

INTRODUCTION: READING THE GEORGICS



Georgica reuerso post Actiacam uictoriam Augusto atque Atellae reficendarum faucium causa commoranti, per continuum quadriduum legit, suscipiente Maecenate legendi uicem, quotiens interpellaretur ipse uocis offensione.

(Donatus, *Vita Vergilii* 91–95)

[When Augustus had returned after his victory at Actium and was staying at Atella to rest his throat, [Vergil] read the *Georgics* to him over four continuous days; Maecenas took up reading in turn whenever he himself broke off through weakness of voice.]

The title of the present study refers to several “readings after Actium”: to the literal reading of the *Georgics* after the battle of Actium envisioned in the passage of Donatus quoted above, to the post-Actium reading of the first *Eclogue* provoked by the end of the *Georgics* (the subject of the conclusion), and more generally to the interpretation of the figure of Octavian/Augustus that must have become quite intense when it became clear, after Actium and to some extent even before, that he alone was to hold the reins of power in the Roman world. It is my contention that the *Georgics* can be profitably understood as a post-Actium “reading,” or rather a set of them, of the situation in which Octavian found himself in the early 20s BCE, after the battle of Actium and before the assumption of the title Augustus.¹ Perhaps more importantly, the *Georgics* represents an attempt to engage in a constructive dialogue with

Octavian on the potential courses available to him and on the potential interpretations of his character, achievements, and motives, which would have been a central concern to the Roman and Italian elite.

Over a century of rich criticism has attempted to show that Vergil's *Georgics* presents a coherent and satisfying vision of mankind's place in the universe. I suggest, however, that the poem presents a vision of mankind's place in the universe that is incomplete and incoherent and that, inasmuch as it deals with what its readers may consider facts, is also inaccurate. Nevertheless, it is enormously potent. The poem's chaotic vision is not a flaw but a strategy, a way of provoking the reader to develop his own vision of the human condition by involving him in the text's feints and evasions, misstatements, and myths.² It thus encourages, even provokes, the reader to construct or reconstruct a view of the world and his place within it.³

The poem's provocations will elicit different responses from different readers, and this book is an attempt to trace the way Vergil's great poem speaks to and about one particular reader, Octavian. The *Georgics* communicates to and about him at a time just after he has become the most powerful man in the Mediterranean world and just before the assumption of his new role and name. Thus, mine is a self-consciously political reading of the *Georgics*, which emphasizes matters that critics of the poem have sometimes preferred to avoid.⁴ I do not pretend that it is the only, or even the best, way to read the poem, but it is an important one, since the *Georgics* should play a much greater role in debates about the nature of politics and society in Augustan Rome. My first goal here is to provide a useful and needed reevaluation of the *Georgics* as a political text, but I would also like to reinsert the poem into discussion of the Augustan principate in general.⁵

Of the major poems in the traditional Latin literary canon, the *Georgics* is almost certainly the most difficult. Despite a great deal of sensitive and erudite criticism, important questions of political orientation and philosophical program have found no consensus, and readers often do not even substantially agree in their answers to more fundamental questions such as what the poem is about or what genre it represents, even if they do usually agree that the poem is about something. Perhaps the most significant recent development in *Georgics* criticism, then, is the increasingly accepted idea that the poem does not admit one dominant, univocal reading; more and more, critics tend to see it as a set of processes or dynamics rather than a set of meaningful aphorisms.⁶ One way to approach such a dynamic and interactive work is to take seriously the poet's didactic stance. Thus, by pressing the metaphor of teacher, lesson, and students, I propose to explore the different points of view at play in the poem by addressing variously what, whom, and how the poem attempts to

teach. As will become clear, I believe that the “lessons” of the poem follow directly from the way the “students,” its readers, engage and work through the problems presented by the text.⁷ Put another way, the lessons of the *Georgics* do not consist of the transmission of information but of the experience of confronting the often chimerical world presented by the poet.⁸ This is not simply indeterminacy; rather, the poem arouses and reflects our need to find one or more reliable meanings in the world around us. It also reflects the way the world has of thwarting us in our attempts to fix meaning. Most of all, the *Georgics* emphasizes the fact that in our quest for a meaning various audiences will construct (or discover) different, and even mutually exclusive, meanings.

This aspect of the *Georgics* has political implications, for one of the ways in which Vergil reveals the inevitable multiplicity and exclusivity of our meanings, our interpretations of the world, is to hold up to scrutiny different potential versions of Octavian. Whenever Octavian appears in the *Georgics*, he is always potentially something else. Again, the issue is not one of utter indeterminacy—the poet is not suggesting that there is no truth at the heart of any of these potential Octavians. Instead he is forcing us, and, more urgently, forcing Octavian himself, to consider how the same truth will appear once it is refracted through the unreliable prism of different human experiences and different points of view.

In examining the *Georgics* as a didactic work directed at Octavian, one that invites him (and any other reader) to react to specific problems, puzzles, and challenges, I have committed myself to a linear reading of the whole poem. Thus, this study follows the format of much older work on the poem: a literary commentary that moves sequentially through the text from beginning to end. While more recent work has tended to follow a topical or thematic approach, my project cannot be accommodated to such a method since it is precisely the path from beginning to end, the reader’s experience of the text as it unfolds, that is important. The poem itself provides cues that we are to move forward, to reevaluate what we have read in light of new developments. Metaphors of motion occur often; the poet-teacher reminds us that we are on a kind of journey, and in fact the poem’s most famous moment is a warning against looking back before the time has come. Admittedly, my reading emphasizes some passages more than others—all literary criticism does—but more topical readings can have the incidental effect of overemphasizing certain themes and images while completely removing others from the reader’s experience; the poet’s engagement with Lucretius, for example, or his religious references, can seem to be the paramount concern of the text. If we understand didactic poetry as a descriptive genre that presents inert information for our inspection and enjoyment, then it may well do to cut the *Georgics* into its component passages, and

these could then be treated in any order. If, on the other hand, we understand didactic as a more dynamic genre, a specialized kind of narrative, then we must recognize that a didactic work will be organized around what Don Fowler has termed a “didactic plot.”⁹ For this reason, I have not limited my discussion to passages in which Octavian or Roman politics is explicitly mentioned. Finally, the poem’s last line, as I argue in my conclusion, directs us to undertake a new and highly political rereading of the poet’s earlier work from the perspective of the *Georgics*. It would not be possible to engage in such a reading after a topical or thematic reading of the *Georgics*, since the text positions *Eclogue 1* as a linear continuation of that text. I would not suggest that a linear reading is the only way to understand many elements of the poem, but for my purposes the didactic plot is essential, since the arrangement of the material, the way it unfolds for Octavian, is vital.¹⁰

In exploring the didactic metaphor, I rely heavily on the figure of the teaching poet and the notion that he is consciously attempting to present his “lessons” and compel his students to think through the intellectual and heuristic dilemmas he poses. To some extent, this model is one offered by the text itself, but my use of it obviously raises the question of authorial intent and its validity in interpretation.¹¹ Though it is not a fashionable point of view, I believe that an author’s intent is significant and that the recovery of that original intention is one of many valid goals of criticism.¹² Frequently it is useful to speak of what a text does instead of what an author does, but—unlike some of Vergil’s trees—no text comes about without some kind of authorship. If I say that the *Georgics* questions the utility of Golden Age mythology, I am asserting either that the author of the *Georgics* has made the text do so or that he has inadvertently allowed the text to do so, even if he has merely failed to block such a potential reading of his work. Indeed, the fact that the author’s intent exists does not mean that it succeeds.

Of course, some of my reading, like any reading, is generated by my own interaction with the text—so I will continue to speak of the poet Vergil and his intentions, goals, attempts, and so forth, since these concepts remain meaningful for me and, I suspect, many others. I openly acknowledge that I derive my Vergil from his works and that he may not be particularly similar to any other reader’s Vergil or to the man who actually first uttered the words that form the text. I should say that I see pronounced thematic and ethical consistency running through the works of Vergil and that we can probably thus know something of the historical person’s outlook, but none of this is crucial to my reading of the *Georgics*.

There is another reason too for exploiting intentionality as a heuristic tool for reading the *Georgics*, or rather there has been a reason for some scholars to

avoid doing so: by removing the issue of intention from a discussion of political poetry, one can attempt to liberate poet, text, and critic from the sometimes unsavory world of the political. By eliminating a conscious authorial program from the *Georgics*, we can avoid the uncomfortable dissonance between our own ethical commitments and those of Vergil. This approach is reassuring and futile: whatever accommodations Vergil made with the powerful are beyond our reach. Our praise or disapproval of the poet may be a relevant stage in his reception, but it does not necessarily reflect the concerns of antiquity.

Recently, Latinists have started to come to grips with the political aspects of Roman poetry in a variety of ways. Thomas Habinek, for instance, has traced some of the political concerns of critics in order to understand the formation of a traditional academic canon of Latin literature in the United States.¹³ Similarly, Duncan Kennedy has examined the history of the interpretation of Horace's *Satires* and found that scholars have resisted the notion that the poems have any political dimension.¹⁴ As Kennedy sees it, the problem springs in part from too narrow a definition of politics and in part from an attempt to isolate both language and literature from political power.¹⁵ Writing on Vergil's *Aeneid*, Anton Powell discusses critical attempts to depoliticize Vergil's poetry as arising from various causes, including a disdain for politics in general, a suspicion of writers attached to specific regimes, and a difference in approach to Augustan Rome on the parts of literary critics and political historians respectively.¹⁶ Significantly, all of these scholars see the often anti-political stance of Latin studies as being reinforced by the typical critical modes of classical scholarship. True though this may be, I would suggest that it applies not only to traditional philological approaches, New Criticism, and various kinds of formalism, but also—and perhaps especially—to much postmodern criticism that seeks to divorce textual processes from authorial practices.¹⁷

Moreover, the so-called death of the author makes assumptions about literary production that are particularly problematic for ancient Rome. For the Romans, motives for writing were often practical as well as artistic. Elite authors were engaged in a kind of social performance that was part of a larger network of social behavior and relations, and their texts served to relate them to sources of political power, traditional prestige, and wealth.¹⁸ To be sure, the precise dynamics of these relationships vary from writer to writer, but obviously poets such as Vergil and Horace were fully implicated in the networks of the powerful, and to reject intentionality as a meaningful category of analysis presupposes that their works somehow float free of their social contexts. This is certainly not to say that a historical author's intentions and goals *are* the meaning of the work, nor does it suggest that a statement of an author's intent can ever automatically trump other readings of a text. Rather, it means

that texts such as Horace's *Satires* or Vergil's *Aeneid* operated within a network of social and political protocols; these texts were implicated in the broader social system by individuals attempting to gain from that system. Whether or not one feels that intention has a privileged epistemological status, it certainly had a special, and very real, social function: an author's intentions are an important part of the way social context, literary text, and individual authors interact. To deny their intentions any validity is to deny that literature was part of the elite commerce in prestige and power, a convenient procedure, especially if we are embarrassed by our authors.

OCTAVIAN AND THE POET'S AUDIENCE

The *Georgics* has multiple messages to teach to multiple audiences, but it is delivered by the poet as a set of exercises in perspective. These audiences are, of course, the poem's readers in general, but at the same time Vergil's text addresses itself more specifically to certain definite audiences, envisioned in different ways as the poet's students. The most obvious of these students are the notional farmers who will learn about agriculture and husbandry from the great poet. They are, as we shall see, the ignorant who require pity. In theory, Vergil offers lessons in farming, but, as has long been recognized, his metaphorical farm is a better laboratory for life than for agriculture.

Octavian may seem to be above the level of student, and indeed most critics treat him as though he were self-evidently outside the poet's didactic reach.¹⁹ Yet in many ways Octavian is the most important audience Vergil has ever had. Some of the poet's apparently political statements may seem unthinkable and rash, especially those that would seem to be warnings from the poet to the *princeps*. But even emperors and gods have to learn their lessons somewhere, and I see in the poem a lesson for the most powerful man alive at the time. Octavian must understand the nature of the world he is trying to govern and the way that world sees him.

Yet Octavian is a reader of a somewhat unusual kind. Certainly he is one of the poem's audiences, but—in contrast to most readers—he is also explicitly one of the topics of discussion. Furthermore, he is invoked as a god at the beginning of the work. This triple relationship to the poem is an important element in the way it teaches.²⁰ For instance, in the invocation to Octavian, he is called upon to pity the “rustics ignorant of the way” as they attempt to learn the poet's lessons, but at the same time he will find that he is himself one of the topics held up for their consideration. His activities will affect theirs, in life as well as in Vergil's poem; in fact, he had already affected them quite a bit, since as triumvir he had control of Italy and was heavily bound up with the

plight of the Italian *rus*.²¹ Thus, in pitying the *rustici* along with the poet he will be confronted not only with their needs and fears in the strictly agricultural realm but also with their anxieties regarding politics, power, and himself.

Octavian is addressee, topic, and also a god who is asked to favor the poet's undertaking and to choose a role for himself in the divine world. This third role adds a further complication to the didactic process. Any reader of the *Georgics* will consider the problems the poem presents and will try to find, in some fashion, the poem's meaning, but as one of the gods called upon to support the poet in his task Octavian bears a singular responsibility for the success of Vergil's project. As one of the poet's students, Octavian will have to consider the problems associated with his own power, but as one of the poet's gods he will also have to make sure that he does well at his lessons—because this student has the ability to shut down the class through his power over the teacher, over the other students, and even over the subject of Italian agriculture and Roman rule.²² It is disturbing enough to think of this in terms of an intentional censorship or oppression, but it is perhaps even more chilling to understand that Octavian might inadvertently have any of these effects: he is a reader who can alter, end, or even unwrite the text. The *Georgics* explores Octavian's power to initiate, maintain, and bring an end to all manner of phenomena, especially agriculture, poetry, and war.²³

The idea that a poet would speak of lessons for Octavian is not far-fetched. In *Odes* 3.4, Horace describes the Muses as offering *lene consilium*, “mild advice,” to the *princeps* finally back in Italy and able to rest after the last of the civil wars. Horace does not tell us exactly what the *consilium* of the Muses consists of, but he proceeds to describe a Gigantomachy—a typical image of the forces of chaos ranging themselves against civilized order, and an image with distinctly political implications. In the midst of this description, Horace voices what may be taken as advice:

uis consili expers mole ruit sua,
uim temperatam di quoque prouehunt
in maius, idem odere uiris
omne nefas animo mouentis.

(*Odes* 3.4.65–68)

[Force without counsel falls under its own weight; the gods, too, exalt force when moderated—but they hate violence that stirs up every outrage within the heart.]

In one sense, the violence of Octavian's enemies is compared to that of the enemies of Jove, but in another, any untempered force can arouse the ire of

the gods. Earlier in this poem, Horace has depicted himself as a kind of inspired priest of the Muses, who therefore may be seen as the actual mouthpiece of their *lene consilium* to the *princeps*.²⁴ Horace's self-positioning as an inspired adviser to Octavian, gently urging him to consider the past and potential violence and impiety of civil war, is not unlike Vergil's self-representation in the *Georgics*. The chief difference is that between the inspired lyric *uates* of the *Odes* and the poet-preceptor of the didactic poem.²⁵

Octavian is not the poet's only student in the *Georgics*, and at times he is not even the principal one, but he is always there. He needs to hear not only the political statements but also, and maybe more urgently, those precepts directed first and foremost to the farmer. Octavian is invited to pity the farmers, and I would add that he must *learn* to do so and to understand their needs and wants. He is to be their *princeps*, and as such he must know the challenges that face them and the often meager rewards that await them. It used to be commonly suggested that Vergil wrote the *Georgics* as a way to appeal to Romans, on behalf of Octavian, to return to the land.²⁶ It may be nearer the truth that Vergil addresses Octavian on behalf of Rome and Italy. Just as Maecenas and the farmer are meant to think through various problems, so, too, must Octavian consider the nature of the world he must now rule. For him, the poem turns into a set of probing questions about the nature of power, the way human beings react to difficult circumstances, the needs of Roman society, and the fact that he has stepped into the most dangerous and deeply ambiguous role a human being could be asked to play. Octavian must consider the human condition because it applies to him even as he has appeared to transcend it.²⁷

Let me make clear that Octavian is not to be considered only a creature of Vergil's text, though of course he is also that. Vergil knew him personally and would forever be associated with him. When I say that one goal of the *Georgics* is to compel Octavian to think through the problems of power and its exercise, I mean very seriously that the historical Vergil cast himself in the role of adviser to the historical Octavian; that the poem often reflects issues of real concern to the *princeps*, including his own past and future behavior; and that the poet has mobilized a number of specific allusions to Octavian's recent past and the career of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar.²⁸ The composition of the *Georgics* was a political act.

This approach to the poem can provide a way out of the often polarized debates on Vergil's attitude toward Octavian and Rome. The poem does not express a view of the *princeps* or his achievements so much as it invites the audience, Octavian as well as us, to consider the theme from multiple points of view. For Vergil does not let any of his students off easy, and Octavian will be

made to consider both the positive and negative aspects of his actions and especially the fact that there may be no agreement on what these aspects are. The poet seems determined to evoke possible negative images of Octavian alongside decidedly positive ones, and it is better not to think in simplistic terms of praise or subversion.²⁹ Rather, the *Georgics* seems to hold up to scrutiny various Octavians that might potentially exist or were already thought to exist by critics and supporters alike.³⁰

Central to the scrutiny of his potential development and public image is the persistent association of Octavian with the god Jupiter.³¹ We know of rumors associating him with Jupiter Optimus Maximus, and at least one statue portrayed him as Olympian Zeus. Though published slightly later than Vergil's poem, the *Odes* of Horace also make a connection between Jupiter and the *princeps*.³² Yet the *Georgics* does not merely reflect contemporary gossip or propaganda—the identification of Octavian with Jupiter is never entirely secure. As flattering as the association seems, it raises the possibility that Octavian has hubristically set himself up as a rival to the king of the gods.

Jupiter himself is a rather enigmatic figure in the *Georgics*. Although his first appearance (1.121ff.) is striking and memorable, it is also somewhat later than we might expect. Jupiter plays no role in the invocations that begin the poem, and, I will argue, his absence there has been highlighted by the poet. It has even been suggested—not without some reason—that Octavian has replaced him.³³ But, like Octavian, Jupiter lends himself to more than one plausible interpretation: benevolent father and capricious tyrant, Stoic world god and Hesiodic storm god.³⁴ Vergil exploits the play between these extremes not only as a parallel to the possible interpretations of Octavian but also as a way of engaging Octavian—and the other students of the poem—in a discussion of the human condition. Until the *Aeneid*, Vergil's Jupiter is a remote figure, like Cleanthes' Zeus, a god whose role as manager of the universe makes him mysterious and forbidding; from the human point of view, Jupiter's activities are accessible only through interpretation. Once again we return to politics, for Octavian's biggest concern after Actium was the way in which he had been and would be interpreted by the various constituencies that made up Rome. If the *Georgics* explores the problem of the inscrutability of Jupiter's power and its effects on human life, it simultaneously deals with the role Octavian's perplexing power was to play in the Roman world.

LESSONS IN VISION AND POWER

Clearly, this way of reading the *Georgics* has much to do with ongoing controversies about the poet's attitude toward Augustus and his achievement. We

will return to these issues, but first it will be helpful to think more fully about the teaching poet's pedagogy. I have already referred to Vergil's poem as consisting of a number of problems to be confronted by each of his students. It is worthwhile to consider further the way the poem's didactic agenda is accomplished, that is, to ask "How does Vergil teach?"

Traditionally, we read a poem like the *Georgics* as a statement or set of statements by the poet: the poem is "about" life, or work, or politics; the poet's message is that "we should . . ." or "one should . . ." or the like. Recent criticism has focused more usefully on the experiences the poem awakens in the reader and the intellectual challenges it poses. I think the poet has no message that can be stated in Latin or any other language. That is, Vergil does not attempt to convey information, especially not a simple message that can be given verbal form. Rather, he tries to transmit a recognition of the problems of the human condition, and he hopes to inspire individual readers to develop whatever philosophical armature they can in order to cope with them.³⁵ That is, he acknowledges that his vision of the world is partial and incomplete, but he uses it to help us articulate our own visions, inevitably incomplete in their own right.

The didaxis of the *Georgics*, then, ultimately has little to do with the precepts the poem trades in. Not that they are unimportant; they are points of departure for other sorts of exploration, and Vergil will do his best to make sure that we explore the complex terrain they suggest. The poet teaches by raising questions and then proceeding to block the obvious answers that we might come up with. The *Georgics* is a dialogue in which the poet refuses to accept any answer his students might attempt: if a precept suggests that nature is accommodating and success probable, Vergil points out the imminence of disaster; if a description appears to confirm that the moral landscape is bleak and that life is unduly hard, Vergil reveals the benevolence of the gods or the potential joys of the simple life.³⁶

This teaching strategy may seem to indicate that the reader of the *Georgics* is supposed to learn that life is a kind of maze where every way seems blocked and there are no easy answers. This, however, greatly oversimplifies the poem's multiplicity of vision (though it may do as a description of the poem itself). Every reader of the *Georgics* already understands what it is like to be human, and the poet does not need to restate that life is uncertain, sometimes easy but often hard, satisfying and disappointing in, at best, equal measure. Nor does he have to explain to any intelligent person (alive in his day or ever after) that war is hell but often inevitable, that people and animals become ill despite the best care, that the gods—if there are any—cannot be clearly understood and may not, after all, be on our side. He forces us not

so much to think about these things as to defend or discard the thoughts and reactions we already have, to develop perspective through the consideration of puzzles and challenges.

At this juncture, it will be useful to consider the inaccuracy of some of Vergil's precepts. The younger Seneca, who mentions the *Georgics* on a number of occasions, states the view that has—with some exceptions—held the field (so to speak) ever since.

. . . ut ait Vergilius noster, qui non quid uerissime sed quid decentissime diceretur aspexit, nec agricolas docere uoluit sed legentes delectare.
(Ep. 86.15)

[. . . as our Vergil says, who considered what might be expressed not most accurately but most attractively, and who did not want to teach farmers but to delight his readers.]

While some have argued that Vergil is not really inaccurate so much as selective, most readers with any knowledge of agriculture notice errors, misstatements, and confusions of various sorts.³⁷ Although the poet's original target audience may have had little hands-on experience of backbreaking physical labor in the fields, it is, I suggest, an exaggeration to say that they would know nothing of actual farming—Cato and Varro, after all, had not directed their handbooks to slaves and subsistence-level laborers. It seems most profitable to assume, then, that Vergil's "mistakes" serve a didactic purpose: by inviting his readers to consider agricultural advice that is either obviously erroneous or presented in a highly selective and nonsequential way, the teaching poet compels them to search for deeper meaning, a term I use with some reluctance.³⁸ The meaning each reader finds will, of course, depend on that reader.³⁹

The idea that the agricultural material is not important for its own sake underlies almost all criticism of the *Georgics* since Erich Burck, but, whereas much older criticism was directed toward finding hidden unity, more recent work has explored the possibility that there is no such unity and that this, in fact, is the central strategy of the *Georgics*. William Batstone has even suggested that the poem calls into question the value of giving precepts in the first place.⁴⁰ Another way of looking at this is to see the *Georgics* as provoking—even compelling—a reader to face the incompleteness of knowledge as it normally presents itself to human experience. All obvious things can be made obscure, and all obscure things can be elucidated—though the process is never foolproof, and nothing ever becomes perfectly clear or remains impervious to interpretation.

Though I believe the poet is not really giving lessons in agriculture, this should not be taken to mean that the agricultural and rustic metaphors of the poem serve only as a rhetorical framework for philosophical or political investigations.⁴¹ The farm is crucial to the strategies of the poem because it is a quintessentially Roman idea of life, one with a literary history that transcends Rome itself and yet one that evokes numerous contemporary Roman concerns and prejudices.⁴² The subsistence farmer's life really is one of nearly constant toil, and therefore Vergil can derive his vision of a *labor*-ridden world from the image of the simple farmer.⁴³

The farm is also a place where wild nature, so often exemplified by the term *silva*, intersects with civilization. The farm is about ordering, arranging, and manipulating—about controlling nature. Yet it is also a space where the civilized individual must bring himself into contact with flora and fauna and acknowledge their needs as much as his own. The poet uses this space to examine how man fits into his universe and to question whether civilization and nature really form a binary opposition after all. Often the poem seems to posit humanity as merely one element in the natural world, not significantly superior to such animals as mice, moles, and toads.

READING THE GEORGICS AND READING OCTAVIAN

I suggest that the poem pursues a number of significant arguments, which are introduced early in the first book and reach a kind of conclusion in the remarkable narrative of Orpheus and Aristaeus which ends the poem. It would be difficult to enumerate all such arguments, and others have traced important ones by examining Vergil's use of his models, his exploitation of scientific and physical theories, his military and political language, and his development of a tension between the figures of the farmer and the poet.⁴⁴ This is not the place for an exhaustive survey of critical approaches to Vergil or even the *Georgics*, but it will be helpful to review those which are most relevant to the reading presented here.

I pass over the phase of Vergilian criticism that saw the *Georgics* as a poem consisting of sincere, if flawed, agricultural material interrupted by ornamental digressions.⁴⁵ *Georgics* criticism as we know it begins with Erich Burck and his attempt to show that the so-called digressions are intimately connected to the poem's didactic material.⁴⁶ Burck was followed by others who continued to probe the poem's nuances with great sensitivity. These scholars, especially Friedrich Klingner and Brooks Otis, tended to see the poem as a positive meditation on life and its concerns, nor did they seriously question the praise of Octavian and Rome found in all of Vergil's works.⁴⁷

In this group we might also place L. P. Wilkinson, whose study of the poem was the first English-language monograph exclusively devoted to the *Georgics*.⁴⁸ He differs from Klingner and Otis particularly in his emphasis on the descriptive elements of Vergil's poem.⁴⁹ While applying a wealth of erudition to the text, Wilkinson wants also to forestall a search for hidden meaning.⁵⁰ Like Otis and Klingner, he emphasizes the redemptive and positive possibilities of concepts such as *labor*, and his work is responsible for much of the optimistic language typically found in anglophone criticism of the poem.⁵¹ His idea of "descriptive poetry" to be enjoyed for its own sake and not endowed with any special purpose or larger scrutiny of the human condition has not been a prominent approach to the *Georgics*, though recently it has surfaced again in an urbane book by Richard Jenkyns.⁵²

With Michael Putnam, the dark side of the poem comes to prominence.⁵³ His book, *Virgil's Poem of the Earth*, is a fine example of New Criticism's contribution to the study of Latin literature. Putnam's close reading of the text provides a useful corrective to the overly positive readings of earlier twentieth-century criticism.⁵⁴ He reveals that the *Georgics* exhibits, often if not always, a darker view of man's activities and his relationship to nature. As in his work on the *Aeneid*, Putnam calls into question the nature of the poet's praise of Octavian, though his emphasis is consistently on the human being in general and not only the Roman.⁵⁵ Putnam considers the poem "one grand trope for life itself" and describes its didactic purpose as "manifestly teaching us how to deal with nature but in fact forming a handbook bent on showing us ourselves."⁵⁶

Putnam's lead has been followed—especially in the English-speaking world—by a number of important critics, whose emphasis on darkness and ambivalence far outstrips that expressed in *Virgil's Poem of the Earth*.⁵⁷ D. O. Ross, in particular, sees the poem as a deeply pessimistic examination of human life.⁵⁸ Focusing on the scientific aspects of the *Georgics*, Ross has illuminated the poet's careful, but sometimes subtle, emphasis on the elements and the necessity for balance among them. Ross's approach is largely shared by Richard F. Thomas, whose commentary has helped revitalize the study of the *Georgics*.⁵⁹ Thomas sees a great deal of darkness in the poem and a real ambivalence in Vergil's approach to Octavian and his program.⁶⁰

Much has also been written on Vergilian intertextuality.⁶¹ Long preeminent here was work examining the relationship between the *Georgics* and the poets thought to be in its chief models, Lucretius and Hesiod. Thomas's work on intertextuality has broadened both the stable of authors studied and, at least as importantly, the methods by which intertextual relationships are approached: in particular, he has revealed the extent of Vergil's use of Callimachus and Hellenistic poets generally and developed a useful taxonomy of

specific kinds of allusions or references.⁶² Joseph Farrell provides the most extensive and systematic examination of intertextuality in the poem, and his discussion of the systematic use of allusion has much influenced the reading presented here.⁶³ More recently still, the long recognized importance of Lucretius and Hesiod has been reasserted in studies that take the earlier texts seriously in their own right and not merely as the straw men they have often been perceived to be.⁶⁴ While intertextuality has been made forever a part of critical dialogue on the *Georgics*, I seldom take up intertextual questions in what follows, since Vergil's relationship to his predecessors is not always at stake in his relationship to Octavian and Roman politics. While one of the poem's didactic strategies does involve the citation and appropriation of other texts, it is not, and necessarily cannot be, the only one.

Some have tried to steer a middle course between more optimistic and pessimistic readings of Vergil, though individually such critics usually lean more toward one view or the other. This more balanced approach is gradually becoming the dominant one, and my own reading is indebted to several of these studies. Christine Perkell's *The Poet's Truth* focuses on the role of the poet and the way in which that role is contrasted with those of the statesman and the farmer.⁶⁵ Her nuanced analysis emphasizes the conflict of values at issue in the poem, particularly those associated with the Golden and Iron Ages.

Perkell's focus on ambiguity and lack of resolution has been one of the most important developments in *Georgics* scholarship.⁶⁶ Her own view of the poem, while not as pessimistic as those of Thomas and Ross (or of others such as A. J. Boyle), does tend to stress its darker moments and emphasis on suffering—perhaps because so much earlier work tended to gloss over such currents in the text. Others have followed Perkell in emphasizing the poem's commitment to uncertainty and multiple points of view. Batstone, for instance, has argued that “the diversity of compelling interpretations is part of the *Georgics*' larger value and meaning.”⁶⁷ In Monica Gale's view, Vergil “offers his reader different ways of understanding the world, but does not give us any clear indication of how we are to choose between them.”⁶⁸ Contrasting Vergil and Hesiod, Stephanie Nelson finds that for Hesiod “the farm's contradictions reflect the complex and deceptive balance of an overarching whole. For Vergil, the contradictions are all there is.”⁶⁹

While the reading presented here owes a great deal to such approaches, I differ from each of the scholars named in the preceding paragraph. My own position is that the poem's meaning—like all literary meaning—lies in the experiences the work provokes. This is not so different from what others have said; the difference for me lies, perhaps, in the idea that Vergil—both the historical writer and the poet-character of the *Georgics*—is not simply proposing

an endless array of potential experiences. Rather, I suggest that the *Georgics*' ambiguities are often calculated ways of exposing the existence of different points of view—in particular, points of view that existed in contemporary Rome and Italy and were a very real phenomenon. Thus, the very different opinions the story of Orpheus generates are a way of demonstrating not, or at least not only, that there are questions without answers but that we create our own answers as best we can, that Octavian (or any reader) must occupy himself with sorting through ambiguities in a necessary—if frustrating—attempt to create clarity.

This implies, of course, that ambiguities remain. Certainly they do—some questions really do not have answers. Again, though, I differ from some current trends in the study of the *Georgics* in that I think the poem does not encourage us to surrender completely to aporia and ambiguity. Vergil cannot compel us to abandon ambiguity because neither the world nor nature works that way. Yet the text's acknowledgment of that fact does not imply—or does not imply to me—that we are to lay down all commitments in life rather than make an imperfect choice. The manifold and manifest ambiguities of the *Georgics* invite us—if they do not compel us—to find a livable meaning that is not merely solipsistic (the isolation of Orpheus) or practical (the activity of Aristaeus) but meets our own needs and those of our world. Thus, where Perkell asserts that “the ambiguities that readers have always recognized are not problems to be solved, but rather may be perceived as the poem's deepest meaning,” I believe that these ambiguities are exactly problems to be solved.⁷⁰ I do not suggest that Vergil has all the solutions, only that he wants his readers, perhaps Octavian above all, to realize that they will have to construct imperfect solutions to their own problems and those of the world. I would suggest, too, that the poet encourages the reader to realize that all such solutions inevitably entail consequences and that those may sometimes be quite negative, even dangerous. For Octavian, an understanding of the ambiguities of the world needed desperately to be accompanied by a less ambiguous idea of how and why to proceed.

My focus on the *Georgics* as a political dialogue with Octavian has affinities with several other works, of which I single out three. The first is Gary B. Miles's *Virgil's Georgics: A New Interpretation*.⁷¹ Miles sees the poem as presenting a sequence of potential paradigms for Roman society; each is held up to scrutiny and then rejected as the poet moves us toward the myths of Aristaeus and Orpheus in the fourth book. Miles frequently links the content of individual passages to political and historical events, and his reading of the poem acknowledges that the statesman must learn the essential lessons of human life and human nature.⁷² Still, Octavian personally remains more a

topic of the poem than an addressee, and Miles does not consider the way in which Octavian's multiple roles contribute to the overall structure or effect of the poem.⁷³

More recently, Llewelyn Morgan's *Patterns of Redemption in Virgil's Georgics* seeks to resist pessimistic readings of the poem—especially those of Thomas and Ross—by proving that the *Georgics* “can on the contrary be interpreted as a thoroughgoing exercise in Octavianic propaganda, a precise response to the requirements of the regime headed by Octavian which at the time of the poem's completion was emerging from the chaos of the Civil Wars; a text, in other words, capable of yielding a highly optimistic purport.”⁷⁴

M. Owen Lee's *Virgil as Orpheus* is a sensitive reading of the *Georgics* that draws on Jungian ideas to make sense of the poem and in particular its final epyllion. Lee's premises are that Vergil has used the figure of Orpheus to structure his poem and that he has designed the poem—at least in part—as an address to Octavian himself.⁷⁵ It is in the latter premise that my work resembles Lee's. Yet for Lee the address is wholeheartedly supportive; Vergil uses his Orphic wisdom to steer Octavian toward humane and reasonable methods and away from the brutality of his youth. Taking this, and the poet's adoption of Orpheus as his emblem, as given, Lee pays little attention to the means by which Vergil's didactic address works. Even if we accept his highly optimistic premise that Octavian was guided by Vergil and Horace to become the more appealing Augustus, we must still ask how the *Georgics* accomplishes this guidance in a poem ostensibly about agriculture, not government.

The great question of twentieth-century Vergilian scholarship concerns the poet's complicated relationship to the political world of his lifetime, above all to the Octavian/Augustus who figures so prominently in his works. In a nutshell, where does Vergil stand? Is he a loyal Augustan propagandist? Or does his palpable unease over the practical side of power and its human costs constitute a rejection of the *princeps* and his program? Some scholars have lined up on one side or the other, while others have tried to find a reasonable compromise between the two extremes. Despite occasional polarization, this debate has refined Vergilian criticism a great deal, as each side has engaged in closer and closer readings of the texts, perhaps especially of once commonly neglected passages. Thus, the debate has been useful, even if it has reached the point of diminishing returns. For the *Aeneid* especially, good surveys of the changing tides of criticism are not hard to come by, and the same patterns are discernible in approaches to the *Georgics*.⁷⁶ While significant work still appears aligned with one or another version of the traditional sides, this debate, too, is losing ground as criticism begins to focus on other aspects of the poet's work or seeks a more nuanced approach to his thought. Thus, as intertextual-

ity, ritual, anthropology, and other aspects of Vergilian poetry become more important, scholars are becoming less comfortable with any easy distinction between Augustan propagandist and literary subversive.⁷⁷ Vergil is a poet whose private sympathies transformed themselves into works that address not only the political world but the underlying human realities that create it and ultimately the place of humanity in a universe poorly understood and often harsh, managed obscurely by gods and operating under principles impersonal, intractable, and mysterious.

Though I do not view myself as a partisan of either side, I should disclose here some of the preoccupations and premises of my approach to Vergil. While there is great joy and often great hope in Vergil's poetry, there is equally great darkness. I cannot call Vergil a pessimist because I do not think the term makes sense for a poet of his day.⁷⁸ The darkness of the Vergilian worldview is only pessimistic if Vergil himself thought a brighter, easier universe was in some way possible or at least plausible. Rather, I would suggest that the darkness of Vergil's universe resides at least partially in our reaction to the poet's assessment of a world not inappropriately dangerous, obscure, challenging, and spare of rewards. The world is perilous. It always has been, and if Vergil recognizes this aspect of life in his poetry, we need not read into it a pessimism that implies an unusual or unwarranted negativity of attitude toward living.

Further, I would suggest that as critics we will have to abandon our wish that Vergil conform to our notions of morality or propriety. To the typically liberal academic of the early twenty-first century, Vergil's accommodations with the man who confiscated property around his hometown and participated in the proscriptions of many innocent men are more than a little distasteful, and yet, if we are honest, we must accept that Vergil made those accommodations. Whatever subversions we may detect within his text, it is virtually beyond question that the poet reaped tremendous advantages from his relationship with the *princeps*. This does not, it is true, mean that Vergil was a sycophant, opportunist, or even an unthinking partisan, but if we cannot tolerate anything but modern liberalism in an author, then we will have to abandon Vergil.

Furthermore, I think it is somewhat misguided to search for subversion or implicit opposition to Octavian in any of Vergil's works.⁷⁹ It is difficult to see how any contemporary of the second triumvirate could not feel some ambivalence about its deeds, but subversive opposition would have been pointless. Whether Vergil liked or disliked Octavian is beside the point. Vergil had no choice about the power of Octavian, and, even if he had, no better option lay easily to hand. I do not wish to imply that Vergil's poetry represents an attempt

merely to tolerate Octavian but that it deals with the *princeps* constructively by accepting that the situation was inevitable and ignoring the futile question of whether it was desirable.

Yet those who have found ambivalence or even criticism directed toward Octavian and his projects have not simply misread or failed to see Vergil for what he is. Rather a central strategy of Vergil's art consists of identifying and exposing the often irreconcilable tensions between incompatible perspectives.⁸⁰ Vergil neither defends nor attacks Octavian on every count. Instead he reveals one of the underlying problems of human life: every conflict consists of two or more sides, and it is possible that each one is equally right. In the *Georgics*, as again in the *Aeneid*, Vergil puts his understanding of the conflict of perspectives to a number of uses, including what I see as a social and political one: the attempt to negotiate the underlying tensions that result from civil war and tend to result in still more civil war.

I have outlined a model of didactic practice in which the poet does not transmit his own stable vision to his students but rather uses his (and not only his) partial and shifting vision to encourage them to develop their own understandings of the way man fits into the world. This does not mean, however, that no aspect of the poet's own views can be pinned down; in fact, there do seem to be certain core elements of the poet's philosophical outlook which remain more or less constant. The poet rarely allows these to dominate the other possibilities he suggests, and ultimately this may indicate that Vergil recognizes the incompleteness of his own vision.

One element of Vergil's worldview, at least as filtered through the agricultural and political concerns of the *Georgics*, is the relentlessness of toil and the corresponding need for unstinting effort. The poet expresses this in the particularly memorable simile of a man instantly carried downstream when he ceases to row for even a second.

. . . sic omnia fatis

in peius ruere ac retro sublapsa referri,
non aliter quam qui aduerso uix flumine lembum
remigiis subigit, si bracchia forte remisit,
atque illum in praeceps prono rapit alueus amni.

(1.199–203)

[. . . thus by fate all things rush toward the worse and are carried backward when they slip, no differently than when a man using oars barely forces his craft against the current. If by chance he relaxes his arms, his vessel pulls him headlong down the stream.]

There are many reflections of this passage throughout the *Georgics*, not the least of which is Eurydice's backward rush away from Orpheus and life. Yet the force of the idea is perhaps strongest not in these transparent moments but in its general applicability to all aspects of daily life. There is no respite in the *Georgics*, as there would not be in the *Aeneid* later, as there had not been in Rome itself for nearly a century.

A more obvious concern is the preoccupation with civil war and its effects on Italy. It would be surprising if a poet of Vergil's generation did not return to this often. In the *Aeneid*, Vergil would take up the theme in that poem's imagery of *furor*; in the *Georgics*, on the other hand, no single image dominates the treatment of civil war. It is not only an artifact of recent history but a perpetual danger that rises from the soil where blood has been sown. If the farm is a particularly Roman symbol for the gentleman's self-sufficiency and ability to control nature and himself, the battlefield is the symbolic space where Roman dominion is realized. In the *Georgics*, they are the same place, as they often have been in history. Whatever conclusions individual readers may reach concerning Vergil's politics, most will find in his works an attempt to probe the dark complexity of civil war. If we cannot, in the end, determine Vergil's conclusions precisely, it is perhaps because our confusion mirrors the poet's own. Some questions have no answers, and it is neither surprising nor, perhaps, regrettable that the violence and turmoil of civil conflict cannot be easily analyzed and dismissed.

Complementary to the focus on civil conflict is the emphasis on community. This aspect of the *Georgics* has been treated generally, but not specifically as it pertains to Octavian and Roman politics.⁸¹ Recently Karl Galinsky has emphasized the communal and cooperative nature of the *res publica*, the Roman commonwealth, which consists in part of "a traditional value system that placed the common good . . . ahead of private interests."⁸² Vergil seems to me to insist that Octavian take this aspect of *res publica* seriously, that he refuse to isolate himself as a king but rather that he put his energy into the (re)building and maintenance of the broader Roman, and human, community.⁸³ For the *Georgics*, this is a community of shared experience and knowledge founded on the understanding that the forces that shape the human condition follow predictable patterns. For Vergil, human beings are a part of the natural world like any other, and whatever he can teach about vines or bees is always applicable to humanity.⁸⁴ Thus, the community he envisions is ultimately coextensive with the universe itself; for this reason, perhaps, Octavian must consider his role parallel to that of the king of the gods. The Roman *res publica* is the human community, the community of living things, the kingdom of Jupiter.

Another of the poet's core concerns is the value of perspective and the difficulties that arise from it. On the one hand, the *Georgics* constantly asserts the need for human beings to take a longer view of their circumstances. This is nowhere more obvious than in the wonderful moment when a handful of dirt quells what has seemed to be a great battle among the bees.

hi motus animorum atque haec certamina tanta
 pulueris exigui iactu compressa quiescent. (4.86–87)

[*These stirrings of spirit and these mighty battles will grow quiet if checked with the toss of a little dust.*]

As the poem moves forward from its beginning, the poet insists more and more on the equivalence of small and great and implies that what seems great can be made to seem trivial by a shift in perspective; similarly, that which is slight can be made to seem great. Perspective is also what makes one *fortunatus*, since, as Book 2 tells us, that status is not achieved through wealth but through knowledge of one's real advantages.

But there is another side to this. If the individual can shift his perspective as needed to navigate the difficulties presented by life, then two individuals can rightly apply different points of view even to the same event or problem. When those two individuals are teacher and student, the availability of multiple perspectives is useful and powerful, but when the perspectives are those of enemies, or of anyone who cannot or will not try to see through different eyes, there is danger of conflict. From the first *Eclogue* to the end of *Aeneid* 12, Vergil presents pairs of characters whose points of view differ diametrically. The tragic play between mutually exclusive ways of seeing the world fuels Vergilian poetry—Dido and Aeneas are only the most famous example. My reading of the *Georgics* emphasizes Vergil's attempt to show Octavian, and the rest of his audience, the dangers of this potential conflict and perhaps to indicate the difficulty of diffusing the resentment that arises through such conflict by activating the reader's own—Octavian's own—prejudices and one-sided interpretations.

Significantly, Vergil's insistence on the inevitable existence of multiple justified perspectives has produced a division among Vergilian scholars that mirrors the political perspectives his work generates and keeps in tension. I do not expect my reading of the *Georgics* to unite both sides in a consensus, not only because that is not how scholarly debate works, but also because the poet himself created these divisions and suggested the difficulty of ever eliminating them entirely.⁸⁵

There has been a corresponding division among historians of ancient Rome, best exemplified by the perspectives of Mommsen and Syme, whose two versions of Augustus are in some ways irreconcilable and yet equally necessary.⁸⁶ The history of views on Augustus and Augustan Rome has been traced well enough elsewhere, but it is worth briefly looking at some dominant approaches.⁸⁷ In the early twentieth century, Augustus was generally understood in constitutional terms; his program was one of legal and procedural change. On this view, the distinction between Octavian and Augustus is real and significant, for the latter name reflects not only personal but political and constitutional innovation. In his great work, *The Roman Revolution*, Ronald Syme challenged this view and united Octavian and Augustus in a triumph not of constitutional reform, or even constitutional manipulation, but of power politics. Syme's Augustus is the leader of a faction, bent on power, and successful in restructuring Rome socially, politically, and even culturally through self-serving, if occasionally magnanimous, manipulations.

By implication, Syme linked Augustus to Mussolini, and Augustan Rome to fascist Europe.⁸⁸ We discount Syme's version at our peril, and indeed his correction of the earlier picture was much needed. Yet Syme's Augustus is not entirely plausible—his control over all aspects of Rome, for example, is almost supernatural. He seems to have emerged from the womb with a coherent military, political, literary, artistic, legal, social, and religious system fully plotted in his head. There is little scope for innovation, or even participation, on the part of others except inasmuch as they carry out a predetermined program. For all Syme's emphasis on factions and partisans, his ruthless Augustus dominates everything that occurs in his Rome.

More nuanced versions of Syme's generalissimo have been elaborated, and recent years have seen a flowering of attempts to refine, if not reject, his model. Augustus is being reinscribed into Rome and its vast diversity of talents, points of view, and ambitions. In particular, Galinsky has argued persuasively that Augustan Rome was marked by innovation and experimentation and that Augustus himself both responded to and influenced various cultural, social, and artistic tendencies of the time.⁸⁹ This view does not seek to purge ambition, or even hunger for power, from the character and aims of Augustus. This Augustus is rather more human, and to my mind more plausible, than Syme's sinister *Übermensch*. Augustus' contemporaries are restored to authentic participation in the developments of the day, and poets such as Vergil are acknowledged as thinkers and creators to whom the *princeps* may have responded instead of cultural secretaries for a program imposed from above.⁹⁰

Without suggesting that Augustan Rome was essentially a response to recommendations in the *Georgics*, I would argue that the poem exposes numerous

viewpoints and problems of contemporary Rome for the consideration of the *princeps*. Vergil represents the multifariousness of Octavian as both a wonderful flexibility and a sinister formlessness. In politics, as in everything else, Vergil forces his audience to consider carefully the disparate hues produced by the prism. Whatever clarity Octavian may have expected did not exist in Vergil's world, and the poet's anticipation of Octavian's conflicted reception should be seen not as subversion or propaganda but as brilliant political proreptic. As far as Octavian is concerned, the didaxis of the *Georgics* works by showing that his own self-fashioning must necessarily trigger reciprocal Octavians in the minds of his contemporaries. The innovative tendency of mid- to late-first-century Rome could be practiced on, as well as by, the powerful.