

Land without War: The Vergilian Adunaton

This paper will argue that while Vergil's Arcadian landscape is generally perceived as an idyllic, imaginary world (as Jones states, "a landscape sealed within itself and separate from an outside" [1]), it nonetheless presents the very real effects of war as a contemporary reality, and that Vergil's landscape is far from idyllic. I will expand Coleman's observation that "If the longing for a lost organic culture is, as some modern theorists have claimed, implicit in the pastoral concept, it was Vergil who developed and exploited this potentiality, to make the genre a vehicle for positive moral criticism of the urban society of his own day" (32), by arguing that Vergil portrays not a mere contrast between rustic and urban life but the harsh impact of war on the bucolic landscape and population – and hence, on artists and their art. Through the experiences of several characters in the *Eclogues*, Vergil suggests that the effects of war on Roman literature and art are as indelible and ineradicable as they are on Roman landscape and identity. (To illustrate this notion, I will briefly discuss the Ara Pacis and Livia's hypogaeum; the artificiality of the bucolic paradise – fashioned as a deliberate escape from the realities of war – demonstrates that in the art and literature of this period, the landscape has been fashioned as a haven from the difficulties of civilized life, which includes war: bucolic paradise is imagined but recognized as an adunaton, just as a landscape and population that does not bear the vestiges of war is unimaginable.) Given the social context of the young Vergil and Octavian, wherein war was a constant, the imposition of war on artistic endeavors is hardly surprising.

If, as scholars have long thought, the *Eclogues* originally comprised poems 1-9 (with corresponding pairs of poems enclosing the fifth in a chaistic pattern), it is significant that the first and last poems framing the collection focus on the effects of war: the displacement of individuals from their land, and the relationship of art (in the form of singing) to those effects.

As the exiled Meliboeus pronounces *nulla carmina canam* (1.77), he declares that exile from one's land and familiar landscape is tantamount to the death of art. The failure of art in *Eclogue* 9, when Menalcas fails at winning back his land through song, expresses the adverse relationship between war and art, as does the difficulty Lycidas and Moeris experience as they attempt to recite verses and memory fails them. In this manner, Vergil portrays war's intrusion into bucolic and artistic life: a comfortable, undisturbed life within the bucolic landscape fosters artistic freedom and creativity, whereas war's intrusion into that landscape hinders or removes it, as Lycidas and Moeris experience. Vergil recognizes that human survival is inseparable from the land, that our relationship to landscape reflects our quality of life; thus, like the ploughman whose plow unearths the rusted implements of war in *Georgic* 1 (493-497), Vergil sees that even though Romans may have buried their violence, it will surely emerge later, though perhaps corroded and discolored by time. The vestiges of war will always resurface, violence will never be fully eradicated. Unlike verses, which can evade the memory, war will always be present. It can be buried or ignored, but the landscape that is represented without its effects is, of necessity, artificially constructed.

Thus, the idyllic landscape that some (e.g., Snell, Jones) think bucolic poetry represents is indeed unreal, a mystical place that does not truly exist. While Jones suggests that painted Roman gardens provided a private shelter from the turbulence of public life, I will argue that the gardens must be represented not as realistic or natural, but as cultivated and controlled, for in the natural landscape, war is recognized as a reality that humans cannot escape. War leaves its marks on individuals as well as the land itself, and is thus present and visible, even when it seems to have abated. However, the pastoral paradise visible therein, with its controlled and stylized imagery, evokes the artificial, mythical past which Augustan Rome claimed as its

foundation.

Works Cited

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