

Cavernous Spaces in Plato and Virgil

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In book 7 of *The Republic*, Plato tackles epistemology with his Allegory of the Cave. According to Plato, a philosopher achieves enlightenment by freeing himself from the illusions of the natural world in order to encounter the true Forms. Virgil, on the other hand, does not address epistemology directly, but his imagery in book 6 of *The Aeneid* seems to answer Plato's cave with the idea that cavernous spaces are not loci of epistemological confinement but rather spaces that signal and uncover deeper meaning. Both Plato's enlightenment and Virgil's attainment of deeper meaning involve knowledge, and the processes involved in attaining each seem to oppose each other. However, Virgil's cave, while not standing in direct opposition to Plato's Cave Allegory, provides a rhetorical contrast by taking concepts such as shadows, falsehoods, and madness beyond the realm of philosophy and demonstrating them at work in an epic.

When Anchises explains the river Lethe to Aeneas in the underworld, Aeneas asks,

Must we imagine,
Father, there are souls that go from here
Aloft to upper heaven, and once more
Return to bodies' dead weight? The poor souls,
How can they crave our daylight so? (Virgil 6.965–
69)

As Mark G. Shiffman notes, Aeneas's questioning of the return of the soul to the body "has no precedent in epic literature; but it might remind us of Glaucon's objection against forcing the blessed philosophers to return to the cave to govern" (4). Interestingly, Virgil uses the language of Plato in his description of the human body. His expression "dead weight" echoes Plato's phrasing: "But suppose ... that such natures were cut loose ... from all the *dead weights*

natural to this world of change” (246; emphasis added). While Plato describes earthly desires as the weights that pull the body downward (κάτω), Virgil emphasizes the slowing effect of the return to a physical body (*tarda reuerti corpora*). For Plato, only upon ascending to “the highest form of knowledge” (246), which includes encountering the Forms, does enlightenment occur. This complex allegory, however, Glaucon calls “an odd picture and an odd sort of prisoner” (241). T.F. Morris is apt to ask, “why did Plato need the fire at all? Why couldn’t the puppeteers just hold the puppets up before sunlight?” (429). Like Virgil’s ivory gate, many aspects of Plato’s allegory have undergone one interpretation after another. While Plato at one point describes earthly desires as what binds the prisoners in the cave, R.K. Elliott interprets this binding as a limitation to opinion: “The state of the bound prisoners is *doxa* [“glory”], and the shadows on the wall of the cave include justice, beauty, and good as these appear to those who identify the universal with the things which ... appear to sense” (148). However, as Morris puts it, “The cave represents the idea that we are trapped inside our minds, mistakenly thinking that we are directly dealing with external realities when we are dealing merely with internal images” (430). For Morris, it is still the “mental image that participates in the Form” (423). Elliott sees the return to the cave as a necessary step in acquiring philosophic discernment: “Only those who have returned to the cave after having beheld the things themselves and the Sun in the upper world can discern which particular things are truly beautiful, just and good” (154). Either way, this process is a slow one, requiring sequential gradations into the realm of the intelligible as the prisoner can look at brighter and brighter things. Plato explains how this occurs, but he explains why it must occur this way no more clearly than Anchises explains the reason for reincarnation.

In Plato’s case, the shadows appear as imperfect dilutions

of the Forms and, while they represent the passers-by coming and going in the light, they have very little sway on the physical world, save to deceive the prisoners and make them take the shadows for reality. The shadows in Virgil's underworld similarly lack substantiality. Before encountering any of the dead, monstrous abstractions such as Death, Hunger, War, and Discord visit Aeneas first. Virgil says that if the Sibyl had not told Aeneas how harmless these "empty images / Hovering bodiless" were, he would have tried to "cut his way through phantoms, empty air" (6.400–02). This insubstantiality repeats itself with Dido's descent into insanity over her love for Aeneas, her "consummation" with a false Aeneas (i.e. their false marriage in a cave, as well as her bedding with his effigy), and her reunion with her "true" love Sychaeus after death (4.226–65, 4.701–02, 6.636–37).

Although Virgil's cave houses shapes that are as ineffectual as the shadows in Plato's cave, both spaces allow unnatural knowledge to be discovered. Moreover, if Plato's cave defines the divide between the worlds of becoming and being, Virgil's cave demonstrates the in-between states of being. The Sibyl inhabits a cavern, which Pounch Saeedi says "projects the image of a tabooed territory which hardly any mortal would dare to penetrate" (3). The golden bough represents a juxtaposition of the unnatural with the natural. Although it is enclosed by "[a] tree's deep shade" (Virgil 6.200) and sheltered within "[t]he whole grove" (6.203) this bough stands as an anomaly in an otherwise natural, albeit hidden, setting. Picking this bough will cause another to grow to replace it, but "It will come willingly, / Easily, if you [Aeneas] are called by fate" (6.214–15). Aeneas's ability to subvert natural order and enter the underworld without the usual prerequisite of dying depends upon divine approval and a subversion of natural order. Even after Aeneas enters the underworld, the boatman refuses to ferry him across the River Styx

until the Sibyl presents him with the golden bough. In the underworld, Aeneas meets many people with whom speaking would usually be impossible, and his meetings with both Anchises and Tiresias reveal knowledge of the future usually unavailable to people.

However, to read Virgil's cave as a direct opposition to Plato's cave would be equivocal. Although the discovery of unnatural knowledge occurs in caves, its effect is not entirely beneficial. Aeneas is reduced to tears when he encounters Dido and discovers truth in the rumours surrounding her death. Another figure that appears in book 7 is Allecto, who, like the Sibyl, resides in a cavernous space in the underworld, and "Even her father Pluto hates this figure, [Allecto] / Even her hellish sisters [hate her]" (Virgil 7.447–48). They hate Allecto "for her savage looks" and monstrous appearance (7.449); however, the underlying reasons may entail more than this. While Shiffman defines the Virgilian underworld as the place that "stands halfway between the unmitigated gloom of Homer and the pure Socratic guidelines" (2), Saeedi cites the monsters that, for Shiffman, "test the nerve of Aeneas" as the in-between, or "liminal" figures, on which she focuses (2). She tracks its occurrence especially in creation stories throughout history and, for Saeedi, it is the monsters' "hybridity" that constitutes monstrosity (5). Virgil also describes Allecto as "Grief's dear mistress, with her lust for war, / For angers, ambushes, and crippling crimes" (7.445–46). Along with an appetite for warfare, madness is Allecto's *modus operandi* as she drives Amata insane. Perhaps even Pluto fears her because she seems to represent the taboo or unsavoury aspects of humanity; her belligerence and madness characterize her as a "betwixt and between" figure who operates outside of human norms (Saeedi 5). A similar characteristic can be observed in Homer's Polyphemus, a character who transgresses the concept of *xenia*, or hospitality. Both characters reside in caves that are located away from human con-

tact. Both characters retain human characteristics, though perhaps Polyphemus does so more than Allecto as they are both linked by aggressive, savage, or even primal aspects that mark them as defiant of human norms. Juno's contact with Allecto and Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus are both unnatural events; Juno's case especially constitutes a divine meddling in mortal affairs. Moreover, along with Dido's love for Aeneas, Allecto's madness recurs with the false and ephemeral as distinguishing characteristics of Virgil's observable world.

For Plato, although he describes the process of enlightenment and subsequent return to the cave as necessary components of his ideal society, this is not a much more pleasant process than Aeneas's descent into the underworld. He admits "all these actions would be painful" as the prisoner gradually adjusts to the light, and that he would "be likely to make a fool of himself" upon returning to the cave (242–43). This admission indicates an in-between state of being and a perspective straddling the world of being and the world of becoming for his philosopher-kings, a life he would force upon them. When Glaucon objects to its unfairness because this process would compel the prisoners "to live a poorer life than they might live" (246), Socrates answers, "The object of our legislation ... is not the special welfare of any particular class in our society, but the society as a whole" (246–47). In other words, the general good of the society takes precedence over the comfort of the philosopher-kings. Anchises, likewise, turns Aeneas's focus from the individual to the collective, answering his question of how souls can even desire a return to a physical body with a seemingly non sequitur lecture on the mechanics of the universe, followed by an auspicious glance at the future souls of Rome. Anchises explains that after the process of purgation and purification, souls simply desire a new body after time. Although the explanation of why they would desire a new body

is scant, it is important to note that Aeneas himself asks not why, but how the souls can “crave daylight” (6.969). Moreover, this process, as Shiffman notes, clearly evokes the Myth of Er and “convey[s] a reassuring sense of order missing in Homer,” mainly through the notion of an ironic underworld (2); Anchises himself admits, “We suffer each his own shade” (Virgil 6.999). This process, although inexplicable, demonstrates a cyclicity and order in Virgil’s world.

Anchises then moves on to an auspicious glance at the future souls of Rome. This scene does more than pay lip service to Caesar Augustus: by juxtaposing death, the universe, and Rome’s descendants in the same space of thought, Virgil ironically demonstrates order—an order that occupies the same space as primal chaos, monsters, and terrifying but ephemeral shapes. Another strand running through *The Aeneid* is filial piety, and Virgil often attaches to Aeneas the epithet “pius Aeneas” (1.410). Unlike Odysseus, who consults the dead for advice on returning to Ithaca, Aeneas descends into the underworld because Anchises’s “sad ghost” beckons him “to the threshold of this place” (6.933–34). If a sense of familial duty rather than some ulterior motive compels Aeneas into the underworld, it would follow that a sense of Roman order and law lies at the heart of this encounter. By showing Aeneas his future and the future of Rome, Anchises—and by extension, Virgil—seems to promote these values, if not at least explicate their significance in a founding myth of Rome.

At the end of his trip to the underworld, Aeneas leaves via the ivory gate, where “false dreams are sent / Through this one by the ghosts to the upper world” (6.1214–15). If Aeneas is not technically dead and therefore did not enter the underworld by the conventional means, he cannot return to the upper world by conventional means either. While this may serve practical and plot-related purposes, it also raises the possibility that this entire encounter was a

dream. Moreover, since the ghosts carry false dreams up from the underworld, does this not actually define Aeneas as a false dream? This playful move by Virgil would undermine his penchant for out-doing Homer: Aeneas's crew navigates past Circe's island, Scylla, and Charybdis with little difficulty, and instead of standing at the lip of the underworld like Odysseus, Aeneas actually makes a physical descent into it. By implying that Aeneas may himself be a false dream, Virgil endangers not only the significance of Aeneas's descent, but also Aeneas's reality and coherence as a true being. Shiffman explains,

This purported acquisition of truth is still governed by the exigencies of myth.... The image of serene life proffered here is an imperfect image of philosophic equanimity achieved by true freedom from the dominion of passions, but in terms accessible to one who has had no taste of the life of contemplative detachment. (4)

In other words, it is an inferior imitation of a greater philosophical uncovering or even enlightenment. However, while the truth does seem to be shrouded in myth, to relegate Aeneas's journey to mythological and allegorical terms seems to downplay its significance and impact. Rather, in the same vein of "betwixt and between" and liminal being, truth maintains a complementary relationship with falsehood in Virgil. In the same way that Odysseus's guile and trickery act as necessary components to his homecoming, the co-existence of monstrous hybrids and the discovery of truth in the same cave, the co-occurrence of order and chaos in the same space, and the terrifying but orderly mechanics of the underworld suggest a notion of necessary falsehood. While Aeneas cannot return via the usual reincarnation, his departure by the ivory gate seems to signal an acceptance, or at least acknowledgement, of both truth and falsehood.

Alternatively, Aeneas, after having come from an in-between state and having seen the juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory elements, may define, by leaving through the ivory gate, his role as a fabrication or a fiction in relation to his narrative. This instance may be Virgil's answer to Plato's suggestion to limit lies to the rulers who know best how to use them, as a doctor uses medicine (Plato 81). Giving falsehood such a large import in Rome's founding myth would suggest an acknowledgement of it as a necessary component, as well as present such concepts as madness (via *Allecto* as well as *Dido's* passion) as a counterpoint to duty and order.

Virgil does not present his cave as the direct opposite or alternative to the Platonic enlightenment, but rather he re-evaluates the events that transpire within it and acknowledges the role of falsehood and madness in narrative. The loci of the cave, where the monstrous and chaotic co-exist with the true and orderly, and the revelations and discoveries that take place within, are not the ultimate culminations of the good and beautiful or even imitations of it, but rather a demonstration of the process by which hidden truth and deeper meaning are discovered, and a recognition of their role in narrative and in society. Plato's world of becoming is a constantly changing world while his Forms represent the ideal and static. But Virgil embraces—or at least recognizes—a more chaotic, anomalous aspect to truth, which contains its own juxtapositions and inconsistencies.

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