The Value of Greece to The Future of the World

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IF THE VALUE OF MAN'S LIFE ON EARTH is to be measured in dollars and miles and horse-power, ancient Greece must count as a poverty-stricken and a minute territory; its engines and implements were nearer to the spear and bow of the savage than to our own telegraph and aeroplane. Even if we neglect merely material things and take as our standard the actual achievements of the race in conduct and in knowledge, the average clerk who goes to town daily, idly glancing at his morning newspaper, is probably a better behaved and infinitely better informed person than the average Athenian who sat spellbound at the tragedies of Æschylus. It is only by the standard of the spirit, to which the thing achieved is little and the quality of mind that achieved it much, which cares less for the sum of knowledge attained than for the love of knowledge, less for much good policing than for one free act of heroism, that the great age of Greece can be judged as something extraordinary and unique in value.

By this standard, if it is a legitimate and reasonable one to apply, we shall be able to understand why classical Greek literature was the basis of education throughout all later antiquity; why its re-discovery, however fragmentary and however imperfectly understood, was able to intoxicate the keenest minds of Europe and constitute a kind of spiritual "Re-birth," and how its further and further exploration may be still a task worth men's spending their lives upon and capable of giving mankind guidance as well as inspiration.

But is such a standard legitimate and reasonable? We shall gain nothing by unanalysed phrases. But I think surely it is merely the natural standard of any philosophical historian. Suppose it is argued that an average optician at the present day knows more optics than Roger Bacon, the inventor of spectacles; suppose it is argued that therefore he is, as far as optics go, a greater man, and that Roger Bacon has nothing to teach us; what is the answer? It is, I suppose, that Roger Bacon, receiving a certain amount of knowledge from his teachers, had that in him which turned it to unsuspected directions and made it immensely greater and more fruitful. The average optician has probably added a little to what he was taught, but not much, and has doubtless forgotten or confused a good deal. So that, if by studying Roger Bacon's life

[1] [The old Greeks and Romans were the dwarfed and weak remnants of the Atlantean Race. For in-depth analysis, consult "Insights to Universal History" and "The Atlantean Origin of Greeks and Romans," in our Atlantean Realities Series. — ED. PHIL.]

or his books we could get into touch with his mind and acquire some of that special moving and inspiring quality of his, it would help us far more than would the mere knowledge of the optician.

This truth is no doubt hard to see in the case of purely technical science; in books of wider range, such as Darwin's for instance, it is easy for any reader to feel the presence of a really great mind, producing inspiration of a different sort from that of the most excellent up-to-date examination text-book. In philosophy, religion, poetry, and the highest kinds of art, the greatness of the author's mind seems as a rule to be all that matters; one almost ignores the date at which he worked. This is because in technical sciences the element of mere fact, or mere knowledge, is so enormous, the elements of imagination, character, and the like so very small. Hence, books on science, in a progressive age, very quickly become "out of date," and each new edition usually supersedes the last. It is the rarest thing for a work of science to survive as a text-book more than ten years or so. Newton's *Principia* is almost an isolated instance among modern writings.

Yet there are some few such books. Up till about the year 1900 the elements of geometry were regularly taught, throughout Europe, in a text-book written by a Greek called Eucleides in the fourth or third century B.C.[1] That text-book lasted over two thousand years. Now, of course, people have discovered a number of faults in Euclid, but it has taken them all that time to do it.

Again, I knew an old gentleman who told me that, at a good English school in the early nineteenth century, he had been taught the principles of grammar out of a writer called Dionysius Thrax, or Denis of Thrace. Denis was a Greek of the first century B.C., who made or carried out the remarkable discovery that there was such a thing as a science of grammar, *i.e.*, that men in their daily speech were unconsciously obeying an extraordinarily subtle and intricate body of laws, which were capable of being studied and reduced to order. Denis did not make the whole discovery himself; he was led to it by his master Aristarchus and others. And his book had been re-edited several times in the nineteen-hundred odd years before this old gentleman was taught it.

To take a third case: all through later antiquity and the middle ages the science of medicine was based on the writings of two ancient doctors, Hippocrates and Galen. Galen was a Greek who lived at Rome in the early Empire, Hippocrates a Greek who lived at the island of Cos in the fifth century B.C. A great part of the history of modern medicine is a story of emancipation from the dead hand of these great ancients. But one little treatise attributed to Hippocrates was in active use in the training of medical students in my own day in Scotland and is still in use in some American Universities. It was the Oath taken by medical students in the classic age of Greece when they solemnly faced the duties of their profession. The disciple swore to honour and obey his teacher and care for his children if ever they were in need; always to help his patients to the best of his power; never to use or profess to use magic or charms or any supernatural means; never to supply poison or perform illegal opera-

[1] Since this paper was first written *Euclid*, Book I, in the Greek, has been edited with a commentary by Sir Thomas Heath (Cambridge Press, 1920). It is full of interest and instruction.

tions; never to abuse the special position of intimacy which a doctor naturally obtains in a sick house, but always on entering to remember that he goes as a friend and helper to every individual in it.

We have given up that oath now: I suppose we do not believe so much in the value of oaths. But the man who first drew up that oath did a great deed. He realized and defined the meaning of his high calling in words which doctors of unknown tongues and undiscovered countries accepted from him and felt to express their aims for well over two thousand years.

Now what do I want to illustrate by these three instances? The rapidity with which we are now at last throwing off the last vestiges of the yoke of Greece? No, not that. I want to point out that even in the realm of science, where progress is so swift and books so short-lived, the Greeks of the great age had such genius and vitality that their books lived in a way that no others have lived. Let us get away from the thought of Euclid as an inky and imperfect English school-book, to that ancient Eucleides who, with exceedingly few books but a large table of sand let into the floor, planned and discovered and put together and re-shaped the first laws of geometry, till at last he had written one of the great simple books of the world, a book which should stand a pillar and beacon to mankind long after all the political world that Eucleides knew had been swept away and the kings he served were conquered by the Romans, and the Romans in course of time conquered by the barbarians, and the barbarians themselves, with much labour and reluctance, partly by means of Eucleides' book, eventually educated; so that at last, in our own day, they can manage to learn their geometry without it. The time has come for Euclid to be superseded; let him go. He has surely held the torch for mankind long enough; and books of science are born to be superseded. What I want to suggest is that the same extraordinary vitality of mind which made Hippocrates and Euclid and even Denis of Thrace last their two thousand years, was also put by the Greeks of the great age into those activities which are, for the most part at any rate, not perishable or progressive but eternal.

This is a simple point, but it is so important that we must dwell on it for a moment. If we read an old treatise on medicine or mechanics, we may admire it and feel it a work of genius, but we also feel that it is obsolete: its work is over; we have got beyond it. But when we read Homer or Æschylus, if once we have the power to admire and understand their writing, we do not for the most part have any feeling of having got beyond them. We have done so no doubt in all kinds of minor things, in general knowledge, in details of technique, in civilization and the like; but hardly any sensible person ever imagines that he has got beyond their essential quality, the quality that has made them great.

Doubtless there is in every art an element of mere knowledge or science, and that element is progressive. But there is another element, too, which does not depend on knowledge and which does not progress but has a kind of stationary and eternal value, like the beauty of the dawn, or the love of a mother for her child, or the joy of a young animal in being alive, or the courage of a martyr facing torment. We cannot for all our progress get beyond these things; there they stand, like light upon the mountains. The only question is whether we can rise to them. And it is the same with all the greatest births of human imagination. As far as we can speculate, there is not the

faintest probability of any poet ever setting to work on, let us say, the essential effect aimed at by Æschylus in the Cassandra-scene of the *Agamemnon*,[1] and doing it better than Æschylus. The only thing which the human race has to do with that scene is to understand it and get out of it all the joy and emotion and wonder that it contains.

This eternal quality is perhaps clearest in poetry: in poetry the mixture of knowledge matters less. In art there is a constant development of tools and media and technical processes. The modern artist can feel that, though he cannot, perhaps, make as good a statue as Pheidias, he could here and there have taught Pheidias something: and at any rate he can try his art on subjects far more varied and more stimulating to his imagination. In philosophy the mixture is more subtle and more profound. Philosophy always depends in some sense upon science, yet the best philosophy seems generally to have in it some eternal quality of creative imagination. Plato wrote a dialogue about the constitution of the world, the *Timæus*, which was highly influential in later Greece, but seems to us, with our vastly superior scientific knowledge, almost nonsensical. Yet when Plato writes about the theory of knowledge or the ultimate meaning of Justice or of Love, no good philosopher can afford to leave him aside: the chief question is whether we can rise to the height and subtlety of his thought.

And here another point emerges, equally simple and equally important if we are to understand our relation to the past. Suppose a man says: "I quite understand that Plato or Æschylus may have had fine ideas, but surely anything of value which they said must long before this have become common property. There is no need to go back to the Greeks for it. We do not go back and read Copernicus to learn that the earth goes round the sun." What is the answer? It is that such a view ignores exactly this difference between the progressive and the eternal, between knowledge and imagination. If Harvey discovers that the blood is not stationary but circulates, if Copernicus discovers that the earth goes round the sun and not the sun round the earth, those discoveries can easily be communicated in the most abbreviated form. If a mechanic invents an improvement on the telephone, or a social reformer puts some good usage in the place of a bad one, in a few years we shall probably all be using the improvement without even knowing what it is or saying Thank you. We may be as stupid as we like, we have in a sense got the good of it.

But can one apply the same process to *Macbeth* or *Romeo and Juliet?* Can anyone tell us in a few words what they come to? Or can a person get the good of them in any way except one — the way of vivid and loving study, following and feeling the author's meaning all through? To suppose, as I believe some people do, that you can get the value of a great poem by studying an abstract of it in an encyclopædia or by reading cursorily an average translation of it, argues really a kind of mental deficiency, like deafness or colour-blindness. The things that we have called eternal, the things of the spirit and the imagination, always seem to lie more in a process than in a result, and can only be reached and enjoyed by somehow going through the pro-

[1] [See translation by Louis MacNeice, on page 15. — ED. PHIL.]

cess again. If the value of a particular walk lies in the scenery, you do not get that value by taking a short cut or using a fast motor-car.

In looking back, then, upon any vital and significant age of the past we shall find objects of two kinds. First, there will be things like the Venus of Milo or the Book of Job or Plato's *Republic*, which are interesting or precious in themselves, because of their own inherent qualities; secondly, there will be things like the Roman code of the Twelve Tables or the invention of the printing-press or the record of certain great battles, which are interesting chiefly because they are causes of other and greater things or form knots in the great web of history — the first having artistic interest, the second only historical interest, though, of course, it is obvious that in any concrete case there is generally a mixture of both.

Now Ancient Greece is important in both ways. For the artist or poet it has in a quite extraordinary degree the quality of beauty. For instance, to take a contrast with Rome: if you dig about the Roman Wall in Cumberland you will find quantities of objects, altars, inscriptions, figurines, weapons, boots and shoes, which are full of historic interest but are not much more beautiful than the contents of a modern rubbish heap. And the same is true of most excavations all over the world. But if you dig at any classical or sub-classical site in the Greek world, however unimportant historically, practically every object you find will be beautiful. The wall itself will be beautiful; the inscriptions will be beautifully cut; the figurines, however cheap and simple, may have some intentional grotesques among them, but the rest will have a special truthfulness and grace; the vases will be of good shapes and the patterns will be beautiful patterns. If you happen to dig in a burying-place and come across some epitaphs on the dead, they will practically all — even when the verses do not quite scan and the words are wrongly spelt — have about them this inexplicable touch of beauty.

I am anxious not to write nonsense about this. One could prove the point in detail by taking any collection of Greek epitaphs, and that is the only way in which it can be proved. The beauty is a fact, and if we try to analyse the sources of it we shall perhaps in part understand how it has come to pass.

In the first place, it is not a beauty of ornament; it is a beauty of structure, a beauty of rightness and simplicity. Compare an athlete in flannels playing tennis and a stout dignitary smothered in gold robes. Or compare a good modern yacht, swift, lithe, and plain, with a lumbering heavily gilded sixteenth-century galleon, or even with a Chinese state junk: the yacht is far the more beautiful though she has not a hundredth part of the ornament. It is she herself that is beautiful, because her lines and structure are right. The others are essentially clumsy and, therefore, ugly things, dabbed over with gold and paint. Now ancient Greek things for the most part have the beauty of the yacht. The Greeks used paint a good deal, but apart from that a Greek temple is almost as plain as a shed: people accustomed to arabesques and stained glass and gargoyles can very often see nothing in it. A Greek statue has as a rule no ornament at all: a young man racing or praying, an old man thinking, there it stands expressed in a stately and simple convention, true or false, the anatomy and the surfaces right or wrong, aiming at no beauty except the truest. It would probably seem quite dull to the maker of a mediæval wooden figure of a king which I remember seeing in a town

in the east of Europe: a crown blazing with many-coloured glass, a long crimson robe covered with ornaments and beneath them an idiot face, no bones, no muscles, no attitude. That is not what a Greek meant by beauty. The same quality holds to a great extent of Greek poetry. Not, of course, that the artistic convention was the same, or at all similar, for treating stone and for treating language. Greek poetry is statuesque in the sense that it depends greatly on its organic structure; it is not in the least so in the sense of being cold or colourless or stiff. But Greek poetry on the whole has a bareness and severity which disappoints a modern reader, accustomed as he is to lavish ornament and exaggeration at every turn. It has the same simplicity and straightforwardness as Greek sculpture. The poet has something to say and he says it as well and truly as he can in the suitable style, and if you are not interested you are not. With some exceptions which explain themselves he does not play a thousand pretty tricks and antics on the way, so that you may forget the dullness of what he says in amusement at the draperies in which he wraps it.

But here comes an apparent difficulty. Greek poetry, we say, is very direct, very simple, very free from irrelevant ornament. And yet when we translate it into English and look at our translation, our main feeling, I think, is that somehow the glory has gone: a thing that was high and lordly has become poor and mean. Any decent Greek scholar when he opens one of his ancient poets feels at once the presence of something lofty and rare — something like the atmosphere of *Paradise Lost.* But the language of *Paradise Lost* is elaborately twisted and embellished into loftiness and rarity; the language of the Greek poem is simple and direct. What does this mean?

I can only suppose that the normal language of Greek poetry is in itself in some sense sublime. Most critics accept this as an obvious fact, yet, if true, it is a very strange fact and worth thinking about. It depends partly on mere euphony: *Khaireis horōn fōs*[1] is probably more beautiful in sound than "You rejoice to see the light," but euphony cannot be everything. The sound of a great deal of Greek poetry, either as we pronounce it, or as the ancients pronounced it, is to modern ears almost ugly. It depends partly, perhaps, on the actual structure of the Greek language: philologists tell us that, viewed as a specimen, it is in structure and growth and in power of expressing things, the most perfect language they know. And certainly one often finds that a thought can be expressed with ease and grace in Greek which becomes clumsy and involved in Latin, English, French or German. But neither of these causes goes, I think, to the root of the matter.

What is it that gives words their character and makes a style high or low? Obviously, their associations; the company they habitually keep in the minds of those who use them. A word which belongs to the language of bars and billiard saloons will become permeated by the normal standard of mind prevalent in such places; a word which suggests Milton or Carlyle will have the flavour of those men's minds about it. I therefore cannot resist the conclusion that, if the language of Greek poetry has, to those who know it intimately, this special quality of keen austere beauty, it is because the minds of the poets who used that language were habitually toned to a higher level both of intensity and of nobility than ours. It is a finer language because

[1] [*i.e.*, Χαίρεις ορών φώς; quoting Euripides: *Alcestis* 691]

it expresses the minds of finer men. By "finer men" I do not necessarily mean men who behaved better, either by our standards or by their own; I mean men to whom the fine things of the world, sunrise and sea and stars and the love of man for man, and strife and the facing of evil for the sake of good, and even common things like meat and drink, and evil things like hate and terror, had, as it were, a keener edge than they have for us and roused a swifter and a nobler reaction.

Let us resume this argument before going further. We start from the indisputable fact that the Greeks of about the fifth century B.C. did for some reason or other produce various works of art, buildings and statues and books, especially books, which instead of decently dying or falling out of fashion in the lifetime of the men who made them, lasted on and can still cause high thoughts and intense emotions. In trying to explain this strange fact we notice that the Greeks had a great and pervading instinct for beauty, and for beauty of a particular kind. It is a beauty which never lies in irrelevant ornament, but always in the very essence and structure of the object made. In literature we found that the special beauty which we call Greek depends partly on the directness, truthfulness, and simplicity with which the Greeks say what they want to say, and partly on a special keenness and nobility in the language, which seems to be the natural expression of keen and noble minds. Can we in any way put all these things together so as to explain them — or at any rate to hold them together more clearly?

An extremely old and often misleading metaphor will help us. People have said: "The world was young then." Of course, strictly speaking, it was not. In the total age of the world or of man the two thousand odd years between us and Pericles do not count for much. Nor can we imagine that a man of sixty felt any more juvenile in the fifth century B.C. than he does now. It was just the other way, because at that time there were no spectacles or false teeth. Yet in a sense the world *was* young then, at any rate our western world, the world of progress and humanity. For the beginnings of nearly all the great things that progressive minds now care for were then being laid in Greece.

Youth, perhaps, is not exactly the right word. There are certain plants — some kinds of aloe, for instance — which continue for an indefinite number of years in a slow routine of ordinary life close to the ground, and then suddenly, when they have stored enough vital force, grow ten feet high and burst into flower, after which, no doubt, they die or show signs of exhaustion. Apart from the dying, it seems as if something like that happened from time to time to the human race, or to such parts of it as really bear flowers at all. For most races and nations during the most of their life are not progressive but simply stagnant, sometimes just managing to preserve their standard customs, sometimes slipping back to the slough. That is why history has nothing to say about them. The history of the world consists mostly in the memory of those ages, quite few in number, in which some part of the world has risen above itself and burst into flower or fruit.

We ourselves happen to live in the midst or possibly in the close of one such period. More change has probably taken place in daily life, in ideas, and in the general aspect of the earth during the last century than during any four other centuries since the Christian era: and this fact has tended to make us look on rapid progress as a

normal condition of the human race, which it never has been. And another such period of bloom, a bloom comparatively short in time and narrow in area, but amazingly swift and intense, occurred in the lower parts of the Balkan peninsula from about the sixth to the fourth centuries before Christ.

Now it is this kind of bloom which fills the world with hope and therefore makes it young. Take a man who has just made a discovery or an invention, a man happily in love, a man who is starting some great and successful social movement, a man who is writing a book or painting a picture which he knows to be good; take men who have been fighting in some great cause which before they fought seemed to be hopeless and now is triumphant; think of England when the Armada was just defeated, France at the first dawn of the Revolution, America after Yorktown: such men and nations will be above themselves. Their powers will be stronger and keener; there will be exhilaration in the air, a sense of walking in new paths, of dawning hopes and untried possibilities, a confidence that all things can be won if only we try hard enough. In that sense the world will be young. In that sense I think it was young in the time of Themistocles and Æschylus. And it is that youth which is half the secret of the Greek spirit.

And here I may meet an objection that has perhaps been lurking in the minds of many readers. "All this," they may say, "professes to be a simple analysis of known facts, but in reality is sheer idealization. These Greeks whom you call so 'noble' have been long since exposed. Anthropology has turned its searchlights upon them. It is not only their ploughs, their weapons, their musical instruments, and their painted idols that resemble those of the savages; it is everything else about them. Many of them were sunk in the most degrading superstitions: many practised unnatural vices: in times of great fear some were apt to think that the best 'medicine' was a human sacrifice. After that, it is hardly worth mentioning that their social structure was largely based on slavery; that they lived in petty little towns, like so many wasps' nests, each at war with its next-door neighbour, and half of them at war with themselves!"

If our anti-Greek went further he would probably cease to speak the truth. We will stop him while we can still agree with him. These charges are on the whole true, and, if we are to understand what Greece means, we must realize and digest them. We must keep hold of two facts: first, that the Greeks of the fifth century produced some of the noblest poetry and art, the finest political thinking, the most vital philosophy, known to the world; second, that the people who heard and saw, nay perhaps, even the people who produced these wonders, were separated by a thin and precarious interval from the savage. Scratch a civilized Russian, they say, and you find a wild Tartar. Scratch an ancient Greek, and you hit, no doubt, on a very primitive and formidable being, somewhere between a Viking and a Polynesian.[1]

That is just the magic and the wonder of it. The spiritual effort implied is so tremendous. We have read stories of savage chiefs converted by Christian or Buddhist missionaries, who within a year or so have turned from drunken corroborees and bloody witch-smellings to a life that is not only godly but even philanthropic and statesman-

[1] [Indian, in fact. See Edward Pococke's *India in Greece*, in the same series. — ED. PHIL.]

like. We have seen the Japanese lately go through some centuries of normal growth in the space of a generation. But in all such examples men have only been following the teaching of a superior civilization, and after all, they have not ended by producing works of extraordinary and original genius. It seems quite clear that the Greeks owed exceedingly little to foreign influence. Even in their decay they were a race, as Professor Bury observes, accustomed "to take little and to give much." They built up their civilization for themselves. We must listen with due attention to the critics who have pointed out all the remnants of savagery and superstition that they find in Greece: the slave-driver, the fetish-worshipper and the medicine-man, the trampler on women, the bloodthirsty hater of all outside his own town and party. But it is not those people that constitute Greece; those people can be found all over the historical world, commoner than blackberries. It is not anything fixed and stationary that constitutes Greece: what constitutes Greece is the movement which leads from all these to the Stoic or fifth-century "sophist" who condemns and denies slavery, who has abolished all cruel superstitions and preaches some religion based on philosophy and humanity, who claims for women the same spiritual rights as for man, who looks on all human creatures as his brethren, and the world as "one great City of gods and men."[1] It is that movement which you will not find elsewhere, any more than the statues of Pheidias or the dialogues of Plato or the poems of Æschylus and Euripides.

From all this two or three results follow. For one thing, being built up so swiftly, by such keen effort, and from so low a starting-point, Greek civilization was, amid all its glory, curiously unstable and full of flaws. Such flaws made it, of course, much worse for those who lived in it, but they hardly make it less interesting or instructive to those who study it. Rather the contrary. Again, the near neighbourhood of the savage gives to the Greek mind certain qualities which we of the safer and solider civilizations would give a great deal to possess. It springs swift and straight. It is never jaded. Its wonder and interest about the world are fresh. And lastly there is one curious and very important quality which, unless I am mistaken, belongs to Greek civilization more than to any other. To an extraordinary degree it starts clean from nature, with almost no entanglements of elaborate creeds and customs and traditions.

I am not, of course, forgetting the prehistoric Minoan civilization, nor yet the peculiar forms — mostly simple enough — into which the traditional Greek religion fell. It is possible that I may be a little misled by my own habit of living much among Greek things and so forgetting through long familiarity how odd some of them once seemed. But when all allowances are made, I think that this clean start from nature is, on the whole, a true claim. If a thoughtful European or American wants to study Chinese or Indian things, he has not only to learn certain data of history and mythology, he has to work his mind into a particular attitude; to put on, as it were, spectacles of a particular sort. If he wants to study mediæval things, if he takes even so universal a poet as Dante, it is something the same. Curious views about the Pope and the emperor, a crabbed scholastic philosophy, a strange and to the modern mind rather horrible theology, floating upon the flames of Hell: all these have somehow to be taken into his imagination before he can understand his Dante. With Greek things this

[1] [Quoting Epictetus: *Discourses* ii, 5.26]

is very much less so. The historical and imaginative background of the various great poets and philosophers is, no doubt, highly important. A great part of the work of modern scholarship is now devoted to getting it clearer. But on the whole, putting aside for the moment the possible inadequacies of translation, Greek philosophy speaks straight to any human being who is willing to think simply, Greek art and poetry to anyone who can use his imagination and enjoy beauty. He has not to put on the fetters or the blinkers of any new system in order to understand them; he has only to get rid of his own — a much more profitable and less troublesome task.

This particular conclusion will scarcely, I think, be disputed, but the point presents difficulties and must be dwelt upon.

In the first place, it does not mean that Greek art is what we call "naturalist" or "realist." It is markedly the reverse. Art to the Greek is always a form of *Sophia*, or Wisdom, a *Technē* with rules that have to be learnt. Its air of utter simplicity is deceptive. The pillar that looks merely straight is really a thing of subtle curves. The funeral bas-relief that seems to represent in the simplest possible manner a woman saying good-bye to her child is arranged, plane behind plane, with the most delicate skill and sometimes with deliberate falsification of perspective. There is always some convention, some idealization, some touch of the light that never was on sea or land. Yet all the time, I think, Greek art remains in a remarkable degree close to nature. The artist's eye is always on the object, and, though he represents it in his own style, that style is always normal and temperate, free from affectation, free from exaggeration or morbidity and, in the earlier periods, free from conventionality. It is art without doubt; but it is natural and normal art, such as grew spontaneously when mankind first tried in freedom to express beauty. For example, the language of Greek poetry is markedly different from that of prose, and there are even clear differences of language between different styles of poetry. And further, the poetry is very seldom about the present. It is about the past, and that an ideal past. What we have to notice there is that this kind of rule, which has been usual in all great ages of poetry, is apparently not an artificial or arbitrary thing but a tendency that grew up naturally with the first great expressions of poetical feeling.

Furthermore, this closeness to nature, this absence of a unifying or hide-bound system of thought, acting together with other causes, has led to the extraordinary variety and many-sidedness which is one of the most puzzling charms of Ancient Greece as contrasted, say, with Israel or Assyria or early Rome. Geographically it is a small country with a highly indented coast-line and an interior cut into a great number of almost isolated valleys. Politically it was a confused unity made up of numerous independent states, one walled city of a few thousand inhabitants being quite enough to form a state. And the citizens of these states were, each of them, rather excessively capable of forming opinions of their own and fighting for them. Hence came in practice much isolation and faction and general weakness, to the detriment of the Greeks themselves; but the same cause led in thought and literature to immense variety and vitality, to the great gain of us who study the Greeks afterwards. There is hardly any type of thought or style of writing which cannot be paralleled in ancient Greece, only they will there be seen, as it were, in their earlier and simpler forms. Traces of all the things that seem most un-Greek can be found somewhere in Greek literature: volup-

tuousness, asceticism, the worship of knowledge, the contempt for knowledge, atheism, pietism, the religion of serving the world and the religion of turning away from the world: all these and almost all other points of view one can think of are represented somewhere in the records of that one small people. And there is hardly any single generalization in this chapter which the author himself could not controvert by examples to the contrary. You feel in general a great absence of all fetters: the human mind free, rather inexperienced, intensely interested in life and full of hope, trying in every direction for that excellence which the Greeks called *aretē*, and guided by some peculiar instinct toward Temperance and Beauty.

The variety is there and must not be forgotten; yet amid the variety there are certain general or central characteristics, mostly due to this same quality of freshness and closeness to nature.

If you look at a Greek statue or bas-relief, or if you read an average piece of Aristotle, you will very likely at first feel bored. Why? Because it is all so normal and truthful; so singularly free from exaggeration, paradox, violent emphasis; so destitute of those fascinating by-forms of insanity which appeal to some similar faint element of insanity in ourselves. "We are sick," we may exclaim, "of the sight of these handsome, perfectly healthy men with grave faces and normal bones and muscles! We are sick of being told that Virtue is a mean between two extremes and tends to make men happy! We shall not be interested unless someone tells us that Virtue is the utter abnegation of self, or, it may be, the extreme and ruthless assertion of self; or again, that Virtue is all an infamous mistake! And for statues, give us a haggard man with starved body and cavernous eyes, cursing God — or give us something rolling in fat and colour. . . . "

What is at the back of this sort of feeling? which I admit often takes more reasonable forms than these I have suggested. It is the same psychological cause that brings about the changes of fashion in art or dress: which loves "stunts" and makes the fortunes of yellow newspapers. It is boredom or *ennui*. We have had too much of A; we are sick of it, we know how it is done and despise it; give us some B, or better still some Z. And after a strong dose of Z we shall crave for the beginning of the alphabet again. But now think of a person who is not bored at all; who is, on the contrary, immensely interested in the world, keen to choose good things and reject bad ones; full of the desire for knowledge and the excitement of discovery. The joy to him is to see things as they are and to judge them normally. He is not bored by the sight of normal, healthy muscles in a healthy, well-shaped body; he is delighted. If you distort the muscles for emotional effect, he would say with disappointment: "But that is ugly!" or "But a man's muscles do *not* go like that!" He will have noted that tears are salt and rather warm; but if you say like a modern poet that your heroine's tears are "more hot than fire, more salt than the salt sea," he will probably think your statement απίθανον[1] "unpersuasive," and therefore ψυχρὸν[2] "chilling."

It is perhaps especially in the religious and moral sphere that we are accustomed to the habitual use of ecstatic language: expressions that are only true of exalted mo-

[1] [apithanon]

[2] [psychron]

ments are used by us as the commonplaces of ordinary life. "It is a thousand times worse to see another suffer than to suffer oneself." "True love only desires the happiness of the beloved object." This kind of "high falutin"[1] has become part of our regular mental habit, just as dead metaphors by the bushel are a part of our daily language. Consequently we are a little chilled and disappointed by a language in which people hardly ever use a metaphor except when they vividly realize it, and never utter heroic sentiments except when they are wrought up to the pitch of feeling them true. Does this mean that the Greek always remains, so to speak, at a normal temperature, that he never has intense or blinding emotions? Not in the least. It shows a lack of faith in the value of life to imagine such a conclusion. It implies that you can only reach great emotion by pretence, or by habitually exaggerating small emotions, whereas probably the exact reverse is the case. When the great thing comes, then the Greek will have the great word and the great thought ready. It is the habitual exaggerator who will perhaps be bankrupt. And after all — the great things are sure to come!

The power of seeing things straight and knowing what is beautiful or noble, quite undisturbed by momentary boredoms or changes of taste, is a very rare gift and never perhaps possessed in full by any one. But there is a profound rule of art, bidding a man in the midst of all his study of various styles or his pursuit of his own peculiar imaginations, from time to time *se retremper dans la nature* — "to steep himself again in nature." And in something the same way it seems as if the world ought from time to time to steep itself again in Hellenism: that is, it ought, amid all the varying affectations and extravagances and changes of convention in art and letters, to have some careful regard for those which arose when man first awoke to the meaning of truth and beauty and saw the world freely as a new thing.

Is this exaggeration? I think not. But no full defence of it can be attempted here. In this essay we have been concerned almost entirely with the artistic interest of Greece. It would be equally possible to dwell on the historical interest. Then we should find that, for that branch of mankind which is responsible for western civilization, the seeds of almost all that we count best in human progress were sown in Greece. The conception of beauty as a joy in itself and as a guide in life was first and most vividly expressed in Greece, and the very laws by which things are beautiful or ugly were to a great extent discovered there and laid down. The conception of Freedom and Justice, freedom in body, in speech and in mind, justice between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, penetrates the whole of Greek political thought, and was, amid obvious flaws, actually realized to a remarkable degree in the best Greek communities. The conception of Truth as an end to pursue for its own sake, a thing to discover and puzzle out by experiment and imagination and especially by Reason, a conception essentially allied with that of Freedom and opposed both to anarchy and to blind obedience, has perhaps never in the world been more clearly grasped than by the early Greek writers on science and philosophy. One stands amazed sometimes at the perfect freedom of their thought. Another conception came rather later, when the small City States with exclusive rights of citizenship had been merged in a larger whole: the conception of the universal fellowship between man

[1] [Pompous, bombastic speech]

and man. Greece realized soon after the Persian war that she had a mission to the world, that Hellenism stood for the higher life of man as against barbarism, for Aretē, or Excellence, as against the mere effortless average. First came the crude patriotism which regarded every Greek as superior to every barbarian; then came reflection, showing that not all Greeks were true bearers of the light, nor all barbarians its enemies; that Hellenism was a thing of the spirit and not dependent on the race to which a man belonged or the place where he was born: then came the new word and conception ανθρωπότης,[1] *humanitas*, which to the Stoics made the world as one brotherhood. No people known to history clearly formulated these ideals before the Greeks,[2] and those who have spoken the words afterwards seem for the most part to be merely echoing the thoughts of old Greek men.

These ideas, the pursuit of Truth, Freedom, Beauty, Excellence are not everything. They have been a leaven of unrest in the world; they have held up a light which was not always comforting to the eyes to see. There is another ideal which is generally stronger and may, for all we know, in the end stamp them out as evil things. There is Submission instead of Freedom, the deadening or brutalizing of the senses instead of Beauty, the acceptance of tradition instead of the pursuit of Truth, the belief in hallucination or passion instead of Reason and Temperate Thought, the obscuring of distinctions between good and bad and the acceptance of all human beings and all states of mind as equal in value. If something of this kind should prove in the end to be right for man, then Greece will have played the part of the great wrecker in human history. She will have held up false lights which have lured our ship to dangerous places. But at any rate, through calm and storm, she does hold her lights; she lit them first of the nations and held them during her short reign the clearest; and whether we believe in an individual life founded on Freedom, Reason, Beauty, Excellence and the pursuit of Truth, and an international life aiming at the fellowship between man and man, or whether we think these ideals the great snares of human politics, there is good cause for some of us in each generation at the cost of some time and trouble to study such important forces where they first appear consciously in the minds of our spiritual ancestors. In the thought and art of ancient Greece, more than any other, we shall find these forces, and also to some extent their great opposites, fresh, clean and comparatively uncomplicated, with every vast issue wrought out on a small material scale and every problem stated in its lowest terms.

GILBERT MURRAY

[1] [anthrōpotēs]

[2] [In the West]

The Cassandra Scene

In *Agamemnon*,[1] Æschylus chronicles a series of tragic events that will culminate in the King's murder by Clytemnestra,[2] who was angry at her husband's sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia, and at his bringing home Trojan Princess Cassandra[3] as a trophy and alleged mistress; for the latter, Clytemnestra began brewing a *pharmakon*.[4]

(Earlier, Apollo had bestowed to Cassandra the power of prophecy but, when she did not return his love, he cursed her so that no one would ever believe her predictions.)

In this moving scene, Æschylus makes Cassandra foretell the demise of Agamemnon and her own, plotted by a vindictive wife assisted by her lover Ægisthus.[5] The plot thickens!

This masterful translation by Louis MacNeice[6] is the truest to the spirit of the great dramatist, and of the Greek language.

THEODOSIOS TSAKANIKAS
Series Editor

Cassandra
Oh, misery, misery!
Again comes on me the terrible labour of true
Prophecy, dizzying prelude; distracts . . .
Do you see these who sit before the house,
Children, like the shapes of dreams?
Children who seem to have been killed
by their kinsfolk,
Filling their hands with meat, flesh of themselves,
Guts and entrails, handfuls of lament —
Clear what they hold — the same their father tasted.
For this I declare someone is plotting vengeance —
A lion? Lion but coward, that lurks in bed,
Good watchdog truly against the lord's return —
My lord, for I must bear the yoke of serfdom.
Leader of the ships, overturner of Troy,
He does not know what plots the accursed hound
With the licking tongue and the pricked-up ear
will plan,

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[1] *i.e.*, "very resolute."

[2] *i.e.*, "famed for her suitors."

[3] *i.e.*, "she who entangles men."

[4] Ambiguous word, meaning either remedy or poison.

[5] *i.e.*, "goat strength."

[6] For a demonstration of Louis MacNeice's wit and humour, see "Blavatsky makes it in Bagpipe Music" in our Blavatsky Tributes Series. — ED. PHIL.

In the manner of a lurking doom, in an evil hour.
A daring criminal! Female murders male.
What monster could provide her with a title?
An amphisbæna or hag of the sea who dwells
In rocks to ruin sailors —
A raving mother of death who breathes against her folk
War to the finish. Listen to her shout of triumph,
Who shirks no horrors, like men in a rout of battle.
And yet she poses as glad as their return.
If you distrust my words, what does it matter?
That which will come will come. You too will soon stand here
And admit with pity that I spoke too truly.

Leader

Thyestes' dinner of his children's meat
I understood and shuddered, and fear grips me
To hear the truth, not framed in parables.
But hearing the rest I am thrown out of my course.

Cassandra

It is Agamemnon's death I tell you, you shall witness.

Leader

Stop! Provoke no evil. Quiet your mouth!

Cassandra

The god who gives me words in here no healer.

Leader

Not if this shall be so. But may some chance avert it.

Cassandra

You are praying. But others are busy with murder.

Leader

What man is he promotes this terrible thing?

Cassandra

Indeed you have missed my drift by a wide margin!

Leader

But I do not understand the assassin's method.

Cassandra

And yet too well I know the speech of Greece!

Leader

So does Delphi but the replies are hard.

Cassandra

Ah, what a fire it is! It comes upon me.
Apollo, Wolf-Destroyer, pity, pity . . .
It is the two-foot lioness who beds

Beside a wolf, the noble lion away,
It is she will kill me! Brewing a poisoned cup
She will mix my punishment too in the angry draught
And boasts, sharpening the dagger for her husband,
To pay back murder for my bringing here.
Whey then do I wear these mockeries of myself,
The wand and the prophet's garland round my neck?
My hour is coming — but you shall perish first.
Destruction! Scattered thus you give me my revenge;
Go and enrich some other woman with ruin.
See: Apollo himself is stripping me
Of my prophetic gear, who has looked on
When in this dress I have been a laughing-stock
To friends and foes alike, and to no purpose;
They call me crazy, like a fortune-teller,
A poor starved beggar-woman — and I bore it.
And now the prophet undoing his prophetess
Has brought me to this final darkness.
Instead of my father's altar the executioner's block
Waits me the victim, red with my hot blood.
But the gods will not ignore me as I die.
One will come after to avenge my death.
A matricide, a murdered father's champion.
Exile and tramp and outlaw he will come back
To gable my family house of fatal crime;
His father's outstretched corpse shall lead him home.
Why need I then lament so pitifully?
For now that I have seen the town of Troy
Treated as she was treated, while her captors
Come to their reckoning thus by the god's verdict,
I will go in and have the courage to die.
Look, these gates are the gates of Death. I greet them.
And I pray that I may meet a deft and mortal stroke
So that without a struggle I may close
My eyes and my blood ebb in easy death.

Suggested reading for students.

From our Hellenic and Hellenistic Papers Series.

- ARISTOTLE ON THE GREAT SOULS
- BLAVATSKY ON GREEK PHILOSOPHY
- CAUCASUS, PARNASSUS, TOMAROS
- COMPENDIUM OF SACRED AND BARBARIC NAMES
- HERACLITUS' FRAGMENTS
- INDIA IS THE MOTHER OF GREECE
- KEATS' ODE ON A GRECIAN URN
- KING'S GNOSTICS AND THEIR REMAINS (1887)
- KINGSLEY ON ALEXANDRIA AND HER SCHOOLS
- LUCIAN'S PHILOSOPHICAL FINESSE AND IRREVERENT WIT
- NICOMACHUS' INTRODUCTION TO ARITHMETIC
- ORPHEUS' HYMN TO THE MUSES
- ORPHEUS' LEGEND AND WORKS
- ORPHEUS' HYMN TO APOLLO
- PLATONIC PHILOSOPHY IS THE MOST ELABORATE COMPENDIUM OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY
- PLATO'S SEVENTH EPISTLE - TR. HARWARD
- PLOTINUS' ENNEADS - TR. MACKENNA AND PAGE
- PLOTINUS ON FOUR APPROACHES TO ENLIGHTENMENT
- PLOTINUS ON THE INTELLIGIBLE BEAUTY - TR. TAYLOR
- PLUTARCH ON APOPHTHEGMS OF KINGS AND GREAT COMMANDERS
- PLUTARCH ON LACONIC APOPHTHEGMS
- PLUTARCH ON THE PYTHIAN PRIESTESS
- POCOCKE'S INDIA IN GREECE (1852)
- PORPHYRY ON THE CAVE OF THE NYMPHS - TR. TAYLOR
- PROCLUS ON AMBROSIA AND NECTAR

- SAMOTHRACE WAS SUBMERGED BY THE EUXINE
- TAYLOR ON THE HYMNS OF ORPHEUS
- TAYLOR ON THE WANDERINGS OF ULYSSES
- THE ELECTRA OF SOPHOCLES AND EURIPIDES
- WAS WRITING KNOWN BEFORE PANINI?
- WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH OUR VICTORY?
- ZEUS TRIOPHTHALMOS