Convenient Truths: Vergil’s *Eclogues*, Ecocriticism, and the Post-Environmental Movement

Traditional ecocritical readings of Vergil’s *Eclogues* have placed it in the catch-all category of “classical pastoral,” a term designating all such poetry written before the 18th century (Garrard 2004, Gifford 1999). Classical pastoral, and consequently the *Eclogues*, represents a deficient forebear to the more enlightened discourse on nature of recent history (Garrard 2004, Buell 1995). Naturally the terms of the debate, and the scale of values determinant of what counts as properly enlightened, spring from the politics and philosophy of the environmental movement of the 60’s and 70’s that launched ecocriticism in the first place (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996); yet these fundamental ideas have recently faced a strong challenge from post-environmental political groups (e.g. Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2005; cf. also Cohen 2004). These challenges to the prevailing environmental orthodoxy in turn offer the opportunity for ecocritical reevaluations of formerly marginalized texts such as the *Eclogues*, and even suggest that it is precisely such texts that most truly embody the spirit of a new, more global, ecological politics.

Four major objections to the old style of environmentalism are that it is elitist in its orientation; that it unthinkingly embraces the Romantic “Wilderness Myth,” an idealization of the “purity” of untouched nature, upon which any human activity is an encroachment (Cronon 1995); that it posits an untenable dichotomy between “ecocentrism” and “anthropocentrism”; and that in its historical development into a large, politically significant special interest group it has come to emphasize unity of vision and purpose over a recognition of the varied nature of local situations and concerns. This paper will analyze the *Eclogues* in terms of these four critiques, contextualizing the poem in its relations to both traditional environmentally-centered literary criticism and to a newer, post-environmental brand of ecocriticism. The resultant change in the terms of debate will thus not only open new avenues of critical approach to the poems, but also pave the way for future engagement with critical communities outside of the traditional classics.

Works Cited

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