
Two Odes

PINDAR

(Translated, with an introduction, by Chris Childers)

I MMEDIATELY UPON the conclusion of the latest NBA Finals—a magnificent, pulsating seven-game series between the San Antonio Spurs and the Miami Heat—the search began for the series’ *meaning*. The answers proffered were of two broad types: praise and blame for individual performances in specific games; and ranking of current players and teams in terms of the “all-time greats” from the past fifty or sixty years: how does LeBron James’s “legacy” stack up in the pantheon, next to Jordan, Bird, Chamberlain, Russell? Where will he stand when his career is over? Statistics are trotted out, records debated, opinions broadcast, and eventually we move on to the next major event—Wimbledon, the Tour de France, the British Open, the baseball season—with nothing resolved, and that little question—what does it all *mean*?—still hanging there, bending, like the fruit of Tantalus, just out of reach.

What we want is to articulate the feelings inside us when we watch world-class athletes do amazing things with their bodies and their hearts. We want to understand the place of sport against the backdrop of human endeavor, in our shared struggle with mortality and transcendence. As David Foster Wallace says, we want to reconcile ourselves “with the fact of having a body.”¹ And we want to contextualize these peak moments of sport—which can border on religious experience—within our own lives and the life of the community.

In other words, we want poetry. To say such things in prose risks ridicule: *Pardon the Interruption* is no place for

vulnerable emotions, and many sports talk shows are as aggressively competitive as the sports they talk about. But in poetry, we can read the ferocious physicality and tenacious courage of a Serena Williams, or a LeBron James, as an ultimate development of human potential, body and—especially—spirit, and ask, Do I have any of that in me, and where can I find it? Or we can look at the dejected San Antonio Spurs, ennobled by defeat, and learn something about the limits even of greatness, even of genius, and hear Tennyson’s “Ulysses” echoing in our heads?

All this and more is what Pindar did for athletes and athletics in the fifth century BC. He took individual victories and, using myths, aphorisms, and digressions, approached their meaning within his own historical, cultural, and religious framework. In *Olympian* 1, the brilliant light of Zeus and the Olympic games contrasts with the darkness shrouding Pelops as he prays to Poseidon beside the gray sea; throughout, right speech and right action, of the triumphant athlete, the royal victor, and the poet himself, intertwine and inform each other in the individual soul, on the racetrack, and in the state. In *Pythian* 8, dark and light, failure and success, mortality and transcendence, are locked in a wrestling match, and we are left with a vision of the brevity and beauty of glory. If indeed, as T. S. Eliot says, “the communication / of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living,” perhaps these ancient poems may shed some light on the power and meaning of athletic *arete*; on our own obsession with, and difficulty discussing, the deeper emotions, and beauty, of sports.

NOTE

1. David Foster Wallace, “Federer as Religious Experience,” *New York Times* (August 20, 2006).

OLYMPIAN I

For Hieron of Syracuse, Winner, Single-Horse Race, 476 BC

Water is best, while of all riches, gold, *Str. 1*
like fire in the dark, shines well apart.

But if it's games, my heart,
you want to hymn, what star could you behold
more warm or more unrivaled in the air
than the bright sun,
or what contest compare
to Zeus's at Olympia? Not one.

From that source, poems that all of us repeat
wing round the minds of wise men, who entreat
and offer praises up to Cronus' son
at the rich and happy hearth of Hieron,

who, plucking such success as few are able, *Ant. 1*
wields just sway in flock-rich Sicily,
and shines in the poetry
we men recite around his friendly table.

Now take your lyre, play something Doric, Pindar,
if Pisa's grace

and Phereclus' splendor
delight you and inspire you to praise
where praise is due. For that sleek thoroughbred
did not need any goading as he sped
past the Alpheus, and, flying ever faster,
won victory and power for his master,

the king of Syracuse, who loves his horses, *Ep. 1*
whose fame beams like a star
in the colony of Pelops, where the course is
and where the good men are.

It was Pelops whom the powerful Earth-holder,
Poseidon, grew so passionate about,
taken by ivory shining in his shoulder
as from the stainless kettle Clotho pulled him out.

There are so many things hard to believe!
And yet, when men talk, as they do,
they don't always hold to what's true,
but with their colorful fancies, weave
elaborate lies intended to deceive.

When Eloquence, which gives men such delight, *Str. 2*
 adds honor to what cannot be conceived,
 it often is believed;
 yet future days are wise and see what's right.
 It's proper for a man to speak no shame
 of gods in glory;
 that way, there's less blame.

Son of Tantalus, here's a different story
 than others tell about you: when your father
 feasted the gods—a favor for their favor—
 in friendly Sipylus, nothing was uncouth;
 but the Lord of the Trident snatched you in your youth

on golden horses, driven by lust and need, *Ant. 2*
 and took you to the honored home of Zeus,
 where, for the same use,
 the gods' king afterwards brought Ganymede.
 But when you'd vanished, and your mother's men,
 hard though they searched,
 could not find you again,
 some envious neighbor secretly besmirched
 your story, saying that your folks had you
 pared and minced and boiled up in a stew,
 then to the gods, when you were quite inert,
 ladled you out and served you for dessert.

But I could not dishonor in my verse *Ep. 2*
 any immortal god
 or say that one's a glutton: slanderers
 rarely come to good.
 Yet if Olympus' keepers ever blessed
 a man with honor, it was Tantalus,
 who, fraught with appetite, could not digest
 his happiness, and won this prize in Tartarus
 when folly made him ruinously blind:
 under a stone of monstrous size
 hung by the Father, he tries and tries
 to free himself, still unresigned,
 and despair bears with full weight on his mind.

He's fourth in hell among the famous three, *Str. 3*
suffering pains and helpless for reprieve
 because he sought to give
 his friends the cup of immortality—
nectar he stole from deathless benefactors.
 No man can trick them;
 his hopes are empty specters,
whoever tries, and he their hapless victim.
And so the gods cast Pelops back in grief
to rejoin men on earth whose lot is brief.
When he'd grown up, and fuzz darkened his chin,
he thought he'd seek a marriage he could win

with famous Hippodamia, the king *Ant. 3*
of Pisa's daughter. One night, he went alone
 to where the gray waves groan
and called the Trident Lord, deep-thundering;
who came, and Pelops said, "If you in heaven
 still honor us
 for gifts of love we've given,
hold back the bronze spear of Oenomaus,
and in a peerless chariot speed me
to Elis; bring me power and victory.
He's killed thirteen already—men who seek
his daughter's hand—and puts off week to week

her wedding. Danger and achievement never *Ep. 3*
 attract the cowardly.
But who could stomach—since no one lives forever—
 a life's obscurity,
attempting nothing fine for honor's sake
and doting on his dotage, to no end?
Not me; this is the test I'll undertake.
But you, fulfill my prayer, and treat me as a friend."
He spoke; Poseidon granted his desire,
 and glorified him and his love
 with gifts straight from the gods above:
 a chariot flashing golden fire
and wingèd horses that can never tire.

He bested Oenomaus, taking the king's *Str. 4*
 daughter to share his bed, and raised six sons—
 commanding, royal ones—
 all fired with passion to achieve great things.
 Entombed now by the Alpheus he rests,
 and drinks his fill
 of worship, where the guests
 from far and wide throng Zeus's festival,
 and fame in the races and bold feats of force
 blazes abroad from the Olympic course
 of Pelops, and each victor feels the balm
 of triumph waft through all his days a calm—

as far as games can give it; for the pleasure *Ant. 4*
 renewed each day brings men most happiness.
 But to crown that man's success
 with a horseman's tune in an Aeolic measure
 is now my task; no host alive displays
 more noble skill
 to robe in folds of praise,
 more deeds of mastery, more lordly will.
 The god who guards you makes it his concern
 to help you reach the dreams for which you yearn,
 Hieron; if he doesn't leave his place,
 I hope to praise an even sweeter race

in the swift chariot, as I trace back *Ep. 4*
 the road of eloquence
 to Cronus' sun-struck hill, and Zeus's track.
 The Muse in my defense
 has strung the strongest arrow on my strings.
 Though many men are great in many ways,
 the highest pinnacle is crowned by kings.
 Cast your gaze no farther. There is no higher praise.
 May you continue drinking that rare air
 for your whole life; and may I come
 with victors to the podium,
 and in the wisdom that I share
 may I outshine all Hellenes everywhere.

PYTHIAN 8

For Aristomenes of Aegina, Winner, Wrestling, 446 BC

Kindly Quiet, Justice' daughter, *Str. 1*
you who make great cities greater
and hold the highest keys
of wars and plans, accept this wreath
of honor won at Pytho by Aristomenes;
for you know when to bless
men with a gift of gentleness
and when to rest for gifts that men bequeath.

When someone screws relentless spite *Ant. 1*
deep in his heart, you meet his might
roughly and force your brash
and overbearing enemy
in with the bilge. Porphyryon was just so rash,
blind that you'd prove his bane
when he attacked. The sweetest gain
is garnered when it's given willingly.

But violence in time trips up all violent blustering; *Ep. 1*
neither hundred-headed Typhus nor the Giants' king
could slip your grasp, for lightning struck them down
and arrows from Apollo, whose good will
welcomed Xenarces' son from Kirrha, with a crown
of Mount Parnassus' laurel and a Doric festival.

Sheltered in the Graces' hands *Str. 2*
this righteous island city stands
touching the feats of glory
the Aeacids performed, her fame
unblemished from the first, extolled in song and story
for heroes she has raised
to pinnacles where they are praised
for winning contests, battles and acclaim.

Her men, too, are preeminent, *Ant. 2*
 but I can't raise a monument
 with lyre and gentle singing
 to all her virtues; that would bore
 and chafe my audience. Here at my feet comes springing
 the song I owe the last
 great honor, child, that you amassed:
 my art will give it wings and let it soar.

Following your uncles' tracks, you don't disgrace their names, *Ep. 2*
 for Theognetus took the crown at the Olympic games,
 Clitomachus, too, at the Isthmians.
 Your glory swells your clan's, and illustrates
 Amphiarus' riddle, when he beheld the sons
 at spear-point hold their ground before Thebes of the seven gates;

watching the Epigones come back *Str. 3*
 again from Argos to attack,
 he said, as they fought on,
 "How clear a father's spirit shines
 forth in his sons, with nature's light! I see my own,
 Alcmaeon, as he wields
 the dappled dragon on his shield's
 bright boss at Cadmus' gates in the front lines.

But for Adrastus, the hero who *Ant. 3*
 met with defeat his first time through,
 the omens now are better
 for his campaign, though not at home.
 For he, alone of the Greek force, will have to gather
 the bones of his dead son,
 but with the gods will soldier on
 and his whole host unscathed at last will come

to Abas' spacious avenues." So spoke, with prophet's
 sight, *Ep. 3*
 Amphiarus. I too hail Alcmaeon with delight,

crown him with wreaths, splash him with melody,
for en route to the navel of the earth,
he—my neighbor, guard of all my property—
he met me with his gift of sight inherited at birth.

And you, lord of the long-range bow, *Str. 4*
to whose bright shrine all peoples go
in Delphi's lofty dell,
where you bestowed, there at your seat,
the best of joys; and earlier at home as well,
you gave on your feast day
the Five-fold crown to take away:
Apollo, everything that I may meet—

with willing mind I pray to see *Ant. 4*
it all in proper harmony.
As Justice takes her place
beside our band in joyful song,
I ask the gods, Xenarces, not to grudge you grace,
for many think that men
who win without long discipline
are geniuses among the foolish throng

and helm their lives with clever stratagems which they have
planned. *Ep. 4*
But such things are not in men's power; a god grants them, whose
hand
now lifts one up and pins another down.
Compete with measure, Aristomenes.
At Megara and Marathon you hold the crown,
and home, at Hera's games, your hard work earned three victories.

Onto four bodies from above *Str. 5*
with violent thoughts you pounced and strove.
For them, Pytho bestowed
no happy homecoming, no wreath;
no mothers' tears of joy, no welcome laughter flowed
at their return. They slink

down alleyways instead, and shrink
clear of their foes, clamped in disaster's teeth.

But one who gains some new success *Ant. 5*
on wings of soaring manliness
and splendid hope takes flight
toward future deeds, for he has caught
a passion beyond wealth. In no time man's delight
bursts into bloom, but just
as fast collapses in the dust,
shaken by a breeze, a shift in thought.

One day we live. What is someone? What is no one? A
dream *Ep. 5*
of a shadow is all we are. But when the heavens shed their
gleam,
our life grows sweet and light shines over us.
Dear mother Aegina, safeguard this city's
voyage of freedom, with Zeus and with King Aeacus,
and Peleus, and noble Telamon, and with Achilles.