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THOUGHTS ON THE EPYLLION

HUMAN BEINGS IN GENERAL and scholars in particular are no doubt too fond of classification. But it is obvious enough that to give something a name is not necessarily to understand it. It is convenient in some respects to be able to classify literature into its own discrete and impermeable genres, but the process can be misleading¹ and can, at times, be compared to the study of a fetus without consideration of its ultimate form or to the dissection of a limb without reference to the torso of which the limb is a part. Within the field of Classical philology, such divisions are numerous and perhaps more dangerous because broadly valid. Such categories may be chronological: Homeric, "classical," Hellenistic in Greek; archaic, golden, silver, mediaeval in Latin.² These terms at times contain within themselves a subtle value judgment and within, as well as between and beyond them, there all too often lies a wasteland, the property of those scholars whom Dr. Peter Green has described as "old professional diggers staking out their claims" in "the bush where tenderfoots never venture at all."³ Passing through the chronological

categories are various subdivisions, with a tendency to become, like Chinese boxes, smaller and smaller, less and less organic.

Of these subdivisions, the epyllion is one. The term is now in general used much less freely than it once was. Since the publication of Allen's paper in 1940, many scholars have been chary of utilizing it.⁴ This is proper, but it leaves a number of questions unanswered. There are several poems, sharing common characteristics, which can be plausibly linked together within a common genre.⁵ What we call the genre is relatively unimportant, provided that its existence is, in broad terms, demonstrable. These short narrative poems, written in hexameters on mythic themes and carefully elaborated in their style and language,⁶ are not readily assigned to existing categories and they pre-

⁴ W. Allen, "The epyllion: a chapter in the history of literary criticism," *TAPA* 71 (1940) 1-26. For a typical recent view, see G. Williams, *Tradition and originality in Roman poetry* (Oxford 1968), p. 242-243.

⁵ Of poems still extant, the following are most commonly classified as epyllia: Theocritus, *Idylls* 24 and 25; Moschus, *Europa*; Callimachus, *Hecale* (fragmentary); Catullus 64; [Vergil], *Ciris* and *Culex*. Other poems not surviving are linked with the group: see n. 23 below. For a brief definition of the conventional view of the epyllion, cf. W. Kroll, *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart 1924), p. 142-143, 212-214. On the origin of the term, cf. J.F. Reilly, "Origins of the word epyllion," *CJ* 49 (1953) 111-114.

⁶ In considering such ancient poems, one is reminded of the mythological "minor epics," popular in the last decade of the reign of Elizabeth I, of which Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *Rape of Lucrece* (1594) are the best known examples. The impetus for these poems was pro-

¹ For critiques of the theory of genres, see R.K. Hack, "The doctrine of literary forms," *HSCP* 27 (1916) 1-65; Ben Perry, *The ancient romances: a literary-historical account of their origins* (Sather Classical Lectures 37 [Berkeley and Los Angeles 1967]), p. 3-27, with notes, 330-334.

² For valuable comments on such fragmentation, cf. E.R. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern 1948), chap. 1.

³ Peter Green, "The humanities today," in *Essays in antiquity* (London 1960), p. 13.

sent a problem which is not solved by disposing of the word which was created to embrace them. The purpose of this brief paper is to re-examine some facets of the question and to suggest a means by which the poems can be better understood and placed in context of the organic totality of ancient literature.

At the beginning of our survey, it is necessary to outline certain aspects of the history of Greek literature in which the epyllia have a natural place. At the threshold is Homer: the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* stand at the commencement of European literature as perfect and symbolic edifices. Unique and unrepeatable as they are, the two epics are the ancestor (however distant) of all succeeding literature, in Hellenic culture the moral, religious, historical and literary *Qu'ran* of each generation. The conditions that produced them were unique and, through historical changes, epic writing yielded place to lyric. The epic tradition, of course, did not die; it metamorphosed. Medical metaphors of atrophy and death are usually misleading in the field of literature. With the division of the Hellenic world into rival city-states and the growth in Ionia and Athens of political and social individualism manifested in democracy the gradual transformation of poetry by the now literate poets was inevitable. In geographical Ionia, a leisured and wealthy upper class wrote lyric poetry, with a philosophy (hedonistic, martial, pessimistic), not in essence radically opposed to the Homeric ethos, but, rather, organically developed from aspects of it. In the other form of lyric, the ceremonial and public ode, represented to us by Pindar and Bac-

vided by the publication in 1589 of Thomas Lodge's *Scyllaes Metamorphosis enterlaced with the unfortunate Love of Glaucus*; Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (later completed by Chapman) was registered at the Stationer's Company in 1593 and other similar works (e.g., T(homas) H(eywood)'s *Oenone and Paris* [1594]) followed rapidly. See E.S. Donno, *Elizabethan minor epics* (London 1963).

chylides, the influence of Homer was all-pervasive.

The Greeks visualized a conflict between their two great hexameter poets, Homer and Hesiod. Hesiod is a far more personal and temporally realistic poet than Homer; though the *Works and days* is ostensibly a didactic agricultural work with a moral (as Vergil realized) that "wealth can only be obtained by labour," within it the universal Greek love for mythical story and digression is apparent. In the *Theogony*, an episodic, discursive, story-telling style dominates the whole work. In the collection of ceremonial poems known as the Homeric Hymns, fable and colorful narrative take their place in the ritual form. The contest envisaged between Homer and Hesiod was one for poetic prowess, not philosophical primacy. The *aretē* inculcated by Hesiod is of course different from Homer's, but only because Hesiod was concerned with a social background that diverged from Homer's heroic world. Homer is not concerned with the peasant and farmer (although he is well aware of the fact that it is on their efforts that wealth depends): his primary concern is with the life of heroes, the conflict of supermen, bearing little or no relationship to the common man, whose part in the *Iliad* is only to die through the wrath of gods and men. The ordinary soldier is chiefly concerned with his return home, ready to scurry off to the ships with or without Helen. He is Hesiodic man, concerned with wringing a meager existence from the soil. In the *Odyssey*, we see the hero overcoming his environment; the typical Homeric digression has become more prominent, the poem is more episodic in structure; there is considerably more attention to the homely and the menial, Hesiodic subjects: Nausicaa's washing, the dog Argus, the swineherd Eumaeus (necessarily a tragic exponent of the Hesiodic viewpoint), to name three examples.⁷

⁷ Cf. the remarks of "Longinus," *On the sublime* 9.14.

In Athens, a truly popular culture arose, the supreme product of which was tragedy, which synthesized the existing verse forms into one structure.⁸ Comedy also synthesized the vulgar and satyric traditions. In tragedy, the choral lyric and dithyramb are represented by the choruses; the iambic trimeter was gradually adopted for dialogue because it had been used for a conversational form of verse by Archilochus and others and apparently approximated to the rhythms of everyday speech: epic was condensed into the obligatory messenger's speech, which reveals a number of epic features in language and syntax and reminds us of the Homeric narratives (e.g., the speeches of Phoenix in *Iliad* 9 and Nestor in 11 and frequently in the *Odyssey*), where the technique of narrated resumé is introduced. Tragic characterization is strongly influenced by Homeric norms and the plots are almost invariably mythic. In Euripides we find the old tradition vying with a new interest in the ordinary man and woman,⁹ which, passing into New Comedy, anticipated much in the Hellenistic era.

The radical transformation involved in the extension of Hellenic culture by the armies of Alexander of Macedon, the consequent shift of the world's cultural center, once again altered the emphasis and purpose of Greek literature. The epithets Alexandrian and Hellenistic have sometimes been used pejoratively. But the trends were inevitable consequences of historical events: Hellenistic literature was written for a small, highly-educated, intensely critical minority of readers; as coterie literature it naturally became terse, polished, ornate, fond of the *recherché* allusion, complex in style, form, meaning. Novelty of theme and treatment was sought at all costs.¹⁰ The Alexandrians re-divided the Athenian synthesis: epic was revived

in a transmuted form, the psychological romance; lyric became for the most part epigram; dialogue appeared chiefly in the short mime. All these forms were studied, stylised, *buchmässig*.

This much condensed summary of Greek literature seen as an organic whole serves, I hope, to show clearly the roots from which the epyllia sprang. They were grounded in tradition and are explicable in the light of their origins. The impetus for their creation is to be found in historical and social changes; as Ben Perry has written, "Change in literature is geared to change in the way men think and react to life, both as groups and individuals."¹¹ The "epyllia" were not wholly a new departure: the seeds were there, waiting for the circumstances in which they could germinate. The potentiality for such poems is present from the beginning, from Homer. Such stories as they recount also appear as integral parts of full-scale epics¹² and can be properly seen as having a genuine relationship to the epos, on a small, specialized scale. But between Homer and the Alexandrian age, other elements have appeared in literature, which are also integrated in and utilized by the composers of "epyllia"—elements which are far distant from Homer but ultimately rooted in his epics. Seen in this prospect, the problem of the "epyllia" appears far less troublesome.

The word epyllion seems to have been brought into currency to describe poem 64 of Catullus; but this remarkable work certainly cannot be "explained" by the production of a label. Writers on the subject have gone astray on some points in their desire to make the epyllion a more rigid genre than is in fact necessary. For example, the *ecphrasis* narrating the story of Theseus and Ariadne (124 f.) is supposed

⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b.

⁹ See the remark of Sophocles quoted in Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460b.

¹⁰ Cf. the remarks of Kroll, *op. cit.*, p. 202–203.

¹¹ Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹² E.g., the *Doloneia* in the *Iliad*, Helen's story at Sparta, Eumaeus' life-history, the lays of Demodocus, etc., in the *Odyssey*.

by some¹³ to be typical of the genre. This is not so. The origins of the *ecphrasis* may be traced to the famous description of Achilles' shield in *Iliad* 18.478 f. This is the earliest known example of the ever-popular poetic exercise¹⁴ of describing in detail a work of the plastic arts. It may be found in tragedy, in epic, in bucolic,¹⁵ for it is a Greek penchant (as we would expect with a race whose verbal art was closely related to the plastic). To classify it as typical of the epyllion is illusory.¹⁶

Similarly attempts to isolate a style of narrative peculiar to the epyllion have proved abortive. The surviving examples of Callimachus' short mythological narratives may be seen in his hymns. The story of Erysichthon in *Hymn* 6 or of Artemis in 3 are typical examples of Hellenistic narrative technique (to be contrasted with their literary ancestors, the Homeric Hymns) but they are plainly not epyllia. In *Hymn* 5, the *Bath of Pallas*, we find a mythological narrative in elegiacs, closer to the *Actia* than to the other hymns or to the epyllia. There is no real difference in technique between Alexandrian hexameter and elegiac narrative.¹⁷ The Greeks were born storytellers, whatever the meter, whatever the excuse.

The desire to label can easily become absurd, because of an attempt to be too precise. Two poems of the Theocritean corpus are consistently and not implausibly designated as epyllia (24 and 25); the

Hylas (13) is normally so described. All three are straightforward narratives in hexameters. The *Hylas* is a fable on love and is prefaced by a verse epistle to Theocritus' friend Nicias, to whom the poet had also addressed *Idyll* 11, the *Cyclops*. Both are by way of being *consolationes amoris*. Is 13 also an epyllion? The question is devoid of meaning. It is related to the epic, just as it has a consolatory purpose and intent. Miss Crump remarks that "its epic character seems to be due to an accidental combination of circumstances."¹⁸ But one cannot separate its epic character from its poetic intent. There is nothing unnatural in a writer's utilizing epic meter and convention for a more personal reason. In the same way, he could combine, if he wished, direct dialogue and narrative, as in *Idyll* 22, the *Hymn to the Dioscuri*. This poem is clearly not an epyllion, any more than it is a mime or a bucolic. Genres were made for man, not man for genres. Nor can such poems be properly spoken of as the result of the "crossing of genres," which presupposes an abstract, fixed norm for each type of literature.¹⁹ The concept of genres only has its use if it is tool, not master.

Idyll 24 of Theocritus is plainly not complete and we have no means of guessing how it finished. The poem is a restatement in hexameters of Pindar's first *Nemean* ode, 35 f. Epic and romantic features have been added, in Hellenistic style, but the outlines of the myth are the same.²⁰ By contrast *Idyll* 25 (the *Heracles leontophonos*) comprises three episodes, each of which originally had a separate title. It is neo-Homeric in concept and structure. It is faithful to

¹³ E.g., by M.M. Crump, *The epyllion from Theocritus to Ovid* (diss. Oxford 1931); cf. Allen, loc. cit. 16 f.

¹⁴ Later also undertaken in prose by the rhetoricians, e.g., Philostratus, Elder and Younger, in the *Imagines*, Callistratus in the *Ecphrasis*.

¹⁵ Among many examples, see Aeschylus, *Septem* 374 f.; Euripides, *Ion* 1143 f.; *Phoenissae* 1104 f.; Theocritus, *Idylls* 1.29 f.; Apollonius, *Argonauticon* 1.721 f.

¹⁶ As Allen has pointed out, *ecphrasis* is not in any case found in Theocritus, *Idylls* 24 or 25, or in the *Ciris* or *Culex*.

¹⁷ Cf. the remarks of C. Fordyce, *Catullus: a commentary* (Oxford 1960), p. 272-273.

¹⁸ Crump, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁹ On the supposed "Kreuzung der Gattungen," see Kroll, op. cit., p. 202 f.

²⁰ We may note one minor difference: Theocritus makes Alcmena summon Tiresias rather than Amphitryon, as in Pindar—an example, perhaps, of the increased concern with womankind and romantic love in the Alexandrian era (foreshadowed in Homer's portrayal of Helen, Nausicaa, Penelope, and in Euripides and the *neai*).

nature in its descriptions of the garrulous husbandman and the stables of Augeas. The third section takes the form popular since the *Odyssey* of a resume narrated by the chief actor. The three episodes are in fact like fragments of a complete epos,²¹ and the *Idyll* can be seen as related to the kind of narrative found in Apollonius' *Argonauticon*, many sections of which could be isolated from their context to form separate episodes.²² The twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth *Idylls* may be termed epyllia, but the word must gain its significance from their relationship with, not differences from, the full-scale epos.

And what of Catullus 64? This poem contains descriptive, dramatic, narrative, prophetic and hymenaeal elements. Is it then to be classified as a synthesis of several different genres? Surely not—for that would imply that genres exist absolutely and restrictively. Catullus 64 is certainly related to a variety of Hellenistic poems and is cast in an epic mould, but, despite these facts, remains *sui generis*. It no doubt belongs to a type of poem favored by the neoteric poets,²³ for which we may use the term epyllion as a generic description. But the term, as Catullus 64 so clearly shows, is

of limited value and it must serve not only to relate poems but to underline their differences. In itself it explains nothing, for such terminology must be existential, not teleological. Too rigid a concept of genres would imply that Catullus 64 is a kind of unnatural birth—which is unjustifiable.

We must briefly consider the *Ciris* and *Culex* in the Virgilian Appendix. The *Ciris* has been termed an epyllion. Critics have asserted that it is a metamorphosis.²⁴ It would be more correct to say that it is not to be defined in such terms. Is the *Culex* an epyllion? Or is it, as its opening lines imply, a parody of bucolic poetry? Again the questions, since clearly they are improperly framed, cannot be appropriately answered. Even less convincing are attempts to divide Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into separate epyllia,²⁵ or to show that an "epyllion technique" influenced Vergil, Statius or other writers.²⁶ To define the epyllion itself is difficult, and to differentiate its own peculiar "technique" from that used in other forms of poetry well nigh impossible. The epyllion is related to the epic in much the same way that the mime is related to New Comedy: insofar as all epics, not excluding the Homeric, are to a greater or lesser extent episodic, they all contain epyllia: but plainly to speak of an epyllion technique in Homer, or, for that matter in Apollonius, would be an absurdity.

A useful parallel may perhaps be taken

²¹ They had no doubt been described in Panyassis' *Heraclea*: see G. Kinkel, *Epicorum Graecorum fragmenta* I (Leipzig 1877), p. 253 f.

²² E.g., the Lemnos episode in book 1; the fight between Polydeuces and Amycus, the scattering of the Harpies and the contest with the birds in the Isle of Aretias in book 2; in book 4, the purification by Circe, the adventure in lake Tritonis, the story of the giant Talos. C.N. Jackson, "The Latin epyllion," *HSCP* 24 (1913) 41, asserts that Theocritus 25 cannot be taken as a typical epyllion, for "it was too reminiscent of the unpopular and antiquated heroic epic." This shows a misunderstanding of the true relationship between epic and epyllion.

²³ I.e., the *Dictynna* of Valerius Cato [?]; the *Io* of C. Licinius Calvus (see W. Morel, *Fragmenta poetarum Latinorum* [Leipzig 1927], p. 85–86); the *Zmyrna* of C. Helvius Cinna (see Catullus 95; Morel, p. 88–89); the *Glaucus* of Q. Cornificius (Morel, p. 90). On Catullus 64 as epyllion, cf. M.C.J. Putnam, "The Art of Catullus 64," *HSCP* 65 (1961) 199.

²⁴ E.g., Allen, loc. cit. 15.

²⁵ As it is by Crump, op. cit., p. 178 f., 274 f. Cf. Brooks Otis, *Ovid as an epic poet* (Cambridge 1966), p. 49: "The *Metamorphoses* . . . is not a composite of little epics or epyllia but a stylistically unified whole." See the remarks of Otis also, p. 206, 217, 330–331, 377–378 (on *Met.* 6.424 f.) Miss Crump (and others) have equally spoken of an "Aristaeus" of Vergil, as if it were a separate poem: cf. also L.P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil: A Critical Survey* (Cambridge 1969), p. 108 f.; 325–326, who treats the end of *Georgic* 4 as an epyllion.

²⁶ Cf., e.g., C.W. Mendell, "The influence of the epyllion on the *Aeneid*," *YCS* 12 (1951) 203–226; J.H. Bishop, "The debt of the *Silvae* [of Statius] to the epyllia," *PP* 6 (1951) 427–432.

from another sphere. Geoffrey Gorer has recently criticized a modern tendency to use “some of the vocabulary of psychoanalysis and of general psychiatry” as “Words of Power” (a term borrowed from the jargon of magic). He writes: “Many people appear to feel that when they have applied a psychoanalytic or quasi-psychoanalytic term to a person or situation they have somehow gained control of the person or situation, rendered him understandable, safe, innocuous.”²⁷ The use of “Words of Power” is not limited to this field. Literary classifications can also be so utilized, and the term “epyllion” is no exception. Many of the poems placed within the genre are especially difficult to classify, because they are idiosyncratic. If the term is used to camouflage this, then Allen was correct in his attempt to dispose of it.

But the remedy need not be so drastic as that. Viewed solely from the rigid concept of genres, the epyllia will never be satisfactorily explained and defined. But, as we have seen, their origin in Greek literature is perfectly explicable, for they have an organic place within the tradition. The epyllia all tell a story; so do many other Greek and Latin poems. The pretext for the story may be any one of many: a hymn, an epithalamium, a friend’s amatory

troubles, an aetiology, the illustration of a theme, the decoration of a larger work; on the other hand, such is the joy of storytelling that no pretext may be necessary at all. Within this broad context, the poems linked together as epyllia have a definable status. Whatever the differences between them, there is a clear basic similarity, which should not be forgotten in stressing those differences. The question must ultimately be, as with any definition of genres, whether terminology is allowed to dominate or is used to serve. Poets in general do not write according to abstract rules, and it is not for the philologist to assume the role of a literary Procrustes. Philology has no need of “Words of Power”; classification is not an end in itself but a means to an end, and requires flexibility not *idées fixes*. To borrow a sentence from Erich Auerbach: “The starting point should not be a category which we ourselves impose on the material, to which the material must be fitted, but a characteristic found in the subject itself, essential to its history, which, when stressed and developed, clarifies the subject matter in its particularity and other topics in relation to it.”²⁸

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²⁷ G. Gorer, “Psychoanalysis in the world,” in *Psychoanalysis observed* (ed. C. Rycroft [London 1966]), p. 29.

²⁸ E. Auerbach, *Literary language and its public in late Latin antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (trans. R. Manheim [London 1965]), p. 19.