PART III

Envoi
This essay was delivered as an envoi to the conference. As a talk it was meant to dispatch the audience: to liberate them from the spell cast by the conference and send them back into the world, free to assess and broadcast its achievement. In its published state the talk loses this performative quality. But even a published envoi, I hope, retains some of the privileges of paratextuality.

I will not comment on the papers systematically, but rather note some patterns. None of the classicists, it seems to me, took up Charles Martindale’s challenge in its most radical form, as thrown down in Redeeming the Text: namely, to demonstrate the inextricability of a classical text from a present-tense reading situation. This challenge provided the original intellectual framework for this conference. Martindale wanted his colleagues to read a classical text through a modern one. Richard Thomas does this in his wonderful paper on Bob Dylan and Virgil, bringing to life “the pathos of Vergil’s poetry,” in the phrase of the editors of this volume, “through the dynamic recontextualization in modern song.” But no one quite undertook what Martindale himself did in the paper he delivered at this conference, where he placed Ovid and Dryden in a symmetrical and mutually creative relation. A classical text, for Martindale, is never inert. Only when academic classicists acknowledge that texts are events, says Martindale, that texts move, will the field begin finally to practice a modern, paradoxical criticism willing to question the historicist dogma of the past’s independence from the present.

This plea was not directed at medieval or Renaissance scholars, who habitually read the classics backwards. They know well that classical status was conferred on the ancient texts by the Renaissance. And in fact at the conference it was the specialists in Renaissance literature who dramatized the inseparability of the classics from their reception by forcing, as Martindale had, ancient authors and modern authors into equilibrium. Among the published papers I note Giuseppe Mazzotta’s on Petrarch and Homer,
and Gordon Braden’s on Shakespeare and Ovid. Mazzotta, by focusing on the poet who initiated the modern project of philological recovery of the classics, actually comes close to suggesting that the ancient texts are invisible to us except through the screen of their Renaissance readings.

In *Latin Poetry and the Judgment of Taste* (2005), Martindale shifted to a more straightforward, non-ironic criticism interested basically in assigning value to literary texts. But this book targeted the same opponent that the first one had: the historicist who attempts to reconstruct the original sense of a text, in its original context. Historicism, a state of mind that emerged in the late eighteenth century in the writings of Goethe and Herder, is the belief that historical statements and acts were governed by conditions below the surface of experience, perhaps invisible to historical actors; that those conditions are permanently changing; and that historical performances cannot be assessed by timeless norms but only on their own terms. Historicism also generated a complementary insight that ended up destabilizing the project of historical reconstruction: if every historical period is guided by invisible but dynamic forces, then so too is the present. Historicism implies that our own judgments, including our assessments of the past, are not free. The past is fixed but the present is a moving platform, and so our perspective on the past, in ways that we cannot grasp from within that perspective, is always shifting. Empiricism, a set of impersonal, collectively enforced protocols for identifying and weighing historical facts, can partially correct for the shifting perspective. But literary meaning is not a quantum readily susceptible to empirical reconstruction, and so literary texts will always elude the historicist project. All Martindale is asking is that his colleagues embrace this reality. He wants them to recognize the excess of literariness that escapes empirical reconstruction, and so practice an anachronistic or Whiggish literary criticism, without apologies. As Margreta de Grazia put it in a recent essay that tracks the development of the chronological approach to the past in the writings of the philologists and historians of the Renaissance, anachronism “is the source of the critic’s power.”

This discussion could be conducted over any corpus of texts, not only classical texts; and as a matter of fact it has been. One has the sense of having heard the whole debate already. The project of an aesthetics of reception was theorized in the 1960s and 1970s by participants in the German study group *Poetik und Hermeneutik*. American literary scholars were intensely engaged with the concept of reception in the 1980s. Since

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1 “Anachronism.” Here de Grazia adapts a formula of Thomas M. Greene.
1990 the reception–aesthetics or hermeneuticist approach has not been conspicuous in the study of postclassical literature, not because it has been discredited but because it has been internalized. Martindale’s challenge to classicists strikes an outsider as belated, though not unwelcome. It compels us to think through the problem again.

It seems clearer now that the debate is a non-debate, because each side – empiricist and hermeneuticist – creates and depends upon the other. Martindale and other hermeneuticists see empiricism as an over-rationalization of reading. Empiricism, in this view, was a well-intended corrective, inspired by the Enlightenment’s critiques of religious superstition or the mystification of political authority, but misapplied to literary texts. Martindale wants to remystify reading by inviting the reader to move freely within a web of texts, a web only loosely tethered to reality outside texts. He believes that empiricism should be succeeded by an emancipated criticism. Empiricism corrected the critical abuses of medieval and Renaissance readers of the classics. But in turn it generated the appetite for a new critical freedom. Criticism, therefore, both precedes and follows empiricism. De Grazia’s “story of anachronism” makes that clear. Readers were wrenching texts out of their original contexts – if it even occurred to them that texts had an original context – and making sense of them exactly as they pleased long before anyone suggested that the past, objectively reconstructed, ought to impose limits on present-day interpretations. The history of modern reading does not simply swing back and forth between these two modes. Rather, it is a cumulative tradition whereby each mode, critical and historicist, continually reacts and adapts to the other.

Historicism is like a mask placed over criticism, designed to block some meanings and reveal others. Moses Finley’s World of Odysseus, for example, showed how Homer’s text was structured by the sociological and economic realities of aristocracy, slavery, kinship systems, land use, and so forth. Finley himself only ever presented himself as an historian prepared to treat Homer as a reliable primary source. But his study was, of course, also an interpretation of the literary text that served as a counterweight to the neo-humanistic readings, on the ascendant after World War II, that sought universal truths in Homer. The humanistic or anachronistic approach, because it was Finley’s hidden target, was therefore written into Finley’s historicism. His disciplining of the critics was only a higher form of criticism. Finley’s materialist reading of the Odyssey, meanwhile, is now affixed so firmly to the text that all future readings have to deal with it one way or another. Criticism reacts by seeking out what historicism missed, and vice versa. The two modes in the end contain one another.
That is just how a classicist, committed to the project of situating texts in time with the instruments of philology and historical imagination, might respond to Martindale: “I am already practicing criticism. Historicism entails a radical subtraction from the totality of possible readings. The idea of reading as an objective assignation of meaning guided by an empirical reconstruction of the past is in fact one of the more abstract and fanciful contrivances of modernity.” Martindale would have to agree, and then concede that he is after all only asking classicists to own up to what they are doing; to concede that they have been practicing criticism all along. And at that point the debate seems to run out of steam.

I am more interested in another question. It is striking to me that a concept of the classics per se plays no role in the debate about reception. Both sides disavow any investment in a concept of the classics. If anything, each side accuses the other of harboring a secret allegiance to a normative canon. Martindale is basically saying that classical texts are just like any others, only older. Antiquity is just one form of alienness. All texts are “antique” in one way or another. He suggests that only pious respect for the integrity of the classic texts discourages classicists from subjecting those texts to a dynamic, anachronizing criticism. The classicists might respond that Martindale’s open-ended, historically insouciant interpretations are only made possible by canonization. Here they are supported by Moshe Halbertal, who argued in People of the Book that canonicity liberates texts from historical context, thus making them available for free interpretation. The traditional classicist, then, is accusing Martindale not of disrespecting the canonical texts, but rather of taking advantage of their canonicity.

In this light it is easier to explain Martindale’s return to basic principles of aesthetic judgment. By appealing to an ahistorical concept of judgment, he naturalizes his interpretations. In this way he responds to the classicists who suspect him of a hidden complicity with a mystified classical canon. Few will be convinced by this argument. Joseph Farrell wondered at the conference whether Martindale’s critical exertions were not after all impelled by a lingering Hellenophilia, a surrender to a mere effect generated by high modernist purism.

On the basis of this volume, meanwhile, a small but significant sample, it would appear that classicists’ reflexive response to Martindale’s challenge is to adopt a meta-critical standpoint. Instead of re-reading the classics by way of the moderns, the classicists contributing to this volume, James Zetzel, Joseph Farrell, Robert Kaster, Richard Tarrant, Emily Wilson, and Richard Thomas, produced case studies in historical reception. These remarkable papers project a range of possible disciplinary futures for Classics:
sociologies, politics, and cultural histories of reading. Yet this is not what Martindale intended. In these papers, subtle and erudite as they are, the literariness of ancient texts is dealt with only at one degree of remove. The ones who engaged directly with Virgil and the rest are characters inside the scholarly narratives offered by these papers. Critical engagement with literature here is not so much the performance of historical study as its object.

No one could object if more classicists, following the lead of the authors in this volume, were to occupy themselves with histories of reading and histories of Latin and Greek pedagogy and curricula in modern societies. The project of reconstructing and purifying the ancient literary texts was central to the self-understanding of early modern European culture (Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities*). Philology produced a body of works with normative authority that served as a reassuring cover for the truly dynamic aspects of European modernity, the innovations that broke with the ancient world once and for all: the printing press, the discovery of the new world, the stock market. A study of Classics as a pedagogical program would demystify the classics, revealing the canonical texts as modern contrivances, artificially isolated from a vast, lost world of spoken Latin (Françoise Waquet, *Le latin, ou l’empire d’un signe*, 1999). The survival of the classics into the twentieth century, now prepared for mass consumption not through philological castigation of the texts but through translation into modern languages, reveals the range of roles they play. The classics might be understood as a compensation for the overwhelming sense of the irrelevance of art and poetry in modern society. The classics might equally be understood as an instrument of power, functioning especially in unstable times, such as the early twentieth century, as guarantors of permanent value (Egidius Schmalzriedt, *Inhumane Klassik*). The classics always entail some rappel à l’ordre. Or perhaps the classics are no more than places of stillness, *loca amoea*, embedded within the chaos of modern discourse: the classics – to extend and radicalize Ernst Robert Curtius (*Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*) – not just as vehicles for *topoi*, but themselves *topoi*. One can easily imagine the study of ancient literature taking up the questions of text-types (Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*). Questions about reading habits, the materiality of the text, and the circulation of texts in antiquity have already been amply addressed by classicists.

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2 See Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext*, pp. 5–6, here following John Hollander on allusions as echoes or ‘images’ of text. These metaphors suggest that intertextuality involves a stilling of language.

3 See for example Cavallo et al. (eds.), *Lo Spazio letterario di Roma antica*.
In their most radical forms these approaches fall under the rubric of “cultural studies.” Cultural studies simply means a loss of confidence in the frame around the text. The literary work as the atomic unit of interpretation gives way to an unbounded textuality. Language-use is understood as a formless flow that occasionally forms eddies of literariness but quickly breaks up again. Once literariness itself is destabilized, the sheltered status of the classical canon will be threatened.

Professional academic classicists who don’t finally wish to tear down the fence that protects the classics tend to lay low by bracketing the whole question of normativity. They will say, and this is a safe thing to say, that the label “Classics” is just shorthand for ancient Greek and Roman literature, which is studied in a separate academic department because the difficult languages call for special treatment. They might predict that to abandon the label and open the gates to cultural studies will encourage a slipshod approach to philology. “Classics,” they are saying, is just a warning label: “Caution, don’t try this at home.” Whereas Martindale is saying that these texts deserve the label “classic” because they are good, or beautiful. They became classics because many readers over a long period of time found them to be good. Good modern poems, Martindale implies, will also one day be classics.

Difficulty and remoteness on the one hand, timeless literary merit on the other. Are these really robust concepts of the classics? It is remarkable that few classicists any more are prepared to defend the exceptionality of the classics not because they are remote, and not because they are good, but because they are true, and moreover true in a different way than modern works are true.

It is not such a strange idea. The modern work of art or literature expects it of the older work. For doesn’t the modern poem almost by definition consider itself to be “true in a different way”? To be modern is not to dismiss the classics as false or overrated, but to see them as paths to truth that can no longer be retraced. To be modern is nothing other than to insist upon one’s own alienation from the classics. The modern is the one who no longer possesses the classics, but only studies them. There can be no vivid sense of modernity without a correspondingly vivid sense of a lost textual home that moderns have learned to live far away from.

But the modern regrets or celebrates a lost intimacy not only with ancient texts but also with the gods that were the subject matter of the ancient texts. Virgil and Ovid were not intimate with the gods, but they were intimate with Homer, who was. At any rate Homer’s text was intimate with the muffled voices, bardic, oracular, or proverbial, through which the
gods spoke. The classics were closer in time to non-time. The threshold of historical memory was not so distant. The gap between the preliterate era and the classical author is measured in hundreds of years, not thousands. It is not simply a matter of the earliness of the classical text, its relative non-belatedness. To be classical really means to have written under different conditions. It means to have written before fictionality and non-referentiality became the criteria of the literary text. Ancient literary texts have non-literary or pre-literary functions inscribed inside them: they archive prayer, charm, riddle, panegyric, proclamation, treatise, catalogue, saga, and myth. The tension between the magical and the literary animates classical literary texts; it becomes the content of those texts. That is true about post-medieval texts as well, perhaps of all literature. Yet the classical literary text is different. Whereas the modern literary text defines itself as the text that declines to refer, the classical text preserves some ambiguity about its possible capacity to refer to the gods. The classical literary text is evasive about its respect for taboos. Such writing always writes over some forbidden utterance. It remembers the origins of poetry as an assertion of one view of things – for example, the immortality of the gods – over an alternative view – for example, the scandalous rumor that the gods are mortal. For Friedrich Kittler, the very thesis of the immortality of the gods was launched by writing. The inscription attempted to defeat the scandalous utterance by revealing it to be mere utterance, contingent and unstable. Writing began as a prohibition against saying: it repudiated as a lie the thesis that “the gods are mortal.” Kittler invokes Paul’s Letter to Titus in which he asserted that Cretans are liars and thus not to be trusted when they denied the true teachings, in particular (at least in Kittler’s reading) the immortality of Christ. He also invokes Ovid, who could not deny the immortality of the gods because of his imperial patrons. The classical era of literature is perhaps no more and no less than the period of the taboo on speaking the death of the gods.

The category “classics” names the idea that literature once communicated with the gods. This idea is contained within the ancient concept of hermeneutics. In his dialogue Ion, Plato described the poets as interpreters of the gods. Martindale, by contrast, following Hans-Georg Gadamer, takes conversation as the model of the hermeneutic engagement, a shuttling back and forth between reader and text that alters both. This is a state of civilized equipoise. But hermeneutics in the original sense is a bringing of unexpected tidings from elsewhere, from beyond the circle of

4 Kittler and Vissmann, *Vom Griechenland*. 
interpersonal exchange. The classical texts are those that remember that the significant messages are borne in, instantaneously or even violently, though not always intelligibly. They measure the clumsy realities of human communication, time-bound and dependent on relays and inscriptions, against the angel-borne messages. The classical text, dominated by its awareness of the absence of the gods, figures the qualities of the gods as poetry: for isn’t poetry itself immortal, capricious, and only dimly intelligible?

Here we begin to pry a concept of the classics apart from a repertoire of historical works. We come to understand, with Geoffrey Hartman, the almost “involuntary” fixation on the possibility of a classics on the part even of such an unclassical writer as Wordsworth:

Milton and Milton’s use of the Classics recall to [Wordsworth] a more absolute beginning: a point of origin essentially unmediated, beyond the memory of experience or the certainty of temporal location. A “heavenly” origin, perhaps, in the sense of the myth . . . that the Intimations Ode presents and which makes a heuristic use of Plato’s notion of preexistence. This recession of experience to a boundary where memory fades into myth, or touches the hypostasis of supernatural origin . . . is what preoccupies the psyche of the poet.5

A strong concept of the classics, then, is nothing other than a strong concept of poetry.

The classics remain a reality – more than the empty preening of an elite class of readers, more than a relic of obsolete institutional taxonomies – as long as the possibility of being classic (being intimate with the gods) remains the content of subsequent poetry. This is not the same as saying, with Thomas M. Greene and other theorists of neoclassical imitatio, that poetry proceeds by recombining the forms and contents of earlier poetry, and by reflecting on its own dependency. Instead, it is to point out, as Giuseppe Mazzotta does in his essay in this volume, that Petrarch learns what artists do – namely, tell lies – by attending to what the classical poets knew about the heroes and the gods, adepts of dissimulation.

The classical text is not scripture. The classical text is not the paragon that guides the ordinary, no longer classical text, but rather the prophecy of that text. Even the most scripture-like classical texts contain their own undoing – the anti-scriptural moment – inside themselves. This is illustrated by a remark of Nietzsche’s: “I know of nothing that has led me more to reflect on Plato’s concealment and sphinx nature than that happily preserved petit fait that under the pillow of his death-bed was discovered no ‘Bible’, nothing Egyptian, Pythagorean, Platonic – but Aristophanes. How could

even a Plato have endured life – a Greek life which he had denied – without an Aristophanes!” (Beyond Good and Evil, § 28).

A robust concept of the classics will problematize both of Martindale’s projects. The aestheticist approach, the application of a free Kantian judgment, is not possible because the classical text foil such a reading by setting up its own referentiality – its non-literariness – as an obstacle. The sacred text never releases the reader into freedom. And as for hermeneutics: is “reception” really the right metaphor for a confrontation with such a text, a text that does not so much emit a message as mark a “dangerous and dubious” vanishing point of meaning (Hartman on Wordsworth)? The word “reception” suggests an unenviable state of passivity.

In commenting on the debate about the reception of the classics among literary scholars, I am really only pointing to a certain lack of drama. The problem of the classics within the academic disciplines of archeology and art history, by contrast, has always been much more acute and the solutions correspondingly more drastic. The burden of art history was the dread white army of Greek and Roman statuary, risen from the ground in the sixteenth century and then endlessly cloned and imitated, infiltrating first aristocratic homes, then the public spaces of bourgeois modernity. The succession of neoclassicisms is easier to track in art than in literature because it centers on the nude and desirable body. The real erotic appeal of the sculpted body, the uncanniness of the effigy, and the ease with which a statue serves as a trophy all complicate the work of the art historian and the art critic. The European and American obsession with Greek and Roman sculpture was not finally discredited until the twentieth century when the forms were contaminated by the role they played in the Fascist cults of the body. The entanglement of art history with classical statuary was aggravated by the fact that the modern scholarly study of art was set on course in the eighteenth century by the antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who posed the conundrum of how to explain historically the transhistorically valuable. That riddle remains programmatic for the discipline.

Today, in art history, the Greek and Roman statuary are thoroughly relativized. No scholar would assert their normativity. Art historical classicists are in fact so lacking in self-assertiveness that they have more or less retreated into a corner of their own, isolated from the rest of the discipline. No classicist proposes, in the spirit of this conference, that Greek and Roman art might profitably be read through the Renaissance and Baroque works that emulated them. But nor does any classicist dare to build a case for the unavoidability of their field, any case at all.
Greek and Roman statuary makes an immeasurably stronger claim to normativity than do the literary texts that we have been dealing with as classics. A statue is a substitute body, an effigy. A statue is a shelter for a god, an entity that otherwise escapes sensory apprehension. It occupies space just as a body does. It invites but does not satisfy a direct interpersonal engagement. Hegel saw the sculptural representation of the incarnated gods of the Greeks as the center of art because here the specific thought of art was most completely realized. The content of ancient sculpture was “the plasticity of the gods.” The form of the statue perfectly realized that content. Language in attempting to redeem its materiality could only aim at, but never attain, the “absolute knowledge” of the Greek statues.\(^6\) Art history dealt decisively with its classics by setting up the exceptionalism of the Greek and Roman statuary as its most grave taboo, and no wonder.

There is a way out of the impasse, and it might serve for literary classicists as well. The way is indicated, in gnomic fashion, in the writings on Renaissance art by the turn-of-the-century German art historian Aby Warburg. Warburg believed – really seems to have believed – that primordial experiences generated powerful pulsations of fear or ecstasy that are transmitted by pictorial formulae across time and space.\(^7\) Warburg tracked the survival of such “pathos formulas” within networks of sculptures, paintings, emblems, diagrams, pictures of all types including modern advertisements and other images culled from the mass media. The pathos formula, for Warburg, was not a sign but a direct expression of a real force. His essential unit of study was not the work of art but the expressive formula. The formula can appear anywhere, in a museum or in the daily newspaper. From this point of view, the vertical hierarchy between the classics (high) and the rest of culture (low) breaks down. The historical or horizontal hierarchy between then and now, however, persists, because the older formula is closer to its invisible source in real experience. But if the later “pathos formula” is sufficiently replete, then the more recent image is as potent as the older image, and the linear chronology that frames all modern scholarship also breaks down.

The latecomer poet or artist who takes the ancient work of art as the key unit and “receives” it by transforming it into a new work risks missing Warburg’s point entirely. For the authorial ambition of the creative imitator may interfere with the essentially expressive dynamic of the image, which punctures the frame of the work. The author is interested in protecting the

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\(^6\) See the remarkable analysis in Melville and Iversen, Writing Art History, ch. 8.

\(^7\) Warburg, The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Among the wealth of recent commentary on Warburg, see especially Didi-Huberman, L’image survivante.
integrity of the work because the work serves as the material placeholder, in the world, for his or her own personhood. Perhaps only the scholar, tracing from a measured distance the paths of emotion from form to form, grasps the true shape of history. From the scholar’s disinterested point of view, and this was Warburg’s point of view, the poets and artists do not know what they are doing. They only transmit. The concept of the “classic” is displaced from works and re-identified as a pulsing or a flow. It is nowhere, but also anywhere.

In invoking the predicament of the art historical classicists, I really only want to take some pressure off the literary classicists. Warburg’s radical disintegration of the classical work was a backlash provoked by the cult of Greco-Roman statuary, which in 1890 might have seemed as intense as ever. Literary study of the classics developed no comparably radical model, and understandably so, because their classic texts lack the iconic density of the statues. As texts the literary classics are better at dismantling themselves. Because their content is already the inaudibility of the gods, they provide the instruments of their own critique. It is understandable that literary scholars, wise in the ways of texts, react to Martindale’s gauntlet with neither outrage nor breathless enthusiasm.

To be sure, some scholars would gladly undertake a relativization of the classical text far more thoroughgoing than anything proposed by Martindale or anyone else in this volume – a reduction of the text, say, to a mere effect of its embodiments in medial technologies. But in order to raise the stakes of such a demystification, one might want to begin by imagining what form a remystification of the text should take.