Boccaccio

A Critical Guide to the Complete Works

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The Buccolicum carmen, the single major poetic work in Latin by Boccaccio, is arguably also the most ambitious poetic work in his corpus. Boccaccio himself seems to claim as much in the Genealogia deorum gentilium when he defends the opinion that poets often hide meanings beneath the veil of stories, citing himself along with Virgil, Dante, and Petrarch. Petrarch’s pastoral poem, he tells us, gives readers more than enough evidence in its gravitas and exquisite elegance to deduce that the fantastical names of the characters have allegorical meanings in consonance with the moral philosophy of his De vita solitaria and other writings. With typical understatement, Boccaccio mentions that he could also offer as evidence of a philosophical poetry his own Buccolicum carmen, but that he is not yet important enough to be considered among such a distinguished crowd; besides, it is proper to leave the commentary on one’s own works to others. Despite the apparent modesty of Boccaccio’s self-mention, the parallel with Petrarch places him among the ranks of the modern philosophical poets descended from Virgil. Perhaps it is even an invitation to his contemporaries to write a commentary on his poem, such as those Servius and Nicholas of Trevet had written on Virgil’s Bucolica and those on Petrarch’s Buccolicum carmen by Donato degli Albanzani, Benvenuto da Imola, and Francesco Piendibenzi da Montepulciano.

Such commentaries on Boccaccio’s Buccolicum carmen, however, were never written, and in the history of criticism on the pastoral, Boccaccio’s poetry remains a footnote to Petrarch’s better-known endeavor to revive the bucolic genre. Composed between 1346 and 1367, the story recounted by the Buccolicum carmen follows Boccaccio’s life from his initial infatuation with love poetry to the political, ethical, and theological issues of his later life. It may seem at first glance that Boccaccio restructures the arc of his life to coincide with the ideal of the Christian conversion story, familiar from
Paul, Augustine, and Dante, among others, since the subject of the poem turns away from love and worldly affairs toward concern for the fate of the soul. In a letter to the Augustinian friar Martino da Signa, written sometime between 1372 and 1374, Boccaccio explained the work's place in the history of pastoral and addressed the allegorical significance of the titles and character names of most of the sixteen hexameter poems that comprise the work. The letter contains a short definition of the bucolic genre meant to situate Boccaccio's work chronologically and ideologically. He begins with a brief mention of Theocritus, who invented the bucolic style (according to Boccaccio), and who did not write allegorically charged poetry (niL sensSt); then Virgil used the pastoral mode to communicate some hidden meanings but did not always (non semper) do so. Although Boccaccio was certainly aware of late antique and medieval examples of the pastoral, he skips over them, saying that between Virgil and Petrarch only unimportant writers tried their hands at the genre. Petrarch followed Virgil by ennobling (sublimavit) the humble bucolic style to the status of epic. Unlike Virgil, Petrarch always (continua) allegorized the names of the pastoral characters.

In the history of the bucolic genre thus far traced, Boccaccio presents his reader with three adverbial alternatives for understanding the meanings intended by the author: nil, non semper, and continue. Boccaccio's own poetry, he goes on to explain, follows the Virgilian alternative, since some of the names of the interlocutors in his poems have no meaning whatsoever. Thus, Boccaccio aligns himself with Virgil in this history and distances himself from Petrarch. Boccaccio claims to engage directly with the poetics of Virgil's pastoral work, the BucoLica, which was thought to be more humble in style and aspiration than his later epic poem, the Aeneid. In this he could even be seen as establishing a humanistic poetics in direct competition with that of the Aretine poet, as the modern successor of Virgil. If Petrarch's Africa was a modern Aeneid, and his twelve-book Bucolicum carmen sought to sublimate the bucolic to the heights of epic, then Boccaccio situates his own pastoral work as the modern-day standard-bearer of the ancient moUe humilis.

After a summary of the sixteen poems that make up this work, an overarching narrative of transformation can be seen to emerge, a narrative that unites the Boccaccian corpus and lays proud claim to the low style of the bucolic genre. With the Bucolicum carmen Boccaccio shows himself to be a master of classical poetry, of Latin style, and of heuristic imitation, as he negotiates influences as far afield as Dante, Virgil, Petrarch, Ovid, and others. As an allegorical narrative the work succeeds in reconciling the eclectic diversity of Boccaccio's literary and political career within a landscape of transformation and self-discovery.

The first eclogue, entitled Galla, takes up where Virgil's tenth eclogue left off; that consolation for the love pangs of Cornelius Gallus turns into a pseudo-autobiographical consolation of the poet's own love pangs. In an elegiac dialogue between the shepherds Damon (Boccaccio) and Tindarus, the former laments the betrayal of his beloved nymph Galla, whom he compares in beauty to Galatea. As Damon, in despair, invokes death, Tindarus invites him—in Virgilian fashion—into his cave to rest, tell his story, and lighten his mind. Despite Tindarus's efforts to pull Damon back from despair, the latter concludes pessimistically that love is savage and ruins the minds of the young.

The second eclogue, Paminea, is Palemon's soliloquy, as retold by Melampus, of his hopeless love for the nymph Paminea, who abandoned him for the shepherd Glaucus. Palemon compares his love experience to those of Jupiter, Phoebus, and Argus, but also to that of Corydon for Alexis recounted in Virgil's second eclogue, which Boccaccio's eclogue echoes throughout. Yet instead of Virgil, Palemon (presumably Boccaccio's pastoral double) claims that it was Nasilus (a thinly veiled Ovidius Naso) who taught him. By the end he begs for death, imploring the forest oaks to fall down on him.

The next seven eclogues are more or less thinly veiled allegories for key political events between 1347 and 1355 and were presumably influenced by the obscure political allegories of Petrarch's own bucolic poems. The third eclogue, Faunus, is a revised version of an autobiographical poem (the third of his Carmina) written in 1348 to Boccaccio's friend in Forli, Checco di Meletto Rossi, and modeled primarily on the second of Petrarch's eclogues, Argus. Palemon and Pamphylus listen to Meris sing of recent events in Naples and mourn the death of King Robert of Anjou. The third eclogue concludes with Palemon's negation of the idyllic landscape, which, he says, is better suited to old men, and his decision to follow Faunus, a mask for Francesco Ordelaffi of Forli, to the aid of Naples during the Hungarian invasion.

The dark fourth eclogue, Dorus ("Bitterness"), also refers to events surrounding the Hungarian invasion of Naples. It opens with the hemistich "Quo te, Dorus, rapis?" (Where are you rushing, Dorus?), based on the incipit of Virgil's shadowy ninth eclogue, whose pessimism it captures throughout with its insistence on dispossession and defeat. This invective-style dialogue takes place between Dorus, a mask for King Louis of Sicily; Montanus, later identified as "any inhabitant of Volterra"; and Phytias, the
Grand Seneschal of Naples Niccola Acciaiuoli. Dorus laments to the hospitable Volterran about the terrible chaotic state of the Kingdom of Naples following the death of King Robert (Argus) and of his own forced flight from the kingdom, while Phytias plays the calm adviser.

Vittore Branca has pointed out that the invective of the fourth eclogue turns into the elegy of the fifth, Silva cadens ("Falling Forest"), and the paean of the sixth, Alcestus. In the fifth, for the most part a monologue on the negative state of Naples after the flight of King Louis, Boccaccio opens with an echo of the incipit to Virgil’s first eclogue. The sixth, Alcestus, is a song of triumph about Alcestus’s (i.e., King Louis’s) return from Provence to Naples with his court.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth eclogues turn to the subject of Florentine politics and become progressively more negative. The seventh, Iurijium ("Quarrel"), is an allegory for the difficult relations between Emperor Charles IV and Florence (Daphnis and Florida). The eighth, Mitas, should be read as the poem that connects the series on Naples with this series on Florence. It is a political allegory about Niccola Acciaiuoli (who was Phytias in the third eclogue), under the pastoral disguise of Mitas, the famously greedy king of Phrygia. The dialogue between the unidentified shepherds, Phytias (presumably Boccaccio) and Damon (perhaps fellow humanist Barbato da Sulmona), recounts Phytias’s anger at the greedy man and Damon’s efforts to calm his rage.20 The ninth, Lipos ("Anxiety"), in many ways a continuation of the seventh, recounts the dialogue between a wayfarer (Archas) and a personification of the Florentine character (Batracos, from the Greek for “frog”). Like the seventh, it highlights the poet’s distrust of emperors and his biting representation of the Florentine demeanor.

Excluding the final eclogue, which is the envoy and dedication of the previous fifteen eclogues to Donato degli Albaziani and appropriately entitled Angeo ("Messenger"), the remaining poems leave aside specific political concerns for simultaneously more personal and more cosmic subjects. The tenth, Valls opaca ("Dark Valley"), recounts the moral and political dissolution of the pastoral universe, while the eleventh, Pantheon, follows loosely the matter of Virgil’s sixth eclogue, in which the drunken Silenus sings myths about the creation of the universe, by using the pastoral frame for Claucus’s (Saint Peter’s) song about biblical history to Mirtillus (the church), a song divided between the Old and the New Testament.21

In the twelfth and thirteenth eclogues, poetry is the subject. In the former, entitled Saphos for the Lesbian poet, Boccaccio stages himself as Aristaeus, caught by the muse Caliope in the laurel grove before he is ready. The muse sends him to Silvamus (Petrarch) for help in ascending the peak.

In the latter, Laurea, Boccaccio stages a singing contest between a merchant (Stibon) and a poet (Daphnis) over the merits of their respective vocations. The shepherd Crites is asked to judge between them, but they conclude in a draw.22 The fourteenth eclogue, Olympia, recounts a dream-like encounter of Silvius (Boccaccio) with Olympia (his deceased five-year-old daughter, Violante). Olympia sings a song of heavenly revelation that outdoes all the classical poets (Orpheus, Calliope, Virgil, and Homer). Finally in the fifteenth eclogue, Phylostropos, Boccaccio figures a conversation between himself (Typhlus, a blind shepherd and everyman figure) and Petrarch (Phylostropos, glossed by the author as “conversion to love”). In it Typhlus is gradually convinced by Phylostropos that he should abandon his current domain of worldly pleasure for a forest ruled over by God.23

With these eclogues the focus of the Buccolicum carmen turns back toward the self, but this time within a pastoral landscape of much greater depth. Boccaccio’s professed engagement with a Virgilian model seems to have been contaminated by Petrarch’s more “sublime” allegorical bucolic mode. The caves, woods, fields, and mountains have taken on a cosmic and theological meaning yet are still related to the pastoral landscape of the earlier poems, both amorous and political. It should be clear enough from these quick summaries that the shift in concern in the Buccolicum carmen is one of depth of form, not one of substance.

When Boccaccio claimed to have followed Virgil’s bucolic model, he meant that he would not transplant into the humble pastoral universe the high allegorical meanings that belong to epic. Petrarch had included twelve eclogues in his own Buccolicum carmen, an epic number.24 From where, then, does Boccaccio’s choice of sixteen derive? Perhaps the “fifteen ewes” he dedicates to Donato degli Albaziani recall the fifteen books of Ovid’s Metamorphoses and that etiological epic’s engagement with the pastoral genre.25 Palemon, masking the young Boccaccio, did say in Pampinea that his master was Nasillus (2.86). If the Metamorphoses does represent a model for the structure of Boccaccio’s bucolic endeavor, then the Buccolicum carmen must tell a story of transformation. With this in mind, one might say that the narrative follows the Pythagorean principle that concludes Ovid’s epic: “And, as the pliant wax is stamped with new designs, does not remain as it was before nor preserve the same form, but is still the selfsame wax, so do I teach that the soul is ever the same, though it passes into ever-changing bodies.”26 The bodily forms and worldly concerns represented by the pastoral characters and landscape take on different, more profound meanings across the fifteen poems, but the spirit of the author remains the same.

This is to say that Boccaccio’s cares remain consistently within the va-
leys and forests of the material world and are mapped onto the pastoral landscape as if it were an ever-changing yet continuous topological space. The Edenic mountains and green pastures of the highlands remain inaccessible to him, whether they are the fertile fields beneath Vesuvius or the green wood ruled over by God. He never leaves behind the valleys of care completely, even though he eventually separates them from more perfect, unreachable loca amoenae, and thereby dispossesses them of any illusory salvific power. The ambiguity of the pastoral landscape, with its liminal position between history and imagination, provides the perfect theater for Boccaccio to reflect on his literary, political, and theological selves and to seek out the point where they converge.

That the matter of the Bucoilecum carmen is narrated by its very landscape is hinted at in the opening lines to the first eclogue, when Damon, the embittered lover, addresses Tindarus with this question:

Tindare, non satius fuerat nunc arva Vesvi
et Gauri silvas tenera iam fronde virentes
incolere ac gratos deducere rivos quam steriles Arni frusta discurrere campos? (1.1-4)

Tindarus, would it not have been better to inhabit now the green fields of Vesuvius and tender leafing woods of Gaurus Mountain and draw down streams so pleasing to the flocks, than vainly roam the Arno's sterile plains?

The historical references to the geography of Boccaccio's life are clear, but Tindarus's answer explains to some extent the figurative meaning of the landscape, set in opposition to a more removed, carefree world:

quantum sibi quisque beavit
qui potuit mentis rabidos sedare tumores
et parvas habitare casas, nemora atque remota! (1.8-10)

Happy is he who has been able to calm the rabid swellings of the mind and dwell in humble huts and groves remote!

The traditional loca amoenae is beyond the scope of this work's landscape. Instead, Boccaccio's shepherds inhabit an imperfect world in exile from the ideal, as Tindarus laments (1.1): "Quod nequeam, dure de me voluere so­rores" (That I cannot be such a man as this / the cruel sisters willed for me).
If you, therefore, / have any pity under that hard bark, / fall down on me and bring death to a wretch / beneath your mighty weight, I pray.

For the lover in pain, the only comfort that the landscape of the locus amoenus can offer is its own collapse and the destruction of the memories that it holds on its hard bark, on which Palemon and his beloved Pampinea had once carved signs of love:

Sed tu que dulcia falce,
dum tibi solus eram, signabas cortice fagi furta. (2.140–42)

But you who with your blade / cut signs of sweet thefts in the beechtree bark / while I alone was yours.30

These first two eclogues set the stage for the landscape of the rest of the work, in which the hills and vales of the pastoral are far from the ideal locus amoenus and are continually shaded by the cares and concerns of an engaged poet. Even though unrequited love will no longer be the subject of that engagement, Boccaccio will superimpose the collapsing forests and burnt fields of these two poems on the political worlds, the personal anguish, and the theological concerns of an ever more complicated reality, becoming more and more attracted by the removed, evergreen forests and paradisiacal mountaintops that reside on its edges.31

Nevertheless, he never abandons the earthly concerns—both public and private—that make the whole forest tremble and shake. The initial verses of the third eclogue juxtapose the quiet of the shepherds’ world and the forest’s eruption with political unrest. The landscape of love becomes the landscape of politics:

Tempus erat placidum; pastores ludus habebat aut somnis lenis; paste sub quercubus altis ac pastulis passim recumbant lacte petulcis ubera prebentes natis distenta capelle; ast ego certa michi pulchro distinguere acantho querebam, servanda tamen dum fistula gratos nostra ciet versus Mopsu, cui tempora digni nectere concessum, lauro et vincire capillos; ocia cum subito rupt vox improba meste Testillis. (3.13–21)

The day was clear; the shepherds played or slumbered. / Beneath the tall and spreading oaks, the shegoats / well-fed lay here and there, now offering / milk-swollen udders to their butting young. / But I was picking garlands of acanthus, / to be preserved as long as my reed utters / verses pleasing to Mopsus, who with laurel / has had his temples bound and locks entwined / by worthy men; when suddenly sad Testillis’ / persistent voice broke in upon our leisure.

The idle pleasures of the locus amoenus in which the poet writes his verses are denied by a political unrest that will eventually threaten the forest with collapse. In Silva cadens, the woods and “flowering countryside” of Sicily are juxtaposed to the wood that metaphorically represents the city of Naples and its ruin:

Iam tace fulmine pinus,
et pecudes prostrasse canes noctisque per umbram
ex septis ululare lupos audisse, nefandum prodigium dederant. (5.13–16)

Already have the pines been struck by lightning, / the dogs have killed the sheep, and through night’s shadows / I heard wolves howling from the folds; all these / had given horrid omen.

The pastoral landscape’s destruction recalls more than just the political exile and dispossession of the king; it evokes a decadent moral state as well. As Caliopus declares at the end of his monologue, “Omne decus perit luc­tusque laborque supersunt” (All beauty here has perished, / but grief and care remain, 5.115). The aesthetic ideal of the pastoral landscape comports with an ethical ideal as well. As the locus amoenus is transformed into a locus horribus, the inhabitants of the ancient wood turn their world into a kind of hell.32

The ruin turns out here to be only a temporary threat, since the next eclogue, Alcestis, begins with the restoration of bucolic idleness in the locus amoenus.33 In the three Florentine eclogues that follow, Boccaccio largely leaves aside the attention to landscape that is so present in the first six eclogues. The shift in structure and the increasingly moralizing tone suggest that he may be taking Petrarch’s political eclogues as a model at this point.34 The landscape returns to prominent titular position, however, in the tenth eclogue, Vallis opaca, where the falling forest is transformed into the “dark valley” of hell itself.

The Changing Landscape of the Self

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This tenth eclogue is one of the most difficult to decipher. It is the conversation between a once-great tyrant (Lycidas) and a shepherd confined to imprisonment in a cave (Dorilus), but Boccaccio gives no hint of its historical referents. Thomas Hubbard has described it as a “macabre takeoff on Virgil’s poems of political dispossession.” Eclogues 1 and 9. Given the Dantean allusion in the title, it is more likely, however, that this eclogue signals a move away from the Virgilian landscape of political disenchantment to a more morally charged landscape of disenchantment with the worldly affairs (love and now politics) that are allegorically bound to the pastoral’s locus amoenus. In it Dorilus laments:

Iuppiter a celso prospectans cardine campos prostravit feriens ignito fulmine fagum
his celebrem silvis: sonitu perterrita tellus
Pastores sese comperta fraude vicissim
in caves clausere malis. (10.6-11)

Great Jupiter from high on heaven’s pole has flattened the fields, with fiery thunderbolt/striking a beech tree famous in these woods. In terror at the sound, earth groaned, the flocks and leaves all trembled mid the briars; in turn the shepherds shut themselves in, with fraud disclosed, in evil caves.

The ethics of care on which the values of Arcadia are founded has become so debased that the threat of hell is imminent. Lycidas, the soul of a tyrant, visits Dorilus in order to warn him of such an infernal landscape and to console him with a presage of future pastures restored: “teque tuis linquet cam­pis: sic vincula solves” (and he will leave you in your fields, your chains thus loosed, 10.171). With this eclogue, Boccaccio’s political anxieties have turned into deeper ethical preoccupations that are quickly becoming theological. The fallen forests and the valleys of inferno to which his shepherds were condemned in earlier eclogues risk becoming the dark valleys and forests of the Inferno. This infernal eclogue ends with a prayer by Dorilus:

Numen honoratum silvis, Pan, te precor, assis,
et veniat lux illa michi: tibi pingtur agnus
ex grege quippe tas ultrro ferietur ad aras
quas statuam, ludosque traham tibi carmine sacros. (10.172–75)

Divinity long honored by the forests, O Pan, I pray, be present, let that day come to me: from the flock a fatter lamb / you may be sure will gladly be struck down / upon the altars which I’ll raise to you, / and I’ll prolong your sacred games with song.

By now Pan, the god of the wood, clearly refers to the Christian God, and the landscape across which Palemon swore to seek out Pampinea in the second eclogue has become an allegory for the created world. Thus in Pantheon, the eleventh eclogue, when Glaucus recounts the history of creation, the landscape of a restored pastoral order has come to resemble the order restored to history by revelation. Christ is the ideal shepherd, whose “labores . . . cunctis voluit prodesse creates” (labors were meant to help all creatures, 11.36–37).

The scale of the two eclogues that follow is less grandiose, yet the landscape continues to adapt itself to Boccaccio’s purposes, especially in Sapho, where the nemus, or “wood,” is specifically a laurel grove. Aristeus (Boccaccio) sacrilegiously invades the sacred grove in search of Saphos, who signifies the laurel crown of poetry and whom only the poet Silvanus (Petrarch) has earned the right to see. Aristeus is informed of the mysterious nymph’s remote whereabouts when he is stopped by Caliopes, guardian of the grove:

Panis nata dei celsum tenet optima Nyse
Saphos, gorgonei residen in margine fontis. (12.100–101)

Pan’s dearest daughter, Saphos, stays upon the heights of Nysa, dwelling by the brim of the gorgonean spring.

When he asks the easiest way to reach Saphos, Caliopes informs him that the landscape prohibits an easy ascent:

Turbavere quidem vestigia longa viarum
et nemorum veteres rami cautesque revulsi,
implicite sentes pulvisque per ethera vectus;
velleris atque fames et grandis cura peculi
neglexit latos montis per secula callces.
Hinc actum ut, scrobibus visis, in terga redirent
iam plures peterentque suos per pascua fines. (12.176–82)

Old branches of the woods and fallen rocks / and tangled briars and the wind-blown dust / have marred the lengthy traces of the
paths; / and greed for fleeces and the great concern / for wealth have caused the wide paths of the mountain / to be neglected now for centuries. / Hence it has come about that many men, / seeing the gulleys, have turned back already / and sought their object in the pasturelands.

Only the high poetry of Silvanus-Petrarch has granted a modern man access to the inaccessible peak, so the muse advises Aristeus-Boccaccio to approach him in order to find out what friends and what paths he used in order to reach it. In the meantime, however, Boccaccio must be among those who seek out their glory in the pasturelands. Finally, from the valley of hell to the garden of creation, Boccaccio's gaze meets again the mountains that were denied the shepherds at the beginning of the first eclogue, and that have now metamorphosed into Parnassus, the sacred mountain of the Muses.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth eclogues, the inaccessible places of the pastoral landscape mutate once more, this time into the mountains of salvation and terrestrial paradise. In Olympia the sylvan landscape is invaded temporarily by the supernatural appearance of the deceased young daughter of Silvius (Boccaccio). Unnatural lights, scents, and sounds fill the forest before her appearance, transforming it into the aromatic forests of Sheba. Upon seeing her, Silvius remembers the circumstances of her death (14.52-53), "calcidicos colles et pascua lata Vesevi dum petii" (while I sought / Chalcidian hills and the wide pasturelands of Mount Vesuvius), the same fertile landscape denied to the shepherds in the first eclogue. She predicts that Silvius will one day ascend to Elysium, which is situated on a distant mountain that

Est in secessu pecori mons invius egro

cui vertice summo

silva sedet palmas tollens ad sydera celsas
et letas pariter lauros cedrosque perennes,
Palladis. (14.171, 173-76)

is impassable to sickly sheep ... upon whose peak a forest raises tall palms to the stars / and happy laurels too and longlived cedars / and Pallas' olives.

Here and in the lines that follow, Olympia is describing paradise in pastoral terms as a new forest that will replace that of earthly tribulations. This description of an otherworldly forest does not, however, push Boccaccio's concern away from the world at hand. In fact, Olympia's last words of advice for finding the way and wings to enter the mountain paradise indicate that Silvius should continue to take care of his world and its inhabitants:

Pasce famem fratris, lactis da pocula fessis,
assis detentis et nudos contege, lapsos erge, dum possis, pateaque forensibus antrum. (14.275-77)

Feed your brother's hunger, to the weary / offer cups of milk, visit the prisoner, / clothe the naked; when you can, raise up / the fallen, let the entrance of your cave / be open to all.

Her words blend the cares of the pastor with the acts of mercy, superimposing Christian ethics on the rules of hospitality from Virgil's Arcadia; they reinforce the poet's dedication to and care for the world of history. 39

Similarly, in the fifteenth eclogue, Phylostropos (Petrarch) describes another perfect locus amoenus beyond the confines of human history:

Surgit silva virens celi sub cardine levo,
aspera dumetis et saxo infixa rubenti. (15.156-57)

A green wood rises under the left pole / of heaven, rough with thickets and infixed / with ruddy stone.

Although Typhlus recognizes his desire to reach this new wood and to leave behind his worldly forest of nymphs and satyrs that is destined to turn cold and hostile, he is frightened, weak, and prone to quit before he even begins. In the end he promises to follow Phylostropos and to leave his earthly, decadent wood where Crisis (Gold) and Dyon (Desire) rule, but the end of the journey is relegated to the future, to the unknown:

Urgeor, insistam; tu primus summito callem

imus ut ex syrio carampus litore palmas. (15.219, 221)

I will press on; I'll enter on the journey; / but you go first; ... / ... we go in order / that we may pluck palms from the Syrian shore.

The promise that Typhlus-Boccaccio makes to Phylostropos-Petrarch at the end of the fifteenth eclogue is never completely fulfilled by Boccaccio
within the poem. The high places that Petrarch’s presence in the *Bucolicum carmen* represents are not the ending place of its journey; they remain always on its edges. In the course of the narrative of Boccaccio’s bucolic poem, the erotic is transformed into the political, which is in turn transformed into the moral and spiritual. A closed set in constant reformation, the landscape remains a place of care and sometimes of grief; it never transforms itself into a completely removed place of leisure or salvation. Boccaccio’s work is continually in dialogue with the world of care, even up to the final envoy of the poem, *Aggelod* ("Messenger"), which describes him as having nothing else to do but

\[\text{patrios ni spectet in agros}\]
\[\text{torpendum est igitur seu vomere vertere glebas. (16.72, 74)}\]

look after his paternal fields / . . . / he must be idle or else plow the soil.

Differently from Petrarch, whose poetic ambitions take him first to the mountain of the Muses and then to the mountain of salvation, Boccaccio’s poetry keeps to the world at hand. In poverty, the poet is content with small things and basks in the freedom offered in creation by the generosity of God:

\[\text{paucis contentor munere Panis.}\]
\[\text{Silvestres corili pascunt, dat pocula rivus,}\]
\[\text{dant quercus umbras, dant somnos aggere frondes,}\]
\[\text{cetera si desint, lapposaque vellera tegmen}\]
\[\text{corporis effet; quibus insita dulcis et ingens}\]
\[\text{libertas, que, sera tamen, respetit inerem. (16.133–38)}\]

I am content with little. By Pan’s gift / the sylvan ivyberries offer food, / the stream gives drinks, the oaks give cooling shade, / a heap of leaves gives rest, if other things / are lacking, and a burr-infested fleece / offers a cover for my weakened body. / To these is added sweet, great liberty, / which, although late, has looked at last upon / an artless man.

When, in his letter to Fra Martino, Boccaccio contrasts his own approach to the bucolic genre with that of Petrarch and simultaneously insinuates that they are equal heirs to antiquity, he is establishing the terms for his own, more modest posterity. The closing words of the final eclogue express the hope that his own version of the humanist enterprise of interpreting, rewriting, and reinventing the themes and language of classical literature, as voiced in the *Bucolicum carmen*, might live on in the future. They even suggest that the fragility of his work might be the sign of its fertility:

\[\text{Claudicet esto,}\]
\[\text{nam pregnans video, prolem sperasse iuvabit}\]
\[\text{et cepisse novam. Surgunt ex montibus altis}\]
\[\text{sydera; sis mecum. Nostro hoc tu iungito, Solon. (16.141–44)}\]

Perhaps that ewe is limping now because, / as I perceive, she’s pregnant; I’ll enjoy / having awaited offspring and then gotten / a newborn. From the high peaks stars are rising; stay with me. Solon, join this flock with ours.

Alluding simultaneously to the appearance of the morning star (*Lucifer*) at the end of book 2 of the *Aeneid*, as Aeneas flees with his father and son from a besieged Troy, and to the rising of the evening star (*Hesperus*) in the final verses of Virgil’s *Bucolica*, Boccaccio leaves the *Bucolicum carmen* an open-ended work. The motif of epic rebirth mixes with the bucolic conclusion to the day, granting it the tenuous possibility of a future in the hands of another shepherd. With the prospect of the birth of the new from the old, the final transformation of the poem—the metamorphosis of the self into the work of art—coincides with the ascent of the stars from behind the mountain peaks in the distance. Boccaccio entrusts his work to the world and finally lifts his gaze from the tribulations of the earth.
Chapter Thirteen


3. For these commentaries on Petrarca’s eclogues, see the classic edition by Antonio Avena, Il “Buccolicum carmen” e i suoi commenti inediti (1906; repr., Bologna: Forni, 1969).

4. The chronology of the composition and compilation of the eclogues that make up the Buccolicum carmen is still contested and largely unascertainable. The poems address historical events that go back to 1341 (Boccaccio’s move from Naples to Florence, referred to in the first eclogue) and that cannot go beyond 1367 (the death of Donato Albanzani’s son in 1368, who is referred to as living in the last eclogue). See Perini’s notes on the chronology of each eclogue in Boccaccio, Buccolicum carmen, vol. 5, pt. 2, pp. 916–1085. Ricci, in “Per la cronologra,” dates the first two eclogues to 1346–47, which corresponds to the traditional dating of the vernacular pastoral novel, the Ninfale fiesolano, as Smarr points out. Ricci breaks up the composition into three distinct parts: 1346–48 (eclogues 1–6), 1355 (eclogues 7–9), and 1367 (eclogues 10–16). See Smarr’s discussion of the issues of dating and influence in “Boccaccio pastorale,” 243–52.


see the discussion by Auzzas in *Epistola*, vol. 5, pt. 1, 841 n. 22. The history of the genre and Boccaccio’s reading of the *Bucolica* as *humilis* is based on the proem to Servius’s commentary on Virgil’s *Bucolica*, in Servius Grammaticus, *In Virgili* *Bucolica* et *Georgica* commentarii, ed. George Thilo (Leipzig: Teubner, 1887), 1–4.


12. Cf. Resta, “Codice bucolico,” 64–65. In her introduction, Smarr rightly notes that Petrarch’s high style was meant to reflect the height of his allegorical and didactic intentions (*Elegyus*, xxvii–vii). Boccaccio’s championing of a mixed discourse (i.e., both humble and allegorical) here and in the *Bucolicum carmen* is a declaration of poetics that can be applied to works throughout his career. He was not a novice in the *modus humilis* of the pastoral nor in allegory. As many have noticed, the *Ninfeo floesolano*, *Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, *Filocolo*, and *Caccia di Diana*, among other of his vernacular works, each engage with the genre and its didactic possibilities. See Giuseppe Velli, “L’Ameto e la pastorale,” in *Petrarca e Boccaccio: Tradizione—memoria—scrittura*, 2nd ed. (Padua: Antenore, 1995), 195–208; and Smarr, “Boccaccio pastorale,” 237–44. For the frame of the *Decameron* as a “pastoral heterocosm,” see Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The World at Play in Boccaccio’s Decameron* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 53. On the garden (including the locus amoenus and Hortus conclusus) as an ethical and aesthetic symbol in the *Decameron*, see Robert P. Harrison, *Garden* *s* *An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 83–96.

13. This is a Virgilian location, but not a Virgilian doctrine, as Hubbard has noticed (*Pipes of Pan*, 236). If the doctrine behind the phrase “leviat montes recitasse dolores” (the mind is lightened when its woes are told, *Bucolicum carmen* 1.27) had a classical predecessor, it must have been Ovid. There are various echoes of the conclusion of Virgil’s *Bucolica*, in which Pan warns that Love cares not for the pain of men and will feed insatiably on men’s tears (10.29–30) and in which Gallus responds that since love conquers all things, he must cede to love (10.69). Other Virgilian themes enter into play as well, such as the oppositions of cave and pasture and of exile and comfort, yet the classicism of the poem is counterbalanced by its medieval story of unrequited love. A pastoral episode from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is alluded to when Damon compares Galla to Galatea (*Bucolicum carmen* 1.34).

14. See especially *Bucolicum carmen* 2.60–65 and 101 for the allusions to Virgil’s second eclogue.

15. It is generally accepted that Boccaccio follows Petrarch’s model of interpreting the purpose of the pastoral. See Velli, “‘Titurus,’” 347, where the author stresses that the *Ameto*, not the *Bucolicum carmen*, represents Boccaccio’s greatest pastoral achievement; Martellotti, “Dalla tenzone,” 356; and Smarr, “Boccaccio pastorale,” 244–54, where the author argues that Dante was just as influential as Petrarch in the initial choice to write Latin eclogues. Resta points out that the version in the *Bucolicum carmen* follows Virgil’s model much more closely than that of Petrarch (“Codice bucolico,” 66–78). I tend to agree with Hubbard’s assessment of the Petrarch-Boccaccio nexus: “Boccaccio was every bit as familiar with classical Latin poetry as Petrarch, but . . . he was able to mitigate his awe before the classic by conspicuously arraying Virgil as one of a series of poets culminating in a near contemporary ( . . . for Boccaccio it was Petrarch). In so doing, Boccaccio creates a pastoral present that rivals and even transcends the weight of the past” (*Pipes of Pan*, 236–37).

22. As Hartis interpreted as theos and kouras, or “son of God,” meaning Christ (Study, 60). Perini has suggested that it comes from theos and kyrios, or the “Lord God.” After Usher’s study on the origin of the name Ischyros (“strong” in Greek) in Olympia’s description of heaven in the fourteenth eclogue, in which he argues that it is the same as that used in the Trisagion, I think it is more probable that the name Theoschyros (theos and ischyros) may mean simply “God the strong.” See Usher, “Ischiros donatore.”

23. The forest is ruled by Theoschyros, which Hartis interpreted as


27. The biographical references would be to the Neapolitan sojourn of the young Boccaccio, his move to Tuscany, and his subsequent nostalgia for the life of intellectual leisure that he had enjoyed in Naples. The possibility of a historical reference to the allegory of this poem and the other poems does not preclude other, “more sublime” allegorical meanings for Boccaccio, as is clear from his explanation of allegory in Genealogia 1.5.5–9.

28. Ernst Robert Curtius defines the locus amoenus in his classic European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. William Trask (1963; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 195: “a beautiful, shaded natural site. Its minimum ingredients comprise a tree (or several trees), a meadow, and a spring or brook. Birdsong and flowers may be added. The most elaborate examples also add a breeze.”
29. It is a commonplace that friendship and hospitality are classical Arcadian values. See, e.g., Robert Coleman’s introduction to his edition of Virgil’s *Eclogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 32. In the case of Boccaccio’s first eclogue, Tindarus offers Damon the cool quiet of his cave (1.22) in place of the pastures burnt by the midday sun (1.16), so that he may recount his misfortunes.

30. It is worth mentioning that there is a strong metaliterary dimension to Boccaccio’s language here and in the previous quotation. The turn of phrase *sub cortice* is often used in the *Genacula* when Boccaccio speaks of allegorical meaning. See, e.g., the chapter heading for the above-cited *Genacula*, 14.10: “It’s a Fool’s Notion That Poets Convey No Meaning beneath the Surface of Their Fictions” (Sultum credere poetas nil sensisse sub cortice fabularum); trans. Charles G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry* (1930; New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), 52; and his letter to Fra Martino da Signa: “After him Virgil wrote in Latin, but he hid some meanings beneath the outer layer [lit. bark]” (Post huce latine scripsit Virgilius, sed sub cortice nonnullos abscondit sensus, *Epistola* 23.2).

31. Although Boccaccio designates the first two eclogues as superficial allegories (*Epistola* 23.4: “et fere juveniles lascivias meas in cortice pandunt”) and urges Fra Martino da Signa to ignore them (ibid.: “de primis duabus elegiis . . . nolo cures”), he did care enough about them to include them in the late collection.

32. Caliopius even invokes the inhabitants of hell as a possible cause of the misfortune of Naples (5.91–92): “quis Orco / eduxit pestes in te?” (Who introduced to you such plagues from hell?).

33. The imagery at the opening of *Alcoeus* (6.1–5) is reminiscent of the melting that takes place after Dante’s ascent from Hell to the Mountain of Purgatory: “Pastores transisse nives et frigora leiti / sub divo vetere stipula modulantur amores, / esculaeas hederae neuntum de more corollaras, / crateras Bromio statuunt et vina salutant / cantibus et multo protendunt carmine sacrum” (Happy that the snow and ice have passed / the shepherd pipe old lovesongs on their reeds / under the open sky; as is their custom, / oak garlands they entwine with ivy vines, / set bowls for Bacchus, honor the wines with songs, / and with much singing lengthen out the rite).

34. Besides the second of Petrarch’s eclogues, *Argus*, which is often cited as the model that instigated the political and allegorical turn in Boccaccio’s work, see, for example, his fifth and sixth eclogues, entitled respectively *Pietas pastoralis*, “The Shepherd’s Filial Piety,” and *Pastorum pathos*, “The Shepherd’s Suffering.”

35. This is evidenced by Boccaccio’s own vagueness in explaining the allegory to Fra Martino, and in the varying historical interpretations offered for the interlocutors (cf. Perini, *Buccolicum carmen*, vol. 5, pt. 2, p. 997). For a list of interpretations that explain this sentiment, see Ricci, “Per la cronologia,” 57, where he also argues that the poem should be read similarly to the *Corbaccio*.


37. Cf. *Genacula* 1.4, where Boccaccio writes that Pan originally signified the created world, or *natura naturata*, as it was formed by the combination of formless material (*Chaos*) and limitless time (*Eternitas*). He also mentions there that in time Pan became confused with the Demogorgon as creator of all things. See David Lummus, “Boccaccio’s Poetic Anthropology: Allegories of History in the *Genacula Deorum Gentilium Libri*,” *Speculum* 87.3 (July 2012): 724–65 (741–52).

38. It has been duly noted that these geographical points refer to Boccaccio’s historical voyage to Naples in 1355. The reference, however, is also internal. Cf. *Buccolicum carmen* 1.1–2.

39. In naming the acts of mercy, Boccaccio does not follow the scholastic list of seven corporal and seven spiritual works. Rather, he refers to the list of six acts enumerated in the “Judgment of Nations,” in Matthew 25:31–46, five of which are corporal, and one of which is spiritual. Cf. Perini’s note in Boccaccio, *Buccolicum carmen*, vol. 5, pt. 2, p. 1064.

40. In fact, in the letter to Fra Martino, when Boccaccio explains the meaning of Phyllostropos, he writes (23.30): “By Phyllostropus I mean my glorious teacher Francesco Petrarca, by whose admonitions I have very often been persuaded to abandon delight in temporal things and direct my mind to eternal ones, and thus he turned my loves, even if not completely, yet considerably toward the better.” (Pro Phyllostropo ego intelligo gloriosum preceptorem meum Franciscum Petrarcam, cuius monitis sepissime michi persuasum est ut omissa rerum temporalium oblectatione mentem ad eterna dirigerem, et sic amores meos, etsi non plene, satis tamen vertit in melius.) The adverb *sepsisse* (very often) indicates frequent conversations between the two men in which Boccaccio was not always successful in implementing the other’s advice. That the “conversion” was not complete, Boccaccio admits openly even to the Augustinian friar.

41. See Virgil, *Aenidia* 2.801 (trans. Fairclough, p. 371): “Iamque iugis summae surgetrat Lucifer Idae / ducebatque diem” (And now above Ida’s topmost ridges the day star was rising, ushering in the morn); and *Eclogues* 10.77 (trans. Fairclough, p. 95): “Ite domum saturae, venit Hesperus, ite capellae” (Get home, my full-fed goats, get home—the Evening Star draws on).