Virgil and the Unspoken

A presidential address given to the Virgil Society on 17 May 2014

In the tenth book of the *Aeneid*, Virgil provides a catalogue of the Etruscan forces who come to join the Trojans – "from the Tuscan shores", as he says, *Tuscis ... ab oris* (164).[1] But the largest space is given to forces who, although Tuscan by blood, do not come from Tuscan shores at all. They come from Mantua (198–206). The story is about a small war in central peninsular Italy, but for some reason the poet imports a contingent from somewhere much more distant: from the eastern half of the plain of the Po valley. It seems very odd, or rather, it would seem odd, did we not know the reason: Virgil came from Mantua, and this is a personal touch.

So in one sense we know why Virgil did it. But in some ways his motives are not so obvious. Did he expect his readers to know what he was up to? His first readers are likely to have known that he was a Mantuan (that is clear enough from the *Georgics*), but his eye will also have been on posterity. Could he be sure that later generations would know? We do not know for sure where Apollonius of Rhodes came from (it wasn't Rhodes). Did Virgil? No one knew where Homer came from. Would future readers retain the knowledge of Virgil's birthplace? Would they have the *Georgics* to hand? Even if they did, they were still likely to read the *Aeneid* first.

There is a further personal touch to the passage on Mantua. In the *Eclogues*, in an incongruous context, Virgil had provided a very brief picture of the river Mincius (7.12–13). In the *Georgics* he had expanded that picture, in the proem to the third book, where he talks about his poetic plans. The distinctive character of Mincius where it flows round Mantua – the slow current, the wide curves, the reed beds, the greenness – acts as Virgil's *sphragis* or seal-stone: it is the stamp of his individuality (13–15). In the *Aeneid*, Mincius is once more described, although in different language – Mincius coming from father Benacus (that is, Lake Garda), veiled in grey reed (10.205–06). The reader who knows the *Georgics* at once feels the impress of Virgil's personal mark.

However, there is not here a single word that overtly expresses any personal interest on the poet's part in these Mantuans, or a connection to them. All that is left unspoken. Well, it may be said, there is a simple reason for this: epic poetry is impersonal, and it would be a breach of generic decorum for the poet to intrude himself directly. Homer tells us nothing

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1 <All translations are the author's own [ed].>

about himself at any time; he does not even have the kindness to tell us how many people he is, which would have saved scholars a world of trouble.

But here we should remember that many of our ideas of what epic is like are actually ideas that Virgil imposed on the epic tradition, and not ones that the ancients themselves would have thought essential. If you look, for example, at Samuel Johnson's account of the nature of epic, in his life of Milton, you will see that only the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* fit it completely, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* fit it to a fair degree, and several of the classical epics hardly fit it at all. "My poem's epic", says Byron in *Don Juan* (1.200), and proceeds to give a satirical account of what an epic poem should contain. Only one poem comes close to matching his list of contents, and that, indeed, is the *Aeneid*.

Yes, for sure, Homer was impersonal, but an epic poet was not in fact required to be that. After all, Ennius told near the start of his *Annals* about his vision in which Homer appeared to him and transmigrated his soul into Ennius' body. In other words, he talked about himself and his experience within an epic poem. Lucan does not do that, but he does intrude his presence – he is constantly haranguing his characters, questioning them, rebuking them, grabbing them by whatever equivalent Roman costume supplied to the lapels. Virgil's decision to be impersonal was a decision to be like Homer – and indeed Virgil's decision to hew so close to Homer was highly distinctive.

Although the Greeks applied the word *epos* to any extended poem composed in hexameters, it is clear that they recognised the distinction, indeed obvious, between heroic epic and the didactic mode, or in other terms, between one stream of tradition descending from Homer and another descending from Hesiod. The author of didactic epos could be positively chatty, as we can see from Hesiod's *Works and Days*. In fact, we may feel that we hear more about the poet's testy relationship with his brother Perses than a gentleman ought to reveal; but then Hesiod wants us to know that he is not a gentleman. Hesiod's *Theogony* is rather different – nothing personal there, except for the brief scene in which the Muses appear to the poet on Helicon and inaugurate him as a poet. That is quite like the vision of Homer in Ennius' *Annals*; it is not much like Hesiod's dour mutterings about his life in the *Works and Days*. For the composer of didactic epos, then, it was a matter of choice: you could disclose yourself, like Hesiod, but also withdraw yourself, like Aratus.

Let us try a couple of thought experiments. Suppose that the *Aeneid* alone had survived of Virgil's works, and we knew next to nothing about him outside his poem (this is after all more or less the position we are in with Homer and Apollonius of Rhodes). What would we make of the passage about Mantua in *Aen.* 10? We would surely wonder why the poet should linger in this way so far from the scene of action. And why are we taken up the river to its source in Lake Garda, even farther from the area of battle? We would feel, I suggest, that something unspoken is at work here, and perhaps we would guess that Mantua had some

special significance for the author. Whereas Homer never tells us that he is a Greek (or perhaps I should say "Achaean"), this poet has lightly indicated that he is Italian (*litoribus nostris*, "on our shores", in the very first line of book 7). We might naturally ask: which part of Italy? And when we reached that place in book 10, we might sense that we had been given the clue.

Suppose, alternatively, that the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid* had all survived but that we had no external evidence about them (again, a situation where we often find ourselves in regard to classical authors). The *Georgics* tells us that Virgil is the author's name, and that he previously wrote the *Eclogues*. Those two works together give us the poet's origin in Mantua and the peculiar significance that he attaches to the river Mincius. We would immediately see that this was picked up in *Aen.* 10. At a minimum, we would know that *Aen.* 10 was in some kind of relation to those passages in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. And even before taking considerations of style and quality in account, we would be pretty sure, I think, that the poet of the *Aeneid* was the same man: the one who identifies himself in the *Georgics* as Virgil.

Perhaps, after all, Virgil was confident that all his works would survive, along with some further knowledge about their author (although we should always remember how hard it was to secure immortality in the ancient world, a subject which had exercised Cicero a great deal). Yet however great or small a given reader's knowledge may be, he or she is likely to detect a personal element in book 10. But that personal element remains unspoken. We may well ask why, or ask what effect this reticence has. In the previous book, Virgil had briefly broken his self-imposed rule of impersonality to affect a passionate feeling about the tale of Nisus and Euryalus: "Happy pair! if my song has any power, no day shall ever erase you from the memory of time, as long as the house of Aeneas shall dwell upon the immovable rock of the Capitol and the Roman father hold sway" (9.446–49). Likewise, there could easily have been some passing exclamation about "my Mantua" in the tenth book. Virgil decides against that, and it is an aesthetic decision.

As with the author's person, so with his influences: throughout his career Virgil's practice was to indicate the poets behind his work without the full explicitness of naming them. Every schoolboy knows that Virgil imitates Theocritus in the *Eclogues*, Hesiod in the *Georgics*, and Homer in the *Aeneid*. The more advanced schoolboy also knows about the imitations of Lucretius, Catullus, Aratus and Apollonius. But none of those names appears anywhere in Virgil's œuvre. Contrast Lucretius: he names Homer, Ennius and Empedocles. Equally significant are the names of poets who do not appear in his poem: Hesiod and Aratus. Lucretius is asserting, through what he says and through what he does not say, that he is not in the didactic line that descends from Hesiod to Aratus and the Hellenistic metaphrasts such as Nicander; rather, he is in the heroic line of Homer and Ennius. The one didactic poet whom he names – and indeed praises lavishly – is Empedocles, whose verse does have a rugged grandeur and some Homeric flavour, and is also strongly alliterative, like Ennius' and Lucretius' own. We

can also look forward to Statius, who at the end of his own epic, the *Thebaid*, will name the *Aeneid*, acknowledging an inferiority: "Live, I pray", he tells his book, "and do not essay the godlike *Aeneid*, but always follow at a distance and worship its footsteps" (12.816–17). That shows that within one epic poem one could talk directly about another epic poem, although I must allow that Statius surely intends this parting touch of humility to surprise us.

Of course, Virgil does acknowledge his debts, although those acknowledgements become increasingly implicit, more subterranean, in the course of his career. In the opening lines of three Eclogues he addresses the Sicilian muses and Arethusa, the fountain of Syracuse, and describes his poetry as Syracusan verse (*Ecl.* 4, 10 and 6). Short of naming Theocritus, who disobligingly will not fit into a hexameter line, he is as explicit as he can be, and this within a work which is in general notable for its elusiveness. Moreover, a contemporary poet, Gallus, is present by name, and is indeed conspicuous, in two of the Eclogues (6 and 10). The *Georgics* is a little more covert in this respect. The very first line alludes to the *Works and Days*, implying, correctly, that only the first book is based on Hesiod. In the second book, Virgil describes himself as singing "Ascraean song" – referring to Hesiod's home village of Ascra – but already there is a something a little teasing about this, for he is calling himself Hesiodic at a point where he has left Hesiod far behind (2.176). Perhaps we may go further. Virgil is here at the climax of his *laus Italiae*; he has been glorifying his native land for some thirty lines. Recall what Hesiod said about Ascra: "a miserable village, foul in winter, harsh in summer, never good" (*Works and Days*, 640). That is what "song of Ascra" is like. So there is paradox in Virgil calling his own verse Ascraean as he concludes the most glorious panegyric to a land ever written.

It is in the second book of the *Georgics* too that he pays his tribute to Lucretius: "Happy the man who has been able to understand the causes of things, and to trample all fears and inexorable fate and the roar of voracious Acheron beneath his feet" (2.490–92). Although Lucretius is not named, the allusions are clear enough, as almost everyone has recognised. Nevertheless, one scholar has doubted that a specific reference to Lucretius is meant, and although I am sure that he is wrong, it is at least possible to have that doubt, whereas to doubt the references to Theocritus in the *Eclogues* would be absurd. Virgil is becoming just a little more subterranean than before.

Lucretius was the poet who influenced Virgil more than any other, and so it is worth asking what he may have learnt from him about reticence and disclosure. Hardly anyone reads Lucretius, I imagine, without receiving the sense of a strongly distinctive personality behind the work, and yet that personality remains inscrutable and unreachable. I have described his voice as being like a voice on the radio: it may be highly individual, but you do not know where it is coming from, and you cannot put a face to it.[2] It is significant that we know less

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2 <Introduction to Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, tr. A. E. Stallings, 2007, London, xxxi [ed].>

about Lucretius than about any other major Latin author, since most of what we are told about ancient poets comes from information found in their works or deduced from them, not always intelligently; Lucretius tells us nothing at all about himself, and the critics and biographers therefore had no material to work upon. Lucretius' passionate reticence, the combination of urgent and immediate appeal to us with pride and secrecy, is an essential part of his poem's unique character.

Now we cannot be sure that our reading of a classical author is a good one, and if it is, we cannot be sure that any particular person in antiquity saw the text in the same way as we ourselves do. But it seems to me likely that Virgil saw Lucretius in the way that I have described, and saw too that he could learn from it. In the *Aeneid*, his idea, I suggest, was that at rare moments something personal should break through, or at least come close to doing so. In the Everglades of Florida I once saw a manatee, a marine mammal that likes to float just under the surface of the water: you make out a shape, but not much more than a shape. The personal element in the *Aeneid* seems to me a bit like that. I have mentioned three places in the poem where there is something like a personal touch. I think that they are the only three places. True, at the start of the poem he says *Musa, mihi causas memora* ("Muse, tell me the cause", *Aen.* 1.8), but that "me" (*mihi*) is a direct translation of μοι in the first line of the *Odyssey*: "Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways who ..." It is not, in reality, personal at all. And each of the three personal moments is so in a limited or equivocal way. To indicate that one is Italian, as Virgil does at the start of book 7, is not to indicate very much. To exclaim over Nisus and Euryalus is to claim a personal emotion, and it does imply that the poet is moved by self-sacrificial love, but that is as far as it goes towards displaying his individual character or experience. The digression on Mantua alone is individually significant, and that is the one where the personal element is left entirely unspoken. And surely we do not regret that. I pointed out that Virgil could have reminded us here that Mantua was his own *patria*, but it is better that he did not. The Lucretian hiddenness is more powerful.

I believe that we can see a response to this aspect of Lucretius in the *Georgics* too, but it was a different response. The first book is entirely impersonal, and since this is the Hesiodic book, that impersonality is striking. In this respect the poet will be entirely unlike his notional Greek model. No doubt we expect him to continue in the same vein, but he is going to surprise us. In the second book comes that talk about the literary situation of his poem – its relation to Lucretius. He implies that he lacks Lucretius' sharply scientific intellect, but he remains rather elusive. This Lucretius talk is woven into the great panegyric in praise of country life, and it is with the countryman that Lucretius is finally contrasted – the man who knows the rural gods, and is undisturbed by the political turmoil of the greater world. One of the best Latinists of our time – I am imitating Virgil in not naming great men directly – once wrote an article in which he suggested that this part of the *Georgics* was a bit of a mess. On this account

the confusion between Virgil the country-loving poet and the country-dweller himself is just that – a confusion. So much of what is written these days about Latin poetry is so completely uncritical that I find this robust approach rather bracing, but I do not agree. I find the way in which Virgil at once discloses and eludes masterly and fascinating. Is Virgil modest here or self-assertive? He suggests that a direct challenge to Lucretius' intellectual system is one that he must duck, but he also seems to suggest that Lucretius' materialism leaves something missing, that "there are more things in heaven and earth … than are dreamt of in your philosophy". However, he does not quite say that. Why not? Perhaps it is out of deference to the master. This is a tribute to Lucretius, and therefore not the moment to be ticking him off. But perhaps we feel a touching uncertainty in Virgil himself, a man no longer satisfied with his youthful Epicureanism, but not sure where he might belong instead. In mentioning the young Virgil's Epicurean beliefs, I am perhaps indulging in the so-called biographical fallacy, importing into the poem a fact about the author's life which he has left outside it. But Virgil's biography apart, I still maintain that we can feel a sense of the poet's uncertainty, mingled with his delight, and that this is achieved through what is not directly spoken.

At the start of the third book of the *Georgics*, we get more of Virgil the individual: the man of Mantua, the poet who has had enough of fancy Alexandrian mythologizing and has plans for a future work on a heroic or panegyric theme (3–8, 12, 26–39). In the fourth book, personal anecdote breaks in for the first time – the old market-gardener that the poet knew down in the deep south of Italy; and the poem ends with a *sphragis* that is more individualised than any had been before: Virgil gives us his name, his place (Naples), an indication of his age (no longer young), the date of composition (while Caesar was by the Euphrates) and a list of previous publications (just one: the *Eclogues*). Little is left unspoken there. But this final impress of the seal gains part of its force from one of the movements through the poem: from reticence towards an increasingly open self-presentation.

I have been speaking of things in Virgil that are subterranean, that lie below the surface, unspoken, but so far they have been things that one may feel lie not very far below. I now turn towards things that are more profoundly hidden, where Virgil's silence may take us nearer the heart of his moral imagination and understanding of the human condition.

I will approach this by an indirect route. A few years ago I became interested in how Roman architecture had developed expressiveness in the shaping of interior space.[3] Classic Greek architecture had been an architecture of the exterior. With the Parthenon and the Erechtheum it was always the exterior that mattered most, architecturally speaking. But in the Roman period, for the first time, an architecture developed in which the interior had the aesthetic dominance, and it found its finest expression in Trajan's complex of his Forum and

[3] <*God, Space and City in the Roman Imagination*, 2013, Oxford, chs 9 & 10 [ed].>

the Basilica Ulpia, which are lost, in the Pantheon, which survives, in Trajan's Baths, which are mostly lost, in the other great imperial bathhouses, and then in the great churches of late antiquity. I then asked myself whether classical authors had taken an interest in interior space, and if so, how they had described it. So I looked through classical literature and the result was, in a way, rather disappointing. It seemed to me that there was only one man who was much interested in describing or evoking in words the spatial quality of interiors, and that was Virgil. It was the more disappointing for me in that I had written a long book on Virgil, and was hoping to move on to new ground; but no, the Mantuan still had me in his grip.

There are many descriptions of palaces in Latin poetry. Most of them are broadly similar: they concentrate on expensive and gleaming surfaces – marble, ivory, onyx, and the gilded *laquearia* or coffering on the ceiling. The palace of Peleus in Catullus 64 (43–49) is the blithest and perhaps the most appealing of these set-piece descriptions; Lucan's palace of Cleopatra is, unsurprisingly, the most frantically hyperbolic (10.111–22). Personal poets, like Horace and Propertius, affect modesty by saying that they don't have houses with all these luxurious materials. The one poet who writes about palaces quite differently is Virgil. Take Dido's palace in *Aen.* 1. Only the furnishings are described as luxurious. For the palace itself, rather than a set-piece description, Virgil gives us snatches of evocation across almost a hundred lines. Not until the meal is over and the tables cleared do we get any account of the banqueting hall itself, and this mostly evokes the innerness of the room, deep within the heart of the house, not surface but space – echoing voices, the lamps hung from the high ceiling. Only briefly is there a mention of that gilded coffering high above the diners (725–27). As for the material of walls and floor – the main interest of other poets when they take us into palaces – nothing is said at all. All that remains unspoken. Virgil shuns fact and detail, concentrating on space, mood, atmosphere.

Or take Latinus' temple palace in *Aen.* 7. Again, the more one looks at other palaces in Latin literature, the more idiosyncratic this one becomes. It has a hundred towering columns, but none of the usual palace apparatus. It is *augustum, ingens* ("venerable, huge"), "shuddersome with woods and ancestral awe" (170–72). But as for materials, walls, ceilings – again nothing is said, and the evocation is all the more effective for the absence of direct description. We might also think of the simile early in *Aen.* 8, where Aeneas' anxiety is likened to sun- or moonbeams reflected off water, darting about and striking the *laquearia* of the ceiling (22–25). Virgil does not say that the *laquearia* are gilded, and gleam aloft as the beam of light strikes them. He does not need to. There is an impressive economy in this. If readers can supply the detail for themselves, then the poet can leave it unspoken.

When we think of interiors, we think mostly of buildings, the works of man. But there are also interiors that are not man-made: there are caves. Again, I looked through Latin literature. There are a number of caves in narrative poetry, and a few elsewhere, but again I found that

Virgil was more interested in caves and their spatial feeling than anyone else. (By the way, Virgil apart, the best cave that I found was in Apuleius' *Golden Ass* 2.4 – a marvellously subtle and vivid depiction of an artificial grotto).

Virgil gave us a spectacular cave the very first time he attempted an extended piece of narrative. This is the underwater home of Cyrene, in the story of Aristaeus in the fourth book of the *Georgics*. It is the most spectacular piece of cavern evocation in Latin poetry (363–67). And when Cyrene sends her son Aristaeus to capture Proteus, he finds him at another mighty cavern (418–22). That suggests how much Virgil liked caves. And of course there are caves in the *Aeneid* – the caves of Aeolus, of Polyphemus, of the Sibyl, of Cacus. The Underworld itself is one vast cavern, and although I suppose that we forget this most of the time, there are moments when we are reminded of the fact – as Aeneas prepares to plunge into the cavern's opening (6.237–41), or when the poet explains that Elysium, although underground, is flooded with light because it has its own sun and stars (6.640–41).

But the most momentous and moving cave of all is surely the one in the fourth book, where Dido and Aeneas come together. I have dwelt on Virgil's interest in describing or evoking caves to bring out the extent of the surprise that awaits us here. *Speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem deveniunt* ("Dido and the Trojan chief come to the same cave", 165–66). *Speluncam* – the cave is given to us in a single word, and that is all. Can you imagine another Latin poet taking his chief characters to a cave where something would happen to change the history of the world, and saying nothing about it at all? And this is not the only thing that is unspoken. Virgil does not tell us what happened in the cave. I stress this – this time, not even one word. Instead, he tells us what happened *outside* the cave – lines of such astonishing beauty that you will not mind my quoting them (166–68):

> *Prima et Tellus et pronuba Iuno*
> *Dant signum; fulsere ignes et conscius Aether*
> *conubiis, summoque ulularunt vertice Nymphae.*

> ("Both primal earth and nuptial Juno give the sign; fires gleamed and Air, witness to the bridal, and the Nymphs wailed on the mountain top").

Some may say that Virgil's reticence here is a matter of genre and decorum: epic poetry does not describe sex. But if they say that, they will be wrong. Virgil does describe sex in the *Aeneid* – in the voluptuous depiction of the love-making of Venus and Vulcan (8.387–93) – lines so sensual that they shocked Montaigne.[4] Virgil could have written in that fashion in book 4 had he wished to do so. Some years ago, I implied that Virgil's choice was another

[4] *Essais* 3.5 ('Sur des vers de Virgile').

way of representing the bleakness of Aeneas' lot: gods can be shown in lavishly enjoyable copulation, but the poet does not allow poor Dido and Aeneas that privilege.[5] I now think that this was a mistake. Of course what happened in the cave was wonderful – it must have been – it transforms Dido at once: no longer does she care how things look or what anyone thinks (4.170–72) – famous and much debated lines.

On a technical level, there is the matter of narrative skill. Virgil's texture is dense and tightly woven. If you don't need to say a thing, why say it? Jane Austen once advised that the novelist should avoid "too many particulars of left hand and of right",[6] and when I read modern novels, I think it a bad sign when the author piles in irrelevant details in the hope of persuading us that the work is observant or true to life.

Perhaps Virgil had learnt from an earlier generation how much can be left out of narrative. At all events, Catullus had managed in his poem 64 to tell two stories – the story of Peleus and Thetis and the story of Theseus and Ariadne – with almost no narrative at all. The most conspicuous example of leaving things out in Virgil comes of course at the end of the poem, or perhaps one should say, after the end of the poem. It is a masterpiece of narrative economy that, while the story has not been brought to its conclusion, the poem is none the less complete. The end is abrupt and yet entirely satisfying, and we realise, as we roll up that twelfth scroll and put it back in its box, that we know all that we need to know.

But I return to the lovers in the cave. Almost every possible and impossible thing that can be said about Virgil has already been said, but no one, as far as I know, has ever doubted that Dido and Aeneas had sex in the cave. On one level, Virgil is silent about this because no words are required. It is an impressive piece of narrative economy. But I believe that he has profounder purposes too.

Let us go back to Cyrene's cave, and indeed beyond Cyrene to what is, I suppose, the best cave in Greek literature – the cave of Calypso in the fifth book of the *Odyssey*. Unusually for Homer, this is shown to us empathetically: we see it as it appears to the god Hermes, who has come to tell Calypso that she must let Odysseus go. It is through his eyes that we are entranced by the lush herbage and fruitage around the cave mouth, and the song of the goddess, emerging from a dark, hidden interior (55–74).

Virgil picked this up when he came to create his own first cave, for he was already finding his way to the empathetic style of narrative that he was to develop so fully in the *Aeneid*. We see the underwater realm through Aristaeus' marvelling eyes, and it is extensively described because he is taking it all in, rapt by what he sees. Dido and Aeneas, by contrast, have eyes only for each other, and the cave itself is of no interest to them at all. Virgil's narrative follows their example.

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5 <*Virgil's Experience*, 1998, Oxford, 520 [ed].>

6 Letter of 9 September 1814.

On the other hand, Aeneas and Dido were very much interested in one another; so why no word of that? One reason, I suggest, is the unknowability of the most intimate experiences. It is partly that what these two feel and do is none of our business. Venus and Vulcan can copulate in our presence because no depth of emotion is involved. Indeed, in the lightest part of what is generally not at all a light poem, we may feel that their embraces are as much for our pleasure as for their own. But Dido and Aeneas preserve their autonomy. There is also a psychological truth here. In such circumstances people may not know themselves quite what happened and how. The sexual pressure has been getting stronger and stronger, and in the cave the passion explodes. How did they find themselves locked in embrace? It is enough that they did, and Virgil's narrative, or lack of narrative, expresses that truth. In any case, Virgil has had another idea of genius. He has displaced the lovers' passion into nature. Their act itself is both natural and supernatural, the wildness is both within and without. The cave is savage landscape, but also their shelter; their passion is both the wild weather and a human huddling from the wild.

Virgil's silence about the event in the cave also has a larger importance in the poem's moral economy. Much talk about Dido and Aeneas is concerned with the question of blame: was it her fault, or his, or the gods', or some mixture of these things? Those of us who are classical teachers know that our pupils really enjoy debating this question. I do not want to spoil their fun, but to guide them towards the best possible answer. At a crucial moment, the poet has deprived us of evidence. Who first shed those dripping clothes? Who first reached out a hand to touch? We have only to pose these questions, I think, to feel that they are not only prurient but absurd. As I have already suggested: did the lovers know themselves? We might contrast the seduction of Tess by Alec d'Urberville in Hardy's novel. There, presumably for reasons of late Victorian propriety, it is not quite clear what happened, and the unclarity does seem problematic. But here in the *Aeneid*, the unclarity is profound. Virgil has a deep understanding of the ambiguity of moral agency. It is not that guilt and blame do not matter, but that an exact assignation of responsibility may be beyond anyone's power, even that of the agents themselves. Fantastical though the cave is, there is also realism here, and truth to life.

Throughout the *Aeneid*, I believe, there is a sense that there are things which must be unspoken because they are unknown, and perhaps unknowable. In the Homeric epics, the human actors may not know the gods' minds and motives, but the poet can tell us. In the *Aeneid*, however, there is a sense that there are things hidden even from the omniscient poet himself. Why should the innocent Palinurus be unable to cross the Styx? We are left with the Sibyl's assertion that the gods have decreed it, and prayer cannot move them (6.376). Why should Aeneas not settle in Carthage, in a noble city with a loving wife? In the words of the hero in another place, *dis aliter visum* ("the gods thought otherwise", *Aen.* 2.424).

The farther side of death is the ultimate unknown, in Virgil's words "things hidden in deep earth and darkness" (6.267). Here he faced a technical problem: he wanted to suggest that the realm of the dead was hidden, beyond knowledge, but at the same time he must describe it, or he has no narrative. His solution, an appeal to Chaos and Phlegethon to be permitted to reveal these secret matters, is bound to be a kind of fudge, but it is fudge of the highest quality (6.264–67). Across the underworld narrative as a whole, he keeps revelation and mystery in balance through the unspoken.

After all the elaborate preparations for Aeneas' descent, we hear nothing about the descent itself – nothing either, apart from two gates, about his return to the world above, which was expected to be so difficult: suddenly we find him by his ships. These inconsequences or discontinuities impart a dreamlike quality. We are told that the personifications that Aeneas meets are *terribiles visu formae* ("shapes terrible to behold"), but there is no description (6.277). Contrast, to look no further, the personifications in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Hunger is skeletally thin, Sleep is for ever nodding off (8.798–808; 11.618–21). That is what we expect a poet to do. But in the *Aeneid*, Death, Sleep, the Evil Joys of the Mind and all the rest of them remain undescribed, and that leaves us unsure of their ontological status (6.274–79). Are these independent, self-subsistent beings, or are they the hero's psychic nightmare?

Why is there an enormous elm in the underworld (6.282–84)? I think of the World Ash Tree of Germanic myth, but I do not suppose that Virgil knew about that, and even if he did, what use has he made of it? Yet it seems powerfully impressive. One day, perhaps, I shall grasp the mystery of the golden bough. That too all readers find impressive, and yet who knows what it signifies? I do not know of any explanation that appears plausible. It is one of those places that justifies the dictum of a former President of this society, T. S. Eliot, that great poetry can be appreciated before it is fully understood. I want to tread carefully here. I do not wish to say that with the elm and the bough Virgil is merely creating a vague mystification, a sphinx without a secret. These things somehow seem absolutely right, they reach atavistically deep. When I was an undergraduate the book that we were all sent off to read was called *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry*. This poet is often presented to us as supremely civilised, educated, deeply read, literary, calculating, controlled. All of that is true, but it should not allow us to miss another side of him, the side that is intuitive and instinctive, that reaches into the unconscious parts of experience, that finds dark and wonderful places. We shall find that side if we are willing, when reading him, to listen to the sound of silence.

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