Poetry Porch: Prose

"Inspired by Virgil"
by Joyce Wilson

Featuring two poems:
"Driving through Southern Lebanon"
"He Was on Leave"

It was my good fortune to get to know David Ferry when I worked at a library at Harvard, where he gave many readings of his poetry, and then while I was teaching at Suffolk University, where, as Professor Emeritus recently retired from Wellesley, he was a visiting scholar. Already well known for his translations: Horace's *Odes*, Virgil's *Eclogues*, his *Georgics*, and *The Aeneid*, as well as his own original poems — some of which won prestigious prizes — Ferry was clearly invigorated by a long career dedicated to the literature that he loved.

Of all his translations, the *Georgics* is my favorite. The subject matter, agricultural life with instructions about how to carry out the tasks — the care of crops, the livestock, and bees — is based on Greek and Roman sources. The poet

Virgil emphasizes the importance of labor, how necessary it is to deal with the impediments, especially bad weather — floods, drought, and storms. He infuses each passage with a song-like meter that conveys a sense of celebration in accomplishment and sympathy for the wayward hand of fate. Lines from Virgil's *Georgics* inspired me to tackle my poems that were set in rural areas of the contemporary world in the Middle East and Southeastern Pennsylvania. They helped me shape the two poems I will discuss today,

It was very generous of Ferry to give lectures to my first-year students, some of whom barely understood what he was talking about when he read his translations and his own original poems. He used humor to reach them and never let an awkward question catch him off guard. I was interested to note that, when he read from his translations, he often remarked that he was not a classics scholar (he was a scholar of Wordsworth and Emerson) and approached each project with his high school Latin education and a dictionary.

Ferry was also generous in critiquing some of my original poems, especially the long ones, some that grew to two pages. It is very helpful to have someone interested in the subject matter of your work, and to hear that you need to stretch out add more details. Most workshops suggest that you cut. It seemed my drafts were underwritten. Some of the poems became a sequence about visiting the Middle East and Lebanon in 2014.

Once I had finished the poems about the Middle East, and had published most of them, I was stuck on the first one. I wanted it to be short and to the point. The scene of this poem was inspired, or provoked, by a drive with my husband and me, our daughter, Lebanese husband, and infant granddaughter from the city of Beirut to the undeveloped desert environs to the south where our son-in-law's family had once lived. We were struck by the quiet. I fell under a kind of spell about the place, thinking of it as a rural countryside that no one knew about but us. And then I was chastened by the realities.

In my poem, I wanted to convey the idea of delight in discovering a private place in the desert, a place where no one else had been, only to learn that I was mistaken. But I had to admit that the details about people, landscape, and sights I had seen were not coming together. I didn't know what to add or what to cut, but I knew I wanted this poem to be short, about half a page.

Then I came across a passage in the *Georgics* and found the epigraph I needed. After introducing the life of the shepherd and his woolly flocks, their vulnerability and isolation, Virgil turns to the vista of the mountains and writes: "It is a delight to go where none has gone before." And I thought, that was my idea!

What is it about a beautiful landscape in a pastoral setting that supports this sentiment of discovering what no one else has known or experienced, whether in

Ancient Greece or modern Lebanon? It's a notion shared across the ages. At last I could envision the direction that I wanted to take for the poem.

Driving through Southern Lebanon

It is a delight to go where none has gone before.
— David Ferry, trans. *The Georgics of Virgil*

Decades after the Civil War, we drive
Through this remote and isolated town

And marvel how the setting holds a modest
Beauty no one else has seen or known,

Far from the urban crowds and offices,
Ill-suited to the theater of war.

Yet we are wrong. The armies have been here,
And what we like they also liked as much:

The rounded cliffs that hug the roadside nook,
The Christian church, the terraced olive groves,

The slope where they could plan the next attack,
Then dig a ditch and leave a roadside bomb.

The sand that lifts and spreads across the road
Obscures the traces of the ones before.

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Preparing for this talk, reading the passage and then my epigraph again, I saw how much I had left out. When you steal from a source, should you hack up the original for your own use? Here is more of the passage:

By sweet love urged
To roam Parnassus's lonely heights, it is
A delight to go where none has gone before,
No predecessor's wheel track to be seen
Upon the slope down toward the Castalian spring.

And it struck me that I had omitted the motive, that the shepherd and the poet are urged to roam the distant mountain heights driven by a sweet love, for green pastures, for fulfillment, for something new.

I could suddenly see that it was love that motivated us: my husband and me, our love for our daughter and her new family, the love of her husband for his country, our love for our new grandchild, and the loving time we were spending together on one splendid afternoon. But I ignored all those feelings as I worked on my poem. Or are they there in the background? Or should I write another poem?

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The next poem was also inspired by Virgil's *Georgics*. In this case, the passage inspired the first drafts of the poem after I came across a depiction of a Golden Age where nature's bounty was so magnificent that

> men shared
> All things together and Earth quite freely yielded
> The gifts of herself she gave, being unasked.

One of the bounties was the wine that ran freely in the streams. With this passage, I suddenly had an image of an alcoholic and his particular joy in finding such a natural source for his pleasure in harmony with the natural world.

The passage reminded me of an African American man from my childhood who walked around our rural neighborhood with a kind of mystic aura, as if he was

transported by a kind of joy in living, however temporary it might have been. The trouble with my poem's composition was presenting the dual nature of this man in a convincing way. All the readers of my early drafts said I was onto something but they weren't getting it. So I went back to Virgil and I saw a better way to approach the material. I realized that it wasn't the bounty of the rivers that influenced the wandering man, home from a stint in the army. It was the wrath of the gods, who upset the available bounty. It was Jupiter overthrowing his father Saturn, who brought about the change from a place of harmony to one of struggle. Jupiter summoned storms, set beast against beast, hid fire from man, and turned off the flow of wine.

He Was on Leave

> *It was Jupiter . . .*
> *Turned off the flow of wine that everywhere*
> *Ran in the streams . . .*
> — David Ferry, trans. *The Georgics of Virgil*

Was he denying proof of origin,
who might have borne the lineage of kings,
each time he gave no other name but Jack?

Was that his shadow, out of uniform,
who turned and cut across the farmer's field?
And didn't he deserve to drive a car?

Enlisted, he had sailed off like a god,
to give and take away on foreign soil
and nourish deserts with his blood to spare.

Now he returned on leave, with time to spare,
to resurrect the golden age at home
that he remembered often while abroad,

but streams no longer flowed infused with wine
where he could quench his thirst by kneeling down

to drink with gods, in beauty and in health,

and he no longer found the warming mysteries
humming through his body when he walked,
a deity who bore a human thirst.

Did we suggest that he begin each day
possessed, and tested like a god, who vowed
to prove he was no ordinary man?

He served his country not with gods but men.
Yet when he came back home, plantation bound,
who would praise him for his sacrifice?

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These details illuminated aspects of the life I remember, its wealth and deprivation. The neighbor I was aware of as a child had achieved mythical status in my memory. He had a regal bearing, physical charisma, ambition, and love of alcohol, which, I suspected as an adult, without the structure of daily life in the army, sometimes got the better of him. How he would have loved partaking in the good life of ancient Greece, I thought, while it was so freely available as a part of nature. How he would have suffered with its removal.

Reading these passages of Virgil, I opened up a cache of energy from an older time, a time of power and investment in dreams, aspirations, and the will to partake in the riches of the world, a world that provides and withholds and changes from season to season, year to year, lifetime to lifetime, that we struggle to understand today. Through Virgil and David Ferry, I forged a link between the Classics of the Golden Age and the wanderings of Walt Whitman in our 19th century. Now, when I

remember my childhood and all its complexity, I remember the landscape of Antiquity and the Gods as it was described by Virgil centuries ago, and I want to sit down and read over his passages again.

