

PART I  
COUNTING AND CRITICISM

Saying things takes time; writing things takes up lines. There is always a connection between the length of a verbal utterance (in time when spoken and in space when written) and what it seeks to describe. There is a certain connection between form and content. In the terms I will be using throughout this book, it is a relationship (as yet undefined) between poetic extent and poetic content. How was this relationship perceived in Graeco-Roman antiquity?

Part I focuses on number and counting as one way in which the interrelation of poetic extent and content was understood. Enumerations of poetry – whether of its length or its quantity – enabled an audience to conceptualise and develop an idea of what the appropriate interconnection might be between the ‘stuff’ that poems contain and the space that is needed to express it. Which is to say, counting becomes one aspect of articulating poetic criticism. My argument across the two chapters of Part I is that Graeco-Roman poets were well aware of the counting criticism that could be directed at their poetry and that they engage with counting as a form of criticism within their poems. Particularly significant is that programmatic statements of poetic principles and of aesthetics contain explicit appeals to counting. Poets incorporate counting and references to counting within their poetry as a means of preemptively negotiating the position of their own works and the work of others within the wider literary landscape. Enumeration, in short, plays an abiding role as a component of poets’ self-advertisement of their distinctiveness, novelty or traditionality.

The story begins in Chapter 1 with the Hellenistic poet Callimachus of Cyrene and the influential prologue to his catalogue poem, the *Aetia*. There, he is emphatic in raising the topic of counting as criticism, only to reject it as a viable means of poetic judgement. In this chapter, I set out the argument of the passage more clearly in relation to poetic enumeration, its connection

(implicit and explicit) to earlier scenes of criticism and the kind of poetic appreciation that Callimachus ultimately proposes. In place of enumerative strategies for assessing poetry, Callimachus proposes evaluating poetry's intellectual value, its σοφία (*sophia*, 'wisdom'). I then trace the later influence of this passage and how subsequent poets responded to Callimachus' rejection of counting and introduction of a criterion that does not involve numerical measure. It will become clear that while they are attuned to Callimachus' emphasis on appraising poetry rather by its refined intellectual calibre, they nevertheless continue to raise and enact enumerative accounts of others' work and of their own. Counting as an evaluative tool is certainly being rejected by these poets, but – paradoxically – their compositions equally evidence that it has become part of the Graeco-Roman discourse on poetic criticism.

Nowhere is this paradox developed more starkly than in the isopsephic epigrams of Leonides of Alexandria, the focus of Chapter 2. His poems take advantage of Greek letters' ability to signify numbers and be read as units, tens and hundreds. When the letters in his poems are interpreted as numbers, they yield couplets of equal numerical value. He makes a radical intervention into the debate about the validity of counting criticism by creating epigrams which are quite literally textual tallies. This compositional strategy is no marginal ornament to Leonides' otherwise accomplished poetry, a literary game to be observed then ignored. Leonides' epigrams, I demonstrate for the first time, actively engage with Callimachean poetics – in the *Aetia* and elsewhere – in arguing for the sophistication, the *sophia*, that emerges from a poetry which can be counted in the most literal sense. For all that Callimachus sought to make a justifiable and clear distinction between the world of numbers and the world of poetry, then, I show over the course of Part I that engaging with counting as a form of criticism was a poetic habit that proved difficult to kick.