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Essay by Spencer A. Klavan

AENEAS AND US

Foundings, Roman and American.



WHEN RIOTERS TOPPLE STATUES OF Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Christopher Columbus, they are saying as much about the present as they are about the past. We are in the midst of a violent struggle over what story we will tell about our origins, which will determine what view we take of ourselves. A national identity crisis of this kind can only be remedied—or exacerbated—by a national reckoning about our founding. Who were our forebears, and who are we?

Though perennial, these questions become particularly pressing in moments of civic uncertainty. In antiquity, one such moment—an important one for us to remember—came just after the fall of the Roman republic. It was then that a dazed citizenry struggled to reconcile the homespun virtue

of its rural past with the sprawling majesty of its newborn empire and the bloody labor that had produced it. The Romans, like us, were nursing civic resentments of the kind that can unmake a people. As they labored to understand themselves, they reached into the myths of their distant past. The enduring product of that soul-searching was Virgil's *Aeneid*, a monumental epic which has received not one but two new English translations over the past six months.

It was the gods who saved Aeneas, prince of Troy, from dying when his city fell. That is the oldest story we have about him, from Homer's *Iliad*. Before Rome was a republic, the Greeks sang songs about how their Achaean ancestors sailed east and sacked the great Trojan stronghold of Pergamum. Aeneas should have died at the hands of

Achilles, the Achaean champion. But Poseidon saved the Trojan warrior: he was fated to carry on his father's line. "Aeneas in his might will be king among the Trojans," said the sea-god, "and his children over all their children, as many as may be born" (*Iliad* 20.307-8—translations are my own unless otherwise indicated).

Centuries later, Aeneas became Rome's official progenitor even as Augustus became her first official emperor. Both developments had been a long time in the making. The crackup of Rome's republic turned violent in 133 B.C., when the controversial reformer Tiberius Gracchus was killed along with his followers by political opponents who suspected Gracchus of staging a popular uprising. The Roman people—frustrated with generations of economic mismanagement and reckless



importation of foreign labor by self-serving elites—began to abandon the republican system which they felt had already abandoned them. A hundred years of turmoil ensued before Augustus gained full control of the state and the military junta that had rallied behind his great-uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar. In the stunned silence that followed, the Romans faced a question not unlike the one Americans face today: what story can we tell about ourselves that will make sense of who we now are?

Augustus had an answer. There had long been a legend that Aeneas, after fleeing the ruins of Troy, made his way to Latium in Italy and created the primitive society that would one day develop into Rome. Now the heirs of that society had become lords of the world, asserting dominance over every major competing power. The Carthaginians in North Africa, the Corinthians in mainland Greece, the Seleucids in West Asia: in the 2nd and early 1st centuries B.C., all of them had bent the knee to Rome's improbable greatness. The chastened kingdoms of the Mediterranean cast about for some origin story to explain that greatness, some founder whose legacy could be discerned in Rome's sudden imperialism. Aeneas was an appealing candidate.

Many believed the Trojans had originally come to Asia Minor from the Peloponnesian peninsula in Greece: this connected Aeneas to the good stock of the old world and made him Greek enough for Augustan apologists like Dionysius of Halicarnassus to advertise him overseas. But he wasn't so Greek that Romans who feared a corrupting influence from the Hellenic East would find him distasteful. He had shouldered his way through a burning Troy to save his father and salvage the icons of his father's gods: that was the kind of piety and filial devotion to which every good Roman aspired. And indeed, the earliest Latin history of Aeneas' journey to Italy was written by no less a traditionalist than the stern censor Cato the Elder. Most importantly, Augustus himself could claim descent from Aeneas and thus from his mother, the goddess Venus. If Aeneas was intrepid, prudent, god-favored, and just cosmopolitan enough to rule abroad—then Rome's first emperor would be, too.

The new Roman regime needed a retelling of its founding myth, an epic to rival the Homeric poems. Virgil's *Aeneid* did the trick, and then some: for centuries, it has loomed over the Western imagination as a towering monument to classical antiquity's most astonishingly powerful civilization. The *Aeneid* fascinated Dante and John Milton, Peter Paul Rubens and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, John Adams and T.S. Eliot. Readers as far

back as the Emperor Hadrian have used the poem to cast lots, picking a passage at random and reading it to predict their future (the *sortes Vergilianae*, or Virgilian lots). Virgil's work affords its readers more than pleasure—it offers and provokes sophisticated reflections upon power, virtue, and the life cycles of great nations.

In our own era of unrest, the very word “empire” makes us uncomfortable. And yet threats of political violence, and popular frustration with our republic's ruling classes, are gathering daily in ways eerily reminiscent of those years before Rome's republic fell. The fact that two new English translations of the *Aeneid* have recently emerged in America—one by the poet Len Krisak and another by the University of Chicago Professor Shadi

in his introduction. Bartsch gives an altogether different rationale. “All translators bring a certain worldview with them,” she writes,

and to date, this view has been mostly a male, European-American point of view. Perhaps, then, it is not insignificant that I grew up as a foreigner in other people's countries (including Indonesia, Iran, and the Fiji Islands as well as Europe)... And I am a woman in a discipline that was still marked by gender imbalance when I was doing my studies.

The scholarly outlook motivating these statements is one that reveals much about our current predicament.

Female translators of traditionally “male” texts have been in vogue since British classicist Emily Wilson became the first woman to produce an English *Odyssey* in 2017. Novelist Maria Dahvana Headley made headlines in 2020 with a “feminist translation of *Beowulf*” which, according to *Buzzfeed's* Margaret Kingsbury, “shows why it's vital to have women and people from diverse backgrounds translate texts.” To consider such a thing “vital” is to foreground demographic characteristics in evaluating an individual's achievements. Note Bartsch's conflation of her “worldview” with her gender and national background. She implies that being a woman, and living as an outsider in a range of places which are not America, equate to a special kind of insight that is lacking from translations by men who have spent their lives in the U.S. Similarly, Wilson and Headley are supposed by their admirers to bring something indispensable to the table that has not been on offer in translations by men of male poets. This may be so, but it may equally be that womanhood and foreignness add very little to one's appreciation of ancient verse. It's possible—likely, even—that scholarly acumen and poetic sensitivity have more to do with producing a good translation than gender, but Bartsch seems to presume that this is not the case. And of course, if one's gender does determine one's insight into a given poem, one could quite plausibly argue that being a woman is likely to be a *disadvantage* for understanding the outlook and concerns of poems by, for, and mostly about men. But such arguments are no longer entertained in polite company.

They are not entertained for reasons of “sensitivity”—sensitivity toward groups and peoples who are perceived to have been on the outs for most of Western history. Our squeamishness about this—our extreme distaste for jingoism, our instinct to recoil from overgeneralizations about race and gender—

Works discussed in this essay:

The Aeneid, by Virgil, translated by Shadi Bartsch. Random House, 464 pages, \$35

The Aeneid, by Virgil, translated by Len Krisak. Focus, 424 pages, \$34.95 (cloth), \$17 (paper)

Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age, by Donna Zuckerberg. Harvard University Press, 288 pages, \$27.95

“Discolor Aura: Reflections on the Golden Bough,” by Robert Brooks. *American Journal of Philology* 74 (1953), pages 260-80

“The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*,” by Adam Parry. *Arion* 2 (1963), pages 66-80

Bartsch—is more than just an academic curiosity. It is a telling indicator of our present political and existential unease.

Pessimism

KRISAK'S TRANSLATION, IN ORNATE rhyming couplets, came out in September 2020. Bartsch will publish hers—blunter in diction and unrhymed—in February 2021. Both have merits. But the most striking thing about them in America's current political climate is the difference, not in *how* these two translators have executed their task, but in *why* they have undertaken it at all. Krisak's motivations are largely artistic: “I wanted to find some way to make the readers of this work feel that they were in fact reading a true poem in English,” he explains



developed in part as a reaction against the ethno-nationalist violence which traumatized 20th-century Europe and, to a lesser extent, America. In the academic study of classics this has generated concerns about “misuse”—fears that ancient literature and history may be employed to justify the worst extremes of imperialism and fascism. One noteworthy book in this vein was written by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg’s sister, Princeton Ph.D. Donna Zuckerberg. Zuckerberg’s *Not All Dead White Men* (2018) laments the fact that the study of Sparta and other ancient cultures is popular in various (mostly male) online chat groups which she considers “alt-Right.” Bartsch, for her part, mentions as a cautionary tale an Italian archaeological exhibition from the 1930s which celebrated Benito Mussolini by comparing him with Augustus and Aeneas. Bartsch contends that she can treat the poem more responsibly by making “a conscious effort not to automatically accept the poem’s dominant perspectives.” This will generate an *Aeneid* for our age, “an age of refugees seeking to escape their war-torn homelands, an age of rising nationalism across the globe, an age in which many in Europe and the United States are suspicious of ‘the East’ and its religious differences.” She sees her approach as consonant with a recent shift in Virgilian scholarship: “the *Aeneid* is now rarely treated as a positive endorsement of empire-mongering, or of autocracy.” That development, too, invites examination.

Scholars have only recently started reading Virgil as a covert critic of Augustus, much as they have only recently begun insisting that Western culture answer for its sins of prejudice and exclusion. The two impulses likely spring from the same source: a rising discomfort with attitudes expressed in the West’s great masterworks which now seem beyond the pale in erudite circles. Motivated by that discomfort, scholars have gone looking for nuance, admonishments, and even censure of Augustus in the *Aeneid*. This “pessimistic” reading was, so far as we know, unheard of in antiquity—in the 4th century, Maurus Servius Honoratus wrote in the preface to his monumental commentary, “Virgil’s intention is this: to emulate Homer and praise Augustus via his ancestors.” The first person to contest that assessment in a sustained and influential way was Harvard classicist Robert A. Brooks in his 1953 essay, “*Discolor Aura*.” Brooks and the others who followed him, such as Yale’s Adam Parry in “The Two Voices of Virgil’s *Aeneid*” (1963), were serious scholars. They did not scrap the traditional reading entirely so much as suggest that some of the poem’s more subversive tendencies had

been overlooked. But it is difficult not to view this shift in emphasis—away from the poem’s obvious triumphalism and toward its subtler undercurrents of self-conscious unease—as a product of postwar anxieties which continue to haunt us.

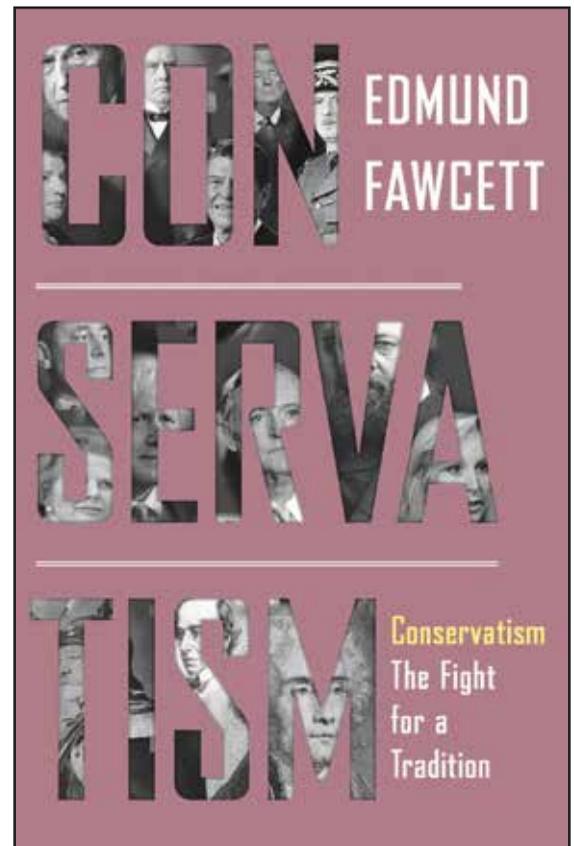
Empire and Its Discontents

TO BE SURE, MORDANT CRITIQUES OF Rome’s imperial rule are not lacking from Roman literature. One thinks in particular of Tacitus, who was left bitterly jaded by the tyranny of Domitian in the 1st century. “They stick the false name of ‘empire’ onto their robbery, slaughter, and plunder,” says the Caledonian chieftain Calgacus of the Romans in Tacitus’ *Life of Agricola*. “They make a wasteland, and they call that peace.” But the *Aeneid* features no accusations so bold or direct against the Rome of Virgil’s own day. The passages which look explicitly forward to Augustus are, on the surface at least, effusive in their praise. In Book VI, the hero meets his father Anchises, now dead, in the underworld. Anchises surveys the long train of Roman souls yet to be born. Here is how Len Krisak translates what Anchises says about Augustus:

Here’s the man—the one to whom
Rome owes its golden age: Augustus
Caesar (son
To him who’s now a god). He’ll reign as
once was done
By Latian Saturn through this land.
Empire shall run
Beyond the Garamants and Indians—
lands that lie
Past zodiac and every orbit, where the
sky
That Atlas bears upon his shoulders
wheels that sphere
Inset with gleaming stars....
And we still wait to stretch our strength
by deeds of might?
Or is it fear that stops our settling
Latian soil?

An impressive resumé of colonization, smiled upon by the newly divinized Julius Caesar and followed by an exhortation to more: go west, son of god. Hardly a condemnation of empire or its attendant violence.

Against this frank expansionism, pessimists set the costs which Aeneas must pay and exact to fulfil his destiny. He must break off his love affair with Dido, the Carthaginian queen: “not of my own will do I head for Italy,” he tells her in Book IV. Parry and others have argued that we are meant to recognize in Dido a prototype



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of that infamous femme fatale, Queen Cleopatra VII Philopator of Egypt. If so, then Aeneas is here presented with the choice of indulging his personal attachments, as Augustus' rival Marc Antony did with Cleopatra, or pressing ruthlessly on toward his political goal, as Augustus himself did by destroying both Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium. Aeneas makes Augustus' choice and presses on, but not without anguish: over and over he wishes he could go back to Troy or even die rather than face the lonely road the gods have laid before him. When he ascends from the underworld and leaves Anchises behind, he travels—unnervingly—through the gate by which false dreams go. It's a moment that defies neat interpretation, but Virgil's audience might have been reminded that even the glory of Rome would one day vanish as swiftly as a deceptive dream.

Darkest of all, perhaps, is the poem's ending, in which Aeneas executes his nemesis, Turnus, to gain control of Latium. Turnus begs for mercy, and Aeneas wavers for a moment. But then he remembers his beloved ward, Pallas, whom Turnus killed and whose stolen armor he is wearing. Bartsch's translation here is forceful and vivid:

Aeneas drank in this reminder of his
savage

grief. Ablaze with rage, awful in anger,
he cried,
"Should I let *you* slip away, wearing what
you
tore from the one I loved? Pallas
sacrifices
you, Pallas punishes your profane
blood"—and,
seething, planted his sword in that
hostile heart.
Turnus' knees buckled with chill. His
life fled
with a groan of protest to the shades
below.

The poem ends abruptly there, and much depends on whether Virgil meant for it to do so. When he died in 19 B.C., a handful of the epic's 9,896 lines remained unfinished. Scholars are divided about whether Turnus' death was the intended conclusion. If it was, then perhaps Virgil wanted us to cool our enthusiasm for empire and reflect on the cycle of retribution which comes with territorial conquest.

In my estimation, the *Aeneid* thwarts any simple attempt at categorizing it as "pro-" or "anti-" Augustus, Rome, or empire. It is a tour de force precisely because its vision—of what Rome had become, and of what her origins meant to her—is so complete. Virgil does acknowledge, with unflinching clarity and a

profound sense of melancholy, that civilization building exacts a price in life, treasure, and personal satisfaction. But it is a modern conceit that by portraying what it is to pay that price, the *Aeneid* suggests it is not worth paying. After all, life, treasure, and personal satisfaction were often lost one way or another in the ancient world, and better that they should be lost in the building of something as majestic as Rome. The ghost of Anchises suggests this as he draws near the conclusion of his speech (my translation):

Others will hammer breathing bronze
more deftly
And coax faces out of marble—I don't
doubt it.
Some will plead court cases better, and
trace the movements
Of the heavens with a pointer, predict
the rising of the stars.
But you, remember: rule the peoples
with authority, Roman.
These are your arts: to impose the ways
of peace,
To spare the conquered, and to crush
the proud.

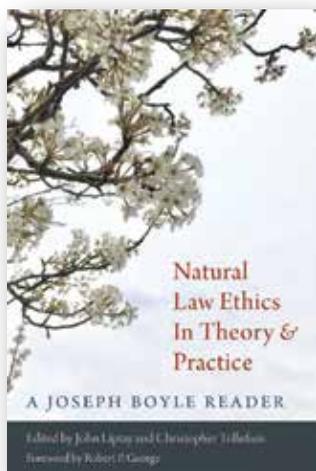
Virgil speaks here for a nation and a people learning to accept what they are. A Roman is not likely to have cringed, as we do, at talk of

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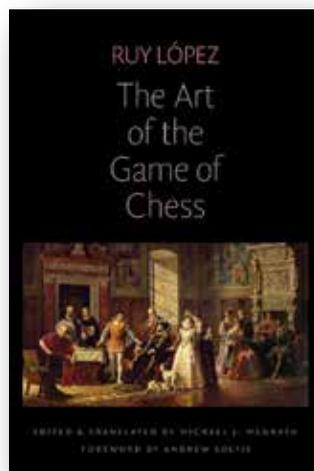


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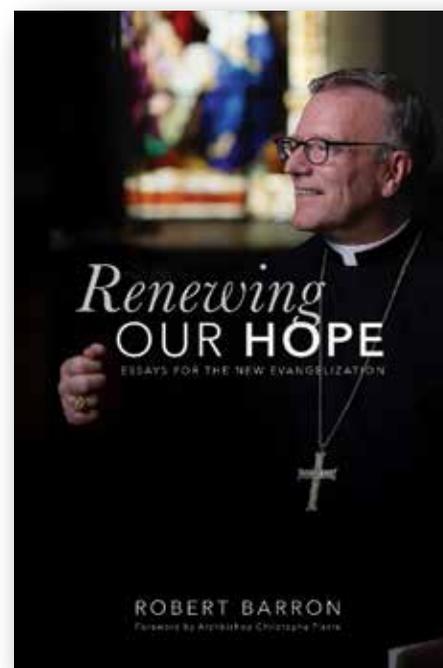
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“conquering” and of “crushing the proud.” Even Tacitus was not disgusted with empire per se but with empire mismanaged and wantonly ruled. The chance to bring order to a rugged and dangerous cosmos would have been satisfying consolation for all the cultural and intellectual supremacy that Virgil cedes, implicitly, to the Greeks. For all their sculpture and astronomy, *they* never brought harmony to Europe’s warring tribes. It was no small thing to be the peacemakers of the world.

Our Story

IT IS WE MODERNS WHO HAVE BEGUN wondering whether civilization—which now brings with it centuries of accumulated guilt over past wrongs—is worth the trouble. We have forgotten that the alternatives are worse. This dysfunction has become particularly acute in America over the past several years, when there has been widespread, radical criticism of our founding ideals and so of us. Such criticism seeks to implicate both the U.S. and the entire West in a thoroughly malicious sham premised on elaborately concealed hypocrisies with the sole purpose of excluding minorities. Having been incubated for decades in universities and among hyper-credentialed cultural authorities, these accusations spilled hazardously onto the streets in the riots of summer 2020. Those riots were the practical expression of an attitude broadcast widely by the *New York Times’s* 1619 Project, a series of essays and Pulitzer Center-backed school courses about the racism and slavery which run “in the very DNA” of America, according to lead essayist Nikole Hannah-Jones. Hannah-Jones’s flagship essay, despite having been denounced as inaccurate at key points by one of its own fact-checkers and by a small army of historians with impressively diverse political viewpoints, has been awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Commentary. Like Howard Zinn’s equally hostile *A People’s History of the United States* (1980) before it, the 1619 Project curriculum has been installed in public and private schools across the country.

Hannah-Jones has been quite clear about both the nature and the aims of her work. “I’ve always said that the 1619 Project is not a history,” she declared in a now-deleted tweet. “It is a work of journalism that explicitly seeks to challenge the national narrative and, therefore, the national memory.” Claremont Institute scholars Charles Kesler and Christopher Flannery pointed out in the *New York Post* and the *American Mind* that insurrectionary riots are the natural result of telling the American people a “national narrative” which casts them as either villains or victims.

Hannah-Jones responded (in another now-deleted tweet) that “it would be an honor” to have last summer’s riots designated “The 1619 Riots.” These statements amount to an admission on her part that she wants to foment civil hostilities in America—not by revealing new *facts* about our origins, but by seizing control of *the story we tell* about them. Senator Tom Cotton’s proposed bill to prohibit the use of federal funds to teach 1619-based lessons in K-12 schools, and President Trump’s formation of a “1776 Commission” to promote patriotic education, demonstrate that some Republicans are coming to understand what is at stake in telling and retelling a nation’s founding history. Hannah-Jones’s fondness for deleting tweets, and the *Times’s* recent decision to tacitly excise the more revisionist passages from the 1619 Project, indicate that they know what’s at stake, too.

One hallmark of a healthy culture is the studious attention and reverence it pays to its founder (in Greek, *ktistēs*) and lawgiver

Our founding presents tales of virtue and heroism every bit as stirring as if they had been dreamed up as allegories of our national character.

(*nomothētēs*). The Athenians had Theseus, slayer of monsters and beneficiary of Athena, and Solon, author of democracy: models of courage, wisdom, and rationality. The Spartans had Lacedaemon, son of Zeus, and Lycurgus, inventor of the tripartite constitution that would serve as a model for republics ever afterward: a proud history of law, order, and religious devotion. The Romans, seeking to restore their own self-confidence after generations of civil war, looked to Aeneas: a steadfast exemplar of dutiful leadership. It is a matter of urgent importance to find virtue in one’s distant past, to point with pride to the sources of one’s way of life. America in the 21st century would hardly like to think of itself as Augustan Rome: we hope, still, to avert the social dissolution and regime failure that would precipitate our own slide into autocracy. If anything, we are closer to the Rome of the 130s B.C., seething with volatile tensions that threaten to unmake our arthritic republican institutions. Like the Romans before

Augustus, Americans lack a stable narrative about the deeds of our forebears: the nature of those deeds, and the character of the men who did them, are now painfully in dispute. Augustus’ genius was to realize that social détente in Rome would require not just military and legal action but also a shared narrative, a story gracefully and nobly told which the Romans could hear and agree: this is us. This is where we came from. Hannah-Jones’s genius is a sad perversion of Augustus’: she knows that if Americans are to be transformed or revolutionized, they must be told an emotionally compelling story—no matter how false—about the vicious evil of their founding and their nation.

Art and Nationhood

BUT AMERICA IS DIFFERENT FROM ATHENS and Sparta and Rome in this way: our founders lived well within the reach of good historical documentation. Solon and Lycurgus were semi-legendary, their deeds exaggerated by later storytellers. Theseus and Lacedaemon, Aeneas and his descendant Romulus, were figures from the distant mists of the mythological past. By contrast, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, William Bradford—our own founders, settlers, and lawgivers—wrote copiously and were written about while still in living memory. They were real men with real shortcomings and blind spots, like all men. This makes it impossible to turn them into giants or demigods for the sake of national pride.

And yet, as if by Providence, our founders are larger-than-life all the same. The storm-tossed voyage of the *Mayflower*; the crossing of the Delaware; John Adams rising to defend American independence at the Continental Congress as the rain hammered down outside; George Washington ceding what could have been lifelong power after two terms in the presidency: these are tales of virtue and heroism every bit as stirring as if they had been dreamed up as allegories of our national character. Until recently, Americans have understood the importance of art which honors the astonishing fact that these dramatic events *really happened*. Recall Emanuel Leutze’s famous painting of the Delaware crossing, or Jean-Antoine Houdon’s statue of Washington, which pays tribute to his humble leadership by comparison to the legendary Roman Cincinnatus. These depictions capture the excellence of our founding in a way that respects, but goes beyond, historical fact.

It is this aesthetics of triumph and dignity, and the admiration for our founding it inspires in us, that the 1619 Project seeks to



undermine. In this sense Hannah-Jones is, of all things, an *artist*: she wants to replace true depictions of our history's greatness with an exaggerated and falsified depiction of our forefathers as slavers, rapists, liars, and thieves. In order to do this she has taken advantage of the founders' proximity to us in time, has magnified their shortcomings and the tragic exigencies of their historical moment to insist that because they were merely men, they were ignoble. Herodotus, the great chronicler of Greece's wars with Persia, wrote history so that "the deeds of men would not fade over time, and the great and wondrous deeds of Greeks and foreigners would not lose their glory." Hannah-Jones writes so that the great and wondrous deeds of our founders—"those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital," as she calls them—will lose the glory that their monuments were designed to afford them.

But the *Aeneid* demonstrates that patriotic art does not have to blind itself to the dark spots of a people's history in order to celebrate that people's origins. It is a lazy assumption, based purely on ignorance, that art which is unapologetically patriotic is necessarily simplistic and reductive. In fact the masterpieces of Western literature are always weirder, more self-aware, and more honest than we give them credit for. *Beowulf*, the great Anglo-Saxon celebration of England's Germanic past, contains plenty of reflections on the instability and cruelty of tribal warfare, though it is a full-throated and swashbuckling panegyric of the Danes and Geats. The Athenians never censored the passages in which Homer honors Trojan heroes or mourns their deaths, even though the *Iliad* became a staple of civic life in Athens and a symbol of panhellenic greatness. And the *Aeneid* does not shy away from the slaughter of Turnus, or from the rage of Dido: Virgil is perfectly honest about the loss and pain that comes with founding a great civilization.

America, too, is not without art that acknowledges the failures in its past. The song "Molasses to Rum" from the 1969 Broadway musical *1776* is as scathing an indictment of the slave trade as one could wish, but the musical itself is a rousing celebration of American liberty. Lin Manuel-Miranda's *Hamilton* (2015), for all its shortcomings as a historical document, manages to portray the revolution as a thrilling story of courage while still noting at a pivotal moment that freedom is a work in progress: "black and white soldiers wonder alike if this really means freedom," says the soldier John Laurens after the Continental Army's victory at Yorktown. "Not yet," says Washington. But Miranda's work fundamentally insists that the birth of this country is worth praising and that nonwhite citizens should imagine themselves as protagonists of our founding story: it was the birth of their freedom, too, even if the maturation of that freedom was woefully delayed. Not to mention the fact that some of Abraham Lincoln's and Frederick Douglass's most moving orations—especially Lincoln's Second Inaugural and Douglass's Fourth of July address from 1852—fiercely deplore America's sins en route to lauding the national splendor which those sins mar. Of all the dishonesty entailed in the 1619 Project, perhaps the most galling is the premise that slavery has been underexamined or unacknowledged in American discourse to date. "We have largely treated slavery as an asterisk to the American story," Hannah-Jones told CNN. We have not, nor need we do so, in order to praise the founding.

When a filmed performance of *Hamilton* was released on Disney Plus during 2020's summer of riots, a podcaster at the progressive magazine *Slate* realized in real time that since the musical opened, her politics had become too extreme to endorse it. "We're actively tearing down statues of these people," said Rachelle Hampton on the *Spoiler Specials*

show. Miranda fails to defame the Founding Fathers, and "that's not really what any kind of decolonizing of history is supposed to be about." Perhaps unintentionally, Hampton acknowledged that it has become unacceptable for the leading faction of the American Left to lionize the founding generation or its achievements.

Those who wish to do so—who wish to rescue America from the self-annihilation that will surely follow from an evil and false founding narrative—must not simply educate Americans about the facts of their history. We need to compose, and tell our children, true *stories* about the majesty of this country and its astonishing origins. We need to award those stories public honors and tell them in public schools. The intrepid voyagers, the rugged journeymen, the volunteer soldiers, the masterly statesmen who brought the best of Europe and antiquity to bear on the creation of a new world: these men and women deserve not just biographies but memorials, songs, and tales to glorify their achievements. We tend to think our great works of patriotic art, such as they are, must already have been created—the founding was a long time ago, after all, and our era of irony and disaffection is not exactly one keen on sculpting monuments so much as defacing them. But Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* more than seven centuries after the founding of Rome and nearly five centuries after the emergence of the republic. We are less than 300 years into our own story. It may well be that the best, grandest, and truest retelling of our founding is yet to be written. It may be we have yet to hear the song, or see the film, or read the poem, which will stir our hearts to say: "this is us. This is where we came from, and who we are, and it is good."

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