You'll Find Me in the Woods

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Michael Putnam needs no introduction. Undeniably one of the *patres* of the modern criticism of Latin (and particularly hexameter) poetry, he has trained his eye on the way that passion and power inform one another in the *Aeneid*; he has commented on the broader Augustan poetic landscape in Horace and Tibullus; and he has compiled one of the most thorough accounts of the Vergilian tradition available to scholars today. In a career of 60 years (and counting), we have benefited from his singular capacity to see and to hear the sights and sounds of Roman poetry. I would fail my present readers if I neglected to mention how formative that work, and the man behind them, have been for me as person and scholar. Putnam guided me to pursue Classics when I read his *Poetry of the Aeneid* (Harvard, 1965) in high school. Hearing the pleading cries of an abject Turnus at the jarring conclusion of Vergil's masterwork through Putnam's reading expanded for me—and, at only a slight risk of hyperbole, for all of us—the possibilities of human expression in Latin hexameters. By the time Putnam, the scholar, had given his concluding thoughts on those possibilities in his monograph, *The Humanness of Heroes* (Amsterdam, 2011),

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Michael Putnam, the man, had also become an important part of my professional life as a trusted mentor.

I cannot, then, profess to be an unbiased reader or reviewer of Putnam's most recent book, *The Poetic World of Statius' Silvae* (Oxford, 2023). For scholars like me, however, this book is a welcome intervention into one of Vergil's most prolific—and, in recent years, most richly studied—devotees, the Flavian epicist and occasional poet Statius. Over the past decade, Putnam has increasingly turned his attention in this direction, and the present volume consists of a series of articles that originally appeared in the journal *Illinois Classical Studies* during that time. In a welcome addition, two previously unpublished essays also appear here for the first time, and even for those already familiar with the earlier articles, the new additions are must-reads. Readers will appreciate in these pages the way Putnam, unburdened by the Statian specialist's obeisance to the (burgeoning) scholarship, reads the *Silvae* as poetry *qua* poetry, in the way that only new critics can. Motes of light dancing in the still air (30 n. 47, commenting on *Silv*. 1.3.54) or the shadows cast by the absence of a long dead brother (14, commenting on *Silv*. 1.3.2): such are the details that Putnam draws out in his close readings of *Silvae* 1.3, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.2, and 4.2. For Statian specialists interested in contextualizing Putnam's arguments, editors Antony Augoustakis and Carole Newlands place these readings within the quickly changing landscape of scholarly criticism on the *Silvae*. We should thank this team of scholars for bringing us such a densely illuminating book, to which any reviewer can do only partial justice.

In his first chapter ("A Stream and Two Villas: Statius' *Silvae* 1.3"), Putnam reads Statius's poem dedicated to

Manilius Vopiscus on the completion of his two-in-one villa, whose twin complexes straddle a river between them. For Putnam, the metapoetically charged riverine setting is also sensually charged by the poem's "notions of doubling, concord, and reciprocity" (11). Statius signals his use of erotically charged language near the beginning of the poem with an allusion to Lucretian *voluptas* and Venus at *Silvae* 1.3.9–10. This, in turn, leads us throughout the poem to find traces of (natural) philosophy. Putnam is at his best, for instance, in his close reading of *Silvae* 1.3.53–55 (*nam splendor ab alto / defluus nitidum referentes aera testae / monstravere solum*). Noting "a cluster of Empedoclean elements" and an instance of grammatical ambiguity (*nitidum* resonates with both *aera* and *solum*), we get in prose the sublimity of Statius's poetry: "the air on high . . . and earth that shimmers sufficiently to return the resplendent glow from above. We absorb the paradox that light behaves like water . . . and that the earth through human artifice now astonishingly glistens like the bright sun" (30). Putnam has always had a keen eye for the way sound and sense mingle on the poetic page, and here, most of all in this collection, he traces the well-known way that Statius puts the "art" in "artifice"; as he says, Statius in the *Silvae* shows the symbiotic way that "by the ingenuity of humankind, nature's quality is twice-over harnessed to our service" (33). In simpler terms, he reminds us of what the *Silvae*, at their heart, really *are*: a meditation on the interplay between nature and human creativity.

The next chapter, "The Garden of Atedius Melior: A Change for the Better (Statius' *Silvae* 2.3)," details one of Statius's most well-known ekphrastic and aetiological poems; in *Silvae* 2.3, Statius describes a plane tree that stands over

a pool in his patron's garden. This tree and pool are actually the result of a metamorphosis of the nymph Pholoe, transformed into water as she attempted to escape Pan's assault. Putnam's discussion touches on Statius's major influences (Ovid and Horace) but he focuses more on novel echoes. Readers will find him here first in the volume deploying his Vergilian expertise in a sustained way. He traces Statius's *causas / Naiades . . . Fauni* (*Silv*. 2.3.6–7) to Vergil's Roman origin story (*Aen*. 8.314: *indigenae Fauni Nymphaeque*). This, in turn, grants the critic space to think about the ambiguity of Hercules-like civilizers, such as Melior and his taming of nature, and the delicate interplay between life-giving light and the restful-yet-destructive darkness in the shade of the poem's plane tree (55–56). Putnam connects the poem's opening lines to Lucan's famous metaphor of Pompey-as-tree, with implications that reward readers' closer attention: the shady plane tree (*Silv*. 2.3.1–2: *stat quae . . . opacet / arbor aquas complexa lacus*) recalls the shade that Pompey's once-great "tree" casts at Luc. 1.135–36 (*stat magni nominis umbra / qualis frugifero quercus sublimis in agro*). We perhaps should not be surprised that trees bear many meanings in a collection titled *Silvae*. Putnam's allusion, however, activates a set of complex cultural connotations for the plane tree that this reviewer, at least, has suspected for some time. The plane is not just the tree of philosophical repose, though it certainly serves that function here; Pompey also famously planted planes imported from his eastern campaigns in the *porticus* leading to his theater.[1] The trees apparently survived to Statius's day (see Mart. 2.14.10: *Pompei dona nemusque duplex*) and were a hallmark of the site. The comparison of Melior's garden to Pompey's *porticus* is an enormous compliment,

as Putnam often says in this book, but this is also classic Statius: the juxtaposition of public and private, of philosophy and politics, of triumph and loss.

The third chapter of the volume, "A Labor of Love (Statius' *Silvae* 3.1)," analyzes a poem celebrating the dedication of a temple to Hercules by Pollius Felix at his property in Surrentum. Statius constantly has Vergil in mind, and so his Hercules as (sometimes problematic) civilizer reappears here. For instance, Putnam draws us back to Hercules and Aeneas in *Aeneid* 8 pressing against the narrow confines of Evander's humble abode (*Aen*. 8.361–67) when Statius details the small shrine Hercules enjoyed before Pollius Felix built this new temple (*Silv*. 3.1.82–83: *stabat dicta sacri tenuis casa nomine templi / et magnum Alciden humili lare parva premebat*). Throughout this book, Putnam identifies intertexts like these that show Statius changing the ambiguity of his Vergilian source to a wholly positive message. Pollius Felix and his labors can be, according to such readings, wholly and simply good (*Silv*. 3.1.32–33: *felix simplexque domus fraudumque malarum / inscia*) in a way that Hercules' labors cannot be.

I must confess that my own reading of the *Silvae* is more ambivalent. For instance, Putnam is correct that the forced movement of people in Statius's poem at *Silvae* 3.1.77 (*abripiunt . . . nec quo convivia migrent*) is foreboding (119). I wonder, however, if Statius isn't of two minds over all the progress he eulogizes in this poem, if there isn't something lost in the humble simplicity of the place. I can't help but think, in walking through the *Silvae* with Putnam, of the way that Statius's *migrent* looks back to Vergil's displaced Moeris in *Ecl*. 9.4, told to leave behind the fields and world he once knew (*veteres migrate coloni*). Moeris's

displacement presumably takes place in the name of the disruptive "progress" that prevailed during the collapse of the Roman Republic, when Vergil was writing his *Eclogues* and people like him were being dispossessed of their lands. To be sure, Statius's poem does not contemplate any similar disruption; we still might wonder, however, where all those "wandering sailors" can make their prayers after Pollius Felix removes the shrine they once frequented (*Silv*. 3.1.4: *tectumque vagis habitabile nautis*). Putnam's argument, of course, still stands: if *migrare* in both poets suggests impermanence and contingency, Statius's uncertainties are rather more muted than Vergil's.

Be that as it may, Putnam is also uniquely suited to reading this poem through another intertextual lens: the Horatian. Putnam approaches the issue from a structural vantage that yields important results. Not only, he argues, does the poem begin by alluding to the opening of the first of Horace's *Odes* 4 (*intermissa, Venus*, *diu . . .*; cf. *Silv*. 3.1.1: *intermissa tibi renovat, Tirynthie, sacra . . .*), but so too does it end with an allusion to the *Odes*' last poem (*Silv*. 3.1.183: *solisque cubilia Gades*; cf. *Carm*. 4.15.16: *solis ab Hesperio cubili*). Framing the poem in this way gives us insight into Statius's appreciation of the architecture of his first edited collection of *Silvae*, with books 1–3 first published in 93 CE in much the same way that *Odes* 1–3 initially appeared together. By framing the last book of his first collection around the beginning and end of Horace's extended edition of the *Odes*, Statius draws our attention to the careful arrangement of his poetry—and perhaps hints at his own follow-up to come later in *Silvae* 4.

The architecture of the *Silvae* and their relation to Horace underlie many of Putnam's keenest insights. He

links, for instance, the end of *Silvae* 2.4 (*Melior dilecte*, 2.4.32)—the end of the medial poem of the medial book of his first collection—to *Ode* 2.20.7 (*dilecte Maecenas*)—the final poem of the medial book of Horace's first edition of *Odes*. Statius's *Silvae* 2.4, lamenting the death of Atedius Melior's parrot, is famous for its generic wit. Once again, however, it is the new critic's laser focus on poetry, its sounds, and senses that will elicit a fresh sense of appreciation. Putnam is uniquely sensitive to the way the parrot's (pre)verbal mimicry develops, like Statius's own, throughout the poem (173): we see "*verba* [*Silv.* 2.4.7] give way to *voces* [*Silv*. 2.4.18] that grant them expression, and these in turn yield to the *vocabula* [*Silv*. 2.4.20] that give nuance to the spoken language." Putnam's attention to semantic systems is compelling, but his ear for semiotic sounds yields transformative results. The creaking, almost plaintive sounds of the door to the bird's cage (*Silv*. 2.4.14: *querulae iam sponte fores*) give "the implication . . . that once upon a time their sorrow was but an echo of the mourning creature which, when closed, they contained within its cage" (170). Putnam gives emotive depth to what a more detached scholarly tradition has long known: the gut-wrenching way that sound creates meaning in this poem.

Not a few readers will be interested in Putnam's reading of "Domitian's Banquet (Statius' *Silvae* 4.2)." This and the next chapter, "Reading Travel (Statius' *Silvae* 3.2)," deal most explicitly with Statius's political world. Putnam focuses especially on the juxtaposition of individual desire and the impersonal/dehumanizing (depending on the reader) demands of the state. In his words, such a relationship exposes many Romans to "an existence that

leaches the individual, human element from the social contacts and professional career requirements that imperial Rome imposes on its servants" (241). The state, for instance, does not care that it drags Statius's patron Maecius Celer away from his friends and family to enact violence on the empire's far-flung subjects (225–27). Some readers will call that pessimism, but for this reviewer it is proof that Putnam remains a "hopeful" reader of the poetry of the world. A hopeful critic like this excavates the way that poets of every age hear the sirens' call for a fairer (in its fullest sense) world far different than our own. Putnam has called this hope for a better world the "dream of a time to come,"[2] referring to Vergil's famous *adynaton* that Romulus and Remus will rule together in Rome's coming Golden Age.

For some readers, Putnam's appraisal of the imperial project in his final chapter may seem inconsistent with his views on Statius's positive deployment of Vergil, even vis-à-vis the emperor. And to be sure, we still get that optimistic outlook in the book's closing chapters (188–89): Statius eulogistically recasts, for instance, Vergil's words on the dubious blessing of birth (*G*. 3.66–67: *optima quaeque dies miseris mortalibus aevi / prima fugit*) when he describes his ecstatic rebirth after seeing his emperor in the flesh for the first time (*Silv*. 4.2.13: *haec aevi mihi prima dies*). What I see again, however, is Putnam's consistency as a hopeful reader, his attention to any good poet's capacity to sing of life's tragedies and victories. Nowhere is this on better display than in Putnam's treatment of Statius's charged words at *Silvae* 4.2.64 (211–12) that his joy on the day of the imperial banquet is matched only by the joy he felt when Domitian crowned him victor at the Alban games . . . finally (*longo*

post tempore venit). We glean from the rest of the *Silvae* that Statius's luck (or lack thereof) at such poetic competitions was a sore spot; in these lines, eulogistic happiness masks the pain of loss. This duality, for Putnam, mimics the only antecedents for the phrase in hexameters, by both Tityrus and Meliboeus at *Ecl*. 1.29 (*longo post tempore venit*) and 1.67 (*patrios longo post tempore finis*): these twin utterances describe the same world, but two very different realities. Statius uses his allusion to Vergil to hint at the way power can inflict happiness and sadness, name winners (like Tityrus and Statius) and losers (like Meliboeus . . . and also Statius). Our poets have experienced both, but can still hope for a world dominated by the former. Is such hope rational? Poets don't have to say. Statius's thoughts must have vacillated, I think, and Putnam has traced the contours of that vacillation with remarkable acuity.

As I read this book, I kept thinking of Joseph Wright of Derby's painting of Statius's contemporary, the poet Silius Italicus, praying—or perhaps composing verses—beside the illuminated tomb of Vergil. Such constant, even faithful attention to the genius of the past has defined Putnam's work throughout his career. His method of reading Latin poetry, applied as it is in this book, shares a natural affinity with Statius's reverence for the masters of Latin verse, and the results of the inquiry tell us much: some of it new, some of it further solidifying things we know or want to be true. This is a handsomely produced volume, with a handy *index locorum* that makes it eminently easy to consult. And it will be consulted frequently. We should thank Putnam for writing this book. But I should like to thank Michael Putnam

for something far dearer to me: for a life of learning. Not his, mind you, but mine.

NOTES

1. See A. Fox, *Trees in Ancient Rome: Growing an Empire in the Late Republic and Early Principate* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 74.

2. See Michael C.J. Putnam, *The Humanness of Heroes: Studies in the Conclusion of Virgil's Aeneid* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 14.