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## The Continuity of Greek Culture

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MY TITLE IS OBVIOUSLY OVERLY AMBITIOUS. THE CONTINUITY of Greek culture is a vast and complex field of study, demanding of its practitioners expertise in ancient, Byzantine, and Modern Greek language, literature, and history; of Slavic and Turkish language and history; of the ritual and theology of the Orthodox Church; and a score of related disciplines, more in fact than one scholar can master in a lifetime. It is also an area of continuing interest and controversy. As recently as 1981, for example, the Hellenic Cultural Centre in London organized a panel discussion on the theme "3000 Years of Greek Identity." The three panels, chaired by the Byzantine scholar, Robert Browning, were addressed by three Greeks brought up outside Greece, three Greeks raised in Greece, and three English scholars; one of the talks by Costa Carras "3000 Years of Greek Identity — Myth or Reality?" was published in London in 1983. And it is a field in which fresh data are constantly supplied to feed fresh discussion.

Even in one narrow field, the continuity of the language, Professor Shipp, an Australian scholar who is a noted authority on the language of Homer, published a book entitled *Modern Greek Evidence for the Ancient Greek Vocabulary* and in 1974 Nikolaos Andriotis, working in the opposite direction, published in Vienna, his *Lexicon der Archaismen in neugriechischen Dialekten*. Here indeed are to be found 3000 years, or more, of Greek identity. The language inscribed on the fire-baked clay tablets found at Pylos on the mainland and at Knossos on Crete, dating from about B.C. 1600, is recognizably a primitive form of the language in which the newspapers of Athens are written today. Of course, in this immense stretch of time, the language has undergone many changes, but no other European language even comes close to claiming such a longevity; the only real parallel, in fact, is Chinese.

The profusion of studies published on this and all the other aspects of the long Greek tradition is such that any deluded speaker who thinks he can build a bridge between ancient and modern Greece in a forty-five minute lecture will end up constructing a shaky structure at best



and may find himself lamenting, like the bridge builder in the famous medieval Greek ballad:

Alas for our trouble, alas for our work,  
To build it all day long, and have it collapse at night.

ἀλίμονο στους κόπους μας, κρῖμα στη δούλευσή μας  
όλομερίς να χτίζουμε, τὸ βράδυ να γκρεμίζεται

I shall aim lower. What I would like to do is to speak about my own encounter with modern Greece, its language and culture, the encounter of a classical literary scholar, brought up on Homer and Sophocles, with the Greece of Karamanlis and Papandreou — the elder Papandreou, I may add — I first went to Greece in 1958. I should begin by explaining that I grew up in England, where I learned ancient Greek at school in London and then went on to St. John's College in Cambridge to read Classics in the early thirties of this century.

The training I received was rigidly linguistic in emphasis (and, in that, was quite typical). The method seemed to have been designed with an eye to producing scholars who could write near-perfect Platonic verse and correct (but dull) Sophoclean iambic verse. I went through three years of Cambridge with the general impression that all the Greek worth reading came to a full stop with Theocritus (though there was, of course, the New Testament, but *that* was something for people studying Divinity) and, furthermore, that Greek history came to stop with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. (after that, it was Hellenistic history). Towards the end of my career at Cambridge, I discovered that a friend of mine, who had chosen archaeology as his special field and was on his way to the British School in Athens, was studying, from a German handbook (there was not one in English), modern Greek. After talking to him and looking at the book, I asked my tutor whether perhaps an acquaintance with modern Greek might be useful. "Not only will it not be useful," he said, "the only people who use it are archaeologists who have to go there. Not only will it not be useful; it will corrupt your prose style and you will end up writing Greek that sounds like Polybios."

This Olympian disdain for people who actually went to modern Greece and did not *have* to go there was no new thing; in the spring of 1877, Oscar Wilde, then an undergraduate reading Greats at Magdalen College, Oxford, went on a trip to Greece with Professor Mahaffy of his former college, Trinity College, Dublin; they saw the excavations at Olympia, the temple at Bassae, Argos, Aegina, and Athens. Unfortunately for Wilde, he got back to Oxford three weeks late for

the beginning of the term (there were no jets in those days). "Voyages to Greece," says his biographer, Richard Ellman, "were not common in the seventies of the last century. That they were necessary to a classical course in Oxford was more than Magdalen was ready to concede." Wilde was temporarily suspended for the rest of the academic year and deprived of his scholarship money. "I was sent down from Oxford," he said later, "for being the first undergraduate to visit Olympia."

This attitude, however, was not confined to the English classical establishment. Some time in the early *sixties* of this century, I asked a French archaeologist who had spent most of his life in Greece at the Ecole Française whether he read the modern Greek poets. (I had just discovered, with immense excitement, the poetry of Kavafis and Seferis). "No," he said, "I have to know enough modern Greek to talk to the workmen on the dig, but I try to keep my acquaintance with it to a minimum — it might spoil my appreciation of the subtleties of Plato's style."

And I am sorry to say that this attitude towards modern Greek and modern Greece, typical of so many scholars, especially those concerned with literature, was just as prevalent in the United States when I first began to do graduate work and then to teach at Yale after the Second World War. My colleagues spent their summers and their sabbatical years in London, Paris, Vienna, Rome — cities where there were manuscripts of ancient Greek authors to collate, where the great libraries offered immense bibliographical resources, the great cities their comforts and cultural amenities, and the universities their classical scholars for consultation and discussion. I, too, when my first fellowship allowed me to travel, in 1953, went to Rome and Florence, partly because, as a result of military service in Italy in the Second World War, I spoke Italian, but also because in Florence, the Biblioteca Laurenziana held the great manuscript of Sophocles, on whom I was working at the time. Greece was a place to visit, perhaps, but not to stay in (like New York); those scholars who did go contented themselves with a visit to the most important classical sites. They returned to their universities not so much disillusioned (for they had expected very little); rather they returned confirmed in their conviction that between the Greece of Pericles and Sophocles, on the one hand, and that of Venizelos and Seferis, on the other, (not that they knew very much about either of these two), there was a gap so wide that little or nothing of value to the classicist was to be learned from a closer knowledge of the life, literature, and language of modern Greece.

To the Greeks themselves, whose early training and later study reinforced their consciousness of the continuity of the Greek tradition, such an attitude must appear bizarre, just as it would appear strange



to Englishmen if a foreign scholar of Chaucer or Shakespeare found nothing useful for his studies in the language and customs of modern England. But this attitude exists and persists and since I, too, shared it to some extent before I had the good fortune to spend a whole year in Greece, I would like to describe it and try to explain it. I have long since been free of it but the converted heretic is perhaps the most competent authority on the beliefs he has rejected.

To begin with, there is the look of the place. No one can fail to be overwhelmed by the beauty and mystery of the Altis at Olympia at moonlight, or of Delphi at any hour (any hour, that is, when there are not ten thousand tourists taking pictures) and no one can fail to be impressed by the huge, yet delicate, beauty of the theater at Epidaurus; the long gallery in the fortress at Tiryns; the splendid, somehow haunted, site of Agamemnon's palace at Mycenae; the tomb of the Athenian and Plataean dead on the plain where "Marathon looks on the sea." But these are secluded ancient sites, where the scholar can easily imagine himself in the Greece of classical or archaic times. The rest of Greece, however, is another kettle of fish. The scholar of Greek literature who manages to find his way behind the Larisa Station to what was Kolonos Hippios, with the marvelous lines of Sophocles ringing in his ears:

εὐίππου ξένε, τᾶσδε χώρας ἴκου τὰ κράτιστα, γὰρ ἔπαυλα, τὸν ἀργῆτα Κολωνόν, ἐνθ' ἃ λίγεια μινύρεται . . . ἄηδών

Stranger, you have come to the land of fine horses, to earth's fairest home, white Kolonos, where the nightingale, a permanent guest, trills her clear notes in green glades, amid the wine-dark ivy in the gods' sacred wood, heavy with fruit and berries, shaded from the sun, shielded from wind and weather.

is in for a terrible shock; what he will find at the end of the bus ride has little to do with horses and still less to do with nightingales. And suppose he tries to follow Socrates and Phaedros out to the shady spot where they talked by the river Ilissos.

"This plane tree is spreading and tall," says Plato's Socrates, "and there is a lovely shade from the high branches of the agnus; now that it is in full flower, it will make the place fragrant. And what a lovely stream under the plane tree! and how cool to the feet . . . and the freshness of the air and the shrill summery music of the cicadas. And as a crowning delight, this grass, thick on the gentle slope, just right to rest your head on it most comfortably."

Our scholar will be a very clever man if he can find the Ilissos at all, and a very disappointed one if he does. Reluctantly, dodging traffic at every intersection, he makes his way back to the Acropolis, where, even though it is scarred and broken, there is enough left of the Parthenon and the Propylaea to remind him of the glories of Periclean Athens.

Outside Athens, things are not much better. Our scholar's first view of Salamis and the straits in which the Greek fleet, watched by Xerxes from his throne, routed and sank the Persian galleys, will probably include the rusting hulks lying at anchor off Skaramangas; and all the way to the site of the Eleusian Mysteries at Eleusis, he will have to look at the plume of white smoke from the huge Herakles cement factory. Where are the pine trees on the Theban mountains, the haunts of Dionysos and his maenads, of nymphs and satyrs? Where is the narrow pass that Leonidas and his three-hundred Spartans held against the Persian hordes? (It would take an army corps to hold it now). Where are the bees of Hymettos? The birds of Aristophanes? The seven gates of Thebes? Only in the books the scholar knows so well and to which he returns with relief. The first impressions of modern Greece, and particularly Athens, are enough to convince most scholars that they will understand the culture and literature of the fifth-century B.C. much better working in a study in Oxford or New Haven than they ever will sitting in a kafeneion near Plateia tis Omonoias or riding the bus to Levadia.

Then there are the people, the Greeks themselves. To the visiting scholar, they are the kindest and most solicitous of hosts (particularly in the country where their hospitality can be overwhelming), hard working, honest, and admirable people but, thinks the scholar, they do not *look* like the ancient Greeks. He has come to Greece for the first time with the idealized faces of the young men on the Parthenon frieze stamped on his memory, his mind full of Homeric tags like *Xanthos*, *Menelaos*, a phrase which, particularly if he is of Anglo-Saxon or Germanic stock, he has been taught to translate "blond Menelaos." In Athens, he finds himself in a world of men and women who seem to be a startling contrast to the ideal faces which have haunted the imagination since he first saw them in the British Museum, of people who bear no resemblance to the gods and goddesses whose exquisitely proportioned features, set in the eternity of marble gilded by time, first drew him to his lifelong study of Greek.

And finally there is the language. He knows that it has changed somewhat in 2,500 years but still feels a certain confidence. After all, he has often successfully plowed his way through scholarly articles in modern Greek and occasionally read with some understanding a Greek newspaper bought in New York or London. Armed with his many years



of study of ancient Greek and perhaps a few days on the boat devoted to a modern Greek phrase book, he expects to be able to manage fairly well when he gets there; after all, he has been studying Greek all his life. But the first contact with spoken Greek, especially if the speaker is a Piraeus taxi driver, can be a shattering experience. The visiting professor is reduced, like all his ignorant fellow passengers, to conducting his negotiations for a ride to Athens in what passes among Piraeus taxi drivers for English. Later, after buying a grammar and making a serious stab at the language, he begins to make some progress, but he realizes with growing despair that the reason he could read the scholarly articles and newspapers is that they are written in a Greek which tries to preserve as much of the ancient language as possible, whereas the waiters and bus drivers and policemen with whom he has to deal on his travels seem to be talking a different language. Modern Greek seems to have so little connection with the language of Demosthenes (Good Lord, it has not even got an *infinitive*) that he sees no point in trying to learn it.

On my first visit to Greece, once comfortably ensconced in a hotel in Iannina (we had arrived on a ferry from Brindisi to Igoumenitza), I displayed my knowledge of Greek by translating the headlines of the newspaper to my wife. But the balloon was soon punctured when she said: "Since you seem to know the language so well, why don't you call up and get us two more pillows and one more towel?" The language of Sophocles and Aristophanes was no help: my best effort — φέρετέ μου ένα λινόν και δύο προσκεφάλαια — was answered by a series of excited questions which, unfortunately, I could not understand and I was reduced to the expedient of going down to the desk and using sign language.

These first impressions are, of course, my own; but I am sure, from comparing notes with colleagues, that they are fairly representative. Unfortunately, not many scholars of ancient Greek literature have the opportunity that was offered to me — to stay on for a whole year and find that these first impressions, like most first impressions, were unreliable.

First, the land itself. It is true that the country has changed enormously since the fifth century but we forget that many of the things we complain of were already a cause for concern in ancient times — deforestation, for example. In Plato's dialogue, *Critias*, the Athenian aristocrat after whom the dialogue is named draws a nostalgic contrast between present and past. "What now remains compared with what existed then," he says, "is like the skeleton of a sick man, all the fat and soft earth wasted away and only the bare framework of the land left . . . The country was once unspoiled: its mountains were arable

highlands and what is now stony fields was once good soil. And the earth was enriched by the annual rains which were not lost as now by flowing from the bare land into the sea . . . but deep soil received and stored the water . . . there were forests on the mountains; there are some which now have nothing but food for bees, that had trees not so very long ago, and the rafters from those that were chopped down to roof the large buildings are still sound." And there are many features of Greek soil and climate which have never changed, the weather, for example. One has to live through a Greek summer to know why Pindar began his first Olympian ode with the bald statement, "Ἀριστον μὲν ὕδωρ, Water is best." I first read that line in England, where water is so plentiful that sometimes there does not seem to be anything else (someone once suggested that Thales, with his theory that all things are water, must have spent some time in England) and the line does not seem to make much sense. (Some schoolboy wit had, in fact, proposed a correction to the text in my book, ζύθος for ὕδωρ, to produce the meaning: "Beer is best.") It is only in Greece that one feels the true force of that magnificent opening phrase, when one has come, like the Greeks themselves, to prefer a glass of water in the heat to beer or lemonade or wine, to call, at the kafeneion, for more and more *neraiki*; only a Greek summer and the total dehydration two hours in the sun can produce will make you feel the full force of Pindar's words. But this is only one small example. One has to experience a Greek thunderstorm, with the lightening visible for miles and the thunder crash echoing from mountain to mountain through the clear air to feel the terror and majesty of the last scenes of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, to know what is meant by the thunderbolt Zeus brandishes with his right arm. And the sea does not change. Standing on the Acropolis looking down on the Gulf at sunset, one can see what looks like wide tracks in the pattern of rough sea and smooth; they are surely Homer's "paths of the sea" (ὄγρ' ἀ κέλευθα). And one has to walk the bare Attic hills in the spring and see the incredible carpet of richly colored wild flowers springing from barren rock to understand why Pindar called Athens "violet crowned." With time, as the seasons change, as the olives are shaken from the trees, gathered and pressed, as the soil is plowed and sown, as much later the fruit begins to ripen and fall, as the grain is winnowed on the high circular threshing floor which must be the origin of the orchestra in which the tragic chorus danced, the scholar who has had the good fortune to spend a whole year in Greece can learn to feel the rhythm of the Greek seasons, of the Greek earth, a rhythm unlike that of his own country and one which has not changed since Hesiod wrote its rulebook and its praise.

So much for the land, but what of the people? The initial



disappointment most Greek scholars feel when confronted for the first time by modern Greeks en masse is due solely to the illusions they bring with them. England and Germany were the two great centers of Greek studies in the nineteenth century and both nations created a vision of the ancient Greeks which had more to do with their ideal of themselves than with reality. In this they were encouraged by the fact that ancient Greek art was known to the nineteenth century mainly in the form of sculpture; Attic vases, which came mostly from Etruscan tombs, were labeled "Etruscan" vases until late in the century. And sculpture, at any rate the unpainted marbles of the Parthenon frieze, allows the beholder to clothe its reticent surface in any colors he pleases. "If horses had gods, they would look like horses," Xenophanes blandly observed long ago; and one has only to turn to the trashiest kind of English and American novels — the surest evidence of a people's deep-seated prejudices and most widely accepted clichés — to find what image of the ancient Greeks was formed in the Western mind. In such novels, the hero is described, as often as not, as looking "like a Greek god." Investigation of the text generally reveals that he is a little over six feet tall and has blue eyes and pale golden hair. He looks, in fact, exactly like the Edwardian ideal of the Oxford undergraduate. No wonder the first sight of the crowds in Piraeus by day and Omonoia by night give the Western classicist a jolt.

There is really no reason why it should. The vases with their black haired and black bearded figures, and still more, the painted archaic sculpture in the Acropolis museum, gives a picture of ancient Greeks who look startlingly like the modern article. There is one *kore* in that museum, with black abundant hair and dark, wide eyes, whose modern sisters can be seen any day of the week walking down Hodos Stadiou. And, in any case, the ancient literature gives no basis for this Western feeling (subliminal but, therefore, stronger) that ancient Greeks were tall, blond, and blue eyed. "Xanthos Menelaos" may have been blond, though the word more likely means red or brown haired, but surely the fact that he is so often called "Xanthos" suggests that the other Achaian chieftains were not. And in Sophocles' *Antigone*, when the chorus wants to say, "ever since I became an old man," they say "ever since my hair changed from black to white" ἐχ' οὗτος λευκὴν ἐγὼ τενδ' ἐλ μέλαινας ἀμφιβάλλομαι θρίχα.

It is, of course, not only in his looks that the modern Greek resembles his ancestors. The men sitting in the *kafeneion* discussing the latest rumors and playing interminable games of *tavli* are no different from the men sitting by the fountain in Corinth playing *pessoi* (it seems to have been almost exactly the same game) from whom the *paedagogos* in Euripides' *Medea* picked up the rumor that his mistress was to be

banished. The ancient Greeks were famous racers, especially in chariots; anyone who is about to take his first taxi ride in central Athens would do well to prepare himself psychologically by reading the description of the chariot race in Sophocles' *Elektra*. I once thought of writing a Pindaric ode in praise of a driver who got me through rush hour traffic to the station mainly by driving on the sidewalks. To strike a more serious note, the same touchy sense of personal honor, which is at the root of Achilles' wrath, still governs relations between man and man in modern Greece; Greek society still fosters in the individual a fierce sense of his privileges, no matter how small, of his rights, no matter how confined, of his personal worth, no matter how low. And to defend it, he will stop, like Achilles, at nothing. Even its name is still the same, φιλότιμο, φιλοτιμία. And, of course, on the larger scale of national politics, little has changed; modern Greek politics have no better analyst than Thukydides, whose somber description of Athens in the last decades of the fifth century B.C. reads like a foreshadowing of the tragic events of 1940-50. The more one lives in modern Greece, the more one is forced to see the modern in the light of the ancient and also to reread the ancient Greeks with new insights drawn for a knowledge of the modern.

And lastly, the language. It is in some ways the most rewarding aspect of modern Greece for the classical scholar. A closer study of the spoken language reveals an intimate and live relationship between the languages of fifth- and twentieth-century Athens. Not only can the modern spoken language be called on to elucidate obscure words in ancient authors, as has been brilliantly done in some passages of Aristophanes, but also the scholar who learned his Greek as a dead language has, in modern Greece, the exhilarating experience of finding it alive: he can hear in the laiki, the open-air market, near Kolonaki every Friday the very tone of Aristophanes' sausage seller and market women, and on the docks of Piraeus, the sharp wit and banter of the sailors who maned the great fleets which set out from what is now Passalimani.

All the scholar has to do is to forget the artificial *katharevousa* of the newspaper editorials and government bureaucracy and listen to and learn from the popular speech of Greece, which is also, of course, the base from the poets work. I ran up against the difficulties involved in the "language question" halfway through my year in Greece, which was 1960-61.

I had already been appointed Director of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington but had not yet taken up its responsibilities. Professor Bakalakis of the University of Thessalonike had somehow heard about the Center and also tracked me down (I was keeping



away from academic circles so that I could get some work done); he invited me to come to Thessalonike to make a speech explaining what the Center was. It was a good opportunity to try out my newly learned modern Greek and also perhaps to recruit some Greek fellows for the Center (and, in fact, over the next twenty years, no less than five young scholars came from Thessalonike to spend a year at the Center). I accepted and started to work on my speech.

On the overnight train going up to Thessalonike I suddenly got cold feet. There I was, going to speak in the *dimotiki* I had learned talking to ordinary Athenians, to an academic audience on an academic subject. They might well think it, coming from a foreigner, presumptuous, even insulting. At the last stop before Thessalonike, Larisa I think it was, I bought a whole clutch of newspapers and with the help of the editorials rewrote the speech in flowing *katharevousa*.

Next morning, at 7:00 o'clock, we arrived. I had an appointment with Linos Politis at ten, so I walked around the town, especially along the magnificent seafront. My bag, however, was getting to be a nuisance; I happened to see the office of the American Express, went in and explained my situation, and asked if they could keep my bag for me, which, very courteously, they agreed to do.

Six or seven hours later, after a fascinating interview with Linos Politis, and a magnificent lunch in a restaurant on the water front, I was taken to my hotel for a rest before the speech and asked my host to stop by the American Express. To my horror, here was a big sign on the door Κ Α Ε Ι Σ Τ Ο. What is more, it was not going to open again until 6:00 — too late for me. The speech was due at 5:30. So, once at the hotel, instead of a rest, I had to recompose the speech, in double quick time and this time there was no fooling around with the *katharevousa*.

The speech went off well. I had inserted two jokes to test the audience's comprehension of my imperfect accent — and they laughed at both places. Afterwards at dinner, I told Politis what had happened. For a moment, I thought he looked shocked and that I had made a mistake to tell him, but then he began to laugh. He laughed very loudly and went on laughing. And finally he said to me, "Your lucky *daimon* was at work. Leaving that second version at American Express was the best thing you could have done." And he proceeded to explain that Thessalonike was, so to speak, the home and champion of *demotiki*, was writing its grammar and syntax — "if you had tried your warmed-up *katharevousa* on the audience, they would have tried hard not to laugh." I told him that I had been suddenly terrified by the memory of a professor of law at the University of Athens who had dominated an Athenian dinner party with long discussions in a very high flying

*katharevousa*; he had been told I was a professor of ancient Greek and informed me that when he went to Munich, the German professor there told him he spoke like Plato. "Oh," said Politis, in a tone of good-humored patience. "Athens . . ."

Even this distinction between an official quasi-literary language and popular speech goes back to antiquity; we still have handbooks written in the Roman imperial period that specify lists of acceptable "Attic" words and rule out others. And we know, from the private letters that have emerged, written on papyrus, from the sands of Egypt, that Greeks there in the second century A.D. were speaking a Greek that had sometimes startling resemblances to the modern article. A boy's letter to his father, for example, in which the child asks to be taken along on his father's trip to Alexandria, begins, exactly as a modern schoolboy might begin: "Αἰπὸν, πᾶτερ μου . . ." "Well, father . . ." Not only is the word λοιπὸν (as it was spelled in fifth-century Athens and still is) used in its modern sense of "Well, . . ."; the boy's phonetic spelling shows that the itacism which is such a pronounced feature of the modern language had already begun.

"It is strange," says George Thomson in his brilliant book, *The Greek Language*, "that so many scholars visiting Greece to refresh themselves at the fount of Hellenism should spend all their time contemplating the material remains of antiquity without realizing that the object of their quest still flows from the lips of the people." In this aspect of modern Greece are great treasures of new insight and fresh understanding ready for the classical scholar to discover, and without the pains of excavation. All he has to do is learn and listen. And also read, for the great poets of modern Greece, and Western Europe is slowly realizing that they are among the world's greatest poets, Cavafy, Seferis, Sikelianos, Elytis, Kazantzakis — all of them are heirs to the legacy of ancient Greece which is both a blessing and a burden; all of them draw strength from the tradition even as they try to maintain their independence from it.

What modern Greece offers the student of classical literature and thought is just as great as, if not greater than, what it offers the archaeologist. It can renew and refresh his contact with the ancient sources in hundreds of ways. Above all, he can ground in Greek earth that Nephelokykygia, the "ideal" Greece he has conjured up from books; it will enable him at last "to give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name."