THE STRUCTURE OF THE SIXTH BOOK OF THE AENEID[1]

The Sixth Book of the *Aeneid* represents the climax of Vergil's ambition. From his schoolboy days when he devoted the central part of his *Culex*[2] to a description of the underworld; through the early prime of his poetry when three times over in the *Georgics* he turned eagerly to and reluctantly away from the theme, not without leaving the immortal story of Orpheus and Eurydice to be preserved in a place not its own; to the full maturity of his power in the *Aeneid* where he cannot exclude it even from the pictures upon the shield of Aeneas,—the subject haunted his imagination and claimed a place in his deepest thought. And in the greatest of all the Books of the *Aeneid*, which, as Mr Mackail has pointed out, reaches out before and after its own province, summing up and linking together the whole Epic in a way attempted in no other part of it, we have the ripest fruit of his genius. If there is any part of Vergil's writing in which we can be sure, despite his own last request, that we have his work elaborated to the farthest degree which the poet's life was long enough to permit, it is the Sixth

[1] This paper is based on a lecture delivered at the Rylands Library, December 11, 1912. Professor Ridgeway's brilliant service to the interpretation of Classical literature is a part of the great debt which this volume is written to acknowledge.

[2] For a demonstration of the authenticity of this poem from internal evidence, see Miss S. E. Jackson's paper, *Class. Quarterly* (1911), p. 163; the concordant voice of numerous and competent external witnesses is lucidly analysed in *Class. Rev.* XXII. (1908), p. 72, by Mr J. W. Mackail. To him, to Mr Warde Fowler and to Prof. W. B. Anderson I am indebted for valuable criticism.

Book of the *Aeneid*—the last of the three which we know[1] he read to the Emperor.

Of the reasons for which the Book was placed where it stands in the poem, two may be mentioned. The first has been pointed out more than once in recent years; namely, that the sanctity of the process of enlightenment which Aeneas is called to pass through lifts the succeeding half of the story to a higher plane; and, in particular, prepares the reader for a higher note of magnanimity and gentleness in the hero Aeneas himself[2]. The second reason has probably been felt by many readers of the *Odyssey* who have compared its ending with that of Vergil's epic. It is true that we could ill spare the mutual *ἀναγνώρισις* of Odysseus and Laertes in the twenty-fourth Book; but it will hardly be contended that the rest of the Book, or even that this charming picture itself, does not appear rather as an anti-climax in the story after the slaying of the suitors. Perhaps it would be truer to say that the end of the Homeric Epic is essentially undramatic, just because it was essential to the story to make the home-coming complete in some of its more tender and simple details. Vergil's Epic which was to foretell the foundation of a world-wide Empire, and the mission of Rome in the life of mankind, must, in point of time, reach out beyond the mere settlement of Aeneas in Italy. But in order to avoid this non-dramatic conclusion Vergil placed his forward-reaching chapter not at the end but in the centre of his poem; so that the story of the Epic itself ends with a climax second to none in tragic poetry—the death in single combat of the last opponent of the whole providential design.

This cardinal importance of the Sixth Book has been realised by modern scholars. Professor Norden's monu-

[1] Suet. *Vit.* 31.

[2] Contrast for instance his impulse to slay Helen (*Aen.* II. 575) with the defensive attitude of his fighting in Book X. ll. 310—360 (up to the point at which the death of Pallas rouses in him the blind rage of battle); or with his impulse to spare Turnus (XII. 940). [But did Vergil mean to keep the Helen passage? J. W. M.]

mental edition of the Book might alone stand as evidence of this recognition even in a country where, by some strange freak of local sentiment, the reverence which Goethe, Schiller and Lessing felt for Vergil was succeeded by a period of comparative neglect[1]. He would be a bold man who should hope to add much to the stores of illustration or to the judicial lucidity of the historical and philosophical interpretation which Norden's great commentary offers. Yet there still remain, I believe, some points of view, not all of them confined to details, from which fresh light may be gained for a study of the Book as a poem, and a poem complete in itself. Upon the genesis of this poem in its present shape, and on the historical, traditional, local, in a word, the external reasons which probably led Vergil to include all the various incidents in his plot, Norden's collection of evidence is invaluable; and no interpretation can be adequate which fails to take account of such considerations. Vergil worked like a goldsmith, picking his precious metals and jewels from a thousand different sources and shaping his design with the knowledge of many earlier designs before him. And yet the master-inspiration, the guiding creative spirit of his craft, was something greater than all his material. Some of us at least are convinced that in such a book as this, there is no single point which is not directly related to Vergil's central purpose; which was not somehow a channel for currents that flowed from the deepest springs of his poetry.

It is difficult to dispense with these somewhat abstract statements as a preface to the considerations for which this paper is intended to plead. But the truth of any particular contention will, I hope, be measured by the reader according to the degree in which it may appear to make the particular passages under discussion more intelli-

[1] This neglect is now happily over. Heinze has earned the gratitude of all students of Vergil by his sympathetic exposition of *Vergils Epische Technik*; and the research of the late Professor Skutsch (*Aus Vergils Frühzeit*) has opened a new chapter in the history of Latin poetry.

gible, more significant, more like what lovers of Vergil know him to have been, however roughly their conception of the poet's feeling may be put into words. One safe method of estimating what Vergil most keenly wished to convey is also a simple one; namely, to glance at the earlier history of the conceptions with which he dealt.

The pictures of the After-world in Homer and Plato stand out from the mass of earlier imaginings. They represent very well, as Norden (p. 5) has pointed out, the two mainly independent and partly competing theories or accounts current in antiquity, which may be called, one the Mythological, and the other that of the Philosophers or Theologians.

The Νέκυια of the *Odyssey* is constructed in a very simple way. When the hero comes 'to the limits of the world, the deep flowing stream of ocean, where was the land and city of the Cimmerians, shrouded in mist and cloud' (that is, of course, the Northern seas, as reflected in the stories of early sailors) he and his crew hold their way along the stream 'until they came to a waste shore, and the groves of Persephone, tall poplar trees and willows that shed their fruit before the season.' Then beside a rock which is the meeting-place of the two infernal rivers, Acheron and Cocytus, Odysseus dug a trench, a cubit long and broad, and poured into it the proper drink offerings 'to all the dead,' beseeching their 'strengthless heads' that they would rise and speak to him; then the sheep are sacrificed and the dark blood flows forth into the trench. Many spirits he sees, 'of brides and youths unwed, of old men who had seen many evil days, and of tender maidens with grief yet fresh at heart; and many there were that had been slain in fight with their bloody mail about them.' First of all the spirits came Elpenor, who had fallen from the upper floor of Circe's house, missing the 'long ladder' in the blindness brought on him by draughts of her wine, and whose body had been left unburied when Odysseus and his comrades sailed away.

Odysseus promises him due burial, but he kept both him and all the other spirits back from the trench, where they longed to drink the blood, until the spirit of the Theban prophet Teiresias came to give him the counsel he was in need of.

Then follows a long series of conversations with a succession of shades; first the hero's mother; then a string of Fair Women with pretty Theban names, Tyro, Antiope, Alcmene, Epicaste, Chloris, Maira, Clymene, Eriphyle, and the rest; and then Agamemnon and Achilles with his famous reply to words of courtly comfort: 'Nay, speak not comfortably to me of death, great Odysseus. Rather would I live on ground as the hireling of another, with a landless man who hath no great livelihood, than bear sway among all the dead that be departed.' Odysseus, however, gives him news of his son's prowess, and Achilles 'departs with great strides, along the mead of asphodel rejoicing.' Next Odysseus sees his old rival Ajax, the son of Telamon, who refuses to answer, remembering still his grudge. There this particular lay must once have ended, and even within this section it is clear that at least the catalogue of the ghosts of Fair Women did not belong to the earliest form of the story. There follows at the end of the book an interesting passage which gives us a series, no longer of interviews, but of mere portraits—introduced quite baldly by the formula 'and then I saw there';—King Minos giving judgment; 'Orion driving the wild beasts together over the mead, the very beasts that himself had slain on the lonely hills'; then of the various criminals undergoing punishment (Tityos, Tantalus, and Sisyphus); and finally, a curious interview with the ghost of Heracles who, however, we are warned, is not Heracles himself, because Heracles himself is living with the gods.

Even therefore in the longest form of the story we have no real descent into any world of the dead; only a series of separate pictures which somehow or other Odysseus was supposed to have seen as he stood by his

trench. On this very ground Aristarchus[1] rejected the passage, asking 'How could Odysseus see these or the others who were all within the gates of Hades?' And it is clear that the earliest version contained nothing but the summoning by magical means of certain ghosts in order to hold converse with him. There is no theory here beyond the very simplest belief in the possibility of visions of the dead. There is no picture of the After-world as a whole, and there is hardly a hint of any part of the future in which happiness could be conceived; not even in the work of the latest poet who may have helped to fashion this book. To him as to his predecessors, if a soul were in Hades at all, it was either being grievously tormented, or mourning its death, or at best pursuing in darkness some phantom counterpart of the life it had lost.

Let us now consider briefly the nature of the After-world offered to us by the Platonic myths, especially by that of the *Republic*. Socrates is represented as ending the long conversation on justice and the nature of the universe, by repeating a story told by a brave man, a native of Pamphylia, who fell in battle and was taken up for burial. Twelve days after the battle, as he lay on his funeral pyre, he came to life again; and we notice that although what follows is called a 'story' (μῦθος) at the beginning and once at the end, there is none of the rather anxious disclaiming of literal intention which is made in the other well-known myth also put into the mouth of Socrates in the *Phaedo*. And however special students of Plato may describe the general purpose of the Platonic myths, no one, I think, can read the long and spirited narrative of this Pamphylian, Er, the son of Armenius, without feeling that Plato meant something by it, and meant it earnestly.

Let us follow then the story of Er. When his soul had gone out of his body, it travelled with many others till they came to a spot of earth on which there were two

[1] Schol. on *Od.* xi. 568, quoted by Norden, p. 196, footnote.

great gaps or openings in the surface, and opposite to these two other openings in heaven. In front sat judges[1] who passed sentence on each soul as it appeared. The just souls had their sentence pinned upon their breasts and were commanded to ascend into the opening which led heavenwards. The unjust souls were told to turn to the left and find the opening that led into earth. Now while some souls were entering these openings, others were coming out of the second mouth of each pair, returning respectively from Heaven or Hell. The souls that arrived out of the heavenly exit were pure and bright; those that ascended from the earthly were squalid and dusty. As they arrived at the spot they went off and took up quarters in a certain meadow hard by, just as folk would for a fair. They greeted those in the throng whom they knew and questioned one another about what had happened to them in their several journeys, each journey having lasted a thousand years. The folk who came from below told of dreadful things they had seen and suffered; the other folk spoke of sights of beauty and joy. Every good deed and every evil deed in their previous earthly life had been requited ten times over. Punishment for impiety, for disobedience to parents, and for violence to near relatives was especially severe. Questions were asked about the fate of a certain Ardiaeus the Great, who had been sovereign in a city of Pamphylia a thousand years before, and who had committed abominable crimes. He and others like him, when they came at last to the exit from their journey of punishment, were repulsed by the Gate itself, which uttered a loud bellowing whenever any one of such incurable sinners tried to pass through it; and thereupon certain 'fierce and fiery' men, who understood the meaning of the sound, seized them by the waist and carried them off. In regard to infants whose death followed close upon

[1] In the *Gorgias* (524 A) the three judges are Rhadamanthus (for Asia), Aeacus (for Europe), and Minos, the referee in hard cases, who alone (526 D) has a golden sceptre.

their birth, the Pamphylian gave some particulars 'which' says Plato, rather grimly, 'need not be recorded.'

But what became of the souls after they had reached the meadow? By long and strange astronomical paths they are brought before the three Fates, and from their laps receive lots, the numbers of which determine the order in which they, the souls, shall each make choice of a plan for his next mortal life. They are then brought before a great multitude of such plans, spread out upon the ground; these include every variety of human and animal fortune, health and disease, wealth and poverty, distinction and obscurity, and various combinations. The souls are warned to choose carefully, and told that even the lastcomer will find a great variety of choice. The soul of Orpheus chose the life of a swan, the soul of Ajax chose the life of a lion. On the contrary, the souls of swans and other music-making creatures chose lives of men. The soul of Odysseus, which happened to have drawn the last lot of all, went about for a long time looking for a quiet retired life, and with great trouble he found one which had been thrown aside by the other souls with contempt. Forthwith he chose it gladly, and said he would have done the same if he had had the first lot. After their choosing, the souls are driven into the Plain of Forgetfulness and drink of the river of Not-caring. Everyone must drink a certain quantity of the water, but the foolish drink more, and when they re-appear upon earth, have completely lost all recollection of their previous existence: whereas the wise still retain some fragments of the memory. The Pamphylian himself was prevented from drinking any of the water, and he knew not by what road he reached his body again.

In the myth of the *Phaedrus* (248 E—249 A) we learn that the ordinary soul goes through ten of these millennial terms and is re-incarnated ten times over. If its progress through this somewhat prolonged course of education is at all satisfactory, at the end of each term it will choose

on the whole a better life for next time; and any soul which is so wise as to choose the life of a true philosopher three terms running need never return to earth at all; the rest, unless they are incurably bad, will complete ten periods, and by the end will have probably advanced far enough to pass their final examination and be so released from any necessity of re-entering the body.

Now this elaborate scheme, developed doubtless by more than one[1] popular form of religious teaching, and used by Plato, though it has obvious lacunae, is far removed from the crudity and ethical insignificance of the Mythological account from which we started. It is noteworthy that Plato does not venture to insert any traditional or historical figures into his picture save Ardiaeus, a typical criminal, and Odysseus the typical Greek hero. Conspicuous also is its mathematical bias, and the keen interest and long labour which Plato bestowed on constructing his astronomical and arithmetical mansions for the soul.

The general colour then of Plato's picture is one of considerable confidence. There is indeed a prudent elasticity about the structure of the story of Er which provides for a variety of cases; but there is no hint (except the curious dismissal of the infants) that the author of the conception felt any grave doubt about its substantial appropriateness to represent a reasonable conception of a future life.

Now what is the effect of this upon the mind of the reader? We feel we have before us a fairly definite and consistent theory, sharply conceived, and challenging enquiry by its very definiteness; and one need not doubt that this was precisely what Plato intended. In a word, Plato's Myths may instruct us and must set us thinking; but I doubt if it ever occurred to any reader to believe them. It is, in fact, the great difficulty in all such writing to find any means whereby the assent of the reader's fancy

[1] See the valuable collection of authorities given by Norden (p. 19 ff.).

to the truth of what he is reading may be secured, even for an hour. The human imagination is a shy creature; it may be led, but it will not be directed; and one of the surest ways in which to prevent a reader from attaching credence to any doctrine of things unseen is for the author of the doctrine to assert it with a show of dogmatic conviction. Which of us in reading the opening of *Paradise Lost*—if I may venture upon a familiar illustration—has not felt repelled by the profession which ends its preface:

> 'That to the height of this great argument,
> I may assert Eternal Providence,
> And justify the ways of God to men'?

Surely the baldness of that pattering line, in which eight colourless words tick off five very dull feet, is somehow connected with the dogmatic confidence[1] of the temper which suggested it? We all know how Milton's genius soared beyond the limits of his theology; how his imagination was concentrated on the figure of Satan, who thus became in reality the hero of the whole tragedy. But this is at the expense of Milton's own prime intention; in so far as Satan arouses our sympathy, in precisely that proportion 'the ways of God' are not 'justified.'

Now what does Vergil do? What is the secret of the fascination which the After-world of the *Aeneid* has laid upon Europe for so many centuries? I believe that part, at least, of the answer is this; that in spite of the vividness with which particular scenes and figures are pictured, Vergil does succeed all through the story in impressing upon the reader a quite intense consciousness, almost a physical sensation, of mystery. He knows in part and that part he prophesies with golden clearness; but he makes us everywhere conscious of darkness beyond and around. The poet, in fact, comes nearer home to us by

[1] Compare Professor Raleigh's *Milton*, p. 126. It is true, however, as Mr Mackail reminds me, that the easy cadence is proper to the close of a great metrical period; and it may be that in Milton's generation a touch of fire would be felt in the line from its relation to great religious struggles not yet outworn.