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Julian's School Law, Cultural Capital, and the Future of Classics

Abstract: The article disputes the validity of the theory of canon-replacement, which is one of the main factors that have led to problematization of the classical legacy in contemporary discourse. Proceeding from the early Christian reception of Greco-Roman cultural legacy as a case-study, it argues that the theory in question cannot be supported by robust historical evidence. Time after time, rather than being thrown away, the cultural capital accumulated in the past is re-used in accordance with the needs of the groups that rise to social and cultural prominence.

Keywords: canon-formation, Church Fathers, cultural canon, Pierre Bourdieu, reception, *paideia*

1

Let me start with an historical example. In the year 362 of the common era Emperor Julian (331–363), the last pagan ruler of the Roman empire, initiated a law which prohibited Christian educators from teaching classical texts of ancient Greece. Julian's main argument was as follows: it would be immoral to teach Homer and other 'Hellenic' (that is, pagan Greek) authors without sharing their religious beliefs: "when a man thinks one thing and teaches his pupils another, in my opinion he fails to educate (ἀπολελεῖφθαι ... τῆς παιδείας) in the same measure as he fails to be an honest man".[1] As far as we can judge, the law had never been implemented, for in less than a year Julian was killed in a battle against the Persians, and the 'Hellenic Renaissance' that he tried to set off came to an end. Nevertheless, Julian's School Law left so strong an impression on the Christians that they kept discussing it for centuries, invariably interpreting it as an anti-Christian conspiracy designed to deprive them of access to what was dubbed in antiquity 'Hellenic education' (*hē Hellēnikē paideia*).[2]

1 Julian. *Ep.* 36. Tr. E.W.C. Wright, slightly modified.

2 For a historical overview of Christian response to Julian's School Law, see Hardy 1968, 132–134; Kaldelis 2007, 146–149.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111337852-003

The first to react was Julian's contemporary Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), who in his youth studied in Athens at the same time as the future emperor.[3] Shortly after Julian's death, Gregory issued two invectives against the emperor and his reforms. His attack on Julian's School Law was especially acrimonious. "How did it come into your head", he asks the late emperor, "you silliest and greediest of mortals, to deprive the Christians of the *logoi*?".[4] Gregory proceeds to argue that, contrary to Julian's claim, Greek language and literature are not the property of the pagans but, rather, constitute a common legacy of all: the emperor's attempt to turn Christians into barbarians devoid of rational thinking (the word *alogia* is used here) is utterly unacceptable.[5]

Note that Gregory's claim that Julian's School Law was intended to deprive the Christian children of Hellenic *paideia* was in fact unfounded: it was the teachers, not the students, who were Julian's target.[6] Everything points in the direction that by this move he tried to prevent Christianization of the Greco-Roman legacy, that is, its reception in the spirit of the Christian doctrine. To put it in his own words: "I think it is absurd that those who expound the works of these writers [*sc*. Homer, Hesiod, Demosthenes, Herodotus, Thucydides, Isocrates, Lysias] should dishonor the gods they honored".[7]

That these concerns were well justified can be seen from the *Address to Young Men*, a famous essay in which Gregory's friend and another fellow student, Basil of Caesarea (330–379), admonishes Christian youths to study the cultural legacy of Greece. Here is how its opening part is concluded:

> That it is, therefore, that I have come to offer you as my counsel — that you should not surrender to these men once for all the rudders of your mind, as if of a ship, and follow them wherever they lead; rather, accepting from them only that which is useful, you should know that which ought to be overlooked. What, therefore, these things are, and how we shall distinguish between them, is what I shall teach you from this point on.[8]

In what follows, St Basil instructs Christian youths to read pagan texts not like "those who take poisons along with honey", stopping their ears "no less than

3 On Gregory and Julian's School Law, see Radford Ruether 1969, 162–167; Kaldelis 2007, 158–164.

4 *Or*. 4.101. Tr. C.W. King.

5 *Or*. 4.102–103; cf. 4.79.

6 Cf. Hardy 1968, 142; Kaldelis 2007, 148. An analogous prohibition supported by similar arguments but directed against the pagan teachers was issued by Justinian in 529, see *Cod.Just*. 1.5.18.4, cf. 1.11.10.2. See further Constantelos 1964; Rohmann 2016, 97–99.

7 Julian. *Ep*. 36 ἄτοπον μὲν οὖν οἶμαι τοὺς ἐξηγουμένους τὰ τούτων ἀτιμάζειν τοὺς ὑπ' αὐτῶν τιμηθέντας θεούς.

8 *Ad adolescentes* 1.5. Tr. R.J. Deferrari and M.R.P. McGuire, slightly modified.

Odysseus did … when he avoided the songs of the Sirens" and paying no attention "when they depict men engaged in amours or drunken, or when they define happiness in terms of an over-abundant table or dissolute songs", and above all "when they narrate anything about the gods, and especially when they speak of them as being many and these too not even in accord with one another".[9] That St Basil's treatise was twice translated into Syriac[10] attests to the wide popularity it enjoyed.

There can be little doubt that Gregory of Nazianzus fully shared this approach.[11] Compare, for example, his *Oration* 43:

> … and as we have compounded healthful drugs from certain of the reptiles, so from secular literature we have received principles of inquiry and speculation (τὸ μὲν ἐξεταστικόν τε καὶ θεωρητικόν), while we have rejected their idolatry, terror, and pit of destruction.[12]

The same attitude will be later adopted by St Augustine, as well as many others.[13]

Several decades after its publication, Julian's School Law was attacked by the Church historian Socrates of Constantinople, or Socrates Scholasticus (380–439). His main argument ran as follows. While it is true that Jesus and Apostles never regarded 'Hellenic education' (ἡ Ἑλληνικὴ παίδευσις) as issuing from divine inspiration, they also never banned it or claimed it is harmful. Accordingly, "by not prohibiting Hellenic education they left the decision to consideration of those who are interested in it"; moreover, while "the Scriptures, deriving as they are from divine inspiration, lead those who follow them to piety and the life of purity", they "do not instruct us in the art of *logoi* (τέχνην … λογικήν) which would enable us to successfully withstand those who oppose the truth".[14]

Note that the Christian critics of Julian's School Law saw the main benefit of 'Hellenic *paideia*' in the mastering of the art of *logoi*. They had good reason for this. From the days of the Sophists, Greek educational tradition had been focused on the acquirement of verbal communication skills — a broad semantic field covered by the word *logos* and its cognates. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates asks the greatest of the Sophists about what qualifications his young protégé Hippocrates would acquire by becoming his student. Protagoras' reply is the quintessential formulation of the principles of the 'new education' he and the other Sophists promulgated: "He

9 *Ad adolescentes* 4.1–4.

10 In the fifth and the seventh century. In 1403, it was translated into Latin by Leonardo Bruni. See Browning 2000, 867.

11 See further Radford Ruether 1969, 164–165.

12 *Or*. 43.11, tr. Radford Ruether.

13 *De doctrina Christiana* 2.40.60 ('Despoiling the Egyptians').

14 *Hist. Eccl.* 3.16; tr. Anonymous. On Socrates Scholasticus and Julian's School Law, see Buck 2003.

will learn good judgement (*euboulia*) in both private affairs, in order to manage his own household in the best manner, and public ones, in order to be able to speak and act for the best in the matters of the state" (318a).

The formula 'to be a speaker of words and performer of deeds' (μύθων τε ῥητῆρ' ἔμεναι πρηκτῆρά τε ἔργων), which emerges as early as the Homeric *Iliad* (9.443), gives adequate expression to the Greeks' belief in the importance of the spoken word — provided that it is translated into actions. But the concept of *logoi* that the Sophists introduced emphasized the fact that, as distinct from its synonyms (for example, the word *muthos* used in the Homeric verse), *logos* stands not just for 'discourse' but specifically for the discourse that is based on argument, that is, on rational thinking. This is the only kind of discourse that leads to persuasion, thereby bestowing power and influence on those who have mastered it.

The main idea that the 'new education' conveyed was, therefore, that of social and personal advantages acquired thanks to one's cultivation of verbal skills issuing from argumentative discourse — a 'gymnastics of the mind', as Isocrates, who several decades later institutionalized this kind of education, put it. It was indeed Isocrates who laid the foundations for the Greek, Roman, and, eventually, modern system of education, in that he saw the objective of *paideia* in stimulating the students to mobilize their intellectual abilities in order to realize their full potential as human beings.[15] The foundation on which this system was based was the standard corpus of classical texts: Homer and other poets formed the basis of the study of grammar, which also included the explication of poetic texts, whereas the next stage, at which rhetoric was studied, focused on orators and historians.[16]

The early Christians were not interested in the Greco-Roman legacy for its own sake. But they were very much interested in that, alongside being good Christians, their children will have access to instruction and training (Gregory's τὸ ἐξεταστικόν τε καὶ θεωρητικόν comes to mind here) that would allow them to successfully cope with both practical and intellectual challenges in their private and public life, as well as to competently discuss and interpret the Scripture. St Augustine (354–430) even argued that Hellenic *paideia* derives from divine providence, for the Christian teacher needs it in order to better understand the Scripture (*de Doct. Christ.* 2.40.60–61). All the attempts to replace it with a wholly Christian system of education based on an alternative corpus of texts (and such attempts did take place, see below) failed to produce a viable alternative to a centuries-long educational tradition. The choice was, therefore, between the adoption of the 'Hellenic *paideia*' and

15 Cf. Marrou 1964, 128: "It was Isocrates, not Plato, who became the educator of the fourth-century Greece and, after that, of the Hellenistic and then the Roman world" (my translation).

16 For a detailed account, see, e.g., Browning 2000, 857–862.

cultural retrogression. We all know what happened next. Christianity did adopt the Greco-Roman curriculum, and it became one of the foundations of what centuries later came to be known as the Western Canon.

2

The historical episode involving Julian's School Law lies at the crossroads of Western cultural history. Had the law been sustained over a long period of time, the ban on the Christian teachers would have most probably led to marginalization of the classical canon in the increasingly christianized world and to its eventual demise. The reception of classical antiquity in Rabbinic Judaism may serve as an example. It is well attested that, parallel to giving their children the traditional Jewish education, some Jews (as a rule, members of the elite) also sent them to pagan teachers (of whom Julian's friend Libanius was one),[17] in order that they may acquire elements of Hellenic *paideia*. Just as their Christian counterparts, the Rabbinic authorities regarded pagan learning as neutral in respect of the religious doctrine and therefore did not prohibit it.[18] As a result, not a few members of the Jewish community became closely acquainted with Greco-Roman cultural tradition. Yet, Hellenic *paideia* did not become integrated into the Jewish system of education; as a result, it has played no part in Jewish educational tradition from antiquity to the present.

It is reasonable to suppose that the same or a closely similar outcome would have been achieved had the Christian purists prevailed. To quote Anthony Kaldelis, "We should not forget that there were always Christians who were ready to basically agree with Julian and refuse to even 'nibble on the learning of the Greeks'."[19] The alternative canon to which they aspired would have probably consisted of such works as those of the two Apollinarii, father and son, whose response to Julian's School Law was to initiate the reproduction of the Old Testament in the verse of Homer and Pindar, and of the New Testament after the fashion of Platonic dialogues. According to the unflattering assessment of Socrates Scholasticus about half a century later, "…and their efforts count now as being equivalent to what has

17 See, e.g., the intriguing *Letter* 502, with Stern's commentary, in Stern 1980, 595–596.

18 Naeh 2011.

19 Kaldelis 2007, 155. On "a strong and well established tradition of Christian disapproval with any traffic in secular knowledge", see also Hardy 1968, 139–140. The examples include Arnobius, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, among others.

never been written".[20] That is to say, in this case too, the cultural legacy of Greece and Rome would have been either lost with the end of paganism or turned into an antiquarian curiosity with no social or cultural relevance worthy of mention.[21]

However, it was the middle way that prevailed, not in the least because the early Church Fathers who promulgated Hellenic *paideia* were themselves highly educated men well at ease with Greek literary tradition. They enjoyed their Hellenic learning and openly exhibited it. Thus, in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Letters* and *Orations* Homer is quoted or alluded at no less than 29 times, Plato 16 times, Pindar nine, Euripides six, and so on, whereas in his *Invectives against Julian* classical references and allusions were so numerous that in the sixth century Pseudo-Nonnus had to write a commentary to explain them for Christian readers.[22] Thanks to their influence, the classical legacy of Greece and Rome survived and became part of the school curriculum, so much so that the *Iliad*, alongside the Psalms, served as the principal school-text up to the fall of Byzantium. The pagan and Christian texts were copied in the same scriptoria, treasured in the same libraries, and quoted in the same context: a balance between the Judeo-Christian and Hellenic tradition became a cultural norm.[23]

But the survival had a price. When planted on a new soil, the texts of pagan antiquity began to be read through the prism of the Christian set of values. As we have seen, it was precisely the outcome that Julian tried to prevent. As St Basil's treatise clearly demonstrates, in order to become acceptable to Christian readers, the classical texts had to undergo an adjustment to their beliefs and values. That this adjustment is only rarely reflected in the body of the texts does not mean that it did not take place. It must have been expressed in the exegesis, both oral and written, in lectures and lessons delivered at schools, in readers' response, as well as in other forms of reception which made the traditional canon relevant to the society dominated by other cultural groups than those that had created it.

20 *Hist. Eccl.* 3.16 τῶν δὲ οἱ πόνοι ἐν ἴσῳ τοῦ μὴ γραφῆναι λογίζονται; my translation. On Socrates Scholasticus and the Apollinarii, see Speck 1997.

21 There is no evidence that the destruction of pagan books initiated by Justinian in the sixth century affected the corpus of texts that formed the school curriculum: Justinian's ban on pagan books targeted philosophy (primarily Epicureanism and its offshoots), religion and magic, none of which was part of the curriculum. For a general discussion, see Rohmann 2016, 102–109; on philosophy, see Browning 2000, 862–864.

22 Radford Ruether 1969, 174–175; Kaldelis 2011, 716. Cf. also O'Connell 2019.

23 Cf. Browning 1992, 147: "It was a commonplace of Byzantine rhetoric, ecclesiastical as well as profane, to quote side by side a tag from Homer and a passage from the Scriptures, most often from the Psalms".

Century after century, the readers turned to the cultural heritage of Greece and Rome in order to adjust it to their own needs and to use it in accordance with their own agenda. This seems to be the main reason why the corpus of classical texts of ancient Greece and Rome has retained its role as a cornerstone of Western cultural tradition. Unexceptional as it may seem, this conclusion finds itself at variance with some influential theories addressing the issue of canon-formation.

3

One of the main arguments that have led to problematization of the classical legacy in contemporary discourse is that the Western canon, one of whose cornerstones classics happens to be, is seen as the main if not the only vehicle for perpetuation of the distribution of power, in that it constitutes a cultural capital to which the underprivileged groups have no access. To quote one of the most influential books in contemporary canon studies, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron,

> because they correspond to the material and symbolic interests of groups or classes differently situated within the power relations, these Pedagogical Actions always tend to reproduce the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among these groups or classes, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the social structure.[24]

While Bourdieu admits that more often than not cultural capital is the object of struggle between the dominating and the dominated groups, he sees this struggle as unproductive and the attempts of the dominated groups at appropriating it as illusory.[25] Accordingly, a thorough cultural transformation, or 'a genuine inversion of the table of values', is the only real alternative to the system of reproduction that Bourdieu and his school envisage.[26] That is to say, when the formerly underprivileged groups come to power, the only way to guarantee their cultural domination

24 Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 11. Elsewhere, the authors define the social function of the traditional educational system as "reproducing the class relations, by ensuring the hereditary transmission of cultural capital", *ibid.* 199.

25 Bourdieu 1984, 165: "It is an integrative struggle and, by virtue of the initial handicaps, a reproductive struggle, since those who enter this chase, in which they are beaten before the start ... implicitly recognize the legitimacy of the goals pursued by those whom they pursue, by the mere fact of taking part". See also Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 23–24.

26 Bourdieu 1984, 168. See also Bourdieu 1990, 41–46.

would be to replace the old canon by a new one.[27] This is the theoretical basis of calls for canon-revision in which classical antiquity is one of the main targets.

I fully concur with Bourdieu's thesis that a cultural canon represents the agenda of the groups that dominated in the society to which this canon originally belonged. What I see as problematic, however, are the conclusions that they draw from it. As far as I can see, the calls for canon-replacement that they instigated are based on a theoretical template which has no historical parallels — or at least no such parallels that would last long enough to take root. Much more widespread are the efforts to appropriate the inherited canon while making it relevant to social and cultural groups that had no access to it in the past. To return to our initial example, there can be no doubt that the corpus of classical texts of ancient Greece and Rome reflects the system of values of the pagan civilization which created it. We have seen, however, that during the transition to Christianity it was not replaced by another set of texts. On the contrary, it was at this stage that it became canonical in the full sense of the word.[28]

The Christian appropriation of Greco-Roman cultural legacy is particularly well-positioned for a critical examination of the issue of canon-formation. But the case of Julian's School Law is far from being an isolated historical episode. Even a cursory examination of randomly selected examples referring to what happened in the past as a result of transition from one dominating social group to another suggests that the thesis of canon-replacement is not substantiated by historical fact.[29] The plays of Corneille, Racine and Molière, firmly associated as they are with the zenith of French absolutism, continued to be the pivot of French education also after the Revolution. Generally speaking, the whole of Europe became dominated by the middle classes without apparently feeling a need to get rid of the cultural capital accumulated in the period of upper-class domination. The same would be true of the status of Pushkin and other canonical Russian authors in the post-revolutionary Russia: after some short-lived attempts to cancel the 'bourgeois culture', the old canon was re-established as an integral part of the curriculum. In our own days, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, which sets out to 'reread' the western 'cultural archive' in order to make it relevant to the former colonial nations who took no part in its formation, or Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, presenting the

27 Cf. Bourdieu 1993, 107–108.

28 Cf. Browning 2000, 867: "Neither in the Greek east nor in the Latin west did the church attempt to set up its own schools in opposition to existing traditional schools. … The church never followed the example of the Jewish communities, who set up their own schools, because, unlike the Jews, it did not see itself as a perpetually marginalized minority".

29 See Finkelberg 2003.

events within the Homeric *Iliad* as being focalized by a woman, offer fitting examples of both the appropriation of the canon and its adjustment to the agenda of the formerly underprivileged and under-represented groups.[30] Over and over again, rather than being thrown away, the cultural capital is re-used in accordance with the needs of the groups that rise to social and cultural prominence. Rather than of canon-replacement, we should, therefore, speak of canon-appropriation.[31]

Two qualifications, however, should be kept in mind here. First, as we saw above, rather than staying in its pristine form, during the process of reception the old canon becomes re-interpreted in accordance with new systems of values. Second and no less important, the canon never becomes appropriated *en bloc*, with no interference with its original nomenclature. New texts constantly enter the inherited canon, whereas some of the former canonical works are pushed to the margins or simply left behind (the comedies of Menander, lost in the period of the transition to Christianity, may serve as an example). Yet rather than resulting in canon-replacement, these processes of inclusion and exclusion diversify the canon and bring it up to date, thus guaranteeing its perpetuation. As John Guillory put it in his *Cultural Capital*,

> When we read Plato or Homer or Virgil in a humanities course, then, we are reading what *remains* of the classical curriculum after the vernacular revolutions of the early modern period. The fact that we no longer read these works in Greek or Latin, or that we read far fewer classical Greek or Latin works than students of premodern school systems, represents a real loss; but this loss must be reckoned as the price of the *integration* of these works into a modern curriculum.[32]

Cultural canon is not a Procrustean bed designed to get those works that are deemed undesirable at a given historical moment to be pushed out of the curriculum: it is a dynamic cultural artifact which is found in a permanent state of flux.

30 Said 1993, 59; Barker 2018. As far as I can judge, the Bourdieu school partly acknowledges this phenomenon but sees it as due to the fact that the formerly underprivileged groups sometimes misrecognize the social function of the so-called 'legitimate culture'. However, the Jacobin defense of the teaching of Latin, the example of the appropriation of the 'legitimate culture' by formerly underprivileged groups that Bourdieu and Passeron adduce, can hardly account for the universal character of the phenomenon. See Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 23–24.

31 It has already been pointed out by Bourdieu's critics that his theory makes no provision for the phenomenon of cultural transition, proceeding as it does from "an apparently homeostatic system of reproduction", see Guillory 1993, 58.

32 Guillory 1993, 51 (Guillory's emphasis).

4

As far as the students of antiquity are concerned, the above discussion would seem to bear a twofold message. On the one hand, we can be reasonably certain that the calls for pushing the legacy of Greece and Rome out of the contemporary cultural canon have no future. A capital, even a cultural one, is not a thing to be thrown away. This was clear to St Basil as early as the fourth century CE. In the concluding part of his *Address to Young Men*, he wrote:

> For it would be disgraceful that we, having thrown away the present opportunity, should at some later time attempt to summon back the past when all our vexation will gain us nothing.[33]

At the same time, it is mandatory to recognize that the once privileged position of classical antiquity cannot be sustained any longer. The classical world can no longer be approached without regard to other civilizations and other cultural traditions. This is why we should also look in the direction of non-classical civilizations of the ancient world, both those which, as the ancient Near East and Egypt, were in constant contact with the Greco-Roman world, and those which, as ancient China or India, may be profitably compared with it. Joint academic programs with relevant departments would assist (and are already assisting) in the formation of a global canon which would embrace the great works of literature, philosophy and art from all over the world, with the classical canon as an integral part of it.

Furthermore, whether we like it or not, we should be prepared for readings of the ancient texts which may lie very far indeed from the messages with which these texts were originally informed. It seems, however, that a degree of creative misinterpretation is essential for keeping texts from the past alive and relevant for generations to come. After all, only in virtue of such cultural adjustment did these texts stay relevant to countless generations of readers and have eventually survived. Otherwise, they would be in danger of turning into antiquarian objects with no meaningful connection to the world of the living.[34] Accordingly, alongside the cultivation of their professional expertise, the classicists of the future should be open-minded towards the spectrum of contemporary reception of ancient Greece and Rome.

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33 *Ad adolescentes* 10.6 αἰσχρὸν γὰρ τὸν παρόντα καιρὸν προεμένους, ὕστερόν ποτ᾽ ἀνακαλεῖσθαι τὸ παρελθόν, ὅτε οὐδὲν ἔσται πλέον ἀνιωμένοις.

34 Cf. Jauss 1970, 10: “A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue”.

This open-mindedness, however, should come with a caveat: under no circumstances should we compromise our mission of the bearers of in-depth knowledge about classical antiquity. Scholarship exists side-by-side with reception, each playing its own role: while reception is a predominantly spontaneous process of adaptation of a text from the past to the current historical context, scholarship is an analytic activity which addresses the text as an object of study in its own right. Rather than merely adjusting the text to hermeneutic attitudes prevailing at a given historical moment, the scholars' task is to approach it critically and, whenever possible, to try to reconstruct its original form and meaning.[35] Both scholarship and reception are vitally important for the survival of our discipline, so that the classicists of the future should be trained so as to be interpretatively generous in their teaching and rigorous in their scholarly research.[36]

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35 See Finkelberg 2014.

36 This paper originates in the inaugural lecture at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities delivered in December 2005 (Finkelberg 2006). It has benefited from the criticism of several colleagues, among whom I particularly wish to thank Richard Janko. I would also like to thank the organizers of the Future of the Past conference for their warm welcome and hospitality.

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