

VIRGIL FATHER OF THE WEST¹

ST. Thomas in affirming that the Birth of Christ took place at the time which was most fitting²—*convenientissimo tempore*—supports one of his arguments with the fact that the governance of a single ruler, the Emperor Augustus, had given the world that most mighty peace—*maxima pax fuit in mundo*—in which Christ Himself chose to be born. That temporal peace was instinct with tranquil expectancy. Men who looked to Jerusalem and to Rome as their Mother Cities were filled with hope: for the Jew, now under the *Pax Romana*, the lines of prophecy and portent were swiftly converging upon Bethlehem. Rome herself, so lately racked with civil strife, was ready to turn from bloodshed and proscriptions as 'from a horrible nightmare, and to apply all her energies to reconstruction, and even to hail, in the *Pax Augusta*, the dawn of the new Golden Age.'³

Ultima Cumaevi venit jam carminis aetas;
magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo,
jam redit et virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna,
jam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.⁴

Now hath the last age come, foretold by the Sibyl of Cumae;
Mightily now upriseth a new millennial epoch.
Justice the Maid comes back, and the ancient glory of Saturn;
New is the seed of man sent down from heavenly places.⁵

Her power was at its zenith, her most brilliant writers expressed for her the standards of human virtue and justice

¹ Essays in Order : 14. *Virgil Father of the West*. By Theodor Haecker. Translated by A. W. Wheen. (Sheed & Ward, 1934; 2/6.)

² IIIa, Q. 35, art. VIII.

³ Mackail, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, Introduction, p. [xix].

⁴ Virgil. Eclogue IV, 4-7.

⁵ Rev. T. F. Royds, *Virgil and Isaiah*, p. 75.

which were fitting her for her true destiny. The time of growth had been painful; and her development seemed to evolve with the rhythm of a living organism which absorbs what is good and rejects what is harmful. Carthage after a life and death struggle was destroyed utterly, for its roots were full of poison: Greek culture was taken in its native decline and grafted upon the hardy stock of Roman virility, for the unlettered Roman was man enough to realize his shortcomings, and humble enough to go to school and learn truth from Athens, fitting himself thereby to learn more perfectly the Truth of Christ's Revelation. Nor was the world ever so perfectly disposed, nor shall be again, as then when it was guided by the voice of one sole prince and commander of the Roman people, as Luke the evangelist beareth witness. And therefore there was universal peace which never was before nor shall be, and the ship of human fellowship was speeding straight to due port in tranquil voyage. O ineffable and incomprehensible wisdom of God, which against thy coming into Syria didst make so great preparations beforehand in heaven above and here in Italy.⁶

Jerusalem the City of God had her prophets: Rome the City of man had her part to play in the divine plan as the instrument of Christ's sovereignty, so she too must have her prophet to sing of her triumph and to make her destiny known for all time. Neither professional philosopher nor academic historian could play the part; the one with his abstractions and concepts was too remote from the generality of man, the other with his material facts too narrowly confined to inspire the heart of mankind with his message. The poet alone, with his sensitive touch and intuitive perception, could be the prophet of Rome; one who could sing his burden in a language and a rhythm tried by predecessors, who had attuned the ear of the listener to delight in his song.

⁶ Dante, *Convivio*, IV, v. 8. Wicksteed's translation in Temple Classics, Dante, pp. 247-248: quoted in *Labourers in the Vineyard*, Giovanni Papini, pp. 222-223.

Virgil was the man designed by Providence to sing the story of Rome and her destiny. Out of a vigorous school of poetry, built upon the forms and conventions of Greece, 'a new voice in poetry had made itself audible, and it was the voice of a new life. A poet who in his earliest work already had, beyond all mistake, a grave sweetness, a tenderness and grace (the *molle atque facetum* of Horace's admirable characterization), a melodiousness of language and beauty of phrasing previously unknown.'⁷

His work too was to show all mankind the simplicity, the upright character and the unsullied purity of a man whom his contemporaries referred to as 'Parthenius, the Virginal.'

Every circumstance combined to produce the single man who could immortalize Rome at the instant of her greatest renown, and could stand as the living symbol of a culture which, far from withering, would attain its finest flower in a Christian setting. The network of province and prefecture, the roads, the organization of external order does not by any means sum up Rome's contribution to Christendom: the humanism which she garnered from Greece and informed with her sound moral sense was an indispensable factor in guaranteeing the validity of the familiar principle that divine grace comes to complete human nature. A power greater than mere coincidence placed Virgil, the spokesman of humanism, within a generation of Christ's birth.

Giovanni Papini has recently drawn attention to the capital importance of Virgil as the Roman prophet of the Advent,⁸ and there is now accessible to English readers in the latest of the *Essays in Order*,⁹ a work on a larger scale from Germany which supplements Papini's lecture in pointing to Virgil as the Father of Western Humanism. The Messianic note is less pronounced, for Herr Haecker's

⁷ Mackail: *op. cit.*, p. [xxviii-xxix].

⁸ Papini: *op. cit.*, pp. 218-251.

⁹ Haecker, *op. cit.*

brilliant essay tends to emphasize the cultural importance of Virgil as the supreme exponent of true classicism. This should gain for him a ready hearing in England, where Messianic zeal is tempered with a scholarly discretion, by the many scholars who love Virgil both for his poetic genius and for his tender human sympathy.

Economic Revolution has cut us off irrevocably from those Augustan days when an apt phrase from the *Georgics* would spring to the lips of the English landowner as he rode round field and farmstead: when Parliamentary oratory sparkled with quotations from the *Aeneid*. Whatever the faults of the oligarch, he cultivated his mind with as much care as he cultivated his land; and his inspiration in each case was principally drawn from the poet who fashioned classical humanism for all time in the music of his incomparable hexameters.

For most of us to-day Virgil means little more than a fleeting memory of the class-room; nevertheless, there rests in the mind a fragrance that mellows the raw judgment of immaturity, even upon the 'pious Aeneas'! Those who by necessity or inclination return to Virgil in their manhood, light upon him with all the marvel of an individual discovery, independently of Christendom's universal veneration, which Dante symbolized by choosing Virgil for his guide.

Herr Haecker places under his debt all who look for the marriage of true humanism with the Faith. Virgil is revealed by him as the man who 'fulfilled the measure of all the good in paganism on the threshold of the Advent.' Aeneas stands as the hero who achieved his divine destiny by obedience and hardship, the embodiment of virtues that the Love of God would quicken to form the groundwork of Christian sanctity.

Virgil stands as the link between old and new, the living pledge of continuity between the ancient and the modern world, showing in his work humanity disposed in the fullness of time to receive the Son of God made Man, and assuring us that the Incarnation should be regarded not as an

interruption so much as a fulfilment. Continuity is also the characteristic note of his life, for the three works which he wrote form part of a 'continuous organic development.' The Book of the Shepherd reveals Eros as the life-force, the fertilizing element of *justissima tellus* and the dynamic instinct of animate nature, which in man produces conflict with the Spirit. In the Book of the Husbandman, *labor improbus*, toil in the sweat of the brow, bridles and disciplines Eros in the work of cultivation. 'The Shepherd plays, the Farmer toils, so that the earth shall in the fulness of her justice yield her best fruit.'

The Book of the Hero stands as the consummation of classic art which is, in Herr Haecker's words, 'the result of the intimate encounter of a great creative power with a great theme, such that each would seem almost to have grown to match the other.' Virgil had the greatest of all themes before the Advent, 'the whole myth and history of Rome in the hour of her triumph,' and upon the threshold of that universal peace which ushered in the birth of Christ. Aeneas in his character embodies every virtue that the Roman wished to practise: without him it would be hard to explain how 'the Romans became Christians as the conquerors, not as the conquered; as the civilizers and bringers of culture, not as the barbarians.' In the life of his hero Virgil shows how the *Imperium Romanum* could by a free act submit to a Jewish Saviour: in Aeneas lies the key to the riddle whereby the divine State destroyed itself by adopting the only religion which must perforce stand above the State.

Aeneas has no true parallel in classical legend. He is a hero in defeat, whose home lies irreparably ruined, whose destiny awaits him in a far-off land: he is *fato profugus*, no self-appointed chieftain, but a man dedicated to leadership and restoration, from whom Rome draws the inspiration not simply to build, but to rebuild, an accomplishment which the Greek cities never mastered. His outstanding quality is *pietas*, which Mackail describes as 'the steady fulfilment of duty to God and man,' its salient activity be-

VIRGIL FATHER OF THE WEST

ing expressed in the mutual relationship of father and son. In this man of action is submissive endurance, with no taint of that Promethean element of rebellion in Roman eyes so fatal to order. Even so, he is human enough to express feelings that will not accommodate themselves with the Divine Will: he longs for Troy, his home.

Me si fata meis paterentur ducere vitam
auspiciis, et sponte mea componere curas;
urbem Trojanam primum, dulcesque meorum
reliquias colerem.¹⁰

If the fates
As I might order, let me lead my life,
And, as I would, my troubles set at rest,
First would I dwell within the town of Troy,
Among the sweet remainder of my folk.¹¹

No hero of the ancient world draws nearer to Christian lowliness and obedience. He sails away from the fires of Carthage, smaller and meaner in the eyes of many for his desertion of Dido, realizing fully the dreadful cost of his vocation and destiny.

The Rome he comes to, *quae nunc Romana potentia caelo aequavit*,¹² 'which Rome now in her potency has raised to level of the sky,' is a tiny hamlet of scattered huts where a refugee and fellow in defeat bids him enter his humble dwelling with words that Rome can never forget:

aude hospes contemnere opes et te quoque dignum
finge deo, rebusque veni non asper egenis.¹³

Have courage, guest,
Wealth to despise, and mould thyself like him
Worthy to be a god, and come to us
In no disdain of our poor circumstance.

¹⁰ *Aeneid* IV, 340-343.

¹¹ Delabère May's translation is used for this and the following quotations from the *Aeneid*.

¹² *Aeneid* VIII, 99.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 364, 365.

Rome accepted Aeneas instinctively as the complete delineation of her ideal, both in what he lacked and in what he possessed, a man lacking in the wisdom and art of Greece, but excelling in governance and leadership, built upon human virtue rather than upon brute force, upon consent rather than conquest. 'She knew herself to be founded not upon a conqueror, but a defeated man.'

The teleological factor is dominant; the hero has a mission to fulfil at the bidding of fate. Virgil, who does not attempt to probe this mystery, makes it the great theological theme of the *Aeneid*: he treats of it as a poet, not as a philosopher, taking the Stoic view of Fate as an utterance, of which truth is the essential condition. 'Truth is a necessary predicate of the Virgilian *fatum*, for the first question which is asked of an utterance is whether it is true or false; only afterwards do questions arise as to its desirability or not, whether it is obligatory or free, good or bad. The ultimate being is an utterance. This is the profoundest mystery to which adventist paganism penetrated.'¹⁴ Fate for Virgil, in Warde Fowler's words, is 'the positive principle which brings order into the universe, the desire of all things to seek their τέλος. Virgil believed in the genial destiny of Rome as a Jew believed in the Kingdom of the Messiah.'¹⁵ For him the person of Jupiter becomes 'at once the utterer and the utterance: he himself is the fate'¹⁶: in this the *divom pater atque hominum rex*¹⁷ seems to foreshadow the *beneplacitum Dei* of Christian theology. 'This is the summit and perfection of Virgil's theological ideas.'

Herr Haecker in a chapter of great sensibility shows Virgil's readiness to leave Stoicism far behind him and to draw nearer to Christ when he faced the tragic conflict between man's aspirations and his destiny. Face to face with

¹⁴ Haecker, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁵ Warde Fowler, *Aeneas at the Site of Rome*, p. 122.

¹⁶ Haecker, p. 88.

¹⁷ *Aeneid* X, 2.

this, Aeneas the ideal Roman could only say *sunt lacrimae rerum*, 'the most untranslatable half-line in the whole of the Aeneid, and for that matter in the whole of Roman literature—it is not to be translated into German nor any Romance language, nor yet even into English. It is Latin through and through. Not only does it tell us there are things over which men will shed tears—that is but the first and obvious interpretation; it tells us that things themselves have tears; or rather, there are things to which there is no answer but tears; things that cannot really be faced or fully known but through tears—and sometimes not even through them: *aut possit lacrimas aequare labores*, 'can tears outweigh our toils?' None but the bloody tears of the Son of Man, the Second Person of the Trinity. All that in three words! No language but Latin could do it.'¹⁸

The *anima Vergiliana* faced with burdens too heavy to bear cannot deny his true manhood by sterilizing his sensitive nature with a proud Stoic endurance; he finds consolation of mind as well as of body in those tears which the modern pagan can never experience. Neither in the Roman nor in the man of the Middle Ages was there a trace of sentimentality; but the one gave us *lacrimae rerum*; the other has placed our supplication to the Mother of God *in hac lacrimarum valle*, 'in this valley of tears.' 'How near the poet of adventist paganism comes with his immortal line, '*sunt lacrimae rerum*, to the approaching Revelation—remote from it, a stranger to it, yet relatively as near as were the Hebrew prophets.'¹⁹

Virgil has depicted the nature of man more completely than any other pagan writer before or since, at the moment when mankind was best disposed to receive God in the likeness of man, when man's ideal of *homo purus* was most ready to hear and receive Christ. The *homo Vergilianus* is not an isolated, closed type of humanity: he is not just political man, economic man, scientific man, man of the

¹⁸ Haecker, p. 93.

¹⁹ Haecker, p. 100.

BLACKFRIARS

world, religious man, 'monads without windows': he is man, recognizable by men of every place and time. Herein is Virgil's essential sanity: he strikes straight at that modern heresy of closed human types, which springs from an invalid application of scientific method to a creature who is by his very nature *causa sui*. 'The science which concerns itself with human beings is to-day more and more exercised to discover, or rather to invent, large and small and smallest of closed human types and enclaves, and jealously to see to it that no one of them shall have anything whatever to do with another, so that there shall no longer be any such thing as man, nor shall the walls that are erected between them show the smallest chink or transparency whatever.'²⁰ Men who will recognize the nature of a dog in such highly differentiated types as the Alsatian and the Pekingese will consider it absurd to grant anything in common between the man in the car and the man in the cave. When such a view is current in fiction and in journalism—and in certain types of spiritual instruction—it is hardly surprising that we find ourselves differentiating separate 'lives' within our consciousness for our different activities. Our religious 'life' tends to cut itself off more and more from our world 'life.' We become slaves of the card-index and suffer the loss of our own soul!

Virgil saves the identity of human nature under every condition and circumstance; in the organic development of his work 'the natural man, who must be farmer and statesman as well as philosopher, is found at his purest, his most natural.'²¹ As with Aristotle, so with Virgil, Providence has entrusted sound commonsense to the pagan, so that the nature of man redeemed and man unredeemed may remain identical in its substance, that there may never be an irreparable cleavage between the natural and the supernatural. Divine grace is most fruitful when man suffers no misconception concerning his own nature. If education and

²⁰ Haecker, p. 2.

²¹ Haecker, p. 119.

VIRGIL FATHER OF THE WEST

human environment tend to develop closed types of humanity, the work of the Church becomes progressively more difficult, since the nature which divine grace must energize is warped and crippled. Catholic humanism goes to Virgil, not as a refuge from a state of things it dislikes, but as a teacher who gives a human reply to any system or school which would deaden the spirit of man, and thereby hamper the Spirit of God.

Men of every generation from St. Augustine down to Cardinal Newman have discovered Virgil by the light of their own experience to be, as Herr Haecker so truly names him, the Father of the West. Like Isaias, he was and still is the prophet of Christ, whom we may greet in the words of the ancient Christmas salutation sung in the Cathedral of Rheims: 'O Maro, prophet of the Gentiles, bear thou thy witness unto Christ.'

AELWIN TINDAL-ATKINSON, O.P.