

## FORUM

### ON STILL NOT KNOWING GREEK

In her essay “On Not Knowing Greek,” Virginia Woolf said “it is vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we should be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps I should have paid more attention to her warning when I set out to learn Greek some years ago. The fluency I expected has yet to come. Sometimes I read sections of a play easily, but just as often I labor over a few lines. And in my most discouraging moments, I have to resort to someone else’s translation. Still I keep at it, wondering, however, why the language keeps me so engaged.

Woolf pondered a similar question. Is it not strange, she asked, “that we should wish to know Greek, try to know Greek, feel for ever drawn back to Greek,” when our prospects of knowing it seem so dim? For her, the obstacles to understanding Greek were not only its complex forms and convoluted syntax, but also a separation of nature and spirit between us and the Greeks of ancient times, a separation that could place the meaning of a passage “just on the far side of language.” Yet, she decided, the “labour and difficulty” of learning Greek were warranted by the great tragedies, in which we encounter “the stable, the permanent, the original human being ... before their emotions have been worn to uniformity.”<sup>2</sup>

Even when I read the plays in translation, these qualities attracted me. Occasionally I thought about undertaking the “labour and difficulty” of learning Greek, not hoping for the impossible—to bridge the separation of nature and spirit that Woolf saw—but simply to come closer to the heart of Greek tragedy by understanding its language. But inertia and my sense of the effort required kept me from it.

Oddly, it was my life in the Information Age that finally moved me to try to learn Greek. I have been deeply involved with computing as a teacher, researcher and consultant. An early and

<sup>1</sup> Woolf (1925) 39.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf (1925) 44–5.

enthusiastic adopter of technology, I found myself a few years ago living more “on the screen” than I would have thought possible when I began my career in computer science. My life reminded me of a vaudeville act from the early days of television.<sup>3</sup> A man set plates spinning atop a row of poles. Back and forth he hustled from one pole to another, giving each just enough spin to keep its plate from falling. While he attended to one plate, others teetered precariously. Too much attention to one meant disaster for others. But not enough attention meant that this one would fall. His success depended on giving each pole just enough attention to keep its plate aloft. As he went, an assistant added a new pole and plate, demanding even more speed from him. Soon he had to conduct his act on the dead run.

Plate-spinning had become a metaphor for my life. From email to cell phone to computer screen I went, giving each a quick spin to keep some project going. As the number of “poles” in my personal act increased, I gave each just enough and no more. I was not at all certain that I liked living this way. Perhaps the study of ancient Greek would settle me down a bit. There would be no need to catch up with updates or new releases of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. They had remained unchanged for more than 2000 years, and they would wait for me while I came closer to them.

For Woolf, understanding Greek meant getting beyond the boundaries of the language. For me, its complex grammar and seemingly endless vocabulary were challenges enough. Earlier students met these demands through extended engagement with the language. But today, with fewer students and courses, prolonged exposure to Greek is less common. I began my study as one of about 15 students in the introductory Greek class at Rice. Only two students stayed with me in the second year, where we jumped (or were pushed) into Plato. (If we taught swimming this way, we would give children a couple of talks on hydro-dynamics and throw them into the water. Floundering around might help us learn to swim, but keeping afloat in Greek is a different matter!) In the few other classes I took, enrollment seldom exceeded a handful of students, who like me repeated courses when the texts changed. All too soon, however, I was on my own, motivated by stories of others who had taught themselves Greek, and aided occasionally by faculty colleagues.

Outside the classroom, I had the traditional materials that sustained students of previous generations: texts, commentaries, dictionaries, lexicons and translations. I also had the Internet, a

<sup>3</sup> Gorry (2005).

resource unimaginable to earlier students. For example, although I studied alone, I could listen to recitations of Greek poetry and prose, even with a tonal accent that made the language sound like Chinese. The most important Internet resource for me was the Perseus Digital Library, a repository containing hypertext versions of many Greek texts. The hypertext made reading generally straightforward. With a page of a play on my laptop screen, I could click on any word, jump to a list of its possible forms and meanings, and call up brief or comprehensive dictionary entries. With equal ease, I could get an English translation of the lines I was reading. No more puzzling out forms, rummaging through dictionaries or pondering meanings; Perseus offered an “efficient” approach to Greek, quite in keeping with the accelerated pace of modern life.

So I adopted a mixed approach to learning Greek. In the traditional way, I studied texts, consulted dictionaries and grammars, learned vocabulary and syntax, read translations and returned to the texts. In the new Information Age way, I browsed Perseus and consulted other Internet resources. Because it was so readily accessible, I used Perseus increasingly to resolve the meaning of words or passages. I could not imagine studying Greek without it. But in a way, my intense use of Perseus was contributing to the “labour and difficulty” of learning Greek.

Take, for example, learning vocabulary and forms. Without knowing the meaning of many words, no one can read Greek texts easily. For earlier students of Greek, to know vocabulary meant to commit it to memory, in part because constant recourse to a dictionary is so tedious. For me, with the meaning of a word only a click away, it was tempting to get just enough of a word’s meaning to move on with my translation—to get to the next speech or the next ode. But this easy access was undermining my larger ambition of knowing Greek. Again and again I encountered words whose meanings I had previously retrieved, but had not really learned.

Early in *Hippolytus*, the chorus recalls a rumor regarding Phaedra’s puzzling illness, a story that came first from women washing at a rock that drips water from the river that circles the world. Like Greek, that rock seemed far off and strange to me. To learn about such a rock today, I might “google” it to retrieve its longitude and latitude, something about its geology, and maybe even a picture. But knowing about the rock is not the same as knowing it. For that, I would have to go to the rock, walk around it, feel it and explore its nooks and crannies. There are, as well, two ways to approach Greek. One, which emphasizes speed and information retrieval, responds to demands of the Information Age, but the other, which stresses patience and care, facilitates “knowing Greek.” While the Internet is still important in my study of Greek, I

now use it more judiciously. When I take up *Hippolytus*, I try to slow down to make my learning accretive, taking the time to add thin layers of understanding to older ones. The Greek tragedies repay repeated visits, not because they are new versions or releases, but because they wait for me, with my slowly improving Greek, to get closer to them.

Even with the addition of digital to traditional resources, learning Greek is difficult; it takes hours I might otherwise devote to keeping up with the rush of the Information Age. My return on this investment, however, has already been substantial. Although I have far to go to know Greek, the great tragedies have become even greater, as I hoped when I began my study. And Greek has encouraged me to return a part of my life to an older way of learning, one that counterbalances the invigorating, but sometimes unsettling life on the screen. I suspect others feel the need for such re-balancing as well. When I see people deeply immersed in their books—in libraries, cafes, on airplanes—I imagine that at least some are like me, fixing an anchor against an information tide in the nooks and crannies of some old and unchanging text.

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#### WORKS CITED

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