
The Greek Invention of the Human

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Thank you, Stamatis, and thank you, Tim, for inviting me, and thank you to all the members. It's really a great honor to be here. I feel a little bit intimidated. It's really hubris for me to come here and tell the Greeks what Greekness is, right? Talk about bringing coals to Newcastle. I don't know if I have anything to say that you don't already know and know in your blood. But I'm going to try to do a few things here this evening, and I will keep an eye on the time. What I'm going to try to tell you today, which you already know, is that the Greeks created Western Civilization. But I'm going to come at it from a couple of different angles. I want to talk about the Greek gods, and what's distinctive about them. Again, I'm coming at this as a classicist. I want to talk about the invention of drama, and what that means. So, coming from different angles, what *essential* Greekness is, and why Greekness, and Greek genius, Greek wisdom are really the basis of everything we value in our civilization—and why it's distinctive from every other civilization. Now, I know you all know all this already, but just humor me.

I'm going to start with a letter tonight, and I'm going to conclude with another letter. The first letter I'm going to read—I'm not going to tell you who the recipient is until I finish the letter. It's a letter from a father to a son.

“My dear son,”—this is an actual letter.

A talk given to The Alpha Omega Council, Boston, MA, in January 2010. Mr. Tim Marken was President of the Council and Mr. Stamatis Astra is Chairman of *Arion's* Development Committee.

“I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted Classics as a major. As a matter of fact, I almost puked on the way home today. I suppose that I am old fashioned enough to believe that the purpose of an education is to enable one to develop a community of interest with his fellow men, to learn to know them, and to learn how to get along with them. In order to do this, of course, he must learn what motivates them, and how to impel them to be pleased with his objectives and desires.

“I am a practical man, and for the life of me, I cannot possibly understand why you should wish to speak Greek. With whom will you communicate in Greek? I have read, in recent years, the deliberations of Plato and Aristotle, and was interested to learn that the old bastards had minds which worked very similarly to the way our minds work today. I was amazed they had so much time for deliberating and thinking, and was interested in the kind of civilization that would permit such useless deliberation. Then I got to thinking that it wasn't so amazing after all, they thought like we did, because my Hereford cows today are very similar to those ten or twenty generations ago. I am amazed that you would adopt Plato and Aristotle as a vocation for several months, when it might make pleasant enjoyable reading for you in your leisure time as relaxation at a later date. For the life of me, I cannot understand why you should be vitally interested in informing yourself about the influence of the Classics on English literature. It is not necessary for you to know how to make a gun in order to know how to use it. It would seem to me that it would be enough to learn English literature without getting into what influence this or that ancient mythology might have had upon it. As for Greek literature, the history of Roman and Greek churches, and the art of those eras, it would seem to me that you would be much better off by learning something about contemporary literature and writings, and things that might have some meaning to you with the people with whom you are to associate.

“These subjects might give you a community of interest with an isolated, few impractical dreamers, and a select group of college professors. God forbid!

“It would seem to me that what you wish to do is to establish a community of interest with as many people as you possibly can. With people who are moving, who are doing things, and who have an interesting, and not a decadent outlook.

“I suppose everybody has to be a snob of some sort, and I suppose you will feel that you are distinguishing yourself from the herd by becoming a Classical snob. I can see you drifting into a bar, belting down a few, turning around to the guy on the stool next to you—a contemporary billboard baron from Podunk, Iowa, and saying, ‘Well, what do you think about old Leonidas?’ Your friend, the billboard baron, will turn to you and say, ‘Leonidas who?’ You will turn to him and say, ‘Why, Leonidas, the prominent Greek of the Twelfth Century.’ He will, in turn, say to you, ‘Well, who the hell was he?’ You will say, ‘Oh, you don’t know about Leonidas?’ and dismiss him, and not discuss anything else with him the rest of the evening. He will feel that he is a clodhopper from Podunk, Iowa. I suppose this will make you both happy, and as a result of it, you will wind up buying his billboard plant.

“There is no question that this type of useless information will distinguish you, set you apart from the doers of the world. If I leave you enough money, you can retire to an ivory tower, and contemplate for the rest of your days the influence that the hieroglyphics of prehistoric man had upon the writings of William Faulkner. Incidentally, he was a contemporary of mine in Mississippi. We speak the same language—whores, sluts, strong words, and strong deeds.

“It isn’t really important what I think. It’s important what you wish to do with your life. I just wish I could feel that the influence of those oddball professors, and the ivory towers were developing you into the kind of man we can both be proud of. I am quite sure that we both will be pleased and delighted when I introduce you to some friend of mine, and say, ‘This is my son. He speaks Greek.’

“I had dinner during the Christmas Holidays with an efficiency expert, an economic adviser to the nation of India, on the board of Directors of Regents at Harvard University, who owns some eighty thousand acres of valuable timber land down here, among his other assets. His son and his family were visiting him. He introduced me to his son, and then apologetically said, ‘He is a theoretical mathematician. I don’t even know what he is talking about. He lives in a different world.’ After a little while, I got to talking to his son, and the only thing he would talk to me about was his work. I didn’t know what he was talking about either, so I left early.

“If you are going to stay on at Brown, and be a professor of Classics, the courses you have adopted will suit you for a lifetime association with Gale Noyes. Perhaps he will even teach you to make jelly. In my opinion, it won’t do much to help you learn to get along with people in this world. I think you are rapidly becoming a jackass, and the sooner you get out of that filthy atmosphere, the better it will suit me.

“Oh, I know everybody says that a college education is a must. Well, I console myself by saying that everybody said the world was square, except Columbus. You go ahead and go with the world, and I’ll go it alone . . .

“I hope I am right. You are in the hands of Philistines, and dammit, I sent you there. I am sorry.

“Devotedly,
DAD.”

Quite a remarkable letter. The recipient of this letter was Ted Turner. And while I think Ted Turner’s father is right about most classicists and classics professors and universities, I don’t think he’s right about the classics. And I believe that it was the crypto-classicist in Turner—his exposure to the wisdom of Greece and the culture of Greece, and to those paradigms of thought and understanding and excellence, the vision that he was exposed to in his studies in the classics—that may have played some role in making him the visionary that he was. I like to believe that Ted Turner created CNN somehow out of his studies in the classics. Because, really, if you think

about it, what he did was take the television set—which, at that point, was a kind of fishbowl that made the world smaller—and he really transformed it into a window on the world. He brought the world home through television. And the original CNN was really very different than the CNN of today, which is soundbite- and tabloid-oriented. I like to think that the classics maybe played some role in enabling Turner to be the kind of man—like most great men—who step out of their time into another time. And, in this case, the time he steps into is Ancient Greece, which enables him to be not only a man of his time, but a man for all seasons.

Let me talk a little bit about the Founding Fathers and the classics. The great sociologist at the University of Chicago, Hannah Arendt, once said that to speak about politics in America, one needs to speak Greek. Everybody probably knows that Thomas Jefferson was steeped in the classics. I'll tell you an interesting story that Jefferson related. Jefferson often met men like Ted Turner's father, who would come to him and say, "You know, Jefferson, what do I need education for? What do I need the Greeks for? I never had any book learning at all, and I own 80,000 acres of this, and 70,000 acres of that, and I've made myself into a great and powerful and influential man." And do you know Jefferson's response to that? "Indeed you have," he would have said, "but just think what you might have accomplished if you had started out life standing on the shoulders of a Demosthenes, or the shoulders of a Plato." Toward the end of his life, Jefferson was asked what was the one thing—this man who had really accomplished so much in so many fields: a president, a statesman, an inventor, an agronomist, a man of letters, a scientist, an architect—what was the one thing that he felt most proud of and was most grateful for? And his answer was that his father forced him to learn Greek so that he could spend the rest of his days reading Homer. Because in the end, that's really all that remains. So, I would like to submit that the great men of our time have been great because they weren't necessarily of our

time, or of their time, but because they were able to step out of it, into another time.

Step into ancient Greece. Unmodern men—in Nietzsche’s sense—men who are capable of thinking unmodern thoughts (*Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*), who then become men for all seasons. Greek genius is at the root of great achievement. It is also a great wisdom which is at the essence of our most profound understanding of what it means to be human. And it’s a wisdom and it’s a legacy that are in jeopardy today.

Let me—before I talk about the gods, and what’s distinctive about the Greek gods, and how they, I think, express what I want to call this essential Greekness, or Greek genius, in contradistinction to every other culture I’ve ever studied—let me just pause on another historical event. One not so distant as Thomas Jefferson. In the middle of the last century, the assassination of John F. Kennedy was certainly an epochal event. November 23, 1963. And although Robert Kennedy, his younger brother, never lived to fulfill his promise, I think his story is a very illustrative, even emblematic one, of what I am talking about here. Again, his biography is well known, so perhaps some of you may know this. Hoover called him—it was a very cold call—“The President has been shot.” And Robert Kennedy was absolutely devastated. He was having lunch with some friends. As David Brooks described in a 2006 *New York Times* article, he “turned away from his lunch companions, his hand to his mouth and his face twisted in pain. In the ensuing months, he was devoured by grief.” And as his biographer, Evan Thomas (cited by Brooks), writes: “He literally shrank, until he appeared wasted and gaunt. His clothes no longer fit, especially his brother’s old clothes—an old blue topcoat, a tuxedo, a leather bomber jacket with the presidential seal—which he insisted on wearing and which hung on his narrowing frame.” And he couldn’t find any solace anywhere. He couldn’t find it in the family—and you know the Kennedys have a very strong, supportive family—that didn’t help. He couldn’t find it in the church. He was at his wits’

end. In March of the following year, he went to stay with some friends in Antigua. Jackie Kennedy gave him a book, which she said was one of his brother's favorites. That book was *The Greek Way* by Edith Hamilton. This was a book of essays on great figures in Athenian history and literature and the worldview embodied by these figures. And Robert Kennedy began to find a way to explain and to recover from the tragedy that had consumed him. Brooks points to a passage that encapsulates what he found there: "When the world is storm-driven, and the bad that happens and the worse that threatens are so urgent as to shut out everything else from view, then we need to know all the strong fortresses of the spirit which men have built through the ages." This book—and then his further readings in Greek tragedy—in fact, changed Robert Kennedy's life. And he carried this book around, all dog-eared and annotated and beaten, for years. In fact, to the day of his death. He took it with him into battle, so to speak, just as Alexander the Great rode into battle with his annotated copy of *The Iliad* on his horse Bucephalus. And in April of '68, two months before *he* was to be assassinated, Robert Kennedy found himself—he was, of course, on the campaign trail—giving a speech in Indianapolis. And his aides were very, very concerned that the situation was unsafe. Martin Luther King had been assassinated the day before, and the FBI said that they couldn't protect him. He mustn't give that speech. But he insisted on doing it. He threw away the speech that had been written for him and wrote one of his own. And as he stood on the back of a flatbed truck in the black ghetto of Indianapolis before a very angry mob, many of whom were just learning, that night, of Martin Luther King's assassination, he delivered the speech that *he* had written. In it, he quoted, from memory, these words from the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus: "God, whose law it is that he who learns must suffer, and even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart. And in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us, by the awful grace of God." Πάθει μάθος,

learning through suffering. Curiously, by a strange, ironic twist of political history, these very same lines passed between Nixon and Kissinger on Nixon's last night in the White House. It was also Richard Nixon's favorite passage.

So what did Robert Kennedy, recovering from his brother's murder, find in the Greeks? He "found a civilization eager to look death in the face, but one that seemed to draw strength from what it found there" (Brooks). The more the ancient Greeks pondered the transience and fragility and pain of human life, the more convinced they became of its dignity and its significance. Their heroes were battle-hardened and undaunted by their scars. Hard-bitten, but visionary in the sense they never relinquished their grip on the absolute, or their dream of a better world, or a "world elsewhere." Over-reaching is in the very marrow of the hero, and he must do as he must do, even though Zeus' lightning will always and inevitably strike the tallest trees. And inscrutable fate—*Μοῖρα*—is older still than Zeus and all the gods. A passage that Kennedy had underlined in Hamilton's book, on the Greek capacity to wrest optimism from pessimism, to draw from life despite all its vicissitudes and changes and setbacks—something indestructibly powerful and joyous—reads as follows: "Life for [the Greeks] was an adventure, perilous indeed, but men are not made for safe havens. The fullness of life is in the hazards of life. And, at the worst, there is that in us which can turn defeat into victory." And I think, for instance, of a play like Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, where the hero is being consumed by the terrible bestial poison that is literally burning him up alive from within—burned alive by the beast within. And what he demands is to be set on fire, to be set ablaze atop Zeus' sacred Mount Oita, a place that has never been touched before by anything except the lightning of Zeus. And in so doing, he literally and figuratively—in the image of his funeral pyre, blazing atop Zeus' sacred mountain—he literally pulls Zeus' lightning down out of the sky, and fights the infernal fire burning him from within with the supernal fire he wills to come down from above. And he

thereby resolves his mortal contingency, his fatedness, resolves it as a kind of freedom and ἀρετή, even an aspiration to divinity. So what Kennedy found in the Greeks was an ethos that embraced the tragic complexity of life and didn't back away from it, that wasn't afraid of it, embraced it, but drew strength from it and not defeat. Now, our Founding Fathers were steeped in this ethos, the best of them. A man like Robert Kennedy, who had a lot of advantages, was able to find it at a time of crisis. But I really believe, in two decades and certainly in future generations, it will be doubtful that young people will even know where to look for it.

Now, how does one define this Greek wisdom and the character of the institutions that have derived from it? I mean, there are lots of ways and we would spend the whole night doing so. Just a few things: we owe the free economy to the Greeks, constitutional government, an egalitarian ideal, a tradition of critical dissent, radical skepticism, and dialectical thinking; the spirit of inquiry, self-reliance, which is a concomitant of democracy: men taking upon themselves the destiny of a society; a sense of individualism, but also, moral responsibility—responsibility for the group to which you belong. The need to harmonize word and deed that fills all of Greek literature, that constitutes the integrity of a man. Seeing the world in more definitive and absolute terms than other peoples did. And, of course, the Greek sense of the bleak, tragic nature of life, of human existence. The yoke of necessity by which we are all bound: old age, death, and the consortium of human fate that binds every human being, in so far as all men must die. But above all—and though it may seem to contradict this understanding or acceptance of fate and necessity—freedom. *Eleutheria*. Not freedom from fate or freedom from necessity—“Even the gods are subject to necessity,” Euripides says in one play—but freedom like Heracles on Mount Oita. Freedom to choose—the courage, the manner, and the dignity with which one confronts that fate; to turn death, to which we are all bound, into destiny. *That* is freedom.

So—I've spoken of media moguls and statesmen and presidents and attorneys general. Let me turn to what I actually do know something about, and that is the gods, since I'm more of a myth-and-poetry and drama man. Again, what I'd like to try to illustrate with this little example is what is essential and distinctive about the Greek gods: what I've gleaned about the nature of the gods themselves. I want to describe an experience that I had, which hit me with the force of a revelation. Now, let me preface this by saying, I'm going to talk about the Parthenon friezes of the British Museum, and of course they should all be in Greece. We all know that they shouldn't be in London. But I did have a remarkable experience there. Maybe you know it. Walking along that long corridor, before one approaches the Elgin Marbles. And along that corridor are the theriomorphic gods of the Ancient Near East. The beast gods of Ancient Assyria, Babylon, Mesopotamia, and Old- and Middle-Kingdom Egypt. You see grotesque hybrid beings: giant, human-headed, winged bulls, and fierce-looking razor-beaked eagle-headed spirits. And the simian Thoth, the Egyptian baboon god of wisdom. And long-eared, leonine monsters with wings and vicious claws from ancient Nineva. And gargantuan, hybrid, human, lion-headed, winged figures from Nimrod. And the lion goddesses, the Sekhmet, enemies of the sun, from ancient Thebes. And the massive figure of Taweret, goddess of childbirth, pregnant hippo with a lion's head. And the giant scarab dung-beetle of Heliopolis, incarnation of Khepri, a form of the sun. And everywhere, gorgons, monsters, lions, monkeys, baboons, sphinxes, jackals, fangs, talons, tails, out-jutting tongues—it's a nightmare. It's a nightmare. It's horrific. These are the gods of all these other cultures. And you turn in horror out of that corridor. You make a left. And you suddenly enter another world: that of the gods of the Greeks. It's as if you have awakened from the most heinous nightmare and suddenly found yourself in the most beautiful dream. There are these sublime forms, these dream-like figures, whether they

are poised or reclining in a kind of otherworldly ease. It's almost as if you've wandered into a cocktail party of the most beautiful people in the world. First you pass the Nereids at the Temple of Lykia, upon whose portico float these sylph-like, wave-borne, wind-blown creatures, their bodies almost transparent under the rippling drapery, wet with sea spray, wafted over the waves of the sea. Then, a little further, you enter the room of the Elgin Marbles—on either side, the sculpted figures from the friezes of the east and west pediments of the Parthenon, perfectly graceful, fluid, sublimely balanced figures. Whether standing or seated, or languidly lounging, the figures appear as if they are all soaring, as if they are somehow swept up by the wind, the supple folds of the drapery suggesting the sweep of the wind over the body, the sensuous folds of flesh and stone on the verge of being transubstantiated to some “unbearable lightness of being” beyond human reach. They're sensuous and yet subliminal. They're sedate and yet soaring. Here is Dionysus, sublimely lounging figure, and there, Dione, Titan mother of Aphrodite, the wind rippling through her lap so she appears more airborne than earthbound. And Aphrodite herself: the sensuality of her body accentuated by the clinging of the drapery in which she is enfolded: simultaneously flesh and seeming—through the rippling, wind-like movement of the fabric—to float somehow above her body. There is Iris, a prism of a pentelic marble, transformed by a rush of wind seemingly sweeping her away. And the perfectly smooth-muscled, perfectly proportioned torso of Poseidon, rising from the waves—rising, to paraphrase a line in Shakespeare—like a dolphin with his back above his element. And Artemis—again, moving aggressively, almost flowing forward, her *chiton* pressed up against the supple curves of her body, suggesting a perfection, even an enticement, beyond human reach; about, as it were, to soar, her massive cape flowing out behind her as if she's airborne on wings. Supple, fluid. But the line always in firm control. Natural force of body and stone revealed by and yielding to

a very highly cultivated sense of form and proportion. And again, if one looks—I'm not going to quote because of time—but if one looks at Archaic texts, like the Homeric hymns, at the description of these gods, one sees they live in this incandescent world of splendor and ease and light and music and dance and song, and yet they look so like us in lineament and form and movement—and yet, in some ways, are so unlike us. But they presage the promise of another world beyond this one: ageless, deathless, and timeless.

So, what does all this mean? I can't overestimate the significance of this. Think of the quantum leap forward in man's mental makeup that this represents, by anthropomorphizing the gods, by making the gods over in human form, by making God over in man's image. Think of the courage, the confidence, the imagination, the spiritual clarity and awakening, the quantum conceptual leap that was required to stare out there into the dark, unknown universe, into the abyss, and to glimpse there, not a swamp of beasts, but the lineaments of man in the mysteries of the divine. So, to say that God made man in His image is almost to put it backwards. It was the greatest day for the gods when mankind saw, in the terrors of the universe, the "human form divine"; when man redeemed the universe from the terrible thrall of these theriomorphic beast-shaped, monstrous, hybrid forms that plagued the dreams of earlier men, and awakened humanity from these nightmarish forms and forces that oppressed it, that conspired to limit it, to a dream of gods as limitless and supernal *human* possibility. And behind their being (that is to say, behind the birth of these gods, the revelation of these gods) lies something like—again, it's hard to put a name on it, but for lack of a better phrase, I call it—the impulse to perfection, this god-intoxicated dream of "a world elsewhere," this transcendental impulse, to take God out of the ground, out of the beast, out of the tree, out of the rock, and dream him up out of the generational matrix: ageless, deathless, aesthetically rarified beings living, dwelling, in this shimmering, incandescent world elsewhere. And the

concomitant of this transcendental passion is not only a metaphysical discontent with the limits that the universe has hitherto imposed upon us, upon man, but a newly awakened capacity for abstraction, for abstract thinking, for conceptualization, for the habits of mind that have made possible all of the intellectual achievements of Western Civilization.

Dreaming these gods up, out of the ground, into their luminous realm, represents an impulse to abstract ourselves from and to ameliorate our own experience. To dream—no, to *join*—these gods represents, insofar as they are the embodiments of the highest human ideals, the capacity to abstract ourselves from our experience. And to that capacity, I think, we owe everything we value in our civilization. Of course, there's a long history to be told: technology, scientific thought and scientific achievement, higher mathematics, photonics, and spaceships that will take us to the stars. But also in culture: music, the architectonics of Mozart. And in the field of medical research: the desire to find a cure to cancer. Anything that uplifts or ameliorates, that seeks to make better or even aspires to make perfect the wretched death-bound suffering lot of man, "all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that flesh is heir to." Everything that strives to elevate us above that death-bound lot has been the thrust and trajectory represented by all the great achievements of Western Civilization. "All dreams of the soul," Plato once said, "begin in a beautiful body." And in the body—the bodies of those gods—from their bodies arise the highest dreams of man. That impulse to the sublime, or to perfection itself. To grasp the absolute. To seize the eternal.

Now, let me just add a footnote, because professors like footnotes. Striving after perfection is almost an archaic Greek mantra. When Achilles goes to battle—you know, his father sends him off with a simple command: *αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείρεχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων* (always be the best, the best, better than all the rest). This is striving after superhuman perfection. But how does one square this, how does one reconcile this, with the Delphic maxim for which later

Greece is known: nothing in excess (*μηδὲν ἄγαν*), that *σωφροσύνη*, that moderate safe-mindedness that also set the Greeks apart from Asiatic tyrants and potentates and arrogant imperial powers like the Persians that they were surrounded by? Nietzsche made an interesting observation about cultural phenomena that he called “negative inference.” He posited that a culture will project, as its highest and most desiderated ideal, that which it is most innately and characteristically, and even congenitally, incapable of. And so the Greek who is all excess, who is all striving after the absolute and aspires to this god-intoxicated world elsewhere, *αἰεὶν ἄριστεύειν*, always to be the best, to achieve perfection—for him, moderation becomes, as the natural counterweight, the ballast that grounds and balances his humanity, the highest cultural ideal. And it’s interesting how the institutions of Greece develop to keep this kind of balance between striving after excellence and understanding human limits. The *ἀγών*, the competition, permeates every aspect of Greek culture. And it is the *ἀγών* that keeps this dynamic tension between excess and aspiring after excellence, and restraint and understanding human limitation—keeps the dynamic tension of these alive. It permeates, I say, every facet, from athletic games to song and dance competitions, to the dramatic festivals themselves—the striving after excellence and perfection, but in a competitive context, where the emphasis is always more on the struggle than on the prize. In the victory odes of Pindar, when Pindar is celebrating an athletic achievement, the victor, in the moment of victory, for one tremulous, precariously-maintained moment, reveals a certain spark of divinity, touches and enacts the god to which he is indentured into existence. But no sooner does Pindar celebrate that than he reminds us that we men are just creatures of a day, shadows of a dream. And you might also recall the very interesting, curious custom in Athens—which was still operative into the fifth century—of ostracism. That when somebody became too big, too powerful, too influential—that is, when somebody threatened the competition and threatened to crush

others and the competitive spirit that leads to human excellence in others, they were expelled from Athens. And the expulsion could be as long as ten years.

So, speaking of ἀγών, let me turn to the most supremely agonistic form that the Greeks ever created, which was Greek drama. It's a distinctively Greek institution and invention. Its origins are obscure. They're lost. Even Aristotle, writing in the fourth century, can say no more—"something to do with satyrs," is about all he knows. But what we do know is this: Archaic Greece was a song-dance culture. There are many archaic choral traditions that survive. At some point, somewhere in the sixth century, it was reputedly Thespis who took the first actor out of the chorus and had him speak; in other words, separated the dancer from the dance. Try to imagine this: the others are presumably dancing and singing some sort of cult hymn as rapt celebratory devotees of the god Zeus—it's presumably some kind of a religious celebration and festival in honor of the god—and suddenly, one person is set apart and told to say something. They're busy chanting, hymning, intoning the great god Zeus, and he suddenly says, "Ah, but how do we know he even exists?" The actor suddenly steps forward and raises a question. He challenges all the traditional givens, the sureties and presumptions of the known universe, that which has been sacrosanct from time immemorial, and says, "Show me, prove it, I have some doubts." So drama is born of conflict. The tension between what is presumed and what is known or experienced, and the desire to put a question to the universe: What? How? Why? And this dialectical spirit suffuses the whole of Greek drama—so that, over time, even the chorus gets caught up in the act. The chorus, obviously religious in its origins, now gets *into* the act, as often questioning the gods as hymning their powers and their praises. In the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, the chorus sings of the mysterious workings of justice (Δίκη) in the universe and of the majesty and mystery of Zeus. And then it suddenly throws up its hands, chanting, "Zeus, Zeus, whatever you really are, if this

is even the name that pleases you, I have pondered everything, but I cannot find a way.” So the chorus itself becomes imbued with the interrogative spirit. The radical skepticism embodied, above all, by the actor who is there to clash, confront, contradict, and question. So this distinctively Greek spirit of radical skepticism and searching for answers through dynamic tensions and oppositions—*dialectically*—and the thoughtful reflection that underlies the invention of drama itself, represent in embryo a habit of mind—Plato will call it *διαλέγεσθαι*—that leads to his elenctic methods of questioning, that leads to Aristotle’s methods of classification, that leads to philosophy, to scientific thinking, and to the spirit of independent inquiry that makes a free society possible. In fact, everything we mean by, and subsume under, the category of the Western Mind and Western Civilization.

Now, again, it may seem improbable to connect the birth of the Olympian gods with the independence and freeing of the human mind from all of the superstitions and bugbears that had terrified and possessed it from time immemorial. And it may seem odd to connect the invention of Greek drama with the development of scientific thinking. But these are how they have always struck me. And they are distinctively Greek.

I have some other wonderful examples, but we don’t have time—maybe in question and answer. But in closing, I’d like to read from another letter. Because this legacy, your legacy, the genius of Greece, which is behind all the great achievements of Western Civilization, is in some serious trouble today. For centuries, the institutions of higher learning in the Western World have carried the ball because they understood its seminal importance. But for a number of reasons—some having to do with an ideological climate change and the influx of postmodernist thinking, which is inimical to the essentialism of Greece; some having to do with economic considerations, budget cuts, but also an increased preoccupation with vocationalism in the universities—the classics are in peril. It was mentioned that I’m the editor of a magazine called *Arion*; it’s a journal of humanities and the clas-

sics, and it is the only truly literary, humanistic classics journal. It has been recognized for its outreach. It is a journal of engaged, creative humanism. Here are original writers publishing alongside classical scholars. And it is a journal that has brought the legacy of Greece to a very broad readership and audience. And the letter I'd like to close with is a letter written by one great man to another great man. I won't reveal the recipient of the letter because I think that would be indiscreet, but he's a member of your community. He is a prominent Greek businessman and longtime benefactor of the Hellenic heritage. The author of this letter is John Silber, former president of Boston University. I met with John a few weeks ago, and I told him of the plight that *Arion* was facing and asked him if he knew anybody who might be able to help. We put our heads together and we talked about the importance of the journal and why its survival was vital, and why the legacy of Greece matters today. Let me just read you the letter he wrote, because I think he makes the case as eloquently as I could ever make it.

"My dear friend,

"I'm writing to enlist your help in a matter that concerns me greatly.

"At the University of Texas in the 1960s, the great classical scholar and poet/translator William Arrowsmith and I developed an excellent program in Greek studies by combining the best classicists in philosophy and in classical literature in a brilliant department. We also founded a journal named *Arion*. The purpose of all these efforts, including dozens of faculty and hundreds of students, was to keep the classics vital to the larger mission of the humanities.

"After I came to Boston University as president, I recruited Arrowsmith and other classicists to Boston University to continue our joint program. I thought *Arion* so important that I also brought it to Boston University. Herb Golder, a student and later colleague of Arrowsmith's, took up *Arion* here in 1990 and continued it after Arrowsmith's untimely death in 1992.

“What has always distinguished *Arion* from other journals is the vigor of the writing, the range and creativity of its scholarship, and the strength of its critical thinking, and the inclusion of poetic and original writing inspired by the classics—what Arrowsmith used to call ‘the development of imagination.’ As an outstanding journal of creative humanism, *Arion* has kept alive the link between classics and living culture. I have always considered *Arion* an essential part of the humanities, and it represents an integral part of the classical legacy that we developed.

“Golder’s achievements have been widely recognized. For example, in 1992, he was awarded the Council of Editors of Learned Journals Phoenix Award in recognition of his having revitalized *Arion*. In 2004 the American Philological Association awarded him and *Arion* its Outreach Award, recognizing that *Arion* is read and valued beyond the academy. It is by far the most influential publication supporting the Greek classical tradition.

“Its current operating budget represents a loss to the university of \$150,000 annually. And while Golder has been working diligently to generate revenues and garner foundation support, he is unlikely to close this gap for the next fiscal year.

“Now that I am no longer president, we have had to seek outside funding for some of the costs of *Arion*. Its excellent reputation merits continued support under Golder’s able leadership.

“For centuries, institutions of higher learning kept the classics central to the mission of the humanities. Now, with the influx of post-modernist thinking and a realigning of priorities by administrators, most colleges and universities are losing sight of that crucial mission, and of the classics’ place in it. I am writing to you, therefore, as part of the Greek community whose genius and heritage have been the basis of our civilization, to ask you to join me in supporting *Arion* for the critical part it plays in the survival of that tradition which I and others here at Boston University have labored so long to maintain and pass down to future generations.

“I enclose a sample issue. Herb Golder can, if you like, send additional issues for you to review. You will see that the classics have been kept not only alive, but kept lively. That *Arion* is a serious, professional journal—one that is also available to a broader international audience, and that it also treats modern artists like Seferis, Elytis, and Ritsos as part of the classical heritage. I am deeply committed to helping *Arion* continue publishing and carrying on the important work it has done over two decades.

“Knowing of your own substantial contributions to the preservation of our Greek heritage, I turn to you for support, and for your advice on where to turn in the Greek community for support.

“With respect and best wishes.

“Sincerely,

John Silber.”

I turn to you for your support and your advice. Thank you very much.