

Hitting “Wrong” Notes? Pindar’s Improvisational Abundance and the Convention of Extemporaneous Performance

John Tennant

1. εἰ δ' ἐὼν καλὸς ἔρδων τ' εὐκότα μορφᾷ
ἀνορέαις ὑπερτάταις ἐπέβα
παῖς Ἀριστοφάνεος, οὐκέτι πρόσω
ἀβάταν ἄλα κιόνων ὑπερ Ἡρακλέος περᾶν εὐμαρές,
ἦρωσ θεὸς ἅς ἔθηκε ναυτιλίας ἐσχάτας
μάρτυρας κλυτὰς· δάμασε δὲ θῆρας ἐν πελάγει
ὑπερόχους, ἰδίᾳ τ' ἐρεύνασε τεναγέων
ρόας, ὅπᾳ πόμπιμον κατέβαινε νόστου τέλος,
καὶ γὰρ φράδασε. **Θυμέ, τίνα πρὸς ἄλλοδαπὰν
ἄκραν ἐμὸν πλῆον παραμείβει;**
Αἰακῶ σε φαμί γένοι τε Μοῖσαν φέρειν.
(*Nemean* 3.19-27)

2. τεθμὸς δέ τις ἀθανάτων καὶ
τάνδ' ἄλιερκέα χώραν
παντοδαποῖσιν ὑπέστασε ξένοις
κίονα δαιμονίαν –
ὁ δ' ἐπαντέλλων χρόνος
τοῦτο πράσσω μὴ κάμοι –
Δωριεῖ λαῶ ταμιευομένην ἐξ Αἰακοῦ·
τὸν παῖς ὁ Λατοῦς εὐρυμέδων τε Ποσειδάν,
Ἴλιῶ μέλλοντες ἐπὶ στέφανον τεῦ-
ξαι, καλέσαντο συνεργὸν
τείχεος . . .
(*Olympian* 8.25-33)

3. εἰ δὲ νιν ἔχων τις οἶδεν τὸ μέλλον,
ὅτι θανόντων μὲν ἐν-
θάδ' αὐτίκ' ἀπάλαμνοι φρένες
ποινὰς ἔτεισαν – τὰ δ' ἐν τᾷδε Διὸς ἀρχᾷ
ἄλιτρά κατὰ γᾶς δικάζει τις ἐχθρᾷ
λόγον φράσαις ἀνάγκα·
ἴσαις δὲ νύκτεσσιν αἰεὶ,
ἴσαις δ' ἀμέραις ἄλιον ἔχοντες, ἀπονέστερον
ἔσλοὶ δέκονται βίον . . .
(*Olympian* 2.56-63)

1. If, being fair and performing deeds to match his form, the son of Aristophanes has embarked on utmost deeds of manhood, it is no easy task to go yet further across the untracked sea beyond the pillars of Hercules, which that hero-god established as famed witnesses of his furthest voyage. He subdued monstrous beasts in the sea, and on his own explored the streams of the shallows, where he reached the limit that sent him back home, and he made known the land. **My heart, to what alien headland are you turning aside my ship’s course?** To Aeacus and his race I bid you bring the Muse. (Trans. Race)

2. But some ordinance of the immortal gods has set up this seagirt land for foreigners from all places as a divine pillar – and may time to come not tire of accomplishing this – a land governed by Dorian people from the time of Aeacus, whom Leto’s son and wide-ruling Poseidon, as they were preparing to crown Ilion with battlements, summoned to help build the wall . . .
(Trans. Race)

3. If one has it and knows the future, that the helpless spirits of those who have died on earth immediately pay the penalty—and upon sins committed here in Zeus’ realm, a judge beneath the earth pronounces sentence with hateful necessity; but forever having sunshine in equal nights and in equal days, good men receive a life of less toil . . .
(Trans. Race)

4. ματρομάτωρ ἐμὰ Στυμφαλῖς, εὐανθῆς Μετώπα,
πλάξιππον ἄ Θήβαν ἔτι-
κτεν, τᾶς ἐρατεινὸν ὕδωρ
πίομαι, ἀνδράσιν αἰχματαῖσι πλέκων
ποικίλον ὕμνον.
(*Olympian* 6.84-7)

4. My grandmother, an inhabitant of Stymphalis,
blooming Metope, gave birth to horse-driving
Thebes, whose lovely water
I drink, weaving for spearmen
my **varied song.**
(My translation)

5. ἀλλ' ὥσπερ δείπνου γλαφυροῦ **ποικίλην** εὐωχίαν
τόν ποιητὴν δεῖ παρέχειν τοῖς θεαταῖς τὸν σοφὸν
ἴν' ἀπίη τις τοῦτο φαγὼν καὶ πίων, ὅπερ λαβῶν
χαίρει <τις>, καὶ σκευασία μί' ἢ τῆς μουσικῆς
(Astydamos, *TGF* 779)

5. Like the varied bounty of an elegant dinner, such
must be what the clever poet offers his spectators,
so that each departs having eaten and drunk and
taken whatever he likes, and that there not be only
one dish of entertainment. (Trans. Liebert)

6. **πολλά μοι ὑπ'**
ἀγκῶνος ὠκέα βέλη
ἔνδον ἐντὶ φαρέτρας
φωνάεντα συνετοῖσιν· ἐς δὲ τὸ πᾶν ἐρμάνεων
χατίζει. σοφὸς ὁ πολλὰ εἰδὼς φυᾶ·
μαθόντες δὲ λάβροι
παγγλωσσία κόρακες ὡς ἄκραντα γαρυέτων
Διὸς πρὸς ὄρνιχα θεῖον·
ἔπεχε νῦν σκοπῶ τόξον, ἄγε θυμέ· τίνα βάλλομεν
ἐκ μαλθακᾶς αὐτὲ φρενὸς εὐκλέας ὀ-
ἴστους ἰέντες; ἐπὶ τοι
Ἀκράγαντι τανύσαις
αὐδάσομαι ἐνόρκιον λόγον ἀλαθεῖ νόῳ,
τεκεῖν μὴ τιν' ἑκατόν γε ἐτέων πόλιν
φίλοις ἄνδρα μᾶλλον
εὐεργέταν πραπίσιν ἀφρονέστερόν τε χέρα
Θήρωνος. ἀλλ' αἶνον ἐπέβα **κόρος**
οὐ δίκαια συναντόμενος, ἀλλὰ μάργων ὑπ' ἀνδρῶν,
τὸ λαλαγήσαι θέλον
κρυφὸν τιθέμεν ἐσλῶν καλοῖς
ἔργοις, ἐπεὶ **ψάμμος ἀριθμὸν περιπέφουγεν,**
καὶ κείνος ὅσα χάσματ' ἄλλοις ἔθηκεν,
τίς ἂν φράσαι δύναίτο;
(*Olympian* 2.83-100)

6. **I have many swift arrows under my arm**
in their quiver endowed with speech for those
who understand. But they have need altogether of
interpreters.
Wise is he who knows many things by nature, but
the learned, boisterous in their garrulousness,
chatter in vain just like a pair of crows against the
divine bird of Zeus.
Come my soul, take aim now at the mark.
At whom do we shoot, and this time launch from a
kindly spirit our arrows of fame? Yes,
bending the bow at Acragas, I will proclaim a
statement on oath with a truthful mind,
that no city within a century has produced a
man more beneficent to his friends in spirit
and more generous of hand than Theron.
But enough: **upon praise comes tedious excess,**
which does not keep to just limits, but at the
instigation of greedy men is eager to prattle on
and **obscure noble men's good deeds;**
Since the grains of sand escape counting, who
would be able to articulate just how many joys
that man has wrought for others?
(Trans. Race, with modification)

7. τᾶς ἀφθονίαν ὄπαζε μήτιος ἀμᾶς ἄπο
(*Nemean* 3.9)

7. Grant from my skill an abundance of such song.
(Trans. Race)

8. ὃς δὲ διδάκτ' ἔχει, ψεφεννὸς ἀνήρ
(*Nemean* 3.41)

8. He who has mere learning is a shadowy man;
(Trans. Race)

9. ἀφθόνητος δ' αἶνος Ὀλυμπιονίκαις
 οὔτος ἄγκειται. τὰ μὲν ἀμετέρα
 γλῶσσα ποιμαίνειν ἐθέλει,
 ἐκ θεοῦ δ' ἀνήρ σοφαῖς ἀνθεῖ πραπίδεσσιν ὁμοίως.
 (*Olympian* 11.7-10)

9. Bounteous is the praise laid up for Olympian victors, but while my tongue would tend those flocks of song, God's prompting brings my thought to surer bloom.
 (Trans. Bundy)

10. εἰ δ' εἶ-
 η μὲν Ὀλυμπιονίκας,
 βωμῶ τε μαντεῖω ταμίᾳ Διὸς ἐν Πίσα,
 συνοικιστῆρ τε τᾶν κλεινᾶν Συρακος-
 σᾶν, τίνα κεν φύγοι ὕμνον
 κεῖνος ἀνήρ, ἐπικύρσαις
 ἀφθόνων ἀστῶν ἐν ἡμερταῖς ἀοιδαῖς;
 (*Olympian* 6.4-7)

10. But if he is an Olympic victor, a steward of the prophetic altar of Zeus at Pisa, and a co-founder of famous Syracuse – what hymn of praise could that man escape, meeting his ungrudging townsmen in delightful songs?
 (My translation)

11. What is the soloist doing when he attempts to “build”? . . . The soloist has to establish for the listener what the important POINT, the motif if you like, is, and then show as much as he can of what it is that he sees in the motif, extending the relationships of it to the basic while never giving the feeling he has forgotten it. . . . **The listener is constantly making predictions; actual infinitesimal predictions as to whether the next event will be a repetition of something or something different. The player is constantly either confirming or denying these predictions in the listener's mind.** As nearly as we can tell (Kraehenbuehl at Yale and I), the listener must come out right about 50% of the time – **if [the listener] is too successful in predicting, he will be bored; if he is too unsuccessful, he will give up and call the music “disorganized.”** Thus if the player starts a repetitive pattern, the listener's attention drops away as soon as he has successfully predicted that it is going to continue. . . . Similarly, if the player never repeats anything, no matter how tremendous an imagination he has, the listener will decide that the game is not worth playing, that he is not going to be able to make any predictions right, and also stops listening.
 (Richmond Browne on jazz improvisation – from Jerry Coker, *Improvising Jazz*)

Selected Bibliography

- Athanassaki, L. 2011. "Giving Wings to the Aeginetan Sculptures: The Panhellenic Aspirations of Pindar's *Olympian Eight*." In D. Fearn (ed.) *Aegina: Contexts For Choral Lyric Poetry*. Oxford: 257-293.
- Berlin, I. 1951. *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. London.
- Bonifazi, A. 2000. "Sull'idea di sotterfugio orale negli epinici pindarici." *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 60: 69–86.
- Bundy, E. 1962. *Studia Pindarica*. Berkeley, CA.
- Carey, C. 1980. "Three Myths in Pindar." *Eranos*: 143-62.
- _____. 1980. *A Commentary on Five Odes of Pindar*. Salem, NH.
- _____. 1989. "Two Transitions in Pindar." *CQ* 39: 287-95.
- _____. 1989. "Prosopographica Pindarica." *CQ* 39: 1-9.
- _____. 1995. "Pindar and the Victory Ode." In L. Ayers (ed.) *The Passionate Intellect: Essays on the Transformation of Classical Traditions*. New Brunswick: 85–103.
- Coker, J. 1964. *Improvising Jazz*. New York.
- Croiset, A. 1880. *La Poésie de Pindare et les Lois du Lyrisme Grec*. Paris.
- Farnell, L.R. 1961. *Critical Commentary to the Works of Pindar*. Amsterdam.
- Fränkel, H. 1973. *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, trans. M. Hadas and J. Willis. New York and London.
- Grethlein, J. 2010. *The Greeks and Their Past. Poetry, Oratory and History in the Fifth Century BCE*. Cambridge.
- Levine, M. 1995. *The Jazz Theory Book*. Petaluma, CA.
- Liebert, R.S. 2010. "Appian Imagery and the Critique of Poetic Sweetness in Plato's *Republic*," *TAPA* 140, 97-115.
- Mackie, H. 1996. *Talking Trojan*. Lanham, MD.
- _____. 2003. *Graceful Errors – Pindar and the Performance of Praise*. Ann Arbor.
- Maslov, B. 2015. *Pindar and the Emergence of Literature*. Cambridge.
- Miller, A. 1993. "Pindaric Mimesis: The Associative Mode." *CJ* 89: 21-53.
- Nagy, G. 1990. *Pindar's Homer*. Baltimore and London.
- Nunlist, R. 2007. "Pindar and Bacchylides." In I. J. F. de Jong and R. Nünlist (eds.) *Time in Ancient Greek Literature. Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative, Volume Two*. Leiden: Brill: 233–51.
- Pelliccia, H. 1992. "Sappho 16, Gorgias' Helen, and the Preface to Herodotus' Histories." *YCS* 29: 63-84.
- Robbins, E. 1986. "The Broken Wall, the Burning Roof and Tower: Pindar, Ol.8.31-46." *CQ* 36: 317-21.
- Race, W. 1979. "The End of *Olympian 2*: Pindar and the 'Vulgus.'" *CSCA* 12: 251-67.
- _____. 1990. *Style and Rhetoric in Pindar's Odes*. Atlanta.
- _____. 1994. "Pindar's *Olympian 11* Revisited Post Bundy." *HSCP* 102: 69-96.
- Ruck, C.A.P. "Marginalia Pindarica." *Hermes* 100: 143-69.
- Scodel, R. 1996. "Self-Correction, Spontaneity, and Orality in Archaic Poetry." In I. Worthington (ed.) *Voice into Text – Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*. Leiden, New York, and Köln: 59-79.
- Segal, C.P. 1985. "Messages to the Underworld: An Aspect of Poetic Immortalization in Pindar." *AJP* 106: 199-212.
- Sigelman, A. 2015. *Pindar's Poetics of Immortality*. Oxford.
- Walzer, M. 1995. "Are There Limits to Liberalism?" *New York Review of Books* 42.
- Young, D. 1970. "Pindaric Criticism." In Wm. Calder III and J. Stern (eds.) *Pindaros and Bakchylides*. Darmstadt: 1-95.