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BOOK REVIEW

Reflections and New Perspectives on Virgil's Georgics. Edited by BOBBY XINYUE AND NICOLAS FREER. Bloomsbury Academic, London, UK and New York, NY 2019. Pp. xii + 286. Paperback £28.99 £26.09; Hardback £95.00 ISBN: 978-1-350-07051-6.

What new can ever be said about Virgil's *Georgics* today? This is the first question that is likely to come to the mind of the reader who finds in his hands a book on this closely studied poem: I must confess that I also asked myself this question as I saw the hardback book edited by B. Xinyue and N. Freer. In fact, I can safely say that the reading of the volume showed me that my distrust was out of place and, more generally, that there is always something new and interesting to say about a complex and nuanced poem as the *Georgics.* This view is entirely consistent with the double purpose stated by the editors in the introduction (1-13); that is, to stimulate innovative ideas on Virgil's poem arising from the major trends of scholarly studies in the last two decades and to present cutting-edge and heretofore underutilized methodological perspectives.

How to read the *Georgics*? Part I of the book offers three answers consisting in very different approaches to the poem. The inquiry opens in the best way, with the outstanding Chapter 1 by Robert Cowan (17-30), who deals with the second-person narration that alternates with the third person in the *Georgics*: sometimes the two narrative strategies are even combined in the same passage, with major implications on the poem's message concerning the tension between natural determinism and the human ability to act and succeed. This is effectively proved through the analysis of two well-known passages, namely the gadfly (3.146-156: here second-person narration defeats the third person, reflecting human autonomy that overcomes determinism) and the storm (1.299-338, with a prevalence of third-person narration that stresses human impotence in face of the

violence of nature, while the return to second-person verbs urging vigilance and religious devotion in the end remains ambiguous).

Steven Heyworth, in Chapter 2 (31-43), is concerned with the interpretation of some technical passages of the *Georgics*, such as the meaning of 1.108 and in particular of the word *supercilium* (when the plants are in danger of dying because of excessive heat, the farmer simply raises an "eyebrow" and they are quickly irrigated) and the structure of 1.43-83 (all editions put a paragraph break at 71, but it should rather come before *ergo age* in 63, in the light of a thorough review of the passage). Richard Thomas, in Chapter 3 (45-64), lays the foundation for an aesthetic reading of the *Georgics*, based on the notion (coming from a correct understanding of New Criticism) that "form and aesthetics provide a worthwhile point of focus" and that "meaning may be sought" from there, which is exemplified and confirmed by some *specimina* of stylistic analysis. This is an important point, since misunderstanding of and summary reaction to New Criticism has long banned from (Anglophone) literary studies any attention for such a major and essential aspect as aesthetics (something similar to what happened in Europe and especially in Italy, as a consequence of the excesses of Benedetto Croce's theory of poetry); but now it is time to reappraise style and aesthetics as an integral part of creative literature.

Part II, concerning religion and philosophy, begins with Tom Mackenzie's Chapter 4 (67-77) that deals with the influence of Orphism in the *Georgics*: the character of Orpheus, who is associated with both poetic inspiration and theogony already in the *Bucolics*, occurs prominently in the mythical episode that concludes Book 4; Orphic theogony is evoked also in other points of this book, such as the birth of Dictaean Zeus at lines 149-152, the pantheism at 219-227 and the theogony at 345-350; hence, an allegorical interpretation of the Orpheus and Aristaeus episode as a reflection on Octavian's (possible) immortality. Nicholas Freer, in his chapter concerning Epicureanism in the *Georgics* (79-90), recognizes in the poem the "confrontation between two competing positions within the Garden": on the one hand, Lucretius' appreciation and exploitation of poetry as a pedagogical tool; on the other, the Athenian tradition beginning with Epicurus himself, rejecting poetry because of its "dangerously irrational allure."

Part III considers the impact of the *Georgics* on society, as well as its political relevance and implications. Bobby Xinyue, in Chapter 6 (93-103), interprets Virgil's discussion of the divinization of Octavian as a response to the latter's "unstoppable course to obtaining ultimate power," in parallel with the gradual loss of poetry's capacity to influence policy and to plead the cause of peace. Chapter 7

(105-114) by Elena Giusti focuses on the image of barbarians at *Georg.* 3.25 "as representative of the language of foreign policy in the Augustan age," since this figurative typology recurs both in the iconography of the time and in the description of Carthaginians in the *Aeneid*: besides, it can be taken as a metaliterary reference to both the archaic theater (in particular, the genre of the *praetexta*) and to Virgil's expected epic, which is presented as a celebration of Augustus' military achievements overs foreign enemies, i.e. the *Augusteid* that (luckily) never saw the light of day. Martin Stöckinger, in Chapter 8 (115-125), examines some passages of the *Georgics* dealing with gift-giving and exchange as means of social reciprocity, which involves relationships between "unequal elements," as men and nature, men and gods, nature and gods, Virgil himself and Octavian; social reciprocity is carried out, then, "in a vertical rather than a horizontal line" and works as a unifying force that cannot remove those tensions, but "acts as a glue that holds the conflicting elements together."

The ancient reception of the *Georgics* is the subject of the part IV. Sara Myers, in Chapter 10 (129-137), compares Columella's two treatments of gardens in the *De re rustica*, namely Book 10 (in poetry) and Book 11 (in prose), concluding that the author wants to prove the superiority of prose for agricultural teaching, while poetry seems rather to indulge in the aesthetic pleasure. Chapter 11 (139-151) by Alisa Hunt takes Servius' note to *Georg.* 1.21 as a case-study to demonstrate the necessity to separate Servius' (idiosyncratic) readings of Roman religion from the true meaning of Virgil's words. The study of reception goes ahead in Part V, with some "modern responses" to the *Georgics*. William Barton, in Chapter 11 (155-168), brings to light the influence of the georgic tradition in general, and that of Virgil's poem in particular, on Marc Lescarbot's *Adieu à la Nouvelle France* (in the collection *Les Muses de la Nouvelle France*, 1617). In Chapter 12 (169-183), then, Katharine Earnshaw focuses on Percy Bysshe Shelley's translation of a fragment from Book 4 of the *Georgics* (namely 4.360-373) and she recognizes, in this work, the very ideas of the English poet on literature, language and rhythm. The book ends with a flourish with Susanna Braund's Chapter 13 (185-200), which is a meeting-point between reception-studies and gender-studies, dealing with Vita Sackville-West's "phenomenal epic poem" *The Land* (1926) and the translation of the *Georgics* by the "classical naturalist" Janet Lembke (2005). The sincere love of the land is manifest in the latter's translation, which is produced with an elegant and unpretentious language perfectly fitting Virgil's mid-level style; the same love of the land and nature is the source of

inspiration of Sackville-West's poem, which is undoubtedly an important stage in the reception of the *Georgics*. The chapter ends with a provocation: "is it possible that female responses offer something unavailable in versions by male translators?" I would not hesitate to answer yes (and this is not the only thing that women scholars do otherwise and with some fine peculiarities, and finally better than men!).

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