"Something Like the Gods":
A Pindaric Theme and the Myth of Nemean 10

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Pindar's Tenth Nemean ends with the myth in which Polydeuces chooses, over perpetual immortal life for himself, to share his brother's mortality: to live—and to be dead—on alternate days, as in the Homeric version quoted above. Probably no other Pindaric myth receives such unrestrained praise. The following are typical comments: "This story is one of the most impressive narratives in Pindar.... No paraphrase could do justice to the nobility of Pindar's narrative" (Race); "Es ist Pindars schönste Erzählung" (Wilamowitz); "[C]e mythe est fort beau...." (Puech); "the noblest example of Dorian poetry ever written.... [Pindar] has nowhere else attained this perfection of austere beauty" (Norwood).1 And yet Pindaric scholars have never reached general agreement on the purpose or meaning of this myth. Specific interpretations differ greatly.

Merkelbach, among more recent interpreters, sees it as an aetiological illustration of the origin of the Spartan Dioscuria, games held in honor of the brothers.2 Stern claims the myth demonstrates "the communication which exists between the world of men and the world of the divine."3 For Maurach,

following Bury, the main point of the myth is to predict a successful outcome of the victor’s prayer for an Olympic victory (29–33); as Zeus fulfills Polydeuces’ prayer, so he will fulfill Theaios’. Some have thought that the myth is intended to give a model of brotherly love. Others argue that it is meant to validate the principle expressed in 54, κοι μαν θεών πιστών γένος. Still others find the myth out of place here. Carne-Ross suggests that Pindar would never have chosen this subject for an Argive victor; but his victor-patron, Theaios, prescribed its use because of a tradition in his family’s history.

In a somewhat marginal comment Carne-Ross suggests that Pindar may have seen some poetic meaning in the myth, as a by-product of his compulsory assignment. He imagines the poet musing on how the Dioscuri “combine mortal and immortal.” “It [the myth],” Pindar thinks to himself, “applies to the victor in a way. Like this.... The Twins—originally one mortal, the other immortal, now both half-mortal for ever. The victor—mortal, but with the shine of immortality that’s on every victor.” I wish to pursue this mortal/immortal idea further, by suggesting that its application to the victor may even be the principal import of the myth; that Pindar may have chosen this myth for this illustrative literary purpose.


5 Brotherly love: Puech (supra n.1) 129; C. A. M. Fennell, Pindar: Nemean and Isthmian Odes (Cambridge 1899) 120; trustworthiness of the gods: Wilamowitz (supra n.1) 429; F. Nisetich, tr., Pindar’s Victory Songs (Baltimore 1980) 280f. F. Mezger, Pindars Siegessieder (Leipzig 1880) 463, 469, combines those two. There are still other interpretations of the myth. K. Crotty, Song and Action: Victory Odes of Pindar (Baltimore 1982) 77f, seems, for example, to regard Polydeuces’ devotion to Castor as paradigmatic of the epinician poet’s devotion to his patron. The myth of Nem. 10 has always led to a variety of unrelated interpretations rather than consensus.

6 D. S. CARNE-ROSS, Pindar (New Haven 1985: hereafter ‘Carne-Ross’) 80ff. After several days simply strolling through the streets of Argos, Carne-Ross imagines, Pindar had dinner with the family and suddenly found himself saddled with telling a myth of the Dioscuri. The style of biographical fabrication here is reminiscent of Wilamowitz, with whom Carne-Ross reveals guarded but obvious sympathy (11f, 75, 166 n.). R. Lattimore, Odes of Pindar (Chicago 1976) 166, terms the choice of a Spartan myth “curious” for an Argive ode.

7 Carne-Ross 82f; but see also n.15 infra.
Although archaic Greeks were aware of mortal and immortal aspects of such heroes of myth as Heracles and the Dioscuri, they rarely suggest this combination in contemporary historical figures. But the notion of posthumous fame as a successful counter to death occasionally did, in fact, bring out this very theme as a kind of oxymoron and metaphor. Thus Tyrtaeus says of the warrior who dies bravely in battle, οὐδὲ ποτε κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἀπόλλυται οὖν᾽ ὁμοί᾽ ἀυτῷ ἄλλ᾽ ὑπὸ τῆς περ ἐνν γίνεται ἀθάνατος. So also Simonides sees the fame of some warriors (probably those who fell at Plataea) in the same hyperbolic way: οὐδὲ τεθνᾶσι θανόντες, ἐπεὶ σφ᾽ ἀρετῆ καθύπερθεν κυδαίνοισ᾽ ἀνάγει δόματος εἴς Ἀἵδεω. These are strong expressions to be applied to contemporaries, hardly less vivid than Homer’s ζώωσι ... τεθνᾶσι (of the Dioscuri). Pindar’s patrons have not fallen in battle, but he often presents his athletic victor’s achievements as parallel to those of the warrior, especially if the patron, as Theaios in Nem. 10, has won in a combative event.

Although critics have studied the Dioscuri myth in the context of Nem. 10, they have neglected its place in the Pindaric corpus as a whole. And they have missed the significance of the myth’s final sentence (90, άνά δ᾽ ἔλυσεν μὲν ὡφθαλμόν, ἐκεῖνα δὲ φωνὰν χαλκομιτρα Κάστορος), where culture as much as syntax dictates that the subject be Castor’s brother, giving the myth its relevance and poetic force. I begin with a review of the epinician context of the myth and will return to the problem of line 90.

8 Tyrtaeus 12 West (9 Diehl, Prato), 31f.
9 Simon. 9 Page (121D), 3f. Like other Simonidean epigrams, this one is often casually rejected as spurious and dated later than Pindar. But J. H. Molyneux, Simonides: A Historical Study (Chicago 1992), follows Page and regards this poem as genuine and “no doubt written ... in autumn 479 or winter 479–8” (197).
10 See D. C. Young, Pindar Isthmian 7, Myth and Exempla (=Mnemosyne Suppl. 15 [Leiden 1971]) 39–43.
11 Failure to grasp the implication of that last sentence has even led some scholars to take Zeus as the grammatical subject of ἀνά δ᾽ ἔλυσεν. G. Huxley, Pindar’s Vision of the Past (Belfast 1975) 21, still follows J. Sandys, Odes of Pindar (London 1946 [Loeb edn: 1915]) 425, Fennell (supra n.5: ad loc.), and a scholiast (168a Drachmann) in making Zeus the subject.
Pindar several times reminds his audience pointedly that the victors are not gods. His comments are significant and concern a complex set of social attitudes and literary motifs. Ol. 5.23f flatly states that the victor can be no god: ὑγιένα δ’ ἐὰν τις ἀλόμον ἀρδεῖ ἐξαιρέων κτείνεσσι καὶ ἐυλογίαν προσθέως, μὴ ματέσῃ θεὸς γενέσθαι. So also at Isthm. 5.7–11 Pindar praises the athletes who have won κλέος, χερσὶ ... ἥ ταχυτάτη ποδῶν,12 and continues (12–15):

δοῦ δὲ τοι ἱερὸς ἄστρον μοῦνα ποιμαίνοντι τὸν ἀλπιστὸν, εὐανθεὶ σὺν ὀλβῷ
ἐὰν τις εὐ πάσχον λόγον ἐσῶν ἄκουῃ,
μὴ ματέσῃ Ζεὺς γενέσθαι· πάντ’ ἔχεις,
ἐὰν σε τοῦτον μοῖρ’ ἐξίκιοτο καλῶν.

As the final sentence shows, these passages are not real warnings or rebukes. Rather, they are highly complimentary statements, something like beatitudes, that Pindarists recognize as elements of the ne plus ultra theme. This theme states that the victor has reached the pinnacle of human achievement, beyond which no one can go.13 The main point is always congratulatory praise. But the compliment necessarily cuts the other way as well: it reminds Pindar’s patrons they are indeed mortal and will die like all humans.

But Pindar does say that mortals—his patrons—can be god-like. He begins Nem. 6 by drawing a line between the race of gods and the race of men.

'Εν ἄνδρόν, ἐν θεῶν γένος· ἐκ μιᾶς δὲ πνέομεν ματρὸς ἀμφότεροι· διείργεται δὲ πάσα κεκριμένα δύναμις, ὥς τὸ μὲν οὐδὲν, ὁ δὲ
χάλκεος ἀσφαλεῖς αἰὲν ἔδοξ
μένει ὑμανάς· ἀλλὰ τι προσφέρομεν ἐμπεῖν ἥ μέγαν
νόον ἦτοι φύσιν ἀθανάτιος....

12 The phrase seems to derive from Od. 8.147f, οὐ μὲν γὰρ μείζον κλέος ... ἥ ὂ 
ti ποσίν τε ἰδὶ καὶ χερσὶν ἵππιν.

13 Variations of this crucial thematic line, 'don't seek to be god', are other cases of human limitation: 'you can’t go beyond the Pillars of Herakles'; and so on. See E. Thummer, Pindar, Isthmischen Gedichte I (Heidelberg 1968) 67–81; Young (supra n.10) 28f with n.94; W. H. Race, Style and Rhetoric in Pindar’s Odes (Atlanta 1990) 191–95.
The powers of the two races are wholly different—so that we are nothing, while the gods live forever in a safe heavenly seat.  

But Pindar adds, as a counter to this pessimistic, nihilistic view of man, ἀλλὰ ... ἔμμαθαν (“But, nevertheless, we can be something like the gods through greatness, either of mind or of body”). Pindar then points to his patron, Alkimidas, as a concrete example. The same pessimism is countered by a similar optimism in one of Pindar’s best known passages, Pyth. 8.95ff, where the pessimism of ἐπάμεροι ... σκίας ὄναρ ἀνθρώπος is quickly and strongly countered with ἀλλὰ ὅταν αἵλα διόσδοτος ἔλθῃ, λαμπρὸν φέγγος ἔπεστιν ἄνδρὼν καὶ μείλιχος αἰών.

Pindar’s business is to capture that brief moment of “the god-given gleam” and “the brilliant light”—the brief moment when his athletes are “something like the gods”—and make it permanent, immortalize it in song. If those moments when a man is something like the gods disappear, he ends as nothing and “has breathed in vain.” But if the poet fixes those moments in the eternal scheme of things, then mortals can be more than mortal. They die but somehow live on. The forceful “stele of the Muses” in Nem. 8 seems something of a Pindaric metaphor for his song that allows a dead man to survive. For he offers it as a feasible alternative to the impossible attempt to return a dead man’s soul to actual life.  

14 The first sentence expresses the separation of the two races, not their union: see P. von Kloch-Kornitz, “Die religiose Problematik in Pindars Nemea VI,” AnA 10 (1961) 155–59.

15 It is likely that Pyth. 8 and the words οἵλα διόσδοτος ... λαμπρὸν φέγγος lie behind Carne-Ross’ phrase (above) “the shine of immortality that’s on every victor.” But Ol. 10.91ff suggests that this shine is lost without the poet; therefore the shine of immortality is not “on every victor,” only on those celebrated in song:

καὶ ὅταν καλὰ ἔρζεις ἀοιδάς ἀτερ,  
'Αγεσίδαμι, εἶς 'Αϊδα σταθὼν  
ἀνήρ ἱερότοι, κενεὶς πεντάστει, ἐπορε μόχθω βραχύ τι τερτυών.

16 Nem. 8.44–47. Many recent editors print the emendation τ' ἐλαφρῶν for τὲ λάβρων of the MSS. because λάβρων often occurs in pejorative contexts. With earlier editors, I accept the received reading, which was in the scholiast’s text (he glosses πυμπον, for which see LSJ): for the word (“loud, boisterous”) is not pejorative in itself, and it gives the Muses’ vocal stele just the proper contrast with the silence of an ordinary stone. Cf. Nem. 5.1–5, where Pindar’s animated, mobile song is contrasted with another silent, stationary monument, the victor’s statue. For Pindar’s claim of preservative power in Nem. 8 see C. Carey, “Pindar’s Eighth Nemean Ode,” PCPS N.S. 22 (1976) 26–41, esp. 37ff, and J. W. Day, “Rituals in Stone: Early Greek Grave Epigrams and Monuments,” JHS 109 (1989) 16–28, esp. 23ff.
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These topics all bear generally on Carne-Ross' comment (supra 124), the question of the meaning of Nem. 10, and the Dioscuri myth with which it closes. Pindar's patron is Theaios, a wrestler from Argos and a prominent athlete. The poem's tripartite structure is not the usual one. The first part briefly reviews Argive heroes of myth and past Argive glories; there follows a central section that praises Theaios and his family, cataloguing their many athletic victories. The last part, more than a third of the poem (55–90), tells the myth about the Dioscuri. Pindar rarely places the myth at the end of the poem. He almost always returns to comment on the victor's present state, that part of the poem which Schadewaldt called the "zweite Siegerlob." But here, I shall later suggest, the "zweite Siegerlob" is contained in the myth itself.

This myth reveals a typical Pindaric ring form. Before narrating his story, Pindar states the gist at the outset: namely, that the Dioscuri have a life and a non-life, which alternate day by day (54–59); one day they spend with Zeus on Olympus, the next, in the underworld. Polydeuces, he says, chose (εἴλετο) that
state over being wholly a god (59, ἥ πάμπαν θεός ἔμενοι). He then tells the tale. There are several earlier references to the Dioscuri’s unusual status, and other versions of the basic myth.

The idea that the Dioscuri alternated daily between life and death appears first at Od. 11.301–04, the text that heads this paper. We may note the emphasis there on the honor that the Dioscuri enjoy, ἰσα θεοῖ. Yet Homer’s version is not Pindar’s. And Homer explicitly states that Tyndareus was the natural father of both Castor and Polydeuces (Od. 11.299f). Hesiod apparently claimed the opposite, that both were fathered by Zeus. But the Cypria apparently assigned the Dioscuri to separate parents, Castor to Tyndareus, Polydeuces to Zeus; that, at least, is the natural implication of the words Κάστορ μὲν θνητός, θανάτου δὲ οἱ αἰσθανόμεναι αὐτάρ ὁ γ’ ἀθάνατος Πολυδεύκης.

In the matter of the Dioscuri’s parentage, Pindar clearly agrees with the Cypria, not with Homer or Hesiod. But his sources for their altercation with the Apharetidae are not wholly clear. In no other version is Polydeuces given the choice he has in Pindar. Whether original with him or not, Pindar makes Polydeuces’ choice a grand focal point. The Dioscuri are attacked by Idas

21 Homer’s text is odd, suggesting that the living and the dead states both occur below the ground (nothing is said of Olympus); so A. Heubeck, A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey II (Oxford 1989) ad loc. Some difficulty may result from the adaptation of common epic formulae to a special situation: see Heubeck.

22 Hes. fr. 24 M.-W. (91 Rzach); Cypria fr. 6, p.120 in T. W. Allen, ed., Homeri Opera V (Oxford 1912). For Proclus’ summary of the version in the Cypria, see p.103.

23 Proclus’ summary of the Cypria reports that Polydeuces kills both Idas and Lynkeus, καὶ Ἴσις ἄνατος (Dioscuri) ἐπετηρίζειν νέμει τὴν ἄθανασιν. He says nothing of Polydeuces’ choice. Apollodorus’ version of the tale (3.11.1=3.135ff Wagner) has Idas kill Castor; Polydeuces kills Lynkeus and Idas smites Polydeuces on the head with a rock (πέτρα), knocking him down in a daze (or is he “killed”? could σφοτόσι here bear its modern Greek value, “kill”?); Zeus then slays Idas (as in Pindar) and carries Polydeuces up into heaven. But Polydeuces will not accept his immortality while his brother is dead, so Ἴσις ἄφθοσταρος παρ’ ἠμέραν καὶ ἐν ἰσαοῖς ἵναι καὶ ἐν θνητοῖς (sic) ἔσω. That feature is similar to, but not the same as, Polydeuces’ choice in Pindar. Perhaps Apollodorus and Pindar have a common, unknown antecedent: the motifs and vocabulary are often similar (cf. δύοκεν in both authors, and πέτρας/πέτρα). If Apollodorus is merely retelling Pindar’s own version, he has garbled many details. Besides the discrepancies noted above, in Pindar both Idas and Lynkeus smite Polydeuces with their father’s tombstone (πέτρας), but it has no effect; and the blow is struck to the chest, not the head.
and Lynkeus in a dispute over cattle. Idas deals Castor a mortal wound, then Polydeuces kills Lynkeus with his spear, and Idas falls to a thunderbolt from Zeus (60–71). Polydeuces, as he hears his brother’s death-rattle (74), is overcome with grief and calls on Zeus. In tears he makes a poignant plea to Zeus, asking for his own death, too, if his beloved brother must die.

With surprising directness, Zeus answers Polydeuces’ call. His voice booms out with three short, powerful words: ἐστι μοι νιός, “You are my son.” But of Castor he says: τόνδε δ’ ἐπείτα τόσις σπέρμα θανατον ματρι τε πελάσσις στάξεν ἥρως. Zeus then offers to make a deal with Polydeuces, giving him a truly amazing choice, a αἰρέσις (82) such as no one else before or after has ever had to make. “If you yourself wish to flee death and hated old age, live on Olympus with me and other gods, that is your lot. But if you really care so much about your brother, and mean to share everything equally with him, you may breathe half the time below the earth, the other half in the golden homes of heaven.”

It is an astounding choice: permanent immortality or dying millions of deaths. Nor can we ignore the implication of the choice. If he chooses the second alternative, Polydeuces will awaken every morning realizing either that he is in the underworld, or that he must descend to it later that very day. And for this, he must give up eternal bliss. But Pindar gives the choice just two lines,24 one of his most abrupt endings. When Zeus speaks, Polydeuces acts:

ὦ ἀρ’ αὐδάσκαντος οὐ γνώμα διπλῶν θέτο βουλάν,
ἀνά δ’ ἔλυσεν μὲν ὀρθαλμόν, ἐπείτα δὲ φωνᾶν χαλκομίτρα
Κάστορος.

“Polydeuces gave it no second thought, first he opened the eye, then the voice of bronze-armed Castor.” End of poem.

Perhaps this abruptness contributes to the scholarly judgment that this myth has exceptional beauty. For the sudden end tends to leave the audience in quiet, dazzled contemplation of all the wonderful things it has just heard. But there is more. No commentator has noticed the full import of Pindar’s words in this last line. They are not just something that the poet tossed off to say, ‘Polydeuces brought Castor back to life’. Rather they are highly charged, full of cultural—even ritual—implications and

24 Ovid might have worked Polydeuces’ monumental choice for several paragraphs—or pages: cf. Met. 7.19–94, 8.462–512.
literary echoes, given that Polydeuces actually reverses the normal procedure by which Greeks tended to the fresh death of a loved one.

Probably the best known version appears in Plato’s account of the death of Socrates (Phd. 118). After remarking “Crito, we owe a cock to Asklepios,” Socrates forthwith dies and his eyes become fixed: καὶ δὲ τὰ ὀμματα ἐστησεν· ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Κρίτων συνέλαβε τὸ στόμα καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς. The sight of Socrates lying there dead, with his eyes wide open and his mouth agape, is not pretty. So Crito closes them as he should, for that was the standard Greek practice.

The ritual value of closing the eyes and mouth goes back to Homer. When Odysseus sees Agamemnon in the underworld, Agamemnon gives a stinging indictment of Clytemnestra. Not only did she kill him, but she also denied him the conventional procedure that a family member owes to the departed (Od. 11.424ff):

> ἢ δὲ κνώνης νοσφίσατι, οὐδὲ μοι ἔτηλ ἱόντι περ εἰς Ἀίδου χερσὶ κατ᾽ ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐλέετιν σὸν τε στόμι ἐρέισαι.

Od. 24.292–96 stresses that this ritual is indeed a debt owed by the surviving family and friends: Laertes, thinking Odysseus lost and gone forever, says,

> οὐδὲ εἰ μῆτηρ κλάψω περιστείλασα πατήρ θ' ... οὐδὲ ἄλοχος ... κόκωσ' ἐν λεγέσσιν ἑων πόσιν, ὡς ἐπεφέκει, ὀφθαλμοὺς καθελόσα· τὸ γὰρ γέρας ἐστὶ θανόντων.25

The same attitudes survive in modern Greece, where the mouth of the deceased is often held closed by a band wrapped around the jaw and over the top of the head. Sometimes the eyes are even sewn shut.26

Thus the end of Nem. 10 is rich with conventional notions, which Pindar reverses. Instead of closing his brother’s eyes and mouth, Polydeuces opens them: ἀνὰ δ’ ἔλυσεν μὲν ὀφθαλμοῦν,
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... And in a final masterly variation, Polydeuces does not open Castor's "mouth," but rather "releases his voice," φωνά, the vital proof that Castor is alive again.27

By this clear reference to a conventional ritual which, when reversed, partially reverses the hero's death, the myth underscores its immediate application, that is, Pindar's implicit claim that his present-day songs can reverse, in part, the deaths of present-day men. Carne-Ross: "It applies to the victor in a way"—a very concrete way. That is why Pindar could here forgo the return to the present situation and the "zweite Siegerlob," the final praise of the victor. All the high praise that is usually contained there this poem expresses implicitly in the final myth. Theaios, and other men like him, are something like the divine. Though mortal, they are something more than that. They live on. That, of course, contains a contradiction; but so too does the myth of the Dioscuri. And Pindar I think chose to present the half-life of a Dioscurus as a fitting, if rather exaggerated, symbol for the status of his athletic patrons, who achieve great things and are then celebrated and remembered in song.28 They die and yet live on. Like Simonides' war-heroes... οὐδὲ τεθνᾶσι θανόντες, or as Homer says of the Dioscuri, ζωοῦσι... τεθνᾶσι.

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27 An overly literal reading here may produce a difficulty: if a dead person's eyes and mouth are ordinarily open and need to be closed, Polydeuces would not need to open Castor's. Perhaps he "frees" them from an open, fixed state; or we are to imagine Castor as a co-operative near-corpse, who has already closed them on his own. But the point is the symbolic value of the ritual reversed, not the actual state of the dead hero's eyes and mouth.

28 Pyth. 3 is Pindar's major statement of the theme of 'poetic immortality'. The Dioscuri serve as especially apt paradigms for the athletes, for they are known as the athletes par excellence of mythology. Pindar also closes Pyth. 11 with their example.