METEMPSYCHOSIS IN AENEID SIX

The purpose of this note is to suggest that, in order to understand more clearly the lines in which Virgil prepares the way for his parade of heroes in Book Six (679-755), we need to appreciate the difficulties presented by the introduction of such an episode, and consider how he handled them.1

Although we can only surmise, it seems highly probable that, influenced by the practice at the funerals of prominent Romans of having relatives walk in procession wearing portrait-masks of the dead man’s ancestors,2 Virgil decided to stage a similar spectacle on a grander scale, including in its scope the great figures of Rome’s past. There are several features that suggest such an origin for his parade. Above all, even though future lives rather than past deaths now provide the figures, the funeral links remain strong. For not only does the first indication that such a parade is planned come from the dead Anchises as his own Funeral Games are concluded (5.737), but in addition the funeral of Misenum is a necessary preliminary to Aeneas’ descent into the Underworld (6.149ff.), and the parade itself ends with lines that anticipate the funeral of Marcellus (6.872ff.).3 The use of the family unit, which is alien to Virgil’s principal source in Book Six, the Homeric katabasis, is also consistent with such an origin: for, in addition to individual Romans, Aeneas sees the Decii, Drusi, Gracchi, Scipiaedes and Fabii (824, 842-5). And as we listen to Aeneas seeking information about the young Marcellus from Anchises (863ff.) it is surely not difficult to visualize a comparable contemporary scene being enacted between an inquisitive son and his more knowledgeable father, as some great man’s funeral procession passed on its way to the city-gates and beyond.

But if Virgil did find inspiration in such a source,4 the actual form involved


2Cf. Diodorus 31.25.2. His contemporary account is surely more relevant than the earlier description by Polybius (6.53.6ff.) cited by Skard (60f.), which involves a much more lavish affair, with the participants (not necessarily kinsmen of the dead man) all riding chariots. For the alternative custom of carrying busts of dead ancestors (which appeared in the second half of the first century B.C.) cf. J. M. C. Toynbee, Death and Burial in the Roman World (London 1971) 40.

3Skard confines his attention to the Marcellus passage (63f.), which he stresses as being especially significant, since the memory of that funeral would still be fresh in Virgil’s mind when he was composing these lines.

4Loretto rightly insists (42f.) that this view should not lead us to neglect the continuing importance of literary sources for Virgil’s actual development of the episode, a tendency he detects in Skard’s article.
was of course ruled out as far as he was concerned, not only because Augustus had to be given his usual prominence in the passage, but also because, in the perspective of the *Aeneid*, all Roman history still lay in the future. His solution, therefore, was to employ the Orphic-Pythagorean\(^5\) doctrine of metempsychosis. Ennius had already introduced it into Roman epic to serve his own poetic purpose (namely to establish his claim to be a second Homer);\(^6\) and Virgil made it the basis of a parade in which souls waiting their turn to figure in the impending history of Rome pass in review before Aeneas, with Anchises providing a commentary as they do so.\(^7\)

The situation now recalls that in Plato’s myth at the end of the *Republic*, in which Er describes how, after a ‘death’ from which he mysteriously recovered, he saw various souls similarly involved in the process of reincarnation.\(^8\) and there seems little doubt that Virgil is indebted in some respects to that account.\(^9\) But quite apart from the difference of form (Er simply describes what he saw, whereas Virgil’s parade is part of the epic action) the poet’s requirements presented two difficulties which do not seem to have been fully appreciated.

In the first place, unlike Plato, Virgil could not depict his transmigrating souls as leaving for the earth at midnight,\(^10\) after drinking the water of oblivion. Indeed, some of them, including that of Augustus, even though they have just completed a millennium of purification, are now faced with a further millennium of waiting before they can make their contribution to Rome’s history. Virgil therefore makes timely, if unexpected, use of that antithesis between soul and body which finds its most thorough formulation in Plato’s *Phaedo*, and figures significantly in the *Somnium Scipionis*.\(^11\) According to this theory,

\(^{10}\) Among the features they share one may note the turn to the right for the just, to the left for the unjust (*Rep*. 614C and 6.540ff.; the millennium between lives (*Rep*. 615A and 6.748); the plain of Lethe with its care-dispelling river (*Rep*. 621A), recalled in the river Lethe and its waters of oblivion (6.713f.)

\(^{11}\) Cf. *Phaedo* 67Cf., 82E: *Somnium* 15 and 29.
the body is essentially a hostile environment that pollutes the soul, hinders its progress to true knowledge, and, to use the Orphic phrase,12 serves as its prison-house. On such a basis one can easily infer a natural aversion on the part of the soul to its next reincarnation: and Virgil proceeds to exploit that notion to solve the first of his difficulties. The way is pointed by Aeneas, who, when Anchises explains why the souls are flocking to the banks of the river Lethe, exclaims:

"o pater, anne aliquas ad caelum hinc ire putandum est sublimis animas iterumque ad tarda reverti corpora? quae lucis miseris tam dira cupidio?"

(VI. 719-721)

Commentators, not unreasonably, have seen in line 721 a reflection of the hero's own sufferings in the past, and of "the bitterness that still reigns in Aeneas' heart."13 But clearly something quite different is involved in the first question: for here, even before he has had the benefit of Anchises' homily, with its complex mixture of Greek ideas, Aeneas already sounds more like the Socrates of the Phaedo than an epic hero.14 And his reference to "sluggish bodies," so typical of the antithesis mentioned above,15 involves a clear anticipation of Anchises' own reference to the body as a harmful agent that exerts a sluggish influence on the divine fire of the soul (730ff.). Indeed, this notion, coupled with the Orphic image of the prisonhouse, plays a crucial role in Anchises' discourse, since it provides the basis for a transition from the initial Stoicism to the central and concluding Orphic-Pythagorean elements:

"igneus est ollis uigor et caelestis origo seminibus, quantum non noxia corpora tardant terrenique hebetant artus moribundaque membra. hinc metuunt cupiuntque, dolent gaudentque, neque auras dispiciunt claues tenebris et carcore caeco. quin et supremo cum lumine uita reliquit. . . ."

(VI. 730-735)

But our more immediate concern is with the fact that both Aeneas and Anchises have by now, through their combined emphasis on the body's sinister influence on the soul, made an antipathy towards reincarnation on the soul's part seem entirely natural. Anchises is thus able to conclude his reply to Aeneas in a way that disposes of that first difficulty. For souls do not drink Lethe's water, as we might have expected, and as Plato implies,16 simply to forget the past prior to their resumption of bodily form, since that would leave no scope for delay. Nor do they even drink it to forget the past and so wish to return to the

12On the Orphic attribution of the phrase see Dodds, 169 note 87.
14One may also compare his surprise that souls should wish to return to the earth with Scipio's query to his father (Somnium 15): "quid moror in terris?"
15Cf. Phaedo 81C.
16Rep. 621Af.
earth, since again there would be no implication that any delay was involved. Instead, they drink it in order to forget the past and begin to wish to return (751): for now a process of indefinite duration is implied, and one, moreover, that allows the kind of irregularity that Virgil’s dramatic situation requires. In the case of Silvius, for example, the process will soon be complete, and before long he will duly take his place on earth (760ff.); in the case of Augustus, on the other hand, it will take a thousand years for his soul to become reconciled to such an idea (788ff.). A solution of sorts to the first problem is thus available in the text, although Virgil does not make it explicit, and if we are sufficiently interested we have to dig it out. And here it is worth emphasizing, in passing, that what I have regarded as the key phrase in this connection is placed immediately before the actual parade begins.

The second problem brought by Virgil’s employment of metempsychosis was easier to solve, though once more it concerned a fundamental clash between the usual form in which the theory is presented and Virgil’s actual dramatic requirements. In the process of reincarnation two lives or identities are naturally involved—the old one that is being discarded, and the new one that is taking its place. And whenever the subject is discussed in the Platonic dialogues, there is a natural tendency for such lives to be linked in pairs.17 Indeed, what concerns the philosopher above all else is the relationship between the two: for when the time comes to choose a new life, the choice itself will for the most part be decided by the way in which the old life was lived. Thus in the myth of Er already cited above, Plato, identifying souls in terms of the old life that is being discarded, shows us (for example) Orpheus selecting the life of a swan, while Agamemnon selects that of an eagle.18 And to complete the account he portrays the souls passing, after the selection, through the various processes supervised by the Fates before proceeding to the plain of Lethe.19 But for Virgil all this is irrelevant. Since he is concerned exclusively with future Romans, he has of necessity to confine himself to the final stage of transmigration, and to the new lives that emerge from it, and discard the rest. We are therefore suitably prepared for acceptance of his essentially curtailed view of transmigration as soon as that subject is raised. For in the opening reference to Anchises in the narrative the transmigrating souls have already reached the final stage of the process, and, in a clear anticipation of the approaching parade, the poet sets the scene:

at pater Anchises penitus conuelle uirenti
inclusas animas superumque ad lumen ituras
lustrabat studio recolens, omnenque suorum
forte recensebat numerum . . .
VI. 679-682

After a suitably emotional staging of the reunion between father and son

18 Rep. 620Af.
Virgil returns to the subject of transmigration and sets the scene once more (703-706), but this time with certain modifications: for now not only do we see the process through the eyes of Aeneas, but the scope is widened to take in, not merely future Romans, but also innumerae gentes populique (706). Nevertheless, as far as the process itself is concerned, our view is still blinkered, and the focus is once more restricted to the final stage of transmigration, as the reference to the river Lethe indicates (705). And finally, even in his detailed account of what takes place in the interval between lives (735ff.), Anchises makes no reference to the selection of new lives to replace the old, or to the role of the Fates. Instead he passes at once from a description of the thousand years of purgation after death (735-748) to consideration of the souls now flocking to the river (748ff.)

In this way, then, the ground has by now been well prepared for the parade that is about to begin: and the reader has become so familiar with the situation by the banks of the river Lethe that he is scarcely likely to be conscious of the fact that it is based on such a restricted view of transmigration, and still less likely to be disturbed by it.

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