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## Pain and Pleasure: Oration delivered at the 2018 graduation ceremony

*Carmel Serracino*

One might expect oratory pouring out from a classicist at any moment's notice. This is certainly not so in my case. I racked my brain over the choice of subject matter for a speech worthy of this momentous occasion. Writing a doctoral thesis was easier.

I turned to the ancients for their assistance, but my invocations and invective to Cicero and Demosthenes were ineffective. The classic Roman description of an orator, which entails a pair of qualifications, *vir bonus, dicendi peritus*, 'a good man, skilled in speaking',<sup>1</sup> intimidated me: my deficiency of the latter condition cannot be compensated by excess in the former one.

I took comfort at the thought that Federico Fellini confronted a lengthy period of personal creative dearth by making a lengthy film on that experience, and 8½ is a masterpiece of the cinema. Taking his lead, I figured that if I could speak about the anguish of writing this speech, it might yet turn out to be a masterpiece of oratory. I veered away from such ambition when I realised that I really would like to speak about pleasure - yes, *pleasure* – the pleasure of studying the Classics; and particularly about one important if masochistic aspect of that pleasure, namely, the trials and tribulations of the study of the classical languages. And so, not to risk having a Ciceronian exordium, let me get to the point.

*The Gateway to Honour: A History of Classics at the University of Malta from 1800 to 1979* is the title I gave to my thesis. The first part of the title, Gateway to Honour, takes its inspiration from the inscription found on the beautiful neoclassical doorway of the Old University. The unique thing about the inscription is that, rather than in Latin, the language typically employed for public inscriptions, it is in Greek. It says ΠΡΟΠΥΛΑΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΤΙΜΗΣ Η ΜΑΘΗΣΙΣ, which can be translated as 'Learning is the Gateway to Honour'. In 1923, this Greek aphorism was among the six phrases considered for the motto of the University coat of arms.<sup>2</sup> The choice finally fell on the Latin *Ut Fructificemus Deo* ('So that we might bear fruit for God'), lifted from Paul's Letter to the Romans.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting, however, to note that one person who had supported, perhaps even proposed in the first place, the choice

<sup>1</sup> Quint. *Inst.* 12.1.

<sup>2</sup> Vella (1989) 95.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Paul, *Letter to the Romans*, 7:4.

of the Greek aphorism was the future Prime Minister of Malta, Lord Strickland. During a sitting of the Legislative Assembly, when the discussion turned on the design of the University coat of arms, Gerald Strickland, the Leader of the Constitutional Party, praised the 'very beautiful and expressive' Greek aphorism, but he expressed his doubt as to whether 'ten per cent of the people who walk through the entrance ever read the motto or whether any single professor at the University could parse it.'<sup>4</sup> The statement was not pompous: Ancient Greek at the time was *not* an area of study at the University. Neither was it part of the curriculum at the Archbishop's Seminary. Strickland could flaunt his knowledge of Greek because, in his youth, he had studied the language outside Malta.

A couple of years before Lord Strickland made his comment, at least one professor had in fact attempted to parse the Greek aphorism. This was in 1920 when Eric Shepherd, an Englishman, had just been appointed to the chair of English Literature and History at the University of Malta. From Shepherd's book about his Malta experience, regrettably an unhappy one, we learn that, upon his first arrival at the University to pay a visit to the Rector, Themistocles Zammit, Shepherd was delighted to see the Greek inscription on the entrance. However, he says he failed to translate it.<sup>5</sup> Now this confession is a cursory detail in Shepherd's memoirs, but, as a classicist, I find it both surprising and reassuring. It is surprising because one would expect that for a scholar who had answered questions at public exams on original texts of Greek authors for admission to the University of Oxford, the translation of our short and apparently straightforward Greek maxim should not have been troublesome. On the other hand, what I find reassuring is the casualness with which Shepherd describes an experience unfortunately rather familiar to anyone who has devoted a number of years to the study of Greek and Latin. I have been studying the two classical languages for longer than I care to remember, but moments persist when a single Greek or Latin phrase utterly crushes me.

I am certain that such a moment of unexpected and bewildering obtuseness is the experience of every scholar, of whatever academic field. However, the study of Greek and Latin poses a tremendous challenge. There is simply no end to it. The BA Classics programme offers a unique opportunity to embark on that course. One issue which troubles me and which I often discuss with colleagues and students is whether we should diminish the amount of Greek and Latin we teach, to replace it with more, as it were, 'attractive' material from the Classics repertoire, such as literature in translation, politics and history, mythology, or the ever more popular Reception, the study of how the Classics continue to prevail through visual arts, creative writing, film, game design, etc. It is a double-edged sword. What I find

<sup>4</sup> *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of Malta*, sitting of 11 June 1923.

<sup>5</sup> Shepherd (1926) 61.

most remarkable is that students who manage to pass through the first stages of our Classics course gradually develop a real liking for the two ancient languages, at times bordering on passion.

Admittedly, there is something really exciting about the study of Latin and Greek. It is not only the awareness that knowledge of these two languages is the best access to the ancient world, with all its allure, wisdom, and multiplicity. It is also that the study of two dead languages – perhaps just because they are ‘dead’ – requires a mental effort which can develop into an exercise of intellectual pleasure. This is saying nothing new: that the study of Greek and Latin endows one with a powerful and philosophical mind is a notion that goes back to the 18th century. Besides, until relatively recent times Latin grammar as the best discipline of the mind was a very common defence aimed to stem the widespread decline of Latin teaching in schools.<sup>6</sup> Now, to be frank, I am not sure whether years of Latin have significantly improved *my* mental discipline. And yet it seems to me that the study of Greek and Latin invariably attracts one to the unknown. When a student is coming to grips with a passage in Greek or Latin, and out of a mass of words and phrases, which at first glance may look disconnected or incomprehensible, the student must, through structural, etymological, and cognitive analysis (plus a degree of imagination), translate into a logical and believable piece of writing, the effort on the intellect is real and considerable. It actually bears a resemblance to what a dream analyst would do when unravelling the mystery and symbolism of a dream. I discovered Carl Jung midway through the writing of my thesis. In *Psychology and Alchemy*, Dr Jung describes the process of dream analysis thus:

We are therefore obliged to adopt the method we would use in deciphering a fragmentary text or one containing unknown words: we examine the context. The meaning of the unknown word may become evident when we compare a series of passages in which it occurs. The psychological context of dream-contents consists in the web of associations in which the dream is naturally embedded.<sup>7</sup>

This is exactly the method we employ to translate difficult texts of a dead language such as Ancient Greek and Latin. It is a technique I keep insisting on students to learn: to try to understand the meaning of ‘unknown words’ from the context of the rest of the passage and associations with what they may know from the text.

I would like to come back to the Greek aphorism at the University gateway. Strangely enough, Strickland was not loth to champion its adoption for the University coat of arms, despite his awareness that ‘none of the professors were able to parse it’. This seems to echo the lack of concern the British had shown a

<sup>6</sup> See Waquet (1998).

<sup>7</sup> Jung (1980) Introduction, para. 48.

century earlier when they constructed the gateway with an inscription in Greek.<sup>8</sup> Even then, in the 1820s, knowledge of Ancient Greek in Malta was a rarity. The reasons for this striking predilection of Greek over Latin seems to me to have been both cultural and political. Romantic Hellenism had taken hold of people's imagination, and anything evoking 'the glory that was Greece' stirred intimations of the beauty of nature and the love for freedom. On the other hand, the period, although still in the early phase of British colonisation of our island, was already marked with colonialist attempts at Anglicization. This included the substitution of Italian by English in official statements or invitations, but also a governmental policy of social preference for the Maltese who professed a knowledge of English. In script and semantics, Latin would be too close to Italian. The other classical language, Greek, had a completely different script, and moreover had no direct connection with Italian. No amount of knowledge of Latin, or of Italian for the matter, would serve a reader to understand even a simple statement in Greek. This was a new era, a new dominion and language, and Greek in preference to Latin would have been meant to signal it.

I think I am allowed to put forward a rather whimsical hypothesis, one which I hesitated to include in my thesis for lack of historical support. Besides the cultural and political influences, I like to think that whoever came up with the idea of an aphorism in Greek for the University gateway had it in mind to arouse a degree of intellectual curiosity among our Maltese ancestors. That person might have used Greek for this purpose as a lure to the 'unknown', the Other, the pleasurable domains of the intellect.<sup>9</sup>

\* A slightly abridged version of this speech was delivered by the author during the Graduation Ceremony at the Church of the University on 27th November 2018.

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<sup>8</sup> Vella (1969) 66.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. John Keats's sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', written in 1816:

'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.'