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Greek Odes

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GREEK ODES.

In ancient Greek odes there is a simplicity, to which modern minds have hardly done justice. Indeed simplicity is a term scarcely strong enough for the trait we have in view: *baldness* better suits it. In all of them there is a remarkable paucity, nay, in many of them an entire want, of those epithetical words (mostly adjectives,) which form the chief finery of our common poetry; and which are an important feature in all poetry, except those imperishable lyrics of Antiquity. These classic songs consist almost wholly of verbs and substantives, with the needful pronouns, connectives, and particles. Yet such is the richness, such the magic of the language, that this apparently stinted vocabulary conveys all the images and feelings which belong to Poetry. Those verbs and substantives contain somehow within themselves, and suggest to the intelligent reader, groups of associated thoughts,

which, in other languages, require separate words to utter them. The Greek dictionary rarely discloses all the teeming significance of those verbs and substantives. Their treasures of meaning can be known only by a long and intimate conversancy with the language; by familiarity with its idioms; and by entering fervently into the spirit of the author you have in hand. Then it is, that his words charm, by unfolding their hidden powers; and his lines, instinct with the soul of poetry, breathe tenderness, passion, and beauty, with a force doubled by the terse condensedness of their diction. The hidden riches of the language are given out like the bloom of flowers from the seed, in Serjeant Talfourd's exquisite lines:

> "——— as the store
> Of rainbow color which the seed conceals,
> Sheds out its tints from its dim treasury,
> To flush the circle in the flower." *

The bald simplicity of the Greek ode makes a literal translation intolerably poor: poor even far beyond most other literal translations. For in such a version, those suggested, "associated thoughts, which in other languages require separate words to utter them," are altogether lost. Yet the Greek words which a mere dictionary version would make to speak in so mean a strain, may, by a mind thoroughly imbued with the poet's meaning, and touched with some poetic fire, (*spiritum Graiæ tenuem Camœnæ,*) be rendered into glorious verse. Witness the two lines of Anacreon, apparently so meagre—quoted in the last Messenger with another view:

> Δοτε μοι λυρην 'Ομηρου,
> φονιης ανευθε χορδης.

which literally signify only

> Give me Homer's lyre,
> Without [its] bloody string;

but which the genius of Moore diffuses into four noble lines:

> "Give me the harp of epic song
> Which Homer's finger thrill'd along;
> But tear away the sanguine string,
> For war is not the theme I sing!"

It may be worth the time and space it will take, to give some other instances of the baldness we have attributed to the Greek ode, when literally, or (may we say?) lexicographically taken. Here is an ode of Anacreon:

> Συ μεν λεγεις τα Θηβης,
> 'Ο δ'αυ φρυγων ἀὐτας·
> Εγω δ'εμας αλωσεις.
> Ουχ 'ἱππος ωλεσεν με,
> Ου πεζος, ουχι νηες·
> Στρατος δε καινος αλλος,
> Απ' ομματων βαλων με.

And here is a verbal translation, with one word necessary to complete the sense, interpolated in brackets:

> You sing the [events] of Thebes;
> Another, the war-shouts of the Phrygians:
> But *I*, my own captivities,
> Not cavalry destroyed me,
> Not infantry, not ships:
> But another, new army,
> Shooting me from eyes.

Only a single adjective—καινος, *new*!

Now, in Moore's version of the same ode, just see how many rich and glowing fancies he throws around Anacreon's chaste nakedness:

> "Thy harp may sing of Troy's alarms,
> Or tell the tale of Theban arms;
> With other woes my song shall burn,
> For other wounds my harp shall *mourn*.
> 'Twas not the crested warrior's dart
> Which drank the current of my heart;
> Nor naval arms, nor mailed steed
> Have made this vanquish'd bosom bleed:
> No—from an eye of liquid blue
> A host of quiver'd cupids flew;
> And now, my heart all bleeding lies,
> Beneath this army of the eyes!"

In our own younger days, before we had seen Moore's translation, we attempted one, of this ode. It is briefer and more literal than his; however inferior in spirit, and in richness of fancy. *Voila:*

> While Theban feuds thy harp employ,
> Or the fierce battle-shouts of Troy,
> A gentler theme these chords require—
> The chains I wear engage my lyre.
>
> I perish!—not by sword or spear,
> Nor in the galley's winged career:
> Heart-pierced, in ecstasy I die
> By volleying shafts from Ella's eye!

The reader will not fail to note how greatly even this closer version adds to, and varies, the ideas of the original. It is always so. We have never yet seen a scrap of ancient poetry "done into" English rhyme, without such adventitious grafts and fanciful variations. It is but a paraphrase at best. Nothing nearer than a paraphrase is possible in rhyme and metre.

We are not done with the Teian bard. It oddly happens that our next specimens are two of his most Bacchanalian effusions. *Oddly*, we say; because we are notorious in our own parish for being the most fanatical cold-water man it contains; and that, too, without ever having been at all given to drink. And how a cold-water fanatic can be an admirer, and a translator, of Anacreon's drinking songs, may puzzle the curious. We offer no solution, except a general reference to human inconsistency; and proceed with our business.

The following Defence of Drinking looks plausible; but is a mere string of sophisms. Mr. Burke, of the Richmond Academy, very happily exposed it in a responsive epigram through the Messenger some years ago—calling attention to the fact, that all those natural drinkings, from which Anacreon

* Ion. Act. I.

argues in favor of wine, are drinkings of pure cold water; or of something equally harmless.

"Η γη μελαινα πινει, &c.

First the literal, or bald translation:

"The black earth drinks,
And the trees drink it:
The sea drinks the air,
The sun the sea,
And the moon the sun.
Why, friends, do you resist me,
Wishing also to drink?"

Only a single adjective, again!—μελαινα, *black*. Now, *for our own metrical and rhyming version*:

The mellow glebe drinks in the rain,
The forests drain the juice of earth;
Aerial showers are quaff'd again
By the vast deep, which gave them birth.

The sun his noontide thirst allays,
With steamy draughts from Ocean's bowl:
And gladden'd by Sol's genial rays,
The pale Moon dances round the Pole.

Thus Nature—Earth and Heaven—declare
That drinking comes by law divine:
Then tell me, why should I forbear,
To quaff inspiring, generous wine?

We give no other of Mr. Moore's translations; having quoted enough to shew their spirited freedom and elegance:—being no way solicitous, either, to court a *further contrast between his work and* ours.

One more of our own, and we shall have done with Anacreon. This is *On the Rose*—Εις το Ροδον. *It is one of those* which most strikingly exhibit that exquisite combination, seen every where in Anacreon, of a style surpassingly chaste, with extreme wildness of passion. It is enriched, however, with an unusual number, for him, of the epithets common in poetry—having no less than six adjectives.

Το ροδον το των ερωτων
Μιξωμεν Διονυσω· &c.

(*Literal Translation.*)

The rose of the Loves
Let us mix with wine;
The lovely-leafed rose
Having fitted to our temples,
Let us drink, merrily laughing.
Oh Rose, thou all-surpassing flower!
Rose, the darling of spring!
Roses even to the gods [are] charming.
With roses the son of Venus
Is crowned [about] his fair locks,
Dancing with the Graces.
Crown me then, and I will play my lyre
Near thy Temples, Bacchus!
With the deep-bosomed maid,
With rosy chaplets
Wreathed, I will dance!

(*Free Translation.*)

All about our sparkling wine
Love's own roses let us twine;
And as we drain the luscious bowl,
Yielding up to mirth each soul,—
Wreathe these temples gray of ours
With the fairest, sweetest flowers.
To thy charms, oh beauteous rose,
Spring her blooming fragrance owes:
'Mid celestial glories bright,
Heav'n from thee draws new delight!
Cupid there, adorned with roses,
In Cyth'rea's lap reposes;
Or frolics with the Graces fair,
Chaplets wreathing all his hair.
Crown me then, and with my lyre
Let me join the festive choir,
Where the bosom-heaving maid
Winds the dance beneath the shade:
There, with rosy garlands bound,
Wheel the joyous, measured round!

We called this a *free* translation: but one who has an eye to the original, will deem it a licentious one. In truth, we should ourselves be shocked at the gratuitous thoughts it introduces, had not the example of Mr. Moore justified them by far greater freedoms.

The next ode we shall produce is the famous one of Callimachus, in honor of Harmodius and Aristogiton; who, on the festal day of Minerva, hiding *their daggers in myrtle boughs*, as was customary on that day, slew the tyrant Hipparchus, last surviving son of the usurper Pisistratus. Probably no other ancient poem has been so often done into *English* verse. *Eight* or ten attempts have come under our own notice; including the one of ours which presently follows, and which, except a slight variation or two, was published in the Messenger ten or twelve years ago. "This noble specimen of classic minstrelsy" has, by many, been ascribed to Alcæus *: it is so, in a small collection (published at Philadelphia, 1810) of Anacreon's Odes, and Relics of Sappho and Alcæus. But Alcæus died long before the event here celebrated.

Hymn, in honor of Harmodius and Aristogiton.

Εν μυρ του κλαδι τυ ξιφος φορησω,
'Ωσπερ 'Αρμοδιος και Αριστογειτων, &c.

(*Literal.*)

In a myrtle bough my sword I will bear,
As Harmodius and Aristogiton,
When the tyrant they slew,
And made Athens free.

Beloved Harmodius! you are not yet dead:
But in the isles of the Blest they say you are,
Where the swift-footed Achilles is
And Tydides, the brave Diomed.

In a myrtle bough my sword I will bear,
As Harmodius and Aristogiton,
When, amid the sacrifices to Minerva,
They slew the man Hipparchus, the tyrant.

* Among others who have attributed this ode to Alcæus are *Dr. Gillies, in his History of Greece, Vol. I, p. 363*, and the poet Collins in his ode to Liberty. The passage is familiar to the reader:

"What *new Alcæus* fancy-blest
Shall *sing the sword in myrtles drest, &c.*"

[*Ed. Mess.*]

Your glory shall be forever,
Beloved Harmodius and Aristogiton;
Because you slew the tyrant,
And made Athens free!

(*Free Translation.*)

Among other freedoms, we take that of leaving out, entirely, the name of Aristogiton; as being too rugged for any art of ours to make glide in numbers. It reminds one of

"Some Russian, whose dissonant, consonant name
Almost rattles to fragments the trumpet of Fame."

But to our version:

In green myrtle my sword I'll conceal
Like our champions, devoted and brave,
When they plunged in the tyrant their steel,
And to Athens deliverance gave.

Belov'd heroes!—immortal, you roam
In the joy-breathing isles of the Blest,
Where the swift and the brave have their home—
Where Achilles and Diomed rest.

In fresh myrtle my blade I'll entwine
Like Harmodius, the gallant and good,
When he made at the tutelar shrine,
A libation of Tyranny's blood.

Ye deliverers of Athens from shame!
Ye avengers of Liberty's wrongs!
Endless ages shall cherish your fame,
Embalm'd in their echoing songs.

We shall exhibit no more of our own handiwork in rhyme. And with one other specimen, we shall close our proofs of the exceeding simplicity of the Greek Ode.

Every body knows of Sir William Jones' fine ode, beginning

"What constitutes a state?"

It is only a wide expansion of one by Alcman, a Greek poet, who lived above 600 years before Christ, and nearly a century before Anacreon. Sir William Jones, the most accomplished of classical scholars and the purest of men, was incapable of plagiarism; and no doubt appended to all his own editions of his piece, Alcman's original—which has been dropped by subsequent publishers. We will give a literal translation first:

(Ου λιθοι, ουδε ζυλα, ουδε, &c.)

"Not stones, or timbers, or
The builder's art, are states;
But wherever there are MEN
Knowing how to guard themselves,
There are walls, and states."

Not one adjective!
Now, Sir William Jones.

"What constitutes a state?
Not high-raised battlements, or labored mound,
Thick wall, or moated gate;
Not cities proud, with spires and turrets crowned;
Not bays and broad-armed ports,
Where, laughing at the storm, rich navies ride;
Not starred and spangled courts,
Where low-born baseness wafts perfume to pride.
"No—MEN, high-minded MEN,
With power as far above dull brutes indeed,
In forest, brake, or den,
As beasts excel cold rocks and brambles rude:
Men, who their duties know,
But know their rights; and knowing, dare maintain;
Prevent the long-aimed blow,
And crush the tyrant while they rend the chain:
THESE constitute a state!
And sovereign Law, that state's collected will
O'er thrones and globes elate,
Sits empress, crowning good, repressing ill.
Smit by her sacred frown,
The fiend, Discretion, * like a vapor, sinks;
And e'en th' all dazzling Crown
Hides his faint rays, and at her bidding shrinks."

The noble spirit of these justly celebrated stanzas warrants their insertion, notwithstanding their length. The last seven lines have nothing of Alcman; but they are worth quoting, for the way in which they hold up to reverence, the SOVEREIGNTY of LAW: a principle which is too frequently forgotten, in this land of laws.

If we had not spun out this article so long, we should find some pretext for showing to our readers Dr. Blacklock's (the blind poet's) paraphrase, in eighteen lines, of Horace's eight, beginning, "*Justum et tenacem propositi virum.*" They may find it quoted, however, by Hume, in a note to his Reign of Charles II, in the History of England. Every lawyer, and legislator, nay every voter, and every mother, ought to know it by heart.

M.