Land of No Return: the Gloomy Kingdom of Hades

Harris and Platzner, ch. 9
The Homeric View of the Afterlife

- Told in *Odyssey* xi (“the Nekuia”)
- Afterlife as oblivion
- Hollow enjoyment of some pursuits of life (cf. Orion chasing animal spirits)
- Ghosts without corporality – no human touch
- Achilles – would rather be a slave to a poor man than king of the dead
The Homeric View of the Afterlife, continued

- Dead have interest in the life of the living
- The dead existence of all is pretty similar – heroes and sinners in same boat
  - The big sinners are punished separately
- No “Elysium” in Homer’s account
Location and Geography of Hades

- Homer has Odysseus sail to edge of world (similar to what Gilgamesh does)
- Underworld usually imagined as subterranean
- 5 rivers – Styx, Acheron, Cocytus, Phlegethon, and Lethe
- Shadowy land – fields of asphodel
- Division into Tartarus (hell) and Elysium (heaven)
Tartarus

- Located as far below the earth as Olympus is above it...
- Tityus – chained to ground with vultures eating liver – tried to rape Leto
- Tantalus – eternal thirst and hunger – tried to trick gods into eating human flesh
Tartarus, continued

- Sisyphus – pushing great boulder up hill – tricked his way out of Underworld
- Danaids – carrying water in sieves – killed their husbands
- Ixion – tied to fiery, spinning wheel – tried to rape Hera
Descents into the Underworld

- **Heracles** – sent to the Underworld to get Cerberus
  - Also wrestled Death and saved Alcestis
- **Theseus** – went with Pirithous to kidnap Persephone – stuck on thrones of forgetfulness
- **Orpheus** – went to retrieve wife – could not look back – failed
Descents into the Underworld, continued

- Aeneas (in Virgil’s *Aeneid* VI) – goes to consult dad’s spirit – sees parade of Roman heroes (who will be reincarnations of Trojan dead)

- Er (in Plato’s *Republic* X) – has vision of afterlife (not Underworld), and reincarnation
Evolving Ideas about the Afterlife

- In Homer, ghosts retain individual identity, but lack ability to influence events
  - As if they were in some dream state
- By Plato, idea of individual judgment enters picture, coupled with reincarnation
- In Virgil’s account, ghosts have different treatment in afterlife, with best sent to spend eternity in Elysian Fields
Transmigration of Souls

- Pythagoras (6th c. BC) and Empedocles (5th c. BC) preached idea of death and reincarnation
  - Soul is immortal, and moves through various physical shells

- Plato, “Myth of Er” in *Republic* X (4th c. BC)
  - Souls go to field to be judged
Transmigration of Souls, continued

- Those judged good go through an opening in the sky
- Those judged bad go through an opening in the ground
- For 1000 years, receive reward or punishment
- Return to field (saints – glowing; sinners – all covered in dirt)
Transmigration of Souls, continued

- After a week’s time, choose new life
- New life attached to soul, soul goes to River Lethe (“Forgetfulness”)
- Return to be reborn, forgetting past life

- Virgil uses Plato’s idea with variations to allow Aeneas to see the Rome that will be