

*A tribute to a modern
sage and teacher*

A Reconsideration: Werner Jaeger's Paideia

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IT IS MORE than fifty years since Werner Jaeger (1888-1961) published the first volume of a three-volume work on the classical age of Greece that he called *Paideia: die Formung des classischen Menschen*. Appearing in Germany in the fateful year 1933, it was translated by Gilbert Highet as *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. It appeared in English in 1939, on the eve of war, three years after Jaeger had left a Germany where, though his position (and the safety of his Jewish wife) had been guaranteed, he did not choose to remain. Published in English before it appeared in German, the second volume appeared in 1943, the year he became an American citizen, the third in 1944. After short stays at Berkeley and Chicago, Jaeger had come to rest at Harvard. There for twenty years his influence radiated to colleagues and students who saw in him something their education had scarcely prepared them for, a twentieth-century sage: gentle, unhurried, productive; so serene among his losses that one could only intuit them; a teacher as cheerful, as unassuming, as accessible as Socrates himself.

Rereading *Paideia* after forty years, I find it hard—I suppose impossible—to experience it shorn of the aura of my old teacher. But the book reached far beyond the restricted world of classical students and professors to the general public for

whom it was written: in the mid-sixties I noted with surprised delight that the literary magazine my children brought home from their small-town high school bore the name *Paideia*. In the world of classical scholarship it was even more influential; Moses Finley records, though with mixed feelings, that the effect of Jaeger on his generation of classicists was overwhelming.

It was a book intended to influence, though it contains no overt preaching and leaves to the reader the drawing of historical parallels. It came out of the twenties, years when (he writes) "our whole civilization, shaken by an overpowering historical experience," was "beginning to examine its own values once again." For Jaeger as historian, any reexamination of values had to be "Hellenocentric," like western culture itself. *Paideia* is a book written in the service of an ideal.

But it was for Jaeger no remote transcendentalism, but an ideal rooted in historical experience. Highet's subtitle, "The Ideals of Greek Culture," is faithful enough to the book's content; *Paideia* is indeed about the ideals of Greek culture as Jaeger saw them expressed in poets, historians, philosophers, orators, from Homer through Plato down to the last voices of free Athens. But as Jaeger himself noted, his German subtitle better

describes what it is really about: not a static set of timeless ideals but a dynamic, here-and-now process, *die Formung des Menschen*, the forming of human beings. *Paideia* is a word we translate as "education," but which (I use the cool wording of Liddell and Scott's Greek lexicon) means not only the rearing and education of children (*pais* is the simple Greek for child) but, by an extension astonishing to us but not to Greeks, "mental culture, civilisation," and then "objectively, the literature and accomplishments of an age or people." It was rendered in Latin as *humanitas*. Ideals seem far away and above; the forming of human beings is an active enterprise that involves us all. The book *Paideia* is about education indeed, but about education as Jaeger saw (and practiced) it. It is education transfigured, a supremely human task and privilege, so central to civilisation that centuries of the deepest utterances of human thought and feeling could be subsumed under that one rich word. That is what he is expressing when he writes—in connection with the goddess Athene's tutoring of Homer's young Telemachus—of "the universal feeling . . . that the act of education, releasing the powers of a young soul, breaking down the restraints which hampered it, and leading it into a glad activity, is itself a divine impetus, another miracle." That glad activity was the young human being's drive toward excellence, toward what the Greeks called *areté*. "In learning, become what you are," Pindar had written. Men must see, in the traditional heroes Pindar glorified, "their true selves raised to a higher plane." Out of Jaeger's conviction came the force of those much quoted words from the introduction to *Paideia*: "Other nations made gods, kings, spirits; the Greeks alone made men."

Influences don't last, however, least of all in classical scholarship, which must exist by discovering ever-new approaches to its closed field of primary texts. William Calder's judgment in the *Dictionary of American Biography* is that though *Paideia* was thought in Jaeger's lifetime to be his great achievement, "the volumes

are rarely read by scholars today"; he presents it elsewhere as "humanistic evangelicism" of a kind he deeply distrusts. Hugh Lloyd-Jones dismisses it as "a dull history of Greek civilisation seen from the scholastic viewpoint." Arnaldo Momigliano admires it as "original in its outlook, subtle in its analysis," yet considers that "it is written with insufficient reference to the political and social history of Greece," and notes how in Jaeger's work "concrete situations, economic and juristic relationships, institutions, are left on one side." Moses Finley's observation is more telling still: that in the index to the three volumes there is no entry for "slavery" or "slave."

What can we learn today, in 1984, from a book which (in Jaeger's own words) strives "to blend [historical fact] in a higher unity with ideal standards" and "treats the historical expression of the spirit in literature and poetry as representative of human *areté*"? Granted, all professors of classics tend to become, in Louis MacNeice's phrase, "impresarios of the Greeks." But Jaeger's aspirations are a bit lofty, surely, in a work purporting to illuminate a past inhabited by a contentious and immoderate people fully as irrational as ourselves, who messed up their civilisation almost as thoroughly as we seem about to mess up ours. Homer, Aristotle noted, showed men as better than they are. That is scarcely what we expect from a historian.

The very appearance in scholarly writing of the words "soul" and "spirit" makes us uncomfortable, except when used to explain how they were used by somebody long ago. And another of Jaeger's words is even more troubling. "Aristocratic" is a word Americans grow up distrusting, and it pervades *Paideia*. From the first chapter, "Nobility and *Areté*," Jaeger presents the development of Greek culture as a steady deepening of the aristocratic, martial *areté* of the Homeric heroes into the intellectual and moral *areté* put forth by Socrates and Plato as the citizen's ideal. "Culture," he writes, "is simply the aristocratic ideal of a

nation, increasingly intellectualised." He could see the process as a democratization: "The class limitations of the old ideals were removed when they were sublimated and universalised by philosophy; while their permanent truth and their indestructible ideality were confirmed and strengthened." Socrates, after all, was the midwife's and the stonemason's son. Nevertheless, the Jaeger of the 1933 *Paideia* is admittedly no democrat; aware, as all classical scholars must be, of how democracy in Athens tore itself to pieces, he could not yet know the horror that was to succeed the turbulence of Weimar. It was in 1944 that he added the essay-long note to Chapter One in which he spoke of "the noble idea of later centuries that all men are born equal," reiterating there what he had already written, that "the democratic culture of Periclean Athens was the final product of a long and gradual transformation and extension of the early aristocratic tradition." *Paideia* follows its Greek sources and, along with slaves, largely leaves out the working classes; when it cannot, as in the chapter on Hesiod, the treatment is weakened by condescension. It is also disconcerting to read in the introduction to Volume I that we have a "sense of complete estrangement . . . when we confront the Oriental nations," or that only in "a vaguely analogical sense" may we "talk of Chinese, Indian, Babylonian, Jewish or Egyptian culture," since "none of these nations has a word or an ideal which corresponds to real culture." No historian today could write those words—nor could the Jaeger I knew in 1944. The world shrinks, and the mind widens.

But dross drops away as we reread *Paideia* in 1984; the gold still shines. This "dull history of Greek civilisation" is steadily in use; the volumes in our college library are all checked out. It is easy, almost automatic, for students to discount limitations rendered obvious by time and history. What rises from every page, that ideal of *kalokagathia*, of beauty, goodness, and achievement melded, still

speaks, no matter how the Greeks, no less human than ourselves, debased it. "Nor," writes Jaeger in his late note, "has the fact that culture in the humanistic sense was originally restricted to a special class ever prevented later generations from asking that more men might share its benefits." The young recognise the heritage they need to believe belongs to them, that ideal realm which modern scholars, modern critics, even modern theologians are so quick to take away. The students of Lawrence Cremin, President of Columbia's Teachers College, are fortunate that he begins his course in the history of education with *Paideia*.

But *Paideia* is much more than a long-winded celebration of an ideal. No one will awake to the glory that was Greece merely because he is told that Greece was glorious. The work adds up to some 1250 pages, if you include the notes (and that you should include the notes is clear when you begin to read them). The bulk of it is exactly what it purports to be: an eloquent yet reliable guide to Greek literature by someone whose enormous knowledge is at the service of an extraordinary power to imagine his way into every nuance of the texts and make them imaginable to others. Unless one reads *Paideia* with Hesiod or Pindar or Solon in hand, or the *Symposium* or the *Republic*, one does not realise how much of it is graceful, readable, trustworthy summary and paraphrase—often, indeed, direct translation. Interpretive commentary is always subordinated to the text's own individual spirit—I might say its *areté*—experienced all the more vividly because Jaeger has communicated it as he perceived it, alive with the life of the human beings who created it in society, in history.

It was not as a popularizer, of course, that Jaeger acquired his immense reputation. The stuff of rigorous scholarship is here too, though the grace of Jaeger's style renders it unobtrusive: the assessments of the contributions of other scholars, the arguments for redating, for the reordering of Platonic dialogues and the authenticity of the Seventh Letter, the

fascinating chapter on Greek medicine as *paideia* and as science, the great original thesis of the central position of *paideia* itself. Though a serious student of Greece cannot take Jaeger as his only guide, he will not soon find a better. If the dead are to speak to the living, said the great Wilamowitz, Jaeger's own teacher, we must feed them with blood, as Odysseus did in Hades—and the blood is our own. As Hugh Lloyd-Jones remarks, writing of Gilbert Murray, "a scholar who does this runs the risk of fathering upon the ancients beliefs and attitudes rooted wholly in the modern world." Those who feed their blood to the ancients lend them a life not wholly theirs. But it is thus that we guarantee the continuance of their perennial life, forcing readers of the future to reread and rediscover and renew.

Werner Jaeger needed an ideal in an age he found "rotten with individualism," and he knew where to find it. He knew quite well what he was doing. He knew—and he wrote—that Pindar's "ideal unity of physical and spiritual may have been very far from reality"; that Plato, describing in the Republic "the principle by which an ideal is created to be a pattern," puts "no emphasis on reality, and compares the power of philosophy to construct an ideal with the art of the painter who depicts not real men but an ideal of beauty." Jaeger saw Plato as philosopher, historian, and poet, who gave life to the dead: to Socrates, to Protagoras, to Aristophanes, the great names and friends of his youth. Jaeger saw himself—entirely

without arrogance—as following in Plato's steps; *Paideia*, he wrote, was "the result of an attitude like that of Plato in the *Laws*." (Volume I of *Paideia* is more read than the subsequent volumes—it is the only one available in paperback, and many people do not realize that all of Volume II and much of Volume III, more than a third of the whole, are devoted to Socrates and Plato.) The very mention of Plato raises the specter of cultural elitism, and if it is elitism to believe that the ideal of *areté* exists, and that it is our human task to make it as real as our capacities allow, we will find elitism everywhere in Jaeger's *paideia*. But we diminish our students—and ourselves—if we allow fear of a catchword to dull the response, as natural as youth and as perennial, to the call of Pindar, narrow aristocrat though he was, to "be what you are." Jaeger saw, even in 1933, the danger in setting the Greeks up as Goethe did, as "the perfect manifestation of true human nature." We can never again, he told us, make them into "timeless idols: they cannot display the standards implicit in their meaning, and their irresistible power to transform and mould our lives, except as forces working within a definite historical milieu—just as they did in the era when they were created." But "today," he wrote, "we [must] counter the opposite danger—a boundless and aimless passion for viewing everything as history, a night in which all cats are grey." It is a danger that fifty years later has not ceased to beset us.