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BY

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TO MY MOTHER

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PREFACE

THE English reader does not need to make a detailed study of the rules of versification in order to enjoy English poetry. He can recognise blank verse, or the sonnet, or the heroic couplet, when he meets it, and for the rest he can safely trust his ear to guide him. But with Greek poetry it is different. The Greek convention is foreign to him, and more elaborate than his own. He reads a piece of Aeschylean lyric, for example. Parts of it seem quite straightforward; they appeal to his instinct for rhythm and, although he might find it no easy matter to analyse them, he is satisfied. Other parts are not so simple—he succeeds, with difficulty, in getting some sort of rhythm out of them, but he is not at all sure that it is the right rhythm. And in other parts again he feels that he is altogether astray. This is a serious obstacle to his enjoyment of Greek poetry.

The first business of the student of Greek metre should be to remove this obstacle; and much has been done in this direction by German scholars—Wilamowitz, Schröder, and others—in the last quarter of a century. Discarding the arbitrary preconceptions of their predecessors and the Procrustean methods with which they contorted the facts to fit them, and relying on what is best and most authoritative in ancient tradition, these scholars succeeded in clearing away many difficulties and in illuminating much that was formerly obscure. Not only have they shown the modern reader how to distinguish the various types of Greek rhythm, but they have given him a general idea of the smaller elements—the phrases—without doing violence to his ear.

Much, however, still remains to be done. Granted that this passage is in one rhythm and that in another, that this phrase is Glyconic and that "iambo-choriambic," why, the reader may

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fairly ask, does one rhythm give place, within the compass of a single poem, or even of a single strophe, to another, why does iambo-choriambic follow Glyconic and yield in turn to choriambic, with such bewildering unexpectedness? Is there any rhyme or reason in it at all?

The first scholar to tackle this problem was the late Walter Headlam. He showed, in the first place, that these transitions are not arbitrary or abrupt; that, in the hands of the Greek poet, one rhythm grows out of another, naturally and beautifully, in accordance with a few rhythmical laws so simple that anyone with an ear for rhythm can understand them. And in the second place, not content with explaining *how* these transitions were effected, he went on to enquire *why*, and discovered that certain rhythms tended to be associated with certain ideas, thus laying the foundations for a theory of *significant* rhythm.

Unhappily, Headlam did not live to complete the work he had begun; and the only monument of his metrical discoveries that he has left behind him is his brief, but brilliant, article in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*[1]. Naturally, it was impossible for him to prove to others, within the compass of that article, that his principles stood the test of application to all the facts, though those who are familiar with Headlam's scholarship can have little doubt that he had proved it to himself. The primary object of this book is to show that they do stand this test, that not only do they remove obstacles from the path of the reader who wishes to read Greek lyric poetry with pleasure and discernment, but they bring to light new beauties which have hitherto lain unsuspected.

Therefore it is my application of Headlam's theory, rather than the theory itself, that is new. At the same time, it will be seen that I have developed his theory in certain important directions along lines indicated by him but not followed up. For the sake of completeness I have incorporated his work into my own, with acknowledgments where they are due, but

[1] *J.H.S.* vol. XXII (1902), pp. 209–27.

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the reader who is interested in the subject will find it helpful, I think, to study Headlam's article in conjunction with this book.

Further, I must mention my debt to Mr J. T. Sheppard, who taught me the right method of approach to the study of Greek poetical technique. Some of his work has been published, and to that I shall refer in the proper place, but most of it has been conveyed to me through the more intimate channels of college teaching, and for that no reference can be given, nor any adequate acknowledgment.

Lastly, I wish to thank Professor D. S. Robertson for correcting some mistakes and for several helpful suggestions.

GEORGE THOMSON

CAMBRIDGE, *January*, 1929

NOTE

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