Paragraphoi

This section publishes short essays that explore topics of interest to the profession. Submissions should run to no more than 1200 words. Diverse opinions and spirited exchanges are welcome. The editor, however, reserves the right to return essays deemed unsuitable for the format.

Professionalizing Politics, Politicizing the Profession

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One of the most striking and paradoxical differences between the current state of Classics in America and in Europe is that over the past several years, during the very same period in which the profession has become increasingly politicized in the New world, it has become increasingly depoliticized in the Old one. In the era of mass travel and "real time" communication, such a persistence of regional differences within the international scholarly community is perplexing: will violent atavistic tribalisms eventually break out not only in disintegrating political empires, but in the *res publica litterarum* as well? The very invention of this new feature in *TAPA* is symptomatic of a state of ferment: the canonization of non-canonicity has indeed made rapid progress if now even the official organ of the association of American Classicists—hardly a cutting-edge media tool—has decided to pay tribute to a wide-spread sense that the issues affecting Classicists as Classicists are no longer limited to scholarly matters treated in a scholarly mode developed and refined over centuries, but now also include problems of greater generality or actuality which demand a different mode of presentation. And the title for the feature could hardly have been better chosen: for one use of the diacritical sign παράγραφος is to denote a change of speaker within a plurality of discourses, all competing for dramatic plausibility in the absence of a single legitimating authorial voice.

In some of their details, to be sure, these developments in Europe and America may well turn out in the end to have been ephemeral; but in the meantime it is surely worth considering how they have come about, for we may thereby be enabled to recognize more permanent relations between the Classical profession and political contexts—relations well worth pondering, since certainly no one who reads these lines does not belong to both.

In Europe, the massive political transformations over the last three or four years—the largest set of peaceful changes in national borders and in political regimes that Europe has ever seen—have been accompanied in numerous countries by alterations in the typical objects and styles of scholarly discourse. These have been most obvious in the countries that used to belong to the Warsaw Pact: after decades of expressions of commitment to a specific political program—expressions sometimes sincere, sometimes opportunistic, sometimes sarcastic, but always prominent—a drastic deideologization has set in. To be sure, deideologization is itself highly ideological, and in certain places it is not yet advisable to point out the home truth that some Marxist theories retain a scholarly interest and usefulness which have not been refuted by East Europe's hectic rush to acquire blue jeans and dishwashers. But gradually the pendulum swings will become less extreme; and even now publications and, even more, discussions with younger or hitherto marginal colleagues from ex–Communist Europe breathe a refreshing pragmatism and a new enthusiasm for texts (Nietzsche) and methods (psychoanalysis, formalism) which can disconcert the jaded Westerner.

In most of Western Europe the corresponding transformation has been more gradual, less spectacular—but at least as profound. Over–reacting, understandably, to the complicity of right–wing governments in the horrors of the Second World War, intellectuals in the generations afterwards instinctively chose left–wing politics as a badge of identity no less obligatory than cigarettes (whereas in America smoking is becoming a sign of inescapable class or race, in Europe it remains one of vaunted critical intelligence). The inevitable reaction, criticizing Marxism in the name of a new pragmatism and sounding the retreat from large–scale ideological programs of any kind, began (of course) in Paris and set in only a decade or so ago. What started as a critique of metaphysics and Europhallologocentrism ended up, oddly, as an apology for free–market capitalism, political liberalism, and the end of ideology (what, badly translated into American terms, became the end of history). Even now the absence of a footnote to Marx on the first page of a book of classical scholarship published in Paris or Milan (to say nothing of Leipzig or Moscow) strikes one at first as a (deliberately subversive?) typographical error; but no doubt this impression will quickly pass.

England, of course, unoccupied in the Second World War, is a partial exception in this regard as in so many others. Its political discourse in the 60s and 70s remained relatively tame compared to continental Europe's; and it was only in the course of Thatcher's seemingly endless reign that a gradual impoverishment of the country, a crude redistribution of its remaining services

and wealth, and an incessant and often rabidly anti–intellectual anti–university campaign led to a polarization of political attitudes within the Academy. English dons have always enjoyed the privilege of being eccentric so long as this did not (gravely) interfere with their (narrowly defined) duties: in practice, one could spy for the Russians as long as one's scholarship in art history or Hellenistic poetry was impeccable. Only recently has the tone started to turn nasty. The silly battle over Derrida's honorary doctorate at Cambridge this spring was merely a particularly notorious incident: but one need only open the review pages of some of the leading English classical journals to see the political battle of the generations being waged with the traditional instruments of scholarship—innuendo, misrepresentation, and insult—but with an astonishing new humorlessness.

The situation in the United States seems in some regards similar, though America's greater social diversity and economic extremes make the stakes there sometimes seem higher. For the first time in two decades, the political structure of the discipline itself has become an object of wide and often partisan attention (only within the discipline, to be sure). In America the politicization of the profession seems obviously to be connected with an increasing awareness of the incapacity of Classicists *qua* Classicists to affect profoundly the cultural and political life of the society at large. Perhaps, in some cases, a generational contrast may tend to pit professors who as students experienced first–hand the temporary politicization of the universities during the Vietnam years and who are now achieving scholarly maturity and professional distinction, against both some older colleagues (who twenty years ago may have been on the other side of the blue book and the police line) and almost all students (for whom 1968 occurred sometime near the middle of the Paleolithic Age): if so, small wonder then that some professors now in their forties reach back to youthful memories to devise strategies with which to establish an identity and to outflank both critics and rivals. Viewed in terms of the profession as a whole, Classics, belated as always, is evidently moving to catch up with issues that have occupied modern language studies in America for years now. In this regard, as in others, Classics still has a long way to go: the APA's conventions are still tame compared to the MLA's, and Cultural Studies have not yet transformed Classics Departments as they have some English ones. And most generally, anyone can be pardoned, after eight years of Reagan and four of Bush, for feeling a general sense of helplessness and indifference in the face of national politics. What leads on the national level to such bizarre but ephemeral phenomena as the populist non–candidacy of Ross Perot may have longer–term consequences within the profession: a turning

inwards, an attempt to apply to the domain of the discipline political strategies and political ideals which only the most naive can still imagine trying to implement directly within the nation at large. If we can not change the world, at least, so it seems, we can try to put our own house in order. And perhaps, if we can succeed in that, might we not thereby end up exercising a salubrious influence upon others as well? Might not redemption begin at home? Such a hope seems wan indeed.

It is a truism that Classics, like any profession, is political, in the sense that it is organized by structures of power and exploitation, that these can be modified by strategic collaboration, and that the whole is linked in many complex and often unconscious ways with other political discourses. In times of non-crisis, most members of the profession are more or less aware of this and do not let such an awareness radically interfere with their work. In a time of crisis, on the other hand, reflection upon the conditions of production of scholarship moves to the forefront of scholarly concern, for enough people for whatever reasons are dissatisfied with those conditions that it seems less urgent to them to concentrate upon what those conditions were supposed to enable than upon the conditions themselves. This is understandable, inevitable, and—within limits—desirable. But theory can not only help practice; it can also interfere with it—anyone who has written a dissertation knows how much time is spent in thinking about thinking about writing it.

If, as the brief comparative survey offered above suggests, the reasons for our present crisis are to be sought not so much within the profession itself as rather in far larger political and economical developments for which Classics is, at most, a very minor epiphenomenon, then politicizing the profession of Classics, in America at least, may also end up running the risk of professionalizing politics, in the sense of leaving genuinely political action to people outside of Classics and limiting the Classicists' contribution to the appearance of political action to Classics itself. There is much that needs to be changed in the Classics profession; but there is more that needs to be changed in America. It would be a pity if concentrating too much upon the former distracted us from the latter. Perhaps it would be more sensible—more *politically* sensible—to get on with our scholarly work as best we can (including trying, while we do, to ensure that the conditions within the profession will enable others to work at their best capacity too, for then in all likelihood so too will we), to lead our lives as best we can (including trying, while we do, to ensure that the conditions within our society will enable others to live at their fullest capacity too, for then in all likelihood so too will we)—and to hope that this time of crisis will soon pass.