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**Author**

Hexter, Ralph Jay

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*Poets and Critics Read Vergil* Ed. by Sarah Spence. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. Pp. xx + 216. ISBN 0-300-08376-9.

In 1995 Sarah Spence invited three poets and three classicists to participate in a symposium on Vergil. This volume represents that initial experience in print form. Spence expanded it to twelve chapters distributed across three unequal sections. Perhaps we are to think of Vergil's three main works (*Eclogues*, *Georgics*, *Aeneid*), and twelve is the number of books in the *Aeneid*. But it seems to me more as if we had twelve eclogues, twelve different vocalized scenes -- some true dialogues, some monologues, one a round-table. And like the *Eclogues*, it is perhaps best appreciated by connoisseurs of Vergil. This collection is not for those who are first-time readers of the Latin poet.

The pieces are highly variable in quality. With all due respect for the brilliance and love Spence and Robert Fagles bring to Vergil's poetry, their "conversation" (pp. 172-83) is often fatuous and could well have been omitted. The same might be said of Rosanna Warren's brief outing on "The End of the *Aeneid*" (pp. 105-17) and even Mark Strand's "Some Observations on *Aeneid* Book VI (pp. 64-75), slight pieces that do not stand up well next to some truly masterly essays in this volume.

It was a premise of the conference (and the volume) that contemporary poets should also come to voice, but one should hardly be surprised if poets are not at their best when constrained to speak prose. I found even Joseph Brodsky, represented here by two selections reprinted (pp. 19-25) from *On Grief and Reason: Essays*, his own collection of pieces originally appearing in the *New Yorker*, oddly off key. Much of Brodsky's piece is, reflecting its origins, "journalistic," and one is left with the sense that there is a crudity to both Frost and Brodsky that seems unVergilian. Of Spence's experiments to introduce other voices into the texture of her volume, her compilation of brief invited comments (ranging from one long paragraph to five paragraphs) from seven other individuals as a

concluding twelfth chapter ("Lacrimae Rerum: The Influence of Vergil on Poets and Scholars," pp. 184-193) includes some precious insights.

The remaining seven pieces all deserve closer inspection. Some are merely solid. Helen Bacon's "Mortal Father, Divine Mother: *Aeneid* VI and VIII" (pp. 76-85) is a welcome corrective to the repeated outings of the father(s)/son(s) motif and deals well with the figure of Venus herself, a rare achievement. In our era of ideological criticism, it seems fairly innocent. Consider her uncritical reading of the representation of the wolf suckling Romulus and Remus (p. 84).

Stronger and more reflective of interpretive problems are Christine Perkell's "Pastoral Value in Vergil: Some Instances" (pp. 26-43) and Craig Kallendorf's "The *Aeneid* Transformed: Illustration as Interpretation from the Renaissance to the Present" (pp. 121-48). Perkell covers considerable territory in her piece, presenting herself in dialogue with a wide range of scholars and poets, some in the volume, others not. One of her most interesting readings focuses on *Eclogue* 10. There I might seek a more measured, and skeptical, account of Vergil's "generosity" (p. 35) in giving Gallus voice in that poem, allegedly including some of Gallus' very own verses. If this is a generous gift, it is also a sly and coercive one in so far as it compels a revoicing. As an antidote to Perkell's sweet concoction ("a gesture ideally expressive of pastoral love and community") I would point out that another Vergil wrote *timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*.

Kallendorf focuses not on commentaries or verbal imitations but visual renderings, and raises questions of reception in the context of the larger post-philological appreciation of the contingency of all interpretation. "[T]o see the classical past as it was" (p. 133) is clearly some sort of touchstone for Kallendorf (compare "the effort to see Vergil's world on its own terms is not completely successful," p. 124), and he insists on the idea that baroque and romantic artists consciously swerved from that. But who is to say that these artists did not believe that the images they produced were not what they thought the classical past *was*? As if Turner didn't really think he was rendering what a

storm at sea was! Like "realism," authenticity has many forms, and even archaeologists' renderings are susceptible to period stylization. Ranke famously described the historians' task as telling things "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist"; but one must historicize "eigentlich."

There remain four important pieces. One expects great essays from W.R. Johnson, Gian Biagio Conte, and Michael C.J. Putnam, and none lets us down. Spence stages Johnson's "Imaginary Romans: Vergil and the Illusion of National Identity" (pp. 3-16) as "The Frame," the sole chapter in the first section, but the tone of the piece strikes me as elegiac, even valedictory. Certainly, it is a valediction to simplicity and monologism. The "imaginary" of his title builds on Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Johnson tries to come to grips with the experience and perspective of Italians as the older, variegated Italian landscape was replaced by a Roman one, introducing, by means of an extraordinary density of parentheses, a dialogic, even polyphonic intensity into his own piece. As today, much is lost in such processes of "unification," and Johnson is not afraid of drawing parallels; he refers to "ethnic cleansing" (p. 14). "Roman Italy," Johnson writes, "was something both to be loved and hated. That -- not Augustus or the empire...-- is where the pain is" (p. 15). Rather than a simple pessimism about the new regime, in Johnson's sophisticated view this is a knowing vision of illusionism itself. "No matter how often reason manages to enfeeble illusions and unmask them, nevertheless they persist in the world.... Among these...are national identities," "tragic," Johnson avers, whether "they flourish [or]...fail" (p. 16).

Michael Putnam's "Vergil's *Aeneid*: The Final Lines" (pp. 86-104) begins with citation and a precise rendering of 12.919-52. His close analysis of these lines, with attention to metrical organization and syllabic sounds, is particularly apt in a collection that highlights poets and poetry. Indeed, nowhere does the volume suggest more clearly that the value of putting scholars and poets in dialogue is that it inspires the former to

attend to poetry in new and rich ways. Putnam, for example, points to a link between metrics and thought in this passage: the frequent enjambment in this portion he reads as "a linguistic acknowledgment that, as the epic's order and disorder comes to a head, in the plotline itself emotionality triumphs over discipline, passion over decorum" (p. 89). Putnam makes us experience these lines as he, one of Vergil's most acute and sensitive readers, does. From out of this reading, balanced even as it is, and dense in specific insights, it is hard to pick specific examples, but what Putnam makes of the adjective *notis* in v. 942 is as subtle as it is unexpected and, I believe, original (p. 101). It is even more telling (if less subtle) if one recalls that these "well-known studs" were on Pallas' *belt*.

Even in a review that is larger than most, I could hardly do justice to G.B. Conte's "Aristaeus, Orpheus and the *Georgics*: Once Again" (pp. 44-63), here chapter four in Spence's collection. Conte opens with a disarming joke about two rabbis, but this is more than a joke, for Vergilian interpretation does indeed have something Talmudic about it. Conte then proceeds with a masterly consideration of one of the great interpretive cruxes in Vergilian studies: how does the tale of Aristaeus in *Georgics* 4 function in context? He compares Vergil's strategy in the *Georgics* to Plato's use of myth to illustrate his argument in some of his dialogues. As Conte shows, while Aristaeus "appears as the prototype of the farmer-shepherd, [Orpheus] as that of the poet-musician" (p. 51), the former the virtuous Roman man of toil, the latter the victim of love's blandishments, Vergil presents no simplistic allegory. "Instead, the extraordinary artistry of Vergil's story consists precisely in the pathetic force with which each of the two stories (in particular, that of Orpheus) acquires expressive autonomy and is elaborated into a complex narrative" (p. 55). But Conte moves to a new level when he suggests that Vergil calculated the "seduction [his] myth of Orpheus exerts on the reader..." (p. 56). To the extent Vergil himself felt that seduction, he understood the bitterness of its insufficiency. "[T]he sympathy which the story of Orpheus encounters in the text shows the reader how great a

sacrifice it cost Vergil to permit dedication to love, that great force hidden in nature, to be condemned to failure" (p. 62).

There is only one piece which is as complex, rich and deep as Conte's. This is the tenth chapter of Spence's collection, Stephen Merriam Foley's "Not-blank-verse: Surrey's *Aeneid* Translation and the Prehistory of a Form" (pp. 149-71). Foley starts with the observation that scholars generally point to Surrey's English rendering of *Aeneid* 2 and 4 in the 1530's as the origin of English blank verse. Foley insists that we explore the emergence of a prosodic form in its own time rather than give it meaning via what came later, whether Shakespeare or Milton. He sets before our eyes a very evocative "scene of translation" (p. 150). Beyond a printed *Aeneid* with commentary and a manuscript copy of Gavin Douglas' 1513 Scots *Aeneid*, we are "to imagine open for the perusal of the young earl, on a book-wheel or spread out across a large writing table, one or more of the unrhymed Italian hendecasyllabic Vergilian poems..." (p. 151).<sup>1</sup>

Detailing the subtle shifts that occur in verse lines when rhyme is removed, Foley opens our eyes to the microscopic level. "Removing the rhyme from the existing decasyllabic line...in English -- as in French or Italian -- provides a formal blank for neoclassical 'invention' between the source and the target languages..." (p. 155). At first we may think that Foley is no more than playing with the "blank" in "blank [i.e., unrhymed] verse," but via his recurrence to Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Task of the Translator" ("Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers"), this "blank" becomes ever more apocalyptic, and, I would add, ever more Vergilian.

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<sup>1</sup>It is odd that virtually the only production flaws in the whole volume are clustered in Foley's essay. 1) The sentence that begins "The prosodies available" concludes "as much the occasion for interlingual exchange as discrete for language codes," where the second "for" likely should either be removed or expanded to "foreign"; 2) in the quotation from C. Baswell, "resisters" for "registers" (quoted on p. 163, and from a paragraph that in Baswell is on p. 276, not p. 277 as Foley's endnote has it); 3) "devination" for "divination" in the quotation from Benjamin's *Selected Writings* (p. 165); 4) *fides* for *fidus* in the citation of Horace, *AP* 133 (p. 170). Elsewhere note that the quotation of *Aeneid* 4.509 has *antris* but the English Conte accompanies it with (from Wilkinson) translates the textual variant *astris* (p. 58).

What Foley makes of "the trope of the blank" involves specific observations valuable for all students of translation and translation theory. First, Foley's "quotations from Benjamin are intended to introduce an anachronous element to the argument of this chapter, as is appropriate for any story of translation, which is by definition a violation of time and place" (p. 164). But the trajectory soon exceeds one's expectations. Paul de Man's critique of the translators of this very essay of Benjamin launches no mere meditation on translation itself, its philosophy and history. Foley deManiacally turns de Man's preference for (Carol Jacobs') more "literal" and "correct" rendering of Benjamin back on de Man himself and reveals that de Man's "...essay is a challenge...[about] the theology of the Word.... And the person challenged is none other than Jacques Derrida" (p. 168).

Foley's opposition of de Man and Derrida recalls the opposing exempla of Orpheus and Aristaeus in *Georgics* 4, or perhaps dueling singers in some theoretical eclogue, with Benjamin behind them as a master-singer Menalcas. For Foley, "Derrida's reply, ...'Des tours de Babel,'... a tour-de-force reading of Benjamin's 'Die Aufgabe,'" provides "the echo of redemption, duty, and survival [that] drowns out de Man's rhetoric of mere cancellation and death" (p. 169). I sense, however, another blank here in this opposition of the redemptive and cabalistic, on the one hand, and -- what? -- nihilistic?, on the other: "der Fall de Man" represented by de Man's so-called "wartime journalism."<sup>2</sup> This comes close to the surface when Foley, explicating Derrida explicating Benjamin explicating God the destroyer of the tower of Babel, writes, "[t]he commitment of the translator is the duty of survivor and the responsibility for ensuring the survival -- living on, living beyond of the original" (ibid.). Foley here translates the pre-holocaust "Aufgabe" into a post-holocaust version, a holocaust of which Benjamin was not a victim in the normal sense only because he took his own life first.

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<sup>2</sup>Paul de Man, *Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943*, edited by Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

Brodsky, too, in the conclusion of his essay, opens up new realms of grief (and reason) by his unmistakable if veiled reference to the Challenger disaster (p. 25). Since then, and since this collection's publication, we have lived through even more stunning public catastrophes and traumas, though I do not mean to suggest that even *in toto* they approach *the* holocaust to which Foley via Derrida and Benjamin alludes. It is an interesting turn in the long history of Vergil reception that just as there was a Christian Vergil, rooted most famously in the prophecy in *Eclogue 4* (but not limited to that poem), so we are now reading Vergil not merely as post-colonial but as post-Holocaust. In retrospect, Conte's light-hearted opening reference to the two rabbis becomes ever darker and over-determined. Like Benjamin, today Vergil is a poet of the apocalypse.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps only against the backdrop of national and international tragedies that we truly understand the power of Vergil, in all his mature poetry, to speak to our anxieties. This volume does, after all, prove what we gain when we go from poet to interpreter and then shuttle back and forth again and again.

Ralph Hexter

University of California, Berkeley

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<sup>3</sup>Auden's is another voice relevant to this context that also emerges in the volume, especially in Warren's essay.