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Καλόν and αἰσχρόν in Theocritus and in Virgil

Abstract
Nella produzione bucolica di Teocrito l’equilibrio tra idealizzazione e realismo nella rappresentazione della vita dei pastori è ottenuto con una sapiente alternanza tra momenti di delicata poesia e scene di volgare crudezza o di banale ingenuità. Quando Virgilio riprende in latino il genere bucolico, assecondando il gusto del suo tempo, ormai alieno dalla concretezza dei poeti ellenistici e neoterici, evita di riprodurre gli aspetti più rozzi e realistici della poesia teocritea o li addolcisce nei toni e nel linguaggio.

Abstract
In the bucolic production of Theocritus the balance between idealization and realism in the representation of pastoral life is obtained with a learned alternation between pieces of refined poetry and scenes of vulgar obscenity or trivial naivety. When Virgil introduces in Latin poetry the bucolic genre, in accordance with the taste of his time, reluctant to the concreteness of Hellenistic and neoteric poets, avoids reproducing the most crude and realistic aspects of Theocritean poetry, or softens them in spirit and language.

When in III century b. C. Theocritus invented the bucolic poetry, he faced the great difficulty of conflating realism and idealization in the representation of his shepherds. The poet was able to resolve the problem by alternating harshly realistic passages and pieces of great elegance, without ever renouncing his detachment and his subtle irony that mark his distance from the world he describes. For this reason, sometimes he represents in a very concrete and realistic way certain aspects of pastoral life, and in some passages he gives the impression of being pleased with an aesthetic of the ugly –so to speak– that actually has deep roots in Greek literary tradition. Think for example of the Homeric Tersites, or Hipponax iambic production, the comedy of Aristophanes, the mimiambs of Herodas and so on. In Theocritus this representation does not imply contempt, as in Homer or in Hipponax; in Theocritus it is rather an element of originality, useful to create distance from matter. Furthermore, this taste can be even the heritage of a mimic tradition deeply rooted in Siceliot area, in which Theocritus and his production are born. In some Theocritean idylls there are very rough passages, on obscene matters (4, 58-63), that result sometimes in grave offenses of a sexual nature (5, 39-42).
In other cases Theocritus expresses the ugly through unpleasant images, ungraceful expressions, negative thoughts, in order to sharpen the contrasts between singers in the agonistic idyllis. So images of great beauty can be abruptly followed by coarse phrases or situations that produce disturbing changes of tone. This is the case at 5, 45-52, in which the wonderful description of the *locus amoenus* contrasts with the disgusting details of vv. 51-52.

On the other hand, in the same idyll another beautiful description of the natural landscape (vv. 32-34) follows the trivial tone of v. 31.

When in the first century b. C. Virgil chooses to write bucolic poetry in Latin, he faces with this ambivalent poetics and aesthetic. He studies Theocritus and his literary world in depth, adopts his characters, images and style, but at a chronological and aesthetic level he remains far from his Greek model, since at the times of Virgil a very learned taste prevails, inherited from Callimachus and from the Neoterics and aimed to a stylistic perfection. Furthermore, Virgil and his fellow poets refuse the Alexandrian emotional detachment from the narration, so that in their production the reader is deeply involved in the characters and their stories (think of Catullus and, later, the elegists).

Another important feature of Virgilian poetry is the unceasing research for beauty, intended as balance and measure, far from the coarse mood of some Theocritean passages. Of course, the *genus humile* of bucolic poetry welcomes realism, but Virgil avoids any excess and tends to remove vulgar, comic and obscene traits from his bucolic poetry. Even if these features are in Theocritus, Virgil tends to ‘correct’ them. For this reason an analysis can help to define what Virgil considers beautiful and ugly and to discover his opinion on Theocritean poetry.

On several occasions, Virgil ennobles certain Theocritean scenes or erases the most coarse details. At *ecl.* 10, 21-30, alluding to Theocr. 1, 66 ss., in which the gods visit the dying Daphnis, he re-writes the words of Priapus, assigning them to higher divinities (Pan and Apollo) and changing their meaning. In Theocritus the obscene Priapus, according to his eminently and brutally sexual nature, does not understand why Daphnis is suffering, since he may have the girl who loves him and whom he rejects (vv. 82-88).
On the contrary, in Virg. *ecl.* 10 Apollo and Pan address to Gallus a warning on the measure and balance to be always maintained, avoiding excesses. And the Theocritean image of the girl who desperately wanders in search of Daphnis is reversed in that one of the elegiac *puella* who flees from the poet and follow a new lover in a winter landscape. With these words Apollo disapproves Gallus’ erotic *insania* (vv. 22-23).

And Pan remarks the importance of *modus* (vv. 28-30).

The elimination of the obscenity is even more evident in the animated beginning of *ecl.* 3. Here the model is one of the most trivial and rough of Theocritean scenes, the brutal exchange of sexual insults at 5, 41-44, already examined. In Virgil the charge of passive homosexuality, very common in antiquity, is only hinted, and the narration is opportunely interrupted with a meaningful aposiopesis (*verecunde*, says Serv. at v. 8). The smiling Nymphs and the comic detail of the he-goats *transversa tuentibus* contribute to lighten the scene:

Sometimes Virgil presents the preference for the ugly as a typical feature of Theocritean poetry. In particular when two shepherds challenge each other in song, in *ecl.* 3, 5 and 7, he explicitly compares a poetry inspired by Theocritus with his own new vision of the bucolic genre, respectively attributing to the singers ‘Theocritean’ and ‘Virgilian’ features, according to their poetic taste. The characters inspired by a Virgilian taste are increasingly original and innovative: this is the case with Menalcas, who in *ecl.* 3 employs expressions and images absent from the bucolic tradition, and in *ecl.* 5 invents the deification of Daphnis after his death. On the other hand, in *ecl.* 3, 5 and 7 Virgil assigns to the ‘Theocritean’ characters a taste for the ugly and the unpleasant, so that they prefer harshness of images and words, while the ‘Virgilian’ singers love sweet and delicate tones. This difference appears first in *ecl.* 3, in which Damoetas, one of the protagonists, is a follower of Theocritus; not by chance he always chooses Theocritean pieces as models for his verses. Compared to him, the younger Menalcas is the exponent of a new and different season of this poetry. In his verses he exhibits remarkably new features and often imitates non-bucolic genres.
So, when the author begins to characterize the poetic tendencies of his singers, he clearly attributes to them two contrasting aesthetics of ugliness and beauty, or—to use his words—a taste for *triste* (in the sense of ‘unpleasant, harmful’) and *dulce* (intended as ‘welcome’ and ‘pleasant’). So Damoetas employs violent and negative images to describe Amarillys’ fearsome wrath (vv. 80-81):

In these verses the unpleasant juxtaposition of hostile and violent situations is expressed with strident sounds (the *t*, the *r*) or grave sounds (the *u*). On the other side, Menalcas, in a deliberate contrast, depicts the joy that his beloved boy gives him, evoking pleasing situations, by means of sweet and clear sounds of the *d*, of the *l*, of the *a* (vv. 82-83):

This opposition is developed in *ecl. 5*, in which two shepherds perform songs on Daphnis: the first (Mopsus) starts from the narration of Daphnis’ death in Theocr. 1, the other introduces a new topic, his divinization (a likely Virgilian invention), that makes Daphnis a benevolent pastoral god. Here too, the relationship with Theocritean models highlights the poetic tastes of the characters: Mopsus, in fact, appears closely linked to Theocr. 1 and presents his song as the natural continuation of the Theocritean idyll. On the contrary, Menalcas symbolizes the Virgilian poetics and its novelty: his song is in fact completely independent of the Theocritean tradition, in which a deification of Daphnis is absent, and he appears rather influenced by other genres, including modern Latin poetry (Lucretius, the Neoterics). The difference between the two singers and their taste is made clear by the words with which each of them praises the song of the other. So Menalcas, although he uses Theocritean features and language to praise the song of Mopsus, chooses serene and restful images, marked by alliterations (vv. 45-47). The key-word of his poetics is again *dulcis* (v. 47):

The tones are soft, the images reassuring, the negative concepts such as tiredness (*fessis*) and *aestus*, the oppressing heat in summer, are softened by features (sleep in the grass, fresh water) that mitigate their hardness.

This is not the case for Mopsus: when he wants to exalt the effect of Menalca's song, he prefers strong and unpleasant images (vv. 82-84). Undoubtedly, these verses are very beautiful: more compact than those of Menalcas, they focus on auditive sensations,
since they are speaking about a song, and, notwithstanding their hard images, they evoke an idea of sublimity and reveal a stronger nature than Menalcas’ piece. They give an impression of power, the sounds reproduce the things (note the repetitions of the s in *venientis sibilus Austri*, which echoes the whistling of the wind, or the sound of t in *iu- vant fluctu tam litora*, to give the impression of the waves on the shore, or the rapid dactylic rhythm in *decurrent flumina valles*, which imitates the fall of the rivers). If in these verses, pronounced by a ‘Theocritean’ character, Virgil wants to define a concept of beauty from a Theocritean point of view, he attributes to his Greek model an extraordinary greatness but also a certain inclination toward the unpleasant and the ugly. On the contrary, it is just the refusal of these features that gives Virgilian poetry its musicality and grace.

In *ecl. 5* Virgil does not give an opinion on the poetic tastes of his shepherds; they are only juxtaposed. Later in the book, however, in *ecl. 7*, the two aesthetic visions are again confronted and here the poet takes a clear position in favour of his own aesthetical view, assigning the victory to the singer who represents it. In the singing competition of the eclogue, the two contenders, Corydon and Thyrsis, are defined, in imitation of Theocr. 6, equal both for their age and for their skill as poets, and in fact the verses they perform are equivalent. Here too we recognize the poetic tastes of the two shepherds, highlighted by their names: if Thyrsis is the name of the great singer in Theocr. 1, Corydon is a properly Virgilian name, as *ecl. 2* shows. Not by chance, Corydon, in contrast to Thyrsis, reveals a Callimacheus and Neoteric taste, and the preference for the erudite poetry of Euphorion and Partenius. Once again, the attitude of Corydon towards sweetness and grace is expressed by pleasing and delicate images and descriptions, while Thyrsis shows his preference for the sour and the negative. He appears arrogant and too sure of himself, and his responses to Corydon are usually opposite in tones. Thus, for example, to Corydon’s devotion to the virginal Delia he opposes his preference for the rough Priapus, and when his opponent proclaims his love and admiration for a poet named Codrus, he clearly declares his dislike for him in a very low language (*invidia rumpantur ilia Codro*, v. 26). At vv. 45-48, Corydon provides a wonderful description of
the summer landscape, in which fresh springs and the shade of the trees give a pleasant refreshment from the summer heat. Springs covered with moss, soft grass, shadow are skillfully opposed to the *solstitium* and to the *aestas torrida*: this adjective, emphasized by the enjambment, creates a sharp contrast with the fresh and the rest; and *lentus*, that here has the concrete meaning of ‘flexible’, adds the idea of placidity, while *defendite* evokes a welcome protection of the flock and of the shepherd. The key-word in this passage is *mollis*, in which the metaphorical sense of sweetness is mixed with the physical meaning of softness (the epithet may well be considered a synonym of *dulcis*, which in the eclogues expresses the peculiar attitude of Virgilian poetry): the unusual association with sleep contributes to this atmosphere of pleasant relax.

Listen now the reply of Thyrsis (vv. 49-52). Opposing to Corydon, he sets the scene in a winter landscape, even in a house, at least in the first two lines: the pleasing sense of warmth is however suggested through the rough image of the soot that blackens the jambs. Then, in a sharp contrast, the winter cold of Borea, the image of swollen and violent rivers and that of the hungry wolf are evoked: like Corydon, who through the mention of the scorching heat highlighted the pleasant resting in the cool, here the heat of the fire is emphasized through the opposition to the cold season. In this way Thyris, as we can see, confirms his inclination toward the negative and the unpleasant, and his images seem to suggest a hint of violence. Not by chance the key word in this section is *pingues*, alluding to physical concreteness, far from the elegance of Corydon.

The opposition between the characters and their tastes becomes more evident at vv. 37-43. In his description, Corydon compares the beauty of his beloved girl with the whiteness and sweetness of animals and plants, creating a bright and delicate atmosphere (vv. 37-38). Skillfully alluding to the etymology of the name Galatea from the Greek γάλα = ‘milk’, he focuses on the brightness of the white colour, framing v. 38 (*candidior cycnis, hedera formosior alba*) between the two adjectives that define it, arranged in chiasmus. Here too the presence of *dulcis* confirms this adjective as a key term defining Virgilian poetry (here it is strengthened by the association with Ibla, the place universally known for the sweetness of its honey). The contrast created by Thyrsis
in his reply is deliberately striking (vv. 41-43). Employing the same structure as Corydon (three images based on associations with plants), the singer gives the passage a harsh and rough tone by means of *amarior*, opposing to *dulcior* of Corydon. The choice of unpleasant images and negative ideas is deliberate, as the three comparatives *amarior*, *horridior* and *vilior* reveal, before that, at the end, *lux* enlightes the scene. The impression is as usually strengthened through the sounds: in the first two verses prevails the rough sound of the *r*, that only at v. 43 is softened by the nasals and *l*. This corresponds to the sense of the passage, that focuses on waiting for the evening and rest. In this eclogue the difference between the two poetics is evident, and, above all, in this poem the author expresses a value judgment. Here, in fact, the clear victory of Corydon illustrates the predilection of Virgil for a poetry based on the harmony of ideas, images and sounds, and on the refusal of the Theocritean taste for ugliness.

Thus, in his gradual path, Virgil in *ecl*. 3 has juxtaposed his bucolic poetry to Theocritus, attributing to his Greek model a sometimes unpleasant realism, which he eliminated from his own poems; in *ecl*. 5 the comparison focuses above all on the themes, revealing Virgil’s originality; here a remarkable beauty is attributed to the poetry inspired by Theocritus, although also a search for the ugly can be recognized in it. Finally, in *ecl*. 7 the two poetics are more carefully defined, and that derived from Theocritus is characterized as a deliberate search of the harsh, the rough, the unpleasant, and its final defeat by the new Virgilian vision of poetry is affirmed in the victory of Corydon. In this way, reworking the Theocritean realism according to his learned taste, Virgil, heir of Callimachus and of the Neoterics, overcomes and rejects his bucolic model and affirms the novelty and beauty of his pastoral poetry.

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