

Grecian intellect and emotion had matured—when the highest flights of imaginative power had reached even the abodes of the gods and incorporated their behests in the enforcement of moral precepts,—when the divine principle of music in undulations soft and sweet had attained the very acme of its ancient excellence,—not until then, that the inimitable Grecian drama, of which the chorus was the nucleus, was wrought into its highest, noblest forms.

With our modern conventional ideas respecting the stage and its performers, we can, judging alone from the present, form no adequate conception of the mighty and beneficent influence of Greek dramatic action upon the devout expectant throng. In no other way can we arrive at a just notion of it than by leaping in thought the chasm of Time that sunders us from those choral days of splendor, and placing ourselves in reverent guise within the hallowed precincts of the vast amphitheatre. Nature here in her higher moods and most majestic aspects treads the elaborate stage. The whole city has come out to worship, assembled at early dawn in the free air of Heaven with no roof but the delightful sky of Greece. The day is sacred to the God Dionysus, and the service begins with a sacrifice to him. It is a day of joy and festivity, but of festivity tempered and subdued by the awfully imposing spectacle of revered divinities talking and acting before mortal gaze. The sacrifice ended, the curtain falls, and discloses the dwellings of the great of earth who had lived centuries before. The spirit of the ages of heroes and demigods descends and hovers o'er the anxious concourse. The persons of the Drama robed in the apparel of deities and heroes make their ingress and egress at successive intervals; while the chorus, now an applauded company of dignitaries, forming the connecting link between the illustrious actors and the awe-struck beholders, slowly enter the orchestra chanting odes of sublimest melody and loftiest conception. As the plot unfolds, some great moral struggle is discoverable in it. Some invincible will, perhaps in the breast of a delicate maiden, or in the huge form of an awe-inspiring Titan contends, with conscious rectitude, against a mightier power. The right suffers, yet still endures.—Mutual wrongs are committed,—mutual guilt incurred; but the Divine Ruler "who never sleeps nor grows old, on whom the unwearied mouths of the gods have no power" finally asserts his supremacy. The long pent up storm now bursts with terrific fury upon the heads of the guilty. Mortal eyes can no longer view the scene. The curtain rises,—the vision vanishes, but a mighty impression is left upon the aroused spectators. Virtue, though weak and deserted, has triumphed.—It may have descended into

sepulchral darkness—the shadow world of the departed; yet even there it meets its reward in the society of the loved of earth and in the Divine favor. The base though powerful have been vanquished. If life is spared them it is but to endure horrors worse than death. Such was the teaching of the *ancient stage*.

Now, throughout all the Grecian tragedies extant, it is evident that the choral odes, marvellous as the lyric powershewn in their construction, are yet essentially connected with the action of the Drama, and not merely Horatian "purple patches" of beauty interpolated as ornaments between the acts to win the plaudits of the crowd. They represent the higher teaching of the ideal spectator reading the world's lessons aright, and pointing to an order which fulfils itself in the midst of all seeming disorder and confusion. Or, we may look upon them as the alembics of the play, in which the ore is fused, and the irradiant gems crystallize and stand forth sparkling with the light of Truth. They are to us "thought in blossom,—life in its intensest moods." Elaborated by the master spirits of antiquity with the highest artistic skill, in a language characterized by a tone at once mellow sonorous, they now remain redolent of the balm of eld, as exhibitions of the choicest linguistic arrangement, and the richest melody of sound.

In what other tongue indeed can we find such beauteous resonance,—such perfect consonance of sound with sense as in the choral summary of the happiness of man contained in the Edipus Tyrannus!

Iō geneai brotōn
Hōs umas isa kai to mē—
Den zōsas enarithmō.
Tis gar tis anēr pleon
Tas udaimonias pherei,
E tosouon osōn dokein
Kai doxant' apokhina;
Tōn sōn toi paradeigm' echōn
Tōn sōn daimona, ton sōn, O,
Tlāmōn Oidipoda brotōn
Ouden makaridzo.

In the course of the same grand tragedy the chorus deprecates the dire calamity that had befallen illustrious Thebes, and in view of the sad havoc already wrought by the will of the all-powerful Jove thus pours forth its wailing plaints:—

"Tell me O deathless voice,
Thou child of golden hope!
For sorrows numberless press on my soul,
And all the host is smitten, and our thoughts
Lack weapons to resist.
For increase fails of fruits of goodly earth,
And women sink in labour's wailing pangs,
And one by one, as flit
The swift winged birds through air,
So, fitting to the shore of Him who dwells
Down in the darkling West,
Fleeter than mightiest fire
Thou seest them passing on."

The choral odes are indeed remarkable for their manifestations of earnest feeling, and warm, yet delicate and etherial imagination. The hearts of the Athenians, who revelled in the luxurious domain of

imagery, responded impulsively to the touching lyric symphonies that rolled in liquid flowing syllables from the enchanting orchestra. Emotion, lording it over the intellect, for the time held sovereign sway, and presented thoroughly sensitive plates for the reception of good impressions. In fact nothing ever yet had marvellous power over men, that was entirely divorced from feeling. The most potent argumentative displays, devoid of this quality, must be relegated to the category of abortive attempts. It is not by grave saws and sleepy precepts that a poet can profit either his contemporaries or posterity. It is by the examples he portrays, by the feelings he inspires, by those high and severe imaginings of more than human excellence,—those holy aspirings,—those immortal longings after all that is best and greatest in our nature. The lamp of the soul too often burns dim in the thick atmosphere of earth. She then must needs repair to the sacred altars of poetry to replenish it with light from those fires, which, like the vestal flames, should never be kindled but from Heaven. Nothing should be here to soften or enervate,—nothing loose,—nothing voluptuous,—nothing but what plumes the soul and imps it for its native skies.

The immaculate purity of thought and style running like threads of gold through these Grecian lyrics, cannot fail to win the heart of the classic student and dignify his musings. Breathing a tender and elevated spirit they yield us the clearest possible views of incarnated poetic concepts. A choral fragment that has survived the attrition of ages thus speaks:—

"No more, ye honey voiced, holy-singing virgins do my limbs suffice to bear me. O! that I were a Cerylus which with the halcyon, sea-blue bird of spring, skims the light foam of the waves with ever dauntless heart."

The utterance of moral reflections and exalted sentiments during the course of the play is also a prominently characteristic feature of the dulcet Grecian chorus. Wisely thrown among the assemblage at the very moment when the emotional element has by the dialogue been wrought to its maximum, the finest shades of its significance are thus perceived,—the profoundest impressions made. Its teaching at times, irresistibly carries men's thoughts on into the future in the spirit of reverence and hope,—nay, even penetrating the mists of the dark valley and disclosing the life hereafter. The importunate invocation to Pluto in behalf of Edipus partakes of this noteworthy faith:—

"O grant that he, the stranger,
Wend his way, with no long agony,
No fate of many woes, to that dark land,
The home of all the dead,
Still wrapped in Stygian gloom.
For thus, though many woes unmerited
Upon his life have come,
God, the all just, shall raise him up again."