The Homeric Hymns Study Guide

The Homeric Hymns by Andrew Lang

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This collection of spiritually oriented poems, written in praise of the Classical Greek gods, came into existence over a period of time thousands of years in the past, and provides the clearest base understanding of Classical Greek theosophy available. While repeated scholarship over the centuries has never specifically defined the authors of each poem, and while several translations of the poems have been published without defining a standard order, their central thematic intentions have remained consistently apparent. These are to remind those who hear them of the presence and power of the gods, and to explore the relationship between the gods and humanity.

This collection consists of several poems written in praise of the Classical Greek gods. They are, in fact, poems of praise, glorification, and invocation - many of them, in fact, end with a request for blessing from the god they address. This is the reason that they have earned the designation of "hymn."

There are several hymns of considerable length in the collection. "The Hymn to Demeter" recounts the story of the earth/mother goddess Demeter's obsessed search for her kidnapped daughter, how she neglected the earth as a result of her obsession, and how her joy when her daughter was returned to her brought life back to what her abandonment had left barren. This is an example of one of the fundamental purposes of myth - to explain why things in the world are the way they are. Meanwhile, "The Hymn to Aphrodite" tells of the love goddess's romantic (sexual?) obsession with a mortal, the lengths to which she went to enable their sexual union, and the powerful control she exerted over him once that union had been consummated. This is an example of another of the fundamental purposes of myth - to illuminate the human condition, to illustrate how universal human experiences (i.e., of feeling) actually are by attributing them to the gods. In other words, as the gods are so are humans - and as humans are, so are the gods.

A third long hymn, "The Hymn to Pythian Apollo," narrates the story of how the sun god essentially kidnapped the crew of a sailing ship and commanded them to serve as the guardians of one of his temples. The point here is to remind those who hear the poem of the omnipotent, sometimes selfish, often capricious power of the gods. Yet another hymn of notable length is "The Hymn to Hermes" which, in its narration of the origins of the god who has come to be known as "The Trickster God", performs yet another core function of myth - to explain the origin of an object or tradition. In this case, the object in question is the lyre, one of the most popular musical instruments of the Ancient World.

There are also several shorter hymns to a wide range of deities - the war gods Ares and Athena, the moon goddess Artemis, the hearth goddess Hestia, and the god of wine and revelry, Dionysus. All these poems celebrate the gods' powers and invoke their blessing.

There is only one hymn each in honor of Zeus, the king of the gods, and of Hera, his wife. Both are relatively short, and lack the detail and scope of the longer hymns (and

even of some of the shorter ones). However, both Zeus and Hera appear frequently as figures in the other hymns, all of which are essentially narrative (ie storytelling) in their structural character. In other words, Zeus and Hera are powerful, motivating and defining characters in the narratives of the other gods. This suggests that even the gods are subject to the will of powers greater than their own, a situation that is itself is a manifestation of one of the collection's central thematic statements, and perhaps one of the key purposes of any hymn, Ancient or otherwise. This is the premise that the nature of existence is defined and determined by greater spiritual and/or moral authority.

Introduction

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This collection of spiritually oriented poems, written in praise of the Classical Greek gods, came into existence over a period of time thousands of years in the past, and provides the clearest base understanding of Classical Greek theosophy available. While repeated scholarship over the centuries has never specifically defined the authors of each poem, and while several translations of the poems have been published without defining a standard order, their central thematic intentions have remained consistently apparent. These are to remind those who hear them of the presence and power of the gods, and to explore the relationship between the gods and humanity.

In his introduction to the hymns, the author/translator/editor outlines the essential function of the hymns (poems) in relation to contemporary understanding of Classical Greek mythology and culture (see "Quotes," p.1), relating the spiritual and literary intent of the poets who created the hymns to contemporary understanding of, and perspective on, spirituality (see "Quotes," p. 3).

Introduction Analysis

At the outset, an important point to note about this collection of hymn-like poetry is the contextual definition of the word "Homeric." The introduction clearly suggests that these poems were not necessarily written by Homer himself (see "Important People - Homer"), but by a group of individuals he calls "the Homeric bards," poets who wrote in the style and spiritual tradition of Homer. In other words, the adjective "Homeric" does not identify the author of the poems, but rather their style and perspective, in the same way as dramatic literature might be described as "Shakespearean."

Hymns to the Earth, Artemis, Hera, and the Mother of the Gods

Hymns to the Earth, Artemis, Hera, and the Mother of the Gods Summary

"The Hymn to the Earth"

In this hymn, the poet refers to the earth as "the mother of us all" and praises the earth for her sacredness and her eternal nourishment of humanity. He describes how her blessings manifest in male wisdom, female beauty, the youth and joy of children - "fortune, wealth, it all follows."

"The Hymn to Artemis" and "The Second Hymn to Artemis"

The first is an introduction to the second and longer hymn, which describes Artemis' powerful, remorseless skill at hunting with violent references to the power of her bow juxtaposed with images of her beauty, and of her graceful dancing at the home of her brother when the hunt is over.

"The Hymn to Hera" and "The Hymn to the Mother of the Gods"

The first hymn praises Hera for her eminence and glory, calling her equal in power and influence to her husband Zeus, king of the gods. At the beginning of the second hymn, the poet invokes the power of one of the Muses as he offers praise to the unnamed "mother of all the gods, the mother of all men..."

He describes the goddess' pleasure at the sounds offered up in the goddess' praise, those made by humans, by animals, and nature alike. The hymn concludes with the poet's reference to his greeting "all the other goddesses/with this song" as well."

Hymns to the Earth, Artemis, Hera, and the Mother of the Gods Analysis

These three hymns offer praise to various female gods. Neither the hymn to "...the Earth" nor to "... the Mother of the Gods" identifies the goddess to whom they are addressed, but it can be reasonably assumed that they are to the extremely powerful earth / agriculture goddess Demeter. Meanwhile, the hymns to Artemis are notable for their apparently jarring juxtapositions of the goddess' apparent bloodthirstiness and equally apparent sensuality. Upon further examination, however, the juxtaposition may not be as unlikely as it first appears - these two hymns, like all the others in this section, are essentially celebrations of nature (human, animal, plant, earth, air, etc), and nature is nothing if not full of apparently contradictory states of being.

Students of Greek mythology may note an intriguing irony in the Hymn to Hera. Throughout the many myths in which she appears, Hera most often appears as shrewish, jealous, and vindictive (see "Part 2 - The Third Hymn to Dionysus" and "Part 10 - The Hymn to Pythian Apollo" for examples). Here, however, the poet completely focuses on what might be described as her "good" qualities.

The Hymns to Dionysus

The Hymns to Dionysus Summary

"The Hymn to Dionysus"

This hymn begins with a sensually phrased description of the beautiful god Dionysus, and then narrates the story of the god's capture by the crew of a rogue sailing ship. The poet narrates the argument between a helmsman (who recognizes the holiness of the prisoner) and the captain (who is determined to hold the prisoner for ransom). As the ship sails onward on the captain's orders, vine leaves appear and sprout grapes, and Dionysus transforms himself into a lion, terrorizing the crew. Finally, all the crew but the helmsman jumps overboard, and they are turned into dolphins. The helmsman is richly rewarded, and the hymn concludes with praise of the god (see "Quotes," p. 17).

"The Second Hymn to Dionysus"

This brief hymn begins with a description of how Dionysus, the son of Zeus and the goddess Semele, was raised by nymphs in a secret cave, and grew to a wild, noisy maturity in their company.

"The Third Hymn to Dionysus"

The poet begins this hymn with a list of the possible places in which Dionysus was born and raised, suggesting that to protect the infant Dionysus from jealous Hera, Zeus bore him "far from humankind." The hymn then narrates how Zeus received a prophecy concerning the fate of Dionysus, and concludes with an invocation to Dionysus, "you girl-crazy goat" (see "Quotes", p. 21).

The Hymns to Dionysus Analysis

Dionysus was among the wildest of the gods, a vivid evocation of the animalistic power of nature. This is why he, like the god Pan (see "Part 4 - The Hymn to Pan") is portrayed as being goat-like from the waist down. Impulsive and wild, Dionysus was viewed by poets and dramatists alike as a manifestation of the raw creative impulse, as opposed to Apollo and the Muses who gave order and structure to that impulse.

The fate of the helmsman in the first poem is typical of the fate of human beings who both believe in and succor the gods, while the fate of his fellow crew members is similar to those who don't - they are not necessarily destroyed, but transformed. There is the sense throughout the myths that these and other similar transformations are metaphorically intended to draw humanity away from its tendency towards independent thought and rationality and towards either a more naturalistic way of thinking and being or a way of life more completely submissive to the will of the gods.

The Hymns to Hermes

The Hymns to Hermes Summary

"The Hymn to Hermes"

This hymn, among the longest in the collection, narrates in some detail the early life of the god Hermes and how he came to be known as the Trickster god, the liar god, and the messenger god.

The poet describes how Hermes was born to the nymph Maia after she was impregnated by Zeus who, in the same way as he kept the mother of Dionysus hidden (see Part 2), kept Maia and her child hidden in a cave. The poet writes of how Hermes, the day after he was born, kills a large turtle and used its shell to make a lyre (see "Objects/Places"), but was unable to play it well. That night, Hermes goes out into the world exploring, discovers a herd of cattle sacred to the sun god Apollo, and steals it, craftily doing his best to ensure he is not discovered (one of his tricks is creating a pair of shoes that enables him to fly). After taking the cattle to a cave, Hermes sacrifices two of them to the power of the gods, and then returns to his bed where, at sunrise, Maia discovers him and is not fooled by his silence. She knows he's been naughty, but laughingly forgives him.

Apollo discovers the theft of his cattle and tracks Hermes to the cave. Hermes protests his innocence (see "Quotes," p. 40), but Apollo sees through his lies (see "Quotes," p. 44) and takes him to Mount Olympus (see "Objects/Places") to be interviewed and judged by Zeus (who, incidentally, is father to both gods). Apollo puts his case before Zeus, who then gives Hermes the opportunity to defend himself. Hermes' spirited, lying defense causes Zeus to laugh, and Apollo to recognize the playfulness of his half brother. In spite of his amusement, however, Zeus orders Hermes to return the cattle.

After they leave Olympus, the poet writes, Hermes plays the lyre for Apollo. After Apollo expresses his pleasure at the music, Hermes gives him the lyre, and he (Apollo) is immediately able to play it beautifully. Apollo then bestows various blessings on the younger god, in exchange for Hermes promising to never steal anything from him again. He also gives Hermes a powerful wand (see "Objects/Places"), and entrusts him with the responsibility of being the messenger of the gods. The hymn concludes with a reference to Hermes being both a helper and a cheat to humanity.

"The Second Hymn to Hermes"

This hymn is essentially a recap of the first part of the previous hymn, telling the story of Hermes' birth. It concludes with a description of the god as "dispenser of favors, guide, giver of good things."

The Hymns to Hermes Analysis

There are, in essence, three different sorts of myths. The first is the myth of illumination, in which the nature of being human is explored and defined by stories of the various immortal, archetypal embodiments of human characteristics. The second is the myth of origin, which offers an explanation of how something thing came into being - the universe, the earth, human beings, animals, plants, objects, relationships between any/all of the above. The third is, for lack of a better phrase, a fairy tale - a fanciful, entertaining story that may or may not have a moral attached to it. Each of the hymns in this collection is a manifestation of one, the other, or all these sorts of myths, with "The First Hymn to Hermes" being a vivid example of how a myth can have elements of all three.

On the first level, that of illumination, "The First Hymn ..." can be seen as a metaphoric suggestion that the soul is what it is the moment it comes into the world. Hermes, being a god, both displays his essential character and matures much earlier than a mortal human being would, but is nevertheless a portrayal of a soul/spirit that emerges into life with its identity defined. Do human babies emerge with such clear personalities? While it's rare that a day-old human child could steal a herd of cattle or invent flying sandals, most if not all children display essential, and individual, characteristics soon after they're born. Other illuminative aspects of this story include the way the warring brothers eventually find a degree of peace in their relationship, the loving tolerance of Hermes' mother, and the authority of the father, all of which might well be described as archetypal or universal in their manifestation of aspects of humanity.

As a myth of creation, the noteworthy element here is the story of the creation of the lyre (see "Objects/Places"), telling the story not only of the invention of one of, if not the most, predominant musical instruments of the Classical Greek period but also of the origins of music itself. It might not be going too far to suggest that the harmony that emerges between the two half-brothers is, in fact, a metaphorical representation of the potential harmony between two (or more) lines of music.

In terms of the third level of mythic meaning, that of the fairy tale, the story of Hermes' antics is undeniably entertaining. The reader can't help but be amused by the cheekiness and inventiveness of the young god, but also might not help but be just a little bit wiser as the result of the friendly chastening Hermes receives at the hands of his older half-brother. In other words, in the same way as the stories of Cinderella or Peter Rabbit offer gentle opinions of morality disguised by engaging, clever storytelling, the story of Hermes is a playful cautionary tale warning of the dangers of crossing too many boundaries at the wrong tame, and of the presence of consequences for crossing those boundaries.

The Hymns to Ares, Herakles, Ausklepios, and Pan

The Hymns to Ares, Herakles, Ausklepios, and Pan Summary

"The Hymn to Ares"

This hymn, unlike many of the others, begins with a frequent repetition of the god's name juxtaposed with his various attributes - "superior force," "has armor of bronze," "leader of most just men," etc. The poet asks the god to both help him find the courage to "shake off cruel cowardice," and restrain "that shrill voice in my heart that provokes me to enter the chilling din of battle." His final prayer is for Ares to help him "linger in the safe laws of peace..."

"The Hymn to Herakles"

This hymn to the great mythic warrior (more commonly known as Hercules) reveals him to be yet another child of Zeus by yet another woman other than Hera, refers to his many wanderings and feats of strength, and his ending up living as a god on Mount Olympus. The poem concludes with a prayer for "excellence" and "wealth".

"The Hymn to Asclepios"

This brief hymn pays homage to Asclepios, the minor god of healing.

"The Hymn to Pan"

This hymn to the minor god of nature and wild music describes him as being a goat from the waist down, born to Hermes, abandoned by his mother, presented by his father to the rest of the gods, and celebrated by those same gods "because he had delighted the minds of all".

The Hymns to Ares, Herakles, Ausklepios, and Pan Analysis

Where the first four hymns of this collection, and the three hymns to follow, focus their poetry and praise on female deities, these four hymns can be seen as focusing on manifestations of maleness. In the first, the drive to confrontation and war is ironically, and intriguingly, juxtaposed with peace, what the poet seems to believe is the inevitable consequence of war, or at least the threat of war. It's an interesting idea - Ares the god of inevitable peace as opposed to the god of war, which he has been known as throughout history.

The second hymn to maleness is to an embodiment/symbol of strength, the half-man/half-god Herakles. The third hymn can be perceived as being a hymn to maleness because at the time the hymn was written, healing practices were almost exclusively the purview of men. Finally, the fourth hymn is a hymn to juvenile, immature masculine energy, expressed in wildness and revelry.

The Hymns to Aphrodite

The Hymns to Aphrodite Summary

"The Hymn to Aphrodite"

This hymn begins with commentary on the three goddesses whom Aphrodite, cannot influence - the three virgin goddesses of war (Athena), the hunt (Artemis) and the home (Hestia). Its focus then shifts to narration of Aphrodite's infatuation with the beautiful cowherd Anchises, telling how Zeus put desire for a mortal man in her heart as a balance for her so frequently putting desire for mortal women in HIS (Zeus') heart. The narrative describes Aphrodite's elaborate and sensual preparations for her encounter with Anchises and her disguising herself as a mortal girl to seduce him.

Narration also describes how Anchises is immediately and completely bewitched by her beauty, his prayer that she be telling the truth (since mortal men sleeping with immortals can lead to destruction) and his eventual sexual encounter with her, after which he falls asleep. When Aphrodite resumes her immortal form and wakes him, he immediately becomes terrified, begging for mercy. Aphrodite tells him that she has become pregnant, that their child will grow to be a great warrior named Aeneas, that he (the child) will be treated well by the gods, and that when he is five years old he will be brought back to earth to meet his father. She then commands Anchises to remain silent about her true identity and disappears.

"The Second Hymn to Aphrodite"

The hymn begins with the description of how the beautiful, sensual Aphrodite was born from the foam of the sea, and presented to the gods on Olympus, where she was immediately welcomed, especially by the male gods who all yearned to marry her.

"The Third Hymn to Aphrodite"

This brief hymn is a poetic description of Aphrodite's seductive power, a metaphor for the seductive power of sexual love.

The Hymns to Aphrodite Analysis

The story of Aphrodite and Anchises functions on all three levels of meaning discussed in Part 3 above. In terms of the myth of illumination, the story serves to illustrate the inevitable, irresistible power of desire, which (it seems) even the gods are unable to resist. In terms of the second, the myth of origin, the story defines the beginnings not of an object, but of an individual - the legendary warrior Aeneas, a Trojan prince who (according to myth) eventually became one of the early emperors of Rome. In terms of the third, the myth as fairy tale, the story (entertaining in its own right), is perhaps an

archetypal model for the many entertaining stories of love between two people that comes into existence as the result of disguise.

Meanwhile, the other two brief hymns add layers of depth and meaning to the portrait of the goddess that emerges in the first hymn, adding to the sense that like so many of the other gods, Aphrodite is an embodiment and/or manifestation of a fundamental force of nature.

The Hymns to Hephaistos, Poseidon, Zeus and the Muses

The Hymns to Hephaistos, Poseidon, Zeus and the Muses Summary

"The Hymn to Hephaistos"

This hymn, written in unusually short lines, praises the god who brought the work of men "who formerly lived in caves like animals" into wider acceptance and ease. For the origins of Hephaistos, see Part 10, "The Hymn to Pythian Apollo."

"The Hymn to Poseidon"

This brief hymn to the god Poseidon evokes his power over the sea, and prays for his blessing on the ships and sailors that travel on it.

"The Hymn to Zeus"

This equally brief hymn to Zeus speaks plainly and simply of his wisdom and power, praising him for being "the most famous of all" and "the greatest."

"The Hymn to the Muses"

The final brief hymn in this section praises the Muses, related as they are to the work of Apollo and the wisdom of Zeus, for the blessings they bring to the life and work of those whom they favor (poets, bards and singers).

The Hymns to Hephaistos, Poseidon, Zeus and the Muses Analysis

These four hymns are, perhaps surprisingly, very brief evocations of some powerful mythic figures. Hephaestos was the ugly and deformed, but nevertheless extremely clever and inventive blacksmith of the gods. He is, perhaps, an embodiment of the essential truth that one should not judge by appearances. Poseidon was the god of the sea and of earthquakes, whose power was particularly and carefully revered by the sea-faring Greeks. Zeus was, of course, the king of all the gods, all-powerful and all-wise.

Meanwhile, the Muses were Zeus' daughters, the goddesses of the arts. While their power may not have manifested with the same physical intensity as those of the other gods in this section, they had considerable influence over history, music, dance, poetry, and drama. Their influence made learning about the gods, praising them, praying to them, evoking their aid and in all ways and developing the relationship between them

and humanity both possible and relatively easy. In other words, the Muses symbolized and manifested the literary, intellectual communion between the humanity of the time its deities.

The Hymn to Demeter

The Hymn to Demeter Summary

"The Hymn to Demeter"

This lengthy hymn combines two mythic stories of the earth/mother/agricultural goddess Demeter. It begins with a brief narration of Demeter's beloved daughter Persephone being kidnapped into the underworld by "He who Receives so Many," later revealed to be Hades, the Lord of the Dead. The poem then narrates Demeter's increasingly desperate search for her daughter, and how the crops of the whole world suffered as the result of her neglectful, obsessive wandering. Narration then describes how Demeter, disguised as an old woman, was welcomed into the home of King Celeus, whose wife Metanira had just given birth to a son that both she and her husband had longed for. In gratitude for being so unconditionally well treated, Demeter begins the process of making the baby immortal by holding him every night in the fire and keeping him injury free.

One night, however, Metanira sees what she's doing and reacts with fear. Demeter loses her temper, decrees that the child will not, after all, be immortal, and abandons the family. She then withdraws into a hermit-like existence, refusing the efforts of all the gods (including Zeus) to draw her back into the world. Eventually Zeus sends Hermes to Hades to convey the order that Persephone is to be set free. Unwilling and/or unable to refuse the will of the king of the gods, Hades does so, but tricks Persephone into eating three seeds of a pomegranate, which entraps her into returning to the underworld at least part of the year. Nevertheless, when Persephone and her mother are reunited (see "Quotes," p. 129), Demeter restores her blessings to the world, offering guidance to those leaders who have pleased her (see "Quotes," p. 133), and also rejoins her fellow gods on Mount Olympus. The hymn concludes with the poet asking Demeter to bless him with "the kind of life my heart wants."

"The Second Hymn to Demeter"

This very brief Hymn offers praise to both Demeter and Persephone, asking their blessing on the poet's city and on his song.

The Hymn to Demeter Analysis

The first "Hymn to Demeter," like most of the longer hymns in this collection ("...to Hermes," "...to Dionysus," "...to Aphrodite," etc.) functions on all three mythic levels. As a myth of illumination, it offers a portrayal of the archetypal human experience of love and loss, specifically those of a maternal nature. As a myth of origin, it explains why there are seasons - when Persephone is in the underworld with Hades, the earth is dark and barren ... fall becomes winter. When she is in the upper world with Demeter, the earth is fruitful and productive ... spring becomes summer.

Finally, on the third level of myth (that of the fairy tale), this story contains the elements of the most entertaining stories - intense feeling, disguise, loss and reunion, suspense, colorful characters, the works. This aspect of mythic storytelling is perhaps one of the reasons the myths have endured for so many centuries - they're not only moral lessons, they're not only explanations of how things came into being, they're also just plain good stories.

The Hymns to Athena and Hestia

The Hymns to Athena and Hestia Summary

"The Hymn to Athena" and "The Second Hymn to Athena"

The first hymn to the goddess of wisdom and the homely arts (weaving, etc.) recounts her origin - how she sprang fully formed and fully born from the forehead of Zeus, both the gods and the men who witnessed her birth reacting with fearful awe. In the second, the poet praises Athena's attributes as the powerful goddess of war, and asks to be blessed with "good luck and happiness."

"The Hymn to Hestia" and "The Second Hymn to Hestia"

Here the poet honors Hestia with praise for her eternal, inescapable presence in the hearths and homes of both gods and humanity, asking her to bless his home in the same way that she blesses that of Apollo.

The Hymns to Athena and Hestia Analysis

These brief hymns celebrate the influence of two powerful goddesses. While Athena is the more flamboyant figure (witness the story of her birth as recounted in the first hymn, as well as the influential role she plays in stories like that of the Trojan War), she is nevertheless a goddess somewhat limited in scope. Hestia, on the other hand, while a much less showy figure and a lack of presence in the great myths and stories, is more universal in her presence. Because she is the goddess of the hearth and the home, and because wherever there was human beings there was a fire and therefore a hearth, therefore a home (of sorts), and therefore the goddess. In other words, she and her spirit and power were truly omnipresent, whereas the other gods tended to manifest and/or evoke only certain circumstances.

The Hymns to the Sun, Moon and the Dioscuri

The Hymns to the Sun, Moon and the Dioscuri Summary

"The Hymn to the Sun"

This hymn describes, without naming him, the origins of the sun god Apollo, and also the manifestations of his light and power. The poet metaphorically likens journey of the sun across the sky to that of the god driving a golden chariot drawn by mighty horses, and concludes with a prayer for "a life that is going to satisfy my heart."

"The Hymn to the Moon"

At the beginning of this hymn, the poet invokes the power and grace of the Muses as he sings the praises of the Moon, whom he names Selene. Like the journey of the sun above, the journey of the moon across the sky is metaphorically likened to that of a mighty chariot drawn by great horses. The poet also suggests that the monthly regularity with which the moon becomes full is "an assurance, a sign to men." Finally, the poet describes Selene's sexual union with Zeus, the product of which was a beautiful daughter.

"The Hymn to the Dioscuri" and "The Second Hymn to the Dioscuri"

"Dioscuri" is the collective name of the immortal twins, Castor and Pollux, born to yet another minor goddess impregnated by Zeus (referred to in the brief second poem as "the dark cloud"). The poet describes how the twins protect sailors, "shooting through the air on their yellow wings" as they calm the storms of the sea. Sailors rejoice, the poet writes, when the Dioscuri make themselves apparent.

The Hymns to the Sun, Moon and the Dioscuri Analysis

These four brief poems celebrate celestial bodies highly important to the Classical Greeks (as was indeed all the many lights in the sky) - the sun, the moon, and one of the most notable constellations in the Greek night sky (Gemini, or The Twins). Interesting elements to note here are the fact that the sun god isn't named, while the goddess of the moon is given a name different from the goddess traditionally associated with the moon, Artemis. The reason for the former is not clear - perhaps the first hymn is intended to be a hymn to the power and purpose of the sun, as opposed to its humanized identity. The reason for the second (the alternative name for the goddess of the moon) is clearer, thanks to history. Throughout the land of Classical Greece and in

the early stages of its civilization, the same "entities" (sun, earth, sea, etc) were called different things in different regions. In terms of the moon, Selene was one such regional name, Artemis another, and Hecate yet a third. As geo-political Greece became more unified, so too did spiritual/philosophical Greece, with the result that the different manifestations of various gods became unified under one identity.

It's also important to note that the Hymns to the Sun and Moon are both origin hymns, explaining why the sun and moon do what they do - travel the sky, alternately bringing light and leaving darkness behind.

The Hymns to Apollo

The Hymns to Apollo Summary

"The Hymn to Delian Apollo"

This hymn describes the birth and origins of the sun god Apollo, born to the minor goddess Leto after being impregnated by Zeus. The hymn narrates her search for a place to give birth, naming and describing each region of Greece that refused her out of fear of her unborn son's power. The rocky, barren island of Delos is the only place that will accept her, saying it's hated by all the Greeks and pleading for Apollo to glorify it with a temple. Leto swears the unbreakable vow of the gods (see "Quotes," p. 154) that Apollo will bring only blessings to Delos, leading the island to welcome her and her child happily. After a narrative of Apollo's difficult birth (complicated by the vulnerable jealousy of Hera), the narrative celebrates Apollo's beauty and musical gifts, as well as the blessings he brought to Delos and its people.

"The Hymn to Pythian Apollo"

This hymn narrates the search of the god Apollo for the perfect location in which to build his temple which, as the poet writes, he wants to serve as the home for his Oracle (see "Objects/Places"). The poet narrates how he is turned away from at least two occasions because those locations (i.e., the land itself) are reluctant, for various reasons, to play host to the god. After a narrative diversion into the origins of a giant dragon slain by Apollo (origins that have to do with vengeful Hera, jealous of Zeus' many infidelities), the poet then describes Apollo's manipulation of a ship full of sailors from Crete. Disguised as a dolphin and then a sea monster, he guides/drives them to the land of Crisus and from there to Mount Parnassus (see "Objects/Places"), where he tells them their home is no longer in Crete, but there at the site of his temple (see "Quotes," p. 177) which he commands them to take care of. The sailors are at first reluctant, but bow to the glory and the will of the god (not to mention his threat of retribution if they disobey him) and celebrate both his glory and their new lives.

The Hymns to Apollo Analysis

These two long hymns are essentially narratives of how the same god (Apollo, god of the sun and of music) manifests in two different locations. Noteworthy elements include the references to Apollo's legendary Oracle (which appears, in one form or another, in almost every Greek legend), more in-depth portrayals of Hera than are offered anywhere else in the hymns, and the endowment of various lands with a human voice.

Perhaps the most notable element of this section is the portrayal, in the Pythian hymn, of the god's willful, literally self-serving control over hapless humanity that really, has no choice but to obey the will of the god. Here, perhaps, is one of the most profound examples of myth's function as illumination of the human condition - specifically in this

case, the condition of being both unquestioningly and inevitably subject to the will of a greater will.

Characters

Zeus and Hera

Zeus and Hera were the king and queen of the gods in Classical Greek mythology. Referred to in many hymns but the central figure in only one (see Section 6), and a brief one at that, Zeus was the king of all the Greek gods. Wise and powerful, he was nevertheless weak when it came to his sexual desires for beautiful females, minor goddesses or mortal women alike. The hymns frequently refer to him as disguising himself in order to be with these women. On one notable occasion ("The Hymn[s] to the Dioscuri," Part 9) he is portrayed as disguising himself as a dark cloud, a perhaps unintentionally ironic reference to the misery his desire brought into the lives of the females he loves and, at times, their children.

The hymns refer just as frequently, and not without relation, to the vindictive jealousy Zeus' wife, Hera. Like her mighty husband, she is the central figure in only one hymn (see Section 1), but plays a defining role in several others - or at least in the origins of the gods REFERRED to in several others. Her (reasonable?) anger at being so often betrayed by Zeus with so many other women leads many of those same women to hide themselves and their offspring from her, with Zeus' help. On occasions, she is referred to as being a source of wisdom for the king of the gods, but apparently not to the point where he became wise enough to keep his libido in his pants - or, in the case of the Ancient Greeks, inside his toga.

Aphrodite

Perhaps one of the most generally well known of the classical gods, Aphrodite was the goddess of sensual love, beauty and desire (for a description of her origin, see "The Second Hymn to Aphrodite," Part 5). Historians and mythologists have argued that among all the Classical gods and goddesses, Aphrodite (or as the Ancient Romans called her, Venus) is, in her way, the most powerful of them all, since many of the other gods, even Zeus, can and often do fall under the spell of the sensual, emotional desire that she embodies, invokes and awakens.

It's interesting to note, however, that the first (and most lengthy) hymn dedicated to her in this collection lists three goddesses, powerful and venerated in their own right (Athena, Artemis, Hestia) who are able to withstand Aphrodite's influence. It's also interesting to note that Aphrodite is one of the very few, if not the only, major member of the Olympian circle of gods that does not have some familial relationship with Zeus and/or Hera. Aphrodite was born from the foam of the sea, which perhaps makes her even more of a force of nature than some of the other gods/goddesses. One final note about Aphrodite - according to mythic stories not referred to in this collection, she married the crippled Hephaestos (see below - also Part 6), which suggests that even she was not immune to her own unpredictable, irresistible powers - of love and desire.

Apollo

Of all the gods referred to in this collection, Apollo is the one who appears the most, and in two of the longest poems. This is perhaps the result of his being the god of the sun, which the Ancient Greeks recognized as being not only powerfully present but also essential for life. In other words, in the same way as Demeter was an embodiment of the earthly life force, Apollo was an embodiment of the heavenly life force without which the earthly life force could not exist. In this context, therefore, it is interesting to consider whether there's a relationship between this aspect of his power and his simultaneously being the god of music - is there a suggestion here that music itself, like the sun, is necessary for life? Or is this just merely coincidence?

It's interesting, meanwhile, to note that of all the stories of all the gods, a hymn to Apollo is the one that defines the extent of godly power. Specifically, "The Hymn to Pythian Apollo" portrays him as commandeering an entire shipload of human beings (which, to the seafaring Greeks, would have been a VERY big deal) and essentially kidnapping them to work for him in his temple. The sailors have no choice, the god has spoken, his will has been made known, and life as they know it will now be lived on his terms. The motif of godly control over human existence appears throughout mythology, and throughout this collection (witness Aphrodite's orders to Anchises in "The [First] Hymn to Aphrodite," or the inadvertent results of Demeter's grief in "The Hymn to Demeter"), but is for the most part is rarely as ruthlessly expressed as it is in "The Hymn to Pythian Apollo."

Demeter

In contrast to some of the other goddesses (Artemis, Athena, Aphrodite), earth/mother goddess Demeter is less flamboyant and therefore less well known. In her own way, however, she is as influential on the lives of the human beings who both worship her and fall under her influence as, say, Aphrodite. It could be argued, in fact, that her power and influence are even greater. While Aphrodite's range of influence is broad, affecting gods and humanity alike, it is also shallow, influencing a limited range of earthly experience.

On the other hand, the influence of moody Demeter (or Ceres as she was known to the Romans, her name being the source of our word "cereal") literally changes the world. The seasons ebb and flow with her moods, crops wither or flourish depending on her mood and/or her will, land is productive or barren. Humanity's very existence depends on Demeter's bounty, her bestowing of life to that which sustains it. The story of Demeter and Persephone is one of the most significant in all classical mythology, awakening in humanity awareness of the cycle of life and of the simultaneous power and helplessness of a mother's love.

Hades and Persephone

Hades was Zeus's brother, and the Lord of the Dead in the Underworld. In Roman mythology he was known as Pluto, and was a fearsome, lurking, if not particularly active, presence in both mythologies. Persephone (or Proserpina in Rome) was, as discussed above, the daughter of the goddess Demeter. Persephone is one of the most intriguing figures in Classical mythology, caught as she is between the worlds of the living and the dead. Spending equal parts of the year in each world, she is perhaps an embodiment of the potential for communication between the two worlds. In certain spiritual practices, in fact (such as the Tarot), she is perceived as a manifestation and/or evocation of the Freudian principle of the sub-conscious, those feelings/memories/beliefs that exist beneath the surface of, but nonetheless define, our attitudes, actions and relationships.

Dionysus

Dionysus (or Bacchus to the Romans) was the god of wine and celebration, and the emotional (freedom?) wildness that can result from either or a combination of both. Sometimes portrayed as young and beautiful, other times portrayed as older and overweight (as the result of his many indulgences), Dionysus was almost always portrayed as having vine leaves in his hair and with a glass or goblet of something intoxicating in his hand. He was, in essence, an embodiment/manifestation of natural spiritual freedom, which perhaps explains why rituals in his honor eventually evolved into the first plays, which in the broadest terms are themselves ritualistic enactments of experiences of freedom from conventional, traditional behaviors and ways of thought ... not to mention the sometimes destructive consequences of that freedom.

Hermes

Hermes was one of the most multi-tasking of the gods, responsible for carrying messages (between gods and humanity, between gods and each other), healing (see "Objects/Places - Hermes' Wand"), lying, trickery, and gambling. Another of Zeus' illegitimate children by a minor goddess (the earth goddess Maia) and referred to by the Romans as Mercury, Hermes was also one of the fastest gods. Where they were all able to move rapidly between heaven and earth, Hermes could do so faster than anyone as the result of the magical flying shoes he invents in "The Hymn to Hermes," part 3. He plays important roles in several mythic stories, including "The Hymn to Demeter" in this collection (in which he conveys Zeus's command to Hades to let Persephone go).

Ares, Hephaistos, Poseidon

The Greek god of war, known as Mars to the Romans, is one of the most straightforwardly and consistently portrayed gods in Classical mythology. He is the god

of war, of conquest, of military strength ... full stop. The hymn that bears his name (Part 4) is perhaps more evocative of his persona and energy than many of the other hymns in this collection - the language is energetic and driving, much as the god himself is so often portrayed as being. One of the very few myths in which he appears in a non-military role is the story of his affair with Aphrodite, which is brought to an abrupt and humiliating end by the intervention of Hephaistos, Aphrodite's ugly but clever husband. The hymn that bears his name evokes this combination of characteristics quite clearly and engagingly, giving the very clear sense that he is a god of both intelligence and resentment, and of quiet power (as opposed to Ares, who comes across as showy and often somewhat stupid).

Meanwhile, it is perhaps surprising that one of the shortest hymns in this collection honors one of the Greeks' most powerful and respected gods - Poseidon, the god of the sea (Neptune, to the Romans). As previously discussed, the Greeks were a seafaring people, and thus put great care into their relationships with the god who controlled it, a circumstance that makes it quite surprising that Poseidon has fewer words devoted to him than a relatively minor god like Dionysus.

Artemis, Athena, Hestia

Artemis was the goddess of the hunt and the moon, Athena the goddess of war and wisdom, and Hestia the goddess of the hearth and the home. All three, as noted in "The [First] Hymn to Aphrodite" (Part 5) were virgins, entirely devoted to the aspects of human existence for which they were honored. As such, they are evocative of the power of undiluted, uncorrupted energy and/or thought ... the power of focus. Athena (Minerva in Roman mythology) is perhaps the most well known of the three, with Artemis (Diana) second and Hestia (Vesta) a distant third. As previously discussed, however, Hestia's reputation (or lack thereof) does not make her unimportant. She was, in fact, one of the most prayed to and respected gods when it comes to the perspective and experience of everyday people. In fact, the priestesses consecrated to her service were renowned for their purity and chastity, and were (in ways that weren't apparent in the priests/priestesses of other gods and goddesses) perceived to be actual living manifestations of the will and ways of the goddess.

The Muses

These nine daughters of Zeus (by a goddess of memory) were manifestations of and/or embodiments of the arts. The exact identification of which muse was responsible for what, and what the muses were responsible FOR, varies from source to source. What is agreed upon, however, is the myth that the Muses made their home on Mount Parnassus (see "Objects/Places"), were artistic disciples of the god Apollo, and were invoked by poets throughout Classical Greece (including those who wrote these hymns) for guidance and blessing.

Homer

This is the name given to a legendary (archetypal?) blind poet/storyteller in Classical Greece, and author of the two great epics about the Trojan War, The Iliad and the Odyssey. His stories were recounted orally, rather than written down, and passed from generation to generation, a situation which has suggested to some scholars that "Homer" was not in fact the name of an actual, historical individual, but was in fact the fictive creation of an unknown bardic storyteller wishing to consolidate mythic ancient stories into a comprehensive, transcribed form.

Objects/Places

Greece

This sunny, hot land in the Mediterranean region of Europe has been archaeologically proven to be the place where some of the world's earliest civilizations began. The stories told in this collection, and the gods/characters that populate them, are manifestations of ancient belief systems that emerged as those civilizations took form, becoming more defined as those civilizations became more sophisticated and introspective, and eventually laid the foundations for what became the society in which modern democracy and philosophy, among other things, began.

Mount Olympus

This mountain in Greece was for centuries believed to be the home of the gods. Its peak often wreathed in clouds, it was a looming and mysterious presence in the lives of the country's inhabitants, and therefore the perfect home for those equally looming and mysterious, powerful presences.

The Lyre

The lyre was one of the most commonly used musical instruments in the ancient world. It consisted of a U-shaped structure, with strings running vertically from a bar across the top of the U to the bottom. Plucked like a modern harp, the lyre was invented by the gods and was the particular favorite of the god Apollo (see "Part 3, The Hymn to Hermes").

Hermes' Wand

Hermes' wand, given to him by Apollo (see "Part 3, The Hymn to Hermes") was called the Caduceus. It consisted of a staff, about a foot and a half long, with the figure of a bird at one end and the figures of two snakes entwined around it. Because Hermes was, and is, traditionally associated with the power of healing given to him by Apollo, the Caduceus became, and remains to this day, the symbol of the healing profession.

Homeric Epithets

As discussed in the Introduction, the term "Homeric" refers less to an actual individual's writing of the hymns than to the style in which those hymns were written. There is a certain formality to many of the hymns (see "Style - Structure"), which is a key component to this style. Another component is the way in which certain descriptive phrases are used repeatedly in relationship to certain gods. In other words, Demeter is

always referred to as having beautiful hair, Persephone as having slim feet, Hera as having white arms or the eyes of a cow.

Zeus is variously, and frequently, portrayed as having his aegis and/or a deep voice and/or as singing far. This repetition of visual/verbal motif is a throwback to the ancient tradition of verbal storytelling which was, according to legend, the way in which Homer himself (the greatest storyteller of all - see "Important People") told his stories. In short, the epithets were created as an aid to memorization. The storytellers didn't have to come up with new and interesting ways to describe the gods or other characters in the epic narratives, they just repeated the standard phrase automatically, therefore giving their mind a split second to focus and/or recall the next memorized, non-standardized, phrase.

The Aegis

The Aegis was a huge, magically invincible shield, used often by either Zeus or Athena. According to certain myths, Athena loaned it to the god/hero Perseus, who used it as a tool to kill the serpent-headed Medusa, whose gaze turned living things to stone. According to that same myth, Medusa's head was permanently mounted into the Aegis, making it not only a defensive but an offensive weapon (since the head retained its transformational powers).

Erebos and the River Styx

Erebos was another name for Hades, or the Underworld, the place to which the souls of the dead traveled. The River Styx was the border to the Underworld, a border that every human soul had to cross before coming to rest. This is what made the river so powerful when it was used by the gods to swear their oaths (see "Quotes," p. 154)

Mount Parnassus

Another tall mountain, Parnassus was said to be the home on earth of the god Apollo. It was there he built an important temple to himself, and according to "The Hymn to Pythian Apollo" (Part 10), it was to Mount Parnassus that he lured an unsuspecting crew of sailors, with the intent of making them his temple attendants. Parnassus was also the home to the Nine Muses (see "Important People").

Apollo's Oracle

The glancing reference to the Oracle in "The Hymn to Pythian Apollo" (Part 10) belies its importance to Classical Greece, both in terms of its mythic foundations and its day to day existence. "Oracle" was the somewhat generic name given to sites throughout Greece where temples were built to Apollo and where it was believed that priestesses, consecrated to both virginity and knowledge of the god's mind, could offer advice and/or

insight into the future. The most famous such site was in the community of Delphi, with the Oracle there manifesting throughout Classical mythology as the most powerful, influential, and accurate of all the Oracles.

Disguise

The idea and practice of disguise manifests throughout the Hymns as the main facilitator of communication between the gods and humanity. The glory of the gods was, in their minds and in the minds of those who told/tell their stories, too intense and powerful for ordinary mortals not only to comprehend, but to withstand. Therefore, gods who wished to communicate directly with humans disguised themselves in ordinary human form (such as in "The Hymn to Aphrodite", Part 5) or, in Zeus' case when he wanted to "be with" a mortal woman or a semi-goddess, as an animal or even a cloud. Ultimately, of course, the god's true identity is eventually revealed, and the human being with whom the god communicated is struck with awe and fear ANYWAY, so one almost wonders why such disguise was necessary in the first place.

Themes

The Nature of the Gods

Classical Greek spirituality was, like many other ancient spiritual systems (Egyptian, Roman, Chinese, Aztec, Native American, etc) is defined as "pantheistic," a word with two facets of meaning, both of which contrast with spiritual systems defined as "monotheistic" (Christianity, Judaism, Islam). Firstly, in pantheism there are several gods, while in monotheism there is only one (mono=one). Secondly, in pantheism the gods are identified with forces and/or experiences of nature, while in monotheism God is identified as being above nature, with dominion over it.

There are two important points to note here. The first is that nature in a pantheistic context not only refers to what contemporary society understands nature to mean (the earth, the sea, the sky, plants, animals, etc.), but also to HUMAN nature. This is why there are not only gods of (for example) storms, rivers, the sun and/or agriculture, there are also gods of (for example) love and sensuality, wisdom, trickery, and envy. The second, and not unrelated, point is that because nature in this context also encompasses human nature, the gods are in fact manifestations of humanity. In monotheism, on the other hand, God is not only above nature, He (and God in monotheism is always male) is above humanity.

What pantheism and monotheism have in common, however, is the core belief that the gods are all powerful. While the pantheistic gods have, as the result of being manifestations of humanity, human frailties and failings where the monotheistic God does not, both spiritual contexts define their spiritual entities as having ultimate control over the lives of human beings. This aspect of the god/human relationship is central to the spiritual premise of all the hymns and indeed of the collection, and is its second major theme.

The Relationship between the Gods and Humanity

There are two different ways in which the relationship between the gods and the human beings who worship them manifests in this collection. The first has to do with the intention behind the creation of the hymns - to praise the gods and to invoke their blessings. This is a clear indication of the perspective of the poets, and in all likelihood the perspective of the individuals they both represent and are striving to inspire - the gods are all powerful, and have to be praised, placated, and petitioned in order for humanity, as a society and as individuals, to thrive.

The second, and not unrelated, manifestation of the relationship between humanity and the gods can be found in the actual narrative content of many of the hymns. Time and again, the gods are portrayed as almost selfishly controlling. Aphrodite in "The Hymn to Aphrodite" dictates the terms of her relationship with the mortal Anchises, and of

Anchises' relationship with their son. Because Aphrodite is a goddess, Anchises has no choice but to accept those terms. Apollo, in "The Hymn to Pythian Apollo," essentially kidnaps the crew of a sailing ship to serve as the guardians of his temple and gives them no choice but to be happy about it. Perhaps most dramatic is the portrayal of humanity that emerges in "The Hymn to Demeter" as the result of her self-pitying neglect of her duties as goddess of the earth and agriculture. Essentially, large populations suffer enormously as the result of the dying crops and poor harvests that, in turn, have resulted from her obsessive search for her kidnapped daughter. In short, Demeter and the other gods are portrayed throughout the hymns as holding ultimate power over humanity in the palms of their sometimes temperamental hands.

The Humanity of the Gods

Ironically, however, and in further consideration of a point made in "The Nature of the Gods" above, there is also the very strong sense about these hymns that while the Classical Gods whose stories are narrated here are all powerful, they are also all too human. This is a clear and vivid contrast to the monotheistic God - one could never, for example, imagine the Christian God, the ruler of all, to have sexual encounters with as many females as Zeus, the ruler of all in Greek mythology. Or one could never imagine the God of the Hebrew faith as being as capricious with the souls of his followers as Apollo in "The Hymn to Pythian Apollo" (although more cynical sorts might argue that yes, in fact, one CAN, all too easily). However, can one imagine the Christian monotheistic God grieving over the loss of his son (Jesus Christ) in the same way and to the same effect as Demeter grieved the loss of her daughter in "The Hymn to Demeter?"

In short, pantheistic gods are portrayed in this collection and throughout their mythologies as being prone to the same conflicts and passions, pleasures and failings as the human beings who are supposedly intended to both worship and emulate them. Are they therefore inspiration or manifestation? Who is emulating whom - are human beings emulating the gods, or are the gods emulating human beings? In other words, are the gods evocations / justifications / projections of humanity, or is humanity an evocation / manifestation / projection of an aspect of the divine? For further consideration of this question, see "Topics for Discussion - Do you perceive ..."

Style

Point of View

There are several noteworthy aspects to consider in terms of the point of view of these hymns. The first is that while the hymns have several different authors (many of them unidentified by either history or scholarship) they all share essentially the same point of view. The second noteworthy element in this context, then, is the nature of that point of view, which in fairly broad terms is that of a believer - the hymns are written in praise of a spiritual entity in which the writer/poet believes. This leads to the third noteworthy element relating to point of view, which is how that belief manifests. That manifestation also occurs in several noteworthy aspects.

In all the hymns, long or short, narrative or simply complementary, the gods are praised, petitioned for blessings, and spoken to/of in reverent tones. In the longer narrative hymns they are also portrayed, defined by their deeds and history. It might not be going too far to suggest that in the same way as contemporary visual images of the gods have in some ways been defined by sculpture that survives from the classical period, contemporary spiritual and/or intellectual images and/or understanding of the gods has in many ways been defined by these hymns. As the introduction suggests, they have been in many ways the original and definitive source for contemporary knowledge and understanding of Classical Greek mythology.

Finally, common to all the poems, in both technical and theological terms, is the way in which the gods' relationship with humanity is portrayed as being simultaneously domineering (in that the gods have ultimate control and/or power over human destinies) and parallel (in that the gods experience human emotion and act on those emotions in very human ways). This makes the gods simultaneously relatable and remote, approachable and austere. In other words, the gods are in life, and life is in the gods.

Setting

Two main aspects of setting are important to consider - geographic and spiritual/intellectual. In terms of the former, the hymns are all "set" in Ancient Greece, a Mediterranean country composed (at the time) of several city/states, each with its own broad strokes socio-political identity (Athens was intellectual, Sparta was military, Mycenae was seafaring, etc.). These city states coalesced into being after an early period in which the many, often isolated regions of the geologically country were isolated and autonomous and, as a result, had their own names for essentially the same entity (see "Section 9, Analysis"). As the city states evolved, they consolidated their military, socio-political and spiritual systems. Many of the hymns in this collection seem to have been written during a time of transition, in which said spiritual consolidation was still taking place (again, see "Section 9 Analysis").

In terms of the spiritual/intellectual setting of the hymns, the important element to note is that for the most part, they are pre-science and pre-monotheism. In other words, many of the gods and the faith in those gods came into being before science analyzed and understood what, for example, lightning was - mythology understood, portrayed and explained them as manifestations of Zeus' power, where now lightning is generally understood to be a discharge of electricity. Praise of Zeus, therefore, could on some level be seen as a manifestation of human desire to avoid his anger and power as manifest in lightning.

Finally, it's also important to note that these poems came into being centuries before monotheism became the spiritual center of much of the world's spiritual perspective. For a further examination of the relationship between monotheism (one God) and pantheism (many gods) see "Themes - The Nature of the Gods."

Language and Meaning

The main element to note here is that the writing analyzed here is a translation from Ancient Greek, which means that language is on some level a manifestation of not only the original intent of the author(s) but of the translator's interpretation of that intent. In that context, it might be valuable to quote from the translator/editor's introduction, in which he suggests that he has attempted to present the essence of the poems rather than a literal word by word, poetic meter by poetic meter translation. "One tries," he writes, "to be the most conscientious literalist possible with the original, but there is a sense of the literal that often eludes those translators who attempt to preserve original line lengths, original meters, and even the exact ancient word order, and that is the sense in which the poem itself is always more than the sum of its parts."

In other words, the translator here is trying to translate and portray spiritual and/or emotional intent more than literal equality of linguistic choice. This may or may not be true of all translations of this material, but it must be suggested that perhaps it should be. While structure and exact meaning may be the point in many forms of poetry, it might not be going too far to suggest that in poetry with a spiritually defined purpose such as the poetry here, the spiritual intent and/or flavor of the work is arguably of more interest and worth.

Structure

Regardless of length and narrative intent, each of the hymns in this collection follows a similar essential pattern. The first section is an introduction, an identification of the god to whom the poem is dedicated. The second section narrates that god's origin, and here there are substantial variations in length. In the longer hymns such as those to Demeter, Aphrodite, Hermes, and Apollo, this so-called biographical section is substantially longer and more detailed. In the Hymns to Hermes and Delian Apollo, in fact, the biographical section takes up almost the entire hymn.

Following the biographical section, the third section celebrates the gods' deeds and/or identity. Again, in the shorter hymns this third section is very brief, while in the longer hymns this section is quite detailed. This is particularly true of the hymns to Demeter, Aphrodite, and Pythian Apollo, in that the stories told here are specific in their explorations and/or narrations of events that either define the god's identity (Demeter) or offer examples not only of the power of specific gods (Aphrodite and Pythian Apollo) but of the gods in general. The final section of each hymn is a kind of farewell, an expression of gratitude for inspiration (to write the poem) and/or presence in the world. The farewell often includes a request for blessing and a promise to write another hymn in praise of the god and his/her attributes.

This sense of structure, in general terms, gives each hymn a certain sense of formality, a certain quality of storytelling (even if story isn't the main purpose of the hymn). In other words, such a strong sense of structure also endows the poem with a sense of ritual and/or ceremony, making each one the equivalent of a mini worship service ... which is, on some level, what any hymn and/or prayer in any spiritual system is.

Quotes

"The Homeric Hymns ... are among the most important primary documents we have of Greek mythology, for they offer a first-hand view of the Greek [mytho-narrative] experience at a crucial, if late, period in the development of that experience." Introduction, p. 1

"There is no constant theme throughout these Hymns, except perhaps the conception they maintain of a dynamic relationship between man and the gods they sing of." Ibid, p. 2

"The poet in praise of the divine: it is an old subject, the oldest perhaps ... the charm of [the Greeks'] verse, their enchantment, in an age void of hymns as it is of any purposeful gods, is that we too become enthralled by their art, we too sense, even if we cannot participate in, these mythical relationships. Their attempts, as poets, to articulate the life of such spirit, are that endurable." Ibid, p.3.

"Farewell, [Dionysus], who had such a beautiful face. Without you, the way to compose a sweet song is forgotten." p. 17.

"...We, the poets, begin and end our singing through you - and it's impossible without you, without remembering you we can't remember our sacred song." p. 21"

"The god tried to improvise, singing along beautifully, as teen-age boys do, mockingly, at festivals, making their smart cracks." p. 25

"I'm not like a person who drives away cattle, I'm not big enough! This wasn't my work! I'm interested in other kinds of things: sleep is what I care about, and the milk of my mother. I care about blankets around my shoulders. And having hot baths!" Hermes to Apollo, p. 40.

"But even though he was himself very smart, Hermes had come up against someone really wise." p. 44

"He took off her beautiful clothes and removed her girdle and put them on a silver chair, he, Anchises! And then, by the will and fate of the gods, he slept, a mortal, with an immortal goddess. And he didn't even know it." p. 78.

"... it's through the Muses and the archer Apollo that there are men on earth singers and lyre players and because it's through Zeus there are kings..." p. 90

"And whenever the earth blossoms with all kinds of fragrant Spring flowers, you will come back up again from the mist darkness, to the great astonishment of gods and mortal men.'" p. 126

"[Demeter and Persephone] spent the whole of that day with hearts united, and they warmed each other's heart with many gestures of affection, and [Demeter's] heart stopped grieving. They gave and received joy from each other." p. 129

"[Demeter] taught [the leaders of the people] the ministry of her rites, and she revealed to them her beautiful mysteries, which are impossible to transgress, or to pry into, or to divulge; for so great is one's awe of the gods that it stops the tongue." p. 133.

"Hestia, you who have received the highest honor, to have your seat forever in the enormous houses of all the gods and all the men who walk on the earth ... without you, mankind would have no feasts, since no-one could begin the first and last drink without an offering to [you]." p. 140

"'Now listen to this, Earth, and the broad Sky above us, and Styx, running your water downward (this is the biggest, the most terrible oath that exists for the blessed gods) ...'" p. 154.

"I am the son of Zeus. I am Apollo. I brought you here over the great deep sea. I intended no evil for you. Instead, you will take care of my rich temple that is so honored by all men. You will get to know the plans of the gods, and by their will you will forever be honored, on and on through every single day." p. 177.

Topics for Discussion

Examine poems/hymns/music of praise in other spiritual traditions - Christian, Hebrew, Islamic, etc. In what ways are their essential purposes similar? In what ways are they different?

In what ways are the thematic purposes of the hymns in this collection similar to those of hymns in other spiritual traditions? In what ways are they different?

Among other things, "The Hymn to Demeter," is an explanation of the origins of spring. Research other origin stories in Classical Greek mythology - the origin of humanity, of the earth, of the gods themselves. Draft your own narrative hymns recounting these origin stories.

Research origin stories in other ancient spiritual traditions (Egyptian, Chinese, Aztec, Native American, etc). Are there parallels between these stories and those of Classical Greece? If yes, why do you think these parallels exist?

What is the likelihood, do you think, that pantheistic gods such as those portrayed here or as portrayed in other similar mythologies came into being as manifestations and/or projections of humanity? Do you think this might be true of the monotheistic God - that is, that humanity invented / defined Him? Is there truly an essential difference between the origins of monotheism and pantheism? Debate your answers.

The Classical Greek gods had clear relationships to aspects of contemporary society - Ares and Athena were related to war (theirs was a warlike culture and era), Hestia was related to the hearth (in a time when houses universally, and necessarily, had fireplaces), Artemis was related to the hunt (in a time when food was hunted rather than farmed).

If a pantheistic belief system existed today, what aspects of contemporary society might be represented by a god? While considering the narratives in this collection, and those found in other pantheistic theologies, imagine what a contemporary god might look like ... might represent ... how that god might manifest in the world ... how that god might relate to other gods ... how that god might have come into being.

If you had lived in Classical Greek times, which god would you have worshiped and why? What characteristic of life and/or nature would you have most strongly identified with and/or desired to connect with?