CHAPTER FIVE

VERGIL’S GEOPOLITICS

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Throughout the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid*, Vergil’s geopolitics are at work as a pervasive influence upon their readers. In Vergil geopolitics not only involves political activity that takes place in a geographical space but also the causal relationships that exist between political power and imperial space. My application of geopolitics involves this nexus of political and geographical factors but emphasizes specifically the political aspects that relate to, influence, weigh upon or literally cast their shadow upon a particular geographical space, in the case of Vergil, the countryside. Snell acknowledges that Vergil permits political matters to intrude into his Arcadia but maintains that the poet is “always careful not to get involved in the slippery problems of political action; in fact one may presume that they never even penetrated to his dreaming ear.”¹ Even so, a work like the *Eclogues* is heavily political, as critics recognized during the Renaissance. In the *Defence of Poesie* Philip Sidney writes, “is the poore pipe [pastoral poetry] disdained, which sometimes out of Moelibeus mouth, can shewe the miserie of people, under hard Lords and ravening soouldiers?”²

Vergil is indeed a political poet: so persistent is the intrusion of political issues and themes at every level of discourse in the *Eclogues, Georgics*, and *Aeneid* that it can be said that the poems constitute a political and ideological statement. Accordingly the setting of the *Eclogues, Georgics*, and the second half of the *Aeneid* is Italy; Arcadia, in fact, is mentioned specifically only a half dozen times (*Ecl.* 4.58, 4.59, 10.26; *G.* 3.392; *Aen.* 8.159, 10.429).³ The geographical common ground of Italy in all three works is consonant with its political elements.⁴ This association

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¹ Snell (1953) 294.
² Sidney (1595) n.p.
⁴ The issues raised in this discussion extend in the Vergilian text to geographical spaces outside Italy and the Roman world. In the *Georgics*, for example, there are references to the contamination or destruction of nature outside Italy such as the bones of the dead at Philippi (*G.* 1.489–97, esp. 490), the plague at Noricum (*G.* 3.478–566, esp. 474), and the butchery of animals in Scythia (*G.* 3.356–75).
between geography and politics is articulated in many forms during the Augustan age, especially its literature and architecture, but receives special emphasis in the Vergilian corpus or text. Just as Arcadia is never simply a landscape, Italy is never simply a geographical place. From the standpoint of its inhabitants and the narrator, the various features of the natural world are in a constant state of flux, ontogenesis, and decomposition. As symbolized by the shades overhanging the land that are incertas (e.g., Ecl. 5.5), the landscape never stabilizes; nor is it possible to demarcate absolutely its elements from those of the city. The physical environment is both Arcadia (e.g., Ecl. 4.58–9) and Italy (e.g., Aem. 7.776); there is the natural cycle of the seasons (e.g., G. 2.317–45); soldiers representing the values of the urban, politico-military superstructure replace traditional shepherds and farmers (e.g., Ecl. 1.70–1); and the implements of husbandry are recast into the weapons of that world (G. 1.508).

My investigation of Vergilian geopolitics concerns the ways in which Vergil successively incorporates the reality of contemporary Rome into the natural dialectics of the Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid.\(^5\) Time and again political events are framed and to a varying extent exposed by the environment in which they take place; a frequent index of sympathy in Vergil is to be found in the narrator’s presentation of or focalization upon aspects of the natural world.\(^6\) Expressed simply, Vergil uses nature to explore political issues throughout his œuvre. Although Vergil’s pastoral world has been viewed generally as a place of co-operation between man and the natural environment,\(^7\) the essential features of Vergil’s commentary in exposing the vulnerability of the environment and its denizens to the ever-encroaching politico-military and urban worlds are not just generally sustained—despite moments of optimism and hope—but rather increase in magnitude and gravity as his narrative progresses.\(^8\) The Aeneid predicts both the past and the

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\(^5\) In preparation for the writing of this chapter, all the references to nature in Vergil were recorded; I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Paul Roche in the compilation of these lists.

\(^6\) I am not concerned here with the ways that Vergil feminizes the landscape and associates nature and land with women, each of which are the object of male control and possession. For this idea see Keith (2000) 36–65 and Quarterone (2002) 147–58; cf. Oliensis (1997b) 304.

\(^7\) Halperin (1983) 42–9.

\(^8\) Cf. Anderson (1968) 1–17, who argues that pastoral innocence in the Aeneid becomes compromised in the world of political responsibility as represented in the figure of Aeneas.