V.S. Lectures, No. 80

THE GEORGICS IN AFTER TIMES

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(Resumé of a paper read to the Society on 21st January 1967, which is intended, in revised form, to be the final chapter of a book on the *Georgics*.)

Within three years of its appearance the *Georgics* became one of the first contemporary poems to be read in school, and throughout the remainder of classical antiquity it shared in the extraordinary reverence paid to all Virgil's work. It continued to be read through the thousand years of the Dark and Middle Ages. If we bear in mind that the relative lengths of the *Bucolics*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid* are as2:5:20, the *Georgics* is cited as frequently as the other works by grammarians and metrists such as Aldhelm. It also played an integral part in the strange conception of the 'Rota Virgilii', in which the Virgilian corpus was regarded as embodying a hierarchy of triads grounded in the nature of things; not only of plain, middle and grand styles of writing, but of stages of social evolution (pastoral, agricultural, martial), of kinds of life (contemplative, sensual, active) of social ranks (shepherd, farmer, soldier), of locales (pasture, ploughland, castle or town), of animals (sheep, cow, horse), of trees (beech, fruit trees, laurel or oak), of implements (crook, plough, sword).

But if we scrutinise the literature more closely, we find that the echoes from the *Georgics* are proportionally fewer, especially after the Carolingian period. Curtius has insisted that the influence of the *Bucolics* in later times was hardly less than that of the *Aeneid*; but the *Georgics* recedes into the background. In the later Middle Ages the *Bucolics* receded too. Dante refers four times to the *Pollio*, not certainly to any other Eclogue; and he has only two or three references to the *Georgics* as against a hundred to the *Aeneid*. Chaucer seems to have known only the epic.

Nor have we from these thousand years, so far as I know, any poem of georgic subject matter. The nearest approach is the *Hortulus* of Walafrid Strabo, a work of the early ninth century. This owes its conception, its verse-technique, and a number of words and phrases to the *Georgics*, and its monastic author cultivated his garden *ipse manu*. But Virgil notoriously renounced the theme of gardens; and in any case this is not an organic poem like the *Georgics*, but consists, after an introduction, of twenty-seven short poems on the *uses* of various plants, mainly vegetables. Ulterior significance comes in only at the end, where the lily and rose are treated as symbols of faith and martyrdom, leading up to a doxology to the Virgin. This is not to disparage it. It is a charming work, worthy of the de luxe Eton-edited edition produced last year by the Hunt Botanical Library of Pittsburgh.

In spite of the fact that the monasteries owned often huge agricultural estates, the evidence suggests that, except in some early Benedictine and again in some early Cistercian houses, monks rarely worked on the land themselves. The poets whose Christian and Secular poems are described in the three large volumes of the lamented Dr. Raby are unlikely to have been close to the soil.

There were odd things in the *Georgics* that interested Christians from early times. The doctrine of divine immanence seemed to be presaged by the *deum namque ire per omnes* passage as well as by the corresponding passage in *Aeneid* VI. But more remarkable is their appropriation of Virgil's idealised bees. These had the especial merit of propagating their species without sexual intercourse, and thus providing a paradigm for the Virgin Mary. There was a ceremony performed on Easter Eve in some places for a thousand years, the Blessing of the Candles. It included an oration in praise of candles and of the materials that composed them

in which the _Georgics_ were often drawn upon when it came to beeswax.

We should also expect the _Georgics_ to be allegorised in a Christian sense, like the _Aeneid_, in the Middle Ages. Fulgentius, who really started the industry in the fifth or sixth century, flinches at the prospect. 'The _Bucolics_ and _Georgics_', he says 'contain truths of such profundity that it is impossible fully to fathom them.' But he does reveal that for him Book I is concerned with Astrology, II with Physiognomy and Medicine, III with Augury and IV with Music. The end of IV was 'apotelesmatic'. This episode was always popular, especially the included story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Boethius saw this as allegorical of the soul that looks backward from the highest good to Tartarus again. In a poem on _Amor et Amicitia_ which has been attributed to Abelard 'saevus amor' is instanced by the stories of Pyramus and Thisbe from Ovid, of Leander and Hero from _Georgics_ III, and as climax of Orpheus and Eurydice from _Georgics_ IV. But in so far as the _Georgics_ was popular, it was for set pieces such as these, not for the main, agricultural part of the poem.

We unfortunately know little of the _Georgica Spiritualia_ of the early thirteenth century now attributed to John of Garland, for the 116 odd hexameters of moral excerpts we have need not be typical. This or other poems may have preceded the _Agricultura Sacra_ of Naogeorgus, _alias_ Thomas Kirchmayer, published in 1550, a work in five books of hexameters indebted, but not markedly, to Virgil. It instructs man in the care of the soul, his estate. There may also have been medieval predecessors of the moralisation which was a feature of the translation published in 1519 by Michel Guillaume de Tours. According to him the four Books of the _Georgics_ represent the four cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, courage and justice. The soul must be cultivated by the Catholic faith, manured by reading the scriptures and listening to homilies, watered by thoughts of the paradise to come, sown with virtue, and tended with the implements of the Ten Commandments. In Book IV the young bullock killed to regenerate the stock of bees is Christ, the room with four windows where the act is to be performed is the Cross with its four arms of charity, humility, obedience and patience. What I have not found so far is any medieval exposition of the _Georgics_ as embodying the 'Gospel of Work', an aspect more congenial to modern, and especially Protestant, minds.

So much for the Middle Ages. What has surprised me, and may surprise others, is how little mark the _Georgics_ made compared with the _Bucolics_, let alone the _Aeneid_. The midwife of the Renaissance was Petrarch. In striking contrast to Dante and Chaucer, he quotes quite freely from the _Georgics_, though not in proportion to the rest of Virgil and with a tendency to pick out tags and mottoes. _Labor omnia vincit_, he said as he struggled up the Mont Ventoux on the prototype of all modern mountain-climbs, and again in his speech when he was crowned on the Capitol. Yet although a keen and lifelong gardener, he never sought to emulate the _Georgics_ as he did the _Bucolics_ when founding the humanistic pastoral allegory and the _Aeneid_ in his Latin epic _Africa_. Most of the Humanists were townsmen; and when, about 1425, Maffeo Vegio was constrained by plague to reside in the country, he complained in an amusing poem of discomforts not mentioned by Virgil in his _laus ruris_. It was only late in the fifteenth century, when the communes were threatened by foreign invaders, that they began to lift up their eyes to the peace of the countryside and to the hardy peasant stock from which they hoped for salvation.

The first georgic poem of the Renaissance was Politian's _Rusticus_ of 1483, an introduction in 570 hexameters to be recited before his lectures on Hesiod and the _Georgics_. Its success initiated the vogue for didactic poetry in Italian, which continued throughout the sixteenth century. The most illustrious example, though modelled on Virgil, was not about agriculture, but about _Syphilis_, the scourge brought back from Hayti by Columbus' men and spread over Europe by the disbanded mercenaries of Charles VIII and to the far east by Vasco da Gama. The author,

Fracastoro, was a Veronese doctor. But some of these poems were agricultural, Giovanni Rucellai's charming Le Api on bees (1539) being followed by Luigi Alamanni's full-scale La Coltivazione, a work of genuinely didactic intention.

Alamanni was an exile in France, and his poem was dedicated to François I in 1546. Our scene now shifts, in fact, to France. There was some tendency there to bypass the Georgics, as being an agricultural treatise; but Montaigne, living on his country estate in Périgord, was an enthusiast in whose numerous quotations from Virgil there is for once a slight preponderance on this side of his work. Ronsard, who knew Virgil by heart, has nearly 200 echoes of the Georgics besides specific imitations; and here one finds a tendency that became almost universal, to favour a few sections only, and those not from the didactic stretches that form the main part of the work. 60% of Ronsard's echoes come from seven passages totalling only 25% of the original.

The English Renaissance followed in the wake of France, and even Scotland, and some two centuries behind Italy. Here again we have the same sense of the Georgics receding. Thus although in the pattern of sixteenth century grammar-school syllabuses, when it was an alternative to the Bucolics, Professor Clarke has observed that if either was omitted it was probably the Georgics. No one translated the work into English before Abraham Fleming's plain crib of 1589. In the sixteenth century it was in the doldrums not only in England but all over Europe, the only considerable work it inspired being Rene Rapin's Horti of 1665, a poem on which Mrs. Dubois enlightened the Virgil Society a few years ago.

The eighteenth century revival and boom seems to have begun in England, perhaps with the publication in 1697 of Dryden's translation. Prefixed to this was a short essay complaining of past neglect and introducing the poem with understanding and enthusiasm. The author, it was later revealed, was the young Joseph Addison. He insisted on the distinction, often confused in the past, between pastoral and georgic. He was also feeling for the idea that the poem was, in its net effect, not didactic but descriptive, and also for a conception of the organic or symphonic unity of the poem. The vogue that followed was astonishing. This was the great age of country-house life and agricultural interest, of the educated class catered for by the Gentleman's Magazine, founded in 1731. Its poets were in no doubt that their medium should be what they called 'verse Miltonick'. But in fact they developed only one or other aspect of the Virgilian original, and no one produced anything comparable with it.

Some essayed genuine didactic, of whom the first was also the best - John Phillips with his Cyder of 1706. This found a public ready for it, both at home and in translation abroad. 'It need not shun the presence of the original', was Johnson's too indulgent verdict. In Italy Alamanni's poem was rediscovered, twenty editions appearing between 1716 and 1781, and in France de Rosset produced a poem on agriculture in nine books. Others then, more promisingly, developed the descriptive aspect of the Georgics. John Dyer, whose Fleece was to be one of the chief didactic poems, was also a pioneer of descriptive poetry with his Grongar Hill. Nature was the goddess of the age. Sometimes she simply represented the countryside, and the theme O fortunatos blended with Horace's Beatus ille was elaborated ad nauseam, as it had been in sixteenth century France. But here there came an interesting shift. The same passage that supplied the theme

Fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestes,

congenial to the innocent Epicureans of the age that enjoyed peace after the turmoil of civil war happened also to supply by contrast that of

Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas;

and Nature now became envisaged as rerum natura, the universe made known b Newton. The new science appealed to the rising middle class of practical men; and it was here blended with natural religion and Stoic moralising.

Towering above these poets, by common consent, was James Thomson, whose Seasons began to appear in 1726 and became progressively more impregnated with the Georgics. Completed in 1744, it took Europe by storm, and exercised a profound influence not only on literature but on landscape-painting such as that of Gainsborough. The greatest influence of the Georgics in this century was probably exercised indirectly through Thomson. Towards the end of it there appeared garden-georgics, such as William Mason's of 1772-82 which helped to spread over Europe the craze for the English garden as against the old formal gardens associated with Le Notre and Rapin; and the case for and against 'Capability' Brown and his landscape-gardening was argued out in verse. Professor Dudley has recently given the Virgil Society a very just impression of these poets, and I will not dwell on them. They pullulated in France and Italy as well as England; but they produced nothing to rival the overall effect of the Georgics.

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE GEORGICS

Presidential Address delivered to the Virgil Society
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by Sir James Mountford, M.A., D.Litt.

There is no reason to disbelieve the tradition handed down in the Life of Virgil written by Donatus, that the poet spent seven years on the composition of the Georgics; and the fact that there are less than 2200 lines in all the four books together, indicates what great pains he bestowed on the perfection of his work. It must have been about the year 37 B.C. when he was 32 or 33 years old, that he undertook the task in earnest; for Octavian, after his return from the campaign of Actium and the subsequent settlement of the Eastern Empire, invited Virgil in the middle of 29 B.C. to come to his Campanian villa at Atella and read the whole work to him.

Virgil however, dedicates his four books not to Octavian, but to his personal patron Maecenas. It is Maecenas who is addressed in the brief summary of the work with which Book I begins:

> Quid faciat laetas segetes, quo sidere terram
> vertere, Maecenas, ulmisque adiungere vites
> conveniat... (I.1-3)

It is Maecenas whose favour is asked for early in the second book:

> tuque ades inceptumque una decurre laborem,
> o decus, o famae pars maxima nostrae,
> Maecenas... (II.39-41)

And in the third book Virgil speaks in more specific terms when he unmistakably states that this work was commissioned, as it were, by Maecenas:

> Interea Dryadum silvas saltusque sequamur
> intactos, tua, Maecenas, haud mollia iussa;
> te sine nil altum mens incohat... (III.40-42)

On the basis of this explicit reference to the haud mollia iussa of Maecenas it has been not unreasonably assumed that the Georgics are in some general way Virgil's contribution to an agrarian policy which, as early as the year 37 B.C., Octavian and Maecenas are supposed to have had clearly in mind.

At a first glance it may seem strange that a Roman poet who had previously written under the influence and in partial imitation of the pastoral style of