

## **VIRGIL`S INFERNO. MEMORY AND REALITY IN THE SIXTH BOOK OF AENEID**

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to offer a clearer image of how the Underworld was illustrated and interpreted by Augustus` most prolific poet: Publius Vergilius Maro. The issues to be discussed are the relationship between reality and fiction in the sixth book of *Aeneid* and the role of memory in the creation of Inferno. Another issue put in discussion is the role of evil in common life in the Ancient Rome, a society that imagined an Underworld ruled by one god: Hades, a different kind of ruler than the other underworld gods from coexistent cultures. In his Inferno, the Augustan poet offers an image of how the great Roman Empire was, and more important, how it wanted to be seen in front of posterity. The main virtues promulgated by Augustus through his Pax Romana are to be found in the national epopee, but are these ideas changing the image of the Inferno? Extremely interesting is in how the political ideas are combined with the religious ones, and the Shield of Anchises is one of the best examples on proving many of Augustus ideas which are to be found in Virgil`s Underworld. The glorious future of Rome is observed from the past, which is not to be forgotten, as it can be seen from the beginning of Anchises` speech, when only after the explanation of life`s meaning the reader can see the Roman warriors and the premature death of Marcellus.

**Keywords:** inferno, Hades, Augustanisation, memory, Shield of Anchises

### **Abstrait**

Cet article vise à offrir une image plus claire sur comment l`Enfer a été illustré et interprété par le poète le plus prolifique de l`Augustus : Publius Vergilius Maro. Les sujets qui seront discutés sont : la relation entre réalité et fiction dans le sixième livre de l`Énéide et le rôle de la mémoire dans la création de l`Enfer. Un autre sujet discuté est sur le rôle du diable dans la vie commune de la Rome antique, une société qui a imaginé un enfer dirigé par un seul dieu : Hadès, un type de souverain différant des autres dieux dans des cultures différentes. Dans son Enfer, le poète Augustus offre une image de

comme a été le grand Empire Romain et, plus important, comment il a voulu être vu devant la postérité. Les vertus principales promulguées par Augustus dans son Pax Romana peuvent être découvertes dans l'épopée nationale, mais ces idées changent-elles l'image de l'enfer ? Extrêmement intéressant est la manière dans laquelle les idées politiques sont combinés avec celles religieuses, et le Bouclier d'Anchise est l'un des meilleures exemples en ce qui concerne les idées d'Augustus qui sont découvertes dans l'Enfer de Virgil. L'avenir glorieux de Rome est observé dans la perspective du passé, qui ne sera pas oublié, comme il peut être observé dans le but du discours d'Anchise, quand, seulement après le sens de la vie est expliqué, le lecteur peut voir vraiment les guerriers romains et la mort prématurée de Marcellus.  
**Mots-clés** : enfer, Hadès, Augustanisation, mémoire, le bouclier d'Anchise.

## 1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to define the concept of evil and inferno, as it is depicted in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and to see and examine the role of memory in creating the past, the future and the underworld in the Augustan Rome. Dealing with three layers of hermeneutics: the mythological or the Homeric one, the moral one and the philosophical one, this paper seeks to offer a more clearly image of Virgil's world and underworld, due to the fact that one is constructed after the other. In his Inferno, the Augustan poet offers an image of how the great Roman Empire was, and more important, how it wanted to be seen in front of posterity.

## 2. The concept of evil and inferno in Vergil's *Aeneid*

The inferno depicted in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* and it shows the journey of Aeneas into the Underworld, a not so perilous journey after all, because he is watched and guided by Sibyl, and also because he has the blessing of the gods. At his arrival, the priestess offers him a prophecy that can be observed in its two parts: the prophecy itself and the fulfillment of it, for which the faith and the will of gods are responsible. The privilege to enter into the world of the dead is gained only by the special ones, the ones who can change something in the human world or have a special purpose, as we can see the cases of Orpheus, Heracles, Persephone and Aeneas. The descent to the underworld it's made by a hero, in this case by Aeneas, who has the benefit to meet again with his father, Anchises, in Elysian Fields, and to come back into the mundane world. The process of anabasis is not so important in the construction of the plot, in comparison with the katabasis, a more developed process which involves a lot more steps: the prayer, the prophecy, the acceptance of the gods, the burial of his friend, and the crossing of the infernal rivers.

## **2.1. Ruler of the Inferno and his reception**

The Roman god of the underworld, Hades (Pluto in the Roman mythology), has the role of a ruler in Ancient Roman world, but not an evil one. The chthonic god received the underworld after the battle against his father, in other words, he didn't chose this realm, it was destined to him. He is often depicted around three-headed dog Cerberus (some myths are saying that he had fifty), a monstrous guard dog generally invoked as 'the hound of Hades', who loved to eat fresh meat and kept living mortals from passing into the Underworld. The name of the underworld god has an uncertain origin, but the most resembling explanation is the one that puts in accord his characteristics and attributes to his name: 'The Unseen One'. One of the six original Olympians, Hades is a god who isn't so interested about what is happening outside of his realm, his only concern is keeping his territory unseen and undiscoverable by the human, therefore this realm is the one of mystery. Considering the mystery of an arcanum, this realm and its ruler are feared as much as they are respected. The respect comes from human's anxiety in front of the unseen or from the fear caused by the death. Everyone expects the death and is conscious that he will die sooner or later, but despite this knowledge, humans are a little bit afraid. In Ancient Rome, Hades wasn't so much depicted in tombs or temples, but when he was, he appeared displaying no pity and being cold. The lack of representations comes from the belief that it's bad luck to mention Hades' name or talk about his world, which people referred to as the Land of the Dead, the House of Hades or the Infernal Realm/Regions, belief that remained valid until Christianity and furthermore. On the ground of the fear, the Romans didn't want to call this god Hades, so they named him Pluto, name that means 'the rich one', attribute that comes from his relationship with Persephone (his goddess) who guards, along with her mother, the harvest, and maybe in tie with the reaches that are found under the ground. Excepting all this fears, anxiety, and merciless, the ruler of the Underworld was never associated with evil. The evil in the person who rules the Inferno comes with the era of Christianity, otherwise he was just a god responsible to rule over the world of dead and performing his duties accordingly. In Homer's inferno, the role of the judge is played by Minos, or in Virgil's inferno the judge is Rhadamanthys, the one who is administering justice in a rough way, by torturing the sinners. The place of darkness, punishment, and dismal, as we see it today through Christianity, is the Tartarus, the furthest place of the Underworld, feared by everyone, including the gods and goddesses.

## 2.2. The concept of Inferno

The term *Inferno* finds its etymology in classical Latin: *infernus*, *inferni*, noun that shows a lower part of something or someone, and also the Underworld. From this term we can observe that the ancient romans believed in the Hades` world as a world found in the layers of the earth, in comparison with other civilizations, like Ural-Altaiic populations or Aztecs, who believed that the souls of the dead people are going North, in a dark place, with no sun, or like the common belief in Ancient World that situates the realm of dead at the edge of the human world, near the ocean`s shoreline. Virgil accepts this belief and places the realm of dead underground, with the entrance at Cumae, the first Greek colony, at the lake Avernus, through which we can observe that aquatic elements are to be found in almost every culture when relating to the Inferno

``quando hic inferni ianua regis  
Dicitur et tenebrosa palus Acheronte refuso,  
Ire ad conspectum cari genitoris et ora  
Contingat; doceas iter et sacra ostia pandas.`` (Vergilius, 2009:163)

The realm of death, with its three parts: the proper Inferno, the Tartar and Elysian Fields, shows that Ancient Romans considered the Underworld as a stratified place, accordingly to the way of living, which consist in the common mass of population (the plebeians), the famous sinners and the ones that are good enough to come again into the realm of the living for accomplishing a political role, as we can see the persona of Augustus

``hic Caesar omnis Iuli  
Progenies magnum caeli uentura sub axem.  
Hic uir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis,  
Augustus Caesar, diui genus, aurea condet  
Saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arua``(Vergilius, 2009:191)

The need to continue a life beyond the tomb is part of the human condition, due to the fact that almost every person desires to never end its life. Creating an afterlife reveals the desideratum of the mundane life and its sins

``hic quos durus amo crudely tabe peredit  
Secreti celant calles et myrtea circum  
Silua tegit, curae non ipsa in morte relinquunt.`` (Vergilius, 2009:196)

## 3. Remembering the past and the future

The three times: past, present and future are united in the human life and in quotidian, as it is in Aeneas life. The future hero of Roman Empire must conceive a plan for the sake of his nation and his future. At his arrival at Cumae he voices a tension which he feels:

``iam tandem Italiae fugientis prendimus oras:  
hac Troiana tenus fuerit fortuna secuta.``(Vergilius, 2009:160)

After a long perilous journey to Italic shores, Aeneas acts hesitant, because he must evaluate and interpret how his past will determine and change his future. The most important matter, in this point of his life, is to figure out how he must act in present, in order to create a fortunate and prosperous future for him and his people. The role of the gods and religion it's crucial in his life as a result of the fact that he doesn't do anything without the god's acceptance and verification. Aeneas asks for permission to settle in Latium and the priestess, struggling with the god who possesses her, provides him a prophecy, a quit terrifying one:

``o tandem magnis pelagi defuncte periclis,  
sed terrae grauiora manen; in regna Lauini  
Dardanidae uenient (mitte hanc de pectore curam),  
sed non et uenisse uolent, bella, horrida bella,  
et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno.  
non Simois tibi nec Xanthus nec Dorica castra  
defuerint alius Latio iam partus Achilles,  
natus et ipse dea; nec Teucris addita Iuno  
usquam aberit, cum tu supplex in rebus egenis  
quas gentis Italum aut quas non oraueris urbis!  
causa mali tanti coniunx iterum hospita Teucris  
externique iterum thalami.  
tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito  
qua tua te Fortuna sinet. uia prima salutis,  
quod minime reris, Graia pandetur ab urbe.`` (Vergilius, 2009:160)

This piety of Aeneas it's never found in the Greek world, which *Aeneid* was accused to emulate and it clearly shows that this Latin poem is an expression of the Roman world, but besides this matter, we can witness in here a more meaningful fact: the future of the Trojans in Latium, figured as a mirror and as a reiteration of their past (Aaron M. Seider, 2013:32). The issue of repetition illustrates the problem of time, in its universality and everlastingness. In the same manner with the Greek Achilles, the priestess of Apollo uses the memory of the Trojan war to create a new foe after a forebear one, also born from a goddess. The repetition is also used on the concern of the feminine figures who root a conflict, as it is the situation of Lavinia (named *as causa mali tanti*), the prior fiancée of Turnus and the future wife of Aeneas, related here to Helen of Troy. Likewise Lavinia, Dido is another figure of Helen, bringing the past into the present and future of Aeneas. The prophecy ends with an ambiguous verse saying that a Greek city will bring amenity, although this may seem implausible for the Trojans. In the eighth book of the *Aeneid* it's divulged that the place which Sibyl was talking about is Pallantium, the city of Euander, an idea which would seem

incredible to Aeneas, because he cannot imagine that it's possible to get help from the Trojans. Virgil brings the concern of memory in history and into everyday life. In its absence, life wouldn't have relevance and consistency, as history wouldn't matter to the future and all the atrocious and wonderful things that helped (or not) the world aren't kept as a mirror of humanity. In this particular case, memory plays the role of the mirror which reflects a magnificent empire and an eternal city. Even though the past will depict de future, it is only a sketch of it, by the cause of its accommodation to the new times and people, in other worlds: a future world, similar to the past, but also different in its way. The different aspect it's the element of surprise that helps the world not to be a completely prophecy.

Through the prophecy of the Apollo's priestess, Aeneas discovers that the future lies in the past, but also he must forget a part of it in order to progress. This problem can be seen as a philosophical matter concerning the time and also the history of a nation. The philosophical layer of the hermeneutics shows in here that the sixth book of the *Aeneid* has a lot of intertextual meanings.

### **3.1. Reincarnation. *Anima mundi***

The memory plays an essential role into the cycle of reincarnation and into the mechanism of anabasis and katabasis. Memory is crucial when the idea of an external world it's putted into discussion, an underworld who has the role of punishing isn't possible without memory. The Inferno, with all its parts: the main part of the Underworld (the common folk), the Tartarus which held the evildoers, and the Elysian Fields, would not be viable in the absence of the memory, which permits the perception of guilt or more than this, the consciousness of sin. If the soul remembers the past, he is well-aware of its mistakes and its religion rigor, and it can also be conscious of its punishment or its reward.

After a person is dead he is incinerated or buried. A person who hasn't received a burial place is destined to live between words, not entering into the Underworld. As it is the case of Aeneas friend, Palinurus, who hasn't got a proper tomb and burial and blocks Aeneas entering into Hades

``praeterea iacet exanimus tibi corpus amici  
(hec nescis) totamque incestat funere classem,  
Dum consulta petis nostroque in limine pendes`` (Vergilius, 2009:165)

For entering, he must build a cenotaph, an empty tomb, to fulfill a religious aspect of Roman funeral practice. These practices demonstrate the essential relation between the body and the soul, because without someone to remember and protect the memory of a dead person and his soul, he will be

forgotten and he will haunt and harass the living family. This presumption demonstrates the importance of a person's remembrance and the role of religion in Augustan world. The rituals regarding the remembrance of the dead are reflected in Lemuria, a festival held in honor of the dead, which showed mostly how someone died, not how he will be rewarded after dead. During this festival, the family gave food and water to the dead, after an Etruscan tradition, concerning more about the body, not the soul, reflecting the pragmatism of the Roman society.

In analogy with the active memory, we can examine the role of the forgetfulness, which appears in the moment of anabasis. The return of Aeneas is conditioned by some key actions, as it is the drinking from the river Lethe, the infernal river of forgetfulness and oblivion. From this river are also drinking the souls that are meant to be incarnated again, a subject that may seem strange to the hero, because he asks his father why these people have the desire to live once more on the Earth.

``o pater, anne aliquas ad caelum hinc ire putandum est  
Sublimis animas iterumque ad tarda reuerti  
Corpora? Quae lucis miseris tam dira cupido?`` (Vergilius, 2009:188)

Question which may insinuate a mistrust, a hint of his own sufferings, that isn't proper for a hero of the Ancient world, but it may be, perhaps, a contemplation of Virgil, due to the fact that the souls who are returning to life aren't completely purified, therefore they are completing a cycle in order to remain into the fields of happiness.

The possibility of reincarnation is a poetic synthesis of the Stoic doctrine of the *anima mundi* with Platonic and Orphic-Pythagorean influences. A soul may proceed to Elysium after it freed from the body and it is cleansed. In this final point of the hero's journey, he can see two groups of souls, each group representing a special sort of souls: one is the group of souls who is meant to be reincarnated and one group of souls that are remaining for eternity in this ethereal state, as it is the case of Anchises, a purified soul, which mustn't be born again to gain the purity. In this point we can see that ``*Elysium is now transformed from the ultimate paradise into a resting-stage on the soul's journeying far beyond it*`` (Austin, 1977:220). The forgetfulness is also encountered in Plato's *Myth of Er*, where is necessary for the souls to drink from the River of Forgetfulness, but they must drink a certain amount of water in order not to forget everything, otherwise a punish wouldn't be needed and understood. Lincoln B., in *Waters of Memory, Waters of forgetfulness* (1982, 21-4), states that a similar belief is detected in Italy, at Petelia, in a grave from the fourth or third century BCE. The inscription found in this tomb indicates, in an instructional

way, that a soul may be capable to retain memories after passing away, therefore, we can identify a common belief with the Greeks, which is not found in Virgil's poem, where a chance to remember something from the previous life in the cycle of reincarnation, isn't viable: a drink from the River Lethe is enough for the soul to forget everything:

``has omnis, ubi mille rotam uoluere per annos,  
Lethaeum ad fluuium deus euocat agmine magno  
Scilicet immemores supera ut conuexa reuisant  
Rursus et incipient in corpora uelle reuerti````o pater, anne aliquas ad  
caelum hinc ire putandum est  
Sublimis animas iterumque ad tarda reuerti  
Corpora? Quae lucis miseris tam dira cupido?`` (Vergilius, 2009:190)

### **3.2. The reality from the realm of dead**

Structurally, the passage regarding the Elysium Fields and its River Lethe has the function to put in front the great personalities of Rome, whom Aeneas reviews in a prophetic way. This parade displays the Roman History as it is destined to be. Anchises' speech is more 'politically correct' than 'religiously correct', because the purpose of his speech is to show a patriotic view of history and also an ideational image of the first Rome's emperor: Octavianus Augustus. The authoritarianism was, until 23 BC, not so plenary, as we can see in the case of Caesar or even in Sulla's dictatorship. The new emperor managed to gather senatorial and military authority, and even the command of commercial sector, becoming in this way a new role model for the future empires. Anchises prophesies to Aeneas that the son's mission is to start creating a world that will be the reestablishment of Saturnian Age, a first Golden Age to which the Romans will return, an allusion to the social and moral reforms, and it's almost evident that the reestablishment of this Golden Age is happening due to Octavianus Augustus:

``Augustus Caesar, diui genus, aurea condet  
Saecula qui rursus Latia regnata per arua  
Saturno quondam, super et Garamantes et Indos  
Proferet imperium`` (Vergilius, 2009:191).

Augustus developed a religious policy, he himself believed that in his divine ancestry, even his birth was covered in myths and legends. The celebration of his birthday and his prosperity developed into an imposing and costly celebration (feriae): Augustalia, inaugurated on October 12, 19 BC. It may represent a desire to restore the old religious values, but on what grounds? He grew up in a religious family, but the new *principe* seems to understand the key role of an unitary and private religion. Morality, cult and



trepida ostia Nilii (Vergilius, 2009:191), an allusion to the conquer of Egypt, occurred in 31 BC. The image of Pax Romana, which lasted until 180, AD when Marcus Aurelius died, was well described by Virgil, comparing the emperor's image with the one of Bacchus and with Hercules works, both being considered benefactors of mankind, as Augustus tried to be, in comparison with Lucretius point of view: "Herculis antistare autem si facta/putabis, longius a vera multo ratione ferere" (Lucretius, 1975:380).

The Homeric Shield has, indeed, some common points with Anchises' speech, it may be a model for a general outline, but every speech has its one particularities. In Homer's verses we can observe a microcosm of civilization, of Greek life, where two cities are in an alternation of peace and war, in comparison with Virgil's verses, where peace and war are to be found in one glorious and eternal city: Rome. In Cicero's *Republic* we can see another shield, a new cosmology created after the *Myth of Er*, a piece of work that reveals the relationship between the cosmology-philosophy-and history. The Speech of Anchises begins from the nature of things and passes through the history of Rome, showing how it evolves and Aeneas interest on memory and his roots. Philip R. Hardie observes that the interest of Virgil on the cosmological origins can be a link to "the Alexandrian taste for aetiological poetry; the *Aeneid* is indeed a poem of foundation, a *ktisis*" (Philip R. Hardie, 1986:68).

Due to the fact that the world of dead mirrors the world of living people, we can observe the role of the Underworld in the construction of *Aeneid*'s plot. Virgil was often blamed for his empathy with Augustus and his way of ruling, and a question arises: Is he the poet or the prophet of Augustus? By creating this poem, Virgil wanted to show how great Pax Romana was and how magnificent was, is and will always be the Roman Empire? Virgil's oeuvre is ideologically complete, but this fact doesn't transform it in an invaluable work, even though it's possible that the poet cut some troubling passages. The underworld of Virgil doesn't draw conclusions, it simply demonstrates a fact: the birth and the rise of an empire, of which Cybele is so proud "laeta deum partu, centum complexa nepotes,/ omnis caelicolas" (Vergilius, 2009:191), the greatest one: the Roman Empire, as we can see in the statement of Richard F. Thomas:

"Virgil lays out the world as it functions, gives us a glimpse of how it might have functioned differently, and leaves his demonstration without gnomic epigram, but rather susceptible to interpretation. The reader time and again is left to supply the epigram, and there are frequently more than one from which to choose". (Richard F. Thomas, 2004: XIX)

Augustus' Empire has its own limitation, because at the end of Anchises' speech we can identify a note of despair, caused by the fact that in

spite of all the Roman virtues, triumphs and grandeur, the entire world lies in the hands and will of the gods, which are consistently reminding us of our mortal condition. Anchises has a pitiful reaction, crying in front of his son, showing him (*Aeneid*, Book 6; verses 867-892) that anything is perfect.

When anabasis is happening, Aeneas is born again, in a metaphorical way, in a new chapter of his life, by the reason of keeping his memory after the exit from the Underworld, which isn't possible for someone who entered into the realm of Pluto. The following book, the seventh, describes what Aeneas had thought in the Underworld and how he can use his memory in exchange for a new nation, a nation which remembers the past, but keeps an active present ``*Coming at a crucial juncture in the Trojan quest, Aeneas` reaction to Ascanius` remark reconstructs the Trojan`s history with an eye toward the present and, specifically, toward blessing their city`s foundation with a propitious atmosphere``* (Aaron M. Seider, 2013:41).

#### 4. Conclusion

The hermeneutic circle of Virgil's *Inferno* isn't closed, and he is evidenced by its many purposes: the mythological purpose, the philosophical one, and the philological one. The aim of Virgil's depiction of *inferno* is after all a *dictum*. It represents the history of Roman Empire with all its limitation, the role of memory, the importance of religious doctrine, and the almighty power of gods, who are determining human's destiny.

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