Ghosts and Daemons: The Revival of Myth and Magic

A Presidential Address given to the Virgil Society on 23 October 2004

It's a great honour to become the President of your Society. I was very surprised to be invited to take this role, and it strikes me as a very generous act of encouragement on your part. Virgil was the first classical *poet* I read: before we began studying the *Aeneid*, we read Julius Caesar's language, so the richness, music, and drama of Virgil threw open casements on a new horizon. I also responded very strongly to the poet's Italian links: above all to the landscape and mythology of southern Italy, which is where my mother was born. I have in mind to write a novel, set in the middle of the last century, inspired by Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, and by the historic splitting of North Africa from the old οἰκουμένη of the Mediterranean. This parting, the consequences of which are setting the world in turmoil today, is symboliwsed, it seems to me, by Virgil's extraordinarily passionate story of Dido and Aeneas.

I haven't managed to begin this book yet, so today I am going to give you some thoughts about Virgil and ghosts, and turn to classical tropes of magic and metamorphosis. Virgil's spirit stalks contemporary encounters with the third kind, above all with ghosts and with visions of an Underworld, or descents into the abyss of death: via Dante, via Milton, he has shaped enduring imaginings of spirit presences. But he not only contributes to the character of spectral and apocalyptic experiences, but to active theories of magic, especially female divination and possession. His apparent expertise in these fields inspired a rich body of legends about the poet and ways of reading him now. This afternoon, I'll look briefly at Virgil's magic, in ritual, divination, and the descent into the Underworld; and then describe how strikingly Virgilian tropes about ghosts and possession continue to mould myth and magic in popular culture. I'll explore classical myths about the defeat of death: the story of descending into hell becomes attached to mythic heroes, from Gilgamesh, who goes to the land of the dead to fetch back his friend, the wild man Enkidu, to Odysseus, Aeneas, Hercules, Theseus, and even Jesus Christ, who harrows Hell in order to redeem the just – according to a tenet of the Christian creed. I'll glance at a parallel tradition developing in counterpoint to these myths of male heroism that casts a female hero at the centre of eschatological drama, through Alcestis and, most recently, Lyra in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials.*

THE DESCENT INTO THE UNDERWORLD

From the earliest extant poem, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the anguish of losing a loved one recurs as one of the deepest themes that myths engage with, and it inspires stories about conquering death, about going down into the realm of shadows and bringing the lost beloved back from the grave. Orpheus may be the most familiar of these myths, especially to opera goers, as his relation to music itself makes him an embodiment of the power of song, and of harmony. But of course Orpheus loses Eurydice when he breaks the prohibition and looks back at her shade as he is leading her out of Hades. Virgil treats it in the *Georgics*, and from there this story of love and loss has spread through the arts, a rich treasure afloat on the ocean of story down the centuries:

restitit, Eurydicenque suam iam luce sub ipsa
immemor heu! victusque animi respexit. ibi omnis
effusus labor atque immitis rupta tyranni
foedera, terque fragor stagnis auditus Avernis.
illa, 'quis et me,' inquit 'miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,
quis tantus furor? en iterum crudelia retro
fata vocant, conditque natantia lumina somnus.
iamque vale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte
invalidasque tibi tendens, heu non tua, palmas!'
dixit et ex oculis subito, ceu fumus in auras
commixtus tenuis, fugit diversa, neque illum,
prensantem nequiquam umbras et multa volentem
dicere praeterea vidit; nec portitor Orci
amplius obiectam passus transire paludem. (4.490-503)

He halts. Eurydice, his own, is now on the lip of
Daylight. Alas! he forgot. His purpose broke. He looked back.
His labour was lost, the pact he had made with the merciless king
Annulled. Three times did thunder peal over the pools of Avernus.
"Who," she cried, "has doomed me to misery, who has doomed us?
What madness beyond measure? Once more a cruel fate
Drags me away, and my swimming eyes are drowned in darkness.
Good-bye. I am borne away. A limitless night is about me
And over the strengthless hands I stretch to you, yours no longer."
Thus she spoke: and at once from his sight, like a wisp of smoke
Thinned into air, was gone.
Wildly he grasped at shadows, wanting to say much more,
But she did not see him; nor would the ferryman of the Inferno
Let him again cross the fen that lay between them.[1]

Virgil's lyric drama reverberates in Gluck's most melodious of arias, of course, and sounds most recently in Harrison Birtwistle's opera, *The Mask of Orpheus*. In Salman Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Orpheus becomes a rock star, Ormus Cama. Another Birtwistle opera, *The Second Mrs Kong*, dramatised a new Orphic tragedy, about the love of King Kong for Vermeer's *Girl with the Pearl Earring*; the story takes place in Hades, where the lovers are doomed not to be able to reach one another.

This evocation of Eurydice thinning into air echoes metaphors of ghostliness from Homer's vision of the insubstantial shades who can be seen but not grasped, and the imagery returns in the Erebus of the

Aeneid. But it is the *Georgics*, and Virgil's description of the shades in Tartarus and of the smoke-like wraith of Eurydice, that has remained the imagination's template for spirits, especially since the development of moving pictures made it possible to render such states visible and apparent.

at cantu commotae Erebi de sedibus imis
umbrae ibant tenues simulacraque luce carentum,
quam multa in foliis avium se milia condunt,
Vesper ubi aut hibernus agit de montibus imber,
matres atque viri defunctaque corpora vita
magnanimum heroum, pueri innuptaeque puellae,
impositique rogis iuvenes ante ora parentum (4.471-77)

But, by his song aroused from Hell's nethermost basements,
Flocked out the flimsy shades, the phantoms lost to light,
In number like to the millions of birds that hide in the leaves
When evening or winter rain from the hills has driven them –
Mothers and men, the dead
Bodies of great-heart heroes, boys and unmarried maidens,
Young men laid on the pyre before their parents' eyes – ...[2]

Dante, guided by Virgil through the Underworld, adopts the earlier poet's metaphors as well as his expert knowledge of the territory. But when he tackles the condition of ghostliness, he uses Statius for his mouthpiece and analyses the evocation of souls in the *Aeneid* using scientific, meteorological imagery, as he conveys to Dante the symbiosis between bodily form and spiritual substance in terms of rainbow colours playing in light, and flames dancing in response to air:

e come l'aëre, quand'è ben pïorno,
per l'altrui raggio che 'n sé si reflette,
di diversi color diventa adorno;

così l'aëre vicin quivi si mette
in quella forma che in lui suggella
virtüalmente l'alma che ristette;

e simigliante poi alla fiammella
ché segue il foco là 'vunque si muta,
segue lo spirto sua forma novella.

Però che quindi ha poscia sua paruta
è chiamata ombra... (*Purg*. 25, ll. 94-101)

and as the air, when it is full of rain, becomes adorned with various colours through another's beams that are reflected in it, so the neighbouring air sets itself into that form which the soul that stopped there stamps upon it by its power, and then like the flame that follows the fire wherever its shifts, its new form follows the spirit. Since it has by this its semblance henceforth, it is called a shade... (trans. John D. Sinclair)

Or better, perhaps, Mark Musa's verse translation:[3]

Then, once the soul is there, contained in space,
the informing power radiates around
to reshape what the body had before.

And as the air, after a heavy rain,
adorns itself with different, fragile hues
born of the outer rays reflected there,

just so, the air enveloping the soul
where it has fallen must assume the form
imprinted on it by the soul's own powers;

as flame inevitably goes with fire,
following it wherever it may shift,
so the new form accompanies the soul.

Since air around it makes it visible,
it's called a 'shade'; and out of air it forms
organs for every sense, including sight.

The extraordinary aspect of these dense, precise images for the shade, or the form of human existence after death, is its prophetic affinity with photographic drawing in light and, even more presciently, with moving pictures of people in the past who are long dead.

In his very first novel, Vladimir Nabokov envisaged his afterlife in the language of film, and imagined the continued existence of the soul as an extra; already, in 1926, he adopted the metaphors of the new mass medium: 'As he walked he thought how his shade would wander from city to city, from screen to screen, how he would never know what sort of people would see it or how long it would roam in the world.[4] In 1940, the Argentinian surrealist and friend of Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, took this vision further, in a strange, compressed, enthralling fable called *The Invention of Morel*. It's the diary of a fugitive from justice, who is struggling for survival on an uninhabited island, but keeps encountering a mysterious group of elegant party-goers in the abandoned buildings around him. He falls in love with one of the women, Faustine, but she does not even appear to see him. Gradually he pieces together that the inventor, Morel, has created machines that project people as they were in life, doing and saying the things they said, and thus preserves them eternally; but in the process of granting them this uncanny immortality and perpetuity of their memories, his machines steal their souls. Gradually, the narrator feels himself to be disappearing and becoming one of Morel's un-dead, his deathless spectres, but he welcomes the state as he believes he will find Faustine there, in the phantasmic dimension of Morel's invention. The fable is highly evocative, eerie, comic, genuinely enchanted, a personal apocalypse both romantic and bleak, in which the copies survive while the originals wither and die. 'The images are not alive,' the narrator tells us. 'But since [Morel's] invention has blazed the trail, as it were, another machine should be invented to find out whether the images think and feel (or at least if they have the thoughts and feelings that the people themselves had when the picture was made; of course the relationship between their consciousness and these thoughts and feelings cannot be determined)... Someday there will be a more complete machine.'[5] This visionary novella inspired the cult movie of the Sixties, *Last Year in Marienbad*, not altogether unexpectedly, since the eternity in which Faustine and her friends have their existence resembles cinematic reality so closely. [6]

Film inhabits an Underworld condition as framed in the visions of the afterlife, first by Homer, but above all by Virgil: spectral insubstantiality. The potential of the new digital media for realising fantasy seems inexhaustible. It does not by any means stop at the outward circumstances of experiences of other worlds like the afterlife: the time and space of film representations institute a parallel world, which interrelates with ours, as depicted in contemporary plots about illusion and

reality – from *Blade Runner* to *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*. In these films, there is a new kind of spectral protagonist, sometimes called a replicant, whose apparent existence is created entirely by televisual communications and virtual, cyber-reality.

Cinematic media have realised visions of phantoms that in the living pictures of Homer or Virgil take form in language alone; the paradoxical presences of Anticleia and Anchises, who look as they used to be in the world but have no substance, can be perfectly captured by the moving camera.

SACRIFICE AND REDEMPTION

When Aeneas pleads with the Sibyl to be allowed to descend into the Underworld, he brings in Orpheus as well as Pollux, Theseus and Hercules, all of them male forerunners in raiding the infernal regions. Naturally he does not mention Odysseus/Ulysses, the Greek deceiver and hence villain of this Trojan national epic. Male precursors of his ambition, these heroes wanted for the most part to rescue someone beloved from death, as Gilgamesh longs to do after Enkidu's death, as Christ was later to achieve when he released the just from hell by harrowing it. Virgil's Aeneas by contrast wishes to fulfil the highest demands of filial piety and see his father again (thereby silently glossing the encounter of the reprobate Odysseus with the shade of his mother), and pay his respects to Anchises. There is no suggestion he can or wants to bring him back.

In Virgil's epic plot, Aeneas's journey to Avernus and back assigns him securely to the company of the highest demi-gods and founding heroes; but Aeneas's aim, to see his father one more time, does not give him hope that he can rescue him. When he at last finds his father, Aeneas gives the immediate cause of his coming:

> *ille autem: 'tua me, genitor, tua tristis imago*
> *saepius occurrens haec limina tendere adegit.* (6.695-6)
>
> Your ghost, my father...your grieving ghost,
> so often it came and urged me to your threshold![7]

So he has been inspired by the apparition of Anchises that compelled him to make the journey. If the vision came in a dream or in a prophetic hallucination or reverie, Virgil does not say but Aeneas, in this respect at least, is also a visionary who translates the mind's immaterial work into real consequences.

Neither the dream mission nor the touching, passionate encounter and farewell of father and son stamps the reader's memory with the vividness that the poet's indelible visions of hell provoke, the unfolding story's wide angle views of the lie of the land, of the yearning souls, most pitiably, infants, and the ordered ranks of the transgressors and afflicted. In some ways, anguished as the experience is for Aeneas, the episode does not move to the dramatic dynamic of the tragic stories, culminating in bitter loss, as with Gilgamesh and Orpheus; nor does it build towards a triumphant reprieve, as with Hercules and Alcestis. This is partly because Virgil does not stage a sacrifice in this epic poem, unlike tragedy, which obeys the laws of religious economy of exchange between divine and human (something still enacted in the ritual of the mass). This is a distinguishing feature of epic poetry with its more linear, and leisurely, succession of events, as well as the historic calling of the *Aeneid's* protagonist: the poem does not represent a symbolic re-enacting of a mystery that needs to be ritually performed to propitiate or to generate auspicious conditions in the present time. It is not in itself redemptive, and so does not seek to redeem Anchises, for example, or to perform any kind of ritual substitution – any life against any death. Virgil is moving into history, out of myth and faith. But it is a mark of Virgil's mastery of atmospheric effects that while he does not wring our hearts as he does in the *Georgics* with a hope that Anchises – or anyone else – will be regained, his vision of the Underworld confronts us so memorably with the ineluctability of death.

In the *Rig Veda*, by contrast, the romance of Savitri describes how Savitri so loves her husband that she offers to die for him instead and through this heroic self-sacrifice softens the heart of Death himself. The Sanskrit romance embodies the hope, characteristic of Hinduism, that virtue can bring about another, more blessed incarnation – the story implies that Savitri and Satyavan are perfected by love and will pass beyond death into another, higher existence as a symbolic bridal pair. The myth of Alcestis in Euripides's play bears a close resemblance to Savitri's, except that, as one would expect of Euripides, he has very much heightened the dramatic psychology, the conflicts between his cast of characters, so that the deliverance of Admetos, Alcestis's husband, from the grip of death here grants a blessed relief of family tension rather than a symbolic rebirth of the cosmos. Euripides introduces, for example, a completely different twist into the plot, because it is assumed, from the start, that Death will accept a surrogate for the doomed husband, if someone can be found to offer up their life instead of Admetos. In short, Euripides reshapes the story to fit into a sacrificial economy of exchange, substitution, and a divine debt called in implacably, as it is in the Christian story of redemption through Christ's death on the cross.

When Gustav Holst revisited the *Rig Veda* legend, no shadow of blame or responsibility falls upon Satyavan. His near fatal illness is his karma, the story relates, and Savitri is warned about it when she chooses him as her love; the pivotal crisis in this story involves no crime, witting or unwitting. Satyavan is simply doomed to die, even before Savitri chooses him, and no bargain is offered for his life. Death comes for him, and him alone. But by introducing the possibility of redemption through sacrifice, the ritual substitution at the centre of Judaeo-Christian worship, Euripides intensely complicates the moral issues of the story. Admetos, Alcestis's husband, cannot but be implicated in his wife's self-sacrifice on his behalf, and his love is profoundly tested by his response – by his acquiescence to this reprieve. Admetos's aged parents refuse point blank to die for their son to live, and they come in for some tough abuse from him for this reason; to which his father retorts that Admetos himself hardly shows great heroism and virtue in letting Alcestis die for him. Admetos's father tells Alcestis she's a fool to volunteer to change places with her husband in the Underworld, and calls his own son 'cannibal' (in Ted Hughes's translation) for accepting that she should:

> Every day you live she nourishes you
> With her dead body.

The exchanges between parents and child, in Hughes' merciless translation, are fraught and extremely vituperative.:

> Like the beating hearts
> Torn out of living crocodiles
> These two refused to stop.
> Bodiless, feeling nothing,
> With the dust on their tongues
> They go on gasping for life.[8]

Yet in the play, each speaker successfully persuades us in turn of the rightness of his, or her, position. The bitter confrontation ends with Admetos' mother cursing him for his self-love. Euripides stacks the pleas of one voice after another for mercy towards Alcestis: the god Apollo himself intercedes with Death on her behalf. Admetos, bewailing her impending death and his future loss, recalls Orpheus, and how he lost his Eurydice. Though the playwright never says so in so many words, he implies that Admetos is perhaps allowed to escape death himself and find Alcestis restored to him because his grief intensifies his love, that he learns through this ordeal sincerity and loyalty.

The children's writer Philip Pullman recently undertook the descent into the Underworld in his highly ambitious trilogy, *His Dark Materials*. Writing in the wake of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, Pullman has also consciously cast himself in a very English, home-grown tradition, a blend of classicism and Christianity. Pullman read English – unhappily – and then started out as a schoolteacher in Oxford during the first peak phase of the Tolkien cult and, as he often recalls, the popularity of another Oxford children's visionary, C. S. Lewis and the *Narnia* cycle. However, Pullman consciously defies both these great successes of his youth: he challenges the archaic savagery and the apocalyptic vision of Tolkien's invented Englishness, and the Christian-Anglican piety of the Inklings like Lewis.

Going down into the Underworld to rejoin a lost loved one without the slightest hope of bringing them back fills the third book of Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, and it responds antiphonally in a spirit of both love and defiance to the whole Virgilian tradition. Will Parry, the boy hero from this world, is the designated, magical bearer of the Subtle Knife, a talisman and enchanted wand-like sword which, like the Golden Bough, can give access to other worlds, and specifically lead the way down to the kingdom of the dead. Will wants to go to see his father, who died very soon after Will was reunited with him after a long separation, but the main thrust of the story shifts from Will for Lyra, the scrap of a girl – rough, wild, clever and big-hearted – with whom Pullman has created one of the most lovable heroines of children's epic. Through Lyra, Pullman openly challenges Virgilian heroic male *pietas*, though in other respects he pays homage to the classical poet with warm admiration, evoking the lightless, drab expanse of the infernal regions in Virgilian terms, punctuated by the bitter cries and wailing of the dead. He also recasts particular scenes: take this picture, for example:

> Then suddenly there was the boat.
>
> It was an ancient rowing boat, battered, patched, rotting; and the figure rowing it was aged beyond age, huddled in a robe of sacking bound with string, crippled and bent, his bony hands crooked permanently around the oar-handles, and his moist pale eyes sunk deep among folds and wrinkles of grey skin…[9]

When Charon speaks, he says:

> How many ages do you think I've been ferrying people to the land of the dead?[10]

Later, as the boat begins to make the crossing, Will asks, 'Are we dead now?', to which Charon, as surly as Virgil's, replies:

> Makes no difference…if you don't know whether you're dead or not… I say nothing to contradict you. What you are, you'll know soon enough.[11]

Lyra's motive is grief for a wrong she did her childhood friend, Roger, when she inadvertently betrayed him to his death, and she wants to go down among the dead to find him and make reparation, and say goodbye properly. Pullman deals with the theme of female heroic sacrifice and altruism, as in *Alcestis*, with a difference that conforms to his declared anti-religious stand. Lyra is not offering herself as a sacrificial substitute for Roger, even though it costs her terribly (Pullman expresses her anguish very strongly) to face the dangers and the partings and the threat of death for herself. But above all, Lyra leads Will into hell and then, seeing the desperate sadness and horror of the dead in eternal nothingness, in a blaze of indignation decides to let them out:

> Will, I want us to take *all* these poor dead ghost-kids outside – the grown-ups as well – we could set 'em free! We'll find Roger and your father, and then let's open the way to the world outside, and set 'em all free!'[12]

It's a strange story to find in a book for children, not least in one that has won a readership of millions. It is determinedly pagan, as opposed to Christian. In a spirit of radical atheism, Pullman proposes release from the falsehood of Christian eschatology and apocalypse, into a cosmological vision of created unity. Lyra's own divinatory instrument, her alethiometer, tells her what will happen to the ghosts:

> When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, just like your daemons did. … they're part of everything. All the atoms that were them, they've gone into the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all the living things. They'll never vanish. They're just part of everything. And that's exactly what'll happen to you…. [13]

In this way, Pullman revives a classical vision of the soul's afterlife and revisits Anchises' explanation to Aeneas, when he tells his son that all shades of the dead will eventually return to the Spirit and Mind that generate and quicken all things. This vision owes something to Lucretius, and echoes in Pythagoras's closing speech from the *Metamorphoses*. It is a uniquely bold theological challenge. Yet, at the same time, it belongs comfortably to a wide seam in popular culture, which is turning towards a diffuse animism in its conception of individuals and other worlds.

By a twofold effect, therefore, Virgil's ghost inhabits contemporary literature about the afterlife and the Underworld: not only through his atmosphere and scene-painting, but also through his asserted principles of fantasy in action, which makes the imaginary (Aeneas's visions of his father) the mainspring of action and of history.

VIRGIL THE MAGICIAN

Through the first-hand knowledge that Virgil demonstrated in his poems about the realm of death and the Underworld, the poet was startlingly transmogrified in his own afterlife, and in popular story he began to figure from the late twelfth century as a marvellous magician. In the imagination of Europe – and not only in secular or unlettered circles – Virgil becomes an omniscient and powerful practitioner of secret arts, not without a touch of humour, and this reputation developed in part because Virgil the poet's vivid passage through the Underworld read as the report of an experience, not a fabrication. His poetry transformed him, in medieval tradition, into an apocalyptic visionary, his historical character becoming buried under a rich mulch of stories. In numerous chronicles and encyclopaedias of the Middle Ages, compiled by courtiers, scholars, and churchmen like Gervase of Tilbury and Vincent of Beauvais, Virgil cuts an ambiguous, flamboyant figure of superseded paganism, part jester, near sorcerer, part prophet, part shaman. The enchanter Virgil presents a recognisable model for Merlin and Gandalf and even Dumbledore today in *Harry Potter*. He is the prototype white wizard, adept at all the arts of sorcery, at spells and counter-spells, who never uses them for dark purposes but stringently rejects those possibilities. He has foreknowledge of the future, but again applies this only to warn and lead the virtuous. Not a twister or a trickster, he surpasses other legendary magicians in power and wisdom because he has direct experience of the Underworld and has, in that sense, encountered death and not suffered from the consequences.

Surprisingly perhaps, English scholars in the late twelfth century led the way in the transformation of the classical epic poet Virgil into this good magician: Alexander of Neckham, who was Richard the Lion-Heart's foster brother, was one source of the stories; Gervase of Tilbury, then professor at Bologna, another; John of Salisbury a third. By contrast, Dante does not repeat a single one of the bizarre and witty stories in circulation in his day about the poet's skills in predicting the future and diverting it from its predestined course; he set aside Virgil's favoured means of transport, a bridge he conjured in the air to take him in any direction, or his curious beanstalk, with telepathic powers to communicate the thoughts of the

person who picked the beans to anyone who ate them (does this connect with 'spilling the beans'?). Dante has no time for magic or magicians. Domenico Comparetti, the scholar who wrote a definitive work - *Vergil in the Middle Ages* - published in 1895, was very tense about the legends that had accrued, and deplored medieval storytelling, trying as hard as he could to corral Virgil the magician into the alleyways and *bassi* of Naples's *popolo*. He expostulated, 'The association of incongruous ideas no longer excited surprise, and [that] any direct investigation of the real causes of things, or any just appreciation of them, was not to be expected. Hence the imagination, ever ready to break bounds, failed to find in the influence of reflection those checks and correctives which it encounters in an age accustomed to critical investigation.'[14]

The mediaeval Virgil of nearly a thousand years ago seems to belong to Naples, where the historical Virgil had lived for a while and where he is buried. In his capacity as the legendary founder of the city, this magical Virgil was highly specialized in areas of concern today: pollution, defence, and surveillance. Neapolitan interests lay close to his heart. So, 'by mathematical art' he forges a bronze fly that scared off all other flies from entering the city. (In my novel *The Leto Bundle*, I borrowed this story and gave it to my protagonist to tell as a kind of fairy story about the future safe-haven she and her children would eventually find.) Virgil did not stop at clearing flies. He also devises a magic butcher's block on which meat never rotted – something which, like protection against flies, would indeed be useful in Naples. When the Neapolitans are plagued by leeches, he makes a golden replica of a leech that he drops into a well, which frightens off the real offenders. Like St Patrick, he cleanses the city of snakes. He keeps a private herb garden, where he grows the spices and plants he needs for his elixirs and potions, and he surrounds it with an invisible rampart which prevents all cross-fertilising from foreign bodies (early GM protection). In his grounds, he sets up a bronze statue of a youth with a trumpet raised in the direction of Vesuvius; by this means, Virgil deflectes the volcano's devastating fire and brimstone, for the trumpeter blows it all in the opposite direction. At Pozzuoli, he opens a series of medicinal baths, with images over each one depicting the specific disease or condition for which that bath was to be used. Most crucially of all, he guarantees the city's security by making a model of it, enclosing it in an egg, placing the egg in an iron cage, and the whole at the bottom of a fortress, This fortress, referred to in 1352 as the *Castellum Ovi incantati*, or Castle of the Enchanted Egg and still known as the Castel dell'Ovo, stands on the shore front of the city, not far from the monument to Virgil.[15]

Meanwhile, in Rome – for Virgil's exploits are not confined to Naples – he also makes an automaton called *The Safety of Rome*. It consists of an elaborate and ingenious series of carved statues personifying the imperial provinces. When trouble brews in Libya, say, or the Middle East, the figure in question rings a bell; this alarm rouses a bronze equestrian figure, mounted like a weathervane on the apex of the roof; he then turns to shake a spear in the direction of the turbulent region, and so the Roman legions, magically informed of the whereabouts of the true culprits, can then move against rebellion – an early instance of pre-emptive strike. This legend draws on the traditional Christian interpretations of the *Fourth Eclogue*, adding an ironic narrative twist: when Virgil confidently tells the Romans that his invention will last until a virgin gives birth to a child, they laugh, and (like Macbeth at the three witches' similar deceptive oracle) unwisely they relax. The story reveals how the legends were spun from interpretations – from overdetermined readings – of Virgil's own writings: he figured as an honorary Christian prophet as Dante makes clear.

Tale-spinners of the early Middle Ages enjoyed fabulism for its own sake, and cared much less than modern readers about plausibility or moral uplift. Learned monks appear to love dwelling on devilry and divination, and then pointing gleefully to their pagan forebears' folly. They had it both ways: passing on entertaining nonsense about Virgil and then scorning him and his society for trusting in such flimflam.

But the fable that seems to me to encapsulate the atmosphere of a thousand years ago has a more domestic character, and it laughs up its sleeve at Virgil the magician's claims to wisdom. Medieval stories,

poems and ballads are full of sinister truth-telling devices: mirrors that speak, severed heads that still utter the name of their murderer, robes that reveal by magic the true characters of the person who puts them on (these are the predecessors of the Emperor's New Clothes). The Virgil of legend contributes one of his masterpieces to this repertory: he makes a stone lion which, if an adulteress puts two fingers into its wide-open mouth and proclaims she was innocent, will snap shut and bite them off. So when the Empress of Rome falls under general suspicion of infidelity, the Emperor orders her to take the ordeal. The Empress, one of those thousands of clever and enterprising (and unruly) women who paradoxically throng the annals of misogyny, agrees, But before doing so, she disguises her lover as a drunken beggar and they plan together that as she is making her way to the test, he will assault her and kiss her wantonly in the public street before the crowd. Then she will be able to swear truthfully that no man has ever touched her intimately – except her husband and that filthy beggar who has just leapt on her, as everyone has just witnessed.

This story, which finds its way into Boccaccio and the *Arabian Nights* and no doubt other compendia of stories, still provides the aetiological legend for the famous *Bocca della Verita* (Mouth of Truth) in Rome, the grim grinning mask in the narthex of the ancient church of S. Maria in Cosmedin. Visitors today like to shudder and grimace before putting their hand in its open jaws for a photograph, because not all of them are as crafty as the empress and can shape a story to pass the test.

MAGIC AND MONSTROSITY

Virgil the poet was endowed by his audience and his admirers with experiences he conjured; as a result of their conviction, he found himself part of his own text in its most extreme and fantastical readings. His legendary afterlife offers an interesting demonstration of Shakespeare's famous lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* about the shaping power of literary imagination:

> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name. (5.1.14-17)

Such speech acts, forging vision from fantasy, can become so persuasive, so real that they abolish their imaginary condition and figure as actual experiences. Dante also learned this from Virgil. For whereas many of his predecessors as visionary travellers to the afterlife – not least St John in the *Book of Revelation* – did not situate it in a material topography in time and space, congruent with physical laws, Dante is assiduous in marshalling realistic coordinates as he charts his journey with Virgil by his side until the close of *Purgatorio*. This empiricism, applied to an unequivocal act of imagination about realms of fantasy, distinguishes both Ovidian and Virgilian visions of the supernatural, and remains one of the most reliable tools for contemporary fantasists, too. The vivid persuasion Virgil works on our minds, as he takes us down into the Underworld, arises from the wide-angle vistas of hell, of the fog and fire, the green shade of the valley where Aeneas finds Anchises, the troops and crowds of souls on the bank of Styx and the Abyss, conveyed in the famous extended similes which Dante imitated: souls as numerous as leaves in autumn and birds gathering to migrate, or the bees humming among lilies on the banks of Lethe. From these commanding high-angle long shots, Virgil moves in to the close-ups, as it were, of the terrible mutilations of Deiphobus, the severed nose and cropped ears, and the glimpse of Aeneas's hands reaching out, three times, to grasp his father's wraith, which slips through his hands. Narrative poetry, especially epic, has itself shaped the modes of picturing and telling that persist today: literature has given form to phantasmata, and still does. The cinema has mimicked these characteristic literary effects, with the long panning shot, surveying an unfolding landscape, and the close up and

jump cut, bringing the crucial instance, the epiphany, the crisis, up before the eyes, crowding the field of vision from end to end, magnified. Contemporary cinema has continued the earliest epics' visions very effectively: an apocalyptic film, such as the recent *Lord of the Rings III,* alternates between huge, thrilling panoramas of burning mountains, louring skies, sable shrouded plains, fields, and countless nameless figures and sudden, passionate scenes featuring the heroes in dialogue.

Virgil's reputation as an enchanter arises from his knowledge of the afterlife and his prophetic acumen. But is there an aspect of his imagination that would warrant such a high reputation for wizardry? Most commentators, like Comparetti, recoil from the medieval concoctions and absolve Virgil the poet from all blame. However, Virgil does display his intimate grasp of magic arts and rituals in the *Aeneid*, while he makes plain at the same time his distance from them. One of the differences between Virgil and Ovid is that the *Metamorphoses* can often communicate a passionate sympathy with transmogrifications, with hybrid punishments and with monstrosity, and the Gods figure as terrifying, cruel, and capricious, all the more redoubtable through Ovid's tight-lipped restraint from condemning them. Think of poor Scylla, cursed through Circe's spite to be girdled with snapping dogs' heads. Virgil, on the other hand, observes a myth like the passion of Pasiphae for the bull and the birth of the Minotaur with moral horror, different in tone from Ovid's mordant, cynical, pessimism.

Ovid wasn't set when I studied Latin at school, but Virgil was. Sister Christina, who taught us, was very young at the time (though of course I only realised this later) and she told us, blushing, not to read certain lines. As in a fairy tale, the prohibition worked wonders on our energies with dictionary and crib, and we spelt out the forbidden passages with great excitement. They both involved sex, of course, but also, more particularly, love-magic devices to achieve the object of desire, and in this sense, they disclosed a disturbing undercurrent in Virgil's expertise. In Book 4, the lines describe the priestess's offerings on Dido's funeral pyre: the herbs, reaped with sickles by moonlight, and bursting with black poisonous milk, … and with them, the love charm, the *hippomanes*, bitten from the forehead of a newborn foal before the mother could take it.

> *sparserat et latices simulatos fontis Averni,*
> *falcibus et messae ad lunam quaeruntur aënis*
> *pubentes herbae nigri cum lacte veneni ;*
> *quaeritur et nascentis equi de fronte revulsus*
> *et matri praereptus amor* (4. 512-6)
>
> She'd sprinkled water, simulating the springs of hell,
> and gathered potent herbs, reaped with bronze sickles
> under the moonlight, dripping their milky black poison,
> and fetched a love-charm ripped from a foal's brow,
> just born, before the mother could gnaw it off.[16]

I remember that we were very puzzled when we made this out and couldn't understand what it meant, and indeed, it was only when I looked it up last week that I saw why Sister Christina was embarrassed. For this ingredient of the witches' brew – equivalent to the 'fillet of a fenny snake', 'wool of bat and tongue of dog', or a pilot's thumb – means 'a secretion of a mare in heat' (Webster's) and is a traditional aphrodisiac. According to the legend to which Virgil is referring, a *hippomanes* grew on the foal's brow and was bitten off by the mare, who would reject her offspring if another took it. In these lines the combination of young growths, animal and vegetable, with the anomalous black milk produces a definitely queasy atmosphere, which then culminates in the spondaic fall of the lines on to the single word *amor* to powerful effect.

This magic bears an affinity with the second passage which we were told not to read, the *ekphrasis* of the gateway to Diana's temple, wrought by Daedalus himself into pictured myths:

hic crudelis amor tauri suppostaque furto
Pasiphae mixtumque genus prolesque biformis
Minotaurus inest, Veneri monimenta nĕfandae; (*Aen*. 6. 24-6)

Here the cursed lust for the bull
and Pasiphae spread beneath him, duping both her mates,
and here the mixed breed, part man, part beast, the Minotaur –
a warning against such monstrous passion.[17]

Pasiphae's 'secret union' and the bull's 'brutal passion' were the nun's worries here. The passage relates to the earlier image of the love-charm because it involves the use of nature against nature, a perverting of proper ends and categories, which is a powerful defining characteristic of black magic. Both Circe or Medea flit behind Virgil's Massylian priestess, whom Dido evokes, and their shadow also lies on the enigmatic figure who performs the rites at Dido's suttee. Such magic acts trespass against the natural order: the mare is turned against her foal and her milk goes to waste -the imagery resonates by implication with the 'black milk' of the herbs in the same sacrificial offerings. By applying the horseflesh amulet, a woman is mingling her nature with an animal's too, as Pasiphae later does in the 'monstrous passion' that produces the Minotaur.

Re-visiting these passages forty years on, I see that Sister Christina was right: Virgil's distaste has a touch of Puritan hypocrisy about it, as he lingers so dramatically on the making of Dido's pyre and its ghastly simulacrum of a love-nest as she places her bed on it, with Aeneas's picture, and then festoons it with flowers. The poet also brushes in allusions to black arts several times to produce undoubted dramatic excitement, and he associates them with Africa in ways that remain a tradition into folklore and fairy tale: Dido refers to the powers of the priestess of the Hesperides as a Massylian – the word for Numidian, used generically for African – many of whom, Dido tells us soon after, she has scorned for a husband. She stresses the power of her love magic to her sister Anna in a litany of other enchantments and portents under her sway:

sistere aquam fluviis et vertere sidera retro,
nocturnosque movet Manis: mugire videbis
sub pedibus terram et descendere montibus ornos. (4. 489-91)

With her spells she vows…
To stop the rivers in midstream, reverse the stars
in their courses, raise the souls of the dead at night,
and make earth shudder and rumble underfoot – you'll see –
and send the ash-trees marching down the mountains.[18]

Virgil's controlled display of esoteric insider wisdom and his sheer writerly brilliance at evoking scenes of magic ritual and touching in moments of perversity perhaps justify some of the fantasies that clustered around him in the Middle Ages, and can go a little way to explain dear Sister Christina's reddening.

MAGIC TODAY

Magic occupies the centre of cultural production in all kinds of areas today – books, films, games. A new sensibility characterises the uses of magic and metamorphosis, myth and faerie; it exhibits certain continuities with the classical past through shared images, motifs, themes, even plots. These frame a contradiction – and it makes matters even more complicated. First, the panoply of fantastic and mythic

elements today are split off from belief systems. For example, James Lasdun's *The Horned Man* is a novel subtly tuned to the misadventures and delusions of a New Yorker who, when his wife leaves him, starts stalking her, and then, like Actaeon in Ovid's terrible tale of vengeance, develops a pair of stag's horns on his head. Even if you're the kind of person who consults your horoscope with genuine anticipation, you probably don't consent to a pagan myth of animal transformation as a possibility in the actual world – but the fiction illuminates psychological depths in the same way as metamorphosis and other improbabilities in mythological children's literature act as metaphorical devices to release truth.

But at the very same time, magic and faerie now command more allegiance and assenting collaboration than was admissible before because, in some unprecedented way, the fantastic has become real, and the various operating dynamics of magic stories – time shifts, ubiquity, metamorphosis itself – have indeed moved into the foreground of everyday experience. A new model of human consciousness and the concept of the individual that emerges from some current writing, for young and old, and a significant aspect of this present vision, aims precisely at dissolving the subject, at evoking the self's volatile, discontinuous disembodiment. Magical psychology, visionary, unstable, metamorphic, telepathic, and deracinated, permeates many of the most enjoyed stories being written and read now.

Interest in persons as no longer unified, but split, doubled, or even multiple – haunted by an evil genius, or illuminated by a familiar daimon – has combined with new instruments of perception and knowledge to reconfigure character and story in contemporary fiction. Philip Pullman is by no means the only writer who is generating new metamorphoses for our time. In the *Harry Potter* series, metamorphoses take place in many different forms, often involving elaborate spells to control and ward off their effects. Hogwart's curriculum includes lessons in Managing Magical Creatures and Transformation, Lord Voldemort has insinuating powers to change shape, become invisible and even, in *The Prisoner of Askaban* (in my view the tightest and most enjoyable of the series so far) to take up habitation as part of Snape's head. Many of the most successful fiction writers for adults also operate in this metamorphic and supernatural territory: Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison introduces the returning dead in *Paradise*; Margaret Atwood explicitly evokes a revenant who works through spirit possession as the avenging motive force in *Alias Grace*, her fictional treatment of the first murder committed by a woman in Canada. In all three cases, the writers are paying homage to the muted voices of past histories, and invoking a nearly obliterated legacy of belief. But they are also engaged, as are the illusionists of the era of phantasmagoria, with making the impossible happen through acts of mimetic language and projection. As Salman Rushdie comments, through his own Orpheus reincarnate, the singer Ormus Cama: 'Everything must be made real, step by step … This is a mirage, a ghost world, which becomes real only beneath our magic touch, our loving footfall, our kiss. We have to imagine it into being, from the ground up.'[19]

CONCLUSION

Why do magic and myth attract new audiences today, young and old? What does magic mean today? Why this revival of interest in other worlds under the appearance of the disenchanted horizons of classical mythology? Why are readers and audiences turning to magical zones outside space-time, peopled by fantastic creatures and organised according to the principles of wonders and myths? The current phenomenon includes writing for adults, at the literary end of the market, where surprising best-sellers include re-visionings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by Ted Hughes, some of Carol Ann Duffy's poetic monologues (in the tradition of the *Heroides*), and many other contemporary writers of mythological fiction and poetry.[20]

At the same time, less accessible but also acclaimed self-conscious literary writers – W. G. Sebald, Iain Sinclair, Marie Darieussecq, James Lasdun, David Mitchell, and the Spanish novelist Javier Marias

– summon zones of contemporary magic: they move through warps of memory and time, they experience the disembodied ubiquity of psychic travel, and explore the farther reaches of consciousness, and the bewildering inter-sheaving of actuality and imaginings, of dream and reality. And I'm not even going to try and pause with popular fantasy fictions which are obsessed with spells and spirit possession, vampires and zombies, such as the occult novels of Stephen King and the vampire fiction of Anne Rice (highly rated as literature of course, in many quarters). The world wide web, needless to say, reveals inextinguishable famishing for the fantastic. It seems that the nightmare banquet at the end of *Through the Looking Glass* has become an everyday state of experience, though no less disorientating for that. You remember, Alice wakes up and asks, was she part of the Red King's dream just as he was part of hers?

Fascinating heroes and heroines like Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or Lyra Silvertongue and Will in Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* draw their magical being from a deep and ancient tradition of myth, of metamorphosis and oracle, of divine possession and ubiquity. When Sethe hears the voices of *Beloved*, the daughter she killed rather than let her live a life in slavery, Sethe acts like a clairvoyant cunning woman in the African and Afro-American syncretic religious ritual, in the footsteps of the pagan oracles, and especially Virgil's Cumaean Sibyl. The haunted, multiple consciousness of the newly conceived personal subject has brought back to immediate experience metamorphic ideas about the life principle, and reanimated ancient, mythological visions of ghosts and spectres. The zones of contemporary entertainment are populated by ancient figures from old stories and to say that the process is growing stronger is really a commonplace. What is perhaps fresher in my thinking about these things is the relation between imaginary realms conjured by poetic language in the past and their realisation in contemporary media, especially photographic. (This is the theme of the book I have just finished, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media*.)

A fantastic storyteller constitutes through 'reasoned imagination' (Borges' phrase) a metaphysical and poetic dimension of reality which repositions us as we confront our selves and our identities in these times. An imagination which thinks by generating images, choosing among fantasies and memories, allows expression to individual subjectivity; but this subjectivity keep itself separate from the phantasmatic phenomena which whirl around us, from which choices have to be made. This contemporary subjectivity does not respect the distinction that used to seem so clear between lived experience and dreams, between actual and unreal events, either in the forms they take or the degree of intensity with which they impinge. We continue to demand that stories be *told over and over*, we want them to metamorphose themselves from the recipes of the manuals into drama and poems, into novels and texts, we want them not only for themselves, but for how they seed storytellers' imaginations, how they make other stories, how they change in different poets or novelists or playwrights' hands into works – into opera, and indeed operas, into *poesis*.

One of the things that we want from stories, it seems, is orientation with regard to the powers that we imagine govern our destinies, call them gods or fate or providence or chaos or relativity. The marvellous geography of myth takes a writer through variable and highly emotional terrain, where anxiety and pleasure, perplexity and discovery take different shapes, like beckoning figures in a dream. It would be stupid to suggest stories invariably enlighten; but stories do offer a way of imagining alternatives, mapping possibilities, exciting hope, warding off danger by forestalling it, casting spells of order on the unknown ahead. Death in a story, as told in the myth of Orpheus, or of Dido and Aeneas, or of fatal, forbidden passion, as imagined in the story of the Minotaur and Pasiphae, tells us such terrible things can happen, but also can perform an apotropaic act by speaking of it, by conjuring it in fantasy. These overlapping qualities and effects contribute to the pleasure, the sheer enjoyment that so much of the literature of myth and metamorphosis can give. Margaret Atwood, in her recent essays called *Negotiating with the Dead*

discusses the purposes and effects of writing and the reasons and motives of writers, and she emphasises the importance of readers in supplying inflections on a work of art's meaning.

Magic, myth, fairyland and other realms of imagination, the irrational and the demonic used to attract a stigma. Philip Larkin famously spurned reworking old stories when in the Sixties he contemptuously rejected 'dipping into the myth kitty' in favour of writing that dealt with the everyday, the realities of contemporary existence – ambulances, mum and dad, the rain in the north. But today, something very different is taking place, and the ancient stories of love and loss, ambition and destiny, such as Virgil told in the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, are still calling out to us. No wonder Orpheus symbolises poetry itself; in his head, which goes on singing, we can recognise Virgil's own voice, calling to us now:

Tum quoque marmorea caput a cervice revulsum
gurgite cum medio portans Oeagrius Hebrus
volveret, Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua
ah miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat:
Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae. (*Georgics* 4.523-7)

…But even then that head, plucked from the marble-pale
Neck, and rolling down mid-stream on the river Hebrus –
That voice, that cold, cold tongue cried out "Eurydice!"
Cried "Poor Eurydice!" as the soul of the singer fled,
And the banks of the river echoed, echoed, "Eurydice!"[21]

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NOTES

1 Cecil Day-Lewis, trans., *The* Eclogues *and* Georgics (Oxford, 1999 [1963]) 125.
2 ibid. 124.
3 *Purgatory* (Penguin Classics, 1985) 272.
4 Vladmir Nabokov, *Mary* (Mashen'ka) (1926), quoted by Stefan Andriopoulos, 'TheTerror of Reproduction: Early Cinema's Ghostly Doubles and the Right to One's Own Image', *New German Critique* (2006).
5 Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel,* trans.Ruth L. C. Simms (New York, 2003 [1964]) 82.
6 The Quay Brothers, visionary film-makers and puppeteers, are now returning to the story in the inspiration behind their new film *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* (2006).
7 Robert Fagles, trans., *The* Aeneid (London, 2006) 205.
8 *Alcestis: In a Version by Ted Hughes* (London, 1999) 28.
9 Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (London, 2000) 294-5.
10 ibid. 297.
11 ibid. 302.
12 ibid. 319.
13 ibid. 335.
14 Domenico Comparetti, *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, trans. E.F.M. Benecke (London l895 [reprinted Princeton 1997]) 241-2.
15 ibid. 268-9.
16 Fagles (n.7) 145.
17 Fagles (n.7) 183.
18 Fagles (n.7) 144.
19 Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet.*
20 Since this address was given, Canongate in Edinburgh have begun publishing a series on Myths retold or revisited by celebrated writers, including Margaret Atwood (*The Penelopiad*), Ali Smith (*Where Girl Meets Boy*), David Grossman (*Lion's Honey*), Salley Vickers (*Where Three Roads Meet*) among other titles.
21 Day-Lewis (n.1) 126.