NOTES/KORT BYDRAES

PINDAR'S SEVENTH OLYMPIAN ODE: COMMENTS ON VERDENIUS' COMMENTARY

In this short note I should like to draw attention to two aspects of Verdenius' Commentary and Supplementary Comments on Pindar's Seventh Olympian Ode.

1. The first aspect concerns his notes on βαθύ in line 53. Verdenius (I, 114) writes: “Not ‘deep’ . . . but ‘high’” referring us to such parallels as βαθυκρήμονα in Nem. ix, 40; κλέως οὐρανόν ἵκει in Homer Iliad viii, 192, and βαθύδοξοι in Pyth. i, 66. Verdenius (II, 249) referring to my suggestion of an associative connection between βαθύ (53) and βενθεσθεν (57) also comments: “I am still unable to imagine what ‘deep glory’ might mean, and adds a further parallel ἐσθλὸν βαθύ in Ol. xii, 12.

Now βαθύ in its physical and geographical sense may refer to that which is ‘deep’ or ‘high’ according to one’s position: looking downwards it will refer to depth, and looking upwards it will refer to height. In Pindar we find several passages in which this literal or geographical connotation of βαθύ is indicated, including the compound adjective βαθύκρημον referred to by Verdenius in Nem. ix, 40, and which is also found in Isth. iv, 62. In Pyth. i, 24 βαθύ probably has the connotation of ‘wide’ rather than ‘deep’ (ἐς βαθεῖαν . . . πόντου πλάκα), while in Nem. iv, 36 (βαθεῖα ποντιακά ἄλμα) and in Pyth. iii, 76 (βαθιὸν πόντον) it obviously refers to depth. In Isth. iv, 62 βαθύκρημον is said of the θέαρ of the grey sea (πολυτερίας ἄλογος): looking upwards from the position of the sea’s hollow bed, βαθύκρημον refers to its height. Liddell & Scott translates accordingly: “with high cliffs”. In Nem. ix, 40 βαθύκρημον is used of the ἀκταῖς of Helorus. Here according to Liddell & Scott the view would seem to be downwards, and it is thus translated as “deep and rugged banks”. But we mostly speak of the steep banks when referring to their height.

There seems to be but little confusion when βαθύ and its related compounds are used in this geographical sense, though translators differ, some translating these as ‘deep’, others as ‘high’. But when we consider passages such as Ol. vii, 53 and Ol. xii, 12 etc., where βαθύ is used metaphorically we should proceed with great care. In Pindar βαθύ is used with the following words which we may place in this metaphorical category: κλάρον in Ol. xii, 62; χρώος in Ol. x, 8; κινδύνον in Pyth. iv, 207; μέριμναν in Ol. ii, 54; κλέος in Ol. vii, 55; and ἐσθλόν in Ol. xii, 12. In all these cases the various objects are qualified, or better, measured, as βαθύ. Now it is totally irrelevant whether we translate βαθύ in these instances by ‘deep’ or ‘high’ since Greek uses the same word or ‘sign’ for both connotations. Verdenius
declares that he cannot imagine what 'deep glory' might mean and that it
must be understood as 'high', but this is of no relevance at all to the meaning
of these phrases. It is however relevant that Pindar deviates from the more
usual word μεγάς to qualify or measure these concepts, using instead the
adjective βαθύς, and that it would be incomprehensible to Pindar if we were
to ask him whether he is referring to the depth or the height of these
concepts. He is in fact referring to their greatness. The inheritance is great or
even rich, the debt is great, the peril is great, the care is great, the glory is
great, and finally the joy or happiness is great! In the case of Ol. vii, 53 “great
glory” is surely the standard English expression, but ‘deep’ or ‘high’ glory is
intelligible in English as well. Even in Afrikaans we do not constantly use the
same adjective; we speak of “diepe geluk” (deep joy), but rather of “hoë roem”
(high glory). The fact is however that there is no physical or geographical
connotation attached to βαθύς used with the concepts listed above, but only
a metaphorical connotation. Thus Verdenius’ interpretation of κλέος βαθύς as
‘high glory’ instead of ‘deep glory’ is really of minor importance since here
and in the other passages βαθύς is used metaphorically as referring to the
‘greatness’ of these objects of thought. I am convinced that in Ol. vii, 53 the
phrase ἐν βενθεσίν (57) suggested to Pindar the use of the word βαθύς (not
his understanding it as ‘deep’ or ‘high’). We have here a word association from
a physical to a metaphorical description in reverse order. Even if we should
adopt Verdenius’ suggestion by translating it as ‘high glory’ the associative
connection between βαθύς and βενθεσίν would still be valid in Greek,
and that is more significant than the question whether we translate it by ‘deep’ or
‘high’.

2. The second aspect concerns Verdenius’ objections to my suggestion that
the meaning of the whole ode is emphasized by certain structural patterns in
it, especially those indicated in the myths. Referring to my interpretation of
lines 39 ff. he lists three objections: “... (1) the divine order has a different
function in the two stories, (2) the craft of the Rhodians can hardly be said to
“balance the crime at the beginning”, and (3) “a pattern covering such a large
distance could hardly have been noticed by the audience” (Verdenius II, 248).

In the light of these objections I should reconsider my interpretation of the
pattern scheme employed in Ol. vii keeping in mind the structural points to
which Verdenius has adverted.

(a) In the first place it would seem that it is only partly correct to state that
the divine order has a different function in the two myths. To this point I shall
presently return. As regards the three myths contained in the ode one should
keep in mind that they are all concerned with the early history of Rhodes and
that they have an interesting feature in common, namely the author’s tacit
conviction that “the errors of men and gods are corrected by some kind of
providence”. The purpose of my article was to show how this is confirmed
by their being narrated according to an identical pattern. The myths here
concerned are the first and second:

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myth 1
a. the crime or error is first stated (28–29)
b. then follows its cause (30–31)
c. it is concluded with a divine command which ends with a happy result (33 ff.)

myth 2
a. the crime or error (48 ff.)
b. the cause of the crime (45–47)
c. the divine command with a happy result in view (39–41)

From this it is clear that the two myths are narrated in a continuous circular pattern (a b c : c b a). This narrative technique is a common and well attested device employed in Greek poetry from Homer onwards as was demonstrated by Van Otterlo.\(^8\)

Verdenius' conclusion that the divine order has a different function in each myth is in part correct, for it is after all two different stories, but this hardly, in his phrase, constitutes a legitimate objection to the pattern of narration. And a closer reading reveals that these two commands have, in the context of the history of Rhodes a most important common feature, viz. a happy result recorded (in myth 1) or prophesied (in myth 2).

(b) The second objection probably arose from a certain vagueness of definition in my article. My statement that the craft of the Rhodians balances their crime at the beginning is not free from ambiguity and calls for clearer definition. This statement should be seen in the light of the pattern of narration: in all three myths the initial crime in the end turns out well: negative action is structurally balanced by a positive result.

(c) The third objection is of a much more serious nature and most germane to our study of the nature of ancient poetry; it concerns the question whether the audience possessed or (as Verdenius believes) lacked the ability to notice patterns in a spoken poem. Their ability or inability to do so raises the whole question of the oral tradition in the Homeric and archaic age.

We know that Greek poetry shares with poetry in general a common feature namely that a poem implies an "achieved content".\(^9\) The important question is what the relation is between the audience and the poem as an achieved content. Could the ancient audience cope with such a content at an oral performance of the odes of Pindar? We may of course, at first blush, be inclined to maintain that the quality of a poem and its intricate structure or "Aufbau" cannot be determined by the ability or inability of the audience to appreciate its full meaning during the performance. But it would be more relevant to refer the reader to the important studies of Parry and Lord which have demonstrated the remarkable ability of poet and society to compose, perform and experience oral poetry or the performance of a written poem (as was the case with Pindar's odes, cf. Ol. i, 105). This finding has been confirmed by the study of contemporary oral poetry and its performance in Europe, and now also in Africa. Pindar's audience were not only able to notice historical and mythical allusions, but were also aware of these patterns of narration with which they had grown acquainted since the times of Homer. We should furthermore bear in mind
that the audiences were expected to follow not only the lyrics, but also the intricate musical (metrical) and dance patterns.

To conclude, without rejecting Verdenius' opinion outright, it would yet seem to me that the upshot of this whole study of oral poetry and its nature, as well as the thorough grasp the audience of early times would appear to have had of the performances should serve as a warning against underestimating the powers of comprehension of the ancient Greek audience.

NOTES

2. W.J. Verdenius, Pindar's Seventh Olympian Ode: Supplementary Comments, Mnemosyne xxix, 3, 1976, 243–253 = Verdenius II.
5. Cf. Ol. viii, 10; Isth. vii, 29; Ol. i, 56; Nem. viii, 25; Pyth. ii, 89; Pyth. iv, 278; Ol. viii, 5/6.

University of Pretoria

J.H. BARKHUIZEN

PARADOX IN THE GREEK SEPULCHRAL EPIGRAM

To stroll through a mediterranean cemetery reading the inscriptions may be a heart-rending experience, but a perusal of the more than 700 sepulchral epigrams in the seventh book of The Greek Anthology is likely to leave one strangely unaffected. Only a small proportion of them are genuine epitaphs, and there is but an occasional note of true pathos in these and in a few others. The vast majority fail to communicate any deep emotion. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the writers were in many cases interested primarily in composing display pieces. Nowhere is the striving for effect more evident than in the quest for the paradoxical. The final result is interesting and varied reading, the tone at times more convivial than funereal.

The kind of paradox to be examined here is distinct from that inherent in some sepulchral clichés, e.g. the very denial of death in order to seek consolation in

σός δ’ ἐπέων, Ἡριννα, καλὸς πόνος οὗ σε γεγαγεῖ
φθίσαται, ἔχειν δὲ χοροὺς ἀμμιγα Πιερίσιν

(12, anon.),

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