

Finding Healing in a Dead Language

“Persephone is having sex in hell/Unlike the rest of us, she doesn’t know/what winter is, only that/she is what causes it.” The first time I opened and read the poem “Persephone the Wanderer” in Louise Gluck’s *Averno* as a sophomore in college, I felt shocked at the voice radiating from the page: alert but cautious, it possessed an authority I felt I had never before encountered. This voice seemed to speak from inside of me; mysteriously, disturbingly, it seemed to be my own voice. And I heard its clarity as an imperative, a challenge to speak and act with as much radical self-knowledge as did the poet. This voice changed my life.

When I arrived in college, I was the younger sister in a deeply conservative first-generation immigrant Chinese family. To my family’s great relief, I was safely installed within an Ivy League college, with a position in a highly coveted BA/MD program. I had validated their sacrifice—our early poverty, the long, often unrecognized hours my parents worked— even, somehow, the collapse of their marriage and painful divorce. I was set.

Except I wasn’t. I very quickly felt something was deeply wrong; I was confused, entrapped, unable even to explore what was then a fledgling love of art and literature—where my mind felt less self-estranged. Vulnerable and unsure of myself, I entered into a relationship which turned abusive. At my lowest point, I understood with excruciating clarity what I had to do. I still remember the look on my advisor’s face when I told him that I planned to drop out of the program so that I could study poetry and art. And the way my family not only lashed out ferociously at me, but crumbled in the aftermath of my decision. My mother grew more isolated, distant, lost her job and never got another. My brother, once my best friend, called me words I will never forget and then did not speak to me for the next decade.

I spent the next deeply lonely, alienating years of college trying not just to learn but to survive. There were the times I could barely make it to class, the times I didn’t, the papers I wrote but never sent in. There was the professor who told me I wasn’t “Brown University material” because I could not emerge out of my silence to participate in his class.

It was at that time that I encountered Louise Gluck and her astonishing poetry. In its refusal to be silenced, it told me that I could not only survive but one day thrive. I wanted to—and I was secretly audacious enough to believe that I could—write poetry of such imaginative empathy, precision and authority.

There was another lesson I took from that book, a lesson I would only be able to capitalize on in later years: in its treatment of the Persephone myth, it showed the incredible, generative richness of classical myth and literature. It was a theme I began to see with the authors I was discovering, the ones whose work would create the structures of my thinking. The way Frank Bidart included a translation of the beginning of Virgil's *Aeneid* in his book *Golden State*, as if to announce a continuity from that tradition to himself as a contemporary poet. How Anne Carson, both a classicist and poet, had taken a little-known myth of a monster named Geryon and utterly reshaped it as a contemporary queer coming-of-age story in her novel-in-verse, *Autobiography of Red*. They kept returning to these ancient sources—sources I didn't know, and felt intimidated by. I didn't know where to begin.

A few years ago, after taking significant time to heal from my undergraduate years, I began to allow in myself the hope of committing seriously to poetry. And I started thinking about classical literature again. I read Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid* and loved the story of Dido and Aeneas, but was turned off by the translation. I read Caroline Alexander's beautifully lucid rendering of the *Iliad*, and felt the life-blood of ancient literature in a way I hadn't before. And then I thought—what if I could read the *Iliad* in the original language, without the mediating layer of the translation? What if, as crazy as it sounded, I learned to read ancient Greek?

So I did. The summer before I began my MFA in Poetry at WashU, I earned a scholarship to study in a 10-week summer Greek intensive at CUNY. From 7 in the morning to midnight every day for ten weeks, I did nothing except study Greek. I started off not knowing the Greek alphabet; by the end, I had read Euripides' *Medea*, Book 6 of Homer's *Odyssey*, and Plato's *Ion* in the original Greek. And at the end of the program, I—the lone poet, a source of curiosity among the classics students and faculty—was designated as “aristos”, the highest performing rank. I can't adequately describe the joy I felt in committing myself to the work, the pride I felt in completing the course, and the healing effect upon my undergraduate experience.

I continued studying Greek during my MFA program at WashU, pulling double duty with my Greek classes and poetry courseload. At one point last fall, I was spending upwards of 20 hours each week studying Greek. I read Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, several books of the *Iliad*, and, in a 500-level graduate course on Plutarch, works by Plutarch I had never even heard of before, like the *Symposium of the Seven Sages*.

I always thought that I would feel power when I read these foundational books in the original language. Like I had climbed over the Western Canon and was surveying it from Mount Parnassus. In fact, what I feel is a profound intimacy with these ancient authors. When I read the lines of the *Iliad* aloud, stretching out or shortening my syllables in accordance with the rules of dactylic hexameter, when the sounds travel through my mind and my tongue, Greek not only feels utterly alive, it feels like my own private inheritance.

And I love it. I love being lost inside this language where reading each new author—tracking how he or she bent and stretched its grammar to construct their meaning—is like learning a whole new language. I love paging through my heavily worn, two-inch thick copy of Hansen and Quinn's *Greek: An Intensive Course* to check incredibly byzantine grammatical rules. I love keeping a meticulous vocabulary journal, writing down the six principal parts of Greek verbs alongside the multiple definitions that every Greek word seems to have. I love (and occasionally hate) that it takes thirty minutes to decode one sentence from Thucydides. It's hard but rewarding work. And it has created for me so many new paths of understanding as I teach, learn and write poetry.

I begin my Poetry I class each semester by writing on the board what was likely the first written line of Greek poetry: “μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος”, or “Wrath—sing, goddess, of the son of Peleus, Achilles”. It's exciting to show my students that western poetry, this form that has been so often misrepresented as primarily the province of love, began with the word “wrath”, and an imperative to sing it.

When my MFA Poetry class read the contemporary poet Lisa Russ Spaar's *Orexia* last semester, I recognized in her title the root of the verb “ορεγω”; it appears in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, when Hector reaches out for his young son Astyanax, to hold him for the last time before he goes off to

defend the city of Troy; the word eventually evolved from this physical act of reaching to suggesting a more metaphysical hunger.

What has been most gratifying is how deeply Greek has made its way into my own poetic work. I've written poems that are hybrids of translation and lyric, engaging Plato's *Symposium*, his dialogue on Love. For those poems, I was awarded funding by the Classics Department at WashU to travel to Greece this summer to explore Plato's analogy of the stages of Love to the stages of the Eleusinian mysteries, annual religious rites which ritualized Demeter's search for Persephone. My MFA thesis is titled "Third Kind", after a concept in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, which sets out his theory of the creation of the universe. In my own way, I have brought the richness of antiquity to bear on my contemporary work—just as I once saw my poetic idols do.

I also recognize now the difference between those idols and myself, a person of color who had to make her own way into ancient Greek. Classics in general remains a white-dominated field. This is partially because the barrier to entry is so high—ancient Greek is so time-consuming to learn that it generally takes years to achieve competency in the language. That kind of extensive language training is inextricable from privileges of education, class and race. In every Greek class I have taken, I am often one of the very few, if not the only person of color. But classics will only survive, grow and prosper with a diversity of voices—and of talents and interests. I believe the field must not only be receptive to contemporary authors and artists who engage classical literature, but invest in their development. I know that with my study of ancient Greek, poetic training, and unconventional path towards ancient Greek and the classics—I can and will play an important role in expanding the field.

What learning Greek represents to me is a refusal to accept my circumstances and allow my learning to be limited by my college experience. When I look back at my journey, I recognize and accept the pain that endures. But with Greek has come healing and now, everyday, joy and discovery. Next, I plan to learn Latin and to read books that I have already read and loved in translation: Virgil's *Aeneid*, Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*, the poems of Catullus. I cannot wait to begin again.

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