In his treatise on *How to Write History* Lucian advises the aspiring historiographer to keep his account short and straightforward, to focus on the essential and to restrain himself in describing mountains, walls, rivers and the like: “You must not give the impression that you are making a tasteless display of word-painting, and expatiating independently while the history takes care of itself. Just a light touch—no more than meets the need of clearness—, and you should pass on, evading the snare, and denying yourself all such indulgences” (57).1 He goes on to present Homer as an exemplary narrator, since, in spite of being a poet, the old master quickly passed by Tantalus, Ixion and Tityus in his depiction of the Underworld. “If Parthenius, Euphorion, or Callimachus had been in his place,” Lucian adds, “how many lines do you suppose it would have taken to get the water to Tantalus’s lip; how many more to set Ixion spinning?” (57).2

Lucian’s sarcastic questions implicitly equate the excruciating tortures of archetypical sinners in hell with the tantalizing sufferings of readers faced with a narrative that indulges in digressions, revels in ostensibly insignificant details, and thus continuously delays the main action. Let’s face it: for all its cynicism this definition of Hellenistic story-telling hits the mark. In fact, we may easily apply it to epyllia written in the Alexandrian-neoteric style, with ekphraseis and other narrative detours playing a major role, while the actual events, i.e. the purported subject matter of the text, frequently seem marginalized.3 As is well known, all three authors mentioned by Lucian had a major impact on Latin poets of the first century BC. The influence of Callimachus on Catullus & Co.

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1 If not otherwise indicated, translations are my own; here I am quoting the English version of Fowler/Fowler (1905). μάλιστα δὲ σωφρονητέον ἐν ταῖς τῶν ὄρων ἢ τειχῶν ἢ ποταμῶν ἐρμηνείαις ὡς μὴ δύναμιν λόγων ἀπειροκάλως παρεπιδείκνυσθαι δοκοίης καὶ τὸ σαυτοῦ δρᾶν παρεὶς τὴν ἱστορίαν, ἀλλ’ ἀλλίγον προσαψάμενος τοῦ χρησίμου καὶ σαφοῦς ἔνεκα μεταβήσῃ ἐκφυγὼν τὸν ἰξὸν τὸν ἐν τῷ πράγματι καὶ τὴν τοιαύτην ἅπασαν λιχνείαν.

2 εἰ δὲ Παρθένιος ἢ Εὐφορίων ἢ Καλλίμαχος ἔλεγεν, πόσοις ἂν οἴει ἔπεσι τὸ ὕδωρ ἄχρι πρὸς τὸ γελόσι τοῦ Ταντάλου ἤγαγεν· εἶτα πόσοις ἂν Ἰξίωνα ἐκάλεσαν.

3 Cf. the description of how a neoteric poet would tell the story of the three little pigs in Ross (1975) 244. For the poetics of deferral in the Hesiodic *Aspis* cf. Bing in this volume.
is palpable throughout their writings. Cicero deprecatingly characterizes the *cantores Euphorionis* as people despising the works of Ennius (*Tusc. 3.45*)—whether or not his remark is targeted at the so-called neoterics, it surely attests to Euphorion’s popularity among a certain group of literati during that period. Last but not least, Parthenius, a prisoner of war brought to Rome by Helvius Cinna (or his father) and commonly believed to have contributed to the rising interest in Alexandrian poetry, dedicates to Gallus his *Erotika Pathemata*, a prose collection of mostly esoteric love stories, which the Roman author is invited to transform into elegies—and ἔπη. What kind of hexameter narratives does Parthenius have in mind here if not the sort of miniature epic that is usually referred to as “epyllion” by modern scholars?

In an article on the neoteric poets, Lyne identified the epyllion as “a (if not the) typical genre of the school.” While it is very problematic to speak of a “school” in connection with this literary movement, there can be no doubt that the format and generic features of such small-scale epics would particularly appeal to poets like Catullus. To be sure, his *Peleus and Thetis* (c. 64) is the only extant epyllion we may properly classify as “neoteric,” but we do know of others—although their remnants are meager at best, they give evidence of a vibrant epyllic production in pre-Augustan Rome. In fact, we can associate precisely one epyllion with each of the writers conventionally named among the neoterics, which led Deichgräber to the

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4 Cf. e.g. Wimmel (1960), Clausen (1964), Hunter (2006), Knox (2007) and Höschele (2009).
6 Clausen’s (1964) 187–188 hypothesis that Callimachus was brought to Rome by none other than Parthenius proved to be highly influential. A critical discussion of Parthenius’ impact on Roman poetry is offered by Lightfoot (1999) 50–76; for a survey of his life cf. Lightfoot (1999) 9–16.
7 On the *Erotika Pathemata* and elegiac epyllia cf. Klooster in this volume.
8 Lyne (1978a) 169. Similarly Wheeler (1934): “The composition of one of these miniature epics became a mark of caste” (80) and “from the point of view of the young poets the epyllion represented the pinnacle of artistic effort” (81).
9 The modern designation “neoterics” goes back to two phrases Cicero uses with reference to an unspecified group of new(er) poets: at *Att. 7.2.1* he inserts a rather mannered *versus spondiacus*, suggesting that Atticus may sell it to one of *hoi neoteroi* as his own; at *Orat. 161* Cicero observes that the *poetae novi* avoid a certain metrical practice found in earlier poetry. On the two terms cf. Crowther (1970) 322–325. Firmly rejecting the idea of a school, Courtney (1993) 189 postulates that we “should cease to use” the word “neoterics.” Against this radical view cf. Johnson (2007) 172, who likewise rejects the notion of an organized poetic school, but acknowledges the rise of a new aesthetics, which we may well call “neoteric.”