

## BOOK REVIEW

Arthur MCDEVITT, *Bacchylides: The Victory Poems. Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2009. Pp. viii, 232. Paper, \$27.00. ISBN 978-18539-9721-1.

This book makes a good first impression: it is well produced, with eleven illustrations and an attractive design. It even hefts well. To the credit of Arthur McDevitt and his collaborators at Bristol Classical Press, this is a handsome volume. Contents include an Introduction (1–21), a list of Works Cited with Abbreviations (23–26), a Further Reading list (27), the translation of Bacchylides' 14 *epinikia* (29–68), and a Commentary (69–227), which provides an introduction to each poem and line-by-line notes. There is a general index, but no glossary. A second impression: a new translation of Bacchylides' victory songs is an eyebrow-raising event. Ten years since the last English translation of Bacchylides,<sup>1</sup> I want this book to be a sign of exponential growth in the popularity of the seemingly always-second-to-Pindar epinician artist. My more pedestrian expectation is that McDevitt is addressing a perceived need for a new translation of Bacchylides among an inclusive audience of students (his stated primary target-audience) and other non-specialists, perhaps among a more exclusive audience of scholars, especially given the copious commentary. The deficiencies of McDevitt's ambitious project unfortunately frustrate my hopes for the success of *Bacchylides: The Victory Poems*.

McDevitt's Introduction outlines contexts in which the victory song was embedded. Subsections of the Introduction are: "Competition and the Greeks," "The Festivals and the Games," "The Poets and the Poems," and "The Text of the Poems of Bacchylides." Thus McDevitt sets the stage for reading the poems, but his treatment of these topics is problematic. One of my central teaching objectives is to enable students how to think about how we think about culture and history, so that I would want my students to locate, for example, McDevitt's claim that "The ancient Greeks, as is well known, were a very competitive people" (3) in relationship to the logic of prejudiced interpretations of culture—e.g., "Trailerparklanders, as is well known, are a very beer-loving people." Such an essentializing and cringeworthy logic of cultural interpretation, which naturalizes

<sup>1</sup> David Slavitt, *Epinician Odes and Dithyrambs of Bacchylides* (Philadelphia, 1998).

prejudice and, if we agree with thinkers such as Talal Asad or Michel Foucault or Chela Sandoval, authorizes legally legitimated uses of force against subordinate groups, must be critiqued and dismantled. While these concerns may appear contentious and, indeed, tendentious to a book review, as I teach my students – my scholarship is also committed to this position – local dynamics of cultural practice, including a translation of Bacchylides, are implicated in global dynamics of cultural practice. When McDevitt writes of aspects of social context such as “a world-view based on the aristocratic values of natural [!] and inherited excellence” (17), it is difficult to differentiate a monochromatic description of the ideological milieu of the victory ode from the cant of the true believer in aristocratic prestige. Instead of such prepackaged teachable moments, I prefer that my students encounter interpretations of culture that admit social and historical complexity.

McDevitt’s characterization of the ideological unity of the victory song can be read against his interpretive horizon, particularly his allegiance to Bundyesque formalism, as expressed by the view that “the poems are in the first instance songs of praise; they were commissioned and designed to eulogize the successful athlete, and this remained always their primary, indeed their only [Really?], function” (15). McDevitt’s Introduction and Commentary resist the influence of scholarship on epinikion in the past twenty years, just taking Kurke’s *The Traffic in Praise* (Ithaca, 1991) as a point of reference. Absent from lists of works cited and further reading is sine qua non scholarship on Archaic Greek poetics (e.g. Calame, Kurke, Nagy, and Stehle). Although he references Hornblower and Morgan’s *Pindar’s Poetry, Patrons and Festivals* (Oxford, 2007), McDevitt’s treatment of context and poetics betrays no familiarity with ideas in that volume. Since the Commentary is underinformed by current scholarship on Archaic Greek poetics, despite its quantitatively above-and-beyond-the-call-of-duty scope, McDevitt’s project falls short of providing readers with “easy access to the kind of information that they might want or need to appreciate the literature more fully” (vii).

The fact that his translation works primarily as a commentary on the translated poems complicates the question of McDevitt’s intended audience. A translation in itself suggests an audience of undergraduate students in, say, a mythology course, artists and scholars who want to range outside their homebase of knowledge, and, perhaps, the just-curious. For that audience, McDevitt has produced a closed text. The Commentary is overgrown—there are 27 pages of

commentary on *Ode 5* (compared to Maehler's 23 pages of commentary<sup>2</sup>)—and composed in philology-cipher. In one note on *Ode 5.22*, there are references to Homer *Il.* 5.526 and 9.186, *Od.* 3.176, 12.44, and 24.62, Alcman 14.1, Aisch. *Pers.* 332, Eur. *Med.* 205, and Bacch. fr. 20 B 2, fr. 20 C 1, 23.4, fr. 4.57, 14.13, 5.73, and 10.10. A list of abbreviations is available, granted, and granted the space-saving interest of economy, such a commitment to the philologist's code nevertheless renders the book a closed text with a more specialist model reader than translations typically assume.

To give readers a feel for McDevitt's translation, compare the following translations of one of the purplest of Bacchylidean passages, *Ode 5.16–30*:

[1] Cleaving the deep heavens with tawny swift wings on high the eagle, messenger of wide-ruling loud-thundering Zeus, is [2] confident, trusting in his mighty strength, and [3] clear-voiced birds cower in fear: the peaks of the great earth do not bar his way, nor the rugged waves of the untiring sea: [4] in the limitless void he plies his fine-feathered plumage before blasts of the west wind, a conspicuous sight for men.

—David A. Campbell, Trans.<sup>3</sup>

[1] Steep air splits  
On the eagle's wings  
That flare out bronze;  
The herald of Zeus,  
Lord of the Thunder,  
[2] Towers tense  
On his vaulting thrust,  
[3] And twittering birds  
Crouch down in fear:  
No check to him  
The great earth's juts,  
And the rough cliffs  
Of the cuffing sea;  
[4] He cuts wild sky

<sup>2</sup> H. Maehler, *Bacchylides: A Selection* (Cambridge, 2004) 106–129.

<sup>3</sup> *Greek Lyric IV: Bacchylides, Corinna, and Others* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1992) 139–141.

With his flashing crests,  
 Backed by a westwind's blast,  
 Bright in the eyes of men.

—Robert Fagles, Trans.<sup>4</sup>

... as the eagle, messenger of Zeus loud-thundering  
 whose realm spreads wide,  
 [1] cleaves the deep sky, high  
 on the pulsing beat of wings, swift,  
 [2] confident, trusting in his mighty strength,  
 [3] and the screeching birds cower in fear;  
 the mountain peaks of great earth  
 do not confine him  
 nor the towering waves  
 of the tireless sea;  
 [4] he, driving on restless wing, featherlight,  
 high in the endless, empty sky,  
 rides on the breath of western wind,  
 a sight well known among men.

—Arthur McDevitt, Trans.

McDevitt's word-choice hews awkwardly close to Campbell's in Passages 1 and 2 (and elsewhere, though Passage 4 illustrates multiple translation possibilities)—perhaps due to the prompt of Douglas Gerber's *Bacchylides* lexicon, which McDevitt does not reference. At Passage 3 Campbell and McDevitt offer different translations of *liguphthongoi*: "clear-voiced" (Campbell) and "screeching" (McDevitt). The half-page justification (the note on *Ode* 5.22 mentioned above) for his accurate rendering of *liguphthongoi* indicates the closed-text quality of this book: McDevitt's assertion of his metaphrastic competence suggests that his translation is not oriented toward "non-language students" (vii), but toward an audience of specialists who may evaluate his translation according to criteria for accuracy and who, it is further implied, would need no translation. Note McDevitt's predilection for participles—"loud-thundering," "pulsing," "trusting," "screeching," "towering," and "driving." Perhaps intended as a strategy for vivid-

<sup>4</sup> *Bacchylides: Complete Poems* (New Haven and London, 1998 [1961]) 13.

ness given the attention to verbal aspect, the grammatical affect dulls the poetic effect. There are nods to poetry: the lines “high in the endless, empty sky, / rides on the breath of western wind” are in iambic tetrameter with a line-initial trochaic substitution. There is internal rhyme with “high” and “sky,” consonance with “endless” and “empty,”<sup>5</sup> and “rides” sustains the sound pattern of “high” and “sky.” But the poeticalness of these lines, more a philologist’s conception of poetry than poetry, is too rare. Why quibble here? McDevitt’s metaphrastic excellence conflicts with his expressed “hope of enhancing the student’s understanding and appreciation of these charming poems” (vii) insofar as philological rigor comes at the expense of engaging readers with exciting language (like Bacchylides’) that is, if not edgy (sure, we can’t all be Anne Carsons or William Levitans), then contemporary. A final illustration. Where Bacchylides has one line, McDevitt uses two: “the mountain peaks of the great earth / do not confine him” (13 syllables, prosodically ambiguous—did he mean to do: two iambs plus double iamb / iamb plus amphibrach?). Compare Fagles’s (also two-line) version: “No check to him / The great earth’s juts” (8 syllables, iambic dimeter—Hopkins anyone?).

In the course of preparing this review I have come to wish that I had had opportunity to provide input on the work in progress instead of responding to it as a finished product. Arthur McDevitt undoubtedly invested a great deal of time in his book, so it is with regret that my overall assessment is negative. Perhaps vigorous and vocal supporters of McDevitt’s *Bacchylides: The Victory Poems* will mitigate that regret.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the vowel *e* represented orthographically, an underlying glottal stop precedes word-initial vowels in many varieties of English.

<sup>6</sup> For another assessment, see Chris Eckerman’s review (*BMCR* 2009.10.43).