XXVI. Solon's Consciousness of Himself.

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Οὐκ ἔφυ Σόλων βαθύφρων οὐδὲ βουλήεις ἀνήρ·
ἐσθλὰ γὰρ θεοῦ διδόντος αὐτὸς οὐκ ἐδέξατο·
περιβαλὼν δ' ἄγραν, ἀγασθεὶς οὐκ ἐπέσπασεν μέγα
δίκτυον, θυμοῦ θ' ἁμαρτῇ καὶ φρενῶν ἀποσφαλείς·
ἤθελον γάρ κεν κρατήσας, πλοῦτον ἄφθονον λαβών
καὶ τυραννεύσας Ἀθηνῶν μοῦνον ἡμέραν μίαν,
ἀσκὸς ὕστερον δεδάρθαι κἀπιτετρῖφθαι γένος.[1] (Fr. 33)

I

Even at a first reading, the careful prosody of this fragment reveals itself. The forceful, insistent trochees proceed naturally with considerable purely aural excitement, as in the sound repetitions of *boulêeis anêr* or *hêmeran mian.* The tetrameter lines are long enough so that the poet can create an aural "atmosphere" carefully and progressively. From the outset one feels mounting suspicions of the frequently voiced idea that Solon wrote poetry only because there was no possibility of writing prose at his moment of history. The historical fact is true, but the implication from it is not. Poetry is a mode of expression which seems to be congenial to Solon's nature. It is one which he disciplined carefully, too.

One is also impressed from the outset, in these lines, with the easy, uncontrived development of a verbal attitude. Such a calm assurance about the technique of developing verse impresses us in many of the Greek lyric poets. Archilochus, Sappho, Alcman: they seem to be saying just what they mean to say, in just the way they mean to say it. The piece before us falls

[1] "Solon is not gifted with wisdom and sagacity. God put good things into his hands, but he failed to grasp them. He cast his net and caught his fish, but, in his wonder and delight, he did not draw it in: both his courage and his wit were unequal to the occasion. If I could seize the power, acquire vast wealth, and be lord of Athens for but a single day, I would give my body to be flayed for a wineskin and consent to the annihilation of my race."

All references to the text of Solon are to Bergk, *Poetae Lyrici Graeci* II (Leipzig 1914). Solon's fragments are analyzed and translated in Ivan Linforth, *Solon the Athenian* (Berkeley 1919). I have used Linforth's translation here.

into two parts. In the first four lines we are given an attitude toward Solon. The first line is offered as plain, abrupt fact, though it shows fine aesthetic assurance, introducing—we may suppose—the poem as a whole. The next three lines justify the first, by explaining how Solon was not *bathyphrôn* or *boulêeis*. The second line moves slightly out of the plain-statement mode of the first, speaking darkly of *esthla* and of God. In the following two lines we are carried all the way to metaphor. Solon has become a fisher, so astonished by the excellence of a catch that he fails to draw in his net. We do not yet know what "noble things" the god gave, or what the catch is, but we know, or rather are brought dramatically to feel, that Solon's lack of wit caused him to neglect some rare opportunity. The plain statement of the first line has been partially clarified and put into a richer, but at the same time vaguer, context.

The next three lines form a conclusion. They begin with a shift to the first person and ostensibly explain, from that new position, what Solon failed to take advantage of, though the narrator makes his explanation by telling what he would have done in Solon's place: that is, the lines are still a commentary, though in a different focus, on the first line. As a ruler (*kratêsas*) the narrator would have had certain opportunities which Solon—we are to assume—also had but ignored: the narrator could have become rich (*plouton aphthonon labôn*) and have been tyrant (*tyranneusas*). The fragment concludes with a line in which the narrator, the "I," shows obliquely just how much he would have given to have had the opportunity which Solon missed. It is worth seeing that the exact character of *Solon*'s missed opportunity is kept slightly—almost coyly—vague throughout. This is mere artfulness, not concealment.[2] More important is the persistent recurrence of the theme set in the first line, in different focuses. The fragment is strangely complex, yet simple and unified in mood. The "I" of the last three lines is really just developing a single attitude in several ways.

The purely structural complexity here becomes much more than that when one considers that Solon wrote it—as he did—and consequently that the critical narrator of the verses (who appears in

[2] For a straightforward statement of Solon's opportunity and what he did with it, cf. the context in Plutarch's *Solon*.

êthelon or *labôn*) does not impersonate Solon's own attitude. (With another poet than Solon this last statement might be open to question. We might take these lines as self-castigation. But this would simply not be in the spirit of Solon.) The whole fragment, in fact, is the expression of an attitude toward Solon. That attitude, of course, is critical. It tries to put Solon in an absurd light, implying that he is stupid and hesitant. Yet the result is not self-castigation because the "I" of these lines very nicely discredits himself. The last three verses show that. The last verse, in fact, is such a violent expression of self-debasement on the part of the narrator that it turns the fragment into an attack against the narrator rather than into an instrument of self-criticism on Solon's part. The concealed attack is highly successful. The lines become a subtle vehicle for Solon's self-praise on moral grounds, despite all initial appearances to the contrary.

Of particular interest is the kind of self-consciousness which Solon shows us here. In itself, Solon's accomplishment in putting an attitude toward himself into the mind of another is significant. As is well known, the growth of the self was a gradual and difficult aspect of early Greek experience. The attainment of self-consciousness required, for one thing, a realization within the individual of the distinctness of his own self from the selves of his fellow-citizens. It is that kind of realization which Solon attains, artistically, in artificially standing outside of, and looking at, himself in this fragment. If it seems to us—who know Shelley, Proust, or Jung—to be no great accomplishment that Solon has made, we need only remind ourselves that not very long before Solon, say in Egypt or Mesopotamia, the individual self's sense of its own distinctness was weak, while even in Homer it is seldom conspicuous.[3]

Since I shall attempt, in the following pages, to characterize Solon's poetic self-consciousness a little further, it is well to make

[3] Bruno Snell's *The Discovery of the Mind*, trans. Rosenmeyer (Cambridge, Mass. 1953) analyzes the discovery of the self, though only incidentally. The attempt to describe and evaluate the "spiritual" components of man is Snell's main theme. His arguments are often enlightening for the present question of the discovery of the self in literature. Cf. also, on the place of Solon in the development of Greek *Geistesgeschichte*, Schmid-Stählin, *Gesch. d. gr. Literatur* (Munich 1929) 1. 1.368–71, and Friedrich Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus* (Ithaca 1949) 107–23, where Solon's spiritual effort is stimulatingly placed relative to those of Hesiod and Aeschylus.

a preliminary qualification which holds generally for the Greek poets in their quest for the self. Those poets were not in search of an ineffable essence in themselves. On the whole, the soul in the Christian sense was not what they tried to express or to discuss through their expressions. They looked on themselves as parts of the natural world and took it for granted that their experiences and attitudes were expressible in natural and accessible language. Far from a man like Solon was the refined worry of a Gide or Malraux that the very words he wrote about himself might be simply masks to hide himself from himself.[4]

II

In the fragment I have considered above, Solon expresses no *deep* awareness of his self: I have tried to stress only his surprisingly "objective" perception of himself, as a distinct entity among other selves. This kind of perception does not set him apart from other Greek lyric poets but, on the whole, it is rarer with most than with Solon. Archilochus, for example, tells us a good deal about himself: what he loves, what he hates, how the sense-world strikes him. But into all this "expression of himself" he integrates little awareness of the distinct nature and position of his own self. This is what limits his self-consciousness: his self has not yet been brought into a system of defining relations. He writes

> Ἐν δορὶ μέν μοι μᾶζα μεμαγμένη, ἐν δορὶ δ'οἶνος
> Ἰσμαρικός, πίνω δ'ἐν δορὶ κεκλιμένος.

We feel we know a lot about the poet from this famous revelation, and it is clear that he has raised the physiognomy of his nature into reason and form here. Yet his statements emerge too directly *out of* the self to include any reflexive awareness of the self. This is generally true of Sappho and Alcman too, for instance.

With Solon the "outer" conditions for such reflectivity were more favorable than with these other poets. In his youth he was an *homme d'affaires* and traveled in highly cultivated circles in Ionia. He was from a good family and knew the best men of

[4] On this distinctive characteristic of Greek lyric poetry, cf. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia* I, trans. Highet (New York 1939) 114 ff. I owe a great deal, here, to Jaeger's discussion. His arguments gain in strength, it seems, for being part of an over-all vision of Greek culture.

Athens. More important, however, is the fact that he had an interest in politics from the time of his youth, and in middle age, in 594, became archon of Athens with exceptional powers. From this position he gave new laws, new currency, and a new constitution to his fellow-citizens. As archon he was called on continually to mediate between the aristocracy and the common people. This difficult life in the public eye, with the demands it made on Solon's natural integrity and decency, no doubt forced him to a clearer awareness of himself, of his own nature, and of his "position," in the intellectual sense. Caught between cross-fires of opposing batteries, he came to realize what he stood for and therefore, inevitably, to have a better idea of what he was. In these circumstances, too, we may contrast him with other Greek lyric poets: Archilochus the mercenary soldier, Sappho the lover, Alcman who, according to Heraclides Ponticus, was an emancipated slave.

These "outer" conditions of Solon's self-awareness are surely relevant here, for they are continually integrated, as subjects as well as ingredients of attitudes, in his verse. We might look, in order to clarify this point, at three poems, starting with one of his most famous elegies:

> *Δήμῳ μὲν γὰρ ἔδωκα τόσον κράτος, ὅσσον ἐπαρκεῖ,*
> *τιμῆς οὔτ' ἀφελὼν οὔτ' ἐπορεξάμενος·*
> *οἳ δ' εἶχον δύναμιν καὶ χρήμασιν ἦσαν ἀγητοί,*
> *καὶ τοῖς ἐφρασάμην μηδὲν ἀεικὲς ἔχειν·*
> *ἕστην δ' ἀμφιβαλὼν κρατερὸν σάκος ἀμφοτέροισιν,*
> *νικᾶν δ' οὐκ εἴασ' οὐδετέρους ἀδίκως.*[5]
>
> (Fr. 5)

We may notice, again, the confident and skillful prosody. Solon has given the poem the naturalness of a calm mind. But especially interesting for the present question is the way in which the form echoes the view-point. The poem is divided into three "couplets," each of them closed, as frequently in the Greek elegy. The first couplet coincides with Solon's statement of just how much he gave to "the people," while the second couplet does the same

[5] "To the common people I have given such a measure of privilege as sufficeth them, neither robbing them of the rights they had, nor holding out the hope of greater ones; and I have taken equal thought for those who were possessed of power and who were looked up to because of their wealth, careful that they, too, should suffer no indignity. I have taken a stand which enables me to hold a stout shield over both groups, and I have allowed neither to triumph unjustly over the other."

for the statement about the aristocracy. In each case the talk of limited giving is reinforced precisely by the formal limits of the poem. Just as the "idea" of the final couplet unifies the "ideas" of the first two couplets, so the last couplet appears as a kind of formal crown to the poem. The three distinct acts of Solon are marked off and "formalized" by the structure of the poem.

Solon's image of "casting a strong shield over both factions" is successful and clear, provided it is not pressed into its sensuous detail. Nor is such pressing required, because Solon's poetry is unusually non-sensuous, relying little, for example, on exact visual imagery. Thus one is ready to read such an image as that of the shield chiefly for its "conceptual drift." The drift is clear. Solon saw himself as a strong, impartial leader, as he informs us in this poem, and as such he both unified—clamped down on, even—both factions of the city and cast a symbol of protection—the shield—over both of them. In the casting of the shield, then, Solon tries to make it clear that he is not merely prescribing bounds for his society but that he is also its unifier and protector. The poem develops a surprisingly complex attitude of Solon toward himself. It is characteristic of his mind that no trace of "egotism" enters this attitude, no foolish or imprudent self-praise.

In another poem, written in iambic trimeters (Frs. 36, 37), Solon expresses this awareness of his self's political context more dramatically. It is the famous poem in which he relates the four good things he has done for Athens. He has freed the land from bondage (mortgages), he has brought many Athenians back home, he has freed many Athenians from slavery, and he has given laws to the good and bad alike. In the fragment (37) which belongs to the end of that poem he says that if he had done what his opponents had wanted, the city would have been bereft of many men (*πολλῶν ἂν ἀνδρῶν ἥδ' ἐχηρώθη πόλις*). At the end, we read:

τῶν οὕνεκ' ἀρχὴν πάντοθεν κυκεύμενος
ὡς ἐν κυσὶν πολλαῖσιν ἐστράφην λύκος.[6]

This time Solon has united a clear, strong image to his forceful iambs, achieving a peculiarly final statement of his political

[6] "This was the reason why I stood out like a wolf amidst a pack of hounds, defending myself against attacks from every side."

troubles. In a way we are reminded of fr. 33—the first one considered in this paper—by the visual objectivity with which Solon sees himself here. Seldom do Sappho, expressing her love-consumed self, or Archilochus his passionate, brutal self, seem to be able to stand beyond themselves and assess their natures with so clear an eye as Solon does here. Seldom does Solon, for that matter, translate his self-consciousness into visual terms.

As a final example of Solon's political self-awareness, let me mention a fragment (32) in which his distinctively ethical self is his theme.

> . . . Εἰ δὲ γῆς ἐφεισάμην
> πατρίδος, τυραννίδος δὲ καὶ βίης ἀμειλίχου
> οὐ καθηψάμην, μιάνας καὶ καταισχύνας κλέος,
> οὐδὲν αἰδεῦμαι· πλέον γὰρ ὧδε νικήσειν δοκέω
> πάντας ἀνθρώπους.[7]

The *ouden aideumai* is a potent understatement, reminding us that Solon's language is always full of character. It introduces here a direct statement of moral principle in which Solon himself emerges, rather anti-poetically, from the surface of his verse and addresses us with an unaccustomed edifying voice. (Just as Solon is never egotistic, so he is almost never moralistic, despite his moral convictions.) Solon is assessing his political achievement and asserting the unity of moral behavior with right political action. He asserts this not as a facile gnomic idea but as a comment on his own experience in the political world. Even in the case of the clause *pleon gar* . . . it is important to see what a conquest over ordinary language and ordinary sentiment has been won. In Solon's case it appears to be won precisely by his attention to his own nature and its experiences.

III

The evidence of Solon's self-awareness scarcely goes farther than these few fragments which I have assembled. Some 283 verses of Solon are extant, and few of them directly concern the present question. It may be worth while, however, before going on to a

[7] "If I spared my fatherland and did not lay hold upon a despotism of harshness and force, staining and defiling my reputation thereby, I feel no shame for that. I believe that in this way I shall so much the more show my superiority over other men."

more general conclusion, to draw together a few observations suggested by the poems already discussed.

As I have said, Solon did not seek for the self as an ineffable spirit in him. In this he was like the other Greek lyric poets, in fact like the makers of Greek poetry in general. In Homer there is the address *to* the self. In most of the lyric poets expression *of* self is the chief step made toward the discovery of the "I." Yet such "address" and "expression" are different from "reflection back onto one's self." Solon is exceptional for his "reflectiveness" in this sense. In his poetry, to be sure, we find him chiefly concerned with the public characteristics of his self, an interest which was to be expected from so publicly oriented a man. In the fragments considered above, Solon has been looking back (in time as well as in "space") on the events of his moral life: its decisions, actions, situations. He looks back, as if from a great distance, on these events with an innate nobility of vision, with what Fränkel calls "unfeierlichen Pathos, das für seine Haltung und Dichtung bezeichnend ist."[8] His self presents itself to him with none of the immediacy of its "accidents" such as its sense-impressions. Nor does it appear as a center of reason or aesthetic appreciation, although in its poetic incarnation it is translated aesthetically. His self emerges through the language in which he presents it as a generative core of his moral life. There is nothing ineffable about it, however, as Solon seems to have no doubts that his language can discover this self.

It remains to consider Solon's distinctive self-awareness briefly in relation to his whole vision of life. One example may be enough to suggest that relation and even to indicate the importance of Solon's self-consciousness in Greek *Geistesgeschichte*, though this last effort has been made often and successfully. Solon is aware of his own self as a center of moral events. It is no surprise, then, to see that he looks on other selves as that, too. He continues the tradition, first evident among the Greeks as early as Homer, of calling upon the individual to grow conscious of his moral responsibilities. In Homer the heroic Sarpedon and the sage Mentor call on others to fulfill their moral beings. Hesiod

[8] Hermann Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums* (New York 1951) 292. Fränkel sees clearly into the characteristics of Solon's verse and is willing, like Jaeger, to consider Solon primarily as a poet. Fränkel's fidelity to the text tself generates his "realistic" aesthetic interpretations.

had done this in the *Works and Days* where, generalizing from his own experience with an unjust brother, he had clearly insisted that *Dikê* is a real principle and one which must be heeded. Hesiod had spoken in universal terms in the conviction that justice is equally an obligation on every man, whether he is a king or a peasant. Solon makes this same projection from his own experience, insisting on the absolute wrongness of *dysnomia* and the absolute rightness of *eunomia*. Both of these principles, he claimed, present themselves to every individual and cannot be eluded. Solon's awareness of his moral self is clearly related to this insistence on the moral responsibility of every self.[9]

This appeal to the individual conscience is made with great force in Solon's long poem *Eis Athênaious* (fr. 4). That poem opens with a diatribe against the injustice of the leading, insatiable citizens, culminating in the general charge that they neglect Justice, *οὐδὲ φυλάσσονται σεμνὰ θέμεθλα Δίκης* (line 14). For this reason Dikê brings slavery and strife into the city:

> *οὕτω δημόσιον κακὸν ἔρχεται οἰκαδ' ἑκάστῳ,*
> *αὐλειοι δ'ἔτ' ἔχειν οὐκ ἐθέλουσι θύραι,*
> *ὑψηλὸν δ' ὑπὲρ ἕρκος ὑπέρθορεν, εὗρε δὲ πάντως,*
> *εἰ καί τις φεύγων ἐν μυχῷ ἢ θαλάμου.*[10]
>
> (27–30)

The picture of the city haunted to its last nook by evil is one of the great visions of Greek poetry. Of special relevance here is the fact that this evil, which follows every man (*hekastôi*) into his home, is the product of a discord in the state (*stasis*) which was caused *by a few men* (*δήμου θ'ἡγεμόνων ἄδικος νόος*, line 7). Individual evil, that is, can cause a flood of evil for a whole state. Solon emphasizes here the moral responsibility of the individual in his community. In his elegy *Eis heauton* (fr. 13) he had emphasized the individual's responsibility to his descendants, or *genos*.

[9] In addition to the important discussions of Solon's *Dikê* and *eunomia* in Solmsen (above, note 3), cf. Gregory Vlastos, "Solonian Justice," *CP* 41 (1946) 65–83. That article considers *Dikê* as a creative principle which works to join a community of like-minded citizens. Vlastos documents his argument thoroughly and develops it convincingly.

[10] "Thus public calamity cometh to the house of every individual, and a man is no longer safe within the gates of his own court, which refuse him their protection. It leapeth over the garden-wall, however high it be, and surely findeth him out, though he run and hide himself in the inmost corner of his chamber."

Speaking of the man who is unjust-minded (ἀλιτρόν/θυμὸν ἔχῃ), he says

ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν αὐτίκ' ἔτισεν, ὁ δ' ὕστερον· εἰ δὲ φύγωσιν
αὐτοί, μηδὲ θεῶν μοῖρ' ἐπιοῦσα κίχῃ,
ἦλυθε πάντως αὖτις· ἀναίτιοι ἔργα τίνουσιν
ἢ παῖδες τούτων ἢ γένος ὧν ὀπίσω.[11]

(29–32)

In one way or another, the individual's moral behavior has significance which goes far beyond himself. For that reason, Solon is saying, the individual needs to know his moral self. This insistence of Solon's, I have said, seems to be related to his own self-awareness. It might even be said—if one were to reconstruct Solon's psychic structure out of fragments—that his own self-consciousness is the ground for his belief in the importance of self-awareness in others. Yet simply stating this relationship makes the importance of the context of Solon's self-awareness clear.

If, then, Solon's distinctive form of self-consciousness is connected with his consciousness of the "situation" of the self in general, then his very self-consciousness becomes an ingredient in his *historical* achievement. That achievement was many-sided, of course: Solon was a creative law-giver, economic reformer, and politician—in the Greek sense—as well as a poet. There was unity to his efforts, however. It lay in the conviction of the worth of the individual self's moral development. We need not suppose that Solon admired Dikê on abstract grounds:

εὐθεῖαν εἰς ἕκαστον ἁρμόσας δίκην . . .

(Fr. 36, line 17)

He admired it for its power to bring a harmonious condition into the state, in which each man could find his place and direction for growth. The same motive, no doubt, urged Solon to free the

[11] "One man payeth his penalty early, another late. If the guilty man himself escape and the fate of the gods come not upon him and overtake him not, it cometh full surely in aftertime: the innocent pay for his offense—his children or his children's children in later generations." (Cf., for a strikingly parallel viewpoint, Hesiod *WD* 240–1).

Among the many discussions of this complex, oddly organized poem, I have been helped especially by C. M. Bowra, "Solon," *Early Greek Elegists* (Cambridge, Mass. 1938) 89–100, and by Richmond Lattimore, "The First Elegy of Solon," *AJP* 68 (1947) 161–79. I have attended mainly to less complex or ambitious poems of Solon in this paper only because they are more relevant to my subject.

land from slavery, that is, from mortgages which kept the majority of Athenians in debt and therefore unable to develop with the moral self-respect which Solon found in the self. For the same reasons, we may guess, Solon opened the ecclesia to the thetes, and the judicial courts to everyone. It is important, of course, not to consider Solon a committed democrat in these acts. It is clear in many ways that he valued the traditional organization of society: clear, for instance, in his admiration for rightfully inherited wealth. Yet he was a democrat to the extent that democracy meant a collection of morally responsible, that is, self-aware, individuals.[12]

The consciousness of the importance of each moral self on which, I think, Solon's historical achievement rests, may be related to his own self-consciousness, as I have said. This point gives peculiar importance to the fragments which have been analyzed here. They permit us to see Solon dealing intimately with his own being and in a manner unique among Greek lyric poets. His self-consciousness is distinctively moral and radiates an appeal to moral self-consciousness in other men.

[12] For a thorough biographical-historical study of Solon, cf. Linforth (above, note 1) 3–102. His study is very careful, bringing out the details of Solon's activities only to the degree that ascertainable facts permit, preferring prudence to imagination when the choice arises. Kathleen Freeman, *The Work and Life of Solon* (Cardiff 1926), supplies many details on Solon's constitutional innovations.