

VIRGIL'S FOURTH ECLOGUE – A LITERARY ANALYSIS

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by

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In choosing Virgil's Fourth *Eclogue* as my topic for this Presidential address I was not motivated by the desire to support or disprove any of the suggestions about the identity of the child, still less to offer anything original on the possible historical and factual background of the poem. What I do want to do is to try to let the poem speak for itself, to wipe away from it just for an afternoon the accretions of generations of learned scholarship and see what its intrinsic qualities are and how they are achieved. It is not that I have anything against the learned scholarship in question (except that I have had to read a lot of it): indeed the fourth *Eclogue* could be a valuable historical document and teach us much about (say) the Treaty of Brundisium or the influx into the Roman world of ideas from the East – 'could be', I say, because in fact all such matters still remain somewhat uncertain simply because Virgil's poem does not afford the evidence that might be wished.

But let us instead treat the poem as a poem, complete in itself, in which Virgil has said all that he thinks necessary for the poem to stand on its own feet without learned foot-notes or investigations of hidden meaning. The child in the poem could be Pollio's (though that seems unlikely in the highest degree), could (perhaps) be an expected child of Antony and Octavia, or (hardly) of Octavian and Scribonia: but Virgil has not said so, and so we must take the poem to be about a child whom Virgil has not wished to identify. This does not necessarily mean that the child is not real, or that he is a symbol of the Golden Age without flesh and blood: it simply means that the poem does not require us to be able to identify the child. It connects the familiar miracle of human birth with the historical concept of the re-birth of a past Golden Age. It is not wholly symbolic, for the child seems very real, especially at the end of the poem, but it invites us to look at human history on the analogy of human birth, development, death, birth again. If the poem is a *genethliacon* (birthday poem) for a particular boy, it is also one for mankind. On all these counts the Christian interpretation of the poem as a prophecy of the birth of Christ (hence it is often called the Messianic *Eclogue*) is readily understandable.

With that much of introduction let me turn to the text of the poem.

The first thing that immediately strikes the reader about this poem is its note of joy: it seems a kind of solemn hymn promising a brighter future. This is made absolutely evident in the explicit opening to the poem. The *Eclogue* is one in a collection of pastoral poems based on Theocritus (hence *Sicelides*, compare 6.1, 10.1, referring to Theocritus' homeland), yet it is not pastoral, and it bears *no similarity at all* to any of Theocritus' pastoral poems. When I say that it is not pastoral I confess that some of the references to the ease of life in the Golden Age (the goats coming home with full udders, the trees providing honey of their own accord and so on) are found in pastoral, but they are found in other types of poetry too (in the *Georgics*, for example, and in elegy). So when Virgil says in line 2 that

not everyone likes pastoral, he means that this will not be pastoral: in line 3 he agrees that the *Eclogues* generally are pastoral (the word *silvae* denotes this), but that this particular one will be different, worthy of the consul Pollio who is addressed in line 12. It will be a greater theme than pastoral — *paulo maiora canamus* — and so it turns out to be: it is a theme that is visionary and idyllic like pastoral poetry, but closer to the real world of human activity, not postulating the distance from reality which is the chief characteristic of the pastoral mode. Pastoral cannot embrace the real world: it may well come into opposition with it (as in *Eclogues* i and ix) or it may take a real person like Gallus into its woods and dreamy haunts; but it is essentially placed at a distance from the real world, operating in a fragile landscape which can be rudely shattered by the real world. This poem is not set in the pastoral distance, but it is a proclamation to all that the real world is about to change, to shed its sin and return to its ancient glories. I repeat what I said before, and shall say again, that it is a highly idealised picture, a happy dream of a kind of paradise: but it differs from pastoral in being a vision of the real human world in which we actually live.

After these introductory lines Virgil begins his theme with the utmost solemnity, linking his prophecy of a new Golden Age with the age-old prophecies of the Sibyl of Cumae, with the great cycle of Stoic philosophy, with the mythology of the departure of the maiden goddess Justice at the close of the original Golden Age, and with the Roman legend of the rule of Saturnus during this original happy period. These were themes dear to Virgil's poetic imagination, to which he was to return again in his poetry. The Sibyl of Cumae dominates the opening scenes of *Aeneid* 6 and reference is made there, as well as in *Aeneid* 3. 441f, to her oracles, the Sibylline books, soon to be transferred by Augustus to his new temple of Apollo on the Palatine. The image of Justice (Astraea, Iustitia) quitting the world when it grew wicked occurs again in a memorable passage in *Geo.* 2. 473f., and the Golden Age of Saturnus is mentioned in Anchises' speech in *Aeneid* 6. 791f. and described at length by Evander in *Aeneid* 8. 314f.

The cumulative effect of these images is to produce an evocative poetic picture of imminent idyllic peace and happiness after suffering and unhappiness in Virgil's own age, the age of iron (line 8). Behind the Roman themes of the Stoic *magnus annus*, of Iustitia, of Saturnus is the long pageant of Greek mythology about the past Golden Age, especially as told in Hesiod; but the idea of its return is Virgilian, not Hesiodic. All these sources are blended into a rich vision, dense in its poetic imagery rather than precise in its philosophy. The metrical style and the diction are characteristic of Virgil's Alexandrian mode in the *Eclogues* (very different indeed from the impetus and infinite variety of the *Aeneid*). Line 4 is a perfect Golden Line, and line 5 enclosed within the pattern of *magnus...ordo*. Repetition (which already has occurred in line 3) is a feature of the balance: *iam...iam...iam, redit...redeunt*.

The section ends where it began, with reference to Lucina, Diana in her capacity as goddess of childbirth and the sister of Apollo, god of the sibylline oracles at Cumae. The line is made memorable by the very unusual sense-pause (unusual especially in Virgil's early style) after the trochee of the third foot.

Next the occasion of the poem is made clear: it is addressed to Pollio, an eminent general, statesman and man of letters already referred to in *Eclogue* 3, who is about to enter upon the highest office of state. In his consulship peace will return after the civil wars (*sceleris...nostri*), and the last traces of sin be eradicated – again a patterned line to end the sentence, line 14.

Lines 15-16, like other places in the poem, are very reminiscent of the ending of Catullus 64 where the poet laments that since the passing of the Golden Age the gods no longer visit the earth or allow themselves to be seen (cf. also Cat. 64. 22f.). But there is the same contrast with Catullus as we have already noticed with Hesiod – the emphasis in Virgil is not on the pessimistic thought of the loss of the Golden Age, but on an optimistic confidence that it is about to return.

After the generalised description of the Golden Age (13-17), Virgil describes the three stages of its coming (18-45): the first of them is during the child's infancy. He begins with three richly coloured lines descriptive of luxuriant profusion, the last of them patterned in its word arrangement, and in the rest of the section we have again the repetition characteristic of this style (*ipsae...ipsa, occidet...occidet*). Notice too the menacing alliteration of the lions *magnos metuent armenta leones*. The list of features of the Golden Age is largely traditional: it is very noticeable that several of them are taken up again in Virgil's passage praising Italy in *Geo.* 2. 151f. (the absence of lions, poisonous herbs, snakes).

Virgil now passes (lines 26f.) to a second stage in the progression of the Golden Age. Lines 28-30 are astonishingly alike in their structure with their verbs enclosed by adjectives and nouns (29 is a perfect Golden Line and 28 and 30 very similar). The rhythm of a word of three long syllables after the 2½ caesura was a very favourite one with Catullus (over 40 in the first 100 lines of poem 64), but has only occurred once so far in this poem (line 5) until this remarkable triple occurrence. It does not occur again except for another remarkable cluster of six instances in 9 lines from 42-50, most of which like this passage is highly descriptive.

The remainder of this section (to line 36) stresses the gradual approach of the complete Golden Age: there will still be at this stage some relics of the corrupt past. The phraseology, *priscae vestigia fraudis*, recalls line 13 *sceleris vestigia nostri*: there we had the promise that these traces will vanish; here in this flashback we see that the process is not an immediate one. The examples given of activities contrary to the ease of the Golden Age seem to modern readers very strange: to sail the sea in ships does not appear heinous, and again ploughing the earth seems less than criminal. But the idea that to disturb the sea was impious seems to have been traditional in Golden Age legend; compare Horace *Odes* 1. 3. 21f. 'nequiquam deus abscedit prudens oceano dissociabili terras, si tamen impiae non tagenda rates transiliunt vada'. 'It was vain that God in his wisdom separated the lands with the dividing sea if in spite of it our wicked ships speed across the oceans which they should not touch'. This kind of activity is compared with Prometheus' impious theft of fire, and Daedalus' use of wings. We can compare also Hesiod *W.D.* 236-7, Aratus *Phaen.* 110-11, Tib. 1. 3. 37f., *Geo.* 2. 503f.

Virgil then proceeds to illustrate from legend the points he has made: the voyage of the first ship, the Argo, with its helmsman Tiphys will be repeated (this line again lacks main caesura in 3rd or 4th foot, like line 16); and the Trojan War will be repeated. The terror of the war is stressed by the epithet *magnus* applied to Achilles and the alliteration of the threatening letter *m*. These references again remind us of Catullus 64, which begins with the voyage of the Argo and contains the long prophecy of the Parcae about the birth of Achilles.

Thus Virgil introduces a note of warning, of continued suffering even in the Golden Age, but it is only transient and temporary. As the child grows to full stature these traces of the wicked past will vanish. This theme is elaborated in the paragraph which follows, the third of the three sections of this middle part of the poem (37-45). *Cedet et ipse mari vector* picks up line 32 and is elaborated in the next phrase, eliminating sea-borne trade as well as travel by sea; lines 39-41 pick up line 33 with the additional idea of pruning being unnecessary.

Then we come to the final and most exaggerated part of the idyllic vision, as Virgil visualises the sheep with fleeces of the appropriate colours, so that the dyeing of the wool becomes unnecessary. Commentators have been unhappy about this: Page says "There is only a step from the sublime to the ridiculous and Virgil has here decidedly taken it", and adds that it "might have suggested a warning to much medieval and modern extravagance which has parodied nature under the name of Art". Now when Page passes an artistic judgment he is almost always right, far more reliable in his judgments than Conington or Henry or any other Virgilian commentator of the nineteenth century – but here he is wrong. The passage aims above everything at visual impact – which it certainly achieves; and it serves to underline the notion running throughout this poem, that it is an imaginary and idyllic vision. It is a dream – it is comparable with the dream of Aeneas' visit to the underworld. The kaleidoscopic sheep are no more to be judged by reality than Cerberus or Charon or the monsters at the entrance to Hades. They are the poet's vision, beyond and above the realities of the everyday world. Of course such imaginings must not be used, without a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous, when the poet is talking about the known *everyday* world – but in this poem Virgil is *not*, and this passage underlines the fact. 'We are the dreamers of dreams' said O'Shaughnessy of poets, and in this poem we have Virgil's dream. It is a dream about the real world, not the pastoral world, but it is still a dream.

This section is rounded off (46-47) with yet another reminiscence of Catullus 64 where the Fates sing their wedding song with the refrain *currite ducentes subtegmina, currite, fusi*; and with a patterned line where the two adjectives are balanced by their nouns.

Now suddenly the dream-like poem leaps into activity and immediacy with the impetus of Virgil's urgent invocation to the child (an impetus which would be removed by the suggestion of some scholars that these lines should be regarded as a continuation of the speech of the Parcae). The urgency of line 48 is reinforced by the total conflict of accent and ictus in the first four feet, and this is echoed in the next line until the spondaic fifth foot, a metrical feature beloved by Catullus but much rarer in the *Eclogues*. The memorable word *incrementum* is presented very unusually in the sense of 'offspring', a repetition and dignified reinforcement of *suboles*, having about it something of the aura of the word 'increase'

in Biblical language. Now there follows an invocation addressed to the reader, with repetition of *aspice*: the sense is 'Look at the great universe – look how every part of it rejoices at the glory to come'. Then finally the poet turns to himself and his hopes that he will celebrate in suitable song the great occasion: first in two simple lines and then elaborated with mythological allusion to Orpheus, son of the Muse Calliopea and to Linus, Orpheus' teacher, son of Apollo, god of music: line 56 is metrically rough in contrast with the smoothness of the proper names in 57. And the paragraph is rounded in a totally Alexandrian manner with the almost exact repetition of one line by the next, and the metrical division of the words is exactly the same. The reference to Pan and Arcadia reminds us that this un-bucolic poem is nevertheless one in a collection of bucolics.

The Alexandrian type of repetition continues in the last four memorable lines – *incipi parve puer, matrem...matri, risu...risere, deus...dea*. There is an intimate softness of sentiment here reminiscent of Catullus' stanza about a little Torquatus (61. 216f.) and a powerful feeling of realism which much convince us that whatever the child in the poem symbolises, he is essentially visualised as a real child.

And here I have to speak about the interpretation of these lines, which have been perhaps more discussed than any other passage in ancient literature. I have nothing very new to say about them, except to emphasize certain literary aspects which make me quite certain in my mind that I know what they mean and that I know what the reading should be. The crux of course is in line 62 where the MSS give *cui non risere parentes* – 'a child upon whom his parents have not smiled', but Quintilian (9.3.8) quotes the line as an example of a plural (so *qui*) followed by a singular *hunc*. According to which reading one prefers one may interpret *risu* in 60 as 'by your mother's smile' or 'by smiling at your mother'.

Who then is doing the smiling? Surely the baby. The ablative in *risu cognoscere* is like the ablative in phrases like *accipere aliquem gaudio*; the point of line 61 is that the baby's smile is the reward for the mother after her long pregnancy; but above all else Virgil has Catullus in mind, as we have already seen, and is thinking of the wish that little Torquatus may smile sweetly on his father with tiny lips half-parted – *dulce rideat ad patrem semihiante labello* (61. 219-20).

Moreover the authority of Quintilian in line 62 gives us a reading which antedates the earliest MSS of Virgil by several centuries, and is not dependent on the MSS of Quintilian (which in fact have corrupted his reading) because what Quintilian is saying amounts to absolute proof that his reading was *qui*. But what seems decisive is the literary argument from the context and meaning: the child is emphatically urged to action by the repetition of *incipi parve puer*, he is urged to begin to do something. But if it is the parents who are smiling and if they don't the child won't dine with gods or sleep with goddesses – then what is the child supposed to begin to do? It is sensible and rhetorically powerful to say 'Begin, little child – those who don't smile...', but pointless and fairly nonsensical to say 'Begin, little child – those who don't get smiled on...'. No, no, (as James Henry would say) it is the child who must smile.