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Theognis (6th Cent. B.C.)

Of Theognis there is much and little to say. The much derives from the fact that an extraordinarily large amount of Theognis' work is preserved, more than that of any other Greek lyric poet of the archaic age; the little from the fact that with one exception we have trouble understanding the fundamental thrust of his work. That exception is this: Theognis is clearly a pessimist---see the evidence below--

> *Best of all for mortal beings is never to have been born at all,*
> *Nor ever to have set eyes on the bright light of the sun.*
> *But, since he is born, a man should make utmost haste through the gates of Death*
> *And then repose, the earth piled into a mound round himself…*

and comes into that attitude from a particular historical setting. Though we are not sure where this poet was from—Megara, in Attica, seems the leading candidate—we know that his inherited world view was aristocratic, that he addressed many of his poems to an (unknown) Kyrnos, and that he deeply resented the incursions of class mixture and lower class values into the aristocratic social world he belonged to. In other words, he was clearly a disillusioned aristocrat, was deeply sensitized to the class struggle which everywhere marked that tendency in Archaic Greece—lying between the epic world and that of the 'democratic' polis—to break down accepted values. We also know, as we read between the lines of his elegiacs, that he was not averse to eugenic thinking:

In rams and asses and horses, Cyrnus, we seek the thoroughbred, and a man is concerned therein to get him offspring of good stock; yet in marriage a good man thinketh not twice of wedding the bad daughter of a bad sire if the father give him many possessions, nor doth a woman disdain the bed of a bad man if he be wealthy, but is fain rather to be rich than to be good. For 'tis possessions they prize; and a good man weddeth of bad stock and a bad man of good; race is confounded of riches and it is no surprise that of all later commentators on this poet it is Friedrich Nietzsche, the brilliant philosopher of race, who found Theognis most congenial.