© EUSP, 2015 ISSN 2310-3817 Vol. 3 stasis No. 2 p. 160–180

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The Shield of Aeneas: Narratives of World-Historical Mission, Ancient and Modern

Abstract

As pointed out by John Taylor, both the Old Testament and Virgil's *Aeneid* evoke "the grand theme of national identity linked to cosmic purposes […] the formation of a people under the superintending hand of Providence." The many narratives of the Marxist tradition—including the *Communist Manifesto*, Lassalle's idea of the Fourth Estate, Kautsky's *Erfurt Program*, Lenin's "heroic scenario," and the "socialist realist" novels of the Stalin era—are based on the same logic. All these narratives tell of a collectivity that, by the very act of fighting for survival in a hostile world, is destined to carry out a world-historical mission. These narratives also share a particular reflexive quality: their plots center on a protagonist's gradual realization of his role in a grander, all-encompassing historical narrative. An emblem of this feature is the Shield of Aeneas, which (in contrast to the Shield of Achilles) outlines a world-historical narrative, namely, the rise of Rome. In this way, Aeneas is the prototype of the "inspired and inspiring hero" central to Marxist narratives of the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Aeneid* can thus be termed "the first socialist realist novel."

Keywords
Aeneid, epic, Marxism, socialist realism, world-historical mission

As pointed out by John Taylor, both the Old Testament and Virgil's *Aeneid* evoke "the grand theme of national identity linked to cosmic purposes […] the formation of a people under the superintending hand of Providence" (2007: 94–5). The many narratives of the Marxist tradition—including the *Communist Manifesto*, Lassalle's idea of the Fourth Estate, Kautsky's *Erfurt Program*, Lenin's scenario of "hegemony" in the Russian democratic revolution, and the "socialist realist" novels of the Stalinist era—are based on the same logic.[1] All these narratives tell of a collectivity that, by the very act of fighting for survival in a hostile world, is destined to carry out a world-historical mission.

These narratives also share a particular reflexive quality: their plots center on a protagonist's gradual realization of his role in a grander, all-encompassing historical narrative. An emblem of this feature is the Shield of Aeneas, which (in contrast to Homer's Shield of Achilles) outlines a world-historical narrative, namely, the rise of Rome: a narrative that starts with Aeneas himself. Thus the *Aeneid* is the story of how Aeneas learns there exists such a narrative, learns to accept his own role within it, and learns to use the narrative itself as a weapon in the struggle to carry out the narrative in the world. In this way, Aeneas is the prototype of the "inspired and inspiring hero" central to Marxist narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Aeneid* can thus be termed "the first socialist realist novel."

The Idea of a Mission

The concept of a mission can be defined by the following features:

1. You are "sent" (*missus*) to do a task at a distance
2. The task is part of a larger and vital project
3. You are under orders (*iussus*), but are also required to use initiative
4. You are a "chosen one," that is, you have special qualities needed to accomplish task

[1] In Lenin's writings, "hegemony" points to a specific political strategy: the Russian proletariat, in the name of its ultimate socialist goal, will lead the peasantry in order to accomplish the democratic revolution "to the end," that is, to bring about a vast social transformation of Russia. I have termed this strategy Lenin's "heroic scenario" in order to bring out its ambitiousness and scope; for discussion, see Lih (2011).

The appeal of the concept of the mission no doubt owes much to its closeness to basic mythic patterns of the hero and his quest, as documented by Joseph Campbell (1969 [1949]), Vladimir Propp (1968), and others. In the two cases of interest to us—the *Aeneid* and the narratives of the Marxist tradition—this mythic resonance is only part of a more specific context. In each case, the narrative of the heroic mission is set forth in highly sophisticated texts that were subsequently adopted by real-world political institutions. As a result, these texts formed the basis of large-scale educational activity and propaganda that less sophisticated texts could not have sustained. Furthermore, the political ideologies informed by these texts had the distinguishing characteristic of making world-historical claims, along with an explicit project of world transformation. We shall see in both cases that the pathos of mission, the high drama of acceptance of the assigned task, plays a larger role than is usually recognized.A *world-historical mission* is thus one in which the task to be accomplished is crucial for human destiny. Given the potentially global scope of such a narrative, the question arises: who assigns the task? The answer seems to be: some transcendent force *outside* of history. Such a transcendental source, however, leads to a logical and literary dilemma for narratives of world-historical mission. A main source of dramatic tension for any story about mission is whether or not the protagonist will accept the mission. How crucial is this issue in the case of world-historical missions? On one hand, acceptance is absolutely crucial since human destiny depends on it, but on the other hand it is no more than a detail, since the transcendental source of the mission has fated the outcome in advance.

One way of dealing with this problem is the technique of intertwined narratives. I shall explain how this device works in the case of the *Aeneid* and then draw some comparisons with Marxist narratives. Since Virgil's epic is no longer the central cultural document it once was, some introductory description will be helpful.

Introduction to the Aeneid

Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* around 20 BCE. The essential fact about its historical context is that the emperor of Rome, Augustus, had just brought to an end two generations of civil war. Augustus' imperial order was still new; it had not been around long enough for "degeneration" to set in. Although the *Aeneid* can be described as a patriotic epic, Virgil is not celebrating Roman conquests so much as the achievement of universal peace by "warring down the proud" (*debellare superbos*).[2]

[2] I have a special fondness for the prose translation by John Jackson from 1921, one that combines energy with word-for-word accuracy. All English citations from the *Aeneid* are by Jackson unless otherwise noted; in-text references are to the Latin text.

The overall plot of the *Aeneid* can be summarized as follows: Troy is overthrown and destroyed by the Greeks, as related by Homer. But the gods have a mission for the defeated Trojans and their leader Aeneas: to found a new nation in Italy that will eventually become Rome, a world empire. The first half of the epic tells the story of him traveling across the seas to reach Italy. But at the same time, as Aeneas is reaching his geographical destination, he is also reaching his spiritual destination—that is, he gradually leans he *has* a mission, he learns *what* that mission is, and he learns to *inwardly accept* that mission.

The second half of the epic tells of the events when he and the Trojans reach Italy. This second half has made much less impact in Western culture than the first half, with its tales of Troy's fall and the doomed romance between Dido and Aeneas.[3] In the Italian part of the *Aeneid,* it looks at first as if Aeneas will accomplish his destiny peacefully, because the local king, Latinus, has received similar messages from the gods. But there are cosmic forces—embodied by Juno, queen of the immortals—that are fighting against destiny. Juno can be called the patron deity of counter-revolution. She sows enough hatred and discord that Aeneas has to wage a destructive war against the native Italians in order to accomplish what has been decreed by the fates.

There are two issues worth mentioning about this war, as presented by Virgil. On one hand, this is *not* a war of conquest, of external invasion. Aeneas wins by putting together a coalition of native Etruscans, Greek colonists, and his own Trojans. Furthermore, the projected political settlement will include everybody. The new Roman nation is an amalgam of peoples. On the other hand, although Aeneas certainly does not want war, nevertheless after he decides it is necessary, he is absolutely ruthless in a way one would not have predicted from earlier in the epic and in a way that is still shocking to modern readers. This ruthlessness comes precisely from his sense of mission—his sense that his enemies are thwarting destiny. The whole epic ends with Aeneas thrusting his sword through an unarmed man begging for mercy.

Intertwining Plots: A Literary Device with Real-World Consequences

A detective story is a familiar example of an intertwining plot. One plot is the story of the crime committed in the past. The other plot is the story of how the first story is pieced together by the detective. This literary

[3] For a recent literary retelling of this relatively neglected second half of the *Aeneid*, see Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2008). Le Guin also plays with the device of intertwining narratives, although from the point of view of Lavinia, the Italian princess to whom Aeneas is betrothed.

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technique goes back at least to what has been described as the first detective story, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

The narratives of world-historical mission take this technique of intertwining plots and intensify it. The *Aeneid, in fact,* has at least four distinct plots, each exciting on its own, and each interacting with all the others. The first of these plots is the world-historical narrative of the rise of Rome. The incidents that make up this historical plot were more or less familiar to the Roman reader, but the excitement comes from seeing them as a narrative—as part of a meaningful plot with a beginning and a climax, namely, the triumph of Augustus in Virgil's day.

The second plot is how the gods (representing the great and permanent forces of history) get the message out to Aeneas and the Trojans. This involves much more than sending Hermes or Iris—the messenger service of the gods—to Aeneas and telling him what to do. There exists in fact great conflict among the gods about Aeneas' mission. In particular, Juno—the spirit of the angry, anti-progressive past—wants to sabotage the mission altogether. And so the *Aeneid* turns into a dramatic network of oracles, visitations, true but mysterious dreams, false dreams, warnings only understood in retrospect, and so on.

The third plot is the understanding and acceptance of the mission by Aeneas and, often overlooked in this regard, by the Trojan people. Aeneas gradually turns from a devastated and rudderless man bereft of home, wife, and country to a disciplined warrior joyfully carrying out a mission, even when it means merciless war.

Finally, there is the story of Aeneas carrying out his specific task, namely, bringing Troy to Italy in order to found a new political entity. He first has to find Italy and then overcome resistance to the progressive political institution desired both by him and by many Italians.

The episode of the Shield of Aeneas, crafted for Aeneas by the God of Fire, Vulcan himself, is a focal point for the intersection of all four plots. The Shield figures in two episodes, in Books 8 and 10. Aeneas receives the Shield when he is far away from his besieged people; he brandishes the Shield on his return, with immediate results. After examining these two episodes in detail, we will show how the Shield links up all the intertwining plot levels.

The Shield of Aeneas

At the beginning of Book 8, the Trojans find themselves dangerously exposed and isolated. Having landed in Italy and established a fortified camp, making a pact with the local king, they now find themselves attacked by a Latin army recruited from far and wide along the peninsula and led by the redoubtable warrior Turnus. Aeneas receives some typically cagey and realistic advice from none other than the River Tiber it-

self: go and find some allies from among those discontented with Turnus. These allies include a Greek colony at Pallanteum (the site of the future Rome) and those Etruscans who are opposed to the Etruscan faction enlisted by Turnus. So Aeneas leaves on a diplomatic mission—a risky move given the precarious position of the Trojan camp in Latinum.

After successfully concluding an alliance with the Greeks at Pallanteum/Rome, Aeneas leaves in the hope of getting the Etruscans on board. On his way there, he happens to find himself alone in a secluded valley, where he receives the Shield from Venus, his goddess mother, in person. Venus inveigled her husband Vulcan into forging an invincible shield, and Vulcan "who was neither unversed in the seers' prophecies nor uninformed about future events" (Ahl 8.627) engraved into the Shield a pictorial history of Rome from its simple beginnings to the climactic battle of Actium that ended the Roman civil war in 31 BCE.

As Philip Hardie puts it, the scenes pictured on the Shield "give a persuasive account of the rise of Rome virtually *ex nihilo* to a position of world empire" (1986: 97). Vulcan's method "allows for the greatest possible contrast between the first scene on the Shield, that of Romulus and Remus with the she-wolf, and the last scene, that of the universal triumph of Augustus, and hence of the universal domination of the city of Rome" (1986: 349). As such, the Shield contains the world-historical narrative that gives a larger meaning to the current struggle faced by Aeneas.

The scenes about early Roman history emphasize the providential nature of Rome's survival while still small, weak and unprotected. We then jump forward in time to Virgil's present, with two splendid set-pieces, the naval battle at Actium between Augustus and the forces of disorder led by Antony and Cleopatra, followed by the ecstatic triumph after victory within Rome's walls. Although geographically within the city, the triumph graphically demonstrates the global reach of Rome's power. Augustus' triumphal procession signifies the accomplishment of Rome's world-historical mission: "to war down the proud" (6.851–3) and achieve lasting peace through universal empire.

Virgil makes it explicitly clear that Augustus himself was not the hands-on general who directed the battle: this job is allotted to Agrippa, with the role of Augustus to act as a conduit for the inspirational fireworks of the gods.

> Here on the tall poop stood Caesar Augustus, leading his Italy to the fray, with senate and people and gods of home and of heaven, while from his auspicious brows twin flames shot, and his father's star beamed over his crest (8.678–81).[4]

[4] At the death of Julius Caesar (the adoptive father of Augustus), a comet appeared that was interpreted as his soul's ascent into heaven.

The huge significance of the naval battle at Actium is emphasized by comparison to huge natural forces clashing not only on the sea but also on dry land.

> A man might deem that the Cyclades floated, uptorn, on ocean, or that mountain-height clashed with mountain:—so mightily the seamen urged onward their turreted ships (8.691–3).[5]

Actium is not just a battle between opposing armies, but a battle among the gods, and, unlike the warring gods in Homer, a battle between two *kinds* of gods. This is a battle between the gods of order and civilization vs. the gods of chaos and disorder.

> Gods monstrous and manifold, and barking Anubis, stood with lifted weapons against Neptune and Venus, and against Minerva. In the heart of the conflict Mars raged, graven in iron, with the fell Sister-fiends descending from heaven; and in rent robes Discord walked exultant, while Bellona followed her with bloody scourge (8.698–703).[6]

Therefore all we mortal humans have a stake in the outcome. In the following ecstatic triumph back in Rome, Augustus again serves as the rather impersonal conduit between the gods (in particular, Apollo as sun god) and the population—which now includes the whole world—with diversity no longer a source of conflict.

> Augustus himself, seated in the snowy portal of shining Phoebus, reviewed the offerings of the peoples and affixed them to the haughty doors, while the conquered nations defiled in long procession, diverse in tongue, diverse in fashion of attire and in arms (8.720–3).

The closing lines of Book 8 are very striking, and are difficult to translate, since the key words have many overtones that are hard to capture. For this reason, I will give the Latin text, and then, as a first approximation, Robert Fitzgerald's translation:

> Talia per clipeum Volcani, dona parentis,
> miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet
> attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum (8.729–31).

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[5] The Cyclades are a group of Greek islands in the Aegean Sea encircling the island of Delos.

[6] Anubis is a dog-god of Egypt; Bellona is an Italian goddess of war. See Quint (1993: 45) for an extended discussion contrasting the forces of order and the forces of disorder in the Shield's portrayal of the battle of Actium.

> All these images on Vulcan's shield,
> His mother's gift, were wonders to Aeneas.
> Knowing nothing of the events themselves,
> He felt joy in their pictures, taking up
> Upon his shoulders all the destined acts
> And fame of his descendants (8.729–31).

Aeneas picks up not just the Shield as a physical object, but the whole narrative represented on the Shield—or even more daringly, not just the represented narrative (*imago*), but the actual historical events being represented (*fata*). Earlier in the epic, Aeneas had made the iconic gesture of carrying his father Anchises on his shoulders in order to save him from the collapse of Troy. Now with a similar gesture but in a much more upbeat frame of mind, Aeneas shoulders the fate of his future descendants.

As so often with Virgil, there are slightly unsettling overtones. The phrase *ignarus rerum*, used to describe Aeneas, literally means "ignorant of things." Does this description merely point to the fact that the pictures on the Shield are not self-explanatory, and that Aeneas very naturally could not have provided an explanation of, say, just why Augustus was at war with Antony and Cleopatra? Or does Virgil's phrase hint (as scholars such as Anthony J. Boyle have suggested) that Aeneas doesn't understand how the world really works—that he is taken in by an ideological interpretation of event that is designed to obscure a grim reality?[7]

In similar fashion, the key words *fama* and *fata* connect the Shield to the thematic imagery throughout the epic. In the course of the epic, these two words have acquired "shadows" of meaning. *Fama* can point not only to glory and fame, but also to rumor and uncertainty. *Fata* can point to destiny, but also to a death sentence (*fama* and *fata* are both etymologically connected to the act of speaking.) In his recent translation, Frederick Ahl (2007) tries to incorporate some of these shadows.

> Such is the tale upon Vulcan's shield, on the gift of his parent.
> Ignorant as to its substance, yet awed by the artwork, Aeneas
> Shoulders with joy fame's rumors and fate's vows for his descendants (Ahl 8.729–31).

The events of Book 9 take place back at the Trojan camp still besieged by the Latin armies under Turnus. Aeneas is absent, and this accounts for the main characteristic of this book, immobility. Despite a fair amount of fighting, the situation at the end of the book is almost exactly the same as at the beginning, namely, the armies of Turnus besieging the Trojan camp.

[7] See (Boyle 1999).

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It is not so much the physical absence of Aeneas that accounts for this flickering futility, but the absence of any shaping sense of mission. Accordingly, the central episode in the book is a botched mission. The two young soldiers Nisus and Euryalus volunteer to break through enemy lines to bring news to Aeneas about the siege, but they get distracted looting and slaughtering, and then by a suicidal attempt by one to avenge the other. Their lack of discipline and focus ends in squalid failure (although this description leaves to one side the enormous sympathy Virgil shows the doomed pair).

Another episode in Book 9 provides necessary background for the brandishing of the Shield in Book 10. As Turnus tries to set fire to the Trojan ship, he is thwarted by an unexpected countermove on the part of the gods: the ships all turn into sea goddesses! They swim away from the Trojan camp and in turn perform the mission botched by Nisus and Euryalus, namely, informing Aeneas of the siege. By traveling up the coast, they meet Aeneas sailing down with the Etruscan fleet carrying his new allies. One of them, Cymodocea, meets Aeneas just before daybreak and fills Aeneas in on the dangerous situation at home. She then gives him the following mission:

> "Take that shield which the Lord of Flame himself wrought for thy conquering arm and rimmed the borders with gold! The morrow's light—if thou deem not my message idly spoken—shall break on mountainous piles of [Latin] dead!" […] Lost in amazement, Troy's hero and Anchises' son [Aeneas] knew not how to think, yet high his heart swelled at the omen (10.242–50).

Cape clipeum, "take up your Shield"—somewhat strange advice, since Aeneas is hardly likely to forget his Shield when preparing for battle. And why does Cymodocea emphasize the detail of its gold borders—is it simply female delight in finery? In actuality, as will be shown in the next section, Cymodocea is suggesting a new and unexpected use for the Shield, one directly connected to the Vulcan's prophetic portrayal of world-historical mission: to serve as a source of inspiration, or, as we might put it, a propaganda tool.

> And now, as he stood on the towering poop, he could discern the Teucrians [Trojans] and his camp; when, on the instant, he upreared the blazing Shield on his left. From their battlements the Dardans [Trojans] shouted to heaven; rekindling hope woke their ire, and the javelins flew from their hands (10.260–4).

John Dryden's translation brings out even better the excitement of the moment.

> His blazing shield, imbrac'd, he held on high;
> The camp receive the sign, and with loud shouts reply.
> Hope arms their courage: from their tow'rs they throw
> Their darts with double force, and drive the foe (Dryden 10:260–4).

In a superbly cinematic moment, the Latin army is at first confused by the sudden jubilation of the Trojans—until they turn around to face the ocean and find it crawling with ships. They too perceive the power of the Shield, but in fearsome and threatening terms.

> On the prince's [Aeneas's] helm the cone burned red, flame shot from his crest on high, and torrent fire streamed from the golden boss: as oft, through the cloudless night, ensanguined comets glare ruddy and baleful; or as the splendor of Sirius—herald of drought and disease to suffering mortality—springs to birth and saddens heaven with malefic beams (10:270–5).

Aeneas not only holds up the Shield, but he himself re-enacts—or pre-enacts—two crucial gestures of Augustus at Actium, as pictured on the Shield: he stands tall on the foredeck (*stans celsa in puppi*) and flames gush forth from his temples. One explanation for this is that Virgil wants to show Aeneas as a type or figure of Augustus, since "both are sailing to the decisive battle which is to establish peace and civilization" (Harrison 1991: 142).[8] No doubt this typology is one of Virgil's purposes, although we should note that Aeneas is here playing a much more active, hands-on role as commander-in-chief than Augustus ever did.

There is, however, a more direct explanation for the similarity: Aeneas is copying the inspiring gesture he has directly observed on the Shield. Aeneas does not have to know anything about the battle of Actium in order to grasp the power of Augustus' gesture. He understands through his own experience how inspiring the Shield can be, and so he lifts it aloft in such a way that it can serve as a conduit for the god's flames. As will be shown later in this paper, Aeneas is a prototype of the inspired and inspiring activist.

If this is the case, a paradoxical result emerges: Augustus' gesture at the end of the historical mission is directly responsible (due to the prophetic power of Vulcan's world-historical narrative) for kick-starting the beginning of the historical mission. The world-historical narrative, even though imperfectly understood, becomes a very practical contribution to its own realization.

[8] Harrison goes on to note that "such analogies between Aeneas and August surface at intervals in the *Aeneid* [...] but there is no constant identity" (1991: 142).

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To sum up, the Shield is a creation of the fire-god who channels the creative potential of fire to forge weapons that will combat and finally destroy the destructive potential of fire. A key feature of this weapon is the world-historical narrative, which inspires even when not fully grasped. In paradoxical fashion, the world-historical narrative makes itself possible by modifying and channeling the leadership of Aeneas as he resolves the first task in the long path toward imperial peace. At the beginning and the end of the process, Augustus and Aeneas stand tall in the foredeck, shooting flames, inspiring the troops, and copying each other.

The Shield and Intertwining Narratives

All four plot levels come together in the Shield of Aeneas. The Shield is part of a set of armor created for Aeneas by the gods—in fact, by the fire-god Vulcan at the request of Aeneas' own mother, the goddess Venus. It is thus part of the plot that describes how the gods get the message out. In fact, the Shield is the final entry in a series of three large-scale prophecies in the *Aeneid*.

In Book 1, Jupiter reassures and inspires Venus by showing how the fates will exalt her son Aeneas's posterity to the skies. In Book 6, Aeneas goes to the underworld to meet with the shade of his deceased father Anchises. Anchises has quite a show lined up for Aeneas: a parade of the great military heroes of Rome throughout its history. He also reveals the purpose, the inner meaning, the *mission* of Roman history, "Roman, be this thy care—these thine arts—to bear dominion over the nations and to impose the law of peace, to spare the humbled and to war down the proud" (6.851–3).[9]

The explicit aim of this so-called *Heldenschau* is to inspire Aeneas. As Virgil puts it, using the fire imagery so essential to the later episode of the Shield, Anchises "fired his soul with love of the glory to be" (*incendit animum famae venientis amore*) (6.889). The parade of heroes and the Shield are thus crucial to the plot of Aeneas' acceptance of the mission.

The plot of the overarching world-historical narrative—the rise of Rome—is given a vivid pictorial representation on the Shield. The idea of a divine shield is taken from Homer's Shield of Achilles, on which the fire god has also created pictures. But these pictures on the Shield of Achilles portray the recurring social processes of Homeric society: marriage celebrations, legal conflict, hunting, and war. Virgil takes up the idea of having the shield describe society, but the Shield of Aeneas describes a dy-

[9] In his discussion of the Aeneas myth, Joseph Campbell (1969 [1949]) puts exclusive emphasis on the *katabasis*, the journey to the underworld, which Aeneas shares with many other mythical heroes (30–1, 35). But the raising of Aeneas's consciousness takes many forms, very much including the Shield.

namic, world-changing, long-term evolution. The climax of the Shield's narrative is its portrayal of Augustus's naval victory at Actium and then the resulting celebration at Rome. Homer also shows both war and peace, but Virgil shows how empire-wide peace is won *through* war—a succinct presentation of his underlying political message.

Virgil also shows how the world-historical narrative, as portrayed on the Shield, has a crucial impact on the outcome of the struggle that Aeneas is conducting in Italy (the plotline of the "carrying-out" of the mission). The scenes pictured on the Shield do not have the benefit of Anchises' verbal gloss given during the parade of heroes in the underworld. Nevertheless, the Shield is a material object in the world, and as such can serve as a source of inspiration not only for Aeneas but his followers. The divine Shield is given to Aeneas at a critical moment just when he has successfully put together a coalition of Greek colonists, Etruscans, and Trojans, but before this new army returns to the field of battle. When he returns from his diplomatic journeys, the Shield reveals itself as invincible precisely because of its inspirational power, first immediately to Aeneas himself, and through him to the besieged Trojans. Thus the narrative at one rather cosmic level itself plays a direct role in the narrative at another, more human level.

When the intertwined plots of *Oedipus Rex* come together and Oedipus' detective work uncovers his own crimes, he is devastated. When Aeneas finally sees the Roman saga in action, even without taking in the details, he himself is inspired and he is able to inspire others. The interacting narratives give each other power.

The Pathos of the Mission: Marxist Narratives

We now turn to Marxist narratives of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Our focus will be on the pathos of the world-historical mission, that is, the emotional charge involved in learning, accepting and carrying out the mission imposed by history. The pathos of the mission is expressed by such key terms of Marxist rhetoric as "historical mission," "task," "duty," and "calling"; it informs the canonical formula "Social Democracy is the merger of socialism and the worker movement."[10] In many ways, this pathos is the heart of the matter—perhaps more so than visions of a socialist society, indignation against exploitation, historical materialism and other aspects of the Marxist movement to which more attention has been paid.

[10] For background on this formula, associated with Karl Kautsky but accepted by all of the socialist parties that constituted the movement of European Social Democracy, see (Lih 2006).

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In his study of epic and empire, David Quint shows the interconnection between teleological narrative and power:

> Epic draws an equation between power and narrative. It tells of a power able to end the indeterminacy of war and to emerge victorious, showing that the struggle had all along been leading up to its victory and thus imposing upon it a narrative teleology—the teleology that epic identifies with the very idea of narrative. Power, moreover, is defined by its capacity to maintain itself across time, and it therefore requires narrative in order to represent itself. In this sense, narrative, like ideology, is itself empowering. The epic victors both project their present power prophetically into the future and trace its legitimating origins back into the past [...] the ability to construct narratives that join beginnings purposefully to ends is already the sign and dispensation of power (Quint 1993:45).

Quint focuses on the sort of power that is embodied in a large imperial state such as Rome, but the same sort of connection between narrative and power can also be seen in a non-state, oppositional organization that manages to stay in existence despite repression and persecution. The charismatic founder of what eventually became the German Social Democratic Party, Ferdinand Lassalle, saw this connection even more directly than Marx and Engels. His highly innovative project was to found a workers' party whose central activity consisted of a permanent agitation campaign centered on the idea of mission. Day in and day out, Social Democratic agitators would tell the Fourth Estate—the proletariat that was assigned the role of taking over the revolutionary mantle of the French Third Estate—that it had a historical mission to transform society. The validity of the mission was demonstrated first and foremost by the Social Democratic party's ability to stay in existence, thus seeming to guarantee the actualization of the narrative in real life.[11]

We shall look at three levels of narrative: the story by Marx, the story about Marx, and the story about Marxists. These three levels are roughly analogous to the four intertwining plots of the *Aeneid*, since they also intertwine and incorporate each in the others. A central figure connecting the various levels is *the inspired and inspiring activist*.

The Story as told by Marx

When viewed in the context of nineteenth-century socialism, the distinctiveness of Marxism is not so much its vision of socialism, its emphasis on class struggle, its self-definition as science, or even its claim to predict an inevitable outcome to history. All these can be found in part in

[11] For a more detailed exposition of Lassalle's project, see (Lih 2006).

other socialist schools. The original feature of Marx's vision was his strategy for achieving socialism: the proletariat will not only be the main beneficiary of socialism, but will itself bring it about. In other words, Marx's political strategy rests on the assignment of a world-historical mission to the proletariat.

This pervasive sense of mission is evident in Marx's words from the Inaugural Address for the First International: "it is the *duty* of the proletariat to take state power" (own emphasis added).[12] *Das Kapital* may explain why the proletariat has this duty, but the *Communist Manifesto* tells the story of how the proletariat learns, accepts and carries out its mission, namely, to conquer state power and thence to build a socialist society, thus realizing mankind's destiny.

The story as told by Marx in the *Manifesto* is comparable in its epic sweep to the story told by Vulcan on the Shield. Both start from the small beginnings of the collectivity that will be entrusted with the mission (demoralized proletarians and defeated Trojans respectively), and then show its slow but unstoppable rise in the world—a rise guaranteed by alignment with the fundamental forces of history. Both are given the perhaps paradoxical task of continual fighting to order to overcome conflict: peace through universal empire, a classless society through class struggle.

As we recall, Aeneas did not grasp all the details of the Shield's narrative, but he was inspired to good purpose by the grandeur and sweep of the images (*rerum ignarus imagine gaudet* [8:730]). Virgil's poetic image makes a good hypothesis about the reciprocal relations of *Das Kapital* and the *Communist Manifesto*. Activists do not have to read *Das Kapital* to be heartened by the existence of a big learned tome that proves that a proletarian victory is fated to be. They can be inspired by the Manifesto's grand narrative even without having fully assimilated all the details.

The Story about Marx

A basic component of Marxist literature has always been stories about Marx himself, and in particular about how he came to the discovery of the proletariat's world-historical mission. Engels' *Socialism Utopian and Scientific* (1972 [1880]) is one of the first entries in this genre. Later on, Engels himself became the subject of similar stories, beginning with extensive obituaries after his death in 1895 written by, among others, Karl Kautsky and Lenin. Another very informative example of the genre is Kautsky's *Die historische Leistung von Karl Marx* (1908).

These narratives usually emphasize how Marx amalgamated various components of European learning and socialist thought, sometimes

[12] The full text of the Inaugural Address of 1864 can be found in the Marxist Internet Archive at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm.

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summed up as German philosophy, French socialism and English political economy. Marx was also able to synthesize the various one-sided insights of previous socialists—in Kautsky's piquant expression from *Historische Leistung* (1908), each thinker contributed "ein Stückchen das Richtigen," a little bit of the truth.

Marx and Engels are praised for their encyclopedic learning, their militant commitment to the proletarian cause, and finally for their sense of the underlying forces of history. Virgil's description of Vulcan as skilled in the message of the prophets and not unknowing of the age to come (*haud vatum ignarus venturique inscius aevi* [8:627]) also applies to the image of Marx and Engels as scholars/fighters/prophets.

The key synthesis accomplished by Marx and Engels is summed up in Kautsky's formula of "the merger of socialism and the worker movement."[13] What this means in practice is the acceptance by the proletariat of the world-historical mission of establishing socialism. The Marxist synthesis thus puts the pathos of the mission front and center.

Stories about Marxists

From an early point, Marxists have told inspiring stories about themselves, with a key theme being the pathos of the historical mission. A fundamental early example is the final chapter of Kautsky's *Erfurt Program* (1965 [1892]), entitled "The Class Struggle." The story as told by Kautsky has two major episodes: the creation of Social Democracy, that is, the creation of a core of committed activists who have accepted the mission, followed by the spread of the good news (Kautsky's own metaphor) to the rest of the proletariat. In a way quite similar to the *Aeneid*, the story of Social Democracy is a story of false starts, of isolated and thus misunderstood insights, of unproductive nostalgia for an irrecoverable past, and the like.

For example, early workers' protests often harkened back to the days of the guilds, to a lost golden age of security. These "reactionary utopias" have to be transcended—just as the Trojans have to stop thinking in terms of reconstituting a New Troy (some fugitives from Troy, such as Pandarus and Andromache, in fact established a nostalgic, backward-looking New Troy).

The next episode in the story of Marxism are the diligent efforts within Social Democracy to spread the good news of the proletariat's mission among the broad mass of workers and beyond. As Kautsky expressed it, the task of Social Democracy is to make the proletariat aware of its own task (1965 [1892]).

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[13] Kautsky's formula is extensively discussed in his *Erfurt Program* (1965 [1892]).

Lenin's *What Is To be Done?* (1902)—often described as a dour, pessimistic book characterized by a profound worry about workers—is on the contrary, one of the best evocations of the *laetitia*, the joy, of accepting a mission with a glorious goal guaranteed by the "active forces" (*Triebkräfte, dvizhushchie sily*) of history. As Lenin put it in *What Is To be Done?*, "You brag about your practicality and you don't see (a fact known to any Russian praktik) what miracles for the revolutionary cause can be brought about not only by a circle but by a lone individual" (Lih 2006: 770-1).

Another important branch of Marxist literature that features the pathos of mission is the Soviet Socialist Realist novel. Socialist Realism can be defined as stories about Marxists after the taking of power, that is, after accomplishing the key goal of Marx's original world-historical mission. Nevertheless, the underlying theme of many Socialist Realist novel is still the learning, accepting and accomplishing of the mission. In her pioneering study of the Socialist Realist novel, Katerina Clark gives us a "prototypical" or "master" plot that is exemplified by such central examples of the genre as Fëdor Gladkov's *Cement* from the early 1920s and *The Young Guard* by Aleksandr Fadeev, a novel from the later 1940s (Clark 1981: 159-176, 255-60). Clark's "master plot" is particularly useful to us because it reveals the pathos of the mission as an important or even the central theme of these novels. I shall also try to make good my description of the *Aeneid* as the first Socialist Realist novel.[14]

The prototypical Socialist Realist plot starts with the hero moving into a "microcosm," a small community such as a factory, kolkhoz, army unit, or provincial town. The novel then moves toward "setting up the task," the hero realizes that all is not right, so he comes up with an innovative solution in order to better accomplish state-imposed goals. As a first step, he "inspires" some section of the local community to support him.

The hero's self-imposed task can be termed a mini-mission that is nested within a series of ever-broadening tasks. As outlined in Clark's text (1981: 159–76), in *Cement*, the hero Gleb wants to set up a cement factory in a provincial town. This task is aimed at restoring Russia's economy that had been devastated by the civil war. Economic restoration in turn serves the goal of preserving the worker-peasant *vlast* (state authority) that was created by the Russian revolution. The task of preserving the *vlast* is itself embedded in the underlying historical mission given to the proletariat of conquering state power as the only way of realizing socialism, mankind's

[14] My remarks are not meant to provide an exhaustive account of theories of Socialist Realism. Clark uses the term "spontaneity" to formulate her thesis; my own research into the meanings of this word in Russian Social Democratic discourse makes me uneasy with formulations of this type (see Lih 2006 for full discussion). Clark's analysis of the Socialist Realist novel influenced my conception of Lenin's "heroic scenario" (Lih 2011).

destiny. Because the hero freely understands and accepts the burden of this all-encompassing world-historical mission, he does not feel he loses autonomy by accepting state-imposed goals in his own microcosm. These wider world-historical perspectives are regularly invoked in the novel, thus ensuring the narrowness of the microcosm is felt as a reflection of the world-historical mission in the macrocosm.

The hero next encounters obstacles in accomplishing his task. To bring out the distinctive nature of Socialist Realist obstacles, Clark quotes Andrei Zhdanov's formula from the 1934 Writer's Union Congress about combining "the most matter-of-fact, everyday reality and the most heroic prospects" (1981: 258). This link between prosaic tasks and the more dramatic class struggle for socialism was a trope in prewar Social Democracy (see, for example, Kautsky's *Historisches Leistung* [1908]). I have described elsewhere Lenin's *What Is To be Done?* as setting forth "the nuts and bolts of a dream" (Lih 2011: 61). The hero also faces personal obstacles in his love life or, more generally, in keeping his emotions under control. This feature might be termed the Socialist Realist version of the Dido episode in the *Aeneid*, since in each case the perspective on individual love is not romantic but mission-oriented.

The hero then goes through a period of self-doubt and reconfirmation in his sense of mission. This episode is necessary as a way of recapturing as much as possible the pathos of the mission. In contrast to prerevolutionary Marxist narratives, the hero arrives on the scene with a prior commitment to the mission. His temporary fall from grace not only gives a well-needed inner drama to the novel, but allows an exploration of the continuing emotional appeal of the overarching historical mission.

Using anthropological terminology, Clark describes this reconfirmation as a rite of initiation. According to her,

> Since legitimization of the present leadership is an important function of the Stalinist novel, it is crucial that the initiation rite be enacted in such a way as to proclaim symbolically the purity and perpetuity of the Leninist line. It is essential that the rite occur under the auspices of an elder whose biography and attributes place him in a line of direct Leninist succession (Clark 1981:168).

The Socialist Realist mentor is the Stalinist version of the key figure of the inspired and inspiring activist who has already assimilated the sense of mission and is therefore in a position to pass it on. Clark's emphasis on the mentor as symbolic father figure recalls the role played by Anchises, Aeneas' actual father, in guiding Aeneas toward his own wholehearted confirmation of Rome's historical mission as in, for example, the parade of heroes shown to Aeneas in the underworld (Book 6). The prototypical Socialist Realist novel ends with the overcoming of the obstacles, followed by "a ceremony to mark the task's completion" and an evocation

of the glorious future—an ending redolent of the triumph of Augustus pictured on the Shield.

According to Clark, "The Soviet novel is somewhat distinctive in that the hero's quest typically has a dual goal" (1981: 162). The novel tells the story of the hero's struggle to complete a public task, but even more importantly, it tells the story of the hero's own struggle to align his will with the will of history—to align himself with historical forces that are moving toward a goal both worthy and predetermined. Virgil was the first to use this method of fusing public and private tasks into a single plot. Consider, for example, how well Clark's description of the hero of *The Young Guard* applies to Aeneas: "Through his Komsomol work Oleg gains greater confidence, experience, and maturity and an increasing understanding of the need to subordinate his individual initiative and even his sense of what is right to the judgment of the collective" (1981: 163).

Since Aeneas is the very first hero of world literature to go through a maturation process defined by the ultimate acceptance of a world-historical mission, the "collective" that imposes goals on him are the gods themselves. But this connection with the divine is not absent from Socialist Realism. As Clark observes, in the Socialist Realist novel, "history is more 'real' than reality, and the changes back and forth within a novel from the realistic to the symbolic are not as radical as they appear to be to the Western reader" (1981: 176).

The conflation of the *Aeneid* and the Socialist Realist novel also finds expression in a similar resistance to them on the part of many readers who are repelled by what they feel is the cold and impersonal emotional life of the hero who willingly allows himself to be swallowed up by his mission. Often the actual content of the world-historical mission—Roman imperialism, world communism—is viscerally rejected. The desire of many readers to find subversive gestures in the *Aeneid* proving Virgil's personal rejection of *Romanitas* is also mirrored in the critical reception of a number of Socialist Realist productions.[15]

"Thus the fates decree" = Fatalism?

A comparison of the *Aeneid* and Marxist narratives helps us to approach a long-standing trope about Marxism: the claim that the insistence on the inevitability of proletarian victory must logically lead to a fatalism, a passivity that can only be escaped by a voluntarism that illogically tries to force the workings of history.

The same dilemma applies to the *Aeneid*. We hear throughout the epic that the rise of Rome is fated to be, that Aeneas will go to Italy and be victorious. We even know (although Aeneas himself does not) how long he

[15] For examples, see Lih, "Melodrama and Myth" (2002).

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will live after that victory—three years, as we are informed by Jupiter in his prophecy in Book 1. So what drama can there be about whether or not Aeneas accepts his mission? We know he will! Isn't he an automaton, a puppet manipulated by the heartless gods?

But, despite the logic, the *Aeneid* is in fact tremendously dramatic. The device of intertwining plots keeps us on the edge of our seats throughout and, I suggest, the same kind of drama explains the seemingly illogical energy and enthusiasm of the Social Democratic activist. The crushed and downtrodden Trojans at the beginning of the epic needed to be told that a cosmic force made their victory inevitable—it was the sense of mission that this narrative provided that gives them the energy possible, if not inevitable.

The same holds true for the downtrodden and isolated workers in Germany and Russia. On the surface, the Social Democratic activist tried to persuade the workers that they didn't need to be persuaded, since victory was inevitable: so the ironic observer pointed out. In reality, inscribing the world-historical narrative on their banner—their own Shield of Aeneas—inspired Social Democratic workers to fight hard for a new society.

Conclusion

What accounts for the similarities we have observed between the *Aeneid* and Marxist narratives? One possibility is that any similarity is sheer coincidence, and pointing them out is no more than an amusing *jeu d'esprit*. Another possibility is that, given the place of the *Aeneid* in Western culture, a direct causal connection can be traced, similar to the one often traced between Marxism and the Hebrew Bible. One highly speculative account of such a link between Virgil and Marx might focus on Dante as a transitional figure. On the one hand, Dante is the last writer to use Virgil's own narrative as a direct support for a political project, namely, the supremacy of imperial power over papal power. On the other hand, Dante is a founding figure of an anti-individualistic, pro-"community of saints" religious left.[16]

Alongside these political views was Dante's sense of personal mission, not only as a poet creating a view of the good society, but also as a pamphleteer, politician, and independent activist. In *Das Kapital*, Marx recognized a kindred spirit when he quoted "the maxim of the great Flo-

[16] Prue Shaw writes: "Dante is as 'engaged' a political writer as here has ever been, and as brave a one [...] Dante wanted a better world for the poor and the powerless, whose lives are made wretched by the greed and corruption of the power, and by the endemic warfare and civic unrest entailed by their ruthless pursuit of personal ambition" (2014: 61).

rentine: 'segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti'."[17] Besides this indirect link to Virgil via Dante, we should recognize that educated people in the nineteenth century (very much including Lenin, who was enthralled by Latin literature as a student) were all familiar with the *Aeneid*.

Even if we are not tempted by this kind of speculation, we can recognize that many similarities, such as the device of intertwining plots, result from the structural logic inherent in any narrative of world-historical mission. Thus the connection established here between the *Aeneid* and Marxist narratives sheds a valuable light on both. In the *Aeneid*, the episode of the Shield takes on a new meaning when we see the Shield as a concrete propaganda tool: Aeneas is inspired by the Shield and is thus enabled to use the Shield to inspire others. In the case of the Marxist tradition, the comparison with the *Aeneid* allows us to see the famous accusation about Marxism's "fatalism" in a new light. The comparison also focuses our attention on the crucial role of the idea of the world-historical mission, not only in the *Communist Manifesto*, but in Marx's political writings and elsewhere. Much more than is usually realized, the pathos of the mission is at the heart of the Marxist tradition.

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[17] Guy Raffa (2000: 186–7) points out that Marx's epigram does not occur in the quoted form in Dante's *Commedia*, but appears to be an amalgamation of several Dante passages to the same effect. Marx's reference to Dante can be found in the 1867 Preface to the first volume of *Das Kapital*; for text see the Marxists Internet Archive at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm.

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