

Winged Words

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presented at the annual meeting of the
American Philological Association
New York 1996

Under-enrollment in elementary Greek has been a chronic problem of most Classics departments for decades. While Spanish and French easily fill sections of 15-30 students, Greek classes of 10 are the norm rather than the exception. In recent years institutions around the country have experienced fiscal constraints and changes in administrative priorities that imperil low enrollment classes: Greek may well go extinct at many American universities during the next few decades.

Ken (Kitchell) invited me to participate in this panel (on the promotion of the study of Greek) because at Ohio University Greek is doing relatively well, and he wanted me to explain the advertising mechanisms that have driven our success. I'm glad to do that, but with this proviso: Even our success is very modest, and our enrollments are lower now than they were a few years ago. Good advertising can help, but it is not a long-term solution. I'll speak a bit about advertising, but I also plan to harangue a while about bigger, long-range issues of recruitment.

First, a word to set Ohio University's classics program in context. The University enrolls about 16,000 undergraduate students. Our College of Arts and Sciences has a two-year language requirement. We are on the quarter system, and our teaching load is 8 courses per year. Until about 1986 we had only one term position and one tenure-track, no secretary, a Latin BA on the books but with only one or two majors per decade. I was the term position; the tenured chair was nearing retirement. Since then we have grown from 2 to 6.3 FTE: 4 tenured, 1 tenure-track, 1 term, and 1 part time, and this year we finally got a secretary. We have developed solid undergraduate majors in Greek, Latin, and Classical Civilization, with growing strength in archaeology. We offer cross-listed graduate courses for the benefit of grad students in other departments, but we have no graduate program of our own.

The department has not lacked institutional support. Our former president (Charles Ping) was and our deans have long been dedicated proponents of liberal arts education, and once they saw that we could grow, they actively helped us do it. It happens that we caught their eye by increasing Greek enrollments. When I arrived in 1983 there were about ten students in first-year Greek. Within 3 or 4 years we had over 60 enrolled. Since the administration was predisposed to believe in the importance of Classics anyway, they quite accurately saw this growth in enrollment as evidence that "the market" would support additional investments in classics faculty.

I'll get into the mechanism by which we attracted those students in a minute, but first I need to emphasize that we took very seriously the college's faith in us, and we were very careful about our hiring decisions. We wanted to hire good scholars, but we absolutely refused to hire anyone we did not regard as an excellent teacher and colleague. We looked for people who were deeply convinced of the value of Classics, who loved teaching undergrads and who would be good-spirited and cooperative colleagues. As a result, each year the college hears excellent reports from students about the courses they take in our department, and there has never been even the slightest hint of discord among our faculty.

So, our department teaches the usual broad spectrum of classics courses, both small and large, and we try to do them all well. We differ from most programs in that elementary Greek courses are not a drain on our department. To the contrary, much of our momentum—both student interest and institutional support—comes from elementary Greek. For the last 10-12 years we have always enrolled at least 40 students in beginning Greek. The average for the first quarter has been about 50, I suspect.

There are two basic strategies for increasing enrollments. The first is to dumb down the curriculum—to fill it with so much "culture" that students identify Greek as an easy way to pass the foreign language requirement. I think that strategy has been chosen by many high school Latin programs, and its long-term outcome is both predictable and just. The other strategy is to realize that Greek is appropriate only for very capable and very well-motivated students, and to expend considerable energy in finding those students and trying to win them to Greek. That is what we have done at OU.

Okay, the mechanism. Every year for over ten years I have requested and received from the university an electronic file of information on incoming freshmen and grad students and have selected from that file students who fit certain profiles. I send each of those students a mail-merge letter. In the early years the goal of the letters was two-fold: (a) to let the students know while in Athens (Ohio) they could learn to read the Greek primary source texts in such fields as theology, history, philosophy, and literature; and (b) to turn on some personal charm and try to attract them to me as a teacher. More recently, my letters have an additional goal: to overtly challenge our culture's pervasive emphasis on professionalism and pragmatism and to make the case that humanistic pursuits like literature, history, philosophy, and theology—indeed, that learning anything out of genuine interest rather than out of shallow self-interest—is indispensable to a good undergraduate education. The effort takes an entire week or two each June. I send out from 700 to 1000 letters, and from those I estimate that we enroll at least 25 additional Greek students. In addition, the letters motivate many students (though I don't know how many) to enroll in Classics courses other than Greek. I have brought copies of my last three letters in case you are interested.

You will, no doubt, be wondering about retention. I'm not one of those amazing teachers who somehow manage to animate all their students. In this regard I am probably worse than the average classicist. I suspect that most of you could do better than I do in the area of retention if you were to obtain high initial enrollments. Frankly, I don't want to retain students who are not willing to develop the motivation and self discipline that is necessary to learn Greek. This fall forty students enrolled in two sections of first-quarter Greek. Twenty percent of those (8 students) dropped within the first two weeks. Of the 32 who finished the first quarter, only 16 will be going on in a single section, and 13 of them are really quite good. Probably ten to fifteen will continue through 2nd-year. So, the net effect of my letter writing is that our first-quarter first-year classes are impressively large. After the first quarter the single section that continues is only somewhat larger than the norm, but the quality of the remaining students is much higher than it would be if we had started out with 15 or 20 and had had to teach with an eye to retaining 10-12. This year we plan to use the web and e-mail as well as traditional mail to recruit students.

We have also tried to take seriously our responsibilities to the students we have recruited. We want them to learn as much Greek as they possibly can in their 2-3 years, and we want them to have fun and be personally enriched while they do it. To that end we host play readings (in translation) and picnics 2 or 3 times a year. During visits last year by Fred Ahl and Mark Damen, we came to realize how much the students enjoy putting on informal public play readings. We hope to do more of that sort of thing in the future.

We have also developed a study trip to Greece. It is to the best of my knowledge the first and only Greek language study-abroad program. In the spring the faculty take turns leading a group of 10 to 20 students from OU and other universities on a 10-week trip to Greece. Students must be at least at the end of their 2nd year of Classical Greek. When they get to Greece, we enroll them in a 3-week crash course in modern Greek at the Athens Centre. They progress very quickly, of course. We spend the next 7 weeks visiting some of the historically and archaeologically important sites in Greece, and other sites where we just sit and read Greek. This spring we plan to read at least 6 books of the Odyssey and several Platonic dialogues. In this setting most students begin to get beyond code-breaking to comprehension of Classical Greek as a real language. By the way, we are glad to take students from other universities, and I would like to enroll another 4 or 5 students this spring. So, I have brought some information. Please think of your students—either undergrads or grads—who might be benefited by an intensive dose of reading Greek in Greece and call this program to their attention.

Neither recruitment nor program excellence, however, can succeed in the absence of a considerable pool of bright, academically motivated undergraduates, and I think that pool is evaporating. Every year I find it harder to recruit students—not because they are not smart enough or hard-working enough. To the contrary, our current students are generally very bright and hard working. Part of the problem, of course, is that I am not as charming as I used to be. I believe, though, that the bigger problem is a general devaluation of academics in our society. Few even of our best students are academically motivated. They are far less interested in ideas than any students I have ever met; indeed they seem repelled by ideas. They are gangrenously pragmatic and professionally oriented. During the last two years I have noticed widespread fear in my classes for the first time: A huge percentage of students listen to important material and the only wonder they can manage is a sort of vague terror that exposure to unfamiliar ideas might bring their GPA's down and keep them out of physical therapy school. We have always had some of this sort of thing, of course. But the atmosphere of stultifying pragmatism is no longer encouraged just by mom and dad, but also by USA

Today and endless polls, by state and federal politicians, and even by Quisling university administrators more devoted to flattering politicians than to protecting the universities with whose welfare they have been entrusted.

I, at least, believe that this cheap, self-serving pragmatism will destroy not only the souls of the students who bend over and grab their ankles in fear of it, but that it will also destroy the souls of universities and ultimately, nations. Unchecked, it will certainly step on a tiny field like Classics and squash it unnoticed like a bug. Strong enrollment in a high effort, low-payoff endeavor like learning Classical Greek simply cannot be sustained in an environment of morbid pragmatism—no matter how well we advertise.

Oh, I know that we have occasionally made claims about the pragmatic benefits of studying Classics, and I think that modest pragmatic claims can be fairly made. I doubt that any of us is prepared to argue, however, that for brilliant student X, the fastest, easiest, and surest way to pragmatic success is along the path of learning classical Greek. Studying Greek is almost always done in spite of, not because of, pragmatic considerations. I personally believe that any student who is seriously moved by virtually any of the great texts of the Greek canon is *because of that experience* at a disadvantage in the quest for personal success. In a world that prefers little thoughts, big minds are an impediment.

I suspect that all of us came into this field because we did *not* think that money, comfort, and social prestige were the highest values. Now, in our moments of middle-aged pragmatic angst, we may regret our choice, but the fact remains: We chose to study classics because we found things in reading Greek or Latin that we valued more than money and comfort. We didn't all value the same things, of course. Some of us fell in love with Platonic idealism and others, with Epicurean materialism. Some, with *dike* and *hybris*; others, with Grimm's Law. In falling in love with ideas like that we were carrying on the academic tradition. Some of you have carried it on brilliantly. Others of us muddle through as best we can. But we have all experienced the mania of passionate love for ideas, which overmastered our self-interest.

I, at least, have had to struggle the last couple of years with the question of whether I made a mistake—whether I am like Lysias' lover who rationally looks back on the cost of his irrational passion and regrets his folly. I have finally decided that I don't regret my passion for Greek a bit. I'm damned proud to be a participant—even a minor one and a muddler at that—in the Greek tradition. I was not a fool to fall in love with the kind of argument and thinking I learned from Plato, Thucydides, Homer, the New Testament. To the contrary, my life is immeasurably richer from having read what those authors wrote and from the effort it cost me to read it in Greek. The people who aspire to nothing greater than getting a good job, driving a BMW, and joining the country club, and who have no desire for understanding that would really cost them something: They are the fools. The entire Greek tradition bears witness to the inevitability that their foolish, uncritical self-interest will deprive them of the very things they are sacrificing their minds and souls to secure.

I have stated this a trifle provocatively because I want to underscore something that I think we all need to realize rather sharply: Our values as classicists are profoundly and necessarily opposed to the cheap pragmatism that is currently reshaping our society into an "economy" and our universities into "efficient schools for sure success." Like it or not, we find ourselves strangers and sojourners—prophets (with a "ph"!)—in our era, even in our own universities.

I have determined during the last year that I will recast my civilization courses to make them much more polemic. I shall sharpen the edge of humanist texts that we read: I shall attempt to rive my students' imaginations from their slavish belief in "success;" to rive truth from "success" and joy from "success" and human worth from "success." My students may choose to go through college like a bunch of intellectual eunuchs, kowtowing to the system and kissing the ass of anyone or anything that offers to give them a paycheck. But, by God, I will give them hell along the way. The students will hear from the Classical tradition that they are choosing to engage in the worst sort of servility and dooming themselves and others to the consequences of their folly and cowardice.

I am not *just* engaging in a self-indulgent tantrum, by the way. I think that what I am saying is precisely on topic. Reshaping my lectures and perhaps even designing a new course to emphasize the importance of the humanist ideas raised in Classical texts will itself prove a way of recruiting Greek students. I am not saying anything revolutionary here. I suspect that all of us have taught the importance of ideas throughout our careers. When we teach the structure of the fifth-century Athenian legal system, we almost certainly include an explanation of the kind of ideas that animated it—the sort of thing one finds in the *Oresteia*, for instance. I simply plan to be much more self-conscious of the importance of the ideas that are the traditional realm of humanities in general, and specifically of Classical humanities. I want my students to understand that they as individuals and our society as a whole will be

impoverished as humans if they balk at contemplating the nature of justice and retribution (for example), and I want them to see very clearly that no matter how much they understand about their own humanity or about human justice, no one will ever give them a bloody dime for their trouble. I plan, that is, to make the conflict between pragmatism and classical humanism overt in my classes. I will win over a few students each year who will decide to spend the extra time, effort, and money to study questions that they consider important just because they believe they are important. Of those students, some will take a few extra courses in physics. Some will take music or anthropology. And some will study Greek. After all, a Greek professor will have been the one who raised the issues with them in the first place.

Finally, I would like to argue that as this conflict between traditional education and pragmatic self-interest becomes really gory, as I think it will, we classicists are in the most enviable position of any academic field: We are the furthest watchtower from the center, probably the most vulnerable of all positions. Now, if we operated at the level of pragmatic self-interest, we would prefer to be in some other field. English, mathematics, the sciences: Such fields can surely survive a siege of pragmatism longer than Classics (and Greek in particular) can. Those fields will survive by contorting themselves, by becoming what they are not. The biologist who studies spiders can pretend to be a pragmatist and can string corporations along for a while with the possibility that the venom of some as yet unstudied Amazonian spider may prove just the cure for hemorrhoids, but in the next generation his field will attract no real scientists.

But we are not people who operate on the basis of self-interest—unless we are *really* stupid. We would not have become Classicists if we were cheap pragmatists. We in Classics have no fall-back position. We cannot fool ourselves. There is no professional or economic reason for studying Greek. We can't become the *Department of Medical Terminology*. We can fight for what we hold dear, or we can surrender and die, but we have no place to retreat to. And so, I suspect that we will be among those leading the fight—a fight for the souls of our universities, the souls of our students, the soul of our society; and in the process, our own souls: I doubt that many of us are by nature courageous people, but the fortunate chance that Classics currently has no unique pragmatic benefit will force many of us to fight like the heroes we are not, and perhaps decades from now we will discover that we have (quite without setting out to) won victories that will give us satisfaction at our deaths. It may turn out that we will have fulfilled our modest calling as the stewards of the Classical tradition in this generation with some distinction.

Let me step back from the Tolkein-esque tone and explain with a bit more restraint why I think Classics is so well-positioned. Of the great triad of university disciplines—science, social science, and humanities—Classics is squarely in humanities. Our colleagues in that area are English, Philosophy, and History. English departments are abandoning their humanities turf as quickly as they can to occupy the more defensible ground of training future professionals to write resumes and technical manuals. Philosophy departments are allying themselves with professional schools (business, medicine, journalism) to teach professionally acceptable ethics. Many history departments are rather like classics—inevitably humanist—though some (like ours at OU) have managed to ensure their security by teaching some pragmatically important period of history (ours teaches post-W.W.II) to the exclusion of virtually everything else. At Ohio University, at any rate, Classics (with the cooperation of the ancient philosopher and the lonely medieval historian) is the department best poised to step forward as an unabashed, enthusiastic champion of the humanities. I, at least, believe that the kinds of questions that are raised in the great classical texts really are indispensable to humane life—both personal and communal. Consequently, I believe that as we faculty search our own souls and rediscover the importance of the texts that caused us to fall in love with Classics in the first place, and as we determine to argue as vigorously for the importance of the humanities as the scientists of the past century have argued for the importance of science, the humanities will experience a resurgence at Ohio U., and the Classics Department will come to be seen as the rightful heart of the humanities. And if that is true—if the great questions of justice, of personal and communal goodness, of the nature of love and reason, and all the rest—if those questions really come to be debated again in coffee houses and bars as fiery young undergrads imitate their classics professors in challenging the shallow and sterile pragmatism of the current era, then many of our recruiting letters will come into receptive hands, and we will continue to enroll a good number of bright, motivated Greek students.

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Sunday, December 29, 1996