Creativity? It’s all Greek to me

Tom Palaima lauds a reflection on the millennia-old struggle to express original ideas through language and attendant implications – cannot be found. There is no way to do this book justice in a review, but arguably, and fortunately, no way to do it serious injustice either. Why? Because in The Poetry of Thought, Steiner is writing down his own thoughts on thoughts for himself, rather than for us who do not have his polymathic familiarity with philosophy, poetry, music, literature and mathematics from the Greek pre-Socratics until the late 20th century.

There are no notes. There are no indices. Some few translations of the words of cited thinkers are given in a brief appendix. The translations seem to have been done when Steiner himself was wrestling with how to understand in English the thought content of the original passages. Steiner calls his book an essay. It is. It is also an argument in the literal sense. It casts light and helps us see.

Steiner’s thesis is that the “intellectual and poetic creativity” of the Greeks “during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. remains unique in human history. In some respects, the life of the mind thereafter is a copious footnote.” The Poetry of Thought extends that footnote. Steiner starts from the song poems of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles and Homer before them, from metaphor that gave birth to abstract thoughts and to poetic instincts and tools that have been used by thinkers throughout the Western tradition to express what Coleridge called “thoughts all too deep for words”.

In a brief last chapter, Steiner reflects on the new technologies that threaten privacy, silence and memory, that block our paths to “the poem and the philosophical statement”. He writes that “the humanities” (his quotation marks) “bleakly failed us in the long night of the twentieth century”. But he places hope that “somewhere a rebellious singer, a philosopher inebriate with solitude will say, ‘No’”, and thereby rekindle the lightning of thought of Heraclitus and of Karl Marx. Steiner shares Marx’s belief that books and words can “irradiate the dormant spirit of men and women, rousing them to humanity”. “In the beginning was the Word”, and the word may make a new beginning.

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