

## Georgic and the Absence of Georgic

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*The Georgic Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985. Pp. xii + 369.

Anthony Low's new book comes at a time of burgeoning interest in pastoral and epic. The focus on Virgil's impact on Renaissance poetry has been particularly intense. With so many recent books on the subject it may seem that *The Georgic Revolution* fills the proverbial much needed gap; Low himself is swift in pointing out that Renaissance poets were not overly fond of the georgic mode. But this fact is only a beginning for Low's fascinating, well-researched, and well-written study. For him, the Renaissance bias in favor of pastoral and epic represents a departure from the medieval adulation of Virgil, which entailed appreciation of "the *rota Vergillii*." All three styles, low, middle, and high (or pastoral, georgic, and epic) reflected a coherent social world of "shepherd, farmer, and soldier" (p. 4). In the Renaissance, with respect to the second order, something odd happened: "The middle term in the Virgilian series, a third part of the *rota* and for that matter an important part of human existence, was unaccountably absent" (p. 4).

Proceeding from the assumption that "poetry is a valuable indicator of cultural patterns" (p. 5), Low argues that the lack of interest in georgic (like pastoral, "primarily a mode rather than a genre" [p. 71]) in a period so dedicated to competition with the classics indicates a profound distaste for labor, in general, and for agriculture, in particular. Hence, the view that the roots of a "Protestant work ethic" lie in the Renaissance, unless radically modified, is unwarranted. In pursuing his thesis, Low suggests that, in recognition of its important contribution to the tenor of various generic expressions, the georgic be given the same broad treatment that pastoral customarily receives. In this broadened sense, Low speaks of a "georgic theodicy" (p. 11) fusing the Virgilian tradition with

In the penultimate chapter ("Georgic and the Civil War"), Low deals with "Royalist Georgic" in the work of Bishop Hall, Richard Crashaw, and Edward Benlowes, before turning to the Puritans. Here, examples before his major interest, Andrew Marvell, are hard to come by. Low discusses "the reformist impulse" in *A Dialogue Betwixt a Horse of Warre, and a Mill-horse* (1644), Patrick Cary's "Country Life," and works by Henry Colman, Robert Fletcher, John Abbot, John Taylor, and the Cavaliers. He has a major section on Robert Herrick, which more or less excludes the poet as a relevant example (because "The Hock-cart" ends up with lines in praise of the social order). The second on Marvell is vigorously argued and quite interesting. Low's discussion of the Mower poems is especially brilliant.

Low ends his study with a chapter on Milton. With Spenser and Bacon, Milton affirms the value of work. Indeed, Low characterizes Milton's antiprelatical sentiments as contempt for their rejection of the nobility of labor (p. 299). Turning to *Paradise Lost*, Low considers the war in heaven in the context of the Virgilian *rota*. He sees Satan as a lover of epic. Eden is not only a garden, but a field, a place for honorable labor, if not a farm. Milton's appreciation of the values of georgic is even more evident in the very form of *Paradise Regained*. Here, Low offers eloquent support to the argument most notably represented in Louis L. Martz's *Poet of Exile*. Low emphasizes the Son's rejection of Satan's underlying temptation, namely, to conceive of the conflict between them in purely epic terms. In this most cataclysmic of human confrontations with evil, we have no single battle, no definitive victory, but only the less grand sense of mature, georgic accomplishment. For Low, even the angelic anthem that follows the Tower scene "moves away from . . . muted epic notes toward georgic" (p. 331). Taking Virgil's *Georgics* as his model and "frame" (p. 333), Milton rejects the martial virtues, affirming instead the less spectacular value of continuous effort. This leads Low to a complex analysis of a fourfold structure imposed upon a threefold temptation.

Thus, in Book I, the Son resists the temptation of the man in rural weeds. In Book II, we have two temptations (the banquet and wealth), in Book III, three (military prowess represented in Parthia, the throne of David and victory over Rome, and the kingdoms), and in Book IV, four temptations (Rome, Athens, storm, pinnacle), thus, comprehending ten temptations in four books. Low ends his learned discussion of the poem by designating *Paradise Regained* a "heroic georgic" (p. 352).

This is an ambitious book. It gains in impact because Low is aware of the difficulties of his subject. He attempts to make analysis of a virtually absent genre a means of articulating attitudes and values central to an

entire epoch. And although at times his notion of the “spirit of georgic” runs the danger of regarding the subject of georgic so broadly as to slide into a more general interest in “labor” or “work” in the larger, non-literary sense, Low’s fine book shows that the risk was definitely worth taking. Why was the middle section of the *rota Virgilii* all but ignored in Renaissance England? Low convincingly argues for an answer to this interesting question. Georgic, and even the absence of georgic, was a form and a mode with political overtones. Its emerging acceptance as both went hand in hand with the revolution and, paradoxically, with composition of the three great epics of the period: *The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained*. Anthony Low’s *The Georgic Revolution* is an important book, and a thoughtful and thought-provoking one as well.

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