

THE DIFFICULTY OF THE ASCENT FROM AVERNUS

It is with some hesitation that I present the following interpretation of that classically vexed passage which describes Aeneas' ascent from the Underworld in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, for it can be supported by no philological evidence. On the other hand, it may be said that of all the explanations offered by scholars and critics, including the most distinguished students of Virgil, none has gained wide acceptance or lasting support.

In a recent article in this journal,¹ R. J. Tarrant argued that, in sending Aeneas out of the Underworld through the gate of false dreams, Virgil was acknowledging the imperfection of man's corporeal state, tainted by its false impressions and false emotions, subject to illusion. This view of mankind is consistent with the account of the purification of souls in the afterlife (6. 724–51). Since Aeneas is returning to a world that is, in Tarrant's words, "not more, but less real than that of the blessed spirits" (p. 54), and since he is tainted with the false emotions of the corporeal realm, it makes sense that he leave through the gate of *falsa insomnia*. At the same time, Tarrant emphatically denies that this general inability of mortals to distinguish reality from illusion detracts from the "reality" of the vision of future Roman history Aeneas has just witnessed. Nor do I believe he would argue that Aeneas' angst and melancholy are merely false emotions. It is acknowledged by Tarrant (p. 53 and n. 10) and critical for me that Aeneas returns to his *socii* as he had "on two earlier occasions when Aeneas returned from a shattering personal experience."²

I am not convinced that Tarrant gives the passage on the purification of souls its proper contextual value. Since he acknowledges that the doctrine is not presented as a tenet of Virgil's own philosophical belief, we must seek the reason for its presence within the context of the poem. If this view of reincarnation serves its dramatic function in its place, we need neither demand nor expect that another part of the poem, like the departure through the gate of false dreams, will continue or consist with it. Instead, at the end of Book 6, too, we should expect a dramatic function for the scene Virgil presents.

By 6. 724 Virgil is already preparing for Anchises' long narrative presentation of the future history of Rome. Instead of endowing Anchises with the divine omniscience of Jupiter predicting the future in Book 1 or of Vulcan depicting it in Book 8, Virgil avails himself of a philosophical system of recycling souls in the Underworld that allows Anchises to "see" the characters who will play a part in Rome's history. This is the dramatic reason for the theory of the purification of souls, with the necessary alteration that the future careers of these souls are already identifiable. But the theory is colored from the beginning by the particular and characteristically melancholy question Aeneas asks of his father (6. 721):

1. "Aeneas and the Gates of Sleep," *CP* 77 (1982): 51–55. I can add nothing to his references.

2. Equally remarkable, although much less remarked upon, is the fact that Aeneas never afterwards mentions or shows any effects of the experience he underwent in the Netherworld. While it would be awkward for commentators to refer back from a non-existent allusion, the reason for their silence may also lie precisely in the success of Virgil's chosen expedient for Aeneas' exit. That, at any rate, is the point of this paper.

quae lucis miseris tam dira cupido?

From Aeneas' own experience, the question is one of some pith and moment. Anchises' response acknowledges Aeneas' concern. Even after the complex process of purification from the corruption and spiritual confusion that is the human condition, souls are called to the River of Forgetfulness:

scilicet immemores supera ut convexa revisant
rursus, et incipiant in corpora velle reverti.

As a response to Aeneas' words, Anchises seems to be saying (*scilicet*) that the desire to return in these souls is not *dira* precisely and only because they now have no memory or notion of what they are in for. There is the further implication (*incipiant . . . velle reverti*) that, if they had any such memory, they might be justifiably reluctant to make the journey back to corporeality. To this point, Virgil has introduced a philosophical notion that has its own dramatic value and that can also elicit from Aeneas an entirely characteristic response.

On the other hand, this notion, accounting for the return to the visible world of freshly recycled souls so recently cleansed of the imperfections and delusions that constitute the visible world, would seem to have little relevance to Aeneas' progress through and departure from the Underworld. There was no question of Aeneas' being purified in the course of his travels—geographical or spiritual—in the Underworld. He descended very much a living mortal and will exit as such.³ Nothing is to be gained dramatically by Virgil's alluding to the undisputed fact of Aeneas' imperfect mortality. It is not clear from Tarrant's account why Virgil would choose to use this means and this opportunity "to express his own sense of the evanescence of mortal aspirations" (p. 54).

I believe that the device of sending Aeneas through the gate of false dreams has to do with what Aeneas will make, or fail to make, of what he has just witnessed. But much depends, especially for Tarrant's view, on what that vision was. I agree with Tarrant and most readers that what Anchises has just revealed to Aeneas is to be taken as real or true. However, while cases of Brutus, Pompey, and, most poignantly, Marcellus may exemplify failed aspirations, I am not prepared to put the portrayal of the triumphant Augustus in the same category. Even if the pervading melancholy Tarrant describes reflects Virgil's own sense, how does the contrivance of the departure from the Underworld affect Aeneas? Is he to be thought of as retaining the examples of tragic figures in Roman history? Then why the gate of *false* dreams? Is he to be thought of as afflicted by false impressions and emotions? Then why did Virgil present so complex and critical a view of Roman history—one to which he himself subscribes?

As Tarrant points out, the view with which Aeneas is presented of his descendants' future history is by no means one of unrelieved joy and comfort. Readers of the *Aeneid* tend to group Anchises' narrative with Jupiter's assurances to Venus (1. 254–96) and the description of the shield in Book 8 (616–728), as encomia to the history of Rome, with special reference in each passage to the triumph of Augustus. Yet, the highly charged close of Anchises' speech, with its pathetic reference to the untimely death of the younger Marcellus, is only one of the tragic

3. Tarrant well points out Aeneas' disorientation with reference to 7. 292–94 on p. 54.

incidents in the reported events. The vignette of the liberator Brutus is devoted only in part to his defeat of Tarquinius and the creation of the Republic. The passage continues (820–23):

natosque pater nova bella moventis
ad poenas pulchra pro libertate vocabit,
infelix, utcumque ferent ea facta minores:
vincet amor patriae laudumque immensa cupido.

Here, at the midpoint of the speech, comes the “historical” analogue to the tragedy of Aeneas: the man forced to private sacrifice in the name of responsibility to the higher, public duty. Just a few lines later, the specter of the civil war is raised, in familial terms of *socer* versus *gener*, with Anchises directing his anguished apostrophe to Augustus’ kinsman and predecessor (830–31). Nothing in the other two “Roman passages” matches these acknowledgements of personal loss and civic tragedy. Of the three passages, Anchises’ vision best reflects the complexity with which Virgil elsewhere in the poem treats the mission of Aeneas and the part of the individual in the triumph of Rome. In it, the mixture of success and failure, of victory and loss, is most poignantly and pathetically expressed.

For this reason I have no hesitation about endorsing Tarrant’s judgment that the validity of the vision in the Underworld, from Virgil’s point of view, is not in doubt. Yet, his interpretation of the gate of false dreams would appear to call into question precisely this vision. There could be no better examples of the evanescence of mortal aspirations than those of Brutus, Pompey, and Marcellus. Why should Virgil want to present Aeneas’ vision of them as tainted by false impressions and false emotions, subject to illusion? Virgil is not characteristically so sparing of Aeneas.

If Virgil’s intention in introducing the gates of horn and ivory is to control Aeneas’ perception of what he has just witnessed, as I believe it is, then it cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of abstractions like Virgil’s notion of the imperfection of man’s corporeal state. We must remain, instead, within the dramatic situation of the poem and consider the interplay, repeated throughout the narrative, of Aeneas’ knowledge and that of the audience.

The fact may be strongly put: Aeneas is either denied knowledge of the future or put in a dramatic situation in which he cannot appreciate it. It is hardly accidental that the only vision of Rome’s future history he witnesses is the most bleak and critical one. There is no question of his hearing the prophecy of Jupiter addressed to Venus or correctly interpreting the depictions on the shield made by Vulcan. His first viewing of the shield is an unusually pleasurable moment for Aeneas (8. 616–18):

ille deae donis et tanto laetus amore
expleri nequit atque oculos per singula volvit,
miraturque . . .

although he is by no means like Vulcan (627):

haud vatium ignarus venturique inscius aevi.

Virgil insists on describing Aeneas’ state of knowledge at the end of the book (8. 729–31):

Talia per clipeum Vulcani, dona parentis
 miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet
 attollens humero famamque et fata nepotes.

If the antithesis of *rerum* and *imagine* and the prominent position of *ignarus* in the middle of the line are no worse than bittersweet, they constitute one of the gentler ironies of the *Aeneid*. Between 618 and 729 he has learned nothing of the success of the mission for which he sacrifices and suffers.

Even with regard to Jupiter's prophecy, where there was no question of Aeneas' knowledge, the ensuing episode, in which Venus comes down to help her son, is contrived by Virgil to be a sad and bitter experience for Aeneas—a contrast noticed by the audience. Aeneas' sense of frustration and mistreatment outweighs, indeed, nullifies, any sense of pleasure or optimism he might have derived from the assurances of this divine intervention (l. 407–9):

quid natum totiens, crudelis tu quoque, falsis
 ludis imaginibus? cur dextrae iungere dextram
 non datur ac veras audire et reddere voces?

Obviously, a very subtle and, for Aeneas, painful play on levels of reality and appearance is here at work. The *imago* in which Venus presents herself is false, as is her speech, but the situation she describes to him is true and his apprehension of it crucial to him. Yet the reality he pleads for is of an undisguised, open relationship between mother and son. Reality and appearance are not always easy to distinguish and are determined by the perception, and the disposition to perceive, of the poet, his character, and the audience. To this extent alone should *falsis imaginibus* be associated with the *falsa insomnia* of 6. 896. The surface deception of Venus' disguise prevents Aeneas from being comforted by, or grateful for, her real assistance. The audience, from a different perspective, can appreciate the service she provides and sympathize with Aeneas' anguish simultaneously.

In the passage above, Virgil is playing the audience's assurances and delight in the optimistic vision (as witnesses to the speech of Jupiter) against Aeneas' ignorance and frustration. When in Book 2 the ghost of Creusa utters her almost pastoral prediction (780–84):

longa tibi exilia et vastum maris aequor arandum,
 et terram Hesperiam venies, ubi Lydius arva
 inter opaca virum leni fluit agmine Thybris.
 illic res laetae regnumque et regia coniunx
 parta tibi . . .

Aeneas can hardly be expected, under the circumstances, to take much pleasure in the prophecy or, in either sense of the word, to appreciate it. There may be a special appropriateness in Creusa's informing Aeneas of her successor, but there is a cruel irony as well.

It is precisely in the pattern of this irony—Aeneas' being in touch with the reassuring fact of the success of his mission, but unable to appreciate and be comforted by it—that Virgil created his device of the ascent from the Underworld through the gate of false dreams. There is nothing dramatic to be gained from a statement on the imperfection of human perception; there is every dramatic need

that the scene he has just witnessed be wiped from Aeneas' consciousness. True, it was the least optimistic of the three major visions of Rome's history in the poem. But it was the only one in which Aeneas, through the exegesis of his father, was able to participate. And, of course, the question whether Aeneas, given sufficient information, will choose to continue his odyssey of personal frustration and suffering in obedience to fate does not arise. The audience must understand that Aeneas emerges from the Underworld with *no* knowledge of historical validity of that mission. His *pietas* consists of blind faith.

Thus, the invention of a dramatic device to erase the complex, because tempered, vision of Roman history in the Underworld parallels the devices of non-participation in Book 1 and non-comprehension in Book 8. The fact that the knowledge Aeneas is here being denied would not be entirely pleasurable is secondary or irrelevant, except in that it probably most closely represents Virgil's view of the mixture of success and loss that was the historical Roman Empire. The reason for the greater proportion of tragedy and loss in this particular passage is dramatic. Anchises sees Aeneas' success in reaching the Underworld, the victory of his *pietas* (6. 687), precisely in terms of the suffering along the way (692-94):

quas ego te terras et quanta per aequora vectum
accipio! quantis iactatum, nate, periclis!
quam metui ne quid Libyae tibi regna nocerent!

And, it is worth pointing out that in spite of its tragic crescendo, Anchises' vision of the future has a very positive purpose (718):

quo magis Italia mecum laetere reperta.

However much Virgil, through Anchises, reveals that this happiness must be tempered by particulars of the vision, the whole second half of the *Aeneid* would be shattered if Aeneas possessed knowledge of the success of Augustus. As late as 12. 435 Aeneas can look upon his fortune as a disaster:

disce puer virtutem ex me verumque laborem,
fortunam ex aliis.

The question is how Virgil will deprive Aeneas of this knowledge. To the degree that it is relevant to consider the passage about the purification of souls, we must acknowledge that Virgil does not take advantage of that expedient. The ascent through the gate of false dreams is a more complicated, almost impressionistic solution. The contrast between truth and illusion is not made on the historical level; what Aeneas was shown is true. There is no more intrinsic distinction than the antithesis between the *rerum imagines* on the shield and the *res* themselves, or between the facts Venus relates in deceptive guise and the facts of the situation *per se*. In each case, what is dramatically important is Aeneas' ability, or inability, to perceive. In Books 1, 2, and 8 it is Aeneas' frustration, grief, and ignorance, respectively, that prevent his acquiring knowledge that would give meaning, and therefore some satisfaction, to his lonely, sorrowful journey. This is the pattern into which the end of Book 6 must be fitted. The only apparent exception to that pattern, "ego poscor Olympo" (8. 532), applies to the battle before him. Neither the moment nor the events that follow are contrived to sustain his optimism.

The ascent from the Underworld, then, is a dramatic contrivance created to deny Aeneas—but not the audience—retention of what he has just witnessed, knowledge of the future of Rome. The device is impressionistic,⁴ dealing with Aeneas' perception, rather than with the "truth" of the vision. But Virgil is working with a highly sophisticated conception, one fraught with technical challenges but, nonetheless, central to the *Aeneid*. In producing Rome's national epic, Virgil must devise tragedy in the historical context of military and political success. To do this, he must deny Aeneas *all* knowledge of that success; for the tragedy Aeneas needs no more emphatic lessons than his own experience. The vision of Roman history presented in the Underworld, although by no means unmixed with tragedy, is not one that Aeneas can take with him from the Underworld to the world above.⁵ His passage through the gate of false dreams is Virgil's way of erasing that knowledge from Aeneas' mind, casting a haze of uncertainty and unreality over the clearly viewed vignettes Anchises had so recently pointed out to him.

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4. For other examples of an "impressionistic" Virgil, we need look no further than the last two lines of the description of the death of Priam (2. 557–58). Virgil, in mid-story, changes the venue and alludes to a variation of the tradition in order to conjure up the memory of Pompey the Great. Similarly "illogical" is the reference to "disiectis oppida muris" (8. 355), with its impression of historical cycles and temporal continuity on what at first seemed to be the primeval site of Rome.

5. "The oblique connection of Aeneas and his *falsa insomnia*, however it operates, must have a negative effect; the associations of deception, illusion, and unreality are disturbing, even ominous" (Tarrant, p. 53).

NERYLLINUS

In a passage of his *Plea for the Christians*,¹ written in the later 170s,² Athenagoras argues that demons work the miracles ascribed to pagan statues, not those whom the statues represent:³

3. τοῦ τοίνυν ἄλλους μὲν εἶναι τοὺς ἐνεργοῦντας, ἐφ' ἑτέρων δὲ ἀνίστασθαι τὰς εἰκόνας, ἐκεῖνο μέγιστον τεκμήριον, Τρωᾶς καὶ Πάριον ἢ μὲν Νερυλλίνου εἰκόνας ἔχει (ὁ ἀνὴρ τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς), τὸ δὲ Πάριον Ἀλεξάνδρου καὶ Πρωτέως· τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου ἔτι ἐπὶ τῆς ἀγορᾶς καὶ ὁ τάφος καὶ ἡ εἰκών. οἱ μὲν οὖν ἄλλοι ἀνδριάντες τοῦ Νερυλλίνου κόσμημά εἰσι δημόσιον, εἴπερ καὶ τούτοις κοσμεῖται πόλις, εἰς δὲ αὐτῶν καὶ χρηματίζειν καὶ ἰᾶσθαι νοσοῦντας νομίζεται, καὶ θύουσὶ τε δι' αὐτὰ καὶ χρυσῶ περιλαίφουσιν καὶ στεφανοῦσιν τὸν ἀνδριάντα οἱ Τρωαδεῖς.

4. ὁ δὲ τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου καὶ ὁ τοῦ Πρωτέως (τοῦτον οὐκ ἄννοεῖτε ρήψαντα ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὸ πῦρ περὶ τὴν Ὀλυμπίαν), ὁ μὲν καὶ αὐτὸς λέγεται χρηματίζειν, τῷ δὲ τοῦ

1. I have used the following special abbreviations: Cook, *Troad* = J. M. Cook, *The Troad* (Oxford, 1973); Magie, *Roman Rule* = D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton, 1950); Levick, *Roman Colonies* = B. M. Levick, *Roman Colonies in Southern Asia Minor* (Oxford, 1967); Schoedel, *Athenagoras* = W. R. Schoedel, ed. and trans., *Athenagoras: "Legatio" and "De Resurrectione"* (Oxford, 1972). I am grateful to Peter Frisch for answering my inquiries.

2. See now Schoedel, *Athenagoras*, pp. x–xi (between 176 and 180). T. D. Barnes, "The Embassy of Athenagoras," *JThS* 26 (1975): 111–14, suggests September 176.

3. *Leg. pro Christ.* 26. 3–4.