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Review of R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Words and the Poet. Characteristic Techniques of Style in Vergil's Aeneid*

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Review of R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Words and the Poet. Characteristic Techniques of Style in Vergil's Aeneid*

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R. O. A. M. Lyne. *Words and the Poet. Characteristic Techniques of Style in Vergil's Aeneid*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. Pp. viii + 209.

In this, his second book on the *Aeneid* in three years, Lyne aims to explain the techniques whereby Vergil manages "to produce poetry from 'ordinary words'" (p. 17). Chapter 1 explains what this means: an approach based on that of Axelson, but one that emphasizes *callida iunctura* as a means of turning prosaic diction into effective poetry. The seven subsequent chapters discuss a number of specific passages in order to illuminate the techniques that Vergil employs to this end. A bibliography and two indices (subjects and passages) round out the volume.

The book's chief value consists in the discussions of particular passages. Lyne is always a sensitive and imaginative reader of Vergil, and some of his discussions offer valuable insights into important aspects of the poem. The inquiry into the mention of Pallas' burial shroud at *Aeneid* 11.72–77 is one of the book's best moments (pp. 185–192). Here Lyne uses a throwaway detail—the fact that Vergil gratuitously speaks of two cloaks, only one of which is used in the burial—to illustrate an important sentimental connection between Dido and Pallas in the mind of Aeneas himself. Aware of the Homeric precedent, Lyne does not limit Vergil to the role of passive imitator, but shows how the poet makes creative use of what was probably a minor *zetema* (cf. p. 191 n. 16). Lyne's imagination here is tempered by a laudable restraint; but might we not speculate further that Aeneas means to use the second cloak too as a burial shroud, for himself? Not all of Lyne's interpretations are equally convincing (e.g. the discussions of *conlabor*, pp. 38–43, and of "contrast similes," pp. 135–148), but some unevenness is perhaps inevitable, and individual readers will form their own judgments about the value of this or that discussion.

As a whole, however, the book impresses one as adding up to rather less than the sum of its parts. The reason for this has to do with method. Lyne has tried very hard to articulate a method and to adhere to it. But the one that he uses is inherently flawed, and the way in which he applies it can become labored and tedious.

To begin with, the Axelsonian approach carries with it a good deal of extremely cumbersome baggage. I say this as one who admires the way in which Axelson's work has been developed by Tränkle, Ross, Knox, and others. In those cases, however, acceptance of the problematical notion of *unpoetische Wörter* seems on the whole to have been justified by results that mesh so well with, and are thus corroborated by, findings reached by other means. Further, it is not essential in measuring the stylistic difference between, say, Catullus' polymetrics and his epigrams, to assume that any portion of Catullus' vocabulary is specifically prosaic; what really matters is simply whether the

vocabulary of the former differs in some measurable way from that of the latter, which is in fact the case. Lyne, however, stakes his entire argument on the proposition that prosaic diction was an especially important element in Vergil's *Dichtersprache*, and that the ways in which he adapted this diction to poetic usage was an essential feature of his style. Certainly there are words in Latin that can be called poetic or unpoetic: cases such as, say, *gladium* and *ensis* (on which see pp. 101–104) are unarguable and establish the basic validity of the distinction. But few examples are as clear-cut as these; and, while Lyne himself concedes that “there may be a good deal of No Man’s Land,” he does not deal with the implications of this fact, but merely asserts that “Prose and Poetry do indeed possess some territory that is distinctly their own” (p. 8 n. 30). Such statements are not very reassuring. Even admitting the very real contributions that Axelson and his followers have made, it seems to me unacceptable—especially in light of the objections raised by a number of scholars, objections of which Lyne is not unaware (p. 4 n. 18)—to continue to apply this method in its original form without addressing issues such as the inadequacy of our statistical sample for so many of the words under discussion. Lyne, however, feels that it is both possible and necessary not only to establish that a given word is a prosaism, but even to guess at what kind of prosaism it is, and why (pp. 8–9). This is, of course, *a fortiori* an even dicier business, as Lyne admits when he notes that “often our efforts will be no more than informed or inspired guess-work” (p. 9)—a candid observation, but one that does little to inspire confidence.

But let us for a moment ignore these issues and suppose that the idea itself of *unpoetische Wörter* and our means of measuring a specific word’s stylistic register were not fraught with difficulties. Even so, it escapes me what this approach really contributes to Lyne’s work. Only, I think, in the case of his dubious argument that Aeneas is characterized as a soldier by his prosaic and specifically Caesarean vocabulary (pp. 116–127) is it important that the words be unpoetic. But in general, Lyne does not show that Vergil handles the allegedly prosaic diction he discusses in a way that differs much from his treatment of poetic diction. Indeed, Lyne doesn’t even suggest that this might be the case. But if it is not, then what is the point of insisting on the special importance of unpoetic vocabulary? Further, he purports to discuss (in the words of the subtitle) “characteristic techniques of style in Vergil’s *Aeneid*.” And yet, chapter 1 associates these techniques primarily with Horace, and examples from other poets ranging back to Homer are adduced throughout the book. In view of these facts, one has to wonder what is characteristically Vergilian about the techniques that Lyne identifies.

As for the techniques themselves, Lyne argues that Vergil converted the prosaic into the poetic by several quite definite means. He tries to define these

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techniques with precision and provides them with a number of guilty-sounding names (e.g. "Incitement," "Trespass," "Exploitation," "Extortion"), which I, at least, found rather off-putting. Lyne also insistently repeats eccentrically chosen phrases to suggest how the techniques in question work. In discussing the technique that he calls "Acquisition," for instance, Lyne argues that by being used in a striking way, or else in a way that is not striking, but nevertheless limits the word's semantic range, an ordinary word "acquires a value" that the poet can "cash in" for a special effect (pp. 178–179). The conception of poetic profit-taking implicit in this financial metaphor becomes a fixture in Lyne's ensuing discussion as a kind of technical term and is repeated at every opportunity. The same is done with any number of other phrases, and the cumulative effect is wearying. The main question, however, is whether the techniques that Lyne identifies really do correspond to something in Vergil's poetic arsenal. The answer that I would give is a yes, but a qualified one. The phenomena that Lyne discusses are for the most part real; but again, it is not clear that they are characteristic of Vergil alone, or that students of Vergil will be better off discussing them in Lyne's terms. The techniques themselves will be more or less recognizable to all students of poetry, and some of the specific discussions will look familiar to most Vergilians. For instance, Lyne observes that *laetus*, despite its cheerful denotation, in the *Aeneid* could almost be said to be a foreboding or even threatening word, so often does its appearance precede immediate disaster (pp. 181–185). But this is an idea that most Vergilians, I am sure, have long taken for granted; certainly I first heard it in school, and have handed it on to my own students as a critical commonplace. In a way I sympathize with Lyne's attempt to impose a rigorous method on such empirical observations; but in general, and especially in view of the methodological problems mentioned above, the effort seems not to be justified by the results.

In sum, although most serious Vergilians will probably want to read this book in order to see what Lyne has to say about this or that passage, I doubt that many will find the overall thesis particularly attractive or useful. But it is the standard that Lyne has set for himself that makes this book's weaknesses so apparent. Many times in the course of the argument, the author refers to a point made in his earlier *Further Voices in Vergil's Aeneid* (Oxford 1987). The reader who does not know that book is advised to follow up the references for a glimpse of Lyne at his best.

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