

Pindar and Plato

An introduction to Pindar's Olympian Odes read in the original

When I decided to get acquainted with Pindar a few months ago, approaching my seventy third year, it never occurred to me that his poetry would have any impact on my understanding of Plato. It was only when I immersed myself more and more deeply into Pindar's world of victors in the Olympic, Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian games, of the aristocrats devoted to the pursuit of *aretê*, of Sicilian princes welcoming philosophers and poets to their courts, that I suddenly realized that this was the world to which Plato's *Republic* was primarily related. This helped me to solve the problem that had beset me ever since I read Plato's *Republic* in Czechoslovakia in the early 1970s. I was reading it in the power plant where I was working as a turbine operator, excluded from academic life like many others, and I could not help noticing similarities between the cultural strictures on the basis of which Plato constructed his ideal state and the cultural straight-jacket imposed on society by the communist regime. After my arrival at Oxford, an academic at St Antony's noticed similarities between my view of Plato and Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*, and he donated it to me. I could not agree with Popper's simplistic view of Plato as the arch-promoter of totalitarianism, with his view of Plato as a man who betrayed Socrates, for I had the advantage of having been steeped in Aristophanes who opened my eyes to the faults of the Athenian democracy. Yet despite all my criticism of Popper I could not help viewing the *Republic* – as he did – against the background of Periclean Athens, of Athens that put up with Socrates doing philosophy for good fifty years, Socrates who was ready rather to die than leave the city. Against this background, I found Plato's *Republic* very unsatisfactory. Pindar's odes opened to me the world in relation to which Plato's *Republic* ought to be read and judged, for it was written in relation to that world. Plato's cultural, economic, and political strictures in the *Republic* are primarily directed at the rulers, the aristocrats, the tyrants of Sicily, whose political power with its potential for the good attracted him, yet whose misuse of power he saw and wanted to remedy.

Aretê – 'virtue', 'excellence', 'achievement' – is central to Pindar's celebrative songs. Thus Hieron, celebrated in the first Olympian, 'wields the rightful sceptre in flock-rich Sicily ... culls the summits of all achievements (*drepôn koruphas aretan apo pasan*) ... the horse-loving king of Syracuse' (1 Ol. 10-23). The 'famous ancestors of Theron', the Sicilian prince of Akragas celebrated in the 2nd and 3rd Olympian, 'added wealth and glory to their native virtues (*gnêsiais ep aretais*, 2 Ol. 11-12). Wealth is worthy of a celebrative song, but only if it is 'adorned with virtues' (*aretais dedaidalmenos*), 'providing fit occasion for various achievements by supporting a profound and questing ambition' (2 Ol. 53-4). With his Olympic victory Theron 'reached the furthest point with his achievements' (*pros eschatian aretais hikanôn*, 3 Ol. 43). The courts of the Sicilian princes were welcoming to philosophers and to poets. 'The thoughts of wise men' gravitate towards 'the hearth of Hieron' who 'is glorified and takes delight in the finest songs such as we men often perform in play about his friendly table' (1 Ol. 9-17). The 'summit [of men's achievements and virtues] is crowned by the kings' (*to d' eschaton koruphoutai basileusi*, 1 Ol. 113-14). 'All the joys which that man [Theron of Akragas] has wrought for others, who could declare them?' (2 Ol. 99-100, the preceding and the following translations from Pindar are those of W. H. Race).

The centrality of *arête* in Pindar's odes struck a chord with Plato. In Pindar's 2nd Olympian ode those who have the courage to live three times here on earth and in Hades 'keeping their souls free from all unjust deeds' progress to live on the Isle of the Blessed; in Plato's Phaedran Palinode those, who succeed in living a life devoted to philosophy, win 'a victory in one of the three truly Olympic

contests' (*Phaedrus* 256b), and those who succeed in living such blessed lives three times in succession regain their wings and live from then on in eternal bliss, liberated from the cycle of reincarnations (248e-249a).

Gildersleeve in the 'Introductory Essay to his edition of *The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (London, Macmillan & Co. 1890) says of Pindar's religiosity: 'Nearly every ode is full of gods. Not one of the shining forms of the great divinities is lacking, not even Hestia ... Pindar's world of gods is an organized state ... In the first Olympian, as in all the Olympians, Zeus rules serenely.' (p. xxix) In Plato's Phaedran Palinode Pindar's world of gods is set into cosmic motion: 'And behold, there in the heaven Zeus, mighty leader, drives his winged team: first of the host of gods and daemons he proceeds, ordering all things and caring therefor: and the host follows after him, marshalled in eleven companies. For Hestia abides alone in the god's dwelling place; but for the rest, all such as are ranked in the number of the twelve as ruler gods lead their several companies, each according to his rank.' (246e-247a, tr. R. Hackforth).

Pindar's Odes are steeped in myth, but he does not accept the myth uncritically. Thus in the First Olympian he resolutely refuses to accept the myth of Tantalos, the king of Sipylus in Lydia, offering gods assembled at his table his newly born son Pelops as a dainty dish, 'that into water boiling rapidly on the fire they cut up your limbs with a knife' – Pindar in his verses addresses Pelops – 'and for the final course distributed your flesh around the tables and ate it' (1 Ol. 48-51). Pindar transforms the myth. Pelops did disappear because the mighty Poseidon, struck by his beauty, 'his mind overcome by desire' (*damenta phrenas himerôî*) snatched him and brought him to 'the highest home of the widely honoured Zeus where at a later time Ganymede came as well for the same service to Zeus' (1 Ol. 41-45). Pindar clearly suggests that Poseidon's *himeros* towards Pelops was sexual, as was that of Zeus' towards Ganymede. Back on earth, Pelops invokes Poseidon: 'If the loving gifts of Kypris [Aphrodite, the goddess of love] count at all for gratitude, Poseidon, come! ... Thus he spoke, and wielded no unfulfilled words. The god honoured him.' (1 Ol. 75-86) From Plato's perspective, this needed to be further corrected. In the Phaedran Palinode, Plato's Ode on pure love, the Pindarean *himeros* is transformed into a flow of particles of beauty that flow from the beautiful face of the beloved into the eyes of the philosopher-lover, 'that flowing stream which Zeus, as the lover of Ganymede, called the "flood of passion" (*himeron*)' (Plato, *Phaedrus* 255c).

Pindar opens his Third Olympian Ode with the words 'I pray that I may please the hospitable Tyndaridai [brothers of the Helen of Troy] and Helen of the beautiful locks' (3 Ol. 1-2) His view of Helen was obviously very different from the Homeric view. Plato concurred with him, for in the *Phaedrus* he introduced his Palinode with Stesichorus' Palinode on Helen: 'False, false the tale: Thou never didst sail in the well-decked ships Nor come to the towers of Troy.' (243a-b, tr. R. Hackforth).

Socrates must have somewhat dampened Plato's Pindarean admiration of the Olympic victories when at his trial he declared that the Olympic victors provided the Athenians with a mere semblance of happiness, whereas he with his philosophical questioning was giving them true happiness. But there was a connection with Pindar's adoration of *arête*. Socrates was offering happiness to his fellow citizens by transforming *aretê* from the sole prerogative of aristocracy into the primary concern of all men and women.

Plato informs us in the *Seventh Letter* that in his early years he wanted to devote himself to politics, most eagerly so in his early twenties, during the aristocratic revolution, which he hoped would bring justice to the city. But when that went wrong, he began to think of a political career within the framework of the Athenian democracy, and there can be little doubt that as long as he was driven by

that desire, his thought focussed on the Socratic notion of *arête*. He continued to be driven by that desire for several years after the death of Socrates, but finally came to the conclusion that there was no place for him in Athenian politics, for human affairs could be put right only if philosophers became kings or kings became philosophers; with this thought he left Athens and went to Syracuse in Sicily (*Seventh Letter* 324a-326b). With his mind firmly fixed on Sicily and Italy, Plato depicts the life of a true philosopher: “The scrambling of political cliques for office ... such doings never enter his head ... His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its wingéd way, as Pindar says (*kata Pindaron*), throughout the universe, ‘in the deeps below the earth’ and ‘in the heights above the heaven’.” (*Theaetetus* 173e, tr. M. J. Levett). Plato thus reverts to the Pindarian conception of *aretê* as the privileged concern of true aristocracy, of philosophers destined to rule in his ideal state. In the fifth book of the *Republic* Plato maintains that the life of the Olympic victors is the most blessed, but the life of philosophers in his ideal state ‘will be even more blessed’ (465d). In the contest between a tyrant and a philosopher concerning happiness in the ninth book the philosopher defeats his opponent in three bouts ‘Olympically’ (*olumpikôs*, 583b). In the tenth book Plato compares men guided by justice throughout their lives to the true runners who come to the finish, receive the prize, and are crowned (*stephanountai*, 613c).

My audio recordings of Pindar’s Olympian Odes are based on Gildersleeve’s metrical analysis in his edition of Pindar. Gildersleeve in his ‘Introductory essay’ instructs the novice: ‘The poem must be read rhythmically over and over until it can be read fluently aloud, and this must precede the intellectual study. Then, of course, the vocabulary must be looked after ... When the rhythm is mastered, it will be found that the way is opened for the appreciation of the meaning of the poem in its parts and as a whole.’ These words reminded me of Goodwin’s warning: ‘Care should always be taken in reading to distinguish the *words*, not the *feet*.’ (*A Greek Grammar*, New Edition 1894, p. 350, par. 1625)

Allow me to advocate a very different approach. Any student of Pindar can obtain W. H. Race’s edition of Pindar’s odes published in the Loeb Classical Library. His translation is excellent. His aim was to produce ‘a readable, clear translation that reflects the grammar of the original Greek text.’ (‘Preface’, p. vii.); it therefore can be used as a torch that sheds light on the Greek text. Hand in hand with Race’s edition I used Gildersleeve’s ‘Commentary’ and Liddell & Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*. Only after understanding the Greek text as fully as I possibly could at that stage did I take recourse to Gildersleeve’s metrical analysis. I was then surprized when I saw how much deeper understanding of the odes I could reach reading them in accordance with their respective meter and rhythm.

To make the task of recording as easy as possible, I typed the Olympian Odes, marking the long syllables with red colour. I left unmarked the long syllables in anacrusis and wherever they take place of short syllables. My readings of the Olympian odes on my website are now accompanied with the corresponding texts thus marked.