

<i>ACTA CLASSICA UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.</i>	<i>LV.</i>	<i>2019.</i>	<i>pp. 261–280.</i>
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SOME NOTES ON THE LITERATURE ON ANCIENT DIDACTIC POETRY*

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Abstract: The student of ancient didactic poetry has to face a complex web of modern findings and opinions about the genre. This paper attempts to present a few prominent studies from some specific points of view, such as the ways in which they describe the genre (with categorizations and sets of criteria) and in which they delineate ancient views on the genre. The levels of a historical approach and self-awareness in these studies are also examined.

Keywords: didactic poetry, definitions of the genre, ancient views on the genre, modern reception, historical approach, self-awareness

Introduction

The question of what is didactic poetry can simply be answered by saying that didactic poetry is some sort of knowledge that has been put in verse. If we have a closer look, however, at the literature dealing with classical didactic poetry, we do encounter a few problems which appear if one tries to give a good definition of didactic poetry. To see these problems better, first I sketch some prominent ideas that are characteristic in the modern discussion of the genre. I have chosen some specific points of view to examine these ideas and to compare them to each, so we are able to gain a complex and detailed picture about the general approach to ancient (Latin and Greek) didactic poems. These points are the followings. I examine (1) the way these scholars attempt to define the genre. Are we presented with a short definition or rather with a categorization (and, consequently, with a canonical list) of the genre? Are there one or more features highlighted as essential or determinative ones?

The next question is (2) whether we encounter in these studies any reference to ancient views on didactic poetry. If so, what does the literature focuses on? Do they employ a historical approach (3)? Do we find a comparison between ancient and modern reception of the genre and, indeed, an awareness of the differences (and similarities) of them (4)? In the answers to these questions I also touch upon whether a study deals with didactic (and, in general, authorial) intent, and if so, what does it teach about it.

After Bernd Effe's seminal treatise on ancient didactic poetry, A. Dalzell and P. Toohey have dealt profoundly with the Latin and Greek manifestations of the genre. K. Volk's special topic is Latin didactic but her notes on didactic poetry on the whole are proved to be valuable. Focusing on the Callimachean effect on the history of ancient didactic poetry, A. Harder emphasizes that the topic conveys a short but clear overview of the genre's development. D. Sider's paper shows a similar historical approach, arguing that the well-defined genre came to exist only in Hellenistic times. These scholars' ideas, definitions and opinions are to be examined in the next chapters along with some studies that were written on a specific author or era but which add some extra points to the question.¹

I. Attempts to define the genre

a) Short definitions

While many scholars admit the difficulty of defining the genre of (ancient) didactic poetry, and, therefore, they try to avoid giving an exact definition,² we do find short definitions, for the sake of clarity. Dalzell and Toohey both give simple definitions, and they both focus on the verse form and the *systematic* treatment of the subject matter.³ Harder emphasizes the topic always embraces an abstract knowledge, contrary to the narrative nature of epic.⁴

In different levels, the concept of changing genre often appears in the definitions, as many scholars hint at the obvious development of the genre and to the important role of a tradition evolving through every new poem. This concept, not surprisingly, gets more attention in the studies of Harder, Sider and Overduin, who all deal with Hellenistic didactic poetry. The essence of the genre, however, is captured differently by them. Harder claims that didactic poetry is what its audience perceives to be so, thus, it follows the changing literary demands. Ar-

A part of this paper, with more focus on Nicander's poems, was presented at the conference 'Sapiens Ubique Civis V', held in Szeged, 30 August–1 September 2017.

¹ For a great part, these studies (so Harder, Magnelli, Papadopoulou and Overduin) are concerned with Hellenistic literature and, in particular, with Nicander of Colophon, since I have originally come across the questions presented below when I was dealing with Nicander's modern reception.

² Toohey 1996, 250; Sider 2014, 13; Overduin 2015, 12.

³ Dalzell 1996, 8; Toohey 1996, 2. Toohey (1996, 5-8), in addition, considers it as a subgenre to epic. This idea is not accepted in modern scholarship elsewhere, although it is similar to the ancient notion on didactic poetry that it is epic, according to its metre (see below). Volk (35) explicitly refuses the consideration of didactic poetry as subgenre.

⁴ Harder (2007) refers to the Aristotelian idea of mimetic and non-mimetic literature, which, in her analysis seems to be equal to narrative and non-narrative literature.

guing that didactic poetry is a Hellenistic genre, Siders asserts that it is the verification of prosaic works. Overduin, likewise, considers it as a ‘union of two ostensible opposites’, Hesiodic form and prosaic topic.⁵

b) Categorization

One may conclude these definitions that, from different angles, different characteristics of the genre are regarded as the most important ones. Since a didactic poem can theoretically offer any kind of knowledge in any type of verse form, it is difficult to define a narrower sense of the genre on the basis of either the topic or the form. One solution is some kind of categorization that is able to show the differences and the similarities between the various didactic poems.

A chronological approach is found in Toohey, who divides the development of ancient didactic poetry to six phases. The different categories correspond to the different functions of didactic poetry in different eras. To this analysis, thus, the concept of changing genre is inherent.⁶ We see another categorization in Dalzell, who distinguishes philosophical and technical poems, which may parallel the late ancient types of theoretical and practical works.⁷ For the first sight, Harder’s categories seem also identical to these, as she speaks about instructive and informative didactic, but she adds that she does not include philosophical poems.⁸ In Harder’s view both types derive from the works of Hesiod, but Callimachus was the first who mixed them in his *Aetia*.⁹ Albeit this division seems a little bit artificial for describing didactic poems,¹⁰ it has a common point with the categorizations that are based on the evaluation of didactic intention, of the seriousness of the poems or of their different functions. The classic example for the first is Effe’s categorization, where he divides three types of didactic poetry, according to the connection between the appointed topic and the offered knowledge. When the two are identical, i. e. the author’s intent is indeed instruction, we talk about ‘real’ didactic poetry. If, however, the poet aims rather at displaying his poetic talent or at conveying an extra message through the medium of didactic, than we are facing a ‘formal’ or ‘transparent’ type. Dalzell, likewise,

⁵ Harder 24–5; Sider 2014, 23; Overduin 2015, 6 and 27.

⁶ Toohey 1996, 7–13 (the introduction of the six phases).

⁷ Dalzell, 1996, 10–11.

⁸ Harder 2007, 26–7.

⁹ Harder 2007, 29 and 44.

¹⁰ This is shown by Harder’s repeated note (2007, 28, 37) that the two categories were often treated as one in antiquity. As to the terms of ‘instructive’ and ‘informative’, see Toohey’s earlier notion (9): ‘It is the implied presence of the student, our addressee, which turns the merely informative into the instructive.’

talks about serious and parodic didactic poems, while Gibson adds the notion of various functions of different poems.¹¹

c) Criteria

Adopting the idea that didactic poetry is what the audience considers to be so, in the studies on ancient didactic poetry we are offered with certain characteristics that make the readers perceive the works as didactic poems. While some scholars are contented with listing some typical features, others put more accent on the importance of one or two of these features, and in some studies we encounter a systematic set of criteria. These sets of criteria are meant to be applied with various strictness. Dalzell, for example, intends only to point out some common characteristics.¹² Toohey, though he repeats his list of six attributes more times, allows that three or four of these attributes are already enough for a poem to be a part of the genre. Volk, on the contrary, adheres to her four criteria, selecting a canonical list of didactic poems according to them.¹³ Albeit Overduin shows an awareness of the problem of introducing criteria (since they are not without exceptions), he finally defines seven of them.¹⁴ In the followings, these appointed features and criteria will be outlined, with a focus on the question whether they are explained by the adhesion to a didactic tradition or rather by the didactic function itself.

To begin with the more tangible characteristics of didactic poetry, we experience that formal restraints, besides the evidence that a didactic poem has to be in verse form, are rarely determined in the literature. Dactylic hexameter as the traditional metre of didactic verse is underlined by Toohey and Overduin.¹⁵ Toohey adds that this metre is the most flexible and suitable one for conveying information in verse, thus, he gives a functional reason for this particular form. Length is marked again by Toohey, as he argues that didactic poems traditionally have a

¹¹ Dalzell 1996, 34. Gibson (1997, 68) only mentions this aspect without explaining it. He does, however, offer a somewhat arbitrary categorization as he divides the three types which (1) offer an interesting or important knowledge, (2) instruct on some specific information, and (3) deal with principles and conviction. It should be noted that Toohey's chronological division embraces a categorization based on different functions, too.

¹² Dalzell 1996, 22-3; Toohey 1996, 2-4 and 247.

¹³ She was often criticised because of her rigorousness, as she excluded e. g. Parmenides. On the other end of the scale of strictness we may put Harder's approach, since she finds the presence of a certain 'didactic mode' alone sufficient to the genre.

¹⁴ Overduin 14-5.

¹⁵ Toohey 1996, 3; Overduin 2015, 15-6.

length of approximately 800 lines.¹⁶ This thesis has not been taken over by others, presumably because this size can be explained by the physical length of a papyrus scroll rather than by tradition.¹⁷

The systematic presentation of the information is, as we have seen, a part of the definitions given by Dalzell and Toohey. Dalzell refers to the structure of didactic poems as Hesiodic, i. e. traditional, but he is not clear on how this structure should be described.¹⁸ The catalogue format is often underlined and certainly belongs to the realm of structure. Overduin considers the application of lists as a sign of fitting into didactic tradition. Similarly, one of Harder's arguments for including the *Aetia* in the line of didactic poems is that Callimachus uses catalogue format.¹⁹ Moreover, she explains the usage of lists by, besides the custom, functional reasons acknowledged by the Hellenistic poet.²⁰ Hutchinson's assertion that didactic poetry and didactic prose stand closer to each than we may think is based on certain similarities between them. That both forms apply lists²¹ shows that the use of catalogues comes from the didactic function, too.

The criterion of the insertion of narrative elements or *excursi* falls again under the issue of structure. These *excursi* seem to combine functional and traditional qualities, too, as on the one hand they are exploited as devices to break away from the basic (i. e. didactic,²² rational, serious or dry) world of the poem,²³ and on the other hand, they appear as traditional elements, if not only through their presence, through their connection to myth, surely.²⁴

The formal characteristics listed so far are often explained by the demand to fit into literary traditions, the utmost traditional feature, however, is the typical diction that is labelled as epic or Homeric.²⁵ It is not in question that Homeric diction obviously signs, especially from Hellenism, the adherence to the tradition of Hesiodic didactic.

Other characteristics are considered rather as merely functional yet common particularities. Among these, the first is the general notion of an instructional

¹⁶ Toohey 1996, 3-4 and 23.

¹⁷ See Magnelli's (2010, 218) similar reasoning for the length of Nicander's poems.

¹⁸ Dalzell 1996, 22.

¹⁹ Overduin 2015, 31; Harder 2007, 31-2.

²⁰ Harder 2007, 35.

²¹ Hutchinson 2009, 199.

²² They are applied both in didactic verse and didactic prose, see Hutchinson 2009, 203-4.

²³ Dalzell 1996, 22-3; Toohey (1996, 27): he regards them as interesting or emotional additions.

²⁴ So Toohey 1996, 3. Dalzell (1996, 22-3) talks about the traditional topics of the *excursi* in a slightly different way, listing theodicy, the praise for civilization or the homeland, or, eventually, for rural life as typical subject matters.

²⁵ See Wright (1997, 5 and 6-18) on Parmenides and Empedocles using Homeric 'vocabulary, phrasing and imaginary', and, moreover, Homeric *topoi*.

tone, i. e. a discernible pursuit of making the impression on the audience that a didactic intent is present in the poem. Some experts find that this impression is produced by the poem's didactic mode or didactic attitude,²⁶ but Volk, for instance, argues against this view, when she excludes such works, which are written in a didactic mode but lack other criteria, as Parmenides' poem, Horace's *Ars poetica* or Ovid's *Fasti*.²⁷ She, along with others, identifies the means which procures the sense of 'didactic' with the teacher-student constellation, with the focus either on the usage of an instructional voice (the teacher's person) or on the constant presence of an addressee (student).²⁸ The latter can be found in Dalzell who asserts that even if the addressee's identification is not clear – since, as he says, the appointed audience is not always the same as to whom the poem seemingly speaks – its presence is still crucial.²⁹ As to the teacher's person, Toohey emphasizes that the success³⁰ of a didactic poem is dependent on the author's strong, first person singular voice. The speaker's manifestation as an authoritative³¹ expert or teacher is supposedly inherent to Dalzell's notion on the traditional sense of mission attributed to didactic poetry, and to Volk's criterion of poetic self-consciousness, though the latter is rather connected to the display of poetic talent than of expertise.³²

Finally, the impression of instruction is strengthened by the didactic intent that is expressed explicitly, so it is one of Volk's four criteria, taken over again by Overduin. Volk does not go into an explanation, but Overduin lists here the usage of the first singular personal pronoun, the repeated addresses, a systematic structure and the stress laid on the poet's own expertise as devices to express

²⁶ Harder 2007, 29; Overduin 2015, 12.

²⁷ Volk 2002, 42-3.

²⁸ This is another reason to Harder (2007, 37-8) for accepting the *Aetia* as didactic poem, seeing this feature to be traditional.

²⁹ Dalzell 1996, 26-7. Overduin (2015, 16) is more indulgent in this question: he utters that the address can be left out, if it is at least clear that what kind of group would benefit from the presented information.

³⁰ Toohey's interesting observations (1996, 13-8) on what makes didactic poetry successful, give an extra angle to the question, although it is not clear whether he talks about the success of the poems in their own era or in later, even modern times.

³¹ See Harder 2007, 37, where the 'didactic plot' (with reference to Flower) is seen as the basis of the narrator's authority.

³² Dalzell 1996, 22; Volk 2002, 40.

didactic intent.³³ As to the evaluation of this expressed didactic intent, the concept of its veneer often appears in the analyses,³⁴ and this concept leads us to the next characteristic which is ‘fiction’, ‘play’ (with reliability or with tradition), ‘innovativeness’, ‘elasticity’ (regarding topics, genres and aims) or ‘complexity’ (of subject matters or intents) inherent to didactic poetry.³⁵

While this latter feature is hard to capture in one sentence, hence it gets more attention and pages from scholars, the final advised characteristic, which is a circle of certain subject matters, is rarely appointed in the literature. It is hard to narrow what kind of subject matter makes a poem didactic, Overduin, however, takes this point of view in his system. He points out that ‘most topics derive from distinct disciplines or branches of learning’.³⁶ Hutchinson, arguing for the similarity of didactic prose and didactic poetry, lists some typical topics treated in both format. Sider’s assertion that didactic poems are based always on prosaic precedents is not surprising, since he regards didactic poetry as a genre that was actually (re)invented in Hellenism.³⁷

II. Ancient views on didactic poetry

To understand the old popularity of the genre or simply to make the interpretation of a certain didactic poem easier, classicists often resort to the aid of contemporary (ancient) views on didactic poetry. While we often find the references to the same author or to the same concept, our focus concerns the various ways in which scholars explain these concepts. What do they highlight in ancient theories or practices? The question bears more importance when the ancient approaches already show contradictions.

³³ Volk 2002, 36; Overduin 2015, 19. The first two, however, were already treated as the means of didactic setting, and the clear structure formed again another criterion. One gets the impression then that Overduin’s set of criteria is slightly overcrowded.

³⁴ Effe’s categorization is based on the different qualities of didactic intent. See furthermore Toohey’s note (1996, 7): ‘These writers aim at different levels of ‘profundity’. Hesiod is ‘deep’, Aratus can be playful, Ovid is parodic.’ On Nicander’s didactic fiction see Magnelli 2010, 222.

³⁵ Play with reliability: Harder 2007, 12; with tradition: Toohey 1996, 18; innovation: Sider 2014, 26; elasticity: Toohey 1996, 6-7; complexity: Dalzell 1996, 30. To my sense, these properties, even if are not meant to be quite the same, share the point of the challenge that ancient didactic poetry offers to its audience, i. e. it is ‘so intellectually demanding’ (Toohey 1996, 251).

³⁶ Overduin 2015, 17. His addition, however, that this feature means ‘the criterion of the single topic, treated extensively and integrally...’ (17-18) reveals that he includes in the criterion of subject matter a systematic structure, too, mixing again the different criteria of his system. See, moreover, the notes on Hellenistic didactic poems which are not complete in their treatment, motivating the reader for further research, e. g. Harder 2007, 39 (on Callimachus), and Semanoff 2006, 312 (on Aratus).

³⁷ Hutchinson 2009, 199-208; Sider 2014, 23.

a) Definitions, tradition

What is commonly ascertained is that although we do not possess an exact definition from antiquity,³⁸ a certain tradition and the pursuit to join this tradition can be sensed throughout ancient didactic poems.³⁹ Volk states that genres were established in antiquity according either to their metre, to their typical topics, or to a certain tradition. Didactic poetry fits to the latter category the best, illustrating well the notion of ‘common sense’ genre.⁴⁰ Sider, furthermore, notes that the concept of didactic poetry might have changed by time, as the ‘early generous view’ regarded a wider range of poetry as being didactic.⁴¹ He argues that a narrower sense of the genre was being formed in Hellenistic literature, and that this concept was projected then to earlier poems. Others also stress that, if not the genre itself, the theoretical attempts to define the genre appeared quite late in antiquity.⁴²

b) Theories (Aristotle and others)

There were ideas, however, that were present in the antiquity from early times, namely the two parallel, sometimes seemingly contradictory views⁴³ on poetry that (1) all poetry is didactic⁴⁴ and that (2) poetry is fiction and it aims primarily at entertaining. The two notions can be reconciled if we take a diachronic aspect in the analysis, as the most of the scholars – with or without explicit awareness of it – does. Dalzell, besides others, claims that the focus on entertainment is strong particular in Hellenistic literature,⁴⁵ and Kahn contrasts this function of poetry with that of the prose⁴⁶ (so, this contrast can be sensed only after prosaic literature became widespread). Thus, it seems that a change of the concept of

³⁸ There is neither a term for it, only from late Hellenism. Volk 2002, 31-8; Sider 2014, 18.

³⁹ See e. g. Dalzell 1996, 19-21. Sider (2014, 13) adds that only a shared view on the Hesiodic tradition and its characteristics made it possible for Hellenistic poets to mix these characteristics with other genres’. See also Overduin 2015, 13: ‘The insecure status of didactic poetry seems, however, to be a technical question, dealing with semantics, not tradition.’

⁴⁰ Volk 2002, 27.

⁴¹ Sider 2014, 20. See also Overduin 2014, 12.

⁴² See Toohey (1996, 5) on early Roman Empire concepts, and Volk (2002, 31-34) on late Hellenistic theories.

⁴³ Dalzell 12.

⁴⁴ Volk 2002, 36; ‘Didactic’ includes moral or ethical education as well as technical information (See e. g. Sider 2014, 18). Cf. the ancient criticism of didactic poetry on a moral basis (Dalzell 1996, 12 and 22). Overduin (2015, 13) adds a different point of view, pointing out that all literature is didactic in the sense that it has an author, a subject matter and an aimed audience.

⁴⁵ Dalzell 1996, 28-29.

⁴⁶ Kahn 2003, 143-4.

poetry had occurred in the classical period. Although poetry was seen earlier as a universal didactic means, since an informative (or technical) kind of poetry actually came to exist, it was not considered to be poetry anymore (as neither the thitherto didactic poetry of Homer was regarded as didactic anymore).⁴⁷ This notion, however, is often connected to Aristotle and emphasized as being theoretical *versus* contemporary practice.⁴⁸

Aristotle's name and his special view on poetry as mimetic appear often as a common reference point in the studies on didactic poetry, since, according to the philosopher, poetry is not determined solely by its very format of verse. 'Mimetic' is explained variously as fictional, creative, narrative, dealing with personal emotions, with life stories of special characters, or based on direct discourse.⁴⁹ When a work is not mimetic in such ways, may its metre or diction appear to be poetic, it is not to be considered as poetry, claims Aristotle. Hence, Aristotle sets himself against the practical division of literature which ranks literary works in the same categories according to their similar metre and which sees didactic poetry as a part of epic.⁵⁰ Didactic poetry lacks a narrative mode and such characters whose adventures would serve the main line of the poems. Furthermore, it aims at conveying information about an abstract knowledge, about reality, thus, fiction gains not much role in this type of literature.⁵¹ According to Aristotle's system, therefore, it is not part of poetry, as it only shares formal characteristics with true (i. e. mimetic) poetry and with epic.

This is the reason behind the often quoted Aristotelian assertion (*Po.* 1447b11-18) that Empedocles' work is not like Homer's, since their only common feature is their metre. This statement is not a negative evaluation of Empedocles' poetry,⁵² but simply the exclusion of Empedocles' didactic work from the realm of poetry.⁵³ This very concept of poetry, where the contents of didactic is evaluated as non-poetic, is frequently interpreted so that the content and form of

⁴⁷ See Sider 2014, 19-22.

⁴⁸ Volk (2002, 28-9) gives a further example to illustrate that literary theories differed from practice: the Platonic-Aristotelian division of literature according to its narrative aspects, though serve a basis for the modern epic-lyric-dramatic categories, does not mirror a widespread view in antiquity.

⁴⁹ Fiction, emotions: Dalzell 1996, 12-8; narrative, fiction, direct discourse: Harder 2007, 33 (with note 25); characters: Harder 2007, 26.

⁵⁰ See Toohey 1996, 5-7 and note 3 above.

⁵¹ Fiction comes up in a different relation with didactic poetry, connected rather to the setting than to the contents.

⁵² As it was (Dalzell 1996, 9) and could be easily interpreted so, since every ancient poets strove for being similar to Homer, thus, expressing differences could have been meant as a depreciation of the given poem.

⁵³ Volk 2002, 30; Osborne 1997, 28; Harder 2007, 26 (with note 12). Aristotle is said to praise, elsewhere, Empedocles for his fine diction and style. See Wright 1997, 3.

didactic poetry are in contrast, and therefore, it is paralleled to modern views on the genre.⁵⁴

c) Arguments for the verse form of didactic

There had been expressed opinions, however, which underline the useful character and, thus, the functional legitimacy of the verse format of didactic works. Wright pays attention to Parmenides' and Empedocles' choice⁵⁵ of poetic form, his arguments, however, for the function of poetry might be, with caution, generalized and adopted to later didactic poems. The preservation of the knowledge is one point of view which strengthens the status of didactic poetry, since the compactness of verse form allows less possibility to corrupt the information conveyed.⁵⁶ The mnemotechnic function of verse is an obvious point and, thus, it is frequently referred to.⁵⁷

Other functions belong rather to the pursuit of persuasiveness or effectiveness. In the case of pre-Socratic poets, poetry seems to be more natural and familiar to the audience. Albeit this is not quite true from Classical times, the familiarity with or popularity of Homeric hexameter and style, especially in Hellenistic circles of educated audience, cannot be denied. A higher style inherent to poetry is another positive and effective feature which facilitates the transmission of the abstract information.⁵⁸ Finally, poetic diction is, in some cases, considered as a means to achieve credibility and genuineness,⁵⁹ which is quite surprising in the light of the general modern distrust in the reliability of didactic poetry.

To summarize the section on ancient views on didactic poetry (and their presentation by modern scholars), I would like to draw two conclusions. First, it seems hard to define the connection between didactic poetry and epic, since the tradition of the former appears to insist on adopting not only dactylic hexameter but Homeric diction and style, too. The Aristotelian notion on mimetic/ narrative

⁵⁴ On this comparison see more below.

⁵⁵ Wright 1997, 5-6. Osborne (1997, 23-4) refuses that it was a choice in the case of pre-Socratic authors, claiming that this form was natural to them and inherent to any literary message in the era. (She refuses even the application of the term of didactic poetry, arguing that the division of form and contents is implicitly the part of it.)

⁵⁶ Wright 1997, 5-6. See also Hutchinson 2009, 209-10 and Hatzimichali 2009, 28 on Galen's recommendation (*De Ant.* XIV 89K) of poetic form for technical and, especially, medical contents, with the same reasoning (and because verse is more secure and easier to memorize).

⁵⁷ Wright 1997, 6; Hutchinson 2009, 209-10; Papadopoulou 2009, 96, note 3. See Overduin 2015, 26 against this view, in the case of Nicander.

⁵⁸ Wright 1997, 6. See also Knoefel, Covi 1991, 51-2.

⁵⁹ Hutchinson 2009, 197, with the example of Aratus and Hipparchus.

and non-mimetic/ non-narrative literature, however, markedly distinguishes didactic poetry from epic.⁶⁰ The hesitation in determining the relation between the two types of poetry may be sensed in the different explanations of the insertion of narrative panels in didactic poems. While we hold, following Aristotle, that didactic poetry is non-narrative, the application of narrative, and particularly mythological, *excursi* seem to be ‘almost an ontological part of didactic.’⁶¹ The reasons behind the usage of these panels deserve, in my opinion, more attention and systematic analyses.

Secondly, as one could see, the ancient approaches to didactic poetry are quite complex, uniting several layers of, on the one hand, tradition and practice, which, in addition, show certain changes by time (thus a historical approach is needed; see the next section of this paper), and on the other hand, of various theories (or, rather, various interpretation of these theories). The latter determine the way in which we compare ancient and modern opinions and the ability to precisely see the similarities as well as the differences between them. The attempt to connect our views to ancient ones, indicating even a sort of continuity, is understandably desirable, but it goes hand in hand with the risk that certain subtle differences remain unnoticed. One example for this is the following one.

As I have mentioned, the Aristotelian mimesis-based concept of poetry is compared in many studies with that of the modern readers, in the respect that both find didactic contents and poetic form irreconcilable.⁶² Indeed, those who write about ancient didactic poetry often begin with a somewhat apologetic manner, since the works belonging to this genre are usually judged by their modern audience as hybrid and odd creations.⁶³ Dalzell convincingly explains that this attitude is due to the concept of poetry that we inherited from Romanticism, where poetry is a vehicle to convey personal feelings particularly. Its common point with Aristotle’s system is that it finds learning inappropriate to poetry in a narrow sense. Drawing the conclusion, however, that Aristotle has already seen didactic contents and verse as opposites,⁶⁴ is not necessarily ascertained. In Aristotle’s view, poetic form is *not sufficient* for poetry but it is *not in contrast with*

⁶⁰ Harder (2007, 33) claims that Hesiod already consciously set himself against Homeric narrative epic. On this issue, see also Overduin 2015, 14.

⁶¹ Toohey 1996, 3. See also Knoefel, Covi 1991, 51, with reference to Plutarch, and Overduin (2015, 25) who says that these mythological parts sign both the didactic poems’ closeness to and the detachment from epic.

⁶² Dalzell 1996, 12-8: Aristotle and Romanticism; Volk 2002, 1-2: ‘contradiction in terms’; Papadopoulou 2009, 96, note 3.

⁶³ See Volk’s introduction to her monograph (2002, iii): ‘the student of this genre is not infrequently faced with miscomprehension on the part of classicists and non-classicists alike (‘Didactic poetry? Sounds awful!’).’

⁶⁴ See Papadopoulou 2009, 96, note 3.

an informative subject matter. He excludes didactic poetry from the category of poetry but it does not mean that he looks at didactic poetry as at an incongruous form of literature. The main point of difference, therefore, is that while Aristotle is not concerned with the poetic nature of didactic poems, modern classicists do examine these works with a primarily literary, moreover, a poetic approach. From this angle, and with the Romantic ideas of poetry in mind, the notion on the contrasting character of form and contents is quite different from that of Aristotle. The various levels of awareness of similarities and subtle differences between ancient and modern views will be discussed later on.

III. Historical approaches

In this section, I discuss the appearance of a historical approach in modern studies in ancient didactic poetry. I examine if there are signs of awareness of the changes of the genre, and if so, whether we encounter attempts to give reasons for these changes.

We may begin with the note that even in the studies where historicism is not an explicit demand, attention is paid to the existence of a generic tradition that was formed and constructed by the ever new-written didactic poems. Kahn, for instance, considers archaic (now lost) poetic handbooks as precedents which played a role in the establishment of the genre.⁶⁵ The definition of the genre is admittedly problematic, as we have seen, because of the very fact that its rules and characteristics had alternated by time.⁶⁶

The basic remark on the change is that later poems are different from earlier ones, and the reason for this is commonly seen in the growth of literacy, the appearance of prosaic works, and, in connection with this, in the changing function of verse. This picture is refined when the analysis suggests an approximate time for the literary-aesthetical changes and goes into the details to determine the nature of them.

The comparison between Hesiodic (Archaic) and later didactic poems evidently presents itself.⁶⁷ Some underline the innovative character of the pre-Socratic works, while others draw a line after them, when prosaic treatises had gained popularity.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Kahn 2003, 148-9.

⁶⁶ Toohey, 1996, 250-1; Harder 2007, 26; Overduin 2015, 25.

⁶⁷ See Dalzell 1996, 22 on both the similarities and differences, and Sider 2014, 26-7.

⁶⁸ Osborne 1997, 30. According to Toohey (1996, 8), pre-Socratic didactic poems serve the transition (not only chronologically but functionally, too) between the 'oral phase' and Hellenistic didactic poetry. Kahn (2003, 143) explains the early appearance of didactic prose (e. g. Pherecydes' work) by the pursuit to break away from Hesiodic tradition.

The most attention in this respect, however, is paid to Hellenistic aesthetics, not surprisingly, either because no didactic poem has remained to us from the Classical period or because the boom of literacy made the greatest effect on the (literary) aesthetics of Hellenism, making it basically prosaic⁶⁹ and book-centred, while the entertaining quality of writing and reading became more appreciated. It is a common opinion that since prosaic handbooks and treatises spread, the use of a poetical form for conveying technical contents indicates a conscious choice (it is not the natural way anymore) that is driven by an extra pursuit of the author. He aims either at entertainment caused by the formal ornaments of the text (diction, literary devices and so on) or at a certain message given in addition to the primary contents. In Effe's categorization, the first is the 'formal', the latter is the 'transparent' type of didactic poetry.⁷⁰ When this extra aim is perceived by the audience as more important than the one that is expressed on the surface, then the notions of 'superficial', 'fake', 'fictional', or 'pseudo' appear. Volk's criterion of 'poetic simultaneity', i. e. the impression raised in the audience that the poem is being sung (or the lesson is being given) while he keeps reading the instructions, is achieved by the sense of orality and by the fictive didactic setting. This structure mirrored a didactic reality in Archaic poems, but later it turned into tradition and literary play.⁷¹ Harder claims that the application of *catalogi* in the *Aetia* serves not the original function (i. e. to facilitate both the delivery and the perception of the information) but supports literary aims.⁷²

Since these formal devices are proven to be fictitious, it is not surprising that classicists take one step further and assume that the didactic intent of Hellenistic authors is on the whole a pretence,⁷³ opposed to the genuine didactic aims of earlier didactic poets.⁷⁴ These notions are widely accepted in the literature, explaining the characteristics of Hellenistic and later didactic poems by literary changes. There have been achieved, moreover, other, more profound analyses of the generic changes, expressly claiming a historical aspect.

⁶⁹ Cf. the assertion that every didactic poem is based on prosaic sources. The prosaic basis of didactic poetry is taken strictly in different levels. Some only point out that the knowledge that is conveyed in Hellenistic didactic poems derives usually from the bookish education of the authors rather than from their live experience, while others claim that the poems are adaptations or even translations of certain prosaic works. See Dalzell 1996, 8; Toohey 1996, 76, 96 and 242; Sider 2014, 23.

⁷⁰ See Harder 2007, 30.

⁷¹ Volk 2002, 13-20.

⁷² Harder 2007, 35. Toohey (1996, 49-50) although discerns likewise that the lists were applied for literary reasons, he stresses that these lists are typical of Hellenistic literature, not taking the precedents of catalogue-literature into consideration. See Overduin 2015, 29-31.

⁷³ See only Overduin's criterion of '(pseudo)-instruction' (2014, 18).

⁷⁴ See Toohey 1996, 2-3.

Toohy, asserting that 'the changing status within a society of didactic epic can tell us quite a lot about its leisure habits and the overall function of literacy and reading within the society,'⁷⁵ explicitly votes for a historical approach. After a discussion on the above presented features of Hellenistic literature in a considerable length, he, at the end of his book, expounds his thesis and assigns the six different phases of didactic poetry he had set to the changing function and nature of leisure as well as to the changing evaluation of free time. His approach is worth to consider, although his final categorization is similar to that of Effe's which was criticised later precisely because of it lacks the diachronic aspect.⁷⁶

Harder's study on didactic poetry, with a particular attention paid to the Callimachean *Aetia*, is a par excellence historical analysis, as she introduces her statements with the following sentence. 'Factors that may influence these changes in genre are the social, economic or cultural developments of a community [...].'⁷⁷ Adopting the idea that didactic poems bear an extra political, ideological or moral message below their surface, she discerns the different functions of Hesiod's works and the *Aetia*. While the Archaic poems, with their religious, moral and practical information, are to be concerned as an answer to important questions of the society in which Hesiod lived, the *Aetia* conveys a certain attitude towards political and ideological issues (namely, it strengthens Ptolemaic ideology and the self-esteem of the Alexandrian Greek).⁷⁸ In this way both authors' poems fit into their social background.⁷⁹

Instead of a case study similar to that of Harder's, Sider offers again an overview of the history of didactic poetry throughout antiquity. After he sets himself against those analyses which lack historicism,⁸⁰ he argues that the approximately well-defined genre had been shaped only in Hellenism. Hence, when he gives his

⁷⁵ Toohy 1996, 7.

⁷⁶ Toohy's (1996, 248) second category is obviously parallel with Effe's 'formal' type, while the other two could be called 'transparent'. This categorization is confusing after the introduced historical approach, because Toohy links various authors from different times to the same categories, so the socio-cultural background seemingly plays a less prominent part.

⁷⁷ Harder 2007, 24-25.

⁷⁸ Harder 2007, 42-3. She points out, for instance, that the structure suggests a hidden ideological background. See Zanker's monography (1987) on the realism in Alexandrian poetry, where he argues that the realistic manner is likewise due to the poets' aim at affirming the Alexandrian Greek population's self-identity.

⁷⁹ Harder (2007, 44) explains by the same argument that Callimachus writes in elegiac *disticha*.

⁸⁰ Sider 2014, 15-7, namely contra Effe and Volk. He mentions only Toohy, but not Harder, as his forerunner.

diachronic scheme of the genre's history, he divides it to the era before Hellenism, the Hellenistic period, and finally, what became after Hellenism.⁸¹ His scheme, however, though he expresses the need for the historical approach, lacks a deeper explanation of the changes, therefore, it remains still somewhat circular.

These studies enrich the understanding of ancient didactic poetry, with their demand for searching for the reasons of its characteristics in the poems' socio-cultural background. This kind of historical research is needed especially in the interpretation of particular didactic poems, similarly to Harder's case study, since such case studies can reveal more details than an overview in broad lines of the development of the genre which is necessarily less sensitive to specifics.⁸²

IV. Awareness of the modern reception of didactic poetry

With the extension of the aspect of historicism to a wider context, in this section I examine the differences between the ancient and modern reception of didactic poetry. The first question is whether references to modern views appear in the literature. The other issue is the self-aware character of the studies and the levels of consciousness with which the experts on didactic poetry treat their own opinions about the genre.

The notion of the modern confusion and distrust towards the phenomenon of didactic poetry is now a cliché,⁸³ sometimes compared with, while other times rather contrasted with ancient views.⁸⁴ Apart from the note that this kind of reception is based on the sense of inconsistency between didactic contents and poetic form, some scholars put more effort in the explanation of this fact. Dalzell points out that in our concept of poetry that is coming from Romantic ideas an abstract, didactic issue is inconceivable to serve the topic for poetry.⁸⁵ Toohey finds, furthermore, that the modern dislike is due to the absence of narrative that

⁸¹ Sider 2014, 24-9. It is not quite clear, however, what differences he senses between the latter two periods (except for, perhaps, their language), especially because he describes both periods' didactic poems as 'translations' (the former: from prose to verse, the latter from Greek to Latin).

⁸² In Overduin's treatment on Nicander's *Theriaca*, although the scholar refers to the historical approach, the characteristics of the poem are not explained by a social or ideological background (apart from the narrower literary arguments). Thus, Overduin implicitly accepts that Nicander's poem is, in Effe's words, 'formal' only.

⁸³ See e. g. Dalzell 1996, 9 on such opinions, and Volk 2002 on the scepticism.

⁸⁴ Toohey 1996, 1: 'Ancient popularity has been no guarantor of modern preference.' See also Hutchinson 2009, 197-8; Overduin 2015, 12. Many scholars add some examples of modern didactic poems to prove that the genre is not that unacceptable even today. See e. g. Papadopoulou 2009, 96, note 3.

⁸⁵ In Papadopoulou's words (2009, 96, note 3), it is a contrast also between the utilitarian character of learning and the freedom of the artist.

is the basis of popular literature.⁸⁶ The other reason, argues Toohey, is the change of reading habits, from loud to silent. Silent reading does not reveal such nuances that could be sensed by reading aloud. The scholar admits, moreover, that ancient didactic poems were written presumably with the aim at suiting an aesthetics different from ours.⁸⁷

This general distrust or the feeling of ‘something is not right with this poem’ leads, in my opinion more often than it could be proven, to the conclusion that the author of such a work cannot be serious in one or other ways. This is clearly shown by the various explanations of the usage of poetic form. Although prose is underrated to poetry as the latter offers more opportunity either for the display of the poet’s talents or for the transmission of hidden messages,⁸⁸ verse is still often ranked under prose in the case of didactic poetry, as it is considered to be superfluous and unpractical to convey technical contents. Since this view not necessarily corresponds with ancient notions, a certain awareness is needed to avoid the projection of our own opinions to the poems’ contemporary readers, especially when our analysis touches upon the question of credibility or the seriousness of didactic intent.⁸⁹

It becomes, hence, an interesting question that how often the scholars reconsider their own impressions raised by an ancient didactic poem. Are they aware of the possibility that their opinions might not be equal to that of the ancient readers?

Starting with Dalzell’s study, we face one of the most conscious approaches towards the divergences of antique and present-day ideas. He admits only once that he finds, after all, hexameter embarrassing.⁹⁰ Toohey, likewise, shows serious awareness of the different aesthetics of the two eras. He does not, however, seem to leave behind his literary-centred angle, as he often describes the technical information conveyed in the poems as dry and dull, (wondering at the taste of ancient readers who found delight in such topics),⁹¹ implicitly excluding the

⁸⁶ See note 4 above.

⁸⁷ His sentences about this remark are worth to quote in length. (19) ‘Why read didactic? Above all for its otherness. We have been schooled in an aesthetic of sensual immediacy, of narrative and emotional simplicity, of narrative cosiness. The restraint, the learnedness, the sheer determined, even obstinate complexity involved both in the production and in the consumption of this genre may challenge us to throw off these shackles.’ And (251) ‘I wonder if we should not cherish a cultural experience that differs so utterly from our own.’

⁸⁸ Hutchinson 2009, 196.

⁸⁹ Hutchinson 2009, 197 points out that the practical view which labels verse as ‘useless’ is not mirrored in ancient sources.

⁹⁰ Dalzell 1996, 31.

⁹¹ Toohey 1996, 251. About Aratus, he says that ‘the topic may seem relentlessly dry...’, on Nicander’s ‘dry list of means of protection’, see p. 68.

possibility that these works were read for gaining practical knowledge from them. An example is his remark on the contents of Aratus' *Phaenomena* (particularly, on the signs for forecasting the weather). 'Why should anyone wish for such a knowledge?'⁹²

Volk, in her introduction, is not concerned that much with the comparison of ancient and modern views (albeit she begins, as others too, with mentioning the issue), but she aims at understanding the authorial motives and the audience's demands. Her assertion, for instance, that verse format lessens the basically dry nature of didactic⁹³ suggests that she tries to project herself into the place of the didactic poet.

In Harder's study, this kind of awareness does not appear explicitly, but the scholar's focus on the socio-cultural background of the birth of the *Aetia* (and of didactic poetry in general) shows an openness towards the 'otherness' of ancient didactic aesthetics. It is also experienced on her wide definition of didactic poetry and on her critical remarks on Effe's and Volk's exclusive analyses, which with their circularity and arbitrarily set canons do not respect the different ancient views.

Hutchinson's findings that didactic prose and poetry share many characteristics prove that the two formats were probably not separated as strictly as in our view, thus, Hutchinson displays a great awareness of the possible differences between ancient and modern literary categories. The nature of Papadopoulou's research already indicates her aims at finding the connections between the so often opposed poetry and science, as she examines the colour words in Nicander's didactic poems. The colour words, *scilicet*, are used both as poetic devices (*enargeia*) and as means of accuracy in the descriptions of the venomous creatures.

Although Overduin seems to be aware of the general modern view on didactic poetry, his notes here and there show that he cannot free himself from the modern distrust towards the genre. He writes about the spread of prose and the loss of function of poetry in this manner: 'It is therefore all the more remarkable that the third and second century BCE produced such unlikely hybrids of science and poetry as the works of Aratus and Nicander. [...] Had they verily been experts themselves they would undoubtedly have written in prose.'⁹⁴ The latter sentence ascertains that Overduin refuses the expertise of the Hellenistic didactic poets on the primary basis of the verse form of their works, approaching them from an angle that is typical of the modern readers of didactic poetry.

⁹² Toohey 1996, 53. Then he reassures himself and his readers with the quite utilitarian answer (referring to Hesiod) that this information was certainly demanded for 'the gaining of wealth'.

⁹³ Volk 2002, iii.

⁹⁴ Overduin 2015, 26.

V. Conclusion

'If many scientists in antiquity took these works seriously we must think very carefully about our arguments for doing otherwise and try to avoid an anachronistic approach', warns Harder in her introduction to the studies on 'Nature and science in Hellenistic poetry'.⁹⁵

Albeit it is hard to put aside our impressions and judgements when we read didactic poems, if we wish to map their place in contemporary literature and culture and to understand their function in their own time, we need to try at least to make ourselves aware of which reaction of ours come from later cultural demands.

The evaluation of didactic intent illustrates well this issue. As we could see, our impression that didactic contents and verse form are somehow contradictory makes us doubt the seriousness of the poems or assume an ulterior motive of the author for writing such a work. An important question flows from this. As opposed to prosaic scientific books, in poetry, the form (that is the use of a strict structure and poetic devices) has always a great importance. If this basic characteristic of poetry lessens the importance of the contents, then, is there any 'real' didactic poetry, where the didactic purpose is not a pose? If the 'outside' is sparkling, does it necessarily mean that the contents are less relevant?

Although there have been uttered more concessive opinions about the authors' interest in their subject matters and about the didacticism of the poems, these opinions still often embrace a bit of the modern distrust.⁹⁶ We do encounter, however, with categories set up according the poets' seriousness,⁹⁷ which indicate that besides the works which do not display true didactic intent, there are genuinely didactic poems, indeed. Many scholars stress also that the intentions of the author are too complex and manifold, thus they are difficult, if not impossible, to tell.⁹⁸

The lack of an awareness of our own ideas leads still too often to the interpretation of the didactic intent, which, without a profound explanation seems to be automatic (i. e. taken over from the previous literature) or even arbitrary.

⁹⁵ Harder 2009, IX.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Dalzell (1996, 31) on Nicander: 'It might be possible to regard Nicander simply as a court poet who had no didactic purpose [...]. But the relentless didacticism of his poetry argues against such a simple verdict'. See Magnelli 2010, 222, likewise, and Semanoff 2006, 312-4 on Aratus.

⁹⁷ Effe's 'ideal' and Heath's 'final' categories show this indication. See Harder 2007, 42, with note 43.

⁹⁸ This is often the argument for applying another approach instead of judging the didactic intent. See Dalzell's (1996, 33) and Harder's (2007, 26) insistence on the analysis that is based on the texts, and Sider's claim (2014, 16) for historicism.

Harder's advice, that we should examine further even the seemingly 'formal' category of didactic poems, as 'it may be worth investigating whether some further meaning can be attributed to them', emphasizes again that we need to approach these poems not only with our classicists, philologists, lover-of-poetry, i. e. with literary considerations. If we can read between the lines, too, we may learn after all more from ancient didactic poems than we would think for the first sight.

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(ISSN 0418–453X)