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WHY STUDY GREEK ?

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“What is the use of studying Greek ?” This is a question that every professor of Greek is asked more than once in the course of a lifetime. At least one member of the guild always answers, “None;” for the question thus put is not for information; it is rhetorical and means, “There is no use in studying Greek.” And what is the use of arguing with a man who has made up his mind past budging before the argument begins? None. But an apter reply, perhaps, would be the retort interrogative. What is the use of taking a bath? Comparatively few, take the race by and large, ever do. What is the use of combing your hair? Many do not and, in the last analysis, it is a vain and ornate affectation. What is the use of wearing clothes? Adam didn’t. What is the use of knives and forks? Fingers were made before both. What is the use of building houses? Holes in the ground would serve, and have served. What is the use of poetry? “Words, words, words.” What is the use of music? Mere sound. What is the use of statues and paintings? Figments of the imagination expressed in pigments and marble. What is the use of religion? You can’t eat it, you can’t drink it, you can’t buy it, you can’t sell it, you can’t wear it—except inside. In brief, what is the use of anything that is very much worth while? Why, if you will have it so, none.

But never since the primal adorning in Paradise has man been willing to lead the unadorned life. He has come to prefer the life beautiful in the very widest sense of the term. He has grown into his clothes and houses, and up to his knives and forks and baths and poetry and music and statues and pictures and religion; and, to tell the truth, he rather likes them all. He finds that they make life not merely tolerable, but a very fine thing—quite the finest that he knows anything about; so fine, in fact, that he fondly hopes it will last forever. He therefore likes everything that makes life fuller and richer and, having found any such thing, he cannot willingly let it go.

“Why study Greek?” Why not? The Greeks were beyond question the most gifted race the world has ever seen, the greatest adorners and enrichers of life, artists in all the arts and artists in living. They were the first to look fearlessly straight out at the world and ask what it was, what it had to say for itself. They were the first to look straight into man and ask him what he was, what account he could give of himself. They arrived at a fundamental conclusion that the world is a cosmos, an orderly creation; and that man is a cosmos, too, or as their proverb put it, “a little cosmos in the great cosmos.” They therefore believed that whatever exists, either in the great cosmos or in the little one, must be accounted for. No partial views of the universe would have contented them—much less of man; man was an aggregate of many parts; none of them could be ignored; right life was the right blending and expression of all these parts. This was sane. Arriving at this premise, the Greeks grappled with every problem of human life—many of the specific problems of science and many of those incident to an industrial civilization had not as yet come to their first statement—and they progressed far toward a solution of most of them. Their solutions were often too concrete but always intelligible, seldom superficial, and usually surprisingly brilliant. They asked and answered, as best they could in the light of what knowledge they had gathered, the great questions of the here and the hereafter. They stated and answered the problems of politics and government and the answers were profound enough to interest men of all subsequent times. They stated and answered with equal brilliancy the problems of ethics, and their answers, though tentative, were in the right direction; they were based upon an analysis of nature and human nature. And they gave beautiful expression to their view of life, not only in their institutions but also in their works of art. Without models—at least without any that permanently or even considerably influenced them—they created an architecture the most perfect that the world has seen in chaste and temperate beauty; this architecture as a whole and in its details is a final contribution to the rich inheritance of mankind, “a possession forever.” With no models to which they long adhered they created a sculpture which is still the synonym of perfection in the sculptor’s art. Who that has gone through any of the great

museums of Europe has not felt the sweet repose of coming from the whimsical or often brilliant individualities of the modern sculptor into the calm and masterful self-possession of the Greek room, where eccentricity is cast aside for the perfect type. "These men," the traveler says, "knew what they wanted; and they found it." Quite without models—and this no other race ever did—they created a great literature, complete in all its forms, in many of them unsurpassed, in some of them still unequaled. Beyond all question no race can exhibit so complete a catalogue of writers of the first rank in poetry and belles-lettres as the Greeks; and the great Greek books are still as direct and fresh and vigorous as they ever were; they came from life and they have life eternal. To turn from the ingenuities and vapidities of a great part of modern verse and the femininity of the bulk of modern fiction to the virile, elemental narratives of Homer is like stepping from a hothouse into the fresh air. A hothouse is a pretty place, but not to live in, and the cyclamen flower is better on a Greek mountainside than it is in an earthen pot. As a final count in a brief and inadequate summary, it is worth remembering that the Christian religion was diffused largely through the Greek world, the Greek mind and the Greek language.

"Why Study Greek?" Because it is eminently worth while, and for no other reason. Greek, like music and art and Shakespeare and the Bible, is one of those useless things that are more useful than anything that is useful because they give life and give it more abundantly. And Greek ranks high among these treasures incorruptible, for the Greeks, in a greater degree perhaps than any other race, had a distinct and vigorous racial genius; they were a "peculiar people." The applications of this racial genius are especially illuminating because the genius was applied to a simpler world than ours. In consequence, the best work of the Greeks, whether in their institutions or in the arts, has a remarkable clearness of outline; in its sum total it is a very distinct and affirmative contribution to the progressive search for truth. And by virtue of its simplicity and its clearness of outline it makes a strong appeal to our intelligence. For the Greeks were on the right road. Their method was inquiry, their aim to understand and express. In a marked degree they were skilful in their method; their aim, in the arts at least, was true and they hit the

mark. Furthermore, the solutions of the future will be worked out along the lines laid down by the Greeks and not by departing from them. We have strayed too long and too far. The world is turning back in its modes of thought and is nearer the view of the Greeks than it ever has been since their time. With far greater knowledge than they possessed, especially in science, we have taken up their method, inquiry, and their aim, to understand and express; and we shall succeed in both far better than they did. We are no longer, as Newton thought he was, like children gathering pebbles on the beach while the great ocean of truth lies before us; we are actually sailing that ocean with chart and compass and we are beginning to know our ports. When we get the whole ocean mapped out we shall still reverence the Greeks as the pioneer voyagers.

"But can I not," you will ask, "learn to understand the Greeks through histories and treatises and translations?" To a considerable extent. The histories and treatises are good; but a good translation is about as rare as the Phoenix. Translation is an exacting art and few attain to great excellence in it. Most translations are bald and unidiomatic, leaving the impression that the Greeks wrote very bad Greek or at least provoked very bad English; others are artificial and scholastic like the Lang translations of Homer; these are remarkable as *tours de force* of scholars and literary men, but they are not Homer and they are not English. Only now and then does a translation come to be counted among English classics, like Jowett's translation of Plato; for "many bear the fennel-rod, but few are real votaries." "But in any case," you will say, "are not the translations better than I can make?" Very likely, but anybody that has ever seriously studied any other language than his own knows that he begins to be on better terms with a people as soon as he learns their alphabet; at all events, the language of any race that has achieved great things will continue to be studied so long as the achievements of that race are valued.

"Shall I not forget all my Greek if I do not continue to study it?" You will forget your mother if you do not get well enough acquainted with her to remember her. Few students get a strong enough grip on any study to hold fast to a very considerable residuum of exact knowledge; few that do get a fair grip keep it. A constant quantity

of knowledge in Greek or anything else means a frequent renewal of study or practice. But most persons that have forgotten their Greek never really knew any. Show me the man who says that he has forgotten his Greek more completely than I have my analytical geometry and I will show him that he has not. I never knew any; I just took it. I suspect, however, that no student, having once become moderately well acquainted with Homer, has quite forgotten what Homer's poetry is like; and I am further of the opinion that this knowledge is worth acquiring and retaining.

As regards the somewhat extraneous motives for studying Greek—such as the training of the mind, the enrichment of our resources in the use of our own language, and so forth—I have little to say. Greek will or will not do these things according to the way in which it is taught and studied; for it is a nice instrument and must be nicely handled. Besides, the plaintiff—or as I should prefer to call him, the defendant—can make out a good case here. Other studies afford a complete training for the mind. The proper study of English is English; if we became as familiar in our youth with some of the great books of our language as the Greeks did with some of the great books of theirs, our English would very well take care of itself; nor have I ever noticed that a knowledge of Greek necessarily implies a peculiar felicity in the use of English. But if the plaintiff proposes to bring forward any study that has the precise virtues of Greek and all of them, he can no more do that than he can bring forward any one poet that shall take the place of Shakespeare. Greek is Greek; there is no Greek but Greek and Greek is its prophet. I am not, however, in favor of anybody's being compelled to study it. I think it regrettable that some study it who have no aptitude for it. I think it more regrettable that many who have an aptitude for it and would profit by it do not study it. If you do not care for it, gentle reader, that is your affair; but you are probably no better qualified to call my vocation useless than I yours. "In brief, sir, study what you most affect." But remember: "The best is the best, though a hundred judges have declared it not so."