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IS THE AENEID A CELEBRATION OF EMPIRE— OR A CRITIQUE?

By mythologizing the Romans' Trojan origins, Virgil turned a story about losers into an epic about winners.

By Daniel Mendelsohn



Even in his lifetime, Virgil was revered as the greatest poet of the age. DEA / G. Dagli Orti / De Agostini / Getty

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ince the end of the first century A.D., people have been playing a game with a certain book. In this game, you open the book to a random spot and place your finger on the text; the passage you select will, it is thought, predict your future. If this sounds silly, the results suggest otherwise. The first person known to have played the game was a highborn Roman who was fretting about whether he'd be chosen to follow his cousin, the emperor Trajan, on the throne; after opening the book to this passage—

I recognize that he is that king of
Rome,
Gray headed, gray bearded, who
will formulate
The laws for the early city . . .

—he was confident that he'd succeed. His name was Hadrian.

Through the centuries, others sought to discover their fates in this book, from the French novelist Rabelais, in the early sixteenth century (some of whose characters play the game, too), to the British king Charles I, who, during the Civil War—which culminated in the loss of his kingdom and his head—visited an Oxford library and was alarmed to find that he'd placed his finger on a passage that concluded, “But let him die before his time, and lie / Somewhere unburied on a lonely beach.” Two and a half centuries later, as the Germans marched toward Paris at the beginning of the First World War, a classicist named David Ansell Slater, who had once viewed the very volume that Charles had consulted, found himself scouring the same text, hoping for a portent of good news.

What was the book, and why was it taken so seriously? The answer lies in the name of the game: *sortes vergilianae*. The Latin noun *sortes* means lots—as in “drawing lots,” a reference to the game's element of chance. The adjective *vergilianae*, which means “having to do with Vergilius,” identifies the book: the works of the Roman poet Publius Vergilius Maro, whom we know as Virgil.

For a long stretch of Western history, few people would have found it odd to ascribe prophetic power to this collection of Latin verse. Its author, after all, was the greatest and the most influential of all Roman poets. A friend and confidant of Augustus, Rome's first emperor, Virgil was already considered a classic in his own lifetime: revered, quoted, imitated, and occasionally parodied by other writers, taught in schools, and devoured by the general public. Later generations of Romans considered

his works a font of human knowledge, from rhetoric to ethics to agriculture; by the Middle Ages, the poet had come to be regarded as a wizard whose powers included the ability to control Vesuvius's eruptions and to cure blindness in sheep.

However fantastical the proportions to which this reverence grew, it was grounded in a very real achievement represented by one poem in particular: the Aeneid, a heroic epic in twelve chapters (or "books") about the mythic founding of Rome, which some ancient sources say Augustus commissioned and which was, arguably, the single most influential literary work of European civilization for the better part of two millennia.

Virgil had published other, shorter works before the Aeneid, but it's no accident that the epic was a magnet for the fingers of the great and powerful who played the *sortes vergilianae*. Its central themes are leadership, empire, history, and war. In it, an upstanding Trojan prince named Aeneas, son of Venus, the goddess of love, flees Troy after its destruction by the Greeks, and, along with his father, his son, and a band of fellow-survivors, sets out to establish a new realm across the sea, in Italy, the homeland that's been promised to him by divine prophecy. Into that traditional story Virgil cannily inserted a number of showstopping glimpses into Rome's future military and political triumphs, complete with cameo appearances by Augustus himself—the implication being that the real-life empire arose from a god-kissed mythic past. The Emperor and his people alike were hooked: within a century of its author's death, in 19 B.C., citizens of Pompeii were scrawling lines from the epic on the walls of shops and houses.

People haven't stopped quoting it since. From the moment it appeared, the Aeneid was the paradigmatic classic in Western art and education; as one scholar has put it, Virgil "occupied the central place in the literary canon for the whole of Europe for longer than any other writer." (After the Western Roman Empire fell, in the late fifth century A.D., knowledge of Greek—and, hence, intimacy with Homer's epics—virtually disappeared from Western Europe for a thousand years.) Virgil's poetry has been indispensable to everyone from his irreverent younger contemporary Ovid, whose parodies of the older poet's gravitas can't disguise a genuine admiration, to St. Augustine, who, in his "Confessions," recalls weeping over the Aeneid, his favorite book before he discovered the Bible; from Dante, who chooses Virgil, *l'altissimo poeta*, "the highest poet," as his guide through Hell and Purgatory in the Divine Comedy, to T. S. Eliot, who returned repeatedly to Virgil in his critical essays and pronounced the Aeneid "the classic of all Europe."

And not only Europe. Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin liked to quote Virgil in their speeches and letters. The poet's idealized vision of honest farmers and shepherds working in rural simplicity was influential, some scholars believe, in shaping the Founders' vision of the new republic as one in which an agricultural majority should hold power. Throughout the nineteenth century, Virgil was a central fixture of American grammar-school education; the ability to translate passages on sight was a standard entrance requirement at many colleges and universities. John Adams boasted that his son John Quincy had translated the entire Aeneid. Ellen Emerson wrote her father, Ralph Waldo, to say that she was covering a hundred and twenty lines a day; Helen Keller read it in Braille. Today, traces of the epic's cultural authority linger on: a quotation from it greets visitors to the Memorial Hall of the 9/11 Museum, in New York City. Since the turn of the current century, there have been at least five major translations into English alone, most recently by the American poet David Ferry (Chicago), in the final installment of his translation of Virgil's complete works.

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Still, the Aeneid—notoriously—can be hard to love. In part, this has to do with its aesthetics. In place of the raw archaic potency of Homer's epics, which seems to dissolve the millennia between his heroes and us, Virgil's densely allusive poem offers an elaborately self-conscious “literary” suavity. (The critic and Columbia professor

Mark Van Doren remarked that “Homer is a world; Virgil, a style.”) Then, there’s Aeneas himself—“in some ways,” as even the Great Courses Web site felt compelled to acknowledge, “the dullest character in epic literature.” In the Aeneid’s opening lines, Virgil announces that the hero is famed above all for his *pietas*, his “sense of duty”: hardly the sexiest attribute for a protagonist. If Aeneas was meant to be a model proto-Roman, he has long struck many readers as a cold fish; he and his comrades, the philosopher György Lukács once observed, live “the cool and limited existence of shadows.” Particularly in comparison with his Homeric predecessors, Aeneas comes up short, lacking the cruel glamour of Achilles, or Odysseus’s beguiling smarts.

But the biggest problem by far for modern audiences is the poem’s subject matter. Today, the themes that made the epic required reading for generations of emperors and generals, and for the clerics and teachers who groomed them—the inevitability of imperial dominance, the responsibilities of authoritarian rule, the importance of duty and self-abnegation in the service of the state—are proving to be an embarrassment. If readers of an earlier era saw the Aeneid as an inspiring advertisement for the onward march of Rome’s many descendants, from the Holy Roman Empire to the British one, scholars now see in it a tale of nationalistic arrogance whose plot is an all too familiar handbook for repressive violence: once Aeneas and his fellow-Trojans arrive on the coast of Italy, they find that they must fight a series of wars with an indigenous population that, eventually, they brutally subjugate.

The result is that readers today can have a very strange relationship to this classic: it’s a work we feel we should embrace but often keep at arm’s length. Take that quote in the 9/11 Museum: “No day shall erase you from the memory of time.” Whoever came up with the idea of using it was clearly ignorant of the context: these high-minded words are addressed to a pair of nighttime marauders whose bloody ambush of a group of unsuspecting targets suggests that they have far more in common with the 9/11 terrorists than with their victims. A century ago, many a college undergrad could have caught the gaffe; today, it was enough to have an impressive-sounding quote from an acknowledged classic.

Another way of saying all this is that, while our forebears looked confidently to the text of the Aeneid for answers, today it raises troubling questions. Who exactly is Aeneas, and why should we admire him? What is the epic’s political stance? Can we ignore the parts we dislike and cherish the rest? Should great poetry serve an authoritarian regime—and just whose side was Virgil on? Two thousand years after its

appearance, we still can't decide if his masterpiece is a regressive celebration of power as a means of political domination or a craftily coded critique of imperial ideology—a work that still has something useful to tell us.

Little in Virgil's background destined him to be the great poet of empire. He was born on October 15, 70 B.C., in a village outside Mantua; his father, perhaps a well-off farmer, had the means to provide him with a good education, first in Cremona and Milan and then in Rome. The inhabitants of his native northern region had only recently been granted Roman citizenship through a decree by Julius Caesar, issued when the poet was a young man. Hence, even after his first major work, a collection of pastoral poems called the Eclogues, gained him an entrée into Roman literary circles, Virgil must have seemed—and perhaps felt—something of an outsider: a reserved country fellow with (as his friend the poet Horace teased him) a hick's haircut, who spoke so haltingly that he could seem downright uneducated. His retiring nature, which earned him the nickname *parthenias* (“little virgin”), may have been the reason he decided not to remain in Rome to complete his education. Instead, he settled in Naples, a city with deep ties to the culture of the Greeks, which he and his literary contemporaries revered. In the final lines of the Georgics, a long didactic poem about farming which he finished when he was around forty, the poet looked back yearningly to the untroubled leisure he had enjoyed during that period:

And I, the poet Virgil, nurtured by
sweet

Parthénopé [Naples], was
flourishing in the pleasures

Of idle studies, I, who bold in
youth

Played games with shepherds'
songs.

I'm quoting David Ferry's translation of the poem. But the word that Ferry translates as “idle” is somewhat stronger in the original: Virgil says that his leisure time was *ignobilis*, “ignoble,” a choice that suggests some guilt about that easygoing Neapolitan idyll. And with good reason: however “sweet” those times were for Virgil, for Rome they were anything but. The poet's lifetime spanned the harrowing disintegration of the Roman Republic and the fraught birth of the Empire—by any measure, one of the most traumatic centuries in European history. Virgil was a schoolchild when the

orator and statesman Cicero foiled a plot by the corrupt aristocrat Catiline to overthrow the Republic; by the time the poet was twenty, Julius Caesar, defying the Senate's orders, had crossed the Rubicon with his army and set in motion yet another civil war. It was another two decades before Caesar's great-nephew and heir, Octavian, defeated the last of his rivals, the renegade general Antony and his Egyptian consort, Cleopatra, at the Battle of Actium, and established the so-called Principate—the rule of the *princeps* (“first citizen”), an emperor in everything but name. Soon afterward, he took the quasi-religious honorific “Augustus.”

The new ruler was a man of refined literary tastes; Virgil and his patron, Maecenas, the regime's unofficial minister of culture, are said to have taken turns reading the *Georgics* aloud to the Emperor after his victory at Actium. Augustus no doubt liked what he heard. In one passage, the poet expresses a fervent hope that Rome's young new leader will be able to spare Italy the wars that have wreaked havoc on the lives of the farmers whose labor is the subject of the poem; in another, he envisages the erection of a grand temple honoring the ruler.

Because we like to imagine poets as being free in their political conscience, such fawning seems distasteful. (Robert Graves, the author of “I, Claudius,” complained that “few poets have brought such discredit as Virgil on their sacred calling.”) But Virgil cannot have been alone among intelligent Romans in welcoming Augustus's regime as, at the very least, a stable alternative to the decades of internecine horrors that had preceded it. If Augustus did in fact suggest the idea for a national epic, it must have been while Virgil was still working on the *Georgics*, which includes a trailer for his next project: “And soon I'll gird myself to tell the tales / Of Caesar's brilliant battles, and carry his name / In story across . . . many future years.” He began work on the *Aeneid* around 29 B.C. and was in the final stages of writing when, ten years later, he died suddenly while returning home from a trip to Greece. He was buried in his beloved Naples.

The epic's state of completion continues to be a subject of debate. There's little doubt that a number of lines are metrically incomplete, a fact that dovetails with what we know about the poet's working method: he liked to joke that, in order to preserve his momentum while writing, he'd put in temporary lines to serve as “struts” until the “finished columns” were ready. According to one anecdote, the dying Virgil begged his literary executors to burn the manuscript of the epic, but Augustus intervened, and, after some light editing, the finished work finally appeared. In the epitaph he composed for himself, Virgil refers with disarming modesty to his achievement:

“Mantua gave me birth, Calabria took me, now Naples / holds me fast. I sang of pastures, farms, leaders.”

Virgil was keenly aware that, in composing an epic that begins at Troy, describes the wanderings of a great hero, and features book after book of gory battles, he was working in the long shadow of Homer. But, instead of being crushed by what Harold Bloom called “the anxiety of influence,” he found a way to acknowledge his Greek models while adapting them to Roman themes. Excerpts of the work in progress were already impressing fellow-writers by the mid-twenties B.C., when the love poet Propertius wrote that “something greater than the Iliad is being born.”

The very structure of the Aeneid is a wink at Homer. The epic is split between an “Odyssean” first half (Books I through VI recount Aeneas’s wanderings as he makes his way from Troy to Italy) and an “Iliadic” second half (Books VII through XII focus on the wars that the hero and his allies wage in order to take possession of their new homeland). Virgil signals this appropriation of the two Greek classics in his work’s famous opening line, “Arms and a man I sing”: the Iliad is the great epic of war (“arms”), while the Odyssey begins by announcing that its subject is “a man”—Odysseus. Virtually every one of the Aeneid’s nine thousand eight hundred and ninety-six lines is embedded, like that first one, in an intricate web of literary references, not only to earlier Greek and Roman literature but to a wide range of religious, historical, and mythological arcana. This allusive complexity would have flattered the sophistication of the original audience, but today it can leave everyone except specialists flipping to the endnotes. In this way, Virgil’s Homeric riff prefigures James Joyce’s, twenty centuries later: whatever the great passages of intense humanity, there are parts that feel like a treasure hunt designed for graduate students of the future.

It is, indeed, hardly surprising that readers through the centuries have found the Aeneid’s first half more engaging. As in the Odyssey, there are shipwrecks caused by angry deities (Juno, the queen of the gods, tries to foil Aeneas at every turn) and succor from helpful ones (Venus intervenes every now and then to help her son). There are councils of the gods at which the destinies of mortals are sorted out; at one point, Jupiter, the king of the pantheon, assures the anxious Venus (and, by implication, the Roman reader) that the nation her son is about to found will enjoy *imperium sine fine*, “rule without end.” As for the mortals, there are melancholy reunions with old friends and family and hair-raising encounters with legendary monsters. Virgil has a lot of fun retooling episodes from the Odyssey: his hero has

close calls with Scylla and Charybdis, lands on the Cyclops' island just after Odysseus has left, and—in an amusing moment that does an end run around Homer—decides to sail right past Circe's abode.

And, like Odysseus, Aeneas is dangerously distracted from his mission by a beautiful woman: Dido, the queen of the North African city of Carthage, where the hero has been welcomed hospitably after he is shipwrecked. Venus, eager for her son to find a safe haven there, sends Cupid to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas in Book I, and throughout Books II and III the queen grows ever more besotted with her guest, who holds her court spellbound with tales of his sufferings and adventures. His eyewitness account of the sack of Troy, in Book II, remains one of the most powerful depictions of military violence in European literature, with a disorienting, almost cinematic oscillation between seething, smoke-filled crowd scenes and claustrophobic moments of individual panic. At one point, Aeneas, fleeing the smoldering ruins, somehow loses track of his wife, Creusa; in a chillingly realistic evocation of war's chaos, we never learn how she dies. As for Dido, her affair with the hero reaches a tragic climax in Book IV. Aeneas, reminded by the gods of his sacred duty, abandons her, and she commits suicide—the emotional high point of the epic's first half. (The curse she calls down on her former lover is the passage that King Charles selected when he played the *sortes vergilianae*.)

The Aeneid's first part ends, as does the first half of the *Odyssey*, with an unsettling visit to the Underworld. Here, there are confrontations with the dead and the past they represent—Dido's ghost doesn't deign to acknowledge the apologetic Aeneas's protestations—and encounters, too, with the glorious future. One of the spirits that Aeneas meets is his father, Anchises, whom he'd carried on his back as they fled Troy, and who has since died; as Anchises guides his son through the murky landscape, he draws his attention to a fabulous parade of monarchs, warriors, statesmen, and heroes who will distinguish the history of the future Roman state, from the mythic king Romulus to Augustus himself. As they witness this pageant, the old man imparts a crucial piece of advice. The Greeks, he observes, excelled at the arts—sculpture, rhetoric—but Rome has a far greater mission in world history:

Romans, never forget that this will
be
Your appointed task: to use your
arts to be
The governor of the world, to
bring to it peace,

Serenely maintained with order
 and with justice,
 To spare the defeated and to bring
 an end
 To war by vanquishing the proud.

This conception of Rome's strengths—administration, governance, jurisprudence, war—in relation to Greece's will be familiar to anyone who's taken a World Civ course. What's so confounding is that, after receiving this eloquent advice on the correct uses of power, Aeneas—as the second half of the poem shockingly demonstrates—doesn't take it.

Books VII through XII, with their unrelenting account of the *bella horrida bella* (“wars, horrible wars”) that Aeneas must wage to secure his new homeland, are clearly meant to recall the Iliad—not least, in the event that sets them in motion. After the hero arrives in Italy, he favorably impresses a local king named Latinus, who promises his daughter, Lavinia, as a wife for Aeneas. The problem is that the girl has already been chosen for a local chieftain named Turnus, who, smarting from the insult, goes on to command the forces trying to repel the Trojan invaders. And so, like the war recounted in the Iliad, this one is fought over a woman who has been stolen away from her rightful mate—the difference being that this time it's the Trojans, not the Greeks, who invade a foreign country and ravage a kingdom in order to retrieve her. One challenge presented by the mythic Trojan origins of the Roman people was that the Trojans lost their great war; reshaping his source material, Virgil found a way to transform a story about losers into an epic about winners.

But what does it mean to be a winner? Anchises instructs his son that, to be a Roman, he must become (in Ferry's translation) “governor of the world.” This rendering of Virgil's phrase *regere imperio populos* is rather mild. John Dryden's 1697 translation far better conveys the menace lurking in the word *imperium* (“the right to command”): “’tis thine alone, with awful sway, / To rule Mankind; and make the World obey.”

Just what making the world obey looks like is vividly illustrated in another vision of the future that the Aeneid provides. In Book VIII, there is a lengthy description of the sumptuous shield that Vulcan, the blacksmith god, forges for Aeneas before he meets Turnus and the Italian hordes in battle. The decorations on the shield meld moments both mythic and historical, past and future, from Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf to a central panel depicting the Battle of Actium, with Augustus and

his brilliant general Agrippa, on one side, facing off against Antony and Cleopatra, on the other. (She's backed by her foreign "monster gods": that "monster" is a telling bit of Roman jingoism that Ferry inexplicably omits.) The shield also includes an image of Augustus marching triumphantly through the capital as its temples resound with the joyful singing of mothers, while—that other product of *imperium*—a host of conquered peoples are marched through the streets: nomads, Africans, Germans, Scythians.

Yet one battle into which Aeneas carries his remarkable shield ends with the hero unaccountably failing to adhere to the second part of his father's exhortation: to "spare the defeated." As the poem nears its conclusion, the wars gradually narrow to a single combat between Aeneas and Turnus, who, by that point, has slain a beautiful youth called Pallas, Aeneas's ward and the son of his chief ally. In the closing lines of the poem, Aeneas fells Turnus with a crippling blow to the thigh. While his enemy lies prostrate before him, the hero hesitates, sword in hand; but, just as thoughts of leniency crowd his mind—he is, after all, famous for his sense of duty, for doing the right thing—he sees that Turnus is wearing a piece of armor torn from Pallas's body. Seized with rage and grief, Aeneas rips open Turnus's breast with one blow, and the dead man's soul "indignant fled away to the shades below."

That is the last line of the poem—an ending so disorientingly abrupt that it has been cited as evidence by those who believe that Virgil left his magnum opus incomplete when he died. One fifteenth-century Italian poet went so far as to add an extra book to the poem (in Latin verse) tying Virgil's loose ends into a neat bow: Aeneas marries Lavinia and is eventually deified. This ending was so popular that it was included in editions of the Aeneid for centuries afterward.

As recently as the early twentieth century, the Aeneid was embraced as a justification of the Roman—and, by extension, any—empire: "a classic vindication of the European world-order," as one scholar put it. (This position is known among classicists as the "optimistic" interpretation.) The marmoreal perfections of its verse seemed to reflect the grand façades of the Roman state itself: Augustus boasted that he found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble.

But in the second half of the last century more and more scholars came to see some of the epic's most wrenching episodes as attempts to draw attention to the toll that the exercise of *imperium* inevitably takes. This "pessimistic" approach to the text and its relation to imperial ideology has found its greatest support in the account of Aeneas's treatment of Dido. That passionate, tender, and grandly tragic woman is by far the

epic's greatest character—and, indeed, the only one to have had a lasting impact on Western culture past the Middle Ages, memorably appearing in works by artists ranging from Purcell to Berlioz to Mark Morris.

After the gods order Aeneas to abandon Dido and leave Carthage—he mustn't, after all, end up like Antony, the love slave of an African queen—he prepares to sneak away. But Dido finds him out and, in a furious tirade, lambastes the man she considers to be her husband for his craven evasion of a kind of responsibility—emotional, ethical—quite unlike the political dutifulness that has driven him from the start:

What shall I say? What *is* there for
me to say? . . .
There is nowhere where faith is
kept; not anywhere.
He was stranded on the beach, a
castaway,
With nothing. I made him
welcome.

In uttering these words, Dido becomes the Aeneid's most eloquent voice of moral outrage at the promises that always get broken by men with a mission; in killing herself, she becomes a heartbreaking symbol of the collateral damage that “empire” leaves in its wake.

Aeneas's reaction to her tirade is telling. Unable to bring himself to look her in the eye, he looks instead “at the future / He was required to look at”:

Pious Aeneas, groaning and
sighing, and shaken
In his very self in his great love for
her,
And longing to find the words that
might assuage
Her grief over what is being done
to her,
Nevertheless obeyed the divine
command
And went back to his fleet.

You wish that Ferry hadn't translated the Latin word *pīus* in the first line of this passage as the English word it so closely resembles, “pious”; here more than anywhere

else, *pious* means “dutiful,” embodying a steadfast obedience to the gods’ plan which overrides every other consideration. Much of the Aeneid is fuelled by this torturous conflict between private fulfillment and public responsibility, which was to become a staple of European literature and drama, showing up in everything from Corneille to “The Crown.” (You sometimes get the impression that Virgil himself would like to be free of his poetic duty to celebrate the empire. In Book V, a long set piece about a sailing competition that Aeneas holds for his men, filled with verve and humor, feels like a vacation for the poet, too.)

When Aeneas does reply to Dido, he’s as cool as a corporate lawyer, rattling off one talking point after another. (Dido has a kingdom of her own, so why shouldn’t he?) But how are we to reconcile this Aeneas with the distraught figure we’re left with at the end of the poem, a man who goes berserk when he’s reminded of the loss of his young ward and who brutally slays a captive supplicant? The contradiction has led to persistent questions about the coherence of Virgil’s depiction of his hero. When critics aren’t denouncing Aeneas’s lack of personality (“a stick who would have contributed to *The New Statesman*,” Ezra Pound sniffed), they’re fulminating against his lack of character. “A cad to the last” was Robert Graves’s summation.

And as with the hero so, too, with the epic itself: for many readers, something doesn’t add up. If the Aeneid is an admiring piece of propaganda for empire triumphant, whose hero emblemizes the necessity of suppressing individuality in the interest of the state, what do you do with Dido—or, for that matter, with Turnus, who could well strike readers today as a heroic native resisting colonial incursion, an admirable prototype of Sitting Bull? And if it’s a veiled critique of empire that movingly catalogues the horrible costs of *imperium*, what do you do with all the imperial dazzle—the shield, the parade of future Romans, the apparent endorsement of the hero’s dogged allegiance to duty?

Latin is a rather chunky language. Unlike Greek, which is far more supple, it has no definite or indefinite articles; a page of Latin can look like a wall of bricks. As such, it’s particularly difficult to adapt to dactylic hexameter, the waltzlike, oom-pah-pah meter of epic poetry, which the Romans inherited from the Greeks. One of Virgil’s achievements was to bring Latin hexameter verse to an unusually high level of flexibility and polish, stretching long thoughts and sentences over several lines, gracefully balancing pairs of nouns and adjectives, and finding ways to temper the natural heaviness of his native tongue. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, called the result “the stateliest measure ever moulded by the lips of man.”

David Ferry more than succeeds in capturing the stateliness, as his rendering of the Proem, the epic's introductory lines, into English blank verse shows:

I sing of arms and the man whom
fate had sent
To exile from the shores of Troy to
be
The first to come to Lavinium and
the coasts
Of Italy, and who, because of
Juno's
Savage implacable rage, was
battered by storms
At sea, and from the heavens
above, and also
By tempests of war, until at last he
might
Bring his household gods to
Latium, and build his town,
From which would come the
Alban Fathers and
The lofty walls of Rome.

Alone among recent translators, as far as I am aware, Ferry has honored the crucial fact that, in the original, this is all one long flowing sentence and one thought: from Troy to Rome, from past to present, from defeat to victory.

But there's more to Virgil than high polish. Because the Aeneid's instantaneous status as a classic made its style a standard, it's difficult to appreciate how innovative and idiosyncratic Virgil's poetry once felt. One favorite device, for instance, is called "enallage," in which an adjective is pointedly displaced from the noun it should, logically, modify. Take the last line of the Proem, with its climactic vision of what Ferry renders as "The lofty walls of Rome." What Virgil actually wrote was stranger: "the walls of lofty Rome." The poet knew what he was doing—"lofty walls" is about architecture, but "lofty Rome" is about empire.

Ferry's creamily elegant rendering of the epic, which tries to "correct" the text's oddness, is likely to leave you wondering why critics both ancient and modern have scratched their heads over Virgil's verse—his occasionally jarring or archaic diction (mocked by one Roman *littérateur* who made his point by writing a parody of the

poet's early work); his "tasteless striving for effect," as Augustus's friend and general Agrippa complained; his "use of words too forcible for his thoughts," as A. E. Housman put it two millennia later. It's these arresting qualities that made Virgil feel modern to his contemporaries—something it's almost impossible to feel about him in this translation and so many others.

But perhaps we don't need a translation to drag the *Aeneid* into the modern era. Maybe it's always been here, and we're just looking at it from the wrong angle—or looking for the wrong things. Maybe the inconsistencies in the hero and his poem that have distressed readers and critics—the certainties alternating with doubt, the sudden careening from coolness to high emotion, the poet's admiring embrace of an empire whose moral offenses he can't help cataloguing, the optimistic portrait of a great nation rising haunted by a cynical appraisal of Realpolitik at work—aren't problems of interpretation that we have to solve but, rather, the qualities in which this work's modernity resides.

This, at any rate, is what was going through my mind one day fifteen years ago, when, I like to think, I finally began to understand the *Aeneid*. At the time, I was working on a book about the Holocaust, and had spent several years interviewing the few remaining survivors from a small Polish town whose Jewish population had been obliterated by what you could legitimately call an exercise of *imperium*. As I pressed these elderly people for their memories, I was struck by the similarities in the way they talked: a kind of resigned fatalism, a forlorn acknowledgment that the world they were trying to describe was, in the end, impossible to evoke; strange swings between an almost abnormal detachment when describing unspeakable atrocities and sudden eruptions of ungovernable rage and grief triggered by the most trivial memory.

Months later, when I was back home teaching Greek and Roman classics again, it occurred to me that the difficulties we have with Aeneas and his epic cease to be difficulties once you think of him not as a hero but as a type we're all too familiar with: a survivor, a person so fractured by the horrors of the past that he can hold himself together only by an unnatural effort of will, someone who has so little of his history left that the only thing that gets him through the present is a numbed sense of duty to a barely discernible future that can justify every kind of deprivation. It would be hard to think of a more modern figure.

Or, indeed, a more modern story. What is the *Aeneid* about? It is about a tiny band of outcasts, the survivors of a terrible persecution. It is about how these survivors—clinging to a divine assurance that an unknown and faraway land will become their

new home—arduously cross the seas, determined to refashion themselves as a new people, a nation of victors rather than victims. It is about how, when they finally get there, they find their new homeland inhabited by locals who have no intention of making way for them. It is about how this geopolitical tragedy generates new wars, wars that will, in turn, trigger further conflicts: *bella horrida bella*. It is about how such conflicts leave those involved in them morally unrecognizable, even to themselves. This is a story that both the Old and the New Worlds know too well; and Virgil was the first to tell it. Whatever it meant in the past, and however it discomfits the present, the Aeneid has, alas, always anticipated the future. ♦

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