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"Thucydides or Grote?" Classical Disputes and Disputed Classics in Nineteenth-Century Cambridge

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In 1839 the Oxford scholar Robert Scott—the Scott of "Liddell and Scott"—wrote as follows of the eminent German classicist Gottfried Hermann:

> This venerable man has long outlived the freaks which brought him under the lash of Porson.... His pre-eminence cannot be disputed; pity only it is that he wishes to reign like the Turk, with no brother near the throne; and declares war against all and sundry who will not join his party.... Our readers may smile at the use of such a word as *party*, in connexion with the dead languages and their literature. *Political* England has other excitements.[1]

The implication is that English scholarship is not, as in Germany, a vehicle for cultural politics. Yet Scott went on to denounce three of his contemporaries for using English notes in classical editions. The spirit of party was indeed active in English classical scholarship; and as we shall see, one of the contested issues concerned the nature of classical scholarship itself.

Seven years later, in 1846, George Grote's *History of Greece* began its stately emergence into the light of day, a process not completed for another decade. The halfway mark was reached in 1851 with volume 6, and a copy was duly deposited in the library of the University of Cambridge. The struggle to be first to borrow the book was won by the classical scholar Richard Shilleto. But Shilleto did not like what he read; in particular, he disapproved of Grote's relatively favourable assessment of the demagogue Cleon, against whom, Grote suggested, Thucydides was biased. Within a few months, Shilleto had circulated a fiercely critical pamphlet entitled *Thucydides or Grote?*[2]

My title is that of Shilleto's pamphlet; my subtitle reflects the two related aims of this paper. One of these is to use disputes among classicists in nineteenth-century Cambridge to identify the dominant local definitions of

[1]Scott 371.
[2]Shilleto.

curricular knowledge and intellectual style. The other is, conversely, to use a knowledge of this context to throw light on those disputes. In nineteenth-century Britain, gentlemanly amateurism gave way to professional study, while scholarship separated itself from the embrace of Anglican Christianity. The domination of Porsonian linguistic discipline was replaced by that of systematic empiricism, practised within an expanded field, but, paradoxically, by increasingly narrow specialists. The nature of the scholar's authority changed too, becoming less diffuse but more limited, as Classics shifted from the heart of a gentlemanly British high culture to the margins of a society which by 1930 had given civil rights to both women and the working class.

The dispute between Grote and Shilleto revolves around an issue which was central to the development of Classics in Cambridge in the nineteenth century. Shilleto, who died in 1871, was the last exponent of a style of scholarship exemplified by the writing of Richard Porson and carried on by his pupils James Monk and Charles Blomfield. Focusing heavily on the language and style of ancient authors, it paid relatively little attention to their status as literature or to their historical contexts. This narrow focus was reflected in, and reinforced by, the content of the Classical Tripos, the honours examination founded in 1822.[3] Despite continual pressure to broaden its scope, it was not until 1849 that questions on ancient history were added; and even then most students did not take them very seriously.

A major factor in this slow development was the initial overshadowing of classics by mathematics, the dominant form of curricular knowledge in Cambridge in the early part of the century. For thirty years after the Classical Tripos was first examined in 1824, it was a voluntary test, open only to those who had previously received high honours in mathematics. In their early years, the Tripos examinations reflected this narrow focus, largely as a result of political compromises with the mathematicians in the foundation of the course. These led to the exclusion from the examination both of historical work and of original composition in Latin and Greek. Composition lay at the heart of the culture of educated gentlemen for much of the century and distinguished English classical scholarship from its counterparts on the Continent. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was giving way to the systematic and specialised learning of the professional scholar; but this shift was gradual and contested, and was by no means complete.[4]

[3]The Tripos took its name from the three-legged stool on which disputants formerly sat while answering verbal challenges from examiners.

[4]The Cambridge classical context is given in more detail in Stray 1997, 1998a. For the history of the University more generally, see Searby.

Having sketched in this context, I will now return to Shilleto's 1851 pamphlet. His substantive claim was that Grote had misinterpreted several passages of Thucydides—in particular, those dealing with the demagogue Cleon. But while much of Shilleto's pamphlet is taken up with detailed linguistic analysis, it opens in a very different vein. "I confess," he says, "that I opened and read throughout Mr Grote's volume with great prejudice against its author—the prejudice of one not ashamed to call himself a Tory against one not (I believe) ashamed to call himself a Republican—of one proud of an Academical Education against one disregarding such a position."[5] Grote's offence was a double one. In seeking to rehabilitate Cleon, he was at once showing democratic sympathies and challenging the objectivity of Thucydides. Shilleto's second point of difference has its ironic aspects. It is true that Grote was a merchant banker without a teaching position. Shilleto himself, however, occupied a somewhat marginal position in Cambridge: his marriage had debarred him from a college fellowship, and he made his living by taking private pupils. This will perhaps have sharpened his antagonism to the views of a successful outsider; but it is also relevant that at this time the University was being investigated by a Royal Commission which was drawing up new statutes.[6] The autonomy of the conservative enclaves of Oxford and Cambridge was being threatened by a liberal government in London; and this surely has something to do with Shilleto's sensitivity to Grote's *History*.

Shilleto's title offers a brutal choice: ancient text or modern commentator? Other conservative dons in this period pronounced in similar terms, declaring that to combine a study of classical authors with that of modern historians was to mix up Classics with something alien. What they feared, at heart, was an infringement by the turbulent present on a repository of timeless value. And behind these controversies about classical texts stood the fear of the threat to an independent Protestant reading of the Bible posed by the recent resurgence of Roman Catholicism. Shilleto's teacher Benjamin Kennedy had given a sermon on the subject entitled *Rome or the Bible: which?*, echoing Shilleto's pamphlet in its stark dichotomy.

Grote decided not to publish a reply to Shilleto, though he did add an appendix to a later volume of his *History*. The cudgels were taken up by his younger brother John, fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and (from 1855) professor of moral philosophy.[7] He began his pamphlet by stressing that

[5]Shilleto 1. ("Republican" in Britain in the 1850s connoted, in conventional social circles, dangerously radical political views, much as "Communist" did a century later in the USA.)

[6]The impact of the Royal Commission on Cambridge is described by Winstanley 1940: 234–69.

[7]Grote 1851.

Shilleto's attack, though "in itself worthless...may be of...interest as a specimen of...classical criticism." In his peroration, he argues that "pamphlets like this of Mr Shilleto's...stand in the way of good criticism...they convert discussion into recrimination, and controversy into quarrel; they discredit criticism..., they stop the mouths...of many who have truth to utter...." At one point he refers to his opponent's "childishness...garrulity...senile narrow-mindedness." These were strong words from a mild-mannered man of conciliatory temperament; but we should also note that John Grote was a philosopher with a special interest in language; he coined technical terms by the dozen, including—rather aptly in the present context—the term *relativism*.

Grote's references to Shilleto display a more general concern about constructive criticism and its enemies. This generalising vein re-emerged ten years later, when he sprang to the defence of William Whewell, the master of his college, with a pamphlet entitled *A Few Words on Criticism*. The target this time was a dismissive anonymous notice of Whewell's *Platonic Dialogues for English Readers* in the literary journal *Saturday Review*. Grote opens by remarking that:

> It is commonly said that ours is in a very special manner a critical age. One may doubt however how far this is really the case. We are fond of *reading* criticism; but a good deal of the criticism we read seems to presume on readers who...are...incapable of making [a criticism] for themselves. There is one thing that this criticism never seems to have a notion of, and that is, the possibility of criticism on itself.

Grote goes on to claim that "Latin and Greek scholarship is...the only branch of science or literature in which...the...impertinent assumption" he is attacking in the review "is ever found...." Part of the problem, he suggests, is the lack of academic journals in which proper discussion could take place.[8] The *Journal of Classical and Sacred Philology*, which J. E. B. Mayor had started in 1854, had ceased publication by the time Grote wrote his pamphlet; its successor the *Journal of Philology* did not begin to be published till 1868. The first British classical journal to appear which survives today, the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, was not founded until 1880. Grote was thus writing at a time when those standard features of a developed academic community, journals and learned societies, had not emerged. For published articles and reviews, readers were largely dependent on general literary magazines like the *Saturday Review* and the *Athenaeum*.

[8]Grote 1861: 3, 41.

As I mentioned above, the full-blown insertion of history into the curriculum had to wait until the late 1870s, when the Tripos was reorganised into two parts. Part I represented the traditional liberal education model and was devoted to language and literature; Part II consisted of a set of specialised courses, including literature but also history, philology, archaeology and philosophy. In 1877, during the debates which led up to this reorganisation, the Greek scholar Henry Jackson characterised the traditional style of Porsonian scholarship in the following manner. "I must go back to the old tripos," he said, "the golden age of 'pure scholarship.' What...'pure scholarship' meant was this. They read Thucydides, but not Grote; they studied the construction of the speeches, but did not confuse themselves with trying to study their drift. They read the Phaedrus, but had no Theory of Ideas...."[9] The older members of Jackson's audience in the university Senate in 1877 would have recognised that his reference to "reading Thucydides but not Grote" alluded to the pamphlet written by Richard Shilleto more than a quarter of a century earlier.

Jackson used "pure scholarship" to refer to the Porsonian style of work carried on by Shilleto. In private he characterised it as "a rather meagre thing." Jackson had experienced it at close quarters, since he had been coached by Shilleto for the Tripos examination of 1862. This style was also referred to as "definite scholarship" and was sometimes described as "narrow and masculine." Its practitioners not only devoted themselves to understanding the nuances of Latin and (especially) Greek usage, but also used this understanding to compose proses and verses in both languages. In this emphasis, which also obtained, if less strongly, at Oxford, lay the distinctive feature of the classical scholarship practised in the ancient universities and in the public schools. The world of the classically-educated gentleman in mid-Victorian England included these schools as well as the universities; but the reform of the Tripos took the organisation of classical knowledge down a road which the schools did not follow. It is significant, therefore, that the most outspoken attack on the reforms of the late 1870s came from a member of the Cambridge classical board whose active career was spent as a schoolmaster. This was Thomas Ethelbert Page, remembered today as the author of enduring school editions of Horace and Virgil and as a founding editor of the Loeb Classical Library.

"The proposed scheme," said Page, "while making liberal provision for men with special knowledge of any of the sections B, C, D, E (in any of which it would be possible to take a high place with but little classical knowledge), absolutely ignores the requirements of perhaps a far more important class of

[9]Winstanley 1947: 211.

students—the men, who without any desire to pursue any special branch of classical learning, are widely read in classical literature...the proposed scheme...affords men of high general attainments no opportunity to distinguish themselves."[10] "B, C, D, and E" were the Part II options in philosophy, ancient history, archaeology and comparative philology. Notice Page's limitation of "classical knowledge" to language. Attempts to promote classical archaeology in schools particularly incensed him; in 1904 he denounced a campaign by the archaeological brothers Percy and Ernest Gardner, declaring that "the living, imperishable value of the classics is almost entirely independent of [archaeology]," and that "education is being much injured by professors...they live in a world of theory, and from it, they hold out a guiding hand to men in hourly contact with hard facts."[11]

Page's remarks summarise a reaction to shifts both in curriculum content and in the social organisation of scholarship: the marginalisation both of the learned schoolmasters who had formerly shared a common world with their university colleagues, and of the literary texts whose eternal value they had revered. In late nineteenth-century Cambridge we can see the beginnings of a division of labour: the staking of claims to their authors by scholars working within a single institution. Here we must remember that in a collegiate university where only half of all college fellows had university positions, academics belonged to more than one kind of community. College loyalties were very strong, and the university Faculty of Classics was not founded till 1923, after the intervention of a further Royal Commission.

The largest college, Trinity, housed both Richard Jebb and Arthur Verrall, whose focus on Sophocles and Euripides respectively reflected their very different personalities: the provocative, sceptical Verrall stood in marked contrast to the controlled poise of Jebb. Let me offer you the view from both sides of a relationship of collegiate avoidance which surely prevented otherwise inevitable disputes. Verrall wrote in his memoir of Jebb that "[h]e could not speak of Euripides without pain in his voice, and seldom, without necessity, spoke at all. He had no strong desire, I think, to comprehend such a person."[12] I am tempted to add, for "Euripides" read "Verrall." Jebb's view of Verrall can be

[10]Winstanley 1947: 221.

[11]T. E. Page, *The Times* (2 January 1904) 10d. The ideological opposition between text-based and artifact-based study is still with us, though now overlaid by the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and by the expansive definition of "text" in the "new" archaeology. The Page/Gardner dispute is described and set in context in Stray 1998a ch. 8.

[12]Verrall 467 n. 1.

glimpsed in his report to the honorary degrees committee to which Verrall had submitted his editions of the *Medea* and the *Seven against Thebes*:

> Both these books...are marked by learning, scholarship and literary skill. They are also distinguished by a verbal ingenuity which is often most striking. This is frequently exercised, as it seems to me, at the expense of sober judgment, and of a due regard for what is probable, or even conceivable, in literature and in language. But it contributes to give Mr Verrall's work what might perhaps be named as its peculiar merit,—a certain intellectual freshness...the general impression which we receive is sometimes one that surprises or interests us rather than persuades. A modern mind, of much acumen...and...with an instructiveness of the larger sort; because, by its qualities and by their defects, it makes us think wherein the antique differs from the modern, and so helps us to appreciate the antique better. Again, this αὐθάδεια of subtlety sometimes hits the mark; and then the gain is direct. There can be no sort of doubt, I venture to think, about this Degree.[13]

The subtext of much of Verrall's writing was an attack on Christian belief, as it was with his colleague James Frazer. Jebb and Headlam, both from families crowded with Anglican bishops, still adhered to Christianity or to a classical sublimation, whether to the Old Testament of Aeschylus or the New Testament of Sophocles. The point is a general one: the polyvalence of disputes makes them all the more useful indicators of the crucial contexts and fault lines of scholarship. Behind such public disputes stand not only the ghosts of disputes past and the tensions which never became disputes, but the potential disputes which never happened. The Jebb/Verrall relationship is one example, but there are many others. How many books have never appeared because their authors could not face the prospect of criticism? Hugh Munro, the editor of Lucretius and first Professor of Latin at Cambridge, withdrew from publishing in the 1870s after being roughly handled in a German classical journal. Henry Jackson's planned history of Greek philosophy never appeared because he was convinced few scholars would agree with his views. A full account of disputes would need to consider such cases, as well as the non-conflictual mutual positionings within the symbolic field of scholarship, whose topology changes as different styles of work emerge, expand and dwindle.

Disputes, as the anthropological literature reminds us, promote both division and solidarity.[14] The most promising questions for future work may concern the relationship between different kinds of division and solidarity and the nature and conduct of disputes. So far we have seen divisions emerging both

[13]Leedham-Green 169–70.

[14]See, e.g., Caplan.

within the ranks of the academics and between university and school teachers. In 1911, in the preface to his *The Glory That Was Greece*, J. C. Stobart lamented both of these trends. Himself a former schoolmaster and then short-term academic, he saw his task as the bringing together of literary and historical evidence in a form which could be appreciated by an educated public which could no longer be assumed to know Latin or Greek. Scholars, he commented, were nowadays like miners tunnelling underground, out of contact with one another. The inference might be drawn (though Stobart did not draw it), that they would excavate each his or her own tunnel without mutual criticism.[15]

In the new era of scholarly specialisation, perhaps the most striking example of a broad vision which might promote argument at a general level was Marxism. Its leading proponent in Britain was the textual critic George Thomson, who conducted a fierce argument with F. M. Cornford about Plato's alleged elitism in the early 1940s.[16] Similarly his fellow-Marxist, the crystallographer J. D. Bernal, wrote general works on the social history of science. Bernal's son Martin, the author of *Black Athena*, has been at the centre of the most widely-reported recent dispute in classical scholarship, one in which a significant part has been played by the fragmentation of the profession. The very wide range of evidence in question—historical, archaeological, linguistic, literary—has made it very difficult to assess Bernal's case.[17] There are striking resonances here with the earlier controversy over the decipherment of Linear B. In each case an outsider has challenged the profession; in each case the fundamental issues revolve around the interaction between Greek and non-Greek. In a sense the claims have been made in opposite directions. In his decipherment of Linear B, Ventris identified what was thought to be non-Greek as Greek, whereas the thrust of Bernal's argument is in the opposite direction. The two cases deserve to be considered together.

The disputes I have described cluster round the fault lines which developed as the content, organisation and context of Classics changed. To locate the fault lines is to understand the disputes; to explore the disputes is to see the fault lines as they ran through the experience of contemporaries. If, as Steve Nimis has suggested, the footnote is the fundament of *Wissenschaft*, then perhaps disputes lie at its heart.[18]

[15]Stobart, preface.
[16]The correspondence is in the possession of Thomson's daughter Prof. Margaret Alexiou.
[17]Levine and Peradotto.
[18]Nimis.

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