

XIII. Three Levels of Meaning in *Aeneid* VI

L. A. MACKAY

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Whether Virgil's conception of the soul's destiny is derived from a single basic conception, or whether different ideas have rather been brought together into a whole that is not free from contradictions, is a question that has been much discussed. Norden's memorable edition, from which these introductory words are piously drawn, did much to clarify the problem by citation of Platonic parallels; but it did not put an end to the discussion, nor would he have wished it to. Some would seek a principle of unity that might justify or explain away the apparent inconsistencies; others would accept them as imperfections that might have disappeared in revision; others prefer to examine them separately and exploit them in quest of greater subtlety and richness of poetic implication. This practice may occasionally have led the interpreters to excesses of subtlety, but those who pursue it may fairly argue that, in general, lesser artists dealing with a greater are more likely to err by reading too little into him than by reading too much.

Within the last dozen years original minds with varying interests and approaches, and varying degrees of restraint, have exercised their ingenuity in extended studies of the poet, with stimulating and sometimes with startling results.¹ It is well to bear in mind Perret's warning (*Virgile* 131 f.) that in assessing the religious element in the *Aeneid*, monotheists and atheists must be cautious about ascribing

¹ e.g. W. F. J. Knight, *Roman Vergil* (London 1944); E. Paratore, *Virgilio* (Rome 1945); R. W. Crutwell, *Virgil's Mind at Work* (Oxford 1946); F. H. B. Letters, *Virgil* (New York 1946); V. Pöschl, *Die Dichtkunst Virgils* (Innsbruck-Wien 1950); A. M. Guillemin, *Virgile, poète, artiste et penseur* (Paris 1951); J. Perret, *Virgile, l'homme et l'oeuvre* (Paris 1952). Among recent shorter studies more particularly relevant to the problems of the *Sixth Aeneid* special reference may be made to Robert A. Brooks' sensitive exploration of the tragic elusiveness that in the *Aeneid* pervades alike the hero's fortunes and the poet's conception of human fate ("Discolor aura, Reflections on the Golden Bough," *AJP* 74 [1953] 260-80), and to Frances Norwood's study, which, grappling more closely with the specific problems of inconsistency, perceives in the book a tripartite treatment, based on the distinctions between the religion of the citizen and that of the poet or the philosopher, and aimed at securing the fullest possible measure of aesthetic effect by appealing to three facets of man's nature, the primitive, the moral, and the philosophical ("The Tripartite Eschatology of *Aeneid* 6," *CP* 49 [1954] 15-26).

to a polytheist all their own doubts and scruples; but there remain in the Sixth Book problems of organisation and interpretation that demand attention. Doubtless many will prefer to share the amiable scepticism deftly expressed in Cartault's comment on *Aen.* 6.264-67:

Ici, Virgile adresse aux divinités et aux localités infernales une invocation dont on a fait ressortir depuis longtemps le caractère grandiose. Elle est admirable en effet, mais l'émotion qu'elle doit nous causer est purement poétique. Il n'y a pas dans les révélations que va faire Virgile d'audace qui frise le sacrilège, puisqu'il ne s'agit point de rendre public ce qu'on enseignait dans les mystères avec défense de le communiquer et qui restait spécial aux initiés. Les conceptions sur la vie d'outre-tombe qu'il va faire passer sous nos yeux, il les a trouvées chez les poètes et chez les philosophes; il les met en vers en les juxtaposant et sans se préoccuper de les accorder. Il n'y a chez lui ni divulgation d'une doctrine secrète ni exposé d'un système original, et il en convient loyalement dans cette demande respectueuse de permission *Sit mihi fas audita loqui* 266, qui au fond est d'une naïveté assez savoureuse, puisqu'il n'a jamais été interdit par les lois divines de révéler ce qui n'est caché pour personne.²

But there are times when it is rash to be too cautious. The secrecy with which the ancients effectively veiled their mystic cults makes it impossible to know whether Virgil was in fact sometimes skirting the fringe of impious revelation, and we may justifiably suspect that if we knew more about the mystic rituals, much that is now obscure in the sequence and treatment of Aeneas' journey would be illuminated.

The evidence of careful and even elaborate design in the general arrangement of the *Aeneid* is so far beyond question³ that it justifies a serious attempt to discover principles of design where, as in the Sixth Book, they seem to be deficient. One may agree that Virgil presents fundamentally incompatible views of the life after death, but one need not abandon the inquiry into his reasons for doing so, nor insist that he could have had only one reason. Some of the inconsistency discernible may be due to the notorious difficulty of integrating myth and philosophy in any culture; but Virgil seems to be fully aware of difficulties that he makes little or no attempt to remove; on some of them he seems even to insist. Evidences of deliberate plan are obvious, and the book is too serious in purpose and treatment to be dismissed as simply a rhetorically picturesque handling of traditional materials.

Whether we regard the experience as a dream, or as poetically

² A. Cartault, *L'Art de Virgile dans l'Enéide* 1 (Paris 1926) 445-46.

³ Cf. G. E. Duckworth, "The Architecture of the Aeneid," *AJP* 75 (1954) 1-15.

actual for the hero, the assumption that this book embodies Virgil's most serious belief finds support in the curious fact that in this, the central episode in a poem instinct with divinity, the gods are notably absent. Charon, though *deus*, is a subordinate figure at best, and is left behind at the entrance; he is a link with that upper world of poetic legend in which the gods do intervene. Tisiphone, a demon at least, if not a god, is apparently vaguely seen in the distance (555-75); but with this remote and passing exception, the underworld as Aeneas sees it is essentially a human underworld. The judges are Rhadamanthus and Minos, of equally human origin with Aeneas; in Elysium Orpheus and Musaeus preside. Aeneas has been told of underworld deities, but he does not meet them. Indeed, once the Styx is crossed, Proserpina's name is never mentioned, and although Aeneas passes along a road which stretches *Ditis magni sub moenia*, Dis makes no appearance, and there is no other mention of him, under any name.

Even on earth, where the greater gods are only infrequent visitors, Aeneas had met with Mercury and Venus, and had seen others of the Olympians at their destructive work in Troy; here in a realm which is the home of two great divinities, to one of whom he had been commanded to bear her own peculiar gift (6.142), he sees none. It is not enough to say, "Neither did Homer's Odysseus meet the gods of the underworld in person," for the experience of Aeneas has actually very little in common with that of Odysseus. Hercules⁴ and Theseus, whose example Aeneas himself cites to the Sibyl, did come face to face with the gods of the underworld, and so did Orpheus. The *Fourth Georgic*, in a passage from which Virgil drew several lines for the *Sixth Aeneid*, is quite explicit on this point: *Manis adiit regemque tremendum* 469; though the scene is not elaborated, for its elaboration would have been out of place. The language used by the Sibyl in directing Aeneas to secure the Golden Bough suggests on the face of it an original intention to have Aeneas appear at the infernal court and personally present his credentials like an ambassador. This could have been a grandiose and impressive scene, but apparently when Virgil came to a serious handling of the problems of man's eternal destiny, he found the picturesque creations of Greek poetic fancy inadequate to his solemn theme.

⁴E. Norden, *Vergilius Aeneis Buch VI* (Leipzig-Berlin 1934) 258, argues that Virgil drew on a "Descent of Heracles" for certain aspects of Aeneas' meeting with the shades of warriors.

He does not deny himself the riches of Greek legend and mythology for poetic embellishment, as Milton in "Lycidas" employs pagan mythology for the general frame of his poem, but deserts it in the central passage that voices his actual religious convictions. Once Aeneas is fairly launched on his journey, the gods appear only in the discourses of the Sibyl. Aeneas himself, whatever he may hear about on his way, completes his journey in the company of a mortal-born, and after he has crossed the Styx he meets with none but the shades of mortals. He does not present his passport to Proserpina; when he comes to dispose of the Bough he does so in a less spectacular, but actually more solemn and more meaningful way.

One of the anomalies of the book Mr. Letters attempts to solve by the interesting suggestion (*Virgil* 125 ff.) that, as in Dante's *Paradiso*, where "by some ineffable mystery of Paradise, the saints of each lower orb are really present together around the central throne of God," so Virgil may have intended at once a connection and a distinction, derived perhaps, Mr. Letters thinks, from Ennius, between the shades that throng the outer divisions of the underworld and the souls in the Elysian fields. Thus Deiphobus, for example, might as shade be hovering around the Styx and the Mourning Fields, yet as soul be passing through various grades of purification, as in the *Odyssey* (11.601-3) we are told that the shade of Heracles is in Hades while the hero himself is in heaven. This is a shrewd speculation; yet there remain difficulties for which the only solution seems to lie in adopting the approach urged by Mr. Letters in another passage (*Virgil* 157): "The failure to suggest any satisfactory solution of the anomalies of the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, for instance, seems to have arisen at least in part from the application of shallow rationalism instead of poetic logic to the situation. Yet if we grant the axiom that two or three senses often coalesce in a Virgilian phrase, it would seem natural to expect this characteristic to attach not merely to the phrase, but to the incidents and developments of the poem as a whole."

As a single electric wire can carry several different messages simultaneously, so, if the poet wishes, a single thread of narrative action can be the carrier of several messages at once. We should seek not for allegory, which demands a single interpretation, but for symbolism, which permits the simultaneous handling of several levels of meaning (cf. Pöschl 37, Perret 93). This approach, if it cannot resolve the discrepancies, can at least reasonably account for

them. If we can identify the strands of symbolism, we may be able to see why inconsistent details are allowed to exist in parallel developments that could not be made homogeneous without damage to the separate strands. The book is not the harmonious development of a single conception, but a polyphonic treatment of varied themes. "The layers are imposed on each other, or blended, or interwoven. None alone can exactly express what is meant."⁵

Whether we regard Aeneas' experience in the Sixth Book as a dream, or as poetically actual for him, the chief directing theme in the journey is certainly its direct personal relevance to the character of Aeneas and his role in the story. In this respect the primary importance of the journey is that it represents a spiritual purification and illumination that fit him for his mighty task. To this development belong, as might be expected, the three episodes in which Aeneas is personally involved, the meetings with Dido, with Deiphobus, and with Anchises. For the last of these, the culminating illumination which fits him for his historic mission, he is prepared by the recall and dismissal of two great traumatic experiences, the tragedy of Dido and the disasters of Troy. That Aeneas' conscience had not been clear on these points is plain from his previous efforts at self-justification. It was his own consciousness of inadequacy, his own sense of being humanly in the wrong, under whatever divine compulsion, that had made him speak so coldly, so crudely, so unfairly to Dido at their parting (4.331 ff.). Indeed it is clear that under the strain of that meeting, with the consciousness that his behaviour is really indefensible, he almost loses his temper, and attempts to put Dido in the wrong, precisely because he is profoundly dissatisfied with his own conduct. It is surely significant that in the second divine admonition to depart (4.554 ff.), which occurs after this scene, Virgil does not say that the god reappeared. The visit was in any case unnecessary; Aeneas was *iam certus eundi* and all was ready for departure, and these things a god might have been expected to know. It is possible that the episode was inserted primarily to increase the tension of the situation, but the handling of the scene is very different from that of the previous visitation. Virgil carefully does not say that the apparition was Mercury; he says it was *omnia Mercurio similis*, which rather implies that it was

⁵ W. F. J. Knight, *Poetic Inspiration, an approach to Virgil* (Exmouth 1946) 16. Though Mr. Knight is speaking here of another poem, he would certainly extend this judgment to the *Aeneid*.

not Mercury. Nor does he say that it was sent by Jupiter. Mercury's first appearance had been in full daylight, and he told the truth. There is nothing in Dido's previous words or actions, and particularly in those that immediately precede this scene, to justify the charges made against her here, and this dream does not, like Mercury, vanish into thin air, but dissolves into black night. We cannot assume its intended truth from the time of its appearance, for the dream that deceived Agamemnon came shortly before dawn, and the true appearances of Hector's ghost (*Aen.* 2.268 ff.) and, it would seem, of the ghost of Anchises (*Aen.* 4.351 ff.) came early in the night.⁶ Surely this is no divine admonition, but a black phantasm of Aeneas' uneasy conscience. Again, Aeneas' fear that in surviving the catastrophe of Troy he had fallen short of true heroism is betrayed, perhaps by his envy of those who fell before Troy (*Aen.* 1.94 ff.), and certainly by his insistence that if fate had not willed otherwise, he had earned death by his deeds (*Aen.* 2.431 ff.). The sense of guilt and inadequacy that might have hampered him in his future conduct of affairs is dispelled by the recall and dismissal of these experiences, indeed by something like confession and absolution, when he comes face to face with Dido, and with Deiphobus, the active head of the house of Priam when Troy fell. Dido does not grant him her forgiveness; she remains *inimica*; but her action now echoes and implicitly justifies his previous choice. As Aeneas before had sacrificed the claims of passion to the claims of *pietas*, so Dido now, after a hesitation indicated with superb delicacy by the single word *tandem*, turns away from Aeneas and recognizes, and finds redemption in recognizing, the claims of *pietas* that bound her to the husband to whom she had sworn fidelity. Deiphobus, the symbol of Troy's last resistance, assures his friend and kinsman that he had done all a man could have done, and sends him on his way with a blessing. In Perret's words (*Virgile* 113), "à chaque palier Enée congédie, pourrait-on dire, remet en ordre pour ce qui est de lui, un moment de son passé."

Aeneas has however a broader significance than merely to prefigure Augustus, or even the genius of Rome. He is a type of heroic virtue from whom not only his son, but any man, may learn *virtutem verumque laborem*. Like Achilles and Odysseus, but with more deliberate intent than these, he is a model for the emulation of

⁶ On the timing of this apparition and the dubious importance of timing in such events, see the note of A. S. Pease on *Aeneid* 4.352, and references cited there.

all men in so far as they aspire to and are capable of heroic virtue. Thus, though precisely because of his heroic stature he does not represent Everyman, he is still a symbol, all the more moving and all the more effective for his hesitations, his limitations, his weaknesses, of human nobility at grips with a tragic and only half-understood destiny, *adversis rerum inmersabilis undis*. To this symbolism belong a number of details in his journey that bear no direct relevance to his development as divinely appointed founder of the Roman State. The order that operates here, as many scholars have seen, is the order of the stages of human life, and the pattern is that of the development of a good and firm character by deliberate choice. In this sequence the central episode is that of the Golden Bough. The ethical significance of this theme has been recognised at least since Servius identified the shape of the bough as that of the Pythagorean letter, symbolising the choice of lives, and therefore appropriately dedicated at the point where its bearer turned to the right along the path of virtue.⁷ No other interpretation will so fully account for the abandonment at this point of the talisman to which so much importance has been attached earlier. Once Elysium has been entered, the dangerous portion of the way is indeed past; but the power of the bough has not in fact been invoked for protection against danger; it has been used only to secure passage on Charon's boat, that is, to permit the beginning of the journey. Its dedication where the ways part symbolises the attainment of mature age and settled character. The chief stages on the way to this point — the child, the lover, the soldier — follow the age sequence familiar, e.g., in the Comedies. The sequence has not the simple directness of Shakespeare's Seven Ages, but Virgil's purpose was much more complex than was Shakespeare's in that speech. The complication of the sequence by poetic enrichment and the overlaying of other themes does not affect the succession of the stages of life appropriate to the youthful interests of love and soldiering.⁸ The early appearance of those condemned to death by a false accusation, or dead by their own hand through sheer inability to cope with life, offers particular difficulty for any systematic interpretation, especially as Virgil insists that their station here is no accident or oversight, but

⁷ Actually the bough was carried by the companion who represents the guidance of divine wisdom.

⁸ Cf. the poets' use of *pubes*, *iuventus*, etc. for "warriors." In Virgil, a military significance or a military context dominates in 17 out of 20 uses of *pubes*, 20 out of 27 uses of *iuventus*.

quite deliberately assigned. It may be relevant to a different sequence to be considered later; but possibly they are placed where they are as being next in innocence to the infants; the order would then symbolise the gradual loss of innocence which culminates for some in Tartarus, in others is redeemed by the attainment of rational virtue. He that chooses the path of rational virtue is rewarded first by what we may call an almost external beatitude, a peace of mind that transfigures the ordinary occupations and enjoyments of life; then, if he persists, he advances to a more complete intellectual understanding of man's place and function in a profoundly rational and profoundly living Universe.

This strand of meaning offers to modern readers an initial difficulty through its frankly limited and aristocratic character. We tend, even unconsciously, to assume that such a moral interpretation is invalid if it is confined to the favored few, and Virgil's insistence on the difficulty of securing the Golden Bough makes it unquestionable that he does so confine it. This should not, however, surprise us unduly. Such exclusiveness is no stranger to the Roman tradition, and Virgil had already given ample evidence of his own tendency to hero-worship. Indeed, even Aristotle, for all his attempt to produce a broadly-based theory of conduct, and all his emphasis on the importance of training and habituation, reserved a great place for natural endowment in the formation of a good character. Plato, whose authority matters much more for Virgil, is notoriously uncompromising and rigorous in this respect, and the Pythagorean tradition, to which Virgil also paid great attention, is reported to have been markedly selective. Some of our difficulty arises perhaps from a tendency to confuse the aristocratic and the oligarchic, a tendency for which there is some excuse in the actual practice of many groups that have called themselves aristocracies. For ancient theorists the distinction was clear and deep. The essential characteristic of the oligarch is self-indulgence, of the aristocrat self-discipline. The doctrines of Epicurus might have inspired a more generously inclusive approach, but Epicureanism, however well justified may be Paratore's insistence on its importance in Virgil's earlier work, had been clearly abandoned in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas is the model not for the average man, but for the exceptional man who is capable of realizing, in spite of difficulties, temptations, and defeats, the best in human nature.

This however does not exhaust the symbolism of the journey,

and certain grave and fundamental inconsistencies in the presentation of the underworld it still leaves untouched. These point to a third level of symbolism, perhaps, for Virgil, the most important of all. Aeneas' journey reflects what might be called the Pilgrim's Progress of the Mediterranean mind in its search for an understanding of the problems of death and life and man's place in the Universe. The inconsistency observed in the representation of life after death is thus a real inconsistency, not casual or careless but designed and deliberate. The eschatologies presented must be accepted in the order in which they are presented, not contemporaneous but successive. We begin with the most primitive conception, simple bleak survival, with no individuation, no moral implication, no thought of reward or punishment.⁹ This perhaps is the chief reason for the otherwise shocking inclusion of the falsely accused, and the guiltless suicides, at the point where we find them. After these the Heroines and the Warriors display the Homeric underworld, with some degree of individuation in its reflection of human fates and personal memories, but still with no moral implications. This shades into the popular, traditional theologies described by Norden. Next on the journey, as it was next, probably, in historical development, and certainly in literary tradition, comes the moral interpretation of the after-life, with its conception of punishment for the wicked, and a blessed abode for the righteous, as developed by the mystery religions symbolised here in the figures of Musaeus and the Thracian priest. Finally with the Platonic-Pythagorean faith, crowned by the Stoic doctrine of the *anima mundi*, as expounded by Anchises, complete illumination is attained. This faith does not attempt to reconcile or assimilate the earlier groping essays at understanding; it completely supersedes them, as each of them in their turn had superseded their predecessors. The importance that this theme of a developing religious insight had for Virgil is indicated by his difficult and hardly successful attempt to accommodate the Stoic doctrines to the pre-existence required for his review of the Roman worthies. The *anima mundi* and its attendant purifications are for the narrative theme merely an encumbrance and an awkwardness that might easily have been dispensed with; to the philosophic theme they are an indispensable culmination.

But knowledge, even wisdom, is not enough, unless it show itself

⁹ The sequence is admirably presented in C. Bailey, *Religion in Virgil* (Oxford 1935) 241-43.

in action. "The end is not knowing but doing . . . even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, the good of the community is clearly a greater and more perfect good, both to get and to keep. This is not to deny that the good of the individual is worth while. But what is good for a nation or a city has a higher, diviner quality" (Arist. *E.N.* 1095A.5, 1094B.7, J. A. K. Thomson's translation). The Roman nation, in whom the purpose of Divine Providence finds its most direct expression, is not denied access to other skills, but its peculiar skill is the art of ordering and directing human life in society. So the culmination of enlightenment is the parade of Roman worthies, with which the main movement of the poem is resumed.

Virgil's remarkable achievement of handling simultaneously throughout the whole poem three themes: the exaltation of Augustus' work, the legendary narrative, and the evocation of the salient values of Roman history (cf. Perret 89), is reflected in the smaller compass of the Sixth Book. Here too the poet achieves a complex interweaving of three themes: the spiritual purification and illumination that fit Aeneas for his historic mission, the moral development that underlies all lives of truly heroic virtue, and the long and ultimately triumphant effort of human thought to attain an understanding of the nature and destiny of man.