Poetry as window and mirror: Hellenistic poets on predecessors, contemporaries and themselves

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

My argument throughout this study has been that it is necessary to consider two interrelated factors to understand the way Hellenistic poets represented poets and poetry: their position in Greek (literary) history and their socio-cultural surroundings. To modern readers, Hellenistic poets are relatively late in Greek literary history; they are the “Nachwuchs” of the great Greek tradition, which ends with the classical era, the literature of fifth-century Athens. Hellenistic poetry is also different in nature from earlier poetry both in its formal aspects and its choice of subject matter. It may be asked how Hellenistic poets themselves appreciated their position vis à vis Greek literary history. Were they aware of this lateness and of the different nature of their works? Did they feel continuity with the past or a break?

To understand the Hellenistic preoccupation with the literary past, it is helpful to refer to Assmann’s concept of cultural memory. If ever there was a time in Greek antiquity in which this cultural memory was deliberately formed, it must have been Hellenism, the period that saw the introduction of great royal libraries as symbols of Hellenic culture. These were the sites of the beginnings of systematic philology and eventually the formation of canons of literary masterpieces and they instigated the debate about how these masterpieces should be interpreted and why. Storing and studying literature in this way implies a feeling of both of admiration for it and distance from it.

So Hellenistic poets did not regard older Greek poetry in the same way as contemporary poetry, which, for as far as we can tell, formed indeed no part of the libraries’ collections. Yet, they clearly sought continuity with the literary past: they admired and mined it for their own poetry to a greater extent than earlier poets had done. Yet their poetry also differed more from the tradition than that of their predecessors; they must have sought to authorize these new aspects of their poetry by their constant reference to tradition, real or invented. Perhaps their position is best summed up by saying that most of them were innovative poets and conscientious scholars of Greek literature at the same time, conscious of their position as critical and creative readers reflecting on tradition without feeling completely cut off from it. The past must have seemed to them like a “window and mirror:” they sought to recognize their reflection, even if the world behind the looking glass was different than their own.
What part did their socio-cultural surroundings play in the molding of this attitude towards the past? Many Hellenistic poets worked at or for royal courts that competed in splendor and prestige. The most renowned was that of Ptolemy Philadelphus at Alexandria, which promoted both the study and production of Greek literature on a grand scale to establish the monarch’s claim on the cultural and political legacy of Alexander the Great. The poets of the age were stimulated to look at and, to some extent, imitate the poetry of the past to enhance the king’s prestige. Against this background, which must have represented a powerful influence even beyond the walls of the Alexandrian Museum and Library, the poets’ preoccupation with their response to the literary past becomes clear, as is duly recognized in scholarship.

What has not received a similar amount of scholarly attention is that encouragement by the court also was an important influence on social interaction between contemporaries affiliated to these royal institutions. The material dependence would have led to rivalry for the king’s favor and thereby fueled a strong drive to claim a position of distinction with regard to one’s colleagues. Thus the courtly surrounding influenced the Hellenistic poets’ identity in two ways: it directed their glance towards the past encouraging them to ground their new poetry in hallowed tradition, and it made them consider their position among contemporary colleagues competing for the favor of the monarch.

1. The Past

Addressing the preoccupation with the past, the first part of my study focused on two categories of predecessors, legendary poets and historical ones. Hellenistic poets attributed a different status to figures such as Orpheus and the mythical herdsman-poet Daphnis than to their historical counterparts Homer, Archilochus, and Pindar. This was mainly due to the fact that the legendary poets had left behind no indisputable literary legacy. To the Hellenistic Greeks, Orpheus was an ambiguous figure, part mythical hero, part mystic teacher, and part cultural forerunner of the Greek poets. The cowherd Daphnis’ legacy was, even in antiquity, still vaguer.

However, their doubtful status as authors did not prevent mythical characters from being made into forebears for poetic practice. The fact that they had not left behind a clear-cut literary legacy was welcome: it gave Hellenistic poets the freedom to turn them into their
own predecessors by forming them after their own image. This need to ground their poetry in the tradition may be explained using Hobsbawm’s concept of invented tradition. This can be observed in the Argonautica of Apollonius, where Orpheus is made into a fictional foreshadowing of the narrator’s persona. Theocritus employs the characters Daphnis and Comatas in a similar way to provide what is now known to be his new poetic invention, bucolic poetry, with a venerable and credible ancestry. The intricate design of his bucolic Idylls give his readers the feeling that they are witnessing tales set in a fully rounded bucolic world full of traditions; they can perceive the gist while remaining unaware of the full story.

So one way these poets used the work of poets of the past was to mold them as desired in whatever way best reflected their own characteristics. However, this was not so easy when the poets concerned were clearly circumscribed by a literary legacy that survived to be studied. Historical poets had expressed their own tenets in poetry: this prevented their being cast in entirely new roles. Yet, like legendary poets, they too were used as models whose authority might be invoked in matters of innovative poetic practice.

The Hellenistic treatment of historical predecessors took on two forms. They were evaluated, mostly in the literary epitaphs and other forms of epigram that flourished in this era. I have chosen to focus on three aspects of the characterization of historical poets in epigram: poetic practice (singing versus written composition); the reflection of character and biography in poetic works, and the survival of the poetic legacy through the medium of written texts. The topics are interrelated. Whereas earlier Greek poetry rarely stressed the fact that poetry (or song) could be written down, it becomes the default expectation in the Hellenistic era, the “age of the Book,” in Rudolf Pfeiffer’s words. That the works of predecessors were securely preserved on scrolls is the reason Hellenistic poets were able to judge them. Poetic works served as the inalienable monument to former poets’ existences. The difference between an indisputable literary legacy (such as that of Sophocles) and a legendary, ambiguous one (such as that of Orpheus) was recognized, as can be shown from comparison of epitaphs written on these respective poets. This fact, that the foremost testimony that remained of a poet after his death was his work, made characterization on the basis of his works very attractive. Ancient biography was mainly an extrapolation of facts from a poet’s works; this practice is clearly echoed by the epigrams. This also proves important in the analysis of Hellenistic poets’ self-representation in epigram. Their insight in
the way predecessors were perceived influenced the way in which they chose to present themselves to future generations of readers.

Unsurprisingly, the biographical mode of reading occasionally led to caricatures, such as Anacreon the lovelorn symposiast and Archilochus the venomous aggressor of young maidens. It seems, however, that some poets were aware that such a reading of literature ignored the creation of personae and roles. In my opinion, this was because Hellenistic poets like Theocritus and Callimachus consciously experimented with such different roles and personae in their own works: they were aware that the speaking “I” in poetry does not have to be identical with the historical author. Theocritus’ epigrams that ironically comment upon the traditional appraisal of poets such as Anacreon and Archilochus alert the reader to this, but the creation of insubstantial voices in Callimachus’ Hymns may also be connected to it.

Besides numerous epigrams featuring predecessors, there are some examples of incorporation of predecessors as models or authorities in other poetic texts. While Hellenistic poets invoked their authority because they felt obliged to Greek poetic tradition, they were unable fully to continue its practices. Not only their mode of composing (with constant intertextual reference to the great tradition) but also the function of their poetry in society (more than ever before, it was defined by reading rather than singing and became an increasingly private art) differed from that of their predecessors. Yet, they did not want to distance themselves completely from what had been produced before their own time; they needed the past both to create and to validate the present. There were various ways of invoking the authority of predecessors and hence justifying novel poetic practices. Predecessors could be cast as models, protoi heuretai and inspirers; in such cases it was either opportune to highlight certain traditionally acknowledged characteristics of their poetry or to manipulate data about their life and works so as to make them fit the proposed aim.

Two examples of this practice have been discussed. Theocritus’ sixteenth Idyll uses Homer, Simonides, and (implicitly) Pindar as examples of the thesis that praise in (commissioned) poetry is the only way for a mortal to obtain immortal fame. Theocritus needed to do this because, in his time, as he argues, “poetry” has come to be regarded by miserly patrons preferably as “poetry by dead poets of the past.” He had to demonstrate that poetry is a living, present thing that has to be nurtured in order to perform its natural task:
the providing of kleos. Paradoxically, the sixteenth Idyll does so by adducing the examples of “dead poets of the past.” Hermesianax’ elegiac Leontion, on the other hand, playfully aims to prove the thesis that all literature is the result of love affairs by “allegorically” interpreting the works of Homer and Hesiod and others. On the one hand, this presentation of literary history is a programmatic choice: Hermesianax supposedly refers to the long tradition in which his erotic elegy stands. On the other, through reductio ad absurdum, this procedure seems to reveal an awareness of how the appropriation of models works.

Merely naming poets as models or examples differs from the choice to allow them to speak for themselves in poetry, as the difference between the abovementioned examples and the poems of Timon (Silloi), Callimachus (Iambus 1), and Herondas (Mimiambus 8) illustrates. These latter examples all incorporate poetic authorities as speaking characters. Interestingly, in all cases this results in tensions between the message that is being propounded and the medium through which it is expressed. In Timon of Phlius’ Silloi, the choice to introduce the detractor of Homeric theology Xenophanes as the author’s guide through Hades to lead him to his philosophical master, the sceptic Pyrrho, clashes strangely with the Homeric setting and vocabulary. Moreover, it seems odd that Timon declared that he visited the underworld; the afterlife was a thing sceptics claimed no knowledge about. This strategy illustrates the awkwardness of appropriating a predecessor as an authority for a poet’s own assertions. By choosing to formulate his narrative as an ironic fantasy, he alerted the reader to his awareness of this.

Callimachus and Herondas both introduce an aggressive Hipponax in their iambic poetry. While Callimachus pretends Hipponax is an independent personage who scolds the scholars of the Museum about their quarrels, the latter is in fact his own creation. The poet is partially hiding behind the mask of Hipponax, winking mischievously. In this way, he demonstrates his awareness of the iambic practice of choosing a mask to voice unwelcome opinions. Moreover, he creates a paradox by not abiding by Hipponax’ advice in the poem and indulging in iambic quarrelsome ness in the rest of the collection. Herondas makes his Hipponax teach him a lesson: by behaving towards his slaves in the same way as Hipponax behaved towards him in his dream, he shows that he has truly captured the Hipponactic iambic spirit of aggression. In both cases, Hipponax’ aggressive behaviour also makes the
reader wonder what the dead poet really would have thought of this new use of his literary inheritance.

2. The Present

The second part focused on the poets’ portrayal of contemporaries, mainly from the point of view of the social interaction of the Museum and Library and comparable institutions at other royal courts. I have chosen to consider statements about other poets and their poetics in the theoretical frame of Pierre Bourdieu, whose field of cultural production-theory elaborates the insight that art is not divorced from society or from the drives determining social interactions. In other words, it would be wrong to view any kind of poetry, even Hellenistic poetry, which has traditionally often been considered “l’art pour l’art,” as a purely aesthetic category. Bourdieu’s recognition of the workings of the striving for “distinction” provided some useful starting points for a consideration of various subjects in Hellenistic poetry. Thus I analyzed the much debated quarrel between Callimachus and Apollonius, as well as the Actia-prologue of Callimachus and the related question of the identity of the Telchines. My analysis of the ancient testimonies about the quarrel supports the growing consensus that there is little evidence to assume that it took place. And even if it did, it seems unlikely that its subject could be deduced. I suggest that the assumption that Callimachus and Apollonius quarreled is probably due to the observation by later readers that they were both active at the court of Ptolemy Philadelphus and produced poetry that could be called similar in stylistic aims. For an observer at some temporal distance, this in itself could suggest that a quarrel between the two was likely; Callimachus’ polemical persona presumably did the rest.

The ensuing analysis of this persona in the Actia-prologue, building on the findings of Cameron, Asper, and Schmitz, shows that Callimachus’ main aim in this text was the creation of a position of distinction and exclusivity for himself, regardless of whether the Telchines were a historical reality. By claiming that he is envied and misunderstood, he implies he is an exceptional and successful poet, who, however, only manages to please true connoisseurs. So a text that has traditionally been interpreted as a purely aesthetically motivated harangue reveals itself as the statement of a strategic position. The discussion of
some epigrams attacking contemporaries, finally, confirms that what poses as an aesthetic judgement may often conceal very different and personal opinions.

The reverse of negative aesthetic judgments, praise, is a neglected subject in Hellenistic poetry. Praise for contemporaries aims to make an assertion about the poetics of the praising voice itself. It may thus serve as a means of obtaining distinction: with their praise of certain elitist and esoteric characteristics of Aratus’ Phaenomena, Callimachus and Leonidas showed that they belonged to the same category of refined (and esteemed) poets as Aratus. Claiming immortality for a contemporary in a poem implies the expectation that the praise itself will also be immortal. Theocritus’ Idyll 7 subtly parodies these principles by making Simichidas claim allegiance to Asclepiades and Philitas. Despite his faux humility, this characterization reveals how the young poet sees himself. Eliciting praise from an addressee or patron works on a comparable principle: by praising the recipient’s literary sensibilities, the poet obliges him to like the poem addressed to him, as happens in Theocritus’ Idylls 16, 17; it is mocked in Idyll 11.

What has emerged up to this point is that the representation of other poets generally reflects the poet who represents them, whether by inventing or manipulating the past to serve as a poetic mirror, underscoring differences with contemporaries to create a distinct position, or claiming allegiance to (successful or exclusive) contemporaries in order to draw attention to a poet’s own artistic tenets. It could be claimed that all these appraisals and representations of other poets contain implicit self-portraits.

3. Selfrepresentation

In the third and final part, the overt self-representation of poets was addressed. To begin with, there are several noteworthy aspects to Hellenistic sphragis-epigrams. They are the natural counterparts of the biographically influenced literary epitaphs of predecessors. The poets’ evident wish to identify themselves explicitly and unambiguously as the author of their poetry (for instance, by means of sphragis-epigrams in poetry books) is due to the circumstance that Hellenistic poetry is, in the first place, poetry for readers rather than for aural audiences. Whereas oral performance necessarily clarifies the speaking voice in a poem, written and read poetry does not succeed in this without using auxiliary means such as explicit speaker identification in the text.
This process of facilitating author identification can also be deliberately reversed, forcing the reader to work out who the speaker is on the basis of hints, as in the mimetic Hymns of Callimachus. Both of these practices are ultimately grounded in the fact that Hellenistic poetry was poetry by reader-poets for a reading audience. Reading texts out of their original contexts made the Hellenistic scholars acutely aware of the problems encountered when visually reading a text that had originally been produced for oral presentation: contingent references, ambiguous speaker changes and the like made interpretation of such texts a challenging and sometimes daunting task.

As the discussion of the epigrams in praise of Aratus’ Phaenomena showed, sphragis-passages could also contain enigmatic elements, often related to etymological explanations or puns on the name of the author (Ἀρατός/Αρατός). This observation was elaborated in Chapter 7, where instances of such enigmatic self-representation were analyzed. They invite the reader to interpret clues and thus gain additional information about the way the author wished himself to be perceived. Thus Apollonius stresses his connection with the god of poetic inspiration and oracles Apollo in the opening of the Argonautica, while Callimachus underscores his poetic ability to find the right word at the right time in his epigrammatic self-epitaph by implying a kat’antiphrasin explanation of the name Battiades (“son of the stammerer”).

Theocritus poses a more complicated enigma to his readers when he calls the young poet who is the narrator of his meta-poetic seventh Idyll “Simichidas.” Scholarship is divided about the degree to which Simichidas should be interpreted as an alter ego of the poet. This question is complicated by the problem of the identification of Simichidas’ dialogue partner in the poem, Lycidas. Simichidas has a stronger claim to identification with the author than Lycidas because he is the internal narrator of the poem. On the basis of the meta-poetic interpretation of two intriguing expressions (ἐσθλὸν σὺν Μοίσαισι Κυδωνικόν εὖρομες ἄνδρα, 7.13; πᾶν ἐπ’ ἀλαθείᾳ πεπλασμένον ἐκ Διώς ἐφονος, 7.44) as well as a structural analysis of the Idyll, I have argued that both Simichidas and Lycidas are represented on a meta-poetic level as mutual fictions of each other. This means that the poem as a whole presents a reflection upon the role of fictional herdsmen-poets in Theocritus’ bucolic poetry. It is an implicit recognition of the fact that he is the originator of the genre and has invented its characters as well as its forebears: bucolic poetry originates in itself.
The final problem I addressed is that of the representation of poetic authority, in particular the status of the Muse as a guarantor of revealed knowledge. By focusing on the use of the Homeric *hapax legomenon* ὑποφήτης (II. 16.235) and its variant ὑποφήτωρ, I analyzed the concept of divine inspiration in Apollonius and Theocritus. The passages in Hellenistic poetry in which these words appear are linked by a specific emphasis on the role of the poet as a recipient and passer on of revealed knowledge (cf. González). For Theocritus, this role is of particular importance in his problematic position of court-poet glorifying (divine) rulers or their favorite semi-deities. By calling himself ὑποφήτης, he arrogates a particular panegyric authority to himself. Apollonius, on the other hand, emphasizes the problems inherent to revealed knowledge about the past. By casting the Muses as a link in a hierarchical chain, dependent on the ambiguous oracular wisdom of Apollo, he figuratively addresses the problems of a poet working in the Museum, searching for information in contradictory, obscure, or untrustworthy sources about the past. In last instance, the analysis shows that both poets look back to the earliest origins of poetry for their self-fashioning, combining poetry and prophecy.

In conclusion, Hellenistic poets represent other poets to reflect on their interpretation of these poets as well as on their own poetic tenets. They are simultaneously readers and writers; both aspects form part of their identity as poets; they see themselves as innovative reflectors on the tradition. Their explicit self-representations appear to target a prospective readership of erudite interpreters who will study this poetry and perhaps even look for their own reflection in it. Thus their works become what they had made the works of their predecessors and colleagues: both window and mirror.