

THE IMPOSSIBLE TRADITION OF THE PINDARIC ODE IN ENGLAND

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Abstract: *The “burden of the past” (W. J. Bate) has persistently remained in the focus of poets’ attention across various periods of the history of Western poetry. Questions of tradition, historical belatedness, and “anxiety[es] of influence” (H. Bloom) have fueled both theorists and practitioners of poetry. The English Pindaric tradition confronts these questions uniquely. It has shown consciousness of its own historicity from the beginning. The vocation of the Pindaric poet and his relation to the inimitable master, Pindar, persist as central themes throughout the reception history. They contribute to the evolution of a tradition where poets increasingly question the possibility of autonomous poetic creation.*

Keywords: *form, irregularity, Pindaric ode, poetic vocation, tradition*

1. Introduction

In the history of the English ode, the Pindaric has made a significant contribution both to the thematic and formal characteristics of that genre. Surprisingly, these contributions are largely based on a misunderstanding of the meter and line structure of Pindar’s odes. Two aspects, real or perceived, of the original Pindaric poetry, nevertheless, persisted in the nearly two hundred years of the English reception history. One of these is the authority of the divinely legitimized poetic voice, which is emulated in the early stages of the tradition and framed as a source of vocational anxiety later. In terms of form, Pindar’s legacy survived in a rapturous presentation of elevated subject matter usually in irregular stanzas, or alternatively, in regular stanzas strongly suggesting irregularity. In outlining the main stages of the English Pindaric tradition, I would like to draw attention to a unique paradox underlying this history; that insofar as works of art within a tradition may be said to emulate their predecessors, or to be in dialogue with them, the English Pindaric tradition problematizes why such an emulation or dialogue with Pindar had become increasingly impossible.

2. Pindar’s Epinician Odes

Pindar’s *epinikai*, or victory songs, were written in celebration of athletic victories. Though the poems ostensibly immortalize individual athletic achievements, they do so by

exposing “the special significance of the occasion ... not only to the victor, but to the rest of the audience” (Nisetich 1990:42). The wider significance of the individual achievement derives from its relation to the mythical past in which the poet embeds the athletic victory. The task of the poem is to reveal those connections and parallels between victory and myth, victor and gods, the ephemeral event and immortality that make the event itself worth committing to its literary afterlife. The frequent transitions between the present and the past most probably did not present any difficulty for the original audience, for whom the various thematic elements of the epinician poem – the celebration of the victor, his family, and city; the mythological and religious reflections; and the gnomic statements – were well-known formulas (Nisetich 1990:40, 44). This is probably also the reason why the poet could afford to compress his thoughts instead of fully elaborating them, and in this way tailor the text to the requirements of the performance. A lengthy, detailed presentation of ideas would not have fitted well with a danced and sung choral performance (Nisetich 1990:47). Pindar scholars often point out that because contemporary readers are not familiar with the thematic and structural formulas and because we do not have any comparable experience of danced and sung poetry, Pindar’s odes have come to present the kind of difficulty that is only surmountable with specialist knowledge.

The meter of Pindar’s odes has been a source of misconceptions throughout the reception history. The highly complex meter of the poems, sometimes Aeolic and sometimes Doric, was not fully understood when the first editions in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. were produced. The imperfect understanding of the meter and, as a result, the imperfect line-division of the 2nd century edition by Aristophanes of Byzantium remained authoritative down to the 19th century. Characteristic of Pindar’s style was the occasional long line, which in the 2nd century edition was broken into shorter sections that sometimes ended in mid-word. Because of the presence of these unexplained and seemingly arbitrary short lines, Pindar’s poems suggested for many early imitators, first, that the poet of the *epinikai* enjoyed a freedom of poetic expression that defied metrical constraints, and second, that the poems are expressive of the state of divine inspiration in which they were ostensibly composed (Nisetich 1990:13-21).

Pindar’s victory odes were written in triads, i.e. in groups of three stanzas where the first stanza is called the *strophe* or *turn*, the second stanza the *antistrophe* or *counterturn*, and the third stanza the *epode* or *stand*. The lines of the strophe may be of varying lengths but the corresponding lines of each strophe and antistrophe are metrically identical. The lines of the epode show a metrical pattern altogether different from the rhythm of the corresponding lines of the strophe and antistrophe (Nisetich 1990:34).

3. Restoration and Neoclassical Reception

The condensed, para-tactical style of Pindar’s poetry and the incorrect colometry of its early editions lie at the heart of the subsequent Pindaric fashion in England. Already at the earliest stages of the reception history, these aspects had falsely been interpreted as stylistic and formal manifestations of divinely inspired poetry. In reality, however, what appeared as irregular

had in fact been composed in accordance with rules that had, soon after Pindar's death, become obsolete (Fränkel 1975:425-426). The para-tactical style is at war with logic only if the reader is not able to anticipate the elided steps of the argumentation, and the line-division suggested formal irregularity only because the correct meter escaped the editors. Neither of these 'mistakes' is derivative from an intrinsic quality in the poetry itself but much rather from the extrinsic condition of its anteriority.

In the English reception, the Pindaric influence is usually correlated either with formal irregularity or a regular form which, nevertheless, imitates an irregular, capricious line structure. Although Pindaric influences can be found already in the Renaissance ode, most notably in Ben Jonson's "To the Immortall Memorie, and Friendship of that Noble Paire, Sir Lucius Cary, and Sir H. Morrison" (1640), the Pindaric did not make a lasting effect until Abraham Cowley published his collection of "Pindarique Odes Written in Imitation of the Stile and Manner of the Odes of Pindar" in 1656. Cowley's publication consisted both of a theoretical treatise on the question of translation as well as poetic illustrations of it, and may, therefore, be seen as the first systematic attempt to domesticate the genre in England. The preface on translation immediately draws attention to the difficulties arising from the historicity of the enterprise:

If a man should undertake to translate *Pindar* word for word, it would be thought that one *Mad man* had translated another ... We must consider in *Pindar* the great difference of time betwixt his age and ours, which changes, as in *Pictures*, at least the *Colours* of *Poetry*, the no less difference betwixt the *Religions* and *Customs* of our Countryes, and a thousand particularities of places, persons, and manners, which do but confusedly appear to our Eyes at so great a distance. And lastly, ... we must consider that our Ears are strangers to the Musick of his *Numbers*. (Cowley 1905:155)

Without considering the historical, religious, cultural, and poetic differences between present and past, the translation would implicate both the original poet and his translator as mad men. Neither a literal translation, nor a poetic paraphrase is a viable option for Cowley because the literal meaning of Pindar's poems is not immediately accessible for the modern reader. Cowley's solution for this impasse is to adapt the style of the epinician odes to the modern context: preserve everything from the past that is still meaningful, abandon all that have lost meaning, and supply the losses with comparable parallels from the present:

[A]fter all these losses sustained by *Pindar*, all we can adde to him by our wit or invention (not deserting his subject) is not like to make him a *Richer man* than he was in his *own Country* ... Upon this ground, I have in these two *Odes* of *Pindar* taken, left out, and added what I please; nor make it so much my aim to let the Reader know precisely what he spoke, as what was his *way* and *manner* of speaking ... This *Essay* is but to try how it will look in an *English habit* ... (Cowley 1905:155-156)

As Carol Maddison suggested, Cowley's Pindar turns out as a 17th century English voice adjusted to the aesthetic norms of the Restoration period. Pindar's para-tactical style, perceived as a mark

of immediate divine vision, is replaced in the translation with “carefully concatenated pieces of arguments”, and the apparent formal irregularity of the original poems is suggested in metrically irregular, but nevertheless, rhyming lines (Maddison 1960:372). In other words, Cowley substituted the logical and formal freedom that was associated with Pindar’s poems for logical rigor and a controlled formal irregularity.

Cowley’s adaptations of Pindar’s *Olympian 2* and *Nemean 1*, his own poems written in Pindar’s style, and most importantly the new irregular form made an extraordinary impact in the second half of the 17th century. The Pindaric became a widely popular genre. Contemporary criticism, as expressed in the words of John Norris of Bemerton, considered it “the highest and most magnificent kind of writing in verse; and consequently fit only for great and noble subjects” (qtd. in Rothstein 1981:7). But in reality, the irregular form of the Pindaric was used “for so many purposes that the genre lost its specific force and meaning” (Rothstein 1981:7). With the exception of Dryden’s odes, Restoration-era Pindarics written after Cowley largely failed to achieve canonical status, and by the beginning of the 18th century the irregular ode seemed to have taken a turn towards decline.

William Congreve was the first to protest against the deflation of the genre, though his first attempts at the Pindaric – “Upon a Lady’s Singing” (1692) and “Ode to the King on the Taking of Namure” (1695) – reflect Cowley’s influence in the irregularity of form. In 1706, Congreve published a new Pindaric poem written in Pindar’s triadic structure – “A Pindarique Ode Humbly offer’d to the Queen On the Victorious Progress of Her Majesty’s Arms, under the Conduct of the Duke of Marlborough” – together with “A Discourse on the Pindarique Ode.” The “Discourse” offers a revised description of the formal and metrical structure of Pindar’s epinician odes, and hopes to serve as a corrective to the formal misconceptions in the tradition. The irregular ode – what it had become in the wake of Cowley’s influence – offended Congreve’s aesthetic sensibility both because complete formal and metrical irregularity were now considered aesthetic monstrosities and because the premise from which they had first been derived turned out to be false:

The Character of these late Pindariques, is a Bundle of rambling incoherent Thoughts, express’d in a like parcel of irregular Stanza’s, which also consist of such another Complication of disproportion’d, uncertain and perplex’d Verses and Rhimes ... On the contrary, there is nothing more regular than the Odes of Pindar, both as to the exact Observation of the Measures and Numbers of his Stanza’s and Verses, and the perpetual Coherence of his Thoughts. (Congreve 1706)

Where the aesthetic of the irregular ode saw formal freedom as a necessary consequence of treating “great and noble ideas,” Congreve finds a necessary correlation between the absence of formal regularity and thematic chaos. The freedom of the poet’s manner of expression, in other words, is not necessitated by his desire to articulate noble ideas that defy formal and metrical rules. Such a freedom, instead, reveals only incoherence, and it may even be suspected to actively generate it. Congreve’s “Discourse,” to my knowledge, is the first published text in English

which points to the historic misunderstandings of Pindar's meter and para-tactic style which had, nevertheless, played such a formative role in the reception history.

Edward Young was another major voice in the 18th century in favor of regularizing the Pindaric. Though Young's poems do not observe the triadic structure of Pindar's poems, they are monostrophic odes which retain the same metrical pattern in each stanza. What is interesting in Young's formal regularity is that it nevertheless gives the impression of an irregular line structure. His Pindaric odes typically use a six-line iambic stanza, where the third and sixth lines are longer tetra- or pentameter lines, whereas the first, second, fourth, and fifth lines are shorter di- or tetrameter lines. The visual effect of these stanzas is of a wavelike movement, suggestive of the stormy commotion and uncontrollable natural powers that the poems use as a metaphorical frame of reference. The visual association is also motivated by the subject matter Young likes to define, somewhat pedantically, in the titles: "Ocean: An Ode" (1730), "The Merchant. A Naval Lyrick: Written in Imitation of Pindar's Spirit. On the British Trade, and Navigation" (1730).

Both "Ocean" and "The Merchant," like Congreve's "Pindarique Ode," were published with theoretical para-texts, which suggests that the Pindaric at this time still did not recover from the bad reputation the irregular Restoration ode had earned for it, and that it was still a highly contested genre, which needed theoretical propping whichever form – irregular, regular triadic, or regular monostrophic – it took. "On Lyrick Poetry," which Young prefixed to "Ocean," offers yet another genre definition. In this, he re-iterates, now specifically in the vocabulary of the sublime, the elevation, nobility, and magnificence associated with the spirit of this kind of poetry:

its thoughts should be uncommon, sublime, and moral; Its numbers full, easy, and most harmonious; Its expression pure, strong, delicate, yet unaffected; and of a curious felicity beyond other Poems; Its conduct should be rapturous, somewhat abrupt, and immethodical to the vulgar Eye. That apparent order, and connections, which gives form and life to some compositions, takes away the very Soul of this. Fire, elevation, and select thought, are indispensable; an humble, tame, and vulgar Ode is the most pitiful error a pen can commit. (Young 1730:11)

What is new in Young's description is the differentiation between the composition as it appears to the reader and the contrary reality of the compositional process, i.e. between apparent irregularity and a concealed underlying order:

Judgment, indeed, that masculine power of mind, in Ode, as in all compositions, should bear the Supream Sway; and a beautiful Imagination, as its Mistress, should be subdued to its dominion ... But then in Ode, there is this difference from other kinds of Poetry; That, there, the Imagination, like a very beautiful Mistress, is indulged in the appearance of domineering; tho' the Judgment, like an Artful Lover, in reality carries its point. (Young 1730:12)

The ode, in other words, should appear imaginative, inspired, rapturous, and abrupt but in reality it should be regulated and controlled by the judgment. The relation between the imaginative

surface and the underlying order in the structure of the Pindaric ode is not primarily a relation of truth and appearance. This would suggest that the imaginative is either less true than what is created by the judgment, or not true at all. In the appreciation of Pindaric poetry, however, both types of experience must be simultaneously present and true, and the poem must simultaneously invite an imaginative and an intellectual kind of response. In other words, the Pindaric must be experienced both as the autonomous expression of the imagination and as a series of ideas presented in a controlled and logical manner.

Young does not spell out exactly how the negotiation between the judgment and the imagination works. We may, however, find an explanation in his introductory remarks about the relation between the merits of a poem and the poet's "Idea of Perfection" in the chosen genre. In proportion to the degree to which the poet possesses this standard, Young claims, he is able to approximate it. Poets who do not possess it, however, can only produce bad poetry: "To our having, or not having this *Idea of Perfection* is chiefly owing the Merit, or Demerit of our Performances ... He that has an *Idea of Perfection* in the Work he undertakes *may* fail in it; he that has not, *must*" (Young 1730:9-10). The "Idea of Perfection" is, of course, captured in Young's description of the ode quoted above, and it is ultimately derived from his understanding of Pindar's epinician poetry. A successful poem must position itself vis-à-vis this poetic standard, which is as platonic and metaphysical as it is historical. Pindar is "the great Standard of Antiquity" (Young 1730:14) as far as the epinician ode is concerned, and his poetry is the greatest historical embodiment of the "Idea of Perfection" in this genre. As elsewhere in Young, the great historical antecedent presents the latecomer with the challenge of upholding the standard without imitating it, of recreating the "Idea of Perfection" but producing at the same time an "Original" (Young 1730:14). We may see the judgment-imagination distinction as a way to mitigate this difficulty. The judgment, in this sense, guarantees both the underlying order in the poem and its adherence to the poetic standard. At the same time, it remains for the imagination, first, to create the illusion that the poem results from an autonomous act of creation and, second, to make sure that the new poem is not only an imitation of the original but it is itself an "Original" in its own right.

4. Imitation and Originality in the Pindaric Tradition

The relation of the modern artist to his great historical antecedent in any chosen genre had been formative for the way the 18th century generally thought about art. The consequences of this question for the Pindaric tradition are, however, unique. I would like to argue that the Pindaric tradition in England had been a self-conscious tradition from the beginning, and it became an increasingly impossible tradition as well in the course of its reception history. By self-consciousness in the tradition, I am referring to the presence of a self-reflective poetic voice constantly examining its claims to authority. This self-investigation takes the form of a sort of "anxiety of influence" towards Pindar as the founder of the tradition – which I mean here literally rather than in Bloom's more violent sense. Historically, the self-reflection of Pindaric poets has

yielded more and more skepticism about the possibility of imitating Pindar, and this increasingly insurmountable difficulty in the reception history is what I am suggesting here by the term ‘impossible tradition’.

Pindar’s epinician poetry itself may be understood as a self-conscious poetic enterprise preoccupied with the legitimacy of its own authority (Nisetich 1990:42-47). He derives authority from his proximity to the Muse, and through the muse from divinity in general. The aim of the victory ode is to immortalize the victor and to reveal through the poet’s understanding of divinity the relevance of the athletic victory to the community at large. The poet, in this role of interpreter, “mediate[s] between the victor’s world and the world of the gods” (Nisetich 1990:42). The mortal poet, however, can only confer immortality if the poem is able to escape the limitations of its immediate temporal, cultural, and geographical context, if, in other words, it is remembered long and widely. The poet’s immediate relation to the Muse guarantees this transcendence. Pindar’s invocations are, therefore, a way to present “his credentials” for the task at hand: to immortalize his poem and in the same instance the victor himself (Nisetich 1990:43). The audience thus perceives the inspired poet as key both to a masterpiece and to divine vision.

When in *Nemean 3* Pindar addresses the Muse as “O Lady Muse, my mother” (transl. F. Nisetich) he offers us irrefutable credentials. The familial relationship between the poet and his Muse implies that a partial identity exists between the two, and consequently that divinity is part of the poet’s nature (Nisetich 1990:43). The poet, therefore, is one of the few mortals who, from his unique vantage point, can claim access to divine knowledge. The audience must concede that a poem produced from this proximity to the gods must itself be considered a more-than-human achievement. This oracular authority and the self-confidence with which Pindar relates himself to the divine inspiration of his poetry is precisely what seems to evaporate from the voice of the modern Pindaric poet.

If we trace the convention of invocation and poetic self-reflection through the English reception history, we find two major Pindaric voices in the tradition: those who self-confidently embrace the vatic role of the Pindaric poet and those who remain insecure about identifying with this role. To the self-confident group belong, as poets, Cowley, Congreve, and Young. Why these poets of the early reception are able to identify with the Pindaric voice may be explained by the specific purposes for which they used the Pindaric form. Cowley’s aim was to domesticate the Pindaric, or in other words to turn an essentially unfamiliar object into a recognizable approximate that would perform the same function and create the same effect in the translator’s literary-cultural context as the original did in its own. The fact that Cowley could, without any adjustment, retain the confident invocations and self-reflective statements in his adaptations of Pindar shows, first, how much this convention was considered a feature of Pindar’s manner of speech, and second, that the concept of the divinely inspired poet was still very much resonant in Cowley’s time. (Cowley’s Pindar adaptations were published only a decade before Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.)

In the case of Congreve and Young, we must distinguish, as it has already been done in another context (Most 1985:12), between a literary-poetic and a theoretical-scholarly strain in the

tradition. The appropriation of the Pindaric voice, which happens automatically in the poems, seems to be treated with skepticism in the corresponding theoretical para-texts, either as to the divine nature of that voice, or as to the possibility of appropriation. Thus, Congreve, as poet, invoking Calliope in his “Pindarique Ode” confidently asserts that the Muse has answered his call: “The Lyre is struck! the Sounds I hear! O Muse, propitious to my Pray’r!” (lines 32-3) Not so in his “Discourse,” where, as theorist, he underscores the feeling of “being sensible that I am as distant from the Force and Elevation of Pindar, as others have hitherto been from the Harmony and Regularity of his Numbers” (Congreve 1706).

Young, similarly, has no reservations using the convention of divine inspiration in “Ocean”: “Where? where are they,/ Whom Paan’s ray/ Has touch’d, and bid divinely rave?/ What, none aspire?/ I snatch the lyre,/ And plunge into the foaming wave” (lines 19-24), or in the opening stanza of “The Merchant”: “The God descends; and Transports warm my Soul.” As theorist, on the other hand, he challenges the very idea of Pindar’s divine inspiration in the Preface to “The Merchant”, where he seems to locate “Genius” not in its ancient divine origins but very much within the bounds of the natural world: Pindar is “as Natural as Anacreon, tho’ not so Familiar”. If we were to compare them to a “fixt Star” and a “Flower of the Field”, Young explains, Pindar would be the star and Anacreon the flower, but both in this comparison are part of the physical world, and share a mortal nature. Young, therefore, clearly operates with different theoretical and conventional/poetic concepts of genius. In what seems to be his authoritative understanding, genius (i.e. the genius of the modern poet) is appropriated (“collected” and “possess’d of”) by the systematic study of the oeuvre of an original genius. Its “energy” can then be “[exerted] in Subjects and Designs of our own” (Young 1730). In poetic practice, on the other hand, a conventional use of the concept aligns him with the specific poetic tradition in which he wishes to position himself.

Why did Congreve and Young differentiate between a theoretical and a poetic response to the convention of divine inspiration? Why did they feel it necessary, as poets, to write in the manner of a divinely-inspired poet, when, as theorists, they either rejected that notion or felt unable to live up to it? The Pindaric poems of Congreve and Young place a more pronounced emphasis on the public aspect of the epinician odes than some of their predecessors. (Cowley’s Pindarics, for example, find a more personal tone even as they address topics of a public nature.) They are patriotic poems celebrating Britain’s emerging national identity as a naval and commercial power. The encomiastic function of the original victory songs is here used in the service of praising the sovereign and legitimizing British imperialist politics. As Suvir Kaul has shown discussing Young’s odes “To the King” and “Ocean”, the Pindaric form and its subject matter work hand in hand; the theme of the glorious British nation, where glory is achieved through hardship, difficulty, and sacrifice, requires a fittingly challenging form. Mastery over the Pindaric form is, therefore, analogous with mastery over political challenges (Kaul 2000:194). The poet in this sense becomes the king’s surrogate, and his control of the uncontrollable Pindaric form is as much a feat as the sovereign’s victory in the international political arena. The analogy between the Pindaric poet and the sovereign whom he celebrates is not unlike the relationship

between Pindar and the ancient tyrants and athletes whom he celebrated, and whose achievement he thought comparable to his own poetic achievement (Fitzgerald 1987:25). Kaul's understanding of the relationship between the Pindaric form and subject matter in Young's ode may be extended to explain the confident appropriation of the role of the divinely-inspired poet in the political public odes of the period in general. An effective encomium requires a confident encomiast, and if the object of praise is a monarch, a divinely inspired panegyric gives authority to the praise at the same time that it legitimizes the reign.

Beside these confident voices, an alternative strain runs in the tradition as well, which denies that the appropriation of the Pindaric voice is possible. An early representative of this insecurity is Horace. In his *Ode IV.2*, he describes Pindar's genius as inaccessible and inimitable, and warns that any poet who tries to imitate this divinely-inspired voice must fail:

Anyone ... who strives to compete with Pindar relies on wings that have been waxed with Daedalus' skill, and is destined to give his name to a glassy sea. Like a river rushing down a mountainside, swollen by rains above its normal banks, Pindar boils and surges immeasurably on with his deep booming voice ... A mighty breeze lifts the swan of Dirce [Pindar] ... when he soars into the lofty regions of the clouds. I, in manner and method like a Matine bee that with incessant toil sips the lovely thyme around the woods and riverbanks of well-watered Tibur, fashion in a small way my painstaking songs. (Horace 2004:221-23)

In response to the danger of failure, Horace outlines the features of an alternative aesthetic for the ode; one that contains no comparable danger of imitation because it is based on "toil", i.e. on personal exertion, rather than the external agency of a "lift[ing] breeze". The rival aesthetic is characteristically humble and sensible, where the rival poet is more like a "Matine bee". He is industrious rather than inspired, and the result of his work is more like honey – sweet but thick and dense – in comparison with the easy fluidity with which Pindar's river rushes and breaks its banks. Pindar, in contrast to the industrious bee, is compared to a magnificent swan. In this carefully constructed analogy, Horace carves out his own "imaginative space" (Bloom 1997:5) in the *agon* with Pindar at the same time that he seemingly upholds his predecessor as by far the more successful contender in the swan-bee contest. The image of the swan is further associated with the story of Zeus and Leda, where it served as Zeus' disguise in the raping of Leda. Helen, their offspring, goes down in history as the source of Troy's fall and the indirect cause of the foundation of Rome. Pindar's poetry, understood from this mythological angle, is like Helen: unsurpassed in beauty, and containing both the seeds of its self-destruction as a tradition and the possibility of renewal in a related but radically new tradition. The new tradition of Horace, unlike the tradition of Pindar, is fundamentally sustainable: the possibility of its growth lies in foregoing more-than-human excellence in favor of reliable human achievement. The new poetics, Horace seems to be suggesting, does not interpret the divine, nor does it mediate between the world of men and that of the gods. But it, nevertheless, has the advantage over divinely-inspired poetry that it is self-sufficient and free from the contingency of divine inspiration.

Horace's warning of the danger of imitation underscores the basic paradox of the Pindaric

tradition. The paradox lies in the fact that Pindar is perceived as the inimitable master at the same time that he serves as the foundational model for the tradition. We, thus, have a tradition that is based on a model one of whose defining characteristics is that it cannot be imitated. Joseph Addison (1958), in an article for *The Spectator* (3 September, 1711), re-formulates Horace's sentiment regarding the imitation of Pindar:

Pindar was a great Genius of the first Class, who was hurried on by a Natural Fire and Impetuosity to vast Conceptions of things, and noble sallies of the Imagination ... When I see People copying Works, which, as *Horace* has represented them, are singular in their Kind and inimitable; when I see men following Irregularities by Rule, and by the little Tricks of Art straining after the most unbounded Flights of Nature, I cannot but apply to them that Passage of *Terence*: ... *incerta haec si tu postules/Ratione certa facere, nihilo plus agas./Quam si des operam, ut cum ratione insanias*. In short a modern Pindarick Writer compared with *Pindar*, is like a Sister among the *Camisars* compared with *Virgil's* Sybil: There is the Distortion, Grimace, and outward Figure, but nothing of that divine Impulse which raises the Mind above it self, and makes the Sounds more than humane. (Addison 1958:483-484)

In Addison's distinction of natural and educated genius, Pindar falls into the first category: authors who "by the mere Strength of natural Parts" (Addison 1958:482) produce great works of art. The educated genius, in contrast, relies on "Rules" and the "Corrections and Restraints of Art" (Addison 1958:484). Imitation as a form of artistic creation is characteristic of the educated genius only; the natural genius creates wholly out of an inner necessity (or, as in Pindar's case, out of "divine Impulse"). Such a distinction ultimately classifies authors on the basis of whether a specific author is a rule-creator or a rule-observer, a potential tradition-founder or a tradition-receiver. To some extent, Addison speaks of all traditions in reprimanding the "modern Pindarick Writer" for "straining after the most unbounded Flights of Nature" "by the little Tricks of Art" (Addison 1958:484). Horace's example seems to suggest that one way in which a poet may become a tradition-founder is when tradition-receiving reveals itself as an endless and impossible pursuit of an unachievable ideal. The unfolding drama of the English Pindaric tradition lies precisely in the force of this recognition: that the tradition cannot be properly received, its ideal cannot be achieved, but at the same time the recognition does not automatically confer on the poet – as it was the case with Horace – the powers of founding a new tradition.

This is, of course, descriptive of traditions in general. What makes the Pindaric different from other traditions in this regard, however, is that here the impossibility of the perfect imitation of the ideal is not a secondary but a defining characteristic. What the reception history perceived as the specifically Pindaric quality of the *epinikai* is the unique and unrepeatable power of these poetic utterances and the divine immediacy with which they were delivered. In a revealing metaphor, Young compares Pindar's muse to "a stately, imperious, and accomplish'd Beauty; equally disdaining the use of Art, and the fear of any Rival" (Young 1730:13). In this formulation, Pindar's poetry appears both as "imperious," i.e. tyrannical in its relation to other poems of its kind because it claims absolute dominance for itself, and as excluding all forms of

“Art” (imitation or composition by rules) from its creative ethos. The paradox, therefore, lies in attempting to write in the vein of a poetry that is perceived as the outcome of completely autonomous acts of creation. When visionary or inimitable creation, in this way, becomes a defining convention of a genre, poets face an insurmountable difficulty. The moment the poet makes use of Pindaric conventions, he forgoes his claim to originality. When a body of poetry is thus distinguished by the inimitability of its individual poems, it naturally turns in on itself, and becomes increasingly preoccupied with its own limitations and possibilities.

5. Conclusion

‘Impossible tradition’, then, refers to a tradition whose foundational model contains as an essential feature the impossibility of imitation. Apart from its birth in the poetry of Cowley and its patriotic youth in the poetry of Congreve and Young, the English Pindaric tradition increasingly adopted a self-reflexive tone and a negative identity. The negative self-conception was fully embraced in the two great Pindaric odes of the mid-18th century: Thomas Gray’s “On the Progress of Poesy” and William Collins’ “Ode on the Poetical Character”. Both of these poems focus on the absence of an inspired, visionary poetic voice in the contemporary poetic scene and the poet’s heightened self-awareness in failing to inhabit that role. The tone of insecurity and the absence of poetic fulfillment frequently returns in the Romantic ode as well, in Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode, Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode”, or Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” – to name only the most famous ones. In conclusion to this paper, however, I would like to refer to another ode from the Romantic period, Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”, as a sort of culmination of this self-reflective, negative strain in English ode writing. As an extended invocation of its Muse, the poem sustains an unresolved separation from its inspiration (Leighton 1984:115). It is, arguably, an unanswered prayer for a sustainable unity between inspiration and composition, and, as elsewhere in Shelley’s poetry and poetics, they turn out to be mutually exclusive concepts: “when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline” (Shelley 2002:531). Pindar and Shelley may thus be read as the opposite poles of a shared tradition. In Pindar, the strongest possible unity exists between the poet and his Muse: the relation between mother and son who, to some degree, share the same divine nature. In Shelley, on the other hand, any proximity between the poet and his Muse can only exist prior to the existence of the poem. The poem’s relation to the inspiration, here, is expressed in the ontological contradiction that the existence of the one is predicated on the absence of the other. In between these two poles, we find a tradition of increasing poetic self-reflection and a growing sense of creative anxiety.

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