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GETTING ON TOP OF THINGS:^{*} FORM AND MEANING IN THE PSEUDO-VERGILIAN *AETNA*

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Abstract: This article offers a fresh view on the poetics of the pseudo-Vergilian poem *Aetna*, proposing a carefully planned and executed structure which is supported through a deliberate arrangement of key terms in the poem as well as a network of verbal cross-references.

Keywords: *Aetna*, *Appendix Vergiliana*, poetics, structural analysis

1. Introduction

The *Aetna*, prima facie a didactic poem about the causes of volcanism, likely dates from the first half of the first century A. D.¹ and, transmitted in the context of the *Appendix Vergiliana*, is a remarkable, yet rather challenging, text.² Even though the text does not pose any significant linguistic challenges in itself, and even though the general outline of the text's content can be reasonably well understood, the manuscript tradition has rendered the text corrupt in multiple ways:³ there are several obvious *lacunae*, there are several passages that are heavily disputed by textual critics, and there are various instances where a re-ordering of the transmitted sequence of lines has been deemed appropriate.⁴ This scenario makes it rather obvious why,

^{*} I wish to thank the students on my 2012 Latin module at the University of Reading for many an insightful discussion of the text: may the trauma of the *crux desperationis* fade eventually. I am grateful to Emma Holding for correcting the language of my paper. All remaining mistakes are entirely my own. – The textual basis for the present paper is that of F. R. D. Goodyear (1965).

¹ De Vivo (1989) suggested a date after the publication of relevant passages in Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* and perhaps related to the beginnings of the reign of Vespasian. The text's relation and relative chronology to Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* is, however, anything but straightforward, see e. g. Goodyear (1984: 348-353) and cf. Garani (2009).

² Generally on the *Aetna* see e. g. Effe (1977: 204-220), Lassandro (1984), and Toohey (1996: 188-192).

³ For the manuscript tradition of the *Aetna* see Reeve (1975) and (1976) as well as de Vivo (1987b) and (1991).

⁴ A masterly, if often needlessly idiosyncratic, edition and commentary has been produced by Goodyear (1965). Based on its occasionally opaque *constitutio textus*, Harry Hine has recently published an excellent translation (2012), which has been used for the purpose of the present paper. For different approaches to the way in which this text ought to be edited cf. e. g. Vessereau (1961), Traglia (1968), and de Vivo (1987a); cf. also the more recent commentary on the *Appendix Vergiliana* by Iodice 2002.

historically, a vast number of scholarly publications on this poem have tended to focus on the reconstruction of this text.⁵

An aspect that has not attracted a great amount of attention yet, however, is the formal aesthetics of the poem, its structure, its design, and the interaction between form, content, and meaning. With the exception of a relatively recent discussion by Katharina Volk, based on the (seemingly) extensive digressions in the *Aetna*,⁶ very few attempts have been made to appreciate the poem in its entirety. Much rather, more recent times have seen an increase in attempts to explain the symbolism of fire, volcanic eruptions, and the poem's famous closing myth of the pious brothers of Catania⁷ as well as in attempts to align the poem with its intellectual background in didactic writing on natural phenomena as well as philosophical discourse, and to establish the Greek and Roman sources that have enabled the poet to conduct the research for his work.⁸

This somewhat peculiar situation with the most significant amount of research having been carried out on either fundamental basics such as the *constitutio textus* or in fact important sideline issues such as *Quellenforschung*, can hardly come as a surprise. The text itself, a pseudepigraphon, appears to be somewhat free-floating as a result of the numerous textual uncertainties. These problems notwithstanding, it shall be argued in the present paper that it is possible to make valid structural and functional observations on the text of the *Aetna* as a whole – observations that shed new and more nuanced light on the composition and formal aesthetics of the *Aetna* as a poem (as opposed to the *Aetna* as an object of textual emendation exercises and of *Quellenkritik*), and that lead to re-evaluate the poet's self-conception, his intentions, and his abilities beyond the idea that he was both an enthusiast of nature and a natural scientist (or philosopher).⁹

2. When does Mt. Etna erupt?

Mt. Etna is not just any random mountain. It is a volcano, close to mainland Italy, and it was for this very reason that it was chosen by the author of the *Aetna* as the paradigm of his poem on the causes of volcanism. In roughly the same time period, it was also studied by other Latin poets, including Vergil, Ovid, and, most significantly, Lucretius.¹⁰ Quite obviously the Etna was sufficiently active at the time to warrant such a poem, as it was sufficiently known to the target audience of it, and one must

⁵ For a summary discussions of earlier research see Ascione (1976) and (1978) as well as Richmond (1981: 1130-1133).

⁶ See Volk (2005a), (2005b: 169 with nt. 33), and (without substantial additions to the more original findings of the two aforementioned works) K. Volk's introduction to Ellis (2008).

⁷ See most recently Santelia (2012).

⁸ Cf. e. g. the magisterial article by Goodyear (1984), alongside some of the more general discourse provided by the authors mentioned above, nt. 2. Among the more recent attempts note e. g. Garani (2009).

⁹ A stance that has been convincingly argued by e. g. Effe (1977: 204-220) (with a strong argument in favour of a unitarian position of the poet) and more recently by Volk (2005a).

¹⁰ See Lucr. 6.639-702, Verg. *Aen.* 3.570-587, and Ov. *met.* 15.340-355. Further on this see Guzmán Arias (2003). The overlap between Lucretius and the *Aetna* poem has been stressed in particular by Hunink (1989), who also suggested that one of the main concerns of the *Aetna* poem is the desire to lift the fear of an afterlife; in a similar vein, especially on the similarity to Lucretius, cf. Lassandro (1993) and Giuliese (2001).

postulate that beyond reasonable doubt it was the very activity of this mountain that attracted the attention of the poet to his object of study.¹¹

If that is the case, it is fair to ask: where and at what point in his poem does the poet allow the volcano to erupt? The answer to this question lies in the following lines:

*His igitur causis extra penitusque coactus
exagitant uentos; pugnant in faucibus; arte
320 pugnantis suffocat iter. uelut unda profundo
terque quaterque exhausta graues ubi perbibit euros,
ingeminant fluctus et primos ultimus urget,
haud secus + adstrictus certamine tangitur ictu
spiritus inuoluensque suo sibi pondera nisu
325 densa per arduas exercet corpora uires
et, quaecumque iter est, properat transitque moramen,
donec confluuio, ueluti siponibus actus,
exilit atque furens tota uomit igneus Aetna.*

So because of these causes, above ground and below, pressure drives the winds into motion; they struggle in the (mountain's) throat, {320} and the channel tries to strangle them tightly as they struggle. Just as, when waves are scooped up from the depths of the sea one after another, and drink in the violence of the east winds, the billows double in size and the last one drives the first ones forward, so the air is constricted and pummelled by competing forces, and sweeping up heavy lumps as it careers along, {325} it propels these solid masses with its flaming energy, and, wherever it finds a path, it rushes ahead and gets past every obstacle, until, merging into a single stream, it gushes out, as though forced up by a pump, and in a fiery frenzy it spews out all over Etna.

(*Aetna* 318-328, transl. H. Hine)

This passage is among the most impressive runs of the *Aetna*, describing the eruption of Etna as the result of fiery matter driven by the impulse of volcanic winds. The *Aetna* contains several sentences that run over a substantial amount of lines. This example, however, is particularly noteworthy, for not only is it one long and sustained syntactic structure, but at the same time it seems to portray, verbally, the building up of a volcanic eruption, culminating in line 328, when the volcano finally gushes out the fiery masses (*furens ... uomit igneus* [sc. *spiritus*] *Aetna*).

The verbal artistry behind the depiction of the eruption process is considerable. The description doubles the impressiveness of violent natural forces by the introduction of a simile that relates the (relatively easily) comprehensible force and the unstoppable, increasing momentum behind the waves of a heavy sea to the rather inconceivable processes involved in a volcanic eruption. Moreover, in a sentence that stretches over almost nine hexametres, the poet has managed (i) to provide a bracket of syntactical agreement between *spiritus* (line 324) and *furens* and *igneus* (line 328) and (ii) to allow the name of the very mountain itself, *Aetna*, to occupy the sentence-final and line-final position.

The poet's artistry, however, goes beyond the mere ability to give a verbal impression of the build-up of an eruption and the very eruption itself. Bearing in mind that the poem has been adversely affected by a manuscript tradition that has left the text with several *lacunae*, one must be somewhat hesitant to place too much emphasis on detailed structural observations. At the same time, there is no reason to believe that

¹¹ On the *Aetna* as evidence for actual scientific observation cf. further Lassandro (1989), Garani (2009), and Heinz (2012); cf. also Paisley – Oldroyd (1979) and White (2008).

significant chunks of the text are now lost; in fact, most *lacunae* seem to be of one or two lines' length (if anything).

With that in mind, one can then go on to consider the position of the eruption passage in the context of the work, and one will thus make a highly remarkable observation: in a work of approximately 645 lines, the very line that depicts the eruption (328) is almost precisely in the middle.¹² This in itself in a poem of the quality and learnedness of the *Aetna* can hardly be considered accidental. What makes this aspect particularly remarkable, though, is that, in a poem about a volcanic mountain, the actual eruption – resulting in the word *Aetna* itself – occurs at the very peak of the poem itself.

This observation of a composition that appears to depict, verbally, the very subject of its narrative immediately opens up the opportunity to ask a range of questions: are there further compositional features to be observed that would support the postulate of a deliberate omphalos (or should it be: crater?) structure of the *Aetna*? Is there any verbal signposting that would help the recipient to appreciate the poet's efforts? Are there any other (more or less) obvious compositional coherences to be found?

3. Up hill and down dale

If one would like to see the description of the eruption as the peak of the poem, an idea that is supported by the passage's position at the very centre of the poem, then one may find it justified to think of the first half of the poem as a movement up hill, towards the summit, and of the second half of the poem as a movement down dale, away from it. Additionally, considering the poem's subject and the very eruption in the centre of the poem, one may also wish to think in terms of a build-up of pressure on the one hand, and a discharge of lava (running down the slopes of the volcano) on the other. Did the poet have similar ideas in mind?

The look at the eruption passage has rendered the poem a bipartite structure, with two halves of roughly 320 lines each.¹³ The first half of the poem, up to the passage discussed in the previous section, can justifiably be outlined as follows:

¹² I do not propose that this line originally was in the middle of the poem with absolute precision.

¹³ The overall structure of the poem has not been studied in sufficient depth. Note, however, the outlines of the poem's structure given by Toohey (1996: 189-190) and Hine (2012: 317), both of which aim to capture the poem's respective sections (and which can be reconciled with related efforts in the present paper), but pay little attention to explicit textual markers provided by the poet himself. A slightly different approach was taken by de Vivo (1985), especially with a view on the structure of the prooemium and its reprises in the subsequent text.

1-28	Prooemium (proper)	
29-93	Myths surrounding Mt. Etna and falsehood of the poets	
94-176	Porous nature of the earth and its enabling of flowing matters, and...	
177-218	Mt. Etna is a clear example for the porous nature of the earth and demonstrably has the exact right structure to enable volcanic flow	
219-281	Hackneyed, ultimately futile subjects for didactic poetry	
282-317	Principles of air flow and pressure and their role in volcanic activity, resulting in...	
318-328	The eruption of Mt. Etna	

From the schematic outline it emerges there are in fact a number of interrelated and interlocked movements to be seen in the design of the first half of the *Aetna*. A clear framework is provided by the overarching framework between the prooemium and the eruption passage, with an important joint in the middle, in which the poet achieves the transfer from his discussion of the porous nature of the earth in general to the application of his scientific views to Mt. Etna in lines 177-218 (marked as bipartite movement ‘a’ in the outline, above).

Interestingly enough, the interim step, too, very much like it was possible to demonstrate for the eruption scene, occurs almost precisely in the middle between two key points, namely the beginning of the poem and the eruption scene itself. Even if one were to adopt a rather sceptical frame of mind originally, as regards the position of the eruption scene in the very centre of the poem, one would have to admit it is even more unlikely to postulate mere coincidence, again, when encountering a second significant signpost situated at more or less precisely half-distance between the beginning of the poem and the exact centre.

What is to be observed within this given framework, however, is even more remarkable: both ‘windows’ contain two more or less discrete elements each, and in both cases they are interrelated and arranged in a parallel manner: the first internal corresponding pair, marked as movement ‘b’ in the outline, above, is the pair ‘Etna-related myth’ ~ ‘less valuable topics for didactic poetry’. Both segments are of roughly equal length, comprising just over 60 lines each (as far as one can tell, considering the somewhat peculiar state of textual transmission). Considering that these two ‘digressions’ have been subject to significant debate as regards their actual purpose within the *Aetna*,¹⁴ one will have to acknowledge that their being linked in terms of position and length must be meaningful to an extent as well as intentional.

The second half of the poem appears to be equally well structured. Without doing any significant force to the poem’s interpretation, it would seem fair to summarise its structure schematically as follows:

¹⁴ For a comprehensive discussion see Volk (2005a) with further references.

318-328	The eruption of Mt. Etna	
329-384	The volcanic winds, their workings and related periods of quiet	
385-456	Flammable and non-flammable materials in Mt. Etna's fires, including the peculiar <i>lapis molaris</i>	
457-509	Flow of lava and eruption	
510-567	<i>Lapis molaris</i> as fuel, its power, and some preliminary conclusions	
568-598	Tourism and sightseeing	
599-645	A believable myth (?): the <i>pii fratres</i> of Catania	

Again, it emerges reasonably quickly from the structural outline that the composition was handled with significant care and consideration. Just like before, in the first half (above), a clear framework is provided by the bracket that unites the poem's central (first) eruption with its end point, the final eruption and the role of the *pii fratres* in it. This overarching movement, just like before, finds additional support in its middle, in a scientific description of the flow of lava at *Aetna* 457-509, thus creating a coherent thematical design (marked as bipartite movement 'd' in the outline, above), firmly incorporating the final myth in the basic structure of the poem. Again, one cannot help but observe that the middle point of this movement 'd' also falls into the arithmetic middle of the second half of the poem.

Approaching the 'windows' left by this overarching framework, one again notices their filling with two thematic panels each, of approximately 50-60 lines (and again, one must be careful, considering the problematic state of the *constitutio textus* overall). What is different from the first half of the poem, however, is that instead of a parallel logic in the arrangement of the two sub-panels (b and c), now a chiasmic arrangement of these segments (e and f) was chosen.¹⁵

4. Signposting on Mt. Etna

So far, the argument has almost entirely been based on structural considerations. Even though the amassed evidence in itself is sufficiently strong to be reasonably confident about the findings, it is worth considering whether the poet himself gave any clues as to how to access, and how to appreciate, his composition. A promising starting point to unravel the artifice behind the composition of the *Aetna* may have been provided in the following lines from the final part of the poem, introducing the poet's final story,¹⁶ that of a miracle of salvation:

600 *haec uisenda putas terrae dubiusque marisque?*
 artificis naturae ingens opus aspice, nulla
 + *cum tanta humanis phoebus spectacula cernes,*

¹⁵ One must also note that the penultimate section (568-598), corresponds with the second of the initial sections in its overall logic, *Aetna* 29-93 (on worthless myths): the myths are worthless, as they fail to explore the deeper workings of the volcano's activities, whereas tourism is worthless, when it focuses on the wrong 'spectacles' to behold.

¹⁶ On this cf. most recently Santelia (2012).

*praecipueque uigil feruens ubi Sirius ardet.
insequitur miranda tamen sua fabula montem*

Do you think you have got to visit these things, swithering between land and sea? {600} Take a look at the immense handiwork of the artist Nature, . . . < . . . >¹⁷ and especially watchful, when fiery Sirius is burning. Yet the mountain has its own amazing legend (...).

(*Aetna* 600-604, transl. H. Hine)

The wording here is full of potentially suggestive terms. *Ingens opus aspice* ('take a look at the immense handiwork'), *artifex natura* ('artist Nature'),¹⁸ *uigil* ('watchful'), *miranda fabula* ('amazing legend'):¹⁹ all of this could well hint an attentive reader towards a more careful (re-)reading of the poem.²⁰

Somewhat more far-fetched, perhaps, yet not impossible to interpret as a metapoetical comment, is a passage only marginally later, drawing attention to the 'midst of the fire', from where, during one's escape from the eruption, one can seize whatever appears to be most valuable, while the fire itself vouches for the safety of such conduct:

630 *parcite, auara manus, dites attollere praedas:
illis diuitiae solae materque paterque,
hanc rapiunt praedam mediumque exire per ignem
ipso dante fidem properant. (...)*

You greedy crowd, stop carrying rich plunder: {630} their only riches were mother and father, this is the plunder they seize, and they hurry to escape through the midst of the fire, which itself grants them safe conduct.

¹⁷ Hine (2012: 324 with nt. 11) follows Goodyear (1965: 207) in the view that the subsequent passage means something along the lines of 'for you will not see such a spectacle amongst the works of men' and that there should be a *lacuna* 'before the enigmatic line 602'. This may be a lot less enigmatic, however, than assumed, when one considers the structure and the sophisticated system of internal references more carefully.

¹⁸ See below, section 5.

¹⁹ See below, section 4.2.

²⁰ A puzzling line that has not received any significant attention in this context so far is *Aetna* 603 and its mention of Sirius (*feruens ubi Sirius ardet*, 'when fiery Sirius is burning'). As *ubi* need not be a temporal pronoun, but can equally well be local, it is potentially interesting to consider just where fiery Sirius shone before in the *Aetna*. Almost unsurprisingly, Sirius is mentioned before, namely at *Aetna* 246, in the very passage 219-281 that suggests that some topics are less useful for didactic poetry than others, mentioning astronomy in a prominent position: *scire uias maris et caeli praediscere cursus / quo uolet Orion, quo Serius incubet index, / et quaecumque iacent tanto miracula mundo / non congesta pati nec acervu condita rerum, /²⁵⁰ sed manifesta notis certa disponere sede / singula, diuina est animi ac iucunda uoluptas. / sed prior haec homini cura est, cognoscere terram / quaeque in ea miranda tulit natura notare* ('knowing the paths of the sea and forecasting the motions of the heaven, where Orion is racing, where the warning sign of Sirius is brooding; in short, not allowing all the marvels that are found throughout this great universe to remain confused and buried in the mass of phenomena, but sorting them out individually, clearly identified, each in its proper place {250}—from all this the mind derives a divine, joyous pleasure. But a more urgent concern for humankind is this, to learn about the earth, and to observe the wonders that nature has produced in it [...]; *Aetna* 245-252, transl. H. Hine). Note how in this passage, too, the phrase *miranda* appears (*Aetna* 252), suggesting that humans should continue their quest for the marvellous and amazing, but to look for what is in front of their eyes rather than unreachable in the stars: an approach, that deeply resonates with the introductory *haec uisenda putas terrae dubiusque marisque* ('[d]o you think you have got to visit these things, swithering between land and sea') of line 600. Consequently, the poet's declaring the episode of the *pii fratres a mirandum* (of the earth!) rather than a mere myth, by definition (i) sets it apart from other myths that the poet so easily dismisses (*Aetna* 29-93) and (ii) makes it something that is eminently worthy of featuring in his didactic poem.

(*Aetna* 629-632, transl. H. Hine)

If it is justified, then, to assume that the poet himself drew attention to the poem's artifice and meaning that is hidden in the poem's structure, one must ask the following question: are the aforementioned passages merely random, throw-away comments that happen to coincide with observations that can be made otherwise, or is there a more robust structural framework at play, which can be brought to the fore through careful scrutiny?

4.1. *Etna in the Aetna*

The most promising way to answer this question might be to follow the poet's lead and to look at what 'artist Nature' has done, and to see where it has placed Mt. Etna itself²¹ – also with a view to provide some context and meaning to the earlier observation that the term *Aetna* featured prominently at the middle of the poem, just when the poetic Mt. Etna was erupting. Interestingly enough (and perhaps unsurprisingly), the spread of the term across the poem – in spite of its somewhat lacunose nature and unsatisfactory state of preservation – is rather significant. Working forward from the observation that the term features at the end of line 328 at the middle of the poem, it is worth to follow this lead and to observe the term's behaviour across the two halves of the poem – pre- and post-eruption.

In the pre-eruption part of the poem, there are seven mentions of *Aetna* (*Aetna* 1. 71. 93. 177. 197. 201. 300) and two of the pertaining adjective *Aetnaeus* (*Aetna* 41. 274).

Of the seven instances of *Aetna* as a noun, two instances stand out immediately: *Aetna* as the first word of the poem's first line (*Aetna* 1) and *Aetna*, again as the first word, at the precise opening of the first half's central movement 177-218 (titled 'Mt. Etna is a clear example for the porous nature of the earth and demonstrably has the exact right structure to enable volcanic flow' in the diagram of section 3, above) – a movement that commences as close as possible to the very centre of the first half. In other words, of the eight mentions of *Aetna* up to, and inclusive of line 328, three instances are found in undisputable key positions – positions that, incidentally, also correspond well to a well-balanced and well-thought-out structure, *viz.* the beginning, the middle, and the first quarter of the poem.

As far as the remaining instances are concerned, one must observe the following (by order of internal chronology):

- Two instances (41 [*Aetnaeus*] and 71) feature in the third and longest of the initial myths that the poet wishes to discard as mere fiction, the former of which at the centre of its opening line.
- One instance (93) features at the precise end of section 29-93, which is concerned with 'myths surrounding Mt. Etna and falsehood of the poets' (see the diagram, above, section 3), thus marking yet another crucial point in the poem's structure, where the poet decides to move away from the falsehood of the myth towards an explanation of his own approach. Incidentally, this instance features at what can be explained as roughly the precise middle of the first quarter of the poem, marking the first one-eighth of it.

²¹ This is a slightly different take on this matter than e. g. pursued by Wolff (2004), whose characterisation of Mt. Etna's presentation in the poem as a combination of a creation of nature and a monstrous creature offers a number of interesting readings.

- The remaining four instances (197. 201. 274. 300) seem to appear at less prominent positions, structurally speaking. They are indicative of something else, however: in all four cases, the poet has dropped the mountain's name in the context of the mountain's acoustic features, while the eruption comes closer.

So far, an image of careful planning and internal organisation has emerged.

The picture seems to change somewhat in the second half of the poem (though it is presumably all too convenient to get carried away with a metaphor and suggest that the poet's planning went downhill). In the post-eruption part of the *Aetna*, there are ten mentions of *Aetna* (*Aetna* 337. 340. 386. 392. 400. 433. 450. 556. 565. 605) and one of the pertaining adjective *Aetnaeus* (*Aetna* 443).

Of the eleven mentions of *Aetna* and *Aetnaeus*, respectively, only three are at least close to positions that one may regard as significant: *Aetna* 386 features at the end of the two-line opening of section 385–456, introducing the second half's major theme of the mountain's fuels and the *lapis molaris*. In that regard, it fulfils a similar structural function as some of the earlier instances in the first half, if marginally less conspicuously placed.

The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the instances in *Aetna* 565 and 605. *Aetna* 565–567 contain the poem's preliminary conclusion, as indicated in the structural overview, above (section 3). The three-line summary of it opens with the words *haec operis summa est, sic nobilis uritur Aetna* ('This is the essence of the process, this is how famous Etna burns'), with *Aetna* in a prominent verse- and sentence-final position at this point – just not at the very end of the entire segment of which it forms part. *Aetna* 605, too, is an important turning point, as it opens the actual narrative of the eruption during which the *pii fratres* achieved their acclaim (*nam quondam ruptis excanduit Aetna cateruis* '[o]nce Etna burst open its caverns and burned with a white heat') – except, that the poet had already begun his overall narrative several lines earlier, at *Aetna* 599. A sense of dissolution and deconstruction in the post-eruption phase of the poem, as noticed merely by focusing on the spread of the term *Aetna*, persists – the theme is still the same, but there is a noticeable key change, and this may not be accidental after all.

This leaves eight instances to be explained independently (again in chronological order according to their appearance in the poem):

- The first two instances, *Aetna* 337 and 340 feature in the section that discusses the principle of the volcanic winds, and both relate to visual features of Mt. Etna.
- The next five instances – after the aforementioned, opening one at *Aetna* 386 – are to be found in the poet's discussion of what fuels Mt. Etna: *Aetna* 392. 400. 433. 443. 450. They all clearly relate to Mt. Etna's material features and powerful composition.
- The final instance (followed by the two sign-posting ones that were discussed above, *Aetna* 565 and 605), at *Aetna* 556 extols the mountain's machinery as incomparable to that developed by men.

The thematic clustering around the instances of name-dropping – in addition to the structurally relevant ones – continues without a fault.

All of the above observations confirm the initial impression that the poet of the *Aetna* has composed his poem with the utmost care and great attention to detail, as far as structure and verbal sign-posting are concerned. At the same time, as far as the minor shifts in straightforwardness are concerned, it is indeed tempting to think of a verbal and structural imagination of unobstructed ascent and turbulent descent or, alternatively, of pressure building up steadily, only to be released suddenly and with

abandon of order and organisation.²² Whichever movement seems more appealing to imagine, their arrangement around the focal point of the central (first) eruption cannot be denied.

4.2. *fabula in the fabula, carmen in the carmen*

The poet's desire to equip his work with an intelligent, meaningful formal design, supporting its meaning in manifold ways, is not restricted to the placement of the term *Aetna* (or the adjective *Aetnaeus*). At the beginning of section 4, above, the passage *Aetna* 600-604 was discussed, a passage that contains the (from the point of a meta-narrative) remarkable term *fabula* at line 603: *insequitur miranda tamen sua fabula montem* ('[y]et the mountain has its own amazing legend'). The structurally and cross-referentially relevant term *miranda* has already been highlighted. But what about the potentially literary term *fabula*?

The term, used with an unambiguously positive connotation at line 603, features four times altogether: in addition to the already mentioned instance, it occurs at *Aetna* 23, 42, and 511. The positive connotation of *fabula* is, of course, not a universal one in the poem – in fact, already its first instance is highly sceptical:

quicquid et antiquum iactata est fabula carmen

whatever old theme of the poets has now become a hackneyed tale

(*Aetna* 23, transl. H. Hine)

– an instance that sets the tone for what is to follow, namely the first major movement of the poem, the dismissal of certain Etna-related myths. Similarly, the term's next occurrence, just at the opening of the third (and longest) of the three mythical stories that the poet of the *Aetna* chooses to dismiss as mere fabrications²³ – a passage that also contains one of the structurally relevant mentions of the term *Aetnaeus*.²⁴

*proxima uiuaces Aetnaei uerticis ignes
impia sollicitat Phlegraeis fabula castris.*

Next the long-lived fires of Etna's summit are deseccated by a sacrilegious fable about the battlefield of Phlegra.

(*Aetna* 41-42, transl. H. Hine)

'Deseccated', as Hine translates, may be a bit too strong – but certainly the *fabula* is a bothersome one (*sollicitat*).

Fabula is mentioned one more time (before its final occurrence at *Aetna* 603), and here too the *fabula* is both bothersome as well as mentioned at a prominent

²² Note how this is counterbalanced by the chiasmic vs. parallel arrangements of themes across the two main parts of the poem in the grander structure, above, section 3.

²³ This has often been explained as a mere *recusatio*, following the lead of Vergil's *Georgics* and Manilius' *Astronomica*, cf. e. g. Volk (2005b: 169–171) (with useful observations on a number of related lines) and, rather more trenchantly and wholesale, Schindler (2005: 193-194 [with nt. 5]. 201. This view oversimplifies matters slightly, however, as it fails to make a positive argument built on these elements' inclusion as well as their specific gist.

²⁴ See above, section 4.1.

position within the narrative, namely at the opening of the 510-567 movement related to the peculiar *lapis molaris* as the Etna's outstanding fuel:

510 *sed frustra certis disponere singula causis
temptamus, si firma manet tibi fabula mendax,
materiam ut credas aliam fluere igne, nec una
flumina proprietate simul condescere, siue
commixtum lento flagrare bitumine sulphur.*

But my attempt to explain each phenomenon by fixed causes is fruitless if you remain firmly attached to a deceptive story, believing that another fuel is melted by the fire, and that streams of different sorts solidify, or that what is burning is sulphur mixed with thick bitumen.

(*Aetna* 510-514, transl. H. Hine)

Interestingly enough, however, *fabula*, folklore, in the view of the poet requires qualification as *impia* (*Aetna* 42) or *mendax* (*Aetna* 511) for it to become unambiguously critical and problematic. What is even more interesting, however, is the link made at *Aetna* 23 between *fabula* on the one hand and *carmen* on the other – which gives reason to examine the use of the term *carmen* throughout the work as well.

There are thirteen instances of *carmen* in the *Aetna*. Their spread across the various segments of the poem, however is anything but even:

- Four instances feature in the prooemium: *Aetna* 4 (*bis*). 23. 28.
- Four instances feature in the section that discusses objectionable myths: *Aetna* 40. 75. 77. 91.
- A single instance features in the section that discusses the flow of air and pressure within the volcanic system: *Aetna* 296.
- Three instances feature in the section that discusses objectionable tourism: *Aetna* 576. 582. 585.
- A single instance features in the poem's final section on the *pii fratres*: *Aetna* 642.

This gives nine out of thirteen instances in the first half of the poem, with eight of them in the prooemium (4) and the passage on myth and poetic licence (4), while three of the four remaining occurrences cluster up in the section about tourism (which, in a number of ways, is a structural counterpart to the myth section of the first half).

As far as the prooemium is concerned, one must notice that the term *carmen* has been used to provide a structural bracket, denoting beginning and end of this segment (in addition to the ambiguous use at *Aetna* 23, which has just been discussed). The poem's very first sentence uses the term at its emphatic end, a theme that gets reinforced straight away in the next sentence when the poet invokes Apollo's support.²⁵

*Aetna mihi ruptique cauis fornacibus ignes
et quae tam fortes uoluant incendia causae,
quid fremat imperium, quid raucos torqueat aestus,
carmen erit. dexter uenias mihi carminis auctor,
(...)*

²⁵ On the prooemium in particular cf. de Vivo (1985) and (1992).

Etna, and the fires that break out from its hollow furnaces, will be my song—what are the causes that so powerfully send conflagrations billowing out, what it is that protests loudly at authority, what produces the swirling, roaring heat. Come, support me, inspire my song, (...).

(*Aetna* 1-4, transl. H. Hine)

The far end of this structural bracket can be found in the prooemium's final line:

25 *fortius ignotas molimur pectore curas:*
 qui tanto motus operi, quae tanta perenni
 explicet in densum flammis et truat ab imo
 ingenti sonitu moles et proxima quaeque
 ignibus irriguis urat, mens carminis haec est.

My mind, with greater courage, labours at unfamiliar subjects: {25} what is it that sets such mighty events in motion, what great <force(?)> . . . > endless <. . .> spreads out flames densely and thrusts great masses up from below with a mighty noise, and burns everything nearby with floods of fire – that is the purpose of my song.

(*Aetna* 24-28, transl. H. Hine)

The intellectual opposite of this type of song is alluded to at another prominent structural position of the *Aetna*, namely in the line that both immediately precedes *Aetna* 41-42 (discussed above, in the *fabula* section) and that concludes the second of the three objectionable myths surrounding Mt. Etna – the story of the Cyclopes, which the poet quickly dismisses as *turpe et sine pignore carmen* ('a discreditable song with no warrant'), before he moves on to the final *impia ... fabula*, the folklore about the giants.

The inherent issue here is, of course, the old, Platonic one – the eternal struggle of the poets vs. the truth, and the poet of the *Aetna*, after he has completed his attempt at the mythical explanation, chooses to reflect on this topic at slightly greater length (if in a passage that, for a number of reasons, has been subject to extensive textual criticism):

75 *haec est mendosae uulgata licentia famae.*
 uatibus ingenium est, hinc audit nobile carmen
 + plurima pars scenae rerum est fallacia uates
 sub terris nigros uiderunt carmine manes
 atque inter cineres Ditis pallentia regna
 + mentiti uates Stygias undasque canentes.

Such is the poetic licence that gives wide currency to a false story. {75} Poets have talent (*hence noble poetry is very daring, its misrepresentation of facts is like the stage*), poets in their song have seen the dark spirits of the departed beneath the earth and the pale kingdom of Dis among the dead, and have told lies about the Stygian boat and the boiling waves.

(*Aetna* 74-79, transl. H. Hine)

Marking the poet's transition from mythical explanations to scientific method, the passage fulfils a key role within the narrative of the *Aetna*, and the cluster of instances for *carmen* (*Aetna* 75. 77), alongside the term for poet (*uates*, 75. 76. 79)²⁶ and

²⁶ Further on *uates* in the *Aetna*, see below.

singing (*canere*, 79)²⁷ is an eminently charged one, not just from a content-related point of view. Unsurprisingly, the term reprises at the end of the entire section, to set the poet of the *Aetna* apart from others – with an interesting twist regarding the issue of poetic liberty.²⁸

*debita carminibus libertas ista, sed omnis
in uero mihi cura: canam quo feruida motu
aestuēt Aetna nouosque rapax sibi congerat ignes.*

Poetry has a claim to that sort of freedom, but my only concern is for the truth: I shall sing of the process by which Etna seethes and boils and rapaciously amasses fresh fires for itself.

(*Aetna* 91-93, transl. H. Hine)

The single most intriguing mention of *carmen* in the *Aetna*, however, is the one that follows next, namely that in the passage that discusses the principles of air flow and pressure within the volcanic system – a passage that also contains one of the conspicuous mentions of *Aetna* in the context of the acoustic features of the mountain.²⁹

295 *nam, ueluti sonat + ora duc + Tritone canoro
(pellit opus collectus aquae uictusque moueri
spiritus et longas emugit bucina uoces)
carminēque irriguo magnis cortina theatris
imparibus numerosa modis canit arte regentis,
quae tenuem impellens animam subremigat unda,
haud aliter summota furens torrentibus aura
300 pugnat in angusto et magnum commurmurat Aetna.*

for, just as . . . sounds with a singing³⁰ Triton (the reservoir of water and the air that is forced into motion drive the mechanism, {295} and the trumpet blares out its long note), and just as in large theatres, the organ sings its hydraulic song, playing melodies with its pipes of different length, through the player's skill, which makes a rowing movement in the water and thus sets the gentle current of air in motion, in just the same way the wind, displaced by torrents of water, rages and {300} fights in its narrow confines, and Etna roars loudly.

(*Aetna* 293-300, transl. H. Hine)

In a remarkable simile, the poet compares the ambient noise of volcanic activity (as well as its production) to the ways in which musical sound is produced and amplified.³¹ In particular, the sound (as well as the way in which it comes about) reminded the poet of the raucous, monotonous sounds produced by the water organ

²⁷ Further instances of *canere* are to be found at *Aetna* 83. 92. 297, meaning that all instances are, in fact, positioned in passages that have already been highlighted as particularly meaningful in terms of form and structure.

²⁸ *Libertas* as opposed to poetic *licentia*, which had just received a scolding at *Aetna* 74.

²⁹ Cf. above, section 4.1.

³⁰ The term used here in the Latin is *canorus*, which is used twice more – on both occasions in the tourism part of the poem, namely at *Aetna* 574 and 586, supposing an alluring (if potentially misleading) nature of song and voice. This further underlines the observation that *carmen* and its cognates have been used especially carefully and thoughtfully by the poet of the *Aetna*, as it adds to the semantic brackets that have been used to link form and meaning across the poem.

³¹ On the use of similes in Latin didactic poetry (especially on Lucretius, Vergil, and Manilius) cf. Schindler 2000, who does not, however, comment on this passage in particular.

that was used in the Roman theatre.³² Acoustically, the poet thus sets the scene for the imminent eruption – setting up nature and its volcano as an artist at work,³³ providing the ambient noise (or rather: background music) for the spectacle to come.

The final cluster of instances for *carmen* is to be found in the passage that concerns itself with objectionable forms of tourism, just before the poem's final movement, the myth about the *pii fratres*. Here, the poet mentions two destinations (Thebes and Athens) that have attracted tourists due to their immortalisation in (myth-related) song³⁴ – a clear continuation of the falsehood-of-myth theme that the poet had introduced in the structurally interrelated initial myth section of his work.

And then there is there is the good kind of myth that gets immortalised through poetry – the story of the pious brothers of Catania, which, together with the *Aetna* poem itself, finds its conclusion in the following sentence, which does not only bring back, for one final time, the *carmina* and their *uates*, but also the notion of *miranda*, which had provided a starting point for this entire line of investigation:

(...) *illos mirantur carmina uatum,*
illos seposuit claro sub nomine Ditis,
nec sanctos iuuenes attingunt sordida fata:
 645 *securae cessere domus et iura piorum.*

Poets' songs celebrate them, Dis has assigned them a special place and a glorious name, and the destiny of the sacred youths is no ordinary one: {645} they have gained dwellings free from care, and the rewards due to the pious.

(*Aetna* 642-645, transl. H. Hine)

5. Instead of a Conclusion: *Ars and Artifex*

One final aspect that has not yet received sufficient attention, despite its lurking presence in the passages that have been discussed so far, is the wider issue of art, artifice, and greatness of mind. An initial need to consider this had already been identified when discussing the phrase *artificis naturae ingens opus aspice* ('Take a look at the immense handiwork of the artist Nature', *Aetna* 601), as mentioned above, at the opening of section 4. The evidence for *uates*, however, as provided e. g. by the passage 642-645 just now, adds to the need to investigate this semantic field somewhat further. This requires further looking into two essential areas and analysing all the instances of relevant key terms: (i) the nouns that denote producers of art, and finally (ii) the term 'art' itself.

Beginning with the two nouns that denote agents of artwork, *artifex* and *uates*, one must note – if with little surprise – a very uneven spread of these terms across the poem. The following clusters emerge, as arranged by the section into which they fall (using the labels that were introduced in section 3, above):

- 'Myths surrounding Mt. Etna and falsehood of the poets' (29-93): *Aetna* 35 (*artifex*). 29. 36. 75. 76. 79 (*uates*).

³² Note that this is the poet's second reference to theatre and drama – now a decidedly positive one, as opposed to the critical one at *Aetna* 76, mentioned above in the context of the falseness-of-the-poets theme.

³³ On the *artifex natura* theme, introduced at *Aetna* 601, see below, section 5.

³⁴ *Aetna* 576. 582. 585.

- ‘Mt. Etna is a clear example for the porous nature of the earth’ (177-218): *Aetna* 188 (*artifex*).
- ‘A believable myth (?): the *pii fratres* of Catania’ (599-645): *Aetna* 600 (*artifex*). 642 (*uates*).

Of these instances, the three attestations of *artifex* stand out. The term first occurs at the end of the first myth – or rather: *fallacia uatum* (deceptions of the poets, *Aetna* 29) regarding Mt. Etna that the poet wishes to dispel, namely the folk tale that Etna was, in fact, Vulcanus’ workshop – a divine forge:

(...) *non est tam sordida diuis*
cura neque extremas ius est demittere in artes
sidera: subducto regnant sublimia caelo
 35 *illa neque artificum curant tractare laborem:*

The gods do not have such sordid occupations, nor is it right to demote the stars to the humblest crafts: they reign on high in the remote heavens {35} and do not contemplate engaging in the work of craftsmen.

(*Aetna* 32-35, transl. H. Hine)

Yet, while the gods may have the prerogative not to debase themselves with craftsmanship, there clearly is nothing wrong with the occupation of an *artifex* as such, as the poet points out some 150 lines later, when he discusses the composition of the earth:

nunc opus artificem incendi causamque reposcit,
 + *non illam paruo aut tenui discrimine signis*
 190 + *mille sub exiguo ponent tibi tempora uera.*

Now my project seeks to know the agent and the cause of the fire. You may observe it without relying on small or subtle distinctions.

(*Aetna* 188-190, transl. H. Hine)

Hine’s translation renders *artificem* as ‘the agent’, thus concealing somewhat the poet’s deliberate expression behind a rather technical term. The *artifex* behind all this – behind the mountain’s forge (note the reference to the blacksmith’s workshop in *quis mirandus tantae faber imperet arti*, *Aetna* 198) – is, of course, nature herself and her use of volcanic winds, and it is precisely this concept of *artifex* that prevails in the term’s final instance at *Aetna* 642, as discussed above. This, in its essence, offers a reconciliation of the Aristotelian dichotomy of nature (φύσις, *natura*) and art (τέχνη, *ars*),³⁵ without reverting to a Platonic model in which nature is an artwork set in motion by a maker extrinsic.³⁶ This is an interesting addition, of course, to the prevailing discourse about the poet’s general stance on science and philosophy, as commonly discussed in the context of the *Aetna*.³⁷

The instances of *uates*, however, remain all potentially or evidently negative – emphasising the (other!) poets’ readiness to misrepresent or to focus on the unimportant: all, except the final instance at *Aetna* 642.

So why write a poem, why be a *uates*? Moving on to the instances for *ars*, an

³⁵ Arist. *Ph.* 2.8 199a11-15 and *passim*.

³⁶ Pl. *Ti.* 28a2. 28c5. Further on this issue see e. g. Lang (1998), *passim*.

³⁷ Cf. e. g. Goodyear (1984), Lassandro (1993), Pingoud (2008).

answer to these questions potentially lies in that very blacksmith's workshop that was already alluded to – a passage, that – by means of name-dropping – introduces the sequence of allusions to *Aetna*'s acoustic features.³⁸

*nec tamen est dubium penitus quid torqueat Aetnam,
aut quis mirandus tantae faber imperet arti.*

But there is no doubt about what tortures Etna deep below ground, or who the amazing craftsman is who commands such great skill.

(*Aetna* 197-198, transl. H. Hine)

It is, of course the person who provides the sound of the *Aetna* who is also the *faber* who *tantae ... imperet arti*, even if that potentially implies *extremas ... demittere in artes / sidera*, 'to demote the stars to the humblest crafts' (see above, *Aetna* 33-34). Yet, *implendus sibi quisque bonis est artibus* ('[e]veryone ought to immerse himself in the noble arts: they are the mind's harvest', *Aetna* 270).

It is hardly coincidental, of course, that a metapoetic comment arises from a passage that, when following the signposts provided through mentions of the very name *Aetna* itself, introduces the theme of sound as related to Mt. Etna.³⁹ This must, of course, be combined with the final mention of *ars* in the *Aetna*, at line 297, in the context of the highly significant passage that likens the sound production of Mt. Etna to that of musical instruments (as discussed above).⁴⁰

300 *carminaque irriguo magnis cortina theatris
imparibus numerosa modis canit arte regentis,
quae tenuem impellens animam subremigat unda,
haud aliter summota furens torrentibus aura
pugnat in angusto et magnum commurmurat Aetna.*

and just as in large theatres, the organ sings its hydraulic song, playing melodies with its pipes of different length, through the player's skill, which makes a rowing movement in the water and thus sets the gentle current of air in motion, in just the same way the wind, displaced by torrents of water, rages and {300} fights in its narrow confines, and Etna roars loudly.

(*Aetna* 296-300, transl. H. Hine)

It is not just the artist's skill that commands the *Aetna*, but it is the artist's skill that makes the mountain resound and eventually even erupt when enough pressure has built up.

Horace famously said that *aut prodesse uolunt aut delectare poetae*, 'either to be useful or to entertain, that is what the poets desire'.⁴¹ Little – too little – has been done to challenge the exclusive nature of the *aut ... aut* construction, as far as Latin poetry is concerned, and with didactic poetry in particular, there is a readiness to assume that the emphasis is decidedly on the *prodesse* rather than on the *delectare*: a truly absurd idea.⁴² The poet of the *Aetna* has been discussed and praised for his

³⁸ See above, section 4.1.

³⁹ See above, section 4.1.

⁴⁰ See above, section 4.1.

⁴¹ Hor. *ars* 333.

⁴² There are exceptions to the rule, of course, and more recent scholarship – one must mention the excellent book of Volk 2002 in particular – has taken remedial action to address this issue. For a discussion of this topic based on the fragments of Roman republican didactic poetry see Kruschwitz 2005.

interests in nature, volcanism, science, and philosophy. What has largely remained lacking so far is acknowledgement of his skills as a poet – for his ability to create artifice, an imagined universe, and to master form and content alike. Recent contributions by Katharina Volk (2005a) and Liba Taub (2008) have suggested that it is time to rethink this matter.

The present paper hopes to have made it clear just how carefully and deliberately the poet of the *Aetna* has gone about a poetic design of his work. It is based on a complex concept of *natura*, *ars*, and it hopes to impress just what a poet can achieve if he focuses on the *miranda* rather than merely promoting (what the poet of the *Aetna* regarded as) shallow or futile subjects, and if he provides sufficient clues to reveal the artwork (or handiwork) that, as a powerful source, lies behind, fuels, and shapes nature.

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