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The Pseudo-Virgilian Culex: What Kind of Parody?

In this short essay, I am not going to discuss either the authorship or the date of the *Culex*, which I personally regard as non-Virgilian but possibly late Republican. This short epic, transmitted as a product of Virgil's literary apprenticeship, is an extremely interesting and sadly neglected chapter of Roman literary history. Surprisingly, the Roman *Batrachomyomachia* did not attract much attention from postmodern criticism of the eighties and nineties; and the only reason for this lies, in my view, in the critic's persistent embarrassment with the fact that such literary personalities as Lucan, Martial and Statius read and worshipped this epic burlesque as genuinely Virgilian¹. Only very few scholars are ready to believe that nowadays, but it may be important to ask why the generations following Vergil should regard this childish literary artifact as genuinely Virgilian. The most obvious explanation is the one suggested by Glenn Most: they believed it to be Virgilian because it contains Vergil *in nuce*: it starts as a pastoral, it includes an extensive Praise of Pastoral Life – a didactic passage corresponding to Vergil's *o fortunatos nimium* (*georg.* II 458 ff.) – and it ends with a vision of the Underworld which has a strong Orphic-Pythagorean flavour and culminates in a catalogue of Roman leaders in Elysium². But was that really enough to convince Lucan, Martial and Statius? I think not; and I am convinced that we do not want to look for more just because *what they believed* is so discomfoting. In other words, the intriguing question about «what is Vergilian about the Gnat» is being subconsciously avoided in view of the highly unlikely possibility that Virgil actually wrote this «ebenso kümmerliches wie anmaßliches Machwerk von dekadenter Morbidität»³.

The poem can in fact be read as a literary identikit of the young Vergil. It contains everything one would expect it to have: an excess of neoteric style, blending of bucolic, Greek myth and Roman history, a bit of Pythagorean mysticism, heavy parody of Catullus and Lucretius and, above all, no intertextuality directly involving the canonic texts of Virgil – no *furta*, and especially no clumsy borrowings one would expect from a second-rate imitator¹. This leads many modern critics to believe that the poem is an ingenious

¹ Suet. *Vita Lucani* p. 50 Reifferscheid: ... *ut praefatione quadam aetatem et initia sua cum Vergilio comparans ausus sit dicere: et quantum mihi restat ad Culicem!* Mart. VIII 56,9-20: *protinus Italiam concepit et Arma uirumque, / qui modo uix Culicem fleuerat ore rudi*, 15,185: *Accipe facundi Culicem, studiose, Maronis, / ne nucibus positus Arma uirumque legas*. Cf. Zanoni 1987.

² Most 1987.

³ Jachmann 1928.

reconstruction of the literary backgrounds of the young poet⁴. The reconstruction theory also explains *why* the catalogue of the Roman leaders in the underworld should end with the Scipios, and *why* the Praise of pastoral life orchestrated by the hero of the poem is so much closer in ideology and form to Lucretius than to Virgil's *Georgics*⁵.

At the same time, as Statius seems to imply, the story of the poem is a version of the Roman *Batrachomyomachia*, with an animal fable featuring as a parody of the main action of the *Iliad*. The basic outline of the story is conveniently summarized in the *Life of Virgil* by Suetonius-Donatus (*Vita Vergilii* 17-18 Brugnoli-Stok):

deinde Catalecton (et Priapea et Epigrammata) et Diras, item Cirim et Culicem, cum esset annorum XVI. [cuius materia talis est: Pastor fatigatus aestu cum sub arbore condormisset et serpens ad eum proreperet, e palude culex prouolauit atque inter duo tempora aculeum fixit pastori. at ille continuo culicem contriuit et serpentem interemit ac sepulcrum culici statnit et distichon fecit:

parue culex, pecudum custos tibi tale merenti
funeris officium uitae pro munere reddit.]

What the biographer omits is the spectacular scene in which the Gnat appears to the Herdsman in his dream asking for a burial, subtly reminding the hero of his own mortality and implicitly threatening him with a catalogue of the doomed in Tartarus. Furthermore, the Gnat's lament reproduces in many places the wording of the monologue of Ariadne in Catullus 64⁶; the insect, who had saved the herdsman from the gigantic snake, obviously sees himself as a second Ariadne and a second Patroclus⁷. Now, the *Culex* parodies Catullus through verbal imitation, in a similar spirit, though not to the same extent as *Catal.* 10, another poem included in the *Appendix Vergiliana*, a parody substituting the elegant yacht of Catullus 4 with a retired mule-keeper who used to provide local transport between Verona, Mantova and Brescia⁸. This time, too, the secondary text follows the original line by line, keeping the lyric tone and much of the wording of the original – in line with the ancient postulate to provide *textual visibility* of the targeted work: *παρωδία γάρ ἐστίν, ὅταν τὸ ἀλλότριον εἰς τὴν οἰκείαν σύνταξιν μεταποιήσῃ τις οὕτως, ὡς μὴ λανθάνειν*⁹. Since the *Culex* does not involve any of Virgil's texts in such a conspicuous way, Wolfram Ax posited an otherwise unattested type of hidden parody, based on a radical *immutatio uerborum et sententiarum*¹⁰. This implies a parody *hiding* behind an ingenious forgery, indeed a schizophrenic mixture of conflicting intentions that is only conceivable as a product of «two souls embodied in a single author»¹¹.

⁴ Most 1987, Janka 2005.

⁵ See Salvatore 1995.

⁶ Marinčič 1996, 53.

⁷ Marinčič 1996, 47-49.

⁸ See Ax 1993.

⁹ Joannes Rhet. in *Hermog.* VI 400, 16 Walz. Cf. Householder 1944.

¹⁰ Ax 2006, 34-35: «Was die Vergilimitatio angeht, so hat der Culex-Dichter die Modifikation mit so großem Erfolg betrieben, daß man tatsächlich jede Abhängigkeit des Culex von Vergil hat bestreiten können».

¹¹ Ax 2006, 43: «Die Abschwächung der Vergilparodie hat dagegen einen anderen Grund. Wie schon mehrfach angedeutet, wohnen zwei Seelen in der Brust des *Culex*-Dichters, die des Parodisten und die des Fälschers. Aber eben diese beiden Dichterseelen haben die unglückliche Tendenz, sich gegenseitig

But why look for parody where there seems to be none in the first place? The only thinkable motive for doing so, indeed the only possible justification for refusing the idea of (a) a forgery or (b) a pre-Vergilian date is the blasphemous possibility that the Father of the West actually wrote this tasteless poetic exercise as a schoolboy and failed to destroy it before he died. It would seem that parody, an eminent case of *littérature au second degré* according to Genette, comes to perform, in this particular case, a totally extratextual function of apology: looking for parody is above all a strategy of protecting Virgil against the insect.

To keep Virgil on a safe distance is indeed a noble cause, especially since otherwise the only way to save his literary virginity would be to embrace Rostagni's apologetic stance:

Nessun altro che Virgilio avrebbe potuto esprimere così delicatamente, con tenera commozione, senz'ombra di ridicolo, le esequie del piccolo insetto.¹²

However, I find it equally symptomatic that scholars arguing for a post-Virgilian date often betray the same reflex of apology that pervades Rostagni's *Virgilio minore*; to talk of «Machwerk von dekadenter Morbidität»¹³ is still apology, though of a more militant brand.

Does the Gnat deserve such verbal execration? François Oudin, an eighteenth-century scholar, showed a better sense of humour and a great deal of philological cunning by supposing a lost Virgilian *Culex* that was clumsily imitated by some north African Vandalic poetaster:

Pervetustus exstat manu descriptus codex, quem a Joanne Lacurna Cl. Salmasius habuerat. Illic videre est quosdam vixisse sub Vandalorum rege Thrasamundo in Africa ingeniosos scilicet homines atque delicatos, qui certarent suffarcinandis horride Virgilianis versibus atque sententiis. Eum ego codicem versavi diu, et monstrosa Gothicae ejus elegantiae specimina vidi satis multa; atque in illis Virgilium agnovi, ut in Culice.

In Culicem Virgilio suppositum
HENDECASYLLABI.

I nunc, i per iter tenebricosum,
Putri nate Culex Gothi cerebro,
Caenosos Erebi lacus revise:
Non es ille Culex mei Maronis.

Ille bellus erat, levique circum
Argutus volitans tubo canebat:
Quale blanda ciet Thalia carmen,
Si quando residem tubam Gradivi
Implevit tenui jocosa flatu.

At tu Vandalico insolenter aures
Tundis Aonias strepens susurro,
Phœbi dedecus, & novem sororum:
Non es ille Culex mei Maronis.
Proinde nunc per iter tenebricosum,
Illos, unde malum pedem attulisti,

abzuschwächen, ja eigentlich sich auszuschließen».

¹² Rostagni 1961, 135.

¹³ Jachmann 1928, 577.

Cœnosos Erebi lacus revise;
 Cinctas verberibus revise Pœnas.
 Nam tu dignus es omnibus flagellis,
 Alecto quibus & Megaera saevit;
 Ausus fraude malâ sacris malisque
 Magnum aspergere versibus Maronem,
 Corvi qualiter inquinant Priapum.
 Si leni Cicero manu polivit
 Rudentem Libyco satum Maduro,
 Dici tu potis es Culex Maronis.¹⁴

Oudin ridicules the supposed Vandalic *Culex* in the vein of *Catalepton* 4, but he uses Catullan hendecasyllabi to suggest a parallel between the gnat and Catullus' sparrow. It is at the same time a Catullan dirge for the lost gnat, and an invective against the low Latin of the anonymous Vandal, with *rudentem* as an efficient allusion to the prologue to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses: exotici ac forensis sermonis rudis locutor*.

Now let me turn to the Iliadic background of the poem. The ghost of Patroclus appearing to Achilles in his dream is a crucial point of departure. Both Patroclus and the Gnat demand a funeral to be able to enter the underworld, or, in the case of the gnat, to approach the judges and gain a place in Elysium. They both use a similar strategy: while Patroclus subtly reminds Achilles of his impending death, the Gnat paints to his executioner a frightening fresco of the Orphic Tartarus. Furthermore, the vision of the underworld with Tartarus, Elysium and *campi lugentes* bears striking similarities to the Bologna fragment of an Orphic catabasis¹⁵; the very idea of extending the speech of Patroclus' ghost with such a vision recalls some classical cases of (allegedly) Orphic interpolation in the *Odyssey*.

<p>εὔτε τὸν ὕπνος ἔμαρπτε λύων μελεδήματα θυμοῦ νήδυμος ἀμφιχυθείς· μάλα γὰρ κάμε φαίδιμα γυῖα Ἔκτορ' ἐπαΐσων προτὶ Ἴλιον ἠνεμόεσσαν· ἦλθε δ' ἐπὶ ψυχῇ Πατροκλῆος δειλοῖο πάντ' αὐτῷ μέγεθος τε καὶ ὄμματα κάλ' εἰκυῖα καὶ φωνήν, καὶ τοῖα περὶ χροῖ εἴματα ἔστο· στή δ' ἄρ' ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς καὶ μιν πρὸς μῦθον ἔειπεν· εὔδεις, αὐτὰρ ἐμεῖο λελασμένος ἔπλευ Ἀχιλλεῦ. οὐ μὲν μευ ζῶντος ἀκήδεις, ἀλλὰ θανόντος· θάπτέ με ὅττι τάχιστα πύλας Ἄϊδαο περήσω. τῆλέ με εἴργουσι ψυχαὶ εἰδῶλα καμόντων, οὐδέ με πω μίσησθαι ὑπὲρ ποταμοῖο ἐῶσιν, ἀλλ' αὐτῶς ἀλάλημαι ἄν' εὐρυπυλῆς Ἄϊδος δῶ. ... καὶ δὲ σοὶ αὐτῷ μοῖρα, θεοὶς ἐπεικέλ' Ἀχιλλεῦ, τείχει ὕπο Τρώων εὐηφενέων ἀπολέσθαι. Il. XXIII 62-74, 80s.</p>	<p><u>cuius ut intravit leuior per corpora somnus</u> <u>languidaque effuso requierunt membra sopore.</u> <i>effigies ad eum culicis deuenit et illi</i> <i>tristis ab euentu cecinit conuicia mortis.</i> 'quis' inquit 'meritis ad quae delatus acerbas 210 cogor adire uices! tua dum mihi carior ipsa uita fuit uita, rapior per inania uentis. tu lentus refoues iucunda membra quiete ereptus taetris e cladibus, at mea manes uiscera Lethaeas cogunt transnare per undas. 215 Praeda Charonis agor</p> <p>... 'Orphic' material with Orpheus and Eurydice as a central inset story ...</p> <p>illi laude sua uigeant: ego Ditis opacos cogor adire lacus uiduos, a, lumine Phoebi et uastum Phlegethonta pati ... <i>Cul.</i> 206-216, 372-375</p>
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¹⁴ F.Oudin, *Poemata didascalica*, III, Paris 1749, 354-356 (first edition: *Dissertation critique sur le Culex de Virigile*, in «Continuations des Mémoires de littérature et d'histoire» 7, Paris 1729).

¹⁵ Marinčič 1998.

The *Culex* follows the standard pattern of the epyllia, presenting the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which forms the nucleus of the catabasis narrative, as a parallel to the main story¹⁶. According to the tendentious interpretation of the Gnat, Orpheus was above all a ruthless lover who caused the death of Eurydice. The concluding narrative of Virgil's *Georgics* has a similar structure, with Orpheus the lover as a model for Aristaeus, who, through an act of indolence, provokes the destruction of his swarm of bees; the gnat, who embodies individual *pietas*, is a parodic counterpart to the 'state of the bees' as an embodiment of collective values. Both poems share a common structural pattern, with a blend of Homeric material and 'Orphic' mysticism and with bucolic motifs as a bridge: both the hero of the *Culex* and Aristaeus are pastoral versions of Achilles – Aristaeus is a Thessalian herdsman and a ποιμὴν λαῶν, that is, a guardian of the 'people of bees'. Both the Herdsman of the *Culex* and Aristaeus provoke a death, and they both expiate their guilt by some ritual act¹⁷.

Leaving aside the discomfiting possibility that the *Culex* was earlier than the *Georgics* and known to Virgil, I would like to insist that the basic seriousness of *Georgics* IV – in contrast to the childish triviality of the *Gnat* – should not obscure the fundamental structural similarity between the two texts. They are both revealing cases of *omerismo alessandrino*.¹⁸

For humanists like Boccaccio¹⁹, Scaliger²⁰ or Balde²¹ who straightforwardly believed that the *Culex* was by Virgil²², it was much easier to take the poem 'seriously' as a ludic literary experiment, especially since the idea of *Culex* as a *praelusio* rests upon the authority of Statius, one of the high priests of Virgilian religion.

In the preface to *Silvae* I, Statius apologises for his belated *nugae* by referring to the 'Virgilian' *Gnat* (*Stat. silu. I praef.*):

quid enim oportet quoque auctoritate editionis onerari, quo adhuc pro Thebaide mea, quamvis me reliquerit, timeo? sed et Culicem legimus et Batrachomachiam etiam agnoscimus, nec quisquam est inlustrium poetarum qui non aliquid operibus suis stilo remissiore *praeluserit*.

He uses almost the same vocabulary in the proem to the *Achilleid* where he announces 'Achilles' as a prelude to 'Domitian' (*Ach. I 18-19*):

te longo necdum fidente paratu
molimur magnusque tibi *praeludit* Achilles.

¹⁶ Perutelli 1978 is a fundamental study on the technique of inset story in ancient epyllia.

¹⁷ Marinčić 1996, 64ff.

¹⁸ The formula was popularized by Cova 1963.

¹⁹ «Culice fu un libretto metrico, il quale compose Virgilio, essendo ancora giovanetto, e, posto che sia laudevole e bello, non è però da comparare all'Eneida». G. Boccaccio, *Il commento alla Divina commedia e gli altri scritti intorno a Dante*, ed. D. Guerri, I, Bari 1918, 33.

²⁰ J. Scaliger, *In Appendicem P. Virgilii Maronis Commentarii et Castigationes*, Leiden 1595, 4.

²¹ *Nunquam tenuia spreveris. / Num barris minor est musca Philostrati? / Cygno Virgilii culex? / Multum debet adhuc Lesbia passeris.* J. Balde, *Carmina lyrica*, ed. B. Müller, I, Munich 1844, 46.

²² Cf. also A. Pope, *Letter to Mr. Jervas*, Nov. 29, 1716 (G. Sherburn, ed. *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, I, 376): «I there saw and revered some of your first pieces; which future painters are to look upon as we Poets do on the *Culex* of Virgil and *Batrachom.* of Homer».

Moreover, I would argue that this proem actually reworks the proem to the *Gnat*, in which, after an invocation to Apollo, the poet promises to a certain Octavius (probably identified by Statius as the young *princeps*) a more serious poem to be written some time in the future:

<p><i>lusimus, Octaui, gracili modulante Thalia</i> ... omnis et historiae <i>per ludum</i> consonet ordo notitiaequae ducum uoces <i>posterius grauiore sono tibi musa loquetur</i> nostra, dabunt cum securos mihi tempora fructus, ut tibi digna tuo poliantur carmina sensu. ... Latonae magnique Iouis decus, aurea proles, <i>Phoebus</i> erit nostri princeps et carminis auctor et recinente lyra fautor <i>et tu, cui meritis oritur fiducia chartis,</i> <i>Octaui</i> uenerande, meis adlabere coeptis, sancte puer, tibi namque canit non pagina bellum triste Iouis ... <i>Cul.</i> 1,4f., 8-10, 11-13, 24-27</p>	<p>tu modo, si ueterem digno depleuimus haustu, da fontes mihi, <i>Phoebe</i>, nouos <i>at tu</i>, quem longe primum stupet Itala uirtus Graiaque, cui geminae florent uatumque ducumque certatim laurus - olim dolet altera uinci-, da ueniam ac trepidum patere hoc sudare parumper puluere: te longo necdum fidente paratu molimur <i>magnusque</i> tibi <i>praeludit Achilles</i>. <i>Stat. Ach.</i> I 8f., 14-19</p>
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Statius obviously regarded *ecl.* 6,1 (*Prima ... ludere*) as an autocitation of *Cul.* 1. Interestingly enough, Servius' note to *Eclogue* 6, which may go back to an earlier source, seems to echo the Statian proem to the *Siluae* (*Seru. ecl.* 6,5):

sane 'cum canerem reges et proelia' et 'deductum dicere carmen' quidam uolunt hoc significasse Vergilium, se quidem altiozem de bellis et regibus ante bucolicum carmen elegisse materiam, sed considerata aetatis et ingenii qualitate mutasse consilium et arripuisse opus mollius, quatenus uires suas *leuiora praeludendo ad altiora narranda praepararet*.

For Statius, the *Culex*, not the *Sixth Eclogue*, is the earliest 'prelude'. Would it go too far to suggest that as a pastoral comedy dealing with Achilles, the *Achilleid*, or at least the Scyrian episode, is meant to represent Statius' own version of the 'Virgilian' *Gnat*? Above all, the *Achilleid* recalls the *Gnat* as a bucolic variation on a central theme of the *Iliad*: Achilles' abstinence from battle and its tragic consequences.

One can see that, in both cases, the anger of Achilles as the motor of the epic narrative and the motive for his absence is substituted by something decidedly non-heroic. In the case of the *Gnat*, the unrelenting anger is parodically replaced by the laziness of the herdsman who indulges in a nap during the decisive battle, letting his war comrade die instead of him. In Statius' version, the destructive anger dilutes into maternal anxiety of Thetis who seeks in vain to protect her son.

One of the points of departure for both the author of the *Culex* and Statius is, I would argue, the scene of Achilles playing the phorminx before his tent in the company of Patroclus (*Il.* IX 185-189):

Μυρμιδόνων δ' ἐπί τε κλισίας καὶ νῆας ἰκέσθην,
τὸν δ' εὖρον φρένα τερπόμενον φόρμιγγι λιγείῃ
καλῇ δαιδαλέῃ, ἐπὶ δ' ἀργύρεον ζυγὸν ἦεν,
τὴν ἄρετ' ἐξ ἐνάρων πόλιν Ἡετίωνος ὀλέσσας·
τῇ ὅ γε θυμὸν ἔτερπεν, ἄειδε δ' ἄρα κλέα ἀνδρῶν.

Stattius transposed this scene to the pastoral setting of Pelion, to the cave of Chiron, where Achilles sings *semina laudum* to his mother (*Ach.* I 186-190):

elicit extremo chelyn et solantia curas
fila mouet leuiterque expertas pollice chordas
dat puero. canit ille libens inmania laudum
semina: quot tumidae superarit iussa nouercae
Amphitryoniades ...

It seems possible, however, that in depicting a pastoral Achilles Stattius actually followed the parodic version of the poet of the *Culex* who describes his hero singing cacophonous κλέα βουκόλων accompanied by a simple pipe (58, 98-100):

«o bona pastoris ...
... »
talibus in studiis baculo dum nixus apricas
pastor agit curas et dum non arte canora
compacta solitum modulatur harundine carmen...

Let me conclude with a few scattered suggestions regarding the biographic constructions of Virgil's early career. The starting point of most reconstructions is probably the epilogue to the *Georgics* (IV 563-566):

illo Vergilium *me tempore* dulcis alebat
Parthenope studiis florentem *ignobilis oti*,
carmina qui lusi pastorum audaxque iuuenta,
Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi.

Stattius and his contemporaries possibly identified the brazen *studia ignobilis oti* as the *Culex*, and it seems that the author of the pseudepigraphic proem to the *Aeneid* was of the same opinion:

ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus auena (referring to *Cul.* 1!²³)
carmen ...

Moreover, they perhaps believed that *ignobile otium* referred directly to the the musical *studia* of the Lazy Herdsman of the *Culex*: *talibus in studiis ... modulatur harundine carmen* ...

Stattius would probably not object to this biographical construction; after all, he was one of its creators. He was probably more than happy to see his *Achilleid* as a monumental

²³ Mondin 2007, 68, allows the possibility of *Cul.* 1 as a direct model.

recusatio on the model of the epic *praeludium* that the ‘young Virgil’ – according to what Statius believed – had dedicated to Octavius. The pattern is also followed by Edmund Spenser, who dedicated a translation of the *Culex* to his patron, the earl of Leicester, and articulated his complaint to the patron who had wronged him by ‘impersonating’, through the act of translation, the ‘Virgilian’ *Gnat* (*Virgils Gnat*, 1591).

It is not easy to read the *Culex* without apologetic bias. To read it as a polemical parody of Virgil’s canonic works is a strategy of defense; to read it without that brings it too close to Rostagni’s Virgilian pietism: «nessun altro che Virgilio ...». Statius, on the other hand, was perfectly able to take the *lusus* seriously as *lusus*, and was not scandalized by the thought of Virgilian authorship. The parallel between the *Achilleid* and the *Culex* in itself provides a useful lesson: it teaches us that modern categories such as parody and travesty are not always convenient for describing poetic products of Roman Alexandrianism. The very idea of presenting Achilles as a bucolic deserter is neither new nor specifically subversive. The episode of Achilles on Scyros was known long before Statius. In itself, the episode is a piece of comedy, but that does not make it less legitimate a part of the epic myth. Also, it would be misleading to describe it as a bucolic travesty: Achilles’ *Lehrjahre* on the Pelion are a traditional element, and the episode of transvestitism on Scyros has a firm biological foundation as it performs the hero’s *rite de passage*²⁴.

A similar case of inherent pastoral is the Judgement of Paris. The *Epithalamium of Achilles and Deidameia*, attributed to Bion, introduces the Scyrian episode with a mention of the responsible initiator of the war as an anonymous herdsman ([Bion] *Epith.* 10):

ἄρπασε τὰν Ἑλέναν πόθ' ὁ βωκόλος, ἄγε δ' ἐς Ἴδαν...²⁵

In Virgil’s *Second Eclogue*, Corydon plays the role of a pastoral Paris, and his choice is presented as an allegorical choice between civilization/wisdom (=Pallas) and wilderness/irrationality (=Aphrodite; v. 60-62):

quem fugis, a! demens? habitarunt di quoque *siluas*
Dardaniusque Paris. Pallas quas condidit arces
ipsa colat; nobis placeant ante omnia *silvae*.²⁶

Bucolic thus becomes a vehicle of allegorical appropriation of Homeric myth, a bridge, as it were, between myth ‘as myth’ and myth as metaphor. The *Culex* is closer to comedy, but its ‘childishness’ should not deceive us. A plenty of ‘Virgilian’ material is there, in infantilized form, yet there is no sign of hostile polemic and no direct parody of Virgil. This is why so many readers have felt invited to read the poem as a text written by (or imputed to) Virgil as a child, a trivial school exercise containing *in nuce* the whole of Virgil’s literary career, *pascua-rura-duces*, and subsuming his (future?) spiritual development into the herdsman’s conversion from a vernacularized version of Lucretian Epicureanism to Orphico-Pythagorean mysticism.

²⁴ On this aspect see Heslin 2005, *passim*.

²⁵ Cf. Hor. *carm.* I 15,1f.: *Pastor cum traheret per freta navibus / Idaeis Helenen perfidus hospitam.*

²⁶ On allegorical backgrounds Schmidt 1987, 130f.

The reduction of Alexandrian *lusus* to the level of infantilism is deliberate and programmatic, in the sense that *lusus* is still taken seriously as a self-contained, autonomous aesthetic attitude. As a hybrid encyclopedia of genres conflating various levels of style, the poem is able to reconcile sheer parody with philosophical allegoresis of Homeric myth. Through its ‘Orphic’ vision of the underworld, it goes beyond the *Aeneid*: Andrew Laird has observed that the vision of the *Gnat* is the first case of eschatological vision providing the description of the Other World simultaneously with the narration, as a live report in present tense²⁷. The ‘scandal’ of the *Culex* thus reaches far beyond Virgil: the *catabasis* of the mosquito anticipates St Paul and Dante.

²⁷ Laird 2001.

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