euryalus gets a long speech, 9.481–97. In the same rhetorical genre is Anna's lament over the body of Dido (4.675–85). Each speech is given its own rhetorical direction, appropriate for its place; none quite approaches the emotional intensity reached when Mezentius excoriates himself over the body of his son.

In Evander's lamentation for Pallas, memorable though it is, Virgil has the easy task of directing pity toward a good, helpless old man. The emotionalism is extravagant, as when Evander apostrophizes his late wife:

tuque, o sanctissima coniunx,  
felix morte tua neque in hunc servata dolorem. (11.158–59)

But, for the movement of the narrative, Pallas' father must have the perspective to exculpate Aeneas, whom he calls *pius*, and then to commit Aeneas to be his proxy in exacting vengeance on Turnus. With that,

<sup>24</sup> See Henry's note to 7.648 for Mezentius' complete unconcern for religious considerations. J. Glenn, "Odyssean Echoes in *Aen.* 10.800–82," *AJP* 102 (1981) 42–49, hears a reference to Homer's Cyclops.

<sup>25</sup> Lausus, of course, is sacrificed to Aeneas. The emphatically placed *Aeneae* is deliberately ambiguous; the sacrilege of perverting the *tropaeum* recoils on Mezentius (11.5–11).

Virgil introduces a new set of associations; and attention shifts, with responsibility, to Aeneas.<sup>26</sup>

Aeneas, as he prepares the body of Pallas for its return to Pallanteum, addresses a final word to the boy. He reveals his chagrin and sorrow that he was not able to protect the young man given by his father into his charge. But Virgil prefers to have Aeneas concentrate on the cruelty of fate and develop a tragic irony by adducing the image of a relieved Evander preparing for his son's triumphal return—a conceit more pathetic, certainly more painful to Aeneas, than if Virgil had actually described Evander awaiting with misconceived joy the homecoming of his son. Aeneas' speech ends by turning outward,<sup>27</sup> by looking at the death of Pallas as a public loss (11.57–58), just as Anchises had looked upon the untimely death of Marcellus (6.870–71).<sup>28</sup>

In Mezentius' speech there is no sharing of grief, no placing the tragedy in a larger context; there is only one emotion, seething and unrelieved: self-hatred. It comes from a man who to this point was incapable of guilt, remorse, self-doubt, or self-criticism. In it, with as little pity or consideration as ever he showed anyone else, he lashes out, inaccurately but with perfect psychological justification, at the core virtue of his being: his unswerving courage. No one else would think of criticizing Mezentius on these grounds:

tantane me tenuit vivendi, nate, voluptas  
ut pro me hostili paterer succedere dextrae  
quem genui? tuane haec genitor per vulnera servor  
morte tua vivens? heu, nunc misero mihi demum  
exitium infelix, nunc alte vulnus adactum. (846–50)

There has never been the slightest indication of a *vivendi voluptas* in this cold, cruel man. Nor is *paterer*, in the sense required here, in the slightest applicable.<sup>29</sup> Virgil invents for Mezentius a line of argument with the maximum scope for self-flagellation, an argument enhanced by the bitter insistence on the father-son relationship he only now appreciates.

<sup>26</sup> Putnam chap. 4 and others who cannot justify Aeneas' action at the end of the poem give insufficient value to 11.177–81. The death of Pallas and his own obligation to Evander are Aeneas' strongest motivating forces in the last quarter of the poem.

<sup>27</sup> 11.42–58 and 96–98, with a controlled, formulaic ending.

<sup>28</sup> Anna's speech over the corpse of Dido (4.675–85) begins with the emotional intensity Virgil elicits through the recognition, understood by Homer (e.g., *Il.* 22.482–89), of the resentment and betrayal felt by the survivor for the departed. Anna's situation is different from that of Andromache, in that, unlike Hector's wife, she was fooled into contributing to her loved one's death. Still, the tension resolves itself as Anna moves to a psychologically more tender, less complex feeling. The effusions of the mother of Euryalus I omit here, reserving for another occasion the demonstration that it is the most conspicuous rhetorical failure of the *Aeneid*.

<sup>29</sup> It is instructive to note that this is merely a different *color* for the theme of failure to protect one's charge, a theme Aeneas uses at 11.45–48.

Mezentius tortures himself with that most terrible of parental fears: that of a father surviving his son. It is a thought, to be sure, that will plague Evander (11.160–61); but since Lausus died to save his father, Mezentius can blame himself, accuse himself as if he had deliberately chosen the course of events. We feel the devastating emphasis of *quem genui* at the end of the first apostrophe more strongly for the lack of an antecedent. *Tuane* picks up and intensifies the first viciously self-lacerating question and introduces a consideration less hyperbolically masochistic, but more fundamentally horrifying. For this quintessential warrior the question of life and death had never been a consideration. His code was to enter battle neither giving nor asking any quarter, without regard for the prerogatives of gods or the opinion of men. From this independence came his magnificence. Only now does he realize that he had a hostage to fortune and that his freedom from fear about his own mortality was illusory. All this is summed up in the phrase *morte tua vivens*—an uncompromising statement of interdependence. Before this he could accept death with equanimity; and, as he tells Aeneas (878–80), he is still not frugal of his own life. What has changed is his realization that he is vulnerable to emotional pain. Thus, with *nunc* repeated in asyndeton and *demum* emphasized by final position unusual for adverbs:

heu, nunc misero mihi demum  
exitium infelix, nunc alte vulnus adactum!

his whole sense of life and living is altered. The mere acknowledgment of a human tie, an emotional dependency, can make him *miser*, as nothing before could. Now death can be *infelix*—as it was not for the mother of Pallas, who predeceased her son (11.159); under these circumstances a battle wound can hurt.<sup>30</sup>

idem ego, nate, tuum maculavi crimine nomen  
pulsus ob invidiam solio sceptrisque paternis.  
debueram patriae poenas odiisque meorum:  
omnes per mortis animam sontem ipse dedissem! (851–54)

These lines, marking the rhetorical movement with *idem ego* and the repetition of *nate*, introduce a more painfully convoluted level of self-destructive introspection, now that he understands he never had the luxury of total independence. He realizes that he cannot die with the insouciance he always believed he could count on. He also looks back to his earlier behavior as tyrant with a different perspective. His mistreatment of his subjects and his consequent exile reflected upon his son. For

<sup>30</sup> 10.850 exitium MRP<sup>2</sup>: exilium Pa Serv. Many critics accept *exilium* against the rhetoric. Mezentius deals with his past life, including his exile, in the passage that is introduced by *idem ego* and repeats *nate*. *Nunc*, repeated, refers to his present condition and imminent death. Cf. 10.159 *felix morte tua neque in hunc servata dolorem* and above, p. 200.

the first time he is forced to consider his past actions in relation to another human being, the only one for whom, as he now realizes, he had affection; and the thought hurts. The symbols of legitimate power he lost through exile were *paterna*, part of Lausus' birthright. It may well be, on the basis of this personal consideration, that if Mezentius had it all to do over, he would have been a less brutal tyrant. Yet there is no hint of public repentance on larger moral grounds, no apology to his people, no greater regard for the divinities. The debt that he owed his people never need have been paid or thought about.<sup>31</sup>

Mezentius is not a morally reformed character. His public persona will remain unchanged until almost the very end. But Virgil has so manipulated the situation that the audience is willing to make do with what little Mezentius concedes. He will not bend or capitulate, as did the Mezentius in the version of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, out of grief for the death of his son. Yet he is now established not only as a tragic figure, but as one for whom the audience has compassion.

nunc vivo neque adhuc homines lucemque relinquo?  
sed linquam. (855–56)

Virgil is working with the same rhetorical turn he used in Dido's last speech before she falls on her sword: *moriemur inultae / sed moriamur* (4.659–60). It might have made an effective curtain line here too, but Virgil is not through with Mezentius or with his audience. There are more, and more pathetic, words to come.

Mezentius is still as gigantic in civic and religious isolation and impiety as when first Evander described him, a man cut off from the society of his people and now of his son and all mankind. But now his isolation is a cause for pity; and Virgil pursues this line. The third speech is addressed to his horse, Rhaebus (861–66). Commentators remind us that in the *Iliad* both Hector (8.184–85) and Achilles (19.400–401) talk to their horses. Some remark on the appropriateness of the one truly Homeric figure in the *Aeneid* availing himself of this *topos*. But they fail to appreciate the deftness with which Virgil manipulates the *topos*. Mezentius, endowed with unaccustomed human feelings, cannot address gods or men; in a desperate, pathetic attempt to reach out, he communicates with the only form of companionship he can appeal to, a dumb animal. I am not insensible to the feeling of affection a man may have for an animal; I have been given to understand that this feeling is particularly strong between a horseman and his mount; the fact remains that

<sup>31</sup> *Sontem* does not argue against this interpretation. It has the sense of "adjudged as guilty" and is not necessarily a confession of one's own wrongdoing. The wish to exchange lives is echoed by Evander at 11.162: *animam ipse dedissem!*

this horseman is Mezentius and there is no one else he can address, without breaking his isolation. And Virgil will not have him do that, yet.

The speech of Mezentius to his horse also contains a sentiment not present in either of the Homeric passages to which the commentators allude:

neque enim, fortissime, credo  
iussa aliena pati et dominos dignabere Teucros. (865–66)

The apprehension is not foreign to epic. Hector fears the day when Andromache will be led off into captivity to serve a Greek master (*Il.* 6.453–56). Virgil, as usual, alludes to, redefines, and enhances his Homeric model, putting as much pathos into this concern for a horse of a proud, lonely man who has no ties to humanity, no wife,<sup>32</sup> now no son; only the newly-found need for companionship. I am impressed, not for the first time, with how dangerously Virgil flirts with banality. Also impressive, though by now perhaps not unexpected, is that Mezentius alters his exterior character very little in this reassessment. There is no palinode, no reconciliation, no conversion. Virgil has imbued Mezentius with the Homeric sensibilities of an Achilles and the personal humanity of a Hector, but without diminishing his now pathetic, yet still gigantic, isolation by making him extend himself to another mortal or a god. In so doing, he engages our compassion and our admiration simultaneously.<sup>33</sup> The audience does all the adjusting as Virgil elicits our sympathy through the private utterance of a man to a beast. Mezentius does not really break.

The fourth speech of Mezentius underlines how little reformed this self-sufficient man really is. This is the only one of the five speeches for which no literary antecedent can be found. In it Virgil explores the possibilities of integrating the vulnerability and the pathos of the loss Mezentius is suffering with his earlier sense of himself as a proud, independent, unbending epic warrior:

quid me erepto, saevissime, nato  
terres? haec via sola fuit qua perdere posses:  
nec mortem horremus nec divum parcimus ulli.  
desine. nam venio moriturus et haec tibi porto  
dona prius. (878–82)

This is, all in all, an extraordinary performance. When, at the beginning of the first half of the battle Mezentius offered his prayer to his right hand and his spear, Aeneas did not respond. Now, Aeneas has

<sup>32</sup> Except for the presence of a son, there is no dramatic reason to imagine a wife for Mezentius until Virgil can make some rhetorical advantage out of a mother of Lausus (818). For a parallel, see below, p. 209 and note 45.

<sup>33</sup> Glenn (3) 13, aptly quotes Heyne's appreciation of the intrinsic pathos of the scene.

prayed to Jupiter and Apollo, but Mezentius does not respond to Aeneas' words. Henry and others hold that Aeneas' brandishing of his spear occasions Mezentius' speech. On the other hand, though the Etruscan unquestionably does address Aeneas in this speech, Virgil has every reason to avoid the give and take of conversation—a convention of Homeric battlefield speech. In three speeches, Mezentius has addressed his right hand and spear,<sup>34</sup> the corpse of his son, and his horse. The only audience for any of these speeches, then, is the audience of the poem. It is as easy to believe that Mezentius in the first lines of this speech is looking inward with his painfully acquired new perception of himself and responding to a taunt Aeneas never uttered. Threats, however appropriately delivered in this Homeric situation, would never have held any terror for Mezentius. He had thought himself invulnerable to fear. No more does he fear death now; but, with his new insight, he knows that personal fearlessness does not meet all the concerns of a man in battle. This awareness corresponds to the lesson Aeneas learned in Book 2.726–29, as he ushered his helpless family out of the burning city of Troy:

et me quem dudum non ulla iniecta movebant  
tela neque adverso glomerati examine Grai,  
nunc omnes terrent aurae, sonus excitat omnis  
suspensum et pariter comitique onerique timentem.

Mezentius has learned too late that the element of responsibility to others interferes with heroic independence. In his case, however, the circumstances by which he learned the lesson simultaneously deprived him of the son who created his vulnerability. Now, because it is too late to matter, he can face Aeneas with the same recklessness, but a different man. Death will be the resignation of a hopeless man, not the transcendent glory of a warrior; or so it seems to him now.

With all this, he nevertheless insists upon his isolation and his impiety. *Nec mortem horremus nec divum parcimus ulli* is still his creed. The usual rhetorical order of the two sentiments would be, "Since I care not about death or any god, there was only one way you might have destroyed me." The reversal of the sequence is both deliberate and effective. The primary thought stands first, positive and alone, before the explanatory proposition, a bipartite, negatively expressed assertion that, by being last and syntactically independent, is not so dismissive as it otherwise would have been. This is still Mezentius; and again we observe the paradox that even as Mezentius retains his powerful outward personality, the audience is directed to change its attitude toward him.

<sup>34</sup> Rhetorically he also addresses his son; but even with the vocative in 775 we feel the outrageousness of the impious conceit rather than any sense of communication.

And Virgil has more. Mezentius gets one last speech; Virgil takes one last opportunity to display the rhetorical finesse by which he can manipulate the audience's response. Now Aeneas stands over the mortally wounded body of his arch-foe and taunts him with the kind of speech that is appropriate to epic. As we recall the Homeric parallels, we are reminded that neither Patroclus under the foot of Hector<sup>35</sup> nor later Hector himself, about to die at the hands of Achilles,<sup>36</sup> was robbed of words or dignity by his disadvantageous position. Virgil gives Mezentius a dignified speech; but, as usual, meticulously adapting the Homeric context to his own, he does much more:

hostis amare, quid increpitas mortemque minaris?  
 nullum in caede nefas, nec sic ad proelia veni;  
 nec tecum meus haec pepigit mihi foedera Lausus.  
 unum hoc per si qua est victis venia hostibus oro:  
 corpus humo patiari tegi. scio acerba meorum  
 circumstare odia: hunc, oro, defende furorem  
 et me consortem nati concede sepulchro. (900–906)

For the first time we feel that Mezentius is talking to Aeneas, not just at him. He now shows the full capacity of his altered character. He is still the warrior, magnificent in pride and courage, who will neither give nor take any quarter in battle. But now he relates that standard to the death of his son. At 902 Virgil extends the harsh, pitiless epic code into a full, sonorous tricolon, with a pathetic personal twist. *Mihi* after *meus* is insistent; *Lausus*, the third subject in as many clauses, closes the period emphatically in final position. We can now believe that Mezentius will, like Hector, ask a favor of his enemy; in fact, he asks for a larger one. Hector, in vain, begs Achilles to return his body to the Trojan people for burial.<sup>37</sup> Mezentius cannot ask for anything so simple; he begs Aeneas to take responsibility for preserving his corpse from the wrath of his people and to assure it a common grave with *Lausus*. For a man who was supremely confident in his isolation and self-sufficiency, Mezentius has come a long way. He has put himself in a position of utter dependence on another person—the enemy he so recently scorned with entirely characteristic contempt. He asks for more than life, and for more than Hector asked of Achilles. He also shows, by the perfect grace with which he accepts death, his confidence that the request will be granted.

It has become almost formulaic among commentators and critics who cite this passage to note that Virgil does not tell us whether Aeneas accedes to this request. That Aeneas cannot make a response of any kind

<sup>35</sup> *Il.* 16.844–54, where Patroclus predicts the death of Hector.

<sup>36</sup> *Il.* 22.337–43, where Hector asks that his body be returned for ransom. Homer includes this detail to reflect a facet of the character of Achilles.

<sup>37</sup> See Heinze 214 and *Il.* 22.338–43.



is a clear dramatic necessity. Any articulation would return to him a brilliant spotlight Virgil has been training on Mezentius. But that does not mean that the question is unresolved. A great responsibility has been enjoined on a man whose life seems to consist of having to accept responsibilities. Like so many others he undertakes, this office is frustrating and disquieting, for it prevents him from glorying single-mindedly in a Homeric victory.<sup>38</sup> But it is also a responsibility that grows out of the feeling a father has for his dead son. Mezentius has just learned the meaning of parental *pietas*. It seems inconceivable to me that Aeneas of all people could ignore Mezentius' expression of it. The last two lines of the book leave no doubt that Mezentius feels he has put things right with Lausus and can therefore die with equanimity:

haec loquitur, iuguloque haud inscius accipit ensem  
undantique animum diffundit in arma cruore.

Virgil accomplished the transformation of Mezentius largely through the variety of rhetorical stances he assigns to his character in the five speeches. Virgil was as well trained in the art of rhetoric as any other Latin poet, and more effective though less obviously so.<sup>39</sup> Whereas in Ovid and Lucan the abundance of figures of speech is a delight for commentators, Virgil's invention lies more in the realm of creating apt and highly imaginative *colores*, twists and variations of *loci communes*, and of manipulating the figures of thought by which they are expressed. But he is not content with limiting this aspect of his rhetoric to the speeches. Again and again in the narrative of these 147 lines, Virgil makes choices in presentation, uses both *inventio* and *dispositio* to contrive situations that force the audience to direct its compassion and admiration toward Mezentius. In these passages, even more than in the speeches, the shift of sympathies seems in some ways to diminish Mezentius' antagonist, Aeneas.

Until the very moment when the fight begins, the rhetoric strongly suggests that Mezentius is the greater warrior. He appears on the scene a gigantic figure, capable, like the massive constellation Orion, of dominating the horizon be it land or sea. Aeneas spots him and seeks him out; but Aeneas holds no terror for Mezentius. Philology does not help us to understand the sense of the singular adjective that next describes Mezentius, *imperfertus* at 770.<sup>40</sup> His utter lack of fear of, or respect for, Aeneas is clear from the way he describes him at 774, *praedo*. Mezentius

<sup>38</sup> Similarly, his obligation to Evander prevents him from sparing Turnus; see above, note 26.

<sup>39</sup> G. Highet, *The Speeches in Vergil's "Aeneid"* (Princeton 1972) 277–90, rightly points out that the speeches in Virgil owe more to poetic antecedents than to practical oratory. That they are not rhetorically constructed and expressed is a presupposition based on a narrower definition of oratory than I can accept.

<sup>40</sup> The word exercised Quintilian *Inst. Orat.* 1.5.65.

utters his arrogant prayer; Aeneas is given no response. So far, the Etruscan dominates the scene. Yet, the battle could scarcely be shorter or more anti-climactic. Mezentius' first and only thrust caroms off Aeneas' shield accidentally killing Antiores. Aeneas' turn is delayed while Virgil plays with the sad irony of *sternitur infelix alieno vulnere* and describes, with melancholy beauty, the death of the man from Argos.<sup>41</sup> The inclusion of this vignette here—this reminder that, however important for the heroic character, war is an indiscriminately cruel occupation—beyond creating suspense, provides a less than exhilarating background for Aeneas' achievement.<sup>42</sup> Now, the Trojan, on his first attempt, strikes his opponent, disabling him but not killing him. Their fight is suspended. The next thirty-five lines concentrate on the death of Lausus. But the specific impulse for the young man's foolhardy act of courage and the general theme of filial *pietas* keep Mezentius, though absent, firmly in our minds. Virgil insists on his rôle as *genitor* (789, 800). We await the effect that the inevitable death of the son will have on the father.

When the narrative shifts back to Mezentius, again as *genitor*, after Aeneas has killed Lausus, Virgil creates a scene of almost pastoral repose (833–38). The wounded warrior is enjoying a brief, blameless respite from battle, ignorant of the intense scene of heroism and, for him, personal tragedy that is being enacted on the battlefield. He rests, propped against a tree by the banks of the Tiber; the war seems far away. His helmet hangs benignly from a branch of a distant tree. Even his arms are described as tranquil: *gravia arma quiescunt* (836), a bold personification. All Mezentius' defenses are down. The irony of this apparent relaxation, supported by the contrast of his peaceful vista to the scene of ineffable tragedy we have just left—deliberately invented by Virgil to create a moment of unsurpassable poignancy—concentrates not only our attention, but also our feelings on Mezentius. For the first time he appears neither frightening nor malignant. And we also know what is in store for him. He will hear of his son's death while incapacitated, far from his natural milieu, stripped of that armor which is part of the persona of an epic warrior. So Virgil conceives the scene.

As the narrative eye focuses in on the man, we learn that, though he appears relaxed with his chin resting on his chest, Mezentius is far from tranquil; rather he is consumed by worry for his son. And Virgil plays the ironies: even as Mezentius sends repeatedly for some word of Lausus,

<sup>41</sup> Virgil learned from Homer how to fashion these pathetic vignettes reporting the deaths of otherwise unknown figures (see A. Parry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*," in *Virgil, a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. S. Commager [New Jersey 1966] 109); and he learned his lesson well.

<sup>42</sup> Horace, as usual, puts it a different way: *quidquid delirent reges plectuntur Achivi* (*Ep.* 1.2.14).

the body of his son is being carried back on the shoulders of his comrades. Virgil's articulation of the lines reflects the futility of Mezentius' efforts:

multa super Lauso rogitat, multumque remittit  
qui revocent maestique ferant mandata parentis.  
at Lausum socii exanimem super arma ferebant. (839–41)

The repetition of *Lausus*, the expressions *ferant mandata* and *Lausum . . . ferebant* with the change in tense, even the two uses of *super*, underline the cross-purposes.<sup>43</sup>

The irony of ignorance and futility is pathetic enough, but Virgil does not stop there. Everything must conspire to force the audience to reassess its original attitude toward Mezentius and focus its sympathy on him. He quickly, illogically, but successfully proceeds to describe Mezentius' *praesaga mali mens*, forcing the listener to dwell on the unusual rhythm. Even before he can make out the procession in any detail, the father knows what it represents. And only now, when it is appropriate for the father to defile himself in grief for his son does Virgil produce the detail, culled from a common storehouse of clichés going back to Homer, that Mezentius' hair was white with age, *canities* (844). The ploy may seem obvious, but it is effective. Page, referring to 838, already describes the beard as white;<sup>44</sup> La Penna repeatedly refers to Mezentius as "il vecchio tiranno." Yet, the characterization hardly seemed apposite a while earlier, when Mezentius was cutting through the Trojan lines.<sup>45</sup> Now that once self-reliant, brutal, impious man extends his hands to heaven in a futile, indefinable gesture, before embracing his son's corpse.

It would be difficult to point to another place in literature where the audience is forced, on such short notice, to alter its attitude and adjust the feelings it had previously been directed to have toward a character, except, perhaps, in the *Merchant of Venice*, when Shylock, suddenly stripped of everything that had given him comfort, begs leave to depart from the court, saying "I am not well."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Virgil may have gotten this from *Il.* 3.243–44, where Helen conjectures wrongly on the absence of her brothers, while the narrator passionlessly informs us that they lie buried beneath the life-giving earth of their homeland. If so, Homer was doing something more; in her incorrect surmise Helen reveals her sense of shame.

<sup>44</sup> Cited above, p. 192.

<sup>45</sup> See Glenn (3) 11, "Virgil has withheld until this moment the *fact* that Mezentius is an aging man," (emphasis mine) which seems to me the wrong way to understand what the poet does. Only now is it rhetorically effective for Virgil to make up this detail about Mezentius. So, the mother of Lausus, above, note 32.

<sup>46</sup> Sullivan 223–24, points to the development of the character of Lear, where, however, as he says, the change is gradual. Character development, as we generally think of it, is not a feature of ancient literature. I have tried to emphasize that Mezentius does not overtly change with each speech. The rhetoric becomes pathetic; and the response of the audience is

Finally, on the subject of narrative strategies employed to achieve a re-definition of Mezentius' character, we must add the last lines of the book:

haec loquitur, iuguloque haud inscius accipit ensem  
undantique animum diffundit in arma cruore.

This is certainly an example of a good and noble death; the references given in the commentaries to gladiators accepting the coup de grace with equanimity are apposite.<sup>47</sup> But what a world of psychological and emotional complexity Virgil adds. The associations of *haud inscius* go well beyond acceptance of the inevitable. It is a sadly gained knowledge of a very different sort that allows Mezentius to offer his throat to the blade, rather than to leave the scene complaining, as do Camilla and Turnus.<sup>48</sup> Starting out as the most loathsome, unsympathetic character in the *Aeneid*, Mezentius is permitted to make his peace most completely. And his equanimity depends on his conviction that Aeneas will honor his request.<sup>49</sup>

The finale of Book 10 would suffice to make a tragedy, if Virgil were writing the tragedy of Mezentius. Clearly, however, this was not Virgil's overriding concern, any more than in the fourth book he was writing the tragedy of Dido. In both cases, where Virgil is at considerable rhetorical pains to shift his audience's sympathy to a character in conflict with Aeneas, he necessarily shows Aeneas in a less obviously sympathetic light. This is a point that neither Page nor Henry addresses when referring to the death of Mezentius, although centuries of readers have been troubled by the same phenomenon when it occurred in Book 4, while some recent critics take a similarly dim view of Aeneas' decision, however reluctant, to kill Turnus in Book 12.

Oddly enough, contemporary readers seem less offended than their predecessors by the Dido and Aeneas episode. We no longer hear the

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occasioned by our observation of what happens when the potentiality for vulnerability is finally realized. It is only in the last speech, begun certainly in a manner conventional both for epic and Mezentius, that he is forced to do something patently out of character.

<sup>47</sup> See Page (citing La Cerda) and Conington, ad loc.

<sup>48</sup> *Aen.* 11.831, 12.952, inspired for expression by *Il.* 22.363.

<sup>49</sup> The suggestion was made to me orally—I have not seen it in the literature—that the death of Mezentius constituted a suicide, to be compared with that of Dido. The similarities between the two episodes are striking and significant. They make the difference in the manner and the matter of the two deaths the more remarkable. Dido's suicide is the desperate act of a despondent woman, an escape, but only a partial escape because she cannot know that Iris will be persuaded to perform the office that will give her peace. Mezentius' death, I contend, is a resolution, peaceful and secure; secure, because he is confident that Aeneas will perform the office that will bring him together with his son. A suicide, then, if one insists, but not profitably to be compared with that of Dido and not possibly to suggest a Stoic death. Mezentius' act is neither a freely chosen, courageous alternative nor an affirmation of self-sufficiency.

argument that in portraying Dido Virgil created an emotional barrier between his audience and his main character by so successfully eliciting the audience's compassion for Dido. It is not that we fail to sympathize with Dido—we are not convinced by the argument put forth by Dr. Johnson that Aeneas' treatment of Dido could be forgiven by his Roman audience only because she was a Carthaginian. Virgil intends his listeners to have a sufficiently sophisticated appreciation of the complexity of the human condition that they can extend a share of sympathy to each of the protagonists: to Dido, because like a long line of Hellenistic women in love she cannot withstand the force, here divine, of erotic emotion in a situation destined to destroy her; to Aeneas, because, for all his conflicting feelings of obligation, loyalty, and love, he is no more capable of controlling the situation than is she. He is as surely *impius* in her eyes as he is *pious* in the estimation of the narrator, who, nevertheless, leaves us in no doubt as to what Aeneas must do.

At the same time, it is impossible to read Book 4, Book 10, or even the end of the poem without feeling that Aeneas is in some sense diminished by these personal encounters. In the first two instances particularly, the antagonists get the more effective speeches, thus communicating their feelings more directly to the audience. In Book 4, though Aeneas is portrayed as caring and intensely uncomfortable with the position into which he has been forced by gods and fate, it is mainly our perception of his tragic plight throughout the whole poem that allows him to recover in our estimation from his exchanges with Dido. The shift of sympathy to Mezentius in the final 147 lines of Book 10, too, is deliberately wrought, calculated, and controlled. In the course of the narrative, Virgil invents scenes that take the glitter away from Aeneas, although Aeneas is clearly doing what is entirely appropriate and expected.

I now turn to what may be called the rhetoric of deflation in the final scenes of Book 10. There is, to begin with, a pattern of dissatisfaction that runs through the entire section, at least as far as Aeneas is concerned. The anticipation of a decisive single combat between Mezentius and Aeneas, raised by the early description of the Etruscan as a brutal, conscienceless tyrant, is only intensified by the revelation in 10.689–761 of his epic competence on the field of battle. When the two meet, however, only two blows are struck. Mezentius is immediately incapacitated, but Aeneas fails to dispatch his opponent. The interruption of the fight only serves to enhance Aeneas' frustration. We feel this in his almost uncharacteristic energy in pursuing Mezentius. Aeneas is at his best holding his ground against the shower of spears hurled by the enemy to cover Mezentius' retreat (802–10), but he finds himself face to face with a brave, altogether attractive young man who is inadequately attired for combat. Aeneas' victory over Lausus, to which I shall return, is blameless, but far from epic. It is, instead, an occasion for sorrow. When Mezentius comes back on the

scene, he is greatly altered from the audience's point of view, grievously wounded both physically and psychologically. As far as Aeneas knows, however, he is still the arch-enemy and the most formidable threat to the Trojans. The effort of sheer will and spirit that Mezentius exerts to get back on his horse is powerfully described to the audience (856–58); we are told of the conflicting emotions that motivate him to return to the fray, emotions growing from a circumstance that has turned the audience's sympathy toward Mezentius. He is no longer the object of unrelieved hate; and he is certainly no longer the military threat that once he was. Aeneas knows none of this as Mezentius circles him hurling weapon after weapon, allowing no opening. Deliberately, and in great frustration, Aeneas aims his spear not at his enemy but at the horse (888–91); that is the decisive blow. There are precedents in Homer for heroes winning easily, usually through the agency of a god; but they can still avail themselves of the privilege of taunting their fallen opponents. When Aeneas follows this pattern, he is treated to an entirely eloquent, appealing, and even sympathetic response. And we feel that, unlike Hector or Achilles listening to the last words of their vanquished foes, Aeneas has had, dramatically, much the worse of the exchange. Mezentius' final thoughts are of his son and a symbolic reunion in death, a reunion only Aeneas can effect. When the fatal blow is struck, Mezentius practically impales himself on the sword. Aeneas has done nothing wrong, but it is difficult to imagine that he can enjoy any feeling of fulfillment. Later, in his public stance and in a scene with a far different mood, Aeneas can utter the Homeric locution, *maxima pars effecta, viri* (11.14).<sup>50</sup> But now he is alone with the corpse of a man he has just killed, in life his most pressing enemy, in death a noble warrior and a grieving father whose last request is that he be buried with his son.

Reduced almost to a bystander by Virgil's treatment of the death of Mezentius, Aeneas had fared equally poorly when he killed Lausus, though the details of the scene are worked out quite differently. Commentators do not agree with each other—sometimes with themselves<sup>51</sup>—as to what happens in this scene. Lausus, motivated by filial piety (789) covers the

<sup>50</sup> Knauer 420 cites *Il.* 22.393 as a parallel. This suggestion goes back to Ursinus who is consistently cited, though nothing Aeneas says closely corresponds to Achilles' boastful utterances.

<sup>51</sup> Burke (1) 207–8, with notes, sees in the passage Virgilian criticism of "Aeneas' rage, blinded by which he slew Lausus," W. Anderson, *The Art of the "Aeneid"* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1969) 9, says of Aeneas, "He vents his anger on the guiltless Lausus," as part of the loss of "control of his passions." Yet on 85 he follows the sequence of the narrative, as does Otis 359. *Increpitat* and *fallit te incautum pietas tua* have been overtranslated to demonstrate a savage cruelty attributed to Aeneas. "Rebukes" is all that *increpitat* means; and the phrase is a reminder that discretion is the better part of valor. Lausus' response, *nec minus ille . . . demens*, allows no other interpretation.

retreat of his wounded father. The narrator immediately interposes an apostrophe, promising to do his best to immortalize the brave deed (791–93). Aeneas, robbed of his prey, stands firm against a storm of weapons; and when the cloud clears, he finds himself facing Lausus. Even at his peak of martial spirit he does not want to have to deal with this vulnerable, unequal opponent and tries to warn the youth off. Now the sequence becomes quite clear:

nec minus ille  
exultat demens; saevae iamque altius irae  
Dardanio surgunt ductori, extremaque Lauso  
Parcae fila legunt. (812–15)

Lausus in his madness ignores the warning and threat; Aeneas rouses his spirit for battle; and the Fates doom Lausus. Aeneas, as usual, has no choice; the tricolon of independent clauses, each with its own subject, underlines the inevitability of the chain of circumstances. Virgil will see to it that Aeneas gets no joy of his action.

All commentators, following la Cerda, point to the fact that when Aeneas looks upon the corpse of Lausus he is referred to as *Anchisiades* (822), reflecting the pity he feels for a young man killed in battle. It is no more casual that he is here referred to as *Dardanius ductor*, his official capacity. Epic anger wells in direct response to an immediate threat, as it must. But the outcome is in the hands of the Parcae. Virgil will make this victory unpleasant for Aeneas, but critics have no support in the text for attaching opprobrium to it.<sup>52</sup> The most striking thing about the fight is its lack of suspense or tension; Lausus is unequal to the contest (*levia arma minacis*, 817). The narrator describes no battle; instead, he draws from the clichés of rhetoric the *locus* of a garment lovingly woven or embroidered by the doomed warrior's mother. We encountered it as recently as 9.488–89, where the mother was Euryalus'. Two deliberate choices by Virgil, then—failure to portray a battle and the introduction of a fabricated, pathetic detail—direct the attention and sympathy of the audience away from Aeneas and toward Lausus. Aeneas does nothing contemptible, but there is something unsettling in the scene, captured in *tum vita per auras / concessit maesta* (819–20). At the same time, Lausus' lack of resistance makes Aeneas appear less unresolved and helpless than is his wont in instances where the audience is inclined to be critical of his action, e.g., the Dido episode and the end of Book 12.

From his responsible and properly executed rôle of *Dardanius ductor* he becomes *Anchisiades* as he looks upon the pallid face of dead Lausus; his mind inevitably turns to the pathos of the father-son relationship. Aeneas, the private man, the father's son, groans with pity—not

<sup>52</sup> Burke (1) 13 presents this point of view.

guilt or remorse. He shows his respect for this grand and futile gesture of filial piety and his admiration for Lausus' courage by foregoing his epic prerogative to the spoils of the vanquished and returning the corpse for burial. He offers as the only consolation the epitaph: *Aeneae magni dextra cadis*.<sup>53</sup> But Virgil will not end the scene in the Homeric mode, with Aeneas's victory. In response to the personal emotions roused by the death of Lausus, Aeneas will perform an office of *pietas* more dramatic than pronouncing an epitaph. It is both the strength and tragedy of Aeneas that, although he is never free of the responsibilities imposed by the epic world, he is involved with a nexus of emotions not generally associated with epic. The tension is ever-present and never resolved. This is what makes the *Aeneid* unique. In fulfilling Homeric responsibilities, he is almost invariably unsettled, frustrated, or sad.

increpat ultro  
cunctantis socios et terra sublevat ipsum  
sanguine turpantem comptos de more capillos. (830–32)

This overpowering tableau vies with the most evocative portrayals of pathos in Greco-Roman sculpture and must be one of the great unfinished gestures of ancient literature. The narrator shifts away, leaving Aeneas, frozen like a figure on a relief, holding the body of his defeated foe out to the paralysed comrades of Lausus. Servius has a note on this passage that suggests statuary.<sup>54</sup> We know that the poets of Alexandria and their Roman adherents delighted in transferring scenes treated in the plastic arts into poetry. Sections of poems and, indeed, whole poems are devoted to infusing with motion and emotion what were, or were conceived as being, representations in the plastic arts or tapestry. Here, Virgil is doing just the opposite. He brings the narrative action to a halt and presents this scene as frozen in time. Only later do we learn that Lausus' corpse was taken back, when his comrades are described bringing the body to Mezentius (841–42). For now, Aeneas stands alone; and we realize, not for the only time, that isolation is not a characteristic that is limited to Mezentius. Aeneas is as alone in his piety as was Mezentius in his pride. But Aeneas' solitude is

<sup>53</sup> The adjective *magnus* is epic, used when *magnanimus* is metrically inconvenient. The rhythm, diaeresis after a fourth-foot dactyl, like that above, *fallit te incautum pietas tua*, is striking. It suggests an abrupt termination, not quite satisfied that everything that might be said has been.

<sup>54</sup> La Penna 19 and note 27 cites Servius' comment on *comptos de more capillos*: "antiquo scilicet more, quo viri sicut mulieres componebant capillos: quod verum esse et statuæ nonnullæ antiquorum docent, et personæ quas in tragoedis videmus similes in utroque sexu . . ." La Penna believes that the tunic of Lausus may also have been inspired by statuary. But the capacity of both details for eliciting pathos should not be overlooked. On the interest of Alexandrian poets in the plastic arts, see R. Thomas, "Calimachus, the *Victoria Berenices*, and Roman Poetry," *CQ* 33 (1983) 92–113, esp. 96–97.



usually dutiful and sad, never magnificent;<sup>55</sup> and Virgil never quite musters the audience's sympathy for Aeneas in isolation as dramatically as he does for Mezentius. Saddened and wanting somehow to do honor to Lausus, he finds no one to accept his gesture.

If the transformation of the character of Mezentius Virgil effects is to be explained by the result it produces, we may say that its function was to reinforce and enhance a pervasive sense of frustration and personal unfulfillment in Aeneas that informs the poem. Virgil deliberately selected rhetorical arguments, introduced narrative details and contrived their treatment that had the effect of denying Aeneas the joy of his successfully accomplished, necessary tasks. This intention on the part of the poet to rob Aeneas of personal satisfaction is underscored by a dozen other major scenes in the *Aeneid*, including Aeneas' departure from the Underworld through the gate of false dreams and the controversial contrivance of events at the end of the poem. In the first case, he is prevented from the satisfaction of witnessing the triumph of Augustus (whatever else he sees in Anchises' vision) as the final success of his mission; in the other, he is forbidden by his epic obligation to Evander to follow his own merciful inclination. To support his intention of frustrating the private man, Virgil uses a variety of rhetorical tricks and contrivances, from succinct ironies of unavoidable ignorance to the drama of conflicting obligations in Book 4, where he can only fulfil his obligations to his people at the sacrifice of his personal feelings, to the major dramatic device of the transformation of the audience's attitude toward Mezentius. Had Mezentius died as a Hector or as a Cacus, the effect on Aeneas would have been entirely different. Instead, Virgil manipulated the situation so that Aeneas' victory gives him neither Homeric nor moral satisfaction.

Mezentius gets the last word and a peaceful death. Virgil shifts the emphasis of the scene from heroic to personal. We focus on Mezentius, a doomed father whose last thoughts turn to his dead son. Aeneas is deprived of the enjoyment of a moment in the Homeric sun and is seen as helpless to avoid the chagrin of being once more robbed of a chance for personal glory.

It is remarkable that in all Aeneas' frustration, suffering, and personal loss Virgil rarely goes out of his way to show his sympathy explicitly. Part of the reason is that Aeneas plays out his emotional scenes alone, not sharing his feelings with another character, sometimes, indeed, deliberately hiding them.<sup>56</sup> Generally, where there is a second character

<sup>55</sup> It is always motivated by *pietas*. Thus at 6.9, while his companions, with a burst of enthusiastic energy, go about establishing themselves on the shores of Italy, Aeneas must go off alone on his own mission: *at pius Aeneas*. *At* is emphatic.

<sup>56</sup> In Aeneas' first two speeches, 1.94–101 and 198–207, his frustrated, anguished prayer and the unfelt exhortation to his men, Virgil makes it clear that Aeneas is undergoing a personal tragedy with which we are to sympathize, although Aeneas cannot indulge it to the point of sharing it.

to share the stage, that character is the focus of sympathy—so Dido, Lausus, Turnus at the very end, and, through the contrivances described above, Mezentius. In the Dido episode, the narrator tells us of the pain and frustration Aeneas is suffering, but he does not give Aeneas the same scope to express his pain that he gives to Dido. Similarly, Virgil silences Aeneas for much of the encounter with Mezentius, letting his audience concentrate its attention on the Etruscan, isolating Aeneas in the execution of his duty. It is as if a convincing articulation of Aeneas' own grief or frustration would constitute a dramatic victory for his human side. Mezentius can enjoy such a victory; Aeneas cannot. Here, as in the Dido episode, Virgil has achieved the most daring of rhetorical *tours de force*: in the midst of speeches, tragedies of silence. I earlier referred to the *Merchant of Venice* and the character of Shylock as a parallel to the abrupt, unanticipated switch in the audience's response. There is this difference, though: when Shakespeare directs our sympathies to Shylock, we part company with Portia and her friends. Though Virgil makes us view the death of Mezentius with admiration and sympathy, we do not, or should not, lose our sympathy for Aeneas for whom the events have been frustrating, disquieting, and painful. Instead of a clean victory, he is left with yet another responsibility, the request of Mezentius by which no audience could fail to be moved.

Aeneas, as characterized by Virgil, is deserving of our sympathy even at those moments when he can say least to elicit it. Virgil too often, too ingeniously, too patently contrives situations to the pathetic disadvantage of Aeneas for the audience to ignore what is happening. Consider Aeneas in one of his last utterances, his only speech to his son, the living symbol of the divine destiny to which he has devoted his life and sacrificed all personal satisfaction.

disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem  
fortunam ex aliis. (12.435–36)

Parallels are found in Homer, Sophocles, even in Accius for this sentiment.<sup>57</sup> In Aeneas' words there is an irony that makes them far more affecting than the utterances of Hector and Ajax. Both those men were facing certain death; Aeneas' *fortuna*, the fortune of Rome, is destined for the most conspicuous success. Only Aeneas can look upon his magnificent achievements, at no point in the narrative more assured than now, as an ineffable sadness. But the audience, conditioned by Virgil, can understand his attitude.

The reason for this intention has been variously explained by members of what W. Ralph Johnson, in a masterful exposition and synthesis of the trends, has referred to as the "somewhat pessimistic Harvard

<sup>57</sup> *Il.* 6.476–77; *Soph. Ajax* 550–51; *Accius fr.* 156 R<sup>2</sup>.

school" of Virgilian criticism.<sup>58</sup> The tendency has been to see Virgil as a prophet of gloomy prognosis for an Augustan Empire fatally flawed by the toll it takes of personal *pietas* or humanity. The character of Aeneas is understood, with varying and sometimes conflicting emphases, as symbolic of frustration, pain, dissatisfaction, perhaps even moral degradation resulting from devotion to an inhuman, if not inhumane, cause. In pursuit of this interpretation and a viewpoint not uncongenial to contemporary times, the critics who constitute this "school" have ignored one important aspect of the *Aeneid*, the successes of Aeneas that are never impugned or qualified as achievements by Virgil. Against the painstakingly worked fabric of frustration and personal loss, everything Aeneas is destined to do or be comes true. He gets to rescue his people from Troy and shepherd them safely through Carthage to Italy; to descend into and ascend from the Underworld; to wage unavoidable war successfully in Italy, winning the support of Evander, and disposing of Mezentius and Turnus to conclude peace with the Latins. Typically, Virgil makes Aeneas suffer personal loss or frustration precisely when the narrative is otherwise most optimistic. Right after we hear Jupiter's assurances of the success of Aeneas' mission, he has a disquieting meeting with his mother, culminating in the pathetic utterance, *crudelis tu quoque* (1.407). His victory over Mezentius is another case in point. Occasionally Virgil will reverse the pattern: it is in the midst of Aeneas' despondency over the loss of Creusa that she appears to him as a Shade with an optimistic prediction expressed in almost lyrical terms (2.776–89). No compensating sorrow or loss tempers the positive note of Tiber's prediction and assurance of help (8.36–65). In response to an omen sent by Venus, Aeneas becomes almost ecstatic (*ego poscor Olympo*, 8.534). Admittedly, such moments are rare, but they do relieve the melancholy.

It has taken some time for critics to stop looking at the *Aeneid* as some kind of Romantic epic. Perhaps it is time to stop expecting that it should portray a world in which the deepest human conflicts of choice and responsibility, love and honor, ambition and sacrifice, are satisfactorily resolved at the end; and to stop looking, in the absence of such a resolution, for a statement of unrelieved gloom and pessimism on man in society or society itself. It is a hard world; a world about which the souls of Camilla and Turnus, about which the river Araxes bitterly complain;<sup>59</sup> a world in which the most eloquent spokesman for innocent, primitive Latin virtues, Numanus, is cut down by Ascanius, the hope of the future of Rome;<sup>60</sup> a world in which fathers mourn the untimely deaths of their

<sup>58</sup> Johnson 9–10 and note 10.

<sup>59</sup> 11.831; 12.952; 8.728.

<sup>60</sup> See 9.603–14 in the context of the entire speech, 598–620. It is hard to imagine that Virgil, as an antiquarian scholar of Italy, would find much fault with Numanus' description.

sons in battle; a world in which Virgil denies to Aeneas more than two or three moments of personal satisfaction. It is also the world of the restoration of peace in Rome, of the expansion of Empire abroad, of unparalleled success and security for people who had grown up among the ravages of civil war. Can such gains be won without personal sacrifice? Even to ponder whether Virgil would on balance have chosen personal fulfillment over public duty is to be unhistorical and to attribute to him a mentality that probably did not exist before Romanticism, Freudian solipsism, and the cataclysm of the 1960s that gave new definitions to words like "passivism" and "patriotism." It is only against the reassuring fact of the death of Mezentius that Virgil can explore the ironies of Aeneas' personal response.<sup>61</sup>

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N. Horsfall, "Numanus Remulus: Ethnography and Propaganda in *Aen.* 9.598f.," *Latomus* 30 (1971) 1108–16, argues convincingly that Numanus' speech is not a paean to the joys of country life or, in any sense, a pastoral. While an Augustan Roman would hardly yearn for the tough realities of primitive living, such a regimen is to be considered preferable to *the Latins' view* of the Trojans' life style, discussed by Horsfall, 1113–15. This view comes up too often in the poem to be ignored, though Virgil, I think, deals with it indirectly. In a sense, Aeneas' entrance into the hut of Evander, 8.362–65, marks the conversion of Aeneas from an Easterner, with the attendant overtones of luxury and effeminacy, to a serious, hardy Roman.

<sup>61</sup> I wish to thank the Department of Classics at Princeton University for their generous invitation to spend 1982–83 there as a Visiting Associate Professor. It was at Princeton that this paper was conceived and produced.