

Classics and Comparative Study

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The Center for Hellenic Studies is a good place to think about Classics and comparative study. Its current director Gregory Nagy has done much for the comparative study of Greek epic.¹ Thanks to him, and other scholars such as John Foley and Richard Martin, that branch of comparative study is very much flourishing today.² Other branches have perhaps fared less well. Classicists are only just beginning to engage with Burkert's and West's work on Greek and Near Eastern literature;³ and the Arab Golden Age, so important for the transmission and transformation of Greek philosophy, barely features in our curricula. The facts of the matter are of course well known, at least to the experts, but those facts do not always translate into scholarly or educational practice. Few classicists currently read Arabic, in any sense of the word "reading." Even fewer, I suspect, read Aramaic or Akkadian.⁴ What we have, today, is an opportunity to establish contact through our own expertise in the Greek and Roman classics.

As Walter Burkert points out, in his characteristically blunt fashion, "European tradition, especially the scholarly tradition, used to see the Greeks [...] as unique and isolated, classical."⁵ If that is broadly true of the history of our subject, as I believe it is, the question arises of how we might overcome that inherited isolation. The current focus on reception is crucial here, because it helps, for example, to insert Classics into the mainstream of postcolonial world literature.⁶ But the work of recontextualisation does not stop with reception. Roughly speaking, there have been two ways of broadening out the study of the ancient world itself. First, there is what we might call the long-distance approach, which looks at societies that are geographically and culturally remote. Geoffrey Lloyd on Greek and Chinese philosophy and science springs to mind;⁷ or Walter Scheidel's more recent work on ancient empires.⁸ There is a lot to be said for long-distance comparison, not least because there is a real appetite for it in the Far East as well as in Europe and the US. What worries me about it is that it can become rather cosily self-affirming: there is not much creative friction between China and Greece – as there might be, say, between China and Japan. There is not much of a sense either that the comparison might make us rethink the boundaries of Classics, let alone those of the "Western" tradition as a whole. Rather, such comparison may assert that ancient empires, *mutatis mutandis*, continue to rule.

By contrast, what we might call the neighborly approach to comparative study confronts us very directly with the questions of what Classics is and where we draw the line. Look at Greece in its Mediterranean context, and you will end up wondering not just about Greece but about Classics as a discipline. Martin West famously calls Greek literature "a Near Eastern literature."⁹ Others have concluded that "the days of an exclusively 'classical' scholarship are over."¹⁰ If that seems extreme, we need only recall the debates over *Black Athena* to appreciate how problematic

the idea of a self-contained classical world has become.¹¹ Let me be clear, I do not think Bernal's intervention was ultimately helpful. What is called for, it seems to me, are not new myths but a constructive dialogue about how we might open out the field of classical literature. In thinking through this issue I take inspiration from Marie-Louise Pratt's work in comparative literature. Pratt has recently called on her colleagues to set aside attitudes "of wariness, fear, border patrolling" and to discover "new forms of cultural citizenship in a globalised world."¹² In comparative literature itself, there has been much excellent work along these lines.¹³ Unfortunately, many classicists do not seem quite ready to follow suit. Thus, Bernard Knox wrote about the study of ancient Greek literature: "The primacy of the Greeks in the canon of Western literature is neither an accident nor the result of a decision imposed by higher authority; it is simply a reflection of the intrinsic worth of the material, its sheer originality and brilliance."¹⁴ No prizes here for spotting the signs of "wariness, fear, and border-patrolling:" Knox sees the privileged position of Greek literature precisely not as a matter of a European cultural perspective which we might wish to challenge. Rather, he insists that its supremacy is due to its innate brilliance, which sets it apart from other literatures of the ancient and modern world. Others have gone even further. Sergei Averintsev, for example, argues that ancient non-classical literatures were not "literature" at all.¹⁵ Averintsev reminds us – if a reminder was needed – that "literature" implies a value judgment. We need not subscribe to Terry Eagleton's strong claim that "literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, *is* an ideology,"¹⁶ to see here another attempt at fencing off the classical world of Greece and Rome from all other ancient cultures. Equally pointed is Barry Powell's suggestion that ancient Near Eastern civilisations were incapable of formulating "novel thoughts" on account of their obscure and cumbersome writing systems.¹⁷ Powell invokes the tools of cutting-edge linguistic scholarship, but ultimately succumbs to the old prejudice that Eastern civilisations are incapable of change.¹⁸ To cite Knox again: "In startling contrast to the magnificent but static civilizations of the great river valleys – Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile – [the Greeks] created in the restless turbulence of their tiny city-states that impatient rhythm of competition and innovation that has been the distinguishing characteristic of Western civilization ever since."¹⁹ Knox's claim does not stand up to scrutiny. Even a cursory glance at the evidence suggests just how innovative Mesopotamian thought, for example, could be: how else do we explain the daring literary experiment of the *Babylonian Theodicy*, or the *Dialogue of Pessimism* with its irreverent take on traditional wisdom literature?²⁰ Not to mention the revolution in Babylonian astronomy at a time when Greek astronomy had little to show for its efforts.²¹ In truth, Babylon in the first millennium BCE was a city in intellectual ferment. Rather than regarding this as a sign of its destabilisation and decline, as has often been the case, why not turn our attention to the exciting achievements of "late" ancient Mesopotamia – and indeed Egypt? For intellectual endeavour, like love, is where you find it (to paraphrase Martin West):²² as modern cultures continue to clash along ancient faultlines, there is a need for classicists to become less detached, more culturally intelligent, and frankly more humane in their appreciation of non-classical ancient worlds. "We are," in the words of Edward Said, "mixed in with one another in ways that most

national systems of education have not dreamed of.” And further: “To match knowledge in the arts and sciences with these integrative realities is [...] the intellectual and cultural challenge of the moment.”²³ This is an insight that merits attention.

But how do we move Said’s agenda forward in practical terms? A lot of excellent work is being done in other disciplines such as archaeology and comparative literature, so we are not talking about inventing the wheel.²⁴ What is needed, it seems to me, are quite simply a few more acts of neighborly border-crossing in our teaching of classical languages and literature. For that, some structural adjustments can, and need to be, made. There are, of course, places like Oxford and Chicago, where students take fully-fledged interdisciplinary degrees in the ancient world. Those are enviable programs, but they will only ever be viable in a few well-endowed institutions. Others need to find different solutions. At Durham University, we did not have a School of Oriental Studies, but we had helpful colleagues in theology and archaeology, as well as a Pro-Vice-Chancellor in Arts and Humanities who was willing to invest the equivalent of \$5,000 per year to help us explore the connections between Greece, Rome, and other ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East. \$5,000 was all it took to set up an interdepartmental research center.

The result, I think it is fair to say, was well worth the investment. Quite apart from the intellectual buzz, we are now in a position to offer our students language teaching in Akkadian, Middle Egyptian, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac, as well as Greek and Latin. The results are already showing: we now have doctoral students taking up comparative work in all these fields. The Department too has been transformed. I still recall the bemused looks when I first proposed a course in Akkadian language and literature as part of Durham’s Classics program: it had never been done before, and it certainly wasn’t Classics. That was a time when we used to see our subject as threatened and felt embattled also within the University. There was talk of slipping standards, of other disciplines encroaching on our turf. Now, we are excited and energised by the prospect of dialogue and border-crossing. And we have one of the largest Akkadian classes in the world: we recruit to the language some fifteen-to-twenty students every year. So here is my pitch for a meaningful future for Classics: as well as expanding our horizons through the study of the classical tradition in all its manifestations, let us take down the border patrols also within the ancient world itself, and get travelling.

Notes

1. E.g., *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); “The Epic Hero,” *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 71–89.

2. E.g., John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Richard P. Martin, "Epic as Genre," *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 9–19.
3. E.g., M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, trans. Margaret Pinder and Walter Burkert (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
4. Precise figures are hard to come by, but anecdotal evidence suggests that not only are numbers small but also that there is widespread ignorance concerning the non-classical languages of the ancient world. In the absence of first-hand experience, unhelpful urban myths abound: Indo-European languages are branded "difficult," non-alphabetic scripts "obscure," etc. For an attempt to put these prejudices on a more scientific footing see below.
5. Burkert 2004, 1.
6. Important recent work includes, *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon*, eds. Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Emily Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); *Classics in Postcolonial Worlds*, eds. Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
7. E.g., G. E. R. Lloyd, *Adversaries and Authorities: Investigations into Ancient Greek and Chinese Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *The Ambitions of Curiosity: Understanding the World in Ancient Greece and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); *The Delusions of Invulnerability: Wisdom and Morality in Ancient Greece, China and Today* (London: Duckworth, 2005); *Principles and Practices in Ancient Greek and Chinese Science* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin, *The Way and the Word. Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); see also Hyun Jin Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China* (London: Duckworth, 2009).
8. Walter Scheidel, *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
9. M. L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 31.
10. Hellmuth Petriconi, "Das *Gilgamesh-Epos* als Vorbild der *Ilias*," in *Linguistic and Literary Studies in Honor of Helmut A. Hatzfeld*, ed. Alessandro S. Crisafulli (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 338 n18, quoted in West 1997.

11. E.g., Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Vol. 1: The Fabrication of Greece 1785–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), Mary Lefkowitz, *Not out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); *Black Athena Revisited*, eds. Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
12. Mary Louise Pratt, “Comparative literature and global citizenship,” in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 52.
13. E.g., David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) and *How to Read World Literature* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Haun Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
14. Bernard Knox, *The Oldest Dead White European Males and other Reflections on the Classics* (New York: Norton, 1993), 21.
15. Sergei Averintsev, “Ancient Greek ‘literature’ and near Eastern ‘writings’: the opposition and encounter of two creative principles. Part one: the opposition,” trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, *Arion* (3rd series) 7.1 (1999): 2–3.
16. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 22.
17. Barry B. Powell, “Homer and writing,” in *A New Companion to Homer*, eds. Ian Morris and Barry B. Powell (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 6–7 and 12.
18. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage, 1978).
19. Knox 1993, 67.
20. For the *Babylonian Theodicy* and *Dialogue of Pessimism* see W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) and Sara J. Denning-Bolle, *Wisdom in Akkadian Literature: Expression, Instruction, Dialogue*. (Leiden: Ex Oriente Lux, 1992).
21. For mathematical astronomy, see O. Neugebauer, *A History of Mathematical Astronomy*. 3 vols. (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 1975); for astrology, see Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
22. West 1997, viii.
23. Said 1993, 331.
24. Among the wealth of inspiring work on material culture one might single out Sarah P. Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Margaret Christina Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: A Study*

in Cultural Receptivity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For Comparative Literature see above n. 13.