

The Literary Background of Virgil:  
Notes on the Vocabulary of the *Georgics*

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Virgil can be considered linguistically as a poet who had to solve stylistic problems by selecting words. Latin poets, who depended mostly on Greek models, were aware of these difficulties, and their works bear witness to a conscious effort in this direction. The *Georgics*, half-way between the still irregular poetry of the neoteric young Virgil and the classic epos of the *Aeneid*, show by their vocabulary the evolution of the poet. Virgil in his poetical career became a master of language. Latin poetry depended after him on the language he had shaped. Like Cicero in prose, he was the classic model in poetry.

How did Virgil give form to his poetic style? He was never so critically minded as Horace about his predecessors in Roman poetry. If Horace, bringing to the Roman Parnassus the Muses of Archilochos, Pindar and the Lesbians, had to break away from the neoteric poets and could not find any guidance in the epic tradition, Virgil, only seventeen years younger than Catullus, and just five older than Horace, but educated in the provinces, derived more directly from the current streams of Roman poetry.

Cicero's classicism was eclectic and so was Virgil's, much more than Horace's. The model for the *Georgics* was, especially in book I, Hesiod, although inevitably the old poet, archaic and rough for the cultivated Romans of those times, was imitated by him in a modern and critical spirit.

It is generally known that the first hemistich of *Georgics* I. 299 is a translation: *nudus ara, sere nudus*. But what in Hesiod was a primitive reminiscence, is explained by Virgil rationalistically and, it seems, unnecessarily: nudity in plowing and sowing meant for him that this

operation must be finished before the arrival of the winter: *nudus ara, sere nudus; hiems ignava colono*. Thus Virgil modernizes the Hesiodic prescription (*Erga* 391-93):

γυμνὸν σπείρειν, γυμνον δὲ βοωτεῖν,  
 γυμνὸν δ' ἀμάειν, εἴ χ' ὄρια πάντ' ἐθέλησθα  
 ἔργα κομίζεσθαι Δημήτερος....

Posterity could not understand these archaic customs, and in fact Virgil contradicts his own explanation<sup>1</sup> in the following verses (305-310), in which he speaks of the farmer's activities during the *ignava hiems*, the quiet winter. Some contemporary readers did not accept Virgil's rationalization, and, as the *Vita Donati*<sup>2</sup> says, an envious detractor of the poet parodied Virgil's line thus: *nudus ara, sere nudus: habebis frigore febrem*.

Grammarians who commented on Hesiod had difficulties with the passage in the *Erga*. We find in the scholia<sup>3</sup> two interpretations: one of them, which Virgil followed, simply prescribes doing the job before the cold arrives (and perhaps because of that Virgil did not translate the Hesiodic ἀμάειν "to harvest"); the other, which seems to be older, and is considered by Wilamowitz<sup>4</sup> to be Proclus', states that the plowman should not wear any clothes which could impede his movements. Even the ἱμάτιον of the scholia would be too much.

In fact, it is well attested that nudity was usual in plowing among the ancients. Wilamowitz<sup>5</sup> draws attention to a vase of Nicosthenes, and in M. L. West's commentary<sup>6</sup> examples of Greek vases, collected by A. S. F. Gow, confirm that plowing and sowing were carried out both in the nude and with some clothes on. In the Hesiodic *Scutum Herc.* 287 plowmen wear clothes tucked up.<sup>7</sup> Modern commentators have compromised by sometimes translating the Virgilian *nudus* as

<sup>1</sup>As E. Paratore comments on I. 305 ff., *Le Georgiche* (7th ed., Milan 1964).

<sup>2</sup>Ed. I. Brummer, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>*Scholia Vetera in Hesiodi Opera et Dies*, rec. Augustinus Pertusi, Pubbl. dell'Università Cattol. S. Cuore, Vol. LIII (Milan, n.d.), p. 136: πρὸ ψύχους, φησί, ἐν ᾧ δυνήσῃ γυμνὸς εἶναι καὶ βοῦσι ἐπακολουθεῖν. ἀντὶ τοῦ ὡσάν πρόθυμος ἔσῃ περὶ τὸ ἔργον, μὴ φορῶν τὸ ἱμάτιόν σου, ἵνα μὴ ἐμποδίζῃ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ. Servius agrees with the first explanation: *adeo sereno caelo ut amictum possis contemnere* (in *Georg.* I. 299).

<sup>4</sup>*Hesiodos Erga*, erklärt von U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (Berlin 1928), p. 88.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup>Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ed. with Prolegomena and Commentary by M. L. West (Oxford 1978), p. 257.

<sup>7</sup>Hesiod, *Scutum Herc.*, a cura di C. F. Russo (Florence 1950), *in loc.*

“ohne Oberkleid,” “just with a tunic,”<sup>8</sup> forgetting that Pliny (*Nat. hist.* XVIII. 20) speaks of the nudity of Cincinnatus who was called to his military duties from the plow (cf. also Livy III. 26. 9).

Since Virgil was imitating Hesiod's *Erga*, he was obliged, in spite of being nearly a neoteric, to accept, under the influence of Lucretius, the whole epic tradition of Roman literature. Let us consider now a few epic elements in Virgil's vocabulary.

The adverb *ceu* never appears in the *Bucolics*, or in the *Appendix*. But for epic comparisons *ceu* was the right word to translate ὡς or ὡστέ. Thus *ceu* is not found in the old comic poets, or in prose previous to Seneca, but it occurs<sup>9</sup> in Ennius and Lucretius, and in Catullus' epic poem 64 (v. 239); in using it Virgil gives the necessary epic flavor to his style in the *Georgics*:

*ceu pressae cum iam portum tetigere carinae...*(I. 303)  
*ceu naufraga corpora fluctus...*(III. 542)  
*ceu pulvere ab alto...*(IV. 96).

It is interesting to observe that among the scanty fragments of Varius, the intimate friend of Virgil, one has been preserved (Morel, *Frag. poet. latin.*, p. 100, no. 4) where *ceu* introduces the comparison of a bitch pursuing a hind. The Epicurean subject of this poem *De morte* imposed a Lucretian vocabulary on Varius.

Virgil's wish to stress his epic vocation by evoking Ennius is found in the use of expressions like *nox intempesta*. This had been coined by Ennius (*Ann.* 102 and 167 Vahlen). But Virgil underlines the archaic style by closing the hexameter with a monosyllabic word:<sup>10</sup> *aut intempesta silet nox* (I. 247). Virgil's allusion to well known verses of Ennius is often transparent. Thus in his variations on the epitaph of the old poet of Rudiae: *Volito vivos per ora virum* (*Epigr.* 18 Vahlen): Virgil desires poetic glory, and finally *virum volitare per ora* (*Georg.* III. 9). The same motif (already imitated by *Lucr.* IV. 38, *umbras inter vivos volitare*) appears also in *Georg.* IV. 226: *viva volare*.

The epic style carried a traditional weight. Yet Virgil, who had started his poetry under the influence of the *cantores Euphorionis*, never renounced neoteric methods. Let us examine for instance *Georg.* III. 338: *litoraue alcyonen resonant, acalanthida dumi*. Of the two birds

<sup>8</sup> *Vergils Gedichte*, erklärt von Th. Ladewig, C. Schaper und P. Deuticke, I, *Buk.* und *Georg.*, 9. Aufl. bearbeitet von Paul Jahn (Berlin 1915), *in loc.*

<sup>9</sup> *P. Vergilius Maro, Aeneis Buch VI*, erklärt von E. Norden (3rd ed., Berlin-Leipzig 1926), p. 439.

<sup>10</sup> As in the ending of the light-hearted hexameter *Georg.* I. 181: *exiguus mus*; cf.

named in this line, the halcyon had already been taken up into Latin poetry,<sup>11</sup> but the other name, *acalanthis*, was apparently odd even in Greek, and belongs to erudite elements in the Alexandrine tradition. The word seems to be a variant form of the better known ἀκανθίς 'goldfinch, *Fringilla carduelis*' or 'linnet, *Fr. linaria*', which is attested in Aristophanes, Antoninus Liberalis and several lexica.<sup>12</sup>

Greek words play a role in poetry, following the long Greek tradition initiated by Homer and Hesiod with their euphonic catalogues of Nymphs and Nereids. The artistic verse of *Georg.* I. 437, with its hiatus and elision, *Glauco | et Panopeae et | Inoo Melicertae*, is, as Aulus Gellius XIII. 26. 3 says, an imitation of the modern poet Parthenius, but the Virgilian line is, according to the same scholar, "νεωτερικώτερος et quodam quasi ferumine inmisso fucator."

Greek words were necessary for every learned subject, but sometimes they are used simply for the sake of euphony. So with the quasi hapax *hyalus*:

eam circum Milesia vellera Nymphae  
carpebant hyali saturo fucata colore (IV. 334-35).

Locks of wool "that had been dyed a deep glassy green,"<sup>13</sup> i.e. *hyalino, vitreo, viridi, nymphis apto* (Servius *in loc.*), displayed a preciousness new in Latin poetry, one that was still imitated in later times by Ausonius and Prudentius (*Thes. ling. Lat.* VI. 3130).

The meanings of such euphonic words are sometimes difficult to determine. This is probably the case too with the passage in which the poet speaks of the most convenient herbs to plant around the beehives:

Haec circum casiae virides et olentia late  
serpylla et graviter spirantis copia thymbrae  
floreant, inriguumque bibant violaria fontem (*Georg.* IV. 30-32).

The Greek θύμβρα is usually considered to be 'savory' (*Satureia thymbra* for the botanists, *LSJ*). But Columella, trying to be more precise, and in a chapter which begins with a reference to this Virgilian text, enumerates (IX. 4. 6; cf. also section 2 of the same chapter) as the

Norden, *op. cit.* in the previous note, p. 440.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil, A critical survey* (Cambridge 1969), p. 237, for its identification.

<sup>12</sup>See F. R. Adrados and collaborators, *Diccionario griego-español*, I (Madrid 1980), p. 107, where we find for ἀκαλανθίς the translation "jilguero, *Fringilla carduelis*." Servius *in loc.* vacillates between *lusciniā* and *carduelis*, but the commentary attributed to Probus (Thilo-Hagen III, p. 383) prefers rightly *carduelis*.

<sup>13</sup>Translation by Gary B. Miles, *Virgil's Georgics, A new interpretation*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1980), p. 262.

most convenient herbs, in first place thyme, then, as the next best, *thymbra*, *serpyllum* and *origanum*. In the translation of E. Heffner (Loeb) these correspond to "Greek savory, wild thyme and marjoram." Then Columella adds as *tertia notae, sed adhuc generosae, marinus ros et nostras cunila, quam dixi* (same chapter, section 2) *satureiam*.<sup>14</sup> In the last place come all the other herbs. In Columella's very extensive explanation, *thymbra* occupies a higher place than the Latin *satureia* 'savory', and evidently the learned agriculturalist used the word to describe another plant, which is confirmed by a passage in his poetic book on gardens (X. 233): *et satureia thymi referens thymbraeque saporem*. It seems probable therefore that Virgil referred to some plant, perhaps encountered in a Greek author, which he did not trouble to identify. The new *Oxford Latin Dictionary*<sup>15</sup> has rightly reopened interpretation by proposing for *thymbra* "an aromatic plant, perh. Cretan thyme, *Corydanthus capitatus*."

But the beautiful Virgilian lines, sprinkled with euphonic Greek words, were in their details not intended to be a manual for real farmers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>The *Servius auctus* (*in loc.*) identifies *thymbra* and *satureia*: *thymbre est, quam cunilam vocamus*.

<sup>15</sup>Last fascicle, ed. P. G. W. Glare, 1982, p. 1939.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Brooks Otis, *Virgil, A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford 1964), p. 145.