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Review of Silvio Bär & Emily Hauser (eds.): *Reading Poetry, Writing Genre. English Poetry and Literary Criticism in Dialogue with Classical Scholarship*

Reception studies in Classics is a fast-growing and extremely diversified terrain, where so far synchronic studies focused on the *Nachleben* of authors from classical antiquity have prevailed over diachronic, process-oriented research. *Reading Poetry, Writing Genre* is not a book that falls within the most familiar and popular category of reception studies, in that it doesn't trace the influence of the classics—for example Homer, Vergil, Ovid—on writers, periods and texts. Rather, the essays collected in this volume break new ground insofar as they take into account scholarship and literary criticism "in connection with reception studies and its relation to the study of genres and genre history" (p. 2), by adopting a diachronic approach. The book "aims to map the history and development of English poetry and the literary history and criticism connected to it as a story of genre discourse in dialogue with classical scholarship" (p. 1). To this end, "the interactions between literary-critical movements and classical scholarship"—which is the main focus of the essays—shows "how

genre is constantly negotiated, reworked and contested in dialogue with contemporary debates in literary criticism and classical scholarship" (p. 6). Approaching the subject from several perspectives and focusing on different genres and different periods, the essays weave together the multiple threads of a continuous and enlarging engagement of English literature with genre-formation and classical scholarship. To read this book means to experience the richness of English literature at the intersection of literary criticism, classical scholarship and genre studies. This triangle serves as a structuring framework of the different case studies presented in this volume.

The history of the continuous reworkings, rewritings, reinventions and influence of the classics in Great Britain goes back to Old and Middle English literature and reaches to contemporary literature and culture. Within the context of a discourse centred on genre, the mind goes to Chaucer and his definition of "tragedie" in the *Monk's Tale.* Chaucer's structural proposition of tragedy in *The Canterbury Tales*—a sudden fall from fortune—is inspired by Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* and both can ultimately be traced back to classical commentaries. However, as Amanda Gerber demonstrates, the etymological approach to the definition of genre favoured by these commentaries—even though they are focused on the same material—and, accordingly, the dissections of terms like

tragedy often result in classifications unfamiliar to the modern scholar. This is evident when we compare the definition of tragedy in *The Monk's Tale* and the *accessus* to the *Pharsalia* in a manuscript of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. The introduction to Lucan's poem exemplifies the literary tradition on genre by referring to an authority—Seneca—and to a collection of historical materials while recalling certain aspects of Aristotle's *Poetics.* Yet, despite its Aristotelian flavour, the *accessus* cannot be traced back to Aristotle directly. Rather it results in a classical pastiche that simplifies the tragic form to tailor it to Lucan's *Pharsalia.* Evidence from the marginalia of manuscripts, as well as the *catena* commentaries and paratexts, suggest that in the Middle Ages the classics were used for didactic purposes and were the purview of classical training. Gerber reads paratexts as documents where early readers' and scholars' approaches to classical curricular authors surface, "to rebuild a paradigm that rendered the components of classical genres applicable for both their medieval and Renaissance beneficiaries" (p. 14). The dismantling of classical literature and the subsequent recreation and reassembly of these texts in the late Middle Ages resulted in a flexible perception of genre that allowed for the coexistence of different genres in the same texts.

Interest in classical genres never faded and medieval scholars laid the foundations for the changes that were

to take place in the Renaissance. In the Elizabethan Age poetry "can be a speaking picture" and classical literature can frame "a poetics of virtue" (Emma Buckley). Ethical issues such as the utility and benefits of poetry are couched in terms of the interaction of neo-Latin literary theory, verse and drama with the vernacular. Insofar as it is an art of imitation—Sidney writes in his *Apology for Poetry*—, poetry "to speak metaphorically, [is] a speaking picture" that aims to teach and delight. As Alberico Gentili remarks in his *Commentatio,* there is a strong moralizing aspect attached to that definition whereby poetry can be a powerfully moral force. This ethical value emerges at its best in performed poetry, where the symbiosis of literature and life produces "the perfect *imago* of excellence" (p. 39). William Gager takes up the issue of performance and virtue in his *Ulysses redux* (1592), a tragedy that draws on the educative and ethical model proposed by his friend Gentili. Gager builds his play on a tragic-comic tension embodied by Ulysses, a tragic revenger who is responsible for the "happy ending of the tragedy" (p. 40), a champion of wisdom in suffering, a trickster and the hero of fraud as well as a wily man. In his prologue to his *tragedia nova*—"Ad Criticum"—the author acknowledges that he is transgressing generic decorum by presenting competing models of virtue to respond to the central issues of early modern tragicomedy. From this point of view,

Ulysses redux is a groundbreaking play that anticipates later tragicomedy while the author rethinks the relationship between virtue, law and poetics.

The Homeric and the Vergilian traditions are the two pillars on which the discourse on genre in *Reading Poetry, Writing Genre* is based. While Buckley focuses on Homer and the Latin tradition of Ulysses, Ariane Schwartz looks at translations of Vergil. Schwartz aims to explore how the conventions of genre guide reader and translator, how the genre of translation is defined and how changes in poetic form and rhyme affect the genre of a translation. In this regard Harrington's translations of Vergil (1658–9), his poems and his prefaces offer an important perspective on epic and bucolic poetry as political vehicles. In Harrington's rewriting of the Dido episode from the *Aeneid,* for example, Dido "is almost a male figure of civic responsibility with her emotions diluted" (p. 62). As a result, Dido's lament is turned into a political speech for Aeneas, while the Vergilian hero becomes a more passionate character than that of the *Aeneid.* Harrington achieves this effect also by the end-rhyme of his heroic couplet, such as the rhyme 'controul' and 'soul' in his translation of *Aeneid* 4,300–304 that creates a tension between the two terms. When compared to contemporary translations of the same episode, this eventually results in a more a balanced portrait of Dido, so much so that "'soul' and 'con-

troul' are the key words that the reader takes away from the lines" (p. 63). This draws our attention to the importance of the formal elements in Harrington's translation. By choosing the rhyming heroic couplet he emphasises the classical restraint and gives voice to his desire to place his translations in the English tradition of Vergilian translations.

A discourse on poetry and genre in English literature inevitably has to touch upon Christian epic and, especially, Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Caroline Stark explores the complexities of classical genre in this work by putting Milton and Dryden in "conversation". Upon its publication (1667) *Paradise Lost* raised issues over a poetic landscape of genre which had political implications and hinted at latent rivalry. This is exemplified in the debate over rhymed verse in tragedy and epic that polarized the different positions of Milton and Dryden. In his 1674 edition of *Paradise Lost* the poet reorganized the material and added a preface to solve issues related to his distaste for rhyme and choice of genre. In the opening lines of Book 9 of *Paradise Lost* (1674 edition) Milton embeds a discourse on genre that marks his shift from the heroic to the tragic mode as he narrates the Fall. He explains the reasons that made him transform *Adam Unparadized* into a universal epic and why he privileged tragedy over epic by referring to Homer while also evoking a Vergilian intertext. The integration of tragedy

and georgic elements in epic results in a "tragic turn" that highlights the ability of epic to capture the richness in suffering equal to tragedy. This example from *Paradise Lost,* coupled with Milton's confrontation with issues of genre in *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes,* illustrates how through a reflection on genre in his epic the poet engages with his literary predecessors.

Vergil plays a major role in the reflection of classical scholarship on genre not only as the author of the *Aeneid,* but also as the poet who wrote the *Georgics.* Juan Christian Pellicer traces the influence of Latin scholarship on the Vergilian georgic as a genre throughout the 18th century. In this period commentators sometimes read the *Georgics* as the work of an agricultural writer and debate over the didactic aim and scientific accuracy of georgic poetry, namely of Vergil's agricultural lore. On some occasions, the debate takes place within the framework of a wide-ranging process aimed at clarifying the poem. This is exemplified by John Martyn's edition of the *Georgics.* The encyclopaedic approach to Vergil's work as well as Martyn's concern for the factual content and literary value of the poem result in a classical scholarly and scientific edition of the *Georgics* and make georgic a viable genre for his age. There are also scholars like William Benson who take the poem as the classic of all Europe and claim that people never read the *Georgics* because they think it is a book about "husbandry". Others, like

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Holdsworth, defend Vergil as an author of didactic epic. In his *Dissertation* Holdsworth maintains that scientific accuracy matters more for literary reasons than for utilitarian ones because factual mistakes affect the logic structure of the poem. Sometimes preoccupation with style triumphs over matter: in his "Essay on Didactic Poetry" Joseph Warton claims that style is Vergil's chief glory and celebrates the poet of the *Georgics* for the Lucretian qualities of his poetry. All these examples draw attention to a distinctive contrast between practical concerns and poetic ambitions that characterizes the reception of the georgic genre in 18th-century poetry.

This is also the age that sees Pope and Dryden as major authors engaging with the classics, particularly with Homer. "To what extent is poetry defined and demarcated by 'versification'?" (p. 107): as Lilah Grace Canevaro writes, this is a relevant question to a volume that aims to investigate the relationship between classical scholarship and genre formation. The above question brings about other key topics such as the relationship between utility and pleasure as well as the marking of genre by metre or theme that is brought into focus in an interesting paragraph on Pope's *Essay on Criticism.* Canevaro dwells on these issues by concentrating on specific features of oral poetry—such as epithets, formulae and rhyming elements—in Pope's translation of the *Iliad,* Dryden's

The Parting of Hector and Andromache and Morris' translation of the *Odyssey.* Giving examples of translations from Pope and comparing them with the modern ones by Fagles and Lattimore, Canevaro demonstrates that formulae and the other features of oral poetry function like 'hooks' that help to establish semantic and metric patterns of responsion between different passages in the poems. In their translations Pope and Dryden opt for flowing English verse in order to capture the poeticity of the English language. In so doing they achieve the same effect that in archaic poetry was achieved by using metre and formulaic diction, although they sacrifice adherence to the Greek. Likewise, by choosing the rhyming couplet Pope and Dryden reproduce something intrinsic in the structure of the Homeric hexameter. For example, the choice of rhyme words in Dryden's *The Parting of Hector and Andromache* reflects the importance of *kleos* in the *Iliad.* While Pope is the last one to celebrate the genius of Homer, "The prince of poets", Morris champions the Homeric tradition and the new oral-traditional approach to ancient epic—in line with Friedrich August Wolf, who changed the image of Homer for the ages to come. Canevaro claims that Morris' use of the rhyming couplet should be reconsidered in view of its potential for traditionality and genre recognition as it appears in his translation of the *Odyssey,* alongside his modern approach to formulae.

During the 19th century, there starts to emerge an unprecedented attention to the oral aspect of Homeric epic that gives life to a new field of study and to an oral-traditional theory that eventually will be developed by Parry and Lord. In his reworking of Homeric narratives, for example, Tennyson places the reader as an auditor within the world of the poem to create a modern adaptation of the oral tradition. This ultimately results in a shift from epic to dramatic monologue in the Victorian Age. Starting with Victorian fascination with Homer and ancient epic, Isobel Hurst illustrates this change by tracing the antecedents of the dramatic monologue in the epic traditions. A detailed analysis of Tennyson's rewritings of Homeric episodes demonstrates how "The Hesperides", "Oenone", "The Lotos-Eaters", "Ulysses", "Tithonus", "Lucretius" and "Tiresias" engage with classical scholarship.

Before the last two essays of the book, that go back to Homer, Silvio Bär devotes an interesting essay to the Elizabethan epyllion, mapping its history as well as that of the term "epyllion" to show how, when and why this term was adapted in English literature. In this regard Crump's thesis in 1931— *The Epyllion from Theocritus to Ovid*—was the most influential work both in Classics and in English philology. The fact that Crump for the first time drew a direct line from the Greek to the Roman epyllion and established a set of criteria

typical of the 'ancient' epyllion was partly responsible for the success of this work. On this basis, later English scholars linked the Elizabethan epyllion to its classical predecessor and scholars like Rose drew an uninterrupted line from the ancient epyllion to the Elizabethan and beyond. There is, however, no evidence that the Elizabethan age considered poems falling within this group as "epyllion". The Elizabethan epyllion, in fact, is an exemplary case in point that shows how a specific development in classical scholarship has shaped the perception of a genre in English literature.

With the last two essays we are back to Homeric epic: Hauser and Cox look at Homer from the perspective of female writing. Emily Hauser focuses on the encoding of genre and gender norms around Homer to illustrate the development of female epics vis-à-vis classical scholarship. An illuminating reading of *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barret Browning and *Helen in Egypt* by H. D. reveals how female epic has always engaged with classical scholarship and contemporary literary criticism to define its place in the tradition. The episode where Aurora Leigh discards some of her father's books is particularly revealing. Not only does the heroine cast aside Wolf and thus his idea of Homeric epic, but she also gives away her father's Elzevirs and Plato. In doing so Aurora Leigh suggests that she is distancing herself from a patrilineal

tradition of classical scholarship while placing Homer in a maternal vision of epic poetry. All this gives life to a new vision of female epic poetry that projects a new type of creative divinely inspired authorship. H. D. also engages with classical scholarship, namely with Parry's research on orality. *Helen in Egypt* responds to Parry by emphasising the tension between orality and textuality as well as the slippage between the oral and the textual recreations of Homer. Both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. demonstrate how the fluidity of Homeric epic can be a site for the redefinition of epic by female authors.

"The classics can console. But not enough", Derek Walcott writes in *Sea Grapes.* Josephine Balmer, however, doesn't seem to agree on this: as her "Transgressions" reveal, the classics 'can' console. Fiona Cox focuses on Balmer's 'transgressions', a term that highlights the hybrid nature of her response to the classics. Comparing herself to an abstract painter, Balmer blends her own original poetry with translations and rewritings of the classics to explore personal experiences and emotions. In *Piecing Together the Fragments* (2013) the author maps the changing landscape of the classics and her personal development as a poet by placing herself in the long tradition of female translators of the classics. At the same time, however, she describes her personal original approach to translation/transgression and her "journey

into the border territory between poetry and translation". In *Chasing Catullus* (2004) the author selects specific passages from the classics that speak to her own emotional state, puts them side by side with original poetry and reworks them in a new context. This is how new poetry is created and becomes 'transgression'. Thanks to her transgressions, Balmer finds a place to hide (cf. the title of an essay of hers about her collection: 'Finding a Place to Hide: *Chasing Catullus: Poems, Translations, and Transgressions*') in the world of the classics to face the loss of those she loves, namely the death of her niece in *Chasing Catullus* and that of her mother in *Letting Go.* In this sonnet sequence Balmer goes back to the female-dominated genre of ancient elegy and writes her own modern elegy to modulate our understanding of male-dominated epic, "by highlighting the dimensions of sorrow and loss that are so often associated with female characters" (p. 179). The rewriting of *Aeneid* 2 to describe the individual personal loss reminds the readers that in ancient epic—in a world of warfare and heroism—we are put in front of powerful explorations of the grief for parents. In an act of cross-gendering voices and cross-genre, Balmer becomes Aeneas as she reworks the episode in Book 2 of the *Aeneid* where the Vergilian hero realizes that he has lost his wife, Creusa. In another poem—'Let Go'—Balmer goes back to *Aeneid* 2 and rewrites the apparition of Creusa to

Aeneas during the last night of Troy to describe a dream where her mother appears to comfort her daughter. Yes, the classics can console—according to Josephine Balmer—and they are enough! Male-dominated genres such as epic and history (Cox writes very interesting pages on the rewriting of Hannibal crossing the Alps episode from Livy) can offer the female voice a 'hiding place' to negotiate the loss of those we love and write deeply personal poetry.

We must be grateful to Silvio Bär and Emily Hauser for putting together such an inspirational and challenging book that opens up new interesting paths for research in the fields of reception studies. Let us hope more will follow.

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