Falsa Insomnia:
The Platonic Significance of the Ivory Gate
in Book VI of the Aeneid

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Homer and Vergil
As Dante’s Vergil leads his pilgrim past the gates of Hell, the narrator recounts how, “with gladness in his face, [Virgil] placed his hand upon my own, to comfort me, he drew me in among the hidden things.”¹ For Dante and those before him, Vergil’s prophetic powers and detailed depiction of the netherworld indicated that he in fact possessed access to occult knowledge. Vergil’s reputation as a prophet derives in part no doubt from the Messianic prophecy of his fourth Eclogue.² Other mystical practices, such as the sortes Vergilianae whereby devotees randomly chose passages from the Aeneid as a form of divination, arose from the conviction that Vergil possessed prophetic insight. The depiction of Vergil as a seer of Apollo no doubt stems from Vergil’s resurrection of the concept of the vates as a poetic soothsayer.³

Vergil’s provocative account of the ascent of Aeneas from Hades in the final lines of the sixth book is yet another passage that invites speculation over Vergil’s message and intent. At the end of Book Six, Vergil describes the two gates of sleep in the netherworld (6.893-8). One is the gate of horn through which verae umbrae, true shades, ascend to the realm of the living. The other is the gate of ivory through which the souls of the departed send falsa insomnia into the world of the living. Aeneas’ departed father sends Aeneas and the Sibyl through the latter gate, that of the falsa insomnia. Much ink has been spilt over whether Aeneas should be interpreted as a falsum insomnium. All

² Although Dante and others in the medieval era interpreted the fourth Eclogue as a Messianic prophecy, D. A. Slater has demonstrated that this Eclogue commemorated the marriage of Octavia to Mark Antony in his “Was the Fourth Eclogue Written to Celebrate the Marriage of Octavia to Mark Antony?—A Literary Parallel,” Classical Review 26 (1912): 114-119.
accounted for, there are at least five theories seeking to explain the significance of Aeneas’ departure from Hades through the ivory gate. After examining these five possible hypotheses, I will argue that the reader best comprehends the meaning of the two gates in light of Vergil’s tendency toward Platonism as suggested by T. J. Haarhoff. The depiction of Aeneas as a falsum insomnium ascending into the world does not indicate that the legacy from Aeneas to Augustus is “false.” Rather, falsa insomnia refers to Rome’s universal imperium under Augustus as an accurate, albeit imperfect, participation in the ideal state.

In the first theory under consideration, W. Everett proposed that Aeneas’ departure through the ivory gate is a reference to the time of night (i.e. sometime before midnight) at which Aeneas returned from Hades, and this literary cue conforms to a folk tradition received by the Romans. According to this theory, false dreams occur before midnight and true dreams occur after midnight. Pliny the Elder accounts for the origin of this belief by explaining that untrustworthy visions occur early in sleep on account of recently digested wine and food, but that once the stomach digests its contents, the sleeper is capable of true visions. If we follow this tradition, only the ivory gate of false dreams would be open before midnight (when food is still in the belly), and later the horn gate of true dreams would be open after midnight (when the stomach is empty). Vergil describes Aeneas entering Hades at dawn (6. 255). Accordingly, Aeneas’ departure

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4 Vergil is not strictly a “Platonist.” Aelius Donatus describes Vergil as typically Roman in his philosophic approach holding an appreciation for the Platonism of the Academy, Epicureanism, and also Stoicism. See Aelius Donatus. Life of Vergil, 46.


through the ivory gate does not communicate anything about whether the descent into 
Hades is true or false. Rather, the departure through the ivory gate only indicates the time
of night and simply as a matter of fact, the other gate of horn was closed.

Nicholas Reed has shown that this explanation is patently false given Vergil’s
account of dreams in other passages of the Aeneid.\(^7\) In book two, Hector appears to 
Aeneas in a true dream sometime around nine at night.\(^8\) Moreover, in Book Five 
Palinurus receives a false vision right at midnight.\(^9\) The latter example could be stretched
to fit the theory described above (by placing the vision just before midnight), but it does
indicate that Vergil did not hold with some a strict understanding of false dreams and true
dreams as being marked off by the advent of midnight. Moreover, the description of
Aeneas’ exit seems to indicate that he departed Hades in the morning and thus far after
midnight. Immediately after passing through the ivory gate of false dreams, Aeneas
“speeds his way to the ships and rejoins his comrades; then straight along the shore he
sails for Caieta’s haven” (6. 899-900). If Aeneas had left before midnight, why would
they suddenly set sail while it was still dark? Everett’s thesis is improbable since it does
not account for a number of details that argue against it.

A second explanation of the two gates and Aeneas’ departure through the ivory is
that the two gates describe the metaphysical status of those who pass through the
corresponding portals. Consequently, the *veris umbris* associated with the horn gate
describe dead and disembodied shades like Hector or Anchises who rightly belong in the
land of the dead. Similarly, the *falsa insomnia* associated with the ivory gate denote those

\(^7\) Reed, 311-2.
\(^8\) “Tempus erat, quo prima quies mortalibus aegris incipit et dono divum
gratissima serpit” (2. 268-9).
\(^9\) “iamque fere medium caeli Nox umida metam contigerat” (5. 835-6).
who do not rightly belong in Hades – Aeneas and the Sibyl, who are not truly dead, but rather “false” inhabitants of Hades. As evidence for this view, N. Reed cites the episode along the river Styx where Charon objects that Aeneas is not a true shade and that the Stygian boat is forbidden from carrying living bodies (corpora viva, 6. 391). Moreover, when the Sibyl and Aeneas do enter into the boat, the craft groans under the weight of their bodies (gemuit sum pondere cumba, 6. 413).

This interpretation of false and true shades begs the question as to whether Vergil’s ivory gate serves the purpose of a convenient escape hatch for embodied visitors to Hades. Yet Vergil draws the image of the two gates from Homer’s Odyssey and it is inconceivable that Vergil would transform the purpose of the gates so radically. Moreover, Vergil’s account of dreams passing through the two gates and their relationship to Hades is perfectly consistent with Homer’s understanding of dreams and death:

They went along, and passed the Ocean stream, and the White Rock,
and passed the gates of Helios the Sun, and the country
Of dreams, and presently arrived in the meadow of asphodel.
This is the dwelling place of souls, images of dead men (Odyssey 24. 11-14).

Moreover, through the mouth of Penelope, Homer’s previous explanation of the two gates connects them to dreams:

My friend, dreams are things hard to interpret, hopeless to puzzle
There are two gates through which the insubstantial dreams issue.
One pair of gates is made of horn (κεράεσσι), and one of ivory (ἐλέφαντι).

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10 Reed, 314.
Those of the dreams which issue through the gate of sawn ivory (ἐλέφαντος),
These are deceptive (ἐλεφαίρονται) dreams, their message is never accomplished.
But those that come into the open through the gates of the polished
horn (κεράων) accomplish (κραίνουσι) the truth for any mortal who sees them.
I do not think that this strange dream that I had came to me
through this gate. My son and I would be glad if it did so (Odyssey 19. 560-90).
In the Odyssey then, “there are two gates through which the insubstantial dreams issue.”
Homer’s two gates denote two kinds of dreams. The gates have nothing to do with the
metaphysical status of the rational agents that pass through them. Penelope states that
deceptive dreams pass through the ivory gate and that prophetic dreams pass through the
horn gate. A. T. Murray brings attention to a clever pair of Homeric puns in Penelope’s
account of the two horns.\(^1\) The verb κραίνω meaning “I fulfill” is a play on the word
κέρας meaning “horn.” Similarly, the verb ἐλεφαίρομαι meaning “I deceive” is a play on
the word ἐλέφας meaning “ivory.” For Homer, the two gates determine truth and falsity
with respect to dreams. They do not determine whether a certain character in Hades is
true or false based on whether he is dead or alive.

A third theory postulated by D. West suggests that Aeneas’ exit through the ivory
gate of deception purposefully alerts the reader that the descriptions of future Romans are
“falsehoods resembling the truths.”\(^2\) In other words, the imagery of Book Six is not a
literal account of what truly is. Instead, the events of Book Six only resemble the truth.
According to this hypothesis, Vergil warns against the false belief that the souls of

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Romulus, Numa, the Gracchi brothers, Pompey, Caesar, and others were waiting to be transmigrated onto the scene of Roman history. Rather, the imagery serves as a parable or allegory. Vergil is not laying down the transmigration of souls as a dogmatic belief for Romans. According to West, just as Plato’s “Myth of Er” in the Republic\(^\text{13}\) is not meant to be a literal account of reality, so also Vergil’s sixth book is not to be taken as a literal account of the afterlife (nor of a prelife). Vergil uses the descent into Hades to emphasize the fact that the future great men of Rome depend upon Aeneas’ perseverance. According to West, the events are not “false” in that they will never happen. They are, after all, *ex eventu* prophecies. Rather, the term *falsa* in this context refers to Aeneas’ experiences in Hades as being non-historical as well as non-dogmatic.

This account is somewhat attractive; however, the entire *Aeneid* also falls into the genre of mythology and nowhere else is the reader alerted. Vergil does not truly believe that the historical Aeneas traveled to Italy and fathered the Roman people through Iulus. Nowhere else do we receive an alert to the reader that the entire *Aeneid* is an allegory. And yet why would Aeneas cleverly alert the reader with respect to the descent into Hades and not at other places? Granted, the *Aeneid* seems to be unfinished and perhaps Vergil planned to make other literary warnings. Nevertheless, given the text as it stands, West’s “genre warning” theory does not fully account for the ivory gate’s significance. However, West’s observation is pivotal in the final conclusion drawn below.

A fourth theory suggests that Vergil grew discontented with the imperial agenda of Augustus and that he added the detail of the ivory gate as a subtle jab at his patron. Bringing Aeneas’ attention to the Roman heroes, Anchises proclaims: “You, Roman, be

sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud” (6. 851-3). Clearly, this prophetic exhortation finds its fulfillment in Augustus. According to this theory, Vergil glorified Augustus out of duty but as a clever poet, he left a clue of his true feelings at the end of the sixth book. In a single line, Vergil revealed his deepest conviction: Augustus is a falsum insomnium. An early biographer recounts that Vergil was quite anxious about the manuscripts and ordered that the unfinished work be burned.14 This theory posits that Vergil’s anxiety stemmed from his displeasure with Augustus and his own dissatisfaction with the Aeneid as a piece of political propaganda. Aeneas’ departure through the ivory gate of falsa insomnia would then subtly communicate the vain nature of the Roman project culminating in Augustus’ ambition.

It is a matter of fact that some sort of tension existed between Vergil and Augustus. Augustus, during his Cantabrian campaign, threatened Vergil in an effort to secure portions of the Aeneid: “send me…your first sketch of the Aeneid, or the first colon, it does not matter which.”15 However, it seems that these threats were lighthearted, as the author of The Life of Vergil interprets them.16 The Life of Virgil recounts that Vergil shortly thereafter read the second, fourth, and sixth books of the Aeneid to Augustus.17 The emperor and his court were attentive listeners. Surely Augustus and his company were not so simple as to miss the detail at the end of the sixth book – portaque

14 “He had arranged with Varius, before leaving Italy, that if anything befell him a his friend should burn the Aeneid.” Aelius Donatus, The Life of Virgil, 39.
16 Our biography of Vergil comes to us through Aelius Donatus, the fourth century tutor of Saint Jerome. Many assume that this work is substantially the biography written by Suetonius, which is no longer extant.
17 Donatus, The Life of Virgil, 32.
emittit eburna. If this line were meant to be a sign of displeasure, why then would Vergil read it openly in the presence of the emperor? For this reason, the anti-Augustan explanation also appears ungrounded.

A fifth theory holds that Vergil purposefully falsified history for the love of Rome. Even sober prose authors like Cicero embellished Roman history in his De officiis and De legibus so as to glorify Roman antiquity with the mythical tales of Romulus, pious Numa, Tullus, the bridge-building Ancus, and others. Vergil joins their ranks by conjoining Rome to the legend of Troy.\textsuperscript{18} As a political poet, Vergil recognized that the myths of Rome’s celebrated origins were falsa insomnia. Vergil’s epic account of Aeneas was a pious fraud meant to popularize Augustus’ political ideology. By depicting Rome’s founding father as exiting through the ivory gate of falsa insomnia, Vergil winks at the reader and exposes the alleged history of Rome as an appropriate legend. The political myths exist to sustain the arts of Rome: “to rule the world, to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud” (6. 851-3). The small detail about the ivory gate at the end of the sixth book is Vergil’s way of listing himself as a member of the long line of political poets who weave falsity with history for the greater glory of the Roman state.

This theory comes closest to the truth. It need not be taken as entirely cynical. Vergil does not perceive himself as a trickster. He is not a conjuror of falsa insomnia for

\textsuperscript{18} See Cicero’s De legibus II, 19-26 where Marcus explains how myth, folklore, and religion have a special utility for the state – especially for the Roman commonwealth. See also the second book of Cicero De re publica where Cicero recounts the history of Rome beginning with a peaceful Romulus who won favor non vi sed supplicis (II, 16). Cicero’s Scipio also recounts the ancient Roman patres as the original senatus Romuli (II, 23) founded by Romulus himself. Cicero description of Romulus reaches its apex when he refers to Romulus’ apotheosis by citing an apparition of the Romulus as divine being to one Proculus on the Quirinial hill (II, 20).
the sake of malice. Moreover, Vergil need not have an axe to grind with Augustus. I suggest that the fifth theory is correct but that it must be read in the context of Vergil’s Platonic imagery. In particular, Vergil incorporates five poetic cues into Book Six that alert the clever reader to Vergil’s Platonic message. These five poetic cues are: (1) the role of Apollo and his priestess; (2) the golden bough needed for entry; (3) descent through a cave; (4) Anchises’ Platonic lesson in lines 730-4; (5) the transmigration of souls; and (6) the depiction of a great city of justice.

The descent into Hades is preceded by a great deal of attention to Apollonian themes. The sixth book begins with Aeneas seeking Cumae “where Apollo sits enthroned” (6. 9-10). Apollo is a special patron of Aeneas because he is a Trojan. Under the height of Apollo, there is a hidden cave inhabited by Apollo’s Sibyl. Apollo breathes into the seer and she reveals the future. The future revealed is the future as interpreted by Apollo. These Sibylline prophecies were allegedly deposited under the statue of Apollo in his temple in Rome on the Palatine hill. The Apollonian imagery is appropriate because the god embodies death, sleep, philosophy, and poetry – four themes emphasized by Vergil. Apollo’s connection to Platonism and the wisdom tradition in general is clear. Throughout the corpus of Plato’s dialogues can be found special devotion to Apollo. In the Apology, we learn that Apollo declared Socrates to be the wisest of all men. In the Phaedo, Socrates reveals his devotion to Apollo by composing a hymn to Apollo. The Phaedo in particular connects philosophic wisdom with the art of poetry – two ideas that complement one another in the person of Apollo.

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At line 136, the Sibyl challenges Aeneas to find a golden bough (*aureus ramus*, 6. 187) – a gift of Proserpina by which Aeneas will be able to pass through Hades. David West suggests that the golden bough is a Platonic symbol that draws on the tradition of the writings of an early first century B.C. author: “Meleager, in introducing the epigrams included in his *Garland*, had given Plato a golden branch to carry as his emblem.”20 The descent occurs through a cave, suggesting that what is seen there is only a shadow or projection of what is true on earth.21 Moreover, R. J. Tarrant has noted that Anchises’ speech about the soul and body in 6. 730-4 mirrors the account in the *Phaedo* (66b-c) of the body as the soul’s prison and obstacle to the truth.22 The literary depiction of the transmigration of souls and the great city of justice – each invokes imagery from Plato’s *Republic*.23 Perhaps these references are coincidental. Whether Virgil’s Platonism of the sixth book of the *Aeneid* is intentionally Platonic or not, a satisfying interpretation of the two gates can be found by situating the account in a Platonic context. What I mean to say is that Vergil may or may not have or intended the poetic cues listed above to serve as signs of a Platonic experience for Aeneas. Regardless, the idea that *katabasis* and *anabasis* are a means of determining truth is a deeply Platonic concept that would have resounded in the literary milieu of Vergil’s era. Aeneas descends into the cave where he sees shadows that can only be understood in the light of day.

What then of the gate of horn and the gate of ivory? How do we understand Aeneas’ departure through the ivory gate of *falsa insomnia*? The great heroes of Roman

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20 David West, xxiii.
history are *falsa insomnia* – false visions. Even more, we learn that Aeneas is a *falsum insomnium*. The idea that Rome in the person of Aeneas is an *insomnium* or “vision” is highlighted by T.J. Haarhoff who connects the word *insomnium* as a Latin equivalent for the Homeric term *ἐνυπνίων*, which denotes a vision given by the gods.  

This does not mean that Vergil scorns Augustus or Rome, nor does it mean that Vergil despises Rome as dishonorable or malicious. It simply means that Vergil appreciated what Cato the Younger and Cicero also knew to be true – Rome does not exist for the sake of itself. Even Augustus once said: “You make my heart glad by building thus, as if Rome is to be eternal.”  

Rome is great. Rome is honored. Yet Rome is not eternal. It is a vision that cannot be truly attained. Vergil’s grammatical structure in the pivotal line concerning the ivory gate (896) reveals the author’s intent. Vergil did not speak only of *falsa insomnia*, but *falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia*. The pairing of *falsa* with *ad caelum* or “toward heaven” is noteworthy. Vergil’s Aeneas is a literary depiction of Rome. Aeneas does not escape hell *ad terram* – back to the earth, but *ad caelum* – toward heaven. By interpreting the ivory gate and the words *falsa insomnia* in this way, Book Six is neither a work of imperial polemic nor a metaphysical discussion of incorporeity. Rather, terrestrial Rome participates in a Platonic ideal. Vergil wrote for the same thing for which Augustus fought—the ideal political order. As outlined by the Plato’s *Republic*, this ideal order requires an ideal poet:

> For if we were right in what we were just saying and falsehood is in very deed useless to gods, but to men useful as a remedy or form of medicine, it

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is obvious that such a thing must be assigned to physicians, and laymen should have nothing to do with it.\textsuperscript{26}

Vergil received his license to practice this sort of medicine from Augustus. As Rome’s chief \textit{vates}, Vergil actualized historical Rome by escorting ideal Rome through the gate of ivory in the person of Aeneas.

Work Cited


