

# The History of the Decline and Fall Of the Greek Republics (1808)

Wilhelm von Humboldt

*THE FOLLOWING ESSAY was written as the first chapter of a book which Wilhelm von Humboldt planned, but did not complete. Nothing of such beauty and profundity on the subject of antiquity, and the Greeks in particular, exists in the English language.*

*Humboldt's insights into the ideality of the Greek character, in contrast to the modern era and that of the Romans, is useful to contemplate. In his brief description of the Romans, we can see echoes of our own degeneration, alienation from nature, and alienation from our own humanity. Hence the differentiation between the Classical (Greek) and the Romantic (Roman, modern).*

*Humboldt's profound friendship and dialogue with Friedrich Schiller is reflected in various ways throughout the piece: in his presentation of the Greek ideal, and especially in his discussion of the concepts of "impulse" and "longing." His elaboration of "impulse," is akin to Johannes Kepler's use of the word "intention," to describe the behavior of the planetary orbits—there is an intention, a passion for the planets to act in the way they do, in accordance with the mind of the Creator, just as with the impulse of the Greeks. It is not arbitrary.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Concerning the Greek Character in General, and the Ideal Persuasion of the Same in Particular

1. The current age finds itself in a situation with respect to antiquity, which was totally alien to antiquity. We have a nation before us, in the Greeks, under whose fortunate hands everything, judging by our innermost inclination, which preserves the highest and richest aspects of human existence, had already ripened to ultimate perfection. We look upon them as a branch of humanity formed from a nobler and purer material; looking back upon the centuries of their Golden Age as on an epoch in which nature, freshly emerging from the workshop of creation, had maintained a still purer relationship with the Greeks;

since they, scarcely looking backward or forward, planted everything anew, founded everything anew, and, pursuing in peaceful simplicity their unrestrained endeavors, exhaling the natural longing of their breasts, established standards of eternal beauty and greatness.

Therefore, for us the study of Greek history is not as it is with the history of other peoples. The Greeks step forth entirely from the selfsame place; although their destinies belong equally to the general chain of events, therein lies but their least importance in regard to us; and we would absolutely misjudge our relationship to them, were we to dare apply the yardstick of the rest of world history to them. Knowledge of the Greeks is not simply pleasing, useful, and necessary to us—it is only in them that we find the ideal which we ourselves would like to be and to bring forth. Although every other period of history enriches us with human wisdom and human experi-

ence, we acquire from the contemplation of the Greeks something more than the earthly, something even almost divine.

For, by what other name should one call a sublimity, whose unattainability, instead of discouraging, remoralizes and incites one to emulation? If we compare our restricted, narrow-hearted situation, oppressed by a thousand shackles of capriciousness and habit, fragmented by countless petty occupations, which never delve deeply into life, with the Greeks' free, pure activity, whose sole goal was the highest in humanity; if we compare our labored works, maturing slowly by repeated efforts, with theirs, which flow forth from the mind and spirit as if from free abundance; if we compare our gloomy brooding in monastic solitude, or mindless intrigues in casual society, with the serene cheerfulness of their community of citizens, who were bound by the holiest bonds; then, one might think the memory of them must make us sad and depressed, just as the prisoner becomes when recalling the unrestrained enjoyment of life; the invalid when remembering his robust health; the inhabitants of the North, by thinking of the image of an Italian spring day.

But, on the contrary, it is only the transposition to that time of antiquity which, uplifting our heart and widening our spirit, restores us to such a degree to our initial, not so much lost, as never possessed, human freedom, that we return to our ever-so-contrary situation with fresh courage and renewed strength, drawing true inspiration at that inexhaustible spring alone. Even a deep awareness of the gap which fate has eternally placed between us and them, urges us to use the newly acquired power born of contemplating them, in order to uplift us to our allotted height. We imitate their models with a consciousness of their unattainability; we fill our imagination with the images of their free, richly endowed life, with the feeling that it is denied us, just as the easy existence of the inhabitants of their Olympus was denied them.

For this can surely be considered a suitable metaphor of our relationship to them. Their gods wore human forms like them, and were created from human material; the same desires, passions, and pains, moved their breasts; neither were the troubles and hardship of life alien to them; hate and persecution stirred violently in the halls of the gods' abode; Mars lay dying among slain warriors; Hermes wandered with trouble over the lonely wilderness of the sea; Latona felt all the afflictions of an expectant mother; Ceres all the anguish of the deserted mother. We find likewise in Hellas all the roughness of life; not only the hardships which befall individuals and nations, but also the most violent passions and excesses, even the brutality of man's unbridled nature. But just as the

unique splendor of cloudless Olympus melted and dissolved all those dark colors, so there is something in the Greeks, which never actually let their spirit sink, which wipes away the harshness of the earthly, transforms the excessiveness of force into exuberant play, and softens the harsh pressure of fate into gentle sternness.

This something is precisely the ideal in their nature. The whole remarkable appearance, the impression, which the works of no other people make on us, even with the most sober and objective scrutiny, comes from the fact that the Greeks indeed touch that place in us which is the final goal of all of our striving. We feel ardently that they have achieved the lot, reached the summit in their own way, where they can rest at the end of life's path. But their greatness arose so purely, truly, and genuinely from nature and humanity, that it does not force us to follow their way, but stimulates, entices us with enthusiasm, to follow our own way, by heightening our independence. This greatness relates itself to us solely in the idea of ultimate perfection, of which it is an undeniable paradigm, but for which we are allowed to strive by other paths, too.

One must perhaps be intimately familiar with the works of the ancients, therefore, in order not to regard the assertion of the unattainability of their virtues as a biased exaggeration. However, what arouses a favorable bias toward them is, that appreciation of the works of the ancients absolutely does not depend directly on learning or research. They make the most profound impression on the most unaffected souls, who are as yet uncommitted to any particular way of thinking, or style of art. It is furthermore remarkable, that the Greek works find access to every nation, every age, every state of emotion, whereas modern works, because they arise from a less universal and objective state of mind, in turn demand a more particular and subjective state of mind. Shakespeare, Dante, and Cervantes will never produce such a universally widespread effect as Homer, Aeschylus, or Aristophanes.

2. To compare the modern works of any type with those of antiquity, except as concerns positive knowledge and mechanical dexterity, demonstrates a similarly incorrect view of antiquity, just as an incorrect view of art is shown, if a specific object of reality is compared to the beauty of a work of art. For, just as art and reality lie in two different spheres, so do antiquity and modern times; they never touch in the realm of phenomena, but solely in truth—to which the idea alone, never perception, attains—in the original force of nature and humanity. Art and reality are two different images, just as antiquity and modernity are two different efforts to assert existence.

Reality, that is, truth and nature itself, is certainly not less noble than art; it is rather the model of art. Its essence is so great and sublime that, in order for us to approach reality to any extent, the only way open to us is to forge a path as yet unknown, just as art does. The smallest object of reality is infused with the same essence; and it is absolutely wrong, that nature in its perfection could be found only in all its particular objects taken together, that the totality of the vital force could be found only in the sum of the particular moments of its being. Both may certainly appear this way, but one cannot think of space as being severed, or of time as being divided. Everything in the universe is one, and one all—otherwise there is no unity at all in the universe. The force pulsating in the plants is not simply a part of the force of nature, but all of it. Otherwise, an unbridgeable gap is opened between it and the rest of the world, and the harmony of organic forms is thereby irreparably destroyed. Every present moment contains all the past and future in itself, for there is nothing to which the fleetingness of the past can cling, as the perpetuity of living.

But, reality is not the receptacle in which this essence can be transmitted to us; rather, its essence becomes manifest in reality only in its original truth, and is, in this form, inaccessible to us. Therefore, because we do not grasp the existence of the actual objects through their inner life, we try to explain it through the influence of external forces, and that is why we misjudge both its completeness and its independence. Instead of believing reality's organic form to be determined through inner abundance, we consider it limited by external boundaries. These are fallacies, which do not exist in art, because art does not represent the essence of nature as such, but functions in a way designed to be understandable and harmonious to our sense organs.

However, our life has not been so stingily endowed by destiny, that it should not have been given something inside itself, and entirely outside of the realm of art, which allows us to draw nigh to the essence of nature, and this something is passion. In no way should one squander this name on the inferior affects by which one usually loves and hates, strives and despises. Profound and rich emotions know a desire, for which the name of



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*Wilhelm von Humboldt*

enthusiasm is too cold, and for which longing is too tranquil and bland; under whose effect man still remains in perfect harmony with the whole of nature; in which instinct and idea become one in a way inconceivable with a cold prosaic approach, and which thereby brings forth the most beautiful birth. In such emotional states of mind, the idea appearing in reality is more correctly recognized, and one can truthfully say that, in higher and purer enthusiasm, friendship and love look upon their object with a more profound and holier gaze than does art. But such is the fate of

reality, that one moment it places the object too low, the next too high; it never allows the full and beautiful balance between the appearance of the object and the intellectual power of the observer, from which follows the inspired and fruitful, and yet always peaceful and calm, enjoyment of art. Therefore, it is not the fault of nature, but our own, if nature seems to be inferior to the work of art. If, therefore, esteem for art is a sign of a lofty age, then esteem for reality is the feature of an epoch having reached a still higher degree of loftiness.

We encounter that full and beautiful balance only in antiquity, and never in modern times. In the manner of thinking and activity of the ancients, mankind's pure and original natural force seems to have burst open all veils so happily, that it presents itself to our eyes in clearness and simplicity like a half-opened blossom, easily understandable. Neither laboriously scouting out the path it will choose, nor anxious about what it leaves behind, it abandons itself trustingly and confidently to the unlimited longing for life's full abundance, and expresses itself in a thousand always equally blessed images. We moderns only research, search, struggle, and battle, often to know the bloody sweat, but seldom the joyful ease of victory; we slave away in lonely, scattered, and isolated existence, never enjoying the beneficial buoyancy, with which a people in harmony uplift their fellow citizens on soil strewn with monuments to their glory and art, under a heaven smiling brightly on them.

Precisely the same characteristics which, upon observation, differentiate reality—in its particular, limited appearance—from art, likewise differentiate the ancient and the modern ages. Like art, everything ancient is

always a pure and complete expression of something spiritual, and leads to the unity of ideas. It entices one to become ever more deeply absorbed in each of its parts; the spirit is voluntarily captivated by its magic within definite limits, and then enlarged by it to infinity. The modern epoch, on the other hand, like reality, only hints at the spiritual, rather than portraying it actually and immediately; it often knows no other unity, than that wherein feeling gathers itself only because of reality, and at its behest. The modern often exercises his best and loftiest effect only by leading over and above himself, and beyond his limits. Even when the modern is infused by the same spirit as the ancients, and when his effects remain close to those of the ancients, they still lack the radiance that firmly unites and fuses everything by its own rays, just as a landscape on a cloudy day lacks brightness.

For, however much man may muse, and choose, and labor, the most delicate and loftiest of his works flow from the hand of the artist, even if he does not know it, penetrating the mind of the observer, even if he is not aware of it. Certainly, he owes this to nothing but the fortunate disposition of his nature and the propitiousness of the moment. He may be armed with genius and energy, as the limits of human nature alone permit it; however, that which especially radiates forth from him, is only what he directly is not—the power of humanity, which begat him; the earth, which supports him; the nation, whose language echoes around him. Man belongs to nature and is not destined to stand there isolated and alone; the word he utters is an element or resonance of nature's sounds; the image he casts down is the outline of the mould, into which nature also poured her own image; his desires are directly the impulse of nature's creative power. This does not lessen his independence; for, in the totality of reality, the power of nature is his own, whereas in appearance everything is closed to him, nation, earth, heavens, surroundings, previous ages, and present time. These remain speechless and dead, unless he is able, through his own inner power, to open, to examine, and to enliven them. Therefore, the most certain characteristic of genius is to bring out everywhere, in every expression of energy, but most especially in the most complicated of all which is life itself, that which inspires, admonishes, and urges, by means of admiration or contempt, love or hate. And,

where reality falls short, for genius to call forth a new and more beautiful world from the past—an aid, which contemporary man often feels compelled to use, whereas the ancients found absolutely everything they needed in their closest surroundings, according to their innermost feelings.

Nevertheless, a modern artist, to go directly to the area in which it is most difficult to take on antiquity, could compete with the works of antiquity in an excellent way. Now, as then, genius can still emerge; research has traversed many difficult paths since then, and skill, enriched by this and through experience, has made much progress. But, what remains unreachable, what separates the ancients and moderns from each other by an unbridgeable gap, is the breath of antiquity, which envelops the slightest fragment, as well as the most perfect masterpiece, with inimitable magic. This breath is not part of



*The Horae, Greek goddesses of order in nature. (Paris, Louvre.)*

the individual creator, it is not part of research, nor even of art itself; it is the reflection, the flowering of the nation and the epoch and, since they never return, it is also lost irretrievably with them. For it is a nostalgic, but also noble privilege of the living, that they never recreate themselves in the same way, and that what is past in them remains gone forever.

Since any work expresses more than the object it directly represents, everything that possesses a certain degree of characteristic specificity falls into place. But, what distinguishes antiquity in this point, is two-fold: first, that in the momentary mood and character of the artist, and in him and his environment, his epoch, and his nation, a wonderful and charming harmony reigns; and second, that all these things in turn are so much at one with the idea to be expressed, that it does not appear as a separate personality in opposition to all these things, but unites with them to a higher effect, to make them

more objective through subjective power. Neither would be the case, if the humanity that is expressed in antiquity, were not purer, clearer, or at least a more easily recognizable imprint of the ideas, which every truly human breast longs for; or, if these ideas did not inflame them more fervently than one would suspect. That breath of antiquity is, therefore, the breath of a humanity made radiant by divinity—for what, if not the idea, is divine? It is such a humanity that testifies loudly and spiritedly in the works of art, poetry, citizen's constitutions, battles, sacrifices, and festivals of the ancients, and actively bears witness to our dullness and pettiness, but shows at the same time what mankind could be, toward which we can struggle along differently traced paths. For, it would be unfortunate, if the merits of antiquity were proclaimed only in dead marble statues and not also in a way equally uplifting and inspiring in customs, thinking, and deeds.

So once again: nothing modern is comparable with anything ancient;

“with gods  
should a man  
not measure himself”;

and what distinguishes antiquity, is not merely a characteristic specificity, but a universally valid superiority, which demands recognition. It was a unique, but happy occurrence in the history of the development of mankind, that out of the ages, which ought to have matured through great effort, a people emerged who grew out of the earth effortlessly and in most beautiful bloom. How this should be comprehensible to us, is already indicative of the developments up to our time; but the whole point of view, especially in its particular uses, can only be justified by the completion of our modern works. Meanwhile, for here and now, and also without further explanation, a thesis is posed which is already quite demonstrated, for whoever accepts it as true. The test of modern nations is their feeling for antiquity, and the more they value the Greeks and Romans equally, or the Romans over the Greeks, the more those nations will fail to achieve their characteristic, specially set goal. For inasmuch as antiquity can be called ideal, the Romans participate therein only to the extent that it is impossible to separate them from the Greeks.

Nothing would be so counterproductive as to begin a work of history from a viewpoint that owes more to a perhaps forgivable, but always ill-conceived enthusiasm, than to calmer contemplation. We cannot gloss over this remark here, since here is where one is most likely to object, that the assertion just made about the Greeks is exaggerated and prejudiced.

And, certainly, it would be both exaggerated and prejudiced, if our argument assumed that the ancients were a superior, nobler branch of humanity than we, as some, who are more concerned to explain world history than to investigate it, claim, concerning the first inhabitants of our globe. They were not divine creatures, so to speak; but, their epoch was so fortunate, that it expressed each beautiful characteristic that they possessed, completely and precisely; not what humanity can become in itself, separately, and diffused, and gradually, and prior to cognition. They stand alone as an unreachable model, but only in the way that they can appear as a living and unique phenomenon.

3. For, if we were to summarize briefly, what particular merit, in our opinion, distinguishes the Greeks above all other nations, it is that they seem inspired by a dominant instinct, from the impulse to depict the highest life, as a nation, and seized this task at the narrow boundary, below which the solution would have been less successful, and above which it would have been less possible for them. In addition to the sensuous liveliness of all energies and passions, and the beautiful inclination to always wed the earthly with the divine, their character also had in its form the singularity, that everything in it expressed itself purely and happily. Everything in it that presented itself outwardly, was transferred with clear and certain outlines from its inner content.

We pause a moment at this last point. That, by that means, the distinguishing characteristic of the Greeks lies more in the representation of what they were, than merely through some particular, they absolutely deserve to be called the ideal, because the conception of the ideal necessarily entails, it yields to, the possibility of the appearance of the idea. Indeed, what one would always choose as the predominant trait in their spirit, if one had to name one only, would be the attention to, and delight in, harmony and balance, and to want to absorb only the noblest and most sublime there, where it harmonizes with a totality. The disproportion between inner and outer being which so often agonizes the modern age, while on the other hand it serves as a fertile source for shocking or thrilling emotions for it, was absolutely alien to the Greeks; they did not know the preoccupation in thoughts and feelings which is a residue of everything expressed, and what did not yield spontaneously and naturally to the two-fold realm of life and poetry, did not belong to their pure, sunny horizon. Nemesis was a true Greek deity, and although its original idea is common to all times and nations, nowhere was it so delicately, widely, and poetically elaborated, as in Hellas. But, the Greek's aversion to the disproportionate did not actually spring from softness

or weakness in the face of excessive imbalance, or even from the usual alienation from nature, but it sprang directly from the necessity to break forth everywhere in the maximum life, which only springs from that harmony which excludes nothing, and is the universal organism, from the profound feeling of nature. Thus, they supported both elements of each truly good spiritual taste's opposing side, one against the other, since taste always remains one-sided and corruptible, if it repulses or attracts excessiveness and force, taken absolutely and in themselves.

An individual is in reality an embodied idea; the physical life force is at every moment renewed striving; the idea of organism is morally the same attempt to assert the particular spiritual character in reality. Therefore, insofar as life appears as a continuous creation, and character appears as the result of it, life indeed can and must be considered as art, and character as an artwork. It now belongs to the genius of art, to harmonically understand, and to intensify, the two-fold condition of the idea and the phenomenon, which every work of art simultaneously subjugates (since, as some claim, the beautiful is never created by relaxation), such that they seem created one only for the other; as it discovers the indivisible point, in which, after an enormous struggle, the invisible is wed to the visible; likewise, this adds to genius in life, and the maximum of all genius, that of a totally lively and harmonious people.

Therefore, what the Greeks actually possessed that was superior to us, be it by merit or accident, and wherein exclusively we never may venture to rival them, was this innate sense for the clearest, most precise, and richest manifestation of the highest summation of human life in their individual and national character.

4. But, that they found this maximum, they thanked the simple disposition of their nature; that they succeeded in the most difficult of all arts, life, they thanked the natural impulse to which they yielded freely and without reservation.

All individuality is based on, or rather expresses itself, in an impulse, and is one with that which is its particular characteristic. From the lowest up to the highest types of life, we recognize each creature in its totality and in the idea of its nature, less by its way of being, than by its striving. In its striving, all its past, present, and future conditions combine together as a unity. As life neither stands still nor can be thought to be moved by an external cause, so the entire universe exists only by impulse. Nothing lives and exists, except insofar as it strives to live and exist; and man would be absolute lord and master of his being and his perpetual existence, if he could

destroy his life impulse by an order of his will. Of course, the impulse is self-determined, and determines the forms of life in turn. All differences among the living, among plants and animals, among their manifold species, and between nations and individuals in humanity, are therefore based solely on the difference of the life impulse, and its ability to work through the resistance which it finds.

This impulse strove to be pure and complete humanity with the Greeks, and they relished human existence with cheerfulness and joy. As man is able to lift himself to the heavens only because he is rooted firmly on earth, so too the sublime quality in the Greek is nothing other than the fruit of natural instinct ennobled by heavenly ideas. The rough and completely unformed Greek undeniably had also two properties, which, as dangerous as they may be in many regards, still certainly promote the development of mankind: Love of independence, and dread before that one moment dark, the next moment dry and boring seriousness, which depend more on the business rather than the pleasures of life. Naturally, love of independence ripened later on to the noblest liberty of the citizens, but, in itself, it was nevertheless generally more a distaste for every constraint, than a deeper aversion of their disposition to injustice alone. Therefore, it manifested itself, and only too often, against the constraint of prevailing laws, and led more to a capricious choice of a self-pleasing lifestyle and activity, than to an isolated and narrowly defined political passion, as was the case with the Romans. However, it removed constraint of caste, priest, and custom, which otherwise stifled the spirit of so many ancient nations. It did away with the inequalities of status in life to the point of destruction, and brought every citizen into the most diverse and universal contact with all others. The other of the two aforementioned character traits was based especially on a rarely interrupted disposition to happiness, which, even still rough, is alone a possession of one with a good-natured soul, with the fortunate gift of unbelievably effortless excitability, which resonated in unfettered imagination with the slightest touch of any object of nature, immediately sounding all the strings of the spirit. Consequently, the Greeks did not need savage and shocking entertainments, as the more materialistic Romans did—early on, they had gladiator sports and bull fights, but they were never significant. The Greek happily let someone chatter to him, tell him fairy tales and stories, and even philosophize to him. Ossian and Atellanian plays and buffoons were no requirement for him. He did not like the dry seriousness of life's business, the trade, agriculture, or the tribunals, according to the wearisome way the Romans exercised administration of

justice. But in no way did he avoid the more profound science and art. Lastly, endowed with a lively sense for everything, biased and prejudicial judgment of matters was alien to him, and already in Homer, Paris reminded Hector very beautifully not to scorn any gift from the gods. To identify the noblest jewel of a nation, it is sometimes useful to see it in its distorted degeneration. The Romans describe the degeneration of the Greeks to us. Not, we would hope, all Greeks (since those who appreciate their forefathers will hide in solitude in the walls, made cold and empty by the destructive Roman emperor, as one who is conquered does with self-respect), but those Greeks who, since they sold themselves every day, like a contemptible sort of high-class slave, cavort in the houses of the rich Romans. They describe such Greeks as idle, curious, talkative, agitated, and eternally changeable braggarts. But even with these defects, justifiably despised, which Plato complained of so frequently and eloquently in the most beautiful time of Greece, a spark is still always visible of the old spirit. There was still freedom from the necessities of life, still a certain tendency to that which does not physically flatter the senses, but as breath and fragrance, as it were, merely caresses the imagination and the spirit. Something still remains which, if it does not lend the soul heavenly wings, still throws off the burden of the body. Our own leisure time, banal with nosiness and chattering, can again return to that noble leisure, to spiritual investigation, recitation of poetry, and such things. Our instability can also return everything to the beautiful concept still so diversely great and admirable in humanity and nature as well. In the most beautiful epoch of Greece, desire for fame and love of sociability are closely united with each other, such that the former, instead of straying far and searching for its gratification in the distant, limited itself to those topics, which were situated immediately in the circle of its citizens and community, and immediately picked the fruit of its work in the same place. Therefore, the victories of the great games were especially preferred to any other glories. Because it was achieved before the eyes of the Pan-Hellens, the name of the contestant and his city resounded loudly in the ears of friends and envious people; and since the victor returned to his fatherland, con-

sequently the reflection of this glorification radiated to him eternally. Love of the fatherland is derived from this leisurely sociability, free from occupation; and since all Greeks knew a common fatherland, Greek soil and heavens received a particular character. The patriotic gods also descended into the circle of the Greek inhabitants, and they did not desert their solidly established homes like unsettled humans; the native heroes did not abandon their graves. Thus, someone banished was not

simply separated from the lifeless fields of his homeland and the memories of his childhood and youth, but also from the loveliest joys of his life, the loftiest feelings of his breast. Consequently, frequent banishment became with the political establishment of Greece one of the richest sources of concerned feelings among the Greeks, and Pindar describes this, when he says:

[The quote is lost]

So, Pindar expresses nothing more than the highest conception of happiness of every Greek. These few traits asserted here should only encounter the objection, that in the former perhaps too much, and something too sublime, of the Greek character is claimed; but they show, that the same original, even in its degeneration, still possessed not entirely faded capabilities,

which, with fortunate development, could grow upwards to the maximum and most beautiful. But, man rarely knows the heavenliness of his pure and uncorrupted nature, and mistrusts it when he sees it, like a strange image or a deceitful illusion. However, the Greeks were formed so fortunately, and so beneficially favored externally by fate, that that impulse just mentioned, rarely or never straying from its goal, made itself perfectly dominant. What seemed only to be capable of the work of genius, was therefore more the work of nature, as generally always in men the finest educated is joined directly to the source of what is originally the best in man, which is replicated in him with more clarity of consciousness. Also, in society, the noblest and most sensitive individuals alone stand with the lowest, who are still the class of people living in natural simplicity in direct contact with the senses and perception. Only those people suspended in the unblessed middle, in contact with neither, are equally alien to true nature



*Menelaus bearing the body of Patroclus.*

and true refinement, one moment without shape, the next moment distorted.

Despite all this, no one easily mistakes or confuses the impulse, of which I speak, with instinctual natural force, or lower passions. Here, what is important, is that once the divine and earthly material is combined in human beings, it is unfair to separate either unilaterally. Nothing of human worth can arise in it, without freedom, that is, without action, which pertains solely to the personality; consequently, the least upon which its entire individuality depends, is its personality itself. But, on the other hand, the principle of life must also actively correspond to the sensation, just as the first impulse corresponds to all action, as the idea legislating and ruling in us. Further, it cannot be put forward by an arbitrary determination of the will, since it rather forgoes all expressed volitions.

Only once one is certain, not to mix the basic impulse of individuality (which can never purely and entirely manifest itself as something infinite in phenomenon) with what one naturally, also properly, terms the original predisposition of a character, so what has just been said, is designated with other words only as far as this basic impulse, the life principal of the individual, possesses freedom and necessity at the same time, according to the degree and the quality in it mutually demanding and determining. That is, that it must be situated in the region, in which freedom and necessity perish in a third, higher idea. Likewise, in its creation: in the physical world of organism, in the aesthetical work of art, in which morally the spiritual individuality of its work is always a true infinity, there is something, from which, regardless of the necessary connection of all parts, freedom does not simply stream forth, but where that necessity itself is only comprehensible through freedom.

What here is called an impulse, is perhaps more accurately named a self-acting idea. But I avoided this otherwise indeed synonymous expression, because it can lead to a misunderstanding, that the idea would lie completed there, and would carry itself out only gradually; whereas it is my conviction, that the always-acting, fundamental power of nature, the epitome and standard of all ideas, exists in an activity, determined at the outset by its own causes. Also, the concept of an impulse would be more useful for a work of history (understood as always a free and legislative impulse), than a self-acting idea, since history does not, as philosophy, go forth from nature's laws, but toward them, supported on a substance mindful of collected phenomena. That primitive impulse arises afterwards, as will be shown later by the example of the

Greeks, in a multitude of subordinate inclinations and attempts, one moment as in brilliant reflections, the next as in half-formed shadow images.

The irresistible impulse which still springs from the part of feeling, mind, and soul, in which only self-given law rules, the German calls the word longing [*Sehnsucht*], which is not familiar or known to any other nation (since the German language is by preference at home in the region, which, to be entirely surveyed, requires the aid of feeling), and from that, humanity has a determined character only insofar as it knows a definite longing. Such a longing bestirs itself in every human being, but few are fortunate enough, that they manifest it pure and defined, not diluted in contradictory affects. Still fewer, are those who approach it on the true ideal paths of the archetypes of humanity. And rarest is the



*The Moirai, Greek goddesses of Fate. (Roman relief, Schloss Tegel, the residence of the Humboldts, near Berlin.)*

good fortune, that this two-fold condition is achieved, along with the external conditions to please man sufficiently, that he gains new strength by satisfaction with this situation.

The ideal nature of a character depends on nothing so much as the depth and the type of longing that inspires it. For the expression of the ideal adds yet something else to morality, not greater (for morality always remains the maximum), but more comprehensive, since an ideal character does not merely subjugate itself to one idea, as duty subjugates the simple moral character, but conforms itself with all ideas of the whole invisible world. The ideal character strives to produce such a disposition to represent all humanity in one particular case (in its dignity and nobility), as the creative artist strives to produce a beautiful work of art. And there, the ideal character finally is creative in the true sense, while it transforms the idea of

maximum humanity, otherwise only intuited by thoughts, into a fact of nature. For this purpose, simple adjustment of thinking and exercise of the will does not suffice; the mind must be made capable of that which no conception and no feeling reaches, and which, when it seems to freely form the imagination, is created by it from the depths of nature. In other words, the idea, which makes up the soul and the life of nature and from which comes all meaning and all form, must appear to the soul and mind and awaken the love [i.e., *agapē*-PN], whose immediate and natural fruit is that high and divine longing.

Perhaps “longing” seems to be a silly, trite expression of a frivolous era to many people, who would rather exchange it with the directly vivid and active term, “striving.” But longing and striving, both taken in their most sublime sense, are not synonymous. In the word longing, the unattainability of that which is longed for, and the mysteriousness of its origin is expressed, while striving goes from a clearly-thought-out concept, to a determined target. Striving can be weakened and thwarted by difficulties and obstacles, but in the face of longing every chain falls broken to the ground, as by a magic recumbent on itself. The artist who is creative longs for the achievement of beauty, which still floats in an unfixed image of his imagination; but, he strives after he formulates his thoughts to be faithful in their execution. The Roman had a zealous, earnest, powerful striving, from which grew a connected activity and steady, gradually progressive results. The Greek was inspired by longing; his deliberate and worldly activity was often very dispersed and cut into pieces, but by his side, unsought, that longing germinated heavenly and enchanting blossoms. This stands in relationship to the world, in that every greatest undertaking, be it addressed to freedom and fame of the fatherland, or to the well-being of humanity generally, is ennobled only the more thereby; that longing above all imparts the idea to us, which should stamp reality. No man deserves being called great, even if he were the most blessed benefactor of mankind, if the breath of such a longing does not touch him. This will have to be discussed further elsewhere, if it is not by now self-evident.

Transferring these ideas to the attentive contemplation of life, one soon becomes aware, mostly in himself, that there is a three-fold type of education: first, the enlightenment of the understanding; second, the strengthening of the will; and third, the inclination to the never-expressed and eternally unspeakable, such as physical and spiritual beauty, truth in its ultimate foundations, and the freedom by which form overcomes material in lifeless nature, and in the living, free thought overcomes blind force. This

last would best be called the education of feeling toward religion, if this expression, “religion,” were not at the same time so noble and so misused, that one must always be careful, not to desecrate religion one moment by the most sublime thought, and the next moment (in its degradation) not to profane higher thoughts by the use of the word religion. The first two types of education can both be the work of instruction and example; but the latter belongs to the soul itself alone, and the experience of life, especially to the fortunate inclination, to allow the world to operate on oneself, and to assimilate its effect in self-created solitude. Here it reveals, what a well-tuned mind and soul, strong and gentle at the same time, knows to produce from the manifold emotions, like desire, love, admiration, adoration, joy, and pain, by whatever names they might bear, which one moment visit the heart in friendly way, and the next moment furiously attack it. For these and all other affects are the true means of awakening that high and noble longing, just as longing purifies the affects in turn, by strength. In him in whose breast these emotions have raged most frequently and powerfully (wherefore women are better attuned, and by their situation more favored, than men for the most part), longing ripens to the noblest and most beneficial powers.

As, therefore, every worthy character demands power and energy of the will, so an ideal character demands still especially, that the intellectual impulse residing in every human being become such a definite and dominant longing, that it give the individual person a specific form, and give the conception of humanity a more or less broadened one. As life generally must be deemed a partially successful war of the spiritual with the physical, so the formation of individuality by the ruling of the fundamental impulse guiding it, is the utmost summit of victory achieved in life. For just this reason, it is the ultimate purpose of the universe; if one averts his glance from it, every apparently noble endeavor becomes low, mechanical, and earthly. The investigated, perceived, surveyed universe, the penetrated depth of truth, the soaring heights of feeling, are wasted powers playing with vain shadow impressions, if they do not ultimately reveal themselves vividly in the thinking, speaking, active human being; if what they effected in him, does not reflect back from his glance; if his words and deeds do not bear witness to them.

Indisputably, such a determined character resides in everyone, as well as the definite impulse to physical organization. The difference between them is only, that, while the latter (a few cases excepted) always reaches its ultimate goal, the former only very rarely succeeds, to the extent that the material, completely conquered, takes

on its form, truly and purely. Yes, it cannot even properly be assumed, if one wanted to agree that there was in some epoch of creation a chaotic flood of organization of forms, and the outline of the present shapes and present organs of life would have fluctuated back and forth for a long time, before they withdrew into the now definite boundaries and rigidly divided species—I say, if we assumed that, we cannot now assume that a similar epoch of the moral organization of forms presides, although, by the way, actually ideal characters indeed enjoy the privilege, as an individual, to be singled out as a species. Rather, for all time, the number of ideal characters will be small, the smallest number those who appear in active life in important ways, as Aristides, Socrates, Epaminondas, Philopoemen and others among the Greeks, Scipio and Cato among the Romans, Luther and Friedrich in modern history; with a larger number of ideal characters reflecting in their works, as with so many poets and sages, the form transposed more into a disposition than into action; and most will reflect only particular, prominently worked out features, mere elements of ideality, not ideality itself, and entire nations will fare no better.

However, nations belong to the greater productions of the forces of nature, in which its effect remains more equal, and strikes that which is effected similarly, to the degree that the will of the particular loses itself in the masses. As nature crowds together coral reefs on certain shores, germinates families of plants in certain regions, it also scatters peoples and tribes, and when they ere long wander over the hills and rivers and finally also the mountains and seas which separate them, nature still acts on them continuously in two powerful matters; procreation and speech. Its dark and mysterious forces govern the former entirely, and likewise give the latter that original expressiveness and color; the tone, the timing, and the original spontaneous connection of the corporeal and spiritual belong to it. Therefore, if it is also difficult to find an ideal national character, and if one also, in order to be just, may put to the side that this virtue belongs exclusively to the Greeks, still one must admit nevertheless, that, to educate by having an ideal form of character in mind, to inspire and excite oneself to reproduce it by particular discovered aspects and efforts, the contemplation of the Greeks is useful and indispensable.

Nature and idea are one and the same (if one may use the word idea, taken absolutely, for the type of universe, which, bestowed with self-acting energy, gradually forms and reveals itself vividly). Nature is idea, as acting power; idea is nature as reflective thought. In individual human beings they both occur separately, ideas as thought, nature as feeling. They can only be associated

imperfectly, by good fortune in genius, or by exertion of the will, always possible to anyone. Therefore, all ideal form reveals itself more easily, where, as is the case in the character of whole nations, nature's part is more prevalent.

Before an ideal character emerges, one cannot divine its existence; it is a pure and new creation, it is not composed from already known elements. Rather an eternally young, eternally new, inexhaustible power recast the elements into a new form. Who would have anticipated beforehand, only to pause by poetic characters, an Oedipus of Sophocles, or an Othello of Shakespeare? Who would have considered a nation even possible, as history shows the Greeks to us? But this is the case with every individual; the idea of each individual is only possible in that it appears as fact. In this connection, we cannot help commenting, how, when one looks on individuality merely as a coagulation of material around definite points of formation, as the determination of a force in an instant, at a place, which connects thousands and thousands of other points, out from which it roams and appropriates the universe; like an infinity, which never repeats and never exhausts itself; like a unity, which in the most wonderful diversity always travels the same course, from the same origin to the same target—I say, if one looks at individuality in this way, its contemplation has either the merits or demerits of its uniquely entire, independent enticement.

But, if individuality is to be ideal, it must surprise by more than mere novelty, it must reveal a great, worthy, universal idea of humanity to such an extent, that it is only comprehensible by its form, that it seems created by it alone. An ideal character must have enough vitality, to move himself and his observers with him from the narrow region of reality, to the wide realm of ideas. It must perceive the seriousness of life only through the seriousness of ideas which it awakens, it must rescue its terrors and pains to sublimity, to widen its joys and pleasures to gracefulness and intellectual serenity, to appear as a victor in all life's battles and dangers, who is certain to secure victory for the great, noble, and immortal in humanity over the low, limited, and mortal. Freedom, therefore, is its essential condition in every noble sense of the word, profound love for wisdom and art its true companions, gentleness and grace its unmistakable characteristics.

Previously, we mentioned Epaminondas, as an ideal character, and if one goes back to the times of the heroes, where fable and history are mixed together, I do not know, in fact, if the whole of antiquity would prove to be more perfect and more poetic than his era. Praise of his *polis*, earned nobly, and the freedoms of Hellas, are the

particular feelings that inspire him. No blood stains his sword, than that shed for Greece. As soon as their war is hard won, he becomes the happy founder of peaceful cities. As Greece needs no more of him, he returns to the humble circle of his citizens, and contentedly practices wisdom and art. He allays the risks of the people's tribunal and death by calm serenity and silent, serious pride, and dissolves them in a pleasant joke. No fortune makes him presumptuous, and no misfortune clouds the sparkle of his glory; yet, he embraces death, and squanders life first, since he is certain of the victory of his citizens. Where is there a more uplifting drama, than the building of the city of Messene? After the successful war for freedom, Epaminondas had returned to one of the noblest, most peaceful nations of Greece, and by their innocent misfortune, and the failure of all utmost efforts of heroic, most moving patriotism, after an absence of centuries, again repatriated to their fatherland, and gave them, not without favorable promises of the heavens, a new *polis*. Afterwards, sacrifices were made to the gods, by Epaminondas and the Thebans to Bacchus and Ismenian Apollo, by the Argive to Juno and the Nemean Jupiter, by the Messenians to Ithomenian and the hero's twins, whose anger was now silently appeased, and by the priests, who were deeply initiated in the great goddesses and the bearers of mysterious rites. They invited the heroes to live in the future walls, first Messene, the daughter of Triopis, then Eurytus, Aphareus and his sons, the Heraclidae Cresphontes and Aepytus and above all the noble but unlucky Aristomenes. And now the three united nations spend the day, repatriators and repatriated, in joint sacrifice and prayer. Next, in the wake, the circumference of the walls rose, and in the walls the houses and temples climbed upwards. Argive and Theban flutes rang out to the chaos of work, where the old Sacadas with his simple music, and later, Pronomos, with his artful music struggled, competing for the prize. The blooming under Epaminondas's caring hands, was the last genuine beautiful blossom of the Greek spirit, and died there with him, afterwards never returning again. Two reasons made it necessary, even with the risk of digressing from the main topic, to enter into these deep reflections. Otherwise, it would have neither the most essential feature of the Greek character, nor could our view of its relation to the present epoch be clearly recognized.

For, if the existence of such a deep and pure longing belonging to every noble human breast were not touched upon, if we were not to have drawn attention to it as the principle through which each individuality receives its befitting completion, it would never become sufficiently clear, how the ideality of the Greek character were possible only by the nature and character of these incessantly

blazing, eternally warming and inspiring flames. Above, we have located the particular characteristic of the Greeks in a certain impulse inspiring them to represent the pinnacle of life, as a nation. We have further said, that the natural inclination of their very being led them, because longing itself, to be absolutely pure and full humanity, expressing itself with inner determination, and externally more by favorable circumstances.

But, this striving already carried the stamp of that higher longing in itself, from the earliest times that we know. For the more the Greek was man, the more he walked on the ground with his feet, so to speak, only to raise himself over it by his spirit. He connects everything to the heavenly; he creates an independent realm of ideas and fantasies from out of every point; his dearest enjoyment was sociality, communication of ideas, and feelings; in work, he esteemed the process, more than the result. Too movable, to let anyone shackle him, he carried over more freedom into both family and political relations, than was associated with the stability of either. His patriotism was more love of fame, than for the prosperity and the preservation of the fatherland.

Several of these traits, especially the latter ones, usually belong only to savage nations, prior to the development of civilization, and vanish with the advent of society. But the Greek distinguished himself precisely, in that he, in the midst of civilization, maintained and developed them, and his natural character immediately became his ideal character. This confirms anew the presence of that longing faithfully accompanying him, in both his raw and his finely cultured condition, whose aim was intellectual and divine, but among these, that which mind and imagination formed in sound and shape. Thence, he was fortunate enough, to be able to aspire to the ultimate goal to which a nation would want to be elevated, as it were instinctually, without internal contradiction and strife. For destiny rules over nations, as it does over individuals; the one it equips more sparsely, the other more richly, and only a few become conscious of the efforts, directly and without confusion, which they are destined to perform.

But secondly, a somewhat detailed illustration of the nature of individuality was necessary, because the investigation of the economy of destiny with individuality, if the expression is permitted, and the investigation, of what character types were produced by the nations and the centuries which are the subject of our consideration, and how much to rescue from the rubble for ourselves today, to apply to our prosperity, always remains a main goal of this type of work. For since herein exists the goal of all human striving—namely, that in the course of centuries, be it in individuals or nations, an ever higher conception of humanity gradually builds up as hard facts—thus no

investigation even remotely touching history may turn its gaze elsewhere, least of all one concerning the history of the Greeks, which undeniably connects antiquity to modern times. And this is now still the view from which we proceed. Life should stitch and create ideas by the fullness of its movement, by ideas superior to itself and to every activity. Man should possess a power, both by his own effort and the favor of fate, to produce spiritual phenomena which, measured by the past, are new, and measured by the future, are fertile. And, as art seeks out, or better, generates an ideal beauty in a pure and incorporeal idea, in the same way philosophy should be able to generate truth, and active life generate greatness of character. Everything should therefore constantly remain in activity—creative activity; everything should amount to the fathoming of the still unknown, and the birth of the not yet seen; everyone should believe himself now, to be standing at a point which he must leave far behind.

Who hereby does not agree, whoever imagines, that superior art could exist only in the attainment of a pleasing truth, that superior philosophy could exist only in the ordering of clearly developed conceptions, that superior moral value could exist only in well-ordered happiness or in private and social perfection attainable by mere lawfulness, without feeling that beauty, truth, and content of character spring from an effort incomprehensible in its character and method, which cannot be judged with existing yardsticks—whoever does not agree, we must part company with him here. Everything said about the Greeks and their relationship to us up to this point must seem to him to be exaggerated and chimerical, and since the point at which for us the truth first begins, designates precisely the end of the truth to him, so his and our paths absolutely couldn't meet at any step.

Having not proved it up to this point, since it actually required no proof, as it is generally shown from the undeniable impression that the Greeks possess an ideal character; and after indicating where it, in effect, lies; we shall now still have to define the nature of its ideality still more precisely, and especially in contrast with our modern character. For what is intended here, is not an actual description of the Greek character as such, but only an investigation of its ideality, to answer the questions: Is it true? Or, only apparently so? Upon



*Poseidon, Apollo, Demeter, Aphrodite, Eros, from the east frieze of the Parthenon. (Acropolis museum, Athens.)*

what is it based? And, how must we deal with it for our benefit?

Enthusiasm is inflamed only by enthusiasm, and only the Greeks exercise such a wonderful effect on us, because the heavenly longing that shines out through them expresses itself vividly. Otherwise, it would be incomprehensible, how often their insignificant fragments so deeply move our soul, or why various contradictions, deficiencies, and defects which we come across in them, do not disturb that effect on us. It was a mistake for a long time, and is often still today, to compare their works with the types which one can classify in a scientific respect; to want to search for rules and theories in them, instead of purely and clearly acquiring the great and graceful spirit of their creators. As long as a nation looks upon ancient Greek works as literature, as having an intention to produce something scientific (as one can with the moderns, the Latins, or the Hellenes themselves since Alexander), it erects a brass wall between true Greekness and itself, and Homer, and Pindar, and all those heroes of Greek antiquity remain silent to it.

It is only the spirit, only the way of thinking, only the view of humanity, of life and of destiny, that attracts and fascinates us in the remains of that epoch, which possessed the wonderful secret of simultaneously unfurling life in its total multiplicity, to deeply move the breast in its mighty depths, and then to control the upsurge of such excited imagination and feeling by a rhythm, always simultaneously moving and calming. One must be to some extent in tune with them already, in order to understand them, to not overlook their profundity one moment, and to recognize their delicacy the next. But, it is noteworthy, that nothing is so injurious to this understanding, as a narrowly defined education, and nothing is less essential than knowledge or scholarship. With the Romans, for example, it is difficult to believe that they

were only somewhat profoundly affected by the spirit of the Greeks. With Cicero, Horace, Virgil, up to the Augustinian and following eras, the opposite is actually evidenced by particular facts, and if perhaps the Romans grasped the Greeks in some period more simply and naturally, it was in that of Ennius, Plautus, and Terence. Even in modern nations that early on were familiar mainly with the Latin authors, is it still obvious that the Greek authors were understood only partially or incorrectly. On the other hand, no one can deny that the Germans know them truly and genuinely. Yet the Romans were themselves descendants of the Greeks, lived at the same time with them, and possessed a language, which can be accounted to a certain extent as a dialect of Greek; and we are more than 2,000 years distant from their most beautiful age, and speak a language, which can be praised only perhaps as a later-formed and less-favored sister of the same extraction as that of theirs. Such a wonderful difference in the destiny of the formation of the nations, deserves a more exact illumination and an exhaustive search for its causes, if this were not to lead too far from the objective.

If man is interested in man, it is not his bodily pleasure and pain, or his external activities and impulses, which usurp the participation of the highest in our feelings, but the universal human nature in him, the interplay of its energy in deeds and activities. When history appeals to us, we demand not just to know how this or that mass of people was oppressed or oppressed others, was victorious or defeated, but we want to know, as in a great panorama, and to the enrichment of our simple cognitive reason, what fate is capable of, over man, and yet more, what man is capable of, over fate. Nothing is more tiring than the multiplicity of reality, and the countless number of its chance events, if in the end the idea does not flow forth. But reality's greatest number of chance events seems few to us, when our mind, guided by objects, discovers its way to the idea. For the simplicity of the idea allows itself, like a many-sided, polished mirror, to be recognized only in the multiplicity of phenomena. Therefore, where a man, a human activity, or a human event carries an idea corresponding most visibly to it, as a transparent veil, it seizes the mind, soul, and feelings most vividly, and effects them most beneficially.

And this is the case with the Greeks. The Greek treated everything symbolically, and he creates a symbol of everything that nears his circle. He becomes a symbol of humanity himself, and indeed in its most delicate, purest, and most perfect form.

The conception of symbol is not always correctly understood, and is often interchanged with allegory. Of

course, both express an invisible idea in a visible form, but in very different ways. When the Greeks named Bacchus for his wings, or portrayed Mars in chains, these were allegorical representations, and such was Diana of Ephesus. For it was a clearly-thought-out idea arbitrarily attached to an image. On the other hand, Bacchus and Venus, Sleep as the pet of the Muses, and so many other figures of antiquity, are true and genuine symbols. They originate from simple and natural objects—Bacchus from a youth overflowing with well-developed strength; Venus from a maiden who just blossoming, becomes conscious of these blossoms with displeasure; the freedom, with which the soul in sleep, unfettered from all worries, roams through the delicately connected realm of dreams. As they start, I would say with these objects, the Greeks arrive at ideas which they couldn't know before, ideas which remain eternally inconceivable in themselves, and separated from their sensuousness can never be purely comprehended, without being robbed of their individuality and true being. As, for example, that which the source of poetic inspiration breaks forth, which, as Schiller so beautifully expresses it, first then even powerfully bestirs itself. As in sleep, the limbs, the colder powers, so to speak, rest numbly, and life, like a dream, overflows with a new brilliance. In the last case, one grasps the idea of sleep more deeply and more beautifully. Man, with trust in the deities who weave protecting laws, closes his wakeful eyes, and withdraws and abandons himself, when he happily withdraws from the tumult of life to the womb of lonely night, joyfully forsakes even pleasure and the purest and most ethereal part of his being, the never-sleeping power of imagination. He awakens, one moment moved by delightful dreams, with melancholy emotion, that first he must annihilate his being as it were, in order to taste divine blessedness, the next moment shudders deeply from fright, that spirit and fate perhaps treacherously lie in wait for him, where he finally, with each rising and setting of the sun, as in a short prelude, always completes anew and begins the great part of his being again—the idea, expressed in this image, appears more profound and more substantial to him. For the symbol has the uniqueness, that the representation and that which is represented, always alternately invite the spirit to linger longer and to delve deeper into it. On the contrary, allegory, once the mediating idea is discovered, like a solved puzzle, leaves behind only cold admiration, or the banal pleasure of a gracefully successful form.

Mere and genuine allegory is alien to the Greeks. Where it is found, it belongs for the most part to a later epoch. For, where the mind gives up perceiving symbols, symbols are easily degraded to mere allegory.

—*translated from the German by Pat Noble*