APOLLONIUS ON POETRY

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‘Poetology’ has always been, at least since the publication of the prologue to the Aitia, one of the most important issues in Hellenistic poetry. In the works of Callimachus, many epigrammatists, and, to a lesser extent, Theocritus a much-varied discourse on poetry is so prominent that for many readers, from antiquity until today, it became the pervasive feature of Hellenistic poetry. Apollonius, however, whose every verse betrays a self-conscious stance towards literary traditions stands apart: his treatises on poetic texts are all lost,¹ and nowhere does his epic touch explicitly upon the subject, which has left readers, ancient and modern, puzzled. Whereas earlier generations of scholars could, at least, help themselves by believing in an ancient tradition that told of a confrontation between Callimachus and Apollonius concerning how to write poetry, it now seems that the struggle is a fabrication, precisely constructed in order to bring the Argonautica into some relationship, in this case a negative one, with Callimachus’ point of view.² Meanwhile, however, it has become clear that Apollonius’ poetic practice in the Argonautica takes on the literary tradition in ways that are no less complex than—and, generally, quite similar to—those of Callimachus. In many respects, both language and subject matter, they share a common ground.³ In terms of poetical practice, therefore, Apollonius neatly fits into what one may reconstruct as a trend of third-century Alexandria. Nonetheless, the quest for second-order remarks on poetry in his verse goes on. In this essay, I shall search the Argonautica for poetological statements, primarily in order to clarify the question and its inherent problems.

A word on terminology might be appropriate, since some of the terms used in the following paragraphs have not yet made it into the OED: in this paper, ‘poetology’ means all poetry about poetry, explicit or implicit; ‘meta-poetics’ means implicit poetry on poetry;

¹ Testimonies and discussion in Pfeiffer (1978) 181–183.
² For the ‘struggle’ see Lefkowitz, this volume, esp. 55–63.
³ See Rengakos, this volume, 247.
‘epic voice’ I understand as narrator’s statements in epic that often, but not necessarily, have poetological significance. Unlike these, ‘self-consciousness’ to me instead appears to be an attitude of the poet towards his practice or towards his product. In the case of Apollonius and his peers one can take their self-consciousness for granted, betrayed by every single line of their extant texts. The question is, however, whether one should see this poetic self-consciousness in itself as a (general) discourse on poetry. If so, Apollonius would talk about (his own) poetry everywhere, usually marking the distance between his practice and those of his predecessors. Perhaps this is what he does. In this paper, however, I shall confine myself to the search for poetological statements of a more specific kind.

It seems that within the generic constraints of ancient Greek epic, there are four possible ways for a poet to engage with poetology, arranged in order of increasing ambiguity: (1) Directly: the auctorial narrator can disclose his views, in an authoritative, disengaged voice. I speak of ‘narrator’s poetology’. (2) Indirectly: A character in the poem, preferably a singer or poet himself, could make a poetological statement as an alter ego of the narrator (or, theoretically, of the poet). In this case, one should think of the statement as ‘narrated poetology’. (3) By intertextual means, the epic poet can provide a comment upon pre-texts and thereby imply a comment upon his own. As far as I can see, this is the only, albeit limited, way to reach the poet’s intention. Therefore, I have named this category ‘poet’s poetology’. (4) In a veiled manner, the poet/narrator can implicitly talk about poetry, by allegoresis, ekphrasis or, generally, symbolic discourse. For reasons that I shall explain later, this should be seen as ‘reader’s poetology’. Of course, these four classes can (and do) combine in several ways. Here, it will suffice to briefly illustrate each class with some examples.

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5 Hunter (1993) 101 persuasively determines “literary self-consciousness” as “the constant demand of poet-narrators to be recognised as the controlling force behind the words of the text.” This “demand to be recognised”, however, often comes with a poetological statement or even is the statement itself. Hunter’s phrase may, at least, work well as a working definition of what self-consciousness is.