

Heidelberg University English Department
Lecture Series: Another Place, Another Time

The Paradox and Genius of Vergil's *Aeneid*

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Annika Elstermann: Welcome to this episode of the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Another Place, Another Time*. Today I'll be speaking with Anthony Barrett, who is a professor emeritus of classics at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, and a visiting scholar at the University of Heidelberg. He has published many books and articles on the history of Rome and its imperial families, the most recent of which is titled *Rome is Burning*. Today he will give us an introduction to Vergil's *Aeneid*, a poem which links a mythical story of another place and another time with a very recent turbulent history of the author's contemporary Rome. So, why did you decide to talk on the *Aeneid*? I know that you're a classics scholar but why this text in particular?

Anthony Barrett: Well, the *Aeneid* is one of the classics of European culture. It had a profound influence on literature, art, music. It's the great national poem of ancient Rome. That was begun by Vergil in 29 BC. In about twelve books, about 750 lines a book, he tells the story of Aeneas, a Trojan, who survived the Sack of Troy by the Greeks, escaped to Italy and established a new people from the union of Italians and Trojans. And their descendants would ultimately become the Romans. The date of the composition, 29 BC is highly significant: Two years earlier, 31 BC, Octavian, later known as the Emperor Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, defeated the forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, the Battle of Actium, brought a end of 100 years of internal strife that at times had broken out into civil war. And then 27 BC, two years later, Octavian symbolically returned the territories of the Roman world to the senate. They acknowledged him as the leading citizen, the Princeps, and gave him the title of Augustus. From now on, Rome would be in effect ruled by an emperor, an emperor.

So, Vergil wrote his national epic at the perfect time; What must have felt like a genuine golden age of hope and confidence. But although it was composed to inspire Romans, somewhat 30 years or so before the Birth of Christ, as a work of literature, it fits the theme of your series perfectly. Because it is totally from another place and another time. So I could say that's the reason why I chose it, but another reason, I confess, is that it's my favourite work of literature. [Both chuckling.] And it's always a joy and fun to talk about it. That's the real reason.

AE: You mentioned kind of the political situation a bit. And also that it's sort of a foundational poem about the mythical origin of Rome. How did Vergil come to write this poem? Was this tied in very much to the political context at the time?

AB: Yes, much of what we know about Vergil, I should mention first, comes from an ancient biography. Probably closely based on the life of a poet written by the famous ancient biographer Suetonius, 150 years or so after the poet's death. Suetonius tells us that Vergil was born near Mantua in 70 BC into a farming family, he says that at an early age he attempted to write an epic, but gave up because he found it too difficult. This is a very interesting observation and I'll return to it later. So instead, Vergil wrote his first major composition, the *Eclogues* or *Bucolics*, pastoral poetry about the lives

and loves of herdsmen, but also with a political dimension: Because in one of them, a farmer has been dispossessed of his farm and he describes how he appealed to a young man who will always be a god to him. This can only be Octavian, Augustus, and it's assumed that Vergil had himself lost his farm in the turmoil that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC and is describing his own first contact with a man who would later stand at the centre of the Roman world.

While the *Eclogues* made Vergil famous and he was asked to write his next major work, the *Georgics*, a manual on farming, and keeping with Augustus' aim of encouraging people back to the land or at least to invest in the land. So, with the completion of the *Georgics*, Vergil was now Rome's premier poet and he had sort of served his apprenticeship as a spokesman for the great new Rome that Augustus was trying to establish and he was therefore the obvious choice for the most important of Augustus' literary projects: The composition of a great national poem to symbolise the rebirth of Rome. For the next ten years to his death in 19 BC, this was Vergil's sole project.

AE: Do we know whether he was actually tasked with writing this poem?

AB: Yes, we do know, even with the *Georgics*, the poem earlier that Misenus, who was Augustus' sort of... minister of the arts, acted as Vergil's patron for the *Georgics* and we do know, yes, that he became a kind of poet laureate. [**AE:** Okay.] And he was Augustus' choice, yes.

AE: You said that this is your favourite poem or your favourite work – what makes the *Aeneid* so special?

AB: Well, at a very early stage of my student life, I was required to read the whole of the *Aeneid* in translation, which I did and I found it a massive disappointment. [Both chuckling.] I simply couldn't grasp what was special about it: This is a work that for much of European history, had a status almost equal to that of the bible, I just couldn't understand it then. Well, I know better now, I hope. And I'm more than happy today to share my thoughts about what I didn't realise in my more youthful days. So, setting about to create the great national epic of Rome, Vergil was faced with two possibilities. Two choices. He could write a historical epic, a narrative poem that recounted Rome's history and achievements from its earliest times. The difficulty is that while historical epics scope for nationalistic feeling and patriotic pride, it is essentially tedious: There's little scope for creativity for allowing the imagination free-reign. There already existed an epic poem on the history of Rome written by the poet Ennius, over 150 years earlier. It survives in fragments and it reads like a tedious history textbook. The alternative is to abandon the historical approach and write a mythical epic. This is a work based on the shadowy pre-historical period, with the distinction between myth and history is blurred, where the roles are played by heroes performing superhuman deeds, often with direct intervention of the gods.

Now, the basic difficulty of the mythical epic, for Vergil's purposes, was that a mythical epic offered the poet a free-hand for creative talent, but it provided virtually no opportunities for expression of patriotism or national feeling. There was a second problem: For the ancients, mythical epic had already reached its peak: The two great epics of Homer, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* had such a powerful impact that it was felt that they could never be matched. Remember that I mentioned that in his early years, Vergil had tried his hand in epic and had found it too much of a challenge – and I suspect that this problem of combining myth and history was what discouraged him. He had to wait many

years before he had the inspiration for a solution. And that solution, now I acknowledge, although I didn't see it as a young student, was sheer genius and this is what makes it special.

First of all, we can say that Vergil opted for a mythical epic and there is no doubt that the *Aeneid* is anything other than that, it is not a work of history. Because he couldn't beat Homer, Vergil, if you wish, simply joined him and transformed him: He made no attempt to disguise the fact that he took Homer's two epics, adapted them into a single poem. The first six books of the *Aeneid* were essentially a Latin *Odyssey*, a Romantic recount of the adventures and wanderings of the hero and the aftermath of the Trojan war, while the second six are the story of warfare, waged by humans, who are often playthings of the gods, hence, a Latin *Iliad*. And the *Aeneid*, I might mention, is in exactly the same metre as Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. But remarkably, while the *Iliad* is a poem set in the time of the Trojan war, it is at the same time a poem about another place and another time the Rome of the last century BC.

AE: Would the readers of the *Aeneid* have been very familiar with the *Iliad* at the time?

AB: Absolutely. Yes. And the *Odyssey*, yes.

AE: And there are even character— kind of crossovers, right? There are characters from the *Odyssey* who appear in the *Aeneid*?

AB: They do, yes. They do, yes. Vergil was not trying to— He was not a plagiarist, stealing from Homer and pretending that it was his own. He would— the poem in a way openly acknowledges its Dad, almost every paragraph it does this, yes.

AE: How does Vergil manage this sort of connection, you've already hinted at this a bit, but this double function of being a mythical epic and also a national foundational patriotic poem of Vergil's actual homeplace, Rome which exists in this year now? Which I think is what perfectly ties it to the topic of this lecture series.

AB: Yes and that's a key question. There are a few cases/places where Vergil was very clever. First of all, he made use of one of the post-Homeric stories associated with the Trojan war, which told of how a Trojan prince escaped Troy as it was being destroyed and made his way eventually to the west and established himself in Italy and this prince, Aeneas, was the perfect protagonist for Vergil's purposes. He was the founder, not of Rome, but of the mythical ancestors of the Roman people. So the poet was licensed to make things up about him as poets do, and he was the perfect mythical figure for the Zeitgeist of the age of Augustus. Aeneas was the offspring of a mortal and a god, he was the son of a Trojan, Anchises, and of the goddess Venus. Now, aristocratic Roman families like to trace their ascent back to the gods. Julius Caesar claimed descent from no less than Venus. Augustus was the adopted son of Caesar, actually he was his great-nephew. But Romans made no real distinction between adopted and natural children. So in basing his epic on Aeneas, Vergil was in fact telling the story of Augustus' early ancestor. And of course there's a clear parallel to be drawn between the two men, just as Aeneas brought about the rebirth of his people, the fiery destruction of Troy, so Augustus brought about the rebirth of the Roman nation, after the destructive horror of almost a hundred years of intermittent civil war.

Of course, this is by no means the full explanation for what makes the *Aeneid* remarkable. This link

between Aeneas and Augustus was very useful, but it surely wasn't enough to create a feeling of patriotism among the broader Roman population, but Vergil came up with a solution that was very simple and quite brilliant in its simplicity: He took a story that was fiction, belonging to the mythical period of the Trojan Wars and using that to kind of screen, he projected onto it a series of incidents that were clearly of a different time and another place. Incidents of Roman history. Now this was not some post-modern type fantasy, this wasn't like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The coherence of the mythical background is maintained throughout, there's no clash of chronologies. By the use of simple things of prophecy, of simile, of descriptions of monuments and the like, he could describe the other time and place without at any point being blatantly anachronistic.

AE: I think we should make use of the fact that you are an expert on this text: Could we dive deeper at this point? Could you give a couple of examples how he does this?

AB: What I'll do is, I'll go through the poem, obviously very quickly [Both chuckling.] – I am not going to read the whole thing – and I'll do just that. The *Aeneid* begins, how we say, in medias res – in the middle of the action – the Trojan War is over, you know, for over some years now, and Aeneas at this point, when the poem begins, sailing towards Italy along the North African coast. Juno, the protector of the Italians is fearful of what will happen if Aeneas reaches his destination, since he is fated to be victorious over the Italians. That's totally illogical of course, if he's fated why does Juno fight it, but this is mythical epic: We don't have to worry about the logic. So in a happy, Homeric way, she intervenes in the action and contrives to bring about a storm. This angers another God, Neptune, who's annoyed that Juno has interfered in his domain. This is purely Homeric. Gods are always having these petty squabbles and Neptune sets forth in his chariot to calm the waves. and Vergil illustrates this with a simile: Just as Neptune used his trident to end the storm,

Sometimes, in a great nation, there are riots
 With the rabble out of hand, and firebrands fly
 And cobblestones; whatever they lay their hands on
 Is a weapon for their fury, but should they see
 One man of noble presence, they fall silent,
 Obedient hounds, with ears pricked up, and waiting,
 Waiting his word, and he knows how to bring them
 Back to good sense again. So ocean, roaring,
 Subsided into stillness, as the sea-god
 Looked forth upon the waters, and clear weather
 Shone over him as he drove his flying horses.

AB: This simile doesn't violate the time and place of the narrative, of course. But it evokes a future time, because the man of noble presence here is of course Augustus, who calmed Roman Italy in the midst of civil wars, just as Neptune calmed the ocean. And to confirm this identification, I might mention that a number of carved gems, of precious stones, date from the period, depicting Neptune on his chariot on the ocean and the figure of Neptune bears a striking resemblance to the statues of the young Augustus. So this simile introduces a parallel that the Romans would be familiar with and – again, it emphasises this idea of Augustus bringing an end to essentially a civil strife. At this point, Aeneas' mother Venus feels concerned for her son. And she asks for reassurances from Jupiter. And

he provides them by giving Venus a glimpse of the future and he makes a prophecy and he tells her:

Your son Aeneas
 Will wage a mighty war in Italy,
 Beat down proud nations, give his people laws,
 Found them a city, Lavinium, a matter of three years
 From victory to settlement. His son,
 The boy Ascanius, named Iulus once,
 When Troy was standing.
 Shall reign for thirty years, and great in power
 Forsake Lavinium, transfer the kingdom
 To Alba Longa, new-built capital.
 Here, for three hundred years, the line of Hector
 Shall govern, till a royal priestess bears
 Twin sons to Mars, and Romulus, [...] builds the martial walls
 And calls the people, after himself, the Romans.
 To these I set no bounds in space or time;
 They shall rule forever. [...] And from this great line
 Will come a Trojan, Caesar, to establish
 The limit of his empire at the ocean,
 His glory at the stars, a man called Julius
 Whose name recalls Iulus. Welcome waits
 For him in heaven; all the spoils of Asia
 Will weigh him down, and [...]
 Then wars will cease, [...] War's grim gates will close.

AB: So this prophecy contains several interesting elements: Jupiter forecasts that Aeneas will reign for three years, his son Ascanius will reign for 30. And their descendant Romulus will come three hundred years later. Now, there's no coincidence that this is 333 years: For the ancients the number three is sacred. And here, three is repeated three times.

AE: I think it's enormously interesting that Caesar is called a Trojan, right? In the prophecy you just read out? [**AB:** Ah, yes! Right!] Caesar is a Trojan at that point, he's not a— He's as much a Trojan as he is a Roman at that point.

AB: Well, there is a good reason for that of course, because Caesar traces his descent from Venus through her son Aeneas. So, I'm sure— That's a good observation, I'm sure that was deliberate to remind people of Caesar's descent. Notice also the names: He says "Ascanius, who is called Iulus while Troy stood" – This comes from Troy's alternate name Ilium and in the Roman period it was usually actually referred to as Ilium, rather than Troy. This was a double name at the time. Troy or Ilium. And Vergil tells us in his fictitious mythology of course, that Iulus through time became Iulus, then an easy step from Iulus to Iulius and the Julian line. And he tells her of course that his descendant Caesar will rise up to heaven and of course, after his death, Julius Caesar was made a god, he was declared a god by the senate. So, again, Vergil remains technically in the mythical past. There is no violation with the integrity of the mythical element here, but by using prophecy, he's able to give us a

synopsis of history from Aeneas, down to Romulus and then down to Caesar.

While Aeneas meanwhile has landed on the coast to North Africa, where the Phoenecian queen Dido, who fled her home city of Tyre, today's Lebanon, has established a new settlement, Carthage. I want to return to Dido and Aeneas later. But for the moment, let me now, that while Aeneas is in Carthage, Vergil borrows a technique from Homer. Well, borrows yet another technique from Homer, I should maybe have said: Homer has Odysseus recount his adventures to his host, the king of the Phaeacians and Aeneas does exactly the same for Dido in book II of the *Aeneid* and in a way brings us up to date by telling us what happened during the destruction of Troy and during Aeneas' travels on his way to Carthage.

And Aeneas reports that during the chaos in Troy he went to rescue his father, who didn't want to leave and insisted that he wanted to die in Troy and that Aeneas should escape without him. At this point, something extraordinary happens: A blaze of light appears on the head of Aeneas' son and Aeneas' father recognizes that it might be an omen of great significance. He then prays to Jupiter to send a sign to confirm the omen, this is what happens:

He had hardly spoken, when thunder on the left
 Resounded, and a shooting star from heaven
 Drew a long trail of light across the shadows.
 We saw it cross above the home, and vanish
 In the woods, a wake of gleaming light
 Where it had sped, and a trail of sulphurous odor.
 My father rose
 In worship of the gods and the holy star,
 Crying: 'I follow, son, wherever you may lead;

AB: Now, you might think that a comet or a fireball is a fairly obvious tool for the gods to confirm someone's vision. When I was a young student this is how I saw it: Well, what's so special about this? This is not particularly interesting. But there is something very noteworthy about the incident. Romans would have seen an additional dimension. Julius Caesar died, famously on the Ides of March in 44 BC. His heir and successor, Octavian Augustus, in the July of that year celebrated funeral games for his adopted father. During these games, a brilliant comet appeared in the sky during the daytime and remained there for several days. This was known as the Sidus Iulium, the Julian Star. This was turned by Augustus into a propaganda event of great symbolic importance, where he saw himself confirmed by heaven as Julius Caesar's successor. And the comet was presented as the soul of Caesar going to join the gods. Augustus later built a temple in Rome to divine Julius and portrayed Caesar in it with a comet on his forehead. And he depicted it also on his silver coinage. And again, it's a nice link between Troy's rebirth and Aeneas and Rome's rebirth and Augustus.

While Aeneas spends time with Dido, as I said, I'll come back to that later, but eventually he's commanded by the gods to continue to Italy. Once there, one of his very first tasks is imposed upon him by the ghost of his father Anchises, who had died on the way to Italy. He commands Aeneas to make a journey into the underworld. Here again, Vergil takes his inspiration from Homer: Book eleven of the *Odyssey* is devoted to a visit that Odysseus makes to Hades. It's acknowledged as one

of the most powerful books of the whole poem. But Vergil takes it to yet another level: Aeneas is more than just an underworld tourist. *Aeneid* book six, where the event is described, is in a way, the critical pivotal section of the whole poem. Where Aeneas' mission is officially sanctioned.

Vergil's approach is a brilliant one in his own way: Odysseus in a similar situation meets the souls of the dead – Aeneas does that, too, I mean, one of the souls he meets is the soul of Dido who was abandoned and committed suicide, but that is very Homeric, meeting the soul of someone that you knew who has died. The master stroke in the *Aeneid* is that Vergil is also able to meet the souls of the Romans who are not yet born. This creates the setting for a parade of the great figures of Roman history.

AE: Oh, so they are all in the underworld. They are all in the Roman underworld, the ones who have died and the ones who have not been born yet.

AB: That's right and it's a curious notion of the soul, which we find in Greco-Roman thought. That our souls preexist us and they're waiting to be born. So, yes, these souls are waiting to be born. That's a very clever idea, so this enables us to have this wonderful parade of all the great figures of Roman history. This would have had special resonance for the Romans because the Roman forum at the centre of the city was lined with the statues of its most celebrated figures of the past and they would have been seen on a daily basis. So this great parade of great Roman military leaders, great political leaders would have been a familiar phenomenon to the Romans.

Aeneas' guide in the underworld is his father, Anchises, and after surveying the great icons of Rome's past, Anchises declares that other nations will surpass the Romans in such things as eloquence and sculpture and science. So he openly admits that other nations – and essentially he is speaking of the Greeks – will be greater orators, they will be greater sculptors, they will be greater scientists, but Rome will surpass in a far more important field:

But thou, who are Roman, learn with sovereign sway to rule the nations Thy great art
shall be to keep the world in lasting peace To spare the humbled foe and crush to earth
the proud

AE: I think it's also quite significant that Romulus and Remus are fathered by Mars, so there's this kind of connection between – On the one hand you have the Trojan lineage with Venus and so on, and on the other side there's Mars who is the god of war and I think, who's much more important to the Romans than the Greek's equivalent Ares – Is that fair to say? Or at least takes on a different role.

AB: Well, Mars has a range of functions in both Greek and Roman mythology. He can be god of war, he can become god of agriculture. But you're right the martial aspect of Mars if you want was far more important, far more emphasised for the Romans. That is actually, that's an interesting point that you have— on the one hand you have Venus but you also have Mars coming into the line here.

These words of course would resonate with the Romans, because this is how the Romans saw themselves, they saw themselves as the most powerful military nation on the face of the earth, of course that was only the mediterranean world. But at the same time, they saw themselves as very much focused on reconciliation of winning over the support and sympathies of the nations they'd

conquered [AE: The *pax romana*.] Yes, the *pax romana*! And there is actually some element of truth in this: This was one of the reasons why Rome was able to expand from a small city state as they were to dominate the mediterranean. They would. They would defeat a nation, then they would sort of incorporate it into sort of the Roman way of life and eventually give the people citizenship. So, I'm not defending Roman Imperialism, but I would say that it did have that remarkable quality. And this is what Anchises is of course referring to in these lines.

Well, Aeneas is now, as it were, anointed for his task, meanwhile Venus is again concerned for her sons' welfare. She goes to Vulcan and persuades him to forge a great shield for Aeneas. This is an idea that is again taken from Homer. When Achilles in the Iliad prepares to go into battle against Hector, his mother Thetis does the very same thing: Persuading Vulcan – or Hephaestus – to make such a shield. But Achilles' shield, described in intricate detail by Homer and though a miracle of workmanship, is quite ordinary in the scenes of Greek life that decorate it. Vergil's shield, however, is highly significant, since it is decorated with a grand tableau of Roman history as it will be the future. Starting with the story of Romulus and the founding of Rome, and proceeding through the great events, down to the climax. The defeat of Mark Anthony. As it says, this is Mark Anthony: Himself a Roman with Hora, an Egyptian wife. So of course we have on the shield the depiction of the final great naval battle between Augustus and Mark Anthony fought in September 41 BC which marked the end of the civil war and left Augustus in sole control over Rome. So this miraculous shield once again enables Vergil to move quite naturally from the mythical to the historical period.

AE: Does he ever, at any point, go beyond that point which for Aeneas is the future but for Vergil and his contemporary readers is the present? Does he ever go into any future beyond that? Because of course for Vergil, he's making these— The shield has all of the future, mythical as well as actual history of Rome, but then history seems to end with Augustus somehow.

AB: Yes. He does, in the very first prophecy that I mentioned, where Jupiter talks about Aeneas, establishing himself in Italy and becoming the answers to the Romans, he says that 'To these I give empire without limit, they would rule forever.' So in a way he's looking to that and the Romans probably believed it at the time. There was – It was a golden Age that they were enjoying under Augustus, it was a high point of the— of Roman history and it was inconceivable to the Romans that the world could be anything other than a world, permanently ruled by the Romans. I supposed in a way it might have felt that history has in a sense come to its natural end. That there would be no history after this, because the future would simply be a future of the Roman world.

AE: Saying as it is, at that point in time a stasis of continuation.

AB: It will essentially stay, it's got to alter in the little details, but the essence of the world will remain for eternity, yeah.

AE: You mentioned, earlier, a couple of times, that you would like to come back to Dido and the relationship between Aeneas and Dido. What role does she play?

AB: Dido is a fascinating figure and the story of Dido is covered essentially in book four and I think it is the great favourite of people who know the *Aeneid* and I would be one of them. Vergil's treatment of Dido is extremely interesting. He uses Dido first of all to show Aeneas as someone with a great

destiny, with a great future, he is the destined founder of the people who would become the Roman nature, but he's also a human And he allows Aeneas to be torn between his love for Dido and his obligation to fulfil his destiny. So simply as a work of poetry, it is very very effective but at the same time, this is Vergil using Dido to say something about Roman history. Dido is a proud queen who founds a great city. She ends up committing suicide in her humiliation of being abandoned by her lover. This is Dido as a literary figure. But she has this other historical role: She is the beautiful foreign queen who tries to distract a great man for playing his destined role in Rome's history and who in the end commits suicide. It would have been impossible for the Romans not to have thought about Cleopatra when reading about Dido: The foreign queen from an exotic land, who similarly distracted both Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony.

AE: Is Dido a historical figure? Was there a queen Dido in history?

AB: No, we have no evidence that Dido was a historical figure. As always with myth, there may be some element of truth in it but it's lost in the historical record. Now, there's yet another aspect of Dido that is very interesting: Dido is the founder of Carthage. And Carthage of course will become the Archenemy of Rome and will fight three brutal wars with Rome. And before killing herself, Dido utters a curse on future relations between the Carthasians and the Trojans.

No love, no peace, between these nations, ever!
 Rise from my bones, O great unknown avenger,
 Hunt them with fire and sword, the Trojan settlers,
 Now, then, here, there, wherever strength is given.
 Shore against shore, wave against wave, and war,
 War after war, for all the generations.

AB: Of course, Carthage will become the great arch enemy of Rome.

AE: I think anyone who took latin for any amount of time knows this. . .

AB: Carthāgō dēlenda est! And Carthago deleta est!, Yeah, it was eventually destroyed and Carthage fought three great wars with Rome. And in the second Punic War in the third century BC we have the great avenger of course, this is Hannibal, who actually gets to Italy and as Dido asks him he hunts them with fire and sword. So this is a complex figure of Dido, a figure of myth. She's also a figure foreshadowing history, completely separate historical figures. There's no connection between Cleopatra, who is a macedonian Egyptian, and Hannibal, who is a Phoenecian Carthaginian, but she incorporates all these into her own person. And this I think makes Dido particularly fascinating.

AE: I do have a question about the connection to Troy as well. . . I'm phrasing this a bit more provocatively than I mean it, I know it's not quite as simple as that: But is there not something odd regarding people or nations who pride themselves as, I think has become clear now, their military prowess and their undefeatedness in the world essentially on basing their origin in the destruction of a great nation? So, essentially, Aeneas' home Troy has been sacked and he has been running away, I think we can say, he is not like his father, staying there to die to go down with the ship. And he is running away and this is the rebirth of the great nation. Isn't there something slightly odd about this?

AB The Romans, first of all, they had this notion of the Phoenix. The Phoenix that lives for a

great length of time and eventually destroys itself in a great conflagration and is reborn from the conflagration, so the Romans were very much taken with the idea of the philosophical movement of stoicism. The Stoics had a similar belief: That after a period of time the earth would be destroyed by fire and then would be reborn. It's like what some people say about the universe, we have the big bang and then the contract and the great crunch and then we explode again and we'll go on. And this to the Stoics was this idea of this eternity. And so I think the Romans would have accepted this idea that out of destruction can come a new future. They would have seen Aeneas not as running away, but as accepting the task, that he has to keep Troy alive in a way. He has to carry the burden, in a way, of continuing Troy's destiny and Troy's destiny will be to merge with the Italians and to create the Roman nation. So I think that the Romans would have found that an acceptable idea.

AE: And of course it gives Rome this idea of destruction and rebirth and continuing on essentially the lineage of Rome—it gives Rome in a way eternal life as well because after the fall of Rome there are various empires who claim that lineage as well. So you could say 'lives on in the British Empire' and now it goes over to the American empire. . .

AB: Well it certainly moved on to the Byzantine empire, they called themselves Roman emperors so it lives on there in the 15th century and you're quite right, you've got great imperial powers that took much of the language and the imagery from, actually from the *Aeneid*, much, much of it comes from, like an unfortunate example, like Mussolini. Mussolini saw himself very, very much as someone who is doing what Augustus did. But he was no Augustus. [laughs] And, you know, reviving the story of the Roman empire.

AE: And I think similarly with, I mean of course not ideologically the same but similarly with the British empire as well.

AB: Yes, well, I think all—the British certainly did, the French did; had this idea that what they're engaged in is not just naked conquest, it is a civilising goal. And I'd suspect that many British and French in the 19th century sincerely believed that. It can have unfortunate consequences, because you're largely doing it without the consent of the people who were being civilised, as it were, but I think it was probably sincere and I'm sure with the Romans: From all I've read in Latin literature, that the Romans genuinely believed this. They weren't simply using this as a cover to go about and conquer and plunder, they genuinely believed that the Roman world was the chosen destiny by the gods for the world, yes.

AE: And that's also interesting that it does come from the gods and also for more modern empires from god, then from a monotheistic god, this idea that this is a divine task, given to us, we have to do this, and from what you mentioned, I mean obviously in the *Aeneid*, it's made quite explicit that this is a task given to the people within this lineage and so on [**AB:** Yes.]. It does kind of make one wonder whether, I mean Vergil, you said earlier, was in essence a sort of proto Poet Laureate who was tasked to write this poem and it is a poem which gives us a foundational myth of the origin of Rome and justifies its entire history and its place in the world and so on. Is this Augustan propaganda?

AB: Well, in a way it is, yes. It is in a way propaganda but I would say with Vergil, I think he was a genuine admirer of Augustus and almost every Roman was. He was a kind of— It's the kind of thing that everyone seems to love and admire and Augustus remained so for the rest of Roman

history. People would always take Augustus for a model so later. They were trying to rule in a way that Augustus had tried to rule. So, although Vergil is a spokesman, I don't think that Vergil was compromising his own ideals to be so. And also, the *Aeneid* is, although it is to some degree a work of propaganda, it's much more complex and I think in many ways it's ahead of its time. And I mentioned Dido was representing these enemies of Rome, but at the same time, Vergil shows great sympathy for Dido.

In the *Aeneid* Vergil uses a Homeric technique: He gives his characters stock epithets as in the *Iliad* would be Achilles fleet of foot, Juno of the golden throne and so on. In the *Aeneid*, this is Aeneas Pius, we tend to think of Pius in the religious sense and for the Romans, piety did have a religious element, but it was more than that, for a Roman a pious person was someone devoted to the family and to the gods and this was the Roman ideal, someone who was devoted to his family, to his gods. Dido, who represents the enemies of Rome, interestingly, she's not hostile Dido, fierce Dido, she is Dido Infelix, unlucky, unfortunate. It is a very interesting choice of word throughout and I think what he was saying, I mean, Vergil was not a mindless nationalist. I think what he was saying was Rome's destiny was determined by greater powers and there's – he accepted, there's nothing that could prevent it if he wanted to prevent it, this is what it was going to be, but it would happen with much suffering. And I think Dido at the same time symbolises that, symbolises suffering. I think Aeneas feels this, when he leaves this, I think Aeneas is torn when he feels this emotional pity for Dido and what is his future destiny, so I think there is at the same time in Vergil there's a little element of protest that he thinks that war is inevitable that it's Rome's destiny to wage war and to conquer the world and thus civilise the world, but horrible things are going to happen during the course of it.

And I think his most haunted words are in the end of book one, where Aeneas has made his way to Carthage and he looks at the city walls and he finds that they're decorated with scenes of the Trojan Wars. And he says the very famous line "sunt lacrimae rerum [...]", it's almost untranslatable. It's literally "There are tears of things.", "There are tears in things." Rerum – literally of things. But I think he just means the world. The world makes us weep. This inherent sadness in the world. "[...] et mentem mortalia tangunt" – "and mortal affairs touch your heart". This I think elevates the poem beyond simple propaganda.

AE: Isn't there something quite similar in the *Odyssey* where they sing a song of the Trojan War and everybody starts weeping?

AB: Yes, but I— It's very, very difficult when talking about the *Odyssey* of course, to talk about the poet's intentions because the long history of it being an epic, what exactly was Homer's role. There was such a thing as Homer and the like. And you do find that— you do find in the art, also you find there are moments of great sadness, there are, in the death of Hector for instance, you could say it brings to us the horror of war, but what I think we have with Vergil, but it's not so much— it's not just that he's describing things that are sad but that he— He almost gives us an inside into the way he sees it, when he says *Sunt Lacrimae Rerum*. That has to be Vergil I think, talking about – not talking about an event but talking about the feelings that this scene evokes in him.

AE: And I absolutely see what you mean. It would be easy, especially in a nation or an empire such as the Roman Empire, which is build on waging wars on others and conquests and so on, to have a

heroic depiction of war as purely glorious and as something to be desired and that it is quite peculiar to have this note of melancholy in there as well.

AB: Yes, and he doesn't of course come out and say: 'War is hell! War is evil! We're killing our young men and we're causing widespread famine...' He doesn't go into an anti-war campaign, but he has these inner reflections, I think, which I find very, very—very, very effective.

AE: I have another question on the afterlife in the *Aeneid*. Do we know how it was received at the time? Of course it's an ancient poem that we still have today, which, most of the texts that were written at the time we don't have access to, they're lost to history, so it must have been in some way well received and reserved. Could you say a few words about how it was read at the time and what happened afterwards?

AB: Well, Vergil had left instructions in his will that anything that was unfinished was to be burned, so... The *Aeneid* wasn't finished, so...

AE: That's a near miss, then!

AB: It wasn't finished in a special way, because— We have information on Vergil's life from what we think is the world study from life by Suetonius. And what he tells us is that Vergil wrote the outline of the *Aeneid* and he composed it as the inspiration took him, so he would jump from book to book, so it's not like Schubert's unfinished symphony, you don't just reach the point where the manuscript stops. There are bits and pieces throughout where you have a half-line and the line hasn't been completed. So in a way, it's incomplete, but you don't think of it as an incomplete poem. It wasn't – it hasn't reached that point of perfection that would have satisfied Vergil, but we know that Augustus saw its qualities and he rescinded the will. He gave instructions to friends of Vergil, men called Varius and Tucca to edit the poem, but we don't know what they did. There may have been parts of the poem that were far more scrappy, but they edited the poem. So at the time it was considered a masterpiece and had to be preserved.

But according to Suetonius, there were critics. And one of the criticisms was what I would have made as a young student: This is just a kind of rehash of Homer. So even at the time there were critics who didn't recognize the special achievement of Vergil and combining myth and history and it was, it was criticised for being unoriginal. After the Roman period of course, when the *Aeneid* had reached the status of the bible, I mean that in a literal sense. Because there was a thing known as the *Sortes Vergilianae* - The Vergilian Fates. And this was just as people would open the bible and randomly point a finger at a line and use that to guide them for the day, people would do the same with the *Aeneid*, including Charles the first and he did that, including the day of his execution – this is English King Charles the first, we don't know what guidance he saw, what guidance he received – couldn't have been that useful – but anyhow, he opened the *Aeneid* at random and pointed his finger at one of the lines and we had works like *The Lusads* of Camões that are essentially irritations from the *Aeneid* moved from, to a different place and a different time again. So, oddly enough the only time when Vergil seems to have come on to criticism was probably in the generation just afterwards. I think it was largely among the kind of literary prosas who, kind of largely were, found it irritating that everyone was talking about the great work of genius and had to find some criticism.

And there was one called the Aeneido Mastigs, I think it was. I don't know if I have got the right word but it translates to 'The Lash (or Whip) of the Aeneid', there was someone who attacked Vergil for writing it, but they were few and far between.

AE: It must be difficult to live in the generation after the poet who has declared that now, essentially nothing new is going to happen anymore.

AB: Yes and still. . . You still do have epics that are written: You have the poet Lucan at the time of Nero and he writes historical epic, but it's such a strange poem. This is his response: He's going to write a mythical – sorry, he's going to write a historical epic, but he's going to do it in such strange Latin with such strange imagery that this is going to make it interesting. And you do get works like, like you do get works on an epic scale like of its metamorphoses, but you. . . No one could really match the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* was recognized by Romans as the high point of Roman literature. You mentioned earlier about how well it survived and the manuscripts unlike many other works: It has been claimed – now, I haven't set on checking this out – it has been claimed that even if we didn't have any manuscripts of the *Aeneid*, we could pretty well construct it from all the quotations that appear in later writers. That's an indication on the impact that it had.

AE: I think that's a very good note to end on. Thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

AB: Well, as I said, I always love talking about the *Aeneid*, so thank you for inviting me!

AE: And thank you all very much for listening. Next week, we'll jump to almost the opposite end of the temporal spectrum, but we'll also switch things around a bit, so next week's episode will be guest hosted by Heiko Jakubzik, who will interview me about *Heterotopia* and space travel.