Greek after Pentecost: the arguments for ancient language

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The writer of the Acts of the Apostles has a heavy responsibility to bear. At the beginning of his account of the spread of Christianity, a religion open to all, from wherever they came, the events of the day of Pentecost are very powerfully presented. The mark of the arrival of the Holy Spirit is the collapse of the linguistic confusion which had been established in the world at the time that the Tower of Babel was destroyed. 'We all hear them tell, in our own tongue, the wonderful works of God'.[1] This is a truth which can break through every barrier set up by language. There is to be no 'sacred tongue' – although at various times in their history the Christian churches have been tempted to attribute that status to various languages: Greek, Latin, or seventeenth-century English.

The story makes a very powerful point; but it has perhaps left in its wake a dangerous aftermath: a subconscious feeling that the acquisition of another language requires (divine) inspiration. The corollary, of course, is that the uninspired cannot hope to learn: 'I can't learn languages' is the semantically empty statement of many a desperate student. The implication is that the only means by which language can be acquired will be the 'inspiration' provided by the tutor, who must somehow transfer his knowledge into the brain of the student.

The first response to this can always be that the student's ability to make this statement indicates that he has learnt at least one language. In the 1990s, to mention issues of English language-teaching and usage in almost any company is to open the floodgates for laments about falling standards and pervasive inarticulateness. However the case may be, it is certainly true that the decision not to teach formal English grammar means that many young English-speaking people do not realize the nature of their achievement in mastering their own language, and often feel extremely unconfident about their ability to develop it. This is further extended by the use of 'immersion' methods to teach modern languages. Such an approach has opened up communication for untold numbers of students, by urging the importance of fluency: launching into the air, rather than clinging with

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desperate claws to the nest of accuracy. However, a by-product can sometimes be that the student who has learnt to communicate in a foreign language cannot perceive the mechanisms which he has mastered, any more than the bird understands the aerodynamics of its flight. 'Before she knew it, she was speaking French' can dangerously reinforce a subconscious belief that the essential requirement is either predisposition – like a bird, you have to be born to it – or inspiration, 'the gift of speaking in tongues'.

The decision to withdraw from teaching grammar was not an irrational one. There was, of course, a real concern to avoid imposing a rigid 'correct' form of language on people from varying backgrounds. While this can be – and often is – decried as social engineering or weak-willed pandering to political correctness, the history of, for example, Modern Greek provides a good example of the pitfalls involved in trying to establish a 'pure' form of language. But perhaps the real impetus came from the difficulty of the enterprise. The lack of inflection in English means that grammatical distinctions always have to be presented as an add-on: the word 'work' can only be identified as a verb or a noun by tacking on a statement to that effect. The consequence is that grammatical analysis can appear to be an unnecessary extra, as conjured up in the delightful scene in chapter 24 of *Middlemarch*, where Mrs Garth is testing her children on Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* (1795), an exercise which seems to require learning complex definitions by heart.

This little vignette is a significant contribution to the picture of the Garths: excellent and intelligent people, but not gentry. The gentry – at least the men – learnt their English grammar by learning Latin, a language where the need to explain is imposed by the constant inflections. It is infinitely simpler to understand why you need to distinguish between nominative and accusative in mastering such a language, and the lessons can then be imported back to the opacity of English. Thomas Arnold commented on the didactic value of 'the Greek and Latin languages, in themselves so perfect, and at the same time freed from the insuperable difficulty which must attend any attempt to teach boys philology through the medium of their own spoken language'.[2]

So by learning Latin and Greek a student could, it was felt, become more agile in handling his own tongue, broaden his English vocabulary and, incidentally, obtain access to a vast and distinguished literature. The longevity of this system of education is explained in part by the wealth and range of the literatures available in Latin and Greek: over the centuries since the Renaissance, the central texts of

the curriculum have constantly shifted. Moreover, the history of the reading of classical texts is the history of finding what the reader is seeking. There has been much study of this in recent years, both academic surveys such as Christopher Robinson's study of the uses of Lucian and fragments drawn from personal experience, such as Eduard Fraenkel's reminiscence of Horace's *Integer vitae* (*Odes* I. 22) set to music and sung at German schools in the nineteenth century on the occasion of funerals. The creative potential of such work is exemplified in George Steiner's masterful *Antigones*, which leaves the reader convinced that the classical tradition is ineradicably entwined in our thought.[3]

But, while the uses of Latin and Greek literature in western education have been well documented, it is easy for classicists, interested in the tradition of the authors they study, to forget that one of the fundamental reasons for choosing to study these languages, and the cultures to which they gave access, was that these were the sacred languages of Christianity. Greek gave access to the New Testament, and sometimes also the Old: at Arnold's Rugby boys read the Old Testament in the Septuagint. Latin has a less direct claim, but was the language of Jerome and Augustine, as well as – for millions – the language of the liturgy and the Vulgate. Lurking in the subconscious was the medieval concept of trilinguism: the three languages used by Pilate on the cross of Christ were the languages of sacred truth, and so rightly used in the formation of an educated clergy.[4] Although, since the Reformation, critics had regularly observed that the teaching of the language and culture of pagan societies was not appropriate for the clergy, this criticism was never effective; instead, many children in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries studied their classical authors with a learned local vicar.[5]

This aspect of a 'classical' education comes out very clearly again in *Middlemarch* (chapter 7) where the most learned of all vicars, the symbolically named Mr Casaubon, embodies such learning and so wins the affections of Dorothea:

> It was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek. Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly. As it was, she constantly doubted her own conclusions, because she felt her own ignorance: how could she be confident that one-roomed cottages were not for the glory of God, when men who knew the classics appeared to conciliate indifference to the cottages with zeal for the glory. Perhaps even

> Hebrew might be necessary – at least the alphabet and a few roots – in order to arrive at the core of things, and judge soundly on the social duties of the Christian.

The link between a classical education and a Christian understanding is here explicit.

The ironies of Middlemarch, and the final end of Mr Casaubon and his polyglot *Key to all Mythologies,* are of course an indication of the collapse of one approach to teaching the Classics. Two years later (1873), John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* appeared, charting the education of a young prodigy who, despite starting Greek at three and Latin at eight, had an education from his radical father untainted by the superstitions of religion. Mill learned the ancient languages solely to read the ancient authors (with a strong preference for prose). For once the goal of access to the sacred texts was removed, the rationale for teaching the ancient languages was presented purely in terms of the value of studying ancient literature and society; that culture therefore had to be presented as intrinsically more worthy of study than others. This idea was already under attack in the nineteenth century: Mill refers to 'educational reformers' who 'entertain the ill-judged proposal of discarding those languages altogether from general education'. He dismisses 'the modicum of Latin and Greek commonly taught to schoolboys'. His response is to suggest that boys should be taught the languages earlier and more rapidly, holding his own education up as a – not entirely convincing – model.

The debate (discussed by Christopher Stray, with reference to the Cambridge Tripos, elsewhere in this issue) was about to be thrown into further confusion. In the same year that Mill's *Autobiography* appeared, Heinrich Schliemann uncovered the walls of Troy. Classical studies were about to enter a new era: the ancient languages now gave access to the study of a culture which was to be enriched each year by more and more discoveries. The classical past was not a fixed landscape, but a lively and dynamic group of societies inhabited by real people who were becoming more and more accessible. In 1869 Thomas Cook had conducted his first tour up the Nile; from now on increasing numbers of people were to have first-hand access to the monuments of the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean.

All this has immeasurably enriched classical studies. But it is important to remember the extent to which it has had an alienating effect. We see, ever more clearly, the societies of ancient Greece and Rome in their own right, free-standing

and different. We can no longer appropriate them as easily as our ancestors did. For John Stuart Mill, even without the 'sacred texts', the literature of the ancient world, taught to him so young, was the medium through which his thought had been born. He was still within the tradition of those fathers of the American Revolution who not only found it natural to write to the press as 'Caesar', 'Cato', 'Brutus' or 'Publius', but could seriously propose the adoption of Greek as the national language of the new republic – one of the great lost opportunities of history.[6]

Instead, modern developments have turned Latin and Greek into languages to be learned solely in order to reach, and study, a distant civilization; and the study of that culture must compete with all the other delights on offer in the school curriculum. In England, as well as finding ways to entice students, the campaign goes on to persuade the government – and the voters – that Classics should be taught. Traditionally in England the debate has always had a strong utilitarian dimension. In the mid-nineteenth century there was already considerable pressure from parents for more relevant subjects: Andrew Amos lectured in 1846 to the boys of the City of London School 'On the advantages of a classical education as an auxiliary to a commercial education'.[7] The unchanging nature of English attitudes is perhaps indicated by the fact that one booklet produced in the more recent debates is called *Classics in the Market-Place*.[8] From the other end of the spectrum, generations of schoolboys trained in the 'dead languages', in their most hidebound form, came as adults to attack the 'Casaubon' tradition. Perhaps the most eloquent of all critics of the nineteenth-century world, Lytton Strachey, chose Thomas Arnold as one of the four figures to be clinically and brilliantly analysed in *Eminent Victorians* (first published in 1918). He criticises Arnold for the prominence given in the curriculum at Rugby to 'the dead languages of Greece and Rome'; interestingly, he quotes with disapprobation a comment of Arnold's that, as time went on, he became 'increasingly convinced that it is not knowledge, but the means of gaining knowledge, which I have to teach.'

The attack on Classics as an education has been going on for so long that the defenders have had plenty of time to prepare their responses and their counter-attacks. The subject has been defended with exemplary energy and imagination in the English-speaking world: new teaching materials abound. The Perseus project, based at Tufts University, is a model undertaking, using modern technology to present the ancient world – artefacts, places and texts – in a stimulating and integrated form. In particular, there has been a continuing revolution in the

teaching of language especially, in England, since the early 1960s, when Oxford and Cambridge dropped Latin as a requirement for admission. It is not surprising that a language which is taught as a necessary requirement – Ancient Greek in Greece, Irish in Ireland, Latin in Italy – tends to be taught by old-fashioned methods. In England the 1960s saw new attempts to lure students, such as the Nuffield Latin project, which produced the Cambridge Latin Course, still widely used and very accessible. A few years later the Joint Association of Classical Teachers sponsored the production of *Reading Greek*. Text-books have become more inviting, filled with photographs of the Parthenon or vase-paintings of women weaving, to remind the student of the goal which lies ahead. New courses continue to be written; and it is unsurprising that the techniques of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) should be being used as well. A useful overview of such programs has recently appeared in what is itself an exemplary undertaking, the electronic journal, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*,[9] and I have been looking closely at one such product, Donald J. Mastronarde's *Introduction to Attic Greek: an Electronic Workbook*.[10]

In the introduction to *Reading Greek*, the moving spirit behind the project, Kenneth Dover, wrote:

> There is one criterion, and one only, by which a course for the learners of a language no longer spoken should be judged: the efficiency and speed with which it brings them to the stage of reading texts in the original language with precision, understanding and enjoyment.[11]

When I first started to teach Greek to first-year undergraduates, I think that I would have taken that sentence to be self-evident; and for several years I used *Reading Greek* with great profit. But times change, and teaching teaches. More recently, I have been teaching larger groups of students, who have not learned an ancient language before; for practical reasons, *Reading Greek*, which teaches through the presentation of long passages, became unwieldy. Moreover, teaching a large group of students of varying abilities, who are taking a compulsory language unit to fulfil a degree requirement, requires to be undertaken in a different spirit. Whatever system is used, some of the people seated in that room will probably never 'read texts in the original language with precision, understanding and enjoyment', not because they lack divine inspiration, but because, following on Mill's point, they have started too late; many of them will not have time to reach

that point before they are catapulted into the world of earning their living, although they may obtain the 'modicum of Latin and Greek' to which Mill referred. What use is all of this to them?

If they are presented with the study of these languages as a journey up a mountain, undertaken solely for the view from the top, there is a moment on the journey when they rightly become dispirited. There are some achievable viewpoints on the way up the slope. There is the stop – quite early on – when they see obscure vocabulary in their own language explained; there is another when they find themselves understanding some of the terminology of ancient institutions; but both of these could be reached by simpler routes. If we accept, therefore, that these languages are being learnt solely in order to reach the glories of classical culture in their fullness, then perhaps we should restrict teaching to a small and dedicated group of enthusiasts.

But it may be that the arguments for teaching these languages should be reassessed; perhaps we should look again at the traditional description of language-learning as a training for the mind. Most university teachers currently in post were taught the ancient languages at school, and their experience has been overlaid by the deployment of those languages; they are likely to overlook the educational importance of the process itself. Every lesson in a foreign language should be an exercise in expanding the sensibilities and exercising the energies of the brain. The child who learns to call a dog a dog is always congratulated by those around him; but he has carried out a standard human function. There is a law of diminishing returns; we exclaim with delight at the first words, but offer very few prizes to young people as they proceed up the ladder of their own language, and try to use it for more and more complex meanings. It is easier to assess and reward the step into foreign languages, whether to *chien* or to *canis*. Then comes the move from *canis* to *canem*. This is not just of value because in future you will know what 'canine' means, nor solely because you can translate 'cave canem' under the picture in your Latin book, or on your holiday visit to Pompeii. It is also (and perhaps principally) of value, because you have been forced to think about how words perform, the machinery of meaning, in a way that was never necessary when you learnt 'dog'.

The easiest way to expose that machinery to people is by teaching them a language other than their own (as Arnold observed); and an inflected language exposes the working parts of language with particular clarity. But the learning must involve both memorizing and rigorous practice. Rather than awaiting the

descent of the holy spirit of language, the student must grasp and wrestle with it if he or she is to master it: Jacob's fight and his dream would here be a better image than that of Pentecost. This is a form of mental gymnastics which (it might be argued) is also provided by mathematics; but learning a precise and inflected language both limbers up the muscles of the mind and at the same time reinforces and builds the linguistic and communicative power of the student. Furthermore, it is rendered infinitely more fulfilling than mathematics because language incorporates both precision and ambiguity. Dog, *chien* and *canis* do not mean the same thing; each of them comes with its own cultural baggage, determined by the society from which it has come. Learning a language which requires great accuracy in its internal structures, while never offering absolute equivalents, is a most exacting and mind-expanding occupation. Moreover, Greek in particular has a whole further dimension to offer, in that the student of Greek is in theory able to look at the development of a language, both its mechanisms and its meanings, over three thousand years – a challenge and an opportunity to consider the very nature of language which are usually ignored.

Such an approach might have seemed old-fashioned twenty years ago; but we have come recently to see that we are beset by languages on every side. One of the most exciting of all sciences which has developed in the last half-century is that of linguistics – using the study of language to understand human construction of meaning – and it is to be regretted that it is so often allowed to remain in its own compartment, rather than being used to enrich more general language teaching. Science and the new technologies – whether computing or genetics – are all languages. The content may change; the transferable skill which the modern graduate increasingly needs is the proven ability to master a complex language. It is noticeable that, as far back as 1990, when *Classics in the Market-Place* was commissioned, the employers questioned regularly singled out computing and information technology as an area where Classics graduates proved particularly well-prepared. You cannot learn computing language by the 'immersion method'; you have to understand the precisions by which all languages are governed. At a basic level, you need to know whether 'Abracadabra' or 'Open Sesame' is the correct command; however attractive the graphics, your computer will behave like the most old-fashioned and meticulous Classics teacher if you make an error. Moreover, if you move to the next stage, and plan to make computers work for you, it is by the manipulation of language that you will do so – something akin to Greek prose composition. There is therefore a double suitability about using the

computer to reinforce language teaching. It is also probably easier to accept the computer's rebuke when you make a mistake; it is not adversarial, simply sure. (This quiet confidence which is such a characteristic of computers means, incidentally, that it is particularly important to avoid errors: *stratêgos* does *not* mean goddess, as in Mastronarde's Pronunciation Guide, unit six.)

So a computer-based workbook for Ancient Greek is very welcome. The first great asset which Mastronarde's program has is consistency. The first two modules are a Pronunciation Guide, with some good supplementary material which can be ignored or summoned up, and Pronunciation Practice. This is certainly better than anything a human teacher can offer, since it is remorselessly consistent; and any human teacher over a certain age, or reasonably travelled, has been exposed to so many pronunciations of Greek that consistency becomes less and less easy. This is one of the many points, too, where the computer allows the student to get over the hurdle of embarrassment; he or she can mutter away to the screen in private. The next module, on accents, is very helpfully presented, with an intelligent explanation of their origin, supported by pictorial examples of their development. The pitch of accents is well observed in the presentation of pronunciation, and it would be hard to present the material so consistently and comprehensibly in class. All this would have been welcome to Dorothea, since 'the answers she got to some timid questions about the value of the Greek accents gave her a painful suspicion that here indeed there might be secrets not capable of explanation to a woman's reason'.

The next stage, however, comes as rather a shock. The modules are: Verb Forms, Noun Forms, Vocabulary and Principal Parts. It is only at this point that the user fully grasps that this material is presented as a supplement to the author's hard-copy book, *Introduction to Attic Greek*.[12] As the description on the cover says, the program can be customized to go with other text books; but it is slightly disappointing after the full presentation of pronunciation and accents, to be confronted with nouns and verbs with no explanations – beyond paradigms – available from within the program. The cost, therefore, is not limited to the £21.95 which the electronic workbook itself costs.

The issue of cost would certainly, therefore, influence any decision as to whether to use this as a course-book. At Berkeley, where Mastronarde and his workbook originate, such a program can presumably be made available to all students; it will be several years before we will be able to assume that every student in a British classroom has unhindered access to a computer, and can be

sent off to do his homework on it. But philosophically there is much to be said for such a division. It represents, in a way, the division discussed above – between the eventual goal, of unravelling the texts, which will probably continue to be read in books, and the parallel activity, of manipulating and mastering language. This approach separates out the two: the book presents the texts, while the computer program aims to support the student in memorizing and analysing language. There are long drills of parsing, of a kind which it would be tedious to present in class or on paper; on the computer they become a reasonably attractive pastime, without the embarrassment of exposing your failures to anyone but yourself.

This is only a beginning. There are no syntactical tests here, and these would be the obvious next step; beyond those lie the possibilities offered within the Perseus programme, where you can proceed from a Greek text straight to the analysis and explanation of different words. It would of course be possible to wander off down the 'ancient culture' path: vocabulary could be illustrated by appropriate pictures. But the great strength of this program is that it elevates elements of language learning that have recently tended to be obscured – the remorseless precision of a computer is properly used to reinforce the remorseless precision of the paradigm of ἵστημι. There are strong arguments for promoting, rather than veiling, the analytical exercise which is learning and mastering ancient Latin or Greek. Those of us who stand inside the citadel will be inspired by George Steiner's claim that the thought and mythology of Ancient Greece are 'indwelling in our semantics, in the fundamental grammar of our perceptions and enunciations';[13] but the young, who stand outside, often deliberately denied access to their own past by their education, will not necessarily see the exploration of that culture as a route to clearer understanding of themselves. Instead, we should perhaps reverse the argument, and follow in the footsteps of a great educator, Thomas Arnold. 'The study of language', he said, 'seems to me as if it was given for the very purpose of forming the human mind in youth; and the Greek and Latin languages seem the very instruments by which this is to be effected'.[14] Lytton Strachey cited this passage too with disdain; but, without having to return to nineteenth-century teaching methods, we are now better placed to appreciate the essence of Arnold's observation. The great achievements of the classical cultures remain essential objects of study, constantly enriched by new discoveries; but in teaching the languages of those cultures we can offer the young, not a mindless mechanism by which to reach a distant goal, but nothing less than language itself. Instead of the culture's validating the language, the language-

learning process itself should be the lure – and what better lure than the bland shining screen of the computer? It is to be hoped that this computer-based initiative may stimulate a more robust defence of the desirability of learning the ancient languages in order to approach the multi-faceted λόγος which is, 'in the beginning', the essence of language.

NOTES

In preparing this note I have benefited from conversations with several colleagues, and in particular Dr Alexandra Georgakopoulou, who was kind enough to read a draft of what I had written and give me the view of a linguistics expert.

1 Acts 2. 1-12.
2 A.P. Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* (fourth edition, London 1845), I, 138.
3 C. Robinson, *Lucian and his Influence in Europe* (London 1979); E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957) 184; G. Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford 1984).
4 See the very full study by F.J. Thomson, 'Saints Cyril and Methodius and a mythical western heresy: trilinguism. A contribution to the study of patristic and mediaeval theories of sacred languages', *Analecta Bollandiana* 110 (1992) 67-122.
5 M.L. Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain,1500-1900* (Cambridge 1959) 43-4, 82-4.
6 H. Mumford Jones, *O Strange New World* (New York 1964) 331.
7 Clarke, *Classical Education,* 86-7, 170.
8 Commissioned by the Council of University Classical Departments and published by them in May 1990.
9 *BMCR* 95.2.11: Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) in the Learning of Greek and Latin (Reviews of CAI software, by divers hands), with an Introduction by William A. Johnson.
10 University of California Press, 1995: 4 HD disks, for use on a Macintosh. Minimum requirements: 030 processor; 4MB RAM; Mac OS 6.0.4 (System 7 recommended).
11 Joint Association of Classical Teachers, *Reading Greek* (Cambridge 1978) vii.
12 University of California Press, 1993, currently selling for £14.95.
13 Steiner, *Antigones*, 138
14 Stanley, *Life and Correspondence,* I, 138.