

CHAPTER III

The Poet as Hero and Maker : A Reading in Early Greek Poetry

Echoing Waller in "A Presage of the Ruin of the Turkish Empire" and Shaftesbury in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* we can refer to Greece as the source of art and cultivated thought and being the most civilised and accomplished nation, then raised, whatever flourished, to the right degree of correctness and perfection. As a matter of fact, Greek poetry was nurtured under the welcome shade of political freedom and their art thrived under the laws of a free society. Poetry, being a serious public concern, easily became the cornerstone of education and civic life. It was a 'delightful' thing that was capable of 'enchantment'; it was not strictly utilitarian for divinity in the form of an inspiration by the gods or the Muses could not be overridden; it existed as an art, a craft, that required talent, training and long practice. So the concept of the Poet as a *teacher*, as an *enchanter*, as a *divinely inspired* individual and as *craftsman* come through quite clearly.

Since the nature of poetry has varied through the development of Greek civilisation, different concepts of the poet have also surfaced. However, before we come to deal with the concept of the poet in early Greece we may note some of the characteristics of the Greek mind such as their love of beauty, humanism, directness, and freedom.

In spite of their love of beauty, the Greeks were not aesthetes; they were more interested in life than in art. The Greek sense of beauty was all pervasive and *kalon* denoted both beauty and goodness. It was with Aristotle that the word *agathos* came to be picked up for moral virtue but it never had the currency that *kalon* enjoyed. When we speak of Hellenism we should bear in mind that the Greeks extended their concept of *kalon* to morals. Beauty was given a much wider scope. When we speak of good, the Greeks were ready to say beautiful; when we speak of evil they were ready to say ugly. It was beautiful to a Greek if a man died for his country or if the Government was

excellent. Victory, temperance, eloquence, punishment of vice, wisdom were not merely good, they were beautiful.

Another feature of the Greek mind had been its unclouded clearness. The Greeks on the whole looked straight at life and saw it as it was. Much of Greek humanism was born of this life-vision. The term *man* was not interpreted in a materialistic way; it did not denote a spiritual entity either. The spiritual slant in the interpretation emerged with Plato and he was an exception to the general run of the Greek mind. By 'man', the Greeks meant the creature under the natural circumstances and with the most obvious attributes, passing from childhood to manhood to old age (with his home and the city, its main events, birth, marriage, death, its chief evils, sickness, poverty, exile, health, wealth, success, honour, warm affections and friendship). The Greek took man with his instinct, impulses, faculties and with no preconceptions in regard to the invisible. It is the human standpoint towards life and this precisely is Greek humanism. And no one better than Protagoras summed up the Greek attitude when he said that man is the measure of all things. Even when the Greek made gods, he humanised them. The dualism that we come across in St. Paul and Blaise Pascal is not to be met with in the pre Platonic Greece. It has often been said that Hellenism dispenses with the need for a deity, a future life and a purely spiritual world. But to the Christian the world is not an adequate theatre. Also St. Augustine's criticism of the Greek view of life is based upon his Platonism. And Plato we know in many things falls away from the Greek ideal of earthiness.

Bassett's perceptive brilliance concretises his concept of the poet as one 'who gives to material at his disposal a particular, individual quality and existence. The "maker" is the formal cause of what he makes. He brings an entity into being by imparting life to inert matter – if what he "makes" is capable of life. In the world of beautiful thought and its expression in words the "poet" is what the Creator was to the author of the first chapter of *Genesis* – the illustration is apposite, since both this author and Homer belong to an early era of thought. The Creator gave life and particular qualities to existing matter and brought our world into existence. The aim of the early poet in thus creating is also illustrated by the Hebrew account of Creation. . . . The only reason for the creative effort of the early "poet", as poet, was the joy in the making, which, because of his humanity

or for some other reason, he shared with his audience. There is strong evidence that Homer had no other purpose than this – a fact which, if established, gives to our oldest literary document the added value of being poetry in its pure state.’ (1938:8-9) According to tradition, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed by the wayfaring singer named Homer. Homer’s name is used collectively for all epic poets just as the name of Vyasa is used as the author of the *Mahabharata*. Homer was more of a singer than a poet in the modern sense of the term – a singer with the gift of ‘invention’, the invention of the myth centering around his epic. Also the singer is said to be knowledgeable. Odysseus is said to be skilful in telling tales but is also said to be knowledgeable as a singer (11,368). The singer considered himself superior to his employers in education and manners. As the singer moved from place to place standing before many strangers’ door, he is said to have learnt the minds of many men (*Odyssey*, 1,3). The wayfaring singers felt themselves to be the inspectors of many people they came to know. The word ‘bard’ or ‘singer’ occurs only once in the *Iliad* (11.24.720) but representations of bard appear variously in *Odyssey*. Words of praise for the bard come from Odysseus and the bard sings ‘all too according to the order of things’, *ien kata kosmon*. The poet is the man who has the ability to provide precise representations of reality. Also the poet knows *thelkteria*, ‘enchancing things’. The Sirens who stood for the bard can boast of the requisite ‘enchantment’. Their listeners were enraptured.

So he spoke but they all remained quiet, in silence
they were held in a spell through the dark hall. (Goldhill 1991:65)

A silence descends on the Phaeacians as they listen to the song of the Sirens. Also in book 13 when Odysseus finishes his lengthy tale in the palace of Alcinous, an enchanting silence settles over the audience. The speaker is eulogised on his grace as a word-weaver, having the genius and the craft of the singer; here hearing him is ‘as soothingly remarkable as drinking the good wine of the patron. This is an obvious pointer to the skill of the master Poet who has his listeners under his spell and charms them into being partakers of the life which his imagination has created. Goldhill, quite

introspectively, cites another instance. Eumaeus describes the stranger to Penelope in the following way.

Such things he tells, he would enchant [*thelgein*] your very heart . . .

As when a man looks at a bard, who has learnt from
the god to sing words pleasing to mortals
and they violently desire to hear him, when he sings.

So that man sitting in the hall kept enchanting (*thelgein*) me.

(Goldhill 1991:66)

Here the linguistic panache of Odysseus draws parallel with the power of language of the Poet that leaves all spellbound. Thus, the hero becomes the Poet. The compelling power of the poet's speech has an obvious Vedic analogy. In the *Rig Veda* speech becomes identified with the creator. 'I am the one who blows like the wind, embracing all creatures.' (O'Flaherty 1994:63) In fact the love of speech is lavished on the poet – 'whom I love I make awesome I make him a sage, a wise man, a Brahmin'.(ibid) The point to be noted is that the power of language grows in the hands of the Poet. Again, the art of the singer consisted in the recitation of the wars and the heroes of the past. The theme of the recitation was announced by praying to the Muse to sing of it (*Iliad*, 2,484). What the Homeric singer aimed at was to arouse the feelings of fear and pity through imagined participation in the tragic events – fear more prominently in the *Iliad* and pity in the *Odyssey*. The tradition of the Homeric singer was fluid because of the absence of a fixed text. The singer usually sang an unwritten, bookless epic and fashioned his chant anew. A passage in the *Odyssey* (22,347) speaks of the art of learning the songs. Here, the singer Phemius, boasts that he is self-taught and that god has implanted songs of all sorts in his spirit. He is *autodidaktos* who sings for gods and men. This is significant for it contains the point about creativity. Phemius points out that the songs that he sings are not repetition of the songs that he has learnt or heard but are *produced* by himself. The word *autodidaktos* testifies to the notion of creativity or the inventive power. However, self-teaching does not obviate the divine aid. By considering the source of his inspiration as mysterious, Phemius further implicitly admits the

transcendent presence and the creative force embodied in the mythic Muse. He sings a very 'new' song – the artistic form of the epic chant – which is the poetic creation. In the *Iliad* (2,485) we are told that the Muses were the original poets who experienced the epic events as eye-witnesses and transmitted such knowledge to later men. The point is that, poetry is a sort of knowledge, and that the poet, when he is blessed by the Muses, comes to have a sort of privileged access to knowledge. This is where the question of divine inspiration emerges. Borrowing from Democritus, Plato points out that, just as iron filings become magnetised through the power of the magnet, so the poet is inspired through the divine power. (But it may be noted that this inspiration is not the Cicerian frenzy in *On the Orator* or in *On the Nature of Gods*; the greatness of the Poet in the aesthetics of early Greek poetry cannot be wholly attributed to a divine *afflatus* or *instinctus* or *concitatio*). However, Homer tells us no less than six times that Demodocus's skill has a divine origin. In fact, the poet is the voice and the vehicle of ancient wisdom without the Dionysiac frenzy that Plato associates with poetry. There is some muscle in the claim that the chief concern of the Homeric bard is pragmatics and not poetics; but it is difficult to accept that Muses are merely repositories of social memory. In the inspiration and the song, the notes of creativity are simply obvious. Pope eloquently acknowledges Homer's creative imagination when he writes:

It is to the strength of this amazing Invention we are to attribute that unequal'd *Fire* and *Rapture*, which is so forcible in Homer, that no Man of a true Poetical Spirit is Master of himself while he reads him ... How fertile will that Imagination appear, which was able to cloath all the Properties of Elements, the Qualifications of the Mind, the Virtues and Vices, in Forms and Persons; and to introduce them into Actions agreeable to the Nature of the Things they shadow'd? (Mack 1967: vii) (the italics are mine)

It is from Homer we arrive at a concept which clearly demonstrates the Poet as a man, possessed with a divine vision (*darshana*) and powers of description (*varnana*), who

like the creator in *Genesis*, breathes life into the image which he had made. Such a concept of the Poet as the divine singer occurs in the *Rig Veda* where Brihaspati, essentially a man, is deified on account of his superior talents and achievements. As a matter of fact in the *Rig Veda* (X 91.3) God is depicted as a poet.

Most skilful with Thy powers, most wise with wisdom,
O God, Thou art a Poet knowing all with thy poetic wisdom.
Master of good things, Thou, the One, art the Lord
Of what the heaven and the earth produce. (Bose 1960:119)

Indeed Wisdom and Art work simultaneously to produce the inspired song. The poet of the *Iliad* is enabled by the benison of the Muses to know not only what the gods did, but also how they did it. The Poet does not merely sense it, he knows it. There are occasions when a god's voice speaks to a mortal *through* the poet. The higher power is revealed through more than the human range of the words. (This reminds us of what Heidegger points out in *Qu'est-ce-que la Metaphysique* where the poet is the mediator between the gods and the humans – 'In-between' (*Zwischen*). The poet shows the openness (*offene*) in this 'In-between' between the divine and the human. Furthermore, the poet is the shepherd of 'language' as much of the being of truth. Sherfan 1997:243) Both the Vedic and Greek poet have the *unobstructed* view. The epic singer is convinced that a god is present at the crisis of our lives, if he chooses to be. Importantly, it is to the poet alone that the god is visible – 'May my song be pleasing to the house of Zeus'. (Frankel 1975:164) The epic which perpetuated the glory of the heroes, shows them as they actually were in the poet's eyes. The poet sees life steadily and sees it whole. With his imagination and preternatural vision, he is like one of Plato's souls that hastens back to earth after a thousand years amidst the indescribable sights and experiences of heaven. Homer's poetry is endowed with the quality to reveal new beauties and enlarge the dimensions of the human spirit. One can, thus, obviously identify the contours of the

'true' poet who reads between the cold dark lines of the world, exhibiting the sublimity of life.

With Hesoid we come to an altogether different world away from the world of heroes. The narrative of the *Iliad* ignores the existence of the ordinary people. Hesoid, by contrast, in *Works and Days* pictures the daily life of people. Hesoid tells us that the Muses have instructed him to sing his song. He is a self-conscious poet who knows about his power, which permits him to ignore the narrow limitations of direct physical experience. He has never been to the sea but he can have the knowledge of seafaring through the Muses (this supports our thesis about an 'external aid' as expounded earlier). The *Theogony* opens with a song of praise to the Muses. The poem begins with a long invocation to the Muses (1-115), in the nature of a 'Homeric' hymn, celebrating their power as well as their piety in singing of the generations of the gods. It is they who once taught Hesoid beautiful song as he tended his sheep under holy Helicon (22-3) and 'they gave me a staff, plucking a fine branch of flourishing bay, and breathed in me a divine voice, so that I might sing of what was to come and what had been. And they commanded me to hymn the race of the blessed immortals and always to sing to themselves first and last' (Easterling & Knox 1989:54). By accepting Hesoid's view that the Muses are skilful in speaking and that they give him a resounding speech, two points can be brought into focus: (a) Language of poetry as a departure from ordinary speech, and (b) the concept of the poetic genius or *pratibha*. There are profound ontological speculations embodied in Hesoid's verse and it is possible to deduce what he himself thought of the art he practised. Hesoid states it categorically that the Muses released him from the lowly animal existence and blessed him. Indeed the power of the poet and that of the king are of the same kind and origin. By the side of the kingly function, which comes from Zeus, stands the singer's function emanating from Apollo and the Muses. Both are distinguished by the gift of attractive and persuasive speech. The Vedas speak of the poet as *vakpati*, the lord of speech. The Greeks, too, attested his extraordinariness in this regard. Another dimension of Hesoid is his keen awareness of the moral corruption of man. In both the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* one comes across a picture of the decay of human morality and the poet's belief in the divine justice. The *Works and Days* appears to suggest that meaning and dignity could be

achieved by the simple life of a peasant when the nobility of the state has suffered decadence. The decay of human morality fails to jolt the poet's faith in the divine justice. Zeus remains the all-mighty refuge of justice:

Zeus who dwells with lightning and has his mansion over the world. Hear me, Zeus, see me, and hearken; let righteousness dwell in thy judgement, mine let it be to declare thy truth and wisdom. (Frankel 1975: 114)

What is significant is that the poet sets himself as the spokesman of truth. Hesoid's realism does not forsake myth altogether. He dichotomises power between *aidos* and *nemesis*. The two concepts describe the feeling for moral values and for the sanctity of justice and these concepts bear corresponding symbolism in the hawk and the nightingale. The nightingale, whose name means the songstress, represents the poet. The poet's function is to declare the blessedness of justice called *dike*.

Coming down the ages we find that Theognis, also, flags off his composition with a prayer and a short hymn of praise to Apollo. Ibycus, it may be noted, in his art would always please god than men in his art. He would choose not to blaspheme god for the sake of artistic effect [Cf. Pindar, *Olympian*, I, 35ff & fragment 81] which can be attributed to the divine favour bestowed on the poet. Even the goddess Aphrodite favours the Poet with a life that is luxuriously open to the sacred power of a grand passion). Whatever is said to have beauty is loved for being beautiful for it implied physical and moral beauty together. This love for the beautiful and an affixation on noble deeds set the tone of his whole work. He professes, truly enough, to enshrine the lessons of life in his verses for he believes in disbursing knowledge when one is the friend of the Muse – inventing, composing and imparting in his own style. Perhaps here lies a pointer to the concepts of *sophia* and *aretai*.

As the precursor of the sophistic enlightenment, Simonides is remarkable for his skill in art and the profundity in his wise perception. Like Xenophanes and Archilochus,

he breaks with the tradition and walking out of the conventional elucidation of words like *agathos*, *kakos*, *aischros* ('goodly', 'mean', 'shameful') emphasises with prophetic insight the uniqueness of intention, justice and laws of society. These perpetuate the glory of the city and the philosophic wisdom that acknowledges the limitations of humanity. Endowed with the power of pathos that is proverbial, Simonides works with a remarkable fluency and rhythm that has Dionysius in a state of admiration. His ability to delineate the fundamental human predicament with rhythmic unity and fluidity speaks of his poetic acumen. In this regard Mimnermus is not to be left behind. Simonides knows the just exercise of his poetic spirit to clothe an emotion, which would otherwise have suffered from cold neglect. He exhibits the poet's 'ability' to feel the sympathy, putting his finger on the right tissue of human suffering. He concretises a given human situation with a vitalising power cloaked in the lustre of a language that seldom divorces it from its natural spontaneity. Dionysius praised his choice of words and his accuracy in combining them, and the ancient critics spoke eloquently about his sweetness and elegance. (It may be noted here that in terms of stateliness, power, and sweetness of diction, Ibycus also heralds his extraordinariness. He has exhibited the strength of the real artist). A mere attention to the smoothness of diction in most of the verses should not coax us to gloss over the inherent wisdom that points to the various truths of human life. Moreover, there is an implicit reference to an artistic consciousness that understands the extraordinariness of 'craft' which is the supreme prerogative of the poet. Under a confused glow of a disintegrating tradition, Simonides works fiercely with typical Ionian clarity and the 'adhesiveness' of a poet's mind that comprehends the bizarrerie of circumstances to infuse a warmth – a warmth that is embosomed in a new feeling for man and his growth in and with nature. With his sapience and prescience, Simonides has led mankind to a zone of greater calm and confidence. The subtlety of his mind has worked on the logic of polarised thought and by introducing an opposition between the absolute and the relative, he has brought man to bear the pangs of his mortal limitations. He infuses an understanding that analyses man's relation to his circumstances with greater prudence and insight and redresses the illusion of perfection that hangs over man, underscoring the reality to supplicate before an inevitable force i.e. the Law. He removes the logs from our eyes and makes us

perceive the principles that honour acceptability and sensibility in life. He emanates as the prophet with a radiant creative power that becalms a besotted herd. This is an interesting angle in the formation of the concept of the poet. His poetry was not a mere adornment of life but bore the *charis* and *sophia*, imbrued as it invariably was, with a consciousness that delights and educates. He is the subtle bee (*Fragment*, 593) who never chooses the luxuriously aromatic garden to suck the honey but weaves his way through the thicket and thyme to sip the ambrosia of poetry. This is the Poet's subtlety – the subtlety of his 'craft'.

With Sappho one comes closer to our concept of the poet as the 'feeling' self who can wrest a song from the sorrow and turn her joys into a melody. It was in Sappho's nature to react passionately and get driven to extremity in crisis. She appears to us as a distant star that shines steadily. She is graced by the Muses and combines a melody that is true to the nature of a true poet. Her feminine nature knows only devotion to grace, the pain of spiritual passion and perceptive intelligence. In her poetry the topical is allied with the eternal in perfect balance. Such reconciliation without struggle is little short of a miracle. In fact such balance and genius find their strong feet in Pindar. Unlike Bacchylides, his art is never lucid without being abstruse or orotund. It has the stamp of the brilliant mind of the poet working at his masterly best. *Theognidea* may have maxims but it requires the poet's art to survive. Pindar wields language with a sublime power, couching his soaring thoughts deftly, demonstrating in the process his inward strength and stability. The realm of his poetry paves enchantingly the roads that lead one to the 'inner resources' and leaves all exit doors closed. It is a self contained universe manifesting the power of Parmenides or Heraclitus with the radiance of the inner power that calibrates the emotion and acts of the heroes and the gods and untangles the intricate nature of men.

A man may be 'twixt ape and Plato

Tis the man who with a bird,

Wren or eagle, finds his way to

All its instincts; - he hath heard

The Lion's roaring, and can tell
What his horny throat expresseth;
And to him the Tiger's tell
Comes articulate, and presseth
On his ear like mother-tongue;

(Keats, "Fragment: 'where is the Poet? Show him! Show him!'" 7-15)

Perhaps, it approximates the Heraclitean philosophy of life that underscores the advance from disorder to order and from the superficiality of the common run of thought to the penetrating insight of the 'few'. It is within the power of the poet to establish a link between values and their manifestations in life. The poet engineers a relationship between the pregnant past and the prospective present and the cross-relations declare a 'power' that leads one to a higher governing reality. Pindar's art profoundly professes poetry as the universal medium. His choral songs weld music and words, exhibiting the profundity of the wholeness. He has the *architectonice*, the interpreting eye and a divine inspiration that lift him high with the spirit that is strong and sublime. The extraordinary intensity of the poetic spirit surfaces in the victory odes and Pindar lays great faith in the principle that achievements have a thirst for song and 'song' bears the implicit premium on the art that weaves the words into a sustaining melody. Obviously it is the poet's art – his gracious gift of the musical art. Alcman, in one of his lyrics says,

I know the tunes of all the birds.

Alcman invented words and tune by which he put into words of melody the voice of the kakkabis bird. (Frankel 1975:162)

In the context of Alcman's choral lyrics we notice that the poet functions as the catalyst to creativity. In Pindar's *Nemean* 5,1 there is a meaningful conflation between the art of the poet and the statuary. Perhaps the emphasis is on the difficulty of the poet's art,

which sounds the upper echelons of creation. And to substantiate the claim that the poet's mind secures the immortality of the fruits of *aretea*, Pindar (*Pythiam*, 6,5-14) hails the 'treasury of songs' that provides a more formidable ring of protection than the treasury of the Delphic would have for statues of victors. It is the Muses' gift of a draught of nectar; it is the exquisite fruit of the poet's soul. In the fifth triad of the first *Pythian* ode, Pindar emboldens his language on the anvil of truth as often he has done in his other odes. He admits the function of the poet as being the voice and conscience of the community, in accordance with the right emphasis on correct judgement. Being apothegmatic – harping on the need to be righteous, truthful and liberal – he transpires wisdom; indeed the treasury of songs that we have seen as being the soulful and artful effusions of the poet, creates the luminous sanctuary of immortality. This has obvious Vedic connection in that Dirghatamas, one of the most important of the poet-philosophers of *Rig-Veda*, points at the holy nexus between access to truth and immortality. Pindar emphasises the immortality conferred by poetry and the image of Apollo's golden lyre (significantly contrasted with the music of Dionysus) that bespeaks a soothing harmony. This 'harmony' pacifies all the wild forces of the divine world, reemphasising thereby the poet's power. In fact the profundity of Homeric and Pindaric creations invariably point to *pratibha*. It is non-*jati*.

Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
 And precipices show untrodden green,
 There is a budding morrow in midnight,
 There is a triple *sight in blindness* keen;

(Keats, "To Homer" 9-12) (italics mine)

It is the power of the mind that makes Homer or Pindar see the subject of their poems as steeped in beauty, rendering, in the process, in apt language, a picture of beauty that they have seen. The concept of the poet combines *smrti* or recollection, *mati* or farsightedness, *buddhi* or intellect and *prajna* or intuition (poetic imagination). For

Homer many a time it is a yogin's yogic perception. They have the creative talent or *Karayitri Pratibha*; it is *sahaja* or inborn.

The Greeks, indeed, have created a new world of poetry (*nirmiti*). With due regard to Mammata (*kavyaprakasa*), the poets with Homer in particular have exhibited the nine Rasas (love, humour, pathos, terrible, heroic, fearful, repugnant, wonderous and peaceful). Rajasekhara in *Kavyamimamsa* admits of the three types of poets of which we can attribute the Greek poets to belong to two categories namely the *sarasvata-kavi* and the *abhyasika-kavi*. Also Ksemendra speaks of two factors that go to the making of a poet viz. (a) divine favour and (b) human effort (*kavikanthabharana*). Indeed if Homer, Hesoid and Pindar belong to the first category, Simonides, Theognis, Bacchylides, Alcman, Ibcus, Mimnermus, Anacreon and the rest, partaking in part from the first division, belong primarily to the second category. However, the discussion cannot end without a brief reference to Plato, a born poet and lover of poetry, who disclaimed it for the higher truth of philosophy. Since the time of Solon and Xenophanes the poet has faced the charge of being a liar. In the corpus of Plato's *Dialogues* there are tributes to the vocation of the poet which are no less striking than the picture of the poet as the dealer of half-truth that we have in the *Republic*. The poet is gripped by *enthousiasmos* that makes him a victim of a 'frenzy' that is beyond his control. Despite his tirade and banishment of the poets there is a wistful admission of the lingering attractiveness of poetry in the *Republic*. Outwardly he bore an attitude of an obscurantist trying to muzzle the poetic impulse; inwardly, he emphasised on *techne* or the artful representation of men and actions without the obliteration of a communication from the soul. For Plato, poetry can be intensely personal and perilous. However, for the early Greek poets it was exquisite and uninhibited.