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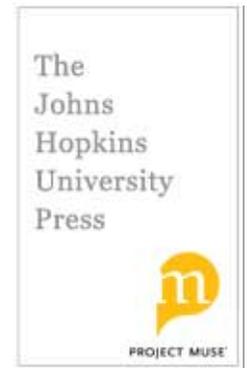
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WAR AND TRAGEDY AND THE FATE OF THE SPOKEN: VIRGIL'S SECULARIZATION OF PROPHECY

WILLIAM FRANKE

The *Aeneid* has long been appreciated for its outstanding qualities as a prophetic poem. Virgil was canonized by Dante as his great pagan precursor in the transmission of divine revelation by means of epic poetry. The *locus classicus* of this extraordinary rhetorical invention is the descent to the underworld, which climaxes in the prophetic preview (in fact, a review) of Roman history in the form of a revelation of Aeneas's future destiny: Aeneas sees in an ecstatic vision a lineage of sacred Roman rulers running from himself down to Augustus Caesar. This inspired vision comes at the center of the epic, at the end of Book VI. The remaining Books, VII through XII, which are occupied by the war in Latium, have traditionally received much less attention, particularly with regard to this issue of the possibility of prophetic revelation in poetry. Yet the problematic is central to the poem as a whole, and it demands to be followed all the way through to the end of the work.

Indeed, Virgil uses the word *vates*, or "prophet," of himself *first* in the invocation to the Muse at the beginning of the second half of the poem: "tu vatem, tu, diva, mone. Dicam horrida bella" ("You, goddess, prompt the prophet. I will tell of frightful wars," VII. 41).¹ Here, prophecy and revelation are profoundly transformed in their modalities, and our appreciation of the unity and complexity of the epic depends on our apprehending the permutations of the prophetic project across the entire expanse of the work. My purpose at present is to bring to light the quite different means of producing and conveying prophetic

insight and the very different forms assumed by “revelation” in the second half of Virgil’s epic poem.²

The interpenetration of fate and freedom, which is the upshot of the Virgilian concept of prophecy based on the retrospective interpretation of history as I have previously delineated it, is written into the narrative and made practically explicit by the Council in Heaven at the beginning of Book X:

The effort each man makes
Will bring him luck or trouble. To them all
King Jupiter is the same king. And the Fates
Will find their way [fata viam inuenient].³
(X. 154-57)

What can be represented by being spoken, even before it comes into being, is literally and etymologically a “fate.” It gives a definite significance to events, which per se are indefinable in their fluidity. “What is spoken”—*fatum*—is the enabling condition of significant action and, to this extent, it is equally the condition of free, consciously chosen action. Without language, there can be no free, rational action but only a concatenation of material causes. Virgil’s imagination of “Fate”⁴ mythically formulates the presupposition of a secular understanding of history in which it is recognized as being merely a discursive construction. He does so, however, without renouncing the dimension of divine revelation, no matter how profoundly this dimension is transformed by secularization.

Throughout the war scenes, Virgil focuses especially on the freedom of speech as an instrument for conscious decision and rational reflection. But speech is also, paradoxically, a means of “fatalistic” determination that gives precedence to irrational powers. They can be found sedimented and crystallized in words themselves. Indeed, rational, human freedom persistently seems to be undermined and destroyed from within by the irrational, angry passions that storm in the human breast and blow the best intentions off course by invading and distorting reasoning itself. The ambiguity of human action—as rational and as determined by passion—is directly reflected in discourse as an artificial and controlled construction of language and at the same time as a manifestation of power and even of unconscious force. This is evident most immediately in the power of names.

Virgil’s proper names are very often, if not always, charged with significance and laden with the fate of the individuals they name. The proper name is itself the expression of the essence or nature of the individual and thereby the key and index to all that happens to them. This was already clearly so in Homer, and Virgil develops the technique in both implicit and explicit etymological glosses.⁵ “Iulus,” added as “cognomen” or nickname to Aeneas’s son Ascanius, is expressly a reminder of “Ilium” (I. 361-2 [Mynors 1969, 267-68]) and therewith inevitably also of Troy’s sinister fate. Generally, the etymological histories of words contain roots and residues that are not easily governed by their rational concepts or definitions. There is thus a dark side to the name buried in its history, a side that its etymology still dimly remembers and reflects. This etymological memory

harbors half-forgotten, obscure meaning that can threaten to overwhelm or subvert the consciously intended surface meaning of words.

It is Virgil's prophetic-historical vision and method of composition that provide the infrastructure for the extraordinary layering of meaning that distinguishes this peculiarly elegiac epic in which almost every name becomes an epitaph. Programmatic examples are the cape named for Palinurus (VI. 512 [Mynors 1969, 377]; cf. VI. 327 [235]) and the town named for "nurse Caieta" (VII. 1ff). Typically memorializing sacrificial victims, such names serve as monuments and indeed as altars erected to an overarching cause or purpose that supposedly justifies the sacrifices exacted. As such, names are instruments of rationalization. On the other hand, the pact at the end, which preserves the historical language of the indigenous people (XII. 1131–36 [834–37]), highlights a stratum of meaning that all the discipline of empire in the face of the violence of war cannot erase or regulate. It grows from the soil and is autochthonous. Even though Virgil's whole epic gives a global meaning to history and makes a general system of all signs, such root meaning at the same time indirectly acknowledges and signals a counter-meaning—manifest as the tug from beneath it of what this system cannot subsume, of what underlies and even potentially undermines it.

Aeneas's own name can be derived from the Greek verb *aimo*, meaning "I consent" as well as "I praise or extol God," and indeed Aeneas becomes the epic's hero only by learning to consent to fate and renounce himself. Language, Virgil is well aware, is a domestication of reality—and even its doing to death. Partly the elegiac tone of the whole epic derives from the fact that as a linguistic work it cannot but deal with the dead. The awesome discipline and order of epic and empire alike must kill their subjects in order to keep them in place. At the very least, a regime of strict control is required, which Virgil then counterpoints with his personal, elegiac strain of complaint. Indeed, the imperial ideal that undergirds the epic at all levels is realized first of all as an empire of signs. Thomas Greene gives us some hints of this:

Empire is the key idea—empire over the world, over nature and peoples, over language, and over the heart. The respective struggles for command over these various realms imitate and illustrate each other. In the end it is hard to say which *imperium* shows the strictest control—the government of Caesar Augustus, or the hexameters which celebrate it, or the terrible moral discipline which Caesar's ancestor is brought to obey. (Greene 1963, 85; emphasis in original)

Revelation in Virgil comes within the framework of an ordered system—an "empire." Yet order and system at the same time tend to obliterate revelation, which rather bursts out through the eruptions of history, which stand in contradiction to all artificially imposed orderings.⁷ It is in this tension between system and history that truth—as this epic understands and conveys it, especially in its second half—is revealed. Language itself becomes revelatory when opened to an etymological perspective on its own history, even though this may contradict its official, conceptual meaning. There is thus a kind of counter-revelation at work, a revelation more material in nature, one hidden in the roots of language

itself and exposed in the language of poetry. An analogous structure of irony can be found in the work's narrative logic, which creates a kind of counterpoint to its overt, official revelation.

The *Aeneid* is based on a narrative logic that pivots on a grasp of the whole from the endpoint as the condition for rational action: the reason for an act is the end at which it aims. This type of action is what is made possible for Aeneas through the prophetic revelation of the goal of history, vouchsafed by Anchises to his son in Book VI, and it is ratified in the ekphrastic revelation on the shield procured for Aeneas by his mother in Book VIII. However, we cannot but see how such rational action breaks down in the event of war, as well as of love. Raging, whether marshal or erotic, is contrary to the rationality of the word. The breakdown of the word condemns us to irrationally enact the dictates of fate to our own utter destruction. And yet the word itself can also become a fatality that inhibits freedom. We must question more deeply the relation between freedom and fate in the sense of *fatum*, the spoken. How is freedom in history found—or rather founded—and perhaps also impeded by the inescapable “fate” of the spoken?

The imagination—particularly in Virgil's imagery of passion—reveals the inextricable interpenetration of *pietas* and *furor* in the work of conquest and civilization. In Aeneas himself, as well as in Hercules and in other figures of his civilizing mission, the noble and rational purposes of universal order assert themselves and are eventually able to prevail only on the strength of intensely personal passion. The imaginative fabric of the poem thus knits together a subtext that is curiously at odds with its official theses and imperial propaganda.⁸ This is the revelation of imagination, and it is not capable of being controlled by any rigid or rational sort of ideology. In the end, the imagination compounds and mixes the rational and the passionate, the public and the private, and reveals an order of meaning that embraces both but escapes exhaustive explanation in either register and remains at least partially opaque.

The main focus of Books VII through XII moves from the private to the public sphere, from the personal to the social. This movement features the struggle for *pietas* against *furor*. A fundamental problem with this “Iliadic” half of the *Aeneid* is that for Virgil war is not heroic, not as in Homer an opportunity to exercise and display human excellence or *arête*. War is only an instrument of pacification, of *imposing* peace (“*pacique imponere morem*,” VI. 852). Aeneas is upstaged when it comes to fighting because his *pietas* is fundamentally opposed to war: war is seen as a terrible necessity that requires Aeneas, against his better nature, to lust for conquest and plunder.

The onset of war in Book VII indeed shows female passion breaking out again after the episode of Dido (the favorite of Juno and a precursor of Cleopatra) in ways that endanger Aeneas's historical mission. The goddess Juno, who has obstructed this mission three times before, takes it upon herself to whip up fury in order to bring to naught the peace pact agreed to by Latinus and Aeneas. She uses the queen, Amata, for this purpose and uses yet another female divinity,

Allecto, as an instrument for arousing destructive passion in the breast of Amata. The scene is sinister and infernal, evoking the darkest powers of the psyche from the underworld of both myth and emotion:

Without delay Allecto,
 Dripping venom deadly as the Gorgon's,
 Passed into Latium first and the high hall
 Of the Laurentine king. She took her place
 On the still threshold of the queen, Amata.
 Burning already at the Trojan's coming,
 The plans for Turnus' marriage broken off,
 Amata tossed and turned with womanly
 Anxiety and anger. Now the goddess
 Plucked one of the snakes, her gloomy tresses,
 And tossed it at the woman, sent it down
 Her bosom to her midriff and her heart,
 So that by this black reptile driven wild
 She might disrupt her whole house.
 (VII. 467–80)

The assault works on Amata like an infectious poison, setting the marrow of her bones on fire. The simile of a top depicts her passion spinning out of control. This is the first in a series of similes, including also the boiling cauldron (VII. 536–40) and a crescendo of waves (VII. 725–28), which convey the escalating violence that leads to civil war. The war is actually touched off by the slaying of Silvia's stag, a sentimentally pathetic scene. This hints at how war logically begins from the least rational and most vulnerable elements of society. From there, it works its way up to the king. Latinus, though he stood like a sea cliff (VII. 806), in the end relinquishes the reins of state in a situation now beyond his control. The internal upheaval and sedition that overwhelm his authority are now expressed by natural imagery: "I am breached by fate, / Wrecked, swept away by storm" (VII. 816–17). This inverts the imagery of social strife used to depict the natural violence of the storm in Book I. 201, suggesting that civilized order is but a fragile artifice in the face of the overwhelming destructive force of nature.⁹

The last third of the epic (Books IX–XII), with its focus on fighting, is dominated to a considerable extent by Turnus. Book IX features Turnus furious and raging, "as a wolf on the prowl," "beside himself." The Rutulian "flared up with helpless rage" and "he, himself enflamed, / Took up a blazing pine torch in his hand" (83–102) with the intent to burn Aeneas's ships. The ships, however, are miraculously metamorphosed into nymphs by the goddess Cybele. Turnus does not understand this: he misinterprets the transformation as an omen that Jove is helping him. His thoughtlessness becomes increasingly evident as he commits strategic errors. For example, he misses his chance to defeat the Trojans when he is in their camp and fails to open its gates to his own men, because

high rage and mindless
 Lust for slaughter drove the passionate man

Against his enemies.
(IX. 1054–56)

There is, of course, also a more human side of war, with its costs and losses. Virgil focuses on this aspect in Book IX through the story of Euryalus and Nisus. Here the friends (lovers) remain bonded unto death, as each one dies for the other. This elicits Virgil's elegiac vein in the lament for youth that is doomed to be cut off like a beautiful and delicate flower that bows its head to the butchery of inclement weather (IX. 617–20). The aestheticization of violence and death is not new, yet Virgil gives it a new dimension of subjective pathos and, furthermore, opens major questions about the reader's relation to and enjoyment of the war narrative. In particular, he makes us look up toward the imperturbable gaze of the gods. The reader's double attitude to the fiction—involvement and yet also detachment—is reflected in the attitude of the gods, who share a similarly sovereign perspective from outside and above the *mêlée*.¹⁰

This episode, featuring also the pathetic keening of Euryalus's mother, occasions expressions of regret about the whole tragedy of history. The human story constantly counterpoints the history of public events and their official meaning. Throughout Virgil's epic, a civilized code vies with a heroic code and its warlike values (Otis, 1963). Jupiter's decrees signal governance not by blind fury but by conscious, deliberate, and rational virtue—Aeneas's *conscia virtus*. Turnus's rage and fury, on the other hand, betray him into acts of deception and even savagery. In Turnus, all passions—his erotic passion for Lavinia and his warrior passion alike—merge into a kind of indistinct, indiscriminating violence:

Desire stung the young man as he gazed,
Rapt, at the girl. He burned yet more for battle.
(XII. 99–100)

Turnus's utter barbarity and disregard of morality are revealed most clearly in his slaying of Pallas, son of Evander. In claiming his victim, he deliberately blasphemes against all filial piety:

“I take Pallas,
Pallas falls to me. I wish his father
Stood here to watch.”
(X. 613–15)

After achieving this perfidious deed, he boasts,

“Arcadians, note well
And take back to Evander what I say:
In that state which his father merited
I send back Pallas.”
(X. 685–88)

The other side of this coin by which the heroic code, in the figure of Turnus, is devalued is the symmetrical devaluation of the supposedly civilized virtue of Aeneas. Aeneas's own passionate involvement becomes the motivation for his

valor in avenging the death of Pallas. When Aeneas sees Turnus triumphing over the slain young prince,

Pallas, Evander, all
Their history rose before Aeneas' eyes.
(X. 724)

It is at this point that Aeneas is personally stirred, cut to the quick; but the result is that he becomes a pitiless butcher himself. His killing is no longer routine and mechanical, performed out of obedience to a command, as before the death of Pallas when the weapons themselves seem to do the killing: it becomes instead impassioned and excessive. The unmeasured retributive violence unleashed here in Aeneas himself seems to be without law or limit. Aeneas scornfully mocks the brothers Liger and Lucagus begging for pity as he slays them:

And deaths like these all over the battlefield
The Dardan captain brought about, in fury
Wild as a torrent or a dark tornado.
(X. 846-48)

The fury and violence of nature are exactly what the civilizing mission of Aeneas, as symbol for Rome, has been defined against up to now. But here we see Aeneas completely overcome and contaminated by uncontrollable rage and brutal force and even repugnantly “heroic” haughtiness.

The noble, civilizing mission of Rome is thus accomplished, right from these supposedly heroic beginnings, by means of horrifying war (*borrida bella*, VII. 41; cf. VI. 86). The hypocrisy latent in civilized, and indeed in human, values surges insistently to the surface in the last segment of the poem, detailing the ravages of war. Aeneas himself is by no means exempt from bloody passions. When he meets Lausus, “Now in the Dardan captain / Anger boiled up higher” (X. 1139-40), and Aeneas himself becomes the slayer of a noble son in the act of sacrificing himself for his father, Mezentius, who in turn is shown to be stricken by mortal grief and to go to his own death as a direct consequence. Aeneas, as son of Anchises, shows himself to be acutely sensitive to the contradiction:

But seeing the look
On the young man's face in death, a face so pale
As to be awesome, then Anchises' son
Groaned in profound pity. He held out
His hand as filial piety, mirrored here,
Wrung his own heart.
(X. 1148-54)

The personal rage and impassioned fury to which even Aeneas yields appear, thus, to be bound up at their roots also with the human attachments of love and commiseration. This peculiar closeness of contradictory motives, their seemingly inextricable mix, makes for a certain continuity of passions from the most terribly destructive to the most tenderly fostering and preserving. From the death of Pallas onwards, Aeneas is no longer a disinterested, detached commander: he is

viscerally involved. His slayings become personally vindictive, expressive of his own animus. He denies the plea of Magus, who appeals to filial piety, and retorts by running the suppliant through:

“Turnus has already done away
 With all such war-trade, Pallas being lost.
 My father Anchises’ ghost feels as I say,
 And so does Iulus.”
 (X. 745–50)

This display of the contradictory nature of human motivations at their source-springs becomes itself a revelation, one that literature is peculiarly apt to capture, for its concrete representations can embody ambiguities and make them humanly believable, whereas abstract statement would simply court incoherence and impossibility. The founding of order on fury, of empire on violence, of peace on pitilessness is disclosed unflinchingly. These brutal truths concerning the bases of social power, which reason cannot guide or account for, become a crucial part of the secularized revelation of the imagination that Virgil’s epic pursues in connection with the unconscionable contradictions of war.

The unheroic atrocity of war becomes most evident and horrendous in Book XI. Aeneas pathetically expresses a wish to avoid loss of life: in making a truce for the burial of the dead, he sardonically remarks that he would have wished to grant this peace for the living (XI. 153). Pallas’s funeral at the beginning of Book XI is an occasion for dwelling on the tragedy of war and the nearly intolerable pain of the loss of individual lives. Aeneas presses for peace and Turnus’s obstinacy in provoking war creates a clear polarity in which Aeneas seems to be in the right, although the imagery has suggested that their motivations can also converge and become practically indistinguishable. In Book XII, the “two assailants” turn out to be both like fire and then like floodwaters from mountain rivers (XII. 708ff). In XII. 972, they are “two bulls” charging each other with lowered heads and horns. Aeneas is also depicted as a hound pursuing Turnus as stag. Aeneas is burning with rage and terrible fury (“furiis accensus et ira / terribilis”), violent, passionate, fervid, and savagely raging (*acer, arduus, fervidus, saevus*).¹¹ This is exactly the sort of raging passion that is found also in Turnus:

In that one heart great shame boiled up, and madness
 Mixed with grief, and love goaded by fury,
 Courage inwardly known.
 (XII. 904–906)

Generally, the symmetry between Aeneas and Turnus is stressed by the elemental and bestial behaviors into which they are sucked by the vortex of passion and violence.

Is history a moral chaos, and consequently *arête*, or valor and heroism, but misleading names for bestiality gone berserk? Or is there some way to bring the apparently mad course of history into conformity with a rational purpose and moral goal? To make it do so is the formidable and demanding task laid

on Aeneas's shoulders from the epic's beginning. It involves renunciation, self-sacrifice, and even morality in a virtually Christian sense of dying to self. Such morality is far removed from the self-assertion of the strong or deviously clever that triumphs in Homeric heroes and even becomes instrumental to divine justice—notably at the end of the *Odyssey*.

Yet Aeneas himself proves prone in the highest degree to acceding to the sort of irrational, vengeful violence that his mission in principle aims to stem and finally eradicate:

At this attack,
A tide of battle-fury swept the Trojan,
Overcome by Rutulian bad faith. . . .
Many times, then into the mêlée
He raced, most terrible to see, with Mars
Behind him, rousing blind and savage slaughter,
All restraints on wrath cast to the winds.
(XII. 670–79)

The war is waged and in effect won by madness without morality—even in the case of Aeneas. The poet himself seems shocked by Aeneas's utter lack of restraint and has to appeal to the gods for an explanation. The symmetry in slaughter between Turnus and Aeneas provokes an invocation to the gods that harks back to the question of theodicy raised in the prologue, placing the whole epic within a theological framework. We hear Virgil's own agonized questioning of providence and of the war that the divine Will seems inexorably to require:

What god can help me tell so dread a story?
Who could describe that carnage in a song—
The captains driven over the plain and killed
By Turnus or in turn by Troy's great hero.
Was it thy pleasure, Jupiter, that peoples
Afterward to live in lasting peace
Should rend each other in so black a storm?
(XII. 680–86)

Virgil has constantly emphasized the interpenetration of love and fury, good and evil, in both his hero and his opponents, and even in the gods who function as counter-fates: Juno, with her love of Carthage, and Allecto, with her demonic passion. Turnus's love of Lavinia and Amata's love of Turnus are further examples of the destructive potential of erotic love-passion to pervert peace and overturn order. Even more provocatively, "Jupiter himself is subject to the furor of the same eternal wound" (Adler 2003, 213)—the love-wound that drives him to rape women like Juturnus. She denounces him for the immortality he gave her in exchange for her virginity, for she is condemned by it to suffer eternal loss due to her human attachment to her brother (XII. 875–884). Passion certainly has a vital place in human affairs, yet it must be tamed and civilized. Only then can personal feeling be in harmony with public purpose. Since this turns out to be always a costly struggle, tragedy is ineluctably inscribed into triumph. And all of this has

an obvious bearing on Virgil's own war-torn times. The war intended to end war had been waged by Octavian (later Augustus Caesar) in order to unify the empire, but then, alas, this empire was itself perhaps still primarily an engine of violence.

The end of the epic conclusively demonstrates the inevitable relapse into fury that dominates even the civilizing hero, Aeneas himself. The defeated Turnus, on the ground before his conqueror, spreading his hands, beseeches Aeneas to "go no further / Out of hatred" (XII. 1275–76). Aeneas is practically swayed to clemency, until by chance he sees something—Pallas's sword belt on Turnus—that arouses uncontrollable passions within him that cannot but be compared with Achilles's passion for his lost comrade Patroclus. And by this reference, the concluding scene harks back all the way to the beginnings of the martial epic tradition:

For when the sight came home to him,
Aeneas raged at the relic of his anguish
Worn by this man as trophy. Blazing up
And terrible in his anger . . .
He sank his blade in fury in Turnus' chest.
(XII. 1287–96)

This is a frightful stroke on which to end, and as Turnus's spirit slithers down to the underworld "with a groan for that indignity" (XII. 1297), the curtain falls on a very somber and disturbing scene, a tragedy indeed. The voice of protest and of personal pain beyond indemnity seems to have been accorded the last word.¹²

The contradictions of Aeneas's motivation in this last scene are patent: love for another man betrays him as protagonist into venting his own fury and thereby blemishing the war for universal peace with an intensely personal and arbitrary act of senseless violence. This act inaugurates in a most ambiguous and unpropitious manner the Roman peace that is supposed to last forever.

This disturbing revelation raises yet again the question of theodicy that was posed at the outset of the poem in a prelude to the storm scene: "Can anger / Black as this prey on the minds of heaven?" (I. 18–19; "Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?" I. 11). Jupiter is accused at the end of the epic by the echo of this question evident in the query as to whether it could be his pleasure that eternal peace should be inaugurated by such a violent concussion ("tanton placuit concurrere motu, / Iuppiter, eterna gentis in pace futuras?" XII. 503–4).

The reader, too, is split between comprehension of the whole—with the providential justification of war from the height of the divine vantage point ("aethere summo," I. 223; also XII. 853)—and passionate revulsion from the way of the world as it is revealed in this universal travesty.¹³ Even Jupiter, the supreme Judge, is susceptible of savagery: his "cruel" will demands the death of Camilla ("et saeva Iouis sic numina poscunt," XI. 901). He is able now to recognize Juno as his sister and as the daughter of Saturn on account of the vast waves of anger in his own breast ("irarum tantos voluis sub pectore fluctus," XII. 831).¹⁴

The rhetorical question of theodicy defies an answer. But it is not as if we are left simply clueless in the dark. There is a revelation: it is history. I have elsewhere observed in the *Odyssey* a strong sense of original unity between the

acts of gods and mortals.¹⁵ At a presumably more advanced stage of reflection, Virgil is discovering a similar coincidence between the divine and the human in the rational structure of significance that confers meaning on history. Material (or natural) causes and rational (or discursive) causes meet in history. Each encounters its limit and spills over into the other. Virgil is deeply interested in how this ambiguity enfolds a potential for regression.

Virgil, of course, repeats Homer's frequent questioning of the ambiguity of our action as evidenced, for example, by his asking "whether a god stirred him, or his own spirit" concerning Telemachos's decision to go to Pylos (*Odyssey* IV. 712–13). Virgil's Nisus puts just such a question to Euryalus:

"This urge to action, do the gods instill it,
Or is each man's desire a god to him . . . ?"
(IX. 252–4)

"Dine hunc ardorem mentibus addunt,
Euryale, an sua cuique deus fit dira cupido?"
(IX. 184–84)

However, in this formulation by Virgil's character, the use of "god" as metaphor for human emotion or impulse becomes deliberate and conscious. There is no longer a mysterious, implicit continuity between the human and the divine so much as a simple resort to expressive hyperbole.¹⁶ In any case, it is not in the particular acts so much as in the overall design of the narrative of history that the question of divine guidance is most relevant for Virgil.

Virgil's epic thus constitutes another step toward the secularization of divine revelation in epic poetry that is already underway in the *Odyssey*. What was represented by the ambiguous significance of things as portrayed in poetic language by Homer becomes in Virgil a split between two worlds, the human and the divine, of which one is real and the other symbolic. Divine revelation by the invocation of the Muses, a convention still honored at the outset of this poem and in certain of its key transitions (I. 13–19, VII. 47–59, IX. 223–26, XII. 68off), is consciously and completely transferred to the faculties of poetic language and imagination.¹⁷

History's purpose can be projected by the construction of narrative and Virgil shows this invention to have great prophetic force. Poetic language becomes *fatum*, the "spoken" that scripts future possibilities.¹⁸ Even the inherent ambiguity of poetic language becomes part of its capability of becoming revelation to humans, who have to choose on their own responsibility the future that they will work to realize.

Revelation of a providential purpose, as if heaven-sent, remains intact for human history. This revelation is disclosed as being deeply implicated in Virgil's poetic construction of narrative in a way that enables the tenses to interpenetrate one another. Historical vision becomes theological revelation for Virgil, but history makes this revelation equivocal and even contradictory. The ambiguities of poetic language and representation express the contradictoriness

that Virgil finds deeply seated in the human heart. This is thus a “revelation” that is immanent to human experience and therefore fraught with all the enigmatic ambivalence of everything human. Revelation involves an orientation toward the future in the present of action that repeats the past. But what is revealed, then, is no longer abstract and pure: it is, rather, imbued with all the ambiguousness of the present in which decisions are made on conflicting impulses and in constraining circumstances. Virgil’s vision is not just a revelation of a utopian ideal but also an expression of present passion in all its murky viscosity—and only this explosive emotion can motivate (or undermine) ideals.

Virgil has become painfully aware that revelation of a divine purpose in history is a product of the construction of narrative—and so of the art of poetic interpretation. This makes prophecy not “true” so much as “fictive,” which he signals by having Sibyl and Aeneas pass through the gate of ivory, the gate of false prophecies, at the conclusion of the prophetic revelations in Book VI.¹⁹ He is no less aware of how the visions of poetry as prophecy can motivate action and inspire valor, of how they become effective in shaping historical reality. Yet they do so only immanently, on the basis of human power and emotion, not by some divine force from above or outside. This entails the insight that prophecy and the history it reveals are fraught with all the ambiguity and contradictoriness of the human heart itself.

In prophesying, Virgil looks deep into the heart of the passion for civilization and its ideals and discovers this passion in its virtual identity, or at least its tight entanglement, with destructive passions associated with bloody vengeance and death-directed Eros. Revelation by the imagination is rooted in this ambiguous human reality; Virgil’s evocations of glory, accordingly, are intoned elegiacally and with painful cognizance of their ultimate impotence and vanity vis-à-vis death. Even while revealing a divine purpose for history that transcends the foul human struggles out of which Roman glory emerges, building upward, as it were, Virgil knows that his prophetic revelation interprets poetically a human tragedy that inevitably ends in death and destruction. Revelation is imagination, splendid and alluring, but ultimately also a phantasmatic construction—issuing out of the gate of ivory.

At some level, what Virgil is putting into question is precisely the construction of a vision of the whole as justifying acts of conquest and violence. That kind of calculated violence, where one has a total explanation in terms of the end that justifies the means, is what creates the tragic undertow that threatens finally to swamp the poem’s official ideology. The theological framework becomes a political ideology and an instrument of violence precisely when it makes this claim to sufficiency and wholeness of vision.

Belying all pretenses to total justification by panoptic vision and rational control, passionate acts in defense of others, though violent, may be morally necessary: at any rate, they are humanly inescapable. In the end this “free” submission to blind necessity is where the authentically theological must be found—it occurs only in the transcendence and negation of all human calculations

and justifications. Because of the *Aeneid's* ambiguity and uncertainty, it *does*, after all, open a space of theological revelation—it opens upon the Unknown. The attempt to unify history in the imagination and to bring it into one order is also necessary. But in the end, the *Aeneid* deplores the tragedy of war and discloses a situation in which humans are called upon to act in faith, in the face of mystery, with no sure legitimation for their acts.

It is been well appreciated that Virgil not only celebrates events in an official, public voice, but also comments on and laments over them in an unreconciled personal voice of protest.²⁰ Prophecy becomes an organ for personal expression, and what the personal voice expresses is sorrow over the tragedy of human history. This has long been felt by readers of the poem, memorably by Tennyson in his stirring salute to “Roman Virgil” in “The Dead Prophet”: “Thou majestic in thy sadness / At the doubtful doom of humankind” (1891, 421). The poet’s personal involvement, in the form of recurrent editorial commentaries, personalizes prophecy and makes it a moral rather than just a metaphysical revelation of another world. Such prophecy is read from the heart as much as from the heavens:

The minds of men are ignorant of fate
And of their future lot, unskilled to keep
Due measure when some triumph sets them high.
(X. 701–703)

This suggests that knowing the future is a moral knowledge of human fate that would constitute a defense against ruinous *hubris*. Divine prophecy and human wisdom here merge.

In the economy of Virgil’s writing in the second half of the *Aeneid*, the revelations of divine purpose and providence are made for the sake of disclosing the human passions that as a result spring up around them and give them their meaning and motivation. The prophecies do not trump human agency and eclipse it by jumping to a higher level at which human aspirations and feelings become irrelevant or at least secondary in importance. Rome’s historical mission is divinely revealed, but what divine revelation really discloses to Virgil is the ultimacy of the meaning of his own human endeavors, as felt deeply in the heart and as removed from all abstract ideals. This is the meaning, at one level, of Jupiter’s declaration that “The effort each man makes / Will bring him luck or trouble” (X. 154–55), from which this discussion set out. The meaning of prophecy as revealing a transcendent order of history registers in its purely human implications. That is why prophecy must speak into the present of action: only there can it have its meaningfulness.²¹ The devastating action of the second part of the epic is indeed the realization of prophecy in the secularizing historical mode that remains in the end as the peculiar mark of originality in the second half of the *Aeneid*.

NOTES

- ¹ I use the Fitzgerald translation of *The Aeneid* (1983) and cite Latin texts from Mynors's edition, *P. Virgili Maronis Opera* (1969).
- ² Concerning prophecy in the first half of the epic, see my "Virgil, History, and Prophecy" (2005). There I make a detailed argument concerning Virgil's invention of prophecy in a sense astonishingly analogous to the typological techniques of biblical prophecy. Whereas traditionally Virgil's claim to be a prophet has rested largely on a Christian misprision of his Fourth Eclogue's prediction of the prodigious birth of a son under the sign of a Virgin (Astrea) as inaugurating a new Golden Age, in his *Aeneid* Virgil forges prophecy in a much more significant sense, as inspired interpretation of history fraught with pertinence to possibilities for action in the present. In this sense, Aeneas emerges as role model for and as an imperative or urgent appeal to Augustus and Augustans. This is the real basis of Virgil's claim to prophecy—and what made him so indispensable to Dante.
- ³ Virgil's own words often contain many more possibilities than a single translation can capture, as here "viam" in "fata viam inuenient" could mean "his way," "their way," "the way," "a way."
- ⁴ For the far-reaching significance of this term, see the penultimate chapter of Theodor Haecker's *Vergil, Vater des Abendlands* (1933).
- ⁵ O'Hara's *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay* (1996) inventories and analyzes Virgil's use of etymologies. In one particularly rich vein of Virgilian research, Virgil's adaptation of this "Alexandrian," scholarly technique in poetic composition is pursued also by Horsfall in *Virgilio: Lepopea in alambicco* (1991) and Paschalis in *Virgil's Aeneid: Semantic Relations and Proper Names* (1997). On Homer, see Reece's *Homer's Winged Words: The Evolution of Early Greek Epic Diction in the Light of Oral Theory* (2009).
- ⁶ I develop this line of interpretation in Franke 2013.
- ⁷ A theoretical framing of this issue could start from Walter Benjamin's conception of the Messianic as a rupture in history. See particularly his "Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen" (1961). For this topic, with emphasis on "divine violence," see also Martel 2012.
- ⁸ This line of interpretation, stemming from Adam Parry (1989), is elaborated especially by the so-called Harvard school of "pessimistic" interpretation of the epic, comprised of, among others, Clausen (2002) and Putnam (1988).
- ⁹ Mack (1999) compares Virgil's descriptions to other authors' (including Apollonius's and Homer's) and finds that Virgil accentuates the war's ambiguity and sinister quality as an invasion more than a return "home" of the Trojans.
- ¹⁰ Denis Feeney (1999, 178–94) suggests that the countercurrent provokes self-reflection on the reader's status as *voyeur*, commiserator, etc., with omniscience.
- ¹¹ This terminology of war is studied in detail by Gransden (1984).
- ¹² See the influential development of this view by Michael C. J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* (1988).
- ¹³ Compare Denis Feeney, "Epic Violence, Epic Order: Killings, Catalogues, and the Role of the Reader in *Aeneid* 10" (1999), as well as *The Gods in Epic* (1991, 155ff).
- ¹⁴ The dark, irrational forces in charge of Virgil's universe are compellingly expounded by W. R. Johnson in *Darkness Visible* (1976).
- ¹⁵ See Franke, 2011. Dimock (1989) is especially revealing on this head.

- ¹⁶ For guidance concerning the Homeric model in this regard, see Lesky (1961). The peculiar reality or truth attributed by the Greeks to their divinities is probed by Veyne (1983).
- ¹⁷ A sense of Virgil's demotion of the Muses from living divinities to figures of style is influentially articulated by C. S. Lewis (1973, 49–56).
- ¹⁸ Of course, the written status of Virgil's "secondary" epic makes this "speech" even more a matter of artifice and imitation.
- ¹⁹ There are alternative readings according to which, rather than questioning the authenticity of the vision, Aeneas's exit through the ivory gate would signal simply that he is not a true resident of the underworld, as Reed proposes (1973, 311–15), or that the *poem's* underworld is in any case a product of Virgil's artistry. These ideas are not incompatible with emphasis on the revelatory capabilities of fiction.
- ²⁰ The seminal essay is Adam M. Parry's "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*" (1963).
- ²¹ This thesis is developed in Franke 2005.

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