

A Perplexing Failure To Understand

Being a slightly revised extract from a letter to friend,
with some footnotes added post scriptum

One of the multitude of things that I have, for years, failed to understand - sans any belief in an all-powerful supra-personal deity - is why I am still alive while people like Sue and Fran - and the millions of others like them - died or were killed, too early. For they neither caused any deaths nor inflicted any suffering on another living being, human and otherwise, while I - and the millions like me, worldwide - continued to live despite having so caused, directly and/or indirectly, deaths and suffering. And in my case, directly and indirectly as my documented so lamentable extremist amoral decades - of violence, hatred, incitement, of being a "theoretician of revolution/terror" - so clearly reveal.

Yet - over twenty years after the death of Sue, and almost ten years since the death of Fran - here I am, still breathing, still pontificating. And all I have - despite years of interior reflexion - is a feeling, an intuition: of the how and why our thousand of years old human culture of *pathei-mathos* is important because - or so it seems to me - it might bring (at least to some others) a wordless intimation of one possible answer to such a perplexing question.

For it is a culture that includes, for example, such diverse artissements as the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* by Thomas Tallis, and the life - and death - of people such as Jesse James, Mohandas K Gandhi, and Edith Cavell; and which culture, enshrined as it is in *Studia Humanitatis*, can perchance teach some of each new generation that valuable lesson about our human *physis*, jumelle as our *physis* is [1] and thus paradoxical as we honourable/dishonourable (often hubriatic) mortals are:

ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν:
πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὄν κατὰ θυμόν,
ἀρνύμενος ἦν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων.
ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὧς ἐτάρους ἐρρύσατο, ἰέμενός περ:
αὐτῶν γὰρ σφετέρῃσιν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ὄλοντο,

νήπιοι, οἱ κατὰ βοῦς Ὑπερίονος Ἡελίοιο
ἦσθιον: ἀντὰρ ὁ τοῖσιν ἀφείλετο νόστιμον ἦμαρ

The Muse shall tell of the many adventures of that man
Of the many stratagems
Who, after the pillage of that hallowed citadel at Troy,
Saw the towns of many a people and experienced their ways:
He whose vigour, at sea, was weakened by many afflictions
As he strove to win life for himself and return his comrades to their homes.
But not even he, for all this yearning, could save those comrades
For they were destroyed by their own immature foolishness
Having devoured the cattle of Helios, that son of Hyperion,
Who plucked from them the day of their returning [2]

A lesson about ourselves which so many others have attempted to
communicate to us, as recounted in a certain tragedy:

οὔτω δ' Ἀτρέως παῖδας ὁ κρείσσων
ἐπ' Ἀλεξάνδρῳ πέμπει ξένιος
Ζεὺς πολυάνορος ἀμφὶ γυναικὸς
πολλὰ παλαίσματα καὶ γυιοβαρῆ
γόνατος κονίαισιν ἐρειδομένου
διακναιομένης τ' ἐν προτελείοις
κάμακος θήσων Δαναοῖσι
Τρωσὶ θ' ὁμοίως. ἔστι δ' ὄπη νῦν
ἔστι: τελεῖται δ' ἐς τὸ πεπρωμένον

Thus were those sons of Atreus sent forth
By mighty Zeus, guardian of hospitality, against Alexander
On account of that woman who has had many men.
And many would be the limb-wearying combats
With knees pushed into the dirt
And spears worn-out in the initial sacrifice
Of Trojans and Danaans alike.
What is now, came to be
As it came to be. And its ending has been ordained [3]

and as described - millennia ago - by a certain poetess:

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
ἔμμεν' ὤνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδυ φωνεί-
σας ὑπακούει
καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν

καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν
ὥς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὥς με φώναι-
σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,
ἀλλ' ἄκαν μὲν γλῶσσα <ἔαγε>, λέπτου
δ' αὐτικά χρωί πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,
<έκαδε μ' ἴδρωσ ψῦχρος κακχέεται / κὰδ' δέ ἴδρωσ κακχέεται>
τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐται

I see he who sits near you as an equal of the gods
For he can closely listen to your delightful voice
And that seductive laugh
That makes the heart behind my breasts to tremble.
Even when I glimpse you for a moment
My tongue is stilled as speech deserts me
While a delicate fire is beneath my skin -
My eyes cannot see, then,
When I hear only a whirling sound
As I shivering, sweat
Because all of me trembles;
I become paler than drought-grass
And nearer to death [4]

and as, for example, described by the scribe of an ancient Hermetic MS:

Solum enim animal homo duplex est; et eius una pars simplex, quae, ut Graeci aiunt οὐσιώδης, quam vocamus divinae similitudinis formam; est autem quadruplex quod ὑλικὸν Graeci, nos mundanum dicimus, e quo factum est corpus, quo circumtegitur illud quod in homine divinum esse iam diximus, in quo mentis divinitas tecta sola cum cognatis suis, id est mentis purae sensibus, secum ipsa conquiescat tamquam muro corporis saepta.

Humans are the only species that is jumelle, with one aspect that foundation which the Greeks termed οὐσιώδης and we describe as being akin in appearance to divinity, and yet also being quadruplex, termed by the Greeks ὑλικός and which we describe

as worldly; whereby from such is the corporeal [body] that, as mentioned, is of - in humans - the divinity, and in which is that divine disposition, to which it is solely related, that is in character a singular perceivment and uncoiling since enclosed within the corporeal. [5]

But will we - can we - mortals, en masse, read, listen, reflect, experience, and so learn? Or will we, as our tragic history of the past three millennia so seems to indicate, continue to be divided - individually, and en masse - between the masculine and the muliebral; between honour and dishonour; between war and peace; between empathy and ipseity?

I do so wish I knew. But all I have to offer, now in the fading twilight of my own mortal life, is an appreciation (perhaps contrary, these days, to οἱ πλείονες) of what some schools, independent ('private') or otherwise, still fortunately do understand is the importance of a 'classical education', and of what may possibly be apprehended by such poor words of mine as these:

Here, sea, Skylark and such a breeze as rushes reeds
Where sandy beach meets
To meld with sky
And a tumbling cumuli of cloud
Briefly cool our Sun.
I am no one, while ageing memory flows:

For was there ever such a bliss as this
While the short night lasted
And we touched kissed meshed ourselves together
To sweat, sweating, humid,
Fearing so many times to fully open our eyes
Lest it all really was
A dream

But Dawn arrived as it then arrived bringing with its
light
Loose limbs and such a reminder
As would could should did
Make us late that day for work.

So, here: a tiredness of age
Brightened by such a June as this

When sandy beach meets
To meld with sky
And that tumbling cumuli of cloud
Briefly cools a Sun

For there are so many recollections of centuries of a so human love, so many memories of years – centuries – of hubris and dishonour, that I can now only live each slowly passing daylight hour *modus vivendi*:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel [6]

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[1] Pœmandres (Corpus Hermeticum), 15:

καὶ διὰ τοῦτο παρὰ πάντα τὰ ἐπὶ γῆς ζῶα διπλοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ ἄνθρωπος, θνητὸς μὲν διὰ τὸ σῶμα, ἀθάνατος δὲ διὰ τὸν οὐσιώδη ἄνθρωπον. ἀθάνατος γὰρ ὢν καὶ πάντων τὴν ἐξουσίαν ἔχων τὰ θνητὰ πάσχει ὑποκείμενος τῇ εἰμαρμένῃ

Which is why, distinct among all other beings on Earth, mortals are jumelle; deathful of body yet deathless the inner mortal. Yet, although deathless and possessing full authority, the human is still subject to *wyrd*

See also Sophocles, *Antigone*, v. 334 & vv. 365-36:

πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδεν ἄνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλε...
σοφόν τι τὸ μηχανόεν τέχνας ὑπὲρ ἐλπίδ' ἔχων
τοτὲ μὲν κακόν, ἄλλοτ' ἐπ' ἐσθλὸν ἔρπει

There exists much that is strange, yet nothing
Has more strangeness than a human being...
Beyond his own hopes, his cunning
In inventive arts – he who arrives

Now with dishonour, then with chivalry

[2] Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 1, v. 1-9

[3] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, v. 60-68

[4] Sappho, Fragment 31

[5] Asclepius, VII, 13-20

[6] TS Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*

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