

Virgil's Corycian, Wendell Berry, and the Ecological Imagination

In *Georgics* 4 Virgil extols his Corycian farmer's humble prosperity within the limits of his land with language emphasizing humility and terrestrial stewardship. Virgil cordons off the passage with words descriptive of memory (*memini*, 125; *memoranda*, 148), abandonment (*relict*, 127, *relinquo*, 146) and darkness (*niger*, 126; *umbras*, 146), paralleling the farmer's partitioning of land with rows of trees (*ille etiam seras in uersum distulit ulmos*, 144f.), acknowledging his own limits as narrator, and leaving the theme to be taken up by his literary heirs. This paper suggests that the power of this vignette is re-appropriated in the agrarian themes of Wendell Berry. While critics have looked to *G.* 4's *bougonia* to examine Berry's treatment of death and rebirth (Morgan [1974]), Berry himself praises Virgil's Corycian as an archetype for the farmer humble in the face of nature, and praises Virgil for breathing enduring life into the character in *G.* 4 (cf. K. Smith [2003], Berry [2003]).

An essential aspect of both authors' portrayals of agrarian stewardship is knowledge of particular place. Virgil places the Corycian not in an idealized landscape but a real place in southern Italy, introducing the passage with a chiasmus of place names: Oebalia and the dark (*niger*, 126) Galaesus. Running through tawny fields, the river provides the dark-light contrast employed throughout the polyphonic *Georgics* in imagery and tone, and implies fecundity by the wetting (*umectat*, 126) of the cultivated earth (Otis [1999]). Though the poet initially denies the fecundity of the Corycian's land with tricolon (*nec fertilis; nec...opportuna; nec commoda*, 128-129), he nonetheless concedes that it proves fertile (*fetis*, 139; *fertilis*, 142) with the gardener's proper cultivation of herbs, flowers, and trees (*seras ulmos*, 144), themselves sown neatly at intervals in our passage (132, 138, 144). The farmer's attention to the landscape is mirrored in

the plane-tree which itself shows care (*ministrantem platinum*) to men drinking in the shade (*umbras*, 146).

Virgil's Corycian puts into practice the poet's emphasis on knowing one's place in the landscape and what a particular environment might or might not sustain, becoming both artist and farmer in the natural enhancement of his acres' creative capacity (cf. Perkell [1981]). The poet-farmer Berry urges likewise, his persistent themes of home and community underscoring the importance of place-knowledge: "we know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love. To defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for we love what we particularly know" (Berry [1999]). With place-names and ecological sensitivity, Virgil supplies such language. While *labor improbus* and similar gloomy moments in the *Georgics*, emphasized by commentators such as Thomas (Cambridge [1988]), do not permit uniformly optimistic interpretation, vignettes like that of the Corycian nevertheless prepare the reader for a positive view of terrestrial stewardship such as Berry describes (cf. R. Smith [2011]).

Berry refers to his initially denuded farmland as "marginal," a statement on its comprised health and productive capacity along with the increasing socio-political marginality of the life he attempts to lead there (Berry 1999). Virgil's independent gardener is likewise marginal, as is his land (Johnson [2004]). The scene is a liminal place, neither wholly natural nor fully civilized: countryside overshadowed by a towering citadel (125). His marginalization gives him a unique and powerful vantage point, one borne of humility and local knowledge. That same power resides in Berry's work and can rightly be attributed not to the banqueting farmer who closes the second book or to Aristaeus who follows instructions to restore apian life, but to our Corcyian

farmer, whose very simplicity generates a powerful moment of fecundity in Virgil's poetry and has regenerated the same in the work of his literary heir, Wendell Berry.

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