

Consuming the Past · *Frederic Will*

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METROPOLITAN MUSEUM in New York: standing in front of the recently installed Egyptian mastaba, a tomb pretending to be a public building, an architectural flourish against biological fate. Hieroglyphs cut like scars—exact, sharp, minute—onto every depictable face of the mastaba's stone. Jackals, papyrus reeds, runners, asps, carts, plumes. (The kind of panoply I stared at in Budge's *Egyptian Grammar*, when I was a kid trying to crack open the semantic marrow in the figures.) Staring at the scars of meaning I feel cut off from the consciousness (and conscience) carved into the stone. I drive my eyes into the hollow space. I drove them equally, knowing I was not knowing, into the Mayan steles at Tikal, intuiting what I could of some meaning crouching between the spaces of the calendrical figures. I tried to break into another mind's code.

There is a thirst for the plenitude of the past's mind, for the juices rising from the stems of ancient perception. This thirst springs from our hidden memory, and its brother—the longing to recover. Are we not *physically, passionately* drawn backward into the nourishment of that memory?

Another sounding, another probe. Hamburg, the huge painting Galerie. Paul Klee carving his universal geometry across my retina. Trapping me. Nothing would save me from the demand. It was just as he would have it, just as I had to have it. Reaching, was I, toward the center of *his* awareness? Passing into the cracks in his scratches in the deaf body of pigment? Attempting to decode him?

Iconic painting and ancient hieroglyphics. Two hermetic signs of the border between our own remembered past and our perceiving present. How could we not feel a passion to return across that border, to become again earlier passages of what we have meant to ourselves?

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What's in the grammar book? The book opens slowly, creaking. Words tumble out. Spiderweb delicate networks of awareness, assertion, implication, innuendo.

meden agan. mega biblion mega kakon. anthropos panton metron. Hellenic condensations of Hellenic experience, perceptions universalized, wisdom trapped in a cameo. What do these code phrases mean? Our old hunger for meaning brought us toward the taste of the signs. Now how do we consume them? Having learned to hear sounds in the primitive scratchmarks, have we not some way to hear and taste what the sounds mean?

We listen for the sounds to become operative, to crack their line into fire, to become deep implications of one another. The dictionary clutches the raw materials, from which we extract the symbols *nothing* and *too much*; *great*, *book*, and *evil*; *man*, *all*, and *measure*. A first step toward defining the Greek code. If we have learned the transformational rules, we can convert these new raw symbols into the meanings indicated not only by the original words but by those words' specifiers—case, number, gender. But will we have begun, even begun, to penetrate those words' meanings? The question reasserts itself at every turn.

How can I penetrate *meden agan*? Will training as a classicist, the obvious answer, help me? Or is the problem not that easily dismissed?

The English words with which I approach the Greek are burdened with cultural associations, are as time-bound as is the whole meaning-giving process. 'Too much,' 'in excess,' 'beyond the proper limit': such phrases suggest to me, today, transgressions like over-drinking, over-screwing, over-eating. None of these excesses will be unfamiliar, but generalized stress on the *error of excess* will seem unfamiliar. Yet my own immediate experience will be my—and my students'—only way out toward the Greek ethical experience. How are we to know what the Greek means by excess except through what we mean by it? In no other way, of course. We define the Greek words, the Greek experience, by our words and our experience. But given this logical difficulty, how do I first think myself into the position to make my definition of the Greek words? How do I first establish my dictionary definitions? By a mixture of convention and hypothesis. I cannot—as lexicographer—equip myself for a critique of the problem of meaning in history. I can only write down inherited equivalents, translate *meden* after the fashion of all lexicographers since Alexandria. Then I can guess, enrich the tradition. But the problem in historical inquiry will not go away, for it is constitutive like the problem of what meaning ultimately means. The penetration of ancient concepts by modern ones will remain approximate, and unverifiable, because only the experience of the present will enable us

to awaken that past which then we must retranslate into the experience of the present.

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The past responds to us, springs to life at our touch or taste. On the whole our vision of the past *seems* to be confirmed by the way the past clarifies itself in the light of that vision. I study the shell of the Parthenon. Certain scrapemarks on the cella-floor suggest that a door must have swung over and across them. But there is no door left. Then I find, in a recently discovered Turkish print, that a door of the Turkish mosque, which was built inside the Parthenon, swung over that very spot. The past confirms my hypothesis, making it firm and actual, responsive to me. Another example. I find fragments of a torso by Phidias, and guess at the whole fifth-century shape it had. Later I come on a Roman copy of the Phidian original, the form of which is exactly what I had expected the original would be. In such ways history can respond to the accounts of it we make to ourselves.

The past responds to us, and in that way tends to reassure us. *Oedipus* coheres increasingly as we mature in the skills with which we bring our Greek to bear on the text. Variant readings are culled to yield lines of mounting operative relevance; other readings are discarded if on insertion they let down the meaning of the text. Trials of this sort remain probes, postulating wholes in order to evaluate rival parts. These wholes, of course, are wholes we find, but they are not exactly imposed. Perhaps we feel they are soliciting-strategies, ways we ask the text or temple to declare itself. The same reconstructive strategy takes us to the *whole* vision of Greek, or any other, culture. We try out our vision of that time, see what it helps to discover, recorrect our lens-setting, and start again. If we are careful we remain critical of our method. If we are tough we remain methodically skeptical.

The past responds to us. Provisionally, detail by detail, it confirms certain of our efforts to reach its actuality. This degree of confirmation lures us on. But is there another way to interpret this relationship? Turn the analysis around and you see that what looks like luring from the direction of the past is our boundless hunger for that past, for our culture as it has been. Nothing less than such hunger could explain the energy of historical scholarship, the historical nostalgia of tourism and ancestor worship, or our acceptance of the inherited guilt-weight which lies on

us all. The past will not let us leave it alone, it is true, but isn't that because we will not let it leave us alone? We feed hungrily on it, and in forcing it up into our need we exceed time after time the clear sightedness requisite for any knowing of things as they are.

Lured and luring, we dance with the past in our arms. Now we hold a fragment, now we reach out for more. Finally we reach for the total body. Nothing can assure us, though, that the past we hold is not a ghost, ready at any moment to fly from our grasp; or, worse, to let us know subtly that we have never held her. And there is good reason to suppose that we are regular victims, of this deception for which we so needfully set ourselves up.

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What Greece is in my arms? What am I holding? Who is this strange dancing partner?

A figure in the middle distance, chiaroscuro, beckoning, turning away, alive, dead, passionate, desiccated. Not indecipherable in the sense of the hieroglyphs in Budge, or the priestly dating-symbols in Mayan script, or even the contemporary Cree syllabary. Simply a body at middle distance, not close but not obscure.

Each of us dances with certain parts of such a body. I dance with Homer, Theognis, Hesiod, Solon, Archilochos, Aeschylus, Xenophon, Herondas. Never with Euripides, never with Sappho, never with Plato. Never with those chilled limbs. It's the way I prefer it, even though I distort the figure of the beloved.

Mustn't I, though, dance with the body entire? Mustn't I clutch Greece itself? What chills me is as much the body as what warms me. Mustn't I conjure, assemble the totality, make what effort I can to see the picture total? To correct small discrepancies, spare myself quirky errors? Mustn't I warm Euripides at the fire of Herondas, Sappho in the harder air of Archilochos? For the sake of the body?

Griechentum. Hellenism. Man facing the bad joke of existence, mediating it in art, and in art's medium, myth, taming it with beauty—form, order, and the tension which makes form powerful. Man wondering effectually how bad the joke is. Man—me—within reach, but not in time, pitilessly close, pitifully far.

Cut-off points in consciousness. Points beyond which we cannot know in knowing or imagining. The Greek world we know is ringed by what

for us, in the Greeks' own phrase, are the *barbaroi*, the foreigners, the outsiders. The Mycenaean forts, the Lion Gate unlike the Parthenon or the Apollo Temple at Bassae, are gates into a world already dark and partially lost in us. The beehive tombs at Mycenae and the Mycenaean fort at Asine and the Minoan palaces in Crete are front lines of a menacing darkness behind the Greek light. Just as in the other Greece, today's, we find the Ottoman darkening up from corners and walls, sitting in the history of the Parthenon, squatting in every back lane of Ioannina and Kavalla.

Teaching the Literature of the Ancient Greeks? (Hebrews, Celts, Bornese?) Absurd assignment. Making Ancient Greek Literature anew? Possible. Brushing on that literature, stamping on it to make it visible, to give it sheen? Also possible. But teaching it? *Teaching* it?

The State of Texas pays me to sit in the same classroom, at regular intervals, with twenty-year-old boys and girls. We discuss Greek tragedy—from recent English translations. We let that tragedy crowd onto us; we seek for an area in which to put the tragedy. The *Oresteia*. Racial conflict, adjudicated in streets and back alleys, is at this time (mid-seventies) passing into many courts. Details of this change aerate the problem of Orestes: allow us to talk about the problem Aeschylus is trying to solve at the end of his trilogy, replacing mechanical killing with law. *Oedipus the King*? Isn't man at our moment trying intensively to find the cause of cancer (a cancer) which is obliterating him? And isn't the cause of cancer, quite possibly, the same man who is searching for that cancer, the man who has, for example, created the pollutants, biochemical susceptibilities, and anxieties which are destroying him? Finally Euripides. Too easy, this time. It is dull to be reminded of Euripides the liberal, protesting; and equally dull to imagine again Euripides the conservative, worshipper of the old Dionysus. But the way Medea climbs to the sun at the end, taken back into the powers, and on the smashing chariot of language! Fire burning up the last lines of the text!

Teaching ancient Greek literature? Letting it help us come to grips with our own actuality? Just any literature could not do this. But should any literature do *this*? Are we pleased to have this happening? Is this kind of making-contemporary a valid means to solving the problem of historical knowing?

The teaching I describe is limited, justifies itself by what it helps us to see—in our own actuality. Dancing with *this* Greece is dancing with

our own time. It is not teaching, but looking, noting, drawing attention to. It has something, but only something, to do with knowing.

I *read* Greek literature, take texts to my table, pry contents loose, make space inside the dense weave of symbols. Me and the texts, this time. The dictionary mediates. The room mediates. My glasses mediate. Through them I enter Archilochos, soldier and poet, swords of language. I know what he 'means.' Each time I go back he confirms more of my impressions of him. I write a book about Archilochos. (I did.) Then more texts are found. (Go to Paros. Fragments of Archilochos come out of the soil, out of building foundations, out of cisterns.) Archilochos changes. My dancing partner switches garments. But when will this masquerading finish? Will I have to re-edit my book? Maybe. But what good will that do? More Archilochos will be found. Sure, but that's not the whole problem. Archilochos figures in various dances. I have a pen pal, Professor Bossi in Bologna, who is writing a book on the text of Archilochos and its meaning. What will *he* say? Won't what he says be a new stage in the life of Archilochos? And if it will, won't Archilochos be surpassing me as I try to hold him? Won't I, for that matter, be surpassing myself as I read Bossi's interpretation of Archilochos?

When I read I make myself by the text, as I make the text itself. I acquire a kind of knowledge, limited but shaped by the configuration of my own life. Once again I make space for the ancient text. I must at the same time think of what I write or think or say about the text as material to be made space of by another reader. Imaginative space, pragmatic space, political space: room to move in.

Writing about Greek literature? Or now, writing about writing about Greek literature? It is simply the biography of work achieved in shadow, the autobiography of a pen. Greeks did their literature: reciting, acting, arguing it out in the agora. Not Herondas, not Callimachus, my real favorites. But most of them. I make maps of their literature, plunge into this mountain range now, that valley next, mine what I can. What I mine mines me, writes my biography as I write it into my autobiography. Writes my and their and—most important of all—your biography.

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Another Greece is in my arms now, living, throbbing, fallen, risen: the Greece of our day. It is still ancient juice, still the past, but now it is the immediately living past, the speaking voice of the Greek stones.

What can it mean to me now, that I wrote a travel book about that rough Greek country I obscurely scout from Tunisia—from Cap Bon, Carthage, La Marsa; across a sea I have so often studied from the Greek side?

Today's Greece wrote itself into my skin, had to be removed by me, deciphered outward, scratched onto another surface. The ancient bound itself into that code. I scratched it out, stone after stone, harbor, myth-mountain, temple—one after another; scratched their dark discomfort out of my skin. For a while Greece became the name of my organ.

That same modern/ancient Greece dances with me, sidles away, turns itself heavily against me for lofty seasons. Colonels take it from me. The strong current of my own life takes it from me. Geography takes it from me. Where else, though, is my life being written? Where else is the problem of knowledge being so intensely enacted for me?

Greece goes on with me. I dream as always of my next point of entry, the southeastern peninsula of the Peloponnesos, from Neapolis south. I dream I reach back into the living Hellenic continuum, open the national life wherever it yields. I make some tortuous way over that Maniote route, through rock and over rock, to within sight of the fable-island, Cythera.

And what is this route? A Greece of the future, of possibility. A country where one has been, even often, yet never yet been. A point of entry. The Greece of the senses, which I have long struggled with, and never a 'Greece of the past.' (How little the readable or writable Greece is past.) It is the Greece I will go to. It is that Greece I penetrate forever, without penetrating, know forever without knowing. It is Pericles and a stinking vine-cluttered kapheneion in Agrinion.

Put it in terms of Ricky.

The old days, the days to come. I first met Ricky in the caves near Ioannina, waiting at the entrance to a gigantic hollow womb in the Epirote Mountains. We wandered together through a stalactite forest, teasing each other in French, playing on the Greece that was writing us both. That was in nineteen fifty-five. Twenty-five years later we are still writing to one another, still mythologizing the too intensely acute times Greece gave us. Someday we will meet again—soon. Part of Greece will be rewritten then. Part of our lives, part of Greece's life, will rewrite itself.

Now I write to Ricky (from Tunis to St. Étienne les Orgues.) Once again Greece is fresh. Time and distance close. Once again, though, the

terms of knowing change. Our mutual geographies have been modified, and with them the passions, the directions from which Ricky and I look toward the moon.

Ricky and Greece are incompleting thoughts for me. Going back to the one is going back to the other, rewriting myself, rewriting the other. Passages of a moment—these efforts to let what we are write itself out clearly, and be written clearly out of us. The object of our knowledge, if we are true to it, will be changed by our being true to it. What we are untrue to—seriously untrue to—becomes then that to which we are able to be true. The dance of cognition plays forever to this perverse orchestration.

Greece is a part of my autobiography. Lives bear themselves to the light from places those lives make into places. Nothing about those places, or our place in our universe, is final, just as these notes to nothing are not, and cannot remain, final. Knowledge is a momentary hold against the slipping foothold.

Apocalypse ahead? A breath of the millenium? Greece will be complete only at the end of time, when all we have been is drawn together and assembled, when the parts of our experiences, and we who are those parts, take on perspectives and place in totality. Greece, then, will be part of the totality we wished of ourselves, and our knowledge of Greece will be the significance yielding itself, from within the puffy symbology of an abandoned inscription.