

Mere creatures of a day

The search for permanence in archaic and classical poetry

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GREEK POETRY IN THE AGE OF EPHEMERALITY
SARAH NOOTER

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WHEN HE FIRST APPEARS in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, dangling in a basket, Socrates responds to the entreaties of the hapless Strepsiades, who has come to be enrolled in his school, with "Why do you summon me, you creature of a day [*ephémere*]?" And when asked to explain what he is doing, Socrates loftily replies that he is investigating "higher - or indeed high-blown, 'meteorological' things".

The investigation of the heavenly bodies and of the nature of the world around us, here comically distorted, was one of the ways in which some thinkers in archaic and classical Greece sought to find permanent structures to set against the inevitable evanescence and changeability of human life. Strepsiades and his colleagues, by contrast, were *ephémerei*, both "short-lived" and living in a "short-term" world of shifting uncertainty. Socrates' most famous disciple, Plato, turned for such permanence to unchanging metaphysical realities, available to the philosopher who has managed to escape the cave of deceptive shadows in which the rest of us dwell. As for poetry, modes of criticism such as allegory, which sought to uncover unchanging moral and physical truths in poetic utterances, offered another aspect of the search not just for stability of meaning, but for a meaning that pointed beyond the moment to something more lasting.

In her suggestive new book Sarah Nooter goes beyond this wider context of "sense-making", which characterizes archaic and classical Greece. She looks instead at how early Greek poetry and poets evoked different modes of what she terms "perdurance" in far subtler ways than the simple claim, familiar from epic poetry and Pindar's grand odes to his elite patrons, to offer "eternal renown". She wants to bring out how the changing experiences and emotions of characters and the history of the objects described in poetry point to a meaningful continuity in the face of change. By focusing on largely familiar passages of early Greek poetry Nooter finds what she is looking for in the sounds and rhythms of poetry, music and dance; in the poems' striking concern with the emotional and physical reactions of the human body and with human affect and "presence"; and in the varied temporalities that the poets stress (for example, the recurrent present of the Homeric simile set against the distant past of the epic narration). The survival of material objects in poetry also plays an important role, whether it be Homer's account of the past history of the lyre with which Achilles "delighted his own heart" in *Iliad* 9, or the tombstones about, and for which, Simonides wrote remarkable poems at the time of the Persian Wars.

At its best Nooter's mode of reading is alive to half-heard echoes and significant silences. The deep self-consciousness of poetic tradition is itself a powerful pointer to continuity and renewal, in choral lyric no less than in epic. Nooter listens hard to this



"The Education of Achilles by Chiron"; a fresco from the Herculaneum Basilica

poetry and has perceptive things to say - even on familiar territory such as the extraordinary simile in *Odyssey* 20 of Odysseus' "barking heart", compared to a mother dog protecting her puppies when the hero sees the unfaithful maids in his palace, or Andromache's fearful reaction to the death of Hector in *Iliad* 22 ("my heart leapt to my mouth"). In these cases she points to the apparent absence of any concern with the ordinary, steady human heartbeat in early poetry. It is in timeless poetic events - Odysseus' finally obedient and "constantly enduring" heart, or Andromache's everyday female activities (weaving, preparing a bath for Hector) - that "perdurance" is to be found.

Much of the second half of the book is concerned with how the practice of writing itself reflects poetry's resistance to the ephemeral. What is at issue is not so much how the coming of writing affected the way in which poetry was composed, but rather how poets represented the idea of writing as a weapon in the struggle for perdurance, and how some, such as Simonides and Aeschylus, prepared the ground for the eventual triumph of writing with poetic images and metaphors that drew on its technology. With the possibility of written survival came also a change in the perception of time. As others have done before her Nooter links the poetic representations of writing (and its effacement) to the coming of written and publicly displayed law; both realms seek to legislate for "the future" and to imagine a time beyond the repressive present.

It goes without saying that this book's title is knowingly double-edged. In our own ephemeral age every moment is captured on a digital device and, however often deleted, is always recoverable and repeatable. More immediately, the author's concerns - embodiedness, object history, ecology - are undeniably "of the moment" in parts of the academy. Classicists have been at the forefront of the exploitation of these newer disciplines in literary criticism. Like some of the poetry it studies, this book offers one particular version of "the present". There is a price. Although Nooter is alive to how these poems are conscious of the tradition in which they are embedded, she chooses to elide much of the longer critical tradition in which she writes. The majority of the scholarship she cites was written in the past three decades, much of it in the US. It is perfectly possible to discuss Sappho fr. 31 ("That man seems to me equal to the gods...") without mentioning the account of the poem in Longinus' *On the Sublime* that preserves it for us, some 700 years after Sappho wrote it; but Nooter's reading of that poem ultimately descends from Longinus' description, and that would have been worth saying.

The layered sediments of reading practice, across different generations, languages and cultures, are themselves markers of a persistent search for a continuity beyond the fragility of the present. ■

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Nooter is perceptive on Odysseus's 'barking heart', compared to a mother dog protecting her puppies

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Granny's guide to antiquity

An American writer of popular books on Greece and Rome

NICK ROMEO

AMERICAN CLASSICIST

The life and loves of Edith Hamilton

VICTORIA HOUSEMAN

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£35 (US \$39.95).

RECIPROCAL DISDAIN still floats across the academic-popular divide. Some academics share Friedrich Nietzsche's assumption that any work intended for a general readership is intellectually inferior. Books for a popular readership "are always ill-smelling books, the odor of paltry people clings to them", he wrote. Some non-academics assume that any specialized work is a morass of jargon and dull detail (Nietzsche too could dismiss this as "ant-like", clearing the field for himself as the true saviour of culture). Both sides are right frequently enough that each can cite supporting examples, yet both are often badly wrong.

Victoria Houseman's choice of the American writer Edith Hamilton as the subject of a new biography, *American Classicist*, raises these issues. Hamilton wrote several popular books on ancient Greece and Rome in the early to mid-twentieth century, including *Mythology* (1942), *The Greek Way* (1930) and *The Roman Way* (1932). For decades copies of her books adorned the shelves of many American homes, functioning as a kind of grandmotherly guide to antiquity.

Some criticism of Houseman's book has focused on the fact that Hamilton wrote about ancient Greece and Rome without holding a doctorate in classics. This is misguided: many brilliant writers on antiquity, from Roberto Calasso on Greek mythology to Gore Vidal on the world of the Emperor Julian, had no doctorate in the subjects they illuminated. Vidal only finished high school. Yet just because some dismissals are snobbish, it doesn't follow that Hamilton merits an entire biography. Any justification of the choice must appeal to some combination of the interest of her intellectual work, her life and the milieu she inhabited. Houseman's biography is admirably researched, but I finished it without being persuaded that Hamilton warranted such attention.

Some of the more compelling material explores the cultural universe in which Hamilton moved. While a student at Bryn Mawr at the end of the nineteenth century, she befriended a classmate who was Mark Twain's daughter. Roughly a decade later, while working as the headmistress at the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, she got to know a medical student named Gertrude Stein. A visit to John Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago shaped her views on pedagogy. The philosopher Bertrand Russell also makes an appearance, interfering in a romantic relationship that Hamilton was pursuing with a woman infatuated with Russell.

Hamilton herself seems likeable, and Houseman has unearthed many humanizing anecdotes and