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Language Arts: The Hellenistic Technopaegnia as Art Historical Theory and Practice

This paper engages some important aesthetic issues raised in such recent publications as *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece* (Tanner, 2006) with a new approach that considers the Hellenistic technopaegnia. I explore these poems as a corpus that illuminates the ever-evolving Greek relationship between the literary and visual arts; that hints at ancient notions of “art” and “art history”; and that should itself be understood as a critical discourse on literary and visual culture. No scholars have yet treated these poems from this interdisciplinary perspective.

Hellenistic technopaegnia, or pattern poems, form the shape of a material object on the page, creating an image by varying the length of lines according to complex metrical patterns and, in some cases, also inverting the line order required to solve the riddles within. This poetic form first emerged in Greece in the early 3rd century BCE (although cf. Cameron 1995) and a corpus of six of these shaped poems survives: the *Wings*, *Axe*, and *Egg* by Simias of Rhodes (*AP* 15. 24, 22, 27), the Ps.-Theocritean *Syrinx* (*AP* 15. 21), and the *Altars* of Dosiadas and Besantinus (*AP* 15. 26, 25); all are marked by intricate allusions and innovative metrical schemes, and have mostly been labeled as trivial word games for an intellectual Hellenistic elite. This is not, however, a sufficient analysis of these poems.

Precisely because the technopaegnia consciously present themselves as both literary and visual product, at once poem and image, they preserve a moment of critically self-aware artistic innovation: their Hellenistic authors engaged with the archaic and classical history of inscribed objects and the epigrammatic poems that accompanied them. Exhibiting another dimension of literary and art critical awareness, these poems also respond to the increasing trend of composing literary epigrams for the page by cleverly reinstating the object, by means of its image, that authors including Posidippus and Callimachus had recently and cleverly replaced with poetic epigram alone. The poems consciously imitate, subvert, and criticize established literary and material traditions from the archaic, classical, and Hellenistic periods by creating an ingenious new literary sub-genre that problematizes notions of “art” and “literature”; the technopaegnia, I posit, are themselves ancient critical discourses on “art” and “art history.”

Indeed, the language of the technopaegnia emphatically reinforces their inventive form with repeated references to dramatized modes of viewing, e.g. the *Syrinx* opens with the command to the reader, *λεῦσσε με*, “gaze upon me,” and the *Altar* forces the reader to look upon the very altar that caused Philoctetes harm when it was the object of his gaze. So, too, the reader notes the emphasis on craftsmanship and the materiality of manufacture, e.g. *πᾶξεν, ἄγαλμα* (*Syrinx* 7, 8), *τεῦξ’, τεῦγμ’* (*Altar* 3, 9), used to describe the form and construction of the poems, and the material of their composition, *χάλκεος* (*Wings* 11). This ecphrastic language reminds the audience that these are not only poetic compositions to be read, but are also crafted, manufactured images meant to evoke three-dimensional objects and to be viewed from an aesthetic perspective: the reader is transformed into viewer. By challenging the traditional generic distinctions between word and image, and apparently declaring poetry the more powerful medium since its authors are now also image-makers, these poems ingeniously intersect the verbal and the visual in a moment worth further interdisciplinary study.