

During Vergil's twenties, while he was studying philosophy with the Epicurean master, Siro, in what was in those days the centre of Greek intellectual life in southern Italy, Naples, he must have realized that poetry rather than legal studies, or even philosophy, was to be his real life's work. In 39 BC, when he was thirty-one, he overcame his reluctance and shyness and gave in to his friends' persuasion to publish a first book of poems, the *Eclogues*, or to give them an earlier title, the *Bucolics*. These ten poems, none of them much longer than a hundred lines of hexameter verse and most of them nearer sixty or seventy, we call 'pastorals', since they follow the model set by the Greek Theocritus of writing about shepherds and goatherds. Vergil's friend Horace described them as 'gentle and witty, like the Muse who loves the countryside'. Many later writers, from Spenser to Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, and A.E. Housman, to mention only four British ones at random, have been inspired by the gentleness and wit of the *Eclogues*.

In spite of the apparent similarity of these poems—the songs of the shepherds, the settings among the flocks on the hillsides or the sheepfolds in the valleys—their variety is marked, and becomes more significant with each reading. Equally various has been the critical reception of them. As far as we know, contemporary Romans found the *Eclogues* enormously attractive and impressive, but later critics have called them everything from trivial, artificial and derivative to mystical and magical, both delicately inspired and inspiring. Clearly, we cannot judge for ourselves if we do not know these poems well, but unfortunately, of all the best-known classical poets' works, perhaps the *Eclogues* are among the least read. I hope here I can convince you that these short pastoral poems have still the ability to challenge and to charm a reader who is willing to spend some time with them.

First, we must realize that these are poems written not in peaceful, but in painful and frightening times, during the bloody civil wars, political manoeuvrings and murders, confiscations and proscriptions.

As we read, we can wonder whether their gentle setting is as escapist as we might prefer it to be. Was Vergil, as it were, running away from fear, brutality and great distress into a kinder, safer, imaginary world? Or was he perhaps preparing an enduring kind of weapon, rather than merely a defensive armour, with which he and his audience might be able to fight against the destructive terror and insecurity of wartime Italy? Vergil's pastoral world contains pain and grief, but these are balanced against the permanency and the inevitability of rural life. Perhaps his audience was intended to realize the truth, rockhard and painful as it may be, that the life of the fields and mountains, the animals and even of the war-damaged people of Rome too must continue, must survive. Individuals suffer, but life goes on, and that knowledge can give a kind of comfort, even when what life brings is harsh and apparently undeserved.

In so short a discussion, I can't do more than say just a sentence or two about each of the ten *Eclogues*, but that will be enough to show their variety and to encourage you, perhaps, to read them for yourself.

Tityrus and Meliboeus are the speakers in *Eclogue One*. Tityrus is the luckier: his farm is still to remain in his care, while Meliboeus must leave, driving his goats along the road, presumably to sell them all at the local market before going off to the wars in Africa, Scythia or Britain. When will he ever again find a home? And to think that some other ex-soldier will acquire his well-tilled acres as his own! "To think that we sowed our fields for the like of that!" Meliboeus concludes, as he bitterly remarks that Discord (by which he means the civil wars) has brought them all into wretchedness.

In *Eclogue Two*, we hear the passionate regrets and frustrations of Corydon, whose love for his master's favourite boy is unrequited and obviously hopeless. All Corydon can do to ease his pain is to sing as he wanders about in the hottest part of the day, when he should instead be eating the flavourful meal Thestylis has prepared with garlic and thyme to revive the tired reapers. He knows he's a fool, that his passion is useless, that he's neglecting his work: he's crazy and he knows it, but that's love!

Menalcas and Damoetas appear in Eclogue Three. Damoetas is minding a flock of sheep, and for all we can say, his own business too, when Menalcas provokes him into an argument. They decide to settle who is the better man, or at least the better singer; just at the right moment, their neighbour Palaemon comes by to oversee the irrigation of his meadows and is asked to act as judge. After he listens to more than a score of competitive couplets from the duelling pair of poets, Palaemon declares them both winners as he can't decide between them, and returns to the more immediate problem of his meadows.

The Fourth Eclogue is a 'Dawn of a New Age' poem. It predicts a golden age to come with the birth of a miraculous child. As Vergil says, this is a song on a more exalted theme than the Muses of Sicily (who both inspire and listen to his pastorals) have heard so far. Long ago this poem was called the 'Messianic' eclogue, since many devout Christians believed that Vergil (or Virgil, as they preferred to spell his name in the Blessed Virgin's honour) was prophesying the birth of Christ. Many suggestions have been made about the identity of the coming Wonderchild. The most likely seems to me to be Octavian and Scribonia's child, Julia, born in 39 BC. Not quite the glorious boy predicted by Vergil, which makes it all the more plausible a guess: before you know the sex of the imperial progeny, better to write in a distinctly enigmatic manner!

Mopsus and Menalcas, in Eclogue Five, are a very different pair of rivals from the Damoetas and Menalcas of the third poem. In fact their only rivalry lies in their each singing a short song in praise of Daphnis, a young shepherd recently dead. Mopsus, the younger man, begins with a lament, calling on his fellow shepherds to raise a tomb for Daphnis and inscribe an epitaph upon it: "Daphnis ego in silvis, hinc usque ad sidera notus, Formosi pecoris custos, formosior ipse."

Menalcas responds with a song of praise and joy at the apparent deification of Daphnis, who now stands on the threshold of Olympus, looking down graciously upon the peaceful countryside below. The shepherds, says Menalcas, will pay him yearly vows, along with Bacchus and Ceres, Apollo and the Nymphs. The two poets exchange gifts (a pipe and a crook) in mutual admiration of their skill. (In the next issue of *Labyrinth*, I'll look at Eclogues 6-10 and sum up the collection as a whole.)