

Code Switching: The Two Voices of Vergil's *Aeneid*

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In addition to being a tale of action, duty, and conquest, Vergil's *Aeneid* is commentary on the Augustan regime and Roman expansion. As a non-citizen that was later made a Roman citizen, Vergil was familiar with the effects of Roman conquest. In the *Aeneid*, his past experiences are evident as he discusses the tragedies of war and conquest. However, Vergil's epic is not an elaborate attack on the empire. In fact, he does describe the greatness of Rome and what it means to be an ideal Roman. Vergil manages to create a work of pro-Augustan propaganda while also commenting on the less-than-ideal aspects of Roman expansion. While Vergil does bring awareness to the costs of conquest, he also glorifies Rome and Roman values. In this way, he supports the regime without ignoring the undeniable sacrifices that come with it.

The connection between Vergil's past and the *Aeneid* is apparent in his description of Italy before the arrival of Aeneas. Vergil, once a non-citizen of Rome in a small farming town called Andes, was later made a citizen with Roman expansion under Julius Caesar. This experience leads Vergil to resonate with the people of Italy in the *Aeneid* as they share similar backgrounds -- both come from pastoral communities that are subject to conquest. The kinship he feels with the native people prompts him to include considerable detail about Italy before the Trojans arrive to conquer it. From this it is clear that Vergil wants to convey Italy as pastoral and serene. There is a sense of peace and moral excellence associated with the more primitive setting that existed before Aeneas. Vergil tells a story of how Latium got its name from Saturn, who brought the people of the wilderness together. This is described as "the Age of Gold" by King Evander (*Aeneid*, 8.382). This excellence is further reinforced when Evander shows Aeneas to his guest bedroom with a bed made of leaves and the hide of a bear. Yet, as Evander makes clear, this isn't degrading as "Hercules in his triumph stooped to enter" (*Aeneid*, 8.425-435). In this way, Vergil displays Evander and the people of Italy as primitive yet tough and full of virtue.

Vergil clearly admired the Italians for their virtue and their ruggedness, yet he doesn't hesitate to show their moral shortcomings. When describing the catalogue of heroes Vergil includes Italian captains such as Mezentius, who was an impious tyrant (*Aeneid*, 7.455-457). This shows that before the Trojans, there was vice and evil. This leads Richard Moorton to conclude that "Vergil's view of the pastoral is subtle and complex. He conceived of the pastoral order at its best as a garden of virtue, but also understands that humans are fallible."<sup>1</sup> Whether or not Vergil viewed Italy as morally perfect, it is evident that he sees Italy's value. It is not a land of uncivilized savages, but instead a primitive, pastoral place that had, in many ways, peace and virtue. Here he doesn't attempt to say that Aeneas's conquest was inherently bad, but he does bring attention to the land before to show it has value and that something will likely be lost when it is conquered.

Vergil provides many examples that explain his balance of praise of the Roman empire and his personal grievances. A key instance is the sixth book, where Anchises and the sibyl guide Aeneas through the underworld. At first glance this book appears to be purely pro-Rome. Not only does Vergil preview the great Roman history, but he also includes many Roman ideals. Aeneas sees "troops of men who had suffered wounds, fighting to save their county," "pure priests," and "faithful poets" (*Aeneid*, 6.764-69). This shows both the virtuous men that shaped Rome and also Aeneas's own call to duty -- to establish the great civilization. Here Vergil surveys the greatness of Rome and shows Aeneas's turn to piety, which is a celebrated Roman value. However, upon a deeper analysis, Vergil does subtly describe his grievances. While traversing the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard F. Moorton "The Innocence of Italy in Vergil's *Aeneid*." *The American Journal of Philology* 110, no. 1 (1989), 108.

underworld, the sibyl makes an effort to hurry Aeneas along and shield him from the suffering. When asked about the nature of the sufferers, the sibyl responds, “Don’t hunger to know their doom, what form of torture or twist of Fortune brings them down” (*Aeneid*, 6.710). Her answer is evidence that she and Anchises focus on the good aspects of the Roman empire while ignoring the suffering. This can be viewed as a presentation of the Roman empire as a false dream -- an unfulfilled promise of greatness that blinds people from the reality of suffering and tragedy.<sup>2</sup> The idea of Rome as a false dream is reinforced when Aeneas and the sybil leave the underworld through the Gate of Ivory, which is the gate of false dreams (*Aeneid*, 6.1035). Anne Shaw even goes so far to say that Aeneas himself, “in the course of book 6, must change and forget personal anguish and thus be able to recreate the past with all its guilt and cruelty.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is more believable that this book was actually a more multi-dimensional commentary on Rome. It was clearly a clever way for Vergil to discuss the greatness of Rome, its history, and the piety that makes a person a good Roman. However, it also shows that with a great empire comes suffering and sacrifice that is often overlooked. Vergil does primarily emphasize the former with his extended description of Roman history, yet he subtly reminds the reader not to ignore that undeniable pain and tragedy.

Perhaps the most pressing issue that *Aeneid* contains is the right to conquest. To examine this idea Vergil tells the story of Hercules and Cacus, in which Hercules murders Cacus as “revenge” for stealing the cattle Hercules once stole from Geryon. (*Aeneid*, 8.220-310). This

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<sup>2</sup> A. J. Boyle *The Chaonian Dove : Studies in the Eclogues, Georgics, and Aeneid of Virgil*. (Mnemosyne, Bibliotheca Classica Batava. Supplementum: 94. E.J. Brill, 1986), 144 - 145

<sup>3</sup> Anne MacDonald Shaw. “The Chaonian Dove: Studies in the Eclogues, Georgics, and Aeneid of Virgil A. J. Boyle.” *The Classical World* 82, no. 2 (November 1, 1988), 128.

story has clear parallels to the rest of the epic, as Hercules may represent Aeneas, Cacus may represent Turnus, and the feud over the cattle likely represents the right to conquer Italy.<sup>4</sup> The tale raises many questions about the validity of Hercules' justification for murdering Cacus over cattle he himself stole. Here, Vergil doesn't make a statement about whether or not Aeneas is justified. He simply raises the point that there is ambiguity over his right to conquest, and this is problematic.

A point against Aeneas and his right to conquest is his merciless slaughter of Turnus in book twelve. This seems to portray him as a ruthless killer whose right to conquer is questionable rather than a dutiful leader sent by the gods to establish Rome. Yet, even the merciless murder is ambiguous, as it was driven by the death of Pallas. Upon seeing the belt worn by Turnus, Aeneas is overcome and driven to kill (*Aeneid*, 12.1098). This may convey that Turnus didn't deserve mercy, as he killed Pallas and despoiled his body. It is possible that Aeneas was not wrong to mercilessly kill Turnus, because, as Damtoft suggests, "one can deny mercy to someone without acting wrongfully."<sup>5</sup> Again, like the conquest of Italy, even the murder of Turnus is riddled with moral ambiguity. This complexity and ambiguity holds true when connecting Augustus to Aeneas. It is apparent that Augustus is a foil of Aeneas throughout the epic. Aeneas, as described previously, is likely linked to Hercules, yet interestingly he also is compared to Cacus as both are described with the word "vomo" -- the Latin word for "vomit" that

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<sup>4</sup>L. Trotz-Liboff "The Advantage of the Stronger: Hercules and Cacus in Vergil's *Aeneid*." *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal of Classics*, 5(1), (2016), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Aske Damtoft. Poulsen "Why No Mercy? A Study of Aeneas' Missing Virtue." *Symbolae Osloenses* 87, no. 1 (October 2013), 127.

Vergil uses to equate things to Cacus.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Vergil depicts Aeneas as an extremely complex character with ties to both the hero Hercules and the monster Cacus, which means he also paints a complex picture of his foil, Augustus. He implies that Aeneas and Augustus may have both heroic and monstrous behavior. One thing that can be deduced, however, is that both Hercules and Aeneas were operating in lawless times. At the very least, Augustus' empire creates laws and, ideally, justice that works to rid moral ambiguity.<sup>7</sup> It seems that Vergil's belief is that conquest itself is often morally ambiguous, yet it can still bring positive things such as justice and stability. Ultimately, he explains that the regime itself is a good thing, yet the conquest that built it is most likely the result of injustice and morally ambiguous behavior -- and this is something the reader should be aware of.

*Aeneid*, beyond being an entertaining epic, is a view into Vergil's complex view of the Augustan regime. The best explanation for Vergil's agenda is Adam Parry's theory that Vergil had two voices: "a public voice of triumph, and a private voice of regret."<sup>8</sup> Outwardly, the *Aeneid* glorifies Rome and shows support for the Augustan Regime. Yet Vergil also makes it a point to subtly bring up his own personal thoughts on the cost of conquest that he doesn't think the reader should lose sight of. Proof of his outward support is captured perfectly with one of the famous quotations from the epic:

But you, Roman, rule with all your power  
the peoples of the Earth -- these will be your arts:  
to put your stamp on the works of and ways of peace,

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<sup>6</sup> Trotz-Liboff 2016, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Trotz-Liboff 2016, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Parry, Adam. "The Two Voices of Virgil's 'Aeneid'." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 2, no. 4 (1963), 79.

to spare the defeated, break the proud in war.  
*Aeneid* 6.981-84

Vergil breaks the fourth wall to address the reader -- “You, Roman.” He tells them it is their duty to “rule with all your power the peoples of the Earth.” And it seems like a positive thing as this brings “the ways of peace” and it will “spare the defeated” by “[breaking] the proud in war” -- something Romans would admire. Yet, as seen throughout the epic -- book six, Vergil’s extended description of Italy before Aeneas, the abrupt ending in the midst of war and tragedy -- Vergil has clear reservations about the regime and the sacrifices involved in its making. He clearly has at least some degree of regret that he conveys in his “private voice”. And in this way Vergil writes to publicly support the regime by glorifying Rome and its history while also revealing his private grievances. He begs the reader to appreciate the positives of the Augustan regime while also recognizing the tragedy and sacrifice that came with it.

Vergil’s long debated epic *Aeneid* brings forth numerous ideas about the cost of conquest. Although Vergil concludes the positive nature of establishing an empire, he refuses to deny what is lost. It prompts us to contemplate the price of anything that is beneficial. Whether it be the founding of a new country, sustaining the world’s hunger for resources, an oversized corporation that provides a useful service, or the Augustan Regime -- everything comes with a cost. Through his exciting epic, Vergil reminds us to celebrate the good in expansion and “progress” while also never ignoring the damage and tragedy that comes with it.

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