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Ancient and Modern: A Critical Reflection*

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I WANT TO BEGIN BY EXPRESSING MY GRATITUDE TO YOU AND TO ALL OF OUR fellow SCS members for the opportunity to serve the Society as president over the past year. One of the final duties of this office is to give an address at the annual meeting, and in doing so, I am all too conscious of the many great scholars who have preceded me. I do not pretend that I can match them in learning or eloquence, but I can promise you one thing, and that is to give what may not be the best presidential address on record, but what I hope will be the shortest—if not ever, then at least in recent memory.

The brevity of my remarks will be appropriate to my theme, in two ways. First, my point is very simple and straightforward, as you will see. Second, these remarks complement the presidential panel organized this year at the SCS annual meeting. Its title was “Global Classics,” and it had to do with the spatial dimension, with the various ways our field is practiced throughout the world. The complementary focus and theme of this presidential address is time. We all know that time is commonly divided into two very broad periods, the “ancient” and the “modern”; but how does this division of time structure, potentiate, and limit our work? Above all, does it continue to serve our purposes as well today as it did when it was first articulated?

That last question may seem puzzling. The dichotomy between “ancient” and “modern” is so familiar that it seems to involve natural categories that never had to be first articulated. But in fact, however familiar these categories had been previously, they were defined in two very specific ways in the period when our discipline was given its characteristic shape, at the end of

* This is a very lightly revised version of the presidential address as it was delivered.

the eighteenth century; and even if both these definitions have been beneficial to our field, there are ways in which they have been so. I believe that a major anniversary like the one we are celebrating is an excellent occasion for revisiting and reexamining the assumptions on which our discipline is based.

The first definition I want to mention is from Friedrich Schiller's foundational essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," which first appeared in 1795.¹ In this essay, Schiller posits the existence of one kind of literature that offers a faithful and uncomplicated picture of nature, which he calls the naïve, and a second kind that offers not an objective imitation but an author's subjective ideas about the world that his work represents; and this he calls the sentimental. Schiller further identifies the naïve mode as characteristic of ancient literature, and the sentimental as characteristically modern. In making this distinction, a certain esteem is reserved for the naïve, ancient literature precisely because it is, *ex hypothesi*, such a faithful reflection of nature, so simple and direct as to seem almost unmediated. Modern, sentimental literature, in contrast, by virtue of its subjectivity, necessarily offers a less faithful reflection of nature, one that is not simple, is quite indirect, and is anything but unmediated. Schiller offers with this distinction an account of why he thinks classical literature is and always will be classical, something that modern literature can never be. On the other hand, it is obvious already in Schiller's essay, and still more so in the work of his many followers, that this distinction does more justice to modernity than to antiquity. If I were to create a poll and ask how many agree that the really distinctive and valuable thing about classical literature is that it simply lacks any significant element of authorial perspective and that it consequently presents an image of nature that is in no way distorted, I suspect that a substantial number of classicists would find it hard to endorse such an idea.

Now, someone might object that Schiller is talking specifically about literature, and not about antiquity as a whole; but, as I have hinted, Schiller's followers were quick to develop the implications of his position. The Marxist critic Georg Lukács in his essay *Epic and Novel* took Schiller's concept of faithful representation so seriously as to argue that lived experience in the Bronze Age was just like the naïve depiction that we see in Homer, even to the extent that epistemic conditions in those times were like those that we see in archaic epic—that living in those times was like living in an epic poem.²

¹ It appeared with the German title *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*. For an English translation see Schiller 1966.

² See the third chapter in Lukács 1916 work, *The Theory of the Novel*, titled "The Epic and the Novel" in the 1971 edition.

We see traces of the same basic idea in the *Geistesgeschichtlich* approach of the 20th-century classicist Bruno Snell and, to some extent, in the comparatist Erich Auerbach's influential work on *Mimesis*.³ And by the same token, Lukács argued, the epistemic condition of modernity is best represented by the novel. Mikhail Bakhtin made a similar argument when he distinguished the authoritative, single-voiced, monologic world of the ancient epic from the decentralized world of dialogical polyglossia that he considers the great subject of the modern novel.⁴ Again, Bakhtin is interested in more than the epic and the novel as literary genres. He treats them as evidence of human cognitive history.

To be clear, I personally have found Bakhtin's ideas powerful and liberating in my own work. The same is true of Schiller, Lukács, other thinkers in this tradition. Nevertheless, as a philologist, I know that Homer used a poetic language, a *Kunstssprache*, that no one spoke, but was a hybrid form that drew upon a number of different Greek dialects; and I do not believe that Homeric poetry was mainly the product of an individual poetic genius. For these reasons, I have had to ask myself what to make of a perspective that defines this poetry as monologic and that contrasts it with the polyphony of the single-authored modern novel.

After some brooding, I eventually came to realize what should have been obvious. The interest of these thinkers is not in antiquity, at all. What all of them are trying to do is to account, not for classical antiquity, but for what they believe to be the very different conditions—aesthetic, discursive, and even cognitive conditions—that characterize the modern world of which they consider themselves to be a part. For this reason, their argument and argumentative strategy are extremely simple, or even simplistic, literally to the point of fallacy. This is not meant as a value judgment but as an acknowledgment that they faced a difficult problem. They either did not know how to describe the condition of the modern, which they regarded as unprecedented, complex, and very difficult to comprehend; or, perhaps, they did not want to define it more straightforwardly because they wanted to stress what they saw as its novel, complex, difficult nature; and so they preferred to represent it in the terms that I have described. Either way, their strategy is to suggest what the *modern* might be in contrast to something else that is opposite to it; and if the modern is new, complex, obscured by various subjectivities, and hard to describe, its nature is most conveniently outlined in contrast to something

³ See Auerbach 1943.

⁴ See Bakhtin 1981.

that is simple, objective, and easy to describe because it had long since held a well-defined place in aesthetic and intellectual history. That opposite thing is antiquity, which in definitions of the modern plays the discursive role of standing for everything that the modern is not, allowing one to suggest what the modern might be, without actually having to define it.

While a professional classicist might find what I am saying more or less correct, he or she might also think it is largely beside the point. Arguments like these, which may be of interest to those who study the history of literary and cultural theory, they might say, have little to do with the way in which Classics is defined as an academic discipline. But anyone who did say this would be quite wrong. That is because Schiller and other German idealist thinkers were part of the same cultural movement that first gave recognizable form to the discipline of Classical Studies as we know it. They were contemporaries of Friedrich Creuzer, Friedrich August Wolf, Wolf's pupil August Boeck, and others who are remembered today as the founders of our discipline. It should be noted that these founders did not all agree with each other in every particular. They argued about whether our discipline is in essence more closely tied to literature or to history, to humanistic or scientific modes of inquiry, and they even argued about whether its practitioners should be called philologists, classicists, or scientists of antiquity. They agreed, however, in drawing on several specific concepts to define antiquity in a very particular way. All of them put a very high value, for instance, on the unity of classical civilization. They did so in part to emphasize the need to expand Classical Studies beyond a narrowly defined literary canon to include all aspects of the ancient world. But they insisted on this unity to an unusual degree. Every aspect of ancient Greek and Roman civilization, they argued, was related to every other aspect in a way that they thought simply untrue of other historical periods, and that could never be true of our own, radically heterogeneous modern world. They believed this, mind you, of a field that they knew covered about fifteen hundred years of human experience over the entire Mediterranean basin, and one in which just two of the many peoples who lived there were deemed to be of real importance for their interests. In fact, the civilizations of Greece and Rome alone were explicitly defined as having a unity and a coherence superior to that of any civilization before or since, something that was unique in human experience. This unified, highly coherent period, of which every morsel apparently stands in something like a fractal or Anaxagorean relationship to the whole, is the twin of Schiller's simple, organically unified, objective world of naïve literature, and is everything that his complex, disunified, subjectively distorted modern world is not. What that means is that the founders of our discipline also constructed our object of study as something that is the op-

posite of the modern world, and as something that possessed characteristics different from those that any other period of human existence has ever known.

I submit that this is a very strange thing to do. I don't believe that it could have happened if it had been attempted in a different time and place by people different from German idealist thinkers. But it did happen, and as we all know, the influence of their definition of classical antiquity has been profound. It has certainly been profound within our own field. Many of their ideas inform basic tools of research and instruction that we still use today. In fact, it does not matter how many or how few of us still actively endorse their definition of classical antiquity in any literal sense. The reality is that they defined our field differently from every other one in the modern academy, and we live out their definition in our daily working lives. In high-level organization, we are orthogonal to every other discipline that can be named. If you imagine a grid on which the vertical axis is defined by time, with the present at the top, and the horizontal axis is defined by subject areas, with the humanities at one end and the sciences at the other, then all the departments, with their names ranged along the top, would look something like geologists taking a collection of core samples. Each team would find a lot of activity up at the top, near the present, representing courses and research projects in modern literature, modern history, and so forth, and for the most part, they would find less and less activity as the sampling device reached back into earlier, more remote time. What they would not have, by and large, would be very many lateral connections between different disciplines. Of course, these do exist, but it is the lament of every university administrator that it is so difficult to create interdisciplinary, which is to say interdepartmental, teaching and research initiatives. The disciplines, they say, keep us shut off from one another; the preferred bureaucratic metaphor is to speak of "silos," not "core samples," as if we were not investigating anything but just being kept in storage for the winter.

There are programs of various sorts that are not defined primarily by a single subject area, but by time, like Renaissance Studies or Medieval Studies; but these programs are not usually represented by departments. By and large, Classics departments are the only ones that cut across (in principle) all of the disciplinary subject areas, while confining the majority of their teaching and research not to the present, but to the fairly remote past.

There are two sides to this coin, as well. On one side, we all have to thank our founders for constituting our discipline as one that deserved departmental status, because if we didn't have that in a large number of institutions, I wonder whether we would have survived this long. On the other side, it is not entirely satisfactory that we have outlived the rationale on which our discipline

is based. That is true both because, in my opinion, it is not a good thing for a discipline to justify its existence on principles that most of its practitioners would not care to defend; and also because a significant number of colleagues in other disciplines understandably expect us to defend these principles, even if they are amazed that anyone would. To speak only for myself, I am not happy when I find that some of my colleagues in other disciplines think I believe more or less the same things about the ancient world as the German idealists did, give or take a few recently discovered papyri. This is a situation that we really ought to address.

The question, of course, is how.

It is now high time for us to attempt a redefinition of our field. One cannot easily know what practical changes would result from this, but if I were going to play some part in a planning committee, I would urge the following point: to make any progress, the oh-so-familiar distinction between “ancient” and “modern,” which is the subject of my talk, has to be dismantled.

I am aware that this must sound a bit radical. How could we ever do without these two useful terms, which, as I admitted before, seem like natural categories, not intellectual constructs? And yet I hope I have convinced you that they are intellectual constructs and that the specific configuration given to them by the founders of our discipline is not only artificial, but actually untenable. That said, I admit that for a relatively small group of scholars with quite specific interests to do away with such a widespread attitude about past and present, would be a kind of miracle. One thing that we might successfully do, though, would be to defamiliarize the concepts of ancient and modern by reapplying them in unfamiliar, but reasonable ways. Along these lines, I have occasionally argued that the great urban centers of antiquity, like Alexandria, Rome, Antioch, and Constantinople, were fully as modern as cities like London, Paris, or Amsterdam in what we now call the Early Modern Period, and that, as such, they were, in fact, the first centers of modernism, over a thousand years before those other places. When this point is made, it does not take long before the burden of proof shifts to the doubters. Typically, among intellectual historians, modernism is defined symptomatically, by the presence of certain social and demographic realities, like population density, a large monetized economy, a reasonably high rate of literacy, substantial ethnic diversity, and so on. Specific forms of cultural production, such as—and this should come as no surprise—novelistic literature, also come into play. Therefore, if it can be shown, as it easily can, that most or all of these symptoms were present in the great cities of antiquity, then only three inferences can be drawn. One is that the symptoms are actually meaningless because ancient cities cannot have been modern in the fullest sense, for reasons that we cannot explain.

That is a position that I would be glad to have any debating opponent try to defend. A second position also would hold that the symptoms are meaningless and that early modern cities were not really modern, after all, but were still somehow ancient, or at least premodern, and that true modernism did not come into being until some time after Schiller and Wolf. This is a position that I would be happy to discuss, and one that eventually would have to be discussed by all of us. But the third inference would be that the symptoms are meaningful, and that ancient cities actually were modern, and this is the position that I would most like to defend. Its corollary, that only ancient *cities* were modern, but most of the *non-urban* areas of antiquity remained ancient, is also one that I would accept, with the proviso that we can identify many pockets “antiquity,” thus defined, in the so-called “modern” world, as well. I would accept this corollary because I object to “ancient” and “modern” as describing a characteristic state of mind, *mentalité*, *Weltanschauung*, or world view representing entire periods of time.

In other words, if we wanted to redefine the words “ancient” and “modern” as terms of reference among intellectual historians, we should begin by reconsidering whether the ancients, or some of them, were in fact already modern, and whether even some of our contemporaries are not, in effect, ancients. To do so, I believe, would further expose the unintended consequences of using these words without reflection. Above all, they really should not be used, explicitly or implicitly, as terms of praise or blame.⁵ In any case, my suggestion is just one way of approaching the problem. There may be other ways, compatible or incompatible with this one, that would be more or less effective. In some sense, I am not too concerned exactly how we go about it. I am concerned about continuing to allow a distinction that seems to be based on common sense, but that is in fact highly tendentious, to define our field *unexamined*. And here I think I am on very traditional ground. The unexamined life, one of our most revered intellectual heroes and exemplars said, is not worth living. Our field and our professional association have faced many challenges over the last one hundred and fifty years, and challenges never stop, they just take different forms. An anniversary like this one is the perfect occasion for

⁵ Shortly after the end of the plenary session, Joy Connolly privately shared with me a number of trenchant observations, the most important of which is that continuing to think within the ancient-modern dichotomy while simply shifting the frame of reference from chronological to social and cultural issues would entail problems of its own. I fully agree with her and can only say that my proposal is intended to start a discussion, not to conclude it. If the discussion is worth having, then it ought not to be possible to know precisely where it will lead.

revisiting the assumptions on which our field is based, if only to reaffirm them; but even better if we find that we can articulate a new rationale for our followers to revise after another hundred and fifty years.

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