When Self-Praise Connects the Speaker to the Universe: A Diachronic View of the Word Eukhomai (ε##χομαι) in Its Homeric Contexts

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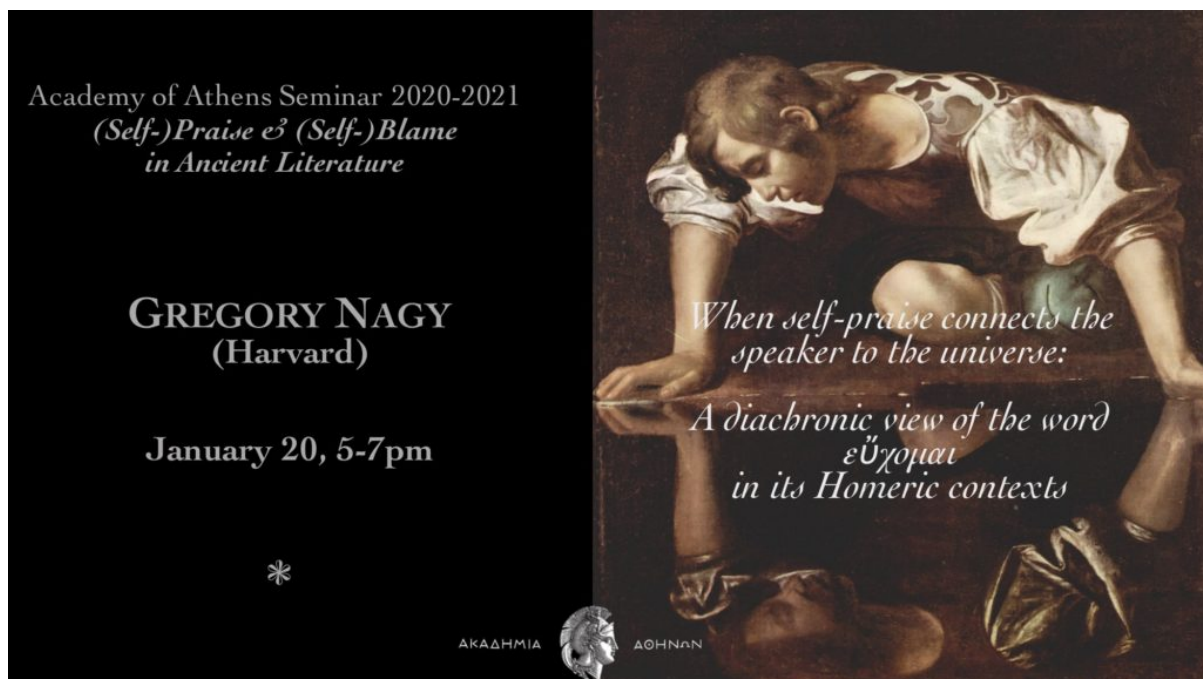http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

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When self-praise connects the speaker to the universe: A diachronic view of the word *eukhomai* (εὔχομαι) in its Homeric contexts

◯ Gregory Nagy

JANUARY 20, 2021 | By Gregory Nagy

2021.01.20 | By Gregory Nagy

Poster for Academy of Athens Seminar 2020-2021.

This text, **https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/when-self-praise-connects-the-speaker-to-the-universe/**, is to be read "live" on January 20, 2021, at 5:00 p.m. Athens time, as a contribution to a seminar series organized by the Academy of Athens for 2020–2021, "(Self-)Praise and (Self-) Blame in Ancient Literature" (Κέντρον Ερεύνης της Ελληνικής και Λατινικής Γραμματείας της Ακαδημίας Αθηνών, στο πλαίσιο του μηνιαίου σεμιναρίου του). My special thanks go to Dr. Efi Papadodima (DPhil Oxon), Research Fellow at the Academy (Ευσταθία Παπαδόδημα, **epapadodima@Academyofathens.gr**), for all her valuable help in organizing my presentation. And what I do present here, in my role as a Philhellene, owes much to three real Hellenes whom I will be praising (without interweaving any self-praise on my part!) in the course of my presentation for their individual contributions to the cosmic *politismós* of Hellenism. Their names are Antonios Rengakos, Alexander Nehamas, and John B. Petropoulos. I list them here in an order that happens to follow the sequence of my relevant words of praise for each one of them. In the case of my friend Antonios, I praise him for his philological accuracy in studying the text and language of Homeric poetry—the kind of accuracy that has been for me a model for the Homeric interpretations that I will be attempting here. In the case of my other friend, Alexander Nehamas, I praise him for writing the best book I have ever read about Friedrich Nietzsche, who had once been a professor of Classical Greek at a German-speaking university. Alexander's book (Nehamas 1985 in the Bibliography below), which analyzes most creatively the genial intuitiveness of Nietzsche, inspired me to delve into this question: what was Nietzsche thinking when he chose the wording *Also sprach Zarathustra* for one of his most arresting displays in thinking? As we will see, the word "*sprach*" as embedded in this title is relevant to the meaning of Homeric Greek *eukhomai*. And, lastly, I praise John B. Petropoulos—Yiannis to me—who is not only a friend but also a former student. He is one of the twelve current senior editors of *A Homer commentary in progress* (Frame, Muellner, Nagy, and others, 2017- in the Bibliography below), and his work on Homeric poetry and beyond represents for me an ideal example of "best practices" in blending philology with linguistics.

"Wanderer above the sea of fog" (ca. 1818), Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). **Image** via Wikimedia Commons.

§0. I start now by sharing the text of the original abstract that I had submitted to the organizers of this series of seminars emanating from the Athens Academy for 2020–2021, "(Self-)Praise

and (Self-) Blame in Ancient Literature."

In translating Homeric Greek, speakers of English need to translate *eukhomai* (εὔχομαι) as 'pray' or 'vow' in some contexts and as 'boast' in other contexts. Meanwhile, there is an attestation of the third-person *eukhetai* (εὔχεται) in a Linear B tablet from Pylos [Ep 704], e-u-ke-to (pronounced *eukhetoi*), but Mycenologists interpret the word in that context to mean not 'pray' or 'vow' or 'boast' but, instead, 'juridically declare'. And, exceptionally, this same interpretation applies once—only once—in Homeric diction. The unique context for such a meaning is a description of a scene of litigation in the ecphrasis of the Shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18.499, where an unnamed defendant makes a juridical declaration. So, how to reconcile the meanings 'pray' and 'vow' and 'juridically declare'? The basic solution has been formulated in a book by Leonard Muellner (1976 [100–106]), and I have reinforced his formulation in my own work [N_1997]. But how to reconcile, further, these meanings with that other meaning, translated as 'boast'? I will argue that the 'boasting' of Homeric personae is valued as cosmically true in Homeric poetry. That is to say, such 'boasting' can be explained as first-person self-praise that is validated by the third-person narrative of Homeric poetry, which claims for itself the inherent power to declare the absolute truth to its hearers.

§1. The wording of my abstract here, as I just shared it, helps explain the title I have given to my presentation, and I repeat the title here for the sake of further contemplation: "When self-praise connects the speaker to the universe: A diachronic view of the word *eukhomai* (εὔχομαι) in its Homeric contexts." But now I offer some qualifications with regard to the content of my abstract. When I say "universe" in the title for my presentation, I mean the *kosmos*, yes. And yet, I do not mean "*kosmos*" only in a universal sense, as when speakers of English say "cosmos," but also in a particularized sense, as, for example, when speakers of Greek in ancient Sparta referred to the oral transmission of their customary laws as their *kosmos*—that is what we read in Herodotus 1.65.4 (PH 14§32). I note, parenthetically, that the abbreviation "PH" that I just gave in my citation, within parentheses, of a relevant comment I had made with reference to the relevant passage in Herodotus, is not meant to be "self-praise" (as implied by way of an archaic phrase used by editors, *locus laudatus*) but merely "self-citation" (as expressed by way of the more common phrase, *locus citatus*). That is to say, I will be making some citations of previous work I have done, but I will keep them as unobtrusive as possible, using abbreviations such as the "PH" here—which can be looked up later by those readers who may choose to consult my Bibliography below.

§2. I am distancing myself from the "universe" of the "speaker" in the title of my presentation because my premise here is that the "universe" of Homeric poetry is hardly the same thing as "our" cosmos. What is "cosmically true" for Homeric poetry—to re-use the wording that I had used in my abstract—is surely not our "truth."

§3. I should add one more qualification about the wording of my title: when I say "diachronic," I do not mean "historical," since I think of diachronic analysis as model-building through time, whereas historical analysis has to deal with the contingencies of real history. To say it more precisely (N_2011 §16): "Both synchronic and diachronic perspectives are a matter of *model-building*. We can build *synchronic models* to describe and explain the workings of a structure as we see it attested in a given historical context. We can likewise build *diachronic models* to describe and explain how that given structure may have evolved from one of its phases into other phases. What we have built, however, is a set of models to be tested on historical realities. The models are not the same thing as the realities themselves. And the realities of history as a process are not dependent on such models. History may either confirm or upset any or all aspects of our models, since the contingencies of history do not need to follow the rules of existing structures."

§4. Such are the underpinnings for my attempt at building a diachronic model for the meaning of *eukhomai* in Homeric diction. And my diachronic modeling will, I hope, lead to a re-assessment of our understanding of this word—and of the etymology of this word.

§5. My approach, I must emphasize, is based not only on linguistics but also on an ongoing analysis of the formulaic system underlying Homeric poetry—a system to which Milman Parry referred simply in terms of "Homeric diction"—that is why I used that same expression in the wording of my abstract, as already quoted. Such an approach to questions of "etymology" is clearly explained in the Foreword to an online project edited by Olga Levaniouk, *A Concise Inventory of Greek Etymologies* (2017-), listed in the Bibliography below.

§6. This same approach characterizes the overall aims of a related project, already mentioned, which is an online Homeric commentary. The title of this other project, as I also already mentioned, is *A Homer commentary in progress* (ed. Frame, Muellner, Nagy, and others, 2017-). I now describe it more fully here (epitomizing from N_2017.11.12). The intellectual foundation of our commentary is simple and at the same time most ambitious: of all existing commentaries on Homeric poetry, ours is the first and only such project that is based squarely

on the cumulative research of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who together created a new way of thinking about Homeric poetry. Both Parry and Lord taught at Harvard University (Parry died prematurely in 1935, when he was still an assistant professor, while Lord was a distinguished Emeritus Professor at the time of his death in 1991). The lifelong research of Parry and Lord, as summarized in Lord's magisterial synthesis, *The Singer of Tales* (1960/2000/2019), proved that Homeric poetry is a system generated from oral traditions, and that the building blocks of this system are formulas on the level of form and themes on the level of meaning (Lord 1960:4). Our commentary is designed to analyze and explain this system of formulas and themes, to which we refer short-hand as a formulaic system—or, to use the term adopted by Parry, "Homeric diction." For a most convenient introduction, I cite Parry 1930 and 1932, online versions of which are signaled in the Bibliography below.

§7. That said, I can now start to contemplate a special kind of discourse, identified in Homeric diction by way of the word *eukhomai* and its derivatives, that is being used by speakers who are quoted or paraphrased in the narrative of Homeric poetry. Such discourse that is being quoted or paraphrased in Homeric poetry—together with the narrative that frames the quotations and paraphrases—must be analyzed, I think, within the "universe" of the formulaic system that Milman Parry chose to describe simply as "Homeric diction."

§8. The systematic language for telling about such a "universe" operates on truth-values of its own, measured in terms of positive and negative valuations. Such measurement is comparable, as I tried to show in a previous work (BA 12§2, with bibliography), to what Plutarch in his *Life of Lycurgus* (8.2, 21.1, 25.2; also 14.3, 26.3) reports about ancient Spartan society, where *epainos* 'praise' was counterbalanced with *psogos* 'blame' in social discourse, especially in poetry (14.5, 26.6). So also in the world of Homeric poetry, as I tried to show, the positive valuations in this same poetic world by way of 'praise' and the negative counter-valuations by way of 'blame' added up to a system of communication that we, in our own hoped-for empirical world, may describe as the special language that Parry described as "Homeric diction."

§9. For the moment, let us view all at once the different interpretations that are assigned to the word *eukhomai* in different contexts of Homeric diction. I review here the different contexts: *eukhomai* as 'pray' or 'vow' or 'boast' or simply 'declare'. Even if these alternative interpretations can be simplified by way of further analysis, the fundamental fact remains that whatever it is that I may be praying or vowing or boasting or declaring may turn out to be

either correct or incorrect in the world of Homeric narrative. That is to say, the world of Homeric poetry may view something positively, so that this something is praised, or negatively, so that this same something is blamed. Explicitly or implicitly, Homeric poetry by way of Homeric diction could indicate what is valid in its universe and what is invalid.

§10. Here is an example in Homeric contexts that call for the interpretation of *eukhomai* as 'boast'. If Agamemnon *eukhetai* 'boasts' that he is 'best of the Achaeans', as we read in *Iliad* 1.91, he will be shown explicitly to be wrong by the overall structure of the *Iliad*, since Achilles is ultimately vindicated as the very best of the Achaeans, as I argued in a previous work (BA chapter 2, especially pp. 26, 44); by contrast, if Odysseus *eukhetai* 'boasts' that he is a Cretan prince who originates from the imperial island of Crete, as we read in *Odyssey* 14.199, he will be shown implicitly to be diachronically "right" even if he is synchronically "wrong" in terms of the overall structure of the *Odyssey*, as I argued in another previous work (N_2017.04.11).

§11. I can make a comparable point about contexts that call for the interpretation of *eukhomai* as 'pray'. If I pray to a god and the god says no to the prayer, then the Homeric narrative that validates the negative outcome of my prayer will take away from my glory simply by way of narrating my failure, whereas that same glory would have been mine if the same god had said yes to my prayer. We have here, I think, the basic reason why the noun *eukhos* can be translated as a synonym for other Homeric nouns that we translate as 'glory' or the equivalent, as in *Iliad* 7.89, for example.

§12. Win or lose, the discourse of characters who are quoted or paraphrased in Homeric diction is of the highest importance—both to the characters and to the poetry. That is why the word *mūthos* in Homeric diction, as Richard Martin (1979) has demonstrated, refers to speech of the highest order, whether this kind of speech is valid or is ultimately invalidated. If I may use the expression of Spinoza (*Ethics* Part V, Proposition XXIII, Scholium), such speech in Homeric diction is quoted *sub specie aeternitatis*.

§13. Whether the divine order of the Homeric world validates or invalidates whatever a character is saying in Homeric poetry, there is a reciprocity—however uneven—between divinities and mortals that depends on the outcome of what is being said. Whatever the outcome of a speech by a mortal, good or bad, this mortal will owe that outcome to the immortals. That is why I prefer the interpretation of Muellner (1976) over other interpretations

that discount the role of the divine order (for example, Perpillou 1972—though I very much value his analysis of Homeric contexts).

§14. Most relevant here is a chapter entitled 'The Vow' in a book by Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* (1973, translated from the French original, 1969), where the analysis focuses on Greek *eukhesthai* and its Latin cognate, *vovēre*. In what follows, I epitomize what I said in a previous work (N_2015 §52). The Latin verb *vovēre* can be translated as 'vow' in contexts where someone is *praying to a divinity* and asking for a favor to be granted, in return for which favor a vow is made to do something that is meant to gratify the divinity. Such a translation also applies in comparable contexts to the Greek verb *eukhesthai*. So, when *you make a vow in a prayer*, as expressed by way of the word *eukhesthai*, you are saying to a divinity that *you will do or are doing or have done something* in the hope that the divinity to whom you are praying will grant *what you are wishing for*. For a most pertinent example in the *Iliad*, I cite a situation where the hero Pandaros is being urged (misleadingly, by Athena in disguise) to make a vow-in-prayer as expressed by the verb *eukhesthai* (4.101: εὔχεο): this hero, by way of making a vow-in-prayer to Apollo, would be vowing that he would perform an animal sacrifice (4.102) in the hope that the god would grant him what he is wishing for, which is a safe homecoming (4.103). Pandaros then goes ahead and makes a vow-in-prayer (4:119: εὔχετο), vowing that he will in fact perform an animal sacrifice (4.120) in hopes of a safe homecoming (4.121). So, as Benveniste says about the meaning of *eukhesthai*—and his formulation applies also to the synonym *arâsthai*—'the "prayer" is not distinguished from the "vow": it is one and the same operation'. Or, as I would prefer to say it, the *wish-in-prayer* is not distinguished from the *vow-in-prayer*. I can paraphrase in terms of the Latin noun *vōtum*, translated as 'vow', which is a derivative of the Latin verb *vovēre*, translated as 'vow'. When you pray to a divinity, the word for *what you vow to do* is *vōtum*, but the word for *what you wish for* is likewise *vōtum*. In the case of the hero Pandaros in the Homeric *Iliad*, his wish—and therefore his prayer—is a failure, since he will soon be killed on the battlefield (5.290–296).

§15. Here I must stop to adjust the formulation of Benveniste, and again I epitomize from previous work (N_215 §53). As Leonard Muellner has shown (1976:55–56), the English translation 'vow' for such words as *eukhesthai* works only in situations where the human who prays to a divinity is announcing an act that will happen in the future. But the fact is, the act of gratifying a divinity can happen in the present or even in the past. What you announce in prayer does not have to be a promise about the future: it can also be an announcement about

the present or even about the past (Muellner 1976:36–37, 55–56). So, the translation 'vow-in-prayer' for *eukhesthai*—and for *arâsthai*—does not cover the full range of meanings for these verbs. From here on, accordingly, I will translate these verbs simply as 'announce-in-prayer', not 'vow-in-prayer'. And I must emphasize that, in each case of an *announcement-in-prayer*, the other side of the coin is a *wish-in-prayer*.

§16. In the mythical world of heroes, a wish expressed by a hero who makes an announcement-in-prayer to a divinity is often not heeded by the divinity (N_2015 §85). For example, at *Iliad* 2.402-429, when Agamemnon sacrifices an ox to Zeus (402–403, 422), he makes a wish-in-prayer, as expressed by the verb *eukhesthai* (411), that he will conquer the city of Troy (414–415) and kill Hector together with as many other enemies as possible (416–418) —all within the space of one single day (413). But Zeus refuses to bring this prayer to fulfillment (419)—even though the god accepts the offering of the sacrifice (420) and even though Agamemnon and his guests go ahead and cook the meat after killing the ox, dividing the beef among themselves and then feasting on it together (421–429). Although the narrative leaves it open whether, one fine day, Agamemnon will still succeed in his wish to conquer the city (419), it is made clear that the present wish-in-prayer, as performed by the hero on the occasion of this particular sacrifice, is a failure (again, 419). To paraphrase in Latin terms: the *vōtum* as a 'wish-in-prayer' is not granted here. And we have already seen another relevant example in the *Iliad*: when the hero Pandaros makes his announcement-in-prayer, as expressed by the verb *eukhesthai* (4.119), he says that *he will perform an animal sacrifice* (4.120) in hopes that Apollo, the god to whom he is praying, will grant him *what he is wishing for*, which is *a safe homecoming* (4.121). But the wish—and therefore the prayer—is a failure, since Pandaros will soon be killed on the battlefield (5.290-296). To paraphrase again in cognate Latin terms: the *vōtum* as an 'announcement-in-prayer' is a failure here because the same *vōtum* as a 'wish-in-prayer' is not fulfilled: the hero Pandaros will never return home safe and sound.

§17. I return to the point made by Spinoza: characters in Homeric poetry are speaking *sub specie aeternitatis*. The gods are listening to everything that was spoken by heroes—and everything that was spoken by the gods themselves in the age of heroes. In the light of such a divine perspective, then, I conclude here by making a comparison with a cognate situation, expressed in a cognate Indo-European language, an old form of Iranian, where the gods were also listening. Or, at least, that is what Zoroaster thinks, when he is said to be saying in the Avesta: 'Thus spoke Zarathustra.' The 'speak' here in 'thus spoke' is cognate with an old form of Greek *eukhomai*, as analyzed by Leonard Muellner (1976; summary in N_2017.04.19 §16):

the form is third-person aorist *eukto* (εὖκτο) 'he [Oedipus] prayed [to the gods]', attested in the Cyclic *Thebaid* 3.3 (ed. Allen). This form is cognate with the Avestan form *aoxta* in the sense of 'he spoke'—that is, 'spoke prayerfully' (Muellner 1976). And here I conjure the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen*, composed in four parts between 1883 and 1885 and published between 1883 and 1891. In this work, Nietzsche speaks as if he were Zoroaster, credited in world history as the founder of a system of thinking generally known as Zoroastrianism. But there is a prehistory to be noted here: in the course of his earlier experimentations with his speaking role as Zoroaster in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche had at one point been tempted to figure the ancient Greek thinker Empedocles and not the Iranian seer Zoroaster as his speaker. His ultimate choice of Zoroaster—a decision that I could playfully describe here as a victory of Iranian over Hellenic models—was influenced by the publication of the Avesta in the 50-volume Sacred Books of the East series, at the initiative of Friedrich Max Müller (starting with volume 4 part 1, Oxford University Press 1880). In the Avesta, at *Yasna* 9.16 we find this most memorable phrase: *āat̰ aoxta zaraθuštrō* 'also sprach Zarathuštra' or 'thus spoke Zarathuštra', introducing the words of prayer spoken by Zoroaster to the god Ahuramazdā. Here we see the foundational inspiration for the words used by Nietzsche as the title of his book *Also sprach Zarathustra*—which in turn inspired a tone poem composed by Richard Strauss in 1896, featuring the same title *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Op. 30).

Portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche (1906), Edvard Munch (1863–1944). **Image** via Wikimedia Commons.

As I once said in another context (N_2017.04.19 §17), I find it appropriate to compare the opening vision in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, made in 1968. The film opens with the opening of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Op. 30) by Richard Strauss. Just as Strauss has

done Nietzsche proud, maybe Kubrick has done Strauss proud as well. And maybe all of them have done Zoroaster proud.

2001 A Space Odyssey Opening in 1080 HD

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PH. See N_1990a.

PP. See N_1996.

By Gregory Nagy

Albert Lord, eukhomai, Homeric epic, Milman Parry