IMAGERY IN SIMONIDES
by W. J. Henderson
(Rand Afrikaans University)

ABSTRACT

In this article some of the similes and metaphors encountered in Simonides' lyric and elegiac fragments are discussed. From the analysis it appears that this poet was highly original and tended to use imagery in clusters within the same poem.

1. Introduction

There are at least thirty-seven identifiable images (similes and metaphors) in the surviving melic and elegiac fragments accredited to Simonides. Of these, twenty-four occur in his lyric, and thirteen in his elegiac verse. I have discussed elsewhere the lyric images commented upon by ancient critics, and wish on this occasion to concentrate on the rest, as well as on the elegiac cases, and then draw some tentative conclusions about Simonides' use of imagery.

2. Imagery in the lyric fragments

Fr. 26, PMG 531

These nine lines on the fallen heroes of Thermopylae have a cluster of images. Diodorus Siculus (fl. c. 60-20 BC) considered Simonides' poem as

2. Three comparisons involving myth contribute nothing to the present discussion and are omitted: Fr. 509 (Polydeuces), 521 (Charybdis), and 607 PMG (Siren).
a fitting eulogy of the valour of Leonidas and the Spartans (11.11.6), but said nothing of the imagery. The image-cluster is built up in three phases. First, there is a series of three implied similes: the tomb is like an altar, 'sacrum et venerabile'; instead of lamentation there is remembrance; the pity is actually praise. The effect of the substitutions is to sublimate the present reality and pain into something more positive and enduring.

Then, secondly, Simonides compares the honour of Greece with a house-slave or attendant. The point is clear: Greece's honour will attend and protect the shrine of its heroic dead. Finally comes the climactic comparison: 'Leonidas, great decor of manliness.' All these images strike one as original—no parallels exist in extant Greek literature.

Simonides' ability to evoke feeling and atmosphere in a few words was recognised in antiquity. The imaginative power is unmistakable here. Though perhaps a little exaggerated, Weber's statement that this poem was 'eines der kostbarsten Stücke deren Lyrik überhaupt' is understandable. There is a nobility of style and sentiment, a blend of simplicity and technical skill, and, instead of sadness and grief, a rising feeling of resignation, pride and gratitude.

Fr. 36, PMG 541

3. The source and occasion of the poem have been the subject of much debate. See E. Degani & G. Burzacchini, Lirici Greci (Firenze 1977, reprinted 1984) 316-18.


5. Following Hermann, J.M. Edmonds, Lyric Greece (Cambridge, Mass. 1934) 268 proposed completing the chain of reeds from the funeral ceremony by reading χοίρος for υἱόν, and σέλην for σκοῖς; 'their grave is an altar, their urns memory, their wine praise.' This idea is sublimated into an altar; memory instead of urns will preserve them; instead of wine, praise will be their libation. This would provide a beautiful tricolon, but unfortunately has no manuscript authority. A.J. Podlecki, 'Simonides: 480,' Hastoria 17 (1968) 460 appropriately warned against any attempt to force the three phrases into exact parallelism.

6. podlecki (note 5) 260-61 understands σπαραττειν as a shroud.

7. G.M. Burns, Greek Lyric Poetry (2nd edition, Oxford 1961) 345-49 argued that the poem was composed for a ceremony of remembrance at a shrine in Sparta, and understood the predicative nouns literally. This was rejected by W.J.H.F. Koepel, Simonides (Thess. Groningen 1961) 31-32 and Podlecki (note 5) 257-75. Cf. also M.L. West, 'Some lyric fragments reconsidered,' CQ 25 (1975) 209.

The remains of this poem also exhibit a cluster of images that encapsulate the thought in concentrated form. The images are closely-packed, and must be unravelled one by one to get the full sense. The poet is talking about the difficulty of being a good person all one's life, and the consequent scarcity of truly good men. The defamer of such a man has a 'doorless mouth' (δόυλον στόματι), always open and unguarded in the process of spreading malicious gossip. The image seems original. Then comes another surprising image: this gossip is like smoke (πτολεμαί): it is irritating and unpleasant, but is soon dissipated and becomes ineffectual (διασπάται). Not only is the image again unparalleled, but the poet actually explains the main point of his image in the adjective ψευδόμος (false). In the very next line, the good man is compared to gold which cannot be tarnished (χρυσός οὐ μεμινθεῖ): he is impervious to being tainted by defamation; his true nature will always emerge (καὶ ὁ δὲ χρυσός εὐρύχρυος). Gold, of course, appears frequently as an image, but here it is the contrast between the images of smoke and gold that gives it impact: the former dull, insubstantial and of no value, the latter shiny, permanent and of great value.

Next, on his road to life-long goodness (12-13), the good man is sidetracked by greed, lust/love and ambition. The closest parallel to the 'path of natural or divine law' (πρόφυλακτος θεοῦ) is Homer's 'path of the gods' (Πανακάμας τοῖς ἡρώοις). Certainly, the μεταμφίσματα (transformation) is unique. The central cause of deviation, lust or love, is elaborated by myth and imagery: Aphrodite cunningly 'weaves' her wiles (ἱκτρήσει), as she does in Sappho (fr. 1.2), and her influence is like the sting of a 'powerful gadfly' (παθητικός αἰχμάτος). In real life the gadfly attacks cattle (Hom. Od. 22.300; OED); in myth, the jealous Hera sends a gadfly to torment Io, who has been changed into a heifer, and to drive her to flight (Aesch. Supp. 541ff.; Pr. 567ff.); in metaphor the gadfly signifies anything that causes a maddening sting (Eur. Hf 862; IT 1456; Soph. Tk. 1254). The sense here is clear: the effect of love is like the sting of the gadfly, causing pain.

9. &0upo< is used metaphorically of a tongue or language (ῥώγα) by Philo Mechanicus 1.678 (3rd/2nd century ac).
10. Smoke was used proverbially for anything worthless or trivial (Aesch. Pr. 399; Soph. Fr. 506; Ant. 1170; Aristoph. Nc. 359; Plato, Hl. 5142; Eur. Oph. 964); and Pindar (Hym. 1.24) uses the pouring of smoke (σωλελίζω) to indicate envy.
11. Pindar and Bacchylides use the image of various paths to indicate options facing the poet: Isth. 4(2).2; 5(4).23; Odyssey 4.23; Bacchyl. 5.31; 8.47.
madness and flight. In the case of our good man, love is strong enough to cause him to deviate from his true course.

According to Plutarch, who cites the lines (Quomodo adfl. ab amico interne. 24), the fragment contains a comparison between a flatterer and a better man. This would make it similar to thought to fr. 541.1-5, discussed above. The comparison of lead to refined and tested gold is not unusual.12 Its application to two types of men is.

Fr. 88, PMG 593

Plutarch (Quomodo quis ... s. 8) explains the reference: Simonides says these words of the bee. From the Anecdota Oxf. (iii.1.73) we learn further that for Simonides the bee is actually the poet, 'the bee of the Muse' (μετέτηυσεν Μοισιώτης). Simonides seems to be the first to use this comparison, after him, Pindar (Pyth. 6:52: 10:53-54) and Aristophanes (An. 748, Ec. 974, s. Arist. Au. 460) also used the bee of poets, and, still later, in the Anth. Pal. (9:506.6), honey, by a natural progression already implicit in the original bee-image, signifies poetry.

3. Imagery in the elegiac fragments

Sirnonides' reference to wine as 'a defender against cares' drew the following comment from Athenaeus (10.457a): 'But when you have drunk, have no fear that you are likely to fall on your back; for that cannot happen to those who drink the wine which Simonides calls ... (fr. 4).’14 Athenaeus focuses on the actual activities of the banquet, here the dangers of excessive


14. Translation by Campbell (note 8) 509.
drinking. Also, his comment is a non-sequitur: the poet meant that wine 'defends' one against the cares of life, not against falling on your back! The idea of wine as a dispeller of cares was not uncommon; what is striking, and perhaps original, is the actual image in 'defender against cares'. The term ἡγίασιν ἄρην or ἔξωπον is not and restricted to formalic use in Homer, where it refers to a human (heroic) or divine rescuer; Simonides alone seems to have applied it to a substance such as wine.15

Fr. 6 W (Page, Further Greek Epigrams LXXXVIII)

Οὐλίμποι ἐπὶ Πατρίν τοῖς ἐπιστημονικοῖς (1)

ἀνθρώποι δ' ἄγαλμαν ὕστεραν γρήγορα (3)

ὦν ἡ γάτη τὴν περικράτησιν (3-4)

The fragment, a riddle to which the answer is 'snow', contains a sustained personification: Boreas covered the 'flanks' of Mount Olympus (with snow), which 'bit' the hearts of men without the necessary warm clothing, but was itself 'bent low' when it 'was dressed alive' in Pierian soil. Athenaeus (3.125c) places the fragment in its real or imagined context: 'Callistratus in book 7 of his Miscellanies says that when the poet Simonides was dining with friends "in the season of mighty heat" and the wine-bearers mixed snow in the drink of the others but not in his, he improvised this epigram:

... (fr. 6)'17 This is fair enough comment: it cites an authority and places the text in a context that identifies its nature (a riddle) and reference (snow). What interests us, however, is the clustering or accumulation of images.

The first image is Olympus' 'flanks' or 'sides'. The nearest parallels to this use of ἐπίστημον of a geographical feature are νῆς ἐπιστημον (Theogn. 99) and χειμών ἐπιστημον (Plato, X. 388e), both later than Simonides. The next image, that of snow 'biting' men's hearts, seems common enough to us to express the sharp sting of cold (Campbell's 'gnawing' is not quite right).

In Greek literature it is used of the pungent smell of smoke or dust,16 or of...
dry winds, or of love, or of extroin things that cause mental distress. No other use such as that by Simonides is recorded.

The final two images, of the snow being 'bent low' (overcome, subdued), and 'being clothed alive in Pierian earth', are complex and pregnant. The reader has to unravel the full meaning. The reference seems to be to the gathering and underground preservation of the snow as ice for use at, for example, symposia (the setting of our poem). The verb φόρεω occurs elsewhere in the sense of being subdued, but not before Simonides. The idea of snow being bent into submissioin in the preservation process is vivid and apparently entirely original. This applies also to the idea of the snow being 'dressed in Pierian earth' and kept 'alive' (as ice) for subsequent use. In extant Greek literature, φόρεω is used of being clad in shamelessness, or strength, or earth (i.e. buried). Only Simonides uses it as he does here.

One further point requires elucidation: why 'Pierian earth'? In a literal sense it refers to Pierus, the mountain sacred to the Muses, and therefore indicates the geographical area in the vicinity. However, one cannot completely exclude the possibility that the adjective φόρεω refers figuratively to the Muses, especially in a poem sung at a symposium and pregnant with the material of a riddle. If this is the case, the poet is making a connection between the place from which the snow originates and the place where it now appears, served at the symposium at which his poem, inspired by the Muses, is being performed.

The compactness, complexity, organic coherence and even originality of these images are undeniable, and are evidence of a forceful creative mind.

Fr. 8 W

'οδη περ ἀστάλον γενεύ, τούτις βι καὶ ἀνθέων' (2, from Hom. Il. 6.146)

19. Vippurc. Aph. 2.3.17.
20. Pind. Pyth. 8.87; Anax. Penn. 302 (καταργία); Thesp. 390.
22. An. Pr. 229, 366; Pind. Pyth. 2.51; Pind. Pri. 220; Rep. 694; Thesp. 390; D.L. Page, Further Greek Epigrams (Oxford 1981) 302, failing to recognize the metaphorical nature of the use, found 'no known use, or reasonable extension of a use... applicable here.'
26. Cf. Page (note 22) 302: 'the Thessalians obtained their snow and ice from Mt. Olympus. Poesis is strictly the hill-country from Olympus northwards.'
Simonides approves of Homer’s comparison of life with leaves, and adds his own: ‘hope grows in young people’s hearts’ (4-5), and ‘the most lovely flower of youth’ (6-7). Stobaeus cites these lines (4.34.28) only to illustrate the theme of transience, worthlessness and care-laden life. Again we are concerned with the cluster of images.

The idea of hope ‘growing’ in young people’s hearts again seems like a cliche to us. In Greek literature, various feelings or qualities are described as ‘growing’ or ‘being planted’ in human minds, but again only after Simonides. On the other hand, ἡπιός ἢς ἁμάρτω (4.34.28) is found before and after Simonides. For ἡπιός ... τήρομαι again, Simonides provides the earliest example. The cluster of images again forms an organic whole, depicting life from rooting and growth, to flowering, and death.

Plutarch (De Herc. malign. 42.872d, e) explains that Simonides did not compose this piece while training a chorus in Corinth or writing a song for the city, but while recording the city’s achievements in elegiacs. All we really learn from this is that the poem dealt with the achievements of Corinth. In the surviving lines, the golden sun is witness to these exploits. Two images are involved: the sun as witness and as gold. The idea of the sun as witness is at least as old as Alcman’s Parthenion (fr. 1.40-43), where Agido summons it to witness (i.e. light up, observe and be part of) the ceremony. In Simonides the sun is ‘the best witness’ in the sense that it observes, reveals, highlights and then spreads the Corinthians’ glory over a wide area (ἐπί οὖν τὰ πάντα ἑαυτόν ἅμα....). The main point of the comparison with gold is made explicit: its great value (τιμήσεως). However, its visual qualities, its colour and brightness, shared with the sun, are understood. The associations are common in Greek literature, but Simonides has skillfully fused image and application.

27. Hdt. 3.60 (φθινόν); Soph. OT 299 (στάθηκεν); OC 1488 (οὸς ναύον); Fr. 949 (καλλίτις); Eur. Hipp. (ὑπὸ πλαταιων); Med. 515 (παραμένειν).
29. Ansch. Fr. 362; Soph. OT 1530; Erc. Alc. 643.
30. Fr. 10-18 West are now recognized as parts of the same poem, a ‘mini-epic in elegiacs’ on the Battle of Plataea; cf. M.L. West, ‘Simonides redivivus’, ZPE 98 (1993) 4-9.
31. The image recurs in Fr. 12 W: ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις ὄντας ἢς ἁμάρτω καὶ ἰματίς ἀπέβαινε, the best of witnesses is the golden sun in the sky.
into an organic sequence: achievements = witness = sun = gold. Together they enhance the Corinthian achievements.

Fr. 13 W (Page, Further Greek Epigrams LXXXIX)

δ' τινος ἄξονες ἅθλοντας,
και τίνην ἄρα καὶ τὰ μικράτα
Stobaeus (Anthol. 1.8.22) cites the fragment for its thematic relevance: the nature, parts and effects of time. The metaphorical use of ψάχνω ('rub', 'scratch') in surviving Greek literature is restricted to the idea of something being rubbed away or obliterated (Arist. Mem. 450b3: of memory) or scratched (Call. Fr. 96: of scribbling). Simonides' use here, the earliest on record, combines both meanings of the verb. The process of wearing away is rendered more vivid and concrete by the reference to teeth: the attrition is caused by 'scratching' or gnawing, like that of an animal.

Fr. 15 West

ζολείς δ' ἄρα ἅθλοντας
Plutarch (An seni sit gerenda resp. 1) felt that the expression 'the city teaches man' is true for those who still have time to be taught a new lesson and learn a new subject which can be mastered only with difficulty after much toil and trouble.19 He says nothing of the image. The personification occurs elsewhere,20 but not before Simonides.

4. Aspects of Simonidean imagery

The above discussion has revealed two facets of Simonides' use of imagery. The first is his originality. Although one is constantly aware of the fragmentary nature of his and others' poetry, one is in the final analysis struck by the fact that he is the earliest (if not only) authority for many of the images he uses. The second facet is more important: the observation that he employs clusters of imagery which, in sustained and organic expression, embody a density and complexity of thought nothing less than surprising. This is most apparent in frs. 26, 36 Page, and 8 and 8 West.21 Although only four of the inelinc and elegiac fragments exhibit this clustering of imagery, they account for 24 images out of the total of 37, i.e. almost 65%. It does not seem too far-fetched to believe that this feature was characteristic of his poetry in general, and that if more of this

32. Translation by Campbell (note 8) 517.
33. Cf. θαλαμήν ἄλλον αἰθήματι, Heraclit. 51; οὐκ ἔχει τις ἄλλον ἄλλον αἴθημα, Democrit. 246.
34. The same trait is noticeable in Adesp. eleg. 8 W, now ascribed to Simonides as Fr. eleg. 21, and well elucidated by West (note 30) 11-12.
great poet's work had survived, it would have been more evident. The ancient testimonia report on his inventiveness in other fields (mnemonics, orthography);[35] his care in the choice of words;[37] his statements that 'the word is the image of the thing'[38] and that 'painting is silent poetry, poetry silent painting'[39]—all of which testify to a highly creative and complex poetic mind.

35. It would, however, be too presumptuous to use this trait by itself as an instrument for determining the authenticity of poems ascribed to Simonides.

36. Suda Y. 439; Cic. De fin. 2.32.104; Long. Rhet. 718; Plin. NH 7.24.89.

37. Dio Ch. Halic. Sest. 2.420: "even better than Pindar"; cf. Cic. ND 1.22.60: "sed Simonides arbiter (quoniam poeta solus saevo veram etiam ceterni doctus sapientiae traditur), quia multa veniunt in mentem acuta et subtilia, dubitabam quid esset certum veritatem desiderare omnem veritatem."


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