

Commentary

Difference and Dissonance in Hellenistic Poetry

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Genre.

What is it? What do we think it is? What did they think it is? And, if we do find the answers to those questions, what can, or should, we do with it? The preceding essays have demonstrated very nicely what kinds of things are to be gained from a consideration of ‘genre’ as a concept. If we know what were regarded as literary norms, we can gauge departures from those norms, and their effects—and departures were a key feature of the mentality of Hellenistic poets. Sensitive, intelligent analysis can illuminate a text such as Callimachus’ second *Iamb*; and alertness to what kinds of genres were current can suggest some of the key reference points we must have in mind when reading Hellenistic poetry. If I propose, therefore, that textual and literary analysis which is based on spotting similarities and classifying into categories can also mislead, and can limit us as readers, I am definitely not arguing that there are no benefits obtained from genre criticism. But I do want to suggest that we scrutinize our preconceptions carefully. It could be that, if we base our analysis of Hellenistic texts on modes of conformity, we will end up understanding far less than we hoped to; if we succumb too much to the urge for scholarly neatness, to the urge to put our precious objects into nice tidy boxes with labels, we may end up in a trap of our own making. As with those “little boxes” on the hills south of San Francisco, which can look quite pleasing in the pastel light of a California winter, Malvina Reynolds’ sharp words and Tom Lehrer’s edgy delivery remain the voices to recall: “they’re all made out of tacky–tacky and they all look just the same.”

Hellenistic writers were indeed thoroughly immersed in the works of the past and all the rules and conventions of their often overwhelming tradition, and they did indeed expect their audiences to spot the cultural and creative norms which gave a good deal of the identity to their creations. But as we read and reread these texts, are we not struck over and again by the constant non-conformity? Are we not repeatedly impressed by the departures and the differences? There is a reason why Callimachus, for example, reminds us so often of Pindar without anyone having been able to write a simple scholarly article titled “Echoes of Pindar in Callimachus” (since M. T. Smiley’s short

piece nearly 80 years ago, that is).¹ It was not the formalities of Pindar's text and the plentiful conventions of his lyrics that struck such a resonant note for the Alexandrian, but the shifting oddity of the archaic writer and his unique quirkiness. Callimachus spotted an artistic soul-mate, not a literary model. And all of the major Hellenistic poets surely have a similarly well-developed sense of their own creative capacities. They may have had many insecurities about the Great Tradition, but they do seem to have had a true, if sometimes febrile, sense of their own time and place.

What does this mean for us as readers and critics so long after the event? It means, I think, that we should pay particular attention to the disjunctions and dissonances that we hear, and especially to what seem to be inexplicable and troubling qualities in the text. There is a genuine methodology here: if we listen to our own reactions to the texts of the Hellenistic poets and try to figure out what is going on precisely where it seems that we cannot understand what is happening, we shall probably start to perform an essential process of diagnosis. It is there, where something puzzles and troubles, that we are most likely to be able to isolate what is truly Hellenistic in the character of our text; and it is at just the same place that we stand to lose the most, and distort our text, if we succumb to the temptation to dispose of oddness and difficulty by squaring our authors away into tidy little boxes. We should also listen, therefore, to those amongst our contemporaries who come up with odd notions or crazy theories. Their solutions may be quite errant, but they may well be responding to a feature in the text which is of primary significance. In a recent work on the structure of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, for example, J. Preininger argued that the poem was so constructed as to reflect the structure of the temple of Apollo at Bassae. (One hundred verses are supposedly equivalent to roughly 100 centimeters).² Now there may be many admirers of Apollonius who also consider that splendid isolated Arcadian temple to be one of the most lovely buildings in Greece, but few are going to be convinced that there is any equivalence between the two works. The response to the *Argonautica* which led Preininger off in such a wayward direction nonetheless had some foundation—the structure of the poem is indeed curious and complex, and there is much illumination to be gained for the work as a whole from examination of detailed structural features. But it is no more to be explained by a simple theory of genre or poetics than by a naive architectural analogy.

¹M. T. Smiley, "Callimachus' Debt to Pindar and Others," *Hermathena* 18 (1919) 46–72.

²J. Preininger, *Der Aufbau der Argonautika des Apollonios Rhodios* (Vienna, 1976).

Another writer on Hellenistic poetry recently observed, in the course of some apt remarks on the depiction of male and female erotic passion in Greek literature, that: "in the Hellenistic age...heterosexual love is best celebrated in comedies depicting silly young men impotent everywhere but in bed, and in pastoral poems—the Hellenistic invention—where thoroughly unlikelike rustics ineffectually moon over young women."³ That observation was not made directly about pastoral as a genre, but it is predicated on such a presumption and it is that that makes it so misguided. "Pastoral poems...where..." Well, if that is the case, what are we to make of the mighty Heracles' ineffectual bellowings about his lost Hylas at the end of the first book of Apollonius' epic, and the depiction of such 'ineffectual' love in the non-pastoral poems of Theocritus, poems such as *Idyll* 14 where the lover is to become one of Ptolemy's Egyptian recruits, or *Idyll* 13, with its clear links to the 'pastoral' *Idyll* 6 and the intermediate *Idyll* 11?

No, these categories do not work. Indeed, no categorizing which attempts to isolate the so-called 'pastoral' poems of Theocritus seems to work: there are just too many Theocritean poems which cannot be squeezed into that box, and too many other totally different texts which share some of the salient characteristics of the supposed Theocritean pastoral. If we want to understand how Theocritus works as a poet we are going to have to drop notions of a pastoral genre, which are derived from much later specializing developments in European literature, and follow the signals which Theocritus gives us throughout his oeuvre. We know that Theocritus, unlike his contemporary Callimachus, for example, never published a Collected or Selected Works. If we forget our preconceived notions of 'pastoral,' then, and ask ourselves what strikes us about his poetry, and needs explaining or 'placing,' one of the primary features, surely, is his concern with Illusion: the illusion of 'country,' the illusion of the epic theme, the illusion, even, of morality. And this constant concern fits with a preoccupation to be found in most third-century Hellenistic poets, the preoccupation with veracity and verisimilitude. What we find ourselves asking, as readers of Theocritus, is: is this really a Love Poem? Is this really an Epic Poem? Is this really a Country Poem? I suggest that if we follow through on this logically, and in a way most likely to be fruitful methodologically, we do not end up asking, "What genre does this or that poem belong to?" (which leads straight into the Pastoral Trap) but "Where is the centre of all this?" and "What, in terms of this whole period, and its mentality,

³C. R. Beye, *Epic and Romance in the Argonautica of Apollonius* (Literary Structures: Southern Illinois U. P., 1982) 89.

will hold true?" The answers to these questions may not always be apparent, but I do think that they are much more compelling than the issues about pastoral and its patent unreality, and it is from these *aphormai* that the next generation of productive research, and scientifically based literary analysis, will be done.

Then, again, Apollonius. It is preconceptions derived from 'genre' (which brings with it all sorts of baggage about what such and such a poem ought to be like) that have made Apollonius into such a poor poet without really giving a convincing account of his text. Can we really say that any book or article written on the *Argonautica* in the last hundred years, whatever its virtues, has really "said it," and has really gotten to the centre of things? Or do we actually still find ourselves greatly discomforted by that poem, and troubled by our own inability to understand what is going on? Does Jason the failed hero strolling languidly through Lemnos really seem satisfactory? Or is that a view of things just a little bit foisted on us by our notions of what the epic genre requires of its 'heroes'? Suppose, as I have suggested elsewhere, we listen to the text, and probe it at just those points where it, or Apollonius, seem most odd or unsatisfactory, do we not find that Jason is, in fact, a figure with some depth? not a hero in any epic sense, but a figure of some historical significance? What is important, in this poem, is Jason's relation in time and place and morality to Hypsipyle and Medea, not as a 'hero,' in other words, but as a part of what happened to them and mattered to them and their descendants. The *Argonautica*, it seems to me, is a poem which has a mythic, epic, theme, but has at its centre a preoccupation with History; and this is hardly surprising in such a historical age as the third century B. C. with its profound sense, in Egypt, at any rate, of the significance of the accomplishments of Alexander the Great and the immense distinction between past and present.

Truth and Illusion, Myth and History. There is a connection between these concerns, is there not? And we are led to them as features of the texts of Theocritus and Apollonius—not by the concepts of genre criticism, but by following the requirements of our senses as trained, scholarly readers whose instincts (our scholarly instincts, I mean) are likely to be a better guide to methodology and truth than any theoretical preconceptions.