Kate Hart

The Violence of Appropriation in Virgil's the *Aeneid*

The use of tree imagery in Virgil's the *Aeneid* has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention during the past few decades.[1] However, critics have not addressed the fact that the recurring images of trees in the poem provide insight into its themes of signification and appropriation.[2] In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas assumes an "appropriative [...] role,"[3] and attempts to give meaning and context to the "remnant[s]"[4] of Troy's civilization by appropriating a foreign country and lineage. The arboreal imagery in the epic illustrates the difficulties as well as the dangers implicit in such an attempt. In particular the two tree metaphors concerning the fall of Ilium reveal Aeneas's fraught struggle to bestow signification on Troy's "chopp[ed]" down and "uproot[ed]" civilization (2.823). At the same time, the repetition of these two tree images and the introduction of others throughout the epic further an implicit critique of Aeneas's appropriative mission. This critique intimates that to "found a city" (1.10) or to appropriate another civilization is to participate in a cycle of destructive violence. Both Aeneas's struggle to confer meaning on the "remnant[s]" of Troy and the destructiveness inherent in his appropriative quest may be traced in Aeneas's association with re-rooting *and* uprooting, in the linking of mutilation and the loss of signification in images of trunks (*trunci*), and finally, in Aeneas's violent usurpation of the Latin lineage (*stirps)*.

Book 2 of the *Aeneid* likens both the fall of Troy and the murder of Priam to severed trees in two striking metaphors. Aeneas describes Troy's destruction in an extended simile as "an ancient ash," felled by foresters:

> As in the high mountains when the countrymen
> ...make their axes
> Ring with might and main, chopping away
> To fell the tree...
> ...bit by bit the strokes prevail
> Until it gives a final groan at last
> And crashes down in ruin from the height (2.821-5).

Ward Briggs notes that this image of Troy, "cut from its roots,"[5] is linked by association to the descrip-

[1] See for instance Kenneth Reckford's essay and Ward Briggs's monograph on trees in Virgil. Both Reckford and Briggs offer surveys of tree imagery in the *Aeneid* and take decidedly "optimistic" views (to borrow one of the traditional categories of Virgilian criticism) of its use. In a more recent essay, Richard Thomas provides an "ambivalent" examination of tree motifs in the *Aeneid* and discusses the violation of trees at length. See Bibliography. I differ from these studies in that I examine Virgil's use of tree imagery vis-à-vis questions of appropriation and signification.

[2] By appropriation, I mean "the taking and using" of a culture, civilization or individuals for a specific "purpose" or meaning ("Appropriation").

[3] Duncan Kennedy, "Virgilian Epic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Charles Martindale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 145-155, 152.

[4] "Aeneid," edited by J. B. Greenough. Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900. *The Latin Library*, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/verg.html> (16 May 2008) 3.120. Translation used: Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990). Hereafter referred to in text; text references refer to book and line of this edition, and translation.

[5] Ward Briggs, *Narrative and Simile from the Georgics in the* 'Aeneid,' (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980) 33.

tion of Priam's corpse.[6] Earlier on in the fall of Troy, Priam's slain body is compared to a "vast headless trunk [that] lies without a name" on a "distant shore" (2.728-9). These two images signify a crisis of meaning, in which Ilium is "chopp[ed] away" and uprooted, and Troy's patriarch lies on a distant shore without a name and potentially without identity or signification. The distant and nameless quality of Aeneas's former civilization must be given meaning and significance. The task of finding a home for the gods and the people of Troy (1.10-11) becomes one of Aeneas's major preoccupations in the epic.

In the aftermath of the destruction of Troy, Aeneas desperately tries to keep alive the meaning of his civilization by preserving its signifiers: its "relics" (7.326) or mementoes salvaged from Ilium, and the "remnant" (3.120) of the Trojan people. Like the "trees" of Priam and Troy, these objects and individuals have been uprooted from their former city and serve as the only representations of the civilization. Aeneas must work actively to re-root the last remnants of Troy in a new "colony" (2.25) or "city" (1.10) to prevent them from becoming like Priam, mute, nameless and defaced objects that have been stripped of their meaning. Aeneas's anxiety over a possible loss of meaning, for instance, is present when he muses on his helmsman's presumed death by drowning: "You must lie naked on some distant shore" (5.1141). The image contains an eerie echo of Priam's own fate as a "headless trunk" on a "distant shore," and betrays Aeneas's concern that Troy will lose its power of signification, that is, its ability to signify and connote meaning, and will instead become mute and anonymous.

However, what is perhaps most interesting about Aeneas's attempt to preserve his civilization is that while doing so he in fact re-enacts the same uprooting exemplified in the tree images of Priam and Troy. Though Aeneas is, as Kenneth Reckford notes, an "uprooted hero"[7] far from any sort of home, he is also an uprooter himself - one who in fact perpetuates the destructive violence that he and his people have suffered during the fall of Troy. Aeneas's quest to root the relics and remnants of Troy in a "home" or new "city" (1.10) nevertheless involves exercising the same violent behaviour he received from the Greeks at Troy.

Aeneas's aggressive uprooting of other living things is perhaps most obvious in the episode concerning Polydorus. In Book 3, Aeneas lands his contingent on the Thracian shore to found "a colony" (3.25) for the Trojans. When Aeneas attempts to pull out saplings to make a roof for an altar, he experiences a horrific surprise: "When [...] the root network burst, / Dark blood dripped down to soak and foul the soil" (3.41-2). Continuing to pull at the stems a second and a third time, Aeneas discovers that he has been "rend[ing]" (3.58) the body of the Trojan prince Polydorus, who lies buried under the thicket. Here, Aeneas in fact re-enacts the simile of Troy as a fallen tree in his attempt to establish a colony for the Trojans. By "t[earing]" up the "stalk" and "root network" (3.40-1) of the saplings to appropriate them for his own altar, Aeneas evokes the uprooting of Troy.[8] Aeneas's lack of hesitation "to

[6] Although Robert Fitzgerald's English translation does not explicitly compare Troy to an uprooted tree, the original Latin contains the word *eruere* (2.628), which as Kenneth Reckford notes, means to "uproot" and to "tear out" (66).

[7] Kenneth Reckford, "Some Trees in Virgil and Tolkien," in *Proceedings of the Symposium 'Perspectives of Roman Poetry,' February 14-16, 1972*, ed. G. Karl Galinsky, (Austin: U of Texas P, 1974) 57-93, 68.

[8] In this essay, I use the English translations of the Latin word *eruere* (as noted above). Unfortunately, Robert Fitzgerald does not use these meanings in his translation.

double [his] effort, a third time" (3.52) recalls the relentless "chopping" of the foresters who uproot the "ancient ash." This repetition thus effects a stunning reversal: it is Aeneas who is portrayed as the uprooter, who in fact harms one of his own kin to whom "Troy / Gave birth" (3.61-2). Here, Aeneas "rend[s]" his own culture and civilization while trying to uproot Thracian vegetation to build an altar for his colony, which suggests that Aeneas's desire to appropriate what is other to him to rebuild Troy can be damaging and destructive.

Another troubling incident involves Aeneas's encounter with the golden bough in Book 6. As two commentators have noted,[9] Aeneas experiences difficulty uprooting the bough despite the Sibyl's assurance that "it will come willingly, / Easily, if you are called by fate" (6.214-5). Aeneas finds that it offers resistance to his assault, and therefore wrenches it from its stem by "t[aking] hold of it / And, though it clung, greedily [he] broke it off" (6.297-8). The bough does not come willingly, perhaps because contrary to the Sibyl's belief Aeneas's fate (*fatum*) does involve a show of strength, as evidenced in the two images of the fall of Troy and the murder of Priam (both fated actions). Aeneas's violation of saplings in Book 3 and the bough in Book 6 indicates that his "greed[y]" appropriation of other, living things for his own purpose is endorsed, even required by his destiny. The inevitability of Aeneas's destructive uprooting is suggested later on, when Aeneas declares that he will "destroy [the Latins'] town, *root* of this war, / Soul of Latinus's kingdom" (12.773-4, my emphasis). In founding a city, Aeneas must ultimately uproot another one, just as he does on a smaller scale with Polydorus and the golden bough.

As noted above, the early books of the *Aeneid* draw upon the tree similes of Troy and of Priam to suggest the more insidious aspects of Aeneas's struggle to fulfill his *fatum*. It is, however, in the "Iliadic" latter half of the epic[10] that these repeated images are transformed into full-fledged symbols of destructive appropriation.

Aeneas's struggle to found a city in Latium and usurp its civilization is a bloody one: the battlefield is scattered with corpses and many defaced trunks (*trunci*) of warriors. The Latin word *truncus*, as Michael Paschalis notes, can mean both "mutilated" or "headless body," and "tree-trunk."[11] It is interesting to note that the images of Priam and Troy in Book 2 both play upon this double meaning of *truncus* (trunk). Priam's corpse is metaphorically a "headless" body and also a "vast trunk (*truncus*) [...] without a name," while Troy is compared to a personified tree (soon-to-be trunk) that emits a "final groan" before falling.[12] Paschalis notes that the two meanings of *truncus* "are almost never kept distinct in the *Aeneid*."[13] As will be discussed, the double meaning of the word represents the loss of signification suffered by the victim who has become a severed *truncus*.

[9] Reckford 71; Richard Thomas, "Tree Violation and Ambivalence in Virgil," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 118 (1988): 261-273. <http://www.jstor.org/search> (21 May 2008), 266-7.
[10] K.W. Gransden, *Virgil: The Aeneid*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 30.
[11] Michael Paschalis, *Virgil's* 'Aeneid'*: Semantic Relations and Proper Names*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 358.
[12] Although, in the extended simile of Troy, Virgil does not use the word *truncus*, he nonetheless invokes the Homeric simile that compares a fallen warrior to a tree, and applies it to the torching of a city (Briggs 32-3). The tree, for instance, retains personified attributes, such as giving a "final groan" before "crashing in ruin."
[13] *Ibid.*

During the battles in Latium, the abrupt metaphoric shift from a fighting warrior to an inanimate tree-trunk can prove startling and alarming. For instance, the Trojan Nisus beheads Remus and "le[aves] the trunk / To spout dark blood" (9.471-2). Similarly, Turnus "cut[s] the head" of Phegeus "away, leav[ing] the trunk mired in sand" (12.523-4). The conflict between the Trojans and Latins is in some sense a struggle for signification, as each faction attempts to appropriate the other and turn him or her into a mute, severed *truncus* with no power of signification. This conflict over meaning is heightened in relation to Aeneas, who like others waging war in Latium, frequently re-enacts the now-familiar images of the fall of Troy and of Priam by transforming the opposing side into *trunci*. This is evident when Aeneas ruthlessly slays Tarquitus and turns him into a "warm trunk" (10.781). Despite Tarquitus's "ple[as]" (10.779) for clemency, Aeneas denies him mercy or even a burial: "No gentle / Mother will ever hide you in the earth / [...] you stay here for the carrion birds" (10.783-4; 786). He does not only kill Tarquitus, but annihilates his meaning or signification, as he becomes merely an anonymous "warm trunk," like Priam's own "headless *truncus*."

Aeneas strips Tarquitus and other Latin soldiers of their lives in order to confer his own signification on their culture and civilization. This calculated defacement is obvious when Aeneas slays Mezentius and "dress[es]" an actual truncated (*trunca*) tree in his "bright [war] gear" thus creating a war "trophy" for himself (11.8-9). Aeneas admits he has appropriated Mezentius's life and weapons in order to confer his own signification on his body when he reveals that "Mezentius, / [has] become this figure at my hands" (11.21-22). Aeneas alters Mezentius's signification from that of a Latin warrior to a war trophy, a literal *truncus* that both semantically and figuratively represents Mezentius's mutilated body. Other Trojan warriors also decorate tree-trunks with arms from slain soldiers to create war trophies (11.111-3), and thus these *trunci* become a symbol of the Trojans' power of signification over their Latin foes. This appropriation is representative of Aeneas's own desire to sever the Latin civilization from its political and cultural context and yoke it to his own purposes. Much like the Greeks at Troy, Aeneas kills to annihilate the roots of a culture and its power of signification so that he can appropriate it for his own meaning or *fatum*.

Aeneas's destructive appropriation is also conveyed through the frequent use of the Latin word *stirps*, which means "shoot or stem," "lineage or race," or when the first two meanings are "combined:" the shoot or "branch of a family tree."[14] In the *Aeneid*, *stirps* is used most often to refer to Aeneas's lineage, his "primal parent stock" (*stirpe*) from Teucer and Dardanus to whom he will return in the land of Latium (3.131; 140). As Duncan Kennedy notes in general of these terms of "familial succession," the frequent references to Aeneas's "stock" and his role as the "father of the Roman race (*stir-*

[14] Max Radin, "Gens, Familia, Stirps." *Classical Philology* 9:3 (1914): 235-247. <http://www.jstor.org/search> (20 May 2008) 247. I am indebted to Martin Hughes, who commented on the double meaning of *stirps* ("branch" and "family relationship") in an online posting on the Virgil Mailing List (Mantovano). See Works Cited. Hughes, however, confined his remarks to the use of the word in Book III and did not address its more interesting appearances in Book XII.

[15] Kennedy, 151.

[16] Kennedy discusses Aeneas's "appropriative role" in the shaping of his "past" history and identity in relation to Virgil's own "appropriation" of Homeric epic (151-2). He does not comment on Aeneas's appropriation of another civilization or culture (as this essay does).

pis)" (12.226) work to "valorise [Aeneas's] presence"[15] in Latium.[16] To David Quint, this rhetoric is part of the epic's "teleological [...] narrative" that moves smoothly to its "final goal of victory" in the "found[ing] of a future Rome."[17] Nevertheless, Aeneas's teleological triumph is not the only story in the *Aeneid*. To Kennedy, "the language of hereditary right, of coming rightfully in one's inheritance [...] occludes [Aeneas's] actively appropriative [...] role."[18] The allusions, via the word *stirps*, to Aeneas's legitimacy of rule direct attention away from the narrative of Aeneas's destructive attempt to appropriate another lineage to create a home for the Trojan people.

The *Aeneid*, however, effects an interesting change in Book 12 in its use of the word *stirps*, one that does work to place emphasis on Aeneas's appropriative role. Latinus's sceptre, which is, as Briggs suggests, a "represent[ation]" of the "governance of Latium,"[19] is described as a "bough" (12.287) that has been "cut from the live tree-bole (*stirpe*) in the forest" (12.285). It would appear in this instance that *stirps* is used merely to denote the stem or shoot of an actual tree, but as Max Radin notes, in Latin the word frequently "retains something of the abstract sense of 'origin,' 'line'" or "descent."[20] Therefore, the "tree-bole" may be viewed as connoting the third meaning of *stirps*, that is, "branch of a family tree," an interpretation that fits well with the allusion to the tree-bole as "mother" (12.286). It is should be remembered that Latinus's rule can be traced to Saturn's own act of appropriation, who as an "exile from a kingdom lost" (8.425) appropriated a native "race of men" who "came from tree trunks," and gave them "laws" and "the name of Latium" (8.417-8; 427-8). Saturn created his own rulers or race when he fathered Latinus's grandfather, Picus (7.64-7), and thus established the line of succession of "Latin lords" (12.289) who formerly carried Latinus's sceptre.

The description of the sceptre therefore suggests that if the "live tree-bole" (*stirpe*) is read as a "branch of the family tree," then Latinus's governance was appropriated or "cut" by Saturn out of the line of descent of the indigenous race of men who "came from tree-trunks." The personified violence in the image - in the form of a bough that is "torn" from its "mother" and "laid bare" of its "branching arms and leaves" (12.286-7) - recalls the mutilated warriors from which Aeneas fashions his war trophies and power of signification over the Latin people. The appropriative history of the sceptre suggests that Aeneas is another Saturn - an "exile from a kingdom lost" and an appropriator of other peoples and cultures. As the "usurper of Lavinia"[21] and thus of Latinus's lineage, Aeneas is ultimately merely appropriating what has already been formerly seized.[22] Through this image, the epic subtly counteracts the teleological orientation of the text as it furthers an implicit critique of the act of civilizing, in which "to found a city" is to participate in a destructive cycle of appropriation.

[17] David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 67.
[18] Kennedy, 152.
[19] Briggs, 40.
[20] Radin, 247.
[21] Eve Adler, *Vergil's Empire: Political Thought in the 'Aeneid,*" (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) 213.
[22] Adler notes, that "on both occasions in the poem when Aeneas is actually referred to as *tyrannus*, the speaker is in fact thinking of him as the usurper of Lavinia" (213). Fitzgerald's translation does not capture, unfortunately, this language of tyranny. For example, the phrase in Latin, "touched the tyrant's hand" is rendered as "join hands with your captain" in English. See 12.359-60.

The word *stirps* is also used soon after to describe the "trunk" (*stirpem*) (12.1038) of "an old wild olive [tree], [...] sacred to [the Latin king] Faunus," which the Trojans appropriate for their own purposes and "lop away," so that "they c[an] fight on a clear field" (12.1037-8; 1043-4). It is the only other instance of *stirps* that is used to refer to a tree or plant growth in the entirety of the *Aeneid*. Given the semantic meaning of the word and the fact that this reference occurs shortly after the description of Latinus's sceptre, it is probable that *stirps* is used here to connote the trunk or "branch of [a] family tree." As noted above, the tree is "sacred to Faunus," the Latin king who is the father of Latinus and grandson of Saturn. It therefore appears that the olive tree is representative of the Latin family tree or lineage, one which the Trojans have lopped away or violated through a war over who will inherit the Latin throne.

The olive tree's involvement in the duel between Turnus and Aeneas further suggests its association with the Latin lineage. While trying to hit Turnus, Aeneas misses his target and his spear "st[icks] in th[e] tough stump" (12.1045) of the olive tree. Some hundred lines later, Aeneas hurls that same spear at Turnus, "passing [it] clean through the middle of [his] thigh," which brings "the huge man to earth, his knees buckling" (12.1258-60). Aeneas's violation of both the tree and Turnus suggests that Aeneas "bring[s] devastation" (12.1256) to both his Latin enemy and also to the Italian lineage or tree. Aeneas not only kills Turnus, but usurps the Latin throne from him and radically changes the Latins's lineage and history. It is interesting to note that Turnus's fall is accompanied by the "groan[s]" of the Rutulians, which "echo on all sides from all / The mountain range, and [...] the forest" (12.1261-3). This image evokes the tree simile of the fall of Troy, just as Turnus's death at the hands of Aeneas recalls the slaying of Priam, as one critic has suggested.[23] Aeneas thus re-enacts the attempted annihilation of Priam's bloodline by the Greeks through his own violation of the Latin family tree. The use of s*tirps* therefore suggests a counter-narrative to the "the language of hereditary right" that portrays Aeneas as the legitimate ruler of the Latins.

In the *Aeneid*, the motifs of re-rooting and uprooting, mutilated trunks (*trunci*) and branches of family trees (*stirpes*) repeat and recall the devastating images of the fall of Troy and of Priam in Book 2. Through this intricate network of arboreal imagery, the *Aeneid* describes Aeneas's struggle to confer signification on the ruins of Troy, and also illustrates the violence and destructiveness of his appropriation of Latium and its people. Though the *Aeneid* does narrate the teleological narrative of the "remnant[s]" of Troy becoming the future Rome in Latium, the tree imagery draws attention to Aeneas's participation in a cycle of destructive appropriation, in which those who do not conform with the *telos* are, like Priam or the Latin troops, "heaped up in mammoth carnage [...] / numberless and nameless" (11.284-5).

Kate Hart

[23] Reckford, 83.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage Classics, 1990.

—-. "Aeneid," edited by J. B. Greenough. Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900. *The Latin Library*. <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/verg.html> (16 May 2008).

Secondary Sources

Adler, Eve. *Vergil's Empire: Political Thought in the 'Aeneid'*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

"Appropriation." Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989.

Briggs, Ward. *Narrative and Simile from the Georgics in the 'Aeneid'*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980.

Gransden, K.W. *Virgil: The Aeneid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Hughes, Martin. "Wood, Metal, Politics." Online posting. 23 Apr. 2008. Mantovano: the Virgil Mailing List. <http://virgil.org/mantovano/> (18 May 2008).

Kennedy, Duncan. "Virgilian Epic." In *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, edited by Charles Martindale, 145-155. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Paschalis, Michael. *Virgil's 'Aeneid': Semantic Relations and Proper Names*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Quint, David. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Radin, Max. "Gens, Familia, Stirps." *Classical Philology* 9:3 (1914): 235-247. <http://www.jstor.org/search> (20 May 2008).

Reckford, Kenneth. "Some Trees in Virgil and Tolkien." In *Proceedings of the Symposium 'Perspectives of Roman Poetry,' February 14-16, 1972*, edited by G. Karl Galinsky, 57-93. Austin: University of Texas P, 1974.

"Stirps." The Classic Latin Dictionary. 1957.

Thomas, Richard. "Tree Violation and Ambivalence in Virgil." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 118 (1988): 261-273. <http://www.jstor.org/search> (21 May 2008).