Theognis 341–50

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Ἀλλά, Ζεῦ, τέλεσόν μοι, Ὀλύμπιε, καίριον εὐχήν·
δὸς δέ μοι ἀντὶ κακῶν καί τι παθεῖν ἀγαθόν.
τεθναίην δ', εἰ μή τι κακῶν ἄμπαυμα μεριμνέων
εὑροίμην, δοίην δ' ἀντ' ἀνιῶν ἀνίας.
αἶσα γὰρ οὕτως ἐστί. τίσις δ' οὐ φαίνεται ἡμῖν
ἀνδρῶν, οἳ τἀμὰ χρήματ' ἔχουσι βίηι
συλήσαντες· ἐγὼ δὲ κύων ἐπέρησα χαράδρην
χειμάρρωι ποταμῶι πάντ' ἀποσεισάμενος·
τῶν εἴη μέλαν αἷμα πιεῖν· ἐπί τ' ἐσθλὸς ὄροιτο
δαίμων, ὅς κατ' ἐμὸν νοῦν τελέσειε τάδε.

Oh Zeus, Olympian, accomplish for me my timely prayer. Grant that some good also may fall to me, instead of misfortunes. But may I die, unless I discover some surcease from my evil cares, and may I inflict harm in return for harm. For this is the way of *Aisa*. But vengeance comes not to me against the men who plundered my possessions and hold them by force. And I, a dog, have passed through the ravine in the wintry torrent, having lost (lit. "shaking off") everything. May I drink their black blood. And may some good *daimôn* arise, who will bring these things to accomplishment, as I wish them.[1]

In the long corpus of Theognidean elegy, so uneven in quality, a few poems stand out for their freshness, incisiveness, and apparent originality. 341–50 seems to belong in this select company of small gems that adorn the collection, but unfortunately its vigor is matched by its obscurity, and its unity clouded by apparently abrupt and arbitrary transitions of thought and imagery.

Scholars agree, broadly, on the general substance of the poem, which must refer to the exile of the oligarch Theognis, the loss of his estates to his political enemies, and his vicious bitterness against the despoilers. But what is to be made of 347–48, verses

[1] This translation is an effort at literal rendering of the Diehl-Young text as it stands. Naturally, like any translation, it involves interpretation in some degree.

which raise more questions than they answer? Why does Theognis refer to himself as a dog? What and where is the ravine, with its wintry stream? And finally, after this poet-become-dog has passed through the icy torrent, what is suggested by the curious image of "shaking off everything"?

Answers have generally fallen into two large categories. One solution is to rule out the intrusion of the dog by emending him out of existence; thus φυγὼν has been proposed in place of κύων.[2] Yet the text tradition appears to lend no real support to emendation, and it is surely preferable to retain the reading of the mss., if it can be shown to be tenable and appropriate in the economy of the poem. But to show that the reading is reasonable, one must first confront the question of what the dog is supposed to be doing. ἀποσεισάμενος has been translated as "having lost my all," i.e. all my property.[3] This, however, adds nothing to the picture, since the poet has stated in the preceding sentence that he has been violently robbed of his property. It has been proposed that the dog may possibly have been cleansed of its vermin by passing through the torrent's cold waters.[4] At best such an image would be clumsy, and quite out of keeping with the serious tone of the prayers that begin and close the poem.

I suggest that scrutiny of other poems located in the vicinity of 341–50 may be of help, since it is recognized that in the Theognidean anthology both genuine and spurious poems on similar subjects, and therefore likely to employ similar diction, are often grouped rather closely together.[5] This is indeed the case with our poem: 337–40, 361–62, and 363–64 are bitter with hate and longing for requital. Specifically, the reader's eye is drawn to ἀποτεισάμενον (340) and ἀποτεινυμένου (362), where in each case we find a verb of vengeance occurring in similar contexts of death, suffering, and a burning desire for revenge. Extrapolating from these lines, I propose that the original text contained in 348 the form ἀποτεισόμενος, as a future middle participle expressing purpose, that a scribe made the error of writing σ for τ (an easy error in minuscule), and that a succeeding copyist changed

[2] J. Sitzler, *Theognidis Reliquiae* (Heidelberg 1880).

[3] This is the sense of the interpretation of J. Carrière, *Théognis: Poèmes Elégiaques* (Paris 1948), commentary *ad loc.*

[4] Cf. T. H. Hudson-Williams, *The Elegies of Theognis* (London 1910) *ad loc.*

[5] Cf. 87–128, possibly eight poems, all on friendship, and 497–510, possibly four separate poems, all dealing with the effects of wine on proper judgment.

ἀποσεισόμενος to the form we now possess, in the effort to make some sense of the passage.

What would be the consequences of the hypothesis that ἀποτεισόμενος is the true reading? The intent of the couplet would then run this way: "I, a dog, have passed through the ravine in the wintry torrent in order to avenge everything"—in other words, to seek requital against the oppressors of the preceding sentence. The change of reading illuminates, I believe, the significance of the dog and the ravine with its torrent. We can now see the dog as an avenging hound of hell, and the river in the ravine becomes the Styx itself. First, the dog is a standard symbol of requital, especially chthonic.[6] One thinks of the Erinyes in the *Oresteia*, who are termed *kunai* (e.g., *Choeph.* 1054); of Agamemnon and Menelaus as winged dogs, agents of the justice of Zeus against Troy (*Agam.* 136); of the fearsome whelps who roamed at night in the train of Hecate: Theocritus, *Idylls* 2.12–13, associates Hecate, *melan haima*, and dogs. The latter were sometimes the souls of murdered men, and apotropaic measures were definitely in order when they were abroad, as *ponêroi daimones*.[7] The association of dogs with spirits from Hades sprang in part from the fact that they were so often observed in cemeteries at night, and wandering among dead bodies on the battlefield.[8]

Secondly, the ravine and its river, a wintry torrent, icy cold and violent. If it is right to identify the *kuôn* as a hound of Hades, then no river would be more appropriate than the Styx. Hesiod (*Theog.* 785–87) speaks of the coldness of the river, and the natural stream commonly identified with it was a torrent in Arcadia fed by melting snows.[9] The ancients thought that one drink of the river would bring instant death, a notion attributable, according to J. G. Frazer, only to the coldness of the waters.[10] The phraseology Theognis uses is of Homeric stamp (cf. *Il.* 4.452–54), but the usage is, as far as I can determine, original in its purport here.

I have, then, suggested three hypotheses in interpretation of 347–48: the *kuôn* as a hound of Hades; the icy river as the Styx;

[6] Cf. H. Scholz, *Der Hund in der griechisch-römischen Magie und Religion* (Berlin 1937) 28–31.

[7] Cf. Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 4.23.7, and see Scholz (above, note 6) 29.

[8] Scholz (above, note 6) 29.

[9] Pausanias, 8.17–19.

[10] See his commentary on Pausanias, 8.18.4.

the replacement of a participle meaning "shaking off" by one meaning "to avenge." But what relevance does the couplet then have to the structure of the entire poem, and how can one accept the theory that the poet asserts that he is a hound of Hades, bent on vengeance, and therefore dead and among the shades, where he can assume this particular form, so effective for his purpose? Relevance can be established, I think, by re-examining the movement of the elegy as a whole.

The poet begins with a conventional prayer to the Olympian Zeus, a prayer that is timely because of the evils we soon find are being copiously inflicted on him. He asks for some good to befall him in place of his accustomed misfortune. He then proceeds to express a wish, virtually an oath, with greater intensity; to paraphrase, may he die unless he finds rest, and can hurt those who have hurt him. For this is the way that *Aisa* does (or should) work as a principle of nature.[11] In this line (345) is the first of two crucial breaks in the poem, both marked by the coincidence of the line caesura with the conclusion of one train of thought and the beginning of a new one. For now, the poet announces that the vengeance he so desires, the vengeance for which he has prayed to the Olympian Zeus, has not been granted him. Implicitly, then, Zeus has denied his prayer; therefore, only the alternative of death is open to him. Once again, there follows a crucial transition, stressed by the joining of line caesura with thought end, after *sulêsantes*. With the failure of prayer to the Olympian, and with his wish to die if vengeance is not given, the exile Theognis is at least symbolically dead. He becomes the hound of hell who crosses the cold river of death, the Styx, with the goal of inflicting the punishment not allotted to him in life. This notion of the avenging spirit is strongly supported by the chthonic wish that follows, to drink the dark blood of his enemies.

[11] The Homeric *Aisa* seems virtually undistinguishable from *Moira* in most of its common but not always precise senses. In the first half of the fifth century, it can clearly stand for a principle of justice, or an agent supporting that principle. Cf. Aeschylus. *Choeph.* 646–47, where *Aisa* forges arms of vengeance on the anvil of the overturned altar of *Dikê*, and *Suppl.* 77–82, in which transgression of *Aisa* is regarded as an act of *adikia* and *hybris*. I interpret the term here in accordance with this Aeschylean usage, and propose that as the tone of the entire poem implies, Theognis looks to the punishment of his foes as a natural inevitability, even if it can be effected only after his genuine or imagined death. The sentence of which *Aisa* forms the subject very probably refers to the train of thought that precedes it; this interpretation is strongly supported by the sharp metrical break in the third foot of 345.

We recall here the eleventh *Odyssey*, and the shades who had no power to recognize and speak until Odysseus had given them the blood to drink. But for Theognis, the drinking of the blood means more than mere chthonic reinvigoration; the blood he will drink is that of his persecutors, and a grim, terrible spirit of total vengeance has entered the poem at this point. Finally, there is also a new prayer, far different from the prayer of the opening lines. Not Zeus, but a *daimôn* is summoned to arise, surely from the earth, and effect the punishment the poet so earnestly desires. Conceivably this *daimôn*, which Theognis terms *esthlos*, is his own shade; in other words, he may have turned from reliance on the Olympian god to the avenging fury which rises from his death and is in a sense distinct from his living being, perhaps on the order of the shade of Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides*.

Whatever the case, he finds his vengeance as a power from the underworld, when the justice of Olympus has failed him. The poem moves, then, in a kind of ring composition from the opening prayer addressing the gods of the upper world, to the concluding litany to the chthonic forces of the underworld. *Teleseie* in the final line echoes the imperative *teleson* of the first; the *esthlos daimôn* has taken the place of the Zeus of the invocation; the *euchê*, the prayer, has become not just the hope, but the realized, materialized objective of the poet, a vengeance present, vivid and savored.

One may conclude offhand that 341–50 (an indecently impersonal "title" for such a personal poem) is a thoroughly unpleasant work through which we merely glimpse a cruel, twisted mind. Yet it is obvious that this was the mind of a writer who had mastered his craft with subtlety and precision, and above all has transmuted the base materials of vicious and agonized self-pity into high art, by the catalysis of imaginative powers of the first order.