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Realism and Idealization in the Representation of Peasants in Virgil's *Georgics*

Realizm i idealizacja w przedstawieniu chłopów w Georgikach Wergiliusza

ABSTRACT

It is commonly said that Virgil, in the *Georgics*, outlines a realistic picture of the work in fields and rural life, with its hardness and challenges; this is true only to some extent. He provides, in fact, an explication for the origin and necessity of work that is substantially a theodicy, since the end of the Golden Age is traced back to Jupiter's decision, aimed at pushing men to develop their skills and to discover arts and techniques: work is therefore justified as a means to redeem human dignity, which was lowered by slumber and idleness. Besides, the life of peasants is praised as a blessed condition, as it is far from war and violence: it is presented indeed as the last stronghold of Justice (personified as a deity) that left human world. Thus, realism gives way to idealization of peasants with the moral purpose to elevate them as a model of the precious values that Roman society had long been lacking: rightness and peace.

Key words: peasants, realism, idealization, Virgil, *Georgics*

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STRESZCZENIE

Powszechnie uważa się, że Wergiliusz w *Georgikach* przedstawia realistyczny obraz pracy na polu i życia na wsi, wraz z jego trudnościami i wyzwaniem; jest to prawda tylko w pewnym stopniu. W rzeczywistości autor wyjaśnia pochodzenie i konieczność pracy, co w znacznym stopniu stanowi teodyceę, ponieważ koniec Złotego Wieku wywodzi się z decyzji Jowisza, mającej na celu skłonienie ludzi do rozwijania swoich umiejętności oraz odkrywania sztuki i technik: praca jest zatem uzasadniona jako środek do odzyskania godności ludzkiej, która została obniżona przez lenistwo i beczynność. Poza tym życie chłopów jest wychwalane jako błogosławiony stan, ponieważ jest dalekie od wojny i przemocy: jest ono przedstawiane jako ostatnia twierdza Sprawiedliwości (uosabianej przez bóstwo), która opuściła świat ludzi. W ten sposób realizm ustępuje miejsca idealizacji chłopów, której celem moralnym jest wyniesienie ich do rangi wzorca cennych wartości, których od dawna brakowało społeczeństwu rzymskiemu: słuszności i pokoju.

Słowa kluczowe: chłopci, realizm, idealizacja, Wergiliusz, *Georgiki*

INTRODUCTION

Virgil published the *Georgics* in 29 BC, two years after the battle of Actium that marked the victory of Octavian over Mark Antony and the beginning of his absolute power, hidden under the guise of republican institutions¹. Many years of civil wars had left Rome in a state of severe social and political crisis, and even on the verge of economic collapse. Octavian presented himself as the savior of the state, the one who restored peace to Roman people, the defender of the *mos maiorum* and of the established order². He carried out a project of economic reconstruction, based mainly on the return to the earth, to agricultural and farming activity that

¹ Overall presentation of the poem: N. Horsfall, *A Companion to the Study of Virgil*, Leiden 1995, pp. 63–100; A. La Penna, *L'impossibile giustificazione della storia. Un'interpretazione di Virgilio*, Roma–Bari 2005, pp. 69–102; N. Holzberg, *Virgil. Der Dichter und sein Werk*, München 2006, pp. 91–128; M. von Albrecht, *Virgil. Bucolica, Georgica, Aeneis. Eine Einführung*, Heidelberg 2006, pp. 65–106. Line by line commentary: Virgil, *Georgics*, vols 1–2, ed. R. Thomas, Cambridge 1988; Virgil, *Georgics*, pref. R.G.M. Nisbet, ed. R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford 1990.

² On the consolidation and legitimation of Augustus' absolute power: M. Dettenhofer, *Herrschaft und Widerstand im augusteischen Principat. Die Konkurrenz zwischen res publica und domus Augusta*, Stuttgart 2000, pp. 145–166 and *passim*; E.S. Gruen, *Augustus and the Making of the Principate*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus*, ed. K. Galinsky, Cambridge 2005, pp. 33–52; K. Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 61–83 and *passim*; A. Borgna, *Augusto al potere: mores, exempla, consensus*, in: *Princeps legibus solutus*, ed. A. Maffi, Torino 2016, pp. 47–62. On his policy of moral and religious restoration: J. Sheid, *Les restaurations religieuses d'Octavien/Auguste*, in: *Le principat d'Auguste*, eds. F. Hurlet, B. Mineo, Rennes 2009, pp. 119–128.

had long been neglected, because of the wars. The restoration of agriculture, involving the distribution of lands and the establishment of a class of small owners, aimed to revive the troubled economy of the Italic peninsula, and to divert the attention of the people from politics that was now in the hands of one man. It is against this backdrop that Maecenas, friend and right-hand man of Octavian, asked Virgil to compose a poem on agriculture, in order to encourage people to engage in work in the fields and farming activity. This is testified by Virgil himself who, in the proem of book III of the *Georgics*, addresses an apostrophe to Maecenas and claims that he has written the poem under his strong encouragement (*haud mollia iussa*)³. Virgil, in fact, endorses and supports Octavian's project of valorization of farming activity: on the one hand, he loves fields and nature, as he has already shown in his first work, the *Bucolics*; on the other, he identifies the rural life and farm work with an ideal of peace and tranquility, which is an alternative opposed to war and violence that has long been raging in Rome and has exhausted the population. We may say that Virgil's intentions and feelings match very well with the project of agriculture recovery carried out by Octavian⁴.

The representation of farmers and their lifestyle is obviously at the heart of the *Georgics*, but the statute and features of Virgil's descriptive technique are not easy to define: the poem is in many respects characterized by a strong realism, affecting the conception of nature and the relationship between the man and nature⁵; yet, sometimes a (ideologically oriented) idealization of the peasants and rural life comes out⁶. The purpose of this chapter is to reconsider this issue, starting from a direct approach to Virgil's text and carrying out a thorough analysis of its contents and language.

³ Cf. C. Marangoni, *Tua, Maecenas, haud mollia iussa. Materiali e appunti per la storia di un topos proemiale*, "Incontri triestini di filologia classica" 2002–2003, 2, pp. 77–90.

⁴ An original approach to Virgil's attitude towards Octavian in the *Georgics* (seen not in any way as "propaganda", but as "protreptic" for the prince) is proposed by C. Nappa, *Reading after Actium: Vergil's Georgics, Octavian, and Rome*, Ann Arbor 2005.

⁵ It is called 'a remarkably realistic poem' by Thomas (Virgil, *op. cit.* (n. 1), vol. 1, p. 16), since Virgil 'squarely confronted the issues of real existence'.

⁶ Cf. P. Thibodeau, *Playing the Farmer: Representations of Rural Life in Vergil's Georgics*, Berkeley–London 2011, going as far as to consider the *Georgics* as 'an enchanting work of fantasy that elevated, and sometimes whitewashed, the realities of country life'.

FROM *BUCOLICS* TO *GEORGICS*: BACK TO REALITY

Virgil's *Georgics* are a didactic poem, that is a wide-ranging text in hexameters, aiming at teaching – the literary genre founded by Hesiod in archaic Greece, and taken up by Lucretius in Roman world, in late republican period⁷. Virgil draws the subject of his poems, as well as many other aspects, from Hesiod's poem *Works and Days* (*Ἔργα καὶ Ημέραι*), from which he also inherits the moral message affirming the necessity of work as a means of obtaining livelihoods and redeeming human dignity⁸. Besides, Virgil owes a great deal to Lucretius' philosophical poem *De rerum natura*: he establishes an ambivalent relationship of both imitation and opposition with this model⁹. He prefers traditional religion merged with Stoic flavor to the Epicurean rationalism and materialism preached by Lucretius, from whom he nonetheless takes many images, stylistic features and verbal expressions – not least, the dramatic flair and a pessimistic vein that sometimes crosses the description of animal and human life¹⁰.

Virgil had already talked about country life in his first work, the *Bucolics*: the characters of these poems are indeed shepherds, who spend their time resting and enjoying the beauty of nature, experiencing the joys and pains of love, playing the flute and singing, often challenging each other in song competitions¹¹. They are idealized characters, shepherds and poets at the same time, located in an idealized landscape: a pleasant and friendly nature that welcomes and accompanies them with

⁷ A. La Penna, *L'impossibile*, n. 1, appropriately defines the *Georgics* 'il poema esiodeo e lucreziano'. Cf. D. Fowler, *The Didactic Plot*, in: *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society*, eds. M. Depew, D. Obbink, Cambridge MA 2000, pp. 205–219; E. Romano, *La poesia didascalica: un genere in cerca di identità*, in: *Il vero condito: caratteri e ambiti della poesia didascalica nel mondo antico*, eds. R. Colombo et al., Pavia 2019, pp. IX–XIX.

⁸ Cf. A. La Penna, *Esiode nella cultura e nella poesia di Virgilio*, in: *Hésiode et son influence. Six exposés et discussions par K. von Fritz, G. S. Kirk, W. J. Verdenius, Fr. Solmsen, A. La Penna, P. Grimal*, Vandœuvres–Genève [1962] (*Entretiens Hardt*, 7), pp. 213–270, notably 225–247; S.A. Nelson, *God and the Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil*, New York 1998, pp. 82–97 and *passim*.

⁹ Cf. M. Gale, *Virgil on the Nature of Things: The Georgics, Lucretius and the Didactic Tradition*, Cambridge 2000; P. Hardie, *Lucretian Receptions: History, the Sublime, Knowledge*, Cambridge–New York 2009, pp. 41–52 and 156–159.

¹⁰ Cf. B. Pieri, *Caeci stimuli amoris: il lessico virgiliano dell'eros animale (e la lezione di Lucrezio)*, in: *Le parole della passione: studi sul lessico poetico latino*, eds. P. Mantovanelli, F.R. Berino, Bologna 2011, pp. 139–169.

¹¹ Overview: N. Holzberg, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 71–90; M. von Albrecht, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 14–64. Commentary: A. Cucchiarelli, *A Commentary on Virgil's Eclogues*, Oxford 2023.

protective solidarity¹². Landscape is described as a *locus amoenus*: a beautiful and peaceful place with conventional features, reproduced again and again in literary tradition, as a soft green grass, the shade of trees, the roar of a stream, the song of birds¹³. It can be seen in an emblematic way in the *incipit* of *Bucolic* I, which is – so to say – the first chord of the symphony. Here, the shepherd Meliboeus talks to his fellow Tityrus and describes the latter's attitude of joyfully resting, playing and singing love songs in a delightful nature setting (lines 1–2, 5–6)¹⁴:

'Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi
siluestrem tenui musam meditaris auena;
[...] tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra,
formosam resonare doces Amaryllida siluas'.

'Tityrus, lying in the shade of the broad crown of a beech-tree, you play a rural melody with the subtle flute. [...] Lying in the shade, you teach the woods to sing the name of Amaryllis'.

The *locus amoenus* is more broadly outlined in another apostrophe that Meliboeus addresses to his friend little later, describing the rest of the shepherd in the embrace of nature that delights him with a harmonious assortment of varied sounds (lines 51–58):

'Fortunate senex, hic inter flumina nota
et fontis sacros frigus captabis opacum.
Hinc tibi, quae semper, uicino ab limite saepes
Hyblaeis apibus florem depasta salicti
saepe leui somnum suadebit inire susurro; (55)
hinc alta sub rupe canet frondator ad auras,
nec tamen interea raucae, tua cura, palumbes,
nec gemere aeria cessabit turtur ab ulmo'.

¹² Cf. Z. Pavloskis, *Man in a Poetic Landscape. Humanization of Nature in Virgil's Eclogues*, "Classic Philology" 1971, 66, pp. 151–168; La Penna, *L'impossibile* (n. 1), pp. 12–32.

¹³ On the topos of *locus amoenus* in general: E.R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern 1948, pp. 189–207; G. Schönbeck, *Der locus amoenus von Homer bis Horaz*, Heidelberg 1962; P. Haß, *Der locus amoenus in der antiken Literatur*, Bamberg 1998. On the *locus amoenus* in Virgil's *Bucolics*, cf. F. Witek, *Vergils Landschaften. Versuch einer Typologie literarischer Landschaft*, Hildesheim 2006, pp. 91–229 and *passim*. On the *Arcadia*-theme: R. Jenkyns, *Virgil's Experience: Nature and History, Times, Names, and Places*, Oxford 1998, pp. 156–169; S. Papaioannou, *Embracing Vergil's 'Arcadia': Constructions and Representations of a Literary topos in the Poetry of the Augustans*, in: *Arcadia, the Golden Age, and the locus amoenus: Idyllic poetic landscapes of early Rome and their later repercussions*, eds. P.A. Johnston, S. Papaioannou, "Acta Antiqua" 2013, 53, pp. 145–170.

¹⁴ Virgil's text (*Bucolics* and *Georgics*) is quoted from *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*, ed. M. Geymonat, 2nd edition, Roma 2008. All translations are mine.

‘Happy old man, here, in the midst of familiar streams and sacred springs, you will enjoy the cooling shade. Here, as always, your neighbor’s bordering hedge that feeds with willow-flowers the Hyblean bees, will often induce you to sleep with soft humming. Here, under a high cliff, the pruner will sing to the wind, while the hoarse doves, your care, will not cease to murmur, nor the turtledove from a lofty elm’.

In the bucolic world, work does not exist: the shepherds take care of their flocks while resting and singing. Agricultural activity is completely ignored.

In the *Georgics*, the *Weltanschauung* changes completely: rural life is described in a realistic manner that takes into account the hardness, difficulties and suffering of work and daily life in the countryside¹⁵. The instructions concerning the cultivation of fields and the livestock farming are alternated with warnings about unexpected and hostile events that risk to ruin the crops and nullify peasants’ work – as it happens, for instance, with seed-eating birds and harmful plants (I, 118–121):

‘Nec tamen, haec cum sint hominumque boumque labores
uersando terram experti, nihil improbus anser
Strymoniaeque grues et amaris intiba fibris
officiunt aut umbra nocet. [...]’.

‘And yet, after all the efforts that men and oxen have made turning and returning the soil of fields, here come the greedy geese or the Strymonian cranes, or chicory with its bitter fibres, ruining it all, and even the shade of trees can be harmful’.

Hence the encouragement to work hard to protect the crop and keep out pests and all possible arms, with the looming specter of starvation (I, 155–159):

‘Quod nisi et adsiduis herbam insectabere rastris
et sonitu terrebis auis et ruris opaci
falce premes umbras uotisue uocaueris imbrem,
heu magnum alterius frustra spectabis aceruum
concussaue famem in siluis solabere quercu’.

‘Thus, if you do not pursue the weed with restless rakes and do not scare birds with noise, if you do not cut with a scythe the leaves

¹⁵ Cf. R. Jenkyns, *Labor Improbis*, “Classical Quarterly” 1993, 43, pp. 243–248; M. Asztalos, *Agricultural Technique and Relentless Toil in Virgil’s Georgica*, in: *Symbolae septentrionales. Latin Studies Presented to Jan Öberg*, eds. M. Asztalos, C. Gejrot, Stockholm 1995, pp. 39–57.

of the trees that cast their shades over the fields, if you do not pray for rain, alas, you will gaze in vain on your neighbor's large store of grain, and you will satisfy your hunger shaking oaks in the woods'.

But the list of the plagues that spoil the crops is still long; new drawbacks and flaws spring out from time to time (I, 181–186):

'[...] saepe exiguus mus
sub terris posuitque domos atque horrea fecit,
aut oculis capti fodere cubilia talpae,
inuentusque cauis bufo et quae plurima terrae
monstra ferunt, populatque ingentem farris aceruum 185
curculio atque inopi metuens formica senectae'.

'Often a tiny mouse sets up his home and builds storehouses under the grounds, or sightless moles dig out chambers; a toad is found in the holes, and the countless pests that the earth generates; the weevil ravages a huge bunch of grain, and the ant worried about a destitute old age'.

The work in fields is often described as a fight against nature: the hoe and the plow are called *duris agrestibus arma*, 'the weapons to be used by tough peasants' (I, 160). Nature actually knows how to be unfriendly and hostile: the farmer has to fight to tame and domesticate it. The victory achieved with the agricultural tools brings glory, just like victory in a war (lines 167–168):

'Omnia quae multo ante memor prouisa repones,
si te digna manet diuini gloria ruris'.

'You, farsighted, will provide and store away all those tools well in advance, if you want to deserve the glory of the divine country'.

The implicit comparison of the work in fields with a war (as for weapons and glory) highlights the challenges and troubles that affect the farmer's relationship with land. On the other hand, it can be seen as an 'antiphrastic metaphor' that opposes the agricultural activity (which is equally hard, but ethically good and peaceful) to the ugliness and atrocities of war¹⁶.

¹⁶ Cf. H. Heckel, *Das Widerspenstige zähmen. Die Funktion der militärischen und politischen Sprache in Vergils Georgica*, Trier 1998, pp. 55–61 and *passim*.

The obstacles that farmer have to face, however, are not occasional accidents: they are rather the marks of a general trend of the (natural) world, which ‘tends towards the worse’, if countrymen do not prevent such drift with their hard work. Difficulties arise from a principle inherent in nature, resulting in a kind of ‘law of fate’ (I, 199–203):

‘[...] Sic omnia fatis
in peius ruere ac retro sublapsa referri, 200
non aliter quam qui aduerso uix flumine lembum
remigiis subigit, si bracchia forte remisit,
atque illum in praeceptis pronis rapit alueus amni’.

‘Thus, by law of fate, everything rushes towards the worse and falls back slipping away, just as if one hardly makes a boat sail upstream by rowing, but he rests his arms for a little while, and the river’s current drags him headlong and casts him adrift’.

The work of the farmer is compared to the act of rowing hard to make a boat sail upstream: just like the rower, the peasant cannot rest even a moment. Indeed, if he lets up for a while, the hostility of nature takes over and nullifies his previous efforts. The work in the fields comes out as an intensive and unceasing commitment, in reaction to the law of fate – or the law of nature, we might say – that imposes men to confront challenges and troubles.

LABOR OMNIA VICIT: THE RESCUE OF HUMAN DIGNITY

However, in Virgil’s view, despite the hardness that overwhelm human life, fate is not cruel, nor is nature. Under the influence of Stoicism, he thinks that the world is governed by a divine principle that leads it towards the collective good, even though passing through difficulties and hardships. So, he reaches an understanding of the hostility of nature and of the resulting necessity of hard work (I, 121–135):

‘[...] Pater ipse colendi
haud facilem esse uiam uoluit, primusque per artem
mouit agros, curis acuens mortalia corda
nec torpere graui passus sua regna ueterno.
Ante Iouem nulli subigebant arua coloni; 125
ne signare quidem aut partiri limite campum
fas erat: in medium quaerebant, ipsaque tellus
omnia liberius nullo poscente ferebat.

Ille malum uirus serpentibus addidit atris
 praedarique lupos iussit pontumque moueri, 130
 mellaque decussit foliis ignemque remouit
 et passim riuis currentia uina repressit,
 ut uarias usus meditando extunderet artis
 paulatim, et sulcis frumenti quaereret herbam,
 ut silicis uenis abstrusum excuderet ignem'. 135

'The Father of gods himself did not want country life to be easy, and first imposed the need to loosen the ground, sharpening human minds by care, not to let his kingdom linger in a heavy numbness. Before the advent of Jupiter, no farmer subjugated the fields; it was not right even to mark land ownership and field boundaries: they pooled the food they gathered, and Earth herself freely offered her gifts without anyone asking. Jupiter gave deadly venom to black snakes, and ordered the wolves to go hunting and the sea to rise; he stripped homey from the leaves and put fire away, and dried up the streams of wine flowing here and there, so that daily practice by taking thought might forge different skills, step by step, seeking to get the corn plant from the furrows of the land, coming up to draw out the fire hidden in the veins of flint'.

Virgil outlines a cross-section of the Golden Age, the mythical early age when men lived easily and happily, without the need to work, in the bosom of a benevolent and generous nature that gave them its fruits spontaneously: honey dripped from the leaves of trees and even wine flowed out in streams *passim*; men smoothly gathered food and shared it in common, without having to defend themselves from wild and dangerous animals¹⁷. The end of the Golden Age is explained differently by different authors. Hesiod (one of the main models followed by Virgil in the *Georgics*) presents the sequence of different epochs, corresponding to metals of decreasing preciousness (gold, silver, bronze, and so on), as a necessary and unstoppable degeneration, due to a universal and inscrutable law; the role of the gods in this process is not clear: Hesiod says that the golden race of men was made by the gods and lived 'without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief', under the reign of Cronus, but then 'earth covered this generation', leaving the place to the silver race, who was 'less noble by far', so much so that Zeus (the new sovereign, son of Cronus) 'was angry and put them away, since they did not

¹⁷ On the evolution of the conception of the Golden Age from *Bucolics* to *Georgics*: P.A. Johnston, *Virgil's Agricultural Golden Age. A Study of the Georgics*, Leiden 1980, pp. 41–89.

honour the blessed gods'¹⁸. Hesiod outlines a completely positive image of the Golden Age and does not explain why and how it ended: Zeus' succession to Cronus can be glimpsed – as the golden race lives under the reign of the latter, while it is the former who punishes and destroys the silver race – but it is not directly associated to the world degeneration; on the contrary, Zeus is always seen by Hesiod as the founder of universal order and the guarantor of justice¹⁹. Virgil, for its part, provides a cut and dried explanation for the end of the Golden Age, with the rise of difficulties of life and the need for work: Jupiter wanted that too easy and too happy condition to cease in order to 'sharpen human minds by care, and not to let his kingdom linger in a heavy numbness'. He made men's life harder to develop their wit and skills, to keep them moving and thinking, to push them to engage and to improve – in one word, to make them better.

Virgil thus outlines a theodicy that recognizes the constructive role of divinity in leading the world and guiding men towards good, even passing through fatigue and suffering. This standpoint is very close to the Stoic doctrine of providence, whereby the universe is governed by a higher and impersonal force, which is sometimes identified with the divine will – one thinks e.g. of the *Hymn to Zeus* by Cleanthes. The Stoic inspiration of the *Georgics* emerges, moreover, from other parts of the work, as the description of bees and their perfect society in book IV²⁰.

Resorting to Stoic philosophy, Virgil finds a way to somehow reconcile the two inconsistent and even conflicting elements coexisting in Hesiod's account of the myth of ages: the deterioration of living conditions of men, and the positive and constructive role of Zeus, who drives that process. In doing so, Virgil also frames the realistic description of country life with its hardship and troubles into an idealized worldview, putting evil and suffering at the service of a greater good. Efforts and pains lead men to exercise their skills and discover the arts and techniques: *tum uariae uenere artes* (I, 145). This argument is sealed by a pregnant sentence that expresses the whole meaning of work as a means of overcoming difficulties and redeeming human dignity (I, 145–146).

¹⁸ Cf. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 106–126 (golden race), 127–142 (silver race); P.A. Johnston, *op. cit.* (n. 17), pp. 16–22; H. Van Noorden, *Playing Hesiod. The 'Myth of the Races' in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge 2015, pp. 43–88.

¹⁹ Cf. W. Zhang, *The Poet as Educator in the Works and Days*, "Classical Journal" 2009, 105, pp. 1–17; A. Priou, *Hesiod: Man, Law and Cosmos*, "Polis" 2014, 31, pp. 233–260.

²⁰ Cf. H. Dahlmann, *Der Bienenstaat in Vergils Georgica*, "Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur" 1954, 10, pp. 547–562; L.P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil: A Critical Survey*, Cambridge 1969, pp. 121–152.

'[...] Labor omnia uicit
improbis et duris urgens in rebus egestas'.

'Hard work overcomes all obstacles, under the pressure of poverty and need, in challenging circumstances'.

Hence arises a courageous and competitive view of life in general, and of country life in particular, based on the awareness that hardship provides men, and meanly farmers, with the occasion to train their skills and to improve their abilities.

FORTUNATI AGRICOLAE: THE IDEALIZATION OF COUNTRY LIFE

Despite the challenges and troubles of rural life, the condition of farmers is still appreciated and even celebrated by the poet, who valorizes their laborious and peaceful habits and customs. He does not hesitate to sing the praises of the peasant, of whom he outlines an idealized portrait that no longer takes account of the hardships and disadvantages, previously described in such effective and detailed way (II, 458–474):

'O fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint,
agricolas! Quibus ipsa procul discordibus armis
fundit humo facilem uictum iustissima tellus. 460
Si non ingentem foribus domus alta superbis
mane salutantum totis uomit aedibus undam,
nec uarios inhiant pulchra testudine postis
inclusasque auro uestis Ephyreiaque aera,
Alba neque Assyrio fucatur lana ueneno, 465
nec casia liquidi corrumpitur usus oliui.
At secura quies et nescia fallere uita,
diues opum uariarum, at latis otia fundis,
speluncae uiuique lacus et frigida tempe
mugitusque bouum mollesque sub arbore somni 470
non absunt. Illic saltus ac lustra ferarum
et patiens operum exiguoque adsueta iuuentus,
sacra deum sanctique patres. Extrema per illos
Iustitia excedens terris uestigia fecit'.

'All too happy farmers, if only they were aware of their blessings! For them, far from the clash of arms, the fair and pure earth pulls out of her soil a good simple food. Too happy, insofar as a stately house in the morning does not pour out of its lavish doors a crowd of courtiers from all the rooms, and they do not gaze with open

mouth at the elegant portals made from variously carved tortoise-shell, or at draperies tricked with gold and at bronzes from Ephyra, and the white wool of their tunic is not stained with Assyrian dyes, nor the taste of clear olive oil is spoiled with cinnamon. Yet, they do not lack a sinless life and a safe and quiet sleep, with abundance of different goods; and still, a peaceful rest in the middle of vast fields; caves, clear lakes and fresh valleys; the lowing of oxen, and soft slumbers beneath the trees. Woodland glades and burrows of wild animals, and a youth hardened to toil and content with little; worship of gods, sacred respect for parents and elders. Among them, Justice left his last footprints, as she departed from earth’.

This celebration of country life balances and overcomes the realistic description of the labors and pains of the farmers. The first and main reason why they are called *fortunati* is that they live *procul discordibus armis*. The work in fields is seen as diametrically opposed to military service and war: the young men called to arms, indeed, were forced to leave the countryside and farming. This was a major cause of the economic crisis that afflicted the Italic peninsula after the civil wars, and which Augustus’ political project of massive return to agriculture was aimed to resolve. Virgil deeply loved nature and country life, but he also wanted to support the reconstruction of economy and peace promised by Augustus: he celebrates rural work primarily as alternative to, and rejection of, military activity and war. Earth is called *iustissima*: country life is under the banner of *iustitia*, while armed struggle and hostilities are the domain of violence and abuses. Actually, the sentence *fundit humo facilem uictum... tellus* is somewhat ambiguous, particularly because of the adjective *facilis*, which can mean either ‘simple’, ‘frugal’, or ‘easy (to get)’: the former meaning is suitable and consistent with the overall vision of country life outlined in the *Georgics*; the latter, instead, is incompatible with the realistic account of the hardship and challenges of farming given throughout the poem: getting the crops and fruits of the land is not easy at all. It goes then without saying that the former meaning is the right one, wholly fitting with this context; and yet the latter can be hazily perceived in backlight, adding a semantic and emotional undertone related to the faded memory of the Golden Age. The description of the crowd of *clientes* and *salutatores* pouring out of the palatial house of a rich and leading citizen recalls the customs, and the malpractice, of city life – namely of Rome. The *salutatio* is just one of the aspects – but an emblematic one – that characterize the dense and complex network of social relationships always at risk of escalating into political bickering and power games, over which looms the spectre of civil war. Besides, attention focuses on the luxury of carved doorposts, refined draperies

interwoven with gold threads and bronze statues that adorn the house; luxury also includes the habits of adding exotic spices to olive oil for seasoning food, and of coloring the robes *Assyrio... ueneno*, 'tough Assyrian dyes' – but the use of the term *uenenum* is significant, since it can mean either 'dye' or 'potion' and even 'poison'²¹. Luxury is stigmatized as a vice and corruption from the traditional and moralistic perspective, based on *mos maiorum* and fully consistent with Augustus' policy of restoration of moral values²².

The criticism of city life, with its 'sick' social relationships and corruption (*pars destruens*), is followed by the description of country life (*pars construens*) that is now idealized as a quiet, pure and happy condition, *diues opum uariarum*, 'rich in various goods' – to be understood on both the material and the moral level. The work in fields is presented, along the whole poem, as the tool for obtaining means of subsistence and chasing away poverty: it is clear then that the *uariae opes* at the disposal of the farmer are the crops and fruits of the land obtained through his (hard) work. And yet, here, there is not mention of work, nor any of hardness; on the contrary, there is a clear and definite reference to *otia*, framed into a charming description of a beautiful and comfortable landscape: such 'quiet rest in the middle of vast fields' seems to enclose the lifestyle of farmers – and it must not be forgotten that the term *otium* and especially the plural *otia* can mean 'peace' other than 'rest'²³. In fact, *otium* is a keyword in the *Bucolics*: it emblematically defines the idealized daily life of those shepherds-poets, who spend all the time resting within the warm embrace of nature; but here, in this celebration of country life, *Georgics* do not seem so far away from that ideal of carefree tranquility – all the more so that landscape is described with the traits of the *locus amoenus*, as you can see in particular at lines 469–470, *speluncae uiuique lacus et frigida tempe / mugitusque boum mollesque sub arbore somni*, where the *molles somni* are located in a welcoming and pleasant nature; and it is also relevant that the fresh valley is called *tempe*, recalling the Valley of Tempi, a gorge in northern Thessaly that became a paradigm of *locus amoenus* in ancient literature²⁴.

²¹ Cf. A. Ernout, A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, 4th edition (revised and enlarged by J. André), Paris 1985, p. 719.

²² On Augustus' legislation discouraging luxury: E. Zanda, *Fighting Hydra-like Luxury: Sumptuary Regulation in the Roman Republic*, London 2011, pp. 60–69.

²³ Cf. J.-M. André, *Recherches sur l'otium romain*, Besançon 1962, pp. 22–25 and *passim*; A. Ernout, A. Meillet, *op. cit.* (n. 21), p. 471.

²⁴ Cf. E. Malaspina, *La Valle di Tempe: descrizione geografica, modelli letterari e archetipi del 'locus amoenus'*, "Studi Urbinati" (B) 1990, 63, pp. 105–135.

BETWEEN ANCIENT RELIGION AND STOIC FLAVOUR

Actually, a closer look finds a nuanced mention of farm work, notably at line 472, in which the poet speaks of *patiens operum exiguoque adsueta iuuentus*: young peasants are appreciated for their dedication to work and their frugal lifestyle; but their daily toil is not emphasized as elsewhere in the poem. The mention of work quickly gives way to the worship of gods (*sacra deum*, line 473) that is considered as a most important aspect of country life. Not by chance, Virgil develops it more widely little later, in a double praise addressed to two different ‘models of knowledge’, resulting in two distinct ideals of life (II, 490–494):

‘Felix, qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum
subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis auari.
Fortunatus et ille, deos qui nouit agrestis,
panaque Siluanumque senem Nymphasque sorores’.

‘Happy is he who has been able to learn the causes of things and has cast beneath his feet all fears, the inexorable fate and the shrieking from the rapacious Acheron. But happy, too, is he who knows the gods of the countryside: Pan and old Silvanus, and the sisters Nymphs’.

The former ‘model of knowledge’ corresponds to philosophical reflection, which is considered in antiquity the same than science, aimed at learning the *rerum causae* – a phrase that recalls the title of Lucretius’ poem *De rerum natura*, from which is also inspired the effective metaphorical image of the wise man who ‘has cast beneath his feet all fears’²⁵. The latter corresponds to a simple and confident devotion to the traditional religion, in particular to *dii agrestes*, the gods of countryside: this is precisely the religious sentiment underlaying the *Georgics*. By comparing these two models of knowledge, Virgil appears to appreciate the philosophical and scientific approach to nature that finds expression in Lucretius’ poem, but he prefers and chooses the trusting acceptance of ancient religion, specifically viewed as the forms of worship typical of the rural world²⁶.

²⁵ Cf. the praise of Epicurus at the beginning of Lucretius’ poem, I, 62–79, and notably 79–78: ‘religio pedibus subiecta vicissim / opteritur’ / ‘religion is crushed beneath Epicurus’ (or men’s) feet’.

²⁶ Cf. A. Barchiesi, *Lettura del secondo libro delle Georgiche*, in: *Lecturae Vergilianae*, vol. 2, *Le Georgiche*, ed. M. Gigante, Napoli 1982, pp. 41–86, notably 58–67; M. Gale, *op. cit.* (n. 9),

The irrational and dogmatic knowledge characterizing traditional religion, which Virgil sees as an atavistic heritage of countryside, shapes an anthropological model free from every (political) ambition and deaf to the lure of power and military glory, even foreign to any interest or concern of the destiny of Rome (II, 495–502):

‘Illum non populi fasces, non purpura regum
flexit et infidos agitans discordia fratres,
aut coniurato descendens Dacus ab Histro,
non res Romanae perituraque regna; neque ille
aut doluit miserans inopem aut invidit habenti’.

‘Neither people’s fasces nor king’s purple can bend such a man; he is not troubled by strife that pushes brothers to betray each other, nor by Dacian incursions from the Danube, bund by war pacts; he does not care for the current affairs of Rome and for the kingdoms that are always destined to perish; he never feels pity for the poor, never envy for the rich’.

The peasant does not let himself be flattered and seduced by the *populi fasces* and *purpura regum*, which are symbols of political power: he does not get caught up in the *discordia* that puts brothers against each other – hard not to see, here, a reference to Romulus’ fratricide, which is at the origin of Rome. More in general, the *discordia* related to *infidi fratres* recalls the civil conflict, while the figure of the barbarian coming from the Danube region evokes the wars against external peoples: these complementary images confirm farmers’ total strangeness to every kind of military activity. May we speak of pacifism? Although many scholars are cautious in applying this definition to the ancient world, I would have no doubt about it. But there is more. The peasant does not care of *res Romanae*: he has no patriotic feelings, since he lives within the microcosm of the countryside and feels foreign and indifferent to the (too big and too far) Roman state. The farmer knows indeed that *regna* are *peritura*: he seems not to share the unwavering faith in the eternity of Rome, claimed out loud at every turn by public figures and ‘official’ poets – Virgil himself, later, will join the chorus! We may wonder if this is still consistent with Augustus’ political project. Rejection of war belongs to the propaganda program of *pax Augusta*, as well as renunciation of common people to political engagement is functional to centralization of power in the hands of one leader (Augustus himself); but the complete disregard for the current affairs of Rome is too much: it cannot be reconciled with the patriotism

expected from all good citizens, who should love Rome, its institutions and political heads – especially the one who stood out and presented himself as *primus inter pares* (once again, Augustus). Here, there is rather a transposition of the Stoic model of wise man, imperturbable and indifferent to the outside world, into the countryside and specifically into the figure of the farmer. This is confirmed by the latter's inner tranquility and by his imperviousness to feelings, as pity or envy, that could upset his peace of mind.

It must be however noted that the peasant's (almost) Stoic wisdom does not rest upon a true philosophical conscience, but upon an instinctual intuition that comes directly from life experience immersed in nature, far from the city with its corruption. Countryside is seen as a world unto itself, completely separated from 'civilized' society and even outside of history – far from the bustle and noise of the *peritura regna*. The farmer's wisdom results therefore in a kind of blessing that seems to revive the Golden Age, which had hitherto appeared incompatible with farm work and hardness of rural life (II, 500–502):

'Quos rami fructus, quos ipsa uolentia rura
sponte tulere sua, carpsit, nec ferrea iura
insanumque forum aut populi tabularia uidit'.

'He plucks the fruits that trees and fields willingly, spontaneously offer him; he has never seen the iron rigour of law, the crazy crowd in the courtrooms or the public archives'.

The toil of work has (temporarily) disappeared from the horizon of countryside: trees and fields, in fact, *uolentia* – a hint to the personification of nature or, at least, to its benevolent attitude towards men – give *sponte* their fruits to farmers. May we understand the adverb *sponte* as 'with no need to work'? The word has a more nuanced meaning: admittedly, in the context of a poem that insists so much on necessity and hardness of work, it sounds somewhat ambiguous; but ambiguity is perhaps deliberately sought by Virgil, to avoid an open contradiction.

A strong advantage of country life is honesty, that goes hand in hand with lack of (political) ambitions and of lust for wealth: this is why farmers keep away from *ferrea iura* and all matters of law and courts. This is why, also, the poet says – at the peak of the praise of rural life quoted below – that Justice (personified as a deity) 'left his last footprints among them, as she departed from earth' (I, 473–474). According to traditional morality, and in the best spirit of Hesiod's archaic values, the righteous and honest man is rewarded – by gods and/or by nature – with wellness

and welfare, that is abundance of crops and fruits, well fed and well grazed animals, and not least a large and healthy family (II, 513–526):

‘Agricola incuruo terram dimouit aratro:
hic anni labor, hinc patriam paruosque nepotes
sustinet, hinc armenta boum meritosque iuuenos. 515
Nec requies, quin aut pomis exuberet annus
aut fetu pecorum aut Cerealis mergite culmi,
prouentuque oneret sulcos atque horrea uincat.
Venit hiems: teritur Sicyonia baca trapetis,
glande sues laeti redeunt, dant arbuta siluae; 520
et uarios ponit fetus autumnus, et alte
mitis in apricis coquitur uindemia saxis.
Interea dulces pendent circum oscula nati,
casta pudicitiam seruat domus, ubera uaccae
lactea demittunt, pinguesque in gramine laeto 525
inter se aduersis luctantur cornibus haedi’.

‘The peasant tills the soil with the curved plow: here is the work of a whole year, hence he sustains his country and his little grandsons, hence his herds of cows and faithful bullocks. There is no respite: the season abounds with fruits, new born lambs and sheaves of Ceres’ wheat; it loads the furrows with crops and bursts the barns. Winter is approaching: Sicyon’s olives are pressed in the mills, the pigs come home gladdened with acorns, the woods give strawberry trees; autumn offers its various fruits, and the sweet grape juice ferments, high up on the sunny rocks. Meanwhile, his dear children stay around him and hang upon his kisses; his unstained home preserve modesty; the cows droop udders swollen with milk; and the fat kids wrestle, horn to horn, on the lush lawn’.

The abundance of means of subsistence, as well as the tranquility and satisfaction that come with it, are presented at the same time as the result of work and the (divine) reward for the justice and moral integrity of peasants.

CONCLUSION

No need for a long conclusion. It is commonly said that Virgil, in the *Georgics*, outlines a realistic picture of work in fields and rural life, with its hardness and challenges; this is true, but only to some extent. He provides, in fact, an explication for the origin and necessity of work that is substantially a theodicy, as the end of the Golden Age

is traced back to Jupiter's decision, aimed at pushing men to develop their skills and to discover arts and techniques: work is therefore presented – and justified – as a means to redeem human dignity, which was lowered by slumber and idleness. On the other hand, the life of the farmer is praised as a privileged and blessed condition, since it is far from war and violence: it is presented indeed as the last stronghold of Justice – personified as a divine entity – that left human world. Thus, realism gives way to idealization of peasants, with the moral purpose to elevate them as a model of the precious values that Roman society had long been lacking: rightness and peace.

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