Divine Destruction: The Paradox of Empire in the *Aeneid*

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, imperialism is presented as both a divinely sanctioned mission and a cause of human suffering and moral compromise. While the support of the gods, especially Jupiter's, frames the establishment of Rome as a noble, heroic duty, the journey to get there is marred by bloodshed and moral conflict. Jupiter promises *imperium sine fine* ("endless empire") that will bring peace to the world, symbolized by the closing of the Gates of War. This idea of empire is essential to the epic's vision of Rome's future—how the founding of the empire will end the cycle of conflict. However, this path to empire is paved with bloodshed. Through divine prophecy, historical foreshadowing, and Aeneas' increasing propensity for violence, Virgil reveals the duality of empire-building and the irreversible damage that comes with victory.

In Jupiter's prophecy in Book I, he mentions "Trojan Caesar, who will extend his Empire to the Ocean and his glory to the stars" (I. 344-345). This represents Augustus, whom, upon being welcomed into heaven "laden with Oriental spoils of war", "war shall be no more, and the ages will grow mild" (I.348-351). Jupiter specifically prophesizes the Pax Romana ("Roman Peace"), stating that, "The Gates of War, iron upon bolted iron, shall be closed…" (I.354-355). In these lines, the duality of empire-building is established, and the ultimate peace of the Pax Romana is framed as the culmination of Rome's imperial mission. Yet, the Gates of War remain open throughout the events of the *Aeneid*, serving as a symbol of the bloodshed needed to achieve eventual peace.

At the center of this struggle is the Trojan hero Aeneas, who characteristically embodies the virtue *pietas*—devoted and dutiful to his country and family. His duty to found Rome is sanctioned by Jupiter, king of the gods, who assures Aeneas' mother Venus that, "Your son will

wage a great war in Italy, crush barbarous nations, and set up laws and city walls for his own people, reigning in Latium…" (I.314-317). However, Aeneas is continuously thwarted by Jupiter's wife, Juno, who cherished Carthage. Juno irrationally believes she can delay or alter Aeneas' fate, but despite her persistent efforts, she cannot stop destiny. In a sense, the conflict between Aeneas and Juno mirrors the dynamic between Aeneas and Dido. In both scenarios, there is a conflict between personal attachment and duty. Ultimately, Dido's love for Aeneas and Juno's love for Carthage are both futile in the grander scheme—underscoring the ceding of personal desires and the sacrifice that founding an empire necessitates.

Once fully convinced of his duty, Aeneas is quite unwavering to his mission, displaying his characteristic devotion. However, his slaying of Turnus appears to contradict this value. In the Underworld, Aeneas is given specific instructions by his deceased father Anchises: "Your mission, Roman, is to rule the world. These will be your arts: to establish peace, to spare the humbled, and to conquer the proud" (VI.1016-1018). This direction makes Aeneas' ultimate action all the more shocking. Turnus, leader of the Latin troops, who humbly pleads for his life, is still killed by the furious Aeneas. While it can be argued that Aeneas was justified in killing Turnus, as avenging the death of Pallas, Virgil's use of language in these last lines is deliberately evocative, painting Aeneas in a terrifyingly violent light. Phrases such as "his own savage grief", "burning with fury" and "terrible in his wrath" align Aeneas more with a fiery force of destruction than a stoic hero (XII.1147-1149).

Many moments in the *Aeneid*, especially this one, invite the audience's own interpretations. Over the years, much of the criticism about the epic has been separated into "optimistic" and "pessimistic" views (Tarrant 255). A traditional optimistic view is inclined to see the *Aeneid* as Augustan propaganda, glorifying Rome's history of conquest and position of

power—supported by Virgil's prominent connections to Augustus' court (ibid). For pessimists, Virgil's graphic descriptions of the cost of war and the shocking ending imply the poet's subtle critiques of the empire (ibid).

Virgil himself seems to embody this duality. In Richard Tarrant's essay "Poetry and Power: Virgil's Poetry in Contemporary Context", he describes Virgil as "reclusive" and "eager to eager to leave [Rome] for the Greek-accented culture of Naples" (243). This characterization of Virgil elucidates the contradiction between his personal detachment from the political culture of Rome and his embeddedness within the imperial system. Virgil's patron was Maecenas, a counsellor to Augustus, and it was Augustus that commissioned the *Aeneid*'s writing, checked in on the progress, and allegedly saved the epic from being lost to history. This all implies Virgil was crafting a narrative in line with the emperor's expectations. However, even with the backing of the Roman emperor himself, there is an undertone of unease that settles in the cracks of the *Aeneid*. Thus, Tarrant argues, "A more adequate description of Virgil's outlook might be 'ambivalence', but only if that term is understood neither as a gentler name for pessimism nor as a diluted compromise between strong positions, but as a powerful and continuing tension of opposites" (255). This framing of ambivalence is essential to the epic's complexity and its nuanced reflection on power and empire. With this viewpoint, the *Aeneid* has stood the test of time, keeping itself open and resonant to readers throughout history. Still, it should be noted that ambivalence has its limitations in that it may push intentionality to the side. The risk is run of reading Virgil as a mere bystander or passive observer of history—neglecting his own role in shaping the Roman narrative.

The tension between personal detachment and political entanglement can be seen within the epic itself—represented through Aeneas' evolving attitude towards his fate. Prior to the

second half of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas was mostly reluctant in pursuing his fate. The shift is first initiated in Book IV, when Jupiter sends Mercury to remind Aeneas of his duty during his dalliance with Dido in Carthage. Mercury tells Aeneas, "If your own glory means nothing to you, think of the inheritance you own to Ascanius—a kingdom in Italy and the soil of Rome" (IV.307-309). Upon the invocation of his son's future glory, Aeneas "burned with the desire to leave that sweet land" (IV.314). The shift is furthered in Book VI, when Aeneas journeys to the Underworld and encounters Anchises, learning about the gravity of his legacy—how his descendants will rule for generations. Anchises names the leaders that will come after Aeneas: Silvius and Procas in Alba Longa, Romulus, and Augustus Caesar (VI.900-947). Because of this, Aeneas understands that his duty is part of a much larger plan to establish a civilization destined to rule the world. Before this shift, Aeneas tries to justify his leaving to Dido by saying, "It is not my own will—this quest for Italy" (IV.415). This line emphasizes Aeneas' internal conflict and how he must sacrifice his personal desires for his duty. The implication of a higher power strains the idea of human agency in the epic. This idea is also seen in the use of ekphrasis in Book VIII, when Vulcan presents Aeneas a shield depicting the destiny of Aeneas' descendants. "Aeneas was moved to wonder and joy by the images of things he could not fathom, and he lifted to his shoulder the destiny of his children's children" (VII.841-844). To him, the shield predicts events incomprehensible to him, and he carries the burden of generations without truly understanding its implications—emphasizing the disconnect between the gods' foresight and human knowledge. All of this complicates Aeneas as a character, making him a vessel for the foundation of an empire.

This shift in Aeneas' character sets up a more profound transformation. As the epic progresses, Aeneas evolves—or arguably devolves—in his humanity. When he kills Turnus in

Book XII, he acts out of his own will, directly disobeying the "arts" that his father told him to live by. In the second half, Aeneas becomes less human in a sense. In the earlier books, he is burdened by divine will, torn between what he must do and what he actually wants. Gradually, he turns away from all distractions, including his love for Dido, taps into the brutality required of him, and secures his destiny. By the time the war in Italy comes along, Aeneas becomes synonymous with conquest and military achievement—implying that moral erosion is something integral to the establishment of empire. The death of Pallas, King Evander's son whom Aeneas treated as his own son, is a critical catalyst for this transformation, fueling Aeneas' pursuit of revenge as he violently makes his way through the Latin lines. The fury that Aeneas gains in the final scene is almost godly, building off of the brutality he displayed in the battle scenes of Books IX and X. Yet, despite the brutality exhibited, Aeneas does not completely abandon his diplomatic talents. He is initially welcomed by Latinus and is able to quickly form an allegiance with Evander. Thus, it can be argued that Aeneas was able to balance military conquest with diplomacy until Juno intervened to set Turnus against Aeneas, suggesting that it was divine intervention that led him down the path of war—stripping away his very human capacity to forge diplomatic ties.

Despite his victory being fated, Aeneas is never shielded from the costs of war. Virgil spends Books VII to XII meticulously detailing battle scenes between the Trojans and Latins. The extreme carnage and loss of life is best displayed in Book IX, during which Turnus goes on a killing spree, powered by the unrelenting Juno: "First he took out Phaleris, and then Gyges, Hamstringing the latter…and he dispatched Halys and Phegeus…and then Alcander, Halius, Noemon, And Prytanis…Amycus was next…And then Clytius…And Cretheus…" (IX.900-917). The constant stream of befallen names emphasizes the sheer magnitude of death that came as a

result of the war. Descriptions of dying are unflinching throughout these later books, painting entire scenes in shades of red. For example, “Mezentius…did not flinch when the sword entered his throat and his life sluiced out in streams of blood” (X.1089-1091). Including imagery like this casts a grim shadow over the narrative, rather than completely glorifying the actions of war. Virgil’s continued employment of darkness in his imagery supports this: “Weapons showered down as thick as snowflakes and their shadows darkened the sky” (XI.724-726). Moreover, “A dark cloud of dust rolled to the walls, and in the watchtowers mothers beat their breasts and raised their cries to the stars” furthers the darkness of war, as well as describes the loudness of agony from victims of the conflict (XI.1051-1053). While the images of war are distinctly bleak, there is always the underlying current of Rome’s future glory and its promise of lasting peace. Rome’s founding counterbalances the darkness, serving as the light at the end of the tunnel.

While Virgil meticulously details the consequences of war in these books, the final moments of the epic are what complicate the notion of heroism. Arguably the most jarring thing about Turnus’ death is its inconclusiveness. By killing Turnus, Aeneas betrays the ideals that both Jupiter and Anchises outlined. Instead of prioritizing peace and sparing the humbled, Aeneas allows himself to be overtaken by his simmering rage. This moment thus begs the question: what is a hero? Whereas this could have been written as a valiant act of revenge, the language Virgil uses seemingly departs from that glorified interpretation. The reader is then challenged to reconsider how a traditional hero should act, or whether the traditional hero can even exist in reality. The ambiguous question of heroism can be extended to the founding of Rome itself. Virgil leaves the reader with a sense that a perfect hero, or perfect society, isn’t without its flaws.

Through this "flawed" action, Virgil is able to paint Aeneas as a character far more complex, which again can apply to the general concept of the Roman empire. Not only does Virgil flip the archetype with Aeneas, but he also provides a piece of writing far removed from what would be expected of pure Augustan propaganda. Instead, the reader is left with an ambiguous, somewhat unsatisfying, image of Rome's founding, knowing that it was willed by the gods, but also a result of incredible violence. According to Tarrant, "Virgil's viewpoint combines an Aristotelian acceptance of anger as justified in certain conditions with a Stoic's horror of the emotion itself and of its effects on the person who acts under its influence" (256). This analysis crystallizes the duality Virgil imbues in the killing of Turnus. There is plenty of sympathy, unquestionable in Aeneas' devotion to Pallas, but at the same time, the act is shockingly cold-blooded and passionate. Interestingly, it is also a surrender of self. As he prepares for the final blow, Aeneas declares, "Pallas sacrifices you with this stroke—Pallas—and makes you pay with your guilty blood" (XII.1152-1154). By invoking Pallas in the killing of Turnus, Aeneas distances himself from the act, perhaps trying to justify or absolve himself of the responsibility.

The paths of Aeneas and the Roman Empire were both fraught with bloodshed. Virgil's historical audience had freshly lived through the War of Actium (32-30 BC), a civil war between Mark Antony and Octavian (Augustus) that involved huge Roman armies. Even before that, decades of civil war and conflict permeated Rome. This was an audience intimately familiar with sacrifice and Virgil's descriptions likely would have resonated with them. In this sense, Turnus' death can be viewed as the death of an alternative for Rome—a possibility of an opposing vision that was extinguished. Turnus compels his men to consider their situation by saying, "The war is in your hands! Remember your wives, remember your homes and your ancestors'

glory…Fortune favors the brave!" (X.336-340). In these lines, Turnus appeals to the past and ancestral tradition. Turnus is playing a defensive game, fighting against Aeneas, who is the embodied vision of Rome's future. On the other hand, Turnus symbolizes something more akin to the past—telling his men to "remember", not to look to some new vision or incoming revolution. This tension between past and future mirrors Rome's own shift under Augustus. With Augustus' victory in Actium, the Empire was established. If Mark Antony had prevailed, Rome may have stayed a Republic. This furthers the notion that glory is always built on the ruin and destruction of another, whether literally in war or symbolically in political ideology. Aeneas' capability of acting in rash anger, choosing passion over reason, and very distinctly disobeying the words of his father, offer an interesting look on imperialism. If *pius* Aeneas, the exemplary hero, acts this way, then perhaps the same can be applied to how the Roman Empire might operate, bringing up the possibility of a society too entranced by its own dominance.

In the war-ridden second half of the *Aeneid* and its haunting conclusion, Virgil most perfectly captures the paradoxical nature of empire. As Tarrant explains, Virgil's purposeful ambivalence is what gives the *Aeneid* its complexity. Because of this, it may not be enough to simply read the *Aeneid* in a linearly optimistic or pessimistic way. In Book VI, Aeneas leaves the Underworld through the gate of false dreams. Virgil's choice in using this gate encapsulates the uncertainty in empire-building—how dreams of prosperity are built on destruction and devastation. Great visions of a lasting empire come at the expense of others' lives and livelihoods. For Aeneas, heroism comes at the cost of being a warrior, leaving behind or losing his loved ones—notably except Ascanius, who is essential to Aeneas' and Rome's long legacy—in order to fulfill his tremendous task. Throughout the *Aeneid*, Virgil's complex voice suggests the dual nature of imperialism, forcing readers to grapple with whether the end truly justifies the

means—or if the "end" is even certain. Aeneas is not a perfect hero, nor is Rome a perfect empire; instead, both are shaped by the sacrifices that made them great. Virgil maintains an ambivalent tone, refraining from giving his audience an easy answer.

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code in this assignment and in all of my written assignments for this course.

Capri Wayne

Works Cited

Virgil. (2005). *Aeneid* (S. Lombardo, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.

Tarrant, Richard. “Poetry and Power: Virgil’s Poetry in Contemporary Context.” *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*. Ed. Charles Martindale and Fiachra Mac Góráin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 243–262. Print. Cambridge Companions to Literature.