

Cosmic Visions

Arts Reading due for Week 3

Virgil, *Aeneid* 2, 680-961, tr. Allen Mendelbaum. Bantam Classics, 2003.

In this passage, the book's titular hero Aeneas describes the horror and despair he experienced at the fall of Troy and explains how he and his family managed to recover themselves thanks to reassurances from his mother, the goddess Venus, and signs of future glories engraved in the sky.

Key characters:

Aeneas (hero), Anchises (his father), Ascanius/Iulus (his son), Creusa (his wife)
Priam (king of Troy), Hecuba (his wife), Polites (his son), Hector (another son, killed years earlier by Achilles), Paris (yet another son, who started the war by abducting Helen)
Pyrrhus/Neoptolemus (Greek hero), Achilles (his father, killed years earlier by a lucky arrow)

The whole passage is recounted by Aeneas. To emphasize words spoken within his narrative, I've placed them in italics.

“Perhaps you now will ask the end of Priam. 680
When he has seen his beaten city ruined—
the wrenching of the gates, the enemy
among his sanctuaries—then in vain
the old man throws his armor, long unused,
across his shoulders, tottering with age; 685
and he girds on his useless sword; about
to die, he hurries toward the crowd of Greeks.

“Beneath the naked round of heaven, at
the center of the palace, stood a giant
shrine; at its side an ancient laurel leaned 690
across the altar stone, and it embraced
the household gods within its shadow. Here,
around that useless altar, Hecuba
together with her daughters—just like doves
when driven headlong by a dark storm—huddled; 695
and they held fast the statues of the gods.
But when she saw her Priam putting on
the armor he had worn when he was young,
she cried: *‘Poor husband, what wild thought drives you
to wear these weapons now? Where would you rush?’* 700
This is no time for such defense and help,

*not even were my Hector here himself.
 Come near and pray: this altar shall yet save
 us all, or you shall die together with us.'*

When this was said she took the old man to her 705
 and drew him down upon the sacred seat.

"But then Polites, one of Priam's sons
 who had escaped from Pyrrhus' slaughter, down
 long porticoes, past enemies and arrows,
 races, wounded, across the empty courts. 710
 But after him, and hot to thrust, is Pyrrhus;
 now, even now he clutches, closing in;
 he presses with his shaft until at last
 Polites falls before his parents' eyes,
 within their presence; he pours out his life 715
 in streams of blood. Though in the fist of death,
 at this, Priam does not spare voice or wrath:
*'If there is any goodness in the heavens
 to oversee such acts, for this offense
 and outrage may you find your fitting thanks
 and proper payment from the gods, for you
 have made me see the murder of my son,
 defiled a father's face with death. Achilles—
 you lie to call him father—never dealt
 with Priam so—and I, his enemy; 725
 for he had shame before the claims and trust
 that are a suppliant's. He handed back
 for burial the bloodless corpse of Hector
 and sent me off in safety to my kingdom.'*

The old man spoke; his feeble spear flew off— 730
 harmless; the hoarse bronze beat it back at once;
 it dangled, useless now, from the shield's boss.
 And Pyrrhus: *'Carry off these tidings; go
 and bring this message to my father, son
 of Peleus; and remember, let him know 735
 my sorry doings, how degenerate
 is Neoptolemus. Now die.'* This said,
 he dragged him to the very altar stone,
 with Priam shuddering and slipping in
 the blood that streamed from his own son. And Pyrrhus 740
 with his left hand clutched tight the hair of Priam;
 his right hand drew his glistening blade, and then
 he buried it hilt-high in the king's side.

This was the end of Priam's destinies,
the close that fell to him by fate: to see
his Troy in flames and Pergamus laid low—
who once was proud king over many nations
and lands of Asia. Now he lies along
the shore, a giant trunk, his head torn from
his shoulders, as a corpse without a name.

745

"Pergamus" = the citadel at Troy's center

"This was the first time savage horror
took me. I was astounded; as I saw the king
gasping his life away beneath a ruthless
wound, there before me rose the effigy
of my dear father, just as old as Priam;
before me rose Creüsa, left alone,
my plundered home, the fate of small Iulus.
I look behind and scan the troops around me;
all of my men, worn out, have quit the battle,
have cast their bodies down along the ground
or fallen helplessly into the flames.

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"And now that I am left alone, I see
the daughter of Tyndareos clinging
to Vesta's thresholds, crouching silently
within a secret corner of the shrine;
bright conflagrations give me light as I
wander and let my eyes read everything.
For she, in terror of the Trojans—set
against her for the fall of Pergamus—
and of the Danaans' vengeance and the anger
of her abandoned husband; she, the common
Fury of Troy and of her homeland, she
had hid herself; she crouched, a hated thing,
beside the altars. In my mind a fire
is burning; anger spurs me to avenge
my falling land, to exact the debt of crime.

"daughter of Tyndareos" = Helen

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770 "Danaans" = Greeks

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*'Is she to have it so: to leave unharmed,
see Sparta and her home Mycenae, go—
a victor queen in triumph—to look on
her house and husband, parents, children, trailing
a train of Trojan girls and Phrygian slaves?
Shall Troy have been destroyed by fire, Priam
been beaten by the blade, the Dardan shore
so often soaked with blood, to this end? No.*

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For though there is no memorable name 785
in punishing a woman and no gain
of honor in such victory, yet I
shall have my praise for blotting out a thing
of evil, for my punishing of one
who merits penalties; and it will be 790
a joy to fill my soul with vengeful fire,
to satisfy the ashes of my people.'

“And carried off by my mad mind, I was
still blurting out these words when, with such brightness
as I had never seen, my gracious mother 795 “gracious mother” = Venus
stood there before me; and across the night
she gleamed with pure light, unmistaken goddess,
as lovely and as tall as she appears
whenever she is seen by heaven’s beings.
And while she caught and held my right hand fast, 800
she spoke these words to me with her rose lips:
‘My son, what bitterness has kindled this
fanatic anger? Why this madness? What
of all your care for me—where has it gone?
Should you not first seek out your father, worn 805
with years, Anchises, where you left him; see
if your own wife, Creüsa, and the boy
Ascanius are still alive? The Argive
lines ring them all about; and if my care
had not prevented such an end, by now 810
flames would have swept them off, the hostile sword
have drunk their blood. And those to blame are not
the hated face of the Laconian woman,
the daughter of Tyndareos, or Paris:
it is the gods’ relentlessness, the gods’, 815
that overturns these riches, tumbles Troy
from its high pinnacle. Look now—for I
shall tear away each cloud that cloaks your eyes
and clogs your human seeing, darkening
all things with its damp fog: you must not fear 820
the orders of your mother; do not doubt,
but carry out what she commands. For here,
where you see huge blocks ripped apart and stones
torn free from stones and smoke that joins with dust
in surges, Neptune shakes the walls, his giant 825
trident is tearing Troy from its foundations;

*and here the first to hold the Scaean gates
 is fiercest Juno; girt with iron, she
 calls furiously to the fleet for more
 Greek troops. Now turn and look: Tritonian Pallas* 830 “Pallas” = Athena
*is planted there; upon the tallest towers
 she glares with her storm cloud and her grim Gorgon.
 And he who furnishes the Greeks with force
 that favors and with spirit is the Father*
himself, for he himself goads on the gods 835
*against the Dardan weapons. Son, be quick
 to flee, have done with fighting. I shall never
 desert your side until I set you safe
 upon your father’s threshold.’ So she spoke,
 then hid herself within the night’s thick shadows.* 840
 Ferocious forms appear—the fearful powers
 of gods that are the enemies of Troy.

“At this, indeed, I saw all Ilium
 sink down into the fires; Neptune’s Troy
 is overturned: even as when the woodsmen 845
 along a mountaintop are rivals in
 their striving to bring down an ancient ash,
 hacked at with many blows of iron and ax;
 it always threatens falling, nodding with
 its trembling leaves and tossing crest until, 850
 slowly, slowly, the wounds have won; it gives
 one last great groan, then wrenches from the ridges
 and crashes into ruin. I go down
 and, guided by a god, move on among
 the foes and fires; weapons turn aside, 855
 the flames retire where I make my way.

“But now, when I had reached my father’s threshold,
 Anchises’ ancient house, our home—and I
 longed so to carry him to the high mountains
 and sought him first—he will not let his life 860
 be drawn out after Troy has fallen, he
 will not endure exile: *‘You whose lifeblood
 is fresh, whose force is still intact and tough,
 you hurry your escape; if heaven’s lords
 had wanted longer life for me, they would* 865
*have saved my home. It is enough—and more—
 that I have lived beyond one fall and sack*

*of Troy. Call out your farewell to my body
as it is now, thus laid out, thus; and then
be gone. I shall find death by my own hand; 870
the enemy will pity me and seek
my spoils. The loss of burial is easy.
For hated by the gods and useless,
I have lingered out my years too long already,
since that time when the father of the High Ones 875
and king of men let fly his thunderbolt
against me with the winds, touched me with lightning.'*

“These were the words he used. He did not move.
We stood in tears—my wife, Creüsa, and
Ascanius and all the household—begging 880
my father not to bring down everything
along with him and make our fate more heavy.
He will not have it. What he wants is set;
he will not leave his place. Again I take
to arms and, miserable, long for death. 885
What other stratagem or chance is left?
And then I ask: *‘My father, had you thought
I could go off and leave you here? Could such
unholiness fall from a father’s lips?
For if it please the High Ones that no thing 890
be left of this great city, if your purpose
must still persist, if you want so to add
yourself and yours to Ilium’s destruction—
why then, the door to death is open: Pyrrhus—
who massacres the son before his father’s 895
eyes, and then kills the father at the altars—
still hot from Priam’s blood, will soon be here.
And was it, then, for this, my gracious mother,
that you have saved me from the blade, the fire—
that I might see the enemy within 900
the heart of home, my son Ascanius,
my father, and Creüsa at their side,
all butchered in each other’s blood? My men,
bring arms; the last light calls upon the beaten.
Let be, and let me at the Greeks again, 905
to make my way back to new battles. Never
shall we all die this day without revenge.’*

“At that I girded on my sword again
and fixed it firm, passing my left hand through
my shield strap as I hurried from the house. 910

But suddenly Creüsa held me fast
beside the threshold; clinging to my feet,
she lifted young Iülus to his father:
*‘If you go off to die, then take us, too,
to face all things with you; but if your past 915
still lets you put your hope in arms, which now
you have put on, then first protect this house.
To whom is young Iülus left, to whom
your father and myself, once called your wife?’*

“So did Creüsa cry; her wailing filled 920
my father’s house. But even then there comes
a sudden omen—wonderful to tell:
between the hands, before the faces of
his grieving parents, over Iülus’ head

there leaps a lithe flametip that seems to shed 925
a radiance; the tongue of fire flickers,
harmless, and plays about his soft hair, grazes
his temples. Shuddering in our alarm,
we rush to shake the flames out of his hair
and quench the holy fire with water. But 930
Anchises raised his glad eyes to the stars
and lifted heavenward his voice and hands:

*‘O Jupiter, all-able one, if you
are moved by any prayers, look on us.
I only ask you this: if by our goodness 935
we merit it, then, Father, grant to us
your help and let your sign confirm these omens.’*

“No sooner had the old man spoken so
than sudden thunder crashed upon the left,
and through the shadows ran a shooting star, 940
its trail a torch of flooding light. It glides
above the highest housetops as we watch,
until the brightness that has marked its course
is buried in the woods of Ida:

far and wide the long wake of that furrow shines, 945
and sulphur smokes upon the land.
At last, won over by this sign, my father rises,
to greet the gods, to adore the sacred star:

*'Now my delay is done; I follow; where
you lead, I am. Gods of my homeland, save
my household, save my grandson. Yours, this omen;
and Troy is in your keeping. Yes, I yield.
My son, I go with you as your companion.'* 950

“These were his words. But now the fire roars
across the walls; the tide of flame flows nearer. 955
*'Come then, dear father, mount upon my neck;
I'll bear you on my shoulders. That is not
too much for me. Whatever waits for us,
we both shall share one danger, one salvation.
Let young Iulus come with me, and let
my wife Creïsa follow at a distance.'*” 960