

Mark THORNE

The *Aristeia* and the Poetics of Epic Failure in Book Nine of Vergil's *Aeneid*

In the ninth book of the *Aeneid*, Vergil at last narrates the battle he has been delaying since announcing his *maius opus* in Book 7, yet he notably continues to delay its onset until the final third of the book (Hardie 1994, 3; Wiltshire 1999, 162). An important unexplored way Vergil constructs these delays is through his use of the *aristeia*. In the most recent study on Vergil's use of epic battle narrative, Andreola Rossi (2004) points out that despite other differences the *aristeia* form remain essentially unchanged; yet her assessment overlooks the essential truth that its *poetic function* has been radically transformed. Once in each of the book's three parts--the failed attack on the ships, the night expedition of Nisus and Euryalus, and the assault on the Trojan camp--Vergil sets up an *aristeia* situation only to abort it before it can take place. Before the end, Turnus is finally granted a full *aristeia* in which he kills many Trojans, yet he fails to achieve any tactical or strategic advantage. Thus in addition to the general "failure of strategy" in Book 9 (M.A. di Cesare 1972) I argue that there is also a failure of the epic narrative itself. Vergil strikingly portrays the *aristeia* form as a complete failure in epic terms.

Although Turnus's epic model Hector enjoys an *aristeia* as he attacks the Greek ships, (e.g. *Il.* 12.465-66), in Vergil the ships are transformed into sea nymphs, denying Turnus the *aristeia* altogether. Later, Nisus and Euryalus, fired with a desire to brave some "epic" deed (*aut pugnam aut aliquid magnum*, 9.186), decide to attempt to get a message through to Aeneas. Once among the sleeping enemy guards, both Nisus and Euryalus begin to kill, an act clearly depicted as a paired *aristeia*. Yet Vergil aborts it as Nisus realizes they need to move on. Fatally distracted by an epic device far more fit for the battlefield than a mission of stealth, the two fail and in the end meet their deaths. Vergil strikingly uses this second delay to focus on the deadly consequences of the *aristeia* for all sides: the Latins weep over their slain comrades while Euryalus' mother laments in grief-stricken rage.

The final aborted *aristeia* comes just after the fighting has begun when Turnus slays a remarkable seven men in a row (9.573-75)! This is the beginning of an *aristeia*--until the next line suddenly switches to other combatants. Once again, Vergil hesitates to commit to the grisly task of narrating such epic death. Yet this epic battle demands epic killing, and at 9.691ff Turnus finally enjoys his glorious *aristeia* in which he routs all who face him. Furthermore, the final victim of this *aristeia* is Cretheus, an epic poet, as if to show that that the deadly power of an epic *aristeia* can overcome the very one who should have power over epic! The great irony of this whole episode is that after all of his "Homeric" success, Turnus can only run away. In the end nothing has changed--except that now countless bodies lie strewn lifeless across the ravaged battlefield. By repeatedly hesitating to commit to an *aristeia*, and by showing its complete ineffectiveness when one finally does happen, Vergil here at the beginning of the battle invites the reader to reflect not on the glory of the hero but rather on its horrific cost.