ANCIENT RITUAL AND THE SEARCH FOR ARCADIA: FROM VERGIL TO POUSSIN

Oh, what’s the way to Arcady?
The spring is rustling in the tree, –
The tree the wind is blowing through, –
It sets the blossoms flickering white.
I knew not skies could burn so blue
Nor any breezes blow so light.
They blow an old-time way for me,
Across the world to Arcady.
H. C. Bunner, The Way to Arcady

Introduction
In his Eclogues, a collection of ten poems that seemingly praises the felicitous lives of Roman shepherds, Vergil addressed some of the most pressing issues of his day, focusing on the civil wars that dealt a soaring wound to the Romans of his generation, and the hope for reconciliation that was rising through the political vision of Augustus. His pastoral images reflecting on human nature and progress are ruled by primitivism and allude to a much desired, yet unachievable past. Vergil specifies the locus of this ideal pastoral life, which originates in Hesiod and was revived many centuries later in the bucolic verses of Theocritus, as Arcadia. The first part of this paper examines the ideological nexus of Arcadia in antiquity and its ability to appeal to the Romans of the first century BCE. I argue that Arcadia, the original locus to have experienced the Golden Age, was transferred by Vergil to contemporary Roman countryside and invested with ritual and philosophical notions that actually render the Arcadian experience

tangible, the reversal of time to humanity’s first – primitive, yet happy – existence possible.

Vergil’s apocalyptic vision was further sanctioned through the prophetic authority of Orpheus who is repeatedly mentioned in the *Eclogues*. The emphasis here is not only on Orpheus’ musical excellence, but, also, his role as a theologian who had first introduced to the Greeks rites (*teletai*) concerned with the afterlife. Therefore, the second part of the paper, considers *Eclogues* 4, 5, and 10 in which Vergil is particularly at pains to present Arcadia as the background to Orpheus’ adventures. By placing the new Golden Age in a Roman Arcadia with Orpheus or Orpheus-like figures as officiating at it, Vergil does not simply negotiate the idea of returning to this ancient Shangri-La, but, in fact, he introduces ritual as the only means of dealing with loss and death in this otherworldly paradise.4

In the third part of the paper, I turn to Arcadia’s sudden popularity in early Renaissance art5 and, in particular, to Nicolas Poussin’s interpretation of Vergil’s ideal landscape.6 Poussin, who was born in 1594, had a profound classical education and was an avid reader of Vergil.7 He produced

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