

"THE TRAGI-PHILOSOPHY OF THE GREEK LITERATI"

For first hand acquaintance with the life, spirit and thought of any momentous age, we naturally turn to its surviving literature. Greek literature begins with the Homeric epic, and because we know nothing of their antecedents, the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" seem to us nothing short of a miracle. Obviously, however, they could not be but the culmination of a centuries long poetic tradition and presupposes some critical thinking and literary techniques. The Homeric epic was an all influential accompaniment for all education, as far as Greece in the Classical age was concerned. The Greeks of the fifth century and earlier were brought up on Homer, whose influence was all pervasive in the development of Greek literature and, indeed, in their whole attitude to life. The Homeric heroes were the heroes of every schoolboy, centuries before Alexander the Great imagined himself a Second Achilles and slept with the "Iliad" under his pillow. The Greeks were fortunate enough that their first introduction to ethics, religion, literature and a Weltanschauung was by way of poetry universally acclaimed as supreme. In a society where poetry holds a vital place and where education largely consists of poetry and music, the poet becomes a teacher and is largely responsible for the effect his work has on the social, moral and philosophical viewpoint that people develop. Hence the Greeks felt that the poets were the teachers of men, and it was very natural that criticism of poetry should begin as moral criticism, that when men's ideas of the gods became more sophisticated the Homeric divinity should be the first to draw the critics fire. Thus began what Plato was to call "the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy."

When we turn away from Homer we find that apart from the two major historical works of Herodotus and Thucydides, by far the greatest bulk and incomparably the greatest in range and power, is the work of the three tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and the Comedian

Aristophanes. The lyric poetry of Greece belongs mainly to the Seventh and sixth centuries B.C., that of the fifth century being traditional rather than contemporary or progressive in spirit; while the full flowering of prose in oratory and philosophy is not to be seen until the fourth century. Greek tragedy touched the deepest centres of man's individual and corporate consciousness and hence could be taken as the plain mirror of man's philosophical "Weltanschauung." At the roots of the origin of "tragic drama" lies, not only human instinct for narrative and impersonation, but also the instinct for the ritualistic expression and interpretation of the power of natural forces, the cycle of life and death, and the nexus of past, present and future. The prime function of Greek tragedy seems to be the expression of the feelings and reasonings excited by man's battles with the eternal forces that appear to govern his life in Sophoclean words "the encounters of man with more than man." The tragedy, whatever its subject, is "our" tragedy. We, like the chorus in a drama, are both the players and spectators of it. And while the tragedy is played out we identify ourselves now with this character and now with that—inconsistent, vacillating mortals that we are. But the tragedy is not fully played out, the story not fully told, until we have looked the whole matter squarely in the face and commented on it truthfully, impartially, without passion, bias or self-deception—implying thereby that we have "lived" that tragedy and that it is philosophically ours.

Homer's "Odyssey" with its happy ending, presents the romantic view of life; the "Iliad" is a tragedy. To paint the beautiful and just Odyssean picture, as it were, Homer took his easel to the lower slopes of Mount Olympus, which are pleasant, green and wooded. But to compose the "Iliad" he moved higher up the mountain side nearer to the eternal snows and where storms hit the hardest, and rend and mar; but they strengthen, they build and they may bring forth serene, changeless beauty—and that is the "real" life. From the mountain top Homer had a different and clearer view of the same landscape of life. Some of the mists had dissolved, the sun "beat pitilessly" on the snow, (thereby, preserving *camus*' "absurd"

by direct confrontation with the "snows" of life rather than eluding it and committing a philosophical suicide) and many things came into sight some of them "terrible and lovely", (thus stressing the existentialist ambivalence of and the theological polarity of Kierkegaard's doctrine of God as the "absolute paradox before whom fear is also love"). With all this realistic view point, Homer himself became even more human. He had climbed high ; he had faced and solved some of the ultimate enigmas.

It is worthwhile to note that Homer's character drawing is marked by a realism, subtlety and modernity. By "modernity" is meant that to Homer his characters were contemporary and true ; they were not drawn from legendary past. Homer's characters owe their creation to his (Homer's) own "experiences of life". One could not help thinking that human nature has not materially changed in the three thousand years since Homer wrote. For, like Shakespeare, he had such piercing vision into all human nature that we could not but accept him as a confidant and friend of men of every era. In other words, Homer is depicting "us" in somewhat different circumstances.

All this shows what a realist Homer is. But the reality that he sees has for his eye a certain transparence, through which he sees and records the ideal or higher reality. Homer's view seems to be like that of Zeus (in "Iliad") who when, sitting on Mount Ida and wearied of watching the unending battle, turns "his shining eyes into the distance," and surveys "the Abii, the most law-abiding folk on earth." By this is not meant that Homer even when he calls a villain "great hearted" is indulging himself in illusion or wishful thinking, but that he is seeing reality at two levels. It is as though he had anticipated Plato's Theory of Ideas according to which all earthly things are the imperfect and transitory copies of ideal Forms that have a permanent existence in Heaven. We could even fancy that Homer, more privileged than Plato, actually saw these Forms and even, on one occasion, brought them down to earth. For it is this that he did when he gave immortal horses to Achilles in his "Iliad."

When Aeschylus said that his tragedies were "slices from the great banquet of Homer", he probably was expressing his indebtedness to Homer—and that debt was indeed considerable, for Homer had shown how to dramatize a story. About three fifths of the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" are in direct speech and large sections of it could be put directly on stage with practically no change; Homer has deservedly been called the "master of tragedy". The three great tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were aware of the fact that tragedy united within itself the two chief genres of poetry, which Greece had so far developed, the dramatic epic and the lyric. And consequently, under the Homeric influence, they set about characterizing, with greater depth and increasing realism, the realities and philosophies of life. But each of these three tragedians reflected a different climate of thought and feeling not only because the Athenian society was changing rapidly but also because of the differences in the ages of each, in spite of being contemporaries. Euripides was only fifteen years younger than Sophocles and died first, but he obviously represents a later climate of thought. Aeschylus reflects the earlier years of the century when the growth of culture was making new and insistent demands upon the old religion; he expresses the new responsibilities which came with freedom from fear of the Persians; Sophocles was thirty years younger and lived his middle life in the great period of expansion and optimism of the Periclean age—"many are the marvels of the world but none more marvelous than man"; Euripides represents the generation of the Sophists, the new thoughts, the new scepticism, the new psychology and humanism.

Euripides coined a new conception of tragedy—for him the central figure or the tragic hero is not an individual but "humanity" itself. This philosophy of the "humanity-at-the-gallows" assumed that the wrong doers and wronged alike are victims of cosmic forces—revenge, lust for power, sexual desire, the ecstasy of wild nature, pride and yet again revenge. This view of life Euripides developed through the long progress of war, with its ordained devastation, crimes and heroism. In some of his plays it is evident that the main character-interest in no case centres round the

person whose name gives the title to the play. What is studied is the impact of suffering not so much on an individual as on a group. The philosophy of life that guides the art of Euripides asserts that happiness and suffering alike are inseparable; that their impact on the group is more significant than their impact on the individual, and the true "tragic hero" is humanity, that evil, by the time its activity has gained any noticeable power, is already outside human control, is something impersonal, something at the same time sub-human and super-human; in fact, something like one of the Olympian gods. But none of the characters are in fact the agent and victim of guilt and innocence. It is the inevitable working of Fate and the impersonal power of the cosmic forces represented by Aphrodite that brings the comprehensive disaster to a closely linked group. Euripides' outlook is admittedly pessimistic. It is right to pursue goodness, tolerance and kindness but the universe is not on the side of goodness. It is not on any side at all; but hostility to human endeavour is its most noticeable feature.

Euripides and Socrates were the two great questioners of their age; they both subscribed passionately to the view that the reality of the world is spiritual and that the integrity of the soul was the most prized valuable. Euripides, however, differed from Socrates in valuing human beings, even when they were not intelligent. Both men were dedicated to the work of probing common beliefs, of exhibiting praised examples in hard unflattering light, and of persuading men to look not to Olympus but within themselves, for both knowledge and the virtue to use it. Euripides, like Thomas Hardy displays a pessimism that seems to echo that the universe is not on the side of goodness and that whatever cosmic forces may exist are at best neutral, often capriciously cruel. And both of them believe that the highest genius lies in suffering rather than in action—a heroic perception which asserts that the beauty of pain nobly borne outweighs the deformity of a soulless world. For those at least who believe that Hardy, as a poetic and philosophic commentator on human life, is among the rare immortals of modern times, these comparisons may prove a help in the discovery of the profundity and the humanity of Euripides.

When we come to Virgil (70-19 B.C) we find in him a striking resemblance to Plato's theory of Ideas. Virgil had no doubt that the affairs of the earthly world are subject to the powers of another world which is normally, but by no means always, invisible, but no less real for that. He strongly depicted this viewpoint in his poems and showed how human affairs are the imperfect controlled by the corresponding perfect types of the other world. But Virgil never attempts, like Plato, to condemn the poet, who depicts the imperfect, unreal types of this world. Plato is concerned to prove the inferiority of the poet to the philosopher who has knowledge of the Forms whereas the poet does not even have knowledge of the particulars which are themselves but imitations of the forms. Plato maintained the separate relative identity of his actual and ideal world—he failed to see that a better solution could be secured in expressing the two in mutual affinity. Unlike Plato, "it was ever Virgil's way to merge the actual in the ideal and so to make its reality shine more, brightly."

Virgil's philosophical ideas are drawn, in part, from different earlier writers. Reminiscences of Homer can be noticed all through Virgil's "Aeneid" Lucretius was a very strong influence, because Virgil knew many hundreds of his phrases and let them suggest ideas. But since he violently disagreed with the materialistic philosophy of Lucretius, he could not adopt his thought. Indeed, he apparently delighted in turning it upside down, and expressing something far more like the idealistic philosophy of Plato even when the phrases of Lucretius were influencing him.

The history of Virgil's fame, his thoughts, both philosophical and literary, leaves us wondering how people found time to attend to anything else. He, "the chastest and royalet poet" as Dryden called him, deserves admiration and thanks. It is hard to avoid a certain awe in his presence. In fact, we could as well fancy that about all Greek literati—their works are to be accepted as they are and not to be dissected and analysed for the microscopic eyes. There is a good story of a sightseer in one of the famous galleries who remarked to the attendant: "I don't know why people make

such a fuss about these pictures. I can't see anything in them." To which the attendant made the sublime reply: "Excuse me, Sir, the pictures are not on trial." Perhaps we could say the same thing about the "pictures" of our Greek literati.

