

«A MAN NOT A MAN ...»

Aeneid VI and the Hermeneutics of Ambiguity

Paul Christopher Smith

At *Republic* 478b-e Plato's Socrates raises the question what sort of being the objects of *doxa* and *doxazein*, opinion and opining, have. The conclusion drawn is that the object of these will turn out to be something «taking part in both being and not-being (τὸ ἀμφοτέρων μετέχον, τοῦ εἶναι τε καὶ μὴ εἶναι)» (478e)¹. To indicate further what such a thing would resemble Socrates then alludes to «the children's riddle about the eunuch and the bat and with what he hit the bat when it was sitting on what» (479c). I quote from W.H.D Rouse's elaboration of the entire riddle: «A man not a man, saw and did not see, a bird not a bird, sitting on a stick not a stick, and hit it with a stone not a stone». What were the things referred to? «The answer», Rouse continues, «was: A eunuch caught a glimpse of a bat sitting on a reed and hit it with a piece of pumice»².

This discussion takes place within the elaboration of an educational curriculum, which as the «divided line» of *Republic* VI 509d-510a makes clear, is designed to bring the future philosopher-guardians of the state, first, from the dream-like, low grade wakefulness of sense perceptions and opinion (*doxa*), then through a propaedeutic for true knowledge (*epistēmē*) by practicing abstraction from sense perception in number theory, geometry, astronomy and harmony. After this follows the dialectic of the ideas and, finally, ultimate wakefulness, the vision of the Good itself (see 524d-534d). All of this training of the mind is to insure that the student does not relapse from sense perception into sleep and dreams, and «without touching upon (ἐφάπτεσθαι) knowledge, and dreaming and sleeping away his present life, [...] first arrives in Hades only to fall asleep completely» (534c-d).

But what if for the most part we are moving, as in fact we actually are, in the opposite direction from Plato's *Republic*, the direction that Heraclitus hints at when he says, «Living, he [the human being] touches upon (ἅπτεται) the dead when he sleeps» (DK B 26), or that Virgil similarly points to when he, following Homer, calls «sleep the twin brother of death» (*Aeneid* VI, 278; see *Iliad*, XIV, 231)? And how can we find ways to interpret the equivocal, questionable, and self-contradictory «reality» – «It is, is it not?» – that we experience as we move down from sense perception through sleep and dreams to «touch upon» death? Might not this descent toward ultimate indeterminacy characterize most adequately an inescapable dimension of our factual human condition? If so, what kind of speech would allow us to say what we encounter in this experience?

In a hermeneutics of its ambiguity I will now attempt to explicate the answers that Virgil's *Aeneid* VI provides to these questions, however indefinite and dubitable these answers themselves might be. To this end let us focus our inquiry on the poetic language and imagery of *Aeneid* VI, for the central question is how one can speak of, and make present an underworld realm about which the fear-

¹ Heidegger might have translated ἀμφοτέρων as «gleichursprünglich». Except where otherwise noted, translations from Greek and Latin will be my own.

² Plato, *The Great Dialogues of Plato*, translated by WHD Rouse, Penguin, New York 2008, p.327n.

some ferryman Charon, in rejecting the still living Aeneas, says, «*umbrarum hic locus est, somni noctisque soporae* (this is the place of shades, of sleep and sleep inducing night)» (390). With what sort of language does Virgil bring us to an understanding of this twilight half-reality that somehow is yet at the same time is not?

Conveniently for us, *Aeneid* VI is the story of just such a descent to Proserpina's land of the dead. In order to learn more of his fated task to found the Roman people Aeneas needs to find and question his deceased father Anchises in the underworld. For this to happen he requires the permission and guidance of the Sibyl at Cumae, who will accompany him on his way below. Significantly, in recounting their descent into near nothingness of hell Virgil brings this twilight, half-reality into view using words that subtract, even delete, substance and definition from the things spoken of. The dubious insubstantiality of Virgil's underworld creatures who both are and are not, is evident, for example, in the monsters Aeneas would ward off as he and the Sibyl pass them by in their descent:

*Corripit hic subita trepidus formidine ferrum
Aeneas strictamque aciem venientibus offert,
et ni docta comes tenuis sine corpore vitas
admoneat volitare cava sub imagine formae,
inruat et frustra ferro diverberet umbras.*

And now, filled with dread and sudden fear, Aeneas waves
the edge of his drawn sword at these oncoming figures.
And did his wise companion not warn him that these tenuous,
disembodied souls
were hovering about, less than the empty image of a form,
he would have rushed at shades, and sought in vain to slash them
in half.

(*Aeneid* VI, 290-94).

Key here is the phrase «tenuous, disembodied souls [...] hovering about, less than the empty image of a form», but it is not only *vitae*, quasi alive creatures, that are sapped of their definiteness in Virgil's account but dead matter as well: when they disembark from Charon's boat on the far side of Lake Avernus, they find themselves in «*informi limo*», formless slime.

The neither-nor/and-also quality of the imagined inhabitants of the netherworld they come to, further exemplifies its deceptive ambiguity. We have *biformes* or «two-formed» centaurs that are neither a man nor a horse – or are a man and also a horse – and, similarly, the woman/fish Scyllae and woman/bird Harpies. We have hundred armed Briareus and triple bodied Geryon, each a man not a man, and snake haired Gorgons, women not women, and the Hydra, a seven-headed snake not a snake (285-89). And at 416-23 we have, the triple throated, triple headed dog not a dog, Cerberus.

But surely Virgil's most eloquent representation of being that is non-being, is the earlier passage telling how the Aeneas and the Sibyl first make their way below:

Íbânt/ òbscû/ rî sô/ lâ sâb/ nôcté pér/ úmbrâm
 pêrqué dó/ môs Dî/ tîs vacú/ âs ét ín/ âniá/ rêgná
 quálé pér/ încêr/ tâm lûn/ âm sâb/ lúcé má/ lîgná
 êst íté/ ín sîl/ vîs, úbí/ caélûm/ còndidít/ úmbrá
 Iúppítér,/ ét rê/ bûs nôx/ âbstúlít/ âtrá có/ lórém.

On they went, those dim travelers under the lonely night
 though gloom
 and [through] the empty halls of Death's ghostly realm
 like those who by an uncertain moon's grudging light
 walk through woods when Jupiter has plunged the sky in
 darkness
 and black night drains (all) color from the world.

(*Aeneid* VI, 268-72, Fagles translation modified)³.

Important here is that as opposed to showing something by reasoning with univocal signs designating determinate realities, this half-world through which they are moving can be brought into its equivocal presence for us only by an extended likeness whose infinite allusions hover indefinitely in our imagination⁴. The inde-

³ I have provided a scansion of these verses, for the preponderance of slower spondees over quicker dactyls lends the whole passage an unspecified doleful tone. For Fagles' translation see *Virgil: the Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fagles, Viking/Penguin, New York 2006.

⁴ Paradoxically, I am reminded here of a crucial shift in the second speech of Socrates in the *Phaedrus* at 246a: Following a tightly reasoned demonstration of the immortality of the soul, Socrates concludes that to tell similarly «what the nature of the soul is (οἶον μὲν ἔστι)» is impossible for human beings. Instead, they can only tell «what it is like (ὡς δὲ εἰκέν)». «Therefore», he says, «Let it be likened (εἰοικέτω) to a combination, if possible, of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer» Remarkably, in exceeding the limits of discursive reason (Plotinus: ἡ νοερά διέξοδος, *Ennead* IV 8, 7), Plato uses the same indefinitely allusive, metaphorical language for expressing the experience of the highest level of wakefulness that Virgil uses to portray its opposite in sleep and death. For example, see this splendid passage from 250b-c:

«κάλλος δὲ τότε ἦν ἰδεῖν λαμπρόν, ὅτε σὺν εὐδαιμόνι χορῶ μακαρίαν ὄψιν τε καὶ θεῶν, ἐπόμενοι μετὰ μὲν Διὸς ἡμεῖς, ἄλλοι δὲ μετ' ἄλλον θεῶν, εἰδόν τε καὶ ἐτελοῦντο τῶν τελετῶν ἦν θέμις λέγειν μακαριωτάτην, ἣν ὀργιάζομεν ὀλόκληροι μὲν αὐτοὶ ὄντες καὶ ἀπαθεῖς κακῶν ὅσα ἡμᾶς ἐν ὑστέρῳ χρόνῳ ὑπέμενεν, ὀλόκληρα δὲ καὶ ἀπλᾶ καὶ ἀτρεμῆ καὶ εὐδαιμόνα φάσματα μωούμενοί τε καὶ ἐποπτεύοντες ἐν αὐγῇ καθαρᾷ, καθαροὶ ὄντες καὶ ἀσήμαντοι τούτου ὃ νῦν δὴ σῶμα περιφέροντες ὀνομάζομεν, ὀστρέου τρόπον δεδεσμευμένοι».

«But at that former time they saw beauty shining in brightness, when, with a blessed company—we following in the train of Zeus, and others in that of some other god—they saw the blessed sight and vision and were initiated into that which is rightly called the most blessed of mysteries, which we celebrated in a state of perfection, when we were without experience of the evils which awaited us in the time to come, being permitted as initiates to the sight of perfect and simple and calm and happy apparitions, which we saw in the pure light, being ourselves pure and not entombed in this which we carry about with us and call the body, in which we are imprisoned like an oyster in its shell». (*Phaedrus* 250b-c, from *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9 translated by Harold N. Fowler, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1925.)

It remains for Dante, of course, to synthesize these opposite sides to trans-discursive speech in the «Inferno» at one end of *La Divina Comedia* and the «Paradiso» at the other.

terminacy of meaning here is further sustained by setting words loose from their natural referent, and here is where Virgil's extraordinary facility in manipulating Latin syntax comes into play. Take, for example, the transferred epithets of 268 where the travellers are called *obscuri*, dark, obscure (dim) and the night is called *sola*, alone (lonely). In detaching these tone and mood setting words from their natural referent, Virgil lets them range indefinitely not only over what they modify grammatically but the entire scene as well. Virgil achieves the same effect with a chiasmus, the artful reversal of the adjective and noun order in 269, first *domus Ditis vacuas* with the adjective second, then *inania regna* with the adjective first, thereby setting *vacuas* and *inania* free in their reverberations to color either *domus* or *regna* and ultimately the whole passage. The same holds for the chiasmus at 270 where we have *incertam lunam* and then *luce maligna*. We note, further, in 272 the hyperbaton or «overthrow» of the usual syntax in the interlocking word order of *rebus nox abstulit atra colorem*, literally «from the world night drains, black, color». As with the transferred epithets of 268, in this redistribution of nouns and adjectives each word, far from having a determinate referent, lends its reverberating associations indefinitely to the feeling of the whole phrase.

To be sure, a warning about the dubiousness of everything we will hear in *Aeneid* VI, an indication of its «Is it or is it not» equivocal status, came early on with the mysterious story of the golden bough, a talisman and gift offering for Proserpina, queen of the dead, but who is called here *Iuno inferna*, the infernal Juno (138). Thus in Proserpina the luminous being of Olympus finds its inseparable counterpart in the dark non-being of the underworld, and the golden bough, as the Sibyl tells Aeneas, will make it possible for him to cross over to the realm of the dead while he is still alive. And even the bough itself, as Virgil speaks of it, belongs to both sides of the contradictory twilight world between not-being and being, into which Aeneas will carry it: «There lies hidden on a dark (*opaca*) tree, a bough with golden leaves and supple stem», he says, and «the whole grove protects it and shadows close in around it in the impenetrable (*obscuris*) depths of a valley» (134-39). As a kind of leitmotif, we will often hear the words *opaca* or *obscuris* in *Aeneid* VI, literally «opaque» or «obscure», for example, «Such was the shining forth of the golden branch on the dark, black oak (*opaca ilice*)» (208).

And Virgil leaves us suspended in uncertainty with yet another ambiguity concerning the golden bough. The Sybil tells Aeneas that when he finds the bough, «it will yield to you voluntarily and easily/ if the fates are calling you; if not, with any strength whatever you apply/ will you be able either to overcome it or sever it with your sword's hard steel» (146-49)⁵. Virgil, however, rescinds this clear-cut 'either/or' with an enigmatic 'neither/nor': neither does the bough come off the tree easily for Aeneas when he tries to break it loose, nor does it actually resist him. When Aeneas «avidly» splits it off, it yields but only after «hesitating» (see 210-11)⁶. We note that, as Charles Segal has brought to our attention, *cunctans*,

⁵ [...] *namque ipse volens facilisque sequetur,
si te fata vocant; aliter non viribus ullis
vincere nec duro poteris convellere ferro.*

⁶ [...] *corripit Aeneas extemplo avidusque refringit.
cunctantem [...].*

«hesitating», is a key, ambiguous word in describing Dido's slowness to emerge from her chambers and join in the hunt that in the end will lead to her irreversible degradation (see *Aeneid* IV, 133)⁷. Segal speaks of such «indeterminacies» as «a fundamental part of the work and a source of ever-renewed interpretability» (97). For Dido has a premonition of uncertainty, a premonition that what *is* a gloriously festive day, *might not be* what it seems, that it might be «the first day of her death, the first of grief» (*Aeneid* VI, 169). So too with the *cunctans* or hesitating of golden bough in *Aeneid* VI, Virgil ever so subtly undercuts the certainty with which we might have taken Aeneas to be the heroic destined one.

Now it follows from the pervasive indeterminacy of its content that this twilight realm is a place for confusion and error: one cannot be sure just what it is that one sees. We have, this is to say, arrived at the contrary of the Platonic ideas, each one clearly marked off from what it is not. Virgil has made the inevitability of confusion and error clear from the start of *Aeneid* VI. When Aeneas comes to the Sybil's cave to seek her help, Virgil inserts an *ekphrasis*, or extended digression, on two golden doors, skillfully crafted by no less an artist than Daedalus, that Aeneas stops to admire before entering. The whole passage might seem inconsequential, but in fact, the reference to Daedalus sounds the first notes of what will be a pervasive theme of *Aeneid* VI. Virgil details for us scenes on the doors from the Cretan stories of Pasiphae, the Minotaur, and, most importantly, the labyrinth Daedalus constructed to house the Minotaur. To characterize the labyrinth Virgil turns two highly evocative phrases, *inextricabilis error*, «a wrong path from which one cannot extricate oneself», and *dolos [...] ambagesque*, «a deception and a misleading ambiguity» (VI, 27, 29). Plainly, Virgil is using the *ekphrasis* of the golden doors to call to our attention that in *Aeneid* VI, rather than the truth, he will fashion for us, Daedalus like, just such a labyrinthine, inextricable error and ambiguous deception. Indeed, he will be like the Sibyl herself, who sings to Aeneas «*horrendas ambages [...] obscuris vera involvens* (horrifying, misleading ambiguities [...]) while wrapping truths in obscurities» (99-100).

In short, a half-world of such wavering indeterminate beings as Proserpina and the golden bough and even Aeneas himself, erases the distinction between truth and falsehood: for anything that is, as it oscillates indecisively between the sides of its self-contradiction, is not what it seems to be. Indeed, Virgil drops an unmistakable hint that *Aeneid* VI and even the *Aeneid* itself might be a lie. As the story goes, after Aeneas has consulted with his father Anchises and has viewed the grand pageant of heroes who are still to come in the line that Aeneas is now confident he will begin, Anchises brings Aeneas and the Sybil to two gates. Through one of these they will return to the land of the living. One is made of horn and the other of ivory:

“*Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur
cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris
altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia Manes*”.

⁷ See Charles Segal, *Dido's Hesitation in Aeneid 4*, in Stephanie Quinn (ed.), *Why Vergil?*, Wanaconda Illinois 2000, 90-100.

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*His ibi tum natum Anchises unique Sibyllam
prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna.*

“They are twins, Sleep's gates. Of these the one, they say,
is horn, and through it true shades are given an easy exit.
The other, perfectly made, is glistening with incandescent ivory
but through it, the spirits of the dead send false dreams to the sky”.
This said, Anchises escorts his son together with the Sibyl
and sends them out through the ivory gate.

(*Aeneid* VI, 893-98).

Aeneas and the Sybil leave through the ivory gate, the gate of *falsa insomnia*, false dreams (896).

What are we to make of this?

To begin with, we note that this tale of the two exits from the underworld must surely be taken together with the tree of empty dreams, *somnia vana* that Virgil places at its entrance:

*in medio ramos annosque bracchia pandit
ulmus opaca, ingens, quam sedem Somnia vulgo
vana tenere ferunt, foliisque sub omnibus haerent.*

In the middle, there spreads its limbs and aged branches
a dark elm, enormous. On it empty dreams, they commonly say,
make their home and cling beneath each leaf.

(*Aeneid* VI, 282-84).

This tree of empty dreams serves as a warning to the listener that in the realm where «Sleep is the twin brother of death» (278), what passes for «truth» is a questionable, dreamlike ambiguity of being and not-being. We are reminded by the *ulmus opaca*, the dark elm here, just as we are by the *eburna porta*, the ivory gate of 895, that *Aeneid* VI is no true story, but like the ivory gate itself, a substanceless dream⁸.

⁸ Virgil can be abrupt in waking us from the *falsa insomnia* he is conjuring. There is, for example, the jarring insertion of an only slightly revised and very well known verse from Catullus in Aeneas's words to an aggrieved and sullenly silent Dido, whom he encounters in the *Lugentis campi* (Mourning Fields) (VI, 440-76). Whereas Catullus has a lock of hair say in faux heroic verse, *invita, o regina, tuo de vertice cessi*, «Against my will, oh queen, I departed from the top of your head» (*Carmina* 66, 39), Virgil has Aeneas say, *invitus, regina tuo de litore cessi*, «against my will, queen, I departed from your shore» (*Aeneid* VI, 460). There have been any number of unconvincing proposals to account for Virgil's excerpting this verse from its semi-comic context in Catullus. These range from Williams' suggestion that he did so unconsciously to Austin's suggestion that its inclusion here is to be taken as a display of Virgil's virtuosity. (See Virgil, *Aeneid*, Books I-VI, edited with introduction and notes by R. Deryk Williams, Macmillan, London 1972, 488, and P. Vergili Maronis, *Aeneidos Liber Sextus*, with a commentary by R.G. Austin, Oxford U.P., Oxford 1986, 164). Austin is closer to the truth, I think, but I would go even further: With this verse from Catullus Virgil is warning us

For anyone in Virgil's audience it would be unmistakable that this passage explicitly reprises Homer's *Odyssey*, XIX, 560-567 and Penelope's dream. In fact to direct our attention specifically to its Homeric precedent, Virgil, in a one time Latin occurrence, even uses the Greek word for ivory in *candenti [...] elephanto* (with incandescent ivory) (*Aeneid* VI, 885) for Homer's *πριστοῦ ἐλέφαντος* (of finely filed ivory) (*Odyssey* XIX, 564). Here is Homer's Greek and Arthur Murray's translation slightly modified:

Ξεῖν', ἧ̃ τοι μὲν ὄνειροι ἀμήχανοι ἀκριτόμυθοι
 γίγνοντ', οὐδέ τι πάντα τελείεται ἀνθρώποισι.
 δοιαὶ γάρ τε πύλαι ἀμενηνῶν εἰσὶν ὀνείρων
 αἱ μὲν γὰρ κεράεσσι τετεύχεται, αἱ δ' ἐλέφαντι,
 τῶν οἱ μὲν κ' ἔλθωσι διὰ πριστοῦ ἐλέφαντος,
 οἳ ῥ' ἐλεφαίρονται, ἔπε' ἀκράαντα φέροντες
 οἱ δὲ διὰ ξεστῶν κεράων ἔλθωσι θύραζε,
 οἳ ῥ' ἔτυμα κραίνουσι, βροτῶν ὅτε κέν τις ἴδῃται.

Stranger, dreams verily are baffling and unclear of meaning,
 and in no wise do they find fulfillment in all things for men.
 For two are the gates of evanescent dreams.
 The one is fashioned of horn, the other of ivory.
 Each of the dreams that come through the gate of finely filed ivory
 deceive men, bringing words finding no fulfillment.
 But those that come forth through the gate of polished horn
 bring true things to pass, when any mortal sees them.

(*Odyssey* XIX, 560-67)⁹.

A close examination of this passage reveals that with his *candenti elephanto* Virgil intends something more than just to display his deep indebtedness to Homer: He wants us to be reminded of the Greek play on the noun *ἐλέφας*, ivory, with the verb *ἐλεφαίρομαι*, meaning to deceive, as this play occurs in *τῶν οἱ μὲν κ' ἔλθωσι διὰ πριστοῦ ἐλέφαντος/ οἳ ῥ' ἐλεφαίρονται ἔπε' ἀκράαντα φέροντες*, «Those dreams that pass through the gate of finely filed *ivory* deceive men bringing words that find no fulfillment» (*Odyssey* XIX, 564-65), and this in sharp contrast to play on *κέρας*, horn, with *κραίνω*, meaning to accomplish or bring to fulfillment, as in *οἱ δὲ διὰ ξεστῶν κεράων ἔλθωσι θύραζε/ οἳ ῥ' ἔτυμα κραίνουσι*, «But those that come forth through the gate of polished *horn* bring true things to pass» (*Odyssey* XIX, 566-67). (Note also the *ἀκράαντα*, «finding no fulfillment», at *Odyssey* XIX, 565.) With this play in mind we can see that the emergence of Aeneas and the Sybil through the gate of ivory means that the story of their trip to the underworld, and most of all the pageant of heroes Aeneas has just witnessed, could be a deceit.

to suspend our suspension of disbelief. He is telling us not just how clever he is in adapting a comic verse for tragic purposes that were wholly foreign to it but, with Nietzsche, that his truth is a lie.

⁹ For Murray's translation see Homer, *The Odyssey*, 2 vols., translated by Augustus T. Murray, 2nd edition (first published 1919), Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge MA 1995.

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This lingering ambiguity is no mere display of Virgil's poetic virtuosity; rather it is existential for him. It expresses the way Virgil experiences the world and reflects an utter disillusionment with the Platonic ideal of univocal truth. The world for Virgil withholds itself from our comprehension even as it displays itself. It *is*, only equivocally and enigmatically. Hence, Virgil's way of bringing the twilight world of «*umbrarum [...], somni noctisque soporae*: (of shades, of sleep and sleep inducing night)» is far from a detour in his presentation of the way things are; it is foundational save that this «foundation» is itself always on the verge of lapsing into nothingness. I would argue that we have here the key to Virgil's so poignant melancholy: alas, nothing is as we might have expected it to be. This truth lies at the heart of the *Aeneid's* disturbing contradiction: it should justify imperial Rome, but in the end, with the ever-questionable hero Aeneas mercilessly dispatching Turnus, it does not.

Attempts to reconcile this ending with Anchises' admonition to Aeneas to live up to the Roman way of «*parcere subiectis* (showing mercy to the defeated)» (VI, 853) are misguided. In introducing book VII and the second half of the *Aeneid* with its awful wars, Deryck Williams writes that,

The battle-scenes and the process of victory could indeed have been the triumphant climax of the spirit of adventure and endeavor in man, with conflict, defeat and death seen as part of a cosmic drama leading to a future, worth all the sacrifices and suffering. This was the ultimate question which Virgil explored, but he did not find the answer he was seeking. Too often strength and bravery turn to hatred and violence. At the end there should have been some other way for Turnus¹⁰.

¹⁰ See the cited Williams (ed.), 1972, 164-65.