Preface

The apprehension lurking behind the present volume's title goes back many decades; in the meantime classical humanities have been alive enough to keep prompting and making worthwhile the question of their continuing value both as institutional discipline and cultural player. At their bluntest, doubts are often formulated in terms of the perceived deadness of ancient Greek and Latin; and, as a rule, the obituarists do not bother to make subtle distinctions between dead and useless. In mid-nineteenth century England when knowledge of the classical languages, especially Greek, was figured as a status and class marker, a badge of cultural identity, a cardinal issue in pedagogy and educational reform, even a banner of political activism and a talisman against barbarism, a Right Honourable gentleman could wax eloquent on the irrelevance of knowing that the word for liver is *iecur* in Latin and ἦπαρ in Greek as against the usefulness of being able to locate the organ and of being savvy about the ways to keep it in healthy condition.

Of course, usefulness, as commonly understood, is a slippery terrain on which to fight in defence of classics, since utilitarians will be quick to occupy the practical high ground; and anecdotal as it may sound the one about the liver, the Right Honourable gentleman's disdainful tone back then seemed to chime with changing perceptions of educational values and goals amid the leaps and bounds of natural sciences and the vocational signals coming from rapid industrialization. Under the changing circumstances only eccentrics could airily claim that mastery of the grammatical rigours of Greek and Latin was a shortcut to intellectual and moral superiority, but then even Matthew Arnold's clarification that it is not vocabulary and grammar but getting acquainted with the substance of classical authors that helps us know ourselves and the world did not sound compelling enough to those eager to champion a scientific rather than a literary education.

Now, it has to be admitted that holistic and noble claims about the value of classical humanities often seem to make a virtue of vagueness and with the chronicle of iconoclasm enriched by ever new chapters over the recent decades such claims are apt to be seen as so much metaphysics in some quarters today. Scrambling for new defence positions classicists latched on to the idea of 'critical thinking' or 'mental discipline' as the peculiar bestowal of a humanistic education only to be apprised of experiments showing that learning stenography or Korean may be equally or more effective for this purpose — which goes to show, among other things, that in their casting about for more pragmatic and less high-flown arguments classicists risk selling themselves short.

One might be forgiven for thinking that we have had our fill of theoretical expositions on the relative merits of classics and other disciplines; in any case,

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nothing was further from the mind of the Athens conference organisers than yet another round of apologetics for the classical humanities, and little in the way of *pro domo sua* pronouncements is to be found in the papers collected here. The best part of the conference's purpose will have been fulfilled if the picture emerging from the contributions is that of a confident discipline which conducts its business in full awareness of the ever changing epistemological, social and cultural contexts while also interrogating the conceptual categories under which it pursues the study of the ancient material and pondering its relevance to various issues of contemporary interest; and if a number of new perspectives may be put down to needs generated by external pressures, it will, I think, be obvious that much that is new, stimulating and fascinating is the result of *intra muros* developments.

Etched on my memory from my postgraduate days in the Cambridge of the early 80's is a metaphor deployed by Tony Woodman and David West in the epilogue of a slim collective volume under the title *Quality and Pleasure in Latin Poetry* published in 1974. Referring to the explosion of theories in the twentieth century and their impact on Latin scholarship, they wax epicolyrical: 'We have heard the rumblings of the great critical storms of the century, and the waves have beaten on our shores. But have they reshaped the coastline?' In the light of hindsight, what the two classical scholars sensed back then was no more than a fresh breeze from the quarters of New Criticism; and little did they know that more was on the way from the Aeolian recesses of Theory. *venti, velut agmine facto, qua data porta, ruunt et omnia turbine perflant*: structuralism with its surplus of codes, semiotic officiations, boas deconstructors, anthropological, feminist and postcolonial lucubrations, gender studies, New Historicisms, philosophies of materialism, ever expanding contextualisations, sprawling re-contextualisations and intriguing versions of 'paradoxical' humanities, or post-humanities, where the human subject is being resolutely de-centred.

Beyond what one might see as undertheorised tame formalism as against an overtheorised surrender to the abstractions of Theory, the new reality is one of radically changing perceptions, perspectives and agendas which work to re-evaluate notions and ideas about what constitutes the classic, about the classical tradition and its European-Western exclusivities, and especially about the crucial question of value which is inextricably bound up with our discipline's durability, in other words with the future of the classical past both at the institutional level and within the broader cultural sphere.

The three days of the conference have reflected some, if not all, of the re-orientations I am referring to, although it seems to me that no tectonic movement considerably high on the Richter scale was registered, simply because the *causa efficiens* eventually declined our invitation. It is, I believe, a good thing that, in dealing with such important issues as the strategic reasoning, the dissolution of the unitary self into ontological fragmented beings, the prevailing educational utilitarianism or

the medical ethics, several papers unfolded a subtle argument oriented towards the future without forfeiting the idea of the classical past's persistent exemplarity. Intelligently reckoned with, the issue of such exemplarity, even if you happen to disagree with its perceived effects, imparts to the discourses of classical scholarship an interest all of their own.

It is also a good thing to hear, as we have heard, that the classical tradition can be much more than the glorified foundation of a western identity and can function as a catalyst for critical and pluralist reflection not only on differences but also on the universals arguably shared by other major civilisations and traditions of thought. It is also good for our intellectual vigilance to be reminded, as we have been reminded, that our classical texts are versatile enough to foreshadow or reflect our modern concerns and anxieties while holding the promise that, subjected to ever new readings, they will continue to do so in the future — a future which, as a couple of papers have reassured us, will see the *grande dame* of classical scholarship marching hand in hand with the technology savvy towards new horizons and experiences.

To sustain the sailing metaphor: hazards may be lurking along the re-shaped coastline, from the neglect of a solid classical training, to the sloppy or cavalier treatment of our textual material (the reverse of the slow reading required by a paper) or to a fundamentalist relativism driven by ideological obsessions. Yet I am confident that on balance our classical studies stand to gain a future which in many respects will be more rich, more inclusive, more exciting, more connected and interactive with other fields of knowledge and research.

Antiquity is (as we know and have heard) both familiar and alien, and its fascination is that while it commands a certain amount of pious genuflections before a demonstrably formative past it also has a knack for constantly and refreshingly contributing to our modernity and its evolving conceptual mechanisms; and because it involves its students in narratives of mandatory diachrony, it is also unique in shaping an intellect capable of better understanding the constructedness and historicity of cultural phenomena. Beyond the celebrations of Antiquity's classical value, it is, I think, its heuristic cultural value that seems more likely to ensure what we have been musing upon during the conference: the future of its past.

On behalf of the organisers I would like to express warm thanks to all those who worked with unfailing devotion for the best possible result in preparing our conference: to the Board of Directors of the Kostas and Eleni Ourani Foundation, the Secretary General of the Academy of Athens, Prof. Christos Zerefos, the Director of the Centre for the study of Greek and Latin Antiquity, Academy of Athens, Prof. Thanassis Stefanis and the Centre's researchers.

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