Pronunciation: Why bother?

I have been startled recently by the number of active Arelates who have shown that they are not simply playing the part of 'Advocati Diaboli' for their own personal amusement in seriously questioning the proposition that if it is worth while reading the Latin and Greek classics at all, it's worth the effort and more intellectually honest to try to pronounce them as accurately as possible. At the risk of boring the converted, (who may well be advised to skip the rest of this article), I am therefore undertaking a rationale of the 'Phonetic' school of thought.

The word 'accurately', of course, raises the question 'Which period?' We have to draw the line somewhere: we cannot hope to achieve a strictly accurate pronunciation of Latin and Greek at every period – nor, perhaps, should we want to. There is also another side to this question: even if we can obtain a fairly clear picture of the pronunciation of, say, the Latin of Ovid's time, or the Attic Greek of Demosthenes, there must still be quite a lot that escapes us even on the theoretical plane, (e.g. the tonic qualities of Latin, and its sentence-stress, if any). Moreover can the average English speaker of today achieve the phonemes of Latin and Greek, together with their stress and intonation patterns, with sufficient confidence to make the effort seem worthwhile?

On these objections, which were given a fair airing at this year's Summer School, much can be said. Perhaps the most interesting point of departure lies in the consideration of our own language and literature. It is argued by the 'anti-phonetists' that if we pronounce and perform the works of Shakespeare in a Modern English pronunciation, why should we try to adapt ourselves to the Latin and Greek pronunciations of Classical times? Two points can be made in reply. First, we have a modern pronunciation of English: there is no equivalent in the case of Latin. Greek, indeed, is still spoken, and there is a school of thought which favours pronouncing Ancient Greek like Modern, though the two versions of the language are, admittedly, mutually incomprehensible in the written form, especially in the more natural Demotic version, where we can compare and contrast them without undergoing controversy. It might be fairer to regard Modern and Ancient Greek, on the grounds of this mutual incomprehensibility, as separate languages, just as Anglo-Saxon and Modern English, Old High German and Modern German, and, more obviously, Latin, and on the other hand, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, have to be treated. I think this question of comprehensibility, or the lack of it is the generally accepted criterion in determining the separateness of languages – I can think of no other. By this criterion, of course, North American English and the various forms of British English are one language, as indeed our experience proves.

But in the case of older English, Chaucer's works, and the attitude of students of Chaucer, contrast most interestingly with our handling of Shakespeare. The reason for the usual insistence on a phonetically reconstituted reading of Chaucer, (which seems to me quite justified), is that the language of Chaucer is by no means obviously our own, and that if you attempt to read

it according to the principles of Modern English, you lose the metre of the verse, (as well as having to think up artificial pronunciations of words now completely obsolete). So much is this true, that, even two hundred years ago, when the poet Alexander Pope tried to write an imitation of Chaucer, he showed his failure to grasp the Chaucerian metre by composing in tetrameters rather than pentameters! On the other hand, could we hear Shakespeare, or his leading actor, Richard Burbage, reading Hamlet aloud, we should not take more than a few minutes before we attuned ourselves sufficiently to their pronunciation to be able to follow what they said. (The sceptical might like to refer to pp. 65-85 of Grimson: **An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English**, published by E. Arnold.)

A similar case could be made out with regard to French literature: the works of the Classical playwrights, such as Corneille and Molière being even closer, linguistically, to Modern French than Shakespeare is to ourselves. What the practice is in France with regard to ancient works like the Chanson de Roland, I do not know, but I would have thought a modern pronunciation highly inappropriate.

With regard to Latin and Greek, the same considerations apply, with the added factor, already stated, that there is no modern norm with which to compare them. The only possible norm that might be suggested is one's own language, and, in fact, until the turn of the century, Latin and Greek were usually pronounced according to the principles of the various national languages. The results of this practice were various, but in England, where the vowel system has developed radically since c. 1400 A.D., they were a total misrepresentation of the ancient phonetic system. The anecdote about the difference in quantity of the 'a's in pater and mater, (pronounced à l'anglaise), is not just a funny story, but a valid comment on the idiocy of the real situation at the time.

What periods of Latin and Greek literature should, then, supply our standard pronunciation? The answers are not difficult. For the student of literature, and this, I believe, is what the Classicist claims to be, the richest period must be chosen. In the case of Latin, we must exclude, or give separate treatment to, the medieval period. It has many treasures, but is not our primary object of study. What we mostly read begins with Lucretius, (about 60 B.C.), and ends pretty well with Tacitus and his contemporaries. This is a span of no more than 200 years. Latin pronunciation did not change much in that time, and if the turn of the millenium is chosen as a theoretical norm, we will have a pronunciation that would have been easily intelligible to both Lucretius and Tacitus, and to those in between, and not particularly strange to Plautus and Terence. In the case of Greek, we have the problem of dialect to contend with, for some of the greatest writers, viz Homer, Sappho, Herodotus and Theocritus, did not write in Attic. There is also a much wider time span. Here we must be a little more arbitrary in our choice. The year 400 B.C. or the fourth century, will probably be our best target, as the great masterpieces of the fifth century were still fresh, and there was certainly very little phonetic development between the two centuries. It is true that such a choice leaves great authors such as Homer, on the one hand, and Apollonius,

Callimachus, and Theocritus somewhat in the wings: for Homer it must be admitted that our present text is based on that established by the Athenians under Pisistratus; the later poets, moreover, do not greatly exceed our limits.

How much do we know about the pronunciation of Latin and Greek in our chosen periods? The answer is, surely, a very great deal. I cannot give details or supporting evidence here, and it is very well set out in Professor W.S. Allen's two books – **Vox Graeca** and **Vox Latina**, for those who will take the trouble to study them. Some things I have mentioned before, e.g. sentence stress and patterns of sentence intonation, we shall probably never know much about. But for the word itself and its constituent phonemes, there is rich and ample evidence.

Ideally, then, we should try to imitate as far as possible the pronunciation of the ancients in reading their literature, (for who can possible appreciate an oral art such as poetry or rhetoric if he cannot hear it as it is meant to be heard?); but we are not all equally adept at getting our tongues round 'foreign' sounds. Here, I am afraid, we shall have to admit that, as in the case of modern languages, some can achieve, for reasons of ear and phonetic skill, a better and closer rendering of the desired accent than others. In the case of Latin and Greek, we shall never hear an absolutely 'correct' reading or rendering. But some will be more persuasive, and harmonise more closely with the theories expounded by scholars, than others.

To be sure, no two native speakers of the language enunciate exactly alike: there is an element of uncertainty in the achievement of utterance just as in the hitting of a tennis ball – though the approximation to a norm is such that we can usually distinguish even a very good foreign speaker from a native one, however indifferent. So that in failing to pronounce Latin and Greek with exact correctness or consistency, we need not feel too downhearted; all we can do is to try to improve our own performance to the best of our capacity, as we might do with a modern language.

Anyone who has ever come to appreciate the poetry of a foreign language – the poems of Beaudelaire, for example, or Verlaine who said 'de la musique avant toute chose', or those of Pushkin, Leopardi, Carducci, Heine or Rilke – will understand how unsatisfactory such poetry sounds if read incompetently by a foreigner, especially by a reader who neglects the prosody of the poems. And it is incontestable that the ancient poets composed in a firmly oral tradition, with the viva voce recitation of their works in mind. If we wish to appreciate their works, (and this goes for oratory, and even historical compositions and philosophical dialogues), as they themselves intended them to be appreciated, we must cultivate the art of reading aloud, and must strive after accurate pronunciation, even if we sometimes fall short. Our knowledge is the result of modern scientific and literary research; our motivation will arise from good taste and a sense of literary and artistic integrity.

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