Octavian in Virgil’s *Georgics*

In a didactic poem on agriculture and livestock, as are the *Georgics*, it is not expected that political concerns take up much space. Yet the name of Caesar returns eight times through the poem’s four books, seven of which to designate Octavian\(^1\), always in apparently laudatory terms. Moreover, as the book is dedicated to his minister Maecenas (*Maecenas*, 1.2; 2.41; 3.41; 4.2: the symmetry is remarkable), whose loyalty to him is deemed above suspicion, one scarcely doubts that the author of the *Georgics* makes allegiance to a power whose policy he objectively served by contributing to the economic and moral recovery program for Italy\(^2\). And this perfect harmony between the poet and the prince would even be testified by the invitation that the latter made to the former to recite before him the whole of the *Georgics*.

But things are perhaps not so idyllic. First, could Virgil actually decline this invitation? When the master calls, he enjoins, and we know that this compulsory task was such a cost to him that he could not stand the test until the end, and Maecenas had to relay him\(^3\). Sore throat\(^4\)? That would be surprising, since the reading was distributed over four days at a rate of one or two hours per day at most. Emotion? Unwillingness? Or the trouble of having to pronounce certain sensitive verses in front of the very man who was their secret target? Indeed, to resist Octavian, Virgil had a weapon far more powerful than just a sore throat: it is *cacozelia latens*, this form of subversive writing M. Vipsanius Agrippa accused him of practising in complicity with Maecenas\(^5\).

This is a precious information, since the dedication of the *Georgics* to Maecenas, far from signifying the rallying of Virgil to the winner of the civil wars, would then rather betray his opposition. So, before we look through the poem for possible evidence of such

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1. 25, 466 (Julius Caesar), 503; 2.170; 3.16, 47, 48; 4.560.
4. As Octavian himself, then (*vita Donati*, 27)?
opposition, we have to examine how Virgil saw the relationship between Octavian and his minister.

1- Maecenas against Octavian

-2. 39-46:

*Tuque ades inceptumque una decurre laborem,*

*O decus, o famae merito pars maxima nostrae,*

*Maecenas, pelagoque uolans da uela patenti.*

*Non ego cuncta meis amplecti uersibus opto;*

*Non mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum,*

*Ferrea uox. Ades et primi lege litoris oram:*

*In manibus terrae; non hic te carmine ficto*

*Atque per ambages et longa exorsa tenebo.*

“And you, Maecenas, lend your aid,

My pride, the better part of all my glory.

Set sail with me on this my enterprise,

Wing swiftly out to sea. I cannot hope

To scour in verses all the wide expanse –

‘Not if I had a hundred mouths and tongues

And a throat of iron.’ Lend your aid, to cruise

Coastwise and close inshore. I’ll not detain you

With fancy myths, digressions, long preambles.”

These verses are a perfect model of "double writing" for, although the name of Octavian (Caesar) is nowhere pronounced, the tribute to Maecenas only takes its value by implicit contrast with the treatment accorded to the Princeps. For one thing, in fact, *Tuque*

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6 The translations from the *Georgics* are by L. P. Wilkinson [*supra* N. 2].
ades... decus spontaneously evokes the famous *Teque adeo decus hoc aeui* of the fourth bucolic (v. 11), which secretly opposed Pollio, the dedicatee, to the triumvir Octavian referred to under the ironic periphrasis *decaus hoc aeui*, “the honor of our time”\(^7\). Furthermore, *non hic te* implies a comparison between here (*hic*) and elsewhere (in the poem), an elsewhere pointed at by terms as *ambages, longa exorsa* and *carmine ficto*, each of them being perfectly appropriate to refer to the grandiloquent proem which occupies in Book 1 the corresponding position (v. 24-42) to our passage in Book 2, and which starts with *Tuque adeo* (cf. here *Tuque ades*). This proem, an invocation to Octavian, strikes by its particular pomposity, as well as its servility, which has revolted many readers throughout the ages\(^8\). Virgil wonders what kind of god Octavian will become after his death. Will he reign on earth? Will the goddess of the Oceans buy with all her waves the honor to have him as her son-in-law? Or rather, will he enter the zodiac as a new Constellation, since the Scorpion already retracts his claws to give him sufficient space? As for the kingship of the Underworld, the poet hopes, with a deadpan humor, that Octavian will not aspire to it.

The very extravagance of the flattery should by itself raise doubts over its sincerity\(^9\), but in addition Virgil took care in the next book to disqualify this senseless eulogy, calling it *longa exorsa*, “long preambles” (it’s exactly that), *ambages*, “digressions” (a way of speaking reserved for enemies, according to the Aeschylean Prometheus: between friends we speak frankly)\(^10\); *ficto carmine*, “fancy myths” (this panegyric mobilizes Tethys, Erigone, Pluto and Proserpine)\(^11\).

Nothing is more contrasted in style than the two related passages, the one being as lively and nervous as the other is convoluted and turgid; nothing is more opposed to the excesses of praise awarded to Octavian than the sobriety of line 2.40, which sums up the poet’s gratitude to the man on whom are based not only his hopes of fame, but even his safety\(^12\). Especially significant is the difference between the heavy emphasis in the first

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\(^8\) So for instance Victor Hugo: “Jamais la flatterie fut-elle si abjecte?” (*Post-scriptum de ma vie*, “Utilité du Beau”. See the article referred to supra N. 5.


\(^10\) Aesch., *Prometheus Bound*, 609-11.

\(^11\) It is primarily the use of mythology that is challenged through the refusal of *carmen fictum*: cf. also 3.3-8.

\(^12\) Cf. Hor., *Od*. 1.1.2: *O et praesidium et dulce decus meum*:
proem on the deification of Octavian, and the subtle paralleling of Maecenas and Bacchus\textsuperscript{13} in Book 2 through echoes like \textit{ades... ades}, 39-44 - \textit{huc... huc... ueni}, 4-7, addressed to the god, or \textit{mecum}, 8 - \textit{una}, 39; and observe also that \textit{Bacche}, 2. 2, and \textit{pastor ab Amphryso} (i.e. Apollo), 3.2, occupy the same position in their respective book as \textit{Maecenas} in Book 1 and Book 4.

It thus appears that the opposition between Octavian and Maecenas finds both a transposition and an ultimate accomplishment in lines 7-8 of the fourth book:

\begin{quote}
\textit{In tenui labor, at tenuis non gloria, si quem}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Numina laeua sinunt auditque uocatus Apollo}
\end{quote}

“Little the scale / To work on, yet not little is the glory

If unpropitious spirits do not cramp

A poet and Apollo hears his prayer.”

We had indeed pointed out in a previous study the numerical correspondence between this \textit{numina laeua} (v. 7) and \textit{Caesar} (v. 7 before the end of the book)\textsuperscript{14}, and besides the relationship is obvious between \textit{tenuis non gloria} and \textit{famae ... pars maxima nostrae} addressed to Maecenas at verse 2.40.

\begin{quote}
-3. 40-48:
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Interea Dryadum siluas saltusque sequamur}
\textit{Intactos, tua, Maecenas, haud mollia iussa.}
\textit{Te sine nil altum mens incohat. En age, segnis}
\textit{Rumpe moras; uocat ingenti clamore Cithaeron}
\textit{Taugetique canes domitrixque Epidaurus equorum;}
\textit{Et uox adsensu nemorum ingeminata remugit.}
\textit{Mox tamen ardentis accingar dicere pugnas}
\textit{Caesaris et nomen fama tot ferre per annos,}
\end{quote}

\begin{url}
http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_1/O_I_01.htm.
\end{url}

\textsuperscript{13} Maecenas might so appear, implicitly, as an emanation of the god.

\begin{url}
\end{url}
Tithoni prima quot abest ab origine Caesar.

“Meanwhile however let my Muse pursue
The woods and glades of the Dryads, virgin country,
No soft assignment by your will, Maecenas.
You only spur my mind to high ambitions.
Up, then, and break the bonds of sluggishness!
Cithaeron calls me with its mighty clamour,
Taýgetus’ baying hounds and Epidaurus
Tamer of horses, and the roaring forests
Reverberate to reinforce the cry.
Yet soon I will gird myself to celebrate
The fiery fights of Caesar, make his name
Live in the future for as many years
As stretch from old Tithonus to Caesar.”

This translation is in conformity with the doxa, but the meaning of the phrase *haud mollia iussa* must absolutely be clarified if one wants to understand the relationship between Virgil and his patron. Referring the reader to a previous article 15, I shall merely observe here that in 3.40-48, at the difference of 2.39-46, the name of Caesar is expressly associated with that of Maecenas. Virgil promises to his friend and protector to write "soon" (*mox*) an epic where he will sing "the fiery battles of Caesar", a "soon" which will probably arrive before Caesar joins the world of gods (*mox*, 1.24), but of which he will not have necessarily to rejoice. It’s indeed to the anti-Æneid that the Mantuan poet seems to refer here, as shown by the disturbing connotation of the term *ardentis*, and by the fundamental ambiguity of the word *fama*, typically a word that falls into the category of *communia uerba*, or words with double meanings, on which was based, according to M. Vipsanius Agrippa, the so-called *cacozelia latens*. The individual to whom Catullus in Poem 88b promises an immortal reputation (*nam te omnia saecla / Noscent, et qui sis fama loquetur anus*) would doubtless have preferred to dispense with such a reward, which will spread his infamy

15 Cf. the article referred to *supra* N. 5.
16 Stressing the negative connotation of fire in the *Georgics*, A. J. Boyle [*supra* N. 9], p. 80, rightly speaks of ambivalence: ‘Caesar’s burning battles may contain not only possibilities for good’.
17 Cf. the article referred to *supra* N. 5, pp. 5-6.
through all ages\textsuperscript{18}. In this case, the glory entirely reflects on the poet (cf. \textit{famae... nostrae, 2. 40}), and the shame on the enemy\textsuperscript{19}.

**2- Virgil rival of Octavian**

Just like 2.39-46 subverts the pompous proem to Book 1 (v. 24-42), so 3.40-48 is in the immediate continuation of the great proem where the author presents himself as the founder of a temple purportedly built to Octavian’s glory, but which might as well be his prison\textsuperscript{20}. Everything happens as if, in the Virgilian logic, it were impossible to praise Maecenas without attacking Octavian. Moreover, when, as we have seen, the poet makes in coded language the announcement of his anti-\textit{Aeneid}, it is a military term he chooses for the occasion: \textit{accingar}, “I will gird myself” (as with a sword)\textsuperscript{21}.

Horace too at the same time likened his reed pen to a sword: \textit{hic stylus... uelut... ensis, Sat. 2. 1. 39-41.} This \textit{accingar}, which symbolically sets the poet up as an emulator, or a rival, of the prince even on the military level, takes great strength to come in crowning of a picture where Virgil is not afraid to award himself the supreme honors of triumph, which one would have thought reserved to Octavian or his best generals. He is careful, of course, to accompany his audacity with the greatest obsequiousness towards the "divine boy", as Cicero said\textsuperscript{22}, but that facade is undermined as much by the perfidious ambivalence of \textit{tenebit}, 16, as by the numerical matching of lines 37-39, devoted to the punishment of \textit{Invidia infelix}, "wretched Envy", with lines 1.37-39 addressed to Octavian (\textit{nec tibi} is exactly symmetrical to \textit{Invidia}: line 37 in both cases)\textsuperscript{23}. We should therefore take seriously

\textsuperscript{18} The evocation of the Trojan lineage claimed by Octavian is probably tinted with sweet irony, especially since this is the epitome of the \textit{carmen fictum} rejected by the author in 2.45.

\textsuperscript{19} To say, as L. Morgan [\textit{supra N. 2}, 57, that the poet’s reputation will in this case necessarily be associated to that of Octavian, is obvious, but the real point is the ambiguity conveyed by \textit{fama}. Unfortunately, L. Morgan contends that there are no veiled attacks against Octavian in Virgil.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{In medio mihi Caesar erit templumque tenebit}: cf. p. 4 of the article referred to \textit{supra N. 14}. Similarly, when the temple of Janus was closed, War was supposed to be imprisoned in it.

\textsuperscript{21} “gird myself, as in armour”, R. A. B. Mynors, \textit{Georgics}, Clarendon Press, 1990. Lost in Saint-Denis’ rendition (“je me préparerai”), the image is neutralized in L. Morgan’s commentary, p. 57: “‘Virgil, predictably, depicts his \textit{mimesis} of military action as the real thing’”.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Hunc diuinum adulescentem}, Cic., \textit{Phil. 5.43; deus... semper deus, Ecl. 1.6-7}.

\textsuperscript{23} If the poet had written \textit{Illi uictor ego}, not \textit{Illic uictor ego} (codex Romanus), it could be argued that in line 17 he dedicates his victory and triumph to Octavian. But the disappearance of a letter seems more plausible than
this ambition which, in a half fanciful half provocative manner\textsuperscript{24}, actually expresses the deep awareness by Virgil of his own genius and of the responsibilities incumbent on him vis-à-vis his fellow citizens subjected to a despotic regime. Two sets of values face each other: that of brute force and that of free and liberating thought. To the military victories of Octavian (\textit{uictorque volentis / per populos dat iura}, 4.561-62) respond the victories won by Virgil in the poetic field (\textit{Temptanda uia qua me quoque possim / Tollere humo uictorque uirum uolitare per ora}, 3.8-9 ; \textit{uictor ego}, 17). Certainly, they make less noise, but they are perhaps of a better quality, as suggested by the poem's final vignette, which parallels the artificial and false glory of the winner of the civil wars with that, solid and authentic, of the \textit{Georgics}' author\textsuperscript{25}. Alas, instead of listening to the message of emancipation sent by the courageous poet, the Romans, blinded by propaganda, are awaiting salvation from the very man who plunged them into the abyss. This is admirably expressed through the calculated ambiguity on the word \textit{iuenem} at line 500 of the first book\textsuperscript{26}, when the poet, anxious about the fate of a Rome torn by civil war, turns to the tutelary gods to beg them “not to prevent at least this youthful man from rescuing a devastated world”\textsuperscript{27}:

\begin{center}
\textit{Hunc saltem euerso iuuenem succurrere saeclo / Ne prohibete.}
\end{center}

On the identity of this would-be savior, commentators do not hesitate a second. Under the pretext that in the following verses the poet addresses Octavian (\textit{“The courts of heaven, / Caesar, have long begrudged your presence here, / Complaining that you care for mortal triumphs”})\textsuperscript{28}, they decide that this person can only be Octavian\textsuperscript{29}. This is to ignore its addition, especially as this addition is in line with the reading most favorable to Octavian (\textit{lectio facilior}).


\textsuperscript{24} This explains the verse 23, so shocking at first sight: \textit{iuuat caesosque uidere iuuenos}, “It is pleasant to see cattle slaughtered”. It is of course not Virgil who enjoys such a spectacle (see 2.536-38), it is the one he mimics and pretends to envy, namely the Roman \textit{triumphator}, specifically Octavian, who was celebrating a triple triumph at the time of publication of the \textit{Georgics}.

\textsuperscript{25} Cf. the article referred to supra N. 14.

\textsuperscript{26} On this point, and on the image of the charioteer (see p. 8), cf. the article referred to supra N. 5.

\textsuperscript{27} My translation.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Satis iam pridem sanguine nostro / Laomedontae laimus periuria Troiae, / iam pridem nobis caeli te regia, / Caesar, / inuidet atque hominum queritur curare triumphos…}
that the demonstrative of the first person, *hic*, usually refers to the speaker, and that Virgil, who was then about forty years, is not excluded by the term *iuuenis*, applicable to men under nearly fifty.

This first book ends with the image of the charioteer carried away by his team, at first glance an innocent picture, but which is secretly connected, via a reference to Aeschylus, to the ambitious young man who claims to hold the reins of the Roman state without having either the legitimacy or the competence for that role. At the end of Book 2, Virgil, by contrast, compares himself to a diligent coachman who has just traversed “a vast course”, and, his task accomplished, “unyoke the steaming necks of [his] horses”.

### 3- Virgil’s grievances against Octavian

This image of the charioteer carried away by his horses naturally evokes the figure of the young Phaethon, who almost brought the world into the final catastrophe for believing himself capable of driving the Sun chariot. Thus is denounced the inability of Octavian to govern the empire, a subject on which the poet will return at greater length in the fourth book through the character of Aristaeus, this “most presumptuous youth” (*iuuenum confidentissime*, 445) who largely represents Caesar’s son, and who, having by his own fault (see below) lost his swarms of bees, is reduced to implore his dear mother like a child (*multa querens*, 320; *lacrimans*, 356).

A solution will be found, the swarms will be restored, but only through a miracle whose barbarity Virgil takes pleasure in emphasizing (v. 299-302). Moreover, if Aristaeus has to sacrifice four bulls and four heifers in exchange of bees (v. 538-40), the transaction is perhaps not beneficial, and, more importantly, it marks at the symbolic level the end of the

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29 “Do not prevent at least this youthful prince / From saving a world in ruins”, L. P. Wilkinson; “notre jeune héroïs”, E. de Saint-Denis. One can find the same equivocation in Hor., *Od*. 1.2.41: [http://www.espace-horace.org/ym/odes_1/O_1_02.htm](http://www.espace-horace.org/ym/odes_1/O_1_02.htm).

30 Phaethon was Sun’s son. As notes R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Further Voices in Vergil’s Aeneid*, Oxford, 1987, 140 n. 63, Octavian himself appears somewhat as Sun’s son, since his father Julius Caesar is associated with that star in the lines 466-68.

golden age. In clear, Octavian has certainly put an end to the civil wars (that he had himself rekindled before), and thus restored the Roman "hive", but peace has been found at the cost of the citizens’ enslavement. His father Julius Caesar, at least, could take pride of his victories over the enemy abroad, but this is far from being the case for the son, despite his bluster! According to him, he has conquered the universe, or it's almost done, since 3.32-33 certainly reflects the official propaganda:

*Et duo rapta manu diuerso ex hoste tropaea*

*Bisque triumphatas utroque ab litore gentis.*

“And two trophies / Snatched from far separated enemies,

A double Triumph from two utmost shores.”

This is the ‘politically correct’ translation, but in his subtle way, and by taking advantage of the ambiguity of the preposition *ab* (geographic location, or agent) as well as of the word *litus* (*utroque… litore*, “both sides of the sea”, or “both banks of the Euphrates”), Virgil undermines from within this too flattering presentation of Octavian’s military performances:

“The dual triumphs won by Romans over Parthians, and by Parthians over Romans”.

This interpretation is at least as plausible as the one instinctively adopted by the doxa, since Rome had never celebrated a triumph, let alone two triumphs, over the Britons, which, according to this same doxa, would be involved here together with the Parthians. On the other hand, the Parthians had defeated the Romans twice, first Crassus and then Mark Antony, while the Romans had triumphed once with Ventidius (against Pacorus), and again... never again, except that Octavian made people believe that he would provide for it: and in fact, ten years later, he will bring back triumphantly from the East the ensigns

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32 *triumphatas confirms it, since it is both passive (“premier exemple de ce passif”, F. Plessis - P. Lejay, *OEuvres de Virgile*, Paris, 1913) and active.

33 The doxa is forced to explain *bis* as a mere repetition: “*Bis répète diuerso et est répété par utroque*” (F. Plessis - P. Lejay); and it would also repeat *duo*.
that the Parthians had taken from Crassus. A business arrangement, in reality\textsuperscript{34}. For the moment, even though he "fulminates" in the East (\textit{fulminat}, 4.561), his victories affect only already submitted people (\textit{uictorque uolentis / per populos})\textsuperscript{35}; and who will believe that the Indians, qualified as \textit{imbelles} (\textit{imbellem ... Indum}, 2.172), are threatening the walls of Rome, as the poet pretends to think?

So, as we can see, the attacks of Virgil against Octavian are by no means gratuitous, but rely instead on solid grievances. Incapacity is one, tyranny is another. This man has destroyed Republican liberties and confiscated the state for his own benefit, a crime summarized at the very end of the poem (4. 563-64) by the phrase \textit{ignobilis oti}, too naively understood as a simple and innocent allusion to the poet's sweet retreat from the noise and fury, an epicurean paradise, in sum, whereas such an expression inevitably evokes by contrast the motto of Cicero in his \textit{Pro Sestio} (98): \textit{cum dignitate otium}, "peace with dignity", an ideal that, in the orator's view, deserved to be defended "at the peril of life", \textit{uel capitis periculo}\textsuperscript{36}.

In the same vein, the famous development of 1.125-46 on \textit{Labor improbus}, usually interpreted as a hymn to work and progress, would rather denounce the grip on the entire society by a totalitarian political system\textsuperscript{37}. Virgil is fond of this kind of illusionism. For instance, his description of the society of bees in the fourth book has sometimes given the impression that he proposed them as a model to human society, and that, captivated by Octavian's charisma, he advocated the establishment in Rome of a sort of "monarchist communism"\textsuperscript{38}. Recent criticism has easily dispelled such a delusion\textsuperscript{39} by stressing the poet's humorous distancing from his subject, and the place occupied by wars among these insects\textsuperscript{40}. In this sense, the Virgilian bees would rather be a foil than a model: not only the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Cf. pp. 5-6 of the article referred to supra N. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{37} \textit{http://www.virgilmurder.org/images/pdf/laborengl.pdf}.
\item \textsuperscript{38} So E. de Saint-Denis, p. XXXV, explaining Virgil's alleged position by "l'autorité croissante du princeps Octave-Auguste".
\item \textsuperscript{39} References can be found in \textit{Violence et ironie}…, 383 n. 70. Cf. recently W. Batstone, "Virgilian didaxis: value and meaning in the \textit{Georgics}", in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Virgil}, ed. Ch. Martindale (1997), 139-41.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Thus, in lines 67-87 bees wage tremendous fratricidal battles, an obvious picture of Roman civil wars.
\end{itemize}
monarchical system does not ensure peace, but it almost inevitably leads (saepe, "often", 67) to discord and civil war.

Thus, far from approving the exorbitant ambitions of the young Caesar, Virgil has set himself the task of combating them, and his favorite method to this end is to abound in compliment: maxime Caesar, "very great Caesar": so much for megalomania (2.170)! This man wants to be a god? Never mind! Right from the sixth verse of the first bucolic he was hailed as such; in the preamble of the first georgic, he is given the choice to become the divinity he prefers; in the prologue of Book 3, a temple is built to him, and at the end of the poem, he is shown “setting his course for Heaven”, the thunderbolt in hand (fulminat… uiamque affectat Olympo, 4.562), and thus virtually equated with Jupiter himself. But the Giants also wanted to climb Mount Olympus and dethrone Jupiter\(^{41}\), and we know what happened. By brandishing the thunderbolt, the ambitious Princeps can only attract on his head the Olympian’s ire\(^{42}\).

Incapacity, incompetence, infringement of liberties, megalomania, impiety: these are general grievances, but Virgil has at least two more personal reproaches to address to the Princeps: these are first the expropriations that struck hundreds of thousands of Italians, among them the poet’s own father, and secondly the double murder of which the young Octavius had been accomplice with his father Julius Caesar on the persons of Licinius Calvus and Catullus\(^{43}\).

Let’s start with the evictions. They are alluded to at least five times in the Georgics. Significantly, it’s with a reminder of his "youth’s boldness" (audaxque iuventa) that Virgil closes his poem, a boldness that made him sing Tityrus "lazing under a beech-tree" (4.565-66). And it certainly needed boldness to dare to defy the all-powerful triumvir with the

\(^{41}\) As remarks R. F. Thomas, *Virgil: Georgics*, Cambridge, 1988, *ad loc.*, “the words strengthen the sense that Octavian in some way supplants, rather than merely joins, Jupiter”. Ovid is perhaps not innocent when he echoes this passage in *Met.* 1.152 (*adfectasse ferunt regnum caeleste Gigantas*).


single weapon of poetry. The dove against the eagle (Ecl. 9.12-13). Tityrus, as we know, met "the divine young man" to obtain justice, but the response was a sarcasm.\textsuperscript{44}

In the apocalyptic vision he paints of an Italy devastated by civil wars, Virgil does not fail to mention “the fields, bereft of tillers, [that] are all unkempt”, \textit{squalent abductis arua colonis}, 1.507. A little further on, in Book 2 (v. 197-98), he recalls with nostalgia “pasture such as hapless Mantua lost”, comparing it to “the distant glades of rich Tarentum”. And the association between Mantua and Tarentum is even reinforced by the similarity between the bucolic Tityrus on one hand, and a certain Gardener established at Tarentum, who has remained in literary imagination as the incarnation of an ideal of happy and independent life, close to nature and in harmony with it, on the other hand: indeed, Tityrus has to settle for bare stone and a swamp covered with reeds (\textit{lapis omnia nudus / Limosoque palus obducat pascua iunco}, 47-48), while the other possesses just “an acre or two of land that no one wanted, / A path not worth the ploughing, unrewarding / For flocks, unfit for vineyards” (\textit{cui pauca reliqui / Iugera ruris erant, nec fertili illa iuuenis / Nec pecori opportuna seges nec commoda Baccho}, 4.127-29). In both cases the land concerned must be poor ground left unallocated by the surveyors in charge of the redistribution of land in favor of veterans\textsuperscript{45}. But in Tarentum the Gardener is his own boss in his personal "kingdom", as he says\textsuperscript{46}, while in Mantua he had to comply with the requirements of a master (Ecl. 9.2-6): sweet revenge\textsuperscript{47}!

The fifth allusion to the expropriations has escaped, it seems, the attention of critics, so deftly it hides under this irrepressible heartfelt cry (2.458-59):

\begin{quote}
O fortunatos nimium sua si bona norint, / Agricolas…
\end{quote}

“How lucky, if they know their happiness,

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Pascite ut ante boues, pueri…}, Ecl. 1.45.

\textsuperscript{45} As notes P. Lejay \textit{ad loc.}, the term \textit{relicti} is a “mot technique chez les arpenteurs romains pour désigner ce qui, dans la distribution des terres d’une colonie, reste sans affectation”. Virgil has pointed to the resemblance between the two properties by picking up in the georgic the triple \textit{nec} of the bucolic (v. 49-50, 57-58): cf. \textit{Violence et ironie…}, 55-56, 70-72.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{regum aequabat opes animis}, 132, “fancied himself a king / In wealth”.

\textsuperscript{47} The relationship between Tityrus, Moeris and the Gardener (+ the \textit{pater} of Catalepton 8) is analysed in \textit{Violence et ironie…}, pp. 61-77.

12
Are farmers, more than lucky..."

Such is the classical interpretation (L. P. Wilkinson), and yet how condescending it is towards farmers, who are thus debased to a level barely above that of animals\textsuperscript{48}! Their condition is enviable, but they do not know it; they are happy objectively, but not subjectively. Only a city dweller as Horace’s Alfius (Epod. 2)\textsuperscript{49} can harbor such a vision, but Virgil, certainly not. Moreover, this famous exclamation is immediately followed in the poem by a lengthy description of peasant life, not seen from the outside but from within, and where joy bursts forth almost at every step.

It is therefore urgent to revise the interpretation of this \textit{si sua bona norint}, as permitted, and even recommended, by Latin use, since the phrase \textit{sua bona} is statistically more likely to mean "their property" than "their happiness", and the verb \textit{noscere}, in its simple or in its compound form (\textit{cognoscere}), is regularly used about the retrieval of movable or immovable assets that have been stolen or confiscated. Examples are numerous\textsuperscript{50}. Accordingly, we will propose to translate: “Too happy would be farmers, if only they could recover their property!”

By seeking such ambiguity in this context, Virgil could have but little doubt about his readers’ capacity to divert his thought in the direction both the most trivial and the most offensive to farmers. His motivation is clear. This cry of bitterness and protest he threw in the face of a predatory soldiery, in the face of a world now enslaved, should not be perceived by the man primarily responsible for the situation, or, if it were, it had, in a way, to be left choked and temporarily repressed, until the day it could at last be released to the light.

\textsuperscript{48} The conclusive sentence of M. Gale’s book [\textit{supra} N. 2], 274, is characteristic in this regard: “The hero of the \textit{Georgics} is… the poor farmer, ignorant of the way and unable to understand the blessings which he (at times) enjoys.”


\textsuperscript{50} So Livius, 10.20.15: \textit{acciti ad res suas noscendas}, “invited to come and identify their belongings”; 24.16: \textit{pecus quod domini cognouissent}; 26.30: \textit{bona quoque multis adempta… orare se} [the Campanians] \textit{patres conscriptos ut si nequeant omnia, saltem quae compareant cognoscique possint restitui dominis lubeant…}; 29.21: \textit{quod sui quisque cognosset prenderet}, (\textit{cognoscere} practically implies \textit{prendere}); Tacitus, \textit{Ann.} 15.60.4: \textit{nocator}; \textit{Hist.} 4.40.4, where \textit{noscere} almost means ‘get back’; Virgil himself, \textit{Aen.} 9.457: \textit{agnoscunt spolia inter se}. For \textit{bona} = ‘confiscated property’, see also Plin., \textit{Epist.} 7.33.4. In Tib. 1.6.33-34, \textit{tua… bona} very concretely refers to ‘your young wife’, \textit{tenera… coniuge}. 13
Injustice prevailed, but you had no right to complain. You had to draw a line under the past, and speak no more of atrocities, violence, assassinations. Woe chiefly to anyone who would dare to investigate the circumstances of Calvus’ and Catullus’ death, as Virgil does first in his Bucolics (audaxque iuventa, 4. 565)\(^{51}\), and again from the very outset of the Georgics, namely the poem 1.24-42, where, through a murderous echo to Catullus’ Poem 88, he connects Octavian to the infamous Gellius\(^{52}\), an association so unthinkable at first glance, that the reader, trying to penetrate the poet’s intentions, should necessarily be led to re-read Catullus, and so recognize the young triumvir under the mask of Gellius, Catullus’ mortal enemy\(^{53}\).

But on a subject so dear to his heart, Virgil could not content himself with a brief allusion, as fierce as it was. To make a worthy tribute to the two brotherly poets who paid with their lives their resistance to despotism, he wanted to create a narrative in good and due form, a tale drawn from mythology, but which, under the allegorical veil, would fully restore the emotional charge of the drama lived by the two "brothers" only a few years before\(^{54}\). This narrative is what we read when we move into the fourth book and discover the sublime episode of Orpheus and Eurydice.

If indeed Aristaeus represents Octavian (see supra N. 31), it is only logical to ask which real persons are hiding under this Eurydice whose death he caused (ll. 456-59), and under this Orpheus from which Eurydice is inseparable. Now it happens that Catullus is presented as a new Orpheus in the Bucolics\(^{55}\) and later in Ovid’s Amores (3.9)\(^{56}\). And it is not “Lesbia”, a mask, who is inseparable from Catullus, it is Calvus, his brother in poetry. The feminization of the latter is not an obstacle, since this travesty is methodical in Catullus’ Libellus. Moreover, the couple Orpheus - Eurydice had been anticipated by Catullus himself when transposing his relationship with the deceased Calvus through the...

\(^{51}\) That an essential purpose of the Bucolics is to denounce this double murder, is the thesis defended and debated at length in Violence et ironie...


\(^{54}\) The episode of Orpheus and Eurydice could have been composed as soon as 36 B. C., or even before, that is to say less than ten years after Catullus’ death (which hypothetically took place around 45 B. C., two years after Calvus’ death).

\(^{55}\) Cf. Violence et ironie…, particularly pp. 203, 241, 327, 337.

couple Laodamia - Protesilas (Poem 68)\textsuperscript{57}. Finally, the term \textit{tyrannus} chosen by the poet to describe the god of the underworld (\textit{tyranni}, 492) is probably not insignificant in the political context of the time. And how could one better explain the remarkable density of Catullian references throughout the episode, than by this interpretation\textsuperscript{58}?

At any rate, it is certain that Virgil attached great importance, and other than literary, to that part of the \textit{Georgics}, so tenuous is the link it has with the rest of the poem\textsuperscript{59}, to the point that many critics in the past have been inclined to admit, after Servius, that the whole second half of the fourth book is merely a replacement version of an original text of which the emperor would have required the removal because it praised Gallus, now fallen into disgrace. This theory seems fortunately out of fashion today, but the question remains as to why Virgil was so keen to integrate into the \textit{Georgics} a story (that of Aristaeus) he invented for the occasion, as well as its relationship with Orpheus\textsuperscript{60}.

To the impunity of Aristaeus protected by his divine mother Cyrene, to his extreme impudence (\textit{confidentissime}, 445)\textsuperscript{61}, and to the miraculous, or monstrous (\textit{monstrum}, 554)\textsuperscript{62}, resurrection of his hives, correspond the insolent triumphs of Octavian earned to him by the protection of Venus (in other words \textit{Fortuna}) from whom he claims to be descended.

\textsuperscript{57} Cf. \textit{Catulle ou l’anti-César}, 95-99.
\textsuperscript{58} See the tables presented in \textit{Violence et ironie…}, 391-92. For the possible presence of anagrams of Catullus and Licinius Calvus in the passage, cf. \textit{ibid.}, 392 n. 97.
\textsuperscript{59} “Scholars are still discussing the question: how can the Aristaeus story, and that of Orpheus in particular, be more than superficially relevant to the poem as a whole?”, L. P. Wilkinson \textit{[supra N. 2]}, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{60} L. P. Wilkinson, p. 40. According to R. F. Thomas \textit{[supra N. 41]}, II, p. 202, “the question of the meaning of 4.315-558 and of their relationship to the first half of the book and the \textit{Georgics} as a whole, is perhaps the most difficult exegetical problem in Roman poetry.” J. Griffin, “The Fourth Georgic, Virgil, and Rome”, \textit{Greece and Rome} 26 (1979), p. 61, lists no less than 17 different interpretations over a period of only 12 years, before confessing his “dismay [and] perhaps despair”!
\textsuperscript{61} The pejorative connotation of the word (‘bold’, ‘audacious’, ‘brazen’: cf. G. B. Miles, \textit{Virgil’s Georgics. A new interpretation}, Un. of Calif. Press, 1980, p. 271) is intensified by the superlative. The cynicism of the mother has in fact nothing to envy to that of the son. She ignores the terrible anger of Proteus towards the young man, and her only reaction to the tragic story of Orpheus and Eurydice is to laugh at it (\textit{Haec omnis morbi causa}, 532: “So, that’s the whole thing” (to avoid this distasteful tone, translators often construct \textit{omnis} with \textit{morbi}: but see 396-97), while fully reassuring his son about the consequences of his fault: \textit{Nate, licet tristis animo deponere curas}, 531: “rejoice, you no longer have to worry about”.
\textsuperscript{62} This is again a typical case of \textit{commune uerbum} (cf. \textit{supra}, p. 5), after \textit{fama, tenere, triumphatas, litus (utroque ab litore)}…
Therefore, it’s not surprising that the illusory "miracle" of the hives is followed without transition by the fulminating appearance (fulminat, 561) of the young Caesar in his purported role of master of the universe. The *Georgics* could have finished with this triumphal illustration of *Labor omnia uicit improbus*\(^{63}\), but the poet did not want to close his poem with this bitter and almost desperate note. In an age of general enslavement (*ignobilis oti*, 564), when the world exhausted by war resigns itself to submitting to the yoke (*uolentis*, 561)\(^ {64}\), Orpheus remains standing, he looks like Virgil (*Illo Vergilium me tempore...*, 563), and his lyre is not for sale.

\(^{63}\) Cf. the article referred to *supra* N. 37.

\(^{64}\) Cf. the article referred to *supra* N. 14.