

1 Eclogues

The ten *Eclogues* (or pastoral poems) were written by Virgil at around the age of 30. His first poems to be published, they evoke the world of the pastoral poetry of the third-century Syracusan poet Theocritus, though they are, of course, written in Latin and not the Sicilian's Greek. Two of the *Eclogues* which we shall look at, 1 and 9, link the pastoral world of poetry with real – and for many, tragic – events. The civil war between Mark Antony and Octavian, the avengers of Julius Caesar, and his assassins ended when the assassins were defeated at Philippi in 42 BC. The victors agreed that land in Italy, including the area round Mantua where Virgil had been born, should be confiscated and settled by their veterans, who perhaps numbered 50,000. In the first of the *Eclogues*, Tityrus has had his farm restored to him by an unspecified young man in Rome, while Meliboeus has been forced out from his property.



A wall painting from Pompeii showing a rustic shrine set in an idyllic pastoral landscape.

Eclogue 1

- 1.1–83 **MELIBOEUS** **Tityrus**, you lying there beneath the shade of a spreading beech practising your woodland music on a slender pipe, we are leaving the boundaries of our country and our sweet fields. We are being exiled from our country, while you, Tityrus, at your ease in the shade, **teach the woods to re-echo the name of beautiful Amaryllis.** 5
- TITYRUS** O Meliboeus, **a god** brought us this peaceful life. For that man will always be a god to me, a tender lamb from our flocks will often stain his altar. He it was who allowed my cows to graze, as you see, and me, their master, to play what I want on my rustic pipe. 10
- MELIBOEUS** For my part I do not begrudge you this. Rather I marvel at it. There is **such complete chaos everywhere throughout the countryside.** Look, I myself am driving my goats forward, sick at heart. This one here, Tityrus, I can scarcely drag along. For just now, here amid the thick hazel trees, she gave birth to twin kids, the hope of the flock, but **left them, alas! on the bare flint.** I remember that **this disaster** 15 was often foretold to us by **oaks struck by lightning** – but I was too foolish to take any notice. But still, tell me, Tityrus, who this god of yours is.
- TITYRUS** The city which they call Rome, Meliboeus, I thought in my folly was like this one of ours to which we shepherds are often accustomed to 20 drive the tender lambs. I used this yardstick: I knew that puppies were like dogs, kids like their dams. That was the way I used to compare great things with small. But this city towers above all others as far as cypresses often do amid the yielding shrubs. 25
- MELIBOEUS** And what was the great cause of your seeing Rome?

MELIBOEUS the name means ‘cattle-minder’. The names **Tityrus** and **Amaryllis** come from Theocritus. Compare line 68 of Milton’s pastoral poem *Lycidas*: ‘To sport with Amaryllis in the shade’.

teach the woods to re-echo the name of beautiful Amaryllis Philip Hardie suggests that the echo may be ‘the sign of nature’s sympathy with men’, while at the same time ‘we are made aware that the magic of pastoral song may be such stuff as dreams are made on’.

a god Tityrus refers to his benefactor with understandable hyperbole. He plans to sacrifice to him (1.7–8, 42–3).

such complete chaos everywhere throughout the countryside the countryside has been turned upside down by the confiscations.

left them, alas! on the bare flint either the kids were born dead or they were so weak that they could not be saved.

this disaster that his farm would be confiscated.

oaks struck by lightning Jupiter is the god of lightning and the oak is his own sacred tree. His striking of his own tree may have made these omens particularly threatening.

- TITYRUS **Freedom.** Though late in the day, she did at last look upon me in my paralysis after my beard became whiter as it fell beneath the scissors. Yes, she looked upon me and came to me after a long time, now that Amaryllis holds me in her power and Galatea has left me. 30
 For, I shall confess it, as long as Galatea ruled me, I had neither any hope of freedom nor any thought of **savings**. Although many a victim left my sheep stalls, and many a rich cheese was pressed for the ungrateful town, I never returned home with my right hand 35
 weighed down with money.
- MELIBOEUS I used to wonder, Amaryllis, why you used to call sadly on the gods, and **for whom you were letting the fruits hang on their trees**. Tityrus was away from here. The very pines, Tityrus, the very springs, these very orchards were calling you.
- TITYRUS What was I to do? I could neither get away from my slavery nor find 40
 gods to give me such present help **anywhere else**. **Here**, Meliboeus, I saw **that young man** for whom **our altars smoke twelve days every year**. Here that man was the first to respond to my petition: ‘Feed your cattle as before, boys. Rear your bulls.’ 45
- MELIBOEUS Fortunate old man, so the lands will remain yours then, and they are large enough for you, although bare rock and the marsh with

Freedom personified as a goddess. We now discover that Tityrus had been a slave. He has now bought his freedom. His spendthrift partner Galatea had not allowed him to think of spending his savings on this. His liaison with Amaryllis has instilled in him more thrifty ways.

savings the Latin word translated here (‘peculium’) in fact means something more precise. A slave could not own property himself but could occupy a piece of land (*peculium*) on sufferance from his master, surrendering to him a percentage of the profits on working it. If he saved sufficient money, he could buy his freedom and gain full possession of the land. Tityrus has done this, and so it would be a disaster for him if the land he was working was confiscated.

for whom you were letting the fruits hang on their trees is Amaryllis too grief-stricken in Tityrus’ absence to look after the estate? Or is she hoping that her partner can have fresh fruit when he gets home?

anywhere else According to Appian, crowds of threatened occupants came to the forum and temples of Rome to protest, and the Romans had a lot of sympathy with them (*The Civil Wars* 5.12).

Here i.e. at Rome.

that young man presumably Octavian, who was 21 at the time of the confiscations. On 1 January 42 BC the senate had confirmed the deification of his adoptive father Julius Caesar, and Octavian was given the title ‘son of a god’ on coinage struck in the following years.

our altars smoke twelve days every year Tityrus is preparing to make a monthly offering.

its muddy rushes cover the whole pasture. No unfamiliar pasturage will assail **the sickly mothers in your flocks** and no damaging infection from a neighbour's flock will harm them. Fortunate old man, here amid well-known rivers and **sacred springs** you will seek out the cool shade. On this side, as ever, the hedge on your neighbour's boundary will often soothe you to slumber with its soft whispers as **Hybla's bees** feed their fill on its willow blossom. On that side beneath the lofty rock the pruner will sing to the breezes; and meanwhile your pets, the throaty wood-pigeons, and the turtle doves shall not cease from moaning from the towering elm.

TITYRUS Sooner, then, will the light-footed stags pasture in the air and the seas leave the fish uncovered on the shore, sooner, **wandering in exile** over each other's territories, will the Parthian drink of **the Arar** or the German of the Tigris than that man's face could fade away from my heart.

MELIBOEUS But we shall go away from here, some to the thirsty Africans, some of us will reach Scythia and **the Oaxes** that snatches up chalk as it flows, and the Britons, utterly cut off from the whole world. Ah, shall I ever, a long time hence, look upon the land of my fathers and the roof of my humble cottage heaped high with turf, look upon and marvel one day at my kingdom, **a few ears of corn**? Will some **godless** soldier hold this fallow land which I have cultivated so well, some barbarian hold these crops? See where **civil war** has brought

the sickly mothers in your flocks the she-goats are especially vulnerable immediately after giving birth.

sacred springs each spring has its own divine nymph.

Hybla's bees bees will play a significant part in Virgil's future work. Hybla, on the southern slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily, was famous for its honey. The idyllic landscape Meliboeus here describes is reminiscent of Theocritus (7.133–45 – bees in line 142). It is interesting that the evocation of the pastoral dream comes from the man about to be excluded from it. But is the dream a never-never land in any case?

wandering in exile as Meliboeus and those like him must now do.

the Arar the river Saône, which joins the Rhône at Lyons in eastern France.

the Oaxes possibly a river in Mesopotamia.

a few ears of corn the state to which Meliboeus feels that the new occupant will have reduced his farm.

godless 'impious', the Latin word used here, is to prove of major importance in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

civil war literally 'discord', to be personified in one of the horrific shapes at the entrance to hell in *Aeneid* 6 (280).

our wretched citizens. It was for **them** that we sowed these fields. **Now, Meliboeus, graft your pears, plant your vines in rows.** On, my goats, once a happy flock, on! No more, as I lie in a mossy cave, 75 shall I watch you at a distance, poised on the edge of a bushy cliff; no songs shall I sing; I shall be your herdsman but you will not crop flowering **clover** and bitter willows.

TITYRUS But for this night you could take your rest with me here on the green foliage. We have ripe fruits, tasty chestnuts and an abundance of 80 cheeses. Already now the roofs of the country houses are smoking in the distance and longer shadows are falling from the lofty mountains.

- 1 How expressive do you find Virgil's evocation of the countryside? How realistic does it seem to you to be?
- 2 Compare the characterization of Tityrus and Meliboeus. How do you feel about them both? Does Meliboeus' attitude change in the course of the poem? Do you find that Tityrus is offputtingly absorbed in his own good fortune? If so, does anything he says modify your impression?
- 3 How do you respond to the fact that Tityrus calls Octavian, a living human being, a god, to whom he will make sacrifices?
- 4 'By including such images of current events in his poems, the poet boldly transformed the pastoral genre' (Josiah Osgood, p. 112). Do you feel that the fact that it reflects actual historical events makes a difference to your appreciation of this poem?

Eclogue 4

Before long the relationship between Mark Antony and Octavian had deteriorated to such an extent that another civil war looked imminent. Two men, both important figures in the literary world and hence known to Virgil, Maecenas, acting for Octavian, and Asinius Pollio, acting for Antony, brokered a treaty between them at Brundisium in September 40 BC.

To cement the peace, Antony married Octavian's sister Octavia. (Both their spouses had just died.) Virgil's fourth Eclogue celebrates this peace, asserting that a new golden age will begin with Pollio's consulship (40 BC) and

them bitterly used to refer to the new occupants of the farm.

Now, Meliboeus, graft your pears, plant your vines in rows what do you feel is Meliboeus' tone here?

clover actually shrub trefoil, which has clover-like leaves and yellow flowers.

foretelling the birth of a Messiah-like boy. Among a number of suggestions proposed for **the identity of this figure**, which inevitably but implausibly include Jesus Christ, the most convincing is a hoped-for child of Antony and Octavia. (In fact, they were to have no sons.)



Octavian. The original of this marble copy dates from the earliest years of his political career.

4.1–25 **Sicilian Muses**, let us sing of somewhat greater things. It is not everyone that woodlands and the low-lying tamarisk bushes delight. If we sing of woods, let the woods be worthy of a **consul**.

Now there has come the final age of **Cumaean prophecy**. The great line of the centuries is being born anew. Now even **the Virgin** returns, **the reign of Saturn** returns. Now a new generation is being sent down from the high heavens. Only

the identity of this figure perhaps the poet left the identity of the boy in doubt quite deliberately. As Philip Hardie remarks, 'The *Eclogues* were written in the rapidly changing and unpredictable conditions of the second Triumvirate, and a poet with an eye to future fame but also with a desire to intervene in contemporary political debate could do worse than develop an allusive and polysemous manner.'

Sicilian Muses a reference to the powers that inspired the Sicilian Theocritus, the inventor of pastoral poetry.

consul i.e. Pollio, the consul for 40 BC.

Cumaean prophecy the reference is to the Sibyl of Cumae, priestess of Apollo.

the Virgin Justice or Astraea, the last of the immortals to leave the world when the behaviour of mankind became intolerable to her (see *Georgics* 2.473–4).

the reign of Saturn Saturn, father of Jupiter, had presided over the first golden age.

do you, chaste **Lucina**, show favour to the birth of this boy, under whom **the iron age** will at last cease and a golden race rise in all the world. Your own **Apollo** is ruling now. 10

It is in your consulship, Pollio, yes yours, that this glorious age will begin and the great months start to move forward. Under your leadership, if any traces of our **sin** remain, they will be erased and will free the earth from fear for ever. **He** will assume the life of the gods, see heroes mingled with gods and himself be seen by them, and rule the world to which his father's qualities have brought peace. 15

But for you, boy, the uncultivated earth will pour forth as her first little gifts wandering ivy with **cyclamen** everywhere, and Egyptian lilies mixed with laughing bear's-breech. Of their own accord goats will bring home their udders bulging with milk, and **the cattle will not fear huge lions**. Of its own accord your cradle will bloom with delightful flowers. The snake will perish too, and the plant which conceals its poison will perish. Assyrian **cardamom** will spring up everywhere. 25

- How successfully do you feel Virgil conveys his vision of a new golden age?

Eclogue 6

At the beginning of his sixth Eclogue, Virgil excuses himself from singing of warfare as Alfenus Varus, a leading statesman and soldier, has asked him to. Echoing the refusal poem (*recusatio*) of the Alexandrian tradition (see Introduction, p. 3), he does not – at the moment – feel that his Muse is well suited to an epic subject.

Lucina the goddess of childbirth, often identified with Diana.

the iron age this was the final age of the poet Hesiod's cycle: gold, silver, bronze, heroic, iron.

Apollo the brother of Diana, Apollo is the sponsor of the new age not only as the god of the Sibyl who foretold it, but also as the god of poetry, inspiring Virgil to sing about it.

sin referring to the civil wars.

He i.e. the boy.

cyclamen we do not in fact know precisely to what plant Virgil is referring here. According to the elder Pliny, it had medicinal uses.

the cattle will not fear huge lions compare Isaiah 11.6: 'The calf and the young lion will grow up together and a little child will lead them'; and the *Sibylline Oracles* 3.791–3: 'And the lion, devourer of flesh, will eat husks in the stall like an ox, and tiny children will lead them in chains.'

cardamom a fragrant shrub.

6.1–8 **Thalea**, my Muse, first deigned to sport in **Syracusan poetry** and did not blush to dwell in the woods. When I was starting to sing of kings and battles, **the god of Cynthus** tweaked my ear and gave me warning: ‘A shepherd, **Tityrus**, ought to feed his sheep to keep them fat but keep his song thin-spun.’ Now I – for you will find poets aplenty who are eager to sing your praises, Varus, and to write about grim warfare – **will practise the rustic Muse on a slender reed**.



This coin shows on one side a head of Octavian and on the reverse a legionary eagle, a plough and the surveyor's rod. The coin is a commemoration of the fulfilment of the promises to soldiers made by their generals. The veterans, who had soldiered hard in the generals' cause, would take a very different view of the process by which they were given land from that of the dispossessed victims. They had the law on their side, even if it was the dubious lex Titia of 43 BC, which gave power to the second triumvirate (see Introduction, p. 1).

- Can you think of any English-language poet who wrote both pastoral and epic poetry? If so, do you think that he or she was equally successful at both?

Thalea this Muse is mentioned here for the first time in Latin poetry.

Syracusan poetry Virgil again pays tribute to the pastoral Muse of the Syracusan Theocritus.

the god of Cynthus i.e. Apollo, born on the island of Delos, whose mountain (or rather hill) is called Cynthus.

Tityrus Virgil is addressed by the name of the lowly, ageing herdsman of Eclogue 1.

ought to feed his sheep to keep them fat but keep his song thin-spun Virgil makes use of Callimachus (*Aitia* 1.1.22–3): ‘Apollo said to me ... “Fatten the beast you offer to the gods, but keep your style lean”’.

will practise the rustic Muse on a slender reed the poet looks back to *Eclogues* 1.1.

In Eclogue 1 the irruption of the confiscations into the pastoral world was not given a specific location. Eclogue 9 appears to be set near Mantua (lines 27–8), Virgil's birthplace. Neighbouring Cremona (it was about 37 miles away) had been chosen as an area for confiscation because of its fertility in wheat, olives, vines and pasturage, but it had proved too small to hold all the veterans assigned to it. The deficiency was made good by the forcible seizure of large parts of Mantuan territory.

Eclogue 9

- 9.1–29 LYCIDAS Where are you walking to, Moeris? Is it where the road leads, to the **city**?
- MOERIS We have lived to see ourselves come to this, that a stranger – something that we never feared – should possess our little farm and say, ‘**These lands are mine**. Off with you, old tenants.’ Now, beaten and grim – since Chance rules everything – **we are taking these kids on his behalf**, and may it turn out badly for him! 5
- LYCIDAS Certainly what *I* had heard was that from where the hills begin to retreat and slope from their summits in a gentle descent, right up to the water and the old beeches with their now-shattered tops, your friend **Menalcas** had saved everything with his songs. 10
- MOERIS Yes, you had heard that, and so the story went. But amid the weapons of war, Lycidas, our songs are only as effective as men say **Chaonian** doves are when **the eagle** comes. So, had not a crow on the left first warned me from the hollow oak to cut short **this new litigation** some way or other, neither your Moeris here nor Menalcas himself would still be alive. 15

city presumably Mantua (see 9.27–8).

These lands are mine this may be technical legal language; after all, the new occupant was now the legal owner. But there is a directness about this and the next sentence that suggests a confrontation.

we are taking these kids on his behalf i.e. to the city. It sounds as if Moeris may be working for the new owner.

Menalcas the pastoral poet was hoping to gain back his and Moeris' former land through his poetry. The implication of Moeris' next speech is that the appeal has not proved successful.

Chaonian Chaonia was an area in Epirus in north-west Greece where Dodona, famous for its dove-haunted oak trees, was situated.

the eagle not only does the bird of prey make a strong contrast with the dove, it also brings into the poem the menacing military emblem: see the coin on p. 12.

this new litigation it looks as if a quarrel had broken out with the new owner which could have resulted in the death of Moeris and Menalcas, had they not backed down.

- LYCIDAS Alas that anyone could fall victim to such wickedness! Alas, was the consolation of your music almost snatched from us, Menalcas, and you as well? Who would sing of the Nymphs? Who would scatter the ground with flowery grasses or cover the springs with green shade? 20
 And who would sing the songs which I stole from you the other day when I eavesdropped as you were going off to see Amaryllis, my sweetheart? 'Tityrus, until I return – the way is short – feed my goats and when you have fed them drive them to water, Tityrus, and while you drive them be careful not to run up against the he-goat 25
 – he butts with his horn.'
- MOERIS But what about this, which he sang to Varus although it was not yet finished: 'Varus, only let Mantua survive for us, Mantua, alas! too near to wretched Cremona, and singing swans will bear your name aloft to the stars!'

- 1 Serious issues are dealt with in Eclogues 1 and 9. Are they blunted by the escapist setting of pastoral poetry?
- 2 Do you feel that poetry has any role to play at times of national crisis or disaster?

Tityrus ... Virgil takes almost all of these verses of Menalcas from Theocritus 3.3–5. But the lines addressed to Varus that follow (9.27–9) are decidedly alien to the spirit of Theocritus' pastoral poetry. As Wendell Clausen remarks, the worst that can befall one of the Sicilian poet's herdsmen 'is defeat in a singing-match, a thorn-prick in the foot, or rejection in love'.

Varus the dedicatee of Eclogue 6 (see above) and one of the land-commissioners overseeing the confiscations. An ancient commentator on Virgil who is usually referred to as Servius Danielis writes that 'because of the unfairness of Alfenus Varus, who managed the confiscations, nothing was left to the Mantuans but swampland'.

swans Mantua was famous for these birds: compare *Georgics* 2.198–9.