THE GREEK WAY

Edith Hamilton

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EDITH HAMILTON

THE GREEK WAY

With a New Introduction by C. M. Bowra

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To Doris Fielding Reid

Κοινὰ τὰ τῶν φίλων

EDITORS' PREFACE

Western civilized man has an amniotic relationship to Greece. It is vital to his thought, omnipresent in his society, and so endemic (Greek for "in the people") to his being that he takes it for granted. Just as Jefferson said that France was every American's second country, so it may be said that Greece is every Western man's second nature.

This obligation of modern man to ancient man was incurred, as Edith Hamilton says in the first sentence of *The Greek Way*, "five hundred years before Christ in a little town [Athens] on the far western border of the settled and civilized world. . . . What was then produced of art and of thought has never been surpassed and very rarely equalled." T. S. Eliot once put our debt to the past this way: "Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know." In the matter of Greece, our debt is also our wealth.

In the matter of Greek scholarship, our debt to Edith Hamilton is similarly our wealth. Miss Hamilton was a very great lady of humanistic letters who died in June 1963 at the age of 96. Her love of things Greek almost spanned her life. Her father started teaching her Latin at the age of nine, but she began teaching herself Greek at seven. As a girl, she customarily combed her hair and dressed with a Greek book propped up on her bureau. She grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana, but the country of her

soul awarded her its recognition when she was made an honorary citizen of Athens just four days short of her 90th birthday in 1957.

Edith Hamilton began intensive study of the classics as the first woman student ever admitted to the University of Munich, and she went on to become headmistress of the Bryn Mawr School of Baltimore in 1896. But it was not until after her retirement 26 years later that her real vocation began. In 1930 *The Greek Way* appeared; it immediately fired the imagination of both scholars and general readers. The book is no less exciting today. It communicates the pent-up ardor of a teacher who never became bored with her subject, never let her affection stagnate in petty pedantry. It lures, never lectures. It guides, never patronizes. *The Greek Way* is the diary of a love affair with a civilization, a love affair that has been going on for over 2,000 years.

Two propositions, or credos, are as crucial to Greek thought as the nervous sytem is to the human body. The philosopher Protagoras uttered the first: "Man is the measure of all things." The philosopher Anaxagoras added the second: "All things were in confusion until Mind came and set them in order."

How novel and how exceedingly daring the Greek exaltation of man was is skillfully shown by Edith Hamilton. The neighbors and enemies of the Greeks, notably the Egyptians and the Persians, held a view of man that was brutalizing, terror-stricken and absymally mean. In those lands, man was caged and groveling, cowed by despots of power, terrified by monstrous demigods and

exploited by magician-priests. No man was the captain of his fate. For these peoples, existence was such a chancy and degraded affair that they tried to live on the borrowed strength of nature and the beasts, forming totemic alliances with sacred cats and holy birds.

How did the Greeks have the audacity to place man at the center of the universe, to make him a dominion and a power unto himself? As Miss Hamilton saw it, Greek pride and confidence surged up from two tremendous and unforeseeable victories, Marathon and Salamis. The triumph of the outnumbered Athenians over the Persians in these battles freed Europe from the threat of Asiatic domination for 1,000 years. These tonic victories also released the spirit of humanism. With her striking insight, Miss Hamilton notes that Egypt's sphinxes and pyramids are like the wind-swept desert sands, massed in strange new shapes; but the Parthenon is a temple of Man. It is scaled to human dimensions. It does not compete with nature, it does not aspire to the supernatural. It does assert man's right to impose his creative intelligence, his imaginative order, on the inchoate sprawl of nature. Is not this the essence of the process of civilization?

If the man-centered universe was a startling Greek invention, so was the mind-centered man. The supreme commandment of the Greeks was: "Know thyself!" Greek —and hence, Western—man was an either/or thinker. Just as the primal act of creation was to divide land from sea, night from day, so the Greek mind polarized the elements of existence. This dualistic mode of thought is still the intellectual tool a Western man habitually uses when he tries to grasp a subject. After 2,500 years, the terms have

scarcely changed: good and evil, spirit and body, cause and effect, appearance and reality, innocence and corruption, subjective and objective.

No monistic theory can adequately account either for the workings of the Greek mind or for the sudden, brief golden age of Greek achievement in thought and art. In the best Greek tradition, one can only speculate. One of the most compellingly evocative speculations has come to us from Oxford's Sir Maurice Bowra, author of the Introduction to this special edition and a man who has lived as intimately and lovingly with the Greek way as Edith Hamilton. In his own great book, *The Greek Experience*, he refers to the physical impact of Greece upon a traveler: "What matters above all is the quality of light. Not only in the cloudless days of summer but even in winter the light is unlike that of any other European country, brighter, clearer and stronger. . . . The beauty of the Greek landscape depends primarily on the light and this had a powerful influence on the Greek vision of the world."

Light is the master image of Miss Hamilton's book. "Homer's hero who cried for more light even if it were but light to die in, was a true Greek," she writes. "They could never leave anything obscure." As light-seekers and light-givers, the Greeks focused intensively on three areas: the light of reality, the light of reason, the light of beauty. The Greeks blinked at no facts: "They had no vital lies." Miss Hamilton cogently argues that the spareness of their prose reflects the toughness of their minds. Relating the disastrous Athenian military campaign against Syracuse, after which the captured Athenian prisoners were worked

to death in the stone quarries, Thucydides added the famed but harshly laconic epitaph: "Having done what men could, they suffered what men must." As Miss Hamilton reminds us, "It was a Roman who said it was sweet to die for one's country. The Greeks never said it was sweet to die for anything."

That the Greek ideal was to live by the light of reason needs no belaboring. It is charming and instructive to find that their men of reason were not contemplative hermits. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates spends all night at the Greek equivalent of a cocktail party where the guests refuse to leave. Everyone drinks too much, but at dawn Socrates is still very much awake and arguing "that the true artist in tragedy would be an artist in comedy also." His remaining listeners, one of whom was Aristophanes "had to assent, being drowsy and not quite up to the argument." Drunk or sober, the Greeks were always intoxicated with dialogue. They instinctively felt that in the thrust and parry, the clash and spark of conflicting ideas, one might hit the truth, just as a duelist pricks an opponent and draws blood. In the drama, that mirror of the Greek soul, they raised dialogue and conflict to the level of tragic ritual.

It is impossible to finish reading *The Greek Way* without realizing, and being rather startled to realize, that one has been immersed in a leisure-class society. In Fifth Century Greece some men were free to pursue the best that was in them because other men were slaves. In this regard it is pertinent and challenging to consider the Greek concept of leisure. The word itself in Greek means "to study." To the Greeks, then, leisure was freedom to study rather

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than addiction to pleasure. What the Greeks studied they bequeathed to us: an enduring vision of the good, the true and the beautiful. The Greek way is hard and exacting, but it is a high road to a high civilization.

—THE EDITORS OF TIME

INTRODUCTION

The civilization of ancient Greece is known only from the none-too-abundant remains which chance or caprice has preserved from the ravages of the years. Of Greek painting in its heyday we have nothing except drawings on vases, which, despite their uncommon command of line and design, can give no notion of what Greek composition was on a large scale with a richer range of colors. Of many temples very few survive, and those are ruined and reft of their original ornaments. Much sculpture has indeed been excavated from the earth, and some of the finest pieces have even survived on temples, but the statues which the Greeks regarded as their noblest masterpieces have disappeared almost without trace. Even in literature, though much was preserved by the scholarly industry of Byzantine scribes who copied out the books needed for schools and libraries, we must be content with only a tithe of what existed. It is true that this contains the complete works of Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato and Demosthenes, not to mention later writers, but the gaps are still enormous. Of the glorious art of lyric song we have only a portion of Pindar and small fragments from other poets, which despite their mutilated state hint at the enormous wealth that is now lost. Even the Attic tragedians, who have played so large a part in the development of European literature, are represented by only a tiny proportion of their whole achievement.

In these circumstances it might be easy to dismiss the Greeks on the grounds that we know too little about them and that we are never likely to know substantially more. Yet such is the power of what survives, such the fascination which it exerts upon us, that we cannot escape it or put it out of our minds. Every time that we look at Greek works of art in words or stone or metal, we find something new. They do far more than inspire an academic or antiquarian interest; their incarnate power is such that they are not only alive themselves but give life to us. In the last resort we cannot say *why* the Greeks did what they did, but at least we can ask *how* they did it, and to this we are impelled by the enchantment which still breathes in almost everything that survives from them.

Such is the power of the Greek achievement that each generation sees in it qualities which have hitherto hardly been recognized, assesses it by them and tries to interpret it afresh. One of the main functions of classical scholarship is to provide material by which our understanding of the Greeks may be strengthened and deepened. The more detailed the study of them becomes, the greater is the need for an embracing vision, for concepts and illuminations which bring them closer to us and yet keep them at that distance which enables us to see them in their distinctness and individuality.

Among those who have attempted this task, Miss Edith Hamilton holds an honored place. Her book *The Greek Way* is the authentic utterance of one who lived so long in her imagination with the Greeks that she made them part of herself and formed an intimacy with them which few more-strictly professional scholars could attain. She wrote of them with the special understanding which comes

from single-minded devotion and admiring affection. Her ideas were emphatically her own, and though she inevitably owed something to other scholars, everything that she said had her own imprint on it and rose from her unflagging concern for what the Greeks did and said and were.

Miss Hamilton started from the best, the right, the only possible point—the actual texts of Greek literature. These she knew from the inside, not through translations and commentaries but through the original words, which are remarkable for their clarity and elegance and force. With this knowledge she was able to turn her feminine intuition in many directions, to adapt herself easily and almost unconsciously to the writers whom she studied, and to extract from their work what appealed most deeply to her and seemed to be most significant.

Yet she tempered this remarkable sympathy with a high degree of independence and detachment. She had her own convictions, and though these were certainly to some extent shaped by Greek examples, they belonged in the last analysis to her own land and age. She stood in the noble tradition of humanism in being able to get the best out of the past without losing herself in it, to enrich it with her own wise and percipient observations and to assess it by generous standards of human worth and potentialities. To her what counted most in the Greeks was their gift for life, their taste for action and for thought, their positive, unwearying search for truth, their courage in facing even the ugliest matters with candor.

This is not to say that Miss Hamilton admired the Greeks without reserve in everything that they did, or held them up as a flawless ideal to be imitated at every point.

The great age of Athens, which appealed so strongly to her, is not a golden age in any humane or charitable sense. The bitter temper in which Greek cities fought one another, the savage treatment of the helpless Melians by the Athenians in 416 B.C., the arrogant illusions of the Syracusan expedition, the judicial murder of Socrates are not excused, still less condoned.

In the long run, however, what matters is that the Greeks themselves admitted such actions to be wrong and condemned them, and it is from what they themselves said that Miss Hamilton formed her judgment. Her masterly treatment of Thucydides is also a wise commentary on the decline of Athens; her appreciation of Plato sets him both in his historical place as a child of a defeated generation and in his timeless grandeur as one who understood, as few have done, the strange ways by which truth can be elicited from confusion by affection as well as by argument. Just as the Greek tragedians drew masterful lessons of the relations of gods and men from ancient tales of horror and savagery, so Miss Hamilton saw beyond the immediate, individual events to wider issues behind them. Born and bred in a gentler and more courteous age than the present, she did not think it her first duty to decry or to discredit. Sure of herself and her values, she knew when to praise and when to blame. She had no inclination to that kind of cleverness which asserts itself by rejecting the wise and sober conclusions of centuries of learning. She was content to tell the truth as she saw it with the wisdom of affection and admiration, and to leave us in no doubt where her affinities lay.

Miss Hamilton candidly admitted that "we cannot re-

capture the Greek point of view," and of course she was right. But she knew that we can learn much from the Greeks because, in spite of everything, we have something very important in common with them. In their search for truth, which had for them a religious seriousness, the Greeks created the scientific spirit, which is perhaps the dominating and most impressive power in the modern world. They would have understood its passion, its integrity, even its ruthlessness. But they tempered it with much ease and with a full appreciation that the creative imagination is just as indispensable to scientific discovery as to artistic performance, that it works best when it is infused with all the strength of a full-blooded personality, that creation is itself a form of action and inspires others to it.

The Greeks saw no gap between natural science and the humanities. Indeed, for them both were almost identical in their aim, their spirit, their methods of work. They would not admit that the achievements of men were in any way inferior to the working of nature as objects of study. More than this, they believed in the complete foursquare man, active alike in mind and body, a man of thought and a man of affairs. That is why Miss Hamilton concentrated on the Fifth Century B.C., when this ideal came closest to being a reality, and why for her Athens embodied all that was finest in Greece.

No doubt she was right in thinking that this ideal cannot be brought to life again in its completeness. Technology and specialization, the enormous increase of knowledge and the ever-increasing complexity of the arts, make such an ideal impossible. Yet we can still gain much

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