Mythical and conceptual agōnes in Theocritus’ first Idyll

Introduction

Summary of Idyll 1

Theocritus’ first Idyll contains a strange account of the fate of Daphnis, the legendary founder of bucolic poetry according to Sicilian tradition. This account appears in an embedded song performed by the shepherd Thyrsis in a rustic setting, to an audience composed of a single goatherd. Thyrsis’ song is preceded by a short conversation between the two herdsmen and by a lengthy description of an elaborate cup by the goatherd, who offers to give it to Thyrsis in exchange for the latter’s performance of the song.

The song tells a mysterious tale of love and death, with the cowherd Daphnis as its protagonist. It begins in media res. The singer addresses the Nymphs, whose absence during Daphnis’ agony he deplores, and paints a picture of the dead Daphnis surrounded by wild beasts and oxen. In an unannounced flashback, he then proceeds to narrate his last moments, during which Daphnis is visited successively by Hermes, some anonymous herdsmen, and Priapus. All inquire about his misfortune, but Daphnis does not give them any answer (HO text 1).

His last visitor is Aphrodite. His exchange with her is marked by a strongly agonistic tone (HO text 2):

Then finally came Cypris, cheerfully laughing; / laughing deceptively, she was harboring a strong grief. / She said: “Well, Daphnis, I believe you swore that you would throw Eros. But now is it not yourself who have been thrown by baleful Eros?” … / Then Daphnis replied to her: “Grievous Cypris, / wrathful Cypris, Cypris hateful to mortals! / So you think that all my suns are already set? / Even in Hades, Daphnis will be a nasty pain to Eros. … Do they not say that the cowherd, with Cypris…? Go to Ida, go to Anchises. There are oaks there, but here, there is galingale and bees sweetly humming around the hives. … Adonis is ripe, too, as he tends sheep and shoots hares and hunts all kinds of beasts. … / Finally, may you go and stand in front of Diomedes, and say: ‘I have vanquished Daphnis the cowherd; now fight with me.’”
After his reply to Aphrodite, Daphnis bids farewell to nature and to the rustic god Pan. He then pronounces an extravagant prayer – which we will look at later – and dies. Thyrsis concludes his song with an address to the Muses and receives the goatherd’s cup.

*Two mains threads in scholarship on Idyll 1*

The abundant scholarship on the first *Idyll* can be broadly divided into two main threads:

1. The first thread focuses on the programmatic nature of *Idyll* 1, that is on the many aspects of the poem that reflect metapoetic concerns (e.g. Segal 1974; Cairns 1984; Goldhill 1991, 240–45). It seems that Theocritus was the inventor, if not of a new genre, at least of a distinctively new form of poetry, which he calls bucolic; and the first *Idyll* is considered particularly rich in details revealing the distinctive features of this new form. The fact that this poem was placed first in all the ancient collections of Theocritus’ work that we know of enhances the relevance of the term “programmatic” to describe this phenomenon.

   The nature of bucolic is a notorious problem in modern scholarship (Halperin 1983b). Although scholars do not agree on the definition of bucolic, they generally agree on the archetypically bucolic nature of *Idyll* 1, and on its programmatic character.

   Scholarship that follows this thread tends to focus on the external frame of the *Idyll*, viz., on the conversation between Thyrsis and the goatherd before and after Thyrsis’ performance. Special scrutiny has been applied to the description of the cup, whose carvings feature many suggestive elements for the interpretation of Theocritus’ poetic program.

2. The second thread concerns the many interpretative problems raised by the embedded “Song of Thyrsis”, which tells the story of Daphnis. Many questions are left without an explicit response in the Song: what is wrong with Daphnis? what do Aphrodite and Eros have to do with his predicament? This thread of scholarship tends to look at Thyrsis’ song as a self-contained unit.

   A valuable solution to the interpretative problems raised by the Song of Thyrsis has been given by David Konstan and Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides in a recent paper (2008). Their argument builds on previous studies that have outlined significant parallels between Daphnis and Adonis (e.g. Halperin 1983a). According to them, Daphnis shares many characteristics with the consort
of the Great Goddess, a mythical archetype that ultimately goes back to Oriental models. In the Greek context, the main example of this type is Adonis, who was himself inherited from the Near East, though he was Hellenized and integrated into Greek myth and cult from the 7th century BC. Adonis was a popular figure with Hellenistic poets, including Theocritus.

This solution to the “Daphnis mystery” has much to commend itself. In particular, it explains the ambiguous but crucial intervention of Aphrodite in the Song. However, it does not account for Daphnis’ strangely aggressive attitude toward Aphrodite and Eros. The docile Adonis does not appear to be an adequate model for Daphnis’ antagonistic behavior.

This paper may be seen as a combination of the two threads just outlined. Although I will focus on Daphnis, this is in order to propose a holistic reading of *Idyll* 1, and, so to say, to take Daphnis “out” of the Song of Thyrsis, making him a part of the whole poetic program of the *Idyll*.

**Daphnis as antagonist and culture hero**

Theocritus’ Daphnis is something more than Aphrodite’s favorite, or just another Adonis. He demonstrates a combative attitude and gives a theatrical performance of his own death. Behind this antagonism one can discern a distinct mythical model, that of the poetic hero or (poetic founder).

**Antagonism**

In her conversation with Daphnis, Aphrodite’s taunting words sound like those of the victorious party in a contest. The agonistic character of Daphnis’ relationship with Aphrodite (cum-Eros) is obvious: Daphnis swore that he would crush Eros, but instead has been crushed himself. This formulation reflects the Greek conception of *agon* as a zero-sum game, one in which the party who fails to subdue the other must by necessity be subdued itself (Gouldner 1965, 49–15).

Moreover, Aphrodite’s explicit mention of a boast (or an oath) suggests that we are dealing with the well-known mythical pattern “human defies god → human is punished.” In this kind of myth, the divinities are usually confronted with challenges that touch one of their major
spheres of influence (τυραί), which adds to the hybistic character of the mortals who issue them. (For example, Niobe boasted that her own motherhood surpassed Leto’s, and was fittingly punished with the death of her children.) The pattern is especially associated with divinities related to poetry: being an important part of Greek cultural life, poetic and musical contests are also prominent in myth (Weiler 1974). One can think of the musical agones between Thamyris and the Muses, Marsyas and Apollo, and Linos and Apollo. Contests with divinities of song are also numerous in the ancient biographical tradition on Greek poets, where they perpetuate the archaic notion of poets as potential, or actual, antagonists of divine arch-performers (Liapis 2017). Indeed, poetic Lives, which constitute a genre in itself, take much of their inspiration from mythical models (Lefkowitz 1981).

The Daphnis of the first Idyll fits the pattern only imperfectly: his archenemies are Aphrodite and Eros, not Apollo or the Muses. Indeed, Daphnis is explicitly said to be “dear to the Muses” (142), while Thyrsis and the goatherd, in their conversation preliminary to Thyrsis’ performance, are very careful to acknowledge their musical inferiority to the Muses and to Pan respectively, thereby avoiding any sort of agonistic confrontation with their patron deities (1-11). I believe that this change in the pattern is accountable to the new stance assumed by Hellenistic poets toward the source of their poetic art. By contrast with the archaic mentality that is reflected in the stories about early poets, Hellenistic poets do not cast themselves as potential adversaries of Apollo and the Muses, but rather as their allies.

*Culture hero*

With his tragic death, Theocritus gives Daphnis a pedigree with mythical dimensions, because Daphnis acts as the mythical founder, and first performer, of bucolic poetry. He is also, in the paradoxical manner of aetiology, the archetypical topic of bucolic poetry, as shown by HO 3, where the goatherd says to Thyrsis: “you sing the pangs of Daphnis and you have reached the summit of the bucolic art.” The expression suggests a hendiadys: singing the pangs of Daphnis = mastering the bucolic art. Other (later) sources, such as those on HO 4, testify to Daphnis’ ambiguous status as both founder of bucolic and prime subject-matter of bucolic.

Despite the numerous and significant resemblances between Daphnis and Adonis that have been outlined, Theocritus clearly distinguishes the former from the latter by his poetic status. Although scholars acknowledge that Daphnis is obviously not a simple reduplication of
Adonis, they seldom tackle the problem of explaining their differences in terms of Theocritus’ poetics.

The meaning of Daphnis’ fatal eros in the context of Idyll 1

I will now look at Theocritus’s evocation of Daphnis’ posterity in Idyll 1. Just before dying, Daphnis pronounces the following prayer (HO text 5):

“and now, brambles, may you bear violets, and you thorns, may you bear them also, and may the fair narcissus grow upon the juniper; may everything be changed, may the pine produce pears, since Daphnis is dying, and may the deer tear the dogs to pieces, and may the owls come out of the mountain to sing with the nightingales.”

This list of impossible wishes (adunata) is quite exceptional in ancient literature. Theses adunata express neither denial of some possibility nor surprise, as is usually the case, but rather a character’s wish that his own disappearance be marked—or compensated—by changes in the natural world. While the deer chasing the dogs qualifies as an image of a “topsy-turvy” world, the other phenomena cannot be strictly characterized as inversions; the overall impression is rather one of monstrous profuseness. Plants and trees that normally have a modest output produce large flowers and fruits, while the deer and the owl, usually discreet and timid animals, demonstrate a perplexing vitality and combativeness. These adunata are Daphnis’ sole offsprings in the biological world, yet in all their prolific exuberance, they suggest barrenness, and the death of nature as it stands.

On the other hand, the mention of the nightingales vying with the owls evokes Daphnis’ poetic descendence. Indeed, as Richard Hunter suggest, line 136 may be read as a metapoetic comment on the origins of bucolic poetry: “The nightingale is par excellence the bird of lamentation, and Daphnis is both the first singer and first subject of a song of ἄλγεα, a θρῆνος in fact. As this suggests ‘tragedy’, the bird of σκώπτειν evokes its opposite, ‘comedy’, and it is in the fusion of the two that the foundation of ‘bucolic’ song is to be located” (Hunter 1999, 104).

I believe that Hunter’s suggestion concerning the metapoetic tenor of line 136 could be extended to the rest of Daphnis’ prayer. The delicate flowers and tasty fruits produced by the prickly brambles and the tall pine may be seen as metaphors of bucolic poetry, an elegant and pleasurable poetic form newly hatched from the rough material provided by the world of rustic
workers. Moreover, given the frequency of comparisons inspired by predatory relationships in Homer, the image of the deer dragging the dogs likely functions as an indicator of bucolics’ detachment from, or inversion of, the value system and the aesthetic model of epic.

Thus Daphnis’ death will provide everlasting material for future bucolic singers, who will sing “the pangs of Daphnis” at repeated occasions. These poets, and indeed the whole genre of bucolic, are Daphnis’ true descendants. His poetic posterity is a direct result of his death, which was prompted by his conflictual relationship with the divinities of sex.

I suggest that this state of affair is more than accidental, and that Daphnis’ fate in Theocritus is designed to evoke a traditional opposition: that between cultural posterity and human descendance. This opposition is familiar from Plato, especially the Symposium (208e-209d), a dialogue with which the Sicilian poet was well-acquainted (Billaut 2008). In Theocritus’ story, Daphnis’ incompatibility with eros denies him the possibility of human offspring, but he receives the privilege of becoming the foundational figure of bucolic poetry. In Platonic terms, his posterity is poetic and immortal, rather than bodily and mortal. The tension that can be perceived in the poem between fertility figures—Aphrodite, Hermes, Priapus—and the infertile, but poetically productive, Daphnis, embodies the contrast between human eros, which manifests itself in sex and offspring, and poetic activity.

Moreover, the problematic relationship between Daphnis and eros may be considered programmatic of Theocritus’ belief in the ultimate incompatibility of eros and poetry—or, perhaps more accurately, of the necessity for poetry to transcend eros. As the three scenes on the goatherd’s cup (32–54) indicate, love, with the physical and mental exertion that it entails, is a full-time occupation, comparable to fishing or crafting (HO text 6). Conversely, the art of poetry demands an involvement that is exclusive of other tasks, including the “task” of love. With a different angle, Theocritus also presents poetry as a kind of consolatory gift to the unsuccessful or bad lover, most famously in the prologue and the epilogue of Idyll 11 (1–4 and 81–82).

The Song of Thyrsis, whose protagonist is engaged in an agora with eros, is thus fully in line with the metapoetical drift of the first Idyll.
References


