

THEOCRITUS *IDYLL* 1 AND THE REVERSAL OF NATURE

A.S.F. Gow on Theoc. 1.132–136 writes, “The drift of the following lines is not quite plain, but the figures are of a kind common especially in Latin poetry.”¹ He goes on to give mainly Roman examples of the reversal of nature. This state, in the sources, is “predicted or prayed for in the event of something deemed impossible occurring, or after it has occurred.” For the second case, Gow is able to quote Archil. fr. 74 D. and Hdt. 5.92 from classical Greek literature.

Archilochus uses the theme of nature gone awry as a transition between a paradoxical physical event, the solar eclipse of April 6, 648 (probably), and a moral event involving the daughter of Archeanactides. The part of the poem treating the second of these is lost, but the poet’s thought is clear: since the eclipse nothing can surprise us. We must not be shocked if land animals take to the water, and vice versa, nor need Archeanactides daughter surprise us . . . The context here is clear. The speech of the Corinthian Sosicles (Hdt. 5.92) repeats the same commonplace: “Men will live in the sea and fish will lead the lives men led before,” prefacing to it another sentiment, “To be sure the sky will be beneath the earth and the earth high above the sky, and . . .” Both these expressions are of radical surprise — this time at Sparta overthrowing republican governments to install tyrannies in their stead. The paradox of earth above and sky below must be distinguished from the one concerning land and sea used by both Herodotus and Archilochus. How and Wells point out² that it is the negative of a formula common in treaties: This treaty shall stand as long as the earth is below and the sky above (cf. Dion. Hal. 6.95).

These are the early literary testimonies to this theme. To them must be added proverbs: (1) ἄνω ποταμῶν ἱερῶν χωροῦσι παγαί, “the holy rivers’ waters flow upwards,” and (2) ἄμαξα τὸν βοῦν ἔλκει (οἱ ἐκφέρει), “the cart is leading the ox.” The first of these is a quotation from Eur. *Med.* 410, and Hesychius tells us it was used by Aeschylus as well (perhaps *Supp.* 520–512 is a reminiscence of it, but more likely the line appeared in a lost play). Line 411 of the *Medea*

¹ A.S.F. Gow, *Theocritus*, (Cambridge 1953) II, 28. This basic work will henceforth be referred to as Gow. The rest of the paragraph quotes or paraphrases Gow on Theocritus 1. 132–136.

² W.W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* (Oxford 1928²) II, 51 (*ad loc.*).

explains Euripides' use of the proverb: "Justice and all is turned round . . ." These proverbs, however, denote a *single* unnatural occurrence in an otherwise normal world, and hence should not be classed along with examples of the whole world turned round.

Another Greek proverb or anonymous quotation from some tragedian is similarly irrelevant, although Gow brings it by the way. It is to the effect that "the world may burn when I die; I couldn't care less, because my affairs are taken care of," *Trag. adesp.* 513 ἐμοῦ θανόντος γαῖα μιχθήτω πυρί. οὐδὲν μέλει μοι. τὰμὰ γὰρ καλῶς ἔχει. This saying, it is obvious, is no example at all of reversal in nature. Instead it refers to a general conflagration, of the sort well-known from Stoic thought. Γαῖα μιχθήτω πυρί is not to be taken as a philosophical expression. As such it would be a good description of a living body, no cause for surprise. It means "let the world be confounded (overturned) by fire."

The literary examples, then, are all that we have of this genre that can be dated before Theocritus. Our poet's lines are different for three reasons: (1) the context does not express surprise, (2) the transformations they picture are all benign, involving no discomfort to speak of and even a rather pleasant sort of disruption, (3) they appear in connection with death; if they spring from a tradition, it is one foreign to Archilochus and Herodotus.

Daphnis speaks:

132 νῦν ἴα μὲν φορέοιτε βάτοι, φορέοιτε δ' ἄκανθαι,
 ἅ δὲ καλὰ νάρκισσος ἐπ' ἀρκεύθοισι κομάσαι.
 πάντα δ' ἄναλλα γένοιτο καὶ ἅ πίτυς ὄχνας ἐνεῖκαι
 Δάφνις ἐπεὶ θνάσκει, καὶ τὰς κύνας ὄλαφος ἔλκοι
 κῆξ ὄρων τοῖ σκῶπες ἀηδόσι γαρύσαιντο.

The general statement is πάντα δ' ἄναλλα (or ἔναλλα γένοιτο, "may everything be topsy-turvy," whereas the particular cases that precede and follow it show an *improved* world. Three come before: "may brambles bear violets, may thorns do so as well, and may the narcissus flower on the juniper shrub," and three after: "may the pine tree bear pears (for Daphnis is dying), may the stag rip the hunting-dogs to pieces, and may owls on the mountain vie in song with nightingales." The theme here is Daphnis' death; these are his last words, and the world is to go topsy-turvy when he dies.

Theocritus uses the theme of the reversal of nature again in 5.124–27. There a shepherd, Lacon, and a goatherd, Comatas, are vying in song. In these lines Comatas retorts to Lacon's boast. The latter has claimed that *he* is irritating Comatas, who has just asserted "Someone is getting annoyed now." Now, in answer, Comatas sings "Let Himera flow with milk instead of water, and you, Crathis, grow purple with wine, and let the bulrushes bear fruit," to which Lacon replies, "Let Sybaris flow with honey for me, and at dawn may my girl dip her pitcher in honeycombs instead of water." (The mention by

Lacon of his girl is another attempt, in the context of Idyll 5, to goad Comatas, and hence he eschews complete parallelism with Comatas' lines describing the reversal of nature.) Lines 124–125, like Daphnis' last words in Idyll 1, picture a beneficent reversal. Gow (*ad loc.*), quite plausibly, proposes that "the meaning and relevance of the following exchanges is presumably that if the taunts are true the age of miracles has arrived." There is another additional meaning here. Comatas is saying, "If you think *you* are annoying *me*, the world is upside down and the man who has the upper hand must have the lower now" (see below). This connotation would make these lines parallel to line 23 in this Idyll where Comatas retorts with a proverb to Lacon's proposing a singing-match: "A pig once challenged Athena," a symbol of delusion and a world of unreality rather than an expression of surprise pure and simple at a falsehood in a taunt.

Idyll 1 lacks any intimation of a falsehood, of unreality, or of surprise. Daphnis *is* dying, and he and all nature know it. Greek literature has no context that is comparable, so far as I know. Elsewhere, however, the topsyturvy world is widely encountered as a description of the Other World, and most especially of Death. There is a "belief that in the Other World everything is inverted. For example . . . with regard to ghosts of the dead and other spirits, . . . their day is our night. In Hindu belief 'left' on earth corresponds to 'right' in the beyond,' while according to the Dyaks of Borneo, in heaven 'no means yes, black becomes white.'" ³ We may quote Eliade as well, on yoga: "We have called attention to the yogic symbolism of death and rebirth — death to the profane human condition, rebirth to a transcendent modality. The yogin undertakes to 'reverse' normal behavior completely. He subjects himself to a petrified immobility of body (*asana*), rhythmical breathing and arrest of breath (*pranayama*), fixation of the psychomental flux (*ekagrata*), immobility of thought, the 'arrest,' and even the 'return,' of semen. On every level of human experience, he does the opposite of what life demands that he do. Now, the symbolism of the 'opposite' indicates both the post-mortem condition and the condition of divinity (we know that 'left' on earth corresponds to 'right' in the beyond, a vessel broken here below is equivalent to an unbroken vessel in the world of the afterlife and the gods, etc.). The 'reversal' of normal behavior sets the yogin outside of life."⁴

Less far afield than Borneo and India, in the Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Pesahim* 50a, we find this tale: "R. Joseph son of R. Joshua ben Levi sickened and expired. When he returned to life his father said to him, 'What did you

³ Quoted from Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London 1962) 146. Ch. VI of this work contains many Irish examples of the motif. The first quotation in the quotation is from the passage cited in n. 4 below. The second is from C.C. Miller, *Black Borneo* (London 1946) 204 f., which I have not seen.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (London 1958) 362.

see?" He said to him, 'A topsy-turvy world is what I saw, the upside is down and the downside up.'" (I.e. those who were on the upper hand, and of importance here I saw become unimportant and be on the lower hand.) "He said to him, 'My son, you saw the real world' . . ."⁵

It is not surprising to find so widespread a conception in Greek literature, and least of all in Theocritus, whose wide use of proverbs⁶ and folk material is well-known. Daphnis' final words are meant to be a premonition of death and an invitation to apotheosis. Other interpretations have come close to this view.⁷ The whole world is sick with Daphnis' death. That its sickness, like his, should end with a state symbolic of death can be easily understood as well. What has not been recognized is that the topsy-turvy world is precisely a description of Death.

Daphnis sings: Let all Nature die along with me. He envisages its reversal just as he is about to enter the upside-down world of death. Nature could bear no greater testimony to him than its participation in his fate. He, in turn, can expect that participation, as it were, because of his position in Nature, and, by the same token, the reality of that position is revealed in his last words. He pictures himself as Nature's Life. When he leaves all things can be subject to reversal, for he is no longer with them to give them life. Yet his view is not entirely subjective, because we know from lines 41-75 of Nature's grief at Daphnis' pining away.

Of the two interpretations brought by Gow, neither is consonant with this idea. Both, indeed, are improbable; for they ignore the relationship between Daphnis and the world of field and flocks. According to the first Daphnis' death is surprising. But to whom? Only some unnamed outside observer, just arrived, could be surprised by it. Nature and the gods know Daphnis is dying, so does he,⁸ and so do we. In fact, no one new could be introduced in a poem where concrete personages are brought in to speak with Daphnis, all with proper introductions. Daphnis has answered the last of these, Aphrodite, having kept silent in the face of Hermes and Priapus. Now he addresses himself, in his parting words, to his animals, to Pan, the god of the countryside, and to the landscape around him. Thyrsis' song opened with these groups, the animals and the countryside, grieving for Daphnis.

Nor is the second interpretation, suggested by Gow with misgivings, any more convincing. Daphnis can not mean that he no longer cares what happens

⁵ Cf. also *Tractate Baba Bathra* 10b for the same story. I am grateful to Dr. Ranon Katzoff of Bar-Ilan University for bringing the passage to my attention. This is the source of my interpretation, above, of Theocritus 5. 124-127.

⁶ Cf. Tribukait, *De proverbiiis Vulgaribusque aliis Locutionibus apud bucalicos Graecis obviis* (Diss. Koenigsberg 1889) my "Theocritus 26.31", *CR* N.S. 18 (1968) 148.

⁷ E.g. G. Rohde, *Studien und Interpretationen* (Berlin 1963) 50.

⁸ Line 108 is clear testimony to this.

after his death. His description of the reversal of nature is the close of his farewell, which begins on line 115, and has four parts: First, he takes leave of the wild beasts, and of the spring and rivers. Then, instead of giving a final greeting to his flocks, he identifies himself as their herdsman, the one who cared for them and gave them food and drink. Next, he calls on the woodland god Pan, in order to make him his heir, so that he may keep Daphnis' syrinx, the musical instrument they share. All this emphasizes Daphnis' position in the heart of nature, and most of all his concern for the objects he has lived with. He has summoned Pan. Will the god come? We do not know. At all events Daphnis has stressed the care he bestowed on his animals. He has bid farewell to the wild. Now he changes his approach. Far from expressing his lack of concern for nature, he begs, as it were, the world of the forest and the hunt to follow him, to come along and join him in his final adventure—as he enters into the topsy-turvy world that is death. Because the changes are beneficent, that death is conceived as enhanced beauty and plenty.

Vergil, in *Ecl.* 5.36–39, reverses the benign reversal. He is imitating our passage, but his barley-fields come up darnel and oats, and his flower beds thorns and thistles. (Of themselves these are rather natural processes!) In *Ecl.* 1.59 he returns to the *topos* of Archilochus, while in *Ecl.* 8.27–28, 52–56 the reversals of nature express first an unnatural union, or one conceived as such, and then the cruelty of Medea as her children's murderess. In both cases the upside-down world is a function of surprise, as it is in Theocritus 5. In *Ecl.* 8 the ἀδύνατα are multiplied in a macabre display of humor; murder and infidelity replace the improvement of nature in the Theocritean original. If Vergil has understood Theocritus, he has “improved” upon the reversal of nature theme in a most un-Theocritean way. Instead of pleasant changes only unhappy things occur.

Other Roman poets (Horace, Propertius, and Ovid, e.g.) use the reversal of nature as an example of the impossibility of love waning. Thus, Theocritus 1.123 f. has no imitators among the Romans. It is the single occurrence of the theme in connection with death in classical literature, but as such it is part of a well-attested, ancient, and widespread tradition. Only in Greek and Latin literature is it a unique passage.

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