429

VIRGIL, *AENEID* 5.835-6

> iamque fere mediam caeli Nox umida metam
> contigerat

This has all the appearance of being a straightforward, even conventional, transition. Indeed, the conceit of Night's chariot is common and has a history stretching back at least as far as the beginning of the fifth century B.C.[1] Night is elsewhere described by Virgil as *umida*,[2] the epithet reflecting the traditional view that Night, like Dawn (cf. Theocr. 2.148), arises from and sinks back into the stream of Ocean.[3] In fact, the chariot of Night had been referred to as recently as lines 721 and 738 of this book, in the latter instance with the epithet *umida* applied to Night. What is new and interesting in our passage is the 'meta caeli' round which Night's chariot turns. The effect of this novelty is to make of Night's vehicle a *racing* chariot, as it is the chariots in the Circus that must negotiate a *meta*. The programmatic reasons for Virgil's having done this in Book 5 are obvious. Earlier in the book Virgil had described the games held in honour of the anniversary of Anchises' death. The first and most elaborately portrayed event in these games had been the boat-race, which is plainly modelled on the chariot-race in *Iliad* 23, the first and most elaborately portrayed event in the funeral games for Patroclus. Just as Achilles had required the competing chariots to race once around a distant turning-post, so Aeneas requires the competing ships to race once around a rock out at sea, which rock is three times called a *meta* (5.129, 159, 171). A simile comparing the sailors and their ships to charioteers and their teams (5.144-7) makes the connection explicit.[4]

But apart from the thematic appropriateness of the 'meta caeli' to this context, there is also an etymological point that Virgil is making, a point that has not been noticed by the commentators. The Greek equivalent of *meta*, and the word which Virgil found in his Homeric model, is νύσσα. In *Iliad* 23 Nestor advises Antilochus on the strategy he is to follow in the chariot-race in which he is entered. Nestor describes to his son the marker that Achilles has established for the race, which, he says, had perhaps been set up as a turning-post (νύσσα, 332) for a race in an earlier time. Later he instructs Antilochus to make sure that his left-hand horse comes close to the post (νύσσῃ, 338) without actually touching it. Further, Nestor assures Antilochus that if he passes the rest of the field at the turning-post (νύσσῃ, 344) no one will be able to catch him. Now, Greek grammarians connected the word νύσσα with the verb νύσσω.

[1] See S. Karusu, s.v. 'Astra', *LIMC* ii.1 (1984), pp. 905-6; C. Robert, 'Der Wagen der Nacht', *Hermes* 19 (1884), 467-9; A. Pasquazi Bagnolini, s.v. 'nox', *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* iii (1987), p. 772.

[2] *Aen.* 2.8, 3.198, 5.738, 11.201; cf. Ov. *Met.* 2.143, 11.607, *Fast.* 2.635.

[3] *Aen.* 2.250 'ruit Oceano nox', Ov. *Met.* 4.92 'aquis nox exit ab isdem'; see S. P. Karouzou, 'Vases from Odos Pandrosou', *JHS* 65 (1945), 38-44, at p. 44, and P. E. Knox, '*Ruit Oceano Nox*', *CQ* 39 (1989), 265.

[4] See F. Cairns, *Virgil's Augustan Epic* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 236, with note 76. It has recently been suggested that Virgil's choice of *four* entrants, in contrast to the five in his Homeric model, was prompted by the number of the Circus factions: P. L. Lindsay, 'The Funeral Games of Virgil's Aeneid', *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 22.2 (1991), 1-22, at p. 8. That there were in fact four factions in Virgil's day is argued by A. Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 56-61. See also J. H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (London, 1986), pp. 137-8.

The alphabetic *Epimerismoi Homerici* (*An. Ox.* i.299.23–6) glosses νύσσα as follows: παρὰ τὸ νύσσεσθαι φαίνεται... ἐπεὶ νύσσονται οἱ ἵπποι. The entry in the *Etymologicum Magnum* (609.29–30) is similar: ὁ καμπτήρ· παρὰ τὸ νύσσω, τὸ κάμπτω, ἢ τὸ πλήττω· ἐπεὶ ἐκεῖ νύσσονται οἱ ἵπποι. Tzetzes recycles this in his note on Lycophron 15 (p. 14.18–20 Scheer): νύσσα λέγεται ἡ ἀφετηρία... παρὰ τὸ νύσσω. This is all, of course, very late evidence,[5] but I am inclined to believe that the connection between νύσσα and νύσσω was made already by the Alexandrian scholars. Indeed, the passage of Lycophron on which Tzetzes is commenting appears to allude to this etymology. At the conclusion of his characteristically euphuistic proem, the speaker of the *Alexandra* represents himself as ἀράξας νύσσαν (15), such is the torrent of verbiage that is welling up to be disgorged. Lycophron here uses νύσσα to refer, not to the turning-post, but to the post that marks the start of the race (as at *Il.* 23.758, *Od.* 8.121). The expression is curious, and has apparently led at least one scholar to emend.[6] But, in the first place, if we begin emending away curious expressions in Lycophron there will be little indeed left of the *textus receptus*. In the second place, we can explain Lycophron's choice of vocabulary as aiming at an etymological *jeu*. For ἀράσσω and νύσσω may be regarded as synonyms, and both are glossed by forms of πλήσσω; cf. Hesychius s.v. ἀρασσόμενα· ... πλησσόμενα and Herodian, *Epim.* 94.1 Boissonade νύσσω, τὸ πλήττω. The ancient lexica give evidence of a controversy over the etymology of νύσσα, some scholars deriving it from νύσσω and some from νεύω. Lycophron, with his striking phrase, seems to be indicating his own preference with some vigour.

In addition to connecting νύσσα with νύσσω, ancient grammarians saw an etymological relationship between νύσσω and νύξ. The entry in the *Etymologicum Magnum* begins (608.56) νύξ· παρὰ τὸ νύσσω, νύξω. And the same etymology appears in the *Etymologicum Gudianum*, s.v. 412.43, in Orion 109.8–10, in Choeroboscus, *Epimer. in Psalmis* 3.39.16 Gaisford, in Helladius apud Phot. *Bibl.* 535a12, in Eustath. *ad Il.* 7.277–82 (= ii.460.23 van der Valk) and 7.466 (= ii.502.3) and *ad Od.* 14.457 (ii.84.19–20 and 32–3), in the *Epimerismoi Homerici* (*Il.* 1.47B = i.122.85 Dyck) and in the etymological treatise written by Johannes Mauropous in Byzantine dodecasyllables.[7] Again, none of this evidence is early – Helladius belongs to the fourth century, Orion to the fifth[8] – but again there is reason to believe that this

---

[5] We find the same etymology also in the *Etymologicum Gudianum*, s.v. 412.56–7, in schol. Oppian, *Hal.* 1.205 (= 273B.35 Bussemaker), in Orion, s.v. ἄνασσα 26.1–2 and s.v. νύσσα 107.23–4 and in Choeroboscus, *in Theod.* 151.14–17 Hilgard. The material in Choeroboscus, however, may derive from the second-century grammarian Herodian; so A. Lentz (ed.), *Herodiani Technici Reliquiae* ii (Leipzig, 1870), p. 805.3–5.

[6] According to Scheer's apparatus, C. H. G. Völcker, *De Lycophronis Cassandra vs. 13–15* (Giessen, 1820), p. 26, emended to παράξας. I have been unable to locate a copy of Völcker's pamphlet, so I do not know what arguments he brought to bear. In any event, παράσσω is not the appropriate verb to use in connection with the *point of origin* of motion.

[7] See R. Reitzenstein, *Geschichte der griechischen Etymologika* (Leipzig, 1897), p. 176.114–15. Mauropous lived in the eleventh century.

[8] Again, however, it is possible that the derivation can be traced back to Herodian in the second century; cf. Lentz (above, note 5), 744.3. This etymology was apparently naturalized by the Latin grammarians (see R. Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* [Leeds, 1991], s.v. 'nox'): Servius on *Aen.* 1.89 'nox dicta quod oculis noceat', Cassiod. *Exp. Psalm.* 1.2 (= *CCSL* xcvii.33.232–3) 'nox autem dicta est, eo quod noceat aspectibus sive actionibus nostris', Isid. *Nat.* 2.1 (= *Orig.* 5.31.1 = Suet. *Rel.* 159.5 Reifferscheid) 'nox a nocendo dicta, eo quod oculis noceat'. It is not clear whether Varro has eyes in mind when he says (*Ling.* 6.6) 'nox... quod nocet'. The fact that he continues, 'nisi quod Graece νύξ nox', indicates that he regards the derivation of *nox* from νύξ and that from *nocet* as alternatives. Neither, however, is incompatible with a derivation of νύξ from νύσσω.

etymology was known to poets and scholars who lived before the time of Virgil. In his review of Bulloch's commentary on Callimachus' fifth *Hymn*, Robert Renehan has very plausibly suggested that Callimachus hints at this derivation when he describes the blinding of Teiresias (*Hymn* 5.82) with the words ὄμματα νὺξ ἔλαβεν.[9] As Renehan reasonably points out, 'Greek etymologists of any period would have found [νύσσω] an obvious etymon for νύξ. (How many Greek roots begin νυξ-?)'. It is possible that a belief in this etymology was encouraged in part by a couple of sequences in Homer, in which 'striking' (expressed by a form of νύσσω) is followed by the onset of the darkness of death (which is itself often referred to as 'night'; e.g. *Il.* 5.310 ἀμφὶ δὲ ὄσσε κελαινὴ νὺξ ἐκάλυψεν). Compare *Il.* 5.46–7:

> νύξ᾽ ἵππων ἐπιβησόμενον κατὰ δεξιὸν ὦμον·
> ἤριπε δ᾽ ἐξ ὀχέων, στυγερὸς δ᾽ ἄρα μιν σκότος εἷλεν.

Very similar is *Il.* 16.343–4:

> νύξ᾽ ἵππων ἐπιβησόμενον κατὰ δεξιὸν ὦμον·
> ἤριπε δ᾽ ἐξ ὀχέων, κατὰ δ᾽ ὀφθαλμῶν κέχυτ᾽ ἀχλύς.

This last, the killing of Akamas by Meriones, is followed immediately by the description of the death of Erymas at the hands of Idomeneus: νύξε (346) ... θανάτου δὲ μέλαν νέφος ἀμφεκάλυψεν (350).

We see, then, that a connection was perceived, perhaps as early as the time of Callimachus and Lycophron but certainly at a later date, between νύσσα and νύσσω, and between νύσσω and νύξ. Given Virgil's interest in etymology,[10] it is difficult to believe that it is merely a matter of coincidence that, in our passage, *Nox* = Νύξ, *metam* = νύσσαν and *contigerat* = νύξε. For this last (often elided as νύξ᾽ and generally appearing, like *contigerat* here, at the start of the line) is the form of νύσσω that Homer prefers.[11] Now, while the equivalency of *nox* and νύξ, and of *meta* and νύσσα, will be readily granted, it is not immediately clear that *contigerat* = νύξε. I should like to suggest, however, that Virgil chose this verb deliberately, because it served more than one purpose and because, as is often the case with Virgil, there is more than one thing going on in these lines.

Like most Latin verbs, *contingo* has a variety of meanings. Only rarely can it be said to be used to = νύσσω. But, in fact, Virgil does so use it in this very book of the *Aeneid*. In the description of the archery contest, he says of Mnestheus (5.509–10) 'ast ipsam miserandus avem contingere ferro/non valuit'. Here Virgil is at once imitating Teucer's unsuccessful effort in the archery contest at the funeral games for Patroclus (*Il.* 23.865 ὄρνιθος μὲν ἅμαρτε) and Ajax' inability to wound Diomedes with his spear in the combat in armour (*Il.* 23.819 νύξ᾽, οὐδὲ χρό᾽ ἵκανεν). But the appeal of this verb lay, for Virgil, in the fact that it can mean not only 'touch', 'strike', but also 'reach'. Indeed, Horace uses the very expression 'contingere metam' (*A.P.* 412) to mean

---

[9] *CP* 82 (1987), 248–9. Renehan further argues in favour of retaining the reading of the manuscripts (ἔβαλεν), on the grounds that it is more appropriate to Callimachus' etymologizing. But compare the Homeric στυγερὸς δ᾽ ἄρα μιν σκότος εἷλεν (see below).

[10] See G. J. M. Bartelink, *Etymologisering bij Vergilius* (Amsterdam, 1965) and now J. J. O'Hara, *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay* (Ann Arbor, 1996). There is, it is true, no explicit 'signpost' in the text that Virgil is here engaging in etymologizing, nor do the Greek words appear which are the objects of this learned exercise, but the same can be said, for instance, of the etymologies (all taken from Bartelink 85–8) of ἱέραξ (*Aen.* 11.721), κωμῳδία (*G.* 2.382), Δία (*G.* 4.220), λαβύρινθος (*Aen.* 6.27) and πλάνητες (*G.* 1.337).

[11] Of the 26 occurrences of the verb in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, 18 are in the form νύξε(ν) or νύξ᾽ (13 in line-initial position).

'reach the goal'. Here, however, where Virgil is using the word *meta* to mean, not the goal of the race, but the post in the middle of the race round which one must turn, the verb *contingo* has particular point. The turn in the chariot-race is fraught with danger. The successful charioteer, as Nestor tells Antilochus (*Il.* 23.319–21), must avoid making too wide a turn, otherwise he will lose time to his opponents. This, in fact, is the situation that Virgil dramatizes in his boat-race, where Gyas twice reproaches his helmsman Menoetes for steering too far from the rock which marks the turn (*Aen.* 5.160–66). Meanwhile (167–71), Cloanthus' ship slips between Gyas' ship and the rock, passing Gyas on the inside and eventually winning the race. On the other hand, one must equally avoid the potential disaster of steering too close to the turning-post. As Nestor says (*Il.* 23.338–41):

> ἐν νύσσῃ δέ τοι ἵππος ἀριστερὸς ἐγχριμφθήτω,
> ὡς ἄν τοι πλήμνη γε δοάσσεται ἄκρον ἱκέσθαι
> κύκλου ποιητοῖο· λίθου δ' ἀλέασθαι ἐπαυρεῖν,
> μή πως ἵππους τε τρώσῃς κατά θ' ἄρματα ἄξῃς.

This too Virgil dramatizes. In his eagerness to avoid being overtaken by Mnestheus, Sergestus steers his *Centaur* too close to the turn and his left-side oars are broken on the rocks (*Aen.* 5.202–6), causing him to lose the race. In our passage, Virgil uses *contingo* as the verb that can most conveniently render both ἐγχρίμπτω and ἐπαυρίσκω,[12] and at the same time reinforces the etymology that was hinted at with the collocation 'Nox ... metam'.

One thing we have not considered so far in our discussion of *Aeneid* 5.835–6 is the lines' immediate context. It is important to do so, since that context helps to clarify what exactly Virgil is up to. These lines introduce the brief scene, which closes Book 5, in which Palinurus is undone by Sleep. They serve to remind us, with their racing-image, of the contest earlier in the book. We will be reminded again when Palinurus is described as being thrown overboard (858–60, with *praecipitem*, 860), just as Menoetes was thrown overboard (*praecipitem*, 175) by Gyas for making too wide a turn in the boat-race. The earlier incident takes place in the lighthearted context of games and, indeed, is the cause for merriment among the Trojans who witness it (178–82). These lines, however, introduce the Palinurus-scene with a hint of ominous foreboding, a hint which is enhanced by the etymological word-play that Virgil is engaging in. Indeed, the words 'Nox umida metam contigerat' represent in concentrated form a prefiguration of the disaster that is to overtake Palinurus. Night is inherently dangerous, as its etymologies in both Greek (νύξ < νύσσω) and Latin (*nox* < *noceo*) indicate. The epithet *umida* foreshadows the watery fate in store for Aeneas' helmsman. And the image of Night's chariot 'touching' the turning-post reminds us that the mid-point of the race, like the middle of the night, is a time of great potential danger. The etymology that connects both νύξ and νύσσα with νύσσω makes the disaster all but inevitable. But it is a disaster for Palinurus alone. For Aeneas and his Trojans, the death of Palinurus ensures safe passage, since he is the sacrificial victim claimed by Neptune (813–15).[13] And, indeed, the middle of the night, like the mid-point of the race, is not only a time of great danger; it is also

---

[12] It is interesting to note that the Stephanus–Dindorf *Thesaurus* translates Homer's λίθου δ' ἀλέασθαι ἐπαυρεῖν by 'cave autem saxum *contingas*' (*TGL* s.v. ἐπαυρέω iii.1442C).

[13] See in particular J. J. O'Hara, *Death and the Optimistic Prophecy in Vergil's Aeneid* (Princeton, 1990), pp. 19–24, with earlier bibliography. It is perhaps relevant that Neptune was identified with the deity Consus, whose altar was located in the vicinity of the far turning-post of the Circus Maximus at Rome, and that both turning-posts were adorned with sacrificial scenes; see Humphrey (above, note 4) 258–9.

the point at which one stands to win great success.[14] As we have seen, the *meta* is the crucial point in the race: according to Nestor, the driver who rounds the turning-post first is destined to be victorious, and in fact Cloanthus wins the boat-race by passing Gyas on the turn. Likewise, midnight is a time at which supernatural powers are likely to come into contact with mortals, for both good and ill. In the case of Aeneas' voyage, the ambivalent character of midnight is reflected in the fact that the disaster that overtakes Palinurus secures for the Trojans safe arrival in Italy.

Eventually Palinurus will be buried on the promontory which is to bear his name, and a tomb will be erected there (*Aen.* 6.378–81). The νύσσα that Achilles establishes for the chariot-race at the funeral games for Patroclus was perhaps the marker of the tomb of some man who died long ago (*Il.* 23.331 σῆμα βροτοῖο πάλαι κατατεθνηῶτος). And ships rounding the promontory of Palinurus face the same danger as do chariots in the Circus that turn too close to the *meta*.[15] The connection between the promontory to be rounded and the turning-post in the Circus, already suggested by the boat-race, would seem to be reflected, for Virgil, in Palinurus' name. The etymology of 'Palinurus' has been the subject of much discussion.[16] What is of concern to us here, however, is not the 'true' etymology of the name, but the meaning that it conveyed for Virgil. The second element of the name was surely felt by Virgil to derive from οὖρος, 'following wind'. This is suggested by 5.832–4 'ferunt sua flamina classem./princeps ante omnis densum Palinurus agebat/agmen', where 'ferunt sua flamina classem' = '(Palin)urus agebat agmen'. The first element of 'Palinurus' reflects the fact that, in rounding the promontory, the sailor must turn *back*, reversing his direction like the charioteer in the Circus. And there is the further implication that the safe passage here provided by Palinurus' death is a *return* to the starting point. For the Trojans, under Aeneas' leadership, are going *back* to the land from which they had originated. This is particularly marked in the case of Palinurus, the man who etymologically supplies the following wind for the return voyage. For, when Somnus, in the guise of Phorbas, first addresses Palinurus (5.843), he names him with his patronymic 'Iaside Palinure'. This is only the second time in the poem that Virgil has mentioned the obscure Iasius. The first time was at 3.168, where the Penates spoke to Aeneas to tell him that he must make his home in Italy, the land from which came Dardanus and father Iasius, 'genus a quo principe nostrum'.[17]

University of Illinois **DAVID SANSONE**