

THE GATES OF SLEEP IN *AENEID* 6

Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur 893
 cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,
 altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
 sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia manes.
 his ibi tum natum Anchises unaque Sibyllam
 prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna. 898

MANY reasons have been put forward to explain why Aeneas and the Sibyl should depart through the gate of ivory, which lets out 'false dreams'. The two views which have perhaps been found the least unsatisfactory are those of W. Everett¹ and the one most recently championed by Brooks Otis.²

Everett suggested that it was a common belief in antiquity that false dreams occur before midnight, and true dreams after midnight; he went on to suggest that Aeneas left Hades before midnight, when only the ivory gate would be open. That there was such a common belief has been disputed by, among others, H. R. Steiner.³ The main evidence cited against the existence of the belief is that Cicero does not mention it in a passage⁴ where he asks how one might distinguish true from false dreams. However, he asks this question 'in view of the fact that the same dreams can turn out differently for different people, and sometimes differently even for the same person'. In other words, Cicero is not so much asking the question, as making the valid point that any criterion one might produce would be arbitrary and useless in any case. So a theory that true dreams occur after midnight would be irrelevant to the point he is making.

Nor can its absence elsewhere in Cicero be held to disprove the evidence of other writers. If a belief is mentioned by four writers—as this is—and omitted by one, this does not show that the belief was never held; merely that it was not held consistently by everyone. The quite sensible reason why it was held is shown by the Elder Pliny, 'a vino et a cibis proxima, atque in redormitione, vana esse visa prope convenit.'⁵ By the second half of the night, such effects ought to have worn off. There is, then, no immediate reason why Virgil is unlikely to have held this belief, and we must examine whether he wished us to explain the 'gates of Sleep' passage in this way. If he did, we should expect reasonably clear indications elsewhere in the *Aeneid* that false dreams occurred before midnight, and a reasonably clear indication in this passage that Aeneas' exit was before midnight.

Both requisites are absent. As to the first, it is true that the appearances of *deus Tiberinus* (8. 26 ff.) and Anchises (5. 721 ff.) take place before dawn. But at 5. 835 it is 'about the middle of the night' when deceitful Somnus comes to Palinurus, and at 2. 268 a true vision of Hector comes to Aeneas at the time

¹ *C.R.* xiv (1900), 153 f. He was followed by E. Norden in his edition of Book VI (Berlin, 1926), 348.

² *T.A.P.A.* xc (1959), 173 ff. For a brief bibliography, and reference to other bibliographies, see Otis, op. cit. 173-4.

³ *Der Traum in der Aeneis (Noctes Romanae)*, 1952), 94.

⁴ *De Div.* 2. 146.

⁵ *N.H.* 10. 211. Macrobius, in *Som. Scip.* 1. 3. 4 elaborates on the theme. Similarly nowadays, if a person has nightmares after eating cheese, people in general regard this as less significant than if he experiences them without such a physical cause.

'quo prima quies mortalibus aegris incipit'. Everett takes *prima quies* out of context, as referring to Aeneas' men, and says that 'according to Deiphobus (6. 513) the revelry had been kept up well into the night, so that the *prima quies* would not have come till after midnight'. But as we have seen, it is the *prima quies mortalibus aegris*, not just for the Trojans on that night, which is being referred to, and secondly, Deiphobus makes it clear that the people he refers to spent the *whole* night in revelry, so they cannot include Aeneas, who was asleep for at least part of the time.¹ In other words, in at least one case Virgil depicts a true dream as appearing *before* midnight, so he does not consistently observe this factor of chronology.

Even if, then, we obtained a clear indication that Aeneas departed before midnight, it would still seem doubtful that Virgil meant us to think false dreams appeared then. But is there such a clear indication? Aeneas enters Hades at dawn (line 255). 450 lines before he departs, we are told that midday has passed (535-6). Everett thought we should assume from this that Aeneas leaves before midnight. Yet Virgil could hardly have expected the reader to remember this 450 lines later, and even if we did, there is still no reason for us to assume it was before, rather than after, midnight. In fact the only indication of time we are given at the crucial point is that Aeneas re-encounters the ships and his companions, and 'then' they set course straight for Caieta. If anything, this implies that morning has already come (and thus that he left *after* midnight): the ships would hardly depart in the middle of the night. I conclude that in view of the fact that we are given no indication that Aeneas leaves before midnight, and that on one occasion a true dream comes before midnight, we must discount Everett's theory where Virgil is concerned.

The second school of thought places emphasis on the 'false dream' which Aeneas is supposed to experience. In its simplest form, it is the view that Virgil was disillusioned in his task. Now it may be possible to find indications that Virgil took a pessimistic view of some of the events he narrates. But if one tries to apply this view to the Gates of Sleep the only sense I can make of it is that Virgil thought that many or all of the numerous prophecies made by Anchises were 'false dreams', and unlikely to come true. Anchises delivers prophecies from lines 756 to 882; all except one of them had been fulfilled by the time Virgil was writing. The single exception is the statement (794-5) that Augustus would extend the Empire *super et Garamantas et Indos*. If Virgil did not believe this one prophecy, and wished to imply that it was a 'false dream', it is quite incredible that he should do so by referring to 'false dreams' in the plural, one hundred lines later. He could not have failed to realize that he would also be implying that all the other prophecies were unreliable.

A more subtle variant of this school of thought is the view that what Aeneas experiences is itself a dream, rather than reality, and that it is 'a "false dream" in the sense that it is not to be taken as a literal reality.'² Now, if one describes an experience as a 'dream', one means that the experience only took place in the mind of the recipient, and is 'not to be taken as a literal reality'. If one describes it as a 'true dream', one means the same thing, but with the additional implication that the dream in some way corresponds to, or has a message for, reality. But if an experience is described as a 'false dream', it can only mean that the experience gives a misleading impression of present or future reality.

¹ As Virgil tells us: 2. 270.

See also his book *Virgil, A Study in Civilized*

² The words are those of B. Otis, loc. cit. *Poetry* (Oxford, 1963), 304.

And it is unacceptable that Virgil could have meant to imply that, because it again seems to imply that the prophecies *post eventa* were untrue (which they were not). It would appear, then, that this theory too will not do, and we must try again.

It was pointed out long ago¹ that the contrast we are presented with is between true *umbrae* and false *insomnia*. Duebner suggested that since Aeneas and the Sibyl are not 'true shades' they have to depart through the other gate *faute de mieux*. But this will hardly do as an explanation: they may not be 'true shades', but still less could they be called 'false dreams'. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Virgil has changed Homer somewhat. In the passage of Homer on which our passage is based (*Od.* 19. 562 ff.) Homer describes both gates as dealing with dreams (*δνειροι*); in Virgil, one of them deals with *umbrae*. Secondly, Virgil calls them not, as in Homer, gates of Dreams, but gates of Sleep (*Somni*). Servius suggested² that this is simply because *somniorum* is unmetrical—a ridiculous reason, because Virgil could easily avoid the genitive, as he does in 896, where he refers to the gate by which the Manes send out *insomnia* (accusative). Part of the reason why he makes this distinction between shades and dreams was emphasized by Steiner.³ Virgil supposes that when one experiences a true dream in which an ancestor or hero comes to give advice or prophecy, the dreamer sees the actual shade of the person concerned, whom we are to envisage as having travelled up from Hades via the gate of horn. This is moderately clear in Virgil's own narrative, when the *facies parentis Anchisae* comes to Aeneas (5. 723); this 'spectre' does not seem to be a mere image, as the language of the figure, both here and when he is seen in Elysium (6. 679 ff.), strongly suggests that it is the *umbra* which speaks to Aeneas in both places. The same idea is more explicit in Homer (*Il.* 23. 65 ff.), where the *ψυχή* of Patroclus comes to Achilles and asks to be buried, so that he can pass through the gates into Hades.⁴

Through the one gate, then, come the shades of dead people who appear in dreams to give true messages. Through the other gate come *falsa insomnia*, which are doubtless to be identified with the *somnia vana* which Virgil describes as living together sheltered by a vast elm near the entrance.⁵ These are not the souls of dead people, but insubstantial 'dream-beings',⁶ which could partially explain the different wording when Virgil talks of 'true *umbrae*' but 'false *insomnia*'.

Yet it would be dangerous to assume that Virgil was drawing the distinction as clearly as this. We can point to his use of the word '*insomnia*', instead of just '*somnia*'; this is the first time it is used in Latin in this sense. Virgil has modelled it on the Greek word *ἐνύπνιον*, which, though it is only an adverb in Homer, quickly becomes a noun and a synonym of *δνειρος* by the time of Herodotus.⁷ In using this newly coined Latin word, I would suggest that Virgil was referring

¹ By F. Duebner in his edition of the *Aeneid* (Paris, 1866) ad loc.

² *In Aen.* 6. 893.

³ Op. cit. 90, following Heyne.

⁴ This hypothesis would then explain the passage where Pliny mentions that the eating of beans is eschewed by the Pythagoreans, either because it causes dreams, 'aut ut alii tradidere, quoniam mortuorum animae sint in ea (sc. faba), qua de causa

parentando utique adsumitur' (*N.H.* 18. 118). Presumably by eating beans one would dream more, and thus disturb a larger number of spirits from their abode in Hades.

⁵ 6. 283–4. Virgil has adapted this image from the description of Sleep in Homer (*Il.* 14. 286 ff.), where *Υπνος* hides high up in the branches of a fir-tree, looking like a bird.

⁶ Cf. Steiner, op. cit. 87–8.

⁷ Cf. e.g. Hdt. 7. 16 β.

to more than just the 'misleading dreams': by using the prefix *in*, he would seem to be conveying the idea of things or people seen *in* dreams.¹ And this will include the shades of the dead who appear in *true* dreams. Similarly, the *somnia vana* should themselves be *umbræ*, because all inhabitants of Hades ought to be shades, whether they were once real people or not. Virgil does appear to refer to them as *umbræ* in line 294.

To summarize. The horn gate deals with true *umbræ*, and thus with true *insomnia*, in which the *umbræ* appear. The ivory gate sends out false dreams, which are in themselves false *umbræ*. This does not seem to be taking Virgil's meaning further than he would wish us to go. On the contrary, both his use of the word '*insomnium*', and the fact that he refers to the false dreams as *umbræ*, appear to show that this is what he naturally assumes, and expects us to assume.

We can now return to the original problem. Why do Aeneas and the Sibyl depart through the ivory gate? As we have seen, that gate deals not just with dreams but also with shades, since both can be called *insomnia*. In other words, not just with *falsa somnia* but with *falsæ umbræ*. I suggest that Aeneas and the Sibyl, in passing through, are regarded not as 'false dreams' but as 'false shades', and as they are real people passing through Hades, 'false shades' is precisely what they are.

All through the description of the Underworld journey Virgil emphasizes that Aeneas and the Sibyl are real people, in contrast to the shades who live in Hades. Thus, when Aeneas takes up his sword to strike the threatening dreams, he is reminded that they are 'tenues sine corpore vitæ . . . cava sub imagine formæ' (292-3). The most striking example is in the passage where Aeneas and the Sibyl are about to cross the Styx (384-416). Charon is very reluctant to take the bodies of the living across at all, and when persuaded by the production of the golden bough, he removes a large number of real *umbræ* from the boat, so that Aeneas and the Sibyl may enter. But even the weight of just the two of them is enough almost to sink the boat (413). And later on in the book, we continue to be reminded of the shadowy and insubstantial nature of the beings to whom Aeneas talks.²

When Virgil depicts the two as departing through the ivory gate, he does so in the thought that they are not 'true' shades but 'false' ones, that is, not really 'shades' at all. We find the word *falsus* being used in this same sense of 'not-really *x*', rather than 'an unreal *x*', elsewhere in Virgil. At 3. 302 he depicts Andromache at Buthrotum, offering a sacrifice 'Ante urbem in luco, falsi Simoentis ad undam'. Here, the word *falsus* has no implication of 'deceptive' or 'unreal'; rather, it means that although the river is not the real Simois, the inhabitants of the area have chosen to regard it as such.³ But for what reason should Virgil have called Aeneas and the Sibyl *umbræ*, albeit false ones?

When he came to the end of the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Virgil was faced with a problem. He had already described a long and impressive journey to reach the Underworld. The Sibyl told Aeneas, 'Facilis descensus Averno, . . . sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, hoc opus, hic labor est'

¹ This was seen by Servius, in *Aen.* 5. 840, but the point has not been taken up since: 'Bene autem discernit ista Vergilius, ut "Somnum" ipsum deum dicat, "somnia" quod dormimus, "insomnia" quod videmus in somnis.'

² Cf. e.g. 492-3; 510; 700-2.

³ One can suspect a similar meaning for *falsus* in the *falsi genitoris* of 1. 716. This may mean either 'of a deceived father' or 'of his supposed father—the one he called father'. The latter is much more likely, in which case it provides a second parallel.

(126–8), and she referred to his wish ‘bis Stygios innare lacus, bis nigra videre / Tartara’ (134–5). Yet for the author to describe the ascent in such terms, however briefly, would almost inevitably create an anticlimax. Virgil solved the problem with a stroke of poetic genius. All who leave Hades are *umbrae*, whether they leave to appear in dreams, or alternatively to enter a newborn child as a soul reborn (713–14). Such *umbrae* would not have an arduous journey to the surface—they would simply pass through one of the gates mentioned by Homer and appear magically on the surface. If Aeneas and the Sibyl take the same exit, the need for a lengthy description of the return disappears.¹ They have to be regarded as *umbrae*, which is, after all, what the other beings who used the gates were. But in this case they are ‘false’ *umbrae*, ‘false’ not in the sense of ‘deceptive’, but of ‘not really’ *umbrae*, the sense we have already seen in 3. 302.

The danger with any theory which attempts to explain a problem like this one, is that it will appear far too complicated for what is, of course, not a philosophical treatise, but a work of poetry. For example, if I appear to treat Virgil as though he left ‘clues’ for us to ‘decipher’ (in, for instance, his use of the word *insomnium*), one need not see in it those terms. All one is trying to do is to discover the fairly simple ideas which were at the back of Virgil’s mind when he wrote the passage, and one can only attempt to discover them by a careful examination of his actual words. However, I shall now summarize the situation as I would suggest Virgil saw it. The two gates send out spirits that leave the Underworld to appear on Earth. Such spirits are ‘shades’, and are either true or false. Aeneas and the Sibyl are real people, and thus ‘false shades’. As such, they take their departure through the ivory gate.²

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¹ Lucian faced a similar problem at *Nec.* 22, and also contrived an easy exit.

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