On Reading the *Aeneid*

"What is a classic?" is the title of the Presidential Address given to the British Virgil Society by T. S. Eliot during the dark days of World War II in 1944. For Eliot the key idea is maturity: "A classic can occur only when a civilization is mature, when a language and literature are mature; and it must be the work of a mature mind." The poet who for Eliot possesses these qualities is Virgil, and the epic poem that embodies them the *Aeneid*: "Our classic, the classic of all Europe, is Virgil."

Fifty years after Eliot spoke these words, I would expand his definition to include America, particularly the United States. I suggest too that this same quality, maturity, is essential to understanding the poem. Finally I argue that maturity is the quality of Edward McCrorie's fine new translation that most recommends it to readers. It is mature in a way that other American verse translations of the poem are not.

Poets of course, even those breaking untraditional ground like Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, to name three poets very different from Virgil, work with or against a tradition and when they sit down to compose a poem, a long line of poetic predecessors sits just behind them, peering over their shoulders. The would-be poets in turn constantly glance through rear-view mirrors at their artistic forebears. Virgil did so and so does Edward McCrorie.

In my town, Amherst, Massachusetts, for example, Robert Francis, a poet of the first rank, was heir to two other Amherst poets, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. Frost's poems often recall Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, and Dickinson, Horace's *Odes*, among other poets who influenced them. The two Roman poets in turn look back to and continue, again, not exclusively, the Greek Lyric and Bucolic poetic traditions.

In epic poetry, our subject here, a straight line runs from Milton to Dante, through Virgil, back to Homer. The challenge for the poet working in the epic tradition is to work within this tradition, discreetly calling attention to his own literary predecessors, those a literate reader would recognize, while at the same
time working fine, subtle variations on the stock themes and language of epic in order to make his own distinctive voice heard. This is less a contest to establish who is the better poet than to say: “My verse reflects and is a continuation of yours but is different from it, in fact uniquely mine, not a mere imitation of yours.”

The Aeneid is a work that establishes the Roman accomplishment—its tradition, history, and culture—as in every way equal to that of the Greeks; it is also, because of the universal themes it contains, a poem that resonates with what is essential to larger human issues and experiences, including our own American experience. It is not only a poem about Rome. Eliot’s dictum needs to be enlarged upon. Our classic, the classic of the entire West, is Virgil.

Maturity. To understand Virgil’s poem, its relationship to its Greek predecessors, as well as the importance of the Aeneid in interpreting Augustan Rome and our own American immigrant experience, a different kind of maturity is required. In addition to the kinds outlined by Eliot, the Aeneid requires maturity of its reader. A mature reader will bring to the Aeneid a set of experiences—those acquired in life and vicariously by reading—against which to compare Virgil’s words. Where this is not the case, for example, among young readers who are deficient in terms of life experiences, if they are able to bring to the poem a literary imagination, one based on good prior reading, the very act of coming to terms with the ideas and language of the Aeneid can be a maturing experience in itself.

Ambiguity provides a good test of a reader’s maturity for it is present in Virgil’s poem in a way that it is not in Homer. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the final scene of the Aeneid, the climactic confrontation between Aeneas and Turnus. After Aeneas takes Turnus’ life, and in a most brutal way, readers rightfully ask whether this death is justified, whether Aeneas goes too far, whether Turnus might have been spared. The Aeneid ends in this haunting, perplexing way and it is left to the reader to ponder the resolution.

In the Homeric poems by contrast, similar questions do not linger in the reader’s mind. In the Iliad and Odyssey it is more a question of when, less of why or if. When will Achilles return to battle to avenge his friend, Patroclus’ death? When will Odysseus and his son Telemachus slay the suitors, all one hundred plus of them, the slaughter itself being a foregone conclusion?

What Virgil asks of his readers is above all an imagination that does not view the poem, and life, in narrowly defined, shadow-
free terms. The *Aeneid* introduces readers young and old to a world very different from Homer’s, one however that an imaginative mind, even without a knowledge of Homer, can enter into and enjoy. The *Aeneid* does not presuppose a knowledge of Homer, but with such a knowledge, the experience of the *Aeneid* becomes an even richer one.

In my experience as a teacher, the *Aeneid* initiates adolescents into the varied levels and complexities of the adult, Virgilian world. Young adults, on leaving Virgil’s poem, should be better prepared to understand their parents’ world and the adult world they themselves will soon be entering, for it is this world that Virgil’s poem explores.

Virgil’s hero Aeneas is a complex character. Compared to the decisions and choices he is called upon to make, Homer’s heroes Achilles and Odysseus inhabit more circumscribed moral, social, and intellectual worlds. Achilles’ sense of honor has been violated by the Greek general Agamemnon. Achilles’ prize, a slave woman, has been taken from him and he will be satisfied with no other. The best of the Achaeans warriors therefore refuses to fight. He retires to his tent and the tide of battle turns against the Greeks. Achilles returns to battle only when his best friend, the beloved Patroclus, dies in his stead, and wearing Achilles’ own armor.

Odysseus, after a ten year’s absence fighting at Troy and a decade of dalliance and delay in making his way home, uses every trick and stratagem his cunning Greek mind can devise finally to reach Ithaca. There, with the help of his son, Telemachus, and two faithful retainers, the swineherd and the cowherd, he slays the suitors and, with Athena’s assistance, once more establishes his right to rule as king in Ithaca.

Two tests remain: the secret of the marriage bed that only he and Penelope possess—eventually he passes this test—and his recognition as son by his father, Laertes, in the final book of the *Odyssey*. By showing his scar to his father and by exactly describing the orchard that Laertes had planted when Odysseus was a boy, the son proves his identity to his father. It is his last, and perhaps most difficult, test. Note that Odysseus *reestablishes* himself as husband, son, father, king in Ithaca. He returns to that which he was before setting out for Troy. His odyssey, as we shall see, is very different from Aeneas’ journey, in almost every respect.

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are each brilliant masterpieces in their own right, finely honed epics, the products of over five hundred years of oral storytelling in the Greek tradition. They are the
time-tested predecessors of the *Aeneid* and themselves the beginning of the Western epic tradition, yet they portray very different worlds from that of the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* begins where the other two poems end. Where Achilles is faced with three major decisions, Aeneas has manifold choices to make: to leave or defend Troy; to return, placing his mission at risk, and search for his missing wife, Creusa, in the burning city, Book 2; to help Dido to found her city or to leave her, Book 4; to accept the Roman mantle his father, Anchises, metaphorically places on his now-Roman shoulders in Book 6 (does he understand what took place in Book 6 or was it all a dream?); in Book 8, to lift to his shoulders the Shield and to accept the Roman future depicted there as he had carried his father from the destroyed city in Book 2; to slay or spare, first, Mezentius, then that enemy’s loyal, devoted son, Lausus, in Book 10; to make a similar choice of his Rutuvian opponent, the great Italian leader Turnus, in Book 12. As his father had ordered him to do in Book 6, “spare humble men and war on the prideful,” so Aeneas again and again is confronted by difficult choices.

While by contrast, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* offer less ambiguous, more cutout decisions, Aeneas is faced with a series of grey-colored choices, where conflicting demands sway him now this way, now that. The world of the *Aeneid* is less a clearly defined word of precise choices required in a more primitive, heroic society, choices of an earlier, less complex, Homeric civilization. Rather, the *Aeneid* involves multidimensional, agonistic choices, often between greater and lesser degrees of good and evil. Such choices exist in the more advanced, developed civilization of the *Aeneid*, a world of history and politics, philosophy and literary tradition, assimilation and mimesis, spheres almost entirely absent from the Homeric poems, as intricate, detailed, and sophisticated as each of these poems is.

Books 6 and 8 of the *Aeneid* provide good examples of such differences. At the end of Book 6, Anchises identifies for his son the individual Roman heroes parading past them. These heroes, descendants yet unborn, begin with the Alban and Roman kings and end with Virgil’s own time, with Julius Caesar, Gnaeus Pompeius, and Marcellus, Augustus’ adoptive son and heir apparent. The son of his sister, Octavia, Marcellus died young, age nineteen, in 23 B.C., a few short years before Virgil’s own death in 19 B.C. Similar historical references are absent from the Homeric poems.

*Aeneid* 8 concludes with the Battle of Actium, 31 B.C., the
defeat of Cleopatra and Antony—the order is significant—by Augustus and his naval commander, Agrippa, effectively bringing to a close the civil discord and chaos that ensued after Julius Caesar’s assassination in 44 B.C. Augustus is now the sole survivor, the new princeps of the state. The Republic has ended; the Roman Empire is born.

Historical references of this sort are foreign to the Homeric poems—an important distinction—and effectively define the Aeneid as a poem about time, about history, about tradition and the historical process, how Rome and the Roman Empire came to be:

... Juno’s fierce and remembering anger caused him to suffer greatly in war while founding a city, bringing his Gods to Latium, leading to Latin and Alban fathers, to high walls of the Romans.

(1.4–8)

The Aeneid contains more differences than similarities with its Homeric predecessors. It represents an essentially different poem from the Homeric accomplishment.

Why is this so? The Homeric poems reflect earlier aspects, some eight hundred years prior, of the continuing western tradition that form the basic groundwork of Virgil’s poem. Virgil had to create a different kind of epic. With the Aeneid, the epic tradition takes a cyclopean step forward, one that requires a more advanced level of understanding, maturity, on the part of its readers. It is a maturity the poem itself helps readers to achieve.

My first exposure to the Aeneid was as a high school teacher in Delaware in 1959 at a private boys’ high school. I was in my late twenties, married, the father of one son. I had lived away from home after college doing postgraduate work in upstate New York, leaving home for an extended period for the first time in my life. In my last year of college, I had also lost my father and sister within a six-month period. Finally, after a number of false starts, I had determined on a life’s work, to teach Latin and the classical humanities, something I have done ever since.

The main events of my life described here, as I learned from teaching the poem for the first time, had parallel analogues with events of Books 1–6 of the Aeneid. It was a revealing experience for me as I worked through these books with my class for I felt as though my own life were being described in the poem, as though Virgil were speaking directly to me, so closely did I identify with the events portrayed in them. I was not aware of it at the time, but
the poem was also indirectly preparing me for events, as yet unforeseen, later in my life. Best of all, as I now realize, it was doing the same thing for my students.

They were young, seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, high school seniors, younger in years than I but equipped, many of them, with solid English and Latin reading skills—they were fourth-year Latin students—and they had received a good grounding in literature from their English and romance language courses.

Here was the great thing about the Aeneid that I and my students discovered that year. While the Aeneid is the defining story, at one level, of how Rome and Roman civilization came to be, the poem is above all a highly human story, one that reflects and foreshadows moments common to all of us as we make our way through life. Like every truly classic work, the Aeneid, while recalling past events, was also preparing me and my students for events in our lives as yet unknown, events most of us eventually do experience.

This, I can now say with assurance, is an important reason, perhaps the main reason, for reading this work. It calls upon our mature selves, and in those areas where we are lacking in maturity it helps us to become more mature: it is itself part of this process.

When we are young, the Aeneid shows us what being an adult entails—it partly helps us to grow up; and when we are older, the Aeneid recalls those experiences we have already had, offering a yardstick by which to compare how we responded to significant moments in our lives.

The Aeneid is a poem that treats of human nature and the human condition, and what it means to be adult, a mature person. It is a poem of parents and children, particularly but not exclusively fathers and sons, of love won and lost, of suffering and sorrow, of hope and achievement, of facing obstacles and overcoming them, of confronting the demons without and within us, of showing us how to live and, by implication, how to die. It is a classic for these reasons too.

The Aeneid is also an “American” style poem. People emigrate, they follow religious or economic destinies, they travel far, westward, in ships, they take on the journey only their most precious objects, sacred and familial, to a new world as yet uncharted, to an undefined future, and to the obstacles encountered and to be overcome there. This is a story most American immigrant families, like Aeneas on his journey, can echo event for event.

And yes, the Aeneid also reflects the American story of confronting indigenous peoples and presents a study of the assimi-
lation of foreign culture with the native traditions. To Virgil’s credit, this assimilation is unlike the American experience, which is more the shameful story of imposing foreign traditions upon the native cultures and destroying the native tradition in the process, traditions we brought with us from the foreign cultures.

The Aeneid also presents the story of the subjugation of native peoples, but with an important difference: instead of destroying the native traditions, assimilation took place, that of the invading people with the native culture. The result is a culture neither Italian nor Trojan but a Roman blend of the two. This fact helps to explain, at least partially, why native people like Camilla and Turnus are portrayed so sympathetically in the poem.

In the light of such subjugation, Virgil’s poem raises the age-old question: does the end ever justify the means? and if so, under what conditions? In Aeneas’ opponents one can limn many a Native American, just as one can see parallels to modern concerns in the conflicts between the Trojans and Rutulians, on one level, and between Aeneas and Turnus on another. Since both sides in the Italian conflict trace their lineage to Greek-speaking ancestors, one can also see the theme of Civil War experiences, brother fighting brother, carried out by the poet.

Here then are two ways to read the poem, ways that help to define it as a classic work. Experienced readers and imaginative younger readers alike can each read and reread the Aeneid at important junctures in their lives. The poem presents new opportunities for growth and understanding at each of these stages, at each rereading. Very few works of literature can pass this test. The Aeneid can, it does, and it corroborates Eliot’s idea that maturity is the key to understanding Virgil’s poem.

Maturity of the translation. Edward McCorrie’s new line-for-line, verse translation of the Aeneid is also characterized by the word maturity. The work before you contains these qualities of a mature, readable translation: fidelity to the original, musicality, modernity, and movement. A word on each.

Fidelity. This translation provides for Virgil’s poem what the translator Richmond Lattimore has supplied for the Iliad and the Odyssey, a rendering of the original text into English that is faithful to the language and spirit of Homer, in this case, Virgil. McCorrie does this for Virgil’s poem. So closely does Lattimore follow Homer’s language that students of Greek find it a most helpful tool to use in their own translation of the poem. To their amazement they discover the Lattimore version to be so true to
the original that it is almost a word-for-word, line-for-line translation, often retaining the very order of the Greek words, a difficult feat given the differences between the two languages. McCrorie's translation shows these same virtues.

In Lattimore's Homer, nothing is omitted, every metaphor is translated, nothing is glossed over. Yet—and here is the astonishing part—the result is a highly readable and poetic work in English. McCrorie matches this accomplishment. He slights neither his obligation to Virgil's text nor the responsibility he has to his second-language readers, a fine line to walk—and he does so gracefully. Finally it can be said: we possess a Lattimore-quality translation of the Aeneid, true to the letter and the spirit of the original.

Musicality. Choosing a five-, sometimes a six-beat poetic line, one which mimics the dactyl-trochee rhythm of the last two feet of the Latin line, using harsh consonants to suggest harsh actions, and softer, more euphonic sounds to portray less harsh moments, often too with enjambement or run-over lines as in the original, McCrorie has given us a highly musical reading of the Aeneid. The poem begins:

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris

which he renders:

My song is of war and the first man from a Trojan coast . . .

Note the use of cano; "I sing" becomes "my song." The Aeneid, as with all Roman poetry (or for that matter, most later poetry that it inspired), is meant to be sounded out, read aloud, sung. Certain kinds of Latin poetry, lyric, for example, are meant to be accompanied by a musical instrument, a lyre, again with emphasis on how one hears the poetry. How else explain all the care the poet and his translator lavish on the precise way the language sounds? Put this present translation to the reading-aloud test. You will discover it to be melodious, rhythmical.

Modernity. McCrorie's choice of poetic language is modern without being solipsistic or slangy, is idiomatic yet formal and majestic, is neither stilted nor pedantic. Other translators, in order to make Virgil more up to date, have opted for less formal language and a faster moving line. Taken with other omissions and glosses, this produces a quickly moving line but one that is not
quite true to Virgil. The slower paced, more majestic rise and fall
of the original, its sonority and mellifluousness, its operatic quali-
ties—all of which we get in McCrorie—are sacrificed in these
other translations to a quicker pace, a faster reading. The result,
it may be argued in these other translations, is perhaps a more
colloquial translation, but less the formal poem Virgil created.

Again McCrorie achieves a delicate balance between language
attuned to a late twentieth-century ear while maintaining the eu-
phony and cacophony, the consonance and dissonance, stateliness
and symphonic cadence of the original. Here too fidelity to the
Latin text is not sacrificed to a more modern rendering.

Movement. Together with the orchestral-like music and the
elevated tone produced by it, the reader experiences the passion
and emotion of the Aeneid in this translation. It affects readers,
involves them in the story, makes of them active participants. One
cannot be a passive onlooker in this tale. Each reader will have
favorite passages once the book is read, but one that I would cite
to show movement in the translation is in the last scene of the
poem, what McCrorie describes as “Single Combat.” In the fol-
lowing passage, note how closely the Latin word order is retained
in English, including the run-over, or enjambed, lines and how
rapidly the lines move:

Cunctanti telum Aeneas fatale coruscat,
sortitus fortunam oculis, et corpore toto
eminus intorquet. murali concita numquam
tormento sic saxa fremunt nec fulmine tanti
dissultant crepitus. volat atri turbinis instar
exitium dirum hasta ferens orasque recludit
loriae et clipei extremos septemplicis orbis:
per medium stridens transit femur. incidit ictus. . . .
(12.919–26)

While he delayed, Aeneas kept flashing the deadly
spear. He spotted a chance: he threw from a distance
with all his force. Stone from siege-slings have never
roared or smashed at a wall, nor has lightning and
thunder
cracked so hard: appearing dark as a whirlwind,
bearing its grim conclusion, the spear went flying and
broke through
the corselet’s edge, the seven-fold shield at the bottom,
grinding, and tore through thigh. Turnus was buckled. . . .
McCrorie, like Virgil, spent many years on this work, and it shows.

The story is told of James Fenimore Cooper, 1789–1851, author of the Leatherstocking Tales, whose best known work is The Last of the Mohicans. Cooper's father founded Cooperstown in upstate New York, near the Finger Lakes region where many of the son's novels took place. The future author liked to read aloud to his family and one day, when he was thirty-one years old and at the exact midpoint in his life, not yet having published any novels, he is said, according to his daughter Susan, to have thrown aside the book he was reading and declared: "I can write you a better book than that, myself!" Whether or not this story is apocryphal, Cooper went on to write fifty books, including thirty-three novels during a thirty-year writing career, travel books, political works, and a history of the U.S. Navy. (He had joined the Navy after being dismissed from Yale.) A not undistinguished record, and his daughter started it all.

The translation before you has a similar genesis. My friend Ted McCrorie tells me that his daughter Jeanne was unimpressed as a high school student with two or three English versions of the poem and asked him: "Why don't you do one?" This translation, many revisions and 10,000 lines later, is the result. Will it be as long-lived as the Cooper novels? It deserves to be.

Above all, as both of these stories indicate, literature, especially Latin literature, is meant to be read aloud. Family reading-aloud is fast becoming a lost art in this country. Read this poem aloud, to yourself, your family, your friends. I believe it is a version of which both Susan Cooper and Jeanne McCrorie (now Jeanne McSweeney) would approve. It sings.

Vincent J. Cleary
University of Massachusetts at Amherst