

# Aeneas the Spin-Doctor: Rhetorical Self-Presentation in *Aeneid* 2

*Revised from a paper given to the Virgil Society on 23 May 2009*

The notion that Aeneas' narration in book 2 of the *Aeneid* has the nature of a rhetorical self-defence is prominent in ancient criticism of Virgil, but in modern times it has not on the whole received much attention from scholars. It is here argued that, far from being outdated or eccentric, this approach clarifies many passages in the text. It can be broken down into three interrelated points. First, that readers ought to take seriously Aeneas' own position as a character who is giving an account of himself: he is more than just an alternative narrative voice to that of the author.<sup>1</sup> Second, that Aeneas has to give that account before an audience that cannot be automatically assumed to be well-disposed towards him (this is as true of Aeneas' imagined Carthaginian audience as it is of Virgil's real Roman audience). Scholars have drawn attention to the alternative versions of the Aeneas story, some quite discreditable to the hero, that circulated in antiquity,<sup>2</sup> and have occasionally pointed to features of Aeneas' narrative in book 2 which seem designed to rebut elements of one or another of those versions.<sup>3</sup> Some readers may not be happy with interpretations of this kind,<sup>4</sup> which may be thought to depend too heavily on material

---

<sup>1</sup> Though of course he is that as well: see A. Bowie, 'Aeneas narrator', *PVS* 26 (2008), 41-51. My approach is on the whole different from (and largely complementary to) that of Bowie, though at one stage (43) he refers to Aeneas' "concern for his audience's view of himself", which is precisely the point that I develop further.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. M. Reinhold, 'The Unhero Aeneas', *C&M* 27 (1966), 195-207; G. K. Galinsky, *Aeneas, Sicily and Rome*, 1969, Princeton, 46-51; N. Horsfall, 'Some Problems in the Aeneas Legend', *CQ* 29 (1979), 372-90. Much useful material also in J. Perret, *Les Origines de la légende troyenne de Rome*, 1942, Paris.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. H.-P. Stahl, 'Aeneas – An "Unheroic" Hero?', in *Virgil: 2000 Years, Arethusa* 14 (1981), 157-77 (165-68); S. Casali, 'Facta Impia (Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.596-9)', *CQ* 49 (1999), 203-11, argues convincingly that the *facta impia* referred to by Dido are those of Aeneas, recounted in the alternative tradition (*i.e.* escape from Troy by stealth or treachery, desertion of Creusa, etc).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps (though it is not quite clear) this is what lies behind N. Horsfall's comment on 2.432 (*Virgil, Aeneid* 2, 2008, Leiden, 337): "Not so much an answer to the old charge ... of treason, or collusion laid against Aen., which surfaces slightly too often in ancient and modern discussions of the Sack ...", although H. himself mentions it at p. 248 (on lines 289-95).

outside the Virgilian text. But even if one confines oneself to the story as Virgil has explicitly set it up, Aeneas must somehow explain his presence as a refugee and survivor of the captured city – a fact with which the Italians explicitly taunt him and his Trojans later in the epic (9.599: *bis capti Phryges*; 12.15: *desertorem Asiae*).<sup>5</sup> The third point, the most important for this paper, is that analysis of the narrative itself reveals numerous features, quite specific and detailed, which have the rhetorical functions of exonerating Aeneas from blame for the events he describes and of presenting his actions in the best possible light. These details have often either gone unnoticed or been interpreted in a contrary sense, because, as I argue, insufficient attention has been paid to the rhetorical context. The more general points are familiar if sometimes neglected; but I have not so far seen another discussion in print that gives a detailed and sustained account of Aeneas' self-justifying rhetoric.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

On his arrival at Carthage, Virgil's Aeneas faces an immediate problem. Before he can get his ships repaired and supplied so that he can eventually put to sea again, before he can weigh the rights and wrongs of settling in the region, he has to solve the simpler question of how to ensure survival. He has arrived in unknown and possibly hostile territory. For all he knows at the beginning, before he has seen anything of Dido's reactions to his arrival, he cannot assume that that he and his companions will not be either killed or detained indefinitely as enemy aliens. Even after the initially friendly welcome by Dido, Aeneas cannot assume that her positive feelings will be shared by the rest of her people, nor that the Carthaginians as a whole (especially given their proverbial reputation among Virgil's readers) can be relied on. Hence Virgil, in writing the narrative of this scene, has set himself the task of managing the arrival in such a way that it is plausible for Aeneas and his followers to be, and to continue to be, treated kindly. Divine intervention plays a part, and of course Virgil could have written the whole episode differently (*e.g.* as a

---

<sup>5</sup> See R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Aeneas Imperator: Roman Generalship in an Epic Context', *PVS* 18 (1978-80), 50-61: "At the fall of Troy Virgil must establish three things about Aeneas. In the first place it must be made clear that the disaster was not his fault ... though Aeneas uses first person plurals to describe what the Trojans did, he does not seem to admit any individual responsibility ... Secondly, Virgil must emphasize Aeneas' courage. It could be held against him that he had survived his city, and Turnus touched a sore point when he called him *desertorem Asiae* (12.15). That is why Virgil makes him organize resistance, though only at a local and subordinate level: he takes up arms without regard for consequences (314 ...), if he had been fated to fall he deserved it by his actions (433f. ...), he emphasizes several times his own *furor* or loss of control (316, 588, 595) ... Thirdly, Virgil must confirm the legitimacy of Aeneas' *imperium*". See also Horsfall (n.4 above) 248-50 on ll. 289-95, and 337 on l. 432.

<sup>6</sup> Apart from the introductory paragraph, this is a revised version of the paper delivered to the Virgil Society on 23 May 2009. I am grateful to David West and Daniel Hadas for their comments.

straightforward story of escape from a hostile power). But once the main outlines of the story as we have it were in place, and if plausibility is to be achieved on the human level, Aeneas has to be made to maximise his own chances of a good reception and not to take too much for granted.

This may seem an obvious and elementary point of narrative technique; but critics have not always found it obvious that Virgil either tried to make Aeneas present himself favourably, or succeeded in the attempt. The standard commentary on book 2 by Roland Austin, for example, analyses the character-presentation of Aeneas in that book, and finds the character as presented significantly wanting.<sup>7</sup> The narrative is held to show up Aeneas' failings as a Homeric hero, initially unable to adapt to changed circumstances, and only at the end of the book growing little by little into a more mature role of leadership. This account probably reflects a wider view of the epic as a whole, which has been fashionable for many years and to some extent remains so, whereby Aeneas' character is seen as gradually developing and maturing throughout the poem from impulsive Homeric hero to Roman imperial leader.<sup>8</sup> Now is not the time for a full consideration of that issue. What is immediately clear is this: if one assumes before one starts that the *Aeneid* is a story of character development, it follows that Aeneas' character as displayed in the early books must be relatively undeveloped. This notion may, if we are not careful, prejudice our reading of the text.

Take, for example, a well-known passage like 2.314-17. Aeneas has had his nightmare vision of the dead Hector, and is awakened by the sound of wailing and the clash of weapons, to find that the nightmare is a reality. His neighbours' houses are on fire and there is fighting in the streets outside. Here he describes his reaction:

*arma amens capio, nec sat rationis in armis,  
sed glomerare manum bello et concurrere in arcem  
cum sociis ardent animi: furor iraque mentem  
praecipitant, pulchrumque mori succurrit in armis.*

<sup>7</sup> R. G. Austin, *Virgil: Aeneid II*, 1964, Oxford, xiv-xv.

<sup>8</sup> The idea of a development in Aeneas' character was brought to the fore by R. Heinze, *Virgils Epische Technik*<sup>3</sup>, 1915, Leipzig and Berlin, 271-80, and has become commonplace. It is convincingly rebutted (with references to earlier literature) by T. Fuhrer, 'Aeneas: A study in character development', *G&R* 36 (1989), 63-72. C. J. Mackie, *The Characterisation of Aeneas*, 1988, Edinburgh, 45-60 (cf. 211-15) shows that Aeneas' character as portrayed in book 2 is broadly consistent with his later behaviour (see also B. J. Gibson, 'Aeneas' Story', *Omnibus* 34 (1997), 28-31, at 29). For a concise assessment of the current state of the question see M. Schauer, *Aeneas dux in Vergils Aeneis: Ein literarische Fiktion in augusteischer Zeit*, *Zetemata* 128 (2007), esp. 126, n.10 and 143, n.348.

One might argue that the text implies strong criticism of Aeneas' behaviour. He is out of his mind (*amens*) and he takes up arms hastily in blind fury (*furor iraque mentem praecipitat*) without any thought of prudence or strategy (*nec sat rationis in armis*). These can easily be taken as signs of an immature character: an unregenerate Homeric warrior who has some way to go before he can be allowed a place at the top table.<sup>9</sup>

But wait a minute. This passage comes from book 2, and the second and third books of the *Aeneid* consist of first-person narrative. As Andrew Laird has pointed out,<sup>10</sup> studies of "speeches in the Aeneid" tend to leave out this one, which is the longest of all (about 1,500 lines); but there is no reason why this speech should not also be subjected to the same kind of rhetorical analysis. At the very least, it seems unpromising to take the words put in Aeneas' mouth as expressing a straightforward, presumably unfavourable, judgement by the author on his character. What we have here, rather, is the poet's conception of how Aeneas himself would *present* his own character and his own story. In the passage just referred to, *amens* and *furor et ira* and *nec sat rationis* are not the author's comments on Aeneas' behaviour: they are Aeneas' own comments, with hindsight, on his own past actions.

Is Aeneas therefore being made to criticise his own past actions? This would, I think, be a hasty interpretation. It seems rather unlikely, on reflection, that Aeneas is here telling Dido: "I was irrational and impulsive at that time, but now I have developed further along the road from Homeric hero to mature Roman leader, and if I were in the same situation now, I would act differently and more rationally". After all, what more rational course of action, consistent with his status as any kind of epic hero, was open to him in that situation? Here, Servius auctus (*ad Aen.* 2.314) is alive to the rhetoric of the situation: *NEC SAT RATIONIS IN ARMIS ... ostendere vult, primam ei cogitationem fuisse de patria, sed subveniendi ei armis nullam fuisse rationem ardente iam patria; quomodo enim incensam civitatem defenderet?* Aeneas, in fact, is presenting himself as having acted bravely and patriotically, and with no thought for his own safety. He is narrating the event in a way that is calculated both to heighten the narrative excitement, and to appeal to the Carthaginian audience's sympathy. His use of words like *amens* need not be read as self-condemnation, but rather has at least three positive rhetorical functions: first, to emphasise with hindsight the desperate nature of the situation Aeneas was in; secondly, to excuse his ultimate failure

<sup>9</sup> Horsfall (n.4 above) 249-50 (on lines 289-95), citing a range of modern opinion, rightly disputes the "widespread vituperation of Aen. for his furious return to battle".

<sup>10</sup> A. J. W. Laird, *Powers of Expression, Expressions of Power: Speech Presentation and Latin Literature*, 1999, Oxford, 199-205, esp. n.88.

to defend Troy effectively, since the situation was obviously hopeless; and thirdly, to show the hero as suitably modest, *i.e.* not boasting inappropriately about exploits that did not, in fact, turn out too well. One could paraphrase as follows: “Looking back on it, I was mad to think I could fight my way out of that desperate situation. I had no strategy available to me; I was impelled by anger and rage, but my only thought was to fight and, if necessary, to die fighting”. In short, Aeneas presents his own reactions in that situation as one might expect a hero to present them. In such a narration, it would not have been so satisfactory to claim to have acted with rational calculation, especially given the disastrous outcome.<sup>11</sup>

This passage is just one of many in which Aeneas is made to put a positive “spin” on his own character and his own experiences at Troy and later. Virgil has put his Aeneas into a delicate diplomatic situation, where he has to give an account of himself to an audience not certainly sympathetic. The narrative put into Aeneas’ mouth is not just a recital of facts, but also (I would argue) a persuasive apologia.

On general grounds, this is not unexpected. Admittedly, Aeneas is not the greatest spin-doctor of the Homeric world; that palm undoubtedly goes to Odysseus. Rather, he is presented (both in the *Iliad* and in the *Aeneid*) as a plain honest Trojan, and it is no part of my purpose to suggest that the text should lead us to see duplicity or deception in Aeneas’ self-presentation.<sup>12</sup> Spin – or, if you prefer, rhetoric – may be defined as the art of manipulating the message without actual misstatement. Nevertheless, on a literary level we know that Aeneas’ narration is modelled on that of Odysseus in Homer, and the Odyssean precedent is never far away (much of Aeneas’ behaviour in book 1 is after all based on that of Odysseus, including a capacity to disguise his real feelings: 1.209). Even an honest Trojan may be expected not to let himself down by a bungled self-presentation. The rhetorical techniques of *captatio benevolentiae* were well understood among Virgil’s contemporaries; but even if it were assumed that the techniques were here applied unconsciously by the author for the benefit of the characters he created, it would still be legitimate to analyse them.

Certainly, at least one Roman reader of Virgil in the next generation was aware that Aeneas’ narrative could be taken as a rhetorical artefact. The cynical Ovid makes Dido write as follows (*Her.* 7.79-82):

---

<sup>11</sup> It has been remarked that Aeneas in the *Iliad* is presented as notably level-headed: see Galinsky (n.2 above) 36-38. Virgil seems to have made him more impulsive, perhaps in an effort to present him (or have him present himself) as a more clearly first-class hero in the mould of Achilles or Hector.

<sup>12</sup> Casali (n.3 above) 210-11 suggests precisely this: “The narrator’s voice never guarantees that Aeneas is telling the truth”.

*sed neque fers tecum, nec quae mihi, perfide, iactas,  
 presserunt umeros sacra paterque tuos.  
 omnia mentiris: neque enim tua fallere lingua  
 incipit a nobis, primaque plector ego.*

Ovid's Dido accuses Aeneas of lying outright: he never carried his father on his shoulders; he never rescued the Penates from Troy. As for Creusa (she continues), he just left her behind, in the same way as he is now abandoning Dido. Of course, Ovid's Dido could not be made to refer explicitly to the text of the *Aeneid*, but surely it is strongly implied here, for an audience familiar with Virgil, that Aeneas' account of the loss of Creusa in *Aeneid* 2 could be seen as a whitewash.

\* \* \*

As a matter of fact, when Virgil began to conceive the *Aeneid*, it seems very likely that Aeneas needed a good deal of whitewashing, if he was to appear as a respectable epic hero and a worthy ancestor for the Julian house.

Doubtless, the core of Virgil's picture is already there in the *Iliad*:<sup>13</sup> Aeneas is the son of Aphrodite, and on two occasions (in *Iliad* 5 and 20) he owes his survival to her intervention. He is a cousin of Priam, apparently given the cold shoulder by him (*Il.* 13.461): this feature does not appear explicitly in Virgil, but may possibly help to explain why, in *Aen.* 2, Aeneas seems to have no control over public events in Troy: a situation that seems inherently unlikely given his status, however necessary for the narrative (as we shall see later). The Homeric Aeneas has considerable heroic credentials, in so far as he is the only Trojan to fight Achilles and survive (although with non-human assistance); and Poseidon famously prophesies that he is the person who will carry on the Trojan royal family and be king.

The Homeric picture contains nothing discreditable about Aeneas; but as in the case of some other Homeric heroes, once one moves outside Homer to what can be gleaned of the treatment of Aeneas in the Cyclic epics, in tragedy and in Greek historians, the picture becomes a good deal more ambivalent. In much of this tradition, it seems, Aeneas appeared as distinctly unheroic.<sup>14</sup> Three different versions circulated. According to one, in the *Iliou Persis* of Arctinus and in a lost play of Sophocles, Aeneas and his family escaped from Troy some time before the end. The escape was prompted by the death of Laocoon, which,

<sup>13</sup> For the Iliadic characterisation of Aeneas see further Galinsky (n.2 above) 11-14.

<sup>14</sup> See nn. 2 and 3 (above). Most of the information about the alternative accounts is, of course, owed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *Roman Antiquities*. See G. Vanotti, *L'altro Enea: la testimonianza di Dionigi di Alicarnasso*, 1995, Rome.

before Virgil reworked the story, apparently had nothing to do with the Wooden Horse, but happened some time before, and was interpreted as a portent of the fall of the city. According to this account, Aeneas moved his household to Mount Ida, where he remained safe during the remainder of the siege. A second version makes Aeneas, usually together with Antenor, stay in Troy to the end but then leave the city under Greek protection: this version is found in Virgil's near contemporary Livy. The third version makes Aeneas part of a plot, with Antenor, to betray the city to the Greek army: this is found in earlier Greek historical sources (Menecrates of Xanthus, perhaps 4th cent. BC), though it reaches its full development in the much later romances which bear the names of Dictys of Crete and Dares of Phrygia, and from there enters the main stream of medieval literature.

The proliferation of alternative accounts is, of course, typical of the majority of Graeco-Roman legends; until the story became the subject of a major work of literature such as the *Aeneid*, the question which version was right or canonical or generally accepted is simply the wrong question to ask. But whichever account one favoured, Virgil faced a problem. Why did Aeneas survive at all? Why did he not fall in the defence of his city, as a good hero should?<sup>15</sup> The explanation might be cowardice, or treachery: Virgil could hardly allow either of these possibilities to obtrude itself explicitly,<sup>16</sup> but because they were there in some versions of the tradition, it might be wise for him to rebut them by implication.

Now if Virgil had been a historian like Livy or Dionysius of Halicarnassus, he would have been free to choose, or construct for himself, a historically plausible version of events, in which Aeneas was shown as actuated throughout by considerations of prudent policy. Such a version was given by the Greek historian Hellanicus (cited by Dionysius), and Austin comments on it as follows:<sup>17</sup> "Here, then, is an Aeneas who is a resolute, resourceful, and formidable military leader, poles apart from Virgil's hesitant, frustrated, uncertain figure". Austin wonders why Virgil did not make more use of this tradition: a story of orderly evacuations, negotiations from positions of strength, safe-conducts for the transportation of valuables, and time-limits for leaving the Troad. I, for my part, wonder whether even Virgil's genius could have made high epic poetry out of that.

Whether or not Virgil seriously considered that option (and I can hardly imagine that he did so for more than a few minutes), in the end he went for a different one, undoubtedly more satisfactory from the point of view of heroic epic in the Homeric manner: Aeneas represents himself as having no regard for his own safety, and his escape from the fighting

<sup>15</sup> See n.5 (above).

<sup>16</sup> Horsfall (n.4 above) 248: "... cowardice, inebriation and gross somnolence are excluded".

<sup>17</sup> n.7 above (xv).

is shown to have been due entirely to the intervention of the divine powers. There was ample precedent for this, not least in that the Homeric Aeneas is already consistently under special divine protection. It was, however, wise of Virgil to portray Aeneas as having no real knowledge of this at the time. An Aeneas who, throughout the story, was conscious of his specially protected status could easily have become insufferable. Rather than detract from his own heroism in this way, Virgil's Aeneas prefers to run the risk of seeming obtuse in the face of admonitions from above. For example, in the dream in 2.268-97, Aeneas is warned by Hector that it is hopeless to try to defend Troy; then he wakes up – and tries to defend Troy. The narrative goes on as though the dream had never happened. Here the poet again had a choice: the dream could have been remembered immediately and acted upon; but Virgil chose to make Aeneas ignore it, partly perhaps for realism (this is after all how nightmares are often treated in real life), and partly because to make him heed the warning would have detracted from his bravery.

\* \* \*

What I have so far said implies nothing about what I think Dido and the Carthaginians, in the story, knew about Aeneas before he started to narrate the fall of Troy. Ovid's Dido certainly seems to imply that her offer of a share in the kingdom was made on inadequate evidence (*Her.* 7. 89-90):

*fluctibus eiectum tuta statione recepi,  
vixque bene audito nomine, regna dedi.*

In *vix bene audito nomine*, Ovid probably alludes to the fact that in *Aeneid* 1.572-74 the offer was made, before Aeneas appeared, to the band of Trojans led by Ilioneus, just twenty-eight lines after their first mention of Aeneas' name. This may not imply that Dido had no previous knowledge of the hero and his reputation; and in Virgil, in fact, it is clear that she already knows a good deal about him. According to her at 1.565-66, she has not only heard of Aeneas and his family, but has heard the news of the sack of Troy (*tanti incendia belli*) and also knows where Aeneas is bound for (569: *Hesperiam magnam Saturniaque arva*, or at least Sicily). In 615-26, it turns out that she has heard about the fall of Troy from Teucer, son of Telamon, who had been assisted by Dido's father in founding his city of Salamis on Cyprus. Though a Greek by allegiance, Teucer had strong family connections with the Trojans (being Priam's sister's son) and spoke well of them, though they were enemies (625). Partly because of this, and partly because of her own position as an exile (628-30), Dido claims to be friendly and sympathetic to the Trojans. Yet Aeneas cannot tell whether this favourable attitude will be shared by the rest of the Carthaginians, whether it will last, or even whether it is genuine. He still has to be careful what he says.



Before these revelations, there is another indication that the name of Aeneas is known at Carthage: the famous mural of the Trojan War described in lines 456-93. At the risk of adding to the discussion on a passage that has received more than its share of attention,<sup>18</sup> I shall venture to suggest that this scene is crucial in preparing for the narrative of book 2, in a way that has not, I think, always been noticed.<sup>19</sup>

Aeneas' reactions to the work of art can, I think, be divided into three stages. First, and obviously, he immediately concludes that, because the Trojan story is known in Carthage, he is likely to get a sympathetic hearing there (463): *solue metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem*. Then, he examines the pictures more closely, and especially those that record the sufferings of the Trojans; these reach their climax in the ransoming of the body of Hector. Here his reaction changes realistically to one of nearly uncontrollable grief. In the third section, he finally sees a representation of himself (488), *se quoque principibus permixtum agnovit Achivis*, together with the arrival of reinforcements for the Trojan side from Memnon and the Amazons. Aeneas' emotional reactions seem to shut off abruptly at this point. All we are told is that he *stupet obtutuque haeret defixus in uno* (495): he is in a daze, staring fixedly at the picture. Has something about this scene puzzled or disturbed him?

In the commentary of Servius, here and on 1.242, we find that there was a difference of opinion in antiquity as to the meaning of line 488. Some took it as I have done since schooldays and as I suspect most readers do: Aeneas saw himself in the midst of the fighting, heroically ill-matched against several of the Greek champions. David West's translation provides an explicit gloss to this effect: "in the confusion of battle, with the leaders of the Greeks all round him".<sup>20</sup> Yet "battle" is not explicit in the Latin, and there was an alternative interpretation. Aeneas might have seen himself represented in the middle of a group of Greek chieftains, not fighting them, but negotiating with them, as in some of the other versions of the story mentioned above. It seems, in fact, that the wording is ambiguous and could support either interpretation. Usage alone does not solve the problem; one may note, however, that in classical Latin in general, the word often has a

<sup>18</sup> See for example R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Further Voices in Vergil's Aeneid*, 1987, Oxford, 210; D. P. Fowler, 'Narrate and describe: the problem of ekphrasis', *JRS* 81 (1991), 25-35; N. Horsfall, 'Dido in the light of history', *PVS* 13 (1973-74), 1-13, repr. in S. Harrison (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Vergil's Aeneid*, Oxford, 1990, 127-44.

<sup>19</sup> See also Casali (n.3 above) 208-09.

<sup>20</sup> D. West, *Virgil: The Aeneid, a New Prose Translation*, 1990, London, 19. David West (private communication) cites *OLD s.v. misceo* 3b and 4b, *permisceo* 3b and 4b for these verbs used in battle contexts.

pejorative tinge: what is *permixtum* is often in some sense out of place (see esp. *OLD s.v. permisceo* 4, 5). Perhaps, then, the effect is that Aeneas thinks to himself: “Hello! What am I doing there among the Greek leaders?”

Now if that is so, the corollary becomes clear: from the point of view of Virgil’s Aeneas, the Carthaginians have, or may have, got hold of the wrong story.<sup>21</sup> At best, they have shown Aeneas negotiating with the Greeks to leave Troy, even before the arrival of the Amazons (and hence well before the end of the siege); at worst, they have followed the version that made him a traitor to his city, fraternising with the enemy. No wonder, in that case, that he is taken aback, as he surely is, in lines 494-95; though usually taken as such, this does not read to me quite like a continuation of his reaction to the rest of the picture. This new reaction may be not just personal interest or emotional involvement, but shock at thinking that one has been libelled. If this is the sense, it is conveyed by the lightest of touches; and yet it goes a long way towards explaining why Aeneas is later so anxious to defend himself in book 2, as indeed Servius *ad Aen.* 1.488 notes: *latenter prodicionem tangit ... ut excusatur ab ipso in secundo, ‘Iliaci cineres’ et cetera.*

The passage Servius refers to is 2.431-44:

*Iliaci cineres et flamma extrema meorum,  
testor, in occasu vestro nec tela nec ulla  
vitavisse vices, Danaum et, si fata fuissent  
ut caderem, meruisse manu.*

If this passage is not rhetorical self-defence, it is difficult to know what rhetorical self-defence would look like.<sup>22</sup> It marks an important break in the narrative, although not usually marked as such in editions; West’s Penguin translation gets it right.<sup>23</sup> The first battle scene (303-430) is over and the second battle, at Priam’s palace, has not yet begun. Aeneas and his followers have had their first encounter with Greeks in battle inside the city, and he has had some temporary success, partly because of his local knowledge (370-83). Then Coroebus, Cassandra’s husband, has the disastrous idea of making use

<sup>21</sup> As argued by Casali (n.3 above) 209-10. *Aliter* Horsfall (n.18 above) who talks of an ironical contrast between Aeneas’ “warm reactions” (throughout) to the pictures and the Carthaginian reality. But if *stupet* and *haeret* do not register some change from Aeneas’ initial reaction, they seem to be a pointless amplification of *miranda* in the previous line.

<sup>22</sup> Here, at any rate, there is little disagreement among scholars. See esp. Stahl (n.3 above) 168: “The verb *testor* implies the situation of the accused”. More material to similar effect in Horsfall (n.4 above) 337 *ad loc.*

<sup>23</sup> West (n.20 above) 43.

of the armour stripped from the Greeks they have killed, in order to disguise themselves. The consequence of this is that they are mistaken for Greeks and attacked by their own side (410-12); then the main Greek force arrives, discovers that they are Trojans (because of their dialect, 423) and all those named up to that point except for Aeneas himself are killed. Aeneas is thus left alone apart from two companions (one elderly and one wounded) and the implication is that one would expect him to be killed as well. No real explanation is offered at this point as to how he managed to survive. But the narrative gap is covered over by this eloquent apostrophe, in which the ashes of burning Troy are called to witness that Aeneas made all reasonable efforts to court death in battle, but that his fated time had not yet come.

It would not be hard to find parallels for this type of thing in actual defence oratory: one thinks immediately of Demosthenes' famous oath by the dead of Marathon in the speech on the Crown, and I offer also one Ciceronian example, *Pro Rab. perd.* 30, where he calls the departed spirits of Marius and other brave citizens to witness that his client Rabirius was right to take up arms against Saturninus: .

*quapropter equidem et C. Mari et ceterorum virorum sapientissimorum ac fortissimorum civium mentes, quae mihi videntur ex hominum vita ad deorum religionem et sanctimoniam demigrasse, testor, me pro illorum fama gloria memoria non secus ac pro patriis fanis atque delubris propugnandum putare.*

To return now to the end of book 1: it is worth noticing that when Dido asks Aeneas to tell his story, she seems discreetly to omit mention of his own part in it. Her questions are initially directed to characters she already knows from the mural. She enquires about Priam and Hector, showing a polite interest in Aeneas' relatives. She asks about the arms of Memnon and the horses of Diomedes, showing a professional interest in military matters and horse-breeding. Then she asks just how big Achilles was: male physique is an interest of hers as well. Finally she asks Aeneas for the story of the fall of Troy: *insidias ... Danaum casusque tuorum / erroresque tuos* (754-55). Although by this stage Dido is far gone in love, the phrasing shows the same care as before on the part of Virgil as scriptwriter. The enquiries are tactful. They presuppose nothing as to Aeneas' involvement in the last hours of Troy, beyond the assumption that he will be able to give an account of what happened.

For all we know at this stage (leaving aside for a moment the expectations set up by the Odyssean parallel), the answer might have been that he watched it all from a safe distance on Mount Ida. But as a matter of fact we all know the answer (2.3-6):

*infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem,  
Troianas ut opes et lamentabile regnum  
eruerint Danaï, quaeque ipse miserrima vidi  
et quorum pars magna fui.*

Aeneas establishes a good deal of positive “ethos” just in these three and a half lines. He is not only a narrator of events but an important participant in them: this immediately rebuts the notion that he had escaped from Troy before the bitter end. His situation as an eyewitness naturally implies that his story will be reliable. Like Odysseus, he is reluctant to begin the story of these traumatic events,<sup>24</sup> and his emotional involvement adds to the impression of honesty. Altogether, this is as convincing an exordium as one will find in any orator: it even continues with the customary protestation of brevity.

\* \* \*

The main part of Aeneas’ narrative, as I have suggested, has as one of its functions that of proving that he was neither treacherous nor cowardly, but that he was as much a victim of deception as the rest of the Trojans; that he fought bravely and several times nearly got killed; and that he refused to leave Troy until he was commanded to by unmistakable omens. This rhetorical strategy, however, carried risks of its own. In implicitly rebutting the accusation of collusion in the Wooden Horse stratagem, Aeneas ran the risk of casting himself as a foolish victim. In telling the story of his desperate last stand, he risked appearing as irrationally impulsive and foolhardy, and forgetful of his duties towards his fellow-Trojans. There was also the unfortunate incident of the loss of Creusa, which could easily make Aeneas appear foolish and negligent, or worse. It is these qualities that have been picked out by Austin in his criticism of the character of Aeneas as depicted in book 2. However, closer analysis of the narrative can, I believe, show that Virgil has in fact made an effort to exonerate Aeneas on all these counts.

A brief typology of self-justificatory techniques may suggest itself. There are two main types: (1) comments by Aeneas as narrator, and (2) expressions of identification with or dissociation from those around him.

(1) Aeneas’ comments on the narrative may be divided into four sub-types:

- (a) expressions of regret or reluctance;
- (b) references to the role of fate;

---

<sup>24</sup> As noted by Laird (n.10 above) 203-04.

(c) references to unexpected divine interventions;

(d) references to Greek trickery.<sup>25</sup>

The last three of these are all examples of the strategy of shifting the blame, which the rhetoricians called the *status translativus*.

(2) The degree of identification between Aeneas and the rest of the Trojans is often shown in the verb-forms. At times when he wants to show himself as part of the crowd, he uses the inclusive first-person plural “we”. Where he wants to dissociate himself from the collective action of the Trojans, he uses the third-person plural “they”; and when he wants to avoid assigning responsibility either way, he relies on passive or impersonal narration.<sup>26</sup> I shall take the first part of the book, the Wooden Horse narrative, as an example of how this type of variation is deployed.

At the beginning, Aeneas associates himself with the Trojans’ initial reaction: *nos abiisse rati et vento petiisse Mycenae* (25). But he detaches himself from what follows, using third-person verbs, passives and impersonals: *ergo omnis longo solvit se Teucra luctu; / panduntur portae, iuvat ire et Dorica castra / desertosque videre locos*. He takes no responsibility for the initial foolishness of the Trojans. He continues by dividing the population into two, a well-known technique characteristic of historical narratives, which again emphasises Aeneas’ detachment: *pars stupet innuptae donum exitiale Minervae* (31). With hindsight, he taxes his fellow-citizen Thymoetes with the suspicion of treachery: *primusque Thymoetes / duci intra muros hortatur et arce locari, / sive dolo seu iam Troiae sic fata ferebant*. Here is another characteristic narrative feature, the pair of alternative explanations: perhaps Thymoetes was in on the Greek plot, or perhaps it was just the fate of Troy, in which case it was nobody’s fault. By expressing ignorance as to the true explanation, Aeneas renders more convincing the notion that he himself had nothing to do with it (otherwise, of course, he would have known). Then Aeneas turns to the wiser half of the population, led by

<sup>25</sup> On this point see Horsfall (n.4 above) 95, on ll. 57-76, with particular reference to the rhetorical plausibility of Sinon’s speeches, designed to exculpate the Trojans for having believed him.

<sup>26</sup> The point is adumbrated by Nisbet (n.5 above) and N. Horsfall, *A Companion to the Study of Virgil*, 1995, Leiden, 110 (“The interplay of first and third person verbs and the use of (*e.g.*) *cuncti* and *omnes* in [book] 2 seems to require further analysis”) but not taken further; cf. also Bowie (n.1 above, 42-43), who draws a somewhat different conclusion about the “objectivity” of Aeneas’ narrative.

Capys,<sup>27</sup> who distrusted the horse; but again the narrative is detached; Aeneas at this point avoids identifying himself with either party.

Laocoon appears, issues his warning, and the trick is nearly revealed: it would have been, *si fata deum, si mens non laeva fuisset* (54). Discussion will continue as to whether the *mens laeva* is that of the gods or that of the Trojans.<sup>28</sup> At this point Aeneas is treading a tightrope: on the one hand he cannot afford to let it appear that he could himself have prevented the disaster; on the other hand, he needs to show his own solidarity with the Trojans. It is precisely at such points that Virgil makes his Aeneas resort to ambiguous phrasing, and there seems to me little doubt that the unclarity is deliberate.

The action is interrupted by the appearance of Sinon, whose speech is introduced with the words *accipe nunc Danaum insidias*, echoing Dido's question at 1.754. The Trojan reaction is first expressed impersonally at line 73: *quo gemitu conversi animi, compressus et omnis / impetus*. But then Aeneas changes to the first person plural: *hortamur fari*. Now Aeneas is himself involved: there was no discredit in showing generosity towards a captive. The first part of Sinon's speech is deliberately designed to arouse curiosity, and the collective reaction continues (105): *Tum vero ardemus scitari et quaerere causas*; the Trojans are now explicitly characterised as ignorant of Greek wiles, *ignari scelerum tantorum artisque Pelasgae*. To claim ignorance of this kind is of course to claim to be on a superior level of moral uprightness. After Sinon finishes his account of himself, the first person plural verbs continue: *vitam damus et miserescimus ultro* (145); again, no shame in showing mercy. But after Sinon has given his account of the Horse, the verbs become passive again: *credita res* (196), "the thing was believed". As modern politicians tend to say, "mistakes were made".

<sup>27</sup> Servius *ad Aen.* 2.32, quoting Euphorion, comments that Thymoetes may have had a legitimate grudge against Priam and thus a reason to betray the city; see Horsfall (n.4 above) 73 on l. 32. The names of Thymoetes and Capys recur later in the narrative. Both defend the Trojan camp in Aeneas' absence in 10.120-45 (at 123 and 145 respectively); but their eventual fates differ, perhaps by way of poetic justice. Thymoetes falls off his horse (12.264), whereas Capys kills his man (9.576) and survives to become the eponymous hero of Capua (10.145); a namesake appears in the royal line of Alba (6.768). It may be better not to raise the question whether both Capys and Thymoetes are imagined to be present at Aeneas' narration. If so, his reference to Capys may come over as a graceful compliment, but the reference to Thymoetes seems tactless: a slip on Virgil's part, or an intrusion of the authorial narrative voice (of the kind envisaged by Bowie, n.1 above)? Or is it a different man of the same name, perhaps a younger member of the family (cf. the index to Mynors's *OCT*)?

<sup>28</sup> Horsfall (n.4 above) 91-92 (on l. 54) devotes a page of discussion to the issue, with an appropriately Delphic conclusion: "It seems in the end that the line refers only to the gods ... though the existence of a reference to human mind(s) in *mens* ... is perhaps not entirely to be ruled out".

The Trojans were deceived, precisely because of their virtues of honesty and generosity; Aeneas associates himself more closely with their virtues, less so with their gullibility.

The story of Laocoon then resumes with these words: *Hic aliud maius miseris multoque tremendum / obicitur magis, atque improvida pectora turbat* (199-200). The adjective *miseris* and the phrase *improvida pectora* hang in mid-air. There is no noun or pronoun to which we can attach *miseris*, nor are we told directly whose are the “unforeseeing breasts”. We know the Trojans are meant, but the impersonal phrases again have the effect of creating narrative detachment. As the snakes appear, Aeneas participates in the general panic: *diffugimus visu exsanguis* (212): no shame in being scared by as horrific a divine portent as this. Then, after the snakes have done their work, the crowd’s reactions are narrated again in the third person: *scelus expendisse merentem / Laocoonta ferunt* (229-30), and *ducendum ad sedes simulacrum orandaque divae / numina conclamant* (232-33).

It is missing a trick to read this as though Virgil had temporarily slipped back into third-person authorial narrative and had forgotten that Aeneas was speaking; or even that we have here a trace of an earlier, unrevised third-person version of the narrative (for which one might cite the half-line at 233). Even in a revised version, there is no reason to suppose that Aeneas would have been made to present himself as one of those drawing mistaken conclusions from the death of Laocoon or calling for the horse to be brought within the walls. Rather, the third person verbs, if one keeps the context clearly in mind, make for a strong sense of dissociation of the narrator from what he narrates, and are clearly in place.

In the next section the first-person verbs resume: *dividimus muros et moenia pandimus urbis* (234); *instamus tamen immemores caecique furore / et monstrum infelix sacrata sistimus arce* (244-45); *nos delubra deum miseri, quibus ultimus esset / ille dies, festa velamus fronde per urbem* (248-49). Now that the fateful decision is made, Aeneas takes his part with the rest in these actions, again showing solidarity. There is a further point in associating himself with the crowd at this stage. This was not, in fact, Aeneas’ last day, though it was the last day of Troy. But it is in Aeneas’ interests to link himself closely with the fate of the city, so as to obviate suspicion that his escape was planned in advance.

Thus Aeneas exculpates himself – I would say successfully – from any blame for the success of the Wooden Horse stratagem. After the interlude with the vision of Hector, the next part of the narrative, as already suggested, is devoted to demonstrating how Aeneas made a desperate last stand and by rights ought to have got himself killed; his

survival is thus shown to be in no way planned by himself, and at several points it is stressed that there was no possibility of his saving the city or his companions in arms.

\* \* \*

There follows the scene of the death of Priam (of which Aeneas is merely a witness), Aeneas' encounter with Venus in the palace and his return home under her protection, and the scene with his family leading to the decision to leave. The rhetorical presentation in these scenes would also repay closer analysis, but I must now jump to the end and look at the last scene of all, the disappearance of Creusa.

This event is obviously indispensable to the legend. Creusa had to be got out of the way somehow: Aeneas must be an eligible widower by the time he gets to Carthage and, of course, free to marry Lavinia once he arrives in Italy. Virgil takes as much advantage of this as he reasonably can. Aeneas' return to the city to search for her intensifies the pathos of his departure; it gives us a last view of the captured city (757-67); it allows time for Aeneas to acquire some new followers (796-800). It may be that these narrative advantages, in Virgil's mind, outweighed the problems he faced in explaining how it all happened; certainly any alternative method of dispatching Creusa (such as making her die of an infectious illness) would have involved sacrificing them. Nor, perhaps, would he have been willing to sacrifice the impressive effect of the speech made by Creusa's *imago*.<sup>29</sup> She explains that she was not fated to go with Aeneas. He is to shed no more tears for her, because she has been saved from going to Greece as a captive. Specific gods are named as responsible – Jupiter himself, and Cybele, the Great Mother: one could hardly ask for higher authority than that. Then she makes the famous prophecy to Aeneas that he will come to “the land of Hesperia”, and find there *res laetae regnumque et regia coniunx*. We are not, of course, told Dido's reaction to this, but the reader must inevitably speculate as to what she thought of the promise of a “royal bride” for Aeneas in a place whose identity might not have been quite clear to her (even if the description did not seem to fit Carthage).

---

<sup>29</sup> See Horsfall (n.4 above) 533-35, 542-44, on ll. 772-89, for the scholarly debate as to whether Creusa is actually dead, or transported to a new life as attendant of Cybele; H. notes her absence from book 6 (p. 544, even remarking on the embarrassment of an encounter between Creusa and Dido in the Underworld). Hence I try not to prejudge the issue. But I observe that (a) there must be no doubt that Aeneas' marriage to her is dissolved; (b) Virgil's language in 772-73, *infelix simulacrum ... umbra ... nota maior imago*, strongly suggests a ghost; (c) Creusa's failure to explain her own disappearance (whether as death or otherwise), or to define the exact capacity in which she is “detained” by Cybele, is a function of the oracular style of the speech as a whole, designed exactly to leave us guessing.



The problem that Virgil has set himself in this passage is encapsulated in Austin's comment: "He forms for one moment a cool plan of action, only to lose his wife by some unexplainable muddle".<sup>30</sup> However, a closer look at the text shows that there is no part of Aeneas' narrative fuller of rhetorical excuses than this one. I have counted seventeen in the passage leading up to (but not including) Creusa's speech.<sup>31</sup>

Excuse 1: It was dark (725).

Excuse 2: Aeneas was not just barging ahead regardless, but treading carefully, with a heightened sense of danger (726-29).

Excuse 3: Nevertheless Aeneas was taken by surprise by the apparent presence of Greek soldiers in hot pursuit (731-32 and 734).

Excuse 4: He took flight under orders from his father (732-4).<sup>32</sup>

Excuse 5: It was an unfriendly supernatural power that robbed Aeneas of his wits (735-36).

Excuse 6: He had lost his way (737).

Excuse 7: Creusa was snatched away by fate (738).

Excuse 8: Or perhaps she herself wandered off the path (739).

Excuse 9: Or perhaps she couldn't keep up, and sat down to rest (739). (7, 8 and 9 are alternatives).

Excuse 10: He didn't look back or realise she was missing until they reached the meeting point (741-43).

Excuse 11: Aeneas was not the only one who hadn't noticed that she was missing. Her companions hadn't noticed either; nor had Iulus (744). (So everyone else was just as much to blame as Aeneas).

Excuse 12: Aeneas started blaming everyone for what had happened (745). This was the worst thing that had happened to him (746). (His reactions at the time prove that he didn't do it on purpose).

<sup>30</sup> n. 7 (above) xiv.

<sup>31</sup> A further excuse is found in line 711, *longe servet vestigia coniunx*: Creusa is to follow at a distance, and Aeneas took all reasonable precautions to ensure her safety (see Horsfall (n.4 above) 503-04 *ad loc.*, rejecting alternative interpretations and emendations).

<sup>32</sup> Horsfall (n.4 above) 514 on line 732: "It could even be argued that Anchises bears a share of the practical responsibility for the loss of Creusa".

The items which follow, nos 13-17, could be seen as one unit; the separation into five “excuses” is meant here just as a tool of rhetorical analysis, and is not of course intended to detract from the tragic quality of the narrative or from its further rhetorical function in exciting the audience’s feelings of sympathy or pity.

Excuse 13: He left the rest of his family, put his armour back on and went back to the city to look for her (747-49). (He did everything he could to find her).

Excuse 14: He went over every inch of ground they had covered, regardless of danger and fear (750-55).

Excuse 15: He even went back to his own house, just in case (*si forte* breathlessly repeated) she might be there, but found it occupied by the enemy (756-57) and just about to be set on fire (758-59).

Excuse 16: He went to search Priam’s palace as well (760): all he found was Odysseus and Phoenix guarding the plunder – the treasure, the women and children. (The question is not explicitly raised whether Creusa had been taken prisoner, but this is the obvious inference for Aeneas to have made; the gap after 767 might, in revision, have been filled with some words to that effect).

Excuse 17: Aeneas even dared to call Creusa’s name, three times (768-70). He was still searching and rushing round the city when the vision of her appeared (771-73).

In *Heroides* 7.83-85, Ovid made Dido write:

*si quaeras ubi sit formosi mater Iuli,  
occidit a duro sola relicta viro.  
haec mihi narraras: sat me monuere.*

Ovid’s Dido would have none of Aeneas’ excuses: from her point of view, Aeneas had simply abandoned Creusa, and was about to do the same again; Dido ought to have taken heed when she heard this part of the story. Undeniably, Virgil had set himself a tough task to make Aeneas defend himself effectively on this point, and it is always open to readers to take a different view, as Ovid did. But at least we ought to acknowledge that Aeneas is here making heroic efforts to explain his actions.

\* \* \*

I am aware of the risk that a “rhetorical” approach to the *Aeneid*, such as I have taken in this paper, may be seen as an artificial resuscitation of the methods of the ancient commentators and even as devaluing the poetry. However, such an approach is surely

justified to some extent in the present case, simply by the fact that Aeneas in book 2 is making a *speech*; and the topic of Aeneas' character-presentation is one where there is, in point of fact, a significant convergence between the interests of the ancient critics and some of their modern counterparts.<sup>33</sup> I argue that an analysis of the rhetoric can enhance our appreciation of Virgil's drama and realism and of the subtlety of his character-presentation. If my analysis is correct, he has characterised his Aeneas in a way that is exactly right for that situation, in full consciousness of the effect that his choice of words might have. Virgil's Aeneas, in the narrative of book 2, makes as good a job of his self-presentation as one would expect a character created by a top-class dramatist and spin-doctor to do – while at the same time also speaking in top-class poetry. It may be precisely because of the poetic qualities of Aeneas' narrative that many readers have lost sight of the dramatic situation in which it is delivered; but a renewed appreciation of the dramatic context need not in the least impair appreciation of those qualities, and may enhance it by counteracting the effects of over-familiarity.

One final thought. Virgil chose to make Aeneas' rhetoric succeed, enough to ensure his survival and thus the continuance of the story. Witness Dido's reaction to it at the beginning of book 4:

*credo equidem, nec vana fides, genus esse deorum;  
degeneres animos timor arguit. heu, quibus ille  
iactatus fatis! quae bella exhausta canebat!*

Dido is persuaded of his divine parentage; she has failed to detect any trace of cowardice in him. She is full of amazement and sympathy for all he has been through. She is obsessed not just with his looks but also with his words (*verba*, 4.5). Aeneas' narration evidently did its job successfully. But the success came at a price.

*Royal Holloway, University of London*

**J. G. F. POWELL**

<sup>33</sup> See esp. Tiberius Claudius Donatus, *Interpretationes Virgilianae* ad Aen. 1, p. 2ff. Georgii: *Purgat ergo haec mira arte Vergilius, et non tantum collecta in primis versibus ut mox apparebit, verum etiam sparsa per omnes libros excusabili assertione, et quod est summi oratoris, confitetur ista quae negari non poterant, et summatim criminationem convertit in laudem . . . simulque partitur quid fato, quid extra fatum perpressus sit, subtiliter monstrans quae accidunt fato nullis posse virtutibus superari, perindeque non esse illius crimen, si expugnare fata non valuit; illa vero quae extra fatum imponebantur . . . patientia et virtute animi transmisisse.* The passage is available in English translation in R. Copeland and I. Sluiter (eds), *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300-1475*, Oxford, 2009, 143-47 (144). Especially for *non esse illius crimen* cf. Nisbet (n.5 above): "the disaster was not his fault".