CHRYSOLORAS'S GREEK
THE PEDAGOGY OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

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This essay does not purport to offer new information about the educational mission of Manuel Chrysoloras; rather what I hope to do, by argument from a certain organization of familiar facts, is remind all of us teachers of classics, no matter at what level we work, school or university, that the continuity of the classical tradition, especially on the Greek side, owes much to enthusiastic teaching. In this regard, I wish to recall the cultural impact of the founder of Greek studies in the Western Renaissance, Manuel Chrysoloras, as a proreptic model for us today.

As we arrive at the beginning of the 21st century in the United States, it is more than apparent that the knowledge of Ancient Greek is becoming a rare form of learning, and few students in schools or even in universities pursue Greek at all. Empirical data do not tell the entire story of the decline of Greek, as any classicist knows well from personal experience with dwindling numbers students in Greek. The numbers themselves paint a grim enough picture, however. As reported in a 1997 article by Richard LaFleur, Greek has declined from its position of 3.35 per cent of all university enrollments in 1960 to .113 per cent of all university enrollments in 1995, i.e., 16,272 students of Greek out of a total college population of 14,389,000 (“Latina Resurgens: Classical Language Enrollments in American Schools and Colleges” 126). Even in the face of declining student numbers, Hanson and Heath in Who Killed Homer? point to, by contrast, the robustness of scholarly publication in the field:

Between 1971 and 1991 the number of classics majors dropped by 30 percent, as did Greek enrollments in the decade from 1977 to 1986.

Of over one million B.A.'s awarded in 1994, only six hundred were granted in classics, meaning that
there are now five or six classics professors in the country for every
classics class major, over thirty articles and books each year for every
classics undergraduate (3. original italics)
As research and publication in classics advance vigorously, ironically,
at the same time, the basic transmission of the essential linguistic
underpinning necessary to continue the authentic classical tradition
decline and falters. In school classics, for certain, Greek is the weaker
sister: 114,000 National Latin Exams in 2001 to a mere 1,334 National
Greek Exams makes the point (The National Latin Exam Newsletter,
Spring 2001; “2001 ACL/NJCL National Greek Exam List of
Prizes”). In respect to Greek, then, it may be only a slight exaggeration
to suggest we are returning to a situation very similar to that of the end
of the Middle Ages when Greek was almost unknown among educated
Westerners.

Then there was a renaissance on the Renaissance, at which time a
widening knowledge of Greek was reintroduced into Italy and from there
progressively spread through the educational structures of Europe.
Classics flowered and peaked in the nineteenth century, but the latter
nineteenth century has witnessed a severe decline in the study of classics,
especially of Greek. Many cultural issues are involved with this decline
of Greek, but here we will examine factors arising within the
field of classics itself and remedies that may be found in the
history of our own discipline.

The particular ideological basis for contemporary American
classics derives, in the main, from a disciplinary reorganization
in the Enlightenment under the German conception of
Altertumswissenschaft. Altertumswissenschaft was the response of
classical scholars of the German Enlightenment to a perceived
need for a reorientation of classi-
cal studies toward the new empiricism, progressive science and
encyclopedia that was embed-
ded in Enlightenment thinking. The two chief figures of Enlight-
enment classics, who were to
leave their indelible mark on the
future direction of classics as a
discipline, were the art historian
and archaeologist, J. J.
Winkelmann (1717-68), and his slightly later philological counter-
part, F. A. Wolf (1759-1824) who originated the term,
Altertumswissenschaft (Pfeiffer 167, 173, 175). Winkelmann was semi-
nal to the future of classics by applying the rationalistic, system-
building spirit of the Enlightenment to the study of ancient art. He
personally visited the current excavations at Pompeii and Herculanum: he went on to Pausanias and Agrippina: he placed great
importance on the empirical aspect of the study of art. Winkelmann's
publications developed a more comprehensive view of Mediterranean
culture and its relationship to Greece and Rome than had the older

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(51) A pointed example of an earlier
and radically different viewpoint is suggested by E. R. Curtius in
European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages, remarking on the
historical valuation of the auctor by the medieval guardians of the
tradition:
All auctores are of the same value, all are timeless. No distinction
is made between Augustan and late antique literature, or between
Theokritus and the early Christian poets. The passage of time only
increases the list of auctores. (51)

Of course, such ahistoricism of the Middle Ages was challenged in the
Renaissance when classical Latin literature was clearly distinguished
from Medieval through the rigorous stylistic canons of the Neo-
Ciceronian movement. Studia Humanitatis of the Renaissance pro-
duced serious scholars, to be sure, but that period was also well
furnished with the amateur classicist soldier, statesman or cleric; the
world of classics was not restricted to a small cadre of specialists working
under a fairly cohesive, professionalized disciplinary ideology. Cer-
tainly, transmission of the classical tradition (teaching, if you like) was
the dominant mission and practice of classicists in both the Middle
Ages and the Renaissance because of the pragmatic demands of society
for competent Latinists in the professions. Altertumswissenschaft, on the
other hand, with its emphasis on systematic accumulation of new
knowledge came at a moment of the decline of Latin as a universal
academic language and provided the ideological platform for a narrowing
but "intensive professionalization of the field" (Selden). As the
science of Antiquity died to imitate the aims of the natural sciences
within German university model (transferred to American graduate
school in the late 1800's), the research motive (Wissenschaft) moved forward to
challenge, and ultimately to displace, transmission of Greek and Latin via
teaching as the major mission of classics at the university level. Teachers, the prior
guardians of the classical tradition, (with the pragmatic need for Latin in wider
society receding) were reduced in status vis-a-vis the creators of new knowledge
while research, the practice of science, reaped rewards as the primary mission of
the reformed, German universities.

Packing research ahead of teaching of the tradition may have been cultur-
ally appropriate in the nineteenth century, given an adequate number of read-
ers of Greek and Latin at that time, but perhaps this priority is no longer the only
measure of good health for the discipline.

As Hanson and Heather report on disparity between teaching and scholarship for
the year 1992, with Greek enrollments falling to under 3 of a percent of all univer-
sity enrollment in the U.S.: "In the single year of 1992, classicists published and
reviewed 16,168 articles, books and monographs. . . the work of over 10,000
individual scholars appeared in nearly 1000 different journals" (1). Yes, the sci-
entific demand for new knowledge, fueling the ideological engine of "publish or
perish," continues to drive its practition-
ers even when there are no students for
them to teach.

How can the cultural significance of transmission, particularly the transmis-
sion of Greek, be recovered within classics community so that Greek will survive

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What lessons, in summary, can we take from the example of Chrysoloras for application to our own age? First, we notice that the continuity of Hellenic studies from old Byzantium to Western Europe rests on a teacher and the transmission of the tradition through personal teaching. As we have seen, Chrysoloras diffused a knowledge of Greek primarily through passing it to others. Second, we can appreciate that Greek studies in the West were motivated, picked up and carried on by Latinists. That is a message to contemporary Latin teachers to embrace an enthusiasm for Greek as the many important Latinists of the Renaissance did, to reflect on the Hellenic background of Latin literature and actively point this out to students, to include some Greek in all Latin classes as appropriate to the topic. And third, we can see that teaching itself, transmitting the Hellenic tradition from one living person to another living person, is a crucial and significant part in the work of high culture pedagogy, too, requires appropriate, professional rewards as highly valued, intellectual work along with research and publication. Our discipline needs to take vigorous steps to balance rewards for transmission of learning with those for the advancement of new knowledge.

Of course, nothing here is really new, but perhaps the recollection of the hero kīsēs of the recovery of Greek in the West will stimulate revised thinking on the contemporary classics scene about the determinative cultural value of the example and voice of the living teacher for the future direction of Greek.

Bibliography

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