

Poetry and the Visual Arts in Virgil

I want to attempt this topic through an examination of the introduction to *Georgics* 3. Animals are to be the subject of book 3, and the first two lines invoke Pales god of flocks, Apollo the herdsman who fed Admetus' cattle by the River Amphrysus, and Pan from Mount Lycaeus in Arcadia. So far, conventional enough, even cautious; Apollo is *memorande*, 'who must be recalled', the first reminder of a duty. Then comes an impatient switch of tone—everything else (*cetera*, 3), only fit for empty minds, is now popularised, trite (*vulgata*), and four or five much-quoted myths are listed. (It is surprising to find Virgil anticipating Dr Johnson here: "Of the ancient poets every reader feels the mythology tedious and oppressive", and "The machinery of the Pagans is uninteresting to us: when a goddess appears, we grow weary.") Therefore, in 8, a new method must be tried; a second gerundive, a second duty to be performed, to match the call for inspiration in 1. I must rise above the earth (i.e., the subject of the *Georgics*) and become famous also (*quoque*) among men, like Ennius, but in his case his fame was claimed only in his epitaph. I shall achieve fame as a victor and in my lifetime (10), and shall be first, (10), yes first (12) to bring the Muses to my homeland and present her with Idumaeian palms, the best palms, the Nobel prize for literature. I shall found a temple (13) in the lush scenery of the North, suggesting fertility and juiciness (*tenera*, 14–15). I shall be the *triumphator* (16), Caesar the temple's god (Octavian is 'Caesar' throughout the *Georgics*), and my victory will be on an extravagant scale: the 100 four-horse chariots (18) are presumably Virgil's verses, whose horses had only just had their steaming necks eased at the end of *Georgics* 2—*equum fumantia solvere colla* (542); the metaphor persists in Gray's phrase "Dryden's less presumptuous car". Greek games will transfer to the new temple (19–20), there will be sacrifices and offerings (21–3) and theatrical performances (24–5), and this is now a joy (*iuvat* 23) not a duty.

JEAN MINGAY

Now comes another switch of tone, to a military scene in relief on the doors (*pugnam*, 26), and to details of Caesar's successes at the ends of the earth (from *Britanni* to *Parthum*, 25–33). *Spirantia signa* (34) will link all this with Troy, and with Apollo, who is builder of Troy as well as source of inspiration. They will be solid proof (*stabunt*) of the legitimacy of the regime—hence *Invidia* (37–9), presumably shown on another temple decoration, with its impending punishments in Hades, will suppress itself in fear; question or resistance will be impious. It is a well-rounded programme, but the work won't appear yet, for *interea* (40–1) Virgil must fulfil Maecenas' hard demands, and with his support treat of the animals native to Greece (42–5), which brings us back to lines 1–2. Only *mox* (46–8) will Virgil gird himself to recount Caesar's military fame.

This is a puzzling passage, often felt as frigid. To compare it first with the introductions to the other books of the *Georgics*: Book 1 has 42 lines, invoking all the presences which preside over farming, culminating in half a line begging Caesar to accept godlike status while still alive. Maecenas is mentioned in 2. Our book 3 has 48 lines, Maecenas appearing again, and Caesar *passim*, and now openly *templum tenebit* (16). Books 2 and 4 have much shorter preludes; Maecenas again appears in both, but Caesar not. This balanced layout is obviously carefully planned; half-way through the work Caesar's importance has grown,¹ undeniably now to godlike status (16), and Virgil has been overtaken by mighty events which must be implicitly acknowledged. The victory of Actium was won in 31 BC, the date accepted in antiquity for the completion of the *Georgics* was 29. If that date should be slightly later,² that makes no difference to the fact that during the writing of the poem the world was turned upside down. Its topic of farming cannot adequately celebrate Caesar's achievements, but equally cannot be abandoned, by Maecenas' *haud mollia iussa* (41). Life may not suffice for the new topic (*modo vita supersit*, 10), but it will treat of the meaning of Caesar's victories and must be announced now, as if Virgil could not bear to seem perfunctory by tacking his intention on to the end of the *Georgics*; but the fact is that he may have written all the prologues last, as is most natural, and as their carefully balanced form suggests. In that case he only decided to attempt his epic when the *Georgics* were nearly complete.³

Virgil also stresses the importance of his new theme by a cluster of references to previous poets, the most obvious the direct quotation (9) of

Ennius' epitaph *Volito vivu'per ora virum* already mentioned; the call for Maecenas' help in 42 (*te sine nil altum mens incohat*), hinting at Lucretius' dependence on his dedicatee Memmius (*De rer. nat.*, 1.140 *sed tua me virtus...quemvis sufferre laborem suadet*); and the bringing of the Muses from the Aonian Mount (Helicon: 11), formerly taken to refer conventionally to Boeotian Hesiod, but perhaps more probably to Callimachos, who dreamt that the Muses carried him to Mount Helicon. This suggestion is strengthened by the unlikely event of the detachment from a mummy-case of a long papyrus fragment celebrating the victory in a chariot-race of a Queen of Egypt. It appears to belong to the beginning of book 3 of Callimachus' *Aitia*, which may help to decode the puzzle of Virgil's placing of our passage at book 3 of the *Georgics*, reinforced by some overlap of subject-matter.⁴ In addition, Lucretius says (*De rer. nat.*, I.117–19) that Ennius was *primus* in bringing his poetic crown from Helicon, that is, from Greece to Italy, but Virgil goes further;⁵ twice (10 and 12) he stresses that *he* is *primus* is bringing poetical fame to his homeland in Cisalpine Gaul. These references are not merely pedantic or self-conscious, but are re-using material belonging to the fabric of poetry, which needs constant renewal and new contexts—otherwise, *omnia iam vulgata* (4). Virgil's work is one of the clearest examples of the linguistic doctrine of intertextuality, namely that every text rests upon previous texts which reappear in new combinations. (There is an incidental interest for classicists that this view suggests that there was no radical change when epic ceased to be oral; Homer used pre-existing poetry, and so did Virgil.)

However, the most important previous text here re-worked is a motif from Pindar, of a praise-poem described as a hall with golden pillars, or a storm-proof treasure-house of song.⁶ Virgil's temple of marble (that is to say, weather-proof, not an 'insubstantial pageant' of the imagination) is the first echo of Pindar in Latin, and there is another Pindaric touch in the Greek games coming to Italy, and in the metaphor of chariots for verses; Horace somewhat later recalls Pindar several times,⁷ and it is pleasant to think of Virgil and Horace reading him together.

But why does Virgil use the temple motif here? Why is it appropriate for a poem celebrating world-shaking events? First, a temple is an offering on a suitably grand scale, one often vowed by generals as thanksgiving for victory in vast campaigns. In Virgil's temple, Caesar will be *in medio* (16), the indwelling presence (*templum tenebit*), and

JEAN MINGAY

Virgil himself will be the victor (9 and 17) in the struggle with words which will create it. It is the struggle against “general imprecision of feeling” and the victory hoped for by T.S. Eliot: “Words strain...slip slide perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still.”⁸ The poem must not only fuse our perceptions of time, because a new age has begun, but must combine familiar and farflung places (the tender evocation of home, 14–15, and the rhetoric of 26–33), this world and the Underworld, as a magnificently decorated temple would do.

Second, in real life, Caesar had launched into a temple-building programme at once. A temple to Apollo, his tutelary deity, was set up at Actium, and on 9th October 28 BC⁹ the Palatine Temple to Apollo was dedicated, incidentally with games and theatrical shows, much celebrated by the poets. In these same years and soon after, now well into the *Aeneid*, Virgil was writing of Aeneas’ promise in the Underworld to build Apollo a temple, after his wondering description of Apollo’s temple at Cumae built by Daedalus himself (*Aen.* 6.18–33). The promise comes at 6.69: *solido de marmore templum instituam festosque dies*—significant words.¹⁰ Finally at *Aeneid* 8.720 on Aeneas’ Shield there appears *Caesar...sedens...limine Phoebi* (that is, on the threshold of the Palatine temple), and fixing *dona populorum* (7) to the lofty doorposts—just as Aeneas in *Aen.* 3.287 had fixed a shield to the doorposts of the then temple of Apollo imagined at Actium, after the visit to Helenus at Buthrotum.¹¹ The time-telescoping is bewildering and thrilling, and perhaps makes us forget that Virgil’s temple of *Georgics* 3 symbolises his projected poem on *Caesar*, whereas what he was actually writing a few years later was a poem on *Aeneas*. Whenever this prologue was written, it is an insight into Virgil’s mind before he quite reached the inspired solution to his problem of 46–7, his duty to relate Caesar’s brilliant battles; the references to Troy both before and after those lines (35–6 and 48) show the way his mind was working—Caesar in the form of Aeneas will be far more convincing.

Once he got to work on the *Aeneid*, his power of *ekphrasis*, description of scenes and objects, comes out very prominently, and buildings figure largely. The lavish decor, and the hectic tone of the description, of our imaginary temple of *Georgics* 3 begins to look like a dry run for the *Aeneid*, where Dido’s palace in 1, Priam’s palace in 2, Latinus’ temple-palace in 7, all have the atmosphere of contemporary Roman buildings,¹² namely much decoration, luxury and great size, and Dido’s temple being

built to Juno (*Aen.* 1.446–56) is *ingens* and *donis opulentum*, with bronze doors and doorposts, and the series of pictures of the Trojan War which electrifies Aeneas.¹³ These may be wall-paintings, or perhaps reliefs on the doors, but in any case, décor to which Virgil's contemporaries would respond with approval, and Virgil seems to enjoy it too. Even so, the famous passage at *Aen.* 6.847–53 comprehensively denies to Romans achievement in the arts: *excudent alii spirantia mollius aera...to regere imperio populos, Romane, memento*. The sculptors, bronze-workers, wall-painters working on these temples and palaces would all be Greeks; probably the architects were also. *Haec tibi erunt artes* puts Roman success firmly in the sphere of government, but architecture is the most public of the arts and the point at which artistic and governmental spheres intersect. This was glaringly obvious in the 20's BC, since revolution always involves a fresh start in public art, and warmakers turned peacemakers must rebuild, as Virgil here enjoins: *pacique imponere morem*, 'add to peace a settled way of life', with all the buildings that that implies. The simplicity of Evander's dwelling, in the Rome that was not yet Rome, (*Aen.* 8.366–8) contrasts with every other building described or referred to in the *Aeneid*, but eventually Roman political supremacy combines with Greek mastery in the arts to produce the architecture Virgil and his contemporaries admire.

The temple by the Mincius, which foreshadows the *Aeneid*, is not described at first, except as durable (*de marmore* 13). However, the activities imagined as surrounding it come thick and fast; a triumphal procession with the Muses as captives (10–11), games, sacrifices, theatrical presentations (19–25). These blend into the reliefs on the doors, the trophies from the ends of the earth, the presiding statues, which authenticate the elevation of Caesar to the presence within. The passage becomes a scene of action; architecture is moving towards poetry, whose function is to tell a story. And turning the metaphor round, the *Aeneid*, which is here foreseen, can be read partly as a striving towards the architecture which symbolises it, in fact towards that most synchronous of all buildings, a temple; above all a Roman temple, which is also 'read', and almost instantaneously, from the normal frontal viewpoint, with its mostly external ornaments. The story of the poem will become as synchronous as possible; it will reinforce Caesar's revolution by rooting it in the past, and giving that past an assured future with the support of the gods, especially in book 6. In that central book of the *Aeneid*, Virgil's

JEAN MINGAY

past becomes Aeneas' future, just as here, in the central passage of the *Georgics*, Caesar, embodying the new, the present, blends into Troy, the seminal event of the remote past (35–6), and into Virgil's fame stretching into the remote future (47–8).

This is the transcendent message of the *Aeneid*, in spite of W.H. Auden's disapproval in his poem 'Secondary Epic': "No, Virgil, no: Not even the first of the Romans can learn / His Roman history in the future tense." As far as possible the impact of words will be telescoped and made as nearly simultaneous as the impact of art. Sir Joshua Reynolds¹⁴ concluded *Discourse VII* thus: "It is by the analogy that one art bears to another, that many things are ascertained, which either were but faintly seen, or perhaps would not otherwise have been discovered at all... The frequent allusions which any man who treats of any art is obliged to make to others...show their near connection and inseparable relation." Or, as Cicero said, *Etenim omnes artes quae ad humanitatem pertinent habent quoddam commune vinculum, et quasi cognatione quadam inter se continentur*.¹⁵

Sheffield

JEAN MINGAY

NOTES

1. See note 4 below.

2. D.L. Drew, 'Virgil's Marble Temple: G.3. 10–39', *CQ* 18 (1924) 195–202, argues for 27 BC as publication date for the *Georgics*, since this passage blends references to Caesar's Triumph in 29 BC (22 and 28–9) with references to the dedication of the Palatine Temple to Apollo in October 28 BC (17–25, games, gifts, sacrifices, theatrical presentations, cf. Suetonius *Aug.* 43). The same blending occurs on Aeneas' Shield, *Aen.* 8, where 675 ff. describe the battle of Actium, from 714 the Triple Triumph (cf. Suetonius, *Aug.* 22), but from 716 we see the sacrifices consequent upon the vow taken at the Triumph, and from 720 we are present at the dedication of Apollo's Palatine Temple. However, Virgil was probably aware beforehand, in general terms, of the programme promised for the temple dedication; Drew's argument is not strong enough to overthrow the traditional 29 BC date of *Georgics*. After all, Virgil's imaginary temple dedication can have what festivities he chooses; it is really not necessary to authenticate them by reference to the actual festivities of 28 BC.

3. Ulrich Fleischer, 'Musentempel und Octavianehrung des Vergil im Proomium zum dritten Buche der *Georgica*'. *Hermes* 88 (1960) 280–331, argues ingeniously that the 'marble temple' is the *Georgics* itself, not any future epic, since the abrupt transition and switch of tone from 2 to 3 is otherwise intolerable. It is certainly difficult, but

Fleischer's view is only sustainable by a very lengthy argument, whereas Virgil's embarrassment at being caught out on the wrong side of a great gulf in world events is perhaps well conveyed by that very abruptness.

4. I owe this information to Professor Parsons' lecture at the J.A.C.T. Annual General Meeting in Manchester in May 1990. Cf. P. Parsons and H. Lloyd-Jones, *Supplementum Hellenisticum* 100–117.

5. The move to Italy is precisely appropriate both to post-Actium politics, with supremacy now established in the West, and to the eventual subject of Virgil's epic, the fall of Troy and the repudiation of Carthage.

6. L.P. Wilkinson (*The Georgics of Virgil* [Cambridge 1969] 168) points out that "it was not common in antiquity to visualise poetry in terms of architecture and sculpture. But it was quite common in Pindar":

O. 6.1 ff. χρυσέας ὑποστάσαντες εὐτειχεῖ προθύρῳ θαλάμου κίονας.

P. 6.5 ff. ἐτοῖμος ἕμνων | θησαυρὸς...τὸν οὔτε χειμέριος ὄμβρος ἐπακτὸς ἐλθῶν |
...οὔτ' ἄνεμος ἐς μυχοῦς | ἀλὸς δῆξοισι.

Cf. P. 3.113; N. 1.8.

On the topic of *Envy* of the victor (G. 3.37–9), cf. Pindar P. 1.81 ff., P. 2.88, Fr. 94a (Snell) παντὶ δ' ἐπὶ φθόνος ἀνδρὶ κέεται | ἀρετᾶς.

Pelops was a trite topic because he was the prototype of Olympic victors, introduced by Pindar at Syracuse since that city had no mythical heroes: O. 1.25.

7. Horace, *Odes* 3.4.69. *testis mearum...sententiarum* is a startling imitation of Pindar's prosaic moments, as is *Odes* 4.4.21–2: *quaerere distuli, nec scire fas est omnia*; *Odes* 3.4.64 also recalls Pindar, P. 1.39; *Odes* 4.2 is a contrast between Pindar *monte decurrens velut amnis* (5) and Horace himself: *ego apis Matinae more modoque...carmina fingo* (27–32).

8. *Burnt Norton* V.

9. Suetonius, *Aug.* 31.

10. Cf. G. 3.13 *templum de marmore*.

11. Silius Italicus also has two set pieces on temples in *Punica* 1. He proclaims his allegiance to Virgil with the unmistakable echoes of 17 *tantarum causas irarum* (cf. *Aen.* 1.11 *tantaene irae*) and 52, where the River Aufidus near Cannae struggles between contracted banks *per clipeos galeasque virum caesosque per artus* (cf. *Aen.* 1.100 *Simois...scuta virum galeasque et fortia corpora volvit*). He maintains the Virgilian style with two ekphraseis of temples, one to Dido, said to be the scene of her death (81–92), and one of the Roman temple covered in trophies in which the Senate received the envoys from Saguntum (617–29). This motif evidently struck Silius as outstandingly Virgilian, set beside the Turnus-like characterisation of Hannibal and the siege of Saguntum, which recalls the siege of the Trojan camp (*Aen.* 9).

12. J. Morwood in *G&R* 38 (1991) 212–23, esp. n. 22, points out that Dido's Carthage will include a theatre and a Senate (*Aen.* 1.421–9), though the standard Roman view of Virgil's time stressed Carthaginian barbarity.

13. Cf. D.P. Fowler, 'Narrate and describe: the problem of ekphrasis', *JRS* 80 (1991) 25–35, especially 31–5. On p. 31, he stresses the many interpretations possible of the scenes in Juno's temple. This article is enormously interesting, if inconclusive, and includes a valuable bibliography, pp. 25 and 31. Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilised Poetry* (Oxford 1963) links Aeneas here "pitying his heroic past" (p. 285) with

JEAN MINGAY

his "brooding over his guilty secret" suggested by the Pasiphae scene on the temple doors at Cumae (p. 284)—*Veneris monumenta nefandae* (*Aen.* 6.26), and the Ariadne scene—*magnum reginae...amorem* (28). But the Sibyl moves him on sharply at 37: *non hoc ista sibi tempus spectacula poscit*. At this stage Aeneas is enervated by his past, and his experience of art only weakens him further.

14. Cf. Reynolds, *Discourse* XV, 139.

15. Cicero, *Pro Archia* 1.2.