

# Battus in Theocritus' Fourth *Idyll*

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THE FOURTH *Idyll* of Theocritus was once, with the fifth, described as "poetically on a lower plane than T.'s other bucolic *Idylls* and the conversations which they contain."<sup>1</sup> Until recently, the poem has seldom seemed to have any purpose other than to reproduce with considerable realism the rustic speech of two south Italian herdsmen; many scholars would still agree that Theocritus quite simply "a condensé dans ce court dialogue comme la substance de toutes les idées familières aux deux pâtres."<sup>2</sup>

We have also been told that "the content of the poem is as simple as possible."<sup>3</sup> The goatherd Battus meets his friend Corydon, who is tending Aegon's cows (1–4). They discuss Aegon's Olympic pretensions (5–11) and the condition of the herd (12–28). While *Idyll* 4 has no song, Corydon mentions several composers and sings the first line of a song to show that he is capable of making good use of Aegon's syrinx (29–37). Battus, reminded of a lost love, Amaryllis, laments her and is consoled by Corydon (38–43). Both men then turn their attention back to the herd, which must be driven out of the olive shoots (44–49), and Battus is pricked by a thorn while watching a heifer (50–57). The poem closes with an earthy discussion of Aegon's father and his current love interest (58–63).

As has been generally recognized, the apparent simplicity of the poem does not preclude a sharp contrast between the personalities of the two herdsmen, particularly in lines 12–31:

<sup>1</sup> A. S. F. Gow on *Idylls* 4 and 5 in *Theocritus II. Commentary* (Cambridge 1965) 76. All translations used here are from Gow, *Theocritus I. Introduction, Text, and Translation*. For helpful suggestions and criticism I am grateful to E. W. Leach, W. Berg, and especially N. Austin, who read several drafts of this article and saved me from many mistakes; for the ones that remain, I am solely responsible.

<sup>2</sup> A. H. Couat, *La Poésie Alexandrine sous les trois premiers Ptolemées* (Paris 1882) 409. For P. Legrand, *Étude sur Théocrite* (Paris 1898), the rusticity was indeed too true to be good. "Après avoir entendu ces pauvres gens converser pendant quelque minutes nous les connaissons en effet tout entier . . ."; but that this is Theocritus' main intention, "Je ne saurais le croire" (170). Legrand concluded that *Idyll* 4 has a special function in relation to the other *Idylls*: to warn against the use of unmitigated realism in the pastoral genre (170–71).

<sup>3</sup> A. Körte, *Hellenistic Poetry* (New York 1929) 286.

- 12 Co. And the heifers here miss their master; that's why they low.  
 BA. Poor beasts, it's a sorry herdsman they found.  
 Co. Poor beasts indeed; they don't care to feed any more.
- 15 BA. Certainly there's nothing left of that calf yonder but the bones.  
 She doesn't live on dewdrops, does she—like the cicada?  
 Co. Faith, no. Sometimes I pasture her by the Aesarus and give her a nice truss of soft hay, and sometimes it's on shady Latymnum that she frisks.
- 20 BA. The bull's thin too—the ruddy one. I hope Lampriadas's folk may get such another when the demesmen sacrifice to Hera: they're [rascals] in that deme.  
 Co. And yet the bull is driven to the saltings, and to Physcus's, and
- 25 to the Neaethus, where all good things grow—restharrow, fleabane and fragrant balm.  
 BA. Wretched Aegon, your cows too will come by their deaths because you, like others, have fallen in love with a cursed victory. And the pipe that once you made yourself is getting flecked with mildew.
- 27 Co. Nay, by the Nymphs it is not, for as he was going off to Pisa he
- 30 left it me for a present. I am something of a player myself, and can strike up Glauca's tunes, or Pyrrhus's, well enough.

The remarks of Battus grow increasingly akin to the pathetic fallacy, which has sometimes been thought to underlie the whole genre of pastoral poetry.<sup>4</sup> Corydon, however, rather than following up his own use of the word *ποθέω* (12), answers as a straight man, in herdsmen's language (somewhat idealized); he seems particularly perplexed by Battus' suggestion about the cicada and dewdrops (a trite literary phrase). Gow has described Battus generally as "ironical,"<sup>5</sup> and Kynaston saw the whole dialogue in terms of the "wag" Battus, whose jokes Corydon, with "amusing stupidity," never understands.<sup>6</sup> Such a contrast was recently elaborated by Ott.<sup>7</sup> The antithesis, however, between a "sentimental Battus" and a "realistic Corydon" suggested (though not developed) by Lawall seems a more

<sup>4</sup> e.g., by R. Y. Hathorn, "The Ritual Origin of Pastoral," *TAPA* 92 (1961) 237–38. T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Green Cabinet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969) 249–50, however, is right to emphasize Theocritus' general avoidance of the pathetic fallacy, particularly with regard to animals.

<sup>5</sup> *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II 86, on line 39.

<sup>6</sup> H. Kynaston, *The Idylls and Epigrams Commonly Attributed to Theocritus* (Oxford 1892) 135, 137. Cf. also H. Fritzsche, *Theokrits Gedichte* (Leipzig 1891) 85, for "Korydon, ein harmloser gutmütiger Mensch" and "Battus, ein witziger Kopf."

<sup>7</sup> U. Ott, *Die Kunst des Gegensatzes in Theokrits Hirtengedichten* (Hildesheim 1969) 43–56, esp. 47–48.

accurate appraisal.<sup>8</sup> Basing their approaches on this theme, Van Sickle<sup>9</sup> and Segal<sup>10</sup> have interpreted the poem as a contrast of two modes or voices of pastoral poetry. Segal, in particular, believes that the “sentimental and romantic mode (Battus)” and “a harder, more realistic, yet more accommodating mode (Corydon)”<sup>11</sup>—or “the ‘fat’ and ‘lean’ styles”<sup>12</sup>—are in tension within Theocritus’ own poetry, and that they stem from “a basic difference in attitudes towards life.”<sup>13</sup>

Segal’s interpretation, which recognizes an examination within *Idyll* 4 of the attempts of pastoral poetry to come to terms with rustic life, yet emphasizes the dramatic nature of the poem, is the most promising so far,<sup>14</sup> but it does not account for several of this short poem’s distinct peculiarities. These peculiarities appear to me to raise a central question: is Battus a herdsman? We have more reason to think this of Simichidas in *Idyll* 7—which no one believes. Simichidas, “whose rusticity is almost negligible,”<sup>15</sup> is really Theocritus; but every pastoral poet must have a herd.<sup>16</sup> As Battus wanders through

<sup>8</sup> G. W. Lawall, *Theocritus’ Coan Pastorals. A Poetry Book* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1967) 47 (hereafter cited as LAWALL, *TCP*). Neglecting this polarity, Lawall suggests that “at the core of the poem’s structure is a constant parallelism between man and animal” (51), emphasizing “these two poles of erotic attitudes: purely physical desire and sentimental longing” (50). “Man in this poem never rises above an animal level” (51). Cf. also Lawall, “Theocritus’ Fourth *Idyll*: Animal Loves and Human Loves,” *RivFC* 94 (1966) 42–50. In my opinion, Lawall’s emphasis on erotic themes in Theocritus, which has contributed to a deeper understanding of *Idylls* 1–7 (notably *Idyll* 5), has here led him into a farfetched and distorted reading of *Idyll* 4. Rather than add to the already extensive discussion of Lawall’s thesis by offering an overall rebuttal, I attempt to answer Lawall on a few key points.

<sup>9</sup> J. B. Van Sickle, “The Fourth Pastoral Poems of Virgil and Theocritus,” *Atti e Memorie dell’Arcadia* SER. 3, 5.1 (1969) 1–20.

<sup>10</sup> C. Segal, “Theocritean Criticism and the Interpretation of the Fourth *Idyll*,” *Ramus* 1 (1972) 1–25.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* (*supra* n.10) 4.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* 7.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> The interpretation of M. Sanchez-Wildberger, *Theokrit-Interpretationen* (Diss. Zürich 1955) 43–48, is discussed by Lawall, *TCP* 50–51, and Ott, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) nn.155, 164 (I have not had access to this work); the structure she suggests (that the herdsmen are gradually elevated from a rustic world to one of fantasy, then returned to the real world of animals, thorns and lusty old farmers) seems a too-mechanical arrangement of the contrasting elements noted by Van Sickle, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.9) and Segal, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10).

<sup>15</sup> Gow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II 129.

<sup>16</sup> On the purely symbolic function of Simichidas’ flock see Legrand, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 152; M. Puelma, “Die Dichterbegegnung in Theokrits ‘Thalysien,’” *MusHelv* 17 (1960) 155; Gow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II 127–29, 155 on line 92; and G. Giangrande, “Théocrite, Simichidas et les ‘Thalysies,’” *AntCl* 37 (1968) 508–11. But Lawall, *TCP* 99, appears to take *Idyll* 7.92 more literally.

the poem without apparent responsibilities, the only suggestion that he is a goatherd is line 39: "Dear to me as my goats you (Amaryllis) were when you were taken." Gow finds the line surprisingly naive for the "ironical" Battus,<sup>17</sup> and Segal calls it "a rather clumsy rustic simile."<sup>18</sup> I would emphasize Legrand's reaction (Battus "affecte une apparence honorable de rusticité")<sup>19</sup> and doubt that a comparable line has been spoken by any herdsman in Greek literature.<sup>20</sup>

Extravagant sentiment and artificial phrases, however, are characteristic of Battus; let us examine his subsequent behavior. Gaping (*χαρμεύμενος*) after a heifer, he runs his foot onto a thorn (50–53). "There is an immediate moral (56–57): when you go into the hills, watch out for brambles. But the quality of the poem is such that we cannot be completely satisfied with so mundane a lesson."<sup>21</sup> For Lawall, Battus' "gaping" shows a strong if temporary erotic desire for the animal; the thorn's prick is a rustic counterpart of Eros' shaft.<sup>22</sup> The wound, however, is explicitly an effect of Battus' distraction, not its cause, and at first seems to inspire nothing more than annoyance, whatever was in Battus' mind just previously. Battus then characteristically turns a pretty, artificial phrase (without erotic implications), and again Corydon gives a "straight" answer: don't go along the mountains barefoot.

I think that it is stopping short of the documentary fallacy to ask what Battus, seemingly ignorant of the elementary precaution of going properly shod in rough and overgrown terrain,<sup>23</sup> is doing in the

<sup>17</sup> *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.5).

<sup>18</sup> *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) 12.

<sup>19</sup> *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 363.

<sup>20</sup> *cf.* Rosenmeyer, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.4); on the essential distance between man and animal in the *Idylls*, see also 130ff, 253–55.

<sup>21</sup> Rosenmeyer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 279.

<sup>22</sup> TCP 48–49. Only Van Sickle, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.9) 15, seems willing to accept this.

<sup>23</sup> B. A. van Groningen, "Quelque problèmes de la poésie bucolique grecque," *Mnemosyne* 12 (1959) 28; Gow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II 139 on line 26; and Lawall, TCP 81, on the assumption that the goatherd Lycidas is teasing Simichidas about his boots in *Idyll* 7.26, believe that the goatherd is barefoot. Lycidas, however, is going along a road; I fail to see, with Gow, *loc.cit.*, how *Idyll* 4.56 strengthens a theory that goatherds normally go barefoot. Even if Gow is right, the problem returns in another form: if goatherds go barefoot (presumably because their feet have become toughened), why do Battus' feet need protection? Or, finally: why does Battus need warning? E. W. Leach has suggested to me that 'barefoot' could be, as sometimes in rural America, a countryman's reference to sandals or light shoes; Battus is not pricked in the sole, but under the ankle. Ott, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 47, suggests that Corydon is mocking the low social status of the barefoot goatherd; the mockery,

countryside. While clearly acquainted with the locale, he is hardly up-to-date on its affairs. He begins with a question (1) made famous by Vergil, and asks several more (5, 58–59). He also makes two false assumptions: the first of these (3), that Corydon is milking the cows on the sly, attempts a wisecrack display of inside knowledge; the second (28), that Aegon's syrinx, like his herd, is perishing through Corydon's neglect, is another of Battus' charming conceits, but there is no real reason to doubt that it was at least partly prompted by ignorance. Gow, realizing that Battus is characterized throughout by extensive yet incomplete familiarity with the area and its people, offers an explanation: Battus has recently returned from a trip, but "T. leaves the situation to be inferred by the reader."<sup>24</sup> If Battus' recent absence is to account for a noticeable peculiarity of the dialogue, it does not seem unreasonable to expect a mention of it; Battus' return to his flock (never mentioned) might naturally have been contrasted with Aegon's abandonment of his.

It seems more plausible to understand Battus as an occasional visitor to the country (perhaps first drawn there by Amaryllis).<sup>25</sup> He likes Corydon and prides himself on his knowledge of the local gossip, while Corydon, a genuine herdsman, insists on his own ability as a singer (29ff).<sup>26</sup> Battus ('Chatterbox') romanticizes some aspects of country life, tries out as a goatherd with a rather phony line (39), then makes a fool of himself by pricking his foot; he is amazed at the thickness of the thornbushes and seems unable to draw out the thorn him-

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which reverses that of Lycidas, seems out of character for Corydon. Moreover, only the remark would be explained, not the situation that occasioned it.

<sup>24</sup> *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II 76.

<sup>25</sup> Van Sickle, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.9) 13–14, has tentatively suggested that Battus could be "a proprietor, come from town to check up on the situation in the country," but makes him in any case more of a local than Corydon, a stranger.

<sup>26</sup> The cosmopolitan and urbane character of Corydon's musical display has provoked comment, most recently by Segal, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) 12; also Ott, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) 53: "Korydons Repertoire enthält Literature!" But perhaps the most acute analysis is that of Lawall, *RivFC* 94 (1966) 46: "Corydon supports his claim to musical proficiency merely by mentioning two composers whose works he knows and by claiming to be able to praise Croton, Zacynthus and the Lacinian shrine. This is not a song learned from Glauca or Pyrrhus but one of his own invention, involving people and places from his own personal experience." Corydon's familiarity with Alexandrian songs is not really established. The names of Glauca and Pyrrhus are exhibited hastily, like "Praxitelean cups" (*Idyll* 5.105); Corydon soon withdraws to his own territory. Lines 5–11, in which Corydon defends the local champion against Battus' patronizing, are far from "poetically neutral" (*TCP* 43), as they provide the material for Corydon's sketched-out song at the center of the poem.

self. His visit, however, is rewarded by a touch of authentic local color: the superannuated lecher, whose behavior immediately and again characteristically reminds Battus of some legendary denizens of the countryside (satyrs and Pans).<sup>27</sup>

Gaping at a heifer as one can imagine him gaping at everything around him, Battus is manifestly out of his element. The "stupid" Corydon treats him gently, at last permitting himself a forbearing "ὦ δειλαίε" (60).<sup>28</sup> Through apparently random conversation Theocritus has characterized the city poet playing at being a goatherd—a counterpart of the goatherd trying to be an urban poet (*Idyll* 3),<sup>29</sup> and probably meant to be equally funny. Theocritus, well aware of the artificiality of pastoral verse, would be acquainted with the humorous and embarrassing incidents that befall a poet among peasants. The *Salonhirt* Battus probably stands for Theocritus himself. This is not to revive the Bucolic Masquerade, but to suggest a close relationship between *Idylls* 4 and 7.<sup>30</sup> Battus' aggressiveness, however, has been exaggerated by recent critics, and the prosaic Corydon is probably satirized to some extent.<sup>31</sup> The confrontation of town and country is underplayed and naturalistic, lacking the tension and malice of *Idyll* 7.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT LOS ANGELES  
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<sup>27</sup> Gow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II 91, understands *τό τοι γένος* in line 62 to refer to Aegon's family; the sense could also be "that yeoman stock" or the like.

<sup>28</sup> On the mild use of *δειλαιος* here see the scholia *ad loc.* and Gow, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) II 90 *ad loc.* Rosenmeyer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 28, remarks that Corydon is "momentarily the straight man to Battus' short-lived melancholy" in lines 41–43 (my italics). Here, Corydon "tries to cheer up Battus by making him look at the situation realistically. One may compare the advice of Milon to the love-sick Bucaeus in *Idyll* 10" (TCP 47). But the rough advice of Milon (like Priapus' to Daphnis in *Idyll* 1) can hardly be compared with Corydon's blameless platitudes. In *Idylls* 4 and 10 we are, rather, shown diametrically opposed methods of handling the same situation, each method easily understandable in its context; the realism lies in Corydon's understanding of the way to talk to Battus.

<sup>29</sup> A modification of the interrelation of *Idylls* 1–4 proposed by Lawall suggests itself: 1 and 2 form "a pastoral-urban diptych," 3 and 4 a second diptych which also "explores the tension between man's ideal and real worlds" (TCP 14).

<sup>30</sup> *Idyll* 7 would then lose some of the isolation most recently noted by Rosenmeyer, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 276.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *supra* n.26.