

V.S. Lectures, No. 98

Virgil's underworld - the opening scenes (Aen. 6.268.416)

Text of a lecture read to the Virgil Society
14th November, 1970.

by R. D. Williams, M.A.

The theme of my paper today is to illustrate Virgil's method of using traditional material as a background for what is special and personal to himself and his poem. I want to illustrate particularly from the opening scenes of the description of the underworld - the shapes at the entrance, Charon and his boat, the ghost of Palinurus - but I would like to begin with a few examples from elsewhere in the poem to show you what I mean.

First then the speech of Jupiter in Aen.1.257f. This is set in a Homeric context - the whole of Aeneid 1 is based on the episode and incident of Odyssey 5-8, and in particular this speech in reply to Venus' complaint is like that of Zeus in reply to Athene's complaint at the beginning of Odyssey 5 ---, but the speech itself is utterly unHomeric. It forecasts the march of history, the destiny of Rome on earth as the gods and fate will it to be. Here is the concept of man's part in the far-reaching plans of the heavenly powers for mortal men - the concept of Rome's divinely-inspired mission for the benefit of human kind. This is perhaps the most fundamental difference of all between Virgil's epic poetry and Homer's.

Secondly Virgil uses in Aen.7.641f. a traditional piece of epic machinery, the catalogue of forces, based on the catalogue of the ships in Iliad 2. But he uses it not, as Homer had done, to describe the forces of the victors; it is a catalogue not of Trojans but of the Italian enemy, and by this means Virgil is able to express his patriotic love of his own Italy and to stress the qualities of the defeated, whose contribution to the Roman nation was much greater than that of the Trojan victors (12.819f.).

Thirdly Virgil describes at the end of Aen.8 the new shield of Aeneas. This is based on the description of Achilles' shield in Iliad 18. But the presentation is entirely different; Achilles had lost his shield because Hector had killed Patroclus who was wearing it, and the description of the pictures is a kind of kaleidoscope of Greek life. Aeneas had not lost his shield, and the pictures are those of Roman triumphs in her future history. Virgil uses the traditional device to remind us, at this last moment before the full-scale fighting starts, of the reasons why Aeneas must fight this war.

Fourthly we may consider the final scenes of Aeneid 12. These are based very closely on the well-known duel in Iliad 22 between Achilles and Hector, and they give a new ending to the story by the reversal of the roles - this time it is the Trojan who prevails and the Achilles-figure (Turnus) who is defeated. But more than that - Virgil presents the duel in such a way as to emphasise the

dilemma of Aeneas as he conquers the proud (debellare superbos). When Turnus' pride is overthrown and he begs for mercy (12.930 ille humilis ---) we expect that the clementia of Aeneas will prevail over the full satisfaction of ultio - but it does not. Virgil had hoped that the Roman attitude towards the defeated could be different from the cruelty of the heroic age - but he leaves us wondering whether it was so. The framework of Homer is used to present a Roman dilemma.

I come nearer home, and offer some examples from Book 6. In Limbo there are the traditional categories of the untimely dead, infants, the unjustly condemned, suicides, and the Fields of Mourning for those who died of love, with a very traditional list of seven heroines - Phaedra, Procris, Eriphyle, Evadne, Pasiphae, Laodamia, Caeneus. Into this framework comes suddenly and with violent impact on the reader the ghost of Dido, altering the mood suddenly from the detailed appreciation and generalised pathos of pictorial detail to an intense personal involvement on the part of Aeneas and every reader of Aeneid 4. This is not from Homer or Plato or Poseidonius, but from Aeneid 4.

Next in Limbo we reach the famous warriors, and are presented with a crowd scene of some of the seven against Thebes, and some of Aeneas' own comrades and some of the Greek enemy - but the feeling is detached until we meet the sad shade of Deiphobus, close relative and personal friend of Aeneas, killed at Troy when Aeneas escaped. Into the tradition comes the special and personal.

We can take an illustration of a slightly different kind from Tartarus. Here we have what is traditional in the highest degree - Tisiphone, Otus and Ephialtes, Salmoneus, Ixion, Sisyphus and Co. - well known founder members of the Great Sinners' Club. In among them are types, unnamed examples of sins, and the sins in question come close to contemporary Roman life.

Hic, quibus invisi fratres, dum vita manebat,
pulsatusve parens aut fraus innexa clienti,
aut qui divitiis soli incubuere repertis
nec partem posuere suis (quae maxima turba est),
quique ob adulterium caesi, quique arma secuti
impia nec veriti dominorum fallere dextras.....
(608-613).

Here the ties of family life are emphasised, the legal obligation of a patronus towards his cliens (one of the items of the Twelve Tables), the expectation of the unselfish use of riches (Geo.2.507, Hor. Odes 2.2); contemporary too are the references to adultery (no doubt Augustus' moral reforms which culminated in the Leges Iuliae of 18 B.C. were already in the air), to civil war (arma...impia), and to the arming of run-away slaves by Sextus Pompey (Hor. Epod.9.9.f.).

We can take the same sort of illustration from Elysium. We meet expected figures of tradition like Orpheus and Musaeus, and famous Trojan ancestors such as Ilus, Assaracus and Dardanus; and then again there follows a list of types (660-664) with a specially Roman, and indeed a specially Virgilian slant. The last two lines are particularly memorable:

inventas aut qui vitam excoluere per artis,
quique sui memores aliquos fecere merendo.

These are very wide categories indeed, opening Virgil's Elysium to all mankind - this is the very opposite of Homer's Elysium, available only to those of divine descent, and it expresses the dimly-defined hope of the religious message of Aeneid 6, that in some imperfectly understood way the confusions and suffering of mortal life is compensated in the world to come.

I turn now to the particular passage I want to analyse, and we begin vestibulum ante ipsum primis que in faucibus Orci (273) with a formidable array of personified shapes. Personification goes back in classical literature as far as we can go back; we find Eris (Strife), Litae (Prayers) and many more in Homer, and in Hesiod Theog. 211f. There is a formidable list of the daughters of Night (Doom, Fate, Death, Sleep, Dreams, Blame, Woe, Deceit, Friendship, Age, Strife); and then of the daughters of Strife (Toil, Forgetfulness, Famine, Sorrows etc. etc.) Cicero (N.D.3.44) gives a list of the children of Erebus and Night, as found in ancient genealogies, as follows: Amor, Dolus, Metus, Labor, Invidentia, Fatum, Senectus, Mors, Tenebrae, Miseria, Querela, Gratia, Fraus, Pertinacia, Parcae, Hesperides, Somnia. Thus it would be fair to say that Virgil had no shortage of sources for personified abstracts: on the other hand we do not know of any previous author who placed them at the entrance to hell. Lucretius, in a fine passage (3.59f.), gives a list of the wicked qualities of life encouraged by the fear of death, and describes them as lingering as it were before the gates of death. We shall see that this passage has influenced Virgil.

Let us look at the individual items. Luctus is traditional - but what of ultrices Curae? Servium, rightly I think, explains this as the pangs of guilty conscience - curae conscientiae quae Puniunt semper nocentes. Juvenal (13.192f.) says that a mind which is diri conscia facti suffers worse than the torments of Rhadamanthus. This is what Virgil means later on when he says (6.743) Quisque suos patimur manes: we all endure our own ghosts. To me this phrase ultrices Curae points to the experiences Aeneas is about to undergo as he meets the ghosts of Palinurus, Dido, and Deiphobus - his curae, his remorse, takes vengeance on him for neglect or imagined neglect of what he might have done. Dido in particular receives something of the vengeance for which she had cried out (4.386-7, 661-2) when Aeneas meets her ghost, tries to express his sorrow, and is rebuffed.

In line 275 Morbi and Senectus are traditional, and so Metus and malesuada Fames. Turpis Egestas recalls Lucr. 3.65 turpis enim ferme contemptus et acris egestas; these qualities remove the enjoyment of life and linger before the gates of death. In the next line Letum is traditional and so is Labos, but the linking with Egestas reminds us of Geo.1.145-6 labor omnia vicit improbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas. The meaning of the Georgice passage is not that hard work wins all the victories (uplifting thought though this is), but that Toil prevailed everywhere and Poverty - after Jupiter had removed the Golden Age.

Sleep as the brother of Death is traditional (Homer, II.14.231) but possibly the choice of the less attractive word sopor rather than somnus conveys the idea of sloth. Mala mentis Gaudia is a vague and most haunting phrase - Seneca

(Ep.Mor.59.3) explains it as voluptates; but I rather think the reference again is to the passage in Lucretius 3.59f., where ambition and greed are specified as the particular qualities which lead to human misery (avarities and honorum caeca cupido). Virgil had experienced these evils in his time, as we have in ours.

Thus the personifications seem to be sometimes specific to Virgil's time, and at the conclusion they certainly are. Bellum is not in the lists from Hesiod or Cicero which I gave earlier, but for Virgil it was the feature of Roman life which Augustus could and would eliminate - Aen.1.291 aspera tum positis mitescent saecula bellis; this is the first characteristic of Augustus' restored Golden Age. This is the concept which he repeats (after the mention of the traditional Furies) in his final picture, Discordia demens. The worst kind of war is civil war - the alliteration of d and the very powerful adjective demens add to Virgil's emphasis. Discordia is personified again in the description of the battle of Actium on Aeneas' shield (8.702); that was hopefully her last appearance on the Roman stage.

Thus the personification of abstracts is based largely on traditional material, but it contains elements special to Aeneas and to Virgil's contemporary world. The same may be said of the monsters, 285 f.; they are traditional but in certain ways they are made relevant to the poem - the Chimaera is Turnus' emblem (Aen.7.785), depicted on his helmet breathing fire which glows hotter as the battles rage more fiercely. Several of the creatures were removed from the upper world by Hercules (the hydra of Lerna, the form of the three-bodied ghost, i.e. Geryon), and generally speaking they represent the kind of savage monster which the early hero of a people is called upon to remove (Beowulf and the monster, St. George and the Dragon, Hercules and the fire-breathing Cacus in Aen.8). The points of similarity between Aeneas and the Stoic hero Hercules have often been remarked, and are very noticeable in Book 8; as Hercules removed monsters so that the world might know civilisation, so Aeneas must remove men like Turnus who oppose the march of Roman civilisation, and Augustus (compared with Hercules in 6.801) must complete the process.

I have missed out the description of the old elm tree with its dreams, between the personifications and the monsters, 282-4. I would like to say something about it, but I haven't much to say. I can say that vulgo goes with ferunt not with tenere, and that the somnia vana seem similar to the falsa insomnia of the Gate of Ivory, the gate of false dreams. True dreams come from Heaven, like the vision of Anchises in Aen.5.722 f.; these are false dreams, perhaps even hallucinations, which mislead and confuse mortals. What is the significance of the elm tree? Trees were common in Roman courtyards, and Mackail suggests a ruined Minoan palace with a tree growing up through the shattered pavement - this doesn't get us very far. There are elm-trees in Homer (II.6.419) growing on the tomb of Eetion, planted by the mountain nymphs, something of a link perhaps between the elm and death. Theophrastus (H.P.3.1.2.) calls the elm-tree 'fruitless', and in the Georgics its use is mainly to support vines, or to have oak grafted upon it: it is said to be valuable for its leaves

(Geo.2.446). The elm occurs in the Eclogues once or twice as a sylvan setting; the word does not occur again in the Aeneid. We do not know Virgil's sources for the elm-tree here; perhaps tentatively we can say that it has some tenuous links with death and barrenness, but I'd like to know more about it.

Next follows the description of Charon and the ghosts waiting by the river. The ferryman Charon is perhaps the best-known of all Pluto's people; he is a figure of folk story, often portrayed (as Charun) on Etruscan tombs. In literature he has become less terrifying: he does not figure in Homer, but is well-known by the fifth century, and in Aristophanes' Frogs is a grumpy and humorous character. His epithet portitor means strictly harbour-master (it is not from portare, 'carry', but portus, 'harbour'); and his job is primarily to be responsible for immigration and customs, only secondarily to do the ferrying across. His first appearance in Virgil is impressive - it is not until later that we enjoy his comical and mock-heroic aspect. His grisly aspect is described - terribili squalore, a matted beard, fiery eyes, a dirty cloak fastened not by a brooch but a knot. He is old (does a god grow old?) but still active: Tacitus remembered this passage and applied the phrase to the Britons who fought against Agricola (29), omnis iuventus et quibus cruda ac viridis senectus.

Upon the description of the grisly ferryman follows the intense pathos of the unburied souls - 'Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks / in Vallombrosa.' The simile has I think three points of comparison; first the number (quam multae); second the fluttering of the ghosts like leaves or birds; and thirdly the thought that the summer of their lives is past. They hold out their hands in longing for the further shore - notice how the assonance of -bant-, -man-, anticipates the full scale rhyme of -oris amorè. Aeneas is deeply moved at the pathos of this scene, and his emotion is intensified as he recognises the ghosts of his old friends Leucaspis and Orontes and Palinurus.

The traditional machinery of Charon, Styx, and the unnumbered ghosts now fades away into the personal meeting between Aeneas and his faithful helmsman Palinurus. The episode itself is based on Homer's story of Elpenor, whose unburied ghost is the first to appear to Odysseus in Odyssey 11 - but Virgil has enormously increased the significance and pathos of this meeting. The account of the death of Palinurus at the end of Book 5 is one of the most moving passages in the Aeneid, and here we see the sequel, the undeserved suffering of the faithful helmsman, and the deep sorrow of Aeneas at the irrevocable loss of his comrade, a scapegoat required by destiny for the safe arrival in Italy. This is the first of the events of the past which Aeneas must live through again in his passage through the underworld, and then leave behind for ever. We see first Aeneas' indignation at the apparent falsity of Apollo's oracular response - notice how his indignation is reflected metrically in the mono-syllabic ending of 346 en haec promissa fides est?; and then Palinurus' explanation that Apollo had not played false, as he did in fact reach Italy alive, only to be killed on landing. His pathetic plea for burial is severely reprimanded by the Sibyl, and Aeneas is made to realise that however sorrowfully he may brood upon the past he can do nothing to change it. The promise of immortality through the Punta die Palinuro seems to the reader inadequate

compensation for the unhappy Palinurus.

Finally Charon appears again to close the scene; and this is where the traditional machinery is used to lower the tension, to provide relief between the pathos of Palinurus and the even greater pathos about to be experienced when Aeneas meets the ghost of Dido in Limbo (see R. G. Austin, Proc. Virg. Soc. 1968-9, pp. 51 f.).

Charon is on the look-out and sees them iam inde (385); his challenge (388) is blustering and pseudo-impressive and is the Latin equivalent of "Halt, who goes there?". Notice the use of the singular - quisquis es - he expects a spokesman to be in charge of the party - , the authoritative use of nostra (388) and the repeated idea of iam istinc - not a step further. Line 390 is splendidly impressive and unnecessary: "this is the place of ghosts, of sleep and drowsy night" - Charon wishes to establish his position beyond any doubt, and the use of the word nefas in the next line cites his authority. No living persons allowed - by order. Then rapidly becoming aware of a weakness in his position he anticipates the possible riposte from his visitors - what about Hercules, Theseus etc? Yes I know, Hercules, he says - but I got no joy there for bending the rules; and the same with Theseus and Pirithous, though they were of divine birth and great strength (he seems to reflect to himself that his favours to them might have seemed justified - instead of which, as Servius tells us, he got chained up for a year as punishment). Now he launches into two pieces of quite gratuitous information about the occasions in question - they obviously rankled with him, and he doesn't get much chance to talk about them, and get them out of his system.

The Sibyl's reply is cool and crisp, and she speaks in a tone of firm authority, not without some sarcasm. She tells him to keep calm, absiste moveri; she and Aeneas are not after Cerberus or Proserpina. She ironically builds up her description of Cerberus (400-1) aeternum latrans exsanguis terreat umbras, and gathers herself for the impressive announcement of her companion's identity which she delivers (403) in a line of full epic weight - Troius Aeneas, pietate insignis et armis

(Bow, bow, you lower-middle classes)

ad genitorem imas Erebi descendit ad umbras.

She pauses to see what effect this portentous announcement has had. It has none. So she has to produce her documentation. Si te nulla movet tantae pietatis imago... 'If the picture of such devotion doesn't move you an inch (nulla in this usage is colloquial, cp. Cat. 8.14) then would you kindly take a look at this branch?' The subjunctive agnoscas is ironically deferential. And she shows the branch which she has hidden in her robes (like the sheriff turning back his lapel to show his badge). Her speech ends after a foot and a half of the line (407), and Charon is promptly and completely deflated. His anger vanishes (tumida...corda refers to Charon alone, a poetic plural as often, cf. 49, 80 of this book) and no more words were said by either party.

The sentences are brief and staccato: Charon tumbles over himself to obey this properly identified authority. It is a long time since he saw the golden bough (409) (I suppose Orpheus may have had it - obviously Hercules and Theseus didn't), and he knows he must obey; it is fatalis, given by fate only to those who may have it (line 147). He comes cruising in and clears the gangways, shoving the ghosts already on board out of the way - deturbat is very colloquial indeed, cf. Plautus, Mercator 116 deturba in viam, 'kick him out', and Aen. 5.175 where in the boatrace Gyas gets infuriated with his timid helmsman and slings him overboard in mare praecipitem puppi deturbat ab alta. So Charon takes Aeneas on board - ingentem Aenean (413). The boat was built for ghosts, and grumbles and creaks at a 13 stone warrior; it was only sewn together (sutilis) and it takes in water through its chinks (rimosa). The crossing then is hazardous, touch and go, but in the end (line 415) - notice the spondee tandem filling the first foot and the pattern of alliteration of t's to start with and then v's and q's - they get safely across. In 134 the Sibyl had expressed astonishment that Aeneas wished his Stygios innare lacus; here the verb nearly comes true literally.

Thus the figure of Charon, the machinery of the river and the boat, the material of tradition, is used to diminish the tension, to intermit the pathos of Palinurus and Dido with writing of a different kind, pictorial and mock-heroic. Virgil often uses the technique of varying his narrative between involvement and detachment, between passages calling for us to identify ourselves emotionally with the characters and passages which allow us to sit back and enjoy the spectacle as onlookers. I don't wish to suggest that either is better than the other - the one is predominantly the method of Catullus and the other perhaps of Ennius, perhaps of Homer - but I do want to suggest that Virgil commands both moods. He is perhaps best known as a poet of pathos, and the impact of the ghosts of Palinurus, Dido or Deiphobus can be felt by anyone with enough Latin; therefore I should end by stressing that he can also write in a detached way, sometimes hard and stern (Jupiter's prophecy in I), sometimes rhetorical (as Venus and Juno, Turnus and Drances), sometimes grandiose (the boxing match, the Cyclops), sometimes simple and matter-of-fact (the boat-race), sometimes (though not often) mock heroic as in the portrayal of Charon, grim ferryman of the Stygian waters.