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Reconsidering Vergilian 'Restraint' in the *Aeneid*

Among the few scholars, such as Blumner and Fuhrmann, who have closely examined Vergil's presentation of scenes of human physical violence in the *Aeneid*, the byword has been 'restraint.' Thus the relatively limited nature of Vergil's descriptions of violence in comparison to those of other epic poets is taken as a result either of the personal sensitivities attested in the *vitae* or of his Augustan fidelity to the particularly Roman sense of epic decorum seen already in Livius' subtle social elevation of the *Odyssey*. But the notion that 'restraint' was determinative for Vergil's presentation of violence quickly proves both untenable and limiting. It identifies Vergil by contrasting him with other poets whose handling of violence must then be considered 'unrestrained' and so somehow faulty. By concentrating on what Vergil keeps himself from, this notion also forecloses discussion of the actual function of images of physical violence in the *Aeneid*.

In this paper, I take up this question by exploring one particular Vergilian technique, that of omitting a central violent image amid other images of physical violence. One strand of Roman thought, beginning at least with Ennius and assuming a Stoic shape in the hands of Cicero and Seneca, recognizes the danger to society that the volatility of violence poses and the departure from the essential human faculty of ratio that it represents. The power of violent images in poetry, acknowledged generally by ancient commentators, but characterized most succinctly by Seneca, is caused in large part by realization of the immediacy of pain and the difficulty of alleviating or reversing the effects of physical harm. I argue that by employing a technique of omission, Vergil creates even greater distress around the social rupture which violence represents by frustrating the recontextualization of this particular power of violent images.

Numerous such images surround Priam's last moments (2.526-58), but strangely, as Blumner notes, we never actually see his death. This omission might be read as an instance of Vergilian 'restraint,' but its inclusion would not significantly augment the horror we find in Pyrrhus' stabbing of Priam at his altar (2.550-3) and Priam's headless trunk (2.558-9). With these images Vergil creates confusion by conflating two traditional versions which have Priam dying either at the altar or on the shore. Aeneas offers a third version later, urging Anchises to flee with him because Pyrrhus, *patrem qui obtruncat ad aras*, will soon arrive fresh from the *multo...sanguine* of Priam (2.662-3). Here Aeneas as narrator himself performs two acts of conflation. First, he attributes to Priam the *multo...sanguine* that earlier belonged to Polites, uniting their deaths and emphasizing the extinction of Priam's line. Second, Aeneas brings even greater uncertainty to Priam's death by combining the two earlier versions: the word *obtruncat* here recalls Priam's *ingens...truncus* (2.557), thereby suggesting he was both stabbed and beheaded *ad aras*.

In this instance, as with the deaths of Dido and Mezentius, Vergil omits a central moment of violence, but refers to it with a constellation of other violent images. This is not, however, the horror movie trick of leaving the most gruesome scene to our imaginations—all of the possibilities are alluded to though not defined. Instead, the effect of such omissions is the opposite of what Plass posits for the arena—not a controlled, Girardean

transfer of community violence onto the other, but rather the creation of a suspended emotional disturbance through the introduction of further complications into the social crisis that violence must always represent.