PANEGYRIC IN VIRGIL’S BUCOLICS

Ruurd R. Nauta

Panegyric is not a very popular topic in the study of pastoral: sometimes it is roundly condemned as being alien to the spirit of ‘true’ pastoral, more often it is just ignored or treated as a marginal phenomenon. But I do not intend to argue that panegyric is, after all, compatible with, or even intrinsic to, pastoral. I will not discuss the question ‘what is pastoral?’; nor the question ‘what is panegyric?’; but I will only add some detail to the observation that there is, in fact, panegyric in pastoral. This holds true especially for the Latin tradition; in the Greek tradition panegyric is virtually absent, even though Theocritus’ poems on herdsmen are connected in significant ways to his more overtly encomiastic compositions and to the political discourses of the world in which he wrote. But in Virgil’s Bucolics (as the Eclogues are more properly called) almost all eclogues contain some kind of panegyric (or at least some kind of discussion of panegyric), and in Calpurnius Siculus panegyric determines the character of the first, middle and last eclogues of the book. At some moments in the Middle Ages, and then in the Renaissance after the rediscovery of Calpurnius around 1360, Virgil was read ‘through’ Calpurnius (as well as ‘through’ the ancient commentators), and this determined the way panegyric was henceforth incorporated into pastoral. Accordingly, a survey of panegyric in pastoral would need to comprise at least three chapters: on Vir-
gil, on Calpurnius Siculus, and on the later tradition. But the present contribution has space for one chapter only, and this must be the first, on Virgil.

1. Aelius Donatus and Servius on praise in Virgil’s Bucolics

The ancient commentators on Virgil were less reluctant than their modern counterparts to see panegyric as a central component of his Bucolics. The most famous of these commentators is Aelius Donatus, whose commentary is lost, but whose life of Virgil is preserved, together with his introduction to the Bucolics. In the introduction Donatus discusses among other points the intentio of the work, which, he says, consisted in imitatione Theocriti poetae … et … etiam in laude Caesaris et principum ceterorum per quos in sedes suas atque agros rediit, “in the imitation of the poet Theocritus … and … also in the praise of Caesar [i.e. Octavian, the later Augustus] and the other leaders through whom he [i.e. Virgil] returned to his home and his lands” (64 Diehl). In the biography he states that the poet composed the Bucolics maxime ut Asinium Pollionem, Alfenum Varum et Cornelium Gallum celebraret, quia in distributione agrorum … indemnem se praestitissent, “most of all in order to celebrate Asinius Pollio, Alfenus Varus and Cornelius Gallus, who in the land-distributions … had saved him from loss” (19). This passage, which almost certainly goes back to Suetonius, shows some differences from Donatus’ own account (no mention of Caesar; the land is not regained but kept), but concords in affirming that the poet had laudatory intentions. Such intentions were more easily assumed in antiquity than nowadays, and Donatus’ formulation of Virgil’s intentio in writing the Bucolics recurs in similar form in the account of the poet’s intentio in writing the Aeneid given by Servius (whose commentary, preserved in its entirety, is dependent on the lost work of Donatus): Homerum imitari et Augustum laudare

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4 For some remarks on panegyric in Calpurnius Siculus see the contribution of Mayer to this volume.
6 According to the survey in Naumann and Brugnoli (1990) 576, no scholar has denied Suetonian provenance. However, Bayer (2002) 191–196 articulates some residual doubts.