

## The Poet as Athlete

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The subject of the greatest surviving lyric poetry is not love nor death but athletic games. That we have manuscripts only of Pindar's Victory Odes is a result of a selection made by schoolmasters in late antiquity, but we are lucky to have victory odes rather than hymns or dithyrambs or paeanes, because unlike most other Greek public poetry they are written for and about contemporary men, rather than gods or the great heroes of the past. As such they tell us something about the values of aristocratic society, that is, why the games were thought so important that, as Pindar puts it, "the victor has sweet fair weather for the rest of his life on account of the contests [he has won]" (*Ol.* 1. 97-99); or, in more practical terms, "[the victor] would be more honorable for his fellow citizens to look on, and he would get a highly visible front seat at the games, and he would get his provisions from the public storehouse, and a gift from his city that he could put in a treasury" (Xenophanes 2. 6-9 DK).

But even though Pindar's odes tell us about the rewards and dangers of winning, they tell us surprisingly little about the actual process of competition: we learn, for example, of the extreme danger involved in chariot racing, when he describes in *Pyth.* 5 how Carrhotus won by completing the twelve laps "with reins undamaged," while forty other chariots were wrecked (32-53);<sup>1</sup> in *Ol.* 1 he observes that the great horse Pherenicus won without being goaded (21)-Bacchylides tells us more explicitly that Pherenicus had tawny hair, won at dawn, and was untouched by dust from horses running before him as he raced toward the goal (*Ode* 5. 37,40, 43).<sup>2</sup> Pindar tells us in *Nem.* 6 about a victor who failed to win at Olympia because he did not draw a bye in one of the rounds of the tournament; but he says so in such an elliptical way that one needs to know about the format of wrestling matches from other sources in order to understand what he means when he says to the victor Alcimidas "a lot that fell too soon deprived you and [your cousin] Polytimidas of an Olympian victory" (62-63).<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere Pindar seems more concerned to express the general significance of any achievement than to detail individual characteristics. The two cousins' failure to win at Olympia illustrates a general rule of human experience, which Pindar describes in the beginning of the ode: "and now Alcimidas bears witness that the family is like

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1. Note also *Soph. El.* 701-48, where nine of the ten chariots are wrecked.

2. Again, perhaps a complimentary exaggeration, cf. Callim. fr. 254 SH, with note.

3. E. N. Gardiner. "Wrestling," *JHS* 25 (1905) 16,18; J. Ebert. *Griechische Epigramme auf Sieger an gymnischen und hippischen Agonen* (Berlin, 1972) no. 32, 55, 109, p. 110.

the fields that bear harvest, which sometimes give men an abundant harvest from the plain, and then sometimes rest and gather in their strength" (7-11). In *Pyth.* 8, an ode that portrays vividly the violence and loss involved in victory and in war, Pindar tells the victor who won the boys' wrestling match at Delphi,<sup>4</sup>

you fell from above on four bodies [i.e., in the four heats] with evil intention; for them no pleasant return-as there was for you-was awarded by the judges at the Pythian games, nor did a sweet smile from their mothers bring them pleasure when they returned home; but down back alleys out of sight of their enemies they crouch, stung by their misfortune. (81-87)

But usually in Pindar's poetry such direct description of the everyday world is rare, and such practical information emerges only in passing: "hot water does not make the limbs so supple as the song of praise accompanying the lyre" (*Nem.* 4. 4-5).

In this and virtually every other ode the poet was obliged to mention the victor's previous victories and those of his family; but where Pindar describes how it feels to compete is not in these catalogues of achievements, but in characterizing the challenge of composing his own song and his power to achieve his goal. These statements, like all references to poetry or poet in hymns or victory odes, mark a transition from one topic to another, and employ metaphors for song inherent in Homeric language. In epic, words that communicate are "winged;" in Pindar and Bacchylides' odes, words are literally winged, in the form of arrows, or even of birds: the poet is an eagle, before whom other birds cower.<sup>5</sup> But where Bacchylides describes the eagle flying high in the still upper air, where men can admire him, with ten thousand paths in all directions to praise the victor (*Ode* 5. 16-34), Pindar concentrates on describing what it feels like to seize control from his competitors at the moment of victory: "it is the eagle swift among birds, who searches from far off and seizes his bloody prey in his claws; but the cawing jackdaws keep low to the ground" (*Nem.* 3. 80-82).<sup>6</sup> Pindar adapts the metaphor of winged words to describe himself as an archer, choosing his target "with gentle intention" (*Ol.* 2. 89-90); it is specifically his skill as a poet that gives a victory "wings" (*Pyth.* 8. 33-34). It was traditional to speak of the "chariot of the Muses" that would take the poet along with them on the road of song; but in an ode for a victor in the mule-car race, Pindar addresses the charioteer and asks him to yoke for him his powerful mules, swiftly,

so that we may make the chariot travel on a bright path, and I may come at last to the family of these men-for they (the mules) know how to lead the way better than others, since they won crowns at Olympia; so we must open the

4. M. R. Lefkowitz, "Pindar's Pythian 8," *CJ* 72 (1977) 215 n. 18. M. Polkiaoff, *Studies in the Terminology of the Greek Combat Sports* (Koenigstein 1982) 107-108.

5. Cf. e.g., *Isthm.* 5.62-3 (song); cf. *Ol.* 9.11-12, 1.112. *Pyth.* 1.1-12, *Nem.* 6.27-29, *Isthm.* 2.1-3.5.46-47: bow as lyre in Heraclitus 22 B SIDK, cf. *Od.* 21.406-9, PMG 951 = 28TGrFl; D. E. Gerber, *Olympian One. A Commentary* (Toronto 1982) 169-170; M. Simpson, "The Chariot and the Bow as Metaphors for Poetry in Pindar's Odes," *TAPA* 100 (1969) 455n.35.

6. P. A. Bernardini, "L'aquila tebana vola ancora," *QUCC* 26 (1977) 121-126.

gates of song for them, and they must come to the nymph Pitana beside Eurotas' stream today at this hour. (*Ol.* 6. 22-27)

In other words, they must now move back in time and space from Syracuse, the victor's city, in Sicily, to a river near Sparta on the Greek mainland.<sup>7</sup> By putting himself in the victor's chariot, Pindar implies that his poetic skill matches the victorious chariot's in its precision and speed, and in its ultimate ability to succeed.

In other odes Pindar abandons the traditional metaphors for song and speaks of his art in terms of the games themselves, describing himself as a successful athlete, but always, as in his use of the eagle metaphor, in ways that explicitly stress his skill and superiority to adversaries. In *Nem.* 5., an ode for a victor in the pankration, he displays his virtuosity by alluding to, but refusing to tell in full, a myth that brings discredit on the heroes of the victor's homeland:

I shall stop here; not every truth brings reward when she shows her face directly, and silence is often wisest for a man to have in mind. But if it seems best to praise wealth or strength of arms or ironclad war, let someone dig up a long jumping place from here; for the spring in my knees is supple, and eagles leap beyond the sea. (16-21)

Here the traditional eagle metaphor confirms that what the poet means when he says that he is ready to compete in the long jump is that he wishes to move quickly from the inglorious beginning of the hero Peleus' story to his most glorious moment, his marriage to the goddess Thetis, for whom he was chosen by Zeus because of his virtue. If Pindar had proceeded chronologically, he would have needed to mention various other of Peleus' achievements and his capture of Thetis—we know that he knows these stories because he tells them in other odes (*Nem.* 3. 32-36, 4. 54-68). Saying "eagles leap beyond the sea" alone might have conveyed his technical meaning, but instead he describes his poetic skill in terms of the victor's achievement, which requires not only strength, but agility, and deliberation, that is, planning and timing: he stops and thinks before he decides to embark on his long jump.<sup>8</sup>

In other cases Pindar's transitional first person statements show an awareness of the athlete's apprehension in entering a new contest, when he confronts the prospect of failure or defeat. In *Ol.* 13, an ode written for a victor in the pentathlon, Pindar ends his narration of the story of the hero Bellerophon at the moment of his greatest triumph, before he dared to ride to Olympus on Pegasus and lost favor with the gods, and then became insane:

I will be silent about his fate; but as for his horse (Pegasus) the ancient managers of Zeus in Olympia received him. For I must not throw the straight whirling course of my javelins beside (i.e., not onto) the target when I hurl my weapons powerfully with my hands. (91-95)

7 Simpson, *op. cit.* (above n.5) 444-446.

8 Cf. C. P. Segal, "Arrest and Movement: Pindar's Fifth *Nemean*." *Hermes* 102 (1974) 397-411; Bemardini, *op. cit.* (above, n.6) 124-125.

Pindar seems to be referring here to a practice throw at a target rather than to a distance throw in an actual competition.<sup>9</sup> The javelin throw was one of the events of the pentathlon, and Pindar knows that the throw must have spin if it is to stay within the bounds. In context his metaphor is readily understandable. because it describes the victor's own sport and because the notion of poetry as arrows is inherent in the Homeric phrase "winged words" and javelins, like arrows, are thought of (in Greek) as thrown missiles: "I have many swift arrows (*bele*) inside my quiver that speak to those who understand" (*Ol.* 2. 83-85).

In *Nem.* 7, an ode for another pentathlon victory, Pindar once again uses the analogy of the javelin throw to express poetic control. and, indirectly, to compliment the victor:<sup>10</sup>

I swear that I have not stepped over the marker (*terma*) and released my swift utterance like a bronze-cheeked javelin, which dismissed my neck and strength from the wrestling contest, without sweat, before my limbs were caught by the blazing sun, (70-73)

In this case, the poet would be like the athlete who did not abide by the rules and was eliminated from the competition before completing the whole course of the pentathlon, in which (whatever the order of the other events), wrestling was the last event.<sup>11</sup> The analogy of accurate song and javelin throwing in the pentathlon is so natural that Pindar uses it for several victors in chariot racing: Chromius, "I pray that I may celebrate this excellence with the Graces' help. and honor this victory beyond others with my words, throwing my javelin at the target nearest the Muses' " (*Nem.* 9. 54-55). Xeinochrates of Acragas, "may I whirl my javelin and throw it so far as Xeinochrates surpasses other men in sweetness of temper" (*Isthm.* 2. 35), and Hieron of Syracuse, "I hope that when I strive to praise that man that-as it were-I will not throw my bronze-cheeked javelin outside [the boundaries], as I whirl it in my hand, but to throw it far and surpass my opponents" (*Pyrh.* 1. 42-45); in competition the longest throw within boundaries won.<sup>12</sup>

In *Nem.* 8, an ode for a victor in the *diaulodromos* or double-furlong race, he describes himself as a runner on the starting line: "I stand on light feet drawing breath before I speak; many tales are told in many ways, and there is every danger in discovering new stories and putting them to the test" (19-21). The danger he is concerned with is not criticism from others for his innovations. because poets were expected to be able to tell stories in new ways; the danger is that, like a winning athlete, he will be envied for his excellence: "to

9. As in *Nem.* 9 54-55, discussed below. and also in the heroic age, as Pindar envisions it in *Ol.* 10.71: Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals* (London. 1910) 354-55 and n 12, below. Cf. C. P. Segal. "Two Agomistic Problems in Pindar, *Nem.* 7. 70.74 and *Pyrh.* 1. 42-45." *GRBS* 9 (1968) 43.

10. Cf. Segal. *op. cit.* (above, n.9) 41: "as a reminder of the magnitude of his achievement. it fills the place of the enumeration of victories or agonistic description which the victor naturally expected."

11. For *pirtein* in the sense of fall on an opponent, cf. *Pyrh.* 8.81-82, above, Poliakov. *op. cit.* (n. 4. above) 107: G. E. Bean: "Victory in the Pentathlon," *AJA* 60 (1956) 362; Segal. *op. cit.* (above, n.9) 39-41; M. R. Lefkowitz, "Autobiographical Fiction in Pindar." *HSCP* 84 (1980) 43, cf. H. M. Lee, "The *terma* and the Javelin in Pindar and Greek Athletics." *JHS* (1976) 69-79

12. Gardiner. *op. cit.* (above. n.9) 355; H. A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca, 1972) 36.

the envious tales are a delicacy; envy always fastens on men of accomplishment, but has no quarrel with their inferiors" (21-22).<sup>13</sup> In reality, of course, the poetic "race" he contemplates has already been run, carefully set into a strict metrical and musical pattern and rehearsed by a chorus specifically trained to perform it. But by pretending that he shares in the victor's tension before and after his winning run, he brings to his own poetic composition a sense of the challenge and excitement of the event his poem celebrates.

In *Nem.* 4, an ode for a victor in a wrestling match, he describes the act of deciding among various themes as a wrestling bout, not a literal one, because his opponents are competing subjects, first of all, the new moon festival, celebrating the first day of the month, sacred to Apollo, presumably the occasion at which the victory ode was performed;<sup>14</sup> and then the sea—as in *Nem.* 5, the sea represents the multiplicity of stories that eagles must fly beyond.<sup>15</sup>

I am dragged along by a magic spell to touch the new moon festival: although the deep salt of the sea holds you by the waist, stand firm against the plots against you. For surely we shall seem to enter the contest in daylight, superior to our enemies. Another man, showing his envy, in darkness wrestles with an empty thought that has fallen to the ground. But as for myself, for whatever excellence lord Fate has given me. I know well that time shall come and bring it to completion. (33-43).

"Drag" (*helkein*), "hold by the middle" (*echein meson*), and wrestle" (*kylindein*). literally, "roll in the dust," are all standard wrestling terms.<sup>16</sup> He describes himself as if he were wrestling first with the theme of the new moon festival, which has a hold on him at the same time as it has cast a magic spell on him; then he struggles against the sea, like a hero alone against the forces of nature (cf. *Il.* 23. 240, *Od.* 5. 411), and calls upon himself to resist the plots against him by his adversary; we knew from the description in *Pyth.* 8 that a successful wrestler falls on bodies from above "with evil intent" *kaka phroneon*, 82). He intends to win "indeed we shall seem to enter the contest" (the technical meaning of *katabainein*), "superior to," literally, "higher than," like the victorious wrestler from "above" in *Pyth.* 8, "to our adversaries in the light," that is, successfully. Finally, he contrasts himself with an unsuccessful adversary, not a real wrestler, but another poet wrestling with his own thought (*gnoma*, "intention"), which—unlike Pindar's—is empty, or vain, already "fallen to the ground," or defeated (cf. *Bacchyl.* 11. 23). Pindar, by contrast, like a victor confident because of his many successes (the victor for whom this ode was written had already won at three different con-

13. See esp. C. Carey. "Pindar's Eighth Nemean Ode," *PCPS* 22 (1976) 30-31; Lefkowitz, *op. cit.* (above, n. 11) 36-37.

14. L. R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States* (Oxford, 1896-1909) 4.415, n. 234-37; cf. *Ol.* 3.34-35, performed at the *theoxenia*, schol. *Ol.* 3. inscr.: 1.104 Dr.; relevance of festival of Apollo Cameios in *Pyth.* 5. 80 and of Hera Parthenia in *Ol.* 6.88.

15. Cf. Call. Hymn 2. 105-106: *Pyth.* 2. 79-80, where salt water represents the talk of slanderers; J. Péron. *Les images maritimes de Pindare*. Etudes et commentaires 87 (Paris 1974) 220.

16. Poliakoff, *op. cit.* (above, n.4) 137-141.

tests. 17-22). knows that his excellence is “fated” and that in time he will win.<sup>17</sup>

The notion of wrestling with ideas is bold, and unique to Pindar, but it is comprehensible (though not in any literal way) because it is drawn out at some length, and then used again at the end of the ode:

Generations differ from one another. A man hopes to speak best of what he himself has encountered. So praising Melesias one should change his attack. weaving his words; not to be wrestled down in speech; with kind intention towards good men. but a hard combatant waiting for the spiteful. (91-96)

Here again, “change,” literally “twist” (*strephein*) his attack. “weaving” (*plekein*). “not to be wrestled down” (*apalaistos helkeit*), and “combatant” waiting (*ephedros*, a competitor who drew a bye in the first heat of the match) are all terms used in wrestling, though “twist” and “weave” are also terms of rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> But in this passage, as opposed to his earlier struggle against the deep sea, the adversaries are not other thoughts but spiteful men who would refuse to give praise where it is due. At the beginning of the ode Pindar had stated that words live longer than deeds, and elsewhere he expresses a keen awareness of the power of speech to affect men’s judgment about deeds (e.g., *Nem.* 8. 24-29). Because poetry has a specific ethical purpose, the poet’s goals are different from the real athlete’s; the victorious wrestler in *Pyth.* 8 fell on each of his opponents “with evil intention” (*kaka phroneon*, 82). whereas the poet is a “harsh combatant” only for his enemies-to good men he has “gentle” or “kind intentions” (*malaka phroneon*).

This brief survey can only suggest the range and versatility of Pindar’s imagination.<sup>19</sup> Where Bacchylides uses only standard terminology to describe his role as a poet, Pindar adapts language denoting accuracy, speed, and distance inherent in Homeric vocabulary of song in new explicit ways to the sports he celebrates, adding in the process a sense of the challenge and the danger involved in sport, and above all, a notion of his own absolute superiority-in the great games of the fifth century there was only one winner. By speaking of himself as an athlete, Pindar expresses his friendship for and appreciation of the victor’s own sport. The comparison compliments both the poet and the victor, and helps to demonstrate once again, but in a new and particularly relevant way, the old notion that both strength and ability to speak well are needed to govern (e.g. *Horn. Il.* 9. 443, *Hes., Th.* 71-102). After all, Pindar was an aristocrat writing not for ordinary citizens but for other aristocrats, the rulers or officials or controllers (even in Athens) of the economic resources of their cities.

17. Cf. Bernardini, *op. cit.* (above, n.6) 123.

18. Poliakoff, *op. cit.* (above, n.4) 140-141; A. Koehnken. *Die Funktion des Mythos bei Pindar* (Berlin 1971) 208-212.

19. Simpson, *op. cit.* (above, n.5) 437 n 1.

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