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THE SWEETNESS OF SPIRIT OR SONG? ON PINDAR'S PYTHIAN 6.52-54

Abstract. – The last verse of Pindar's sixth ode (*P.* 6.54) has traditionally been understood as a praise of Thrasybulus' generosity, his spirit, which surpasses honey in sweetness. Some more recent interpretations disagree, arguing that the verb ἀμείβεται cannot mean "surpass," since there is no parallel for this in Greek poetry. Instead, they understand it as "requite" or "get in exchange"; this has broader implications: the expression μελισσῶν... τρητὸν πόνον is thus supposed to denote a poem and refer to the ode in which it appears, i.e. *P.* 6, which the poet dedicates to Thrasybulus in gratitude. The traditional understanding, which is said to originate from the scholiast's misunderstanding, is therefore impossible. Although this interpretation is well argued and a new reading is possible, the question remains open. The article presents arguments that the verb ἀμείβεται can have the figurative meaning "to surpass" and that the traditional reading can therefore still be justified. It also presents possible arguments for the scholiast's reading of the passage, which is not necessarily the result of a misunderstanding. If the poem was intended to be performed at a symposium, this has pragmatic implications for the new reading as well: in fragment 124ab (in a poem, which is probably an erotic encomium, addressed to Thrasybulus,) Pindar says that the purpose of his poem is to evoke, in synergy with wine, an ecstatic experience for all participants in Thrasybulus' symposium, which would not be possible without the latter's hospitality. So even if the last line of *P.* 6 means that Thrasybulus receives the poem as requite, this implies, in close connection with the previous two lines, praise for his exceptional generosity, the sweetness of his spirit (γλυκεῖα φρήν): it is the one that provides the pragmatic context for the performance, in which the poem can be fully actualised as a song and prove itself to be a honeycomb, "the perforated labor of bees".

The purpose of this article is quite modest: I wish to offer some arguments in favor of the traditional reading of the conclusion of Pindar's sixth Pythian Ode (*Pythian* 6.52-54):

γλυκεῖα δὲ φρήν
καὶ συμπόταισιν ὀμίλειν
μελισσᾶν ἀμείβεται τρητὸν πόνον.

In more recent times, the last verse has become a bone of contention. According to traditional understanding, the expression μελισσᾶν... τρητὸν πόνον is a paraphrase for “honeycomb” or “honey,” while ἀμείβεται means “to surpass”: the verse thus means that the subject of the sentence, the spirit of Thrasybulus, son of the addressee of the epinician, surpasses honey in sweetness. Let me illustrate this reading with a few representative recent translations in different languages:

And his sweet spirit,
in company with his drinking companions,
surpasses the perforated labor of bees.¹

La sua indole dolce persino nei conviti con gli amici
sorpassa il lavoro trapunto delle api.²

Seine süße Umgangsart, auch im Verkehr mit Trinkgefährten,
übertrifft der Bienen gebohrtes Werk.³

Et son esprit si doux au fréquentier des commensaux
vaut l’ouvrage ajouré des abeilles.⁴

Decades ago, some scholars understood the phrase μελισσᾶν... τρητὸν πόνον as a metaphor for a song and interpreted it as a self-reference: it was supposed to refer to the song in which it appears, i.e. the epinician *Pythian* 6.⁵ However, such a reading also requires a change in the meaning of ἀμείβεται; this step was, to my knowledge, first taken by Leslie Kurke, who believes that this verb here means “repay, requite”⁶ and translates the passage as: “And his mind, sweet also in keeping company with his fellow drinkers, requites this carefully wrought encomium”.⁷ Such a reading, as Kurke says, reverses the epinician convention, according to

¹ Race 1997a, 318–319. Pindar’s works are cited in the notes and bibliography according to their publishers, as differences between editions and translations are of significant importance.

² Gentili 1995, 194–195.

³ Bremer 1992, 180–181.

⁴ Savignac 1990, 234–235.

⁵ Svenbro 1976, 174–175; Greengard 1980, 84–85.

⁶ Svenbro 1976, 175 already understood the passage in the same way as Kurke: “Le fils du commanditaire, détenteur d’une αἰτία μελίφρων, doit ‘récompenser’ le travail par lequel cette αἰτία a été transformée en ‘rayon de miel’, c’est-à-dire en poème.” He therefore translated ἀμείβεται as “récompense”, but did not comment on the traditional translation (“surpass”).

⁷ Kurke 1990, 101–102.

which the poet gives the epinikion to the victor as a reward for his *πόνος*, his hard-won success and his hospitality, since here it is precisely the opposite: *the victor's xenia* rewards the poet's *πόνος*. Finally, Chris Eckerman upgraded this reading by interpreting ἀμείβεται as “get in exchange”; in this way, he preserved the metaphorical interpretation of μελισσᾶν... τρητὸν πόνον and the epinician convention: Thrasybulus is the one who is rewarded with the song. It was precisely in Kurke's reversal of this convention that he saw the reason why the metaphorical interpretation was not accepted in the translations that appeared after the publication of her article. Eckerman is convinced that this question has thus been definitively resolved and that the traditional reading is no longer possible.⁸

I think that's a bit of a stretch. A new, metaphorical interpretation is certainly possible and very well argued, especially since Pindar very often uses the imagery of bees and honey in relation to song⁹ and because “‘perforated’ (τρητὸν) works well as a denotation for the artistic complexity of song,”¹⁰ but this does not exclude the possibility of a traditional reading. Both Kurke and Eckerman see the origin of the latter in the fact that modern scholars followed the ancient scholiast, who understood the expression μελισσᾶν... τρητὸν πόνον literally and was therefore forced to explain ἀμείβεται as “surpass”:

ἡ δὲ φρήν αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὴν πρὸς τοὺς συμπότας ὁμιλίαν γλυκεῖά ἐστιν, ὥστε τὰ κηρία παραλλάσσειν καὶ παραπορεύεσθαι τῇ γλυκύτητι τῶν φρενῶν· ἀντὶ τοῦ νικᾶ τὸ μέλι.¹¹

They consider this to be a mistake: the main argument of both scholars is that the verb ἀμείβω in the middle nowhere else in Greek means “surpass.”¹² But is this really the case?

The basic meaning of the verb ἀμείβω is “to change.” This directly transitive verb is also used to denote movement; in this case, its basic meaning¹³ is modified or even somewhat figurative: the subject of the verb does not change or affect the direct object, but rather changes its own position in relation to it. In other words, it replaces the space of its location, which is expressed as an object, with another, unexpressed (implied) space. In such cases, the object is implicitly understood as part or element of the path taken by the subject. Such an element can also be

⁸ Eckerman 2018, 857.

⁹ See e.g. O. 6.21, O. 11.4, P. 10.54, N. 3.4, N. 3.77, N. 7.11, perhaps N. 7.53, N. 11.18, I. 2.7, I. 2.32, I. 5.54, I. 6.9, *Pae.* 5.47, *Pae.* 6.59, fr. 122.14, fr. 246a. Most of these are compound adjectives.

¹⁰ Cf. Eckerman 2018, 858, n. 10.

¹¹ Scholion 49.10, Drachmann 1997, 200.

¹² Kurke 1990, 100–101; Eckerman 2018, 857.

¹³ Chantraine 1999, s. v. ἀμείβω lists “changer de lieu” as one of the basic meanings for both the active and medial forms, and also “franchir” for the medial form.

imagined as an obstacle that the subject “overcomes” on its path.¹⁴ In such cases, the verb in transitive use can also be understood as an intransitive verb of motion. There is no difference between active and medial forms.¹⁵ Insofar as the subject implicitly changes its location in relation to the object, the medial form seems even more appropriate. Such cases are translated into English with the verbs “pass,”¹⁶ “cross,”¹⁷ sometimes also with “enter,”¹⁸ depending on the context: however, they always express transcending (in the etymological sense), surpassing, passing over the object.

It is quite likely that the scholiast proceeded from such an understanding of the verb ἀμείβεται and therefore paraphrased it with the verb νικᾷ; this is also indicated by the other two paraphrases: παραλλάσειν and παραπορεύεσθαι, which undoubtedly express transcending in space and also in a figurative sense.¹⁹ Of course, the scholiast’s interpretation of Pindar’s verse refers to surpassing in a figurative sense, in terms of quality or intensity: and what bothers Kurke and Eckerman is obviously the fact that ἀμείβομαι does not appear anywhere else in such a figurative sense. However, the idea of surpassing is quite clear in it and is easily understandable (in the context of Pindar’s language, it is actually a very simple example of figurative use). The absence of semantic parallels is not yet a definitive argument, especially not in the case of a poet who is renowned for his linguistic creativity and innovation.²⁰

Kurke argues that the connection between ἀμείβομαι and ἀμείβομαι in P.1.45 is unfounded and that “the LSJ entry for ἀμείβομαι, ‘Doric = ἀμείβομαι’ is misleading, since there is no evidence that the two verbs are etymologically related.”²¹ This is a rather risky claim, since this verb is interpreted in this way by almost all of the most prominent commentators on the Pythian hymns, and moreover, the absence of etymological evidence in reference dictionaries is not in itself a conclusive argument. However, it is interesting to compare the two verbs from a semantic point

¹⁴ Such usage is also known in some modern languages, e.g., in Italian “la strada sorpassa il fiume”, German “eine Steigung überwinden”; Slovenian “premagati razdaljo”.

¹⁵ Cf. Hutchinson 1985, 189: “But in the field of motion, ἀμείβω and ἀμείβομαι appear to be completely synonymous.”

¹⁶ Hom. *Il.* 9. 409, *Od* 10.328 (ἀμείψεται); E. *IA* 144 (ἀμείβων).

¹⁷ A. *Pers.* 69 (ἀμείψας); A. *Choe.* 965 (ἀμείψεται); Hes. *Th.* 749 (ἀμείβόμεναι); Simonides 94B (ἀμειψόμενοι).

¹⁸ E. *Alc.* 752 (ἀμείψασθαι); Hdt. 5.72 (ἀμειψαι).

¹⁹ This is especially true for παραλλάσειν: for moving or exceeding in space (“pass”) cf. X. *HG* 5.1.12; Plb. 5.14.3; in time (“pass out”, “exceed in point of time”) Plu. *Cim.* 1; for exceeding in speed (“move much faster”) cf. Arist. *Mete* 342^a 33.

²⁰ Just for example: in *the Nemean Odes* alone, there are 44 *hapax legomena* (Fowler 2022, 179; Cannatà Fera 2020, 59), and even more striking is Pindar’s idiosyncratic use of words and bold syntactic constructions.

²¹ Kurke, 1990, 101.

of view. ἀμείβομαι has two very different meanings in the LSJ: 1. “surpass”, “outstrip”; 2. “purchase”, “acquire by exchange”.²² The first meaning is attested in literary usage, the second in non-literary usage.²³ How can they be connected? If we assume that the verb has the core meaning of “change,”²⁴ then we could use an analogy with ἀμείβομαι: the second meaning is “to exchange” (*échanger*) goods, while the first is “to change (*changer*) one’s position in relation to an object,” “to go beyond it,” “to surpass it,” and finally “to overcome it.” From this, a usage can then develop that has only a metaphorical connection with movement (as in P. 1.45). This is only a hypothesis, but it is based on the most likely core meaning of the verb ἀμείβομαι; the semantic analogy with ἀμείβομαι that it offers supports the traditional interpretation of P. 6.52–54 and makes it still relevant.

I would like to add something about the possible stimulus for the scholiast’s paraphrase. Although there is no formal comparison (no comparative) in the last three lines of P. 6, the idea of comparison is introduced by the verb ἀμείβεται in the sense of “to exceed” or “to surpass”. This refers to the paraphrase for honey, which in the Greek world is the standard for sweetness or, by convention, expresses the highest degree of sweetness.²⁵ In comparisons that contain such a standard of any property, known as comparisons of the type *melle dulcior*,²⁶ a comparative is used, which, despite its morphology, has the meaning of an equivalent according to almost unanimous opinion. Comparisons of this type therefore correspond semantically to adjectives formed with a noun that denotes the standard for a given property. In addition, comparisons of the *melle dulcior* type are also characterized by the fact that “the relationship between comparee and standard is figurative”.²⁷ Pindar, as is well known, uses numerous compound adjectives formed with the noun μέλι to denote songs and related concepts, thus attributing to them the highest degree of sweetness. Recently, however, some scholars have argued that comparatives in *melle dulcior* comparisons can also be (depending on the context)

²² Cf. Frisk 1960, s. v. ἀμείβασθαι: “übertreffen”, “überschreiten”; “Handel treiben”.

²³ Inscr. Cret. 4.4.1.

²⁴ Cf. Chantraine, s. v. ἀμείβασθαι: « Terme dialectal et dorien dont les emplois se trouveraient justifiés si l’on posait le sens originel de « mouvoir, changer, échanger, valoir ».

²⁵ The entity that represents the standard of comparison is described in various ways in scholarly literature: “un stéréotype culturel de la qualité possédée” (Bertocchi and Orlandini 1996, 210); a “norme immuable” (Benveniste 1948, 135); an “archetypal bearer of the quality” (Haug, 2001, 211); an “object which possesses the optimum of a quality”, or a “quality-typifying substantive” (Rosén, 1999, 193).

²⁶ Some of them, e.g., ‘sweeter than honey’ and ‘whiter than snow’ “seem to be common also in other Indo-European poetic traditions,” De Kreij 2021, 86. Cf. Benveniste 1948; Berg 1958; Puhvel 1973.

²⁷ De Kreij 2021, 86.

true semantic comparatives.²⁸ They acknowledge that “on a higher level, i.e. in terms of pragmatic inference, such constructions can certainly be conceived as elatives (or, in other words, ‘unconditioned superlatives’), since after all they can indeed be understood as actually expressing a very high degree,”²⁹ but nevertheless believe that “all proverbial phrases of the *melle dulcior* type essentially and inherently comprise a hyperbole or exaggerated comparison [...]. What they are intended to express is precisely that, according to the speaker, the comparee is endowed with more of the quality than the entity which is conventionally regarded as having its maximum degree.”³⁰

This seems relevant to the scholiast’s understanding of our passage, according to which μελισσᾶν ἀμείβεται τρητὸν πόνον is used instead of νικᾷ τὸ μέλι. Examples of the type *melle dulcior* are already common in Homer³¹, and in addition to morphology (adjective in the comparative), the scholiast may also have been influenced by the fact that they are very often used as hyperbole or exaggerated comparisons. And here the tone of the diction is certainly hyperbolic. A very interesting example of this type can be found in Pindar, frg. 152:

μελισσοτεύκτων κηρίων ἐμὰ γλυκερώτερος ὀμφά.

This example undoubtedly refers to song (or its performance), and because it contains a similar paraphrase of honey with honeycomb (μελισσοτεύκτων) as in *P.* 6.54, Eckerman believes that “it corroborates the suggestion that the honeycomb of *P.* 6 should be read in relation to song.”³² This is an interesting argument, but again not decisive: in frg. 152, the honeycomb means honey, i.e. the standard of sweetness which a certain voice (most likely Pindar’s) exceeds. The traditional reading of our passage therefore remains possible and the question open. For this reason, I would like to conclude by dwelling on a new reading that understands the phrase μελισσᾶν... τρητὸν πόνον as a periphrasis for song.

The proposed metaphorical reading can be understood in two ways: as a self-reference, i.e. as referring to the epinicion at the end of which the verse stands; or as depicting Thrasybulus’ symposia in general. In the first case, only the previous two verses describe Thrasybulus’ usual hospitality, while in the latter, Pindar says that Thrasybulus either requites the poet’s efforts,³³ or receives this epinicion, *Pythian* 6, (which may

²⁸ Ittzés 2021, de Kreij 2021.

²⁹ Ittzés 2021, 237.

³⁰ Ittzés 2021, 246.

³¹ *Il.* 1.249, 3.10-1, 4.277-8, 10.436; 13.817-9, 18.109-10, 18.610; 19.436; *Od.* 16.216-9, 18.195-6, 23.103.

³² Eckerman 2018, 857 n.10.

³³ Kurke, 1990, 101.

not have been performed at the symposium) as a token of appreciation and gratitude.³⁴ Scholars who advocate one of the variants of this reading support it with the argument of the epinician's elaborate structure: the sophisticated metaphor *μελισσᾶν...τρητὸν πόνον* "is presumably meant to evoke an association with the proem's metaphorical image for the epinician as a small but well-built architectural structure."³⁵

The problem with this reading is that the expression *μελισσᾶν...τρητὸν πόνον* is used as a synonym for song without an article; the generality of the metaphorical expression without an article suggests that the direct object of *ἀμείβεται* is all the songs performed at Thrasybulus' symposia.³⁶ With this understanding, the phrase has an important implication. Thrasybulus' "sweet" spirit (*γλυκεῖα φρήν*) is rewarded directly with (Pindar's) songs, which corresponds to the usual economy of the relationship between the addressee (although Thrasybulus is not the direct addressee) of the epinician and the poet (see note 34). Here, in addition to the question of the setting of the performance, the question of the genre of P. 6 also arises; scholars interpret the poem very differently: "At one end of the spectrum, the poem has been viewed as an erotic encomium that Pindar composed *gratis*, as a result of the strong attraction he felt for the young Thrasybulus. At the other end, the poem is an epinician and the erotic relationship is a metaphor whereby the cash relationship is concealed in the guise of a pederastic one."³⁷ This question must remain unanswered for now. However, in any case, P. 6 has more elements in common with fragment 124ab, which is classified as an (erotic) encomium:³⁸ the addressee Thrasybulus, the symposial atmosphere, erotic themes, and the theme of sweetness.³⁹ The fragment particularly emphasizes the prag-

³⁴ Eckerman 2018, 85 8: "At the end of P. 6, Thrasyboulos' mind, which manifests itself in the gathering of friends around him in the here and now of performance, gets the current song of Pindar in exchange for being sweet to the gathered symposiasts. Thus, Pindar requites Thrasyboulos, and the dynamics of reciprocity in this ode are in line with the dynamics of reciprocity, between poet and patron, exhibited elsewhere in epinician discourse." The question of the place of the performance of this epinician is the subject of a very long discussion, cf. see Boeckh 1821: II.2 297 and 300; Clay 1999, 30–31; Carey 2001, 22 n.20; Morrison 2007, 43; Eckerman 2011, Eckerman 2012; Athanassaki 2012; cf. Smith 2017, 72.

³⁵ Greengard 1980, 84. Kurke 1990, 101: "The image in *πόνος* – "a work produced by labor" – picks up the metaphor of the poem as artifact from the proem's *ὑμῶν θεσῶρος*."

³⁶ "If the phrase *μελισσᾶν...τρητὸν πόνον* is a metaphor, there is also the possibility of a general reference that includes but is not necessarily restricted to *Pythian* 6. By this account, the reference encompasses all artful songs whose performance Thrasybulus enjoys in his symposia", Athanassaki 2012, p. 150.

³⁷ Athanassaki 2012, 135, where the main representatives of opposing views are also listed.

³⁸ Maehler 1989, 109–110.

³⁹ Athanassaki 2016, 99.

matic context of the symposium, which essentially determines the function of the poem, or rather, the song:

ἼΩ Θρασύβουλ', ἐρατᾶν ὄχημ' αἰοιδᾶν	Str. 1
τοῦτό <τοι> πέμπω μεταδόρπιον. ἐν ξυνῶ κεν εἶη	
συμπόταισίν τε γλυκερὸν καὶ Διονύσοιο καρπῶ	
καὶ κυλίκεσσιν Ἀθαναΐασι κέντρον·	Str. 2
άνικ' ἀνθρώπων καμτώδεες οἴχονται μέριμναι	5
στηθέων ἔξω· πελάγει δ' ἐν πολυχρύσοιο	
πλούτου	
πάντες ἴσα νέομεν ψευδῆ πρὸς ἀκτάν·	Str. 3
ὄς μὲν ἀγρήμων, ἀφνεὸς τότε, τοὶ δ' αὖ	
πλουτέοντες	
.....	
...	Page 4
<-> ἀέζονται φρένας ἀμπελίνοις τόξοις δαμέντες	11

O Thrasybulus, I am sending you this chariot of lovely songs for after dinner. Amid the company may it be a sweet goad for your drinking companions, for the fruit of Dionysus, and for the Athenian drinking cups, when men's wearisome cares vanish from their breasts, and on a sea of golden wealth we all alike sail to an illusory shore; then the pauper is rich, while the wealthy . . . increase in their minds, overcome by the arrows of the vine.⁴⁰

Pindar sends these verses to Thrasybulus as “this chariot of lovely songs” (the expression with the demonstrative pronoun is undoubtedly self-referential) and with the wish that “may it be a sweet goad for his drinking companions.” The combined, synergistic effect of song and wine, the fruit of Dionysus, is described as a kind of ecstasy, an escape from the wearying reality into the illusory reality of golden abundance.⁴¹ It is particularly emphasized that the song is intended for all drinking companions (ἐν ξυνῶ κεν εἶη / συμπόταισίν) and that all participants in the symposium experience the ecstasy equally (πάντες ἴσα νέομεν). Just like Thrasybulus' hospitality, γλυκερὸν κέντρον, the sweet goad of Pindar's song, is intended for everyone; and although the contributions of the other symposium participants to the creation of the ecstatic experience are not mentioned, their presence and goodwill are essential conditions for the symposi-

⁴⁰ Race 1997b, 354–355.

⁴¹ Cf. commentary in Athen. 11.782D: αὔξει γὰρ καὶ τρέφει μεγαλύνει τε τὴν ψυχὴν ἢ ἐν τοῖς πότοις διατριβή, ἀναζωπυροῦσα καὶ ἀνεγείρουσα μετὰ φρονήσεως τὸν ἐκάστου νοῦν, ὡς φησιν ὁ Πίνδαρος: άνικ' [m-dash]πλουτέοντες, εἶτ' ἐπάγει ἀέζονται δαμέντες.

um event. And thus also for the poem to become a song and to fully actualize its sweetness.

In this sense, μελισσᾶν...τηρτὸν πόνον, as a metaphor for the songs at the symposium, could also imply the favorable presence of fellow drinkers and the “honeyed atmosphere” of the symposium as a whole. The idea of reciprocity is also emphasized in P. 6 with the expressions συμπόταισιν ὀμιλεῖν and ἀμείβεται (if we understand it as “get in exchange”); mutual affection is in fact crucial for the friendship of the symposium participants, and an essential feature for establishing this affection is Thrasybulus’ good behavior toward guests, which is celebrated in the conclusion of *Pythian* 6. This also applies to the functioning of the song: the host’s affection is a pragmatic condition for its proper functioning, a condition for its own sweetness to be actualized, for it to truly prove itself to be what it is: honeycomb, “the perforated labor of bees.” It is not, therefore, merely a matter of conventional reciprocity between poet and patron: the song is not only a means of payment, but together with Thrasybulus’ sweet spirit, it creates the “honeyed” atmosphere of the symposium.

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