

Volvere Casus: The Aeneid and Volvo

In the *Vita Vergiliana*, Donatus says that Marcus Vipsanius accused Vergil of “having been put under the yoke” (*suppositum*) by Maecenas to become the “inventor of a new affectation” (*novae cacozeliae repertorem*). Of this κακοζήλία, Donatus goes on to describe it as being “not swollen nor sparse, but derived from common words, and for that reason, obscure” (*non tumidae nec exilis, sed ex communibus verbis, atque idea latentis*, 44). There has been much debate about what exactly this passage means (see, e.g., Horsfall 1995 and, most recently, Colombo 2014), but there is consensus on one point: Vergil frequently uses simple language in unfamiliar ways. The verb *volvo* is one example of this. As Alfonso Traina has shown in his survey of *volvo* in the *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* (1990), this word has a full spectrum of meanings in the *Aeneid* and is employed, on several occasions, in an unusual or unique manner. One such instance comes early in the epic: *volvere casus* (1.9). “To roll misfortunes” makes no immediate sense. Servius’ solution is to interpret the infinitive as a passive (*casibus volvi*) while the *OLD* suggests—somewhat problematically given the comparanda cited—that it can be sorted under the sub-definition “to bring round in due course.” Neither option is satisfactory. This simple phrase defies a simple translation. Thus, as early as the invocation, Vergil is signaling that he is ready to use this common verb in uncommon ways. It is a marked word. Moreover, this is only the first of many instances where *volvo* is directly connected to the concept of misfortune.

The first part of my paper, therefore, will categorize the varied uses of *volvo* in the *Aeneid*, building on Traina’s work. The second part will argue that Vergil, beginning from line nine, endows this verb with special significance. Consistently throughout the epic, *volvo* appears in strategic locations to indicate crucial moments and to foreshadow future disasters. It is woven

into the very narrative structure of various episodes, three of which I will discuss in detail: (1) Dido's romance with Aeneas, (2) the origins of the hostilities between the Romans and Latins, and (3) the deaths of Pallas and Turnus.

For the first example of Dido, *volvo* marks important moments and shifts in her doomed relationship with Aeneas. When the Trojan first lays eyes on Carthage, *volvo* is present (1.424), prefiguring the future stagnancy and danger he will bring to the city (cf. 4.88-89). In Book 4, while Dido and Aeneas are content in their affair, *volvo* is absent. After Aeneas announces his departure, however, the verb returns (4.363) and quickly becomes a fixture in the queen's struggles (4.449, 4.524, 4.533, 4.643, 4.671, 4.691).

Next, the crucial steps leading to hostilities between the Romans and Latins are accompanied by the verb: Latinus deciding to marry Lavinia to Aeneas (7.251, 7.254; cf. 7.77), Allecto sowing discord in Amata's heart (7.350, 7.382), the actual commencement of physical combat (9.7, 9.36), Aeneas receiving his armor (8.618) and departing Evander's small kingdom to return to Latium (10.159), and the day dawning whereon Aeneas first enters the fray (10.256). The sheer number of times *volvo* marks the beginnings of conflict in Books 7-10 cannot be a coincidence.

Finally, *volvo* holds a prominent role in the carnage of Books 10-12. The verb appears at the beginning of the events leading to Turnus killing Pallas (*lumina volvit* 10.447) and—in turn—to Aeneas killing Turnus (*volvens oculos* 12.939). And in between these two events, *volvo* becomes increasingly more negative and concentrated on the horrors of warfare. Eighteen of the twenty-one uses of *volvo* between 10.447 and 12.939 are explicitly connected to battle, and many are especially graphic (e.g. 10.556, 10.700, 11.635). Everything and everyone are swept up by the carnage and blood and dirt of war like the *revoluta saxa* of the ocean metaphor at 11.627.

Thus, *volvo*—the harbinger and companion of calamity—is clearly an important word for Vergil and his conception of the *Aeneid*. He treats the verb with conscious and deliberate attention. It is appropriate, then, that he introduced *volvo* to the audience joined by *casus* (1.9), stamping upon this verb so early in the epic an identity forged alongside the misfortunes and fortunes of ever-turning life.

Bibliography

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