



Discolor Aura. Reflections on the Golden Bough

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DISCOLOR AURA.

REFLECTIONS ON THE GOLDEN BOUGH.

Vergil's golden bough is one of the crucial images of the *Aeneid*. In it the poet catches up plot and hero into one of those knots of meaning which unify the poem. The importance of the bough is universally allowed; its significance is not. The depth and multiplicity of meaning which it provides have served too often to lead away from the image, and the poem, instead of toward them. Commentators have followed the threads of reference rather than the threads of suggestion. What they have found relates to the more or less distant environment of the *Aeneid*, to tradition, belief, and ritual, which must be considered in the interpretation of the poem, but which cannot constitute that interpretation, or even begin it. The oak-spirit and the King of the Wood, the mistletoe and the Queen of the Dead are all impressive concepts. But if the "real meaning" of the golden bough lies in these or near them, then Vergil must be considered an artist after the fashion of the late David Belasco, who painted the back of his stage sets as well as the front. What is actually happening on the stage or in the poem we may suspect to be illusory or subsidiary; the real action may be taking place in the carefully prepared but invisible recesses of the scene, approachable only by those who have a pass backstage. This is not Vergil's method, and least of all could it be his at this point in the development of the *Aeneid*.

The Sixth Book is the center of the poem, symbolically as well as literally. The journey to Italy is over; the war has not yet begun. It is the still point between the two fields of action postulated for the hero in the first words of the poem, between the predominantly individual experience of the man, and the predominantly social experience of arms. In this pause, the destiny which frames the hero in both his worlds, as son and as city-ancestor, is supernaturally consummated. But to encounter both father and race, past and future, is an experience of terror, in fact of death. It can only take place in another world whose perceptions envelop, confuse, and sometimes deny the validity

of the life-experience on earth. The underworld and all the images that go with it are demanded by the necessities of the poem. They are neither intruded upon Vergil by convention nor lightly used by him for mystification and "atmosphere." Every passage in the book is a new and integral perception of what has gone before, and an ineluctable framing of what is to come. There is no place here for tricks of staging, for external matter half-hidden, in one scholar's phrase, by "a haze of poetry." It is not only possible, but necessary, to view the golden bough as part of the *Aeneid's* structure, to evolve its meaning primarily from its context and from what Vergil says about it, not from what we know or he may have known about its origins.

Sic fatur lacrimans. The Fifth Book passes instantly into the Sixth, from Aeneas' words to the tears which accompany them. No other passage from book to book in the *Aeneid* provides so little pause.¹ Throughout the earlier books Aeneas has been prepared to confront the underworld; now he is almost hurried to the encounter. After a moment's pause before the Daedalian doors of the temple at Cumae, the prologue begins. Spatially it has an elaborate development in the penetration of one recess after another.² The hero passes from chamber to chamber, to

¹ Servius' account of the passage indicates Vergil's method of connecting the two books. See E. Norden, *P. Vergilius Maro: Aeneis Buch VI* (3rd ed., Leipzig and Berlin, 1934), pp. 110-11.

² The theories of W. F. Jackson Knight, *Cumaeae Gates* (Oxford, 1936), and of R. W. Cruttwell, *Virgil's Mind at Work* (London, 1946), concerning the symbolism of the temple doors need attention here. Knight's work was not available to me (except indirectly through reviews), but both authors apparently see a symbolic reference to the rites of initiation and the tortuous passage to the underworld in the labyrinth carved by Daedalus upon the doors. This view seems particularly appropriate to the formal ritual pattern and to the progress from level to level which forms the rest of the prologue. Unfortunately I feel that the labyrinth image is not intrinsically important to Vergil. It is one of a series which passes in quick review the whole Cretan episode; it bears no more weight than Pasiphae or the Minotaur and considerably less than Icarus. The enormous breadth of parallels adduced by Knight and Cruttwell may possibly convince one of an archetypal image working below Vergil's consciousness, but Vergil's mind at work is not necessarily at work upon his poetry. Their interpretation is cabalistic, not symbolic; it involves too many secret keys to be applicable as criticism.

the temple, the Sibyl's cave, the grove of the bough, and finally the underworld itself. His progress is cast by Vergil into the rhythmic structure of ritual. It opens with a sacrifice to Apollo, and proceeds to the two prayers of Aeneas, which are answered in turn by the priestess as god and the priestess as mortal. Both exchanges are balanced again by the two tasks which they impose upon Aeneas, the finding of the bough and the burial of Misenus. The great sacrifice to the gods of the dead closes the prologue as it began, and hastens the hero into the kingdom of Dis.

The prologue-rite, like others, conveys meaning beyond and through its formal structure. The movement, words, and action of Aeneas not only bring him from the doors of Daedalus to the jaws of hell, but convey him from one level of existence to another. Objectively he passes from life to death, subjectively from the impotent and chaotic perceptions of mortality to a power over himself and the world which barely falls short of being ultimate knowledge as well. The book opens with Aeneas' futile and ignorant lament for Palinurus; at the end of the prologue he has come to command, at least temporarily, his own fate, both social and personal. Within the frame of ritual, Aeneas' experience of the past and his will for the future, "memory and desire," meet and are unified. For the first time in the poem there is a total realization of the central character. It is this inner progress which is really necessary for the mysterious journey.

An external agent, the Sibyl, guides the hero throughout. Far more than any person so far introduced in the poem, even Aeneas himself, she would be to the Roman a figure of history and authenticity. With the coming of Aeneas to Italy the heroic world, Greek and Trojan, begins to be absorbed into the Roman-historical sphere, and this process continues throughout the latter half of the poem. The Sibyl is the first agent and representative of the change. But she is more than a type of Roman religious authority; Vergil portrays her as a personality, after a popular tradition which is far wider than Rome. Like the witch-concealed divinity familiar in folk-tale, in fact like the mysterious woman who bargained the Sibylline books away to Tarquin, she accosts the hero abruptly, even abusively, but proves his helper and guide:

non hoc ista sibi tempus spectacula poscit.

Equipped with the pragmatic folk-wisdom of such figures, as well as with the prestige of Rome, she acts as foil to Aeneas, historical against heroic, social against individual, and consequently "real" and skeptical in the face of the inner experience of the hero.

She demands his prayers, and he asks first for his people—*Latio considerare Teucros*. This is the collective destiny, to be followed in the second prayer by individual experience, relations, and will. They are not to remain as *Teucrici*, however. After a cento of reminiscences from the previous wanderings, with a suggestion of divine responsibility for his erratic course as well as for his safety, Aeneas asks for an end (62) :

hac Troiana tenus fuerit fortuna secuta.

The society of the heroic past must be wholly removed, for Troy survives only as a curse that drives him on. He prays for a consummation of that death announced by Panthus in the Second Book (325-6) :

fuius Troes, fuit Ilium et ingens
gloria Teucrorum,

using the same utterance of finality (VI, 64-5) :

dique deaeque omnes, quibus obstitit Ilium et ingens
gloria Dardaniae. . . .

For the new birth of his people, new temples and new oracles are vowed. Aeneas speaks here as the leader, the fore-shadow of Augustus. But he is answered with the agony of the Roman Sibyl, and finally with the mouth of the god. His journey will end as it began, in the convulsion of war. Only on the other side of that cycle is peace and *salus*.

Of course this answer is not enough, for us or for the poet. It is a crisis in that peculiar dualism which is the essence of the *Aeneid*. Vergil spares us no hindsight throughout; Rome and the ancestor-hero of Rome are brought forth at every turn in the proper attitudes of piety and consummation. But opposed to these axioms of success is a complex series of incongruities in speech, character, and action, which are fully as important to the structure of the poem. It seems that the poet has no intention of fulfilling the comfortable expectations which he himself creates. The story of the *Aeneid* is a continual evasion of necessities.

The chain of history is already forged. Success is foreordained. But its nature, and the struggle which achieves it, are not, and this indeterminate quality presses continually upon the accepted order of things, forcing it into new and strange aspects. We are compelled to ask whether Aeneas is really achieving anything, whether Rome is really the crown of his destiny. At this point in the poem the incongruity between fact and attitude, history and the individual, emerges in the plainest manner. Now of all times the destiny which lies beyond peace and *salus* demands expression, and does not receive it. It is not only the narrative which creates this impression—a request for settlement and a new society is answered with a prophecy of war—, but the undercurrent of images reinforces the denial. Upon the conclusive and orderly phrases of Aeneas' speech, the prophetic certainty of the Palatine temple and the Sibylline priests, follow the animal frenzy and ominous obscurity of the Sibyl. The result of the contrast is an acute tension between the poet-observer and the hero, between the historical order which is the fact and frame of our existence, and the individual who struggles painfully and fallibly toward its realization.

Relief follows, but again not in the expected pattern. The second prayer of Aeneas and its consequences bring him to a fulfilment, and eventually to the revelation which we demand. But the route is devious; the corporate destiny lies deeper than the Sibyl's cave, and before it is uncovered the individual soul must be prepared. This inner attainment is the function of his second request to the Sibyl. Significantly, before he makes it, she becomes again the human *vates*, instead of the mouthpiece of the god (102):

ut primum cessit furor et rabida ora quierunt.

He puts aside the *horrida bella* which he as leader of his people must direct and suffer (105-6):

omnia praecepi, atque animo mecum ante peregi.
unum oro—

and his prayer is not for further revelation of some divine purpose which lies behind them. Instead (108-9):

ire ad conspectum cari genitoris et ora
contingat.

He asks for and at the same time reveals a completion of his own nature. *Pius Aeneas*, until now, has been another of those apparent norms of the poem which are formally insisted upon and substantially evaded. Aeneas has been dutifully subordinate to his father while alive—and continually frustrated in knowledge and action by this pious position. In Troy it is the vision of doom and terror, *dirae facies*, which is given to him; Anchises and Iulus, the generations on either side of him are vouchsafed the divine signs of safety (the flame) and hope (the shooting star). His father's panic loses him Creusa; his father's misreading of the oracle leads him to the false home in Crete. In all this the son of course says nothing of blame, or, more important, of love; he merely follows and suffers. It is Vergil's presentation of the relationship which creates the tension, and quietly corrodes the traditional formalities of *pietas*. The poet comes closest to being explicit, through the mouth of Aeneas, in the central episode of the Third Book. After meeting Helenus and Andromache, Aeneas, privately speaking to his seer-cousin, shows himself for once pragmatic and hopeful (III, 362-8) :

fare age (namque omnis cursum mihi prospera dixit
religio et cuncti suaserunt numine divi
Italiam petere et terras temptare repostas
.....) quae prima pericula vito?
quidve sequens tantos possim superare labores?

But after the colloquy Anchises and Iulus reenter the scene. His divinely certified family closes in upon him, receives further encouragement for the future, and Aeneas sinks to the contrary mood of despair (III, 493-6) :

vivite felices, quibus est fortuna peracta
iam sua; nos alia ex aliis in fata vocamur.
vobis parta quies, nullum maris aequor arandum
arva neque Ausoniae semper cedentia retro
quaerenda.

Nothing that Helenus has said would change Italy from a land hidden but accessible to the obedient hero, to a phantom receding before his search. The alteration is subjective, and by it Vergil associates Anchises with a feeling of futility and oppression. Aeneas is the fate-driven man; but in the presence of his family

he realizes that it is not his own fate which is driving him. After death, in the Fourth Book, Anchises continues to oppress his son. Throughout the idyll at Carthage, not once, like Mercury, but every night (351-3):

me patris Anchisae, quotiens umentibus umbris
nox operit terras, quotiens astra ignea surgunt,
admonet in somnis et turbida terret imago.

Here, then, in the Sixth Book, *pietas* is still ambiguous at best. Anchises' shade has already commanded Aeneas to descend to the lower world, and we can expect no more than the dutiful response. But to respond so at this point and in these words connotes much more than duty:

ire ad conspectum cari genitoris et ora.

The vision of Anchises is substituted for the vision of Rome. Expression and cadence recall the first mention of his father in the Second Book: impelled by the blood of Priam and the fires of Troy (560):

subiit cari genitoris imago.

This first rush of love and anxiety, the reaction of the natural unfated man, is at last fulfilled here. The intervening frustrations, springing from the double pressures of fate and parental authority, are erased. Anchises in Aeneas' eyes is no longer *sancte parens*, the dominant and divine old man, but helpless and pitiable, his journey viewed here for the first time in purely human terms (112-14):

ille meum comitatus iter maria omnia mecum
atque omnis pelagique minas caelique ferebat
invalidus, viris ultra sortemque senectae.

The revelation of destiny follows, not because he asks for it, but because by this act of the personal will he has shown himself worthy.

This is not a complete resolution (there is none in the *Aeneid*): the tension between knowledge and ignorance, history and the individual, is not so easily discharged. But Aeneas' speech, catching up together the levels of his experience, gives him a power found nowhere else in the poem. His particular

excellence, the heroism of obligation, reaches its summit here, in the act of going down to death.

The Sibyl's second reply, like the first, runs counter to the tone of Aeneas' request. She speaks here above all as the folk-seer, the primitive skeptic who finds reality only in the tangible, the apparent world. She says little of Anchises, and observes the inner consummation of Aeneas with a cold eye, seeing only, from the outside, the antithesis of life and death which he presents. Her speech parodies, somewhat cruelly, the solemn words of the hero. He has addressed her as the guardian of hell's gate, which indeed she is (106-9):

quando hic inferni ianua regis
dicitur.....
.....doceas iter et sacra ostia pandas.

But she answers, with an intentional misunderstanding which is almost mockery, that the gates of hell are not guarded at all (126-7):

facilis descensus Averno:
noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis.

Anyone may die; there is no need to ask her for permission. But to pass through the kingdom of death and still remain alive, that is a fearful task even for those who boast of their divine descent. She forces us and the hero to recognize the enormity of his request. His *κατάβασις* is not to be an Odyssean adventure, but an equivalent performance of the real death-journey.

Later in her speech, the paradox is put as sharply as possible (133-5):

quod si tantus amor menti, si tanta cupido est
bis Stygios innare lacus, bis nigra videre
Tartara. . .

The first line recognizes the subjective experience of Aeneas. *Amor* is the transcendent condition of *pietas* at which he has finally arrived. By one of Vergil's continual echoes, the phrase immediately recalls *sed si tantus amor* in the Second Book. The connection is deep and illuminating. This is another yielding of the self to share with another an extraordinary and terrible experience. In the earlier book Dido was to share with Aeneas the disaster of his city, the death of his race. Here Aeneas is to

share with Anchises an end even beyond this, the death of the individual.

But the object of *amor* which the Sibyl perceives is neither the one stated by Aeneas (the union with Anchises), nor the enlargement of personality implied by this line. She emphasizes the cold and fearful fact of death, not the attitude which leads Aeneas to accept the experience. The two crossings of the Styx come of course from the *Odyssey* (XII, 21-2): Vergil's line, though, is more concrete, and significantly different in its position. Circe speaks thus to Odysseus and his crew *after* they return from the underworld. They realize their action in retrospect. Here Aeneas must know that his mission will be the death-journey *before* he undertakes it. It is the immediate condition of his love and life.

The Sibyl, always the folk-wise observer, gives this union of opposites no encouragement. The line which follows expresses a curious contempt (135):

et insano iuvat indulgere labori.

The verbs suggest laxness and pleasure; joined with *insano* the phrase makes of Aeneas' request something almost indecent, to the Sibyl's pragmatism, and certainly unnatural. It is *amor* perverted. If it is to succeed, there must be a sign.

So, suddenly, we come upon the golden bough (136-48; 200-11):

latet arbore opaca
 aureus et foliis et lento vimine ramus,
 Iunoni infernae dictus sacer; hunc tegit omnis
 lucus et obscuris claudunt convallibus umbrae.
 sed non ante datur telluris operta subire
 auricomos quam qui decerpserit arbore fetus.
 hoc sibi pulchra suum ferri Proserpina munus
 instituit. primo avulso non deficit alter
 aureus, et simili frondescit virga metallo.
 ergo alte vestiga oculis et rite repertum
 carpe manu; namque ipse volens facilisque sequetur,
 si te fata vocant; aliter non viribus ullis
 vincere nec duro poteris convellere ferro.

* * *

inde ubi venere ad fauces grave olentis Averni,
 tollunt se celeres liquidumque per aera lapsae

sedibus optatis geminae super arbore sidunt,
 discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit.
 quale solet silvis brumali frigore viscum
 fronde virere nova, quod non sua seminat arbos,
 et croceo fetu teretis circumdare truncos,
 talis erat species auri frondentis opaca
 ilice, sic leni crepitabat brattea vento.
 corripit Aeneas extemplo avidusque refringit
 cunctantem, et vatis portat sub tecta Sibyllae.

Within the frame which I have tried to outline, we approach this extraordinary image. Clearly, there is in it an element of the external. Vergil reached beyond the world of his poem for a fact or belief or tradition which existed independent of his own imagination. Despite many conjectures it appears equally clear that we shall never trace down the referent in specific terms. Servius suggested the rites of Proserpina, and interjected that famous *publica opinio* about the grove of Nemi which was to lead Frazer forth on his massive pursuit of the tree-spirit and the sacrificial king. Heyne suggested, among other origins, the golden apples of Juno and the Hesperides, the pomegranate of Proserpina, the branch of the suppliant, the *aurea virga* of Mercury as psychagogue, and the Golden Fleece.³ Conington thought of the mysteries of Isis.⁴ Frazer ended with the derivation of the bough from folk beliefs concerning the properties of the mistletoe.⁵ Norden too approached the image through the mistletoe simile, but added the concept of the bough of myrtle or olive brought as a gift to the goddess Proserpina/Kore and as a symbol of life and rebirth in the mystery rituals.⁶

The diversity of conclusions does not result from any lack of diligence. No amount of searching, in literature or anthropology, will ever arrive at a single incontrovertible "answer," and this does not greatly matter. For whatever lies behind the bough-image lies also behind and outside the *Aeneid*. The golden bough of the *Aeneid* means exactly what Vergil, in his enormously

³ C. G. Heyne and G. P. E. Wagner, edd., *Publius Vergilius Maro* (4th ed., Leipzig, 1833), II, pp. 1014-15.

⁴ J. Conington, ed., *P. Vergili Maronis Opera* (London, 1884), II, p. 426.

⁵ J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Part VII, *Balder the Beautiful* (3rd ed., London, 1913), II, pp. 279-303.

⁶ Norden, *Aeneis VI*,³ pp. 163-75.

complex and allusive way, says that it means, no less and no more; in other words, it means what it is in the poem. None of the conjectures, therefore, which relate ultimately to the circumstances of the poem, and of the poet, should be entertained until the internal progress, the organic coherence of Vergil's imagination, has been examined. The point is universal. The creative product is never a logical and predictable result of its environment. The necessities and sequences of poetry are its own; if they are considered as fully explicable in terms of external statement—historical, philosophical, religious, or critical—poetry is destroyed. Because this image has received such a vast burden of attention from this external point of view, it is one of the critical points at which the nature of poetry must be maintained.

The poet has presented life and death, both as opposites, in the wisdom of the Sibyl, and as union, in the will of Aeneas. The human actors have reached the impasse of inner experience and outward observation, two irreconcilable aspects of reality. The golden bough is the necessary and external sign demanded to resolve the antinomy, and bears a fundamental relation to it. Let us take, for the present, the bough in its simplest aspect as a thing of gold. It grows in a dense tree, like the mistletoe, on an oak. It exists on a living thing, the last outpost in fact of the live world before the stinking jaws of Death. But the bough is made of gold—therefore it is not itself alive. It does have the semblance of a living branch; it grows leaves—*frondescit*—but always *simili metallo*. This flowering is denied the accustomed tissues of the kingdom of life. When the breeze catches the bough, *crepitabat brattea vento*. The line obviously represents sound, and by no stretch of the auditory imagination could it be the sound or motion of any living thing. The gold takes its meaning from the tree on which it grows, and the essential purpose of the image, resolving symbolically the conflict between Aeneas and the Sibyl, is to create a contrast between living and dead which is at the same time a vital union. The idea is grandly developed again by Aeneas (195-6):

derigite in lucos ubi pinguem dives opacat
ramus humum.

The epithets both signify wealth, but one connotes the abundance of the life-giving earth, while the other casts upon it the shadow

of a different splendor. This too, the sense of alien things in union, is the first significance of the mistletoe simile, and the contrasts in the simile itself, winter and growth, tree and parasite, emphasize the division.

Aeneas, in fulfilling his own life, must pass into death. He is not merely to see the underworld, but to undergo an analogue, dangerously close to reality, of his ultimate death-journey. The Sibyl, essential and external seer, observes this paradox with some disbelief. Life-in-death contravenes the natural order of mortality. If Aeneas' will is to become the exceptional reality, a sign of success is demanded. That sign is the golden bough; death-in-life. The magic is allopathic; the two strange unions complement each other and together complete an invulnerable circle which transcends nature. The bough becomes a guarantee both of Aeneas' ability to enter the underworld and of his protection while passing through it. Not only Aeneas and the bough, then, but his action upon the bough and the consequent journey are reciprocal symbols. As he plucks the bough from the tree, death from life, so he departs from the underworld unharmed, life from death.

The bough appears again at the crossing of the Styx (405-10), where the contrast of living and dead is most explicitly marked and the anomalous position of Aeneas is challenged (by Charon's recognition of a live soul, by the boat sinking under his weight). Finally he leaves the *munus* at the palace of Dis and Proserpina (628-36). This is the center of the triple scheme of the underworld. First Aeneas encounters the traditional Hades, then the vision of hell and heaven, Tartarus and Elysium, and finally the prophetic cycle of the souls and ages. Between the two elements of the central vision is the palace of the infernal king and queen, and the end of the bough's journey. It is no longer needed; the dangerous death-passage is ended (through the hopelessness of Aeneas' own mortal experience, through the eternity of evil), and the journey into life, indeed to something beyond life, is about to begin. *Largior hic aether*; Elysium is a different world.

The essence of the golden bough is the contrast between its lifeless nature and its organic environment. But we cannot stop here. Obviously the image of gold must express other relevant associations; otherwise lead or iron or stone would have done

equally well. These are not, however, the associations which have generally been conjectured for it—those of Pindar, for instance, for whom gold is a constantly recurrent symbol of glory and power.⁷ We look in vain in Vergil's lines for an unequivocal expression of brilliance, glory, or life as inherent in the golden bough. Rather, the first words give the key: *latet arbore opaca*. The bough is hidden by tree and forest; the hero cannot find it without supernatural guidance. Once it is plucked it is hidden again in the garments of the Sibyl (406). It enables Aeneas to descend to the "hidden places of the earth." This is not like the worked gold which is displayed as the emblem of wealth and splendor, but rather suggests the rare metal which must be sought in the depths of darkness and the earth. The *aureus ramus* is a secret, symbolically buried as well as lifeless. It belongs physically below the earth, in the dead world, and so is a peculiarly appropriate *munus* for the queen of that world, the consort of Dis/Πλούτων who is lord of the riches under the earth.⁸ In fact, the bough is not so much given to Proserpina as returned to her. When the Sibyl carries it down to Hades, it is recognized by Charon as something *longo post tempore visum*. I suggest that this does not refer to any previous heroic journey with the bough,⁹ but rather to the fact that it *belongs* in Charon's

⁷ So Norden, *ibid.*, p. 172.

⁸ As a matter of fact, it seems to be more familiar to Vergil's Italy than to Greece. The realm of Hades/Pluto to Greek writers was generally a place of gloom and cheerlessness, and his wealth was rather the agricultural bounty which is sent up from underground than mineral riches, *θησαυρός*. One of the few exceptions is the *χρυσόρρυτον* . . . Πλούτωνος *πόταμον* in Aeschylus, *Prom.*, 805-6. It is in the Roman writers, perhaps following Etruscan traditions, that we find the second element emphasized; in Naevius' epitaph, for instance (66 Morel):

itaque postquam est Orci traditus thesauro,

and in the *Iphigenia in Aulis* of Ennius, without parallel in Euripides' Greek (fr. IX Ribbeck):

Acheronta obibo, ubi Mortis thesauri obiacent.

⁹ Norden, following Heyne, first thought of an Orphic *κατάβασις*, then changed his mind (*Aeneis VI*,³ p. 170). The earlier explanation, though wrong, is considerably better than his final one, which supposes that Charon had to recognize the bough because the Sibyl had said *ramum hunc* . . . *adgnoscas*. This sort of extrapolation of a poet's characters into reality is hardly a serious comment. Why did the Sibyl have to say *adgnoscas*?

world underground. Its existence in the upper air is considered here to be temporary and unnatural.

The only suggestion of shining or brightness develops at the moment of the bough's discovery, and it is presented in a curious and baffling expression (204) :

discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit.

The brightness is *discolor*, not pure light, but rather another and strange color in the dark and green of the wood. *Aura* is even stranger. Vergil is playing of course on the sound of *aurum*, but this cannot be the whole explanation. Normally the word has no visual sense; ¹⁰ it means a quality of the atmosphere, an emanation, an "air." The poet may have been thinking of *superasque evadere ad auras* in the Sibyl's speech above (128); if so, the *aura* of the bough would again connote the underworld, and would be truly *discolor* to the living green of the tree. In any case, if Vergil is trying to describe the brilliance of gold, this is a strangely hesitant and unsatisfactory way to do it. Of course he is not. The hidden thing is found, but in revealing itself it maintains a secret and enigmatic quality. It appears to the hero's eye; it is his to gather. But even at the moment of action and success Vergil is unwilling to give himself up to one perception alone. Everything implies its opposite; the bough is seen, but by some faculty which is not exactly visual. Aeneas plucks it, but not with the necessary ease (210-11) :

¹⁰ I do not find *aura* so used before Vergil, although the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* proposes two examples. Varro, *Men.*, 139, *simul ac languido corpori solis calidior visa est aura* of course refers to heat and the sense of touch. Similarly Lucretius, IV, 251-3:

et quanto plus aeris ante agitur
et nostros oculos pertergit longior aura,
tum procul esse magis res quaeque remota videtur,

is talking about the mechanics of seeing rather than sight itself. For him, it breaks down into tactile sensations, for which *aura* is appropriate. In fact, it exactly equals *aera* in v. 247 above. The *Thesaurus* also appeals to Callimachus, *Hymn. Dian.*, 117, *φάεος δ'ένενης ἀύτμην*. But *ἀύτμη* from Homer down means particularly a breath of fire and means exactly that here. *Φάεος* is substituted for *πυρός*, and has no primary visual meaning. After Vergil, Lactantius, *Phoen.*, 44, is apparently the first to use *aura* in exactly this sense: *emicuit liminis aura levis*.

avidusque refringit
cunctantem.

Another antithesis is already beginning to take form.

The significance of the bough as death, or rather as the tension between life and death in a single unit of being, does not exhaust the image. It certainly does not preclude the traditional interpretations, but at this point requires them, and determines their application to the poem. The studies of Norden and Frazer have explored the wide importance of vegetation as related in primitive thought to life and death, and the survival in ritual or quasi-ritual procedures of these modes of thinking.¹¹ In relation to the grave and the underworld, vegetation universally appears to have the significance and the power of life. It is impossible to transfer this significance summarily to Vergil's bough, which is not vegetation, and whose symbolism is far too complex to represent life alone. But the investigators, although they have misinterpreted the image as a whole, have uncovered one point at least of supreme importance to the pattern which I have attempted to trace.

Vergil compares the bough to the mistletoe (205-8) :

quale solet silvis brumali frigore viscum
fronde virere nova, quod non sua seminat arbos,
et croceo fetu teretis circumdare truncos,
talis erat species . . .

We have already seen how the contrasts of color, texture, and growth between mistletoe and oak reinforce those between bough and tree. But the mistletoe, as Norden and Frazer point out, also possesses, in popular and mythical thought, extraordinary qualities of magic and sometimes of divinity. The simile then forms an overt point of contact, at which power is released from that deep reservoir of primitive belief and practice lying behind Vergil's image. Norden remarks of the mistletoe that it seems to have a double aspect, as a power of fertility, protection, and life, and as a power of death. It can heal disease and avert demons, but can also kill the tree on which it grows. Loki opens the doors of hell with a sprig of mistletoe, and kills

¹¹ Norden, *Aeneis VI*,⁸ pp. 164-8; compare Frazer's discussion of the mistletoe and the "external soul"; *Balder the Beautiful*,⁸ II, pp. 76-278.

Baldur with the same. "Death and life in mythical thought are not always opposites, but can form a single unity."¹² This is crucial. When an object has enough magical power to represent life, in a sense to *be* life, this power can be expressed and used negatively as well, to cause death, to *be* death. The power of life and death is a single reality. The golden bough, generically as vegetation-magic and specifically as assimilated to the mistletoe, has such a power. Like the lesser oppositions of color, texture, alienness, the primary paradox of life/death, immanent in the healing and parasitic plant, reinforces the created image of the poet. Again I do not mean that Vergil simply took over some primitive "idea" and proceeded to put it into verse. It seems rather doubtful that in such cases there is anything which can be called an idea, a formulation of phenomena, already existing in the folk mind. We may make abstractions like the one above which cover observed beliefs or customs, and the poet may draw his paradox from the same source, but both are products of a "sophisticated state of language and feeling."¹³ It was Vergil who perceived or felt an ambiguity underlying the whole mass of observance, belief, and legend concerned with the relation of the vegetative power to life and death, and expressed it through his own imagery. The mistletoe-simile is the dark and environmental aspect of his meaning, connecting it with the secrecies of the primitive mind. But the union of life and death implied by the simile could not have the same power—could not, in fact, convey its meaning at all—, if the same meaning had not already been presented by the primary and immediate image of the gold, hidden and lifeless in the living tree. One mode of thought enlarges the other, and works the whole into a complex and sinister unity.

Interlocked with the task of the bough and obviously parallel to it is the mission to find and bury Misenus (149-83; 212-35). The two signs complete and guarantee the two requests of the

¹² Norden, *Aeneis VI*,³ p. 166. He discards this paradoxical unity in his interpretation, however, for the *progress* of nature from death to life, which is a different matter.

¹³ W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (2nd ed., New Directions, 1947), p. 195. His discussion of the union of opposites in a single word is extremely valuable.

hero. As the first answers Aeneas' personal will, so the other follows upon his prayer for his people's settlement. Misenus is not for Vergil merely an awkward doublet of Palinurus. Each does correspond partially to Elpenor in the *Odyssey*, the fore-runner who goes down to the shades in advance of the hero. But beyond this each episode has something to express peculiar to itself and organic to the poem. The resolution in Misenus' case is relatively simple. He has been the trumpeter of Hector and Aeneas, giving the signal for the battles of the past. Vergil used him thus deliberately, to make him the embodiment of the *Troiana fortuna*, the unfortunate destiny of the race, for whose end Aeneas has prayed. Like Troy, he is dead but not buried and in that state pollutes the whole company of *Aeneadae*. Once he is laid to his final rest, they are made *casti* at last, free from the curse of the dead city, and can participate vicariously with their leader in the journey of purification and rebirth to a new land.

Underneath its stoical surface the *Aeneid* is a web of anti-thetic symbols, of tensions and oppositions never finally resolved. The golden bough is one of the most critical and complex events in this internal structure. For Aeneas it is a symbol of power to match and complete his own. But the completion is produced on the level of magic, of the wonderful conjunction of external things. It is the Sibyl as folk-woman who demands it, makes it possible, and limits it to this sphere. The bough then is a testament of power, but not of resolution. As in the prayer for settlement, the poet has brought his other self, the hero, to a point of expression which demands revelation, and again the sign which is given does not answer the demand.

Aeneas in praying to see his father has come as close as may be to a divine sensibility, to an ultimate inclusiveness and reconciliation with experience. He realizes in himself at last the inner meaning of that Tree of Life to which he is compared in the Fourth Book (441-6) :

ipsa haeret scopulis, et quantum vertice ad auras
aetherias, tantum radice in Tartara tendit.

The whole simile, of which this is the conclusion, compares Aeneas' stubbornness in the face of Dido's passion and Anna's

pleading to that of an oak wrenched but still undestroyed by the winds.¹⁴ In the context of the Fourth Book, the image seems rather too large for its setting. Aeneas is obeying the *fatum*, but there is not yet an adequate reason why in doing so he should encompass both hell and heaven. Vergil has suddenly passed beyond the immediate comparison and into a prophetic insight of something far deeper in the significance of Aeneas, which is not to be made plain until the descent to the underworld in the Sixth Book. The quest for the bough recalls images of tree, heaven, and hell in a pattern which completes the likeness. Aeneas is led to the bough by twin doves, creatures of the air and messengers of his divine mother. As they approach the goal (201-3):

inde ubi venere ad fauces grave olentis Averni,
tollunt se celeres liquidumque per aera lapsae
sedibus optatis geminae super arbore sidunt.

There is a symbolic upward movement here, both in the connotation of the birds and in their action. But the flight of the birds is not only a reaching to heaven; it is also an escape from hell. The tree is rooted in the jaws of Avernus, and the breath of the place is deadly (239-41):

quam super haud ullae poterant impune volantes
tendere iter pennis: talis sese halitus atris
faucibus effundens supera ad convexa ferebat.

¹⁴ The image comes directly from the *Georgics*, II, 291. There it refers to the *aesculus*, and is part of a practical discussion of how trees should be planted. The passage continues:

ergo non hiemes illam, non flabra neque imbres
convellunt. . . .

One could reason from this that the isolation of the image in the Fourth Book simply derives from the fact that it is copied. Storm and immobility suggest the tree-image from the *Georgics*, and the tree-image brings along heaven and hell as superfluous baggage. In spite of this I should like to argue for relevance. The image which joins tree with stress has a peculiar internal importance in the *Aeneid*. The vision of Troy overthrown by the gods in the Second Book culminates in the simile of the tree cut down by human hands. In the Fourth Book the man of Troy stands against a human storm. Certainly the *quantum vertice ad auras aetherias* takes on a relevant meaning in this context, and the whole sense is completed by the association with Aeneas, bough, and tree in the Sixth Book.

The doves can lead him to the tree which is in this case his magical counterpart, but no further. The creatures of heaven cannot enter hell. Only the hero himself, like the tree which carries both bough and doves, can unite the two in thought and actuality, the realms of his mother and of his father, *amor* and death.

In doing so, he strains the nature of mortality. Such a mode of experience is possible only beyond the bounds of the normal human faculties. When a sign is given to guarantee this inner experience, one must expect it to have a similarly transcendent quality, passing beyond the contrasts of nature to an ultimate harmony. The bough does not possess this quality. Like Aeneas himself, in the Sibyl's skeptical view, it is unnatural, embodying the contrasts of nature, rather than supernatural, transcending them. The scene of its finding is pure magical prescription. No words are spoken; everything is action and movement in a ritual silence. The rite is effective and the hero receives his power, but not the knowledge of what that power should mean. At the summit of his experience Aeneas looks for a sign, and finds it to be but a mirror-image of himself, life-in-death confronting death-in-life.¹⁵ The *amor* which impels him to pass living into death receives no answer. This deeper antithesis of success in action/frustration in knowledge is the central and fundamental significance of the golden bough. Certainly it is this which effects that curious distortion of the language at the moment of the bough's discovery. *Discolor aura*: not the light of revelation, but the dubious and shifting colors of the magic forest.¹⁶

The golden bough is a moment in a larger progress. The relation which it expresses between the hero and the world is one which is repeated at various levels and in various forms throughout the poem. Aeneas is continually arriving at a kind of order,

¹⁵ The mirror-image of the bough even has a quality of distortion and mockery; the dead parent/living child relationship, the substance of Aeneas' fulfilment, is reflected and inverted in it too, but like the mistletoe the bough is something *quod non sua seminat arbos*.

¹⁶ See M. Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (London, 1934), pp. 129-36. I am deeply indebted to Miss Bodkin's discussion of the bough. She is concerned, however, with seeking a universal archetype of the imagination which will include not only the bough but Dante's angel at the gates of Dis, and so tends to ignore some aspects of Vergil's own context.

a limited state of grace, and as continually finding that this is not the whole condition of his destiny. Always he must go on to more knowledge and suffering. The actual excludes consummation.

His world in Troy is that of the epic hero, and he is ready to fulfill the last demands of this heroism. In the last night of the city, the gods have departed from their worshippers: *λίπεν δέ εἰ Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων*. The hopeless struggle, however, must still remain as the hero's necessity (II, 351-3):

excessere omnes, aris adytisque relictis
di quibus imperium hoc steterat; succurritis urbi
incensae: moriamur et in media arma ruamus.

He expects his heroism to be futile; he does not expect it to be falsely construed. For he will see that the gods have not departed. They are still there, laboring at the destruction of their city. His vision of them at once denies him epic heroism and sends him forth in search of another means through which order may be found.

In Rome he attempts the opposite, the pastoral construction of the world, taking on the humility and communion of the Arcadian kingdom (VIII, 364-5):

aude, hospes, contemnere opes et te quoque dignum
finge deo.

But his assumption of the mantle of Hercules plunges this same kingdom into war, kills its heir, and destroys the *aurea aetas* to which he has just been admitted. Even before the event he realizes that this effort at order is not the end (VIII, 520-2):

vix ea fatus erat, defixique ora tenebant
Aeneas Anchisiades et fidus Achates
multaque dura suo tristi cum corde putabant.

The end of the poem brings no finality of knowledge. The Fury, for all her terror, is the angel of Jupiter, bringing the decision and the peace Aeneas has looked for so long. But he is blind to her, and sees only, in his private rage, the belt of Pallas. Dido's curse is already coming true, in a sense deeper than its original intention (IV, 618-19):

nec, cum se sub leges pacis iniquae
tradiderit, regno aut optata luce fruatur.

Aeneas never fully possesses either the light or the kingdom that is ordained for him. Clearly the kingdom—Rome or Lavinium—is a historical fact, and Aeneas' failure to realize it is evolved circumstantially from the myth. It is far stranger, and more moving, that he never fully possesses that divine order of which he is the literal and symbolic carrier. Vergil seeks justification for Aeneas, not only by time, as Ancestor of the City, but in experience, as the individual who is driven by forces and looks for a personal fulfilment outside and beyond himself. The justification is never found. This failure is what we have already taken to be the central thread of the *Aeneid*, and the episodes quoted above, above all that of the bough, lie very close to it. The *Aeneid* is an attack on the part of the indeterminate, the various and fallible nature of man, upon the necessities both of history and of fate. The attack begins by assuming conquest; it ends by implying defeat and destruction. Man does not fit in history. Neither the hero nor the poet ever comes to terms with the ends which are so easily postulated and so desperately sought throughout the poem.

The *Aeneid* is a work in limbo. Vergil had left behind the satisfactory order informing his previous work—*fortunatus et ille*. He was in passage to the end of his own life-journey, never to be achieved;

felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas.

The world of the *Aeneid* lies between the two, and hints at failure of the capacity to go further. The causes of things are never to be known with the same ecstatic certainty as Lucretius'. Neither causes nor things are the same, in Vergil's world. They are revealed, not deduced, and conceal themselves again in the act of revelation. In the Fourth Canto of the *Inferno* Dante has his master say of the sphere which he inhabits for eternity:

semo perdoti, e sol di tanto offesi
che senza speme vivemo in disio.

At the center of Vergil's poem, the golden bough, in all its density of suggestion, is the primary symbol of this splendid despair.

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