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Abstract

Although Pindar's Homer began its life as the Mary Flexner Lectures in the Humanities at Bryn Mawr College in 1982, it clearly represents far more than a revised transcript of that event. The book looks more like a lifetime's work: over five hundred pages, elegantly produced with expansive footnotes and copious bibliography, wrapped in a glossy black dustjacket that gives it an authoritative, if somewhat daunting, feel. It is, truly, a magnum opus, and although it is unlikely to be Nagy's last word on many of the subjects he treats, he has obviously taken great pains to present his material in the most comprehensive manner possible.

Comments

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Gregory Nagy, *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. Pp. ix + 523. ISBN 0-8018-3932-7. \$38.95.

Reviewed by Ralph M. Rosen, University of Pennsylvania.

Although *Pindar's Homer* began its life as the Mary Flexner Lectures in the Humanities at Bryn Mawr College in 1982, it clearly represents far more than a revised transcript of that event. The book looks more like a lifetime's work: over five hundred pages, elegantly produced with expansive footnotes and copious bibliography, wrapped in a glossy black dustjacket that gives it an authoritative, if somewhat daunting, feel. It is, truly, a magnum opus, and although it is unlikely to be Nagy's last word on many of the subjects he treats, he has obviously taken great pains to present his material in the most comprehensive manner possible.

Pindar's Homer is, in some ways, the book many have been waiting for since *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979). The latter dazzled us from start to finish with new and often iconoclastic readings of archaic texts, and gave birth, as if by a thunderbolt, to a major hermeneutic extension of Parryism that boldly confronted major issues in Greek poetics and in the interaction of Greek poetry and culture.¹ *Pindar's Homer* essentially takes up where *The Best of the Achaeans* left off, extending Nagy's basic approach to Greek epic formulated in the earlier book to "the full range of poetic and song-making traditions in early Greek civilization" (p. 2). One major difference between the two works, however, is that the newer book, though every bit as complex as *The Best of the Achaeans* and in many ways even more ambitious, is easier to read. Nagy is always very careful, for example, to let the reader know exactly how a given discussion relates to his central theses (on which see below). This is not an insignificant feature of the book in view of Nagy's unique style of argumentation and his eclectic methodology. He intertwines many seemingly different and unrelated threads of evidence, and his most important arguments tend to develop slowly, subtly and incrementally over hundreds of pages rather than over a few, so that it is useful to have frequent reminders (through meticulous cross-references and useful recapitulations) of how a given argument has evolved throughout the course of the book.

Over the past two decades Nagy has been striving to counteract the various modern preconceptions about and constructions of archaic poetry which, in his view, impede a clearer understanding of how the poets worked within their traditions. Specifically Nagy bristles at the prevalent modern discomfort at reconciling poetic "genius" or "value" with an undeniably oral tradition. At the same time, most classical scholars continue (as they have for several centuries), to privilege the notion of the individual author as the primary

force in poetic composition. It is no surprise that as soon as our evidence allows us to speak comfortably of historically real poets, we start to hear of, as Nagy puts it (p. 2), the "rise of individual innovation over collective tradition." Even though it is slowly becoming unfashionable (thankfully) to speak of Greek lyric in such simplistic terms, it cannot be denied that scholars still generally think of Homeric epic and Greek lyric as fundamentally distinct, albeit related, traditions, and that they tend to attribute this distinction to a contrast between "oral" and "written" culture. In *Pindar's Homer*, Nagy is not out to argue that Greek lyric is the "same" as epic, that it is "oral" in the same sense as Homer, that lyric poets didn't use writing or couldn't express their private thoughts. Rather, he argues for three basic points: (1) that archaic, and at least some classical, poetry is part of a dynamic continuum; (2) that we can detect a unifying "Panhellenic" impulse in the poetic production in this period (or at least in the poetry that became canonical early on), and (3) that in post-Homeric poetry the forces exercised by vibrant, continuous poetic traditions can account more accurately for how poets appropriate other poets and genres than the narrow concept of "poetic borrowing" or "citation."

Nagy has been arguing these three points in one form or another throughout most of his work, but *Pindar's Homer* now focuses specifically on post-Homeric poetry. Nagy uses Pindar as his main example throughout since Pindar is the latest of the lyric poets in the Alexandrian canon and, perhaps even more importantly, because of the metrical and thematic affinities Nagy finds between Pindar and epos (pp. 3-4). Still, the book is less "about" Pindar or his "uses" of epic than it is about the substrata that unified even highly differentiated forms of Greek poetry up to the end of the fifth century.

Nagy lays the foundation for his whole approach in the first chapter, aptly entitled "Oral Poetry and Ancient Greek Poetry: Broadening and Narrowing the Terms." Indeed in this fascinating chapter Nagy seeks to extend and redefine our conception of orality in such a way that the term can easily accommodate archaic lyric as well, without denying the existence or use of writing by poets in this tradition as a means of transmission: "... so long as the traditions of oral poetry are alive in a given society, a written record cannot by itself affect a composition or a performance, and ... it cannot stop the process of recomposition in performance" (p. 19). This approach, which draws persuasively on the work of social anthropology, essentially liberates us from our often unacknowledged prejudices about what constitutes poetry by urging us to think of the written aspect of poetry only as one specialized (he would say "marked") feature of poetry in general (an "unmarked" category that embraces all specific manifestations such as song and recitative, "whether oral or written"). In short, Nagy makes it possible to speak of Greek epic and lyric as part of an ongoing process of poetic differentiation and transformation.

To support further his argument that poetic differentiation in archaic poetry can be seen as a continuum, Nagy restates and embellishes the conclusions of an earlier work (cf. above n.1), in which he attempted to show that the dactylic hexameter of epic can be explained as a differentiation of various lyric metrical forms, i.e. that the hexameter was constituted from already existent lyric meters (cf. p. 48 and Appendix, pp. 439-64). This position in turn bolsters Nagy's idea of how Greek poetry developed: SONG [sic] (a form of "marked" speech that may or may not have had melody) differentiating into song types

(song in our sense of the word, having melody) and poetry (non-melodic, as in dactylic hexameter or elegiac distich). Homeric epic, then, while it imitates song, and can refer to itself as song, was, synchronically speaking, not song but "poetry" (in Nagy's sense of non-melodic poetry). The references to song in epic point to its origins as undifferentiated SONG, although the epic as it was performed by rhapsodes was more like recitative. Similarly, the metrical affinities that Nagy isolates between the Homeric hexameter and the diachronically later song (lyric) tradition of Pindar suggest to him that undifferentiated SONG was a kind of well-spring from which all (archaic, at least) Greek poetry in some sense derives.

In the chapters that discuss the Panhellenic diffusion of poetry, Nagy again clarifies some positions taken in earlier work (Ch. 2), and attempts to extend his theory to the lyric tradition (Ch. 3). Chapter 2 is especially compelling, as Nagy explains how, during the gradual process of poetic diffusion from initial (oral) composition to textual fixation, the very notion of the author is transformed into a generic concept (e.g., p. 79). Nagy contrasts by way of example the Homeric epics (i.e. the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) with the poems of the Epic Cycle. He accounts for the "superior prestige of the Homeric poems on the basis of their greater Panhellenic orientation and diffusion" (p. 72), whereas, for example, the *Aithiopsis* focused on local traditions of Miletus. He even argues that canon formation in antiquity (made possible by textual fixation) arose as a result of Panhellenic diffusion. The mechanics of this process are difficult to imagine with precision, given our evidence, but Nagy's basic insight is profound and persuasively set forth. As he summarizes at the beginning of Chapter 3 (p. 82): "The concept of Panhellenism helps explain not only how the multiple traditions of Archaic Greek oral poetry became a synthetic tradition but also how this tradition ... tended to counteract the emergence of historically verifiable authorship."

The crucial question Nagy must address (in Chapter 3 and elsewhere), if he is going to regard Pindar and the epinician tradition as Panhellenic (which he must do, of course, if he is to argue for a unifying, synthetic tradition going back to Homer and beyond), is, how can a localized and highly occasional genre such as the epinician be at the same time "Panhellenic?" The route Nagy takes to answer this is highly involved, but I quote here his conclusion (p. 114): "Though each of Pindar's victory odes was an occasional composition, centering on a single performance, each containing details grounded in the historical realities of the time and place of performance, still each of these victory odes aimed at translating its occasion into a Panhellenic event, a thing of beauty that could be replayed by and for Hellenes for all time to come."

I have spent considerable time on the early chapters because they are essential for understanding where Nagy is heading in the rest of the book. The book's fourteen chapters cover an enormous amount of material, draw on practically every aspect of antiquity for evidence and employ a variety of methodologies. After the "introductory" chapters, however, Nagy basically deals with three major topics: Pindar and Homer; Pindar and Herodotus; and the effects of fifth-century Athenian society on the lyric medium.

In Chapters 4-7, Nagy examines in great detail the relationship between Homer and Pindar from the point of view of the hermeneutic models he set forth at the beginning of the book. Contrary to what one might expect, Nagy's Pindar is every bit as different from Homer as one finds in any handbook, but with a twist. Epinician is certainly not Homeric epic, but both genres are fundamentally concerned with kleos, and epinician seems to authorize its praise of victors with reference to the praise of past heroes. Moreover, the milieu of praise poetry (or ainos), the athletic agon, had a ritual dimension that connected contemporary victors with heroes of the past. Pindar is quite self-conscious about this, as Nagy shows with a number of detailed examples in Chapter 6 (*Pythians* 6 and 8, and *Isthmian* 8), and his description of the Pindaric ainos as a "form of expression that purports to close the gap between the heroic past and the historic present" (p. 193) seems well justified. So while Pindaric epinician and Homeric epic serve different social functions and are performed on different occasions in different media (one lyric and choral, the other non-lyric and monodic), nevertheless each one can be defined in terms of the other on a fundamental level, and both can be seen as differentiations of a kind of "proto-Song" (in Nagy's terminology undifferentiated SONG). As for the problem of how the occasional and localized Pindaric ainos attains Panhellenic status and transcends its own occasion, Nagy explains this with reference to the politics of patronage. Paradoxically, the tyrants who by and large supported poets such as Pindar for their own prestige and who would revel in the localized veneer of epinician, themselves became the subtle targets of an ainos tradition of moralizing and warning (see following paragraphs) that was universalizing and Panhellenic.

Probably the boldest and most controversial chapters of the book are those in which Nagy argues for including the prose of Herodotus in his scheme of poetic development. We are prepared for this somewhat in the first chapter, where Nagy derives prose as well as "song" and "poetry" from a proto-SONG. This notion may at first seem to run counter to common sense: surely, one might object, prose must be a direct manifestation of everyday speech, an "unmarked" member of an opposition in which poetry is the "marked" member. Or, as Nagy puts it (p. 47): "... prose seems closer than poetry to speech in that it does not have the same degree of specialized patterning in rhythm." But Nagy's Herodotus was a product of an oral tradition, and as such his prose seems more akin to "de-poeticized" poetry than to speech (cf. p. 47 for more detail). Nagy analyzes closely the prooemium of the *Histories* and argues convincingly that, even if we imagine Herodotus holed up in a study surrounded by every conceivable writing instrument, his apodeixis was a "public demonstration of an oral performance" (p. 220). His statement in fn. 16 on p. 217 is an important step in the argument: "... the rhetoric of Herodotus' prooemium in particular and his entire composition in general is predicated on the traditions of speaking before a public, not of writing for readers. To me, that in itself is enough to justify calling such traditions oral."

Once Nagy has established a formal link between prose and poetry, of course, the way is paved for examining Herodotean narrative in this new light. The program of Chapters 8-11 is set out on p. 215: "Like the ainos of Pindar, the historia of Herodotus is a form of discourse that claims the authority to possess and control the epic of heroes." Basically Nagy argues, through detailed linguistic and cultural analysis, that the Herodotean

discourse of *historia* has a fundamental juridical aspect to it that allies it with the *ainos* of Pindaric poetry (here *ainos* takes on its other meaning of "fable"). In other words, both *historia* and the *ainos* are discourses that judge, moralize and often warn obliquely rather than straightforwardly (a quick example from Herodotus: Solon "does not tell Croesus directly what we find him teaching in his own poetry, that ate is brought about by *hybris*" [p. 262]). Nagy even goes so far as to state (p. 314) that Herodotus' *Histories* is "shaped by the principles of the *ainos*," by which he means that the "thought patterns" associated with *historia* are akin to those of the Pindaric *ainos*. Like Pindar and Homer, Herodotus too is fundamentally concerned with conveying *kleos*, and as such he can be seen as part of a poetic tradition. Herodotus himself, although a prose writer (*logios*), used poetry (especially in his relating of oracular utterances) self-consciously as an implicit code, a means, if I understand Nagy correctly, of punctuating explicit historical narrative with his own judgment in the manner of an *ainos*. As he states on p. 329: "[Herodotus is] ... like Pindar in his mastery of the *ainos*, though his medium is not *ainos*; rather, it contains the *ainos*. For Herodotus, the heritage of *ainos* is to be found in the traditions of poetry and song making as they are contained and applied in his *Histories* by way of quotation, paraphrase or mere reference." Towards the end of the book (Chs. 12 and 13) Nagy takes up subjects he has alluded to throughout, namely authorship, textual fixation, and the question of how occasional poetry could achieve Panhellenic status. Chapter 13 in particular offers a highly original and provocative study of fifth-century Athenian culture, in which he examines the interaction between politics and poetry during this period and argues that the Athenian democracy was transforming the "old aristocratic poetics into the new popular poetics of the City Dionysia." The result was an increased need for elite private schooling, which in turn became the "nondemocratic self-expression of aristocrats, the new breeding ground for tyrants" (p. 405). Canons of "Classics" arose for educational purposes, as students and teachers began to read texts nostalgically rather than perform them. Thus, ironically enough, while tyrants originally played an important role in the development of Pindaric poetry (as Nagy discusses in detail throughout the book, though cf. Ch. 6 especially), it was only after they were fully supplanted by a democracy at Athens, and their presence in some circles was missed, that Pindar achieved his final fixity. The irony is even greater if Nagy is correct to see in the epinician *ainos* a tension between localizing and Panhellenizing elements (see above, and a convenient summary on p. 436), since we would then have a situation in the later fifth century in which aristocrats who idealized a cultural milieu that bred potential tyrants desired as a fixed poetic ideal what an earlier age of tyrants had admired for its localized political utility.

I have only been able to offer a small glimpse of a monumental and fascinating work, and I have had to neglect scores of topics and sub-topics introduced by Nagy which lead in many directions. Even though the sheer volume and range of the material demand the reader's full and constant attention, in the end Nagy succeeds in articulating his challenging and in many ways unique vision of the development of Greek poetry. Naturally, a work as ambitious as this cannot hope to satisfy every reader at every turn, and many of Nagy's arguments will no doubt generate controversy. Some arguments are breathtakingly brilliant while others on occasion appear to border on the tendentious, or seem to beg a premise or two. And, of course, all readers will find places where they desire further clarification or where Nagy's discussion provokes a new set of questions. (I

would have liked to hear more, for example, about how exactly Nagy envisions the practical effects of growing literacy on poetic [and prose] composition. How exactly, for example, did Pindar's method of composition differ from, say, that of Homer or Hesiod on the one hand, and Callimachus or Apollonius on the other?) It would be easy, moreover, to fault the book for over-schematizing, for trying with relentless zeal to find unity at every turn. But Nagy himself seems to be aware that he cannot be telling the whole story, that the evidence for the archaic period is often sketchy, particularly in matters of social history, and that his work will need further refinement here and there. Still, when we find ourselves speaking vaguely of an "archaic mindset" or wondering why we sometimes have that mysterious sense that all archaic and classical Greek poetry is of a piece, we can at least find one fully-formed model that attempts to explain such perceptions, and that does so with remarkable insight, boldness and passion.

NOTES

- [1] Nagy, of course, began developing the technical underpinnings of his ideas on archaic poetry in *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (1974), but it wasn't until *The Best of the Achaeans* that we found him articulating (to a wider audience in particular) the larger ramifications of the earlier work.