

Virgil and the reimagining of man

A number of literary critics argue that Homer is a transcendent and original author, Virgil a derivative and highly stylized author. According to this view, once the ornamentation is removed from Virgil's writing, there is little of substance left to contemplate and admire.

An examination of the trip to Hades in the *Odyssey* and in the *Aeneid* will serve to dispel the notion that Virgil is concerned more with form than substance, and will trace the development of the afterlife in the intervening years between the composition of the *Odyssey* and that of the *Aeneid*.

On the surface, the treatment of the trip to the underworld in the two works appears to be strikingly similar. The heroes of both poems are told to consult an oracle in order to reveal their future destinations: in the case of Odysseus, he must consult Tiresias to gain information relating to his return to Ithaca; in the case of Aeneas, he must consult the Sibyl to determine the locus of the founding of his city. Before the heroes are able to continue on their quest for discovery, they must deal with the shadow of a fallen comrade; both must sacrifice a proscribed number of bullocks and sheep. Each hero must propitiate Proserpine to gain entrance to the underworld: Odysseus must present the blood of a slain ram to gain entrance to Hades; Aeneas must present a golden bough to gain passage.

Upon gaining the entrance to the underworld, both heroes see the shade of a parent, and in touching scenes, each hero attempts to embrace his parent three times and fails; each learns that while the shades have some semblance to living personages, their spirits are incorporeal. The similarities continue in the scenes which show the heroes of the Trojan War; Odysseus converses with the Greek heroes, Aeneas with the Trojan heroes. Both men are shown the

shades of wicked men and unfaithful women; both witness the semi-mythical figures of Sisyphus, Tantalos, Tityos, and the Titans.

Despite the apparent similarities of the trip to Hades, there are notable differences in the treatment of the afterlife in the two works. In the *Odyssey*, the dead are mere shadows, who in order to regain a semblance of human form, must drink the blood of a ram to become enervated. Each character whom Odysseus meets, with the lone exception of Achilles, must drink the blood of the ram in order to speak. Yet, even the great Achilles, whose soul retains a vestige of his former existence, would rather trade his place with that of the lowest drudge living above the earth: “O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying. / I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another/ than be king over all the perished dead” (Homer 415). The overall impression of the dead in the *Odyssey* is one of shadow and nothingness; there is no reward for a life well-lived, no glory for a renowned warrior. As Anticlea tells her son: “the sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together,/ and once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest/ of the body is made subject to the fire’s strong fury,/ but the soul flitters out like a dream and flies away” (Homer 410).

Nor are the dead in the *Odyssey* able to know the fate of those remaining on earth. Nowhere is this more evident than in the questions that Agamemnon, preeminent leader of the Greek armies, makes to Odysseus, regarding his son, Orestes:

But come now, tell me this and give me an accurate answer;/ tell me if you happened to hear that my son was still living;/ whether perhaps in Orchomenos, or in sandy Pylos,/ or perhaps with Menelaos in wide Sparta; for nowhere/ upon the earth has there been any death of noble Orestes. (Homer 415)

The *Aeneid* paints a far different picture of the afterlife than is shown in the *Odyssey*. Here, the shades do not have to drink blood to become animated; they appear to have some form of will and self-directed motion. Aeneas, seeing the Elysian Fields for the first time, notes how the souls of the heroic and the good spend time in this place:

The pleasure those heroes had felt, / when alive, in their arms and chariots, the care they had taken to pasture/ Their sleek horses—all was the same beyond the tomb. / Aeneas noticed others to the left and right on the greensward/ Feasting and singing a jovial paean in unison/ Amidst a fragrant grove of bay trees, whence the river/ Eridanus springs, to roll grandly through the woods of the world above. (Virgil 190)

Aeneas, after witnessing the existence of those souls in the Elysian Fields, is reunited with his father, Anchises, who contemplates the fate of future generations of Trojans:

Deep in a green valley stood father Anchises, surveying/ The spirits there confined before they went up to the light of/ The world above: he was musing seriously, and reviewing/ His folk's full tally, it happened, the line of his loved children,/ Their destinies and fortunes, their characters and their deeds. (Virgil 191)

Anchises, along with Aeneas, is able to witness the future; he is aware of the present and able to provide guidance to his son. He is no mere shade, but is able to witness events on earth, and to predict the future. Something has happened in the notion of the afterlife between the time of Homer and that of Virgil: the soul has become something more than the fluttering, powerless dream bemoaned by Anticlea.

Indeed, the notion of soul or spirit, as developed by Virgil, is not limited to men alone, as Anchises relates to Aeneas:

First, you must know that the heavens, the earth, the watery plains/ Of the sea, the moon's bright globe, the sun and the stars are all /Sustained by a spirit within; for immanent Mind, flowing/ Through all its parts and leavening its mass, makes the universe work. / This union produced mankind, the beasts, the birds of the air, / And the strange creatures that live under the sea's smooth face. (Virgil 192)

This idea is an echo of the notion of soul propounded by Plato, in the *Timaeus*, when Timaeus relates to his listeners that: “The soul, interfused everywhere from the centre to the circumference of heaven, of which also she is the external envelopment, herself turning in herself, began a divine beginning of never-ceasing and rational life enduring throughout all time” (Plato 450).

It is necessary to understand this notion of the soul as part of a larger whole to fully appreciate the theological construct that Virgil is creating. Virgil is not only commenting on the stages of the rebirth of the soul, he is constructing a universe where soul or mind plays a role. Accordingly, the role of mankind changes as well. No longer are men to be remembered solely for their war-like, glorious deeds as in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Virgil notes that future Roman citizens will:

. . . excel as orators, others track with their instruments/ The planets circling in heaven and predict when stars will appear. / But Romans, never forget that government is your medium! / Be this your art:—to practice men in the habit of peace, / Generosity to the conquered, and firmness against aggressors. (Virgil 195)

Mankind, given the array of choices now open to them, can choose to live evil, wicked lives; good, enlightened lives; or live a life between these two extremes. Accordingly, each soul

is judged based upon the life lived on earth. The evil souls, those incapable of reclamation, are sent to the threshold of the damned “Here Rhadamanthus rules, and most severe his rule is, / Trying and chastising wrongdoers, forcing confessions/ From any who, on earth, went gleefully undetected/—But uselessly, since they have only postponed till death their atonement” (Virgil 188). Those who have lived lives that are neither wholly good nor evil are sent to purgatory, where, through a series of trials, they are purged of the evil and await reincarnation. Finally, the blessed merit an existence which frees them from rebirth, and transforms them into pure spirit. Actions in life have consequences in death as explained in the following quotation:

Therefore, the dead are disciplined in purgatory, and pay/ The penalty of old evil: some hang, stretched to the blast of/ Vacuum winds; for others, the stain of sin is washed/ Away in a vast whirlpool or cauterised with fire./ Each of use finds in the next world his own level: a few of us/ Are later released to wander at will through broad Elysium,/ The Happy Fields; until, in the fullness of time, the ages/ Have purged that ingrown stain, and nothing is left but pure/ Ethereal sentience and the spirit’s essential flame. (Virgil 192-3)

Virgil’s notion of rebirth and redemption is an echo of the ideas contained in the *Phaedo*, where Plato delineates the fates of the evil, middling and good souls, and relates that:

Those too who have been pre-eminent for holiness of life are released from this earthly prison, and go to their pure home which is above, and dwell in the purer earth; and of these, such as have duly purified themselves with philosophy live henceforth altogether without the body, in mansions fairer still, which may not be described, and of which the time would fail me to tell. (Plato 249-250)

The heroes having made their respective trips to the underworld, depart with markedly different results. Odysseus leaves the entrance to Hades (it is interesting to note that he never enters Hades, although Aeneas does so) with answers to some of his questions, but other questions remain. He does not fully understand the oracle of Tiresias, with its vague hints of some future journey: “. . . you must take up your well-shaped oar and go on a journey/ until you come where there are men living who know nothing/ of the sea, and who eat food that is not mixed with salt, who never/ have known ships whose cheeks are painted purple. . .” (Homer 408). Nor is he able to visit the shades of the earlier heroes, such as Perithoos and Theseus; instead he leaves with his wishes unfulfilled and he departs as “green fear took hold of me” (Homer 418).

Aeneas, on the other hand, departs Hades with more information than he hoped to obtain. The location for the founding of his town is confirmed by Anchises; he visits with his fallen comrades; he witnesses the purgation of spirits and their rebirth. Finally, accompanied by Anchises, he is allowed to see the future generations of Romans: “Listen, for I will show you your destiny, setting forth/ The fame that from now shall attend the seed of Dardanus/ The posterity that awaits you from an Italian marriage—/Illustrious souls, one day to come in for our Trojan name” (Virgil 193).

Just as the accounts of the underworld are different in the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, so too is the world-view developed in these poems; the world of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is populated by warriors who strive for glory knowing that at the moment of death, they will become mere phantoms. Their deeds are watched over by gods and goddesses who sometimes interfere with the action to advance the cause of their hero, or to retard the progress of their enemy. Their actions are played out at the surface: seldom is the reader allowed to see the psychology which

informs their decisions. Similarly, the gods and goddesses who populate these works are seen as humans with enhanced abilities, but they are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. In the background lurks another element, an element that both men and gods must defer to: fate. While the role of fate is loosely defined, it is nevertheless taken as real. Although never explicitly stated, fate is seen as the unknowable, but clearly functioning entity, which exists when rational explanations no longer suffice to explain the workings of the universe.

The world of the *Aeneid* is different from that of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Glory and valor are important, but are tempered by other virtues; among them duty, piety, and civility. A catalog of the appellations of Aeneas will reveal this list of expanded virtues; he is variously called virtuous Aeneas, god-fearing Aeneas, and pious Aeneas. The gods and goddesses still interfere with the action of the plot (witness the misdeeds of Hera and the succor provided to Aeneas by Venus), but their interference is more purposeful. Hera wishes to continue her harassment of the Trojans for the slight given her by Paris. Venus wishes to provide her son with the kingdom he has been promised and merited. Fate and the gods still obtrude in the workings of mankind, but seem less malignant and more hopeful than in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. This hopeful note is sounded when Jove reconciles his feud with Hera and promises a melding of the Latins and Trojans:

. . . Willingly I grant what you ask; you have won me over. / The Italians shall keep their
native tongue and their old traditions; / Their name shall not be altered. The Trojans will
but sink down in/ The mass and be made one with them. I'll add the rites and usage/ Of
Trojan worship to theirs. All will be Latins, speaking/ One tongue. From this blend of
Italian and Trojan blood shall arise/ A people surpassing all men, nay even the gods, in
godliness. (Virgil 318)

What has changed in the five hundred years since the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were reduced to writing, and the *Aeneid* penned by Virgil? Mankind has progressed. Virgil has taken the notion of the soul as having an existence of its own, and infused his work with the notions of self-directed activity. No longer are men destined to flit like insubstantial shadows in the afterlife; the soul has an existence after bodily death. Moreover, the path of the soul after death is determined by the quality of life when the soul was united with a body. The gods and fate no longer have the ultimate say in the destiny of man: men are not fated to wander like Achilles, who would trade his lot with the lowliest servant alive, but can look forward to a future determined, in part, by their own actions. Near the end of Aeneas' trip to the underworld, he and his father can contemplate a future filled with promise: "So far and wide, surveying all, / They wandered through that region, those broad hazy plains. /After Anchises had shown his son over the whole place/ And fired his heart with passion for the great things to come. . ." (Virgil 196).

What makes a work derivative, and is being derivative necessarily bad? Virgil took the form of the epic from Homer and took scenes and themes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In similar fashion, Virgil appropriated the notion of soul from Plato, and incorporated this idea into his poetry. The *Aeneid* is more than literary theft, more than diction and meter without purpose. It combines elements of earlier works and adds new concepts and virtues: the soul, duty, piety, and civic law. It stakes out a new order where man is not ruled solely by gods and fate, but has some say in his own future.

Perhaps the best measure of Virgil's worth as a poet can be seen in those who continued the conversation aided and informed by his work: Dante, Milton, T.S. Elliot, and Sir James Frazer. One of Virgil's most famous lines, and one that echoes in later poets, comes when Aeneas and the Sibyl enter Hades. Aeneas notes the number of souls awaiting passage across the

river Styx: “Multitudinous as the leaves that fall in a forest/ At the first frost of autumn, or the birds that out of the deep-sea/ Fly to land in migrant flocks, when the cold of the year/ Has sent them overseas in search of a warmer climate” (Virgil 182). Multitudinous, as well, those who have come to love and value this work.

Works Cited

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