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# The Direction of Vergil's Weather

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## The Direction of Vergil's Weather

The first question one must ask of a work of literary art is purpose. Once the purpose is clear, the method of construction can be seen, and the workmanship better evaluated. There is no better shortcut to an author's purpose in construction than to see where he ends: He has total control over where his words go. Presuming a planning author rather than an automatic amanuensis, which school of writing has its adherents, one has as a corollary a literary law: if X is where the author arrived, X is where he intended to go, meditating all the while on how he could get there. Consider the mystery; it ends with the clever solution. Structurally, all that preceded was set-up to that end. Consider now Book 1 of the *Georgics*. It begins, of course, once we are past the four-line table of contents (which itself merits at least a separate article) with an invocation to twelve gods appropriate to Vergil's ostensible topic. You could write on the matter of farming without such an invocation — there is, for instance, no such thing in Cato's *De Agricultura*. Apart from Vergil's work being verse, not prose, the clear reason for the invocation to gods of farming is so Vergil can invoke Caesar as one of them. Is it really uncertain what divine jurisdiction Octavian is to hold? (cf. lines 36-39). No. The invocation identifies, even defines him, by the company he is given, as a god of farming — a logical development from his being apotheosized as the Justice of Peace which makes possible the work of peace, farming. But Book 1, being a fourth of the *Georgics*, does not take us so far. It takes us to the assassination of Caesar with the plow abandoned, the world gone to war, turned into a chariot without a driver, a problem for which Octavian's unchallenged rule will be — as is intimated by the prayer at the close of Book 1 — the solution. Now how does one get to such a close if the chosen vehicle — I mean

that in several senses here — is a plow? This paper will suggest that the thirty-three weather signs of Book 1 are there because (1) they subtly underscore a favorite message of Vergil's, the insufficiency of individual unfated effort, or "whatever comes up by itself is weeds," and (2) because Vergil saw them and used them as his route to the assassination of Caesar and to the posing of anarchic war, with attendant stoppage of farming, as the principle problem. It will, *ambulando*, record that, in so far as I have been able to observe them, the weather signs from the sun and moon are true: they mean what Vergil says they mean.

Dante's guide to the Underworld also turns out to be a pretty reliable guide to the weather. "Never", asserts Vergil "has a storm come unexpected." Every reader has at times told himself "It's going to rain," but did you ever take exact note of what it was that told you? Vergil, for his own literary purposes, set out 32 such weather monitors in a rather climactic order. The thirty-third is the darkness at noon upon the assassination of Julius Caesar. My purpose first is merely to set them forth in an organized manner so the reader may, if he wishes, take note, watch for them, and judge from his own observation what they are worth. I have been doing this myself since 1974. So far one of them has an accuracy which has been absolute. The least of the rain signs has, when observed, at least increased the chances for rain on the next day, i.e., has coincided with a change from zero to a 20% chance of rain according to the Weather Bureau. Many of them I simply haven't seen yet.

First come the signs from the behavior of animals. This is not improbable. I have a newspaper clipping in my files of a farmer who matched the weather bureau for accuracy over an extended period just by watching his cow. Vergil's set is a bit more extensive. It's not that animals have any mystic foreknowledge, writes Vergil, merely that they react in different ways to the difference density and feel of the air. Rain approaching leads cranes to fly high

away from it, out of the deepest valleys, the cow to sniff at the air with flaired nostrils, the swallow to fly in circles around a lake, and the frogs to commence croaking. Ants, when such weather is imminent, are very often seen wearing a path, carrying eggs out of the old nest. Frogs, of course, I have heard croaking, but long before knowing Vergil and thinking to check the accuracy of his weather signs. The others I have not seen. Other animal signs of impending rain are crows flitting off from their feed in a body (which they are more likely to do nowadays from the sight of a shotgun), or a single crow cawing and walking along the dry sand.

The all-clear and the advent of fair weather out of bad are seen from several animal signs. Pigs have, when the weather is to clear up, no thought, writes Vergil, of tossing straw around with their snouts. (Conversely, I suppose pigs tossing straw into the air with their snouts should be an indication of bad weather). Likewise when fair weather is to come the kingfishers are not seen stretching out their feathers in the warm sun; the owl, watching the sunset from a high perch, sings to foretell fair weather, as does the crow. Finally, home in their high nests, the birds break out in happy song with an "I didn't know what sort of" (cf. "une je ne sais quelle . . .") "sweetness beyond the normal" I know, and when I recognized it this last May, with perfect faith in Vergil and the birds, I chopped three hours off the televised term of the tornado watch. It's the same massing with which the birds herald the sunrise. This is easily recognized by anyone who has ever been up late enough to hear them in the morning. Also when Vergilian fair weather is on the way up in the air you can see *nisus* chasing *ciris*. These are supposed to be sea birds, but no classicist knows their identity. Any tips from the reader will be welcome.

The inanimate signs are more widely observable. A big rainbow seen drinking from the earth foretells rain. When the burning wick of your oil lamp sparkles and spits, rain is on the way. This one I have never seen, but it appears perfectly reasonable: it would occur only when the humidity had recently risen markedly, getting H<sub>2</sub>O into the wick. Likewise when roddy fungi gather rain is coming.

Most of the signs, though, are the varying appearances of the sun, moon, and stars. Vergil

saves these for later, and gives as the theoretical basis for their validity that "The Father Himself" determined what the moon should show when various weathers are coming up. One can add nowadays to Vergil's faith the realization that to look at the sun or moon or stars is also to look at the intervening atmosphere: any change in the appearance of any of the three is purely a function of change in the atmospheric conditions. Vergil notes that the signs from the sun, for instance, come at sunrise or sunset. This is, of course, precisely when one has the greatest amount of atmosphere between one's observing self and the sun. The stars, says the Mantuan seer, do not at all seem dulled in their keenness when the weather is to turn and stay clear; the moon, when clear skies are coming, shines with unusual brightness, "as if independent of the light of the sun." Completing Vergil's entire guide to clearing weather are two points about the clouds: there are not "light puffs of wool" to be seen, "but instead the clouds seek the depths and recline on the plain."

As a corollary, one should suppose that the puffs of wool bring heavy weather. When they are nearly opaque, they produce Vergil's next sign, expressed, as usual, in terms of the appearance of a heavenly body: the "blackout of a horn of the moon." What does it mean? *Maximus imber!* When clouds are dense enough to black out part of the moon, but spotty enough to let part of it shine brightly through, I have noticed, you are usually about to be engulfed by a front with what a navy man would call a line squall just behind it. One occurred the night of June 20, 1975, preceded 25 minutes in the van by a Vergilian partial lunar blackout. Winds to 61 mph, two inches of rain. 1,500 homes in Lincoln were without power from trees crashing through electrical lines. Sirens going off. *Maximus imber.* Apparently lots of the opaque and spotty clouds are required, though: the one prior sighting of this sign had more clear sky than cloud and all it did was mark an increase in the wind velocity from one day to the next, from one to two to ten to twenty.

Have you ever seen a young girl blush red? I'm not sure I have, but Vergil's next moon sign, a *virgineus rubor* on the Phoebe's face is what started this whole thing. I was sure,

the evening of April 25, 1974, that I saw Phoebe blushing. ("I see the moon, the moon sees me, the moon sees somebody I'd like to see." It must have been very embarrassing) But Vergil had described it, and I was impressed. "Aptus Maro!" I exclaimed, permitting myself a nominative of exclamation rather than the textbook accusative. "Wind," predicts Vergil with the sight of blushing Phoebe. Not absolutely definitive. The next day brought wind, yes, but also rain. "When Phoebe at the fourth rising goes pure, with undulled horns, the daytime to a month will be free of rain and winds." I believe by fourth rising Vergil intends the fourth day of the new moon, even though the moon rising at this time of the month is invisible: this early in the month the moon is so close to the sun you can't see it until the sun is all but set, and the moon itself is, when it becomes visible as a sharp-ended finger-nail paring, already well past the meridian and setting too. There seems to be a perfectly rational basis for this one, though a whole month of clear weather after it may be a bit extreme: much of what dulls the finger-nail paring is earthshine: the larger portion of the moon not lighted by the sun *is* lighted and clearly visible because of light mirrored onto it from earth. Earth's albedo varies with the cloud cover. The earth's albedo is lowest, the moon's larger portion darkest, and the terminator of the finger-nail paring is sharpest when the whole hemisphere west of the observer (the hemisphere whose weather is brought to Nebraska and Italian alike by the prevailing westerlies) is completely free of clouds. If this sign of Vergil holds water, so to speak, and this accounting for it is correct, then Vergil was using the amount of earthshine on the near side of the new moon as a gross mirror of the atmosphere west of him, and using the moon as the first weather satellite. It provided a once a month chance to be a twentieth century man.

Vergil reserves the solar weather signs for the end, consciously aware that he is building to a climax, and saving his solidest material for the close. "The sun, too, rising and when he hides himself in the waves will give signs. The *certaintest* signs follow the sun", and the morning and evening solar signs have equal validity (438-40). When the sunrise is pied with spots

and half the solar orb lies hidden in cloud, *suspecti tibi sint imbres*. "Look out for showers, for a strong southern wind is pressing on from the sea, a wind left-handed for trees, crops, and flocks." For Italy. Not much sea south of Nebraska. The next one I call the "Japanese Flag Sign." "When diverse rays break out under the light amidst dense clouds . . . oy, then the foliage will hardly at all defend the clusters of grape, so heavy and horrid will the hail jump, crackling on the roofs." This has been a very good one. In the Midwest, hail is a satellite to the tornado. I have seen this sign only one time in these three years of watching when there was not also a tornado somewhere in the local region (12 blocks to 45 miles) and that time the cloud producing the Japanese flag was the only one in the sky. Even that signaled the end of what they called on the TV a "stagnant high pressure cell," with the wind increasing the next day by a difference of 15-25 mph. Sixteen for sixteen, otherwise: hail, winds around 40, and a tornado watch, or a tornado alert. And still today there is nothing in human power to do about it, but to hope before, and rebuild after, should it reach down and touch you. And do you know what modern technology can do about the hail? There is something. Agronomy researchers have constructed a hail-making machine. Dale A. Flowerday, a friend and colleague on the ag campus here in Lincoln, recently spent a day shooting down wheat with hail, adjusting the storm, as the machine was hauled down the rows, from mild to total destruction. The purpose? To train insurance adjusters in evaluation of hail damage. That's all. The farmer's work can still go all for naught for the whim of a passing storm.

To return to Vergil, we might ask what could better suggest the helplessness of individual effort, the fates unwilling? Foreknowledge of the course of the weather still does no good — there is no profit in it — which is probably why Cato has no weather prognostics in the *De Agricultura*. The sudden storm in Book 1 suggests this hopelessness, as does the whole train of weather signs. If the fates are unwilling, one's efforts are futile. One must accept what the signs foretell, and not fight it. It becomes clear just a few signs farther on that Vergil means to apply this lesson to the Roman state.

The signs continue. Somewhat less distinct

than the "Japanese Flag" sign, but foretelling the same weather, is when Aurora, pale (pallida) leaves the saffron (croceum) bed of Tithonus. I'm not even sure how to watch for that one. Besides, I very rarely stay up that late. More profitable to remember to watch for, as Vergil himself admits, is that differing colors are seen in the face of the sun at setting. Dark ice-blue (caeruleus) announces rain. Firey (igneus) announces easterlies. "But if spots begin to be mixed with the ruddy fire, you'll see everything alike boil 'mongst wind and clouds." Should Sol be both clear at sunrise and clear at setting, clouds the next day are meaningless, and "you'll see the woods stirring in a clear north wind." Concluding the weather signs, Vergil reasserts the validity of the *solar* signs, and lays down a challenge:

"Who would dare say the sun is false?" Vergil's habit is to illustrate his assertions with examples, and he manages the transition to his political end by giving what follows as if it were just another illustration. As if he were still intent on establishing the validity of the weather signs, his case. Actually, the weather signs were all along merely the chosen road to lead to Caesar, who comes in unobtrusively, as if he were simply the next thing on the road: "Who would dare say the sun is false? He even warns that tumultuous violence is lurking, and deception, and open warfare. He even, pitying Rome with Caesar snuffed out, hid his radiant face in opaque blackness, and the impious ages feared an eternal night." It is Vergil's way to slip in unobtrusively the things he's really interested in. From here, the text of Book 1 degenerates into a sort of *Andy Warhol's Georgics* with the portents attendant upon Caesar's death: 20 lines of howling dogs, sweating and weeping idols, and crowds of threatening comets. Vergil has used the meteorology to lead to the worldwide significance and universal divine notice of Caesar's greatness, and the greatness of his loss. From there, with sufficient historical accuracy, he describes the world gone off to the wars, the plow stopped dead in its tracks, a prayer (unobtrusively and symbolically answered with the resurrection of the beekeeper's bees in the fourth and closing book) that the gods permit this young man (Octavian) to aid the topsyturvy world, and, for a closing figure for this initial portion of the *Georgics*, four-horse

racing chariots, let loose from the starting gates; they run on and on, the charioteer (singular, though at the start Vergil spoke of plural chariots) holding the reins in vain, carried on by the horses, the whole rig paying no attention to any reins. This is absence of effective one-man control, and so, since that's what they were fighting over for almost twenty years after Caesar's assassination, it is absence of peace, until the prayed-for Octavian will, by finally subduing all rivals and achieving peace through merited and fated victory, at last gets the Roman soldier back to his plough, and makes possible the happiness of farming which Vergil illustrates in Books 2 and 4.

That is the weather according to Vergil, in his long poem which, ostensibly about the art of farming, is really about Octavian's success in turning the world from war to peace, which made farming possible. If the reader makes a clear sighting of any of the weather signs he is invited to note it down with the observed result and write me about it. And for your own sake, watch out for the Japanese flag sunburst in a darkly clouded sky.

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