

*Myrtia*, n° 16, 2001, pp. 105-110

## HOW DID VIRGIL READ THEOCRITUS?

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**Summary:** This paper will try to support the thesis that Virgil read in Theocritus' so-called bucolic poems the poet's renunciation of bucolic poetry as inviable expression of contemporary society. He agreed with it and expressed his agreement chiefly in the *Eclogues*, composed in a period of political turbulence and social unrest. The support of this thesis is based on the examination of characteristic passages of the two poets and of few other passages which, I believe, point to this direction; the examination focuses on the ways Virgil imitated and adapted his literary model.

When I started to work on Theocritus, the notion that he was a simple poet singing the praises of the countryside had died long ago and I was taught to read him as an intricate and cryptographic poet. Working on his poems, especially on the *Thalysia*, I was gradually convinced that his allusiveness, the generic complexity of his poems and the songs indented in them, as well as the pervading irony, which he treated his characters with, went beyond the Alexandrian *jeu d' esprit*; that they were something more than witty game and had a purpose, which was worth exploring. I ventured to undertake the exploration focusing my attention on the so-called bucolic poems, i.e. *Idylls* I and III-XI, with the whole of his surviving work always in perspective and, inevitably, side by side with Virgil's *Eclogues*. The examination of Theocritus' "bucolic" *Idylls* and its conclusions are now published in the *Acta, First Panhellenic and International Conference on Ancient Greek Literature* (Athens 1997) under the title: "The Meaning of Theocritus' "bucolic" *Idylls*". This paper on Virgil comes as a sequel to it.

I believe that Theocritus, the best bucolic poet but not the inventor of the genre<sup>1</sup> exploited its conventions, mainly through diction, in order to subvert it: the

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poor presence of *locus amoenus*, the unconventional singing contests, with perhaps the exception of that in *Idyll V*, the use of the dactylic hexameter, the metre of epic, and, especially, the incongruously posch language of the uncouth shepherds point to poetry which is anything but bucolic. To borrow D.Halperin's words, in his response to P.Levi's paper *People in a Landscape: Theokritos* "... a writer whose artful language, lavished on uncouth subjects, creates an effect of deliberate incongruity which is designed to forestall any reader's attempt to wallow complacently in Theocritus' sensuous images"<sup>2</sup>. It was mainly through this artful language, that the poet chose to express utter disbelief in the capacity of bucolic poetry to express the realities of his time. I shall mention a few characteristic examples: in *Id.III*, a parody of *komos*, an urban poetic genre, the shepherd who is serenading Amaryllis, in order to make his amorous advances more convincing, resorts to mythology and evokes Endymion and Iasion as characteristic examples of mortals loved by goddesses, but he is ignorant of the fact that both of them paid dearly for their love: *Id.III* 49-51: ζαλωτὸς μὲν ἔμιν ὁ τὸν ἄτροπον ὕπνον ἰαύων / Ἐνδυμίων· ζαλωῶ δέ, φίλα γύναι, Ἰασίωνα, / ὅς τόσσων ἔκυρησεν, ὅσ' οὐ πεισεῖσθε, βέβαλοι. In *Id.IV*, regarded together with *Id.V* as the quintessence of Theocritean realism, Battus laments Amaryllis' death in an incongruously pompous way: *Id.IV* 38f.: ὦ χαρίεσσ' Ἀμαρυλλί, μόνας σέθεν οὐδὲ θανοίσας / λασεύμεσθ' ὅσον αἴγες ἔμιν φίλαι, ὅσσον ἀπέσβης. Σέθεν is epic and ἀπέσβης belongs to tragic diction; oscillating between epos and tragedy Battus ends up comparing his love for Amaryllis with his love for his goats, thus creating a bathos effect; not to mention the other shepherd, Corydon, who boasts that he can play the tunes of Γλαύκη, a female κρουματοποιός, who lived in Alexandria, according to the *Scholia*<sup>3</sup>. In *Id.V* the uncouth Lacon uses the magniloquent ὦ Παιάων, which recalls the choral songs of Tragedy, only to complain of Comatas' loquacity: *Id.V* 79: ἦ στωμύλος ἦσθα, Κομάτα..

In *Id. VII*, the famous *Thalysia*, which has always been regarded as a programmatic poem, almost everything is un bucolic; even the festival Simichidas and his friends are heading to is, to use Gow's words, "...certainly rustic but in no sense bucolic"<sup>4</sup>. Lycidas is supposed to be a bucolic poet and Simichidas an urban poet, who wants to be initiated in bucolic poetry. It is noteworthy that Lycidas' bucolic appearance is emphasized in unmistakably homeric diction (II.13f.):.. οὐδὲ

<sup>1</sup> On this point, see Hatzikosta, *op. cit.*, p. 568 and n. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Hellenistic History and Culture* (ed. P. Green), Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1993, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> C. Wendel, *Scholia in Theocritum vetera*, Leipzig, 1914, (repr. Stuttgart 1967), Σα, b, ad *Id. IV* 31 (p. 144).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. S. Hatzikosta, *op. cit.*, p. 576 n. 36.

κέ τίς νιν / ἠγνοίησεν ἰδών, ἐπεὶ αἰπόλῳ ἔξοχ' ἔωκει The songs of both of them are far from bucolic: Lycidas' song begins with a προπεμπτικόν, an urban poetic genre and continues with the description of a strange symposium, the only reminiscence of the bucolic world being the songs that will be sung to him, but not by him, about two mythical goatherds, the famous Daphnis and a certain Comatas and the rustic "dishes". Simichidas' song, following his claim that he learnt it from the Nymphs in the mountains (Il.91-2)<sup>5</sup>, is a παιδικόν with a reference to παρακλαυσίθυρον, both urban poetic genres. In this allusive way Theocritus chose to bid farewell to bucolic poetry.

In the Introduction of his Commentary on Virgil's *Eclogues* Servius compares Theocritus and Virgil. I would be reluctant to agree with him that Theocritus was a simple poet but happy to do so with his shrewd observation that Virgil imitated Theocritus with poetic elegance and wit: *Serv. Comm. III 2.14-23* (ed. Thilo-Hagen): *Intentio poetae haec est, ut imitetur Theocritum Syracusanum, meliorem Moscho et ceteris qui bucolica scripserunt-unde est <VI I> "prima Syracosio dignata est ludere versu nostra"- et aliquibus locis per allegoriam agat gratias Augusto vel aliis nobiles, quorum favore amissum agrum recepit. In qua re tantum dissentit a Theocrito: ille enim ubique simplex est, hic necessitate compulsus aliquibus locis miscet figuras, quas perite plerumque etiam ex Theocriti versibus facit, quos ab illo dictos constat esse simpliciter. Hoc autem fit poetica urbanitate.* Virgil's *Eclogues* are mainly modelled on Theocritus' "bucolic" *Idylls* already mentioned. They are full of verbal echoes- some of them literal translations of Theocritean lines- but mostly of ingenious adaptations. It is not only the echo of Theocritus' verses that refers us to his poetry, it is also Virgil's picture of his shepherds: some of them do not even have bucolic names e.g. *Alcon*, *Mopsus*, *Moeris*. Corydon's song in *Ecl. II* is really an urban song, a κῶμος reminiscent of the song of the pathetic shepherd in *Id. III* and Polyphemus in *Id. XI*. The songs of *Ecl. IX* are also urban songs, the second pointing directly to *Id. II*, a μῦθος Tityrus of *Ecl. I* sings the praises of Rome, the glorious capital, which Lycidas and Moeris are heading to in *Ecl. IX* while reposing in a typical *locus amoenus*. In the same *Eclogue* (l.65) Meliboeus refers to *Oaxen Cretae*, a non-existent river, in typically Theocritean mode<sup>6</sup>. Damoitas in *Ecl. III* begins his bucolic song with an incongruously posch *Ab Jove principium, Musae* (l.60), which points to the first lines of *Id. XVII*- a hymn to Ptolemaeus (ἐκ Διὸς ἀρχώμεσθα

<sup>5</sup> On the meaning of ἀν' ὄρεα βουκολέοντα (*Id. VII 92*), see Giangrande quoted by Hatzikosta, *op. cit.*, p. 578 n. 44.

<sup>6</sup> See S. Hatzikosta, "Non-existent rivers and geographical *adynata*", *MPhL* 8, 1987, pp. 121-133. For a similar occurrence in *Ecl. II 24 (Actaeo Aracyntho)*, see J. Moore-Blunt, "Eclogue 2: Virgil's Utilisation of Theocritean Motifs", *Eranos* 75, 1977, p. 28f.

καὶ ἐς Δία λήγετε, Μοῖσαι)-and Aratus' Φαινόμενα and to other texts definitely not bucolic; he goes on to say (l.61) that his song is under the protection of Zeus, who, however, has nothing to do with poetry and singing. In the same *Eclogue* Menalcas' stake is a couple of finely decorated cups made by Alcimedon, a non-bucolic figure, as his name indicates (Alcimedon is, among other persons, an Olympic games victor celebrated by Pindar in *Olymp.VIII*). The elaborate decoration of the cup is an adaptation of the decoration of the κισσύβιον in *Id.I: pocula ponam* of *Ecl.III.36* refers to *Id.I.27* καὶ βαθύ κισσύβιον (δωσῶ) and the unbucolic *Alcimedon (...divini opus Alcimedontis)* of the following line evokes the equally unbucolic Πραξιτέλης in *Id.V 105*. Corydon of *Ecl.VII 61* refers to the poplar as the favourite tree of Heracles, for whom he uses the rare patronymic *Alcides:Populus Alcidae gratissima...*The line recalls *Id.II 121*, where the townman Delphis refers to the poplar as Heracles' holy plant, though in a less elaborate way: κρατὶ δ' ἔχων λεύκαν, Ἡρακλέος ἱερὸν ἔρνος Then Corydon refers to the vine, favourite plant of Dionysus, the myrtle, favourite plant of Aphrodite and the laurel, favourite plant of Apollo, and rounds off this stream of incongruous erudition with hazels, which, he claims, will be more important than any of these plants previously mentioned, as long as Phyllis, obviously a shepherdess, likes them (ll.61-4); this anticlimax refers us to the pathetic Battus of *Id.IV*.

These examples suffice, I hope, to show, that Virgil followed Theocritus' main technique. that is, that he lavished artful language and sophistication on his uncouth shepherds to blow up the illusion of bucolic poetry as viable expression of the needs and problems of his turbulent times.

This conclusion is reinforced by the poet's own words; less cryptic than Theocritus. the poet indicates explicitly the route he followed before abandoning bucolic poetry: He begins *Ecl.IV*, clearly not a bucolic poem by invoking the Muses of Sicily, Theocritus' native island, asking them to express more lofty themes: *Sicelides Musae. paulo majora canamus* in an attempt to broaden the scope of conventional bucolic poetry: The first two lines of *Ecl.VI* with their playfully ironic tone, point to the failure of this attempt (*Prima Syracosio dignata est ludere versu/nostra neque erubuit silvas habitare Thalia*)<sup>7</sup> and ll. 6-11 of the same *Eclogue* (*nunc ego (namque super tibi erunt qui dicere laudes), /Vare,tuas cupiant et tristia condere bella)/ agrestem tenui meditabor harundine Musam:/non injussa cano. Si quis tamen haec quoque, si quis/ captus amore leget, te nostrae, Vare, myricae,/te nemus omne canet; nec Phoebos gravior ulla est*) point to his intention to promote the Syracusan Muse into a more elaborate Muse, unlike the Muse of Tityrus, who

<sup>7</sup> On these two lines, see Hatzikosta, *op. cit.*, p. 581 n. 53; on *Eclogue VI* as a programmatic poem. see R.B. Rutherford, "Virgil's poetic ambitions in *Eclogue 6*", *G&R* 36, 1, 1989, pp. 42-50.

would sing *quae vellet* in *Ecl.*I 10 and that of Corydon, who *incondita.../... jactabat* in *Ecl.* II 4f.; a Muse in the rustic vein but, at the same time, capable to express a variety of themes other than bucolic. The choice of Silenus to sing of such themes like cosmology and mythology is not fortuitous: as an inspired and enthusiastic poet, a *vates*, he is capable of singing of such themes, but his lascivious figure dwelling in caves and mountains keeps the song within the boundaries of the rustic world. In *Ecl.*IX the city emerges twice: in the first line as a probable destination (*Quo te, Moeri, pedes? an, quo via ducit, in urbem?*) in l.62 (*hic haedos depone, tamen veniemus in urbem*) as a positive one, upturning the conventional polarity between town and country, which tacitly assumed the superiority of the latter. In ll.11-13 of the same poem the impotence of bucolic poetry to prevent a war- i.e. to influence crucial events of life- is stated unequivocally (*audieras, et fama fuit; sed carmina tantum/nostra valent, Lycida, tela inter Martia quantum/Chaonias dicunt aquila veniente columbas.*) Most critics<sup>8</sup> take the lines as expressing the inviability of poetry in general, but *nostra* in l.12 (attributive to *carmina* in l.11) refers us to the songs of Menalcas, a typically bucolic figure and, hence, to bucolic song. In the first line of *Ecl.*X the poet asks Arethusa, the spring near Syracuse, Theocritus' birthplace, to consent to the song, which will positively be his last one, as the emphatic position of *extremum* shows: *Extremum hunc, Arethusa, mihi concede laborem*: The poem sings the unrequited love for Lycoris of the elegiac poet Gallus, who promises to abandon elegy for the sake of bucolic poetry, only to say a little later (l.63) his last adieu to the woods: *...ipsae rursus concedite silvae*. The scene is laid in Arcadia and Gallus praises Arcadians as the only able singers, thus highlighting the origins of bucolic poetry just when he is abandoning it. Jenkyns, who read the *Eclogues* as "teasing, riddling, playfully elusive poems" understood this antinomy as part of the "teasing nature of these poems"<sup>9</sup>. I believe the poet rather wanted to show that he was fully conscious of the origins and conventions of the poetic genre he was abandoning.

In the *Georgics* Virgil will refer to bucolic poetry several times: in II. 493-502 of the 2nd Book he refers explicitly to the very narrow limits of the world of shepherds, a world of blissful ignorance detached from the life and interests of real society: *Fortunatus et ille, deos qui novit agrestis,/ Panaque Silvanumque senem Nymphasque sorores./ Illum non populi fascies, non purpura regum/flexit et infidos agitans discordia fratres,/ aut conjurato descendens Dacus ab Histro,/ non res Romanae perituraque regna; neque ille/aut doluit miserans inopem aut invidit habenti./ Quos rami fructus, quos ipsa volentia rura/ sponte tulere sua, carpsit, nec*

<sup>8</sup> See A.J. Boyle, "A reading of Vergil's *Eclogues*", *Ramus* 4, 1975, pp. 193, 195, S.V. Tracy, "Theocritean Bucolic and Virgilian Pastoral: Commentary on Alpers", *Arethusa* 23, 1990, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> R. Jenkyns, "Virgil and Arcadia", *JRS* 79, 1989, pp. 32, 34 respectively.

*ferrea jura/ insanumque forum aut populi tabularia vidit.* Later, Calpurnius Siculus will condemn, straightforwardly, especially in his 4th *Eclogue*, bucolic poetry as inadequate to extoll Roman cities and divinities (ll.5-11): *-Carmina jam dudum, non quae nemorale resulent,/volvimus, o Meliboee, sed haec, quibus aurea possint/saecula cantari, quibus et deus ipse canatur,/qui populos urbesque regit pacemque togatam./-Dulce quidem resonas, nec te diversus Apollo/despicit, o juvenis,/sed magnae numina Romae/non ita cantari debent, ut ovile Menalcae.* To return to Virgil, in *Georg.*II.485-6 he delights in the countryside, although it excludes access to fame: *rura mihi et rigui placeant in vallibus amnes,/flumina amem silvasque inglorius...* But then Virgil is an ambitious poet as *Georg.*III.8-9 show: *...temptanda via est, qua me quoque possim/tollere humo victorque virum volitare per ora.*

Thus, bucolic poetry, according to Virgil, is not a viable expression of the poet's contemporary society and refuses him access to fame. Before he treads the last, widest path of his poetic career he looks back to its starting point, bucolic poetry (by significantly repeating the first line of his first *Eclogue*) as a youthful mistake he has dismissed. In his dismissal he follows Theocritus' techniques because, with admirable insight, he had read behind his allusive lines the subversive intention which he shared with him<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Many scholars have clearly seen Virgil's critical stand towards bucolic poetry in the *Eclogues*; yet, mysteriously, they are reluctant to admit it; see Hatzikosta, *op. cit.*, p. 582 and nn. 59-62.