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ODYSSEUS' AND AENEAS' VISITS TO THE UNDERWORLD

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ODYSSEUS' AND AENEAS' VISITS TO THE UNDERWORLD.

Literature has been defined by someone as the lasting expression in words of the meaning of life. Such problems as love and hate, fidelity and desertion, peace and war, patriotism and treason have given meaning to life since the rise of civilization. From the time men could write and, no doubt, by word of mouth before the development of writing, the stories and emotions resulting from these problems have interested each succeeding generation. Some tales depicted humorous situations, others tragic ones.

Legends and myths, common to people of widely separated areas, "have floated seemingly unattached"¹ through many centuries and appear in recognizable guises in literature of many countries.

"It would be the work of minstrels, priests, and poets as national spirit grew conscious of itself, to shape all these materials into a definite body of tradition."²

From this body of tradition Homer found the source of his great epic poems The Iliad and The Odyssey.

"Roman writers generally imitated the writings of the Greeks whom they recognized as their literary masters."³

¹; John C. Shaffer, The Odyssey by Homer (New York, The MacMillan Company, 1946) XXV
². Ibid.
So it was not strange that some eight hundred years later, the Roman poet Virgil used this body of tradition now clothed with the great poems of Homer, to write his national epic, The Aeneid.

Octavian, the emperor better known as Augustus, in his desire to restore to the state the virtues, patriotism, and worship of the gods which had characterized an earlier period of Rome's history, became the patron to men of literary talent, who by their writings aided him in this cause.

Virgil's Aeneid was his contribution to an emperor whom he genuinely admired and for whose sake he glorified piety by making it the chief virtue of his hero, Aeneas. (He himself, like most of the Romans of his day, probably had very little faith in the gods.)

"The manners which our poet gives his hero are the same which were eminently seen in his Augustus. Those manners were piety to the gods, a dutiful affection to his father, love to his relatives, care of his people, courage and conduct in the wars, gratitude to those who obliged him, and justice in general to mankind."\(^4\)

It is not difficult to trace the patterns Virgil has borrowed from the epics of Homer, but with his great originality in embellishing these outlines with stories of his own, he has written a poem which even one very familiar with the Odyssey can

enjoy without a feeling of tiresome repetition.

There are many points of similarity:

1. Odysseus and Aeneas were each ordered to go to the Underworld and were told the kind of sacrifices they must make to the spirits of the dead.

2. Each had an unburied companion whose shade he met.

3. One spoke with his mother, the other with his father. Both found the shades had feelings but no substance.

4. Grudges held on earth continued in the lower world.

5. Warriors with or against whom each had fought at Troy were seen.

6. Each had glimpses of regions of eternal punishment.

7. Each hero was successful in his mission.

8. Each book ends with the hero returning to his ship.

On the other hand there are many differences in the poems:

1. Book VI of The Aeneid is much longer than Book XI of The Odyssey.

2. Aeneas had a guide to lead him to Hades.

3. There was no mention of Odysseus crossing the river Styx, so Charon's and Cerberus's only part in The Odyssey is in a story told by Achilles.

4. Odysseus from without saw the House of Hades with
the horror of its figures being punished but Aeneas passed through Hades on his way to the Elysian fields.

5. All shades with whom Odysseus spoke came to him. Aeneas met them as the Sibyl took him to find his father.

6. There is no mention in The Odyssey of the Elysian Fields nor of souls waiting to be reincarnated.

7. The mission of Aeneas was more majestic. Odysseus was trying to learn his personal destiny. The fate of Rome and so, of the world, depended upon Aeneas's following the course outlined by his father.

By way of background for each story, let it be said that in the book just preceding the ones mentioned two things of importance occurred. Each hero received an order to go to the Underworld and each had lost a companion whose body had not been given proper burial.

After Odysseus and his followers had spent a year on the island of Circe, the men were eager to set out for Ithaca, their home. When Odysseus told this plan to Circe, he was warned he must first go to Hades to seek the Theban Teiresias who would tell him what the gods had in store for him. She told him he would need no guide but could recognize Hades by the description she gave.
In their haste to get away, the men aroused Elpenor, one of Odysseus' men, "being heavy with wine," too suddenly from his sleeping place on the roof. He slipped and "his neck had broken from the bones of his spine and his spirit went down to the House of Hades."5

Aeneas' warning came in a different way. In the dark of night the image of his parent Anchises, coming down from heaven, seemed suddenly to pour forth these words: "Go to the home of Dis in the lower world and seek a meeting with me, my son, through deep Avernus. For impious Tartarus of the gloomy shades does not hold me, but I dwell in Elysium amid the pleasant councils of the Virtuous."6

Palinurus, Aeneas' trusted pilot had to die, because Neptune had demanded "that one life be given for many" before he would allow the Trojan wanderer safe passage to Avernus.

The god of Sleep, dressed as a man, came to Palinurus to persuade him that he no longer need steer the ship but should get some rest. When he refused, "Behold the god pressed upon both his temples a branch wet with leafy dew and drugged with Stygian power, and overcame his drowsy eyes although he resisted. Hardly had unexpected sleep relaxed his body when bending over him, the god threw him headlong into the liquid waves with a part of the ship that was torn away, together with the tiller. Often he called to his companions in vain."7

5. Shaffer, The Odyssey, 156.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid. 133.
Following Circe's directions, Odysseus reached the lower world and made the sacrifice to the dead as he had been instructed. After the blood of the black sheep he killed had been caught in a pit, the shades of the dead, wanting to drink the blood, crowded around him. With drawn sword he kept them away, even the soul of his own mother. "Anon came up the soul of my mother dead, Anticleia...whom I left alive when I departed from sacred Ilios. At the sight of her I wept and was moved with compassion yet even so for all my sore grief, I suffered her not to draw nigh to the blood, ere I had word of Teiresias." Teiresias alone knew his future so he must be the first to drink.

Elpenor, his unburied friend, was seen and promised fitting burial.

Then the spirit of the Theban Teiresias with a golden scepter in his hand recognized Odysseus. When he had drunk of the dark blood, he told him his fate. If Odysseus's men avoided harming the cattle of the Sun God, they would reach home safely. Otherwise, only Odysseus would survive. His troubles would be many before he reached home, but even more trouble awaited him in Ithaca.

Teiresias told Odysseus if he allowed the shades to drink the blood in the pit they could converse with him. This he permitted them, one at a time, to do.

His mother, of course, was first. She said she had died of grief when Odysseus failed to return home after the war.

10. S. H. Butcher, The Odyssey of Homer, (New York, MacMillan Co.)
She gave him news of his wife, son, and father. Odysseus tried three times to embrace her, three times she flitted through his hands as a shadow or a dream.

"Thereafter came the soul of Agamemnon, son of Atreus, sorrowing, and around him others were gathered...and he knew me straightway when he had drunk the dark blood, yea, and he wept aloud and shed big tears as he stretched forth his hand in his longing to reach me. But it might not be, for he had no steadfast strength nor power at all in moving, such as was aforetime in his supple limbs."

He told Odysseus that upon his return from Troy he had been treacherously murdered by his wife and her lover, even before he had been permitted to see his son. He eagerly sought news of Orestes, but Odysseus could tell him nothing.

Achilles, mightiest of the Achaeans, found little comfort in being a prince among the dead, for he told Odysseus:

"Rather would I live on ground (above the earth), as the hireling of another, with a landless man who had no great livelihood, than bear sway among all the dead that be departed." He rejoiced greatly over the news Odysseus gave him of the renown his son, Neoptolemus, had won in the last days of the Trojan war.

Ajax approached, but he made no answer when Odysseus appealed to him to master his wrath. (Ajax after going mad had committed suicide when Odysseus won the armor of Achilles.)

12. Ibid., 172.
After he had spoken with many shades both of men and women, Odysseus had a glimpse through the halls of Pluto of the tortures being endured by those who were doomed to eternal punishment.

And Tityus there I saw - the mighty earth
His mother, - overspreading as he lay
Nine acres, - with two vultures at his side
That, plucking at his liver plunged their beaks
Into the flesh; nor did his hands avail
To drive them off, for he had offered force
To Jove's proud wife Latona, as she went
To Pytho through the pleasant Panopeus.

And next I looked on Tantalus, a prey
To grievous torment, standing in a lake
That reached his chin! Though painfully athirst
He could not drink; as often as he bowed
His aged head to take into his lips
The water, it was drawn away and sank
Into the earth, and the dark soil appeared
Around his feet; a god had dried it up.
And lofty trees drooped o'er him, hung with fruit-
Pears, and pomegranates, apples fair to sight
And luscious figs, and olives green of hue.
And when that ancient man put forth his hands
To pluck them from their stems, the wind arose.
And whirled them far from the shadowy clouds.

Sisyphus was pressing a monstrous stone and trying to roll it upward to the brow of the hill.

But oft as he was about to hurl it over the top, the weight would drive him back, back, so once again to the plain rolled the stone, the shameless thing. And he once more kept heaving and straining, and the sweat the while was pouring down his limbs and the dust rose upwards from his head.

The only happy phantom Odysseus saw was Heracles who

"hath joy at the banquet among the deathless gods, and hath to wife, Hebe of the fair ankles, child of great Zeus and of Hera

of the golden sandals. And all about him there was a clamor of the dead as if it were fowls flying every way in fear, and he was like black Night with bow encased and shaft upon the string, fiercely glowing around like one in the act to shoot.  

Heracles wore the belt on which he had wrought figures of bears, boars, lions, wars and murders. He said that no harder task had he had upon earth than bringing back the hound of hell.

Odysseus wanted to see some of the heroes who had died in olden times but ere that might be, the myriad tribes of the dead thronged up together with wondrous clamor, and pale fear got hold of me, lest the goddess Persephone should send me the head of the Gorgon, that dread monster out of Hades.

Straightway I went to the ship and bade my men mount the vessel and loose the hawser. So speedily they went on board and sat upon the benches. And the wave of the flood bore the barque down the stream of Oceanus, we rowing first and afterwards the fair wind was our convoy.

Eight hundred years later in point of actual time but with a lapse of only a few years according to the story, Virgil sent his hero, Aeneas, on a trip to Hades. Warned in a dream by his father's ghost, Aeneas, after he landed in Italy, went in search of the Cumean Sibyl, who was to be his guide to the lower regions. The Sibyl told him that no one could return from Hades unless he carried with him the golden branch sacred to Persephone. Only if he could find it would she agree to

15. Ibid. 175.
16. Shaffer, The Odyssey, 175, 176.
lead him there. Aeneas appealed to his goddess mother, Venus, for help. She sent two doves, which flew ahead of him into the forest and finally lit on the golden branch. True to the Sibyl's words, as soon as he broke the branch from the tree, another grew to take its place. So Aeneas and his guide started on their journey. They came to a cave with "a vast yawning mouth, rocky and protected by a black lake and the darkness of the grave. Over this opening hardly any birds could wing their way without harm, such was the vapor pouring from the dark throat and rising to the vault above."17

Here Aeneas offered his sacrifices of black-backed bullocks and a black fleeced lamb to the gods of the underworld.

Before the very entrance and the very jaws of Orcus, Sorrows and avenging Cares set up their couches. There dwelt pale Disease and Sorrowful Age, Fear, Hunger that persuades to evil, and squalid Poverty - forms terrible to behold - and Death and Toil; there also sleep the Kinsman of Death, and the sinful Joys of the mind, deadly war..., the Furies..., and insane Strife.1

From here there was a road that led to the waves of hell's Acheron. Here a stream churning with slime from a vast whirlpool boiled up and threw all of its sand into Cocytus. The horrifying toll collector Charon, frightfully squalid, guarded the water of these rivers! His chin had a great growth of unkempt gray hair, his eyes were aflame, and from his shoulders there hung a foul garment held up by a knot. He himself pushed along the boat with a pole, managed the sails and carried bodies across in his iron-colored skiff. Though he was old, his age had the vigor and freshness of a god.18

17. Guinagh: The Aeneid, 144
Crowds of people stood on the banks, praying to get across. Charon received some spirits and allowed them to get into his boat, but he pushed others back.

The priestess told Aeneas that the crowd upon the banks was poor and unburied. The buried people Charon could transport, but the others must wander and flit about for a hundred years before he would take them across.

Aeneas with difficulty recognized among the crowd Palinurus, his helmsman. Palinurus appealed to Aeneas to invoke his goddess mother for aid to take him over the Styx with him.

But the prophetess spoke, "$\text{How, Palinurus, has such an impious desire as this entered your mind? Although unburied you wish to see the waters of the Styx and the awful river of the Furies, and unbidden, you would approach its bank? Cease hoping to turn aside the will of the gods by your prayers.}"^{19}

However she promised that his body would be given fitting burial.

After the Sibyl showed Charon the golden bough:

The dark blue boat came sculling to the shore and he drove spirits Lining the thwarts ashore and cleared the gangway. And took Aeneas aboard; as that big man Stepped in, the leaky skiff groaned under the weight And the strained seams let in the muddy water. But they made the crossing safely, seer and soldier To the margin, colorless and shapeless, Grey sedge and dark brown ooze. They heard the baying Of Cerberus, that great hound, in his cavern crouching Making the shore resound, as all three throats Belled horribly; and serpents rose and bristled Along the triple neck. The priestess threw him

A sop with honey and drugged meal; he opened
The ravenous throat, gulped and subsided filling
The den with his huge bulk. Aeneas, crossing,
Passed on beyond the bank of the dread river
Whence none return. 20

After his crossing his first encounter was with Dido. He
had heard she committed suicide, but he wanted her to know
he had left her kingdom unwillingly; only because the gods com-
manded did he go.

Linger a moment, do not leave me. Whither
Whom, are you fleeing? I am permitted only
This last word with you.

But the queen unmoving
As flint or marble turned away, her eyes
Fixed on the ground; the tears were vain, the words
Meant to be soothing, foolish; she turned away
His enemy forever, to the shadows
Where Sychaeus, her former husband, took her
With love for love, and sorrow for her sorrow.
And still Aeneas wept for her, being troubled
By the injustice of her doom; his pity
Followed her going. 21

The way through Hades became more difficult. As Aeneas
and his guide reached the most remote fields, they met famous
warriors who had fallen at Troy. "Numbers of ghosts crowded
around him on the right and left nor were they satisfied when
they had seen him once. It was pleasing to them to delay him
further, to walk along with him and learn the cause of his
coming...but the chieftains of the Greeks...trembled with
fear. Some turned their backs and fled." 22

Translation, (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 158.
Aeneas saw his friend, Deiphobus, to whom he had given a fitting burial, even though his body hadn't been found in the ruins of Troy. He found him with his whole body "lacerated; whose face and hands were cruelly mutilated, whose ears were torn from his temples and whose nose was disfigured by an unsightly wound."23 Deiphobus had married Helen after the death of Paris. On the night of the destruction of Troy, Helen had removed his sword as he lay sleeping and had let in Menelaus, her former husband, who had mutilated his body thus.

The road on which Aeneas and the Sibyl were travelling branched. Their path led to the right, but before they took it, the priestess showed him the road to the left. "Aeneas looked off to the side and suddenly saw under a cliff to the left, a far-scattered castle surrounded by a triple wall. Around this Phlegethon, the rapid river of hell, flows with rolling flames and hurls up sounding rocks. Straight ahead there is a great gate and columns of adamant so solid that no human power, not even the gods themselves, could destroy them with engines of war."24

Radamanthus, the judge, forced everyone to confess his crimes, especially those who had postponed atoning for their sins before they left earth. Many of the characters seen by Aeneas were the same ones described in the Odyssey. Others Virgil had added, such as Theseus, Phlegyas and Pirithous.

"Hell itself extends twice as far down into the shadows as the view of airy Olympus."25

The Sibyl told Aeneas that even if she had a "hundred tongues and a hundred mouths and an iron voice" she could not list "all the types of crimes nor run through all the names of torture."26

Aeneas next placed the golden branch on the doorstep of Persephone's palace and performed the rites due the goddess.

They then entered Elysium, the home of the blest.

Here a freer air clothed the fields with brilliant light and the shades enjoyed their own sun and their own stars... The same pleasures they had during life in chariots and arms, the same interest they had in pasturing their sleek horses, followed them when they went to their death. On the right and left he saw other men feasting as they lay on the grass and singing in chorus the joyful song of victory in the fragrant laurel grove, from which the great river Eridanus rose through the forest to the upper region. Here were bands of those men who suffered wounds fighting for the fatherland, those who were chaste priests when life was theirs, those who were devout poets and who spoke what was worthy of Phoebus, or those who spent their lives in artistic invention or who by reason of their merit caused men to remember them.27

There Aeneas met Anchises who wept and stretched out his arms to his son. As tears coursed down his face, Aeneas "three times attempted to put his arm around his neck and three times the image vainly grasped, escaped his hands like gentle breezes or a fleeting dream."

"On the flower covered banks of Lethe races and people without number were streaming - 'These, Anchises told him, 'are the

souls destined by fate to have second bodies; at the wave of the river Lethe they drink the care banishing waters of long forgetfulness...After they have spent a thousand years in expiation of their sins they are summoned to return to earth."\textsuperscript{28}

Anchises had called Aeneas to meet him in the underworld so that he might explain to him the glory the gods had in store for the Trojans and their descendants. He told Aeneas his own fate. A long list of illustrious men who would make Rome great was revealed to Aeneas. Anchises admonished him thus, "But you, Roman, remember to rule over peoples with your government. This will be your art; to improve conditions of peace, to spare the conquered, and to crush the proud."\textsuperscript{29}

Anchises took "his son over every part and roused his spirit with love of coming fame."\textsuperscript{30} He revealed the wars Aeneas must fight before he could find the peace promised by the gods at the time he left his ancestral home of Troy. At last through one of the turn-gates of Sleep, he sent Aeneas and the Sibyl forth into the light.

Aeneas made his way back to the ship and came once more to his comrades.

Virgil paid his debt to Homer in the only way one generation can repay a former one. He in turn handed down to Dante and Milton the great body of tradition now made richer by three great epics.

\textsuperscript{28} Op. Cit., 159.
\textsuperscript{29} Op. cit., 163.
1. Addison, James Thayer, Life Beyond Death In the Beliefs of Mankind. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932)

2. Bryant, William Cullen, The Odyssey of Homer, Translated into English Blank Verse (Boston, Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1872)


4. Cumont, Franz, After-Life in Roman Paganism, (New York, Yale University, Press, 1923)


