

Poeta Oeconomicus: The Labor of Poetry in Vergil's Georgics

While the subject of the *Georgics* is agricultural labor, which facilitates the exchange between man and nature, the goal of the poem is mediation among men in the aftermath of the civil wars. The farmer of the poem, however, works alone and does not depend on the labor of other men. In the absence of a system of divided labor, farmers do not assemble in the course of their work. When the farmers do congregate, they do so in song and ritual. The communal variety of song depicted within the poem caps a period of intensive labor. Song is a medium of exchange, like labor, that maintains harmony between man and other men. My interest in this paper will be how art, rather than labor, establishes community among men.

First, I will look at how, in the poem, the division of labor among men is a potentially destructive basis for community. Vergil portrays agricultural labor in the human world as undivided. The farmer distributes his time and effort to all varieties of responsibilities such that he does not depend on the labor of other men. His isolation, however, is stylized. A few scattered references indicate that the the exchange of goods is suppressed in the poem rather than nonexistent. When Vergil does describe market exchange, he describes the exchange of luxury goods. In passages, such as that at 2.458-66, Vergil extols the self-sufficiency of the farmer by decrying the large-scale market exchange that creates demand for Ephyreian bronze, Assyrian ointment, and such. The division of labor necessitates the exchange of goods, which results in demand for excesses.

Second, I will look at Vergil's mixed depiction of the community of bees in Book 4. Much debate has been generated over whether Vergil idealizes the bees. Though the bees are diligent and efficient workers, they have neither language nor art and cohere entirely through the exchange of labor. The bees are capable only of making buzzing noises and respond to chaotic

sound. The basis of their connections to one another is restricted to labor, rather than affective attachment. Vergil does not reject the notion of community, but criticizes its basis. If the bees are to be taken as a positive model for human community, we must not substitute not only humans for bees, but art for labor as what forges connections between them.

Finally, I will turn to two passages at 1. 343-350 and 2.380-89 to show that art, in the form of ceremonial song, forges such affective attachments among men. In Book 1, farmers celebrate a harvest by offering to Ceres milk, honeycomb, wine, and a sacrificial victim. The poem then shifts its address to Ceres, imitating the sort of hymn the farmers themselves might be singing. The song and ritual do not only reinforce the relation between farmers and the gods, but between the farmers. Vergil plays with nouns in the singular and plural to describe how song transforms a plurality of farmers into a single entity. For instance, he initially employs a collective noun, *chorus*, and the plural, *socii*, to designate the farmers, but describes the sound emitted by this plurality in the singular, as *clamore*.

In a conclusion, I will consider Hannah Arendt's distinction between labor and work to clarify my notion of the relation between art and agriculture. Labor, in the scheme of *The Human Condition*, serves only to sustain the physical life of man and fails to extend outside of an individual in its process or effects. The results of labor are impermanent and must be repeated regularly. Work, however, creates permanent objects that constitute the world which humans inhabit together. Arendt classifies agriculture as labor and art as work. I suggest that song in the *Georgics*, because it is impermanent and a periodic ritual, is art that fits more aptly into Arendt's category of labor. The agricultural labor that mediates between men and the earth therefore models the art that creates relations among men.

Bibliography

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1998.