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Why Classical Languages?

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“There is no form of art, no phase of philosophy, of ethics, no development of physical science that is alien to the student of language, and the student of physical science in his turn needs the human interest of our study to save his life from an austere and merciless quest of fact and principle in a domain where man enters only as a factor like any other factor.”¹

As the quotation above implies, language study is, more so than any other discipline, a humanistic endeavor. By “humanistic” I do not mean the oft-maligned modernist conception of *humanism* by which some seek to make man the measure of all things (to borrow a phrase from Protagoras). Rather, as a humanistic endeavor, language study immerses the student in that which is a unique, God-given characteristic of humanity: the ability to reason, to communicate, and, to borrow a concept from J. R. R. Tolkien, to *sub-create*, that is to “make a Secondary World which [anyone’s] mind can enter.”² In Tolkien’s case that secondary world is Middle Earth; for C. S. Lewis it was Narnia.

Human beings speak and predominantly think via language, and not even the artist can avoid the centrality of language insofar as the arts of all media stimulate thought, much of which can be expressed only via *words*. The same holds true for the painter, the physician, and the philosopher. They all inevitably reason and communicate verbally. This is none other than an expression of the *imago dei* in mankind. Thus, when we use language and its inevitable offspring, literature, in a fundamental and unique way we deal in what it means to be human.

It is not irrelevant to the question posed in the title to this essay that our Lord Himself chose literature as the primary vehicle of His revelation. Those inspired utterances and remembrances that God in His providence preserved for the generations of His people were just that: utterances and events retold orally and by text—that is, by language. This is our dominical *Canon*,³ that set of Scriptures that governs our faith and life. But there is another, broader literary canon. That broader canon—largely existing in Latin and Greek—preserves, among other genres, a vast amount of history, theology, philosophy, mythology, tragedy, comedy, and poetry. It preserves both the successes and failures—what is imitable and what is not—from the level of human action to the level of ideas. The philosopher George Santayana recognized this when he composed his well-known maxim:

Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness . . . [W]hen experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.⁴

Therefore, we study, acquire, and use classical languages so that our infancy may not be perpetual: so that we may learn from our elders in the faith; so that we may not repeat the

errors of the past; and so that we may participate in the common graces that God has given us through thousands of years of western literature. The church father Vincent of Lerins said essentially the same thing in the 400s A.D. when he explained the meaning of Paul's command to Timothy to "keep that which is committed to thy trust" (1 Tim 6:20):

It is that which has been entrusted to you, not what you have invented; what you have received, not what you have devised; not a matter of ingenuity, but of doctrine; not of private acquisition, but of public tradition; a matter brought to you, not created by you; a matter you are not the author of, but the keeper of; not the teacher, but the learner; not the leader, but the follower. This deposit, he says, guard.⁵

We keep what has been entrusted to us, mindful also that the essence of what the atheist Santayana and the Christian Vincent wrote was said much earlier and in a different way by a biblical author: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). We are thus *obliged* to study the literary canon—Latin and Greek authors especially—as a matter of godly wisdom.

Why study literature that is so ancient?

The Geneva School affirms that the tradition that is the inheritance of western Christianity represents the highest literary attainment. This inheritance is built on a foundation that is firmly centered on the Scriptures, but that also appreciates the nonscriptural contributions of wise and brilliant men and women of the past. The Scriptures, by their own testimony, were nurtured in a larger political, religious, and literary milieu, beginning with ancient Mesopotamia, the homeland of Abraham. This literary milieu included wisdom, law, prophecy, apocalyptic, and especially the epic tradition—of which ancient Greece was the inheritor—as exemplified by *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and other, similar works. Yet as important as these works are for understanding our ancient heritage, they were lost for centuries, and so have no continuous tradition of reading and transmission down to the present day, as does Greek literature, beginning with Homer.

The claim has been made, and not without justification, that western literature finds its source in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Indeed, later Greek writers who had contempt for the mythology that underlies these epics nevertheless understood Homer's importance. Plato, for example, called Homer "the educator of Greece." Homer, however, represents only the beginning of a literary tradition encompassing over a millennium of Greek-speaking historians, philosophers, playwrights, and, in the fullness of time, apostles and church fathers. Though Latin, because of its primacy in the development of western Christianity, is and should remain the center of any western classical curriculum, we would do well to remember Horace's Latin words: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latio* "Captive Greece took captive her barbarous conqueror and introduced the arts to backward Latium." Though the apostolic church was nurtured in a Roman political world, it is perhaps equally important that it was nurtured in a Greek cultural world, to the extent that our Lord's very words were preserved for us in the Greek language, and that the version of the Old Testament that the early church adopted as its own was the Greek Septuagint.⁶

Why should my child read pagan authors?

Before answering this question, we must first note that there is a great deal of Christian literature written in the classical languages. So, in one sense, this supposed dilemma is a false one: students of classical languages may on average spend a greater portion of their time

reading the writings of orthodox Christians.

Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons to read pagan authors also. For example, while Christendom indeed has a monopoly on saving truth, it by no means has a monopoly on truth generally conceived. All humans are God's image-bearers, and though that image in us is marred, in us it remains. We must also remember that God has never rescinded His judgment that creation, humanity included, is fundamentally "good." Thus the pagan can be, and often is, a source of wisdom, a recognizer of truth, and a producer of beauty. Such can certainly be said of many classical authors—Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Vergil and Marcus Aurelius among them. Their paganism does not negate the good things contained in their works. It simply calls for wisdom and discernment in reading them. We need not fear them. Indeed, we should *plunder them*. Gregory of Nyssa, the great Cappadocian theologian of the fourth century, encouraged this plundering of "the *paideia* [instruction] of the outsiders" on the basis of Scripture itself, reminding us that Acts 7:22 attributes Moses' own power of speech and action to his "paideia in all the *sophia* [wisdom] of the Egyptians."⁷

But how should we view their paganism *specifically* when reading their works? How can we as Christians benefit from works whose merits are so thoroughly enmeshed within a pagan worldview? Perhaps no one has answered this particular question better than John Henry Newman, speaking about the poems of Horace:

[T]hey bring before us most vividly and piteously our state by nature; they increase in us a sense of our utter dependence and natural helplessness; they arm us against the fallacious promises of the world, especially at this day—the promises of science and literature to give us light and liberty. It is most piercingly sad to observe how the heathen writers yearn for some unknown good and higher truth, and can not find it; how Horace in particular tries to solace himself with the pleasures of sense, and how stern a monitor he has within him, telling him that Death is coming. Lucretius is another author teaching still more solemnly the same awful lesson. "We should be happy," he says, "were it not for that dreadful sense of Religion which we all have, which poisons all our pleasures. I will get rid of it." But he could not, and he destroyed himself. Who can but pity such a race, so great and so little? Who does not recognize the abyss of misery which lies in that world which sin has made in us? Who does not begin to see from such a spectacle the Love of the Eternal Father, who felt it in fullness, and sent His Son to die for His dear rebellious children?⁸

Why not just read English translations?

Translations are, of course, a good thing, because they make available to all literate English speakers what would otherwise not be available to them. Clearly not everyone will learn Latin or Greek, and not all who learn it will remain proficient in it. However, it has been said elsewhere that a translation is a "commentary without notes." When one reads a translation, one irrevocably attaches oneself to the opinion of a particular translator, and has no real basis from which to judge a translator's decision on a debatable passage, word, or literary device; indeed, even whether there is an issue to begin with.

More importantly, however, a translation inevitably fails to reproduce the sometimes painstakingly achieved artistry of a given author's work. This would be as much true for, say, a Latin translation of Shakespeare as it is for an English translation of Vergil. For example, legend has it that Vergil wrote only three lines of his *Aeneid* per day, thus taking on the order

of ten years to write the entire epic. If this is true—and there is no reason to doubt its essential truth—then clearly every word of that epic is carefully chosen: can we really expect that an English translation with a modern publishing deadline could possibly mimic the care that went into Vergil’s original composition? It is all but impossible. Thus translations that may *get at* the idea of a work invariably fail to convey the nuances of meaning that reside in its subtleties. For the person who has acquired classical languages this problem is eliminated. Each generation, therefore, will have many who are able to recognize and preserve beauty, wisdom, and artistry that would otherwise be lost.

Classical Languages and Integration

At The Geneva School, we speak a great deal about the principle of *integration*: that is, inasmuch as reality itself is an integrated unity, the curriculum should reflect that unity by bringing all “subject” areas into interrelationship with each other as those interrelationships are manifested in the world about us. Thus there are, for example, significant points of contact between history and math, between art and science, between logic and literature, and so on. We are constantly about the task of discovering those points of contact and teaching them to our students so that they avoid the debilitating fragmentation of knowledge that is so prevalent in our contemporary culture.

Returning to the quotation cited at the beginning of this essay, the author, Gildersleeve underscores the truth that language *per se*—in The Geneva School, classical language in particular—is fundamentally integrative by its very nature. How is this so? To become fluent in the speaking of or, in the case of the classical languages, the reading of a language, one must become fully enculturated to the people who spoke that language. This means that one must understand their history, religion and mythology; their science and modes of reasoning; their literary genres and devices. For cultures and languages that are no longer living and productive, there are two primary avenues to this understanding: through archaeology and through their texts. It is particularly through the latter that the student of language in a unique and fundamental way integrates across the curriculum and contributes authoritatively and directly to the various disciplines, whether it be history, philosophy, religion, or literature. Any area of knowledge in which ancients engaged is, in the words of Gildersleeve, *not* “alien to the student of language.”

¹ Basil L. Gildersleeve, “On the Present Aspect of Classical Study,” *Essays and Studies, Educational and Literary* (Murray, 1890), 508.

² “On Fairy Stories,” *Tree and Leaf* (HarperCollins, 2001), 37.

³ From Greek *kanōn*, “rule, standard.”

⁴ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000.txt>, Chapter XII—Flux and Constancy in Human Nature.

⁵ *Commonitories*, Chapter 22; *The Fathers of the Church* (Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1949), 7:308.

⁶ As is evident in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* [a Jew], 71:1-2: “But I certainly do not trust your [Trypho’s Jewish] teachers when they refuse to admit that the translation of the Scriptures made by the seventy elders [i.e., the Septuagint] . . . is a correct one . . .,” tr. Thomas B. Falls, rev. Thomas P. Halton; ed. Michael Slusser (Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

⁷ Cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture. The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (Yale, 1993), 10.

⁸ John Henry Newman, “Letter to Mr. Leigh,” November 24, 1873 (cited from Francis X. Connolly, ed. *A Newman Reader. An Anthology of the Writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman*. (Image Books, 1964), 311-312.