It's often said that Book VI offers a cure to nostalgia. Aeneas's Underworld encounters with the shades of his loved ones bring more pain than resolution, while the procession of august Romans who are yet to be brings hope. In Book VI lies affirmation of the life quest, though Heaney reserves his pathos for Aeneas in his tearful moments of self-sacrifice: his final address to Dido, the lover he left, who "showed no sign of having heard, no more/Than if her features had been carved in flint/Or Parian marble"; his too-short encounter with Deiphobus, the mutilated son of Priam, his "face in shreds"; his failed attempts to embrace his father's ghost—"Three times he tried." Heaney's description of the procession of future Romans is suitably more official, almost corporate: "this clan", "Marcellus, head and shoulders above the rest", "What presence he has."

The publication of a classical text in translation—one twelfth of one at that—may be a rare thing, but the choice of poem could hardly be more traditional. It has been more than 80 years since Theodor Haecker named Virgil "Father of the West", but this new translation does much to perpetuate that status. Its lexis is so contemporary that one finds oneself questioning what Virgil's role in Western civilisation is today, not least because it was the compatibility between the English language and Virgil's verse that informed Haecker's view.

Writing in 1934, the German critic wondered whether the reason that English translates Virgil so well is that "no Englishman, just as no Roman, with the one exception of Catiline, was ever cynical towards the res publica, and because, moreover, England is an empire?" In his sorrow for the fall of the Holy Roman Empire and rise of German cynicism towards the state Haecker was prone to exaggerate, but he was not wrong to say that Virgil's popularity has owed much historically to the pride of imperialists. In 2016, however, the cynicism is ours; imperialism has become distasteful. We consider ourselves so far above the Augustan propaganda of Book VI with its promises of a new Saturnalian Age that we are only comfortable when laughing it off. We seek from Virgil something more than the explication of an empire that will never be surpassed.

We find it, perhaps, in Aeneas's virtues, which are under particular scrutiny in Book VI as the good souls line up in anticipation of reincarnation, "the roll of my descendants". The hero's intense familial piety and humility were what enabled Haecker to understand the possibility of Christianity in a pagan world. Dante, Spenser and Milton all took their cue from Virgil. Aeneas's selflessness and sense of purpose appealed particularly to T.S. Eliot, who spoke wistfully in a 1944 address to the Virgil Society of the epic's "central European values", and the threat which the Second World War posed to them.

As he watched the "progressive mutilation and disfigurement" of Europe, Eliot came to see Virgil as a unifying figure: "As Aeneas is to Rome, so ancient Rome is to Europe." For Eliot, as for Heaney, Virgil was an anchor with the past that could not be obliterated. Virgil's epic was important because it was fruitful and authoritative evidence that "Europe is a whole". Europe could be broken, but its literature would still hold it together, since it leaked from the common fount of Greece and Rome that found the most perfect unity in the *Aeneid*. As such, the *Aeneid* gave us what Eliot called "our standard of the classic".

The *Aeneid* is unlikely to be invoked by the Remain campaign this summer (though it wouldn't be their most desperate argument, I'm sure), and its status as a classic today must depend upon less idealistic arguments, such as its absorption of earlier cultures and its stylistic conservatism.

The hexameters and epithets which ▶

Aloof epic: "Lake Avernus: Aeneas and the Cumaean Sibyl", c.1814-15, by J.M.W. Turner