Aeneid Book II

Book Two of the Aeneid, one of the epic's most powerful episodes, deals with Troy's downfall, with the Greeks' strategy of the wooden horse that towers over their deserted camp, with the suspicion and seeming impiety of the Trojan priest, Laocoon, who distracts Greeks on every count and who dies agonizingly with his two sons by the attack of twin sea serpents, and with the devious rhetoric of Simon, a Greek captive, allegedly a deserter, who persuades the credulous Trojans to accept the "gift"—a fatales machina fera arma—that will presently release its deadly brood of Greek warriors and so bring down the city. The Trojans are taken by surprise during the night, and the city succumbs to murderous onslaught. King Priam is butchered and decapitated in his palace compound. Aeneas witnesses the slaughter and joins a counter-offensive where Trojans are disguised as Greeks, but to no avail. Venus counsels her son against killing Helen, instigator of the war. Aeneas withdraws from the action to return home, where he tries, vainly at first, to persuade his crippled father Anchises to join in the family's departure. Omens involving Ascanius-Iulus and celestial signals finally induce Anchises to join the refugees. During the evacuation, Creusa, Aeneas' royal wife, mother of Ascanius-Iulus, becomes separated from the group and, her fate unclear, has to be left behind as votary of the goddess Cybele, one of Troy's protective deities.

Vergil's Book Two is often called "The Tragedy of Troy." How "tragic" is Aeneas' (and Vergil's) account of the fall of Troy? Should we regard Greek tragedy as a primary model for the account, or assume that Vergil's own experience of war was a primary ingredient? R.G. Austin in his commentary (Oxford, 1964, p. ix)" was convinced that Vergil's personal experience was indeed central to the issue:

Vergil has lived through the last hours of Troy, knowing how the minds of men (civilians and military alike) work in war-time, familiar with the personal tragedies that war brings, sharing in the destruction of a city whose stones he has known and loved; he has seen men shot down in ignorance by their own side, old men murdered in their homes, women and children lined up for prison camps; he has endured the incomprehensible injustice of what must be interpreted as the will of heaven.

Vergil's personal involvement in a world turned upside down in the civil wars that bloodied Rome throughout his lifetime, must have left indelible memories of oppression and killing, of eviction and humiliation; his response was an epic with a grippingly tragic universality.

Greek tragedy, nevertheless, did exert a profound influence on his work. The triadic structure of Book Two is transparent: Part I, Simon, Laocoon, and the Wooden Horse (1-249); Part II, The Fall of Troy (250-358); and Part III, The Departure of Aeneas (359-804). The entire narrative is an eyewitness report to Dido by Aeneas and is comparable, though on a larger scale, to messengers' accounts of disasters in Greek tragedy.

Because Aeneas offers a narrative of personal involvement, he expresses some reluctance to recount the painful memories of Troy's final hours. He begins by telling how happy the Trojans were to emerge from their 10-year siege and to visit the deserted Greek quarters. But the wooden horse on the shore is a source of controversy; some favor hauling it into the city, while others call for its destruction. Laocoon, priest of Neptune, shows his contempt for its alleged sanctity by hurling a spear into the horse's side. A Greek captive, Simon, whose name suggestively connotes a serpent's sinuosity, is dragged before Priam and, by his skillful, devious rhetoric, is able to excite the pity and win the confidence of his captors. The horse, according to Simon, is meant to compensate for the protective wooden image of Pallas (Athena) which had been stolen by the Greeks to damage the Trojan fortunes; its size will prevent its entry into the city and so prevent its becoming a protector of the city. Suddenly two large serpents emerge from the sea to attack and kill Laocoon and his innocent sons. The Trojans interpret the priest's death as retaliation for his sacrilege against the Horse, and the creature with its deadly cargo of warriors is dragged into the city through a breach in the walls.

The episode is a masterpiece of Vergilian creativity, cinematic art and ingenuity, and rhetorical display. Simon is Vergil's creation, although the character mirrors Odysseus in several respects. Generally speaking, he behaves like a Greek tragic messenger, except that tragic messengers generally tell the truth; Simon's revelations, well articulated and convincingly circumstantial, are mostly lies. Ironically, the Greek whom Simon claims to detest, Odysseus, is in reality a model for the deceitful, insinuating Simon. Why are the Trojans deceived? After all, Simon is far from being a patriot and, by his own admission, he was meant to be sacrificed for alleged treasonable behavior after the death of his protector, Palamedes. If the Trojans had followed suit and regarded him as an appropriate sacrificial victim, as a scapegoat for Greek barbarities, and if they had taken advantage of this being prepared earlier for sacrifice, Troy might have been saved. But Trojan humanity and credulity rejected murder, and the sequel was disaster. Simon also portrays himself as endowed with virtues that would appeal to the Trojans (and later to Romans): steadfast in misfortune, a man of invariable truth, loyal to a friend (Palamedes), with none of the pretense of Odysseus, and pious towards his homeland, children, and gods (87-195). Simon's characterization is a tour de force. And Laocoon's story accents both Trojan piety and tragic necessity: engaged in sacrificing a bull on the shore, he and his sons unable to save their father, die terribly, visually and aural
features of the simile comparing Laocon's cries of anguish to the bellowing of a sacrificial bull parallel and extend the action.

Virgil's account of Troy's final night is intensely dramatic, and rich in cinematographic effects. Aeneas' dream vision of the mutilated Hector is another masterpiece, as unforgettable as Hamlet's scene and dialogue with the ghost of his murdered father at Elsinore. Aeneas' dream address to the apparition is a valid intrusion; it heightens the effect of the ghastly warning to leave. The episode of Panthus, priest of Apollo, with his son is a preview of Aeneas' own departure with Ascanius, but carries the tragic suggestion that Panthus and his son will both be lost in the battle. The Coroebus episode is remarkable, since it involves Trojan (rather than Greek) duplicity. Coroebus came to Troy to marry Cassandra, prophetess daughter of Priam, but was intercepted. When the Trojans, with Aeneas, follow his advice to make themselves indistinguishable from Greeks by impersonation—by putting on Greek armor—and the strategy is questioned, Coroebus responds: "trickery or courage? When it is a question of an enemy, who will ask?" (380).
That deliberate erasure of differences is a reflection of civil war, which permeates so much of the epic's military action. The Helen episode (567-88) remains problematic. Is it truly Vergilian, awaiting completion and proper insertion into the holocaust narrative, or is it a later interpolation? It seems genuinely Vergilian to most critics, who assume that it was removed for some compelling reason from the posthumously edited copy. Can you find a reason?

The assault on Priam's palace is filled with sound and fury, with desperate measures of defense, sacrificial engagements, and Greek barbarity. The scene of the royal couple Priam and Hecuba, huddled with their children at the palace altar, normally a place of sanctuary, the death of Polites ("Citizen") before his parents' eyes, the murderous onslaught of Achilles' son Pyrrhus (Neoptolemus), and the brutal sacrifice of Priam's faithful resisting are heartwrenching. Although Priam apparently dies at the palace altar, Vergil redirects his camera to show us the aged king's beheaded corpse exposed on the shore, sine nomine corpus.

The final act, Aeneas' departure, features another Venus Aeneas episode, the second in Book Two, a deus ex machina scene that might derive from a Euripidean tragedy, with pertinent dialogue, sound, and light. A reading of Euripides' The Trojan Women will enrich your appreciation of the second and third "acts" of this dramatic book. The detailed account of Anchises' refusal to leave the city, the pitiful appeals of family and household, and Aeneas' decision to face death at Troy, must have caused Dido considerable anguish as she listened to the tale. Heavenly intervention, in the diadem of fire on Anchises' head, and the fall of the star (or comet) to mark their departure route towards Mount Ida, persuade Anchises to agree to retreat. The family set off together, with the familiar icon of Aeneas carrying on his shoulder crippled Anchises with the Vestal fire and Penates, Ascanius Fulus trying to match his father's stride, and Creusa following. Because Creusa is missing at the reunion point, Aeneas feels compelled to return to the burning city, like Orpheus in search of his lost Eurydice.

Virgil's portrait of Creusa is a marvel of characterization—a remarkable vignette of maritam love, devotion to family, and reverence for the divine will (virtus that serve in part, as we shall see, to intensify our perception of Dido's faults in Book Four). Creusa's a personal testimony to pius and to love, to the wisdom born of suffering, and to the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.
Dido and her court listen in rapt attention as Aeneas reluctantly agrees to relate to them the horrific tale of Troy's final day.

1 Contiqueceo, conticisci, conticui, to cease to talk, become silent, to be silent
   about (the prefix here has intensive force; for the form, see note on tenare 1,12).
2 intendis the adj. here, as often, has adv. force.
3 óra trechant: i.e., they held their gaze; the line's heavily enjambic rhythms suit
   the rapt attention Vergil describes, and the tense shift from perf. to impt.
   suggests how the banqueters immediately fell silent and then remained so.
4 toró ... altó: the phrase suggests Aeneas' position as guest of honor.
5 órurus sc. est: cf. 1.325 above.
6 iubémus sc. ném.
7 ut ... ederent (5); ut here is how, ind. quest. dependent on renovare (3), to
   renew (by telling).
8 lamentávelis, -e, -e, pitiável, deplorable, lamentable.
9 Tróia tróia ... lamentável: the repeated long i's (assonance), three of them
   under the ietis add a plaintive sound.
10 érō, éruere, éruit, éruitus, to dig up, uproot; to lay low, destroy.
11 que ... et (6): an epic archaisms for et ... et, both ... and.
12 miserrima: sc. ea, in appos. with the ut cl. and anteced. of qua and quorum (6).
13 pars magna: Aeneas is not boasting here but suggesting how deeply involved
   he was in the catastrophe.
14 Quis: used as a pron. here and as an adj. with miles in 7 (see note on 1.439)
15 fando: ground of far, m tellings speaking, by contrast with infantum (3).
16 Myrmidonones (-en), Myrmidonum, m. pl., Myrmidons (a tribe in Thessaly, led by
   Achilles in the Trojan War).
17 Dolopes (-en), Dolopum, m. pl., Dólpòs (another Thessalian tribe, connected
   with Achilles' son Pyrrhus).
18 Myrmidonum Dolopum; gen. of the whole with quis (6). -e is used here,
   vs. aut, to juxtapose the two closely related words, whose assonance is
   accentuated by the ets in the -en syllables.
19 Ulisse, -i, m. Ulysses (Roman name for the Greek hero Odysseus, who was
   noted as much for his guile as for his valor).
20 temperet: potential subjunct., would (be able) to ... .
21 túmerus, -a, -um, nei, multit. damp.
22 præcessit ... somnōs: a marvelously symphonic line, with the dactylic and
   harsh-cut alliteration sounding out the downward crash of night and
   the falling stars; the internal rhyme underscored by the ets in -entsque
   cadentia, and the sibilants (s hiss) suggesting the breath of sleep; even Vergil
   delighted in the sound effects, which he repeated in 4.81 below.
23 amor: sc. tibi est; with cognoscere, a use of the inf. common in verse.
24 suprēmus, -a, -um, highest; farthest last, final.
25 suprēnum ... laborem: i.e., death.

Questiōnēs
1. Comment on the word order in line 1.
2. In what respects is Aeneas aptly called pater in line 2?
3. What device of word order does Vergil employ in line 3 and how is it effective?
12 lúctú, abl. of cause.
13 incipiam: enjambment and the abrupt caesura in the second foot effectively punctuate Aeneas’ opening remarks and prepare us for the story to come.
14 Danaum: for this very common gen. pl. form, see note on supernum (1.4).
15 . . . annis: the war was now in its 10th year.
16 *instar, in acc. and nom. only, n., often + gen., the equal, equivalent (off, too, in size, effect, moral worth—here in appos. to equum).
Palladis are: the role of the virgin goddess Athena/Minerva in Troy’s destruction figures prominently in this book; see line 21 and passim. Homer tells us in Odysseus 8.493 that the Greeks erected the horse (see 264 below) with the guidance of Minerva, who was goddess of crafts.
17 intextó, intexere, intexuit, intexus, to weave (into), make by weaving.
abex, abeten, f., silver fir, fir-wood.
abex: regularly stressed in verse, with the i consonantal.
18 volvente: equam esse.
restitui: i.e., their safe passage back to Greece.
*vagor, -āri, -āsum: to wonder, rumm to spread freely unheeded.
19 *dēlectus, -āri, -āsum: chosen for excellence, hand-picked, select.
virum: for the form cf. 1.119.
20 *sortes, sortīri, sortitum sum, to draw lots; to choose by lot, select.
21 includit, includere, includi, includere, to insert, enclose.
22 includent . . . complerent (20): the two vbs. aptly enclose the highly alliterative couplet in a chiasmic arrangement.
23 *caverna, -ae, f., hollow cavity in the earth, cave, cavern, cavernous space.
24 *externus, -a, -um, abdant, belly, womb (often with its contents, an unborn child).
uterum: Vergil consistently uses this term for the horse’s belly (at verses 38, 51, 243, and 258), and it becomes increasingly clear as the narrative progresses that he intends us to imagine the beast’s womb as, metaphorically, pregnant with violence and war.
25 *arma (1), to fit with weaponry, arm, equip.
milites: here collective sg., band of soldiers, soldiers.
26 in conspectu: i.e., of Troy.
*Tenedos, -e, f., Tenedos, (modern Tenedos, an island a few miles off the coast of Troy, associated in Homer’s Iliad, 1.38 and 452, with Apollo).
27 dives opum: Vergil applies the same description, in the same metrical position, to Carthage at 1.14; though perhaps coincidental, it may have been his intent to link the two locations, as both represent threats to the future of Troy and Rome.
28 Priamī: with régna root opum, another example of the sort of anaphorism common in Vergil and in Lat. verse generally.
*i. . . . carina, -ae, f., keel, hull (of a ship); poetic (by metonymy of synonymeche), boat, ship.
29 quamquam animus meminisset horret lúctūque refugit,
30 incliam.

Frustrated by their failure to sack Troy after 10 years of war, the Greeks build a colossal wooden horse, fill it with troops, and, leaving it outside Troy’s gates, sail off to a nearby island.

"Frácī bellī ëtisque repulsī, ductorēs Danaum, tot iam labentibus annis, instar montis equam divinā Palladis arte aedificānt sectāque intexūt obiecte costās; vōtum pró rediti simulāt; ea fāme vagātur. Hūc, dēlectā virum sortīri corpora, fūrītā
inclāvit cacō laterī petitusque cavernās ingentēs uerumque armātō milīte compōnt. Est in conspectu Tenedos, nóssima fāmā insula, dives opum Priamī dūm régna manēbant, nunc tantum sinus et statīo male fīda carīnās:

Questions
1. What reasons does Aeneas give in 3–12 for his reluctance to tell his Carthaginian hosts of Troy’s destruction? List the several words he uses that suggest his grief over his country’s loss. Cf. Odysseus’ speech to Alcinous in Odyssey 9.12ff.
2. What correspondences do you find, in form, function, and content, between 21–13 and 1.1–11? Comment on the word order in verse 13 (frācī . . . repulsī).
3. What is the effect of enjambing ingentēs in 20?

There is an isle in sight of Troy and Tenedos it high,
A welthly land while Priamus state and kingdoms stood aghast,
But now a bay, and harbor bud for ships to lie a roade,
To that they went, and hid them close that none was scene abroad.
Wee thought thymen gom, and with the winde to Greece to have beene fled.

From the translation of Thomas North and Thomas Tusser, 1573