

**THE TRAGEDY OF GREECE; A LECTURE
DELIVERED FOR THE PROFESSOR OF
GREEK TO CANDIDATES FOR
HONOURS IN LITERAE HUMANIORES
AT OXFORD IN MAY 1920**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649193226

The tragedy of Greece; a lecture delivered for the professor of Greek to candidates for honours in literae humaniores at Oxford in May 1920 by A. J. Toynbee

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

A. J. TOYNBEE

**THE TRAGEDY OF GREECE; A LECTURE
DELIVERED FOR THE PROFESSOR OF
GREEK TO CANDIDATES FOR
HONOURS IN LITERAE HUMANIORES
AT OXFORD IN MAY 1920**

THE TRAGEDY
OF
GREECE

*A Lecture delivered for the Professor of
Greek to Candidates for Honours in
Literae Humaniores at Oxford
in May 1920*

BY
A. J. TOYNBEE

*Ipse Epicurus obit decurso lumine vitae,
qui genus humanum ingenio superavit et omnis
restinxit, stellas exortus ut aetherius sol.
tu vero dubitabis et indignabere obire?*

LUCRETIUS iii. 1042-5.

OXFORD
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1921

DF
218
.775

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW NEW YORK
TORONTO MELBOURNE CAPE TOWN BOMBAY
HUMPHREY MILFORD
PUBLISHED TO THE UNIVERSITY

11

H. 12-13-21 R.W.

I

The Work of Art

I BELIEVE that most of you who are attending this course of lectures have been studying Greek and Latin literature and are now going on to study Greek history.

I dare say many of you have been thinking over this change in your studies and perhaps looking forward to it, or regretting it, as the case may be. But this morning I want to draw your attention to the continuity between the literary studies on which you have been engaged, some of you for a considerable number of years—at school as well as at the University—and the historical studies on which you are embarking. After all, if names have any meaning, 'Literae Graecae et Latinae' (the official title of Honour Moderations) and 'Literae Humaniores' (the 'Greats' School) cannot really be alien to each other. The names imply that your studies in the local fields of Greek and Latin literature have equipped you for pursuing the same studies in the widest field of all—the field of humanity—and I believe that this is profoundly true.

Rec'd Victoria 27/2/22 R.F.

385530

6 THE TRAGEDY OF GREECE

owes nothing to others? And a civilization, the work of countless individuals and many generations, differs, I believe, in this respect from a poem or a statue not in kind but only in degree. It is a social work of art, expressed in social action, like a ritual or a play. I cannot describe it better than by calling it a tragedy with a plot, and history is the plot of the tragedy of civilization.

Students of the drama, from Aristotle onwards, will tell you that nearly all the great tragedies in literature are expositions of quite a few fundamental plots. And I suspect that the great tragedies of history—that is, the great civilizations that have been created by the spirit of man—may all reveal the same plot, if we analyse them rightly. Each civilization—for instance, the civilization of Mediaeval and Modern Europe and again that of Ancient Greece—is probably a variant of a single theme. And to study the plot of civilization in a great exposition of it—like the Hellenic exposition or our own Western exposition—is surely the right goal of a humane education.

But of course one asks: Why study Ancient Hellenic civilization rather than ours? The study of any one civilization is so complex, it demands so many preliminary and subordinate studies—linguistic, institutional, economic, psychological—that it is likely to absorb all one's energies. The

greatest historians have generally confined themselves to the study of a single civilization, and the great Greek historians—Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius—concentrated on their own, and only studied others in so far as their own came into contact with them. Clearly, people who are going to be historians, not for life, but as an education for life, must make their choice. They must practically confine themselves to studying one civilization if they are to reap the fruits of study at all, and in this case it is natural to ask: Why study Hellenism rather than our own history? There are two obvious arguments in favour of studying modern history. It seems more familiar and it seems more useful. And I am not going to misrepresent these arguments by stating them only in their cruder forms. By 'familiar' I do not mean 'easy', and when I say that modern history seems more useful than ancient I do not mean that the study of it is a closer approximation to a Pelman course. There is an exceedingly crude view of education among some people just now—I think it is largely due to the war, and I hope it will disappear like other ugly effects of the war—which inclines to concentrate education on applied chemistry, say, or engineering, with a vague idea that people whose education has been devoted to these subjects will

8 THE TRAGEDY OF GREECE

be more capable of competing with foreigners in the dye industry or of working in munition factories in the next emergency. In the same way, I dare say, concentration on modern history might be supposed to fit you for securing concessions abroad for your firm, or for winning a parliamentary election. Of course, this attitude, though I believe it is rather widespread just now, is absurd. I need not labour that here. The fallacy lies in confusing the general theoretical knowledge of a subject acquired through being educated in it with the technical knowledge and personal experience which you must have if you are to turn the same subject to practical account in after life. There is no difference of opinion on this point between 'humanists' and 'scientists'. The issue is between people who do not appreciate the value of the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself, and those who do appreciate it and who therefore understand what education means. True lovers of knowledge and true believers in education will be found on the same side in this controversy, whether the subject of their study happens to be the spirit of man or the laws of its environment. But apart from that crude utilitarianism, which is as unscientific as it is un-humane, a serious argument for studying modern rather than ancient history can also be

stated from the humane and the scientific point of view. It may be argued that the direct experience we have of our own civilization makes it possible for us to have a deeper, and therefore a more humane and scientific, understanding of it than we can ever have of Ancient Greece. And one might go on to argue, on grounds of humanism alone, that such a comprehension of the character and origins of our civilization would have a more profound humanizing influence upon its development than a less intimate study of a different civilization could produce. This argument is bound, I think, to appeal to the generation which has experienced the war. The war is obviously one of the great crises of our civilization. It is like a conflagration lighting up the dim past and throwing it into perspective. The war makes it impossible for us to take our own history for granted. We are bound to inquire into the causes of such an astonishing catastrophe, and as soon as we do that we find ourselves inquiring into the evolution of Western Civilization since it emerged from the Dark Age. The shock of the Peloponnesian War gave just the same intellectual stimulus to Thucydides, and made him preface his history of that war with a critical analysis, brief but unsurpassed, of the origins of Hellenic civilization—the famous intro-