

## Dead, Living, and Unborn Meet in Vergil's Underworld

It is a standard feature of *katabasis* narratives for the hero to meet dead relatives or loved ones: Odysseus sees his mother and Orpheus finds his wife (Jáuregui 2015: 19). But only Aeneas finds unborn souls on his journey, which is both logically incompatible and out of step with previously established norms for this narrative type. The mixing of dead, living, and unborn within the space of the underworld is an “unnatural” combination. In this context, “unnatural” refers to narrative elements that either violate logic or reality, conflict with established story rules, or force readers into non-standard interpretive frames. (Alber et al. 2013: 102-4). In short, the final underworld scene of the “Parade of Heroes” (6.756–892) combines previously distinct elements to create an unnatural and impossible group of figures who are allowed to meet and interact despite contradicting the rules of genre, logic, and reality.

The *katabasis* of Aeneas does more than just provide context the hero's own life and future. What he learns in the underworld expands the narrative scope beyond the traditional horizons of epic into the historical and aetiological realms (Zetzel 1997: 135). To prepare him for the task of founding Rome, Aeneas is shown the whole course of Roman history by his father Anchises. But in this case, the history has actually not yet happened, and Aeneas receives an education from his descendants rather than his ancestors as would be proper (Freudenburg 2017: 122–4). This is prophecy on a new scale, which foretells an entire culture rather than the events of one life, far beyond the confines of any previous example of underworld foretelling.

Vergil's underworld provides a nexus of unnatural elements: it is a place where time flows inconsistently; the future can be remembered like the past; and the dead, living, and unborn can meet. Aeneas is permitted to view the Roman future all the way down to the time of

the author. Although Vergil himself does not appear, the mention of his contemporaries like Augustus and Marcellus makes it clear that the worlds of author and character are merged in this moment. The underworld not only violates conventions within the narrative, but fully leaves behind the fiction of mimetic accuracy. This is a positively postmodern narrative turn from a time period that is best known for its mimetic genres—tragedy and epic. When ancient works are mentioned as unnatural, it is mostly parodists like Aristophanes, Lucian, or Apuleius who write more obviously non-mimetic stories. But the Aeneid has high status as a traditional narrative of the western canon, and yet this unnatural nexus of events is hiding in its very core.

The presence of contemporary figures like Marcellus and Augustus presents the most compelling arguments for the unnatural character of this scene. The treatment of Marcellus is striking given his recent death at the time of the epic's publication. This background event means that Anchises gives him a eulogy, even though in the underworld Marcellus is still unborn and full of potential. His inclusion in the parade has been variously interpreted as an acknowledgment of the loss inherent to an empire (Feeney 1986: 15) or a promise that Rome will endure despite such losses (Stahl 1998: 128). But aside from these readings, the "unnaturalness" of Marcellus remains. He is at once alive and dead, the future and the past, and wholly an enigma in the context of the work. He is a microcosm of the parade as a whole, which exists only because of the unique environment of the underworld and novelty of the narrative design.

## Bibliography

- Alber, J., Iversen, S., Nielsen, H. S., & Richardson, B. (2013). What Really Is Unnatural Narratology? *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 5, 101–118.
- Feeney, D. C. (1986). History and Revelation in Vergil's Underworld. *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 32, 1–24.
- Freudenburg, K. (2017). Seeing Marcellus in Aeneid 6. *Journal of Roman Studies*, 107, 116–139.
- Jáuregui, M. H. D. (2015). Traditions of Catabatic Experience in Aeneid 6. *Les Études Classiques*, 83, 329–349.
- Stahl, H.-P. (Ed.). (1998). *Vergil's Aeneid: Augustan epic and political context*. Duckworth, in association with the Classical Press of Wales.
- Zetzel, J. E. G. (1997). Rome and its traditions. In C. Martindale (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Virgil* (pp. 188–203). Cambridge University Press.