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TRADITIONS OF CATABATIC EXPERIENCE IN *AENEID* 6

A. An all-too-classic question: the sources of *Aeneid* 6

It is well known that the modern debate about whether or not Vergil derived Aeneas' *katábasis* from the mysteries can be traced back to Bishop William Warburton's 1737 reading of *Aeneid* 6 in Eleusinian terms, and Edward Gibbon's sharp criticism of such fancies in his first English prose work: in short, says E. Gibbon, if Vergil had been an initiate he would not have told, if he had not been one he could not tell. However, the mystic interpretation of this particular book has proved irresistible for many illustrious readers of all times, like Servius or Sir James G. Frazer [1]. In spite of the enormous progress in Vergilian scholarship in the last century on both sides of the Atlantic, the old quarrel between mystics and skeptics around *Aeneid* 6 is still alive in more refined forms, and probably it will never be completely solved, since it ultimately depends on the taste of each reader for literature and religion, hardly an objective standard. This does not seem to deter critics from coming back time and again to the problem of Vergil's sources in *Aeneid* 6, apart from the self-evident Homeric *Nékyia* in the *Odyssey* and Plato's myth of Er (through Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*). Eduard Norden's effort at the beginning of the 20th century to systematically trace the lost sources has been reappraised very recently by Nicholas Horsfall and Jan N. Bremmer [2]. Though both scholars disagree on several issues, mainly regarding the possible Jewish models of Aeneas' tour, they

1. Cf. A. Ossa-Richardson (2008), p. 362-364. The latest attempts of a ritual reading of *Aeneid* 6 are R. J. Quiter (1984) and G. Luck (2000, p. 16-34), but the reviews of F. Graf (*Gnomon*, 58, 4 [1986], p. 360-363) and R. G. Edmonds III (*BMCR* 2001.01.01: http://bmcr. brynmawr. edu/2001/2001-01-01.html), respectively, share a well-grounded skeptical objection: there is no attempt to delimit what may be specific to a particular ritual from topical elements of the tradition of descents to Hades.

2. E. Norden (1903, 1927[3]), N. Horsfall (2013), J. N. Bremmer (2014, p. 180-204, Appendix II; a previous version in *Kernos* 22 [2009], p. 183-208). Within this spam of more than one century, great progress in the research of Vergil's sources was made by H. Lloyd-Jones (1967) [= 1990] and R. J. Clark (1979). On the Bologna papyrus, which threw important light on Vergil's Orphic sources, cf. the bibliography in *OF* 717 (Bernabé).

validate with new materials Norden's conclusions about some specific sources of Vergil: i.e. a *katábasis* of Heracles and a *katábasis* of Orpheus. In their respective works, each of them tries to trace back with more or less probability each Vergilian motif to a specific source, driving to the maximal level of sophistication the centenarian work of *Quellenforschung* of *Aeneid* 6.

The three levels in which all this source-hunting of Aeneas' *katábasis* operates are: (1) the characters, scenes and topographical motifs of the literary accounts of descents to the Underworld; (2) the philosophical and religious doctrines about afterlife that the Sybil and Anchises explain to Aeneas; (3) the rituals that would be reflected in Aeneas' actions. In all three levels, it is clear that Vergil does not translate slavishly, but freely uses, reshapes, reorders, and reinterprets, through *bricolage*, mosaic, *alambicco*, or whichever metaphor is preferred, previous materials to accomplish a new creation. There are indeed direct references (topographical details, formulae, proper names, or particular scenes) that point to specific sources: e.g., we may legitimately think, as many scholars have, that the admonishment *procul o procul este profani* (258) before entering the Underworld is there as a signpost, just as the figures of Orpheus (645) and Musaeus (667) in the Elysian fields, in order to tell the reader that what follows has an Orphic tone; likewise, the Sibyl's warning to Aeneas that his sword is useless against ghosts (291-295) must be recognized to be a direct reference to the descent of Heracles. However, it would be a vain attempt to pinpoint a direct source for each line which recalls parallels. Not only a motif may be shared by different texts with complex interrelations to each other (or be by Vergil's time a general theme) but also Vergil's reinterpretation of each element will seldom keep straightforwardly the same meaning that it had in earlier sources. In fact, he may accumulate the references in an altogether new image, and none of the associations that he brings to it can claim to be the only one. The best known instance is the golden bough, which, even after the traditional comparison with mistletoe has finally lost scholarly favor, can be simultaneously associated with the branches used by initiates and by suppliants, with the golden fleece, with Hermes' wand, with the *moly* in Circe's episode, with Meleager's reference to Plato, and last but not least, with the Orphic gold leaves [3]. None of these is a linear reference which offers a simple key of interpretation.

The multiplicity of possible references goes of course far beyond the sphere of *katábasis*. A paradigmatic instance may be the handclasp, alluded as a gesture implying salvation from death in two key passages of *Aeneid* 6:

3. Cf. A. OSSA-RICHARDSON (2008), N. HORSFALL (2013, p. 152-156), J. N. BREMMER (2014, p. 193-196) for a summary of these proposals.

Palinurus asking Aeneas to take him by the hand (VI, 70: *da dextram*); Aeneas asking (in vain) his father to take him by the hand (VI, 697: *da iungere dextram*). This gesture is probably a recurrent element in Heracles' *katábasis*, where he liberates Theseus taking him by the right hand; but *dexiosis* can be found in other contexts with probable but loose links to catabatic poems, and also it has a general sense of welcome and agreement [4]. So it would be absurd to restrict the Vergilian references to handclasp as alluding to Heracles' descent, instead of seeing a new and characteristic application of a motif typical (but not only) of *katábasis*, which he uses to underline the difference between the living and the dead – no matter whether the status of the latter is happy or not, handclasp with Aeneas is impossible both for Palinurus and Anchises.

However, it is perhaps a trap of scholarly tendency to oscillate in a pendulum-like manner that after painful efforts in distinguishing sources comes back a fashion of blurring the distinctions previously made, so that Penelope's shroud must be re-weaved [5]. I will try to avoid such inertia in this study of catabatic experience, and will content myself with observing that since we have practically nothing left of the poems about Heracles' and Orpheus' descents, which probably also had variants and horizontal relations between them, the tracing of a specific source for each motif seems at least hazardous in many cases. Besides, the possibilities of other unknown written sources, oral accounts, or visual paintings that may have inspired Vergil are practically infinite. Yet on the other hand Vergil, although free to reshape any previous element, is also purposefully heir of, and in conscious competition with, the earlier traditions he is echoing, which often he would want to be recognized by his readers, no matter how many variations and reinterpretations he brings in.

Therefore my aim will not be to separate what might belong to one source or other, since little progress can be made now in that direction, but to point out some traditional elements which might be common to many of them, and to analyze Vergil's reworking of these widely shared materials. My specific focus will be the "catabatic experience", an admittedly loose

4. Heracles: Apollod., II, 5, 124 (in the text he fails to reach Peirithoos's hand, while some vase paintings emphasize their handclasp; cf. *LIMC s.v.* Peirithoos 71). Other texts with catabatic atmosphere including the handclasp are Parmenides, B1.22 DK and *Il.*, XXIV, 360-361, 671-672 (cf. M. HERRERO DE JÁUREGUI [2011], p. 57-58). Iconography also emphasizes the gesture: cf. G. DAVIES (1985, p. 628-630, 635-636) on the variety of meanings that handclasp may have in funerary steles.

5. E.g. F. SOLMSEN (1972) against earlier attempts (by Otis and Norwood) to blur the distinctions of E. NORDEN's *Quellenforschung*, or H. LLOYD-JONES (1967 [= 1990], p. 187) against Austin's patronizing despise of source-searching.

category that, however, may be useful to understand some keys of Vergil's reshaping of previous traditions.

B. Catabatic experiences in myth and ritual

Descriptions of the land of the dead are by essence paradoxical, since it is in principle impossible to come back to tell the living how it is. Dreams and visions may offer hints of the Underworld, but direct autopsy would be the most trustworthy and complete description – if only it were possible. This paradox is only solved in the realm of myth: thus the experience of Hades is construed by tales of descents in special times, either in the *illud tempus* of the past, when a hero descended, or in the eschatological future when the soul will descend after death. This double dimension of the mythical time in which journeys to the Underworld are accomplished differentiates them from other heroic journeys to dangerous distant lands (e.g. Colchis, Scheria), since the hero anticipates what every mortal will go through once he dies. The Greek conception of death as a journey is deeply embedded in funeral rites and beliefs [6], and this makes myths of *katábasis* particularly paradigmatic, both as exceptions in heroic times to the general rule that this frontier cannot be trespassed before death, and as illustrations of what will come after it.

The awareness that such a trip is impossible for a living being makes it also a paradigm of any experience that aims to be unique and transformative. Passage rites, initiatory experiences, fundamental transitions, and the like, are not death in themselves, but death is often taken as a conceptual model to categorize them [7]. For that reason, mythical accounts of *katábasis* shape fundamentally those present experiences that are endured as a sort of death by individuals (and groups) mainly through the performing of rituals. A famous text of Plutarch describes the experience of death (τελευτή) and of mystic initiation (τελετή) in strictly parallel lines departing from the phonetic similarity of the Greek words [8] :

> The soul, upon dying, suffers an experience (πάσχει πάθος) similar to those who celebrate great initiations. Therefore to die and to be initiated (τελευτᾶν

6. This conceptual metaphor, to use the popular terminology of G. LAKOFF, M. JOHNSON (1980), is common to all Greek positive, negative, or neutral visions of death and the afterlife: cf. Christiane SOURVINOU-INWOOD (1981).

7. Death functions as a conceptual metaphor (see note above) to categorize the ritual experience. A. VAN GENNEP dedicates Chapter 8 of his classic *Les Rites de passage* (1909) to funeral rites. However, the equation often made (on the steps of Mircea Eliade) between initiation and rebirth is over-generalizing: death and rebirth may be a frequent image of initiation, but not necessarily the only possible one.

8. Plut., fr. 178 (Sandbach). Cf. W. BURKERT (1987, p. 91-92) from whom I take the translation.

> καὶ τελεῖσθαι) are similar both in sound and in reality. Wandering astray in the beginning, tiresome walking in circles, some frightening paths in darkness that lead nowhere; then immediately before the end all the terrible things, panic and shivering and sweat, and amazement. And then some wonderful light comes to meet you, pure regions and meadows are there to greet you, with sounds and dances and solemn, sacred words and holy views. And there the initiate, perfect by now, set free and loose from all bondage, walks about, crowned with a wreath, celebrating the festival together with the other sacred and pure people, and he looks down (ἐφορῶν) on the uninitiated, unpurified crowd in this world in mud and fog beneath his feet, trampling itself down and crowded together, for fear of death remaining still sunk in its evils, unable to believe in the blessings that lie beyond.

Plutarch models his image of death on that of the initiatory ritual, whichever it may be. In other cases, though, it seems that the ritual is self-consciously echoing a descent to the Underworld in order to provoke a certain kind of experience, as this famous text of Pausanias describing Trophonius' oracle shows[9]:

> After this those who have entered the shrine learn the future, not in one and the same way in all cases, but by sight sometimes and at other times by hearing. The return upwards is by the same mouth, the feet darting out first. They say that no one who has made the descent has been killed, save only one of the bodyguard of Demetrius. But they declare that he performed none of the usual rites in the sanctuary, and he descended not to consult the god but in the hope of stealing gold and silver from the shrine. It is said the body of this man appeared in a different place, and was not cast out at the sacred mouth […]. After his ascent from Trophonius the inquirer is again taken in hand by the priests, who set him upon a chair called the chair of Memory, which stands not far from the shrine, and they ask of him, when seated there, all he has seen or learned. After gaining this information they then entrust him to his relatives. These lift him, paralysed with terror and unconscious both of himself and of his surroundings, and carry him to the building where he lodged before with Fortune and the Good Spirit. Afterwards, however, he will recover all his faculties, and the power to laugh will return to him. What I write is not hearsay; I have myself inquired of Trophonius and seen other inquirers. Those who have descended into the shrine of Trophonius are obliged to dedicate a tablet on which is written all that each has heard or seen […].

These two roughly contemporary texts show that the mirroring play between catabatic myth and ritual makes them models of each other, so that strict priority of one upon another cannot be established. The experience of death is by essence unknown, and that of mystic ritual is often ineffable, so in ancient Greece *katábasis* became a narrative pattern through which both could be understood and transmitted, in reciprocal relationship.

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9. Paus., IX, 39, 12 (transl. W. H. S. Jones slightly modified). For Trophonius' ritual and mythical complex, cf. P. BONNECHÈRE (2003).

It would be a mistake, therefore, to attempt a neat separation between the experience of ritual and that of oral or written accounts of journeys to Hades, intended to provoke similar experiences through mental contemplation of the Underworld. Seeing and listening are the key of the *katábasis*-like experience of the inquirer in Trophonios' oracle, who is immediately asked to write down what he has seen, in order to communicate to others that unique ritual experience. Modern cognitivists would call this kind of occasional account the "spontaneous exegetical reflection" of an "imagistic mode of religiosity", instead of the stable description typical of a doctrinal mode [10]. But however we choose to label this process, it seems clear that the texts derived from these accounts are prone to influence the ideas about Hades of other people, and the experience of later initiates, just as they have been influenced by previous ones. This process of transmission of the experience is not restricted to participants in the ritual. Reading texts, listening to recitations, and contemplating images depicting *katábasis*, may bring to the mind a whole set of sensations that conform an experience intimately bound with that of a ritual which actually includes an underground descent. Accounts such as Plato's myth of Er or Plutarch's myth of Thespesius aim to instill into the audience the feelings of terror and relief not unlike those experienced in the ritual [11]. An individual experience, unique as it is, is inevitably framed by the collective references transmitted in oral accounts and written texts, reflected in paintings and rituals, in the ideological and narrative levels. And vice versa, each individual account of such experience contributes to the collective tradition with its particular modifications and crystallizations of the previous background.

There is hardly a better instance of the interrelation between text and rite, eschatological myth and funerary praxis, individual adaptations and collective imagination, than the so-called Orphic gold tablets. The beginning of the longest one (from Hipponion), "when you are about to die you will go to the well-built halls of Hades; a spring is on the right ...", anticipates what will happen in the moment of death. They contain a mixture of

10. These categories were successfully theorized by H. WHITEHOUSE (2001). H. BOWDEN (2010) is a good attempt to apply them to the ancient mystery cults.

11. Cf. R. GAGNÉ (in this volume) for Plutarch's impressive depiction of the terrors of the Afterlife to support his defense of divine justice. A cross-cultural parallel, *mutatis mutandis*, may be the contemplation of Hell and Heaven that is famously practiced in Jesuit 'spiritual exercises' since the 16th century. Sensations awakened by typical icons (in this case of the afterlife) may be called, in cognitive terminology, "flashbulb memories", that may be stimulated through ritual performance or in narration. This should of course be differentiated from the *Lesemysterien* imagined by R. REITZENSTEIN (1927, p. 51-52, 243-245) for Hermetic texts, a construction in which Protestant Scripture-centered religion is clearly projected.

poetic hexameters depicting the descent of the soul to Hades in the moment of death, and performative utterances deriving from initiation and / or funerary ritual. The poetic descriptions and dialogues underline precisely the experience of descent to Hades as unique: the visual indications and the utterances that will be heard and must be said are all part of "the experience you have never experienced before" [12].

Now what is the real value of these tablets to interpret Vergil's text? They have been mainly used as evidence for the traditions of infernal topography, along with Plato and other descriptions of the Underworld, and taken as examples of what would be Orphic-Pythagorean eschatology, with which Vergil is supposed to be familiar [13]. More recently, extreme opinions about their specific value have been expressed. On the one hand, they have been said to be a direct model for the golden bough, since they function as passports to enter the "abode of the blessed" [14]. On the other hand, they have been denied any value for the comparison, since Plato would have been Vergil's direct source for the most evident parallels with the tablets, like the sacred prairies or the two departing ways [15]. However, these yes-or-no approaches fail to address the right point. The tablets, drawing as they do on general catabatic tradition, are very relevant to understanding the kind of experience that Vergil had in mind when depicting Aeneas' descent, even if there is no need to posit (nor a way to demonstrate) that he had direct knowledge of the tablets (or of poems where they would have taken their verses from). Their motifs were shared, in different combinations, by other catabatic tales which conveyed similar experiences. They present, in effect, not only the usual topographical details of underworldly trips, but more complex notions of space and time, scenes and ideas that play a key role in *Aeneid* 6, although with a very different function. In what follows, some

12. On the tablets, cf. A. BERNABÉ, Ana Isabel JIMÉNEZ SAN CRISTÓBAL (2008), R. G. EDMONDS III (2011) and F. GRAF, Sarah Iles JOHNSTON (2013). Here they will be quoted by A. Bernabé's edition of *Orphicorum Fragmenta (OF)*. The problem of whether they deserve the label "Orphic" does not affect our argument here. The three tablets with the formula "when you go down to Hades" are *OF* 474-476; the formula about the unique experience is in *OF* 487, which starts: "but when the soul leaves the light of the sun". The composers of the texts (not necessarily the scribes) clearly had a religious program in mind for the deceased, which does not preclude the possibility that some (or most) of the tablets were left in the tombs as amulets to grant a better afterlife by people who did not care about the inscribed texts – as H. BOWDEN (2010) suggests.

13. J. E. ZETZEL (1989); U. MOLYVIATI-TOPTSIS (1994), the most extended study of the tablets to explain Vergil's topography of Elysium as derived from Orphic-Pythagorean eschatology; J. N. BREMMER (2014).

14. B. KAYACHEV (2012).

15. S. SUNDELL TORJUSSEN (2008), arguing specifically against U. MOLYVIATI-TOPTSIS (1994), and also against others like J. E. ZETZEL (1989) or R. D. WILLIAMS (1964), who take for granted Orphic-Pythagorean influence.

specific passages hitherto not analyzed to my knowledge under the light of comparison with the tablets will exemplify how Vergil reflected and used fundamental elements of the earlier traditions of catabatic experience in Aeneas' journey. I will focus on three separate dimensions: space, time, and identity.

C. Space

The experience of *katábasis* is intrinsically linked to a particular spatio-temporal status that defines the uniqueness of the journey to Hades. Infernal topography has been exhaustively studied, indeed with a passion that no geographer has ever felt for existing lands. It is not my intention to dwell again on the divisions or the physical features of the Underworld in Vergil and before him, since these details are very well known: Hades is dark, sad, muddy, dirty, etc., while Elysium is green and shady, and so on. More specific is the fact that adjectives for infernal places denote the feeling of those who visit or inhabit them. For example, the characterization of the Underworld as *domos uacuas et inania regna* (VI, 269) transmits the frustrating sensation of useless effort (like the "tiresome walking in circles" alluded by Plutarch); the "merry places and happy abode" (VI, 638-639: *locos laetos … sedes beatas*) contrasted with the sadness of Hades (VI, 534: *tristis sine sole domos*) make almost trivial the interchangeability of epithets for places and people. This is also perceivable in the adjectives for the fearful inhabitants of Hades (VI, 688: *horrendum stridens*; VI, 298-299: *horrendus ... terribili squalore*) which convey the terror felt by the visitor [16]. Vergil famously showed his skill in using these resources in the double enallage "*ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram*" (VI, 268). The Sibyl and Aeneas are imagined to be "dark" through the "lonely night". In fact, it is interesting to note that such solitude expressed by the enallage is not literally true, since the Sybil and Aeneas are with each other. Loneliness is, however, typical of the catabatic hero, since descent to Hades is not a group journey and is conceded only to individual people, as the failed attempt of the comrades Theseus and Pirithous shows *a contrario* [17]. Vergil expresses

16. The panorama of adjectives for spaces in the tablets is quite scarce, probably due to their functional and urgent tone: only in *OF* 474 and 493, the path and the prairy are said to be "sacred" (ἱερός) and the guardians "sharp-minded" (φρασὶ πευκαλίμαισι). Of course the tablets only focus on the 'nice' part of the Afterlife.

17. In *Il*., XXIV, 148, 177, Priam undertakes a *katábasis* like trip "alone" (οἶον) yet accompanied by a herald (an inconsistency which must have caused the appearance of the variant οἷος, referring to the herald). Cf. M. HERRERO DE JÁUREGUI (2011), p. 58-59. The group arrival of the suitors' souls in *Od*., XXIV, 1-14 is exceptional as a transition to an Underworld dialogue. In the first *Nékyia*, only Odysseus undertakes a dialogue with the dead, while his men are silent. The gold tablets differentiate clearly the

the elitism of the journey through an adjective, *sola*, which provides an insuperable example of transmutation of sensations between people and place [18].

Just as in Plutarch's text depicting the ritual catabatic experience, the opposition between two polar extremes is also found in the Vergilian description of the Underworld. Line 637, when they enter Elysium after leaving the golden bough on Persephone's gates (*his demum exactis, perfecto munere diuae* / *deuenere locos laetos* ...), is the dividing axis of *Aeneid* 6, after which the experience of the travelers is exactly the contrary as it was before. Aeneas had been led by the Sybil through Hades, but now both will be guided, first by Musaeus and then by Anchises. This corresponds inversely to the placing of the dead, who were allotted fixed places in the first part of Hades (VI, 426-547) while in Elysium they have no fixed place (VI, 673: *nulli certa domus*). This is not equivalent to being lost: in fact, the dead in Hades *errant* (VI, 329; 451), while those in Elysium *uagantur* (VI, 886). This might be the same distinction reflected by Plutarch between a first stage of wandering and a second one of strolling around. The former reflects disorientation, the latter lack of preoccupation. In the first part of Book 6, the firm and goal-oriented walking of Aeneas and the Sybil contrasts with the wandering of the restless dead: they are recognized as different by Charon when he sees them "go through the silent wood and draw near the bank" (VI, 386: *per tacitum nemus ire pedemque aduertere ripae*). Instead, in the second part they peacefully follow the pace of the happy blessed. The spatial framing of the scenes in Hades corresponds to the experience of the visitors, in Vergil as in the traditions he reutilizes.

Finally, attention should be called to the sensorial aspects which define the quality of the space and that, as Plutarch's and Pausanias' texts show, are essential part of the experience. The darkness and light, silence and rumor of the spaces they are crossing, help to mark what is seen and heard in them as fundamental revelations. Vergil deploys a parade of mythological, Trojan, and Roman figures which are commented on being seen, each of them as a statue with an inscription explaining it. This has been noted as a characteristic Augustan use of images, but it is fully inserted in the theme of Hades, since, as R. A. Smith has underlined, "the sight of persons and leg-

descent of the deceased soul from what others do: "there the souls are drinking; do not even approach that spring!" (*OF* 474). The opposition of the single descendant to "the many" is clearly depicted, though the soul will join afterwards the groups of the blessed (cf. n. 40).

18. The only parallel is found in Empedocles, fr. 49 DK: "solitary, blind-eyed night", probably belonging to the *Purifications*, where identification between the fallen δαίμων and the space in which he dwells in exile is taken to the extreme, through reincarnation. Cf. R. GAGNÉ (2006) for the catabatic color of Empedocles' poem.

endary places there spontaneously evoke a graphic description that would characterize any katabasis" [19].

D. Time

The temporal dimension plays an equally essential role in the experience of the descent to Hades. As Elpenor or Palinurus exemplify, the dead instantly get to the land of the dead, while the living have to travel a long way. In the Vergilian Underworld, time goes by on a different level, since from the timeless perspective of the dead, the past and the future may easily conflate with the present: Dido or Deiphobus live through their past grudges (like Ajax in the *Odyssey*), while Anchises, gifted with prophetic vision like the Homeric Teiresias, cries over the future premature death of Marcellus. This dimension contrasts with the worldly temporal perspective of the visitor, in which memory keeps a linear conception of events. Perhaps this is a reason why the way to cross the boundary between life and death is through oblivion or dreams, as we shall see [20]. But how is this contrast marked in the actual descent? The temporal aspect of the catabatic experience can be defined with three terms that indicate different, albeit overlapping, features: exceptionality, urgency, uniqueness.

A visit to Hades is exceptional, i.e. it is only possible if the necessary conditions to go down and break the usual norms of space and time are met. Ritual initiation, in Eleusis like Heracles or through the Sybil like Aeneas, is the only way to reach such exceptional permission [21]. Those who tried illegally, be it Peirithoos in myth, or Demetrius' bodyguard at Trophonius' oracle in Pausanias' propagandistic tale, remained in Hades for ever. Such exceptionality means that the conditions under which the trip can be successfully undertaken are very limited, and one of them is the time-span. Being a climactic and unique moment, the parallel with tragedy, which according to Aristotle must depict all crucial events in one turn of the sun, is telling. "One day" is the most usual temporal extension for such unnatural adventure as crossing the boundary between the dead and the living. In Lucian's portrait of the inverse journey, Protesilaus, for instance, is given just one day to go back to the living [22]. On the ritual level, Servius says twice that

19. R. A. SMITH (2005), p. 90 (p. 82-90 for the primacy of vision in Book 6).

20. A. M. SEIDER (2013), p. 175-76. Cf. *infra* on the exit from Hades through the Gates of Dreams.

21. Only of Heracles there are archaic versions in which he enters Hades successfully by force. In later accounts he is initiated (R. J. CLARK [1979], p. 79-94).

22. Lucian, *Dial. Mort*., 28. I study other references to the motif of the crucial day in myth and ritual in M. HERRERO DE JÁUREGUI (2013).

rites in which Vergil takes inspiration were one day long [23]. He supposes this because when Aeneas enters the Underworld, it is dawn, and when he speaks to Deiphobos it is midday. The poet says, "perhaps they would have spent the whole time assigned to them" (VI, 536: *et fors omne datum traherent per talia tempus*), if the Sybil had not got impatient and warned him that they must hurry. Most commentators are skeptical about Servius' explanation that this '*datum tempus*' refers to one day following the ritual norm [24]. But given the lack of any other satisfactory explanation for the passage, one can be almost certain that Servius is on the right track, because Vergil is following not necessarily a specific rite, but the tradition that allows exceptional circumstances only on a special day. More specifically, there is a further relevant parallel with a ritual performance reflecting a journey to Hades that takes place in a single crucial day: two almost identical Orphic tablets from Pelinna begin, precisely, with this sentence: "you have died and you have been born on this day" (ἄματι τῶιδε) [25]. Again, of course Vergil is not echoing the ritual of the tablet, but the general motif, present in myth and in ritual, that the journey to Hades, being exceptional and unique, must be accomplished in a single, appointed day.

A logical, almost necessary consequence of such exceptionality is the urgency of the whole enterprise. In *Aeneid* 6 there is a permanent hurry which stands in narrative tension to the poetic wish to satisfy the audience's curiosity and offer a thorough and detailed account of the Underworld. In spite of her explanations, the Sibyl urges permanently Aeneas to hurry up (VI, 629: *sed iam age*; VI, 630: *acceleremus*), and every verb of movement suggests briskness (VI, 425 = VI, 636: *occupat aditum*; VI, 426: *euaditque celer*). This is one of the main differences between the typical epic scene of an arrival to a strange land (e.g. Scheria in the *Odyssey* or Carthage or Latium in the *Aeneid*) and the arrival to the Underworld. In the former, as it is logical, the usual behavior is to advance slowly measuring every movement. Instead, in Vergil's Underworld the swift movement is compulsory. As stated above, their determined walking, furthermore, contrasts with the aimless and circular movements of the dead, who have no reason to be hurried.

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23. Serv., *ad* 535: *Haec sacra, ut diximus supra, praeter unius diei spatium non tenebant: unde ueretur Sibylla, ne inanibus fabulis 'datum', id est statutum et legitimum, 'tempus' teratur.* Cf. also Serv., *ad* 255, referring to the entrance at dawn.

24. N. HORSFALL (2013), p. 383: "that (*scil*. Servius explanation) has a marked air of information offered not because it was correct and generally known, but from the need felt to explain a couple of words not well understood." However, in the previous page he seems to admit the possibility: "Was Aeneas allotted but a single day in the Underworld? If that were indeed so, then evidently the Sibyl's haste is explained."

25. *OF* 485-486; cf. several parallels in M. HERRERO DE JÁUREGUI (2013).

Is this Vergil's innovation or did this belong to the tradition of *katábasis*? In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus stops his νεκυομαντεία for fear that a Gorgon or Persephone herself might appear. But fear that e.g. Charon might wake up or some other monster appear is not mentioned here. Other details in the mythical tradition seem to indicate that swiftness is of the essence to accomplish a successful *katábasis*: Peirithoos and Theseus stopped walking to sit down and remained forever in Hades; in Aristophanes' *Frogs* Dionysus asks Heracles the swiftest way to get down there (117-118): φράζε τῶν ὁδῶν / ὅπῃ τάχιστ' ἀφιξόμεθ' εἰς Ἅιδου κάτω [26]. However, the most clear parallel for the urgency of the catabatic experience, again, is offered by the gold tablets, many of which present a very urgent tone: the soul says "I am dying of thirst: give me water". The Hipponion tablet has a specific adverb "give me quickly" (δίψαι δ' εἰμ' αὖος καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἀλλὰ δότ' ὦκα), a line that is found in another long tablet (from Petelia) with the variant αἶψα instead of ὦκα [27]. It is symptomatic that another tablet (from Pelinna) has as ritual utterance "quickly (αἶψα) I fell into milk". Although αἶψα is probably a scribal mistake for an original αἶζα (goat), the fact that the scribe has "quickly" in mind suggests that swiftness is typical of the funerary / initiatory rites alluded to by the tablet [28]. These parallels, therefore, allow postulating that Vergil is consciously reworking the element of urgency typical of *katábasis* to depict Aeneas' experience.

Finally, the journey to Hades is not only exceptional and urgent, but also unique, i.e. it is an individual trip that has never been done before and will never be repeated again. A Thurian tablet greets the defunct saying "hail, you having experienced the experience never experienced before" (χαῖρε παθὼν τὸ πάθημα τὸ δ' οὔπω πρόσθ'{ε} ἐπεπόνθεις), a line that emphasizes through triple repetition the primordial character of a unique kind of παθεῖν [29]. It is necessarily unique because one dies only once, and never crosses twice the Acheron. And if on the one hand a catabatic anticipation of death partly breaks that law, on the other hand, it replicates it: this exceptional crossing of the ultimate boundary will happen also only once. In fact, it would have no sense to come back again in a second

26. Cf. also αὐτίκα restored by Lobel in *P. Oxy.* 2622 fr. 3 a) 10 with a fragment of Pindar's poem on Heracles' *katábasis* (H. LLOYD-JONES [1990], p. 175). The adverb suggests quick movement, even if in this case it probably refers to the sudden appearance of the souls of the dead before Heracles. The swiftness of the characters contributes to the dreamlike (or nightmarish) atmosphere of the catabatic trip.

27. *OF* 474.11 (Hipponion); *OF* 476.8 (Petelia). The petition of water without the adverb is found in shorter tablets, *OF* 477-484.

28. *OF* 485 (Pelinna): cf. J. V. MÉNDEZ DOSUNA (2009) for the hypothesis of the original reading.

29. *OF* 487. Cf. n. 45 on παθεῖν.

descent [30]. In an initiatory trip there is no way back to the previous stage, and it is not possible to undertake it again: one makes such journey to learn ultimate truths, not temporary tricks that might expire and become invalid. The transformation is definitive and radical. In fact the same Thurian tablet says in the following line "you have become a god from the man you were" (θεὸς ἐγένου ἐξ ἀνθρώπου). The occasion is indeed unique, impossible to repeat or to undo.

There are some passages in the description of Aeneas' descent that recall this irrevocable uniqueness. In VI, 425 Aeneas leaves "the bank of the river over which there is no return" (*ripam inremeabilis undae*). And this irrevocability is present in every place that is visited for the first and last time, and every person that is encountered by Aeneas. He knows it well, as it is patent when he tells Dido "it is fated that this is the last time I speak to you" (VI, 466: *extremum fato quod te adloquor hoc est*). This line has led to speculation, from Servius onwards, about whether when Aeneas dies definitively he could meet Dido, but the debate clearly misses the point. Precisely what Vergil is underlining is that such a journey with all this series of encounters will never be repeated [31]. Also Aeneas' Trojan comrades know that the occasion is unique: they try to keep pace with him because "seeing him just once is not enough" (VI, 487: *nec uidisse semel satis est*). The adverb *semel* emphasizes the uniqueness of the moment, which they try to enlarge as much as they can (*iuuat usque morari*) [32]. Deiphobus impresses Aeneas and manages to entertain him for a while, but after the Sybil's rebuke, he acknowledges the inevitable: "I will leave, fill the ranks of the dead and go back to darkness: go, great glory of Troy, go and enjoy a better destiny" (VI, 545-546: *discedam; explebo numerum reddarque tenebris; / i, decus, i, nostrum; melioribus utere fatis*).

With these conversations, Vergil makes it clear that Aeneas leaves behind forever his Trojan past in order to confront his Roman future: paraphrasing the tablets, we can say that he becomes a Roman from the Trojan he was. In the last part of this paper, we will explore how this change of identity is experienced by the Vergilian hero and by his audience.

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30. Again, Heracles is an exception, since he goes back to return Cerberus to his master. This seems a mythographical explanation of why, if he took Cerberus to Euristeus, the monstrous dog is still in Hades.

31. N. HORSFALL (2013), p. 348: "Servius supposes (which itself suggests that some readers did wonder whether they might indeed have met yet again) that after his death Aeneas will occupy a different *circulus* of the Underworld, so they should not meet again."

32. Cf. N. HORSFALL (2013), p. 358-59: the expression *nec uidisse semel* is "not a common way of putting things"; *iuuat usque morari* means "to keep on his company, extending the time element present in the verb".

E. Identity and memory

As it is well known, in the mystic rites which echo a journey to Hades, the initiate claims to be irreversibly and radically transformed, a transformation that is often identified to acquiring a new identity. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* offers the most famous first-person account of how this change of identity took place, thus expanding in a literary narration the kind of ritual experience that we may guess lies behind many obscure mystic *symbola* [33]. In the gold tablets, this new identity is constantly emphasized as a rediscovered lineage of heavenly ancestry, which is proclaimed when arriving to Hades: "my name is Asterius (starry)"; "I am the child of earth and starry heaven, but my race is heavenly"; "I claim to be too of your blessed lineage" [34]. The probable implication is that such identity has been revealed to the μύσται during initiation, and they must remember it in the key moment of death, for which presumably initiation had prepared them. As in Trophonius' ritual, memory is the key of the real lasting value of the catabatic experience. Not in vain the Hipponion tablet is called a gift (or a leaf, or a work, depending on the reading of its first line) of Mnemosyne [35]. The soul must drink from Mnemosyne's spring, and then, as two other tablets say, "recount the whole truth", and "preserve everything very well" [36]. If the souls of the tablets had a slogan, it would indeed be: no salvation without preservation – preservation through memory of their true identity and their heavenly lineage.

Now, looking again at the general pattern rather than to any specific source, we may say also of Aeneas that he changes identity along his journey, or rather, he discovers his deepest and truest identity. Anchises in fact had told him to go to Hades in order to get knowledge of his lineage (V, 737: *tum genus omne tuum et quae dentur moenia disces*). And after discovering not his ancestry, but his descent, his identity will change. In the first part of the voyage he meets all his Trojan past, and in the second all his Roman future [37]. In VI, 759 Anchises begins his description of the great

33. W. BURKERT (1987), p. 97-99. Cf. especially Apul., *Met*., XI, 23, 6: "I approached the frontier of death, I set foot on the threshold of Persephone."

34. *OF* 477.9: Ἀστέριος ὄνομα. *OF* 475, 476, 484: Γᾶς υἱός εἰμι καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος· αὐτὰρ ἐμοὶ γένος οὐράνιον. *OF* 488-490: καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼν ὑμῶν γένος ὄλβιον εὔχομαι εἶμεν. In the Pelinna tablets (*OF* 485-486) this change of identity is considered a rebirth – a well-known pattern of initiation, which is also a "logical" claim of one who has gone to Hades and goes on living, cf. Apul., *Met*., XI, 21, 6 – but not the only possible claim (cf. n. 7).

35. *OF* 474.1 (the word ἐριον of the tablet has been pausibly interpreted as ἔργον, ἱερόν, ἔριον, and δῶρον).

36. The formulae in *OF* 477 (εὖ μάλα πᾶσαν ἀληθείην καταλέξαι) and *OF* 487 (πεφυλαγμένον εὖ μάλα πάντα) are clearly related.

37. Cf. e.g. R. D. WILLIAMS (1964, p. 63) [= 1990, p. 207]: "he takes his final leave

heroes of Roman history – the so-called *Heldenschau* – with this promise to Aeneas: *te tua fata docebo*. First the Albans that live between Aeneas and Romulus, and them the Romans themselves: *hanc aspice gentem Romanosque tuos* (VI, 788-789).

The *Heldenschau* ends up with the most oft-quoted line of Latin poetry: *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento* (VI, 851). There are many layers of interpretation of this passage, but I will restrict my analysis to its relations to the poetics of *katábasis*, which, to my knowledge, have not been sufficiently noted. This expression has a distinctively oracular tone [38]. The revelatory style obviously fits a disclosure of the future as that which follows, and Hades is an appropriate place to receive oracles. Indeed acquisition of a deeper knowledge is one of the most common features of *katábasis*, both in myth and ritual levels. But who receives this oracle? This generalizing vocative seems *prima facie* an appeal to all the Roman heroic figures that have passed before his eyes. The previous lines have addressed heroes like Cato and Fabius Maximus, also in the 2nd person, so they are all subsumed in this *Romane*. However, we must not forget that the primary addressee of the entire revelation is Aeneas, father of all these people he has just seen, and as such he is also addressed as *Romanus*, for the first and only time in the poem [39]. At the end of his journey he is integrated into a collective lineage, under a common identity. In effect, the souls that Anchises shows are going to be subsumed under his own name (VI, 758: *animas nostrumque nomen ituras*). This is not any more an individual name, but a generic one, *Romanus* – a similar acquisition of a generic identity to that observed in the tablets [40].

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of the Trojan and Homeric world and moves towards the Roman future."

38. Cf. J. E. ZETZEL (1989, p. 278) on the Sibylline oracle preserved by Phlegon of Tralles, *FrGrH* 257 F 37 (p. 84.2 Stramaglia), and Zosimus, II, 6, 1, used to legitimate the *Ludi Saeculares* of 17 BCE, which begins with a parallel formula: μεμνῆσθαι Ῥωμαῖε. On p. 284 he rightly compares the memory required from the Roman to the spring of Memory in the tablets.

39. J. E. ZETZEL (1989, p. 278) says emphatically that Aeneas is not addressee of this *memento*, since the only addressee it accepts is the contemporary Romans. I cannot agree with this reductionist perspective. The fact that he does not want to consider in his paper "the development of the character and psychology of Aeneas himself" (p. 264) does not mean that it does not play a role for Vergil. Besides, his argument that it would be anachronistic to call him 'Roman' is unpersuasive. J. E. ZETZEL's own paper demonstrates admirably that the perspective of the Underworld allows contradictions with the rest of the poem (where the perspective is from the living), so the *Romane* would merit the same justification.

40. For the expressions of collective lineage, cf. n. 34. The destiny of the soul, who arrives individually, is to join a collective; see *OF* 493a: "send me to the θίασοι of initiates"; *OF* 474: "you will go along the sacred road that the other μύσται and βάκχοι travel"; *OF* 488-490: "send me to the seats of the blessed".

This identity acquired in Hades transcends the personal appearances of the upper world of the living, and implies the conscience of an immortal destiny. Unlike in the tablets, however, Aeneas' newly discovered identity will not grant him a happy afterlife – this is a different issue that Vergil treats as a general doctrine about all human souls in Anchises' lips. Neither is Aeneas' main interest in the immortal glory won by heroic deeds, although the Homeric conception is paid due homage in the poem [41]. Instead of the Achillean way to immortality, Aeneas had been granted a special one since the first preserved stages of the epic tradition – the *Iliad* and the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. The reign of his descendants, "his children and his children's children" is meant as the kind of "mortal survival" granted to Aeneas by his being son of Aphrodite [42]. Vergil famously reinterpreted this tradition as the Roman universal empire commanded by the Julian dynasty, and by setting its definitive unveiling in a catabatic scene, he gave it a scent of initiation into a new kind of immortality granted by the memory of a true identity.

This identity is dependent on memory, whose preponderating role in Book 6 fits perfectly with a catabatic setting. Granted, the '*memento'* of line 851 is related to the complex issue of how much Aeneas will remember of his journey after going out of Hades through the Gate of Ivory, in Vergil's last coup at the very end of the book. In fact Aeneas seems to remember nothing in the rest of the *Aeneid* of this revelation, as if it had been a sort of dream [43]. However, just before describing the Gates of Dreams, Vergil underlines that Anchises fires Aeneas' spirit (VI, 889: *incendit animum*), relates to him the upcoming wars (VI, 890: *bella memorat*), and teaches him how he must accomplish everything (VI, 891: *docet*). There is a careful equilibrium between the emotional and the intellectual in Anchises' instruction of his son [44]. Again, the tradition of *katábasis* may help to understand Vergil's explicit balancing both aspects of Aeneas' experience.

In effect, the tension between μαθεῖν and παθεῖν is also characteristic of catabatic trips: in the poems of Parmenides and Empedocles, generally admitted to be depicted in catabatic colours, or in Plato's eschatological

41. Cf. A. M. SEIDER (2013, p. 78), commenting on VI, 664: "those who won the memory of men by their merits" are in Elysium. As he shows on p. 41 and 50, the different forms of immortality presented in the poem are not separate compartments, but skillfully linked by the poet under the common theme of memory.

42. S. SCHEIN (2012), p. 310. The prophecy of *Il*., XX, 308 was reinterpreted by Vergil in *Aen*., III, 98.

43. The interpretation of VI, 893-896 is a classic problem of Vergilian scholarship, well summarized by N. HORSFALL (2013), p. 612-618.

44. This equilibrium is similar, but not identical, with that of seeing and learning well explained by R. A. SMITH (2005, p. 82-89) for *Aeneid* 6.

myths, doctrinal teaching seems the most important result, just as in the Orphic Bologna papyrus that seems to draw from some source also known by Vergil. However, in the ritual *katábasis* of the tablets παθεῖν is clearly the most important element, as the aforementioned Thurian tablet purposefully underscores with the line that makes παθεῖν the key to salvation (χαῖρε παθὼν τὸ πάθημα τὸ δ' οὔπω πρόσθ' ἐπεπόνθεις). Aristotle's famous statement about the mysteries – "men being initiated have not a lesson to learn, but an experience to undergo and a condition into which they must be brought" (τοὺς τελουμένους οὐ μαθεῖν τί δεῖν, ἀλλὰ παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι) – clearly shows that the tension between μαθεῖν and παθεῖν went far beyond the rhetorical word-play, and that practitioners like the composer of the Thurian line, or theoreticians like Aristotle were aware of it [45]. Pausanias' account of the practice of Trophonius' priests of recording the experience makes it clear that they considered that from pure παθεῖν some recordable teachings could be drawn. Vergil does not really privilege either one or the other, but his careful effort for equilibrium between both poles in *Aeneid* 6 shows that he was also aware of this dichotomy in tales of *katábasis*. He has shown Aeneas experiencing emotions more intensely than in any other episode before (e.g. weeping after seeing Dido), but also receiving theoretical and practical teaching. After his exit through the gates, however, the question remains open regarding how much he will remember, or how much the impulse received in the Underworld will reinforce him.

However, a possible solution to this problem may come from the awareness that there is a third addressee of the imperative *memento* apart from the Roman heroes up to Augustus, and Aeneas himself: the Romans who read Vergil's poem have accompanied Aeneas in his descent, experienced with him his moments of panic and amazement, and received with him knowledge from the lips of the Sybil and Anchises [46]. All Romans are told by Anchises / Vergil "remember your true identity", and they are granted an immortal destiny through this memory. This is the traditional effect of literary *katábasis*, in opposition to the individual results of the ritual one: Homer's audience learnt about Odysseus' destiny (and that of other heroes like Achilles or Heracles) and knew what to expect from the afterlife according to the authority of the poet. So did those who listened to the *katabáseis* of Orpheus or Heracles, as well as those who read Plato's

45. The most relevant texts playing on the conceptual (not only rhetorical) opposition between παθεῖν and μαθεῖν are analysed by H. DÖRRIE (1956). On Aristotle's passage (fr. 15 Rose), cf. W. BURKERT (1987, p. 69), recalling the context of the fragment quoted by Synesius. The dichotomy proposed by H. WHITEHOUSE (2001), icons *vs*. arguments, is partly coincident.

46. This is the only addressee considered by J. E. ZETZEL (1989), wrongly, cf. n. 39. Cf. A. M. SEIDER (2013), p. 55-56.

eschatological myths, or Plutarch's. As stated at the beginning of this paper, reading those depictions provoked a contemplation of Hades in which the feelings of awe, terror, and relief of the characters were shared by the public. Vergil's main goal, unlike that of many previous authors, is not to assert a religious or philosophical vision of the afterlife, but a political agenda based on Roman universal destiny (this is not the place to discuss whether this agenda was supportive or critical). Aeneas is told an account of the afterlife and of human destiny, but his inner transformation is from Trojan to Roman. In his newly discovered Romanness lies his claim to immortality as founder of a perennial lineage with a universal destiny, and this becomes also the lineage and destiny that must be remembered by all Romans as their truest and deepest identity. Thus through Vergil's art, the catabatic experience of Aeneas, with its transformative effects, has been shared with all his Roman readers of all ages.

Conclusion

In the previous pages an attempt has been made to pinpoint which characteristic features of the catabatic traditions, present both in the literary accounts and in the ritual recreations of descents to Hades, were used and reinterpreted by Vergil to depict Aeneas' experience – an experience which would influence all later accounts of journeys to Hades. No quest has been made here to determine specific sources of Aeneas' *katábasis*, beyond mentioning several passages which scholarship has assumed to reflect previous poems. Instead, it has been assumed that the most typically characteristic features of *katábasis* would probably have been shared by many literary and ritual accounts of descents to Hades, as well as by other texts (and images) influenced by them. In fact, with the final exit through the Gates of Dreams, it seems as if Vergil had wanted to give a last shake to the cocktail of catabatic ingredients in casting a dreamlike tone to the whole episode, so that elements can combine freely. After the examination of the presence of these features in *Aeneid* 6, it seems clear that Vergil has captured the gist of whichever sources he used. Not in vain did Aeneas' *katábasis* remain as the most famous one in ancient literature, even if other heroes like Heracles or Orpheus had had many more singers before him. The tale of his descent is depicted with the features of an experience recognizable from the catabatic traditions in myth and ritual, which results in an effective transmission of this experience to the readers of the *Aeneid*. Vergil's masterful treatment of the spatial, temporal, and identitary dimensions that belong to the tradition of underworldly trips shapes the experience of Aeneas and of the readers of the poem who see, hear, and feel what he sees, hears and feels. Aeneas will forget the details of the revelation, but the readers will remember all. An

individual, unique, and unaccountable journey to an unreachable and inexplicable land has been made by Vergil a universal experience for many, to be undergone and understood in all times and places. Many Greek poets before him had aimed to do the same, possibly using similar techniques to bring home their own ideological and poetic agendas. However, the genius of the Roman poet changed the way posterity looked at descents to Hades, and *katábasis* was turned into a Vergilian genre.

Miguel HERRERO DE JÁUREGUI
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
miguelhe@ucm.es

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