

CLASSICAL TRADITION AND THE CREATION OF VALUES

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I have no idea what the significance of classical philology would be in our age, if not to have an unfashionable effect - that is, to work against the time and thereby have an effect upon it, hopefully for the benefit of a future time.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', *Unfashionable Observations* trans. R.T. Gray (Stanford 1995) p. 87.

One of the great literary quarrels of Greek and Roman antiquity was that between rhetoric and philosophy. It began in the fourth century BC when Plato on behalf of Socrates laid into the great rhetoricians of the previous century and their claims that rhetoric was the highest art, in dialogues like the *Gorgias*; on the contrary claimed Plato, philosophy was the only path to true knowledge, and the only proper education for the young. Although he never mentions him, it is clear that Plato is attacking his own contemporary Isocrates, whose rival educational system (which he confusingly also called philosophy) was based on the teaching of rhetoric for the purposes of public life. Aristotle continued the feud, by deliberately lecturing in the afternoons on the grounds that 'it is disgraceful to keep silent and let Isocrates do the talking,' and writing a treatise on rhetoric which convincingly demonstrates that anything you can do I can do better.

Thus a legacy was established in the western ancient world of two competing forms of higher education. At different points in time one or the other was the more popular: on the whole Romans in the Republic thought that practical tips on public speaking were

worth more than speculation on the end of life; but in the empire things became more equal as rhetoric began to be associated with panegyric of the emperors, and philosophers came back into fashion, revered for their freedom of speech, dirty beards and refusal to flatter. In the so-called 'second sophistic' of the high empire, the quarrel was carried on at all levels, from claims to tax exemption to long and turgid discourses attacking Plato or defending the moral value as well as the usefulness of rhetoric. The dispute continued deep into the Byzantine period, with writers like Themistius (who thought he was a philosopher) and Libanius (who thought he was a rhetorician), or Synesius (who thought he was both). The fact that modern scholars can see very little difference between rhetoric and philosophy in this period fails to do justice to the venom with which the two sides attacked each other, or the way that Dio 'the golden mouth' could present his transformation from rhetoric to philosophy as a genuine religious conversion. This is one of the great quarrels of western literary history.

But it is much more difficult to understand what lies behind the endless polemics, which serve to disguise rather than illuminate whatever differences there may have been between two ways of looking at the world, which to modern eyes seem essentially the same. Why should we care about this quarrel? The answer, I believe, lies in one of the fundamental dichotomies of the classical tradition in western education.

For the most part in the modern age Plato has

had it all his way. The last time Isocrates was hailed as the secret of Greek thought was between the two world wars, when Stefan George and his 'Kreis' proclaimed an ethereal spirituality and the pure ideal of classicism. The scholar most closely associated with this movement was Werner Jaeger, who published the first volume of his famous book *Paideia: die Formung des griechischen Menschen* in 1934, the year of Hitler's triumph, a book whose three volumes sought to present Isocrates as the true embodiment of Hellenism and the ultimate expression of 'the Third Humanism.' Although Jaeger and many of his associates strongly resisted the advent of National Socialism, and Jaeger himself had to emigrate to the United States, this idealisation of the Greeks was held by the next generation to be in some way responsible for the failure of humanist education to resist the rise of totalitarianism. For the generation that emerged from the Second World War, *paideia* was soft at the centre, like Isocrates himself; what was needed was a realistic approach to the Greeks which would see them not as an ideal, but as a challenging contrast, in many ways savage and brutish, deeply flawed and capable of teaching us through their very alterity rather than as a model.

Recently however there have been signs of a return to this earlier Isocratean tradition, and younger scholars (such as Yun Lee Too in Columbia) seek to place rhetoric at the centre of the educational process; in so doing they reveal clearly what this quarrel can mean to us today. Instead of talking about 'education', they use the newly fashionable word 'pedagogy', which symbolises their commitment to a new conception of education, in which education is at the service of government and its power structures. Pedagogy for them is measured by its usefulness in relation to the values of social control, and they seek for the most part to show how elites and authorities have manipulated individuals through their control of the pedagogic process. This is of course the modern western philosophy of education, as espoused by those who wish to emphasise the usefulness of education to society, its practical value, and therefore its right to social prestige and government funding. In an age when every university course and every university teacher is expected to produce a mission statement of 'aims and objectives' which will be

measured in accordance with the added value that his pedagogic activity is supposed to impart to the earning power of his pupils, Isocrates does indeed rule supreme. Isocrates is on the side of the big battalions, and against the freedom of the human spirit. Isocratean rhetoric has always been at the service of authority - speeches as power, pedagogy as authority, panegyric as political thought. For the Isocratean tradition is not interested in the truth or falsehood of propositions; in this modern formulation it has even abandoned the claim to the power to persuade others of truth and falsehood: to quote Yun Lee Too, what the new Isocrates 'demands of his audience is merely the perception and reception of the images he produces rather than a belief in them.'

The problem with this view of the value of the western classical tradition is that, although it is undoubtedly true that classical learning has been used in different periods in order to stifle originality and impose the values of whatever elite or government was in control, it is equally true that (often in the same periods) classical learning has been the secret weapon of a group opposed to the dominant pedagogic ideology of any society, and has been used to subvert it: so neo-Platonism, paganism, rationalism, libertinism, freethinking, have been as important a part of the classical tradition as its abuse by those religious and political autocracies that sought to mould it to their ends. Here it seems is the ultimate meaning of the ancient quarrel between rhetoric and philosophy; for the classical tradition has a double heritage of conformism and liberation, embodied in these two traditions. We can construct any view of the relation between education and power out of selective use of the past. But in bringing the past to bear on the present we must be careful of what we are doing: what future do we want?

Today in all countries (except possibly Italy) the study of ancient Greek and Roman culture is a deeply esoteric activity. It is almost inevitable in the modern educational system that all of us in the west and surely also in the east will have experienced the call to the Classics as such a conversion on the Road to Damascus, a demand to leave the normal and everyday society, in order to embark on some enterprise of enormous cul-

tural and spiritual significance, involving years of preparation in activities regarded by others as useless and unremunerative. I still remember vividly my own conversion - the refusal of my teachers at the age of eleven to let me learn Greek, because French was easier and I lacked the necessary linguistic flair. A forbidden language in a secret script became the object of my dreams, and a reality that a few years later in the fifties I willed on myself as a refuge from a hostile world. I remember too the long and solitary hours spent counting out my pocket money in the vast and rambling bookshop of our local cathedral town, where the libraries of the canons and the clerics of a century earlier had ended their days in a dusty upstairs room full of titles and indeed whole books in Latin that no-one had disturbed for decades. In these cracked and worm-eaten leather - bound volumes lay I was convinced the secret that my boring teachers and my trivial contemporaries were unable to comprehend.

The power of that image has recently been reaffirmed. What is it that makes the English Patient in the recent movie so irresistibly mysterious? It is in part his mask, the fact that his identity is concealed behind a barrier through which only the workings of his own memory can penetrate. But it is also the fact that the record of his past is contained in a book interleaved with mementoes. This book is of course Herodotus, the symbolic traveller of the western world and restless soul, whose work invites modern interpolations: the Odyssey was presumably too well known, and the Epic of Gilgamesh too obscure to function as an icon, though each of these would have done as well to symbolise the theme of adultery which the story of Candaules' wife reveals when told around the camp fire in the desert by Katharine Clifton (Kristin Scott-Thomas), the future adulteress herself. It is the book of Herodotus (though presumably in English translation, for the Count shows no knowledge of the original Greek) which establishes Count Almásy (Ralph Fiennes) as a special person, one of the elect. As a result I am told there was not a single copy of Herodotus to be found in all the bookstores of the USA, and the same was certainly true of London;

while even Oxford (where the supply is greater, and many of those who went to the movie already owned a copy) sold out briefly.

This conception of the classical tradition as defining a group of the elect, is not a new phenomenon, and has little to do with the alleged decline in the teaching of Classics in the last generation. While it is true that Italy is now probably the only country in the world where classical studies are taken seriously as an intrinsic part of the secondary curriculum of the *liceo classico*, the idea that the deep study of the classics (that is, the study of Greek and Latin) was once widespread elsewhere in the western world is an exaggeration: only perhaps in the period from 1850 to 1914 was this even remotely true for most western countries. We should not become obsessed with the position of the Classics in that short period at the end of the nineteenth century, when, under the influence of German *Altertumswissenschaft* classical learning became the badge of a western international elite; then Thomas Gaisford could end a sermon in Christchurch Cathedral by saying, 'And in conclusion, let me urge upon you the value of the study of the ancient tongues, which not only refines the intellect and elevates above the common herd, but also leads not infrequently to positions of considerable emolument.'¹ And in the United States Thorstein Veblen in 1899 could characterise the Leisure Class by their education:

The ability to use and to understand certain of the dead languages of southern Europe is not only gratifying to the person who finds occasion to parade his accomplishments in this respect, but the evidence of such knowledge serves at the same time to recommend any savant to his audience, both lay and learned. It is currently expected that a certain number of years shall have been spent in acquiring this substantially useless information, and its absence creates an assumption of hasty and precarious learning, as well as of a vulgar practicality that is equally obnoxious to the conventional standards of sound scholarship and intellectual force.²

The nineteenth century did indeed elevate the study of the Greek and Latin languages to the supreme

1 Gaisford quoted in H. Lloyd-Jones, *Blood for the Ghosts* (London, 1982) p.82.

2 T.Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London, 1970) p. 255.

position above even sciences and technology, and proceeded to appropriate the classical discourse to its own elite agenda of educating gentlemen and rulers of the British Empire, distinguished (as Thorstein Veblen said) by 'the ability to use and understand certain of the dead languages of southern Europe' both from the vulgar mechanics and from the weaker sex. But the fact remains that, outside this brief period of the second half of the nineteenth century, the deep study of the Classics, that is the study of both Latin and Greek, was never a widespread phenomenon, even among the educated.

The gnostic element is intrinsic in the nature of our studies. Initiation is an essential aspect of education, and those educated will always look back on their experience as a process of enlightenment. The more difficult the process, the greater the barriers and the preparation required, the more significant the rite of passage becomes: no-one attributes transcendental meaning to the learning of the twelve times tables; but the progress in western education through (until recently) some dozen or more years of life towards a degree in Classics - and even now, with more efficient and later language teaching, it still takes almost half as long - signals that the reward in wisdom and power must be commensurate. The feeling that there is a secret knowledge, a *kryphios logos*, known only to the initiate, has always been a central aspect of the classical tradition. Yet there is a dangerous confusion here: because special knowledge is required to understand a discipline, that does not imply that the discipline is necessarily a secret in the possession of a group of the elect. Skills may be difficult and confined to a small group, without in any way creating secret knowledge with a higher status.

At a very early stage in the western tradition this vision of ancient learning as providing access to esoteric truths was combined with another and more important aspect of the classical tradition. There is indeed considerable truth in the claim that the classical tradition has always since the end of antiquity been fashioned and understood as a counter-culture and a refuge from the dominant world view. That is one of the more significant aspects of its enduring power. Each generation in the classical tradition has created a new synthe-

sis in opposition to the dominant ideology. Already the neo-paganism of late antiquity from the age of Julian onwards was a counter-image to the new force of Christianity, with a cultic organisation, a theology, a sense of ritual and a priesthood which in fact owed more to Christianity than to paganism. Yet despite its reliance on Christian forms it was a refuge from the dominant ideology; and after its public collapse lived on as an esoteric sect for the chosen few in neo-Platonism and the Hermetic tradition. Classical learning and the pagan tradition had already become the weapon of the opposition to orthodoxy. Thus began the long and secret history of the classical tradition, based on the confusion of these two elements, the gnostic and the subversive.

The evidence of this dichotomy can be found in all periods of the classical tradition. From time to time a small group of the educated would seek to impose again the standards of a past age, and those educated in antiquity tended always to regard themselves as an exclusive brotherhood of the elect. In the sixth century the ancient *eloquium Romanum* was praised in Ostrogothic Italy by Ennodius. In a recent discussion of eleventh century Byzantine humanism the aptly named modern scholar Panagiotis Agapitos (was not Agapetos the Deacon of Aghia Sophia in the age of Justinian the last of the great panegyrists of antiquity?) brings to life the forgotten educators in 'the hermeneutic art', Mauro-pous, Xiphilinos, Niketas, Psellos and Italos, who created the most learned period of Byzantium, and defended the values of a defiant Platonism against the obscurantist theology of their church: 'Plato is mine, most holy and wise lord, Plato is mine? Oh earth and sun, to use a phrase from the tragic stage! If you accuse me that I once dealt in depth with his dialogues and admired the quality of his interpretative and syllogistic power, why then do you not also accuse the great Fathers who refuted the arguments of so many heretics with the exactitude of their syllogisms? ... I indeed fell in love with Plato and Chrysippus - could it have been otherwise? -, but in depth and beyond their smooth surface.' Thus Psellos, defending his right to interpret Christianity in the light of Platonism; Psellos's letter to the Patriarch Keroularios is indeed one of the most inspiring and passionate defences of academic freedom and attacks on time-serving bureaucracy that I have

read. It uses rhetoric of course, but in defence of a true ideal; and ultimately for Psellos rhetoric is not important. As he said of his pupil Italos in a backhanded reference which would not have got him a job in any modern university, 'His art is powerful but the elegance of his style non-existent...He does not convince by his grandiloquence and rhetoric (after all he does not know how to ensnare by means of a graceful discourse), he does not entice with his style nor does he attract with sweetness, but he conquers and subdues his listener with the content of his arguments.'³

In the Latin culture of the medieval west we do not know, though we may well suspect, how many of the patient copyists of pagan subversive texts from Lucretius to Petronius in their frigid monasteries became admirers of the ancient world, and were themselves corrupted by transcribing forbidden wisdom into joining the secret society; in the case of the great Latin fore-runners of the high medieval poets, Virgil and Ovid, their effect on their readers is clear. In the age of Charlemagne the protagonists of the *renovatio* (as they called it) played at being court poets: Charlemagne himself was David, Alcuin was Flaccus, Theodulf Pindar, Angilbert Homerus. The early humanists from Petrarch onwards were no different. The ancient knowledge was secret knowledge, pagan wisdom, which gave an independent power that was at least in part incompatible with the teachings of Christianity. In this way it provided freedom of thought, but at the same time was often reinterpreted to fit the contemporary conception of esoteric knowledge: Ficino's fifteenth century Platonism is a christianised pagan mystery.

Even when the classical tradition became accepted as part of a dominant ideology, let us say from the 16th century onwards, it retained many elements combining esotericism with the idea of a counter-culture, supporting on the one hand alchemy and astrology, freemasonry and rosicrucianism, and on the other scepticism, hedonism and all forms of libertarian freethinking. But in the post-Renaissance period there is I think a crucial change, as the two aspects began to separate. For as counter-culture the influence of humanism in the

west has been almost entirely beneficial, in offering a different model of the universe based on reason rather than faith or revelation, in which the divine element accompanies without explaining the nature of the world and the forms of human society. It is hard to conceive of the modern world without that element of rational humanism which has enabled us to construct it in the past five hundred years. And that legacy itself raises the central question for classical studies in their western context.

This question is of course, has the classical tradition lost its usefulness at the turn of the millenium? Have other ways of thinking independent of this tradition provided new structures for understanding the world. I do not of course mean in the relatively trivial sense of new scientific advances, such as IT or genetics; but rather in the sense that, 'is our world view so different that there is no longer any point in considering where we came from and how we can use past models to help us understand the present?' That question has I think been a serious one ever since the Darwinian revolution, which encapsulated in a general scientific and social theory the reversal of the human relationship to time. For classical antiquity, time past lay in spatial terms before us (*ante*), visible to the human intellect and capable of providing models of behaviour; time future lay behind us (*post*), obscure, invisible, unknowable, but not likely to be different from that past which we could see in front of us. Darwinian *homo sapiens* looks the other way, forward into a future in which biological selection underpins the notion of advances in all areas of human endeavour. The way may lie uphill, but somehow at the top we shall find the promised land spread out before us. We face the future resolutely, and the past is behind us. It is noticeable that most modern travellers prefer to sit in a railway carriage facing the engine, to see where they are going; the ancient Greeks and Romans sat with their backs to the engine, looking at the landscape they had passed through.

What then is the point of a tradition? Is it just an antiquarian indulgence, which panders to our weakness for desiring to inhabit a familiar world? Or is it

3 In Yun Lee Too and Niall Livingstone (eds.), *Pedagogy and Power: Rhetorics of Classical Learning* (Cambridge 1998).

more dangerous, an attempt to prevent change, or even to channel it into forms which are acceptable to conventional values? It is for instance only too easy to represent the classical tradition as not just established by but intended to perpetuate the values of a white urbanised western male elite. Some of the most influential, most learned and most amusing of modern work on the classical tradition seems to view that tradition as a source of error, inhibiting a correct view of the world by virtue either of ideological bias or of the tendency of the human mind to follow through logically from false premisses to false conclusions. I think of writers as different in their attitudes as Martin Bernal, Lisa Jardine and Tony Grafton. But the history of ideas is not the history of the errors and follies of the past, however much that may serve to amuse us or to reinforce our own sense of ideological superiority. It is rather the history of the choices that humanity has made in the realm of the free spirit.

There is indeed a secret history that has yet to be told of our own generation, the history of the classical tradition in Eastern Europe. I can only speak of those I have known both before and after the lifting of the Iron Curtain. But it is clear to me that during the whole period of Communism the classical past was felt by individual teachers and pupils throughout the Soviet zone as a secret world where the human spirit indeed remained free. In the last thirty years I have met so many scholars from eastern Europe who had one belief in common, that there were no barriers within this secret world to which we all belonged, and that they could find in the study of the classics a sense of the European past free of all ideologies; even at the worst times of the Cold War, when they dared not talk openly, they indicated in a variety of ways, between themselves and with those of us on the outside, their sense of belonging to a common counter-culture. This story follows on from that other great expression of the power of the classical tradition in our century, which also has still to be told: the story of the rebirth of classical scholarship in the USA and England brought by the expulsion of the Jews from Germany and Italy. For the Soviet bloc I remember many personal friends in the humanist faith, individuals of courage and vision who have added so much to my life. There are I know hun-

dreds of others who have found in the study of the Classics the ability to transcend the ideologies imposed by their own societies. And the story continues today: recently I have visited Russia and the Ukraine, where there are many who continue to study the ancient cultures and to excavate ancient sites, without access to libraries and without regular salaries, in conditions of deprivation which we can scarcely imagine in our capitalist subsidised academic world, and against the prevailing culture of a ruthless and often criminal neo-capitalism.

But in western Europe the twentieth century was the greatest age for the persecution of intellectuals since the Christian wars of religion in the seventeenth century. At the start of the 21st century, when most forms of intellectual persecution are at least temporarily in abeyance, our answer to this question of the continuing purpose of the western classical tradition must be to consider how far its traditional function as a counter-culture is still useful; in what should that counter-culture consist, and how can we distinguish it from the idea of an esoteric sect with a secret wisdom?

It seems to me that a pluralist society is intrinsically more able to adapt than a culture based on a single world-view. In the modern materialist age we need at least one and perhaps a variety of transcendent goals in order to protect even a Darwinian future: gene diversity is beneficial even in the realm of ideas. Capitalism was an infinitely better system while Marxism survived; only now are we beginning to see its intrinsic disadvantages as a monoculture. So we need alternatives, and these must be believable and useful ones. Traditional alternatives have a head start, simply because they are familiar and well rooted. Whether or not religion is believable, it is certainly useful in the moral sphere; but it does not help much elsewhere. The advantage of the humanist tradition is that it has a wide range of influence on action, and sufficient flexibility to engender new solutions from within its intellectual framework. By chance no doubt, but by good fortune, it is also fundamentally anti-materialist. There is no place for concepts of self-advantage or the profit motive in the classical world-view. It is therefore an extremely effective counter-cultural phenomenon in the modern world of

materialism.

How we use it is up to us: the description of this process as 'tradition' or 'reception' is misleading; as Michael Baxandall has said in relation to art-criticism:

Influence is a curse of art-criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the inferential beholder will wish to take into account. If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X.⁴

Similarly we do not passively *receive* that which is *handed on* to us. A living tradition works like influence: it is we who take from the past, not the past which dictates to us. And a living tradition will therefore always and wilfully reinterpret the past, shape it to its own expectations and needs. For such reasons I do not believe that the future of humanism is in any danger at all. It is far better adapted than any other alternative to perform the necessary function of a counter-culture in the modern age.

Whatever may be true of the nineteenth century, as we look back on the twentieth century, our generation seems rather to exhibit the power of classical thought in the defence of freedom. The classical tradition inspired cultural resistance to dictatorship in the countries of Europe for sixty years from the twenties onwards; it gave a spiritual home to the refugees of a Jewish diaspora more powerful than their own religion, because it spoke to believers and unbelievers alike. In the countries behind the Iron Curtain it provided a powerful reminder of the freedom that they had lost, and of the former culture of pre-communist Europe. And in the west the classical tradition has united a dissident minority against the monocacy of consumer capitalism. Today we need it even more than ever before in both east and west.

This is as true in education as in other areas of human activity. To return to my starting point, the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy continues. The philosophical ideal, so often and so paradoxically enshrined in a form of Platonism, concerns the passionate search for ultimate truth, not for temporal power. So to the philosopher, education is a form of enquiry conducted together by teacher and pupil, not indoctrination beaten into the bored schoolchild by an empowered pedagogue. If modern pedagogy takes over from education we shall indeed create a race of slaves, for as Yun Lee Too has (rather misleadingly) claimed, "Pedagogy" is from the Greek, *'paid- + agoge*, 'the leading of the child/slave'; whereas education is the 'drawing out' of the talents of the individual to create a fulfilled personality. That is why in the end Isocratean pedagogy is incompatible with freedom, whereas Platonic philosophy with its emphasis on the truth wherever it may lead is indeed the path to freedom. As the experience of modern society continues to show, it is a very dangerous thing for academics to praise their rulers, or to seek to be useful to them. But those who feel persecuted by the new rhetoric can take heart from the words of Themistius (himself no mean orator and government adviser) in the fourth century A.D., an age when rhetoric ruled supreme: 'the value of a philosopher's discourse is not diminished if it is delivered under a solitary plane tree with none but cicadas to hear.'

4 M. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (Yale, 1985) pp. 58 - 9.