

## LABOR IMPROBUS

The paragraph in the first book of the *Georgics*, running from lines 118 to 159, which describes the loss of the golden age and man's subsequent history, has been very diversely interpreted.<sup>1</sup> But one sentence, at 145f., has been especially controversial:

labor omnia vicit  
improbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas.

Three lines of interpretation seem worth consideration:

A. The words mean that toil and the pinch of need drove men on, with the result that they succeeded in defeating the obstacles before them. A laboured translation might be, 'Tiresome toil and the pressure of need amid hard circumstances conquered all.' On this account the sentence continues and sums up the account of progress in the preceding ten lines: man discovered agriculture, fire, astronomy, carpentry, metal-working, then the various arts – in short, through effort, impelled by the goad of need, he got on top of his circumstances. This was the standard interpretation in earlier generations; among recent scholars, R. D. Williams, Huxley and Wilkinson adopt it.<sup>2</sup> Let us call it the progressive interpretation. (It is better not to label it 'optimist', since it is compatible with a pretty dour view of man's lot.)

B. The meaning is that trouble and neediness came to dominate man's life: to borrow Thomas's (partial) translation, 'Insatiable toil occupied all areas of existence.' On this account the sentence looks back to a point rather earlier in the paragraph, where Jupiter's destruction of the golden life of old is described. This is the interpretation adopted in Altevogt's monograph, and it is accepted by most recent commentators: Richter, Thomas and (probably) Mynors.<sup>3</sup> It is also followed by Putnam.<sup>4</sup> Possibly we should reckon it the orthodox view at the present time. Let us call it the pessimist interpretation.

C. In principle at least, we might consider some combination of A and B. Klingner's account could perhaps be put under this heading, though it seems better to regard it as a modified form of A.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now examine the arguments put forward in favour of B:

<sup>1</sup> It is misleading to call the passage 'Virgil's Theodicy', not only because this implies a Christian concern to justify the ways of God to men which Virgil does not have, but also because the divine motivation plays only a small part in the passage, which is centred upon the consequences for humanity.

The following works are cited in this article:

H. Altevogt, *Labor improbus, eine Vergilstudie* (1952)

M. Geymonat (ed.), *P. Vergili Maronis Opera* (1973)

H. H. Huxley (ed.), *Virgil: Georgics I and IV* (1963)

F. Klingner, *Virgil* (1967)

R. A. B. Mynors (ed.), *Virgil Georgics* (1990)

M. Putnam, *Virgil's Poem of the Earth* (1979)

W. Richter (ed.), *Vergil Georgica* (1957)

R. F. Thomas (ed.), *Virgil Georgics* (2 vols., 1988)

L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil* (1969)

R. D. Williams (ed.), *Virgil: the Eclogues and Georgics* (1979).

<sup>2</sup> Commentators ad loc.; Wilkinson, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Mynors's commentary is delphic; in his lectures he was plainly of the pessimist school.

<sup>4</sup> Putnam, pp. 32–6.

<sup>5</sup> Klingner, pp. 203–5.

1. This is the argument on which Thomas relies. He maintains that A is wrong because '(a) in this poem (as in life) toil does *not* overcome all difficulties... (b) the realities of *labor* and its susceptibility to failure provide the major theme of the poem...'

To this it can be answered (a) the *Georgics* contains plenty of statements which are not easily reconciled to a strict logic, and a few which, at least on the face of it, are flatly incompatible; and (b) the argument rests on a view of the poem as a whole which will seem to many misguided, or at least one-sided. As a rule, it is seldom satisfactory to try to solve the problems of a particular passage by reference to very general considerations. But the decisive answer to this argument is (c): that there is nothing in the progressive interpretation incompatible with the rest of the poem. The sentence (on this view) does not imply that hard work has removed every awkwardness and made life comfortable: it refers back to the invention of arts and crafts in the distant past, and maintains that these gave man mastery over all his various areas of endeavour. Did he need food? He invented farming, trapping, hunting and fishing. Did he need to travel? He invented boats and the science of navigation. Did he need tools? He devised metal-working – and so on. There is nothing in this to deny that man may have to labour constantly and face painful setbacks and disasters, and thus nothing incompatible with the *Georgics* as a whole. We may conclude that there is no substance in this argument.

2. 'labor omnia vicit' is to be compared with 'omnia vincit amor; et nos cedamus amori' at *Ecl.* 10.69. Just as love has man in its power in the Eclogue, compelling his submission, so do 'labor' and 'egestas' in the *Georgics*.

At first sight this seems a strong argument; upon further reflection it looks less good. Let us presume that 'vinco' can be translated 'conquer' or 'defeat'. 'Love conquers all' in the Eclogue presents no problem. In another context the meaning might be that lovers' wills are so strong that they can overcome every obstacle to their desires' fulfilment, but in this place the meaning is plain: no one can resist the power of love over himself. Now consider the context in the *Georgics*. We have ten lines describing one human discovery after another, culminating in the statement 'Toil conquered all' or 'toil defeated all'. What would this mean to an English-speaker? Surely that toil overcame the difficulties in man's way. Could he understand 'toil conquered (or defeated) all' to mean 'toil ruined men's lives'? It is well-nigh impossible. We may notice that the pessimist school has to resort to paraphrase to convey what it supposes to be the significance of the words, whereas the translations given here and under A above, though stilted, stick close to the Latin. Now it is open to the pessimist interpreters to argue that the range of meaning covered by 'vinco' is sufficiently different from English 'conquer' or 'defeat' for these translations to mislead, but the burden of proof is plainly on them, and it is pretty clear that such an argument could not be sustained. So the parallel does not work in the way that the pessimist interpreters believe; it may even be an argument in favour of A. Virgil may well have had the parallel consciously in mind, in which case it is between forces which dominate man's mental experience and determine his behaviour: in the *Eclogues* that force is, characteristically, love; in the *Georgics*, no less characteristically, the sterner *labor-and-egestas*. It might be noted, more subjectively, that the context in the *Eclogues* is by no means disagreeable: the surrender to all-powerful love has a voluptuousness about it. In other words, a reader of the *Georgics*, recalling the phrase in the *Eclogues*, is not going to say at once, 'Oh no, here's *another* ghastly thing coming along'; rather, 'Ah, here's another driving-force for mankind; I expect the mood will be tougher than in the *Eclogues*.'

3. (a) 'egestas' is necessarily a pejorative word. (b) 'labor' is not necessarily pejorative, but in association with 'egestas' it becomes so: Egestas and Labos (an archaic variant of 'labor') are among the dread forms encountered in the underworld in the *Aeneid* (6.276f.).

(a) is certainly correct; Servius auctus comments that 'egestas' is worse than 'paupertas', since 'paupertas' can be honourable, whereas 'egestas' is shameful.<sup>6</sup> (b) should perhaps be qualified, as we shall see, but it may at least be allowed that 'egestas' (like 'improbus', which we shall consider shortly) reminds us of the unpleasant connotations of 'labor'. It is also true that Virgil can use 'labor' to mean something like 'woe';<sup>7</sup> this must be roughly the meaning at *Aen.* 6.277.<sup>8</sup> Not too much should be made of this passage, though: some of the personified abstractions in it, like Sleep, are made grim only by the context; Labos here seems sure to have a meaning somewhat different from that which it bears in our passage; and 'labor' and 'egestas' are not an obvious pair. It may be that a memory, conscious or unconscious, of the *Georgics* led Virgil once more to put the words in close proximity, and this in turn confirms what 'improbus' has in any case made certain: that Virgil wants us to feel some disagreeable connotations to the idea of 'labor'.

In sum, the advocates of B are right to find pejorative language in the sentence. But this is not necessarily an argument against A. 'egestas' is not, after all, unqualified: 'duris urgens in rebus egestas' is very much a single concept, conveying the idea of the pressure of need. The idea that something in itself unpleasant may have good consequences is not a difficult one (compare the English saw, 'Necessity is the mother of invention', though 'egestas' is sharper than 'necessity' in modern usage), and though neediness in itself may be a bad thing, the driving force produced by neediness can be seen as good. So 'egestas' cannot of itself be used to refute A.

4. Altevogt has demonstrated that 'improbus' must be a pejorative word: it cannot be translated (for example) 'unflinching' or 'unremitting', but must carry the idea of blame.<sup>9</sup> It might fairly be argued that the case here is different from that of 'egestas' on two grounds. (a) 'egestas' is basically a descriptive word. To make a comparison: 'hunger' and 'thirst' are pejorative words – they denote states of being which we know to be unpleasant – but they are descriptive none the less: it is not a matter of opinion that a man in the Sahara without water is thirsty. (They can also be said to have pleasant consequences: 'He enjoyed the drink immensely because of his great thirst'.) 'improbus', by contrast, is purely evaluative, and without descriptive content: to say that something is 'improbus' is precisely to find fault with it. And the word is emphatically placed. (b) It is common ground between A and B that the whole sentence refers back to the distant past. But B supposes the beginnings of a state of affairs that has persisted ever since: toil and misery overspread everything

<sup>6</sup> 'peior est egestas, quam paupertas: paupertas enim honesta esse potest, egestas enim turpis est.'

<sup>7</sup> Compare English 'toil' in such usages as the 'toil and trouble' of Shakespeare's witches.

<sup>8</sup> This sense of 'labor' may perhaps help us with one of the most perplexing passages in Virgil: Jupiter's speech at *Aen.* 10.104–13. 'sua cuique exorsa laborem fortunamque ferent' (111f.) is commonly taken to mean 'let each man's efforts bring him his task and allotted outcome'. More probably 'labor' and 'fortuna' are in disjunction to each other: 'woe' and 'success'. One might translate, 'Let each man's efforts bring him ill fortune or good'. A consequence of this would be that 'fortunam' in line 112 carries a meaning very different from that of 'fata' in 113; some take them as near synonyms.

<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Servius, and to *TLL*. Huxley translates 'unremitting drudgery' – fairly, since the blame is conveyed by the noun. But 'unremitting labour' or even 'unremitting toil' would not do.

in consequence of Jupiter's acts, and mankind is toilsome and miserable to this day. The progressive interpretation, however, refers 'egestas' to a situation that is over and done with. Virgil has been developing a version of the hard-primitivist myth: the life of early man was poor and needy, and that drove him to strive for the discovery of arts and crafts which would improve his lot. In other words, 'egestas' was a pressure that led to discoveries that removed, or at least mitigated, 'egestas'. But the same cannot be said of 'labor'. Virgil has in fact coalesced two ideas in the preceding lines: the 'labor' needed for the invention of crafts and the 'labor' needed to practise them after they have been invented. So the 'labor' which (according to A) overcame difficulties remains a permanent part of the human condition. In any case, since 'labor' is such a central theme of the poem as a whole, we are bound to refer the word here to the world that we know. And it is this which is labelled, emphatically, as 'improbis'.

All of this seems true, and indeed important, but not to counteract the case for A. Let us look closer at the interesting word 'improbis'. First, a general consideration: a pejorative word may be used in a favourable sense, and for the very reason that it is pejorative. That may sound paradoxical, but it is in fact true to common experience. The word 'naughty' in 'naughty knickers' or 'naughty but nice' is a case in point: something is being recommended for the very reason that it is indecent or improper or self-indulgent. 'Tough' is used in the school playground in this way; compare the Glaswegian usage, 'hard man'. Anyone who supposed that the adjectives in these cases were synonyms for 'strong' or 'brave' would miss the point entirely; the pejorative flavour in the words is an essential part of the praise. Virgil's use of 'durus' is a subtilization of this phenomenon – which is less a curiosity of language than a curiosity of human nature. Clearly, words that are very strongly pejorative – like 'vile' or 'detestable' – cannot be used in this way, except by a pervert; what we shall need to consider is whether 'improbis' belongs to the milder range of adjectives which can be pejorative without conveying ultimate disapproval.

It seems that 'improbis' can be used quite lightly, and in ordinary speech. Horace tells the story of Philippus, a gentleman who is so charmed by the sight of the humble auctioneer Vulteius Mena cleaning his nails outside a barber's shop that he sends his slave to invite him to dinner; the slave comes back saying 'negat improbis'.<sup>10</sup> The tone of this must be 'the blasted man says no' or 'the ruddy man says no'; plainly 'improbis' expresses light annoyance (maybe even humorous annoyance), not moral blame.

Virgil was himself ready to exploit this side of the word: thus 'cornix...improba', the 'rascally crow', in a passage which is a masterpiece of smiling, affectionate observation.<sup>11</sup> A similar flavour must lurk in 'improbis anser' ('the rascally goose', 'the wretched goose') at the beginning of the paragraph.<sup>12</sup> Thomas sternly denies the 'playfulness' that most have found in the phrase. Now it is right to insist that pests were a serious matter to the ancient farmer,<sup>13</sup> but serious matters can be handled with

<sup>10</sup> *Epist.* 1.7.63.

<sup>11</sup> *Geo.* 1.388. Some nuances are lost to us. One might ask, tentatively, if a ghost of ordinary language does not survive even in such a passage of high emotion as *Aen.* 4.412, 'improbe Amor' – is the tone of 'Love, you bastard' just hinted at?

<sup>12</sup> *Geo.* 1.119.

<sup>13</sup> Compare K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (1983), pp. 274f. (on early modern England): 'It is easy now to forget just how much human effort went into warring against species which competed with man for the earth's resources. Most parishes seem to have had at least one individual who made his living by catching snakes, moles, hedgehogs and rats... Every gardener destroyed smaller pests, and it was usual for the gardening-books to contain a calendar like the one drawn up by John Worlidge in 1668: "January: set traps to destroy vermin. February: pick

a light touch, and it is perverse to deny that Virgil derives some amusement from just this theme at 1.181ff. Humour is almost too strong a word for Virgil's delicacy, but perhaps it can be used in default of a better. The ant anxious about her old age must have some humorous element, as must the uses of 'populare', 'ravage', (apparently here first applied to animals) to describe the activities of ant and weevil (this anticipates the affectionate quaintness with which the bees are treated in the fourth book). Then there is the 'exiguus mus' of 181, with the stressed monosyllable at the end of the line producing a famous piquancy. 'Would commentators be so amused,' Thomas asks, 'if we did not have the subsequent and famous line of Horace, *parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*, A.P. 139?' The answer is yes: Horace has picked up the touch of humour in Virgil but spoiled the best of the effect by destroying Virgil's understatement. The tone of 'improbus anser' is similar. Virgil is serious about the nuisance of geese and weeds, but he can handle the matter with a certain wryness. To understand him fully here we shall need to think of the architecture of the paragraph as a whole: when we come to examine this, we shall see that the passage both begins and ends with a kind of dour humour.

It is not an accident that the same adjective comes twice in so short a space of time. Virgil's texture is polyphonic: as part of it he wants one tone that will link the practicalities of the farmyard to the large thoughts about the human lot which grow out of it. Now the sentence about 'labor improbus' comes, as we have seen, at the climax of twelve lines which have been devoted to human progress and invention; thus far the progressive interpretation seems irresistible, and the tone of 'labor improbus' therefore needs to be something like 'bloody hard work' or 'hard work, dammit' – the adjective being pejorative but not without some dour pride. The fact that 'labor' is forced upon mankind and the fact that it is disagreeable impose a certain austerity on the poet's vision here; but they do not require it to be pessimistic.

We must also consider the order of the words and the way that they are placed in the line: 'labor omnia vicit / improbus'. The sentence seems complete at 'vicit', and the line-ending encourages the voice to make a pause. 'improbus' is thus both unexpected and emphatic; its effect must be surprising, it must give the tone a new twist. The cheerful picture of the previous dozen lines is given a jolt; and 'egestas' follows to reinforce the sterner note. Virgil's technique of construction also requires the word 'improbus' to be interesting; a general expression of disapprobation will hardly be enough. The word needs something more to justify its prominence – the nuance of wryness, the tough grimace. Line 146 shifts the tone, but it cannot utterly change the meaning: if 'labor omnia vicit' supports the progressive idea, as it must, 'labor omnia vicit improbus' must do the same, if in more acid tone. The meaning of lines 133–45 requires the progressive interpretation, as does the construction of 145–6; for unless the mood is confident to begin with, there is nothing worth giving a twist to.

But we have yet to examine the bleakness in the lines which follow, where the pessimist case may perhaps seem strongest. After Ceres has taught men arable farming, they face more toil and trouble: mildew and weeds. Has the paragraph now turned firmly in a gloomy direction? Two considerations may deter us from a simple pessimism.

(a) Out of 147–59 one can extract these propositions: (i) Ceres taught men agriculture; (ii) they have to struggle against weeds and mildew; (iii) if you (the arable

up all the snails you can find, and destroy frogs and their spawn. March: the principal time of the year for the destruction of moles. April: gather up worms and snails. May: kill ivy. June: destroy ants. July: kill ... wasps, flies." And so on throughout the year.'

farmer) do not work hard, you will go hungry; (iv) meanwhile the good farmer piles up a big heap of grain. Put together, these propositions tell us that toil is necessary, but it brings success; in sum, they seem consistent with the rest of the paragraph and book.

(b) We might be tempted to think of lines 145–6 as a pivot: before, progress; after, pessimism. That is not exactly the case. At line 147 the account of progress continues to surge forward, with Ceres teaching man to plough: the picture of a god guiding men to new discoveries recalls the work's proem. This is the context in which the weeds and blight appear. The technique is again polyphonal. At line 146 the account of progress is given a twist of austerity; it presses on, but then is twisted again, and the gloomier note starts to predominate as the theme descends once more to the practical problems of farming. As Klingner observes, the sentence at 146–7 marks a boundary: before, the theme is man's invention, after, his exertion.<sup>14</sup> The second theme is naturally a tougher one, particularly since it is to lead us back to the topic of practical nuisances which began the paragraph. At its end the lazy farmer's troubles are more prominent than the good farmer's success, but the good farmer's success is none the less there for those who have ears to hear. The tone at the end is ironic and not to be taken too solemnly. The pictures of the lazy farmer gaping at the neighbour's heap and shaking acorns from the trees are quaint and bantering; the 'heu' ('ah me') is humorously grave. If that 'heu' were wholly serious, it would be a bad error of taste and proportion.<sup>15</sup>

In brief conclusion: the pessimist interpretation cannot stand. The progressive interpretation is broadly right, provided that it recognizes the twist at 146–7 and does not try to draw the sting from 148ff. It does not, of course, deny the sternness of Jupiter's purpose or the need for unrelenting hard work.

For the purposes of argument in a controversial case, it has been necessary to treat the paragraph as a whole and lines 146–7 in particular as a problem to be tackled. That is a pity, because the passage should not be intrinsically hard or puzzling and what we have been confronting as a difficulty should rather be enjoyed as a brilliancy of poetic technique and complex, flexible rhetoric, various in tone. The paragraph describes a great parabola, beginning and ending with everyday nuisances: birds, weeds and the shadow of overgrowing trees.<sup>16</sup> The opening topic leads to a remark about Jupiter's severity, out of which grows a great picture of human progress which rises to a climax, twists, turns and descends again, back from god to man, from past to present, back too to that familiar tone of wry, dour irony which was never quite absent even when the declamation was at its height.

*Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford*

R. JENKYNs

<sup>14</sup> Klingner, p. 204.

<sup>15</sup> For a similar use of 'heu', compare Tibullus 2.3.2 and 49.

<sup>16</sup> It is a misjudgement to mark a new paragraph at line 147, as Geymonat and Thomas do, masking the poetic architecture.