

Reading the “Roman” Song Fragments in Virgil *Eclogue* 9

This paper will contest the notion that the song fragments in Virgil’s Ninth *Eclogue* can be adduced as support for an optimistic (e.g., Klingner 1967; Alpers 1979) or pessimistic (e.g., Putnam 1970; Powell 2008) reading of the poem as a whole. The premise of *Eclogue* 9 is that two singer-herdsmen recall, with difficulty, fragments of songs they have heard before. Critics’ responses to the poem typically posit a particular relationship between the framing scenario and the fragments within: either the fragments allay the bleaker aspects of the poem or the poem’s frame ironically negates any positive elements in the fragments. However, *Eclogue* 9 is poorly served by readings (e.g., Alpers 1979, Perkell 2001) that draw such facile distinctions between optimistic and pessimistic elements while ignoring the poem’s semantic complexities. To remedy this and suggest new avenues of interpretation, we must consider the poem not as a simple reflection of its historical context but as a text that creates and makes reference to a world, that is, a capacious fictional space within which to enact complex ethical dynamics.

Scholars have intimated that the poem invites multiple modes of appreciation: “The dramatic fiction” is that the fragments are “out of context: they were, of course, composed precisely for this context” (Clausen 1994). The poem’s form, dramatic dialogue, directs our attention to the fictional scenario represented, but it is always also a poem we understand as the work of an author composed within a particular historical context. This paper will demonstrate that a simply historicist approach is inadequate, but neither is the poem pure fantasy: fiction in the *Eclogues* blends the real and unreal. Reading with that fact in mind complicates the interpretation of two of these fragments (*E* 9.27-29 & 46-49) especially.

Perkell and others claim that the ‘Caesar’s Star’ fragment (46-49) is a sound basis for an optimistic reading of the poem thanks to its “unambiguous” positive tone. However, such an interpretation fails to appreciate the fragment within the context of the dramatic situation. By recalling these words, one speaker, Lycidas is attempting to spur the other, Moeris, to continue singing. However, this rhetorical move fails: Moeris sings no more (51). Another fragment (27-29) almost invariably provokes pessimistic responses, thanks to line 28: *Mantua vae miserae nimium vicina Cremonae*. Yet it too is ambiguous. It is erroneous to assume that the name *Mantua* evokes the same pathos within the poem’s fictional world as it would for Virgil himself or a reader aware of the historical context: though the world of this *Eclogue* (and others) no

doubt derives much from the author's actual world, it need not be identical to it (see Doležel 1998). Moreover, focus on the negative valence of line 28 has obscured the positive tone of 29: *cantantes sublime ferent ad sidera cycni*. This line is positive within the world of the fiction since it promises fame for "Varus." It also stands out as an eloquent expression of poetry's power to immortalize, despite the emphasis on the limitations of poets and poetry that is a major theme of the dramatic situation enacted in the poem.

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