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Reviewed Work: *The Criticism of Didactic Poetry: Essays on Lucretius, Virgil, and Ovid* by Alexander Dalzell

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Reviewed Work: *The Criticism of Didactic Poetry: Essays on Lucretius, Virgil, and Ovid* by Alexander Dalzell

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THE CRITICISM OF DIDACTIC POETRY: ESSAYS ON LUCRETIUS, VIRGIL, AND OVID. By ALEXANDER DALZELL. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press (The Robson Classical Lectures). 1996. Pp. xii, 212.

THE BOOK UNDER REVIEW PRESENTS THREE ESSAYS (chapters 1, 2, and 4) that were delivered as the Robson Lectures at Victoria College, Toronto, in October 1990. They have been "considerably enlarged and revised" for publication, and supplemented by two additional essays that "always formed part of [the author's] original design" (xi). There are also a brief preface, an introduction, and a bibliography, but no index.

The main title of the book, which reappears as the title of chapter 1, seems to present it as a unified work of generic criticism. This impression is soon reinforced. In the book's preface, the author announces that his "debt to modern critical theory will be obvious" (xi); then, in the introduction, he writes of postmodern liberation from traditional generic straitjacketing as a positive development that actually brings us closer to the understanding of genre shared by classical poets, not as a set of prescriptive rules, but as a more fluid set of communications protocols. "There can be no fixed laws of genre," he writes, "since every new work of art alters the canon and, in doing so, rewrites the rules" (6). Up to this point, which is still quite early in the volume, it seems reasonable to expect that one is dealing with a theoretical inquiry into the idea of didactic poetry as such. But this expectation must soon be revised. In chapter 1, Dalzell guides the reader on an eclectic tour through the history of literary theory in which he finds no productive unity of approach to didactic poetry or to genre. Modern critics are cited very off-handedly and in fact very little effort is made to engage with contemporary theory of any kind. In keeping with the position announced in the introduction, Dalzell assumes that modern criticism has been consistently misguided in the realm of genre theory; but here, in contrast to the introduction, the more fluid postmodern position seems to be viewed merely as a state of aporia. He therefore turns to a survey of ancient theorists, which concludes with the unsurprising observation that "none of these disappointing essays in literary classification suggests that much thought was given [in antiquity] to the criticism of didactic poetry. We have no evidence of any serious attempt to define the genre or give a description of its character. For that we must turn to the poets themselves" (21). The remainder of the chapter thus considers what the ancient practitioners of didactic poetry have to say about the genre; and the four chapters that follow, which are the actual heart of the volume, consider three of those practitioners in greater depth.

The first two of these essays are both on Lucretius, and they show Dalzell at his best. Chapter 2, “The *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius,” is a good general introduction to a number of familiar issues in Lucretian scholarship. As others have done, Dalzell takes Lucretius’ poem as “the test case for theories of didactic poetry” (36). In considering such problems as the relationship between Lucretius’ technical subject and the poetic form in which he propounded it, or his position within the literary landscape of first-century Rome, or his handling of Memmius as addressee, Dalzell breaks no new ground, but does an effective job of introducing less experienced readers to these important issues. Chapter 3, “The Philosophical Language of Lucretius,” is the single best essay in the book and deserves to become a standard entry in every Lucretian bibliography. Here Dalzell surveys the key issues surrounding Lucretius’ innovations in handling and enriching both Latin philosophical language and *Dichtersprache*, in exploiting the peculiar powers of both Latin and Greek within his personal idiolect, in exploiting such humble devices as repetition, and so forth. Dalzell’s own enthusiasm for this topic is palpable and infectious.¹ As a whole, these two essays make an effective introduction to basic issues in Lucretian scholarship, and the bibliography cited by Dalzell will enable the interested beginner to find his or her way to the most important secondary literature on more specific topics.

Perhaps chapter 3 in particular is a hard act to follow, but I found chapter 4, “The *Georgics* of Virgil,” to be certainly the weakest in the book. Its critical perspective is essentially that of Wilkinson, which even today, more than thirty years after it appeared, remains an excellent introduction to basic, formal features of the poem, but which was never a very penetrating work of interpretation. “Why,” Wilkinson wrote, “should everything have to be *interpreted*?”² Dalzell, in a similar vein, groups the *Georgics* with modern didactic genres such as glossy coffee-table books on gardens and gardening, “some, I am told . . . purchased by people who have never planted a petunia or hoed a row of turnips.” Dalzell feels that many ancient didactic poems—“didactic enough to be taken notice of by experts in the field, but not didactic enough to be useful to the serious practitioner”—fall into the same category, which he calls “the armchair school of practical knowledge” (111–112). My summary does no justice to the cheerful tone that pervades this essay, a tone that for many will be in welcome contrast to the somber notes that have often accompanied *Georgics* criticism of more recent date. But I confess my disappointment that Dalzell does not engage more earnestly with the main trends of *Georgics* criticism, which, whether it adopts a more “optimistic” or “pessimistic” view of the poem, nevertheless takes it to be serious moral and political utterance, and not just a piece of middlebrow entertainment.³

¹ I must say that, in view of Dalzell’s keen appreciation of Lucretius’ linguistic and stylistic powers, I was frankly puzzled by his rejection (66) of the more and more widely accepted idea that Lucretius’ language is a simulacrum of the physical universe that he describes, and specifically that the grammatical rearrangement of the same letters (Greek *stoicheia*, Latin *elementa*) to produce different words reflects the physical rearrangement of atoms (Greek *stoicheia*, Latin *elementa*) to produce different compound entities.

² L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil: A Critical Survey* (Cambridge 1969) 7 (original emphasis).

³ A clearly superior approach (in my view), though it appeared too late for Dalzell to make use of it, is that of William Batstone, “Virgilian Didaxis: Value and Meaning in the *Georgics*,” in C. Martindale (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge 1997) 125–144.

The final chapter on "Ovid: The *Ars Amatoria*" does not rise quite to the level of those on Lucretius, but is certainly better than the essay on Vergil. If the *De Rerum Natura* is the ultimate test-case for any theory of didactic poetry, then Ovid's *Ars* presents considerable challenges of its own. Dalzell considers the appropriateness of viewing the *Ars* through various lenses, including those of morality and even practical advice. In keeping with his general approach, Dalzell settles on genre, but this time genre defined by strictly formal criteria: "To Ovid all literature was serious business, and elegy was entitled to its proper honour. What separated epic from elegy was not a question of literary status or poetic fame: it was a question of genre. Elegy, as Ovid understood it, could not carry the sort of message which we expect to find in epic or in tragedy" (136). This position, left unqualified, would hardly be acceptable; but Dalzell goes on to consider the concept of *didactic* elegy in terms inspired by Stephen Hinds's work on the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti*.⁴ He thus manages some interesting observations on the problem posed by the *Ars* as "a mock-didactic poem, a didactic poem for those who do not need to learn" (164).

The trajectory of the volume thus describes a movement from the urgency and earnestness with which Lucretius presents his message of salvation, to Vergil's presentation (on Dalzell's reading) of real lessons about farming as providing an occasion for a fairly conventional type of aesthetic refreshment, to Ovid's definition of a most sophisticated relationship between a didactic poet who in fact has nothing to teach his readers. The history of the didactic genre implied by this trajectory might usefully have been explored in a conclusion; but the book has none, and I felt this as a lack. Certainly the introduction and the opening chapter raise the expectation that the book will present some unified idea about didactic poetry as such, whether literary-historical or theoretical in character; and a concluding argument, or even a brief statement summarizing what the four independent author-oriented essays might have to contribute to such an argument, would have done something to satisfy these expectations. On the other hand, one has to admit that the first chapter raises issues that the rest of the book simply does not address, and no conclusion could easily have resolved these differences. For, even if we do not expect a theoretically sophisticated approach to didactic or to genre theory, a really comprehensive survey of didactic poetry as a genre ought to do more than just mention authors like Hesiod, Aratus, Nicander, Horace, Germanicus, and Manilius.⁵ There is no need to dwell on this matter, but I want to stress that no one should approach this volume with the expectation of finding a cogent theoretical statement about didactic poetry. In fact, the theoretical position that Dalzell adopts is a little like Jowett's dictum about textual criticism. The doyen of Balliol advised his pupils, "Don't criticise classical texts; buy a good text." Dalzell counsels his readers not to theorize about the didactic genre, but to read good didactic poems. This volume, then, is best viewed as a collection of basically independent essays loosely unified by the theme of didactic poetry. It is the work of a fine scholar and a sensitive reader of Latin poetry, but its value lies in the details rather than the attempt at a unified design.

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⁴ S. Hinds, *The Metamorphosis of Persephone: Ovid and the Self-Conscious Muse* (Cambridge 1987).

⁵ Dalzell in fact calls Manilius "the didactic poet who is most articulate about his function" (30), but deals with him in a summary paragraph (*ibid.*).