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The Future of Classics: The Cost of Forgetting

Abstract: This article shows first how imagining the future is integral to classical writing, for which the anticipation of retrospective evaluation and memorialization is fundamental. How this imagining is shaped changes over time and community, not least with the coming of Christianity. There are complex narrative modellings of how the future is conceived. Consequently, the very notion of the classical tradition becomes a mode of disavowing or veiling the work of partial selection involved in its construction. Second, it shows how Classics as a discipline has repeatedly imagined and even proposed its own transformation, and even its own dismantling, as a response to the politics of culture and education. Current arguments about the future of Classics should be viewed within this long trajectory.

Keywords: Classical tradition, conceptualizing the future, disciplinary history, politics of culture, development of Christianity.

From the very beginning, what we call the western classical tradition has been obsessed with its own future. The *Iliad*, the first and founding text of Greek literary culture, is structured not only around the choice of Achilles between a short life with immortal future fame or a long life without renown, but also around the promise of epic itself to construct and perpetuate the fame of its hero, 'for future generations to know'.[1] Each and every reading of the *Iliad* performs this act of perpetuating the hero's future renown, by singing his narrative. What is more, the literary narrative itself — which is never approached by readers or audience as a *tabula rasa* but always within the framing of generic expectations, inherited knowledge, and constructed expectations of cultural value — dramatizes the anticipation of retrospective meaning. Its celebrated ring structure, where book 24 echoes book 1, is only the largest structural form by which Achilles' ending and the text's ending are set in tension with each other. The temporality of deferral, integral to epic narrative, repeatedly stays and anticipates a future fulfilment. The imagination of the future is a principle of ancient epic, and fundamental to how modernity's response to the past is constructed: our future is formed through how we imagine the past to have prepared it for us.

1 Lynn-George 1988; Nagy 1979; Goldhill 1991, 69–93. Footnotes here are designedly minimal, and include only directly salient works, each of which has further bibliography.

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A principle of epic, but not uncontested. 'What is it worth dying for?' is the foundational question of the *Iliad*,[2] but already in the *Odyssey* there is a question of the *Iliad*'s response. When Odysseus meets Achilles in the Underworld in book 11 of the *Odyssey*, he praises Achilles in his own Iliadic terms for his achieved fame beyond death; but Achilles answers bitterly in famous words: 'Do not try to talk around *death*', he states, 'I would rather be a hired worker on earth than king over all the dead' (*Od.* 11.488–90). The man who insisted on his own *timê*, to the point of self-destruction, now declares his willingness to experience any humiliation for the sake of a life on earth. The *Odyssey*, whose hero indeed suffers a string of humiliations to regain a long life amid his possessions, entraps Achilles with a redraft from the imagined future of how the imagined future had been evaluated in the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey*'s complex narrative (*poikilos*, as Aristotle called it [*Poet* 1459b]), with the retrospective tales of Odysseus' *apologoi*, and its series of lies like the truth, dramatizes the tension between the tales that are told of the past and the possibilities of the future — and does so with brilliant and twisting ironies. When Penelope reports her dream to the disguised Odysseus, a dream in which an eagle turns out to be a disguised Odysseus returning in vengeance, Odysseus himself in disguise, returned, interprets the dream to mean that Odysseus will return in disguise for vengeance (though Penelope rejects such an interpretation). What work is necessary to make the future a fulfilment of its anticipation? Reading the signs, asking for omens, giving prophecies, plotting, planning, failing to recognise the signs, failing to plot adequately — all key elements of the *Odyssey*'s narrative — each stage the desire to make the future a necessary product of its past anticipation. This desire is framed by the *Odyssey*'s narrative of redrafting stories of the past. This tension between the will to make the future a necessary result of the past and the constant and fractured retelling of the past forms a key vector of the *Odyssey*'s perspective on human action and language within a divinely determined world.

The syntax of future possibility — and with it the fragility of certainty about the future — is built into the language of epic. The counterfactual is a repeated trope of Homeric Greek, which has been well discussed by critics[3] — and even seen as necessary for its narrative: 'A constituent part of our sense of the present moment is an imaginative investment in some of the futures that might come out of it.'[4] Or as Morson insists, 'For there to be eventness there must be alternatives'.[5] The

2 Lynn-George 1988.

3 Lang 1989; Morrison 1992; Nesselrath 1992; Purves 2019, 93–116; and especially Louden 1993. See also Levy 2015; Ferguson 1997.

4 Bernstein 1994, 29.

5 Morson 1994, 22.

counterfactual is used, first of all, to mark significant junctures in the plot: what might have happened but didn't happen serves to emphasize the significance of the event that is a turning point.[6] Second, there are specific moments where the traditional motifs of myth are set at risk and re-asserted. Thus Paris would have been killed by Menelaus, *had not* Aphrodite snatched her hero from the battlefield and transported him to the bedroom he shares with Helen. Or Patroclus would have captured Troy, *had not* Apollo driven him from the walls. This story, Homer's account, is also a redrafting — or maintaining — of tradition. Third, the counterfactual can thus act as a form of editorial comment, where the poet implicitly enters the narrative to indicate its shaping. This expression of the self-conscious manipulation of narrative possibility is essential also to the ethics of the epic and thus its ideological parameters. As Michael Lynn-George in particular has articulated, the narratives of possibility and of possibilities denied, tested and hoped for, constantly inform the representation of Achilles as agent.[7] For all the rhetoric of fate and the enactment of prophecy, humans and gods remain aware of alternative routes of action, attempt to affect such alternatives, and the tension between choice and inevitability determines the tragic emplotment of the epic. The counterfactual is the grammar that underlies this emplotment. Human agency in Homeric epic is articulated between the fated plot and the need to recognize and control the uncertain possibilities of the future.

When lies are like the truth, what, then, happens to the perpetuation of *kleos* in the words of men? This challenge from the *Odyssey* will echo through the classical tradition, not just in the continuing representation of Odysseus as an iconic figure of manipulative rhetoric and misplaced glorification, but also in the continuing and necessary struggle of the classical tradition to construct itself *as a tradition*. Retelling the story of the past to construct a valued future is tradition in formation. Tradition, to paraphrase Heidegger, functions as a rhetorical term to make the past look self-evident, as if it is a fixed, necessary and monumental entity. Yet tradition requires constant work first to determine what it is — the normative acts of exclusion and inclusion, which texts count and which do not — and secondly to maintain it as significant to the present — against the dual pressures of forgetting and contestation — does *this* or *this* past pass the test of significance for the present and future? As with the narrative of the *Odyssey*, we classicists keep telling different stories of the past to make the future seem a necessary fulfilment, a fated end that needs to be struggled for.

6 These three categories follow Louden 1993.

7 Lynn-George 1988.

Epic remains a model for this process of constructed tradition. Demosthenes gives a marvellous example of how the political process, too, demands such work of a memorialized future. Demosthenes' Funeral Oration, his version of the institutionalized speech over the war dead, is inevitably a text where self-conscious acknowledgment of tradition is high, both because it is a heavily conventional genre, and because the conventions demand a tour of the historical traditions of the city. As Nicole Loraux writes: 'the funeral oration reveals an ever more imaginary installation of the city in a time that is ever more timeless'[8] — the city stretching into the future unchanged as it has been in the past, unchanged. In his speech Demosthenes recalls the Athenians' fight against the Amazons, the Athenian support of the Heracleidai, and of the Seven Against Thebes, and then he transitions to events closer to the present time (60.9):

> τῶν μὲν οὖν εἰς μύθους ἀνενηνεγμένων ἔργων πολλὰ παραλιπὼν τούτων ἐπεμνήσθην, ὧν οὕτως ἕκαστον εὐσχήμονας καὶ πολλοὺς ἔχει λόγους ὥστε καὶ τοὺς ἐν μέτροις καὶ τοὺς τῶν ᾀδομένων ποιητὰς καὶ πολλοὺς τῶν συγγραφέων ὑποθέσεις τἀκείνων ἔργα τῆς αὐτῶν μουσικῆς πεποιῆσθαι: ἃ δὲ τῇ μὲν ἀξίᾳ τῶν ἔργων οὐδέν ἐστι τούτων ἐλάττω, τῷ δ᾽ ὑπογυώτερ᾽ εἶναι τοῖς χρόνοις οὔπω μεμυθολόγηται, οὐδ᾽ εἰς τὴν ἡρωϊκὴν ἐπανῆκται τάξιν, ταῦτ᾽ ἤδη λέξω.
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> Now, I have left out many deeds that are classed as myths [*muthoi*]. Of the events that I have recalled to mind, each has provided many charming stories [*logoi*], so that our writers of poetry, whether recited or sung, and many historians, have made the deeds of those men the themes of their art. But now I shall be describing deeds, which, though in merit they are not inferior to these former events, because they are closer in time, have not yet become myth [*memuthologeitai*] or even been raised to heroic rank [*tên hêrôikên taxin*].

Demosthenes does not merely refer back to what he has discussed as myth, but specifically as events 'classed as myth', τῶν ... εἰς μύθους ἀνενηνεγμένων ἔργων: he acknowledges the work of classification between myth and other categories. These events have provided *logoi* for the multiple public voices of the city, different genres of writing. Myth is not opposed to *logos* here, as Plato would have it. But the more recent endeavors of the city, Demosthenes continues, because they are closer in time, have not yet become myth — μεμυθολόγηται — 'been told as myth', nor even have they entered the rank of the heroic. The implication is that as time passes so contemporary events in history will become myth. 'Heroic rank' may imply that in the future events of today will be the subject of epic poetry, or that its heroes will become cult figures as with the men who fought at Marathon. As time passes, the status of stories changes. Myth is reserved for the stories of the deep past. Where

8 Loraux 1986, 131.

Thucydides demands that his history is a 'possession for all time', Demosthenes suggests that history passes into myth over time. Our future is to become myth.

The Funeral Speech is a fifth-century redesign of the memorialization provided by epic, now for the democratic *polis*. The *epitaphios logos* sets itself against epic (as does the historiography of Herodotus and Thucydides), but here in Demosthenes' version we see a self-conscious discussion of the very dynamics of how the future is anticipated within the framework provided by epic. Demosthenes marks the variety of genres — poetry of various types, historiography — as competing models of memorialization, but allows that what now is memory of great deeds will in the passing of time become something else, namely, myth. Demosthenes locates himself between pasts and futures — the plural matters — because the pasts change as they become more distant and the future will respond differently, over time, to these changing pasts. Both the future and the past are subject to the changing frameworks of human memorialization.

This epic sense of acting 'for future generations to know', recalled in performance as an exemplary past, becomes a mainstay of rhetorical theory too. [Ps-] Longinus[9] instructs his pupils that they should try and imagine what Homer, Plato, Demosthenes or Thucydides would have said (*Subl.* 14); then, he adds, that it would be better to imagine how would Homer, 'had he been here…listened to what I have written' — to have the past as judge of the present. But, he concludes (*Subl.* 14):

> Yet more inspiring would be the thought: with what feelings will future ages through all time read these my works? If this should awaken a fear in any writer that he will speak in a way unsuited (*huperhêmeron*) to his own life and time (*chronou*), it will necessarily follow that the conceptions of his mind will be crude, maimed and abortive, and lacking the ripe perfection (*chronon*) which alone can win the applause of ages to come.

A rhetorician — any writer — should see himself not just to be following the exemplars of the past (the heroes of mythic proportions), nor even to imagine oneself judged by such paradigms, but also and most inspiringly to see oneself read and valued in every generation (*pas aiôn*) — all time — in the future, and, what's more, to recognize that only with such a perspective can a true sense of oneself in time lead to a fulfilment of a writer's potential. Everyone must anticipate a future that will remember his past excellence. The present, which will always find it hard to live up to the past, must always have an eye on the future when this present will be in turn a (mythic) past. The longing for a lost past is transformed by the anticipation of future memorialization.

9 On the sublime, see Porter 2016.

This long tradition of the classical construction of a future — in poetry, rhetoric, history, theory — is itself transformed by the coming of Christianity, and its new conceptualizations of temporality. I have written at length elsewhere on this topic.[10] Here, I will make two general points, each with an example, which will be of relevance to my overall case. The first concerns the role of the afterlife and the apocalyptic theology in which it is expressed. Whereas in the classical Greek tradition agency is integral to a hero — taking action, verbal and physical — and, consequently, waiting is constructed as a dead time of unfulfillment, for Christian ideology waiting itself becomes an ideal — waiting for the death which transforms this deathly life into the blissful life after death that is the Christian promise. Waiting is transvalued in Christian theology. To await the Second Coming — to watch and wait, 'because you do not know the day or the hour' (Mat. 25 13) — is the Gospel's demand, which will become for the monk the life of constant prayer enjoined by Paul. The prediction of the future demands that our future is one in which we watch and wait. Vigilance, a vigil, is required. For Christians, the Gospels demand, anticipating, waiting, expecting is what the faithful do, all the time. That is how the time of everyday life is now to be inhabited.[11]

Augustine shows how tortured this waiting can be. His *Confessions* is studded with the rhetoric of *quamdiu? quamdiu?*, 'How long, O Lord, How long' — as he waits for the coming of grace which will bring about his conversion. Yet Augustine also theorizes this waiting for a future transformation in a remarkable passage of commentary on the Psalms (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 102: 16):

> Sunt enim qui praeparant conversionem, et differunt, et fit in illis vox corvina, "Cras, cras". Corvus de arca missus, non est reversus. Non quaerit Deus dilationem in voce corvina, sed confessionem in gemitu columbino. Missa columba reversa est. Quamdiu: Cras, cras? Observa ultimum cras: quia ignoras quod sit ultimum cras, sufficiat quod vixisti usque ad hodiernum peccator. Audisti, saepe soles audire, audisti et hodie: quam quotidie audis, tam quotidie non corrigeris. Tu enim secundum duritiam cordis tui et cor impoenitens, thesaurizas tibi iram in die irae et revelationis iusti iudicii Dei, qui reddet unicuique secundum opera sua [Rom. 2.5–6].
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> There are those who make preparations for their conversion, and delay; in them comes into being the voice of a raven, "tomorrow tomorrow" [*cras*/*cras*=caw/caw]. The raven was sent from the ark, and did not return. God does not seek delay in the voice of a raven, but confession in the moaning of a dove. The dove, sent out, returned. How long: tomorrow, tomorrow. Look to the last tomorrow. Because you do not know what the last tomorrow is, let it be enough that you have lived as a sinner until today. You have heard, you are used to hearing often, you have heard today too: as many times as you hear, you will not change. For 'according to the

10 Goldhill 2022.

11 Goldhill 2022, 85–100.

> hardness of your heart and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against you in the day of wrath and the revelation of the just punishment of God, who will repay each man according to his deeds.' [Rom. 2.5–6]

The raven is a model of the continuing deferral of the hesitant convert. He 'goes out but does not return' — where 'return' is the *termus technicus* for the repentance required by *conversio*. *Conversio* requires *revertere*. The dove, by contrast, goes out and comes back. But this symbolic contrast is expressed in terms of voice. The dove moans in penitence; but the raven caws, which in Latin sounds *cras, cras*, 'tomorrow, tomorrow'. *Cras cras* is precisely what Augustine himself declared in his own hesitant journey towards his own conversion in the *Confessions*.[12] *Quamdiu* 'How long?' was his redrafting of the biblical language of pleading [Ps. 13] into his desperate awareness of the waiting for grace. Augustine models his own experience through the raven, hears his own dilatory travel towards God in the cry of the bird. 'You have heard…' he repeats, and his repetition overlaps three sorts of hearing: his injunction against the failed hearing of the sinner; his insistence on the revelatory pun of *cras cras* ('hear!'); and the remembrance of his own text, the *Confessions* ('you have heard…'). He goes on to dismiss the sinner's deferral of repentance with a quotation from St Paul (Rom. 2.5.6), a reminder that the day of judgment will end such delays with terrible punishment. But this text also affords Augustine another telling pun. The problem of the hesitant repentant is precisely in his *duritiam* ***cordis*** and ***cor*** *impoenitens*. The repetition of *cor* is obscured in the King James translation ('after thy hardness and impenitent heart', which follows the Septuagint), but here is surely made to sound out significantly. The ***cor****vus* lurks in the ***cor*** of the hesitant, as the *vox* of the raven is heard in the *cras cras* of delay, Augustine's own voice of despair. Noah's raven who does not return becomes a potent image of the time-bound incapable convert, waiting for, but resisting, a tomorrow of grace.

Augustine's waiting is fully part of a Christian theology of inhabiting time, whereby the anticipation of death and the anticipation of the Second Coming makes the present constantly defined as a sort of death (*vita mortalis*) until the true life after death (*mors vitalis*) comes.[13] To live a life with a (Christian) eye on the future is not — as in Longinus — to see yourself memorialized in the eyes of future generations, but to wait for your own transformed future, as part of the transformation of the world.

The second transformation of the future in Christianity is even more comprehensive. Immediately after his conversion experience in the garden, Augustine

12 See *Conf.* 8 12 28: *quamdiu quamdiu cras cras*.

13 Ricoeur 1984, 5–31; Kennedy 2013, 1–42; Hartog 2020; with Conybeare 2016.

runs to his mother, Monnica. Now, thanks to his conversion, they recognize together, Augustine will no longer seek a wife, nor any 'hope of this age (*saeculi*)', nothing the age can offer. He and his mother will no longer seek the immortality of family, 'the grandchildren of my flesh' (*nepotibus carnis meae*).[14] Immediately on conversion, Augustine and Monnica, son and mother, recognize that he has rejected the possibility of the future of their family, a rejection of the most insistent injunction of both Greco-Roman and Jewish communities, namely, the continuity of the family — a fulfilment of the most shocking radicalism of Christianity's call to change. Conversion, that immediate moment, is to transcend the *saeculum*, the time that is the mundane world, in the name of *vitae vivere*, to live for a life beyond; and conversion is a rejection of the immortality of the generations which drives so much of Greco-Roman and Jewish moral and social expectation. The relation of the self to the future has been fundamentally altered, and with such a transformation comes a disruption of the social relations and the moral imperatives of those social relations, which both Jewish and Greco-Roman society upheld. Augustine's personal transformation is also a sign and symptom of a new insistence on the individual in relation to God rather than to a network of social relations. Augustine's conversion means the designed and willed loss of what the classical world understood as the future: children and the continuity of the family line.

What I hope to have shown so far — albeit within the limited scope of a short chapter — is four things. First, the imagination of the future is integral to classical writing, and made an explicit theme both in literary works and, with a more explicit theoretical buttressing, in works of rhetoric, rhetorical theory and, later, in theology. The anticipation of retrospective re-evaluation and memorialization is integral to the performance of classical writing, to its future. Second, such self-placement in time — such self-understanding — is embedded within different intellectual, cultural, social and theological regimes of thinking — and transforms over time and jurisdiction. Most strikingly, the inheritance of Greek thinking that stretches back to Homer and which privileges the future fame of human agents, is radically altered by Christianity, not least in its willingness to desert the family and the city as the twin loci of memorialization, continuity and status. To imagine the future is an ideologically charged and normative act that, however untimely, is always produced from within a particular time and place — and has its own purposiveness. Third, there are complex narrative modellings of how the future is conceived. The profoundly self-reflexive demand of Augustine to hear — to *get* — the word '*cras*' is articulated within the tradition of normative commentary (for which the sermon is the most performative type), while the retrospective narration of Odysseus enacts

14 *Conf.* 8 12 30.

a verbal journey backwards, a *nostos* of a sort, that constructs re-telling, with all its fractures and promises, as the necessary mode of future fame. Fourth, the very notion of the classical tradition is all too often used to disavow or veil the work of selection, partiality, and active preservation that forming a privileged, instrumental and normative relation with the past entails. Tradition is never self-evident nor fixed: the future of the past is under constant formation.

I stress these four points — and start with antiquity — in part because in many recent discussions of the future of classics as a discipline, it would seem that the complexity and variety of how classical antiquity itself imagines its own privileged future, projects and promotes an idea of itself as a tradition, and contests the fixity of its own past — in the present and in the future — has all too often been forgotten. And forgotten to the cost of the coherence and nuance of the important political and cultural arguments at stake. Irony is perhaps too feeble a word to capture the trivialization of the past that these shrill arguments about preservation and destruction of the classical tradition mobilize.

To approach the current debate, however, let us begin (again) in the nineteenth century, since it is so often the nineteenth century's perspective of classical antiquity that has prompted the discipline's twenty-first century debates and anxieties: it has become the past against which the future is to be articulated. And as with my discussion of antiquity, it must be noted from the start, that my comments must be restricted to stay within the scope of a short chapter.

It should not be a revelation that nineteenth-century intellectual life was dominated by an obsession with the biblical and classical pasts — and by the relationship between them.[15] When Prime Minister Gladstone wrote a pamphlet — it is over 100 pages long — expressing his views on how the Providence of God's plan and the Homeric poems could be reconciled, it sold 125.000 copies.[16] The sales figures of the second printing were boosted not just by Gladstone's status, but also by the excitement of Schliemann's recent discovery of Troy. Schliemann had toured Britain to lecture on his remarkable uncovering of Homer's city — it need not be a concern here about what he had actually excavated — and his public lectures were introduced by no less a personage than Prime Minister Gladstone. The discovery of Troy was international news and deserved the light of such political publicity. Similarly, when Tischendorf found the Codex Sinaiticus and whisked it out of the monastery of St Catherine to Russia and then to the British Museum, this too was a revelatory moment, not just for theologians but for an international public.[17] The facsimile of

15 Howard 2000; Bennett 2019; Goldhill and Jackson Ravenscroft 2023.

16 Gange 2009.

17 Goldhill 2021, 45–49.

the manuscript when it went on sale became a very expensive best-seller with tens of thousands of copies immediately purchased. Discoveries from antiquity changed how a broad public — and not just an elite academy — understood the past and their own present.

This palpable and extensive excitement about such discoveries was fostered because a *genealogical* link with the classical and biblical pasts was integral and formative in the cultural identity not just of Britain but of the nation states of Europe. This was an era obsessed with origins — from the origin of species in the hands of Darwin or Chambers, to the origin of the earth itself led by Lyell's geology, to personal psychological formation with Freud's primal scenes, to society's or civilization's origins thanks to Maine or Marx or Bagheot or Spencer or Buckle or Tylor…[18] At the most general level, ancient Greece and the Bible offered two differing, privileged models of an originary past through which the West could assert its sense of its own destined cultural and political primacy. Matthew Arnold — iconically — made Hellenism and Hebraism the twin and interlinked matrices through which modern British culture should be evaluated — and, for many people, he defined how a self-understanding in cultural terms could be expressed.[19] Ancestry grounded authority: religious, cultural, and political power was rooted in genealogy.

Now, there is an evident tension in this double trajectory of pagan (to use a Christian word) and Christian beginnings. The self-description of Christianity from its earliest days demanded its own disjunction from the values, culture and intellectual apparatus of the society of Greece and Rome in which it took shape (and, even more violently, from the Judaism in which it was born).[20] Yet from the start, too, there was a profound complicity both with the culture of Greek in which Christianity's founding texts were written and, as Christianity developed, with the structures of Roman power it took over to establish Christendom. When Gladstone wrote his pamphlet and his huge books trying to link Homer and the Bible, he was consciously contributing to this long tradition of attempted assimilation between the biblical and the classical pasts as authoritative origins. Such an assimilation proved deeply contentious — Gladstone was mocked by his learned contemporaries — but at every level in the search for authority, the past and which genealogies counted prompted bitter arguments. Catholics and Protestants fought furiously over the early church and the possibility of apostolic succession or reformation. Nation

18 Goldhill 2020a; 2023.

19 DeLaura 1969; Anderson 1971; Collini 1994; Goldhill 2002, 213–231.

20 Becker and Reed 2003; Lieu 2003; Boyarin 2004; Dunn 2006; Carleton Paget and Lieu 2017; Vinzent 2019; Sandwell 2021.

states competed over their privileged descent as Aryans. Genealogy from the past was a battleground of politics, identity, culture — because it mattered so intently.

The same cannot be said of today. To claim privileged descent from antiquity — biblical or classical — would be to marginalize oneself as an extremist, a nationalist who has not learnt from the history of the twentieth century and its painful demonstration of the dangers of such ideology, an ideology that the Second World War, as much an any intellectual argument, has made unacceptable. True, there are groups which do make such claims, and sometimes do so very loudly, and use such loudness to effect instrumental political interventions, but mainstream culture constructs the past otherwise. For contemporary western thought, I would argue, *difference* rather than genealogy is the dominant mode of self-understanding. The past of antiquity has indeed become another country, not the motherland which nourishes us. So whereas for Victorian Protestants what happened in the first century in Palestine was crucial to understanding how contemporary Christianity should be shaped (the argument from genealogy), such anxieties play almost no role in today's Christian polemics. Even professional classicists will hesitate — rightly — to claim that democracy simply finds its roots in antiquity, but, rather, will immediately point out the exclusion of women and slaves, the difference between direct and representative democracy, the question of scale, and the huge rupture between antiquity and now, concluding that the centuries in which democracy was absent and denigrated as a political system means that modern democracy is an invention of modernity, even and especially when it looks back to Athens in the fifth century for its justification (or mystification). When John Stewart Mill declares that the battle of Marathon as an event in history is more important in British history than the battle of Hastings, his demand to see Britain lined up with ancient Greece against the East can seem in today's society quaint at best and damagingly Orientalist at worst. Or just wrong. (It is less often noted that this much-quoted remark was made in a review of George Grote's field-changing history of Greece, and is a knowing intervention in liberal politics and its appropriation of Greek democracy.)[21] The otherness of antiquity was already part of the nineteenth-century idealism of ancient Greece (ancient Greece was always lost and longed for, even in the genealogical argument). When men who desired men read Plato, and found a model for their own sexuality, it was because they could idealise ancient Greece as a lost and ideal place.[22] But even that idealism will inevitably look painfully naïve to contemporary eyes, more attuned to hierarchies of power and the complex history of sexuality.

21 *Edinburgh Review* Oct. 1846, 283. For the politics, see Turner 1981.

22 Dowling 1994 remains seminal. For further bibliography, see Goldhill 2016a, 315–317, to which can be added Eastlake 2019; Butler 2022.

Even in intellectual history, where it is possible to write that philosophy is 'a series of footnotes to Plato' or that 'the entirety of philosophy is conceived on the basis of its Greek source', what follows from such claims is not a simple glorification of Greek writing as a model to follow but a critique of the buried life of concepts — or a more challenging historicization of how ideas travel.[23] Paradigmatically for the nineteenth century, Richard Wagner saw his 'Music of the Future' (*Zukunftsmusik*) as a re-invention of a classical past with which he was in a longing and ruptured genealogical link. The future, his future, needed this genealogy. He declared he would give years of his life to experience one day at the festival of the Great Dionysia in fifth-century Athens.[24] Most modern classicists would worry about the lack of coffee, aspirins and their mobile phone. Genealogy from antiquity has been largely replaced by difference from antiquity.

Now, I start with this very general map not simply to show that contemporary western society has its own particular way of exploring how and why the past matters to it.[25] After all, every era has its strategies of forgetting or re-articulating a relationship with a past or with pasts. Between different times and different communities, there are multiple, different ways of engaging with antiquity, for sure. Rather, I want to explore current public, historical understanding of why or how classical antiquity can or should matter, and suggest that debates in this arena have depended on some profound losses in terms of self-understanding, losses that stem from trivializing the complexity of the past and its view of the future — as we look forward. If we do want to discuss the future of classics, it is essential to understand its pasts — please observe that plural — and how such pasts are worked into the present to imagine a future.

So can we imagine a nineteenth-century past in a more productive way than is currently so prevalent? Can we investigate with more self-conscious attentiveness how our own contemporary desires work to construct the nineteenth century we need?

I wish to open discussion (again) by asking whether the *excitement* of understanding the ancient world has disappeared. That is, have we lost the thrill and sense of deep significance that invested the nineteenth century's passionate engagement with the antiquity that grounded their values and imagination of the future? Does the loss of a privileged genealogical link with the classical past mean that classical antiquity can no longer have the significance it held in the nineteenth century? In some ways, the answer is bound to be in the affirmative: in general

23 Whitehead 1979, 39; Derrida 1978, 81.

24 Goldhill 2011, 125–152.

25 Koselleck 2004.

terms, classics no longer holds the place in the academy and in the popular imagination that it did hold in the nineteenth century; but the passion for why the past matters has not necessarily and wholly dissipated, though I do think that some of the dominant current forms of excitement reveal a worrying confusion, and, indeed, ignorance. There have been a set of recent public arguments about classical antiquity and its teaching in the future that culminated — at least for now, as I write — in a bruhaha in America and subsequently across Europe, about the Princeton Department of Classics, and specifically its willingness to allow some students to complete courses in classics without the ancient languages, and, further, about the claim attributed to Dan-el Padilla-Peralta, professor of Roman history at Princeton, that if classics cannot get its act together with regard to its chequered history concerning elitism, racism and imperialism — exclusionary privilege — then it would be better to 'burn it down'.[26] It is a rather depressing inevitability that the press through which this story has been disseminated, has exaggerated, twisted and distorted all sorts of aspects of the case and taken considerable advantage of the fact that Professor Padilla-Peralta is not only not white but also came to America as an undocumented immigrant.[27] The story prompted a lot of words about the future of classics — in the context of a self-promoting war over culture and its values — and I will take it as my case study for what follows. It will show how the lack of historical understanding dangerously distorts the future of classics.

Dan-el Padilla-Peralta is for sure not the only classicist involved with an attempt to ask classicists to look at the history of their discipline with a critical gaze, especially with regard to its contingent or endemic connections with the practices of social and political exclusion. Nor is Princeton the only department to engage in such debates. But the combination of the facts that Dan-el Padilla-Peralta is not white and that Princeton is Princeton, allowed the press to indulge its obsession with privilege, on the one hand, and race, on the other — a heady and toxic brew. The case became embroiled with wider arguments about race on campus, other members of the classics department, and its bitterness swung precipitously into the wider public media. Simple and obvious rejoinders were easily lost in the noise: how many departments of classics allowed courses in translation, how many great books courses did precisely the same, why was it useful in an American educational economy to attract student numbers, and to move towards higher technical achievements only in graduate school, how many classicists *did* graduate with excellent language skills, how many more could benefit from such a course and in

26 For a range of such arguments, see Culham and Edmunds 1989; Nussbaum 1997; 2010; Jenkins 2015; Hanink 2017; Zuckerberg 2018; Postclassicisms Collective 2020; Adler 2020; Spawforth 2023.
27 Pedilla Peralta 2015.

what ways? There are, of course, few universities in the world that have not had such discussions within their departments of classics.

Yet what is perhaps most striking for a discussion about the future of the discipline is how little focused attention was actually given to the history of the discipline. In particular, commentators on all sides studiously avoided how regular and how heated such discussions about the future of the importance of ancient Greece and Rome have been. Indeed, much as preservation of an inheritance and longing for a lost past are endemic to classicism, so too, it seems, are contestations of such ideology, contestations that are often violent in their extreme rhetoric and desire for change. I will focus shortly on the nineteenth century when the disciplinarization of the subject in its modern form was shaped, but first we should remember that the nineteenth century was certainly not the first moment of such vitriolic argument.

The violence of the Reformation in Europe has multiple vectors of causality, but one such vector was the rediscovery of ancient Greek sources for the Christian bible by western scholars. Erasmus was a key figure in this intellectual rediscovery.[28] His watchword — which became the banner of the reformers — was *ad fontes*: a biblical injunction in itself to return to the sources, the sources of truth, at one level, and, at another, the Greek sources of scripture. Learning Greek became an essential project of any serious reformation scholar, supported in the republic of letters by each other's efforts. The revelations of such a movement found a touchpaper in the first words of the Gospel of John: what did *Logos* mean? Erasmus retranslated the Gospels into Latin from the Greek text, and his changes to the Vulgate, the standard and much-loved version attributed to Jerome, caused shock and outrage. Instead of *in principio erat verbum*, he wrote *in principio erat sermo*. Perhaps even more shockingly, he could find no authoritative manuscript of Paul that included the one crucial sentence that was the proof text for the notion of the Trinity — the so-called Comma Johanneum (1 John 5:7), and therefore deleted it from his text. This change seemed to its opponents to threaten the whole establishment of church and state — to threaten the basis of personal belief and religious truth.[29] It is in such a fevered context that his religious opponents could insist that learning Greek was 'the fount of all evil' — to return *ad fontes* was in their eyes to open the 'fount' of sin. Indeed, to know Greek was declared 'a heresy'![30] That is, to study the language in which the Gospels were written would lead to eternal damnation. To study Greek would lead

28 Goldhill 2002, 14–59; Jardine 1993.

29 MacDonald 2016.

30 Rummel 1989, 132; Erasmus *Antibarbari CWE* 23: 32; *EE* 4: 400–411 [*Ep.* 1167].

you to burn in the fires of hell for ever. Martyrs indeed were burned at the stake for their philological commitments.[31] For self-preservation… burn it down!

The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns in seventeenth-century France did not result immediately in the sort of physical violence in which the Reformation was born. Yet it should not be forgotten that this *querelle* was not merely an aesthetic spat in the salons of Paris. Rather, it went to the heart of how the state was to be represented — how French cultural identity was to be understood. The figure around whom the *querelle* was articulated, after all, was Louis XIV. The moderns claimed that the triumphs and perfected rule of Louis and the church with its perfected religion surpassed everything in antiquity and thus a new language and new literature was needed. As Perrault famously wrote: *La docte antiquité dans toute sa durée/ A l'égal de nos jours ne fut point éclairée*, 'Learned antiquity in all its time was never enlightened to equal our days'.[32] Modernity claimed enlightenment for itself. What's more, France's new literary institutions would be under the control of the state and would speak the language of the state. The 'ancients' argued that the test of time, embodied in the status of the classics, was the proper route of evaluation. The very image of the state with an absolute monarch at its head was at stake, and, with it, the church's dominance over the narratives of the past. When Karl Marx wrote that 'the French Revolution was enacted in Roman dress', he was also marking that the *querelle* had a long afterlife, and that the rejection of the power of the monarchy in France inevitably turned to antiquity for its ideological authority — as the citizens cried 'burn it down'.

In recent public debates on the future of classics, it has become a determinative vector of the heated rhetoric that classics in the nineteenth century was complicit with racism, imperialism and elitism. It is not hard to demonstrate such points with detailed readings of nineteenth-century texts, nor hard indeed to show the consequences of such texts and of the learning that subtend them, although such detailed readings are surprisingly rare in the debates. Stereotypes are easier to bandy. I have had my go at uncovering the richness and complexity of such writing through the Protestant histories of the Jews; Charles Kingsley's racism; genealogical claims of classical authority; and at greatest length, the hundreds of novels following on from Bulwer Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii*.[33] I have argued too that classical Greece provided a model of political revolution that over the century was tempered and controlled by the increasing institutionalization and disciplinarization of the study

31 For the exemplary case of van Flekwyk, see Goldhill 2002, 31–32.

32 Perrault's poem *Le siècle de Louis le Grand*, read at the Academie Française, and then published in 1687.

33 Goldhill 2011, 153–244; 2016b; 2020a; 2020b; 2023.

of antiquity — though a promise of sexual revolution based on antiquity grew.[34] Greece, through its imagination of another world, offered to idealists and reformers a resource to conceptualize transformation, not conservatism. Here, too, is a source of the excitement with which classics was invested in the nineteenth century: it became a battleground of conceptualizing cultural and social transformation.

Yet what is often forgotten is the degree to which the place of classics in the curriculum and in the public imagination was *challenged*. Learning Greek was attacked as the epitome of useless knowledge in a century which adored the useful.[35] The place of classics in the curriculum should be expunged, cried the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Robert Lowe, Oxford educated classicist, because it is useless.[36] Henry Sidgwick, the famous reforming philosopher, who gave his name to the current Cambridge Humanities Campus, the Sidgwick Site, declared that the university should positively 'exclude Greek' from the University curriculum. William Sellar, the Oxford-educated professor of classics at St Andrews, chipped in 'No liberal mind will regret [its] abolition'.[37] Even Matthew Arnold, prophet of Hellenism, thought Greek should be removed from the curriculum, because it blocked access to education for so many. These are not marginal figures: a leading politician, leading public intellectuals, a professional classicist at the height of his career, all argue for the dismantling of classics as it is taught, studied and valued in Victorian society. Burn it down…

Classicists have been threatening the existence of their own field for centuries — not because they want the field to disappear but because they want it to *change*. Both Sidgwick and Sellar were passionate liberal educational reformers. And *transformation* is exactly what Padilla Peralta was encouraging and why he was both lionized and excoriated.[38] The point is at one level a simple one: although tradition often represents itself — masquerades — as stable, immutable, uncontroversial, there has in fact been a long history of often bitter, violent and society-changing argument about what the classical tradition means and what its status is, in education, culture, self-understanding. And so, for us now, too — rightly.

The claim of tradition — a commonplace in education as in religion — acts upon society to keep things as they are. Tradition is not a given, but always needs to be constructed, asserted, maintained — performed. It is a way of authoritatively locating oneself in the present by determining that such an authority, such a sense

34 Goldhill 2002.
35 Goldhill 2002, 178–245.
36 Goldhill 2002, 195–213.
37 Sidgwick 1867, 141; Sellar 1867.
38 See Padilla Peralta 2021.

of placement, comes from a historically privileged continuity: a line, an ancestry, a promise. Tradition not only presents the past as self-evident but brings with it a set of normative claims about value, status and belonging. Tradition is how cultural ideology writes its history.

Tradition becomes a matter of debate when *fitting in* has become a pressing issue; when rupture from the past demands attention and produces dissent; when cultural ideology begins to fracture. Then tradition becomes turbulent. A stimulus to conflict and a place for conflict, rather than a strut and stay of belonging. Dan-el Padilla Peralta's insistence on the need for change (and he is far from alone in this) is because simply to continue in the same way as in the past has become intolerable, because the established — traditional — privilege of education comes at too great, too *damaging* a cost to too many underprivileged members of society, to society as a whole. Classicists cannot claim simply to be curators of the heritage of the past — as if it were a straightforward business to declare what does count about the past and who, then, will be allowed entrance to the museum of antiquity, and at what cost, and who will be its gatekeepers.[39]

The professional discipline of classics can and *should* take a lead in this project of much needed transformation. But to make this transformation possible, a properly nuanced history of classics as a discipline is also needed and a properly nuanced history of classics as a discipline should make tradition anything but self-evident. In much of the current discussion of the future of classics, the nineteenth century has emerged in a naïve, blanched image, an oversimplified negative picture that fits the political case to be made. The complexity of how the nineteenth century explored the value of the past for its contemporary politics is replaced by the self-serving and smugly certain assertion of our modern transcendent difference.

Antiquity has changed and still is changing; the study of antiquity has changed and is still changing; how we understand the relation between antiquity and the study of antiquity has changed and is still changing. If we do want to influence the future of classics it does require us to understand the multiple and changing pasts that make up classics as a tradition of scholarship, its complexity, conflicts and development. We need to understand how antiquity imagined its future. To oversimplify the nineteenth century is to project a self-serving image of the past, which can only oversimplify our own investments and engagements in the present. The self-critique and self-awareness I am advocating requires a certain humbleness, on the one hand — a humbleness that recognizes that we too are likely to appear the mistaken forefathers of a new understanding in the future. It should stop us being too self-righteous. At least *ideally* it should. On the other hand, it is an intellectual demand

39 On the history of the term heritage, see Swenson 2013.

that we acknowledge the need to comprehend the *situatedness* of scholars in the past and today, as best we can: such self-critique is the beginning of understanding others.[40] How we write our own past can also reveal our failings and misapprehensions as well as our triumphant transcendence of the errors of the past. If we, as classicists, want to get the past as right as we can — and I am happy with this sentence as an opening salvo; of course 'right for whom?', 'right how?', and so forth remain insistent questions — nonetheless if we do think it is important to get the past of antiquity as right as possible, we have the same duty to get the more immediate pasts as right as possible too. That way we might approach the future in a more informed and less shrill, self-serving and un-self-aware manner — that recognizes how the future of classics has repeatedly been and must remain an unending and contentious question.

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40 For the term situatedness see Postclassicisms Collective 2020, 144–160.

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