

**THE GREEK TRADITION;
ESSAYS IN THE
RECONSTRUCTION
OF ANCIENT THOUGHT**

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The Greek tradition; essays in the reconstruction of ancient thought by J. A. K. Thomson

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ESSAYS IN THE RECONSTRUCTION
OF ANCIENT THOUGHT

BY

J. A. K. THOMSON, M.A.

Author of "Studies in the Odyssey"

WITH A PREFACE BY PROF. GILBERT MURRAY

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*Let all men judge, who is it can deny
That the rich crown of old Humanity
Is still your birthright? and was ne'er let down
From heaven for rule of beasts' lives, but your own?*

CHAPMAN.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN Mr. Thomson's fine *Studies in the Odyssey* appeared, I happened to notice one solemn reviewer who, after four lines of earnest misdescription, concluded by expressing his grief that any University had published such a book. It should have been strangled unborn and its author effectually silenced. Meditating on the point of view disclosed, I remembered that exactly the same thing had been said about one of my own early books. And, on further reflection, I recalled at least three other scholars, now occupying University Chairs or similar positions, whose early writings were welcomed in the same way.

There is nothing odd in this. It is only one more reminder to us old and established scholars to keep our minds as alert as we can, and not grow stiff and deaf in our favourite orthodoxies. But the incident made me try to think why I had derived so much pleasure and instruction from a book which other students appeared whole-heartedly to despise.

I think the reason probably lies in a certain divergence of view about the proper aims of scholarship. When a scholar prepares to comment upon an ancient poem—say an Ode of Pindar—he may, for instance,

find out from the lexica the received translations of all the words, analyse the syntax, identify the dialectical forms, tabulate the comments of the scholia and make a scheme of the metre ; he may, with luck, collect definite evidence of the date at which the Ode was performed. So far he will be on what is called 'safe ground.' It is not in the least safe really ; for the lexicon interpretation will probably be inadequate, the syntax of a particular passage may have some subtlety of its own which escapes the broad rule, the scholia will be confused or, more important still, will not have sufficient command of exegetical language to say what they mean, and so on. But it is safe in the sense that, if he is challenged, he can give "chapter and verse" for all his statements. And of course he will have done valuable work.

Yet he will not yet have asked himself the two questions that matter most : What does this poem mean ? and What is there fine about it ? Still less will he have asked a third question : How did it come to be what it is ?

Now these questions are rather like the great problems of philosophy. Philosophers tell us that, though we may never raise those problems or even know of their existence, we cannot help consciously or unconsciously answering them. I believe there are scholars who, by great self-restraint, inhibit their natural curiosity and try their best to avoid asking any question whose answer does not admit of what they would call proof. But they do not really succeed. All that happens is that since these questions cannot be 'counted' in examinations and since they demand faculties which the ordinary routine of a scholar's or

teacher's life does not specially cultivate, they answer them carelessly or irritably. They treat them as trifles and interruptions. And when they find a scholar, like Mr. Thomson, who is almost entirely occupied with such subjects, they are bewildered. They expect him to be answering their questions, whereas he is really answering his own. And they read, skipping and skipping and wondering when the point is coming, and in the end do not see what it was all about; they only know that they violently disagree with, say, a footnote on p. 1000.

Now of late there has been an interesting change of emphasis in the study of Greek, a change, we may say, from morphology towards semantics: from the study of forms towards the study of meanings. Of course neither side can be neglected with impunity. But from the semantic point of view the central fact to grasp is that to understand Greek literature you must be able to understand literature, and that you cannot understand literature without using your imagination. Your imagination is, of course, faulty and liable to mislead—just like your other faculties. You can never arrive at certain and complete knowledge of what Aeschylus had in his mind when he composed a particular passage. But, unless you prefer to give up trying to understand anything at all, the only help is to train your imagination, widen its range and improve its sensitiveness, and by increased knowledge make it a better instrument for approaching the truth.

Of course a weak or lazy or irresponsible imagination is no use at all. Indeed the quality on whose usefulness I am insisting might perhaps be called power of analysis rather than merely imagination. It is the power and