The Musical Soundtrack of Theocritus’ Pastoral *‘Idylls’*

This paper argues that Theocritus manipulated the sound of the pastoral *Idylls*, which provide their own intrinsic musical accompaniment in imitation of oral performance, such as Lyric poetry or the *Homeric Hymns*. Theocritus’ pastorals are some of the most sonorous poetry of the Hellenistic period, as has long been recognized (Van Groningen 1953). According to Rosenmeyer (1969), Theocritus was the first poet to enlist meter and sound patterns in order to underscore narrative themes, varying his verse appropriate to his poetic intentions. This use of what Rosenmeyer called “sound painting” contributed to the drama and verisimilitude of the *Idylls*. I suggest, therefore, that in an attempt to reinterpret oral performance, Theocritus fashioned musical language, which he used both to enhance the drama of the scene and to invite the reader to recline in a pastoral *ataraxia*.

The first part of the paper examines the melodic quality of Theocritus’ language, and how it simulates archaic Lyric poems of, for example, Sappho. I compare the musical theories of ancient scholars with the pastorals, and note instances of mimetic sound and emotive sonorous language. These poetic tools, first recognized by the ancient musical scholars, produce the mimetic effect of musical performance and contribute to the development of the drama and natural setting of his pastorals. Plato, Aristoxenus of Tarentum, Demetrius of Phalerum, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Longinus, among others, discuss the possibilities of reception in the musicality of the spoken word, and the effects of such tools as alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, dialect, and rhythm. These scholars observe that ancient audiences recognized verbal cues in language. For instance, meter reinforced the impression of a musical performance by quickening or slowing down the tempo to enhance the mood of the passage. Such effects are not unique to Theocritus, but the single most prominent characteristic of his poetry is a repetition or partial repetition of words.

In the second part of the paper, I show how meter and figures of speech like onomatopoeia and alliteration draw attention to the presence of a sympatheticnature in the *Idylls*. This pathetic fallacy projects the listener into the pastoral community, which offers the audience *ataraxia* within the grove. This reproduction may be as simple as the meter mimicking the movements of an animal, like the gentle flight of the bee, or even an animal’s voice. In *Idyll* 1, for example, Theocritus mimics the mournful howl of the wolf upon the death of Daphnis. The slow meter and deep vowels in this scene invoke the sad longing of a dirge; the entire pastoral landscape laments the fallen cowherd and invites him into the scene. In sum, although the sonority of Theocritus’ pastoral *Idylls* has been noted in older scholarship, it has been overlooked by more recent studies. I assert that this musicality deserves more attention than a brief mention since I have not seen a study that spends much time to survey the instances when Theocritus mimics the musical sound of oral performance or how the mimetic sound of nature are important to the dramatic and philosophical understanding of the *Idylls* when read aloud.

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