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“Duizelingen, paradox en doorns. Epitomisch schrijven in Virgilius Grammaticus, Solinus, Fulgentius.”

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Vertigo, Paradox, and Thorns

Epitomic Writing in Virgilius Grammaticus, Solinus, Fulgentius

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Samenvatting/Summary

Deze dissertatie benadert laatantieke epitomes vanuit een literair-theoretisch standpunt; de hermeneutische uitdaging bestaat erin om deze teksten, die gewoonlijk beschouwd worden als afgeleiden of puur functionele teksten, te lezen zonder daarbij te kijken naar de "originele tekst" waarvan ze zijn afgeleid. De dissertatie bestaat uit een inleiding en drie casestudies. In de inleiding zet ik uiteen dat de focus van deze studie niet zal liggen op *epitome* als een genre of een tekstuele teksttype wat moeilijk te bevatten zou zijn, zo niet methodologisch incorrect), maar wel op wat ik *epitomisch schrijven* noem. De drie casestudies zijn geselecteerd uit werken waarnaar slechts zelden verwezen wordt als "epitomes": het onderliggende idee is om de blik van de analyse te verruimen en aan te tonen hoe *epitomisch schrijven* elke genre-afbakening kan overstijgen. De gekozen werken behoren alle drie tot de late oudheid, hoewel hun troebele chronologie inderdaad beschouwd kan worden als een resultaat van epitomisch schrijven. Virgilius Maro Grammaticus' *Epitomae* en *Epistolae* (7e eeuw N.C.?) zijn absurdistische variaties op het genre van de grammaticale commentaar. Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (3e-4e N.C.?) is een beschrijving van de *oecumene* die bol staat van de wonderlijke monstruositeiten; Fulgentius' *Mythologiae* zijn een "ongebreidelde", tenminste naar moderne maatstaven, allegorische interpretatie van Grieks-Romeinse mythes. Bij de lectuur van deze drie laatantieke staaltjes proza gebruik ik concepten zoals tekstuele hechting, ondoorgrondelijkheid, verticaliteit, beweeglijkheid enz. (dit zijn op zich geherinterpreteerde en omzeggens "anamorfotische" versies van enkele populaire kritische concepten zoals nomadisme, *trace* enz.).

Met een close reading van delen van deze werken wil deze dissertatie aantonen hoe "epitomes", verre van statische literaire producten, bijzonder onstabiel en ongrijpbaar kunnen zijn. Door de zogenaamde "epitomische dimensie" te bestuderen als een bijzondere con-/dis-figuratie van het proces van tekstuele productie, mondt deze analyse bovendien haast onvermijdelijk uit in een problematisering van genealogie, temporaliteit en causaliteit binnen ditzelfde proces.

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The present thesis approaches late antique Latin epitomes from a literary-theoretical point of view; its hermeneutical challenge lies in reading texts traditionally considered as derivative or merely functional by paying scarce or no attention to the correspondent "original texts". The thesis consists of an introduction and three case-studies. In the

introduction I make clear that the focus of the dissertation will be oriented not so much on *epitome* as a genre or textual typology (which would actually be hard to pin down, if not methodologically incorrect), but, rather, on what I dub *epitomic writing*. The three case-studies are selected among works seldom referred to as "epitomes": the underlying idea is to broaden the scope of the analysis and to show how *epitomic writing* can transcend any genre demarcation. All of the three works belong to late antiquity, even though their blurred chronology might be seen, indeed, as result of epitomic writing. Virgilius Maro Grammaticus' *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* (7th c. CE?) are an absurdist variation on the genre of grammatical commentary; Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (3rd – 4th c. CE?) is a description of the oikoumene constantly indulging in marvels monstrosities; Fulgentius' *Mythologiae* are an "unbridled", at least to modern standards, allegorical interpretation of Graeco-Roman myths. These three samples of late antique prose are read by drawing on such concepts as textual suture, opacity, verticality, motility etc. (themselves a re-interpreted and, so to say, "anamorphic" version of some popular critical concepts such as nomadism, trace etc.).

Through a close-reading of parts of these woks, the thesis aims to show how "epitomes", far from being sclerotic literary products, can be extremely unstable and elusive. Moreover, the analysis ushers almost inevitably into a problematisation of genealogy, temporality, and causality in the process of textual production, by investigating what is here labelled "epitomic dimension" as a peculiar con-/ dis-figuration of this very process.

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In line with the literary works here discussed, this dissertation was for a long time on the brink of non-existence. More than to myself, it owes its birth to many of the people I've been lucky enough to meet in these last four and a half years.

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Je n'ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n'ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte.

B. Pascal*, Lettres provinciales, 16*

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Introduction

1 Reading Severed Heads

This beginning is also an ending. A fact that is almost unbearably annoying. The redactional trick of writing or revising introductions as the final contribution to a work represents a very common trap: it is an unwritten law that one should weave connections with what will follow, sometimes even comment on it, make it comprehensible or graspable – one *needs* to fall into a *circular pattern*. And the reverse is no less constraining, "in my end is my beginning": introduction is a form of containment and pre-determination. The creation of a pattern – the emergence of *circularity* – somehow runs against the object here under investigation, or, rather, the object that has been constructed through this investigation.

In fact, the idea would have been to present the readers with a sheer *tabula*, a space that can contain objects with no other aim than bringing them together – *tabula* as a form of spatial demarcation, characterized by a constitutive internal discontinuity (Foucauldians might dub it *heterotopia*).[1] If patterns are to be allowed at all, then they should be only temporary, fleeting connections between disparate fragments of discourse, ephemeral configurations ready to conflagrate as soon as they have been set up. But then again: why should we look for correspondence between the objects of investigation and the form of their display? How should we justify such an obsession with isomorphism and with the reciprocal mirroring of form and content? What would be more circular, in the end, than this leaning on the organizing force of *mise-en-abyme*? What more *unified*? Perhaps it is just impossible to avoid the emergence of echoes and repetitions, to obliterate the correspondences between the extremities of the present textual structure; perhaps there is no way to prevent the formation of consonances, to hinder the surfacing of *rhythm*.[2] And where rhythm emerges, a first step is made towards *patterning*.[3] Being able to

1 See Didi-Huberman 2018 [2011], pp. 36-46, 55, who has inspired some of the following considerations; Foucault 2009 [1966].

2 On the fundamental role played by rhythm in the emergence of any cultural system, see the still inspiring Leroi-Gourhan 1969, pp. 94-119; for a broader overview, see Sauvanet 2000a.

3 For "figural rhythm", see Leroi-Gourhan 1969, pp. 216-217 and Krauss 1996, pp. 1-27; Sauvanet 2000b, pp. 9-36.

recognize patterns is a bit of a prodrome to reading. Indeed, what is unescapable is the *legibility* of *tabula*.[4] As the most basic tool for establishing a hermeneutical space, a *tabula* is a mechanism that can, precisely, generate correspondences – a machine for rhythms and readings. It is also a mechanism for abstraction.[5] The very act of bringing things together paves the way for *schematism*, the progressive enucleation of the general from the particular. *Tabulae* always implement a process of semiotization: the objects they frame are transformed into meaningful elements.

It is to Franco Farinelli that we owe the "elegant"[6] intuition that Salome's plate, Salome's table, was actually a *map*: "That the table of Salome was a map – and even that the episode of John the Baptist's beheading is nothing other than the first complete illustration of the terrible consequences of what we casually define today as the process of cartographic reduction – is certainly suggested by the term used to describe it, but also by the mechanism of language for which the daughter of Herodias (who neither desires nor thinks) is a mere mouthpiece: a language that proceeds exclusively by proper names, which happens only on maps".[7]

Such a reduction, though, does not "happen only on maps"; it belongs to maps because it belongs to "tables". I thought I would present the severed head of a prophet, but all that I can display is a set of names, the aseptic residual of some stultifying abstraction. Be it because of the table or because of my gaze as a viewer, be it because of their shared capability of semanticizing things by *framing* them, under such circumstances objects can hardly preserve their materiality: in order to be arranged into a signifying constellation, objects must lose themselves and abdicate their irreducible difference. *Tabulae* tend inevitably to be *operating tables*, where the first violence to be perpetrated is *synthesis*. For even the surface of a *tabula*, ready to be crossed in whatever direction and apt to host any heterogeneity, is a *unified* space – for even heterotopies are, in the end, *topoi*.

[4] Didi-Huberman 2018 [2011], pp. 6-8, reflects on the notion of *Lesbarkeit*, "legibility", in Benjamin and Aby Warburg, whose famous "atlas of images" *Mnemosyne* is taken as a most telling example of *tabula* as tool for producing readings. On *Lesbarkeit* as broad cultural metaphor, see Blumenberg 1981.

[5] Didi-Huberman 2018 [2011], pp. 220-235, correctly observes that *tabulae*, by allowing an *Übersicht* ("surveying gaze"), are also based on the viewer's ability to *übersehen* ("to overlook") something. *Tabulae* propel creative synthesis because, in a way, they help us to miss things.

[6] Westphal 2007, p. 101.

[7] Westphal 2007, p. 101.

2.1 Deferring the Object: History

Although inadequate for conveying the full physicality of flesh and blood, Salome's plate might well still function as an *emblem*. Indeed, it does not seem totally absurd to assert that the object of this investigation might be seen as standing under the sign of the Baptist's severed head. *Epitome* – for this is the object of the present investigation – bears the idea of *cutting* inscribed in its very name – *cutting* as a strategy for constructing meaning.

As will soon become clear, my insistence on speaking of an "object'' under investigation is probably an unconscious attempt to compensate for the elusive nature of the epitomic phenomenon. *Epitome* can be satisfactorily defined only as a word; we can outline the story of its usage, determine its etymology, list its occurrences with reference to literary products – but it remains at best problematic to pin down its real referent. *Epitome* has no format, let alone a genre. We shall soon see that it might be useful to broaden the concept to encompass some very general cultural mechanisms connected to the creation, preservation, and transmission of information; however, for the time being, the interesting thing is that several histories of this non-genre have already been written.[8]

Taken in what has become the most accepted meaning – as summaries of previous, more extended works, or as companions (*compendia*) to a given subject – epitomes owe a lot to, and are victims of, the most mature season of 19th century positivistic philology.[9] Theodor Mommsen, Heinrich Keil, Alexander Riese and many others contributed to the re-edition and systematization of a great deal of works that could be dubbed as epitomic.[10] Nonetheless, they also consolidated a series of critical stereotypes surrounding epitomes, namely that:

1) Epitomes, being inherently derivative, are inevitably inferior to original texts;
2) Epitomes are symptoms of a certain decline in creativity;
3) Epitomes testify, at their best, to periods of cultural systematization, but not of cultural production;
4) Epitomes are most typical of Late Antiquity;
5) Although deprived of any intrinsic interest, epitomes represent a valuable source of fragments of lost works and textual variants.

[8] See Galdi 1922 for Latin literature; Bott 1920 and MacLachlan 2004 for both Greek and Latin.

[9] Drawing on Bott 1920, Opelt 1962, col. 945 distinguishes between *epitoma auctoris* and *epitoma rei tractatae* respectively.

[10] I am here referring to Theodor Mommsen's edition of Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (1895), Heinrich Keil's *Grammatici Latini* (1855-1880), Alexander Riese's *Geographi Latini Minores* (1878).

This last point has often served as an apologetic argument for any scholars brave enough to undertake the thankless job of editing such uninteresting material.[11] It would be illuminating to carry out a fully-fledged study on the ''rhetoric of self-sacrifice'' that permeates late 19th and early 20th century scholarly production, a highly telling compromise between two cultural *idola*: on the one hand the positivistic cult of unbiased science, on the other, the post-romantic celebration of ''novelty'' as a criterion for establishing aesthetic hierarchies. This attitude, it should be noted, did not necessarily affect the quality of the philological achievements of the time. Ever since Wölfflin's articles in *Archiv für Lateinische Lexicographie*, scholars seem to have been primarily concerned with constructing a history of the term ''epitome''. Heinrich Bott opened his dissertation *De epitomis antiquis* (1920) with a reflection on the alleged distinction between *epitome* and *breviarium*, an approach echoed a few years later by Marco Galdi in his thorough monograph devoted to epitomes in Latin literature, *L'epitome nella letteratura latina* (1922). Still partially present as an undertone in Ilona Opelt's article in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (1962), the distinction reemerged in Rosalind MacLachlan's unpublished dissertation *Epitomes in Ancient Literary Culture* (2004).[12]

Galdi's book is, in many respects, highly representative of such positivistic attitudes, in both its qualities and its limits.[13] Next to a rich collection of carefully (and chronologically) arranged material, Galdi makes several derogatory remarks about the low intellectual value of the works he has been analyzing, exemplified in the very first lines of the introduction: "Overall, the tendency to excerpt and summarize larger works is tightly connected with the political and moral decay of a nation".[14] Resorting to the "decadence'' paradigm, Galdi produces an argument commonly employed to support pseudo-historicist claims. This is far from unexpected, and the same might be said for the strong nationalistic and idealistic undertones of statements such as the following: "In ages characterized by thriving literary activity – when the production is original and capable of mirroring, to a large extent, the flourishing material and spiritual conditions of a population marching forward on the path of civilization, and when only one single concern seems to loom over writers, that of contributing to the greatness of one's own country or of celebrating one's

[11] Cfr. *infra* p. 57 Mommsen's remarks on editing Solinus.

[12] See Wölfflin 1902a; *Id*. 1902b; *Id.* 1902c ; *Id.* 1904; *Id.* 1906; Galdi 1922, pp.18-22; MacLachlan 2004, pp. 3-14. Rosalind MacLachlan, though, cannot but admit that, p. 24: "The range and variety of epitomes argue against there being a neat definition and a simple answer. They seem not to be joined by a common form or to compose a genre with prescribed characteristics".

[13] Cfr. MacLachlan, pp. 14-17, for a critical assessment of Galdi's theoretical tenets.

[14] Galdi 1922 p. 1: "In generale, la tendenza a fare estratti e compendi di opera di maggiore mole è strettamente connessa al fenomeno del decadimento politico e morale di un popolo."

own ancestry – summarizing someone else's works would be held to be a pointless chore"; and "It has already been observed that summaries usually turn out being detrimental to works of art. Indeed, an *opus integrum*, once summarized, is disfigured, since it loses those traces of freshness and immediacy, if not of organicity, that were its own".[15] If today these claims sound grotesque, or even, in the light of the subsequent European history, utterly ominous (Galdi's nationalistic vocabulary might well remind us of the incipient Fascist era),[16] it is only because we have somehow *displaced* the same longing for coherent historical reconstruction that influenced the Italian philologist in the 1920s. Indeed, one can find many intuitions scattered throughout *L'epitome* that need only be properly relocated to appear as the basis of current historicist discussions on *epitome*.

In the wake of Birt and Bott, Galdi stressed the relevance of the introduction of the codex to the success of epitome from the 4th century onward, thus pointing to technological innovation as a fundamental component of cultural production. [17] This perspective would become central in the works of Ann Blair. Although devoted to an entirely different historical period (the Early Modern Age), Blair's studies engage with the problem of ordering and disseminating knowledge in times marked by a widespread feeling of information overload.[18] The theme of ''too much knowledge'' might actually, at least partially, help us to rethink the flourishing of epitomic works in Late Antiquity as a phenomenon connected to an increased demand for information-storage technologies rather than to a simple decay in the capacity of readers to master long works.[19] Similarly, Galdi was well aware that epitomized texts were privileged in schools, but we had to wait for Rita Lizzi's considerations on "selective memory" and Kaster's thorough survey on grammarians for late antique schools to lose any reductive connotations as receptacles of "rudimentary culture" and be acknowledged as essential triggers of cultural

[15] Galdi 1922 p. 1: "Nei secoli di ricca fioritura letteraria, quando la produzione è originale e rispecchia in larga parte le floride condizioni di ambiente e lo stato d'animo di un popolo che imprime le sue orme sul cammino della civilità, e quando una sola preoccupazione pare che incomba sugli scrittori, di nulla trattare che non contribuisca alla grandezza del proprio paese od alla celebrazione della propria stirpe, si reputerebbe vana fatica l'industriarsi a ridurre opera altrui"; *Ibid.* p. 3: "Si è già detto che il compendio, di solito, torna a detrimento dell'opera d'arte. E nel vero, un *opus integrum*, compendiato, si sfigura, perdendo quell'impronta di freschezza e d'immediatezza, se non di organicità, che gli era propria."

[16] Cfr., for instance, Galdi 1922 p. 2: "[…] opere immortali e dove è impresso il genio della propria razza" – epitomes are not, of course, such works.

[17] See Galdi 1922, p. IV. Cfr. Birt 1907 and Bott 1920. For an overview of late antique librarian production that is still useful see, Cavallo 1975.

[18] See Blair 2010, especially pp. 14-22, on "information management in antiquity".

[19] See Blair 2003 and *Ead.* 2007.

development.[20] Finally, Galdi speaks poignantly of a true "compendium industry."[21] No one, of course, would be so naive as to confuse Galdi's use of "industry" with the meaning that this word would assume in Critical Theory, nor presume that Galdi meant to oppose it, in a typically idealistic way,[22] to the more spiritually elevated ''work of art''; nonetheless, the intuition of a *cultural industry* is already present, almost foreshadowing Santo Mazzarino's path-breaking formula of the late antique "democratization of culture."[23]

This is not to say that *L'epitome* anticipated all the scholarly trends that would crop up in later decades: rather that, given the set of data we have, when looking at epitomes from a certain vantage point, the results can hardly be expected to undergo radical alterations. Ever since Birt, the *object* of scholarly observation has been epitomes as the product of a socio-historical constellation, precisely not my *object* here.

2.2 Deferring the Object: Redemption

By looking at the same object as Galdi and his contemporaries and forerunners, one is likely to fall into a *redemptive mood*, equal and opposite to their disparaging attitude. In short, the most adopted strategy has become to deny the exclusively derivative nature of epitomes and to stress, instead, the many different ways in which the original text is fragmented, recombined, and transformed. In other words, critics and philologists started laying claim to the *authoriality* of the epitomizer. The apology of the text is hence substantiated through the introduction of a new persona: the *worthy, skilful author*. Even today the critical pendulum swings between two poles: on the one side, theories which hold that it is impossible to analyse and evaluate epitomes without making reference to their purportedly primary sources; on the other hand, the attempt to consider epitomes

[20] See Lizzi 1990 and Kaster 1988. Indeed, 'school' has been an emblematic word for late antiquity ever since Henri-Iréné Marrou's groundbreaking work on Augustine's education (Marrou 1938). For a classic view on the socio-political impact of rhetorical education, see Brown 1992.

[21] Galdi 1922, p. 2.

[22] "Idealistic" in the sense of Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), whose extremely influential *Poesia e non poesia* was to be published just one year after Galdi's monograph, in 1923.

[23] See Mazzarino 1974 [1960]. For an assessment and history of Mazzarino's controversial formula, see Carrié 2001 and the special issue of *Antiquité tardive* in which is published. On how a new conception of rhetoric and literariness impacted on late antique textual production (*Fachliteratur*, commentaries, exegesis etc.), see Formisano 2012, pp. 512-520.

in their own right as self-sufficient literary objects, as the products of creative gestures and authorial self-confidence.

This former standpoint is, for instance, indicatively revealed by what historian Hervé Inglebert suggests in his essay on Lactantius's *Epitome* of his own *Institutiones Divinae* (a somewhat famous example of self-epitomization): "While dealing with an epitome the most important question to be answered is not *What*, since this is provided by the model, but *When*, which is essential to the very comprehension of the epitome and sums up all of the other questions, *Why*, *For whom*, and *How.*"[24] According to this view, epitomes are functions, in mathematical terms, of previous texts, and the only way to predicate anything on them is to know the argument of the function, the input variable: *the original*.

The most systematic *functionalist interpretation* of this kind has probably been provided by Markus Dubischar under the concept of the *auxiliary*.[25] To put it in as a few words as possible, epitomes, like commentaries, translations, and many other kinds of *derivative literature*, help to make other texts understandable, that is, readable: "[Auxiliary texts] render service and help, as it were, to a primary text or corpus that needs or deserves this kind of service and help. […] Since the fundamental purpose of a text is to be read and understood, texts are in difficulty when they find fewer and fewer readers, and perhaps even fail to find readers at all."[26] Drawing mostly on Paul Grice's theory of conversation and Niklas Luhmann's analysis of sociological systems, Dubischar points out that "all communication is based on, and made possible by, reducing complexity. Moreover, real communication is initiated by the recipient."[27] Epitomes aim to give birth to a new audience for unheard texts by reducing the distance between the cultural system in which primary texts were produced and that of the current audience: "Auxiliary texts could be viewed as ''gate-keepers'' placed at a system's boundaries, securing but also controlling the supply with information from the environment."[28] But what about the intrinsic opacity of any textual object? How can we determine the borders of the pretended original readability? When do texts really start to ''need or deserve'' help to be understood? How thin can the boundaries between two cultural systems be?

Discussing Vegetius' *Epitoma rei militaris* (4th-5th century), one of the most widely read Latin texts during the Middle Ages, Marco Formisano has shown how epitomes can

[24] Inglebert 2010, p. 514: " La question la plus importante pour un épitomé n'est pas le 'quoi?', qui est donné par le modèle, mais le 'quand?' qui est seule essentielle pour comprendre l'existence même de l'épitomé, et qui concentre les questions 'pourquoi/ pour qui/ comment?'".

[25] See Dubischar 2010, pp. 41 ff.

[26] Dubishar 2010, p. 42.

[27] Dubischar 2010, p. 61. Cfr. Grice 1975 and Luhmann 1984; *Id.* 1997.

[28] Dubischar 2010, p. 62 n. 53.

effectively *establish*, not only adapt, translate or preserve, a cultural system, by engaging in a complex, dynamic relationship with the past and tradition – in this particular case, even by founding a peculiar textuality: "In fact, I would argue that the *Epitoma rei militaris* is more interesting for literary than for technical reasons. It aims to reintroduce to the contemporary system the ancient rules applied in Rome during the first stage of empire […] Even the title *Epitoma rei militaris*, which might best be translated into modern languages as 'The Roman art of war' or 'The ancient art of war' […] is a reminder of the close relationship the author wishes to have with the past. Vegetius's logic is circular: he begins from writing, substantiates actions with exempla that also derive from a world of books, only to return inexorably to writing. His work inherits, justifies, and sets up a system of profound interaction between 'literary' past and present action, which becomes the axiom of the art of war for the future."[29]

Actually, trying to connect the pragmatic of the auxiliary with the ambiguous field disclosed by such concepts as intertextuality, intratextuality, and transtextuality, may turn out to be quite a challenge. Not surprisingly, these ideas constitute the basis for the other critical pole mentioned above, the one interested in reasserting the creative potential of epitomes. One need only look back at Gérard Genette's classical work *Palimpsestes* to find out that: "no reduction, since it cannot be *simply* a reduction, is completely transparent, meaningless – innocent."[30] It would suffice to select random passages from prefaces to late antique Latin and Greek epitomes to discover that their authors were proud to show what a difficult task it had been to sum up all of that information, to structure it, to make it, as it were, *useful*.[31] They seem to be well aware of the fact that they can lay claim to a certain degree of *ingenium*. Thus, when Markus Mülke, in his essay entitled *Epitome – Das Bessere Original?* ("Epitome – A better original?"), highlights the sophisticated expertise that a "true epitomator" (*ein richtiger Epitomator*) had to display, he resumes a long-established motif (at least in Late Antiquity).[32]

[29] Formisano 2012, p. 525. For a problematization of the interaction between 'writing' and 'war', see also Formisano 2002; *Id.* 2009; *Id.* 2011; and the contributions in the volume Formisano – Böhme 2012.

[30] Genette 2003 [1982], p. 349: "aucune reduction, n'étant jamais simple réduction, ne peut être transparente, insignifiante – innocente."

[31] This is what Opelt 1962, col. 959, analysing the most common *topoi* in the prefaces of epitomes, dubs *Nutzen-* or *Zweckenformel*, that is, formulas pointing to the "use" that could be made of the epitome.

[32] Mülke 2010, p. 87.

2.3 Deferring the Object: Subversion

Some scholars have taken further steps in the direction of establishing a more accentuated textual autonomy for epitomes, adopting other, more radical models of cultural transmission.

In the sociological scheme proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar, goods – material or semiotic – having trespassed systemic borders can undergo a process he names *cultural transfer*: the imported goods cease to be perceived as external and are wholly integrated in the new economical/cultural repertoire.[33] If this osmotic dynamic is fully fulfilled (Even-Zohar gives it the name of *interference*), then "the question of source/origin is no longer relevant. For the majority of the members of a community, once introduced into their repertoire, the fortune of an item in terms of success or failure becomes a domestic matter."[34] This is to say that once texts have undergone *interference*, once, for example, texts have been epitomized in order to fit the requirements of a new reading audience, their former status must take second place: the extreme consequence of the auxiliary – and anyone dealing with the remnants of ancient literature should agree – is, paradoxically, the complete erasure of the source, its replacement.

In his influential book on rewriting, André Lefevere argues for an overtly dialectical interpretation of how cultural systems function.[35] His axiom is that they "develop according to the principle of polarity, which holds that every system eventually evolves in its own countersystem."[36] The point is instrumental in positing the possibility of subversive effects achieved through apparently non-subversive procedures: even *repetitive textual acts* such as translating or summarizing are likely to trigger a process of semantic shifting that will eventually lead from the original signifying set to its very opposite.

Subversion, if regarded from the perspective of a *redemptive* reading of epitomes, might be a very convenient tool, and has actually been used as such. Wolfgang Raible has drawn attention to different examples of *Reduktionsformen*, an umbrella concept under which he gathers epitomes, *compendia ad usum delphini*, registers, Japanese haikai, and more.[37] Grouping epitomes and registers (not to speak of haikai) under the same label may sound a little questionable, even without resorting to Genette's meticulous distinction

[33] See Even-Zohar 2010 [2005], pp. 70-76.
[34] Even-Zohar 2010 [2005], p. 53.
[35] See Lefevere 1992.
[36] Lefevere 1992, p. 38.
[37] See Raible 1995.

between abridgment and condensed text, summary and digest.[38] I am nonetheless persuaded that Raible's attempt to find a common ground for practices of textual fragmentation and re-assemblage may be of use to extending our idea of epitomization. Raible argues that there is something in common between "summaries" and, let's say, Raymond Quenau's rewriting of Mallarmé sonnets (which Queneau rewrote by picking up only the last word of each line): in dismembering a text and putting it together again, an ironical, subversive mechanism is taking place.

Two well-known late antique Latin works have been interpreted in this "subversive" light. Aude Doody presents us with the strong clash between authority and authorship that she detects in the so-called *Medicina Plinii*.[39] The *Medicina Plinii*, which is thought to have been composed in the 4th century, belongs to a tradition of late antique medical compendia which tried to condense classical medical authorities into more accessible forms. It draws its material mainly from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* and most of the manuscripts refer to its author as *Plinius Secundus Iunior*. Doody rightly points out that although medicine can be considered the focus of Pliny's books 20-32, Pliny's own position towards physicians (namely, Greek physicians) is relatively disapproving: no small a part of his ideological project consisted in opposing the intellectualistic and, according to him, suspicious Greek medical science to natural, reliable, traditional Roman medicine. As a consequence, as Doody puts it, "while the *Medicina Plinii* is dependent on Pliny's name and Pliny's text for some of its authority, its radical reworking of the *Naturalis Historia*'s approach to medicine could be seen as an implicit critique of Pliny's organising strategies: the book of extracts aims both to co-opt and to supplant the authority of the source-tekst."[40] An antagonistic attitude thus comes to light: reshaping the original, the epitomizer exerts an act of appropriation, whose violence is the *conditio sine qua non* for the emergence of his/her own textual identity.

The implications of such an antagonistic model were brilliantly exposed by Jeffrey T. Schnapp in his essay on Proba's famous *Cento vergilianus de laudibus Christi*.[41] Approximatively dated to the second half of the fourth century C.E., this 694 hexameter-long patchwork of Virgilian lines makes "the greatest poet" of Rome sing the history of Christian salvation. To describe what's going on here, Schnapp turns to the Situationist concept of *détournement*, that is, in the words of Guy Debord, the *appropriation*, *critical deflection*, and *historicization* of the meanings of pre-existing artefacts without effacing them. In Debord's definition we can track the same dialectical tension between

[38] Genette 2003 [1982], pp.341 ff.

[39] See Doody 2009.

[40] Doody 2009, p. 95.

[41] See Schnapp 1992. For an in-depth study of the cento, see Schottenius Cullhed 2015.

preservation and obliteration, continuity and discontinuity found in Even-Zohar's idea of *interference*, now slightly nuanced by the awareness that what was before referred to as "replacement" is probably better defined as "erasure": not effacement exactly, but a sort of *preservation through obliteration*.

In line with this approach, but with a broader perspective, Marco Formisano has repeatedly argued that epitomes traditionally intended – *florilegia*, *centones*, but also grammatical commentaries, technical treatises, encyclopaedic compilation etc. – can all be reduced to a series of common cognitive and textual procedures, namely to *fragmentation*, *dislocation*, and *replacement*: [42] "[that is] mechanisms of recollecting past textual traditions, fragmenting and dislocating their content and giving them a new form – like Hippolytus's body after the mythical *sparagmós.*"[43] An *epitomic dimension* would thus appear to underlie the entirety of Late Antiquity, consisting in the parcelling and displacement of earlier classical culture.[44] Formisano accordingly stresses the role played by *allegory* in Late Antiquity: not only is *allegory* a tool that implements the *détournement* of Antiquity, it affects late antique textuality more generally, a textuality constantly "détourning" itself.[45]

2.4 Deferring the Object: Unconscious

Although subversive readings doubtlessly help to free epitomes from interpretations that tend to dissolve them into their sources (the obsession, in the last instance, of much *Quellenforschung*, and in many respects the dominant hermeneutical paradigm in the study of epitomes), they seem to be no less reductionist than their polemical target. By constantly looking for subversive patterns we run the risk of substituting a teleology oriented to *the original* with a teleology projected toward *the anti-original*. Exchanging one fetishism for another does not really seem to be a fruitful way to account for the complexity and semiotic richness involved in any writing or re-writing process. The very idea of ''subversion'' is trapped in a dichotomy that opposes apparent meaning to concealed meaning; moreover, before turning something upside down you have to

[42] See Formisano 2001, pp. 154-161; *Id.* 2007, pp. 282-284; *Id.* 2012, pp. 522-527.

[43] Formisano 2012, p. 526.

[44] This dialectic somehow also impacts on the status of Late Antiquity within the Western academy. See Formisano 2007, p. 280; *Id.* 2019, pp. 119-125.

[45] See Formisano 2017b.

crystallize the object of the subversion, which means to *stabilize* it, to make it the *origin* of the whole process. In their redemptive efforts, scholars arguing for this *geometrical* reversal not only fail *to get rid of the original*, but, in the worst of cases, they fall victim to the temptation they reproach in more traditional analyses: they act *systematically* to get rid of it, exchanging the redemption of one textual constellation for the condemnation of another. Once again, an apologetic gesture has turned into an act of hermeneutical violence.

I am not suggesting that we completely delete what, in Hegelian terms, we should call the *negative movement* of the dialectical process. I take it to be undeniable that the *Medicina Plinii* destabilizes Pliny's text, and, more generally speaking, I continue to be convinced that we can hardly dismiss binary patterns of analysis: what I hesitate to do is to arrest this dynamic and to fix it into an oppositional *macro-system*. I would prefer, instead, to track a series of *multiple micro-systemic negativities*, of infinitesimal shifts, whose final sum does not necessarily result in the reversal of the previous configuration; it can, but it does not have to. Epitomes, thanks to their status as *erasing texts*, at once preserving and negating a previous textuality, give us the opportunity to study interesting phenomena of what we may define as *pervasive negativity*, which cannot be reduced to the static scheme of dialectical reversals. Then, drawing on what Renate Lachmann wrote almost thirty years ago in her monograph on *Memory and Literature*,[46] rather than subversion, I would speak (though not exactly with Deleuze) of *rhizomatization*: each time a text is fragmented, each time its signifying set is altered, it becomes impossible to describe the subsequent signifying process as a linear string, since it is *something wandering a-teleologically*. The space occupied by epitomes is the space produced by these wandering signifiers, an *inter-textual* field. Lachmann holds that the inter-textual field corresponds to the domain of *memory* at the cultural level and to that of *dream-work* at the intrapsychic level. Thus, through Lachmann's remarks, we arrive at one of the most controversial critical concepts from the final years of the ''linguistic turn'': the so-called *textual* or *intertextual unconscious*.

I know it is risky (and perhaps even *démodé*, just like the whole framework sketched above) to dig out a critical tool as elusive as textual unconscious, whose very definition varies remarkably according to the critic we choose (Bellemin-Noël, Riffaterre, Culler etc.);[47] nevertheless, it is precisely this instability that makes it fit for my purpose. If we look at the textual unconscious as an interplay of sliding signifiers conditioned but not determined by external pressures and drives (in our case they would be represented by

[46] See Lachmann 1990.

[47] See Bellemin-Noël 1979; Riffaterre 1987; Culler 1984.

genre constraints, audience expectations, and even, to some extent, authorial intentionality),[48] then we might arrive at an analytical model fit for dealing with the processes that occur when texts are fragmented, recomposed, and consequently destabilized in their semiotic structure, reshaped but not necessarily turned upside-down. What I am looking for is a way to safeguard the openness of the whole textual constellation at stake, a way to account for the deep dynamicity we can perceive even in the apparently static gesture of literal repetition. Gilles Deleuze was right when stating that, in the game of difference and repetition no one has gone further than J. L. Borges: his Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*, looms as a ghost, a godfather, or just as the unreachable asymptote behind any attempt at re-writing. [49]

3 First Steps and Three Words

Needless to say, I could not find such an *object*. Nor could I have *looked* at it. Perhaps because, as I cursorily observed before this sequence of deferrals, what I was looking for was, in the end, the act of *cutting* itself: an interstitial space not only between one text and another, but also within the same text, or even within a single word; hence the difficulty of building a *corpus* for my research – or rather, the paradox of constructing an organism when the purpose should be to contemplate dismemberment.

In the following three chapters a recurring insistence on *tension* will become apparent, among other idiosyncrasies. The three works selected are all intersected by forces that stem from a series of polarities – it is precisely their being a force field that I would like to bring to the fore. Yet, deliberately, I did not pay much attention to the kind of tension one might expect to be the most typical in epitomes: the one between the epitome and its ‘‘original(s)’’. Indeed, this issue has been almost systematically avoided in my study: among the selected works, only one, Solinus’ *Collectanea*, might properly fit into some of the categories usually employed to describe epitomes. For *epitomic writing* does not necessarily coincide with epitomes. It is more a textual dynamic than a textual form, more

[48] See Miller 1986; Rajan 1991; Stanford Freidman 1991.

[49] See Deleuze 2003 [1968], p. 152-153: “Sur ce jeu de la différence et de la répétition, en tant que mené par l’instinct de mort, nul n’est allé plus loin que Borges, dans toute son œuvre insolite”.

a process than an outcome.[50] And, it seems to me, the best way to show its effects is to see how it works *within* a given text. I have tried to capture this phenomenon of internal splitting, the fissuring of the textual surface. Thus, the tension to which I refer can be most often observed between a text and that text itself. The term *epitome* can thus return to its primordial meaning of ''cutting on'' – we will look at texts that act as self-inscriptions, texts that, in a way, cannot stop dismantling and re-writing themselves. In other terms, the focus will not be on the literary domains where epitome as a functional object has already been the subject of scholarly analysis (namely: historiography, scientific writing, *Fachliteratur*, and versification),[51] but, rather, on works that clearly display a tendency towards *instability* – a tendency that only our ''modern'' gaze would judge to be opposed to functionality.

It is not by chance that the authorial figure is controversial, to say the least, in all of the three cases under consideration. Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, the author of two series of very peculiar grammatical treatises entitled *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* belonging at first glance to the genre of *commentarii in artem Donati*, has been dated variously between 4th and 7th century and localized in Gaul, Spain, Ireland, and England.[52] His name is obviously fictitious, as are most of the *auctores* he quotes in the treatises. Virgilius Maro Grammaticus is for us, literally nothing but a projection of *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*, and any scholarly attempt to pin down his identity clearly represents an attempt to stabilize his unstable text – and vice-versa.

The prosopographic discourse has played a less important role in the assessment of Gaius Iulius Solinus (even though, as we shall see, chronology has been similarly used as a criterion for estimating Solinus' cultural relevance); the reason for this is that positivistic philology regarded Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* as a trivial compendium of

[50] I am here elaborating on Formisano 2007, p. 284: "epitome constitutes itself as a genre or rather, as I would say, as a textual dimension. It becomes a modality of literary expression and an epistemic tool. It is the product of a new culture and describes a new geometry of knowledge in granting an original form to materials stemming from the tradition." See also Formisano 2012, pp. 522-528.

[51] As regards historiography, see the overviews in Banchich 2007 and Gasti 2015; there has been a recent revival in editions, studies, and translations of Iustinus' epitome of Pompeius Trogus (Borgna 2018; *Ead*. 2020; Hofmann 2018); Eutropius' *breviarium* (Bordone-Gasti 2014; Bleckmann-Gross 2018); Festus' *breviarium* (Fele 2009); the *Origo gentis romanae* and other sources (Bleckmann et al. 2017). For *Fachliteratur*, see Formisano 2001. For recent translations and commentaries of Vegetius' influential *Epitoma rei militaris*, see Milner 1993 and Formisano 2003. New translations with commentaries have lately been produce for Iulius Obsequens' *Liber prodigiorum* (Gusso – Mastandrea 2005) and Lucius Ampelius' *Liber memorialis* (König 2011). Similarly, a renewed interest can be observed in "miniaturizing" versification, see at least Reitz 2007; McGill 2018. On the intersection of visual and textual "miniaturization", see Squire 2011 who discusses the so-called *tabulae iliacae*.

[52] On the identification and dating of Virgilius, see Herren 1979. For a thorough treatment of Donatus' *Artes grammaticae* and their legacy, see the still fundamental Holtz 1981.

teratological material drawn from Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, and so Solinus himself did not need to be much more than a shadow cast by Pliny, as dull and flat as his *Collectanea*. I hope that my reading will reveal, if anything, the protean nature of this shadow.

Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, on the contrary, seems to have represented first and foremost a prosopographic dilemma for modern scholars: was he the well-known bishop of Ruspe (ca. 460-533 CE) or just his namesake? I will not tackle this issue directly: for my purpose it is much more relevant that all the works traditionally attributed to Fulgentius share an undeniable, almost maddening stylistic *outrance*: Fulgentius *is* such *outrance*.[53]

This sequence of authors/works does not, I think, engender any pattern: there is no real argumentative progression, no teleological arrangement. Again, patterns and cross-references will necessarily emerge, but only as a consequence of juxtaposition, not as its cause. A first step into epitomic writing will be to accept the absolute permutability of any discourse on epitomic writing.

The very title of the present dissertation tries to reproduce this effect of juxtaposition and permutation; three words, *vertigo*, *paradox*, and *thorns*, have been decontextualized and then assembled, they are the result of a gesture of disruption and re-configuration. The ''original'' contexts are, as it will appear, the title of the single chapters from which each word has been plucked – *vertigo* stands for Virgilius Grammaticus, *paradox* for Solinus, *thorns* for Fulgentius. But are these words in some way ''representative'' of the three authors? What is their relationship to their referents? What is their reciprocal interaction? In other terms, what is the meaning of *vertigo* once it comes to be read side by side with *paradox*, and this with *thorns*? Can we alter this configuration? Can we shuffle the title?

I hope that the three following chapters will help to answer the last two questions affirmatively. For the strongest tension residing in *epitomic writing* is the one regarding the determination of meaning as an act of *reductio ad unum*: what happens to this *unum* once the text has been dismembered? To what extent is the unifying moment in epitomes (the re-composition) actually *unifying*? The selected texts should help us to look into the fractured-and-yet-interconnected condition of the products of *epitomic writing*; all of them show a certain distance from themselves, a series of internal fissures: they are permeated by *cutting*.

[53] Beside the *Mythologiae* on which I focus in the third chapter, three other works are attributed to Fulgentius: *Expositio virgilianae continentiae*, an allegorical interpretation of the *Aeneid* that, in many respects, constitutes a diptych with the *Mythologiae* (Wolff 2009); *Expositio sermonum antiquorum ad grammaticum Calcidium*, a list of "abstruse" words (*de abstrusis sermonibus*) explained (Pizzani 1978); *De aetatibus mundi et hominis* (Manca 2003), a world chronicle in lipogramatic form (in the first chapter the letter *a* is missing, the letter *b* in the second, *c* in the third and so on).

However, by plucking a word for each chapter, I obviously run the risk of moving in the opposite direction, that is, of providing *the* interpretative key for reading every single chapter – maybe suggesting, even more inappropriately, that these words are *the* keys to Virgilius Grammaticus, Solinus and Fulgentius. Instead, less univocally, and certainly more correctly, *vertigo*, *paradox* and *thorns* are meant to create *emblems*, I intend for them to reproduce the complex semiotic relationship we find in the enigmatic assemblages of images and words in the Early Modern *emblemata*.[54] To phrase this as a semiotic blasphemy, *vertigo*, *paradox*, and *thorns* must function as *images*. They are juxtaposed not only reciprocally, but also to their respective chapters. They aim to create a *tabula*. Like this:

Vertigo: The first chapter tackles the problem of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus' baffling textuality. In his ''grammars'' (*Epitomae* and *Epistolae*) not only is the Latin language altered, disassembled and re-assembled, but the whole tradition of antique and late antique grammar undergoes a radical process of demolition and re-configuration. There is an abundance of *auctores*, but, most probably, they are all fictitious; there are several quotations, but they are all made up. While commenting on adjectives and pronouns, Virgilius portrays a world in which grammarians live for hundreds of years, busy with crypto-languages, and cultivating what appears to be an esoteric doctrine. ''Parody'' seems to be too straightforward a word for what occurs in Virgilius's treatises. Time, space, and logic (*ratio*) are made to collapse. *Condensation* and its ''absurdities'' pervade the text.

Paradox: The second chapter analyses Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* as a force field crossed by *centripetal* and *centrifugal* forces, by archival-encyclopaedic principles and geographic *nomadism*. Information is accumulated in the form of *congeries*, which can be read as a static heap of data and as text that rapidly changes at the same time. Snippets of marvelous and bizarre information flow incessantly, sometimes engendering unexpected, almost subversive constellations. The

[54] As is well known, emblems are central to Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory as expounded in the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin 1998 [1928]). See at least Agamben 1993 [1977], pp. 135-140. For a historical and theoretical overview of early modern emblems, see Daly 1998; *Id*. 2014.

Collectanea seems to be a reference book asking to be read linearly – or vice versa, an exploded, granular, polycentric narrative.

Thorns: In Fulgentius' *Mythologiae*, *epitomic writing* shows its most opaque face and condensation has become *density*, both stylistic and thematic. Fulgentius' repertoire of ''untenable'' allegorical readings of mythological stories is no less thickly covered with briers than the fields that the ''narrator'', as we shall see, has to traverse in the *Prologue*. Fragmentation and re-composition, the two basic movements of epitomic writing, are shown here to be not only the form of the clash between burgeoning Christianity and ancient Paganism, but also to constitute the very structure of any hermeneutical enterprise.

Chapter 1
Schwindelliteratur as Vertigo-literature
(Virgilius Maro Grammaticus)

Pourquoi pas? – le signifiant est bête.
J. Lacan*, Seminaire XX: Encore*

Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek. Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children? He does no harm to anyone hat one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.
F. Kafka*, The Cares of a Family Man*

1.1 Starting from an Afterword

Grammatica dividit,[1] and so does Virgilius Maro Grammaticus. It is difficult to think of an author who has stimulated more controversial discussion in scholarship over the last decades, nor one whose works have fluctuated so much in critical estimation since their first re-emergence in Angelo Mai's modern edition of 1833.[2]

Now, these first remarks are trite commonplace. The very fact of pointing to Virgilius' swinging literary status, to his awkwardness and idiosyncrasy, could be said to have turned into a proemial *t(r)opos* for anyone willing to approach the Grammarian. "Elusive", "baffling", "fertile of imagination"[3], "*strano*" (weird)[4], "a paradox"[5], "eccentric"[6]: these are but a few of the labels proposed by Virgilius' (more benevolent) interpreters. However, it is precisely such widely recognized elusiveness that makes Virgilius' a peculiarly useful starting point for reflecting on the dynamics enacted by texts that float in a field of perpetual tension, such as *epitomes*. No solution will be here provided for the many enigmas surrounding the author; we will rather seek to plumb the depths of his uncanniness, to *inhabit* (and, to a certain extent, *map*) his provocative *alterity*.

Such *alterity*, for the sake of truth, has already been *inhabited*, in Giovanni Polara's critical edition of Virgilius, written towards the end of the 1970s.[7] The volume included –

1 Sidon. Apoll. *Ep.* 5.2.1. Cfr. Kaster 1988, p. 19.
2 A concise but still valuable overview of Virgilius' scholarly vicissitudes up to the 1970s can be found in Herren's seminal article, Herren 1979, pp. 35-42. Also see Polara 1977.
3 Law 1995, p. 1.
4 Polara 1988, p. 109.
5 Law 1988, p. 121.
6 Naismith 2008, p. 59.
7 Polara – Caruso1979.

along with an *Introduction* by Polara himself, an Italian translation, and a *Nota* on the manuscript tradition by Mirella Ferrari – an *Appendice* (appendix) written by the translator Luciano Caruso: "On the Theory and History of Quotation. From Virgilius the Grammarian to…" ("*Sulla teoria e storia della citazione. Da Virgilio grammatico a…*").[8]

Starting from the title of the first subparagraph, "Hibernation" ("*Ibernazione*"), readers of the appendix are immediately confronted with a sudden swerve away from what one may expect to find in an afterword to a late antique/early medieval treatise. The surprise effect grows more and more alienating as the afterward progresses and the reader encounters an apparently chaotic heap of out-of-context quotations, argumentative inconsistencies, and randomly juxtaposed considerations on far-fetched philosophical issues written in dizzyingly dense language that seems to contain most of the linguistic tics common to Italian academic writing of the late 1970s:

> "***Hibernation***
> An obsession with deterioration (i.e. with methods of production, dissemination, and consumption) as well as the emergence of a new method, disconnected from the previous ones, could be seen as the basis for the assumptions underpinning the following discourse. Thus far, signification (usually known as 'interpretative lines') has been examined through the lenses of historians, critics, and philologists, who are the false founders of a pretended new era to come. For now, the explanation, together with its own theoretical grounds, will be reactive in nature, that is, it will draw on testimonies, so as to make clearly visible the fields from where theories about the work might get started – and from where they did actually get started."[9]

And so on for almost thirty pages.

The most important point is probably that readers accustomed to late 1970s academic writing would not have gotten the joke before reading through at least twenty pages, and had Caruso not added a final disclaimer, in which he explicitly argues that the appendix is an "absurd text" ("testo assurdo"), a playful piece meant to be "a parody, indeed quite a

[8] Polara – Caruso 1979, pp. 335-378.

[9] Polara – Caruso 1979, p. 335:

"***Ibernazione***

L'ossessione del deperimento (vedi, metodo di produzione, diffusione e consumo) insieme con l'avvento di un metodo diverso, non derivato dal primo, può essere alla base dei presupposti da cui muove questo discorso. Sino ad ora il modo di significazione, chiamato di solito 'linee interpretative', è stato esaminato seguendo le ragioni usuali di storici, critici e filologi, che sono di fatto i falsi installatori della supposta nuova epoca che si apre. Per il momento, la spiegazione, e la fondazione della spiegazione, è reattiva, essenzialmente articolata sulle testimonianze, di modo che si vedono perfettamente i campi dai quali può partire, e in effetti è partita, la teoria sull'opera." Translation is mine.

good one, of academic discourse" ("una parodia, abbastanza buona, di un discorso accademico"), such over-intellectualised pastiche might well be taken seriously even today.[10] The fact is that Caruso had not only been trying to produce a contemporary version of what he, following Polara, supposed to be Virgilius' parodic attitude: a closer analysis of the *Appendice* exposes a strong interest in indeterminacy at the core of Caruso's literary experiment.[11] Although claiming that his appendix would be of no real use to understanding Virgilius' works ("so che questa appendice servirà poco a 'comprendere' l'opera di Virgilio Grammatico"),[12] Caruso had been surreptitiously arguing against any other way of tackling Virgilius' text. In fact, if anything at all is to be grasped from the aforementioned passage, it is a protest against historians, philologists *et similia*. It should nonetheless be noted that the statement is uttered through the *persona loquens* of a convoluted academic scribbler, and, as such, it had somehow to be marked by a typically 70's dismissal of ''traditional science.'' Caruso's writing both mocks and employs the tenets of contemporary academic discourse. The peculiarity of his scholastic game (a game played among scholars, contesting *scholae*, and against the *schola*) thus lies in its deliberately undecidable nature. Nothing could be set further away from the monodirectional rationality of the academic discourse – and yet, at the same time, the appendix does not really resemble a virulent example of academic subversion.[13]

The problems are more subtle in Virgilius' case, his alterity more unstable and displaced.

[10] Polara – Caruso 1979, p. 367.

[11] Determining the exact meaning and extent of the term "parody" when referred to Virgilius Grammaticus is one of the main problems tackled in the following pages. A "parodic" reading of Virgilius has been popularized outside the circle of Virgilian scholars by Mikhail Bakhtin's influential work on Rabelais, where Virgilius is somehow connected to the well-known *Coena Cypriani*. Interestingly enough, the Russian scholar spoke, more precisely, of *semiparody*: "Another ancient parody is the 'Grammatical Virgil Maro' (*Vergilius Maro Grammaticus*), a semiparodical learned treatise on Latin grammar which is at the same time a parody of the scholarly wisdom and of the scientific methods of the early Middle Ages", Bakhtin 1984, p. 14.

[12] Polara – Caruso 1979, p. 367.

[13] It is not my aim here to judge Caruso's gesture in terms of its less or more revolutionary efficacy, nor to enter the major topic of academia and western political discourse in the 1970s. Suffice to recall Caruso's own final exhortation to Polara that he "step back into secrecy and keep on talking about this topic between the two of us, so as to be ready for the imminent explosion of the contradiction on which our society and culture are based; we are living in a time of restoration which cannot be contrasted by resorting to these weapons" ("[è necessario] tornare alla clandestinità, a farceli fra noi certi discorsi, per prepararci alla prossima esplosione della contraddizione su cui è costruita la nostra società e la nostra cultura; questo è un tempo di restaurazione che non è possibile contrastare con queste armi"), Polara – Caruso 1979, p. 367. Trained as a philologist and a philosopher, Luciano Caruso was a poet, art critic and visual artist himself, a conspicuous figure in the Italian neo-avant-garde of the 1970s. See Asor Rosa 1992, p. 127.

If one had to look for *discursive clashes* in Virgilius' text, it would become quickly apparent that their constituent parts (i.e. dialectically opposed discourses) are anything but easily identifiable: they do not occupy the polarized extremities of a once-and-for-all given force field. For example: is Virgilius' weird linguistic theory to be taken as a claim *against* other grammars, if not *against* Grammar? As previously touched upon, polemics over the supposedly parodic character of Virgilius' writings are a commonplace in the Virgilian critical debate.[14] While acknowledging Virgilius' undeniable originality in deforming the ordinary *praecepta*, the parody-interpretation — which goes back at least to Lehmann and has been repeatedly maintained by Polara — might be understood as the most convenient shortcut to accounting for Virgilius' paradoxicality.[15] By way of positing the *object* on which Virgilius carries out his supposedly distorting experiments, we make a first step towards a *definition* of Virgilius' literary practice. Once the model (or the many models) are *delimited*, we need only compare texts, operate *differentially* (i.e. detect and catalogue local overlaps and discrepancies), to finally reach an understanding of Virgilius' fundamental law of permutation.

On the other critical pole, those who, not being fully satisfied with parody, have taken up the shield of ''wisdom literature'', might be rightly credited with having shaken up Virgilius' scholarship again. They argue that Virgilius' works cannot be easily aligned with other parodies: his treatises are too long and too rich in ''serious'' grammatical detail to be overtly interpreted as parodic texts.[16]

Be that as it may, the primary concern of most scholars dealing with Virgilius has actually been to look for the one key which would enable them to *decode* his works, that is, to unify the manifold meanings unleashed by his text under one single signifying strand. To put it more straightforwardly: the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* would owe their awkwardness to the fact of having NOT been correctly interpreted YET.[17]

[14] See Law 1988, p. 123; *Ead.* 1995, pp. 10-11; Munzi 1993, pp. 69-70; and all of Polara's contributions.

[15] See Polara 1988, p. 110: "in most cases, when Virgilius provides the reader with amusing pleasantries he does not draw on any conjecturable archetype, so that we cannot but savour his fertile imagination and creative originality" ("nei moltissimi casi in cui [Virgilio] ammannisce al lettore divertenti amenità si distacca quasi sempre da qualunque ipotizzabile archetipo a tal punto che si può solo gustare la sua fertile fantasia, la sua originalità creativa"). Lehmann's influential verdict is worthy of full quotation, Lehmann 1923, pp. 21-22: "is he [Virgilius] a hustler, or rather a very learned fool? Possibly neither: maybe he was a damned buffoon" ("ist er ein Schwindler der mit Gelehrsamkeit protzt, oder ein gelehrter Narr, der seine Schriften ernst gemeint hat? Möglicherweise war er keines von beiden, sondern ein arger Schalk"). *Schwindelliteratur* ("charlatan literature") is another way to designate "fake-literature" and, according to Herren 1979, this term has been used to define Virgils' works.

[16] This was notably Vivien Law's ''personal battle'', see Law 1988 and *Ead.* 1995, but also Munzi 1993.

[17] Interestingly enough, the most insightful argument for Virgilius' *irreducibility* is to be found in Vivien Law's *Decoding Virgilius Maro Grammaticus*. However, Law's willingness to discard the current parody reading results

I am not sure whether Amsler is right in stating that "to some extent, Virgilius' precise intention forever eludes us", but I think he does provide a helpful hint with his suggestion that: "Virgilius's text is potentially the super-reiteration of the original antique grammatical discourse, but in an anagrammatical mode. Virgilius MARO's AMOR of ROMA reclaims the *medulla sensus*, the MARROW of extraverbal meaning […] It is prophetic, not antiquarian, *etymologia*. The grammarian and the vatic poet of the *Aeneid* inhabit the same name."[18]

In many respects, Virgilius's works seem to act as a counter-melody to the Isidorian etymological enterprise and the ultimate late antique encyclopaedic (and epitomatory) tradition.[19] This notion of ''counter-melody'' should not, however, imply an idea of one-to-one contrapuntal effect.[20] Counterpoint rests on binary oppositions, whereas one of the main reasons it is difficult to disentangle the discursive threads that make up Virgilius' writing is that he has a pronounced tendency to *make things collapse*.

Collapsed temporality is one way of looking at it. Virgilius' ''imaginary library'', a book collection purportedly spanning all ages and the entire oecumene, distills a kind of knowledge that is *inherently supplemental and differed*, a cultural construct that at once re-establishes and erases its origins.[21] In point of fact, taken in its most basic manifestation, the Virgilian text is a commentary on books that *possibly* (who is the reader to judge?) never existed: the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* embody the legacy of a *possible* past that might never have happened, and that, at the same time, constitutes the potential future seed for a creatively reinvented history. Let us stress once again that Virgilius is not in

in a quest for *the* message and *the* content of Virgilius' texts: "That parody plays an important part in Virgilius' writing is undeniable; but it is no more satisfactory as a solution to the problem of his intent than the earlier hypothesis of earnest but misguided didacticism. Adopting the explanation of parody goes one step beyond the literal reading of the text; it peels off one layer of obfuscation. But it remains on the level of form, leaving the content – Virgilius' message – untouched. Until we delve deeper we will find no solution. Perhaps, though, we are wrong to expect a single and all-encompassing 'global solution'. More of our habits of thought than we realise have been permeated by the materialistic exigencies of natural science. In demanding a single solution to a problem, a single etymology for a name, a single underlying structure for a sentence, we transfer Aristotle's dictum, 'two bodies cannot occupy the same space', to a domain for which it was not intended. No medieval reader would have been so simplistic […] Only by shaking off our ingrained craving for a single simple solution will we have any hope of understanding the nexus of intersecting planes of significance which Virgilius creates", Law 1995, pp. 3-4.

18 Amsler 1989, pp. 197-207.

19 For a theoretical sketch of Isidore's cultural enterprise and Virgilius' possible self-positioning within it, see Amsler 1989, pp. 132-207.

20 Nor am I here strictly referring to the well-known Saidian and then post-colonial concept of *contrapuntal reading*. Cfr. Said, 1994 [1993], pp. 66-68 and Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin, 2007, p. 49.

21 Cfr. Naismith 2009. For a general introduction to the thematics of 'imaginary libraries' see Werle 2007, pp. 3-52. On supplementarity and lost books cfr. Braune 2013.

contradiction with the grammatical canon – instead, his work represents what the canon would have been if it had been different. Likewise, Virgilius cannot be said to be against historicity – he *plays with* the biases of historicity. Virgilius' text is a space of *coexistence* of times and places, of shared knowledge and supposedly esoteric gnosis. Virgilius' future – Virgilius' readership – is made of the debris of an irretrievable past – Virgilius' mysterious books and sources –, a future that, as a consequence, turns out to be no less irretrievable. An economic way of defining Virgilius' indefinability could be that *Virgilius' readership – Virgilius' future – cannot exist*. At best, it might *coexist*.

In order to better grasp (or just to divine) who Virgilius' readers may be, one could resort to the idea of a *shifting reader*. By *shifting reader* I mean a reading subject that never stops to negotiate its status during the reading process – a sort of photographic negative of any given implied reader, constantly ready to be subverted and questioned.[22] Virgilius' text, ostentatiously based as it is on a proliferation of references (to previous grammarians, literature, philosophy etc.), nonetheless requires its readers to forsake any demand for referentiality: since *the referent is lost*, what remains is only the movement of reference, its phantasmatic force. Virgilian grammar performs and instantiates what one may be tempted to call a *longing for meaning* - not meaning *per se*, but its deferral.

The fact that such a continual deferral of significance is achieved through the appropriation of literary forms and practices usually connected to genres that attempt to pin down meaning (such as grammatical commentaries and treatises) accounts for much of Virgilius' uncanniness. As already mentioned, much in the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* strongly recalls and directly draws on ''Donatian'' (serious) grammar. In strictly quantitative terms, the amount of ''respectable'' grammatical doctrine actually exceeds ''Virgilian'' theory, but the general impression modern scholars have of the whole work inclines towards an opposite estimation. Such was not the case, notoriously, between the 7th and 9th centuries, a timespan that witnessed a marked spread of Virgilius' works as authoritative grammatical treatises.[23] This is probably the clearest result of the amphibological nature of Virgilius' writing. My limited purpose in the followed sections will be to investigate the contradictory semiotic matrixes that seem to be interlaced in Virgilius' text. An obvious objection may be that resorting to any analytical grid runs against the very idea of an *undecidable* text, a text, such as this one, that teems with lists

[22] For an interesting reassessment of the very classical problem of "the reader" see Bennett 2008, pp. 11-43.

[23] Especially in the Irish area. For an overview of Virgilius' reception and presumptive Irish background, see Herren 1979; Holtz 1977; *Id.* 1981; and *Id.* 1983. Vivien Law repeatedly wrote against the scholarly common place of an Irish Virgilius while advocating for a need to revise the whole myth of Irish ''*latinitas*" by pointing to the role played in the early Middle Ages by Anglo-Saxons centres. Cfr. Law 1982; *Ead.* 1993.

and catalogues and makes itself unclassifiable by performing a plethora of classifications. I cannot but agree.

1.2 Order and Hierarchy

Virgilius, for all of his tendency towards digression and his apologies for plurality and multifariousness, produced a text that is rich in self-reflexive hints at its own structure and argumentative development.[24] The *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* are punctuated by rhetorical gimmicks we know only too well from the technical and textbook tradition.[25] They present themselves as *ordered texts*. The very concept of *ordo* is emblematic of Virgilius' posture as a grammarian and constitutes a key word in his authorial self-fashioning as a *technical writer* (*primum* ***in ordine*** *ego*, "*ego* will be the first according to the order," Epist. II, 12; *de cuius VII speciebus* ***ordinatim*** *expossiturus*, "I will discuss the seven forms of the verb according to their order," Epit. VII, 19).[26]

A lexicon of *self-pacing* runs throughout the text, bringing to the fore its argumentative articulation. For obvious reasons, such connectors abound in opening and, even more so, closing sections, where they sound formulaic, but, at the same time, suggest a certain taste for variation:

> *His omnibus licet alio itinere decursis ad nostrum propossitum, hoc est* ***ad metrorum narrationem fine tenus recurramus*** (Epit. IV, 312-314)
>
> Having dealt with all these other topics, let us come back from this digression to our original goal, that is, to the discussion of poetic meters

[24] On "multifariousness" cfr. Law 1995, pp. 47-56; 77-82.

[25] The seminal work on ancient handbooks is Fuhrmann 1960. Useful surveys of didactical rhetorical strategies, although with an emphasis on didactic poetry, can be found in Effe 1977, Volk 2002, and Markovic 2008. For late antiquity, see Formisano 2001. On grammar-handbooks, see Holtz 1981, pp. 46-121.

[26] On the rhetorical strategies through which technical writers created and negotiated their own *persona*, see Formisano 2001; *Id.* 2009; and Doody 2009. Such transitional formulas are very common indeed, even in Fulgentius, an only slightly less idiosyncratic author than Virgilius, *Aet*. p. 138.10, *ordo sumpti exigit operis quo*…. Cfr. Hays 2003, p. 198: Lact. *Inst*. 3.1.8, *ad hoc igitur me […] susceptae materiae ordo ipse deduxit*; Mar. Victorin. *Defin*. (PL 64: 903B), *quia ordo propositionis exegerat*; Greg. M. *Moral*. 1.10, *nunc ordo expositionis exigit ut*…etc.

unum uobis huius rei ponam testimonium, quod ***clausulam dabit*** *epitomae* (Epit. X, 188-190)

I will give you another example of such procedure [i.e. the scinderatio], by which this epitome will come to an end

Haec tibi, diacone sanctissime, de pronominis ratione breuiter dicta ***oportunum sibi petunt finem*** (Epist. II, 334-335)

Venerable deacon, my short discussion of the nature of pronouns calls now for a conclusion, and rightly so

Quia autem hiis dictis supra memoratus Aeneas suum ***finiuit sermonem****, mihi quoque hanc epistulam scribenti* ***hic terminus ponendus est*** (Epist. IV, 149-151)

Since the aforementioned Aeneas wrapped up his speech with these words, I too had better use them to conclude my letter

Verum quoniam de participio et in hoc et in supra memorato sepe opusculo sufficienter edisseruisse me arbitror, ***oportunum huic epistolae finem dabo*** (Epist. V, 268-270)

Since here and in the short treatise I have mentioned before I think I have sufficiently dealt with the pronoun, it is time to conclude this

The *ordo scribendi* is, as usual, hypostastized, and functions as an agent resolutely leading the *persona loquens*:

Disposueram quidam de syllabis longius sermonem protrahere, sed quoniam ad metrorum nos pensationem ***ordo prouocat scribendi****…* (Epit. III, 31-33)

I actually wanted to expand further on syllables, but the plan of my work requires me to move on to exploring poetic meters

It stands for the constraints of what could be labelled a "well-shaped-discourse" and it speaks the language of necessity from the fifth epitome:

Nunc de conparatione ***pauca dicenda sunt*** (Epit. V, 86)

Now we have to say a few words on comparison

Nunc de genere ***tractandum est*** *nominum* (Epit. V, 124)

Now we have to deal with the gender of nouns

De numeris autem ***hoc tantum dicendum est*** (Epit. V, 149)

As to the number [of nouns] we have to point out just that…

Nunc de cassu sermo ***paulo longius protrahendus est*** (Epit. V, 219-220)

Now we have to linger a little longer on the concept of case

Expressing *necessity* is a way of voicing a belief in *totality*: such articulatory jointure-elements, scattered throughout the otherwise lubricous surface of Virgilius' treatise, provide it with a kind of *didascalic rhythmicity* while constantly bringing it back to an idea of *wholeness*, to a totality which is, first and foremost, *structured*. A fantasy of *bodily organicity* presides over the self-representation conveyed by Virgilius' work when it performs as a grammatical text.[27] What is more, this textual body is not only structured and articulated, it also has an orientation, a way in which it should be preferentially traversed: Virgilius' utterance *reddimus, ut potuimus,* ***superiore epitoma*** *rationem requirentibus* ("In the **previous** epitome we answered, as far as we could…," Epit. VI, 1-2) implies that the reader (at least on a primary level) is expected to move forward linearly following a predetermined path – that is, there are *former* and *latter Epitomae*, whose position within the system cannot be changed arbitrarily. Such observation, admittedly laughable in itself, may seem less obvious if one takes Virgilius' *scinderatio fonorum*[28] as an example of *paragrammatic* (fragmented, non-linear, constructive) *reading* and, in the

[27] For of an overview of the role played by the concept of *ordo* in ancient rhetoric see Squire 2014, pp. 358-361; 367-373; for its socio-political implications see Kulikowski 2015.

[28] This is the term employed by Virgilius to refer to a series of techniques of word fragmentation, re-composition and permutation that he accurately describes and that cannot but remind modern readers of "cryptographic" practices.

wake of Amsler, sees in it a *mise-en-abyme* of Virgilius' entire approach to (the grammatical) tradition.[29]

The relevance of linearity or, more precisely, of *sequentiality,* gains further meaning when considered against the backdrop of the debate on the order to follow when exposing the *partes orationis*.[30]

The *Epistolae* faithfully reproduce a series crystallised in Donatus' *Ars minor*: *nomen* (Epist. I), *pronomen* (Epist. II), *verbum* (Epist. III), *adverbium* (Epist. IV), *participium* (Epist. V), *coniunctio* (Epist. VI), *praepositio* (Epist. VII), and *interiectio* (Epist. VIII). As for the *Epitomae*, they mostly overlap with the *Ars Maior,* in spite of some blatant and easily noticeable discrepancies (namely: the first Donatian chapter *de voce* is replaced with an epitome *de sapientia*; the whole third book on linguistic *vitia* is taken over by the notorious epitomes on *scinderatio fonorum* and etymology, and then by the *catalogus grammaticorum*).[31] The question of whether the *expositio* of nouns should precede or follow that of verbs, or, similarly, the apologetic explication of the reasons why even pronouns are expounded before the "king of the sentence" (*quia verbum simile debet esse regi*, ''since verbs cannot but be similar to kings'', Epist. III, 69-70) becomes in Virgilius' hands a place for dealing with the issue of *hierarchy*.

In the prefatory section of the epitome *De nomine*, Virgilius' beloved master Aeneas is said to have written no less than ten volumes on this controversial topic, Epit. V, 1-13:

[29] Amsler 1989, pp. 206-207. The idea of *paragram* and *paragrammatic reading* as a way to approach literary phenomena has been popularized by Julia Kristeva and Jean Starobinski (based, as it is well-known, on Ferdinand De Saussure's notes on anagrams. See Starobinski 1971). The paragrammatic textual model, which admits contradictory and contrasting meanings within one and the same word, proves particularly apt for approaching Virgilius' textuality. Cfr. Kristeva 1969, pp. 183-184: "l'ambivalence du paragramme poétique: il est une coexistence du discours monologique (scientifique, historique, descriptif) et d'un discours détruisant ce monologisme […] L'interdit constitue le sens, mais au moment même de cette constitution il est transgressé dans une dyade oppositionelle, ou, d'une façon plus générale, dans l'expansion du réseau paragrammatique"; *Ibid.* p. 195 "Le paragramme étant une destruction d'une autre écriture, l'écriture devient un acte de destruction et d'autodestruction". This is not the place to draw even a sketchy history of such anti-linear readings – their obvious psychoanalytical background would demand almost all of psychoanalytical literary theory to be included, for which anti-linearity has become a veritable exordial *topos*. See for instance Hertz' reading of Longinus, Hertz 1985, p. 8: "the movement I follow [in Longinus' text] is clearly not linear; it does not run in tandem with the progress of the rhetorical argument from topic to topic but it is in certain ways cumulative – that is, at certain points one becomes aware of at thickening of texture."

[30] See Holtz 1981, pp. 64-69.

[31] See Law 1995, pp. 5-6; Polara 1993.

De nomine breuiariam epithomam edicturus rogare prius debeo quaerimoniantibus, qua diuitia nomen omnibus partibus Latinitatis praelatum sit, cum in Hibernorum[32] *eloqutione et conpossitione* ***primatum tenere aestimatur uerbum. Super hoc Aeneas X libros edidit, ex quibus unum tantum sumere oportunum puto quassum: Nomen, inquit, secundum sensum principium est, non secundum appellationem. Cum enim nascitur homo, antequam rem aliquam agat uel discat uel sciat, nomen illi inditur. Nomen ergo principalis pars Latinitatis est.***

Before starting my short epitome on the noun, I should give an answer to those asking why the noun should be granted a privileged place with respect to the other Latin parts of the speech, whereas in the language of the Hiberni the first place is given to the verb, both in terms of eloquence and phrase composition. Aeneas devoted ten books to this subject, but I will refer to just one of them: "The noun", said Aeneas, "holds the first place according to its meaning, but not according to its denomination. When men are born, they are given names even before they are able to act, learn or know anything. That's why the noun represents the first part of the speech in Latin."

Further explicit justification for the adopted (Donatian) order of the *partes* is also conveyed at the beginning of Epit. VI, *De pronomine*, 3-17:

Nunc aliud quaestionis inminet genus, cur etiam pronomen uerbum praecedat, cum uerbum omnium partium egregium sit. Quibus hoc modo respondendum est, quod in divisione omnium partium orationis alii octo partes dixere, nonnulli eundem numerum minuentes nomen et pronomen in eandem partem redigendum putauerunt; uerbum quoque et participium in unum conglomerantes ***absordum dixerunt uelut a corpore membrum, ita a verbo separare participium****; adverbia autem et coniunctiones unam partem esse putauerunt, sequestratis praepossitione et interiectione; atque ita erat, ut pro octo partibus V annumeraverint. Hac ergo ratione* ***pronomen a nomine secernere noluerunt sicut socios a rege****.*

Now we should answer another kind of question, that is, why in our treatment the pronoun comes before the verb, even though the verb is the most important part of

[32] The lectio *Hibernorum*, first suggested by K. Sittl, is significantly controversial. Herren 1979, pp. 56-57 accepts *hibonorum* instead, attested in the Parisian manuscript *P.* This is no innocent decision, since Herren reads *hibonorum* as *Hi bonorum*, "of the good men of Iona", and uses it to further support his theory of Virgilius' Irish origin. It is no wonder that Löfstedt, quite convinced that Virgilius should be situated in a Roman language speaking environment, restores Sittl's conjecture. See Löfstedt 1981a; *Id.* 1981b; *Id.* 1982; *Id.* 2003. Herren restated his assumptions in Herren 1995, p. 59. For a critical evaluation of Löfstedt's edition see Holford-Strevens 2003; Kisdi 2003; Glei 2004.

> speech. This can be answered by recalling that some grammarians fixed the number of the parts of the speech to eight, but some others, by merging nouns and pronouns, reduced the number of the categories; they merged verbs and participles as well, arguing that to separate them would have been like severing a member from the body; they also thought that adverbs and conjunctions were one and the same part, while prepositions and interjections constituted another one; as a result, they counted no more than five parts of the speech. For the same reason, they refused to separate pronouns from pronouns, just like one would never separate a king from his fellows.

Images of bodily and social integrity are tightly connected and play an important role in this last passage.

If we had to give a clearer definition of the nature of this social integrity by privileging one element over the others, we could call it monarchy: monarchic imagery is well attested throughout the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*, and, as may already be clear, is particularly relevant in the discussion on verbs, Epit. VII, 10 -14:[33]

> *[…] quod uerbum principalem partem orationis cuncti astruunt. Nam licet in ordine praeesse nomen admittat, tamen in possitione quassorum* ***principatum tenet, cui aduerbiorum coniunctionumque agmina omne ius suum dederunt.***
>
> […] since everybody sees the verb as the most important part of the speech. Actually, although the noun holds the first place in grammars, the verb is first when it comes to structuring phrases: troops of adverbs and conjunctions bestow the right to command on the verb.

The most eloquent passage on this theme is probably Epist. III, 104-111:

> *Status igitur uerbi hic est, quod omnis dictio atque ratio uel sententia usque ad uerbi locutionem differtur et quodammodo mutificatur:* ***Sicut usque ad regis sententiam auctoritatemque nulla populus pope uti potest, nihil loquela, nihil numerositas consiliumque proficit, ita etiam uniuersae orationis partes, licet numerosae sint et clarae, nisi tamen verbum adfuerit, ifirmantur et nullificantur.***
>
> The status [role, condition] of the verb is such that every phrase, thought or statement is somehow suspended and silenced until the verb is made explicit. Common people, although eloquent, in big number or wise, are totally subject to the king's authoritative opinion; in the same way, all the parts of speech, even if

[33] Virgilius' familiarity with the notion of monarchy and its generally positive connotation has been used to try to date Virgilius, although quite unsuccessfully. Cfr. Herren 1979, pp. 42-47.

> numerous and clear in their meaning, are almost weakened and annihilated until the verb shows up.

The universe here reflected is a *kosmos*, a reality ordered in both socio-political and ontological terms. Shortly after, Virgilius rounds off his reflections on the *status verbi* by quoting the "well-known" scholar Originis Africanus, Epist. III, 134-138:

> *Sicut et Originis Africanus in quodam uolumine super statu hominis edito sic fatus est:* Hominis, *inquiens*, status si coepto permaneat, **nihil instabilitatis habebit, sed inmotabilis quodam modo et aeternus aestimabitur**.
>
> As Originis Africanus said in a book on the human condition: *If human beings keep sticking to their original purpose, their condition will not be precarious, but it will be regarded as unalterable and, in a way, eternal.*

The insistence on *stabilitas* goes hand in hand with the essentialist thinking that grounds the equation *verbum* = *rex*. True, Originis Africanus' statement is about "human beings", not about "grammar", but a sort of continuum between grammar and anthropology/cosmology is one of the most conspicuous trademarks of the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*.[34]

It is not difficult to hear some echoes of the most wide-spread, top-down world views common in Antiquity and Late Antiquity in the *elogium* of the *status verbi*. Our aim is to investigate how such imagery, replete with phantasms of *order*, *stability*, and *autocracy*, turns out to be blatantly contradicted by Virgilius' writing. Though, before seeking points of friction, let us continue reviewing the different shapes this imagery can assume.

Another obvious example of *straight imagery* is provided in the section of the first *epistola* (*De nomine*), which discusses the *casus accusativus*, Epist. I, 304-315:

> *Nunc de accusatiuo casu. Videtur mihi accusatiuus casus inter ceteros aliquid habere* ***cuiusdam praelatiuae firmitatis****, sicut et inter ceteras uerborum significationes actiuum uerbum. Unde et nonnulli ueterum [estimabant] accusatiuum cassum [uerbo actiuo] non nisi* ***de genere masculino*** *sumi omnino debere statuebant. Cuius quaestionis solutio haec erit:* ***Genus masculinum dicitur omne quod firmum est; unde et fortes feminae dicuntur <uiri>; unde et Rithea, Nini regis uxor, suis clientibus dicebat:*** **Nolite me dicere feminam, quia vir sum.** ***Hoc autem dicimus ut sciamus, quid sit accusatiuus de genere masculino****.*

[34] As well as of Late Antiquity in general. Cfr. Amsler's reflections on late antique etymological thinking, esp. Amsler 1989, pp. 44-53, 118-132. On Isidore of Seville's linkage of grammar and anthropology, see Gasti 1998; and Henderson 2007, pp. 121-148.

> Now let us move to the accusative case. It seems to me that the accusative case is the only one to show a sort of firmness that makes it superior to the other cases, very much like transitive verbs do if compared to other verbal forms. As a consequence, some ancient grammarians assumed that no other accusative than the masculine could be used with transitive verbs. The reason goes as follows: whatever is firm and strong is called masculine; that's why strong women are called <men>; that's also why Rithea, king Ninos's wife, used to say to her courtiers: *Don't call me a woman, since I'm a man*. I said this in order to prove what the masculine accusative is.

Firmness (*firmitas*) and primacy (*praelatiuae firmitatis*) are here explicitly gendered: *masculinity* emerges as the natural place of *stabilitas* and contributes to further outlining the shape of the *kosmos*.

As this reference to virility helps to clarify, a relevant role in the pursuit of order is played by the principle of *verticality*. This whole universe could be described, indeed, as a set of verticalities, each one ordering the field of politics, gender, epistemology, grammar and so on. Verticality is at its most active in the very first *epitoma*, *De sapientia*, a text which, in many respects, sets the tone for the entire collection. Virgilius opens the epitome by opposing earthly (*tellea*) and heavenly (*aetrea*) wisdom, Epit. I, 14-18:

> *Haec sapientia biformis est:* ***aetrea telleaque****, hoc est* ***humilis*** *et* ***sublimis****; humilis quidem, quae de humanis rebus tractat, sublimis uero, quae ea quae super hominem sunt internat ac pandit.*
>
> This wisdom is of two kinds: earthly and heavenly, that is, humble and sublime; the humble one deals with human things, the sublime one can penetrate and disclose whatever transcends the human dimension.

Such a polarisation is obviously traditional.[35] Moreover, it constitutes the conceptual basis for the *visio Tarquini*, a sort of visionary overture introducing the world of the *Epistolae* (Epist. Praef. 1-23). Virgilius claims to have found in some Greek *historiae* (*in Graecorum legimus historiis*) the story of a certain Persian *vates* called Tarquinius who used to write his prophecies down on *tabellae* and *codiculi* without publishing them before they proved true. One of the unpublished predictions ran, Epist. Praef., 15-23:

[35] Cfr. for instance the paradigmatic exordium of Seneca's *Quaestiones Naturales*, 1, 1, where philosophy is strictly separated from the other disciplines to be then split into two parts, one dealing with human things, the other with divine objects: *Quantum inter philosophiam interest, Lucili uirorum optime, et ceteras artes, tantum interesse existimo in ipsa philosophia, inter illam partem quae ad homines, et hanc quae ad deos, spectat.*

> *Vidi [ait uatis] inmensum flumen* ***de celo fluens alto****, et hoc flumen uinum erat. Alium quoque riuulum uidi* ***e terrae manantem petris****, et hic riuulus aque erat; tum orto iubari solis raptus est ille riuulus obuiam flumini ab alto labenti, et collecti <duo> in unum fluuii uinum effecti sunt.* ***Et unum erat flumen aetrium implens ac tellurem****, in quo innumeri agni et vituli ludebant bibentesque ex eo inebriati ephitalamium canebant, et eorum audita uoce caelum ac terra pariter laetata sunt.*
>
> I saw [says the prophet] an immense river flowing from the height of the sky, and it was made of wine. I also saw another river, small, gushing from the stones of the ground, and it was made of water; then, flowing from the east, the small river ran against the river from the sky, they merged, and they became one single river made of wine. And now there was but one earthly river flooding everywhere, in which lambs and calves were playing and drinking and, drunk as they were, they sang epithalamia – heaven and earth rejoiced at their voices.

In Virgilius' interpretation of the *vaticinatio* (Epist. Praef. 24-36), the "heavenly-wine river" stands for Christ and the Holy Scriptures, while the "earthly-water river" can be identified with the *philosophiae eloquentiola*; their convergence represents the conjunction of mundane and religious wisdom giving birth to a new, joyful dimension of knowledge, as embodied by Virgilius' addressee, the deacon Iulius, an erudite in both the secular and religious domains (Epist. Praef. 37-43). The final image of hybridization (that is, the christological interlacing of heaven and earth, wine and water), though invested with a positive and overtly eschatological meaning, rests nonetheless on an original, irreducible bipolarity.

That this dichotomy is clearly *oriented* emerges, again, through Virgilius' emphasis on the idea of *progression*: not only is human knowledge organised along a line that moves from earth to heaven but no step of such ladder to wisdom can be skipped or reversed in sequence, Epit. I, 19-24:

> ***Nemo sane in hac me carpat pada, quod ueluti praeposterato telleam aetreae ordine antetulerim, cum scandentium hic mos sit, ut ab inferioribus incipiant et ad superiora scalatim perfendiant****; unde et conparationum gradus hac moda ponimus, ut primum possitiuum acsi decelsiorem, dein conparatiuum, exhinc superlatiuum ordiamus.*
>
> Let nobody blame me for subverting the established order and placing earthly wisdom before heavenly wisdom, since it is normal to progress step by step from the bottom to the top, just like people climbing a ladder; the same principle lies at the basis of the degrees of comparison, which we order as follows: the positive - as if it were the lowest one - then the comparative, and, at the top, the superlative.

With a typical movement, grammar becomes a mirror for the world, and vice versa.

The insistence on the gap between earthly and heavenly knowledge, *philosophia* and *Hebreorum leges* (Epit. I, 31-33), has led some scholars to locate Virgilius in the centuries-long debate about the place of pagan mundane culture in a christianized world.[36] His final utterance, *Non audemus tamen decelsis celsa subicere* ("we don't dare to subdue what is higher to what is lower", Epit. I, 33) could well be read as a programmatic statement, but we do not need to be reminded that a parodic reading would ask us to ironize and subvert it. At any rate, what should be taken into account is that Virgilius' world, be it on a "merely" *imaginary* register, is not only epistemologically split from within, but this same fissure, predictably enough, is said to be found in the nature of man: *Haec ergo pars sapientiae, quae humilis est, sublimi servire debet, sicut et plastum afflae* ("Thus, this part of wisdom, which is lower, must serve the sublime one, just like the body serves the soul", Epit. I, 27-29).[37]

"*Plastum*" (body) and "*affla*" (soul), two typically Virgilian words, summarize a fundamental dualism (or in Virgilius' case, as we shall see, triadism) no less effectively than the opposition "earth" / "heaven", and they imbue one of the most abundantly attested parallels in the history of grammar with a Virgilian allure: human being vs letters.[38] At Epit. II, 21-27 we read:

[36] See Law 1995, pp. 47-71; and Naismith 2009.

[37] To account for the long story of the dualism between body and soul here is impossible. Suffice it to recall that Vivien Law rightly pointed to the coexistence, in Virgilius, of this bipartite model (body/soul) with a tripartite one (body/soul/spirit), Law 1995, pp. 57-76. She stressed the potentially "revolutionary" implications of Virgilius' standpoint in a context in which the tripartite doctrine was (possibly) regarded as dangerous and "heretical" (cfr. the resolutely dualist model of Isidore, *Etym*. XI, 6 ss.). In her view, Virgilius' choice should be read "in the service of his programme of fostering an atmosphere sympathetic to intellectual multiplicity" (59). The present analysis is not meant to reject Law's claim so much as to highlight that, be it tripartite or bipartite, the models proposed by Virgilius remain strictly *hierarchical*, and therefore, at least to a certain extent, operate under the sign of *singularity*. For a history of *anima* and *spiritus* in the Christian milieu that is still very valuable, see Verbeke 1945, pp. 387-510, to be integrated with Law's remarks on post-Augustinian disputes, pp. 63-66. See also Dupuis 1967, pp. 36-57 and Crouzel 1981 for a discussion of Origen's trichotomic model. On anthropology and psychology in Isidore of Seville, see Gasti 1998.

[38] Cfr. Law 1995, p. 57 n. 3, where a short list of patristic and grammatical texts on the topic is provided. Law traces the parallel back to Aug. *De quantitate animae* XXXIII, 66; another canonical *locus* is Pris. *Instit*., 13, 21-27. A comparison between vowels and the five senses is made at Epit. XI, 215-217; see also the aforementioned Epit. VI, 3-17 for grammatical phenomena explained through bodily metaphors. For the deconstruction of this model, see *infra* pp. 47-48. The relationship between letters and macro/microcosms lay at the core of treatises of the kind represented by the so-called *On the Mystery of Letters*, see Brandt 2007. The notion of God's Truth as a "body of letters" can be shown to be relevant to gnostic thinking, for instance in Marcus Gnosticus' doctrine as we read it in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1, 13-20. See Stroumsa 2016, pp. 108-120, and, for the Platonic context, Oberhammer 2016.

Et ut aliquid intimatius aperiam, ***littera mihi uidetur humanae condicionis esse similis****: sicut enim homo* ***plasto*** *et* ***affla*** *at quodam* ***celesti igne*** *consistit, ita et littera suo* ***corpore*** *(hoc est figura, arte ac ditione uelut quisdam conpagibus, arcubusque) suffunta est,* ***animam*** *habens in sensu,* ***spiridionem*** *in superiori contemplatione.*

And to make my inmost thoughts more evident, it seems to me that the letter and the human condition are quite similar: just as human beings consist of body, soul, and a kind of celestial fire, in the same way the letter can rely on its form as on its body (position and sound function as jointures and articulations); its meaning corresponds to the soul, while the celestial fire can be found in the higher degree of contemplative speculation that the letter can spawn.

The link between letters and the human constitution is made possible by their common hierarchical structure.

Virgilius develops his anthropological model further in the fourth epitoma by offering the reader a fully-fledged psychological theorization. Epit. IV, *De metris*, includes a long digression (for once signalled as such by the author himself) in which Virgilius expounds his own "encyclopaedic" system by way of commenting on the various *genera philosophiae* (Epit. IV, 119). Having provided a cursory definition of *philosophia* (*philosophia quidam est amor et intentio sapientiae, quae fons et matrix est omnis artis ac disciplinae*, "philosophy is a form of love and constant proclivity to wisdom, which is the source and the matrix of any art and doctrine") and having reasserted its duplicity (*sive celesti sive terrestri*, "heavenly or earthly"), the author gives a list of the *studia* of the *artes* (*mulae philosophiae*)[39]: *poema*, *rehtoria*, *gramma*, *leporia*, *dialecta*, *geometria*, and *astronomia*. It is not by chance that the *explanatio astronomiae* (242-262) transitions seamlessly, after a usual remark on the untenability of astrology (stars cannot exert any influence on human life, since this is a prerogative of the Creator, God), into a more general statement on the ultimate goal of all wisdom, Epit. IV, 262-269:

Omnis igitur humana industria, omnis ad hoc spectat sapientia, ***ut de inferioribus ad superiora conscendat****, quo scilicet naturalem omnium rerum notitiam, hoc est* ***fisicam****, disputans,* ***ethicam*** *quoque, quae ad morum emulumenta pertenditur, legitime transcendens,* ***logicam*** *ipsam, hoc est rationabilem supernarum rerum attinguat disputationem.*

[39] Here, as in other *loci*, the editor's choice strongly impacts the text: Löfstedt has chosen *mulae* instead of the far less expressive *multae*, the lectio attested in Virgilius' most complete manuscripts (the Neapolitan *N* and the Parisian *P*).

> All human effort, all human wisdom aims at rising from lower things to higher ones, so that we transcend the discussion of natural things, i.e physics, to get to ethics, which deals with the refinement of our behaviours, and we finally reach logic, that is the rational discussion of the highest subjects.

The tripartite ascensional scheme here outlined is applied shortly after to the most accurate discussion of human condition to be found in the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*, Epit. IV, 270-295:

> *Illud quoque omni sapienti sciendum atque scrutandum est, quomodo et qualiter sese plastus homo habeat, qui primum plastum ex limo, dein afflam ex superioribus et haec ineffabiliter coniuncta habet, dissimili natura in semet ipso perfruens.* ***Plastum*** *quidem quasi* ***materia uiliore*** *conpactum, utpute ex liquidis et aridis, frigidis et calidis rebus conexum, in famulatum sibi* ***affla****, quae est* ***anima****, nouerit deputatum. Sed quia anima ad hoc tantum imperat* ***corpori****, ut animet sicut et omnia animantia, ergo, nisi haec anima* ***mentem et rationem*** *habuerit, nihil ab animantibus differ, quae motu utroque carent.* ***Sicut anima corpori, ita et mens animae et ratio praesulat menti****. 'Mens' enim de metiendo dicta, quandam subtiliorum sensuum mensuram aperit animae, in quam capacitate tali quadam facta superior ratio infussa perfecte eam sapire facit in cunctis.* ***Secundum triplicem ergo sapientiae quam diximus regulam triplex quoque in homine status est: Anima quidem naturalia sapit, in qua est et ingenium de ingenuitate creationis creatoris sibi insertum ac nominatum; mens autem moralia intellegit, in qua est memoria, qua uisa et audita tenaciter memorat et in ipsa uelut in quodam integro uasse congregans innumeris cogitationibus scatet; ratio uero superiora et caelestia perlustrans intellectum quodam modo ignitum flammosumque possidet.***

> Every wise man should try to know and find out how and of what parts the human being is composed; first of all, human beings have a body that derives from the earth, then a soul that comes from heaven, and these two components, inexplicably enough, are bound together, so that human beings show a very contradictory nature in themselves. The body is made of humble materials – liquid and dry, hot and warm elements –, and it does know that it is inferior to the soul, which is a heavenly breath. But if the soul's effects on the body were limited to animating the body and if the soul did not have a mind or any rational component, then no difference would be seen between human beings and any other living creature lacking both mind and reason. Just like the body is subject to the soul, so is the soul subject to the mind and to reason. 'Mind' [*mens*] comes from 'measuring' [*metiendo*], since it discloses to the soul the finest nuances of perception, and it is only later that reason, which is even more refined, enables the mind to understand everything. Thus, the tripartite structure of the human being corresponds to the tripartite structure of wisdom: the soul knows natural things – which includes what is called 'ingenium', deriving its

> name from the nobility [*ingenuitate*] of its Creator. The mind knows ethical objects – which includes memory, through which it can recall whatever has been heard or seen and, like a full vase, is replete with countless thoughts. Finally, reason can deal with superior and heavenly objects thanks to its intellectual power, which is subtle and penetrating like fire.

What Virgilius proposes is nothing less than an umpteenth variation on the articulation of the relationship between knowing subject and known object and the ensuing hierarchy of sciences:

Gradient of refinement

anima	***mens***	***ratio***
ingenium	*memoria*	*intellectus*
naturalia	*moralia*	*superna*
fisica	***ehtica***	***logica***

This system recalls many other *progressive* models; its progression is based on the congruence of *micro*- and *macrocosm*.[40] Aptly enough, the whole digression concludes with an eloquent description of man as *mundus minor* (Epit. IV, 295-319): the binary *Weltanschauung* is thus completed.[41]

In such a *kosmos*, *measure* and *coherence* cannot but gain in importance, both on a moral and a cognitive level. If the field of grammar may turn into a veritable battlefield, the words Virgilius puts into the mouth of a certain Lupus, an Athenian Christian grammarian known for his expertise in verbs, sound like a *vademecum* for surviving such intellectual war by resorting to rational weapons, Epist. III, 344-352:[42]

[40] Cfr. among others Aug. *De trin.* IX 1-4, XIV 1-3; *De civ*. VIII 6. See in general Law 1995, pp. 62-71. Law 1995 calls this tripartition "obscure", p. 136 n. 57. It parallels many other tripartite schemes which arrive into medieval medical theories, up to the revival of pneumatology in the eleventh century. Most of the (*lato sensu*) Aristotelian physicians distinguished three progressively more refined spirits: the *natural spirit*, the *vital spirit*, and the *animal spirit*. See Agamben 1993 [1977], pp. 94-95.

[41] For the phrasing *mundus minor* cfr., among others, Arnobius, *Advers.* II 25, p. 95 l. 14; Fulgent. *Myt*., *De art*., II p.137 l. 14, III p. 141 l. 10.

[42] Cfr. Epist. III, 238-243: *De his formis uerborum inter Regulum Cappadocum et Sedulum Romanum non minima quaestio habita est, quae usque ad gladiorum pene conflictum peruenit* (''Regulus of Cappadocia and Sedulus of Rome had no small argument on these verbal forms, a dispute which almost degenerated into a duel with swords''). See also Desbordes 1989, p. 148: "Virgile part lui aussi de la grammaire classique et il en cherche les raison: ratio est son maître mot".

> *Variis [inquit], fili, opinationibus non satis credas, quia tam multae sunt quam et cogitationes hominum. Lege ergo singulorum libros et scrutare et considera et uide quid in eis* ***congruatum*** *atque* ***unanime*** *(ut ita dicam) quidue diuisum ac desentiuum, et* ***quicquid concors et cosentiuum inueneris, hoc suge in corde tuo ueluti quoddam salubre ac suaue uinum infunde****; quicquid autem discors ac desentiuum repperieris, uelut uenenosum ac toxicum penitus euita.*
>
> Son, don't trust all diverse opinions, since they are as many as the thoughts of men. Read everyone's books, examine them, reflect upon them, and try to work out on which points they seem to agree or, on the contrary, to dissent, and pick up just what they agree on, take it as if you were drinking a healthy and sweet wine; dismiss their points of dissent as if they were toxic and poisonous.

The search for what is *congruatum*, *unanime*, *concors*, and *consentiuum*, though representing an implicit admission of the chaotic state of grammar as discipline, is nonetheless exemplary of a trust in *organizatory principles*, in the existence of a red-thread that might lead out of a maze of pure linguistic potentialities. [43] The possibility of *closure*, of *finitude* (measure) as a guarantee for the intelligibility of any given system, crops up at different moments.[44] Most interestingly, a praise of disambiguation can to be found in a section that is unanimously regarded as highly "Virgilian", the notorious *Epitoma X*, *De scinderatione fonorum*, 100-103:

> *Sciat unusquisque scindentium peritorum hoc in primis curare se debere, ut* ***quaecumque sic scindat, soluitio probet, quomodo scindat. Non enim recte solui a quodam potest, quod non recte praeponitur.***

[43] Cfr. the very explicit statement at Epist. VI, 51-55: *Mirandum autem, immo deflendum est totoque lugendum affectu, quod cum ceterae orationis partes tum maxime coniunctiones confusae et circumiectae sint, in tantum <ut> inter causales et rationales nulla pene distantia sit* ("It is not only hard to believe, but even regrettable and totally deplorable that conjunctions, just like other parts of speech, are confused and scattered to such extent that it makes it very difficult to tell causal conjunctions from rational conjunctions"). De Nonno 2017, pp. 239-240 points out that non-dogmatic grammarians have always tried to face up to *quaestiones de dubio sermone* by resorting to "variable-geometry systems" ("sistemi a geometria variabile") in which the principles of *consuetudo*, *auctoritas* and *ratio* are made to freely interact - a sort of geometry of chaos.

[44] The risk of a potentially infinite *regressio etymologica* was notably one of the main arguments in Augustine's critique of etymology, considered as a solid ground for epistemology, a mistrust that led him to situate linguistic origin beyond language itself. Cfr. Amsler 1988, pp. 51-53. On Augustine's "restricted relativism", see Carlo Ginzburg's discussion of *De doc. Chr*. III.14.22 in Ginzburg 2010, p.76 ff.

> An expert in word-scrambling should always take care to provide a key to decode the scramble. In fact, no scrambling can be solved if it is not presented in a convenient way.

The "scrambling of words", this passage seems to imply, must remain within the boundaries of intelligibility. Virgilius outlines a "deontology of the scrambler", an ethics for linguistic jugglers, which can be condensed into the slogan: "*there must be a solution*". In other words, in this passage Virgilius pronounces himself against an infinite drift of meaning.

A penchant towards closed signifying constructs emerges no less vividly in a motto Virgilius attributes to Felix Alexander, *Agenorum magister*, Epit. IV, 137-139:

> Unaquaque, *inquiens*, ars intra suas conteniatur metas, ne adulteretur disciplina maiorum et nos apud eos accusare cogatur*.*
>
> *Let every art contain itself within its own boundaries,* he said*, so that the doctrine of our fathers won't be contaminated and we won't be culpable in their eyes*.

Shortly thereafter, the *metae* that shape and identify the various disciplinary domains reverberate in the etymology Virgilius gives for *mens*, in the above mentioned anthropological passage, Epit. IV, 270-295: *'Mens' enim de mensura dicta* ("'Mind' thus comes from 'measure'").[45] *Measure* is thus one of the many hypostasies of the order with which we began our analysis. This appears very clearly in meta-grammatical reflections such as the following, Epit. VII, 31-35:

> *Ita et verbum quoque ex qualitate ordiendum est, quae ex modis ac formis uelut quibusdam certis limitibus determinatur; modus enim non aliud quam certam mensuram significat. Ex his itaque modis tractatum incipiamus habere.*
>
> Verbs should also be ordered according to their quality, which is defined by modes and forms in precise terms; actually, 'mode' does not mean anything but 'measure'. Thus, let us start the present treatise by dealing with modes.

Virgilius has no problem dismissing a theory he does not like by accusing it of running *contra omnem ordinem rationemque* (Epist. I, 111-112).

[45] Isidore, Etym., XI 12 focuses on *memoria* and *eminere* instead.

Felix Alexander's *praeceptum* adds a further element to the range of *ordines* we are looking for, and a very significant one when it comes to grammar: *authority.*[46]

What is meant here by *authority* does not exactly coincide with *auctoritas*, that is to say, with the criteria that have defined *latinitas* since Varro (at least).[47] Although the list of these criteria varies slightly over time (the Varronian *natura*, *analogia*, *consuetudo*, *auctoritas*; Quintilian's 1. 6. 1-3 *ratio*, *vetustas*, *auctoritas*, *consuetudo* etc…) and despite some oscillations in meaning, *auctoritas* can be conveniently described by resorting to the definition transmitted by Charisius, *GL* 1.15.8-12:

> *Auctoritas in regula loquendi nouissima est: namque ubi omnia defecerint sic ad illam quem ad modum ad aram sacram decurritur; non enim quicquam aut rationis aut naturae aut consuetudinis habet: tantum opinione oratorum recepta est, qui et ipsi cur id secuti essent, si fuissent interrogati, nescire se confiterentur.*
>
> When establishing the rules of a language, authority is the last principle we can adopt: after all other principles have proved useless, one can resort to it as to a consecrated altar; its argumentative strength does not rely on reason, nature or linguistic habits: it is exclusively based on the opinion of rhetors who, if asked about the reasons for their linguistic choice, will probably admit that they have no idea.

Significantly enough, *auctoritas* designates what falls out of any rational inference and can be justified on the sole basis of being attested in some authoritative text. The arbitrariness of this procedure is made even clearer by the circular formulation it takes on in the *Ars Sancti Augustini*, I:[48]

> *Latinitas est observatio incorrupte loquendi secundum Romanam linguam. Constat autem modis tribus, id est ratione, auctoritate, consuetudine […] auctoritate secundum eorum scripta quibus ipsa est auctoritas adtributa.*

[46] See De Nonno 2017, pp. 221-235. On the merging of *antiquitas* and *auctoritas* in Nonius Marcellus' *De compendiosa doctrina*, see Chahoud 2007, pp. 79-81. Cfr. also Law 1995, pp.79-82. On *auctoritas* and *origo*, see Bracken 2006, pp. 9-10.

[47] On the difficulty of pinning down Varro's exact words, see De Nonno 2017, p. 231. n. 71. On the history and oscillations of *latinitas* as a model of cultural and linguistic identity, see Desbordes 1989.

[48] These are very Augustinian ideas indeed. Cfr. *De doc. Chr.*2.19: *Quid est ergo integritas locutionis, nisi alienae consuetudinis conservatio, loquentium veterum auctoritate firmatae?* ("What then is purity of speech except the preserving of customs different to ours, established by the authority of former speakers?"). See De Nonno 2017, pp. 229 ff.; Law 1990; *Ead.* 1995, p. 80. See Pollmann 1996, p. 153 for Augustine's merging of *auctoritas* and *consuetudo*.

> Latinitas can be defined as the way of speaking correctly in accordance with the rules of the Roman language. It is based on three principles, reason, authority and habit […] authority is based on those works to which authority itself is attributed.

In the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*, *authority* subsumes all *verticalities* under a single category: indeed, *authority* structures hierarchy and establishes order, while at the same time pointing to their conventional nature.

In a passage from the first epistle, Virgilius urges his reader Iulius not to dismiss apparently wrong word-combinations such as *hoc arbor* and *hoc lapis* when they are anciently attested, though not by an "undoubted author", Epist. I, 44-50:

> *Moneo itaque te, o frater carissime, ut, quamuis non hac nunc consuetudine scribendi utamur,* ***tamen quia hoc apud ueteres pro recto habebatur, si quid forte huius modi scriptum repperieris, licet non ad indubitatam auctoritatem referendum putes, tamen quod a ueteribus usurpatum est, reprehendere omnino non debes.***
>
> Let me remind you, my dear brother, that, even if we no longer write in this way today, since the ancients thought that it was acceptable, you should not rebuke them if they use a linguistic form which cannot be found in unquestionably authoritative texts.

The *ueteres* seem thus to bear a sort of inherent authority, Epist. III, 352-359:

> *Vnde et ego hoc inserui, ut in ratione verborum, quaecumque a maioribus ac ueteribus inserta sunt, libenter suscipiatis. Quae autem media sunt et quodam modo in ambiguo posita, hoc nec refutabis nec adfirmabis, etsi scriptum audieris, non contendes, utrum ad indubitatam auctoritatem aut ad ambiguum exemplum.*
>
> I added this information to enable you to pick up whatever you want from what the ancients have said about the verb. Moreover, you will neither reject nor confirm those forms that might seem to be ambiguous, and if you hear them written, you won't wonder whether they are to be taken as proof of unquestionable authority or as examples of ambiguity.

In spite of all the anti-archaistic trends that can be found in the history of grammar, Virgilius is consistent with later attitudes according to which the past is *per se* authoritative, an idea he conveys at many different points in his work: *et ne unius tantum utamur exemplo, quod a nostris maioribus plerumque uetitum est…* ("and not to limit myself to one single example (which was forbidden by our fathers)…," Epit. VII, 96-97); *multa de impersonali modo dixere ueteres, ex quibus pauca promam* ("The ancients wrote

a lot about the impersonal form, but I am going to deal with few points…," Epit. VII, 113-114).[49]

Of the most notoriously striking features of Virgilius' writing is his taste for biographical and autobiographical anecdotes, and the essential role played by the teacher-pupil relationship in the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae.*[50] The world Virgilius portrays is characterised by an utmost respect for disciples and their masters – in this sense, Virgilius' love for his own teacher, Aeneas, is exemplarily proposed as a model worthy of imitation. Aeneas and his colleagues (and forerunners) make up a gallery of authoritative figures: *Ego Aeneam, quem falli in nulla erat possibile ratione, sequens confidenter assero*…("In the wake of Aeneas, who could in no way be wrong, I argue that…," Epit. V, 103-105). A faithful disciple and a scrupulous grammarian, Virgilius never stops underlining his dependence on previous doctrines and/or theories: *sed haec licet indubitatam nobis auctoritatem non exhibeant, tamen quia a plerisque gnarissimis uiris ussurpata sunt, apertam diffessionem inferre non debent* ("but, even though these phenomena are not supported by an unquestionable authority, we should not reject them, since they are attested by many highly competent writers," Epit. V, 112-115); *nos autem sequentes doctorum scita, non uulgaribus opinionibus adducimur* ("but, by following in the footsteps of erudite men, we don't fall prey to vulgar opinions," Epit. V, 297-298); *sed ego Gratiano magistro fretus, cuius in scola decim annos, hoc ita statui* ("I'm arguing this relying on my teacher Gratianus, whose school I attended for ten years," Epit. VIII, 136-137). As noted before, the continual tension between potential chaos (in the form, for example, of countless, disparate explanations of the same grammatical phenomenon)[51] and normative order, a tension that permeates the whole history of grammar, finds convenient expression in Virgilius'

[49] Cfr. Law 1995, p. 79. For the complex relationship between *antiquitas* and *auctoritas* in ancient grammar, see De Nonno 2017 and Chahoud 2007.

[50] Cfr. Law 1995, pp. 27-29. The most obvious result of this tendency is Epit. XII, the *catalogus grammaticorum*.

[51] Cfr. Epist. II, 117 ff.: *Est pronomen, de quo dubitatio magna habetur, utrum finitum an infinitum sit, ut iste. Nonnulli etenim infinitum esse cum quadam diffensionis suae auctoritate hortantur…*("It is highly controversial whether *iste* should be considered as a definite or an indefinite pronoun. Some grammarians argue that it is indefinite and support this theory through authoritative examples…"); Epist. III, 750 ff.: *Inchohatio in una tantum uerbi forma habetur, quae forma ob hoc inchohatiua dicitur, quia praeteritum tempus non habeat, ut calesco. Quamquam multi Latinorum diffinite affirment nullum uerbum fieri debere, quod prateritum tempus non habeat…* ("There is but one inchoative form, which is called this precisely because it lacks the past form, as we can observe in *calesco*. And yet, some Latinists purport that it is impossible that a verb does not have a past form…").

textuality: his ostentatious search for the *ratio* underlying each and every grammatical issue ends up in an apology of the most arbitrary ordering criterion, *auctoritas*.[52]

What we hope to have shown is that because of an overwhelming presence within Virgilius' discourse of an *ideology of power* (based on *order*, *hierarchy*, *authority*, and easily formalized into what we called *verticalities*), the text, even at a "literal level", is capable of alerting the reader to the arbitrariness of this very same power, or, at least, of the circularity of its pretensions. It is worth stressing that the reader we are talking about is not an *ironic* one (nor, for that matter, a *parodic* one): on the contrary, this particular process of inherent contradiction is especially effective for those readers who are ready to take Virgilius "seriously".

1.3 Towards…what?

Françoise Desbordes has rightly drawn attention to the almost obsessive rationality displayed by this author, who has often been labelled a "fool", but it is to Vivien Law that we owe a more detailed analysis of the effects of ambiguity produced by Virgilius' way of dealing with rationality and authority.[53] In particular, she has singled out some passages from Epist. III*, De verbo*, that merit further attention: 185-187: *Quod quia nulla ueritate subnixum atque suffultum est,* ***non ad auctoritatem, sed ad ambiguitatem scribendum est*** ("Though, since this phenomenon cannot be positively proved to be correct, if we find it in texts, that is not because of any authoritative witness, but because of the ambiguity of the language"); 355-356: *Quae autem media sunt et quodam modo* ***in ambiguo posita****, hoc nec refutabis nec adfirmabis, et si scriptum audieris,* ***non contendes, utrum ad indubitatam auctoritatem aut ad ambiguum sumatur exemplum*** ("you will neither reject nor confirm those forms that might seem to be ambiguous, and if you hear of them written, you won't wonder whether they are to be taken as proof of unquestionable

[52] Cfr. Baratin 1996, pp. 255-257: "la grammaire antique se présente comme la rationalisation d'une accumulation […] la grammaire est la science de cette diversité qui est née de l'accumulation, mais pour dire cette diversité, ou bien elle ne fait que la répéter, et elle ne sert à rien, ou bien elle la systématise, et, du coup, elle ne la dit plus […] l'idée même de système généralisé, susceptible de transcender l'infinie diversité apparue concrètement avec l'accumulation de textes, aboutit, à travers sa recuperation scolaire, à server de reflet à une bibliothèque limitée". Virgilian grammar can also be regarded as a means to transcending these limitations.

[53] Cfr. Desbordes 1985, p. 148: "Virgile part lui aussi de la grammaire classique et en cherche les raisons: *ratio* est son maître mot. Mais ce faisant il met au jour les contradictions de la grammaire et, volontairement ou non, les approfondit au point de les render irréductible".

authority or as examples of ambiguity"); etc. "Ambiguity," Law sums up, "is pointed out repeatedly, instilling insidious doubt into the reader's mind. If a grammarian cannot convey confidence in authority, who can? By his very inconsistency Virgilius signals his view: authority is (as a rule) as inappropriate a means of settling linguistic disputes as it is in other situations. Ambiguity, which after all is simply another sort of plurality, is as mighty a force in language as in other spheres of activity."[54]

Nonetheless, as we have seen, authority *is* also ambiguity, they are two sides of the same coin. In a similar way, the aporetic redundancy of Virgilius' linguistic analysis seems both to brim with erudition (authority) and to mock the numbing effects erudition might engender (ambiguity): an excess of cultural authority turns into its reversal, obtuseness.[55] One could go so far as to argue that ambiguity is employed as a *stylistic* tool, as the *basso-continuo* of a writing style that inevitably becomes more and more ambiguous as it boasts of "grammatical" exactness and exhaustiveness – repletion and numbing repetition loom everywhere in the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*.

The relationship between repetition and parodic attitude has been extensively investigated. Olbrechts-Tyteca quotes two well-known lines from *Hamlet* as an example (Act II, Scene II):

King: "Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern''
Queen: "Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz"

The comic effect, Olbrecht-Tyteca maintains, is here produced by means of the disruption of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz's individualities: comicality substitutes previous uniqueness (in this case, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz being considered as distinct

[54] Law 1995, pp. 81-82.

[55] A highly productive obtuseness nevertheless. Such a procedure is well known in literary history and became a favourite aesthetic gesture of Modernism, and its precursors. Cfr. Jonathan Culler's discussion on erudition and *stupidity* in Flaubert's *La tentation de Saint Antoine*, Culler 2006 [1974], p. 184: "The attitude of mind which makes the vast collection of heresies, theories, images, and objects into instances of stupidity does not dispense with them but makes them more powerful as temptations, since in them the mind can attain the kind of exaltation and freedom which Antoine expresses in his final paragraph. The supreme accomplishment of stupidity as both a property of objects and a mode of vision would be to overcome all alienation by making the actual forms of the world disappear and allowing the mind itself to create the world out a universal and undifferentiated matter." See also Sianne Ngai on *stuplimity* as a conflation of *stupidity* and *sublimity*, Ngai 2007, pp. 248-297: "stuplimity drags us downward into the realms of words rather than transporting us upward toward an unrepresentable divine", p. 263. Among late antique grammarians, Pompeius (not by chance compared to Virgilius, see *infra* p. 50) provides a suitable example, Holtz 1981, p. 236: "Pompée, par son laisser-aller, sa volumineuse enflure, sa vacuité, représente dans la si riche littérature technique des Africains un cas-limite. Les règles de grammaire deviennent l'occasion de discussions à perte de vue sur des points de detail. Discussions passionnées sur des sujets futiles ou irréels".

persons) through a new and *displaced* unity (Guildenstern and Rosencrantz becoming interchangeable, one and the same thing). In such "*comic du lieu de l'unique*" lies much of the efficacy of parody.[56] In his *Vorschule der Aesthetik,* Jean Paul had already observed that if it was true that a detail in someone's face could turn into something comical if transferred to another person's face, two completely identical brothers were more likely to cause fear than amusement.[57] The German writer had thus already fully grasped the Freudian *uncanniness* often implied by repetition. Parody, as a form of repetition, can be no less uncanny.[58]

Paola Mildonian, commenting on mimetic writing modes (pastiche, cento etc.), goes further in this direction: parody, being based on repetition and therefore being in essence self-reflexive, should be aligned with what Hans Bloomenberg once dubbed "forms of *Nachdenklichkeit*" (thoughtfulness)[59] – parody is a gesture of epistemological introversion that causes the reader's (listener's, beholder's) attention to shift from the present text to another one, creating not only an intertextual space, but also an intratextual one, a fissure *within* the text.[60] Just like allegory, parody exploits the multiple meaning of words: by pointing to its potential multifariousness, it distances a text from itself.[61]

And yet, to return to Virgilius, what if we had some trouble in pinning down the extent of such a ''space''? What if we are not even sure that we are dealing with a ''parody'', or whether our text is *actually* ironic and referential? The problem could tentatively be worked around by abandoning traditional definitions of parody and adopting *distancing* as a main criterion.[62]

[56] Cfr. Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974, pp. 97-98.

[57] Quoted by Olbrechts-Tyteca, p. 98 n. 13.

[58] Cfr. Hutcheon 1995, pp. 32-34; Mildonian 1997, pp. 15-19. On repetition and its paradoxical status, see Rimmon-Kenan 1980.

[59] Mildonian 1997, pp. 18-19.

[60] In this sense, parody is most explicitly *paragrammatical* (cfr. *supra* p. 28 n. 29). For a series of compelling reflections on intratextuality in ancient literature, see Sharrock 2000.

[61] In other terms, parody helps to *spatialise* the text, allowing for multiple readings and breaking down the unicity of the so-called original – in every single text, it seems to argue, many texts always coexist. Moreover, being essentially a self-aware game with codes, parody draws our attention to the arbitrariness of codes in general and reveals the piece of art for what it actually is, a *constructed object*. The word "object" is here of no less relevance than the adjective "constructed": every parody seems to perform a reifying gesture with respect to the original text. As we shall see in the case of Virgilius, this *reification* has much to do with the exuberant materiality of the signifier – words, when considered through a distancing eye, turn out to be *objects*. But reification can encompass all signifying systems. On this aspect, Mildonian 1997, p. 18 quotes an illuminating saying by the "great parodist" Stravinskij: one should not only listen to music, but also *see* it.

[62] Note the assertive tone with which Frank Wünsch begins his classification, Wünsch 1999, p. 11: "Eine parodie bezieht sich immer auf eine Vorlage (ein Original, einen Bezugstext), die sie partiell wiederholt (imitiert,

In his monograph devoted to the "impossibility of reading" in modern literature, Benjamin Bennett resorts to the concept of *intransitive parody*.[63] He defines it as "parody without an object", a text perceived by readers as referring to another text, but whose referent cannot ultimately be proved to exist. Among Bennett's examples, the most well known is probably Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. The style of the novella, rich in classicising metaphors and lavish adjectives, could be read as a parody of the protagonist's (the renowned Gustav von Aschenbach's) literary style, as far as we can infer it from the novella. Furthermore, *Death in Venice* itself seems to be the very work on Tadzio which Aschenbach could not write, producing a full list of supplemental works instead (whose titles are actually listed in Mann's narrative): what we read is thus a text which the ''author'' never really wrote, and which parodies texts that we will never read. The game is further complicated if we take *Death in Venice*'s ''real'' author into account and consider Gustav von Aschenbach as his fictional Doppelgänger.

Intransitivity, *auto-reflexivity*, and "*objectlessness*" are labels that might be easily used to approach Virgilius's writing, provided we do not succumb to the temptation of seeing them as Virgilius's programmatic goal. The very existence of a goal would posit an object, but the peculiarity of Virgilius's text lies precisely in its capability of losing itself and bringing goal-obsessed readers to the brink of exasperation. ''A self-losing text'' might actually be a way to rephrase Bennett's *intransitive parody*: a text that runs parallel to another one without ever intersecting it – plus one more fundamental condition: running text and unreachable text are one and the same.

nachahmt, nachbildet), aber gleichzeitig auch variiert (verändert, adaptiert). Die Art der Variation ist gründsäztlich abweichend, unpassend, verzerrend, und verzerrt wird immer dargestalt, daß eine komische Wirkung entsteht speziell eine komische Diskrepanz zwischen Original und Parodie". The emphasis lies quite often on *intentionality*, Wünsch 1999, p. 117: "Die komische Verzehrung der Vorlage ist grundsätzlich bewußt und intendiert; sogenannte 'unfreiwillige' Parodien werden ausgegrenzt (und sollten der Klarheit halber besser gar nicht als Parodien bezeichnet werden)." Cfr. also, with a specifically medieval focus, Bayless 1996, p. 3: "I define parody as an intentionally humorous literary (written) text that achieves its effect by (1) imitating and distorting the distinguishing characteristics of literary genres, styles, authors, or specific texts (*textual parody*); or (2) imitating, with or without distortion, literary genres, styles, authors, or texts while in addition satirizing or focusing on non-literary customs, events, or persons (*social parody*)". By now it should be clear why it is hard to apply any of these criteria to Virgilius. For a rich bibliography on parody, see Müller 1997, pp. 275-295; for a short introduction see Dentith 2000, esp. pp. 1-54. Cfr. Hutcheon 1985 on parody as a combination of repetition and distance: p. 6: "Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity"; p. 20: "I see parody as operating as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance"; p. 32: "Parody, then, in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repletion with difference."

[63] Cfr. Bennett 2008, pp. 223-263.

Intransitive parody, in other terms, turns out to be one of the several possible formal transcriptions of *negativity.*[64] Through their convoluted games, intransitive parodies address the contradiction inherent in the hermeneutical process, they stage its circular and aporetic character. Yet, what really matters is that *contradiction is allowed*: it is, in the end, a form of assertion. The *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* succeed in bringing the *positivity* of any nihilistic game to the fore, and Virgilius sets the signifier free at every level in the text. The odd opulence of his language is the predictable outcome of a (literary?) technique whose main characteristic seems to be a willingness to dismiss meaning by exhausting it.[65] To adopt some Bourdieunian jargon, Virgilius succeeds in performing an exercise in the appropriation of symbolic goods (the prestige of the grammatical tradition) by rejecting the very gesture of appropriation (Virgilius makes up *false* quotations, proposes *false* theories, mentions *false* grammarians). If he had simply turned the tenets of grammatical science into their opposites, he would have fallen into the same mechanism he was attempting to erode. Virgilius does not offer the reader an anti-grammar, but, instead, a *playful* grammar.[66] In so doing, he simultaneously profits from and mocks grammar's prestige.

What I have just argued only partly clarifies the relationship between Virgilius' grammar and the *grammatica*: it does not say anything about Virgilius' text itself. If the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* are, in a sense, *parodies of parodying*, how can they utter a single word without being inevitably self-contradictory? How can any *significance* subsist, once its epistemological ground has been discarded? Virgilius' text, it is worth repeating, *should not exist*. The tension between negativity and positivity permeates Virgilius' inconsistent argumentation as well as his hypertrophic linguistic display.

Inconsistency and *hypertrophy* cooperate in setting the tone of numerous Virgilian pages. It might be interesting, for instance, to verify how the discourse on verticality and straightforwardness dealt with in the previous section comes to be surreptitiously contradicted while also apparently restated in Epist. III. Here, Virgilius reports the theory

[64] By this term I am referring to the concept as it was intensively discussed from both critical and literary perspectives particularly in the 1970s and '80s. A thorough investigation can still be usefully read in Kristeva 1974, pp.101-150 . See also Agamben 1992 [1982], p. xii: "The question that gives rise to this research [the connection between language and death] must necessarily assume the form of a question interrogating the place and structure of negativity. Our attempt to respond to this question has led us […] to an examination of the problem of Voice and of its 'grammar' as a fundamental metaphysical problem, and, at the same time, as an originary structure of negativity."

[65] A *mouvance* which, in its turn, cannot but produce meaning again and again. Cfr. Chin 2007 and Chin 2008, pp. 72-109.

[66] There is no need to point out that when I say "*playful* grammar" I am leaning on the extremely serious connotations that *play* and *game* have gained as (anti-?)metaphysical terms over the last century.

of a certain Stoic called Cromas who proposed to accept no more than four vowels on the basis that this number would be a better fit in any given numerological scheme, Epist. III, 622-637: [67]

> *Sciendum proinde est Stoicorum hunc esse morem, ut, cum typum aliquem uel numerum praetendere uoluerunt, non tam totam summae plenitudinem quam quod ad typum pertineat propositum annumerent. Quorum unus, qui erat ut rebantur praecipuus Cromas nomine, ad nos usque peruentans quattuor tantum uocales litteras numerandas esse censebat. Cuius rei rationem cum ab eo Aeneas meus perquireret, tranquillo reddidit effamine:* Scimus*, inquit,* et nos quidem quinque esse litteras, quae uocales dicuntur. Nostrorum tamen ueterum parentum mos antiquarius erat, ut nullum numerum absque typo mensurarent; unde quia quinquenum in supputatione Stoica numerum nullus cardinalis praecesserit typus, quattuor tantum uocales litteras subtracta u principaliter summauerunt.
>
> It should be known that the Stoics, when they wanted to explain the nature of a symbol or of a number, did not calculate the actual total of the sum, but counted what pertained to the symbol under consideration. One particular Stoic, called Cromas, whose renown has come down to us, argued that there are but four vowels. When my Aeneas asked the reason of this matter from him, he answered: "We all know that five are the letters called vowels, but our ancient fathers, in compliance with a very old custom, could not measure any number without a symbol; thus, since in Stoic calculation no fundamental symbol precedes the number five, they counted only four major vowels by subtracting the 'u'."[68]

In what seems to be a search for *ratio*, Virgilius, again, points instead to the arbitrariness of the system.[69]

Likewise, in Epist. I, discussing the plural form of vesper, he mixes up a plaidoyer of *ratio* and *ordo* with a very personal judgment on a colleague, Epist. I, 107-119:

> *Cauendum est tamen, ne aut uesper aut uesperum aut uespera pluralem numerum habere putentur. Vnde miror, quomodo quidam procacissime ausus sit dicere*

[67] Virgilius resorts to microcosmic-macrocosmic explanations, cfr. Stroumsa 2016, pp. 108-120 for further examples.

[68] The passage is indeed obscure. I followed Polara – Caruso 1979, p. 267 in translating *typus* as symbol, but this solution remains unsatisfactory.

[69] However, Virgilius does not dismiss *systematic thinking* as a whole. In so doing, he proves to be far less contradictory than many anti-systematic and, though, highly systematising contemporary thinkers. The critical power of Virgilius lies in his writing praxis more than in his thought – but the dichotomy writing/thought risks to sound here more simplistic and useless than ever.

> *'uesperes', et non solum pluralem numerum contra omnem ordinem rationemque confusibiliter adsumpsit, uerum etiam genus ipsum corrupit, pro neutrali masculinum ponens.* ***Sed huius modo uiri nomen, quia noblis est et satis clarus et multis forte eius dipliceat infamia, manifeste prodere nolo, praesertim cum hoc confessus sit non solum audaciter, sed et temerarie se dixisse et faciem suam in sinum meum porrexerit. Sed de hoc uiro satis sit dictum.***
>
> Don't think that *uesper*, *uesperum* or *uespera* have a plural form. I don't really know how a certain grammarian could dare to say *uesperes*, so that he not only used, in a very confusing way, a plural form that runs against any rational principle, but he also wrongly identified the gender of the word, turning a neutral noun into a masculine one. But I don't want to make his name explicit, since he is noble, and well-known, and his shame would embarrass many people – moreover, he admitted to having made a bold and thoughtless statement and buried his face in my lap. But enough has been said of this man.

The entanglement of ''technical'' (objective) and ''private'' (subjective) voice is, in general, one of Virgilius' most recognizable features, but here, in particular, the digressive and autobiographical tone of the remark is placed in a sort of discursive friction with the glorification of order and rationality that underlies the whole passage.[70] At the end of the exposition of the theory, moreover, Virgilius likens the supposedly stable *ratio* to a wavy sea, Epit. IV, 309-311:

> *[…] mare quoque undosum biluosumque in turbinossa cordis profunditate hominis et in ipsa ratione.*
>
> […] the wavy and savage sea in the depth of man's heart, and in reason too.

It is through passages like this that ambiguity permeates Virgilius's text, even more than through those passages where *multifariousness* is explicitly thematised. The most obvious statement is possibly Epit. X, 81-83:

> *Per uarias Latinitatum multifariasque deferentias quis currere poterit, cum tam multae sint, ut nequeant numerari?*

[70] As to this point, Virgilius' anomaly should be considered more quantitative than qualitative in nature. One can find a similar emergence of autobiographical elements in Jerome's exegetical writings, most significantly in the memories related to his great teacher, the grammarian Aelius Donatus: *in eccl.* 9, 10: *Vnde praeceptor meus Donatus, cum istum versiculum exponeret*… ("Hence my teacher Donatus, while explaining this line…"). Cfr. Holtz 1981, pp. 37-46.

> Who could ever get through the different and multifarious forms of all the Latins, since they are so numerous that it is impossible to count them all?

Small wonder, then, that Vivien Law could speak of the Epitomae as a "plea for plurality, for a multiplicity of roads to the same goal. The theme of difference, of variety, of parallel if not necessarily equal approaches, is as pervasive as that of wisdom."[71] And yet, multifariousness is designed to achieve a goal in such a reading, whereas a trademark of Virgilius's textuality is a baffling estrangement-effect that the reader can perceive whenever actual, monodirectional, constructive argumentation is displayed. Virgilius's pleas for a "positive" multifariousness, for the very fact of being a positive statement, resound with an implicit vertical echo, namely that of any didactic discourse: "I'll carry you up to the truth" - this is the implicit message. By asserting the value of multifariousness, a form of axiological judgment is inevitably introduced – and axiology is the science of verticality, of hierarchizing objects according to a chosen scale. That we are wandering into an ostentatiously verticalized system, a system in which the plurality of directions inherent in the concept of multifariousness might even be perceived as dangerous and misleading, becomes more evident when plurality is justified and redeemed through didacticism, as in Epit. V, 370-375:

> *Nosse itaque debemus, quod ea quae paulo rariora sunt ob hoc doctores possuerunt, non quo nocere uellint auditoribus suis, sed proficere, ut, cum haec in eorum uidauerimus operibus inscribta, tamquam trita et cognita in ussu habeamus*

> Therefore, we must realize that erudite people decided to use unusual words not to scare their listeners, but, instead, to advantage them, in order for us to recognize those weird words as commonly used and known whenever we come across them

Multifariousness seems to be accepted here just because it might help to enhance the interpreters' self-confidence and tame their disconcertedness when faced with deviant forms. Multifariousness, therefore, can also be a way of *ordering*.

These last remarks lead once again to an attempt to formulate a further general assessment of Virgilius's text. Every and each time discursive consistency might emerge, another, opposed force initiates a process of discursive erosion: the *text* problematizes, inescapably, the *discourse*. This is true to such an extent that the phrasing I have just employed, "general assessment", blatantly clashes with this kind of textuality. Virgilius's writing is a major example of *opacity*, of a semiotic material which contrasts any

[71] Law 1995, p. 49. Cfr. the whole chapter *The multifarious nature of wisdom*, pp. 47-56.

hermeneutically generalizing approach by opposing to it the *unicity* of its non-signifying non-system.[72]

Virgilius's *playful grammar* turns out to be, in the end, a grammar of language as *bruissement* (rustling), itself an example of this very *bruissement*.[73] To use a phrase of Roland Barthes, spoken words (*parole*) seem, on the one hand, to be doomed to a kind of "mumbling" (*bredouillement*), to be misunderstood or poorly deciphered by the receiver; written words (*écriture*), on the other hand, are subject to silence and a rigid differentiation of signs from each other – as a result, an excess of meaning remains in both cases, preventing language from "fulfil[ling] a delectation appropriate to its substance." One can imagine moving beyond the clumsiness of a stammering language that fails to properly communicate (despite retaining communication as its intention), beyond the paralyzing rigidity of differentiated signs, to attain the utopian state of a *music of meaning*, "the rustle of language". This doesn't simply imply a triumph of suprasegmental elements (accent, intonation, vowel quantity, etc.) over semantic ones,[74] but a subtler merging of the two; the phonic signifier is able to fully deploy itself without abruptly rejecting meaning, without *castrating* it.[75] It is precisely here, in this place precariously balanced between sense and non-sense, that Virgilius's grammar can *play as grammar* and stage its idiosyncratic mixture of normative jargon and disruptive *calembours*. Starting from this point of view one can easily understand why, among Virgilius's putative fathers, critics

[72] The *vertical systems* mentioned here might be profitably compared to what Deleuze and Guattari call *espace strié*: "Il est strié par la chute des corps, les verticales de pesanteur, la distribution de la matière en tranches parallèles, l'écoulement lamellaire ou laminaire de ce qui est flux. Ce sont des verticales parallèles qui ont formé une dimension indépendante, capable de se communiquer partout, de formaliser toutes les autres dimensions, de strier tout l'espace, et par là le rendre homogène", Deleuze-Guattari 1980, p. 458. To the *espace strié* they oppose the anti-hierarchical and inherently heterogeneous *espace lisse*. The *opacity*, *unicity*, and *alterity* I advocate for Virgilius' text make it a suitable example of *espace lisse*. Cfr. discussion in Westphal 2007, pp. 65-70; Lapoujade 2014, pp. 54-60.

[73] Barthes 1984 [1975], pp. 93-96.

[74] Indeed, this is not really an unusual phenomenon in ancient rhetoric. Philostratus tells us on at least two occasions in his *Vitae sophistarum* (I 8, 7; II 10, 8) that among those who listened to the sophists, some were incapable of understanding Greek but enjoyed their performances nonetheless. Cfr. Malaspina 1988, p. 47.

[75] Barthes 1984 [1975], pp. 94-95: "Et la langue, elle, peut-elle bruire? Parole, elle reste, semble-t-il, condamnée au bredouillement; écriture, au silence et à la distinction des signes: de toute manière, il reste toujours *trop de sens* pour que le langage accomplisse une jouissance qui serait proper à sa matière. Mais ce qui est impossible n'est pas inconceivable: le bruissement de la langue forme une utopie. Quelle utopie? Celle d'une musique du sens; j'entends par là que dans son état utopique la langue serait élargie, je dirais même *dénaturée*, jusq'à former un immense tissue sonore dans lequel l'appareil sémantique se trouverait irréalisé ; le signifiant phonique, métrique, vocal, se déploierait dans toute sa somptuosité, sans que jamais un signe s'en détache (vienne *naturaliser* cette pure nappe de jouissance), mais aussi – et c'est là le difficile – sans que le sens soit brutalement congédié, dogmatiquement forclos, bref châtré."

have repeatedly pointed to Pompeius, a commentator of Donatus arguably active in Africa somewhere between 5th and 6th century.[76] Pompeius's *commentum artis Donati* (a genre to which the *Epitomae* might be at least formally ascribed) is characterized by overwhelming and repetitive exemplification, self-contradiction, and random argumentation. Ever since Louis Holtz's insightful surveys, Pompeius's commentary has been interpreted as a revised compilation of stenographic notes – orality is the most convenient way to account for what, in the work, does not "work".[77] Yet, no one would dare to argue that oral marks could be traced in Virgilius' hypertrophic *page*. The difference between Pompeius's *commentum* and Virgilius's treatises is thus, in Barthes's terms, the difference between a ''mumbling'' language and the rustle of language, between unsuccessful communication and an *excess of language* produced through textual praxis.

By writing in this way, Virgilius poses a hermeneutical conundrum. Despite all the references to an epistemological dimension situated beyond the mind and beyond linguistic articulation, what emerges from the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* does not immediately recall a poetics or epistemology of transcendence and ineffability, of the breaking down of language when confronted with something that goes beyond symbolization.[78] To put it better, this is *precisely* what such passages *immediately* recall, a fact that should automatically alert Virgilius's reader. In his textual praxis, the opposition between *res* and *verba* has, finally, collapsed. This merging doesn't proceed from concreteness to abstraction – it is not that *res*, in the traditional sense, can be read as *signa*, but, rather, that *verba* are dealt with as *res*: opaque, breakable, even silent.[79]

[76] Keil, V, pp. 95-312. Cfr.; Holtz 1971; *Id.* 1981, pp. 236-237; Kaster 1988 pp. 139-168; 343-346.

[77] Cfr. Kaster 1988, p. 156: "Pompeius is a man talking, not writing".

[78] As we have seen, in Virgilius *ratio* transcends *mens*. Law 1995, pp. 72-76 connects this aspect to the imagery of fire and sun in the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*: *homo plasto et affla et quodam caelesti igne consistit* ("man consists of body and soul and a sort of celestial fire") Epit. II, 23-24; *intellectum quodam modo ignitum flammosumque possidet* ("to the intellect belongs somehow a blazing nature") Epit. IV, 294-295; *ignis* is the sample word used to exemplify the twelve Latins in Epit. I. Spirit, which goes far beyond sheer mind, coincides with fire. Law takes this symbolic equation as a fundamental clue to the "esoteric" nature of Virgilius' works and their possible affinity to a "tradition" which would run down to the Cathars, Rosicrucians, Jakob Boehme, and Rudolf Steiner, not to mention the Qabbalah, the Sufi, and Theosophy. For a literary approach to the theme of *silence* and *ineffability* in late antique aesthetics, see Hernández Lobato 2017, pp. 10-24.

[79] For an influential theory of *res* and *signa*, the unavoidable reference is the first three books of Augustine's *De doc. Chr*. A useful sketch of the pagan and Christian hermeneutic background of the Augustinian treatise is provided by Pollmann 1996, pp. 147-196. Still worth consulting is Colish 1968, pp. 8-81. See also Markus 1996, pp. 71-104. For a discussion of *De dialectica* and *De magistro* and their links to stoic linguistics, see Stock 1996, pp. 138-162.

Take, for example, one of the best known passages from Virgilius' *Epitomae*; the last section of Epit. I, *De sapientia*, in which the author gives a first account of his theory of the "twelve Latins", 64-83:

> *Latinitatis genera sunt XII, quorum unum usitatum fitur, quo scripturas Latini omnes atramentantur. Vt autem duumdecim generum experimentum habeas, unius licet nominis monstrabimus exemplo. In usitata enim Latinitate ignis I. habetur, qui sua omnia ignit natura. II. quoquihabin, qui sic declinatur: genitivo quoquihabis, dativo quoquihabi, accusativo –bin (ueru superpossito), uocativo –bin (breve), ablativo –bi; et pluraliter: quoquihabis (producte), genitivo quoquihabium , dativo –bibus, accusativo –bis, vocativo –bis, ablativo –bibus;* ***quoquihabin dicimus, quod incocta coquendi habeat dicionem****. III. ardon dicitur, quod ardeat. IIII. calax calacis ex calore. V. spiridon ex spiramine. VI. rusin de rubore. VII. fragon ex fragore flammae. VIII. fumaton de fumo. VIIII. ustrax ex urendo. X. uitius, qui pene mortua membra suo uigore uiuificat. XI****. siluleus, eo quod de silice sileat, unde et 'silex' non recte dicitur nisi ex qua scintilla silet****. XII. aeneon de Aenea deo, qui in eo habitat sive a quo elimentis flatus fertur.*
>
> There are twelve different sorts of Latin, the first being the one usually used by the Latins to write. To give you an idea of these twelve Latins we will focus on one single word. In usual Latin, we find *ignis* I. which is called this way since it *ignit* (burns) everything by nature. II *quoquihabis* must be declined as follows: genitive *quoquihabis*, dative *quoquihabi*, accusative *–bin* (after the verb), vocative *–bin* (short), ablative *–bi*; and in the plural: *quoquihabis* (long), genitive *quoquihabium*, dative *–bibus*, accusative *–bis*, vocative *–bis*, ablative *–bibus*; *quoquihabin* is called this way since it can cook what is not cooked. III *ardon* is called this way since it burns (*ardeat*). IIII *calax calacis* because of its warmth. V. *spiridon* since it breathes (*ex spiramine*). VI. *rusin* since it is red-couloured (*e rubore*). VII. *fragon* because of the crashing (*fragore*) of flames. VIII *fumaton* because of the smoke (*de fumo*) VIIII. *ustrax* since it consumes (*ex urendo*). X. *uitius* since through its vigour it reinvigorates vigourless limbs. XI. *siluleus* since it stems from hard stones, so that it would be inexact to call stones that cannot produce fire 'silex'. XII *aeneon* is derived from the god Aenaes, who inhabits fire and provides all elements with breath.

Whether this is a ''parody'' of Donatian grammar or Isidorian etymologies, a manifesto against the normativity of the school, an example of cryptography, or all of these at once, I would like to our draw attention to the effects of semantic evacuation activated in this passage by strings of characters such as *quoquihabin dicimus, quod incocta coquendi habeat dicionem*, or *siluleus, eo quod de silice sileat, unde et 'silex' non recte dicitur nisi ex qua scintilla silet*. Virgilius seems to play with the reifying effects inherent in grammatical

discourse: in Virgilius' works, grammar itself, taken in its totality, undergoes the same process of reification which was the common outcome of grammatical practices.

A *grammar* celebrating the corporeality of any spiritual meaning and the literality (*objectuality*) of any allegorical reading: one deep-seated reason for Virgilius's *uncanny alterity* might be seen in the quintessentially hybrid and shifting character of the semiotic processes triggered by his texts.[80] His writing dwells (quite comfortably, indeed) in the split between signifier and signified – it revels in the fissure that enables semiosis and, at the same time, prevents its conclusion and solution. The *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* confront readers with the *materiality* of the signifier – words, objectified, point to the mystery of their *(un)necessary arbitrariness*, and grammar and etymology become the keys to explaining the world precisely because they can hardly explain anything.

1.4 Epitome and Absence

The literary and epistemological challenge launched by Virgilius' treatises can be easily (although reductively) articulated in terms of a *tension* between *fullness* and *emptiness*: on one hand, the fullness of the signifier as an opaque object that reveals its own semiotic emptiness; on the other, the emptiness from which meaning derives and on which it is based.[81] But a similar dialectic underpins Virgilius' *persona* as well, a *persona* that was taken, over time, to be that of a madman as well as a serious scholar, a grownup with no books and the product of a bookish culture – someone for whom there was "too much to

[80] Virgilius's writing thus recalls Benjamin's conceptualization of baroque allegory more than the Pauline opposition between the letter and the spirit, which strongly influenced Christian hermeneutics through the dichotomy literal reading/allegorical reading. Cfr. one of Benjamin's famous statements: "In the anagrams, the onomatopoeic phrases, and many other examples of linguistic virtuosity, word, syllable, and sound are emancipated from any context of traditional meaning and are flaunted as objects which can be exploited for allegorical purposes. The language of the baroque is constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the element which makes it up", Benjamin 1998 [1928], p. 207. For a short overview of Benjamin's theory of allegory, see Cowan 1981. On the Pauline dichotomy see, Ginzburg 2010.

[81] I should probably apologize for constantly falling back into binary oppositions while dealing with a series of texts that, I am arguing, constantly evade binaries. Though, in a way, to talk about *tension* without mentioning the opposite poles of which it is composed – or, in other words, to talk about *interstitial spaces* (another name for Virgilius' textuality) without resorting to an idea of spatial limitation – seems to be impossible: indeed, such a contradiction is nothing but the re-enactment of the *negativity* posed by Virgilius' texts itself.

know"[82] or someone who suffered from such a penury of culture that he was obliged to make up his own imaginary library and raise his provincial colleagues to the status of classics: either the author of a charlatan text (*Schwindelliteratur*) or of a work that mirrors the very processes of cultural exhaustion.

The naiveté and untenability of these polarised views are, in the end, less interesting than the fact that they would eventually surface in Virgilius' reception history. They represent the most obvious effect of the textuality of the *Epitomae* and *Epistolae*, and both of them stem, albeit moving in opposite directions, from the sense of bottomless vertigo (*Schwindel*) these texts engender in the reader.

The paradoxical, though inevitable, coexistence of *fullness* and *emptiness* that characterizes Virgilius' work is one of the grounding components of what we can call the *epitomatory dimension*. In fact, the *presence* of Virgilius' treatises is increased by the very fact that they constantly point to *absent* objects (the plethora of non-existing sources and grammarians, for example). The *Epitomae* and *Epistolae* gesture as *traces*, as semiotic sutures, hinting, as they do, at unknown/lost worlds while, at same time, preventing the reader from accessing them. As previously stated, the *scinderatio fonorum* (scrambling of words) might be taken as the realization, at the level of word, of the process of *dissection* performed by Virgilius at the more general level of the grammatical tradition in its entirety.[83] *Epitomae* are *condensed* texts not so much in the sense that they summarise a given body of knowledge, but because they draw together many disparate discourses with no apparent concern for their reciprocal coherence.[84] As a consequence, condensation in Virgilius' writing cannot be reduced to a tendency to *freeze* meaning in a compact and easily digestible form; on the contrary, it ignites a process of textual motility which is hardly likely to satisfy any ''*frozen*'' readers. This is also why I started my discussion by advocating for the necessity of *inhabiting* Virgilius's texts rather than commenting on it. Focusing on the dizzy feeling these treatises generate seems to be a productive way of approaching them, since it respects their implicit mandate: be literal and get lost among letters![85] By *inhabiting* I mean little more than attempting to uncover a hermeneutics that

[82] This is the incisive title chosen by Blair 2010 for her thorough and insightful monograph on reference books and compilation in the Early Modern Age.

[83] Cfr. *supra* p. 23.

[84] In this sense, my understanding of *epitomatory condensation* comes closer to Freudian *Verdichtung* – the process of condensation/compression of several association under one single image/ memory/ though that Freud saw as one of the basic mechanisms of dream work – than to the notion that it is "just" a tool for information management (cfr. Dubischar 2010).

[85] Hence the resistance of Virgilius to translation. All of the translations included here are nothing more than normalizations intended to make some conceptual aspects of the text accessible.

does not oppose any resistance to the motility of the text – that is, does not feel ashamed of becoming *trapped* within it.

To end I shall return to our point of departure, Luciano Caruso's preface. It is no surprise that Luigi Munzi launches a pretty open attack against Caruso's *Appendice* in his meticulous review of Polara's edition.[86] The piece is accused of being nothing more than a skilful ''game'' seeking to imitate Virgilius' *manière* and *épater les bourgeois*. Though Munzi fairly admits that Caruso's pastiche shows a certain degree of witty cleverness, he also sees it as cool and intellectualistic, and, in the end, not really worth publishing along with a highly 'scientific' object such as a critical edition. Despite all of his good will, we do not need much *esprit de finesse* to realize that Munzi could have hardly produced an apter contribution to Caruso's ''game'' – the reviewer ends up stressing the clash between the straightforwardness of his own "scientific thinking" and the provocative "uselessness" and self-referentiality of the *Appendice*. It is precisely this proliferating *discursive clash* that creates the space in which the effect I call *indeterminacy* can reverberate and transform Caruso's text into an effort to inhabit Virgilius'. Burning the discourse brings the text to life.

Ardon dicitur, quod ardeat
(Epit. I,75)

Dialecta est mordatrix omnium uerborum, quae
legi, dici ac scribi ab omnibus solent, exiterans
quodammodo atque effibrans uiscera sententiarum,
medullas sensuum, uenas fonorum .
(Epit. IV, 176-178)

[86] Cfr. Munzi 1983, p. 91.

Chapter 2
The Paradox of Movement
(Gaius Iulius Solinus)

Le Guatémala, par exemple, n'existe
pas. Je le sais, j'y ai vécu.
G. Arnaud*, Le salaire de la peur*

2.1 Of Apes and Encyclopaedias

Both Caius Iulius Solinus and his work, the *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, have undergone many transformations and at least one veritable metamorphosis throughout their history. Long before becoming, in the words of his most important modern editor, Theodor Mommsen, a "laughable little teacher" (*ridiculus magistellus*), Solinus had already had the rather unusual privilege of being transformed into an ape. "Pliny's ape" (*simia Plinii*) was the depreciatory nickname late humanists began to use for Solinus, referencing the *Collectanea*'s (apparently) obvious dependence on Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*. This mocking designation enjoyed quite a long-lasting success, being popularised by Vossius and employed well into the twentieth century.[1] Though I am not

[1] The whole first section of Mommsen's introduction, *Auctor et auctoritates*, is quite telling of the disdain with which Solinus was regarded by 19th century philology, a dismissive view that dated back to the late Humanists and was provoked by the derivative nature of the *Collectanea*, cfr. Mommsen 1958 [1895], p. VIII: *Iam Plinii naturae historia cum extet integra, epitomen hanc docti viri hodie fere contemnunt, nec sine causa. nam sane perparvum interest scire quibus artibus seculii tertii scholasticus Plinium quasi scriptorem iusto simpliciorem loqui docuerit tumide et perplexe et insipide, cuius si placet exemplum luculentum considerare, expende quid effecerit ille c. 24, 3-6 ex Plinianis 5,3. nec magis persequendi sunt ridiculi magistelli errores…* ("Since Pliny's *Natural History* still exists entirely, scholars nowadays generally despise this epitome, and rightly so. It is actually useless to know with what techniques a schoolteacher from the 3rd c. taught Plinius (an author whose style is, in a manner of

as ready as Kai Brodersen to argue that Richard Burton, in his English translation of the *1001 Nights*, mistook *Simia Plinii* for a real alternative to Solinus' name, I would like to believe it.[2] For it does not seem inappropriate that a writer who had the chance of being regarded as one of the most quoted authorities in Western geography only to end up being despised as an idiotic *compilator*, should push another aspect of his persona to its limits: that Solinus, the great collector of marvellous tales, the source of monsters for many centuries to come, should himself incorporate a quantum of such animality and transform into a *miraculum*, an emblem of hybridity in his own right.[3]

Hybridity permeates the literary quandary posed by the *Collectanea*. To put it plainly, Solinus' book may be described as a geographical compendium drawing mostly on Pliny's books 3-6 and Pomponius Mela's *Chorographia*, with a specific interest in lesser known

speaking, more trivial than it should be) to speak in a bombastic, twisted, and ultimately disinteresting way; a telling example of which is provided by the fate of Plinius 5,3 in *Collectanea* 24, 3-6. The mistakes of this laughable little teacher do not deserve further attention…"). Vossius's judgment ("*tam multa ex Plinio exscribit, ut etiam Pliniana simia dici meruerit*", *De historicis latinis libri III* 1651 [1627], p. 720) was based on a *communis opinio*, attested in as early as the late 15th century by an emblem sketched in the margin of a 1480 edition of the *Polyhistor*, bearing the words *Simia Plinii Maioris*. This volume (Firestone Library, Princeton University, ExKa 1480: Solinus 1480) belonged to the Neapolitan humanist Julio Pomponio Leto (1428-1498), but we cannot determine who drew the emblem. For Solinus' humanist reception, see Dover 2013, *Id.* 2014. Although most scholars still reiterate Mommsenian percentages when documenting Solinus' dependence on Plinius (Dover 2013, p. 2013 assures that "nearly four-fifths of Solinus' text is directly or indirectly taken from Pliny's work"), some recent surveys have started to question such assumptions. Hillard concludes his analysis of prosopography in Pliny and Solinus with a bold statement: "I consider it beyond doubt that he [Solinus] was not dependent on what could be gleaned from Pliny and/or Mela. This is far from saying with confidence that he? it? was independent of Pliny, but it does mean, I would aver, that when he produces an item that differs from a parallel item in Pliny, that datum should be treated as having been derived from an earlier source […]", Hillard 2014, p. 74. For the controversy on Solinus' sources, see Hillard 2014, pp. 59-61.

2 Brodersen 2011, p. 70 notes that "indeed, a 19th century translator of the 'Tales from 1001 Nights' regarded *Plinii Simia* as Solinus' alternative name!." The translator is Sir R. F. Burton, the book his pathbreaking *The book of the thousand nights and a night* in 10 vols. In the edition I could consult (*sine loco*, *sine data*, Burton Club), the referenced passage appears in Vol. VI, p. 6 n.1: "These fish-islands are common in the Classics, *e.g.* the Pristis of Pliny (xvii. 4), which Olaus Magnus transfers to the Baltic (xxi . 6) and makes timid as the whales of Nearchus. C. J. Solinus (*Plinii Simia*) says, "Indica maria balænas habent ultra spatial quatuor iugerum"." It is evident that no explicit statement is made here on Solinus' possible names; moreover, Brodersen omits in his quotation the italic that differentiates *Plinii Simia* from the *tria nomina*, a graphic distinction which makes it hard to put the five words on the same level and regard the locution as Solinus' "alternative name".

3 Solinus appears as a key figure in many histories of the "monstrous" and the "marvellous" in Western culture. One should mention, at least, Rudolf Wittkower's essay on the "marvels of the East", Wittkower 1942. The *Collectanea* played a central role in the tradition which finally led to medieval *bestiaria* like the so-called *Liber monstrorum*, cfr. Bologna 1977, p. 199: "la compilazione soliniana rappresentò in sostanza la mediazione dalle teratologie classiche alle compilazioni medievali"; see also Bianchi 1981, pp. 241-247.

anecdotes and marvellous details.[4] The inadequacy of such a definition, however, becomes clear as soon as one begins to *read* the text.[5] It is very telling that David Paniagua, as late as 2008, still felt it necessary to stress that the *Collectanea* can be more profitably read within the encyclopaedic tradition than in merely geographical terms.[6] Nonetheless, one of the most influential contributions to Solinian studies in recent years has focused primarily on Solinus' achievements as a geographer.[7] Resorting to a reasonable compromise, Paniagua suggests that the *Collectanea* should be considered an encyclopaedic compilation whose material is ordered according to geographical criteria. In more abstract terms, we could say that geography functions here as the *centripetal principle* of a composition formed by *centrifugal forces*, the forces of a *curious* compilatory method. By *centripetal force* I mean any cohesive and structuring principle that contributes to organizing a text along a given set of lines, centralizing it and stabilizing its meaning. The *centrifugal force*, meanwhile, is a disruptive factor that interferes with the centralizing process – it could take the form of an abrupt transition in subject or of a loosening in the logical concatenation of the elements which build up a semantic or syntactic unit. This is only one of the many implications of the *Collectanea*'s hybrid configuration. The main goal of the following pages is to analyse the ways in which such aberrant conditions are reflected in the text. We will start by looking at the paradoxical nature of Solinus's prefaces (**2**), move on to examining the specificity of Solinus' epitomic

[4] A tradition of writings on *mirabilia* had already developed in the Hellenistic age and was conspicuously present also in Pliny's work, see Beagon 1992, pp. 8-11, 144-147. For a short history of teratology in the Greco-Roman world, see Schepens-Delcroix 1996.

[5] *Reading* a text is here to be considered as opposed to *using* a text (be it as reference book, as a source for lost *auctores*, as a tool to emend other texts etc.). Doody 2010, p. 92 effectively points to the paradox inherent in encyclopaedic texts that "having gone to the immense effort of gathering together information covering all the branches of human knowledge, it expects its readers not to read at all." This opposition is to be meant in a broader way, of course, than opposing *episodic* to *linear* reading.

[6] See Paniagua 2008, p. 109. Paniagua perhaps seems to be far too confident in speaking of the "encyclopaedic project" ("proyecto enciclopédico", p. 107) or "encyclopaedic goal" ("objetivo enciclopédico", p. 109) in a pre-modern context. See in general König-Woolf 2013 and more specifically Doody 2010 pp. 41 ff. On the relationship between *genre* and technical writings, see Taub 2017, pp. 4-17. Johnson 2016, pp. 29 ff. stresses the entanglement of encyclopaedic and geographical thinking in Late Antiquity, both considered as expressions of an overarching *archival* thinking.

[7] Brodersen 2011 aims to present Solinus as an innovator in the field of descriptive geography (for the distinction between "descriptive" and "mathematical" geography – the one, for instance, of Ptolomy – see the overview by Dueck 2012). Next to some small but broadly influential lexical innovations (i.e. adjective *mediterraneus* instead of Pliny's *interior*), the scholar draws attention to the changing of the mode of description from the linear approach of *peripli* and *itineraria* to a new areal mode, based on the concept of *plaga*. This would witness Solinus' use of maps in rearranging the material he found in his sources (Brodersen compares only with Pliny and Pomponius Mela). On the opposition of areal and linear geographical description, see Janni 1984; for a critique of such a polarized view, see Talbert 2009; *Id.* 2016.

gesture (**3**), and conclude by exploring the issues of paradoxicality, polarity and hybridity and their effects on the ways in which Solinus' text deals "epitomically" with the problems of truth and referentiality (**4**).

2.2 Prefaces and Tensions

Solinus' two introductory paratexts have received a good deal of scholarly attention. The reason for this lies both in their programmatic content and in the philological issues with which they engage.[8] Ever since Mommsen's edition, the *Collectanea* and their textual transmission have been regarded as a possible example of an authorial double edition, although Mommsen rejected this possibility. The German scholar sorted the extant manuscripts into three families, the third presenting a version of the text which, despite being attested in exemplars that are extensively contaminated with manuscripts from the first two families, can be easily recognized as a different version, marked by many textual divergences and expansions.

Most significantly, the manuscripts belonging to the third family are introduced by a second "short preface" that tells an interesting story: its author, talking as Solinus in the first person, maintains that previous, still unpolished versions of the book had once circulated and should now be substituted by the present version. A new title is proposed, *Polyhistor*, and the former title, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, is explicitly deleted (II Pref.: *erit igitur operi isti titulus Polyhistor: nam quem in exordio designaveram, scilicet Collectanea rerum memorabilium, cum his quae improbavimus placuit oblitterari*, "the present work will be entitled *Polyhistor*, since I decided to eliminate the previous title *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* along with other things I could no longer accept").[9]

On the basis of this textual evidence, rivers of ink have been spilled. Mommsen thought the *Polyhistor*-version was an apocryphal reworking of the original 3rd c. edition by an early medieval *redactor* (hypothetically, an Irish monk from the 7th c. CE) – an interpretation

[8] For the philological aspect, see Mommsen 1958 [1895] pp. LXXXVIII ff.; Walter 1969, pp. 15-33; Sallmann 1971, pp. 164-165; Schmidt 1995, pp. 26-35. For a literary discussion, see Santini 1998; von Martels 2014, pp. 181-21; Pavlock 2014; Apps 2014, pp. 32-35; Schlapbach 2014.

[9] In the manuscripts of the first two families both the "first" prefatory letter and the actual treatise are preceded by an index of the *capitula* (or *rubricae*). The manuscripts of the *Polyhistor*-version open instead with the "second" letter and show the sequence: "second" letter + index + "first" letter + treatise. See Schmidt 1995, pp. 26-27. All translations from Solinus are my own.

that was quickly discarded for lacking evidence. Hermann Walter, reviving the Solinian question in the 1960s, resolutely tried to support the existence of two original Solinian versions; nowadays this seems to be the most accepted theory, although uncertainty remains as to how and why the two versions were published.[10]

It is not my purpose to enter the thorny and highly conjectural field of Solinus' manuscript tradition and its various redactions. Suffice to recall that two of the most relevant articles in the last decades, Schmidt 1995 and Brodersen 2011, diverge as to the author's chronology, situating him in the 4th and in the 3rd century CE respectively, with not irrelevant consequences: Brodersen's re-evaluation of Solinus as a geographical innovator is consistently based on the premise that Solinus was writing in the 3rd c. CE – for a 4th c. author one could hardly speak of innovation. This same hermeneutical paradox led Hyskell, in his study on the language of the *Collectanea*, to praise Solinus for his lexical audacity, since most of Solinus' words became fairly common in the 4th c., though the scholar maintained Mommsen's 3rd century chronology.[11] Once the dismissive attitude of 19th c. philology faded away, critics risked falling into an apologetic tone and obsessing over attempts to prove Solinus' qualities by replacing one evaluative system with another, allegedly newer one.[12]

Let us jump to a consideration of the prefaces as exemplifications of some peculiar aspects of Solinian textuality. The very existence of two contradictory prefaces, or better said, their preservation in a substantial part of the manuscript tradition, may be regarded as an eloquent index of two of the *Collectanea*'s main features, namely *accumulative excess* (*two* prefaces) and *paradox/polarity* (two *contradictory* prefaces). The first, "long" preface could be read as a list of such polarities and, in a way, it is not completely surprising that a work meant to collect memorable materials should set out by exhibiting an

[10] Walter 1969 takes the "second" prefatory letter to be true. Schwindt follows him but goes further, arguing that the first version of the work was dedicated to the Emperor Constantius II on the occasion of his visit to Rome in 357 CE. The lectio *Constantio* is actually attested as a variant for *Advento* as the dedicatee of the "first" prefatory letter in some 12th century manuscripts. See Schwindt 1995, pp. 33-35.

[11] See Hyskell 1924. Most of the arguments proposed to date the *Collectanea* are ultimately inconclusive. Cfr. Schwindt 1995, pp. 31-33 and bibliography, who nonetheless, as we have seen, strongly supports a 4th century date. On the contrary, Brodersen 2011, p. 66 sums up internal non-linguistic evidence for the 3rd century in the following points: Solinus (50.3) remarks that men are wearing silk robes, which might be seen as a hint to an innovation introduced by Elagabalus; Solinus' interest in the calendar may parallel Censorinus' *De die natali* (238 CE); Antioch and Byzantium are hardly mentioned, and the latter never as Constantinople. His remark that "while none of these features individually can be used to date Solinus' work, the cumulative evidence may point to the later 3rd century for at least the first version" sounds, indeed, quite optimistic.

[12] It is small wonder, then, that almost all of the essays collected in Kai Brodersen's volume *Solinus. New Studies* (Brodersen 2014a) start with an apology for the author, and that the very first article (von Martels 2014) is entitled "Turning the Table on Solinus' Critics."

inclination to building up polarities – memory itself existing only in a polarised space, being a form of re-collecting.[13]

Solinus presents his work from the outset as a *compendium* and, as such, as a sort of compromise between two contending tendencies: overwhelming loquacity and unsatisfactory brevity, Pr. I, 2:[14]

> *Liber est ad compendium praeparatus, quantumque ratio passa est ita moderate repressus, ut nec prodiga sit in eo copia nec damnosa concinnitas.*
>
> This book has been conceived as a summary and has been condensed as much as is reasonably acceptable, so that it contains neither an overwhelming loquacity nor an unsatisfactory brevity.[15]

The conception of the book is explicitly linked to the notion of *measure*, a rationale closely connected to an idea of balance. Santini, in his thorough analysis of Solinus' prefaces, has laid convincing emphasis on the importance of the monetary metaphor that runs through the text.[16] Both *prodigalitas* and *damnum* clearly belong to economical jargon, a jargon that also permeates the following sentence, Pr. I, 2:

[13] More than to the opposition *past*/*present* I am referring to the couple *absence*/*presence* (cfr. *supra* pp. 53-54), or, in other terms, to the "fort/da" game expounded by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – to memory as an exercise in mastering absence through symbolical tools (cfr. Lacan 1978, p. 375: "C'est ici [in the "fort/da" game] que nous débouchons sur l'ordre symbolique, (…) il tend au-delà du principe de plaisir, hors des limites de la vie et c'est pourquoi Freud l'identifie à l'instinct de mort. Et l'instinct de mort n'est que le masque de l'ordre symbolique en tant – Freud l'écrit – qu'il est muet (…)"). For classic perspectives on memory as a cultural and literary organizational device, see Assmann 1999 and Lachmann 1990.

[14] Both motifs are traditional. The stress on brevity (*Kürzeformel*) is listed by Opelt 1962, col. 959 among the features common to many epitome-prologues. Despite all the modesty affected by the epitomiser (*Bescheidenheitsformel*, another feature well represented in Solinus' preface), it could be that what is here called *prodiga copia* was pointed to as a flaw of the "original" works, thus making explicit the agonistic implication of the epitomic discourse. See also Santini 1998, pp. 39-40 and Apps 2014, p. 33.

[15] Apps 2014, p. 33 translates *damnosa concinnitas* as "detrimental beauty of style". This rendition seems to be more in line with the common rhetorical usage of *concinnitas* as meaning harmony or aptness (cfr. Cicero *Orat*. 44. 149: *Collocabuntur igitur verba, aut ut inter se quam aptissime cohaereant extrema cum primis; aut ut forma ipsa concinnitasque verborum conficiat orbem suum*), but the Solinus passage is reported in *Th. l. L.* s.v. a 50,1 precisely as evidence for the meaning of *dicendi brevitas*. In spite of the circularity of the argument, I chose to make explicit the reference to brevity (evoked by the adjective *damnosa*) in order to strengthen its antithesis to *copia*.

[16] Beside the examples here discussed, it should be remembered that the term *compendium* originally had economic connotations (cfr. Forcellini s.v. 1, *est quidquid lucramur rem nostrum Servando*). *Fermentum* (*fermentum cognitionis*) could also bear financial nuances (Petron. 76,7 *hoc fuit peculii mei fermentum*). See Santini 1998, pp. 39-42.

> *Cui si animum propius intenderis, velut fermentum cognitionis magis ei inesse quam bratteas eloquentiae deprehendes.*
>
> Upon closer inspection, you will see in it more food for thought than a lavish patina of eloquence.

This statement, opposing content and form, usefulness and real knowledge to rhetorical embellishment, is quite canonical; what Solinus is proposing is an *economy of literary communication*.[17]

A principle of economic exchange can also be detected in Pr. I, 3:

> *Exquisitis enim aliquot voluminibus studuisse me inpendio fateor, ut et a notioribus referrem pedem et remotis largius inmorarer.*
>
> I confess I have sedulously read several selected books, in order to be able to move away from common topics and spend more time on unusual ones.

Solinus is now drawing on another topos, suggesting that thanks to his effort (*studium*) his readers will be able to save their energies.[18] By remarking that he will not linger on well-known matters, instead devoting time to things likely to be unknown, he introduces some new elements to the picture. This is the first time that space explicitly enters Solinus' discourse, through a metaphor in which the writer is compared to a traveller, an image that returns throughout the *Collectanea* and cooperates in making Solinus' work a peculiar textual space, even before a text about space.[19] An attentive reader may already foresee that the centre of the book will dwell in the *remota* – that the centre of the *Collectanea*

[17] The *brattea* metaphor can be found, with a similar moralising twist (surface vs. substance) in Seneca, *Epist.* 115, 9 *omnium istorum, quod incedere altos vides, bratteata felicitas est*. See Santini 1998, p. 40; Apps 2014, pp. 33-34.

[18] Cfr. Opelt 1962, coll. 9589 ff. for prefatory *topoi* in epitomes. In praising his own service to the reader, the *compendiator* could take up an agonistic attitude towards the epitomised *auctor*. See, for example, what Ianuarius Nepotianus writes in his preface to the epitome of Valerius Maximus' *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri*, Praef. 7-12: *igitur de Valerio Maximo mecum sentis opera eius utilia esse, si sint brevia: digna enim cognitione componit, sed colligenda producit, dum se ostentat sententiis, locis iactat, fundit excessibus, et eo fortasse si paucioribus notus, quod legentium aviditati mora ipsa fastidio est* ("Therefore, talking about Valerius Maximus, you will agree with me that his works are useful if they are brief: he certainly writes things that are worth reading, but he lengthens what should be shortened while showing off witticisms, boasting figures speech, indulging in digressions, and, maybe, this is the reason why he is not that popular among readers – eager readers are annoyed by constant dawdling").

[19] The very common journey-metaphor was already present in Pliny's dedicatory preface, Praef. 14: *Praeterea iter est non trita auctoribus via nec qua peregrinari animus expetat*. See Pavlock 2014, p. 26. For a more literary theoretical discussion of this *topos* see Montalbetti 1997, pp. 99-120.

will always remain displaced, re-motus, i.e. in a way, de-centred.[20] It would be easy to judge such a penchant for de-centring as a form of escapism, an effect of Solinus' superficial curiosity. To the utilitarian as well as humanitarian ideal underlying the previous lines – where the writer is presented as a sedulous medium between the reading public and knowledge – a new, more hedonistic nuance is added, which will be fully voiced shortly thereafter, Pr. I, 4:[21]

> *inseruimus et pleraque differenter congruentia, ut si nihil aliud, saltem varietas ipsa legentium fastidio mederetur.*
>
> We have also inserted many disparately compatible things, so that, if nothing else, the variety of the matter will counter effect the reader's boredom.

Most remarkably, it is the addition of *differenter congruentia* that makes *varietas* possible. It is tempting to take this oxymoron as an emblem of the whole *Collectanea*, but the mention of *varietas* comes right after the main focus of the book has been made explicit, Pr. I, 3:

> *Locorum commemoratio plurimum tenet, in quam partem ferme inclinatior est universa materies. Quorum commeminisse ita visum est, ut inclitos terrarum situs et insignes tractus maris, servata orbis distinctione, suo quaeque ordine redderemus.*
>
> For the greatest part, the book is a recollection of places, a topic on which much of the content converges. It seemed appropriate to recall the best known spots from both land and sea according to the different areas in the world and their order.

A short list of "secondary" topics, the *differenter congruentia*, follows, Pr. I, 4:

> *Inter haec hominum et aliorum animalium naturas expressimus. Addita pauca de arboribus exoticis, de extimarum gentium formis, de ritu dissono abditarum nationum, nonnulla etiam digna memoratu.*
>
> Among these things with which we have dealt are also the natures of men and other animals. Moreover, we have added some information on exotic trees, on people

[20] Cfr. Gellius' scarce confidence in the very possibility of finding something *remotum*, Praef. 15: *Nam ecquid tam remotum in litteris est quin id tamen complusculi sciant? Et satis hoc blandum est, non esse haec neque in scholis decantata neque in commentariis protrita* ("Is there any in literature so recondite as not to be known to a goodish many? In fact, I am sufficiently flattered if these subjects have not been repeated over and over again in the schools and become the common stock of commentaries" trad. by J. C. Rolfe).

[21] Both utilitarianism and humanitarianism already constituted essential features of Pliny's cultural project, see Beagon 1992, pp. 55-75.

> living far away, on the unfamiliar customs of hidden countries, and other things worthy of being recalled.

Already in this short overview a tension is detectable between centrifugal and centripetal forces. Solinus distinguishes between a main theme and *additamenta* (*addita*), between *cursus* and *ex-cursus*. Moreover, geography is here clearly linked to the idea of measuring the world (*ordo*, *distinctio*), of organizing space, of *striping* it, in Deleuzian terms.[22] And yet, ironically enough, treatises which would conform to such an ordered view are implicitly accused of being boring.[23] In order to please the reader, nothing *curiosum* can be left out, (Pr. I, 5: *quae praetermittere incuriosum videbatur*, "to omit such thing would be a form of negligence").

The very gesture of reading seems to be presented as propelled by *varietas* and *curiositas*. Along and beyond the utilitarian *economy of order*, a new economy comes to light – an *economy of pleasure* based on concepts such as movement, difference, and distance from the centre. To dismiss this as a regressive kind of escapism would prevent us from appreciating the inherent mobility of Solinus' text; for it is true, in a way, the *Collectanea* are constantly escaping.[24] If we had to take on Paniagua's commonsensical invitation to regard the *Collectanea* as an encyclopaedic compendium, we would be obliged to acknowledge that the conceptual and generic core of the work does not lie in its geographical section, but in the *additamenta*, ergo in the *ex-cursus*.

The paradox of such formulations (centre-in-the-*remota*; core-in-the-excursus) is produced by the attempt made in the preface to articulate the hybridity of the text by resorting to binary oppositions, that is, to polarised structures. Indeed, antithesis (a most polarised structure) abounds in the few lines of the long-preface, as well at the thematic level already analysed on the smaller scale of some *callidae iuncturae*.[25] To the

[22] Cfr. *supra* p. 49 n. 72.

[23] Intellectual dryness and literary platitude are very usual charges for the remnants of Latin late antique geographical writing, even in favourable critical accounts, cfr. Molè 1985, p. 703. The judgment seems to be unfair if one considers the mainly pedagogical function of some late antique texts (see for instance the ones included in Riese's *Geographi Latini Minores*, Iulius Honorius and Vibius Sequester). On geography in the late antique educational system, see Dalché 2014; on Christian and pagan geography in Late Antiquity, see Zecchini 1993 and Humpries 2007; on mapping and "cartographical thinking" in late antiquity, see Johnson 2016.

[24] As a classic example of such dismissal we could take the words of Sallmann 1971, p. 160: [if one reads Solinus in comparison with Pliny] "dann liegt der gewaltige Sturz der römischen Bildungsidee bis hinab zu einer Modeliteratur vor Augen, der Bildung nur Unterhaltung bedeutet, Belehrung als rhetorische Attitüde dient und die jedes wissenschaftlichen Geistes und Wertes enträt".

[25] I have already quoted (*supra* p. 57 n. 1) Mommsen's judgment on Solinus' style, whose writing is defined as *tumidum*, *perplexum* and *insipidum*. Santini 1998, p. 37-38 points to the ''ostentato manierismo'' of the prefatory letter and analyses its rhetorical sophistication. Humanists pillaged Solinus in search of technical terms and,

aforementioned *differenter congruentia*, we could add the subtly evocative *de ritu dissono*, and even the central *locorum commemoratio*, in which time (*memoria*) and space (*locum*) almost inadvertently merge.[26]

In paragraphs 5 to 8, this tension – the result, I repeat, of an effort to transcribe hybridity into polarised patterns – runs the risk of undermining the whole geographical/encyclopaedic project. Solinus apologises for his *curiositas* by leaning on the *auctoritas* of his forerunners, Pr. I, 5:

> *quae [addita pauca] praetermittere incuriosum videbatur quorumque auctoritas, quod cum primis industriae tuae insinuatum velim, de scriptoribus manat receptissimis.*
>
> To omit such things would be a form of negligence, all the more so since their relevance is guaranteed by trustworthy authors, a fact I would like you to be one of the first to appreciate.

But the pivotal argument is that, in the end, *curious* things aside, very little remains for Solinus to tell, Pr. I, 5:

> *quid enim proprium nostrum esse possit, cum nihil omiserit antiquitatis diligentia, quod intactum ad hoc usque aevi permaneret?*
>
> What could actually be *ours*, given that the diligence of the ancient writers has left nothing untouched in our own age?

Stuck in between two economies – *ordo* and utilitarianism on one hand, *varietas* and pleasure on the other –, Solinus' text may never come to light: why should anyone indulge in telling stories, if all relevant tales have already been told? Is *curiositas* really enough to account for the *presence* of the *Collectanea*? What comes to the fore is a poetics of exhaustion, the flip-side of the underlying poetics of *curiositas*/marvel. Since the *diligentia antiquitatis* has left little room for novelty or actual discovery, Solinus is to be judged for his skills in selecting and reshaping materials that already been discussed, Pr. I, 5:

sometimes, did not hide stylistic appraisal, see Dover 2013; von Martels 2014. Beroaldus (1500, quoted by Dover 2013, p. 433) wrote that Solinus: *Plinianam maiestatem nec minus brevitatem foeliciter effinxit; fecitque ex plinianis racemis racemationem haud dubie florulentam*.

[26] *Commemoratio* stands here for *commentatio*, *descriptio*, cfr. *Th. l. L.* 1829, 3, and retuns as such at several turning points in the treatise, cfr. II, 1 *ad locorum commemorationem stilus dirigendus*; LVI, 6 *gentium vel insularum commemoratione*. The theme of memory was essential to compilations such as Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* (Praef. 2) or Ampelius' *Liber memorialis*. See Santini 1998, pp. 40-41.

> *quapropter quaeso, ne de praesenti tempore editionis huius fidem libres, quoniam quidem vestigia monetae veteris persecuti opiniones universas eligere maluimus potius quam innovare.*
>
> Therefore, I beg you, do not ponder the authenticity of this work by resorting to current criteria, since, adopting the mould of old coins, we have preferred to pick up common opinions rather than to look for new ones.

This is a well-known prefatory *topos* for compilators,[27] yet here it gains in importance as it marks the opening of a textual movement typical of Solinus, one that could be dubbed the poetics of *praeteritio*.[28] As we shall later see in more detail, Solinus speeds up his narrative pace when confronted with "very important" subject matter (for example Augustus), ostentatiously avoiding dealing with it in an extensive way. In light of this, what is said in the closing section of the preface becomes all the more meaningful, functioning as both an overview of the overall structure of the *Collectanea* and an introduction to the first section of the treatise, Pr. I, 7-8:

> *sicut ergo qui corporum formas aemulantur, postpositis quae reliqua sunt, ante omnia effigiant modum capitis, nec prius destinant in membra alia, quam ab ipsa ut ita dixerim figurarum arce auspicium faciant inchoandi, nos quoque a capite orbis, id est ab urbe Roma principium capessemus, quamvis nihil super ea doctissimi auctores reliquerint, quod in novum praeconium possit suscitari, ac supervacuum paene sit relegere tramitem decursum tot annalibus. Ne tamen prorsus dissimulata sit, originem eius quanta valemus persequemur fide.*
>
> Like painters, when they set out to draw the human body, having postponed all the other parts, start from the head and do not proceed to the other members until they have taken a good omen from, so to say, the acropolis of the whole body, we too shall start from the head of the world, that is the city of Rome, even though the most erudite writers have hardly left something new to say, and it might seem pointless to walk again and again down a path already known from so many historical books. Nonetheless, we will deal with the origin of Rome as reliably as we can, so that this topic may not appear to be totally dismissed.

The fact of choosing Rome as a starting point is presented as ineluctable and useless at the same time. The organic metaphor through which the ordering principle of the book is

[27] See Opelt 1962, coll. 959 ff.; Paniagua 2008, pp. 107-108. The comparison between ancient authors and old coin may be paralleled by Fronto, *De orationibus* 13 [= 159, v.d.H.] *monetam veterem sectator*, but the image of the scale seems to be a Solinian invention. See Santini 1998, p. 42.

[28] On the "apophatic aesthetics" in late antique literature, see Hernández Lobato 2012, p. 401-449 and *Id.* 2017.

justified, moving from the head to the limbs, reveals itself as contradictory:[29] important subjects should be tackled precisely because they are important, but, if they are really important, then they are likely to be widely known, and thus do not really need to be tackled.[30]

Even before actually setting off, Solinus' collection of marvellous stories and anecdotes has to face the threat of silence. And yet, it is precisely such a lack of things which *should* be told that fuels a longing for narrative. To continue telling stories might be seen as the consequence of a mindset haunted by a sense of exhaustion, whose only reasonable path is the silence to which it cannot bring itself to surrender.

Shortly before, Solinus asks his addressee for understanding, Pr. I, 6:

> *ita si qua ex istis secus quam opto in animum tuum venerint, des velim infantiae meae veniam: constantia veritatis penes eos est quos secuti sumus.*
>
> Thus, if you do not receive from what I have written the same impression I intended to produce, forgive, please, my inability to speak: the reliability of my writing is guaranteed by the authors I have followed.

Far from being unusual, this *professio modestiae* recalls a similar *topos* in technical writing;[31] nonetheless, the stress is here placed not so much on the style (*infantia* as the opposite of *eloquentia*)[32] as on the *inventio*, on the quality of the matter collected and proposed to the readers. We shall return to the relationship between Solinus and his

[29] The equivalence head/*arx* was quite traditional. A later epitomizer, Cassius Felix (mid 5th century), testifies to its popularity in medical literature, *De medicina*, Praef. *et ideo a principio passionis capitis inchoantes scripsimus, quoniam summa civitas corporis a ueteribus dicitur caput*, cfr. Ps. Gal. XIV, 313 K. See Fraisse 2002, p. 4 n. 4.

[30] The relatively thorough treatment that Italy receives in the *Collectanea* (the second chapter, devoted to Italy, is one of the longest of the whole work) might suggest we should consider it as an expression of Rome's declining relevance in the 3rd-4th centuries, to the advantage of the Italic "periphery" (and, to an even greater extent, of other "peripheries"). But I am not sure that we can use Solinus to this purpose. In his text, both Rome and, as we shall see below, Italy, appear under the sign of *praeteritio*. On the essential interaction between Rome and Italy in Roman self-fashioning, see at least Dench 2005, pp. 153-221.

[31] Cfr. Opelt 1962, col. 959 on the so-called *Bescheidenheitsformel*. Formisano 2001 provides a thorough discussion of the specific rhetorical and literary tools employed in late antique technical writing, "testimonianza della progressiva autonomia che la letteratura tecnico-scientifica ricerca dal sistema dell'*eloquentia*, della volontà di tale letteratura di trovare un proprio spazio e una propria identità" ("testimony to the progressive autonomy from the system of *eloquentia* that technical writing was trying to gain, as well to its willingness to establish its own literary space and identity"), p. 105.

[32] *Infantia* can traditionally stand for *imperitia fandi*, cfr. Cic. *De orat*. 3, 342, *infantiam eius, qui rem norit, sed eam explicare dicendo non queat*; Front. *De eloquentia* 2,8 [= 139,12 v.d.H.] *tum si eligendum sit, longe longeque eloquentiam infantiae praeferas*. See Santini 1998, p. 43. Walter 1969 p. 30 takes it literally, but quite unconvincingly, as a hint at Solinus' young age.

auctores and to the ways in which *auctoritas* is exploited as a guarantee for referentiality (in other terms, for the reliability of the information provided in the *Collectanea*). Here it is worth noting that Solinus' *infantia* is more radical. The tension is not so much between bad and good words, or good content and bad words, as between speaking and not speaking at all. The contrast of *prodiga copia* and *damnosa concinnitas* turns out to be somewhat deeper than it at first appeared. What seemed to be an economic principle of balance reveals itself as the instantiation of the tension that grounds, permeates and informs the whole cultural project of the *Collectanea*, providing them with a peculiar textual physiognomy which we will now try to conceptualize.

2.3 Epitomic Nomadism

I have not yet discussed perhaps the most blatant discrepancy between the ''first'' and ''second'' prefaces, namely the shift of the (pretended) title from *Collectanea* to *Polyhistor*. Apart from philological disputes, these two titles welcome reflection on the twofold nature of the epitomic gesture. Both terms convey an idea of multiplicity, but if *Polyhistor* represents the fundamental meaning of plurality (*poly-*), *Collectanea* stresses the act of gathering and assembling scattered pieces of information (*colligere*). Just like *compendium* (originally opposed, in its basic meaning of ''saving'', to the centrifugal *dispendium*, ''expense''), *collectanea* reminds us that the movement with which epitomes are traditionally identified is a *centripetal* one. An *epitoma rei tractatae* is made of material drawn from several books and organised around one single topic – many bits of information are made to converge in a single point. The semantic evolution of the word *epitome* in English clearly shows the importance of the *unifying moment* in the epitomisation process: ''epitome'' currently stands for the quintessential, the most typical manifestation of a given phenomenon, and, therefore, is strictly connected to a form of *essentialist* thinking.[33]

Solinus' text, however, is characterized by discontinuity and divergence. For all the centripetal force exerted by geography as an ordering principle for the *many stories*

[33] This is no place, of course, to engage with a necessarily cursory discussion of the philosophical tenets here at stake nor to draw even a sketchy history of the opposition between essentialist and non-essentialist approaches. By essentialism I simply refer to "The doctrine that it is correct to distinguish between those properties of a thing, or kind of thing, that are essential to it, and those that are merely accidental. Essential properties are ones that it cannot lose without ceasing to exist." (*The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* 2016, s.v.).

assembled together, an impression of an inextinguishable mobility emerges from the text, of a work, as I said before, that constantly runs away. And this from the very beginning of the work.

The *Collectanea* open with what we could call an *archeology* of Rome: in a text that should mostly deal with *space*, *time* turns out to be the first protagonist to enter the scene. The treatise opens with a survey of the different theories concerning the name *Rome* (I, 1-5), followed immediately by a description of the most ancient Roman cults and cult places (I, 6-16), a discussion of the city's foundation, and a list of the seven kings and their traditional living places (I, 16-30). The debate on foundational date of Rome (I, 27-30) leads, via a very condensed scheme of Roman history (I, 31-33), to a discussion of calendars and calendar reformation (I, 34-47). Augustus, as a remarkable calendar reformer, brings to an end the first half of the first chapter (I, 47-52). The second half (I, 53-127) is entirely devoted to the human being and provides a sort of marvellous anthropology.

Only in chapter two does the treatise return to its original premise and talk about *places*, as Solinus himself does not omit to point out, II, 1:

> *De homine satis dictum habeo. Nunc, ut ad destinatum revertamur, ad locorum commemorationem stilus dirigendus est atque adeo principaliter in Italiam, cuius decus iam in urbe contigimus.*
>
> I have written enough about man. To return to our initial purpose, let us move our stylus towards the recollection of different places, and of Italy in particular, whose glory we have already shown by dealing with Rome.

Solinus' intervention seems to confirm a feeling that may have already crept into the readers – that they have been submitted to a rather long ex-cursus. The first chapter is arguably the most heterogeneous and, for exactly this reason, it anticipates some typical textual moves that return again and again in the *Collectanea*.

First of all, a sense of *deferral*. By frustrating the reader's expectations, Solinus introduces space *into* the narrative; the expected topic is displaced and a kind of dynamism is injected into the text. Space is no longer a matter of content as a formal principle, the slippery (dynamic) base of the whole *Collectanea* – a *perturbing* principle more than a constructive one. Gaps, holes, and abrupt transitions seem to be the complementary side of the cumulative tendency typical of miscellaneous writings, since *lists* and *juxtapositions* (here taken as the basic form of any miscellany) are lists and juxtapositions precisely due

to the white spaces inserted between their component parts.[34] Scholars have radically diverged in their attempts to pin down Solinus' "art of transition". While Fernández Nieto and Paniagua stare in admiration at his mastery in systematising such a disparate material, Schlapbach speaks of an elegant "meandering from one topic to another."[35] This very contrast between logical articulation and analogical continuity captures the hybridity at the heart of Solinus' writing. If it is true that specific thematic threads emerge more or less regularly throughout the work (and not only the ones listed in the preface – unfamiliar animals, plants, and habits – but also minerals and commercial goods),[36] the variety of strategies employed to jump from one topic to another one is no less remarkable.

At II, 25 we read about the river Po, *Padus*, a logical subject within the framework of the topographical outline of the Italian peninsula that Solinus has been sketching since II, 19. But at II, 26 an abrupt transitional sentence leads to an entirely new topic:

> *Memorabilibus inclutum et insigniter per omnium vulgatum ora, quod perpaucae familiae sunt in agro Faliscorum quos Hirpos vocant.*
>
> Among other memorable, famous and broadly known facts is that in the territory of the Falisci there are a few groups of people called Hirpi.

Having moved away from topography, we are now plunged into ethnographic and cultic considerations regarding the *Hirpi*, a brotherhood whose members used to jump on burning pyres, II, 26:

> *hi sacrificium annuum ad Soractis montem Apollini faciunt: id operantes gesticulationibus religiosis impune insultant ardentibus lignorum struibus, in honorem divinae rei flammis parentibus.*
>
> These people celebrate a sacrifice for Apollo every year on the Mount Soracte: during the ceremony, among other rituals, they jump on burning pyres without getting wounded, since the flames prove to be obedient in honour of the deity.

[34] On "cumulative aesthetics", a key concept in late antique studies, see at least Elsner 2006 (criticised by Liverani 2011); see the discussion *infra* pp. 95-96. For a theoretical discussion of "lists" as a literary-aesthetic tool, see Eco 2009 and Milcent-Lawson et al. 2013.

[35] Cfr. Schlapbach 2014, p. 142 and n.3.

[36] A stress on commercial goods is not very common in Latin late antique geographical writings, with the conspicuous exception of the *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, on which see Rougé 1960; Molè 1985; Humphries 2007.

It is probably this idea of portentous physical resistance that allows the subsequent transition to the *Marsi*, people immune to snake venom. Such peculiarity is then justified through a short ex-cursus which binds the Marsi to Circe and Medea, II, 27-30:

> *Gentem Marsorum serpentibus inlaesam esse nihil mirum: a Circae filio genus ducunt et de avita potentia deberi sibi sciunt servitium venenorum: ideo contemnunt venena. C. Coelius Aeetae tres filias dicit Angitiam Medeam Circen: Circen Circeios insedisse montes, carminum maleficiis varias imaginum facies mentientem: Angitiam vicina Fucino occupavisse ibique salubri scientia adversus morbos resistentem, cum dedisset homines vivere, deam habitam: Medeam ab Iasone Buthroti sepultam filiumque eius Marsis imperasse.*
>
> It is no surprise that the Marsi are immune to snake venom: they say they are descendants of Circe's son and they know that, thanks to their ancestral power, they can't be hurt by venom; that is why they have little regard for venom. C. Coelius tells us that Aeeta had three daughters, Angitia, Medea, and Circe: Circe lived in the area of the Circei mountains and used her magical arts to imitate the different corporeal forms; Angitia, located close to the Fucinus, knew how to heal people, and since she was able to make people go on living, she was regarded as a goddess; Medea was buried by Jason in Buthrotus, and her son reigned over the Marsi.

Another fast transitional phrase (II, 31, 9-10: *Sed quamvis Italia habeat hoc praesidium familiare, a serpentibus non penitus libera est*, ''but, despite this domestic defence, Italy is not completely free of snakes'') brings the narrative back to snakes and to Italian fauna, flora and mineral resources more generally (II, 32-50). A specific textual *mouvence* is bestowed to the *Collectanea* by the way in which Solinus fills the two major geographical blocks, topographical (II, 19-25) and naturalistic (II, 32-50), passing from the Padus to the Marsi via Circe and Medea. At times, progressions such as these are sped up by the effacement of any transitional jointures, attaining an effect of *congeries*.

In the following passage from the long anthropological section in chapter one, sharp-sightedness is in the spotlight, I, 99-101:

> *Visu deinde plurimum potuit Strabo nomine, quem superspexisse per centum triginta quinque milia passuum Varro significat, solitumque exeunte a Carthagine classe Punica numerum navium manifestissime ex Lilybitana specula notare. Cicero tradit Iliadam omnem ita subtiliter in membranis scriptam, ut testa nucis clauderetur. Callicrates formicas ex ebore sic scalpsit, ut portio earum a ceteris cerni nequiverit. Apollonides perhibet in Scythia feminas nasci, quae bitiae vocantur: has in oculis pupillas geminas habere et perimere visu si forte quem iratae aspexerint.*

> A man called Strabo was extraordinarily sharp-sighted, to the extent that, according to Varro, he could see up to a distance of 135,000 paces and was able to count from the Lilybaeum promontory the number of ships of the Punic fleet sailing off from Carthage. Cicero tells us that the entire *Iliad* was written on so tiny a piece of parchment that it could be enclosed by a nut-shell. Callicrates sculpted ivory ants whose proportions could be hardly appreciated by other people. Apollonides recounts that in Scythia women called *bitiae* are born: they have double pupils in each eye and, when they are angry, they can kill whoever they might be looking at through the very power of their sight.

The passage is entirely built on the juxtaposition of anecdotes, leaving it unclear as to why one nugget of information should follow another. The idea of sharp-sightedness tends to fade into the background, becoming nothing more than a slight thematic denominator. Cicero's *Iliad* "in a nutshell" and Callicrates' ivory ants are, first of all, minuscule objects, "*therefore*" very difficult to see.[37] The double *pupillae* of the Scythian *bitiae* have a totally new kind of visual capacity – that of killing. The *congeries* never ceases to be a *congeries*, but, on a closer scrutiny, exhibits a tight network of analogical interconnections.[38] As a result, the dialectics centre-periphery and centripetal forces-centrifugal forces are reiterated at the level of each thematic sub-unit, being the major thematic thread relentlessly intersected by other divergent lines.

It is sometimes hard to avoid the temptation to read something more than an analogical embroidery into Solinus' montage of stories. For example, juxtaposition can achieve the effects of irony. Let us look again at a passage from the long ''anthropological'' section of chapter I in which Solinus discusses a series of curious facts variously related to childbirth. As it is well-known, he maintains, the first sound produced by new-born babies is a cry, since they are not able to express joy before their fourth day. Yet, an exception is provided by Zoroaster, who is said to have started smiling on his very first day of life (I, 72). On the contrary – and here we have a typically analogical swerve –, Crassus, the triumvir, was said to have never laughed in all his life, hence his nickname *Agelastus* (I, 73). This mention of Crassus conjures up the following micro-section, centrifugal in respect to the thematic thread of childbirth, I, 73-74:

[37] On the *tabulae iliacae* (small tablets representing episodes of the Iliad in miniaturized size) and for an insightful discussion of the aesthetics of miniaturization, see Squire 2011.

[38] De-contextualisation, isolation, and accumulation of phenomena were textual strategies often employed in paradoxography, cfr. Schepens-Delcroix 1996, p. 393: "Whereas in these works [Aristotelian treatises etc.] observations are set in some context and inserted in a narrative or explanatory frame, the paradoxographer tends to isolate, to set apart and, through these very procedures, to stir amazement at the uniqueness and the eccentricity of a phenomenon."

> *inter alia Socratis magna praeclarum illud est, quod in eodem vultus tenore etiam adversis interpellantibus perstitit. Heraclitus et Diogenes cynicus nihil umquam de rigore animi remiserunt, calacatisque turbinibus fortuitorum omnem dolorem vel misericordiam uniformi duravere proposito. Pomponium poetam consularem virum numquam ructuasse habetur inter exempla: Antoniam Drusi non spuisse percelebre est.*
>
> Among other examples of Socrates' greatness, it is well-known that he never changed his attitude and appearance whatever his opponents said. Heraclitus and Diogenes the Cynic never abandoned their spiritual firmness, and even when confronted with the diverse vicissitudes of fate, they equally endured pain and joy. Among other examples, the consul and poet Pomponius is said to have never belched; and we all know that Antonia, Drusus' wife, never spat.

This anecdotical sequence is composed of four units devoted, respectively, to Socrates, Heraclitus/Diogenes, the poet Pomponius, and Antonia, Drusus' wife: two Greek units plus two Roman ones. The unexpected swerve coincides with the transition from the Greek to the Roman world; having recalled the philosopher's impressive self-control *adversus omnem dolorem vel misericordiam*, Solinus moves on to Pomponius' and Antonia's rougher forms of self-control with no evident shift in tone – and yet, this is a veritable fall from tragedy to comedy, a contrast made all the more ironic by the homogenizing influence of the *congeries*, a form-without-form that allows the antithetical to be juxtaposed without the need for the contradiction to be solved.[39] Considered in this way, it would be misleading to think of the chaotic homogeneity of the *congeries* as a flattening force (in accordance with the principle: since there is no order, no real chaos can exist; since no *doxa* is given, no actual paradox can emerge), or to conceive it of as a synthesis of dialectical contraries. The movement of the *congeries* is *not* a *dialectical* one, as no *Aufhebung* is foreseen, no solution is required. Given a thematic unit that we will take as our *thesis* or *positive moment*, and given another subsequent, unrelated unit which, due to its being disjointed from what precedes it, we will consider as *antithesis* or *negative moment*, the result of their juxtaposition will not be a *synthesis* of the two: the second unit will not sublate (*aufheben*), rewrite or erase the first, but they will coexist together in a single place: a *textual* place more than a *logical* one. The loosening or breaking down of any causal/implicational linkage (that is, of what should constitute the ground for *logical articulation*) creates an apparently static condition: to abolish the *logical* movement of cause/effect/implication may seem close to abolishing any movement whatsoever. Even

[39] This is a paradox that *congeries* share with another "formal" device, the list. This is no place to tackle the topic more in detail, but see, at least, Eco 2009 and Milcent Lawson et al. 2013.

so, what I am arguing is that far from arresting movement(s), the *congeries* succeeds in speeding it up beyond the threshold usually accepted by a ("modern") reader. If the passages we have been reading may appear as *static* heaps of scattered bits of information, it is just because of the difficulty we as readers have in catching up with their counterintuitive and relentless thematic shifting.

In such a proteiform textual environment the very notion of compositional balance seems to be discarded. Solinus' proclivity for *varietas* and remoteness impacts conspicuously on the way the different topics are distributed and, even more, on the quantity of space given to each topic. Augustus (I, 48-49) is referenced in 15 lines in Mommsen's edition, whereas no less than 31 lines are devoted to the *diomedeae aves* and their habits (II, 45-50): these allegedly interesting birds receive twice as long a treatment as the founder of the Empire.[40] The whole life of the first *princeps* is, moreover, reduced to nothing more than a list of misfortunes, in an attempt to answer the rhetorical question of whether or not the emperor's existence had been richer in dangers than in happiness (I, 48: *tanta et tot in vita eius adversa inveniuntur adversa, ut non sit facile discernere, calamitosior an beatior fuerit*). Here we once more encounter Solinus' tendency to provide cursory treatment of matter that he wants his readers to understand as relevant.

This practice is overtly thematised, in a way, at the beginning of chapter II. The incipit of the geographical treatise deserves full-length quotation, II, 2-5:

> *sed Italia tanta cura ab omnibus dicta, praecipue M. Catone, ut iam inveniri non sit, quod non veterum auctorem praesumpserit diligentia, largiter in laudem excellentis terrae materia suppetente, dum scriptores praestantissimi reputant locorum salubritatem, caeli temperiem, ubertatem soli, aprica collium, opaca nemorum, innoxios saltus, vitium olearumque proventus, nobilia pecuaria, tot amnes, lacus tantos, bifera violaria: inter haec Vesubium flagrantis animae spiritu vaporatum,*

[40] Solinus' passage actually offers an *amplificatio* of Pliny. Compare, for example, how Plinius and Solinus describe the "ritual" celebrated by these birds on Diomede's altar: *aedemque eam cotidie pleno gutture madentibus pinnis perluunt atque purificant, unde origo fabulae Diomedis socios in earum effigies mutatos*, "and every day they wash and purify the temple mentioned by filling their throats with water and wetting their wings, which is the source of the legend that the comrades of Diomede were transformed into the likeness of these birds", Plinius, *N.H.* 10, 127; *aedem sacram omni die celebrant studio eiusmodi: aquis inbuunt plumas alisque inpendio madefactis confluunt rorulentae: ita aedem excusso umore purificant: tunc pinnulis superplaudunt: inde discedit quasi peracta religione*, "every day they sedulously honour the sacred temple as follows: they imbue their feathers with water and, once their wings are totally wet as if soaked with dew, they fly together over the temple: by shaking their wings, they release the water, thus purifying the temple: it is as if they were applauding with their soft feathers; then, they fly away, as though they had accomplished a ritual", Solinus, II, 49. In Solinus' version the scene is expanded, or, better, the action is captured in slow-motion (the birds *inbuunt*, *cofluunt*, *purificant*, *superplaudunt*, *discedunt*) with lexical exactness (note the adjective *rorulentae*, and the verb *superplaudunt*).

tepentes fontibus Baias, colonias tam frequentes, tam assiduam novarum urbium gratiam, tam clarum decus veterum oppidorum, quae primum Aborigines Aurunci Pelasgi Arcades Siculi, totius postremo Graeciae advenae et in summa victores Romani condiderunt: ad haec laterum portuosa, orasque patentibus gremiis commercio orbis accommodatas. verum ne prorsus intacta videatur, in ea quae minus trita sunt animum intendere haud absurdum videtur et parcius depasta levibus vestigiis inviare. nam quis ignorat vel dicta vel facta a Iano Ianiculum, a Saturno Latium atque Saturniam, a Danae Ardeam, a comitibus Herculis Polyclen, ab ipso in Campania Pompeios, qua victor ex Hispania pompam boum duxerat?

But all ancient authors (M. Cato especially) have already described Italy so carefully that it is no longer possible to find a topic left untouched by their zeal, there being plenty of reasons for this extraordinary land to be praised, to the extent that most eminent writers continue to commend the healthiness of its regions, the mildness of the climate, the fertility of the soil, the sunlit hills, the shadowy woods, the gentle mountain passes, the abundance of vineyards and olive groves, the excellent cattle, the many rivers, lakes, and the beds of violets blossoming twice a year; and again, Vesuvius, smoking because of its inflamed soul, Baiae, warmed up by its hot water springs, the many colonies, the enduring beauty of the recent cities, the prestigious eminence of the older towns founded by the Aborigines, the Aurunci, the Pelasgi, the Arcades, the Siculi, and, in the end, by foreigners from all Greece and by the ultimate winners, the Romans; to all this, one should add the coasts fit for harbouring and, thanks to their vast gulfs, for trade relationship with all the world. But in order not to give the impression that we have been neglecting Italy, it does not seem unreasonable to dwell on lesser known aspects and to deal cursorily with scarcely frequented themes. For, who does not know that the Janiculum was named after Janus or that it was founded by him, as well as Latium and Saturnia by Saturnus, Ardea by Danae, Polycle by Hercules' comrades, Pompei in Campania by Hercules himself while he was victoriously leading his cow herd from Spain?

This passage re-enacts on a larger scale some of the phenomena we have already observed. It probably represents the most explicit statement of Solinus' *poetics of praeteritio* which we saw foreshadowed in the preface.[41] The motif of an all-too-well-

[41] Cfr. *supra* p. 64 and also: II, 36: *sciens de lupis praetereo multa: spectatissimum illud est* ("I will omit lot of information on wolves, although I know many things on this subject: but it is a very hackneyed one"); III, 3: *sed haec facessant* ("but enough with this topic"); IV, 1: *Sardinia quoque, quam apud Timaeum Sandaliotin legimus, Ichnusam apud Crispum, in quo mari sita sit, quos incolarum auctores habeat, satis celebre est* ("It also quite known in which sea Sardinia (which Timaeus called Sandaliotis, Crispo Ichnusa) is located, and from where its inhabitants come"); VIII, 3: *ac ne in montes notos eamus, Pindum et Othryn agitent qui Lapitharum originem*

known Italy was far from new, as testified by a parallel locus in Pomponius Mela, II,58: *De Italia magis quia ordo exigit quam quia monstrari eget pauca dicentura: nota sunt omnia*. And yet, the *form* this motive assumes is revealing: a veritable *praeteritio amplificata*, a paratactical, long and virtually self-effacing list of things-which-do-not-need-to-be-said-but-are-nevertheless-being-said, reminiscent of other, similar late antique specimens.[42] This initial *praeteritio* constitutes the conceptual matrix of the whole second chapter. It is among the longest and most detailed sections of the *Collectanea*, but, nonetheless, is intrinsically destabilized, constantly on the brink of *not being written* at all. The same could be said of the first chapter, where the "necessity" of speaking of Rome culminated in the relegation of the spatial theme in favour of embracing the temporal one (namely the problem of Roman origins, calendar reformation, and human birth and development):[43] the *Collectanea*'s chatty exhaustion proceeds not only by means of an accumulation of positive data, but also by means of omissions, gaps, and sudden leaps backwards and forwards.

It should be noted that the *discontinuity* of such a textual surface can only be fully appreciated through a full-length and *continuous* reading. Hence, my entire argument might be dismissed by the claim that the impression of nomadism and centrifugal movement which we have been analysing is based on a misconception – on an attempt to *sequentially* enjoy a text originally meant to be read *discontinuously*, in bits: as if we were trying to read a reference book from cover to cover. Interestingly enough, though, Solinus' popularity is somehow bound up with this duplicity and tension.

On the one hand, ever since its earliest beginnings, Solinus' text has been regarded as a repertoire, an archive from which to pluck random curiosities. The apparatus of *rubricae* that accompany the treatise in manuscripts, allegedly from a very early stage, seem to testify to such *fragmentary fruition*.[44] This detailed systems of headlines, almost one for

persequentur, Ossam quos Centaurorum stabulis immorari iuvat ("We will not discuss the famous mountains - the Pindus and the Othryn are proper subject for those who search the origins of the Lapites, the Ossa for those who like lingering on the stables of the Centaurs") ; IX, 3: *verum ut sileam aut Rhodopen Mygdonum montem aut Athon* ("I will pass over in silence the Rhodope, mountain of the Mygdones, and the Athos) ; XLV, 1: *multae in Cappadocia urbes inclitae: verum ut ab aliis referamus pedem, coloniam Archelaidem* ("in Cappadocia there are many celebrated towns, but, to pass over the others, the colony Archelais…").

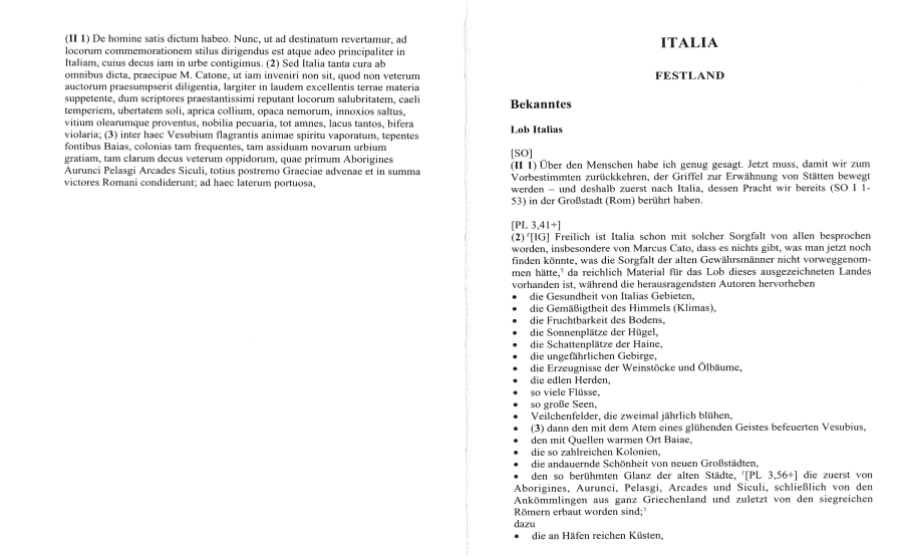
[42] Cfr. most famously Sidonius Apollinaris' *carmen* 9, a *recusatio* 346 lines long. See Hernández Lobato 2012, pp. 413-419 and *Id.* 2017, pp. 284-287.

[43] As is well known, the calendarial dispute was central to the Roman cultural system, see Wallace-Hadrill 2008, pp. 239-248; Moatti 2015 [1997], pp. 136-143.

[44] The *rubricae* can be consulted in Mommsen 1958 [1895], pp. 223-232. Since they predate the bifurcation of the manuscript tradition, Walter thought that they were "original", cfr. Walter 1969, p. 23: "Beide Arme der Überlieferung enthalten mit Unterschieden, wie nicht verwunderlich, die Rubriken. Diese wurden mithin vor der

each paragraph, is obviously meant to facilitate the retrieval of information and is somewhat comparable to the modern articulation of chapters and sub-chapters.

Fig. 1, taken from Kai Brodersen's German translation of the *Collectanea*, shows to the extent to which the text can be visually reshaped to conform to a reader's need for *well-ordered data*.



(II 1) De homine satis dictum habeo. Nunc, ut ad destinatum revertamur, ad locorum commemorationem stilus dirigendus est atque adeo principaliter in Italiam, cuius decus iam in urbe contigimus. **(2)** Sed Italia tanta cura ab omnibus dicta, praecipue M. Catone, ut iam inveniri non sit, quod non veterum auctorum praesumpserit diligentia, largiter in laudem excellentis terrae materia suppetente, dum scriptores praestantissimi reputant locorum salubritatem, caeli temperiem, ubertatem soli, aprica collium, opaca nemorum, innoxios saltus, vitium olearumque proventus, nobilia pecuaria, tot amnes, lacus tantos, bifera violaria; **(3)** inter haec Vesubium flagrantis animae spiritu vaporatum, tepentes fontibus Baias, colonias tam frequentes, tam assiduam novarum urbium gratiam, tam clarum decus veterum oppidorum, quae primum Aborigines Aurunci Pelasgi Arcades Siculi, totius postremo Graeciae advenae et in summa victores Romani condiderunt; ad haec laterum portuosa,

ITALIA

FESTLAND

Bekanntes

Lob Italias

[SO]
(II 1) Über den Menschen habe ich genug gesagt. Jetzt muss, damit wir zum Vorbestimmten zurückkehren, der Griffel zur Erwähnung von Stätten bewegt werden – und deshalb zuerst nach Italia, dessen Pracht wir bereits (SO I 1-53) in der Großstadt (Rom) berührt haben.

[PL 3,41+]
(2) '[IG] Freilich ist Italia schon mit solcher Sorgfalt von allen besprochen worden, insbesondere von Marcus Cato, dass es nichts gibt, was man jetzt noch finden könnte, was die Sorgfalt der alten Gewährsmänner nicht vorweggenommen hätte,' da reichlich Material für das Lob dieses ausgezeichneten Landes vorhanden ist, während die herausragendsten Autoren hervorheben

- die Gesundheit von Italias Gebieten,
- die Gemäßigtheit des Himmels (Klimas),
- die Fruchtbarkeit des Bodens,
- die Sonnenplätze der Hügel,
- die Schattenplätze der Haine,
- die ungefährlichen Gebirge,
- die Erzeugnisse der Weinstöcke und Ölbäume,
- die edlen Herden,
- so viele Flüsse,
- so große Seen,
- Veilchenfelder, die zweimal jährlich blühen,
- **(3)** dann den mit dem Atem eines glühenden Geistes befeuerten Vesubius,
- den mit Quellen warmen Ort Baiae,
- die so zahlreichen Kolonien,
- die andauernde Schönheit von neuen Großstädten,
- den so berühmten Glanz der alten Städte, '[PL 3,56+] die zuerst von Aborigines, Aurunci, Pelasgi, Arcades und Siculi, schließlich von den Ankömmlingen aus ganz Griechenland und zuletzt von den siegreichen Römern erbaut worden sind;'

dazu

- die an Häfen reichen Küsten,

[Fig.1] Kai Brodersen 2014b, pp. 58-59

It has also been noted that one of the advantages of Solinus' *Collectanea*, which probably guaranteed its success over the centuries, is that it is possible to read it from cover to cover, unlike Plinius' imposing *Historia* or other multivolume works.[45] The phenomena of discontinuity that we have been detecting are more noticeable during such continuous cover-to-cover reading.

The *Collectanea* exemplify what we may refer to as an *encyclopaedic paradox*: by aiming to condense multiple strands of knowledge into a single book, the author produces

Spaltung der Handschriftenfamilien, d. h. vor der Überarbeitung, ja vor der Handschriftenunterschlagung abgefaßt, sind also authentisch." An insightful study of the importance of such paratextual tools in understanding how books were supposed to be read is provided by Doody's analysis of Pliny's *summaria* (short lists of book contents) throughout the centuries, cfr. Doody 2010, p. 93: "The summarium is our clearest textual hint for a methodology of reading that pinpoints the necessary fact at the expense of reading a narrative." As for Solinus' *rubricae*, Pliny's *summaria* can be traced back very early in the manuscript tradition. The *Codex Moneus* (**M**), shows that *summaria* were common by the 5th century and, most likely, already present in the 2nd century codex from which the *Moneus* was probably derived. The practice may have originated at the time of the papyrus rolls, when each book was contained in a single roll. See Doody 2010, p. 99-100. For a thorough analysis of the uses of *capita* with reference to Cicero's corpus see Butler 2014.

[45] See Dover 2013, pp. 435-436.

a work that does not really function as a single book.[46] Truly *epitomic*, Solinus' collection of memorable things is at once scattered and unified: it enacts its own genesis – the founding gesture of fragmenting texts in order to originate a new one – in its own textual movement, and constantly reiterates it.[47]

Given such a background, a further complication arises when one progresses to wondering about what kind of relationship links the text to its purported ''content'': the world, its organization and its marvels.

2.4 Veritably Fantastic Beasts

We have already seen how the theme of reliability was central and tightly bound to the concept of authority in the preface – the *constantia veritatis* rests on the *auctoritas* of Solinus' forerunners.[48] As is often noted, Solinus' concern for truth appears to be all the more relevant if one considers the marvellous contents of his book: the more a story is incredible, the more it needs the support of authoritative sources, though it would probably be reductive to consider this strategy as a mere rhetoric of authentication.[49] A substantial part of Solinus' argument consists in the avowal that the information he provides might turn out to be, at closer inspection, obsolete or even false: *quapropter quaeso, ne de praesenti tempore editionis huius fidem libres, quoniam quidem vestigia monetae veteris persecuti opiniones universas eligere maluimus potius quam innovare* ("therefore, I beg you, do not ponder the authenticity of this work by resorting to current criteria, since, adopting the mould of old coins, we have preferred to pick up common opinions rather than to look for new ones," cfr. *supra* p. 66). This statement at once confirms and discards the authoritative principle. All we can say is to be found in the words

[46] Cfr. Doody 2010, p. 92: "The key paradox of the encyclopaedic text is that, having gone to the immense effort of gathering together information covering all the branches of human knowledge, it expects its readers not to read at all. The tension between the unifying discourse of complete knowledge and its practical segmentation into digestible chunks requires a certain amount of conceptual shimmying on the part of the reader." Interestingly enough, Doody is here writing about Pliny, whose work Solinus is supposed to have made *readable*.

[47] The bibliography on the very concept of the "fragment" is endless. Lucien Dällenbach's research, after more than 30 years, remains useful and stimulating. See his edited volume Dällenbach 1984 and, more recently, Dällenbach 2001.

[48] On the phrase *constantia veritatis*, see von Martels 2003.

[49] See von Martels 2003, p. 71; Apps 2014, p. 42. Not surprisingly, the naming of sources was an essential principle of paradoxography, see Schepens-Delcroix 1996, pp. 383-386.

of our *auctores*, but it is not always true that they represent the world truthfully. Can Solinus *really* ask his readers to believe his wor(l)ds? And what does this mean? Arwen Apps is quite confident in arguing that: "Within certain limitations, he [Solinus] wanted above all else to construct an account which was "correct". Even with the educational (or "edu-training"?) aim he seems to have had in mind in selecting lesser-known topics, nothing can have been further from his intentions than misleading posterity." But, shortly thereafter, she is nevertheless obliged to admit that: "Solinus was of course prey to the kinds of difficulties confronting all other ancient researchers: conflicting, scarce information and tyrannies of time and distance […] But for whatever reason, physical autopsy seems not have interested him in the slightest; it played no part in his compilatory methodology."[50]

This last statement recalls the *topos* according to which Late Antiquity is considered an intrinsically ''bookish'' era, an age that witnessed a step back on the path towards ''modern'' epistemological standards. This is no place to argue against the problematic teleology of such a view; suffice it to note that Solinus' position is ambiguous enough to encourage caution.[51] The fact that his sources are outdated (*monetae veteris*) is hardly disputable. It has been calculated that only three out of the sixty-two *auctores* he mentions date from the Common Era: the natural historian Fabianus (Tiberian age), the chronographer Bocchus (Claudian age), and the historian Granius Licinianus (2nd c. C.E.).[52] If one takes into account that Solinus is mostly borrowing from Pliny and Pomponius Mela, as well as intermediary sources, the phenomenon appears to be far from surprising. Pliny himself has notoriously been rebuked by modern critics for his indiscriminate trust of unverified sources, to the extent that he is even accused of having slowed down the progress of Western science.[53] Predictably, but still remarkably, a high concentration of references to the *auctores* can be found in Solinus' discussions of controversial subjects, that is to say, where several rival explanations are at his disposal. The longest lists of

[50] See Apps 2014, pp. 34-35.

[51] Apps 2014, p. 35 quotes an old article by William H. Stahl, a piece very telling of how a prominent mid-20th century scholar of ancient science could look down on late antique outputs. Stahl 1959 was ruthlessly unambiguous in stating that "as geographical works, Solinus' and Capella's treatises are worthless" (p. 111); "the encyclopaedists [i.e. Solinus, Martianus Capella, Isidore etc.] are wholly bookish in their instincts. They may have been quite familiar with the geography of a country through having spent a lifetime there, yet they prefer to preserve the scanty or faulty information about that country found in some handbook" (p. 124). For the changed perspective on late antique science and scientific writing, see Formisano 2001; *Id*. 2017a; *Id*. 2018.

[52] Cfr. Apps 2014, p. 41. She draws from Mommsen's *index auctorum a Solino laudatorum*, Mommsen 1958 [1895], p. 237.

[53] See Doody 2010, pp. 14-23 and Schepens-Delcroix 1996, pp. 435-437.

auctores thus often coincide with clashes in authority, each voice contrasted and limited by the others.[54]

This way of piling up *auctores* acquires further significance when somewhat thorny topics, such as the origins of Rome, lie at the centre of the debate. If it is undeniable that Solinus, in accordance with what he declares in the preface, starts his book from the *caput mundi*, it is also worth noting that in his version the name of the *Urbs* turns out to have an elusive history; Solinus' treatment of the centre of the Roman world sets off with a series of conflicting hypothesises I, 1-5:

> *Sunt qui videri velint Romae vocabulum ab Evandro primum datum, cum oppidum ibi offendisset, quod extructum antea Valentiam dixerant iuventus Latina, servataque significatione inpositi prius nominis, Romam Graece Valentiam nominatam […] Heraclidi placet Troia capta quosdam ex Achivis in ea loca ubi nunc Roma est devenisse per Tiberim, deinde suadente Rome nobilissima captivarum quae his comes erat, incensis navibus posuisse sedes, struxisse moenia et oppidum ab ea Romen vocavisse. Agathocles scribit Romen non captivam fuisse, ut supra dictum, sed Ascanio natam Aeneae neptem. traditur etiam proprium nomen Romae, verum tamen vetitum publicari…*
>
> According to some people, the name Rome was first given by Evander when he ran across a small fortified town, founded some time before, which the Latin youth used to call Valentia and, while preserving its original meaning, he translated this denomination into the Greek word Rome […] Heraclides argued that after the fall of Troy a bunch of Achives had reached, through the Tiber, the place where now Rome [the city] rises, then, persuaded by Rome, the most noble among their captives, they burnt their ships, built the foundations, erected the walls and called the town after that captive. Agathocles writes that this Rome, unlike what was previously said, was no captive, but Ascanius's daughter and Aeneas' granddaughter. Rome [the city] is also said to have a true proper name that cannot be publicly revealed…

A feeling of exhaustive accuracy goes hand-in-hand here with a destabilizing effect. A similar uncertainty lurks in the discussion of the founding date of Rome, I, 27:

[54] Apps 2014, pp. 36-37 identifies some basilar and predictable patterns in Solinus' dealing with *auctores*: the quoting of rival opinions when no *opinio universa* is available is the most common (cfr. the different versions of the name *Palatine*, I, 15; on the origins of Tibur and Praeneste, II, 7 – II, 9; on the name of Crete XI, 5 etc.); sources are involved when technical information is provided (cfr. I, 17, where Lucius Tarruntius is quoted to describe the arrangement of the heavenly bodies at Rome's foundation); sometimes Solinus conjures up eye-witnesses (cfr. XXX, 17-17, Sotacus is said "to have seen" the *dracontia* stone); finally, *auctores* are cited in support of traditions that deviate from mainstream versions (cfr. I, 18 where the annalist Gnaeus Gellius is cited for his rationalization of the myth of Cacus).

> *Cincio Romam duodecima olympiade placet conditam: Pictori octava: Nepoti et Lutatio opiniones Eratosthenis at Apollodori comprobantibus olympiadis septimae anno secondo: Pomponio Attico et M. Tullio olympiadis sextae anno tertio…*
>
> Cincius argues that Rome was founded during the twelfth Olympiad; Pictor, during the Eighth; Nepos and Lutatius, accepting the date proposed by Eratosthenes and Apollodoros, propose the second year of the seventh Olympiad; Pomponius Atticus and Marcus Tullius the third year of the sixth Olympiad…

An ostentatiously detailed series of calculations follows, leading to the conclusion that:

> *quapropter cum octingesimo primo anno urbis conditae ducentesima septima olympias conputetur, par est Romam septimae olympiadis anno primo credi conditam*
>
> therefore, since the 801st year after the foundation of Rome coincides with the 207th Olympiad, it is correct to state the Rome was founded in the first year of the seventh Olympiad

As Solinus' overview reminds us, the founding date of Rome had famously been a debated issue among historians and antiquarians, a dispute which has ideological implications that can hardly be underestimated.[55] Although the only polemical urgency here is that of an ''inoffensive'' erudite controversy, this catalogue of alternative datings ends up dismantling the ground upon which the *Urbs* was supposed to have been founded: its temporal pedestal. While reading such a list, one should bear in mind Solinus' attitude towards temporality and authority as it was expressed in the prefatory request discussed above. The antiquity of the *auctores* makes them trustful, but it also inevitably endangers the up-to-dateness of the information they provide.

Reality, truth, and time are set in a counter-intuitive if not contradictory constellation, at least at first sight: Solinus seems to be ready to admit, very candidly, that the material he is drawing on might be false – or, in other terms, that what is supposed to be an entirely referential text might instead be read as partially, if unintentionally, fictional. Solinus' remark is too general to allow for any precise estimate of the amount of ''truth'' he attributed to his own work, but it is, nonetheless, indicative of the expectations he was raising in his readers. The author and the reader whom he conjures up seem to share a

[55] The debate continues today, see for instance Carandini 2014. On the role of the foundational myth in Roman self-fashioning and the importance of antiquarian practices, especially in the late Republican age, see at least Wallace-Hadrill 2008, pp. 231-248; Moatti 2015, pp. 143-163, 272-307; most recently, on the Varronian cultural project, see Leonardis 2019.

certain trust in the authoritativeness of (possibly) outdated *auctores*, as well as a degree of indulgence towards the infiltration of unverified news.

A concern for truth and correct information had been a major, even structuring principle of historical/geographical writing since at least the time of Herodotus; imposing enterprises such as Polybius' *Historiai* and Strabo's *Geographica* drew heavily upon it to construct their own authority.[56] In particular, a passage in which the latter dismisses a series of authors specialised in the *Indika*, "Indian matters", has become common reference for scholars studying the negotiations between ''scientific'' geography and ''popular'' teratology, Strab. 2.1.9:

> Ἅπαντες μὲν τοίνυν οἱ περὶ τῆς Ἰνδικῆς γράψαντες ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ ψευδολόγοι γεγόνασι, καθ᾽ ὑπερβολὴν δὲ Δηίμαχος· τὰ δὲ δεύτερα λέγει Μεγασθένης· Ὀνησίκριτος δὲ καὶ Νέαρχος καὶ ἄλλοι τοιοῦτοι παραψελλίζοντες ἤδη· καὶ ἡμῖν δ᾽ ὑπῆρξεν ἐπὶ πλέον κατιδεῖν ταῦτα, ὑπομνηματιζομένοις τὰς Ἀλεξάνδρου πράξεις· διαφερόντως δ᾽ ἀπιστεῖν ἄξιον Δημάχῳ τε καὶ Μεγασθένει. οὗτοι γάρ εἰσιν οἱ τοὺς Ἐνωτοκοίτας καὶ τοὺς Ἀστόμους καὶ Ἄρρινας ἱστοροῦντες, Μονοφθάλμους τε καὶ Μακροσκελεῖς καὶ Ὀπισθοδακτύλους· ἀνεκαίνισαν δὲ καὶ τὴν Ὁμηρικὴν τῶν Πυγμαίων γερανομαχίαν, τρισπιθάμους εἰπόντες. οὗτοι δὲ καὶ τοὺς χρυσωρύχους μύρμηκας καὶ Πᾶνας σφηνοκεφάλους ὄφεις τε καὶ βοῦς καὶ ἐλάφους σὺν κέρασι καταπίνοντας· περὶ ὧν ἕτερος τὸν ἕτερον ἐλέγχει, ὅπερ καὶ Ἐρατοσθένης φησίν. ἐπέμφθησαν μὲν γὰρ εἰς τὰ Παλίμβοθρα, ὁ μὲν Μεγασθένης πρὸς Σανδρόκοττον, ὁ δὲ Δηίμαχος πρὸς Ἀλλιτροχάδην τὸν ἐκείνου υἱόν, κατὰ πρεσβείαν· ὑπομνήματα δὲ τῆς ἀποδημίας κατέλιπον τοιαῦτα, ὑφ᾽ ἧς δή ποτε αἰτίας προαχθέντες. Πατροκλῆς δὲ ἥκιστα τοιοῦτος· καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι δὲ μάρτυρες οὐκ ἀπίθανοι, οἷς κέχρηται ὁ Ἐρατοσθένης.
>
> However, all who have written about India have proved themselves, for the most part, liars, but pre-eminently so, Deimachus; the next in order is Megasthenes; and then, Onesicritus, and Nearchus, and other such writers, who begin to speak the truth, though with faltering voice. I, too, had the privilege of noting this fact extensively when I was writing the "Deeds of Alexander". But Deimachus and Megasthenes especially deserve to be distrusted. For they are the persons who tell us about the "men that sleep in their ears,", and the "men without mouths," and "men without noses"; and about "men with one eye," "men with long legs," "men with fingers turned backwards"; and they revived, also, the Homeric story of the battle between the cranes and the "pygmies," who, they said, were three spans tall. These men also tell about the ants that mine gold and Pans with wedge-shaped heads; and about sallow oxen and stags, horns and all; and in these matters the one

[56] See the quick overview by Dueck 2012, pp. 41-44.

> refutes the other, as is also stated by Eratosthenes. For although they were sent on an ambassadorial mission to Palimbothra (Megasthenes to Sandrocottus, Daimachus to Allitrochades the son of Sandrocottus), still, as memoirs of their stays abroad, they have left behind such writings as these, being prompted to do so by – I know not what cause! Patrocles, however, is by no means that sort of man. And what is more the other witnesses that Eratosthenes has used are not lacking in credibility.[57]

In a seminal overview of the origins of the Western iconography of monsters, Rudolf Wittkower (Wittkower 1942) connected Strabo's passage with an anecdote told by Aulus Gellius, in which the Roman erudite describes how, strolling in the harbour of Brundisium, his attention was drawn to some books on sale, *N.A.* 9.4, 3-4:

> *Erant autem isti omnes libri Graeci miraculorum fabularumque pleni, res inauditae, incredulae, scriptores veteres non parvae auctoritatis: Aristeas Proconnesius et Isogonus Nicaeensis et Ctesias et Onesicritus et Philostephanus et Hegesias; ipsa autem volumina ex diutino situ squalebant et habitu aspectuque taetro erant.*
>
> All those books were in Greek, filled with marvellous tales, things unheard of, incredible; but the writers were ancient and of no mean authority: Aristea of Proconnesus, Isogonus of Nicaea, Ctesias and Onesicritos, Philostephanus and Hegesias. The volumes themselves, however, were filthy from long neglect, in bad condition and unsightly.

He goes on reporting the marvels he excerpted from these fascinatingly *taetra volumina*, providing a sort of extended version of Strabo's list; however, despite the non *parva auctoritas* of the *auctores*, he concludes by stating that, *N.A.* 9.4, 12:

> *Haec atque alia istiusmodi plura legimus, sed cum ea scriberemus, tenuit nos non idoneae scripturae taedium nihil ad ornandum iuvandumque usum vitae pertinentis.*
>
> This and many other stories of the kind I read; but when writing them down, I was seized with disgust for such worthless writings, which contribute nothing to the enrichment or profit of life.

Wittkower coupled Strabo and Gellius' accounts in a section entitled *An Enlightened Interlude*, stressing the rationalistic and mistrustful attitude they embody. Scholars are now more cautious in judging ancient authorial postures and declarations, but it is true

[57] Transl. by H. L. Jones 1917. See Wittkower 1942, pp. 165-166; Romm 1992, pp. 96-104.

that voicing a feeling of mistrust towards one's sources was (and remains) a good strategy for increasing one's own credibility.[58]

Through Pomponius Mela and Pliny the Elder,[59] the "marvels of the East" were granted a long-lasting presence in Latin geographical writing, and Solinus might well be regarded as the fundamental gate-keeper of this tradition: thanks to the extensive re-use of the *Collectanea* by Martianus Capella and Isidore of Seville, Solinus' work entered the Middle Ages as a standard stock of monstrous creatures. The India of Ctesias and Megasthenes turned, in Western literary consciousness, into the India of Solinus.[60]

In this light, the way India is introduced in chapter 52 of the *Collectanea* seems all the more significant, especially when compared with Pliny's parallel locus *N.H.* 6, 57-59. Pliny, after reporting Posidionius' theory that India lies opposite Gaul,[61] identifies the eastern country as a land of exuberant alterity and summarises part of the tradition we have already encountered:

> *Alia illi caeli facies, alii siderum ortus; binae aestates in anno, binae messes, media inter illas hieme etesiarum flatus, nostra vero bruma lenes ibi aurae, mare navigabile. Gentes ei urbesque innumerae, si quis omnes persequi velit. Etenim patefacta est non modo Alexandri Magni armis regumque qui successere ei, circumvectis etiam in Hyrcanium mare et Caspium Seleuco et Antiocho praefectoque classis eorum Patrocle, verum et aliis auctoribus Graecis, qui cum regibus Indicis morati, sicut Megasthenes et Dionysius a Philadelpho missus, ex ea causa vires quoque gentium prodidere. Non tamen est diligentiae locus: adeo diversa et incredibilia traduntur.*
>
> In that country the aspect of the heavens and the rising of the stars are different, and there are two summers and two harvests yearly, separated by a winter

[58] It has been observed, for example, that Strabo's attitude itself seems to be inconsistent with regards to India, see Romm 1992, p. 103: "Strabo's attempt at revisionist Indography, with its glowing faith in the advances wrought by Alexander and Augustus, turns out to be only marginally more restrictive than the efforts of earlier writers […] Strabo seems to surrender his judgment when faced with large collections of wonders and to be carried along by the catalogue, allowing its spare style and rapid momentum to carry him past all questions of credibility."

[59] It is no wonder that Gellius (9.4.7), a few lines after the passage quoted above, mentions Pliny book 7, a book devoted to "man", rich in teratological material on which Solinus' excursus on the same topic is also based (I, 53-127). See the commentary by Beagon 2005.

[60] On the story of the "monstrous races" see Wittkower 1942 and Friedmann 1981.

[61] For all its awkwardness from a modern geographical perspective this theory is explicable on the grounds of the Ocean river theory (according to which the *oikoumene* was surrounded by a huge, unique river) and on the minimization of the real proportions of northern Eurasia. On this, and on the strange case reported by Pomponius Mela (3. 44-45) and Pliny (*N.H.* 2.170) of "Indians" found ashore in Germany, see Podossinov 2014.

> accompanied by Etesian winds, while at our midwinter it enjoys soft breezes and the sea is navigable. Its races and cities are beyond counting, if one wished to enumerate them all. For it has been brought to light not only by the armed forces of Alexander the Great and the kings who succeeded him, Seleucus and Antiochus, and their admiral of the fleet, Patrocles, having sailed round even into the Hyrcanian and Caspian Sea, but also by other Greek authors who have stayed as guests with the Indian kings, for instance Megasthenes, and Dionysius sent by Philadelphus for that purpose, who have also reported on the strength of these nations. Nevertheless there is no possibility of being exact in this matter, so discrepant and difficult to believe are the accounts given.[62]

In this last remark, *non tamen est diligentiae locus*, we can hear an echo, although weakened, of Strabo's polemics. For his part, Solinus takes over some of Pliny's material only to radically alter its implications:[63]

> *Hanc [Indiam] Posidonius adversam Galliae statuit. sane nec quicquam ex ea dubium: nam Alexandri Magni armis comperta et aliorum postmodum regum diligentia peragrata penitus cognitioni nostrae addicta est. Megasthenes sane apud Indicos reges aliquantisper moratus res Indicas scripsit, ut fidem, quam oculis subiecerat, memoriae daret. Dionysius quoque, qui et ipse a Philadelpho rege spectator missus est, gratia periclitandae veritatis paria prodidit*.
>
> Posidonius placed India opposite Gaul. No aspect of this country is mysterious: Alexander the Great's military conquest and the commitment of his successors have provided us with a thorough knowledge of India. After a sojourn at the courts of some Indian kings, Megasthenes wrote his treatise On Indian things in order to entrust to memory what he had seen in person. Dionysius, who had been sent to India as an observer by king Ptolemy, also wrote similar things in support of truth

Megasthenes and Dionysius are presented as reliable autoptic witnesses, without any mention of the polemics surrounding their writings. For a "guardian of memory" (Paniagua) this is quite a remarkable move. But some irregularities in the passage merit closer inspection. The final sentence, in particular, seems problematic. The complemental structure *gratia +* genitive is rarer than the opposite genitive + *gratia*; moreover, Mommsen's punctuation somehow separates *gratia periclitandae veritatis* from the participle *missus* through the insertion of a comma. In my translation I take *gratia periclitandae veritatis* as the goal of Dionysius' mission, consequently making it directly

[62] Text and translation are taken from Rackham 1942.

[63] The question of whether Solinus drew directly from Pliny, from an intermediary source or from a common source is here irrelevant.

dependant on *missus*.[64] Fernández Nieto, in his commented Spanish edition, follows Mommen's punctuation closely, but, as a result, his translation sounds somewhat ambiguous: "Asimismo Dionisio, que fue enviado por el rey Filadelfo, también como observador, *nos ha legado un* relato *parecido al objeto de averiguar la realidad*" (Fernández Nieto 2001, p. 524, my emphasis). Was Dionisius sent in order to ascertain the truth or did he write a report similar to Megasthenes' in order to fabricate a shared truth? Deciding between these two possible readings does not produce a neutral resolution, since if we accept the former Solinus would really be stating a contrary opinion to Pliny while stressing over and over that he is drawing on dependable sources.[65]

As is very often the case, such textual difficulties conceal more radical hermeneutical doubts: is Solinus deliberately manipulating his sources in order to mislead his reader? Such an interpretation may sound unacceptably rough, but it has been proposed and has the advantage of acknowledging a certain degree of personal initiative on the part of Solinus.[66] A less "personalistic" way of conceptualizing this problem might be to rephrase it in terms of genre expectations: Solinus, by de-problematizing the material he finds in his *auctores*, is implementing a strategy quite common among teratologists, whose compositional technique mostly consists of excerpting extraordinary information from contexts in which it would usually be normalized.[67] The relief given to the *marvellous* in the *Collectanea* (and not only to the Indian marvellous) makes the reconfiguration of the ''deontological'' principles outlined in the preface understandable. A new form of negotiation, a different writer-reader pact is here implied. In line with what we designated as an *economy of pleasure*, if, on the one hand, the reader's enjoyment of the *mirabilia* significantly depended on the assumption that the marvellous information was true, on the other one, there would have been no pleasure at all if the information had been sifted too rigorously. When stating this we must avoid falling into a simplistic characterization of late antique readers as too unsophisticated for "real" science and of Solinus as their complaisant servant.

[64] Cf. Brodersen 2014b, p. 291.

[65] Even the apparently clear-cut introductory utterance *sane nec quicquam ex ea dubium* ("no aspect of this country is mysterious") is not completely free of philological uncertainties: Mommsen's apparatus shows that *G*, a manuscript already collated by Gustav Parthey and at that time in possession of Mommsen himself (Mommsen 1958 [1895], p. LII) deletes the *nec*, thus providing a reading of the passage that would be closer to the traditionally distrustful attitude: *sane quicquam ex ea dubium*.

[66] See Apps 2014, p. 34 n. 2. Typically enough, in his *Dawn of Modern Geography* (Beazley 1897, p. 247), Beazly argued that, notwithstanding Solinus' derivativeness, "it would be wrong to refuse him a place in the history of Christian geography, for no one influenced it more profoundly or *more mischievously*." (My emphasis).

[67] Cfr. *supra* p. 72 n. 38.

The result of Solinus' contradictory gestures (flaunting reliable *auctores* while admitting that they could be wrong; purporting a rigorous obedience to his sources while radically sifting their material etc.) is a *hybridization of worlds*, a dimension in which the exact meaning and the extent of the term ''referentiality'' is blurred. Indeed, by defining referentiality as the correspondence between a set of elements constituting the "real world" and those constituting any given ''book world'', we run the risk of adopting a grid that is too rigid.

Most of the models proposed to describe the status of geographical objects in literary works rely on a tripartite scheme: at the extremities we find objects that belong exclusively to either the ''real world'' or the ''book world'', in the middle are objects that share features from both realms. For example, Parsons relies on three different but similar categories: *immigrant* objects (taken from the ''real world'' and transplanted into the ''book world''), *narrative* objects (existing only in the ''book world'') and, in between, *surrogate* objects.[68] Davis calls the entities belonging to the ''real world'' *actual*, while the ones that belong exclusively to the ''book-world'' are *fictitious*, and *renamed* objects are things like real cities disguised in the narrative under a fictitious name.[69] A very similar structure underpins Westphal's distinction of three different types of referential system: *consensus homotopique* (when a geographical entity in the ''book world'' is meant to correspond univocally to an entity in the ''real world''), *excursus utopique* (referring to places that exist only in the ''book world''), and *brouillage hétérotopique* (under which label Westphal places any overlapping of the two domains, through juxtaposition, interpolation, etc.).[70] All of these paradigms, even when one considers their intermediate categories (*renamed*, *surrogate* and *heterotopic* objects), rest on a systemic opposition between Reality and the Book, non-fiction and fiction. They do not ascribe priority to either of the two domains – both Reality and the Book are equally treated as discursive constructs – but their very individuation fails to fit the case of Solinus' work. Indeed, the distinction that they draw, if not ontologically embodied by the ''object'', definitely points to a posture of the ''subject'', a speaking/writing subject that operates in lucid awareness of what is fiction and what is not.

Parsons, Davis and Westphal provide their tripartitions as tools for analysing fictional texts, but these tools are scarcely helpful when dealing with non-fictional works, and even less so when approaching the old problem posed by the reciprocal porousness of ''actual''

[68] On Parsons' categories, which he fully developed in *Nonexistent objects*, see Pavel 1986, pp. 27-31.

[69] Davis 1987, p. 55. Davis' main focus, though, is not so much the "ontology" of literary places as their ideological implications (cfr. the whole chapter *Known unknown locations: the ideology of place*, Davis 1987, pp. 52-101).

[70] Westphal 2007, pp. 169-172. For an overview of these and other tripartite schemes, see Piatti 2009, pp. 131-147.

and ‘‘fictional’’ worlds. Thomas G. Pavel focused on this paradox in his classic monograph, at the end of which he offers a sketchy outline of what he labels an *economy of the imaginary*.[71] At a given point in space and time the world view of a given community may consist of several contrasting *ontological landscapes*, that is, of different sets of beliefs that establish the boundaries for what can exist or what cannot, what can happen or not happen. For example, a Christian ontological landscape open to miracles has been coexisting for three centuries at least with a scientific landscape that resolutely rejects them; rejection is but one of the possible configurations of the relationship between two ontological landscapes, whose negotiations are more often subtle, complex and unstable. We could say that ‘‘fiction’’ arises when an ontological landscape is discarded and employed for secondary uses and the ontological level of its objects is downgraded (think of the destiny of ‘‘mythology’’).

Now, what kind of speaking/writing subject is Solinus? What is his India? An *immigrant* object? If so, we could be so bold as to argue that Solinus did actually believe in the referential quality of all his information. If this is the case, how can we account for the shifts in the form and style of his teratological treatise? One could pick up any passage in chapter 52 and immediately recognize the catalogic abundance and unashamed decontextualization of the *mirabilia* collected there, their paroxysmal caricature of encyclopaedic exhaustiveness.[72] Is India a *narrative* object? This would run against the genre affiliation claimed in the preface. And how could we choose one of the middle-categories, if the conditions for their possible existence are erased and collapsed? Clearly, the most conspicuous consequence of Solinus’ weak epistemology is the impossibility of outlining the ontological landscape of the *Collectanea* in a clear-cut way. As a gate keeper of tradition, in the end, Solinus is relatively ambiguous. His work, shuttling between centrifugal and centripetal forces, never settles in a stable middle point, never rests in a centre of stillness: its being “in between” – genres, levels of referentiality, ontological landscapes – is a kinetic condition, its epitomic condensation generates movement instead of stasis.

Given this scenario, when and where could such a text come to an end? This question might be rightly asked of any work with encyclopaedic ambitions (when and where should we stop cataloguing the world?), but it is all the more interesting in the case of a book whose potential openness has to come to terms with its being *ad compendium praeparatus*. The *memorabile* and the *mirabile*, although serving as selection criteria and therefore as semantic stabilizers, nonetheless allow for diversity and permanent

[71] Pavel 1986, pp. 136-148.

[72] See, most famously, the long list of Indian monsters and *mirabilia* at LII, 27-45.

deviation, to the extent that at any new chapter (or, better, at any swerve into a new topic) it seems difficult to foresee how long it will take for the theme to be consumed.

The *Collectanea* end, just like Pliny's properly descriptive geographical books (*N.H.* 3-6, the last part of book 6 being devoted to calculating the dimensions of seas, rivers, continents etc.), at the Western extremity of the known *oikoumene*, at the so-called *Insulae Fortunatae* (Isles of Blessed) – but this ending conceals something more than an external, physical boundary.[73]

The final section (LVI, 14-19) sets out with a disclaimer: Solinus warns the readers that the archipelago falls short of the expectations its name might raise, LVI, 15:

> *De harum nominibus expectari magnum < non > miror, sed infra famam vocabuli est.*
>
> I would not be surprised if one had great expectations, on the basis of their names, but they do not live up to their reputation.

Interestingly enough, there is no sense of this dismissive tone in Pliny *N.H.* 202-205, the passage on which Solinus is probably drawing. Furthermore, as we have seen on other occasions (cfr. *supra* the digression on the *diomedeae aves*), Solinus systematically amplifies Pliny's phrasing in the ensuing description, with the clear purpose of painting a gloomy picture of the *Insulae*. The neutral Plinian observation that there are no buildings on the island called *Ombrion*/*Embrion* (*N.H.* 6, 203: *primam vocari Ombrion, nullis aedificiorum vestigiis*) is reformulated by Solinus to encompass more explicitly both past and present (LVI, 15: *in prima earum, cui nomen est Embrion, aedificia nec sunt nec fuerunt*); the juice of some black canes growing there is said to be *amarum* by Pliny, *amarissimum* by Solinus; talking about another island, *Iunonia*, Pliny recalls that it harbours a small temple made only of stone (N.H. 6, 204: *in ea aediculam esse tantum lapide exstructam*), a temple Solinus presents in harsher terms by stressing its smallness and the inadequacy of its "roof" (LVI, 16: *in qua pauxilla aedes ignobiliter ad culmen fastigata*).[74] But the most incisive intervention is to be found in the very last sentence.

[73] Solinus identifies the *Insulae Fortunatae* with the modern Canaries, thus following Pliny, whose main sources were the Latin geographer Statius Sebosus and the Numidian king and polymath Juba. On the different ancient and modern identifications, see Amiotti 1988; Santana Santana – Arcos Pereira 2006. For an overview of imperial and medieval testimonies on the *Insulae Fortunatae*, see Cristini 2017.

[74] It is difficult to decide whether *ad culmen fastigata* should be read as a precise architectonical notation or not. Manfredi 1996, pp. 124; 141 ff. (quoted in Fernández Nieto 2001, p. 568 n. 1463) quotes Solinus' description to argue that the building was not an actual temple, but a small votive chapel of Phoenician foundation. This reading is interesting not so much for the (I think indemonstrable) material evidence, but because it would imply that Solinus is here adding some new, i.e. non-Plinian, information. Can the discrepancies between the two texts be

Pliny's cursory remarks on the presence of rotting carcasses (N.H. 6, 205: *infestari eas beluis, quae expellantur adsidue, putrescentibus*) is transposed by Solinus as follows, LVI, 19:

> *Perhibent etiam expui in eam undoso mari beluas; deinde cum monstra illa putredine tabefacta sunt, omnia illic infici taetro odore; ideoque non penitus ad nuncupationem sui congruere insularum qualitatem.*
>
> The rough sea, they say, casts ashore wild creatures; then, as these see-monsters rot in putrefaction, everything stinks with their foul stench; that's why the actual quality of the islands does not match their name.

The closing scene of Solinus' textual travel is set in a nightmarish landscape. Against a backdrop of stormy waves, rotting carcases exhale an overwhelming miasma. Far from weakening the *presence* of the *monstra* that, as readers, we have met throughout the work, this final dissolution makes the monsters even more haunting – the savage materiality of this vision is striking, as persistent as the *taeter odor* of decomposing remains. This explosion of material *evidentia* is accompanied by the acknowledgement that signified and signifier can be irreversibly split, that *res* and *verba* do not always match in a consequent way. This is the ultimate clash staged here, and it is this very clash that makes the *Collectanea* possible. The pedantic indignation of the last sentence (*ideoque non penitus ad noncupationem sui congruere insularum qualitatem*) can hardly make us forget that it is only through an imperfect transposition of *res* into *verba* that a catalogue of the world *ad compendium praeparatus* is feasible. The Solinian *congeries* is, first and foremost, a *congeries* of words – in this sense, its ''bookishness'' should be connected to more fundamental processes than those implied by uncritical erudition. At the end of his journey, Solinus leaves the reader brooding on how real *monstra* can be, wondering whether the truth lies in their excessive existence or in the haunting stench of their rotten bodies.

explained through Solinus' direct access to Pliny's *auctores* (Juba? Cfr. Cristini 2017, p. 157) or/and to an intermediate source? I do not think that the answer is really relevant to the present discussion.

Chapter 3
Thorns, Marrow, and Meaning
(Fabius Planciades Fulgentius)

Col passo avaro, indocile, acre, rompo
all'aldilà che in falde e felci sfrangia
sul botro; oltre le serpi e i pruni zompo.

E nell'alto aldilà, nei fondi teneri
do di tacco, do a sacco, sfregio veneri,
falsifico simbiosi: ora si mangia.

A. Zanzotto, *Il galateo in bosco, Ipersonetto V*

«Tutto arbitrario, tutto documentato»

G. Manganelli, *Pinocchio: un libro parallelo*

3.1 *Mysticum cerebrum*

3.1.1 *Labyrinthus in vacuo* (a pre-analysis)

Tandem inter sentosa nemorum fructeta, quae agrestis olim deseruerat manus – nam, intercapedinante pavoris prolixitate tam larga, fumo lurida parietibus aratra pendebant et laborifera boum colla iugales in vaccinam mollitiem deduxerant callos – squalebat viduus sulcis ager et herbidis sentibus olivifero vertici minabatur; ita enim nexili de syrmate meandrico gramini labrusca coibant, quo saepta herbosis

radicibus tellus Triptolemicum contumax abnueret dentem – ergo dum huiuscemodi paliurea prata incedenti premerem planta et roscidos florulenti velleris colles spatianti meterem passu, defectum voluntas peperit et egredientis studio sedulitas ex labore successit. Devertor arborei beneficium umbraculis praesumens, quo me errant foliorum intextu Phoebis torridis defensaret obtuitibus et circumfluo ramorum recurrentium nexu umbram quam propriis radicibus praeberet mihi etiam concederet esse communem.

And so, among the thorny briers of the glades, once kept in order by the hand of the countryman (because the stoppage and long neglect caused by that fear, the ploughs, a sorry sight and thick with soot, were hung up on the walls; and the necks of the oxen, once fit for hard toil, had now reduced the tough skin of their yoking to a cow-like softness), the neglected land stood with its furrows overgrown and threatened to choke the tops of the olive trees with its thick briers. The wild vine was collecting with its binding, winding, and trailing growth, as if the earth held down by its matted roots would stubbornly refuse the tooth of Triptolemus. As in this fashion I forced my steps across the fields through the advancing thorn and paced through the mounds with their bright and spreading tufts, my enthusiasm for walking began to falter, and eagerness gave place to toil. I turned aside, anticipating the benefit of the shady tree with its interwoven leaves to protect the wanderer from the fiery glances of Phoebus, and in the entwining of its bending branches I gained the shady spot which at its vey roots is provided and let me share.[1]

The eye glides slowly across a desert of devastated fields, a post-apocalyptic horizon littered with the remnants of long forgotten human activities, the anthropic landscape now reduced to a *tabula rasa* where infesting weeds can freely sprawl. Then, all of sudden, a shift in tone, *defectum voluntas peperit* ("my enthusiasm began to falter"), *devertor* ("I turn aside") – and the vision begins to transform, from abandoned glades we are transported, thanks to emergence of the first person voice, to a place where the mild shadow cast by some trees offers a comfortable shelter away from the burning sun, a *locus amoenus* at the heart of desolation.

[1] All translations are taken from Whitbread 1971 with some modifications. It should be noted that Whitbread's translation, still the only extant English full-length translation of Fulgentius' works, is far from being flawless, as already pointed out by Bruère 1973 and Relihan 1986, p. 540 n. 11. The Latin text reproduces Venuti 2018 for the *Prologue* and Helm 1898 for the three books of *fabulae*. Pages and lines references are based on Helm 1898.

This excerpt is taken from the *Prologue* of Fabius Planciades Fulgentius's *Mythologiae* (Prol. 6,4 – 6, 20).[2] The first person, as it will be confirmed shortly thereafter, is Fulgentius himself: we are ushered into the hermeneutical world of the *Mythologiae* (three books of *fabulae*, "myths", and interpretations) through an ostentatiously autobiographical voice. And yet, what kind of voice is this? What kind of *bios*? Before delving into a closer reading of the *Prologue* (see section 2. ''The Allegorical Satire of the *Prologus*'') I would like to linger a little longer on this vision of grimness and subsequent, unexpected peacefulness by making it resound in a vacuum, as if it were an *excerptum* rescued from an irretrievable totality: a way of reading that, as we shall see, shows some affinities with Fulgentius' own interpretative strategy and bestows an *epitomic* character to his work.

By offering a content-centered paraphrase of the passage, I have substantially obscured its most striking feature: the blatant panache of the prose.[3] In this sequence of descriptions all nouns and adjectives, sedulously displaced, seem to be loaded with something more than mimetic accuracy; everything is a *topos* overflowing with figurative abundance (note the redundancy of *nexili de syrmate meandrico gramini*); everything is detailed, but all details sound generic.[4]

A similar kind of discrepancy, between topicality and excess, coherence and arbitrariness, might be spotted in the spatial configuration of the scene: plundered fields and blossoming mounds belong to two totally different worlds – a fact which, apparently, does not prevent them from being staged as contiguous. If it is hard to draw a map of the land here described, it is because such a landscape is too *topical* to fit into a naturalistic *topography* – an abstract *topology* is all we can attain. But what may appear as a traditionally climactic ascension from darkness to light – in three acts: devastated country/blossoming mounds/*amoenus* lonely tree – is blurred by a factor that subtly connects the starting and the final point of the climax: the labyrinthine texture of the vegetation. The tangle of briers choking the ground (*ita enim nexili de syrmate meandrico gramini labrusca coibant, quo saepta herbosis radicibus tellus Triptolemicum contumax abnueret dentem*) is mirrored in the interwoven foliage and branches of the tree, a visual echo that breaks the pure linearity of the ascending movement from death to life, from

2 On Fulgentius' three names and on the *vexata quaestio* of whether the author of the *Mythologiae* should be identified with the well-documented bishop of Ruspe (468-533 CE), see the thorough treatment by Hays 2003. Despite Hays' resolution in denying the identification, there is still no agreement among scholars. Cfr. Venuti 2018, pp. 11-21.

3 For an assessment of Fulgentius' notorious prose, see Venuti 2018, pp. 30-34; Wolff–Dain 2013, pp. 25-29; Manca 2003, pp. 58-63, on the *De aetatibus mundi et hominis*.

4 The overwhelmingly rich intertextuality of the *Prologue* will not be at the centre of the present discussion; it has been already intensively investigated by Venuti 2018.

squalor to dewy hills, and impresses on it the mark of circularity. Both the fields and the tree share a common feature: they are, as it were, *saturated environments*, spaces replete with an exceeding element; or again, as I suggested before, *tabulae rasae* on which we can recognize a meandrous pattern – they are *inscribed surfaces*. And the shape of such inscriptions is analogous to Fulgentius' own divergent writing, characterized as it is by displacements in the expected *ordo verborum*, metaplasms, *hapax legomena*.[5] The thickness of the thorns on which the first person narrator has to step while walking through the fields (*dum huiuscemodi paliurea prata incedenti premerem planta*) is reminiscent of the thickness that readers find in the excess and saturation on Fulgentius' page.

Slowed down in the very process of interpreting the text, a reader of the *Prologue* has to struggle against its opacity, which is accompanied by a feeling that everything, on this page, is meaningful. Its overstuffed signifiers trigger questions about their relationship to the signified: the glades, the mounds, the tree, but also the first-person wanderer, the bending branches, the vines, the olive tree, every component of the scenery *might not* simply be what it seems. Their accumulation and juxtaposition on Fulgentius' over-inscribed page invites the reader to look for supplemental readings, or just to *read the objects*. The *Prologue* is a maze of opaque signs whose intricacy reveals itself to be, at the same time, the cause and the final result of their excess of meaning.

However, it is also worth noting that accumulation and loosely coherent juxtaposition may contribute to making the single objects stand out against the blurred (entwined) background, providing them with the evidence of isolation. In such saturated environments, objects, instead of interconnecting in a stable network, or building up an easily decipherable relationship, emerge as unrelated monades, as characters of a broken alphabet: we *see* the *lurida aratra*, we *see* the meandering scribbling of the weeds, we even *see* the hammering alliteration of *paliurea prata incedenti premerem planta*, or the twisted syntax of *quo saepta herbosis radicibus tellus Triptolemicum contumax abnueret dentem* – what is hard to *see* is the system that would account for their meaning and make it not only *perceivable*, but also *utterable*.

[5] On the linguistic features of Fulgentius' inclination to *hapax legomena*, see Manca 2003, p. 63; Hays 2002, pp. 249-252; Wolff – Dain 2013, pp. 26-27.

3.1.2 Frames and Meanders

Thus far, the discussion has been deliberately presented in the form of a *pre-analysis*, that is, in a way which many will judge as not analytical at all. Instead of trying to disentangle the several aspects of the text, I have let them collapse in on each other. For example, the *meander* has been taken ''literally'' at the level of the narrative (*meandrico gramine*) and used subsequently as a formal pattern, standing for any kind of intricacy (leaves and branches). Reduced to the status formal of pattern, it has been applied to stylistic features as well as to more general semiotic considerations. A similar ambiguous inconsistency could be ascribed to the use of the phrase *tabula rasa*, the verb *devertor* and the term *topos*, as well as to the treatment of space. This was no analytical argumentation because it was based upon abrupt shifts from one signifying system to another, from the fictional world within the text to the linguistic code underlying the text itself, and from the code to its rules. Moreover, it might also be pointed out that the reader here evoked resembles an abstract function more than a historically and phenomenologically anchored subject. This implies that the present observations are nothing but undemonstrated and indemonstrable generalizations relying upon the (mis-)conceptions of one single reader – "me". We shall see how the merging of disparate semiotic codes and the "arbitrariness" of the analysis are exactly what usually baffle post-renaissance students when they approach Fulgentius's *Mythologiae*.[6]

Even so, while rambling in thrall of the text and its meanders, we touched upon an actual problem which lies at the heart of any epitomic practice: the conundrum of meaning and of its delimitation. Reflecting on accumulation and juxtaposition, or, to resume some phrasing from the pre-analysis, reflecting on *opacity*, requires us to grapple with the issue of *de-contextualization*.[7] By shifting from one signifying system to another, what we are doing is, basically, transplanting units from one context to a new one – I take the meanders drawn by the grass and transpose them at the level of textual analysis, never forgetting, though, their irreducible origin. One might say that I am just metaphorizing. When staring at an object, it is difficult to perceive it as an integrated wholeness once we are aware of

[6] The *Mythologiae* were very popular in the Middle Ages, not only as a source of myths. Carolingian authors seem to have admired Fulgentius' style and to have adopted some Fulgentian phrases, cfr. Laistner 1957 [1928]. Fulgentius' repertoire of myths remained authoritative at least until Giovanni Boccaccio's *Genealogiae deorum gentilium* and Coluccio Salutati's *De laboribus Herculis*. See Hays 2013, esp. pp. 319-333, who concludes that: "The dismissal of Fulgentius as an eccentric and minor author – 'pretentious, yet essentially trivial' – as Laistner called him – is a comparatively recent phenomenon, and one driven primarily by trends in modern classical scholarship", p. 332.

[7] My use of the term *opacity* does not entirely overlap with the aesthetical use popularized by Edouard Glissant (cfr. Glissant 1990), on which see Mbom 2000.

the disparate provenience of its elements. While reading of a luxuriant tree growing a few steps away from a plundered field, we are likely to glimpse the disjointedness of the image, all the more so if we find it described in terms that immediately recall the *locus amoenus topos*: we will be inevitably led to make sense of the presence of the tree *through* the *topos*, that is, by connecting the tree to another signifying context. But what would happen if we did not know anything about *loci amoeni et similia*? What if, in other words, the only available context were the one at hand, this unaccustomed juxtaposition of devastation and luxury, and we were not able to hear in the tree the echo of a *topos*? Would we still perceive the disjointedness of the image? Or is this rather a product of our disjointing gaze?

For all their triviality, such questions play no secondary role when it comes to studying a set of phenomena which, for brevity's sake, I will subsume under the label of *cumulative aesthetics*. This term has often been utilized for late antique artistic products, with reference to both visual and literary output;[8] it points to a crisis in the ideal of organic totality which became more and more conspicuous in late antiquity: a pre-eminence of details over the whole, an inclination towards the heaping of "ornaments", a fragmentation of the object (sculpture, poem etc.) into un-related units are all characteristics widely attested in art from the 3rd-7th c. CE.[9] In addition to such formal disruption, the identity (understood as *uniqueness*) of the work of art came to be menaced, at least from a modern point of view, by the continuous ostentation of the derivativeness of the work itself, by its repeated insistence on being a patchwork made of scraps taken from previous cultural experiences. Jaś Elsner has argued that the *spolia*-aesthetics observable in much late antique architecture and statuary can be interpreted as a correlative to typically late antique textual works like centos, quotation-stuffed poems and, of course, epitomes: the Arch of Constantine would be comparable to Homeric and Virgilian centos, which pillaged canonical literary texts to create new entities out of their words.[10] It is here that our ''trivial questions'' become most relevant. Paolo Liverani has repeatedly warned against drawing hurried parallels between *spolia* and intertextual practices.[11] In his opinion, *spolia* and citations cannot be made to overlap since the latter is not an invasive technique, while the former derives from a previously destroyed context;

[8] See Elsner 2006; Elsner-Hernández Lobato 2017, pp. 6-9; Johnson 2016, p. 29 speaks of an "aesthetic of accumulation."

[9] Cfr. Elsner 2006; Patricia Cox Miller speaks of an aesthetics of fragments based on "distant echoing", Cox Miller 2009, pp. 43ff.. This concept is similar to the "aesthetic of discontinuity" famously analysed by Michael Roberts in his monograph on late antique "jewelled style" (Roberts 1989). See in general Lobato 2012, pp. 257-317.

[10] Elsner 2006, pp. 279-280.

[11] Liverani 2009; *Id.* 2011.

quotations demand, as it were, to be read against an original background, they function as bridges between two (con)texts, whereas *spolia* often entail the material effacement of this very (con)text. Did the Arch of Constantine need its observers to be aware of the origins of its medallions and columns? Liverani denies this possibility by arguing that the *spolia* appearing in the arch performed a *phatic/metalinguistic* function, that is, they reinforced and explained the monument's own mode of communication: "In the most elementary fashion, the reused columns and the profusion of marbles that Constantine and his successors employed in the imperially sponsored church basilicas were saying something similar: 'this is a building of imperial status, worthy of the emperor's benefaction'."[12] In other terms, in the eyes of Roman viewers the disparateness of the columns and reliefs dissolved into the majestic totality of the political message. The pressure exerted by imperial ideology functioned as a semantic homogenizer, obliterating any potential internal discrepancies. What would have been easy to deconstruct as an accumulation of fragments was actually perceived as a coherent totality.

At the intersection between cumulative aesthetics and delimitation of meaning we find the problem of *framing*.[13] In the case of the Arch of Constantine, the broad frame superimposed by imperial ideology supersedes the minor frames of columns, narrative panels, and freezes. The constitution of meaning always depends on the number of interconnections we are willing to admit among the elements of a given set: to choose a frame means to accept some connections, to bring them to the foreground, while discarding others, relegating them to the background – it is a process of marking, of creating a path. In an *over-inscribed environment* (as in its opposite, an *empty environment*) one might be tempted to indulge in the most characteristic feature of frames: their unrestrainable capacity for producing meaning. Once framed, even a void becomes significant; when too many objects are eligible to be framed, the temptation is to frame everything, be it by setting the focus closer on the object or further away from it, by reveling in close-ups or exceeding in long-shots. Over-inscribed environments help us to realize that, in the end, it is the very act of framing that ignites the process of semiosis – to realize that the confusion elicited by where to put the frame (a crisis of legibility) is a confusion that *should always be there*, even if there are no objects to frame.

Fulgentius' textuality embodies this apparent paradox – the overabundant significance of the void, the emptiness of an over-significant space – both from the perspective of the object being-read and of the reading subject (thus destabilizing any neat distinction

[12] Liverani 2011, p. 37.

[13] It will become clear in the following pages that I deliberately take the term *frame* and its derivatives in quite broad a sense. For some theoretical considerations on frames and their disruption, see at least Kovács 2016. For a cultural history of frames in the ancient visual and textual domains, see Platt – Squire 2017.

between the two): the meandering signifiers of the *Prologue*, so hard to disentangle, anticipate Fulgentius' own entangled reading of the myths, its incessant shifting of frames. As we shall later see, Fulgentius' hermeneutics insists on the signifier only to smash its boundaries and shuttle freely between *verba* and *res*, breaking down words, tales and images, so that *sepulto mendacis Graeciae fabuloso commento quid mysticum in his sapere debeat cerebrum agnoscamus* ("once the fictional invention of lying Greeks has been disposed of, we may infer what allegorical significance one should understand in such matters", Prol. 11, 17-18). This *mysticum cerebrum*, a variation on what Macrobius had called *cogitationes latentes*, the hidden meaning of words,[14] is attained at costs that have often proved hardly acceptable for modern scholars. In order to find some very harsh judgments of Fulgentius' interpretative technique one does not necessarily need to go back to the baffled, dismissively positivistic condemnation expressed by Domenico Comparetti who, in his widely influential monograph on the reception of Vergil in the Middle Ages, lamented that "the [allegorical] process of Fulgentius is so violent and incoherent, it disregards every law of common sense in such a patent and well-nigh brutal manner, that it is hard to conceive how any sane man can seriously have undertaken such a work, and harder still to believe that other sane men should have accepted it as an object for serious consideration."[15] Indeed, as late as 1971, Leslie G. Withbread observed that "[Fulgentius'] purposes and methods [are] muddleheaded and dubious, and [his] displays of learning second hand and suspect";[16] and in 1986 J. C. Relihan began an article noting ironically that "Fulgentius the Mythographer suffers from an academic contempt that seems to be completely justified."[17]

If we decide to define Fulgentius's controversial hermeneutics as ''allegorical'', then it seems to be appropriate to look at it as a form of "radical interpretation", as Gerald L. Bruns phrases it, that is to say, as a way to radically subvert the apparent meaning of a given sign (either textual or visual). An important disclaimer should not here be omitted: allegory as "radical interpretation" has always been, in Bruns' opinion, a typically Western

[14] *Sat.* 1.17.5. Cf. Amsler 1989, p. 126. Venuti 2018, pp. 211-212 lists other passages from the *Mythologiae*: 12,3 *secretis mysticisque rebus vivaciter pertractandis*; 12,12 *mysticae artes*; 15,1-2 *mysticis* […] *rationibus* […] *de his expectas effectus*; 54,9 *sed haec fabula mystici saporem cerebri consipit*; 74, 8-9 *nunc ergo huius mysticae fabulae interiorem cerebrum inquiramus*; 78, 18-20 *vocis pulchritudo* […] *interna artis secreta virtutem etiam mysticam verborum attingit.*

[15] Comparetti 1997 [1872], p. 112.

[16] Whitbread 1971, p. IX.

[17] Relihan 1986, p. 535.

hermeneutical tool, an instrument of power, control and cultural appropriation.[18] Before assigning such an attitude to Fulgentius and making him a sort of intellectual conqueror, it is worth taking a closer look at this peculiar use of the concept of allegory.

3.1.3 Allegory and Satire

In *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (1992) Gerald L. Bruns defines allegory as the hermeneutical practice of transposing an object into a code understandable by (or compatible with) the reader and her/his community. In this sense, allegory, although based on the multifariousness of the sign, might be regarded as a semantic stabilizer: it exploits the instability of the text to make it say what the reader yearns to hear (the figural interpretation of the Old Testament would be a classical example of such a procedure).[19] Unlike the Benjaminian allegorical reader, fascinated by textual ruptures, deviations, and unfathomable juxtapositions of scattered fragments, a truly demolishing reader, Bruns' allegorist is first of all a powerful centralizer of meaning, someone able to make everything converge on a single point, since in "radical interpretation what matters is not meaning but truth; that is, the question is not, What does this sentence mean? but How would this sentence have to be construed so as to be held true in our language?"[20] Allegory, then, seems to be here the very structure of ideology, almost a factory of master signifiers that leaves scarce or no room for an actual, dialogical encounter between texts and readers: allegory – that is, radical interpretation – turns out to be a reader's monologue, or even a soliloquy, in which the text, precisely because of its opaqueness, is utilized as if it were a mirror.[21]

At the opposite pole, Bruns locates satire: "Satire is the discourse of the Other against the Same: counterallegory. Satire explodes the conceptual schemes or mechanical operations of the spirit by which we try to objectify and control things, including all that comes down to us from the past." Resuming the terminology I adopted speaking of

[18] See Bruns 1992, p. 83: "'Radical interpretation' means the redescription, in one's own language, of sentences from an alien system of concepts and beliefs […] In this context making sense does not mean recovering or preserving an original message, or at least not just that; rather, it means integrating a text (and its meanings) into a radically new cultural environment." As Bruns himself points out shortly thereafter, he borrows the term ''radical interpretation'' from David Davidson's *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, which, in turn, reinterpreted and modified Willard Van Orman Quine's concept of "radical translation".

[19] Bruns 1992, pp. 88 ff. focuses on Philo of Alexandria.

[20] Bruns 1992, p. 83.

[21] In order to oppose such a solipsistic attitude, Bruns suggests we go back to Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons", Bruns 1992, pp. 209 ff. For a subtler and somehow less pessimistic account of the relationship between ideology and allegory, see most recently Jameson 2019, pp. ix-xxi.

Solinus, if allegory is a *centripetal* hermeneutical strategy, satire is a *centrifugal* one, "unconvertible, uncontainable, uncontrollable; it rages at the gates for all the world like the voice of a madwoman."[22] And where allegory can only be *monological*, satire is inherently *dialogical*. Bruns considers both these strategies as ways of confronting "tradition" or "the past". Tradition is, indeed, often conceptualized as an allegorical process, as a *subsumptive thinking* that canonizes objects and makes them acceptable by stabilizing their meaning in accordance with a fixed set of values; the traditionalist cannot but silently welcome the things this enormous machine of meaning-production hands down to him/her. On the contrary, the satirist chooses to play an interlocutory role and to deal with tradition not so much as with an archive of consolidated values as with an agonistic space, a place where "[one] exposes one's self-image to alternative descriptions, producing an irrepressible satirical desire"[23]; for the satirist, tradition is a place to lose the self through contamination.[24]

I think that the Bachtinian echoes of Bruns' theory are here sufficiently evident: the monological ratio of allegory is to be seen as a coercive (although highly productive) force, whereas the polyphonic dialogism of satire would act as a disruptive, liberating gesture. Like many other dichotomies, this opposition, while providing a handy hermeneutical tool, convincingly captures some phenomena while remaining blind to others. The tension that Bruns recognizes between allegory and satire could actually be said to be operative within allegory itself. In an influential overview of allegorical practices in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Jon Whitman, analyzing the exemplary case of Bernardus Silvestris' *Cosmographia*,[25] draws attention to the double dynamics that allegory can generate: on the one hand, allegorical objects or characters (i.e., for instance, Nature) are made to converge around a core of truth, that is, are interpreted as functions of the master signifier (once we know that a specific character represents nature, we will be inclined to read all of its elements as representing a particular aspect of nature) – this is usually called *allegoresis*, or allegory as interpretative practice. On the other hand, compositional allegory, that is, allegory as the creation of allegorical objects, can really proliferate indefinitely, to the extent that these objects can become so numerous that it is almost impossible to derive a coherent

[22] Both quotations from Bruns 1992, p. 204.

[23] Bruns 1992, p. 204.

[24] Interestingly and perhaps unexpectedly, Bruns 1992, p. 199, chooses Petrarch as an example of dialogical appropriation of tradition, assuming that: "The lesson of Petrarch would be that tradition is not an empire of the dead whose ruins litter the contemporary landscape; not the *bricoleur*'s debris. It is not something that requires to be disinterred and reinstituted in a museum or a throne. It is not *vergangen*, or gone for good. […Petrarch] gives us the model of the hermeneutical concept of tradition as an ongoing conversation from which modernity (by definition) excludes itself".

[25] Whitman 1987, pp. 218-260.

master signifier: “On the one hand, the correspondences of compositional allegory begin to expand as the characters diverge from themselves. On the other hand, the divergences of interpretative allegory begin to coalesce as the characters correspond with each other, and in so doing, converge on an underlying truth.”[26] Such a movement dramatically complicates the polarized scheme outlined by Bruns: there is an element of satirical indeterminacy in every attempt at allegory/allegoresis, so that allegory reveals itself as an inevitable factor of instability (a tempered version, it could be argued, of the notion of allegory as a disruptive force presented by Paul de Man and other deconstructionists).[27]

To our present purpose, though, Bruns’ schematic view offers an interesting point of departure, since Fulgentius’ *Mythologiae* seem to subsume both tendencies, the allegorical and the satirical, in quite a straightforward way: the *Prologue* has been long since described as belonging to the ancient genre of *satira menippea*;[28] the three books of allegorical explanations to that of Graeco-Roman *fabulae* constituted as popular models down to Boccaccio.[29] Yet, more interestingly, Fulgentius’ work also contradicts the polarized structure of Bruns’ theory, polarizing, in its turn, critical interpretations. The next two sections will try to examine this mechanism in more depth.

3.2 The Allegorical Satire of the *Prologus*

3.2.1 Shifting Frames

A first, easy way to tackle the problems of allegory, satire, and, again, framing in the *Prologue* of the *Mythologiae* is to interrogate its architecture and the role it plays in the compositional economy of the whole work. In Helm’s edition, the 13 page long *Prologue* is directly attached to the first book, since no actual cutting is discernible between the closing section of the *Prologue* and the beginning of the mythological discussion.

[26] Whitman 1987, p. 243.

[27] I am referring, of course, to de Man’s essays collected in *Blindness and Insight* (1971) and *Allegories of Reading* (1979). For a general (and polemical) assessment of de Man’s allegory, see Kablitz 2016, pp. 27-44. Against any interpretation of allegory as a “structure of meaning”, see Machowsky 2013, pp. 1-63.

[28] Cfr. Relihan 1993, pp. 152-163. Venuti 2018, pp. 30-34, is more cautious in assigning the *Prologue* to any definite genre, and she confesses that she does not think it “possibile, e nemmeno utile, attribuire un’etichetta esclusiva di genere a questo prologo”, p. 33. For a quick overview of the genre from antiquity to modern times, see Weinbrot 2005.

[29] See *supra* p. 95 n. 6.

Nonetheless, this very seamless juncture distinguishes the *Prologue* from the two other short introductions to the second and the third book, which are remarkably shorter and self-contained.[30] The first prologue is, moreover, by far the most rhetorically refined section of the *Mythologiae*, which would not be peculiar at all, were it not for the fact that ''rhetorical refinement'' for Fulgentius generally involves a display of his taste for hapax legomena, syntactical difficulties, and unexpected *iuncturae*: the immediate connection to the first book is thus counterbalanced by a conspicuous linguistic specificity which contributes to the separateness of the opening section of the *Mythologiae*. This effect of discontinuity and interruption constitutes, I would argue, a constant of the Prologue and one of its distinctively satirical features.[31]

On a macrostructural level, the most striking form of discontinuity is represented by the insertion of two poems, which has led scholars to speak of *satira menippea* when trying to define the genre of Fulgentius' work. The presence of these two poems suggests a subdivision of the *Prologue* into three major sections, whose articulation is only partially self-evident. In order to better grasp the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity active here and to understand why one should avoid any hasty partition of the text, it might be useful to draw a sketchy outline of the content of the *Prologue*.

The *Mythologiae* begin with an acknowledgement of the cultural squalor of their time, an age in which one has to struggle to stay alive, let alone to cultivate literary glory (*famae…poeticae* 3,6); even so, the author hopes that the dedicatee, referred to as a *dominus*,[32] will generously accept the result of his efforts, namely, the explanation of myths through philosophy (3-4,7). What has so far been a pretty topical dedication now takes on a more autobiographical nuance, significantly introduced by the first person pronoun (*Me interim discedentem a te, domine,*…. 4,7). Fabius Fulgentius (the two names are explicitly mentioned in the *Prologue*, at 10,11 and 12, 22 respectively) tells the story of how, having escaped from the stressful life of the city, he looked for some quiet in the countryside, only to be followed by a horde of tax collectors (*tributaria conventio*, 5,1) and end up stuck at home by the reiterated military attacks of some mysterious enemy (*bellici*

[30] For a comparative reading of all Fulgentian prologues, see Manca 2002.

[31] Needless to point out that here my usage of the term "satire" refers to the traditional Latin genre only *lato sensu*. Still, the discontinuous, juxtapositional character of satire emerges in the well-known ancient etymology of *satura*, connected as it was to an idea of variety and, obviously, saturation. Cfr. the famous passage from Diomedes, *GL* I, 485. See Freudenburg 2005, pp. 2-3 and the overview of different 19th-20th century theories in Knoche 1957, pp. 8-13.

[32] It is impossible to identify Fulgentius' dedicatee. In some manuscripts*, inscriptiones* and *subscriptiones* present the work as dedicated to a certain *Catus/Cantia presbyterus Carthaginis*. In any case, Venuti 2015 is right when trying to prove that drawing historical information from such stylized a text as the *Mythologiae* is methodologically problematic, to say the least.

frequenter incursus, 5,8). The advent of a *dominus rex* (5.14) has now rescued the country from the *ingressores* and set the writer free from his seclusion. Leaving home, Fulgentius enters a world of ruin and devastation, but wandering through plundered fields he reaches a solitary *locus amoenus* (5,17-6,22); once there, he sings in praise of the Muses. This invocation in trochaic meter marks the beginning of the second part of the *Prologue*: attracted by Fulgentius' *carmen*, three Muses really do show up, led by Calliope, who engages Flugentius himself in conversation; at the end of their dialogue, Calliope promises that she will send Urania, Philosophia and Satira, whose praise concludes Calliope's speech (8-13,5), as helpers to Fulgentius in his philosophical project. The third section is then rather abruptly introduced by a hexametric patchwork of astro-mythological indications of the incipient night. We soon realize that the poem has served to dramatically shift the narrative in time and space; it is night, and from the *locus amoenus* have we moved to an interior, Fulgentius' own house, perhaps. The writer is sleeping, noisily snoring, when all of a sudden he is startled by the arrival of Calliope, gloriously circumfused with light and accompanied by the promised *tutrices* Urania, Philosophia and Satira: thanks to their support, Fulgentius is finally ready to start his interpretation of Graeco-Roman myths (13,17-15,19).

This rough summary might already suffice to provide a hint of the striking degree of textual variety in the *Prologue*, which switches not only from prose to poetry, but also from densely descriptive passages to anecdotes, from plain narration to dramatic dialogue. If this fragmentary unfolding seems to fit into a general idea of cumulative aesthetics, the juncture linking the fragments and panels to the extremities of what has been defined as an "allegorical play in three acts"[33] deserves some scrutiny.

The exordium couples topical material with idiosyncratic Fulgentian language:[34] the first sentence runs over no less than twenty lines in the *editio teubneriana*, quite a problematic textual *limen*, both repulsive and captivating. We will not indulge in a close analysis, but the passage is worth reading in its entirety – in its torrential self-deployment (3,1-3,20):

> *Quamvis inefficax petat studium res quae caret effectum et ubi emolumentum deest negotii causa cessat inquiri – hoc videlicet pacto, quia nostri temporis aerumnosa miseria non dicendi petat studium, sed vivendi fleat ergastulum nec famae adsistendum poeticae, sed fami sit consulendum domesticae – cito itaque nunc aut quod amiseris fleas aut quod edas inquiras quam quod dicas invenias; vacatque hoc*

[33] Venturi 2018, p. 26.

[34] Among the *topoi* one might recognize the *servitium* theme (with terms such as *dominus*, *imperare*, *auscultare*); the description of the *qualitas temporum*; the opposition between silence and sound etc. Cf. Manca 2002 and Venuti 2018's commentary *ad loc*.

temporis potentibus opprimere, prioribus rapere, privatis perdere, miseris flere – quia soles, domine, meas cachinnantes saepius nenias lepore satirico litas libentius adfectari, dum ludicro Thalia ventilans epigrammate comoedica solita est vernulitate mulcere, additur quia et mihi nuper imperasse dinosceris ut affatim feriatas tuarum aurium sedes libido quolibet susurro permulceam: parumper ergo ausculta dum tibi rugosam sulcis anilibus ordior fabulam, quam nuper Attica saporante salsura, nocturna praesule lucerna commentus sum, ita somniali figmento delusam, quo non poetam furente aspicias, sed onirocriten soporis nugas hariolantem advertas.

> Although a subject which lacks immediate purpose may produce little real enthusiasm and, where there is no material advantage, may well cease to be pursued for practical reasons (on the ground, that is, that the calamitously wretched state of our times invites no enthusiasm for putting such a subject into words, and has only pity for a drudgery which cannot be justified in poetic fame but serves only for personal edification), I now take up a subject the loss of which you may regret, the statement of which you may need or discover to be necessary, and one which in this age of ours it is pointless for those in power to suppress, or our leaders to commandeer, or private individuals to destroy, or the oppressed to bewail. For you, Master, are accustomed to treating with indulgence those sad dirges of mine so often ridiculed with the kind of satirical pleasantry that Thalia, the Muse of comedy, flourishing her humor with theatrical epigram, is in the habit of pertly rapping out. Moreover, you will remember, you recently commissioned me to try to soothe your moments of leisure with some agreeable murmuring. For a short space, then, listen while I unfold for you a tale, wrinkled like the furrows of an old woman, which, performing by night lamp and mocking the pretense of sleep, I have just concocted with a salty Attic flavor. In this you will not see a poet seized with frenzy, but you may be diverted by dreamlike nonsense expounding trifles suited to sleep.

The verbosity of this first sentence, as well as *Prologue* as a whole, stands in a sharp contrast with the condition of forced silence and cultural depression denounced in the narrative;[35] the reader will soon discover that this work is the effect of a gloomy *secessus* to the country, a dark parody of the traditional philosophical *negotium* – a text that declares from the outset a certain inability to exist.

Significantly enough, a *recusatio* immediately follows, a negative statement in which the author insists on his rejection of myth-telling in favor of myth-explanation – the negation, the void, with a movement we have already learnt to observe in Virgilius and Solinus, is expanded in the form of a catalogue (4,1-4,6):

[35] Cf. Lobato 2017, pp. 293-304 for an acute analysis of the theme of silence in the *Mythologiae*.

> *Neque enim illas Heroidarum arbitreris lucernas meis praesules libris, quibus aut Sulpicillae procacitas aut Psyches curiositas declarata est, neque illam quae aut maritum Fedrium in tumulum ducit aut Leandricos natatos intercepit, sed quae nostrum academicum rhetorem ita usque ad vitalem circulum tulit, quo paene dormientem Scipionem caeli civem effecerit.*
>
> In these books of mine you will see neither those lamp-light performances of Ovid's Heroides, in which either the shamelessness of someone like Sulpicia or the exotic feelings of Psyche are revealed, nor what forcibly led Theseus, the husband of Phaedra [Phaedrus?][36] into the underground cave or carried off Leander as he swam. It will be such things as those of which our Academic orator Cicero has given a lively account, almost making the sleeping Scipio into a Citizen of heaven.

However, for all its relentless syntactic *outrance* and thematic negativity, the *exordium* nonetheless achieves a kind of homogeneity. The first real swerve occurs with the irruption of the first person pronoun *me*: it opens up a new generic system (autobiographical narration), or, at least, exploits it in a more overt way than the commonly topical references to the relationship between the author and dedicatee of the *exordium*.

This seemingly minor transition in the generic system is particularly relevant as it represents a first change of *frame*, a sliding in the hermeneutical strategy the reader is supposed to employ. It anticipates the successive, explicit breaking points I have already highlighted, those that correspond to the insertion of the poetical invocation of the Muses and description of night; in both cases, though, the abruptness of the shift invites the reader to look for traces of continuity: the dispersal of the material (the fading of the seemingly autobiographical focus) triggers the search for unifying elements. One might thus notice, for example, that the noun *melos* crops up shortly before both of the poems. In the first occurrence, it is part and parcel of a paragraph that actually functions as a juncture, a bridge towards the new, poetic dimension (6,22-7,4):

> *Nam me avium quaedam vernulitas, quae fragili quadam dulcedine crispantes sibilos corneis edunt organulis, ad hoc opus allexerat et laboris tam subita requies melos quoddam carminis exspectabat.*
>
> Whereupon a certain liveliness of the birds, as with a kind of delicate softness they produced their rapid whistlings through their horny beaks, lured me back to this

[36] For the philological debate surrounding the adjective *Fedrium* and the subsequent interpretation of the passage, see the thorough treatment of the passage by Venuti 2018, pp. 144-147, who suggests to see here a reference to a *fabula* by Phaedrus (Phaedr. 3,10).

present task of mine, and the unexpected respite from toil inspired a kind of melodious verse.

The poeticization of the singing of the birds (as well as the ''naturalization'' – the becoming natural – of the poet's singing) preludes the reification of the Muse-*topos*, its *materialization*:[37] once the poem has been ''sung'', the Muses evoked turn out to be materially present; the verb *adstiterant*, on whose possible Boethian echo much ink has been spilled,[38] conveys the well-nigh ''staged'' evidence of the Muses:

Adstiterant itaque syrmate nebuloso tralucidae ternae viragines…

The maidens had been standing in group of three, shimmering in their long, gossamerlike robes…

In Fulgentius' self-proclaimed post-pagan and post-mythological world, the anomaly of a ''pagan'' literary investiture, contrary to what we might expect, is not only accepted, but even plastically enacted by inserting speaking characters in to what seemed to be an autobiographical account: not unlike Hesiod and his followers. The *melos carminis*, the poetic moment, becomes a point of *conflation of frames* (Greek and Latin, pagan and Christian, prose and poetry), preserving textual continuity by, at the same time, sanctioning conceptual disruption.

No less ambiguous is the context of the second occurrence of the noun *melos* at 13,4, *melos cantandi*. Calliope is here concluding her speech by praising Satira's power to silence the garrulous Sempronia even in the presence of Catilina: *Hac etenim alludente […] Sallustianaeque Semproniae quamvis praesens sit Catilina melos cantandi raucescit* ("For with her [Satira's] jesting the wordiness of the Sempronia mentioned by Sallust is wrecked and, although Catilina is there, the song becomes coarse", 13,3-13,5).[39] Remarkably, just after the phrasing *melos cantandi raucescit*, the nocturnal poem begins: the effect is that of an ironical montage, of a conceitful interplay between a fading *melos* and an incipient

[37] Cfr. Fredric Jameson's reflections on the unifying/objectifying effects of alienation and allegory: "something withdrawn from me becomes in other words a kind of unity in its own right; it unifies what was hitherto disparate for lack of a general name, and only after it is thus unified can it be treated as a kind of object […] Such objectification/reification is also to be considered an allegorical process, the alienation of an objectifying name and its transformation into an object of exchange", Jameson 2019, pp. 40-41.

[38] The apparition of the Muses has been contrasted with the apparition of Philosophia in Boethius *De consolatione philosophiae* (1.1.1.: *astitisse mihi supra verticem visa est mulier reverendi admodum vultus*…), a possible parallel that, if confirmed, would play an important role in the debate around Fulgentius' chronological collocation. See the discussion in Hays 2003, pp. 169-173 (Hays tends to dismiss the problem since, in his opinion, "the similarities are not, by and large, coincidences of phrasing but rather of motifs", p. 171).

[39] I here modify Whitbread's translation to follow Venuti's interpretation, cf. Venuti 2018, p. 127; 223.

carmen (a poem, it should be noted, that thematizes night/silence). But it is at the end of the poem that Fulgentius' satirical sabotage of his own text emerges most distinctly: the brief summary or prose paraphrase that follows the hexameters (and that had similarly followed the invocation to the Muses, 8, 6-8) plays with dry irony on the gap between the ornamental rhetoric of poetry and the straightforwardness of ''standard'' language, mocking the pretentiousness of the former, but also implicitly bringing to the fore the violence intrinsic to any commentarial enterprise – to any *explanatio*.[40] We need to look at the entire passage to grasp the contrast in all its poignancy, 13, 6-16:

Solverat ignivomos mundi regione peracta
quadrupedes gelidumque rotis tepefecerat orbem
rector et auratis colla spoliabat habenis.
Iam Phoebus disiungit equos, iam Cynthia iungit;
quasque soror linquit, frater pede temperat undas.
Tum nox stellate mundum circumlita peplo
caerula rorigeris pigrescere iusserat alis
astrigeroque nitens diademate Luna bicornis
bullatum biiugis conscenderat aethera tauris.
Iam simulacra modis mentes fallentia plastis
mollia falsidicis replebant stramina signis

et, ut in verba paucissima conferam, nox erat.

Earth's territory crossed, and the chilly world
Warmed by the chariot-wheels, the charioteer
Loosed his fire-breathing horses, from their necks
Removed the golden reins. Phoebus unyokes
His steeds, as Cynthia prepares her team.
The brother tests the waters with his foot
Up whence his sister rose. With starry cloak
Binding the earth, night bids the sky to rest
On dewy wings, while all agleam the moon,
lts two-pronged diadem adorned with stars,
The twin bulls yoked together, mounted up
The fresh-laid sky, and mind-deceiving shapes,

[40] Moreover, Fulgentius' textual strategy is perhaps even more layered if we take *nox erat* as an intertextual reference to Vergil's most famous nocturnal scene in *Aen*. 4, 522 ff., *Nox erat et placidum carpebant fessa soporem/ corpora.* In this sense, Fulgentius may be opposing ''good'' Virgilian poetry to his ''bad'' patchwork. I owe this suggestion to Prof. Wim Verbaal.

Phantoms in formless guise, soft pallets fill
With lying images—

And, as I can state in very few words, it was night.

The last two verses add further (self-)destabilizing material to the discourse: the poem ends with a stress on the delusional effects of dreaming, no casual ending if what we find shortly thereafter, at the opening of the final section, is a self-portrait of Fulgentius as an *insanus vates* ("frenzied bard"). Given such a background, what interpretation of the ensuing scene are we supposed to arrive at, as Calliope and the promised helpers finally arrive and wake up the snoring *vates*? 13, 17-14,1:

> *Cuius noctis nomen iamdudum oblitus ut insanus vates versibus delirabam, dum subito agrestis illa, quam dudum videram hospita, oborto impetu cubicularias impulsu fores inrupit inopinanterque me iacentem repperiens marcentia languore somni lepido lumina rapido atque admodum splendifice intermicanti quodam sui vultus coruscamine perpulit; erit enim ultra solitum eminens mortalitatis aspectum. Denique pigrae adhuc quietis indicium rotatis naribus eructuantem repentina ostii crepitatione turbavit.*

> Having long since forgotten the word night, I was revelling in these lines like a frenzied bard when the lady I had seen before as a guest, making her appearance with a sudden rush, burst roughly into my bedchamber and, to her surprise finding me lying down with my eyes drooping in a gentle sleep, drove in upon me, her face gleaming with a kind of darting and quite magnificent glow—for she was tall beyond the average look of mortal man. Then, her nostrils flaring, she interrupted this display of peaceful rest, and by her violent rattling of the door threw the snorer into confusion.

Is the *Prologue*'s last section meant to be a drunkard's vision or, on the contrary, an awakening from the fallacy of mythology to the truth of philosophy? Are we asked to allegorize Fulgentius's own dreams? Scholars have provided different answers.

3.2.2 Meaning and its Discontents

As I mentioned briefly above, Fulgentius' *Prologue*, being satirically (as well as allegorically) polymorphous, has prompted quite polarized readings, a fact understandable in the light of the text's morphology: marked by discontinuity and perpetual frame-shifting it is hardly surprising that this text displays disparate configurations depending on the vantage point the observer decides to choose.

A telling attempt to superimpose a systematic reading-grid onto Fulgentius' text has been made by J.C. Relihan.[41] To bring order to the *Prologue*'s heterogeneous material, Relihan adopts as a fundamental thesis (that is, as a major analytical *frame*) an opposition between pagan mythology and Christian interpretation, according to which Fulgentius is first and foremost a Christian thinker totally absorbed in the effort of demystifying Graeco-Roman mythology. The extent of the ideological implications of such an assumption can be measured by looking at Relihan's resoluteness in cutting short the long-lasting prosopographic debate on the possible identification of the author of the *Mythologiae* with the better known Fulgentius Bishop of Ruspe (ca. 460-533 CE): "I take it as certain that both authors are the same man, as does Courcelle […]. The latest full discussion of the problem reaches the same conclusion: P. Langlois […]." References to Courcelle 1948 and Langlois 1964, even in the late '80s, were not enough, of course, to speak of "certainty", as the overturning of the scholars' *communis opinio* was to prove in the following three decades;[42] Relihan simply needed to anchor his reading strategy historically (or, maybe better, contextually), as a way of justifying his often radical treatment of the literal surface of the text. I am consciously using the adjective "radical" to point to the *allegorical* nature of Relihan's interpretation, an interpretation which, not surprisingly, has been met with some bafflement by Fulgentius' scholars.[43]

In fact, the apparently straightforward opposition pagan vs. Christian, when applied to this text, activates an interesting series of subversions that, even if problematic and rarely acceptable, are nonetheless emblematic of the interpretative clash surrounding Fulgentius and can prove useful in grasping the extent of his work's ambiguity.

Relihan sees an overt rejection of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the *Prologue* and reads Fulgentius as an anti-Ovid.[44] That the Ovidian poem might constitute a major intertextual reference seems to be, indeed, hardly disputable; the *recusatio* Fulgentius opposes to Calliope is undeniably not only a gallery of myths, but also an anthology of Ovidian stories, 10, 19-11,12:

> *Index te libelli fefellit, generosa Loquacitas; non mihi cornutus adulter arripitur nec imbre mendaci lusa [Danae] virgo cantatur, dum suo iudicio deus sibi pecudem praetulit et hanc auro decepit quam potestate nequivit; non suillo canimus morsu depastum amantis iuvenis femur nec in meis libellulis sub falsa alite puerilis pependit lascivia; non olorinis reptantem adulterum plumis, ova pulligera virginibus*

[41] See Relihan 1984; *Id.* 1986; *Id.* 1993.

[42] See a quick overview of the debate in Venuti 2018, pp. 14-18 and, for a long argument against the identification, Hays 2003.

[43] Cfr., for example, Mattiacci 2002, p. 254 n. 9: "assai stravagante risulta tutta la sua [di Relihan] tesi".

[44] See Relihan 1984, p.88.

> *inculcantem quam semina puerigena visceribus infundentem, nec lychnides puellas inquirimus, Hero atque Psychen, poeticas garrulantes ineptias, dum haec lumen queritur extinctum, illa deflet incensum, ut Psyche videndo perderet et Hero non videndo perisset; nec referam virginali figmento nonacrinam lusam viraginem, dum quaereret Iuppiter quod magis esset volle quam fuerat.*
>
> The title of my little work has misled you, noble declaimer. Not through me will the horned adulterer be seized, or the maiden Danaë, deceived by a false shower, be celebrated in verse, as by his own choice the god Jove showed her wealth and tricked with gold one he had been unable to trick by force. I do not write about the thigh of a young lover fed to the teeth of swine, nor in my little work has youthful wantonness been described under a false guise. I am not concerned with him who creeps about as an adulterer in the plumage of a swan, foisting his eggs on maidens as he pours child-bearing seed into their bodies, or with those lamp-carrying maidens, Hero and Psyche, as one wishing to ramble on about such follies of the poets, as, for instance, that the first of these lamented a light that failed and the second one that was burning, Psyche perishing for seeing and Hero for not seeing. Nor do I tell of the maiden from Arcadia, deceived by a pretense of virginity when Jove sought her, wishing to be greater than in fact he was.

If it is true that it would be quite difficult to draw a list of mythical exempla without intersecting one of Ovid's works and if, therefore, Fulgentius' list does not have to be considered necessarily Ovidian, the final claim – i.e. an explicitly programmatic formulation of the goal of the *Mythologiae* – does obviously sound like anti-Ovidian manifesto, 11, 12-13:

> *Mutatas itaque vanitates manifestare cupimus, non manifesta mutando fuscamus […]*
>
> What I wish to do is to expose alterations away from the truth, not obscure what is clear by altering it myself […]

Relihan's polarizing reading emerges more dramatically in his analysis of the first poem, the invocation to the Muses; he takes the last two lines, 8, 4-5 *ad meum vetusta carmen saecla nuper confluant* ("may the wealth of all the ages flow together for my lay") as a deliberate inversion of the incipit Met. 1, 4 *ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen* ("bring down my song in unbroken strains from the world's very beginning even unto the present time") observing that "[here] all ages meet in one poem for summation, and the

song is hardly perpetual."[45] Even though the Ovidian subtext is easily recognizable, a precise assessment of the extent of the inversion remains problematic; the inversion of complements (*ad mea tempora* vs. *ad meum carmen*) does not necessarily entail the subversion of content suggested by Relihan. For such subversion to hold, the scholar has to radically extend the scope of his ''allegorical'' reading to encompass all mythical allusions present in the *Prologue*; they would always have to appear in ''negative'' contexts (5, 3-6: even if Fulgentius were Midas, he could not pay his taxes; 6, 14: the ground is said to reject Triptolemus' plow; 6, 20: Fulgentius hides from Phoebus' beams), and every allusion to the Muses would be mocking in tone:[46] Calliope meets Fulgentius after a walk through the thorny fields, which implies that she does not really belong to the *locus amoenus* (8, 14-16); the statement 7, 23-24 *quicquid exantlata gazis vestra promunt horrea* ("all the riches to be gathered from your emptied treasure-trove")[47] does not seem to be the most flattering description of the Muses' creative powers; in the invocation, Virgil and Homer are mentioned, of course, but not for their most important works (the *Georgics* and the *Batrachomyomachia* instead of the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*, 7,25-8,1); Fulgentius venerates Calliope, but he does not stand up when they meet – he simply raises himself up on his elbow (8, 17-18).

All these are relatively small details, and yet the importance they are given in Relihan's reading (*per se* quite free, we should perhaps note, from any "deconstructionist" bravado) is revealing of the procedures of sampling and magnifying inherent in all allegorical approaches: Relihan isolates details, fragments, and textual debris just to make them fit into the general hermeneutical picture he has presupposed, erasing their singularity, obliterating the specificity which, in the beginning, had made them stand out (in Michael Riffaterre's words, their *ungrammaticality*).[48]

[45] Relihan 1984, p. 88.

[46] See Relihan 1986, pp. 542-543.

[47] The interpretation of *exantlata gazis* is controversial. Mattiacci 2002, p. 262 signals a parallel in Apu. *met*. 5, 2, 1 *horrea* […] *congesta gazis*, but she also observes that *exantlata* (from the Greek ἐξαντλέω) means exactly the opposite and is quite confusing (how could anyone gather anything from empty *horrea*?). She has therefore suggested that we restore a manuscript variant, *ex Atlantis gazis*, a solution rejected by Venuti 2018, pp. 178-179.

[48] More specifically, Riffaterre used this term to point to any anomaly in a text that attracts a reader's attention and warns of latent (broadly meant) "intertext", Riffaterre 1980, pp. 627-628: "The text's ungrammaticality is but a sign of a grammaticality elsewhere, its significance a reference to meaning elsewhere […] Ambiguity is generally, if empirically, recognized as a feature typical of literary discourse. As I see it, ambiguity exemplifies the idiolectic ungrammaticalities that warn the reader of a latent intertext. Text and intertext alike derive from these ungrammaticalities." Cfr. also Riffaterre 1987, where ungrammaticalities are interpreted as manifestations of the "intertextual unconscious".

Such a mechanism becomes even more conspicuous when Relihan comments on the dialogue between Fulgentius and Calliope in the second section. The writer's initial failure to recognize the Muse (8, 21-22 *et quia non mihi evidenti manifestatione quaenam esset liquebat, cur venisset inquiro*, "because it was not clearly apparent to me who she was, I asked why she had come") is explained as follows: "Yet because it is not immediately apparent *who* she is, he asks *why* she has come. This is a subtle point, for such a statement makes no logical sense unless it means that Fulgentius did not expect a goddess of grade-school rote learning to be elevated to the rank of Muse. He recognizes the effects of this goddess upon him, but is confused. He seems to have hoped for someone greater."[49] Apart from the question of whether or not the passage makes ''logical sense'', what is striking is the sudden shift to a psychologization of the narrator, that is, the overt assumption about what "he seems to have hoped". Here, the interpretative gesture reveals itself, almost materially, as *ventriloquism*, as an act of appropriation, erasure and substitution of someone else's voice.[50] Relihan, with a curiously untimely (I would not dare to say outdated) critical movement, treats the Fulgentius-character as if he were a layered psychological subject and makes him say what the interpreter would like to hear. The homology with allegorical procedures is patent and, in the end, hardly surprising, if one recalls Northrop Frye's well-known adage according to which literary commentary is always allegorical.[51] The ultimate result of Relihan's appropriation of Fulgentius is a dialectical reversal of the very position of the narrator: in Relihan's reading, not only the Muses and pagan culture more generally, but even Fulgentius becomes a victim of the *Prologue*'s mocking tone. The *Prologue* would seem to stage a pretentious but self-deluded character, still fascinated by the ''old'' (pagan) culture while eager to operate within the ''new'' (Christian) one. In this context, what may appear to be a typically late antique pattern of religious/cultural conversion, becomes instead a sharply ironic tool which helps to deconstruct almost every element of the textual surface. Thus, in Relihan's estimation, the nocturnal poem "is intentionally bad […] Fulgentius is sufficiently sure of his literary abilities to write a bad poem and expect it to be read as such"; and the self-portrait as "a raving poet and no prophet" (*ut insanus vates versibus delirabam*) represents a way to point through self-mockery to the futility of the pagan tradition.[52]

Relihan's interpretation develops in the space opened up between author, narrator, and character, and exploits its potential, self-directed violence: the *Prologue* thus ends up

[49] Relihan 1986, p. 543.

[50] For thorough overview of ventriloquism in cultural history, see Connor 2004, pp. 3-43, in particular, with focus on its psychoanalytical implications in the construction of the subject.

[51] Frye 1990 [1957], p. 89.

[52] Relihan 1986, p. 546.

being a wry self-parody, whose aim is to prove the inconsistency of the whole literary tradition at its base. This self-deconstructive trajectory is, at the end, summarized (or, indeed, allegorized) in Satira herself: Calliope "says that these three women [i.e. Urania, Philosophia, and Satira] will put Fulgentius in the stars […] but not through the means of poem, tragedy, oration satire, or comedy. To say that Satira will work her effects without satire is to show that there are two kinds of satire. The Satira of the third scene is not the promised Satira of the second. Calliope promised serious Muses and Satira as a diversion, and has produced the opposite. We have a serious Satira who has the same power to see hidden meanings as Fulgentius claims to have."[53] In other words, according to Relihan the *Prologue* serves to create a fissure, a form of distance between the author and his subject, and, more radically, between the author and his literary projection. The ultimate goal of satire is precisely to engender such an internal displacement;[54] but where Relihan sees an intercultural clash ("The *Mythologiae* are a serious attempt – however bizarre its methods in treating individual myths – to contrast cultures and to define the beginning of a new order from the death of the old") it is perhaps more hermeneutically promising to speak of an intra-cultural, if not intra-subjective, split.[55]

The *Mythologiae*, which will later appear to Christian readers as a model for allegorical practice, and to modern interpreters as a notorious specimen of preposterous arbitrariness, are thus preceded by a text that questions the very idea of systematic coherency and seems to be constantly on the brink of self-contradiction. Satire, here, is not satire – *pace* Bruns, satire is allegory. Fulgentius's text, in a way, radicalizes Relihan's interpretative boldness: moving beyond the rigid opposition of *pagan* vs. *Christian*, what remains is a self-destabilizing narrative in which the narrator, the Muses, and the poems are not what they *should* be.[56]

However, as noted earlier, Relihan's interpretations have met a certain resistance, particularly his (all too simplistic) pagan/Christian opposition and the self-deconstructive implications of his reading; he has been accused of arguing for an "odd" (*stravagante*)

[53] Relihan 1986, p. 547.

[54] In this sense, satire somehow overlaps with *intransitive parody* as discussed in relation to Virgilius Grammaticus, cfr. *supra* pp. 45-46.

[55] Relihan 1986, p. 547.

[56] Hernández Lobato 2018 points insightfully out how "Ovid's *Metamorhposes* represents the ever-changing, alluring but ultimately deceiving reflections on the river's surface (i.e. the world of language, 'illusions of presence' and anecdotal narratives), whereas what Fulgentius is trying to show is the mysterious and immutable riverbed (the *quid mysticum*) underlying the apparent diversity and the noisy incoherence of myths and words (i.e. the realm of silence, essence and mystical encounter).", p. 258. My suggestion is that Fulgentius' silence is (*also*) paroxysmal chaos, that his anti-logocentric project is carried out by exploiting all of the self-annihilating potentiality of *logos*.

theory and of contorting the text to force it to fit into an apologetic (pro-Christian) scheme. To the hermeneutical violence of contortion, other scholars have preferred the violence of dismembering: while refusing to adopt a unifying, generalized allegorical matrix, they are rather inclined to privilege reading practices which dissolve the text into myriads of intertextual networks. In so doing, they seem to be exploiting the potential of another typically satirical feature, that is, the polyphonic, opaque nature of the text (the other feature being its ''iconoclastic'' power, although Relihan's proudly Christian Fulgentius might be properly described as a *mythoclast*).[57] The *Prologue* is transformed into a mine for intertextual references: a *satura*ted textual environment is made intelligible through its presentation as an embroidery of thickly interwoven, but still individually discernible, threads. Literary analysis thus becomes, first and foremost, an attempt at disentangling the compact mass of the text, at isolating its multiple voices. From a methodological point of view, this approach runs the risk of making an attuned choir out of what might be better understood as an agglomeration of interferences.

Silvia Mattiacci argues for a deliberate authorial strategy; from her perspective, Fulgentius's writing is "a continuous challenge to its readers, since Fulgentius' readership is constantly urged to decipher his obscure and weird allusions, to recognize his more or less overtly cited literary models."[58] Fulgentius himself is described as a witty provocateur, moved by "what seems to be an undeniable willingness to fake sources and testimonies." The echoes of a *lato sensu* post-modern fascination with ludic poetics and literary *pastiche* is clearly noticeable in analyses such as Mattiacci's, who speaks of *divertissements* when referring to Fulgentius's poems; the invocation to the Muses as well as the nocturnal hexameters are sedulously dismantled word by word and showed to be reminiscent of Vergil, Ovid, Statius, Tiberianus, Prudentius, Claudianus etc.[59] Significantly, in at least two episodes where Fulgentius is called on to provide a kind of intellectual programme, Mattiacci stresses the decidedly derivative nature of the text: Fulgentius *is* the masks he wears throughout his work, his voice coincides with all the voices his text conjures up, even more so when it should prove to be ''original''. In the first, most obvious episode,

[57] This term is actually used with reference to Fulgentius by Albu 2009 and Cullhed 2015, pp. 402-432.

[58] Mattiacci 2002, p. 252: "una sfida continua all'acume del lettore, costantemente sollecitato a capire le allusioni oscure e stravaganti, a riconoscere i modelli letterari ora più ora meno palesemente evocati."

[59] Almost every scholar working on Fulgentius has tried to tackled the problem of his intertextual network. Beside Venuti's commentary on the *Prologue* (Venuti 2018), see at least Mattiacci 2002 and *Ead.* 2003; Hays 2003 and *Id.* 2004; Venuti 2011; Manca 2015. Baldwin 1988 provides a list of all of Fulgentius' credited sources (potentially fake-sources included, p. 37: "it does seem that Fulgentius fabricated sources and texts; some particular dishonesties can be proved").

Fulgentius has to answer Calliope's question as whether or not it would be dangerous for him to indulge in literary activity while living in a barbaric time, 9,19-10,8:

> *Tum illa: "Non paves – inquit – musicum tuis receptare dogma penatibus, cum barbarorum morem auscultaverim ita letterarios mercatos penitus abdicare, ut hos, qui primis elementorum figuris vel proprium descripserint nomen, cassata inquisitione, mutum in carnificinam reptassent?'. Tum ego: "Non ita est – inquam – ut 'audieras, sed fama fuit'. Nam 'carmina tantum nostra valent', Musa, 'tela inter Martia, quantum' 'dulcis aquae salientis sitim restinguere rivo' ". Et ut suum me amplius familiarem rescisset, illud etiam Terentianum adieci: " 'Olim isti fuit generi quondam questus apud saeclum prius'. Nunc itaque ita litterae <quo> quicquid Helicon verbialibus horreis enthecatum possederat in ipsis potestatum culminibus hereditario iure transferret catus extendunt."*
>
> Then she said: "Aren't you afraid to receive the teaching of the Muses in your own home? For I have heard of the custom of barbarians to ban the business of literature in their houses, whereby those who wrote even their own unspoken name with the first shapes of their letters could reckon on a violent interrogation and the torture chamber." Then I said: It is not as 'you had heard, but the report was so,' for 'our songs serve as well,' O Muse, 'among the weapons of Mars' 'as to quench one's thirst from a rivulet of sweet leaping water.' " Then to encourage her friendship all the more, I added this line of Terence: "Once that stamp of man drove a trade, a generation or so ago." Now, therefore, literature, as […] its urns pour forth whatever contents in its storehouse of words Helicon possessed to pass on in due succession.

Fulgentius, immediately thereafter, calls his own words "little verses" (*versiculis*, 10, 8), thus explicitly pointing to their being *excerpta*, namely quotations from Vergil, the most popular and studied Latin poet, who, as such, does not even need to be named (unlike Terentius, another protagonist of late antique Latin education). Fulgentius' speech is, in some respects, a Virgilian cento. But we get still closer to Fulgentius' usual practice with the second episode, taken from the first section of the *Prologue*, quoted before:

> *Additur quia et mihi nuper imperasse dinosceris ut affatim feriatas tuarum aurium sedes libido quolibet susurro permulceam: parumper ergo ausculta dum tibi rugosam sulcis anilibus ordior fabulam, quam nuper Attica saporante salsura, nocturna praesule lucerna commentus sum, ita somniali figmento delusam, quo non poetam furente aspicias, sed onirocriten soporis nugas hariolantem advertas.*
>
> Moreover, you will remember, you recently commissioned me to try to soothe your moments of leisure with some agreeable murmuring. For a short space, then, listen while I unfold for you a tale, wrinkled like the furrows of an old woman, which, performing by night lamp and mocking the pretense of sleep, I have just concocted

> with a salty Attic flavor. In this you will not see a poet seized with frenzy, but you may be diverted by dreamlike nonsense expounding trifles suited to sleep.

Although no auctor is explictly mentioned, Mattiacci rightly observes that the textual references embedded here are unlikely to go unnoticed and the whole passage might be seen as, this time, an Apuleian cento. The evoked Apuleian loci are indeed among the most well-known, coming from the Prologue of the *Metamorphoses* and the introduction to the fabula of Cupid and Psyche respectively:

> Met. 1.1.: *At ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram auresque tuas benivolas lepido susurro permulceam, modo si papyrum Aegyptiam argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam non spreveris inspicere, figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursum mutuo nexu refectas ut mireris. Exordior. 'Quis ille?'. Paucis accipe. Hymettos Attica […] mea vetus prosapia est.*
>
> But I would like to tie together different sorts of tales for you in that Milesian style of yours, and to caress your ears into approval with a pretty whisper, if only you will not begrudge looking at Egyptian papyrus inscribed with the sharpness of a reed from the Nile, so that you may be amazed at men's forms and fortunes transformed into other shapes and then restored again in an interwoven knot. I begin my prologue. Who am I? I will tell you briefly. Attic Hymettos and […] form my ancient stock.
>
> Met. 4.27.8: *Sed ego te narrationibus lepidis anilibusque fabulis protinus avocabo.*
>
> But right now I shall divert you with a pretty story and an old wife's tale.[60]

The overlapping is not only lexical. As is well-known, the story of Cupid and Psyche is told to Charite by an old woman, a bride kidnapped by pirates and held prisoner in a cave; in order to assuage the scared girl, the old woman decides to interpret her dreams (*Met.* 4.27.5: *Bono animo esto, mi erilis, nec vanis somniorum figmentis terreare*, "Cheer up, my mistress, and don't be frightened by the empty fictions of dreams"): just like Fulgentius (3, 20), the old woman becomes a storyteller as well as an *onirocrites*, an interpreter of dreams. Fulgentius announces the project of his own allegoresis through someone else's voice – through the *persona* of the *anus* (in her turn, of course, a *persona* of Apuleius).

Asking when one should stop detecting intertextual references is not that different from wondering when one should arrest the search for the *mysticum cerebrum*, when one is supposed to bring allegorical interpretation to an end – or to arrest the *allegorical drift*.

[60] Tex and translation by Hanson 1996.

That intertextual analysis has remained common practice through the ages risks obscuring the (indeed fascinating) phenomenon of *intertextual drift*, intertextual over-interpretation. In a way, an intertextual *critical furor* might be precisely what would prevent us from succumbing to the temptation to *disentangle* the text, rather than to confront its opacity. We should try to pursue a criticism that allows the text to be invaded, instead of being made, by the voices criticism can detect: an unleashed intertextual criticism as a response to the polyphonic density of satire – this could be a tentative formula for approaching the *satura*tion of Fulgentius' text in full awareness.

One should never forget that satire is always, in at least one important respect, *allegorical*; but in satire the displacement implicates not so much the meaning as the very constitution of a text: allegory as the presence of the voice of the other, as the co-existence of many voices at the same time.

It comes as no surprise, then, that critics are at odds when determining who is actually speaking at the end of the *Prologue*. In his commentary to the *Mythologiae*, Étienne Wolff attributes the last lines of the *Prologue*, which serve as a transition to the first myth-interpretation, to the narrator:

> *Ergo nunc de deorum primum natura, unde tanta malae credulitatis lues stultis mentibus inoleverit, edicamus. Quamvis enim sint quidam qui spreta capitis generositate aricinis atque arcaicis sensibus glandium quippiam sapiant atque eorum altiori stultitiae nubilo soporata caligentur ingenia, tamen nequaquam aput humanos sensus nisi fortuitis conpulsationibus moti nascuntur errores, ut etiam Crysippus de fato scribens ait: conpulsationibus lubricis volvuntur incursus. Itaque primum omisso circuitu, unde idolum tractum sit, edicamus.*
>
> Let me now first explain about the nature of the gods, whereby such a plague of sinful superstition grows in foolish minds. Although there are those who, rejecting the noble resources of the intellect, merely let their stupid and dull senses nibble at a tiny morsel and let their sleepy brains grow dizzy in a fog of deep stupidity, yet errors of the human senses are not produced except when motivated by chance forces, as Chrysippus remarks: 'Insidious attacks are made by insidious compulsions.' First, then, now the preamble has been completed, let me explain the origin of an idol.

Wolff's only argument is that edicamus seems to be a technical exegetical word, which appears again and again in the actual treatise when Fulgentius is about to introduce his interpretations.[61]

[61] See Wolff-Dain 2013, p. 146 n. 99. The signalled passages are: 29,8; 32,21; 37,20; 64,14; 76,116.

Martina Venuti is more cautious and admits that "non è evidente chi stia parlando" ("it is not clear who is speaking").[62] This *effet flou* does not cease with the opening of the treatise proper; at the beginning of the second *fabula*, the *fabula Saturni*, Fulgentius gives Philosophia the floor as she starts a monologue:

> *Saturnus Polluris filius dicitur, Opis maritus, senior, velato capite, falcem ferens; cuius virilia abscisa et in mari proiecta Venerem genuerunt. Itaque quid sibi de hoc Philosophia sentiat, audiamus. Tum illa:*
>
> The name of the son of Pollus, and the husband of Ops, is Saturn, an elderly man, with his head covered, carrying a scythe. His manhood was cut off and, thrown into the sea, gave birth to Venus. Let us then hear how Philosophy interprets this. She says thus:

Needless to say, this monologue is never explicitly interrupted, so that the readers may well forget that they are listening to Philosophia's voice – indeed, they could also have missed the reference to Philosophia altogether. Such oscillation in the speaking (i.e. interpreting) voice is part and parcel of the overall sense of vagueness and incoherence that looms over Fulgentius' text. In the *Prologue*, satire becomes allegorical by blurring and, finally, losing the origin of the linguistic utterance as well as of the hermeneutical process, in a total allegorization of satire. Now we shall seek to take a look at the satyrization of allegory.

3.3 The Satirical Allegory of the *Fabulae*

3.3.1 Of Sirens and Hermeneutic Circles

In our discourse, satire has been so far characterized through an imagery of opaqueness and density, described as a field of intricacy and, perhaps tautologically, of saturation. On the contrary, in the following section, the discourse on allegory will be marked by concepts such as segmentation, disconnection and, more generally speaking, fragmentation.[63] An

[62] Venuti 2018, p. 245.

[63] The most obvious reference to a theory of allegory permeated by ideas of disconnection and fragmentation remains Walter Benjamin's contribution in the *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* ("Origin of German Tragic

underlying idea of dissolution can be easily traced in many critical readings that aim to pin down Fulgentius' allegorical technique. In current critical discourse, to define Fulgentius' allegoresis as peculiarly fragmentary and disjointed seems to constitute a fair strategy for avoiding the traditional charges of exegetical arbitrariness and conceptual inconsistency that have haunted Fulgentius' reception to the modern day. Martina Venuti is right to claim that we still lack a systematic description of Fulgentian allegorical procedures, but the actual question remains whether an analytical *expositio* of Fulgentius' practice would be of any help in understanding his textuality.[64] Be that as it may, Venuti identifies some major analytical strands in the *Mythologiae*: etymology, iconography, quotation, and moral/philosophical reading.[65] When commenting on a *fabula*, Fulgentius sometimes draws on all of these domains, or selects just some of them; accordingly, a mythological figure is in each instance a name that can be etymologically deconstructed as well as an image that can be parceled out into its visual attributes – and finally, all of these conceal moral/philosophical meanings that can be shown and proved to be true by reference to auctores. A full-length example will suffice to provide a quick overview of Fulgentius' allegoresis: we shall take the eighth *fabula* from the second book, the *Fabula Ulixis et Sirenarum*, 48,9-49,2:

> *Sirenae enim Grece tractoriae dicuntur; tribus enim modis amoris inlecebra trahitur, aut cantu aut visu aut consuetudine, amantur enim quaedam <vocis suavitate, quaedam > specie venustate, quaedam etiam lenante consuetudine. Quas Ulixis socii obturatis auribus transeunt, ipse vero religatus transit. Ulixes enim Grece quasi oloxenos id est omnium peregrinus dicitur; et quia sapientia ab omnibus mundi rebus peregrina est, ideo astutior Ulixes dictus est. Denique Sirenas, id est delectationum inlecebras, et audivit et vidit id est agnovit et iudicavit, et tamen transiit. Nihilominus ideo et quia auditae sunt, mortuae sunt; in sensu enim sapientis omnis affectus emoritur; ideo volatiles, quia amantum mentes celeriter permeant; inde gallinaceos pedes, quia libidinis affectus omnia quae habet spargit; nam denique et Sirenes dictae sunt; sirene enim Grece trahere dicitur.*
>
> The Sirens are named as "those who lure"[66] in Greek, for the allure of love is interpreted in three ways, by song or by sight or by habit: some creatures are loved

Drama"), Benjamin 1998 [1928], pp. 158-235. For a critical assessment, see at least Cowan1981; Kablitz 2016, pp. 17 ff.; Jameson 2019, pp. 22-37.

64 Unless one is willing to embark upon an *Expositio fulgentianae continentiae*…

65 See Venuti 2010, p. 89.

66 Whitbread 1971, pp. 73-74 translates *tractoriae* with "deceivers" and, at the end of the passage, *sirene* with "betray", thus losing the etymological pun. Wolff's (Wolff-Dain 2013, p. 95) maintains it, but in his translation, "celles qui entraînent" and "entraîner", to get lost is the implicit meaning of "fascination, attraction".

> for [the pleasure of their song], some for beauty of appearance, and some for pleasant habits. The companions of Ulysses pass by these with ears stopped up, and he himself goes past tied up. For Ulysses in Greek is for olonxenos, that is, stranger to all; and because wisdom is a stranger to all things of this world, so Ulysses is called crafty. Then he both hears and sees, that is, recognizes and sizes up and still passes by the Sirens, that is, the allures of pleasure. And they die just because they are heard, in the sense that all self-indulgent feelings of a wise man die away. Also they are winged creatures, because they may quickly enter the minds of lovers; whereby they have feet like a hen's, because the indulgence of lust dissipates all it possesses. And finally they are called Sirens, because sirene is the Greek for to lure.

As is often the case, etymology here marks the initial threshold of interpretation: *sirenae* and *Ulixes* are, first and foremost, meaningful names whose etymological reading is supposed to disclose the truth about the res they refer to. The treatment of *Ulixes* is in many respects emblematic. The fact that a Greek etymology is applied to a Latin name makes it clear to what extent Fulgentius' etymological thinking differs from its post-19th century analogues. Drawing on a set of phonic resemblances, Fulgentius creates a new compound which is designed to shed light on the original, apparently opaque name.[67] *Ulixes* is segmented and reshaped as *oloxenos*, a new string of characters to which the actual explanation is applied. It could be that not all the passages are explicitly present in the text, as is the case with *sirenae*: the opening statement *Sirenae enim Grece tractoriae dicuntur* leaves to the reader the task of filling in the gap and linking sirenae to the Greek verb σύρω, "to drag".[68]

Both etymologies are seamlessly followed by a moral/philosophical explanation, which is then interrupted by a sketchy narrative of the myth. The last paragraph (*Nihilominus*…), set up as a series of equations connecting an iconographic or diegetic component of the *fabula* to its allegorization, displays Fulgentius' inclination towards segmenting mythic totality into signifying units. He isolates and magnifies narrative/visual elements in order to transform them into the meaningful elements of a new semantic system, a system embedded in *and* divergent from the ''original''. As for the thickly inscribed *tabula rasa* of the *Prologue*, the problem present here is the *construction of meaning*, that is, the

[67] See Amsler 1989, pp. 23 *et passim*, on the principal etymological techniques employed during Antiquity and early Middle Ages (namely *interpretatio*, *compositio*, *derivatio*, and *expositio*). Amsler himself draws consistently on the classic Klinck 1970.

[68] Fulgentius likes to display his familiarity with Greek, whose relatively copious presence in the *Mythologiae* has been taken as the sign of a certain (perhaps even active) mastery of the language. See Venuti 2018, p. 33, and Wolff 2009, pp. 16-17. For the possible interaction between Fulgentius and Greek mythography, see Cameron 2004, pp. 308-310, and Manca 2011.

question of how to choose objects that can be pertinently connected in a signifying constellation.

Emily Albu has compared Fulgentius' hermeneutical procedures to late antique *centones*, texts in which lines are lifted from ancient authors and freely reassembled[69] (they have also provided a common critical metaphor for describing the late antique *pseudomorphosis* of ancient culture),[70] although the comparison falls short of accurately describing the mechanisms of such a transference from one cultural code to another. More pertinently, Jon Whitman speaks of *atomistic allegory* when pointing to Fulgentius' habit of dismembering words and stories while looking for new meanings: the ''original'' totality is fragmented into disconnected particles whose very existence seems to be independent from the system of origin. Once Fulgentius has discovered the hidden meaning, he draws a series of conceptual inferences that can be hardly harmonized with what could be designated as surface meaning: every hidden meaning is made into a semantic matrix on which a *new* semantic system can be built.

If we follow Gordon Teskey's suggestion that semantic matrixes function in allegory like *vanishing points* in traditional perspective,[71] Fulgentius' practice would seem to consist of multiplying the vanishing points – admitting the possibility, say, that every single point in the picture might possibly be a vanishing point towards which everything can be made to converge: if the sirens stand for lust, then their wings recall the quickness of lust in grasping lovers' minds, their hen's feet stand for dissipation, and so on. Fulgentius *dissolves* his objects into a network of signifiers depending on, or pointing to, a series of given semantic matrixes: what matters here is not so much the name *Ulixes* in its integrity, but rather the newly formed (and *ad hoc*) compound *olo* + *xenos* that is subsumed under the idea of *peregrinitas*; it is not so much the emblem of a bird-woman that responds to the unifying concept of *libidinis affectus* as the sum of wings + hen's feet. Robert Edwards has assumed that "when they explicate complete texts, most allegorists, including Fulgentius, concentrate on small portions at a time. They do not feel the urgency of relating every part directly to a unifying whole."[72] I would slightly adjust his argument by observing that these portions, understood as pieces of allegorical information, are conceptually manageable and semantically loaded only when they are projected against a

[69] On Latin *centones*, see McGill 2005; Formisano-Sogno 2010; Hinds 2014; Elsner 2017.

[70] See Schnapp 1992; Formisano-Sogno 2010; Elsner 2017. The use of the crystallographic metaphor of *pseudomorphosis* to describe the reconfiguration of antique culture in the late antique period goes back to Henri-Irénée Marrou, who borrowed it from Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. Cfr. Marrou 1978, pp.71-72.

[71] See Teskey 1996 p. 5 ff.

[72] Edwards 1976 p. 20.

unifying background – the sirens' feet are isolated because they function as part of a more general discursive structure opposing *amor*/*libido* to *sapienta*/*virtus*.

The tension between the incessant segmentation of the material at hand (words, images, narratives) and the ongoing individuation of wide-ranging semantic matrixes through which the material is organized may account for the clash, in Fulgentius' text as well as in the related critical debate, between *fragmentation* and *circularity*. Whereas Edwards has insisted that the whole *Mythologiae* can be seen to thematize the impossibility of constructing meaning as a monolithic object, arguing that it presents itself as a text often interspersed with references to fragmentation, multiplicity and semantic collapse,[73] Venuti is convinced that Fulgentius' analysis produces a hermeneutical *circle*, in quite a peculiar acceptation: a vortex that homogenizes everything and makes the myth "sink down under new interpretative layers, under which they are hardly recognizable."[74]

Although fragmentary and fragmenting, Fulgentius' allegoresis seems to be *circulating* from detail to detail, from abstraction to abstraction, returning again and again to a few master ethical-philosophical oppositions (*sapientia*/*ignorantia*; *libido*/*virtus* etc.): the circularity pointed out by Venuti can also be described as a form of argumentative density which makes it difficult to follow the interconnections among the diverse, "atomistic" allegorical explanations – if there are interconnections at all. Fulgentius' text is at once profoundly circular/continuous and deeply disjointed: it embodies the paradox of an *argumentation without articulation*.

The dialectic between continuity and rupture, the tendency to collapse and merge which, by now, should be familiar from similar phenomena in Virgilius and Solinus,[75] affects not only Fulgentius' hermeneutics, but also, as we have already seen while commenting on the structure of the *Prologue*, the whole architecture of the work. We shall now take a closer look at the general architecture of the three books in order to better investigate the collapsing (satirical) dimension of Fulgentius' writing.

3.3.2 Fragments, Totalities, and Architectures

The tripartition of the *Mythologiae* has naturally prompted a discussion on the rationale underlying such a subdivision. Étienne Wolff feels confident enough to state that "the

[73] According to Edwards 1976 the very first *fabula*, *Unde idolum* (15,21-17,8), devoted to the birth of idols as substitutes for dead people, thematises absence and desire as the origin of signs, and the *Mythologiae* as the investigation of this absence; the multifariousness of knowledge is symbolised by Minerva's *triplex* dress in 38,3; the stress on etymology and language implying that "a semantic order can replace an ontological one", p, 22.
[74] Venuti 2018, p. 90.: "il mito […] sprofonda sotto nuovi strati, sotto i quali è perfino difficile riconoscerlo."
[75] See *supra* p. 53 and pp. 72-74.

composition of the work is indeed justified."[76] According to his reading, the first book, opened by an etiological *fabula* about the birth of idols (1.1 *Unde idolum*), is a canonical representation of the Greco-Roman mythological world from the Olympian Gods down to heroes and simple men (1.2 *Fabula Saturni* – 1.22 *Fabula Admeti et Alcestae*); the sixteen *fabulae* of the second book revolve around the themes introduced by the allegorical analysis of the judgement of Paris as a moral choice between three kinds of life, *activa*, *contemplativa*, and *voluptaria* (2.1 *Fabula de iudicio Paridis*); the third book (sixteen *fabulae*) examines and condemns the nefarious effects of *libido*. Wolff's scheme is constructed on the basis of two fundamental movements, from the general to the individual and from the mythographical to the philosophical/ethical: the first book is loosely structured as a genealogy of the Olympians with a quick overview of their attributes; the second one narrows the focus to a selection of stories chosen for "ethical" reasons; finally, the third book develops one of the strands touched upon in book two (the risks of lust connected with the *vita voluptaria*) with a stronger moralizing concern.

The very fact that such an architecture has been individuated, regardless of whether we are willing to accept it or not, shows the power of semantic matrixes as ordering principles. In Wolff's reading, the ethical dilemma presented by the allegoresis of the judgement of Paris sets the tone for the rest of the collection, as if its harmonics could be heard throughout this series of apparently disjointed *fabulae*. From a strictly hermeneutical point of view, the problem remains whether this attempt at interpretative unification is nothing but the result of a ''quantitative'' fallacy: does the fact that the *Fabula de iudicio Paridis* occupies a broad textual space at the beginning of book two (just as the long *Fabula Bellerofontis* opens the third book by stressing the importance of struggling against *libido*), does this fact, we should be wondering, somehow impact on Wolff's decision to make it the dominant note of what follows? Or, is it perhaps their initial collocation that invites us to bestow a certain thematic relevance upon these *fabulae*? *Thematic* is no casually chosen adjective: despite its usual employment in reference to ''content'', it still encapsulates an original notion of *positioning* (τίθημι, "to put, place, set") – I employ it as a reminder of the subtle influence exerted by structural factors even when we try to isolate ''thematic'' threads. For their part, saturated texts are characterized, I would argue, by a problematic *thematicity*, by a resistance to structuring

[76] Wolff-Dain 2013, p. 17: "La composition de l'ouvrage en trois livres trouve donc sa justification".

and ordering agents: the *thematic* moment, the creation of a determined interpretative space, seems to be systematically avoided. [77]

José Amarante has bracketed for a while any re-organization of the *Mythologiae* to pursue the hypothesis of continuous, "horizontal" reading of the text.[78] Rather than relying on wide-ranging semantic matrixes, Amarante concentrates on the micro-level of the transitions from one *fabula* to another. He aims to demonstrate that the *Mythologiae* not only constitute a network, but also that this network is linearly organized: its rationale emerges through the succession of myths, which, far from being disjointed, are proved to be readable "cover-to-cover".[79] As a result, Amarante's analysis substitutes Wolff's *structural cohesion* by resorting to a kind of *flow cohesion* – but *cohesion* is still the goal. Both Wolff and Amarante's hermeneutics are, in the end, *hermeneutics of continuity*, as they both look for a thread to follow, for links to bridge disconnected elements.

In fact, it is not wholly unexpected that a work traditionally regarded as incoherent – and for this very reason often brutally dismissed – should prompt apologies insisting on consistency and meaningfulness. Although this is not the place to begin brooding over the possibility of a *hermeneutics of discontinuity* (something quite different, to be clear, from any aesthetics of fragments, ruins, or gaps), it is important to notice that any attempt to establish criteria for a *morphology* seems to lead inevitably to *unification*, or, in other terms, to *synthesis*. The same could be said for *typology* and any other classificatory enterprise. The fundamental and uncanny question is whether or not there might be an irreducible contrast between the text and that very synthetic gesture we call reading.

Commenting on Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory as outlined in the *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* ("Origin of German Tragic Drama"), Karlheinz Stierle projects the characteristics of an *allegorical* reader onto Benjamin himself, depicting him as a reader attracted by pitfalls and inconsistencies, an interpreter whose analytical eye dismembers the text by breaking down its linearity – in Stierle's own phrase, an *innehaltende Leser* ("pausing reader").[80] But even an *innehaltende Leser*, although she/he rejects linear continuity, in effect disseminates continuity by establishing connections where they are not expected to be found: instead of moving along the textual surface, such a reader cuts

[77] I understand the *thematic* moment as a consequence of the *thetic* moment investigated, among others, by Kristeva 1974, pp. 42-43 *et passim*. In Kristeva's theory, *thetic* designates the moment in which subject and object come to be self-limited and determined: by *thetic*, in other terms, she defines the split (*rupture*) that engenders the subject through a process of self-identification; this positioning of the subject coincides with the passage from the semiotic regime to the symbolic one. For a critique of *thematicity* cfr. also Schwindt 2009, pp. 145-146.

[78] See Amarante 2019, pp. 71-103.

[79] Cfr. the similar discussion on Solinus *supra* pp. 76-77.

[80] See Stierle 1984, pp. 337-338.

through the text *systematically* and follows a multidimensional path, which, despite its multidimensionality, remains grounded in *analogical thinking*.[81] If analogical thinking constitutes, in the end, the necessary substratum for all allegorical thinking, its *satirization* would then mean a radicalization of the analogical principle, its randomization to levels of chaos unacceptable for most readers, let alone those supporters of ''literal'' reading. The proliferation of the previously mentioned ''vanishing points'' therefore corresponds to an expansion of the analogical principle well beyond safe limits, a fact which, in turn, requires a hypertrophy of unifying potency.

Trapped in this impossibility of not falling from the fragmentary into totality and from totality back into the fragmentary, interpreters struggle to *tame* both outcomes by synthetizing the fragmentary and by analyzing totality. The most common taming strategy consists, of course, in dissolving the singularity of the fragment into the totality of History. Gregory Hays has sought to demonstrate how some of Fulgentius' "strangeness" becomes more comprehensible, and definitively less awkward, when considered in the context of late antique grammatical and scholastic practices.[82] The internal disposition of some of the *fabulae* would thus recall the structure of *progymnasmata*, the school exercises we know from rhetorical handbooks;[83] for instance, the moral maxims that from time to time appear in the *fabulae* (and are not to be found in canonical mythographers like Hyginus and Antoninus Liberalis) indeed resemble the short gnomic introductions known as *promythia*.[84] Likewise, the alleged inconsistency of Fulgentius' allegoresis finds several echoes in one of the most popular commentators of Vergil, Servius no less. In an old article, J. W. Jones tackled the problem of Servius' allegorical technique and revealed the many points it has in common with previous allegorical practices (Stoic, Varronian, etc.).[85] *Ergo*, Fulgentius' allegoresis is neither less nor more preposterous than any predecessor. We

[81] The most provoking and fully-fledged treatment of analogy as a philosophical concept remains, to my knowledge, Enzo Melandri's *La linea e il circolo. Studio logico-filosofico sull'analogia* (Melandri 1968). The second chapter (*Teonimia*) of the first section (*Topica: I luoghi naturali dell'analogia*) is a thorough investigation of semiotics, allegory, symbolism, and Thomistic logic in the light of analogy, cfr. Melandri 1968, pp. 91-150.

[82] See Hays 2002, pp. 25-30.

[83] The bibliography on *progymnasmata*, school exercises, and rhetorical handbooks is vast and diverse. Still very useful as an introduction to actual scholastic practices is Cribiore 2001, although focused on Greek. For an overview of *progymnasmata*, see most recently Berardi 2017.

[84] Cfr. Berardi 2017, p. 212-213. A few examples: 42, 5-6 *Si fumum fures eructuant, quis involantem dum negat agnoscat*, "If thieves give out smoke, anyone can spot the despoiler even when he denies it"; 54, 1-5 *Quamvis in omnibus libidinis amor sit turpior, numquam tamen deterior erit quam cum se honorato miscuerit*, "Although love of lust is shameful in all men, yet it is never worse than when it is involved with honour"; 55,15 *Quis plus quaerit esse quam licet, minus erit quam est*, "He who seeks for more than he should have will be less than he now is"; etc.

[85] See Jones 1961.

could even build further on the argument by noting that Mark Amsler's overview of etymological theories from Plato's *Cratylus* to the Early Middle Ages suggests that if Fulgentius' technique may seem arbitrary, it appears so only when compared with modern, historical-linguistic etymology.

In other terms, the two major elements of awkwardness in Fulgentius' hermeneutics, his unbridled allegoresis and arbitrary etymological analysis, turn out to be far less idiosyncratic once they are plunged into the flux of tradition. Yet I do not think the most trivial of historicistic postulates can really exhaust Fulgentius' specificity. The scattered world of the *Mythologiae* cannot but *exceed* tradition.[86] The very fact that 19th century classical philology, as exemplary proved by Domenico Comparetti's harsh judgement, dismissed Fulgentius' works as irremediably "bad", points to their *inadequacy*, but we have to take this term literally: the *Mythologiae* – indeed, all the writings attributed to Fulgentius – can hardly be *equated*, they resist levelling, on both an internal (being flattened on a single semantic core) and external (being flattened on a genre paradigm) level.

Such a resistance to categorization becomes all the more blatant when Fulgentius' mythological readings expand their range to incorporate other fields of knowledge, in full accordance, after all, with their philosophical ambitions.[87] It is probably not exaggerated to speak of a veritable *encyclopaedic* attitude in the *Mythologiae*, an attitude that emerges at its strongest in two *fabulae* from the third book, collocated, maybe not by chance, very close to the end of the work: the *Fabula Apollinis et Marsyae* (3, 9) and the *Fabula Orphei et Euridicis* (3, 10).

Fabulae 3,9 and 3, 10 constitute a sort of diptych on music – where music is to be considered as representative of the *artes* and of knowledge in general: given Fulgentius' own commitment to *sapientia*, it is perhaps not surprising that we find a good number of self-reflexive resonances in these *fabulae*.

In spite of the title,[88] the *Fabula Apollinis and Marsyae* is only partially devoted to telling the well-known story of the satyr who challenged Apollo; the narrative is so shortened that it omits the most notorious episode in the myth, Marsyas' gruesome agony. The narration revolves around the *tibiae* (double flute), the musical instrument

[86] "Tradition" is here to be taken in the reductive sense deplored by Bruns 1992, p. 204: "a conception […] which confuses tradition with the institutions that try to allegorize it or read it as a homogeneous master narrative in which everything is joined together in a vast program of conceptual integration."

[87] See Hernández Lobato 2018, p. 259-261 for Fulgentius' Neo-Platonism.

[88] Whether the titles go back to Fulgentius or were added by later copyists is controversial. Amarante, on the basis of the many divergences in the manuscript tradition of the titles and of his linear analysis, suggests entirely revising Helm's subdivision of the text into 50 *fabulae*. See Amarante 2019, pp. 99-101.

invented by Minerva, rejected by the goddess because it disfigured her cheeks, and finally picked up by the satyr Marsyas, 73,11-16:

> *Minerva ex osse tibias inuenit, de quibus cum in conuiuio deorum cecinisset eiusque tumentes buccas dii omnes inrisissent, illa ad Tritonam paludem pergens, in aqua faciem suam speculata, dum turpia adiudicasset buccarum inflamina, tibias iecit. Quibus Marsyas repertis doctior factus Apollinem concertaturus de cantibus provocavit.*
>
> Minerva invented the double flute from a bone, but when she played on it at a banquet of the gods and all the gods laughed at her puffed out cheeks, she went to the salt lake Tritonia ; and observing her image in the water and having adjudged shameful the blowing out of her cheeks, she threw the flute away. Marsyas, finding it, made himself skillful at it and, eager for a hard contest, challenged Apollo to perform.

The narrative line is intersected by the story of Mida, the king called to judge between Marsyas and Apollo (73,17 *[Qui] sibi Midam regem iudicem deligunt…*, "They chose king Mida as umpire…"), but also in this case only one aspect of Mida's myth is retold, namely how he got his infamous asinine ears (the fabulous power that allowed Mida to transform whatever he touched into gold is narrated at 2, 10, *Fabula Midae regis et Pactoli Fluvii*). Thus, interestingly enough, *fabula* 3,9 seems to move entirely in the margins of myth, at its tangential points: in Fulgentius' storytelling, this is first and foremost the story of an *object* – he diverts our attention from the narrative proper (a narrative of characters) to the object-based core of the tale: the *tibiae* become at once a curse (see Marsyas and Mida's wretched destinies) and an emblem – they become the story itself. Fulgentius will have to break down the rough, thick bark of the object in order for it to release its allegorical marrow, 74, 8-9: *Nunc ergo huius misticae fabulae interiorem cerebrum inquiramus*, "Now, therefore, we may seek the hidden sense of this mysterious story"; and the marrow, we are told, is music: 75, 9: *A musicis haec reperta est fabula, ut Orfeus in teogonia scribit*, "The story is shown to be associated with musicians, as Orpheus wrote in his *Theogonia*." A compendium of musical theory immediately follows, with particular reference to *tibiae* and *cithara* (Marsyas and Apollo's instruments, respectively); only after this long digression (74,18-76,11, almost two pages in Helm's edition), a complicated passage ostentatiously rich in technical vocabulary, the discourse returns to a more familiar mode of allegorical interpretation, 76,11 ff.:

> *Ergo post Artem musicam Minerva repperit tibias, quas omnis doctus in musicis propter sonorum despuit paupertatem. Inflatas uero buccas ideo risisse dicuntur, quod tibia uentose in musicis sonet…*

> So, after the art of music,[89] Minerva discovered the double flute, which anyone skilled in music despises for the poverty of its sounds. They are said to have laughed at her puffed out cheeks because the flute sounds windily with its music…

I called the passage a *compendium* and a *digression*: both definitions somehow hint at the *satirical* nature of this *fabula*, at its being a heterogeneous conglomerate, but they are also meant to recall, of course, the literary model provided by Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, arguably the most popular example of 'encyclopaedic' satire.

''Encyclopedism'' lies at the heart of 3,10, *Fabula Orphei et Euridicis*: the musical motif – 77,15-16 *Haec igitur fabula artis est musicae designatio*, "Now this story designates the art of music"[90] – now serves as a starting point for a schematic presentation of the *artes*, that is, of the late antique cultural/educational system, 77,17-78,6:

> *In omnibus igitur artibus sunt primae artes, sunt secundae; ut in puerilibus litteris prima abecedaria, secunda nota, in grammaticis prima lectio, secunda articulatio, in rethoricis prima rethorica, secunda dialectica, in geometricis prima geometrica, secunda arithmetica, in astrologicis prima mathesis, secunda astronomia, in medicinis prima gnostice, secunda dinamice, in aruspicinis prima aruspicina, secunda parallaxis, in musicis prima musica, secunda apotelesmatice. De quibus omnibus breuiter rationem perstringam necesse est.*
>
> In all the arts there is a first and a second stage; for boys learning their letters there is first the alphabet, second learning to write; at the grammar level, first reading, second clear speech; at the rhetorical level, first rhetoric, second dialectic; in geometry, first pure geometry, second arithmetic; in astronomy, first learning the Science, second applied astrology; in medicine, first the diagnosis, second the therapy; in divination, first the inspection of omens, second their application; and in music, first the melody, second the effect. Now I shall briefly explain them.[91]

[89] I modified Whitbread's hardly tenable translation "So it was according to the art of music that Minerva discovered…", Whitbread 1971, p. 94. Wolff-Dain 2013, p. 176 n. 108 rightly observes that Minerva did not discover music and suggests that Fulgentius might have misunderstood Ovid *Fast*. VI, 709, where the goddess, while referring to the flute, says *sum tamen inventrix auctorque ego carminis huius*, "I am the inventor and founder of this music."

[90] Whitbread 1971, p. 96 gives "Now this legend is an allegory of the art of music", but I have preferred to avoid the term "allegory". Curiously enough, in Whitbread's text *Myth*. 77, 10-15 (a short summary of Orpheus and Eurydice's story) is missing.

[91] Again, Whitbread 1971, p. 96 omits the last sentence.

At the end of this second *compendium* (*breviter rationem perstringam*), an unexpected swerve brings us suddenly from music (*apotelesmatice*, defined at 78,19 as *effectus tonorum uirtusque uerborum*, "effects of scales and the power of words") to hermeneutics, or, more precisely, to Fulgentius' own practice: 78,18-20 *uocis ergo pulchritudo delectans interna artis secreta uirtutem etiam misticam uerborum attingit*, "for the beauty of the voice as it appeals to the inner secrets of the art also has to do with the mysterious power of words". Just like Fulgentius' interpretative efforts, music is tightly connected with the inner power of words – from the general *ordo* of knowledge we are transported back to Fulgentius' own immediate concerns: this is a circular movement that seems to reproduce the organic systematicity of the encyclopaedic order itself. It is nonetheless worth noting how the totality typical of the encyclopaedic discourse is attained through a synecdochic procedure: the *tibiae* lead to music, music leads to the *artes*, the *artes* are necessarily related to *signa* and their *cerebrum*. The synecdochic chain could also be read backwards, from the interplay of *signa* to their objectification, from encyclopedism as a system of signs and codes to encyclopedism as a collection of *Realien*. In fact, the reversibility of the movement might be regarded as an exemplary mark of the late ancient ideology of *kosmos*, according to which the fragments of ''reality'' must be bound together and organized through an overarching principle (be it social, political, or theological)[92]; the investigation of truth, supreme goal for *rethores* (and *philosophi*), actually mirrors the tight interconnectedness of the *kosmos*, 78,7-9: *aput rethores uero aliud est profuse et libero cursu effrenata loquacitas, aliud constricta ueritatisque indagandae curiosa nexilitas*, "it is one thing for *rethores*[93] to have profuse, unbridled, and unrestrained fluency, another to impose rigorous and scrupulous control over the investigation of truth." Once again, the dialectic between fragment and totality, individuality and universality, seems to find a dynamic balance: at the end of the *Mythologiae*, the whole cultural system within which the three books are inscribed is now, in its turn, inscribed in the three books.

Still, balance in Fulgentius is always doomed to break down. *Fabula* 3,10 ends with a consideration that has not yet received enough critical attention. Fulgentius is here explaining why Orpheus is not allowed to turn his head and to look at Eurydice, 79,3-11:

> *dicere enim possumus quod Dorius tonus aut Frigius Saturno coiens feras mulceat, si Ioui, aues oblectet. At uero si rei expositio quaeritur cur hoc fiat, uestigandae rationis captus inmoritur. Ideo ergo et ne eam respiciat prohibetur et dum uidet amittit; nam perfectissimus Pithagoras dum modulos numeris coaptaret simphoniarumque*

[92] See Chin 2015.

[93] Withbread 1971, p. 96 translates, quite inaccurately, "instructors in rhetoric".

pondera terminibus arithmeticis per mela et rithmos uel modulos sequeretur, effectus uero rationem reddere non potuit.

for we can say that the Dorian mode or the Phrygian is like Saturn in soothing wild beasts, or like Jove in charming the birds; but if the explanation why this happens is sought for, the theory of the subject inquired into dies away. Therefore, Orpheus is forbidden to look upon Eurydice, and loses her when he does look upon her; therefore the highly skilled Pythagoras when he adapted tunes to numbers and pursued the depths of musical composition in arithmetical terms through their melodies and rhythms and tunes, yet could not explain the reason for their effect.

Commenting on this fabula, Étienne Wolff laconically remarks that "the whole passage is obscure."[94] Certainly more audacious, if not completely acceptable, is Robert Edwards' suggestion that at the end of fabula 3,10, "Orpheus' loss of Eurydice symbolizes the impossibility of comprehending art. Fulgentius also observes that Pythagoras' adaptation of mathematics to musical notes cannot account for the effects of music. In its application to other fields of knowledge in the liberal arts, the explanation represents the final breakdown of hermeneutics. The systems of interpretation remain unable to grasp the essence of the arts or to offer special insights into them. At most, they constitute a realm of discourse around their topics."[95]

For all its boldness, Edwards' reading is fascinating. More than the plea for an irrational appreciation of the work of art, what is striking here is the realization that the most encyclopaedic *fabula* comes to an end with a "breakdown of hermeneutics"; apparently not even the cogent *constricta curiosa nexilitas* suffices to account for every *effectus*: the *kosmos* of knowledge has room for epistemological failure, the system of signs for the un-signifiable. The ultimate synthesis is thus a silent one – similarly, the satirical conglomerate of fragments we call *Mythologiae* resists any final explanation, but not allegorization, since the very idea of a definitive allegory is simply absurd: and once allegorized, the conglomerate announces its own silence.

3.3.3 *Labyrinthus in silentio*

We have traversed Fulgentius' *Mythologiae* with an eye to their opacity and I am not sure that such an approach makes any sense at all. I began with a pseudo-analysis, then only pretended to abandon its paralogical tenets. After Virgilius Grammaticus' condensing

[94] Wolff-Dain, p. 178 n. 123: "tout le passage demeure obscure".
[95] Edwards 1976, p. 29.

strategies, after Solinus' divergent and centrifugal drives, what Fulgentius bequeaths is precisely the collapsing of frames, the blurring of codes. The *Mythologiae* are exemplarly epitomic less for their being a juxtaposition of short, radically summarized narratives, than for the hermeneutical drama they stage: the drama of cultural transference from Paganism to Christianity, from one semiotic code to another one. Epitomic is the blurred intricacy of the textual surface of the *Mythologiae*, its self-deployment which, as we have seen in the awkward fate of its encyclopaedic ambitions, is a form of self-limitation at one and the same time. In the end, the fragments are unified, but this can only be achieved at the cost of silencing *ratio* – and still, this will be an *inscribed silence*. Only by losing Eurydice will Orpheus' severed head be able to perpetually sing.

Conclusions

My initial obsession with breaking *circular patterns* has gone, now we can see it, spectacularly wrong. I have ended up exactly where I began: with a severed head. There the Baptist, here Orpheus. Instead of disrupting the circle, instead of showing repetition in its liberating potentiality, I have fallen victim to the enticements of rhythm, to repetition as recursive structure. But if Virgilius, Solinus, and Fulgentius have been shown to be characterized by an inherent textual motility, and if such motility, being epitomic, is profoundly connected to repetition (Virgilius repeats previous grammatical discourses; Solinus the geographical-encyclopaedic tradition and Pliny; Fulgentius the mythical discourse), why should I be concerned? Where does such repulsion for repetition stem from? My very insistence on the intrinsic dynamicity of epitomic texts might seem to reveal, indeed, some critical inability to carry the burden of static repetition, to overtly confront its uncanniness. Why do I seem to be unable to *truly* accept the idea of an immobilizing repetition?

Connected to this inability is the uneasiness running through the present work – the uneasiness, I must admit, of someone who cannot really manage repetition but *neurotically*. The entire investigation shows several symptoms of neurosis. Praising movement, divergence, mutability etc. is, maybe, simply a way to conceal some deeper difficulty in conceptualizing these terms without resorting to stasis, order, and coherence. Much of the analysis in these three chapters is based on dichotomies. *Tension*, to various degrees and in various forms, plays a most prominent role exactly because of the neurotic inclination of the analysis – an inclination to totalization, schematism, reductionism. Objects are viewed through the prism of a polarized world in which sense and non-sense remain distinct, although questioned, concepts: and objects are trapped in this polarity. They are studied as meaningful artifacts, while, at the same time, recognised as pointing

to the very impossibility of meaning. As a result, in spite of their purported idiosyncrasy, Virgilius, Solinus and Fulgentius' texts seem to be doing almost *the same thing*: they all appear to be variations on the theme of opacity and linguistic excess. Has my gaze annihilated the object of its contemplation? Is *epitomic writing* not rather a fig leaf for a tyrannical modality of reading? For this was, in the end, the question looming all along over the present research: fragmenting and re-composition, isn't this an apt description of any reading act? Isn't this the formula of critical thinking? Of academic discourse?

Isn't Salome's plate, in the end, a frightening mirror?

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