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# ANCIENT POETRY and MODERN READERS

*Inaugural Lecture of the  
Professor of Classics  
delivered at the College  
on March 11, 1969*

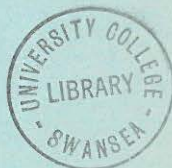
by

JOHN GOULD

M.A. (Cantab. and Oxon.)



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA



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ANYONE who is called upon to write and deliver an inaugural lecture, certainly anyone who brings to that task the added handicap of an awareness of literary tradition and a sense of the past, must come to feel sooner or later in the course of his creative struggles (and probably sooner) that the art form of his composition is a very curious one, and that the ceremony of its delivery has every mark of a ritual occasion of uncertain purpose. As with any true rite, there are prescriptions as to time and place, a prescribed form of dress, some degree even of prescribed language. And to a performer in this ritual act who is Professor of Classics, uneasy images rise in the memory: the analogy that insistently presents itself is that of sacrifice, a rite whose central and significant moment is an act of slaughter. An uncomfortable analogy, the more so when the doer in the act scans the scene in anxious expectation of the arrival of the victim. For then the thought strikes him that this is indeed a peculiar rite, that the culmination for which the witnesses are gathered is this time to be an act of self-slaughter, to which the victim has, as the victim must, walked serenely and unconstrained, decorated as though for an occasion of great joy.

Perhaps it would be wiser, and certainly less intimidating, to turn aside from ceremony, and concentrate attention instead on the words to be uttered. Is an inaugural, as Professor Nevin suggested two weeks ago, a dirge over departed glories, or is it rather an exhortation to a heroic future? Or perhaps neither, but, as the name seems to imply, a taking of the omens at the outset of an enterprise newly embarked upon. That interpretation, of course, would raise new ambiguities: for a Professor whose title proclaims that he professes, not Latin and not Greek, but Classics, must be uncertain as to whether he should face north or south to take the



omens, whether the bird of good omen is to be looked for on the right or on the left. Maybe he can profit by the ambiguity and enter that complex world in which Latin poetry itself moves, when the poet is Greek or Roman by turns and at will : then the bird may be sighted first and declared with complete confidence to portend the cooperation of the powers that be. Thereafter, with the flight of the bird safely logged, the decision as to whether the sighting was done under Greek or Roman rules can be declared without risk.

But if the omens have been duly taken, there remains the major task still to be attempted, and there remains also that basic uncertainty as to what the task is. In some sense at least, an inaugural is an occasion in which the speaker comes forward as spokesman for a community : he speaks, that is, for that group of teachers and of students with whom he shares a common concern, a common commitment to a given area of study, and seeks to present to the rest of the academic community some realization of what it is that he and his fellows are about, some sense of what they believe themselves to be doing, and why they are doing it. But it would be foolish self-deception to pretend that an inaugural is merely a statement on behalf of the group, that it serves to present the group and its activities to the world at large. There are, after all, few activities so unambiguous in their nature that there is no room for disagreement and discussion, no place for differences of definition and variations of emphasis. So that it is not surprising if, seen from another angle, an inaugural should appear rather a matter of personal statement, in which the Professor speaks to, rather than for, his colleagues and seeks to convey his sense, rather than their common sense, of what his subject is, what is more, what less important in it, and of what direction he believes its pursuit should take.

There are, of course, limitations to both aspects of what an inaugural is, and still further limitations that arise from the combination of two aspects. The Professor

may not present his sense of the subject to the world at large in terms so technical that he merely confirms the natural suspicion that academics have no access to the language that the rest of the world speaks and understands, nor may he address his colleagues in language so general that his colleagues are reinforced in their equally natural belief that Professors are chosen specifically for their capacity to say nothing in sonorous and resounding phrases. Conscious, then, of the tightrope that I have been summoned here before you to walk, and of there being no safety-net visibly there to break my fall, I must now embark on this peculiar and hazardous assignment.

My title, unchallenging though it must seem, is intended briefly to present the theme of what I mean to say tonight. It is my belief that to embark on the study of what by tradition and for the sake of brevity, though not without some danger of misunderstanding, we call 'Classics' is in essence to set about the acquisition of a skill of reading the literature of Greece and Rome. It is in an attempt to define that skill, and to consider both some of the inferences that we may legitimately draw from the definition, and the difficulties that lie in the way of one who today tries to acquire the skill so defined that I wish to speak to you tonight.

Now the notion of an art or skill of reading as the end-product of the study of literature is no new conception. In 1931, with characteristic panache, Mr. Ezra Pound published his pamphlet *How to read*. A year later, Mr. F. R. Leavis took up the challenge with *How-to teach reading*, a pamphlet which he reprinted in 1943 as an appendix to his book *Education and the University*, still, I think, the most persuasive and closely argued account of what a School of Literature should be. The reading that both were talking about is not, of course, reading in the sense of that capacity that one learns in primary school, but that other reading which is the peculiar concern of a school of literature in a University, a matter, as Mr. Leavis has described it, of perception, judgement and analytic skill

in a creative response to the whole thing which literature is ; reading, that is, as involving full attention to, and full awareness of, the complex of implications and structural relationships that go to make a work of literature more than a string of simple statements dressed out in ornamental language.

Preoccupation with ' how to read ' is, or ought to be, a central focus of thought with all of us who are involved in the business of teaching in a literary school. And the problem of defining objectives and choosing methods is nowhere a more compelling problem than in a school of Classics, where the attempt to clarify to ourselves and to others what it is that we should be doing brings obstacles and difficulties to light that outtop the difficulties faced by teachers in other schools of literature. Their problems we indeed share, but we have others of our own. First, and indeed centrally, there is the problem of concentrating attention on the right thing : literature in a special sense is ' made of words ' and those words are not mere counters to be replaced by others at will. A poem is an organised structure of words, a verbal object, not merely a way of saying something that could just as well be said otherwise ; a poem is itself in the same way as a painting or a piece of sculpture is itself, and not merely a way of recording and making permanent a visual impression. And yet it is all too easy, and all too common, when we try to talk about a poem that we have read, even in our own language, to find ourselves talking, not about the poem, the given arrangement of words in a particular formal mode, but about some paraphrase that we have tacitly substituted for it, some set of propositions that we attribute to the poet, or some digest of what the poem is ' about '. What we say about a poem may seem adequate when we set it against the paraphrase that we recall, and yet be clearly inadequate or even false to the poem itself, when we return to the business of reading. Hence the importance of keeping the poem itself constantly in view, the necessity of a heightened attention that calls for training and

practice for its achievement. Moreover, the longer the poem, the greater the temptation to substitute paraphrase for poem : hence perhaps the peculiarly unsatisfying nature of much that is written about the larger kinds of poetry, in particular epic and drama. And, of course, these larger kinds account for a great deal of ancient poetry. If it is difficult to talk to the point about Milton or Shakespeare, or even to agree as to what talking to the point should be, we will not find it easier to talk to the point about Homer or Vergil, Sophocles or Plautus.

Thus far we are faced with problems that anyone involved in the work of a University school of literature must find sadly familiar, but the problems of a school of Classics are more numerous. The problem of language and its relation to the reading of literature is central to our work. Let me return to Mr. Leavis' dictum that ' literature is made of words ' : the ' words ' of a literature are the expression of a cultural tradition, which is not to be got at except through direct contact with the language of that culture.

Here perhaps I should insert a word of explanation. In speaking of the necessity of direct contact with the languages of Greece and Rome, I do not mean to deny all place to a different kind of knowledge of Greek and Latin literature, acquired wholly through the medium of translation—translation, that is, in the proper sense, the sense in which Richmond Lattimore's translations of Homer or Louis Macneice's of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* are translations. Indeed, we have already established a Part I course which sets out to offer this to students of English, Modern Languages, History and the like : acquaintance with Greek and Latin literature in translation is infinitely preferable to no acquaintance at all, or to that futile ' knowledge about ' the literatures of the ancient world that comes from reading handbooks and digests of critical opinion. But such acquaintance, even when accompanied by awareness of the nature of the distortions that translation involves, is in no sense a

substitute for a direct response to the literature itself through the words of its own language. And it is with this response and with reading in this sense that a school of Classics is primarily concerned.

At the outset we face a problem for whose existence we are ourselves in some measure responsible. For, by tradition, in school and University, we inculcate by positive demand and passive acquiescence a complex habit of mind in our students that threatens quite to defeat the ends which, I am suggesting, we should be working to achieve. At every stage in the teaching of Latin and Greek we have demanded, as the principal criterion by which we judge the capacity to understand the language concerned, a constant running translation into the native language. Otherwise, we have said, there is no check against the possibility, if not the near certainty, of systematic misunderstandings lurking undetected behind any comments on, or elucidations of, the text that our students may make. Now I would be the first to accept both that misunderstandings do indeed lurk, that failure to grasp the nuances of sense and implication in a Latin or a Greek text is a trap into which all of us fall on occasion, and that the briefer or shallower our acquaintance with the language the more constant the danger. I would readily grant too, that translation into our native language can be not merely a check upon these dangers but also a real and fundamental exercise in conveying our grasp of meaning, tone and shape, in fact a full and accurate commentary on what, in our view, the passage in question amounts to. Translation can be all this, but this is not in practice what we have demanded, and for good reasons. It is too heavy a demand to be imposed as an exercise of daily use. In practice we have all too often acquiesced, even at University level, in a kind of bastard English, a strange and all but illiterate sub-dialect of the language, an isogloss study of which would reveal that it is the language only of those engaged in the educational task (I use the word with conscious irony) of translating

Latin and Greek, and of them only when engaged in this particular task. Few (and I am sure that most of us admit the fact with relief), few of our students would ever employ this sub-dialect in any other activity involving the use of the native language, such as intelligent conversation or writing a letter or an essay. If challenged on this point, some would perhaps defend this particular tendency in translation by ennobling it with the term 'close' rendering, and by insisting that anything else is mere paraphrase. Now the distinction between translation and paraphrase is not meaningless, but we do our subject no service at all when we imply that 'these things having been done' is in any sense translation. It is not. It is in fact no more than a conventional way of signalling that the writer has grasped two points about the grammatical structure of the Latin: 'perfect-participle-passive', he or she calls urgently, and 'ablative absolute', and if that is all that we as teachers wish to be signalled to us, and only if that is so, are we entitled to accept the formulation.

It may be argued, nevertheless, that though the facts are so, their undesirable consequences are negligible in comparison with the habit of close analysis of grammatical structure that this usage enforces. I believe not; on the contrary, that the consequences are destructive of the capacity to read and go very deep. For the habit engendered is one which replaces the texture of a living language in which words are used with intensity of effect and a controlled sense of rhythm and mood by one which is effectively insulated from all contact with the use of words as a conscious medium for the expression of meaning. I have suggested that all that is conveyed, even to the initiated, is a kind of encoded commentary on the grammatical structure of the original, and nothing else. And if nothing more is conveyed to the teacher, nothing more, certainly, is conveyed to the student; yet it is in reference to this, and this alone, that by design or default, he or she is encouraged to think about what he reads. For we must not suppose that the process

of mental translation is merely accessory : it is, in fact, the process by which the actual Latin or Greek presents itself to the student. The tendency is strengthened many times over if we combine with it, as we have in the past, a fundamental neglect of the sounds of Greek and Latin, and of the languages as oral material, so that students find themselves incapable of uttering aloud or in the mind's ear a passage of Latin in any fashion that meaningfully couples sense to sound. The cumulative effect of these habits is, after all, to drain off the charge of meaning and the strength of utterance and replace it by something lifeless and ersatz : the residuum is all too often a sludge of tasteless, odourless, shapeless verbiage, and it is by reference to this residuum that students of Latin and Greek must in the end judge the worth of what they read. Small wonder then if they remain incredulous when they are handed *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the value and greatness of Latin and Greek literature. How can we expect otherwise ? Why should we be surprised if students find it difficult to conceive that questions such as ' Is this great poetry ? ', ' Is this poem better, more successful than that ? ' have any relevance to anything that is part of *their* experience in reading Latin poetry.

If perhaps we are inclined to dispute the validity of those conclusions, I would suggest a piece of self-examination. Can any of us who believes that there is great poetry in Greek and Latin (and I hope that I can take it for granted that we do so believe) deny that our own sense of its greatness has been achieved by unlearning the habits that I have been describing, by creating for ourselves the capacity to read Latin and Greek poetry directly from the text, as a given sequence and pattern of Latin and Greek words ? In no other way, I suggest, can a real response to the poetry be achieved ; in no other way, can a sense of the differences between one poem and another, differences of quality and kind, be arrived at, and it must be one of our primary objectives to encourage the growth of such a capacity in our students, and,

certainly, to do nothing that constitutes an actual barrier between them and the essential objective. Knowledge of a language is not only to be tested by what we conventionally call translation (I have sometimes the feeling that the very term as we use it of the teaching exercise is a libel on those who in the true sense claim to translate), and we must not lose sight of the pressing need to turn our capacities of invention to the development of new forms of learning and testing exercise to aid the process of language learning.

Here I would like to say something further about one particular aspect of the way in which language and literature are related in a school of Classics. Few, if any, teachers of Classics would disagree with what has been so far implied about the basis of linguistic skill that a course in Classics must demand ; few who understand the nature of reading a poem would dispute that no clear dichotomy exists between language and literature in the reading of any literature. We cannot certainly say, though it has been said, that learning the language is a preliminary affair, the business of the schools, and literature the business of a University ; our capacity to read a poem is controlled at all points by our capacity to work with and respond to the language in which the poem is composed, and this capacity is one that is never perfected and complete. Nevertheless, though it is clear that linguistic skill is a necessary condition of informed reading of a work of literature, it does not follow from this that linguistic skill is also a sufficient condition of such a reading. It has often been implicitly assumed in the past that this was so, that a student who had attained a certain level of technical competence in the languages of Greece and Rome was thereby fully equipped to profit from a literary course in the field of Classics. But the experience of many students has been quite otherwise : they have found themselves bored, frustrated, and bewildered by the close study of literature that they had embarked upon ; unhappy with the whole process of trying to

understand a work of literature at a level beyond that of arriving at a working comprehension of the grammatical sense. Nor is this surprising: reading a poem calls for aptitudes and tastes more sophisticated than, or at any rate different from, those of grammatical decipherment. And it is not difficult, I think, to see the cause of this state of affairs: there has been perhaps too often a tendency to regard the study of ancient literature as a peculiar activity, peculiar in that it was thought of as an activity different, say, from that of reading English or French literature, calling for different and special qualities, and carried on in a world remote and cut off from the concerns of other schools of literature. To some extent, the traditional triad of Latin, Greek and Ancient History in the sixth-form has been both the result and the cause of this mistaken assumption: too often, students of ancient literature *have* been cut off from any sense of sharing a common activity with students of English literature. That this has been disastrous for the study of ancient literature I am convinced: literature, like peace in Maxim Litvinov's conception of it, is indivisible, and it does not make sense to suppose that lack of interest in, and inability to respond to, the literature of one's own language is likely to be combined with a capacity to find educational rewards in the close study of poetry in Latin or in Greek. To quote Mr. Leavis, 'if one is uneducated in one's own literature one cannot hope to acquire education in any serious sense by dabbling in, or by assiduously frequenting, any other'.<sup>1</sup> In the study of ancient literature, we are engaged in a pursuit that is merely part of a whole, 'the common pursuit of true judgement', in T. S. Eliot's phrase. If ours is a special pursuit, it is so only in the sense that we are marked off by a specialism of interest, a particular concern with the literature of one period of time and one area of the common human effort to describe and convey his sense of the world. But

<sup>1</sup>F. R. Leavis, *Education and the University* (London, 1943), p. 134.

that specialism is rooted in the general study of literature, and the general sense of its value and meaning, or it is rooted in nothing at all. In a school of Classics, teachers and students must share an acceptance of the basic cultural rôle of literature, if what they are doing is not to become a special and peculiar activity indeed.

But supposing we have the linguistic skill and the sense of the value of literature, the language factor presents itself again in a new aspect, and one in which the problem of reading is at its most acute. In illustration I would cite Wordsworth describing in the *Prelude* his own experience of the study of classical literature:

'I was a better judge of thoughts than words,  
Mised in estimating words, not only  
By common inexperience of youth,  
But by the trade in classic niceties,  
The dangerous craft of culling term and phrase  
From languages that want the living voice  
To carry meaning to the natural heart;  
To tell us what is passion, what is truth,  
What reason, what simplicity and sense'.<sup>1</sup>

'Languages that want the living voice': here, of course, we have the heart of our problem. Latin and Greek are not the native languages of any of us, and we can respond to Latin and Greek literature, even after prolonged effort and attention, only in a way that we must all recognise as inadequate if we compare it with an informed response to literature in our own language. An example may focus the problem more sharply. When we read a poem in our own language, a major factor in our response to what we read is an instinctive and all but unconscious reaction to the tone of words and the texture of style. We draw on a life-time's experience of the usage and association of English words and the varieties of English utterance. Our

<sup>1</sup>Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, vi. 105—114.



response to a poem which begins ' For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love' . . . or

' Busie old foole, unruly sunne,  
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Through windows, and through curtains call on us . . .'  
is inevitably different from that to such an opening as

' When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
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our sense of the rhythms of different modes of English speech, of the natural ambience of words and the varying structures of English sentence control and direct our reading of a poem in our own language in a way that we can never completely attain in a language that is not our own, and *a fortiori* in one that we have never heard spoken by a native speaker. It is not merely a much more laborious process, but essentially a different one, that brings us to the point where we can be confident in our discrimination between the tone, say of

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et quod uides perisse perditum ducas'<sup>1</sup>

on the one hand, and

' Qualis Thesea iacuit cedente carina  
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on the other. Indeed, it may be argued that we can never achieve such confidence, that scholarship and the painstaking accumulation of data can never provide a substitute for the native ear and the living voice. Certainly we must be modest in our expectations and critical in our use of evidence. The distinguished Swedish scholar, Bertil Axelsson, in a widely-admired book<sup>3</sup> some time ago

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<sup>2</sup>Propertius, i. 3. 1—2.

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offered a critical tool for the analysis of tone in Latin poetry by arguing, on the basis of word counts in a variety of authors, that a clearly defined difference of diction existed between Latin poetry and prose, except, (as he argued) that poets existed who admitted an element of the prosaic (or 'unpoetic') in their poetry: this use of the 'unpoetic' was to be treated as a defect of poetic 'taste'. The naïvety behind the critical theory is all too clear, and Professor Gordon Williams has recently devoted some well-argued pages to demonstrating the weakness of the concepts involved.<sup>1</sup> Yet Axelsson's word-lists do tell us something important about relevant differences between one poet and another, and it remains true that only by the painstaking, and at times apparently pedantic collection of statistical data on the areas of use of different aspects of Latin and Greek vocabulary, on the characteristic patterns of sentence structure and the rhythms of speech of different writers can we hope to provide a substitute for that sensitivity of ear to corresponding aspects of our own language that is ours, in part at least, by virtue of the nature of our experience of our own language. There is no critical explication of a poem without appeal to our sense of what precise tone and atmosphere a given arrangement of words calls up, and in the case of Latin and Greek poetry it is a major task of scholarship to construct that sense: critical and scholarly activity are not merely not to be opposed, they are essential partners. Without scholarship critical judgement becomes subjective taste, without critical judgement scholarship is sterile and fruitless encyclopaedism.

I have suggested that the study of ancient poetry is closer to the study of other literatures and less of a peculiar activity than is sometimes supposed, and by implication that we can profit by the example of other literary studies. There is, to take only one example, much

<sup>1</sup>Gordon Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 743—50.

for us to learn from Reuben Brower's analysis of Ovidian wit in his study of Pope, and from his perceptive comparison of Homer with the translations of Chapman and Pope.<sup>1</sup> And it is salutary, if not flattering, to recall that two of the best books in English on Greek tragedy of recent years, A. J. A. Waldock's *Sophocles the dramatist*<sup>2</sup> and John Jones' major critical work *On Aristotle and Greek tragedy*,<sup>3</sup> were written by professional students of English, not Greek, literature. I would like to suggest now that there are aspects of reading ancient literature that require us to make use of techniques and concepts that derive from other disciplines. I have laid stress on the inseparability of the study of languages and literature. Now language is a social institution. Language does not merely convey the cultural traditions of a people: in a fundamental sense it *is* that tradition, and it reflects the system of values, and of social groups and rôles, that characterize a particular culture in its social aspect. That is why we can only really grasp a given cultural tradition by close attention to its language, and such close attention demands that we focus sharply on the language as it actually is, and on the structure of concepts that it embodies, without allowing ourselves to veer away onto the easier course of tacitly replacing its ideas by our own as they are embodied in *our* language. Here again translation, if we mean by it the replacement of concepts in one language by those of another, may be the enemy of understanding. And yet, in focusing attention on the structure of ideas in, say, Greek, we will find ourselves asking questions that we may think more characteristic of the anthropologist than of the student of literature. As an example of what I mean, I would like to take a single Greek word-system, which has received a good deal of attention recently,<sup>4</sup> and with it try to explore some of the

<sup>1</sup>Reuben Brower, *Alexander Pope: the Poetry of Allusion* (Oxford, 1959), esp. chaps. iii—iv.

<sup>2</sup>Cambridge, 1951.

<sup>3</sup>London, 1962.

<sup>4</sup>A. W. H. Adkins, *C.Q.*, n.s. xiii (1963), pp. 30—45; M. Landfester, *Das griechische Nomen 'philos' und seine Ableitungen* (Hildesheim, 1966).

ways in which the structure of ideas in Greek differs radically from our own, and the reasons for that difference.

Conventionally we translate the Greek noun φίλια as 'friendship', the adjective φίλος as 'dear', or, when it is used as a noun, as 'friend', and the verb φιλέω as 'love', and when we so translate we may for much of the time be conscious of no incongruity. We shall notice that the class of 'friends' in Greek is wider than in English, since it includes kin: husbands and wives, parents and children are 'friends' one of another, and 'friendship' exists between them. Perhaps here we shall rather use the translation 'dear'<sup>1</sup> and describe parents as 'dear' to their children, and the relationship between them as 'love': then we shall interpret the basic concept common to this word-system as one involving warmth of feeling, tenderness and affection. But what are we to make of it when Homer describes Meleager as 'enraged against his dear mother Althaia'?<sup>2</sup> The dictionary here offers us an alternative translation, 'one's own': Meleager's anger was directed at 'his own mother'. The same translation is suggested for another field of usage that is immediately puzzling to an English reader, a usage in which the same adjective is applied to parts of the body or components in the processes of thinking and feeling (never very clearly distinguished in Greek). Frequently in Homer we come across phrases such as 'while my dear knees have power to move',<sup>3</sup> 'his dear heart laughed',<sup>4</sup> 'neither food nor drink shall go down my dear throat':<sup>5</sup> the effect of literal translation is absurd, and there is strong temptation to accept the version 'my own' or 'his own', and pass on with hardly a second thought, and only a residual sense of surprise at the need that Greek seems to have felt to stress the intimacy of relationship between 'knees',

<sup>1</sup>So Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek Lexicon*, s.v. φίλος, I.

<sup>2</sup>*Iliad* 9. 555.

<sup>3</sup>*Iliad* 9. 610.

<sup>4</sup>*Iliad* 21. 389.

<sup>5</sup>*Iliad* 19. 209f.

response to a poem which begins ' For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love ' . . . or

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I have suggested that the study of ancient poetry is closer to the study of other literatures and less of a peculiar activity than is sometimes supposed, and by implication that we can profit by the example of other literary studies. There is, to take only one example, much

<sup>1</sup>Gordon Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 743—50.

for us to learn from Reuben Brower's analysis of Ovidian wit in his study of Pope, and from his perceptive comparison of Homer with the translations of Chapman and Pope.<sup>1</sup> And it is salutary, if not flattering, to recall that two of the best books in English on Greek tragedy of recent years, A. J. A. Waldock's *Sophocles the dramatist*<sup>2</sup> and John Jones' major critical work *On Aristotle and Greek tragedy*,<sup>3</sup> were written by professional students of English, not Greek, literature. I would like to suggest now that there are aspects of reading ancient literature that require us to make use of techniques and concepts that derive from other disciplines. I have laid stress on the inseparability of the study of languages and literature. Now language is a social institution. Language does not merely convey the cultural traditions of a people: in a fundamental sense it *is* that tradition, and it reflects the system of values, and of social groups and rôles, that characterize a particular culture in its social aspect. That is why we can only really grasp a given cultural tradition by close attention to its language, and such close attention demands that we focus sharply on the language as it actually is, and on the structure of concepts that it embodies, without allowing ourselves to veer away onto the easier course of tacitly replacing its ideas by our own as they are embodied in *our* language. Here again translation, if we mean by it the replacement of concepts in one language by those of another, may be the enemy of understanding. And yet, in focusing attention on the structure of ideas in, say, Greek, we will find ourselves asking questions that we may think more characteristic of the anthropologist than of the student of literature. As an example of what I mean, I would like to take a single Greek word-system, which has received a good deal of attention recently,<sup>4</sup> and with it try to explore some of the

<sup>1</sup>Reuben Brower, *Alexander Pope: the Poetry of Allusion* (Oxford, 1959), esp. chaps. iii—iv.

<sup>2</sup>Cambridge, 1951.

<sup>3</sup>London, 1962.

<sup>4</sup>A. W. H. Adkins, *C.Q.* n.s. xiii (1963), pp. 30—45; M. Landfester, *Das griechische Nomen 'philos' und seine Ableitungen* (Hildesheim, 1966).

ways in which the structure of ideas in Greek differs radically from our own, and the reasons for that difference.

Conventionally we translate the Greek noun *φιλία* as 'friendship', the adjective *φίλος* as 'dear', or, when it is used as a noun, as 'friend', and the verb *φιλέω* as 'love', and when we so translate we may for much of the time be conscious of no incongruity. We shall notice that the class of 'friends' in Greek is wider than in English, since it includes kin: husbands and wives, parents and children are 'friends' one of another, and 'friendship' exists between them. Perhaps here we shall rather use the translation 'dear'<sup>1</sup> and describe parents as 'dear' to their children, and the relationship between them as 'love': then we shall interpret the basic concept common to this word-system as one involving warmth of feeling, tenderness and affection. But what are we to make of it when Homer describes Meleager as 'enraged against his dear mother Althaia'?<sup>2</sup> The dictionary here offers us an alternative translation, 'one's own': Meleager's anger was directed at 'his own mother'. The same translation is suggested for another field of usage that is immediately puzzling to an English reader, a usage in which the same adjective is applied to parts of the body or components in the processes of thinking and feeling (never very clearly distinguished in Greek). Frequently in Homer we come across phrases such as 'while my dear knees have power to move',<sup>3</sup> 'his dear heart laughed',<sup>4</sup> 'neither food nor drink shall go down my dear throat':<sup>5</sup> the effect of literal translation is absurd, and there is strong temptation to accept the version 'my own' or 'his own', and pass on with hardly a second thought, and only a residual sense of surprise at the need that Greek seems to have felt to stress the intimacy of relationship between 'knees',

<sup>1</sup>So Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek Lexicon*, s.v. *φίλος*, I.

<sup>2</sup>*Iliad* 9. 555.

<sup>3</sup>*Iliad* 9. 610.

<sup>4</sup>*Iliad* 21. 389.

<sup>5</sup>*Iliad* 19. 209f.

'heart', and 'throat' and the person whose knees, heart and throat they are, particularly striking since of course words for 'his' and 'my' also exist in Greek. Yet to pass on is to miss an essential opportunity, an essential clue to the structure of ideas in Greek. For it is clear that in fact the common basic concept in this word-system is that of functional relation, of closeness and solidarity: when a Greek described someone or something (the distinction is not important) as φίλος, he is asserting that he and they function and stand together, make common cause and belong, as it were, to a common bloc when facing the rest of experience. It is a word that serves sharply to divide the world into 'one's own' and the rest. And this division, as a central and focal fact of experience as it presented itself to a Greek, is in all respects in line with the other key concepts by which the Greek language expresses its sense of the world. It stresses at all points the notion of functional and social rôles over against individuality of feeling or inclination: when Alcestis, in Euripides' play, asks Admetus, her husband, not to remarry after she is dead, she reminds him that their children are as much φίλοι to him as they are to her,<sup>1</sup> and in saying this she means that she, her husband and their children belong to a single group which must stand together. It is an appeal to objective fact, and it would be true, as Homer's phrase about Meleager shows, even if there were, in fact, hatred and enmity between Admetus and his children. In the same way, the chorus in Euripides' *Medea* can describe Medea and Jason as φίλοι at the centre point of a bitter clash between them,<sup>2</sup> and in a play which deals with the savage revenge taken by one for humiliation at the hands of the other. We shall be entitled to say, then, that Greeks of Homer's age and those of the fifth century B.C. had in common a view of the world that sharply differentiated between those who

<sup>1</sup>Euripides, *Alcestis*, 302f.

<sup>2</sup>Euripides, *Medea*, 521.

would work together and co-operate as a group, and the rest. What is expected of the rest is very clear: it is hostility and conflict, and it is this that makes the sharpness of differentiation so important, since standing and respect (what we may conveniently call 'honour', so long as we are careful not to think that 'honourable conduct', in our sense, contributes to a man's 'honour') are the highest goals of human endeavour, and since they are regarded as existing in an essentially competitive context, so that an increase of 'honour' for one man can generally be attained only by the diminution of another's, it is not surprising that mutual hostility and suspicion are the normal context in which Greeks face one another. The world is a competitive arena, and a man has no honour to which he cannot assert and maintain his right. It is consistent with this set of ideas that the world should also be seen as stratified horizontally into different status groups: no competitive challenge exists when a man faces a woman, a free man a slave, or a man of birth and wealth another who has neither. In comparison with the first, the second in each case has no claim to 'honour', and the avoidance of competition by status division serves to reduce the area of conflict to manageable limits.

There are, of course, exceptions to these general principles, and the exceptions are interesting. I have said that there is no competition between man and woman. Yet in fact, of course, much of the power of Greek legends of famous women, such as those of Clytaemnestra, Medea and Electra, arises from the implicit claim of these women to 'honour' in direct competition with men. Clytaemnestra has a 'mind that plans like a man',<sup>1</sup> and all three refuse to be humiliated and laughed at in terms that make them very much competitors of men. Correspondingly, much of the achievement of Athenian democracy lies in the fact that at Athens differences of social

<sup>1</sup>Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 11.

and economic status did not altogether preclude a sense of being involved together, not so much in mutual acknowledgement of rights as in mutual competition for 'honour'.

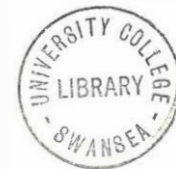
But in general aggressive conflict tempered only by acceptance of co-operation between φίλοι and recognition of clear boundaries of status characterize the world of Greek thought. It is a defining mark of Greek usage that there is no clear division between the vocabularies of status description, social approval and moral approbation, and the situation in Latin is fundamentally comparable. We shall not understand either the language or the society which created it without some use of the anthropologist's techniques of cultural description. One last illustration of this theme must suffice. The most notable marriage between humans in Greek legend was the marriage of Helen and Menelaus. The Greek poet Hesiod in his *Catalogue of Women*<sup>1</sup> described the negotiations that led up to the marriage and includes the great list of suitors who competed for acceptance by the family of Tyndareus. From what survives of Hesiod's poem one striking fact emerges: it is that all but one of the suitors was represented in this competition by another, a brother or other kinsman, or else makes his claim to marriage from a distance. In the negotiations, Helen's family is represented, not merely by her father, Tyndareus, but also, and actively, by her brothers, Kastor and Polydeukes. On the other side, the list of suitors is long and includes Menelaus, Alcmaion, Odysseus, Ajax and Protesilaus. The only one to appear in person is Idomeneus the Cretan. The marriage is, of course, an arrangement between kinship groups, whose primary significance is the continuity and strengthening of the kin, not the mutual acceptance of two individuals. But it is also, in the context of competitive hostility between any individuals or groups of the same status, who are not φίλοι, a sort

<sup>1</sup>Hesiod, frags. 196—204 Merkelbach-West.

of negotiated peace between warring groups. And in a society which sets 'honour' as the highest goal and humiliation as the greatest evil, it is also an occasion of great tension and potential danger: for this is a competitive situation in which, in the outcome, one man (the chosen suitor) must gain in honour, and the rest must lose face. Clearly it is in an attempt to restrict and minimise these dangers that the intending suitor sends an envoy to negotiate for him, rather than risk the still greater humiliation of being rejected in person. And it is in this way too that we must understand the famous oath that the suitors swore, namely to act together if there should be any attempt by any one of them to regain lost face by abducting Helen. The whole story, then, both in its details and in its overall shape, owes its force and its hold on the Greek imagination because it hinges on a moment which focuses all the hostilities and dangers that give tension and a sense of significant excitement to life in a society whose values are structured as Greek values were. And such a society is only to be understood by careful attention to concepts and techniques which we must learn from anthropology. It is significant that two anthropologists who have recently published work on contemporary Greek peasant communities, John Campbell and Ernestine Friedl,<sup>1</sup> have themselves drawn attention to the ways in which a modern Greek peasant community continues in fundamental respects to reflect this value structure: their work, in fact, provides a valuable commentary on the poetry of ancient Greece.

There is one further aspect of reading ancient poetry about which I would like to say something: it is about the concept of a literary tradition and its relevance to

<sup>1</sup>J. K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford, 1964); Ernestine Friedl, *Vasilika: A Village in Modern Greece* (New York, 1962). See also, more generally, R. Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago, 1956), and most recently, J. Pitt-Rivers, "The Stranger, the Guest and the Hostile Host: Introduction to the Study of the Laws of Hospitality", in *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology: Mediterranean Rural Communities and Social Change* (Paris and The Hague, 1968), pp. 13—30.



Greek and Latin poetry. The sense of belonging to and working within a tradition is, of course, a governing feature of the writing of poetry in the ancient world. We sometimes talk as though consciousness of tradition were a discovery of the Hellenistic world, a world in which the breakdown of the classical framework of social and political life, the city-state, brought about the creation of a new governing class and a new literary public, and correspondingly new dimensions in the making of poetry. But, of course, it is not so : there is no clearer example of a literary tradition, however different from those familiar to us, than the oral tradition of epic poetry, and later we find equally clearly in the lyric poetry of Archaic Greece this same overriding sense of working in a tradition, now beginning to differentiate itself by the creation of new genres and formal modes of poetry, but nevertheless conscious of its descent and already skilled in the exploitation of the sense of continuity, of the present significance of the past that the existence of a tradition gives to poet and audience alike.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is true that with the poetry of Hellenistic Alexandria conscious exploitation of familiarity with the poetry of the past attains the status of a new mode of literary expression. And it is above all with the tradition of Roman poetry that we encounter something that calls for a precise grasp of the nature and significance of tradition for an accurate response to the poetry written within it.

Few of the legacies of the Romantic era entail so radical an obstacle to our understanding of the pre-Romantic world than its declared cult of individual creativity and of the autonomy of personal expression and experience. A view of the world which looks outwards from the essentially private and inner experience of the self, and which with the passage of time has acquired so sophisticated a sense of the depth and intricacy of personal experience, must inevitably throw up barriers between it

<sup>1</sup>A. E. Harvey, *C.Q.* n.s. vii (1957), pp. 206-23.

and comprehension of a quite different structuring of the common experience of mankind. We see the effectiveness of these barriers, for instance, in the difficulties so widely evidenced of coming to terms with the drama of the past on any other basis than as an exploration of individual 'character', in which the playwright is directed in the writing of every speech by a desire to reveal the progress of thought and the ebb and flow of feeling in the personality of a given character. In a way, it is surprising that these things should be still so, since much of the writing of the last fifty years has been directed by an overriding desire to get away from these very pre-occupations : to take one example only, both in his major essay, *Tradition and the individual talent*, and in his poetry, most notably in *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot should have given the modern reader a better grasp of the nature of a literary tradition than was available to our immediate predecessors. Yet only a slight acquaintance with the essays of a majority of intelligent students, let alone with much of today's subcritical writing, shows that the barriers are as solid as ever.

If we cannot appreciate the nature of the literary tradition in our own language, there are naturally still greater obstacles in the way of a grasp of its significance in ancient poetry. It is not in the least surprising that Robert Graves, who reacted with something like disgust to *The Waste Land*, should feel an even greater lack of sympathy with the *Aeneid*. For, in attempting to indicate the nature of the literary tradition in Latin poetry, I cannot do better than quote Northrop Frye on Eliot's poetry : 'Anyone who thinks of writing poetry as a self-expressive activity may imagine that he is creating something out of nothing, like God : but nothing like this happens. The impulse to write can only come from previous literary experience, and is conditioned by poetic conventions throughout. The new poem . . . is born into a verbal society, an order of words already there. Hence the view that "originality" consists in making a fresh

start in literature is a half-truth. An essential part of creative power is in past literature. Every poet inherits a literary continuum which has come down from Homer to our own day, and feels that this continuum "has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order"<sup>1</sup> (the last phrase is a quotation from Eliot himself). Mr. Frye describes Eliot as 'one of the poets who make a possessive use of sources', and it is equally clear that Vergil is another. In his recent important book, *Die Aeneis und Homer*,<sup>2</sup> Professor Georg Nikolaus Knauer has documented in depth as never before the manner and the extent of Vergil's use of Homer. We have the material before us for a re-assessment of Vergil's essential quality, but everything depends on our approach to the material. It is easy for us, using the bearings of our own cultural map, to view Vergil's use of the poetry that he had heard and remembered as at best an empty gesture to the giants of the past which adds nothing to the quality of his own poetry, at worst as evidence of his lack of creativity. But if we do so we miss the point. The allusiveness of Vergil serves two functions. It places him for the reader within the 'simultaneous order' of poetry, and implies the claim to be regarded henceforth as part of that order, and it produces for the ear of the reader an expressive analogue for that sense of visual depth and recession which we gain from the superimposition of two images. In Vergil's voice as in Eliot's we hear constantly the echo of other voices, and the combined effect of this sound and those is to produce a characteristic quality of utterance that is not merely the sum of its constituents. The technique may be used for a variety of ends: it may produce a note of irony, the satirical, bitter tone of much of *The Waste Land*, or in Pope's moral poetry, or it may produce an affirmative note which avoids a trite and facile optimism by fusing a

<sup>1</sup>N. Frye, *T. S. Eliot* (Edinburgh and London, 1963), p. 26; *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 95-8.

<sup>2</sup>Göttingen, 1964.

whole range of experience. When we read the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, we can separate out by analysis the distinctive contributions of Odysseus' descent into Hades in the *Nekuia* of the *Odyssey*, the myth of Er at the end of Plato's *Republic*, the dream of Scipio in Cicero's *de re publica*, of Naevius and the Cumaean Sibyl, Ennius and the prooemium of the *Annales*, and the many other strands of Greek and Latin poetry. But in reading, the experiences are fused in what Frye calls 'an intensity of combination', or by what Eliot himself, speaking of the Metaphysical poets, has described as 'a mechanism of sensibility that could devour any kind of experience'.<sup>1</sup> One of the major 'kinds of experience' on which the poetry of a literary tradition draws is the experience of poetry itself.

Perhaps unwisely, I earlier defined my task to be that of presenting some sense of what a modern reader of ancient poetry is about, and some sense also of why he is doing it. If by now I may hope that I have done something to make good the first promise, I am conscious of having done little or nothing to fulfil the second. It is indeed not easy to justify by argument any activity whose basic value is called into question. There is a risk either of complacency or arrogance about not doing so, and yet the reasons for doing anything are more complex than might appear, and the conviction that they carry more a matter of individual judgement than we might at first admit.

To say that intellectual curiosity is, as Aristotle asserted, a fundamental human trait, and one that is to be valued for itself and given scope, is no more a justification for the study of ancient poetry than it is for the study of anything else, but it is equally no less a justification. And to say that the serious study of literature is also an activity to be valued for itself is not only again too large a justification to distinguish the study of ancient literature from that of any other, but also a proposition perhaps more likely to

<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London, 1951), p. 287.



be denied. Yet it should not be : for literature is the medium by which the cultural and moral tradition of any society is transmitted. It is the memory of society, and a society without a memory is a society without experience, with nothing known and everything to learn. Moreover literature is language put to considered use : its continued existence is the barrier between us and the degeneration of language to the level of mindless cliché and all too mindful leverage upon the emotions : the world of pulp journalism, of the ad-man and the Führer. Literature, to quote Ezra Pound, 'has to do with maintaining the cleanliness of the very tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself'.

But if it be granted that the study of literature deserves to be regarded as a serious and central activity, it may still be suggested that the literature of the ancient world is no longer part of our concern, no longer indeed part of our memory : it has, it may be argued, nothing to say to present day society. If we accept that suggestion, we are saying, I think, two things : that technological and social change has so altered the mind of Western man that the past has become incomprehensible, and that nothing is relevant to an understanding of modern Western society that is not of that society. The first I do not believe, and the second, I think, is positively dangerous. If we are not to fall, like Narcissus, into total self-absorption, into an ultimately destructive and essentially uncomprehending contemplation of our own image in the mirror of the world that we have made, it is essential that we look at the world as it appears to others, at other forms of the imagination, other conceptions of a moral and a social order, and it is in literature, and only in literature, that we will find these things. The literature of Greece and Rome has a particular claim upon our attentions, for two reasons. Firstly (I am quoting Mr. Leavis on the study of Dante, but his words hold equally good for the study of ancient poetry), 'it would involve, in a most effective kind of way, the study of a cultural order extremely

different from that which has grown out of it—and which did grow out of it ; and it would provide for the contemplation of the modern scene a measuring reference, and, in so far as such can ever be attained, a standing place, outside'.<sup>1</sup> It is that sense of recognition, combined with realization of its essential otherness, that the reading of ancient poetry uniquely brings. The second reason is, quite simply, the greatness of the poetry itself, the very completeness of the way in which the major poetry of the ancient world presents its sense of the world, its grasp of the whole range of experience. When we read it, we are impelled to say, as Eliot says of the final canto of the *Divina Commedia* : 'it is the real right thing . . . it is the utmost power of the poet'.

One last word. It is sometimes suggested that concern for the poetry of the ancient world is the product of, and in turn breeds, nostalgia for the past and contempt for the present, a kind of high Toryism of taste that condescends to later achievement and rejects any future that is not a return to the past. That is a view that I cannot share : a serious concern with the past in no sense excludes commitment to the present. Perhaps indeed, in the last resort, one is impossible without the other : for our sense of the seriousness and worth of the utterances of ancient literature is, and must be, commensurate with our grasp of the seriousness of the present. A superficial understanding of the one cannot cohere with a taking of the full measure of the other.

I would like to end by quoting from the work of a contemporary Greek poet in whose poetry the significance of the past and of its literature is fused with a completely realised presentation of the world as it now is. The third poem of George Seferis' sequence *Mythistorema* is headed by an epigraph from Aeschylus : 'Think of that bath where you were stripped of life'. It conveys, economically and powerfully a sense of the past as something familiar

<sup>1</sup>F. R. Leavis, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

yet enigmatic and disturbing, an inescapable concern because it is there, not to be easily dismissed, yet not either to be casually accepted. Here is the poem :

I woke up with this marble head in my hands  
which exhausts my elbows and I do not know where to  
set it down.

It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the  
dream  
so our lives joined and it will be very difficult to part  
them.

I look at the eyes : neither open nor closed  
I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak  
I hold the cheeks which have passed beyond the skin  
I have no more strength.

My hands disappear and come back to me  
mutilated.

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