

Part I

Overview

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§1

The Classical Tradition and the Scope of Our Book

The classical tradition covers a millennium and a half of cultural achievements, historical developments, facts, fictions, and phenomena on many levels. It subsumes the many ways in which, since the end of classical antiquity, the world of ancient Greece and Rome has inspired and influenced, has been constructed and reconstructed, has left innumerable traces (sometimes unregarded), and has, repeatedly, been appealed to, and contested, as a point of reference, and rehearsed and reconstituted (with or without direct reference) as an archetype.

Interest in aspects of the classical tradition is currently as active as it is widespread. The classical canon may no longer dominate the modern mind, as it once determined the responses of elite circles in the past, but we live in a time when Hollywood blockbusters about ‘three hundred’ Spartans or the tale of ‘Troy’ attract enthusiastic audiences around the world, when innovative stagings of Greek drama are a familiar presence in many countries, when idealistic notions of, or anxieties about, ‘democracy’ continue to engender debate, and when the enduring tussle between Britain and Greece over the ownership of the Elgin (or Parthenon) marbles shows how cultural goods tied up with the classical tradition can still be a matter of high politics and national interest. These and countless other achievements, developments, and debates, past and present, are increasingly the focus of a miniature explosion in publishing and what is almost a new academic discipline in its own right.¹ Various, often controversial, factors may have played a part here, not

¹ ‘New’, though ‘the classical tradition’ was identified as long ago as Victorian England (John Addington Symonds invokes, and contrasts, ‘Christian and Classical Traditions’ in his *Renaissance in Italy: The Fine Arts*, 1877, ch. 1), while it was formally institutionalized as a field of study in the Warburg Institute, first in Hamburg (from 1921), then in London (from 1934).

least the switch, within classical education in the English-speaking world, from language skills to ‘classics in translation’ (§§4, 15), but the level of interest in the classical tradition, both among the classically trained and across the arts and humanities, is beyond dispute.

What is ‘the classical tradition’? In contemporary usage, ‘classical’ and ‘the classics’ may mean a Beethoven symphony, the novels of Tolstoy, the films of René Clair – or a range of notable entities, from permanently-in-fashion dress designs to pre-quantum mechanics.² For our purposes, ‘the classical’ means the world of ancient Greece and Rome, and ‘the classical tradition’ means reflexes of,³ uses of, reconstitutions of, or responses to, the ancient world from the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire to our own day. But – given that ‘classical’ has always had strongly positive connotations, and ‘tradition’, arguably, too (§2) – this entire domain is inevitably caught up in implications of value. For a start, it is not just any aspect of the Greco-Roman world that inspires and influences, but, overwhelmingly, the special and the privileged – Homer’s *Iliad*, Plato’s dialogues, the ruined glories of Phidias’ marbles – even if the process of inspiring and influencing can sometimes seem to make the whole of antiquity special and privileged anew.

The classical tradition overlaps with the reception (or receptions) of Greece and Rome. They are not the same thing, and for several reasons.⁴ First, because the reception of Greece and Rome includes readings and rereadings from within the ancient world itself.⁵ There will be all manner of particular differences, but there is no necessary difference in kind or in hermeneutic status, between a response to Virgil’s *Aeneid* from Virgil’s own time, one from later antiquity, and one from a later age – say, T. S. Eliot’s response, in a pair of provoking essays (§35). Yet though these are all instances of the reception of Virgil, only Eliot’s essays can meaningfully be referred to the classical tradition. Conversely, the classical tradition is wider in scope. Many of its embodiments are not classical receptions in any meaningful sense. Post-classical versions of classical archetypes sometimes involve reception, sometimes not (§19). Equally, the Romance and Modern Greek languages are momentous post-classical reflexes of Latin and Ancient Greek, and as such clearly belong to the

² All, on different levels, authoritative. The association of ‘classical’ with authority is inscribed in its etymology from Latin ‘classis’ (‘fleet’/‘army’, as well as social ‘class’; cf. §3 n. 14) – as it is in (e.g.) the use of ‘classical’ architecture for buildings required to connote authority, from banks to museums. ‘Authority’: cf. §5.

³ We borrow – and extend – this use of ‘reflex’ from historical linguistics, where the word stresses the fact of descent without any implication of purposeful transmission or adjustment: ‘*reflex* . . . a word or other linguistic form which is directly descended within a particular language from an ancestral form taken as a reference point. For example . . . Italian *donna* “lady” is a reflex of Latin *domina(m)*’: Trask (2000) 278. In our extended usage, the word is reapplied from particular linguistic forms to whole language systems and other large behavioural structures. Thus, the Italian language *per se* is (largely) a reflex of Latin *per se* (§13), and medieval Italian carnival (partly) a reflex of ancient ceremonial or ritual (§12).

⁴ Compare and contrast e.g. Budelmann and Haubold (2008) and Caruso and Laird (2009) 2–3. See further §2.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Martindale (2006).

classical tradition, but they are not, in themselves, ‘receptions’ of anything. Whether the same should be said of Medieval Latin, and of Renaissance Latin too, is another matter; both, in any event, belong straightforwardly to the tradition.

Then again, the classical tradition, as a continuum, subsumes not only direct engagements with antiquity, but engagements with earlier engagements. Like Eliot, the poet Milton responds to Virgil’s poetry; unlike Eliot, he responds not as critic, but by and within his own poetry, which – from *Lycidas* to *Paradise Lost* – creates (among much else) an idiosyncratic classicizing idiom that looks back to classical Latinity in general and Virgil’s Latin among others. In this sense, Milton’s poetic language represents a distinctive embodiment of the classical tradition; it is also the object of an Eliotian critique in a notable essay, which, however, makes virtually no reference to antiquity at all. That essay is eminently discussible as itself a critical contribution to the tradition and as significant evidence for Eliot’s sense of his own distinctive place within it⁶ – but there is nothing in the essay to invite talk of ‘reception’ of antiquity, nor indeed is the essay commonly discussed as such.

Above all, though, whereas ‘classical’ and ‘tradition’ tend to prompt consideration of value, ‘reception’ does not. In a nutshell, the ‘classical’ of ‘the classical tradition’ tends to imply canonicity, even when the post-antique engagement with the antique is anti-canonical (as is the case, most obviously, with engagements within popular culture: §12). Indeed, notwithstanding the fact that it is precisely the value associated with the classical over hundreds of years that has brought its multiple receptions into being, reception studies tend to operate in a relativistic spirit, generally preferring cultural-historical engagement with such issues to critical engagement. All in all: reception *studies* have helped to make what was once the preoccupation of a minority of classicists, and others, fashionable – while reception *theory* has helped to generate better understandings of various aspects of the field – but in no sense has ‘reception’ itself been shown to redefine, let alone to replace, ‘the classical tradition’ itself.⁷

The scope of the classical tradition is vast. Its many continuities (and discontinuities) range from high culture to low, from politics to sport, from law to urban planning, from the Romance languages, and the Modern Greek language, to the international, largely Greek-derived terminology of modern science and the continuing use of botanical Latin names for plants – and not just by professional botanists, but by ordinary gardeners too.⁸ And if the scope is vast, the variety of usage that arises from particular points of reference is no less so.

Take Augustus and his age. Often regarded as (and seemingly regarding itself as) a ‘classical’ age in its own right, on the model of fifth-century Athens, with its

⁶ Milton, Eliot, and Virgil: §35.

⁷ Value: §§2, 18, Epilogue. Reception theory and the field: Martindale (1993), (2006).

⁸ In Britain, for instance, herbs like ‘salvia’ and ‘artemisia’ are as familiar under those names as under their English names, ‘sage’ (*salvia officinalis*) and ‘wormwood’ (*artemisia absinthium*). As these examples suggest, botanical Latin uses classical lexemes or word-shapes, but not necessarily according to the rules of classical Latin usage.

sublimely assured art and architecture and public poetry, the Augustan age has in turn inspired classicizing revivals, along with other responses, in great profusion. It has bequeathed to the Western world the concepts of urban renewal in the grand manner⁹ and of ‘the classic of all Europe’ (Eliot on Virgil again: §35). And the ideals it has been taken to embody have been acclaimed and denied and reinvented, from Charlemagne and Alcuin (who relived the relationship between Augustus and his poets) to the Holy Roman Emperors (who retained ‘Imperator Augustus’ in their titles), from Cosimo I of Florence (who promoted himself as a Renaissance version of Augustus the autocrat, saving the state from the instabilities of republicanism) to John Dryden (founding father of the English ‘Augustan’ poets, who reconfigured the same historical schema in his youthful ‘Astraea Redux’, composed to celebrate the restoration of Charles II), from Joachim Du Bellay (who invoked ‘that most happy age of Augustus’ as a model for the emergent French aspiration towards a great language and a high culture) to Benito Mussolini (who commemorated his hero’s 2000th birthday with a grandiose Fascist exhibition in 1937–8)¹⁰ to W. H. Auden (whose poem ‘Secondary Epic’ sniped from below at Virgil’s lofty vision of Augustus as a carrier of destiny). In this example, and a host of others, it is hard to overstate the rich complexity of a tradition that has Greco-Roman antiquity as its unifying point of reference, but comprehends such a variety of forms and figures, social settings and relations, themes, media, and conflicting ideologies.

The range of our book, and the diversity of its connections and appraisals, reflects this ‘infinite variety’, but (we repeat) the book makes no attempt to take account of all possible points of reference, in topical, chronological, or geographical terms. While it contains its proper share of facts and figures, attested origins and unmistakable developments, our overall aim is an informed reading of the tradition that responds to diversity by making critical sense of it, and stimulates our readers to form, or sharpen, their own responses and assessments – perhaps in contrast to ours. Our emphasis is on art, literature, and thought: art, with more than passing attention to architecture; literature, with the same attention to theatre, opera, and film; thought, philosophy, and ideas, including, not least, ideas about, or associated with, art and literature themselves. Given the intricate relationships between literature and language, and thought and language, issues of language will impinge significantly on the discussion. So too will the interrelated histories of classical scholarship (§16) and education (§4), and also – interrelated again – of translation (§15). The ideological implications of the tradition will be a recurrent theme, as will the relation between high culture and low (we confront this directly in §12) and the related question of value.

Within art, literature, and thought, we have again made no attempt to scrutinize all media and all periods across all the cultures of the world. The classical tradition at its widest is a global phenomenon (witness Gandhi on Plato, Roman influences

⁹ According to Suetonius (*Augustus*, 28), Augustus’ proud boast was that ‘he found Rome built of brick and left it in marble’. Cf. §25.

¹⁰ *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*.

on the architecture of the mosque, the Greek-tragic evocations of the plays of Soyinka); and it has certainly been in constant dialogue with other cultural traditions throughout its history; but our discussion is concentrated on Western culture and, within Western culture, on the primary and closely related cultural traditions of Italy, France, Germany, and the English-speaking world.¹¹ Among much else, this means that we have relatively little to say about Byzantium,¹² which sustained the language, learning, and texts of Greek antiquity for a thousand years after the collapse of the Roman empire in the west, and which has considerable importance as a site of the classical tradition in its own right. Our focus is on the classical tradition in its undoubted heartland.

Within these limits, we seek to give a sense of the diverse contents of the tradition, but we are more concerned to ponder its coherence,¹³ delineate its profile, and explore its typology. In effect we are asking a series of questions about the tradition overall.

What is ‘the tradition overall’? How do we identify its boundaries? We confront this question repeatedly, especially in Part I of the book, from §1 (the present section) to §18.

What is its trajectory over time? Here, within the long march (or meandering) from late antiquity to the modern age, we give more than usual attention to the status of the eighteenth century as a transitional era, and to the Romantic generation as a turning-point (see, most immediately, §3 and §5). But the book is anything but a linear history, though many of its sections contain historical sketches.

What definitive forms does the tradition take? Reception, though itself a broad category, is only one such; and any answer to the question must take account, also, of reflexes (of which language is surely the most important: §13), of archetypes (§§19–22), and, as we have already pointed out, of engagements with earlier engagements (exemplified, representatively but not only, in §35). ‘Engagements’, in their considerable variety, we also categorize in different terms in §14.

What kinds of difference has the tradition made? This is a question we attempt to confront by placing the classical in and against the context of the non-classical. We do so both in large terms (§18) and by a focus on specific case studies (§§28–31).

¹¹ Initially, but not of course exclusively, European. Here as elsewhere, recent scholarship seeks to take account of the marginalized and the peripheral (as, in conventional terms, they would be regarded), along with the canonical and the central: see e.g. Goff (2005), Goff and Simpson (2008), Hardwick and Gillespie (2007).

¹² Our most significant omission besides is Spain (esp. significant in the Renaissance) and the Hispanic world.

¹³ Regarding this ‘coherence’, we note a revealing comment by the Nigerian playwright, Femi Osofisan, on his *Women of Owu*, an adaptation of Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, first performed in 2004. His play addresses, not Western audiences (familiar, perhaps, with the Euripides), but ‘a Nigerian audience . . . the audience I am familiar with’: Budelmann (2007) 30. In a post-colonial perspective, there will be both new creativities to add to the old and new ways of reading the old, including the classical old: Euripides ‘reclaimed’ as ‘world literature’ is different from Euripides as part of the Western classical tradition.

We also do so, more pervasively, by presenting the more ‘classical’, at any one time or place, as part of a less ‘classical’ whole. Our very different discussions of popular culture (§12) and Rome (§25) may be taken as representative here.

What kinds of relationship are there – comparative, contrastive, interactive – between the tradition in our four cultures? Between its embodiments in different periods? And (in some respects the most challenging question) between the art, the literature, and the thought of our title? – challenging, if only (though not only) because these three large areas of human creativity and endeavour are seldom brought together in any concerted way in contemporary understandings of the present or past, classical-related or other. These questions are not the kind that allow neat or simple answers, but we have had them in mind throughout.

And, not least, a question that arises directly from the others: what are the different ways in which the tradition can profitably be approached and understood? This question, along with the questions about relationship just cited, has determined the shape of our book. The body of the book is organized as thirty-five sections, of varying lengths, in five parts. Part I (§§1–18) is designed to represent an overview of the tradition and its diversity (this is outlined in detail in §2); Parts II–V present a series of closer readings from alternative standpoints: ‘archetypes’ (§§19–22), ‘the imaginary’ (§§23–27), ‘making a difference’ (§§28–31), ‘contrasts and comparisons’ (§§32–35).

In a more practical sense, considerations of diversities and alternatives have helped to determine the shape and size of the thirty-five sections. Some sections present their material at relative length, as with the important topic of language (§13). Others, much shorter, we offer as pointers for debate. Two in particular, §10 (‘special relationships’) and §18 (the classical tradition and *other* traditions), belong here – though in both cases the desire to avoid long lists of illusory counter-examples is also a factor. The shortest sections, designated as ‘prefaces’ to the several Parts that follow the overview (§§19, 23, 28, 32), seek to provide a theoretical framework for the different kinds of material, and different kinds of discussion, that follow them. But short or long, prefatory or discursive, every section is intended to contribute to a critical reappraisal of the tradition as a whole.

We use the word ‘critical’ advisedly. Any satisfying treatment of art, of literature, of thought, calls for critical judgement. Such judgement is exercised not least in the choice of examples, and here we are not just selective: we repeatedly argue from particular examples – a technique (this is no coincidence) most familiar in literary criticism. But in any case the classical tradition in these large areas is so implicated in value judgements from the past that any attempt at ‘impartiality’ now is likely to end up as a quaint evasion. Conversely, though, it may be acknowledged that in art and literature, in particular, achievement is not ‘superannuated’,¹⁴ and that there is a clear distinction between such areas and those where judgement now is largely superfluous and the classical tradition is a matter of essentially historical interest.

¹⁴ Compare and contrast Eliot’s refusal to ‘superannuate’ Shakespeare, Homer, or ‘the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen’ (‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, 1920).

The most obvious of the latter is the realm of scientific ideas, where a once common appeal to ancient authority – to the mathematician Euclid, to the medical expert Galen – has been superseded, since the age of Newton, by the dynamic of progressive discovery and the paradigm shift. Between the two extremes of art (visual or verbal) and science, what we are designating ‘thought’ tends to occupy an intermediate position.

In practice, our concern with critical judgement means attending, as sensitively as we can, not only to the variety of embodiments concealed within ‘the’ classical tradition, but also to the underlying presuppositions of our own discussion. This means that relevant issues are liable to impinge (they already have) as theoretical issues. For our explorations, theoretical perspectives are a prerequisite – as is a readiness to discriminate between, or beyond, them. Our discussions (or so we would like to think) are both theoretically informed and also actively engaged in current debate on a range of theoretical fronts, from hermeneutics to cultural studies to gender.