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Virgil's Georgics: A New Verse Translation (review)

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(Review)

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not Xenophon nor himself, from the antinomies of writing, reading, and interpretation, whose interlinking allows no certainty as to the boundaries between source text and translation. The book's last chapter invites us to question both the triumphant narrative closure apparently implied by Xenophon's shout and Rood's division between Victorian and Edwardian readers for whom *Thalatta* was a fairly simple, unproblematic symbol, and on the other hand the unsettling irony of modernist texts. Rood ends up by suggesting that neither were the Victorians ignorant of the power of irony, nor could the modernists fully repudiate the compelling burden of the 'classical' past. How we read '*Thalatta! Thalatta!*', the book aptly concludes, is a question that is profoundly political, and politics cannot escape the contradictory forces that shape its history.

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Virgil's Georgics: A New Verse Translation. By Janet Lembke. Pp. xxiv + 114. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. Hb. \$23.

All the not inconsiderable resources of Yale University Press have been mustered to produce Janet Lembke's new verse translation of Virgil's *Georgics*. Appearing in the 'Yale New Classics' series, it comes complete with an elegant paper cover wrapped around its case binding, and some of the most austere beautiful typographic design, inside and out, that I have ever seen. From the line art of a wheelbarrow on its title page, to the luxurious choice of text sheet, this is a production to marvel at and display with pride on one's bookshelf – where, however, it will probably languish after a single perusal.

If so, it will not be because of incidental errors, but what could such eminences as the 'Kingsley Trust Association Publication Fund established by the Scroll and Key Society of Yale College', which contributed an unspecified subvention, have been thinking when they decided to jettison the invaluable aid of a copy editor and proofreader? Lembke's Introduction gets off to a horrific start on the very first page, with a birth date for one 'Publius Vergilius Naso'. Ovid must have been on her mind, but have we reached such a pass that no one in Yale's editorial department could be expected to catch such an error? Lembke's 'Translator's Note' continued to give me a sense of foreboding as I read that Virgil's 'practices ... tribes ... lands, and ... many place-names are foreign indeed, in many cases striking no contemporary resonance'. It does not take much prescience to see where this disheartening attitude will lead any translator. In an attempt 'to bridge

the gap between then and now, to make the poem more accessible and less remote', Lembke updates, spells out, and modernizes with a vengeance. Larus becomes Lake Como, and Rhodope (a name I at least find resonant, and a term the first appearance of which should be a splendid occasion to send the grateful reader to a footnote or reference work) becomes Rose Mountain (which at least nods to the word's root) or – what is far worse – 'a Thracian range'.

But surely Lembke must have noticed that 'Thracian' presents the reader with that same problem of pitifully inadequate 'resonance'. Why not an infinite regress of periphrasis in which Thrace comes disguised as 'a land north of that sea just east of Greece'? Or would Greece itself then need to be redefined? Such disheartening obeisance to our Laodicean pedagogues apparently never tempted Smith Palmer Bovie, whose version of *The Georgics* published almost fifty years ago had no footnotes. Mount Gargara, in his splendid blank verse, appears as ... Mount Gargara. Lembke is in thrall to a number of such dubious assumptions about cultural 'distances' and 'gaps' in need of closing. Astonishingly, many proper names in the Latin text have simply been omitted entirely. As she puts it, these redolent terms 'would have created pictures in the Roman mind', but for English readers pictures in English are necessary, so that Typhoeus becomes 'one with snake-fingered hands'. Well, 'one' blanches to think what metrical hurdles Lembke sets herself as a result of such decisions. But as we shall see, metre may not have been a matter that concerned her much.

Lembke's Introduction begins: '*The Georgics* is a poem for our time.' My teeth on edge as I read this clarion call to what I suspected would prove to be a set of environmentalist pieties, I waited for the political harangue I feared would follow – perhaps something like the wisdom Peter Fallon treats us to in the petulant 'Afterwords' to his recent translation of *The Georgics*. Relatively little of this followed, however. Lembke treats us instead to a brief potted history of Rome – replete with helpful explanations such as "Crossing the Rubicon" now means "taking irreversible steps". Elsewhere, we are informed that the poem 'is quadripartite, comprising four books'. Was this whole project predicated on the assumption that readers could not possibly manage such challenges on their own? Did Yale (abetted by The National Endowment for the Arts) simply plough ahead on the dispiriting premise that no one knows anything any more? Finishing Lembke's account of her plan in translating this work, I came to the conclusion that a dreary dumbing-down to 'relevance' was the motive force. Either that or a publisher's decision is certainly responsible for the egregiously padded endnotes. Almost every line of the poem gets the treatment

‘These lines deal with ...’ or ‘These lines describe ...’. Of lines I.160–75, which begin ‘And I must speak of militant farmers’ weapons’, we are informed: ‘These lines describe the implements – the ‘weapons’ – with which the farmer can vanquish his enemies.’

To the translation itself. Virgil’s hexameters are polished as only lines tweaked and fretted over for ten years could be. They vary between thirteen and seventeen syllables, most often resolving to fifteen. Often syntactically enjambed and exhibiting skilful placement of the caesura, they offer a verse translator ample breathing room to match them, if not line for line, then sentence for sentence within an identical number of lines. Eventually, things will fall into place. That Palmer Bovie should have needed only a 12% ‘pad’ while employing blank verse is proof that just about any competent poet ought to be able to handle this job in English hexameters that match Virgil’s total number of lines. And Lembke has certainly come round all right in the end, but just what prosodic plan of attack she employs cannot be fathomed. One immediately rules out syllabics and strict accentual-syllabics, leaving not much else to settle on but accentual (strong stress) verse. David Raeburn’s recent *Metamorphoses* takes this route, and the results, while not spectacular, are at least satisfying. One is almost never in doubt as to how to scan the lines as one reads. The accentual metre is, in other words, *directive* – the work of a steady hand that guides the reader skilfully to the right emphases.

But abandon metre – either by so much anapestic substitution as to slacken the lines beyond any reader’s (or listener’s) ability to hear the stresses, or by wobbling from six iambs all the way to a line of free verse – and one might as well be writing prose. Lembke’s lines *seem* to vary from five to seven stresses, but how can one be sure, when no aural pattern is ever established? Perhaps Lembke hears her stresses clearly in her own mind, but can the reader? In a parody of the *sortes Virgilianae*, I opened blindly to these lines in Book I (71–3):

Every other year, let your fields lie fallow after harvest;
likewise allow idle land to keep its stiff, dry stalks.
Or, the stars having changed, you’ll sow grains of light red wheat.

Line 73 can be read with six, seven, or even eight stresses: can the reader know which to choose? I have read line 71 aloud numerous times and still do not know whether six or seven stresses are meant. I challenge the patient reader to scan, along with me, line 72. Is that ‘likewise’ a spondee? Or should it be considered trochaic? Do we hear ‘**allow idle land to keep its stiff, dry stalks**’? Then we have either an eight- or nine-stress line.

With this metrical latitudinarianism Lembke not only makes her line-for-line translation possible, but easy. And yet she does so at the expense of any organized prosody. Line 72 exhibits no regular, apprehensible aural pattern. Is it, in the scheme by which I have tried to scan it (XX uX Xu X uX uX XX), iambic? trochaic? amphibrachic? Or, just possibly, is it an altogether accommodating piece of prose? Lest I be suspected of a tendentious selection of lines, I offer these at random:

the vines learn to climb and scoff at the winds, their canes (II.360)
you should protect them from the ice and snow-bearing winds (III.319)
so that they can alight on bridges placed close together (IV.27)

No scansion will render an acceptable account of these lines since there is none. Perhaps a forthright admission, as in the 'Translator's Note' to David Ferry's new version (2005), would have helped Lembke to understand her own practice. Ferry simply says he has 'used iambic pentameter, with frequent anapestic substitutions, as [his] metrical system'. At least having faced up to the requirement for such a statement might have forced Lembke to provide a standard by which to judge how well she has accomplished her avowed aim.

How accurate is this translation? I am far from being a believer in the literal translation of poetry. Such a programme assumes that a poem – even a great one like *The Georgics* – can be reduced to a mere prose paraphrase of some vaguely ideational 'content', a collection of images and themes that should have been an essay or short story in the first place. No: verse calls for verse, and the English result had better read like a true poem, or the project subsides to a schoolboy's trot, like Fairclough's Loeb rendition. Nonetheless, as in horseshoes competition, 'closeness counts'. In fact, every translator's goal ought to be the creation of a true English poem that omits nothing that is in the Latin, invents nothing, eschews anachronism, and yet catches the flavour of the original – its tone, its ironies, its jokes, and allusiveness. When, for example, the diction of an English translation falls out of register, and Ovid's *domina* ('mistress', 'paramour') becomes 'whore' in English, the wheels have come off. (Had Ovid wanted *scortum*, he would have known where to find it.)

On the same rationale, aural or sonic felicities, heavily marked syntax, and so forth, should be paid attention to, and at the very least given a nod in any translation. Often such elements defeat the translator, but that is all right if evidence of an attempt in good faith remains. (Lembke herself, to her credit, notes the aural and syntactic intricacies of I, 348–409, where chiasmus and other figures

approximating end-rhyme are employed by Virgil, and accordingly she offers us end-rhyme and repetitions in their place.)

Since a line-for-line comparison of the Latin against Lembke's English is of course impossible in the space available to us, I have chosen three if not perfectly representative, at least not totally random, passages to look at. These are: the last four lines of the poem, where Virgil reconnects us to his *Bucolics*; lines 478–81 from Book III, where the famous description of the plague begins; and from Book I, lines 160–4, a homely, somewhat mundane introduction to the farmer's 'weapons'.

Beginning with perhaps the slightest of the three extracts, here is Virgil:

Dicendum et quae sint duris agrestibus arma,
quis sine nec potuere seri nec surgere messes:
vomis et inflexi primum grave robur aratri,
tardaque Eleusinae matris volventia plaustra,
tribulaque traheaque et iniquo pondere rastrī

An attentive reader will note the Virgilian sound-play of 163 and 164, from 'tardaque' to 'traheaque', the consonantal and assonantal echoes of 'agrestibus / messes / matris / plaustra / rastrī / aratri', and the syntactical elegance of 'sine nec ... seri nec', among much else. And since these five lines are all endstopped, they afford a particularly good test of Lembke's abilities. She translates:

And I must speak of militant farmers' weapons,
without which the crops could not be sown nor sprouted:
first, the plow and the curved share's heavy hardwood frame.
The grain carts of Ceres rolling slowly on the farms

Her 'militant farmers' weapons' is a bit of a stretch, since 'tough', or 'hardy', or some such choice is needed to describe those *agrestibus*. Since Virgil himself has wittily turned the sword/ploughshare concept around (*The Georgics* trades in political, military, and social allegory throughout, even while giving full honour and dignity to the earthy vitality of creatures and the Lucretian thingness of things), Lembke has some warrant for eliding the world of *arma* with that of country folk (not farmers *per se*, but the hard-working rustics who till the unpromising patches and small plots – the 'little' folk so put upon by the soldiers displacing them in *The Bucolics*). Hence their 'weapons'. 'Sprouted' in 161 is just unfortunate, where *surgere* demands a word that suggests energetic rising or springing inside the dull semantics of growing. Though 'not sown nor sprouted' is a decent stab at Virgil's almost Euphuistic parallelism of *sine nec potuere seri nec surgere*, the full

effect of the sound echoes mentioned earlier is perhaps too much to expect; Lembke does not attempt it.

There are occasional signs of carelessness with the Latin. Where Virgil has listed among his farmer's armamentarium *vomis*, the plough-share, with its semantic connection to *penis* (for crude but obvious reasons), and *inflexi aratri*, the 'curved' or 'bent' (heavy wooden-framed) plough, Lembke simply transfers the adjective and hence muddles what should be a clear picture. True to her pledge to absolve her readers of any annoying periphrasis (though Virgil could not be considered a neoteric, he was certainly fond of inkhorn terms), Lembke writes 'Ceres' for 'the mother of Eleusis'. Is this dodging the issue? Even a compromise like Day Lewis' 'the Mother of harvest' is preferable to this avoidance of an inescapable feature of Virgil's style – its 2000-year-old strangeness and distancing rhetorical stance. True, Palmer Bovie and Ferry both succumb, with 'Demeter' and 'Ceres', but it is not as if 'Eleusis' cannot be worked into a hexameter line. Why not 'The lumbering wagons of the Mother of Eleusis', or 'the Eleusinian Mother's slowly rolling wains'? Go not in fear of footnotes, translators; your readers may learn something.

How well does Lembke cope with the plague? These descriptions of disaster are a staple of classical literature from Thucydides to Ovid – and the trope extended its influence well beyond, to Boccaccio and Defoe. Virgil begins with a transition from a lament for (and warning of) the consequences of disease left unchecked among sheep – the devastated pastures of Noricum and the desolate lands the Timavus waters:

Hic quondam morbo caeli miseranda coorta est
tempestas totoque autumnu incanduit aestu,
et genus omne neci pecudum dedit, omne ferarum,
corruptique lacus, infecit pabula tabo.

Or roughly: 'Here [*there* in the Illyrian lands just mentioned] there once arose, from a diseased sky, a terrible season, and it burned with the full heat of autumn, and it killed every kind of creature (or cattle), tame or wild, and tainted the(ir) pools and poisoned the(ir) fodder with disease.' Lembke acquits herself well here – nothing invented, nothing left out, and only the challenge of the subtle sound play of '*coorta est* / *tempestas totoque ... aestu*' unmet; but that is a daunting challenge that would defeat any translator. Full honours here, then – which suggests Lembke could achieve something better than this rendition were she to concentrate on wrestling into shape lines ranging from five stresses to seven:

Here, at one time, from an afflicted sky a season
to lament broke out and glowed with the full heat of autumn.
It brought death to all domestic animals, all beasts,
and it tainted their water, poisoned their fodder with sickness.

As *The Georgics* ends, Virgil assumes the seemingly obsequious persona of a (formerly) lazy dabbler in pastoral while Augustus was conquering the east. (By ironic indirection, the poet may just be hinting that *The Georgics* is the far worthier project Caesar had been expecting from him.) In any case, the poem concludes with an explicit reference to the 'ignoble' *Bucolics*:

illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat
Parthenope, studiis florentem ignobilis oti,
carmina qui lusi pastorum audaxque iuventa,
Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi.

As Lembke has it:

In those days, sweet Naples nourished me – Virgil –
who flourished at leisure in undistinguished efforts,
I who played with shepherd's songs and, as a bold youth, sang
you, Tityrus, under the leafy crown of a spreading beech.

This is a trickier passage than it might at first appear. The sense *seems* plain, but how to work with that delayed clause, almost appositive-feeling syntax, and still write only one English sentence? Clearly an em-dash is going to be needed at least once, somewhere, but will that be enough? And is Virgil saying that in those balmy days he was flourishing, thriving, or just happy while in the studies of ignoble leisure (as opposed to Caesar) or – far more loosely – was he unknown (*ignobilis*) at that time, flourishing in the arts of humble peace? I think grammar demands the first reading, so I cannot see how Lembke can arrive at 'undistinguished efforts'. Lembke does about as well as can be expected, though, with the balky sentence, and she avoids Fallon's error of having Virgil the poet lying under that spreading beech, when it is clear that Virgil can remember his own opening lines of Eclogue I.

What, finally, to make of this project? I suspect Yale University Press felt it 'needed' a *Georgics*, decided to cosset it in every conceivable aesthetic and bookbinding luxury, and then left the verse to shift for itself as best it could. I certainly cannot imagine anyone buying this book to enjoy an English Virgil graced by subtle, powerful, elegant poetry. And that is a pity.

LEN KRISAK