

## TEXTS, READING AND EPHEMERALITY

NOOTER (S.) *Greek Poetry in the Age of Ephemerality*. Pp. xii + 242. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £85, US\$110. ISBN: 978-1-009-32035-1.

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Readers of Anthony Doerr's novel *Cloud Cuckoo Land* will be imaginatively attuned to this superb book: humans, so very fragile, read/hear/perform ancient stories/poems/songs that are themselves so very fragile. Our ephemerality, as we 'slip the trap' (Doerr) while we read/hear/perform stories/poems/songs, shimmers over and under their and our precarious survival. Art's involvement in our ephemerality, and the varied struggles to be a stay against it, are not news. N. engages with it in arguments and evidence that are fresh, challenging and, at times, on first reading, even unconvincing – more on that below. The book takes us through nuanced readings, inferences and speculation from Homer, the Homeric Hymns, Sappho, Simonides, Pindar, Aeschylus, then finally Archilochus and Timotheus. These centuries of poetry are the 'age' of the title.

This short book takes time – not to read but rather to let the careful readings simmer. N.'s arguments are concise but complex. Recognising this, N. provides regular signposts for readers. A last signpost near the end of the book is a look back (p. 217): the human body in early Greek poetry is perceived as ephemeral and fragile, while poetry's performing bodies and inscribed texts, in various ways, imagine temporal and spatial perdurance 'through the rhythms of performance and the embodied interface of writer, reader, and text'.

The introduction is a lively walk through theoretical, scholarly and philological debts and pathways – including tattoos (perdurance allied to ephemerality of the body) and mummification ('conservational, yet transformative', p. 3). A series of careful word-studies (*demās, oimē, rhythmos, schema, pūr, ephēmeroi*) set the tone for the book's weave of philology and theory. N. introduces the techniques ('rhythm and measure, soundplay and wordplay, metaphor and meaning, and the material of the embodied word', p. 4) by which poetry *tries* to transform 'ephemeral experience into lasting meaning' through 'performing bodies and enduring objects' (p. 6). The book can serve as a model, joining as it does the challenging questions of literary and cultural theoretical discourse with a learned and lithe dexterity with the most useful characteristics of philological analysis.

Part 1 is 'Bodies'. In the opening chapter, 'Did the Heart Beat? Rhythm and the Body in Ancient Greek Poetry', N. dismisses an analogy between heartbeat and the regularity of rhythm. On the contrary, in early Greek poetry the heartbeat is unpredictable, malleable, needs external forces to keep it in rhythm. Eventually it is poetry (with concomitant singing and dancing) that becomes that external force. Chapter 2, 'The Substance of Song: Music in Homer and the Homeric Hymns', argues that song and music in the Homeric epics are fleeting and associated with death. Their involvement with animal voices (a perduring non-human world) and the materiality of aesthetic objects gives song and music their foothold against ephemerality. The Homeric Hymns provide a more consoling view of poetry's role as comfort: while we listen, time and our own ephemerality are suspended (like Doerr's 'slip the trap'). 'The Erotics of Again: Time and Touch in Sappho' closes Part 1. N. here develops a different mode of perdurance: (re)performing/reading/singing a poem of desire (re)creates presence.

Part 2 turns to 'Texts'. The opening chapter, 'Situating Simonides: Stones, Song, and Sound', is perhaps the most compelling: a *tour de force* of nuanced, cogent readings of texts and culture. N. suggests a new cultural worry about a 'fixed futurity'.

Performance, verbal memorability, rhythms and metres: all are still part of the stay against ephemerality, but now Simonides adds materiality, becoming ‘a poet of stone and one of song’ (p. 137). Yet, stones still need their poems/songs performed, as much as poems/songs need stones. Song animates bodies, but also animates the material on which it preserved.

Especially in this chapter and in the last N.’s attention to metre is important (e.g. dactylo-epitrites, aeolic lyric, dactylic hexameter). N. notes how metre shapes and pervades an experience of a poem, beyond mere adornment or sound effect. N. puts to good use a salutary attunement to the resonance of the words resurfacing in different metrical patterns. N. also takes other acoustic or sonic correspondences seriously as well as ‘the enlivening substance of sound’ (p. 152). There is occasional overstatement of a metre’s characteristics: for example, the forward momentum of a hexameter (which I would argue is not a feature of the metre itself, but rather of contexts that develop that potential). My slightly raised eyebrow here is a small price to pay for a book that takes metre seriously.

N. continues to tease out and develop ancient Greek metaphors for ephemerality and lasting futurity in ‘Writing the Future: Pindar, Aeschylus, and the Tablet of the Mind’. Pindar and Aeschylus now bring in the language of legal contracts. This chapter also has a brilliant exploration of the implications of the future tense and of the use and nuance of *méllein*.

The book makes a remarkable pivot as it come to a close, turning to the ways in which we deal with the material survival of ancient texts. In ‘Recovering the Bodies of Archilochus’ Cologne Epode and Timotheus’ *Persae*’, ephemerality, sound, performance, perdurance and materiality become a matter of our engagement as fragile human beings with fragile texts. N.’s reading(s) of the Cologne Epode, especially, attune us to the word *sōma*, interweaving the treatment of a (female) body by a (male) poet and the later treatment of the fragments by (male) scholars. A full sentence on these poems is worth quoting to give an idea of N.’s sentences that are clear, yet in which every word carries water (p. 209): ‘Each part of their passage though the material conditions of the world has shaped the way we read them now, becoming indelibly enmeshed in the stories of mortal fragility and survival that they instantiate’.

N. explores subtle concatenations of ways, changing over time, by which Greek poetry enacts and embodies perdurance in an endeavour to stave off ephemerality. On first reading, I was sceptical, thinking that N. had spun too much web out of too little thread. Diffidence led to procrastination, yet this highlights an important quality of the book (Georgia O’Keeffe: ‘to see takes time’). After reading (and rereading) these chapters, through the passage of time, N.’s arguments kept resonating. Scepticism slowly turned into nods and affirmations. The patient persuasiveness of the arguments, the careful sentences, the blend of theory and philology, will (and should) continue to resonate and shape the ways we read, talk and write about these (and other) poems.

Virginia Tech

ANDREW S. BECKER  
abecker@vt.edu