# VALERIUS FLACCUS THE POET

DETAILS of poetical expression have received only incidental mention in my earlier articles on Valerius Flaccus. The purpose now is to fill this gap by outlining what has struck me most forcibly about Valerius' use of language and metre. This is offered not as a final assessment, were such a thing ever possible, but rather as a supplement or epilogue to what has already been published, with the emphasis on aspects unnoticed or not elaborated by others.

The writers of Silver Latin epic drew for many of their effects on an armoury of images forged by their predecessors from Ennius to Ovid. These images were part of the poetical stock-in-trade. Their novelty had worn off in part through repetition, yet their inclusion in a work, together with metrical form, differentiated it from prose. It was understood that the common stock should supply most of a poet's effects, if he was not to be precious and unreadable. Valerius may be described as a conventional Latin poet in this respect. He owes part of his attractiveness to a liberal sprinkling of standard images, fused perfectly into his poem. This article must deal primarily with Valerius' more original achievements, but a few examples of him as a follower of tradition will be given to help drive the point home that, however daring and novel his expression on occasions, his whole work is far from being characterized by over-indulgence in linguistic deviation.

Valerius was always ready to embellish his epic with images of brightness, of which Latin poetry offers a formidable repertory: cf. *Georg.* 4. 401 *medios cum sol accenderit aestus* and *Arg.* 3. 411 *ubi puniceas oriens accenderit undas*; *Aen.* 4. 262 *Tyrioque ardebat murice laena* and *Arg.* 3. 340 *ardentes murice uestes*;[1] *Aen.* 1. 50 *flammato . . . corde* and *Arg.* 4. 655 *flammata pudore iuuentus*; *Aen.* 9. 66 *ignescunt irae* and *Arg.* 5. 520 *furiis ignescit opertis*. Valerius is similarly partial to *implere* in its extended senses with a personal object, e.g. 2. 126 *hanc . . . his uocibus implet*, or 2. 167 *tum uoce deos, tum questibus implent*, for which uses *Met.* 7. 120 is a closer parallel than *Aen.* 3. 434 or 7. 475. Even prose authors used *uestire* for coverings other than those afforded by clothing, as is apparent from Lewis and Short's impressive array of metaphorical usages. Virgil went a step further in *largior hic campos aether et lumine uestit / purpureo* (*Aen.* 6. 640–1), so that when Valerius wrote *effluit imber / spumeus et magno puppem procul aequore uestit* (*Arg.* 4. 665–6), he was merely transferring the metaphor to a new element, and not breaking new ground in any revolutionary way.

The above images, all borrowed to a greater or lesser degree, are a few of the hundreds that enliven the *Argonautica*. But Valerius' innovations repay especial study. They are always evocative and pregnant with suggestion. They occur where another poet will perhaps give a detailed description in more ordinary phrases. Valerius throws out his hint, and leaves the rest to one's imagination. The bold metaphors arrest the reader, who after a moment of reflexion will feel that the expected word would have been infinitely less effective, less rich in nuances.

Valerius has cast his Cyzicus episode into the tragic mould, using every

[1] But contrast Valerius' original way of saying that a garment was dyed crimson at 5. 512: *Taenarii chlamydem de sanguine aeni*.

device of literary association to intensify the horror of the events.[1] It is within this context that the phrase *tepidi singultibus agri* (3. 218) should be examined. The ground was warm with blood, not with death throes, or, more particularly, with the rattling in the throats of the dying. Valerius' line would have accommodated *atque madentes sanguine campi* perfectly, but his unique use of *singultus*, stretched to mean 'blood spurting out amid the paroxysms of death' makes his scene so much more vivid and terrible.

The latter part of Valerius' seventh book is taken up with Jason's struggle against the fire-breathing bulls and the Earth-born. At this stage he is a hero in the truest sense of the word, and great stress is laid on his exertions. When finally victorious, he rushes to the river, and is likened to Mars himself bathing in the Hebrus after battle. With a bold hyperbole Valerius conveys the god's stature, and by implication, Jason's: *uritque grauem sudoribus Hebrum* (7. 645). The river is not just seething, it is being scorched or burnt up!

In describing a work of art Valerius can communicate the idea that it is magnificent or life-like with a single daring metaphor, so that all need for further description stops. Jason's offering to the dead Idmon is *caelata . . . multa / arte . . . uelamina* (5. 6–7). *Caelare* properly means 'to engrave in relief', mostly in metal, but also occasionally in ivory or wood. Valerius' transference of the word to a woven material is quite unparalleled and obviously designed to convey the magnificence of the embroidery. When Jason first received the garment from Cyzicus, we learnt that Clite had made it, and the description then was more specific: *picto . . . uariauerat auro* (3. 10). Solemn occasions like Cyzicus' farewell or the death of Idmon call for exquisite gifts, and what better compliment to Clite's skill than Valerius' allusive *caelata uelamina*? Of the ivory statue to which the weeping Hesione is compared we read *exanimum . . . / maeret ebur* (2. 465–6), and of the identical cloaks embroidered for Castor and Pollux by Leda *bis Taygeton siluasque comantes / struxerat, Eurotan molli bis fuderat auro* (1. 429–30). Through the directness of his verb/noun juxtapositions Valerius has destroyed the distinction between art and the reality that it represents, and we are left to imagine perfect art.

By the choice of a single word, Valerius effectively represents Jupiter's power over men: *cum uarios struerem per saecula reges* (1. 535). *Struere* is normally used with impersonal objects, except in military contexts. When Eurystheus sends Hercules to one quarter after another to perform his various labours we read *magnum rex spargit ab Argis / Alciden* (5. 487–8). Elsewhere when *spargere* takes a personal object, that object is plural or collective. Lewis and Short lose some of the meaning in rendering the verb merely as 'to separate, part' in this passage.

The images of brightness quoted earlier all had close parallels in previous Latin literature. But Valerius himself sometimes coined phrases that were arresting, seemingly contradictory, yet not obscure if read in their context. To convey the fearsomeness of the fire-breathing bulls even before they appear, Valerius employed two devices. The first is hyperbole. In making the whole land glow with the fire exhaled by the bulls, Valerius gave himself the stamp of a Silver Latin poet and wrote in a way that has little appeal for modern taste. His second device is a brilliant oxymoron: *ardentes stabula effudere tenebras* (7. 566), which clearly refers to the mixture of fire and smoke issuing from the

[1] See *CQ* N.S. xiv (1964), 267–72.

bulls. At 2. 198 another startling juxtaposition of adjective and noun adds colour to Valerius' description of Venus' frightening descent to Lemnos, accompanied by the raging elements: *nimbis et luce fragosa | prosequitur polus et tonitru pater auget honoro. Lux fragosa* is perhaps the most original phrase in Latin literature for lightning and the thunder that follows it, yet taken in its context it communicates its meaning with abundant clarity.

The question of obscurity in poetry is vexed and, to some extent, arbitrary. In most modern poetry obscurity is, if not regarded as a virtue, at least taken for granted. With the ancients we appear to discriminate between genres: Pindar and tragic choruses are 'in', for all their obscurity; Lycophron is 'out', in part because of his. Of our epic poets we seemingly demand a lofty utterance that does not bamboozle. If this is indeed the criterion, then, it must be confessed, Valerius does occasionally overstrain our ingenuity.

Most of the *ἅπαξ λεγόμενα* are easily understood, e.g. *lustrifico cantu* (3. 448), or *mugitor . . . | Vesbius* (3. 208–9), but two of his coinages, though not too difficult in themselves, form part of a verbal maze. When Juno asked Venus for *artificis blanda aspiramina formae* (6. 465), the Roman listener at a *recitatio* would have had to go through some rapid mental contortions. He would have worked out that the novel *aspiramina* was a formation from *aspirare* in its relatively rare sense of 'to impart', that its adjective *blanda* was transferred from *formae*, since the beauty and not the communication of it was to be alluring, and that *artificis* in the objective genitive was adjectival and used in its rarer passive sense of 'skilfully wrought'. Equally labyrinthine is *hinc barbarici glomerantur ouatus | hinc gemitus* (6. 187–8). By itself Valerius' coinage *ouatus* clearly means 'exultation', but we must here twice reverse the adjective/noun relationship in order to deduce the only possible sense, 'the barbarians swarm, here exulting, there groaning'. The excessive separation of *quem* and *iuxta* in *quem comes infelix Pario de marmore iuxta | stat soror* (5. 187–8) imposes an uncomfortable effort on the reader, and in *breuis hanc sed fata ferentem | prodidit et piceo comitem miserata refulsit | Luna polo* (3. 194–6), in addition to the distance between *breuis* and its noun *Luna* there is the unusualness of its meaning, 'a fleeting shaft of moonlight'. Apollo relies inordinately on our knowledge of mythology while showing some deficiency in his own in his plea to Jupiter for Prometheus' release: *sat tibi furtum | ignis et aetheriae defensa silentia mensae* (4. 66–7). Prometheus' theft of fire was never 'defended', and the reader must mentally supply *punitum* in order to make sense of the plea, the second part of which is, incidentally, irrelevant, since it was Tantalus, not Prometheus, who deprived the gods of their monopoly over nectar and ambrosia. There is a similar shortage of verbs in *flagrantes aras vestemque nemusque sacerdos | praecipitat* (1. 755–6), which describes the priest's reaction to the rumour of Aeson's imminent murder. *Vestem praecipitat* is normal Latin for 'he casts down his robe'. From the context, the rest would appear to mean 'he rushes away from the burning altars and out of the grove', in which case the construction is repugnant to Latin idiom. If another zeugma *igne simul uentisque rubens* (3. 131) is analysed literally, we have palpable nonsense. We should accept Courtney's view that *et quem fama genus non est decepta Lyaei | Phlias immissus patrios de uertice crines* (1. 411–12) is both unfinished and displaced, but 411 as it stands contains Latin so twisted that one would wish to be able to postulate some textual corruption. The meaning of 411–12 must be that Phlias was rightly rumoured to be Lyaeus' son and that his hair, like his father's, streamed down from his head. Finally,

*iamque altae cecidere iubae nutatque coactum / iam caput atque ingens extra sua uellera ceruix, / ceu refluens Padus aut septem proiectus in amnes / Nilus et Hesperium ueniens Alpheos in orbem* (8. 88–91) is probably to be explained by Langen's view that Valerius is comparing the serpent losing its strength to various rivers flowing with diminished force as they meet the sea or spread into a delta. However, the existence of such rival explanations as Wagner's, that the size of the serpent's neck is being compared to the vastness of rivers, or Koestlin's, that the reference is to rivers in flood, suggests that Valerius has confused rather than edified.[1]

Much ink has been spilt over Lucretius' ponderous sonority and Virgil's more subtle rhythms. But critics have dismissed Valerius' treatment of the hexameter as monotonous, and they have tended to ignore the sound of his word-groupings. It is in this field especially that one runs the risk of reading too much into a poet, as has undoubtedly been done by some in the case of Valerius' more illustrious predecessors. However, as honest over-interpretation seems preferable to callous neglect, I shall presume to give, with representative examples, a personal view of Valerius' stature as a master of rhythm and sound. Every epic has its high points, and it is at these that Valerius rose to the occasion. In the intervals, it is true, his verse sometimes has too even a flow. I have been struck by the occasional occurrence of series of three, four, or even five lines with an identical dactyl/spondee pattern, and little or no variation in the pauses, e.g. 2. 179–81, 8. 84–7,[2] 8. 202–6. That said, we may pass to the credit side of the ledger.

In writing

> When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
> The line too labours, and the words move slow.
> Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,
> Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along the main
> (*Essay on Criticism*, 369–72),

Pope expounded the potentiality of the hexameter better than any one else has done. Valerius made more frequent and effective use of predominantly dactylic lines than he did of spondaic. There is nothing in the *Argonautica* to rival Virgil's *illi inter sese magna ui bracchia tollunt* (*Georg.* 4. 174). In *Arg.* 2. 430 *spumea subsequitur fugientis semita claui*, the dactylic rhythm fits the speed of the ship, while for the description of the splashing spray of the sea the alliteration of *s* and the assonance especially of *u* and *i* had the same irresistible appeal for Valerius as for Virgil when he wrote *fit sonitus spumante salo* (*Aen.* 2. 209).[3] After the dark happenings of Book 1, Valerius ends on a note of luminosity: *durat aprica dies thiasique chorique uirorum* (1. 844). Here the light, airy, dactylic rhythm conveys both this luminosity and the joyful activities of the righteous dead. Dactyls are used also for the sudden appearance of light: *fulsere repente*

[1] I owe to Mr. A. J. Gossage of King's College, University of London, the interesting parallel from Statius (*Theb.* 4. 705 f.), where the Nile is *refluus* at a time of drought, i.e. it sinks down in its bed. While there is no suggestion that *refluus* or *refluens* can mean 'sinking down', it is possible that the visual effect of 'flowing back' is one of the sinking down of the water level. This would basically support Langen's explanation of the simile, and indeed make it fit the sinking down of the serpent's neck quite admirably.

[2] Could the monotony here be deliberate, echoing Medea's repetitive, somniferous spells?

[3] *Arg.* 4. 688 *clausum scopulos super effluit aequor* and 4. 665–6, quoted above, come to mind also as having a suitably watery sound. See *CQ* N.S. XV (1965), 114 (footnote).

*et nemora et scopuli nitidusque reducitur aether* (3. 466–7) and *emicuit reserata dies* (1. 655), the latter particularly notable also for the vividness of its imagery. Quickly flapping sails are described in dactyls: *uela super tremulum subitus uolitantia malum / turbo rapit* (1. 620–1). The confusion of the word-order is in keeping with that of the scene, as is the alliteration of *t* and *r* with the tearing of the sails. A more subtle effect is obtained at a meeting of Jason and Medea by *ora simul totiens dulces rapientia uisus, / nunc deicit uultus aeger pudor et mora dictis / redditur* (7. 513–15). The predominantly dactylic rhythm of the first line conveys the gentle, surreptitious snatching of sweet glances by the young lovers. The next line is somewhat heavier and disjointed, being thus admirably suited to the description of downcast looks and hesitation. Note the pronounced diaereses at the end of the fourth foot in line 514 and of the first in 515, together with the comparatively rare masculine caesura in the fifth foot of 514, leaving *mora*, like *pudor*, without ictus.[1] In *quod nullae te, nata, dapes, non ulla iuuabant / tempora, non ullus tibi tum color* (8. 162–3), the diaereses at the end of the second foot in 162, and of the first, third, and fourth in 163 accord well with the gradual, but forcible, dawning of the truth on Medea's heart-broken mother. She recalls Medea's symptoms one by one, and they all point to the inevitable conclusion that Medea is the victim of an overwhelming passion.[2] The diaeresis at the end of the second foot of line 23 in *qualem praecipiti grauidum iam sorte parentem / natorum flet parua manus trepidique precantur* (5. 22–3) is particularly abrupt, as if echoing the sob of a bereaved child. The sustained alliteration of *r* may represent the harshness of inexorable fate. Valerius breaks his line at the end of the second foot also in 4. 684, where Juno and Minerva keep the Symplegades apart for the *Argo* to pass through. In *caeruleum fundo caput extulit* (1. 642) the diaereses at the end of the third and fourth feet mark the suddenness of Neptune's emergence from the depths, and the simile of the dove (8. 32–4) ends with an abrupt diaeresis: *in quemcumque tremens hominem cadit.* Quite helpless, the bird falls. Here the diaeresis is but the final seal on a piece of writing that owes its beauty more to its own inherent pathos than to any specific technicality (but note also the recurrent *em* rhyme). When Valerius ends a line with *specus umbrarumque meatus* (3. 403), his arresting diaeresis at the end of the third foot may underline the transition that has just

[1] Cf. also *unda laborantes praeceps rotat ac fuga ponti / obuia* (4. 656–7), describing the turmoil of the sea.

[2] The psychological progression in this soliloquy is outlined in *CQ* N.S. XV (1965), 110 (bottom). Far from casting all his speeches in the same mould, Valerius strives for ἠθοποιΐα. Medea's sentences tend to be simply-constructed and staccato, e.g. *sis memor, oro, mei, contra memor ipsa manebo, / crede, tui* (7. 477–8), or *ne crede, pater, non carior ille est / quem sequimur; tumidis utinam simul abruar undis* (8. 12–13). Realizing that she is not being honest with herself, Medea breaks off in line 13, and with girlish incoherence of thought suddenly wishes she were dead. At 8. 108, she ends her speech with *iamque omne nefas, iam, spero, peregi.* Here Valerius combines her staccato utterance with palillogy (for the irony, see *CQ* N.S. XV (1965), 109). Aquites' plea for his life reflects his frenzied spirit: *'te'que 'per hanc, genitor' inquit 'tibi si manet, oro / canitiem, . . .'* (6. 305–6), while in *date fallaci pudibunda senectae / exitia indecoresque obitus* (1. 809–10), Aeson's impressive polysyllables show an old man mustering all his strength to heap a final curse on the tyrant responsible for his death. Other remarks about speeches in the *Argonautica* occur in the following places: *CQ* N.S. XIII (1963), 262 (footnote) (Jason's cry before engaging the Doliones in battle); 265–6 (the rival speeches of Telamon and Meleager; here there is an *erratum*, which I noticed too late for a correction to be made: the oath at *Aen.* 12. 206 ff. belongs to Latinus, not to Aeneas); XIV (1964), 274 (the crafty appeals of Fama and Venus at Lemnos); 275 (Hypsipyle's farewell); 276 (Pelias' grief at Acastus' joining the expedition).

been made to the subterranean regions. The sound and the unusual rhythm of the rest of the line, with *umbrarumque* filling the fourth foot and most of the fifth, perfectly suggest the solemn procession of shades descending for purification.

Valerius makes excellent use of elision in the first line of *ergo ubi cunctatis extremo in limine plantis / contigit aegra toros et mens incensa tenebris / uertere tunc uarios per longa insomnia questus / nec pereat quo scire malo* (7. 4–7). The two heavy elisions, a very unusual combination in any Valerian line, may denote Medea's faltering at the threshold, and the rest of the passage owes its power to the elaborately interwoven alliteration of *r* and *s*, the haunting rhymes and hints of rhymes in *mens incensa tenebris*, *uertere . . . uarios*, *longa insomnia*, and the confused word-order of *nec pereat quo scire malo*, reflecting the confusion of Medea's mind.

In some of the above passages metrical devices combined with alliteration to produce a special effect. Latin poets rather more than English ones felt alliteration to be desirable in itself and to help hold a line together. We all know the alliterative monstrosities ascribed to Ennius, and how later poets moderated the habit while still indulging in it. Alliteration is considered to be especially effective where it involves onomatopoeia, but it is a mistake to seek an onomatopoeic significance in all cases, or the same onomatopoeic significance each time a certain consonant occurs in alliteration, e.g. cf. the hissing *s* in Virgil's *sibila lambebant linguis uibrantibus ora* (*Aen.* 2. 211) and the gentle *s* in *suadentque cadentia sidera somnos* (*Aen.* 2. 9). Poets clearly expect one to exercise discretion in reading.

Alliteration may be suggestive without being onomatopoeic. Valerius was particularly successful in making the sound of a line convey wistful longing. Of the Argonauts' grief at the death of Idmon we read *exanimum frustra Minyae clamore morantur* (5. 28), of their yearning for Hercules *uacuos maesto lustrarunt lumine montes* (4. 248). The murky gloom of night is admirably suggested in *in mediis noctis nemorisque tenebris* (7. 403). In *protulit ut crinem densis luctatus in extis / ignis et escendit salientia uiscera tauri* (1. 205–6), the picture gains life through the onomatopoeic alliteration of *s* for the hissing of the flames, the personification of *ignis* that is implied in *luctatus*, the use of *crinem* for what we, with less daring, call 'tongues of flame', and *salientia*, which is more vivid than our 'throbbing'. *Auditi sonitus insanaque saxa, / saxa* (4. 641–2) exemplifies the use of hendiadys and palillogy, and the alliteration of *s* to represent the seething of the sea about the Symplegades. The simile of the olive is enriched by a mixture of *m*'s and *s*'s, suggesting both the menacing storm and the lashing wind: *subito immissis praeceps Aquilonia nimbis / uenit hiems* (6. 715–16). Ample use is made of alliterations with *r*, *littera canina*, e.g. *frangentem morsu super alta leonem / terga ferens* (2. 459–60). The grim sixth book opens harshly with *ardet furiis Gradiuus et acri / corde tumet* (1–2). Elsewhere, as death presses relentlessly on, we have *mors frigida contra / urget* (5. 26–7). (Note how line 27 halts with an unusual and marked feminine caesura in the first foot.) Aeson's curse rolls out with *sacer effera raptet / corda pauor* (1. 798–9), and the harshest sounds in Latin are mixed in *te, puer, in nostrae durus tormenta senectae / nunc lacerat* (1. 718–19), the cruelly pathetic lament of a heart-broken father. *Nos quoque, nos Amycum, tanto procul orbe remoti, / sensimus, et saeuis frater mihi fusus harenis* (4. 745–6) is another harsh expression of bereavement, and note the emotional effect obtained through palillogy and the diaeresis pauses at the end of the first foot of both lines. Finally, when farmers stand by helplessly watching a bull torn to pieces by a lion, their inarticulate cries stick in their throats: *caeco clamore coloni* (2. 461).

These are some of the adornments in a much-maligned epic. When Valerius died, Quintilian wrote *multum in Valerio Flacco nuper amisimus* (*Inst. Or.* 10. 1. 90)—a judgement that I have attempted to support in this series of articles. I find after a decade of study that Valerius, though a poet of the middle rank, reveals something fresh on each reading. And so, even as I bring this series firmly to a close, my regrets are most aptly voiced in a mistranslation of Quintilian: 'I have just missed a great deal in Valerius Flaccus.'

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