

BOOKREVIEW

Dissonance: Auditory Aesthetics in Ancient Greece. By SEAN ALEXANDER GURD. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 239. Hardcover, \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-823-26965-5.

This slender yet demanding book crackles, buzzes, and even sometimes thunders with fresh ideas about sound in Greek auditory art. Archaic and Classical Greek song culture was noisy. Songs often describe or remark upon noises and regularly equate these sounds—the roar of monsters or the din of battle—with acts of social disruption or figures of social disorder. At the same time, however, the songs themselves, performative products of an ordered society, are remarkably and often experimentally sonorous. This paradox of Greek song as a bulwark against the dangers of noise and as a resonant expression of that same noise is the dissonance of which the title of Gurd’s book speaks. Reacting against the Romantic conception of the ancient world as an elegantly ordered and silent cultural keepsake, Gurd argues that Greek song culture valued sound and thus was more akin to modern avant-garde noise music in their shared “commitment to creating sensuous artistic presences through the disruption of... cultural expectations.” (5) Through this revisionary look at the sound of Greek song, Gurd offers his readers a vital piece of “sensuous scholarship”, to borrow the phrase of Paul Stoller, and makes a significant contribution to the study of the senses in ancient art, literature, and thought.

After a rhapsodic “Capo” of ancient Greek sounds stitched together from various sources, the book is divided into a “Prologue”, three main chapters organized chronologically around a shared theme, and a summative “Coda.” Extensive endnotes and an index of key terms follow.

In the “Prologue”, Gurd covers a vast amount of theoretical and conceptual ground—from Marx to Jakobson to Deleuze and cognitive psychology—as he seeks to situate the study of sound in Greek song in “a history of the sensations produced and explored in technical media” (11), and so within the burgeoning field of sound studies and the broader “affective turn” that has taken place in the Humanities. Sappho is the centerpiece of this chapter, whose poetry is a paradigm for the intersection of words, sound, and meaning. With Gurd’s well-trained ear as

a guide, we hear the sonic complexity of Sappho's lyrics, which softly babbles idyllic soundscapes and thrums out the destructive physical manifestations of erotic jealousy. While the occasional use of academic jargon (e.g. "affect in a work of art has to do with the becoming-other of language" [18]; "But we have seen there is also an implicitly vectoral poetics of affect in his emphasis on what might be called the heteronym as a way of alienating language" [73]) may cause some to have to read certain discussions here and elsewhere at *Larghissimo*, Gurd has nevertheless provided an essential and up-to-date introduction to the various strands of thought that impact the study of sound and other sensations in aesthetics, art and music, and his generous citations of the literature will be a significant resource for Classicists.

Chapter 1 ("Figures") examines the sonorous moments in ancient Greek poetry when the "poems themselves begin to speak of sound" (16); when, in other words, the "sonic materiality" (16) of the poem rises to the level of cognitive awareness. Gurd deftly surveys such moments of "auditory awareness" in Homer, Hesiod, Alcaeus, Pindar, and Aristophanes among others, and convincingly demonstrates that at points in poems where the disruptive forces of noise are featured the poems themselves are often quite sonically complex. Hesiod depicts Typhoeus, who represents the final threat to the cosmic order of Zeus, as a noisy menace in verses that chime with a complex series of repeated sounds. Similarly an exiled Alcaeus, yearning for the bustling cacophony of the assembly and the shout of the herald, must instead listen to the "uncanny sounds" of female activity in the countryside, whose noises echo in the poem, particularly in the repeated motif of $\gamma\rho$, which sonically thematizes the wilds ($\acute{\alpha}\gamma\rho\iota\omega\tau\acute{\iota}\kappa\alpha\nu$) to which the city-loving ($\acute{\alpha}\gamma\acute{o}\rho\alpha\varsigma$) poet is exposed. Gurd is at his best in the chapter when he dissects the sonic motifs of the poetry, drawing the reader's attention to the intricate play of meaning and sound sown into these songs by their poets. His individual readings are miniature master-classes in reading with one's ears.

Inspired by the Deleuzian theory of affect, which is a transitive emotional process that links body and experience, Gurd examines in Chapter 2 ("Affect") the "auditory affect" of sound in tragedy, focusing particularly on Aeschylus. This is the most intellectually demanding but equally rewarding chapter in the book. At the heart of the discussion, Gurd convincingly demonstrates how in Aeschylus sounds often travel across time and space, and that the movement of sound impacts on the emotional states and actions of characters (and possibly the audience), producing more sounds and resulting in an "affective contagion" (64). For Gurd affect was a

“central pillar” (64) of Aeschylus’ tragic aesthetics resonant in the language, plotting, mythology, and even politics of his work. In the *Persians*, for example, the victorious shouts of the Greek fleet at Salamis, as reported by the Messenger, reverberate at the Persian court through the incorporation of pained nonverbal cries in mouths of the Chorus and Xerxes. This chain-reaction of sounds and emotional states within the play leads Gurd to wisely consider the terminus of this auditory affect in the response of the Athenian audience, for “this is the tale of tragedy: terrible sounds invade and almost overcome—*almost*—the dramatic form, resonating uncannily in the curved space of the theater.” (83) The “sonic materialism” at play in the *Persians* and elsewhere is of piece with contemporary theories of hearing, which Gurd illuminatingly highlights, thus bringing art, sound, and the body fittingly into contact at the close of a chapter on affect.

Chapter 3 (“Music”) explores the melody of Greek poetry, focusing in particular on what has become known as the “New Music”. Gurd, however, traces a centuries-long tradition of complex and innovative experimentation with sound in Greek poetry. Pindar self-consciously sings of the novelty and polyphony of his compositions, and this is matched by the complexity of sounds that his words produce. In the works of Timotheus and Euripides uncanny and unsettling subject matter resonates in the sounds these lyrics produce. As in Chapter 1, Gurd’s readings are most resonant when he guides the reader through the soundscapes of the passages, helping us to listen to the poetry.

Gurd’s soundings into Greek auditory art are sophisticated and illuminating treatments of their subject matter, but they are also, more importantly, provocations for scholars to open their ears to Greek poetry from the Archaic period onwards and see what sounds they can hear.

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