

## Time in Virgil's *Eclogues*

Time is an enduring preoccupation in first century Rome. Wallace-Hadrill (2005), for example, charts the interconnections between political and calendrical transformations under Caesar and Augustus, rightly observing the long gestation and ongoing nature of these changes. Scholars such as Mack (1978) have observed a similar predilection in Virgilian poetry, noting the poet's particular interest in time, and how this distinguishes his work from that of his various models. Often overlooked in studies of Virgil's bucolic poetry, however, is how these two strands of investigation overlap. There currently exist few attempts to interpret some of the characteristics of the apprehension and conceptualization of time in the collection within the framework of contemporary developments in Roman culture more generally. This is surprising given some of the clear parallels between the two, and because of how various theorists and sociologists have explored time as a key concern during periods of transition and upheaval. This paper examines how the *Eclogues* – especially the fourth poem – demonstrate an engagement with time as a focal point of contemporary cultural anxiety.

Discussion first reveals how the depiction of time in the *Eclogues* is one of the key vehicles through which the poet expresses the confusion, conflict and disruption of the triumviral period. Thus often in the *Eclogues* it is possible to trace an unsettled portrayal of time. Far from being an orderly process it is frequently presented in competing and contradictory fashion, shifting between, for example, cyclical and linear progression, and measured and natural time. The inability to comprehend the present or future based on prior experience (e.g., 9.2-5), moreover, reveals the missing constancy and structure ideally conferred by time. Yet within this complex framework, this paper contends, the *Eclogues* exhibit numerous efforts to articulate an emerging stability, or at least the possibility of such, through a reasserted and reordered

functioning of time. By employing and building upon some of the methods and conclusions of scholars such as Grethlein (2010) and Koselleck (1985), this paper argues that through such features as the reorientation of time through the then unique idea of the return of the golden age, genealogy, the doctrine of *historia magistra vitae* (in the upbringing and education of the child), and the employment of a myth of progress, there exists in the fourth *Eclogue* and elsewhere in the collection a clear effort to establish stability and order through a well-structured and firm temporal continuum. Time can thus be viewed as reflective of, and solution to, contemporary upheaval. Understood in this way, analysis of Virgil's apprehension of time underscores the poet's role as contributor to this ongoing debate, and it also reinforces the conclusion of scholars such as Wallace-Hadrill and Galinsky that the transformations of the first century and Augustan period were continuing and involved wide participation by all sectors of Roman society.

Galinsky, K. 1996. *Augustan Culture. An Interpretive Introduction*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.

Grethlein, J. 2010. *The Greeks and Their Past*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Koselleck, R. 1985. *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. By K. Tribe. MIT Press: Cambridge.

Mack, S. 1978. *Patterns of Time in Vergil*. Archon Books: Hamden.

Wallace-Hadrill, A. 2005. "Mutatas Formas: The Augustan Transformation of Roman Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus*, ed. by K. Galinsky, 55-84.