

## POETRY AS SELF-ENLIGHTENMENT: THEOCRITUS 11

ERLING B. HOLTSMARK

*University of Iowa*

The eighteen prefatory lines of Theocritus' Eleventh Idyll<sup>1</sup> console the physician Nicias by asserting that the only remedy against love is song, or poetry. The love-sick Cyclops, who by his own song (19-79) found a "cure"<sup>2</sup> for the love he had for Galatea, provides the poet's specific proof of the introductory generalization, and thus enhances the validity of the consolation. Gow,<sup>3</sup> taking exception to the use of ἀείδων in line 13, argues that although Theocritus considers singing a "cure" for love, he yet lists singing as one of its symptoms. The inconsistency is only apparent. For when Theocritus claims that it is difficult to find a "cure" for love in poetry he means that it is not any kind of song or poetry which will avail, but only that particular kind which brings the singer to self-awareness. In this note I wish to show how Polyphemus' song is a corroborative paradigm of the enlightening and remedial character of poetry.

<sup>1</sup> The text is that of A. S. F. Gow, *Bucolici Graeci* (Oxford 1952).

<sup>2</sup> It should be realized that throughout my paper the translation "cure" for φάρμακον (1, 17) is a stop-gap, for no one English word carries the much wider connotation of the Greek (e.g. alleviation, anodyne, assuagement, charm). In view of Polyphemus' ἔχθιστον . . . ἔλκος (15), Theocritus is not concerned so much with an outright "cure" as with the remedial or palliative characteristics of poetry. At least Callimachus (*Epigr.* 46.1-4), speaking of the Cyclops in the same circumstances, asserts that poetry, as a spell-binding charm (ἐπασιδᾶ) and a "cure" (φάρμακον), emaciates (κατισχνάινοντι) love, i.e. weakens love, but does not necessarily cure it outright. So Theocritus elsewhere (14.52-53) implies that against love, which is ἀμήχανος, there is no final "cure" (φάρμακον).

<sup>3</sup> *Theocritus: Edited with a Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge 1952) 2.211; he claims that the song ". . . shows Polyphemus very far from cured." The point of ἀείδων in line 13 is missed also by Quintino Cataudella, "Un Aporia del 'Ciclope' Teocriteo," *REG* 66 (1953) 477, who wants to avoid its difficulty by reading ἀεὶ λῶν. See, further, Hartmut Erbse, "Dichtkunst und Medizin in Theokrits 11. Idyll," *MH* 22 (1965) 233-34.

Of the four sections (lines 19–29, 30–53, 54–71, and 72–79) in which Theocritus successively shows Polyphemus as becoming aware of the nature of love and of himself, considerations of form reveal that the first is hymnal: flattering epithets of the *invocanda* (20–21); an account of her activities (22–24); *hypomnesis* (25–27);<sup>4</sup> and implied request.<sup>5</sup> Theocritus, by presenting Polyphemus as a suppliant-lover who invokes his deity, demonstrates that the Cyclops grossly misunderstands the workings of Eros.

Now, Hellenistic Eros is a rather brutally realistic thing. In order to appreciate its character it will be necessary briefly to examine a few passages in Theocritus and Callimachus. We may first consider Callimachus, *Epigr.* 25.

Ὡμοσε Καλλίγνωτος Ἰωνίδι μήποτ' ἐκείνης  
 ἔξειν μήτε φίλον κρέσσονα μήτε φίλην.  
 ὦμοσεν· ἀλλὰ λέγουσιν ἀληθέα τοὺς ἐν ἔρωτι  
 ὄρκους μὴ δύνειν οὔατ' ἐς ἀθανάτων.  
 νῦν δ' ὁ μὲν ἀρσενικῶ θέρεται πυρί, τῆς δὲ ταλαίνης  
 νύμφης ὡς Μεγαρέων οὐ λόγος οὐδ' ἀριθμός.

Although Callignotus has broken the oaths of love which he swore to Ionis, it is he who profits thereby, she who suffers. The gods certainly do not pay attention to such oaths. That is to say, Eros is a law unto itself and looks out for its own interests, and that lover is lost who does not press his suit to his own particular advantage. The meek and passive have no place in this game, for they, like wretched Ionis, will end up of no account or reckoning. Indeed, the relationship seems to demand that a calculated initiative be taken, or else that the whole thing best be forgotten (Callimachus, *Epigr.* 52). Theocritus, likewise, makes

<sup>4</sup> A very common element in the so-called hymnal style is the *hypomnesis*, or reminder, in which the suppliant bases his claim on an appeal either to the kinship which he and the invoked deity share (e.g. *Od.* 9.529) or to some former service which he has rendered to the deity (e.g. *Il.* 1.40–41). In line 27 Polyphemus alludes to a former service; in line 26, to kinship. For Polyphemus and Galatea are in fact related. His mother is the sea-nymph Thoosa, a daughter of Phorcys; Phorcys is a brother of Nereus, the father of Galatea. Since, therefore, Thoosa and Galatea are cousins, Polyphemus is related to Galatea. For a recent discussion of the hymnal style, with the relevant literature, see Jene LaRue, "Creusa's Monody: Ion 859–922," *TAPA* 94 (1963) 127 and *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> As in any formal structure, the order in which components appear is not rigid. Here the opening question (19) is a polite request: Please do not reject your lover.

clear that Eros has no realistic chance for fruition unless initial overtures are boldly and actively answered—refusal is refusal, acceptance is acceptance, and that is that (5.132-135). To Simaetha (*Idyll* 2), again, who “pursues” a fleeting lover, Eros proves cruel and relentless. Eros is anything but sentimental, and one should not kick against the pricks!

The hymnal form of Polyphemus’ address, then, presents him as a beseeching suppliant and Galatea as a powerful deity. He thus fails to perceive that he has placed the advantage fully on Galatea’s side, and that in so doing he is no lover, merely passively love-sick (cf. 6.7: *δυσέρωτα*). It is his inability fully to understand why the hymnal request is, indeed must be, without efficacy in a matter of love that leads him, in section two of his poem, to suggest an explanation.

“I know why you run away,” he asserts. It is because he has a shaggy brow stretching from ear to ear, a single eye beneath it, and a flat nose (31-33). To compensate for his external grotesqueness he catalogues his material wealth, and if Galatea will but come to him, she will have his treasures: countless cattle, excellent milk, cheeses in laden baskets during all seasons (34-37); fawns and bear cubs (40-41); a cave, laurels, cypresses, ivy, fruit-bearing vines, cold water from the melting snows of Aetna (44-48); oak logs and a fire that burns continuously (51). These logs and fire, he suggests (50), will offset his unpleasant appearance; so, too, the rest of his wealth will make up for his physical ugliness. He takes for granted that what he has to offer is preferable to any attractions that the sea might hold for Galatea (42-43, 49). In desperation he vows that he would even allow her to destroy his *ψυχή*, his inner feelings, and his one eye. He will, in other words, allow her to destroy his inner self that he may satisfy his own narcissistic longing to be “loved” at any cost, for such an act on her part would mean that she had at last conceived love enough for him to abandon her own world to be with him in his. The passive type of love now envisaged by the Cyclops is wholly unrealistic, since it is precisely as blind and unseeing as Polyphemus would have himself become at Galatea’s hands: it is a love that obfuscates and destroys, not one that creates and enlightens. Nevertheless, he recognizes, as he did not previously, that love involves the more active role of giving on his part. Although he can at this point only think of “giving” as the giving of material things, he advances in understanding; for he realizes

that love must do more than simply request. Polyphemus has gained a modicum of insight into love, but, since he has not attained his wish, dismisses his efforts.

His continued failure to charm the Nereid leads him, in line 54, to wish that his mother had borne him with gills, for then he could approach Galatea in her own element. The wish demonstrates a notable sharpening of the Cyclops' awareness. Explicit in his utterance is the realization that perhaps it is he who should give of himself sufficiently to be willing to abandon his world for Galatea, rather than that she should leave the sea for him. Implicit, and more important, is his recognition, as yet unformulated, that he and Galatea, creatures of land and sea, are too fundamentally different ever to be joined in any lasting sense. Their very natures fight against his hopes and desires. Polyphemus has come to suspect that his preceding explanation for Galatea's rejection lacks validity: externals are not really of ultimate moment in love. If he had been the sea-dweller that he is not, he might have won his suit. But tacitly recognizing the hopelessness of becoming what he cannot possibly be, he offers to learn how to swim. For the first time, the Cyclops is willing to assume a truly active role and assert, or give of, himself in order to gain Galatea's love. No longer does he make plaintive demands on her, no longer does he try to win her only by material gifts, but he has come to appreciate that he must first give himself. He does not, however, fully understand the implication of his new insight, for he still assumes that ultimately she will renounce her real self and desert her marine habitat in order to live with him (63-66). Polyphemus has yet to learn that his hope for Galatea involves an outright impossibility. Despite his growing recognition of his own nature and that of love, he wishes to cling to his illusions. The censure of his mother (67-71) displays his immaturity in that it shows him wanting, like a child, to enjoy maternal protection against the cruel impingement of adult reality. This outburst prompts the transitional passage from childhood to manhood that is the education and development of the self to awareness.

His mother alone, he exclaims (67), wrongs him, not Galatea. Since Thoosa has done nothing to promote his quest of Galatea, he considers telling her of his pain that she, too, may suffer. That infantile threat is the last delusion which Polyphemus will allow him-

self; and now, just as his infatuation with Galatea began in the company of his mother (25-27), so, also, it ceases under her (here indirect) influence. "O Cyclops, Cyclops, where is it you have flitted off to in your thoughts?" (72). Why, he asks, is it that he has not seen his mistake? He has, instead, permitted himself to search out rationalizations and to flit the byways (*ἐκπεπότασαι*) of understanding. In lines 67-71, where he reverts to his earlier position (26-27) on the validity of maternal intercession in his passive pursuit of Galatea, the circularity of his explorations becomes evident to him. Having seen that no more now than previously can his mother be of any importance for his dealings with Galatea,<sup>6</sup> Polyphemus proceeds (73-76) to formulate the consequence of his discovery.

The cardinal point of the poem's concluding section is illuminated by the metaphorical application of a time-honored theme in Greek literature: that of the possible-impossible pursuit and the individual's recognition of his ability or inability to cope with it.<sup>7</sup> His failure to assess his own limitations, and the consequent pursuit of what for him is impossible, can only have disastrous results. Fundamentally, the individual must know himself, if he is to choose which pursuits are proper to him and which are not. For Polyphemus, a land-dwelling shepherd, the proper pursuits are plaiting cheese baskets, shepherding, and milking (73-75). Milking of the goat at hand (75) is, in the traditional connotation of the theme, suitable to Polyphemus; he should not engage in the impossibility of pursuing a sea-dwelling Galatea who flees him.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that in this line Polyphemus asks the proper question, the opposite of that asked in line 19; the metrical identity of the two

<sup>6</sup> It may be suggested that adolescent (cf. line 9) Polyphemus has finally recognized that, on the basis of the familial relationship between Thoosa and Galatea, the latter is, by transference, substituting for Thoosa; and he can never love his mother as mistress.

<sup>7</sup> The theme finds specific formulation in the following places: Theognis 1151-52; Pindar *P.* 3.19-23; Aeschylus *Persae* 823-26; Sophocles *El.* 392; Euripides *Hipp.* 184-85, *Rh.* 482, frgs. 1076.2-3, 1077 (N); Theocritus 5.26-27, 10.7-9 (a specifically erotic context). In these examples one notes the several constants: (1) the use of the participle *παρών* (or an equivalent) to indicate a present certainty which is rejected in favor of (2) the pursuit (note some of the words of "pursuit" employed: *ἐρᾶν*, *διώκειν*, *θηρεύειν*, etc.) of impossibles (frequently used words are: *ἄλλος*, *ἄπών*, *φεύγων*, *ἀμήχανος*, etc.). Further passages are listed by Gow in his note on line 75. The same basic idea of the possible-impossible pursuit, in an erotic situation, lies, I think, at the core also of *Idyll* 30.

<sup>8</sup> On the masculine form of the participle, see Hermann Fritzsche, *Theokrits Gedichte* (Leipzig 1881) 160, as well as Gow (above, note 3) 220.

questions strongly suggests that Theocritus meant to stress their connection as representing the Cyclops' development from initial blindness to final clarity about himself. The Cyclops' clarifying discovery is the insight that no inherent fault in himself is responsible for Galatea's rejection, but rather that it is their irreconcilable natures.

In support he reminds himself (77-79) that there are many maidens who dally in love with him,<sup>9</sup> and not the least of the reasons they do so is that he pays them heed (78) in a way he had never done to Galatea. On land, his proper element, he clearly counts (79): that is where he belongs and, once realizing it, that is where he can fulfill his own nature.

In conclusion to my reading of the poem I should like to explore some of the ramifications of the two final lines, which Gow reads as "a hit at Nicias' profession." Theocritus is not, I believe, so much concerned with a "hit" at medicine as he is with a vindication of poetry's relevance to existence and of its ability to alleviate the ills of the spirit. The Cyclops' poem demonstrates as an example that the only natural remedy against love is song, or poetry—a remedy, and not a temporary analgesic. It is this which Nicias, who is both a physician and a poet, is able to appreciate, for he knows that his medicines can afford little more than a brief alleviation from the pain of love. What, then, does poetry do that the drugs of medicine cannot do?

Theocritus tells us in line 7 that the Cyclops, by turning to poetry, went on living very easily because he discovered that non-medicinal remedy (cf. lines 1-2) which is not easily found. In the last line of the poem Theocritus returns to that point, adding that Polyphemus went on living easier than if he had paid money to a physician. Thus the healing power of poetry is greater than that of medicine, for it attacks the root, not only the symptom, of the disease. Poetry, as exemplified by the Cyclops' song, is superior to medicine as a remedy against love, because it is a process of internal exploration during which the individual gradually comes to accept the basic truths about his emotions, discards cherished but harmful illusions about himself, and, finally, sees himself as he in fact is, not as he would in fancy like to be. Honest

<sup>9</sup> Fritzsche (above, note 8) *ad loc.*, and R. J. Cholmeley, *The Idylls of Theocritus* (London 1930) 271, seem to me to be in error when they suggest that in these lines (77-78) the poet means that the girls are laughing at Polyphemus and making fun of him because of his grotesqueness and stupidity.

confrontation with the revelations which emerge from the poetic experience constitutes the supreme difficulty of this type of remedy. Poetry does not primarily cure the individual of his love-sickness, but, rather, enables him to discover and, most important, accept himself.<sup>10</sup> In short, it educates the self. Medicine might for a moment dull Polyphemus' pain, but it would not eradicate his smoldering infatuation with Galatea; poetry, however, attacks the very cause of his misery, for it has made him understand something of the frank and unsentimental nature of love. This understanding depends on his understanding of himself, so that he may see that his love and Galatea's love cannot find a common meeting ground. She can, therefore, never be the cause of further anguish to him.

A pre-Alexandrian poet, finally, would no doubt say that the Muses are the teachers of men, and that they visit us with insights. In the Alexandrian Age, however, though a token respect may be paid to the corporeal Muses, the internal monologue of the self-evaluating poet has replaced his dialogue with them. Formerly the divinities appeared to men as the forces of the inner man, but the Alexandrian Cyclops no longer believes in these externalizations: he must contend, alone, with himself. The poetic forms must certainly shift during the half millennium between Homer and Theocritus, but the problems and the solutions remain essentially unchanged: Know Thyself! In the Eleventh Idyll of Theocritus we have an Alexandrian version, wherein the poet's inner monologue becomes a means to his own self-enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see R. Stark, "Theocritea," *Maia* 15 (1963) 368-70.

<sup>11</sup> See Erbse (above, note 3) 236.