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Memory and Loss in the *Bucolics*

Memory is an integral component of Virgil's *Bucolics*. Two of the most basic features of the pastoral world are, after all, the recall and transmission of song by herdsmen such as Meliboeus and Menalcas. As Michael Putnam observes, "one need not stress again the importance of memory in bucolic poetry, which is regularly stylized as an oral form" (Putnam 1970, 314). As a result of the significance of memory for performance and continuity in the pastoral landscape, it is surprising that in the *Bucolics* the reader finds extensive evidence of mnemonic dysfunction. In *Bucolic* 1, for instance, there is not the expected amoebian exchange between singers, but rather silence. Neither Tityrus nor Meliboeus recall any songs and the latter admits that, for him, the cycle of poetry has broken down (*carmina nulla canam*, 1.77). Mnemonic disruptions are even more prominent in *Bucolic* 9. When Moeris turns to sing, for example, he struggles to remember a piece on Galatea (*si ualeam meminisse*, 9.38). Problems recur in Lycidas' response to Moeris. He likewise experiences difficulties when he attempts to remember a song on the *sidus Iulium* (*numeros memini, si uerba tenerem*, 9.45). This inability of the herdsmen to remember soon reaches a climax when Moeris acknowledges that many songs from his past have now been relegated to oblivion (*nunc oblita mihi tot carmina*, 9.53). Memory problems appear elsewhere in the collection. In *Bucolic* 3, for example, Menalcas is unable to remember the name of one of the figures carved on the beechwood cups he proposes to wager (3.40-42). Mopsus' reliance upon writing in *Bucolic* 5 (5.13-15), moreover, is also relevant. This new feature not only signals a concern with memorialization and permanence, but may also be viewed as an aid to memory (Clausen 1994, *ad* 5.13). Given the importance of memory in the pastoral world, these frequent collapses in the mnemonic process present a remarkable situation. Their absence from the Theocritean *Idylls* both buttresses this conclusion and suggests that memory problems are a distinctive feature of Virgilian pastoral.

The problematization of memory in the *Bucolics*, however, has not received comprehensive treatment. Existing analyses usually focus on individual poems and attribute disruptions to rustic characterization (Coleman 1977, Clausen 1994) or the "revisionary misprision inherent in all poetic memory" (Hubbard 1998, 124). Yet in this paper I argue that cultural context supplies a more profitable framework for interpretation. Numerous sociological and literary studies have observed that memory problems frequently find expression in times of social and political upheaval (Terdiman 1993, Gross 2000). Critics have traced this same phenomenon in Rome in the first century B.C. Gowing (2000), for instance, has elucidated how the concerns with memory that permeate Cicero's *Brutus* stem from the political unrest of the late Republic. Wallace-Hadrill (1997) has made similar observations in relation to the role of antiquarianism in the transition from the Republic to the Principate. These studies not only underscore the disquiet over memory in the first century B.C., but also expose its origins in the perceived instability of the *respublica*. It is within such a context, I suggest, that we can find an applicable model for the place of memory in the *Bucolics*. We should resist seeing the complications with memory in the *Bucolics* simply as rustic characterization, in other words, but more likely as evidence of a more extensive memory

crisis. What makes this conclusion more compelling, of course, are the frequent interconnections Virgil establishes between memory problems and the social and political disorder of the forties and thirties. The collapse of memory in the *Bucolics* is most pronounced in poems 9 and 1. Not coincidentally, it is in these poems, to a greater extent than any others in the collection that the current conflicts at Rome intrude into the pastoral world. This situating of memory within its larger social context thus demonstrates that in his treatment of the topic Virgil was in many ways reflecting upon and participating in a larger cultural preoccupation.