

From the Alphabet to the *Odyssey*: Learning Attic Greek in an Immersive Learning Program **Nicole Tjin A Djie, 2021**

This summer, through the support of the Bowdoin Classics Department and the Jacob Jasper Stahl Fellowship, I completed a ten week study of ancient Greek at the University of California Berkeley. For forty years, this intensive language program has guided students to a proficiency in ancient Greek. Achieving this proficiency not only makes for a strong introduction to a classical education, but is essential for further study in ancient philosophy, philology, theology and other disciplines.

Requiring no prior knowledge, the program begins on day one with a lesson in the Greek character and diacritic system. Over the next six weeks, students learn the core grammar of Attic Greek, the sub-dialect of Ionic Greek used to write foundational texts of the Western intellectual tradition, most notably the works of Plato and Aristotle.

By week seven, the course becomes structured on one of these very works along with a text written in Ionic Greek. For the last month of the summer, the program focused on Plato's *Symposium* and Homer's *Odyssey*. We read the texts incredibly slow during this period, taking time to work through the intricate grammar constructions. Reading at this slow pace—around fifty lines per hour—gave me a level of familiarity and engagement with each line that is missed when reading these same texts in english. Translating an ancient Greek text, one sentence or one clause at a time, I came to see in the second portion of the program, was an exercise in close reading and careful reasoning. Knowing the meaning of words and basic grammar of the language is not enough to read the texts. To apprehend the magnitude of Plato's ideas or see the beauty of a Homeric epic, one must learn how to quickly draw connections between specific words or ideas. Seeing these connections—connections which combine to form a unified whole of a complex philosophical idea or literary device—is essential for the study of ancient Greek. It is a skill that I began to develop this summer and one that I hope to hone these next two years as I continue to study this wonderfully rich, yet excruciatingly complicated language at Bowdoin.

This summer I believe I gained the knowledge to begin reading the *Iliad* in the fall as part of the Homer class at Bowdoin. Beyond giving me this level of competence in ancient Greek, the fellowship gave me both a better picture of Classics scholarship in the past and present and a deeper appreciation for the field as a whole. Many wonder why anyone would endeavor to learn a language not spoken for more than two thousand years, especially one so difficult. The more I study ancient Greek, the answer to this 'why' question becomes clear. Ancient Greek is the language that made philosophy possible and put democracy into being. It is a language that has conveyed universal truisms and the most astute observations about human nature ever recorded.

I know that my current knowledge of Greek is relatively small and my study of it just beginning. A very long time will pass before I can translate a sentence of Plato or Homer well enough to capture the shades of meaning in a given line or verse. I am motivated and drawn to this area of Classics by the notion though that, in the words of Marguerite Yourcenar, "almost everything that men have said best has been said in Greek."

In the next two years, with my growing knowledge of Greek, I plan to research some what has been said by as it pertains to the central questions of classical political philosophy. These questions, first asked by Plato more than two millennia ago, remain undeniably relevant; they have only gained significance with the passage of time.

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