Virgil as Proteus (*Georg. 4.317-529*)

“We feel that Virgil himself, not the grotesque Proteus, is speaking”

Among the many myths bequeathed to us by antiquity, few have such great power of fascination as the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, and it’s essentially through Virgil’s artistic genius. No version of this legend, not even the Ovidian one, as admirable as it is (*Met. 10.1-85, 11.1-66*), equals the perfection of the narrative Virgil has placed in the fourth book of the *Georgics*, dedicated to bees. What bearing with bees, you ask? None or almost none. The author has just imagined that Aristaeus, the mythical shepherd and beekeeper, after the total loss of his bees from hunger and disease, went to get help from his mother the nymph Cyrene.

She advised him to consult Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, about the reason of this disaster. Questioned, the god unleashes his anger: "What? You are surprised? You play the big innocent? Have you forgotten your responsibility for the death of Eurydice?" And he recounts in detail the whole story: how Aristaeus had caused the death of the girl by chasing her, how Orpheus descended into the underworld to bring her back to light, how he had almost succeeded, and how, having lost her beloved for the second time, he withdrew into the desert, and was finally torn to pieces by Thracian women infuriated by his disdain...

And so Aristaeus recovered his hives: four altars erected in haste, one botched sacrifice, some poppies to calm Orpheus, and it’s done, very easy. A pure miracle, Virgil comments with a straight face (*dictu mirabile monstrum*, 554, “prodigy wonderful to say”). A “miracle” indeed, and all the more miraculous since the animal sacrifice here described had nothing to do with the process allegedly used in Egypt to generate swarms from carrion, a

---


3 Cyrene’s instructions were to offer four bulls and four heifers to the Nymphs, poppies to Orpheus, and an additional heifer to Eurydice, not to mention a black sheep (v. 538-47). In fact, Aristaeus forgets the sheep and the additional heifer (v. 548-53).

4 On this curious method, called bugonia, see references to ancient authors in E. de Saint-Denis, *Virgile. Géorgiques*, Paris, 1956, *ad* v. 285
process whose detailed description in lines 295-314 the author uses as a transition between the theme of bees and the Aristaeus epyllion\(^5\).

But, apart from contradicting the laws of nature, the incredible favor enjoyed by Aristaeus is moreover an insult to common justice. Indeed, not only, as we have seen (N. 3), this happy man does not even bother to strictly follow the requirements of his divine mother, but those requirements themselves appear as a shockingly easy recipe to wipe out the crime and make fun of the punishment. A crime? what crime? Is it the fault of Aristaeus if a snake was on the path of the girl he pursued? A regrettable accident... except that in this case, the Old Man of the Sea, to which nothing can escape (neque est te fallere quicquam, 447)\(^6\), should rather sympathize with the misfortune of that young man than burst out in anger against him as he does (iuuenum confidentissime, 445)\(^7\). He gnashes his teeth, his eyes roll ablaze, his whole body writhes before he finally “opens his lips to the fates” (v. 450-52):

\[
ui\ denique multa / Ardentis oculos torsit lumine glauco
\]

\[
Et grauitur frendens sic fatis ora resoluit\(^8\).
\]

While at first glance this anger could be explained by the fact that the young man had attacked him physically, pinning him to the ground and tying his hands to force him to talk, the rest of the text shows that the Old Man of the Sea has deeper reasons to be angry with his assailant (v. 453-56):

\[
Non te nullius exercent numinis irae;
\]

\[
Magna luis commissa: tibi has miserabilis Orpheus
\]

\[
Haudquaquam ad meritum poenas, ni fata resistant,
\]

---


\(^6\) But the phrase is ambiguous: cf. infra.

\(^7\) “most impudent”, in Thomas’ translation.

\(^8\) *Pace* L. P. Wilkinson (“The seer, yielding at last / To strong compulsion, rolled his eyes ablaze / With sea-green light, and grumbling angrily / Unsealed his lips to utter Fate’s decrees.”), it seems better to refer *ui... multa* to the violence Proteus exerts on himself, as a response to the violence he has just undergone (*uim duram, 399*). Anyway, these expressions of anger cannot be confused with the symptoms that accompany the entering in trance of the Sibyl in *Aen.* 6.77-80.
“No! don’t believe that no divine anger pursues you: you expiate great crimes. This punishment which, without the action of fate, would be too little to live up to your fault, is inflicted to you by the unfortunate Orpheus, harsh avenger of the murder of his wife.”

**Magna luis commissa,** all is said: the serpent was only the agent of the crime\(^9\), its true author is Aristaeus, and he shall have to pay for it. The loss of his bees is just the beginning\(^10\), and however Proteus, the omniscient (v. 392-93), cannot ignore that Cyrene will find a way to make her son escape his nemesis. This is why he insists that cheating will be futile, for the fates will catch the culprit whatever he does\(^11\). Remarkably, Proteus embraces the cause of Orpheus as if it were his own, so that their respective *ira* (‘angers’)\(^12\) merge into one: *ira* is plural, *non nullius* does not exclude that there is more than one offended deity\(^13\). Actually, this solidarity is scarcely surprising, since Orpheus was a sacred poet, a *Vates*, and Proteus himself is thrice called by this title (v. 387, 392, 450)\(^14\), as though Virgil wanted to insist that his own voice, as the *Vates* author, cannot be distinguished from that of Proteus, the *Vates* narrator.

So, we cannot doubt that Virgil shares Proteus’ detestation against Aristaeus, as well as his empathy for Orpheus’ misfortune, a fact that would be actually of little consequence if a real character did not loom behind this mythical figure, a character who could be none other than the young Octavian Caesar, the master of Rome.

---

\(^9\) And it’s a Virgilian innovation: M. O. Lee [*supra* N. 1], p. 13. Note that the snake can also figure the criminal himself, as at 3.425-39: [http://www.virgilmurder.org/images/pdf/calabreng.pdf](http://www.virgilmurder.org/images/pdf/calabreng.pdf).

\(^10\) Cf. J. R. T. Pollard, “Something odd about Virgil”, *PVS* 7 (1967-68), p. 50: “That Aristaeus’ bees should die seems light punishment indeed for such a heinous deed [against Eurydice], yet no one, least of all his mother and her attendant nymphs, even mention it…”

\(^11\) This is what suggests *haudquaquam ad meritum ni fata resistant*, admittedly a somewhat puzzling formulation, but editors make it incomprehensible by replacing *ad* (the Palatinus reading) with *ob* (not to hurt Aristaeus, probably). Exceptions are for example L. P. Wilkinson (“Far less than you deserve…”), G. B. Miles, *Virgil’s Georgics. A new interpretation*, Univ. of Calif. Press, 1980, p. 269, H. Jacobson, “Aristaeus, Orpheus, and the *Laudes Galli*”, *AJP* 105 (1984), p. 282, and R. F. Thomas [*supra* N. 5], *ad loc.: “Against you pitiable Orpheus stirs punishment – not at all undeserved (if the fates should not resist him)”.

\(^12\) Of course, this plural would not be decisive by itself: cf. for instance *Amaryllidis iras*, *Ecl.* II, 14; *Amaryllidis irae*, *Ecl.* III, 81.

\(^13\) The double negative also highlights the complete indifference of Aristaeus to his fault. As noted by G. B. Miles, p. 270: “he seems actually to be utterly oblivious both to her loss and to his responsibility for it.”

\(^14\) This insistence is not gratuitous: although, strictly speaking, Proteus is a soothsayer and Virgil a poet, the word *Vates* joins them together.
The mask is transparent, so transparent that the vast majority of critics agree, it seems, on this point\(^\text{15}\). We will therefore reserve our efforts to draw from this widely accepted fact its "scary", but inevitable, consequences about the relationship between the prince and the poet, namely Octavian and Virgil, which we are invited to place under the sign of a violent antagonism, whereas the tradition presents it as idyllic. Indeed, if, as we have seen, the feelings of the Vates towards the son of Cyrene have nothing particularly warm, the converse is quite as true.

Just look how savagely this young man, \textit{iuuenis} (423, 444), rushes up screaming (\textit{cum clamore ruit magno}, 439) on the old Proteus, \textit{senem}, 438\(^\text{16}\), even before he falls asleep (\textit{uix... passus}), despite the advice given by his mother (404, 414). The obvious comparison is with that passage from the sixth bucolic (v. 13 ff.), where Chromis and Mnasylos, two young shepherds, aided by the lovely Aegle, attack the old Silenus to extract from him a wonderful song: for all chains, they have flowers (\textit{sertis}, 19), for any violence the surprise effect (\textit{satis est potuisse uideri}, 24), and their intentions are so pure that the god cheerfully accepts to comply (\textit{Ille dolum ridens}, 23). What Aristaeus requires from Proteus, by force and by a blatant lie (\textit{deum praecepta securi}, 448)\(^\text{17}\), is not a good song, it is an oracle, \textit{oracula}, 449, a remedy for his misfortune (\textit{lassis... rebus, “our weary fortunes”}\(^\text{18}\)), in short, a recipe (cf. \textit{euentusque secundet}, 397). With his illusory physical superiority (largely due to the balm with which his mother has coated his body: v. 415-18), he feels able to dictate his orders to the interpreter of destinies.

One too readily hears a compliment in his \textit{neque est te fallere quicquam}, but the usual translation “for nothing can deceive you”\(^\text{19}\) (or “it is not possible that anything escape you”)\(^\text{20}\) obscures a less favorable (“you cannot deceive me”, since you are my prisoner), and yet more


\(^{16}\) The violence exercised by this \textit{iuuenis} against the \textit{senex} Proteus recalls Octavian’s (\textit{iuuenem}, 42) arrogance toward Tityrus (\textit{senex}, 46) in the first bucolic: cf. \textit{Violence et ironie…}, pp. 42-45.

\(^{17}\) He claims to “obey the commands of the gods”, while it is only Cyrene who sends him: this young man has the nerve!

\(^{18}\) R. F. Thomas.

\(^{19}\) L. P. Wilkinson.

plausible meaning, given what follows: *sed tu desine uelle*, “then stop wanting”\(^{21}\). And indeed, *fallacia*, or “art of deception”, is shown throughout the episode as the main feature of Proteus (*fallacia*, 443; *doli*, 400). We cannot help in this regard but think of *cacozelia latens*, which is also properly an art of deceiving (the hasty reader), for example in elegy (*fallax opus*, Prop. 4.1.135; *fallere*, 146)\(^{22}\) or in lyric poetry (*fallax*, Hor., *Od*. 3.7.20)\(^{23}\). It is not without a secret humor that Virgil portrays himself as a master magician able to transform you at will into every beast of the creation, and even, if necessary, to turn into fire or water (v. 406-11,440-42), thus symbolizing the infinite resources of the double writing. An allegory signed by a pretty good anagram of VERGILIVS MARO on line 411\(^{24}\).

Nonetheless, Aristaeus still manages to seize this elusive entity and compel him to speak. In clear, Octavian, absolute master of Rome, orders Virgil to sing his praises. But no one can submit the *Vates*. Far from complying with the requirements of Aristaeus, Proteus forces him to hear the voice of eternal justice, and then inflicts him the pathetic and highly detailed narrative of the suffering of his victims, before slipping back, free, in the sea waves. “But not Cyrene”, Virgil adds jokingly (*At non Cyrene*, 530). A chance for her son, distraught by his failure, and paralyzed by fear (*timentem*). He is soon reassured. So, Proteus refuses to cooperate, this odious, this stinking character to whom Neptune, by some strange aberration, awarded the supreme gift of clairvoyance (v. 394-95)\(^{25}\). Never mind, one can do without his advice. Eternal justice, retribution, punishment? Pure drivel: a clear conscience can be bought. And forgiveness also: Cyrene has no doubt that the anger of Orpheus and Eurydice will be soothed with a few offerings (v. 534-36). And indeed, everything seems to work according to her estimates, for Aristaeus triumphs in spite of Proteus, as well as Aeneas triumphs in spite

---

\(^{21}\) Nothing could better express the mortal struggle between the Prince and the Poet than this syntactic tension between two opposite meanings: who deceives whom? See the famous *te prius obire* in Hor., *Od*. 2.17.2-3: [http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_2/O_II_17.htm](http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_2/O_II_17.htm)


\(^{23}\) Cf. [http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_3/O_III_07.htm](http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_3/O_III_07.htm) for its subtle play between *fallax*, *falsis*, *uafer*.

\(^{24}\) *Sed quanto ille magis formas se ueret in omnis*. And even *magis* is likely to emphasize the anagram, as Virgil’s maternal grandfather’s name was, it seems, Magius; about the syntactic ambiguity of *Mago* in *Aen*. 10.521, cf. “Une ombre immense”, *AC* 63 (1994), pp. 12-13.

\(^{25}\) *Quippe ita Neptuno uisum est immania cuius / Armenta et turpis pascit sub gurgite phocas*, 394-95. The phrase *quippe ita uisum est* expresses resignation mingled with bitterness at a reality that one deplores: see for instance *uisum superis*, *Aen*. 3.2; *dis aliter uisum*, 2.428; *sic uisum Veneri*, Hor., *Od*. 1.33.10.
of Juno\textsuperscript{26}, and Octavian in spite of Virgil (v. 560-66)\textsuperscript{27}. This may be a scandal, but so goes the world, where poets seldom triumph over princes.

Yet Virgil has not wanted to limit himself to the mere finding of this sad state of affairs, thus letting to his reader the impression that he was resigned to it, or even that he sided with Aristaeus against Orpheus\textsuperscript{28}. Critics have perhaps not paid sufficient attention to the rather cavalier way in which Proteus takes leave of his assailant, without giving him the recipe he expected (l. 449), but copiously splashing him by jumping into the abyss (v. 528-29):

\begin{quote}
\textit{Haec Proteus et se iactu dedit aequor in altum}

\textit{Quaque dedit spumantem undam sub uertice torsit.}

“So saying Proteus plunged into the depths

Churning a seething whirlpool where he plunged.”
\end{quote}

This translation\textsuperscript{29}, though excellent, does not perhaps do enough justice to the facetious tone of the model, visible in the resumption of \textit{dedit}, with the funny removal of \textit{se} (“he gave himself to the waves, and where he gave, he splashed...”). No doubt that Proteus could do a perfect dive, and if he splashes, it’s on purpose, as to slap his assailant (\textit{torsit} picks up \textit{intorsit}, 451, which marked his anger). The comparison with Homer, \textit{Od.} 4.570, to which

---

\textsuperscript{26} The pair Aristaeus - Cyrene clearly foreshadows the pair Aeneas - Venus: cf. \textit{Violence et ironie…}, pp. 379-80.

\textsuperscript{27} \url{http://www.virgilmurder.org/images/pdf/studiiseng.pdf}.


these two lines echo, is quite eloquent in this regard. But, still more precious to perceive the intentions of the author of the *Georgics*, is a certain passage from the first book of Plato's *Republic*, where Thrasy machus, after advocating the most brutal injustice, which, as he says, is embodied par excellence in the tyrannical power, “intends to retire as a bathman after pouring over our ears the enormous mass of his speech”\(^{31}\). Admittedly, the roles are reversed, since in the *Georgics* Proteus, the defender of justice, leaves the scene, while in Plato’s *Republic* the defender of injustice remains on the spot, yet the reference amounts to an invitation made to the reader to reflect on the question of right and wrong, and especially on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of tyrannical power.

It is little risky to assume that Virgil adopts the view of Socrates rather than that of the "divine" and "excellent" Thrasy machus, which Julius Caesar, for example, openly approved\(^{32}\). Aristaeus is thus tried and convicted, and Octavian through him, as shown also by the last lines of the poem (v. 559-66), as cryptic as they are\(^{33}\). Being founded on injustice and crime, the "miraculous" success of despots can only be illusory and transient: such is the luminous teaching of Socrates.

That Aristaeus/Octavian will have to pay his debt to Orpheus, such is the prophecy issued by Proteus/Virgil. It has sometimes been supposed that through Orpheus - for the logic of allegory requires that we put a real name on this fictional character - Virgil thought of his friend Gallus, disgraced and so condemned to death by Octavian, who had since become

---

\(^{30}\) Οξ εἰπόν ύπὸ πῶντον ἔδόσετο κυμαίνοντα. As seen, Virgil dilutes at pleasure, and the highlighting of *spumantem* contrasts with the conventional *κυμαίνοντα*, which is an epithet of nature; let’s add that (very different from the conventional "Οξ εἰπόν) *haec* without a verb is as abrupt as the departure of the god.

\(^{31}\) Plat., *Rep.* 344d: “having, like a bath-man, deluged our ears with his words” (B. Jowett, 1892). This reference is triggered by the context (reflection about justice; apology of the tyrant, as justified by the very extent of his success), by the image, which is the same, although the Latin poet replaces Plato’s bathman with a diver, by the parallel between the abruptness of the departure of Proteus and the boy’s (*ἅθρων* in the sense of “all at once”: so P. Shorey, 1935, who proposes: “he had poured his speech in a sudden flood”), and finally by the echo between *At non Cyrene*, and οὐ μὴν εἰσάγων γε αὐτὸν οἱ παρόντες…, “But the company would not suffer him and were insistent that he should remain and render an account of what he had said”, P. Shorey: [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D344d](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D344d).


\(^{33}\) Cf. the article referred to *supra* N. 27.
Augustus\textsuperscript{34}. But besides the fact that the \textit{Georgics} were published in -29, three years before the fall of Gallus\textsuperscript{35}, one should not forget that we are dealing here with two murders, not one. On this basis, speculations are open\textsuperscript{36}.


\textsuperscript{35} The hypothesis of a late reworking of the fourth book of the \textit{Georgics} does not stand examination: one will find a useful bibliography on the subject of \textit{Laudes Galli} in Jacobson’s study [\textit{supra} N. 11].

\textsuperscript{36} The poets Catullus and Calvus might have paid the price for their attacks against Caesar: cf. the article referred to, \textit{supra} N. 15.