

# **Up Through the Shining Gate of False Dreams: Foundational Images of Native People in the Epic Literature of Western Civilization from Vergil's *Aeneid***

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As he lay dying, Publius Vergilius Maro asked that his epic masterpiece, the *Aeneid*, be destroyed.

More than 30 years ago, when I was in graduate school, I took a course in British Literature in which we read *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's modernist prose-poem of European Imperialism in Africa, and since I already knew well Vergil's Roman imperial epic of the *Aeneid*, I was astonished at the ground for comparative insight provided by juxtaposing the two in terms of imagery, structure, and theme. My British Literature professor in the course was not immediately happy at all with the correspondences in the two texts, which I drew to his attention in an essay assigned toward the question of Kurtz's "horror," but in his defense I must also note that perhaps a year later, after some time for reflection, he asked me to come to his class to lecture on the subject. In fact, I later included an analysis of the matter in the comparative section of my dissertation, and still later presented a long paper, perhaps 20 years ago at a conference in Sault Ste. Marie, about the textual correspondences which resonated in several subsequent texts of the tradition, including Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, which in some significant fashion embodied this dynamic; at that time I began with Homer and ended with Conrad. Although I could easily have continued with Faulkner's *Light In August* and included others, such as Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," I did not.

But Vergil's epic is my topic today, because though Vergil is drawing on Homer, the great tragedians, the classical philosophers, and all who went before him, it is in the *Aeneid* that the foundational paradigm is fully formed as the poetically represented rationale specific for imperial conquest. It is in the *Aeneid* that the specifically imperial image of Nike takes wing.

I say "significant" because the Vergilian literary paradigm has influenced not only Rome in the time of its empire, but has also survived to be reborn in the imperial ethos of modernity over the past 500 years, reborn not only in the literary texts which are my area of interest, but also in the minds and dreams and destructive processes of the imperial conqueror time and time again. And here I should pause for a moment to tell you in no uncertain terms that I do not believe in this imperial paradigm, that what I am describing to you today is a true picture of something false, something so false as to be virulent; but I think it is important to understand its basis and its persistent mythic presence and grip in the ethos of conquest in the Western psyche, if one is to understand the historical forces involved and to effectively refute the paradigm in both thought and action. Otherwise, one may be pulled unawares into the destructive dynamic and accept unawares an

assigned role in the story. Understanding the *imperium* is the first step to loosening its fury's grip.

I know also that others have clearly noted that false imagery has been historically projected or imposed on Native Americans in the mythos of Manifest Destiny, and that this process has philosophic underpinnings in the Western mind. In fact I recently had the pleasure of reading an essay by N. Scott Momaday titled "The Morality of Indian Hating" in *The Man Made of Words* (1997), in which he very ably considers both the Calvinist root of the evil savage image and the Noble Savage of Rousseau in the English and American view of Indians. I recommend the essay and the various writings of others on this subject; what I am offering is a literary interpretive textual perspective that does not supplant but complements such analyses, because what is illustrated in this foundational text predates by a millennium and a half modernity and Calvin—or Montaigne's famous essay and Rousseau; for I believe that this Vergilian synthesis, itself a distillation of so much of ancient literature and philosophy that went before Vergil into the specifically imperial mythos of his *Aeneid*, is in fact the literary source and presaging sign of subsequent Western mythic monsters of conquest.

That strain of Western civilization involved in the historical conquest of native peoples has generally conceived of itself in aggressive male terms. Domestic culture may once have been embodied in the image of woman chaste and idealized, but those non-European peoples who oppose being conquered and who fiercely resist the domination of Western empire-making are often portrayed in savage terms, either as a male brute who must be exterminated or as natural and passionate woman who must be sexually conquered. In this latter image the male brute and the savage female are identified with unconquered primeval nature, with the dangerous and unshackled wilderness, and in the final sense with matter itself; and here matter or the natural realm is given an essentially negative characterization, the body of death as the contaminating prison house of the soul, though certainly the movement from a general Platonic view of the body as the infecting jail of the soul to the even more horrifying demonic association with nature in the Puritan mythos which Hawthorne exemplifies in his *Young Goodman* short story is another turn of the Jamesian governess's screw. Unconquered nature and the undominated native woman (and the people who reject the imposition of empire) are portrayed as exotic and passionate like the wild earth, fascinating and treacherous, hence also evil and ugly, which then translates into the opposing male figure who resists the divinely ordained empire as a savage brute, who opposes the conqueror's subjugation of his female and his land. (Hi, I'm Aeneas and god sent me to marry your girl and rule your land.) In this model, the earth and the woman identified with the non-Western people must be conquered and dominated as nature must be exploited and conquered, or the Western conqueror feels himself threatened with submersion into his own alien animal nature, and he fears the loss of the divine ideals that order his imperial civilization, which is authorized by heaven and based in parallels on the principle of spirit versus matter, civilization versus nature, order versus furor. The empire builder in sexual possession of the barbarian female must not become possessed by her and the imagined demons of female desire, if he is to avoid losing his identity and his goal of conquering the new land, what the British in their version called "going Native." (Consider the fate of Conrad's Kurtz and the ending of Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*.) The would-

be conqueror wishes to kill or spiritually negate the native male, make the native female into his image of submission, and turn the savage princess, the as it were wilderness of death, into a vitiated and pale garden. Dido must transmute into Lavinia/Italia and become subject to empire through marriage with Aeneas, the divinely-ordained Trojan/Roman prototype of the world empire to come; but fury-possessed Amata and Turnus are in savage opposition. In this imperial perspective, Metacom must die and his wife be sold into slavery, the Pequots exterminated on the Mystic River, a sweet sacrifice to the god of imperialism, but Pocahontas must become the mythic mother of European-American Virginia gentlemen, mother of the son-in-law of Thomas Jefferson. (While Jefferson is playing out the pale civilized wife/dark passionate princess dynamic in his personal life, caught up in the nightmare's tragic scenario of desire. Slavery is internalized imperialism.) And you can substitute the names of many native people in the opposing roles which their images are made to play in the drama of the conqueror's script(s) of history. (The first emperor of Rome as *he* lay dying: "Have I played my part in the drama well?")

Thus, this destructive paradigm holds true for Roman imperialism, for the so-called White Man's Burden of the British Empire, and for the doctrine of Manifest Destiny in American continental expansion, and in many and various less epic, but no less destructive manifestations of conquest. The deep structure and driving force of all these historical phenomena is what I have called on occasion "the Savage Princess Syndrome in Western Civilization," and this syndrome finds its first and most complete literary expression in an epic poem which is the very trunk of the tree or of the body of the many hydra heads of the mythos of Western conquest—Vergil's *Aeneid*.

Completed not long before the birth of Christ, the *Aeneid* is the titan poem of the Augustan age. The *Aeneid* tells the mythopoetic tale of the Trojan prince who flees the fall of Troy with a group of Trojan refugees, his household gods, and his son, while carrying his invalid father on his back. Losing his city, Aeneas also loses his wife, Creusa, on his way out of the burning town, and embarks on a new *Odyssey* and *Iliad* of his own to found a race that is destined to rule the world, to bring peace and order via an iron fist.

Aeneas travels the Mediterranean, driven by fate and the gods on his way to found a new order which will become Rome. The intent of fate and Jove is that he will go to Italy and gain lands and rule by marrying the native princess Lavinia, daughter of the native king, Latinus, so that from his line will come the proper rulers of the earth, the Romans. But Juno, Jove's implacable sister and wife ("Can such fury live in heavenly breasts?"), hates Trojans and opposes the divine idea of an empire in Italy. She causes a storm (natural disorder) by bribing the king of the winds, Aeolus, with the marital favors of a desirable nymph (disordering passion), and thereby drives Aeneas' fleet into the North African harbor of Carthage, where her ardent female adherent, Queen Dido, rules. The imagery of this harbor's description in the *Aeneid* is female, with twin peaks above a forested grove, dark with gloomy shade (Vergil was Freud long before Freud was Freud, and Aeneas was his discontented "ego"), and it is here that raging Juno attempts to deflect the fated empire from its proper *telos*.

Dido's passion for demigod Aeneas is soon engaged by his mother, Venus, erotic desire, who fears the machinations of Juno, and together (though at cross-purposes) the two female deities contrive an illicit tryst for the two mortals in a cave (in the womb of mortality) in the wood during a violent storm. Anything passionate, stormy, natural, chaotic, woodsy, or evil is associated in the *Aeneid* with feminine typology and source. For example, Ascanius' mortal wounding of a pet stag belonging to Silvia (*silva*: woodsy forest) brings her Italian folk into the war against the Trojans. And, of course, the reason the world needs the divinely ordained empire is to impose order on the chaos inherent in the tragic union of matter with spirit, which is the basis of the cosmos itself. Vergil's apologia for the empire is founded on an essentially tragic view of life, and his most endearing quality is his implied empathy for his fated characters.

Aeneas is trapped in the throes of a low passion; the fated empire in Italy seems in danger of subsumption into Dido's realm in Africa. Aeneas is going native (or at least Phoenician), and so Jove sends his messenger, Mercury (later Marlow), to command Aeneas to leave impassioned Dido's imprisoning arms and to seek the dream of *imperium*. Sexually conquered Dido, however, suffers her passion like a mortally wounded doe in Vergil's metaphorical imagery; then she literally curses her fleeing lover, kisses the bed they made love on, and commits suicide with his phallic sword in the midst of the smoke of the burning pyre of all her fiery desire.

It is commonly recognized that her curse connects the *Aeneid*'s poetic import with two elements of our particular theme, for its content is both mythopoeic and historical, and both aspects involve potent opposition to the *imperium*. Within the structure of the poem's action, her curse presages the war in Italy and the native warrior Turnus, who, by the way, is possessed by a female fury named Allecto summoned from the netherworld by Juno; and it is Turnus (made furious through being horrifically possessed by the female fury) whom Aeneas must conquer to gain Lavinia and rule of the new Western world of Hesperia (Italia). Within the frame of literal Roman history, her curse also prophesies (*ex eventu*) Hannibal, the great Carthaginian general who cost the Romans so dearly (thousands of dead Roman soldiers in one particular day) and very nearly stopped the historical process of Rome's rise to dominance in the Mediterranean, and Rome's imperial domination of the ancient realms occurred only after the elimination of the rival power of Carthage. Thus, her two-fold summons implies both the major mythopoeic and historical forces which were subjugated by Rome in order for the Roman Empire to find its imperial place in Western civilization. Vergil's metaphorical interpretation of historical conflict comprehends the bases of empire in this vituperative, accursed characterization rendered in Aeneas' dangerous lover, Dido, a "native" sexual conquest whose passion is associated with natural disorder and with the feminine principle of Juno, both the natural and the supernatural, and it is permeated with an underlying fear of the body's natural womb-source, because the womb which is a life-source, in this tragic interpretation of life, is the source of death as well (the horror, the horror).

The formal metaphysical key to this syndrome of thought is Platonic, spirit versus matter, but the response of conquest is Vergil's prescription and what makes the dynamic so very destructive. Vergil's middle Platonism, influenced by both stoicism (itself a subsequent corollary to Platonism) and imperial historical directives, draws from Plato's

idea of being and becoming in the creation of the *Timaeus*, and especially direct from the heart of Socrates' thoughts about the body and soul expressed in the *Phaedo* (81C85B). But using this Platonic metaphysical synthesis as the basis for imperial conquest is most clearly spelled out in the philosophic discourse of Anchises, the spirit of Aeneas's old father in the underworld of Book VI of the *Aeneid*, after Anchises had died during the long journey to Italy. A significant passage which I have translated from the Latin text follows:

In the beginning, the spirit nourishes from within the heaven and the earth and swampy plains, the lucent lunar globe and the titan sun star; and mind poured throughout the embers puts in constant motion the whole mass and mixes with the great body. From there comes the genus of man and beast, and the life of flying creatures and the wonders which the sea bears under a white, foamy surface of water. Fiery is the force and divine the origin in those seeds, insofar as the noxious bodies do not hinder them, and earthly limbs, mortal members do not deaden them. Hence they fear and desire, suffer grief and experience joy. Enclosed in darkness, in a blind prison cell, they do not see clearly the airy light. But even at the end of life when life has fled from the light, even then not all the evil or infections of the body go completely out of these miserable ones... (*Aeneid* VI: 724-737).

The patriarch's ghost explains to his son who visits him in the underworld that the cosmos is formed by the enlivening and paradigmatic infusion of spirit into matter. This mix makes the life we know, but in the process imprisons and corrupts spirit or mind in the throes of an eternal, unstable matter of irrational sensationalism. In this view of the nature of things, all burning passion and furor arise from this distorting entrapment of the life-giving airy fire. All evil comes from the infective bodied elements of embodied spirit. Matter is the dark and blinding prison of spirit (as many centuries later Shakespeare's Sycorax will imprison Ariel in a tree), and Anchises, in conjunction and as a corollary to this view of the nature of things, presents to his son a pageant of Roman history leading toward the establishment of the *imperium* (empire) in the first *imperator* (commander as emperor) Augustus Caesar (Vergil's imperial patron); and then he explains to Aeneas the Roman empire's mission to beat down (*debellare*) the proud (*superbos*) and the furious, that is, of course, to subdue the opponents of the Roman command and the iron-fisted rule of peace: "tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento" (VI: 851). Sadly, the only part of the prescription that was often neglected in the last five centuries of imperial conquest was the part about sparing the humbled (*parcere subiectis*), i.e., sparing the conquered. (See Kurtz's postscript.)

We can see a tapestry of imaginative discourse in the *Aeneid*, which portrays the rule of the empire versus native peoples who are the objects of Roman conquest as an expression of spirit versus matter, divinely instituted order versus furor, reason versus passion, and we note the fear of the feminine womb-source of the material body in a syndrome founded on the belief that matter is the source of evil and the body the origin of disorder and destructive passion, passions which are symptoms of our mortality. (From the raging tragic perspective of life and death, to reproduce is an implicit sign of your mortality.) We must then conquer (not shape) nature and the body so that we will not die.

The Homeric wisdom expressed in the living art of the marriage bed of Penelopeia and Odysseus is lacking. Here there is no balance of what is shaped and what is shaping, no earth and sky coming together, no integration of life and death into the larger mythos of life, death, and rebirth, no shaping of nature and desire—here the only form of transcendence is suppression and conquest; nature must be conquered; Dido/desire is death. Jove is reason, and Juno the opposition of furious emotion in the divine realm, which is concomitantly played out in the mortal realm (tragic because mortals, unlike the gods, die of the angry cosmic dualism). Hence, Turnus, the native prince, is portrayed as a fearsome savage due to his possession by a female fury under Juno's command, and he is the native rival for Lavinia's hand. Dido, the image of passionate woman, of woman as the unshackled wilderness, of Carthage and Hannibal, must be sexually conquered; and the Latin princess Lavinia, the image of passive woman, the vitiated garden, must be possessed, though her passionate mother, Amata, resists in madness; these conquests made, the empire results. The opposition of male and female principles (as Vergil conceives them) and the dual images of woman subdued and unsubdued express the metaphysical warring dualism of spirit and matter and provides the underlying rationale and characteristic imagery of Western conquest of native peoples, that is, of people native to the lands which are the object of Western conquest. The popular image of Pocahontas (which is after all only a pale ideological image developed dramatically from the original historical person) embodies both signs in her fascination for the American psyche. She is Dido/Lavinia in the American mythos, Dido as the savage princess, and Lavinia as the imperially subsumed native mother of the Roman (and American) *imperium*. She is Kurtz's betrothed and Kurtz's African inamorata, phantom images of Kurtz's horror projected in the mind of Western man.

Two qualifications of Vergil's celebration of the Augustan age deserve our attention, however, for they indicate that the poet had his doubts about this scheme he so powerfully propagated in poetry. First, and most obvious, when Anchises sends his son up from the underworld armed with a vision of the empire to generate the roots of the Roman rule, he does not send him up through the proper Homeric gate of dreams. It is problematic that Anchises does not send Aeneas armed with the divine idea of empire up from the underworld through the horn gate of true dreams, but up through the ivory gate of false dreams. (Pointing out this textual fact to an imperial apologist will invariably result in odd rationalizations.) Second, Aeneas himself subsequently cannot fulfill the role of a Platonic-stoic soldier king. He vacillates in battle between a civilized man with a dispassionate mind (*mens immota manet*) fighting chastely for just principles, and a maddened killer whose savagery rivals the iron-hearted frenzy of Homer's precedent Achilles at his worst. Aeneas becomes a sort of Dr. Jove and Mrs. Hyde of epic proportions. Aeneas fails to harmonize transcendence and immanence within this antagonistic perspective of spirit and matter, civilization and its wilderness of discontents, reason and emotion, man and woman, conqueror and object of conquest. No Homeric restoration of this humanity, torn by an active warring dualism of spirit and body, ensues for Aeneas; tragically, for Aeneas, it is not that the spirit is willing but the body is weak; it is that the spirit is superego and the body is essentially evil; so in the last moment of the *Aeneid*, as Aeneas is angered by the thought of the death of his native ally Pallas—Pallas/Uncas, the original noble savage, that is, the native collaborator with empire who is therefore a noble savage—Aeneas is pictured in the final scene

slaughtering a disabled, conquered Turnus in an eye-rolling frenzy. Indeed, the poet uses the same phrasing to describe Dido in her suicidal fury and Aeneas in his homicidal furor: wildly rolling eyes. This epic ending does not bode well for the imperial dreams of Western man, dreams which will subsequently become the nightmares of many native peoples, bad dreams haunted by images of drunken Caliban seeking to overthrow Prospero, and evil Magua mad after raven-haired, full-blooded Cora, of pasteboard versions of Geronimo and Pocohantas, of Miranda and all the brave, new worlds to be conquered and exploited by those so hungry for the fat (*wasicu*) of the land.

Publius Vergilius Maro had his doubts, but his magnificently written poem embodies and promulgates a destructive and tragic view of life and desire, of human nature and politics, of an incessant need for conquest which has desacramentalized the world, which has which has been the bane of many native peoples, of nature's inherent animism, of woman, of Western man himself; for in our epic drama we have mistaken the *imperium* for the kingdom of heaven, and then, disillusioned, summoned rabid furies up through the ivory gate from the underworld of our own deconstructed dreams ... and internalized our own oppression.