SOME RECENT BOOKS


This Ramus collection offers seven essays on the *Georgics*. A brief editorial introduction properly underlines the error in any view of the poem as a farming calendar or handbook and stresses rather the tensions and ambivalence which exist within it. The poem is not one easily amenable to straightforward labels. By and large this view sets the tone of the book. Gretchen Kromer's contribution assesses the *Georgics'* place within the didactic tradition from the same viewpoint. Distressingly, however, she limits herself to Hesiod, Aratus and Lucretius and we miss discussion of other Hellenistic didactic and particularly of the Greek philosophical tradition. However there is some stimulating thought on the role of strife and work as themes within the four authors' works with Virgil's approach reverting more to the Hesiodic viewpoint and away from that of Lucretius. Helpful also is the linking of Lucretius' exploration of the didactic poet's role with a dichotomy in Virgil's own poetic stance, at one moment the omniscient and detached instructor, at the next the sympathetic reporter of the personal feelings of his characters or creatures.

P.J. Davis views the *otium* of the farmer's life of *Georgic II* as the complement of the more militaristic *labor* imposed upon him in *Georgic I*. Both aspects are contrasted with the disordered 'iron-age' existence of the town-dweller. But the farmer's *otium* is too fragile to survive the grimmer realities of the last two books. The only candidate for such an ideal existence there is the Tarentine farmer in his isolated retreat and we should view him as the pastoral ideal of the poem. Yet the bizarre conflation of Epicurean *autarkeia* and the pastoral world of the *Eclogues* that results seems to do less than justice to the delicacy of this brief view of a gardener's quiet paradise. The problem is one of definitions. Throughout the essay there are too many equations for *otium*: pastoral ideal, *Eclogues*, Epicureanism. *Otium* is indeed a wide-ranging and subtle term, but hardly an umbrella of quite such awesome proportions.

For Peter Connor, 'Description lies at the heart of the *Georgics* but it is never set-piece description . . . (it) presents a landscape that changes and moves.' This writer is interested in Virgil's 'pacing' of the *Georgics'* varied episodes: brief descriptive summaries, the use of the seasons as a pictorial *leitmotiv* and especially in some of the more elaborately worked short passages of description. An analysis of the battle of the bulls, viewed as an 'unfinished' story, shows Connor at his best on Virgil's imagery and use of dramatic force, although I confess I find it difficult to see the *formosa iuvenca* as 'described in cosmic terms'. A good contrast is set up between
Virgil’s hostility to sexual *furor* here and the lyrical description of Spring in terms of the *hieros gamos*. Connor finds the sexless bees antiseptic and dull, viewing their ordered business at IV 184-90 as lifeless by contrast with the frenzied activity of the Scythian wastes at III 354-75, a point in which I cannot wholly follow him. Interestingly Davis (p.28) has sided rather with the view of Segal here criticised of the ‘lifeless inertia’ of these Scyths, dubbing their *secura otia* as perverted.

Dorothea Wender’s attempt to argue that the *Georgics*’ literary sources explicitly indicate shifts in Virgil’s reading and ideas during composition, a transition from Hesiodic traditionalism via Lucretian Epicureanism towards a final and regrettable capitulation to the ‘tough-minded impersonal (view) of the more aristocratic Homer’ is misguided and grossly underestimates the complex process of Virgilian composition. Moreover the skimpy list of sources selected from Conington-Nettleship to back this contention offers staggering omissions. Where, to take a few examples that spring to mind, is the fragment of Eratosthenes on the zones for *Georgic* I, where Bacchylides or most of the Catullan reminiscences to balance the incomplete list for Homer in the Aristaeus episode? The list for the first *Georgic* does not begin till line 96. A consultation of Knauer’s Virgil/Homer Index to the Aeneid might have warned against the improbability that Virgil’s sources for the Georgics could be confined to four columns on a small page.

A.J. Boyle’s own contribution is the most wide-ranging and challenging, although I could wish that its English style were more easily accessible to the ordinary reader. We are offered a dry run on the *Georgics* of a section from Boyle’s forthcoming book in which Virgil will doubtless figure as Rome’s greatest exponent of pessimism, a view of which Boyle has constituted himself this century’s most extreme exponent in his recent writings here and elsewhere. Here the argument hinges on the poem’s political aspects in particular. For once in the *Georgics* Virgil seriously considered the possibility of political optimism and genuine panegyric, setting it against the more general despair and pessimism concerning the human and ‘existential’ (a favourite word) condition of the rest of the poem. In the end, as the poet intended, any such attempt to ‘subsume’ the gloom is seen to fail. There is much in what he says. The precise balance between optimism and pessimism in Virgil depends very much on the individual critic, although nowadays the scales rightly tend to tilt towards the pessimistic side. For my own taste Boyle takes matters slightly too far. Just as I would hold that the poet’s hopes for a future role as expressed towards the end of *Eclogue* IV and reiterated at the start of *Georgic* III are not entirely to be dismissed as ineffectual pipe-dreams, so here I would argue against a final accounting within the poem and maintain rather that we are offered a deliberately
undecided tension between hope, perhaps against hope, and total despair. But that is my own taste and perhaps out of place here. All in all we are offered some valuable insights and much food for thought. Despite my comment above I would particularly recommend the manner in which the projected glorification of Augustus in the proem to *Georgic* III is shown to be undercut by its total opposition to the values offered elsewhere in the poem.

Frances Muecke’s otherwise sensitive examination of Virgil’s statements about his art in *Georgic* II is marred by some over-sweeping preliminary statements about the automatically programmatic nature of poet’s allusions to other poets. However her detailed analyses of many of the passages concerned is good and she is particularly helpful on those sections where Virgil’s discussion of his relationship to Lucretius is concerned. In her discussion of the *makarismos* problem of II 490-94 her view seems in the end closer to Klingner’s condescending remark that the farmer’s existence offers ‘eine Art Weissheit’ and I am not convinced that she has dealt satisfactorily with Buchheit’s complaint that Virgil cannot intend these two contradictory *makarismoi* seriously, but rather that *felix qui potuit* should be treated ironically.

Aya Betensky’s brief analysis of the farmer’s battles is one of the best pieces in the book. She sets forth from a fine analysis of the famous comparison of vines planted on the hillside to the ordering of troops on a plain in battle formation to consider the more widely distributed use of this metaphor for the farmer’s life. The related passage of Lucretius (II 317-32) in which the two notions are juxtaposed rather than compared provides further insights. Finally from the *dubius . . . Mars* of the Virgilian simile we are led to view the peaceful order resultant from the farmer’s metaphorical battles as a precarious state of balance between the chaos of untutored Nature and that far bloodier chaos which erupts on the plain of human war when battle is actually joined.

This is not a book for the beginner, and the student already familiar with the difficult problems of interpretation posed by the *Georgics* will find its offerings of rather mixed value. But as a whole it provides a number of helpful insights into a work which, thanks to the pitfalls it offers the unwary scholar, only of recent years begins to receive the critical attention it deserves.

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