

Insects, Poets, and Philosophers in Virgil's *Georgics*

In Letter 58 of Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*, the philosopher begins a discussion of the paucity of the Latin language when it comes to Greek by excerpting from Virgil's *Georgics*:

est lucos Silari circa ilicibusque uirentem
plurimus Alburnum uolitans, cui nomen asilo
Romanum est, oestrum Grai uertere uocantes,
asper, acerba sonans, quo tota exterrita siluis
diffugiunt armenta;

There is many, many a flyer around the groves of Silarus and
Alburnus flourishing with oaks, to whom the name is 'asilus'
In Rome, but the Greeks have changed, calling it 'οἴστρος,'
Harsh, sounding bitter, from whom the whole of the flocks
Flee terrified from the forests. (Geo. III.146-50)

While Seneca focuses on the word *asilus* in his description and its departure from the Latin of his day, Virgil's own poem shows a similar concern with Greek translation, as Stanley Schechter (1975) and Richard Thomas (1982) illustrate, and this is centered around the connection between the *asilus* and the οἴστρος, each providing a name for the *volitans*, i.e. the gadfly, present in these lines. Virgil goes on to describe this gadfly later on as a "plague," moving from the more technical description above to a more sinister literary application: "At one time Juno exercised her terrible wrath by this monster, having considered this a plague for the calf of Inachus" (*hoc quondam monstro horribilis exercuit iras/Inachiae luno pestem meditata iuuencae*, III.152-3). The mythological extension of the gadfly may not be out of place for a poet keen to use the literary and scientific discourse of his day such that it "has been conflated, corrected, or renovated by this complex process of reference," as Thomas (1986: 198) has explained, but the distinctly negative appearance of this particular *volitans* is striking when compared to the programmatic portion of what Elena Giusti labels the "proem in the middle" of Virgil's 'poem

in the middle,’” in which the poet claims “*temptanda uia est, qua me quoque possim/tollere humo uictorque uirum uolitare per ora* (III.8-9). On one level, the alliterative assertion is a pointed reference to a line of Ennius – *volito vivos per ora virum* (Va. 17) – used very similarly to denote poetic immortality, and thus places Virgil as *volitans* above his Latin epic predecessor, but on another, the paucity of this verb in the *Georgics* as a whole – appearing only four times – suggests a much closer connection between this ostensibly aspirational usage and the negative association of the verb following in the same book.

This crux intersects at the etymological play in the first passage which Seneca quotes, and I argue that this is for the same reason that Seneca uses it: as a gateway to Plato. In particular, Virgil’s note that the οἴστρος has been changed opens up the path to its close synonym, the μύωψ, used by Plato’s Socrates as the analog of his role for the great animal that is Athens (*Apology* 30de). In this paper, I will trace the etymological play of Virgil’s gadfly, using the work of Thomas (1982, 1986, 1987) & James O’Hara (2001), while also adding connections with the corpus of Plato which they neglect, to point toward the philosophical resonances of its flight as well as the poetic persona’s assumption of the role of the gadfly for the poem. The combined “gadfly *volitans*,” being changed from the οἴστρος of the poets to the μύωψ of Socrates, shows Virgil taking up the heritage of philosophical didaxis - with a particular fondness for Plato – as well as his forebears in Greek and Latin literature. Combined with other imagery, illustrated as early as Ernest Sihler (1880), as well as by Antonio Tovar (1983) and Monica Gale (2000), Virgil positions himself as a teacher poet who will fly and sting in order to both achieve fame and to distribute his wisdom.

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