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## Review of Christine Perkell, *The Poet's Truth: A Study of the Poet in Virgil's Georgics*

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Review of Christine Perkell, *The Poet's Truth: A Study of the Poet in Virgil's Georgics*

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CHRISTINE PERKELL. *The Poet's Truth: A Study of the Poet in Virgil's Georgics*. Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, University of California Press, 1989. Pp. xi + 210. Cloth, \$25.00.

In this welcome addition to the continuing dialogue on the *Georgics*, Christine Perkell sets forth with grace and clarity an interpretation that aims to move past the prevailing dichotomy between “optimistic” and “pessimistic” readings “towards a more balanced, inclusive view of the poem,” arguing that “the ambiguities that readers have always recognized are not problems to be solved, but rather may be perceived as the poem’s deepest meaning” (16–17). She sets forth her argument in an introduction and three chapters (with copious citations of Latin and Greek sources accompanied by translations), and provides a full bibliography, an index locorum, and a general index.

Perkell focuses her study on the role of the narrator as a locus of the poem’s meaning. Chapter 1 (“The Figure of the Poet”) contrasts “the first-person speaker of the poem,” a.k.a. “the *Georgic* poet” (25), with the figure of the farmer, a contrast repeated and crystallized in the treatment of Orpheus and Aristaeus in Book 4. This contrast reveals itself most clearly in terms of the poet’s capacity for pity, a quality that Perkell does not find in the farmer. But between these very different figures there is similarity as well: “both farmer and poet are Iron Age figures, flawed in their relationships to nature and to other men” (45). In the case of the violent, acquisitive farmer, the point is obvious. As for the poet, although he seeks “to expand the sensibility of readers and to fashion them into a humane community” (54), his efforts are futile and without efficacy: he is subject to the same depressing conditions as the farmer, even if his response to them differs.

This response is the subject of Chapter 2 (“The Poet’s Vision”), which traces the Golden Age myth throughout the *Georgics*. Perkell reads this theme as an imaginary foil intended to evoke a critical evaluation of contemporary reality. She argues that “the poet does not imagine a paradisiacal past to have occurred historically, nor does he genuinely imagine such an event for the future. Rather he uses the motif of the Golden Age to express moral tensions central to the poem, thus illuminating certain oppositions between material

progress and humane value" (91). Accordingly, contemporary approximations of the Golden Age are always either severely compromised (as in the *laudes Italiae* of Book 2 and the excursus on the Corycian gardener in Book 4) or parodic (the Scythians and the Plague of Noricum in Book 3). "An ideal is conceived in the poem but not shown as capable of realization. The conflicts of life to which the poet points appear incapable of resolution. This view, while tragic, is not sentimentalized in the poem or pathetic. The poet sees evenly, with clear-eyed vision" (138).

The final chapter ("The Poet's Truth") measures the *Georgic* poet's discourse against several other types of ancient scientific and poetic discourse—including sign theory, theories of plural causation, the doctrine of primary opposites, and myth—to which the poem alludes. This process shows that the *Georgic* poet's didactic unreliability implies a "privileging of myth over *praeceptum*, of divine revelation over experience and practice, of mystery over solution" (21). Accordingly, Perkell reads myths, including the *bugonia*, as "paradigms or alternative illuminations of human experience" (176) which, though "completely without georgic truth" (139), nevertheless become the means by which the *Georgic* poet "reveals his ultimate truths" (146). But the importance of myth does not make the farmer's lot irrelevant. The poet, despite his Golden Age vision, remains bound by Iron Age laws. Like Orpheus, he is powerless, finally, to do anything because he feels too much. An Aristaeus might actually achieve something, though without our sympathy, because the cost of achievement is so high. And yet what he achieves is, in a certain sense, worth doing.

Perkell's main advance consists in recognizing the reader's inability to resolve the conflicts and tensions that pervade the *Georgics* as a source of poetic power and meaning. Previous critics have labored variously to reconcile the fundamentally incompatible points of view that the farmer and the poet represent. Instead of resolution, Perkell posits a model of suspension that would allow these dichotomous elements to remain in fruitful tension instead of moving towards a climactic reconciliation. Grounding her approach on the development of twentieth-century *Georgics* scholarship since Burck, she is also the first critic to have had the advantage of building upon the recent work of David Ross and Richard Thomas, and her method of doing so is instructive. For Ross and Thomas, the subtle and deliberate mendacity of the technical portions of the poem is matched by the outright falsehood of myths like the one that concerns the *bugonia*. Thus there is no trustworthy source of comfort, knowledge, or truth: humankind is cast adrift in a hostile and deceptive world. According to Perkell, however, who develops a valuable principle laid down by Karl Büchner, Vergil's deliberate errors in the technical passages have the effect of making it possible to glimpse in them, and even more so in the poem's mythological passages, a higher form of truth. She thus contributes notably to the process of deconstructing the poem's overtly didactic form, a process that has been perhaps the main achievement of recent Vergilian criticism.

No book is faultless, of course. The first thing one notices here is a certain

inconcinnity between the methods on which the author says she will base her interpretation, and what she actually does. In her introduction, Perkell invokes some of the fundamental insights of reader–response criticism to support the notion that “Virgil’s texts tend to ambiguity and irony . . . and that, therefore, consistency and unity—at least as conventionally conceived—are not features of his texts” (5). This is obviously an approach that has much to recommend it; but in fact, Perkell’s chief critical assumptions and the rhetoric by which she advances her argument derive almost entirely from the New Critics in the tradition of exoteric Structuralism. Thus we hear a lot about the tensions that pervade and enliven the poem, and about the various polarities that create these tensions, but very little about how the dynamics of reading through this text should inform our interpretation of it. The few discussions that do mention the reader’s diachronic experience of the text (e.g., the enjambement *labor . . . | improbus* at *G.* 1.145–46) derive from other well-known treatments, and are not integrated with a more thoroughgoing theory of reception. The main difference between Perkell and a more conventional New Critical reading, such as that of Putnam, consists in her aforementioned (and laudable) forbearance to resolve the tensions that she perceives—a critical move that is congenial to reception theorists, but by no means their exclusive property. One now wonders where Perkell’s argument might lead if a critic of her sensitivity should take the idea of an unstable text more seriously.

There are also points to which I, at least, found it difficult to give assent. Perkell’s interpretation of *G.* 1.50 (*at prius ignotum ferro quam scindimus aequor*) speaks rather extravagantly of plowing a new field as “the paradigmatic moment of man’s initial confrontation with nature, the moment when, without the aid of obfuscating tradition or others’ labor, we confront our primal and defining ignorance” (141). But here the poet is advising us to avoid this primal confrontation with ignorance by first (*prius*) learning all we can about the field we want to plow—what kind of weather it gets, what methods of cultivation have been used on it, and what it will and will not bear (*G.* 1.51–53). Again, in her otherwise excellent discussion of plural causes (166–72), she is too anxious to distance Vergil from the scientific mainstream represented by Epicurus and Lucretius by claiming that only the *Georgic* poet goes so far as to suggest plural causes (for the beneficial effect of burning a barren field, *G.* 1.86–93) that are mutually exclusive. But when Lucretius explains that the moon either reflects the sun’s light, or else shines with its own, or that perhaps a new moon is created every day (*DRN* 5.705–50, a passage which Perkell cites as a contrast with Vergil), I find it difficult to regard the possibilities as compatible in any meaningful way. Fortunately, however, examples like this are few in a book that is really quite notable for good judgment and rhetorical restraint; and what minor shortcomings there are do not detract from what Perkell has achieved.

The *Georgics* is not an easy poem to interpret, regardless of what method one adopts; even a competent reading is likely to seem unsatisfying to anyone familiar with the refractory nature of this deeply ambivalent text. By facing up

to this ambivalence, Perkell has produced a reading that is impressive, above all, for its sense of fundamental soundness. One comes away from this book feeling that, despite any disagreements over particulars, this is, if not the one right way, then certainly an extremely valuable and fruitful way to approach the haunting complexity that is among the chief beauties of the *Georgics*.

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