The *Georgics* has for more than twenty years been a source of fierce controversy among scholars of Latin literature. Is the work optimistic or pessimistic, pro- or anti-Augustan? Should we read it as a eulogy or a bitter critique of Rome and her imperial ambitions? This book suggests that the ambiguity of the poem is the product of a complex and thorough-going engagement with earlier writers in the didactic tradition: Hesiod, Aratus and – above all – Lucretius. Drawing on both traditional, philological approaches to allusion, and modern theories of intertextuality, Monica Gale shows how the world-views of the earlier poets are subjected to scrutiny and brought into conflict with each other. Detailed consideration of verbal parallels and of Lucretian themes, imagery and structural patterns in the *Georgics* forms the basis for a reading of Virgil's poem as an extended meditation on the relations between the individual and society, the gods and the natural environment.

MONICA GALE is a Lecturer in Classics at Trinity College, Dublin. She is the author of *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius* (1994).

VIRGIL ON THE NATURE OF THINGS

The *Georgics*, Lucretius and the Didactic Tradition

Monica R. Gale
Trinity College, Dublin

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for my parents

qui potuerunt rerum cognoscere causas

I am wary of the words pessimism and optimism.
A novel does not assert anything; a novel
searches and poses questions.

MILAN KUNDERA

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PREFACE

It is now some twenty years since Michael Putnam's influential study, *Virgil's Poem of the Earth*, first put forward the view that the *Georgics* is a profoundly gloomy work, a view which has dominated scholarly opinion (at least in the English-speaking world) ever since. Putnam himself speaks of the 'realism, graphic and largely pessimistic' with which the poet depicts the relationship between human beings and the world around them; the overt, agricultural subject-matter of the poem is, in his view, 'one grand trope for life itself'. Other critics have focussed their attention on the political stance of the poet, or the position he takes up with respect to the literary debates of his era; but the majority have followed Putnam in treating the didactic surface of the poem as a kind of façade, behind which the poet's true concerns lie concealed. There has been a prevailing tendency, too, to privilege certain sections of the text over others, in the attempt to construct a univocal 'message' from the shifting balance between the elements of light and darkness, panegyric and vituperation, comedy and tragedy, which make up the *Georgics* as a whole.

It is my contention that attempts to explain away the poem's ambiguities in this way are misconceived. While the work *admits of* either an optimistic or a pessimistic reading, it does not *enforce* either. It seems to me that what Milan Kundera says of the novel in my epigraph can equally be applied to the *Georgics*: Virgil 'does not assert anything', rather he 'searches and poses questions'. In what follows, I attempt to show how the poem engages dynamically with the entire didactic tradition. Virgil subjects the diverse world-views of his predecessors (particularly Hesiod, Aratus and Lucretius) to a searching scrutiny, without attempting to resolve their differences or even to favour particular aspects of one system or another. Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is more frequently evoked, and informs the themes and structure of Virgil's poem more fully, than any

other work in the tradition; but that is not to say that the poem is consistently either pro- or anti-Epicurean in its outlook.

It is also misleading, I think, to describe Virgil's agricultural subject-matter as a metaphor or trope. Clearly, it makes no sense to treat the poem as a practical handbook; yet the poet seems to me to be no less (and no more) serious about his theme than Hesiod or Lucretius. Just as Hesiod's agricultural precepts are thoroughly intermeshed with his exhortations to work and piety, and just as Lucretius' account of the physical world is simultaneously a rejection of superstition and irrationality, so Virgil's picture of the Italian farmer and his world naturally broadens out into wider reflexions on philosophical, theological and political themes. For the Roman reader, the farmer embodied a very particular set of ideals: honest and unstinting toil, old-fashioned piety, the toughness and natural justice which made Rome great. Naturally, then, these themes too are central to Virgil's poem.

The simple piety traditionally associated with rural life also constitutes an obvious and immediate point of contact – and conflict – with Lucretius. The *DRN* has two explicit aims: to free the reader from the fear of death, and to combat superstition and irrationality. For Lucretius, both traditional Roman religion and the more sophisticated philosophical theologies of the Stoics and others fall squarely under the latter heading. Hence, the nature of the gods and their relationship with human beings and the world as a whole are central both to Virgil's poem and to my reading of it (chapters 3 and 4).

My first two chapters set out the groundwork for this interpretation, looking first at some questions of theory and critical practice, and then examining the framework of proems and finales which – I suggest – invite the reader to view the poem as a whole as a response to the *DRN*. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 consider further areas of engagement between the two poems and their didactic predecessors. Lucretius promises to free his reader from toil (*labor*) and anxiety, firmly rejects the idea that any phenomenon can be attributed to supernatural causes, and portrays serenity and freedom from conflict as the ultimate goals of human life. In response to each of these propositions, Virgil points to tensions in Lucretius' use of imagery and his rhetorical strategies, and (so to speak) stages a series of confrontations between Hesiodic, Aratean, Lucretian and traditional Roman ideals. Chapter 5 looks at the theme of *labor*, which is common to Hesiod and Lucretius, though handled very differently by each; chapter 6 considers Virgil's treatment of the marvellous and supernatural; and chapter 7

examines the theme of warfare, which is prominent on both a literal and a metaphorical level in both the *Georgics* and the *DRN*.

Quotations from the *Georgics* and the *DRN* are taken from the Oxford Classical Texts of R. A. B. Mynors (1969) and C. Bailey (2nd edition, 1922) respectively. All translations are my own.

Several important books devoted wholly or partly to the *Georgics* have appeared in print in the last twelve months, after the present work was effectively complete. I have been unable to take full account of their conclusions, and confine myself here to indicating some areas of agreement and divergence. Stephanie Nelson's *God and the Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil* (Oxford, 1998) presents the *Georgics* as a poem of 'unresolved tensions', contrasting it with the more unified world-view of Hesiod. Her reading of the poem has points of similarity with my own, particularly in her account (pp. 141–51) of books 3 and 4 as an exploration of tensions between individual and community (without reference to Lucretius, however). Robert Cramer, Richard Jenkyns and Llewelyn Morgan all present essentially 'optimist' readings of the poem. Cramer (*Vergils Weltsicht: Optimismus und Pessimismus in Vergils Georgica* (Berlin and New York, 1998)) offers a moderately effective demolition of the 'pessimist' interpretations of Ross (1987) and Thomas (1988); but his own view of the poem arguably involves equally arbitrary assumptions (particularly in textual matters). Jenkyns devotes four chapters of his *Virgil's Experience: Nature and History; Times, Names, and Places* (Oxford, 1998) to the *Georgics* and Lucretius; his discussion of Lucretius' concept of natural law and Virgil's use of *adynata* anticipates some of the points that I make in chapter 6. It will be evident, however, that I cannot accept his view of the *Georgics* as essentially descriptive, nor his denial (p. 322) that Virgil is concerned with 'moral ideas'. Morgan's *Patterns of Redemption in Virgil's Georgics* (Cambridge, 1999), finally, presents a powerful defence of the old theory that the poem is essentially a work of pro-Augustan propaganda; again, while I remain unconvinced by the view that suffering and violence are consistently portrayed by Virgil as ultimately 'constructive', there are several points of overlap between Morgan's discussion and my own, particularly on the issue of animal sacrifice (pp. 105–49 and the concluding section of my chapter 3).

The research on which the present work is based was begun at Newcastle University, where I held a Sir James Knott Research Fellowship in

1992–3; the completion of the book was facilitated by two terms' research leave, partly funded by the Humanities Research Board of the British Academy, in 1996–7. I am indebted to both institutions for their support. I am grateful also to the officers of the Cambridge Philological Society and the Virgil Society for permission to reprint parts of chapters 3 and 4 (which appeared in *PCPS* 41 (1995) under the title 'Virgil's metamorphoses: myth and allusion in the *Georgics*') and chapter 7 (an earlier version of which was published as 'War in Lucretius and the *Georgics*' in *PVS* 23 (1998)).

It is a pleasure to thank the many friends and colleagues who have generously offered their help, advice and encouragement. My colleagues at Royal Holloway, London and Trinity College, Dublin provided a congenial and stimulating working environment. Philip Hardie and Michael Reeve read the entire book in draft; their comments, criticisms and suggestions were invaluable at the revision stage. I am also grateful to Susanna Morton Braund, Adrian Hollis, Andrew Laird, Steve Linley and David Scourfield for comments on different parts of the books at various stages of composition. Last, but most of all, I would like to thank David, for his encouragement and moral support (and for thinking up the title) as well as his critical acumen; and my parents, who never told me to stop asking questions. To them, with gratitude and love, this book is dedicated.

ABBREVIATIONS

EV	F. Della Corte, *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* (Rome, 1984–91)
LSJ	H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, rev. by H. S. Jones and R. Mackenzie, *A Greek–English Lexicon* (9th edn, Oxford, 1996)
Mynors	R. A. B. Mynors, *Virgil: Georgics* (Oxford, 1990)
OLD	*The Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1968)
RE	A. Pauly and G. Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1894–)
SH	H. Lloyd-Jones and P. J. Parsons, *Supplementum Hellenisticum* (Berlin, 1983)
SVF	H. von Arnim, *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* (Leipzig, 1903–24)
Thomas	R. F. Thomas, *Virgil: Georgics* (Cambridge, 1988)
TLL	*Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (Leipzig, 1900–)

Abbreviations for journal titles generally follow the system used in *L'Année Philologique*; lists of standard abbreviations for classical authors and works can be found in LSJ and the *OLD*.