

odoratum lauris nemus (Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.658)

Nicholas Horsfall

Virgil commentators are very numerous; so are the problems they have left unresolved. Thus when lecturing recently on *Aeneid* 6, I realised that I had no explanation to hand of why there was a grove scented with laurel in Virgil's Elysium. One of the least attractive and most unhelpful commentaries on that book appeared to provide an answer: H.E. Butler cites Stes. fr. 8/185 *PMG* (= S17 Davies): ὄδ' (Heracles) ἐς ἄλσος ἔβα δάφναισι †κατα/σκιον ποσὶ †παῖς Διός (no obeli in *PMG*). On the context Robertson and Page agree:¹ the return of Heracles to Tartessus to restore the golden bowl to the Sun. Now Stesichorus was widely read in Augustan Rome,² and given that Virgil shows ample acquaintance with both Pindar and Bacchylides,³ there is no *prima facie* reason why he should not have read Stesichorus too,⁴ though discussion is complicated by the many problems that the *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina* continues to raise.⁵ But that is not the point which I hope here to resolve. With improved understanding of Virgil's compositional techniques, it becomes at times less important — though this may seem paradoxical — to establish whether or not Virgil read a particular passage of a given Greek author.

Virgil's underworld still drives critics to perplexity, or frenzy, above all if they concentrate on the whole and not, more prudently, on the many details as yet imperfectly understood. His Elysium is subterranean only in the most formal

¹ M. Robertson, *CQ* 19 (1969), 216; D.L. Page, *JHS* 93 (1973), 149.

² Horsfall, *JHS* 99 (1979), 37-8.

³ Pindar: A. Setaioli, *Encic. Virgiliana* s.v. *Pindaro*, Horsfall, *PLLS* 6 (1990), 53 n. 20.; *id.*, *Vergilius* 35 (1989), 11 n.19. Bacchylides: B. Gentili, *Encic. Virgiliana* s.v.; but note the scepticism of J. Farrell, *Vergil's Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic* (Oxford 1991), 107 with regard to the "classic" instance in *G.* 4.359ff.

⁴ *Encic. Virg.* s.v. *Stesicoro* (R. Rocca) is sadly confused; it is quite irrelevant that the Julio-Claudians had a splendid villa at Misenum, whose eponym has a minor role on the *Tab. Il. Cap.*

⁵ On the *Tab. Il. Cap.* Davies *ad* Stes. fr. 205 is in strong disagreement with my 1979 discussion (above, n. 2). That was not an easy paper; some have been content to follow the brief summary in F. Castagnoli, *Stud. Rom.* 30 (1982), 8 with n. 39, as shown by shared error. I pass over the resulting confusion.

μᾶλλον ἐπίδειξιν ἢ δόκησιν ἀρετῆς ἐπιτραγωδουμένη καὶ καθ' ἅπασαν ἰδέαν ἐκβέβηκε τὴν ἀρχαίαν εὐτέλειαν.

Dionysius is certainly not saying that Roman triumphs preserved their ancient simplicity until the time of Augustus, and only then became wasteful and ostentatious.

4. The structure of 4.24.4 is different, but perhaps not significantly so. Servius Tullius established the custom of conferring the citizenship on manumitted slaves. Roman slaves at that time obtained their freedom by good behaviour; 'Ἄλλ' οὐκ ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνοις οὕτω ταῦτ' ἔχει, ἀλλ' εἰς τοσαύτην σύγχυσιν ἦκει τὰ πράγματα καὶ τὰ καλὰ τῆς Ῥωμαίων πόλεως οὕτως ἄτομα καὶ ῥυπαρὰ γέγονεν [so that slaves get rich by robbery and prostitution and buy their freedom and Roman citizenship]. ἔχει is counterbalanced by ἦκει which has a perfect sense, and by the perfect γέγονεν. In Dionysius' days Augustus was actually taking steps to remedy the situation complained of in this passage; the deterioration which led to it had of course taken place much earlier. The perfect and the present tenses are virtually interchangeable in such a context. Closely similar to 4.24.4 are the passages where Dionysius describes ancient Roman institutions or customs, and then says that they are different in his time (using the present tense) while it is clear that the change took place long ago — 1.78.5; 6.90.3; 8.37.3; 10.7.6; cf. 2.74.4.

To sum up: in describing the customs and institutions of archaic Rome, Dionysius is constantly comparing them with contemporary practice. Whenever he can, he notes that the custom described "is still observed in our times" (cf. note 28 above). When contemporary practices are different from the ones established by Romulus, Numa Pompilius or Servius Tullius, Dionysius says that the institution in question is different/is changed/has changed (all those expressions are interchangeable) "in our times". The change is usually presented as a result of falling standards, as a relaxation of pristine strictness, discipline, severity or simplicity — this is perhaps how Dionysius regards the change referred to in 4.21.3. When the change took place is almost never indicated, since Dionysius is interested not in giving a survey of Roman history from ancient to modern times but in a comparison between ancient and contemporary Roman society; 2.11.3, referring to Gaius Gracchus, and perhaps 5.77.4, referring to Sulla (though not purporting to describe a permanent change) are exceptional. But in all the passages mentioned here it is obvious that the change had taken place long before Dionysius' time; and nowhere in the *Antiquitates* does Dionysius refer to a change that occurred under Augustus. κείνηται ἐν τοῖς καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνοις may well refer to the results of the third-century reform of the centuriate assembly.

and superficial sense; that it owes much to visions both of the Isles of the Blessed and of the stellar ascent of the Soul has long been recognised.⁶ Thus the presence of an *odoratum lauris nemus*⁷ “underground” is in itself entirely unsurprising. The powerful but pleasing aroma of the laurel is likewise familiar in ancient texts.⁸ But why laurel? Not, clearly enough, because of any widespread connection between laurel and the world of the dead.⁹ In Stesichorus, perhaps on account of the chain of associations laurel-Apollo-Sun. In Virgil, one has perhaps to look a little harder.¹⁰ Virgil’s Elysium contains not only athletic victors (642-3) but also, with majestic and clearly significant repetition, poetry and song, both in general (644, 657 *laetumque choro paeana canentis*, directly before our laurel grove, 662¹¹) and in particular: both *Musaeum ante omnis* (667) and, first of all, Orpheus (655-7). Virgil thus not only indicates his sense of the divine origin and celestial benediction of poetry, but also ingeniously and elegantly ‘signals’, as in many other passages,¹² nourished by a rich Alexandrian awareness, allusive or explicit, of the sources of the epic, that he wants his readers to be aware of the Orphic origin of much of what follows.¹³ The laurels may, therefore, be Stesichorean, or they may not be: I am not convinced that they must be. What is clear is that they are programmatic and poetical. The delights of Virgil’s Elysium are high-minded and restrained: they represent a moment of

⁶ Norden’s preface (ed. 3, 1927, 20-48) to his edition of *Aen.* 6 is still an amazing feat of scholarship. For more recent discussion, cf. A. Wlosok, *Res humanae — res divinae* (Heidelberg 1990), 384ff. = *Listy Filologicke* 106 (1983), 13ff.; A Setaioli, *Encic. Virg. s.v. Inferi*.

⁷ It is at least nearly certain that Virgil wrote *lauris* and not *lauri*; cf. Austin’s commentary *ad loc.* and M. Geymonat, *Stud. Class. Or.* 14 (1965), 92ff.

⁸ Tib. 1.3.62; Virg. *Buc.* 2.54f.; cf. the frankincense of Pind. *Threnoi* fr. 129.3f. Maehler.

⁹ M. Blech, *Studien zum Kranz*, *RVV* 38 (Berlin 1982), 93.

¹⁰ I consulted 16 or so commentaries and sufficient works of reference before deciding that *Aen.* 6.658 needed explanation.

¹¹ Cf. Blech (above, n. 9), 312ff. Pascoli notes well (*Epos* [Firenze 1958], 245) ‘peane e lauro sono di Apollo’; cf. already Serv. *ad Aen.* 6.657.

¹² Cf., for the Hellenistic precedents, the material I gathered at *Athen.* 66 (1988), 32 n. 13. For Virgil see now my *Virgilio: L’epopea in alambicco* (Napoli 1991), 103ff.

¹³ Setaioli (n. 6), 957ff., Norden (n. 6), 34ff.; cf. Ps. Plat. *Axiochus* 371c for a similarly verdant paradise in a c. 4 BC text often notably close to Virgil. Cf., too, A. Dieterich, *Nekyia* (Leipzig 1893), 121.

particular decorum on the road from *Od.* 4 to the Schlaraffenland, on which I, and surely too my old friend Ra'anana Meridor, was raised.¹⁴

Rome

¹⁴ For the Isles of the Blessed and related gardens, see E. Rohde, *Der griech. Roman*³ (Leipzig 1914), 192ff. (= 205ff.), P. Capelle, *ARW* 25 (1928), 245ff. and 26 (1928), 17ff., M. Nilsson *GGR* 1² 324f., M. West on Hes. *Erga* 171, S. West on *Od.* 4.563, Barrett on Eur. *Hipp.* 742-51, B. Gatz, *Weltalter, goldene Zeit, Spudasmata* 16 (Hildesheim 1967), 188. For later developments, cf. A. Lumpe in *RAC* s.v. *Himmel*, and for Schlaraffenland, A. Graf, *Miti, Leggende e Superstizioni del Medio Evo* 1 (repr. Roma 1989), 17ff.