

VERGILIAN “WORKS-RIGHTEOUSNESS”: SALVATION THROUGH WORK IN THE *AENEID*

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“Indeed it is in the contemplation of a life of toil that he finds his honest philosophy of life: the gospel of salvation through work. Hardships whet the ingenuity of man.” Although Tenney Frank wrote this in his biography of Vergil with regard to the *Georgics* (161), his statement can be seen as describing a central theme of the *Aeneid*, one that is set out in the proem and summarized in its last line, *Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem* (I.33). In fact, it is precisely in the context of founding a city that we see this concept of salvation through work most evident, and nowhere is it clearer than the description in Book IV of the time Aeneas spends at Carthage.

For the Roman, at least through the late Republic, work was good and leisure, if not bad, was nevertheless suspect. In one of the earliest statements about work, we find Cato laying out two core understandings of it. Gellius tells us that in a speech to the Numantians, Cato said,

Cogitate cum animis vestris: si quid vos per laborem recte feceritis, labor ille a vobis cito recedet, bene factum a vobis, dum vivitis, non abscedet; sed si qua per voluptatem nequiter feceritis, voluptas cito abibit, nequiter factum illud apud vos semper manebit. (Noctes Atticae, XVI.1.4)

First, we see *labor* as a means to an end. In this the Romans were not ancestors of the modern workaholic who views work as an end in itself. Roman *labor* served an identifiable and achievable purpose, one that would remain even after the work itself had passed from memory. The second characteristic of work is that it is the preferred means of achieving a goal. Something may be achieved *per laborem* or *per voluptatem*, but only the former, at least according to Cato, is *bene factum*.

The opposite of *labor* is *otium*, although W. A. Laidlaw discusses a number of senses of *otium*, not all of which were negative in the Roman mind. For example, he refers to Cicero’s citation of Cato’s claim about Scipio Africanus, *Numquam se minus otiosum esse, quam cum otiosus (De Officiis, III.1)*.² Cicero goes on to proclaim this a wise statement, and Laidlaw discusses Cicero’s need to make his own *otium* productive (Laidlaw, 44). Yet such discussions of a productive *otium* are only necessary to establish the contrast of this rarer sense of the word to the more common understanding of it as a period of leisure most likely used for sensual or even immoral behavior.

Perhaps the most famous passage on *otium* is the final stanza of Catullus 51.

*Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:
Otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:
Otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.*

(51.13–16)

Laidlaw notes that “Catullus has slid over from the personal to the national relevance of the word” (47), i.e. that which destroys cities and kingdoms. While *otium* may be pleasurable *per se* or at least provide the opportunity for pleasure to the person who experiences it, it is deadly to a nation. For the character of Aeneas, however, there can be no distinction between a personal and a national sense, since for him the personal has been completely subordinated to the national, a fact most vividly expressed in the feasting scene just outside Carthage, *curisque ingentibus aeger spem voltu simulat, premit altum corde dolorem* (I.208–09), and again when he says to Dido that, with regard to his departure from Carthage, *Italiam non sponte sequor* (IV.361). Thus, *otium* for Aeneas must be taken in this national, and therefore negative, sense.

If *otium*, then, should be understood for Aeneas in its national sense, we must construe its opposite, *labor*, in a similar way, and there can be no national sense of work for Aeneas apart from establishing a new and permanent home for the Trojans. The entire poem is, in fact, a testament to this understanding of *labor*. In the *Aeneid*’s realistic portrayal of human life that is so characteristic of the Roman arts, there is a veritable catalogue of the different types of work. There is, of course, the physical, manifested in Aeneas’ slaying of deer to feed his men in Book I, the preparation of ships for departure from Carthage in Book IV, and the pursuit of Turnus around the walls of Laurentum in Book XII, to name but three of countless examples. Vergil does not limit himself to depictions of physical work, however, but completes the portrait with explorations of emotional *labor* and work that involves various sorts of conflict. Vergil portrays emotional work in Aeneas’ vain attempts to embrace loved ones (Creusa in Book II and Anchises in Book VI), in his struggle to suppress emotion (see citations from Books I and IV above), and in his difficult interactions with Dido at the end of Book IV and again in the underworld in Book VI. As for the *labor* of conflict, this comprises the majority of the second half of the epic. In all instances, however, Vergil never allows the reader to forget the purpose of the work, which is ultimately to establish a new home for the Trojans.

To elaborate briefly with one example, when Aeneas tries to rescue Creusa and encounters her shade, the emotional *labor* he must perform is to surrender his beloved wife to fate. Vergil does not let his audience forget the ultimate purpose of this work as he causes Creusa to remind Aeneas of the long path ahead to the land of the Tiber River where his kingdom awaits (II.780–84).

Yet there are three specific instances of the salvific nature of work and one in which this nature is made conspicuous by the absence of *labor*. Prior to his arrival in Italy, Aeneas makes two attempts to build a second Troy, first in Thrace and then again shortly afterward on Crete. Upon the Trojans’ landing in Italy in Book VII, Aeneas begins to establish a settlement on the banks of the Tiber as soon as Ascanius has made his comment about the eating of the plates, thus indicating the fulfillment of Celaeno’s prophecy (III.255–57). As will be shown, in all three of these instances, the salvific character of the work is evidenced by the immediacy with which it is undertaken.

The work of building a settlement for a band of refugees is salvific in a way that the work of an athlete training for a competition is not. The Trojan exiles had lost not only their homes, and therefore the physical supports of life, but they had lost their homeland as well, thus losing the source of life itself. When Aeneas exclaims in Book I his wish to have died with other heroes, *ante ora patrum Troiae sub moenibus altis* (I.95), he is acknowledging the vital nature of Troy for all Trojans. His soul, the seat of his existence, has perished with the fall of Troy. He merely wishes that his physical form would reflect this fact. Thus, the Trojans must be saved by the *labor* of building a city, for such work will not just provide them anew with the resources to live, but in its reestablishment of the Trojan line, will restore to them their identity and their true reason to live.

Such work is also salvific specifically for Aeneas, for the founding of a new home for his people has become his own *raison d'être*. It is why he suppresses his own feelings and is the reason used by Jupiter via Mercury to prompt him to leave Carthage. This work produces in him not only the same kinds of salvation that it brings about for the other Trojans, but is *per se* a salvation just for Aeneas. As he recounts in Book II his actions on the night of Troy's fall, he reveals that his very reason for being is to serve his people, in other words, the *pietas* for which he is famous. He risks everything to enter the fray in a last ditch effort to save the city, then does the same to rescue his family. Whether it is responding to the vision of Hector or returning when he realizes Creusa is lost, Aeneas is always quick to serve. It is his instinct, his essence as a hero.

When the purpose of his life becomes establishing a new Troy, he pursues this work with the same zeal. He builds his settlements in Thrace, on Crete, and by the Tiber the very moment he thinks he has found the destined location. Here is no Cicero, shoring up senatorial support to do what he knows he needs to do. While Aeneas may have wished to die before the faces of his fathers, he would never have said, *Nos, nos, dico aperte, consules desumus* (*In Catilinam* I).

Yet for all the evidence that the specialized form of *labor* that characterizes all of Aeneas' work brings salvation, it is a scene in which work and its consequent salvation are absent that best makes the point. When Dido falls in love with Aeneas, all work on Carthage ceases. In Book IV, we read,

*Non coeptae adsurgunt turrets, non arma iuventus
exercet portusve aut propugnacula bello
tuta parant: pendent opera interrupta minaeque
murorum ingentes aequataque machina caelo.*

(IV.86–89)

Towers stand partially completed. All preparations for war are at a standstill. Construction equipment sits unused.

Like the Trojans, the Carthaginians are exiles in need of the same kind of salvation wrought by the work of establishing not just a place to live, but a new homeland. They face the additional challenges of harsh geography, hostile neighbors, and threats from Dido's brother, as Anna is quick to point out (IV.39–44). For them, the salvation of work is particularly urgent.

The *otium* that has produced the stalled efforts to build Carthage is thus clearly destructive for the Carthaginians, but it is destructive for the Trojans as well. While Aeneas and Dido may be blinded to their duties by love, those around them are quite aware

of the problem, that they are both *regnorum immemores* (*Aeneid* IV.194). Catullus puts it a bit more pointedly.

*Otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.*

(51.15–16)

In and of itself, *otium* is not destructive and, in some of the senses discussed by Laidlaw, can provide the space for meaningful accomplishment, or at least pleasure. Only when it stands in opposition to a salvific form of *labor* can it be deleterious, for then it has prevented salvation. The leisure of Aeneas and Dido is clearly of the destructive variety observed by Catullus, and this reinforces Vergil's "gospel of salvation" *per laborem*, which forms the warp and weave of the entire epic. Since all forms of work for Aeneas have the ultimate purpose of establishing a new Troy, and that act alone brings about salvation for him and the Trojans, it becomes clear that *labor* carries over into the *Aeneid* the salvific character that Frank observed in the *Georgics*.

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