

Fabius smoothed down these protests. He told them it was a shameful thing to be angry with a defeated general, and so he averted the people's indignation. Men who claimed Mars as their ancestor should not be mastered by adversity, nor be unable to hide their grief; nor should they seek solace for their mourning in punishing others. But if they were to allow him to speak a word of reproof, the day on which he saw Varro proceed to the camp was more painful to him than that on which he saw him return without an army. By his words their threats were silenced and their feelings underwent a sudden change: now they pity Varro's misfortune, or reflect that Hannibal had lost the satisfaction of killing both the consuls. Therefore all the people poured forth in long procession to thank him; and they protested that he had acted nobly when, relying on the ancient glory and power of his country, he refused to despair of the city inhabited by the sons of Laomedon.

None the less, sad at his failure and sore ashamed, Varro drew near the walls with faltering steps and weeping eyes; it was pain to him to raise his eyes from the ground and look upon his native city and recall their losses to the citizens. Though the Senate and people came out then to meet him on his return, he felt that they were not there to thank him, but that each man was demanding a lost son or brother, and that unhappy mothers were ready to tear out the consul's eyes. Thus his lictors kept silence as he entered the city and he claimed no respect for the high office which the gods had condemned."

(adapted from Duff, Loeb)

The entry of a great man into the city and the welcome he receives, is a traditional *topos* in Greek and Latin literature. Pearce (1970:314-316) has collected numerous instances. One of the most well-known of these is Cicero's triumphal return to Rome after his period in exile (*Pis.* 51-52). Cicero proceeds to contrast his own *triumphus* with the ignominious homecoming of Piso from Macedonia which, far from being the return of a distinguished general, resembled the bringing home of a dishonoured corpse (*mortuus infamis Pis.* 53).

In a similar neat and skilful reversal of the *topos*, Silius in this passage vividly portrays the shame of Varro as he approaches the city after the disaster at Cannae (630-639). His steps falter, his eyes fill with tears. It is painful for him to face the Senate and people who have come out to meet him; in his guilt, he imagines that they are only there to demand a lost son or brother. Even his lictors maintain an eerie silence:

sic igitur muto lictore invectus in urbem

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Under normal circumstances they would have made an impressive sight, shouting *date viam consuli*. The use of *invectus* is surely ironical and is certainly inconsistent with *gressum portabat* (631-632). Instead of standing in triumph on his chariot, Varro is forced to enter Rome on foot. He is only saved from the anger of the people by the statesmanship of Fabius who cleverly transfers responsibility for the disaster from Varro to the hotheads who elected him (620-625).

The gratitude of the people also seems ironic under the circumstances. At least Varro had deprived Hannibal of the satisfaction of killing both consuls! Spaltenstein (1990:100) comments on the banality of *desperare* used with the dative (629), citing *TLL* 5.1.741:38.

The tension is prefaced by the destructive effects of *vagus rumor* (606) which is an echo of *Fama* used earlier by Silius to describe the news of Cannae reaching Rome:

Fama dehinc gliscente sono iam sidera adibat;
iam maria ac terras primamque intraverat urbem.
(10.578-579)

"Meanwhile Rumour waxed ever louder and louder till it reached heaven. Soon it found its way over sea and land, and came first of all to Rome."

(translated Duff, Loeb)

Silius' account of Varro's return has been adapted from Livy whose version seems bald and perfunctory by comparison.

nec tamen eae clades defectionesque sociorum moverunt, ut pacis usquam mentio apud Romanos fieret, neque ante consulis Romam adventum, nec postquam is rediit renovavitque memoriam acceptae cladis; quo in tempore ipso adeo magno animo civitas fuit, ut consuli ex tanta clade, cuius ipse causa maxima fuisset, redeunti et obviam itum frequenter ab omnibus ordinibus sit et gratiae actae, quod de re publica non desperasset; qui si Carthaginensium ductor fuisset, nihil recusandum supplicii foret.
(22.61.13-15)

"But neither the defeats they had suffered nor the subsequent defection of all these allied peoples moved the Romans ever to breathe a word about peace, either before Varro's arrival in Rome or when his presence in the city had brought home to them afresh the fearful calamity which had befallen them. So great, in this grim time, was the nation's heart, that the consul fresh from a defeat of which he had himself been the principal cause, was met on his return to Rome by men of all ranks who came in crowds to participate in the thanks, publicly bestowed upon him, for not having despaired of the commonwealth. A Carthaginian general in such circumstances would have been punished with the utmost rigour of the law."

(adapted from De Sélincourt, Penguin Classics)

Much closer to Silius' emotive *labes* (613) used in the sense of *infamia*, *dedecus* (*TLL* 771:80) and *dirum omen* (614) is Cicero's description of Piso as *mortuus infamis* referred to above. I have shown elsewhere (Matier 1988) that Silius was a great admirer of Cicero and was well acquainted with his works.

It is very significant that Silius portrays Fabius as the dominant figure at Rome following the disaster at Cannae (615-629). In Livy (22.57.5) Fabius is merely sent to Delphi to ask the oracle about the forms of prayer necessary to placate the wrath of heaven. Elsewhere in Book 10 (592-604), Silius ascribes to Fabius specific actions such as proclaiming a levy and enlisting men for service. Livy (22.57.9-11) tells us that such tasks were performed by the dictator Marcus Junius and Tiberius Sempronius, his Master of the Horse. The account

in Livy cited above is also different in that he neither mentions Fabius nor hints at the existence of any hostility towards Varro. The version in Silius may well have been influenced by the role of Fabius as described by Plutarch:

Μάλιστα δ' ἂν τις ἀγάσαιοτὸ φρόνημα καὶ
την πραότητα τῆς πόλεως, ὅτε τοῦ ὑπάτου Βάρ-
ρωνος ἀπὸ τῆς φυγῆς ἐπαιόντος, ὡς ἂν τις
αἰσχιστὰ καὶ δυσποτμότατα πεπραχῶς ἐπανίοι,
ταπεινοῦ καὶ κατηφοῦς, ἀπήντησεν αὐτῷ περὶ τὰς
πύλας ἢ τε βουλή καὶ τὸ πλῆθος ἅπαν ἀσπάζο-
μενοι. οἱ δ' ἐν τέλει καὶ πρῶτοι τῆς γερουσίας,
ὧν καὶ Φάβιος ἦν, ἡσυχίας γενομένης ἐπήνεσαν,
ὅτι τὴν πόλιν οὐκ ἀπέγνω μετὰ δυστυχίαν
τηλικαύτην, ἀλλὰ πάρεστιν ἄρξων ἐπὶ τὰ πράγ-
ματα καὶ χρησόμενος τοῖς νόμοις καὶ τοῖς πολίταις
ὡς σῶζεσθαι δυναμένοις.

Plutarch. Fabius Maximus 18.4-5

"But most of all was the gentle dignity of the city to be admired in this, that when Varro, the consul, came back from his flight, as one would come back from a most ill-starred and disgraceful experience, in humility and dejection, the senate and the whole people met him at the gates with a welcome. The magistrates and the chief men of the senate, of whom Fabius was one, praised him, as soon as quiet was restored, because he had not despaired of the city after so great a misfortune, but was at hand to assume the reins of government, and to employ the laws and his fellow-citizens in accomplishing the salvation which lay within their power.

(translated Perrin, Loeb)

Nicol (1936:46) sees the above passage as proof "that there was an actual tradition which justified to some extent the poet's statements". The exaltation of Fabius in the *Punica* is discussed by Nicol at some length (1936:25, 46, 70-77). He contends that it "is too concrete and definite in its effects to admit of being explained as an intentional falsification of history for poetical effect" (73). He concludes (76): "although the nature of Silius' portrait of Fabius suits the epic tradition, it *seems* (my italics) to be due largely to an annalistic authority whose laudatory extravagances and family bias were appreciably diminished in Livy's presentation of the subject". In spite of this supposition on Nicol's part, he is forced to concede (76: footnote 2) that various minor differences from Livy in points of fact about Fabius may be due *merely* (again my italics) to poetical invention on the part of Silius. This, in my view, highlights the major weakness of Nicol. He refuses to give Silius credit for any originality when his account differs in any way from that of Livy. Heynacher (1877) has tried unsuccessfully to prove that Silius did not use Livy but rather an older annalistic source which celebrated the glory of Fabius in particular. Klotz (1927 and 1933) postulates the use of Valerius Antias as an annalistic source. Both Kissel (1979:220 note 31) and Nesselrath (1986) have systematically refuted the views of both Nicol and Klotz. They have conclusively shown that where Silius does depart from Livy,

this is to be attributed to originality on the part of Silius rather than the use of non-Livian sources.

Ahl, Davis and Pomeroy comment (1986:2530) on the significance of lines 617-625 as follows: "by allying himself with the outcry against Varro, Silius has cleverly highlighted the exceptional wisdom and forbearance of Fabius which transcends not only that of Fabius' contemporaries but even that of the poet himself. Silius thereby succeeds, without fanfare, in doing for Fabius what Lucan did (with more elaborate orchestration) for Cato. Fabius, by his brief and simple words, reported not even directly but in *oratio obliqua* ... has not just saved Varro from the wrath of his city, as he had saved Minucius from Hannibal: he has rescued the city from its most severe threat: internal recrimination and despair".

Further interesting discussion of the role of Fabius in the *Punica*, particularly in Book 7, may be found in Von Albrecht (1964:68-76), Stanton (1971), Kissel (1979:116-127) and Spaltenstein (1986:481 and 1990:99).

In marked contrast to Fabius, it will be seen that Varro is portrayed in a very poor light by both Silius and Livy. C. Terentius Varro was a *novus homo*. It is therefore hardly surprising that the aristocratic tradition deals with him no more kindly than with his predecessors Flaminius and Minucius. He is represented as a radical demagogue opposed to the senate but his career shows that he enjoyed its confidence. "Tradition made him the scapegoat of the disaster at Cannae, but he was scarcely more culpable than his colleague", (the aristocrat L. Aemilius Paulus) according to Scullard (1960:194). The bias shown by Livy is delightful in its frankness:

C. Terentius Varro ... loco non humili solum sed etiam sordido
ortus. patrem lanium fuisse ferunt, ipsum institorem mercis,
filioque hoc ipso in servilia eius ministeria usum.

(22.26.18-19)

"Varro was of humble, indeed of mean origin: his father is said to have been a butcher who retailed his own meat and employed his son in the servile offices of his trade."

(translated De Sélincourt)

Scullard (*ibid*) comments: "he was decried as a butcher's son, as Cromwell was called a brewer, but he did not lack sterling qualities". Be that as it may, Silius' portrayal of Varro is uniformly negative, as Ahl, Davis and Pomeroy show (2531-2536). It seems that Silius' grievance with Varro is not so much that he lost the battle, as that he fought it at all. Silius makes it clear (10.29-30) that had Paulus controlled the decision, the battle would never have taken place. "Silius, throughout his epic, treats popular champions with particular sourness and the victims of popular displeasure as noble martyrs (Ahl, Davis and Pomeroy: 2532). They conclude (2536): "we have, then ... two paradigms of Roman conduct, one glorious, the other shameful. The cautions, if acerbic, Paulus who can beg for Rome's welfare with tears in his eyes is capable of achieving the most impressive *aristeia* in the epic. Varro, wild and dishonest in words and in strategy, is helpless upon the battlefield and thus devoid of *virtus* of any kind whatsoever."

It remains to discuss the nautical simile (608-612). It was doubtless suggested to Silius by the phrase in Livy

reliquias tantae cladis velut ex naufragio colligentem
(22.56.2)

where Varro is described as collecting, as though after a storm at sea, the wreckage of that great disaster.

The simile, one of ten nautical images in the *Punica*, (Matier 1986), is a vivid poetic elaboration of the idea in Livy. In sharp contrast to the shipwrecked Varro is the statesman Fabius, who elsewhere is likened to a veteran pilot who when from his high stern he sees that the gale will soon fall upon his canvas, reefs his sails in haste upon the top-mast:

ut saepe e celsa grandaevus puppe magister,
prospiciens signis venturum in carbasa Caurum,
summo iam dudum substringit lintea malo.
(1.687-689)

It is significant that Silius also portrays Flaminius as a nautical disaster:

ut pelagi rudis et pontum tractare per artem
nescius, accepit miserae si iura carinae,
ventorum tenet ipse vicem cunctisque procellis
dat iactare ratem: fertur vaga gurgite puppis,
ipsius in scopulos dextra impellente magistri.
(4.713-717)

"So, if a mere landsman, with no skill to manage the sea, has got the command of a luckless vessel, he himself does the work of foul weather, and exposes the ship to be tossed by every gale; she drifts at random over the sea, and the hand of her own pilot drives her upon the rocks."

(adapted from Duff)

In the most exhaustive and penetrating analysis, *Die Welt der Gleichnisse*, Von Albrecht (1964:90-118) has shown that one of the functions of the simile in Silius is the portrayal of character, as here.

Elsewhere (Matier 1988:19) I have referred to this episode of Varro's return as one of the better passages in the *Punica* which would doubtless have escaped the notice of Vessey whose supercilious attitude is typical of many modern scholars. "Silius" *Punica* has been rarely read but commonly disparaged: somewhat unjustly, for, despite its many and obtrusive blemishes, there is in it much that is not despicable. It is, however, too optimistic to expect that many readers should feel impelled to sift the seventeen books of the *Punica* in quest of its better passages" (1982:62). It will therefore come as no surprise that Feeney (1991:301-312) is the latest to join the fray. In this book, *The Gods in Epic*, he prefaces his remarks on Silius with the following quotation:

Approachable as you seem,
I dare not ask you if you bless the poets,
For you do not look as if you ever read them,
Nor can I see a reason why you should.
(W.H. Auden, "Homage to Clio")

He continues: "a capricious Fortune has seen fit to spare only one other historical epic from the wreckage of Roman literature In this poem, the *Punica*, we find the full epic panoply of divine action on display, and the judgement of modern scholars is virtually unanimous in denouncing Silius for the supposed folly of mingling the gods in historical events" (301-302). But at least he is honest enough to record the minority viewpoint (302, footnote 203): "exceptions to this prevailing judgement are Mendell (1924), 105, and the sympathetic article of Matier (1981), 142". It seems that I shall continue to be a lone voice crying in the wilderness!

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