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Author(s): L. P. Wilkinson

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THE INTENTION OF VIRGIL'S *GEORGICS*

By L. P. WILKINSON

MANY and various have been the approaches to Virgil's *Georgics*. Dryden once stated roundly that they were 'the best poem of the best poet'. The director of a well-known botanical garden maintains, rather oddly, that they are the best thing for starting boys on botany. It is worth while to try to discover what Virgil himself thought he was doing, and for what readers he intended his poem.

Let me first recall the circumstances of his upbringing. He spent his childhood on his father's farm, amid the sights and sounds and smells of the country. But by his fifteenth year he was sent to school at Cremona, and from there on to Milan, after which he completed his studies at Rome and near Naples. There is every indication that his bent was for literature and philosophic speculation, and no good evidence that he was ever himself a farmer. By 37-6 B.C., when he was 33, he was already established as a poet, and with Varius had become the nucleus of Maecenas' circle. He had run through the gamut of pastoral poetry, and was on the look-out for fresh woods and pastures new. His intense love of the country, attested in every line of the *Georgics*, would in itself suffice to account for his choice of subject, and the impact of Lucretius' recent masterpiece for his choice of form.

At the close of his breathless baroque overture Virgil alleges pity for the ignorance of the rustic as his motive for writing, but that is simply part of the game. Lucretius' poem had indeed been genuinely didactic, aiming at being exhaustive and answering all likely questions or objections; but Virgil's is not, and there is at least one obvious reason. In those very years 37-36 the octogenarian Varro published a trilogy of treatises on agriculture in dialogue form embodying the best lore then available, written for his wife, who had just bought a farm, so that, as he says, she might turn to them on any occasion when she wished to know how to proceed.¹ The appearance of such a work, which Virgil can be shown to have studied carefully, would have been enough to head him off genuine didactic about farming, even if he had been bent on it before.

One or two illustrations will suffice to show the difference of Virgil's approach. Cato, your true handbook, details every item of equipment

¹ *De Re Rustica* i. 1. 4.

you will need for setting up a farm, and tells you the best place to get it in south Italy.¹ What would the prospective farmer make of Virgil's inventory of requisites for growing crops?²

1. Ploughshare.
2. Heavy timber of curved plough.
3. Slow-rolling wains of the Eleusinian Mother.
4. Sledges and drags.
5. Mattocks.
6. Rough wicker utensils of Celeus, arbutus baskets, and Iacchus' mystic winnowing-fan.

It seems hardly complete. Again, Varro draws up a schedule of jobs suitable to be done at certain times, and recommends that it be posted up in the farm for the attention of the overseer.³ What would the overseer have made of Virgil's supplementary schedule from Hesiod?⁴

5th of the month: avoid; birth of pale Orcus and the Furies;

17th: favourable for planting vines, breaking in oxen, adding loops to webs;

9th: good for runaways, bad for thieves.

Twice Virgil pauses to emphasize that he is not trying to be exhaustive, and once he apologizes for going into details.⁵

But enough has been said. If the *Georgics* in general give sound precepts, it is because the precepts then current were sound; and if Columella and Pliny quote Virgil as an authority, it is because they preferred to quote a great poet rather than the text-books when both said the same thing. The only farmers who would appreciate the delicate refinements of such poetry would be men like Horace, who tells us that the neighbours looked over the wall and laughed when he did a spot of gardening.⁶ We must all agree with Seneca,⁷ a great admirer, that Virgil was more intent on what could be said *decentissime* than *verissime*, and that his object was not to teach farmers, but to delight readers. But just as Ovid, bent on writing satirical verse about love, perceived that there would be an added piquancy if he pretended to be writing a practical treatise, so Virgil, exploiting the didactic form, in effect enriched literature with a poetic form which is still in vogue—*descriptive poetry*.

Agriculturally, then, the *Georgics* are not really didactic; but 'criticism of life', in Arnold's phrase, they certainly are, Virgil being what he was, and Hesiod having pointed the way; that is, they have political and moral

¹ 10-14; 135.

⁴ *G.* i. 277-86.

⁶ *Epp.* i. 14. 39.

² *G.* i. 162-6.

⁵ *G.* ii. 42, 104; i. 177.

⁷ *Epp.* lxxxvi. 15.

³ *Op. cit.* i. 36.

implications, which I shall touch on first before I go on to what I conceive to be their main poetic intention.

Some scholars have expressed the view that Virgil wrote the *Georgics* in furtherance of the Augustan policy of 'back to the land'. Both Page¹ and Heitland² mention 'The Emperor' as likely to have been the prime mover. As so stated this view seems to me anachronistic. In 37 B.C. there was no Emperor, nor yet, one may surmise, any very clear 'Augustan' policy. Octavian was still a shrewd young triumvir preoccupied with outwitting Mark Antony. It is true that Maecenas was already his henchman, but his circle of poets produced little before the time of Actium that smacks of Augustanism. The passages in the *Georgics* that exalt the future Augustus, the Proem and (?) the Finale of Book I, the encomium of Italy in Book II, the Proem of Book III, and the Finale of Book IV, all seem, on internal evidence, to be among the latest in the work.³ The only contemporary evidence for official inspiration is the well-known phrase in the Proem of Book III where Virgil, after heralding the epic he is eager to compose in honour of Caesar, says that he must first complete the *Georgics*, 'tua, Maecenas, haud mollia iussa'.⁴ But this was written six or seven years after the poem was begun, and need in any case mean no more than that Maecenas is holding him to finishing his present task.

At this point it is pertinent to ask what kind of farmer Virgil had in mind. The greater part of Italy at that time consisted of *latifundia* run by slaves; yet the remarkable fact is that slavery, the *sine qua non* of Varro's farming, is never mentioned in the *Georgics*. Heitland, in pointing this out,⁵ suggests that Maecenas may have warned him not to stir up such a hornets' nest as the system of land-tenure; but it can equally well be urged, in view of the proposals of reformers both before and after, that the poet was depicting rural life not as it was but as he thought it ought to be. However, a simpler explanation may well be true. Virgil's farmers are small cultivators, *coloni*, whether tenant or proprietor he does not make clear.⁶ Now Varro, unlike Cato before him, does mention *coloni* as an existing class, and there seems to have been no lack of them in the Po Valley, where Virgil was brought up. Moreover, at the time when he was writing the *Georgics* he was living at Naples amid the fertile Ager Campanus which was peculiar in consisting of small farms let out by the State to *coloni*. And indeed, when he visited the modest Sabine estate which Maecenas gave to Horace in 33-32 he may

¹ Introd., p. xxii.

² *Agricola*, p. 224.

³ See Haverfield in Conington's *Virgil*, vol. i (5th edn.), p. 164.

⁴ 41.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 218.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 227-8.

well have met the five *coloni* who rented the outlying farms.¹ So it is quite possible that, whatever the general condition of Italy, small-holdings were the system of land-tenure with which he himself was most familiar. In any case his vagueness about the status of his farmers has proved an advantage to all save the historian; for since the breakdown of slavery a farm has been envisaged as a small-holding by the majority of his European readers, so that his poem has gained in universality by his tacit exclusion of the system dominant in his day.

Virgil was a man of peace, and the one insistent political motif in the *Georgics* is that swords should be beaten into ploughshares. Italy was wasted with civil war, through neglect more than through devastation:

non ullus aratro
dignus honos: squalent abductis arva colonis,
et curvae rigidum falces conflantur in ensem.²

Farming offered an outlet for the pugnacious and domineering instincts of man, and Virgil depicts it as a constant physical battle with iron weapons against weeds and overgrowth, in which the victor 'lords it over the fields'—*imperat arvis*. It provides that sublimation of those instincts for which social psychologists now recommend football, with the added advantage of being productive. It is not for nothing that the old market-gardener whose life is idealized in Book IV³ had once been a man of violence, a Cilician pirate, one of those whom Pompey defeated and then settled in Calabria with a view to rehabilitation. To Virgil agriculture is the one permanent factor underlying the changes and chances of this mortal life. His *Leitmotiv* for this theme is a line of splendid, slow stability,

agricola incurvo terram molitus aratro.

In a passage of superb imagination he suddenly sees the civil wars of his time *sub specie aeternitatis*:

Ergo inter sese paribus concurrere telis
Romanas acies iterum videre Philippi;
nec fuit indignum superis bis sanguine nostro
Emathiam et latos Haemi pinguescere campos.
Scilicet et tempus veniet cum finibus illis
agricola incurvo terram molitus aratro
exesa inveniet scabra robigine pila,
aut gravibus rastris galeas pulsabit inanes,
grandiaque effossis mirabitur ossa sepulchris.

¹ Hor. *Epp.* i. 14. 1–2.

² *G.* i. 50. 6–7.

³ 125–46.

Fulfilment came
 when twice Philippi saw the levelled spears
 of Roman matched with Roman in fell fight;
 nor did Heav'n think it monstrous that our blood
 should fatten twice Emathia and the plains
 that spread through Haemus. Verily the day
 will come, when the curved plough, working that soil,
 will turn up for the farmer's wondering eye
 spears well-nigh eaten through with scaly rust;
 his heavy hoe will strike on empty helms
 and giant bones, deep in the gaping tombs.¹

He comes back to this theme in Book II in a subtly contrived passage. After depicting in rapidly moving verse the frenzied life of the world of affairs, he suddenly turns, with his *Leitmotiv*,

agricola incurvo terram dimovit aratro,

to the steady life and prospects of the farmer; but lest anyone should object that the spirit of man demands variety, he passes at once to the procession of the seasons, in verse as rapid as before, and ends his description of a rustic holiday, not indeed with football, but with its equivalent for cathartic purposes, competitions in javelin-throwing and wrestling.²

But no amount of demonstration that farming was a good life could save the *colonus* from being called up, or from seeing his land become a battlefield; and in despair Virgil looked for security to the young man who had seemed a god to Tityrus in the *Eclogue*, with an enthusiasm that colours his description of the ruler of the beehive,

rege incolumi mens omnibus una est,
 amisso rupere fidem,

and with a hope, after Actium, that brightens the proems and finales with which he crowned his work.

So much for political intention. In his metaphysical thought Virgil was poetic rather than systematic, and we cannot attribute to him a steady philosophic intention such as Lucretius had. But there is one idea, introduced near the beginning of the *Georgics*, which is important for the whole poem as well as being profound and, to the best of my knowledge, original. Faced with the problem of pain as manifested in

¹ i. 489-97. I quote from the spirited translation of L. A. S. Jermyn, originally made in an internment camp at Singapore (Blackwell, 1947).

² G. ii. 503-31.

the struggle between Nature and the farmer, Virgil takes the old Hesiodic legend of Prometheus and the Fall,¹ and transfigures it. He grants (for purposes of symbolism) that primitive man lived under Saturn in an earthly paradise, the Golden Age when everything grew of its own accord; but whereas Hesiod attributed the introduction of toil by Zeus to his anger at Prometheus' stealing fire, the symbol of progress, and giving it to men, Virgil sees it as a wise dispensation: 'The Father himself did not wish the way of cultivation to be easy, and ordained skilled working of the fields, by troubles sharpening the wits of man, and not suffering his kingdom to idle in gross stagnation':

Pater ipse colendi
 haud facilem esse viam voluit, primusque per artem
 movit agros, curis acuens mortalia corda,
 nec torpere gravi passus sua regna veterno.²

In the fourth *Eclogue* Virgil had idealized the Golden Age, but face to face with the realities of rural life he was well aware that it would not do. To anybody not too busy to think about it the idea was no more satisfying than any other paradise conceivable by human imagination. Milton's Adam reacted no less philosophically to the loss of Eden:

With labour must I earn
 my bread? What harm? Idleness had been worse.

The text of Virgil's Gospel of Work was not *Laborare et orare*, as some have suggested, but *Laborare et vivere*. Curiosity, inventiveness, variety, and complexity are what makes the life of civilized man higher than that of the contented cow. That was the instinct of the classical Greeks, as it has been of the modern humanists. The god who had so disposed was to Virgil a father:

Before Jove
 no ploughman forced the fields to own his sway;
 forbidden were both mark and boundary-ditch
 on the wide champaign; as to a common store
 men brought their profits: ay, and earth herself
 foison in greater plenty bore, unasked.
 Jove gave to serpents fell their dreaded bane:
 he bade wolves ravin and the seas to heave:
 from honeyed foliage he shook its sweet,
 took fire away, and stopped those founts of wine
 that flowed abundant; so that, step by step,
 practice and thought might forge out many an art,

¹ *Works and Days*, 42-105.

² *G. i.* 121-4.

find the corn springing from the furrowed land,
 and hammer hidden fire from veins of flint.
 Then first the river felt the light canoe,
 hollowed from alder, and the sailor made
 his tale of all the stars, and gave them names,
 Pleiads and Hyads and the bright She-Bear,
 child of Lycaon. Then invention taught
 trapping of beasts, tricking of birds with lime,
 cordons of dogs round the wide forest-lairs.
 Men, searching deep, would lash with casting-net
 wide streams, or drag the wet trawl from mid-sea.
 They of old time used wedges to split wood:
 now came stark iron and the shrill saw's blade,
 with many a craft; for everything gave way
 to toil unstinted and the driving force
 of hard, dire poverty.¹

There is no attempt here to minimize the hardness of the toil, but the dominant impression left is, 'What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!' Does not this passage remind one of something in previous literature? Does not the varied list of the pursuits of civilized man recall the proud claim of the arch-enemy of the Almighty, Aeschylus' Prometheus?

No token sure had they of winter's cold,
 no herald of the flowery spring, or season
 of ripening fruits, but laboured without wit
 in all their works, till I revealed the obscure
 risings and settings of the stars of heaven.
 Yea, and the art of number, arch-device,
 I founded, and the craft of written words,
 the world's recorder, mother of the Muse.
 I first subdued the wild beasts of the field
 to slave in pack and harness and relieve
 the mortal labourer of his heaviest toil,
 and yoked in chariots, quick to serve the rein,
 the horse, prosperity's proud ornament;
 and none but I devised the mariner's car
 on hempen wing roaming the trackless ocean.²

Virgil has, in fact, transferred to the Almighty, now called the Father, the role of Prometheus as educator of mankind. But he is an educator who, instead of giving men fire, hides it so that they must bestir themselves to find it. For he saw that under Saturn one good custom was corrupting the world, and himself devised the paradoxical redemption.

¹ *G.* i. 129-46, tr. Jermyn.

² *P.V.* 454-68, tr. George Thomson.

The working out of this idea in the *Georgics* is blurred by the famous eulogy of country life at the end of Book II beginning *O fortunatos nimium . . .*¹ This passage, superb in itself, must be accepted as a purple patch sewn on. It is clearly coloured by the set piece of the oratorical schools in which country life, assimilated to the Golden Age, was contrasted with the cares of the world—the theme which Horace in his second *Epode* puts half-ironically into the mouth of the confirmed usurer Alfius. Such a phrase as *latis otia fundis* transports the mind to the *latifundia* of the rich Romans, away from the small-holdings which are the true background of the *Georgics*. And yet without some such eulogy the total impression given by the poem might have been false. For the incessant toil has a reward besides the sharpening of wits: it is carried on amidst, and contributes to, *divini gloria ruris*. Another famous passage in this book, the encomium of Italy beginning *Sed neque Medorum silvae . . .*² reflects likewise a well-worn *locus* of the day, which crops up in Varro, in Strabo, and in Dionysius.³ It says nothing of the ravages of the civil war, and admits itself to be an idealization by such a claim as *auro plurima fluxit*, not to mention the *ver assiduum atque alienis mensibus aestas*. But its general tenor is true—that for varied beauty and opportunity Italy is unsurpassed; and the *Georgics* range from one end to the other of the Peninsula, whose inhabitants had but recently been united in common citizenship.

But for all the purple patches and the political and moral implications, the bulk of the *Georgics* is occupied with agricultural lore, and it is as a whole that we must appreciate the poem. As I said before, it may be claimed for Virgil that in the *Georgics* he established descriptive poetry as a form, inspired no doubt by incidental passages of description in Homeric similes, in Hesiod, in Hellenistic poetry, and in Lucretius. He seems to have realized from reading Hesiod that an accumulation of details, some of them colourless in themselves, can create a remarkably picturesque impression, quite apart from the subtle touches of colour that he knew so well how to add. It is not the imperative verb of the precept, but the object which is significant. Our poetic inward eye seems to take a peculiar pleasure in passing rapidly from one image to another, a fact to which Cicero plausibly attributes the effectiveness of metaphor. The successive pictures conjured up by the *Georgics* suggest (*si parva licet componere magnis*) a superlative documentary film; yet the comparison falls far short, for a great artist expresses his own personality in every line. If you can imagine a film composed consecutively

¹ 458 ff.² 136–76.³ Varro, *op. cit.* i. 2. 1–7; Strabo iv. 4. 1; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* i. 36–7.

according to the technique of Disney and consisting entirely of paintings by Breughel in the manner of his *Seasons*, you may perhaps see what I mean. Breughel's power of creating a beautiful landscape and peopling it with peasants engaged in various activities, not without touches of humour—all this we find in Virgil; and besides this, the pervading liveliness imparted by the romantic epithets and by the personification of nature, animate and inanimate, which is beyond the reach of pictorial art.

Let me give a few illustrations, all taken from ostensibly didactic portions of the poem.

How should one choose land for growing corn?

Land nearly black when ploughed, with oily sheen,
yet friable—for such we strive to attain
by constant ploughing—is the best for corn;
and from no other acres will you see
so many wagons drawn by homing steers
slow-footed; or such land as has been cleared
of timber by the cursing ploughman when
he uproots woodland, many a year untouched,
to crash in ruin, dragging down the homes,
long-standing, of the birds. The whirring wings
soar upward; nests are emptied; while the plain
shines neath the driven share, though rough before.¹

Let us now come closer and see how grafting is done.

There are two methods of ingrafting slips.
For where a bud thrusts from the inner bark,
breaking its delicate sheath, a narrow slit
is made within the knot. Here you enclose
a twig from a strange tree, training its growth
incorporate with the wet, incised bark.
Or again, knotless trunks are cut, and deep
are wedges driven to split the solid wood.
Slips are infixed. In briefest time your tree
with sturdy branches shoots aloft toward heaven,
marvelling at new verdure, alien fruit.²

And let us now follow the flocks, pasturing all day in summer.

But when the Zephyrs call, and summer sends
joyously flocks of sheep and goats to glens
for pasturage, then, as the Morning-star
rises betimes, let us be early afield,

¹ ii. 203–11, tr. Jermyn.

² ii. 73–82, tr. Jermyn.

when airs are cool, dawn fresh, and grass a gleam,
 and sweet to flocks the dew on tender plants.
 Then when the sun's at thirsty ten o'clock,
 and plaintive whisper of cicada bursts
 over the quiet coppice, I would call
 the flocks to wells or stagnant pools to drink
 the water running in long oaken pipes.
 But at full noon a shady hollow seek,
 where Jove's huge oak in ancient majesty
 stretches his knarry limbs, or find some spot
 wherein a grove, with many an ilex dark,
 dreams godlike, overshadowing the ground.
 Then let them sip again, again take food,
 at sunset, in the cooling dusk, when moons
 freshen the woods with dew, and shores are loud
 with kingfishers, the brake with warblers' song.¹

Didactic or descriptive? Surely the latter. What we enjoy is the picturesqueness. And these three passages are typical of the greater part of the *Georgics*. We may fairly surmise that, whatever Virgil's alleged reason for undertaking them, he was painting because he loved to paint and to recapture every detail that had caught his observant eye:

singula dum capti circumvectamur amore.

But a poem is far more than a series of thoughts and images: it consists of sounds and rhythms. Space forbids me to say more about Virgil's poetic intention. I will only emphasize that the hexameter verse he used was a heroic verse, already the medium he was to use in the *Aeneid*; and whether we like it or not, it was a medium nurtured on rhetoric. Reaction from the exuberant sublimity of the Victorians led, in the first decades of this century, to a cult of restraint which has sometimes degenerated into a cult of sheer pedestrianism. In modernistic poetic circles rhetoric and the grand manner have gone out of favour. But a poet who conceived of himself as driving a chariot² should not be made by translators to go on foot:

Nunc, veneranda Pales, magno nunc ore sonandum.³

Difficult though it was to elevate the humble sheep to the dignity of such verse—*angustis hunc addere rebus honorem*—that was Virgil's avowed intention. Is it too much to hope that with the whirligig of time our poets and translators may get over their shyness of *μεγαλοπρέπεια*, and their suspicion of the rhetorical element which plays so integral a part in Augustan poetry?

¹ iii. 322–38.

² ii. 541–2; cf. iii. 17–18.

³ iii. 294.