

THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

ANDRE MICHALOPOULOS

Fairleigh Dickinson University

THERE IS NO GREATER FALLACY than the belief that the classics of ancient Greece and Rome are but the dead leaves of a remote and forgotten past. On the contrary they are the parent roots of our western civilization: the sap still flows from them and vitalizes the branches of an age-long, ever-verdant tree.

The basic values set by the Greeks thirty centuries ago are permanent human values which western peoples still cherish and apply.

The continuing spirit of Hellenic civilization is perhaps more easily perceptible to the people of Greece today than to peoples farther removed from the scene of its origin. The splendor of line and color which is a glory of the Grecian landscape is the same which inspired Aristophanes to sing:

*Clouds, ever drifting in air
Rise, O dewy anatomies, shine to the world in splendor.
Upward from thundering Ocean who fathered us
rise, make way to the forested pinnacles.
There let us gaze upon
summits aerial opening under us;
Earth most holy, and fruits of our watering;
rivers melodious, rich in divinity;
seas, deep-throated, of echo reverberant.
Rise, for his Eye, many-splendored, unwearying,
burns in the front of Heaven.
Shake as a cloak from our heavenly essences
vapor and rain, and at Earth in our purity
with far-seeing eye let us wonder.¹*

The great mountains of Greece still rise in all their majesty, their names unchanged: Pindus, Kyllene, Parnassus, Olympus over which the golden eagle, sacred bird of Zeus, circles in lordly flight.

Athens and Sparta and Corinth and Megara and hundreds of other towns and islands still bear their ancient and honored names, and the pride of long tradition warms the hearts of their citizens. I happen to come from the small town of Aigion on the Corinthian Gulf. Homer, in the Iliad, lists it among those which sent ships to Troy. Homer wrote in the ninth century B.C. and the Trojan War was fought four centuries before that. Moreover, it is an incontrovertible fact that Aigion, which means "City of the Goat," was so named, long before the Trojan War, because we produced a goat which nourished with its milk the infant Zeus before he became Father of the Gods.

Not far from my home flows the River Styx, the river of the dead, and, as it disappears into a dark and awesome cavern, you can still hear the barking of the dog Cerberus and the splashing of Charon's oar as he ferries the souls across to the shore of no return.

¹Clouds, 275-90 transl. T. F. Higham.

The Classical Tradition

In connection with Charon I cannot resist a parenthetical quotation of a poem in the Greek Anthology which illustrates the deep humanity and the love of children which prevailed among the ancient Greeks:

THE LITTLE GHOST

*Ferryman that rowest the barge the buried fare on,
With all its freight of anguish, across Death's reedy
mere,
Give to the child of Cinyras, O gloomy Charon,
A kindly hand for climbing to thy boat, as he draws
near.
For the little one trips in his sandals; yet he will shrink to
tread
Barefoot the sandy beaches of the River of the Dead.²*

On the crest of the Acropolis, in the center of the "violet-crowned city," the Parthenon still stands, a structure of incomparable beauty, reflecting through the ages the purity and balance and harmony of the Mother of our civilization.

It is not easy for even the most untutored who live amid the ever-present vestiges of such natural and spiritual grandeur to lose sight of the values which it represents.

Since the Age of Enlightenment, which followed in the wake of the Renaissance when Greek culture was revived in Western Europe, until the beginning of the twentieth century, the classics formed the basis of the education of the ruling classes. There was no doubt then in the minds of intellectuals that the values set by Greece and Rome were valid and enduring. When Thomas Jefferson set the pattern for higher education in America by the foundation of the University of Virginia, he clearly intended that the youth of the young Republic should draw their ideals and inspiration from the august models of antiquity. It is to his lasting credit that, setting aside the natural

²Zonas of Sardis, transl. F. L. Lucas.

aversion of a revolutionary to things British, he summoned scholars from Oxford to teach Greek and Latin at Charlottesville. That I was reared in this tradition has afforded me the greatest satisfaction in life, and I shall never forget the abbé Guérin, a humble village priest in France, who, when I was eleven years old, introduced me to the magic of Homer and Vergil by making me read them aloud in the original and so teaching me ancient Greek and Latin as *living* languages.

As this century of industrial expansion and scientific discovery advanced, however, the predominant position of the classics in education naturally receded. Thousands of scientific and technological experts became essential to the provision of the daily necessities of a new and materially more complex way of life. The harsh beauty of the machine with its whirring harmony of wheels and cogs, and the positive magic of the mathematical formula threatened to obliterate the values and ideals of less urgent times.

Within the last decade, nevertheless, business men and scientists in America have become increasingly conscious of the importance of the spiritual values of our ancient heritage, and Industry is not only recruiting students of the liberal arts for its organizations, but also expects its technical personnel to be familiar with the basic patterns of our civilization. Thus it is today my very happy privilege, among my other pursuits, to be teaching the classics in an American university dedicated mainly to the training of scientists and technicians.

What are the enduring basic patterns which were set for us by the ancient Greeks?

There were of course great oriental civilizations which flourished before the time of the Greeks and from which they inherited some characteristics, as attested by an oriental strain in primitive Greek art. But these oriental civilizations were static. They were opposed to the positive spirit of western ideology and have remained so to the present day. In the case of Egypt, for example, whose civilization attained great power

The Classical Tradition

and grandeur, all that is left is a chain of imposing colossal and inhuman monuments—a tribute to the power of arrogant and absolute masters over a nation of slaves. The spirit of Egypt is accurately portrayed in Shelly's sonnet to Ozymandias:

*And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.'
Nothing beside remains; round the decay
Of that colossal wreck boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

The western spirit in conscious literature originates with Homer. He is the fountainhead of our culture and way of life. The pattern of our ideals emerges clearly out of the dust and confusion of a barbaric war in the melodious cadences of the Homeric hexameter. Of course, Homer is primarily a great poet and a magnificent storyteller, and his narrative moves forward powerfully in obedience to the promptings of his imaginative genius. In the presentation of his theme, both in the Iliad and in the Odyssey, Homer is in no sense a philosopher or moralist. He is an artist. Indeed his "theology" would shock our sense of religious propriety, did we not know that in his time the indigenuous Hellenes paid scant attention to the newly imported gods of Olympus, and that their religious devotion was directed to the Chthonian gods, who were never made light of. Homer, with a humorous twinkle in his eye that was never blind—his magnificent descriptive passages are proof of this—gives us the most delightful glimpses of the Olympian supermen indulging most enviably, and with impunity, in all the human passions as they control the ebb and flow of a senseless war. That Homer considered war senseless is made clear indirectly, and to this extent the Iliad points a moral which is definitely Hellenic and western. Throughout the twenty-four books of the Iliad, Homer, the Greek, is entirely impartial on the issue of a war between Greeks and Trojans. He is deeply conscious of the

tragedy of the doomed city of Troy, and of the human drama in the individual lives of its princes and people. The epic does not end in triumph for the Greeks, who are left victorious but helpless in a foreign land; it ends (books xxiii & xxiv) in a minor key with an account of a Greek and a Trojan burial—a note of mournful resignation at the utter futility of the whole struggle. Homer is facing a problem that is still with us: his reactions are those of civilized western man.

In my opinion, however, the outstanding characteristic which makes Homer the fountainhead of our civilization is that he is the first to introduce into literature a deliberate element of kindness and compassion. He is not in the least squeamish or sentimental; his war reporting is accurate and down-to-earth, as in this passage:

*From the steep bank he drew his spear and left there
Asteropaios whom he had slain, lying in the sands, and the
dark water flooded him. Around him eels and fishes
swarmed, tearing and gnawing the fat about his kidneys.³*

He describes the passions and jealousies which divide the Greek chieftains with consummate psychological skill. But I think that we are most deeply moved by the warmth of his humanity in such scenes as the parting of Hector from Andromache and their little son when the Trojan prince goes forth to battle, never to return; or, by the kindness which old King Priam shows toward Helen at a time when the war was going badly for the Trojans and the king's advisers were openly blaming this beautiful Greek princess in their midst as the cause of all their woes. "Come and sit by me, my child," says Priam, "I do not blame thee; rather the gods, or fate do I blame." Deeply moving, too, is the scene in which old Priam goes to the tent of Achilles to beg for the body of his slain son and kneels down before the conqueror and kisses 'those murderous hands', and Achilles, seized with compassion, raises the old man up and comforts him. Over and over again, in this tale of force and

³Transl. Leaf, Lang and Myers.

The Classical Tradition

violence, do we meet with flashes, such as these, which display a quality of almost Christian mercy in the poet. These are lasting western values which we recognize with amazement and warm gratification in this epic of the ninth century B.C.

Again, there is an air of equality and freedom breathing through the Iliad and Odyssey. Chieftains and warriors, heroes and men, are equals on the human level. There is a free-and-easy spirit of camaraderie among them which we readily recognize as part of our way of life and which would be incomprehensible, for instance, to a Hitler or a Stalin. Homer is as free and vast and ample as his "unharvested sea."

Four centuries after Homer, Greek civilization had achieved its splendid maturity. The age of Aeschylus, Pericles, Phidias, Sophocles, Euripides and Plato gave birth to the most balanced culture the world has ever known, and western civilization acquired therefrom its permanent standards and values.

The part played by the Athenian theater in molding these standards and values is worthy of note. The people of Athens did not go to the theater merely to be entertained. They were not intrigued by the intricacy of a plot, for the action and ending of each drama were familiar to them. The theme was taken from the often gruesome legends of remote antiquity. Everyone knew, before the play began, that Oedipus would end up by gouging out his eyes and Jocasta would hang herself. What the audience went to see and hear was how the playwright of the day would treat a subject already presented by many of his colleagues before him. More specifically, they wanted to learn what lesson, religious, moral or political, was to be drawn from the presentation. Thus, in the great Greek tragedies that have come down to us we have an almost complete picture of the great problems to which a solution was being sought in the western world of twenty-five centuries ago. The same problems, in great measure, are still with us today, and the manner in which the Greeks tackled them is by no means alien to our way of thinking.

Perhaps nothing could better demonstrate the affinity which exists between the ancient Athenian concept of democracy and our own than the following paragraph taken from a speech made in 429 B.C. by Pericles:

Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. We do not copy our neighbors, but are an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while the law secures equal justice to all alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty a bar, but a man may benefit his country whatever be the obscurity of his condition.⁴

These words, without the change of a single comma, might have fallen from the lips of Jefferson, Lincoln or Eisenhower. They reflect the continuing ideology of the democratic west, and since we see that they had their roots in ancient Greece, what better argument could be found in favor of the study of the great prototypes of our civilization?

⁴Transl. Benjamin Jowett.