

Ruined Landscapes and Forgotten Songs in Vergil's Ninth *Eclogue*

It has long been recognized that Vergil's ninth *Eclogue* is a companion piece to *Eclogue* 1 (see *inter alios* Leo 1903, Stégen 1957: 131-134, Segal 1965, Henderson 1998). The immediate backdrop to both poems is the land-confiscations instituted by Octavian in 41 (or late 42) B.C.E. (Williams 313-314), but *Eclogue* 9 is a much darker response to these events than *Eclogue* 1. Not that the picture in *Eclogue* 1 is entirely rosy: the poem ends with Meliboeus dispossessed of his land and dependent upon the charity of Tityrus for the night's rest (*Ecl.* 1.83). Still, the bucolic landscape remains intact. Meliboeus's misfortune is to be exiled from his native Arcadia (*nos patriam fugimus*, *Ecl.* 1.4), but while the detested occupier evicts Arcadia's citizens, he leaves her *loci amoeni* unmolested. By contrast, the landscape of *Eclogue* 9 is a wasteland; this wasteland, moreover, is the result of ravages visited upon the Arcadia of *Eclogue* 1, as the early representation of the beech tree in both poems underscores: whereas the beech in *Eclogue* 1 furnishes the protective shade under which Tityrus reclines (*Ecl.* 1.1), the beeches of *Eclogue* 9 are useless as shade trees, for their crowns have now been shattered (*Ecl.* 9.9). The ninth *Eclogue* employs this image to introduce a depiction of the gradual failure of song itself. Under repeated prompting from Lycidas, the bucolic singer Moeris progressively loses touch with his own poetic tradition (Putnam 1970: 323), which cannot survive without the bucolic landscape to sustain it.

The impotence of song is foregrounded almost immediately. When Lycidas reports the rumor that the poet Menalcas has saved, by means of his songs, all the land between the hills and the water (*Ecl.* 9.7-10), Moeris rejoins that the rumor is false: songs are powerless amid the weapons of war (*Ecl.* 9.11-13). Lycidas then recites three lines of

Menalcas (*Ecl.* 9.23-25), which he caught while eavesdropping upon him (or, less likely, upon Moeris; so Clausen 1994: 274 *ad Ecl.* 9.21); Moeris counters with three lines of Menalcas addressed to P. Alfenus Varus (*Ecl.* 9.27-29), the land-commissioner who administered at least some of Octavian's expropriations (Coleman 1977: 177 *ad Ecl.* 6.7). Equality of length balances the two quotations, and fragmentariness links them, although they are fragmentary for different reasons: the first is a partial imitation from Theocritus (*Id.* 3-35); Menalcas may have translated the whole poem, but three lines are all that Lycidas managed to pick up by stealth (*sublegi*, *Ecl.* 9.21). The song addressed to Varus, of Menalcas's own composition, is fragmentary because as yet unfinished (*necdum perfecta*, *Ecl.* 9.26). Already this is an environment in which a song cannot be sung to completion.

Lycidas then urges Moeris to do just that: *incipe, si quid habes* (*Ecl.* 9.32, Clausen 1994 *ad loc.*), but promptly appends a curious *recusatio*: the Muses made Lycidas a poet too, he has songs to sing as well, the shepherds call him a poet too (thus giving him authority by acclamation over the bucolic genre), but he does not trust any of these sources of poetic authority, for he regards himself as a goose among swans by comparison to Varius and Cinna (*Ecl.* 9.32-36). The more he asserts his status as a poet, the more his confidence in it wanes. Moeris, for his part, doubts his own ability to remember an entire song (*si valeam meminisse*, *Ecl.* 9.38); those doubts are confirmed when he achieves only a fragmentary imitation of Theocritus, *Idyll* 11.19 and 42-49 (*Ecl.* 9.39-43; Putnam 1970: 315, Clausen 1994: 281 *ad Ecl.* 9.39). Lycidas responds by trying to recall an original song he once heard Moeris singing alone on a clear night; by his own account, he remembers the meter, but has trouble getting hold of the words (*numeros*

memini, si verba tenerem, Ecl. 9.45). He does manage a fragmentary recollection of this song (*Ecl. 9.47-50*), but Moeris, unable now to remember even his own compositions (*nunc oblita mihi tot carmina, Ecl. 9.53*), cannot fill out the rest. Time has despoiled him of his poetic memory (*omnia fert aetas, Ecl. 9.51*; Henderson 1998: 161) in a hideous alliance with the soldiers who have devastated the poetic landscape.

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