



Silenus on the Universe: Philosophy and Cosmogony in Virgil's *Eclogue 6*¹

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Abstract: *Eclogue 6* of the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BC) is one of the most famous poems in Latin pastoral poetry. It has an individuality of its own. In this poem, Virgil, as a poet with a sophisticated and philosophical mentality, forms a new kind of pastoral poetry. He merely employed the pastoral genre as a frame to allow him to touch upon intellectual, philosophical and literary subjects of the day.

Silenus, who was one of the old rural deities, is here the bard of Virgil's song. He could surpass Apollo and Orpheus by his charming song. There is not one common theme in all the stories Silenus touches upon in his song.

The song starts with a non-pastoral context, a piece of Epicurean philosophy, which reveals Virgil's early and real interest in philosophy. Then it moves from didactic description to human race and mythology. What concerns me in this paper is Silenus' talk about the origin of the universe (*Eclogue 6. 31-40*), the creation of the world, and the beginnings of life, with echoes of scientific poetry. In order to gain a better understanding of Virgil's poetry in general, and the song of Silenus as a particular, not only a knowledge of philosophy and cosmology is essential, but also a perception of

¹ -This paper was read at the 5th Conference of the School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, on "Philosophy and Cosmology", in the occasion of the 2400th birthday of Aristotle, 18-20 October 2016. I would like to thank the organizers of the Conference for the kind invitation. I am grateful to the audience for their interaction and enlightening discussions.

Alexandria as a centre of sciences. I give Virgil credit for a real interest in Alexandria, both as a matter of poetical technique, and as sharing the scientific interests of Hellenistic Alexandria.

KEYWORDS:

Silenus, *Eclogues*, Empedocles, Epicurean philosophy, Lucretius, Hellenistic Alexandria, cosmology and cosmogony.

The Roman poet Virgil was one of the best, if not the best ever, of all Roman poets, his words always mean much more than they say. At the Roman Empire, Virgil was one of the four central authors (*quadrigae*) who constituted the basis of Roman education. The other three were Cicero (106-43 BC), Terence (c.195-c.159 BC), and Sallust (c.86-35/34 BC).²

Virgil's works reflect his early interest in philosophy, which he adapted to his own poetical talents. According to Donatus (*Vita Vergilii*, 79), Virgil was the pupil of the Epicurean philosopher Siro, who lived in Naples and flourished about 50 BC.³ Cicero considered Siro, along with the Greek poet and Epicurean philosopher Philodemus (c.110-c.35 BC), as being "excellent citizens and most learned men" (*De Finibus*. 2.35).

According to the Roman biographer Suetonius (AD c. 69- c. 122), Virgil, after finishing writing his epic the *Aeneid*, decided to devote the rest of his life studying philosophy (*Vita Vergilii*, 35). Virgil's intense appeal to Philosophy is unquestionable.⁴ That is why Virgil is most convenient for talking about philosophical poetry.

My preoccupation with Virgil's *Eclogue* 6 dates back to the 1990s, when I treated Virgil's artistry and poetics of Roman Alexandrianism in this very *Eclogue*.⁵ In my present paper I am concerned with the cosmogony episode in the song of Silenus.

² -Kallendorf (2015) 60.

³ -In *Catalepton* 5, one of the minor poems in the collection of *Appendix Vergiliana*, ascribed to Virgil, the author mentions that he is seeking peace in the company of Siro. Rieu (1972) 8, states correctly that there is good reason for believing that the impulse which produced the *Eclogues* was the outcome of this prolonged period of philosophic study and of the literary contacts it afforded.

⁴ -For the ancient sources that mentioned Virgil as philosopher and compendium of knowledge, see Ziolkowski and Putnam (2008) 463-464. For a discussion of Virgil's reputation as a particularly philosophical poet, see Farrell (2014) 61-90.

⁵ -See El-Nowieemy (1995) 1-25.

Virgil introduces the shepherd Tityrus to be the addressee of the first lines of *Eclogue* 6.⁶ After a literary introduction of twelve lines, in which Virgil announces his credo of poetics through literary allusions to Alexandrian poetry, Silenus appears. It has always been a matter of debate why Silenus appears in *Eclogue* 6. Silenus is one of the minor rustic gods, the Satyrs. He was an attendant of Dionysus (Bacchus),⁷ the god of wine, that is why Silenus is always portrayed drunk.⁸ Ostensibly the serious theme of the cosmogony episode might not seem relevant to Silenus' character,⁹ but if we put in mind that Dionysus was not only the god of wine but also the introducer of civilization to humanity, it is natural to find Silenus both drunken and a learned god.¹⁰

If we trust the story which the 4th century AD commentator and grammarian Servius (ad 13 and 26) told us, we may account for the presence of Silenus in *Eclogue* 6. Servius said that the Hellenistic Historian Theopompus of Chios (c. 378-c. 320 BC), wrote a work entitled *Thaumasia* ("Marvels"), in which the drunk Silenus is caught by shepherds of king Midas of Phrygia, when questioned, Silenus unmasked "things natural and of old" (*de rebus naturalibus et antiquis*).

It is likely that Virgil knew Theopompus' *Marvels*, and that it inspired him to cast Silenus in the role of *vates* i.e. "prophet-poet",¹¹ especially that Virgil in *Eclogue* 6 relates how two shepherds caught Silenus asleep in his cave, and asked him to sing a song,¹² as we shall see. The song contains the account of the creation, to which

⁶ -Thomas (1999) 291-296, refused the traditional view that Tityrus is simply an alternative name for the poet in *Eclogue* 6. He argues convincingly that the poem is the narration of a "shepherd", Tityrus. For a detailed discussion of the identification of Virgil with Tityrus, see Hahn (1944) 196-241, esp. 220-226. Cf. Coleman (1986) 176. Whether Tityrus is meant to be the poet or a shepherd, this does not affect my argument here concerning the song of Silenus.

⁷ -According to Diodorus of Sicily (4.4.3), when Dionysus went abroad in his civilizing journey, he was accompanied by Silenus who was his instructor and contributed greatly to Dionysus' achievements and fame. In such a way, Silenus was indirectly a contributor to mankind civilization.

⁸ -For more details on Silenus, see for example Putnam (1970) 201-203.

⁹ -Silenus' main interests are wine and women. Nevertheless, Cicero connected Silenus with moral wisdom (*Tusculanae Disputationes*, I. 48. 114). For the association of Silenus with wisdom, see Notopoulos (1967) 308-309, esp. 309, who confirms the likening of Socrates' appearance to Silenus, as has been noted by Stewart (1959).

¹⁰ -See above n. 7. Putnam (1970) 202, thinks that Silenus as the intellectual father of a god (Bacchus) who helped the world advance from a state of sylvan rusticity, holds a didactic role in the myth of culture's development.

¹¹ -Putnam (1970) 201, argues that Silenus' chief function in *Eclogue* 6 is to be a *vates*, a prophet cognizant of the past and future, who must be tamed before he is willing to impart his knowledge. See the discussion by Hardie (1986) 16-22, of the notion that the *vates* is qualified to sing of the secrets of the universe, of cosmology. Cf. the argument of Uhlfelder (1966) 583-595, esp. 584-586 concerning the relationship of man to the cosmos in the power of speech as a mark of man's uniqueness; Burkert (1999) 103.

¹² -See Servius, comment on *Ecl.* 6.11. Elder (1961) 109-125, esp. 215, remarks that Virgil sings Silenus' song which ought to be called "Virgil's song of Silenus", and that the song was originally Apollo's song. See the discussion by Hight (1974) 24-25, following the Donatus life of Virgil that the

Theopompus' statement could be applied: Silenus unmasked "things natural and of old".¹³

Virgil talks about the two young shepherds, Chromis and Mnasyllus, who with the help of the nymph Aegle, playfully bind the drunken Silenus while asleep:¹⁴

.....Chromis et Mnasyllus in antro
 Silenum pueri somno videre iacentem,
 inflatum hesterno venas, ut simper, Iaccho;
 serta procul tantum capiti delapsa iacebant,
 et gravis attrita pendebat cantharus ansa.
 Adgressi (nam saepe senex spe carminis ambo
 luserat) iniciunt ipsis ex vincula sertis.

(*Eclogue 6*, 13-19)

"Young Chromis and Mnasyllus came upon Silenus lying asleep in a cave, and flushed, as usual, with yesterday's wine. The garlands had slipped off his head, but they lay there close beside it, and his heavy tankard hung by its handle from the fingers that had worn it thin. They closed with him (for the old man had often raised false hopes in both of them by promising to sing), and tied him up in the very garlands he had worn."

(trans. E. V. Rieu, 1972)

In return of his freedom, Silenus agrees to sing a song as a reward to the boys, and another reward is playfully promised to the most beautiful nymph, Aegle (*Eclogue 6*, 25-26). Servius (on *Eclogue 6.1*)) claimed that Siro, the Epicurean philosopher, was commemorated in Virgil's *Eclogue 6* as the character Silenus, the

Bucolics were publicly recited, or chanted, or sung, in theatres during Virgil's lifetime. He believes that *Eclogue 6* is a case in point. Cf. Rieu (1972) 9, who took it for granted that the *Eclogues* were even recited or sung in the theatre. On the performances of the *Eclogues*, see also Ziolkowski and Putnam (2008) 164-165.

¹³ -Notopoulos (1967) 308-309, esp. 309, explains briefly that in none of the ancient sources, Silenus is a scientist so that Virgil could use this persona to sing of his interest in Epicurean science. He adds that for a fuller understanding of Virgil's Silenus we must go to the Greek Satyr plays of the fifth century which happened to be of interest to the Augustan poets. In a papyrus fragment (*Oxyrynchus papyri* 8, 1911, no. 1083), as Notopoulos suggests, we have the only palimpsest for Virgil's Silenus as scientist.

¹⁴ -Quotations and all references to the text of Virgil's *Eclogue 6*, as well as the translations are that of Rieu's Penguin Classics edition (1972).

two shepherds were Virgil and his friend Varus,¹⁵ the dedicatee of the poem, and Aegle was the Epicurean doctrine of *voluptas*. I find the identification of Siro with Silenus unconvincing.¹⁶ How could this lustful, drunken creature represent the philosopher Siro? It is as much hard to me to believe that Silenus' myths that come after the creation episode are the counterpart of Siro's philosophical themes. *Eclogue* 6, as far as I can see, is neither ironical nor satirical.

However, it is hard to expect anything serious from Silenus who is traditionally known for his sexual instincts, and after the amusing way of his capture, the creation passage is far from being parody of Siro by being put into Silenus' mouth.

As soon as Silenus starts his song, fauns, wild beasts and trees are moved by his song:

.....Simul incipit ipse.
tum vero in numerum Faunosque ferasque videres
ludere, tum rigidas motare cacumina quercus;
(*Eclogue* 6, 26-28)

".....Then he began to sing, with no more said.
And now a miracle- you might have seen the
Fauns and the wild creatures dance lightly to the
tune and stubborn oak-trees wave their heads.

(trans. E. V. Rieu, 1972)

The characteristics which were traditionally attributed to both Apollo and Orpheus in music and song are now conferred on Silenus:

nec tantum Phoebe gaudet Parnasia rupes,
nec tantum Rhodope miratur et Ismarus Orphea.
(*Eclogue* 6, 29-30)

"Rocky Parnassus is not so deeply moved by the
music of Apollo; Ismarus and Rhodope have never

¹⁵ -Ostensibly *Ecl.* 6 is dedicated to Varus, seemingly a friend of the poet. For arguments on the question of who Varus was, see Hahn (1944) 196-241, esp. 196, 233-236; Williams, G. (1968) 243; Williams, R. D. (1987) 114; El-Nowieemy (1995) 1-25, esp. 18, n. 5.

¹⁶ -Hahn (1944) 196-241, esp. 218-219, following Servius suggestion, identifies Siro with Silenus basing his view on several points which are not convincing to me: 1-the two names, Silenus and Siro, begin with the same sound, 2- the one occurrence of Silenus' name in this *Ecl.* (v. 14) is in the form Silenum, the single case in which the two names also end with the same sound as well as being metrical equivalents. Hahn advances in favour of this view proposing that Chromis and Mnasyllus (the two shepherds who bind Silenus) are Varus and Virgil (students of Siro).

known such ecstasy when Orpheus sang."

(trans. E. V. Rieu, 1972)

Silenus, that lustful creature, could surpass Apollo and Orpheus by his charming song. The mention of Orpheus' name calls to the mind of the reader the cosmogony in Orpheus' song in the *Argonautica* (I. 496-502) of Apollonius Rhodius (3rd century BC), which Virgil undoubtedly had in mind.

As for the subject matter of Silenus' song, Virgil shifts his focus from the pastoral to cosmology and scientific elements.¹⁷ This leads us to mention Virgil's "Cosmic Sense". This term was first used in 1954 by Pierre Boyance, and ever since it has been used by scholars.¹⁸ This term refers to Virgil's uses of cosmological material in his poetry, and to his uses of allegorical adaptations of mythology to his view of the universe, as he did in the song of Silenus that will be discussed below.

The song of Silenus is noticeably divided into two sections:

First: The creation of the world, "cosmogony in miniature".¹⁹

Second: Allusive references in the Hellenistic style to some mythological stories, with themes favourite to the Alexandrian poets: metamorphosis, unnatural and frustrated love.

Actually there is not a great gap between the first description of cosmogony and what follows,²⁰ in the sense that the coming myths are concerned with man as part of nature in its cosmic sense, humanity and its development, starting with stories of the origin of man and the creation myths, since man is part of this universe.

What concerns me here is the cosmogony episode that is depending on both Empedocles (c. 492-432 BC) of Acragas in Sicily,²¹ and the Epicurean Roman poet Lucretius (c. 99- c. 55 BC).

The song starts:

Namque canebat , uti magnum per inane coacta
semina terrarumque animaeque marisque fuissent
et liquidi simul ignis; ut his exordia primis

¹⁷ -It was not the first time for Virgil to transcend the generic boundaries in his works. Pastoral themes recur in both his didactic poetry, the *Georgics*, and in his epic, the *Aeneid*, see Anderson (1968) 1-17; Ross (1990) 59-75; Halperin (1990) 77-93. For the generic mingling in Virgil's *Eclogues* in the Alexandrian manner, see Sickle (1978) 101-116. In the words of Coleman (1986) 203, "Silenus' song is quite unlike anything else in the genre".

¹⁸ -See Hardie (1986) 5.

¹⁹ -In the words of Brown (1963) 62.

²⁰ -For discussions on the chronological order of *Eclogue* 6, see Woodman (1997) 593-597.

²¹ -On Empedocles as an important predecessor and rival of Lucretius, see Gale (2010) 61-64.

omnia et ipse tener mundi concreverit orbis;
 tum durare solum et discludere Nerea ponto
 coeperit et rerum paulatim sumere formas;
 iamque novum terrae stupeant lucescere solem,
 altius atque cadant submotis nubibus imbres;
 incipiant silvae cum primum surgere, cumque
 rara per ignaros errent animalia montes.

(Virgil, *Eclogue* 6, 31-40)

"Creation was his theme, how elements of earth, air, sea and liquid fire were massed together through the mighty void; how everything arose from these, and the world itself, still soft, condensed into a globe. How next the land began to harden, to pen the Sea-god in his own domain, and slowly to assume the forms of things we know; how the first glory of the new-born Sun struck the astonished Earth; how, when the clouds were raised and rain-showers had a longer fall, the woods began to grow, and one by one beasts made their devious way through wondering hills."

(trans. E. V. Rieu, 1972)

Thus the description of the genesis of the world is scientific in the sense that "order came out of disorder":

- 1- Silenus sang how the primal atoms of earth, air, sea and fire met in the space or void, and how from them all the universe and the earth were formed.
- 2- The dry land was divided from the sea and began to take shape.
- 3- The sun began to shine.
- 4- The clouds began to form and descend in rain.
- 5- The woods grew and living animals started to move upon the hills.

In Silenus' cosmogony, scholars have traced references to some ancient sources.²² Echoes of Empedocles to whom is attributed the four-elements theory of matter (earth, air, fire and water) have been traced. Empedocles uses the terms of "sun", "sea", and "Earth" interchangeably with "fire", "water", and "earth". The same process is displayed in Silenus' account of creation mentioned above.

On another level, Silenus' description of the creation depends greatly upon the philosophical Roman poet Lucretius, who explained the theory of Epicurus (341-270 BC) in his famous poem *De Rerum Natura* "*On the Nature of Things*" (esp. 5.416-508).²³ Epicurus believed that the basic constituents of the world are atoms, and accordingly tried to explain all natural phenomena in atomic terms.²⁴ Scholars trace echoes of Epicurean beliefs that are presented in Silenus account of the creation, through the influence of Lucretius.²⁵

The poem ends at line 86. Virgil gives the reader the impression that the song of Silenus is much longer than it actually is, and that this is merely a part of it, a part that lasts until sunset. The evening star Vesper brings it to a sudden close (*Eclogue 6*, 84-86).

At the end of the song, Virgil rounds off his talk about Silenus' song. He starts by equating it to Apollo's songs and Orpheus' songs that move the cosmological elements of nature by their music. Then Virgil ends by the evening star climbing into the reluctant heavens. Even Olympus is listening to the song and does not wish it to end.

²² -Stewart (1959) 179-205, esp. 183, argues that the generic quality of the divisions of Silenus' song is preserved by mixed allusions to different works and avoidance of dependence on a single work or author. Cf. Leach (1968) 17. Nabielek (2007) 97-118, esp. 100-107, advances another hypothesis that of Pythagorean ideas communicated by Silenus in Virgil's *Eclogue 6*.

²³ -Lucretius himself claims to be an imitator of Epicurus (Lucr. *De Rer. Nat.*, 3.6). On Lucretius' commitment to Epicureanism, see for one Warren (2010) 19-32.

²⁴ -On Epicureanism see for one Morel (2006) 486-504. See the assumption discussed by Cornford (1952) 4-5, that the questions the early Greek philosophers asked themselves, the motives which prompted their inquiries, and the quarters to which they looked for the sources of knowledge, were the same then as now. This assumption, Cornford adds, is very naturally made by most historians of science, who, looking at the past from our own standpoint, are interested in those features of ancient thought-atomism, for example- which can be historically linked to modern developments, just as they are concerned with alchemy chiefly for the sake of its anticipations of chemistry.

²⁵ -For Lucretius as an important model for the *Eclogues*, and the influence he exercised upon Virgil in all his works, see for example Hardie (2010) 113-116. Williams, R. D. (1987) 115, traces Lucretian phraseology in Silenus' song. However, in Coleman's view (1986) 203, the opening cosmogony in *Eclogue 6*, though Lucretian in style, is too general to be labeled exclusively Epicurean. Cf. Notopoulos (1967) 308-309, esp. 309, who calls it natural history rather than science.

This means that even the gods who supervise the cosmos were interested in the cosmological material of the song of Silenus.²⁶

Why the universe is included in Silenus' song? There is more than one reason that might have stimulated Virgil to include the universe in Silenus' song:²⁷

- 1- Virgil's life, I suppose, contextualizes his poem. He wrote the *Eclogues* in a period of political instability, violence and uncertainty. The upheavals of the civil wars formed a chaos in his private life. The political chaos related to the human nature is equivalent to the chaos of the universe. The political chaos was to be resolved by "armed conflict" in the real world. Cosmic chaos had to be resolved through "imaginative art".²⁸
- 2- The previous ancient tradition of writing poetry on cosmological themes was a stimulus that inspired Virgil to write on the universe . Whether it is the mythological cosmology of the Greek poet Hesiod (fl.c.700 BC), or the philosophical cosmology in the poems of the pre-Socratics, Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570-c.478 BC), Parmenides of Elea (fl. c. 5th century BC) and Empedocles, or the Epicurean philosophy of Lucretius.²⁹
- 3- The advances in natural sciences in the Hellenistic age and the comprehensive conception of the cosmos were also responsible for Virgil's interest in the universe. The Roman poets were working within a frame of Alexandrian knowledge in the field of science. This was the outcome of the scientific tradition available to the Romans.³⁰

To conclude, as far as the *Eclogues* are concerned, the theme of *Eclogue 6* is original and alien to pastoral poetry. In the song of Silenus, Virgil boldly departs from the pastoral tradition and extends the range of the pastoral beyond the limitations of the traditional genre as this suits his purpose well. Virgil as a philosopher poet came

²⁶ -Too (1998) 11, explains how the Greek word *Kosmos* suggests an implicit analogy between the order of words and the order of the world or cosmos, which this word also denotes. Cf. Phillips (1983) 780-818, esp. 789; Burkert (1999) 88.

²⁷ -Leach (1968) 13-32, esp. 17, says that Virgil's choice of a scientific over a mythological description of the origins of the world gives a peculiarly impersonal quality to nature.

²⁸ -Ross (1987) 5, comments on Virgil's three works (the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid*) by saying that Virgil's world began in chaos, with uncertainty and random violence; understanding was possible only by imposing abstract patterns upon disorder, the result of which was far removed from observable reality. Then Ross rightly adds that Virgil could never forget blind violence, the irrational madness that is never alien to human nature and is a constant in the universe.

²⁹ -See the discussions by Hardie (1986) 5-32, on poetry and cosmology in antiquity

³⁰ -For more details on this aspect, see El-Nowieemy (2013).

in the line of a long tradition of cosmological poetry. Alexandria developed new knowledge in sciences, which appealed to the Roman poets. In this context, Virgil composed his poem, *Eclogue 6* with its cosmogony. The cosmogony episode afforded material for the display of his learning and of his Alexandrian inclinations.

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