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Review of Lobe, M. (1999) Die Gebärden in Vergils Aeneis. Zur Bedeutung und Funktion von Körpersprache im römischen Epos

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M. LOBE, *Die Gebärden in Vergils Aeneis*. Zur Bedeutung und Funktion von Körpersprache im römischen Epos (Classica et Neolatina. Studien zur lateinischen Literatur, 1). Frankfurt etc., Peter Lang, 1999. 230 p. Pr. SFR 64.00

A.L. BOEGEHOLD, *When a gesture was expected*. A selection of examples from archaic and classical Greek literature. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999. 154 p. Pr. £ 20.50

Here we have two volumes dealing with non-verbal communication (nvc) in ancient literature, from either side of the Atlantic, published about the same time, but conceived from a completely different perspective. Lobe is the more traditional of the two. L.'s work looks back to Carl Sittl, *Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer* (Leipzig 1890). Only, where L. (rightly) criticizes Sittl for uncritically piling up evidence of many different kinds and from many different periods, he himself has

a much more restricted aim, viz. to give as complete a systematic and analytic overview of gestures described by Vergil in the *Aeneid* as possible.¹⁾ Boegehold on the other hand, also acknowledging Sittl, moves off in an utterly different direction. His approach to gesture and literature is quite innovative, looking at the *performance* of ancient texts and asking himself where the utterance of the words will have been supported by an appropriate gesture. When I say innovative, this is not to say that B. had no predecessors—whom he duly acknowledges—, but that he is the first to pursue this performative approach to ancient literature in this particular and systematic way, and on this particular scale. So L. is speaking about gesture *in* Vergil, and B. about gesture *by* Vergil, if he would have been speaking of Latin literature and if Vergil would have been reciting his own epic (which he probably did).

L. has no small task. Vergil's epic contains a lot of descriptions of gesture, supposedly because Vergil partook of the very visual culture which flourished at the start of the principate ("poetischer Reflex der augusteischen Bilderwelt", p. 17), as formulated in several publications by Paul Zanker.²⁾ In the course of his argument, L. even suggests that Vergil has borrowed concrete elements from this *Bildprogramm*, thus turning some of his descriptions of gesture into a kind of *ekphrasis* of Augustan imagery (summarized on p. 210)—an assertion which seems difficult to substantiate. At a later stage, L. adds other possible explanations of the visual quality of the *Aeneid* (its *Anschaulichkeit*. He also calls the epic, as has been done before by F. Mench, filmic): first the popularity of pantomime at the time, leading to a particular *Wahrnehmungsästhetik* (p. 204), secondly Augustus' love of drama (pp. 205-6), and thirdly Vergil's histrionic abilities (pp. 206-7). Elsewhere, he states that rhetoric was important as a source of contemporary reflection on gesture; nvc is of course largely unreflective behaviour, even where intended, purposeful gestures are concerned, while an author such as Vergil *describing* gesture has to be uncommonly aware of nvc in order to reconstruct it in as many of its aspects as possible. In addition, there are also scattered remarks on conventions of the theatre influencing Vergil, which is something rather different again. Of course, Vergil's predilection for the description of nvc, and the supposedly underlying wish to make his epic into something easily visualized, may be the result of all of the above—but one would have liked a bit more systematic approach towards possible influences and motivations.

B. also wants to make the modern reader aware of the visual aspects of ancient literature, but this time its performance, its acting out (only in one place, pp. 180-4, does L. mention that the descriptions of gesture may have functioned as "eine Art implizite Anweisungen für entsprechend auszuführende Handbewegungen", but he does not really

elaborate on this). B. thinks this is a way to gain a better understanding of the texts, down to the point of solving textual problems. Some of the more persistent problems may not be problems at all, if only one inserts a meaningful gesture. At several junctures “a gesture was expected”—but not by us, who are looking at the text as text on a page, instead of text in performance. And thus we fail to understand what we are reading.

L. in his introduction explicitly discusses the definition and classification of *Gebärden*, and that is the way it should be. He opts for a very broad definition, making gesture more or less the equivalent of nvc (very much like Sittl did over a century before; but L. includes, as recent literature on nvc does, prosodic and para-linguistic elements, posture, looking, and facial expressions).³) This enormous field is then classified as: affective, reflexive, and communicative gestures; besides, we have two other categories: *Ethosgebärden*, which is a strange catch-all rubric which cuts across the other elements of the classification (cf. below), and *Leserlenkung*, which is a compository device, as when Vergil says: *omnes convertere oculos*, thus also directing the inner eye of the reader or listener to the scene that is being described. To classify in this way means asking for trouble, and indeed, it does not work out. I can only give a very few examples. From the very first section: *lacrimae coactae* certainly cannot, and the gestures and general nvc of wailing women most probably cannot be classified as *Affektgebärden*; amongst the communicative gestures (characterized by the “explizite Absicht zur Mitteilung . . . intentional an einem Empfänger gerichtet”, p. 145) we find gestures described as spontaneous, even such without any possible recipient of the communicative act in sight. But the main weakness of this classification is the fact that L. must have established beforehand what is expressed by every gesture, because they are not classified according to, for instance, objective biomechanical criteria but as expressions of anger and so on (in principle much like Sittl again). The interpretation of the gestures is preempted by the classification.

Next, L. provides an overview of past scholarship on nvc, in the field of classical philology, but also in the social sciences. The last adds up to a disappointing, almost preposterous one and a half page with a lot of names on. Without any indication of the hypotheses formulated in these works and the ways in which L. has been borrowing from these (or rejecting these, for that matter), this name-dropping has to remain useless—except, that is, to indicate serious omissions.⁴) B. on the other hand, while showing himself well aware of what he calls “the anthropological literature” and having the smaller but better bibliography of the two, explicitly states the amateur nature of his jargon, including his usage of “gesture” (here he offers an adequate description of the full range of nvc). B. seems to be in command of the the-

oretical issues, but chooses to ignore them in the present context. The context, I feel, allows him to do so. With L., one suspects a mere dutiful exercise, while of the two studies under consideration his account is in most need of proper theoretical underpinnings, dealing not with concrete performative gestures, but with nvc in general, on several different levels. Maybe I wrong L., but it certainly is striking, how little, if any, use he makes in the bulk of his text or in his conclusion of the theoretical literature that he *does* refer to.

L. in 160 pages deals with some 75 different gestures, listed according to his classification. All relevant texts are quoted (but not translated; there is an *index locorum*), and L. makes many interesting remarks about what that particular description is doing there at that particular junction in the unfolding story of the epic. His explanations come under three heads: 1) psychology: the descriptions of the nvc attributed to a particular individual contribute to the characterization of that individual (of course, if one is interested in this process of characterization, one has to gather one's information from across L.'s volume—but here the section on *Ethosgebärden* comes to our rescue with subsections such as 4.6, “Körpersprache des Turnus und Aeneas im Vergleich”, and 4.11 “Abschied und letzte Begegnung zwischen Dido and Aeneas”); 2) narrative: descriptions of gesture help carry forward the story (or urge the reader to do so: the issue of the *Leerstellen*, for which I refer to L. p. 84); 3) the wish to visualize (the *Anschaulichkeit* again). L.'s hypotheses about why Vergil would wish to write *anschaulich*, have been mentioned above. Probably the other two explanations come from Vergil's assumed wish to communicate effectively with his audience (but when asking why Vergil preferred visual means to that end, we come back to his general wish for *Anschaulichkeit*). Or something like that: I am trying to systematize what L. has left as ever so many loose ends.

The three explanations above, and especially the third one, involve questions about the “realism” of the picture painted by Vergil. L. gives haphazard attention to this question. In fact he seems to consider most nvc described by Vergil to be nvc in common use in his day and understandable to all—except where this is obviously untrue (e.g., p. 69, n. 202). This begs some questions.⁵) Sometimes L. digresses on a particular gesture as used in the real world outside epic, even dating things down to the stone age: p. 147 (very dubious), or positing universality (p. 119: “kulturunabhängige und zeitenüberdauernde Universalien theatralischer Greisendarstellung”, even more dubious, at least as far as this particular example is concerned).

B. sets out from the fact that the ancient Greeks gestured when speaking, and the fact that most texts were composed in order to be performed to an audience (without denying the existence of silent reading, p. 7). What gestures are we talking about? (B. expressly leaves out

dancing from his account, but he realizes its importance, p. 9). B. distinguishes three sources of information on ancient gesture: 1) descriptions of gestures in words; 2) imagery showing poses from which with some effort gestures can be reconstructed; 3) survival of gestures from classical to modern times. The first two are obvious enough, the third is fraught with danger. B. recognizes this, and tries (not completely convincingly, in places over-confident) to defend its reliability—but he is aware of the remaining problems and speaks of “heuristic devices, i.e., templates by whose application missing elements of antiquity’s body language can be inferred” (p. 9). That seems fair enough. In his first two chapters, B. discusses some of the information about gestures available from the three sources distinguished, but he does so in a somewhat messy and scrappy account. These two chapters could easily have been combined and their contents rearranged to provide a more coherent argument.

In the next seven chapters, B. concentrates on a selection of texts. He seeks to complement the textual tradition with its missing gestures, i.e., the *nvc* aspects which were lost in written transmission. To this end he is looking for the evocative phrase, but especially for absences or gaps: instances of ellipsis, or rather seeming ellipsis, such as supposedly incomplete conditional sentences or otherwise irregular syntax. The explanation of such ellipsis might be *anakolouthon*, *aposiopesis*, but also the (unwritten) presence of a finishing gesture. B. provides examples of what he supposes to be such instances of written text complemented by reconstructed gesture taken from Homer, Archilochus, Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Alcidamas, Antiphon, Andocides, Lysias, Demosthenes, Lycurgus, the Law Code of Gortyn, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and Plato (and some others get mentioned). This is not supposed to be a complete overview, and B. explicitly stresses that these are *Lesefrüchte*. Still, some 100 passages are scrutinized, and 200 more get a mention (see the *index locorum*). All texts are translated, with the Greek given in the footnotes. Not every single instance is equally convincing, but that hardly matters: it is the principle that counts, and this seems sound enough.

L. has written an old-fashioned and in many respects quite defective study. As a whole it is no good, but it contains several interesting asides, and is a useful compilation of passages dealing with the *nvc* in the *Aeneid*. It will undoubtedly be used as a work of reference. B. has written an innovative, and thoughtful study. As a whole it is an impressive book, but there are many little things to quibble about, which undoubtedly will be quibbled about. There will be an audience for either book, but B.’s book deserves the widest dissemination.