

VIRGIL

DAVID R. SLAVITT



HERMES BOOKS

VIRGIL

DAVID R. SLAVITT

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藏书章

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for Nina

*ipsa tibi blandos fundent cunabula flores.
occidet et serpens, et falax herba veneni
occidet; Assyrium vulgo nascetur amomum.*

FOREWORD

"IT WOULD BE A PITY," SAID NIETZSCHE, "IF THE CLASSICS should speak to us less clearly because a million words stood in the way." His forebodings seem now to have been realized. A glance at the increasing girth of successive volumes of the standard journal of classical bibliography, *L'Année Philologique*, since World War II is enough to demonstrate the proliferation of writing on the subject in our time. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the studies listed will prove on inspection to be largely concerned with points of detail and composed by and for academic specialists in the field. Few are addressed to the literate but nonspecialist adult or to that equally important person, the intelligent but uninstructed beginning student; and of those few, very few indeed are the work of scholars of the first rank, equipped for their task not merely with raw classical erudition but also with style, taste, and literary judgment.

It is a strange situation. On one side stand the classical masters of Greece and Rome, those models of concision, elegance, and understanding of the human condition, who composed least of all for narrow technologists, most of all for the Common Reader (and, indeed, the Common Hearer). On the other side stands a sort of industrial complex, processing those masters into an annually growing output of technical articles and monographs. What is lacking, it seems, in our society as well as in our scholarship, is the kind of book that was supplied for earlier generations by such men as Richard Jebb

and Gilbert Murray in the intervals of their more technical researches—the kind of book that directed the general reader not to the pyramid of secondary literature piled over the burial places of the classical writers but to the living faces of the writers themselves, as perceived by a scholar-humanist with a deep knowledge of, and love for, his subject. Not only for the sake of the potential student of classics, but also for the sake of the humanities as a whole, within and outside academe, it seems that this gap in classical studies ought to be filled. The *Hermes* series is a modest attempt to fill it.

We have sought men and women possessed of a rather rare combination of qualities: a love for literature in other languages, extending into modern times; a vision that extends beyond academe to contemporary life itself; and above all an ability to express themselves in clear, lively, and graceful English, without polysyllabic language or parochial jargon. For the aim of the series requires that they should communicate to nonspecialist readers, authoritatively and vividly, their personal sense of why a given classical author's writings have excited people for centuries and why they can continue to do so. Some are classical scholars by profession, some are not; each has lived long with the classics, and especially with the author about whom he or she writes in this series.

The first, middle, and last goal of the *Hermes* series is to guide the general reader to a dialogue with the classical masters rather than to acquaint him or her with the present state of scholarly research. Thus our volumes contain few or no footnotes; even within the texts, references to secondary literature are kept to a minimum. At the end of each volume, however, is a short bibliography that includes recommended English translations, and selected literary criticism, as well as historical and (when appropriate) biographical studies. Throughout, all quotations from the Greek or Latin texts are given in English translation.

In these ways we hope to let the classics speak again, with a minimum of modern verbiage (as Nietzsche wished), to the widest possible audience of interested people.

John Herington

PREFACE

PUBLIUS VERGILIUS MARO WAS BORN AT ANDES, A VILLAGE NEAR Mantua, on 15 October 70 B.C. . . .

But even to address such a subject as the thumbnail life of the poet is to venture upon controversial ground. After all, what has the poet's life to do with his work? A help in understanding some of the references, perhaps? Well, yes, but there is a certain kind of scholarship that was questioned for a while—historical criticism, it was called, by the new critics and then the deconstructionists and textual analysts. And now that deconstruction is under something of a cloud, these old-fashioned methods are back in slightly updated clothing. Their practitioners call themselves the new historicists now.

From outside the academy, we can relax a little and allow that a certain amount of information is useful if not actually essential. Gossip is generally delightful, and on occasion instructive. The temptation is to let the gossip take over entirely, to reconstruct Lord Byron's checkbooks while ignoring his poetry. Biography is about people and is warm and attractive; art, on the other hand, is rather more abstract and demanding—which is why the popular press loves to skip to the interview and tell us whether the author likes cats, drinks too much, writes with a gold fountain pen, or lives in the middle of the woods with his menagerie of semitamed fauna. For obvious reasons, the "People" section has always had a more avid audience than the "Books" section in *Time*.

With Virgil, though, we can have it both ways. There is

a fairly detailed life by Suetonius, but it is fanciful and unreliable, so we can recite the information without taking it too seriously, eating our cake but having it too. Our intellectual purity won't be besmirched.

The name, first off. Vergilius is the Latin, from which "Vergil" would be the expected form and is the one many writers in English have used, more and more of them lately. "Virgil," however, is the legitimate English name and the one I like because it is slightly less pretentious. "Vergil" sounds to me just a little like the mannerism of those television anchorpersons who develop an instant and obviously fake Spanish accent whenever they have to pronounce "Nicaragua" and "Salvador."

But back to the life. Virgil was said not to have cried at his birth and to have had such a gentle expression as an infant as to give assurance of an unusually happy destiny. He spent his early life at Cremona, moved for a brief time to Mediolanum, and then to Rome. He was tall, dark, rustic-looking, suffered from stomach ailments, sore throat, headache, and nosebleeds. He was abstemious about food and drink, was homosexual and passionate for boys, especially Cebes and Alexander (whom he calls Alexis in *Eclogue* 2). He was rather shy and, in Naples where he had a country place, was called "Parthenias," which means "Virgin" or at least "Maiden." On his visits to Rome, he was said to have avoided admiring crowds that collected to follow him around, ducking into any nearby house, asking for refuge, and hiding there until the people outside went away.

After some juvenile work, he is said to have begun some large poem about Roman history which he abandoned. He then wrote the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid*, in three, seven, and twelve years respectively. His manner of composition from the *Georgics* onward was to dictate a large number of lines each morning to an amanuensis slave and then spend the rest of the day reducing them, in the manner of a she-bear licking her cubs into shape. The success of the *Eclogues* was

such as to make him instantly famous—at the age of thirty-one—and win him the patronage of Maecenas for the *Georgics* and of Augustus Caesar himself for the *Aeneid*, which was not quite complete when, in his fifty-second year, Virgil died at Brindisi on the eleventh day before the Kalends of October (21 September 19 B.C.) in the consulship of Gnaeus Sentius and Quintus Lucretius. His ashes were taken to Naples and laid to rest in a tomb two miles outside of the city on the via Puteolana. His instructions had been that, at his death, his friend Varius was to burn the *Aeneid*, but Varius refused to promise this. On his deathbed, then, Virgil called for the manuscript boxes, presumably intending to oversee their incineration himself, but no one would bring them. He left his executors instructions that they were not to publish anything he himself would not have given to the world, but, at the “request” of Augustus, Varius decided to publish the *Aeneid* after all, making only a few corrections and leaving the incomplete lines as they were in his dead friend’s text.

That Virgil is such an overpoweringly established writer speaks against him as much as for him, as far as I’m concerned. It is a measure of my admiration for his work that I can like it in spite of its being a Required Text of Western Civilization, and it is no accident that my real enthusiasms are for the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*. In fact, I have some real trouble liking the *Aeneid*. I can admire it but I find it hard to warm up to.

What I am hoping to suggest is that these poems of Virgil’s are worth reading not because they are officially certified Great Works of Art, but because they are humane, and shrewd, and sad, and comforting. Because they really do reward our attention and repay abundantly the effort they demand.

Actually, I was first drawn to Virgil by Robert Graves’s nearly insane fulminations against him, remarks that were so intemperate and insulting as to provoke my interest (an interest that had not, I confess, been much aroused at school).

I began, twenty years ago, reading and thinking about Virgil and translating some of the *Eclogues*. Eventually, I did all the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* as well (these have recently been reissued). It was largely because of that book that I was invited to write this one.

Robert Frost used to say that his idea of a lively student was one who would duck assigned work to do something else of equal or greater intellectual challenge. My idea of a good book is one that you read in moments snatched between "assignments." This hasn't been the usual circumstance for Virgil, but times are changing, and a lot of the old requirements have been relaxed or abandoned. Whether his poetry is assigned or not, it remains true that Virgil's work is still worth reading, and I hope to have served one of the laudable aims of the *Hermes* series in demonstrating that.

Perhaps my main worry is that I have not been clear about the fact that these are poems, that there is a play of language and image, a physical kind of appeal which is the fundamental business of poetry. I never know how to explain that sensuous apprehension of language. Technical discussions of prosody are surely not the way to go about it. And here, where the text is in Latin, there are further and greater difficulties. If you know Latin well enough to read it, you may get some sense of its chewiness and orderliness. But if not? You have to trust me, taking what I say at least partly on faith. I have done the best I could, supplying, for the *Aeneid* at least, Robert Fitzgerald's splendid versions to which I invite the reader to attend in every possible way. Not just the meaning, but the music, the energy, the stress and *tristesse* of the lines as they dispose themselves on the page. For the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, I have used my own translations.

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PART I
THE ECLOGUES

THE RULES OF THE GAME

IN THE MINDS OF MOST PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT SCHOLARS AND classicists, Virgil is the author of the *Aeneid*. Italo Calvino suggests in the opening of his wonderfully intelligent *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* that there are "the Books You Needn't Read, the Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before Being Written," as well as "Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered." It is regrettable but true that Virgil's other works, the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, fall far too frequently into that last category with people who are not to be despised. (At least they've heard of them.)

I shall begin with the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*, and then move on to the *Aeneid*, which many people have read some of, which almost everyone has to some extent absorbed by osmosis even if without opening its pages, and which has, all too often, prevented an exploration of the earlier and, to me, more congenial works. With the *Aeneid*, about which I have mixed feelings, I shall do my best.

The *Eclogues* are as inviting and easy to like as the *Aeneid* is difficult. Their surface is immediately attractive and then, on further examination, they prove to be intelligent, even profound poems—which is more than we ought to expect in the work of a young man. And the Virgil of the *Eclogues* is obviously young, a bright, ambitious fellow looking to make a reputation for himself. He is on occasion, brash and nervy but, at the same time, disarming. The *Eclogues* (it means "Selec-

tions"), also called the *Bucolics* ("Country Poems"), are actually an artful, urbane, even citified set of performances which invoke the tradition of Theocritus, the Greek poet of the third century B.C., but do so mostly to play with it. This early work of Virgil's is, at least in part, manifesto poetry—poetry about poetry and the lit-biz and also about poetry's great subjects. The poems reach out, therefore, particularly the even-numbered ones, to address and include most of life.

There is an unabashed glitter to the *Eclogues* and, in Virgil's complicated reworking of the Theocritan precedents, an even brighter dazzle he achieves from the inevitable comparison the readers were invited to make between his work and the earlier, paler Greek poems, most of which mean more or less what they say. The interesting exception is Theocritus's *Idyll* 7, "Harvest Home," in which the poet offers himself dressed up as Simichidas, the goat-herd. Virgil adopts this strategy of disguise and pretense and extends it to contrive a similar but much more pervasive program of refraction and allusion. These shepherds of his are not intended to convince anyone of their authenticity. They come quite unabashedly not from real fields and meadows but from a kind of playground Marie Antoinette maintained at the Petit Trianon, dressing up as milkmaid or shepherdess. The transparency of the get-up was part of its point, because Virgil's subject was not at all country life but Rome—where the complications and pressures, the pace and sometimes the ennui of the city dwellers' sophisticated and competitive existence could make the lives of shepherds and farmers seem not only desirable but "real."

The machinery of the pastoral has sometimes been compared to the old joke about capturing an alligator with a telescope, a pair of tweezers, and a matchbox. The trick is to look at the alligator through the wrong end of the telescope so that he appears to be very small. Then, picking him up with the tweezers, one—very quickly!—pops him into the matchbox, shutting it tight. This is, of course, absurd, and yet it has a