

SLANDER'S BITE: *NEMEAN* 7.102-5 AND THE LANGUAGE OF INVECTIVE

**Abstract:** Discussion of the closing lines of Pindar's seventh *Nemean* has concentrated almost exclusively on the lines' relevance to the larger question that hangs over the poem: does the ode serve as an apologia for the poet's uncomplimentary treatment of Neoptolemus in an earlier *Paeon*, and is Pindar here most plainly gainsaying the vilification in which he supposedly previously engaged. The reading that I offer suggests that a very different concern frames the conclusion to the work. Rather than seeking to exculpate himself, the poet announces instead that in the song that the audience has just heard, the composer has adhered to two prime virtues that the encomiastic genre should embrace: *variatio* and an ability to counter the language of blame. By reorienting the debate in this way, I aim to elucidate the striking metaphors and other rhetorical devices that fill the final lines, and most particularly to make sense of the canine imagery that seems so recurrent a motif. As my reading seeks to show, the dog is chosen as master trope both for his relation to the practice of invective and for his relevance to that stale act of repetition that the poet here rejects. By giving his audience a sample of the mode of speech that the calumnist practises, and that the praise poet may appropriate when combating the opposite genre, Pindar makes the merits of his own poetry shine the brighter, and invites the *cognoscenti* to appreciate his *sophia*. More broadly, the encomiastic singer's brief deployment of the weapons of the abuse poet allows us to understand something of the overlapping and symbiotic relations between the different genres in archaic Greek poetry.

τὸ δ' ἐμὸν οὐ ποτε φάσει κέαρ  
 ἀτρόποισι Νεοπτόλεμον ἐλκύσαι  
 ἔπεσι· ταῦτ' ἀ δὲ τρις τετράκι τ' ἀμπολεῖν  
 ἀπορία τελέθει, τέκνοισιν ἄτε μαψυλάκας "Διὸς Κόρινθος".  
 (N. 7.102-5)

But my heart will never say that it has savaged Neoptolemus with unyielding words, but to plow the same ruts three and four times is pointless, as when someone yaps at children 'Corinth of Zeus'.

IN a poem notorious for the controversy it has generated, the final lines of *N. 7* play no small part in the difficulties and disputes surrounding the larger composition. As commentators regularly ask, do we find here verification of the belief attributed to Aristarchus and his pupil Aristodemus that *N. 7* served as an apologia for Pindar's uncomplimentary treatment of Neoptolemus in an earlier *Paeon*?<sup>1</sup> For those who follow the ancient view, the poet's final declaration that he has not 'savaged' or 'mauled' the hero with his intractable words supplies the most explicit expression of Pindar's desire to make amends.<sup>2</sup> But as several discussions point out, the words are perfectly intelligible even to an audience unaware of any previous account on the poet's part.<sup>3</sup> All

<sup>1</sup> Σ ad 70, 94a, 123a, 150a. M. Heath, 'Ancient interpretations of Pindar's *Nemean 7*', *PLLS* 7 (1993) 169-200 traces the process whereby the ancient commentators reached their verdict.

<sup>2</sup> For a very balanced discussion, see H. Lloyd-Jones, 'Modern interpretation of Pindar: the Second Pythian and Seventh Nemean Odes', *JHS* 93 (1973) 136, reprinted in *Greek Epic, Lyric and Tragedy. The Academic Papers of Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones* (Oxford 1990) 110-53. E. Tugendhat, 'Zum Rechtfertigungsproblem in Pindars 7. nemeischen Gedicht', *Hermes* 88 (1960) 404, views lines 102-4 as the only unambiguous reference to the earlier version and the difficulties it provoked. Note too C. Carey, *A Commentary on Five Odes of Pindar: Pythian 2, Pythian 9, Nemean 1, Nemean 7, Isthmian 8* (New York 1981) 135; S. Fogelmark, *Studies in Pindar with*

*Particular Reference to Paeon VI and Nemean VII* (Lund 1972) 106.

<sup>3</sup> Most cogently argued in G. Most, *The Measures of Praise: Structure and Function in Pindar's Second Pythian and Seventh Nemean Odes* (*Hypomnemata* 83, Göttingen 1985), esp. 207-9. For other discussions of the possible relation between *N. 7* and *Pae. 6*, E. Thummer, *Pindar: Die Isthmischen Gedichte* (2 vols., Heidelberg 1968-9) 1.95; W.J. Slater, 'Futures in Pindar', *CQ* 19 (1969) 92-4, and 'Doubts about Pindaric interpretation', *CJ* 72 (1977) 203-7; E.L. Bundy, *Studia Pindarica* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1986) 28-9; A. Köhnken, *Die Funktion des Mythos bei Pindar* (Berlin 1971) 80; C.A.P. Ruck, 'Marginalia Pindarica IV, V, VI', *Hermes* 100 (1972) 144.

we need assume are listeners familiar with the dark traditions surrounding Neoptolemus' Trojan career and death at Delphi, and consequently alert to the changes that Pindar's very different version has rung on the tale. In my own reading, I want to move away from the problem that preoccupies earlier treatments and suggest a fresh perspective on the lines. In a poem that constantly addresses issues of encomiastic propriety,<sup>4</sup> Pindar draws his work to an end with an assertion of two facets of his mastery of his chosen genre: his practice of invention or *variatio* and his ability to counter the language of blame. This approach not only allows us to make sense of the striking vocabulary and imagery chosen by the poet in the closing portion, but more broadly illuminates relations between the different generic modes and linguistic registers in which the poets of the late archaic and early classical age might compose.

I begin with the adjective ἀτρόποισι included in line 103, a term whose core meaning, most commentators agree, is 'unchangeable' or 'unyielding'.<sup>5</sup> The expression selected to qualify the words uttered by the poet offers the first sounding of a theme which will continue through the remaining lines, that of a rigidity or lack of variation which the singer condemns. The subsequent clause refines the meaning of the term (the δέ here should be read in its explanatory sense, introducing a more generalized statement of a sentiment already expressed),<sup>6</sup> and pinpoints its precise significance in the linguistic realm. To speak with ἀτρόποισι ἔπεισι is tantamount to 'ploughing the same furrow three or four times', a phrase which both here and elsewhere simply denotes the repetition of what has been said before.<sup>7</sup> The very sound and structure of lines 104-5 offer the audience a specimen of the discourse critiqued. With its emphatic t-alliteration, the clause displays a harsh, jingling and repetitive sound as it actualizes the notion of reiteration that it describes.<sup>8</sup> Nor is this repudiation of saying the same thing again and again surprising in a poem concerned with avoiding verbal excess in any form. Already Pindar has declared his preference for succinct phrasing (48) and his desire to spare his audience the boredom and satiety that result from verbal exaggeration or speech that is too prolonged (52, 66).<sup>9</sup> Read as a whole, what these concluding lines condemn is not so much a particular story about Neoptolemus as the very act of repetition itself:<sup>10</sup> the poet is not backtracking, but just espousing that doctrine of variation and novelty to which poets from Homer to Aristophanes and beyond adhere.<sup>11</sup>

But the opening term of line 105 also involves an almost imperceptible shift in ground, allowing the poet to modify the notion already aired and to link the practice of this rejected discourse to a particular class of individuals. The action of the plough, or rather that of the speaker who repeats what has already been said, results in mere ἀπορία, futility or pointlessness. The reference to ἀπορία introduces what an ancient audience might recognize as an encomiastic commonplace. When we encounter the term and its cognates or equivalents elsewhere in the epinician songs, the conceit most commonly appears not in the context of repetition, but at moments where the poet contrasts praise and blame or distinguishes a paucity of subject matter from the abundance that the laudator uniquely enjoys. Very close to the terms used in *N.* 7 is the poet's comment at *O.* 1.52 where Pindar rejects the φθόνοϛ-inspired tale of the gods' cannibalistic feast on the body of Pelops: 'It is impossible (ἄπορα) for me to call any of the immortals greedy' (52). That the ἄπορα should be understood as an indicator of the lack of πόροι or resources with

<sup>4</sup> For this, T.K. Hubbard, 'The subject/object-relation in Pindar's Second *Pythian* and Seventh *Nemean*', *QUCC* 22 (1986) 53-72. Hubbard's reading, however, contains only very brief references to the concluding portion of *N.* 7.

<sup>5</sup> See Most (n.3) 204-6 with full discussion, and a convincing refutation of other views.

<sup>6</sup> Most (n.3) 206.

<sup>7</sup> For a particularly close parallel, Soph. *Phil.* 1238; cf. Pl. *Phlb.* 34b.

<sup>8</sup> The t-alliteration is noted in C. Segal, 'Pindar's Seventh *Nemean*', *TAPA* 98 (1967) 477, but differently interpreted. Contrast the repetition here to the poet's own chosen manner at line 48.

<sup>9</sup> See Hubbard (n.4) 61, 67.

<sup>10</sup> As Most (n.3) 206 argues, Pindar is not saying here that he is not going to repeat his denial, but is rather explaining why he faults the use of unchanging words.

<sup>11</sup> Hom. *Od.* 1.352; Ar. *Nub.* 545-59; *Vesp.* 62-3.

which the practice of praise endows the speaker, the following line makes plain: 'impoverishment (ἀκέρδεια) is generally the lot of the calumnist (κακαγόρους)' (53).<sup>12</sup> Contrast this state with the scenario described in the opening declaration of *I.* 4: 'I have, thanks to the gods, countless roads in every direction, O Melissos, since at the Isthmian games you showed forth an abundant resource (εὐμαχανίαν) to pursue in song your family's merits' (1-3).<sup>13</sup> *P.* 2.52-6 unpacks the more indirect or metaphoric accounts presented elsewhere, spelling out the relationship between the one who engages in invective, and an absence of πόροι or μηχαναί: 'but I must avoid the persistent bite of ill-speaking. For, keeping my distance, I saw censorious Archilochus, while in a state, for the most part, of resourcelessness (ἀμαχανία) fattening himself upon heavy-worded hatreds.' As Andrew Miller, arguing for a metaphoric rather than literal reading of ἀμαχανία, paraphrases the remark, the poet 'who restricts his professional activity to the negative exercise of censure and blame, *psogos* and *kakagoria*, will eventually find himself afflicted by a kind of poverty of poetic resources, a sterility'.<sup>14</sup> While the notions of repetition and poetic poverty can be joined (the blamer might be reduced to saying the same thing because he has no new matter with which to work), Pindar does not pursue that particular connection. Instead, as the imagery of the surrounding terms suggests, the practice of blame and the epinician poet's powers to counter it are the lines' more dominant concern.

With his glance towards the want of resources that falls to the calumnist, Pindar both recalls and retrospectively elucidates the striking phrase used in the previous clause, where the poet denied the charge of having 'savaged' Neoptolemus with his words. While several modern readings dispute the ancient commentator's confident gloss on ἐλκύσαι, 'the metaphor is from dogs dragging about a corpse',<sup>15</sup> the scholiast is perhaps guilty not so much of misrepresenting the meaning of the term, as of assuming an audience of readers rather than of hearers. Only after we have reached the ending of the song, and encountered the much more direct reference to dogs in the 'yapping' of the final line, do all the pieces fall into place. But a canine metaphor proves entirely apposite to the broader theme that the passage explores. Both the charge of acting in the manner of a dog and that of having a taste for human flesh belong to the conventional language of blame. Pindar's turn to this vocabulary and his appropriation of the diction of his opposite number is, I suggest, determined by his wish to condemn the behaviour of the blamer and to distance himself from the very course that his imagery conjures up.

First the well-known role of the dog in ancient invective. The animal is already ubiquitous in the discourse of abuse exchanged by Homeric heroes. As Margaret Graver's discussion concludes, 'metaphors drawn from the κύων group are a rather harsh form of abuse', generally applied to those whom the speaker wishes to portray as 'greedy and potentially cannibalistic' in a variety of different spheres.<sup>16</sup> The iambic poets continue very much in the same vein. In a song

<sup>12</sup> As L. Kurke, *The Traffic in Praise. Pindar and the Poetics of Social Economy* (Cornell 1991) 228, notes in reference to other Pindaric passages, κέρδος, as literal profit, is always condemned and only appears in a positive light when it is used in a metaphoric sense. So too here, the calumnist who seeks remuneration in the actual sense finds himself in the both literal and metaphoric dire straits of ἀκέρδεια.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *P.* 8.34; *P.* 9.92; *N.* 7.22; *Pae.* 7b.17. The opening of *I.* 4 lends weight to the suggestion that we understand the expressions ἄπορα and ἀφίσταμαι coupled together at *O.* 1.52 as an instance of Pindar's common use of the metaphor of the path of words. For discussion of this reading, D.E. Gerber, *Pindar's Olympian I. A Commentary* (Toronto 1982) ad 52. Also apposite is

*N.* 4.70-2 where, again using a metaphor of travel, Pindar advises himself to 'turn back the ship's tackle to the mainland of Europe; for it is ἄπορα for me to go through the entire story of the descendants of Aiakos'. In this instance the very abundance of subject matter would prompt a too lengthy digression.

<sup>14</sup> A. Miller, 'Pindar, Archilochus, and Hieron', *TAPA* 111 (1981) 140.

<sup>15</sup> Σ ad 150a. Homeric precedents include *Il.* 22.336; 17.557-8. Cf. Eur. *HF* 568; Hdt. 1.140; Pl. *Rep.* 539b. For dissent and different interpretations of the meaning of the verb, Slater 1969 (n.3) 93 and Slater 1977 (n.3) 205; Köhnen (n.3) 81.

<sup>16</sup> M. Graver, 'Dog-Helen and Homeric insult', *CA* 14 (1995) 53.

which some assign to Archilochus, others to Hipponax, the speaker devises a series of imprecation-like insults which imagine his victim suffering all manner of terrible fates as he lies face-down like a dog (Arch. *fr.* 79a.10 W). So too Semonides derives some of the unattractive characteristics that he assigns to one of the subspecies of womankind from her canine progenitor (7.12-20), perhaps situating the target of his invective in the tradition of the Hesiodic Pandora and her dog-like disposition (Hes. *Op.* 67). When Pindar denies that he has behaved in the manner of a dog, he is borrowing the very language of his detractors, imagining the terms in which they would abuse him as they charge him with the same canine voraciousness that the insult so commonly describes.<sup>17</sup>

But the praise poet also introduces this language for its very particular relevance, or rather opposition to the mode in which he works. As Homeric precedents show, individuals not infrequently attract the label of dogs on account of faults in the verbal domain, whether for speaking out of turn or for dealing out invective.<sup>18</sup> So at *Il.* 13.622-3, where Menelaus addresses the Trojans, the hero remarks, 'you were not lacking before in abuse and disgrace with which you abused me, you evil bitches'; and again at *Od.* 19.372-4 Eurykleia observes to Odysseus that 'just as these bitches all mock you, and you, to avoid their insults and manifold humiliations, do not allow them to wash you'. Semonides' dog-born woman betrays her heritage through her unceasing yapping (7.15, 20), and the threats that she attracts in return (ἀπειλήσας, 16) indicate a two-way flow of verbal abuse.<sup>19</sup>

Metaphoric representations of the impact of slander and blame also suggest a more particular link between invective and canine activities: the abuser and/or his words bite and feed off the victim much as the dog does his prey. In Book 22 of the *Iliad*, in a passage replete with references to dogs tearing at and rending their victims' bodies (335-6, 354), Achilles declares his gruesome desire to feed off Hector's flesh (347) even as he abuses his enemy with the term more appropriate to his own present disposition, κύον (345).<sup>20</sup> Pindar preserves the epic association. In *P.* 2.52-3 the poet invests κακαγορία with a 'persistent bite', and goes on to imagine the prime practitioner of blame poetry, Archilochus, growing fat off his 'heavy-worded hatreds' (54-5).<sup>21</sup> *N.* 8 still more densely conflates the dog's ravaging with the language of detraction in a series of images that turn the object of verbal attack into the meal off which the slander (or slanderer) feasts. Citing the quarrel between Ajax and Odysseus over Achilles' arms, the poet describes how φθόνος, here malice-inspired speech, 'grabs (ἄπτεται) at the noble, but does not have ἔρις with inferior men. It was that which feasted (δῶψεν) on the son of Telamon' (22-3). As Gregory Nagy's discussion of the passage demonstrates, both verbs selected here occur expressly in the context of dogs feeding off the bodies of the dead.<sup>22</sup> Reading this passage together with descriptions of the effect of φθόνος and calumny elsewhere, Nagy concludes, 'the language of praise poetry presents the language of unjustified blame as parallel to the eating of

<sup>17</sup> The poet follows a very similar procedure in *O.* 6.89-90 where he again simultaneously quotes and refutes the charge of those who would deny the merits of his song, calling him 'Boiotian pig'.

<sup>18</sup> Garver (n.16) 52-3. For a later instance of the dog-insult, and intemperate and inopportune speech, Aesch. *Ag.* 1228-9.

<sup>19</sup> As does her husband's attempt to silence her by knocking out her teeth (17-18); as we shall see, the practice of abuse is described as the action of the dog biting. Again, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* echoes the motif when, in the context of an exchange of insults, Aegisthus charges the chorus leader with provoking him with 'foolish barkings' (νηπίσις ὑλάγμασιν) (1631).

<sup>20</sup> It is striking that the poet uses the verb ἔλκω, here

applied to the dogs worrying the corpse, to describe Achilles' dragging of the body of Hector elsewhere (*Il.* 22.401, 24.52; cf. 24.21).

<sup>21</sup> G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans. Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (2nd edn, Baltimore 1999) 226, observes that the verb used of Archilochus' feeding, πιαίνω, appears in Iliadic diction in reference to dogs devouring the fat of bodies left uncremated.

<sup>22</sup> Nagy (n.21) 226. Nagy (225-6 and n.3) also proposes that we construe the phrase rather differently than the standard interpretations which imagine φθόνος as the agent here. Instead he reads Odysseus, the one who has φθόνος, as the subject of the two verbs, and suggests that the meal eaten by the man of φθόνος turns out to be the victim of his calumny.

heroes' corpses by dogs'.<sup>23</sup> In *N.* 7, announcing himself incapable of the invective whose delivery assimilates the blamer to a dog, a biter rather than a speaker, Pindar suggests that he has not made a meal of Neoptolemus (himself, we recall, involved in a dispute over meat, but in no dishonourable fashion, at line 42). Instead the audience is reminded of the impeccably laudatory account of the hero in the song they have just heard, and is invited to contrast it with the negative version propagated by earlier poets who had neither the skill nor resources to think up something new.

In the final line of *N.* 7, Pindar neatly brings together the motifs sounded in the earlier statements, uniting them in a single composite expression. Comparing the individual who endlessly repeats the old slander against Neoptolemus to one 'yapping (μαψυλάκας) to children', he evokes the blame poet in the familiar guise of a dog, whose unpleasant barking is nothing more than the ceaseless declaration of the same thing. The poem ends with a fresh and still more damning sample of this particular mode of speech. Many readers register the sudden descent in tone in this concluding expression, and object to the breach in the high style normally preserved by the epinician poet.<sup>24</sup> But the inconcinnity and contrast with the loftiness of the preceding lines is quite deliberate on Pindar's part. Both the audience whom the final phrase commands and its very diction are calculated to place the blame poet outside the charmed social and linguistic circle that the practitioner of praise reserves for himself. In place of the σοφοί whom Pindar has privileged throughout the ode, and has claimed as his particular patrons and auditors,<sup>25</sup> we now encounter the children who both here and elsewhere are exemplars of folly and a sad lack of taste.<sup>26</sup> The proverb that closes the remark exactly demonstrates the kinds of discourse suitable for these listeners. Not only do proverbs themselves form part of that 'popular' speech that characterizes the lower register of iambic poetry and invective, but the very brevity of this remark is an invitation to the repetition already roundly critiqued. If this is the kind of language that auditors want, then they have no place among Pindar's more select audience.

While the final lines of *N.* 7 stand as a unit self-contained and coherent in its imagery, their treatment of the distinction between praise and blame also involves a return to a concern already explicitly introduced in the epode of the third strophe. There, as bridge between the myth of Neoptolemus and the praise of the victor's father Thearion, Pindar advertised his credentials as the ξείνος who 'keeping away dark blame' would bring fame to his friends (61-4).<sup>27</sup> But, as the ending demonstrates, this vaunted capacity to thrust off blame must in part depend on the poet's own familiarity with the methods of his opponents and his ability in timely fashion to turn their arms against themselves. In the very name of exclusion and rejection, praise poetry can draw on other genres and linguistic registers, marking them off from its own sanitized body by presenting them in the form of citations and locating them in the mouths of others. Having his cake and eating it both, the encomiast can thus speak that which he simultaneously sets outside the modes of discourse that he reserves for himself. A footnote justifying the use of 'low and base' matter in Book II of the *Dunciad* shows Alexander Pope deploying a similar stratagem many centuries later: 'the politest men are sometimes obliged to swear, when they happen to have to do with porters and oyster wenches'.

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<sup>23</sup> Nagy (n.21) 226.

<sup>24</sup> G. Norwood, *Pindar* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1945) comments, 'Most surprisingly of all, the massive Seventh Nemean dwindles down to a brisk conversational remark about poverty of thought and senseless babble' (79); A. Peuch, *Pindare, III: Néméennes* (Paris 1923), wonders at Pindar's use here of an expression whose 'familiarité peut étonner' (91).

<sup>25</sup> See particularly 17 and 23-4.

<sup>26</sup> For a very close parallel, *P.* 2.72-3 where the expression that pleases children betrays exactly the repetition that Pindar here condemns.

<sup>27</sup> Here I mention only one of the several ways in which the ending coheres with what has come before; for fuller treatment, see particularly Segal (n.8) and Most (n.3).