

39. Where the effect of contrast is not dissimilar.
40. The pathos of this scene is not to be compared with that of 424ff., dealing with a relationship which Virgil doubtless understood from his own experience. It is something of a set-piece, a variation on a conventional theme.
41. In the article cited in n.32, p.36.
42. "The tragic spirit of the *Aeneid*", 1955.
43. "The death of Turnus and the pessimism of the 'Aeneid' ", *AUMLA* 33 (1970) 67-76. Mr. Little holds that Virgil's view is "still optimistic, but it is tempered with apprehension for the progress which rests on so unsure a foundation, and pessimism for the nature of things".

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TWO SUPERNATURAL INCIDENTS IN THE *AENEID*

I

"nam mihi Cassandrae per somnum vatis imago
ardentis dare visa faces: 'hic quaerite Troiam,
hic domus est' inquit 'vobis.'" [5. 636 - 38]

Iris, passing herself off as a mortal, Beroe, is speaking to the Trojan women, who are now weary and in despair. The purpose of the goddess is to exploit this misery and to induce the women to set fire to the ships of Aeneas, so preventing him from leaving Sicily. The reader of the *Aeneid* will be familiar with the convention that the immortals, despite their divine power, do not always achieve a faultless performance when they assume human guise.¹ In this instance Pyrgo, formerly nurse to the Trojan princes, is able to denounce the false Beroe. She draws attention to signs of divinity in the face and bearing of Iris and clinches the matter by disclosing that she has herself just come from the sick-bed of the genuine Beroe. We should note that in addition to the two pieces of external evidence provided through the mouth of Pyrgo, Virgil offers internal evidence to discredit this impersonation by the goddess.

Iris-Beroe claims to have seen Cassandra in a vision and to have heard her affirm "*hic domus est vobis.*" Now Apollo decreed that Cassandra should always declare the truth, but that mortals should never believe her. If the pretended Beroe claims that as a mortal she has heard Cassandra, and if she then proceeds to urge acceptance of what Cassandra has said, there is an evident flaw in her story. Virgil, we may suppose, has left his reader the opportunity of detecting for himself this slip on the part of Iris, who has as much difficulty in assuming the mentality of the mortal she portrays as she has in concealing the burning eyes and other physical indications of her own divinity.

II

his aliud maius Iuturna adiungit et alto
dat signum caelo, quo non praesentius ullum
turbavit mentes Italas monstroque fefellit. [12. 244–46]

Juturna's sign takes the form of an eagle, which seizes a swan, is mobbed by other water birds and is finally forced to release its prey and fly off. Tolumnius, the Rutulian seer, hails this sign. For him it symbolizes the invader yielding to the natives, and modern commentators follow Tolumnius. In her recent edition, for example, Bertha Tilly says:

For him [*Tolumnius*] ... rightly the eagle represents Aeneas, the swan which it seizes Turnus, the flock of river birds the Latins and Rutulians... This portent sent by Juturna is meant to deceive and although Tolumnius' interpretation of the imagery is right, what it seems to foretell does not become a reality. Turnus is not saved from Aeneas and Aeneas is not driven away.²

The purpose of this note is to call into question the concept of a false omen.

The *Aeneid* conforms in many respects to the doctrines of the Stoics, or, more precisely, to those of Roman Stoicism, for the Romans found it possible to accommodate that philosophical system to their state religion with its marked interest in augury. We have no Stoic treatise specifically explaining omens, portents, prediction and other such paranormal phenomena, but it is possible to sketch out Stoic ideas from the information provided in Cicero's *de divinatione* and *de natura deorum*. Briefly, in the Stoic cosmology there is communication between gods and mortals because the universe is their common home and because the human spirit derives from the divine.³ This communication may take the form of a dream, a vision or an ecstasy, or it may express itself through some material phenomenon.⁴ The relationship between this last and the event it presages may be obscure, but a full understanding of the causation is not necessary.⁵ The universe proceeds in a rational manner:⁶ certain events are preceded by certain signs and prolonged observation has led to a practical art of interpretation.⁷ If from time to time the interpretation of a given sign does not correspond to the event in reality, it is the interpreter who is at fault,⁸ since the universe is not irrational and omens do indicate the destined course of events.

In the *Aeneid* itself, the present passage aside, it is noteworthy that signs and prophecies are always fulfilled, though not necessarily in the way that might be expected.⁹ Perhaps the most doubtful case occurs at the start of the ninth book, when Iris tells Turnus of Aeneas' departure and the consequent vulnerability of the Trojan camp. As the goddess departs, the heavens open for her and Turnus cries

“medium video discedere caelum
palantisque polo stellas. sequor omina tanta.” [9. 20–1].

In fact the attack on the Trojan camp does not in the end prove to be successful, but that does not constitute a false revelation or omen. The information given by Iris is perfectly correct and so are the tactics she urges. It is Turnus who chooses to regard the opening of the heavens as an omen of success, a phenomenon which Quintus Cicero lists among precursors of disaster.¹⁰ The reader here is privileged to know that Turnus is wrong, just as he is at the transformation of the ships of Aeneas, when his boasting and particularly his words

“sunt et mea contra
fata mihi” [9. 136–37]

have their own irony. As for the other signs and revelations, of whatever sort they are – the sow and her litter, the eating of the tables, the oracles, the prophecies of Helenus, of the Sibyl and of others, the mystic fire about Iulus, the comet, the warnings of spirits and so on – in one way or another they all represent a coming reality.

In considering our own passage it is also helpful to take into account a familiar but important aspect of Virgil's style. By a sort of literary irony Virgil uses a similarity in language, in imagery or in some other aspect of presentation to establish for his reader a link between certain incidents or passages. Thus the words of Dido to Aeneas

“cui me moribundam deseris, hospes,
hoc solum nomen quoniam de coniuge restat?” [4. 323–24]

recall ironically those of Creusa

“cui parvus Iulus,
cui pater et coniunx quondam tua dicta relinquitur?” [2. 677–78]

Similarly the pathetic but horrifying phrase

infixum stridit sub pectore volnus [4. 689]

recalls from the opening of the fourth book the *tacitum volnus* of Dido, for whom the words and ways of Aeneas

haerent infixi pectore [4. 4]

The common simile of a tree links and contrasts the Troy of Laomedon, destined to fall, and the mystical Troy of Aeneas, servant of the divine will, which is to stand.¹¹ So too in the funeral games, when Nisus slips and falls in spilt blood, but still attempts to help Euryalus, the episode, grotesque enough in itself, foreshadows the death agony over the pierced body of Euryalus that destiny has in keeping for Nisus.¹²

The incident that throws light on Juturna's omen occurs at the start of the *Aeneid*, when Venus interprets for Aeneas the omen of twelve swans, escaped from an eagle, which represent the Trojan fleet restored to safety.¹³ If the theory of a false omen is rejected in our passage as being out of keeping with Stoic views on the nature of omens and with the practice followed by Virgil elsewhere in the *Aeneid*, the swan, a bird associated with