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978-1-107-43219-2 - A Translation of the Idylls of Theocritus

R. C. Trevelyan

Excerpt

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THE
IDYLLS
OF
THEOCRITUS

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IDYLL I

THYRSIS

The Sicilian shepherd, Thyrsis, at the invitation of a goatherd, sings the 'Sorrows of Daphnis'. No complete version of this pastoral hero's legend has come down to us; but it would seem that Daphnis, after wedding the nymph Nais in his early youth, had boasted that he would never again be subdued by Love. So when the offended Aphrodite had inspired his heart with a passion for another nymph, Xenia, Daphnis refused to confess his love, and pined away to death, with his last words reproaching Aphrodite for her cruelty.

This beautiful Idyll has been the ancestor of a more numerous and distinguished progeny than any other poem of antiquity. Moschus, Virgil, Ronsard and Milton, followed by the innumerable flock of minor pastoral poets, have all imitated and borrowed from it with varying success; and its spirit, though not its form, may still be discerned in *Adonais* and *Thyrsis*.

THYRSIS. Sweet is the whispering music of yonder pine that sings
Over the water-brooks, and sweet the melody of your pipe,
Dear goatherd. After Pan, the second prize you'll bear away.
If he should take the hornèd goat, the she-goat shall you win:
But if he choose the she-goat for his meed, to you shall fall
The kid; and dainty is kid's flesh, till you begin to milk.

GOATHERD. Sweeter, O shepherd, is your song than the melodious fall
Of yonder stream that from on high gushes down the rock.

If it chance that the Muses take the young ewe for their gift,
Then your reward will be the stall-fed lamb; but should they choose
To take the lamb, then yours shall be the sheep for second prize.

THYRSIS. Now by the Nymphs, goatherd, I pray, will you not sit down there,
On yonder shelving hillock, among the tamarisks,
And pipe to me? I will stay here and tend your goats the while.

GOATHERD. That may not be; no, shepherd: we may not play the pipe
At noonday. It is Pan we dread; for at this very hour
He takes his rest wearied with hunting; and he's choleric;
Around his nostrils bitter wrath sits lurking evermore.

But, Thyrsis, you were wont to sing the tale of Daphnis' woe,
And in the pastoral Muse's art none has such skill as you.
Come then, let's sit beneath yon elm, over against the statues,
Priapus and the fountain Nymphs, there by the shepherd's seat
And the oak-tree grove; and if you will but sing as once you sang
In rivalry with that Chromis who came from Libya,

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I'll give you for three milkings a goat, mother of twins,
 Who yields two pailfuls every time, for all she feeds two kids.
 A deep bowl of carved wood I'll give you too, rubbed with sweet bees-wax,
 Two-eared and newly wrought, still smacking of the graver's tool.
 Around the upper edges the winding ivy runs,
 Ivy besprent with helicyse, and therewith intertwined,
 Rejoicing in its golden berries, the proud tendril curls.
 Within, a woman is designed, such as the Gods might fashion,
 Clad in a robe, with snooded hair; and upon either side
 Two men with fair long locks contending in alternate speech
 One with the other; but her heart is touched by naught they say:
 For now at one she glances with a smile, and now again
 Flings to the other a light thought; while they, with heavy eyes
 Long wearied out for love of her, are wasting toil in vain.
 Beyond these there is carved an ancient fisherman, who stands
 On a jagged rock, and busily the old man gathers in
 His great net for a cast, like one who toils with might and main.
 You'd say that he was fishing with the whole strength of his limbs;
 Such swelling sinews everywhere stand out around his neck;
 For grey-haired though he be, his strength is worthy of youth still.
 Then, but a little space beyond that sea-hardened old man,
 Is a vineyard, richly laden with clusters fiery-red,
 And guarding it a little lad upon a rough wall sits,
 Two she-foxes on either side; one ranging up and down
 The vine-rows, pilfering the ripe grapes; the other against the wallet
 Is marshalling all her cunning, and vows she will not leave
 That boy, till she has set him down to breakfast on dry crumbs.
 But he with stalks of asphodel is plaiting a pretty cage
 For locusts, binding it with a reed; nor cares he for his wallet,
 Nor for the vines so much as in his plaiting he finds joy.
 And all around the cup is spreading soft acanthus leaf,
 A sight of varied loveliness, that will amaze your soul.
 I bought it of a merchant who came from Calydon,
 And the price I paid him was a goat and a great white cream-cheese.
 Never yet has it touched my lip, but still unstained by wine
 It lies. This bowl with all my heart would I bestow on you,
 If you'll be kind and sing that song I yearn so much to hear.
 I am in earnest. Come, friend; surely you will not hoard your song
 Until you come to Hades where all things are forgot?

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THYRSIS

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THYRSIS *sings*

Lead now, I pray, dear Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 Thyrsis am I of Etna; and sweet is the voice of Thyrsis.
 Where were ye then, while Daphnis pined away, where were ye, Nymphs?
 Haunting Peneios' lovely valleys, or the glens of Pindos?
 For not by the great river of Anāpos were you dwelling,
 Nor upon Etna's heights, nor yet by Akis' holy stream.

Lead now, I pray, dear Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 For him the jackals howled, for him the wolves: the lion even
 Came forth from the thicket to lament him when he died.

Lead now, I pray, dear Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 Many a cow and many a bull stood round him where he lay,
 Many a heifer and young calf, lowing for misery.

Lead now, I pray, dear Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 First from the hills came Hermes, and said, 'Daphnis, my friend,
 Who is it that is torturing thee? Whom so much dost thou love?'

Lead now, I pray, dear Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 Came the herdsmen and the shepherds, and the goatherds came:
 All of them asked what ailed him. Came Priapus too,
 And said, 'Poor Daphnis, wherefore thus lie pining, while the maid
 By every stream, through every grove is roaming up and down—

Lead now, I pray, dear Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 —Seeking thee? Ah thou feckless boy, in love thou art but a fool.
 A herdsman wast thou called, but now thou art like a sorry goatherd.
 When a goatherd looks upon his flock sporting in wanton play,
 His eyes grow wistful for regret that he was not born a goat;—

Lead now, I pray, dear Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 —So thou, when thou beholdest how gaily the girls laugh,
 Thine eyes grow wistful, since thou dost not join them in their dance.'
 Yet to them all the herdsman answered naught, but still endured
 His bitter love, aye, he endured it even to the fated end.

Lead yet awhile, ye Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 But now the Cyprian Goddess¹ came, smiling in kindly mood,
 Secretly smiling, though beneath pretence of heavy wrath.
 'So, Daphnis, thou didst vow,' she said, 'thou would'st throw Love a fall:
 Yet here is it not thou thyself by grievous Love art thrown?'

Lead yet awhile, ye Muses, lead you the pastoral song.

¹ The Cyprian Goddess is Aphrodite.

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Then at length answering her taunts spoke Daphnis: 'Cruel Cypris,
 Vindictive Cypris, Cypris by mortal men abhorred,
 Doubtless already thou dost deem my latest sun has set.
 Nay, Daphnis even in Hades shall work Love bitter woe.

Lead yet awhile, ye Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 Do they not tell how the herdsman loved Cypris? Get thee to Ida;
 Get thee to thy Anchises.¹ There are oaks and galingale,
 And there melodiously the bees flit humming round the hives.

Lead yet awhile, ye Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 Adonis too is in his bloom. Either he tends the sheep,
 Or shoots the hare, and chases the wild beasts every one.

Lead yet awhile, ye Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 And then I'd have thee go encounter Diomed,² and say:
 "The herdsman Daphnis have I conquered; now fight *thou* with me."

Lead yet awhile, ye Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 O wolves, O jackals, O ye bears that sleep in mountain caves,
 Farewell! The herdsman Daphnis you shall never meet with more,
 Never in forest, glade or grove. Fare thee well, Arethusa,
 And all you streams that down the vale of Thymbris flow so fair.

Lead yet awhile, ye Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 I am that Daphnis, he who drove the kine to pasture here,
 Daphnis who led the bulls and calves to water at these springs.

Lead yet awhile, ye Muses, lead you the pastoral song.
 O Pan, Pan, whether thou art on the high hills of Lykaïos,
 Or whether o'er great Mainalos thou roamest, hither come
 To the Sicilian isle, and leave the tomb of Helike,
 And Lykaonides' lofty cairn, which even the Gods revere.

Break off, I pray, ye Muses, break off the pastoral song.
 Come, lord, and take this shapely pipe, fragrant with honeyed breath
 From the sweet wax that joins it, curved to fit the lip so well.
 As for me—down to Hades Love is haling me already.

Break off, I pray, ye Muses, break off the pastoral song.
 Bear violets henceforth, ye brambles, and ye thistles too,
 And upon boughs of juniper let fair narcissus bloom;
 Let all things be confounded; let the pine-tree put forth figs,
 Since Daphnis lies dying! Let the stag tear the hounds,

¹ Anchises and Adonis were both loved by Aphrodite.

² Diomedes, according to Homer (*Iliad* v, 330), fought with Aphrodite, and wounded her in the hand.

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And screech-owls from the hills contend in song with nightingales.’

Break off, I pray, ye Muses, break off the pastoral song.

These words he spoke, then said no more: and him would Aphrodite
 Fain have raised back to life; but no more thread for the Fates to spin
 Was left him: down to the stream¹ went Daphnis: eddying waves closed o’er
 The man loved by the Muses, whom every Nymph held dear.

Break off, I pray, ye Muses, break off the pastoral song.

And now give me the she-goat and the bowl, that I may milk her
 And pour forth to the Muses. O Muses, fare you well,
 And again farewell. Another day a sweeter song I’ll sing you.
 GOATHERD. Thyrsis, may your fair mouth for this be filled and filled again
 With honey and the honey-comb; and may you eat dried figs
 From Aigilos; for more lovely than the cricket’s is your song.
 See, here’s the bowl; and mark, my friend, how savourly it smells.
 In the well-spring of the Hours you might think it had been dipped.
 Come here, Kissaita!—She is yours to milk.—Beware, you kids;
 Skip not so wantonly, or you’ll have the he-goat after you.

¹ The stream of Death.

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IDYLL II

THE SORCERESS

Simaitha, forsaken by her lover, the young athlete Delphis, endeavours by various magic rites to draw him back to her house, invoking the Moon by her three names of Selene, Hekate and Artemis. Afterwards she tells the Goddess the tale of her love, and of her desertion by her lover, and finally vows to poison him, if her charms should fail.

It is uncertain whether the scene of this Idyll is the island of Kos, or of Rhodes, or some town on the Karian coast. The subject, and to some extent the form, are said by the Greek commentator, or Scholiast, to have been suggested to Theocritus by one of the lost prose mimes of Sophron, who however had given Simaitha's attendant, Thestylis, a share in the dialogue. Virgil's imitation in his eighth Eclogue is a frigid academic exercise, with none of the passion, the realism and the poetic beauty, which make this Idyll perhaps the greatest love-poem in the whole of classical and modern literature.

WHERE are those laurels? Bring them, Thestylis—and the love-charms too.
 Wreath the cauldron with a crimson fillet of fine wool;
 That I may cast a fire-spell on the unkind man I love,
 Who now for twelve whole days, the wretch, has never come this way,
 Nor even knows whether I be alive or dead, nor once
 Has he knocked at my doors, ah cruel! Can it be that Love
 And Aphrodite have borne off his roving heart elsewhere?
 To Timagētos' wrestling school tomorrow will I go,
 And find him and reproach him with the wrong he is doing me.
 But now by fire-magic will I bind him. Thou, O Moon,
 Shine fair; for to thee softly, dread Goddess, will I chant,
 And to infernal Hekate, at whom the very whelps
 Shudder, as she goes between the dead men's tombs and the dark blood.
 Hail, awful Hekate! and be thou my helper to the end,
 Making these charms prove no less potent than the spells of Circe,
 Or of Medea, or the gold-haired sorceress Perimede.

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 First in the fire barley grains must burn. Come, throw them on,
 Thestylis. Miserable girl, whither now are flown thy wits?
 Even to thee am I, vile wretch, become a thing to scorn?
 Cast them on, and say thus, 'the bones of Delphis I am casting.'

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 Delphis has wrought me anguish, so against Delphis do I burn

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This laurel shoot: and as it catches fire and crackles loud,
 And is burnt up so suddenly, we see not even the ash,
 So may the flesh of Delphis be wasted in the flames.

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 Even as now I melt this wax by the aid of Hekate,
 So speedily may Myndian Delphis melt away through love.
 And even as turns this brazen wheel by Aphrodite's power,
 So restlessly may he too turn and turn around my doors.

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 Now will I burn the bran. Yea thou, Artemis, thou hast power
 To move Hell's adamantine gates, and all else that is stubborn.
 Thestylis, hark, the dogs are baying now throughout the town:
 At the cross-roads is the Goddess. Quick, beat the brazen gong.

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 Behold, the sea is silent, and silent are the winds;
 But never silent is the anguish here within my breast,
 Since I am all on fire for him who has made me, unhappy me,
 Not a wife, but a worthless woman, a maiden now no more.

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 Thrice do I pour libation, Goddess, and thrice speak this prayer:
 Whether it be a woman lies beside him, or a man,
 Let such oblivion seize him, as on Dia¹ once, they tell,
 Seized Theseus, when he quite forgot the fair-tressed Ariadne.

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 Horse-madness is a herb that grows in Arcady, and maddens
 All the colts that range the hills, and the fleet-footed mares.
 Even so frenzied may I now see Delphis: to this house
 May he speed like a madman from the oily wrestling school.

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 This fringe from his mantle did Delphis lose, which now
 I pluck to shreds and cast it into the ravenous fire.
 Woe's me, remorseless Love, why clinging like a fen-born leech
 Hast thou sucked from my body the dark blood every drop?

O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.
 A lizard will I bray, and bring him a deadly draught tomorrow.
 But now, Thestylis, take these magic herbs, and secretly
 Smear them upon his upper lintel, while it is night still,
 Then spit, and say, 'It is the bones of Delphis that I smear.'

¹ Dia is another name for the island of Naxos, one of the Cyclades.

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O magic wheel, draw hither to my house the man I love.

Now that I am alone, whence am I to bewail my love?
Wherefrom begin my tale? Who was it brought this woe upon me?

Anaxo, daughter of Euboulos, bearing the mystic basket,
Passed this way in procession to the grove of Artemis,
Many a wild beast thronging round her, among them a lioness.

Bethink thee of my love and whence it came, O holy Moon.
So Theucharidas' Thracian nurse, who since has gone to bliss,
But then was living at our doors, besought and entreated me
To come and see the pageant; and I, poor luckless fool,
Went with her in a linen gown, a lovely trailing robe,
Over which I had thrown a cloak that Klearista lent me.

Bethink thee of my love and whence it came, O holy Moon.
And now, half way along the road, as we passed Lykon's house,
I saw Delphis and Eudamippos walking side by side.
Their beards were more golden than flower of helichryse,
And far more brightly shone their breasts than thou thyself, O Moon;
For from the wrestling school they came, fresh from their noble toil.

Bethink thee of my love and whence it came, O holy Moon.
O then I saw, and fell mad straight, and my whole heart was fired,
(Woe is me!) and my comely cheeks grew pale; nor did I heed
That pageant any longer. And how I came back home
I know not; but a parching fever seized me and consumed me,
So that I lay pining in bed for ten days and ten nights.

Bethink thee of my love and whence it came, O holy Moon.
And often pale as boxwood grew the colour of my flesh,
And the hairs kept falling from my head, till what was left of me
Was naught but skin and bones. To whom did I not now resort?
What old crone's house did I not visit, who was skilled in spells?
But that way remedy was none; and time fled swiftly by.

Bethink thee of my love and whence it came, O holy Moon.
So at last I told the whole truth to my serving-maid, and said:
'Go, Thestylis; find me some cure for my sore malady.
Wholly am I become (woe's me!) the Myndian's slave. But go,
Go now and lie in wait for him at the school of Timagētos;
For there it is he most resorts, there that he loves to lounge.

Bethink thee of my love and whence it came, O holy Moon.
And when you are sure no one is near, nod to him silently,