

The *Aeneid* and Roman Culture

A paper read for a student seminar, 1982

Vergil's *Aeneid* is a perfect example of the epic as an integral part of a civilization. It was written, as were John Milton's essays, not to become a great literary masterpiece but to be a work of political propaganda. It was not his first work of this kind. He had written the *Georgics* on the joys of farm life, a book designed as kind of a promotional scheme to get unemployed veterans off the streets of Rome and into rural areas.

Vergil lived in troubled times. It seems that history in general is mostly a record of catastrophic events, but the period in which Vergil lived seems to have had more than its share of mind-boggling upheavals for the Roman state.

Nine years before Vergil's birth, a bloody civil war had ended with Sulla becoming dictator. While Vergil was growing up, Catiline and his conspirators almost succeeded in assassinating the consul Cicero. When Vergil was twenty-four, another civil war broke out between Pompey and Julius Caesar, the war in which Caesar made his famous statement, "the die is cast," as he crossed the Rubicon River to confront Pompey with his army. Then two years after Caesar defeated Pompey, he himself was assassinated at a senate meeting. His henchman Mark Anthony and his nephew and adopted son Octavian tried to hold the government together. Anthony, who had a personal grudge against the great Cicero, almost immediately had him brutally executed. And not one of Caesar's assassins survived Caesar for more than two years. But soon a power struggle developed between Anthony and Octavian, which ended in the suicide of Mark Anthony in the country of his mistress Cleopatra. Thus Octavian became the head of the Roman government. By this time Vergil was forty years old.

The morale of the Roman people was very low. They were disillusioned with their leaders and confused by the chaotic state of the government. But Octavian's chief adviser, an Etruscan named Maecenas, was also the most prominent patron of literary men in Roman history, perhaps in all history. He, of course, knew Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* since educated Romans finished off their education by studying in Greece. He suggested to Octavian, later called Augustus, that the best way to get the Roman people unified in a common spirit of patriotism was to have Vergil, who was under his patronage, write an epic of Rome. So Augustus sent for Vergil and gave him the assignment of writing this poem. He wanted it to accomplish three specific things: (1) to revive the people's religious instinct (they were becoming perfunctory in their worship because of their disillusionment); (2) to arouse patriotism by instilling in the people a pride in their heritage; and (3) to implant in the people's thinking the idea that the Julian house, of which he was a member, was destined to lead the Roman state. Thus, at the age of forty-one, Vergil started on this political assignment.

His first task, of course, was to find an appropriate subject. We are not entirely sure where the Romans originated, but by Vergil's time it was an established tradition that the city had been founded by the twins Romulus and Remus, descended from the Trojan Aeneas, who had escaped the Trojan War with the destiny of founding a new Troy. To this day representations of the wolf suckling the two babes Romulus and Remus, who had been exposed to die, are ubiquitous in Rome.

Aeneas had been a somewhat minor character in the *Iliad*, portrayed as a brave and devoted warrior, who was destined for glory, but the delineation of his character and personality had been vague, which gave Vergil plenty of opportunity to develop him on his own pattern. Therefore, he chose the adventures of Aeneas as the subject for his epic. And with his three aims in mind and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* open in front of him as models, at forty-one years of age he set about the task that had been assigned to him.

Vergil was a meticulous writer. He did not toss off his poem in six months. First he organized his material and wrote the whole thing out in prose. Then he converted it, a segment at a time, into poetry. He used the dactylic hexameter line, which Homer had used, and which in Greek and Latin worked like blank verse in English as the most effective meter for narrative poetry. He spent the entire last ten years of his life working on the *Aeneid* and intended to spend another three years revising and polishing it. For one thing, he had occasionally had difficulty with his meter, and there are more than fifty unfinished lines in the *Aeneid*. When Vergil became very ill and realized that he was not going to live to get this work polished, he asked that the manuscript be destroyed because he felt that a poem should not be allowed to exist in an imperfect condition. But Augustus forbade its destruction because he felt that, even in its unpolished state, it had accomplished what he wanted.

Since it is the function of an epic to exemplify the best qualities of the group whom it represents, Vergil gave to Aeneas those qualities which the Romans admired most, all of which really could be summed up on the one word *pietas*. English has no equivalent term. This word certainly does not mean what our word "piety" means; it is a much more comprehensive concept, which involves devotion and loyalty to one's family, his country, and his gods. And the adjective *pious* is used by Vergil to describe Aeneas as consistently as Lionhearted is attached to King Richard or the Great to Alexander.

But let's analyze just what Vergil had worked into his poem to accomplish the tasks that August had assigned him:

1. to revive the people's religious instinct -- the gods play a significant role in this poem, sometimes manipulating the actions of mortals as they did in the *Iliad*. Venus protects her son Aeneas at all times, even causing Dido to fall desperately in love with him so that she will not harm him. Juno orders the storm that wrecks the Trojan ships at the beginning of the poem. Mercury is sent to Aeneas to tell him to get on with his mission and quit wasting his time playing around in Carthage. And Jupiter keeps an eye on the whole process on earth and prophesies the future greatness of Rome to Venus. Such intermingling of mortal and divine activities is found throughout the *Aeneid*.

2. to instill pride in the Roman heritage -- Since Aeneas lived around 1000 B.C., long before Rome even existed, and since Rome had a history of more than seven hundred years by Vergil's time, Vergil was able to refer in his poem to many of Rome's accomplishments as prophecies or foreshadowings from the period of Aeneas. Two places in particular gave him an opportunity to elaborate on Rome's greatness and power. One great achievement of Rome had been the complete annihilation of the powerful city of Carthage after three wars, in one of which Hannibal had brought a conquering army almost in sight of Rome itself. In the *Aeneid*, Vergil has Dido curse Aeneas after he has deserted this lovesick Carthaginian queen. She asks the gods for endless strife between her people and his. Of course, the Roman reading this in Vergil's day could not help recalling Rome's eventual complete conquest of Carthage. But an even stronger glorification of the greatness of Rome comes when Venus complains to Jupiter about the ordeals that her son Aeneas is going through. Jupiter offers to unveil the future to her. He promises that Aeneas will finally reach Italy and that his descendants will establish a great city, the heart of a powerful civilization, and he ends his revelations with the statement: "I will give them power without end." In Vergil's day the complete overthrow of Rome seemed more remote than today the complete destruction of the United States of America seems to us.

3. to implant the idea that the Julian house was the chosen leader for Roman politics -- Vergil drags in many subtle references to the great accomplishments of Julius Caesar and of his successor Augustus. He even relates the Julian family to the family of Aeneas in this way: He says that Aeneas' son Ascanius was also known as Iulus (the Trojan) as long as Ilium (the name for Troy that gave us the word "Iliad") existed. This name Iulus in Italy had become Julius, since the Latin "i" and "j" were the same letter. Just let another "i" slip into this word, and you have the origin of the Julian family. Granted, this took a little maneuvering, but Vergil accomplished it. But the place where he really pours it on thick is where Aeneas consults his dead father in the Underworld. Anchises reveals to his son the souls of some future great figures in Rome's history -- Romulus, King Numa, Cato, the Gracchii, et al.; but he reserves the most fulsome praise for Augustus, whom he refers to as the son of a god (after all, Julius Caesar had been deified, as was Augustus himself later). Anchises calls Augustus a "second founder" of Rome, who takes a troubled state and leads it into a golden age. He is described as a man who will have dominion over more territory than all the lands passed through by Hercules.

Yes, Vergil carried out his assignment well on all three of these counts. Strangely enough, most of these "duty passages" are found in the first six books of the *Aeneid*. There are a few spots where such things are slipped into the last six books, but not many. The only major one is the description of Aeneas' shield in book viii. Vulcan had put a lot of future Roman history into the decoration of that shield -- the wolf with Romulus and Remus, the rape of the Sabines, Horatius at the bridge, the attack on Rome by the Gauls, Catiline, Anthony and Cleopatra and, of course, Augustus Caesar on the stern of a warship while over his head glowed the comet which had presumably appeared in the sky the night of Julius Caesar's death. Here Vergil has managed to bear down hard on two of the three stipulations of Augustus. But the last half of the *Aeneid* is mostly straight story, modelled in great part on the *Iliad*.

Although Vergil was writing a political document at the command of the chief of state, he was basically a literary genius; therefore, his epic became more than a piece of propaganda. It became one of the world's great literary masterpieces.

The *Aeneid* was immediately popular in Rome. It was not only widely read but was even used as a textbook in schools. Vergil also became one of the few pagan authors whose works were carefully preserved by the Medieval churchmen when they were trying to stamp out all pagan influences. They excepted Vergil from this purge because an eclogue of his was interpreted as prophesying the birth of Christ. His works were even used for prophecies by being opened at random, and the passage which presented itself being interpreted prophetically.

After Vergil, the first piece of momentous world literature to be produced was Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Not only does this work show a distinct influence from Vergil but also Dante used Vergil as his guide through the two sections of Hell and Purgatory. Dante could not allow Vergil to guide him through Paradise because, after all, Vergil was a pagan and thus could not enter Heaven.

Since the Renaissance, the importance of the *Aeneid* in world literature has virtually been unquestioned. Its material has caused countless students to wrestle with its Latin. It has had a tremendous impact on literature and art, and more than sixty operas have been written on the tragic love of Dido and Aeneas, a story created by Vergil.

I'll end this rambling discussion with a personal comment. If I could have only one example of each "art," I would certainly choose as my statue the Bernini representation of Apollo and Daphne which stands in the Borghese Gallery in Rome; and as my one book I might well choose Vergil's *Aeneid* with its beautiful writing and its vivid word pictures on every page.