The Roman Self in Late Antiquity

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An Epic Successor?
Prudentius, *Aeneid* 6, and Roman Epic Tradition

The *Psychomachia*’s linguistic borrowing from the *Aeneid*¹ has led critics to rely on their interpretation of the *Aeneid* when approaching the *Psychomachia*. The implicit result of this working assumption is the proposition that the way in which one reads the *Aeneid* directly affects one’s reading of the *Psychomachia*.² In light of this assumption and the documented literary dependence of the *Psychomachia* on the *Aeneid*, however, discussion has not fully exploited their rich intertextual relationship.³ Generations of scholars uncovered linguistic parallels to demonstrate Prudentius’ “parasitic” relationship with Vergil,⁴ but more recent approaches construct this relationship differently: as either antagonistic, with the Christian poet painting his pagan rival as an inferior,⁵ or ambivalent, representing an unresolved tension between pagan epic techniques and Christian content.⁶ Yet these advances have not adequately revealed Prudentius’ deep engagement with Roman epic tradition and its dominant author, Vergil—a state of affairs that has excluded the *Psychomachia* from its rightful place in the history of epic.⁷ In three recent treatments of the subject, Prudentius is given no mention while Claudian, for instance, is given significant space.⁸ Therefore, a reexamination of Prudentius’ relationship with Vergil and of the Christian poet’s role in the development of epic is in order.
To this end, I argue in this chapter that, from the first line of the *Psychomachia* to its epilogue, Prudentius programmatically engages *Aeneid* 6 in an effort to transform the political, ethical, and metaphysical landscape of Vergil’s master narrative.\(^9\) *Katabasis*, the descent of the epic hero Aeneas to the underworld, an exercise in self-definition, and a harbinger of national and spiritual identity, provides a basis for the *Psychomachia*’s narrative, as well as for the rite of passage which its poet and reader must complete to reach their individual, and national, Christian identity.\(^10\) This intertextual bond between the *Psychomachia* and *Aeneid* 6 reveals a literary purpose.\(^11\) From the first line of the *Psychomachia*, Prudentius places his poem squarely in the Roman epic tradition, which Vergil spearheads. Specifically, Prudentius’ manipulation of the notion of *katabasis* as a trial permits the Christian poet to appropriate several epic categories, such as the source of poetic inspiration, theology, the hero, and national identity. The invocation of the *Psychomachia*, the centrally placed battle between *Avaritia* and *Operatio*, and the epilogue, as well as other passages, allude systematically to *Aeneid* 6, reinforcing the picture of the soul’s journey from mortality and death to life and immortality. The journey turns on a moral and spiritual choice between virtue and vice. To choose virtue and Christianity represents a radical conversion that, if replicated in enough individuals, engenders a Christian community—that is, a Christian Rome.\(^12\)

The chapter falls into two sections. In the first part, which forms the bulk of the chapter, I shall demonstrate that the *Psychomachia* firmly implants the *Aeneid*’s *katabasis* within its structure and meaning through systematic allusion. This allusive program furnishes a way of reading the *Psychomachia* that exposes the poem’s epic purpose and ambitions. In the briefer, final section of the chapter, I suggest several ways in which Prudentius’ appropriation of Vergil’s *katabasis* reworks fundamental categories of epic (e.g., the heroic trial, the nature of the hero, and the idea of Rome). I conclude that the Christian poet deserves the status of an epic successor to Vergil and the Roman epic tradition.

**Prudentius Engages Vergil: Underworld, Soul, and *Katabasis***

In its first line, the *Psychomachia* so directly engages the *Aeneid* that it is difficult not to conclude that the Christian poet sees himself and this work as the epic successor to Vergil and the *Aeneid*.\(^13\)

\[
\text{Christe, graves hominum semper miserate laores} \quad \text{(*Psych. 1*)}
\]
\[
\text{Christ, you always take pity on the heavy sufferings of human beings}
\]
Phoebe, gravis Troiae semper miserate labores  
Phoebus, you always take pity on the heavy sufferings of Troy

Prudentius has adapted *Aeneid* 6.56, excepting the words *Phoebe* and *Troiae*. In one line the poet shows how everything has changed. No longer is Apollo the inspiration for poetry as the Augustans traditionally held;¹⁴ no longer do pagan gods exercise divine authority; no longer do we live in a pagan past but, instead, dwell in a Christian present with a bright future; and finally, instead of a concern for Trojans becoming Romans it is now Romans who must become universal citizens in the new celestial order.¹⁵ Prudentius’ engagement with Vergil betrays a sense of literary history that ancient poets, as a group, furnish and is widespread throughout the history of epic. Vergil did to Homer what Prudentius does to him.¹⁶ In the first line of the *Aeneid*, he replaces the *Odyssey’s* ἐνδρα with *arma* (echoing the sound of Homer), thus not only signaling his subject matter but also inviting the reader to compare the works of the authors.¹⁷ As Gian Biagio Conte has reminded us, lines like these are where epic’s defining characteristics are indicated “so that the new text enters the literary system as a literary work, as though by hereditary right.”¹⁸ Just as the text of the *Aeneid* through its engagement with Homer endeavors to transcend its genre and privilege itself in literary history, as it privileges Rome’s *imperium* in history,¹⁹ so *Psychomachia* 1, when it alludes to *Aeneid* 6.56, “announces” its own ambition to enter the epic “literary system” the *Aeneid* spearheads.²⁰

If we examine further the contexts and words that the lines share, similarities and differences arise. Both Aeneas and Prudentius are praying. Aeneas is at his most priestlike in *Aeneid* 6, performing sacrifices, engaging in ritualistic activity, and acting as the conduit between his Trojan comrades, the oracular pronouncements of the Sibyl, and the seemingly oracular words of Anchises. The sacred words Aeneas hears hold the key to knowledge of his destiny and that of his men who desperately need a home. Analogously, the poet of the *Psychomachia* prays for himself and the human race, laying out in his poetry through the interpretation of sacred texts the knowledge of individual and collective salvation, which is allegorically portrayed in the *Praefatio* through the metaphor of home²¹—in fact, *domus* is the last word of the *Psychomachia’s* preface. Taken together with the *Psychomachia’s* entrance into the context of the Trojans’ quest for home in *Aeneid* 6, the line overflows with surplus meaning. Aeneas and the Trojans seek an earthly city, enduring great difficulties and
trusting in their destiny, whereas all human beings in the new dispensation (should) seek the heavenly city of the soul that is presented in the second half of the *Psychomachia* and is a construction that is well-ordered, peaceful, virtuous, and preserved by an abiding faith in the Christian god.

Like the Trojans’ quest for home in the *Aeneid*, the search for home in the *Psychomachia* (that is, the search for salvation) requires the endurance of suffering, *labores*. The Trojans suffer at the hands of the Greeks, lose their city, and are forced to undertake a long and arduous journey. In the *Psychomachia*, human beings bring suffering upon themselves through original sin and their freely chosen, immoral behavior. This suffering is overcome through a radical conversion of the soul, figured as a journey, in which a victorious struggle within each person between virtue and vice results in an ideal soul. In the *Psychomachia*, the exterior and worldly vicissitudes of Aeneas’ and the Trojans’ *labores* are rearticulated as taking place inside a person, in her soul, in the form of vice that causes suffering. Moreover, rejection of vice by the Christian soul is an attempt to keep the world on the outside, where vice originates. This movement from the exterior-oriented narrative of the *Aeneid* to the interior struggle of the person, hinted at in the first line of the *Psychomachia*, sets the stage for the poem’s allusive appropriation of underworld landscape of *Aeneid* 6 to describe the soul’s inner battle between the virtues and the vices. The soul’s struggle becomes comparable to an epic descent into hell, a trial, so that the soul might become pure for meeting God.

*Miserate* supports similar observations but from the perspective of the divine. When Aeneas states that Apollo “takes pity” on Trojan suffering, he is crediting the god with ending Trojan homelessness and further, as the reader of the *Aeneid* comprehends, granting civic glory to the proto-Romans. The idea of Rome casts a long shadow over the actions of Aeneas and the Trojans. Rome also plays an important role in the *Psychomachia*’s Christian worldview, if we take into account the poem’s civic discourse (e.g., the civil war narrative during the *Avaritia* section), the civic themes and language of Prudentius’ other works such as the *Contra Symmachum* and *Peristephanon* and, finally, the intertextual civic context of *Aeneid* 6. For Christ to “take pity” on human suffering is to forgive humans for their self-inflicted spiritual and ethical state, to watch over each person as she undergoes the trial with the vices, and to grant each individual’s soul eternal life. As we see by the end of the poem, this can only happen if each person exercises her freedom to choose and construct her own temple/city of the soul as a faithful follower of the Christian God.
Through such conversions, the city of human beings, Rome, will prosper and live on.

A brief summary of the early section of *Aeneid 6* will help set out certain themes and highlight diction that the *Psychomachia* purposefully exploits. *Aeneid 6* opens with Aeneas arriving at the temple of Apollo and the cave of the Sibyl at Cumae, where he will receive guidance on how to reach the underworld (*Aeneid* 6.1–13). His mission is crucial because he will find out—in general terms at the very least—what the future holds for him and his men (*Aeneid* 6.11–13). While awaiting the arrival of the Sibyl, Aeneas and the men gaze at murals upon which the story of Daedalus is depicted (*Aeneid* 6.14–30). When the Sibyl arrives and startles them out of their bemusement over these images, Aeneas prays to Apollo—from whence the Prudentian invocation comes—to grant safe passage to Latium, in return for which he will build the god of prophecy a marble temple (*Aeneid* 6.56–76). After the Sibyl becomes divinely possessed, she predicts that the Trojans will experience “great dangers” (*magnis . . . periclis*) “grievous woes” (*graviora*), “wars” (*bella, horrida bella*), and “misfortunes” (*malis*) (*Aen. 6.83–97*). Aeneas replies that he has seen it all, *non ulla laborum, / o virgo, nova mi facies inopinave surgit* (*Aeneid* 6.103–104), and requests a meeting in the underworld with his father from whom he will receive a more detailed blueprint of the future.

*Psychomachia* 5–6 exhibits language familiar from *Aeneid* 6.55:

*disserere, rex noster, quo milite pellere culpas*  
*men armata queat nostri de pectoris antro,*  
*Say, our king, with what fighting force the soul is furnished and is able to expel the sins from*  
*the cavern of the breast,*

* . . . funditque preces rex *pectore ab imo:*  
* . . . and the king [of the Teucrians] pours forth*  
*prayers from his inmost heart:*

The context of Aeneas “praying” from his inmost being resonates with Prudentius’ prayer and invocation to Christ. The association of the image of the cave with the soul or mind is explicit in Prudentius and implicit in *Aeneid 6* where Aeneas’ inner consternation is highlighted as he leaves the Sibyl’s cave:

* . . . quibis altus Apollo*  
*praesidet, horrendaeque procul secreta Sibyllae,*  
*antrum immane,* petit, magnam cui mentem animumque
Delius inspirat vates aperitque futura.
Where Apollo sits enthroned, and a vast cavern
hard by, hidden haunt of the dread Sibyl, into whom
the Delian seer breathes a mighty mind and soul
revealing the future.

ingreditur, linquens antrum, caecosque volutat (Aen. 6.157–58)
eventus animo secum . . .

[Aeneas] wends his way, quitting the cavern, and
ponders in his mind the dark issues.

Both passages acknowledge the tension between receiving directions for future
success and the ability to understand and carry out such prescriptions. Just as
Aeneas must follow Apollo’s directions via the Sibyl to found Rome, so must
Prudentius, and the reader, follow Christ’s doctrine in order to be part of the
heavenly city.

The positions of Aeneas, the Sibyl and the Psychomachia’s poet and reader
are analogous. Traditionally, the Roman vates is associated with the poet and a
figure similar to the Sibyl, both of whom act as conduits for communication
between humans and the divine. Vergil mentions the word three times within
the first eighty lines of book 6 (Aeneid 6.12, 65, and 78), with the most vivid
usage occurring at Aeneid 6.11–12, where the word describes the source of the
Sibyl’s power, and her function, which originates in Apollo, the Delian vates:
antrum immane, [Aeneas] petit, magnam cui mentem animumque / Delius
inspirat vates aperitque futura. The initial verses of book 6 emphasize divine
prophecy and knowledge of the future.

The term vates does not occur in the Psychomachia. Nor does the Psychomachia
mention the Sibyl. And as we have seen, Apollo’s name is missing as
well; however, by leaving out any mention of Apollo, vates, or Sibyl in the
Psychomachia, yet by clearly recalling these names and their functions from
Aeneid 6, Prudentius transforms the Vergilian context and highlights his own
adaptation of the themes and ideas these figures represent. Christ, not Apollo,
is the god we pray to for knowledge of our future; though the function of
Apollo remains in the Psychomachia, it is transferred to Christ, who becomes
the divine source of knowledge and literary inspiration. In the Psychomachia,
Prudentius eliminates the vates as a mediator for gods and humans for divine
knowledge. The roles of the Sibyl and Aeneas are therefore merged in the
Psychomachia into that of Prudentius the poet. The poet is one less step re-
moved from Christ, unlike Aeneas, who is separated from Apollo by the Sibyl.
and by the shade of his father, Anchises, both of whom provide knowledge. Since Prudentius implicates the reader as the receiver of divine knowledge in the same direct manner as the poet, the flattening out of previous pagan hierarchies is accomplished. The implied reader and poet become equivalent—a quintessentially Christian maneuver.

In addition, the positioning of the implied reader and poet in relation to the action of the poem (i.e., the actual battles) parallels the position of Aeneas regarding the pageant of Roman heroes in Aeneid 6, themselves a set of souls who will follow virtue or vice in their future life on earth. Psychomachia 5 and 6 contain two first-person plural forms, noster and nostri, which look back to the use of hominum at Psychomachia 1 and denote not only the poet (the so-called royal we) but also any other member of the human community who is presumably reading Prudentius’ poem. The implied reader and the poet occupy equivalent places as subjects who will receive knowledge and therefore immortality. At the end of the invocation, Psychomachia 18–20, Prudentius articulates the way in which these subjects are to position themselves vis-à-vis the subsequent battles between the virtues and the vices:

Vincendi praesens ratio est, si comminus ipsas
virtutum facies et conluctantia contra
viribus infestis liceat portenta notare.
The way of victory is at hand, if it is permitted [for the poet/us]
to observe at close quarters the very features of the Virtues
and the monsters who struggle with dangerous force against them.

Prudentius’ use of notare positions the poet and the implied reader as discerning observers who are so close to the conflict that they will be able to recognize the characteristics of both virtues and vices. This immediacy may be just what is necessary for the reader to make the right choice when he becomes the subject of this monumental struggle. The reader in the role of viewer, observer, and learner parallels Aeneas’ position as he makes his way through the underworld with his father, who provides an intimate glimpse of Rome’s future.

Vergil’s underworld provides the terms of representation for the picture of the soul as embattled, which Prudentius immediately establishes.

Ipse salutiferas obsesso in corpore turmas (Psych. 14–15)
depugnare iubes, . . .
[Christ] You yourself command the relieving
squadrons (i.e., the virtues) to fight it out in the
besieged body, . . .

tu regere imperio populos, Romane . . . (Aeneid 6. 851–53)

. . . _debellare_ superbos.

you, Roman, be sure to rule the world . . .
. . . and crush the proud.

_Psychomachia_ 14–15 portrays the soul under stress in a Christian epic where the text describes the virtues, the soldiers of Christ, who do battle within the soul. The verb _depugnare_ occurs only here in the Prudentian corpus and appears to be a synonym for _debellare_, the verb from Anchises’ famous dictum to Aeneas about the mission of Rome, _debellare superbos_ (Aeneid 6. 853). Vergil never uses _depugnare_ and uses forms of _debellare_ in two other places for ultimate military conflict and for the mission of Rome to subdue the Italians and the proud. The verb _depugnare_ has the same meaning, “to fight it out,” that is, to master one’s enemy completely. And in the case of the _Psychomachia_, it is the virtues that will engage in such totalizing warfare. The shift to _depugnare_ is appropriate because, whereas Vergil highlights war on a large scale (bellum), Prudentius includes a kind of fighting that is personal (pugno). The battle between the virtues and vices is a war, but it is also a personal struggle, a fight for survival.

Another Vergilian allusion in the invocation of the _Psychomachia_ reinforces this picture of concern for the soul and its battles. _Psychomachia_ 7–11 recalls _Aeneid_ 1.148–53:

> exoritur quotiens turbatis sensibus intus (Psych. 7–11)
> seditio atque _animam_ morborum rixa fatigat,
> quod _tunc_ praesidium pro libertate tuenda
> quaevae acies furiis inter praecordia mixtis
> obsistat meliore manu.
> when there is disorder among our thoughts and
> rebellion arises within us, when the strife of our evil
> passions vexes the spirit, say what help there is then to
> guard her liberty, what array with superior force
> withstands the fiendish raging in our heart.

> ac veluti magno in populo cum saepe _coorta est_ (Aeneid 1. 148–53)
> _sedition_, saevitque _animis_ ignobile vulgus,
> iamque faces et saxa volant (furor arma ministrat),
> _tum_ pietate gravem ac meritis si forte virum quem
conspexere, silent arrectisque auribus astant;
ille regit dictis animos et pectore mulcet:
And as, when often in a great nation tumult has risen, the base rabble rage angrily, and now brands and stones fly, madness lending arms; then if by chance they set eyes on a man honoured for noble character and service, they are silent and stand by with attentive ears; with speech he governs their passion and soothes their breasts:

Prudentius adopts several key words from Vergil’s simile (*exoritur* for Vergil’s *coorta est, seditio,* and *anima*), as well as the main idea of the simile, which compares the calming of a storm to the soothing words of a leader to his people who have been rioting in a great tumult. These two passages capture nicely the concerns of both texts. Much has been written on the political and cosmic significance of the storm in *Aeneid* 1. Such a context is apt for the opening lines of the *Psychomachia*, which emphasizes the inner turmoil and eventual ordering and calming of the human soul. Further, Prudentius has introduced, however indirectly, a political tone to his poem in mentioning leaders and their people.

Beyond a concern for the soul and its conflicts, the *Psychomachia* takes from *Aeneid* 6 the themes of prophecy and knowledge of the future. In both works knowledge of the future is not merely knowing what is going to happen in detail, but knowing how to behave and what to do when trying circumstances obtain. The Sibyl warns Aeneas of the *labores* that await him and his men: namely, war, bloodshed, and suffering: *magnis . . . periclis* (*Aeneid* 6.83), *graviora* (*Aeneid* 6.84), *bella, horrida bella* (*Aeneid* 6.86), and *malis* (*Aeneid* 6.95). The early lines of the *Psychomachia* display similarly dark language: *graves . . . labores* (*Psych.* 1), *culpas* (*Psych.* 5), *turbatis sensibus* (*Psych.* 7), *sedition* (*Psych.* 8), *furiis inter praecordia mixtis* (*Psych.* 10), *ludibria cordis* (*Psych.* 16), *conflictantia* (*Psych.* 19), *viribus infestis* and *portenta* (*Psych.* 20). When Prudentius leaves the invocation’s generalized, allegorical discourse of the soul for the first battle between *Fides* and *Veterum Cultura Deorum*, his language becomes more concrete and more Vergilian. So at *Psychomachia* 21–27, the prelude to the actual physical struggle, we encounter a flurry of allusions to Vergilian battle language.32

Two noteworthy cases are *Psychomachia* 21, *Prima petit campum dubia sub*
sorte duelli (“[Faith], with an uncertain fortune, seeks the field of battle first”), and *Psychomachia* 27, *provocat insani fragenda pericula belli* (“[Faith] challenges the furious dangers of warfare about to break them down”). The first case places the reader into the situation of war where the outcome is always in doubt, especially apt since a Christian’s salvation depends on a contested choice to follow good or evil. *Psychomachia* 21 is the first line after the invocation, and its concrete talk of war prepares the way for the allusion at *Psychomachia* 27 to the famous passages in *Aeneid* 7, where Allecto inflicts a lust for “insane war” on Turnus (*insula belli, Aeneid* 7.461). Further, just after Ascanius has killed the stag, Allecto describes the lust for “insane war” she causes in the minds of the Latins (*insula Martis, Aeneid* 7.550).  

Prudentius has appropriated these Vergilian contexts to underscore the intensity of the war about to take place between the virtues and the vices, and the inner, psychological discord that such a battle assumes. Moreover, the use of Vergil in these early lines of the *Psychomachia* builds tension by appropriating the atmosphere of the underworld from *Aeneid* 6. Near the end of the *Psychomachia*, Prudentius revisits *Aeneid* 6 and 7 when he writes that *bella horrida* (*Psych. 902 and Aeneid* 6.86 and 7.41) burn in humans’ bones, because any victory over vice is temporary. The war must be fought continually. This instantly recognizable phrase, placed at such vital junctures in the *Aeneid*, brings the *Psychomachia* full circle, and crystallizes the Christian message of this epic in the soul’s allegorical description as an immortal and virtuous entity.

Additional thematic parallels serve to foreground the context of *Aeneid* 6 in the invocation of the *Psychomachia*. Prudentius exploits Vergilian material to highlight the theme of temple-building. At *Aeneid* 6.9–10, Aeneas lands at Cumae and makes his way immediately to the temple of Apollo (*at pius Aeneas arces, quibus altus Apollo / praesidet*). After another passing reference to the temple (*aurea tecta*), Vergil furnishes its aetiology (*Aeneid* 6. 14–33), in which we are told that Daedalus, after having landed safely in Cumae, built the temple for Apollo (*posuitque immania templam*). Finally, in Aeneas’ prayer to Apollo, Aeneas himself promises, should he be victorious, to build Apollo a temple that looks forward to the Augustan structure built on the Palatine to commemorate the victory at the battle of Actium, the defining event of the Principate. Parallel to the *Aeneid’s* focus after Book 6 on the victory of the Trojans over the native Italians, which itself suggests Augustus’ total victory over his enemies, the central focus of the *Psychomachia* is the victory of the
virtues over the vices—. Prudentius commemorates the virtues’ victory by the detailed and monumental construction of the new Christian temple (Psych. 804–87), not only as a replacement for Solomon’s temple but for Apollo’s temple at Cuma as well.37

The language of initiation rites and mysteries, whose fundamental themes of death and rebirth saturate Aeneid 6, contributes in the Psychomachia to the figuring of the soul’s journey as an epic descent.38 Aeneas’ trial confirms his divine and heroic status, putting him in the company of other epic figures: Odysseus, Hercules, Orpheus, Pollux, and Theseus. Aeneas’ actions in Book 6 are a classic katabasis, a descent into death followed by a re-ascent into life.39

This initiation story directly mirrors a movement from past and negative historical events to future and positive history. Aeneas’ journey takes him from a past-oriented stance—from the shades of Palinurus, Dido, and Deiphobus—to the future-looking parade of Roman souls: *hac Troiana tenus fuerit fortuna secuta* (Aen. 6.62).40 As William Fitzgerald has noted, the Daedalus story, the temple building, and the ekphrasis of Aeneid 6.14–36 imply “a historical transition from one culture to another,” since both Aeneas and Daedalus are escapees from stories of disastrous love, figured on the diptych as a flight from east to west, from Crete to Athens.41 Aeneas’ prayer to Apollo makes explicit this temporal and thus historical and geographical shift, as Aeneas puts aside events of the past (e.g., the death of Palinurus and the Trojan tragedy) in preparation for the future.42

The Psychomachia reworks the religious and temporal strategies of Aeneid 6 through a careful allusive program. Psychomachia 30–31 describes the vice *Veterum Cultura Deorum* at the moment of her death: *Illa hostile caput falerata-que tempora vittis / altior insurgens labefactat* (“But she (Faith), rising higher, smites her foe’s head down, with its fillet-decked brows”). The vice is wearing the typically pagan religious *vittae*, which are worn by priests performing sacrifices or by the sacrificial object itself. This is also the headdress of poets in the Roman tradition who were thought to enjoy a divine status.43 Aeneid 6.665 (*cinguntur tempora vitta*) contains an instance of this phrase in the same line position (though in the singular) as that of Psychomachia 30.44 In the passage from the Aeneid, the archetypal poet Musaeus is leading Aeneas to Anchises. Just lines before, Vergil describes the inhabitants of this part of the underworld:

\[
\text{quique sacerdotes casti, dum vita manebant, (Aeneid 6. 661–62)}
\]

\[
\text{quique pii vates et Phoebo digna locuti,}
\]
those who in their lifetime were priests and pure, 
good bards, whose songs were suitable for Apollo,

Both poets and prophets wear the religious headdress; and in this passage the priests and poets are dead, associating the *vitta* not only with sacrificial activities, prophecy and poetry, but also with death. Two other occurrences of the phrase, in the same line position, at *Aeneid* 2.133 and 10.5 look forward and backward respectively, to the contexts of poetry, prophecy, and death in *Aeneid* 6. The headdress, mentioned at *Aeneid* 2.133, is worn by Sinon, the Greek who deceived the Trojans into accepting the Greek’s gift-horse. In this passage, Sinon weaves a yarn in which he was to be a sacrifice, chosen by the Greeks in response to an oracle of Apollo mentioned several lines earlier. The headdress signifies his sacrificial status and his proximity to death. *Aeneid* 10.538, by contrast, portrays Aeneas about to kill a priest of Apollo, son of Haemon, who wears the headdress and acts as a sacrifice in revenge for the death of Pallas. Finally, when Laocoon is killed in *Aeneid* 2, he is described as *perfusus sanie vittas* (*Aeneid* 2.221). His headdress, which he wore as a priest making a sacrifice, ends up bloodied and worn by the dead.

These passages in the *Aeneid* are consistent regarding context and meaning. They argue for a parallelism between Christ and Apollo created through the categories of prophecy, poetic inspiration, and sacrificial death. They dovetail with the context of *Psychomachia* 30, which describes the death of all pagan gods, the personification of which wears the *vitta*. The passages, then, recall the tone and setting of Vergil’s underworld which Prudentius painstakingly recreates at key junctures of his poem.

The next cluster of allusions to *Aeneid* 6 occur at *Psychomachia* 89–97, an excerpt from the speech of *Pudicitia* as she boasts over the dying *Libido*:

Tu princeps ad mortis iter, tu *ianua leti*;  
corpora commaculans animas in *tartara mergis*.  
Abde caput tristi iam frigida pestis abysso;  
occidere, prostibulum, manes pete, claudere Averno,  
inque tenebrosum *noctis* detrudere *fundum*!  
Te volvant subter vada flammea, te vada nigra  
sulpureusque rotet per stagna *sonantium vertex*.  
Nec iam christicolas, *furiarum maxima*, temptes,  
ut purgata suo serventur corpora *regi*.  
You are the leader to the path of death, you are the gate of death
staining our bodies you plunge our souls into Tartarus.
Hide your head in the grim pit, now you feeble pestilence;
die, harlot; seek the shades of the dead, be shut up in Avernus,
and be thrust down into the dark depths of night.
May the fiery rivers below roll you along, the black streams
and the whirlpool of sulfur swing you around through the resounding waters.
No longer, greatest of fiends, may you tempt the worshippers of Christ,
So that their cleansed bodies are preserved for their own king.

In this passage, we encounter a multitude of words and circumstances that
recall the underworld setting of Aeneid 6. Let us begin with the phrases
furiarum maxima and regi (Psych. 96–97), which are paralleled at Aeneid
6.604–607:

\[
\ldots \text{epulaeque ante ora paratae}\\
\text{regificio luxu; Furiarum maxima iuxta}\\
\text{accubat et manibus prohibet contingere mensas,}\\
\text{exsurgitque facem attollens atque intonat ore.}\\
\ldots \text{and before their eyes is spread a banquet}\\
\text{in royal splendor; the greatest of the Furies reclines}\\
\text{nearby and prevents their hands from touching the tables,}\\
\text{and she springs forth raising a torch and thunders with her voice.}
\]

Aeneas is in the midst of his tour of Tartarus, observing monsters, divine
beings, and sinners who have committed an assortment of crimes having to do
with the desire for power, money, and sex. Prudentius mentions Tartara
(Psych. 90), manes and Averno (Psych. 92), all of which evoke a pagan atmo-
sphere of the underworld and by extension help to describe Christian hell.
The phrase ianua leti at Psychomachia 89, a common epic formulation for the
gates of the underworld, reinforces the evocation of the pagan underworld.
Aeneid 2.661 has ianua leto at the end of the line and forms part of Aeneas’
appeal to Anchises to leave Troy with him before it is too late. The context of
Aeneid 6 is preserved since both Aeneas and Anchises, the two main actors of
Aeneid 6, are at the center of a life and death struggle in this passage.

We can telescope this allusion further with the reference at Psychomachia 95
to Aeneid 6.652. The Prudentian phrase sonantia vertex picks up Vergil’s sonan-
tia saxa. Aeneas leaves Deiphobus, his last symbolic connection with the Tro-
jan past, and comes to the fork in the underworld’s road leading either to
Elysium or Tartarus. *Aeneid* 6.651–52 and *Psychomachia* 94–95 both describe
the underworld river of Tartarus. In this place *Libido* will dwell for eternity.
The context of these Vergilian passages suggests Aeneas leaving the past and
death behind in preparation for the visit to the valley of Lethe later on in
*Aeneid* 6. Such a journey (*iter*) parallels the experience of the poet/implied
reader of the *Psychomachia*. Not only has Prudentius recalled Vergilian under-
world language in a general way to connect the vice *Libido* to the pagan
construction of hell, but he has also figured death and the options in the
afterlife according to the architecture and narrative of *Aeneid* 6. *Pudicitia’s*
words to *Libido* place the reader squarely in the context of *Aeneid* 6.604–607,
in which the Sibyl describes the mythological inhabitants of Tartarus.

In the central battle of the *Psychomachia*, which pits *Avaritia* against *Oper-
atio*, the reader once again encounters a series of allusions to *Aeneid* 6. Just
after *Avaritia* enters, her personified attendants are listed (*Psych.* 464–66),
three of which—*Metus, Fames, and Eumenides*—occur at *Aeneid* 6. 273–81.

Cura *Famis Metus* Anxietas Periuria Pallor  (*Psych.* 464–66)
Corruptela Dolum Commenta Insomnia Sordes,
*Eumenides* variae, monstri *comitatus aguntur.*
Care, Hunger, Fear, Anguish, Perjuries, Pallor
Corruption, Treachery, Falsehood, Sleeplessness,
Meanness, diverse fiends, go in attendance on
the monster.

vestibulum ante ipsum primisque in faucibus Orci  (*Aeneid* 6. 273–81)
Luctus et ulrices posuere cubilia *Curae,*
pallentesque habitant Morbi tristisque Senectus
et *Metus* et malesuada *Fames* ac turpis Egestas,
terribiles visu formae, Letumque Labosque:
tum consanguineus Leti Sopor et mala mentis
Gaudia, mortiferumque adverso in limine Bellum
ferreique *Eumenidum* thalami et Discordia demens,
vipereum crinem vittis innexa cruentis.
Just before the entrance, even within the very jaws
of Hell, Grief and avenging Cares have set their bed;
there pale Diseases dwell, sad Age, and Fear, and
Hunger, temptress to sin, and loathly Want, shapes
terrible to view; and Death and Distress; next, Death’s
own brother Sleep, and the soul’s guilty Joys, and,
on the threshold opposite, the death-dealing War,
and the Furies’ iron cells, and maddening Strife,
her snaky locks entwined with bloody ribbons.

After Avaritia is killed, her attendants disperse (Psych. 629–31) and the light of
the sun and heaven returns (Psych. 639). The dispersal of her attendants alludes
to two more passages from Aeneid 6 (Aeneid 6.276–77, 6.381–83); and the
return of light alludes to still another (Aeneid 6.640–41). These passages form
the end frame of the Avaritia section.

His dictis curae emotae. Metus et Labor et Vis (Psych. 629–31)
et Scelus et placitae fidei Fraus inﬁtiatrix
depulsae vertere solum.
At these words their cares departed. Fear and
Suffering and Violence, Crime and Fraud that
denies accepted faith, were driven away and fled
from the land.

aeternumque locus Palinuri nomen habebit. (Aeneid 6.381–83)
his dictis curae emotae, pulsusque parumper
corde dolor triste;
and forever the place shall bear the name of
Pallinurus. By these words his cares departed,
and for a little space grief is driven from his
anguished heart;

purpuream vides caeli clarescere lucem. (Psych. 639)
and light from heaven begins to shine
resplendent to the view.

largior his campos aether et lumine vestit (Aeneid 6.640–41)
purpureo, solemque suum, sua sidera norunt.
Here an ampler ether clothes the meads with
resplendent light, and they know their own sun,
and their own stars.

Moreover, nearly in the middle of the Avaritia section, Aeneid 6 is made the
focal point again. At Psychomachia 538–39, Avaritia describes the death of
Achar, an Old Testament casualty of greed (Joshua 7). These lines contain
Vergilian expressions from Aeneid 6:
An Epic Successor?

*Caedibus insignis* murali et *strage superbus* (*Psych.* 538–39)

[subcubuit] capto *victis* ex hostibus auro,

For though he won glory by the slaughter and was exalted by the overthrowing of the walls, he fell victim to the gold that was taken from the beaten foe,

[nocte tulit fessum vasta te *caede* Pelasgum (*Aeneid* 6.503–504)]

*procubuisse* super *confusa* *stragis* acervum.

on that last night, weary with endless slaughter of the Pelasgians, you had fallen upon a heap of mingled carnage.

*Ille triumphata Capitolia ad alta Corintho* (*Aeneid* 6.836–37)

*victor* aget *currum caesis insignis Achivis*.

That one there (Lucius Mummius), triumphant over Corinth, shall drive a victor’s chariot to the lofty Capitol, famed for Achaeans he has slain.

At *Aeneid* 6. 503–504, Aeneas speaks to the shade of Deiphobus, whose death he mentions (compare *Psych.* 94–95 which alludes to the Deiphobus scene as well). At *Aeneid* 6. 836–37, Anchises, during the pageant of Roman heroes, points out Lucius Mummius, who destroyed Corinth in 146 BCE. In this particular verse Anchises depicts Mummius in triumph after killing Greeks. The recollection of these Vergilian passages further contributes to the atmosphere of death and the underworld with which the center battle of the *Psychomachia* teems. The story of Achar, put into the mouth of a vice and evoking the language and environment of Vergil’s underworld, produces a Roman epic version of a biblical story. Far from mock-epic or typical biblical epic, the passage performs an essential function of Roman epic: to restate national identity through a master narrative of larger-than-life figures. Prudentius attempts to include Achar’s story as part of the master narrative of salvation history that includes Rome.

If we analyze the sets of allusive passages which frame the central battle at the beginning and end, we see that the *Avaritia* section projects a vivid sense of psychology created through the personification of emotions. In addition, because these Vergilian recollections evoke the netherworld ephemera of *Aeneid* 6, the *Avaritia* scene becomes an essential part of the *Psychomachia’s* debt to Vergil, suggesting how the *Psychomachia* reworks the *Aeneid*.
In the first set of framing passages, *Psychomachia* 464–66 and *Aeneid* 6. 273–81, Prudentius emphasizes the personification of emotions as the constituents of a soul dominated by *Avaritia*. In the *Aeneid*, the poet has just invoked the gods of the underworld to grant that the truth be revealed.\(^{52}\) Vergil describes the landscape as Aeneas and the Sibyl enter Pluto’s realm. The Sibyl rushes into the cave, *antro se immisit aperto* (*Aeneid* 6.262), and Aeneas stands at the entrance, *vestibulum ante ipsum* (*Aeneid* 6.273).

In drawing on this scene, Prudentius envisions the landscape of the soul in the spatial terms delineated in *Aeneid* 6.\(^{53}\) Vergil’s underworld is a dark and forbidding region populated by disease, fear, hunger, and death. These monster-like beings translate well into the region of the soul in which *Avaritia* dwells. The spatial terms imply psychological concepts that Prudentius’ poem imitates. The spatial-psychological connection materializes when the Sibyl exhorts Aeneas to take courage (*nunc animis opus, Aenea, nunc pectore firmo, Aeneid* 6.261) and rushes into the cave. This reading of Vergil in Prudentius is reinforced by the Vergilian phrase, *comitatus aguntur*, found at *Psychomachia* 466. The phrase refers to the personified followers of *Avaritia* and is taken from *Aeneid* 12.336, the context of which relates directly to the underworld scene of *Aeneid* 6 since Vergil deploys personifications, *Ira* and *Insidia*, to highlight Turnus’ extreme psychological state during his Homeric *aristeia*. In essence, Prudentius has adapted Vergil’s netherworld landscape and its attendant psychology to create a manifestly psychological space, bringing the epic struggle into the mental and emotional interior of the individual.

The set of allusive passages that form the end frame of the *Avaritia* section continue and solidify the psychological affinity between *Aeneid* 6 and the *Psychomachia*. *Avaritia*’s dreadful retinue disperses (*Psych*. 629–31) and is re-described as *curae emotae*, a phrase that Vergil uses at *Aeneid* 6. 382 of the nether-Palinurus who, upon being informed of his impending burial, experiences the dispersal of his cares. Rather than a subversive and hostile stance toward the *Aeneid*,\(^{54}\) the *Psychomachia* has elaborated on ideas present in the Palinurus scene. Prudentius’ allusion achieves a new epic vision by constructing on epic terms a psychological discourse in which inner, psychological qualities become narrative characters in order to describe the new epic battle within the soul.

Moreover, the journey of Palinurus and Aeneas toward their destinies takes them through the realm of death, an epic circumstance emulated in the *Psychomachia* by the poet/implied reader’s journey within his own soul to eternal life. Prudentius’ re-naming of the personifications (*Metus* et *Labor* etc.) as
“dispersed cares” parallels Vergil’s appositive of *dolor, curae emotae*. These maneuvers evoke the underworld, which allegorically stands for the soul, as defined as mental states and emotions. Prudentius reads *Aeneid* 6 psychologically, constructing a world that does not exist in real space and time but is described through spatial and temporal discourse. The poet creates a place that is otherworldly, demonic, and full of surprises. Yet, in true Platonic style, the inhabitants of this world are real. The way in which one negotiates the journey through this immaterial world determines one’s destiny in the earthly world of change.

Prudentius uses Vergil in a similar way when the virtues, after the defeat of *Avaritia*, arrive at the double gate to their camp:

\[\text{Ventum erat ad fauces portae castrensis, ubi artum (Psych. 665–66)}\]

They had reached the passage of the camp-gate, where a gate with double-door hinges furnishes a narrow entrance.

\[\text{ventum erat ad limen, cum virgo, “poscere fata (Aeneid 6. 45–47)}\]

They had reached the threshold when the maiden said: “it is time to ask the oracles; the god, here is the god!”

As she spoke such things in front of the doors, suddenly neither her demeanor nor her color was the same,

\[\text{inde ubi venere ad fauces grave olentis Averni (Aeneid 6.201)}\]

Then, when they reached the jaws of stinking Avernus

The context of the *Psychomachia* passage is forbidding because, although the virtues believe that the battle against the vices is finished, the unwelcome surprise of *Discordia* awaits them within the walls of their camp.

The Vergilian passages have parallel contexts. The first takes place at Aeneas’ initial contact with the Sibyl and the second occurs when Aeneas receives a clear sign indicating where to find the golden bough. The atmosphere of Misenus’ death surrounds the giving of the sign, thus coloring Aeneas’ success with a foreboding sense of sacrifice and of the difficulty of leaving the underworld. The *Psychomachia* exploits the tension and suspense of the *Aeneid* passages, which emphasize the uncertainty and unpredictability of these liminal moments in the underworld.

*Fauces* (Psych. 665) participates in this emphasis, for it is a loaded word in
the Psychomachia, standing for the throats of vices which at the moment of
death are crushed by the virtues (e.g., the death of Avaritia, faucibus artis / extorquent animam, Psych. 592–93). Fauces recalls the contexts of Aeneid 6. 201
and Psychomachia 592–93 where, in the former, the word is used of the en-
trance into hell and, in the latter, of the corrupt throat passage of Avaritia;
corrupt, because it spews forth heresy just as Discordia’s “breath-passage of her
voice” does (vocis . . . spiramina, Psych. 717) following Psychomachia 665–66.
Given these associations, with the use of fauces for the camp of the virtues,
Prudentius suggests that the camp is still polluted with the concealed presence
of Discordia.

The Vergilian context of the entrance into the pagan Sibyl’s cave dovetails
with the Psychomachia’s suggestion of a corrupt camp of the virtues. What is
more, at Aeneid 6. 46–47 the description of the Sibyl’s changed complexion and
countenance parallels Discordia’s heretical ravings about the godhead: compare
deus est mihi discolor (Psych. 710) with non color unus (Aeneid 6. 47). In this case,
the allusion projects the pagan quality of the Sibyl and her oracular residence
onto Discordia, a pagan character turned Christian heretic. The contexts of
Aeneid 6. 45–47 and 201 influence the reading of the description of the virtues’
camp and the characterization of the heretical interloper, Discordia.

The relationship between the two texts converges further if we compare
Psychomachia 639 and Aeneid 6. 640–41. In the former, Metus, Labor, Vis, and
Scelus have departed, causing the light of heaven and the sun to return. In the
latter, Aeneas has just planted the golden bough at the threshold to the “Bliss-
ful Groves” where blessed souls of poets and prophets reside, bathed in light.
The context of the Aeneid passage cannot be more appropriate to the purpose
of the Psychomachia. The recollection of the groves from Aeneid 6 bestows epic
stature on the departure of the minor vices in the Psychomachia while simulta-
neously exhibiting the change in the metaphysical positions from pagan hell to
Christian tranquility. Prudentius does not engage in literary subversion, but
exploits the Aeneid to delineate the terrain of the soul and its bifurcated nature
(i.e., good/bad, light/dark, virtue/vice).

A final cluster of allusive passages occurs at the end of the poem, Psychomachia 889–90, thus creating a frame around the poem, the beginning of
which, Psychomachia 1, mobilizes the allusive program:

grates, Christe, tibi meritosque sacramus honores  (Psych. 889–90)
ore pio; nam cor vitiorum stercore sordet.
[We give unending] thanks to you, Christ, and offer to you honor that is deserved with loyal lips; for our heart is foul with the filth of sin.

... di, talia Grais (Aeneid 6. 529–30)
instaurate, pio si poenas ore reposco.
O Gods, with like penalties repay the Greeks
if with pious lips I pray for vengeance!

Immediately, one is struck by the fact that Psychomachia 889, with its appeal to Christ, and in its rhythm and sound of the first and last pairs of words, recalls Psychomachia 1, Christe, graves hominum semper miserate labores. Prudentius returns to the beginning of his poem, signaling a transformative engagement with the Aeneid and the Roman epic tradition. The “heavy suffering of human beings” of the first line, itself a substitution for Trojan suffering, is replaced by “thanks” to, and the “deserved honor” of, Christ. The metaphorical distance traveled from Christ pitying humans to humans thanking Christ marks the progress of the soul’s journey in the Psychomachia. Although the soul continuously struggles against vice (as the last 23 lines of the poem assert), the allegory of the ideal soul is offered as a model to be imitated by the poet/implied reader.58 Psychomachia 889 offers thanks to Christ for helping the poet/implied reader through the trial of each one’s soul. The focus shifts from the first line, where all individuals (hominum) seek relief from suffering, to Christ (tibi is in the same line position as hominum) who is the instrument of salvation. To redeem themselves humans must look not to each other but to Christ—though in order to look to Christ, humans must each exercise their own free will and make a personal decision.

The phrase ore pio adds to this view by recalling Aeneas’ words to Deiphobus in the underworld, a section of Aeneid 6 recalled in the battles between Pudicitia and Libido, and Avaritia and Operatio. Although this expression is found sparingly in Christian literature,59 it is a fixture in Cicero and Livy, and is used by Roman epic poets such as Vergil, Valerius Flaccus, and Silius Italicus.60 This pagan epic diction is challenged in the next line by stercore, an un-Vergilian word that describes the vice-laden part of the soul. The pull of these two traditions within the phrases, ore pio and vitiorum stercore, in this one line express each person’s two-sided nature, a fundamental dualism that has its roots in the epic hero himself, who is, like Aeneas, burdened by a choice between action and inaction, glory and obscurity.
Both *Psychomachia* 889–90 and its Vergilian counterpart are prayers (*Aeneid* 6.529–30) to a god.\(^{61}\) The *Psychomachia*’s return to Aeneas’ meeting with Deiphobus situates Aeneas at the crossroad between the past and the future. His words represent the struggle of the Trojans to put to rest their tragic past and enter the “bright,” Roman future. The parallel to the poet/implied reader is made palpable once again since Prudentius in these lines summarizes the struggle that each human soul must undergo to achieve immortality—that is, through the choice of virtue, to leave the past and move on to a perfect future.

Vergilian piety is paralleled by Christian virtue. Vergil’s emphasis on piety in *Aeneid* 6 is well-known, expressed in Aeneas’ unflinching commitment (after *Aeneid* 6 at any rate) to his journey and mission. Piety ultimately means he must act and endure according to rules he does not make, so that he may found the greatest earthly city. In the epilogue of the *Psychomachia*, the same quality of piety is invoked twice at *Psychomachia* 890 and 911, directing the reader/poet to take up the challenge of *horrida bella* within the soul (*Psych.* 902), so that virtues may expel vices (*Psych.* 911) and the soul may live forever in the heavenly city. In this way, Prudentius reads the *Aeneid* optimistically, though he seems to comprehend the *Aeneid*’s profoundly tragic situation.\(^{62}\) That is, far from an ambiguous or ambivalent narrative of Aeneas’ founding of Rome,\(^{63}\) Prudentius’ allusive program with *Aeneid* 6 helps to construct the *Psychomachia*’s salvational message.\(^{64}\) Recollection of the journey of Aeneas adds epic weight and seriousness to the journey of the poet/implied reader.

*Psychomachia* 889 also contains the phrase *meritos . . . honores* which is found at *Aeneid* 3.118, 3.264, and 8.189. The contexts of the passages from *Aeneid* 3 evoke Apollo, Anchises, the idea of the journey, and knowledge of the future, elements which we have already seen in other allusions to the *Aeneid*. *Aeneid* 3 narrates the Odyssean journey Aeneas and his men take in the Mediterranean. *Aeneid* 3.118 narrates the sacrifices to Apollo and Neptune which Anchises performs in response to an oracle of Apollo on Delos. Aeneas reports the speech of Anchises (*Aeneid* 3.103–17), who begins by recounting the Trojan past and ends by exhorting Aeneas and the Trojans to move on, *sequamur* (*Aeneid* 3.114), as the past gives way to the future. The phrase *meritos honores* (*Aeneid* 3.264) also occurs within a speech of Anchises that takes place after the seer of Apollo, Celaeno, prophesies that the Trojans will not found their city until they “eat their tables.” The founding of a new city translates into a new life for each and every Trojan. These passages embellish the end of the *Psychomachia*, which celebrates the metaphor of the soul as an ideal temple/city,
perfected only after Christian doctrine is accepted, the vices have been ex- pelled, and the virtues have attained complete control. Pagan epic contexts are exploited and reworked to serve Christian ideology.

In addition, Caelano’s words warn of violence and wrongs to be endured before the Trojans reach their new home—a motif encountered earlier in the two works’ intertextual relationship. Anchises prays to the gods to keep the Trojans safe during their impending sea voyage that will retrace the route taken by Odysseus. A brief Odyssean itinerary is given (Aeneid 3.270–75) as emblematic of the Trojans’ long journey, made more unbearable by the fact that Odysseus, their most bitter enemy, followed the same path. The itinerary concludes at the shrine of Apollo at Leucas, which also recalls another shrine to Apollo at Actium. The Trojans must retrace their past sufferings in order to reach their new home just as the poet/implied reader must face his vices within himself in order to construct the temple/city of the soul. The final resting place of the Trojans is mentioned by Celaeno:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sed non ante datam} & \quad \text{cingetis moenibus urbem,} \quad (Aeneid 3. 255–57) \\
\text{quam vos dira fames nostraeque iniuria caedis} & \\
\text{ambesas subigat malis absumere mensas.} & \\
\text{but you shall not surround with walls your promised city before} & \\
\text{dread hunger and the wrong of violence toward us} & \\
\text{force you to gnaw with your teeth and devour your very tables.} & 
\end{align*}
\]

The lines refer to the future and the unrealized city of the Trojans and contribute to the thematic and linguistic nexus of allusion, since the Psychomachia’s goal is to construct a purified soul in the form of the ideal city. The dark language of the first 20 lines of the Psychomachia, which evoked the foreboding language and atmosphere of the first section of Aeneid 6, is revisited in the pagan prophet’s words (e.g., malis, 3. 257 and iniuria caedis, Aeneid 3.256—compare similar language of violence in Psychomachia 538–39 and Aeneid 6. 503–504, 836–37). Further, Anchises’ plea invokes piety (pios, Aeneid 3. 266), the quality which Psychomachia 890 and 911 explicitly offer to Christ as a characteristic of the good Christian poet/implied reader. Both passages from Aeneid 3 contextually and thematically complement and reinforce the reference at Psychomachia 889–90 to Aeneid 6.529.

As for Aeneid 8.189, the context is the famous story of Hercules and Cacus which Evander narrates to Aeneas. In the passage, Evander states that the meritos . . . honores (“deserved offerings”) are performed to keep his people
safe from *saevis . . . periclis* (*Aeneid* 8.188). For Prudentius, violence matters less than the suggestion of sacrifice and ritual in these lines. Moreover, just as Hercules neutralizes the monster Cacus under a burning volcano, so do the virtues stamp out the vices. A reader of both the *Aeneid* and the *Psychomachia* may recall the violence of Hercules’ story and perhaps even the ambivalent attitude toward Augustus and his regime that the story may suggest, but the “deserved offerings” which Prudentius directs at Christ lack ambivalence and appear to rework the pagan language of sacrifice into a Christian context. At the very least, the allusion reinforces a central theme of *Aeneid* 6, relief from the dangers and sufferings accumulated during the search for home. The *Psychomachia* capitalizes on this idea throughout its narrative.

**Epic Ambitions: Readers, Heroes, and Identity**

Acceptance of the claim that Prudentius’ “reading” of *katabasis* in *Aeneid* 6 attempts to rival the *Aeneid* leads us to reflect on Roman epic tradition. To this end, I conclude by offering several suggestions regarding how the *Psychomachia* transforms the pagan epic tradition. First, the battle of the virtues and vices is figured in the *Psychomachia* as a *katabasis* of the soul, which Prudentius describes by appropriating the language and setting of Aeneas’ descent into the underworld. The allusions to *Aeneid* 6, especially those that inform the battle between *Avaritia* and *Operatio*, establish an underworld atmosphere that evokes the Vergilian *katabasis*. Directly following this scene, Prudentius re-describes the Vergilian trial, but this time as the Old Testament story of the Exodus when the Jews, who allegorically stand for the virtues, escape the Egyptians, who stand for the vices, through the “psychological” depths of the Red Sea (*Psych. 650–64*). Note that these lines are the only formal, Vergilian simile in the *Psychomachia* (*non aliter, Psych. 650 . . . sic, Psych. 663*). Yet this is not the end of the repetition. For once again Prudentius thrusts the reader into a *katabasis*-like milieu of the virtue/vice battles, when *Discordia* inaugurates another trial during which she unexpectedly threatens the virtues and is destroyed within the walls of the city of the soul. After her death, Prudentius describes the temple of the soul according to a New Testament source, Revelation. This description, which alludes to both Solomon’s and Deadalus’ temples, is built only after all of the vices have been vanquished. The third description of the trial of the soul is now complete, but this time ending on Christian terms after the cross-examination of *Discordia*, which is modeled on the ques-
tioning of Sinon in *Aeneid* 2 (and which contains language drawn from the second half of the *Aeneid*).

There is a marked fall-off of Vergilian allusions in the temple section of the *Psychomachia*. The description of the temple of the soul represents the final step of a Christian trial in which the soul emerges from inner psychological battle against vice to a state of purity and readiness for communion with God. Hence, there is the Vergilian *katabasis* which underlies the *Avaritia/Operatio* scene, the *katabasis* of the Jewish Exodus through the Red Sea, and finally, the related trial beginning with the battle against the heretical *Discordia*. Prudentius describes the *Discordia* scene in a manner befitting the Vergilian underworld and ends the poem with the temple drawn from *Revelation*. This repetition represents a striking adaptation of the epic motifs of *katabasis* and the heroic trial. The sequence brings the reader from the pagan tradition and Jewish traditions to the Christian dispensation.

Secondly, the *Psychomachia*’s focus on the struggle within the soul results in the reconfiguration of Aeneas’ dualistic nature, which simultaneously projects “*Roma aeterna*” and also doubt, ambivalence, or even self-destruction. The epic hero, the *unus homo*, who stands for Rome, is wracked with conflict that is expressed, in the case of Aeneas, as a dialectic between *pietas* and *furor*. This dialectic reflects an uncertainty about Rome’s moral and political authority. The killing of Turnus by Aeneas at the end of the epic signals this fundamental dualism. In Lucan, to cite one other example, we witness a series of oppositional character pairs, Caesar/Pompey, Caesar/Cato, which reflect the political duality of Principate/Republic. In the *Psychomachia*, virtues and vices represent the residue of the moral and psychological dualism seen within Aeneas and his epic descendents. Confidence and an imperial swagger are delineated in the virtues and also, for example, in the *Peristephanon’s* martyr figures, who make the courageous and correct choice of following their faith; whereas doubt and self-destructive behavior are associated with the Vices.

Aeneas as wanderer and seeker of future knowledge parallels the Christian poet who petitions Christ to aid him in finding his true future of immortality, thus ending his spiritual wandering. Through the Sibyl, Apollo speaks to Aeneas just as Christ speaks to Prudentius the poet. For Christ communicates to the implied reader *through* Prudentius, just as Apollo does to Aeneas *through* the Sibyl. Thus parallel hierarchies appear in the schemes of Apollo-Sibyl-Aeneas in the *Aeneid* and Christ-Prudentius-implied reader in the *Psychomachia*. However, in the latter poem, the distance between the poet and the
implied reader collapses, since the poem posits the reader and the poet together as subjects seeking correct knowledge for the attainment of immortality. The collapse of the two terms, “Prudentius” and “implied reader,” into one furnishes a more varied set of parallels with the hierarchy in the Aeneid. Therefore, comparisons are implied in the two texts between Prudentius the poet and Aeneas the founding father, the poet and implied reader as seekers/wanderers, and the implied reader and Aeneas as seekers/wanderers. The Psychomachia fashions a close relationship between the implied reader and the text in complementary ways. For the poet and the implied reader become nearly equivalent while simultaneously the implied reader stands in a more intimate relationship with the divine.

Another aspect of Prudentius’ restatement of epic dualism is that the poet/implied reader takes on a psychological dualism summed up by the choice between virtue and vice. In choosing virtue, the poet/implied reader gains knowledge of, and acquires, an ideal soul. Prudentius’ personifications are the allegorical parts that form a soul “on the page,” but also the soul within the reader himself, who embodies a potential epic hero should he follow Christian doctrine. It is not the characters who are problematized in the Psychomachia, but rather the individual who reads and reflects on the characters as moral and religious examples. In keeping with the doctrine of Christian free will, the reader is compelled to make a choice between good and evil, faith and godlessness, immortal life and death. Thus, the epic dualism found in Vergil and Lucan becomes extratextual, projected onto the reader herself, and is figured as an internal conflict within the soul, resolved through choice. The choice of the reader is parallel to the choices that Aeneas and other epic heroes make, and even perhaps accompanied by the tragic overtones. The reader is being called upon to become an epic hero, whose prize, like any other epic hero’s, is immortality.

Finally, Prudentius’ epic version of Rome, although not explicitly asserted, assumes Rome to be a Christian city that parallels the happy destiny of the Christian individual. Unlike in the Aeneid, Lucan’s Bellum Civile, and the Punica of Silius Italicus, where Rome itself is problematized, the Psychomachia assumes a post-Constantinian golden age in which Rome is a stable and politically homogenous state. Rome’s political and military success is not problematized. Rather, Prudentius transfers his epic battles from the earthly and mythohistorical space of Troy, Latium, Pharsalia, and Zama, to the immaterial and divine realm of the individual soul. In the Aeneid, the assumption of an
Augustan golden age goes hand in hand with a reexamination of the past in the shadow of an uncertain future. Lucan juxtaposes the Principate’s assumed benefits with a senseless civil war to devastating effect, and Silius ruminates on Rome’s possible decline after the defeat of Hannibal.\textsuperscript{75}

In the \textit{Psychomachia}, the secure city where the virtues dwell at the end of their war against the vices is the celestial double of Rome, which, if we interpret the parallel, is now somewhat safe and secure because of each citizen’s faith. The historical reality of martyrdom and the political/military victory of Constantine, both viewed unambiguously, combine to become the golden age successor to the Augustan return of the Republic in Vergil.\textsuperscript{76} Therefore, the idea of Rome does not bring a dualistic meditation, alternating between confidence and melancholy expressed literarily but rather remains unabashedly pure, having reached an unassailable condition after Rome took up Christianity as the state religion.

Prudentius’ version of Roman national identity, the representation of which is a basic function of epic, is tied to \textit{Christianitas}, which becomes integrated into Roman society through each individual soul’s radical conversion. The heroes of pagan Roman epic have a national and collective purpose, however fraught with contradiction it and they may be. Are there signs of this national hero who stands for the totality of Rome in Prudentius’ poetry? In the \textit{Psychomachia}, Prudentius deconstructs the Roman epic hero into each reader, who is part of a political purpose. Rather than founding the empire and unifying Rome through personal greatness, the reader is part of a reconstruction of Rome, one citizen at a time. The reader is not engaged in founding an empire through conquest and the imposition of political and cultural identity on a population but rather is a singular example of many, whose recognition of a Christian identity through a conversion of the soul is necessary for the construction of Rome as a Christian world nation. The conversion to Christianity represents a harmonious union between the religious and the political realms.\textsuperscript{77} Each person must choose to know and to live by what is truly Christian in order to be truly Roman. Thus, collectivity through a private conversion experience is a goal of the new Christian epic.\textsuperscript{78}

The idea of a Roman Christian collective guides Prudentius’ use of history, which attempts to unify the Roman pagan, Christian, and Jewish traditions. The challenge of including these disparate traditions in a coherent story functions ideologically to create a new, dominant historical narrative—namely, salvation history. The use of Vergil hints at this project, revealing a change in
the Roman epic categories of the nature of the divine, the heroic descent/trial, the nature of the hero, and the idea of Rome. Prudentius accomplishes this through a careful allusive program that simultaneously embraces and distances itself from his epic predecessor. In addition, a biblical allusive program, which takes the form of carefully chosen typologies, embraces Roman pagan history as it acknowledges the ultimate authority of Christian ideology in the construction of history.