The Imagery of Bacchylides' *Ode 5*

Jacob Stern

ACCEPTED by most critics as pertinent to any interpretation of Bacchylides' *Ode 5* is the scholion to *Iliad* 21.194:[1] according to the scholiast Pindar told the story of a proposal of marriage between Heracles and Deianeira, which took place in Hades after the death of Meleager; in this narration the offer was made by Meleager, who desired to protect his sister from the awful Achelous. In Bacchylides' *Ode 5* the plot is different in one important regard: it is rather Heracles himself, moved to tears by the recital of Meleager's story, who asks whether Meleager has a sister whom he might make his bride.

Bacchylides' version of the myth[2] has been thoroughly discussed by the critics, who, in their interpretation of it, fall into two groups. In the first we find those who, surprisingly enough, take it in conjunction with the abrupt end of the myth as humorous. Zielinski's "Herculem . . . ionica quadam levitate contactum," or Jebb's "une naïveté qui peut nous faire sourire," are typical of this view.[3] It often has associated with it the opinion that the humor can only be accounted for by assuming a courtly reference to some marriage among Hieron's followers. The second interpretation is most clearly represented by Preuss: "ut Meleagri laudes augeret, fabulam immutavisse iure Bacchylides existimari potest."[4] The change in point of view is conceded to be slightly "romantic,"[5] but is found to have the advantage of focusing the attention more completely on Meleager.

---

[1] *Pindari Carmina*, ed. O. Schroeder (Leipzig 1900) fr.249a; my text of Bacchylides throughout is *Bacchylidis Carmina cum fragmentis*, ed. B. Snell (Leipzig 1961).

[2] Which poet wrote first on the marriage theme is doubtful: if we accept Wilamowitz' attribution of fr.249a to the Kerberos dithyramb and if we accept his dating of the latter after 470 B.C., Bacchylides will appear to have written first. See U. von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, *Pindaros* (Berlin 1922) 314, 341f, and W. Schmid and O. Stählin, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* I.1 (München 1929) 525.

[3] Th. Zielinski, "Bacchylidea," *Eos* 5 (1898) 28; R. C. Jebb, "Bacchylidea," *Mélanges Henri Weil* (Paris 1898) 234; *cf.* A. Platt, *CR* 12 (1898) 60, and H. van Herwerden, "Adnotationes ad Bacchylidem," *Mnemosyne* 27 (1899) 14.

[4] H. Preuss, *De fabulis apud Bacchylidem* (Königsberg 1902) 28.

[5] Jebb, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.3), and M. Croiset, "Sur les origines du récit relatif à Méléagre dans l'Ode V de Bacchylide," *Mélanges Henri Weil* (Paris 1898) 74.

That there is anything humorous in this presentation of the myth—
or more particularly in the abruptness with which the myth ends—
this paper will attempt to show is hopelessly improbable; that it may
be more "romantic" is irrelevant. To Pindar the myth must have
illustrated a basic principle which is pervasive in his odes: heroism
with its duties and prerogatives is passed on from generation to
generation. The confrontation of the two heroes in Hades suggests a
line of succession: the original protector of Deianeira is dead, but a
new protector is at hand to take up the burden. In Pindar's thought
the suggestion of marriage falls therefore properly to Meleager.[6]
But Bacchylides' view is not the same: to him there is latent in the
situation not so much an opportunity to employ the heroic code as a
peculiarly sad irony. Man's pathetic lack of control over his own
destiny has already been illustrated by the picture of Meleager
faltering in the midst of success at the walls of Pleuron. That immedi-
ately thereafter Heracles should himself unwittingly be planning his
own destruction, lays stress on the point; and that Deianeira—for the
mention of her name immediately brings to mind the sequel[7]—
should similarly have wrought her own destruction in the very act of
attempting to do good, serves as a final emphasis. The significance of
Bacchylides' choice of myth is exactly in the fact that Heracles, while
attempting to do good, unknowingly chooses his own destruction.
The point has been appreciated by Parry: "the hero's weakness is
finally his humanity."[8] It is the irony of this picture of man, and the
pessimism entailed therein, to which Heracles himself unwittingly
alludes at line 160f:

$$\ldots\, \theta\nu\alpha\tau o\hat{\iota}\sigma\iota\ \mu\grave{\eta}\ \phi\hat{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\iota\ \phi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\iota\sigma\tau o\nu,$$
$$\mu\eta\delta'\ \mathring{\alpha}\epsilon\lambda\acute{\iota}o\upsilon\ \pi\rho o\sigma\iota\delta\epsilon\hat{\iota}\nu$$
$$\phi\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\gamma o\varsigma.$$

The narrative chosen by Pindar perhaps lends itself more immediately
to a heroic view of man; that of Bacchylides is rather tragically ironic.
    The pessimism of this ode has been appreciated among recent

[6] The point is from *Bacchylides, the Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jebb (Cambridge 1905) 472,
which is an English version of *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.3); see also M. van der Kolf, *RE* 15 (1931)
459–60.
    [7] C. Robert, "Theseus und Meleagros bei Bakchylides," *Hermes* 33 (1898) 152; "Auch
unausgesprochen soll es der Hörer errathen, der sich natürlich hier die Fortsetzung der
Geschichte ebenso ergänzt"; *cf.* D. Comparetti, "Les Dithyrambes de Bacchylide," *Mé-
langes Henri Weil* (Paris 1898) 31.
    [8] *Bacchylides, Complete Poems*, tr. R. Fagles with notes and introd. by A. M. Parry (New
Haven 1961) 110.

commentators most completely by Steffen: "the myth was so narrated by Bacchylides as to make the weakness and futility of man most striking."[9] This paper hopes to establish, by examining imagery and verbal patterns in the ode, the extent to which even its language contributes to this dark view of man's lot. The investigation will also lead to certain generalizations about Bacchylides' method of composition and in particular about his use of expressions or tropes from the earlier epic and lyric traditions.

The most obvious fact about the language of the ode is that it is pervaded with Homerisms; the point has been established at length by Buss and Eberhard, and it will therefore be necessary here only to give a few examples.[10] Many of the phrases and epithets are taken directly from the epics: Διὸς ἀργικεραύνου (58; cf. Il. 19.121 etc.); καρχαρόδοντα κύν' (60; cf. Il. 10.360 etc.); τεύχεσι λαμπόμενον (72; cf. Il. 20.46); μοῖρ' ὀλοά (121; cf. Il. 16.849). In other cases the epithet is derived from the epics but is joined with a noun with which it is not found in Homer: thus, instead of the usual γυναῖκες, Hera is καλλίζωνος (89); instead of Hera, Artemis and Calliope are λευκώλενος (99, 176); so also the brand of Meleager, like the Homeric arrow, is ὠκύμορον (141); the Muses, rather than Aphrodite (h.Hom. 6.18), are ἰοστέφανοι (3). Almost all the moving forces of the poem have their parallels in the epic: the dog of Hades, on whose account Heracles descends to the underworld, the boar sent by the goddess, in fact the whole myth, aside from the introduction of the brand and the emphasis on the death of Meleager, is almost directly from Iliad 9. The lucid parataxis of the narrative style, particularly during Meleager's story, might also be pointed to as symptomatic of epic influence.[11] Examples could be multiplied, but the point is clear: the poem in diction and spirit is thoroughly under the influence of the epics.

Yet superimposed on top of epic language is a group of words not only not found in Homer, but unique in all of Greek: ἀελλοδρόμαν (39), ἀκαμαντορόαν (180), εὐρυδίναν (38), ἱπποδινήτων (2). It is rather in

---

[9] W. Steffen, "Bacchylides' Fifth Ode," Eos 51 (1961) 19.

[10] H. Buss, De Bacchylide Homeri imitatore (Giessen 1913) passim; E. Eberhard, BPhW 34 (1914) 1220–8. Cf. also the more general statements of A. E. Harvey, "Homeric Epithets in Greek Lyric Poetry," CQ 51 (1957) 208. That Bacchylides' diction in this ode might have been influenced by Stesichorus' Syotherai or Kerberos is possible, but must remain in doubt, though there are hypotheses that the myth itself may have come from Stesichorus: see Schmid/Stählin (supra n.2) 478f and 525, and Croiset, op.cit. (supra n.5).

[11] Parataxis in this ode is momentarily discussed by B. Gentili, Bacchilide. Studi (Urbino 1958) 23.

these *hapax legomena* than in its Homerisms that we find our first hint of the ode's major verbal pattern. That it should thus emerge in clearest form from a group of words unique to Bacchylides will suggest the care which the poet has taken in developing this pattern. 'Continuous motion' is the theme to which our attention is first directed; the idea of constant 'swirling' or 'rushing,' for example, will be found in the words already mentioned: ἀελλο-, -ρόαν, -δῖνος, δινήτων, as also in v.46, described by Smyth as a paraphrase of the single word ἀελλοδρόμαν:[12]

$$\rho\iota\pi\hat{q} \; \gamma\grave{\alpha}\rho \; \mathring{\iota}\sigma os \; Bop\acute{\epsilon}\alpha.$$

Steady, continuous motion is stressed also in the battle scenes of Meleager's story: συνεχέως (113), ἐνδυκέως (112, 125). Again, a motion which is both sudden and constant is suggested by the boar of Artemis sent to harass Calydon: its onslaught is immediate (ἐπαΐσσων 116) and overwhelming like a flood (πλημύρων 107).

As this verbal pattern emerges we shall discover that many of Bacchylides' echoes of Homer and Pindar serve to enhance it: that the poet has so borrowed cannot be ignored, but what is important is that he has consciously and carefully borrowed what will fit and enlarge his pattern of images. Thus the verb δονεῖ (67) used with ἄνεμος as subject is Homeric,[13] as is the whole metaphor of the ghosts of the dead being like leaves swirled in the wind. Again, the long steady swoop of the eagle, to which is devoted the whole of antistrophe A, has been discussed by critics, some of whom suggest that it is too patent an "answer" to Pindar[14] or is simply unconnected with the sequel: yet its rôle within the imagery is significant. The importance of this metaphor is again the stress which it lays on continuous motion. The very length of the

[12] H. W. Smyth, *Greek Melic Poets* (London 1904) 405.

[13] *Il.* 12.157; but the metaphor is based on 6.146f, where the verb is χέω.

[14] Two Pindaric *loci* are possible sources: *Nem.* 5.21 and *Ol.* 2.87f: the first clearly was written prior to Bacch. 5; the second was written for the same festival in 476 B.C. That Bacchylides could be "answering" a poem written by Pindar on the same date is apparently considered possible by Smyth (*supra* n.12) 402, and C. M. Bowra, *Pindar* (Oxford 1964) 10–1, 232; but impossible by Steffen (*supra* n.9) 17, and Jebb *ad loc.* D. S. Carne-Ross, "The Gaiety of Language," *Arion* 1 (1962) 80, contents himself with suggesting that Bacchylides is, in this lengthy metaphor, being "bullied" by the *modus Pindaricus;* see also Schmid/Stählin (*supra* n.2) 525: "pindarischen Adlerfedern." It is an issue on which only opinion can be given, and not strictly germane to a discussion of how the metaphor functions within Bacchylides' ode itself. The poet as bird is, under any circumstances, a commonplace and should be understood as a 'formula' of the genre; for other references see W. Prentice, *De Bacchylide Pindari artis socio et imitatore* (Halle 1900) 27.

metaphor is suggestive: the cumulation of lines as the eagle goes low (βαθύν) or reaches the heights (κορυφαί), as he crosses the unwearied (ἀκαμάτας) sea or the limitless void (ἀτρύτῳ χάει), produces the effect of endless motion. The fact also that the eagle never stops is noteworthy, as we shall see; the endlessness of his swoop, as it were, pervades the rest of the ode. Even the waves over which he travels seem to emphasize the point: they are δυσπαίπαλα, "rough in their tossing."[15] And when after this extended metaphor Bacchylides returns to his theme, he does so with a traditional expression, but one which nevertheless fits well his image: for endless motion and distance is suggested by the μυρία κέλευθος (31), though the phrase can be found elsewhere in Bacchylides and Pindar.[16] The borrowings are clear, but what is important is that each has been carefully chosen to heighten the verbal scheme.

In contrast to this pattern of continuous motion is a sequence of events within the narrative in which action is abruptly curtailed at the very moment of climax. Lines 72–6, for example, present Heracles carefully and steadily readying his bow against the ghosts of the dead: the action is suddenly stopped by Meleager, who breaks into speech: στᾶθί τ' ἐν χώρᾳ. So also Meleager himself is suddenly cut off in his pride of victory (152); the battle which Bacchylides had taken pains to describe as continuous and constant is stopped in one word: Meleager's life has a ὅρον (144), a limit; his brand is ὠκύμορον (141), swiftly curtailed.[17]

But the most striking example of this breakage of continuous action is the structure of the myth itself. The narrative flows steadily and lucidly in Bacchylides' usual paratactic manner, until at the very moment of climax it too is broken off *ex abrupto*: στᾶσον αὐτοῦ

---

[15] This difficult word has been the subject of much discussion: editors generally agree with Hesychius, who renders παιπάλλειν by σείω; this suggests for the adjective an etymology from πάλλω, though they obscure the literal sense by translating 'rough' or 'stormy.' L. R. Palmer, *Glotta* 27 (1939) 134–43, is more accurate: associating the word with 'quaking' volcanoes, he translates 'angrily tossing.' So also F. W. Thomas, *CR* 12 (1898) 78: 'restless waves'; van Herwerden (*supra* n.3) 9 curiously considers the word "parum feliciter." I have suggested in *GRBS* 6 (1965) 275–82 that etymologizing is characteristic of Bacchylides' style, and that it is often necessary, in order to understand how he uses a word, to take it in its most literal sense.

[16] Bacch. 9.47, 19.1; Pindar, *Isth.* 4.1; see Schmid/Stählin (*supra* n.2) 525. It is surely safer to call this a "formula" of the genre, than to accuse anyone of plagiarism or redundancy: the phrase is too common to be thought otherwise. For further reference to the "paths" of poetry see Prentice (*supra* n.14) 21–2.

[17] With this epithet the parallel to Achilleus in the *Iliad* becomes clear.

(177–8)—the words are an apparent echo of those which Meleager had used to stop Heracles from drawing his bow against the ghosts of the dead. Commentators have stressed the traditional nature of this abrupt transition. The many examples of similarly swift movement in Pindar have been adduced:[18] *Pyth.* 11.38, *Nem.* 4.69, *Ol.* 1.52 and others. Indeed Bacchylides' own works afford examples of such sudden breaking off of a narrative, for it is thus that both *Dithyramb* 15 and *16* end.[19] That the trope is a commonplace of the genre, however, does not entail that its use here is meaningless. It is in fact not unlike Bacchylides to use consciously and to new purpose the formulaic tropes of his tradition; this characteristic has already been suggested by his choice of echoes from Pindar and Homer described above.[20] As will be seen, the abrupt transition from the myth accords perfectly with the general image of motion.

It will be noted that all references to continuous, uninterrupted action have to do with non-human phenomena: it is the rivers which "flow wide and far," "are unrelenting in their flow"; the wind which "swirls" the leaves; the waves of the sea which are δυσπαίπαλα. So also as the non-human symbol or abstraction of Hieron's victory, his horse is ἀελλοδρόμαν, his nation is of men who are ἱπποδίνητοι; and so again the eagle, "simbolo sublime di vigore e di forza,"[21] is endless in its swoop. It is with man and man alone that the sudden breaking off of this steady motion occurs: Heracles is cut off in mid-motion; Meleager most strikingly in the midst of violent action; and so the myth itself is curtailed to bring to the listener's mind the sudden end to which Heracles himself came in the very midst of his successes. The imagery makes the point clear: in the sea and the winds, in the vastness of the eagle's poetry, continuous action is possible; in the life of man it is not: he is cut off in his prime.

That Hieron should have been ill at the time of the great victory

---

[18] Especially by H. Weil, "Remarques sur la versification des lyriques grecs . . .," *Journal des Savants*, 1898, 183–4.

[19] So sudden is the abruptness with which these odes end that their completeness has been doubted by, among others, Wilamowitz, *GöttGelAnz.* 160 (1898) 135f. Defending their completeness are D. Comparetti, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.7) and H. Jurenka, "Die 'Dithyramben' des Bakchylides," *WS* 21 (1899) 223f. The problem is beyond the scope of this paper and could be solved only by the discovery of another Bacchylides papyrus. I agree with those who assert the completeness of the odes as we have them: as in *Ode 5*, the effect of the abrupt endings seems to justify them.

[20] *Cf. GRBS* 6 (1965) 275–82: in *Ode 11* "revitalization" of hackneyed epithets and themes becomes a pervasive structural principle.

[21] Gentili (*supra* n.11) 15.

which this ode celebrates[22] is an observation perhaps not out of place here, for the pessimism of the imagery is clear. To Bacchylides the moment of victory brings to mind not so much the moment of "final elevation,"[23] of timelessness in success, as the threat of what is to come directly after: the sudden fall to which man is subject during his success. The imagery of the ode, therefore, is a pathetic comment on the prayer with which the poem ends: that the "stocks of good fortune" can be ἀκινήτους, "not liable to alteration," is for man clearly impossible.

There are in this ode yet other verbal patterns which both function as structural elements and reinforce the mood of pessimism which has so far been observed in the image of motion. Though these are not so pervasive as those already described, they illustrate the same technique of composition: Bacchylides begins with some common-place expression of the tradition, insists upon a literal association, and from there builds his verbal pattern. An image which will exemplify this point is that concerned with plants. It will, for example, strike no reader as peculiar that Meleager is described as ἔρνος of some unnamed god or man (87; cf. possibly 58);[24] equally well-known is the Homeric metaphor already mentioned of the souls of the dead quivering like leaves in the wind (65f). But from these is evolved the major association of the image: plants, like man, are subject to early death, and bloom only for a short time. The connec-tion is made most firmly in the myth itself: it is the φιτρόν which is, almost as if personified, ὠκύμορον. The life of the hero is completely intertwined with that of the brand. With this association in mind, other less commonplace metaphors fall into place: success being only a thing of the moment and necessarily followed by disaster, all that the poet can wish Hieron is an εὐδαιμονίας πέταλον—happiness lasting as long as the leaf. We should not be blinded to this clear melancholy overtone by an equally possible second meaning for the phrase: the leaf of the wild olive, the prize at Olympia.[25] Similar too

---

[22] The fact is well established: see Jebb ad 5.50–5, and Steffen (supra n.9) 19.

[23] J. H. Finley Jr, Pindar and Aeschylus (Harvard 1955) 40, thus describes the effect of "the touch of self-transcendence and unforeseen power" which comes to the legendary hero and the Olympian victor from the gods. Bacchylides seems more pessimistic than Pindar, concentrating not so much on the flash of glory at the moment of victory as on the inescap-able fall which will come after it.

[24] Aside from Pindar, Nem. 6.38, the metaphor seems to be most common in tragedy: Ag. 1525, Eum. 661, OC 1108; but cf. the Homeric use of ὄζος.

[25] See Jebb ad loc. and LSJ s.v. πέταλον; the closest apparent parallel, νεικέων πέταλα of Pindar, Isth. 8.42, is not strictly apropos.

is the overtone of line 198, πυθμένες ἐσθλῶν—that good fortune should bloom from plantlike stems is again a suggestion of how short-lived it is. It is in this connection also that the vexatious adjective applied to Deianeira at 172 is to be understood, χλωραύχενα. The literal English "green-necked" is clearly impossible; the color prefix has rather the hint of verdant, momentarily fresh bloom.[26] Deianeira too like a beautiful plant blooms for a moment before the disaster, vividly brought to mind by the myth's abrupt end, strikes.

But χλωρός most obviously refers to color, and of bright color many examples also can be found in this ode. These are not so much unique to this ode as common to all of Bacchylides' writings.[27] The splash of bright, apparently happy tones is clear even during the *nekuia*: χρυσός (13, 40, 174), χαλκός (34, 74), λευκός (99, 176), ἴον (3), ξουθός (17), κύανος (33), ξανθός (37, 92), φοῖνιξ (102). The list again appears to illustrate Bacchylides' method of composition: the pattern, like those mentioned above, is a blend of Homeric or traditional language and specially contrived *hapax legomena*: χρυσόπαχυς, χαλκεόκρανον, φοινικονώτων.[28] And here also the overtone of melancholy is not far off: it is the very χρυσός (174) of Deianeira which is to prove Heracles' destruction; it is particularly the ἀγλαὰν ἥβαν (154) which Meleager is forced to leave; and it is, most pessimistically, the very ἀελίου φέγγος (160-1) which Heracles asserts is most to be avoided by man. Into this pattern the epithet χλωραύχενα of Deianeira fits perfectly: in the brightness of her color she is to destroy, while her own bloom is not to last long.

The verbal patterns discussed here have in common both a mood and a technique. In them we see a consistent method of composition employed: the poet weaves together with commonplace epithets or expressions his own new and carefully contrived metaphors or

---

[26] So J. van Leeuwen, *Mnemosyne* N.S. 31 (1903) 115, "*vegeta, florida*"; G. E. Marindin, *CR* 12 (1898) 37; and H. Mrose, *De syntaxi Bacchylidea* (Leipzig 1902) 55, "*in flore aetatis.*"

[27] See the full exposition of L. Mallinger, "Le caractère, la philosophie et l'art de Bacchylide," *Musée Belge* 3 (1899) 27f.

[28] Though here, it must be granted, the technique is much less obviously demonstrable than in the other cases, for two reasons: (1) we have no way of knowing whether these *hapax legomena* are really new coinages of Bacchylides; (2) much more clearly than the *hapax legomena* in the motion image, these fit the category which is described by Harvey (*op.cit.* [*supra* n.10] 208): "Bacchylides uses language in which many of the adjectives, though not actually Homeric, are formed on the Homeric model and give the impression of Homeric compounds."

adjectives.[29] Bacchylides conceives of his task as reworking and infusing with new life the tradition behind him. He does not so much set out in new directions as work within the traditional mold, yet his conceptions are new. In addition, the patterns here discussed have in common their mood of tragic irony. With a deep pessimism seldom found in Pindar, Bacchylides concentrates both myth and language upon the sudden appearance of disaster during or directly after a seeming success.

THE CITY COLLEGE OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

October, 1966

[29] The care with which these patterns are contrived and especially their occurrence throughout the ode provide evidence to support Steffen (*supra* n.9) *passim* and Gentili (*supra* n.11) 18f, against Snell (*supra* n.1) 41* and T. R(einach), *REG* 11 (1898) 17f: the first triad was not composed long after the rest of the ode; the poem is rather a whole and conceived of as such. Especially the eagle-metaphor, summarizing as it does the whole image of motion, is an integral part of the conception.