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0521812283 - Who Needs Greek?: Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism

Simon Goldhill

Excerpt

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During the siege of Jerusalem in 65 BCE, the Jews inside the walls let down baskets with money in them to buy animals, so that they could complete the regular Passover sacrifices at the Temple. ‘An old man, learned in Greek wisdom, spoke with the besiegers in Greek: “As long as they continue the Temple service, they will never surrender.” When the next basket came, the money was taken, but a pig was put in it. Half way up, the pig’s claws dug into the wall, and the whole land of Israel shook for 400 parasangs about. “Cursed be a man who rears pigs; cursed be a man who teaches his son Greek wisdom”’, cry the Jews.<sup>1</sup>

What the pig is to Jewish ritual, it would seem, Greek wisdom is to intellectual and social life.

It is tempting to let this story stand as a kind of epigraph to the following chapters. But such a knowing silence would play false to the tradition of the Talmud, which never fails to add commentary to commentary (to commentary), and it would also run counter to my own nature as a scholar and teacher (which may be lured by the poetical but can’t resist the exegetical). Resonances need sounding out . . . Indeed, the Talmudic passage continues with a question (of course). Is speaking Greek the same thing as learning Greek wisdom? Not necessarily. And what of Rabbi Gamaliel, did not his school have 500 pupils learning Talmud and 500 pupils learning Greek wisdom? But that was ‘because they had close associations with the government’. And there, pregnantly, the discussion ends. The man who teaches Greek wisdom is cursed, yet Rabbi Gamaliel can teach it parallel to the Bible itself, because of the requirements of dealing with the authorities. The slide from aggressive cursing to necessary accommodation tellingly traces the lures and threats of Hellenization in the culture wars of ancient Palestine.

<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud: *Sotah* 49b.

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What this Talmudic passage knows is that Greek is *foundational*. Greek wisdom, learning Greek, means an absorption not only of a linguistic resource but also of a cultural paradigm. The threat of Greek is that it will inveigle its way into your culture, it will destroy the foundations, an enemy within that will bring the walls tumbling down. This image of the *danger* of Greek to a cultural identity will be central to this volume: in my story too, Greek books lead to death and murder, to cultural crisis, to social, religious and intellectual mayhem.

The narrative context of the Talmudic anecdote is especially pointed therefore. The story is told in a sequence of stories leading up to the destruction of the Temple, that is, the cataclysmic loss of the defining centre of Jewish ritual practice. Rabbinic Judaism, with its insistence on the centrality of Talmudic and Biblical study, constitutes the forced redirection of Judaism, with all the inevitable conflicts, confusions and changing claims of cultural affiliation that follow such an upheaval, such a political disenfranchisement. This story, then, is not only part of an ideologically laden, retrospective construction of that history, but it is also *performative*. It is designed to have an effect in a social and polemical context. Its telling is an *act* of boundary reinforcement. There is in the Talmud a fiercely explicit (and fearful) set of injunctions about the risks of imitating dominant Greek and Roman cultures, injunctions that build on the Pentateuch's proclamations of separateness, chosenness, and holiness to enforce a social and intellectual exclusion from the norms and practices of Empire. Yet this is coupled with a more insidious invasion of the text of the Talmud by Greek and Roman words, by Greek and Roman ways of thought, and by a recognition of the institutional structures of the Empire, and by a life in the architecture of Empire. The tension between the desire for integrity and the necessity of engagement produces a string of fascinating stories, which struggle, like this Talmudic passage does, to control the conflicting impulses of cultural negotiation, often through the uneasy projection of an image of secure exclusiveness.<sup>2</sup>

The performative value of this story is highlighted sharply by a very different account of the event by the historian Josephus, who had been a general of the Jews, but who, as an honoured hostage and finally representative of the Roman conquerors, wrote a history of the war first in Aramaic and then in Greek (a political and cultural position that makes *his* version far from transparent). Josephus explains that the besieged in Jerusalem offered large amounts of money to their fellow countrymen

<sup>2</sup> For discussion and bibliography, see Schwartz (2001a) and generally Schwartz (2001b).

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outside the walls for the animals for the Passover sacrifices. The Jews outside agreed, but then reneged, merely stealing the money as it came down in the baskets. God, comments the historian, punished their breach of trust and their impiety with an instant crop failure. The story here is one of religious corruption and mistrust between Jews during a civil war, and Josephus happily calculates that the impious made no profit because of the increased price of wheat. The pig and the Greek (and all the politics of accommodation with authority) *structure* the Rabbis' tale, but have no place in Josephus.<sup>3</sup>

What interests me most in the Talmudic story, however – and what makes it an excellent introduction to this book – is the strange passions of its extreme formulation: a world shaken by a pig's foot. The end of the story is the violent destruction of a community (with all the freight of such an image for ancient and modern Jews), but the rhetoric of the story focuses on the necessity of fearing the apparently small causes of destruction. It demands from you not an epic battle (no Iliadic siege, no Vergilian sack) but rather a heroic *caring*: a caring about what you read and study. The displacement of military violence onto the power of Greek words aims to make cultural resistance a matter of life and death.

*Who Needs Greek?* is about such climaxes of passionate caring about Greek – it is about critical moments when cultural identity has become inextricably linked with an idea of Greek and Greek becomes a bitterly contested area of social and intellectual activity; it is about highly charged scenes where obsession, fantasy and projection lead to wild commitments and to bizarre declarations which now seem barely comprehensible. By '[the idea of] Greek' I mean not only the Greek language, though that is often the key battleground, but the whole ideological and symbolic value of Greek culture – Greekness itself. The slippage between an ideal image of a past society and the language in which its literature is enshrined is constantly at work in the debates I will be tracing.

It should be clear from the outset, then, that this is not a history of classical scholarship (for all that classical scholarship has its fair share of the obsessive, wild and the bizarre). Nor is it a history of the 'reception' of Greek texts in the West – there are no lists here of who read what or of the ancient sources of modern literature. Nor is it a history of education, nor a plea for a place for Greek in the modern curriculum. (It will end with some remarks about the consequences of forgetting

<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Antiquities* XIV 25–8.

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about Greek, but these comments will not be framed explicitly in terms of educational policy.) The question of the title will not be answered with a conservative nostalgia for a lost world when Classics formed the basis of all education ('we all need Greek'); nor with the foolish blinkers of the contemporary presentism that makes a barely considered idea of 'relevance' the criterion of educational and cultural value ('no one needs Greek').

The following chapters put together authors and histories that do not usually appear between the same covers and consequently, more than many books, this volume needs to explain the structure of its argument with some care and to justify both its selectiveness and its narrative strategy. Here is how the chapters unfold. I begin with the story of the *resistance* to Greek in the Renaissance. The triumph of classical learning is, of course, a defining narrative of the move out of medieval darkness into the splendour of modern Europe (though medieval scholars don't usually put it in those terms), and makes an obvious point of departure: the Renaissance is when the need for Greek is (re)discovered in the West. Less familiar, however, is the fierce and persistent opposition to Greek study, epitomized by the extraordinary claim of John Standish who told his congregation in London in around 1520 that 'Learning Greek is Heresy' – in a period, note, where 'heresy' not merely had its full religious import, but also constituted a charge which could lead to trial and death. How could a Christian religious leader – Standish was a Doctor of Divinity and an authority in the Church – declare that to learn the language in which the Gospels were written was such an act of religious error that it deserved the death penalty? What made Oxford men break up Greek classes? What led a scholar to be burnt at the stake for mistranslating two words of Plato?

My first chapter attempts to answer these questions by exploring the polemics about studying Greek that surrounded the central intellectual figure of this turbulent period of reform, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmus was a tireless promoter of Greek as the route to a true understanding of early Christianity (as well as the ancient Greek world itself), but his work was perceived as an outrageous challenge to the authority of the established Church, and particularly to the authority of the Latin Bible, the so-called Vulgate. His hugely influential new educational methods threatened vested institutional interests. His delight in the humour and sarcastic wit which he found in ancient texts, disturbed the self-image of the dignitaries of the Church. The resistance to Greek – to Erasmus' Greek – became a heady conflict through the

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bloody development of the Reformation, where politics, theology, and cultural and educational control overlapped, often with great intellectual and physical violence. Promoting and resisting Greek was fully and dramatically a mainstay in the exercise of power in society. A burning issue . . .

The starting point of this volume is with Erasmus not merely to correct the way in which the Renaissance is so often described as the re-discovery of Greek *without* taking account of the resistance to the new learning. Rather and above all, my concern is with what such resistance indicates. The very widest concerns of politics and power, religion and the soul are at stake in the battle over knowing Greek. It is a moment that fully embodies ‘a passionate caring’ about Greek – a life-and-death matter, both in this world and the next.

One of Erasmus’ favourite writers was the satirist, Lucian, who wrote in Greek in the second century CE. Erasmus first came to prominence in Europe through the translations of Lucian he made with Sir Thomas More (and which remained bestsellers for many years). Erasmus’ most celebrated and most polemical work is *Praise of Folly*, a satirical text that was explicitly understood – loved and reviled – as ‘Lucianic’. Erasmus made Lucian central to new and trendy Greek studies. Yet – or perhaps because of this – the Catholic Church placed Lucian on the Index of banned books in the sixteenth century. Martin Luther detested and reviled him too. Lucian was an author who acted as a lightning-rod for the controversies of the Reformation. Lucian summed up the value of Greek for Erasmus: yet Lucian was a Syrian. He made his way in the Roman Empire as a Greek-speaking orator. This exemplary Greek had to *learn* how to be Greek. My second chapter, ‘Becoming Greek, with Lucian’ looks first (and at greatest length) at how Lucian represents himself as a learned Greek (in both senses of ‘learned’). How can you become (culturally, educationally, linguistically) Greek? Lucian writes extensively and very funnily about the signs of Greek culture, and he satirizes with brilliant wit the desire to possess culture and to fit in. Lucian shows how even in the ancient world there is a recognition that ‘Greekness’ is a constructed quality, crossed by fantasy, projection and desire. Being Greek is a real *performance*.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, Lucian’s reputation underwent an extraordinary change. Particularly in Germany, and particularly as German nationalism burgeoned, Lucian became viewed as the paradigm of a false, imitative, unreliable Greekness. The reasons for this are complex but necessarily involve the wholesale re-evaluation of

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the Greek writing of the Roman Empire (the so-called Second Sophistic). The writers of the Second Sophistic in the second century CE found their inspiration, their literary models, their very language in the works of classical Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE: the Second Sophistic is often termed a 'revival' of (ancient) Greek learning. Romanticism's privileging of originality, sincerity, authenticity and emotional grandeur consequently found it easy to dismiss Second Sophistic prose as derivative, insincere, and, simply, second-rate. Lucian's love of role-playing, sarcasm, irony and masks was declared to be not merely the sign and symptom of a thorough-going cultural degeneracy (second-hand culture), but also and more specifically, a *racially* marked characteristic. Lucian became the exemplar not of Greekness (as he had been for Erasmus: clarity, purity, intelligence) but of the East, and, worse, of 'mixed race' origins (corruption, insincerity, flattery). By 1941, he could be dismissed (quite falsely and quite remarkably) as 'the Jew'. 'Greekness', then, is what Lucian sets at stake and in play – and the modern era has made his Greekness part of religious conflict and of a murderous nationalist politics. In this way, Lucian epitomizes two of the major concerns of this book; first, how learning Greek and studying the Greek past play an integral part in fashioning a cultural identity – even in the ancient world; second, how the figures of the Greek past undergo drastic and far-reaching re-evaluation – and how this re-evaluation in turn plays an integral role in readers' self-fashioning. Lucian, in particular, demonstrates a specific and significant shift in the comprehension of ancient Greece between the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, on the one hand, and the post-Enlightenment world of late nineteenth-century society, on the other – culminating finally in the self-consciously deconstructive modernism of the twentieth century. Lucian is, in short, a yardstick for the construction of cultural tradition.

The third chapter, 'Blood from the shadows: Strauss' disgusting, degenerate *Elektra*', goes to the heart of this modernist engagement with things Greek, and specifically with the very acme of classicism, Sophocles. This chapter focuses on the first performance of Strauss' opera *Elektra* in London in 1910, which caused a storm of controversy. The *Elektra* is chosen not just because of the huge importance of its cultural impact, but in particular because it so vividly encapsulates a modernist assault on Victorian classicism. It epitomizes the rupture between the nineteenth-century ideological appropriations of classical Greece and the deliberately shocking, violent reworkings of modernism. In a debate riven with the new concerns of nationalism, psychoanalysis and

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anthropology, the responses to this opera show the full force of the crisis in modern Hellenism (in which Lucian too was being rethought). This is a case where Greek culture and its ideals, far more than the Greek language, are being set at stake. The libretto was by Hugo von Hofmannsthal from his own play, which had been an immense scandal and success in German-speaking theatres a few years earlier. Hofmannsthal's modernist poetics and Strauss' modernist music took the most 'pious' of classical authors and offered a version full of blood and violence and sexual perversion. The responses to this shocking play in Germany and to the horrifying opera in England, Germany and America reveal the deep investment of different national cultures in ideals of Greek value. Fierce debates about Greekness rapidly turned into vitriolic arguments about Germanness and Englishness. Again, what a struggle about Greekness encapsulates is the passionate commitments of political and cultural self-definition. Dress, music, poetry, education, party politics, governmental agendas, set-design, all become part of a growing war of national identity. Greek theatre, in the years leading up to the first world war, became thus (as Aeschylus might put it), 'a contest about everything'.

In the nineteenth century, however, for all the privilege of Greek in Victorian intellectual self-representations, and for all that 'Victorian Greece' offered a looming target for Hofmannsthal's modernism, the place of Greece in Victorian cultural life and educational institutions was itself deeply contested. Where the third chapter treats a production whose circumstances reveal the intellectual and socio-political turmoil in which the re-evaluation of Lucian took place, the fourth and longest chapter, 'Who knows Greek?', takes a step back from 1910 to consider one fundamental and constitutive element of the conflict over Greek theatre, namely, the question of what it means to say in the nineteenth century 'I know Greek', and how this cues a long-running argument about what the need for Greek is. This chapter looks at the construction of the Victorian Hellenism against which Hofmannsthal was rebelling – and finds a far more complex and contested picture than modernism's dismissiveness would lead us to believe. I start from the Romantic Hellenism of the early years of the century (and the fight for Greek independence), and trace an argument that brews throughout the century about the place of Greek in the education system and what the *point* of knowing Greek might be. This is never merely a question of linguistic competence or training. Rather a host of political, cultural and personal politics making 'knowing Greek' a very complex idea indeed, as it is debated in parliament, in the lecture halls of America, in the common-rooms of

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Cambridge colleges. The increasing professionalization of the study of classics, coupled with increasing attacks on the validity of studying Greek from the disciplines of science and English, constantly make the discussion of Greek a heated row about the most general values and direction of society. Between leading politicians, major poets, cutting-edge academics, intellectual superstars, ‘the Greek question’ becomes a national and international debate.

In particular, in the different sections of the chapter, I look at three different moments in time and three different types of argument about knowing Greek. First, with the scandalous prose of Thomas De Quincey and the classicizing verse of Keats, I look at the literary re-workings of knowing Greek in the first quarter of the century. Second, through the politician Robert Lowe and the writer and educationalist, Matthew Arnold, I explore the political and educational arguments about the role of Greek in the curriculum and in culture, from the middle of the century on in England and America. Third, from the last part of the century, I investigate arguments within academia about knowing Greek, especially through a row between two leading Cambridge dons, Walter Headlam and A. W. Verrall. It is a chapter that travels from Shelley emoting in front of the newly displayed Elgin Marbles to Headlam, self-marginalized and cocooned in his rooms in Cambridge – a catalogue of men, ring-fencing the privilege of Greek from female eyes. The story of ‘knowing Greek’ is also the story of the building of scholarly and institutional walls around Greek knowledge.

What, then, is the *value* of Greek culture? This general question, which underlies so many of the debates of the fourth chapter, takes on a further specific form in the fifth and final chapter, where my primary subject is Plutarch, an author who for many centuries epitomized the value of classical learning. Plutarch, who lived in the first century, in the first years of the dominance of Greece by the Roman Empire, is himself in the business of trying to construct a new sense of Greekness, a new model of how to be Greek, when the old ways of military and political heroism are no longer available. Plutarch is part of an ongoing re-invention of Greekness. Both in his lives of the military and political heroes of the past and in his encyclopedic collection of treatises on subject after subject, from science to religion to history, he brings the whole world under the gaze and appropriative comprehension of Greek wisdom. Everything is subject to the knowing Greek’s understanding, and the knowing Greek expresses his cultural identity in and through such activity. What’s more, as with Lucian, the evaluation of Plutarch underwent a sea-change in

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the later nineteenth century. Once regarded as the exemplary repository of ancient knowledge (on the one hand) and the inspiration of revolution (on the other), Plutarch becomes the touchstone of the outdated and the boring, the incoherent and unimportant collector of other peoples' knowledge. He becomes dismissed by academics and increasingly ignored by readers. What has been lost in forgetting Plutarch's value? More than any other writer from the ancient world, Plutarch's status has veered from one of the greats of culture to an almost wholly silenced figure. My interest is not just in the construction of Greekness in Plutarch, nor just in the different values placed on Plutarch in the modern period, but rather on the process itself of what I shall call 'cultural forgetting'. What are the forces that led Plutarch to fall so far so suddenly in the cultural expectations of the West? How did we forget Plutarch?

Each chapter of the book, then, treats a critical, cultural *conflict* about Greek and Greekness: opposition to learning Greek, hostility to representations of Greek, drastic redrafting of the value of a previously privileged idea of Greek. Each of these conflicts is passionate because it concerns the construction of a cultural (religious, national, intellectual) identity. This in itself provides one thematic continuity for the volume. The question 'Who Needs Greek?' announces the arena of these battles.

That is the basic story line, then. It should be immediately obvious that that the book makes no attempt to give an exhaustive treatment of the passion for Greek even in nineteenth-century England (let alone the modern West): that would be an impossibly huge undertaking. The cases that my argument focuses on are *examples*, examples which seem to me to be especially important and particularly telling. I am well aware that other exciting areas have been (temporarily) silenced. A full history of the passionate battles over Greek(ness) would certainly have to include the emancipation of modern Greece (with its fights over *katherevousa* and *dimotiki*, formal, 'pure' Greek, and 'the people's Greek'), seventeenth-century political theory (Hobbes' Thucydides, the rows over 'belles lettres' and so forth), and eighteenth-century political revolutions (leading into Romantic Hellenism and the emancipation of Greece). And more besides. But examples do not have to be arbitrary. In offering my account, the selection of material is based on three criteria. First, each of these battles represents a major juncture in cultural history – events whose fall-out is extensive and long-lasting, involving actors of outstanding importance in Western culture, and writings whose impact is still being felt. They each matter, and can be shown to have mattered widely. Yet each chapter is also concerned with cultural re-evaluation and with

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cultural memory and forgetting. Each chapter is about how what matters in Greekness changes and can be forgotten. What makes an event an event? What gives it its significance and impact? How does the constant reworking of the past inform the present? Despite the historical importance of each of the areas I treat, none, I think, is (yet) ‘fashionable’ in current cultural history. Contemporary forgetting of these intense conflicts over Greek partly motivates my project to recover them – and is in itself a telling example of the historical processes I am discussing. Like so many stories, this is also a tale of how passion flares and fades – and what this means for cultural history.

Second, this selection of subjects brings into play a considerable range of materials and disciplines from many different levels and areas of cultural production: theology and newspaper reports, opera and cartoons, music and politicians’ speeches, painting and educational polemics, photographs and novels, biography and poetry, drama and dinner-table talk, clothes and racist theory . . . Such an interdisciplinary approach is absolutely necessary if the question ‘what makes an event an event?’ is to be answered with any depth. There is a polemical agenda here too. I want to move critical discussion away from too exclusive a focus on texts and on tracing ‘literary influence’ and ‘literary sources’ towards considering what texts (images, music) *do* in society. Students of ‘the classical tradition’ all too often ignore how an engagement with Greek *matters* (socially, politically, intellectually). This is a story not just of books and readers, but of how cultural battles are fought out.

This leads to my third point. Each of these battles over Greek also leads into some of the most pressing and complex general problems of understanding cultural identity. The first chapter on Erasmus must be seen within the Reformation’s murderous arguments about the word of God and the truth of the past. Lucian’s self-presentation speaks to a fascination with the construction of the self in society and how the signs of culture function. Strauss’ opera raises the question of how theatrical performance is framed by a national culture (and a culture of nationalism). The politicians who argue about Greek are explicitly debating the role of education and models of social good in the modern nation state. The criticism of Plutarch sets at stake the value of knowledge and of heroic action. What is more, in each case the idea of ‘Greece’ is formulated specifically through a sense of another culture: in Lucian’s case, ‘Greece’ is triangulated via Syria and Rome; in Plutarch’s via Rome and, to a lesser degree, Egypt; for Erasmus, Greece is conceptualized in relation to Christendom, or the New Jerusalem; for Strauss and Hofmannsthal,