

III. What Time Can Do (Pindar, *Nemean* 1.46–47)

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“All that critical scholarship has done or—it is to be feared—can do for this text is to despair of it.” With such words Farnell begins his note on *Nem.* 1.46–47;¹

ἀγχομένοις δὲ χρόνος
ψυχὰς ἀπέπνευσεν μελέων ἀφάτων.

That the passage is unusual is scarcely open to doubt; but that one should “despair” of a solution is not, I think, necessary.² Although there are one or two small points of difficulty, the crux of the passage is the use of *chronos*, and it is this which we must first attempt to explain and justify.

A literal translation would be: “Time caused their souls to breathe forth from their monstrous limbs as they were being strangled.” But can time do this?³ Two arguments will, I hope, prove that it can.

The first is raised in Fränkel’s excellent discussion of the concept of time in early Greek thought.⁴ He points out quite clearly that *chronos* in Homer is never an active agent, but only a factor in

¹ All quotations from and references to Pindar are from the second edition of Snell’s Teubner text. Farnell’s note is from his *Critical Commentary to the Works of Pindar* (London 1932).

² Various emendations have been suggested. M. Schmidt, “Zu Pindaros,” *RhM* 4 (1846) 462 f., conjectured *χρόμος* and won the support of Bury in his *Nemean Odes of Pindar* (London 1890). Bergk in his Teubner edition of Pindar first read *ἀγχομένοις δὲ λέχρις ψυχὰς ἀπέπνευσαν*, but later changed it to *ἀγχομένοις δ’ ἄτρομος ψυχὰς ἀπέπνευσεν*. H. van Herwerden, *Pindarica* (Leipzig 1882) 24 f., emended to *χάνος*. The most recent conjecture was made by H. Roell, “Zu griechischen und lateinischen Schriftstellern,” *WkPh* 29 (1912) 1324 f., who suggested *βρόχος*. This was also suggested by J. J. Hartman, “Annotatiunculas criticas ad Pindari locos quosdam,” *Mnem.* 46 (1918) 445 ff., who was apparently unaware of Roell’s article, and has been incorporated in Bowra’s edition of the Oxford text.

³ The causal sense of *apopneō*, found in no other passage, need not trouble us. Anyone who has read even a little of Pindar is well aware that the Theban poet was not afraid to depart from the more normal constructions of the Greek language, if it suited his poetic purpose.

⁴ H. Fränkel, “Die Zeitauffassung in der frühgriechischen Literatur,” *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens*² (Munich 1960) 1 ff. A more recent discussion,

events themselves, whereas in Pindar it now becomes "geladen mit Energien." These "Energien" may be seen in many passages. For example, time can "grow weary" (*Pae.* 2.27), "make one ashamed" (*Olym.* 10.8), "cause trouble" (*Olym.* 6.97), "bring something to pass" (*Nem.* 4.43), and "save just men" (*Fr.* 159). A consideration of other expressions of time in Pindar only serves to reinforce Fränkel's argument. In *Pyth.* 4.115, for example, Pindar makes night a "partner" in a journey. Later in the same ode Sandys translates (verses 254 ff.): "And then it was that the fated day, or, haply, the night watches, received in a foreign field the seed of your bright prosperity." Similarly in *Olym.* 13.37 ff.: "And, in the same month, at rocky Athens did one swift day fling o'er his hair three fairest crowns of victory." Thus time in its various aspects is virtually personified in Pindar,⁵ and in view of this it does not seem difficult to conceive of *chronos* as "causing souls to breathe forth."⁶

These examples illustrating Pindar's concept of time might be considered sufficient proof in themselves that *chronos* is sound in the passage under discussion, but there is an additional argument in support which has not to my knowledge been sufficiently explained. As we mentioned earlier, Fränkel pointed out that in Homer *chronos* is never the subject, but only a factor in events themselves, whereas in Pindar it becomes an active agent. However, in Pindar and the other poets of his period *chronos* is viewed in both ways, as a factor in events and as an active force,

S. Accame, "La concezione del tempo nell' età omerica e arcaica," *RFIC* 39 (1961) 359 ff., does not mention *Nem.* 1.46 f. and has little to say about *chronos* as an active force in Pindar.

⁵ One should also note the personification present in *aion* in Pindar. See especially *Olym.* 2.10, 9.60 f., *Nem.* 2.6 ff., 3.74 f. and *Isth.* 8.14 f., and R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*² (Cambridge 1954) 405 f.

⁶ According to H. H. Pierrepont, "Gildersleeve on the First Nemean," *CJ* 49 (1953-54) 219, Gildersleeve felt no doubt that in this passage *chronos* is personified and consequently has "hands" which would enable it to strangle the serpents. H. Strohm, *Tyche* (Stuttgart 1944) 63, note 48, also agrees on the personification of time in this passage. Snell personifies *chronos* in *Olym.* 2.17 ("Time, the father of all things") and *Olym.* 10.55 ("Time alone puts truth to the test"), and other editors personify *chronos* in other passages. The question, however, of when words like *chronos* should be personified and therefore capitalized is difficult to determine. Obviously *chronos* is not personified to the degree that the Olympian gods are personified, and yet some degree of personification is clearly present. I should prefer to say that *chronos* in the passages mentioned above is semi-personified and that—*εἰ καὶ γελοιότερον εἰπεῖν*—should be written with a mark halfway between a small and capital letter.

and the latter view is simply a more vivid and poetic equivalent of the former. Thus when Pindar says that "time killed the serpents," he is in effect saying nothing more than that "the serpents died *in* time." If, therefore, it can be shown that the Greek poets could express the same general idea either by using *chronos* as the agent or by using the dative *chronōi* with some other agent, we shall have proof that this passage is merely Pindar's way of saying: ἀγχόμενοι δὲ χρόνῳ ψυχὰς ἀπέπνευσαν.⁷

I can find no two passages in Pindar which express the same idea using *chronos* first in the nominative case and then in the dative, but there are several examples in other early poets where passages parallel to some in Pindar may be found. Two which are most similar are *Pae.* 2.26 f.:

μή μοι μέγας ἔρπων
κάμοι ἐξοπίσω χρόνος ἔμπεδος.

and Aesch. *Eum.* 907–8:

καρπὸν τε γαίης καὶ βοτῶν ἐπίρρυτον
ἄστοῖσιν εὐθενουντα μή κάμνειν χρόνῳ.

Other similar passages are *Olym.* 10.53 ff. and Aesch. *Agam.* 807 ff., *Nem.* 4.41 ff. and Bacchylides 18.45, Fr. 227.2 f. and Bacchylides 13.205 ff.

These two arguments, the "Energien" which *chronos* has in Pindar and the parallel examples which show that Pindar uses *chronos* as subject and agent, whereas other poets can express the same general idea by using the dative, prove that the passage under discussion is Pindar's way of saying that the serpents were strangled and killed "in time."

One further explanation is necessary. Farnell objects that *chronos* "might mean 'length of time,' i.e. the long time that Herakles took in strangling them (one would think that the prodigious babe made short work of them)." But while it is true that *chronos* by itself often seems to mean a "long time," in most of the passages we have discussed in Pindar *chronos* means not so much a "long length of time" as an "indeterminate length of time." For example, when Pindar says in *Olym.* 10.53 ff. that

⁷ Other words also are used in this twofold way. *Tyche*, for example, may be either active or passive. It may be a force which causes something to take place (cf. *Olym.* 12.1 ff. and Fr. 38) or may simply denote that something takes place *tychái* (cf. *Nem.* 10.25, *Isth.* 8.67 *et alibi*).

"time alone puts truth to the test," he means that at *some* time in the future the truth will be revealed, not that it will necessarily require a long period of time. Pindar is, therefore, saying in *Nem.* 1.46 f. that a "period of time" killed the serpents, and we need not interpret this "period of time" as being either long or short. Farnell may feel that "the prodigious babe" would make "short work" of the serpents, but Pindar need not have felt so. These are, after all, no common serpents. They are sent by Hera, and it surely does not reflect on the infant Heracles' strength to say that he strangled them after a period of time, or even after a long period of time.⁸ The point the poet wishes to make is simply that the babe, Heracles, killed the serpents, not the length of time it took him to accomplish this. Farnell is straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel.

Nem. 1.46-47 is, therefore, perfectly sound, and any emendation would only destroy one of Pindar's most striking images. The modern reader may feel the strangeness of the image, but that is only because he normally thinks of time as something abstract. To Pindar it is far more concrete, a vital force which plays a significant role in man's life. Finally, and most important, we should remember that this is not only poetry, but highly lyrical poetry, and must be treated as such. In attempting to understand poetry in any language we should always beware of allowing sober scholarship to destroy our imaginative faculties. Both must go hand in hand.

⁸ Cf. C. A. M. Fennell's rather humorous note in *Pindar: The Nemean and Isthmian Odes* (Cambridge 1899): "The duration of *chronos* is relative. Experiments in the strangulation of large ophidians would be instructive but costly. I think that a grasp sustained long enough to make a tolerably large snake lie stiff would be miraculous as to time in a new-born infant, and it seems that the house was roused by the lashing of the creatures in death throes and possibly in reflex action after death."