CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TRANSMISSION OF VIRGIL'S WORKS IN
ANTiquity AND THE MIDDLE AGES

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The publication of Virgil's poems and the earliest phase of their diffusion
in Rome and in the Empire

For its age and its riches, the tradition of Virgil is comparable only—and that is no accident; cf. n. 45 below on Virgil as the Pagans' bible in late antiquity—with that of the Bible and of a few other important Christian works. Of Buc., G. and Aen. we have over 1000 mss. (cf. n. 63): a notable quantity, but only a tiny part of the innumerable rolls and codices that must have been produced in the 1500 years between the poems' publication and their first printed editions. It is a paradox that the intense reading of Virgil itself led not only to the production, but also to the loss of very many copies: as lacunae appeared and as the script became illegible in a ms., it was swiftly enough replaced. The disused text was either destroyed or reused after washing, as a palimpsest (cf. 307 below); so too many imperial buildings were used as quarries for later constructions!

Numerically, the largest part of our Virgil mss. consists of humanist copies, but we do also have seven splendid late antique productions, three of which are almost complete, which have passed without break from the patrician palaces of Rome to later mediaeval libraries, and thence to modern collections. There are moreover more than thirty mss., complete or fragmentary, copied in France, Germany or Italy between the end of the c. 8 and the beginning of the c. 10: in the case of (e.g.) Horace, Lucretius and Ovid, we have no earlier mss. The epigraphic and papyrological evidence, some of which belongs to the first century after Virgil's death, is discussed elsewhere (252-5).

To the question of how Virgil's works were circulated from the outset, there is no altogether simple answer. We have seen already that there is good evidence for the circulation and performance of individual Elogues (28, 249f.); Virgil himself suggests as much, quoting the incipits of Buc.2 and 3 at 5.85-7, and referring to 6 by its title, Varus at vv. 11–2. The success of Buc. individually, and as a
collection, is demonstrated by numerous echoes in contemporary authors. But in the context of contemporary Roman literature, the Buc. were a text so strongly innovative that there was no shortage of jealous critics opposed to Virgil: thus e.g. Bavius and Maevius are probably to be identified as obtructatores (Buc.3.90f.). That could have been a scathing answer, for example, to a poetaster who had had fun at the expense of 2.23 (certainly earlier than Buc.3): there Serv. notes: \sane hunc versum male distinguens Vergiliomastix uituperat `lac mihi non aestate novum, non frigore: desit’, id est semper mihi deest! We should perhaps also bear in mind the possibility of adjustments effected when the collection was brought together, such as the hypothetical addition of 2.45–55 (which do not gybe with the symmetry of the poem as a whole: 1–5, 6–18, 19–44, 56–68, 69–73); when they are added (cf. 33f.), Buc.2 + 8 (181 verses) = Buc.3 + 7 (the same).

The G. too had their jealous and mocking critics (cf. 65 n. 15 for some statistics in support of their unpopularity in general): e.g. the man who recitante eo ex Georgicis [1.299]: `nudus ara, serre nudus’ subiecit: `habebis frigore febrem’ (VSD 43) or C. Melissus, Maecenas’ learned and witty secretary, who wrote a pamphlet de apibus (cited by Serv. on Aen.7.66; cf. 9 on M.’s description of Virgil’s voice) to make fun of the topic (cf. EV 3.461f.). The first ‘publication’ of G. was of course oral, by means of the reading at Atella (13, 87), and their rapid diffusion is, as we have seen, one of the factors which makes it quite impossible to lend credence to the silly tale in Servius about a revised edition of G.A (cf. 86–9 for detailed discussion and bibliography).

The tradition of the G. soon enough conformed to that of Buc. and Aen., but there are traces of an independent phase: mediaeval and humanist mss. of G. alone are rare but may have been more numerous in late antiquity and the grammarians Julius Hyginus (Augustan) and Valerius Probus (late c. 1 A.D.) claim to have consulted

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1 Cf. n. 61 for Hor. Epd.16; G. D’Anna in Virgilio e gli Augustei (Napoli 1990), 89ff., for Tib., V. Gigante Lanzara, ib., 113ff. for Prop.; cf. too EV s.v.

2 So already W. Kroll, Studien... (Stuttgart 1924), 117–38; cf. EV s.v. obtructatores (Görler).


4 For the little story reported, not without irony (ea re uerane an falsa sit non labora; quin laborum multo aliusque ad aures sit ‘ora’ quam Nota’, dubium id non est) by Gell.6.20, about C.2.224f. see ch. 1, n. 48. Important as an indication of how and why people played, in the days before crossword puzzles, with the text of Virgil.

5 See not so much A (see 306f. below; note that this typeface (A) is used only for sigla of the mss. of Virgil), of which we have only pages containing G., but which