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On the idea of dead poets as imagined by T. S. Eliot, compared with ideas about reperformance, Part II

 Gregory Nagy

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§0. In Part II of this essay, continuing now from Part I (Nagy 2021.04.17, linked [here](#)), I return to what T. S. Eliot said (1919 [1975]:38) about the poet he was in his youth—and about any aspiring poet in general: “the most individual parts of his work,” he said, “may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.” In Part I, I applied this idea of “dead poets” to ideas about “reperformance” in a song culture like that of the ancient Greeks, where the basic reality of performance is still needed to bring a poetic composition to life. I argued that Eliot’s words, as I have just quoted them again, can be reapplied in the case of ancient Greek poets like Sappho and Alcaeus, both of whom are conventionally dated to around 600 BCE, if we take for a moment the performer’s point of view. In reapplying the words of Eliot, however, I reworded his wording about the generic poet by saying not “his work” but, rather, “his or her performance.” For an ancient Greek poet as a performer of poetry, I said, *the most individual parts of his or her performance may be those in which the dead poets, his or her ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously*. Here in Part II, I take the argumentation further by thinking of reperformance in the context of ancient Greek traditions of poetic performance linked with seasonally recurring festivals. What I describe here as the performance or reperformance of *poetry* could be better described, from the perspective of most classicists today, as *choral song*, but it could be even better

described, from an anthropological perspective, as a ritualized re-enactment, by way of singing-and-dancing in a group, of the seasonal recurrence of vitality in plant-life. That is what was happening, as I showed in another essay (Nagy 2021.03.20, linked [here](#)) at seasonally recurring festivals celebrated in such ancient cities as Orkhomenos-in-Boeotia. The name of *Tháleia*, one of the three divine *Khárites* or ‘Graces’ worshipped in that city, was pictured there as an embodiment of festive singing and dancing, as we read in Pindar’s *Olympian* 14. In this connection, I highlight the fact that the noun-formation *tháleia* derives from the verb *thállein*, with reference to the ‘flourishing’ of vitality in plant-life as also to the general festivity that marks the celebrations of festivals. Further, as I showed in yet another essay (Nagy 2021.04.03, linked [here](#)), the noun *kháris*, embodied in the plural name *Khárites* linked with the three ‘Graces’, could refer not only in general to the *pleasure* of experiencing *beauty* but also, more specifically, to special examples of *pleasurable beauty* such as *garlands woven by stringing together flowers blossoming on a myrtle tree*. The flowers were reperforming, as it were, the rite of spring—or of autumn, or of whatever season it was when the local flowers that marked that season were expected to blossom. And the festivities of singing-and-dancing were a reperformance, as it were, that matched the primal performance of the ‘Graces’, who presided over the blossoming of flowers every year at the right time, in the right *hōrā* or ‘season’, year after year after year. So, there is something to be said for the words of Alice when she sings in the 1951 film *Alice in Wonderland*, produced by Disney Studios (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043274/>), “you can learn a lot of things from the flowers.”



Alice surrounded by flowers. After *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske. Drawing by Jill Robbins after a still taken from **this video**, around 3:03.



The prima donna flower. After *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske. Drawing by Jill Robbins after a still taken from **this video**, around 3:26.

§1. In Part I of my essay, I went on to offer this formulation about reperformance: *the reperformed composer becomes the recomposed performer*. This formulation, which I applied further in another essay (Nagy 2021.02.27, linked [here](#)) goes back to my overall thinking about reperformance in *Poetry as Performance* (Nagy 1996:214, linked [here](#)). But the thinking goes much further back in time, back to the book *Pindar's Homer* (Nagy 1990 = PH, starting at p. 18, 1§5 and continuing from there, especially at p. 81 2§53 and in Chapters 3, 12, 13, 14). All along, my understanding of reperformance has been different from most though not all of some newer approaches as represented in a book edited by Richard Hunter and Anna Uhlig (2017), mentioned already in Part I. Here in Part II, I focus on a basic difference, which is evident in the wording used by the editors in their introduction to their book. What they say about my overall work on preclassical Greek poetry, especially in my book *Poetry as Performance* (1996), is that I view this poetry as “a process of ritual re-enactment.” (Hunter and Uhlig 2017:10).

§2. This description is for me quite problematic, since the term “ritual” is not explained. Left without explanation, my approach to reperformance is thus made to sound quite mystical and even mystifying. But my understanding of ritual, as I define it best in *Pindar’s Homer* (Nagy 1990 p. 44 1§49), is derived from a classical definition based on Aristotle’s thinking about *mīmēsis*, hereafter written simply as *mimesis*, in the primary sense of ‘re-enactment’ and in the secondary sense of ‘imitation’. And I now add a further point that is relevant to my argument—that Aristotle’s programmatic definition of *mimesis* reveals something else that is basic to the idea of reperformance. The basic fact is—to put it in Aristotle’s terms—that the experience of *mimesis* is fundamentally *pleasurable* (for the relevant wording of Aristotle I refer to Nagy 2015.10.15, §§4–9, linked [here](#)).

§3. With reference to ritual, I now quote a most elegant formulation once made by my late friend Stanley Tambiah. The first time I ever quoted this formulation was in *Pindar’s Homer* (Nagy 1990 1§49), at which time, I am fairly certain, most other classicists were not yet reading Tambiah. And then, so many years later, I quoted him again, in the context of an analysis of the Greek word *mimesis*. I review here this version of my analysis, featuring my quotation from Tambiah (Nagy 2019.05.03, linked [here](#)).

§4. The word *mimesis*, as used by Aristotle in his *Poetics* 1449b24–28, designates the enactment of mythical action in tragedy. More generally, this word designates the reenactment, through ritual, of the events of myth. In the case of a highly stylized ritual complex like Athenian tragedy, the reenactment is equivalent to acting out the roles of mythical figures. The acting out can take place on the level of speech alone, or else, on the level of speech combined with bodily movement, that is, dance: it is in this broader sense of *acting* that we can understand the force of *pros*, ‘corresponding to’, in the expression *pros ta pathea autou*, ‘corresponding to his sufferings [*pathea*, plural of *pathos*]’, in Herodotus 5.67.5, describing the singing and dancing by *tragikoi khoroi*, ‘tragic choruses’, at the city-state of Sikyon in the time of the tyrant Kleisthenes, in reenactment of the *pathea*, ‘sufferings’, of the hero Adrastos. The fundamental meaning of *mimesis*, to repeat, is that of reenacting the events of myth. By extension, however, *mimesis* can designate not only the reenacting of the myth but also the present reenacting of previous reenactments. So, *mimesis* is a current ‘imitation’ of earlier reenactments. That is because the newest instance of reenacting has as its model, cumulatively, all the older instances of performing the myth and not just the oldest and supposedly original instance of the myth itself.

§5. This line of thought corresponds to the celebrated description of mimesis in the *Poetics* of Aristotle as the mental process of identifying the representing ‘this’—in the ritual of acting the drama—with the represented ‘that’ in the myth that is being acted out by the drama. In Greek this mental process is expressed thus: *houtos ekeinos / touto ekeino* ‘this is that!’ (Aristotle *Poetics* 1448b / *Rhetoric* 1.1371b); such a mental process, Aristotle goes on to say, is itself a source of pleasure. This pleasure is not incompatible with an anthropological understanding of ritual as defined by Tambiah (1985:123):

Fixed rhythm, fixed pitch are conducive to the performance of joint social activity. Indeed, those who resist yielding to this constraining influence are likely to suffer from a marked unpleasant restlessness. In comparison, the experience of constraint of a peculiar kind acting upon a collaborator induces in him, when he yields himself to it, the pleasure of self-surrender.

§6. This anthropological formulation by Tambiah, I argue, corresponds to Aristotle’s idea of *catharsis* (*Poetics* 1449b24–28):

ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι’ ἀπαγγελίας, δι’ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν.

Tragedy, then, is the re-enactment [*mīmēsis*] of a serious and complete action. It has magnitude, with language embellished individually for each of its forms and in each of its parts. It is done by performers [*drōntes*] and not by way of narrative, bringing about through pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*] the purification [*katharsis*] of such emotions [*pathēmata*].

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