

THE GREEK LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE.

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Amidst wars' alarms, and death marching with anarchy for a companion, the quiet contemplation of a movement in literature towards a higher form of energy and usefulness is an anodyne that is worth seeking. Such an anodyne is to be found in a movement which, although it has no birth in England, yet may by English help and English assistance attain great results—the attempt of a band of cultured Greek scholars to crystallise their language as it is spoken and understood to-day into such order and form as may establish it as classic for its time, and enlarge the scope of all Greek learning by bringing to the schoolroom and the home literature of all kinds—philosophy, science, poetry, and fiction—in a diction at once dignified and simple, such as may be handed down to posterity with no apologies, and which will serve the highest purpose of a language, that of representing contemporary thought and history as it was; and this is best done by employing a language which is pure and yet representative of the people at the time it is spoken. In the English language Mr. Ruskin, perhaps as notably as any, has so employed modern English to convey to his readers his thoughts and conclusions in a diction picturesque and pure, but he has few imitators, and more is the pity. For Greece this band of writers may do much, but they have a heavy task. They meet at the threshold the opposition of the Legislature, whose laws are written after the archaic manner; that also of the professions, who retain much of it; that of the schools, which teach from the classical model, and base their teaching for modern life and conditions on a dead grammar, bringing to a half life dead words, which may confuse but cannot replace for use those which have grown up with the nation.

A hurried glance at the progress of the Greek language since what may be termed the classic times discovers that literature has not been dead: it has not been the literature of philosophers; rather has it been that of the chronicler, the romancer, and, more latterly, the poet and ballad maker. In a language, or in form of a language, which is not that of the classics, our New Testament was written, and may still be read. Vernacular, simple, pure, it helps us to understand much of the speech of the people of that time. Yet were it to be judged on the classical model it would be found wanting; but it is a classic of its own time. The Byzantine period gives to posterity histories, but no poetry until after the capture of Constantinople by the Turks, and yet Prodrômus proved the best, but only amongst a class we might term "minor." In prose the Byzantine period lacked originality or creative power. The Greeks of this period rather served the purpose of librarians and book collectors. But from the tenth century onwards some notable writers and striking work from time to time appeared. An early work, "The Pastor of Hermas," shows unmistakable indications of the influence of the early vernacular language of this period upon modern Greek. The "Exploits of Basilios Digenis Akritas," of the second half of the tenth century, is even more striking an example. The Neo-Hellenic movement, which had its rise near the end of the last century, had good for its object, but has brought about the direst confusion. One school went for the ancient form; this school was led by Chrysopoulos. Another school, headed by Economos, went for a qualified classical language; while a third, led by Corais, adopted a compromise and carried current feeling with it. Complex, transposed, confusing, little wonder that modern Greek literature has suffered under the infliction.

The new Hellenic movement, although following a channel formed by Corais, was very ardent, and in spite of this drawback due to a bad vehicle, a great deal of literature was published, although the readers were comparatively few and the resources of the country narrow. The apostles and disciples of this school of compromise claim that this was the result of their work. It was in spite of it, and the present movement is aimed at giving this Hellenic literary fervour a natural channel, and not an artificial one, a channel which, like a river passing through a country since time immemorial, follows the changes due to time, but remains the river still. The Corais movement is purely artificial and more of the nature of a canal—stiff, silted, ugly—and not after the nature of the country through which it is mechanically cut.

England, busy with her own affairs, little wote of literary movements of importance passing in countries so small compared with herself, although the birth-place of a literature she prizes before all other. Yet she may learn great lessons for her own advancement if she but traces in her own history a parallel. Does England not need a band of purists eager to establish a modern English, which shall be a classic of to-day, but of the best of to-day, frowning at the careless phrase, welcoming the clear-cut sentence, rejecting slang, and opening the arms to simplicity. The modern writer of fiction will suffer, but literature in general will gain, pedantry will be relegated to the past, but purity will come to the front.

So far, this Greek brotherhood, of which this article speaks, has actually done but little, yet a few works are before us, one of them "Tales of the Isles of Greece," by Argyris Ephtaliotis, being a particularly charming example, its translation from the pure, modern, simple Greek into English having lost little or nothing through the skill of the translator, Mr. Rouse, a man deeply imbued with the best Greek traditions. It is a series of native sketches of peasant character—romantic, simple, picturesque, and Greek in every touch and word. It deals of the people of to-day, the things of to-day, in the language of to-day, and will repay the reading. Other works on political economy, on philosophy, on science, fiction, poetry, are now in the press, to show that the pure language of a pure people is the best vehicle for thought and expression; and, while allowing the writings of classic times to do their work as they alone can do it, to do the work of to-day with the tools and by the means that he at men's hands now, and merely crave the using of them.

I.B.M.

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