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Early Greek Lyric Poetry: The Cry of the Self

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Early Greek Lyric Poetry: The Cry of the Self

It was the ancient Greeks who in lyric poetry were the first really to discover what we know today and take for granted as the "self." It is difficult for us now to imagine how that discovery must have felt like a great revelation.

In general, the self as we know it is what the OED says, "a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness." The word itself was not established until 1674, emerging from the literature of theology and philosophy.

The Greek consciousness of each person's self came about in the early 6th century B.C., the time of the earliest recorded Greek lyric poets Archilochus and Sappho - long after Homer in the 7th century B.C. Significantly, the lyric poets' time saw the emergence of the Greek polis or city-state; significant because in the polis, the individual (only male) citizens lived under the same law, were in close contact with one another, and had a vivid sense of sharing/possessing in common certain values, thoughts, feelings. That time was also the period of the shift from oral to literate culture.

The Greek sense of self was of the body as one with the soul: the soul as an extension of the body into an inner or spiritual dimension such that the philosopher Heraclitus (between 540-480 B.C.) could say, "You cannot find the ends of the soul though you traveled every way, so deep is its logos." By Heraclitus's time, which was after Archilochus and Sappho, the word "psyche" was already established as the soul inhabiting the living human body but not associated with any of its physical organs.

The Greek discovery of each person's integral self or soul came about first through the early lyric poets' discovery of the body. From the early 6th century B.C. - Sappho's time - Greek athletes performed in public in the nude. The Greeks saw in the beauty of the human body, male and female, a reflection of the divine. They celebrated the body, their pride and confidence in the body, because they had a sense that spirit and body were one. Since they had no comforting illusion about the afterlife - they thought of the dead as shades in Hades without physical vitality - the Greeks like few others celebrated the physical world, the body, and the present. (This Greek sense of the wholeness or oneness of spirit and body was broken in the Western Christian and Cartesian tradition which split body and soul into polar opposites. The Renaissance in the 16th century involved the rebirth of the ancient Greek consciousness of the integral self, body and soul, two thousand years earlier.)

Homer and his time had no sense of the self as the Greek lyric poets apprehended it through the body's experience of intense emotions like love and desire. In fact, Eros - never mentioned in Homer - was a discovery of the lyric poets. Love or desire was perceived not so much as emotion as an event provoked by the gods (Aphrodite, for one, in Sappho); and that godly provocation was associated with invasion of the body and a

painful, discomfiting loss of control over one's condition. The lover learns as he loses control or self-mastery to value the bounded entity of himself: his wholeness as self, body and soul.

Homer, as we said, had no sense of that wholeness. The body had still to be discovered. Homer had no words for the body as the locus of intense emotional or spiritual turmoil. During his time, the body was seen not as a unit but as an assemblage of various independent organs. The Greek word "soma" (which later denoted the living body) was in Homer the "corpse." He used other words to denote the living human body (all from an external standpoint): "demas" which means "in shape" or "in structure" (which applied in contexts where something was large or small, or in pointing out a resemblance to someone); frequently, he used the Greek word for "limbs" by which he meant "the limbs as moved by the joints" or "the limbs in their muscular strength" (apparently, Homer locates the secret of life in the vigorous and nimble use of the limbs); another Homeric word for body is "chros," signifying the "skin as surface" or "the outer boundary of man" (used in the context of "he washed his body" or "he placed his armor about the body"; not to be confused with skin in anatomy, which is "derma").

Homer has no words directly corresponding to our words "mind" or "soul." He mainly uses three words to encompass our own modern concepts of "mind" and "soul." But all three words - psyche, thymos, noos - represented organs of the mind imagined as analogous to organs of the body. The word "psyche" is associated with "breath" (Greek psuchein, to breathe): it is a force that keeps a human being alive - only by extension is it something like consciousness. "Psyche" is lost in battle when it leaves the dying through his mouth or wound to flit away to Hades where it continues or survives as a shade. "Thymos" was perceived as "the generator of motion and agitation"; as the organ of motion and emotion, it was the source of joy, love, sympathy. It did not continue in Hades. "Thymos" also functioned as knowledge and will. "Noos" was a kind of "mental eye"; it amounted to something like intelligence and individual thought.

Homer understood the excitation of mind and soul as essentially symptoms of one of those spiritual organs (psyche, thymos, noos) that functioned in the same way as any of the bodily organs. In Homer, mind or soul was still solidly anchored in the body. He did not see internal psychological conflict or inner spiritual tension the way we do. He sees primarily the conflict between a man and one of his organs when he says, "he was willing but his thymos was not": what he sees is not conflict within the same organ, which is to say, he has no notion of someone being genuinely divided in his or her feelings. We can see this difference in understanding in Sappho's perception of the ambiguity of emotion in her expression, "bittersweet Eros" (glucopikron: "sweetbitter").

Once more Eros, the looser of limbs, drives me about,
a bittersweet creature which puts me at a loss.

In Sappho's time a new expression had been coined, equivalent to our expression, "I am conscious of/aware of"; but that new Greek expression literally says, "I share knowledge with myself" (sunoida emanto). The root of "sunoida" signifies the idea of "togetherness" which is still present in the Latin-based word "conscious" (cum, "with"; scire, "to know"). When Archilochus - with whose works Sappho was familiar - addresses his "thymos," he no longer thinks of it as part of the bodily/physical anatomy, but as a dimension of the soul. Which is why "thymos" was later commonly translated as "heart" in our metaphorical sense of it as seat of the emotions or as a spiritual entity. When Archilochus calls his thymos "stirred up with suffering", or says of his general, "he is full of heart," the original organs in Homer's vocabulary have become metaphors for an emotional state.

How did the early Greek lyric poets discover the body and thence, the soul (the self)?

We have actually already touched on it. The agonies of Eros (desire: longing and lack) led to a new awareness of the body, and thence, to a discovery of the mind and the uncharted territory of the soul: to repeat, a sense of the soul as an extension of the body into an inner or spiritual dimension of mind, thought, consciousness, feeling and emotion; such an extension in a way that makes for wholeness or oneness of body and spirit; further, this sense of wholeness involves a perception of an imaginary space in which consciousness is gathered into a sense of personhood, which can say "I" similarly to the way we do today.

It was the intensity of the emotional experience, of Eros or desire invading the body, that compelled a recognition of the body as a unit (a unity) rather than an assemblage of independent parts; from thereon, the word "soma" took on the meaning of the living human body. The anguish, confusion, helplessness, and frustration compelled a recognition of an inner dimension, an inner reality, in the body. Passion, desire, unrequited love awakens the mind to itself, isolates the individual, forces the soul to confront itself: itself being like an awareness of an enduring, hidden, suffering inner body. We see this best when we read Archilochus or Sappho. Here is Archilochus - two fragments:

If only it were my fortune just to touch Neobule's hand.

...

Such a desire for her rolled up under my heart,
poured a great darkness on my eyes,
robbed from my heart its tender wits.

Miserable I lie under desire, lifeless, with harsh pains;
because of the gods, pierced to the bones.

And here is Sappho:

Like to the very gods in my sight is he who
sits where he can look in your eyes, who listens
close to you, to hear your soft voice, its sweetness
murmur in love, and

laughter, all for him. But it breaks my spirit;
underneath my breast all the heart is shaken.
Let me only glance where you are, the voice dies,
I can say nothing,

but my lips are stricken to silence, under-
neath my skin the tenuous flame suffuses;
nothing shows in front of my eyes, my ears are
muted in thunder.

And the sweat breaks running upon me, fever
shakes my body, paler I turn than grass is;
I can feel that I have been changed, I feel that
death has come near me.

But one can endure all ...

Sappho's poem, like Archilochus', is focused on symptoms of the body which are caused by desire and which reflect its deathlike spell. There is a triangle of love: the girl who is chatting and laughing whom the poet loves; a man who sits close to the girl and listens; and the poet, the poem's "I", who observes all but mostly herself. Jealousy is part of the scene (needless to say, the speaker is lesbian, at least from our modern standpoint), but it isn't what the poem dwells on. The focus is on the poem's "I," on her mind (or consciousness or self); the phrases "[that man] in my sight" or, in another translation, "[that man] appears to me" and "I feel [death come near to me]" or "I appear [close to death]" occur at the start and the end of the poem. What is going on (the internal reality), what is happening to her, is expressed through images of the body.

The "sweet speech" and "charming laughter" of the girl are contrasted with the poem's I's failing senses: loss of normal perception, loss of control over the body, the apparent death of the body and yet an awareness of still being alive in some extension of the body that "can endure all." The people in the poem are to all intents and purposes static; it is the speaker's body that enacts or performs a great drama of the soul, whose subject is desire. This inner dimension where the drama takes place is perceived as an extension of the body, owned and acknowledged by the self in its enduring and suffering. As a contrast, the man who sits close to the girl and listens is, in the speaker's sight, "like a

god" because he does not suffer, he is in control, he is immune to the invasion of desire that threatens the boundaries of the speaker's body but also awakens her to the terrain of the soul where she endures all.

II

The discovery of the enduring, real-life, less-than-heroic self must have struck with wonder and delight the early Greek lyric poets' listeners and readers. We have to remind ourselves that the ancient Greek world-view perceived the vast material universe as suffused with divinity, from "adagios of islands" to "crocus lustres of the stars" (Hart Crane); there was no sharp distinction between physical body and spirit. So, the wholeness of self, body-soul, was a revelation that accorded with their sense of harmony and order of the cosmos (the Greek word "kosmos" itself meant "order, harmony").

From thereon, the Greek thinkers continued to explore the relations of body and soul, and the nature of the soul, but the lyric poets had already prefigured some of the soul's attributes: spontaneity, tension, solidarity. When they experienced the agony of longing and the misery of lack in unrequited love, they became aware of the soul's spontaneity: their suffering seemed to originate from within their own bodies rather than coming from a fate assigned to them by the gods. Tension has to do with intensity and depth. Once the poets grasped the "agon" or contest of opposing forces within themselves, the contradiction and ambiguity of inner impulses - as it were, the negative and positive charges of desire - they recognized tension as ineluctably of the soul's structure: as it were, an aspect of its nervous system. And solidarity or joint possession: the Greek citizens, as we mentioned earlier, lived in the polis in close association with one another; in that social intercourse, they were aware that they held in common, or shared, thoughts and feelings. With the recognition that each one had a vulnerable, multifaceted self came also the recognition that the sharing of values, feelings, and ideas was possible because, in the same way that divinity suffused all nature, there was no barrier to the human spirit. Community was spiritual communion.

So philosophy continued to explore the open territory of the soul until, as we mentioned earlier, Christianity and Cartesian thought split the self into polar opposites, body and soul. That polarity is very nicely foregrounded in Yeats' poem, "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" (1933), where the Bishop admonishes Crazy Jane: you are old now, your breasts are flat and fallen, "Live in a heavenly mansion, / Not in some foul sty"; and Crazy Jane replies -

"Fair and foul are near of kin.
And fair needs foul, ...
.....
A woman can be proud and stiff

When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent."

But in poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking in our time, that division, or alienation of the physical and material world from the inner spiritual reality, led to the dissolution of the self's autonomy. A perilous stance of radical skepticism came about, as in Lacan and Derrida who thought of self-fashioning as purely a "fantasmatic process" - a radical skepticism (perhaps of the Greek hubris type) where any fact is always already interpretation; where all knowledge is unstable, always already deconstructible, undecidable; where the self is merely a historical and social-cultural construct. This is a dangerous intellectual position; as Primo Levi says in *Survival in Auschwitz*, "we have learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is much more in danger than our life."

We might then seriously consider the catastrophe of Nazism and fascism when, long before the postmodernists, people began to be considered as masses without soul. Nietzsche in *Will to Power* proclaimed as necessary a "war on the masses by higher men" - "everywhere (he says) the mediocre are combining to make themselves master" which, if ignored, he foresees will end in "the tyranny of the least and dumbest." While the ancient Greeks had a dreadful sense of bodiless souls crowding Hades, the modernist thinkers and poets (Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses*, T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence) were haunted by their image of soulless bodies crowding the cities. I think of Ezra Pound "In a Station of the Metro" –

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Actually, as Pound tells us, what he saw at the Metro at La Concorde were "beautiful faces" - a child, a woman - but for six months he "could not find the words that seemed ... worthy [of], or as lovely as that sudden emotion" that he felt on a day at the Metro. But that they were beautiful faces gave the masses, each one in the crowd, a face. I infer that Pound must have caught a sudden glimpse of each one's marvelous self, for he speaks of his emotion "as lovely." This was a different haunting.

But as we were saying, in the early part of the last century, there was a kind of psychological turn of mind and sensibility: the intellectuals and writers were alarmed by the threat to the individual self amid the rapid and tremendous social changes; they tried to rescue the self by affirming its integrity while denying it to others, those others being the newly created literate masses that Aldous Huxley in 1934 called "the New Stupid." This contempt for the masses - where the word "masses" itself was an abstract metaphor for visible crowds of people in their metaphysical aspect as soulless and

mechanical - was part of the climate - the spiritual dimension, if you will, of the mind - that helped prepare for the horror to come: Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, totalitarianism.

Curiously, at the same time that the bond between body and soul seemed to be dissolving, it also began to be rediscovered in psychology, in Freud and Jung. Psychology, says the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, "did not begin to develop until the day it gave up the distinction between body and soul, when it abandoned the two correlative methods of interior observation and physiological psychology." (Here we might recall in passing Sappho's focus on both bodily symptoms and the I's consciousness of an inner life in turmoil.) So today, despite the postmodernist assault on the self as a mere epiphenomenon, there remains a sense of the close connection between "soma" and "psyche," even if their polarity has long dominated our way of thinking. When Heidegger cries out at the end of his life, "Only a god can save us," I think of the Greek "thymos" and the English word "enthusiasm" (from Greek "en-" and "theos") which then means inspiration or inspiriting (by a god within).

Nietzsche's Zarathustra says, "how could I endure to be a man, if man were not also poet and reader of riddles and ... a way to new dawns." So today, this lyric spirit continues, "the sacred fire" (as Stanley Kunitz calls it), this irresistible impulse; it continues to see that, as Loren Eiseley asserts, we are more like our ancestors 20,000 years ago, and more like one another, than we are different. That likeness is the very image of humanity's self, and the lyric poet's task is to serve that self with honesty and passion.

[Ay, naku! salamat at natapos then, "Daimon".]

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