September 1994

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Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 30, no.3, September 1994, p. 162-170

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Cupid at the Ivory Gates:  
Ausonius as a Reader of Vergil’s Aeneid  

by N. GREGSON DAVIS

Ausonius’ CUPIDO CRUCIATUS is a witty “eclogue” in hexameter verse that purports to depict a katabasis of Cupid.¹ Through the time-honored device of ekphrasis—in this instance, the description of a painting the author claims to have seen at Trèves—Ausonius graphically recounts a bizarre episode in the life of the love god: Cupid is shown on a visit to the fields of mourning (lugentes campi)—the site in the underworld where Vergil had located famous heroines who met a violent death on account of amor. Upon recognizing their divine tormentor, the heroines proceed to assail and, in their turn, torment the intruder. In the climactic scene they tie him to a myrtle tree and subject him to a collective and bloody scourging. This vengeful punishment,² which is carried to an extreme by none other than Cupid’s own mother, Venus, is eventually halted at the intercession of the heroines themselves; whereupon the harrowed god is released and, awakening from his nightmare, leaves the underworld by the gate of ivory. The surprise denouement is encapsulated in the following five line coda:

talia noctumis olim simulacra figuris
exercet trepidam casso terrore quietem.
quae postquam multa perpessus nocte Cupido
effugit, pulse tandem caligine somni
evolat ad superos portaque evadit eburna.

Such visions with their night-born shapes sometimes disturb his rest, disquieting it with idle fears. When these he has endured through a great part of the night, Cupid flees forth, banishing sleep’s gloom at last, flits forth to the gods above, and passes forth by the gate of ivory.³

The connection Ausonius explicitly posits between nightmare visions and the sleeper’s subsequent escape through the porta eburna raises intriguing questions of narratological import for both his own representation of Cupid’s illusory

². The emblematic nature of the punishment reflects manifold religious and literary sources, pagan as well as Christian. Among the former, which include Orphic and Dionysiac mythical motifs, are Greek ekphrastic epigrams depicting a bound Eros (see detailed analysis in Vitry [1894]).
³. Translations of Ausonius reproduced in this article are by Evelyn-White (1919).
katabasis and its Vergilian intertext. For instance, what can we infer from this playful imitation about Ausonius’ interpretation of the notorious enigma that has exercised scholars and exegetes since the time of Servius—the exit of Aeneas and the Sibyl through the gate of false dreams at the close of Aeneid 6? The answer I shall be adumbrating here may help to elucidate a late antique author’s reading of a famous classical locus, as well as an important strand of the vast exegetical tradition surrounding Vergil’s own narrative.

Since the intertextual horizon of Ausonius’ allusion extends beyond the text of Aeneid 6, let us take the preliminary step of revisiting Vergil’s appropriation of the original topos from Odyssey 19. In going over this well-trodden ground, it is important that we avoid the common error of confining our analysis to the two short passages that enclose the topos of “the gates of sleep/dreams,” while ignoring the larger narrative frameworks of both the Homeric and Vergilian epics.

To grasp the wider significance of Penelope’s reference to the “gates of dreams” in Odyssey 19, it is necessary to recall that she invokes the motif in the context of the verification of a dream interpretation that she has reported to the disguised Odysseus. As the late Jack Winkler has shrewdly reminded us, Penelope’s reported dream regarding the eagle and the geese is idiosyncratic in so far as it encodes its own interpretation: “Note how odd this is. She has asked for an interpretation; but the dream itself contains its own interpretation, a unique event in the annals of oneirokrisy. She has in effect given the beggar both an allegory and its interpretation and is asking him whether she is right” (Winkler [1990] 153). In the dream narrative as presented by Penelope, the eagle (who stands for Odysseus) returns to decipher the allegory of the very script in which it has figured, employing in the process “a mortal voice” (Od.19.545). The “oneirokritic” curiosity is not lost on Odysseus, who immediately moves to endorse the embedded interpretation in no uncertain terms:

“Ὅ γάρναι, οὐ πωλ ὑποκρίνομαι τηθρόν ἄλλη ἀποκλίναντ’, ἐπεὶ ἦ γάρ τοι αὐτὸς Ὀδυσσεύς πέφρασ’, ὅπως τελείω μνήμητοι δὲ φαίνετ’ ὀλέθρος τάσι μᾶλ’. οὐδέ κε τίς θάνατον καὶ κῆρας ἄλυξε.”

“Lady, in no wise is it possible to wrest this dream aside and give it another meaning, since verily Odysseus himself has shown thee how he will bring it to pass. For the wooers’ destruction is plain to see, for one and all; not one of them shall escape death and the fates.”

(19.555-58)

4. E.g., Rutherford (1992), who refers to “Vergil’s mysterious imitation” of the Homeric Gates of Sleep. For a succinct review of scholarly interpretations of the mystery from antiquity to the present, see Vanucci (1989) 50-51.

It is at this juncture in the exchange that Penelope introduces the question of the inherent difficulty of validating dream interpretation in general:

Penelope’s twin etymological puns interlinking elephas (ivory) with elephairomai (deceive) and keras (horn) with kraino (fulfill) serve to underscore the basis of her professed scepticism: the truth or falsehood of a dream interpretation (she contends) is only revealed in the course of time. Since the dream is read as a prophecy, the diachronic playing out of the prognosis is crucial to its verification. Future fulfillment, then, is the unique touchstone: certitude is deferred unless and until the predicted event actually occurs. To rephrase the dream interpreter’s doubt in “Freudian” terms (which, as we shall argue later, are by no means alien to Ausonius’ own dream psychology), Penelope has no way of differentiating a “wish-fulfillment dream” from a reliable prescription for the future. In short, once the axis of time has been put forward as the ultimate test of veracity, Penelope can plausibly insist on the opacity of the dream’s meaning, despite the internal (and Odysseus’ external) corroboration of its transparency (eagle = Odysseus; geese = suitors).

The hermeneutic horizon Homer has sketched out functions as a basic subtext for the Vergil passage; for the issue of prognosis and fulfillment casts its oblique shadow over Aeneas’ exit from the underworld in the company of the Sibyl. Prophecy, after all, has not only defined the Sibyl’s role in the epic, it has also been central to the role of Aeneas’ father, Anchises. The latter, in fact, is represented at the end of Book 6 as having just uttered a famous prophecy (the
so-called “parade of heroes”) concerning prominent figures in Roman history—a prophecy that the privileged reader can “verify” from his own knowledge of that history. Since the Vergilian narrator has foreshortened, if not virtually eliminated, the deferral of fulfillment, the verification of Anchises’ script is curiously simultaneous with its utterance.

But there is more to Vergil’s narratological “cunning” (to borrow Winkler’s terminology) than the deceptive reassurance we may temporarily derive from the confirmation of Anchises’ prophecies. It is commonly (though inaccurately) asserted by commentators that “Vergil” makes Aeneas and the Sibyl leave the world of the dead by the gate of ivory. Strictly speaking, however, the exit is delicately mediated; for it is Anchises, not the narrator, who is credited with directing the two pilgrims back to the upper air:

Sent geminæ Somni portae, quarum altera fertur
cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,
altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia manes.

his ibi tum natum Anchises unaque Sibyllam
prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna.

There are two gates of Sleep: one of these (men say)
is made of horn, and through it easy exit is
accorded to true apparitions; the other is finished
with the radiant glow of ivory, but through it
the shades send false apparitions to the world above.
With these words Anchises then and there ushers his
son together with the Sibyl, and sends them forth
through the gate of ivory.6

(6.893-98)

In the jargon now made familiar by de Jong (1987), the exit of Aeneas may be said to be “focalized” by the action of another figure in the narrative. The ascription of this particular choice of route to Anchises is far from trivial in its implications. At the very least it problematizes the role of the protagonist’s father as purveyor of transparent truth, for he is a representative of those very manes, who, we have just been told by the narrator, “send false insomnia to the world above” (896). From a metonymic perspective, Anchises’ gesture of “emission” tends to blur, if not render opaque, the reader’s perception of the travellers themselves and their recent peregrinations. If the two figures appear, at least by association, to be assimilable to the apparitions that appear in false dreams, then they are ipso facto made to function as signs, whose interpretation on the part of the reader is far from translucent. By the same token, they are provisionally analogous to the “sender” himself, as he is represented elsewhere in the Aeneid; for Anchises has at several crucial points in the narrative appeared to Aeneas in his sleep. A salient example occurs in Book 4, where Aeneas, in seeking to justify

6. I cite the text of the Aeneid in the edition of Sabbadini (1930); English versions are my own.
to Dido his decision to leave her, appeals to the repeated oneiric warnings of his father’s *imago*:

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

As often as night hides the earth with moistening shades, as often as the fiery stars rise, I am warned in my dreams by the gloomy apparition of my father Anchises.

(4.351-53)

Before shifting our focus from the Vergilian manipulation of the “gates of dreams” topos to its Ausonian permutation, let us lay to rest an interpretive ghost that reappears sporadically in the commentaries on *Aeneid* 6. In his ekphrasis of the *Somni portae*, Vergil employs the expression *verae umbrae* (“true apparitions”) in a rhetorical structure that makes clear its antithetical relation to *falsa insomnia* (“false apparitions”). Conington, who grasped the synonymity of *umbra* and *insomnium* in this passage, correctly glosses *umbrae* as “real spirits that appear in sleep” (Conington [1876] ad 894). As functional equivalents of the Greek *enupnion*, the two words are here used interchangeably. Conington goes on to note that the epithet *falsa*, modifying *insomnium*, “probably refers both to the quality of the apparition and to the message that it brings.” Such a contextual understanding of the connotations of *verae umbrae* invalidates, in my view, the jejune and all too common opinion that Aeneas and the Sibyl are made to exit by the ivory gate because they are manifestly not “true shades” (i.e., they are alive, not dead).8 This attempt to trivialize the passage rests on a patent misreading of Vergil’s text, which, as we have seen, turns on the subtle issue of distinguishing between true and false *dream visions*.

How did Ausonius hear the Vergilian cadence to the underworld suite? Did the ivory gate sequel appear to him to be dissonant with the terms of the preceding *katabasis* narrative? An important clue may be found in a passage from his poem, *Ephemeris*, which also alludes to the twin gates:

```
divinum perhibent vatem sub frondibus ulmi
vana ignavorum simulacra locasse soporum
et geminas numero portas: quae fomice ebumo
semper fallaces glomerat super aera
formas~
anter qua veros emittit cornea visus.
quod si de dubiis conceditur optio nobis,
desse fidem laetis melius quam vana timeri.
```

7. Cp. 5.722-39, where the Anchises phantom appears to Aeneas, reassures the anxious hero of his genuineness and provides timely and comforting information.
8. This interpretation is trenchantly criticized by Norden (1957) ad loc.
They say the heavenly bard set for the empty phantoms of sluggish sleep a place beneath an elm-tree’s leaves, and appointed them two gates: that which is arched with ivory ever pours forth upon the air a host of deceptive shapes: the second is of horn and sends forth visions of the truth. But if I am granted a choice regarding these dubious matters, better that cheerful visions deceive us than we should fear illusory ones.9

(8. 22-28)

Ausonius here combines allusions to two separate Vergilian loci regarding the subterranean existence of false dream visions: Aen. 6.282-84 (where these are located among the leaves of an elm tree) and the “gates of sleep” passage whose complex signification we have been seeking to unravel. The combination suggests that, in the conception of Ausonius, at least (and contrary to the views of some modern scholars),10 there is no inconsistency between the two loci: on the authority of “the heavenly bard” dreams reside among the leaves of the elm, and issue forth, as appropriate, via either the horn or the ivory gate. Ausonius’ musings about dream hermeneutics (“quod si de dubiis conceditur optio nobis” 27) are extremely circumspect: he even goes so far as to express the wish that all dreams should be unfulfilled (vana). The dreamer cannot be sure that the apparitions he sees are “true,” in the sense that the message they are meant to purvey (in particular, the content of their prognoses) will be fulfilled. Homer’s Penelope would have been very much in tune with such sceptical sentiments.

The discussion of dream visions in Ephemeris 8 is fundamentally consonant with the closure of the Cupido Cruciatus. In the latter poem, the love god’s terrifying vision is retrospectively revealed by the narrator to have been a nightmare, and the entire episode in the fields of mourning is hereby exposed as a “false” phenomenon (a falsum insomnium in Vergil’s terms). The manner of the final authorial revelation is instructive: the dreamer’s exit from the underworld (the final incident within the framework of the dream narrative) is represented as coincident with his awakening from sleep (the moment of rupture of the dream narrative). Underworld sojourn and dream text are coterminous. This convergence is not, however, entirely deferred to the poem’s close, for if Green is indeed correct in asserting that “for Ausonius aer was the place of dreams” (Green [1991] ad loc.), then a dreamscape is already subtly foreshadowed in the Vergilian tag that launches the opening hexameter:

aeris in campis, memorat quos musa Maronis

In the aerial fields, told of in Vergil’s verse.

9. This sentence is my own substitution for that of Evelyn-White’s: “But if dreams of doubtful import leave us the choice, better that cheerful sights deceive us than we should fear with a cause.”

10. See, e.g., Norden (1957) 47, who asserts that the motif of the “gate of dreams” “widerspricht auch der Lokalisation der Träume am Hadeseingang” (282ff).
In the perspective of hindsight, Ausonius’ ivory gate is a trope that operates simultaneously on two levels: it marks the boundary, for the dreamer, between sleep and wake; and it also constitutes the means of entry and exit for the dreamer’s false visions. In this dual conception of the gate’s liminal function, both the dreamer himself and the stuff of his dreams share the same passageway. It is therefore plausible to extrapolate an Ausonian reading of Aeneas’ katabasis as a dreamlike peregrination. If such an extrapolation is valid, it should encourage us to revise the widespread assumption among modern philologists that the oneiric interpretation of Aeneas’ descent is a relatively late critical phenomenon. Whether or not we see Ausonius as having succeeded in reconstructing Vergil’s “intention” regarding the status of Aeneas’ journey, the late antique poet nonetheless appears to have anticipated modern critics like Otis, who have argued eloquently for the “subjectivity” of the narrative episode (Otis [1964]).

A similar notion of “subjectivity” avant la lettre seems to underpin Ausonius’ speculations, not only about dreams and reality (cp. our analysis of the Ephemeras passage above), but also about the general psychological phenomenon that we would now refer to as “externalization.” In the course of describing the heroines’ motivations in attacking the god of sexual desire, for example, he perceptively remarks:

\[ \text{se quisque absolvere gestit} \]
\[ \text{transferat ut proprias aliena in crimina culpas} \]

Each to acquit herself of blame, seeks to lay her offences to another’s charge.

(63-64)

The insight he offers here echoes the sentiment set forth in the prose preface apropos of the same lovesick figures of legend, whom he accuses of blaming the gods for their own libido: “Cupidinem cruci affigunt mulieres amatrices, non istae de nostro saeculo quae sponte peccant, sed illae heroicæ quae sibi ignoscunt et plectunt deum” (“Cupid is being nailed to the cross by certain love-lorn women—not those lovers of our own day, who fall into sin of their own free will, but those heroic lovers who excuse themselves and blame the gods”). Cupid’s nightmare descent and punishment imply a parallel psychological critique on the speaker’s part, in so far as these dream episodes may be said to reflect the love god’s intrapsychic guilt, as well as his acute anxiety at being held accountable for his mischievous deeds.

The sophistication of Ausonius as a reader with a surprisingly modern orientation is also manifest in his “metapoetic” interventions concerning the technique of ekphrasis (cp. Nugent [1990] 240-47). Several contemporary critics of both Vergil and Homer have sought to demonstrate a thematic rapprochement

11. An exception is Vanucci (1989) 51, who hypothesizes that the “oneiric” reading may have been contemporary with, if not invented by, Ausonius.
between epic ekphrases (such as the shields of Achilles and of Aeneas) and their larger narrative frames. As a keen, as well as profound, reader of Vergil, Ausonius was no doubt aware that two different, but related, types of ekphrasis frame Aeneas’ katabasis: the description of Daedalus’ panels in the entryway of the temple to Apollo at the beginning of the trip (6.20-33), and the portrayal of the twin gates of sleep at the end (“ekphrasis loci”). The links between the content of the two ekphrases and the narrative context are more evident in the case of the former, since today’s reader, at least, has little difficulty in understanding Daedalus as an allegorical figure for the artist in general or in making the metaphorical association between the labyrinth and the underworld journey. The symmetrical “ring” structure formed by the two arching descriptions may suggest that the latter, more opaque one marking the hero’s egress also carries a message about the “subjectivity” of the ascent no less than the descent.

In Ausonius’ astute adaptation of the Vergilian sequence of descent and ascent, the distinction between framing and ekphrastic (embedded) narration is somewhat blurred. After the epistolary preface identifying the painting for the addressee, Ausonius plunges immediately into the verse description of its subject. The closing coda, however, does not make clear whether the exit of Cupid through the ivory gate is or is not represented in the painting. The generalizing tenor of the lines preceding the awakening of the god creates the impression that we are listening to the author’s editorial reflections on what he has been depicting: “talia nocturnis olim simulacra figuris / exercent trepidam casso terrore quietem.” On the other hand, the upward escape of the love god may equally plausibly be conceived as part of a suite of narrative panels (“evolat ad superos portaque vadit eburna”). In addition to this indeterminacy of boundaries (pictura/poesis) at the close, Ausonius earlier interjects a reference to pictura within the body of the narrative in a way that is archly self-reflexive:

\[
\text{tota quoque aeriae Minoia fabula Cretae} \\
\text{picturarum instar tenui sub imagine vibrat:} \\
\text{Pasiphaeae nivei sequitur vestigia tauri,} \\
\text{licia fert glomerata manu deserta Ariadne,} \\
\text{respicit abiectas desperans Phaedra tabellas.} \\
\]

Here also the whole story of Minos and aery Crete glimmers like some faint-limned pictured scene: Pasiphaeae follows the footsteps of her snow-white bull, forlorn Ariadne carries a ball of twine in her hand, hopeless Phaedra looks back at the tablets she has cast away.

\[(28-32)\]

Since the ostensible point of departure of the poem’s narration is a description of a wall painting (“tabulam pictam in pariete”), the redundant effect of the simile

12. See, e.g., Williams (1972) 458-69 on the ekphrasis on the doors of Apollo’s temple at Cumae. For an elaborate treatment of Homeric narrative along these lines, cp. the recent work of Stanley (1993).
13. An attempt at reconstructing the painted scenes is provided by Fauth (1974). Nugent (1990) 241 astutely points out, however, that in Ausonius the ekphrasis “often strove to exceed the visual.”
is to conjure an “ekphrasis within an ekphrasis.” It is perhaps not fortuitous that 
the legendary material selected for this quasi-baroque double embedding is the 
Minoiafabula—the very subject matter that informed the artistic preoccupations 
of Vergil’s Daedalus. Ausonius thus achieves contradictory effects in his 
representational poetics: he sometimes blurs, and at other times makes salient, 
the ekphrastic illusion in which the verbal narrative is cast. Throughout his 
miniature katabasis, however, he never loses sight of the Vergilian model, 
despite ancillary allusions to other texts by Ovid and Statius.14

Ausonius’ eclogue furnishes a slender, but by no means insignificant, clue to 
the hermeneutic labyrinth of Aeneid 6. Despite the author’s self-deprecating 
remarks15 in his preface to his ineptia poetandi, his brand of intertextuality is 
highly nuanced and reveals a sophisticated reading of Vergil’s text that recog­
nizes its narratological complexity. The fact that Ausonius locates his divine 
protagonist in a specifically Vergilian landscape (“aeris in campis, memorat 
quos musa Maronis”) invites the reader to ponder the topographic symbolism of 
the intertext. While the Cupido Cruciatus categorically represents the love god’s 
katabasis as a nightmare, it also obliquely reveals an awareness of the ambiguity 
of the Vergilian closure to Aeneid 6. That closure, as often in Vergil’s poetry, 
provokes questions (epistemological no less than narratological) that render the 
status of the underworld episode opaque and, like a dream narrative, only dimly 
decipherable.

14. On the extensiveness of the allusions to various authors in the Cupido see Vanucci (1989).
15. Such self-deprecation is a well-worn prefatory topos, which has a famous antecedent in Catullus’ nugae.