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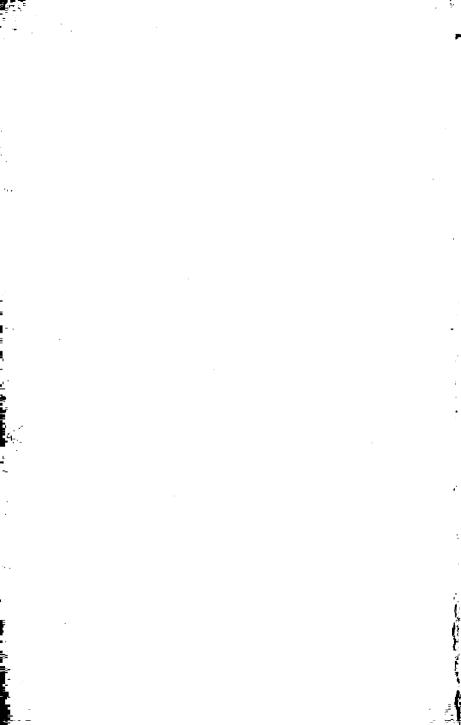
PETERLEVI



PELICAN BOOKS

THE PELICAN HISTORY OF GREEK LITERATURE

Peter Levi, a classical scholar, archaeologist and poet, was born in 1931. He has translated two works for the Penguin Classics: Pausanias's Guide to Greece (in two volumes) and The Psalms, as well as a translation of Yevtushenko (with R. Milner-Gulland) for the Penguin Modern Poets; and he is the editor of The Penguin Book of English Christian Verse and the Penguin Classics edition of Johnson's A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland with Boswell's The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides. The Light Garden of the Angel King, his account of his travels in Afghanistan, is published in the Penguin Travel Library. In 1984 Peter Levi became Professor of Poetry at Oxford University.



PETER LEVI

The Pelican History of Greek Literature



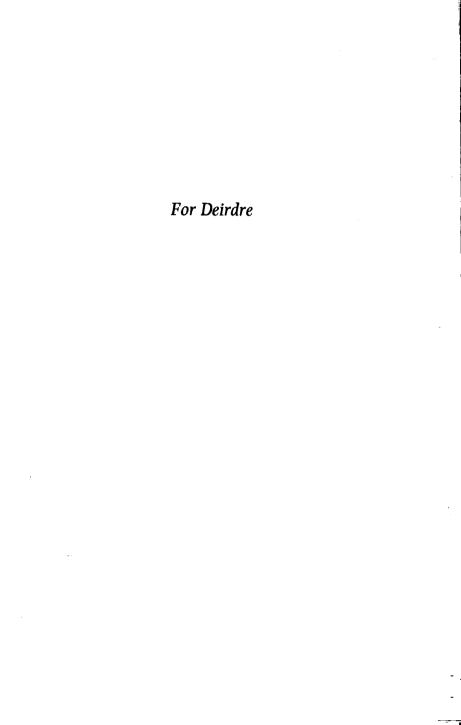
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"The Reader will find here no Regions cursed with irremediable Barrenness, or bless'd with Spontaneous Fecundity, no perpetual Gloom or unceasing Sunshine; nor are the Nations here described either devoid of all Sense of Humanity, or consummate in all private and social Virtues . . . He will discover, what will always be discover'd by a diligent and impartial Enquirement.

what will always be discover'd by a diligent and impartial Enquirer, that wherever Human Nature is to be found,

there is a mixture of Vice and Virtue, a contest of Passion and Reason . . .'

from the Preface to A Voyage to Abyssinia, by Father Jerome Lobo, a Portuguese Jesuit, translated by Samuel Johnson (1735) į

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INTRODUCTION

There is usually something to be said for the expression of a lifetime's passion. And probably it is only after a lifetime that one can make sense of literary history for oneself. Some scholars found colonies and create empires of knowledge. Others, perhaps the best, leave only two or three great monuments of a life-work, two or three editions or commentaries. Some put their whole scholarly power into teaching. And there are those who spend a lifetime just trying to make sense of their material, burrowing into it like moles or crawling about all over its surface very patiently, like snails.

After rather such a useless and unproductive lifetime, with no empire opened, no colony flourishing, no great scholarly monument and not many pupils, one is justified in expressing to the best of one's ability what sense one has made. It will be useful to many readers, more now than ever before, I imagine, to know what Greek literature contains and what it is like, to understand it as history and to experience some of its attractions. Even specialized scholars may find a one-man tour d'horizon refreshing or amusing. Its only authority is that of personal conviction. It depends massively on other people's work, but it is never based on second-hand opinions, though it often records more opinions than my own. It is a personal book in the limited sense in which taste and reading are personal. They become more so the older one gets. When I was younger I would have written more freshly but more wildly, and even less accurately.

The purpose of this book is first to record the writings of the ancient Greeks, then to describe them, to offer short samples and to show what the writers were like. It is not long enough to be comprehensive, but it claims to be a critical history. That means it is subjective, and pays attention to whatever I thought important. I do not think I have strayed very far from the normal educated opinions of my own

generation, and I hope I never stray without warning the reader from the opinions of scholars on scholarly matters. Of course, nothing has been so worked over as the Classics, but scholarly and critical opinion do shift all the same. This book is for now. I have attempted to feed a hungry curiosity about Greek poetry and prose which arose rather recently and is widespread. When traditional classical education came close to foundering, a new readership arose that wanted Greek poetry for its true nature and on its merits, and Greek prose in the same way, without any reference to education. I greatly sympathize with that curiosity and that hunger.

Still, it is not always easy to answer a simple question or meet a simple demand. Greek is inevitably a learned subject, though its difficulties in the past have been grossly exaggerated. Even if one sticks close to the texts one cannot quite avoid the learned industry of classical studies, though one can often escape more lightly than our teachers used to admit. The lists of further reading I offer are minimal, but most of the absences from those lists are deliberate. I have mentioned only the few books I found most helpful, and avoided discussing whatever a sensible reader could afford to ignore. I have tried to stick to the text, and to be honest.

Any history of literature will raise questions about comparative importance. Since such a small amount of ancient Greek literature survives, compared to what once existed, there is a further problem about fragments and absences. Where we have complete plays, I have said very little about tantalizing fragments. I have concentrated on what has survived in bulk, but paid some attention to those mutations and transformations that seem important, however little evidence we have for them: the origins of the prose romance, for example, and the Alexandrian poems about fishermen. There are almost, but not quite, equally important kinds of poem I have virtually ignored: Alexandrian poems about the stars, for example. It is a question of literary merit, which is unpredictable, and may raise any kind of writing to sudden greatness, and even if merit is lacking in what survives, a question of the momentum of literature and of later influence.

But I have not traced every Greek origin of every European influence; we shall be concerned with good writers and great writers and what sets them in perspective, and with little else. I do not think

many readers, if they knew the field, would complain at what I have left out, except that I have failed for lack of space, and by concentrating on literary value, to record the interesting mass of Greek technical and medical writings. Yet it is essential to grasp that throughout the archaic and classical and Hellenistic periods of Greek, as they are called, a crowd of ghostly figures whom we scarcely know are thronging on the edges of the works we study. From time to time, one must name them. It may be that literature has no history. There is only history, and literature is part of it. Certainly the history of literature is not just a string or succession of great writers or surviving writers. But the great writers really are paramount, and they illuminate everything else; it is to read them that one learns Greek, and I have concentrated on them. The greatest Greek writers, on a Shakespearean scale of greatness, are Homer and Plato, I think.

In the course of writing this book, I felt I was learning a good deal, much of it by now already forgotten or pushed to the back of the mind, but most of it, I hope, embodied in the book. One of the problems was pace. After endless pondering and futile notetaking, I saw that I must put the whole thing on paper in some form in about a year or else abandon it. A slower pace would have obvious advantages, but would be self-defeating, since one might easily spend ten years on each of these twenty chapters. Since I have already passed a lifetime teaching and rereading the Classics, and come to that point of life where one forgets more quickly than one can learn, the book seemed to be a matter of now or never. I reread a lot of Greek literature in the evenings while I was writing. The longest pause was on Plato; I found myself reading some of Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch and even Xenophon for the first time. My own tutor, who could write better Latin and Greek verse at fifteen than I have ever written. read the whole of ancient Greek literature in seven years and then gave it up and became a doctor. But I have found the repertory of Greek writers is inexhaustible by a serious reader with other interests in an average lifetime. While I wrote, I seldom found reason to alter any seriously considered opinion, however conventional, about what was, or was not, great literature. Greatness is something anyone can see at once, though the judgement of past centuries is a less reliable guide than one imagines. As for the shape of Greek history, and the shape of the history of Greek literature. I was both alarmed and pleased to rediscover the other day that my innermost feelings about the subject correspond rather closely with those expressed by Louis MacNeice in *Autumn Journal*.

About some problems I changed my mind more than once. Even since finishing this book, I have found that I believe less than I did in the truthfulness of Herodotos, and a little differently about his dates, but I have let the chapter stand. The alternative would be complete rethinking and rewriting of chapter after chapter – in fact, another lifetime. Some problems I left aside because I saw no solution. What is the point of discussing the Acts of the Apostles only in terms of thorny and intricate controversies? To discuss them helpfully would take much more space than the subject deserves. How can one fit all that can be known from comparative literature into one chapter on Homer, or from social anthropology into the fifth-century chapters? What is the point of talking about Hieronymos of Kardia, in whose eyes the nomads were heroes of freedom, since we lack his writings?

I paid too little attention to the traditional association of certain styles and even dialects with particular genres. I suppose because I do not really understand it. In lyric poetry it may have something to do with musical style, as well as the prestige of great originals. I think I have stressed insufficiently the poverty of our evidence for early philosophers. We know them only through later eyes, and we are lucky if we have one complete and genuine paragraph of their writings. The same is true to a lesser degree in other areas of Greek literature. We do better to stick as far as possible to what we have most of, and to the best of that. I wish I had space and leisure to deal with Marcus Aurelius and Julian; they open new perspectives I could not follow. But every generation has to explore the storerooms for itself, and every generation finds its own treasures that others had neglected. Every reader who has time will find them.

For a comprehensive discussion of the whole of this subject, down to the last nook and cranny, one should still consult Albin Lesky's History of Greek Literature (1966) or the new Cambridge History of Classical Literature, Volume One (1984), which is more reliable and up to date, but not always as full or as readable. For a clear, succinct account of most of the known facts about the more important writers and phenomena, one must still use the Oxford Classical Dictionary.

My own book has a less academic purpose: to give a short, lucid description in easy, continuous prose of most of ancient Greek literature, showing differences, explaining relationships, briefly discussing dates and developments, conveying by a little use of translation the qualities of the best Greek poets and prose writers, and setting them in the context of history and of life.

Although I have been lucky enough to work for many years in Oxford, where I was also a student, and to have had invaluable help from those who taught me and from colleagues, I do not feel it would be decent to name the great men to whom I am most indebted, since the numerous shortcomings of this book, of some of which I am conscious, are mine alone. Thoroughness is hard to combine with simplicity and depth. But I must express my gratitude to Pauline Hire, for access to books, and to Nigel Wilson, who kindly agreed to question the more questionable sentences I had written, and made a number of valuable suggestions, including the truth about baby lobsters. The inevitable trouble with such a long book (which at the same time is not long enough for its subject) is that, whatever one may imagine before writing, or after having written, the scale and balance are substantially determined by small problems, and not by large considerations. Historians of literature are often villains; they are not quite historians and not quite critics, and not quite in command of their subject. There is no excuse really except stubborn affection for the Classics, and a certain sense of what happened.

Peter Levi St Catherine's College Oxford 8 January 1984

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Particular references are given at the end of each chapter.

Cambridge History of Classical Literature, vol. 1 (Greek), 1984 N. G. L. Hammond, History of Greece, 2nd edition, 1967 A. Lesky, History of Greek Literature, 1966 M. Nilsson, Greek Popular Religion (in some editions, Greek Folk Religion), 1940 Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2nd edition, 1970 Oxford Introduction to Greek Literature, 1985 C. M. Robertson, Shorter History of Greek Art, 1981 C. A. Trypanis (ed.), Penguin Book of Greek Verse, 1971

Penguin Classics include excellent translations of many Greek books.