AENEAS, ROME’S MAN
OF DESTINY*

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WRITTEN between 29 BC and 19 BC, the Roman poet Virgil’s epic, the Aeneid, recounts the adventures of the Trojan hero Aeneas, fruit of the union of the mortal Anchises with the goddess Venus.

Having miraculously survived the destruction of Troy, Aeneas, accompanied by his father, his infant son Iulus and a handful of faithful companions, sets sail in search of the place, appointed by destiny but as yet unknown to him, where he is to build a new Troy. As his journey unfolds, he comes to realize that the city’s mysterious new site is situated in Italy, in the region of Latium.

Warrings and wanderings
Before reaching his goal, however, he is fated to wander the length and breadth of the Mediterranean for seven years. This is partly because the utterances of the oracles, who purport to guide him in his quest, are inevitably far from clear. A false interpretation of one oracular message makes him think for a time that his destination is Crete until, warned of his error by the outbreak of a terrible plague, he is forced to flee the island. But the prime cause of his misfortunes is the unrelenting hatred of the all-powerful Juno, wife of Jupiter, the king of the gods.

This hatred stems from an ancient incident recounted by Homer – the famous judgement of Paris, the Trojan who dared to award the prize for beauty to Venus rather than to Juno. As depicted at the beginning of Virgil’s epic, the queen of Olympus neither can nor wishes to forget what she considers to be a personal affront for which, through Paris, she holds all Trojans responsible. She finds it intolerable that a small group of Trojans should have survived her vengeance and have the temerity to want to rebuild a city that is for her accursed. No subterfuge that may prevent Aeneas from achieving his aim and ensure his final downfall is too low for her.

After seven years of wanderings, Aeneas lands in Sicily where his old father dies. By now he knows for certain how and where he will discover the

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site to which destiny will lead him and it is with confidence and a light heart
that he sets out for Italy. Seeing him so near his goal, Juno succumbs to a
murderous rage and bribes Aeolus, the keeper of the winds, to unleash a
furious tempest. The Trojan fleet is scattered and largely destroyed; the few
survivors are thrown up on the African coast not far from Carthage.

Thanks to the intervention of Venus, anxious to ensure the safety of her
son, the sovereign of those parts, the Phoenician queen, Dido, welcomes
the shipwrecked survivors with generous hospitality. Taking advantage of these
events in a further attempt to detain Aeneas far from his Italian goal, Juno,
with the complicity of Venus, thrusts the unfortunate Dido into the arms of
her Trojan guest.

Surrendering himself to the delights of a mad passion, the Trojan hero
forgets his predestined mission for twelve long months. When Jupiter imper­
iously takes him to task, however, he remembers the duty fate has laid upon
him and leaves Carthage and the delights of love, setting sail to the light to
the funeral pyre on which the despairing Dido has thrown herself.

A stop at Cumae gives Aeneas, guided by the Sibyl, the opportunity to
descend into the nether regions where he encounters his father’s shade, who
presents to him those who will play leading roles in the accomplishment of
Rome’s future glory. Aeneas next arrives at the mouth of the Tiber where
the fulfilment of a prophecy confirms that his long voyage is over. Recogn­
izing in him the foreigner his diviners have predicted will marry his
daughter Lavinia, Latinus, the king of the region, welcomes Aeneas with
open arms.

Juno, however, returns to the charge. Arousing the jealousy of Turnus, a
suitor of Lavinia who cannot bear to find himself set aside in favour of the
newly-arrived stranger, she sets the scene for a desperate struggle. A long
series of combats ensues in which the warriors of both camps distinguish
themselves by brilliant individual exploits.

Finally, weary of the useless carnage, the two sides make a solemn pact to
leave the resolution of their quarrel to the outcome of a single combat
between Aeneas and Turnus. Aeneas, of course, emerges victorious and at
this point the epic draws to a close. However, a number of predictions
inserted throughout the poem foreshadow the future course of history that
the epic itself leaves untold — how Iulus, Aeneas’ son, will found the city of
Alba from whence, 300 years later, will come forth Romulus and Remus,
the twin founders of Rome.

An epic that reinterpreted history
The choice of such a subject offered many advantages. In literary terms it
demonstrates fidelity to the Homeric tradition without being a slavish imit-
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ation of it. Of the twelve books that make up the epic, the first six, in which the hero’s perilous voyage from Troy to Italy is recounted, conjure up in the reader’s mind overtones of the *Odyssey*; the last six, in which the war in Italy incited by Juno is related, are an open evocation of the *Iliad*.

Yet though the Homeric model was clearly in the minds of both the poet and his readers, it was used to tell a quite different tale. Furthermore, while deliberately placing itself within the context of Greek epic poetry, the *Aeneid* appears to be an extension of it, since the action begins at the precise point where it ends in Homer — with the capture and destruction of Troy.

Above all, the subject furnished political advantages. The legend unfolded in the *Aeneid* provided justification for Rome’s complex relationship with the Hellenic world, which involved military and political domination coupled with a certain cultural dependency. Representing Rome as a resurgence of a Troy destroyed by the Greeks gave the Roman conquest of Greece the colouring of legitimate revenge. Virgil did not miss the opportunity to put into the mouth of Jupiter, in a lengthy prophecy addressed to Venus, a proclamation that Rome would destroy the most renowned cities of Greece, which were responsible for the fall of Troy.

Yet Rome was indebted to Greece for this justificatory legend, which has its roots in the *Iliad*. By the end of the fourth century BC, at the latest, Greek historians had given shape to the myth of the arrival of Aeneas in Latium and of his founding of Lavinium (today Pratica di Mare). Thus began a subtle interplay between victor and vanquished with the victory of Roman arms over Greece finding justification in legendary tales evolved in Greece itself.

Not least of the advantages of Virgil’s epic was that it glorified Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Adopted by Julius Caesar, Augustus belonged to the Julian family which claimed direct descent from Aeneas. The claims were supported by a phonetic play, obligingly echoed by Virgil, on the name of Aeneas’ son. From the original ‘Hus’ (which simply means Trojan), ‘Iulus’, then ‘Iulius’, were derived. The philologists of old were very partial to such approximations.

The predictions inserted throughout the epic, foretelling the future grandeur of the descendants of Aeneas, naturally referred to the one who was foreseen to be the most illustrious among them — the emperor Augustus. Contemporary readers had no difficulty in making the link between the great future foretold for the descendants of the epic hero and the new régime of their own day. By the same token, this new régime no longer appeared to be the result of chance but the fulfilment of an eternal destiny.

The war that Aeneas was compelled to wage to secure a firm foothold in Latium also provided the opportunity to foretell the coming of the multi-
cultural empire over which Augustus was to rule. For in his struggle against Turnus, Aeneas was aided both by a small Greek community established on the site of the future city of Rome and by an Etruscan prince. This coalition of peoples of such diverse cultures — Latin, Hellenic, and Etruscan — was already, in itself, a foretaste of the cultural situation of historic Rome.

Furthermore, at the close of the epic, Juno renounces her vendetta and accepts the defeat of her protégé Turnus on condition that the newly-arrived Trojans in turn abandon their customs and their language and merge with the native population to constitute a single people. The *Aeneid* concludes less with the vision of a bloody fight to the death than with the promise of the harmonious fusion of different cultures within the framework of a political union. Thus the Virgilian epic made Augustus, the prestigious descendant the oracles were united in telling Aeneas he would sire, the guarantor of that fusion and that union.

**A poem for all time**

Though it may have been a piece of topical propaganda, placed within a historically limited context, the *Aeneid* is well worth reading today because it was written by a very great poet, a genius of such stature that the style and the events of his epic narration are rich in connotations and implications that go far beyond the author’s immediate purposes.

The modern reader will be all the more at ease with Virgil in that the hero of his epic is not cast in the monolithic mould of the Homeric model. Robots tirelessly performing feats of arms, Homer’s heroes maintain virtually unchanging patterns of behaviour and feelings throughout his narrative and the reader leaves them at the end of the epic as they were at the beginning. Virgil, however, endows his hero with the full panoply of human psychological complexity, with doubts, uncertainties, and moments of despair.

The *Aeneid* breaks new ground in epic poetry by its use of the narrative technique to reveal the inner feelings of Aeneas. Instead of being related by an aloof third person, the dramatic episodes of the destruction of Troy and the hero’s wanderings in search of the site on which his city is destined to be rebuilt are recounted by an ‘I’ still pulsating with the excitement of the events through which he has lived. From the start, a kind of intimacy is established between the hero and the reader, to whom he seems to speak personally. And this initial intimacy is reflected throughout the narrative.

By introducing the psychological factor, Virgil avoids the snare of a simplistic dualism between good and bad people. Dido and Turnus are, it is true, formidable obstacles to the accomplishment of Aeneas’ mission and can be counted among the negative characters in the epic. But it would be
too simple to leave it at that and Virgil succeeds in portraying them with sufficient complexity to make them seem more worthy of compassion than of enmity. His lines on Dido's tragic suicide are among the most sensitive ever written by a poet of Antiquity and even today it is impossible to read them without being profoundly moved.

Finally, what makes the Aeneid an epic apart is its initiatory connotations. The difficulties the hero has to face to accomplish his mission are a poetic transposition of the classic ordeals of an initiation ceremony. Aeneas comes through these ordeals not only as the victor but as a man transformed. The Aeneas who finally settles in Latium is a new man, destined for a new life.

The rites and mysteries of the religions of Antiquity may be of little interest to the modern reader, but no-one can remain unmoved by this lesson in self-transcendence, by this splendid example of a mastered fate.

'Virgil presents Dante to Homer.' Detail of a fresco by the French painter Eugene Delacroix (1798 – 1863) in the cupola of the library of the Senate, Paris.

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