

# The Power of the Word

## Introduction:

Here this evening to suggest that we as Greeks are doubly blessed with regard to patrimony.

We have a Christian Orthodox Legacy  
&  
We have an Ancient Hellenic Legacy

- What I hope to suggest is that despite many clear antipathies between Christianity & Paganism, there was nevertheless an eventual synergism between ancient Paideia & the Kerygma of early Christianity
- This marriage was promoted by both the Cappadocian and the earlier Alexandrian fathers
- And as we will see, the significance of this convergence cannot be overstated because it helped stem a series of powerful, disintegrative forces that threatened both the unity and the very identity of the Church itself
- In more specific terms, I plan to show that the ancient Greek wonderment for the word, for the mystery of language, became an integral part of the early Church's efforts to clarify doctrine, convert the masses, & inspire the faithful.
- To begin, allow me to offer a few observations on the general significance of language.
- In this regard, we are guilty to some degree of simplistic underestimation
- Too often we think of language as a reflexive mechanism of communication; an assembly of words reflecting certain culturally determined symbols and their conventional use.
- This is not the way the Ancient Greeks understood language
- For them-Language is the unique Arete possessed by man. Language separates us from all other life.
- The ancient assessment is shared today by modern experts including philosophers, Historians, and Psycholinguists: Benjamin Whorf to Walter Ong to Edward Sapir & Noam Chomsky
- M. Heidegger for example speaks of Dasein – i.e. unique human consciousness formed by language
- Human identity formed in the Womb of Language
- Also means all culture is formed, developed, and transmitted via language

- Another point we should not overlook re language is the phenomenon of linguistic inequity. Not all languages are created equally. Not all languages are capable of bearing the same weight conceptually speaking.
- As an illustration – how did Greeks invent science & philosophy? An autochthonous achievement – unique to Hellas. Ancient Greek peculiar syntax & grammar – especially prevalent use of the definite article See Bruno Snell – Discovery of the Mind
- Power of the definite articles lies in this:
  - Delimits & defines an idea > detaches from context
  - Promotes generic/category status
  - Individualizes universal categories allowing for comparisons
  - (Bracketing)
- Latin has no definite article. Explains why Cicero must resort to unwieldy circumlocutions when he attempts to express Greek philosophical concepts in his native language – also mentioned by Lucretius – poverty of Latin Tongue
- Thus, Amos Wilder, well-known Biblical scholar said “The language of a people is its fate” Truly applicable when it comes to the ancient Greeks.
- Profound respect for their “fate”, from the beginning. Respect for the magic and majesty of words is found in the most ancient of Hellenic traditions. Pausanias claimed that Theseus (synosis) had established a cult to Peitho – the goddess of persuasion
- Homer makes a melifluous tongue a prized virtue among his heroes.
- As Phoenix, Achilles’s teacher reminds his student in Bk 9 (Embassy Scene), he was sent by Peleus to accompany Achilles to ensure that he become both “a speaker of words and a doer of deeds”.
- Phoenix notes that men are made pre-eminent not simply on the battlefield but also in debate
- Remember too, Nestor, “the Ancient Counselor” “the lucid speaker of Pylos, from whose lips the stream of words ran sweeter than honey (1.247-8)”.
- Also, Odysseus whose words “come drifting down like the wintry snows, against which no man could stand (3.220-223) “
- Classical era, a debate as to who was the more complete hero – Achilles or Odysseus. Achilles an inexorable force of nature in combat – but Odysseus may have been the consummate champion given his superior facility with words.
- Now let’s move forward to the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. bearing in mind the architectonic role Homer played in Greek Culture – that his image of the speaker of words & doer of deeds remained the model of human virtue.

- By the mid 5<sup>th</sup> cent. The Greek Alphabet has been well est. (1<sup>st</sup> Phonetic). The City State has been well est. (1<sup>st</sup> phonetic). The city state has become the chief form of social organization and Democracy has been est. at several key cities, including Athens w/ its emphasis of Isegoria.
- This is a perfect environment for a movement known as sophistry. Today the term sophist carries strongly pejorative connotation. Originally – only a skilled or wise man Homer & Pindar). Defamatory tones lent by Aristophanes and above all, Plato.
- The roster of great sophists included –
  - Protagoras
  - Gorgias
  - Hippias
  - Antiphon
  - Prodicus
- A remarkable group who revolutionized Western Culture. They completely transfigure Hellenic paideia.  
Supplant the old Aristocratic learning they eclipse the Kitharistes, Paidotribes with a vast new menu of subject matters – science – mathematics – astronomy
- They accomplish two things:
  - Redefine Arete – knowledge (techne) not bloodlines
  - Democratize learning Virtue as acquired characteristic
- As a group, the Sophists were:
  - heterodoxic
  - iconoclastic
  - polymathic
  - pragmatic
  - humanistic &
  - secular
 Above all they were Masters of the Word. The fathers of Rhetoric.
- New Sophistic teaching reaches Athens in 427 B.C. brought there by a key figure in the movement – Gorgias of Leontini. There on a diplomatic mission but he presents his case to the Athenians using a new form of speech – Alter the course of World history – Rhetoric
- His highly ornate language sweeps the Athenians off their feet. His colorful use of parallelism, assonance & antithesis form a style known today as euphuism (euphuos ancient Greek for “clever”). See his Praise of Hellen Defense of Palamedes
- Tradition says rhetoric born C. 465 B.C. at city-state of Syracuse with the deposing of the tyrant Thrasybulus. Court claims to re-establish Property confiscated by the tyrant. Tisias & Corax invent manuals on how to speak persuasively before the dicasts.
- This is the exact moment when language became conscious of itself. Now speech becomes the object of rational & scientific analysis – no longer a reflexive response. But a meticulously choreographed program of oral presentation which includes logical (enthymeme) psychological

(e.g. Therasymachus on Pities Antiphones Clinic at Corinth) and even body language (cheirnomia – Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria)

- Over time, 3 distinct forms of rhetoric evolved:
  - Deliberative (political)
  - Forensic (courts) Demosthenes – Delivery, Delivery, Delivery
  - Epideictic (display-praise/blame)
- No facet of Greek Civilization was immune to this – the first system of meta linguistics in world history. Even the ancient Physicians are effected e.g. See Hippocratic Corpus – Decorum
- Objections to Rhetoric: Rise of Rhetoric not without objection and controversy. Most strident voice is Plato's who constantly asks “what about truth” what are the implications of sophist relativism MAN IS THE MEASURE-Protagoras
- Sophist epistemology For the Sophist there is no Noesis. No supersensible reality with normative implication. For them doxa is the mother of aleitheia
- Instead of eternal verities, they offer belief & opinion. And words are the means of instilling both. Words are incantational; magical, spellbinding. They craft the soul, molding it by persuasion. Truth is therefore – a negotiable thing. Always fluid – a preferential conviction All convictions untimely preferential.
- These are the views that infuriate Plato. But in the end even he must acknowledge the power of rhetoric. Seen in Phaedrus and in LAWS provision made for a higher Rhetoric. Aristotle already teaching rhetoric at the Academy – prior to Plato's death.
- Still, the philosophers concerns remains valid. Rhetoric is a tool. A device. Good or evil purpose - depending on the user.
- The next figure in our historical survey is the great Athenian Rhetorician, Isocrates the student of Gorgias.
- He was the great rival of Plato. Est terms & conditions of an agon between Rhetoric & Dialectic. Some sense, rhetoric was victorious.
- Isocrates was the student of Gorgias A gifted speech writer – we have many. Language more important than the barren abstractions of the philosophers – we are human because of Logos!

“Because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and generally speaking there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish”  
(letter to Nicocles & Antidosis)
- Isocrates promoted the idea that great literary models (paradigma memesis) should form the core of the learning experience. For 800 years this model of paideia served Western Civilization. Should be remembered everytime one sits in a literature course.

- It was this version of education that was taken-up by Cicero & Quintilian. Cicero in his De Oratore describes Isocrates as a Trojan Horse from which emerged generations of Lovers of fine phrases.
- Also it the Isocratean notion of the higher learning that was exported to the East by the conquests of Alexander. This is how the rhetorical hermeneutical traditions among the Jews is to be explained, i.e. Rabbinic Judaism
- So, there is a double Diaspora of the Greek tongue and its methods - One East and One West
- This brings us to the Post Hellenistic & Roman periods where Greek rhetoric experiences an explosive revival known as the second sophistic, so named by Philostratus. 2<sup>nd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> cent A.D. Emphasis here on epideictic Oratory – display speech (praise or blame a given subject)
- For the next 4 centuries, rhetoric served as the undisputed definition of Paideia. The timeframe includes the period of Christianity's formation.
- At this time Roman Emperers were establishing endowed Chairs in Rhetoric at major cities throughout the empire – Vespasian, Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius
- This brings us to St. Paul. Educated at Jerusalem under Gamaliel I. Babylonian Talmud (Tractate, BABA KAMMA 83a) says Gamaliel's students also routinely educated in “the Greek Wisdom”, viz, Rhetoric. Paul A Hellenized Jew & Roman citizen. All suggest exposure to Greek paideia.
- Definitive evidence in the epistles themselves. See G.A. Kennedy. All these forms of Rhetoric are found there.
  - Forensic – Galatians
  - Epideictic – Icorinthians
  - I Thesalonians
  - Rhetoric diatribe – Romans 1.18-25
  - Rhetorical paradox & Irony –
    - e.g. The call to be a fool for Christ
    - e.g. Christ's victory in his physical defeat (crucifixion)
- In particular, Paul presents an endless stream of tropes – embellishments & figures of speech
- Throughout his letters we find word play such as:
  - Antonomasia – epithets, e.g. “super-apostles”
  - Asyndeta – repetition of some key term
  - polysyndeton – repetition of linking term
  - metonymy – substitute words, e.g. his blood for Crucifixion
  - erotema - rhetorical questioning
  - anaphora – repetition of last word in a clause, in next clause
  - antanaclasis – same word repeated but used in a new sense
    - e.g. LAW (Mosaic/Jesus)

- These are not chance occurrences. Part of a consciously constructed tapestry skillfully employed by St. Paul to spread the Good News, to instill conviction, and to prosleytize on behalf of the faith.
- St. Paul was as much a Son of Gorgias as he was a Son of Abraham
- And this brings us back to good work of the hierarchs. In their day, powerful central forces at work in the Nascent Church. Above all, there were destructive questions afoot along Christological lines. Battle over Jesus' identity and his relationship to the godhead.
- In the middle of this identity crisis men such as Basil, Gregory, & John Chrysostom stepped forward.
- As the champions of Orthodoxy. They helped to revitalize the Nicene Creed. They helped to crush the Arian heresy that denied full divinity to Christ. They helped defend against the Pneumatomachi, who rejected the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
- What we must also acknowledge here is the continuous presence in their activities of ancient paideia. The tools they used in defense of Orthodox were the Rhetorical weapons traceable back to the likes of Protagoras, Demosthenes, & Isocrates.
- Educationally, our hierarchs shared a common background. Studied among the greatest professors of Rhetoric in their day – men such as Prohairesus, Himerius, & above all, Libanius.
- With the assimilation of Ancient Rhetoric to the Holy purposes of the Faith, Plato's ancient concern was resolved. The "word" of ancient Hellas was joined to the word of Christ and the glue that achieved this merger was the devotion, humility, & piety of the 3 Hierarchs.

### **Summary Survey:**

1. The Greeks must be credited with formulating a linguistic medium that fostered scientific & philosophical thought.
2. They created the 1<sup>st</sup> system of metalinguistics in world history. They made language an object of scientific research, analysis & development. They elevate language to the level of science.
3. They helped equip a fledgling Church with the conceptual & linguistic tools it needed to crystallize its identity & accomplish its mission. In a real sense, we can speak of St. Basil, Gregory & John as Christian Sophists – in the best sense of the word.
4. Finally, the Greeks have bestowed a ubiquitous/powerful legacy to modernity. There is hardly a facet of modern life that does not reflect the skillfully embroidered language of the ancients. From our pulpits, in our courts, in our schools, in the Halls of Congress, to Wall St., and Madison Avenue.

Be advised my friends, the Greek Tongue continues to wag, Gorgias Lives!

## The Hierarchs

### St. Basil

Brother of Gregory of Nyssa

Educated at Caesarea, Constantinople, 7 Athens

Dies 379 A.D. before 2<sup>nd</sup> Ecumenical Council – Constantinople 381 D.C

Key defender against Arianism

A/s against the Pneumatomachi

### St. Gregory of Nazareth

Educated in Athens

Major role in re-establishing Nicene Creed at Constantinople 381 B.C.

Collects writings w/Basil of Origins - Philocalia

### St. John Chrysostom

Greatest Christian Expositor – Greatest since Demosthenes

Humble – wanted the eremitic life

Educated at Antioch by Libanius

Father of our Liturgy

Wrote, “On the Priesthood”