

## Presentation of the Honorand's Contribution to Scholarship and Society by Professor Lucia Athanassaki, Chairman of Classical Studies

IT IS A GREAT HONOR and a great pleasure to say a few words tonight about Gregory Nagy's work – just a few words, because it is impossible to present in a short time his enormous contribution to scholarship, teaching, and research, a contribution that spans six decades and is still in full swing. There will be a personal tone in what I will say – when I started thinking of my presentation I realized that I have known Greg for thirty years. My familiarity with his work, on the other hand, is even older, it goes back

to the early 80's, when one of the first books I bought as a graduate student was *The Best of the Achaeans*, which came out as a hardcover in 1979 and immediately made a big impression. This book, which won the Goodwin Prize of the American Philological Association –now the Society of Classical Studies–, highlights the relationship between poetic depictions of heroes (primarily epic) and local heroic cults by focusing on Achilles and Odysseus. Nagy's interest in representations of heroes in Ancient Greece remains undiminished –I note that he will shortly speak about Heracles–, heroes are the subject of numerous studies and the subject of his online course, the most successful in international studies, the famous 24-hour journey that lasts a lifetime, as we read on the website.

Going back to the 1980s, *The Best of the Achaeans*, won fanatic friends and fanatic enemies since it takes up the thorniest issue of classical studies, the well-known 'Homeric question', on which there is no consensus and I am convinced that there will never be. Although scholars agree on the traditional character of Homeric poetry, opinion on Homer differs widely. On one side are those who believe that Homer was a literate genius. On the other side, where Nagy belongs, the emphasis is not on the poet, but on the genius of a tradition which has been perfected by countless generations of poets. It is certainly not a matter of different emphasis, it is a fundamental difference that affects editing principles, to which Nagy has also contributed by creating a digital edition that accounts for variants and like all his publications is open access. Going back to the fundamental difference I just mentioned, I wish to illustrate Nagy's contribution, by offering a very rough summary of the ideas of Nagy's spiritual predecessors, the proponents of



Fig. 6 : Presentation of the honorand by Chairman of Classics, Prof. L. Athanassaki

oral theory in the early 20th century, Milman Parry, and Albert Lord – I mention parenthetically that Albert Lord was later Nagy's teacher at Harvard. Through an in-depth study of the language of epics under the supervision of linguist Antoine Meillet, Milman Parry was able to establish the importance and extensive use of stereotypical expressions, such as e.g. fast-footed Achilles (πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς) and long-suffering divine Odysseus (πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς) to meet the same semantic and metrical needs in different syntactical contexts. These initial observations led him progressively to the theory of oral composition and field research in Yugoslavia, which began in 1933–35 and was continued by Albert Lord after the untimely death of Milman Parry in 1935. The path-breaking finds of Milman Parry and Albert Lord put the Homeric issue on a new footing, but did not satisfy those who continued to see a big gap between illiterate Yugoslav oral poets, who had in their arsenal stereotypical inherited expressions, and masterpieces such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The disagreement acquired an ideological dimension which had to do with the relative merits of orality and writing and, I assume, low and high culture. As already said, Nagy argues for the value of oral composition, but he intervenes in favor of orality by broadening the horizons of the Parry and Lord theory both from a linguistic and a social point of view.

As already mentioned, *The Best of the Achaeans* was published in 1979. Five years earlier, in 1974, Nagy had published another book, *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter*, which goes far beyond its title and heralds the vast research area to which Nagy will return in subsequent decades. In 1974 through comparative study of Greek and Indian stereotypical expressions, Nagy argued that the wealth of poetic expression predates the stereotypical expressions in which it progressively crystallizes and, in contrast to Parry's focus on the interaction of stereotypical expressions, he explored the genetic material of stereotypes by focusing on the stereotypical expression κλέος ἄφθιτον. The comparative study of the Greek epics and the Sanskrit hymns, the Vedas, leads Nagy to the conclusion that in Ancient Greece lyric genres predate epic, despite the fact that lyric poetry is only attested later. For example, the fact that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* predate the songs of Archilochus, Alcman or Sappho, does not mean that epic, as a literary genre, is older than lyric poetry. People sang at weddings, lullabied their children, mourned their dead and praised the gods in melic meters long before some poets sang in a certain rhythm, the dactylic hexameter, of the Achaeans' campaign against Troy in order to bring back Helen, as they had promised her father, when he gave her as bride to blond Menelaus. Nagy uses as evidence Sappho's famous song about the marriage of Hector and Andromache (44 LP), which also contains the stereotypical expression κλέος ἄφθιτον, unperishable glory. This study is the first sample of the panoramic study of early Greek poetry that characterizes Nagy's prolific scholarly production in the fifty years since its inception.

Our next brief stop is *Pindar's Homer: the Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*, published in 1990, which I got in my hands almost immediately – it was a classmate's

gift to me, the day I was awarded my PhD degree. It was a prophetic gesture. For reasons that will soon become clearer I have given this book the title, *pace Greg*, 'Nagy the Classic'. One of the reasons is that this study offers a panorama of archaic and early classical production which expands to include tragedy, but also Herodotus' *Histories*, issues to which Nagy will keep coming back. Equally important is the introduction of an interpretative sociocultural axis that enables Nagy to view this amazing artistic production in context. From a generic point of view, epic, songs for solo performance, tragedy, and also historiography derive their origin from the same womb, the ritual performance of choral song. From a thematic point of view, the warp around which the threads of epic, lyric poetry, tragedy, and historiography are woven is *κλέος ἄφθιτον* – unperishable glory. In this book Nagy examines both the oral survival of the poetry of Pindar and his contemporaries, e.g. Simonides and Bacchylides, and its textual stabilization. The richness of its ideas renders any summary of this book impossible. I shall therefore restrict myself to a couple of examples. We have already seen that following Parry and Lord, Nagy considers that each new performance of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* constitutes a different version. At the same time, due to their geographical diaspora, both epics gradually lose their epichoric features and acquire Panhellenic characteristics. The same is true of the lyric compositions, the songs that became great hits and survived thanks to their Panhellenization. The symposium and the festivals are of course crucial for such transformations. Political events, such as the progressive dominion of tyrants in metropolitan and colonial Greece, are also taken into account. When tyrants such as Hieron of Syracuse, for instance, commission famous poets such as Pindar to immortalize their achievements, they essentially arrest the creative development of the tradition. According to Nagy, re-composition does not come to an end because of the widespread use of writing, but because of the interventions of tyrants whose praise sets barriers to the free re-composition of songs. In this conundrum 'Homer' comes to rescue: poets like Pindar avoid the danger of slavish flattery because of the privileged relationship they maintain with Homer – for Nagy 'Homer' is not the poet of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but represents all epic tradition which is alive because it is performed at the symposia and the festivals whose importance for the cultural life of ancient Greek cities is enormous. School exercises constitute another sort of reperformance and yet another venue for the survival of epic and lyric until their inclusion in the Alexandrian canons and preservation in writing. The parody of a song-dance that Pindar composed for Hieron by Aristophanes on the Athenian stage more than fifty years later after the death of the tyrant shows that Nagy is right about the importance of festivals, symposia, and schools for the survival of song through reperformance. Thirty years after the publication of *Pindar's Homer* this may seem obvious, but it was not back then.

I have insisted on Nagy's sociocultural interpretative axis because it shows both Nagy's affinities with Parry and Lord, but also the distance he has travelled. Like

his predecessors, Nagy highlights the importance of the oral phase of archaic poetry, but differs from them because he broadens the horizon to include all oral genres which he brings to life by following singers, dancers and actors from festivals to symposia and vice versa all over the Greek speaking world. The interpretation of the superb artistic production of Archaic Greece in the light of its religious and sociopolitical context is Nagy's enormous contribution to the theory of orality: this impressive study essentially reconstructs cultural life in the making in Greek cities in the Archaic and Classical period.

Six years later Nagy published another stimulating study, *Poetry as Performance. Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge 1996). This book studies the fluidity of oral versions and in particular how each new performance produces a somewhat different version. In this study Nagy illustrates the fluidity of tradition through comparative study of medieval narratives, such as *Carmina Burana*, compositions such as the *Chanson de Roland* and the songs of the troubadour Jaufré Rudel, which scholars do not consider final versions, but songs in the making (*en train de se faire*, Nagy 1996: 9).

I will end this necessarily highly selective and concise presentation of Nagy's scholarly contribution with a brief mention of two volumes which spring from the famous Sather Classical Lectures series he was invited to give to Berkeley in 2002, two years after he was appointed director of the Center for Hellenic Studies, to which I will return shortly. The first volume is entitled *Homer the Preclassic* (published in 2009), the second is entitled *Homer the Classic* (2008). In these two studies Nagy discusses the reception of Homer and his poetry in antiquity, from the Bronze Age to the Roman era, and from Roman times to the present day. One of the links of the two volumes is the reception of Homer by the Athenians during the Athenian hegemony. I quote here a sample paragraph showing Nagy's take on Homer's reception (*Vita 2*):

Ε§62 This visualization of Homer as the *koinos politēs* 'common citizen' of all Ionian cities as he 'speaks' his Hymn to Apollo at Delos exemplifies the imperial phase of Homeric reception: each and every city of the Ionians now claims Homer as an authorized citizen, while the city of Athens claims to be the metropolis or 'mother city' of all Ionian cities. The word *koinos* 'common, standard', as applied to Homer and Homeric poetry, reflects the appropriation of Homer as a spokesman for the incipient Athenian empire at the Panionian festival of the Delia in Delos, and this myth about Homer in Delos as the *koinos politēs* 'common citizen' of all Ionian cities prefigures an imperial universalization of Homer for all Hellenes.

This is just one example of the wealth of ideas that one finds in all Nagy's works. I realize that time flies and that I need to say a few words about Nagy as *heros oikistes*, but before saying these few words, I cannot resist the temptation to point out that he has directed more than fifty doctoral dissertations in addition to his mentoring of junior fellows at the CHS in DC. As already mentioned, Nagy was

the Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies for 21 consecutive years, without falling behind in research and without stopping teaching at Harvard – which of course means that he travelled from Boston to Washington DC every week. What a better illustration of the proverb ‘if you want something done, give it to a busy person.’ This is not all however. In addition, eight years after taking office at the CHS he founded a new Center, the Center for Hellenic Studies in Greece at Nafplio, thus adding a third city, this time overseas, to his agenda. 13 years after its foundation, Nafplio has become a point of reference in Greek academia and society – the daughter center is developing a number of educational programs in collaboration with Greek and foreign Universities, it organizes lectures and scholarly conferences and is open to all who want to use its impressive digital facilities. Nafplio has achieved so much that it gives the impression that it has been operating for many years but, if one counts, they cannot but be impressed with the status and visibility it has managed to acquire in only 13 years. In retrospect, the task might even seem easy, but Nagy and his associates had to overcome the fear and suspicion that the advent of foreign institutions in Greece used to cause and continues to cause. Fear and suspicion were dispelled once people realized that Nagy did not have a colonial agenda, but the wish to share knowledge and resources with the Greek community which he did not wish to patronize, but to collaborate with. Nafplio was staffed with smart, capable and enthusiastic young Greeks who managed to realize Nagy’s vision which, if I understand it correctly, is open access to knowledge for all – and especially for the underprivileged, on the one hand and on the other promotion of new ideas and empowerment of young scholars. As director of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Nagy increased the number of scholarships in DC and created new scholarships in Nafplio, thus expanding the circle of researchers who got the opportunity to take advantage of Harvard’s vast resources.

Any presentation of Nagy’s achievements, whether extensive or concise –as is necessarily my presentation today–, is bound to be incomplete. I will therefore call him *aristos*, like the heroes to whom he dedicated his life. But I call him *aristos* by quoting his own view of excellence which I heard in one of his lectures in Greece, I no longer remember which one, and I add that I have appropriated this definition –sometimes without attributing it to Nagy– after the fashion of epic singers, but today proper attribution is in order. Nagy intervened in the public debate on *aristeia* in Greece about a decade ago and pointed out that Achilles, the best warrior of the Achaeans in Troy, is *aristos*, but we should not forget that Odysseus, who tries to save his comrades, is also *aristos*. The combination of individual and social *aristeia* characterizes Nagy himself, our dear Greg, whom I welcome to his new home, the Department of Philology of the University of Crete, and I hope to have the pleasure to see him in person here soon.

Welcome, dear Greg! Καλώς όρισες, Γκρεγκ!

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Fig. 7 : The hybrid ceremony



Fig. 8 : Greeting the honorand at the end of the ceremony