

Drinking the Sun of Corinth and
Reading the Marbles
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October 13, 1998

I am deeply honored to have been invited to give the inaugural John C. Rouman Lecture. In establishing the lecture and naming it for Professor Rouman, Christos and Mary Papoutsy have made a magnificent contribution to the preservation and dissemination of the classical heritage.

Fifteen hundred years ago, the light of classical learning was nearly extinguished in western Europe. The Roman authors were preserved by monks in their monasteries, but the Greek tradition was lost entirely in the West. Geoffrey Chaucer knew Homer only through Latin adaptations, and when Petrarch wanted to learn Greek he was forced to import a tutor from Byzantium.

The situation is in some ways less perilous today, and in some ways it is more so. We are in no danger a s society of losing the knowledge of ancient Greek; but it is now possible to be considered not merely educated but even highly educated without any knowledge of either Greek or Latin, a situation that would have been unthinkable two centuries ago.

The preservation of the classical heritage is now in the hands of a relatively small group of scholars and teachers at the colleges and universities where the classical languages are still taught. And the idea that an institution where the classical languages are not taught is either a college or a university would have been bizarre until quite recently. Indeed, at the start of this century, the same would have been true of an institution that taught no Latin and still called itself a high school.

Professor Rouman s thirty distinguished years at the University of New Hampshire exemplify the band of classical scholars and teachers who defend and preserve our classical heritage as that band of Spartans defended the pass at Thermopylae. Professor Rouman and his colleagues have the additional satisfaction that the Persians are still on the other side of the pass.

Mr. and Mrs. Papoutsy deserve our gratitude for their imaginative and generous plan to honor Professor Rouman and to preserve and disseminate the heritage of which he is so able an exponent.

In this lecture in his honor, I would like to reflect on the classical tradition and its place in the modern university.

The ancient Greeks had what amounted to an obsession with education. They rightly understood that the character of their state would depend upon the education their people received. Accordingly, the quality of that education was a matter of intense public concern. Understanding that the citizens ought to be trained and educated in a variety of ways, they produced a system of education which the German scholar Werner Jaeger was to describe and analyze in his monumental study *Paideia*. *Paideia* comprised a broad-based and intensive system of education by which the young of the species *Homo sapiens* were brought to a moral, physical and intellectual status to make them fit citizens.

This concern with individuals in their full complexity is the great legacy that Greece left Western culture. It is a legacy under attack.

Three hundred years ago that heritage, with its derivative Roman and Christian offshoots, formed the entirety of the university curriculum. Sixty years ago, although higher education had broadened its compass to include contemporary science and a wider range of literatures, the Greco-Roman tradition was still at the core of the humanities, which themselves formed the core of higher education. And even forty-five years ago, although there was increased competition from the sciences for space in the curriculum, the Hellenic tradition was still at its center.

How do we stand today? Not well, I think. A curriculum proposal at a great university is illustrative. I quote from the report of the curriculum committee: We do not think there is a single set of great books that every educated person must master and we do not think an inevitably thin survey of conventional areas humanities, social sciences, natural sciences is any longer valuable. The last part of that statement may be harmless; the first part, however, is a cultural statement of the greatest importance: We do not think that there is a single set of great books every educated person must master. That statement was issued by the curriculum committee at Harvard, but that attitude is not limited to Harvard. It is shared at Stanford, at Brown and at a long list of distinguished universities.

This is not, I take it, a point of view that would find much favor before an audience of Hellenes. You spring from the civilization that not only devised the notion of paideia of education as a transmission of culture but which also produced most of the culture to transmit. This was once so obvious a fact as hardly to need saying, although people occasionally found striking ways of saying it: for example, Alfred North Whitehead's remark that all philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato, or Sir Henry Sumner Maine's dictum that Except for the blind forces of Nature, nothing moves on this earth that is not Greek in its origin.

The implication of Harvard's proposed curriculum, with its rejection of the Greeks and their successors in the tradition of humane letters such as Augustine, Shakespeare and Hobbes is that there is no particular reason why an educated person should know these works, or know the works of Sophocles, of Aeschylus, of Aristotle, of Moliere or Kant. If we consider the simple facts of educated reading, we can see that this notion is false, if for no other reason than that an educated person must be able to read, with comprehension and without recourse to a reference library, the works of readily accessible poets in his own language. Milton's sonnet *On His Blindness* is one of the greatest poems by one of the greatest English poets:

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere hath my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide

This makes perfectly good sense to one who has read the parable of the Talents and no sense at all to one who has not. A student who has not read the Gospels, in trying to understand this sonnet, may require access to a research library. The Bible, I suggest, is a book that an educated person should have read.

Or consider Milton's sonnet *On His Deceased Wife* :

Methought I saw my late espoused saint
Brought to me, like Alcestis, from the grave,
Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave,
Rescued from death by force though pale and faint.

Who's Alcestis? If he has not been exposed to classical learning, the student must return to the library to find out, and when he does, his appreciation of the allusion can never be the same as if he had recognized it directly, experiencing one variety of what the critic Edmund Wilson called the shock of recognition, that wonderful excitement when one understands instantly the reference in a poetic line.

This poem and other classics of our culture, which were not college but high school requirements in the nineteenth century all over the Midwest, the Southwest, the South and other benighted areas of the nation, may now be beyond the educational expectations of graduates of our leading universities.

In such a sterile educational tradition, we will find ourselves in the position described by St.-Exupery in his book *Flight to Arras*. Anticipating a reconnaissance flight from which he was unlikely to return, he wrote:

And as I sat there longing for night, I was for a moment like a
Christian abandoned by grace. I was about to do my job
honorably, that was certain. But to do it as one honors ancient
rites when they have no longer any significance, when the god that
lived in them has withdrawn from them.

It is typical that St.-Exupery's climactic simile should be derived from the ancient Greek religion, grounded as it was in the physical presence of the deity. Increasingly, such forceful embodiments of abstractions will be unavailable to a generation that has been educated if that is the proper term in isolation from its cultural heritage. For culturally, we are all Hellenes, and a rejection of the classical tradition is therefore a rejection of ourselves.

We are in danger of losing our way. I believe that many in the university will admit that the god has withdrawn from the ceremonies it celebrates and from the principles for which it allegedly stands. This withdrawal is no fault of ours, nor our fathers, nor our predecessors, nor the previous presidents of our institutions, nor boards of trustees. The fault lies neither in our stars nor in ourselves, but in the cultural disarray that marks our age.

As educationally dubious as any curriculum must be that does not include the study of the classics as a requirement, what can we say of entire educational institutions where such study is not possible even as an option? Once or twice in my experience as President of Boston University, it was suggested to me with various levels of stridency, that I should close down the Department of Classics and transfer to other departments the money that is now spent at Boston University not only on the teaching of ancient Greek but also on the teaching of Byzantine and modern Greek. My answer on these occasions was this: it is not possible for Boston University to survive without a department of

classics because no institution without one deserves to be called a university. Institutions of higher education that turn their backs on the Hellenic tradition behave as if they wish to have honey without keeping bees. And if enough of them adopt this policy, there will be none to keep bees and then there will be no honey. But it is a sad fact that many colleges and universities have lent themselves to this shortsighted rejection of the classics.

What have we lost in the ongoing loss of the Hellenic tradition? Sometimes the loss is of archetypes, for there are now no archetypal moments on which one can depend unless Hollywood has made a movie of them. I once asked a group of Boston University freshmen, What did David and Jonathan have in common with Achilles and Patroklos? Few knew who David and Jonathan were and only a couple of classics students had heard of Achilles and Patroklos. As an experiment, I then added Starsky and Hutch to the pairs and everyone knew the answer. One can measure the decline of a civilization by noting that that generation found its archetype of male friendship not in David and Jonathan or Achilles and Patroklos, but in the confused television images of Starsky and Hutch. Now, for this generation of students, I would have to propose a currently relevant pair Beavis and Butthead. Thus we can measure a further decline in our civilization.

Sometimes our loss is of pungency and subtlety: when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had Dr. Watson mourn Sherlock Holmes as the best and wisest man I have ever known, his readers would have recognized the allusion to Socrates and known that Dr. Watson could find no better words to express his sense of loss in the death of Sherlock Holmes than those Phaedo used to eulogize Socrates. The reader deprived of his cultural background can still resonate to these moving words, but the force of the tribute can never be what it was to the original reader.

And sometimes our loss is of pedagogical technique. A hundred years ago, the Platonic dialogue was still a living form in use in our elementary and secondary schools. William Holmes McGuffey prepared readers for our primary and secondary children that included such dialogues as the following, entitled Let it Rain, in which the Platonic view of the inseparability of fact and value was clearly presented.

Rose. See how it rains! Oh dear, dear, dear! How dull it is! Must I stay indoors all day?

Father. Why, Rose, are you sorry that you had any bread and butter for breakfast, this morning?

Rose. Why, father, what a question! I should be sorry, indeed, if I could not get any.

Father. Are you sorry, my daughter, when you see the flowers and the trees growing in the garden?

Rose. Sorry? No, indeed. Just now, I wished very much to go out and see them they look so pretty.

Father. Well, are you sorry when you see the horses, cows, or sheep drinking at the brook to quench their thirst?

Rose. Why, father, you must think I am a cruel girl, to wish that the poor horses that work so hard, the beautiful cows that give so much nice milk, and the pretty lambs should always be thirsty.

Father. Do you not think they would die, if they had no water to drink?

Rose. Yes, sir, I am sure they would. How shocking to think of such a thing!

Father. I thought little Rose was sorry it rained. Do you think the trees and flowers would grow, if they never had any water on them?

Rose. No, indeed, father, they would be dried up by the sun. Then we should not have pretty flowers to look at, and to make wreaths of for mother.

Father. I thought you were sorry it rained. Rose, what is our bread made of?

Rose. It is made of flour, and the flour is made from wheat, which is ground in the mill.

Father. Yes, Rose, and it was rain that helped to make the wheat grow, and it is water that turned the mill to grind the wheat. I thought little Rose was sorry it rained.

Rose. I did not think of all these things, father. I am truly very glad to see the rain falling.

Socrates held that one does not know what a thing is unless one knows what it is good for, what is its purpose or function. One does not know what a knife is unless one knows what a knife is to be used for. Only then does one have the criteria by which to understand the meaning of knife. One does not know the form of anything unless he knows the form of the good in relation to it. And here in McGuffey's reader was a clear illustration of Plato's point, designed for the moral education of primary school children, that demonstrated the interpenetration and interdependence of fact and value. This understanding is the foundation of a wise adulthood.

Here, although sugared over with a sentimentality that would have offended Socrates, McGuffey's method was essentially Socratic, used to bring home some elemental truths to the very young. Two and a half millennia have not given us a better method, and yet we have largely abandoned it and are now in danger of forgetting it altogether.

But our greatest loss is the loss of meaning, for by providing meaning to human existence the humanities have their justification. The meaning of the *Iliad* has survived for nearly thirty centuries, for the first five or so by being told around small banquet-fires (on occasions far less grand than this one) to generation after generation of Greeks. These were not men of genius; these were *hoi polloi* who lived in Ionia, on the Aegean Islands and on the Greek peninsula, and the *Iliad* was a story that entertained them. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are first of all simple stories about fundamental experience, told in a way that anyone can understand, but in a way that will move any person of normal intelligence and sensibility; any person of ordinary capacity will be elevated and inspired by them.

When, in the *Iliad*, the body of Patroklos is brought back and Achilles goes into great mourning and decides not to bury his friend as long as the man who killed him lives, we are confronted with an elemental understanding of friendship and its obligations. At last Achilles has been compelled by events to engage in battle with Hector. Finally they meet each other and after several passes at one another, Hector runs four times around the city of Troy with Achilles in hot pursuit. Then he turns in full dread of his approaching death and fights Achilles fact-to-face before the city gates.

Why does Hector or anyone turn to fight? Why not continue to run? As Patroklos said earlier, if we had the option of living forever then we would take care not to risk our lives. But since none of us will live long, the important thing is to live well and to bring glory to our lives before we die. Hector is deeply moved by the same thought: he will not die with a spear between his shoulder blades; nor will he forfeit his life to Achilles without trying to prevail over him. Instead he will turn, fight for his life and lose it with a glory second only to Achilles' own. In opting to die well, he lives well.

Achilles triumphs over Hector's body and drags it back to the Greek camp. Then he faces the question of burying Patroklos and what to do with the body of Hector. This leads to a profoundly moving scene. Achilles has already grown in spirit from the time when, angered by Agamemnon's mistreatment, he sulked in his tent, refusing to fight, and thereby inadvertently contributed to the death of his close friend, Patroklos. Now he has the opportunity of despoiling the body of the man who killed Patroklos and of burying Patroklos with honor.

At this point, however, Hector's father Priam comes to beg for the body of his son. The old king kneels before Achilles, who has killed many men who embraced his knees as suppliants. But Achilles, reminded of his own father as he looks at Priam, is moved to tears. The powerful young man and the frail old man weep together over the bodies of Patroklos and Hector. United with Priam in their common grief, and in the common humanity that is in their common mortality, Achilles gives the body of Hector to his father for honorable burial.

A person who has read the *Iliad* and attended to it is prepared to live and prepared to die in a way that those who have not read it will not be. Those who have read it know about friendship and its obligations and rewards, about anger and its dangers, about resentment and its demeaning cruelty, about the risks men run when they violate the demands of justice, about the distinction between right and power, about the importance of piety, that reverence which flows from our awareness of our own mortality, and about the grandeur and nobility of pity.

The *Odyssey* is no less rich in insights, nor merely of adventure and warfare, but of domesticity. When, after twenty years away from his home, Odysseus finally returns to

Ithaca and meets with his son, Telemachos, we are presented with an incomparable picture of a reunited family, one that over the passage of thirty centuries still has the power to move us:

[And so Odysseus spoke], and sat down again, but now Telemachos folded his great father in his arms and lamented, shedding tears, and desire for mourning rose in both of them; and they cried shrill in a pulsing voice, even more than the outcry of birds, ospreys or vultures with hooked claws, whose children were stolen away by the men of the fields, before their wings grew strong; such was their pitiful cry and the tears their eyes wept.

Note that in one another's arms, the desire for mourning arose in Odysseus and Telemachos. Why not the desire for rejoicing? Because the father and the son had to mourn twenty years of companionship forever lost while Odysseus was trying to return home from Troy. And, consequently, while they rejoiced they simultaneously mourned. The sensitivity with which Homer recounts this reunion has never been surpassed.

And finally Odysseus is revealed to his wife, Penelope, who had for twenty years resisted the suitors who wanted to marry her and possess all of Odysseus' holdings. Penelope, wary after those long years of trial, views Odysseus with suspicion, hardly able to believe, to dare to believe that it is truly Odysseus and not an imposter:

So he spoke, and her knees and the heart within her went slack as she recognized the clear proofs that Odysseus had given; but then she burst into tears and ran straight to him, throwing her arms around the neck of Odysseus, and kissed his head, saying: Do not be angry with me, Odysseus, since, beyond other men, you have been the most understanding. The gods granted us misery, in jealousy over the thought that we two, always together, should enjoy our youth, and then come to the threshold of old age. Then do not now be angry with me nor blame me, because I did not greet you, as I do now, at first when I saw you . . . But now, since you have given me accurate proof describing our bed, which no other mortal man beside has ever seen, but only you and I . . . [now I know that it is you].

The way in which Odysseus proves himself the husband of Penelope is significant: he proves it by describing their marriage bed, which obviously would not be evidence had it been frequented by others. In our age, in which intimacy with strangers is commonplace, not only on television and movies but in real life, an author would have to find some other device for proving the identity of the returning husband.

But perhaps our greatest legacy from the Hellenic tradition is the tragic vision that informs us that all men are losers. We must remember the poignant saying, which Sophocles applies to Oedipus: Count no man happy until he dies.

This austere, sane, invigorating and ultimately exalting view of human life is still authoritative. Despite the decadence of our times, the themes and myths that animated

Greek culture in antiquity have survived. They are too profound, too tough, too significant to our own lives, to disappear. Among others, modern Greeks have continued to work the rich ore of their cultural heritage. They have read Homer and more important they have understood him. In consequence, they have produced works of art that are as powerful and as Greek as the original. Consider, for example, this poem by C. P. Cavafy. Called *The Horses of Achilles*, it is imbued with Homer's tragic visions of life:

When they saw Patroklos dead
--so brave and strong, so young
the horses of Achilles began to weep;
their immortal nature was upset deeply
by this work of death they had to look at.
They reared their heads, tossed their long manes,
beat the ground with their hooves, and mourned
Patroklos, seeing him lifeless, destroyed,
now mere flesh only, his spirit gone,
defenseless, without breath,
turned back from life to the great Nothingness.

Zeus saw the tears of those immortal horses and felt sorry.
At the wedding of Peleus, he said,
I should not have acted so thoughtlessly.
Better if we hadn't given you as a gift,
my unhappy horses. What business did you have down there,
among pathetic human beings, the toys of fate.
You are free of death, you will not get old,
yet ephemeral disasters torment you.
Men have caught you up in their misery.
But it was for the eternal disaster of death
that those two gallant horses shed their tears.

Nor is this tragic view of life confined to heroic figures: to Patroklos and Achilles, to Penelope, Ajax and Odysseus. It is also applicable to the life of every one, Everyman, to the hoplites at Thermopylae, for example, whose matter-of-fact gallantry has inspired poets from Simonides to T.S. Eliot.

Honor [sings Cavafy] to those who in the life they lead
define and guard a Thermopylae.
Never betraying what is right,
consistent and just in all they do
but showing pity also, and compassion;
generous when they're rich, and when they're poor,
still generous in small ways,
still helping as much as they can;
always speaking the truth,

yet without hating those who lie.

And even more honor is due to them
when they foresee (as many do foresee)
that Ephialtis will turn up in the end,
that the Medes will break through after all.

(For those of you who may have forgotten, Ephialtis was the treasonous Greek who betrayed the secret pass that let the Medes through to destroy the Greeks.)

When we recognize that all men face essentially the same end rich and poor alike that is, that all men die and that the problems posed by higher religion and by ethical systems have been those of seeing how defeat can be transformed into victory through a variety of spiritual and moral movements, we will confront religion and ethics in a profoundly different light--in the light of the humanities.

It is a light that first illuminated Hellas. And all of us Greeks by birth and Greeks by education have a stake in seeing to it that this light not be extinguished.

We have in common with the men and women of classical Greece the culture which they developed and which through thirty centuries, as often as not through inadvertence rather than deliberation, has been handed down to us. A substantial part of our humanity and the humanity of all mankind is Greek. We all of us, in all cultures throughout the world are what we are in part because of the Hellenic tradition. And when we study it, we study ourselves.

As different as the next century will be from fifth-century Greece, it will also be a dangerous and challenging time in which to live and, thus, very similar. And the ancient Greeks have much to tell us about how to live and how to die in such a time. The world of Homer and the Greek dramatists is not a fair world: up on Olympus, the gods live and laugh, intervening in the affairs of men in ways that are neither predictable nor always admirable or desirable. Their erratic dominion over man is not because, like the Christian God, they made him and love him, but rather because they are there bigger and more powerful than man and immortal.

Living in intimate contact with such gods was a risky business, and it taught the Greeks the wisdom of accepting the inevitable and getting on with the business of life. Homer had taught them the stupidity of bitterness. They learned to accept the inevitability and irrationality of the thunderbolt, thinking of it as just Zeus again. They did not allow themselves to be terrorized into living in caves. They knew it was not only possible, but essential, to live well even in the face of an unpredictable and sometimes downright malevolent universe.

While we have made some progress in taming the universe and the forces of nature, the universe is really not much more predictable or less dangerous than it was in Homeric days. And if we are to live in a way that justifies the labor of existence, we cannot look for a better guide than the Hellenic tradition, to live with courage that alone brings joy.

That is why I am certain that five hundred years or a thousand years from now, we shall still, in the beautiful words of Odysseus Elytes, be

Drinking the sun of Corinth and
Reading the marbles.

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