

CULTIVATED TASTE

The Georgics of Virgil: Bilingual Edition, translated by David Ferry.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 224 pages, \$14 (paper)

Virgil's Georgics, translated by Janet Lembke.
Yale University Press, 144 pages, \$24 (cloth), \$15 (paper)

"THE BEST POEM OF THE BEST POET," said John Dryden of Virgil's *Georgics*. Montaigne praised the Roman poet's four books on farming as "the most accomplished work of poetry." Such estimations would strike even literate people today as hyperbolic or puzzling, given the obscurity of Virgil's masterpiece and its seemingly tedious subject matter. The conceit of plain poetic speech popularized by the Romantics, the ignorance of farming and country life typical of most moderns, and the decline in knowledge of classical literature all leave most people, even the tiny minority of poetry readers, incapable of appreciating the brilliance of the *Georgics* and its place in Greco-Roman and European literature. We live in a much different world from the one in which William Pitt, orating against slavery in the House of Commons, quoted from the first *Georgic*—in Latin.

The reduction of the *Georgics* to a literary curiosity is a shame. Virgil's themes, hardly limited to agriculture, address themselves to the timeless concerns of civilization, politics, and the human condition. And he writes with a virtuosity of poetic craftsmanship rare in any age, but especially so these days, when poetry has been reduced to virtual prose obsessed with private sensibilities, or postmodern word-puzzles destined to be deciphered by graduate students. The *Georgics'* fulfillment of what Virgil's colleague Horace deemed poetry's duty to "delight" and "instruct" explains the high opinion the poem enjoyed from the Renaissance down to the early 19th century. Despite that long eminence, however, the *Georgics* could not "survive the disruption of leisured elegance by the *Sturm und Drang*, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the Romantic Movement," as L.P. Wilkinson puts it in the introduction to his own excellent translation of the *Georgics*.

To translate the *Georgics*, we will see, is a difficult task, and we should be grateful to have two new versions. Janet Lembke and David Ferry are both veteran translators, though Ferry has more experience with Latin. Lembke writes about the natural world and has previously

translated Aeschylus's *Persians* and *The Suppliants* and Euripides' *Electra* and *Hecuba*. Ferry is a poet who has translated *Gilgamesh*. His *Georgics* joins his earlier successes in translating Virgil's *Eclogues* and Horace's *Odes* and *Epistles*. Taken just as translations, both Lembke and Ferry have served Virgil well. Both communicate with fluidity and grace most of the literal meaning of the poem and much of its poetry, which is no small thing in a translation.

VIRGIL'S SEAMLESS MELDING OF POETIC craft with complex philosophical ideas accounts for the difficulty a reader experiences in using any translation. Poetic artistry is always difficult to duplicate in another language, but Virgil's is particularly intricate and sophisticated. He reportedly spent seven years writing these verses, and presented them to Octavian himself in 29 B.C. Like all the great poets of the late Roman Republic, the so-called neoterics, Virgil was influenced by Hellenistic Greek aesthetic canons that put a high value on "learning" and "polish," the display of craftsmanship through a sophisticated interplay of meter, allusion, literary references, wordplay, imagery, and sound. For example, line 8 of the first *Georgic* celebrates the agricultural deities by whose generosity (in Ferry's translation)

Chaoniam pingui glandem mutavit arista.

The earth exchanged the acorns fallen
from oak trees
for ripening ears of grain.

Virgil assumes his reader will know that eating acorns is a motif of the golden age—that time before agriculture and technology first described by the Greek poet Hesiod. Thus he introduces here one of his major themes, that humans are humans because of arts like agriculture, the application of skill and thought to the raw material of a nature indifferent to human survival. Virgil strengthens the reference to the golden age by making this line syntactically a "golden line," a hexameter comprising two nouns, two adjectives, and a verb, a typical display of polish

for Roman neoteric poets. Finally, the adjective "Chaonian" refers to Dodona, a Greek city that had an oracle to Zeus. Virgil delicately suggests that just as the golden age of Saturn must give way to Jupiter's iron age of work for mankind to reach its full potential, so too must Greece (and Greek literature) yield to Rome, a theme he elaborates in the *Aeneid*.

Or consider the multi-layered effect of Virgil's adjective *improbis* in these (once) famous lines:

*labor omnia vicit
improbis, et duris urgens in rebus egestas*

and everything
was toil, relentless toil, urged on by need
(Ferry)

Relentless work conquered
all difficulties—work and urgent need
when times were hard
(Lembke)

Most translators, like Ferry and Lembke, go with "relentless." This choice, while a good one, necessarily misses other, more negative meanings in Latin: "shameless," "immoderate," "flagrant," even "greedy." Such connotations suggest that the need to survive is indifferent to the more refined protocols of civilization. And let's not forget the sly reference Virgil makes here to his own earlier tenth *Eclogue*, in which a lovesick poet says *omnia vincit Amor*, "Love conquers all things." The self-reference is illuminating, for the need to control passion, and the destructive consequences of failing to do so, are one of the *Georgics'* major themes.

AS FOR THE PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS, they are among man's weightiest: the possibilities of creating cultural and political order, indeed human identity itself, in a world riven by the forces of nature and the fierce passions of men. This process often exacts a tragic cost, and depends on the willingness of men to labor grimly and violently at checking the chaos inherent in themselves and

in the cosmos. Virgil's characteristic genius can be seen in the way the *Georgics*, like his later masterpiece the *Aeneid*, raise these problems and examine them from numerous perspectives, at times optimistic about the possibilities of civilized order, at other times philosophical about this order's necessary transience.

Despite the manifest difficulty, both translators, as I say, serve Virgil well. Ferry seems more frequently to find effects in English that capture Virgil's artistry. For example, in his description of water running in a ditch Virgil uses the marvelous phrase "*raucum murmur*," the vowels and the "m's" suggesting the sound of the water, an effect Ferry duplicates with his "muttering guttural sound of the water." This is much more effective than Lembke's "hoarse white noise," particularly since "white noise" has connotations in English inappropriate for describing water in a pre-modern ditch. But there's not much to criticize in either translation.

SUCCESS AT TRANSLATING AN INTELLECTUALLY and poetically sophisticated poem like the *Georgics* depends on how well the general reader is helped not only to appreciate Virgil's artistry, but also to understand his ideas. This means that a thorough introduction, along with copious notes, should accompany the translation so that the reader is "instructed" as well as "delighted." In this regard, both editions leave much to be desired. They do cover the usual biographical and historical issues, though Lembke is better at discussing the influence of Hellenistic poetry on Virgil's craft, and the importance of the Epicurean didactic poet Lucretius on Virgil's poetics and themes. Ferry directs the reader to Richard F. Thomas's excellent Cambridge University Press commentary for more information on these matters, but readers would have benefited in both introductions from a more detailed discussion of Virgil's poetics. Particularly glaring is the failure to address the structure and characteristics of the *epyllion* in Book 4, the story of how the mythic agricultural hero Aristaeus lost and recovered his bees. More than a "mini-epic," as Lembke's note has it, the *epyllion* was the genre in which the protocols of neoteric poetics were most on display, and discussing this genre would have provided an opportunity to illustrate Virgil's poetic principles. Moreover, the relationship of this story to the rest of the *Georgics* is a continuing critical problem, which itself testifies to the poet's sophisticated architectonics.

When it comes to the ideas at the heart of the poem, Lembke is positively misleading, and Ferry, while correctly identifying the work's theme, does not elaborate enough to help the reader understand Virgil's larger meaning. Lembke makes several statements that muddle Virgil's theme. For example, when she writes that Virgil "passionately advocated caring without cease for the land and for the crops and animals it sustained," and that his message is that "only at our gravest peril do we fail to husband the resources on which our lives depend," she makes Virgil sound like a modern romantic environmentalist eager to restore a lost harmony with nature. This obscures something the *Georgics* clearly asserts, that the human relationship with nature is necessarily exploitive and violent—a point Virgil emphasizes by repeatedly comparing farming to war and the farmer's implements to the weapons of war. Nature is brutally indifferent to human flourishing, and only our uniquely human, crafty minds, and virtues like self-control and hard work, allow us to survive. Any beauty and order in nature, apart from the divine celestial bodies, is the consequence of human alteration and skill, as in the Italian farms and towns Virgil famously celebrates in Book 2. In fact, the *Georgics* offer a corrective to many of our own ecological delusions, in which we idealize nature and demonize civilization.

Lembke comes closer to the mark when she says that "an underlying thesis of the *Georgics* is that agriculture is the underpinning of civilization and the existence of civil communities." Yet she doesn't go on and elaborate this point and its significance for Virgil's political philosophy, but instead veers off into a confusing discussion of the golden age myth Virgil so brilliantly manipulates in the *Georgics*. She seems to miss Virgil's intent altogether when she writes: "In his nostalgia for the lost golden age, Virgil shows an intuitive grasp of the havoc wrought in human life by urbanization and warfare." Virgil indulges no such nostalgia for the golden age, a time when humans lived little better than animals feeding dumbly off the earth. That's why Jupiter ended the golden age, *nec torpere gravi passus sua regna veterno*: "Forbidding the world he rules to slumber in ease" (Ferry). Humans in the golden age are only potentially human; they require a harsh world to sharpen their wits and so realize their full potential, which, as Socrates says in the *Phaedrus*, can happen only in cities with sophisticated culture. But the tragic cost of this

development includes suffering and hardship, death and disorder; the price we have to pay for human grandeur.

FERRY GETS CLOSER TO THIS IMPORTANT theme when he writes that the *Georgics* celebrate "human accomplishment in the difficult circumstances of the way things are" and notes the pride the poem takes in humanity's "precarious successes." He is also better at identifying the correspondence between nature's destructive forces and those of human nature, a point Virgil makes by describing nature in human terms and vice versa, as in the description in Book 3 of the two bulls fighting over a cow:

*dulcibus illa quidem inlecebris, et saepe superbos
cornibus inter se subigit decernere amantis.*

And she, with her sweet allurements...
excites two ardent suitors
to fight it out in battle with their horns.

(Ferry)

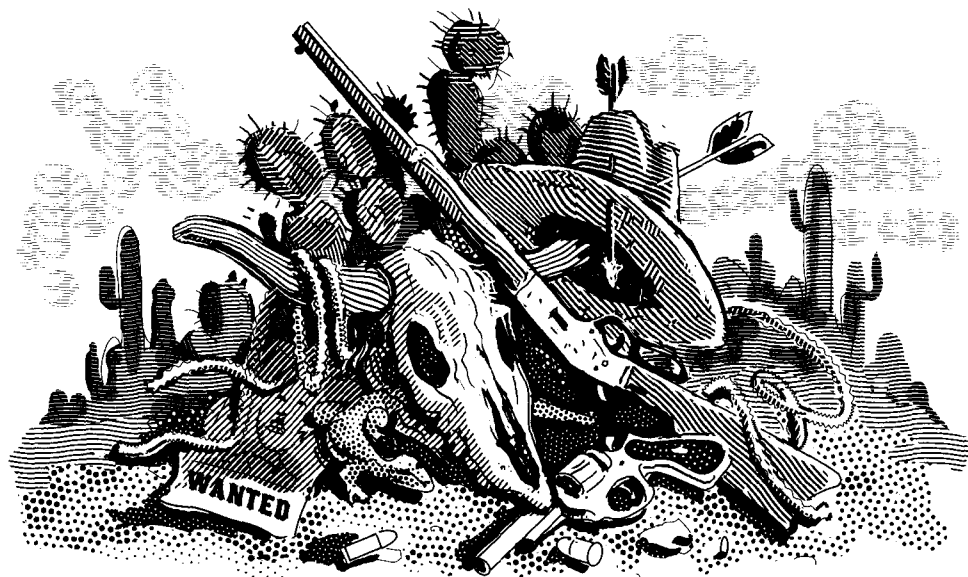
The personification of the bulls in a phrase like *superbos amantis* (literally, "proud lovers") suggests the eternal human conflict sown by sexual passion, the confluence of violence and sexuality, which Virgil himself will explore through Dido and Lavinia in the *Aeneid*. And Book 4's discussion of bees is rife with implications for human society and political virtue, as well as civic disorder and war. But we need much more discussion of these ideas, and the explanatory notes need to be more thorough, if the reader is to take from the poem the philosophical riches it contains.

A didactic poem like the *Georgics*, taking up as it does serious philosophical ideas while lacking an accessible story and characters, cannot reach a modern reader on the basis of a translation alone, no matter how faithful or beautiful. I suppose we should be grateful that publishers will spend the money on new translations of one of the West's most spectacular poetic achievements, and both translators deserve praise for their work. But their publishers should be chastised for failing to ensure that these new translations were attended by adequate introductions and notes, so that readers might experience the full brilliance of Virgil's poem—and the translators' achievement.

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Essay by Douglas A. Jeffrey

LARRY McMURTRY AND THE AMERICAN WEST



ENTERING HIS EIGHTH DECADE, LARRY McMURTRY has under his belt 29 novels, five collections of essays, several screenplays, and, recently, a few short histories, not to mention his vast journalistic output. Raised up in a ranching family near Archer City, Texas, he has become one of his generation's more prolific men of letters. A bibliophile at his core and a rare book dealer on the side, his knowledge, interests, and the topics and settings of his books range widely. But from the beginning of his career, the American West has been the theme and the place to which he has most often repaired. And he is of two minds about it.

In *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen: Reflections at Sixty and Beyond* (1999), McMurry lamented that his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Lonesome Dove* (1985), a saga of two legendary retired Texas Rangers, had failed in its purpose. He had intended the book to "demythify" the West. "[I]nstead," he complained, it "became a kind of American Arthuriad." In later (and lesser) novels, McMurry tells us, he "tried to subvert the Western myth with irony and parody with no better results." He persists in this quest down to his latest novel, *Telegraph Days* (2006) and his latest history, *Oh What a Slaughter: Massacres in the American West, 1846-1890* (2005). Yet somehow his writings on the West nearly always subvert his subversive intentions.

Telegraph Days is the story of a bright and sassy woman with the Dickensian name of Nellie Courtright (she finds herself courted by, among others, George Armstrong Custer, Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, and Virgil Earp), nar-

rated in the first person. It opens in the Oklahoma territory, in and around a desolate town called Rita Blanca, and ends on a Hollywood movie set that perfectly reproduces the town (though appearing now more charming than desolate) from old photographs. The disjunction between town and movie set, and between Nellie's life and the plot of the film—in which she will be played by Lillian Gish—is the novel's theme, and this disjunction between the reality of the past and how it is remembered, artistically and popularly, is the theme of most of McMurry's recent books.

Telegraph Days—like McMurry's earlier *The Colonel and Little Missie: Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley and the Beginnings of Superstardom in America* (2005)—depicts William Cody as the capitalist inventor of this lucrative deception. Nellie writes:

Lots of people live in the past, but Bill Cody seemed to be one of the rare few who lived in the future.... The Rita Blanca I was standing in, getting grit in my teeth, wasn't the Old West to me—it was the only west available. But Bill Cody was sincere, and calm as a banker. He was looking ahead to a day when our ordinary day-to-day lives on the prairie would be—what's the word?—picturesque, like the knights and ladies in King Arthur, or the novels of Walter Scott.

"As soon as something's ended," Cody tells her, "people will start flocking to get at least a glimpse of what it was like before it was over....

It's human nature." Nellie replies: "I'm a human, and it's not my nature." Then she adds: "Even as I said it I knew that my remark was partly a lie. Why read Walter Scott if not to catch a glimpse of what life was like in older times—times that were surely gone forever?"

Here in a nutshell are the two main questions of fact raised in McMurry's books on the American West: What was it really like? and what of it remains, if any?

Failure or Triumph

OH WHAT A SLAUGHTER DEALS primarily with six incidents, from the little-known Sacramento River Massacre in 1846 to the better-known Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. Five were perpetrated by whites on Indians, one—the Mountain Meadow Massacre of 1857—by whites (with a few enlisted Indians) on whites. Secondly, the book considers two military engagements in which Indians slaughtered white soldiers—the Fetterman Battle in 1866 and the Battle of Little Big Horn a decade later. These too qualify as massacres by McMurry's graphic definition:

The vocabulary of atrocity has always been rather limited.... You can burn a body, hack it up, decapitate it, cut off—or out—its genitalia, smash its skull, tear fetuses out of pregnant women, shoot arrows or bullets into it, maybe rip out its heart or other organs; and, really, that is more or less the whole menu.