TIME AND TEXTUALITY IN
THE BOOK OF THE ECLOGUES

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To the degree that a book can be perfect, Virgil’s Eclogues have defined perfection. In this case, perfection equates to formal polish, symmetry, and, above all else, a dominant impression of unity achieved from the coordination of apparently disparate parts.¹ It is the function of the perfect book, in other words, to take the ten separate eklogues, eklogai, “selections”, and craft them into a singular, whole liber bucolicon.² To some readers, the intense poetic craft of the Eclogues has suggested a design of total completeness and even mystical significance. While not all have subscribed to such strong formulations, the history of the interpretation of the Eclogues is in no small part a history of responses to the unity of the book. At Rome, the Eclogues book set a precedent for formally polished poetic collections and, in the words of John Van Sickle, “immediately prompted a mode of reading appropriate to itself as a whole entity”.³ In other words, with their own poetry books, Horace, Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid inaugurated the tradition of the reception of the Eclogues as a unified book. History, however, has shown, if anything, the capacity of the perfect book to expose the imperfection of readers and of readings. It is fair to say that as yet no one ideal reader or ideal reading has emerged from the succession of efforts at describing the unity of the book.

The present discussion does not offer a new scheme to explain the “architecture”, “design”, or “structure” of the Eclogues. The prominence

¹ “The ‘Liber Bucolicorum’ is one of the few perfect books: each eclogue is enhanced somehow by its position—this effect was achieved, I have no doubt, by a certain amount of rewriting; and, taken together, the ten have an additional beauty and sense” (Clausen (1964) 193). See now Barchiesi (2005b) on perfection as a theme of scholarship on poetry books; my thanks to him for sharing his paper with me in advance of its publication.


of architectural metaphors like these in descriptions of ancient poetry books reflects a shared desire among critics to comment on the book as a complete and whole entity. For that, the appeal to vision, traditionally regarded as the sense that apprehends wholeness and simultaneity, is fundamental to architectural metaphors. And, in fact, a visual approach extends beyond just critical vocabulary. The charts and graphs that often accompany discussions of the Eclogues—representing the numbers of lines in poems or subdivisions of poems, shared themes between poems, and other patterns of symmetry and responson—function as visual abstractions of the book, snapshots of it as it exists all in a single moment. With the simultaneity of vision, however, we can contrast reading as a process that has movement both across the physical space of the book and through time. And this at least, no matter how obvious, merits stating right up front: attested theatrical performances of the Eclogues notwithstanding, the perfection of the Eclogues as a book presupposes an audience of readers, readers of a particularly attentive and engaged sort. While the activity of reading, at least in its most familiar modern form, does involve vision, in the form of the eye’s scanning of the page, even so, reading a book of poems is not particularly like looking at a building. For one thing, even the most assiduous reading does not, at least initially, apprehend wholeness and unity of the type that can be represented visually in a chart. Every reading might have unity and consolidation as its ultimate goal, whether that goal is acknowledged or not. But in the process of reading, the book of the Eclogues confronts the reader with an infinite number of ways in which it can be broken into pieces. To fall back on a familiar dichotomy, the diachronic experience of the Eclogues as a book is significantly different from the book taken in all its synchronic wholeness.

All poetic collections are characterized by the tension between diachronic diversity and synchronic unity. But in the case of the Eclogues, that tension has a particular generic relevance. In antiquity, pastoral, or bucolic, is a literary form found primarily in collections of short poems, that is in books. In this sense, pastoral contrasts itself with other genres, and with epic above all. As a collection of disparate parts a book

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4 Cf., e.g., Fowler (1991) 29–30.
5 Anderson (1986) 53–55 likewise interrogates the metaphors of “architecture” and “structure” for their suggestion that the experience of reading is analogous to visual scanning of a building, although not all of his objections are equally valid.