Prophecy and Permanence in Pindar's 8th Pythian Ode

Arguably Pindar's most famous passage, *Pythian* 8.95-7 may be a victim of its own notoriety. While many scholars have seen the passage as the sublime reflections of an aged Pindar (Gildersleeve 1892, 325, Fennell 1893, 244-5, Burton 1962, 192-3.), in the broader context of *Pythian* 8, the lines serve not as the poet's contemplation of life, but as a logical conclusion to one of the poem's central episodes.

Turning to the passage, a significant feature of its language has gone unappreciated in scholarship on the ode (*P*.8.95-7):

ἐπάμεροι· τί δέ τις; τί δ' οὕ τις; σκιᾶς ὄναρ 95 ἄνθρωπος. ἀλλ' ὅταν αἴγλα διόσδοτος ἕλθῃ,

λαμπρὸν φέγγος ἔπεστιν ἀνδρῶν καὶ μείλιχος αἰών.

Joseph Fontenrose has observed, "the *all'hotan / hopotan* opening introduces conditioned commands and conditioned predictions…" (Fontenrose 1978, 170.). There are manifold examples (Hdt. 1.55.2, 3.57.4, 6.19.2, 8.77, Aristoph. *Av.* 967-8, Plut. *Mor.* 399c.). Treating the phrase as the beginning of a conditional prophecy demands we re-think the lines. First, how do we understand the questions in the line before?

Hermann Fränkel long ago observed that the term $\dot{\epsilon}\pi\dot{\alpha}\mu\epsilon\rho\sigma$, "in early Greek literature, does not mean "creature of one day, short- lived" but "subject to the (changing) day, variable" ¹ (Fränkel 1946, 131). This view better accords with the direct questions coupled to the phrase effectively rendering the thought: "when our circumstances change by the day, what is someone? And what is no one?" The oracular response offers a blunt answer to the first question, τί δέ τις—σκιᾶς ὄναρ ἄνθρωπος. Yet Pindar offers a more optimistic, albeit opaque, view to the second question: no one is inevitably doomed to remain *only* a dream of shadow. Some can transcend the darkness of their evanescence through the blazing glory of achievement: ἀλλ' ὅταν αἴγλα διόσδοτος ἕλθῃ, λαμπρὸν φέγγος ἕπεστιν ἀνδρῶν καὶ μείλιχος αἰών.

The thought is well paralleled in the Pindaric corpus. Proclaiming his motivations for undertaking the chariot race against Oenomaios, Pelops declares (*O*.1.81-4):

ό μέγας δὲ κίν-

δυνος ἄναλκιν οὐ φῶτα λαμβάνει. θανεῖν δ' οἶσιν ἀνάγκα, τά κέ τις ἀνώνυμον γῆρας ἐν σκότῷ καθήμενος ἕψοι μάταν, ἁπάντων καλῶν ἅμμορος;

For the hero, the darkness of anonymity from playing it safe is to be rejected: those who feel the blaze of glory shun no danger.

But if, as I suggest, *Pythian* 8.95-7 is a prophetic engagement, we may wonder who speaks the lines. Significantly, *Pythian* 8 has already mentioned an encounter with a prophetic figure (*P*.8.56-60):

χαίρων δὲ καὶ αὐτός Ἀλκμᾶνα στεφάνοισι βάλλω, ῥαίνω δὲ καὶ ὕμνῳ, γείτων ὅτι μοι καὶ κτεάνων φύλαξ ἐμῶν ὑπάντασεν ἰόντι γᾶς ὀμφαλὸν παρ' ἀοίδιμον, μαντευμάτων τ' ἐφάψατο συγγόνοισι τέχναις. 60 While the identity of the passage's first-person voice has remained controversial, Bruno Currie has convincingly argued for the persona of the victor speaking the lines (Currie 2013). Yet, if we see them as spoken by the victor, the conclusion to the passage seems less satisfactory: what did the hero say to the young athlete?

Reading *P*.8.95-7 as a dramatized epiphany of the prophetic hero suggests a possibility. Significantly, the response in lines 96-7 makes perfect sense as a prophetic exhortation to an anxious athlete on his way to the Pythian games. Indeed, situated in this context, the parallels with the passage above from *O*.1. run deeper. Pelops' speech is set on the eve of his contest with Oenomaios and directed at an epiphany of Poseidon. Moreover, the speech emphasizes a similar point: fortune favors the brave. In *P*.8, however, the logic is inverted. Instead of a bold pronouncement cajoling a god to grant a favor, the athlete's questions are anxious and uncertain. The answer in the Argive hero's prophecy highlights the default obscurity of the human condition and encourages the athlete to transcend it through brave deeds.

Since the passage concludes a section highlighting Aristomenes' success in Delphi, the audience is encouraged to realize that the young boxer successfully understood the mantic rhetoric and fulfilled the prophecy. While still an undeniably powerful statement on the human condition, in the context I have developed, I suggest the passage is less a melancholic reflection than a demonstration of an important—and often underappreciated—aspect of Pindaric lyric: its dramatic power.

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