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Et in Theocrito ego...
Death in Theocritus' Bucolic *Idylls*.

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Abstract

In the bucolic world, as conceived by Theocritus in some of his *Idylls*, death is rarely present, thus it is all the more important when it is. In this paper I argue that death has an existential and a generic meaning. The disappearance of all people, from a beloved one to the learned poet, cannot be avoided but is paradoxically a means of *ἀσυχία*, an ideal way of life fundamental to Theocritus' bucolic world. In its conflict with Mnemosyne, death gives birth to a metapoetic reflexion on the bucolic genre, on the poetic creation and the poetic reception and is thus an essential link for continuing and renewing bucolic tradition.

Keywords

Death – the Bucolic genre – Theocritus – Mnemosyne – *ἀσυχία* – *Idylls*

Since it signifies the dissolution of the body and the disappearance of thought, death generally causes a feeling of horrified fear, which induces a hedonistic inward focus on the living or an ironic distance. Being a force of darkness, born from *Nύξ* according to Hesiod,¹ it does not seem to have its place in the Theocritean bucolic bubble world, “completely absorbed in itself”.² And yet, its shadow also hovers over Arcadia, be it Theocritean or Virgilian:³ *Et in Arcadia ego...* the grimace of death that Nicolas Poussin⁴ shows in the inscription on the tombstone and encodes in the form of a scythe thrown by the shadow of the shepherd who is deciphering this inscription; the destruction of all knowledge and all feeling; the Œdipal resistance of the spirit within a community of shepherd-poets able to rise above their finitude. Indeed, as I demonstrate in this paper, if death is undoubtedly an end, it is also the driving force behind poetic creation; furthermore, it is a meaningful force of life.

¹*Theog.*, 123-124.

²This quote is adapted from Sirinelli's analysis 1993, 131 (« cette littérature est celle d'un moment et d'un univers, coupés non point du réel car ils contiennent ce réel, et même le valorisent, mais coupés de tout ce qui n'est point eux »).

³About Arcadia and its symbolic value in Greece, cf. Borgeaud 1979, 15-69 and the synthesis of Kossaifi 2008; on the problem of the link between Arcadia and Sicilia, cf., inter alios, Fabre-Serris 2008 (Arcadia is not Theocritean but Virgilian), Leclercq 1996 (notion distorted by our culture).

⁴Poussin painted two pictures from Le Guerchin's painting, the second one (*circa* 1640) being far more suggestive (there is no picture of the skull); these paintings (mainly the second one) raised a considerable number of comments and exegesis: double image of death (the corpse in the tomb and the beautiful young woman on whom a whole network of points converges) and difficulties in translating the inscription (past and present), link with constellations, Œdipus solving the enigma of the Sphinx (on all these aspects, see http://t3m.voila.net/tab_poussin_bergers_arcadie.htm). Among other analysis: Panofsky 1936, from whom I have drawn my title, and Lévi-Strauss 1993.

1. The shadow of Hades

1. 1. *A virtual presence*

Θάνατος, as a generic term, does not occur in the bucolic idylls: there is no universal and inflexible law but a concrete and human way of dying, ἀποθνήσκω, or being buried, θάπτω. But even then, it is a form of insult or threat rather than an effective death. Thus, in *Idyll 5*, when Lacon was reminded by Comatas of the painful sexual penetration that he has inflicted upon him, he answers aggressively: “may you not be buried deeper, μὴ βάθιον... ταφείης, than that penetration, hunchback!” (44),⁵ which is a way of undermining the quality of the said penetration and of pointing out Comatas’ displaced pride. The physical devaluation (“hunchback”) which goes hand in hand with the wish of a superficial sepulchre strengthens the eristic dimension of the passage: the agôn between the two shepherds takes on an epic tone, carried by the Homeric reminiscences of verse 44;⁶ the injury inflicted by Comatas (ἄλγεες, 41) is answered by the threat of a pseudo-funeral, which is a bucolic variation on the corpses left to the birds and dogs on the Iliadic battlefield. Words replace death, which is placed at a distance by this “non-lethal duel”.⁷

On the contrary, under desperate love, shepherds sometimes wish to remove this distance. The goatherd of *Idyll 3*, tormented by the indifference of Amaryllis, wants to die three times, first by hanging (9), then by drowning (25-27) and finally by apathy and by being devoured by wolves (53-54). However, if he actually suffers from his love, his death wishes are purely formal and the means he thinks about seem increasingly unlikely.⁸ He begins by asserting his will, but at some indefinite time in the future: ἀπάγξασθαί με ποησεῖς (“you will make me hang myself”); the absence of the bucolic diaeresis, for the first time in this poem, seems to underscore his emotion but the pathos fades away quickly since there is nothing to indicate that he has no hope of convincing Amaryllis: this is a threat to bring the girl out of her cave – and to existence – but this is not a real threat to life. In the same way, when he thinks about jumping in the waves, he re-enacts the mythical gesture of Sappho,⁹ but he carefully indicates the place, which is that of his daily life (“from the cliff whence Olpis, the fisherman, watches for the tunny”) and the methods of his suicide (“I will strip off my cloak”); the reader has no fear for his life: this bucolic “Lefkada’s jump” is part of an argumentative strategy. The call for death at the end of the idyll proceeds with the same mixture of psychological despair and literary playful creation: exhausted by this vain θυραυλία, the goatherd falls on the ground waiting for death, like a sportsman defeated at the palaestra or like the young man in Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusae*, who threatens his beloved in the same way if she does not welcome him.¹⁰ The wolfish image is a metaphor of Amaryllis’ cruelty which inscribes the desire of death within the bucolic framework but does not give it the consistency of a true act. Death again is not a biological reality but a rhetorical means to underline a deep and painful love.

Idyll 3 highlights the psychological, dramatic and poetic link between *thanatos* and *eros*, while excluding from the bucolic world the concrete experience of physical disappearance.

⁵Unless mentioned, translations are Gow’s 1952. Here it is mine (Gow translates it into Latin).

⁶Cf. *Il.* I, 23 ; II, 242; *Od.* XXII, 78 et 134.

⁷Väänänen 2010, 7-16, 34, 40; as she says, “Theocritus, while exchanging a martial landscape for the tranquil countryside, is able to use the typical patterns of the non-lethal warrior duels (the agonistic exchange of words, the contrived, “middle” space, and the superimposed ending) as prototypes for his pastorals” (18); Virgil uses this poetic technique in his *Bucolic* III; cf. Putnam 1970, 121.

⁸Cf. Legrand 1898, 1968, 109.

⁹On Sappho in love with Phaon and her suicide, cf. *Men.*, fr. 258 K-T, *Ov.*, *Her.* 15 and the analysis of Nagy 1973.

¹⁰*Ar.*, *Eccl.*, 962-963 (καταπεσὸν κείσομαι). On the image of the athlete defeated at the palaestra, cf. Aesch., *Eum.* 590, *Ar.*, *Clouds*, 126, Meleager, *A. P.*, XII, 48, v. 1 and Di Marco’s study, 1995.

1. 2. *The mythical dimension*

On the contrary, on a mythical level, the power of death exists and shepherds sometimes sing about great figures of the past really dying of love. For instance, to please Amaryllis and to awake her interest, the goatherd of *idyll 3* (he again!) sings a sophisticated song - a mythological catalogue of *exempla* in the manner of Hesiod and Hermesianax, in which an exceptional love is paid for by death: he is jealous of Jasion who died for the special interest that Demeter took in him (50-51); he thinks “fortunate” the one “who sleeps the sleep unturning, ὁ τὸν ἄτροπον ὕπνον ἰάωων, Endymion” (49): by replacing Thanatos by his twin brother, Hypnos, as in epitaphs,¹¹ the shepherd-hunter loved by Selene is given a state of eternal peace; he is doubly happy: the goddess has many times shown him her affection while visiting him in his cave in Caria and he will never know the painful sufferings and disappointments due to Eros. Endymion’s fate is a counter-example of the goatherd’s, confronted with the indifference of Amaryllis and tormented by the sufferings of his amorous desires, while the epithet ἄτροπον, reminiscent of one of the three Moirai,¹² suggests how terribly beneficent death could be. In another way, Adonis, also mentioned by the goatherd, exemplifies the strength of love -since “even in death, οὐδὲ φθίμενον, (Aphrodite) puts him not from her breast” (48)- and the promise of a cyclical revival -since, though struck down, he seems to drink the milk of the goddess like a child. The image, which may be connected with an *ekphrasis*, has religious undertones suggesting that death is the first step before resurrection; it is linked with *idyll 15*, even if the goatherd, under the extreme sufferings caused by love, mentions only the pain of the separation,¹³ mimetic of the intensity of his feelings. Thus, as Segal says, “(the goatherd) brings within the limited enclosure of his conventional and trivial amorous problems the gigantic archetypes and the tragic universality of primal fertility myths”.¹⁴

However, in the bucolic *Idylls*, the most outstanding death is Daphnis’, the mythical shepherd of *Idyll 1*, sung by Thyrsis. And, again, the word θάνατος is replaced by more concrete or metaphorical notations: Daphnis burns and languishes under the fire of a love he refuses to yield and he endures his sufferings “even to his appointed end”, ἐς τέλος ἄνυε μοίρας (93); better, he is proud of this painful submission to fate, which he sees as a challenge with Aphrodite and the cause of his glory, “even in Hades”, κῆν Αἴδα (103). His passing away brings profound grief to all living beings, to the shepherds of course (77-90), but also to the animals, both pets and wild ones (71-75), and, in *idyll 7*, even to nature (74-77): the whole bucolic world is disturbed; the sufferings of the shepherd are so severe that they became proverbial (5, 20). He is an archetypal and mythical example of the *fatum*, which weaves together the threads of life and death; his fate exemplifies in a hyperbolic manner the inescapable finality of life, the destruction of all consciousness and all feelings. And, since it is a universal experience, the poet cannot completely overlook it, even in the shepherds’ daily life.

1. 3. *Lived realities: a universal experience*

And indeed, “death is here and death is there”¹⁵ for both animals and human beings. The heifers of Aigon repeat in a bucolic mode the mythical passing of Daphnis. They low because they “miss their master” (4, 12) gone to the Olympic Games and refuse to feed (14), to such an extent that “there’s nothing left of (them) but the bones” (15-16). Their mortal sufferings, due to their deep attachment to Aigon, remind the shepherds of their human finality, even in the bucolic

¹¹On this, cf. Vermeule 1979, 145-156.

¹²Cf. Hes., *Theog.*, 905.

¹³The reference may also have a political significance: cf. Hunter 1999, 127-128 and Hunt 2011, 390-391.

¹⁴Segal 1981, 71-72.

¹⁵As noticed by the reader, it is the very beginning of one of Shelley’s posthumous poems, 2010 [1824].

bubble; their too skinny bodies, in whose examination Battos takes some malicious delight, may be likened to the inscription read by the shepherds in Poussin's painting: the reading of the text, just as the precise and concrete description of the cattle's thinness, is used as an artistic medium; it says that the presence of death behind a reckless life and under the sufferings of amorous desire or hunger -depending on the analysis of the text¹⁶- is a universal physical law, poetically displayed by the interplay between humans and animals, essential for understanding the idyll, according to Lawall.¹⁷

Indeed, human death appears at the end of the idyll: Corydon speaks about the "charming Amaryllis" and Battos, very moved by this name, swears not to "forget (her), dead though (she) is", θανοίσας, since she was "dear to (him) as (his) goats when (she was) taken", ἀπέσβης (v. 38-39). Be it genuine feeling or humorous parody of rustic singing,¹⁸ death is nonetheless physiologically there in the participle θανοίσας and is experienced by those left alive as a fall into deep dissolution, an irretrievable loss of the beloved who has walked away (ἀπό).¹⁹ The consolation of Corydon to Battos, far from being "clumsy", as Hunter says,²⁰ is based on the same perspective: "hopeless are the dead",²¹ ἀνέλπιστοι δὲ θανόντες, unlike the living (42), who concretely feel time passing on and helping them in their mourning process: "tomorrow", αὔριον, will perhaps be better for them but for them only; death is a separation and this experience is as upsetting as that of love, as painful as the loss of a goat. Indeed, in the Theocritean bucolic world and especially in this idyll, humans and animals are connected in an affectionate bond, which illustrates the hybrid nature of Pan, lord of Arcadia.

So, death is here and there, and "death is busy everywhere", in the mythical world as well as in the human and animal lives as shown by the only three occurrences of Hades in the genuine bucolic idylls. Daphnis, "even in Hades", κῆν Ἄϊδα, defies Aphrodite (1, 130); the goatherd of *idyll 1* only succeeds in inducing Thyrsis to sing by reminding him of the power of "Hades that brings forgetfulness of all things", Ἄϊδαν γε τὸν ἐκλελάθοντα (63); the wasting away of Aigon's cows will drive them "to Hades", εἰς Ἄϊδαν (4, 26-27). Yet, far from being totally negative, this presence of death involves an aesthetic art of living. Just as the painting of Poussin could have been analysed as an "iconographic novel",²² death in Theocritus' bucolic *Idylls* can be analysed in terms of poetry and poetics, first and foremost because it founds the bucolic ἀσυχία.

2. Survival strategies

2. 1. *Happiness in the present moment: playing the syrinx and dancing*

To keep death as far as possible at bay, herdsmen develop mainly two strategies. The first strategy being that they live in the present, in the existential and aesthetic moment: they are all active singers or syrinx players, and this musical instrument is so dear to their hearts that they never give it up. When Daphnis was dying, he bequeathed it to the pipe-playing god Pan. In the

¹⁶For Lawall 1967, this cohesive relationship between the shepherd and his animals is a way of studying love and the depths of the human mind, but, for Hunter (1999, 134), it is a depreciation of Corydon unable to understand that his cows are simply hungry! Such different analyses, born from the same text, show how subtle Theocritus' poetry is and how its meaning may change under varying perspectives: Lawall's analysis is based on animal sentience, the beasts being able to communicate with their shepherd by music, as it has been shown by Duchemin 1960, 107-108, while Hunter focuses on the humour of the poet (on this humour, cf. Kossai 2009).

¹⁷1967, 42-51.

¹⁸Hunter 1999, 138-139.

¹⁹On the meaning of the proverb, cf. Chantraine 1999, 97-99.

²⁰1999, 139.

²¹My translation.

²²Prado 1994.

daily world of the herdsmen, Aigon gives it to Corydon as a gift; a syrinx, which “is getting flecked with mildew”, εὐρῶτι παλύνεται (4, 28), is a life fading away, a breath dying away, a patient effort of workmanship, ἄν ποκ’ ἐπάξα, reduced to nothingness, corroded by rot due to moisture, εὐρῶτι. That is the reason why Corydon, in *idyll 4*, is so proud of being a singer, ἐγὼ δέ τις εἰμὶ μελικτάς (30): his artistic talent wards off the gloomy implications of the Αἴδαν which threatens the herd. Amaryllis’ death itself is remote or, at least, lessened by the power of song; as Hunter points out,²³ Battos expresses his sadness as a threnody: in the same way he has expressed sorrow for the dying thin cows of Aigon, he laments Amaryllis in a kind of epitaph mingling goatherds’ words and epic formulations in response to the radiant burst of laughter of the sparkling Amaryllis,²⁴ as previously reported by Corydon. “Battos matches Korydon’s song with a lament for the dead Amaryllis, an αἰπολικόν to match Korydon’s βουκολικόν”, in an eristic exchange which removes death in the field of art. Such is also the meaning of the richly dressed woman in Poussin’s painting.

Through music and singing, the herdsmen really live and feel every moment however painful it may be; through their syrinx, time stands still, life is improved, suffering is soothed. Indeed, the syrinx is a duality, as the god is who, in Hellenistic mythology,²⁵ has conceived and manufactured it: it can express strong desire and seductive pleasure, then “(distilling) a sound rapture; merging the earth, the sea, the starry sky in the cohesiveness of its harmony, it connects man to gods, supports the universe, gives the rhythm”.²⁶ But, when it conveys violent frustration, it becomes querulous, painful, mournful and may even “become sometimes a means of communicating with the underworld”.²⁷ Made of thick and soft wax, as that of Daphnis, it is a door open on a sort of immortality, as temporary and vital as the breath which gives it life.²⁸

If music is indeed one of the major strategies to combat death, dance, although less frequent in the bucolic *idylls*, also gives animals as well as humans pleasure and happiness. At the end of *Idyll 6*, when “Damoitas began to flute and neatherd Daphnis to pipe”, “straight, the calves (begin) to skip in the soft hay”, ὠρχεῦντ’ ἐν μαλακᾷ ταῖ πόρτιες αὐτίκα ποῖα (6, 45). The verb ὠρχεῦντ’, used here in the specific meaning of animals’ group dance,²⁹ implies, as Athenaeus says,³⁰ moving in all directions under a vital force and being mentally moved by these movements which “ignite” the heart. For an instant, man meets animal, music marries with dance in a “magic” suspension of time and reality.³¹ The wild Polyphemus, too, “under the Dionysiac wine’s spirit that pervades him”, stamps his foot on the ground, ποσσὶ χορεῦσαι, and, as a symposiac dancer of a new kind, he gives himself up to this instant of happiness, close to his herd among which he dances, κατ’ ἀλῖα (7, 152-153), without knowing and caring about what his fate will be in a moment.³² When you enjoy deeply the present moment and you give yourself up to it, you suspend the power of death...

²³Hunter 1999, 138-139.

²⁴The name derives from the verb ἀμαρύσσειν, which means *to flash*; cf. Gow 1952, 65.

²⁵The myth of Syrinx, as all the narrative stories about Pan, has first been elaborated at the Hellenistic period. In classical mythology, Hermes invented the syrinx: cf. *H. H. Hermes*, 512, Euph., quoted by Atheneaus IV 82, p. 184 a, Ps. Apollodorus III 10, 2.

²⁶Borgeaud 1979, 181 (translation is mine), who points out the ambiguity of this music, a means of both calming passions down and rousing them into a mad panic.

²⁷Borgeaud 1979, 129. On this, cf. Kossaifi 2002, 72-74.

²⁸On this, cf. Meillier 1982.

²⁹It is the only occurrence of this verb in the Theocritean corpus; it has a different meaning from χορεύω, *ring or chorus dancing* and σκιρτάω, *jumping*, cf. Chantraine 1999, 830 and Cusset 2011, 188-189.

³⁰1. 21 A, quoting Anacreon (fr. 69), Ion (fr. 50), Callimachus (*H.* 4. 139); cf. Gow 1952, 126.

³¹On the magic power of music, dance and words, cf. Duchemin 1960, 42-43, 52-54 and *passim*.

³²Cf. Kossaifi 2013, 82-83.

2. 2. *Harmony between man, nature and gods: an oasis of peace*

The second strategy developed by the herdsmen is a philosophy inscribed in the logic of another survival strategy consisting of retreating into a bubble of happiness, within a friendly world where nature combines with the animal and the divine to create an oasis of peace for the herdsmen. Indeed, all the bucolic idylls are conceived as variations upon this “triangle of happiness”, which connects man with nature and gods.³³ A rich net of “correspondences” (in the Baudelairian sense) is consequently formed and, weaving the weft threads of “the living pillars” of the sacred to the warp yarns of multiple synaesthesias, it sketches the outlines of the bucolic world’s “illusionistic realism”³⁴: it gives senses their shimmering power to keep death at a distance and to blur it. Because they are in harmony with a familiar, well known and much loved nature which gives them stable and secure spatial boundaries and because the primitive he-goat god Pan is a divine projection of themselves, the herdsmen can forget death and quietly spend their time in singing. While sitting on a rock, like Polyphemus singing for his Galatea (*II*, 18) or under an elm, as the goatherd and Thyrsis (*I*, 21), the beauty of the place or the pleasure of the song pervade their minds and give them new energy for work, as in *Idyll 10*, or for *agôn*, as in *Idyll 5*. In this poetic microcosm, where time is sensitivity, modelled by the pastel tints of a subtle, delicately shaded music, everything is but impressionistic “touches”,³⁵ which capture the essence of life, rather than its details, and shape the landscape or the gods’ psychology according to the *impressions* they create in the characters’ consciousness. As Sirinelli says, it is “a world of sensations, remote from duration, closed on its own fullness, without any need for a past, nor a future, nor even for anything elsewhere, and giving contentment in all meanings of the word, that is to say a satisfaction, whose components all complement one another without requiring reference to something alien to them”.³⁶ The only discordant note is death, whose fearsome power has to be removed by myth or art.

This existential and aesthetic *ἀσυχία* is perhaps best exemplified by the garden of Phrasidamos, whose heavenly abundance and sensual harmony are described by Simichidas, lying on a bed made of fresh vine branches (*7*, 135-146): it triggers all his senses without crushing them and he experiences “the rapturous state of mind in which meditation borders on drowsiness”³⁷ and supports poetic daydreaming, infusing all the landscape, *πάντα* (143), with quietness and well-being, perceived by the nose, *ῥῶσθεν* (*ibid.*, the verb being repeated), while the references to the Castalides Nymphs (148), to Chiron and Heracles (149-150) or to Polyphemus (v. 151-152) give to it a mythical dimension. Though this garden is a place of *ἀσυχία*, where reality is lived through senses and filtered by memory, death is there, discreetly present in the *opora*³⁸ (143). The word is generally understood as “the summer season”, but is in fact more equivocal: etymologically, it means what is coming “behind”, *ῥπισθεν*, “the summer season”, *ῥρα*, -no longer summer, yet without being autumn.³⁹ Bountiful nature carries with it the seeds of fatal decay under which it will be bent and “hung down to the ground”, *ἐκέχοντο... ἔραζε* (v. 145-146), but, thanks to poetry, it will stay fresh forever, stuck in the feast of the “*gras été, du naissant automne*”, according to Sainte Beuve’s translation.⁴⁰ Phrasidamos’ garden unites existential well-being and poetic creation,⁴¹ as is shown by the descriptive details

³³It has been demonstrated by Kossaifi 1998, 126-244.

³⁴These are Arnott’s 1996 words.

³⁵On Theocritean poetic “impressionism”, cf. Kossaifi 2005, 67-71 and Cusset 2011, 73.

³⁶1993, 131 (translation is mine).

³⁷Legrand 1924, 91: “these familiar sounds, (these) limited spectacles keep senses busy without having them work” (translation is mine); Hunter 1999, 192.

³⁸On this, cf. Kossaifi 2007, 22-23 and 28-29 (Theocritus).

³⁹Fontoyment 1977, 84 (n. 21, about *ῥπισθεν*); Chantraine 1999, 808-809.

⁴⁰1846, 1993, « Théocrite », 727.

⁴¹And so, it is really, as Plazenet says (1994, 106), “an artificial and original world” (my translation).

chosen by Theocritus and also used as images of poetic creation:⁴² the worked style of the passage, sprinkled with antithesis, chiasmus and parallelism and the peculiar words' order indicate that true happiness is to be found in poetry, which is able to sublimate suffering, to beautify the real and to transcend death by mastering it, as I demonstrate in my third and final part.

3. Poetics of death: the children of Mnemosyne

Death is not only a door opening onto nothingness, it is also the salt of life: encouraging poetic creation, it is indirectly the source of the aesthetic pleasure felt by the listener of a song and this pleasure, if intense, is a kind of death of the self. But in order to be able to express the positive essence of Hades, first it is necessary to neutralise his power of destruction by preserving memory.

3. 1. *Preserving memory: the poet, son of Mnemosyne*

The shepherds refuse to yield to “Hades that brings forgetfulness of all things”, Αΐδαν γε τὸν ἐκλελάθοντα (I 63): when Battos says, in *Idyll 4*, using the first person plural, that he “will not forget lovely Amaryllis, dead though she is”, σέθεν οὐδὲ θανοίσας / λασεύμεσθ’ (39-40), he really brings her back to life by his memory, which, preventing oblivion, is etymologically true, ἀ-ληθής.⁴³ That is the reason why the singer of the Muses is also the son of Mnemosyne, the Titan goddess who bore them from Zeus: the outpouring desire for love, the vivid strength of life are answered to by the memory’s ability of the singer to recreate the past according to the wishes of his listeners or to his own emotions. For example, in *Idyll 7*, Lycidas explores the circularity of his desire and he frees himself from his sufferings by recreating the time of Comatas, the prestigious goatherd fed by the Muses: he first regrets his death, αἴθ’ ἐπ’ ἐμεῦ ζωοῖς (86), then he thinks about the pleasure he would have felt to listen to his “voice” and his “sweet pipe music”, ἀδὸ μελισσόμενος (89): dream pervades reality whose field it blurs, poetry recreates “the divine Comatas” and annihilates death. If Lycidas gives memory a cathartic power, Thyrsis, in *Idyll 1*, uses it in a more convivial way: he sings again the “Sorrows of Daphnis”, through which he wins over Chromis of Libya, but he subtly adapts it to his listener. Thus, the speech of Priapus emphasizes twice the link between Daphnis and a goatherd, αἰπόλω (86) and ὠπόλος (87); for Mark Payne, Thyrsis’ emphatic repetition is “a deliberate jest incorporating his audience into the song. The verses are a fiction of oral composition and dramatize the singer’s adaptation of his song to fit its performance context”,⁴⁴ and Daphnis offering his syrinx to Pan is an indirect connection with the pipe-singer goatherd (cf. 1-6): “it is an adaptation of his song in performance that celebrates his listener’s skill even as it acknowledges his refusal to play”.⁴⁵ These allusions reinforce the complicity between the two artists and by this collusion they thumb their nose at Hades. Far from being a bare source of songs fixed forever, memory is alive: it is an essential tool for artistic creation and it is nurtured in poetic duels which connect men, as in *Idyll 7*, or communities, as during the great event at which Thyrsis and Chromis compete.⁴⁶ The songs are transmitted to others who remember them, repeat them and readapt them, thus constructing a tenuous but powerful wall against deadly oblivion, frail words and finite human life.

⁴²Cf., inter alios, Lawall 1967, 102-106; Kyriakou 1995, 216-231; Hunter 1999, 191-199.

⁴³Cf. Chantraine 1999, 618-619.

⁴⁴2007, 42; cf. 2001, 281 and 284 too.

⁴⁵2007, 44.

⁴⁶On this, cf. the analysis of Hunter 1999, 75-76.

But memory is also present in works of art, a gravestone in Poussin, in Theocritus a marvellous carved drinking cup: an *art of living* which is also a *poetic art*. The three carved scenes illustrate the suffering of life and the possible bucolic happiness. The first scene (1, 32-38) sets out the destructive strength of love, which frees the animal impulse of man by awaking his desire. In the second, the old fisherman (39-45) tells of the burden of old age which mistreats the body and enslaves the mind. Thirdly and lastly, against these sad realities, there is the scene of the child who weaves a grasshopper cage, totally absorbed in this pleasant work, *περὶ πλέγματι γαθεῖ* (54). The poetic *πόνοσ*, metaphorically expressed by this “weaving” activity of the child “figure of the bucolic poetry”,⁴⁷ removes death and suffering after having domesticated them. Happiness lies in poetry, in the act of weaving the different threads of inspiration drawn from the glittering variety of reality, in the pleasure of carving verses and treating new topics on daily life, lower than those of Homer. The modest cup of the goatherd, inscribed in the bucolic world, *αἰπολικόν*, is beautifully marvellous, *θάημα* (56), because of this new source of inspiration, which gives to it its purity and its “virginity”, *νεοτευχέσ* (28), *ἄχραντον* (60);⁴⁸ the plant motifs which enhance it promise Dionysiac immortality to the poet. Ivy and acanthus are linked in the same purport: art embodied in this cup, poetry through which it exists outlast the passing of time, give birth and also pass through the circle of life which, in a perpetual motion, constantly brings humanity from birth to degeneration: the bucolic *opora* of Phrasidamos’ garden (7, 143) finds an echo in the artistic *opora* of the third scene of the cup and the “vineyard with a fair load, *καλὸν βέβριθεν ἄλωά*, of reddening clusters” (1, 46) reminds one of the pears and apples which are “rolling plentifully, and the branches hung down to the ground with their burden of sloes”, *καταβρίθοντες* (7, 146), to offer Simichidas the same plenty magnified by poetic art.

3. 2. *Giving immortality through myth: Daphnis*

But, in the bucolic *Idylls*, the herdsman-singer knows not only how he can remove death from his world, but also how he can use it to give a cowherd or a goatherd a mythical status. Comatas in Lycidas’ song exemplifies this power, and much more so with Daphnis, whose death has been so well sung by Thyrsis in *Idyll 1* that it has become a mythical one. Daphnis spent a life of happiness taking care of his animals and playing the syrinx before becoming a victim of Aphrodite and Eros. Tormented by a love to which he refuses to yield, he prefers to die an initiatory death and “he (goes) to the stream,⁴⁹ *χὼ Δάφνις ἔβα ρόον* (140); the waters closed over him, whom the Muses loved, nor did the Nymphs dislike him” (140-141). The expression *ἔβα ρόον* is very ambiguous: it sets out the idea of a passing, accepted by the character, as the active form of the verb shows, and the waters which “close over” Daphnis embody this transformation, without suggesting a complete disappearance since his herd seems to be mourning his corpse, *πᾶρ ποσσί* (74). Anyway, the wording chosen by Thyrsis brings Daphnis into a mysterious and mythical⁵⁰ state which imposes him as a paradigmatic bucolic figure. Theocritus has shaped his legend⁵¹ by giving his sufferings an epic grandeur which makes of him an initiator and a hypostasis of Pan. As for Adonis (whom he mentions in his answer to Aphrodite, 109-110), his death is not an end but a transformation, a “bucolic apotheosis”, which

⁴⁷These are Loupjac’s words (2003, 131, my translation), about *πλέκειν*.

⁴⁸Virgil, who has well understood the significance of this detail, emblem of the *new* poetry (cf. Call., *H.* 2, 111), repeats verse 60 twice in his third *Bucolic* (43 et 47).

⁴⁹Be it metaphorical of the Acheron (understanding of the scholies), a means of mythical unity (according to Segal 1981, 25-46) or a poetical image, this current remains that of death.

⁵⁰On this aspect and the unifying function of water in this idyll, cf. Segal 1981, 25-46.

⁵¹On the creativity of Theocritus in this legend, cf. Kossai 2005b, 123 with bibliography, note 69; Bing, 1988, 56-67; Hunt 2011, 392.

has a poetic and political significance. As Jeffrey Hunt has shown,⁵² “Daphnis’ presence connects Theocritus’ bucolic poetry with a pastoral tradition, and his death ushers in a new tradition that redefines bucolic song”; being linked with Adonis in *Idyll 15*, “through the apotheosis motif”,⁵³ it is a political tool to celebrate Ptolemy, the man made god. Daphnis the cowherd becomes a legend and gives each transmitter of memory the rich set of themes of his mythical destiny.

And these themes, as myth itself, are adaptable and can be read in quite different ways. Indeed, Daphnis’ story is told differently in the *Idylls* and these conflicting versions create an illusion of oral songs. Lycidas, very keen on myths, as we saw, fictionalizes reality when he speaks of the song of Tityrus who, in his turn, says how Daphnis, in love with Xenea (the beautiful foreigner?), is mourned by the hills “all around”, ἀμφ’ (7, 74), and by the oak trees, while “he was wasting like any snow under high Haemus or Athos or Rhodope or remotest Caucasus” (76-77); the geographical list with the poetic strength of its proper names indicates that Daphnis is dying under extreme sufferings but also that he is becoming an aesthetic and orphic symbol: the mountain’s threnody “all around”, his herd “at his feet” in *Idyll 1* (74-75), “a scene represented on very many archaic vases”,⁵⁴ recall works of art decorated with Orpheus among animals and nature, all of them being charmed; the places mentioned by Tityrus are Thracian, the country where Orpheus dies... The plasticity of myth allows many allusive puns on spatial but also temporal dimensions. *Idyll 6* speaks of a bucolic *agôn* between two friends, Damoitas and “Daphnis the neatherd” (1), both of them being teenagers (3). Even if the link between this character and the mythical Daphnis is not totally sure, the phrasing brings it to mind,⁵⁵ the aesthetic pleasure of the song, which sings of Galatea and Polyphemus’ loves interacts with the future tragic fate of Daphnis’ deadly passion, in a subtle weaving typically Theocritean. And the poet of *Idyll 8*, possibly a little subsequent to Theocritus,⁵⁶ sings of the agonistic victory of Daphnis over Menalcas, thus becoming “first among the herdsmen” (92); the myth is therefore refocused on happiness,⁵⁷ since death is not mentioned and Daphnis, “while yet a youth, wedded the Nymph Naïs” (93). It embraces the whole range of feelings and stages of life, from youth to death, through adulthood.

3. 3. *The aesthetic death: the listener of a song*

Death is a rich artistic theme and a way for the poet to think about his art practice and transmission and, in the bucolic *Idylls*, it is also dealt with from the listener’s viewpoint; indeed, he plays a major role in transmitting the song, since it is he who collects it in his memory and then actually gives it an existence. And for this, he must have a real aesthetic sensitivity that ensures the quality of the listening and understanding. Only two characters in the bucolic *Idylls* are capable of this and they exemplify two different poetic approaches, two sides of the same concept, empathy, whose analysis has been renewed by actual science.⁵⁸ In the second part of his song in *Idyll 7* (71-89), Lycidas stages himself as a listener, first of Tityrus’ song, then of Comatas’ and this embedding process fictionalizes him and reshapes the bucolic myth which becomes “the real”. Listening to Tityrus’ song gives him pleasure, an existential pleasure and

⁵²Hunt 2011, 392.

⁵³Hunt 2011, 393.

⁵⁴Hunter 1999, 90.

⁵⁵Cf. 7, 73 and Cusset 2011, 64-65.

⁵⁶On the problems of authenticity and transmission of this idyll, cf., inter alios, Gow 1952, 170-171; Fantuzzi 1998, mainly 61-62; contra, recently, Blanchard 2008, 103-131.

⁵⁷In *idyll 18* as well, Helen marries Menelaus in a day of happiness and nothing is said about Paris and the Trojan war: it is the same kind of pun on time.

⁵⁸Cf., inter alios, Nussbaum, 2010, 2011; Baumard, Chevallier, Grèzes and Pouga, 2010.

an aesthetic one, generated by beautiful sounds⁵⁹: it takes place during a rustic party, with “two shepherds” (71) playing the aulos, symposiac and rustic, while Tityrus’ voice, at his side, ἐγγύθεν (72), is mingling with that of the author (be it Lycidas or Theocritus)⁶⁰ and this experience is a sort of death to the self, in the same way as the orgasm, sometimes called *la petite mort*. Through it, Lycidas (as Daphnis) enters the world of myth and listens to Comatas’ song, as sweet as that of Pan, ἀδὸ μελισσόδεμος (89), while herding his “fair goats”: he “enters the stream” thanks to Tityrus’ artistic skill and he is given birth again, as a character of the bucolic world, released by poetry, remedy to all his sufferings.

The experience of the goatherd in *Idyll 1* is somewhat different. Since he is a refined aesthete of acute judgement and a skilful poet capable of showing with words the beauty of the cup that he offers Thyrsis in exchange for his song, he experiences art as a privation of the self and a total rapture in the pleasure of listening⁶¹ without any artistic creation unlike Lycidas. He is a passive receiver, as are Patroclus in the Homeric *Iliad* (9, 186-191) or the Platonic Ion (533d-534c). When he hears Thyrsis singing “the Sorrows of Daphnis” (19),⁶² he experiences the “physical pleasure of hearing”, as Gutzwiller says⁶³; he feels the same aesthetic emotion as that he felt at seeing the *kissybion* and the words he uses to describe its impact are linked with art and poetic listening as well. The perfect beauty of the work, be it an art manufactured object, music or poem artistically and divinely carved, τὶ θεῶν δαίδαλμα (1, 32),⁶⁴ brings forth the admiration of the listener; imbued with this beauty that is perceived through viewing or listening, entranced by this “quasi-magical” physical effect of music and song⁶⁵, he loses consciousness of the real: under the psychic trauma of the θάημα (56),⁶⁶ he experiences the paradoxical state of being alive and dead at the same time: he is alienated from himself but connected with supra-sensitive realities; he himself describes this experience as a “marvel”, τέρας (therefore linked with the supernatural), that “strikes the heart with amaze” (56). The enthusiasm he expresses at the end of his song (143-148) confirms the fact that death is fertilized by poetry, conceived as an act of creation as well as of listening.

Conclusion

Death is very ambivalent in Theocritus’ bucolic *Idylls*. It is “busy everywhere”, in myth as well as in shepherds’ daily life; it is to be feared because of its power of dissolution and its capacity to remove all memory, all consciousness: it is the supreme winner of all time. And so herdsmen choose to be happy in the present moment and to get pleasure from singing, playing the syrinx or dancing, in peaceful nature inhabited by a friendly god, the archaic Pan. And so, death gives birth to a meta-poetic meditation about the bucolic genre, whose surviving and renewing it questions, the aesthetic trauma of being alienated from oneself and the poetic creation that exists

⁵⁹This is, for example, the theory of Andromenides and Eratosthenes, on which see Gutzwiller, 2010, 340. The author also underlines the “correspondances between the views attributed to Heracleodorus (poetic excellence lay not in the choice of beautiful words, but in arrangement, σύνθεσις and the innovative practices of third-century poets” (348-349).

⁶⁰On the “fictionalizing impulse of author and characters”, cf. Payne 2007, 152 (about *Idyll 8*); on the link with Longus, essentially in the legend of Phatta, Kossaifi, 2012, 589-595.

⁶¹His experience foreshadows that of Bernini. Anyway, the ekphrasis of the cup is more an emotional and aesthetic response than a real description, if not a fictional creation: cf. Payne 2001, 265 and 275-276.

⁶²Cf. Payne 2001, 286: “Thyrsis’ singing is the real source of the goatherd’s pleasure”.

⁶³2010, 352 (about *Idylls 8* and 1).

⁶⁴On this notion, cf. Payne 2001, 266 and Kossaifi 2014, 94-95.

⁶⁵See Gutzwiller, 2010, 340.

⁶⁶On the link between *thauma* and *ekphrasis* (which shows something), cf. Purves 2010, 141-142; about the relations of Daedalus to *thauma*, Neer 2010, 36; Barbanera 2013. These notions have been analysed by Kossaifi, 2015, along with that of tarab.

only in an exchange between the one who sings and the one who listens.⁶⁷ Death is the impulse to poetic creation: it welds a chain of memory, linked by poets and their works, that functions as the Platonic magnetic power of the “Heraclea stone” mentioned by Socrates in the *Ion* (533d) and it has the same power, “which not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a power whereby they in turn are able to do the very same thing as the stone”.⁶⁸ And such are death and life...⁶⁹

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⁶⁷The archetypal example is that of Achilles playing the lyre while Patroclus is listening to him in Homer's *Iliad* 9, 186-191, mentioned above; cf. Lascaux, 2006, 54.

⁶⁸See Kossaiifi 2012, 596.

⁶⁹This text is the English translated version of a paper delivered at Bordeaux (France), 14th congress of the *Fédération Internationale des associations d'Etudes Classiques* (FIEC), August, 2014, 25-30th. I thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the fact that a paper in French could put off English readers.

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