# VERGIL, *AENEID* 2. 250–2

vertitur interea caelum et ruit Oceano nox
involvens umbra magna terramque polumque
Myrmidonumque dolos;[1]
(*Aeneid* 2. 250–2)

These lines from the second book of the *Aeneid* introduce the night on which Troy falls. They have always been felt to be impressive: rich in allusion, noteworthy for the monosyllabic ending of the first line,[2] and memorable for the majestic zeugma of the last two lines. Line 250 opens by incorporating a half-line from Ennius:

vertitur interea caelum cum ingentibus signis
(*Ann.* 211)

and closes with a near-translation of the substance (as well as the rhythm) of a half-line from Homer:

ὀρώρει δ' οὐρανόθεν νύξ,
(*Od.* 5. 294)

juxtaposing in this way the *Annales* and the *Odyssey*, the night before Pyrrhus' attack on the Romans, and Odysseus' departure from Calypso's island. Vergil may even have packed the *Iliad* into this small compass as well, if Macrobius is right in asserting that the lines are patterned on *Iliad* 8. 485–6:[3]

ἐν δ' ἔπεσ' Ὠκεανῷ λαμπρὸν φάος ἠελίοιο,
ἕλκον νύκτα μέλαιναν ἐπὶ ζείδωρον ἄρουραν.

But whether we make this connection or not, we are sure to think of Achilles and the *Iliad* as we read 'Myrmidonumque dolos', equated by zeugma with earth and sky against the unhappy Trojans. Here, at the very least, Vergil brings resonance and perspective into his account of destruction and rebirth by invoking his two predecessors in epic, calling on the Homeric myth lying behind Greek history and the Ennian myth lying behind Rome's history, at the moment when Troy, mother of Rome, is to fall.

Familiar as this passage is, however, there remains some question about what precisely is the action of night that it describes so powerfully, and thus about basic meanings. Is night conceived here as rushing *from* the ocean (ablative) or *to* the ocean (dative)? Servius thought *from* the ocean ('nascitur de Oceano')

[1] All citations from the *Aeneid* are from *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*, R. A. B. Mynors, ed. (Oxford, 1972). The only change I have made is the use of 'v' for consonantal 'u'.

[2] Cf. R. G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Secundus* (Oxford, 1964), ad loc., and J. N. Hough, 'Monosyllabic Verse Endings in the Aeneid', *CJ* 71. 1 (1975), 16–24.

[3] *Saturnalia* 5. 5.5.

and in general he has been followed.[4] But was he right? Is this what Vergil means? Two kinds of evidence necessarily bear on our decision. The first is the meaning of the verb *ruit*. Can it imply motion upward? Most readers think of motion downward when they read *ruere*, probably because of its connection with *ruina*, a noun Vergil uses a number of times in the *Aeneid* to express the collapse of a towering structure: a house (2. 310–11); a tower (2. 465–6); a tree = Troy, in a simile (2. 628–31). Consequently, most editors, commenting on 2.250, feel obliged to prove that Vergil uses the verb elsewhere to suggest motion upward. Many parallels are cited; the most convincing are two adduced by James Henry:

> . . . . et interea revoluta ruebat
> matura iam luce dies noctemque fugarat;
> (*Aen.* 10. 256–7)

and:

> nam saepe incautis pastoribus excidit ignis
> qui furtim pingui primum sub cortice tectus
> robora comprendit, frondesque elapsus in altas
> ingentem caelo sonitum dedit; inde secutus
> per ramos victor perque alta cacumina regnat,
> et totum involvit flammis nemus et ruit atram
> ad caelum picea crassus caligine nubem . . .[5]
> (*Geo.* 2. 303–9)

But let us look more closely at these and other instances. How does Vergil actually use the verb? Forms of *ruere* occur seventy-eight times in the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*; of these, seventy-two are intransitive, six transitive.[6] None of the intransitive usages, including those cited by editors to prove their point, *necessarily* implies motion upward, so far as I can determine. For example, in the following frequently cited passages:

> nox ruit, Aenea; nos flendo ducimus horas.
> (6. 539)

> nox ruit et fuscis tellurem amplectitur alis.
> (8. 369)

[4] Nearly all editors of the *Aeneid* agree with Servius. They include (alphabetically) Austin, Bennett, Conington, Echave-Sustaeta, Henry, Ladewig, Schaper and Deuticke, Page, Papillon and Haugh, Peerlkamp, Pharr, Speranza, Thiel, and R. D. Williams; so far I have only found one editor, Heyne, who definitely disagrees. Mackail, in his 1930 edition of the *Aeneid*, refers to much debate on the subject, but I have not been able to find a trace of it except perhaps in the fact that each editor feels obliged to justify his reading. Translators of the *Aeneid* also, for the most part, agree with Servius, among them, Copley, Fairclough, Humphries, Lewis, Lind, and Mandelbaum in English, Onesti in Italian; only Dryden and Jackson Knight do not. Wetmore holds the view of the majority but Szantyr, ed., *Lateinische Syntax und Stilistik* (repr. Munich, 1963) calls *Oceano* a 'dativ des Zieles'. The only other supporter of this view that I have been able to find is A. Preuss, *Die metaphorische Kunst Vergils* (Graudenz, 1894), who, on p. 23, according to Ladewig, Schaper, and Deuticke, states that *Oceano* = 'auf das Meer'. (I have not yet been able to obtain a copy of Preuss's book.) Forcellini's Lexicon cites the passage as evidence of the meaning *adventare* for *ruere*. *Ruit* = 'celeriter venit, et ideo ruit, quia mare altius terra'.

[5] James Henry, *Aeneidea*, Book 2 (Dublin, 1878), ad loc.

[6] I arrived at these figures using M. N. Wetmore, *Index Verborum Vergilianus* (3rd edn., Hildesheim, 1961) and Mynors's O.C.T.

*ruit* seems to me more naturally to express forward motion and speed, than rising.[7] Even 'ruebat . . . dies' the passage from Book 10, cited on p. 154, does not require the meaning 'rise'. The sun rises, it is true, but it makes very good sense to think of day as merely rushing onward here.[8]

Elsewhere Vergil uses *ruere* intransitive for downward motion (eleven times, if we count 2. 250) indicating direction by means of a preposition, as at 4. 164, 'ruunt de montibus amnes', or merely by context, as at 2. 363, 'urbs antiqua ruit'. Most often *ruere* is used neutrally meaning 'rush', 'speed along' with no goal or direction specified (twenty-nine times); slightly less often (twenty-two times) a goal or direction is implied, normally by prepositions like *ad*, or *in* plus accusative, or by *quo* interrogative. Occasionally (seven times) the location of the rushing is given, usually with *per*; now and then the source is specified (five times) with a preposition plus ablative or *unde*.[9] Would Vergil have used *ruit* if he had intended to express motion upward? Or, if he was committed to *ruit* would he not have used a preposition with *Oceano* to make it clear that it was the source and not the goal? Since Vergil so seldom refers to the source with *ruere* and so often to the direction, would he have said *Oceano ruit* meaning 'rushes up from the ocean'?

Before deciding, we must look at the one passage, the lines about fire from the *Georgics* quoted on p. 154, in which Vergil actually does seem to use *ruere* for motion upward. A spark, smouldering secretly for a while, bursts into flames, which shoot from the tree tops, engulfing the wood. 'Thick with pitchy darkness, it [the fire] rolls a black cloud towards the sky.' Vergil may be thinking of the fire spreading *against* the backdrop of the sky rather than *up towards it* (*ad caelum*), but it is certainly possible that here, at any rate, he associates *ruere* with upward motion. Of course, this is not a true parallel to our passage because the verb *ruit* is transitive. It seems to be the case, from other poets' practice, and perhaps from Vergil's own, that *ruere* transitive is used to express motion upward from below: 'to dig up' or 'turn up',[10] as in Lucretius:

> cum mare permotum ventis ruit intus harenam . . .
> (6. 726)

or in Horace:

> . . . tu protinus unde
> divitias aerisque ruam dic, augur, acervos.[11]
> (*Serm.* 2.5. 21–2)

It is, then, possible, that Vergil used *ruo* transitive to express motion upward; from the evidence it is less likely that he used *ruo* intransitive for the purpose.

Another piece of evidence for the prevailing view frequently cited by editors is the undoubted parallel of *Aeneid* 2. 250–2 and *Odyssey* 5. 294, and the likely

[7] Cf. Mackail, ad loc.

[8] Elsewhere Vergil speaks of day rising and uses *surgebat*:

> Postera iamque dies primo surgebat Eoo
> umentemque Aurora polo dimoverat umbram
> (3. 588–89).

[9] There is some overlap in categories, as in 'ruunt de montibus amnes', quoted above, where the verb is used with a preposition *and* implies downward motion. Therefore the sum of the totals given before exceeds seventy-two.

[10] It is possible that *ruebant* in 'spumas salis aere suebant' (*Aen.* 1.35) should be taken in the sense 'they were ploughing up' and that 'maerentes altum cinerem et confusa ruebant/ossa focis' (11. 212–13) means, as Forcellini claims, 'de cineribus eruebant'.

[11] It is, of course, possible that E's reading *eruat* is right.

parallel of the *Aeneid* passage and *Iliad* 8. 485–6, both quoted on p. 153. The half-line from the *Odyssey* is, indeed, relevant. The rhythm is strikingly similar, the word order is the same, *ruit* corresponding to ὀρώρει, *Oceano* to οὐρανόθεν, and *nox* to νύξ. Vergil almost certainly had the line from the *Odyssey* in mind when he wrote his line. He may have intended an ablative, *Oceano*, 'from the ocean' to correspond with Homer's οὐρανόθεν, 'from the sky', but it is just as likely that he meant, as Homer did, that night came down *from* the sky (onto the ocean). The parallel does not prove the case one way or the other.

The parallel with the *Iliad* is equally inconclusive; it certainly does not prove that Vergil thought of night's source in the ocean. In the lines from the *Iliad*, the sun sets in the ocean and nightfall follows. So much is clear. In some unspecified fashion, the sun's light, sinking into the sea, draws black night over the land. This does not indicate that the sun sinks into the sea and night rises from it. The difficulties of night being drawn upward by the sun which remains below are obvious. The Greek says nothing about night rising (or falling); it suggests a curtain or cloak of darkness drawn over the land.[12] Thus, if Vergil had this passage from Homer in mind when he wrote his lines, he may indeed have been thinking of night as a cloak coming down on the sea. It is unlikely they would have suggested to him night rising from the ocean.

The other kind of evidence to be weighed stems from the ancient view of the machinery of nightfall. The argument is put neatly by Henry:

> In as much as the ancients always represented night as following the course of the sun *i.e.*, as rising in the east, traversing the sky, and descending or setting in the west . . . the words *ruit oceano nox*, applied to the commencement of night, are to be understood, not as presenting us with the ordinary English image of night *falling on the ocean*, but as presenting us with the directly reversed image of personified night *rising* (rushing) *from the ocean*;[13]

in other words, Vergil must have meant to say that night rushed from the ocean because that is the way the ancients thought.

There is some evidence for Vergil's imagining night passing through the sky (*Aen.* 2. 8–9; 3. 512; 3. 721, 738, 835–6). There is proof that Ovid (at least once) thought of night rising from the waters at sunset:

> . . . et lux tarde descendere visa
> praecipitatur aquis, et aquis nox surgit ab isdem.
> (*Meta.* 4. 92)

Possibly Vergil suggests the same in Iopas' song:

> quid tantum Oceano properent se tingere soles
> hiberni, vel quae tardis mora noctibus obstet;
> (1. 745–6)

although I am not convinced that we need to take 'Oceano se tingere', as Henry does, with 'tardis noctibus' as well as with 'soles hiberni'; i.e. 'Why are the winter

[12] Cf. Walter Leaf, ed., *The Iliad* (2nd edn., Amsterdam, 1960), ad loc. on ἔλκον: 'a bold but vivid metaphor, darkness being regarded as a mantle or cloth which is dragged over the earth by a departing sun.'

[13] James Henry, *Notes of a Twelve Years' Voyage of Discovery in the First Six Books of the Aeneid* (Dresden, 1853), p. 57.

suns in such haste, and the winter nights so slow, to plunge into the ocean?'[14] Whether or not Vergil states it outright, it is the logical corollary of night passing through the sky and the logical parallel to the sun's progress. If the sun rises from the sea, crosses the sky, and sets into the sea again, it makes sense that at sunset night should rise, make its way through the heavens, and set, in its turn, in the sea. Thus it seems plausible that Vergil might have thought of night rising from the sea.

It does not, however, seem to me that we must assume that Vergil means night to rise from the sea just because that was a common ancient conception if, in fact, it was. Is a poet always consistent or even logical, in his poetic images? Did Stesichorus, for example, worry about exactly how night got from the Island of the Hesperides to Greece? A poet may look at the sky with different eyes at different times. It seems to me that Vergil presents at least three different, if not conflicting, notions of night, depending on what suits his particular context. At times he seems to hold the 'scientific' view of a fixed world capped with a rotating heaven, one side dark and star-studded, the other bright. This seems to be the implication of the first half of line 250, 'vertitur caelum', and of 11. 201–2. Elsewhere night seems to be a charioteer drawn through the sky, as at 2. 512 and 5. 721, 738, and 835. A third notion of night (which I think we find in our passage) is of a cloak or pall dropped from above and veiling everything in shadow. Similar in conception is:

> nox ruit et fuscis tellurem amplectitur alis.
> (8. 369)

Night rushes on or down, and wraps the land round about with protecting folds, or, in this case, wings, and keeps it safe through the dark hours.[15] We do not, then, have to assume that Vergil always thought of night in the same way. Therefore, the argument that he must have intended *ruit* to mean upward motion because the ancients always thought of night as following the course of the sun is not convincing. Accordingly, it seems to me that neither of the two arguments usually presented in favour of the traditional interpretation proves its case.

All things considered, then, there seems to be no conclusive proof that Vergil imagined night rising from the ocean at *Aeneid* 2. 250, and the likelihood remains that he thought of it as descending from the sky to cloak the land. In that case *Oceano* would be a dative expressing the goal of *ruit*. It is characteristic of Vergil to use a dative with verbs of motion (both simple and compound) to express direction, e.g. 'inferretque deos Latio' (1.6), 'it clamor caelo' (5. 451), and 'deturbat terrae' (10. 548). While he is also fond of the ablative with no preposition, his most characteristic use of that case is to express not the source but the location of an action, as in:

> quaerenti et tectis urbis sine fine ruenti
> infelix simulacrum atque ipsius umbra Creusae
> visa mihi . . . .
> (2. 771–3)

[14] Henry, *Notes*, p. 57. See also his discussion in *Aeneidea* (London, 1873), i. 856.

[15] Cf. *Aeneid* 4. 351–2: '. . . quotiens umentibus umbris/nox operit terras . . .'.

or:

> undique convenere animis opibusque parati
> in quascumque velim pelago deducere terras.
> (2. 799–800)[16]

Thus, I would suggest that the burden of proof remains with those who argue that Vergil means to portray night as rushing from the sea here even though he nowhere else in his works uses *ruit* intransitively to express motion upward.

In conclusion I would like to mention evidence which is patently subjective, but worth a hearing. First, the rhythm of verse 250 fits the action of night falling from above better than it does the action of night rushing up from below. If sound contributes to sense, as I think it often does, the falling rhythm of this predominantly dactylic verse, which comes down with a heavy finality in the unusual monosyllabic ending, suggests the descent rather than the rising of night.[17] Second, if we look at the verse as a whole, we find, I think, a much more forceful visual image if night falls. The heavens turn and night comes. The process is smooth and natural if the heavens turn and, as a result, night falls down like a great curtain or cloak to envelop all the visible world below; it is rather disjointed if we think first of the sky turning overhead and then of night rushing up from below.

A final argument, perhaps fanciful, but based on patterns of imagery familiar to all readers of Vergil (his treatment of fire, for example), is the possible anticipation in *nox* of the fate of Troy: oblivion rushing down from the gods and fates on a doomed city and civilization, even as night is rushing down on the sea, in an image that foretells the ruining or toppling of Troy's lofty towers.

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[16] See Mackail, Appendix A, on the Vergilian ablative.

[17] I was hoping to find some confirmation of this in Hough (see n. 2) or in Eduard Norden, *P. Vergilius Maro Aeneis Buch VI* (4th edn., Stuttgart, 1957). Both refer to the line but neither says much about it. On p. 440 Norden, speaking of 'schliessendes Monosyllabon', says that in 'insequitur cumulo praeruptus aquae mons' (1. 105) 'wird das Überhangen der Flutwelle gemalt (der Vers selbst ist gewissermassen "praeruptus") wie in II 250 *ruit oceano nox . . .*' This may suggest agreement. He also quotes *Aeneid* 5. 481 f.: 'sternitur exanimisque tremens procumbit/ humi bos' and says that here 'wird das plötzlich Niederstürzen des Rindes plastisch zum Ausdruck gebracht.'