

THE GREAT GOD PAN IS DEAD: CLASSICISM AND MODERNITY

Posted on January 1, 2018 by N. Dass



Is the West's deep debt to the Classics at an end? Do the Greeks and the Romans have no further use in the twenty-first century, where people are interested only in "living each moment to the fullest."

If true, this would mean that the ancient Greeks and Romans (aside from keeping otherwise unemployable academics in harness) only offer us nostalgia, which embodies the entire of industry of keeping in harness otherwise unemployable academics. Such nostalgia is the shiny side of nihilism - which is continue to teach while believing in nothing. But then nihilism is the currency of the Academy.

There are different versions of this nostalgia, where the hows and the whats are efficiently encountered and taught - but the more important question of, why, is often neglected. Why the Greeks? Why do they keep haunting us?

The title of this presentation comes from a story told by [Plutarch](#), in his dialogue entitled, "[On the Failure of Oracles](#):"

I have heard the words of a man who was not a fool nor an impostor. The father of Aemilianus the orator, to whom some of you have listened, was Epitherses, who lived in our town and was my teacher in grammar. He said that once upon a time in making a voyage to Italy he embarked on a ship carrying freight and many passengers. It was already evening when, near the Echinades Islands, the wind dropped, and the ship drifted near Paxi. Almost everybody was awake, and a good many had not finished their after-dinner wine. Suddenly from the island of Paxi was heard the voice of someone loudly calling Thamus, so that all were amazed. Thamus was an Egyptian pilot, not known by name even to many on board. Twice he was called and made no reply, but the third time he answered; and the caller, raising his voice, said, 'When you come opposite to Palodes, announce that Great Pan is dead.' On hearing this, all, said Epitherses, were astounded and reasoned among themselves whether it were better to carry out the order or to refuse to meddle and let the matter go. Under the circumstances Thamus made up his mind that if there should be a breeze, he would sail past and keep quiet, but with no wind and a smooth sea about the place he would announce what he had heard. So, when he came opposite Palodes, and there was neither wind nor wave, Thamus from the stern, looking toward the land, said the words as he had heard them: 'Great Pan is dead.' Even before he had finished there was a great cry of lamentation, not of one person, but of many, mingled with exclamations of amazement. As many persons were on the vessel, the story was soon spread abroad in Rome, and Thamus was sent for by Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius became so convinced of the truth of the story that he caused an inquiry and investigation to be made about Pan; and the scholars, who were numerous at his court, conjectured that he was the son born of Hermes and Penelope.

One of the pioneers of Greek studies, Johann [Joachim Winckelmann](#), in his famous work, [The History of Art in Antiquity](#) (1764), also speaks of nostalgia:

Already here I have overstepped the limits of art history, and when I have meditated on its decline I have occasionally felt like a

historian, who, in telling the story of his native country, is forced to allude to its downfall, of which he himself was the witness. And ***yet I could not refrain from following the fate of the artworks as far as my eyes were able to see, just like a young girl standing at the shoreline, watching, with tear-filled eyes, the departure of her beloved, without hope of ever seeing him again, and in the distant sail believes she can recognize his image; precisely for this reason we feel an even stronger yearning for what has been lost, and we contemplate the copies of the original images even more attentively than if we had been in possession of them.***

For Winckelmann, the ancient Greeks are the very origin of the modern world, without whom there can be no understanding of why society must exist in sacred unity – sacred because it sees order as divine, in that order must constantly stand against chaos. Thus the classical age is a normative process, one that structures our thinking and our reality.

Further, Winckelmann warns against a slavish imitation of the simplified paradigms of the Greeks, for to do so would mean the neglect of the very purpose, the why, of the Greeks in any sense of modernity.

Thus, those who would point us to quotations in popular culture, or to architectural features even in contemporary buildings as a justification for allowing the Greeks to exist in modernity, fail to see the purpose of these "quotations" in their ancient context – which was to present that sacred unity.

In fact, nostalgia cannot be a wistful gaze backwards; rather, it is a process through which to think of the future. The past cannot help but be wistful, because it comes to us in fragments, never as a whole. And when we encounter these fragments from antiquity, we begin to think of origins, and by thinking of origins, we begin to think what must come after.

If we are to entirely abandon the Greeks, as Greenblatt concludes, because they are no longer valid for the concerns of today, what becomes of our origins – the very DNA of our thinking? And when an understanding of origins is neglected, then, it is not long before the link between *mythos* and *logos*, mythology and reason is broken, and we fall into idle romanticism, where each one must find his/her own origin, in a personally constructed etiological narrative.

Is this not the fundamental problem facing the world today – the clash of mythologies, of personalized narratives that demand not simply a hearing, but a vanquishing of all others – and more tragically, each of these narratives is also a utopian fantasy for the individual fantasist, and harrowing dystopia for the outsider.

In other words, to lose sight of the Greek origin of our habit of mind, is to become open to division, which is euphemistically referred to as, "diversity," which in turn becomes a tragic tyranny.

To be Greek-less is to be world-less, and to be word-less is to descend into an intense solipsism, where things exist for the self alone. It is [Alexandre Kojève](#) who reminds us that becoming an animal is becoming modern, and such is the future of modernity. To live only for the present is to live without

origins. In a famous passage in [The Use and Abuse of History](#), Nietzsche tells us this fable:

Observe the herd which is grazing beside you. It does not know what yesterday or today is. It springs around, eats, rests, digests, jumps up again, and so from morning to night and from day to day, with its likes and dislikes closely tied to the peg of the moment, and thus is neither melancholy nor weary. To witness this is difficult for man, because he boasts to himself that his human condition is better than the beast's and yet looks with jealousy at its happiness. For he wishes only to live like the beast, neither weary with things nor in pain, and yet he wants it in vain, because he does not desire it as the animal does. One day the man demands of the beast: "Why do you not talk to me about your happiness and only gaze at me?" The beast wants to answer, too, and say: "That comes about because I always immediately forget what I wanted to say." But by then the beast has already forgotten this reply and remains silent, so that the man keeps on wondering about it.

To live without memory is also the abandonment of memory, which is the abandonment of humanity. Nietzsche will answer this abandonment with his notion of the Superman, the Overman, who becomes Shaw's [greater defender of the "Life Force."](#)

And notice, too, here, that by neglecting our origin, we must separate sensuality from thinking. For the Greeks, art was philosophy because it was sensual, because thinking and sensuality could never be separated – is this not what the story of [Pygmalion and Galatea](#) all about?

Reality as the undistinguished unity of sensuality and thinking. The name "Galatea" is rooted in the Greek word for "milk." By joining sensuality and thinking humanity nourishes itself. In his essay on Parmenides, Martin Heidegger [observes](#): "*never would it be possible for a stone...to elevate itself toward the sun...and move like a lark.*"

Galatea only becomes the nourisher, the milk-giver, if you will, when Pygmalion (the etymology of whose name is lost to us) beckons her with his desire and his wish – the translation of the ideal into reality.

The human must be more than the object, because reality must possess more than blind purpose – it must also possess meaning. Galatea, not simply as stone-cold, but a warm, beautiful woman. The inchoate quality of nature is finally and fully completed in mankind, and only in human apprehension, and therefore the creation, of beauty.

The rather mysterious, and famous essay, dating from perhaps 1796, or 1797, entitled, "[The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism.](#)" which might have been written by Hegel, or Hölderlin, or Schelling, or perhaps someone else, states:

Finally, the idea which unites all, the idea of beauty, the word understood in the higher Platonic sense. I am convinced now, that the

highest act of reason, which—in that it comprises all ideas—is an aesthetic act, and that truth and goodness are united as sisters *only in beauty. The philosopher must possess as much aesthetic capacity as the poet. The people without an aesthetic sensibility are philosophical literalists . Philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy.*

Beauty, in effect, makes sensible ideals that would otherwise be unattainable, which therefore give to mankind a destiny that is higher than individual perceptions or concerns.

In other words, beauty provides us with the understanding that our individuality stems from something greater and higher – a “grand physics,” in the words of this anonymous essay. And this grand physics, this essay says, “will survive all other arts and sciences.” Beauty, then, as origin of human thought.

It is here that the question of classicism in modernity becomes crucial; for who but the Greeks have given us the habit of mind to align beauty with humanity, with the merging of the transcendent with the mundane?

We see this play out in the work of the Greek tragedians. Why tragedy? Why the need to show the fall of human endeavour into failure? Why the need to show human dignity in the midst of utter despair and suffering?

All these questions may be answered in a succinct way – that humanity alone is marked by natural moral law, and that all the despair and the ensuing destruction cannot negate this law – it alone is pervasive and eternal. The expression, the consequence of natural moral law is beauty.

If we are to look for a definition of what is meant by “classicism,” then it is here – classicism is the expression of natural law as beauty. And in the very word “beauty” is summarized the entirety of Greek thought, which seeks to understand virtue, wisdom and reason. Without the Greeks, beauty is lost in purpose, in necessity.

Thus to suggest that the Greeks are dead and useless is to abandon the human project. This suggestion may even signal the end of humanity and the beginning of “animality,” where the world can only be a battlefield, where only the will to power holds sway.

To abandon the Greeks, means also the abandonment of all notions of civilization and barbarity, because the play of power can only lead to dominance and subservience, because power has no need for natural moral law.

Greece, then, is more than a geographical location, more than a historical name. It is our mirror image, upon which we can speculate – that is, contemplate ourselves, for the root meaning of “speculate” is the Latin *speculatio*, that is, observation, contemplation, as in a mirror – a *speculum*. Greece is this mirror, because it is our ancient ancestor, for as the Greeks themselves said, to think like a Greek is to

be Greek. Through them we have our being, and without whom we cannot be.

We are like Odysseus, erring and wandering, but ever mindful of our return home, our nostos, the true root meaning of "nostalgia." And it is the memory of this origin, this spiritual homeland, that awakens in us a great and painful yearning (algos) to keep venturing farther away, and yet also to keep returning home. The future is therefore always the past.

Greece builds us, because it is only through Greece that we come to possess history as the amassed consequences of ideas and actions, which in turn bring us to modernity, which is often marked by despair, in that transcendence is irreversibly lost. Modernity as a Greek tragedy.

To lose the Greeks is to lose the very idea of transcendence – wherein the individual places himself in something greater than his own existence, which simply means that there exists an innate link to destiny in each of us.

To lose that link means the loss of meaning itself, for how can we live without meaning? At the end of Sophocles's *The Women of Trachis*, Hyllus, just as he is about to place the body of his father, Heracles, on the funeral pyre, says: *You have seen new and terrible deaths, many woes and new sufferings, and there is none of these that is not Zeus.*

All things have meaning only through transcendence. To think of a future without the Greeks, is not to think at all – rather, it can only be an abandonment to despair, from which there is rescue – the crisis of modernity. To say goodbye to the classical world is also to say goodbye to morality, justice, and the good.

And what is left? That is the question that leads to modern despair. What is truly left, when the Greeks are finally and irretrievably gone? Is it possible to live without an origin, a goal, a telos? And since rationality is always goal-directed, how shall we think?

Simone Weil asks this question in another way, [in one of her notebooks](#): "Would a society in which only gravity reigned be able to exist?" By gravity she means what Nietzsche said in the *Genealogy of Morals* – that "since Copernicus man has been on a steep slope rolling towards nothingness."

Thus, gravity is that which forever pulls us down. But humanity also needs a force that pulls it upwards. A good society must have an equilibrium of both ascent and descent; and this movement of up and down, becomes a barrier against evil (that which destroys humanity).

To have a society controlled by gravity is to have a society in which opposites cannot exist, for there is only a one-way movement, downwards. Injustice could never be expiated; evil could never be countered by the good, because the good has been questioned away as "anything goes."

And individuals fail to set themselves apart from society, and society fails to close itself to harmful individuals. Weil goes on to call such a society, "The Great Beast." This she gets from Plato, who in his [*Republic*](#) says:

It is as if a man were acquiring the knowledge of the humors and desires of a great strong beast which he had in his keeping, how it is to be approached and touched, and when and by what things it is made most savage or gentle, yes, and the several sounds it is wont to utter on the occasion of each, and again what sounds uttered by another make it tame or fierce, and after mastering this knowledge by living with the creature and by lapse of time should call it wisdom, and should construct thereof a system and art and turn to the teaching of it, knowing nothing in reality about which of these opinions and desires is honorable or base, good or evil, just or unjust, but should apply all these terms to the judgements of the great beast, calling the things that pleased it good, and the things that vexed it bad, having no other account to render of them, but should call what is necessary just and honorable,1 never having observed how great is the real difference between the necessary and the good, and being incapable of explaining it to another.

And such descending individuals learn to develop a personalized structure of behaviour in order to live with such a beast. Acts of criminality become ordinary and therefore acceptable, since such acts are simply another version of personalized behaviour.

Indeed, [Durkheim](#) soon realized that there could never be an end of hierarchies, where even the criminal has a vital role to play in society.

In other words, without the Greeks, all we are left with is nihilism, where there is no end to entropy, the endless fall into dissolution. Only the descent, never an ascent.

The character of Lord Darlington, in Oscar Wilde's play, [Lady Windermere's Fan](#), utters this famous line: "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

The final thing left in Pandora's box was hope, [Hesiod tells us](#):

***Only Hope was left within her unbreakable house,
she remained under the lip of the jar, and did not
fly away. Before , Pandora replaced the
lid of the jar. This was the will of aegis-bearing
Zeus the Cloudgatherer.***

What is hope, if not transcendence, to think beyond the present, and into the future, by way of the past?

The Great Pan is dead, said the voice in lamentation, because modernity is the refusal to look up from the gutter at the stars.

To lose the Greeks, is to lose our humanity.

W.H. Auden [concludes his poem](#) on the death of W.B. Yeats, with this quatrain:

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

The [photo](#) shows, "Pygmalion and Galatea," by Louis Jean François Lagrenée, painted in 1781.

