THE PICTURES ON DIDO’S TEMPLE

(Aeneid 1. 450–93)

Shortly after his arrival at Carthage, while he is waiting for Dido to meet him, Aeneas finds that the walls of her temple are adorned with pictures of the Trojan War. *Sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi*, he cries to Achates, *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*. The description of the pictures which follows is a remarkable example of Virgil’s ability to use a traditional device (*ἐκφρασις*) in such a way as to strengthen and illuminate the main themes of his poem. It is my object here first to reinterpret one of the scenes which has been misunderstood, and then to discuss how Virgil has chosen and arranged his episodes so that the description of a picture gallery becomes a part of an epic poem.

The pictures which Virgil describes are these: first a general scene of battle with the Greeks in flight, then a similar scene with the Trojans in flight and Achilles pursuing; next, four particular episodes ending at a climax, Rhesus, Troilus, the supplication to Pallas, the ransoming of Hector’s body; finally a pendant concerned with pictures of Aeneas himself, of Memnon, of Penthesilea. In the central series the episode of Troilus, which is not Homeric, seems strangely inserted among three very prominent episodes of the *Iliad*, and it has also presented difficulties of interpretation. It is therefore with this scene that we must begin.

(a) The Troilus Episode

*Aen*. 1. 474–8

Parte alia fugiens amissis Troilus armis,
inflexi puer atque impar congressus Achilli,
fertur equis curruque haeret resupinus inani,
lorae tenens tamen; huic cervixque comaeque trahuntur
per terram, et versa pulvis inscribitur hasta.

It is generally thought that this picture represents the outcome of an armed combat deliberately sought by Troilus, in the course of which Troilus *amisit arma* (whatever that means), and having in flight fallen from his chariot is being dragged along with his spear trailing behind him. Servius evidently felt unhappy about this: on *hasta* his comment is ‘hostili scilicet’. He presumably thought that ‘Troilus, *amissis armis*, could not still have his spear. Modern critics have rightly refused to accept that the spear is Achilles’ spear with which Troilus is transfixed.¹ For there is nothing in the passage to suggest that it is Achilles’ spear; and, as Heyne gently says, if Virgil had meant Achilles’ spear, he would have expressed himself otherwise. In any case Achilles’ spear could not be *versa*. Servius recognized this objection to his interpretation, and was prepared to take *versa* from *verrere*; but this makes no sense, and in Con-way’s words ‘Vergil never sets his readers such a trap’. The decisive argument against Servius is *Aen*. 9. 609 f., the use of the ‘reversed spear’ as a goad,

¹ Achilles does in fact kill Troilus with a spear in some versions of the story (Stat. Silv. 2. 6. 32 f., Eustath. on *II*. 24. 257); the imitations of the passage (applied to other warriors) in Stat. *Th*. 10. 544 f., Sil. 4. 254 f. have nothing decisive.
versaques iuvenecum | terga fatigamus hasta. If then it is Troilus’ spear which trails, how do we overcome Servius’ difficulty? Modern critics mostly do it by referring armis to his shield only: Heyne says clipeo ex manu dimisso, Wagner clipeo, nam hastam tenebat, Forbiger de solo clipeo intelligendum, Lejay ‘ses armes défensives, son bouclier’, Mackail ‘his armour flung away in flight’, Conway ‘perhaps only the shield is meant . . . in that case his spear may have been still in his hand, not merely entangled in his fall’. This would be odd Latin, and a strange and unsatisfactory picture of armed combat.

But what reason is there in the Virgil passage to think of armed combat? The phrase amissis armis refers to some event which occurred before the moment of the picture; in the picture Troilus is portrayed without his arma. One of the natural meanings of the phrase would refer to defensive1 armour (δίπλα—shield, helmet, and greaves), and this seems to me strongly supported by the words huic cervixque comaeque trahuntur | per terram. Troilus is not wearing a helmet,2 and obviously he has not lost it during armed combat with Achilles in a chariot. It seems that he was unarmored when he met Achilles. If this is accepted, we still have not the evidence to explain the circumstances in which Troilus has lost his armour; we may make conjectures in the light of the legend, to which I now turn.

In Homer (II. 24. 257) the sole mention of Troilus is when Priam laments that Ares has left him not one of his sons alive, not Mestor, not Troilus, not Hector. From Proclus’ abstract of the Cypria we hear that it was Achilles who killed Troilus. In the tiny extant fragments of Sophocles’ Troilus there is not much added, but there is an important reference to this play by the scholiast on Hom. II. 24. 257. He says that in it Sophocles told of Troilus ambushed and killed by Achilles while exercising his horses at the Thymbraeum:3 Σοφοκλῆς ἐν Τροίλῳ φησίν αὐτὸν λοχθήναι (emended from ὀξευθήναι) ὑπὸ Ἀχιλλέως ἱππὸς γυμνάζοντα παρὰ τὸ Θυμβραῖον καὶ ἀποθανεῖν. This scene of ambush is frequently portrayed in Greek art.4 The most common representation is of Troilus on horseback, unarmored, ambushed by Achilles in full armour when he had come to a spring to water his horses. He is often accompanied by Polyxena with a pitcher.5 There are also fairly frequent representations in art

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1 Varro, De L.L. 5. 115 arma ab arendo, quod his arcemus hostem; other Roman grammarians differentiate between arma and tela (see Thes. L.L., s.v. arma). Of course the word very often means fighting equipment of all sorts, but we can fairly say that it is at least as likely to mean ‘armour’ as to mean ‘weapons’.  
2 I should not press this point far if we were concerned with rapidly changing and eventful narrative; a poet who describes many related scenes in quick succession may not remember, or be concerned to remember, whether a warrior when last mentioned was wearing a helmet, or had two spears or one, or was accompanied by a charioteer or alone. But I do stress it very strongly in this case where Virgil is describing one single scene only, one picture whose visual impact is not blurred by actions leading up to it or away from it.  
3 See Pearson’s Intro. to the fragments of Sophocles’ Troilus, and Roscher and Pauly–Wissowa, s.v. Troilos. Mayer in Roscher regards Virgil’s version as confused, but rightly denies that Virgil altered the legend so as to portray an armed combat. Lesky in P.–W. argues that Virgil followed an already existing legend involving armed combat, but the evidence for this is very faint indeed compared with the unarmed tradition.  
5 It is noticeable that the literary evidence always tells of Troilus ambushed while exercising his horses; it knows nothing of Polyxena and the spring, so frequent in art.
of the next scene, when Troilus is carried to the altar of Apollo and there killed (so Lycophron, Alex. 307 f.).

There was then a very strong Greek tradition that Troilus was ambushed when unarméd, and it is evident that this was current in Virgil’s time. On the other hand, there is no trace before Virgil of the chariot of Troilus; it seems that Virgil may have adopted the idea of being dragged behind a chariot from the story of Hector. There are remarkably few references to Troilus in extant Latin literature, and by the time of Dares (fifth century?) the legend has changed very considerably. The episode is now put later than the death of Hector, and in it Troilus is a formidable warrior who has deliberately sought armed combat, has wounded Achilles, and only been killed by him after his own horse had been wounded (not by Achilles) and he had become entangled in the reins (Dares 30 f., esp. 33). Virgil has evidently had some influence on the later version (as would be expected), but except from a misunderstanding of the passage there is nothing in Virgil to suggest deliberate armed combat, and the legend of the warrior Troilus is essentially associated with the placing of the episode after the death of Hector, which is patently not the case in Virgil.

There are additional reasons for believing that Virgil follows the traditional story of the ambush, some important, some less so. It might be said that the absence of a charioteer for Troilus (lora tenens tamen) suggests that he did not deliberately go out to fight, but rather that he was driving his chariot for some unwarlike purpose and unluckily came upon Achilles; it might be said that infelix puer suggests not the rash youth trusting too much in his self-confidence, but rather the hapless victim. But the two really important points, as we shall see, are firstly that the death of Troilus was one of the fated ‘dooms’ of Troy and it would be wholly out of place for Troilus himself deliberately to jeopardize his country’s safety; and secondly that the Troilus episode, put next to the story of Rhesus, indicates increasingly the ruthlessness of the Greek enemy—the warrior Rhesus slain in his sleep, the boy Troilus caught defenceless by Achilles. Accipe nunc Danaum insidias et crimen ab uno / disce omnes.

We can then interpret the Virgilian passage as follows: at a stage prior to the scene actually pictured Troilus has been caught by Achilles while he was occupied in some activity during which he was not wearing his armour. We

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1 The evidence from Roman art suggests it (see P.–W., ad fin.), though it is much less clear than the Greek evidence. It occurs too in Greek writers of the Roman period, Apollodorus (Epit. 3. 92) and Dio Chrysostom (11. 77–78). The latter specifically links the death of Troilus with the early part of the war, when the Greeks were not in possession of much of the Troad; for otherwise ‘Troilus would never have ventured outside the walls for exercise’.

2 Conceivably the Greek pictures of Troilus riding one horse and leading another alongside may have given Virgil the idea of a chariot-team.

3 From the first century we may note Sen. Agam. 747 f. (an echo of Virgil) niumnam cito / congressse Achilt Troile, Stat. Silv. 2. 6. 32 f. circum saevo fugientem moenia Phoebi / Troilun / Haemoniae dependorit lancea dextrae, Silv. 5. 2. 121 f. Troilus haurd alter gyro breviore minantes / eludebat equus (evidently an echo of Virgil’s chariot).

4 So in Ausonius (Epit. 18), in a passage full of Virgilian reminiscence: Hecotre prostrato, nec dis nec viribus aequis / congressus saeco Troilus Aetacidae, / roptatus bigis, fratris coniunxor honori. Dictys (4. 9) also puts the event after the death of Hector; Quintus of Smyrna (4. 430 f.) implies deliberate armed combat. Servius (on 1. 474) has a variant on the erotic element in the story as told by Lycophron.

5 Lesky in P.–W. thinks that the word congressus is significant, but it need mean no more than ‘coming up against’, ‘meeting’.
do not know what this was. We might guess that he came out in his armour to exercise his horses; thinking himself safe he took off his armour and was then ambushed by Achilles. At all events in the picture on the wall Troilus is without his armour, and thus defenceless is trying to get away, fugiens amissis Troilus armis. His horses are running away with him, like those of the charioteer in Geo. 1. 514 fertur equis auriga nec audit currus habenas. He has fallen out backwards from his chariot, perhaps wounded, perhaps because one of his horses has been wounded and cannot be controlled. But he still grasps the reins, still tries to regain control. He is not yet dead, as Servius and others have suggested; his skill is in horsemanship (ὑποχάρμης, Hom. II. 24. 257), and at the last, in spite of all (tamen), he still hangs on. In this piece of the description Virgil is thinking partly perhaps of Soph. El. 746 f. and Eur. Hipp. 1236 f. (where the drivers are dragged behind their chariots), but especially of II. 22. 401–3 (Hector’s corpse, stripped of the armour, dragged behind Achilles’ chariot)

τοῦ δ’ ἥκομένων κοινάσαλος, ἀμφί δὲ χαῖται
κνάέαι πίτναντο, κάρη δ’ ἀπαν ἐν κοινῆι
κεῖτο πάρος χαῖνεν.

This is the source of Virgil’s huic cervixque comaeque trahuntur | per terram.

The final touch in the picture, the dust scored by the reversed spear, adds an idea of motion to the static picture by giving a sort of ‘wake’ to the movement of the chariot. There is now no contradiction between hasta and amissis armis, whether we consider that Troilus had just time to seize his spear as he leapt into his chariot to escape, or whether (as seems much more likely) he was already in his chariot carrying a spear which he was using reversed as a goad (like the Rutulians in Aen. 9. 609 f. quoted above; in Greek art the otherwise unarmed Troilus is sometimes shown carrying a spear or a goad). As he fled he had the spear in one hand while he held the reins in the other (having no shield to occupy the use of one hand). When he fell backwards the spear, still held in his hand, trailed with the point on the ground. This is the only legitimate meaning here of versa hasta, which is sometimes wrongly taken to indicate that the dust was scored with the butt-end of the spear. The normal position of a spear is pointing forwards, in the direction of motion; when it is versa it has the butt-end forward, and therefore when it trails it scores the dust with its point. The unwarlike intentions and utter helplessness of Troilus are thus symbolized in this final phrase.

(b) Virgil’s Selection and Arrangement of the Episodes

This series of pictures on Dido’s temple is the first sustained account in the Aeneid of events in the Trojan War, the final stages of which are soon to be so powerfully described in Aeneid 2. The setting of the passage is made very emphatic by the stress laid on the profound effect which the pictures have on Aeneas (lines 450–65), and the description itself is integral with the main theme of the poem because of its subject-matter and because of the relationship of the pictures to one another. In this respect it is comparable with the description of Aeneas’ shield at the end of Book 8, and quite different from a simple decorative ἐκφρασις like the pictures of Ganymede on the cloak in Aen. 5. 252 f.

It has often been noticed that the pictures are in pairs: (i) the Greeks flee, the Trojans flee; (ii) death of Rhesus, death of Troilus; (iii) supplication of the Trojan women, supplication of Priam; (iv) Memnon’s Eastern armies,
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Penthesilea's Amazons. Again, we can observe contrasts, between war scenes and scenes of supplication, between general war scenes and particular war scenes. We can see that Homeric episodes are models for the Rhesus scene and the two supplication scenes, and that all the incidents selected for portrayal have a vivid pictorial impact. But all these aspects of choice and arrangement are subordinate to the main purpose, which is the relationship of the pictures to the motifs of the poem.

The passage begins (466) with general scenes of warfare, showing first the Trojans dominant and then the Greeks, with the threatening figure of Achilles prominent. Then follow the four scenes of the central block, leading to the climax expressed at 485 (tum vero ingenti gemitum . . .), and the description is concluded with three pictures of less intense emotional significance.¹

The central block is conceived as a portrayal of the fata Troiana, the series of divine omens, portents, and prophecies associated with the doom of the city. Running alongside this theme is the theme of Greek ruthlessness, the perfidia and crudelitas of the enemy as seen by Aeneas and described with such force in Aeneid 2. Let us look at the four episodes in the light of this double motif, fata Troiana and Greek cruelty.

The death of Rhesus illustrates how Greek ruthlessness prevented the salvation of Troy. If the horses of Rhesus had cropped the grass of Troy and drunk from the river Xanthus (which they so nearly did but for the night ambush of Diomedes and Ulysses) then it was fated that Troy would not fall, and the sovereign city of Asia would still have been standing. This well-known aspect of the story of Rhesus is made explicit in lines 472–3 prius quam / pabula gustassent Troiae Xanthumque bibissent. Equally explicit is the cruelty of the slaughter of sleeping men (470–1) primo quae prodita somno / Tydides multa vastabat caede cruentus.

The death of Troilus (not, as we have seen, an obvious subject to include) illustrates the same two themes. The story was that if Troilus lived to the age of twenty Troy could not be taken (Myth. Vatic. 1. 210 Troilo dictum erat quod si ad annos xx pervenisset Troia everti non potuisset). Virgil does not make the oracular connexion of Troilus' fate explicit, but as he had done this with Rhesus he could expect the reader to be ready to do the same with Troilus. The story seems to have been well known, for in Plautus' Bacchides (in a passage probably based on Menander's Δίσ ἐξαιρετῶν) it is mentioned as one of the three 'dooms' of Troy (953 f. Ilio tria fuisse audivi fata, quae illi fovent exitio . ..). The cruelty of Achilles' behaviour in killing his unarmed victim is reinforced by Virgil's comment infelix puere atque impar congressus Achilli, and by the sorrow in the lines which follow, so typical of Virgil's sorrow over youthful death; the incident therefore portrays a worse example of cruelty than the death of Rhesus.

After the two human illustrations of the doom of Troy there follows the divine embodiment of this doom, the hostile Pallas Athena, the champion of the Greeks.² The hopelessness of the Trojan supplication is made evident, and the cruelty of the goddess is shown in her epithet (non aegae) and in the unmoved enmity of the cold and terrifying line diva solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat.

These three pictures then are the fates, the causes, the themes; and there

¹ The emotional structure and intensity of the passage has been well discussed by Th. Plüts, J.K.Ph. (1875), pp. 639–42.
² It is possible that a mental association can here be made with the loss of the Palladium (Am. 2. 166), another of the three 'dooms' of Troy mentioned in the passage from Plautus cited above.
follows the event, the death of Hector and the final certainty of the doom of Troy. It comes with an impact of inevitability; the actual death and ignominious treatment of the body have already occurred (the pluperfect tense is used), and the picture shows one aspect of the consequence, the sale of the body for gold. In two ways Virgil departs from the Homeric version, in order to emphasize the cruelty of Achilles: in Homer Hector was dragged around the tomb of Patroclus, but Virgil adopts the later and even more disgraceful version that he was dragged around the walls of his own now helpless town. Again, in Iliad 24 Achilles shows himself human before Priam; here he is coldly inhuman—auro corpus vendebat. This scene is the climax of Greek cruelty as well as of Trojan doom.

Virgil emphasizes this climax with the words tum vero ingentem gemitum... and concludes it with the person of the old king Priam; it is a climax already foreshadowed for us by the mention of Priam in lines 458 and 461. The story of Troy’s doom culminates here in the pictures, as it had in the Iliad.

As the central block had its introduction, both in the summary description of 456–8 and in Aeneas’ few words in 459 f., so now it has its pendant telling of other pictures which illustrate events after the death of Hector. If we ask why the description does not end at its climax, we shall find much of the answer by relating the descriptive episode to the narrative technique of the poem. The tension has to be lessened for the transition to Dido’s appearance. We must be brought away from the heart of Troy’s tragedy, symbolized in Hector and Priam, by a diminuendo effect, still relevant but less intense. This is done by the three scenes of later events in the war. First is Aeneas himself, fighting in the forefront among the Greek leaders as had been prophesied (II. 20. 332 f.), and as it was appropriate that he should when Hector was dead (II. 5. 467 f.). This brief mention of Aeneas prepares us for Dido’s Tune ille Aeneas...? (617), and also serves a psychological purpose, as we shall see. Then there come two heroes of the post-Iliad period of the war, who did not fight at Troy until after the death of Hector, with whom Quintus of Smyrna began his Posthomerica. They are both exotic and romantic figures, but neither of them causes the emotional reaction in Aeneas which had been caused by the four scenes of the central block. They bring the description to a close with a kind of half-unreal splendour, Memnon the strange king of distant lands, and Penthesilea, the semi-mythical Amazon warrior. We are reminded of how Virgil ends the catalogue in Aeneid 7 with the warrior-maid Camilla.

Finally, we should consider the relationship in this passage between art and literature, between the pictures and the poem in which they are described. Virgil does not give us a catalogue or a series of photographs of these mural paintings, but an impression of their effect on Aeneas; much of the unity of the themes which I have been discussing is a unity imposed by the observer (Aeneas) upon the series of the pictures. We are left with the feeling that Aeneas is recollecting it afterwards; that the pictures are coming to us through the mind of the beholder, coloured and interpreted by his own emotions. This effect is strengthened by the constant mention of Aeneas: he is very prominent in our minds before the beginning of the description, he is mentioned at the beginning (namque videbat uti...), then at 470 (agnoscit lacrimas), and then at the climax (tum vero ingentem gemitum...). This is immediately followed by the picture of Aeneas himself among these events—‘quaque ipse miserrima vidi | et quorum pars magna fui’; he himself is placed here in the series immediately after
the climax to reinforce the subjective element in the interpretation of the tragic pictures, and to detach the diminuendo ending of Memnon and Penthesilea, who were not so closely connected with Aeneas personally. We notice too a subtle interrelationship of time and space: Aeneas is walking past the pictures—*ex ordine* (456), *nec procul hinc* (469), *parte alia* (474), yet the word *interea* (479) suddenly transforms the pictures into events, and three times we hear of aspects of events which are not portrayed in the pictures, indicated by different tense usage: *vastabat...avertit* (471–2), *amissis armis* (474), *rapta-verat...vendebat* (483–4). The *ἐκφανσις* has been made real by the personal interpretation of the pictures; it is a story as well as an art gallery.¹

¹ I am much indebted to Mrs. A. D. Ure and Mr. A. E. Wardman for their help in discussing with me many aspects of this article.