Forum

Mapping Vergil's Quantitative Sublime

To the Editor:

By evoking but then "bypass[ing]" (58) an entire dimension of the "Vergilian sublime," Elizabeth Young's "Homer in a Nutshell: Vergilian Miniaturization and the Sublime" (128.1 [2013]: 57–72)—itself often Longinian in its exquisite diction (Young is a published poet)—invites supplementary comment that could make its case about sublime miniaturization even stronger. Before offering several observations in this spirit, I will touch on three points of context Young emphasizes.

First, the essay's titular calque from Cicero, the "nutshell" image preserved only in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, may be usefully understood as Pliny did—that is, literally, beyond the appealing misprision (or *licentia poetica*) appropriated here (57, 65, 68–69). Citing Cicero, Pliny writes, "In nuce inclusam Iliadem Homeri carmen in membrana scriptum" ("a parchment copy of Homer's poem *The Iliad* was enclosed in a nutshell"), the first in a series of hyperboles for "oculorum acies" ("visual acuity") that "maxime fidem excedentia . . . exempla" ("transcend . . . belief in the highest degree" [Pliny the Elder; *Natural History*; trans. H. Rackham; vol. 2 (Harvard UP, 1989) 560–61; bk. 7, ch. 21]). Pliny's (and presumably Cicero's lost) point is an ancient commonplace: Homer's *Iliad* is extremely long (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1462b2); imagine having eyes sharp enough to read the script of a manuscript/scroll/codex so incredibly miniaturized.

Second, the essay begins with and returns throughout to the threatening sublime of bigness: "All epics are big" (57). Yet however big the *Aeneid* is (9,896 hexameters), Vergil copes with the "crippling" enormity of Homer's epics paradoxically, proceeding by a "process of belated composition" that adapts Callimachus's "ingenious method" of miniaturization (64). He does this rhetorically—"In the midst of this epic's

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rush toward greatness and grandeur, tiny cities, tiny heroes, tiny ants, bees, and kings continually waylay its narrative in undersized worlds" (58)—and, my interest here, quantitatively: "The poem famously strives to condense all forty-eight books of Homer into a twelve-book kernel" (57), "six Odyssean books" "followed by six Iliadic books" (69n1).

Third, the essay's modern critical analogue, the "Hertzian sublime" (58, 63), has both rhetorical and quantitative dimensions: the "sublime turn" that Neil Hertz adopted from Longinus and—among what Young "bypasses"—the "blockage" Hertz developed from the second great locus classicus of theorizing on the sublime, Kant's "Inquiry into the Sublime," especially the "mathematical sublime," which arises from "mental overload" and a despair of "bringing a long series or a vast scattering under . . . conceptual unity" ("A Reading of Longinus"; *The End of the Line* [Columbia UP, 1985] 39; see also Jonathan D. Culler, "The Hertzian Sublime"; *MLN* 120.5 [2005]: 975–76, and Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* [Routledge, 2006] 77–83). But the mathematical sublime also arises from revitalization by our reason, since the infinite or indefinitely plural "can nevertheless be *thought*" as a unified whole (48). Hertz's striking modern example: scholars' familiar sublime experience of bibliographic "blockage" "in the face of 'the proliferation of secondary comment'—plural, heterogeneous, dismaying" (42).

As a case in point, consider the proliferation of twentieth-century Vergil scholarship's attempts to fathom the quantitative superstructure of the *Eclogues* (10 books, 829 hexameters), *Georgics* (4 books, 2,188 hexameters), and *Aeneid* (e.g., Philip Hardie; *Virgil* [Oxford UP, 1998] 48–49, 72–75, 88–91). Both *in modo* and *in re*, the drama here has been between the kind of cognitive "blockage" this scholarly disunity or overload entails and what our "reason" encourages us to expect: Vergil must have had some unifying design principles governing these quantitative subdivisions, something comparable in craftsmanship to what we otherwise admire in his poetry, at least within each text and perhaps

encompassing all three as a 26-book whole. Hypotheses to date proceed from one of two rudimentary principles of (Greco-Roman) mathematics, rarely from both together: arithmetic equality (e.g., in the *Georgics* books 3 and 4 are 566 verses each, and Vergil names his friend and patron Maecenas in 1.**2**, 2.**41**, 3.**41**, and 4.**2**) and proportionality (controversially, e.g., the extreme and mean ratio, or golden section).

As it turns out, the disposition of the *Aeneid*'s four striking bee passages offers a suggestive instance of Vergil's sophisticated technique in both quantitative regards. Arithmetic equality frames each six-book half:

$$6\begin{cases} \text{I } (apes \text{ 'bees' } 1.430) \\ [\textbf{four books}] \\ \text{VI } (apes \text{ 6.707}) \end{cases} \begin{cases} \text{VII } (apes \text{ 7.64}) \\ [\textbf{four} \text{ books}] \\ \text{XII } (apes \text{ 12.588}) \end{cases}6$$

Odyssean: Iliadic:

One recalls the symmetry of honeycomb hexagonality and hexametric epic prosody, perhaps also of bilateral hexametric apian anatomy. And by hypothesizing from one of the possible implications of this arithmetic symmetry—beginning with philology's best-received text (consensus hexameter totals), as we procedurally must (S. K. Heninger, Jr., et al.; "Measure and Symmetry in Literature"; *PMLA* 92.1 [1977]: 126–29)—we observe that six parameters of the book divisions also "unite" the two six-book halves by proportionality:

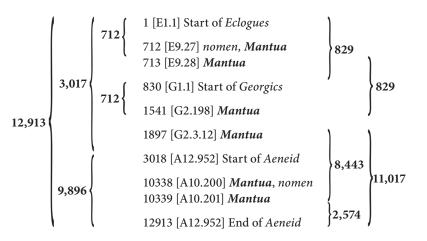|	Odyssean:	Iliadic:	
	I **756**	VII **817**	
	II 804	VIII 731	
	III 718	IX 818	
3,999	IV 705	X 908	**4,324**
	V 871	XI 915	
	VI 901	XII 952	
	Total: **4,755**	Total: **5,141**	

Proportion in six terms: 5,141/4,755 = 4,324/3,999 = 817/756 (factors to the nearest integer here and below).

Happenstance? Consider, representatively, two relevant sets of features much discussed (except for their proportionality). First, Vergil's

phrase for inexpressibility in *Aeneid* I's bee simile, *mirabile dictu* ("wondrous to relate" [1.439]) occurs twice in *Georgics*, its collocation echoed prominently in conclusion. Proportionality? Yes:

$$1{,}331\left\{544\left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{1 (1.1) Start of } Georgics \\ mirabile\ dictu\ \text{[G2.30, ordinal } \mathbf{544}\text{th]} \\ mirabile\ dictu\ \text{[G3.275, 1,331st]} \\ dictu\ mirabile\ \text{[G4.}\mathbf{554}\text{, 2,176th]} \\ \text{2188 [G4.566] End of } Georgics \end{array}\right. \right\} 845 \right\} 857$$

1,331 / 845 = 857 / 544 (and corollaries).

Second, Vergil combines qualitative and quantitative sublimes by linking the six namings of his hometown, Mantua, within the collective 12,913 verses of the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid* by lexis, arithmetic equality (iterations 1–3, 712 = 712, etc.), and proportion (iterations 4–6): poetic-cosmic sublimity (in the *Eclogues*)—"tuum nomen . . . / . . . / cantantes **sublime** ferent *ad sidera* cycni" ("your [Varus's] name singing swans shall bear **on high** *to the stars*" [*Virgil*; vol. 1 (Heinemann, 1916) 9.27–29; my trans. and emphasis])—and political twelveness (in the *Aeneid*): "gens . . . triplex . . . sub gente quaterni" ("three races with four peoples under each" [*Virgil*; vol. 2 (Heinemann, 1908) 10.202; my trans.]). Proportionality (commutative):

$$\frac{12{,}913\ \text{``Book of Vergil''}}{11{,}017\ Mantua_4} = \frac{9{,}896\ Aeneid}{8{,}443\ Mantua_4 - Mantua_5 - Mantua_6} = \frac{3{,}017\ Eclogues + Georgics}{2{,}574\ Mantua_5 - Mantua_6}.$$

$$12{,}913\left\{3{,}017\left\{\begin{array}{l}712\left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{1 [E1.1] Start of } Eclogues \\ \text{712 [E9.27] } nomen,\ \boldsymbol{Mantua} \\ \text{713 [E9.28] } \boldsymbol{Mantua}\end{array}\right\}829 \\ 712\left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{830 [G1.1] Start of } Georgics \\ \text{1541 [G2.198] } \boldsymbol{Mantua}\end{array}\right\}829\end{array}\right. \\ 9{,}896\left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{1897 [G2.3.12] } \boldsymbol{Mantua} \\ \text{3018 [A12.952] Start of } Aeneid \\ \text{10338 [A10.200] } \boldsymbol{Mantua},\ nomen \\ \text{10339 [A10.201] } \boldsymbol{Mantua} \\ \text{12913 [A12.952] End of } Aeneid\end{array}\right.\end{array}\right.$$

with braces: 8,443; 2,574; 11,017.

Longinus's main interest is in the sublimity of individual passages, but in a context emphasizing larger, quantity-derived concepts, chiefly *armonia* ("harmony, the proportionality of music theory") and *synthesis* ("composition of a whole"; for both see esp. chs. 39–40 of *On the Sublime*): "composition is a kind of harmony of . . . words"; "it builds up an accumulation of phrases into a grand and harmonious structure" (*Classical Literary Criticism*; trans. T. S. Dorsch [Penguin, 1961] 150–51).

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