THE ORIGINS OF TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

By 'traditional grammar' I mean the kind of grammatical system set out in and presupposed by standard modern grammars of Greek and Latin like Kühner-Gerth or Kühner-Stegmann. Since grammars of this kind traditionally have been followed quite closely by grammarians of other languages one may speak traditional grammar quite generally. Grammars of this type consist of three parts: a phonology, dealing among other things with the sounds of the language, a morphology, dealing with word-formation and -inflection, and finally a syntax in which we are told which combinations of words constitute a phrase or a sentence. Moreover, such grammars are characterized by a certain set of concepts, especially the so-called grammatical categories, that is, notions of various parts of speech like that of a noun or a verb, and notions of various features of these parts of speech which traditionally are called 'accidents' or 'secondary categories'. Examples of such accidents are gender, number, case, mood, tense.

The only ancient text which more or less fits this characterization is Priscian's Institutiones, written in the early 6th century A.D. But we do know that earlier ancient grammarians like Apollonius Dyscolus in the 2nd century A.D. covered in their writings the whole of traditional grammar, and we can see from his extant writings on various parts of speech and on syntax that by his time the concepts of traditional grammar were already fairly well established. Hence we have to look for the origins of traditional grammar in antiquity.

Some of the concepts of traditional grammar can in fact be traced back to the 5th century B.C. Protagoras distinguished the three genders (Aristotle Rhet. 1407b6; cf. Soph. El.173b17), and during the following centuries the familiar concepts seem to make their appearance one after the other. Hence historians of ancient grammar like Steinthal tend to treat their subject as if it had a more or less continuous history. If one treats of the subject in this way, though, one

runs the risk of overlooking the motives and guiding principles followed by those who first tried to write something like a systematical grammar as opposed to those who just occasionally would care to note a point of grammar. Hence, when I talk of ‘the origins of traditional grammar’ I am trying to talk about the first attempts to write something like a traditional grammar.

Unfortunately the origins of traditional grammar in this sense are very obscure, mainly because all the texts of the formative period, with one exception, have been lost. The exception is Dionysius Thrax’ Τέχνη γραμματική, and this text poses such problems that even its authenticity has been doubted (cf. Di Benedetto, Dionisio Trace e la Techne a lui attribuita, Annali, Scuola Norm. Sup., Pisa, v. 27, 1958, p. 169 ff.), though nowadays the text is generally accepted as genuine. But the origins of grammar are also very much obscured by an ambiguity in the ancient terms for grammar or the grammarians. Grammar may just be the modest art of reading and writing, sometimes also called ‘small’ or ‘lower grammar’ (Scholia Vaticana in Dionysium Th. 114, 23 ff. Hilgard; cf. ἀτελειστέρα Philo De congr. erud. causa §148) or ‘γραμματιστική’ (Sextus Emp., A.M. I,44; Philo ibid.). In Hellenistic and later times ‘grammariam’ primarily refers to those Alexandrian scholars and their followers, including the schoolmasters, who are concerned with the restitution, the proper reading, the explanation and interpretation of the classical texts, and their literary criticism. This art was also called ‘great’ or ‘higher grammar’ (Schol. Vat. 114, 27ff), ‘perfect’ or ‘complete grammar’ (e.g. ἐντελὴς S.E. A.M. I,44; τέλειος I,46; τέλεια I,76; τελειοτέρα Philo l.c.). High grammar is basically what we call ‘philology’. And it was in fact one of these Alexandrian scholars, Eratosthenes, who first wanted to be referred to as a ‘philologos’ (Sueton. De gramm. 10, 4). Finally, incorporated as a part of this grammar, we find a discipline called ‘the technical part of grammar’ (S.E. A.M. I,91; 96) or ‘methodical grammar’ (Quintilian I,9, 1). It is this technical grammar which corresponds to our traditional grammar; and hence what we are concerned with are the origins of this technical grammar.

Since the earliest grammar of this type we know of is the one I referred to above, written towards the end of the 2nd century B.C. by the Alexandrian scholar Dionysius Thrax and often thought to be the