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Literary Allusion and Cultural Poetics in Vergil's Third "Eclogue"

Joseph Farrell

University of Pennsylvania, jfarrell@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract

Among the rich variety of approaches to the study of Vergil's *arte allusiva* one finds at least one, quite understandable, common element—namely, an overriding concern with the text itself as the dominant locus of meaning. This is true of Professor Conte's earlier work, at any rate, as well as of those who stress the philological Alexandrian attitude towards poetic composition,² and even of the more traditionalist school.³ Indeed, it is fair to say that in our discipline the process of literary allusion—a process read by different scholars as yielding radically divergent interpretations of individual poems—is fundamentally a process that involves the transformation of texts. This means that the process of allusion is conceived as something that the creative intelligence of the poet works, actively and deliberately, upon the relatively inert material of an existing text in order to produce meaning. For Conte, of course, the process is somewhat different: agency is located in a zone that hovers between the text itself and the readers, who are given a role that is at least equal to that of the author in the production of allusive meaning. But in all cases, I think, it is fair to say that what is at issue remains the transformation of texts. The agent of transformation may differ, but the concern with the form of the text remains paramount.

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Literary Allusion and Cultural Poetics in Vergil's Third *Eclogue*¹

Among the rich variety of approaches to the study of Vergil's *arte allusiva* one finds at least one, quite understandable, common element—namely, an overriding concern with the text itself as the dominant locus of meaning. This is true of Professor Conte's earlier work, at any rate, as well as of those who stress the philological Alexandrian attitude towards poetic composition,² and even of the more traditionalist school.³ Indeed, it is fair to say that in our discipline the process of literary allusion—a process read by different scholars as yielding radically divergent interpretations of individual poems—is fundamentally a process that involves the transformation of texts. This means that the process of allusion is conceived as something that the creative intelligence of the poet works, actively and deliberately, upon the relatively inert material of an existing text in order to produce meaning. For Conte, of course, the process is somewhat different: agency is located in a zone that hovers between the text itself and the readers, who are given a role that is at least equal to that of the author in the production of allusive meaning. But in all cases, I think, it is fair to say that what is at issue remains the transformation of texts. The agent of transformation may differ, but the concern with the form of the text remains paramount.

The reasons for adopting such a position are clear, and require no defense. Obviously, the results achieved by those working in this particular area speak for themselves. But it remains possible to conceive of allusion rather differently: not altogether differently, but significantly so. My concern in this paper will be not the transformed text itself, nor the specific agents of its transformation, but rather the larger context within which texts are produced, reproduced, translated, interpreted, and exchanged as both material and cultural artifacts. I refer here not to the repertoire of techniques, the scholarly and interpretive aids, the categories of textual manipulation, or the individual and collective

¹This paper is a slightly revised version of the one read at the Vergilian Society panel in Chicago. I have provided it with more specific textual citations than seemed appropriate to *viva voce* presentation, and with essential bibliographical references. In general, however, it retains its original character as a rather brief exploration of a complex topic, one that I hope to address at greater length in the near future.

²I have discussed what I consider to be the main contributions to this field—namely, those of Giangrande and his school, of Clausen, Ross, and Thomas, and of Professor Conte and his associates—in my book *Vergil's Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic: The Art of Allusion in Literary History* (New York and Oxford 1991) 11-24.

³See especially G.N. Knauer, *Die Aeneis und Homer: Studien zur poetischen Technik Vergils mit Listen der Homerzitate in der Aeneis*, Hypomnemata 7 (Göttingen 1964), with my discussion, *op. cit.* n. 2 above, 7-11.

authorial or readerly decisions that contribute to the process of transforming texts, but rather to the nature of the text as something that changes along with the cultural circumstances in which it finds itself embedded, or through which it flows. This is a new application of Pasquali's *arte allusiva*—one partly anticipated by Professor Conte's most recent work in *Generi e lettori*—and a new direction for Vergilian studies, but one to which I think both the method and the material are ideally suited. My purpose today, then, is to focus on a parallelism that seems to be emerging between Professor Conte's continuing involvement with allusion and the work of other scholars whose approaches I have found especially stimulating—primarily that of the American New Historicists.⁴

The third *Eclogue* will provide a convenient vehicle for our discussion. This is one of the most openly imitative poems in the *Eclogue* book. While its (chiefly) Theocritean sources are well known, the poem's extensive allusiveness has usually been regarded merely as a token of its early date.⁵ This assumption is also made with respect to *Eclogue* 2, and indeed, these poems are in many ways companion pieces. Not only are they both unusually dependent on Theocritean material, but both are "cited" by the shepherd Menalcas in *Eclogue* 5 (86–87)—a point to which I shall return. The citation, which appears to make poems 2 and 3 as early, or earlier, at least than poem 5, has tended to reinforce the notion that extensive imitation betokens a young poet's excessive dependence on his model.

This line of argument may be sound, but it begs a lot of important questions. I take particular exception to the idea that the allusive technique of these poems is immature. From the technical point of view, the *Eclogue* book is just as accomplished a piece of work as the *Georgics* or the *Aeneid*. Both later poems contain passages of imitation that seem almost slavishly close, along with other passages of marked independence from any particular model. The differences

⁴The best examples of the approach I have in mind can be found in the work being done by students of the English Renaissance, particularly two books by Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London 1980) and *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in the Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1988), and a collection of essays that he edited, *Representing the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1988), with contributions by many scholars. A broader approach, in terms of both subject matter (which ranges approximately from Thucydides to Foucault) and methods of inquiry, and an effort to define the movement more frankly than Greenblatt has been willing to do, can be found in another collection of essays edited by H. Aram Veeger under the title *The New Historicism* (New York and London 1989).

⁵Most of the allusions in the *Eclogues* were collected by Paul Jahn and published in three parts under the collective title *Die Art der Abhängigkeit Vergils von Theokrit und anderen Dichtern* (Programmen der köllnischen Gymnasiums zu Berlin 1897–99). See also Sebastian Posch, *Beobachtungen zur Theokritnachwirkung bei Vergil*, *Commentationes Aenipontanae* 19 (Innsbruck and Munich 1969). For a representative view concerning the relative dating of individual eclogues, see R.G.G. Coleman, ed., *Vergil, Eclogues*, *Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics* (Cambridge 1977) 17.

between the two kinds of passage can more productively be attributed to an overall allusive plan, in which faithfulness to and departure from specific models is motivated by considered generic and thematic agenda, rather than to the poet's effort to gain independence from his master.⁶

Furthermore, the imitative strategy of *Eclogue* 3 differs—if not in kind, than certainly in degree—from that of its companion piece in an important way. *Eclogue* 2 follows a single source, Theocritus' eleventh *Idyll*, very closely indeed from start to finish. The major differences between the two poems lie in the various specific ways (mythic versus rustic characters, female versus male love object, etc.) in which the generally similar situations of Polyphemos and Corydon (both unrequited lovers) have been conceived. With respect to imitative technique, we may observe that Vergil employs the element of *contaminatio* very little. Almost all of the Theocritean material here comes from *Idyll* 11. What few passages Vergil does borrow elsewhere come from sources that suggested themselves obviously: the speech given by Samoitas to Polyphemos in *Idyll* 6, for instance, and some elements from the κῶμος represented in *Idyll* 3. There is no need to labor the point.⁷ What is important is simply the fact that here it makes sense to speak of a primary mode, *Idyll* 11, along with subsidiary sources, *Idylls* 3 and 6.

In *Eclogue* 3 the situation is rather different. The poem begins with an ostentatious allusion to *Idyll* 4, one which, given the usual limits of Vergilian *variatio*, is quite precise. Thus the reader might reasonably expect the poem that follows to be a virtual translation of the fourth *Idyll*, or, at least, that it will resemble its model as much as *Eclogue* 2 does *Idyll* 11. But, although Menalcas' next speech (3-6) incorporates two of the insults that Battos hurls at Korydon in *Idyll* 4 (3, 13), from this point onward the eclogue veers off in a different direction, becoming instead an eclectic mixture of at least six other *Idylls*, to mention only its Theocritean sources.

Damoetas' reply to Menalcas' opening salvo is a veiled but scornful jibe at his tormentor's manhood, such as the ones delivered with such unvarnished gusto by Komatas in *Idyll* 5 (39-42). A parallelism between *Eclogue* 3 and this *Idyll* seems to be confirmed by subsequent allusions. Many scholars in fact single out the fifth *Idyll* as the chief model of this eclogue. But to argue that Vergil is following a chief model here is just as misguided as arguing over

⁶This is one of the points I have tried, following Knauer's approach to the *Aeneid* (op. cit. n. 3 above), to demonstrate in my book on the *Georgics* (op. cit. n. 2 above). To prove that the *Eclogue*-book follows an overall allusive plan lies beyond the modest scope of this paper.

⁷Rather than go into detail, I can refer here to the full discussion of this *Eclogue* by Ian Du Quesnay, "From Polyphemos to Corydon: Virgil, *Eclogue* 2 and the *Idylls* of Theocritus," in *Creative Imitation in Latin Literature*, ed. David West and Tony Woodman (Cambridge 1979) 35-69, 206-21.

whether the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* is the true model of the *Aeneid*. Damoetas' and Menalcas' efforts (in lines 28–48) to negotiate the terms of their wager are obviously based on *Idyll* 8, where Daphnis and Menalkas are the characters involved. But for Menalcas' stake in the contest, Vergil draws upon still another *Idyll*, the first. In fact, when the two passages are compared, it becomes apparent that the general terms of Menalcas' and Damoetas' wager owe a lot to the bribe that the goatherd of the first *Idyll* offers Thyrsis if he will sing the sorrows of Daphnis (25–32). But the choice of a judge for Menalcas' and Damoetas' singing contest veers back to *Idyll* 8, where the herdsmen immediately agree to appoint a judge named Palaimon.

These examples of *variatio* may simply illustrate the principle of *oppositio in imitando* at the dramatic level. Taken as a whole, they have tended to impress critics as the efforts of a relative tyro experimenting with imitative technique. But if we try to read these allusions as comprising a coherent system, we find that the poem draws heavily upon a number of *Idylls* that, taken as a group, dwell upon a unifying theme: the theme of exchange. That this theme is not, perhaps, the first that we would identify as the controlling theme of any one of these poems is beside the point; nor should we feel constrained to locate the theme somewhat closer to the existing center of critical gravity—for example, by stating that all of the *Idylls* to which *Eclogue* 3 alludes are about the creation of the bucolic world through song, or something similar to this. For it is clear that, as Vergil handles them, these allusions point to a pastoral world that is not the safe, enclosed, solipsistic haven that it is so frequently taken to be. This in itself should come as no surprise. It is a basic allusive strategy of this collection to regard the pastoral legacy of Theocritus as precisely this: a static, comfortable place dominated by personal concerns which are constantly contrasted with the more impressive problems of history, militarism, politics, and city-dwelling, as these themes are represented in other genres. That this conception of Theocritus' poetry may not be the only, or the richest possible, reading of the *Idylls* is not the point: what matters for us is that Vergil deals with a pastoral world very much like the one I describe, one that he goes to some lengths to associate with Theocritus, but that he then brings into shattering conflict with precisely those forces that Theocritus' pastoral *Idylls* rigorously exclude. When dealing with Vergil's Theocritean allusions, then, we should not be surprised to find in them material that points us away from the enclosed refuge of the pastoral world and indicates the encroachment of those forces outside the pastoral world with which Vergil's shepherds must negotiate their precarious existence.

To resume: The theme of exchange appears in various guises within the allusive design of *Eclogue* 3. We find it certainly in the amoebaeian structure of the singing contest between Damoetas and Menalcas; in the procedures by which the contestants fashion their songs, each of them picking up on and

developing the same language and motif used by his opponent; and in the wager that the contestants make, which recalls in general terms similar wagers made in the *Idylls*, but more particularly alludes (in the cup ecphrasis of lines 36–43) to the price that the goatherd agrees to pay Thyrsis for a song in the first *Idyll*. We have here different types of exchanges, each with its separate Theocritean precedent, brought together in a way that focuses the reader's attention on the theme of exchange itself. What, we may ask, is the point of this sharpened focus?

Let us begin with the form of the contest. The question of why such contests are so prevalent in pastoral poetry, particularly in their amoebaeian form, is an old one to which I have no better answer than anyone else. But I would suggest that the imitative poet, approaching Theocritus more or less as the originator of a fixed genre, was apt to see in this form something extremely relevant to his own situation. The amoebaeian contest, in which Menalcas consistently fashions his poetry out of what Damoetas has just sung, presents an image of poetic composition as a process of exchange between poets. Because the amoebaeian form is only one of the motifs that Vergil borrows from Theocritus throughout the *Eclogues*, we can hardly avoid reading this contest as an emblem of Vergil's agon with the founder of bucolic poetry as well. For Vergil was, in a way, engaged in a singing contest with Theocritus, one in which Theocritus took the part of Damoetas, the first singer, and Vergil that of Menalcas, who follows.⁸ Such a reading has obvious implications for Vergil's participation in the (re)constitution of the genre; and I would note in passing that, in light of the allusive practice we can observe in his later works, we are justified in construing this image of intertextuality/exchange as vital to Vergil's conception of poetics as a whole. For the immediate argument, however, it is unnecessary to go this far. Here I would merely state that to "wrap up" several of Theocritus' singing contests into a single poem is a natural idea for the imitator, who must have been keenly aware that he was in competition with the established master of his chosen genre.

My second point concerns the economics of poetic production. Critics have traditionally discouraged readers from taking the exchanges of material or artistic goods in the pastoral genre as meaningful in economic terms. Thomas Rosenmeyer, for example, has characterized the negotiations that these simple shepherds conduct by the memorable phrase *negotium in otio*, which suggests that we are dealing only with the image of a business transaction, not the real thing, and that what is really at stake is merely the mutual expression of friend-

⁸I am not suggesting that these characters represent the two poets allegorically, but only that their respective situations are roughly parallel.

ship and the enjoyment of leisure in the company of another.⁹ It is obviously right that the reader of pastoral poetry who does not keep some such understanding of these little rustic dramas in mind might as well not read them at all. And yet, the characteristic mode, of Vergilian pastoral anyway, is to depict the corruption of such happy conditions. The first *Eclogue* announces with unmistakable clarity that not only military, but economic considerations have forced themselves upon the Vergilian rustics. Indeed, Tityrus mentions concern for one's *peculium* (32), a word that denotes his servile status, as a natural preoccupation for one in his position. He speaks of the city to which he and his fellows normally go to sell their wares (19–21), and it is to the city that Moeris is headed at the beginning of *Eclogue* 9, where again the discharged and resettled veteran is a recent interloper from a foreign sphere. Such passages suggest that Vergil's rustics are all too familiar with economic concerns.

Consonant with this observation is the cluster of allusions in the third *Eclogue* pointing to Theocritean passages in which the poetic artifact is shown to have exchange value. The Theocritean goatherd of *Idyll* 1 in effect purchases a poem from Thyrsis. Its price is three milkings of a goat that he claims is especially productive, and a chased cup (23–28), which he had acquired from a Calydonian ferryman at the price of a goat and a large wheel of cheese (57–58). It is easy to see the essential value of the cup, the item that the goatherd describes at such great length (28–57), as consisting in the marvelous image of the pastoral world that it contains, and thus to regard it as something that can be measured only in artistic terms: the cup expresses the worth of Thyrsis' song, itself an embodiment of the concerns that animate the pastoral genre. But, on the other hand, Theocritus measures the song's material value quite precisely: it will bring the singer three pails of milk, plus a cup, which is itself worth a goat and a wheel of cheese. I repeat that it is easy and legitimate to regard these precise references to the purchase price of Thyrsis' song as humorously metaphorical, and that unless we do so we shall miss important aspects of the poem's meaning. But when Vergil collects the various passages in which Theocritus' shepherds negotiate the value of a song, or use song to win title to material objects that they have wagered, it would seem that the later poet is taking very seriously indeed the idea that poetry is a commodity like any other, and that one aspect of a poem's value can be measured in terms of what it might bring in exchange.

In this context, it seems significant that the contest between Damoetas and Menalcas exhibits another sort of allusion, one that no doubt possesses literary dimensions (though most of these are, in the prevailing state of our

⁹*The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European Pastoral Lyric* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1969) 154–55.

knowledge, strictly unrecoverable), but that also involves persons who exist outside of Vergil's and Theocritus' poetry. There are two relevant passages. In the first, both singers make rivalrous allusion to Asinius Pollio as a reader and as a poet in his own right (84–89). Then, in response to Damoetas' continued praise of Pollio, Menalcas denounces Bavius and Maevius (90–91), who gain at least the appearance of historicity from the fact that Maevius is mentioned also in Horace's *Epodes* (10.2) and treated as more than a simple fiction by the ancient commentators on both poets.¹⁰ The image of these poets, possibly historical, who are said to produce verse that could only be admired by those who would try to yoke foxes and milk billy goats, is a clear representation of someone totally incapable of appreciating the type of poetry that we are hearing or reading now, the contest of Damoetas and Menalcas, Vergilian pastoral. It can't be accidental that we encounter this disparagement of poets who exist outside the world of Vergilian pastoral precisely in the context of praise directed at Pollio both as a poet and as a reader. Pollio, the discerning reader, who writes good poetry himself, will surely appreciate the difference in quality between *Eclogue* 3 and the junk that Bavius and Maevius may try to show him.

Here one becomes more and more aware of the role that Pollio plays in these poems as addressee—most openly in the fourth *Eclogue* (12), but also, I believe, in the eighth,¹¹ and clearly here. It has, of course, been traditional to regard these addressees as, in some sense, early patrons of Vergil. The poetics of patronage is a rich field in itself, one that I cannot address fully here.¹² I will, however, observe that Pollio is only one of several individuals addressed in the *Eclogues* as, in some sense, a patron—certainly as an honorand, and perhaps as a benefactor, whatever the relationship during this period between literary patronage and the social institutions of *patrocinium* and *clientela*. Indeed, the concern of Damoetas and Menalcas to make valuable offerings to Pollio in the form of sacrificial beasts, their fulsome praise of his poetry, and the just barely implicit insistence that he will, as an informed reader and critic, find their poetry superior to that of Bavius and Maevius, points to an anxiety that, I would suggest, corresponds at some level to Vergil's own concerns about the econom-

¹⁰See Servius, Junius Philargyrius, and *Schol. Bern.* on *Ecl.* 3.90, Porphyrio on *Epod.* 10.2, 10.21, *Serm.* 2.3.239.

¹¹"Asinius Pollio in Vergil *Eclogue* 8," *CP* 86 (1991) 204–211.

¹²This subject is being intensively worked by several scholars. See Barbara K. Gold, *Literary Patronage in Greece and Rome* (Chapel Hill and London 1987) and *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome* (Austin 1982), a collection of essays edited by Gold, including J.E.G. Zetzel, "The Poetics of Patronage in the Late First Century B.C." (87–102); Matthew S. Santirocco, "Poet and Patron in Ancient Rome," *Book Forum* 6 (1982) 56–62 and "The Maecenas Odes," *TAPA* 114 (1984) 241–53; Peter White, "*Amicitia* and the Profession of Poetry in Early Imperial Rome," *JRS* 68 (1978) 74–92 and "Positions for Poets in Early Imperial Rome" in the collection edited by Gold (50–66). Two more books by Santirocco and White are in progress.

ics of poetic production. Again I may refer to the first *Eclogue*, where Tityrus' continued ability to play his pipe under the shelter of a pastoral beech is so clearly and even painfully predicated on the favor of powerful men in the city.

Much in this inquiry must remain open for the present. I will close, therefore, by stating simply my major premises. The third *Eclogue* alludes to Theocritus in a way that invites us to look beyond the strictly literary issues that present themselves in all imitative poetry. Here Vergil's allusive web extends beyond the circumscribed world of poetic intertextuality to include the social setting in which the poetry is produced. The writing of pastoral poetry is thus revealed to be a process very different from the untroubled exchange of mutual tokens of admiration that we have traditionally been encouraged to see in these rustic exchanges. Instead, it is disclosed as a process that involves the negotiation of value, both literary and material, between the pastoral poet and a wide variety of interconnected others: his models, his rivals, and his readership. Especially prominent in this last group are those powerful individuals to whom he dedicates his work, whether openly or by indirection. In the act of allusion, he finds a trope that embraces these, and possibly many other aspects of valuation and exchange that affect his reputation and his livelihood. And if such issues ruffle the placid surface of the clear blue pond that graces Vergil's pastoral pleasance, can we deny that the highly allusive nature of Roman culture in general was infused with the cognizance of how thoroughly entwined all culture is in the contingent material circumstances of its production?

Joseph Farrell
University of Pennsylvania