The role of the herd in Virgil’s *Eclogues* – ‘nec te paeniteat pecoris’

by

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Abstract:

In this paper I shall take a closer look at the role played by the herd in Virgil’s pastoral poetry. Are the animals only a part of the setting or do they also have a semiotic or narrative function? Do they perhaps play an important part in the poetics of pastoral? So far the domestic animals have been rather neglected in scholarship on the *Eclogues*. It is my hope that such an investigation could turn out to offer a fresh and important angle to the reading of Virgil’s text.

The *Eclogues* – so important for all later pastoral – make up a set of ambiguous and multilayered texts. Richard Jenkyns remarks that ‘it is one of the greatest ironies of literary history that these elusive, various, eccentric poems should have become the pattern of hundreds of later writers’.¹ The debates and uncertainties are well known, and they relate to different aspects of the poems ranging from politics and patronage to the order of the collection and poetics.² The problems of definition also differ from many of the other ancient genres, since we do not have any guidelines for pastoral in any of the surviving ancient poetic treatises.³ The story of pastoral theory has therefore become very much the story of the reception of Virgil and Theocritus, and Virgil’s version of Theocritus rather than Theocritus himself.⁴ It is accordingly my hope that an investigation of the role of the herd could turn out to play a certain part not only in the reading of Virgil’s *Eclogues*, but also in relation to what one might call the ‘pastoral problem’.⁵ However, I have no pretence of giving a single answer to either the role of the herd in the *Eclogues* or the nature of pastoral. By turning the spotlight in the direction of the domestic animals it is rather my aim to open a new vista of possibilities in relation to this text and the pastoral genre.

The pastoral landscape has been a popular object of scholarly literature in the past centuries, and, more recently, the eco-critical turn of pastoral theory has prompted fresh interest in the topic.⁶ This interest in the pastoral landscape is partly convergent with and inspired by an interest in the notion of Arcadia.⁷ Some articles have also been written on the hierarchy of the herdsman in Theocritus and Virgil in the tradition from the *Vita Donati* (215-18).⁸ There seems however to be a lacuna in the scholarly literature with regard to the herd present in pastoral poetry. Of course single observations occur in commentaries and articles, but there is no adequate survey. The only exceptions are Thomas Rosenmeyer’s chapter on animals in his work on pastoral,⁹ and Auguste Cartault’s useful survey Etude sur les Bucoliques from the end of the 19th century.¹⁰

The herd also plays a more backstage part in the pictorial reception of pastoral. If one considers some of the most prominent pastoral images, such as Poussin’s painting *Et in Arcadia ego* (Fig. 1), there are no sheep or other domestic animals present. The illustration to Battista Guarini’s pastoral drama *Il pastor Fido* from a Venice-edition of the play from 1605 (Fig. 2) is an other case in point: eleven shepherds with crooks, but not a herd in sight. In these two images we see the shepherds taking the centre stage. In other cases, like Claude Lorran (Fig. 3), we see the landscape taking over. In all cases the herd plays a backstage role – if it is given a role at all.

Contrary to the meagre scholarly and pictorial interest, I would argue that the pastoral herd actually needs special attention. It might for example be particularly pertinent to take a look at the role of the herd in the light of recent debates on the very nature of pastoral.
The American scholar, Paul Alpers defines pastoral through what he calls a representative anecdote: that of herdsmen and their life. As the domestic animals constitute the single element that distinguishes herdsmen from other professions they should be seen as rather important. As Rosenmeyer states: ‘the fact that animals are on the scene stamps the scene as a pastoral one’.

If one takes a look at the famous frontispiece by Simone Martini to Petrarch’s Virgil-manuscript (Fig. 4), this is quite clear. In this image – an image that has no pretense of being a specifically pastoral image – we see Virgil, Servius and the three major Virgilian opera represented by the soldier, the farmer and the shepherd, and the shepherd is of course marked as a shepherd through his sheep. Likewise Corydon defines himself as a shepherd in Ecl. 2 vv. 20-21 by referring to his flock.

What can looking at the herd tell us, then? Rosenmeyer states that ‘in the pastoral pleasance, the animals are free; their vitality is such that it brooks no subjection to ulterior ends. Theocritus and Virgil knew this, and proceeded accordingly’.

This is a statement particularly based on his observation that the bucolic style in general frowns upon animal comparisons and shows a surprising scarcity of animal-similes. Yet, I would argue that at least Virgil puts the animals to a very good use – poetically speaking. In the following I shall attempt to highlight what I would call Virgil’s most specific poetic usage of domestic animals through a very brief survey of the major instances where these animals are mentioned.

The first important observation I want to make is the fact that domestic animals are hardly mentioned as much as one might expect given the pastoral nature of these poems. In the 10 poems covering a little over 800 lines I have only found about 18 places where the herd is dealt with in some way or other, and apart from perhaps the first eclogue they never take the centre stage. The French scholar Cartault notes that, Les pâtres de Virgile sont moins intimes que ceux de Théocrite avec leurs bêtes; ils ne les interpellent que rarement. I shall not go into a comparison with Theocritus here, simply notice Cartault’s observation that the shepherds only rarely interact with the herd.

In Georgics III. 286-290 Virgil calls it a great task to invest such humble things as the shaggy goats and sheep with dignity. An astute reader of the Georgics might therefore infer that his strategy in the Eclogues is to simply avoid bringing attention to the herd. However, despite this very passive role and the rather infrequent interference, I shall continue to claim that they do have an important part to play and that the animals appear in most strategic positions.

First, as remarked by Rosenmeyer above and illustrated by Simone Martini (Fig. 4), the herd is the sign that indicates that we are dealing with a pastoral poem. The flock operates as a generic marker, or like the attribute of a god: the one element that signals the bucolic. The shepherd’s staff used to signify the activity of the shepherds in the illustration by Guarini occurs only once in the Eclogues. Accordingly, no poem is completely without reference to the herd. Even in Ecl. 4, the description of the golden age paradise, which is otherwise a generically intricate poem, we have some mention of sheep (vv.21-22 and 42-45) that might remind us that we are still moving within a pastoral context. Ecl. 9 is an other case in point: in this poem the two shepherds are trying to remember songs, and we are at once reminded that one of these songs is pastoral through the mentioning of the name Tityrus and the herd (vv. 21-25).
Apart from being one of the most explicit and technical reference to herding in the entire Eclogues, this reference makes it absolutely clear that Lycidas is thinking of a pastoral song. The use of the herd to mark out a poem as pastoral is a very obvious and perhaps banal point to make, but I think it still needs to be uttered.

Second, as remarked by Robert Coleman in the case of Theocritus, issues related to the herd often function as a framing device. The Eclogues do not really involve much action. And what little action there is (people meeting, time to rest etc.) is mostly placed at the beginning and end of each Eclogue. Particularly in the poems that deal with singing competitions to mention the herd works as incipits and closing scenes. Ecls. 3, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 10 either begin with or begin and end with some kind of reference to the herd. Ecl. 7, vv. 1-5, is a typical example of the poet setting the scene before the singing can start and the prominent place the domestic animals have in this process:

Or there’s the song I lately overheard from you, The day you made your way to our darling Amaryllis: ‘Tityrus till I come (the way’s short) feed the goats, And drive them fed to water, Tityrus, and take care While driving not to cross the he-goat – that one butts’

After this follows a passage where the narrator (Meli-boeus) is told by Daphnis to rest and listen to the great match since his flock is safe, before the great match Corydon v. Thyrsis starts. The respective flocks are the first qualifying features the poet offers of Corydon and Thyrsis, even before we are told that they are Arcadians and able singers. The reader is thereby made absolutely certain that what is to follow is a pastoral song. Similarly Ecl. 6, the so-called Silenus epyllion, which in many ways wanders far beyond the strictly pastoral in its cosmology and neoteric poetics, is pastorally closed with a reference to the flock (vv.84-86):

He sings (the smitten valleys tell it to the stars), Till Vesper came to view in a reluctant sky And bade the flock be folded and their number told.

Through this return to the mundane counting of the flock, the reader is back in the pastoral framework before the poem is ended. Virgil also uses this technique for the entire collection: when the sheep go home in Ecl. 10, the Eclogues are over and Virgil’s pastoral period has come to an end. This narrative framing function, I will argue, also carries a wider significance. The placing of the animals in the beginning gives the pastoral poems a defined spot from where to start. It contributes to give the shepherd/poet a platform from which he can talk and a common ground from where he can divert. In a recent PhD thesis Timothy Saunders points out the importance of the landscape as the actual physical place from where the singing starts. Similarly, but from the perspective of the shepherd, Paul Alpers emphasises the importance of convention and convening in the pastoral genre – the actual meeting of shepherds as a premise for poetry. In Saundier’s terms I would call the presence of the herd a signpost in the landscape of the pastoral dwelling place. In Alpers terms I would call their presence yet another form of convention – which in some cases they truly are, e.g. Ecl. 7 starts with not only Corydon and Thyrsis meeting, but also combining their flocks (vv.1-2, quoted above).

Whether one chooses to go with Alpers or Saunders, I would argue that the most important function of this framing is its generic function: By having set out the major conventions and defined the place from where the poet/shepherd speaks – the genre has a firm frame within which the poet can operate. By mentioning the
herd in this frame, the poem is defined as pastoral. From there the poet can go on to discuss erotics, poetica, and politics. Ecl. 6, the Silenus-epyllion, is a case in point with its cosmology and bizarre mythology framed by two references two the herd (vv. 4-5 quoted below and v. 84-86 quoted above).

This frameworking technique and the use of the herd as a clear generic marker, I would argue, also plays a large part in why the genre has become so popular throughout literary history. Once this very fixed frame is established, the poet can do whatever he likes.24

This gives the pastoral poet a liberal room for manoeuvre. There is accordingly a certain irony in the use of domestic animals as a defining factor: once the frame is sufficiently given and the flock has been placed on stage the poet/shepherd needs it to withdraw/calm down/take a rest in order to compose. Thus in Ecl. 5 v.12 an important premise for the singing is that Tityrus watches the flock while the others sing: incipe: pascentis servabit Tityrus haedos (you start, and Tityrus will watch the grazing kids). Likewise, in Ecl. 7 Meliboeus can take time off only after he hears that his goat is safe (vv. 7-10). Even for love to start the shepherd-business has to be over, e.g. in Ecl. 7 the bulls have to have returned home before the amorous encounter with Galatea can happen. Luckily shepherds have a lot of time off when the herd goes grazing on its own and the sun is too hot for doing anything else than seeking a shadowy tree.

This is probably another reason why shepherdpoets have proved such a success in literary history – whether one thinks of them as developed from real herding-songs or being purely artistic creations – to compose you need a lot of leisure. Accordingly it is absolutely no surprise if the herd is rather invisible in the shepherd’s song itself. The herd represents the premise for the otium, but what you fill the leisure with is another matter.

The first eclogue is one of the poems where we hear slightly more of the domestic animals, and where I would argue they also take on more than a framing generic function: the shepherd’s relationship with the herd has an important poetic significance. In this poem we meet the herd already in Tityrus’ first response to Meliboeus (vv. 6-10):

O Meliboeus, deus nobis haec otia fecit.
namque erit ille mihi semper deus, illius aram
saepé tener nostras ab ovilibus imbuet agnus.
ille meas errare boves, ut cernis, et ipsum
ludere quae vellem calamo permisit agresti.

Non equidem invideo, mirror magis: undeque tots
usque adeo turbatur agris. en ipse capellas
protinus aeger agn; hanc etiam vix, Tityre, duco.
huc inter densas corytlos modo namque gemellos,
spem gregis, a! silice in nuda conixa reliquit.

I am not envious, more amazed: the countryside’s
All in turmoil. Sick myself, look, Tityrus,
I drive goats forward; this one I can hardly lead.
For here in the hazel thicket just now dropping twins,
Ah, the flock’s hope, on naked flint, she abandoned them.

The contrasting situations of the two shepherds is here primarily illustrated by the different situations of their respective flocks.

The next significant encounter with domestic animals in the first Eclogue is the reply from the young god to Tityrus (v.45): pascite ut ante boves, pueri, summitite tauros’. (Grazing cattle as before, and yoke the bulls). Libertas (v. 27) is here given through the right to let the herd graze. As in Tityrus’ first response there is a close connection between the situation of the flock and the general status of the shepherd. I shall not go into all the political implications these lines have in relation to the very important political background - the harsh realities of the land confiscations.26 The only political point I want to make here is the simple fact that it is these references that work as links to the political reality. For the sake of this paper I am more interested in the link between the herding and the singing-conditions that seem to be apparent in this Ecologue. Others have noted how poetica is a prominent feature in this poem.27 Tityrus’ meditation on the woodland Muse is signposting a specific poetica for the Eclogues; a short and learned form i.a. inspired by Callimachus.28 The shepherd’s music is like Virgil’s own pastoral poetry. The singing throughout can therefore on a meta-poetic level be read as the composing of poetry. A link between herding and singing, as seen in vv. 11-15, makes the herd important in the marking out of a pastoral poetica. This link is further strengthened towards the end of the first Eclogue, where the connection between singing and pasturing is made also by Meliboeus (vv. 74-78):

ite meae, felix quondam pecus, ite capellae.
non ego vos postlac viridi projectus in antro
doomus pendere procul rupe vides;
carmine nulla caram: non me pascente, capellae,
florantem cythis et salices carpitis amaras.

Go, little she-goats, go, once happy fl ock of mine.
Not I hereafter, stretched full length in some green cave,
Shall watch you far off hanging on a thorny crag;
I’ll sing no songs, not in my keeping. little goats,
You’ll crop the flowering lucerne and bitter willow.

The singing is here literally placed between the herd (pecus and capellae) and the pasturing (me pascente). A similar juxtaposition of the composing of poetry and
herding is apparent in *Ecl. 6*. In this poem we meet the flock in the famous callimachean *recusatio* (vv. 1-5):

Prima Syracosio dignata est ludere versu
nostra neque erubuit silvas habitare Thalea.
cum canerem reges et proelia, Cynthius aurem
velli et admonuit: ‘pastorem, Tityrus, pinguis
pascere oportet ovis, deductum dicere carmen.’

With Syracusan verses our Thalea first
Thought fit to play, nor blushed to live among the woods.
When I was singing kings and battles, Cynthius pulled
My ear in admonition: ‘A shepherd, Tityrus,
Should feed his flock fat, but recite a thin-spun song.’

In Apollo’s admonition the shepherding and singing are somewhat seen as in opposition to each other at the same time as they are syntactically on the same level. How does this fit in with my thesis of the herd as one of the most important signposts for the pastoral situation in pastoral poetry? I would argue that the mentioning of the herd by both Meliboeus and Tityrus in *Ecl. 1* and the opening of *Ecl. 6*, could work in a similar way. The situation of the herd constitutes an image of the premises for writing and performing poetry. But rather than simply being the framework from where the shepherd-singer would move onto other things, this condition takes the centre stage. Notice the placement of these passages, the opening of *Ecl. 6*, and in the case of the first Eclogue, the opening of the entire collection. The latter is well balanced by the flock going home at the end of *Ecl. 10*.

What does a vista of the *Eclogues* from the point of view of the domestic animals imply in relation to the broader issues concerning Virgilian pastoral? As shown in this paper, the domestic animals play an important part in the creation of a pastoral framework. And it is precisely because this framework is so clearly defined, not least by using domestic animals as signposts, that the genre can be so liberal in relation to its content as both Virgil and his reception clearly demonstrate that it is. The domestic animals therefore make up an important premise for the writing of pastoral poetry. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the herd and herding take a significant place in Virgil’s own description of a specifically pastoral poetics. This does not necessarily lead us to a new definition of the pastoral or a completely revised view of Virgil’s *Eclogues*, but I hope to have shown that looking in more detail at the role of the herd – which I have only started – might prove useful both to a further investigation of the *Eclogues* and other pastoral texts. Finally, therefore, I would argue that Virgil’s hortation to the divine poet in *Ecl. 10*, *nee te pauenete pecus*, should also go for the scholar – divine or not: do not be ashamed of the *pecus*.

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2 For a brief historical overview of the major debates on Virgil’s *Eclogues*, see Leach 1974, 19-21.
3 As the first to write a dissertation on the pastoral genre, René Rapin, complained: ‘I have no guide, neither Aristotle nor Horace to direct me … and I am of the opinion that none can treat well and clearly of any kind of poetry if he hath no help from these two’. Quoted from Halperin 1983, 39.
4 Accordingly the genre is named by its Latin name ‘pastoral’, rather than the Greek ‘bucolic’. For a discussion of this, see Martindale 1997, 108. Thus, even though Jenkyns in many ways is right when he stresses that ‘in a significant sense it is misleading to talk about pastoral at all in relation to Ancient literature’, (Jenkyns 1998, 178-9) the ancient texts through their reception do play a significant part in the later concept of pastoral. I shall therefore continue to use the term ‘pastoral’, but fully aware of potential anachronism. On the same note as Jenkyns, David Halperin 1983 calls his monograph on Theocritus *Before Pastoral*.
6 E.g. Snell 1953, Nethercut 1967, Leach 1974, Jenkyns 1998, Saunders 2001. Alpers 1979, 5-6, argues that to give such a centrality to landscape in the definition of pastoral is a modern misunderstanding built upon the reading of romantic poetry rather than in accord with Greek and Roman thinking. Saunders 2001, 36-38 and 167-96, although agreeing with Alpers up to a point, contests his general thesis through disagreeing with his view of the pictorial.
7 On Arcadia in pastoral, see e.g. Snell 1953 and Jenkyns 1989.
8 According to Donatus, cattleherds take precedence over shepherds and shepherds over goatherds, see e.g. Coleman 1974, 24.
9 Rosenmeyer 1969, 131-144. This chapter is, however, slightly problematic to use because he does not really distinguish between domestic animals and wild animals.
11 Rosenmeyer 1969, 131.
12 On this image, see e.g. Patterson 1987, 19-23. She argues that the entire situation in this frontispiece is pastoral.
13 *quam dives pecoris, nivei quam lactis abundans.* *Siculis errant in montibus agnae* (How rich in flocks, how affluent in snowy milk. My thousand ewe-lambs range the hills of Sicily) (*Ecl. 2*, 19-21).
14 Rosenmeyer 1969, 144.
15 The passages I refer to are: *Ecl. 1.7-10*, 11-15, 44-5, 74-9; *Ecl. 2*, 19-21; *Ecl. 3*, 1-6; *Ecl. 4.21-2*, 42-45; *Ecl. 5.13*, *Ecl. 6.4-5*, 84-6; *Ecl. 7.1-10*; *Ecl. 8.1-5*; *Ecl. 9*, 5-6, 23-5, *Ecl. 10*, 7, 16-18, 75-7. By writing ‘dealt with in some way or other’ I exclude places where the name of a domestic animal is mentioned without any further significance. For an accurate list of all the names of animals used in the *Eclogues* and their frequency, see Cartault 1897, 438-442.
16 Cartault 1897, 442.
17 Whether Theocritus or Virgil shows the better knowledge of countryside-matters is not an uncontroversial issue. In general Cartault 1897 argues that Virgil deals with details of herding and the herd in a more economical way than Theocritus (448). Coleman 1980 argues for the opposite, 23.
18 *superat pars altera curae, inaneros agitare greges hirtasque capellas. hic labor, hinc laudem fortes sperate coloni. nec sum animi dubius, verbis ea vincere magnum quam sit et augustis hunc addere rebus homonem.* (My second part remains, to drive
afield/My flocks of fleecy sheep and shaggy goats./ Here’s work for you, stalwart farmers, and here’s hope/ Of earning praise. I’m well aware how great/ A task it is by mastery of words/ To invest such humble things with dignity) (Geor.3. 286-90) Transl. L.P. Wilkinson, *Virgil. The Georgics*. Penguin Books 1982.

19 All texts and translations are taken from Lee '1984.
20 Coleman 1977, 8 and 23.
21 *ite domum saturae, venit Hesperus, ite capellae* (Go little she-goats, Hesper comes, go home replete) (*Ecl.*10, v. 77).

24 A striking example is the use of pastoral by political dissenters like the renaissance poet Serafino Ciminelli.
25 On the equivalence of animals and poetry in this passage, see Iser 1993, 32-3.
26 See e.g. Winterbottom 1990 and Clausen 1994, 30-31.
28 This is most clearly set out in the recusatio in *Ecl.* 6 (which is echoed in *Ecl.* 1, see Clausen 1994, xxv), but e.g. Jenkyns 1998 names his entire chapter on the Eclogues ‘The neoteric experience’ Others have, however, promoted a more nuanced view, e.g. Van Sickle 2000.

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