CJ-Online, 2012.12.15

BOOK REVIEW

Pindar's Verbal Art: An Ethnographic Study of Epinician Style. By James Bradley Wells. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2010. Distributed by Harvard University Press. Pp. viii + 266. Paper, $19.95/£14.95. ISBN 978-0-674-03627-7.

Wells' monograph, based on his doctoral dissertation, approaches Pindar's epinician poetry through the lens of contemporary pragmatic linguistics, while also keenly engaged with the writings of the Russian formalists and the Prague School of linguistics. As such, it adds to a growing body of scholarly literature re-examining classical Greek texts from this perspective. For Wells, close analysis of the various registers and speech genres of epinician expression ("ways of speaking") contributes to our understanding of social practice. This is not a work for beginners in the method, but scholars interested in what Wells calls "intersubjective objectivity," i.e. "approaching context from the inside" of the text's language, will find much here to reward their study.

The first chapter ("Text and Sign") opens with a suggestive interpretation of the proem to Pindar's *Pythian* 1 (especially the puzzling v. 3 πείθονται δ' ἀοιδοὶ σάμασιν, "but singers heed the signs"), where he believes the signs in question are "sociolinguistic and traditional conventions that cue the singers' performance of epinician song and, crucially, the audience's participation in that performance" (21). Wells proceeds to discuss Pindar's "metalanguage" (specific words of saying or singing) and "metacommunication" (statements, especially gnomic, about the proper use of language). Criticizing what he calls the "oral subterfuge hypothesis" (which sees the performative language as a pretext of extemporaneous speech, cloaking carefully premeditated writing), Wells insists on the primacy of orality and the performative act, with written diffusion as secondary and derivative. However, the temporal perspective is not one-dimensional: he later states that the original performance is successful precisely insofar as it becomes a model for future re-performance (140–1). Drawing on *Paean* 6.7–15, he sees the act of composition as a form of "recognition" of a pre-existing truth.

Some might criticize these assumptions as bending Pindar's communication to an essentially Platonic theory of language, thus subject to Derrida's critique of the "metaphysics of presence." I would prefer to call attention to the ambiguities and tensions of Pindar's disseminated text as it is refracted through multiple audiences and focal points of reception long after the initial performance, music, and dance are forgotten. I am also unsure that the success of an initial performance necessarily has any connection to re-performances, which may be adapted to different music, may be monodic rather than choral, and may appeal to spectators with a different ideological apparatus. Is a premiere performance always the "model" for re-performances? I recall being present when the Deutsche Oper in 2003 revived Mozart's long-unperformed *Idomeneo*, only to have the General Director booed and hissed at the end, because of the production's perceived impiety toward some traditional religious icons. The premiere's success was at best ambiguous, but the production gained popularity and was later replicated in multiple cities. People with certain religious sensitivities were cautioned not to go, so later audiences were more receptive.

Chapter 2 ("*Epinikion* as Event") begins by observing that the predominantly Doric and secondarily Aeolic dialect and meters encode oral performance (51–2). But I wonder whether the Aeolic element does not also point to the possibility of monodic re-performance more in the style of Sappho and Alcaeus? The chapter goes on to list several "performance keys," including parallelism, repetition, rhetorical formulae, appeals to tradition, and disclaimers (e.g. break-off formulae), all of which enable the audience to "evaluate and interpret *epinikion* in terms of the art form's idiomatic, connotative meaning" (59–60), which Wells sees as firmly embedded in actual performance.

Chapter 3 applies the linguist Dell Hymes' concept of "ways of speaking" to epinician poetry by identifying several micro-genres within its ambit: gnomes, lyric (i.e. self-reflexive passages), *angelia* (the victory announcement), and mythical narrative. Various examples of these are analyzed with respect to six defining linguistic categories: speaker, addressee, speech object (i.e. theme), speech plan (i.e. perlocutionary force), spatial dimension, and temporal dimension (i.e. past, present, or future). Chapter 4 focuses on one specific way of speaking common in epinician, namely prayer. The chapter is grounded in a useful semantic discussion of Pindar's various words for prayer. I am not, however, persuaded by the author's argument for *euchos* ("vaunt") as a self-reflexive reference to the epinician performance itself (93): its connection to prayer is rather as the accomplishment of what an athlete has prayed for. Wells fails to observe that Pindar uses the verb *euchomai* ("vaunt") especially in contexts of claim to a divine patrimony (see *O.* 7.23, *P.* 4.97) and thus a special access to a god.

Chapter 5 ("Novelistic Features of Epinician Style") is perhaps the book's most adventurous, applying Bakhtin's insights about the novel to the analysis of epinician *polyglossia.* However, I am not persuaded that a theory developed with regard to a nineteenth-century literary construct transfers that well. Generic interpenetration has always been a feature of Greek literature from the time of epic (with its distinctive linguistic and metrical registers for speech vs. narrative, not to mention the multiple micro-genres within both) to the familiar Hellenistic *Kreuzung der Gattungen.* Wells acknowledges that Bakhtin himself explicitly retreated from applying his approach to poetry, inasmuch as versification imprints a stylistic unity quite different from the variegated diction of the novel. He works around this objection by insisting that epinician combines "high" and "low" categories of verbal art (177). But his attempt to find "low" art in Pindar, based largely on the concept of "parody," does not in my opinion succeed.

Wells' sole example of Pindaric parody centers upon a rather tendentious interpretation of the term *charis* in Pindar's *Olympian* 1 (159–69). While it is true that the word's semantic range includes a specific application to sexual gratification, nothing codes sexuality as an inherently "low" topic: are *Iliad* 14, Sappho, and Theognis examples of a "low" style? Wells repeatedly invokes "questionable" or "irreverent sexual practices" in the myth of Poseidon and Pelops, but so far as I can see, what he so designates is nothing more than his unjustified assumption that Pelops' prayer to Poseidon for the "loving gifts of Cypris" to yield some *charis* (vv. 75–6) somehow implies that the grown-up Pelops now demands the right to become an *erastês* to Poseidon in the role of a subordinate *erômenos.* This is certainly a novel interpretation of the passage, but it is grounded on nothing: *charis* implies a reciprocal relationship, in which Pelops has granted sexual favors (the "loving gifts of Cypris") in return for some benefit he should receive from his older lover (parallel to the love-gifts of Greek vase painting, the pedagogical mentorship offered by Theognis, or the consolatory wisdom Sappho gives her younger companions). Wells would have benefited here from Bonnie MacLachlan's excellent *The Age of Grace* (Princeton, 1993), which does not appear in his bibliography.

These criticisms of detail notwithstanding, Wells has produced an original and challenging monograph that updates our understanding of Pindar's style and generic building-blocks with the insights of an increasingly influential sociolinguistic approach. Whether he has actually succeeded in revealing anything about the social practices of Pindar's time out of his careful analysis of "ways of speaking" is something each reader will have to judge.

THOMAS K. HUBBARD

University of Texas, Austin, tkh@utexas.edu