

Supranational Utopia: Virgil's Arcadia^(*)

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As a way of beginning, let me start with J.F. Lyotard's words as they have a direct bearing on my argument:

"it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented"⁽¹⁾.

In my present paper I would like to put a classical notion to a new use. As always the case, utopia⁽²⁾ is one of the most appealing and influential ideas since Antiquity. It has been developed in almost all literatures over the centuries since Plato's basic text of utopia⁽³⁾. Utopian writing is even considered by some a specific literary genre⁽⁴⁾. Utopia raises a number of questions: social, political, intellectual, etc⁽⁵⁾. Although utopia is not a social fact, but a social idea, the status of the society in which the utopian writer lives concerns us a great deal.

Going through the utopian imagination of Classical Antiquity: Plato's, Virgil's and Ovid's⁽⁶⁾, we discern more than one sort of utopia. They can be classified under utopia of time, and utopia of space:

1-For the first sort, we may discern utopia into the past, and utopia into the future. The utopia of time is best attested in Graeco-Roman traditions by the Golden Age myth⁽⁷⁾, known almost to all literatures.

It is the idea of a happily glorious remote past, or it could be related to the future, which means the possibility of the return of the Golden Age as perceived in Virgil's *Eclogue 4*, the so-called

^(*) This paper was initially read at the 17th ICLA Congress, on August 10, 2004 in Hong Kong. I am grateful to those who attended my presentation and offered useful comments and valuable suggestions. A special word of thanks is owed to the organizers of the Congress.

⁽¹⁾ J.F. Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism", in: *Modernism / Postmodernism*, ed. P. Brooker (Longman 1992) 150.

⁽²⁾ Utopia is derived from two Greek words *ou*, which means no, and *topos*, which means a place. So it originally means no place, i.e. a place, which is not located on any real map. Hence it has become an ideal place, an imaginative one, and not in the conceivable world.

⁽³⁾ In his *Republic*, Plato put his contemplated utopia in the form of a state governed by philosophers. In his perspective, justice is required to attain happiness. In its turn, justice requires a communal way of life, including the community of wives and children: see: Plato, *Republic* (2 vols.), ed. with an Eng. trans by P. Shorey (LCL 1946 & 1953 repr.). For a good study of Plato's utopian state, see: Julia Annas, *An Introduction To Plato's Republic* (Oxford 1982) 170 ff.

⁽⁴⁾ Giovanna Pezzuoli, "Prisoner In Utopia", in: *Theory and Practice of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. G. Mora & K. Hooft (Michigan 1982) 36, draws the reader's attention to the difference between utopian writings and utopian experiments.

⁽⁵⁾ Pezzuoli (ibid.) 37, points out that it is not an accident that the epochs in which utopian writings are concentrated coincide with periods of regression following large social transformations, such as the Counter-Reformation or the epoch following the French Revolution.

⁽⁶⁾ Virgil's and Ovid's utopias are mainly centered about the so-called myth of the Golden Age, discussed below. Cf. the utopian dream of peace and quiet of Theocritus *Idyll 1*. See, G. Lawall, *Theocritus Coan Pastorals* (The Center For Hellenic Studies 1967) 1 ff.

⁽⁷⁾ For a good study of the Golden Age, see among others: H. Baldry, "Who Invented The Golden Age?", *CQ* 46 (1952) 83-92. He defines the term (p.83) as an imaginary existence different from the hardships of real life - an existence blessed with Nature's bounty, untroubled by strife or want. Naturally this happy state is always placed somewhere or sometime outside normal human experience, whether "off the map" in some remote quarter of the world, or in Elysium after death, or in the dim future or the distant past. Such an imaginary time of bliss in the past or the future has become known as the 'golden age'. See also: J. Fontenrose, "Work, Justice, And Hesiod's Five Ages," *CPh* 69 (1974) 1-16; C. Querbach, "Hesiod's Myth of The Four Races", *CJ* 81 (1985) 1-12; C. A. Huttar, "Tolkien, Epic Traditions, and Golden Age Myths", in: *Twentieth-Century Fantasists*, ed. K. Filmer (Macmillan 1992) 92-107, deals with the Golden Age motif as one widespread in the world's cultures and defines it as follows: "It is the idea that the world as we know it represents a woeful decline from a glorious remote past". p.93.

“messianic *Eclogue*”⁽⁸⁾, where Virgil prophesized a new and blessed era by the birth of a certain child⁽⁹⁾ (*Ecl.* 4.4ff.). This was the first appearance of the Golden Age in Virgil⁽¹⁰⁾. Although much literature has been written on this *Eclogue*, still scholars believe that it will always remain mysterious⁽¹¹⁾.

Roman poets are interested in describing the conditions of life of the Golden Age⁽¹²⁾, either the idealized “good old days”, or the idealized “future”⁽¹³⁾. From this imaginary time of bliss, in the past or the future, it has become a commonplace to describe an outstanding period of history or literature as a “golden age”⁽¹⁴⁾.

2-For the second sort of utopia we may discern a utopia into some distant place, possible or impossible⁽¹⁵⁾, that is the idea of an “Elsewhere”⁽¹⁶⁾.

What concerns me most, in my present paper, is the supranational conception⁽¹⁷⁾ of utopia, exemplified in the pastoral poetry of Virgil, the greatest Roman poet of the Augustan Age, if not the greatest ever of the Roman poets of Classical Antiquity.

As a classical writer, and as one of the most distinguished utopian writers of classical Rome, Virgil aspires to transcend national boundaries to a certain utopian place in Greece, to Arcadia⁽¹⁸⁾, where one can lead a life of innocence, simplicity, and closeness to nature⁽¹⁹⁾.

Arcadia here is, as Bruno Snell argues, the imaginary creation of Virgil⁽²⁰⁾. It is not exactly the one located on the map, of which the Dictionary says: a mountainous inland district of the Peloponnesus in Greece⁽²¹⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ The messianic *Eclogue* 4 was interpreted in the Middle Ages as foretelling the birth of Christ.

⁽⁹⁾ For the identity of the child as a major topic of discussion see: R.D. Williams, *The Eclogues and Georgics* (Macmillan 1987) 104 f.

⁽¹⁰⁾ For the Golden Age as a community among all men and between men and nature in Virgil, see: Christine Perkell, *The Poet's Truth* (California 1989) 52 ff., 64 ff., 90 ff. See also, F. Brenk, *Clothed In Purple Light* (Stuttgart 1999) 82 ff.

⁽¹¹⁾ The literature on *Eclogue* 4 is extensive and exhausting. For comment, consult for one: A. McKay, *Virgil's Italy* (Adams & Dart 1971) 25f., Brenk (1999) 82 ff.

⁽¹²⁾ See Tibullus 1.3.35 ff., 1.10.1 ff.; Ovid, *Amores* 3.8.35ff.; *Metamorphoses* 1.89ff. For a good and well-documented study of the Golden Age motif in both Greek and Roman literatures, see: Patricia Johnston, *Virgil's Agricultural Golden Age* (Leiden 1980) passim.

⁽¹³⁾ C. Platter, “*Officium* In Catullus And Propertius: A Foucauldian Reading”, *CPh* 90 (1995) 211-224, declares how Roman poets appeared to represent themselves as being alienated from Roman political life of their times.

⁽¹⁴⁾ See Baldry (1952) 83.

⁽¹⁵⁾ See Horace, *Epode* 16.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Pezzuoli (1982) 37, says that utopias, which cannot coexist with the reality around them, bind themselves necessarily to the idea of an “Elsewhere”. She explains the idea of an ‘Elsewhere’ as a non-place where imaginary inhabitants can settle, challenging the laws of the known world.

⁽¹⁷⁾ I do not mean by using the term “supranational conception” any political significance, in the modern sense of the word, or any implications it might have had in minds owing to the recent conception of the formation of nations in modern times. All what I mean is interculturalism that traverses territories and achieve some sort of universality against provinciality.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Virgil, here, left Rome and Italy far behind and set out for Greece, the origin of Roman culture, where he once stayed in search for higher education and thought.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Scholars talk about the “Arcadian world of Evander” in *Aeneid* 8, where the setting is Pallanteum, Evander's town on the future site of Rome. J. Wilson, “Action And Emotion In Aeneas”, *Greece And Rome* 16(1969) 70, argues that when Aeneas was worried about the coming war, this worry was magically removed for a while in the Arcadian surroundings of Evander's town. Though it is set in Italy, it has the pastoral characteristic features of Greek Arcadia, see W. S. Anderson, “*Pastor Aeneas*”: On Pastoral Themes In The *Aeneid*”, *TAPA* 99 (1968) 1. In his analysis of the *Aeneid*, McKay (1971) 46, uses Arcadian for a past that was peaceful, productive and normal. McKay believes that Aeneas, like Virgil, seeks to regain the bliss of Arcadia.

⁽²⁰⁾ Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind* (New York 1982), devotes the whole of chapter 13 (pp. 281-309), to: “Arcadia: The Discovery Of A Spiritual Landscape”. He starts by saying that Arcadia was discovered in the year 42 or 41 B.C., not of course the Arcadia of the encyclopedia: “But the Arcadia which the name suggests to the minds of most of us today is a different one; it is the land of shepherds and shepherdesses, the land of poetry and love, and its discoverer is Virgil.”

⁽²¹⁾ The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* says of Arcadia “a mountainous area in central Peloponnesus approaching the sea only in the south-west... Its small valleys have a hard climate.”

Arcadia here is a sort of spiritual place⁽²²⁾. Virgil's aspiration to Arcadia⁽²³⁾ comes to a climax in *Eclogue* 10⁽²⁴⁾, the last of his pastoral poems. Let me put this poem into its context.

The *Eclogues* are a collection of comparatively short pastoral poems, published in 39 B.C., and are largely representative of their period. They were composed in a tumultuous context of Roman history, during the Civil Wars, and in the years following the assassination of Julius Caesar. In such a context, the *Eclogues* were considered an escapist poetry, an escape from reality into art⁽²⁵⁾.

In *Eclogue* 10, Virgil, in order to immortalize his fellow-poet and friend, Cornelius Gallus⁽²⁶⁾, and to pay him a tribute, sets him down in Arcadia, among the sheep, goats and shepherds (*Ecl.* 10.6 ff.). Let us take into consideration that Cornelius Gallus was a Roman militant statesman, descending from an equestrian family. He played a role in Roman literature, politics and military life. He was one of Octavian's leaders, and his delegate to the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Gallus took part in subduing Alexandria to the Roman power, and became the first Roman Prefect to Egypt in 30 B.C.

Let us imagine then this well-known Roman in the pastoral world of Greek Arcadia⁽²⁷⁾, suffering from ill-requited love, as his beloved had run off with another officer (*Ecl.* 10. 22 f.). What is Virgil trying to convey here about Arcadia?

There are some internal and external evidences that Gallus was held of high esteem by his friend Virgil⁽²⁸⁾. So when Virgil sets down his dear friend in the utopian world of Arcadia, this is not with a sense of mockery⁽²⁹⁾, but with a sense of paying him a tribute, and helping him get out of his personal plight. Most likely Virgil is translating what must have been the experience of his unhappy times into that of Gallus. Virgil is also paying a tribute to Arcadia⁽³⁰⁾.

At the beginning of *Eclogue* 10, Virgil appeals, neither to the Muses, as the ancient tradition goes, nor to Apollo, the god of poetry, not even to the pastoral gods⁽³¹⁾, but to Arethusa, the Arcadian nymph, to help him sing the sad love story of his miserable Gallus (*Ecl.* 10. 1 ff.).

It is widely agreed that, in his pastorals, Virgil followed in the footsteps of his Hellenistic predecessor Theocritus of 3rd Century B.C. Alexandria. Yet Arcadia was not a tradition Virgil had inherited from his Hellenistic model. When Virgil aspired for a pastoral retreat, this was not to Sicily, the Roman Province, which was the setting of Theocritus' *Idylls*. But the greatest Roman poet turns to the Hellenic setting of his spiritual homeland of Greece. Like many Roman

⁽²²⁾ In this respect, R. Coleman, "Pastoral Poetry," in: *Greek and Latin Literature: A Comparative Study*, ed. J. Higginbotham (Methuen 1969) 106, says that Virgil's Arcadia has no pretence to being more than a concept. In his commentary, R. Coleman, *Virgil: Eclogues* (Cambridge 1986) 296, says: "Arcadia is not a place to be travelled to, but a state of mind to be sought here and now in ourselves". McKay (1971) 23, believes that Virgil's Arcadia is more a spiritual landscape than a physical reality. See also (in Arabic): Yehya Abdallah, "Death in Arcadia", in: *Classical Papers*, vol. 3 (Cairo 1994) 58 f.

⁽²³⁾ McKay (1971) 47, portrays Virgil's spirit throughout his poetry as longing for Arcadia and the Golden Age.

⁽²⁴⁾ Arcadia appears in two other *Eclogues*, 4 and 7.

⁽²⁵⁾ Quintilianus, *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.55. See Coleman (1969) 101: "The pastoral represents a protest by urban man against certain distasteful aspects of his environment ... Believing that the development of civilization had corrupted human life, man longed to escape, now and again in the imagination, to an idealized world of simple shepherds, happy in the innocence and freedom of pastoral life and love". See also McKay (1971) 22; K. Quinn, *Texts And Contexts* (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1979) 168.

⁽²⁶⁾ For Cornelius Gallus, see: Magda El-Nowieemy, "To Cornelius Gallus: A Reading Of Virgil's *Eclogue* 10", *Bulletin Of The Center Of Papyrological Studies And Inscriptions*, vol. xvii (Cairo 2000) 309 ff.

⁽²⁷⁾ It is highly significant to set a Roman military and statesman, not in a Roman or Italian landscape, but in Greek Arcadia.

⁽²⁸⁾ For more details see El-Nowieemy (2000) 310 ff.

⁽²⁹⁾ See R.Q. Lyne, "Servitium Amoris," *CQ* 29 (1979) 121.

⁽³⁰⁾ I do not agree with Snell (1982) 294, in saying that Virgil was always careful not to get involved in the slippery problems of political action; in fact one may presume that they never even penetrated to his dreaming ear.

⁽³¹⁾ Pastoral gods like Pan or Silvanus.

writers of the age, Virgil “yielded to the allure of Greek culture”⁽³²⁾, in spite of his profound sense of Rome. Scholars in recent years focus their attention more perceptively and increasingly on the synthesis of Greek and Roman culture in Virgil’s writings.

Although Virgil was a nationalistic poet, “if not the poet of the court, at least he was highly esteemed by the court”, he transcends national boundaries in his utopian imagination. Virgil sets his utopia in the world his audience knows, or at least hears of, but yet remote from where they live⁽³³⁾. Arcadia enjoys the spiritual distance from Rome. Arcadia in his imagination is a land blessed with undisturbed happiness, untroubled by strife as Rome was, and far removed from the political context of first century B.C. Rome⁽³⁴⁾.

So when Virgil was longing for a simple innocence, for an innocent ease which urban man had lost, he looked to Arcadia. He created out of it a pastoral myth, embodying the ideals that he was seeking, a retreat from the real world!⁽³⁵⁾ Arcadia is thus Virgil’s pastoral vision of a Golden Age.

In spite of some voices of protest⁽³⁶⁾, Arcadia still represents for scholars of Graeco-Roman Antiquity a pastoral symbol, the very essence of the pastoral world⁽³⁷⁾. They read the dream of Arcadia in the utopian imagination of other Roman poets, even if Arcadia is not mentioned by name⁽³⁸⁾. Arcadia is also the unique integration of reality and fantasy in Virgil.

Such a utopian writing shows the power of literature to liberate the imagination from its confinement to present circumstances⁽³⁹⁾.

Such a utopian writer is turning to literature to escape from harsh realities. This is neither a sign of weakness nor a refusal to face life. Utopia is set bravely in opposition to surrounding reality. As Eberhart rightly puts it:

“By seeing through one’s times one transcends them. A poet feels ahead of his times because of his revolutionary dissatisfaction with everything about him. He heads into the future and may reach a beyondness.”⁽⁴⁰⁾

⁽³²⁾ E. Gruen, *Studies In Greek Culture And Roman Policy* (California 1996) 1. See also E. Gruen, “Cultural Fictions and Cultural Identity,” *TAPA* 123 (1993) 7. P. Veyne, *Roman Erotic Elegy: Love, Poetry, and the West*, trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago 1988) 16, goes as to say that Rome was a people whose culture was that of another people.

⁽³³⁾ See Snell (1982) 282: “Virgil needed a new home for his herdsmen, a land far distant from the sordid realities of the present. Because, too, pastoral poetry did not mean to him what it had meant to Theocritus, he needed a far-away land overlaid with the golden haze of unreality.”

⁽³⁴⁾ For more reasons behind Virgil’s choice of Arcadia, see: Coleman (1969) 106, 108; R. Whitaker, “Did Gallus Write ‘Pastoral’ Elegies?” *CQ* 38 (1988) 457.

⁽³⁵⁾ Coleman (1986) 32, believes that Virgil saw in the myth of Arcady an embodiment of certain moral ideals that he could himself identify closely with the real countryside.

⁽³⁶⁾ See Jenkyns’ argument against Snell’s interpretation of Virgil’s imaginative creation of Arcadia: R. Jenkyns, “Virgil And Arcadia,” *JRS* 79 (1989) 26-39.

⁽³⁷⁾ McKay (1971) 21 ff., uses Arcadia as a pastoral symbol. Coleman (1986), uses Arcadia for the setting of the pastoral myth throughout his introduction to the text edition, as he himself states at the start” (n.2, p.2).

⁽³⁸⁾ W. Johnson, “Messalla’s Birthday: The Politics Of Pastoral,” *Arethusa* 23 (1990) 112, thinks that Virgil and Tibullus, each in his different way, had wanted from Arcadia something that it does not have to give, freedom, various kinds of freedom. Although Arcadia is not the setting of Tibullus’ pastoral poetry, Johnson calls him Arcadian Tibullus. And throughout his paper (95-113), Johnson talks about Tibullan Arcadia, the escape to Arcadia, the dream of Arcadia, the reality of Arcadia, the spiritual Arcadian landscape. Cf. D. Mills, “Tibullus And Phaeacia: A Reinterpretation Of I.3”, *CJ* 69(1974) 228ff. Abdallah (1994) 59, argues that Arcadian characteristics could be found among us in both far away places and those near by. We should search for some Arcadia somewhere in our world.

⁽³⁹⁾ See: C. Segal, “Landscape In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. A Study In The Transformations Of A Literary Symbol,” *Hermes* 23 (1969) 75; Helen Gardner, *In Defense Of The Imagination* (Oxford 1984) 35ff.; A. J. Welburn, *The Truth Of Imagination* (Macmillan1989) 3. For the nature and value of imaginative literature, see: D. Daiches, *Critical Approaches To Literature* (Longman 1982) 3 ff., and 107 ff. for the role of imagination as a creative power in poetry.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ R. Eberhart, *Of Poetry And Poets* (Illinois 1979) 4.

Let us think of Thomas More's utopia⁽⁴¹⁾, written in 1516, where the idea of an "Elsewhere" is a non-place, locatable on no map, where imaginary inhabitants settle, challenging the laws of the known world, and opposing the woeful decline of England of his times⁽⁴²⁾.

I would like to conclude the supranational utopian vision of Virgil by calling to my support T.S. Eliot, who held Virgil in high esteem. He set him in a unique position in European literature for his maturity, comprehensiveness, and universality⁽⁴³⁾, which is my point here. In his well-known article "What is a classic?", Eliot says:

"From the beginning, Virgil, like his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, was constantly adapting and using the discoveries, traditions, and inventions of Greek poetry: to make use of a foreign literature in this way marks a further stage of civilization beyond making use only of the earlier stages of one's own"⁽⁴⁴⁾.

Eliot believes that Virgil is the classic of all Europe. He means by classic maturity. With maturity of mind, Eliot associated maturity of manners and absence of provinciality⁽⁴⁵⁾.

The universality of Virgilian thought, his supranational vision, which transcends national boundaries, is a step forward to consider literature from a multicultural perspective⁽⁴⁶⁾. It is also a step forward that helps us understand the otherness of modern culture.

The idea of supranational utopia can stimulate some exciting research in cultural identity and cultural interaction in both ancient and modern societies.

Having in mind the example of Virgil's supranational utopian vision, let us question the validity of utopian thought of our day. Could it be a supranational imagination? What our world would be like? Could there be a place we consciously imagine or perceive in either cases: multiculturalism or globalism?

As Annabelle Patterson, in her illuminating study on pastoral and ideology⁽⁴⁷⁾, argues that what people think of Virgil's *Eclogues* is a key to their own cultural assumptions, because the text was so structured as to provoke, consciously or unconsciously, an ideological response. Taking into consideration the enormous influence utopian writings have ever had on men's minds⁽⁴⁸⁾, they can help us propose an imaginative vision of remedies for world cultural problems.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. & ed. by R. Adams (Norton. New York & London 1992).

⁽⁴²⁾ It was the time of Henry the 8th. See, Zaki Nagib Mahmoud. Introduction to the *Utopia* of Thomas More (Egyptian General Organisation Of Book 2000) 9 ff.

⁽⁴³⁾ T. S. Eliot, "What is a classic?", in: *On Poetry and Poets* (Faber & Faber 1979 repr.) 53-71.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Eliot (ibid.) 61.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Eliot (ibid.) 62. The same could be said of Shakespeare, see: I. Kamps, "Introduction: Ideology and its Discontents," in *Shakespeare: Left and Right*, ed. I. Kamps (Routledge 1991) 1: "He is not for an age but for all time - because his genius allowed him to capture what is most true, universal, and enduring about human nature."

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Consult: M. Levine, "Multiculturalism and the Classics", *Arethusa* 25 (1992) 215-220.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Annabelle Patterson, "Pastoral And Ideology. Introduction," in: *Why Vergil?* Ed. S. Quinn (Bolchazy-Carducci 2000) 267-274.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Such as Plato's, Virgil's, Ovid's, and Thomas More's. In his preface to the 2nd edition of Thomas More's *Utopia* (above, n.41) Adams says: "The book is thus of special interest to Americans, North and South; it helped to make us what we are today by determining, not our immediate institutions, but the level of our expectations. And in the long run that may be the most important, though the least formal, of our institutions". p. viii.

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