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A MUSE FOR RECOLLECTION: ON COLLECTING ANCIENT GREEK TEXTBOOKS

Rachel, my cousin, rubbernecks at the bookshelf's contents then at me. She tilts her head, creases her eyebrows. They're brown and thin and line her forehead with confusion.

"Wait, these are...your books?"

Anyone else might have been confused too. Vestiges of my youth—a sixth grade clay sculpture of an oddly-proportioned hippo and a 5x7 portrait showcasing my never-in-vogue bowl cut—sit atop a bookshelf whose second ledge exposes Ancient Greek textbook spines. I take it Rachel is reconciling a ur-adult with the stereotypic caricature of an old, elbow-patched curmudgeon; she is teasing apart the twenty-one-year-old me from the one who, depending on your stance toward the classics, is either studying the foundation of Western thought or the language of neatly-etched college insignias.

I slide out one of the textbooks, *Little Studies in Greek*, and show her my name printed in print-cursive on the inside cover. As I thumb through the aged and suntanned pages they sound crinkly like feet stamping on leaves.

"Yes, of course they're mine," I say.

That book was the first book I acquired in my Ancient Greek textbook collection. A tall woman named Ms. Thomas, distinguished for her Medusan mangle of brown knotty hair, gave it to me in high school. She was a Latin teacher and had a penchant for orating like Isocrates, for cawing spontaneously in Virgilian dactylic hexameter, and for shedding light on obscure Roman mythological figures like Lima and Sterquilinus; her enthusiasm was infectious. Ms. Thomas had instilled in me a curiosity to explore classics' intricate mysteries – to unravel its ambiguous word order and to make sense of its often-illogical history.

One day, after a lesson on the ruins of Pompeii, she tells us she's leaving Wheeler school and moving to New York. Behind her sits a white carton of hauled-in books that need, she says, to be passed on. She pushes them forward with her purple clogs.

"It's a sad thing, but I know your hands will care for them more than mine." Her statement feels oddly reminiscent of Odysseus' epic departure.

She lugs the box around the classroom and we grab for whatever dictionaries or textbooks rest inside. When she gets to me, she points to a near-green hardcover whose corners are worn: *Little Studies in Greek*. She jokes I should check out that 'other' classical language: Ancient Greek.

Later that day, I crack open the book out of curiosity, but like my cousin I too become disoriented. Blocky capitals and serpentine lowercase Greek letters intercept my gaze. The preface's well-laundered '30's parlance—"brief outlines of Greek literature and art appended with the hope of so stimulating the interest of the student"—seem practically unintelligible. I'm not sure if I should be comforted or dismayed by this gem: "[*Little Studies in Greek*] may appeal to parents who desire to know why their children are studying Greek." (Some things really don't change, I suppose.)

Undertaking the study of Ancient Greek felt like a Sisyphean task, and I hadn't even grappled with the language's more difficult parts: nasal double-stem nouns, telic participles, and athematic verbs. I stuck it out though; once I mastered the elementary principles—the Greek alphabet and the -αϛ declension—and once I arrived at WashU where my introductory Ancient Greek class used *Athenaze*—the *de facto* Greek primer—and once I *finally* understood nasal double-stem nouns and telic participles and athematic verbs, I soon recognized the more valuable qualities of *Little Studies in Greek*. Sure the book seemed like a sterile didactic instrument at first, but its content, exposed to the patina of time, had made the Greek civilization seem just *that* much closer; *Little Studies in Greek* made it seem as if I could truly grip the Greek civilization in all its ancient glory. As if I could truly touch beehive chambers called θόλοι and cyclopean walls in Mycenae. As if I

could truly know Plato and Homer and Socrates. Rewarding aphorisms at the end of each chapter (Chapter 4: μελέτη τὸ πᾶν, “Interest is the whole thing”) made the rigors of Ancient Greek seem even less daunting.

Since this newfound appreciation, I have expanded my textbook collection from three books—*Little Studies in Greek*, *Athenaze I*, *Athenaze II*—to eight. And it’s growing at the pace of swift-footed Achilles. By scouring eBay and channeling my inner Mercury—the patron god of commerce—I snatched up *The First Greek Book*, *From Alpha to Omega: An Introduction to Classical Greek*, and *First Greek Grammar Syntax*. I perused the annual Providence outdoor book fair and liberated *Phillips’ New Introduction to Greek* and *Introduction to Attic Greek* from the depths of a sad-looking blue storage container. Besides marveling at each text’s pedagogical tactics, I also admire each book’s stylistic differences. The *Phillips’* stately ashen-black cover intimates something plainly illustrative. A serif ‘60’s typeface dots creased ivory pages while terse explanations of grammar mimic Ancient Greek’s very exactitude. Most notably, the aorist passive and perfect systems don’t make appearances until chapters thirty-one and thirty-two, keeping the reader anchored in the present tense – the always-immediate Greek.

On the other hand, *From Alpha to Omega* sports a plucky sunflower-yellow cover. A Siren-like woman strumming the κιθάρα (a two-stringed lyre) invites readers to explore fifty chapters brimming with classic Ancient Greek prose and enlightening paradigm tables. Author Anne Groton illustrates her uncanny ability to meld together folksy Ancient Greek passages and footnoted syntactical technicalities when she writes, “I strove to make the textbook as pleasant and accessible as possible without sacrificing its rigor.”

But the collection’s most impressive aspect is that despite Ancient Greek’s uniform and standard nature, the textbooks are more disparate than the always-opposed gods Ἔρις (Strife) and Ἄρμονία (Harmony). It’s easy to imagine *Introduction to Attic Greek*—replete with arcane linguistic

scholarship—as a curmudgeonly highbrow prattling on about Grassmann’s Law, or to envision *The First Greek Book*—chock-full of elegant lithographic drawings—as some gentlemanly figure humming noun declensions on an evening stroll. Despite the collection’s Janus-faced personality, all these textbooks pay homage to the richly-saturated Greek language; with the aid of these textbooks, I’m now able to read Thucydides and untangle his densely-packed eponymous sentences. I’m able to transcend the line between the linguistic $\theta\eta\sigma\alpha\upsilon\rho\acute{o}\varsigma$ and the real-life treasure house in Delphi. I’m able to remember.

By showcasing the language’s richness and depth, my Ancient Greek textbook collection not only has enraptured me, but also has served as a conduit for memory – as a muse for recollection. Each book evokes a real life persona: Rachel and Ms. Thomas (*Little Studies in Greek*), the me tracing out lambdas and omegas (*Athenazē*), the me charmed by Lysias’ tact (*From Alpha to Omega*). These memories, coupled with the disorienting, but also comforting nature of Ancient Greek itself, serve as an inspiration to study—and to keep studying—the past, the classics.

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