Preface

Half a century ago, Roland Barthes made popular the phrase, "the pleasure of the text."[1] In presenting this splendid collection of papers on Hellenistic poetry by Benjamin Acosta-Hughes, I would like to amplify the phrase and speak of the pleasure of reading about the text. For that too offers an intense kind of pleasure, and the reader who has opened the covers of this book will find it in abundance in the pages that follow.

Hellenistic poetry is commonly regarded as dense, learned, bookish — and indeed, one of its major composers was a librarian. And yet, Kenneth Dover, in the introduction to his commentary on selected idylls of Theocritus, opined that, in the absence of linguistic or metrical markers characteristic of what we now think of as the Hellenistic period, it would be difficult to decide whether a hitherto unknown fragment of poetry was classical or Hellenistic.[2] Or, as Acosta-Hughes puts it: "If 'Hellenistic' is to be defined through characteristics rather than date, there is also no clear beginning." Acosta-Hughes shows clearly how even archaic poetry, such as that of Sappho, exploits similar techniques and subtleties to that of Callimachus, Theocritus, or Apollonius of Rhodes. There is no clear dividing line; indeed, it appears that the very notion of an "archaic" period is nowhere to be found in ancient Greek texts.[3] Perhaps the safest thing to say is that Hellenistic poetry condenses and intensifies elements that are common to all literature. This kind of distillation invites a special type of attention, as the reader overhears fleeting allusions to other texts, or perceives subtle shifts in word order or usage that elicit new and delicate nuances.

So much of ancient Greek and Roman literature is lost, and so far are we from the command of the Greek language that would have been instinctive to native speakers, especially those who were highly trained in rhetoric, that we inevitably fail to pick up cues that would have been readily noticed by readers at the time. Expert studies of Hellenistic poetry help readers today to identify these features, and to return to the texts with a new appreciation of their richness and an enhanced pleasure in their style. But that is not all that scholarly articles offer, at least the best of them (like the best poems or prose works). For, as I have suggested, there is a pleasure just in reading them, for the ways in which they make manifest the lacelike interconnectedness of the entire body of classical literature,

1 *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

2 *Theocritus: Select Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. lxvi.

3 I owe this observation to a still unpublished paper by Lawrence Kim.

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and the learning they effortlessly display in assembling allusions into the satisfying patterns that once were visible to all educated readers. At its best, literary criticism invites us to savor its own art even as it sends us back to the texts it is about with new eyes.

Acosta-Hughes — Ben, to those who know him — is a master of the form. He is erudite: you can't read a paragraph without noticing that. Soon after opening these pages you come across this passage, à propos Theocritus' second *Idyll*:

> The manuscript tradition in line 148 has Ἀῶ τᾶν ῥοδόπαχυν. Gow prefers the reading ῥοδόεσσαν of the Antinoe manuscript, which is neither infallible nor too ancient. As a variation of the Homeric ῥοδοδάκτυλος, Sappho's "rosy-armed Dawn" invites us to return to the manuscript tradition.

And return we do, for who of us would not accept that invitation, with Ben as guide? Hipponax, that fierce reviler of his contemporaries, in the first *Iamb* of Callimachus appears as a literary peacemaker. Many, including myself, have been puzzled by this new role. But Ben explains: "Boupalus, Athenis and Mimnes, the objects of the invective poet's derision, are all artists. The truly striking element here is that Hipponax faults all of these artists, directly or indirectly, for something each has done aesthetically wrong or in a displeasing manner." This is why he can serve as a model literary critic in Callimachus' iambics.

We tend to think of Theocritus and Callimachus as quite different in their styles. And yet, as Ben observes:

> Both poems, Theocritus *Idyll* 16 and Callimachus *Hymn to Apollo* are, albeit differently articulated, appeals for patronage; both are detailed statements of poetic self-definition; both look to (intriguingly) North Africa with their highlighting of Carthage (*Id*. 16) and Cyrene (*Hy*. 2), and both are complex readings of Pindar's first *Pythian Ode*.

The accumulated examples are gently underscored by the anaphora. All good literature seems to signify doubly; as Ben observes: "the lock Berenice places at fr. 110.56–58 on the lap of Aphrodite-Arsinoe is also a metaphor for the completion of the *Aetia*." Ben begins a paper on resonances of lyric poetry in Theocritus' *Idylls*: "Hellenistic reception is often simultaneously analytic and mimetic. In the same song settings later voices perform and earlier voices sing again." We are immediately drawn into the argument, eager to hear more about that interplay of voices. But scholarly reception too is mimetic, in its way, as well as analytic. It too has a voice, and Ben's is clearly audible behind the formidable array of citations and arguments.

The simplest questions are often the most fruitful. Ben asks: "why would Nonnus be recalling Callimachus' *Lock of Berenice*?" I have no idea, not ever

having put the question to myself. But I know I'll find out here, and what is more, I suddenly discover that I *want* to know why. For I am sure that the answer will be intriguing, as Ben develops his case. Another example: "Socrates at the time of his death attempts to set fables of Aesop to poetry, Callimachus in the opening fragment of his *Aetia* in fact does so. Is not Callimachus in effect re-claiming the role of Socrates, the truth-teller hounded to death by his jealous contemporaries?" Yes, he may well be, and I know that as I read all the evidence, so meticulously accumulated, will lead me to see that it is so.

A single observation may open up an entire new perspective. Ben writes:

> One of the many outstanding and unusual features of Apollonius' *Argonautica* is that the male hero is the object of the erotic gaze: we read through Medea's internal dialogues and acts of heroism, but it is Jason who is the object of the admiring and erotic gaze, particularly the female gaze.

So true. I might even have said, obvious, but it is so only after reading Ben's words. As he puts it, "Apollonius presents Jason from the outside." Ben will expand the insight beyond Apollonius. In a different paper (later in the volume), he observes:

> Archaic and Classical Greek literature (and art) do not lack for celebration of the male form, but there is a development in a new direction in the Hellenistic period, one that particularly arises from the gaze upon male beauty, and what the gaze perceives.

For all that the dividing line between Hellenistic and earlier literature is blurred, some changes stand out, once one knows where to look. One of my favorite lines comes from a paper that begins: "The Italian Landscape in Hellenistic poetry is not an obvious theme."

Ben is alert throughout to the political context of Hellenistic poetry, and its intimate and reflexive relationship to art of the period. For it is there in the details, for those who have an eye to see "a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower," as Blake wrote; or a history of poetry in a single tear, a motif that Ben traces from Homer to Horace. The following might almost serve as a précis of Ben's approach:

> From a small beginning, a re-evaluation of the final line of Callimachus' *Hymn to Delos*, to colossal images of the brother and sister monarchs, I have tried to cast a short overview of how artistic culture of this period was influenced by the presence of a royal sibling marriage, a union of older sister and younger brother that for at least a decade in the first half of the third century BCE witnessed an extraordinary flowering of creative talent of many kinds in a new city in Egypt.

All from one verse, as from a grain of sand.

Poets not only reflected their world and its leaders, the spoke directly to them in encomia and other forms. And "they spoke" is the right word, in a culture in which most people, at most times, continued to hear poetry rather than read it. This was true even in private, where it was customary for the well-to-do to have educated slaves who read aloud to their masters. Today, performance is a flourishing subfield in classical studies. But, as always, Ben handles the topic with tact and due caution. As he writes in connection with Theocritus' 17th *Idyll*, a panegyric to Ptolemy II Philadelphus:

> A caveat, a simple thing, but one worth keeping in mind; it is we who encounter ancient performance and/or occasional poetry as literature that we read. A poem like *Idyll* 17, with which I began this discussion, is a good case in point — it is extremely unlikely that the Egyptian king sat down and perused this, its intended context was surely some court occasion now unknown to us. We respond, of course, to poetry as we encounter it, as texts that we read. But we must be very careful of making this assumption of the original audience.

A sound note of caution, no doubt. And yet, just what was at stake in performance? To what extent is our conception of performance itself a function of our own times and expectations? Ben is, as usual, alert to the question, and offers an image that makes the ancient practice both more remote and more familiar:

> In our conceptualization of performance occasion, we may want to move away from the finality of e.g., earlier book publication, and think more along the lines of e.g., internet publication, which allows for ongoing updating and enhancement. At issue is far less chronological priority of poetic works than a shared poetic dialectic around their composition, performance, and indeed reperformance. In this dialectic Theocritus is clearly a very active participant.

With the internet, we have at last put brackets around the age of the book!

Reader, I have detained you long enough. I am just the greeter at the door. The delights are inside. But if I may offer just a word of advice, from a famous poem of Cavafy, whose relationship to Callimachus constitutes the final chapter in the book: "Don't hurry the journey. Better if it lasts for years," for you will "visit many Egyptian cities to learn and go on learning from their scholars."

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