The Poets and their Work

In the Greece of the seventh century before Christ the human spirit was fast growing to man's estate. Kings had mostly gone, aristocracies were going, wealth and power, even supreme power, were for any man to win. The patronage of art was passing from the court to the count-house by way of the town-hall. Homer had told long before of the Heroes, Hesiod more recently of husbandry, both in epic verse which had now begun to lose its once invariable musical accompaniment. Archilochus, Mim-nermus, Alcman, in tunes and measures new to the world of art, were now singing to flute or lyre of their own feelings; and the age-long rite of tribal song-dance not only had become a thing of state-encouraged competition, but was adding secular and personal elements to its hieratic theme. Alcman makes his chorus of Spartan girls, with the simple sympathetic vividness of a vase-painting, describe themselves; and describes their trainer in two lines of a solo Love-Song which bear the hall-mark of whole-world kinship: 'It is not Aphrodite; but wild Love, like a child, plays me touch-me-not-with-your-little-reed, treading softly on tiptoe.' Here is self-consciousness, individualism, the personal lyric. The world has indeed grown up.

The first portrait-statue—that of a victorious Spartan athlete—appears in 628, the first Encomium or Eulogy among the fragments of the Lesbian Alcaeus a few years later. This, the Song-in-the-Revel, came of an old feast-custom akin on the one side to the 'renowns of men' of which Homer tells and whence the Epic grew, and on the other to the traditional Libation-Songs sung to Zeus and
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the Heroes, and the Paean sung to Apollo. Difference of occasion, at first slight, abetted for us by Alexandrian pedantry, has divided this class of songs, or as they still sometimes were, song-dances, into the Victory-Song, the Drinking-Song, and the Love-Song. The pedigree of the Love-Song is marked by the fragment in which Alcaeus begs his beloved to ‘receive your revel-singer’, i.e. serenader. The Victory-Song, or song of congratulation to the winner in the Games—how Greek that these should be some of their finest poetry!—is outside our present scope. Translations of most of the extant Drinking-Songs are reserved for a future volume, but not a few will be found in this; for a Greek Drinking-Song did not necessarily concern itself with drinking. In Greek education the learning of poetry by heart took the place which language-study does in ours; and the Greeks did not put away such things as childish when they left school, but sang or recited poems they had learnt there or picked up in later life, whenever their turn came to entertain their fellow-guests. Thus almost any theme was suitable—wealth and poverty, youth and age, virtue and vice, war, friendship, love, marriage, behaviour at table, politics, travel, satire, death.

Archilochus, it is said, ‘invented the custom of reciting some of the Iambics to music and singing others’. Here begins, in another sphere than the Epic, the divorce of poetry from song. Before the turn of the century we find at least one of the two Lesbians using the Love-Poem as the love-message. But most of the exquisite (though too often fragmentary) poetry of the great Mytilenean monodists Sappho and Alcaeus, who through their imitators have done more for the poetry of Europe than any man but Homer, was doubtless sung to the music of the lyre; for they employed mainly what in their day and long after were the

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metres \textit{par excellence} of song, the ‘tune-metres’ as they were called, Melic. For the poetry of love and wine this tradition held, side by side with that of the Elegiac, sung to the flute, and that of the Iambic and Trochaic, whose accompaniment was a kind of lyre, through the century which began with Solon, continued with Stesichorus and Ibycus, and ended with Anacreon. From the Persian Wars near the beginning of the fifth century to the revival of the Lyric Tale by Timotheus towards the end of it, the Melic metre—except for the Dithyramb or song-dance to Dionysus and (later) other Gods—is almost entirely confined to the Choric songs, as the Iambic to the spoken parts, of the Drama; the Elegiac, growing more and more a matter of mere recitation, holds almost undisputed sway over poetry of love and wine until the Alexandrian Age revives the Hexameter and the Anacreontic.

Solon is an example—not unparalleled in early Greece—of the poet who receives full powers to heal public ills. Even his political poems are always poetry. It is clear that he was a statesman because he was a poet, and not \textit{vice versa}. Of another poet-statesman, canonised like him as one of the Seven Sages, Cleobulus of Lindus in Rhodes, we know that he wrote songs and riddles. The riddle, which, like the pun, enjoyed greater dignity than it does now, was often an alternative to a song or recitation at table. To the same age belong Demodocus of Leros and Phocylides of Milētus, writers of satire in epic or elegiac verse. Phocylides’ couplet on the little city set upon a high place is alone enough to justify his ancient reputation. Demodocus’ lines on Procles imitated by Porson in the famous epigram on Hermann, and his dictum that the Milesians may not be dolts but they behave like dolts, make us wish we had more of him. Of Stesichorus’ Doric Love-Songs, though we know he wrote
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them, we have nothing but a few names and plots which indicate that they were impersonal, Lyric Tales taken, it would seem, from the lips of the people and sung to the lyre by a single performer to the accompaniment of a dancing chorus. His later contemporary Ibycus, who refused the offered 'tyranny' of his native city, the half-Doric half-Ionic Rhegium, and withdrew to Samos, there to live under Aiaces and his son Polycrates, is the first court-poet we hear of after the Heroic Age. If we had more of his work, this once famous man would perhaps rank as the 'male Sappho'. Like Sappho's, some at least of his poems were Choric. At the same court, and later at the court of the Pisistratids at Athens, lived the great Ionian monodic singer of love and wine—and old age—Anacreon, whose modern fame rests, for all but those who know the fine few remnants of his own work, on poems inspired by his in late Alexandrian and Roman times. It speaks much both for Anacreon and for his public that Pausanias could write in the second century of our era: 'On the Athenian Acropolis there are statues of Pericles son of Xanthippus and of his father also who fought the Persians at Mycalé: near Xanthippus stands Anacreon of Teos, the first poet excepting Sappho of Lesbos to make his chief theme love; the statue represents him as one singing in his cups.' Alcaeus has been called the Greek Byron; Anacreon may more justly, though with many reservations, be called the Greek Burns.

In the Song-Book, or rather Song-Books, which have come down to us under the name of Theognis of Megara, we have probably the remains of a late sixth-century collection, added to in the fifth, of his own and some others' convivial poetry—taking this term to include all poetry suitable for singing or reciting at table. It is written entirely
in the Elegiac metre. Among much that is unattractive to
us, though never second-rate, there are some fine Love-
Poems. A Song-Book of slightly later date is the collection
known as Athenian Drinking-Songs preserved in whole or
part by Athenaeus. This, which contains songs written in
various metres, is the source, for us, of the famous Harmodius-
Song, and of the inimitable War-Song of Hybris the
Cretan, which has been translated once for all by Thomas
Campbell. The Drinking-Songs ascribed to the Seven Sages
and preserved by Diogenes Laertius may be as old as 500
b.c. Timocreon’s Song to Wealth is to be dated about 470.

Side by side with these poems of love, wine, and wisdom,
sung or recited, most of them, at table, the Greek genius
developed the ‘Inscription’, or to use its own word,
Epigram. This class, written almost entirely in Elegiac
metre, came to include not only Epitaphs, Labels—called
Dedications—for works of art and other votive offerings,
and inscriptions for wells, gardens, banks, or inns, but title-
poems for books, ‘posies’ or labels for gifts, invitations and
other letters to friends, drinking-songs, love-songs, and short
satirical poems. We have two or three Epigrams, in this
sense, rather doubtfully ascribed to Sappho, we have some
of Anacreon, many—some very lovely ones—of Simonides,
two of Bacchylides, one of Aeschylus. The Alexandrian and
later Ages have left us hundreds. The songs of Choral Lyric,
danced and sung by a number of performers together, are
mostly outside our present scope; but the reader will find
here a fine fragment of Lycophronides; and one or two
exquisite fragments of Sappho’s Epithalamies and Alcman’s
Maiden-Songs, and a few examples from Simonides, in-
cluding his incomparable Danaë—these to be recognised
as choral by the uneven length of the lines—are reserved
for a later volume.
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Of Greek Folk-Song—there is really no difference between folk-song and other poetry, save perhaps in its uses and the manner of its transmission, but the distinction is generally made—it is hoped to include one of the pretty Children’s Game-Songs, and the delightful Swallow-Song, which after two thousand years still survives in a modernised form in Thessaly. Of the fragments of the philosophers I have translated for a later volume Xenophon’s lines on Anthropomorphism and Scythnus’ on Time—both amazingly modern—and a cynical couplet of the dramatist-philosopher Epicharmus.

In the latter half of the fifth century before Christ the tradition of poetry-of-the-table was carried on by Ion of Chios, Dionysius Chalcus, Evênus, and Critias; love inspired the Lydè of Antimachus: but we possess nothing of theirs that is ‘universal’ enough in its appeal to be given here. A few fine epitaphs, however, of this age have been translated, and a little poem of the painter Parrhasius, which serves to remind us that poetry had now come to be written by others than poets. Among the poems of the next century, we possess of Plato, always a poet, at least one supremely beautiful epitaph, and several superb little Love-Poems, of which some, strangely enough, seem to have been written for Socrates. Two epitaphs on Plato—he died in 347—one of them by Speusippus his successor at the Academy, belong to this period. Some of the Anonymous poems, too, other than those preserved in ‘Theognis’ and the collections cited by Athenaeus and Diogenes Laertius, are as old as the Athenian Age or older.

Hitherto, with the exception of Theognis, of whom we possess medieval MSS., we have been mainly dependent for our matter on the citations made by prose-authors. Henceforward, save for the Bucolic Poets and the inscrip-
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and Alcaeus, and among those of Theocritus, at any rate, we have Love-Poems which, if archaistic in form, come none the less from the heart as well as the head. One of these is in hexameters, and this is the metre used by his imitators in the Pastoral, the sweet but sometimes too precious Sicilian Moschus, who flourished in the second century, and the wholly delightful Bion of Smyrna, who is to be placed about a hundred years before Christ.

But we have gone too fast. After Theocritus come Theodôridas, writer of the best of all the epitaphs on sailors; Dionysius (‘You with the roses’); Dioscorides, Theactêtos, and Alcaeus of Messênê; in the next century, Pamphilus, Capito (if he is to be identified with the epic poet of that name), and the gentle and humorous Antipater of Sidon; Glaucus of Nicopolis, Ariston (the lines to the mice), Tyrnnes (the pet bird’s epitaph), perhaps Menecrates; and, contemporary with Bion, Diodorûs of Sardis, called Zônas.

Of the remaining poets whose work is given here or reserved for a later volume, the first in time as in taste and feeling is Melêger of Gadara in Palestine. His work often has the new quasi-oriental flavour of Bion’s Lament for Adonis; yet if he is unrestrained it is only as a Greek. He lived near the beginning of the last century before Christ. His fellow-countryman the philosopher and amorous Philodêmus, the friend of Cicero, the same whose philosophical books have been partly preserved for us by the lava of Vesuvius, lived later in the same century. Among the lesser lights of that age are Statylius Flaccus, perhaps the friend of the younger Cato; Thyillus (‘Ariston the dancing-girl’); Isidôrus of Aegae; Tullius Laurea, of whom we have a graceful epitaph on Sappho; Adaeus of Macedon (The Old Ox); Apollonidas (Old Euphrô’s Prayer); and probably Gauradas (The Lover and Echo). To the times of Augustus

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and Tiberius belong Satyrus and Evênus (not to be confused with his earlier namesake); Lollius Bassus, Alpheius of Mytilene, and Antipater of Thessalonica; Antiphanes; Crinagoras, friend of the young Marcellus; the writer of at least one vivid sea-piece, Antiphilus; Biãnor, Automedon, and the genial Marcus Argentarius. Later in the first century of our era come Maecius and the satiric Nêarchus; Leonidas of Alexandria, who succeeds sometimes in spite of his misguided ingenuity; Lucilius, pensioner of Nero; Diotimus of Milêtos; and probably Gaetulicus.

Of the age of Plutarch, Lucian, and Marcus Aurelius—Gibbon’s ‘happy period’, 96–180—I have translated some pretty Love-Poems of Strato of Sardis, the compiler of the collection known as Musa Puerilis, Book xii in the Palatine Anthology; epigrams by two poets called Archias; a fine little poem by Ptolemy the Astronomer; and some notable verses of Lucian himself, including one perfect epitaph of a child. Here too should be placed, in all probability, the gay love-poet Ruffinus.

Two generations after Constantine and the state-recognition of Christianity in 324 come the still-Pagan lover-moralist Palladas, friend of the woman-philosopher who gives her name to Charles Kingsley’s novel Hypatia; and probably Aesôpus, the otherwise unknown author of a fine address to Life. The remains of both these poets suggest to us that they belonged to a tired world. Then there is another gap in our story till the sixth century and the revival of elegant verse under Justinian. The epigrams of the court-officials Paulus and Irênaeus; of Macedonius the Consul, Theodôrus the Proconsul, Julian Prefect of Egypt; of the advocates Arabius (author of The Palace-Garden), Leontius (The Lucky Cup), and probably Nêlus (The Laughing Satyr); of one Eratosthenes, and Mariânus the
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translator of Theocritus into iambics; were collected and edited with his own by the lawyer-historian Agathias. Some of these which remind us of our Elizabethans, particularly some of the sonnet-like love-poems of Macedonius, Paulus, and Agathias, deserve a higher epithet than 'elegant'. Indeed, with the exception of a few epitaphs, they show more real feeling than any short poem since Meléager’s. Whether the love-poems of these Byzantines have any connexion with the Italian origins of the Sonnet is a question which deserves to be investigated. The great movement of Greek books westward began in 1185.

‘Epigrams’ in the old language—as it now was—continued to be written in the ancient tradition for four centuries after Justinian. Cométas the Chartulary, the latest writer whose work I have translated, was contemporary with the last ‘ancient’ editor but one of the Anthology, Constantine Cephalas, who was Protopapas or chief-priest at the court of Constantine VII only a century and a half before our Norman Conquest. From 650 B.C., when our story begins, to A.D. 920, when it ends, is nearly sixteen hundred years.

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