Preface

The real life of Rome did not permit itself to be Hellenized in any vital part, but the more Rome subjected herself to the formative discipline of Greece, the more clearly the natural energy of national life revealed itself.

(E. Fraenkel, Inaugural Lecture, Oxford, 13 February 1935.)

In a well-known passage of the thirteenth book of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells a long and circumstantial story to Athene, who is disguised as a young shepherd. There is not a word of truth in his tale, and at the end mortal and goddess recognize each other for the first-class deceivers they are (vv. 287 ff.). A Greek audience, as Stanford comments, would enjoy this back-chat between the wisest of gods and wiliest of men, because they admired a tall tale for its own sake.

And it is with a tall Greek tale that literary historians have been too often fascinated. They like nothing so much as to dilate on the backwardness of the "untutored Romans," when they are trying to say something about the first beginnings of artistic endeavor at Rome. Of course they have Horace on their side:

Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit, et artes
Intulit agresti Latio: sic horridus ille
Defluxit numerus Saturnius, et grave virus
Munditiae pepulere: sed in longum tamen aevum
Manserunt hodieque manent vestigia ruris.

(*Epp. II.* 1. 156-60)

But what we have to remember is that Horace was not so much a professor as a partisan in his literary judgments. Even Cicero, as D. R. Shackleton Bailey points out to our readers, is not wholly reliable here. Horace was concerned to defend the Roman revolution as it had affected literature. That is perfectly legitimate. But we should not look to him for truths about the situation which really existed, and we should not use convenient quotations from him as an excuse to avoid thought.
For in fact, if we teach our students the sort of literary history which insists that the Romans could not or did not stir hand or foot in matters artistic until they made contact with the Greeks, and then that they became what is so often called by the unpromising name of "imitators," we are doing a grave disservice to our cause. First of all, we are implying that the difficult language Latin is only going to make sense if there is added to it the difficult language Greek, and, though this may be true in the long run, I am not sure it is true immediately; and so true that it has to be thrust upon students as a first principle. Secondly, as a corollary from this first mistake, we will be tempted to downplay the originality of Roman literature, and to be suggesting all the time that, whatever its merits, they are as pale moonlight when compared with the bright Apolline sun of Hellenism. Why should anyone want to be bothered with the second-rate, even though there have been scholars who have not hesitated to apply that epithet to the very Latin authors over whose texts they have lingered so attentively?

The most pressing question of Latin literary history becomes therefore, as Gordon Williams argues later in these pages, the question of Roman originality. Were the Romans "untutored" or were they not? The first point to get clear in our answer is that they were not a tabula rasa, smooth and blank, waiting for some Greek seal to be impressed upon them. We need to introduce from our colleagues in modern languages the concept of "reception." No one thinks, for example, that the British had no literary aptitude of their own if someone writes about the "reception" of Russian literature in England in the 19th century. The Romans received plenty, no doubt, from the Greeks, as they did from the Etruscans, though that is matter for another volume. But they took it, not onto a wax tablet, but into a curious olla, a pot, of their own devising, and in doing so they immediately gave what they got fresh contours, a fresh context, a fresh "deformation," to use a word of which French critics are fond.

The peculiar outlines of the Roman aesthetic imagination may be seen if we study three phenomena, the circus, the triumph and the carnival, where it is hardly likely that the Romans had to wait for Greek inspiration before they moved. Archaeologists tell us that the circus at Rome was built as early as the time of the kings, and that the games held there were associated with the god Consus, the god who presided over the harvest home, when the grain was "hidden" (condo) in store to be produced in time of winter's bleakness. As Roman civilization developed, the circus took an ever stronger hold on the Roman popular imagination, until at Byzantium the rival factions of the Blues and the Greens, as in the case of the Nika revolt against Justinian, could
threaten the destiny of the emperor himself. But we must remember that it is precisely from the start of a horse race in the Circus that Ennius drew his picture of the tense wait at the very foundation of the City to see whether the gods would favor Romulus or Remus.

Anxiety filled all the men as to which of the two would be ruler. As, when the consul means to give the signal, all men look eagerly at the barrier’s bounds to see how soon he will send forth the chariots from the painted mouths — so the people waited.

The Romans were, in a profound sense, a Circus people right from the start. This is why that archetype of all the modern popular introductions to Roman civilization — L. Friedlaender’s *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms*, available in English translation* — should be among the first books to be utilized by the teacher, and the first to be browsed through by the student. What we need of course is an updating of Friedlaender with good, modern illustrations.

What does the Circus entail? What do we mean by saying that the Romans were “a Circus people?” For one thing, it means accepting the primacy for the Roman imagination of comedy: obviously not of Greek comedy, a view against which George Sheets rightly protests. This need not imply that the Romans were always expecting their readers and viewers to laugh, since the comic, pushed beyond a certain point, can also terrify, as admirers of Dante will testify. Perhaps we might say that the Romans had a deep awareness of the grotesque. Does not Horace, in the *Ars Poetica*, begin by warning the budding poet against the Picasso-like depiction of a girl with a beautiful head, a horse’s neck, and a fish’s body? (We should savor this description. Scholars hasten to agree with Horace, but never say a word about the extraordinary fact that he should have chosen this, of all, examples to illustrate his theme.) Does Horace not speak of the Roman public’s taste for “striking marvels,” *speciosa miracula* like Homer’s Antiphates, Scylla, Cyclops, Charybdis (*A.P. 144-45*)? And does not the same poet, who began by warning us against the mermaid with the horse’s neck, end his poem with a bear that turns into a leech and alters its gender in the process?

Like the bear which has found the strength to break the bars of his cage, the untimely reader of verses scatters in flight unlettered and lettered alike: if he manages to catch someone, he grips him and kills him by his recitation: he is a leech, who will not relax her hold on the skin until she is glutted with blood (*A.P. 472-76*).

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At the end of the second book of his *Odes*, this same Horace describes his metamorphosis into a swan, complete with rough skin (*asperae pelles*) on his legs. Scholars have never known what to make of this absurd image.

From “grotesque” I have slid to “metamorphosis.” This is in fact a basic circus concept, which can vary from the party hat and long nose to the clown’s full dress regalia. Another variant of it is wearing one’s Sunday best in order to go to church, just as Domitian ordered that Romans should attend the games wearing their togas. In the sweltering Roman summer, the order was hygienically absurd, as Martial complains. But hygiene had nothing to do with it. There was a folk idea of great antiquity at work here, and ultimately a religious reason. “Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having on a wedding-garment?” said by the King to his guests, is an aspect of the same feeling.

The student of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, especially if he begins with the account of creation, will not take long to deduce that metamorphosis has biological roots. The scientist looking through his microscope will not need much convincing, as he gazes at the squirming and ever-changing shapes on his plate, that nature dearly loves the cycle of growth and change, a cycle in which death becomes an incidental in the natural round. But, though the Roman farmer had no microscopes, did he not grasp the same truths in his walks around his fields, or in his daily contact with his animals? Horace may have sneered at the “traces of the farmyard” which he still found in Roman poetry, just as Catullus sneered at the *Annales Volusi*. But without those traces, and more than traces, Roman poetry would not be Roman. J. E. G. Zetzel shows this for Ennius and Catullus 64, and Georg Luck for Naevius and Virgil.

Another implication of the circus idea is freedom: freedom from constraint, as when the trapeze or high-wire artist performs his or her death-defying act, or when the clown on tall stilts breaks the ban on human height: but also freedom of thought and expression. Here one may quote Naevius at one end of the time-scale: *libra lingua loquemur ludis liberalibus*, written in the third century B.C.: and at the other a passage from C. A. Trypanis’ *Medieval and Modern Greek Poetry* referring to the Hippodrome in Byzantium. Trypanis writes (p. xxxvi):

The hippodrome became much more than a mere race-course; it was an assembly, a substitute for the vanished Comitia, the last asylum of the liberties of the Populus Romanus. There the people, forgetting the rivalry of the two main political parties — the Blues and the Greens — into which they were originally divided, could call an emperor to account or demand the dismissal of an unpopular minister.
The Roman Saturnalia, in which slaves briefly assumed the cap of liberty and were able to speak freely to their masters, like Davus in the seventh satire of Horace’s second book, shows that this license of language was built into the Roman calendar. It too is something sacred, and that is why parrhesia, the freedom of the Athenian citizen in his democratic state to say what he liked, is also a term much used in St. Paul’s Epistles.

Now it is possible to see how that peculiarly Roman phenomenon, the triumph, fits into a larger pattern. It had its metamorphosis, as when the face of the triumphing general was painted vermilion, like that of the statue of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. It had its freedom, as when the soldiers in the triumphal procession were allowed to sing rude verses about the personal habits of their leader. “Look out for your wives, citizens: we are escorting a bald adulterer,” was what they sang about Julius Caesar (moechus punning on the Atellane Maccus?) in the trochaic meter typical of comedy. And of course there was the slave who stood behind his master in the chariot, whispering all the time “Hominem te memento,” rather like the priest on Ash Wednesday.

The circus, the triumph, the Saturnalia or carnival: as we read Friedlaender’s pages we can find their common elements, and begin to appreciate the quality of the shaping aesthetic imagination which makes it nonsense to speak of the Romans as “mere” farmers before the Greeks moved in. But there is one important question which Friedlaender does not tackle, and which it would be essential to confront if his book were to be updated for use by our students. How does this sort of imagination jibe with the imagination we are conditioned to look for in the authors we read in class? A full answer to this question would really demand the re-writing of Roman literary history. In some authors, such as Ovid, we can feel the carnival presence without too much difficulty. But what about Virgil? What about the Aeneid, that poem of tragic intensity? Yet even the Aeneid becomes a poem of metamorphoses, when we study the complex relationship a character like Dido bears to Greek figures as disparate as Nausicaa, Helen, Circe, and from Apollonius Rhodius, Hypsipyle and Medea. Or what about the internal metamorphoses, when Turnus, Juturna and queen Amata in book XII at the culmination of the epic replay Anna, Dido and Aeneas from book IV? Nowadays scholars would not find any of this too new. But perhaps they would not have taken so long to discover what a strange poem the Aeneid is if they had not been so anxious to ignore Roman aesthetic independence.

Nor would scholars ever have been so ready to see in the Aeneid a propaganda blast from an Augustan mouthpiece if they had understood
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the right of circus freedom. The very fact that the Aeneid is polyphonic (quite literally, since Virgil was famous for the "extraordinary harlotries" of his voice) means that it cannot signify one thing only. As characters blend into one another, as Aeneas and Turnus interchange, for example, the characters of Homer's Hector, Achilles and Ajax, we are no longer able to say straightforwardly that one of them represents the right and another the wrong. It is the same suspension of commitment as was enjoyed by the soldiers in the triumphal procession, except that what was enjoyed by them so briefly is here eternalized in the timeless dimension of great art.

Readers of the Aeneid from at least the time of St. Augustine, if not that of Ovid, have always been inclined to sympathize with Dido against Aeneas, and this may explain why in the Middle Ages Turnus is held in high regard, while Konrad of Hirtzau reports that, after his victory, Aeneas made himself so unpopular among his Italian subjects that eventually he was struck down by a lightning bolt! Metamorphosis, the carnival dissolution of one semblance into another, shows that for Virgil Dido was meant as a somewhat more terrifying symbol than sentimentalists realize. Book III of the Aeneid, where Aeneas recounts his adventures in his Mediterranean wanderings, is crucial for the understanding of this. The book culminates with the picture of mount Etna, in all its dreadful might, and the horrible Cyclops, who threatens, along with his brothers, to destroy Aeneas and his company. Scholars chide this book as uninspired and dull. But what they will not see is that "the fires of Etna" were a well-known topos for the passion of love. The comparison may be traced from Catullus, through Horace, Ovid, Seneca, Petrarch to Sannazaro and Ariosto. In fact, Aeneas is not telling his story to us. He is telling it to queen Dido, who is hanging with rapt and love-sick attention on his every word. Caeco carpitur igni is what we will hear of her at the start of book IV. What Virgil has done is to show us what the "fires of Etna" are really like, and the threat which they pose to Aeneas. This is the reality which underlies the posturing of Dido's Hellenistic court.

And the Cyclops, the man-eating monster who so powerfully anticipates Dante's image of the devil in the bottommost pit of hell, eternally devouring Brutus, Cassius and Judas? When Dido is cursing Aeneas, she threatens him with Hannibal:

exoriar e aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor
qui face Dardanios ferroque sequare colonos....

(IV. 625-26)

And we know of Hannibal that, when he was in Italy, he was indeed one-eyed: altero oculo capitur (Livy XXII. 2. 11). It is laughable, and
yet it is from just such laughable material, and ultimately from the car-
nival, that Virgil’s high tragedy is constructed.

The Roman aesthetic imagination is not wholly different from that of the Greeks, but it has its own rude, native vigor. *Hirsutae corona*ae may have been criticized by Propertius, as John Miller will show, but at this distance they look well on the brows of that *rustica proles* which conquered the world and appropriated forever the literature of Europe. *Plus est ingeni Romani terminos in tantum promovisse quam imperi.*

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The following papers were presented in their original form at the *Hirsutae Coronae* Conference held at the University of Minnesota. Warmest thanks are expressed to Professors John Miller and George Sheets for the energy and enthusiasm shown in organizing the conference, and for their subsequent editorial labors. A grant from the University of Minnesota towards the expenses of preparing the present volume is also gratefully acknowledged. The order of papers as presented has been preserved.

Once again Frances Stickney Newman generously undertook the burdensome task of preparing this issue on UNIX* and of producing the indexes. She receives our inadequate thanks for countless hours of labor.

Dr. William Plater, Associate Director of the School of Humanities, continued to encourage and sustain our efforts. His reward is, we hope, to see what has been done.

J. K. Newman

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