

Classics

A Very Short Introduction

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The true fascination of human history lies in the recognition of the well-known in different circumstances. In this regard history shares many of the fascinations of science-fiction, although from an ontological point of view it is very different, because history did take place after all, while science-fiction is just fiction. But on the other hand is the study of ancient history such as the Classics really not fiction? To what extent is Socrates a real historical personage and to what extent is he just a fictional (re)creation of Plato, who himself is indeed close to being fiction.

The point of this very short introduction by Beard and Henderson is to give a rapid introduction to the Classics, not of course in any systematic way but one which like an arrow goes to the heart of the matter. If you want to get to the heart the point of entry is not important, and the authors choose as introductory theme the temple of Bassae, which was found and explored and partly transported to Europe, where its frieze now occupied a specially designed room in the British Museum. That mission was accomplished by an intrepid and multi-national set of leisured gentlemen explorer. Whatever induced them to brave malaria infested wilderness to bring home some fragmented pieces of rock? True they, or at least those who survived, eventually made a fortune out of it, but that only begs the question. The Classics did indeed constitute culture for the elite, in fact the only culture, and their quest certainly was motivated by their vivid conception of the Classic world. This leads to the crucial point of Classics, it is not only about the Classics but the way the Classics is reinvented from generation to generation. It is indeed an illustration of Collingwood's dictum that history is not the past, it is about reconstructing the past in the present.

The Classics splits up into two parts, the study of the Roman and the Greek world respectively. As to the former there is an unbroken tradition through the dark ages transmitted by the Church and especially through the unending toil of generations of monks. Latin although a so called Dead language was very much alive as a written Lingua Franca all over Catholic Europe. Indeed its pre-eminence lasted well into the 19th century and for about two thousand years instruction in school was more or less nothing but instruction in Latin. The popular advance of Science in the 19th century was instrumental in breaking the monopoly by the 20th century, although the study of Classics was considered the only way to acquire true culture well into it¹. In fact the predominance of Latin made it imperative for any young gentleman taking the Grand Continental Tour to go down to Rome, that early on became a tourist center with regular hotels, restaurants and guides and guide

¹ Many of my contemporaries colleagues did have a Classic education at the Gymnasium not a mathematical or scientific one

books². Rome was in other words getting to be too tame for people of an adventurous bent, too many had already been there before, thus the untrammelled wilderness of Greece beckoned in post-Napoleonic time.

Greek itself was obviously considered not only more exotic than Latin but more sophisticated as well. Greek survived in the Greek Orthodox Church as Latin did in the Catholic, but it was also being spoken by a surviving population, although those country bumpkins, that latter day travelers encountered, seemed to have little to do with the heroic civilization of the ancient Greeks. Much of Greek learning survived not through the copying of monastic scribes but through Arab scholarship and has reached the West through that detour. It is not true that ancient Greece was discovered through the sack and conquest of Constantinople in 1453, an event which is said to have spurred the Renaissance through the exile of scholars, because Aristotle was a major figure in Scholastic philosophy already in the 13th century. Roman civilization owes much to Greece, and in fact the Romans did always have a cultural minority complex vis-a-vis the ancient civilization they conquered. Nowadays the debt to Greece is very much at the center of Western Civilization. Rome may provide some ancient authority as to law and political statecraft, but to the Greeks we do not only impute the notion of democracy (although the kind of democracy actually practiced in Greece would not meet the more exacting standards of today, for one thing large portions of the populations were disenfranchised such as the slaves, and the political rights of women would leave much to be desired by us) but perhaps even more importantly, as Popper is always at pains to point out, the birth of the rationalism and scientific thinking. So even if few people today know Classical Greek the legacy lives on.

In spite of all this why is it important to keep the Classical tradition alive? One argument is of course that any tradition keeps memory alive and lends to the succession of generations a coherence, very much as the sky above us gives us a general reference for orientation and navigation. The function of myths are very important to any society. The Greek Myths and later the Roman adaptations of them seem by any kind of standards outmoded in our modern highly technological society, and indeed those Myths are no longer to be seen as anything but curiosities. The Greek Myths were replaced by Christianity, which of course made a very thorough break with the past. Pre-Christianity is referred to paganism, which originally were to be thought of as a derogatory term, but paganism would remain as a possible alternative to the human condition with its own set of morals. The Greeks are both so familiar to us as well as being so very much different. Thus the Classics also assumed an anthropological interest which became marked during the 20th century when the monopoly of Christianity was seriously challenged. A particular topical aspect of this is the Greek attitude towards homo-sexuality.

Finally one can think of the Classics as just one historical problem among others, but of course one which has an added significance because of its links with our civilization. Just as with Paleontology, what comes to us from the past is fragmentary and any

² In fact tourism has a long pedigree, it was not uncommon in Roman times, and Pausanias wrote in the second century after Christ a guide book about the temple of Bassae, which in spite of inevitable inaccuracies has proved invaluable, and which obviously did inspire, those aforementioned explorers, who nowadays would be referred to as looters.

reconstruction is liable to be contradicted by what the future may bring. This gives added force to Collingwood's aforementioned dictum that history is provisional and can only be written with the tools of the present. One may wonder what treasures have been for ever lost to us, there are many works which are mentioned but only fragments remain, which also goes for the works of the great dramatists of the past. Although it seems unlikely that people of the stature say of Plato have been obliterated by the passage of time, after all if they had existed they must have left some traces at least as mentions in the contemporary records. But history is not just written texts, although this is a classical definition of history and also a rather convenient one; if we really want to know what life was like back then it is not enough to read we also have to dig. Thus archeology emerges as a natural link between a humanistically pursued history and one which is conducted by the tools supplied by natural science³. If we really want to know how it was to live an everyday life in ancient times we need to discover artefacts in the ground and carefully ponder their relations to each other, spatial as well as temporal. Such matters of everyday life are usually never considered important or noteworthy enough to be observed by contemporaries. As Collingwood reminds us, we can know more about the past than those who actually lived it, could know.

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³ But also in classical humanistic work there emerges a science of textual analysis, which in many crucial ways is pursued in the spirit of natural science, in fact can be thought of as an archeology of manuscript pertaining both to their physical bodies as well as their actual texts.