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# Forward to Special Issue of *Vergilius* on "The Vergilian Century"

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### **Abstract**

This special issue of *Vergilius* collects papers that were presented at a conference on "The Vergilian Century" at the University of Pennsylvania on November 17-18, 2000. The conference was conceived as an opportunity both to take stock and to look forward, to consider the place that Vergil has occupied and continues to occupy in Latin studies as a whole. Participants were asked to discuss the role that Vergil criticism has played in shaping the agenda that all Latinists have pursued over the last hundred years; to examine the ways in which twentieth-century political and social history has informed those agenda; and to ask themselves whether the conditions that have determined the course of Latin studies in general and of Vergilian studies in particular, remain the same or have changed significantly as we move from the last century into the next. Within these general parameters, speakers were given great freedom to respond to these issues in whatever way they chose. The result was two days of papers that spoke to issues of authorial design, dynamics of reception, modern political, social, and intellectual history, and related issues. The event was intended to open debate rather than to produce a unified statement about these ideas. The papers in this volume are offered in a similar spirit.

### **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Classics

## Forward

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The plan of the volume roughly follows that of the event. The first paper sets forth the rationale behind the conference as it was originally presented to the participants. It argues that criticism of Vergil, and especially of the *Aeneid*, has been the driving force in Latin literary studies for over a hundred years, but that Vergilian and hence Latin studies have been dominated since mid-century by concerns that arise from American cold-war politics. The last decade, however, has seen the beginning of a shift, one that parallels the emergence of a new world order. No longer is the logic of geopolitical struggle characterized by a binary opposition between rival superpowers. Instead, we now live in a world where a single superpower faces widely diffused and multiform opposition from a variety of potential opponents. The former condition corresponds to what twentieth-century Vergilians saw as a choice between triumphalist and oppositional (or “optimistic” and “pessimistic”) readings of Vergil’s poetry, while the latter finds its parallel in the current impatience with this polarity and a concomitant surge of interest in,

and of important work devoted to exploring the more heterogeneous world of Ovid.

This first, programmatic paper is followed by an assessment of the conference plan by Michèle Lowrie. Lowrie is skeptical that Vergil, and the *Aeneid* in particular, can ever cease to be at the center of the classical curriculum or of definitions of what we call “literature.” She complicates the idea of a transition from a Vergilian Cold War to a new, Ovidian world order when she recalls universalizing conceptions of Vergil on the part of Curtius but also of Derida. The Vergil regarded by the conference prospectus as a symbol of totalizing imperialist ambition might be imagined as “a precedent for unification,” and thus — whether sympathetically or not — as an equally apt symbol of “Americanization,” “globalization,” and the like. At the same time, Lowrie finds, stark contrasts between good and evil in the political realm are often refracted and blurred in the realm of the aesthetic, whether in the form of “high art,” fashion, or popular culture; and in place of a migration from the political to the aesthetic, she argues for a turn to “seriously playful” readings, grounded in the discipline of literary criticism, that do justice to cultural matrix that produced both Vergil and Ovid.

These opening observations are followed by five contributions that span Vergil’s oeuvre and consider it and its reception throughout the last century. Two papers on the *Aeneid* frame three on Vergil’s earlier works, two on the *Eclogues* and one on the *Georgics*. This arrangement of topics recapitulates both the order in which most of us first read Vergil’s works and the shifting focus of Vergilian studies over the last half-century.

The papers begin with Ellen Oliensis’ challenging essay on “Freud’s *Aeneid*.” Whether or not we have just lived through a Vergilian century, it was certainly a Freudian one. Oliensis delves into the underexplored relationship between Vergil’s masterpiece and one of the titans of twentieth-century critical discourse. Her analysis reveals a Freud thoroughly constructed by Vergilian preoccupations and a reading of the *Aeneid* as dream work struggling with the most intimate of familial and cultural forces. Oliensis finds the psychic energy of the poem circulating throughout the text itself rather consistently fixed in individual characters. She is attentive to the familiar Oedipal concerns of critics such as Bloom, Hardie, and Reckford, but also recuperates in part a number of relatively neglected experimental readings of the sixties and seventies while drawing into a

more generous neo-Freudian perspective several recent gender-oriented readings, whether or not they are explicitly psychoanalytic in orientation.

Olinesis is not alone in regarding Vergil's poetry as a mirror for modern critical theory and practice. Christine Perkell's consideration of "Vergil Reading His Twentieth-Century Readers: A Study of *Eclogue 9*" takes recent Vergil criticism as an activity programmed by the poet and reflected in the immanent characteristics of his poetry. Perkell begins straightforwardly by surveying the late twentieth-century critical landscape and finding that *Eclogue 9* typifies a dichotomy of interpretive opinion divided between "optimistic" and "pessimistic" camps. Within all such readings she discerns the identification of a structure "in which fragments and frame are meaningfully related and significant for interpretation." Perkell's own reading of this structure reveals an extraordinarily careful balance of dichotomous readership *within* the poem. Taking the principle characters, Moeris and Lycidas, not so much as poets themselves but as readers of a third poet, Menalcas, she finds each of these figures fully characteristic of, precisely, optimistic and pessimistic responses to poetry. "The optimism / pessimism divide that characterizes contemporary critics of *Eclogue 9*," Perkell concludes, "seems to be a function of parallel deployment of describable interpretive conventions, corresponding to observed structural features of the text." On this reading, the critical debates of the late twentieth century are not so much products of their times as direct outgrowths of a first-century B.C. text.

Perkell's essay hints at the extent to which twentieth century was notable for its preoccupation with the pastoral mode. In the following essay "Picture Arcadia: The Politics of Representation in Vergil's *Eclogues*," Joy Connolly situates this preoccupation in the context of the political pressures brought to bear on the American literary and art worlds after World War I. First Connolly sketches the influence on American pictures of Arcadia wrought by the New Criticism through the mid-century. She then proceeds to examine the New Critics' connections to Abstract Expressionism. Finally, with the politics of both these movements in mind, Connolly offers a polemical, alternative view of Vergil's representational technique in the *Eclogues* as a key component of his poetics of political engagement. For Connolly, New Critical characterizations of Vergil's Arcadia as a space that (in both senses) contains politics, amount to

a characteristically American intellectual fantasy of a discourse “that can speak to and about politics while remaining free from the co-optation of existing frameworks for political debate.”<sup>1</sup> In place of this fantasy, Connolly argues that “the alienation of poetic language from a referential reality” in these poems “draws readerly attention to extratextual — which is to say political and social — efforts to make landscape whole.” On such a reading, Vergil’s pastoral essay is almost the exact opposite of belletristic escapism, but is rather an example of poetry as engaged political discourse.

For Richard Thomas, political engagement is never absent from interpretation. The *Georgics* in particular has been an interpretive battleground ever since it began to attract increased critical attention in the late seventies. One recurring theme in these battles has been the extent to which the essential qualities of the poem are accessible to critics who do not themselves know the land, or whose national literary and cultural traditions do not include major episodes of agrarian celebration. The charge of lacking sympathy with the georgic sensibility is perhaps more frequently leveled by English critics against their American counterparts, although various critical ideologies based in agricultural idealism have been voiced on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup> But as Thomas shows, English and colonial responses to the *Georgics* are anything but uniform. In times of political strife, the poem has produced reactions so extreme in their difference as to make more recent scholarly debates look like celebrations of unanimity. On one side, there has been a pronounced tendency to read the *Georgics* in terms of a specifically English nostalgia for an idealized country life, a tendency represented with clarity in C. Day-Lewis’ influential translation of the poem. In “From Virgil to Heaney: The *Georgics* of Resistance,” Thomas scrutinizes translations and adaptations of the *Georgics* from the last

<sup>1</sup> This observation resonates with an important point made by Michèle Lowrie on the relationship of the political to the aesthetic (see p. 33 below).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Jasper Griffin, “Haec super arborum cultu,” *CR* 31 (1981) 23–27; Richard Jenkyns *Virgil’s Experience: Nature and History, Times, Names, and Places* (Oxford 1998), passim; Stephanie Nelson, *God and the Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Victor Davis Hanson has, in series of books (e.g. *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (New York, 1995), made agricultural idealism into the very basis of an approach to classical studies as a whole.

century against the background of earlier engagements. By adducing both literal and cultural intertexts as distant as the period of the English civil war and as recent as the work of Irish poets Patrick Kavanaugh and Seamus Heaney, Thomas identifies a “realist” strand of georgic poetry that parallels what Sidney Burris has called a “poetry of resistance” within the pastoral tradition. Thomas sets the work of these “resistance” poets against a tradition that, in his words, “has overlaid the georgic form with an idealized, post-Virgilian...European pastoral and the pietistic surface of the *Aeneid*, filtered too often through the brilliant rewriting of Dante.”

Thomas’ reference to a strand of reception that unites the modes of pastoral and epic under an idealist banner forms a bridge between Perkell’s and Connolly’s papers on the *Eclogues* and the paper that follows. In addition, Glenn Most’s “Memory and Forgetting in the *Aeneid*” closes the frame opened by Oliensis by returning to those issues worked out at length and in their full complexity in Vergil’s final masterpiece. The focus of this essay is the end of the epic, which has been the focus of Vergilian studies, and in many ways of Latin studies in general, for almost fifty years. But Most draws on the tradition of reading Vergil’s oeuvre as a unified whole to develop new insights into the working of memory in its poetic, erotic, didactic, and political dimensions through the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* as well as the *Aeneid*. He argues in favor of forgetting as an active principle equal in importance to memory, and in doing so lays bare Aeneas’ final act in the poem not as a symptom of anger, whether righteous or uncontrolled, but as a gesture fraught with elements of memory and forgetfulness. The richly interdependent relationship of remembering and forgetting is revealed as absolutely central to the most prominent issues in Vergilian criticism and is shown to be deeply and paradoxically implicated both in the choices faced by Vergil as he developed his portrayal of the hero Aeneas, and in the choices faced by Augustus as he developed his own role as leader of the Roman world.

The closure signaled by a paper on the end of Vergil’s final work and by the closing of the ring opened by Oliensis’ paper would have been a false note on which to end this volume. Instead, the collection concludes with Michael Putnam’s “Ovid, Virgil and Myrrha’s Metamorphic Exile,” a fittingly open, even liminal coda. Our other collaborators consider individual poems and passages within Vergil’s oeuvre, and engage in their various ways with the first as-

pect of our joint purpose — namely, to explore the idea that the last century was for Latinists a Vergilian one. Putnam ranges widely over Vergil’s oeuvre and over the interface between Vergil and Ovid. Finding in Ovid’s Myrrha episode a distillation of Vergilian themes, ideas, and motifs, he uses intertextual relationships to explicate the metamorphosis of Vergilian into Ovidian poetry. As often both in intertextual studies and in metamorphosis, continuities are as impressive as disruptions. Themes of exile, death, banishment, and transformation emerge from Ovid’s engagement with Vergil in a way that points to the center of Vergil’s oeuvre. On this reading, Ovid’s intertextual exploration of Vergilian ideas and motifs reveals an Aeneas who undergoes “metamorphosis” into Pallas;<sup>3</sup> and a series of transformations through exile and death that anticipate not only the *Metamorphoses* the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* as well. Putnam’s essay implicitly raises the question of whether we can finally separate Vergilian and Ovidian poetry and modes of reading, or whether each kind really contains the other as the abiding themes of Latin literary studies pass from one poet, one reader, to the next.

Limitations imposed by the journal’s publication schedule as well as other commitments faced by some of the participants made it impossible to include all of the papers presented at the conference.<sup>4</sup> (Fortunately, several papers that do not appear here are scheduled to appear elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>) Under these circumstances, it seemed impracti-

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the comments of Most, p. 149 below.

<sup>4</sup> In addition, several regular or semi-regular features of *Vergilius* do not appear in this special volume. These include book reviews, books received, and varia didactica, as well as summaries of articles, which are effectively supplied by this foreword. All of these features will return in volume 48.

<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Barchiesi’s paper “Naissance d’un peuple” will form part of a book entitled *The Geopoetics of Vergil’s Aeneid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Likewise Thomas Habinek’s paper “Rites of Manhood: Vergil, Ovid, and their Interpreters” will also be included as part of a larger project. Philip Hardie’s paper “Another Look at Ganymede” will appear in *Classics in Progress. Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. T. P. Wiseman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2002). At the Penn conference Glenn Most presented a paper on the critical history of the *Appendix Vergiliana*, but for this publication he preferred to contribute a different paper on memory and forgetting in the *Aeneid*. An Italian version of this paper, entitled “Memoria ed oblio nell’*Eneide*,” will appear in a forthcoming volume entitled *Memoria e identità nella Roma antica*, ed. Mario Citroni. The *Appendix* paper will be part of a book entitled *Refractions of Authority: Intertextual Strategies in the Appendix Vergiliana* (Cambridge: Cambridge

cal to try to include the responses by Denis Feeney, Stephen Hinds, and Georgia Nugent, which were in fact among the most exciting and memorable features of the conference and contributed greatly to its success. Still, it is hoped that the papers that are contained in this volume will not only give some indication of the intellectual energy that characterized those two days, but that they will bring the discussions begun at that time to a wider audience. What you have before you is not so much a record of conference proceedings, but an opening up of those discussions to the readers of *Vergilius*.<sup>6</sup>

The process of opening up does not end here. The original plan for “The Vergilian Century” involved not just a single conference, but at least two. The second will take place on March 22–23, 2002, at Trinity College Dublin. This event, organized by Professor Damien Nelis, will be entitled “*Aetas Ovidiana*: Ovidian Themes in Contemporary Latin Studies” and will examine ways in which characteristically Ovidian considerations have reshaped the work of Latinists at the turn of the century. Over half of those who took part in the Penn conference are scheduled to speak at Trinity as well, along with an even greater number of new participants. A publication of the Dublin conference, similar to this one of the event in Philadelphia, is planned to appear in a future number of the journal *Hermathena*. Further instaurations are under discussion; but, whether these paired events do or do not launch a series of continuations, it is hoped that the questions they raise about the past,

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University Press, forthcoming). Two other papers read at the Philadelphia conference by Damien Nelis (“Vergilian Time: History in the Prologue to *Georgics* 3”) and Elena Theodorakopoulos (“Closing the Book on the Vergilian Century”) unfortunately could not be revised in time for publication here.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who contributed to the success of the Penn conference and to the vetting and production of this volume. In addition to those who presented papers or who gave responses at the conference, I would particularly like to thank Tiffany Barlow, Rebecca Bushnell, Shane Butler, Sybil Csigi, Julia Dyson, Jennifer Ebbeler, Julia Gaisser, Cherylynne Graham-Seay, G. N. Knauer, Daniel Hooley, Catherine Keane, Victor Mair, Sheila Murnaghan, James O’Hara, Samuel H. Preston, and Stephen Wheeler, and all of my colleagues and students at Penn. Financial and technical support for the conference were provided by the Department of Classical Studies, the Center for Ancient Studies, The School of Arts and Sciences, the Kahn Fund for Faculty Excellence, and the office of the Vice-Provost for University Life.

present, and future of our field will stimulate discussion and response in a variety of fora.

Joseph Farrell, *editor*