

## THE NARRATIVE COMPOSITION OF BOOK 8 OF VERGIL'S *AENEID*: NEW INSIGHTS

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### Introduction

In Vergilian scholarship, a good deal of attention has always been paid to Book 8 of Vergil's *Aeneid*. The book's textual references to the site of Rome and the Roman times post Aeneas, the *ecphrasis* of the famous shield, and its position within the narrative structure of the poem make Book 8 one of both the most attractive and rewarding in this epic for many classicists. Furthermore, in the last two decades several very useful methodological tools were introduced into the field of classical scholarship and applied successfully to Vergilian narrative technique, Don Fowler's narratological analyses being the most prominent of them. Taking into account also the opinions of the so-called 'pessimistic Harvard school' tracing the 'further voices' in the text of the epic, one might suggest that Vergilian scholarship has been experiencing a certain extension of its interpretative scope.

In the study that follows I shall try to develop some of the thought-provoking ideas of Vergilian scholars. I shall focus on the narrative technique of Book 8, analyse *textual representations of Roman past and history*, including the shield of Aeneas, and consider them with regard to the reader of the *Aeneid*. An ensuing interpretation of Vergil's way of story-telling in Book 8 brings new insights into the process of how actual and fictional components of the text act and react within the narration, and it reconsiders the artistic representation of the shield from the narratological perspective.

### A narrative setting

Book 8 occupies an important position in both the composition of the poem and the structure of the story told. After Aeneas' wanderings, dramatic events in Carthago, and the hero's descent to the Underworld, the poet switches our attention to the arrival in Italy and the situation in Latium before the outbreak of war. The narrative tempo is thus being slowed down and the focus shifts to the key figure of Aeneas. Before we make an identical step, we shall examine the *other key component of the narrative* – the *setting* in which the book's characters take actions and the way this setting has been literarily represented by Vergil.

The fact that there is a considerable number of allusions to Roman history and references to it in the text of the *Aeneid* is not surprising, and it has been pointed out by many Vergilian scholars. These 'reflections of events and persons in Roman history', to quote Camps' words (1969: 103), are spread within the poem and run throughout the narrative.

The nature of these references justifies fully the term ‘net’, since Vergil uses them in a very sophisticated manner: they enable him to *constitute a conceptual framework* on which the reader’s assessment and understanding of the poem is based.

These references are naturally of varying importance and they have impacts on different narrative levels – on a semantic level, lexical, con/textual, and even symbolic one. Furthermore, some of these allusions seem to be obvious and easy to decipher, whereas others remain hidden and indirect. Yet, all of them participate in the process of how Vergil’s literary representation of Roman history and Aeneas’ character are perceived and imagined by the Roman reader. They make up the principal components of the *textual narrative setting*.

If one tried to classify, at least approximately, these components into specific groups, the first examples of them, related to military life, are found at the very outset of the book. Its narration opens with the collection of Turnus’ forces for war and uses the identical terms for the military customs<sup>1</sup> as they were in the times of the author and his contemporary reader: *belli signum extulit* (v. 1–2), *omne coniurat Latium* (4–5). Similar terms can be traced throughout the entire book: *signa secuti* (52), *signa ferre* (498), *scutorum incendi acervos* (562), *castra tenebant, legio* (604ff.), *equos et corpora curant* (607). Words and phrases used at religious matters, feasts and rites are mentioned likewise by the names well-known to the later times: *rumpere sacra vetat* (110f.), *sacra quae differe nefas* (172–3), *ara maxima* (271–2), *monstrat aram* (337); the libation to Hercules and *Salii* (281–5), *sacri nemus Argileti* (345), *haruspex retinet* (498), *larem parvosque penatis* (543). Certain hints of Roman daily or public life and family relations occur, too: *neque mos neque cultus* (316), *tunica induitur artus, Tyrrhena vincula circumdat* (457–8), *sub te magistro* (515); *verba parentis* (155), *rogo, genetrix nato* (383), *femina, cui tolerare colo vitam* (408–9). On the other hand, allusions to the political concepts of Rome are rather rare: *Romana potentia* (99), *pauperque senatus* (105), *foedera rumpant* (540).

It could be argued that the usage of such a word register is self-evident and that Vergil could have hardly used a different one in his narration. This objection, however, does not affect the *impact* of such verbal choice on the reader, namely that these familiar words, names, and phrases, constituting the narrative setting, **made the text accessible** to Vergil’s Roman contemporaries. They caused the narrative setting to be read within the setting of their actual world, in a mirror of their age, which was essential for the readers’ imagining and conceptualising the fictional world of the Aeneid. The issue is even more complex, since the interrelation between these two mirroring worlds is particularly complicated in the case of the Aeneid and Book 8, as we shall demonstrate in the next sub-chapters.

### Augustan allusions

Along with the references to *Roman habits and customs*, as outlined above, there can be found allusions to *persons and places* as well, and to Augustus in particular (for this moment we are intentionally omitting those on the shield). The word ‘ductor’ (or ‘dux’) is worth noting among these, as it is regarded to have been closely connected

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<sup>1</sup> Fordyce (1977: 205).

with Augustus<sup>2</sup>. Hercules' fighting Cacus (190ff.) is usually interpreted as a sequence of Roman heroes and enemies<sup>3</sup> in which Augustus represents one of these heroes. Besides, Augustus was the new founder of Rome as Hercules is said to have been in the past, who '*aram luco statuit, quae maxima semper / dicitur nobis et erit quae maxima semper*' (271–2); Augustus was also given *laudes Herculeas* for what he had done (alluded in v. 287–8).

The overt reference to Augustus is indeed found in the depiction of the shield. In this passage, the future emperor is introduced into the poem not only as a mere name possessing (and capable of) various intra- and extra-textual associations, but he is portrayed as a man of flesh and blood who participates actively in the climax of the narration. In this context of Augustan allusions it is no less interesting that the overwhelming majority of the references to *events* in Book 8 (putting aside those on the shield) appear to be somehow related to Augustus himself. There are the Tiber floods at the time of Octavian's offer for the restoration of the Republic<sup>4</sup> (*tacita refluens substitit unda*, 86–89); the destruction of Antony's house on Palatine<sup>5</sup> (*inclusumque ... molaribus instat*, 248–50); the triumphal honours for Octavian after Actium<sup>6</sup> (*tum Salii ... et facta ferunt*, 285–7); the deification of Augustus and allusion to his modest house<sup>7</sup> (*finge deo ... tecti*, 365–6); the return of Augustus from the East<sup>8</sup> (*externos optate duces*, 503).

Are these readings of commentators over-speculative, or do they identify certain specific features of Vergil's narrative not yet touched upon – an Augustus' *encomium*, the ideology of the Augustan era? It may be both, to some extent. While it would be unwise to deny that such a quest for historical and factual allusions does not always seem to be utterly convincing, equally it would not be wise to neglect *evident Augustan echoes* in the text, permeating the entirety of the poem and co-operating in the creation of the book's narrative setting. Augustus was undoubtedly one of the central figures of the reader's world of the day.

It is evident that Vergil builds an *intentional parallel* within his text: the ancient settings, events and hero – the present settings, events and hero. The old rites and the Republic have been restored, a connection with old Rome established again by Augustus. A cyclic structure of history was being fulfilled, the new Golden Age was beginning within Latium, and it was acknowledged to be Augustus' achievement. Two years after Augustus defeated his enemies in the East and ended the Civil Wars, he was returning to Rome. Also Aeneas was coming to Italy from the East, being called 'Teucrum atque Italum fortissime ductor' (513). These characteristics of Aeneas fit acceptably the image of Augustus, both in name (*ductor*, as mentioned above) and in the sense. Notice also Aeneas' speech in lines 147–9: '*nos si pellant nihil afores credunt / quin omnem Hesperiam penitus sua sub iuga mittant, / et mare quod supra teneant quodque adluit infra*' – this passage might be read as alluding to Antony's and Cleopatra's presumed proposals. Not only

<sup>2</sup> Gransden (1976: 148). The words occur in v. 129, 470, 496, 503, 513.

<sup>3</sup> Camps (1969: 98–9).

<sup>4</sup> Camps (1969: 139).

<sup>5</sup> Gransden (1976: 15).

<sup>6</sup> Camps (1969: 99).

<sup>7</sup> Camps (1969: 140–1).

<sup>8</sup> Gransden (1976: 148).

is Aeneas speaking for Hesperia, 'the western land', though he has just arrived there, but he is also warning of the immediate threat.

One more noteworthy example can be added. In the poem, the house of the king Evander, 'good man', is located in the same place<sup>9</sup> as the later modest dwelling of Augustus, and a strong allusion to that place is emphasised by a sort of word-play (366): *'angusti subter fastigia tecti'*. It would be very unlikely if this expression was not intentional<sup>10</sup> (though this interpretation has recently been questioned<sup>11</sup>).

To summarize briefly: as well as a reader acquainted with both of Homer's poems discovers the allusions to them in the Aeneid, for a contemporary reader in Rome it had to be easy to discover events and places related to Augustus *foreshadowed* in the text. These reflections on the character of Augustus and ancient Roman allusions lead inevitably to the discussion of an *interrelation between the actual and fictional elements* within the narrative of Book 8.

### The actual and fictional in the narrative

In the preface to his latest book, a Czech-American narratologist L. Doležel (2010: vii) discusses the *relationship between history and fiction* in the context of the famous Hayden White quote 'historical texts are literary artifacts'. In the case of the Aeneid, such a discussion is both extremely interesting and necessary. What kind of narrative actually is the Aeneid? It is a poem, sure, but what is the relation between the historical and fictional components in it? Could the epic be defined as a historical text *sui generis*, as an example of a fictional narrative idealising the Roman past, or as a fictional representation of the past constructed under specific constraints of the Augustan era? The exciting question of the interrelation between representation and reality in the text of the Aeneid is one of the most crucial for the interpretation of this text.

P. G. Walsh (1977: xxv) commented that 'Aeneas is introduced to the dynamic continuum of Roman history' in Book 8. The phrase 'dynamic continuum' is commendable; however, it needs to be noted that this continuum is a discursive construct only, it is a *specific representation* of Roman history as literarily depicted by Vergil, and there are different representations of it conceivable, although they did not really exist. Still, readers of the epic do (and did) know that the situations and events depicted especially on the shield had come to pass, that they had been 'anchored' in the history of the actual world. The readers thus tend to perceive the depictions as actual, not merely fictional, and are likely to *read them as artistic re-presentations*, not as Vergil's *literary representations* of the Roman past – as well as we may be inclined to. In other words, in the reader's mind the intensity of a fictional narrative diminishes in favour of a 'historical' narrative which is given credence to.

This process adds immensely to the commingling of actual and fictional elements in the narrative. The *actual world of the Augustan reader commingles conceptually with (the representation of) the fictional world* of Book 8. The fictional world of Roman pre-history

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<sup>9</sup> Gransden (1976: 30).

<sup>10</sup> Gransden (1976: 142).

<sup>11</sup> Rees (1996: 586).

is viewed and read through the filter of the Augustan present and with the aid of the net of textual allusions to Rome. The effect is that a reader of the Aeneid is drawn into the narrative and that he is enabled to move back in time.

In the passage frequently quoted, the narrator of the poem says:

*miratur facilisque oculos fert omnia circum  
Aeneas, capiturque locis et singula laetus  
exquirisque auditque virum monumenta priorum* (310–2).

The Roman hero is charmed by the place he looks at, he looks around with interest and by Evander he is told stories connected with the site. Actually, he is told *the past*, which is emphasised once more, about forty lines later: ‘*reliquias veterumque vides monumenta priorum*’. As Fordyce comments (1977: 238), the etymology of ‘monimenta’ is obvious: they remind, *monent*. At this moment Aeneas must have experienced a sort of strange feeling, along with, and in contrast to, the reader. To be more precise, Aeneas does not know anything about the site he is guided through, he has no image of the past on the site of ancient Rome, and therefore *miratur*<sup>12</sup> – unlike a Roman reader of Book 8, who may be assumed to have known very much about the Roman past, who should have had a specific, vivid image of the site, and who compared his own image with that of Vergil and Rome as such. We interpret this as **another intentional parallel** connecting the actual and fictional worlds: *a guide* (Evander, Vergil) – *a guest* (Aeneas, a reader of *Aeneid*).

The highest level of commingling of the two worlds is shown in the passages where the omniscient narrator virtually enters the site and points out directly: ‘*quae nunc Romana potentia caelo / aequavit, tum res inopes Euandrus habebat*’ (99–100); ‘*ad Capitolia ducit / aurea nunc, olim silvestribus horrida dumis*’ (347–8); ‘*iam tum religio ... terrebat ..., iam tum silvam saxumque tremebant*’ (348–9). Using the pairs *nunc-tum*, *nunc-olim*, *iam tum-iam tum*, Vergil is able to link Rome’s past and present in one moment (be aware that these are only Vergil’s *representations* of both). This has an impressive effect on the reader’s understanding of not only the poem’s setting, but also the symbolic resonance of the epic.

I suggest this process be called a **time-shifting**. Such a suspension of spatiotemporal differences between the actual and fictional worlds enables the author to create a firm link between the reader’s imagination and the image of the Roman past in the book. It, in fact, projects the reader’s *personal* representation onto the *fictional* representation of the narrative and shifts time levels of the narrative in a single second. The author tries successfully to make the reader believe that there has been an uninterrupted continuity of the city of Rome; having mentioned an army with identical terminology, spoken of identical religious cults and worship, and alluded to the identical concepts of life, the voice of Vergil’s narrator turns into an overt ostension of the famous landmarks at the site of Rome.

In his recent and inspiring work dealing with vision in the Aeneid, R. A. Smith (2006: 94) claims that Aeneas ‘sees future topographical monuments superimposed upon the geography of the past’, because through the act of passing through the gate of Car-

<sup>12</sup> Walsh (1977: xxiv) stresses the fact that ‘a key-word of the book is *mirari*, found ten times.’

mentis, Evander's mother endowed with the power of foresight, a gap between Roman past and future has been symbolically bridged and vistas of the future opened to Aeneas. But Smith's observation deserves to be restated. The narratological counterargument is that it is not Aeneas *who sees* the future monuments, it is the narrator: he serves as a focalizer here. The pairs *nunc-tum* and those alike denote the very moment when the *viewpoint switches* from the omniscient narrator to the character of Aeneas; accordingly, these words make the time-shifting overt and instant.

If we now step out of the narrative and attempt to restate Smith's observation considering the position of the reader, we may conclude that it is the reader who sees *present* topographical monuments superimposed upon the geography of the *hero's* (and heroic) *past*. Aeneas' history is thus paralleled to and rendered as the reader's pre-history, while the representation of Aeneas' present in the narrative is viewed through the lens of the reader's past. Analogously, the same temporal parallel has been reserved for the hero's future, as depicted on the shield.

### The representations on the shield

During the encounter with his mother Venus, Aeneas is bestowed the new arms made by Vulcan (v. 617ff.):

*ille deae donis et tanto laetus honore  
 expleri nequit atque oculos per singula uoluit,  
 miraturque interque manus et brachia uersat  
 terribilem cristis galeam flammisque uomentem,      620  
 fatiferumque ensem, loricam ex aere rigentem,  
 sanguineam, ingentem, qualis cum caerulea nubes  
 solis inardescit radiis longeque refulget;  
 tum leuis ocreas electro auroque recocto,  
 hastamque et clipei non enarrabile textum.      625*

The great shield is mentioned the last of these arms. Aeneas again marvels, this time at mighty gifts he has been given, and takes a curious look at them. In contrast to other pieces of Aeneas' armour, which are mentioned as direct objects (*galeam, ensem, loricam, ocreas, hastam*), it is the *textum* that is emphasised in the representation of the shield: *clipei non enarrabile textum*.<sup>13</sup>

This is a very significant difference. *Textum*, or how the 'fabric' of the shield was made, can be interpreted as **being of a twofold character**. Within the narrative itself, it represents a fictional, yet conceivable object: a piece of metal armour given to Aeneas. However, on the interpretative level it may too refer to the way the *narrative fabric* depicting the shield, to use the same metaphor, has been woven, i. e. how its textual representation has been developed by Vergil. The words 'non enarrabile' encourage this interpretation. As generally known, the shield encompasses the history of Rome starting with a representation of the she-wolf suckling the twins and finishing with a graphic

<sup>13</sup> Note also its position at the very end of the verse.

portrayal of the triple triumph of Augustus. The *ecphrasis* opens with the four verses (626–29):

*illic res Italas Romanorumque triumphos  
haud uatum ignarus uenturique inscius aevi  
fecerat ignipotens, illic genus omne futurae  
stirpis ab Ascanio pugnataque in ordine bella.*

Then a series of illustrations follows. Given the preceding words ‘non enarrabile textum’, the narrator (Vergil) makes it clear that the composition of the shield cannot be fully described, it is impossible to be narrated at length. Its depiction is only *a selection* of the scenes. West (1990: 298) and Quinn (1968: 78, 196) make the same point; but what has not, as far as I know, been noted is the fact that such a selection, depicted by the narrator, is mediated through the *vision (focalization) of the hero*. Accordingly, the reader is not allowed to visualize more than the hero-spectator sees and the narrator tells. The comment ‘non enarrabile’ and the opening four lines are therefore to be ascribed to the *narrator’s eye* and his voice, whereas the focus on the specific illustrations embodies (and ‘embeds’, from the narratological perspective) the vision of the hero. It is Aeneas who is looking at the shield and who is describing its outer artistic form whilst it is the voice of the narrator that gives such an artistic representation its proper meaning, derived from the history of Rome.<sup>14</sup> During this process, we can observe *a constant switching of the viewpoint* in the narrative. Aeneas sees, but Vergil comments, and this switching opens up a space for the narrative time-shifting.

The depiction of the scenes which is explained in this way offers a clue for answering the perpetual Vergilian question: why is the survey of Roman history on the shield that selective, and why did so many decisive moments of the history go unnoticed? The clue lies in the *position of the eye-witnessing hero*. Aeneas’ gaze is likely to be roaming from one tableau to the other as they somehow visually attract him. Aeneas fastens his eyes – and the narrative focus – on only several specific representations on the shield. The remainder of it is veiled with the narrator’s eloquent silence. The reader may only presume that there are illustrations left without a depiction, yet seen – or at least glimpsed at. There is no way to approach them except for pointing out that some important scenes on the shield are felt to be missing. This is what the artistic power of the ‘supernatural, miraculous, impossible shield’ (West (1990: 298)) arises from: *an imaginative potentiality and selectivity at once*. The composition of the shield can be reconstructed only with regard to the incompleteness of such reconstruction.

Nevertheless, there is still one more question to be answered: what is, then, the *message* of the tableaux included in the depiction, and what is the purpose of such selection? Beyond the character of Aeneas-spectator the author emerges, and beyond the selectivity of Aeneas’ vision the author’s intention appears. West (1990: 303) has quite convincingly argued for the primacy of an artistic representation: the illustrations were selected to be ‘concievable and effective on a real metal shield’, though there never was a shield like this. The artistic representation is indeed of considerable interest. While casting his eyes over the single tab-

<sup>14</sup> Cf. also Fordyce’s (1977: 273) comment on Aeneadae (l. 648).

leaux, Aeneas saw the colourful details of them graphically and vividly emerging from the surface of the shield. The illustrations are *vivified by means of Aeneas' vision*.

We thus come to the conclusion that the only half-successful attempts of scholars to find a plausible criterion of Vergil's selection (see West (1990: 296–7) for a survey on these opinions, also Thomas (2001: 198ff.)) have proven themselves to be ill-founded. The tableaux fit neither 'scenes of escape from terrible perils' nor 'examples of Roman virtues', nor even 'chronological landmarks', because they cannot. Instead, we are invited to admit that they irradiate *strength of poetic imagery and artistic plasticity*. For a piece of art, this is not bad news at all.

### Conclusion

In the middle of the shield the vivifying portrayal of the Roman future reaches its peak (*'in medio classis aeratas, Actia bella, / cernere erat'*, 675ff.). What is set before Aeneas' and the reader's eyes is not a mere artistic representation of Roman history anymore – it becomes *a history vivified*. In the course of the narration now one feels to be rather watching a film, a sequence of images of the battle itself, as the tableaux obtain a dynamic character in time and space.

Surprisingly enough, one can find a *parallel* to the set of these battle illustrations in Christian art. There exist paintings of saints, which try to depict the most decisive moments of their lives in one pictorial representation. We may encounter a saint betrayed, martyred, and wearing a halo after his death in one single picture encompassing all these dramatic moments. Such a way of artistic representation seems to be, I argue, very similar to that of Vergil. It allows the events represented to acquire the *vital dimensions of time and action*. Without it, the events – and those on Aeneas' shield as well – could not be fittingly narrated.

And again, the entire commentary on the future events during and after the battle of Actium is provided by the narrator. The character of Aeneas focuses his attention on the drama and artistry embodied within the tableaux. He sees the illustrations, but has no knowledge of the events coming to pass, being 'ignarus', as the closing verses of Book 8 tell us:

*Talia per clipeum Volcani, dona parentis,  
miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet      730  
attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum.*

This of course contrasts with the Roman reader who had to be 'gnarus' and understand them.<sup>15</sup> In spite of that, Aeneas takes pleasure from the scene. This statement also applies to the reader of the Aeneid: to *take pleasure from the scene*, although – and because – he has the exact knowledge of the events. When Aeneas lifts the shield upon his shoulder, it is a symbolic burden of future tasks he is the first of all Romans to undertake. But when the Augustan audience listened to this passage, they knew well that Aeneas had succeeded. The glory and destiny of the hero's descendants were palpable and living in that very moment. One is tempted to call such a feeling *an imperial pleasure*.

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<sup>15</sup> Also observed by Smith (2006: 58).



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## THE NARRATIVE COMPOSITION OF BOOK 8 OF VERGIL'S AENEID: NEW INSIGHTS

### Summary

The study analyses textual representations of Roman history in Book 8 of the *Aeneid*, focusing on the interrelation between the actual and fictional components in the text. It reconsiders an artistic representation of Aeneas' shield from the narratological perspective and argues that the narrator's selection of the shield's tableaux results from the vision (focalization) of Aeneas.

## NOVÝ POHLED NA NARATIVNÍ STRUKTURU 8. KNIHY VERGILIOVY AENEIDY

### Shrnutí

Studie analyzuje způsob, jímž jsou v 8. knize Aeneidy textově reprezentovány události římských dějin, zaměřujíc se na vztah mezi skutečným a fikčním v textu. Z naratologického hlediska nově zkoumá umělecké zobrazení Aeneova štítu a argumentuje, že vypravěčův výběr scén na štítě je určen pohledem (fokalizací) Aenea.