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Virgil's Aeneas: The Roman Ideal of Pietas

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VIRGIL'S AENEAS: THE ROMAN IDEAL OF *PIETAS*

To get right to the heart of the matter, the Roman ideal of *pietas* which Virgil's Aeneas embodies means the observance of what is due to the gods and men, and obeying one's destiny (*fatum*, fate) or calling.

Fatum is associated with the word *fari*, to speak; thus, destiny is the expressed will of the gods: a vocation, a calling (*vocatio*, a summons; *vocare*, to call). In Homer, destiny is the portion allotted each man at birth – the length of his life, blessings, miseries. All things are fixed and determined by Necessity (another idea of Fate or Fortune); the gods decide all things, yet even the gods are subject to Fate. Hence, because of the conditionality of human existence, the individualist Homeric ideal of *arété* (personal glory in any *agon* or contest) and *timé* (personal honor and esteem among one's peers).

But in Virgil's *Aeneid* – where the leitmotif of *fatum* recurs some 120 times – the gods work through human wills and desires; their interventions are often metaphors for divine promptings within, for good or ill. Certain events are predetermined, but the precise time and circumstances of their fulfillment are flexible; this flexibility allows the free operation of the human will. The speech of Aeneas' father, Anchises, in Book 6 shows that Virgil subscribes to the Stoic principle of rational determinism (or necessity) working throughout the universe; that is to say, divine providence moves ineluctably towards justice and right. The most striking instance of human free will operating without divine interference occurs in Book 10 where Jupiter declares impartiality in the war between Aeneas' Trojans and the Latins. Here human fate becomes man's existential choice: on the plains of Latium, man in his loneliness must enact history. Man will simply find out at the end whether his action has won divine approval or provoked divine outrage.

Historical Backdrop

On 2 September 31 B.C., Gaius Julius Octavianus, adopted son and heir of the assassinated Julius Caesar, defeats Mark Antony and Cleopatra in the sea battle of Actium, and emerges as the *princeps* (first citizen) and ruler of the Roman world. About three years later, 29 B.C., Virgil, 40 years old, begun the *Aeneid*; Book 8 celebrates the victory at Actium which had in a few years become the birth legend in the mythology of the Roman Empire. In 27 B.C., Octavian received the title "Augustus," and he established peace throughout the Roman world: the Pax Augusta. He unified Italy, a unity that in modern times was not achieved again until the 19th century.

During the Pax Augusta, many altars and temples were rebuilt that had been wrecked during the civil war following Julius Caesar's assassination in 44 B.C. The reconstruction was a performance of *pietas*, a supreme value in the Roman ethos, so that in the *Aeneid* the hero is often called "pius Aeneas." The Romans sometimes attributed their

misfortunes, individual or national, to lack of *pietas*, so that the sins of the fathers continue to be visited on their children.

During the years before Actium, Virgil completed the *Georgics*, a didactic poem on farming and the care of livestock, bees and vines; its first book evokes the horrors of civil war (*saevit toto Mars impius orbe*) and prays to the gods to allow Octavian to become the savior of his generation.

Augustus Caesar (Octavian) died in 14 A.D. Curiously, Virgil's celebration of the Pax Augusta in the *Aeneid* (Book 8) coincided with the birth of Christ, just as though the Roman belief in universal peace was justified in the temporal world (it was of course several centuries before the Roman Empire officially adopted the new religion). Thus, through the 2000 years of its life, the *Aeneid* has been read in a Christian context, so that Virgil's celebration of the Pax Augusta has been interpreted as the inauguration of a new order of time and history. In the Middle Ages, Virgil was revered as a "magus" (wise man) and as *anima naturaliter Christiana* (a Christian soul by nature), so that in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, he is the poet's guide through Inferno and Purgatorio.

In the *Aeneid* (Book 6), the shade of Anchises reveals to his son Aeneas the future heroes of Rome, culminating in Augustus. The Messianic tone and language are unmistakable. In Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, a pastoral poem written in 40 B.C. (long before the *Aeneid*, and only 4 years after Julius Caesar's assassination and the civil war), Virgil speaks of the virgin birth of a boy of divine origin who will restore a golden age of peace and justice in the world.

The idea of a world savior is rooted in various "savior cults" of the first century B.C., of which only Christianity (as a savior cult) was destined to survive. The "savior heroes" are sometimes also called "culture heroes." Deified, they are often thought of as laboring on behalf of civilization. One such savior hero is Hercules who slew Cacus, a fire-breathing monster on the Aventine hill, future site of Rome. Virgil uses this legend in the *Aeneid* (Book 8) where the battle of Actium is portrayed as a war between Olympian deities on Augustus' side and the dog-headed monsters of Egyptian worship on Cleopatra's side. The worship ritual of Hercules bears some resemblance to Christian communion – the shared feast, the wine, the hymn and prayer to a deity who will come to help those in need: *auxilium adventumque dei*.

"Pius Aeneas" then is a culture hero, but even as in Homer, the *agon* or encounter has become more humanistic than the ancient *titanomachy* (Olympian battle against the Titans): that is, both sides of the conflict have dignity and humanity. Aeneas' arch-enemy, Turnus (like Hector, Achilles' mortal foe) is not barbaric or monstrous, although unlike Hector, he is portrayed also as hotheaded, selfish and boastful. What is stressed throughout the *Aeneid* is Aeneas' civilizing mission, unlike in Homer where the ethos is individualistic. The role of the savior hero is not only to rid the world of evil but, more

important, to found a lasting city. Thus, the real theme of the *Aeneid* is the founding of Rome and its subsequent rise under Augustus to its greatest glory – the Pax Augusta: because in the Roman ethos, peace is the crowning glory of civil society. When Latinus, king of the Latins, and Aeneas, leader of the Trojan exiles, strike their peace treaty, it is agreed that both sides shall be undefeated (*nvictae*) and shall keep their own laws; neither side shall impose conditions on the other. The labors and suffering of Aeneas are only the first stage of a mighty endeavor: *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*. The language of the *Aeneid* is the language of the Pax Augusta.

Let us dwell a little more on Virgil's most famous Fourth Eclogue because of its remarkable political and philosophical prophecy. Its apocalyptic imagery has an oracular tone. St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) suggests that the savior child there is Christ, and that Virgil took the prophecy from the Sibylline oracles (Greek *sibulla*, the will of God) which were consulted by the Roman Senate in times of calamities (pestilence, earthquake) for some remedy to expiate ill omens. The Sibyl (prophetess) of Cumae prophesies to Aeneas in Book 6 the glorious future of Rome. The verse, "The cattle shall not fear the lion" occurs in the Sibylline oracles, in the Hebrew Isaiah (11.6), and in the Fourth Eclogue. Isaiah and the Sibylline oracles also have the line, "and a little child shall lead them"; this line isn't in the Fourth Eclogue, yet the sense that the child will be a ruler is strong in that Eclogue.

But it is improbable that Virgil read Isaiah; what is important is his vision of universal regeneration in a golden age. Hesiod (ca. 776 B.C.), the earliest recorded epic poet next to Homer, in his didactic poem, *Works and Days*, speaks of five races of men degenerating irreversibly from a golden age to iron times when "there will be no help against evil." Virgil reverses this process in the *Aeneid*, following his predecessor, the philosopher-poet Lucretius (ca. 96-55 B.C., by his own hand) who, in *De rerum natura*, thought of humanity's progress as evolutionary. There is no evidence, and little likelihood, that when Virgil speaks in the Fourth Eclogue of the virgin birth of a boy of divine origin, he is referring to Christ – or even to Augustus, since that Eclogue was written in 40 B.C. when Octavian was still a minor partner of Mark Antony. Those rhetorical *topoi* (themes) – Wonder Child and Golden Age – were commonplaces in Virgil's time; another *topos* – the good ruler – goes back to Homer (*Odyssey*, Book 19: 108-14) and Hesiod. The prophecy of a glorious offspring was also a traditional *topos* of the epithalamium (Greek word: "bridal chamber) or marriage hymn, to which Virgil is certainly indebted.

But the Fourth Eclogue remains *sui generis* (unique), summing up in powerful metaphors, as in Isaiah, the recurrent hope and dream of humankind: universal peace, Pax Augusta.

VIRGIL

Publius Vergilius Maro was born 15 October 70 B.C. at Andes, a village near Mantua (modern Pietole), and died 20 September 19 B.C. at Brindisi, and was buried near Naples, on the road to Pozzuoli.

He never married, was shy and retiring, and made no mark in public life. He might have had homosexual inclinations: while homosexual themes are characteristic of pastoral or bucolic poetry derived from Greek models, the intense particular friendship between the Trojan heroes Nisus and Euryalus in the *Aeneid* (Book 9) seems more homo-erotic than the friendship between Achilles and his cousin Patroclus. Virgil was brought up in the country, educated at Cremona, Milan and Rome where he studied rhetoric and was preparing for a legal and political career which he soon abandoned, retiring to Naples when the civil war broke out (49 B.C.) to study philosophy, his first love.

Later, through friends in high places, he recovered his father's lands which were taken away when the triumvirate (Lepidus, Mark Antony, and Octavian) redistributed land to returning veterans of the campaign at Philippi (42 B.C.) where Brutus was defeated. Virgil was a friend of Horace and other poets who made up the literary circle around Augustus through Augustus' friend and counselor Maecenas, a notable patron of the arts. Virgil read Books 2, 4, and 6 of the *Aeneid* to Augustus and his literary circle.

In 19 B.C., Virgil left Italy for Greece, intending to spend three years there revising the *Aeneid* and devoting his life to philosophy. He wrote the whole draft of the *Aeneid* in prose, and then composed it again, passage by passage, in dactylic hexameter. *Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris / Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit / litora ...* In Athens, he met Augustus who persuaded him to return home; on his way homeward, he fell ill at Megara after sightseeing on a hot day. He embarked nonetheless for Italy and died when he reached Brindisi. He had tried to persuade the poet Varius in Augustus' literary circle to burn the manuscript of the *Aeneid*. When he passed away, Varius and another poet, Plotius Tucca, published the *Aeneid* on Augustus' instruction. It has only 50-odd incomplete lines (hemistichs).

Virgil's canon of works consists of the Eclogues, the Georgics, and the *Aeneid*, forming a structured hierarchical progression from pastoral to didactic to high epic.

The Eclogues (Greek, *eclegein*, to select) consist of 10 short pastoral poems modeled on the *Idylls* of Theocritus (3rd century B.C.). Its theme is *otium* (leisure), in contrast to *negotium* (business, work), and personal relationships in an idyllic Arcadian *locus amoenus* (pleasant place) where shepherd-poets live together for art's sake, discuss poetry, and make and celebrate love. Yet Virgil relates this idyllic world to the harsh realities of the politics of his time: violence, ambition, civil war, land confiscation,

and exile, by stressing *libertas* (the pastoral poet's freedom) and the fact that art and farming can be a casualty of war.

The Georgics (Greek, *georgos*, farmer), consisting of four books, owe a debt to the didactic "wisdom" poetry of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Its theme is *labor improbus* (hard labor) – the symbiosis of the land's fruitfulness and man's energy and resourcefulness. Here we have another version of the ideal society – the self-sufficient village economy, the farmer at peace on his own land, living the good life: *aureus hanc vitam in terris Saturnus agebat*. In the *Aeneid* (Book 8), the Arcadian settler Evander lived such a life on the site of the future Rome; in the Georgics (Book 2), Virgil underscores the Stoic philosophy of being content with a modest livelihood to criticize the growing wealth of metropolitan Rome with its superfluous luxuries; he saw, like Augustus himself, a correlation between material excess and moral decay.

In the Eclogues, then, the world is private and idyllic, where people are in love with love and art. In the Georgics, the world is collective and social and deeply moral, where people are engaged in earnest work. In the *Aeneid*, patriotism: the love of one's own land and people, is set in a large historical context, showing how the land was first won for civilization not by the ploughshare but by the sword – a tremendous labor that needed in Virgil's own time to be done over again because of ambition and violence.

THE AENEID

Virgil's *Aeneid* has two predecessors: (1) The first national epic of Rome, the *Annales* of Ennius (239 B.C.-170 B.C.), the father of Latin poetry; the annals trace the history of Rome from the fall of Troy to the death of Romulus. (2) The philosophical verse-treatise of Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, on the teaching of the materialist Greek philosopher Epicurus (342 B.C.-268 B.C.) against which Virgil reacted; modeled on Ennius, *De rerum natura* is the first systematic treatment of Greek philosophy in Latin.

In Homer's Iliad (Book 20), Poseidon prophesies that Aineias (Aeneas) will survive and reign over the Trojans again; thus, the legend of Aeneas was born. Virgil's master stroke was to create from that legend a structural and thematic reworking of Homer: the first half of the *Aeneid* is Odyssean – Aeneas searching for a homeland; the second half is Iliadic – Aeneas warring against Turnus to establish that homeland.

Aeneas escapes from burning Troy (where his wife perishes) with the help of his mother, the goddess Venus; he literally bears on his back his old father Anchises, carries in his arms his son Ascanius, and brings to his ship his household gods: the *Lares* (ancestral spirits) and *Penates* (twin guardian spirits of the storeroom). This was an act of *pietas*. He reaches *Hesperia* ("western land," Italy) and settles in Latium (modern Lazio), north of Rome. Rome was founded, according to tradition, in 751 B.C. by Romulus, son of Mars; Troy fell in 1184 B.C. So the mythographers made Aeneas

founder of Lavinium, and his son Ascanius ruler of Alba Longa, forerunner of Rome, where his descendants ruled for 300 years until Romulus' birth. (These details are in Jupiter's prophecy in the first book of the *Aeneid*.) Thus, the warlike legend of Romulus, son of Mars, is balanced with the story of Aeneas, son of Venus, renowned over and above his military prowess, for his *pietas*. We should also note that in mythology, Dardanus (whence the Dardanelles, a strait in northwest Turkey) was born in Italy, emigrated to Asia Minor, and there founded Troy; so, Aeneas, coming to Italy, is claiming his rightful heritage.

Virgil assimilates to Aeneas the adventures of Odysseus, like the episode with the Cyclopes. Surviving (like Odysseus) a shipwreck in Book 1, Aeneas finds himself on the coast of modern Tunisia at Carthage, which was to become the city of Hannibal (whom the Romans defeated a hundred and fifty years before Virgil's time), and later, the city of St. Augustine. There he is welcomed by Queen Dido, like himself, exile and founder of a great city.

Book 6 is the *Aeneid's* pivot: it marks the transition from the Odyssean to the Iliadic part. Aeneas the wanderer becomes *dux* (leader); he moves from exile and near-despair to a sense of divine mission and responsibility. In Book 6 Virgil addresses the Romans of his time: "Remember, Rome, your task is to rule, to establish peace and civilization, to put down the proud and spare the defeated." As epic hero, Aeneas is stoic, willing and ready to subordinate his individual will and desire to destiny, the common weal, the future.

Virgil significantly modifies Homer's Iliad. Aeneas only wishes to found in peace a settlement in Latium for exiled Trojans; his is no expeditionary force like Agamemnon's against Ilium (Troy). And he is only forced into a war by Turnus who is angry at being rejected as Lavinia's suitor in favor of the newcomer Aeneas. Lavinia is the daughter of the king of the Latins, and so, like Helen, becomes the *casus belli*. Again, when Aeneas goes away to enlist allies like the Etruscans, the war against Turnus turns badly; this is equivalent to Achilles' absence from the battlefield out of pique and hurt pride. But here Virgil transforms the Homeric ideal of *timé*. The Homeric hero fights for *aristeia* (personal glory); there was little sense of collective patriotism and even less of divine mission (*pietas*). Throughout the Iliadic *Aeneid*, the reader is conscious of the goal for which much blood is shed: not the destruction of a city but the founding of a lasting one – *Roma aeterna, imperium sine fine*.

Still, Virgil emulates Homer in that Aeneas is not without anger. Everyone in the last four books of the *Aeneid* is dominated by *furor*, the madness of war; and there are individual acts of *aristeia* (prowess and glory). Achilles returns to battle and kills Hector as revenge for the killing of Patroclus. Aeneas' ally, the Greek Evander, had left Arcadia in Greece and settled beside the Tiber on the site of the future Rome; he entrusted his young son, Pallas, to Aeneas. When Aeneas returns to battle, having gained an ally in

the Etruscans, he could not prevent the killing of Pallas by Turnus. Pallas thus assumes the role of Patroclus. Aeneas, *in loco parentis* to Pallas, repays his debt of gratitude to Evander by killing Turnus. The personal motive of revenge is there, but much more is involved: Turnus is the last *impedimentum* (obstacle) to Aeneas' divine mission.

Virgil also takes much farther the sympathy expressed by Homer for the doomed and noble Trojan Hector and for the fall of Ilium. Virgil shows a profound sympathy for all the young men on both sides of the conflict who are all victims of *furor*. Youth was not a notable feature of Homer's warriors who, when the Iliad opens, have already been fighting for ten years; but the warriors in Latium are all young untried soldiers, in action for the first time. Virgil evokes profoundly the pity of war, *horrida bella*, while in no way reducing the epic grandeur of individual *aristeia*.

Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, the love affair of Aeneas and Dido, is the most famous of its 12 books. It is, first of all, a good example of how Virgil assimilates Homer and other post-Homeric works. The Aeneas-Dido interlude has its seed in Odysseus-Calypso. In Homer, the lovers' parting is good-humored, matter-of-fact, down-beat; Calypso even helps Odysseus on his way. In Virgil, Dido is distraught, violently denounces Aeneas, curses his descendants, commits suicide. Virgil also takes from the Jason-Medea story in the Hellenistic epic, *Argonautica*, by Apollonius of Rhodes, but the story of Aeneas and Dido has psychological depth. *Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae*, says Dido. Images of fire and wound enhance the tragic love affair. Dido is compared to a deer hit by an arrow from a hunter who does not realize that he has wounded her. When Aeneas and Dido make love in a cave during a storm, Virgil says that Dido, no longer affected by what her people might say, did not trouble to hide her love affair; she called it a marriage, thus using the word as a cover for her *culpa*: wrongdoing, because she has vowed fidelity to her dead husband Sychaeus.

The love affair is also a moving dramatization of Aeneas' *pietas*. It cannot be overstressed that the *Aeneid* is about a dutiful hero who, through much labor and suffering, follows the will of the gods, and so starts a historical process that will culminate in Augustus and universal peace. The episode with Dido is a love story, but love is the antithesis of history because it is timeless; it is the supreme anti-historical force, seeking to halt the progression of events or to initiate a different sequence of events altogether, dictated not by divine providence but by individual desire. The winter that Aeneas spends with Dido is a period out of time because Aeneas' mission is suspended. Dido cannot bear to return from her love to the world of political realities: she is Queen of Carthage, and her chief responsibility is to her people. When Aeneas deserts her, she sees only one way: from the timeless ahistorical world of *amor* to the timeless ahistorical world of death. Aeneas weeps as he prepares to leave Dido: at whatever cost, he has to subordinate his own desire and personal interest to his mission and calling.

For centuries after Virgil's death, the *Aeneid* was a textbook in schools of grammar and rhetoric, and was the subject of the first exhaustive commentaries on any ancient work. Not only have commentaries since Roman times to the present made the *Aeneid* seem perpetually modern, but also, those commentaries have in fact become part of the totality of one and the same text. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil becomes the supreme voice of the consciousness of Rome and of the Latin language itself – the voice of a civilization which had absorbed and transformed past civilizations, a transformation which the *Aeneid* itself enacts and which is the poem's own peculiar and unrepeatable achievement.#

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