

Greek gods and the Archaic aesthetics of life¹

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At the wedding-feast for one of Zeus's serial marriages (probably to Themis, divine symbol of order and rectitude, or possibly to Hera, his final consort), Zeus himself asked the rest of the assembled gods whether there was anything of which they felt a lack in their universe. They responded by proposing that he should bring into being a further group of deities whose purpose would be to adorn with words and music the world-order Zeus had put in place as leader of the Olympians. This account of the creation of the Muses was presented, and conceivably invented, by the poet Pindar in the *Hymn (to Zeus?)* (fr. 31 Snell-Maehler) which the scholars of Alexandria subsequently placed at the beginning of the complete book of his hymns (and perhaps at the head of the collected edition of his works). Since the hymn has not survived and we have only scanty references to this part of it in later sources, much remains inevitably obscure about the moment at which the idea of the Muses was first conceived on Olympus. But it is legitimate to wonder whether there is an important sense in which Pindar's imagination – the inheritor of complex Archaic traditions of thought and feeling – was giving shape in this mythological vignette to a notion of something that might count as the 'birth of aesthetics' among the society of the gods.

In his speculative reconstruction of Pindar's hymn in *The Discovery of the Mind*, Bruno Snell suggested that 'if we had this episode in Pindar's own language..., it would surely be among the most famous in Greek literature'. He continued: 'Pindar could not have expressed more fittingly what poetry means to the world. On the day when the world attained to its perfect shape he affirms that all beauty is incomplete unless someone is present to celebrate it.'² Although one might have reservations about other elements of Snell's reconstruction, he is right that Pindar's lyric narrative appears to have represented the birth of the Muses as answering and remedying a sense of 'incompleteness' among the gods. The Muses are conceived of in this context as adding something that was previously missing from Olympian society. What they bring to it is a value of a different kind from the operations of divine power and will

¹ It is a pleasure to contribute this short article to a celebration of the work of Øivind Andersen, a scholar who has made so many subtle contributions to our understanding of ancient Greek culture.

² Snell 1953, 78. For more recent reconstructions see Hardie 2000 (claiming a Pythagorean background) and D'Alessio 2005 and 2009; both argue for Apollo not Zeus as the addressee of the hymn.

in action: something which can be used to reflect and glorify that power but which nonetheless converts it into material for the distinctive realm, and the second life, of song. For Pindar and for the cultural conglomerate of Archaic Greece in general, the Muses, together with other divine musicians (especially Apollo, lyre-player and singer, and various groups of female singers/dancers, including the Graces), embody the idea of a divine aesthetic of self-reflective beauty.

Such ideas of the ‘music’ of Olympian society have become so overfamiliar – in part through their constant adaptation in the vocabulary, imagery and tropes of many later phases of Western culture³ – that it is worth reminding ourselves just how remarkable they are from the viewpoint of comparative mythology and religion. The role of the Muses within a conception of the community of the gods has no clear precedent or parallel in either Indo-European or Near Eastern evidence, despite the fact that the conception in question owes a great deal in other respects to those cultural zones. Even if one casts the net further afield, it is difficult to find in other religious and mythopoeic traditions a substantial equivalent to the way in which Archaic Greek culture ascribes to its gods a collective commitment to the arts of the Muses. It is a pervasive assumption of Greek religious myth that the gods can experience shared fulfilment, both as performers and audiences, in the ravishing beauty of music, song and dance. Greek gods, it appears, *need* the Muses’ values to exist in their world in order to satisfy the more contemplative side of their nature.

Consider now, however, a different but cognate image of this divine aesthetic. The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* celebrates a god who precociously demands a lyre, *kitharis*, for himself (as well as a bow: unlike the Muses, he is a god of both action and song) on the very day of his birth (130–2). The journeys he undertakes thereafter are marked at critical junctures in the poem by musical performances; they are, in a sense, travels in song, a divine analogue to the itinerary of a travelling musician, such as the blind Chian bard (often equated in antiquity with ‘Homer’) who identifies himself as the singer of the hymn and refers to his own wanderings across the earth (165–78).

The particular scene I want to focus on here is a passage which describes the moment (to be thought of as one of an indefinite number of such moments) when Apollo arrives on Olympus from his shrine at Delphi to take part in the society of the gods. His arrival is marked by a spontaneous impulse on the part of the whole divine community to express itself in song and dance. In that regard the scene is a counterpart to Pindar’s image of how the Muses were

³ Curtius 1953, 228–46.

called into being to complete the needs of the gods. But in the *Hymn to Apollo* the scene takes a striking twist which discloses a deep question lurking within the ‘divine aesthetic’ I have so far outlined.

αὐτίκα δ’ ἀθανάτοισι μέλει κίθαρις καὶ αἰοιδῆ.
 Μοῦσαι μὲν θ’ ἅμα πᾶσαι ἀμειβόμεναι ὅπι καλῆ
 ὑμνεῦσιν ῥα θεῶν δῶρ’ ἄμβροτα ἢ δ’ ἀνθρώπων
 τλημοσύνας, ὅσ’ ἔχοντες ὑπ’ ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι
 ζώουσ’ ἀφραδέες καὶ ἀμήχανοι, οὐδὲ δύνανται
 εὐρέμεναι θανάτιό τ’ ἄκος καὶ γήραος ἄλκαρ. (188–93)

At once the immortals’ minds are occupied with lyre and song.
 The Muses, answering as a group with their lovely voices,
 Sing of the divine gifts of the gods and of humans’
 Sufferings – all the things that at the hands of the immortal gods
 Humans live through in their folly and helplessness,
 Incapable of finding a cure for death or a defence against old age.

Apollo’s movement from Delphi to Olympus (‘like an instant of thought’, 186, because, for all their anthropomorphized trappings, the gods inhabit a special plane of consciousness) might be expected to take us, by means of the hymn’s own imaginatively mobile focus, into a domain entirely set apart from the human world. Yet the Muses celebrate Apollo’s arrival by singing precisely about the lives of human beings – focusing, what’s more, on the misery, helplessness, and mortal finitude of their existence. The paradox of the moment is reinforced when the passage proceeds to describe an accompanying dance by nine goddesses and two male gods: Apollo himself, bathed in a light of divine radiance, plays the lyre at the centre of the ensemble while his parents, Zeus and Leto, derive intense delight from watching the whole performance (194–206).

If we have here, in part, the same divine aesthetic found in Pindar’s account of the wedding-feast for Zeus and his bride, it is an aesthetic which the hymn darkens and complicates by its ascription to the gods, in a setting of exquisite performative beauty, of a song about the miseries of human life. The irony is made more pointed by the phrase ‘divine gifts of the gods’ (θεῶν δῶρ’ ἄμβροτα, 190), which has caused some scholarly disagreement. But whether it refers to the gods’ own immortality (making the song’s themes counterbalance divine and human spheres) or to the good things they sometimes bestow on humans (so that the song then deals with both positive and negative sides of human existence), or indeed to *all* the conditions of human existence (as the idea of the gods’ ‘gifts’ certainly does in Achilles’ famous parable of Zeus’s two jars at *Iliad* 24.528), the result in any case throws heavy emphasis onto the

paradox of divinely beautiful song as a medium in which to express thoughts of human frailties, limitations and sufferings.

What are the implications of this paradox? Surely we are not meant to draw the grotesque inference, as some have supposed, that the Olympians derive self-satisfied pleasure, almost *Schadenfreude*, from contemplating the sheer miserableness of mortal existence. Greek gods, with only special exceptions, are not like that: capable though they are of gloating and destructive cruelty, they rarely if ever derive pleasure directly from observing the ephemerality of human life.⁴ On the contrary, Archaic Greek culture posits gods who are emotionally absorbed by, even obsessed with, the contents of human lives, finding them a suitable object for fascinated viewing (as well as partisan interventions). The *Iliad* imagines even Zeus himself as moved to concern and pity over human affairs, not just in a unique case like that of his son Sarpedon (for whom he sends down a shower of his own tears of blood at 16.458–61) but also in more wide-ranging ways. At the start of Book 20, for instance, Zeus expresses general concern for the destruction of both Greeks and Trojans, but then announces his intention of staying on Mount Olympus (while the other gods go down to join in the fighting) to take pleasure from watching events below (20.20–30). Once again, this is not a matter of anticipated pleasure at the sheer fact of human conflict and suffering. Rather, the scene evokes a typically ambiguous divine perspective, one which not only is unstable in the operations of its sympathy for human agents but also has the capacity to remove itself to a more reflective vantage point and observe human life as an object of quasi-aesthetic interest. As well as being a supreme agent in the poem, Zeus is, on another level, a kind of ultimate ‘audience’ of the *Iliad* itself.

The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, despite its later (and probably compound) authorship, exhibits the same fundamental understanding of the gods as the Homeric epics. That the terms of this world view permit the Muses and Apollo to perform songs about human sufferings betokens a complex conception both of the gods themselves and of the nature of song. This conception encodes an Archaic Greek aesthetic in which human and divine impinge on one another. If the practices of a human song-culture are projected onto the society of the gods, and if human life is translated into a subject somehow worthy of the gods’ own songs, the divine realm itself symbolizes values which can in turn be predicated of human song. This is illustrated by the intense ‘radiance’ (αἴγλη) which surrounds Apollo in the Homeric hymn as he plays the lyre and dances (202). That same word is found in some of Pindar’s evocations of the transformative radiance which can be bestowed on human existence at

4 Halliwell 2008, 337–9.

moments of special, divinely sanctioned success. One such instance occurs in a famous passage at the end of *Pythian* 8 (Pind. *P.* 8.95–7), where the pessimistic depiction of human life as ‘a dream of a shadow’ (σκιᾶς ὄναρ) is momentarily transfigured by the radiance of a Zeus-sent light (αἴγλα διόσδοτος). That example is doubly apt for my purposes, since Pindar’s own song implicitly purports to be a transmitter of that light. This underlines the way in which the attribution of a song-culture to the gods themselves is always a gesture of dialectical imagination designed to construct an ‘aesthetics of life’ in which human song itself aspires to participate.

At the heart of that aesthetic, I submit, lies a sense of the transformative power of song: the power to convert even suffering and negativity into beauty and expressive intensity, though without thereby erasing the significance of suffering itself. Some such power is implied in the invocations to the Muses at the very start of both Homeric epics, in the *Odyssey*’s retrospective glimpse of the Muses’ involvement in the mourning for the dead Achilles (*Od.* 24.60–4), and also (at least on my own rather heterodox reading) in the two songs about the Trojan war sung by the blind Demodocus for Odysseus in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*.⁵ My present thesis is that the transmuted suffering into the beauty of song lies at the heart of the paradox of the Archaic aesthetic in which gods themselves are both performers and audiences of such song. The gods cannot need song for the same reasons as humans, but they can exemplify the transformative power that humans experience in song as one form of the divine.

As a complement to this compressed argument, I would like at this point to juxtapose the Archaic sensibility I have tried to characterize with Nietzsche’s famous pronouncement in Chapters 5 and 24 of *The Birth of Tragedy* that ‘only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified’ (‘nur als *aesthetisches Phänomen* ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig *gerechtfertigt*’ [Nietzsche’s original emphases]).⁶ Nietzsche’s own thinking in *The Birth of Tragedy* is of course extensively influenced, in ways too complex to rehearse here, by elements of Archaic Greek thought and imagery. But it usually goes unnoticed that the aphorism just quoted has the suggestive imprint of an Archaic sensibility. In his later ‘Attempt at Self-Criticism’ prefaced to the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche connects the aphorism with the idea of an ‘artist-god’ (‘Künstler-Gott’).⁷ Now, it is true that for this Nietzschean

5 See discussion of all these passages in Halliwell 2011, 55–92.

6 Nietzsche [1872] 1988, 47. Ch. 24’s wording is subtly different: ‘only as an aesthetic phenomenon does the world *appear* to be justified’ [my emphasis], ‘...gerechtfertigt erscheint’ (Nietzsche [1872] 1988, 152). For some discussion, see Silk and Stern 1981, 294–5.

7 Nietzsche [1872] 1988, 17.

artist-god or ‘world-artist’ (‘Weltenkünstler’)⁸ the whole world, including human beings, is his ‘work of art’ – a notion for which there is no ready-made precedent in Greek conceptions of the Olympians. In fact, Nietzsche associates this quasi-artistic force (which destroys as well as creates), in heavily metaphysical fashion, with the ‘Dionysiac’ nature of primal being, the opposite pole to everything he associates with Apollo and the rest of the Olympians. On the other hand, it seems clear enough that the principle of ‘justifying’ the world aesthetically is not tied exclusively to Dionysiac creativity; it is also applicable to the opposite artistic-cum-aesthetic pole, the Apollonian. It is indeed easier to see how the principle applies to the Apollonian than to the Dionysiac, since the idea of an ‘aesthetic phenomenon’ fits the sphere of Apollonian image-making and beautiful illusions more closely than it does that of Dionysiac oneness. Moreover, Nietzsche understands the Olympian gods themselves as a projection of aesthetic ‘illusionism’: in Chapter 3 of the *Birth*, he calls the world they inhabit in the Archaic Greek mind an ‘artistic middle-world’ (‘künstlerische *Mittelwelt*’, Nietzsche’s emphasis) interposed between themselves and the underlying horror of existence.⁹ In a paradoxical sense, the Olympian realm to which the Greek god Apollo belongs is itself a product of the ‘Apollonian’ aesthetic drive.

The threads of thought which connect Nietzsche’s early conception of an ‘aesthetic justification’ of existence with what I have termed Archaic Greek ‘aesthetics of life’ are tangled, for sure. It is significant, for one thing, that *The Birth of Tragedy* barely acknowledges Greek myth’s own image of the Olympian gods as susceptible to certain kinds of aesthetic experience. Nietzsche does refer in passing, in Chapter 2, to Apollo as himself a music-god, though only in order to contrast the supposedly limited nature of Apollonian music (a kind of Doric architecture in sound, as he puts it) with the overwhelming power of Dionysiac music.¹⁰ Similarly, Apollo’s close relationship with the Muses is glanced at only once, in Chapter 4,¹¹ and nowhere does Nietzsche ponder the gods’ capacity to find the flawed, tragic conditions of human life a suitable subject for their own ‘aesthetic’ attention.

Nietzsche’s peculiar reworking of Archaic Greek ideas can sharpen our awareness of certain unresolved tensions in the myth-making imagination which originally produced those ideas. Greek gods do not help humans to solve the problems of existence; indeed, they reflect, magnify and (in part) cause those problems. (That, of course, was one of Plato’s fundamental reasons for

8 Nietzsche [1872] 1988, 30.

9 Nietzsche [1872] 1988, 36.

10 Nietzsche [1872] 1988, 33.

11 Nietzsche [1872] 1988, 41.

refusing to believe in such gods.) But the gods are also sources, for these same humans, of possible experiences of deep, transformative, and consoling value: the arts of the Muses, which Greeks came eventually to call simply ‘music’, *mousikê*, are one of the most important of those sources. The song-culture ascribed to the gods themselves is both an authenticating mirror of human song and yet also the projection of an ideal beauty which can never be fully possessed by humans, only aspired to. An essential intuition of Archaic Greek aesthetics lies in the problematic space between those two things.

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