THE SERPENT AND THE FLAME.

THE IMAGERY OF THE SECOND BOOK OF THE AENEID.

The Second Book of the Aeneid displays the full magnificence of Virgil's imagery. In this account of Troy's last night images of raging fire and flood, ravening wolves, storms at sea, the fall of an ancient tree, lend to the events with which they are combined the proportions of a universal cataclysm. Among these tremendous images of destruction there is one which by its emphatic recurrence comes to dominate all the rest. This is the image of the serpent.

Infandum regina iubet renovare dolorem. Aeneas tells Dido the story of the violence of Troy's fall, engineered by concealment and completed by flames. The ferocity of the attackers, their deceit, and the flames which crown their work are time after time compared, sometimes explicitly but more often by combinations of subdued metaphor, verbal echo, and parallel situation, to the action of the serpent.

For these connotations of the serpent, violence, concealment and flames, Virgil had good precedent in the Latin tradition. It is a commonplace of Latin writing (as it is of English) to compare the serpent and the flame; in English both hiss, creep, and have flickering tongues; in Latin the words serpere, lambere, labi, volvere, and micare are used of both, often in contexts where one clearly suggests the other. The serpent traditionally


2 Selected examples: Serpere used of flames: Statius, Silvae, V, 5, 20; Ovid, Remed. Amoris, 105; Seneca, Medea, 819; Lucretius, V, 523; Livy, XXX, 6, 5; Caesar, B. C., III, 101. Lambere used of flames: Virgil, Aen., III, 574; Horace, Sat., I, 5, 74; Seneca, Hercules Oetaeus, 1754. Lambere used of serpents: Ovid, Met., III, 57, IV, 595; Statius, Theb., I, 91, V, 524; Silius Italicus, VI, 264. Labi used of flames: Virgil, Georg., II, 305; Horace, Sat., I, 5, 73; Tacitus, Hist., III, 71, 19. Labi used of serpents: see note 12 infra. Micare used of serpents: Cicero, De Div., I, 106; Virgil, Georg., III, 439. Cf. especially Virgil, Aen., VII, 346 ff. where the serpent thrown by Allecto at Amata produces a (metaphorical) flame in her breast; the words used to describe the motion of the serpent suggest the flame before it is mentioned—lapsus . . .

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strikes from concealment, as the Greeks did from the horse; *latere, latebrae*, are clichés used generally of the serpent.\(^3\) Finally, violence as a characteristic of the serpent, common enough elsewhere in the Latin poets,\(^4\) is forced on the reader’s attention in the second book of the *Aeneid* by the description of the fate of Laocoon and his sons.

The serpent is thus an apt comparison for the essential nature of the Greek attackers, ferocity, their typical method, concealment, and their principal weapon, fire. But it is an ambivalent image. Besides suggesting the forces of destruction, it may also stand for rebirth, the renewal which the Latin poetic tradition associated with the casting-off of the serpent’s old skin in the spring.\(^5\) And this connotation of the serpent is of the utmost importance for the second book of the *Aeneid*, which tells of the promise of renewal given in the throes of destruction; the death agonies of Troy are the birth-pangs of Rome.

Only three passages in the book deal explicitly with serpents. In addition to the elaborate description of the death of Laocoon and his sons, there are two serpent similes; Androgeos is compared to a man who comes unaware upon a snake,\(^6\) and Pyrrhus *volvitur . . . errat*. Compare also Lucan’s enigmatic account of the troubled dreams of Caesar’s veterans after Pharsalia (VII,772), *sibilaque et flammas infert sopor.*


\(^6\) *Serpens* and *anguis* are confidently distinguished by Servius on II, 204. *Angues aqaurum sunt, serpentes terrarum, dracones templorum.* His definitions appear to be based on Virgil’s usage in this particular passage; for the snakes are called *angues* in line 204 (the snakes are still on the sea), *serpens* in line 214 (they are now on land), and *dracones* in line 225 (they are on their way to the temple). Servius admits that his distinction is not always observed—*sed haec significatio*
is compared to the snake which has cast away its old skin in the spring. These three passages are the base which supports a complex structure of references to the dominant image; elsewhere in the book the figure of the serpent is evoked by phrase after phrase which reminds us of its presence where it lies half-concealed in the language—*latet anguis in herba*. This dominant metaphor creeps into many contexts where its presence is surprising, and the result is in some cases a mixture of imagery which borders on the grotesque—a mixture which is typical of Shakespeare too, and which has recently been explained, in the case of *Macbeth*, as a result of the same process which can be seen in the second book of the *Aeneid*, the working of a dominant, obsessive metaphor.⁷

The manifestations of the serpent are widely distributed; the suggestions which they make form a pattern full of meaning for the book as a whole. The pattern of the metaphor runs parallel to the pattern of events, the plot; but it does more than enforce the impression made by the events, it interprets them. At the emotional climax of the book, the death of Priam, it is in the image of the serpent that the complete meaning of the event is to be seen. And as the pattern of the metaphor unfolds, an independent process of development is revealed; the imagery has, as it were, a plot of its own. In the course of its many appearances in the book the metaphor undergoes a transformation like that of the serpent which it evokes, it casts its old skin. At first suggestive of Greek violence and Trojan doom, it finally announces triumphantly the certainty of Troy’s rebirth.

The first overt appearance of the serpent is the description of the fate of Laocoon and his sons (199-227). This is one of the events of the narrative, an incident in the fall of the city; *plerumque confunditur*. It was apparently unknown to Virgil, who uses the terms indiscriminately in other passages where there is no change of locale. Cf. *Aen.*, VII, 346 ff.: Allecto throws a snake (*anguem*) into Amata’s bosom (346); a few lines later the same snake is described as *serpens: serpentis furiale malum* (375). Cf. also Ovid, *Met.*, IV, 575 ff.: Cadmus prays to be changed into a serpent—*ipse precor serpens in longam porrigrar alvum*, and ten lines later, as the metamorphosis is taking place he says *accipe dum manus est, dum non totum occupat anguis* (585).

there is, on the surface, nothing metaphorical about these serpents; they exist, and destroy. Their action is an essential part of the plot; the death of Laocoon removes an influential figure who might have barred the wooden horse’s way. But they are something more, as both Servius and Donatus realized. The incident is a symbolic prophecy of the fall of Troy as a whole.

The serpents come from Tenedos, where the Greeks, characteristically, are in hiding. (Huc se provinci deserto in litore condunt.) A TENEDO, says Servius, ideo quod significarent naves inde venturas, ECCE AUTEM GEMINI A TENEDO potuimus hoc signo, says Donatus, praevidere manifestam immine perniciei; significabant enim hostis venturos a Tenedo et maximos duces et geminos. Henry elaborates this signum, the prophetic significance of the serpents, in the following terms.8 “The twin serpents prefigure the Grecian armament, which, like them, comes from Tenedos . . . like them crosses the tranquil deep . . . lands . . . slaughters the surprised and unsuspecting Trojans (prefigured by Laocoon’s sons) and overturns the religion and drives out the gods (prefigured by Laocoon).” Henry supports his parallel by reference to “minute particulars,” some of them verbal echoes, and points out finally that “when their work is done they take possession of the citadel under the protection of Pallas,” a fact which he connects with Venus’ announcement of the consummation of the city’s fall—Iam summas arces Tritonia respice Pallas insedit (615).

This “drawing out of the parallel in detail” is censured by Conington as something for which there is “no occasion”; and it is true that some of Henry’s remarks, particularly the distinction between Laocoon’s sons as the unsuspecting Trojans and Laocoon as religion and the gods, deserve the censure. None the less Henry had the right understanding of this passage—it is much more than an incident in the plot. He concentrated his attention on the parallels between the approach and arrival of the serpents and the approach and arrival of the Greek fleet (250-267), and the limits he thus placed on the significance of the Laocoon passage were perhaps responsible for the forced nature of his interpretation. In fact, however, the echoes of the Laocoon passage in the lines describing the fleet’s arrival

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8 Henry, Aeneidea, II, pp. 115-16.
are only the beginning of a long series of echoes which culminates in the unmistakable parallel between the sea-serpents and Pyrrhus, son of Achilles.

This description of the death of Laocoon and his sons is the principal basis of the subsequent serpent imagery. It is one of Virgil's most impressive descriptive passages, and any echo of it which occurs later in the book brings these terrible serpents back to mind at once. There are many such echoes, and they awaken metaphors which without the connection provided by the echo might have lain dormant or dead.

The description begins (201) with Laocoon sacrificing at the altars, ad aras. Ecce autem gemini a Tenedo—they are twin serpents, and this word is repeated later in line 225, at gemini. The Atridae are twice described with this word later in the book, gemini Atridae (415) and geminos Atridas (500). This echo explains Donatus' comment on line 203—hostis venturos . . . et maximos duces et geminos. The twin Atridae are compared to the twin serpents; both couples are forces of merciless destruction.

The serpents proceed side by side to the shore, pariterque ad litora tendunt. Their bloody crests tower over the waves, iubaeque sanguineae superant undas; their length behind wreathes their huge backs in voluminous folds, pars cetera . . . sinuatque immensa volumine terga. Their eyes blaze, ardens tisque oculos, and they lick their hissing mouths with flickering tongues, sibila lambebant linguis vibrantibus ora. They make for Laocoon, but first attack his sons. Embracing the childrens' bodies, they twist around them, corpora natorum serpens amplexus uterque implicat, and biting deep feed on their wretched limbs, miseris morsu depascitur artus. Next Laocoon himself, as he tries to intervene, auxilio subeuntem ac tela fere tatem, is seized and enfolded; the serpents tower head and neck above him, superant capite et cervicibus altis. Their task fulfilled, they glide off to shelter, at gemini lapsu . . . effugiant, and hide beneath the feet of the statue of Pallas, sub pedibusque deae . . . teguntur.

This terrifying picture, as verbal echo and parallel event and situation recall it to the memory throughout the rest of the book, is seen in retrospect to contain all the violence of the sack
of Troy. These lines foreshadow not only the arrival of the Greek fleet, but the attack, the Trojan resistance, the deaths of Polites and Priam, and the flames which tower over the burning city. They present the fall of Troy as the action of the serpent.\footnote{The twin serpents appear three more times in the Aeneid. (On their dramatic function for the poem as a whole see G. E. Duckworth, \textit{Foreshadowing and Suspense in the Epics of Homer, Apollonius and Vergil} [Princeton, 1933], p. 57, and references there.) They are in all three cases portents of destruction. Allecto (VII, 450) rouses the hesitating Turnus by rearing two snakes from her tresses, \textit{geminos crexit crinitibus angues}, Hercules (VIII, 289) strangles the twin serpents sent by Juno, \textit{geminosque premens eliserit anguis}, and on the shield of Aeneas Cleopatra calls on her army and does not see the twin snakes behind her (VIII, 697), \textit{necdum etiam geminos a tergo respicit anguis}.}

The next forty lines (228-68) apply the metaphor to the particular agents and events of the city's fall. The process begins at once. The two lines which follow immediately (228-9) describe the reaction of the Trojan bystanders to Laocoön's death:

\begin{quote}
Tum vero tremefacta novus per pectora cunctis insinuat pavor.
\end{quote}

"A new fear winds into our breast." (Mackail). \textit{Insinuat pavor} is a reminiscence of Lucretius' \textit{Divom metus insinuarit pectora} (V, 73), but in Virgil's line the word \textit{insinuat} stands out sharply, for though it is one of Lucretius' favorite words\footnote{Lucretius uses the word thirty times.} Virgil uses it only here. \textit{Sinuare}, which it brings to mind, is one of the stock words used of the serpent,\footnote{Cf. Ovid, \textit{Met.}, III, 42, IX, 64; \textit{Aetna}, 47.} and \textit{insinuat} is a striking echo of \textit{sinuatus}, which has been used only twenty lines previously—
\textit{sinuatque immensa volumine terga} (208). This terror, which causes the Trojans to accept Laocoön's fate and disregard his advice, helps to prepare for the fall of Troy; it is one of the agents of the disaster, and it is here suggested, lightly but none the less impressively, that it is itself a serpent.

The narrative proceeds to the description of the entry of the horse into the city (234 ff.), and here the same suggestion is made, this time more emphatically. The Trojans attach wheels\footnote{Mackail notes, "Here, however, \textit{rotae} strictly means rollers." The} to the horses' feet, and Virgil describes this action in
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the words pedibusque rotarum subiciunt lapsus (235-6). Rotarum lapsus, "the gliding of the wheels," is an arresting phrase, a Grecism, as Mackail points out, and probably a specific imitation of τρόχων βάσως in Sophocles' Electra 718, as Conington suggests. In that case it is a typically Virgilian imitation, for the phrase has undergone a transformation, the metaphor has changed. βάσως (βαίνω) suggests the "strides" made by the chariots overtaking one another in the race, but lapsus, though it can be used to convey the same impression of speed, suggests methods of moving which have nothing to do with strides. Virgil uses forms of labi together with rotae in two other places, and in both passages the combination is used to describe the speed of a chariot; a racing chariot in Georgics, III, 180, aut Alphæa rotis praelabi flumina Pisae, and a divine (and amphibious) chariot in Aeneid, I, 147, atque rotis summás levibus perlabilur undas. But this impression of speed, in the case of Neptune's chariot of effortless, frictionless speed, is violently incongruous in a description of the movement of the wooden horse. The other phrases of Virgil's description suggest, not speed, but the laborious effort involved in moving the horse into the city. Dividimus muros, says Aeneas; the horse, as Conington says, was "heaved over broken walls." Accingunt operi, scandit fatalis machina muros. Far from gliding swiftly, the horse sticks four times at the entry, substitit; the word recreates the sudden friction-bound halt of the vast mass. The incongruous suggestion of speed is emphasized by a repetition of the disturbing word, inlabitur urbi. The emphatic repetition increases the strain to which this word is being subjected, and an unusually elaborate echo makes it clear that this word, like insinuat in line 229, recalls the figure of the serpent. The closing lines of the description of the serpents, only ten lines back, are recalled by other two passages in which Virgil uses labi and rotae together suggest otherwise, and in any case this technical meaning is inappropriate, for it adds a concrete detail to a picture which seems to be deliberately vague. Virgil's reference to the horse in VI, 515, cum fatales equus saltu super ardua venit Pergama, indicates a vision of the wooden horse as something with a will of its own, almost alive, something magical; the same impression is produced by the words scandit . . . subit . . . inlabitur . . . and monstrum in our passage. (Cf. G. E. Duckworth, C.f., 1944, pp. 99 ff.) To insist on the connotations of rota as a technical engineering term destroys this fine effect.
three verbal echoes, and the reappearance of lapsus, the emphatic word, in the same position in the line. The serpents (235-7)—at gemini lapsu . . . effugient . . . sub pedibusque deae . . . teguntur. The horse (235-6)—pedibusque rotarum subiciunt lapsus. The echo suggests the likeness of the horse to the serpents; lapsus and inlabitur intensify the suggestion, for labi and its compounds are words that occur sooner or later in almost any passage which describes the movement of the serpent; 13 indeed, were it not that serpere claims the honor, labi might be described as the vox propria of the serpent. LAPSU, remarks Servius on line 225, labi proprie serpamentum est.

The metaphor is surprising, if not grotesque; a horse is not much like a serpent, and a wooden horse less so than a live one. But that this image, the Trojan horse moving like a serpent upon its prey (inlabitur urbi), was possible for a Latin poet, is indicated by Propertius’ description of the same event (III, 13, 63-4). “Cassandra alone,” he says, “proclaimed the horse a trick, as it crept upon her fatherland”:

sola
fallacem patriae serpere dixit equum.

In the Virgilian lapsus and inlabitur the metaphor is latent; but Propertius’ serpere can hardly suggest anything else but the horse as a serpent. This is recognized by Rothstein, who comments as follows: “The threatening danger of the wooden horse is presented in the image of a serpent, which creeps unnoticed upon its prey; in this sense Propertius can . . . use serpere of a horse.” 14

Virgil emphasizes his comparison of the horse to a serpent later in Book II, by another significant echo. The line which describes the snake to which Pyrrhus is compared (475) arduus ad solem et linguis micat ore trisulcis, repeats the salient word

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13 Cf. Virgil, Georg., I, 244, Aen., VII, 349; Ovid, Met., IX, 63, XV, 721, Amores, II, 13, 13; Silius Italicus, II, 589; Statius, Theb., V, 514; Propertius, III, 22, 27; Livy, XXV, 16, 2, XXVIII, 11, 2; Lucan, IX, 712.

14 Die Elegien des Sextus Propertius, erklärt von Max Rothstein (Berlin, 1898): “Die drohende Gefahr des hölzernen Pferdes wird unter dem Bilde einer Schlanges vorgestellt, die sich unbemerkt an ihr Opfer heranschleicht; so kann Properz . . . serpere von einem Pferde sagen.”
of Panthus' description of the wooden horse (328) arduus armatos mediis in moenibus adstans. This repetition of arduus (not used elsewhere in Book II) would be negligible were it not for the fact that Virgil often associated this word with both horses and serpents; he applies it elsewhere four times to horses,\textsuperscript{15} and three times to serpents.\textsuperscript{16}

The lines which follow the account of the triumphal entry of the horse (250 ff.) contain a description of the night approach and arrival of the Greek fleet. The verbal parallels between these lines and those which describe the approach and arrival of the serpents from Tenedos have already been mentioned; they were pointed out by Henry. The most striking correspondences are: gemini a Tenido, of the serpents, a Tenedo, of the fleet (203 and 255); tranquilla per alta, of the serpents, tacitae per amica silentia lunae, of the fleet (203 and 255); pariter of the serpents, instructis navibus, of the fleet (205 and 254); ad litora tendunt, of the serpents, litora nota petens, of the fleet (205 and 256). To Henry's full discussion may be added the fact that pariter, used of the serpents in 205, is used in Aeneid, V, 830 to describe the co-ordination of naval manoeuvres,\textsuperscript{17} and the remark that he sees in the correspondences between the two passages only the "prefiguring" of the fleet in the serpents, and does not examine the complementary effect, that the fleet, like the Trojan fear after Laocoon's death and the wooden horse, is implicitly compared to the serpents.

One of the essential factors in the fall of Troy is the deep sleep of the Trojans on that fatal night. Invadunt urbem somno vinoque sepultam. This sleep is mentioned in line 253, in the passage which describes the approach of the Greek fleet. Sopor fessos complectitur artus. The image of the serpent appears again, for this phrase is a complex echo of the words which described the death of Laocoon's children, thirty-five lines before (214-15):

serpens amplexus uterque implicat et miserors morsu depascitur artus.

\textsuperscript{17} Una omnes fecere pedem, pariterque sinistros nunc dextros solvere sinus...
The metaphor sopor complectitur artus, which Virgil uses nowhere else, is revealed as another manifestation of the dominant image by the elaboration of the echo. The verbal echo amplexus . . . artus, complectitur artus, is strengthened by the metrical repetition, depascitur artus, complectitur artus; even the onomatopoeic sibilance of miserors morsu depascitur artus reappears in sopor fessos complectitur artus.

The word complectitur is full of a tension which is typical of Virgil's language. Its associations of friendly or loving embrace are appropriate for the Trojans' feeling as they yield to the sleep that ends their first day of peace, and by its evocation of the serpent the word represents Aeneas' horror at the recollection of that sleep as he tells his tale some seven years later. This tension is even more striking in the passage which follows immediately, Aeneas' preface to his account of his dream (268-9):

Tempus erat quo prima quies mortalibus aegris incipit et dono divum gratissima serpit.

In the melody of the first line we feel again the Trojans' welcome acceptance of sleep, but there is a touch of foreboding in the sadness of mortalibus aegris. The second line is filled with foreboding. Dono divum is a hint of discord, for donum, which has been used five times already in Book II, has always appeared in a menacing context, it has referred each time to the horse. Aeneas' statement is couched in general terms—rest is a gift of the gods—but the associations of donum remind us that his general statement has a precise and terrible application. This rest is indeed a gift from the gods; it is part of the divine plan for Troy's overthrow. Inimicaque Troiae numina magna deum. And the last word of the line brings back the familiar metaphor; serpit, this rest creeps like a serpent. Serpere is a word

18 The whole phrase is one of a series of variations on an epic formula, but the combination sopor . . . complectitur is unique. Cf. Georg., IV, 190: fessosque sopor avus occupat artus, Aen., III, 511: fessos sopor irrigat artus, Aen., VIII, 26-7: animalia fessa . . . sopor altus habebat, Aen., IV, 522, etc.

that could hardly become a dead metaphor in Latin as long as the word *serpens* remained in use to keep it alive. This is the *vox propria* of the serpent, and Servius seems to have felt something of its force in this famous passage, for he glosses it with *latenter membris infunditur*. The metaphor *quies ... serpit* is a violent one, and I have not been able to find any parallel to it in the Latin poets.\(^{20}\)

There is, of course, a word often used with *quies, sopor*, etc. to convey precisely the effect of Servius’ *latenter membris infunditur*, a word which has no serpentine connotations, *repere*.\(^{21}\) It is used in contexts similar to Virgil’s *quies ... serpit* by Catullus (LXXVI, 21: *surrepens imos ut torpor in artus*), Ovid (*Heroïdes*, XVIII, 46: *sed movet obrepens somnus antile caput*, Fasti, III, 19: *blanda quies furtim victis obrepit ocellis*), and Statius (*Silvae*, I, 4, 56: *fessos penitus subrepit in artus / insidiosa quies*).\(^{22}\) These instances, from one of Virgil’s predecessors, a contemporary, and one of his successors, show that Virgil, as so often, is varying a stock expression, and the variant he employs calls attention to the dominant metaphor. Seneca, who imitates this passage in Virgil very carefully in his *Troades*, avoids Virgil’s *serpit* and substitutes the more usual word. Andromache is describing her dream (Seneca, *Troades* 440 ff.):

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\text{Ignota tandem venit afflictae quies}
\text{brevisque fessis somnus obrepit genis ...}
\text{cum subito nostros Hector ante oculos statit}
\text{non qualis etc.,}
\]

Seneca’s indebtedness is clear, and his avoidance of *serpit* striking. His restoration of the usual *repere* is a reminder that Virgil’s suggestive word is not the consequence of the paucity of the Latin poetic vocabulary, nor even a case of submission to the much-invoked goddess Metri Gratia. *Dono divum gratis-sima serpit* strengthens and develops the metaphor of the Trojan

\(^{20}\)The only parallel, as far as I know, is Pliny, *Hist. Nat.*, VII, 24 (90): *somno serpente*. In this context, too, the approach of sleep is viewed as hostile: *somno quoque serpente (memoria) amputatur*.

\(^{21}\)I have not been able to find any examples of *repere, obrepere*, or *subrepere* used of serpents.

\(^{22}\)Cf. also Horace, *A. P.*, 360; Statius, *Theb.*, I, 340, VIII, 217.
sleep as a serpent which first appeared in sopor fessos complectitur artus.

Aeneas awakes from his dream to see all Troy in flames. The spectacle is compared to a crop-fire and a flood (304-7). Deiphobus' house collapses in flames, and the fire towers over it, Volcano superante. This phrase recalls the serpents again, the serpents whose crests tower over the waves, superant undas, and who tower over Laocoon, superant capite et cervicibus altis. The reminiscence is repeated much later, when Aeneas sees his own house in flames, exsuperant flammae (759).23

The principal instruments of the Trojan downfall, the Trojan fear, the horse, the Greek fleet, the deep sleep, the fire, have all now been linked with the image of the serpent. All except one, Sinon, the personification of Greek treachery. The actions of Sinon are described before the arrival of the serpents from Tenedos, so that in his case there can be no question of verbal reminiscence; yet the same metaphor is implied, in at least one place strongly, in the language which Virgil puts into his mouth.24 His name itself, with its resemblance to sinus, sinuo, etc.25 helps to bring out the suggestion; it is contained in his lying story of his escape from sacrifice at the hands of the Greeks (134-6):

... vincula rupi,
limosoque lacu per noctem obscurus in ulva
delitui . . .

Deliscere is an uncommon word, and one which is used with peculiar appropriateness of the serpent; "iam ista serpens" says Cicero, "quae tum hic delitescit . . ." (De Haruspicium Re-

23 There are traces of a MS tradition which emphasizes the echo more firmly. P, for example, reads VOLCANOESUPERANTE at 311; Ribbeck (1894) adopts exsuperante in this line, and Mackail remarks that the reading of P indicates a "variant reading exsuperante which might be thought preferable if it were better supported." One late MS (so Conington describes it) has exsuperant at 207; this reading was adopted by most of the old editions.

24 Cf. also seu versare dolos (62). Versare is often used of the serpent moving his coils; cf. for example Aen., XI, 753: serpens sinuosa volumina versat.

25 For Virgil's use of the suggestions (etymologically justified or not) inherent in proper names, see below on Pyrrhus and Neoptolemus.
sponsis, 25), and Virgil, in the only other place where he uses this word, applies it to the viper (Georgics, III, 416-17):

Saepe sub immotis praesepibus aut mala tactu
vipera delituit . . .

Sinon’s delitui is no more than a suggestion, but seen in the context of the imagery of Book II as a whole, it is a significant one.

When Aeneas sees Troy in flames, and hears the explanation given him by Panthus, he loses his head, and forgets his duty. His duty is to run away; he is ordered to do so three times, in almost identical words: by Hector, Venus, and Anchises.26 Hector’s command, the first, is ignored. Aeneas turns instead to violence. It is mad violence, and he admits it, arma amens capio (314).

Aeneas’ first victim is the Greek Androgeos, who appears in a line which almost exactly reproduces the line which introduced the first Trojan victim, Laocoon (40 and 370):

Primus ibi ante omnis magna comitante caterva
Laocoon . . .
Primus se Danaum magna comitante caterva
Androgeos . . .

Virgil does not use the Homeric formulaic line, and this close correspondence is unique.27 Its significance is clear. Laocoon and Androgeos are somehow alike; the likeness is revealed by the simile which follows. The first Trojan victim was destroyed by serpents, and so is the first Greek victim. Androgeos is killed by Aeneas and his companions, and it is at this point that Androgeos is compared to a man who has come unaware upon a snake (378-81):

Obstipuit, retroque pedem cum voce repressit.
improvisum aspris veluti qui sentibus anguem
pressit humi nitens, trepidusque repente refugit
attolentem iras et caerula colla tumentem.

Improvisum, unforeseen, because concealed; the word reminds

26 Heu fugac nate dea (289), cripe nate fugam (619), fugac nate (733).
27 Virgil uses a phrase containing caterva and occupying the final position in the line seven times in the Aeneid. The two discussed here are the only two which are identical; all the rest show some variation. Cf. I, 497, IV, 136, V, 76, XI, 478, 564.
us of Sinon's ironical prophecy *improvisi aderunt* (182). But now the rôles are reversed. Aeneas and his Trojans now deal in the violence of the serpent to which they are compared, and they proceed at once to assume another characteristic of the serpent, concealment. At the suggestion of Coroebus, they disguise themselves in the armor and insignia of the Greeks they have killed. *Dolus an virtus, quis in hoste requirat?* says Coroebus (390). The Trojans adopt the Greek weapon, *dolus*, as their own; it is the mark of the serpent, they fight now from concealment, *haud numine nostro*, as Aeneas says (396).

This appearance of the serpent, for the moment identified with Aeneas and his Trojans, interprets the events. Aeneas himself admits that his action is madness; this is emphasized by the melodramatic despair of his speech to his men (348 ff.). and his comparison of his Trojans to a band of ravening wolves (355-8). But the suggestion, implicit in the simile and its immediate sequel, that Aeneas has usurped the attributes of the serpent that has so far stood for violence and deceit deepens immeasurably the sense of his wrongness and folly, and reminds us how far Aeneas has strayed from his duty, which is not to fight, but to yield to a greater purpose, as he does yield in the end. *Cessi*, runs his concluding line, *et sublato montis genitore petivi*.

By the time the violence of Book II reaches its climax in the assault on Priam's palace, Aeneas' impulsive counter-attack has failed. He is betrayed by his own deceit; the Greek crests on the borrowed helmets draw fire from the Trojans. This fatal confusion is expressed in the phrase *Graiarum errore iubarum* (412), a reminiscence of the crests, *sanguineae iubae* (206), of the serpents that killed Laocoon and his sons. At this moment the Greeks too attack him; his men are cut down, and he escapes from the slaughter with only two companions, one an old, the other a wounded, man. Aeneas' violence has ended in failure, and his brief assumption of the characteristics of the serpent is revealed, in the succeeding lines, as a pathetic masquerade; the real serpent is at the gates of Priam's palace.

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28 For *dolus* and the Greeks see II, 44, 62, 152, 196, 252, 264.
This is Pyrrhus, son of Achilles. The verbs alone of lines 480 ff. are enough to make it clear that he is violence personified—\textit{perrumpit vellit cavavit instat insequitur premit}. This is the man who, as Aeneas says later, "cuts down the son before the face of his father, the father at the altar," \textit{natum ante ora patris, patrem qui obtruncat ad aras} (663). The time for concealment is past; Pyrrhus’ violence is open, like that of the serpents which killed Laocoon and his sons; like them he kills the son first, and then the father who attempts to intervene; \textsuperscript{30} like them, he kills his victim at the altars. When Pyrrhus twists his left hand in Priam’s hair to hold the king’s body firm for the final stroke, \textit{implicititque comam laeva} (552), the words recall the serpents that twisted their coils round Laocoon’s sons, \textit{corpora natorum serpens amplexus uterque implicat} (214-15).

This parallel is emphasized by the simile which, at the very beginning of this magnificent passage, compares Pyrrhus to a snake (471-5):

\begin{quote}
Qualis ubi in lucem coluber mala gramina pastus
frigida sub terra tumidum quem bruma tegebat
nunc positis novus exuvis nitidusque iuventa
lubrica convolvit sublato pectore terga
arduus ad solem et linguis micat ore trisulcis.
\end{quote}

This simile illustrates the general transition, now complete, from concealment to open violence; from the lies of Sinon and the subterfuge of the horse to the ferocity of the assault on the palace; for Pyrrhus in particular, the transition from concealment in the dark belly of the horse to violence in the glare of the burning city. The caverns of the horse’s belly are twice (38 and 55) called \textit{latebrae}, a word suggestive of the serpent’s hiding-place; \textsuperscript{31} Pyrrhus is the serpent that has emerged.

This is the third overt appearance of the serpent in Book II, and it is different from those that precede it. The simile presents the serpent as the symbol of rebirth and this new connotation of the serpent is appropriate for the immediate object of the comparison, Pyrrhus. The snake, in contrast to the darkness from which it came (\textit{sub terra . . . quem bruma tegebait}), is

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. \textit{auxilio subeuntem ac tela ferentem} (216, Laocoön) and \textit{Telumque imbellè sine ictu coniecit} (544, Priam).

\textsuperscript{31} Cf. note 3 \textit{supra}. 
bright and shiny, nitidus, and this corresponds with the real Pyrrhus, luce coruscus aena, and with his name, Pyrrhus, Ὑππός. The snake is new, positis novus exuviiis, and this reminds us of Pyrrhus’ other name, Neoptolemus, new war, new warrior. He is the renewal of the old war, the rebirth of the old warrior; Pyrrhus is Achilles reborn in his son. Just as Achilles killed and mutilated Hector before the eyes of Hecuba and Priam, Neoptolemus now kills Polites before the same unhappy pair who witnessed his father’s cruelty. Instat vi patria, says Virgil (491), and Neoptolemus is followed by his father’s constant companion, equorum agitator Achillis armiger Automedon.

The terms of the simile at the same time subtly qualify the identification of father and son which they suggest. If on the one hand they make a comparison between Achilles and his son, they none the less suggest a contrast between them. The serpent in this book of the Aeneid has come to stand for the merciless and unthinking violence which was typical of Achilles at his worst; but we remember, even before Priam reminds us of it, that he had a better side. Achilles killed the son, but revered, in the person of Priam, old age; Neoptolemus kills father and son alike. This Achilles reborn is not the true Achilles; the comparison of Neoptolemus to a serpent (his father was a lion) anticipates

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32 This is the point of the emphatic position of in lucem; these two words convey the immediate significance of the simile. Virgil puts them first and lets the syntax take care of itself. As Conington says, in lucem “does the duty of a verb.”

33 Cf. Conington, ad loc. G. Wijdeveld (Mnemosyne, X, 3rd Series [1941-2], p. 238) discusses the significance of the name Pyrrhus. He equates the Greek word πυρρός with the Latin aenus, and sees in exsultat telis (470) a reference to the πυρρίχη which he suggests was originally a spring ritual. He rejects Conington’s comment that positis novus exuviiis points to the name Neoptolemus on the ground that Virgil has not yet mentioned Pyrrhus’ other name: “v. demum 500 Neoptolemus vocatur. Num credi potest Vergilium in legentibus tantam expectasse sagacitatem uteminissent nominis de quo mentionem poeta nondum fecisset?” This is an oversight, for the name Neoptolemus has already occurred in the list of the warriors whom Sinon released from the horse, Pelidesque Neoptolemus (263).

34 Cf. Iliad, XXII, 405 ff.

35 Cf. Iliad, XX, 164, XXIV, 40-3. Mala gramina pastus is a reminiscence of Iliad, XXII, 94, where Hector awaiting Achilles’ attack is
Priam’s taunt *satum quo te mentiris Achilles* (540). Only the worst of the father is reborn in the son; his sarcastic words to Priam, *degeneremque Neoptolemum* (549), are the truth.

The simile is complex in application and rich in meaning, for it is loaded with the cumulative significance of the dominant image. There is more to it still. For this new association of the serpent, the cycle of winter hibernation and spring renewal, death and rebirth, though applied specifically to the re-appearance of Achilles in his son, is not so limited in the reader’s imagination. It is a familiar and universal symbol, suggesting the process which is common to all nature, the process of life, death, and rebirth. Troy too is to be reborn; that is the implication of Hector’s neglected command to Aeneas, *his moenia guaere magna* (294-5). At the climax of Troy’s destruction, just before the most terrible incident of the city’s last night, the image of the serpent appears again, not only to portray the invincible ferocity of the attackers, but also to suggest the promise of salvation for the defeated. In this image is a hint that the fate of Priam is more than the cruel murder of an old man; this death is part of a birth.

This simile is the turning-point in the development of the dominant metaphor; it prepares for the final appearance of the serpent, which is unequivocal, an unmistakable portent of Troy’s eventual rebirth. But meanwhile there is a last glimpse of the old serpent, with its connotations of concealment and destruction unmodified. It is contained in the famous lines that describe Helen (567-74). Aeneas comes upon her in hiding:

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limina Vestae
servantem et tacitam secreta in sede latentem.
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*Secreta in sede latentem* is a familiar suggestion, and it is repeated a few lines later, *abdiderat sese* (574).[^56] *Limina servantem* sounds like a reminiscence of Virgil’s description of the serpent that killed Eurydice, *servantem ripas* (*Georg.*, IV, compared to a serpent. Aristotle’s choice of an example to illustrate the difference between simile and metaphor (*Rhet.*, III, 4, 1) indicates that the comparison to a lion was the standard one for Achilles.

459); there are other reminiscences of the Eurydice passage in this book of the Aeneid. 37

The final appearance of the dominant metaphor is a celebrated passage. Aeneas, now intent on his duty, prepares to leave Troy with all his family, but his plans are hindered by old Anchises’ refusal to leave. Aeneas returns to counsels of despair, rursus in arma feror (655), but Anchises’ mind is changed by a portent, the flame which appears on the head of Iulus (682-7):

ecce levis summo de vertice visus Iuli
fundere lumen apex, tactuque innoxia mollis
lambere flamma comas et circum tempora pasci.
nos pavidi trepidare metu crinemque flagrantem
excutere et sancto restinguere fontibus ignis.

These words are full of reminiscences and suggestions of the serpent. Lambere brings to mind the serpents which attacked Laocoon, sibila lambebant linguis vibrantibus ora, and pasci recalls the snake, mala gramina pastus, to which Pyrrhus was compared and the serpents that fed on Laocoon’s children, miserum morsu depascitur artus. Tactuque innoxia 38 refers by contrast to the proverbial untouchableness of serpents, mala tactu Virgil calls the viper in Georgics, III, 416; and innoxia, in the only other place where Virgil uses it, Aen., V, 92 (a passage which echoes and clearly refers to the one under consideration), 39 describes the serpent which came out of Anchises’ tomb:

libavitque dapes, rursusque innoxius imo
successit tumulo, et depasta altaria liquit.

These indications that the famous flame is described in terms of the now familiar image are strengthened by a consideration of the retractatio of this passage written by one of Virgil’s most sedulous imitators. Silius Italicus follows the Virgilian descrip-

38 The variant reading tractu (see Conington, ad loc.) is an interesting one, for it may refer either to flames (as in Virgil, Georg., I, 367; Lucretius, II, 207), or to serpents (as in Virgil, Georg., II, 154; Ovid, Met., XV, 725; Statius, Theb., V, 506; Culex, 163, 181).
39 Both portents are connected with Anchises. The passage in Book V echoes pasci in depasta as well as innoxia in innoxius.
tion closely when he comes to describe the flame which at an equally critical moment appeared on the head of Masinissa (Punica, XVI, 119 ff.):

carpenti somnos subitus rutilante coruscum
vertice fulsit apex, crispamque involvere visa est
mitis flamma comam atque hirta se spargere fronte.

The deliberate nature of Silius' imitation is clear; apart from the verbal repetitions, the word-groups are rhythmically identical in fundere lumen apex and vertice fulsit apex, and very similar in lambere flamma comas and mitis flamma comam; mitis in Silius corresponds to innoxia and possibly to mollis as well in Virgil, and atque hirta se spargere fronte to et circum tempora pasci. Silius goes on to imitate the next two lines, and his words suggest strongly that he saw the image of the serpent in his Virgilian model:

concurrunt famuli et serpentes tempora circum
festinat gelidis restinguere fontibus ignes.

The separation of serpentes from its noun by almost a line and a half makes the metaphor almost unmistakable here, and its appearance in so close an imitation of the Virgilian passage confirms the suggestion that Virgil's flame is another appearance of the metaphor which dominates the imagery of Book II of the Aeneid.

It is the last. In this flame the pattern of the dominant metaphor is complete. The development of the image, the increasing complication of meaning which constitutes its plot, comes to an end. The serpent has cast its old skin. All previous significances of the serpent are here by implication summed up and rejected in favor of the new. In the shape of Sinon, Helen, and the wooden horse, the serpent stood for concealment; here all is light, and abundance of it, fundere lumen. In the form of Pyrrhus, the serpents from Tenedos, and even Aeneas himself in his madness, it stood for violence; here it is tactu innoxia, harmless to the touch, and mollis, though grammatically it may qualify comas, adds to the contrast. The serpent stood also for the destructive flames of Troy's fall; here it is still a flame,

40 Except for the distant echo in the description of Aeneas' burning house, exsuperant flammae (759), for which see above, p. 390.
but a sacred one, sanctos ignis, a harmless one, innoxia, more, a beneficent flame. The fourth connotation of the serpent image, rebirth, a significance held in reserve in the earlier part of the book and first faintly suggested at the climax of the violence, the lowest depth of Troy's fortunes, is here its proclaimed and only meaning. The flame, which Virgil's allusive language presents as the final manifestation of the serpent metaphor, is a portent of Troy's rebirth. Anchises does not realize its full significance, but he is joyful (laetus 687), and prays that the omen be confirmed (691). The confirmation comes in the form of thunder on the left, a falling star, and finally Creusa's prophecy to Aeneas of a new kingdom in the West.

41 On the shield of Aeneas, where the twin serpents appear behind Cleopatra as a sign of her eventual destruction (VIII, 697), the opposing figure of Augustus is seen with twin flames at his temples, geminas cui tempora flammis laeta vomunt (680-1). The serpent and the flame, which at the end of Aeneid II are united as a double symbol of Troy's rebirth, are on the shield separated and opposed.

42 The similar omen described in VII, 71 ff., where Lavinia's hair is seen to burst into flame, is interpreted by those who saw it in a very different fashion:

namque fore inlustrem fama fatisque caneant
ipsam, sed populo magnum portendere bellum.

It has been pointed out to me that this same interpretation might be applied to the flame omen in Book II. "Ascanius will also become famous (like Lavinia), and be the cause of war to his people (he starts the actual warfare between Trojans and Latins by killing the stag of Tyrrenhus)." The parallel is striking, but against it may be urged the fact that Virgil makes no attempt to connect the two flames, they are contrasted rather than compared. Iulus' flame is mirabile monstrum, a neutral phrase implying neither good nor bad (cf. V, 523, where monstrum is used of Acestes' arrow, his reaction is joyful, laetum [531]; VIII, 81, of the sow; IX, 120, of the transformation of the ships of Aeneas); Lavinia's flame is described as horrendum ac visu mirabile ferri (VII, 78), and the description begins with the words visa nefas . . . (VII, 73). The reaction of Latinus is anxiety, sollicitus monstris (VII, 81), that of Anchises joy, laetus (II, 687). There is not one important verbal echo in the Lavinia passage of the description of the flame in Book II; each passage has a vocabulary of its own, a striking phenomenon when the similarity of the subject-matter is considered. It is striking too that in the Lavinia description the words used to describe the flame have none of the serpentine connotations of the key words of the Iulus passage; their absence in the one throws into clearer relief their presence in the other.
THE SERPENT AND THE FLAME.

This analysis is an attempt to examine some of the rich complexities of one of Virgil's many sustained images. To support it by an appeal to Virgil's intentions would be barren and irrelevant. But in this particular case there is some ground, apart from the analysis itself, for suggesting that Virgil, as he composed the second book of his Aeneid, did have serpents in mind throughout, for the book is full of echoes of some earlier lines of his which constitute a short "catalogue of serpents." 43 The short passage in the third Georgic (414-39) which describes the snakes the horse-breeder must beware of contains the phrase mala tactu vipera delituit (416-17) which is echoed in Sinon's delitui (II, 136) and in tactuque innoxia (II, 683), the description of the flame; the same passage contains also the line (421) tollentemque minas et sibila colla tumentem, which is the basis of a line in the Androgeos simile, attoltem iras et caerula colla tumentem (381); finally it contains three separate lines (Georg., III, 426, 437, and 439),

Squamea convolvens sublato pectore terga
cum positis novus exuviiis nitidusque juventa
arduus ad solem et linguis micat ore trisulcis

which all reappear, with little or no change, in the Pyrrhus simile (Aen., II, 473-5). Further, this early passage contains an account of a savage serpent, the terror of the country-side in the dry season,

exsilit in siccum, et flammanitia lumina torquens
saevit agris

(Georg., III, 433-4), which sounds like the basis of the description of the serpents that came from Tenedos.

This is clearly a passage which was often present in Virgil's mind as he wrote the second book of the Aeneid; its presence there may be connected with the dominance which the image of the serpent assumed. More than this can hardly be suggested.

43 The Culex contains (163-197) an elaborate description of an immense serpent. It is curious, if it is Virgil's work, that Book II of the Aeneid contains hardly any echoes of it; the only two are Culex, 166: vibranti lingua, Aen., II, 211: linguis vibrantibus and (perhaps) Culex, 168: tollebant irae . . . viscus, Aen., II, 381: attoltem iras. The "serpent catalogue" in Georg., III, 414-39 is the quarry from which most of the serpentine phraseology of Aeneid, II is drawn.
for in the complexity of a great poet’s imagery we must recognize a mystery which lies beyond the frontiers of conscious art. Οὐκ ἐκ τέχνης, says Plato, ἀλλ’ ἐνθεοῦ ὄντες καὶ κατεχόμενοι, and although here, as always, he is grinding his anti-poetic axe, he is more right than wrong. To probe Virgil’s mind at work is beyond any powers of analysis, though analysis may occasionally reveal fresh treasures in the poetry which his mind produced. There is no fear, in Virgil’s case, that the process may dissipate the poetry; its riches are inexhaustible. In his use of the sustained metaphor, a power which he shares with Aeschylus and Shakespeare, Virgil defies any final analysis; a glimpse such as this into the “chambers of his imagery” reveals only further chambers beyond: Apparet domus intus et atria longa patescunt.