



The Senses on Edge?

Overstrained and Fading
Sensory Perception in
Graeco-Roman Literature

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Beyond *imperium sine fine* *Affective Subjectivities of Violation in the Aeneid*

REBECCA MOORMAN

Abstract: This chapter examines Aeneas' feelings of anxiety, horror, and sovereignty, or Georges Bataille's notion of the momentary suspension of knowledge, during moments of extreme violation in the *Aeneid*. During Aeneas' encounter with Polydorus (*Aen.* 3.13–68), the spatial opposition between anxiety and horror, affects which grant insight through opposite means of distance and proximity, creates a moment of aporetic suspension wherein the intensity of sensory experience suppresses all cognitive thought. Momentarily delivered from the intellectual labor of *pietas*, Aeneas enters a suspended state of “unknowing” that enables him to continue his sensory-based exploration. The realm of unknowing is an affectively rich space of subject-subject exchange in which the ostensible sovereignty of a dominating subject is nullified by the duality of sensory touch: only through his violation does Aeneas recognize the subjecthood of the presumed object he has violated, his blood relative Polydorus. Acknowledging Aeneas' violation as a paradoxical recognition of the other's subjecthood in turn allows us to understand two other troubling violations, the Golden Bough and the death of Turnus, not as mere erosions of Aeneas' *pietas* but as renegotiations of the subject-object divide between conqueror and conquered that take Aeneas beyond the *imperium sine fine* of Jupiter and *princeps*.

Keywords: Vergil, Aeneas, knowledge, *pietas*, emotion

Three times in the *Aeneid*, Aeneas becomes so overwhelmed that he cannot speak. The most extended instance of this arrested speechlessness occurs at the opening of Book 3 (*Aen.* 3.19–68). While collecting myrtle branches for a sacrifice to the gods in support of his newly founded city of Thrace, Aeneas is shocked to pull up a branch dripping with blood. Rather than retreat, however, Aeneas persists in pulling up a second branch, and then a third. Eventually, the grove calls out to him in pain, begging him to “stop polluting pious hands” (*parce pias scelerare manus*, 3.42).¹ The grove

1 Text of the *Aeneid* is that of Mynors (1969). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.



that Aeneas has been culling is the murdered co(r)pse of his cousin Polydorus, whom Priam had entrusted to Polymester, king of Thrace, during the Trojan War. Faced with the knowledge that he has been violating his relative's makeshift grave, a horrified and anxiety-ridden Aeneas cannot move. He stands speechless, rooted to the spot:

*tum uero ancipiti mentem formidine pressus
obstipui steteruntque comae et uox faucibus haesit.*

Then, truly pressed in my mind by uncertain dread, I was struck
dumb: my hair stood on end and my voice clung in my throat.

Verg. *Aen.* 3.47–48

Aeneas' speechlessness repeats exactly his earlier dumbstruck horror at the sight of Creusa's ghost (*obstipui, steteruntque comae et uox faucibus haesit*, 2.774) and closely mirrors his later shock at Mercury's admonition when he lingers in Carthage with Dido (*arrectaeque horrore comae et uox faucibus haesit*, 4.280).² Each instance abruptly confronts Aeneas with a failure of *pietas*: the loss of his wife; the desecration of a grave; the neglect of his own people.³

Scholars have struggled to account for Aeneas' lack of piety in his encounter with Polydorus, questioning the degree to which he knowingly violates the grove's sanctity.⁴ Richard Thomas has influentially argued that Aeneas' "completely intentional" failure to offer an initial prayer is an indication of his, and Vergil's, ambivalence towards cultural and religious convention: no victory in the *Aeneid* comes without at least some discomfort and often with great violence.⁵ Eve Adler alternatively argues that Aeneas' decision to continue uprooting branches is part of a gradual recognition of his potential impiety.⁶ The first branch of myrtle, a plant sacred to Venus, is gathered in an act of piety to adorn the altar; the second branch is pulled by a "more attentive" Aeneas, who is aware that something unusual is happening but does not yet know what or why. It is only after Aeneas has pulled up two branches that he becomes anxious about the "possibility" that his actions "might be displeasing to the gods." Thomas and Adler use

2 For Hosle (2021), Creusa and Polydorus represent mirroring prophecies within the larger ring composition of *Aen.* 2 and 3; I would add to this the mirroring experiences of overwhelming shock for Aeneas.

3 Cf. the contribution to this volume by Munro. On Aeneas' failures with Creusa and Dido, see Feeney (1998); Grillo (2010–2011); Sugar (2019); and Perkell (2021).

4 See, e.g., Thomas (1988); Putnam (1995) 51–53; Dyson (2001) 29–49; Casali (2005); and Dufallo (2007) 106–109; cf. Allen (1951) and Adler (2003) 282–285. For a political reading of Polydorus within the Trojan family "tree," see Gowers (2011); cf. Stahl (1998) 43–44.

5 Thomas (1988) 265. Dufallo (2007) 108 likewise sees the episode's horror as "a parable of not looking further," since "past violence leads only to further violence," but with a hopeful outlook, as Aeneas' piety in subsequently providing Polydorus with a proper burial points towards positive Augustan reform.

6 Adler (2003) 283.



similar methodologies to reach separate conclusions regarding the troubling question of Aeneas' piety, focusing on Aeneas' knowledge of his own actions, or lack thereof.⁷

Moving beyond questions of knowing, this chapter considers Aeneas' experience of "unknowing," an affective model of knowledge-seeking paradoxically premised on the abandonment or momentary suspension of knowledge and the labor entailed in the pursuit of this knowledge.⁸ An affect is typically understood as a state of "in-between-ness" or "beside-ness":

the name we give to those forces – visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability.⁹

I use "affect" to describe experiences in the *Aeneid* that exist outside or beyond both conscious thought and sensory experience: when a subject becomes so overwhelmed by their feelings that neither sensory perception nor cognitive thought can fully account for their experience. In Aeneas' case, the spatial impasse created by his simultaneous experience of anxiety and horror – two affects which grant insight through opposite means of distance and proximity – overrides his cognitive capacity. Aeneas' sensory-based insight during his encounter with Polydorus, as he "feels out the reasons hidden deep inside" the grove (*causas penitus temptare latentis*, *Aen.* 3.32), relies on physical, haptic proximity: he must pull the object of his horror closer in his quest to understand.¹⁰ Anxiety, on the other hand, is a notably "indefinite" and uninvolved affect that creates a projection "*away from*."¹¹ Before pulling up a third and final branch, an uncertain and anxious Aeneas utters a prayer, projecting his anxiety onto the gods and away from himself (3.34–36, 39). This act of projective relocation affirms Aeneas' inquiry by distancing him from anxiety's grip.

As Aeneas' horror and anxiety create new pathways for insight, the very impossibility of a simultaneity between "towards" and "away from" suspends his inquiry in a moment of overwhelming shock (*obstupui*, 3.48). In addition to Aeneas' experiential overload, then, his senses are also fading: there is a nothingness that follows from the subject becoming completely overwhelmed. Twentieth century philosopher Georges Bataille describes this nothingness as "non savoir" [unknowing], a paradoxical experi-

7 See further Dyson (2001) 35–39; cf. Horsfall (2006) 58–61; Dufallo (2007) 108; and Rossiter (2020) 260.

8 Cf. Farrell (2021) 114–116.

9 Gregg/Seigworth (2010) 1 (original emphasis).

10 For various theoretical approaches to the paradoxical attraction of horror, see Kristeva (1981) 1–18; Carroll (1990) 12–58; Menninghaus (2003) [1999] 365–401; and Korsmeyer (2011) 113–135. On the aesthetics of Roman *horror*, see Schwartz (2013) and Estèves (2020), esp. 93–123.

11 Ngai (2005) 232 (original emphasis).



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