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Europe's *Pax Romana*: a tribute to Vergil and Augustus

Actium: from war to peace

The background of Vergil's *Aeneid* is Rome's prolonged series of civil wars. The freedom which allowed a Roman general to build his own army (a loophole in the unwritten constitution of Rome) ushered a century of civil wars from the times of Sulla and Marius down to Octavian, who, at the end of that century, became *Augustus Imperator*. By means of a private army, although defraying the State from the expenses of equipment and the enrolment of soldiers, the victorious general could, if strong enough, invade his own State and aim at sole leadership. However, not every successful general was to be a good administrator. In fact, Sulla, foreseeing this, abdicated his six-month dictatorship. A similar dictatorship Julius Caesar feigned to abdicate, and so met his doom at the hands of his conspirators. Although his enemies succeeded to eliminate one of the world's greatest military and administrative geniuses, they however failed to replace him by another one. Octavian, knowing he was no match to his Late adoptive father and great uncle, therefore resorted to literary propaganda to shield his defects and bad image which hovered around him before Actium.¹

We bear in mind that at the time of the hundred-year civil wars, Rome was already an empire, though still a Republic. Already by the beginning of the third Punic War, Rome's presence had been established throughout Southern Europe, North Africa and Western Asia. To achieve this supremacy over other powers expressed through its protégée mission, Rome lost many lives and suffered a great economic instability. This weakening of the Republic was further gnawed by the internal dissensions within Rome which were in turn squashed with the Battle of Actium.

This port in the Adriatic Sea became the turning-point in Classical History where a golden opportunity provided Octavian to sustain his military achievement, aided by the naval operations of Agrippa, with some effective measures to turn the Roman minds away from war to peace, from *furor* to *pietas*,² and to sustain that peace against further warfare. To achieve this programme of reconstruction, Augustus left it to Maecenas and his team of writers, comprising especially Vergil, Horace and Livy, and their propaganda machine. The success of Augustus' *Pax Romana*, confirmed by its retention over three centuries, was partially due to the impact Augustus' contemporary literature made on the Roman world. In the words of Sabine Grebe,

¹ Like Aeneas who needed to receive in the Underworld an amnesia of his actions described prior to Book VI of the *Aeneid*. See also A.J. Boyle (1972b), 127-129.

² As A.J. Boyle (1972a), 63, says, the conflict of *pietas* and *furor* is one of the most important motifs in the *Aeneid* and permeates the entire poem.

“Vergil’s epic is a piece of propaganda, though a very sophisticated one, in that it reinforces the divine foundation of the Emperor’s *auctoritas*”.³

This scenario of prolonged warfare between nations and within a nation, of occasional bidding for world or continent leadership, can be applied not only to individual European nations before the creation of the European Union, but also to Europe as a super power. The creation of the League of Nations and that of the subsequent United Nations are considered to be the direct outcome of world dissatisfaction with warfare. Despite the institution of these political bodies, one continues to fear the threat of war. What must Europe do to avoid further warfare? Has it succeeded for good?

A common spiritual inspiration of peace

The creation of a body politic like the European Union can only be successful if it experiences a natural growth. Grafting or obliging disgruntled nations to stay on is not a natural process. Old branches give way to new, while grafted ones need more time and aid to become naturalised. But the original tree continues to be the source of sustenance for all the branches, indeed a unifying common inspiration which holds together forces tending to move astray from the mainstream of affairs. It is in no way to be a stump of hetero-exclusive pseudo-autonomous suspicious entities. And here is the crux of the problem Europe needs to be aware of: the successful administration of a twenty-five-nation-or-more United Europe does not depend solely on a successful administration that changes by rotation, but on a very deep, religious mission and experience which one expects every member nation to be imbued in. It is the heart of Europe which sustains the blood flowing into the veins: the long, sustained, shared experience which Augustus himself wanted people like Vergil to put forward in order to keep the inhabitants of a newly founded Empire away from mischief.

Vergil

Vergil is, in the words of H.M. Currie, “is the first European who consciously composed symbolic poetry”.⁴ He was inspired by the message of the unification of Romans under one, strong, religiously motivated administrator, determined to bring the *Pax Romana*, from the moment Pollio introduced him to Maecenas and eventually to Octavian himself in Rome. What was initially the solution of an earthly problem, the reacquisition of part of his father’s farm lost through politics, now appeared to introduce the young poet to national politics and even global issues.

The *Bucolics* are an allegory of Vergil’s journey in his poetic career from Mantua to Rome, from his attachment to Mark Antony in the North of Italy to Octavian in the South, from the celebration of the idyllic life to the witnessing of great things to come in Italy and the world. The *Georgics*, particularly the fourth and last book, are an allegory of the dire need of the Italian people to resettle in their devastated farms and return to their industrious and peaceful activities. Farming, and not warfare, was to be once more the occupation of the newly established Roman Empire. But to achieve this end, precautions had to be taken against a repetition of mistakes: there was to be only one leader who made sure no dissensions destabilized the common good any more.

³ S. Grebe (2004), 36.

⁴ H.M. Currie (1962-1963), 17.

The bees have their one queen, under whom they keep busy. When trouble arises, the warring partners are squashed with a layer of dust. Similarly, Octavian became the one *Imperator*, under whose protection the inhabitants of the Empire could enjoy peace and prosperity.

The *Aeneid* and *fatum*

In the Donatus-Suetonius life we read (21): “Last of all he began the *Aeneid*, a varied and complicated theme, a sort of equivalent of both Homer’s poems; also, it was concerned with characters and events which were both Latin and Greek, while in it there would be contained the origin of the city of Rome and of Augustus”. Servius, in his introductory note to his commentary on the *Aeneid*, says: “Vergil’s intention is to imitate Homer and to praise Augustus by means of his ancestors”.⁵ In the words of G.E. Duckworth, “The *Aeneid* of Vergil is the great national epic of ancient Rome; it portrays the journey of Aeneas and the Trojans from Troy to Italy and their trials and victories after they reach their ‘promised land’; ... it presents the outstanding events of Roman history and the achievements of Augustus in Vergil’s own day”.⁶ B. Otis adds, “Only the *Aeneid* aspired to be both heroic and civilized, both remote and contemporary, both Homeric and Augustan”.⁷ Finally, according to A. Thornton, “Vergil wrote a Homeric epic because he was writing a spiritual or moral work”.⁸

Vergil felt, or was possibly made to feel, that in the passing of time and in the changing of administration, however good it might be, there was present a spiritual substratum, the experience of which existed also in the original builders of the Republic and of the other initiated nations incorporated within the Empire. “Rome was not built in one day.” This dictum can be applied also to the building of the Roman awareness that there was a Destiny which needed to be realized, that of eliminating the haughty and that of securing peace and tolerance.

This mission was expressed in Vergil’s *Aeneid* towards the centre of the twelve-book epic poem. The utterance of this mission was conveniently placed at the centre of the Mediterranean, the heart of Italy, in the vicinity of Cuma, where Vergil imagined Aeneas, formerly a refugee and a wanderer in search of that same Destiny,⁹ receiving a revelation in the Underworld. This was Heaven brought down on Earth before the times, where Aeneas returned from as a changed person, motivated, and determined to prepare the way for the future birth of Rome.¹⁰ Rome was to succeed, and Augustus, the second Aeneas, son of goddess Venus, claiming descent of the Julian race from Aeneas’s own son, Julius, was to be the sole leader destined to bring this *Pax Romana* (*tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento*).¹¹

⁵ Translations as in R.D. Williams (1967), 29.

⁶ G.E. Duckworth (1960), 184-185.

⁷ B. Otis (1964), 2-3.

⁸ A. Thornton (1971), 75.

⁹ On the uncertainty in Aeneas’ search for this Destiny described in the first five books of the *Aeneid*, see A.J. Boyle (1972), 113. On a comparison of Aeneas’ status as a refugee, wanderer and in search of a new home with that of Daedalus and Evander, see respectively W. Fitzgerald (1984), 52, and H.C.R. Vella (2004), 5.

¹⁰ As A.J. Boyle (1972b), 113, says, Aeneas experience what might be construed as a spiritual regeneration, an experience denied Aeneas by W.A. Camps (1967-1968), 27.

¹¹ As predicted by the ghost of Aeneas’ dead father in the Underworld (*Aeneid* 6.851), and as fulfilled in Vergil’s own times. See also W.A. Camps (1967-1968), 29.

A new Rome

Rome's success in retaining this stability, oneness amid diversity, protection against the haughty, tolerance (despite the persecutions under certain odd emperors), deserves not only our admiration, but also our emulation. In addition, the fall of the Roman Empire needs to be studied if Europe wants to remain united against new Vandals not necessarily from the North. And if the vision of Rome has been on and off missed, its internal spiritual milieu always came back to the surface in the appearance of some Holy Roman Empire, today the European Union.

A re-Christianised Europe

Europe is at this moment in search of God. He is not yet in its Constitution. No one asks here whether Europe is in the Constitution of God. God however is ever so nearer as when apparently so further away. The naturalized branches which temporarily were replaced by the grafted ones will be re-accommodated within the same *almus arbor*; indeed, it will be easier for them, as St. Paul said, than for grafted ones to be so accommodated. The experience of God in Europe was the experience of God in history: the temporary infiltration of Islam in Southern Europe was in the past regressed through sheer faith. Today, it is not Allah that will be regressed, but the absence of God. He, Vergil's *fatum*, the *Aeneid*'s mission, the Church's pilgrimage on earth and the expression of religion through culture, have still to be realized by today's European Union in search of a Constitution. God outside Christian Europe means museum-churches, a backward look at the past which is no longer ours, great as it appears to have been; it is a re-Christianised Europe that will bring the realisation of the essential qualities of all Europeans which remain in the heart and veins of us all. Vergil, whose *anima* was *naturaliter Christiana*, has been instrumental and will continue to be useful in moulding or rediscovering our European spiritual qualities, which are both Roman and Christian in essence.

Protégéism

Vergil's Aeneas, although a son of a goddess, was nonetheless a mortal just like any other. His heroism was not just shown in martial qualities, as in Homer's Achilles, or in resourcefulness, as in his Odysseus, but in his call to understand God's special will for him and his descendants, that no matter how hard he tried to defend the burning Troy, how well he planned to build Rome on African soil, it was through no personal effort of his that by the river Tiber he was to assume the role of a second Hercules in whose cottage he slept, the role of a protégé of a client against third parties.¹² This became the role of Rome already in the pristine years of the growing Republic: this was the method Rome used to assume a bigger body politic, and what is astonishing is, that in this process, Rome acted as if it knew from above that such was to be her policy over other nations requiring her protection against other haughty ones.

Dido and Turkey

¹² H.C.R. Vella (2004), 3.

In a similar policy which Europe follows, that of enlargement by offering a hand of protection to nations in difficulties, it has to learn from Rome and Vergil that not every culture can be accepted and moulded harmoniously within its own. By making Aeneas land on the shores of Carthage still being built, an anachronism created to incorporate in epic narrative the prelude to the future three Punic Wars, Vergil was trying to warn Rome that a very deep and significant difference exists between the East and the West, the Greco-Roman civilisation and the Phoenician. This warning still applies to today's Europe as it continues to be at the other extreme of Islam.

Aeneas, interpreting God's will that Carthage was the promised Hesperia where providential hospitality was now offered to the Trojans by the widowed Dido, decided to settle there and cement the two people's friendship with marriage. But are not marriages with foreigners fraught with problems? Does one accept any applicant nation and would it readily baptise it in a cauldron of fire and anguish? Do we forget the speech of Dido to Aeneas when Mercury woke him up from his night sleep and vocational slumber? Did she not predict a hatred that will survive among her descendants and those of Aeneas and Rome?

Europe today faces the application of Turkey to join as member of the European Union. Indeed, there are very many naïve-minded member-nations who would close eyes and ears, but open their hearts with hands outstretched towards the applicant nation. Had Barroso been *alter Aeneas aut Augustus*, had Europe been *altera Roma*, apart from adopting Vergil's *timeo Danaos et dona ferentis*,¹³ Europe today would adopt the same protégé-method in favour of its own member-state – not client, I must say, but member-state against its aggressor, and would convert the aggressor before accommodating him as the twenty-sixth member.

But is Turkey a European nation? Is Spain an African nation? Does it matter what foot or toe a nation has present in the neighbouring continent? Do we limit ourselves to basic geographic factors when we talk of, not Europe, but a European Union? Do we accept Turkey because it will be our buffer-state in Asia, friendly with our friends? Or are we really considering changing the roots of the applicant country, that is, its hostile mentality, to finally befriend itself with Cyprus? Will Allah ever be our God? Will *Deus Omnipotens* be their God?

Indeed, mine is not the first plea to Europe versus Turkey quoting the *Aeneid* of Vergil. Girolamo Balbi's *De civili et bellica fortitudine liber ex mysteriis poetae Virgilii nunc primum promptus*, written c. 1521, is a philosophical epic written to exhort Pope Clement VII to undertake an offensive and decisive campaign against the Turks. In this epic, Balbi used Vergil's *Aeneid* as an ideology against an eastern oppression which had already seen in Balbi's own times the capture of Constantinople, Otranto, Athens, Kosovo, Cyprus, Hungary, the Western coast of the Adriatic and the North African coast from Egypt to Tunisia. The success of this exhortation came nearly half a century later with the battle of Lepanto in 1571.¹⁴

Europe would do well to study history and inspirational and political poetry as that of Vergil's *Aeneid*.

¹³ A. 2.49.

¹⁴ See J.M. Scott (2004), 63-95.

The experience of Aeneas and Europe

Vergil represents Aeneas in search for two things: a new Troy and the will of God. He represents us, human beings, in our search for a new home, a new establishment, a *Pax Romana*, where there will be no more wars or fires, but love, tolerance, self-sacrifice, solidarity and identity. He represents us, human beings, in our search for God, not just in the Constitution, but in our own experiences as individuals, and in our own experience as a re-Christianised European Union. Aeneas, as an ordinary human being, despite all the revelations he received, generally felt so far in finding this home and in understanding the will of God. At times he even built a new Troy in the wrong places, and interpreted Dido to be the one who would fill in the void caused by Creusa's death. Indeed, Aeneas was as far from understanding God as the Chorus was by the end of Euripides' *Medea* or as Job in the *Old Testament*.¹⁵ Yet, he persisted in his loyalty to respond to the plan of Providence, during the course of which he received in the *Aeneid* the title of *pater* for 16 times, and that of *pious* for 19 times.¹⁶

Europe has been on a similar pilgrimage. One only has to look at the changing old maps of Europe. So many nations, which somehow already existed before, are now permanently on the map as independent nations. All these nations have been in search of a home. Their obstacles were warfare and the haughty attitude of their hostile neighbours. Europe too, in its journey to find its identity, has proved to be Christian culturally. Anything you touch in European history has to do with Christianity: philosophy, art, architecture, science, trade unions. All these aspects make one, long, determined effort of our forefathers in making sense with their own existence in their own times, an experience of life as God meant it to be.

Like Aeneas, Europe has on and off missed home and the vision of God. But like Aeneas, Europe has at times come very close to achieve this mission, as when Aeneas brought the war-stricken Trojans to Latium, as when Augustus brought to Rome the *Pax Romana*, as when Europe got united under the Holy Roman Emperor, as when today's Europe has broken the barriers in bringing together what formerly were enemy-nations, and in consolidating a continent protecting it from without. More, however, needs to be done in claiming Europe's own identity from the residue of the past. Europe may not be born again as another continent: it shall, however, rejuvenate itself upon self-discovery and frank admittance to be what it really, that is, fundamentally, is.

***Haec Patria nostra* and Europe's Mission**

The fundamental mission of any Europe remains what it has always been: the *amor patriae patrumque* and the transmission of that same love of fatherland and forefathers to later generations and across the boundaries. To love what is one's own is the most natural desire man and nation could be after. This is the means of the survival of the species. This is what Europe needs to learn from the Romans and Vergil's message of the *Aeneid*: the respect for the unknown, the endeavour to materialize *fatum* by obedience to its dictates, the adherence to one leadership, the

¹⁵ For a study of the developing character in Aeneas, see Th. Fuhrer (1989), 63-72.

¹⁶ T.J. Haarhoff (1959), 5.

supremacy of the *mores maiorum*, those traditions in which Roman and European authority have been rooted, the solidarity shown towards member-states of the empire, and the openness towards growth and consolidation.

Vergil's society believed in the divine hearth of Rome and the divine hearth within every family's house, around which the legends of the past were repeated and passed on to the younger generations. Today, the national hearths are the Christian churches, while the individual hearths would be the natural families and schools of good formation. The obedience to *fatum*'s dictates through the interpretation of Roman *augures* finds equivalence today with today's Europe's open ears to *Summorum Pontificum* public warnings, as against participation in unjust warfare and ignoring the plight of the poor majority. The adherence to one *imperator* is today expressed to both internal political stabilities within individual European nations, but also to the concept of the *pater patriae*, expressed so clearly by Cicero and Vergil alike, the concept of a *primus inter pares* which goes back to Heroic Society expressed by Homer through figures like Agamemnon. Such authority as vested on Augustus was precisely the political subject-matter of Vergil's *Aeneid*.¹⁷

Europe has such a person which remains in office despite the rotation of government. But this person needs to be invested with greater spiritual leadership, somebody whose authority echoes that of a Kofi Annan or even the Pope, a leader that speaks out for Europe in appropriate times. The *mores maiorum* form our culture as we inherited it and which we preserve not just by financial aids, but also by strict legislature which would ensure its preservation and transmission. Today, we show solidarity with each other not only in times of need, but also in times of peace, while we grow in the present European mentality of oneness and brotherhood. Finally, we today are open to growth within the European Union motivated not by geographical, strategical or military concerns, but by the same protégé attitude of the Romans shown towards nations outside its empire, imposing upon the applicant nation important conditions transcending economic problems, taking into account its culture and religion and how these could mould themselves into our culture and religion.

Conclusion

To conclude, one says that Europe was not born again when it formed the present brotherhood of men, a brotherhood based no longer on a common market, but on solidarity, participation and identity. Europe instead used what history preserved for its lessons: that it gains nothing by internal dissensions and by bidding for sole leadership through warfare. Peace and stability, brotherhood, solidarity are all found in Vergil's and Augustus' society with the victory at Actium. The celebration of this victory by Vergil throughout the *Aeneid*, also kaleidoscopically through the centre-piece of the Shield sent from Heaven to Aeneas in the site of future Rome as narrated in the eighth *Aeneid*,¹⁸ is a landmark in European awareness of what is European, what is ours, what is the victory over arrogance, what introduces us to new friends, what excludes others, what sustains our determination not to slip back into wasteful attempts to hurt one's own Europe and image, but to build up each other and experience how great it feels to be brothers in a united Europe.

¹⁷ S. Grebe (2004), 35.

¹⁸ On which see H.C.R. Vella (2004).

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