

“To Pull History Through to the Present”: The *Aeneid* and the Artistic Design of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum.

In a recent interview Michael Shulan, Creative Director of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, said the conceptual intention of the museum was to “pull history through to the present.” The “history” was both the 9/11 attack, and *The Aeneid*, particularly, Book VI.

The final plans for the Memorial and Museum created an underground entrance to the Museum at the bottom of an incline taking the visitor 70’ to bedrock, where he or she confronts a solid wall. Behind the wall, and closed off from the public, are the remains of those who died on 9/11. The New York City Medical Examiner still conducts forensic research to establish their identity.

The visitor proceeds down an underground tunnel to the first level of the National 9/11 Museum. The permanent collection includes “photographs, videotapes, voice messages, recovered property, clothing and other personal effects, workplace memorabilia” and other items to call to mind the experiences of September 11, and the earlier truck-bomb attack on the Twin Towers of February 26, 1993. The visitor rises to ground level, and is greeted with the daylight pouring through a modernist clerestory window. The exit from the Museum is onto the broad Memorial plaza with fountains in the two foundations or “footprints” of the Twin Towers, each bearing the names of those who died in that Tower, and a memorial grove of trees.

The influence of Vergil on the conceptual design of the Museum is signaled first on the wall dividing the visitor from the unidentified remains. On the wall are the words, “No day shall erase you from the memory of time,” a translation of “*Nulla dies umquam memori vox eximet aevo*,” Vergil’s farewell to Nisus and Euryalus (*Aeneid*, IX). The

words are forged from metal salvaged from the site, and are pitted with the damage from the blast.

The conceptual intent of the entrance and the museum itself are inspired by *Aeneid* VI. Both Michael Shulan, and Alice Greenwald, the Director, saw in Vergil's description of the journey to the Underworld a way of shaping the experience of the visitor as journey from mourning, through understanding, and finally a contemplation of the responsibility to the future.

I interviewed both Michael Shulan and Alice Greenwald in connection with a documentary I am producing, along with Professor Rhiannon Ash (Classics, Merton College), on the reception of *The Aeneid*. In the presentation I propose, I would like to show portions of the interviews which I think will be of particular interest to those attending the conference. I hope to provide some insight into the process which led them to select Vergil's description of the Underworld as the conceptual framework for the 9/11 Museum, as well as the source of the controversy attending their choice of the quotation from Book IX.

