

SIMONIDES NEGATIVE

ANNE CARSON

Not for no reason, I begin with an anecdote. One day Simonides and William Safire were sitting in a bar, chatting about language, when Simonides said to his companion, "Isn't it a curious thing that both of us have in our respective languages a phenomenon whereby two negative words or expressions combine to form one positive meaning, the so-called 'double negative,' but the converse phenomenon, whereby two positive words add up to a single negative meaning, does not occur?" Safire glanced up from his drink. "Yeah, yeah," he said.

The anecdote is a useful one for illustrating how powerful an effect can be obtained by a speaker who causes an affirmative statement to transform itself into a negative one. When "yes" turns into "no," there is a sudden vanishing and a shift to new meaning, there is a tilt and realignment of the listener's world-view. Simonides is a master of such transformations. He says "no" more often than any other poet of the period. If we compare the extant corpus of his poetry,¹ which contains roughly 1300 legible words, with comparable samples of verse from the contemporary poets Anakreon, Pindar and Bacchylides, the following statistic emerges: in 1300 words of Anakreon we find the negative adverbs *ou* and *mē* employed 28 times; 1300 words of Pindar render 16 usages of *ou* and *mē*; 1300 words of Bacchylides give us 19 instances of *ou* and *mē*. The count for Simonides is 56. **The high ratio of Simonidean negativity depends, in no small degree, on his inclination to form even positive statements negatively, that is, his**

¹ Fragments of Simonides are cited from the editions of Diehl 1941-1952 = D; Page 1962 = PMG; West 1972 = W.

fondness for the double negative. So, for example, when Simonides wishes to assert that human life contains suffering, he says, "Nothing is not painful among men" (526 *PMG*) or "There is no evil not to be expected by men" (527 *PMG*) or "Not even the men of old who were sons of gods had lives that were not full of pain and death and danger" (523 *PMG*). Instead of saying "Pleasure is good," he says "Without pleasure not even a god's life is enviable" (57D). Rather than "Virtue is difficult," he says "No one attains virtue into whom heartbiting sweat does not come" (579 *PMG*). To describe a weeping woman he has the phrase "with cheeks not unwet by tears" (543.5 *PMG*). To describe a sound which spreads far and wide he says, "No leafshaking blast of wind arose which would have prevented the sound from spreading far and wide" (595 *PMG*). In order to celebrate the fact that the city of Tegea has survived a war, Simonides says, "The smoke of Tegea burning did not rise up into the clear air" (122D). And in the famous poem known to us from Plato's *Protagoras*, Simonides addresses himself to the definition of virtue by setting out 12 negative and double negative formulations in the space of 40 lines of verse, leading to the resoundingly Spinozan conclusion, "All things to be sure are beautiful into which ugly things are not mixed" (542 *PMG*).²

It would be an insult to the care which this poet lavishes upon telling us what is not the case to dismiss his negativity as accidental, incidental or rhetorical. His poetic action insistently, spaciouly and self-consciously³ posits in order to deny. To read him is a repeated experience of loss, absence and deprivation for the reader who watches one statement or substantive after another snatched away by a negative adverb, pronoun or subordinate clause. Simonides' poetic imagination conjures so vividly events that did not occur, people who are not present, possibilities which cannot be expected, that these come to rival the reality which is present and actual. No other poet of the period manages to deny so much, so well. What is Simonides up to?

A prior question can not be avoided. What is a negative?

² Only slightly less sweeping the metaphysic of W. C. Fields: "Anyone who doesn't like children, dogs and horses can't be all bad" (reported by John J. Winkler). "All determination is negation" instructs Spinoza in his *Ethics*.

³ The poet's awareness of his own taste and tactic flashes out, for example, from fr. 593 *PMG*: "Not from fragrant painted flowers . . . but from the bitter thyme I suck my verse."

A negative is a verbal event. There are, philosophers assure us, no negatives in nature, where every situation is positively what it is. The negative is a peculiarly linguistic resource whose power resides with the user of words. But verbalization in itself is not sufficient to generate the negative. Negation depends on an act of the imagining mind. In order to say "the smoke of Tegea burning did not rise up into the clear air" I bring together in my mind 2 pieces of data, one of which is present and actual (Tegea itself perceptible before me), the other of which is absent and fictitious (Tegea as it would be if it were burning). I put the 2 data together and say "This is not that." Negation requires this collusion of the present and the absent on the screen of the imagination. The one is measured against the other and found to be discrepant; the discrepant datum is annihilated by a word meaning "no." The interesting thing about a negative, then, is that it posits a fuller picture of reality than does a positive statement.⁴ And the person who speaks negatively can be said to command and display a more complete view of things than one who makes positive assertions.

Now, the ancient poet is by definition someone who commands a fuller view of reality than other people. According to a venerable Greek tradition the poet is *sophos* and his task is to see and to teach a vision of life from which the particularity of our ordinary experience ordinarily excludes us. But Simonides lived in a time when new and enlightened pressures were being placed on poetry to justify its traditional claim to special wisdom. Sophists in the fifth century openly challenged the validity of poetic *sophia* and evolved a science of dialectic to replace poetic teaching. Simonidean negativity, I would suggest, represents a unique poetic response to these pressures. Simonides accepted the sophistic challenge and co-opted its science.

It was essentially a science of measurement, famously summarized by Protagoras in the words "Man is the measure of all things — both of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not" (B1 *VS*; Plat. *Tht.* 161c; Arist. *Met.* 1062b 13-18).

⁴ ". . . There is more and not less in the idea of an object conceived as 'not existing' than in the idea of this same object conceived as 'existing'; for the idea of the object as 'not existing' is necessarily the idea of the object as 'existing' with, in addition, the representation of an exclusion of this very object by the actual reality taken en bloc" Bergson 1928.302.

So, while other fifth-century intellectuals were measuring geometrical angles, intervals of music, spaces between stars, Simonides took his measuring inside the mind and method of poetic *sophia*. And whereas Protagoras prided himself on a technical ability to argue both sides of any case and published 2 textbooks of *Antilogika* (or Contrary Arguments), Simonides for his part constructed poems in the shape of *antilogika*, painting a picture of things that moves inclusively over the negative and the positive, defining the things that are by excluding the things that are not, evoking the absent in order to measure it against the present. The technique would impress any sophist but the poet's aim is not technical, nor is his measuring sophistic. It is a mode of knowledge,⁵ perhaps best described in terms borrowed from philosophy. It was the fifth-century philosopher Parmenides who said to the seeker after truth, "You must gaze steadily at what is absent as if it were present by means of your mind" (λεῦσσε δ' ὄμως ἀπεόντα νόω παρεόντα βεβαίως; fr. 4). It was the twentieth-century philosopher Bergson who described philosophic speculation as "making use of the void in order to think the full."⁶ When Simonides pictures the world in relations of denial and absence, he is using the power of the negative to cut reality free from sophistic subjectivism. For Protagoras, man is the criterion of what exists; his *logos* makes nothing of reality. The Simonidean *logos* says "no" to that nothing.⁷

⁵ Leopardi's poem "The Infinite" adopts a similar technique:

This lonely hill has always been so dear
to me and dear this hedge which hides away
the reaches of the sky. But sitting here
and wondering, I fashion in my mind
the endless spaces far beyond, the more
than human silences and deepest peace;
so that the heart is on the edge of fear. . . .

One critic has said of these verses: "The very fact that the hedge *cuts off* the vision of unknowable space releases the imagination to create that vision": Casale 1981.44.

⁶ Bergson 1928.289.

⁷ For an example of the converse phenomenon we might look to the usage of another sophist, cleric of a more recent and arguably less robust Enlightenment, George Eliot's Casaubon:

"'Yes' said Mr. Casaubon, with that peculiar pitch of voice which makes the word half a negative" (*Middlemarch* 231).

Perhaps the most poignant example of Simonides making use of the void in order to think the full is his poem on time (fr. 521 *PMG*):

ἄνθρωπος ἐὼν μὴ ποτε φάσῃς δ τι γίνεται [αἰθριον],
μηδ' ἄνδρα ἰδὼν ὄλβιον ὄσσον χρόνον ἔσσειται·
ὄκεια γὰρ οὐδὲ τανυπερύγου μύλας
οὕτως ἂ μεταστασις.

Being man, you can't ever say what will happen tomorrow,
nor, if you see a man happy, how long it will last.
For quick — not even of a longwinged fly
so — the change!

It is a poem so tiny it manages to vanish as you read it, not only into the past but into nonexistence. At the end you find yourself staring at an event which did not take place. The first 3 verses prepare this vanishing point by means of a series of contractions. As you proceed from verse 1 through verse 4, each line is shorter than the one before it. The units of syntax progressively simplify. The metrical units are reduced, from choriambic metra with dactylic expansion in verse 1, to choriambic metra alone in verse 2, to dactyls in verse 3 and finally, in verse 4, to an indefinable metrical shape not quite a choriamb, not quite a dactyl. The units of thought dramatically diminish, from the universal *anthrōpos* of verse 1 to an individual *andra olbion* in verse 2, who dwindles to a fly in verse 3, which vanishes in verse 4. And time itself shrinks sharply, from the foreverness of *mē pote . . . auron* in verse 1 to a specific measurement of *hosson chronon* in verse 2, which contracts to a mere attribute of swiftness (*ōkeia*) in verse 3, and even that vanishes in verse 4 into *metastasis*. *Metastasis* is where you end up but, by the time you get there, the change to which the word refers is not only retrospective, it is retrospectively negated. As you glance back from *metastasis* to the negative adverb *oude* looming above it, you realize that the fly in this poem has not only shifted its wings, it has flown right out of the argument, relegated to the category of a negative exemplum. Like time itself, the fly is present only as an absence.

The poet's control of time is a power vested in negativity. Once we have invented time, and we have, we can only escape it by refusing

to know what time it is.⁸ That refusal is an almost godlike⁹ gesture; the mind that can deny time can say “no” to mortality, as Simonides did repeatedly and famously throughout his career, for he was the most prolific composer of epitaphs in the Greek tradition and widely celebrated for his funeral songs. It is a nice puzzle whether the outstanding negativity of this poet is cause or effect of the fact that he spent so much of his time in the company of the Great Gainsayer. **Certainly death gives most of us our elemental experience of absent presence, and an epitaph might be thought of as a vanishing point — or a sort of concrete double negative — where the absence of life disappears into the presence of death and nullifies itself. Certainly the poet’s power to negate the negating action of death derives from his special view of reality, a view which sees death everywhere and finds life within it, a view which perceives presence as absence and finds a way to turn that relation inside out. Certainly this paradox of absent presence, forming itself as an act of negation, is the shape built into Simonides’ concepts and syntax and poetic technique, and also into many of the stories he tells in his verse. But we should not fail to notice that it is also a shape recurrent in the stories told about Simonides, that is, the mass of anecdotes transmitted to us from**

⁸ Insofar as Simonides himself described poetry as “silent painting” (Plut. *glor. Ath.* 3; cf. Mich. Psell. 821 Migne), let us compare this Simonidean poem on time with an early painting by Cézanne entitled *The Black Clock*. It is a painting of a clock with a face and no hands, that is, a picture of timelessness. A clock without hands designates no particular time and all possible times at the same time. A clock without hands is a powerful image of the vantage-point taken by the poet as his *logos* ranges forward and backward in time and the rest of us stand, lodged in our partial view of reality, eyes fixed on the moment we call The Present. Meanwhile we should not overlook the fact that the clock face on which Cézanne captures timelessness is a black one: an act of painterly negation.

We might also recall the opening shot of Ozu’s 1933 masterpiece *Floating Weeds* (a film about the effects of passing time on a travelling company of Kabuki players), which begins in the waiting room of a railway station: the camera is positioned so that it looks *out* from inside the glass cabinet of an enormous grandfather clock.

⁹ “I was strong, of unknown strength, a spirit, almost a god. . . . Thus had the Everlasting No (*das ewige Nein*) pealed authoritatively through all the recesses of my being, of my Me: and then it was that my whole Me stood up, in native God-created majesty and with emphasis recorded its Protest. Such a Protest, the most important transaction in life . . . might be called”: Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*.

antiquity as his biographical persona. Consider the following stories from the traditional *vita* of Simonides.¹⁰

Once Simonides was feasting at the table of the tyrant Hieron and noticed that roast hare was being served to all the other guests, but not to him; the absent presence of roast hare moved Simonides to compose a small poem (fr. 7 W; Athen. 656c). Once Simonides was dining with friends on a hot day and saw that the waiters were mixing snow into everyone else’s wine, but not into his; whereupon Simonides was inspired to compose an epigram (fr. 6 W; Athen. 125a-c). Once Simonides was commissioned to write a poem in honor of the Thesalian prince Skopas. When he performed the poem, Skopas was less than pleased, charging that the poet had allotted too many verses of his poem to the gods and too few to Skopas. The prince therefore denied Simonides one half of his poetic fee, instructing him to seek the rest from the gods. This incident provoked Simonides to create, not another poem but the famous Simonidean memory-system (on which see further below). Another anecdote tells us that Simonides kept in his house 2 boxes in which to store the *charis* received for his poems: one box for money, one box for gratitude. The second box was always empty (Stob. 3.10.38; *schol.* Theocr. 16; *schol.* Aristoph. *Pax* 697; Plut. *Mor.* 520a, 555f). Finally, Simonides is alleged by the Suda biography to have added 4 letters to the Greek alphabet (*ēta*, *ōmega*, *psi* and *xi*). Alongside these anecdotes we should note an enigmatic sentence from the Simonidean testimonia:

βλαβερῶς παραινεῖ Σιμωνίδης παίζειν ἐν τῷ βίῳ καὶ
περὶ μηδὲν ἀπλῶς σπουδάζειν.

Simonides advises us to play at life and to be 100% serious about nothing (fr. 646 *PMG*).

To be 100% serious about nothing, about absence, about the void which is fullness, is the destiny and task of the poet. These biographical vignettes are not stories of Simonidean greed, as they have

¹⁰ Documentation and discussion of these stories, as well as current bibliography on the anecdotal tradition, are provided by Bell 1978; Podlecki 1979.

been traditionally interpreted,¹¹ but rather they offer a paradigm of the poetic consciousness in its relation to everyday reality. The poet is someone who feasts at the same table as other people. But at a certain point he feels a lack.¹² He is provoked by a perception of absence within what others regard as a full and satisfactory present. His response to this discrepancy is an act of poetic creation; he proceeds by means of his poetic *sophia* to make present in the mind what is lacking from the actual. One more story from the Simonidean *vita* will help us focus this paradigm. It is a story of annihilation and miraculous escape, a story about making use of the void to think the full, a story in which the poet gazes steadily at what is absent and makes it become present by means of his mind — the story of how Simonides came to invent his memory-system (see fr. 510 *PMG*).

Once Simonides was dining in the house of Skopas with a number of other guests, when a servant appeared at his elbow to say that two young men were asking for him at the front door. Simonides left the table and hurried to the door but found no one there. Meanwhile, behind him, the roof of the house collapsed, crushing Skopas and all the other banqueters. This calamity at first appeared to have cancelled not only the lives but the afterlives of Skopas and his guests, for the bodies were too mangled to permit identification for burial. But Simonides saved the day. He returned to the room and was able to conjure up mentally the exact location of every guest at the table. He filled in the absent presences and attached to each a name and a memory. By means of his poetic mind, Simonides doubled the negative of death and said “no” to oblivion.

It is a not uninteresting coincidence, whose decoding I leave with you, that the stories of which Simonides is the author and the stories in which Simonides figures as protagonist betray a rich and strange similarity. An unforgettable shape of absence is in them. As

¹¹ The *topos* of Simonidean greed saturates the biographical tradition, well documented by Bell 1978. A grace note is bestowed on our metaphorical reading of the *topos* by the anecdote in which Simonides at table, exhorted to moderation by Xenophon, holds out firmly for the poet's claim upon a richer reality: “Surely anyone whose appetite is keen takes far more pleasure when served with a richer array of food than those before whom cheaper things are set” (Athen. 144d-e).

¹² “In some era of prehistory, negation was perhaps a wholly physiological voicing of disgust or refusal, an abrupt expulsion of breath through the nostrils, probably intended to symbolize a spewing-forth of disagreeable food” Mauthner 1910.II.149.

historians we are wary of such coincidences, alert to a tendency within literary biography to read the nature of a poet's poetry back into his life as personal event. So, for example, Anakreon was said to have perished by choking on a grape seed, while Sappho jumped off a cliff for love of a young man and Tolstoy died waiting for a train. But it is a very rich reading that can bring down the roof of a house and crush a roomful of banqueters.

On the other hand, Simonides was a very greedy poet. And surely a poet must be greedy for reality if he is to transcribe his perception of the whole of things. Why did Simonides bother to invent 4 new letters for the Greek alphabet? Presumably, from a certain sense of cognitive pique. He heard these sounds being pronounced in people's speech, he saw no symbol for them in the written language, he refused to tolerate this partial transcription of reality. He sat down and filled in the absent presences, by means of his poetic mind. Simonides' is a mind that sees its poetic task clearly: the task is to reject absence wherever absence occurs.¹³ It is a task that pits him against sophistic subjectivism, against the limitations of mortality, against time itself — for the task is endless. Nothing fails to escape Simonides, forever.

Princeton University

¹³ So too the Chinese poet Lu Chi (A.D. 261-303):

Tax Non-Being to demand Being
 Knock on silence to seek sound
 Contain what is endless on a foot of white paper
 Utter what is boundless from the square inch of the heart.

See Lu Chi's “Exposition on Literature” in Liu 1975. A twentieth-century mind, by contrast, may recognize the task but is inclined to lose heart in the midst of it: “Nobody kept answering,” says Holden Caulfield, hanging up the telephone.

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