

The Origins of Poetic Form

Harmony

In its beginnings (before Homer, 8th century B.C.) poetry in the western world was not an art form in itself. Poetic language, dance, song and music were intrinsically bound up with one another and were practiced in collective religious ceremonies. In the Grecian perspective harmony and balance between gods, humans and other living beings, the heavenly bodies, and the elements etc. were essential to life. The ceremonies were part of the everyday with the intention to praise, appease or plead with the gods for a good harvests, health, children, peace etc.

Form, Pattern

The form of the ceremonies and of its components - poetic language, dance, song and music - had meaning rather than purely an aesthetic purpose. The pattern of dancing, singing and music reflected the rhythm of the ancient Greek speech pattern which was predominantly long-short-short (dactylic) or reverse short-short-long (anapestic). The concept of form embodied the pursuit of harmony which was found in the patterns of the ancient „round dances“.

The dancers started with the forming of a circle. They moved from East to West mirroring the movement of the sun in an hexameter pattern (6 dactyls). This movement was called „strophe“ („turn“). They reversed from West to East in a movement called „antistrophe“ (6 dactyls) and then faced the altar and stood still for the „epode“ for the length of 6 dactyls. This repeated itself ad infinitum. The dancers moved in a variety of circular patterns with varying orientations (i.e. East and West, the position to the altar or to the other dancers) and could also break away from the circle into a serpentine pattern and its variations, spiral and weaving. The altar was often inscribed with poetic language in a pattern called „boustrophedon“ („bous“ meaning ox), which refers to the way an ox ploughs a field: from left to right and back again. The Greek word for this turning action is „verse“, a poetic term still used today. („Verse“ is formally a single line in a metrical composition)

Dialectics-Muses

Part of the Grecian concept of harmony and balance was dialectics. The strophe needed an antistrophe and a verse demanded a reverse. The muses embodied this concept by telling lies and truths in equal measure, never revealing which was which. Acting as a mouthpiece of the gods, the muses inspired the poets to create myths and thus ensured the perpetuation of the religious cult. The unity of poetic language, dance, song and music was named „mousike“ in their honour.

Originally there are believed to have been two sets of three muses. The first set were Aoidē („song“), Meletē („practice“) and Mnēmē („memory“) in Mount Helicon. The second set were Nētē, Mesē and Hypatē at Delphi, standing for the lowest, middle and highest strings of the lyra. All the muses worked in unison and helped with the creation and performance of the *mousike*. The muses at Mount Helicon presumably instilled mnemonic techniques in the „aoidos“ („singers“) so they could remember and recite the huge amounts of words. The muses at Delphi guided the plucking of the lyra strings which supported the dancers/singers/speakers in their rhythm.

Sacred v. Secular, Epic

As poetic language gradually began to separate itself from the religious cult, the concept of *mousike* changed. The epic („word“, „story“, „poem“) is still oral poetry but it mixes myth with folklore and it is no longer necessarily bound up with *mousike*. This transition can be traced in Homers epics „Odysee“ and „Iliad“ where an individual human is interacting with and challenging the gods.

The epic in this period gains a fixed style and theme which later became a poetic form. An epic poem is a long narrative that describes the journey of a hero. It has several sub-features, for example, every epic starts „in media res“, right in the middle of the story and has a large range of subjects, places and times. The traditional epic metre is a dactylic hexameter.

Alphabet

With the expansion of Greek trade came the introduction of the Phoenician alphabet in the late 9th or early 8th century B.C. This was also the beginning of authorship - the focus was now on the individual rather than the collective, on the production of poetry rather than the reproduction through recitals of it. It is through the written word that a concept of self became possible.

Lyric

The form of the epic also gave way to the form of the lyric (lyre), which was non-narrative and shorter than the epic. It was written in a subjective voice, trying to capture a moment or an experience. Lyric poetry was sung by individuals or a chorus and accompanied by the lyra or other stringed instruments. The most well known ancient Greek monodic lyric poet is Sappho (6th - 5th century B.C.).

Poetry

Around the 4th century B.C., poetry was established as an artform in itself. The philosopher Democritus named the art of language, separate from dance and music, „poetry“, from „poiein“ (to make, create). Poetic form as we know it in the West, still retains the elements of its origins and continues to develop them: the circular, serpentine patterns of dance, the oral, the musical, the dialectic, the strophes, the metres and the inter-relation between technique and meaning.