

## Poetic Potency and Loss in the *Dirae*

The pseudo-Virgilian *Dirae* literalizes its struggle to succeed and surpass Virgil's *Eclogues* by means of metaphors of pastoral destruction. Recent work on the *Appendix Vergiliana* has shown how impersonators function in much the same way as exegetes and how we can discern a similar critical process (Peirano 2012). Peirano's work can lead us to question how the *Dirae* poet interpreted Virgil in order to imitate and best him. Others have examined the *Dirae* as an inheritor of the metapoetic techniques of the *Eclogues* (Rupprecht 2007, Breed 2012). Breed in particular has argued that the destruction in the *Dirae* is a reassertion of pastoral control.

This paper argues that the *Dirae* sustains a tension between creative potency and loss suggested by Virgilian and Ovidian intertexts. In Ovid's exilic writings and especially the *Ibis*, poetry is occasionally reduced to an "irrepressible, yet futile, scream" (Williams 1996), and both Virgil and Ovid use the figure of Orpheus to mediate between the poet's power and frailty (Segal 1989). The *Dirae* poet takes up these concerns and reenacts them with metaphors and techniques familiar from pastoral, namely refrains and *adynata*, while adopting the moniker of curse poetry. This juxtaposition can be seen as the *Dirae* poet's reading of poetic possibilities in Virgil and Ovid.

The *Dirae*'s speaker opens by claiming that he will "repeat swan voices" (*Battare, cycneas repetamus carmine voces*, 1). Swan-song was traditionally associated with death (cf. Cic. *De Orat.* 3.6) and swans themselves with canonical poetry (e.g. *Ecl.* 9.35-36 and Horace's *canorus ales* in *Carm.* 2.20). This first line turns out to be the first instance of refrain or set of eleven intercalary verses, of which nine contain a word for repeat or survive. The poem thus draws attention to its repetitions while those repetitions (*voces cycneas*) draw attention to the

finality of death and of the canon. Through repetitions, these final moments, which represent the defeat of death or the victory of poetic immortality, are kept on the cusp and never quite arrive. In addition, the most important criterion for a pastoral community is not herding, but singing (Karakasis 2011), and the *Dirae* speaker's address to Battarus (who appears in seven of the refrains) locates the speaker, therefore, in a pastoral community, with its notions of continuity and persistence. These uses of repetition and continuity undermine the *Dirae*'s stated goal, the final destruction through curses of usurped land. The poem's irony is that because the curses will always be reenacted, they will never be effectual.

The *Dirae* speaker also undermines himself through his use of *adynata*. He prays that a variety of impossible things occur before his shepherd's pipe be unfree (*multa prius fient quam non mea libera avena*, 7), but then he proceeds to conjure impossible curses of watery or fiery destruction. He indicates fidelity to his mistress under similar conditions (*migrabunt casus aliena in corpora rerum/ quam tua de nostris emigret cura medullis*, 100-101). It is unclear what would happen if the impossible did in fact come about. In pastoral, *adynata* can occur, so we must consider the possibility that the speaker's pipe will eventually be unfree. The best solution is that the speaker means he'll finish singing once his curses are effectual. We see him, therefore, perpetually resisting but never accomplishing. The *adynata*, either the ones that will make his pipe unfree or the ones that will fulfill his curses, are always right around the corner. The speaker has trapped himself, then, between the (pastoral) poetic power to accomplish the impossible and his profession of steadfastness until the impossible occurs.

The *Dirae*, therefore, uses techniques common to pastoral, namely refrains and *adynata*, to maintain the tension between the poet as powerful and the poet as suffering. This tension is implicit in Virgil's *Eclogues* and Ovid's exilic poetry, especially the *Ibis*. The *Dirae* poet has

carefully read these, and makes a metapoetic comment on them through an explicit pastoral program that before the *Dirae* had been only an implicit possibility.

### Bibliography

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