THEOCRITUS’ CONSTRUCTIVE INTERPRETERS,
AND THE CREATION OF A BUCOLIC READER

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Every literary genre is in some way a selection and a stylization of a segment of life, and as a result every kind of classical poetry looks more like a synecdochical proposal of a world than an act of imitation.\(^1\) But every type of classical poetry also presented itself as either an imitation of the real or of a figment of the imagination based on the real world: very few ancient literary texts actually attempted to represent abstractly fictional worlds.\(^2\) Therefore, on the one hand, each genre provided an essentially delimited and more or less evident outlook on a ‘portion’ of life, but on the other, some ‘portion’ of life always had to be there, recognizable in each poem and framed by the generally coherent constants of behaviour or setting underlying the partial world of every genre—patterns according to which events and actions played out by the characters could be related to the real world, and thus understood by the audience.

Pre-existing traditional genres provided the authors, and their audiences, with ready-made sets of specific ‘constants’ defining the specific selections of the world created by each genre, for which in all but a few cases (e.g. most likely in the case of the Sicilian mime) the authors, because of the more-than-local diffusion of these genres, could rely on

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1 “Every genre is a model of reality which mediates the empirical world. The text does not work upon the direct presence of ‘reality’, but upon a selective representation of it. The genre, a paradigm of the things to represent, makes reality recognizable and meaningful by translating it into something it is not. This means that, in order to be perceived, the world must take a form, become a model of meaning; and the literary genre’s communicative strategies help the reader to construct a situation … if poetry is conceived more as a proposal of a world than as mimesis, it is hard to do without genres” (Conte (1994) 112–113).

2 An all-embracing ancient taxonomy, in these terms, of the possible ways poetic contents are related to the real world is offered by Σ Hom. II. 14.342–351. The ideas of genres in the archaic and, in part, the classical age were of course different from the Hellenistic one—the former were paradigmatically built on the pre-existing sets of texts, the latter on the pre-existing sets of rules plus texts: cf. Fantuzzi in Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004) 21–26, but the role of pure fictionality remained consistently marginal. On the exceptionally high level of fictionality in Theocritus’ bucolic idylls cf. Payne (2006).
a pan-Hellenic competence or at least on their pan-Hellenic resonance. Many of these traditional genres, and par excellence the epos from which Theocritus borrowed the metre for almost all of his poems, also had their stories and characters arranged according to the most coherent structures of the mythical-heroic world—so coherent, self-defined and ‘expectable’ as to be used often as paradigms for understanding real life. On the contrary, the mimes of Epicharmus and Sophron, which undoubtedly were the main precedent for Theocritus’ urban mimes and an indirect model for his mimetic and non-mimetic pastoral poems, offered in a sense distorted images of the real world of humble people. Furthermore, the Sicilian mime was hardly ever widely diffused beyond the boundaries of the Greek cities of Sicily and Southern Italy; and though the shepherds’ life would always be less foreign to urbanized Greeks of the Hellenistic age than it is to us, it was probably less well-known to many of these Greeks than was the reality of the urban world, where they lived their everyday life, or the fictional worlds of epic and tragic heroes, with which they were literarily acquainted. Consequently, the focus of a great deal of bucolic poetry on scenes removed from the horizon of expectation of its readers meant that it was especially crucial for Theocritus, as a bucolic author, to insert into his poetry the idea of an implicit reader who was especially ready to catch the hints about how the new genre was ‘functioning’, and to (re)construct it.

In spite of this original handicap, which has to do with what we may call “generic recognizability”—or maybe, as we have said, precisely because of it—, Theocritus’ search for internal coherence and ‘traditionality’ is most obvious in the pastoral poems, perhaps because the urban mimes already had models in the para-literary tradition of the Sicilian mime, as ancient readers well understood. His bucolic poems strive to give the opposite impression, i.e. of a deep-rooted and con-

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4 Cf. Gutzwiller, this volume, pp. 1ff.
6 Two introductory scholia on Id. 2, which are probably the remains of an ancient hypothesis, state that “Theocritus derived the character of Thystylis crudely (ἀπειρωτὰ-κάς, cf. Wendel (1920) 70) from the Mimes by Sophron” and that “(the author) derives the plot (ἐπιθέμος) of the spell from the Mimes by Sophron” (cf. pp. 269–270 Wendel); the first Σ Id. 15 states: “(the author) has formed the poem by analogy with Sophron’s Women attending the Isthmian games” (p. 305 Wendel).