

HERCULES AND THE HYDRA (VERGIL *AEN.* 8. 299–300)

In their hymn, the Salians conclude their enumeration of Hercules' achievements by singling out his conquest of the Hydra: "non te rationis egentem / Lernaeus turba caput circumstetit anguis." The phrase "non te rationis egentem" is peculiar, and there is no fully convincing attempt to explain it. Most commentators, including Forbiger, have followed Heyne's lead and consider this phrase as the equivalent of "*consilii inopem de ἀμηχανία, ἀπορία ex pavore: h. terrore perculsum.*"¹ The interpretations of Benoist ("Tu n'a pas été troublé par la crainte") and Conington ("Thou wast not panic-stricken") seem to be influenced by the preceding lines (especially "non terruit ipse Typhoeus," 8. 298) and are even further removed from the original meaning of *ratio*. Ladewig-Schaper-Deuticke-Jahn echo Heyne's *consilii inopem* by translating "um Rat verlegen."

The analogies that have been cited for this phrase are not satisfactory. Conington has a cross reference to 8. 299 in his commentary on 2. 314 ("nec sat rationis in armis"), but the point there clearly is Aeneas' *amentia*, because "nec sat rationis in armis" is explained by *arma amens capio* (2. 314) and *ardent animi* (2. 316). The same is true of Ovid *Tristia* 2. 395: *egentem mentis Oresten*. To cite Valerius Flaccus' imitation of Vergil's phrase ("sentit enim Pollux rationis egentem," 4. 303) would be to beg the question, but even in that passage nothing suggests that Pollux' opponent is "troublé par la crainte."

That Virgil wanted to stay close to the original meaning of *ratio* is evident from the context of this phrase in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* whence he borrowed it. At 4. 469 ff., Lucretius discourses on the reliability of the senses for providing us with true knowledge. For example, towers appear rounded at a distance but rectangular when seen from nearby

and man lacks the reasoning (*rationis egentem*, 4. 502) to explain why this is so. This inability to reason or to explain is again connoted by Lucretius' phrase *rationis egestas* at 5. 1211.

Vergil's application of this phrase with these overtones to Hercules' combat with the Hydra is meaningful in the light of a tradition that can be traced as early as Plato. In *Euthydemus* 297C, Socrates says that the Hydra was a sophist καὶ διὰ τὴν σοφίαν ἀνείσθη, εἰ μίαν κεφαλὴν τοῦ λόγου τις ἀποτέμει, πολλὰς ἀντὶ τῆς μιᾶς. The cleverness (σοφία) and reasoning (λόγος) of the Hydra called for even greater efforts in cleverness and reasoning on Hercules' part. This is evinced, for instance, by the account of Vergil's contemporary Diodorus, who speaks of Hercules ἐπινοήσας τι φιλοτέχνημα against the difficulties posed by the Hydra (4. 11. 5). The allegorical tradition of the Hydra as a sophist found its greatest echo in the Renaissance when authors such as Salutati, Boccaccio, and de Villena promulgated it,² but the origin of this view of the Hydra and of the skills required for overcoming her is ancient. It may have originated in the fifth century with Herodorus of Heraclea, who can be considered the creator of the philosophical Hercules allegories,³ but the tradition certainly was not isolated because Eusebius also refers to the Platonic passage.⁴

This tradition, then, seems best to explain Vergil's choice of "non te rationis egentem." Only a hero who is in full control of his rational faculty can prevail over the hundred-fold dangers with which the Hydra is confronting him. *Ratio* complements Hercules' just *furor* (*Aen.* 8. 228–30). Thus he is a worthy model for Aeneas, whereas the opponents of Hercules and Aeneas, Cacus and Turnus, are *rationis egentes*.

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1. P. Virgilii Maronis opera, ed. C. G. Heyne, ed. quartam cur. E. Wagner, III (Leipzig and London, 1833), *ad loc.*

2. C. Salutati, *De laboribus Herculis* 3. 9. 4; G. Boccaccio, *Genealogie* 13. 1. 133c; E. de Villena, *Los doze trabajos de Hercules*, ed. M. Morreale (Madrid, 1958), p. 70.

3. F. Jacoby, s.v. "Herodorus," *RE*, VIII (1912), 980–87, and *FGH*, 31. Cf. my book, *The Herakles Theme* (Oxford, 1972), ch. iii.

4. Migne, *PL*, XXVII, cols. 311–12, year 768 after Abraham.