

Confronting the Classics

Traditions, Adventures and Innovations

M.Beard

December 24-27, 2016

The Classics, meaning the surviving writings of the Greeks and the Romans, constitute fiction. Not necessarily in the sense that it is all made up, although there are strong elements of that in the study of Classics to which we will return, but that it serves the same purpose as that of fiction. Fiction for adults, providing among other things compelling narratives.

What do we mean by the Classics? There is a simple answer to that, namely texts written in Ancient Greek or Latin, so called dead languages, during a thousand years between say 500 B.C to 500 A.D. As the author notes there is an embarrassment of riches which have survived from that time, although there naturally are much more that is lost, some of which we tantalizingly know is lost, some of which whose traces are even lost so we do not even know they are lost¹. This is the basis for the Classics, and there is no real equivalence anywhere else in history. Onto this we have the study of the Classics which have dominated, not to say defined Western culture for the ensuing 1500 years, at least starting from late Medieval times. There is a gap between the Ancient Mediterranean World and the Modern, a gap that is usually referred to as the Dark Ages, the day to day knowledge of which is far scantier than that we have of the Ancient world². There was not a complete gap, had there been, the Classics would not have played that fundamental role it has, but the dead languages were kept alive, in the West Latin by the liturgy of the Roman Church, and in the East that of Greek through the Orthodox one. But Christianity was after all a reaction against the Pagan past and thus to a great degree a suppression of that tradition. Another blow against the Greek-Latin tradition was of course the great Arab expansion of the seventh and eighth centuries and the concomitant spread of Islam which more or

¹ One is reminded of all those species who are going extinct before they are being discovered, and leave not even fossils

² Do we even have a documentation of each year during the Middle Ages? How do we know whether our historical dating is accurate? Are there missing years, or even years counted twice? This is a standard historical challenge, to count years documented in the written record. But is the written record extensive during the Dark Ages enough to do so? Modern technology, such a carbon dating is of course to imprecise, both as to measuring time spans and to relate them to specific events. The most reliable retroactive dating is furnished by astronomy, in practice the noticing of spectacular events such as solar eclipses, which allows accurate spot checks. Astronomy does of course also provide the standard means of keeping track of time as it unfolds, and in old traditional civilizations, such as the Babylonian, there are extremely long series of records, for obvious reasons (so far) unmatched in the modern era. But where they being conducted during the Dark Ages? Certainly not in Europe.

less wiped out Christianity from its heart lands of North Africa and the Middle East³, yet ironically a large part of the Greek heritage was preserved through translation into Arabic, Latin translations of which found their way into Middle Age Europe constituting the main source of the European encounter with Greek culture. At the fall of Constantinople in 1453 a mass of original Greek manuscripts archived by the church found their way to Europe starting what we refer to as the High Renaissance⁴.

Now Western Culture is dominated by Latin not Greek. Greece quickly becoming an Oriental country swallowed up politically and territorially by Islam, and Latin served as lingua franca among the elite, specifically the learned elite, until the beginning of the 19th century. To be learned was equivalent to being versant in Latin, and the tradition of learning Latin as a schoolboy continued well into the 20th century, and was needless to say an absolute pre-requisite for a university education in most Western countries up to the end of the 19th century. What eventually changed that were the great technological changes brought about by the scientific advances as well as the rapidly expanding industrialization of the 19th century. This brought about a modernization of the traditional curriculum injecting it with science and the study of modern living languages. This meant a much-needed vitalization of education although keeping the well-established forms of the traditional education. One may remark that the great German mathematician - Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-56), arguably along with Newton the greatest mathematician of the the modern world, as a young man seriously considered studying the Classics but was returned to the path to his true destiny by a wonderful discovery at the age of 17. Latin and mathematics were traditionally the supreme tests of intellectual acuity, and their study was recommended, not to say demanded, as means of sharpening your wits. Not surprisingly there was a high degree of correlation between achievements, as the story of the young Gauss illustrates, and the fact that many of the Senior Wranglers of mathematics also were Wranglers of the Classics in Cambridge, both being manifestations of the achievements of exemplary school-boys. One should note that Oxbridge universities until the early 20th century were intellectual backwaters, however charming, not able to hold the candle to German universities at the time.

Latin was a dead language in the sense of not being the Native language of anybody. Admittedly Montaigne supposedly were reared in Latin as a mother tongue by his father, but as he was not surrounded by Native speakers the suggestion is moot, language after all being an eminently social phenomenon that does not make sense in isolation. But it was a living language as far as international contact was concerned especially in science until the Romantic National revival of the early 19th century changed that⁵. Latin was hence a language which was read and written not so much talked and listened to (Church

³ There are still remarkably pockets of Christianity in the Middle East, a testimony to the basic tolerance of Islam, one wonders whether Christianity would have tolerated pockets of Islam in its midst. On the other hand it did tolerate Judaism, although hardly uncontroversially.

⁴ Still a sizable part of the Greek heritage is only preserved through garbled Arab translations.

⁵ But of course Galileo and Descartes wrote in the vernacular to reach a larger audience already in the early 17th century. Descartes was not taken seriously until he was translated into Latin, thus his *je pense donc je suis* is never quoted in its original French but every peacock parrots *cogito ergo sum*. Maybe Latin is more elegant after all?

liturgy is of course quite another thing having nothing to do with communication as much as incantation) and that poses interesting linguistic questions. Although much Latin texts were produced be it in scientific books and articles⁶ the verse that was written seems always to be rejected as mere doggerel and there is much reference to dog latin⁷ and as far as I know there has never been any sustained and notable attempts in modern times to write literature, in particular novels or even short stories in Latin. One surmises that any attempts to do so would be dismissed as curiosities of merely a clinical interest if any. Why is that? Could it be that Latin is a dead language after all, and literature can only be written by Native speakers, having to be grounded in everyday life, as Latin no longer can be?⁸ In this context it may be relevant to refer to the excesses of an educational tradition, in which pupils were occasionally given demanding tasks as to translate Shakespeare into Latin, assignments no doubt dreamt up by bored and frustrated teachers eager for some real challenges. But that seems to have been a *cul de sac* and the results were no doubt mercifully forgotten, instead as I understand it the bulk of Latin teaching consisted in translations of Latin texts into the prevailing vernacular, which must be a rather deadening, if somewhat useful, experience.

So now what was this language skill used to? Where could it feed? And the answer is obvious, on the rich legacy left over from Roman times. Any tradition feeds on its past, and a tradition without a past is not only an oxymoronic but strictly an impossibility, it cannot emerge spontaneously in a vacuum, just as little as organisms can occur without parents. The Western cultural tradition was drafted upon the Classical one, and any literary tradition needs to make references. Without the classical texts, where could references be directed to? Thus we have a layered structure. First the texts, then the study of the texts, which to a large extent characterizes Western high culture until recently, and then of course the study of the study, including the lamentation that the study of the Classics is on the decline, while ironically, this is true on the academic level, never have so many been exposed to them outside the academic world as now. In Sweden it is a long time since young pupils were exposed to Latin, it certainly was not made part of the curriculum when the reform of 1842 provided universal elementary education. The far-sighted educational reforms of the Prussia state were instigated a few decades earlier, and I would be surprised would that have involved compulsory Latin instruction. But as late as the

⁶ As the mathematician-cum-mathematical biographer E.T.Bell notes. To learn to read Euler in Latin would only require a few weeks of study, but to learn modern languages takes years of effort. He has a point. It has been pointed out that Latin has now been replaced by pidgin-English.

⁷ Having been deprived (or spared?) instruction in Latin, the term intrigued me when I first encountered it as a teenager. What did it really mean? If Latin was defined by such strict rules it could not be too difficult to compose grammatically correct sentences if some care was used. Only later I have come to understand that the term is closer to the Swedish concept of 'pekoral' for which I have never encountered an adequate English equivalent.

⁸ That literature can only be written by Native speakers in their own idiom is a stubborn myth, giving credence that there seem to be so few exceptions. Conrad in the English language, and Canetti in German (not a Native speaker as he was taught the language by his mother when he was six or so). Yet many educated speakers who have picked up the language as adults show a sophistication of its use way above that of the Native man in the street.

mid 60's there were in Swedish 'gymnasiums' a division into Real (with mathematics at its core) and Latin (obviously with Latin serving the same purpose, and also the possibility of including Ancient Greek) and a few decades earlier some reform adding a third division for those who could not stomach either. Then the Real was changed into Natural Science temporarily with an enhanced curriculum before the general decay would set in, and Latin to Humanistic where Latin only survived as an exotic option would enough students show interest. In other European countries the tradition survived longer so many of my mathematical colleagues studied in the Classic division. Thus the present decline of the Classics from their elevated position which shows no signs of being reversed. In fact at some time (in the 80's) it was feared that mathematics would suffer the same fate as Latin due to the onslaught of computer science, this did not happen (not yet anyway). Thus there is an uphill battle for Classicists to impress the academic bureaucrats of their importance, a plight shared by the humanities at large⁹. The situation being desperate, or at least sensed at such, rather desperate measures are resorted to, such as arguing for the many practical uses humanistic skills can be turned to, and even worse that the study of the humanities is good for the soul, making you a morally more sophisticated individual, contrary to the fact that at least the latter is definitely not true, counterexamples abounding. The author notes the much more modest claim that we need to maintain a cadre of specialists that keeps up the technical competence as to Latin making sure that when Latin quotations appear those are grammatically correct, and more importantly that we keep up the tradition of people competent to read and translate the original sources. Now after this lengthy introduction is is time to come to the heart of the matter.

The subject matter of the Classics is fiction, more precisely science-fiction. The charm of the latter is to see how human nature reacts in a different environment. As William James noted, what really interest people is not the unfamiliar, to which they cannot relate, but to the familiar in an unfamiliar setting¹⁰. In fact that is what makes human history so interesting, the supposed invariance of human nature, through changing historical circumstances. In the Romans we can recognize ourselves, even if the setting is so different, although there is an abyss of time that separates us from them, and not only that, but also figuratively a moat consisting of the Dark Ages. As a child I was exposed to the classical old fairy-tales transmitted in modern times by Perreault and Grimm, but also to the Biblical stories, which fascinated me even more, as there also was an element of them being actually true and being datable (this obviously does not hold for fairy-tales which are timeless and set in a romantic past conveniently devoid of all modern contraptions). To a much lesser extent I was exposed to the Classical stories, but surely they serve the same purpose as the Biblical stories. Ultimately what is literally true or not is only the concern of simpletons. Any person whose memory survives those who have had personal contact with him or her will enter the fictional world. The fictional world is not necessarily made

⁹ In the Classics, in spite of the rich legacy, the texts form a limited oeuvre after all, and Trevor-Roper realized to his dismay that would he continue in the Classics, in which he had excelled as a good school-boy, he would be doomed to write commentaries on commentaries, and he switched to Modern History instead.

¹⁰ The example he refers to is the Hawaiians aborigines showing great interest, not in the big ship of James Cook, but in the life-boats, to which they could directly relate having similar boats themselves.

up, its main characteristics is that it lives entirely in the imagination. Lady Diane was for most of her mourners a fictional figure, this did not stop them from the kindly mourning that feeds on the sweet sentimentality of loss, not the one generated by the harsh painful deprivation of the same; in fact the former is quite similar to the feelings engendered by the death of Dickens little Neill in the previous century (human nature indeed remaining the same). What characterizes fiction is that there is only one channel, namely the text itself, the world is entirely contained in it. All we know of Socrates is how he appears in the dialogues of Plato (except for a brief appearance in the play 'the Clouds') and as such he is clearly a fictional person. More generally we can think of Plato as fictional too, even if there is documentary evidence about him lacking for the more shadowy Socrates. The point is that we can only relate to him in the imagination. Now, admittedly there are other channels to the world of the Antiquity, namely archeology.

Archeology came relatively late on the scene. The remnants of the buildings and monuments of the past were used as quarries for new ones. Part of the ruinous character of old buildings are naturally due to neglect letting weather and wind have unlimited access, and a decaying building is naturally more inviting to dismantling than a functioning one¹¹. If something was retrieved from the past it was pieces of arts, so called treasures, and even those were for natural reasons not in pristine condition necessary some make-overs to return them to their original spirit. Remnants of the past are typically mere fragments, haphazard traces left in the presence, and the purpose is to reconstruct them to their past glory, because this is after all what is interesting. The case of Pompeji was something thrown into your lap, later came the ambition to actually look for sites. The classical case is that of Schliemann (1822-90) a German business man looking for the traces of Troy, thus actually trying to anchor a fiction into reality by finding another channel. His quest was to some extent successful, giving at least tenuous evidence that the Homeric tale at some historic basis. But the science of archeology being in its beginning, much irreparable damage was done, and in retrospect it would have been much better had the site been excavated in modern times, but any field needs pioneers who invariably will commit mistakes, some of them big, but without mistakes there is no learning curve. Schliemann inspired another wealthy amateur - Arthur Evans, who turned his attention to Knossos. This was a site of pre-historic times, and the most significant finds were tablets containing two kinds of scripts, baptized linear A and linear B respectively by Evans. The first script has resisted all attempts at decoding, while the second succumbed in the early 50's to the efforts of yet another amateur Michael Ventris in tandem with John Chadwick, on the daring assumption that they were written in Greek. As it turns out Greek civilization is very old and extended, extended enough to have had its own Dark Ages during which the script and other parts of the culture disappeared, while the language itself survived. However, the decoding of the script did not lead to any exciting discoveries, the texts available were no more exciting than laundry lists. It is notoriously difficult to relate written documentary material with archeological remains, the latter being rather mute. Thus archeology rarely reveals what interests us most as people, namely human thought.

R.G.Collingwood is in my opinion the foremost philosopher of history, or at least, what

¹¹ Although functioning buildings are torn down all the time, as being inconveniences occupying valuable real estate not profitably enough.

amounts to the same thing, among those I have encountered. The author clearly finds him overrated, although admitting to a youthful enthusiasm; finding upon a rereading of *The Idea of History* thirty years later, that it was not so great as she had remembered. In particular she finds many of his insights rather trivial, more in the nature of attacking men of straw than breaking truly new ground. Who today seriously takes the matter of 'scissors and paste' or is not asking question what every historian does? I came upon Collingwood rather late in life, after having first been alerted to his existence by a long article in the TLS, where he intriguingly was presented as an opponent to the prevailing Analytic philosophy of my hero Russell prevalent at Oxbridge. The above-mentioned book was the first I came across and I was delighted by the limpid style and the clear arguments, how different from the voluble chatter of an Isaiah Berlin, who I had just read. The arguments he presented appeared indeed unobjectionable and the conclusion inevitable, just as in mathematical reasoning. In view of the opinion of the author, he must have been too successful, making his stands in retrospect obvious. It takes much more effort to convince than be to convinced, the real difficulty is to isolate and formulate the telling arguments, and by pointing his finger at 'scissors and paste' he found a sore point. Indeed much of what goes for history, even today, especially when it comes to writing of biographies, of which he was very scornful, succumbs to this method. Instead Collingwood emphasized the asking of questions, as in any scientific endeavor, and to use as sources anything that was available and relevant, in particular not confining yourself to written ones, which typically defined the traditional method of the historian. History was a matter of reconstructing the past in the present with the material available at the time of reconstruction. This ties in rather well with the speculations of time which St-Augustine laid out in his *Confessions*. Thus emphasizing the provisional in any historical narrative, as future evidence may force us to revise it. True, from a scientific point of view, as explicated by say a Popper, nothing duly remarkable. Crucial is his comparison with a crime investigation, historical research actually being a forensic exercise, teasing out of the subtle traces left in the present the nature of what caused them. In mathematical jargon an inverse problem. Now every criminal investigator cannot take anything on face value, least of all testimony, and instead he has to ask himself what does it all mean. Crucial to any criminal investigation is the understanding of a motive, and that is usually what guides the procedure¹². The same thing with history, what makes a historical narrative understandable is our common understanding of human nature which makes it possible for us to understand the motives behind the actions. As Collingwood stresses, human history is the history of thought, and thereby it differs from natural history, which is, in his words, a mere spectacle¹³.

Now the book consists in updated reviews having appeared in TLS, LRB and NYR over the years, and as a regular reader of those journals since many years, I am surprised

¹² In fact if there is no motive unearthed, in particular if the perpetrator is unrelated to the victim, it is next to impossible to identify the culprit, this is why some people can make a living as hit men.

¹³ In science one should not ask 'why'-questions, those concern ultimate causes as opposed to proximate, and belongs to the period of Aristotle. But in human history you should, Collingwood admonishes. And evolutionary biologist, such as Ernst Mayr, claim that evolution itself offers ultimate explanations, i.e. 'Why'-answers, even if one should not assign to it any teleological intent.

that I do not recall having encountered any of them before. Maybe the updating has been more thorough than mere cosmetic changes. A reference to the presidency of Obama could hardly have been made at the time of the writing of 2004 in one case, but must be a latter insertions. They inevitably cover a lot of different topics, with an emphasis on the Roman period, and are arranged in thematic order, with some introductory and explicatory texts inserted. Many of them take to task the egregious mistakes and liberties taken by many authors when presenting elaborations on biographies of ancient people or historical narratives. Mistakes just as elementary as that of 'scissors and paste'. True they take Collingwood's encouragement to try and reconstruct the thoughts and motives of the actors to heart, thus getting carried away. Admittedly, the stories of the ancient world belong to the imagination, and should be engaged in imaginatively, on the other hand, satisfying as the elaborations may be to the authors, why publish them? You do not normally publish your day-dreams. But maybe there is after all a big popular demand, giving the lie to the Classics being dead and of no concern to the larger public, and publisher are eager to cash in on it, and even respectable Classicists are easily seduced. Still it leads to confusion, if engaged in too regularly. The books (and the subsequent TV-series) of 'I Claudius' is a case in point, but here there is no pretension of being fact only fiction. I never watched the series when aired in the 70's but I read the books on a train ride back and forth to Rumania and Bulgaria in the summer of 2001 and must admit that I rather enjoyed it. Nothing like fiction to spice up a dry factual historical account you are as likely to forget upon reading it. The names of Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius are engraved in my mind in a way they would not otherwise have been. And after enjoying fantasy you are much better prepared to check what is really known. But this of course presupposed that there is a factual basis. And that brings us to another important feature of fiction. Is it fiction merely made up or fiction which actually happened?

A story which is true is interesting merely because it is true. If we are told that it is made up, we normally loose interest. This gives us a criterion for art and the artfully told. When it comes to art we suspend judgment and the question of literal truth somehow is irrelevant, it manages to engage us nevertheless. But most stories are not artfully told, but that does not matter that much if they relate to something which actually happened. We are curious about what happened, even if it happened a long time ago. This provides the real fascination of the Classics, it is fiction yes, in the sense of only being accessible through the imagination, but it is also true, and thus we would like to find out much more about it. And here the real frustration enters. There is indeed much that has been preserved those two thousand years ago, and we wonder how much of contemporary life will be studied two thousand years from now. Who of our contemporaries, if any, will be remembered two thousand years hence? But as noted, much is lost, and as soon you subject the sources to a real scrutiny, asking questions, you are made aware of all the gaps. There might be a lot, but there is not enough as soon as you start to probe. No wonder this urge of fanciful interpolation. There is of course archeology, but to be honest, it is not quite as exciting. True your curiosity has been whetted as to daily life of the Romans, to find out about things which are not to be found in the written documents. To, in the words of Collingwood's admonishment, look at all kinds of sources. The excavations at Pompeji provides maybe the most important window on quotidian Roman life, but of

course it is but a random choice, and how representative? But that is what we have, and we have to make the most of it, resorting to our imagination to fill in the gaps and make more or less warranted generalizations. In short making, once again in the words of Collingwood, a reconstruction of the past in the present using the material at hand, and hence by necessity being provisional. Had we not been familiar with the Classics beforehand, the exercise would not be as exciting as we find it now.

Greek and Roman are different. The Greek I find much more interesting. There is mathematics, to which you can directly relate across the large sweep of time, there is also science and a sophisticated philosophy (Whitehead claimed that all Western philosophy is really nothing but footnotes to Plato). Add to that art and plays, and you have a treasure, unmatched by the Romans. The literature of the Romans does not compare to that of the Greek, nor their art, and of science there is none, and the philosophy is faded in comparison. Civilization, as little as Evolution, does not progress, at least not consistently. What does the Roman world have to offer? There is of course its dramatic history of world conquest, nothing like that in Greece, which was not an Empire (that of Alexander the Great was something different, definitely not part of Classical Greek, but a short lived effusion of a Macedonian adventurer, and belongs to a later era). There are of course surviving letters and diaries, and one thinks of Cicero. The Roman World teaches lessons in politics, administration and law, and as such admittedly very instructively, but it is not a world for mathematicians and poets, but one more congenial to administrators, political scientists and military men. It is a practical world and as such it has served as a model for Western material expansion and consolidation, rather than inspiring to flights of the imagination. Thus it is in many ways a more accessible one, and school boys struggled with translations of the campaigns of Julius Caesar, not with the dialogues of Plato. One suspects that there is a hierarchy of classicists, those mainly concerned with the Roman world, and those with the more exalted Greek one, more distant, more elusive, and with a more difficult language to master. A Latin quotation may be part of general culture (the one she supplies as the most common one, I actually had never heard of, I would have suggested *veni, vidi, vici*), but hardly one in Greek. Of course a classicist worth his or her salt are at home in both worlds, but hardly equally.

December 29-30, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se