

LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING: AN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF GREECE FOR THE INNOCENT

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'Forty-two!' yelled Loonquawl. 'Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?' 'I checked it very thoroughly,' said the computer, 'and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is.' 'But it was the Great Question! The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything,' howled Loonquawl. 'Yes,' said Deep Thought with the air of one who suffers fools gladly, 'but what actually is it?'

(Douglas Adams, *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, p. 136)

The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything: without doubt the ancient Greeks would have been as keen to know this as any of Douglas Adams' characters, and one suspects that if they had had the answer, they would have discovered it. The Greeks strove persistently to free themselves from ignorance, posing fundamental questions about man and society and the nature of the world in general, and seeking answers to them. Indeed, the development of such inquiry is one of the most significant achievements of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., and one of the determining characteristics of the epoch.

Yet the teaching of this period at undergraduate level tends to shun the philosophical approach.<sup>1</sup> Ancient history is still regarded primarily as political history; intellectual history, the history of the development of thought, receives little attention in comparison. Now I do not wish in any way to suggest that political history is unimportant, still less that its study fails to offer a proper training in the use of source-material and basic historical techniques. But in this paper I am concerned with Classical Civilisation courses; and our aim here, particularly in the first year, when no prior knowledge of the subject-matter can be presupposed in the students, and when they will perhaps benefit most from a bird's-eye view of Antiquity, should, in my opinion, be to evoke an ancient civilisation - and this implies, ideally, a synthesis of all its elements, where the barriers

between political, social, economic; and intellectual history, and between history, literature, and the visual arts, are broken down as completely as possible.

This of course is easier said than done. The categories into which study of the ancient world is traditionally divided are convenient to the teacher and often helpful to the student. The student, too, can hardly be expected to achieve a firm understanding of a period of history, looked at from many points of view, without acquiring a basic chronological and geographical framework and a knowledge of the key political events of the period. But, assuming the provision of such information, the sort of approach I have in mind can, I think, be attempted.

Since 1985 first-year Classical Civilisation at the University of the Witwatersrand has been divided into a Greek half and a Roman half, each half being devoted equally to history, which may include some archaeology, and literature. The inclusion of an art component is plainly desirable, but it has not been found possible to do this without overloading the course, disturbing the balance between Greek and Roman, or omitting some other important area of study. Art is introduced in the second year, where it forms a quarter of the course.

The first teaching block of Classical Civilisation I covers the *Iliad*, and an outline of Greek history to 500 B.C.; in the second the history is taken down to 386 B.C., and in tandem with it is taught a unit in fifth- and fourth-century literature. The prescribed texts for this part of the course are Herodotus, Book I, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Euripides' *Medea*, the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, and the *Symposium* of Plato.<sup>2</sup> The selection is designed to be fairly representative of the literature of the time, of intrinsic merit, and reasonably accessible to the student who approaches it with little background knowledge.

Around these texts I have tried to weave something of an intellectual history of the period. Of course, each text needs to be taken separately and examined from a specifically literary viewpoint; but by highlighting certain themes as they occur, and attempting to link together the pieces of evidence relating to a particular theme, it is possible to create a fuller picture of the thought-world in which the texts were written. The student is invited to

consider what attitudes to the world - to the state, foreigners, natural phenomena, the supernatural, and so on - are detectable in the works he reads. Once some answers to these questions are found, others present themselves; most obviously and importantly, perhaps, how we may seek to explain changes in attitude since earlier times, or contemporary conflicts of attitude, and what consequences for Greek social and political life can be seen to result from such changes or conflicts.

The practicalities of this approach can perhaps best be illustrated by example. I shall begin with the individual text.

As I suggested above, each text needs first to be studied by itself. Our familiarity with Greek literature must not blind us to its difficulties for the novice, who will require a good deal of guidance through a play like *Antigone* or a dialogue like the *Symposium*. The teacher has both to supply the necessary background material, which in the case of tragedy, for example, can be considerable - to have some grasp of the mechanics of the theatre and the conventions of the genre is essential if the student is to be able to acquire more than a superficial understanding of a particular play - and, it seems to me, to provide a close reading of the whole or substantial parts of the work, demonstrating how it is constructed and why it is constructed in that way, and offering an interpretation. At the same time attention can be drawn to passages that tell us something about contemporary attitudes and beliefs, whether they are held by the author himself or simply recorded by him or reflected in his work.

In the case of all five texts this approach can successfully be employed, though each text will naturally dictate its own variations on the approach. Let us consider the first book of Herodotus.

Clearly the first book cannot be studied in isolation from the rest of Herodotus' work. A prime requirement is the provision of basic information about the Persian Wars, which I am able to leave to my colleague who teaches the matching history unit.<sup>3</sup> The student will also need to be told something about how Herodotus came to history, about his aims and how he conceived his task; and this will call for discussion of Homer, of Herodotus' more immediate predecessors, especially Hecataeus, and of the intellectual atmosphere of the Ionian enlightenment.

In coming to look more closely at Book 1, one may choose to concentrate on its essentially literary characteristics, considering, for example, Herodotus' narrative technique as seen in the episodes of Arion and the dolphin (cc. 23-4) or Atys and Adrastus (cc. 34-45) or the infancy and boyhood of Cyrus (cc. 107-22), or the overall structure of the book. But to employ a purely literary approach is to omit much that is of interest and value. It is the ideas that underlie his work that make Herodotus such fascinating reading. In discussing his art as a storyteller one needs constantly to ask what significance a particular anecdote or tale has for him (the story of Arion is unusual in apparently being told simply for its own sake); and the structure of the book cannot be fully explained without reference to the view of life held by the author.

It is perhaps more rewarding, then, to look at Herodotus' thought, focusing on certain key areas of belief and attitude. First must come his fundamental philosophy of history, the view of life mentioned above, which he indicates at an early stage in the work:

I will proceed with my history, telling the story as I go along of small cities no less than of great. For most of those which were great once are small today; and those which used to be small were great in my own time. Knowing, therefore, that human prosperity never abides long in the same place, I shall pay attention to both alike.

(1.5.3-4)

This theme of the instability of human fortune underpins the whole book; it is exemplified both in the case of Croesus, who crashes from the height of prosperity to defeat and enslavement by Cyrus, and in that of Cyrus himself, the apparently invincible king<sup>4</sup> who meets his death in battle against a people ruled by a woman.

Secondly, there is the religious element in Herodotus' thinking. Of particular interest is his tendency to attribute events to divine causes. It is in this kind of way that Croesus' loss of his son Atys is explained:

After Solon's departure nemesis fell upon Croesus, presumably because God was angry with him for supposing himself the happiest of men. It began with a dream he had about a disaster to one of his sons: a dream which came true.

(1.34.1)

Croesus' attitude, though this is not strictly ὕβρις offends the gods just as if an act of ὕβρις had been committed. Herodotus is less explicit about the gods' role in the case of Cyrus' defeat by the Massagetae, but he hints strongly that it is to ὕβρις that this too is attributable:

There were many things which roused his ambition and gave him courage to undertake this new war [against the Massagetae], the two most important being the legend of his superhuman origin and the success of all his previous campaigns; for it was a fact that till then it had been impossible for any nation to escape, once he had marched against it.

(1.204.2)

From here one may conveniently proceed to look at instances of the notion of ὕβρις elsewhere in fifth-century literature.<sup>5</sup> A similar link may be forged in the case of the notion of hereditary guilt. Croesus' downfall is viewed as punishment for the crime of his ancestor Gyges in murdering Candaules of Lydia and usurping his throne<sup>6</sup>. This is not an isolated fifth-century case of the ancient belief in the transmissibility of sin. One calls to mind also the part played by the curse on the house of Atreus in the *Oresteia*. And in *Antigone* the chorus sing:

Fortunate they whose lives have no taste of pain.  
For those whose house is shaken by the gods  
Escape no kind of doom. It extends to all kin  
...  
Ancient the sorrow of Labdacus' house, I know.  
Dead men's grief comes back, and falls on grief.  
No generation can free the next.  
One of the gods will strike. There is no escape.

(*Antigone*, 582-5, 593-7)

One further area of Herodotus' thinking is worth mentioning here: his almost total tolerance of non-Greek peoples and acceptance of their customs. Although he confesses the view that

the Greeks have never been simpletons; for centuries past they have been distinguished from other nations by superior wits

(1.60.3),

he does not suggest that the customs and practices and even the religious beliefs of foreigners are less acceptable or valid; indeed, the only non-Greek practice he criticises in the whole book is that of the Assyrians, whereby every woman of the country had once in her life to go to the temple of Aphrodite and have sex with a stranger (1.199.1). The appearance of such an attitude is important in the history of fifth-century thought, and I shall return to it.

From a single text to a single theme, again chosen by way of example, but possessing, I suspect, an especially strong appeal for the undergraduate: love. What evidence for the Greek attitude to love can be found in the prescribed texts? Most probably the student will first think of Medea's passion for Jason, and how it is soured by events; or of the *Symposium*, where all the characters, no matter how their opinions on the nature and effects of love may differ, assume without question that the love they have undertaken to eulogise is of the homosexual type; or of the notion of love as a god in the same work. But let him look more obliquely; in the choral ode at *Antigone* 781ff. he will find love described as an inescapable, irresistible force, which maddens its victims. This objective, distinctly unromantic view of love figures large in Greek thinking on the subject, and the passage affords the opportunity to introduce the student to other texts which display a similar outlook.<sup>7</sup>

The thematic approach is a good one, but to examine one theme is not to tell the whole story. There is a wider and more crucial perspective. The fifth century saw an intellectual revolution in Greece.<sup>8</sup> Accepted, traditional values began to be challenged, for reasons that were many and complex. Doubt was cast on what had been held certain, the basis of belief called into question. At the same time a conservative strain of thinking persisted. The prescribed texts can be used as a starting-point for investigation of this changed intellectual climate, with all its tensions. A few examples will make the point.

First, Herodotus. The historian's acceptance of the customs and standards of behaviour of foreign peoples, no matter how un-Greek they may be, reflects a situation in which values are perceived to be not absolute but relative. In the period following the Persian Wars it begins to be seen that different sets of mores can co-exist, and that none is necessarily better than any other.<sup>9</sup> One of the consequences is that the opinion of the individual comes to possess an authority it never had before.

In the political sphere the widening of the democracy at Athens, especially after the reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles, promoted the same result. The status and power of personal opinion is enhanced, the authority of tradition undermined. The validity of law comes in for attack. For a Greek of the archaic period, said E.R. Dodds, 'law' usually meant 'the entire body of traditional usage which governed the whole of his civic conduct ... The laws represented the collective wisdom of the past; perhaps they had been codified by some great man, a Lycurgus or a Solon, but they were felt to rest ultimately on an authority higher than that of any individual statesman'.<sup>10</sup> But in fifth-century Athens the religious sanction began to decay; and newly-made laws did not have the sanction of antiquity either. What moral value could the laws then possess? It is against this background that one must view Antigone's appeal to 'the gods' unwritten and unchanging laws' (*Antigone*, 454-5), when she defends her ritual burial of Polyneices in defiance of Creon's edict.

In religion, though it would be untrue to say that there had been no questioning of traditional anthropomorphism before,<sup>11</sup> accepted beliefs are now more frequently held up to examination. The religious conservatism apparent in the works of Herodotus or Sophocles is confronted by scepticism and rationalising interpretations of natural phenomena; Aristophanes' *Clouds* mirrors the new tendency and makes comic capital out of it. *Clouds*, indeed, is a document of enormous importance for the historian of fifth-century ideas: the tensions between new beliefs and old could scarcely be better illustrated.

These are merely brief indications of how, using a limited range of material, one can unlock the door to whole areas of thought. We are quickly into the field of sophism, rhetoric, and persuasion - a topic of significance in *Medea*, for example<sup>12</sup> - and the Thucydidean perception of how

language can be manipulated for particular ends.<sup>13</sup> We are quickly into the clash between νόμος and φύσις that critical antithesis of fifth-century thought. And it is only a small step to discussion of the consequences of this kind of thinking, particularly in politics. It was amid this intellectual maelstrom that the Peloponnesian War was fought. The period is proof that the history of action and the history of thought cannot be separated.

The ideas presented in this paper do not take us very far down the path towards a fully integrated course in Greek Civilisation. But I hope I have demonstrated how a small group of texts can be taught in such a way as to bring into the student's full view areas of worthwhile inquiry which are generally unexplored and even unperceived. Too often our approaches are narrow and blinkered; we need to look at the material obliquely as well as head-on, and to suggest to the student the kind of questions that he might profitably raise about it during his reading. The answers found will frequently be partial or ambiguous, but they will be none the less valuable for that; and they will often invite further questions. In this way the study of the Greek world will be conducted in the same spirit of inquiry as motivated the Greeks of the fifth century themselves.



## NOTES

- 1 I am thinking primarily of the teaching at South African universities, but I suspect that the observation is equally true for universities elsewhere.
- 2 In the following translations:  
Herodotus, A. de Sélincourt (*Herodotus, The Histories*; Penguin, London, 1972);  
*Antigone*, E. Wyckoff (*The Complete Greek Tragedies: Sophocles 1*, eds. D. Grene and R. Lattimore; Chicago, 1954);  
*Medea*, R. Warner (*The Complete Greek Tragedies: Euripides 1*, eds. D. Grene and R. Lattimore; Chicago, 1955);  
*Clouds*, P. Dickinson (*Aristophanes, Plays: 1*; O.U.P., London, 1970);  
*Symposium*, W. Hamilton (*Plato, The Symposium*; Penguin, London, 1951).  
Passages from Herodotus and *Antigone* quoted in this paper are taken from the translations of de Sélincourt and Wyckoff.
- 3 Which deals mainly with political history.
- 4 Cf. 1.204.2 (quoted below).
- 5 The classic text, of course, is Aeschylus' *Persians*.
- 6 Cf. 1.13.2, 91.1.
- 7 The most famous, perhaps, is the hymn to Love at Eur. *Hipp.* 525ff. R.W.B. Burton, *The Chorus in Sophocles' Tragedies*, Oxford, 1980, pp. 113-17, also draws attention to passages from the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite and from elsewhere in Sophocles.
- 8 The best introduction to this subject known to me is W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 6 vols., Cambridge, 1962-81, 3.14-26.

- 9 The changed perception cannot, however, be attributed simply to the close contacts with the Persians in the first quarter of the century, though these may have encouraged it. There had, after all, been close contacts with foreigners before. See the comments of Guthrie, *op. cit.*, 3.16-17.
- 10 'The Sophistic Movement and the Failure of Greek Liberalism', **The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief**, Oxford, 1973, pp. 97-8.
- 11 Cf. e.g. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, 3.226, G.B. Kerferd, **The Sophistic Movement**, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 163-4.
- 12 See in particular R.G.A. Buxton, **Persuasion in Greek Tragedy**, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 153-70.
- 13 Thuc. 3.82.4-5.