

DRAFT

YOUR GENERATION AND MINE

A Letter to a Young Scholar about Fifth Century Athens

You spoke of “virtuous Athens,” and I said, such phrasing “gives me the willies.” You asked why, and I found that I could only answer by looking in the rear view mirror at how my generation studied classical Athens. At the moment, here is where I am: My generation received more or less intact a Victorian view of Greece. It shattered, and we found no adequate substitute. The ball is in your court.

We started off with Jowett and friends on one side of the Atlantic and Edgar Allan Poe on the other. It’s hard to imagine now how gauzy Poe’s classicism was, when the sight of his Helen sent HIM back to a fantasy ancient world:

Thy Naiad airs have brought me home

To the glory that was Greece,

And the grandeur that was Rome.

To Helen, revision of 1845

Athens was the magnetic north pole to which a widespread cultural interest in the Greeks was drawn. One did not have to look far to see what Athens was like. Pericles told it like it was, and Thucydides transcribed it for us. It was truly “Periclean” Athens. It was an ideal which our society could emulate, a standard by which it could judge itself.

As a teen ager I bought a paperback edition of Edith Hamilton’s The Greek Way to Western Civilization, the celluloid peeling off the tacky cover. Hamilton had published it in 1930, well before I was born, but it was perennially popular, if not with professional classicists (as I learned in due course), then with a remarkably wide segment of the reading public. In 1957 it was a Book of the Month Club selection. It did not offer, to be sure, a profound insight into the Greeks, but it did bring together tragic poetry, philosophy and, to some extent, historical experience. Synthesis produced synergy. Besides, it was the only act in town. My teachers warned me against it, but when I asked for an alternative they steered me to Werner Jaeger’s Paideia: the ideals of Greek Culture (New York, Oxford University Press, 1945). I read it in the translation by radio host classicist, Gilbert Highet, best known for his *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (1949).

Robert Kennedy, we later learned, had read and reread and underlined his copy of Edith Hamilton’s Greek Way. After his brother’s death in 1963 he kept in his wallet a passage from Aeschylus’ Agamemnon that Hamilton had paraphrased in her book. He REFERRED TO it from memory when in Indianapolis on the night Martin Luther King was slain. Kennedy confronted a crowd, enraged at the shooting, and quieted them. Indianapolis escaped the burning that many American cities experienced

that night. You can read that passage now on a block of marble set up opposite Bobby Kennedy's grave after his own assassination in 1968:

In our sleep pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until in our own despair ... comes wisdom." (Evan Thomas Robert Kennedy p. 394.)

Hamilton offered unhesitating admiration of "the calm lucidity of the Greek mind." But long before her demise (in 1963, the same year as John F Kennedy), another quite different perspective on the Greeks had emerged as the Cold War grew colder and more frightening. Secretary of State George Marshall in a speech at Princeton in February 1947 put it this way, "I doubt seriously whether a man can think with full wisdom and deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the Fall of Athens." (I was a 12 years old, ignorant kid in a three-decker in a shabby industrial town in Massachusetts at the time, and had no idea what Marshall was saying, but the comparison between Athens and America was in the air at that time.) The "basic international issues" included, of course, the bipolarity between the US the USSR, analogous to the alleged bipolarity between freedom-loving Athens and 'totalitarian' Sparta. The reason for "reviewing in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War" was, ominously, the "Fall of Athens." That raised the underlying question: Could democratic America, bastion of freedom, successfully confront totalitarian Soviet Union and satellites? The "Fall of Athens" left only two ways to answer that question, either democracy itself was a flawed system, doomed to fail, or the problem was political leadership, the "demagogues" who misled a gullible populace.

But such questions, whatever their answers, marked a link between the classics and an American establishment, because, for a while, America *needed* Athens, not as an ideal to which to aspire (the place where it was possible to see "life steadily, and see it whole" (Matthew Arnold "To a Friend")), but as a wrestling partner, whose experience would force us to confront geo-political realities. America needed to figure out how to make democracy work, and avoid the disastrous fall Athens had experienced. That required, surely, an educated citizenry, alert to the perils of demagoguery, apathy, AND despair. An education in which one had, in Marshall's words, "at least reviewed in [one's] mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the Fall of Athens" was surely part of readiness for citizenship in a time of imminent peril. That was, I believe, the idea behind the Harvard "Red Book," General Education in a Free Society, of 1945, and the curriculum reforms to which it pointed. A guiding hand in shaping this report had been the Thucydidean scholar John Finley, and soon there followed the epitome of the Establishment, another Thucydidean scholar, Nathan Pusey, president of Harvard, from 1953 to 1971. Pusey's one serious scholarly contribution was an article on Alcibiades as he appears in book six of Thucydides (Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 51 (1940) pp. 215 – 31). Another classicist, a scholar of Sophocles, Robert F. Goheen, became president of Princeton in 1956. After that classicists disappeared from the presidencies of major institutions, until Hunter R. Rawlings, an eminent scholar of Thucydides, became president of the University of Iowa (1987 – 1995) and then of Cornell (1995 – 2003)). It seemed clear that for a while general education in the view of the authors of the Harvard report, and indeed of many leaders of higher education in America, did not just exist in, or depend on a free society. It was vital for the survival of such a society.

In these years, classicists didn't have to "make the case" for themselves. The Establishment did it for them. And behind the Establishment stood preeminently "Periclean Athens," and Pericles himself, still very much in focus when Donald Kagan followed his four volume history of the Peloponnesian War (Ithaca, Cornell Press 1969 – 1987) with a biography entitled *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy* (New York, The Free Press 1991). Plutarch, to be sure, was important for such work (greatly facilitated by the publication of Philip Stadter's *Commentary of Plutarch's Pericles* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1989), but even more crucial was Thucydides. As long as the "fall of Athens" was the conceptual center of research and teaching about fifth century Athens, Thucydides did much of the heavy lifting.

Talk of the "fall of Athens," turned easily into "the tragedy of Athens." The subtext was, perhaps, the tragedy we all feared, that any mistake by the politicians could result in atomic warfare and global destruction. For some of classicists, I suspect, that colored thinking about tragic drama, tying it to the political life of the city where it was performed. Most effective in developing this approach was Bernard M.W. Knox whose brilliant book *Oedipus at Thebes* (Yale University Press, 1957, reissued as *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time* in 1998) might equally well have been titled *Oedipus in Athens*, for the central character of the *Oedipus Tyrannos* was shown to resemble Pericles in powerful ways.

But, of course, it was more complicated than that, with philosophy and the visual arts very much in play, not to mention what archaeologists were turning up in the Athenian Agora and epigraphers reading on the stones. Also, there was money to be made. In 1952 the president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, working with Mortimer Adler and William Benton (later a US senator), launched the Great Books of the Western World, a publishing venture with the Classics in a prominent place. After some sputtering, the venture took off, with Encyclopedia Britannica backing it and door to door salesmen beating down 50,000 doors in one year.

Great Books courses were soon developed in many colleges and universities around this canon of works. (Despite criticisms such as that by Henry Louis Gates that the list showed a "profound disrespect for the intellectual capacities of people of color – red, brown or yellow," and the intensifying demands for immediate "relevance," numerous colleges and universities still offer Great Books courses as William Casement's list of College Great Books Programs indicates.)

As Cold War in Europe turned to jungle war in Vietnam, and 1950s-style niceness gave way to the anger and demands for radical change of the 1960s, the link between classical Athens and the American establishment, was no longer to be admired. Thucydides and Aeschylus, Sophocles and the rest were "dead white European males," needing to be displaced from their privileged position in the academy to make way for works by women, and those from the Third World. The understanding of Athens changed a well. Many in my generation of classicists, the one coming into its own in this era, took apart the old clichés about Athens, and saw instead a chauvinist, misogynistic, imperialist, slave holding, women-abusing society.

Studies argue that Athens, like the rest of Greece, did not just fight frequent wars. War was, as Eric Havelock put it in 1972, “a way of life in classical culture.” That is, the values and structure of ancient Athens derived to a large extent from endemic militarism (Eric Havelock, “War as a Way of Life in Classical Culture,” in E. Gareau (ed.) Classical Values and the Modern World, pp. 19 -78 (Ottawa). Moses Finley and others showed in detail how slavery worked (e.g. Finley *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1981). Greek tragedy was now often seen as an expression of hostility toward women (for example, Froma Zeitlin, “The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*” *Arethusa* 2 (1978). And then there was Socrates or rather the city that put him to death, and exiled Thucydides, too.

Thucydides’ Funeral Oration cloyed, stuck in the craw; his accounts of Melos and the defeat of the expedition to Sicily were what redeemed the work. But however great the pathos, whatever the analogies to America’s overseas blunders, the case for putting Athens, admiringly, front and center in a liberal education faded swiftly away. Sparta began not to look so bad or so glibly “totalitarian.” Literary theory of one sort or another was very attractive. But the perennial pleasures of intensely focused philology endured. Scholarship in Greek studies moved, as E.J. Champlin said of Roman studies, “downward, later and outward.”

In the 1960s and 1970s all life played out under the shadow of the military draft. Almost every young man stood under that shadow, and the daily casualty reports from Vietnam made it perfectly clear it was the shadow of death. Thus, when Thucydides had Pericles say,

Such is the Athens for which these men, in the assertion of their resolve not to lose her, nobly fought and died; and well may every one of their survivors be ready to suffer in her cause, (2.41 ad fin, trans. Crawley),

it sounded like the elderly rubbish we heard from Washington. No one needed more of that.

The roots of this disillusionment, I believe, reach deeper than the blood stained soil of Vietnam, and affected our culture far beyond the now off-putting Funeral Oration did. If we lived under the shadow of war in Asia, we also lived with what the Second World War had done to confidence in European civilization. Genocide. Holocaust. Something had gone deeply wrong, so much so that phrases such as “the Greek Way to Western Civilization” sent a shiver down the spine. No thanks!

Just as the Second World War broke out W.H. Auden had expressed a similar disillusionment in his poem, *September 1, 1939* :

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,

And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

The old Thucydides was gone, and the other stars that once gleamed so brightly in the Athenian firmament faded as well. So did Plato, if Louis MacNeice had it right:

Good bye now Plato and Hegel
The shops are closing down
There ain't no universals in this man's town.

Autumn Journal

He published those verses in 1939, anticipating, as it were, Karl Popper's The Open Society and Its Enemies, published in 1945 in two volumes, "The Spell of Plato" and "The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath".

Eventually, with all this nudging the Athenian Humpty Dumpty slipped off his exalted perch. He deserved it. Those of us still drawn to fifth century Athens had no plan, perhaps no desire, to put him together again. There was, however, one ironic result of this: "demolition." The "fall" of Athens was pushed aside along with all the glory-talk. The long, miserable Peloponnesian War could now be seen not as the end of Athenian power and influence, but as a series of missteps, miscalculations, mistakes, ending up, to be sure, with Spartans exercising control through a narrow and vicious junta. But -- the story continues in Xenophon -- Athens picked itself up, learned from its mistakes, and soon enough threw out the Spartan-backed oligarchs, and restored in more moderate form its historic democracy. Meantime, Sparta, well-organized, well-disciplined, exemplary Sparta, found itself in grave difficulties almost immediately after its victory in the Peloponnesian War, and a generation later, after the battle of Leuctra in 371, was no longer a significant force in Greek affairs.

Seen in this way, the most resonant theme in Thucydides is not the grandeur of Athenian achievements depicted in the Funeral Oration, nor the abuse of power by petty “demagogues,” nor its “fall,” but something for which there is no Greek word, but to which Thucydides nonetheless calls attention -- *resilience*:

Yet after losing most of their fleet besides other forces in Sicily, and with factions already dominant in the city, they could still make head against their original adversaries, joined not only by the Sicilians, but also by their own allies nearly all in revolt, and at last the king's son, Cyrus, who furnished the funds for the Peloponnesian navy. Nor did they finally succumb till they fell the victims of their own intestine disorders. Thucydides 2, 65. 12, as emended in *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies to B.M.W. Knox (Berlin, 1979) pp. 269-271.*

So, did Athenian democracy, for all its faults and failures, get something right? And if so, what was it?

Those were not questions my generation spent much time on. We were too busy pushing Humpty Dumpty off the wall, or perhaps we'd say, clearing away old mistakes, pushing aside the debris, making way for new construction – an intellectual equivalent to the urban renewal projects that knocked down the historic centers of many American cities.

In bleaker moments that seems to me that was what our generation accomplished in its study of the “fall” of Athens. We cleared the way for new construction. We brought things to the point where others -- your generation, not mine -- might ask if there was, after all, a connection between Athens' political system and the literary, philosophical and aesthetic flourishing that continued through and beyond the “fall”?

One promising approach to these questions is to try to determine if democracy, even if imperfect, has among all political systems unique cognitive power. Or to put it crassly, was Athens a knowledge machine capable of generating and applying knowledge to great advantage? Josiah Ober has opened up that line of inquiry in his trilogy (*Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens (1989)*, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens (1998)* and *Democracy and Knowledge (2008)*). It is not the only possible approach, but it's where the debate, it seems to me, has to start.

Where will it lead? Back to the idealization of Athens? I hope not. To a new synthesis of classical Greek civilization with a renewed surge of energy in the study of the Classics? That is perhaps too much to hope for. Maybe Auden in the last stanza of *September 1, 1939* pointed to all that is now possible:

Defenceless under the night

Our world in stupor lies;

Yet, dotted everywhere,

Ironic points of light

Flash out wherever the Just

Exchange their messages:

May I, composed like them

Of Eros and of dust,

Beleaguered by the same

Negation and despair,

Show an affirming flame.

What might those ironic points of light be? An occasional glimpse of something unique in fifth century Athens? A recognition of values that scholars still need to tease out, think through and maybe even live by? That's not for me to say. The ball is in your court now.

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