

“With Fearful Steps Pursuing Hopes of High Talk with the Departed Dead”*

Glenn W. Most

University of Heidelberg/University of Chicago

Let us suppose, for reasons of equity, that the Martians decided to send their own space probe from their red planet to our blue one in order to find out whether intelligent life on Earth was responsible for the crude technological litter which had recently begun to be tossed carelessly onto the surface of their pristine environment; and let us suppose further, for reasons of statistical probability, that that probe landed by chance at one of our major universities, in the bushes outside the facility housing the departments of what are still called, oddly, the humanities. If so, that device might well be forgiven if it beamed back to Mars the information that apparently there was indeed intelligent life on our planet, but that it had only existed for a couple of decades, and that it seemed to have been preceded by a large variety of forms of stupid life, which had lasted for many centuries before finally dying out. For the notion that we ourselves are far smarter about issues of political, racial, and sexual injustice than any generation that preceded us seems to have become well entrenched recently in America, and perhaps nowhere else so strongly as in university literature departments. If traditional and modern cultures are distinguished from one another not only by a variety of objective economic, social, and technical factors, but also by the simple subjective fact that the former believe that they are traditional while the latter pride themselves on being modern, then we are certainly witnessing the rapid establishment and propagation of an unprecedented culture of modernity, at least in many literature departments in America, and perhaps more generally within America and indeed throughout much of the rest of the world.

*This article reproduces, with minor modifications, the text of a talk delivered at the Third National Conference of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics in San Francisco on 8 November 1997 at a panel on “The State of Literary Studies.” I should emphasize that my remarks were, and are, addressed to an audience consisting not exclusively of professional classicists, and that the analysis and suggestions offered here are aimed at the situation of Classics in the United States and not elsewhere. My thanks to the organizers for their kind invitation, to the participants for their helpful discussion, to T. Saavedra and C. Wassman for suggestions and criticism, and to P. B. Shelley for the title.

The consequences of this development for the extensive and intensive scholarly study of the past history of humanity need not be imagined: they are open to inspection. Whatever the challenges (or let us call them obstacles) which have been created for the study of the more recent past by the concurrence of a number of factors—most spectacularly by the unimaginable triumphs and disasters of technological progress, the shifting demography and economics of American universities, and the development of new scholarly paradigms within the humanities and social sciences—the difficulties that have thereby been placed in the way of research into the more distant past, and in particular into Greek and Roman antiquity, have become all the more formidable. In our “rave” new world, which measures memory in gigabytes rather than in remorse and defines “real time” as absolute simultaneity, i.e., as the total absence of temporal difference, the classics cannot simply count upon the mere traditionality of traditional modes of self-justification if they are to compete successfully in a market whose economic ideology of profit and utility has become so pervasive that I find its metaphors infecting even this very sentence.

In that regard, the present situation of American Classics is not very different from that of other literary and historical disciplines in America; and in some respects American classicists are in a more fortunate position, at least at the moment, than many of their European colleagues. English Classics suffered for decades from its traditional identification with social class and only recently, together with the country as a whole, has begun to rediscover a sense of optimism and strength. German Classics never fully recovered from the forced emigration of many of its greatest minds in the 1930s and from the failure of many of those who remained to distance themselves adequately from the ideology and practice of National Socialism. In Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and those non-European countries where Classics is studied, many individuals have performed outstanding work but few departments, if any, have been able to achieve long-term distinction as a whole. French and, to a lesser extent, Spanish Classics have attained an international scholarly level for the most part only in highly technical sub-disciplines (such as linguistics, epigraphy, and archaeology) while tending to entrust the criticism and interpretation of the central literary and philosophical texts to high school examiners on the one hand and to belletristic popularizers on the other. Certain French classicists, like Vernant, Detienne, and Loraux, have enjoyed enormous and well-deserved success in America; but in France their position within the rigid hierarchies of academic institutions was always relatively marginal and they do not seem to have succeeded in establishing a prominently and centrally anchored cadre of

numerous younger scholars to continue their scholarly heritage. Only in Italy, and one-sidedly in Greece, is Classics likely to continue to flourish in the coming decades, out of pride in an ancient national heritage, compounded by a sense of present economic inferiority and confirmed by hordes of well-paying foreign tourists who may not be certain of the difference between Orpheus and Morpheus but who prefer their beaches and Mediterranean cuisine to be seasoned with a little bit of the aura of antiquity.

What, in comparison, has hitherto saved American Classics at the university level has been the general failure of American education at the high school level. A corps of graduate research scholars, quite large and active by international standards, has been supported by a huge industry in undergraduate courses in translation, which have done what little they could to try to repair at least some of the damage caused by six years of American secondary education. The scholars, and the students, may sometimes deride large undergraduate lecture courses on the great books of Western literature or on ancient mythology or on English etymology as “Plato to NATO” or “Heroes for Zeroes” or “Words for Nerds”: but the former know, unless they are fooling themselves, that they depend upon such courses to a certain extent to provide teaching fellowships for their graduate students and budgets for their departments, while the latter have for the most part either been willing enough to let themselves be entertained two or three times a week with amusingly presented smatterings of classical culture or, if not, have been encouraged, or obliged, to do so by distribution requirements, general education programs, core curricula, or the like.

In Europe, for a long time, the situation was very different: secondary schools were classified into very disparate categories; most were much better anyway than their American counterparts; there was no general consensus that the interest of society as a whole required that all children attend the most prestigious kind of schools and go on to university; and university study was closely linked to professional careers, so that, for example, most students of Classics in Germany went on to become teachers of Greek or Latin in the schools. But even now, despite widely recognized changes in the European situation—the various school types have been converging for years; there is general agreement that the level of instruction at schools has noticeably declined; at least three times more people are studying at universities than a generation ago; and, in the case of Classics, the likelihood of finding a post as a school teacher of Greek or Latin has been virtually reduced to nil—nonetheless most European university systems have still failed to adapt to the new reality of large numbers of inadequately prepared and insufficiently motivated students with uncertain job prospects. It is only recently, and reluctantly, that European

universities have begun to institute beginning language courses in Greek and Latin for those who, like myself, came to university with inadequate preparation to study the languages or who came expecting to study something else and then switched to Classics late. As for general education classes or courses in classics in translation, the career linkage of traditional European programs of study, combined with mounting financial difficulties and rigid administrative bureaucracies, has tended to preclude the very notion. In both of these latter regards, many British universities furnish a laudable exception.

Though it may be hard for Americans to believe, the American situation has tended, in contrast to the European one, to be more flexible, more pragmatic, more oriented to what students and their tuition-paying parents could be persuaded were their real needs. For example, while German enrollments were tripling in a generation, American enrollments about doubled; but the German university system, which had been geared for small numbers of self-disciplined, well-trained, and highly motivated students, failed until just recently to even begin to try to adapt to the new circumstances of large numbers of confused, ill-trained, and poorly motivated students. (In the largely dismal landscape of humanistic studies in present-day Germany, Classics has remained, at least until recently, a somewhat more congenial exception.) By contrast, the American system was diverse and receptive enough to be in part readier for the new kind of students that were coming, in part eager to adapt to their needs.

But it is obvious that strains have been put upon the American university system by developments over the last decades; and one of the victims of those strains may well turn out to be the relatively safe position that Classics in America has hitherto enjoyed. For the linkage between mass general education courses in translation on the one hand and, on the other, the scholarly research and graduate instruction of professors, upon which that safety depended, may well have been characteristic of American higher education in general terms; but, in the specific form it assumed in American Classics, it was in fact little more than a convenient fiction, and as such was always potentially at risk.

Now that fiction is under assault, from two sides. On the one hand, the notion that all ladies and gentlemen who are to count as well educated must have read, or at least been examined on, a certain number of works of ancient and modern European literature, philosophy, history, and religion has been vigorously contested as irrelevant, imperialistic, hegemonic, and, worst of all, old-fashioned; on the other hand, many Classics scholars themselves have started to turn away from the central literary and philosophical works of Greco-Roman antiquity, either because they are discouraged by the accumulated weight of centuries of erudition on those texts and seek less heavily trampled

byways for their scholarship, or because they are more genuinely interested in the cultural contexts teasingly revealed through the distorting lens of those works. On the one side have been those who, quite reasonably, wanted to add more modern writers, more women and minorities, to the traditional canon; on the other side, those who, quite understandably, found the ancient texts interesting also for the light they cast upon the condition of ancient women and slaves or upon ancient views of homosexuality or other social issues. On both sides, too, there have been those more vociferous and less patient partisans of the “either/or now” rather than of the “both/and soon,” who wanted not to add but to substitute and not to modify but to suppress. For the ideologues, who see no reason to study dead white men except to show how much better off we are without them, there are few objects of study imaginable that might seem deader, whiter, and maler than the ancient Greek and Roman authors.

Put in these terms, the conflict is not at all new, but in fact expresses a tension which has constituted the modern study of classical antiquity since its beginning as a professional discipline of university research and teaching in the late eighteenth century, a tension between what might be called classicizing and historicizing approaches to the understanding of the ancient world.¹ But in one decisive regard at least, the current situation of American Classics does indeed seem to be new. This is that, for the first time in two centuries, the disquieting but productive tension which has always informed the discipline is threatening, in some quarters, to become fundamentally lopsided, or indeed even one-sided. On the one hand, fortunately, the historicist side continues to flourish, indeed may seem never to have been stronger. Structural anthropology, historical psychoanalysis, statistical sociology, women’s studies, and the history of sexuality have all recently made significant contributions to reopening old questions, rediscovering old issues, and reinterpreting old evidence. But, seen within a larger perspective, contemporary scholarly efforts to reconstruct the ancient Greek connection between male heterosexuality and political rights, or between a tragedy and a religious ritual, or similar issues, for all their greater methodological sophistication and sometimes rebarbative terminology, are still asking the very same kind of question that the most hard-nosed German historicists of the early nineteenth century would have had no difficulty in identifying as their own: namely, what can the surviving documents of ancient Greece and Rome tell us about the specific, local, transient cultural formation out of which they arose? Whether we then go on to approve, condemn, or

¹I have discussed this issue elsewhere, most conveniently perhaps in “One Hundred Years of Fractiousness: Disciplining Polemics in Nineteenth Century German Classical Scholarship,” *TAPA* 127 (1997) 349–61.

simply acknowledge what we learn about that culture, whether we try to argue for the adoption of some aspect of it in our own lives, pride ourselves on our living in a more enlightened culture, or merely assign it to the repertory of the historically given, is less important than the fundamental step of viewing ancient Greek and Roman culture as just one more foreign country, privileged in principle neither more nor less than tenth-century Mongolia or twentieth-century Cuba.

But this is only one side of the tension. Many of the same professors who traditionally prided themselves upon looking at ancient Greece and Rome as just one more culture simultaneously prided themselves upon being the custodians of the remains of that one culture which just happened to include what they were sure were some of the highest achievements of the human spirit. After all, they were studying not just antiquity, but *classical* antiquity, and applying to it not just philology, but *classical* philology. The Serbian *guzlars* could be used to cast light upon the oral nature of the Homeric epics, just as Chinese herbal manuals could be used to illumine Hippocratic medicine; but very few classicists indeed actually ended up going native, abandoning the classical texts from which they had started and preferring instead to dedicate themselves exclusively to Yugoslavian epic or Chinese science. To be sure, not all classicists were equally unembarrassed about proclaiming that the works that were entrusted to their care were the very best ones ever written; but they were unlikely to protest vehemently when their colleagues did make this claim, they never objected to the financial and institutional resources that it made available to them, and they tended to confirm their own adherence to it implicitly in their scholarly practice if not explicitly in their professed ideology.

Now things seem to be changing. Among some of my fellow classicists, the slight but unmistakable flush of embarrassment which always accompanied the hard-nosed historicist's declaration of personal preference for the texts he or she worked on seems recently to have grown into a full-fledged fever of guilty conscience. Indeed, some of my younger colleagues seem to accept, or even to welcome, the necessity of amputating the ideology of classics as the preservation of cultural masterpieces in order to rescue the ideology of classics as the preserve of cultural relativism. Thus one answer to the question "Why should one study Classics nowadays?" that one hears recently with increasing frequency runs more or less as follows: "Given that our own immediate and urgent historical situation must make us especially interested in studying issues of multiculturalism, of minority rights, of sexual identity, of gender issues, of power and exploitation, of slavery and imperialism and militarism, ancient Greece and Rome provide an especially useful domain for studying just these

issues. After all, the ancient Greeks and Romans confronted problems which were much like ours, and came up with a variety of solutions for them, which in a very few instances might turn out to provide useful hints of directions that we could choose to follow out ourselves, but which in most others were so obviously illiberal and unenlightened that we can easily learn from them just what pitfalls to avoid in the postcolonial future we must construct for ourselves and our children.”

What is wrong with this rationale? Certainly it is not that we ourselves might even for a moment want to adopt ancient attitudes toward women or slaves—I myself would no more advocate a return to ancient family life or slavery than to ancient dentistry or surgery. Nor is it that the ancient issues cannot at all usefully be compared with the modern ones, and lessons drawn in one direction or the other—if I really believed that, then I would certainly have chosen to study some other culture whose problems and solutions were indeed comparable with my own.

No, the problem with this rationale has to do with the peculiar, indeed in some respects quite bizarre practice of studying a dead language. The proponents of this view seem to take for granted that people already know two dead languages, ancient Greek and Latin, and they seem not to have recognized just what a strange and improbable activity the study of such languages really is. If the only reason to study the culture of the ancient Greeks and Romans is that their problems were very much like our own problems, then it would really be much more sensible, given the premise that we are interested most of all in our own problems, to study not a culture whose problems were only *similar to* ours, but instead one whose problems were *identical with* ours; and that could only be our very own contemporary culture. This would not at all preclude our choosing to study some modern, living languages—on the contrary, if our present culture is indeed as multicultural as it professes to be, then it would seem irresponsible not to.

But—and this is my crucial point in this connection—studying a living language and studying a dead language are two entirely different cans of worms. One chooses to study a living language, ultimately, in order to converse with living human beings in that language. One may start out from an appreciation of Greek beaches or Italian wines or Japanese movies or Thai cuisine; studying the particular foreign language takes time and trouble but is worth it because doing so opens up unforeseeable possibilities for enrichment of our own lives through conversational exchange with others. If one learns Italian, one can end up marrying an Italian—but, no matter how well one

learns Latin, one will never end up marrying an ancient Roman (but only, at best, a modern Florentine).

Studying a dead language requires our withdrawing ourselves from the normal linguistic circulation of our contemporaries for long periods of time and devoting ourselves to perfecting an idiom in which even our best conversations will inevitably be, at least in a superficial sense, one-sided. It requires that we retreat, at least temporarily, from the living embrace of those who would love us, for the sake of those who are dead and cannot hear our call. Why ever should we, why ever should anyone, want to do something as strange as that? Only two reasons can be imagined. One is compulsion. Certain religions, for example, provide compelling reasons for studying ancient languages, classical Hebrew or Arabic or Chinese or Sanskrit; but, for that very reason, these languages are not entirely dead, and anyway the modern study of ancient Greek and Roman culture was instituted, in part, precisely in order to provide a non-denominational alternative to parochial religiosity. So too, for centuries many European school children were compelled to learn Latin, and in some cases ancient Greek, if their parents wished them to pursue certain courses of study and thereby have a better chance of attaining certain kinds of positions in adult life. But those days are gone forever, or will be soon: even in Germany, to say nothing of the rest of the civilized world, it is already the case that virtually no child any longer studies the classical languages because he or she is obliged by the school program to do so.

But if compulsion fails as a reason, the only one that remains is love. Works of literature written in a dead language can only survive as active cultural forces if they are translated into living languages. Sooner or later, young minds will be brought into contact with them, in the form of translations, by the mediation of parents, friends, media, schools, and, I continue to hope, even universities; and if the translation is attractive enough, and the external circumstances are not too unpropitious, then the likelihood is that a few young people will fall so irremediably in love with the literary work in translation that they will persuade themselves, or allow themselves to be persuaded by canny teachers, that they need only to strip away the veil of translation and encounter the author of the text in his or her own language to satisfy their desire for that author and for the characters he or she created. Put enough bright and impressionable adolescents in prolonged contact with a thoughtful selection of the works of Greek and Latin literature in good translations, and not even the most inventive university administration will succeed in preventing every single one of them from deciding to go ahead and learn Greek or Latin. If some of them will then go on in their professional lives to choose to study not the

traditionally central texts of the literary canon but instead such cultural issues as gender or slavery in antiquity, all the better.

There is no doubt that, in this way, fewer people will go on to learn the classical languages than once did, and that is certainly extremely regrettable. But by the same token, first, there is no doubt that those who will learn them will learn them with a passion and a dedication which most of those who used to be compelled to learn the languages conspicuously lacked; second, we may suspect that society does not really require a very large number of people in every generation to be custodians of the works of classical antiquity in the original languages (though I should not wish to be pressed on just how many would be needed, and happen to believe that our society would be benefited considerably if familiarity with the classics were far more widely diffused than it is ever likely to be again); and third, we may hope that even a few such custodians in each generation, if they were indeed active and engaged, not only in scholarship for the few but also in mediation for the many, and if they were supported adequately by educational institutions, would be enough to save those works, from generation to generation, for those living young people who, against better sense and the counsel of their parents, will insist upon falling hopelessly in love with dead old people.

Love tends especially to be directed to individual human beings—it is only by an abuse of language that people say they love avocados or San Francisco, when what they really mean is that they like them very much indeed—and this seems particularly to be the case among adolescents, upon whose decision, in each generation, to learn a dead language the chances for the survival of the classics in the future may well turn out to depend in a significant degree. Hence it seems natural to expect that that love which some young people in each generation will feel will be directed in the first instance not to abstract ideas, to ancient Greek culture, to democracy, to multiculturalism, but to individual human characters, to Achilles and Antigone and Dido, and to the individual human authors who gave us such moving versions of them, to Homer and Sophocles and Virgil. For epics, novels, plays, traditional narrative histories—and films too, for that matter—present us with a host of individual literary characters who, if they are portrayed plausibly, can become not less real, and far more comprehensible, to us than the real human beings who surround us; and from behind these individual characters can emerge the plausible figure of the writer who invented them and who can become not less richly specific for our own imagination than the creations of his or her fantasy. So too, poems, orations, and even works of philosophy speak to us in a unique and unmistakable voice which we cannot help but understand as the plausible

utterances of a person we can end up imagining vividly and even passionately. Thus, on the one hand, we can fall in love with Daphnis and with Chloe—but also with Longus; on the other hand, we can fall in love with Catullus, and even with Aristotle. No doubt, most professional scholars of the classics develop, as they age, beyond this kind of love; but most, I suspect, never leave it entirely behind them and continue to find within it a source of strength and joy. A program of study of the ancient Greek and Roman world that refuses to justify itself by appeal, without undue embarrassment, to the great works of the human spirit, as these are expressed in the memorably plausible characters of literary and philosophical texts and their authors, has no chance of survival in the long run; one that does, does.

My optimism, cautious and I hope disillusioned as it is, derives not only from my own experience and from the observation of students in several countries, but also from a peculiar feature of our access to ancient Greek and Latin literature, namely that a ruthless work of selection—not *the* work of selection, but *a* work of selection—was already performed upon the works of classical antiquity before they ever reached us. In the age before printing, the reproduction of written texts was time-consuming and laborious, expensive in terms of materials and human time; few copies of any but the most popular books were produced. Any book that was to survive through the many upheavals of antiquity and the so-called Dark Ages into the various Renaissances and finally into the age of printing so that it could safely reach us had to appeal to enough different people, in enough different places, at enough different times in the course of its transmission, that people could take the decision over and over again to go to the trouble and expense of recopying this old work rather than some other newer one. The chances of survival were best for school authors, like Homer and Virgil, Plato and Cicero, who were distributed widely enough that not even natural and civil disasters, ignorance and sloth, could obliterate them; but even the few authors, like Catullus and Lucretius, who were rescued from oblivion by the freak accident that a single manuscript of their works survived the end of antiquity, must have appealed to enough readers in, and above all after, their lifetimes for that single manuscript and all its ancestors to have been copied down.

Of course, much that we ourselves would like to be able to read from ancient literature was selected out, and no classicist would make the same selection as his or her colleague would make, or as accident and design did make. But the result of this selection process is that most of what has survived did survive because it was capable of engaging the interest of very different kinds of people in very different historical circumstances. No doubt part of the

reason for this diversity, longevity, and intensity of appeal was the rhetorical schooling of many ancient authors, which made them acutely aware of techniques for the attraction and manipulation of their audience’s interest and profoundly sophisticated in their deployment of them. This may be why so much of surviving ancient literature presents us with such strikingly memorable and movingly plausible characters, to whom many different kinds of readers can respond with admiration, with fear, with hatred, but never with indifference. Of course that does not mean that these ancient works will necessarily appeal to all of us in our own circumstances. But perhaps the chances that they will are somewhat greater than is the case in any modern literature written in a living language and published in a period in which there may be too little of some things—peace, health, tranquillity—but in which of one thing there are surely not too few: books. If so, then it does not seem overly optimistic to hope that, among the works that have survived from ancient Greece and Rome, there will always be some which will ignite the love of enough readers in each of the coming generations to permit enough familiarity with their languages to persist, to generate enough good new translations, and to ensure that the whole cycle of love and toil, which has lasted for millennia, will be able to continue.

It is all too easy for adults, especially perhaps for those who read for a living, to forget how passionately they used to read when they were younger. The young reader’s ardent love for books, which seems to me the only possible motor (but also a sufficient one) for the cycle I have been describing, may be difficult for some of us to recall; it may help to envision it, if I conclude my own abstract and sketchy discussion of this phenomenon by citing one great poet’s account of it, Rilke’s poem “Der Leser” from the second part of his *Neue Gedichte*:

“Der Leser”

Wer kennt ihn, diesen, welcher sein Gesicht
wegsenkte aus dem Sein zu einem zweiten,
das nur das schnelle Wenden voller Seiten
manchmal gewaltsam unterbricht?

Selbst seine Mutter wäre nicht gewiß,
ob *er* es ist, der da mit seinem Schatten
Getränktes liest. Und wir, die Stunden hatten,
was wissen wir, wieviel ihm hinschwand, bis
er mühsam aufsah: alles auf sich hebend,
was unten in dem Buche sich verhielt,
mit Augen, welche, statt zu nehmen, gebend
anstießen an die fertig-volle Welt:
wie stille Kinder, die allein gespielt,
auf einmal das Vorhandene erfahren;
doch seine Züge, die geordnet waren,
blieben für immer umgestellt.

“The Reader”

Who knows him, this one, who sank his face away from Being to a second one, which only the swift turning of full pages sometimes violently interrupts?

Even his mother could not be certain whether *he* is the one who over there is reading what has been steeped in his shadow. And we, who had hours, what do we know, how much vanished away for him, until

he laboriously looked up: heaving onto himself everything that was in the book below, with eyes which, instead of taking, giving, bumped against the finished-full world: as silent children, who played alone, suddenly realize what is present; but his features, which were ordered, remained forever rearranged.

Some contemporary theorists assert that literary works crush the poor readers exposed to them, incapacitating them by imposing upon them hegemonic ideologies and thereby preventing them from resisting the exploitation of dominant power structures. Rilke’s poem tells a different story, of the way in which a literary work empowers readers who surrender themselves to it, helps them to escape from the confines of the form of life into which they were born and to run the joyous risk of trying out new and unforeseen modes of experience. This reader’s mother would no longer recognize her own son, so far has the experience of literature liberated him from the genetic destiny to which she had no choice but to consign him. As for us, the “Wir” who have “Stunden” that are both the mechanical clock-time of everyday technical, non-poetic life, and the hours of instruction in classes which pretend to teach us about poetry but really know nothing about it, “we” too may know very little at first but can be brought by the agency of this very poem to imagine what that reader must have been experiencing. For Rilke, the experience of reading does indeed inevitably abstract us at first from our lived world; but then, like the reader’s eyes, it ends up giving far more than it takes: it activates imaginative possibilities within us that make the real world seem boring, finished, trivial in comparison, and that change us, not momentarily in the way that children switch suddenly from their games to an awareness of the reality that had surrounded them the whole time, but permanently, so that we will be different people from the ones our parents made us and will be able to shape a reality none of us could have envisaged before.

Rilke’s poem starts like a sonnet, but—after the astonishing enjambment “bis | er mühsam aufsah” (8–9)—it goes on to substitute a refined and unexpected octet for the conventional sestet, and it carefully omits the expected iamb at the end of the first quatrain and in the last line. Thereby it invites us to fill out the form ourselves, expanding and exploiting the rigid stereotype of the

sonnet form in order, precisely, to break through it, bursting open conventional expectations and introducing us, its readers, to a new poetic world, a second Being. But for this to work, we must be willing to drench the literary text with our own shadow: not only in the concrete sense we would expect from a *Neues Gedicht* of Rilke's, that the heads of readers bowed over the text they are concentrating upon block off from the page some of the very light they need in order to illuminate what they are reading; but also in the symbolic sense we expect no less from Rilke, that readers must irrigate the dry letter of the transmitted past text with the fertilizing vitality of their own present existence if the spirit within it is to speak to them and through them.

Rilke's reader is a limit case, to be sure, but his condition is one to which, I believe, readers, and especially young readers, have always aspired. To adopt the words which Shelley wrote about his own childhood in his “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” young people always have been, and presumably always will be, “...with fearful steps pursuing | Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.” In the one hundred and eighty years since Shelley wrote these lines, and especially in recent decades, our steps may well have become more fearful. But our hopes have not changed.

Further Reading

It is one sign of the continuing vitality of Classics in America that the issues considered in the present essay have been the object of lively and controversial discussion, especially in the last several years. Readers may wish to compare the positions argued for here with the following views:

- P. Culham and L. Edmunds, eds., *Classics: A Discipline and Profession in Crisis?* (Lanham, MD 1989).
- D. Damrosch, “Can Classics Die?” *Lingua Franca* 5:6 (Sept./Oct. 1995): 61–66.
- V. D. Hanson and J. Heath, “Who Killed Homer?” *Arion* 3rd series 5.2 (Fall 1997): 108–54.
- . *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York 1998).
- J. Herington, “Litterae Inhumaniores,” *Arion* 3rd series 5.1 (Spring/Summer 1997): 7–21 (reprinted from *The American Future and the Humane Tradition*, ed. R. E. Hiedemann [Associated Faculty Press, 1982]).
- K. F. Kitchell, Jr., E. Phinney, S. Shelmerdine, and M. Skinner, “Greek 2000—Crisis, Challenge, Deadline,” *CJ* 91.4 (1996): 393–420.
- B. M. W. Knox, *The Oldest Dead White European Males and Other Reflections on the Classics* (New York 1993).
- P. Lewis, “Not to Bury Homer but to Update Him,” *New York Times*, 7 March 1998, pp. B9 and B11.
- C. McGee, “The Classic Moment,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Sunday, 16 February 1997, p. 41.
- M. C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA 1997).

- J. O'Donnell, *et al.*, "Is Classics Ancient History? A Mini-Symposium," *Lingua Franca* 5:6 (Sept./Oct. 1995): 62–65.
- G. Wills, "There's Nothing Conservative about the Classics Revival," *The New York Times Magazine*, Sunday, 16 February 1997, pp. 38ff.