

Aeneas Reincarnated

Essay assignment as part of the requirements of the module: Virgil at UWTSD

One may surmise that one of the greatest and most renowned western philosophers and theologians, whose thinking has had great impact on the formation and development of the *Abendland* throughout the Middle Ages until contemporary times, would have great appreciation for him who has later been baptised the Father of the West.¹ The effect of Vergil's writings on the intellectual and literary heritage of the Western World may be comparable to the influence Augustine (353-430) has had on the Western Christian world. Both writers had great impact on the spiritual and intellectual formation of the West. Even though Christians later revalued Vergil and baptized him *anima naturaliter christiana*, undoubtedly due in part for his views on Aeneas' pious behaviour toward the gods, Augustine states in his celebrated *Confessiones* that Vergil has a negative influence on his quest for God.² In his *Confessiones*, written in a simple but yet profound style, he illustrates how Vergil's telling of the story impedes his endeavour for obeying God. Thus on the surface it would seem that both great masters of the Latin language are at odds when it pertains to the perception of obedience to gods/God and that their theologies differ immeasurably. While there are significant

¹ The term *anima christiana naturaliter* has first been applied by Theodor Haecker in his book, *Virgil Father of the West*. Vergil acquired the 'title' posthumously for the most part due to his Fourth Eclogue, which prophesies the birth of a special boy, a golden race and world peace. (*Tu modo nascenti puero, quo ferrea primum desinet ac toto surget gens aurea mundo, casta fave Lucina.*) In the *Infancy Narratives* of his famous trilogy *Jesus von Nazareth* pope Benedict, considered Augustinian in his theology, also refers to this messianic archetypal image (Benedict XVI 2012, 54-55). Haecker claims that Vergil was the bridge between the classical antiquity and the Christian occident. "In 'What is a Classic?', T. S. Eliot proclaimed the *Aeneid* as 'the classic of all Europe' because of its perceived 'maturity' and 'comprehensive-ness' in dealing with universal religious, political, and ethical themes" (Harrison 2007, 240).

² C.f also David Bonagura's essay "Was Virgil Catholic? An old book teaches some new literary lessons" (Bonagura Jr. 2015)

distinctions in the personal struggles of Augustine and Vergil's protagonist Aeneas, they may be more comparable than one may be led to believe.

This essay endeavors to demonstrate that there is noteworthy evidence of kinship between Vergil's main character of the *Aeneid* and Augustine, even though the latter says to loathe his encounters with the first. It exhibits that this kinship shows itself significantly pertaining to the idea of culpability, destiny and obedience. Especially from a theological perspective, the great Church Father owes the Father of the West more than what he may have wanted to know. One finds a first illustration of this in Augustine's reference to Aeneas' encounter of Dido in the underworld in book six.

However, before else, we must discount that Augustine wrote the *Confessiones* at age 31/32 not long after he converted to Christianity. We know that Augustine demonstrates more respect for Vergil than in the *Confessiones* in his later writings (MacCormack 2009, 886). For instance, in his *De civitate Dei* Augustine denotes Vergil twice as *poeta nobilissimus*.³ Considering this we must argue that his lack of appreciation for Vergil in the *Confessions* originated in a moment of time; it is but a snapshot.

Aeneid 6.450-476 narrates about the Trojan hero bursting into tears when he meets the ghost of Dido in the great woods and attempts to converse with her. The theme of culpability saturates the narrative of this encounter; Dido may have committed suicide, yet Aeneas feels he may have had a part in her death. Swearing by the stars (*per sidera*), the celestial gods (*per sidera*) and the most profound trust (*qua fides tellure sub ima est*) Aeneas states that he left her against his will (6.458-459). The same gods that ordered Aeneas to go through the underworld, ordered him to leave the shores of the Carthaginians. He did not know that he

³ C.f. *De civitate Dei*, 10.27 and 15.9

would cause her so much grief in leaving her. She, on her part, does not fix her eyes upon him, but stares to the ground instead and stands there as if she was made of Marpesian marble. At last, she speeds away to Sychaeus, her first love, and as she leaves, Aeneas stares at her for a long time while his eyes fill with tears.

Prior to integrating the above narrative into his account about the days of his youth, which in part were spent for the purpose of his intellectual formation, Augustine makes manifest that he delighted in his studies of the Latin language as opposed to the Greek. He loved Latin: *adamaveram enim Latinas* (*Confess.* 1.13.20); it taught him to write. Yet, although he had great appreciation for the works of the Latin poets in his younger days, he can love them no longer, as they do not direct him to God. Learning Latin is only purposeful for reading and writing, a method of communication. Learning Latin poetry is a waste of time. Better to forget what one has learned about the wanderings of Aeneas, as opposed to the ability to read and write. *Nam ecce paratior sum oblivisci errores Aeneae atque omnia eius modi quam scribere et legere* (*Confess.* 1.13.22). According to Augustine we do not know whether the legend of the *Aeneid* took place truly and historically, however, we are certain about the letters used as symbols to spell the name of Aeneas (*Confess.* 1.13.22). Hence grammar, vocabulary and syntax are of greater use than literature. *At si quaeram quibus litteris scribatur Aeneae nomen, omnes mihi qui haec didicerunt verum respondent secundum id pactum et placitum quo inter se homines ista signa firmarunt* (*Confess.* 1.13.22). Reading, writing and arithmetic serve a great purpose *et dulcissimum spectaculum vanitatis, equus ligneus plenus armatis et Troiae incendium atque ipsius umbra Creusae* (1.13.22). For Augustine there are too many questions about the poem's historicity (MacCormack 2009, 865). Despite of this, Augustine presents a linguistic dodge in his text by quoting the *Aeneid*. Let us first probe into this brief citation before returning to a number of key biographical themes dealing with (theological) guilt.

We do not know whether Augustine quoted Vergil by heart or whether he had all or part of Vergil's *Aeneid* at his disposal. Either way, the question to be asked is why Augustine quotes Vergil – adapting the use of hexameter to make it fit into his own text – if he considers Vergil's work frivolous (*inania*) and of little use as we have seen above.

The words Augustine quotes are taken from the second line of Aeneas' address to Dido (6.457): *Infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo venerat extinctam ferroque extrema secutam?*

Augustine adopts the last four words and composes this sentence: *Et haec non flebam, et flebam Didonem 'extinctam ferroque extrema secutam', sequens ipse extrema condita tua relicto te et terra iens in terram* (*Confess.* 1.13.21). He thus exchanges Vergil's dactyl, *Venerat*, for a spondee, *Didonem* (the *-em* being muted by the first syllable of *extinctam*).

While Augustine says he loathes the frivolous tales of Vergil, in reality he has been significantly formed by them. The building of his character and the development of his theology are for a significant part indebted to the works of the great Latin poet. The literature of Vergil cannot have left him untouched. We may postulate that while writing the *Confessiones* Augustine experienced the inner conflict of wanting to flee from Latin poetry while simultaneously cherishing it. What he loves, he attempts to hate. Vergil poetical heritage was engrafted in his memory, in his reason, in his mind. Augustine was unable to release himself from the Virgilian paradigm. Much of this can be noted if one compares the biography of the protagonist of Vergil's epic to that of the author of the *Confessiones*. Just as Aeneas was said to have been unfaithful to Dido even so Augustine is unfaithful to God. Aeneas is accused by Dido to be *perfide* (4.305; 4.366); he is blamed for having committed *periuria* (4.542). Dido is to a certain extent analogous to Augustine's God, to whom one can demonstrate unfaithfulness, about whom one can weep having been unfaithful to.

Evidence of this type of sorrow we also find in the paragraph of the *Confessiones* discussed prior to the one approached above. In these lines he himself compares his wanderings to that of Vergil's legendary hero. Augustine prays thus:

(...) *tenere cogebar Aeneae nescio cuius errores, oblitus errorum meorum, et
plorare Didonem mortuam, quia se occidit ab amore, cum interea me ipsum
in his a te morientem, deus, vita mea, siccis oculis ferrem miserrimus*
(Confess. 1.13.20).

Augustine was forced to memorize the wanderings (*errores*) of Aeneas all the while being oblivious of his own wanderings (*errorum*); he weeps (*plorare*) about Dido dying (*mortuam*) whilst he himself was dying (*morientem*) away from God and not shedding a tear (*siccis oculis*) about it.⁴ Themes of culpability, wandering and homecoming make the lives of Aeneas and Augustine so comparable.

Vergil's epic is dominated with the theme of wandering. Aeneas wanders from Troy, to Sicily, to Carthage and on to Italy. He is in search of his true destination, trying to fulfill what he has been called to do and at times uncertain about what the gods have in store for him. His escapade at Carthage, though orchestrated by Venus, is a deviation from his true vocation. Italy is to be his true home and destiny. Likewise, Augustine's biography contains dominant themes of drifting and the search for a perpetual home.⁵ The perhaps most famous line of the *Confessions*, found in the opening paragraph illustrates this precisely: *inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*.

⁴ Here I consulted Joshua Benjamins' convincing article entitled: "Augustine Encounters Vergil: A Rhetorical and Literary Analysis of Confessions 1.13.20-21".

⁵ Having written a commentary on the book Genesis, Augustine must also have identified himself with the figure Abraham who was also a recipient of a divine command, having to make pilgrimage to the promised land.

The wandering of Augustine, who strays from his home in Hippo to Carthage, to Rome, to Milan and then later back to Carthage, is arguably more spiritual. Yet he also takes on escapades that lead him away from his true destiny. Moreover, both their biographies contain the ever-present notion of the founding of a new city. Aeneas must establish Alba Longa. Just as Aeneas struggles with loyalty between two cities: Carthage and Rome to be founded, even so Augustine in his 22 books together entitled *De Civitate Dei*: Rome and the eternal Jerusalem.⁶ Having been a student of Vergil, Augustine must also have seen the analogy of Aeneas' wandering and homecoming to his discovery of rest in the Christian God. This idea of homecoming is closely connected to resistance and obedience to the will of gods.

In 6.450-476 Aeneas formulates his defense to Dido beforehand should he be accused of being the cause of Dido's suicide. He hides behind his obedience to the will of the gods, his higher calling. He has to fulfill Jupiter's higher purpose.⁷ He cannot help himself leaving her. As we saw above, he swears by the stars, the superior beings and faith in the depth of the earth that he left the shores of Carthage against his will (*inuitus*) (A. 6.460). In book four Vergil makes Aeneas say that going to Italy entails much self-denial: *Italiam non sponte sequor* (A. 4.361). Aeneas does not make his own choices. "Aeneas sails away to fulfill what the gods think fit" (Austin 1979, x). He merely obeys the will of the gods. Just as the gods coerce him to go through the underworld, even so he obeyed them in leaving the coasts of Carthage. Not him but his obedience to the commands of the gods (*iussa deum*) is to blame (A. 6.461).

⁶ On a side note, *De civitate dei* contains 46 references to Vergil and twelve references to Aeneas specifically.

⁷ "Jupiter [...] is shaping the events of history so as to bring about the foundation and development of Rome's imperial power" (Rudd 1990, 145). Rudd in this chapter focusses on the 'moral flaw' for which Dido may be considered responsible. The question asked is whether this flaw is that she broke the vow to be faithful to Sychaeus' spirit.

Admittedly, Augustine's theological axioms differ substantially with those of Vergil as they focus not primarily on obedience to a deity but mostly also demonstrating love to it. Traditional Roman religion is less concerned with loving gods, instead rites are conducted according to the principal of *do ut des*. Yet, for Augustine loving God means obeying God. Disobeying God is not loving God and not loving God is a manifestation of fornication. Augustine accuses himself of having poorly directed his love, of having fornicated: *non te amabam, et fornicabar abs te* (*Confess.* 1.13.21). He felt attracted to the story of Dido's fate instead of feeling attracted to God. This has much to do with Augustine's platonic and dichotomic way of thinking: the age of evil versus the age of good, the temporal Rome versus the eternal Jerusalem, world versus God, as the phrase expressed right before Augustine quotes the *Aeneid* testifies: *amicitia enim mundi huius fornicatio est abs te* (*Confess.* 1.13.21). The analogy between Aeneas and Augustine leaves something to be desired when restricted to a strict theological framework, but as stated before, Aeneas also finds himself guilty of having misdirected his love. Aeneas procrastinates completing his mission due to falling in love with Dido. He spent his time in Carthage and was sensitive to the pleasing of a lady instead of focusing on his calling to establish a new city. He needed a moment of conversion, an apparition of Mercury sent by Jupiter himself, a catalyzer to move him towards his destiny (A 4.220-223). Comparably, Augustine also needs an 'apparition' to turn his faculty of love from the world unto God. Being in despair he heard the voice of a child singing over and over again *tolle lege, tolle lege*, which he believed to be something *divinitus* (*Confess.* 8.12.29). Obeying the command he reads by chance Romans 13.13-14 which admonishes him to "[...] walk

properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.”⁸

Lastly, both the lives of Augustine and Aeneas are colored by the theme of culpability and this makes their biographies so comparable. There is the ever-present notion of the feeling of having made the wrong choice. Augustine’s experiences do not differ much from those of Vergil’s Aeneas; both seek to appease their conscience. Aeneas, after stating that he has heard about Dido taking her own life, dares to ask whether he himself is the cause of her death: *funeris heu tibi causa fui?* (A. 6.458)? The question contains a significant rhetorical aspect. Aeneas feels great guilt, asks the question, and hopes a ‘no’ will be the response. He is seeking to provide rest for his conscience. Perhaps just as Augustine seeks to find rest for his soul by fleeing from an evil way of life to a life in obedience to the divine as he makes evident with one of the most famous phrases of the *Confessiones*: *et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te* (*Confess.* 1.1.1.). The theme of culpability is accompanied with the expression of emotions. At times both weep for the wrong reasons. Augustine is moved by powerful leitmotifs present in Latin literature while he feels he should be sorrowful about his sins and his fornication against God. Aeneas may in book four be depicted as the dispassionate leader while Dido expresses all the emotions a person may be in possession of (4.331–2, 393–6, 437–49), later in the underworld he cannot but shed his tears (*demisit lacrimas* 6.455) (Harrison 2007, 211). Both weep; Aeneas weeps for Dido, Augustine weeps for God.

In conclusion, a significant pedagogical lesson for the first readers of Vergil’s epic is one related to humility. Aeneas shows filial devotion to the gods as all Romans should. Augustine’s *Confessiones* also teach humility towards the divine. Even though Augustine’s devotion is

⁸ This quote is taken from the English Standard Version.

more based on love, while Aeneas' devotion is based on obedience, both yield to the will of deities. This makes their biographies so analogous. The *Aeneid* deals with fate. Fate, which finds its origin in the word *for*, 'to speak or say'. Aeneas is presented as a devotee who listens to what the divine has spoken. If today's reader does not take the theological differences much into account, one easily observes that Augustine likewise by trial and error seeks to hear what has been revealed by the divine. Peace and destiny are found when one yields to what the divine has in store. In a certain sense, all members of humanity wrestle with themes of destiny, homecoming, obedience and culpability. Literature offers to aid us to complete the pilgrimage of our lives. It helps us making the pivotal choices in life, finding our destiny, and reflecting upon our shortcomings. All the same Vergil's *Aeneid* influenced Augustine.

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