

Plowing as a Metaphor for Poetic Composition in Vergil's *Georgics*
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In his discussion of the phrase *itur in antiquam silvam* (*Aen.* 6.179), Stephen Hinds (2001: 11-12) has shown that Vergil sometimes comments on his own poetic activity by representing literary metaphors in the literal objects of his text: thus Aeneas's visit to an ancient forest figures Vergil's own encounter with epic source material in this passage (*Aen.* 6. 179-82 ≈ Enn. fr. 175-9 Sk. ≈ *Il.* 23.114-20) through the metaphorical use of *silva* for "source material" (< Gk. *ύλη*, which means both "forest" and "source material"). This paper argues that plowing functions as such a self-referential metaphor in the *Georgics*, and that by playing on an etymological link between *versus* "verse" and *terram vertere* "plow," Vergil implicitly makes programmatic and literary-historical statements about poetry through his discussion of plowing.

Isidore of Seville, in the 7th c. AD, is the first to draw an explicit etymological link between writing and plowing, but he preserves evidence that it was known in the 1st c. BC as well. In a passage that was once attributed to Suetonius, Isidore says that verse is so called because the ancients used to write like they plowed, i.e. back and forth (*convertebantur... versus*; cf. *βουστροφηδόν*), and that rustics to that day still called furrows *versus* (*Etym.* 6.14.7). Not far from this passage, Isidore records a punning quotation from the comic poet Atta (d. 77 BC), which shows that his audience too saw a link between writing and plowing: *vertamus vomerem | in ceram, an mucrone umquam aremus osseo?* (*Etym.* 6.9.2).

Vergil uses *versus* in the *Georgics* to mean both "verse" (2.42, 386) and "furrow" (4.144), and his discussion of farming frequently suggests crossover between these meanings by using well-known literary critical terms to describe soil. Thus although *macer* "lean" is properly the opposite of *pinguis* "rich, fertile" in agricultural writers, Vergil instead talks of soils that are *tenuis* or *pinguis*, reproducing the stylistic opposition of *tenuis* (*λεπτός*) to *pinguis* (*παχύς*) in Callimachean poetics (Thomas at *Geo.* 2.180; cf. Call. *Aet.* fr. 1.21-4, *Ecl.* 6.1-8). Often too Vergil juxtaposes *pinguis* to *tenuis* without violating poetic decorum by pairing reference to "fat earth" with reference to "slender furrows" (1.63-70: *tenui sulco=tenui versu*), or even slender vetch, slender rains, or slender wine (1.71-83, 84-93, 2.91-94).

More concerted is the suggestive language of the aetiology of *labor* (*Geo.* 1.118-46), which explains the metaphysical necessity of work in terms that closely resemble the programmatic language of Lucretius and Horace. These lines, which are rich with literary double meaning, equate *labor*, a well-known metaphor for poetic craftsmanship (*Ecl.* 10.1, *Geo.* 2.41, 4.116), with plowing (*terram versare*, 119; *terram vertere*, 147). They also present a mytho-historical history of cultural *artes* in Italy that matches in outline with the early history of Latin literary *artes* in Horace's *Epistle to Augustus* (156ff.). When Vergil says that *pater ipse* was the first to plow fields *per artem* (1.122-3), we presume that he is talking about Jupiter introducing the agricultural Iron Age after the reign of Saturn, since he goes on to say that no one subdued the fields "before Jove" (125). But because of the metaphorical overlap between plowing and poetry, these ambiguous lines can also describe Ennius—whom Horace and Propertius call *pater*—introducing the Greek hexameter to replace the native *numerus Saturnius*, which seems to have been very different from quantitative meters (cf. *ante Iovem nulli subigebant arva coloni, | ne signare quidem aut partire limite campus | fas erat*, *Geo.* 1.125-7). In the proem to *DRN* 1, Lucretius laments that it is difficult to compose Greek hexameters in Latin because of the relative poverty of the Latin lexicon (*difficile inlustrare Latinis versibus esse... propter egestatem linguae*, 137-9), and Vergil seems to have had these lines in mind at the beginning and end of the aetiology of *labor*, which he opens by saying, *pater ipse colendi | haud facilem viam voluit* (121-2), and closes thus, *tum variae venere artes. labor omnia vicit | improbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas*. The aetiology of *labor* passage is not only about literature, of course,

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but like much of the *Georgics* it reflects metaphorically on both life and literature at the same time. Horace, at any rate, seems have seen a reference to the hexameter here, since he links Greece, *artes*, and Saturn in his literary history at *Ep.* 2.1.156ff.: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis | intulit agresti Latio. sic horridus ille | defluxit numerus Saturnius.*