

view as generally accepted: 'Das Virgil nicht für den Landmann, sondern für ein kunstsinniges, hochgebildetes Lesepublikum schreibt, darf heute als communis opinio gelten'.

15. See P. van de Woestijne, 'Varron de Reate et Virgile', Rev. Belge de Philol X, 1931 909-929. E. de St Denis, Georgiques... Introd. xxix ff. provides excellent illustrations of the way in which the poet gives life to the pedestrian descriptions of Varro.

V.S. Lectures, No. 85

THE ROLE OF THE SIXTH BOOK IN THE AENEID

A lecture delivered to the Virgil Society

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In bringing Aeneas to Cumae in the sixth book of the Aeneid Virgil follows what was evidently an already existing version of the travels of the Trojans on their way from Troy to Latium. But what remarkable, if accidental, opportunities the tradition of a halt at Cumae offered to his invention. As home of a Sibyl it gave occasion for prophecy, so convenient to Virgil's design of relating his story of a mythical past to the course of later Roman history up to his own time; and an opportunity further to evoke by anticipation a particular organ of prophecy that was characteristic of the Roman state - the celebrated Sibylline Books. Furthermore, the presence nearby at Avernus of a supposed entry to the world of the dead made it possible to associate with the prophetic motif an episode corresponding to one of the most remarkable episodes in the Homeric poems - the visit of Odysseus to the world of the dead in the eleventh book of the Odyssey. Nor was this all. It happened that Cumae was in a neighbourhood personally familiar to Virgil from his frequent spells of residence at nearby Naples. And it was further charged with memories of events in recent history, and those of a moving and exciting nature: for here had been the base of Octavian's naval forces in the war with Sextus Pompeius; the scene, too, of a momentous conference between the rival leaders and later of a disastrous battle. One may truly feel that the legend has been kind to the poet in bringing his hero to this particular place at the very moment when he is about to reach his journey's end and the Trojan remnant are to find a new home in Italy and there lay the foundations of the Roman race.

The first 264 lines of the book are occupied with preliminaries - Aeneas' interview with the Sibyl, the discovery of the death of Misenus (required, we recall, by the legend) and his burial, the finding of the mysterious Golden Bough which marks Aeneas as a man of destiny, and the sacrifice to the gods of the underworld which immediately precedes the hero's entry into the underworld itself. The rest of the book, 647 lines, relates the successive stages of his experience as he passes through the habitations of the dead.

(In parenthesis, a small curiosity may be noted here. The visit of Aeneas to the Sibyl at Cumae has been foretold by the seer Helenus in the third book of the Aeneid already. Helenus there promised Aeneas that the Sibyl would inform him of 'the peoples of Italy and the wars that are to be and by what means you may escape from or endure your several trials'. But here in the sixth book this information is imparted to Aeneas not by the Sibyl but by the shade of his own father (6.891-2). The fact is of no significance for our present purposes, nor of any important significance at all. But it is interesting to observe that a similar contradiction in the Odyssey has often appeared among the arguments (some good, some bad) which are used to show that the eleventh book of the Odyssey is a later insertion in the texture of the poem in which it stands; it illustrates the caution that has to be maintained in judging exactly what inference can be drawn from a datum of this kind. But we must return to our present subject.)

The experiences of Aeneas among the dead follow very closely, in certain respects, the Homeric prototype of this adventure in Odyssey 11. In the Odyssey Odysseus meets first a friend (Elpenor) whose body lies unburied. Then he meets a prophet (Teiresias); then his mother (Anticleia). Then he sees an impressive pageant of legendary figures (the romantic heroines of a bygone age). Next he meets figures from his own past with whom he has shared a great emotional experience: his comrades in the Trojan war, and among them Ajax, once his friend but now irreconcilably estranged. Finally he sees other traditional denizens of the underworld, the legendary sinners, such as Tantalus and Sisyphus, who are being punished for the wicked deeds they did in life.

In Virgil's version Aeneas too first meets a friend whose body lies unburied, the pilot Palinurus, whom in the preceding book we have seen fall overboard on the Trojans' otherwise uneventful voyage from Sicily to Italy. It is easy enough to see why Palinurus has been chosen to be the counterpart to the Odyssey's Elpenor: his death, like that of Misenus, was associated in the legend with the Trojans' voyage up the west coast of Italy and Cape Palinurus was supposedly named after him - because he died and was buried there. By changing this particular and causing Palinurus to be lost at sea Virgil escapes the necessity for a separate landing of the Trojans at Cape Palinurus, and at the same time finds an equivalent for the Homeric Elpenor and so an occasion for the pathetic scene between the hero and the ghost of his unburied friend; while he also preserves an overtone which though accidental would not be lost on his contemporaries - for the name Palinurus was charged with painful recent memories on account of the disastrous storm which wrecked Octavian's fleet there in 36 B.C.

Aeneas next encounters (as does Odysseus at a later stage in the series in the Odyssey) the ghosts of those who had shared with him the great crises of his own past, Dido, who turns from him in silent hate (as did Ajax from Odysseus) and Deiphobus who had been his comrade in the war at Troy and a victim of the awful catastrophe of the city's final fall. And after leaving them he sees the place where the great sinners of legend are being punished and hears from the Sibyl the catalogue of their torments (including, as in the Odyssey, those of Tantalus and Sisyphus).

Lastly Aeneas is brought into the presence of his father Anchises, who combines the characters of parent (like Anticleia in the Odyssey) and prophet

(like Teiresias in the Odyssey). And through him he receives a prophetic revelation of the future of his descendants in the form of a pageant of unborn heroes, from his own son Silvius to Augustus, ruler of Rome in Virgil's own day. This motif, of the catalogue or pageant of heroes, is one that was common in various contexts of Roman life and literature; in the rows of statues of kings and heroes on the Capitol and in the Forum, in the procession of busts of ancestors at the funerals of the nobility, in the series of names with which Cicero more than once adorns his discourse: as in the Pro Sestio for instance, qua re imitemur nostros Brutos, Camillos, Ahasias, Decios, Curios, Fabricios, Maximos, Scipiones, Lentulos, Aemilios ... innumerabiles alios qui hanc rem publicam stabiliverunt; or in the Tusculan Disputations, multo autem tardius fama deseret Curium, Fabricium, Calatinum, duos Scipiones, duos Africanos, Maximum, Paullum, Catonem, Laelium, innumerabiles alios But if the pageant that Aeneas sees has thus a Roman parentage it has undoubtedly a Homeric parentage also, in the pageant (different though its content is) that Odysseus sees of the heroines of Greek mythology. Thus there remains in some respects a remarkably close relationship between all these individual scenes in the Homeric and the Virgilian stories, totally different though the effect is both of the individual scenes and of the two episodes as wholes. For the Homeric motifs have been adjusted in every case to the circumstances of Virgil's hero and the Roman theme of his poem.

Virgil's picture also differs from Homer's in that his underworld has a geography. Homer's Odysseus stands at the outer limit of the abode of the dead and the ghosts come out to talk to him; the process is a sort of necromancy. Virgil's Aeneas makes a progress right through the infernal regions, and this involves the poet in giving his readers some account of how the underworld is arranged and what goes on in the various parts of it. I do not think we know what variety of pictures of the underworld was available in popular imagination or literary tradition in Virgil's day; there is not much evidence, and it is unlikely anyway that a fixed picture existed, for there was no established doctrinal authority to provide one and keep it stable. We can however compare with Virgil's poetical picture that implied by poetical references in his contemporaries Horace and Tibullus and Propertius. The principal feature of this picture is a Judgement, and the separation of the dead in consequence of this into two categories, the Bad who are punished and the Good who are assigned a residence in the abode of the blessed; nothing is said or implied of any intermediate category. In Virgil's underworld, by contrast, the usually spectacular element of the Judgement is very much subordinated: it appears only in brief references, almost parenthetical, to Minos (432) and Rhadamanthus (566). On the other hand Virgil introduces categories of the dead intermediate between the Bad and the Good; and these intermediate categories are two. There is a class of souls undergoing purgation, to purify them of curable imperfections acquired during their life on earth and prepare them for a new incarnation; and there is a class of souls who are set apart from the rest because they died, in various ways, prematurely - the dead in infancy, the dead by execution for crimes which they did not commit, the suicides, the dead for love. Taking the common characteristic of these latter groups - a death in some striking manner premature - with the statements of one or two ancient authors that some believed that the prematurely dead had to wander about until the time came when they would have died in the course of nature, it seems a safe conclusion that somewhere in Virgil's mind is the idea of a Limbo temporarily occupied by the prematurely dead. If so, this is one element in his conception of the underworld which differentiates it from the conception that we seem to meet in his contemporaries in literature. The other differentiating element, mentioned already, is

the purgation of souls who do not qualify immediately either for damnation or felicity, and their later reincarnation and return to the world above. The two ideas - the period of suspense for the prematurely dead and the purgation of curable sin - belong to different orders of thought, for the one in its nature is superstitious and the other in its nature is moral. But 'organisationally' they are compatible: for the soul of a prematurely dead person can wait for the prescribed period, and then come to the Judgment, and then proceed to the stage of purgation (or damnation, or eternal felicity). This of course suits the design of Virgil's story: for Aeneas will be able not only to see the souls awaiting rebirth after purgation, and so the prophetic pageant of his own descendants, but also to converse with Dido and Deiphobus (both recently and prematurely dead) before they become involved in conditions in which no suitably pathetic encounter would be possible. The presence of these features in Virgil's account of the underworld is thus easily explained by the advantage they offer for the economy of his story. But did they also correspond to beliefs which he really held himself?

That this should be so seems to be excluded when we come to consider his treatment of the two ideas. If the sojourn of the prematurely dead in their place apart is not temporary but permanent, then it is in disharmony with what we hear later about purgation and so forth; for there is no reason imaginable why premature death should exempt its victims from a system of moral retribution and reform. But if the sojourn of these souls in their limbo is temporary, why does the poet never say so? Further, why does he include in the category of those 'dead for love' a person such as Eriphyle (445), whose death was not for love at all, but for cupidity? Again, if the warriors who come next in the series are those slain in war and so prematurely dead, they should not include Adrastus (480) who alone of the Seven who fought against Thebes was not killed in the war. However, the poet actually describes these warriors not as 'slain in war' but as 'who won glory in war'. But if this is what they are, how are they distinguished from those who died 'fighting for their fatherland' who appear later (660) among the permanently blessed in Elysium? It cannot be reasoned that these are souls who must wait for their normal span of years to be accomplished before proceeding to the place of their final disposal, since Adrastus and his companions in the war of the Seven against Thebes, Parthenopaeus and Tydeus (479-80) belonged to a bygone generation already in relation to the Trojan war and the events of the Aeneid. It is clear from all this that the poet is not dealing with an idea that has any real value for him, but simply with one that he has found to offer a convenient basis for the pathetic encounters that he wishes to introduce.

The same conclusion imposes itself in regard to the doctrine of reincarnation after a thousand years (748 ff.), but in fact we are shown among them souls (Augustus, Marcellus etc.) who have still a thousand years to wait before their incarnation will take place. Moreover, the souls seen awaiting reincarnation are endowed with all the attributes of their maturity in future life, though in fact of course they will be born as babies. The resulting pageant of future Roman heroes is brilliantly effective as a prophetic vision, but ludicrous as a symbol of any religious or philosophical concept. It is, we recall, introduced by the celebrated speech of Anchises (724-51) in which he affirms the immortality of the soul and explains the process of purgation and rebirth. The whole complex that embraces this speech and the subsequent pageant has a multiple literary ancestry: not only the prophet-parent-pageant sequence of the underworld scenes in the Odyssey, and the pageants and enumerations that we have remarked already in so many contexts of Roman life and literature, but also the Myth of Er in Plato's

Republic and the Dream of Scipio in Cicero's Republic (his Latin counterpart of Plato's). Plato's Er comes back from the dead with an account of a process of judgment, purgation and reincarnation, and the memory of a pageant of souls about to be reborn. Cicero's Scipio has revealed to him by his father in a vision the human soul's immortal nature and the rewards that await the soul of a virtuous and patriotic person after death. In both Republics the purpose of the revelation is the improvement of the moral self; doctrine and example are an incitement to live well during our lives on earth so as to qualify for a better rather than a worse state hereafter. But in the Aeneid no such consequence is drawn: the doctrine of reincarnation is brought in simply to introduce in its turn the pageant of Roman heroes, required by the poet as a means of expressing the continuity of the story he is telling in the Aeneid with the history of his country up to his own time. As for the hero, he is shown the vision in order that he may 'rejoice the more' in the finding of a new home in Italy for the Trojan remnant (716 ff.); and after he has seen it he is said to be 'fired with the hope' of these glories promised to his people (889); but it is not suggested that the revelation of the immortality of the soul and its purgation or punishment or reward has any profounder effect on him at all. In short, nothing is made in the Aeneid of the moral significance of this doctrine which Anchises (rather perfunctorily) expounds. It serves solely to introduce the poetically indispensable pageant of Roman heroes.

(In parenthesis may I refer here to a point of interpretation in Anchises' speech? He says in lines 740 ff. that souls undergo cleansing in various ways, some by wind, some by water, some by fire. He goes on (743 ff.) quisque suos patimur manes - which I take to mean that we each receive in the underworld the treatment appropriate to our case - and then exinde per amplum mittimur Elysium et pauci laeta arva tenemus. Does not this mean simply that 'some of us, a few, are admitted to range Elysium and find our abode in the Happy Fields'? inde and exinde are well attested in the sense of ex iis; and also well attested are constructions in which a phrase such as ex iis in conjunction with a verb gives the sense of our 'one of ...' or 'some of ...'; for instance in Tacitus (Annals 2.60.3) iussus e senioribus patriam linguam interpretari (one of the older priests was asked to translate). In this parenthesis in his account of purgation, the lot of all ordinary souls, the poet excepts from the process a chosen few who pass directly after death to Elysium: such a one surely is Anchises, whom we cannot conceive as having been washed or burned or aired to free him from his sins in the short time that has passed since his death, or as having been imagined by the poet to need such treatment.)

To return to the question of Virgil's picture of the underworld, if this does not reflect either a conception really held by the poet or one current among his contemporaries, but resembles in this respect his story of the Aeneid as a whole - a poetic amalgam which corresponds neither to a traditional version of Aeneas' adventures nor to Virgil's private belief about what these really were - can we instead discern a figurative significance in the hero's experience in this book? We can certainly see that the story of the Aeneid as a whole is in some sense a figurative counterpart of the history of Rome as well as its opening chapter. Can we detect also a figurative value, perhaps profounder, in this particularly impressive episode? This is indeed what many readers feel must be possible; and one such view, now pretty familiar, was put with persuasive eloquence in a notable chapter of Warde Fowler's Religious Experience of the Roman People. Fowler argued that the hero's experience in the world of the dead brought about a kind of spiritual regeneration in him, liberating him from the past, so that his gaze henceforth is fixed upon the future, and purging him of the weakness and hesitation

which has sometimes appeared in his conduct in the earlier part of the poem, so that from now on he is a changed man, dedicated and undoubting.

Now if anyone sees this significant pattern in the story as Virgil unfolds it, he has a right to do so; for the multiple suggestiveness of Virgil's poetry is an excellence by comparison with which academic niceties are of small importance. But that the poet himself saw such a pattern in his story does not seem probable, on the evidence that we have. For he gives no hint of anything like this in his account of Aeneas' reaction to his experience. He says that Anchises meant the revelation of the future of Aeneas' descendants to encourage him in the pursuit of his mission (718), and that it did so (889); and this is what we should expect. But this is a very different matter from spiritual regeneration, or liberation from the past. It implies no change in Aeneas' character or attitude. And after this, neither the revelation or any effect of it is ever mentioned in the poem. If we look for evidence of any special and profound effect upon the hero, we can only hope to find it by comparing his behaviour before and after this experience, and seeing whether this experience is a necessary explanation of any difference that we observe. Now it is of course true that in the first half of the poem Aeneas displays weakness and hesitation in the episode between himself and Dido; and that he is also said (unplausibly, as it appears to me) to do so again after the loss of the four ships in the mutiny of the women in Sicily in the fifth book. But I do not think that anything else in his behaviour in the first half of the poem can be construed as a sign of moral failure, or lack of conviction. Not, for instance, his proper deference to his father in the third book; nor again his despairing resistance at the fall of Troy in the second - for it is clear from Aeneas' words in his narrative to Dido (2.431 ff.) that what he and the poet for him felt to need justification was not his hopeless and therefore irrational resistance but the fact that he had survived the fall of his fatherland at all: he did his best, he says, to get killed. And if in the first book he feels discouragement after the disastrous storm (1.208) it is hardly possible to interpret this discouragement - which he does not allow to affect his conduct - as an instance of moral failure: he has at the moment good reason to believe that almost his whole fleet is lost, and at no other point in the story is he threatened, after the fall of Troy, with any remotely comparable catastrophe. If Aeneas sometimes doubts and hesitates in the first half of the Aeneid, he is in that part of the poem tried and tempted in a way in which he will never be tried and tempted later. And when in the concluding books 10 - 12 he confronts the hazards of war, he is in a context in which it is inconceivable that any Roman hero could be depicted as anything but brave and confident. And if we consider the earlier books of the poem's second half, before the fighting begins for Aeneas, it is at once apparent that Aeneas' experience here consists not so much of trials and afflictions as of a remarkable and insistent series of assurances of divine favour and encouragement: the sign of the Eaten Tables, the thunder sent in answer to Aeneas' prayer, the reports of prophecies that have told the natives of Italy to expect the coming of a man of destiny, the recognition of Aeneas as that man by the king, the vision of the Tiber god and his promise, the sign of the Sow, the sign in the sky sent by Venus, the coming of Venus and her gift of divine armour, the assurance of Evander that he is the man called by destiny, the acceptance of him as such by the Etruscans, the apparition of the nymphs (once ships) on the voyage to the scene of war and their promise of success if the sixth book were not in the poem at all, there would still be nothing needing explanation in such difference as there is between the hero's demeanour before and after the Trojans' arrival in Italy. For immediately after the events of Book 6 they reach their journey's end in Latium and have found the new home which has eluded them for so long. From

then on they are no more tired seekers of a still unknown destination, but defenders of a promised land that they have now attained. For all these reasons it is as difficult to infer from the general course of the story as it is to infer from Aeneas' immediate reactions that the experience of Book 6 is conceived by the poet as having any effect at all upon his character, or any more effect upon his attitude than have all the other encouragements that he receives in the middle part of the poem.

What then can be said about this sixth book? First, it stands in its own right as a **splendid** episode, for the pathos of the encounters with those whom Aeneas knew in life and for the power with which the atmosphere of this strange environment is created and conveyed. But a more distinctive function of the book appears in the fact that it forms with the preceding Book 5 a complex which has for its theme the relationship between father and son. Anchises is in mind in all Book 5, from the sacrifice at the beginning which Aeneas makes at his tomb, through the games held in his honour which form the main content of the book, to the dream at the end in which he appears to allay Aeneas' concern and to give him the instructions and the promise (of a revelation of his people's future) which are the direct occasion of Aeneas' descent into the underworld in Book 6. This enterprise of Aeneas is described more than once in the telling as an act of filial pietas specifically - by the Sibyl in her words to Charon at the crossing of the river, and by Anchises in his greeting to his son when Aeneas at last reaches him in Elysium. Thus from the moment of Aeneas' arrival in Sicily (5.31) to the moment when his father takes leave of him at the gates of the underworld (6.897) Anchises is constantly in mind; and it becomes clear also that a principal effect of the preoccupation of Aeneas with his father's memory is to confirm him in the pursuit of his mission. This distinctive role of the father in the story is not, it seems to me, sufficiently explained by the normal importance attached by the Romans to the father-son relationship, nor by the legendary piety of Aeneas in saving his father from the burning of Troy. But this opens up a subject of separate enquiry: there is time here only to note the close association of Book 6 with its predecessor Book 5, and the fact that this points to a structure of the poem based on units consisting of Books 1-4, and 5-6, and 7-12: which may be felt to yield a more satisfactory proportion than the division into halves consisting of 1-6 and 7-12 which most of us start with and which is of course in one sense valid too.

However, no grouping of this kind in the Aeneid is absolute: all overlap with groupings of other kinds. And while the sixth book belongs in the above respect closely with the fifth, in another it belongs with the two books that follow it, the seventh and the eighth. For it is in Book 6 that the Trojans reach Italy: as the Sibyl tells Aeneas before his descent into the underworld, his wandering, his Odyssey, is now over. This means that in Book 6 we have the first stage of the arrival in Italy rather than the last stage of the wanderings. In this and the following books (7 and 8) the story moves first to Italy (6), then to Latium (7) and finally to the site of the future city of Rome itself (8). In each case the progress is miraculously assisted; by Neptune from Sicily to Italy and then up the Italian coast to Latium; by the Tiber god up his own river from the estuary to the site of Rome. And this part of the poem, which is marked as a unit of composition by other distinctive features beyond those noted - for instance, by the evident parallelism between the prophetic pageants at the end both of the sixth book and of the eighth - seems to dwell on the moment of the Trojans' arrival with the deliberate intention of emphasizing at that moment the idea of Rome as the end

of the whole story. Thus the revelation in Book 6 is surely not to be separated from the whole complex of prophecies and assurances that follow it, including the parallel revelation (to the reader though not to the hero) that comes in the scenes on the shield in Book 8. Of this complex the revelation in the underworld is only a part; but it is a very important part because it makes concrete and visible the meaning of the many signs and prophecies which follow but which remain in themselves vague and mysterious.

Concerning the content of the revelation in the underworld something remains to be said. At the end of Anchises' speech in which he catalogues the future heroes of Rome, as their souls stand assembled in the meadow by Lethe awaiting the time of their incarnation, there is a famous passage in which he declares that other nations may indeed excel in the arts and sciences, but that the Romans are to excel in the art of ruling, and bring peace and order to the nations, sparing the vanquished and conquering the presumptuous. These words have often been understood literally as an injunction, meaning that Rome had a 'mission' to bring order to the world, and to conquer the uncivilised with this end in view. Thus Warde Fowler said somewhere of the Aeneid, in the book from which I quoted earlier on, that 'we may think of it ... as a great fugue, of which the leading subject is the mission of Rome in the world'. This reading of the Aeneid was natural enough in the context of the ideas about empire which were current in England and other countries at the end of the last century. But I do not know of any evidence that the Romans conceived themselves as having a 'mission'; and Anchises' words, though cast by a figure of speech in the form of an injunction, are in reality simply a prophecy that the Romans will win and rule the large empire which in Virgil's day they had won and were ruling. That this empire imposed peace and order was a fact that Virgil knew; and that the rise of Rome was willed by fate is a belief which the Aeneid constantly proclaims. But it is not clear that Virgil or his contemporaries ever thought of Rome's imperial role as fulfilment of a duty to mankind, or of fate's design in promoting the rise of Rome as part of a larger design for the betterment of the world as a whole. The idea of Rome's 'mission' in the world has perhaps been put into the Aeneid by readers nearer to our own day, partly under the influence of conceptions current in their own world, partly from a retrospective appreciation of the formative influence that Rome has in fact had on the development of western civilisation, and partly again because the hero of the Aeneid has indeed a mission, the mission Romanam condere gentem.

So I would suggest that the intentions of the poet in this splendid book are the ones which are obvious enough, though not less important on that account: to create a Latin counterpart to one of the most celebrated episodes in Homer, to present to the reader as well as to the hero a visible image of the purpose in history to which the action of the poem leads, and to express a very singular and profound relationship between the hero's father and himself. It does not seem probable that we should look in this book either for an account of a spiritual experience undergone by the hero, or for an expression of the poet's beliefs about the nature of the human soul and what awaits it after death. But to say this is not to deny the significance of the book as a document of a religious history in a more general sense; for it discloses repeatedly and emphatically the poet's feeling about the way of the higher powers with individual humans. This feeling is not a happy one. The law that governs the world is harsh and stern: desine fata deum flecti sperare precando ... quam vellent aethere in alto nunc et pauperiem et duros perferre labores: fas obstat... And besides being stern it is irrational: constitit Anchisa satus et vestigia pressit, multa putans sortemque animo

miseratus iniquam ... casu concussus iniquo ... heu miserande puer, si qua fata aspera rumpas! Aeneas' first encounter is with Palinurus, doomed with his kind to wander disconsolate for the accident of not having had burial in the world above; his last is with Marcellus, doomed a thousand years before his birth to die on the threshold of manhood with his promise unfulfilled. The unhappiness of so many in the world of the dead, and the harshness of their lot, reflects the same condition of the living individuals in the rest of the story. It stands in permanent contrast with the benevolence of heaven towards the Roman state. And the tension between the modes of feeling thus contrasted, so important an element in this poem's power to move, finds in the sixth book its clearest and most concentrated expression.

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THE CYCLE OF GROWTH AND DECAY IN LUCRETIUS AND VIRGIL

A lecture delivered to the Virgil Society

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by W. Liebeschuetz, Ph.D.

'The influence direct and indirect exercised by Lucretius on the thought, composition and even diction of the Georgics was perhaps stronger than that ever exercised before or since by one great poet on the work of another.' So Sellar wrote in his Roman poets of the Augustan Age.⁽¹⁾ The present paper⁽²⁾ is concerned to trace one aspect of this influence, to provide an outline of Lucretius' treatment of the cycle of growth and decline in organic and inorganic nature and to point out how Lucretius' handling of the theme has influenced Virgil in the Georgics.

For Lucretius the apparent solidity and stability of our world is deceptive. Underlying it there is the never ceasing movement of atoms in endless collisions, combinations and separations - resembling the battle of dust particles caught in a beam of light.⁽³⁾ The battle is eternal but the state of the contestants varies from time to time. At the beginning of the world the result was overwhelmingly constructive.⁽⁴⁾ Today construction and destruction are in equilibrium and the decay of some things is balanced by the growth of others.⁽⁵⁾ But the equilibrium remains precarious: sooner or later the destructive process will gain the upper hand and the whole world will be destroyed.⁽⁶⁾

On the atomic scale the cycle of growth and decay is invisible. Its reality must be proved by deductive argument and illustrated by images such as the strife of the elements⁽⁷⁾ which provide only imperfect analogies. But in the world of everyday life the cycle of growth, fruit bearing and death of animals and vegetation supplies a visible model of the cyclical process which can be made the basis of arguments about examples of the cycle which take place out of reach of the senses⁽⁸⁾ whether at atomic or at cosmic level or at extremes of time.⁽⁹⁾