

Eclogues I & II
by Tom Masters

with a foreword by Katherine Orman
and illustrations by Katherine Anteney



Alderwood Press 2017

First published in 2017 by Alderwood Press

Email: alderwoodpress@outlook.com

All rights reserved

© Tom Masters, 2017

The right of Tom Masters to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

Illustration © Katherine Anteney, 2017

Foreword © Katherine Orman, 2017

ISBN: 978-1-912420-18-6





Foreword

It's July and I'm sitting in the walled garden at the Hospital of St Cross in Winchester. Sunlight beams through the leafy branches of the tall, old plane, casting playful shapes onto the page in front of me. It almost seems unbelievable that a whole year has passed since I was here with Tom. I can picture him clearly, pacing up and down on the grass beside the pond, muttering away. '*Come reeds upon the tremor of the breeze...*'. Who knows what people must've thought! Yet Tom's method of oral composition when creating these poems really does reinforce both the textured sounds of his language and the structural form these eclogues take.

Tom has chosen to write in iambic pentameter, the traditional 'heroic line'; a metre perhaps most notably used in English literature by the likes of Shakespeare and Milton. While placing constraints on a poet – something Tom has described as 'a liberating form of creative compression' – the pentameter line also harmonises well with the natural rhythms of spoken English. The result is an amplification of speech infused with a heightened clarification of image; and while using iambic pentameter in an age where free verse largely dominates might be seen as rather old fashioned, the poems' polyphony and frequent use of enjambment creates an effect that is often strangely haunting and modern.

To be honest, I hadn't heard the term 'eclogue' before Tom began composing these poems. The word itself simply means 'a selected passage', but it became heavily associated with the pastoral tradition through the work of the Roman poet Virgil, who wrote his ten pastoral poems, *The Eclogues*, during the declining years of the old republic. Virgil's eclogues take inspiration from the writings of the Greek poet Theocritus of Syracuse, and present the reader with an idealised rustic landscape in which shepherds fall in love and entertain each other with song. Yet Virgil's art is not purely an escapist one. He was writing at a time of great civil unrest and this underlying tension frequently finds its way into *The Eclogues*, casting weird shadows across his sunlit scenes. Here the pastoral is both an aesthetic act of defiance and an oblique social critique; however, the overall effect is one of suggestion rather than overt didacticism.

Just as Virgil guided Dante through the first two parts of his Divine Comedy, so the Roman poet's shade seems to haunt Tom's poetic imagination. Sometimes the influence is clear; in 'Eclogue II', for example, the references to 'Amaryllis' (line 2) and 'the beechen shade' (line 6) are markedly Virgilian. At others, this influence is subtler; for example, the imagery of the cave, again from 'Eclogue II', is redolent of Virgil's sixth eclogue, where Silenus, lying asleep in a cave, is playfully bound by two boys and a naiad before being beguiled into revealing ancient mysteries. Even the names of the characters, Thomas and Matthew, gently evoke Virgil's Tityrus and Meliboeus; although it should be observed that neither poem in this pamphlet appears to contain any shepherds, idealised or otherwise.

Tom's other notable influences include such writers as Spenser and Drayton; the Romantic poets Keats, Coleridge, and Wordsworth; and even Yeats, Walter de la Mare, and Dylan Thomas. Yet it is by no means necessary to be familiar with any of these poets to appreciate the eclogues within this pamphlet. In many ways, Tom's eclogues are self-sustaining dream poems, taking place in a landscape that's both familiar and strange. The reader, and even the characters themselves within the poems, are left to consider whether the scene before them is real or imaginary.

'Eclogue I' begins with a nod to the classical tradition by making a playful invocation to an unnamed goddess: 'Amuse us with the laughter of a stream;/So with sweet voice of water, goddess: speak' (lines 1-2). The wordplay here, Amuse/Muse, is characteristic of Tom's poetry, and in the context of 'Eclogue I' lulls the reader into a false sense of security. This is very much a poem of two halves, and the atmosphere of the first half is light and pleasant. The spirit invoked appears benign, gentle, and even comforting; its 'touch is blossom to the tender bough' (line 10). Indeed, the overriding sense in the first half of this poem is that the landscape is peaceful and idyllic. However, things soon take a darker turn. The poem's second half is separated from the first with: 'What is the secret meaning of this place?' (line 21) – a question that is not fully answered. Immediately, there is a change in atmosphere to one that is eerie and mysterious, signalled by the line: 'How strange the echo of the light has grown' (line 22). Even the 'spirit in the leaves' (line 9) now appears sinister: 'Something is watching. I can see its

eyes' (line 29). It's interesting to note that while the poem is written in iambic pentameter throughout, the effect is markedly different in each half. Whereas the lines in the first half are smooth and expansive, befitting the harmonious atmosphere, in the second they are more knotted and edgy; an effect that's created, in part, through the increased number of midline caesuras, and which reflects the new tension in the landscape as the poem's speaker moves into the wood.

As in 'Eclogue I', the landscape in 'Eclogue II' is both peaceful and frightening. Its imagery reflects 'Eclogue I', with its faces amongst the leaves and the tangled paths; yet 'Eclogue II' takes the form of a dialogue – traditional in pastoral poetry – between its two characters, Matthew and Thomas. At the beginning of the poem, there is a tension between Matthew's present tense and Thomas's past tense narration, which begs the question of whether, at this point, a dialogue is actually taking place between them at all. Indeed, it appears that Matthew and Thomas are on different planes of consciousness, as if they are both quite out of one another's grasp. However, it is interesting to note how the imagery of one speaker seems to affect the imagery of the other. Take, for example, Matthew's 'I fear dark eddies of the currents' swell' (line 32) which is followed by Thomas's 'A darkness swelled to thickness in the gloom' (line 33) – the fact that Thomas reiterates the imagery of a swelling darkness may suggest that Matthew's speech is in fact helping to shape Thomas's dream.

Certainly there is tension at the heart of 'Eclogue II'; the tension of dreams versus reality. Indeed, amid the swirl of the poem's images, what is 'dream' and what is 'reality'? Does the sleeping Thomas ever really wake up? Thomas and Matthew eventually appear to reside on the same plane of consciousness, even sharing lines of iambic pentameter – yet does this mean Thomas is awake, like Matthew? Or is Matthew also asleep (or even a figment of Thomas's unconscious), luring him to go even deeper into the dream? Whatever the case, it seems that Matthew is distanced from reality, as his memories of home have become unclear, as if shrouded by fog. It is the spirit in the woodland that appears responsible, as Matthew notes that it is this strange power which 'compelled/Me to forget' (lines 123-124). Forgetfulness affects Thomas too, who struggles to remember his own name, 'I think...my

name/Is... Thomas' (lines 105-106). Yet Thomas, who fears that he will not be able to wake up, vows to 'journey on' (line 140) – but is he only going deeper into unconsciousness, and thus, from a certain perspective, further away from reality? Will the mystery of the landscape be revealed; or the question in 'Eclogue I', 'What is the secret meaning of this place?', be answered?

Tom has informed me that the eclogues within this pamphlet are the first two of what will become a collection of ten (a very Virgilian number) and it's interesting to briefly note the historical relationship between pastoral and epic poetry. Virgil wrote *The Eclogues* in dactylic hexameter, the same metre in which he later wrote his epic poem *The Aeneid*. Similarly, in the English tradition, Edmund Spenser's epic *The Faerie Queene* was preceded by his collection of eclogues, *The Shepherd's Calendar*. Are Tom's eclogues, too, the seeds for an epic poem? If so, what – or whose – story might emerge?

In this pamphlet, 'Eclogues I & II' are beautifully complemented by the linocuts of Katherine Anteney, whose work provides an exciting visual experience of the world within the poems. Katherine's artistic interpretation wonderfully captures the poems' varying moods, combining a playful, child-like innocence with a graceful and enchanting quality. The dream-like atmosphere the art evokes is perfectly in keeping with the haunting landscape of Tom's eclogues, where, as we've seen, the distinction between reality and dreams is blurred.

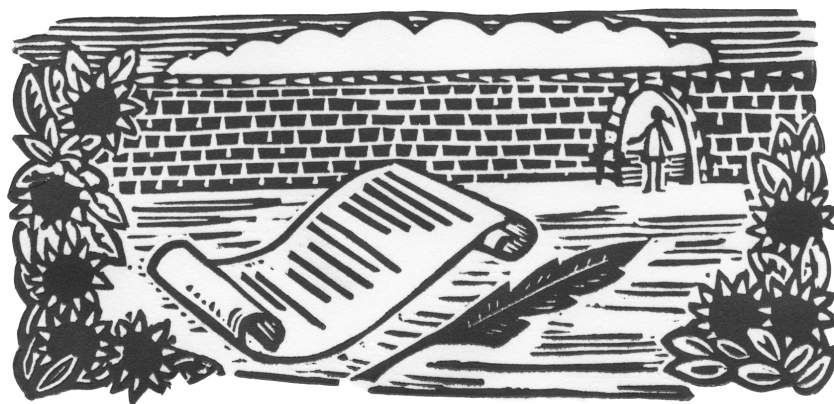
Indeed, Katherine's linocuts offer the reader an opportunity to view the poems' shared landscape from a new perspective. While the poems themselves are written at times from the viewpoint of an unnamed speaker, and at others from that of either Thomas or Matthew, Katherine's images allow the reader to explore the poems' scenes through a further pair of eyes. I find Tom's poetry intensely visual, and Katherine has reached into this dimension of the writing to create a set of images that linger in the reader's imagination long after the pamphlet has been closed. They also, rather magically, allow the reader to participate in the poems' narratives. For example, in one linocut, we see the figure of the walker from 'Eclogue I' continuing on their journey, while the face amongst the leaves looks out from the foreground, directly at the viewer. Thus, as viewers of the linocuts, we are also participants

in the scenes they playfully interpret and transform, as we too make our own way through the wood on our journey home.

Speaking of which, the afternoon is wearing thin and it will soon be closing time. The gardener has just switched off the fountain and the water in the pond is now still. As I put Tom's poems back in my bag I wonder about the next pair of eclogues and where they'll take me. The imaginative landscape is vast, the possibilities expansive. Will Thomas find his way home? Who else will the reader encounter in the depths of the wood? As I make my way towards the gate, I look back at the now empty garden. It seems so peaceful in the quietening light, and I know that I'll be here with Tom again.

Katherine Orman

July 2017





Eclogues I & II

Eclogue I

Amuse us with the laughter of a stream;
So with sweet voice of water, goddess: speak.
Cleft lips of earth that murmur, dark and green
Rhyme with the notes of golden shallows, deep.
I walk beside the coursing of her song
Reflecting my reflection in her eye;
Below, the stream-like motion of the sky
Where clouds, like fishes, scale the limpid air.
O how there is a spirit in the leaves
Whose touch is blossom to the tender bough;
Who soothes the walker with their scented shade
And dapples dreamly on the waking ground.
Come reeds upon the tremor of the breeze
Breathe with the sylvan melodies, and lo
Out from the ancient faces of the bark
The lissom bodies of the woodland grow.
I watch the sapling willow of their dance
As round this shimmer of a glade they go;
So with the cloven rhythm of their feet
Some primal beat into the earth is sown.
What is the secret meaning of this place?
How strange the echo of the light has grown;
O how the light's grown strange, as deeply now
The shadows pool the hanging of the trees.
I worry through this tangle of a path
That winds as weeps the shroudings of its way;
That splays with roots the crackings of its stones
And mocks my footfalls with unkindly play.
Something is watching. I can see its eyes.
Some eerie gaze out through this mask of leaves:
A glint of green amid the greenly shades.
She flows into the chaos of my path;
Lithe with unnatural nature how she moves.

Her beauty's weird: her skin, like lichen, seems
To breathe across her growth of limbs; her hair's
Like moss, all knotted through with vines; and though
She smiles, her smile it seems, knows nothing of
My kind. So still within this moment's held
The musings of our eyes. We cannot speak.
Yet as I blink she thinks to touch my hand.
And then she's gone. And so the path goes on.





Eclogue II

MATTHEW

THOMAS

- M: He seems so still; perhaps he is asleep
And Amaryllis looms deep music of
His dreams? The grass is soft, so like a bed
O hear the crickets' song, they do not sing
Of mourning. Yet he seems so still; his skin
So ashen in the beechen shade. I think
Perhaps he's strayed too long, and all the while
This gentle dell has lulled his life away.
- T: I dreamt of blading forth on grassy seas
High over meadows' waves, where swallows' fins
Made spume the swirling clouds. My hollow barque
Was tossed upon the foaming of the wind
The shell-like roar of corn was siren to
My ears, I feared the keeling plunge; then down:
A violent splash of petals on the prow.
- M: He seems to stir. There's life behind his eyes.
A breath about his lips that breathes to speak.
I cannot read the journey of his words.
- T: The place I found myself I did not know.
Like dreaming in my dream, the painting of
The light stroked weird upon the scene. I saw
A milken flow of ever-budding trees;
Soft petalings of leaves, whose colours ran
And carpeted the ground. I heard the sound
Of distant thunders waters torrents run;
Saw rivers of the sun, whose shade stretched wings
To furl the furrowed foldings of the land;
Saw there, pecked deeply into rock: a cave.
- M: The shadow play of eventide draws near.
It laps against the brushwood of the dell.

And still he floats, adrift upon his dreams.
 I fear dark eddies of the currents' swell.
 T: A darkness swelled to thickness in the gloom.
 No sound for sight, I stumbled on my way
 Weighed down by burrowed blackness, fretful in
 The chill. I felt along the blindness of
 The wall; its smoothened face was cool, was damp
 Beneath the tracings of my hand; it seemed
 I recognised its tears. For surely here
 Was nothing and forever; nowhere; and
 I knew that I would never...knew that all
 Was never and forever, nothing nor
 Together...never sound, nor sight, nor breath
 This breathless weight like death...this waiting in
 The dark to wait no more...for surely here
 Was only ever in fornever...as
 The throttle of the blackness choked me down...
 A tallowing. A tallowing of light
 Exhaled the room. The flicker of its life
 Breathed shadows on the walls: a rounding
 Of limbs, whose dance was like the quickening
 Of green beneath the rain. Again they turned
 Now faint, now clear; it felt like I could hear
 The reachings of their cries. But sound was still.
 And dancing on, the figures stretched to grow
 So slowly yet so sure. I saw them strain
 Towards that rocky dome of sightless sky.
 But there was sunlight there. Its golden grace
 Of fingers kissed my cheek. And there were smiles
 Amid the touchings of the leaves. O how
 We ran; through grasses, long so wild, to where
 The willows wet their hair with plaited reeds.
 And there the waters greened the hazel in
 Your eyes. And there the mossy light was still:
 A soothing haze; such dream-lit quiet in
 Our gaze, no scaled splash nor thin wings' hum

Bespoke the silent movement of our hands.
 But tightening its grasp the light closed in.
 Alone, my world waned small. Then with me in
 The cave I saw the body of a man.
 He looked so pale; perhaps he was asleep?
 Around him petals lay. There was a breath
 About his lips...I heard him speak: 'O breathe...'
 M: ...night's nectar in this dell is anodyne.
 O breathe; the heady musk of dreams has whelmed
 You in her sensate deep, and deeply down...
 T: '...and deeper still...'
 M: ...O breathe...
 T: ...awake...'
 M: ...O breathe.
 T: How strange. How strange it is to see your voice
 So like the face I dreamt I knew. Where is
 This place?
 M: The place I found you; here, beneath
 The beechen shade.
 T: What is the hour?
 M: Late.
 T: Too late, I think. My head is thick with sleep.
 Am I awake? All seems unreal. How can
 I trust my eyes? I feel as though I were
 Some other place, and here is only there
 Hung darkly with the likeness of this dell.
 These shadows play; their bodies taunt the fire
 Drawn thin, like ghosts. I see and cannot see
 And hear, and always out of reach –
 M: Friend: draw
 A little closer to the fire; there is
 No seeming here, but seen.
 T: What is your name?
 M: My name is Matthew.
 T: (That sounds well enough).
 How came you here?

M: Please; tell me first your name
And then you'll have my tale.

T: I think...my name
Is...Thomas.

M: Thomas? Well, I doubt my tale
Will flesh forgetting's bones. In truth, it is
A mystery to me; part broken paths
And knotted trees; part sunlight laughing with
The lispng streams. How came I here? At times
I feel I know, and could perhaps outpace
The creeping growth of root and stem; for if
I could but trace my pathway in, I would
Escape. And yet to leave... This place affects
You, Thomas; how it alters you. Once, all
I longed for was my home. Each day-lit dream
Each wakeful night, was burnt with embers of



My hearth; with smiles and with the loving hands
Of those I loved. O how I should've fled
This place, and ran to them, and held them close.
But some strange power, whose dark habit is
Of leaves, and dwells among these trees, compelled
Me to forget. Yet how could I forget?
Their faces have grown dim. My hearth's burned cold.
Please – do not look so pained. In truth, there's chance
They never were, and everything I've said
Is simply my imagining. It's hard
In here to tell the route from root, each path's
So tangled. But in time, my friend, you'll see
There's beauty too... Come, Thomas: you should eat
Then rest. I have some bread; and here, I think
A little cheese. Tomorrow all might seem
Quite changed; less like a dream, night-fashioned by
Some unseen hand.

T: I fear I'll never wake.
But thank you, friend. It's good to know that there
Is kindness here amid these shades. I sense
That soon some dawn shall break. And then, for what
It's worth, I'll journey on.

