MICROCOSM AND THE VIRGILIAN PERSONA

I wish to approach the persona of Virgil from the perspective of microcosm, which I broadly define as a literary figure involving a comparison between something great and something small. I shall focus on three related microcosmic passages, one from each of the three works: a speech of Tityrus in the first *Eclogue*, a simile from the fourth *Georgic*, and the shield of Aeneas. Thus my discussion will offer something of relevance to the poet’s persona in and across the three works. I begin with an overview of microcosm in Virgil before exploring the connection between microcosm and the poet’s persona.

Virgil’s *oeuvre* is microcosmic in different ways. The late-antique Neoplatonist commentator Macrobius explicitly compared Virgil to the cosmos. This comparison is a central reference point for scholarly appreciations of the universal and all-embracing qualities of Virgil’s poetry, especially the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*. Critics since the fourth-century commentators Aelius Donatus and Servius have noted both the intertextual imperialism of Virgil’s synthetic poetics and the way in which the three works taken together seem to encompass the entire trajectory of human civilization, from pastoralism through agriculturalism to urban polity. The three works also contain many instances of *mise en abyme*, which is microcosm of a second order. Lucien Dallenbach, author of the classic study on the subject defines *mise en abyme* as “any internal mirror that reflects the whole of a narrative by simple, repeated or ‘specious’ (or paradoxical) duplication”. But the term is often applied more loosely, and in Virgil’s case it is useful to distinguish between intertextual and intratextual miniaturizations. The most obvious example of intertextual *mise en abyme* is the way in which the *Aeneid* incorporates a reworking of both Homeric poems. On a smaller scale Book Three of the *Aeneid* mirrors the embedded narrative of the wanderings of Odysseus. It has also been argued that the sixth *Eclogue* is a miniaturization of Callimachus’ *Aetia*, that the murals on Dido’s temple to Juno present a synopsis of the entire archaic epic tradition, and that the parade of heroes and the shield of Aeneas recapitulate in different ways the *Annales* of Ennius. Among the intratextual *mises en abyme* are the many summaries, proleptic or analeptic, partial or precise, of the works in which they are embedded. Other passages and whole

---


7 Some examples: lines 70-1 from the *sphragis* of the tenth *Eclogue* offer a characterization of the collection, *haec sat erit, dinae, nestrum ecinitse poetam*, | *diu sedet et gracili fisullam textibisio*, as Servius recognized in his note on 71, *allegoricos autem
books have been read as reflecting either the contours of the surrounding work, or some of its more important thematic thrusts. Even the epic's incipit, Arma virumque is a microcosm both intra- and intertextual. Insofar as Arma virumque is the poem's title, Arma virumque cano means both 'I sing of arms and the man' and also 'I am singing the Aeneid.' But the phrase also points to the poem's status as a microcosm of both Homeric epics.

Microcosm offers a privileged locus for accessing the poet's persona. First of all many of these microcosmic passages occur within the poet's direct self-representations and are deeply implicated in his literary and generic self-positioning. Secondly, many others are focalized through an internal narrator or surrogate author, and in all of these cases there is either a clear echo of words in the poet's voice or of some part of his work, or a miniaturizing allusion to one or more of his models. Surrogate authors are often considered refractions of the poet's persona, just as internal audiences or viewers may be considered surrogate external readers. Fowler, Hardie and others have discussed analogies between acts of composition and reading within the poem, and our reaction to the poem as external readers. Fowler in particular has addressed the special connection between mise en abyme and authorial surrogacy. The present opusculum situates itself within this scholarly tradition by considering three related microcosmic passages which are fundamental to an understanding of Virgil's literary, generic and ideological negotiations.

I would argue that Virgil's microcosmic preoccupations can be traced back to the first Eclogue, to the second speech of Tityrus, who may be read as a surrogate author. The intermittent identification of Tityrus with the authorial voice goes back to Servius (Comm. Aus. 1.1 hoc loco Tityri sub persona Vergilium dehonest accepere, non tamen ubique sed tantum ubi exiguit ratio), and it has been a pervasive idea, though not universally accepted, in the history of criticism. But of course the Eclogues are famous for their obfuscation of the authorial voice, and Tityrus is only one of many herdsmen who could be considered authorial surrogates. He responds as follows to Meliboeus’ enquiry about the identity of the god who has allowed him to keep his lands (19-25):


Vrbem quam dicunt Romam, Meliboeoe, putau
stultus ego huic nostrae similem, quo saepe solemus
pastores ouium teneros depellere fetus.
sic canibus catulos similes, sic matribus haedos
noram, sic paruis componere magna solebam.
uerum haec tantum alias inter caput exultit urbes
quantum lenta solent inter uiburna cupressi.

The city they call Rome, Meliboeus, I thought – stupid me – was like ours here, where we shepherds so often drive the tender young of our flocks. Thus I knew puppies were like dogs, and kids like their dams, thus I was in the habit of comparing great things with small. But this one has reared her head as high among all other cities as cypresses often do among the bending guelder-rose bushes. (tr. Fairclough-Goold, adapted)

Tityrus comes across as charmingly naïve, and the circuitous form and rustic analogies of his response typify the simplicity and nonchalance of the bucolic world at its happiest. He attempts a full-blown simile, but for Pöschl and Rieks, his failure to get beyond the kind of correlative comparison (tantum ... quantum) which is the norm in the Eclogues comes to express the incomparability of Rome. Perhaps more importantly, with its first words urbec quam dicunt Romam, and its comparisons between great and small, Tityrus’ speech springs the poem’s frame of reference from the green cabinet to the city which impinges on it. This builds on the hints of a wider world already present several lines earlier in patriae ... patriam (3-4), and looks forward to the extension of the poem’s spatial embrace (both horizontal and vertical) to include earth, sea and sky, and the boundaries of the known world. Tityrus’ speech thus indicates one of the poem’s central themes, the relationship between the small and hitherto peaceful settlement of the idealized countryside and the expanding reach of the imperial metropolis. This opposition between Rome and the idyll is central to Pöschl’s universalizing interpretation of the poem. In short, Tityrus’ words figure the first Eclogue as a microcosm.

I suggest that Tityrus’ speech lends itself to a metapoetic reading. As he enlarges on Rome, he effectively offers three similes, or fledgling similes (urbec quam dicunt Romam, Meliboeoe, putau | [ ...] huic nostrae similem | sic canibus catulos similes, sic matribus haedos | noram), which since his visit to the city he now sees – stultus ego – are inadequate to the task. These are followed by a comment on the practice of composing similes (sic paruis componere magna solebam), and finally by the more ambitious simile which comes closer to the mark (uerum haec tantum alias inter caput exultit urbes | quantum lenta solent inter uiburna cupressi). The confrontation between Rome and the pastoral idyll, between great and small, necessitates for Tityrus a change in the way pastoral poetry is composed. As Servius observed, the first three similes involve magnitudinis differentia, whereas the fourth involves et generis et magnitudinis differentia. Rome is of a different order altogether, nam est sedes deorum, as Tityrus can now appreciate. All of this has obvious relevance for Virgil writing about recent history and contemporary matters. My claim of a metapoetic reading derives some support from the fact that the Latin word simile may carry its technical sense at least as early as Cicero.

Equally the range of meanings of the verb componere includes

14 Cf. 59-69, Tityrus: Ante leues ergo pascentur in aethere cerui | et freta destituent nudos in litore piccis, | ante pererratis amborum finibus excitat | aut Ararum Partibus bibet aut Germania Tigrin, | quam nostro illius labatur pectore nudus. | Meliboeus: At nos bine ali si tientis ilium Afras, | pars Scythiam et ripadam creatae unenimus Oasen | et penitus tuo divius orbis Britannos. | en umquam patrios longo post tempore finis | pauperis et tuguri congestum caespide culmen, | post aliquot, mea regna, uidens mirabor aristas?
15 Pöschl, ibidem.
16 Servius on 1.22.
17 OLD s.v. simile 2 cites Rhet. Her. 2.46, Cic. Fin. 3.46, Or. 3.163, Tusc. 2.13 and Quint. Inst. 5.11.34. Cf. H. Lausberg, Handbook of Literary Rhetoric, Leiden, p. 200-2 and 377-80, where simile is often synonymous with similitudo in ancient
‘compose’ as well as ‘compare’. *Paruis componere magna* is a particularly loaded phrase in a collection which thematizes the antithetical relationship between ‘grand’ and ‘humble’ genres of poetry, and the subject matter which they may treat. This tension (as I see it) is most apparent in the change of key at the beginning of the fourth *Eclogue*, heralded by the poetological invocation (*Sicelides Musae, paulo maior canamus*) and the following lines which plead for the worthiness of pastoral poetry to negotiate consular themes (*non omnis arbusta iuuant humilesque myricae; si canimus siluas, siluæ sint consule dignæ*). Such an elevation of pastoral to consular status could also be glossed as *paruis componere magna*. A similar generic tension surfaces in the *recusatio* which begins the sixth *Eclogue*, where the distinction seems to be between martial epic and pastoral. The *recusatio* is intratextually conversant with the beginning of the fourth *Eclogue* (6.1-5):

```
Prima Syracosio dignata est ludere uersu
nostra neque erubuit siluas habitate, Thalea,
cum canerem reges et proelia, Cynthius aurem
uellit, et admonuit: 'Pastorem, Tityre, pinguis
pascere oportet ouis, deductum dicere carmen.'
```

My Muse first deigned to sport in Sicilian strains, and blushed not to dwell in the woods. When I was fain to sing of kings and battles, the Cynthian plucked my ear and warned me: “A shepherd, Tityrus, should feed sheep that are fat, but sing a lay fine-spun.” (tr. Fairclough-Goold)

Virgil is dramatizing a mandatory regression from martial epic (*reges et proelia*) back to pastoral, and the terms in which the distinction is expressed (*pinguis ... ouis, deductum ... carmen*) also look back to (the same?) Tityrus’ comparison of great things with small in the first *Eclogue*. To use Servius’ terminology, between martial epic and pastoral, there exists *et magnitudinis et generis differentia*. Thus once again the *Eclogues* are microcosmic in the way that they retrospectively afford a vista onto the epic which Virgil went on to write.

Turning now from pastoral to the grander genre of didactic epic, my argument for a metapoetic reading of Tityrus’ speech gains some retrospective support from Virgil’s use of the phrase *si parua licet componere magnis*, an inversion of Tityrus’ phrase, in the simile in the fourth book of the *Georgics* which compares the bees to Cyclopes (4.170-7):

```
ac ueluti lentis Cyclopes fulmina massis
cum propterant, alii taurinis follibus auras
acciipient redduntque, alii stridentia tingunt
aera lacu; gemit impositis incudibus Aetna;
illi inter sese magna uir bracchia tollunt
in numerum uersantque tenaci forcipe ferrum:
non aliter, *si parua licet componere magnis,*
Cecropias innatus apes amor urget habendi
```

---

18 OLD s.v. *compono* 8a cites instances of the verb used to mean composing poetry: Cic. Mar. 26; Ov. Tr. 5.12.60. For a metapoetic reading of *componere* in an apertural context at *Aen.* 1.274 cf. D Nels, ‘From didactic to epic’, p. 95.


20 D Nels, ‘From didactic to epic’, p. 74, with further references, notes these and other parallels between the fourth and sixth *Eclogues*.


22 As we have noted there is also allusion to cosmological epic at the beginning of the song of Silenus; cf. *Ecl.* 6.31-40.
Here the phrase is in the poet's voice, and it has explicit poietological force. It is also deeply embedded in a nexus of micro- and macrocosms, which I believe works on three levels.

The first of these is the way in which the hive is a paradigm for the Roman state. The bees' microcosmic status is evident from the opening lines of the book, and there has already been extensive play on the contrast between large and small. As with Tityrus' comparison, this play works both on a stylistic and an ideological level. Virgil draws attention to the microcosm with the phrase *si parua licet componere magnis*, and by comparing the bees' labour with 'the grandest industrial spectacle available to the imagination of Antiquity, the busy forging of Jupiter's thunderbolts.'

The second way in which the bees-Cyclopes simile is microcosmic is that it resonates intertextually with the micro- and macrocosmic strategies of Plato's *Republic*. The idea that Virgil's account of apian society owes something to the discussion of the ideal state in Plato's *Republic* is one that has been around at least since Servius; I believe it has much to commend it. Plato's Socrates is interested in justice in the soul, and he initiates discussion of the ideal state in order to discern justice 'writ large.' As such, the ideal state in the *Republic* is a macrocosm. Thus a shared feature of Plato's macrocosm and Virgil's microcosm is that they are both concerned with government and with social order. But within Plato's macrocosm there is an extended hive metaphor, which, as Adam notes, 'is worked out with unusual completeness, even for Plato.' It implicates the hive, the king-bee, and (most prominently) drones. It is ingenious that Plato's macrocosm contains an embedded apian microcosm. I believe that Virgil alludes to this embedded microcosm, first of all by aligning the social organization of his bees with that in Plato's ideal state, and secondly by including a Cyclopean macrocosm within his own apian microcosm. The inversion of Tityrus' *sic paruis componere magna solebam* in the phrase *si parua quamque suo.*

---

23 The poet of the *Georgics* styles himself a shepherd at 3.286–7, and invites a unitary reading of both *Eclogues* and *Georgics* in the *sphragis* of the later poem.


30 On the apian metaphor in the *Republic* cf. D. Tarrant, 'Imagery in Plato's *Republic*', *Classical Quarterly*, 40, 1946, p. 33–4; A. Pelletier, 'L’image du “frelon” dans la République de Platon', *Rentrée de philologie, de littérature et d’histoire anciennes*, 22, 1948, p. 131–46; and R. S. Liebert, 'Apian Imagery and the Critique of Poetic Sweetness in Plato's *Republic*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 140, 2010. The Philosopher Kings are encouraged, against their will, to behave like leaders and 'king-bee in a hive' at 7.520b; all other instances of the metaphor are drone–focussed: the oligarchical man at 8.552c (cf. also 554b, 554d); the transition to democracy (555d–559d); at 8.564c the doctor or law-giver, like a good bee-keeper must subdue or eliminate the drones; the transition from democracy to tyranny (564d–567d); the psychic condition of the tyrannical man (9.573a).
licet componere magnis points to the double inversion of Plato in the simile in Book Four of the Georgics. The significance of the Platonic intertextuality is more difficult to determine. Because Plato’s apian metaphor is most sustained with reference to drones, particularly in the discussion of degenerate forms of government in Books Eight and Nine, one might almost say that it is a drone-metaphor with several references to bees (industrious bees, that is) rather than the other way around. This emphasis is conspicuous in light of the favourable comparisons between bees and humans elsewhere in the Platonic corpus.

On the one hand this might seem to offer grounds for a ‘pessimistic’ reading of Georgics Book Four: it is possible that even after the bugonia has provided a new hive, the persistence of drones may signal a recidivist tendency to social degeneration. On the other hand, Virgil directly addresses the threat posed by drones in the Georgics (4.244 immunisque sedens aliena ad pabula fucus), and it is significant that the bees have mechanisms to suppress them (4.167-8 aut agmine facto | ignavum fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent).

The third microcosmic level in the bees-Cyclopes simile is also intertextual. Here Virgil looks back, by means of window-allusion, to Homer’s Odyssey through Callimachus’ Hymn to Artemis. His intertextual juxtaposition of a grand epic with a smaller one could reasonably be described as parsa componere magnis (or vice versa). Joseph Farrell has admirably exposed the allusive subtlety of the passage.

And straightaway she went to visit the Cyclopes. Them she found on the isle of Lipara – Lipara in later times, but back then its name was Meligunis – at the anvils of Hephaestus, standing round a molten mass of iron. For a great work was being hastened on: they fashioned a horse-trough for Poseidon. And the nymphs were frightened when they saw the terrible monsters that resembled the crags of Ossa: all had single eyes beneath their brows, like a shield of fourfold hide for size, glaring terribly from under; and when they heard the din of the anvil echoing loudly, and the great blast of the bellows and the heavy groaning of the Cyclopes themselves. For Aetna cried aloud, and Trinacia cried, the seat of the Sicanians, their neighbour Italy cried, and Cyrnos added a mighty cry too, when they lifted their hammers above their shoulder and smote with rhythmic swing the bronze glowing from the furnace of iron, labouring greatly. (tr. A. W. Mair, slightly updated)

---

31 R. S. Liebert, ibidem, cites Meno 72b Phd. 82b and Pol. 301c.
32 The present paragraph is much indebted to J. Farrell, Vergil’s Georgics, p. 243-5.
There is extensive play on great and small in this hymn, especially in the passage quoted. Artemis’ nymphs take fright at the terrifying size and din of the whole scene (note the preponderance of words indicating great size, great din etc., underlined), but Artemis herself, though still little, is not cowed. The Cyclopes’ mega eárgon turns out to be nothing grander than a horse-trough for Poseidon. Bornmann and Casali have ascribed metapoetic significance to the deflationary tone of potièstrhn in line 50, and to the asymmetrical abruptness with which the hoplopoia is finally concluded. Callimachus alludes in this passage to the blinding of Polyphemus in Book Nine of the Odyssey. Virgil in turn alludes both to Callimachus and through him to Homer. The window-allusion thus directs the reader from a small-scale example of Hellenistic epos back to a grander one. This may be read as closely related to the increasing density of Homeric allusion in the Georgics, as the poem proceeds, particularly in Book Four.

I would argue that the Georgics simile builds on Tityrus’ phrase from the Eclogue to look forward to the Aeneid. Each of the three microcosmic levels in the simile reflects a transition from small to large. His bees pass along a similar trajectory. The first (not especially marked) reference to bees comes in the first Eclogue, in Meliboeus’ idealized vignette of the pastoral idyll which Tityrus may continue to enjoy (54), while Meliboeus himself must migrate to the boundaries of the empire (64-8). In the Georgics, as we have seen, the bees have grander significance. Then there are various ways in which the heroic pursuits of the bees in Georgics Book Four prefigure the Aeneid, not least the fact that four of the main peoples in the later poem are compared to bees, in language that persistently echoes, sometimes very closely, the bees of Georgics Four. This can only corroborate allegorical readings of the bees in the Georgics. But our bees-Cyclopes simile in particular is repeated almost verbatim in Book Eight of the Aeneid. This implies a significant relationship between the three passages which I discuss, Tityrus’ speech, the simile, and the shield of Aeneas. Let us now turn to Book Eight of the Aeneid.

As Vulcan prepares to fashion armour for Aeneas, he orders the Cyclopes to interrupt their work on Jupiter’s thunderbolt with the following words (8.439-41):

‘tollite cuncta’ inquit ‘coeptosque auferete labores, / Aetnaei Cyclopes, et huc aduertere mentem: / arma acri facienda uiro.’

“Away with all!” he cries. “Remove the tasks you have begun, Cyclopes of Aetna, and turn your thoughts to this! Arms for a brave warrior you must make.... (tr. Fairclough-Goord)

The mandate to craft arms for Aeneas, arma acri facienda uiro, can hardly fail to recall the poem’s incipit, with all its titular force. As such the shield may be read as a kind of surrogate Aeneid, and Vulcan as a surrogate author.

---

33 Cf. Hymn 3.72-80, which leads into Artemis’ bold address to the Cyclopes.
35 Od. 9.389-93, paënta deê oîav bleßfar’ a˘mìfsf kaiê oîfruæaj euåsen a˘+tmìf | ghênhj kaiomeınhj: sfarageu˘nto deê oîv purîê ìêızai. | wêj d’ oàt’ a˘nhêr xalkeu˘j pelekeun meegan bleß skepàrnon | eîn uîdai yuxr% = baëpt$ megàla iàcëkonta | farmaësswn.
36 Cf. J. Farrell, Vergil’s Georgics, p. 244: ‘Vergil carefully alludes to the element that Callimachus borrows from Homer (alii stridencia tingunt | aera laciæ 172-173). By doing so, he discloses the literary history of the motif.’
37 On this phenomenon cf. J. Farrell, Vergil’s Georgics, Ch. 6, and L. Morgan, Patterns of Redemption.
38 On the idea of the Georgics as a transitional poem cf. n. 1, above, especially D. Nelis, ‘From didactic to epic’.
39 Carthaginians at 1.430-436; Romans at 6.707-9; Trojans at 7.64-7; and Latins at 12.587-92.
40 The simile from Geo. 4 is repeated almost verbatim at Aen. 8.449-53, but the whole episode which concludes with these lines (416-453) also reworks the passages quoted from Callimachus’ Hymn to Artemis and Odyssey 9, as well as Il. 18.372-89, Hes. Theog. 140, Apoll. Agr. 1.730-4, and Lucr. DRN 6.246-378; cf. S. Casali, ‘The Making of the Shield’, p. 197-203.
41 Vergil also uses labor (≠ labores, Aen. 8.439) of his own poetic endeavour at Eid. 10.1, Geo. 2.39, 3.288, 4.6, 116; and the metapoetic resonance of mens (Aen. 8.440) is a Lynch-pin of D. Fowler’s argument (‘Epic in the Middle’, p. 99) for Nisus as a surrogate author (Aen. 9.187).
The shield has Augustus’ Actian victory at its centre (675 in medio), and in a later panel Augustus surveying the triumphal procession from the temple of Palatine Apollo (720). Thus the shield may be read as a fulfilment of Virgil’s pledge in the proem of Georgics Book Three to compose an epic poem on the exploits of the princeps, with Caesar in the middle (16 in medio mihi Caesar erit templumque tenebit). But if the shield is a surrogate Aeneid, it is a miniature one, and in fact there are numerous other ways in which the shield is microcosmic. It is one shield to counter all the Latin enemies’ weapons (8.447-8 ingentem clipeum informant, unum omnia contra | tela Latinorum); in this respect it coheres with the synecdochic schema of one-for-all, which is one of the Aeneid’s fundamental structuring principles, and also a microcosmic pattern. But metapoetically speaking, it is also unum omnia contra in the sense that it reworks and subsumes an impressive range of intertextual models, which are themselves microcosms. This is true of the Aeneid in general, but of the shield in particular.

Si parua licet componere magnis, it is modelled on Homer’s shield of Achilles, which Hardie, following the ancient scholia, has discussed as an imago mundi, and which is also in some respects a mise en abyme of the Iliad. Another of its models is Jason’s cloak in the Argonautica, which is itself a stylistic and thematic mise en abyme of Apollonius’ epic, and which the ancient scholiasts also read as a cosmological allegory. As we have noted, it is a recapitulation of the Annales of Ennius: it begins with Romulus and Remus, proceeds chronologically (629 in ordine), and the part of its historical content which is narrated to us extends to the poet’s own day. The shield’s Ennianism, its annalistic mode, reflects for Barchiesi ‘a kind of antagonistic poetics, a road not taken’. There is, then, (to return once again to Servius’ analysis of Tityrus’ speech) et magnitudinis et generis differentia between the shield, a miniature Aeneid, and the Aeneid itself.

Coterminous with the (updated) temporal expanse of Ennius’ Annales the shield is an elliptical précis of Roman history, but what exactly is depicted on it? Let us examine how it is introduced (624-9):

tum leuis ocreas electro auroque recocto,
hastamque et clipei non enarrabile textum.
illic res Italas Romanorumque triumphos
haud uatum ignarus uenturiq
ue inscius aeui
fecerat ignipotens, illic
genus omne futurae
stirpis ab Ascanio
pugnataque in ordine bella.

...then the smooth greaves of electrum and refined gold, the spear, and the shield’s ineffable (?) fabric. There the story of Italy and the triumphs of Rome had the Lord of Fire fashioned, not unversed in prophecy or unknowing of the age to come; there, every generation of the stock to spring from Ascanius, and the wars they fought in their sequence. (tr. Fairclough-Goold)

The phrase non enarrabile textum suggests that there is more on the shield than can be fully narrated, and that the panels which follow this introduction represent selections. This view is supported by Virgil’s own description of the shield: he tells us that Vulcan had fashioned it genus omne futurae | stirpis ab Ascanio. The words genus omne figure the shield as an icon of infinity, of the imperium sine fine which Jupiter prophesied in Book One (279). Its literary aesthetic seems identical to the Callimacheanism of Cornelius Nepos, as praised by Catullus in his first and programmatic poem (5-7

43 This is only one possible view; on the fulfilment of Virgil’s pledge in the proem to Geo. 3 cf. D. Nelis, ‘From didactic to epic’, with further references.
44 Cf. P. Hardie, Epic Successors, p. 27-32.
...itum, cum annus es unus Italorum | omne aenum tribus explicare cartis | doctis, Iuppiter, et laboriosis), the difference being that Virgil's shield encompasses the future as well as the past. Through Vulcan's divine artistry, Virgil represents himself as a universal poet, as a poet of infinity.

One of Dällenbach's categories of *mise en abyme* is the presence within a work of 'repeated' or 'infinite' duplication. He illustrates this with a quotation from Derrida. 'When one can read a book within the book, an origin within the origin, a centre within the centre, this leads us into an abyss, a bottomless and infinite duplication'49. There are several examples of this on the shield of Aeneas, which point once again to its status as an icon of infinity. First, on the shield which has come down from heaven (608-9), Vulcan had devised shields fallen from heaven (664-5 *lapta amilia caelo | extuderat*). Secondly, Alexander McKay has argued that all the locations mentioned on the shield are to be found along the route of the *pompa triumphalis*80. And the shield depicted, we are told, *res Italas Romanorumque triumphos* (626). So if the series of tableaux on the shield points to a triumphal parade, then Augustus' triple triumph (714-28) is a triumph within a triumph. Further layers of recursion emerge when the reader looks at Aeneas looking at a shield which depicts Augustus reviewing gifts, perhaps including shields (721-2 *dona recognoscit populorum aptatque superbis | postibus*)51. We are in a microcosmic hall of mirrors.

Now that we have followed an intratextual line from small to large, and from the beginning to (not quite) the end, it is time to draw some conclusions. Virgil's self-representations are rarely direct, and even those that appear to be so are intensely stylized and metaliterary. It is impossible to draw any distinctions between what might be autobiographical and what is a literary motif. So while most readers would find it highly unlikely that he had planned out his poetic career at the time of writing the *Eclogues*, the composition of a long epic poem about *reges et proelia* was clearly on the horizon of the metafictional persona which we can glimpse behind Tityrus, indeed when he is at his most recusational and Callimachean. It is certainly true that my argument depends heavily on a retrospective reading; but Virgil too was a retrospective reader as well as a retrospective poet, and the intratextual cues between the three passages which I have discussed invite a unitary reading of the tripartite corpus. Under the guise of Tityrus (*Tityri sub persona*) Virgil uses the microcosmic analogy to thematize the relationship between small and grand genres of poetry, and to explore how humble pastoral may comprehend Rome and the universal. As ever, genre and ideology are in close dialogue with one another. This is no less true of the *Georgics*, where Virgil harks back to Tityrus, and retains his preoccupations with the relationship between small and large. In the bees-Cyclopes simile he alludes to models which themselves thematize this relationship, some of which have extensive political import. If the microcosmic patterns of *Georgics* Book Four seemed vertiginous, those in Book Eight of the *Aeneid* are more complex still. Here Virgil uses microcosmic tropes (especially different levels of *mise en abyme*) to accord the shield of Aeneas a privileged status within the epic, to indicate his subordination of the entire epic tradition, and to figure himself as a poet of infinity. Virgil's use of microcosm allows us to perceive his generic ascent from small to large, from pastoral through didactic to the composition of an epic that would rival all its predecessors, and that served as a model for all its successors. His persona is literary and metaliterary, and his concerns are universal52.

---

48 The augmentor of the Servian commentary envisaged as infinite the temporal span of the poem which Virgil promises in the proem to *Georgics* Book Three. On Geo. 3.48 * Tiboni prima quo abest ab origine Caesar he comments: ab infinite infinitium, quia Tiboni origo non potest comprehendi*. For D. Nelis, 'From didactic to epic', p. 88, this places Caesar in medio in an additional sense. Auden's poem, *Secondary Epic*, offers a relevant and insightful reading of Virgil's shield.


52 I extend my warmest thanks to the following for their generous and enriching responses to earlier incarnations of the ideas presented here: S. Alexander, F. Budelmann, A. Dale, P. Hardie, D. Kennedy, R. S. Liebert, M. Marshall, and D. O'Rourke.


