The Singer’s Shrine: Constructing Space for Poetic Immortality in Vergil’s Fifth Eclogue

In Vergil’s fifth eclogue, the poet deviates from his Theocritean model by prophesizing Daphnis’ impending immortality. The reader understands why Daphnis is so deserving of perpetual memory: he was the first to introduce the Bacchic rites to his bucolic community (Ec. 5.29-30). These feats are the ostensible reasons the singer-hero is deemed a subject worthy of song, and they also explain why Daphnis receives his own shrine and ritual offerings within the poem. The combination of the two elements, song and shrine, ensures that Daphnis will be remembered, and ultimately grants him the status of a divinus poeta (45).

For all Vergil’s debts to his Theocritean model, the idea that shrine and song can ensure eternal memory has a Republican lineage as well as a Hellenistic one. Cicero, an older contemporary of Vergil’s, seems to have understood the power of monumenta perfectly as he writes to Atticus detailing his plans for a shrine honoring his deceased daughter, Tullia (ad Att. 12.37a). Cicero’s correspondence with Atticus is fertile material for thinking about the ways in which real Romans memorialized their kin during the late Republic, and Cicero’s musings about immortalization recur in his other writings with increasing frequency after Tullia’s death (cf. de Finibus, Disputationes Tusculanae, de Amicitia, etc.).

By drawing connections between the Eclogues, the Ciceronian corpus and historical funerary practices of the late Republic, this paper moves away from the ideological and intertextual readings of recent scholarship on Vergil’s pastoral poetry. Instead, I embed the Eclogues in a richer historical framework to argue that contemporary ideas at Rome about divinization, as well as thoughts about immortality expressed in Cicero’s philosophical works and correspondence activate Vergil’s fifth bucolic and suggest that the civic efficacy of a poet’s song could earn him an eternal memory through funerary ritual and shrine.

Select Bibliography: