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ABSTRACT

This speech emphasizes the significance of living literatures and living cultures which owe a direct debt to the Romans and the Greeks from whom they can trace their origins. After commenting on typical rejoinders to the question "Why study classical languages?" and poking fun at those who advance jaded, esoteric responses, the author dispels the arguments that classical languages are linguistically superior and that Latin study helps students with English. A review of current ideas, ideals, and political institutions illustrates the continuing influence of Greek and Latin. Discussion of historical revolutionaries, the religious schism of Europe during the Middle Ages, and the discovery of the New World are viewed in terms of social relevance and the study of the classics. (RL)

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WHY STUDY CLASSICAL LANGUAGES?

(Speech delivered at the ACTFL Convention on November 29, 1969 at the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans)

Addressing a group of Classicists on reasons for studying Classical languages is a little like carrying coals to Newcastle and even a bit presumptuous. They know the reasons: the literature is great, the languages beautiful or noble and precise; what is written in them is relevant to our times and has been relevant to many times; study of Greek and especially of Latin seems to help with literacy in one's native tongue - and besides we like the study and make our living at it. Do we need more reasons? All right: Latin and Greek literature and their civilizations have presented and continue to present important models for institutions, ideas and ideals of Western civilization, models to be followed and even models to be avoided. And now that Africans and Asians are either establishing their nations or re-establishing themselves on basically Western models, it may be said that the whole world has Roman and Greek ideas, ideals, and institutions as their ultimate models. Are there any better reasons for studying Latin and Greek? So, why don't we flourish? Why is Latin an invalid and Greek dead in the public schools? Why does anyone have to make a speech on: Why study Classical languages?

There is another bit of apparant hybris which I should like to exorcise by way of introduction. That it should be a Classicist who gives reasons for study in his field may, paradoxically, seem to some equally presumptuous and may even be somewhat dangerous and self-defeating. Would a lawyer not support the study of law, or a dairyman not proclaim: "Drink milk; it's good for you!" or a tailor not advertise: "Clothes make the man!" or, if his target is women: "The look is you!"? So if a Classicist speaks up the Classics, there are always people, in this era of almost total faith in the daimon of hidden motivations and in the self-centered subconscious as the only true reality, who will say: "Aha! He must have guilt feelings about the matter. Otherwise why does he speak so strongly

in favor of his own field? Obviously he's hiding some really good reasons besides the ones we know why not to study Classical languages!"

Besides, with our genteel traditions many of us have felt that such self-assertion is the direct opposite of what we stand for - a case of the means destroying the ends. We've usually thought it wiser and safer to let others praise and advertise us. But that hasn't helped either. So maybe we've been too modest, too gentlemanly and lady-like. Our very reticence may prove to others that we are not "with it". They won't buy our image in this brash, multi-decibel era. Or their image of us is wrong and outworn: the gentle, elderly, distant, sere, unworldly scholar among his musty tomes and discolored manuscripts, in his ivory tower. No matter how many Roman banquets we arrange for young people to recline at one some wholesome bucolic campus, no matter how many Greek games we stage with pretty young miniskirted coeds pulling the chariots the picture the public has of us as the exclusus amator of the dead past will not go away. Let's advertise: Classics is/are good for you! Cicero saves sanity and Aristophanes chases away the blues! Take your next trip with Tibullus! Propertius beats pot! Homer turns you on and Vergil gets you right here! And for the older generation, maybe something like: Invest in Thucydides and you'll have dividends forever!

Well, where do we stand today? Let us leave the matter of numbers of students and other statistics for later. Let us see rather how the public sees us, for that is ultimately the source of those statistics, good or bad, and of our survival on decline. Here are some little incidents which will serve to illuminate that.

The commonly accepted picture of the Classicist as a moldy museum piece even in the eyes of the young is illustrated by the following incidents from my own experience. A few years ago a young girl reporter of our college newspaper came to interview me about my scheduled participation in a campus panel discussion. When she opened the door of my office and took a look at me, she said, "Oh I thought you'd be older."

So I said, "I am older." Then I asked, "What did you expect? An old man with a white beard?" And she said, "Yes!" And that was before being over-thirty got to be such an immoral act.

And take this incident, expressing an attitude shared by more than one parent not without some justification. A friend of mine called me up toward the end of the summer in some distress. It seems that his daughter, after a two years in college, had decided to become a Classics major, and he wanted to know what I thought of the idea. It almost seemed as if he wanted me to prescribe a cure. I understood his concern. The matter was something a parent of his and my generation might well worry about. We had both lived through the Depression of the 30's when our society had no use for physicists, mathematicians, foreign language specialists - to say nothing of Classicists who were the most useless of all, it seemed. Even in 1969 one doesn't go into our field without some risk. So I told him the facts as I saw them. In the New York City metropolitan area on the high school and junior high school level there are really no jobs. The situation is similar in most large cities with the newly developed exceptions of Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia. But there are teaching opportunities if the young aspirants are willing to teach and live some distance from metropolitan areas. In suburban and semi-rural areas the situation is better but not great. On the other hand there has been a growth in colleges and universities, where, of course, one needs a Ph.D. degree which takes years of graduate study without any really gainful employment during the study period. This father was partially relieved to find that his daughter's aspirations were not entirely unrealistic and that Classicists still had some meaningful function in the United States of 1969. But his feelings are characteristic of many people in this country, that being a Classicist is no way to earn a living and that it is foolhardy for anyone to entertain serious hopes of a career in the field.

But let me pursue this matter frankly a bit further. Until recently in my own college when students came to ask me about majoring in Classics things were even more discouraging. The growth in colleges did not show up until about 1958 as has been

indicated in reports in Classical World. So I would speak to them as Saul did to the Hebrew leaders who wanted to make him king. After listing all his bad qualities, he said in effect, "If you'll take me with my faults, I'll be your king. " So I used to warn our students about the risks they were facing, but most persisted and many have gone on to higher degrees and considerable achievement in the field. But the situation in the high schools and below is not satisfactory and may be getting worse.

Now, two other little scenes, but with a different tenor. On my return from a trip to Greece this summer, an elderly acquaintance eagerly asked, "What do you think of the Acropolis?" I was about to answer, "It's in need of repairs." But since both he and the Acropolis are much older than I am, I could not be so flippant, and since he was not obviously not expecting the full-minute lecture and is from a culture area where it is not impossible to answer a question with a question, I said, "What can one say about the Acropolis?" He would have been equally satisfied if I had in a way been more positive and uttered a grunt of approval on a rising inflection: "Mhum!!"

Then there was the lady from the tour group in Greece to which I was lecturing who asked at Mycenae or Knossos or Athens, "When do we get to the Elysian Fields?" When I had her repeat the question and realized she was serious, I took the opportunity to explain that one had to be dead to get there. Happily one of the lectures I had scheduled myself to give to the group was to be on Greek religion including the mystery cults, so I would have a built in motivation in at least on auditor.

Now why mention these last two incidents? These are fine intelligent people, why my tone of annoyance? These may even be friends of the Classics. On the one hand, in the case of the lady, who is not untypical, there is a display of real ignorance of which she was not even aware peppered over with a few catchphrases which she took to be understanding and knowledge. But give her credit: she was willing to learn and that's why she was on the trip. In the case of both, they illustrate a certain attitude to

our field, an unthinking acceptance, an assumption that we are Culture with a capital "C" that is really more destructive to us than hostility. We are looked upon as a high quality product but too rarified to be bothered with on any but special occasions, like those ten "great books" that one would like to have with one on a desert island, not so much because they are so great, but because no one would want to read them unless there was nothing else to do.

We have become part of the sacred, therefore the useless, we are the elect but not the elected, we are a "cultural experience" not life. For too long, for instance, if one saw a performance of a Greek tragedy in translation, one felt and was expected to feel as if one was in church. And the hush that pervaded during such performances was not ecstasy or interest but polite boredom. But, by the gods! The Greeks were and are Mediterranean people and their works just burst with vitality and ungenteel cries and agonies of pain and joy! And the Romans were Italians, not frozen marble busts in museums! It was not until a Caccoyanis produced Euripides' Trojan Women and Iphigeneia in Aulis in New York some years ago that theater audiences began to enjoy Greek drama, and at some scenes wept as heartily as ancient Athenians. So why study Classical languages? Because the people who spoke them and the works they wrote in them dealt with life - its living, its problems, its joys, its sorrows. And we who teach them had better convey this through our teaching to our students, their parents, and the public at large; or we'll truly be buried with our so-called dead languages.

Let me review with you a few examples of the relevance and vitality of Classical literature. Take a scene in Aristophanes' Clouds, not the serious debate between the Just and Unjust Reason on the old versus the new values, whose relevancy is quite obvious, but rather two lively little scenes spoofing the new science of the fifth century. On entering Socrates' thinking shop - or shall we call it "think tank" - the elderly matriculating freshman, Strepsiades, led by a student guide, sees some students bent over toward the ground

and asks what they are doing. Answer: "Digging for knowledge." Since their backsides are stuck up in the air, he points and asks, "What are they doing with that?" Answer: "They're studying astronomy." Earlier the student guide had described to the old man's admiration the precision of a scientific experiment by Socrates. The Master had wanted to find out how far fleas could leap. Realizing that it wasn't really scientific to measure flea distances in human feet, he decided to establish valid criteria for such measurement and hit upon the concept of flea feet. ("Brilliant!" cries Strepsiades.) So catching a flea, evidently a not unfamiliar part of the Athenian ecology, he carefully dipped its foot in melted wax. When the wax hardened around the foot, it formed, said the student, a sort of tiny Persian slipper. Then carefully slipping the insect's foot out of this wax slipper, he had a proper measure. The flea hopped, the distance was marked, and then measured accurately with the waxen slipper with proper scientific objectivity. "Oh Zeus our lord," cries Strepsiades, "what a brilliant mind!" An unfair attack on the new science and on Socrates who was not interested in the sciences, but relevant. Aristophanes is making a mockery of scientific experiment at a time when science is at its very beginning, but Aristophanes' attack is based on the feeling that both scientific development and Socrates' re-examination of all accepted standards would contribute to those very changes to which the rather conservative comic poet and many of his audience were opposed. The scene may also remind us of the uneasy feelings people have been having lately about our scientific achievements. The relevance of his Ecclesiazousai (Women in the Legislature), Lysistrata and Peace does not need detailed discussion.

Which leads to another problem that is still with us and agonized over by a number of ancient writers, but especially by Tibullus, the Roman elegiac poet. Let me read you my somewhat rough version of the first fourteen lines of his Book I, no. 10:

Who was it who first invented the sword?
What a savage he was and utterly steel-hearted!
Then murder and war were born to humankind,
and a short-cut to dread death was found.

Or perhaps, poor fellow, he doesn't deserve the blame,
but we, who have turned to our own destruction
what he gave us for use against wild beasts.
The trouble started when gold became the source of wealth;
there were no wars when a simple beechwood cup
was what one used at meals and it was a feast.
There were no forts, no ramparts then,
and carefree the shepherd took his nap among his browsing sheep.
That's when I should have lived my life,
and I would not have known the sad wars of people against people,
or heard with beating heart the trumpet blaring.
Now I'm dragged to war, and already perhaps
an enemy holds a spear destined to stab me in the heart!

On the subject of war and the lacrimae rerum militarium, I draw your attention to the Iliad, a book about war, in which, however, the pity and waste of it are frequently expressed directly and indirectly and particularly in Book XVI, 434 - 461. There Zeus, who had wanted to save his favorite son Sarpedon from impending death, had been persuaded by Hera against interfering. And, as he reluctantly gives in and lets fate take its course, the Lord of Olympus weeps bloody tears (lines 459 - 461): "And the father of gods and men let fall blood-red droplets to the earth below for the sake of his dear son whom Patroclus was destined to kill on rich-soiled Troy far from his homeland."

Then there is Cicero who has deserved better of us, Cicero the most misrepresented and misused of Classical writers and leaders in many a classroom. This was because of a concentration on his rhetoric and his own self revelation in his letters which show his weaknesses and insecurities as they don't show them for a Caesar who left none (except in the novel of Thornton Wilder). Cicero is the classic example of the tragedy of the moderate in time of revolution, a mediator at a moment of confrontation. And his proposed

solution for the troubles of his times was too late by perhaps a century. But his contributions to his contemporaries and to us in political theory and philosophy are tremendous. He was the chief transmitter of Greek ideas in both these fields to Rome and through Rome to us, and like other great writers molded the Latin language and mind to the new concepts. One quotation on equality from his Laws will have to do (transl., Francis Barham, 1841, Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West, vol. I, Columbia Univ. Press 1954, p. 190): "There is no one thing more like to another, more homogeneous and analogous, than man is to man. And if the corruption of customs, and the variation of opinions had not induced an imbecility of minds, and turned them aside from the course of nature, no one would more nearly resemble himself than all men would resemble all men. Therefore whatever definition we give of man, it must include the whole human race. --------In fact, reason-----is assuredly common to all men."

There are many others, the mere mention of whose names indicates their abiding importance: Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius. There is Thucydides on the nature of revolution and the ideal picture of the liberal democratic state, whose whole book illustrates a paradox that still troubles us: a state, Athens, which became more and more democratic at home as it became more and more imperialistic in its foreign policy. To move to more everyday social and family problems, there are Plautus and Terence, the latter of whom especially wrote family problem comedies a common theme of which was the generation gap, the clash between father and son, the apparent hypocrisy of parents. Plautus himself recently had a resounding hit both on stage and in the movies when he collaborated with a team of young American writers and composers on A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. Need I detail the relevance of Vergil over whose Aeneid there broods a modern introspective angst, or that ancient "beat" novel of black humor, Petronius' Satyricon? And there are many more.

I think I've said enough for the vitality and meaningfulness of Classical literature to our times and our students. It is time to get into a more organized presentation of other specific reasons for the study of Classical languages.

Two arguments can be disposed of at once and conceded as not tenable, one because it won't stand up and the other because it is so debatable that it is really hot worth spending our time and energy defending it when we have much better and unchallengeable reasons to offer. The first, the argument from beauty, nobility, and precision, cannot really be supported. Though to you and me Greek is beautiful and Latin is noble and precise, beauty is, after all, in the eye, or ear, of the beholder, nobility is common to all great literatures, and precision, as linguists we must admit, depends on the speaker or writer, not on the language used. One can be as vague and fuzzy in Latin or French as in Japanese, and as precise in Japanese as in Latin or French which prides itself on precision. And bombast and euphuism are by no means foreign to Latin and Greek, although there is very little in what has survived. Besides, the public won't buy this argument. Let me confess, though, I myself lovingly believe that Latin and Greek are beautiful - and noble and precise, but love is blind, and I do enjoy working out the obscurities in a text when they occur.

The second argument: Latin helps students with their English. You may believe it, I may believe it - and we have all seen it happen. But the arguments against it, or the explanations given for the phenomenon by those who don't deny it are hard to gainsay. It may well be true, or at least probable, as opponents maintain, that: a) those who tend to elect Latin are scholarly and literarily oriented to begin with and hence their good English was there before they began Latin and continues to be enhanced by their continued reading in English and American literature rather than through their Latin study as such; b) the same attention given to the improvement of English as such rather than the study of Latin would produce the same beneficial results. There may even have been studies made to prove this. My education professors in college used to sound as if there were. So this argument is not worth wasting our effort on even though we may feel like doing so.

However, what cannot be denied in this Latin-English relationship is that as much as 50% of English vocabulary is of Latin origin and that the probability, if not the certainty, of improving a student's English vocabulary is great if attention is paid to the study of the Latin elements in the vocabulary. This is already being done by Latin teachers in their classes. We might turn the argument against us to our advantage by pressing, especially in those schools that do not teach Latin (or Greek), for a course on Latin and Greek elements in English to be taught by a specialist. This will have a triple advantage: a) students' English will be improved without our having to argue about the effect of the study of Latin as such on the improvement; b) if well taught, such a course may stimulate students toward the study of a Classical language, as has happened through college courses in literature in translation; c) the rightful task of Classics teachers will not be usurped by the unqualified or the less qualified.

But we have much better arguments which are unassailable and undenied. They are based on fact. One is that Classical literature is one of the greatest in the world and in many ways the greatest in the West, that it is the chief source and model for Western literature, and that Classical literature is relevant today. On the matter of greatness and relevancy I have already said more than enough, and further, this is quite evident from the spread of courses in Classical literature in translation in the colleges and their starting introduction in some high schools, and from the large number of paperbacks in our field being published and sold. On the matter of being a source and model, a few suggestions will suffice to enable even the non-Classicist to fill out the details himself. A roll-call of genres and writers such as used to emblazon library walls will make this clear immediately. Every literary form was either brought to perfection or invented by the ancients including the novel, which is the only form developed more fully since its revival in the sixteenth century. And even the drama, which in its development toward realism took a completely new direction in the late 19th century, has in recent years been returning to the earlier forms as in the so-called epic theater, participatory theater, and other recent avant-garde experiments. Agreed, not all the new playwrights are consciously under the influence of the old, but many are. And let us list a few ancient writers, some not for the first time today: Homer, the Greek playwrights, Vergil,

Horace, Propertius - there is no doubt about their vitality and importance. Where would Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Milton, Moliere, Racine be without the Classics? Or Pope, Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold - or James Joyce, Gide, Camus - you can add to the list.

The second matter which cannot be challenged, and which may be even more important for our times is that the ideas, ideals, and political institutions of Classical antiquity as depicted in its literature, served and still serve as basic models for those of modern times. This does not mean that other important factors did not go into the molding of modern civilization, or that there has been no originality in these areas since antiquity, or that our institutions are merely restorations of ancient ones. But in the beginning of what could be called modern times, the revolutionaries of the 18th century in America and France, as Professor Gerald Else has been reminding us recently - and it is too bad that we need reminding - took as their models the Greek and Roman republics with the Roman Empire as a sort of anti-model. And their theoretical support, their ideology, for the new states they were founding was stongly based on the ancient political thinkers in whom they were deeply steeped and whom they constantly reread and frequently quoted or paraphrased. Their own idealogues, such as Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, were equally nurtured on the Classics. Read the Declaration of Independence or the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Even their symbols were drawn from this source, the eagle of the American republic and the cap on the figure of Liberty.

Two other examples of an earlier time, not in the political field, might be pertinent here, especially since I have not seen them discussed much or at all. One involves religion, the other the discovery of America. As to the first, the division of Europe during the Protestant Reformation into Protestant and Catholic countries seems to be related to whether or not a nation had been in the Roman Empire. Those that had been part of the Empire tended to remain in the Roman church: Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, the Rhineland and southern Germany, Austria; those which had never been in the Empire, broke with Rome: the Scandinavian countries, Scotland, the rest of Germany. An apparent exception is England, full exceptions are Ireland and Poland. Belgium and Holland, though not independent at the time, tend to follow the pattern. England is no real exception because while separating from the Roman church, it retained in its Established Church ritual and theology much like that of Rome, which may be related to its having separated from the Empire much earlier than the other countries and thus

was both in and out of the control of Rome. For Ireland and Poland, never in the Empire their maintenance of Roman Catholicism was related to their attempts at maintaining national independence in the face of their threatening neighbors, Protestant England in the case of the first and Protestant German states and rising Orthodox Russian in the case of Poland. There were, of course other and more important reasons for the religious upheavals of the 16th century, but the effects of the existence of a Roman Empire evidently played a part.

Greece and Rome also played a direct role in the discovery of America which was the result of the revival of Greek science with its knowledge that the world was round and of the search for a direct route in the spice trade with India and the East. But this trade between Europe and the East and the inculcation of a taste for spices was the result of the work of the Emperor Augustus. As a result of Augustus' efforts in fostering this trade, starting with pepper, it grew tremendously in succeeding Roman centuries. As Innes Miller has pointed out in his recent book, The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire (Oxford, 1969), the Romans inculcated a taste for spices in the peoples of their Empire, especially Europeans to whom most spices were new, a taste which starting as a luxury became a necessity and extremely profitable to traders and the state. Thus Columbus and other explorers were impelled to seek a new route to the Indies by a taste acquired like other tastes from Classical Rome - and discovered America.

So there are plenty of good reasons for the study of Greek and Latin and of their literatures and cultures. Granted, someone will say, but why not read all these books in translation? Why in the original? There is no denying the seeming reasonableness of this question. One cannot read all the great works of all great writers in the original languages. True. But why should the tendency have been in the last several years for our society to deny access more and more only to the reading of books in the original Latin and Greek? Why are obstacles put in the path especially of those who wish to study Latin and Greek in public schools. Why should the field of Classical languages be the most underprivileged, the most disadvantaged area - almost a disaster area - in American education. We are not saying that all must study Classical languages. That's what many an opponent seems to think we are saying. All we are saying is that we have a very important contribution to make in American

education - besides supplying names for missiles from mythology - and that our field should be treated as the equal of other fields. Instead we often exist on suffrance, we are treated with disdain, indifference and even occasional hostility by school administrators, some local and state governments, and even the Federal government. Occasionally they throuw us a crumb and include us in a Humanities Bill; after argumentation and heroic effort by a John Latimer they throw the Humanists a few sesterces in a Humanities Bill. Imagine! I was about to get carried away and fall into the rhetoric of the times with a remark about stopping the linguistic genocide, and was even ready to coin a new word, linguicide, but Athene caught me by the arm to remind me to be reasonable, to tell me that all we really need and want is to be given a fair chance, and students will come to us as is indicated by the experience of colleges in the last ten years. Calling again on Classical World reports, in those colleges where Latin or Greek was revived or introduced over the last several years, there was a continued growth in the number of students in the field.

One cannot discuss reasons for the study of Classical languages without facing up, even briefly, to what looms as a new threat, not only to our field but to all foreign language study. In the 1920's when "Why study Classical languages?" became a strong rhetorical question expecting and receiving a strongly negative response, nobody expected there would be cries from the young people this time, 40 years later, of "Why study modern foreign languages?" and finally, "Why study anything?" These are perfectly legitimate questions which must be answered not only giving reasons, but also by the respondents convincing their questioners by the way they teach and by what they teach. This has been the classicists' problem especially these past 50 years during which we did not have the support of the educational system or of our society and our field has survived to the extent that it did when we responded effectively to this responsibility. Soon now we'll all be in the same leaky boats, but the Classicists have had that half century of experience in paddling with bare hands and bailing with a new edition of Vergil and an occasional new approach to language teaching. And sometimes archeology threw us a lifeline. And so now even those who are teaching so-called living languages are being challenged to prove that both they and what they are teaching are alive. In other words, the mere fact that languages are spoken - and by millions of people to whose countries, ironically, more and more Americans go to visit, is no longer good and sufficient reason for American students to study them. The only good and sufficient

reasons are those I have been presenting for classical languages, namely, that their literatures and cultures are alive and vital, and the ideas and content of these literatures have something important to say to our people, young and old. Perhaps Classicists will be able to lead the way. But we can be convincing only by how and what we teach, and by really believing in what we are doing. Let us hope that our years in the desert will have taught us that we must not wait for manna from above - we already have it our own hands. It is Greek and Latin literature. But having fed on it ourselves, we must feed it properly to others. It is food for thought, food to enjoy, and food for action. It is health food - for the mind, for the soul, and for the body politic.