The Unplowed Field: Fear and Cultivation in Roman Epic

Through close examination of instances of agricultural language in Roman epic, specifically that of unplowed or uncultivated land, this paper looks beyond the standard metaphor of creative acts for poetry. This paper examines instances of landscape described as unplowed or unplowable to argue that such landscapes are described as unplowable or unplowed in instances when the author does not wish to describe further the coming scene but must, by necessity, proceed.

Almost anything can be construed into a metaphor for the art of poetry. While many of these metaphors can be hackneyed and overdrawn, those that revolve around human-driven creative acts are more convincing. Often, these creative acts involve an act of destruction, such as the building of the Argo in Valerius Flaccus. Something is plundered and destroyed in order to create something new and marvelous: a forest for the Argo, previous poetry for a new epic. The metaphor of the forest is perhaps the most common (Stover 2010). This paper will instead focus on the metapoetic metaphor in the plowing—or lack of plowing—of a field. Plowing as a metaphor for writing poetry is well attested and is part of a long tradition of creative acts standing as metaphors for writing poetry. Although not technically epic, Vergil's *Georgics* employs the phrase *terram vertere* to allude both to poetry and, metapoetically, the composition of *versus*. A compound of *aro*, *exaro*, is often used to indicate writing or noting things on tablets (Lewis and Short s.v., C). Although Vergil more commonly uses a form of *verto* when discussing plowing—nine times, as opposed to four instances of *aro*—he still refers to the act of plowing. Vergil also utilizes standard poetic terms, such as *pinguis* and *tenuis*, to describe the soils being plowed (Henkel 2009).

Specific focus will be on two words: *inaratus* and *incultus*. While *incultus* can refer to a lack of civilization, this paper's emphasis will be on instances where it applies more directly to uncultivated fields. *Inaratus* occurs in Vergil's *Georgics* 1.83, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1.109, Lucan's *Bellum Civile* 1.28, and Statius' *Thebaid* 10.512. *Incultus* occurs in *Georgics* 2.415 and 2.430, and *Metamorphoses* 7.534, and occurs as a substantive plural noun in Vergil's *Aeneid* 1.308.

To further contribute to the discussion, two instances that do not quite fit the above requirements will be used. The first is from *Thebaid* 1.131-8, which while it does not employ *inaratus* or *incultus*, does mention two bulls meant to engage in agricultural activity that cannot. The other instance will be from Horace's *Epodes* 16. While not epic, it provides a helpful framing for the kinds of attitudes taken towards civil war, discord, and their integration with vivid depictions of land.

In addition to attention paid to metapoetic metaphor, there has been much work on locations themselves in epic and their political geography (Bexley 2009, Pogorzelski 2011), as well as on the metapoetic implications of interaction with landscapes. In Lucan, there are several man-made landscapes in ruin: the past of Troy, the present of Rome, and the future of Alexandria (Spencer 2005). This paper will combine the discussion of place and landscape with the discussion of metapoetic metaphor, addressing how authors of epic subvert the manmade and the beautiful to demonstrate unwillingness. The unplowed land as expressed in epic is similar to the *locus inamoenus* described in Garrison 1992. Garrison observes that the *locus amoenus* of Hellenistic convention is corrupted in some Augustan era poetry and thereafter it is almost completely corrupted into *inamoenus*—an idea echoed in Newlands' 2004 comparisons of Statius and Ovid. This subversion of ordered, pleasant land and corruption into chaotic, untilled, land helps to communicate hesitation and unwillingness on the poet's part. This kind of hesitation is known in Lucan, exhibited through rhetorical devices and elaboration (Masters 1992). This paper, however, will take those ideas and develop them further, in Lucan and in others such as Statius and Ovid.

Works Cited

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