I

PRECEDENT, SURVIVAL, METAMORPHOSIS: CLASSICAL INFLUENCES IN THE MODERN WORLD

WHAT WE HOPEFULLY LABEL the 'classical heritage' is, ultimately, a phenomenon as elusive as Lewis Carroll's Snark – liable to turn into a Boojum when cornered – and as mutable as Proteus, the original Old Man of the Sea. About the one general point of agreement is that by 'the classics' we mean the Graeco-Roman tradition: and even that has been challenged, on occasion, by hopeful Sinologists or students of the Upanishads whose cultural allegiances outstrip their historical common sense. Anyone who pursues this subject for long will soon begin to sympathise with Aristotle's revealing remark – 'The more time I spend by myself, the more attached I have become to myths.'[1] The myths, of course, are modern no less than ancient; and even the ancient ones have been put, as we shall see, to some modern uses that would have baffled, and sometimes shocked, their Greek or Roman exponents. *Mimesis*, for instance, it has recently been argued,[2] is really not in the pattern, but in the mind of the observer, and offers not so much a technique of conservation as strategies for improvement.

Such trends have not stopped those old enough to hanker, wistfully, after a belief in metaphysics from promoting classical culture and art – products of *mimesis* in a very different sense – as 'a prophylactic against unacceptable aspects of the modern world'.[3] Aristotle, of course, is invoked as authority for both views. No serious artist today, critics argue, can work through the canons of classical art; yet that art has never been more widely or intensely admired. Hence the oddly impassioned ongoing debate over Andrew Wyeth: not so much is he a good artist, but is he an artist at all? Classical education, based on a deep knowledge of the Latin and Greek languages, is, at best, a flourishing minority cult for enthusiasts; yet today classical scholarship has scaled fresh heights of methodological precision and technical sophistication, while Greek and Roman authors are reaching a wider audience – even if only through the distorting glass of translation – than ever before. The situation,

in short, is redolent of paradox, something that properly invites closer scrutiny.

In some ways, of course, we are shaped by the legacy without being consciously aware of it. This is most strikingly true as regards the language we speak. English is an immensely complex repository of assimilated loan-words. By far the largest proportion of these – indeed, it has been estimated, over three-quarters of our entire vocabulary, and 50 per cent or more even of the 10,000 most common words we use – are of Latin or Greek derivation.[4] In short, like it or not, we *are* our history: a history shaped irrevocably by Greek concepts and Roman law and administration: by the common Greek speech of the *koine* and the Latin of imperial bureaucracy, transmitted through the Eastern and Western churches respectively; by Ciceronian rhetoric and Aristotelian logic: by that all-pervasive Platonic philosophy to which – as Whitehead claimed,[5] with only minimal hyperbole – the work of every subsequent thinker formed no more than a series of extended footnotes.

The same is true, *a fortiori*, of former provinces such as Spain or France, where, as in Italy itself, culture was largely continuous, and the language remained a mutation of Latin. To an even more striking extent Greece forms an historical and linguistic continuum. In Germany, by contrast, where the Roman legions and administrators never settled, classical loan-words are notable by their absence, while Teutonic myth (as Wagnerian addicts are uncomfortably aware) remained lumpish, violent, and primitive, shot through with most unclassical infusions of improbable Brobdingnagian lusts and forest *Schwärmerei*.[6] Most significant of all for our present purposes, Latin and Greek were, and have remained, unashamedly elitist in function: the languages of scholarship, of the Church, of the Imperial civil service, of the great humanists, of upper-class, often aristocratic, thinkers and writers who believed in that hieratic cosmos of fixed class-distinctions popularised by the Stoics. Language preserves the dichotomy of Us and Them. Anglo-Saxon terms are simple and basic: indeed, Old English betrays its linguistic, one had almost said tribal, primitivism by repeatedly borrowing words for general concepts, though it already possessed numerous terms denoting aspects of those concepts – something calculated to put any social anthropologist on the alert. Thus, it had no noun to express colour, though enough individual colour-identifications to fill the spectrum; no verb 'to move', though verbs in plenty for specific types of movement, from running to swimming: no generic terms for family relationships, but labels for just about every member of the family. For all but the very simplest concepts or abstractions, above all for scientific neologisms, Latin and Greek 'provide virtually every derivation'.[7]

In Greece (see n.19 *ad fin.*) this linguistic dichotomy has been fixed, apparently for ever, as a political confrontation between conservative right (*katharévousa*) and populist left (*dhemotikí*). Such ingrained elitism, however variously our own prejudices may choose to describe it – the pursuit of excellence (or *arete*, or *virtù*), nostalgic conservatism, a class-bound and

reactionary attachment to outmoded privilege – lies at the very heart of the classical tradition, and, ever since the early nineteenth century, has proved an increasingly divisive factor in determining our conscious attitude to the legacy as we perceive it. The great paradox of the Graeco-Roman world for us today is the way in which its unparallelled intellectual and artistic fecundity of invention in the arts and sciences was dedicated throughout (with brief exceptions only) to the maintenance of a privileged *status quo*. The ancient economic ideal was not – you may be surprised to learn – our own goal of increased productivity, but stability of revenue.[8] Stoic cosmology envisioned a changeless uniformity of order, in heaven as on earth, a 'natural law' that justified the prescriptive rule of imperial Rome or Byzantium, and was eagerly borrowed, not only by medieval thinkers (who revamped it as the Ladder of Being), but also by men of the Renaissance as distinguished as Hooker or Sir Thomas Elyot.[9] Shakespeare gives vivid expression to this concept in *Troilus and Cressida* (? 1603):

> The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
> Observe degree, priority and place . . .
> Take but degree away, untune that string,
> And hark, what discord follows!

It is no accident that the Greek and Roman verbs (*neoterizein, res nouare*) habitually translated as 'to rebel' or 'to make a revolution' in fact simply mean 'to produce change (or novelty)': all change was, by definition, disruptive of the social order. The number of classics professors who are ferocious reactionaries should not really surprise us. *C'est leur métier*: conservation is, on every count, their proper business.

Here, of course, we run into yet another paradox, since one of the greatest Greek gifts to the world is commonly held to have been democracy. No one would argue with that; and yet we should never forget the severe limitations, of both extent and duration, that applied to the original experiment. It had no other parallels in neighbouring Near Eastern countries; while within Greece itself it was far from universal, and certainly not (as is sometimes supposed) coterminous with the rule of the city-state (*polis*). The example, of course, that we know best is that of post-Cleisthenic Athens from the late sixth to the mid-fourth century BC; and even here political equality, *isonomia*,[10] neither took in slaves and women, let alone foreign residents (*metoikoi*, metics), nor did anything to disturb a social class-system still firmly rooted in blood-lines, privilege, capital, and unabashed snobbery. The best and the brightest (a fair equivalent of the Athenian *kaloi k'agathoi*) might give the many-headed garlic-breathing landless rabble the vote: but they were not required to invite its members to dinner, much less introduce them to their daughters. Some of Aristophanes' bitterest jokes – Euripides' mother as greengrocer, Strepsiades marrying above his station[11] – are solidly class-

based. The *banausos*, originally simply an artisan, acquires pejorative associations.[12] Manual labour of any sort, especially at the behest of others, is looked down on. The modern reader who studies Aristotle's *Politics* (*c.* 325 BC) finds, to his astonishment, that learning to play a musical instrument is rejected as a banausic manual occupation, unsuitable for gentlemen, and that a clear distinction is made, not only between the educated (*pepaideuménos*) and the vulgar (*phortikós*), but also, despite the franchise, between the banausic *and the free* (*eleutheros*). [13]

This attitude foreshadows the *de facto* collapse of *polis* democracy, and the reversion to authoritarian (or, at best, oligarchic) rule during the Hellenistic period: and it was the Hellenistic rather than the classical legacy, politically speaking, that was transmitted, via Rome, to the medieval and modern world. The snobbery, the elitism, the contempt not merely for trade but for all applied science (this being in the hands of technicians and artisans),[14] the obsession with stability and the fixed world-order – these remained constant throughout, and form one of the most significant elements (though seldom recognised as such) in the whole classical tradition. Variations on this attitude confront us in virtually every classical author, since, for Greeks and Romans alike, writing, like the study of history or mathematics, was the prerogative of educated rentiers supported by a private income. For fifteen hundred years and more this expression of a socially fixed order – fixed, indeed, by divine dispensation – met with no serious objections. Indeed, until the late eighteenth century, and in some areas much longer than that, it was accepted as virtually axiomatic, a moral postulate no less praiseworthy than Alexander's conquests (which themselves began to acquire some strange cultural justifications after aggressive imperialism went out of fashion). It was not until the egalitarian 1940s that liturgical editors were shamed into excising, from that peculiarly insipid hymn 'All things bright and beautiful', the tell-tale stanza proclaiming: 'The rich man in his castle,/The poor man at his gate,/God made them high or lowly/And ordered their estate.'

The scholars, politicians and divines of the Renaissance would have dismissed as subversive drivel Lewis Mumford's speech at the 1943 Stanford Conference, on the theme of 'The humanities look ahead', when he castigated the Greeks for 'their failure to embrace humanity . . . to address the soldier, the sailor, the craftsman, the farmer, and to give hope and faith to the common man . . .'[15] Their respect for the common man stood on a par with Plato's in the *Republic*, and lower than that it is hard to go. They looked to the past for practical advice on good government, even for moral uplift, while never doubting that it was they who had the prerogative to govern, that their moral rectitude was a class, almost a private family, issue between themselves and God.

Nothing else has so laid the classical tradition open to attack in our own time as this sanctified perpetuation of class privilege, and the prescriptive dogmatising on anything from literature to the natural order – look at

Aristotle's *Poetics* no less than his cosmological pronouncements – that forms its natural concomitant. Thomas Gaisford, Professor of Greek at Oxford in the early nineteenth century, is reported [16] to have declared – during a Good Friday sermon! – that 'the advantages of a classical education are twofold – it enables us to look down with contempt on those who have not shared its advantages, and also fits us for places of emolument not only in this world but also in that which is to come'. We may laugh at Gaisford's eschatological pretensions – the notion of professors forming a *corps d'elite* in heaven has its own weird charm – but the class prejudice was all too palpable, and, worse, as we have seen, directly derived from Graeco-Roman social mores.

From the American War of Independence until the aftermath of World War II this elitism provided one of the stock charges against a classical education, though there were plenty of others. Perhaps most deleterious, certainly in the USA, was that disdain for history, that wholesale rejection of the past – above all the European past – which has always formed so prominent a strain in American anti-intellectualism (itself a central feature of the egalitarian process). Look to the future: the past is irrelevant – or, even if relevant (in the fashionable sense of containing one's roots), obscured and corrupted by the elitist garbage of centuries. Up with hot-gospellers and down with the Apostolic Succession. Above all, down with humanism (often equated by the semi-literate faithful with Satanism), and with any prescriptive dogma except that trumpeted from the pulpit. Refugees from the past have, of course, a special incentive 'to excise history from their lives'.[17] No monuments, no ruins, no bunk. The foreshortened perspective thus produced (something from which in the fifth century BC both Herodotus and Thucydides had to struggle free: trends tend to be cyclic) leads, of course, to foreshortened judgments. Those who cannot recall the past are indeed condemned to fulfil it'[18] – a more cogent reason than many, as Polybius saw no less clearly than Santayana, for the study of Graeco-Roman culture.

The sheer number of points at which the classical tradition has come under attack during the past two centuries testifies eloquently to its influence – and, indeed, to its staying-power. The Romantic Revival, in both literature and the visual arts, fought to break away from precedent and *mimesis*, in any form, and, as a result, put a premium on self-generated originality, pure inspiration. Scientific progress, while loosening the stranglehold of Protestantism, also contrived to render by far the larger part of ancient science and medicine (if not pure mathematics) wholly obsolete, thus undermining the prescriptive authority of Greek and Roman texts as a whole. The French Revolution, the American and Greek Wars of Independence, inevitably disseminated a political egalitarianism squarely at odds with the Hellenistic and Roman systems inherited by the Renaissance. The fixed world-view became a scientific and a political anachronism: Aristarchus and Galileo, lone wolves both, had not lived in vain. Economics moved from static to dynamic objectives. The rhythms of written prose approximated, with unconscious

populist zest, ever closer to the vernacular.[19] Heroic *gestes* went out of fashion. The revolt against prescriptive patterns led not only to impressionism in art, but in mathematics to the development of non-Euclidean geometry,[20] and in linguistics to post-Chomskyan systems of grammar.

A new, more functional approach to education as, primarily, vocational training – attacked, without noticeable success, by countless humanists[21] – had the effect, while paying lip-service to classical studies, of relegating them to the status of cultural 'top-dressing'. There was no longer any need, it was argued, to turn to the classical past for anything practical: certainly not to learn how to express oneself or to solve problems of conduct, two reasons regularly advanced by Renaissance humanists.[22] The way to the stars – and, *a fortiori*, to Star Wars – was to be achieved by increasingly complex high technology, not through familiarity with Homer: the past was expendable, its function over, to be jettisoned like the first stage of a rocket. All the more regrettable, then, that those with the largest investment in the classical legacy, the scholars dedicated to its preservation, should in so many ways have failed to meet the challenge. The faults by no means lie all on one side.

Nor, in the case of the humanities, has it been only the professionals who are to blame. Perhaps the most insidious danger to which our Graeco-Roman roots have been exposed since the Industrial Revolution has been the temptation to use antiquity not so much to view modern problems (whether political, ethical, psychological, social or artistic) in true perspective, but rather as an idealised, and increasingly unreal, refuge from the harsh stresses and demands of contemporary life. (Visually, the dislocated marble statues and timeless sunlit colonnades of De Chirico embody this mood to perfection: his long lancing shadows suggest a world like that of Tennyson's Lotus Eaters, in which it was always afternoon, the apotheosis of *ataraxia*.) The Greeks looked back to a lost Golden Age: they would have been surprised to hear that they themselves were living in it.

Meanwhile this kind of escapist passivity bred its own, equally unreal, equally escapist reaction. Nietzsche and Schliemann, Gladstone and Arnold, Carlyle and Froude between them set several generations of classically educated Englishmen, weary of industrial squalor, Victorian pieties, and the emergent bourgeois state, to emulate that 'action, nobility, and moral and physical strength'[23] which they professed to find in early Greek epic. When war came in 1914 men like Rupert Brooke or Julian Grenfell saw themselves, with mythic insouciance, as Homeric heroes. Gallipoli was, after all, in the Thracian Chersonese, well on the way to Troy, so that Patrick Shaw-Stewart could write:

> I will go back this morning
> From Imbros over the sea:
> Stand in the trench, Achilles,
> Flame-capped, and shout for me.

The botched strategy and mudbound mass slaughter that followed quickly put paid to such romantic fancies: Shaw-Stewart might have done better with Thucydides, or even Archilochus, in his pocket rather than the *Iliad*.

The ancient world, though never (for complex reasons) effectively technologised, went through just about every modern reaction to the great fundamentals of life, most often in a disconcertingly sophisticated manner. As a result we have a constant, and constantly varied, sense of *déjà vu* in studying its history: it is we moderns who are so selective in our approach to it. Perhaps this is why the past obstinately refused, and still refuses, to die. I find it symbolically appropriate that the end of World War I should also have marked the completion of Marcel Proust's obsessional exploration of *temps perdu*. '1918 was the end of a myth', Robert Ogilvie wrote of this period.[24] Not so much the end, surely, as the *beginning* of a profound mythic revolution, a subterranean bombshell as powerful as any other upheaval that marked the years between the wars (what Auden so aptly labelled the Age of Anxiety), and, incidentally, revealing the archetypal durability of charters and patterns that had their genesis among warring Mycenaean baronies in the Peloponnese, 1500 years and more before the birth of Christ.

The much-publicised ransacking of myth, for their own ends, by Freud and Jung gave fresh force and significance to familiar literary landmarks: the toybox of the conscious mind stood revealed as a dangerous repository of unconscious dynamite. Paradoxically, again – since the Oedipus complex, however firmly acclimatised as a Bronx joke, has won few serious adherents, while the evidence for Jungian archetypes tends to go soft on close investigation[25] – the shaky scholarly underpinnings of such theories made no difference to their epidemic appeal, a fact of life which Robert Graves and Arnold Toynbee (to take only the two most obvious examples) were to cash in on with some gusto. Diagrammed by Lévi-Strauss as a problem in man's autochthonous origins,[26] Oedipus remained (what indeed he had always been) a powerful property for poets – though Sophocles might have blinked a little at the version Ted Hughes presents in his ballad entitled (inevitably) 'Song for a Phallus':[27]

> The Dickybird came to Oedipus
> You murderous little sod
> The sphynx [*sic*] will bite your bollocks off
> This order comes from God.

Yet Sophocles himself had invented, it seems, Oedipus' agonising process of self-discovery, self-blinding, exile, and miraculous assumption at Colonus: having a well-developed fifth-century sense of guilt and retribution to keep his unruly erotic urges in check, he could not stomach the archaic tradition, according to which Oedipus, that incestuous parricide, remained ruler in Thebes till the day he died, eyes intact, leaving rich flocks to be fought over

by the sons he had cursed.[28] The dominant characteristic of living myth is its infinite adaptability to fresh needs.

Homer himself provides a remarkable instance of this. As countless new translations, not to mention a remarkable recent TV documentary,[29] make very clear, many of us are still in search of the Trojan War. Schliemann's veracity, and psychological balance, may have taken a beating lately,[30] but Achilles, Agamemnon and Odysseus still fascinate. That kind of attraction, of course, always arouses academic distaste: hence the passion (camouflaged as scholarly honesty) for proving everything of the sort, from Troy to the Troezen Decree, a fantasy or a fake. The anti-romantic reaction had, in fact, begun long before 1914: as early as 1842 the cartoonist Honoré Daumier produced an acid series of lithographs in *Charivari*, [31] depicting, *inter alia*, Odysseus and Penelope reunited in bed – a stout, elderly, decidedly plain matron rather wistfully contemplating her nightcapped, toothless, open-mouthed, snoring and clearly senile husband. Such an attitude looked forward to similar Gallic *jeux d'esprit* of the 1930s: Jean Giraudoux's *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place* (1935), with Hector and Odysseus working to sidetrack battle via negotiation, or Jean Giono's *Birth of the Odyssey* (1938), in which Odysseus figures as an aging, neurotic fantasist, spinning ever taller stories to excuse his erotic escapades.

Yet the *Iliad*, even in an age that had no time for heroics, retained all its pristine emotional power. In the late summer of 1940, after the fall of France, Simone Weil saw it as a 'poem of force', a marvellous evocation of that cold and stony cruelty, backed by divine caprice, which forms a fundamental (and often disregarded) aspect of antiquity, and to which the expansionist activities of the Third Reich had given a new and fearful validation.[32] Auden's haunting variation on this theme, 'The Shield of Achilles', binds together modern statistical propaganda, marching legions and weed-choked fields, all the horrors of totalitarianism and, centrally, the Crucifixion, thus not only synchronising history, but turning Homer's counterpointed picture of civilisation and war inside out, so that what Hephaestus offers Thetis is no longer peace amid conflict, or even the conflict itself, but a blight obliterating both:[33]

She looked over his shoulder
  For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
  And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
  His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
  And a sky like lead.

The reworking of Graeco-Roman myth by modern poets and playwrights is an enormous theme on which I can do no more than touch here. But its

very size and universality are worth stressing. The need for roots, however cynically exploited, is not a mere temporary fad: and some roots run very deep. To jettison the past not only foreshortens our perspective; it also impoverishes the psyche. Too many ahistorical critics have emphasised that 'the dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did'; we still need Eliot's famous rejoinder:[34] 'Precisely, and they are that which we know.' There is a nightmarish poem by the Irish classicist Louis MacNeice, belonging to his last phase (1962), when, like Webster, he was much possessed by death. In a surreal scene of London at night, fogbound and with all the bridges down, Charon appears as a Thames ferryman:[35]

> He looked at us coldly
> And his eyes were dead and his hands on the oar
> Were black with obols and varicose veins
> Marbled his calves and he said to us coldly:
> If you want to die you will have to pay for it.

The density and interpenetration of past and present achieved here is only possible on a basis of tradition known, assimilated, and present as a potent, all-pervasive element in the inherited bloodstream of a culture. Here jazzy modernity need be no impediment: can, indeed, enhance the effect. Consider, for example, Kit Wright's 'Fortunes of War', a hilariously funny ballad in which the narrator, a renegade Trojan loaded with stolen loot, finds Cassandra living in 'a grey block of flats' off the Fulham Road in London, and uses her prophetic powers to make a fortune betting on the horses.[36]

The technique bears a certain affinity to that of the modern Greek poet Yannis Ritsos, in his great dramatic Mycenaean soliloquies.[37] Here, with a kind of unselfconscious synchronicity, Chrysothemis will talk to a reporter from a newspaper chain; automobiles coexist with chariots, and telephones with messengers; Phaedra chain-smokes; Persephone, on vacation from Hades, complains about the blinding Greek sunlight; and the aged Helen, warts and whiskers sprouting from her withered face, sits in squalor amid dirty coffee-cups while church bells sound outside. Here, of course, history and culture form, more than elsewhere, a single unbroken continuum. Greece is Greece *is* Greece, so that even Ritsos, a communist poet imbued with the populist post-Byzantine tradition of *Romaiosyne* (that anti-classical obsession with nationalism and the Christianised culture of the New Rome in Constantinople), also thinks naturally and by instinct in the archaic mode. 'That grey ghost Helen,' exclaims Wright's narrator, 'was she what they all died for?': it might have been Ritsos' Helen that he had in mind.

Sometimes the use of the myth is esoteric, and knowledge of it inessential: no one, let's face it, is the worse off for not realising that Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* is an adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestis*, [38] while in Cocteau's *Orphée* the 'themes and symbols are part of the mythology of Cocteau, not of Orpheus'.[39]

But few would argue that Prometheus – to take an obvious example – does not stand at the very heart of society's perennial balancing-act between authority and freedom, or that a knowledge of the metamorphoses undergone by that Protean figure down the ages [40] does not immeasurably enhance our understanding of the human condition. From such a viewpoint myth and history serve a common purpose. Anyone who supposes that the totalitarian ills of this century are something new and unprecedented should turn back to Thucydides' analysis of civil war (3.82-83), parts of which, with their description of double-think, calculated atrocities, and what today might be labelled 'bourgeois objectivism', read as though written by George Orwell. *Those who cannot recall the past are condemned to fulfil it.*

Perhaps the most useful thing to be done at this point in a state-of-the-art report is not so much to pursue any specific aspect of the classical legacy – that will come later – but rather to attempt a provisional balance-sheet in historical terms. We have to admit, from the outset, that a good number of the criticisms levelled at classical learning, and the humanities generally, have been, and in some cases still are, well-founded. I have, in the past, formulated such charges myself,[41] and have already suggested others here. As regards the actual literature of antiquity, and the cultural values to be extrapolated from it, the most common complaint, of course, is that it is irrelevant to our own age. Historically fallacious, as we have already seen, this charge remains a perennial favourite with the instant-culture brigade. To make it stick, we must assume that the only knowledge worth having is practical and functional: that all education should be career-oriented, primarily towards industry, commerce, administration, and the applied sciences; and that the liberal arts can only be tolerated, if at all, as a recreational or decorative luxury.

For the past forty years or so, ever since World War II in fact, this attitude has been far more dominant than all but the most honest humanists care to admit. Here is that embattled liberal Norman Foerster, writing in 1946:[42] 'It is believed, if not always asserted, that the good life of man consists mainly in the pursuit and possession of material advantages . . .' The ideal is seen as 'a living world of experience, not a dead world of records and books'. There are, of course, good, if not sufficient, reasons for this. We often forget the extent to which Renaissance humanists utilised the newly recovered texts of antiquity *as sources of knowledge*, as 'authorities on matters of fact in such spheres as astronomy, geography, zoology, medicine'.[43] As has been well said,[44] 'the past fortunes of the classical heritage are there to show us how social aspirations and interests can affect the course of education'; the rise of modern science and technology, to look no further, has largely robbed these ancient texts of any factually prescriptive value they might once have had. This is the main reason why the classical legacy as a whole (viewed by functionaries solely in functional terms) has been sidelined in such quarters like the Epicurean gods, a cultural anachronism worth no more than the occasional polite genuflection for the sake of past glories.

Here the humanists have not, unfortunately, always served their own cause to advantage. Too many of them, seeing modernism as the Great Enemy, have in response adopted, with unseemly relish, that fundamental Graeco-Roman elitism which professed to despise all aspects of commerce, industry, and technical knowledge as 'banausic': a view which, though it had the backing of writers as diverse as Xenophon, Aristotle, and Seneca,[45] still played straight into the Great Enemy's hands. When modernists dismissed this attitude as anti-egalitarian (which it was), and fundamentally unrealistic, traditional humanists – accepting the challenge, but too often somewhat hazy about the realities of life – clung to the classics as the embodiment of good taste, the proper intellectual training for a corps of post-Platonic Guardians whose business was government, and whose leisure, what the Romans termed *otium*, embraced such interesting minor skills as pastiching English poetry into Greek or Latin verse.[46] They made the classic mistake of despising both science and industry without a proper understanding of either. Small wonder that their opponents, just as mistakenly, dismissed ancient literature as a mere florilegium for the privileged. Worse, the traditionalists' sclerotic conservatism was, notoriously, symbolised by the fact that professional classical scholars still clung, with fierce exclusiveness, to the editing and textual criticism which had constituted a necessary rescue operation in the Hellenistic Age and, to a lesser degree, during the Renaissance, but which now should have served, at best, as means to a greater end – full cultural understanding.

This end, unfortunately, scholars all too seldom pursued. They were not comfortable with literary value-judgments or aesthetics, which they tended to dismiss, defensively, as emotionalism or non-quantifiable hot air. This, combined with innate snobbishness, made some of them take a kind of inverted pride in accepting the modernists' criticisms. In 1938 one commentator observed, ruefully, that the humanities 'build no bridges and raise no crops; they cure no fevers and point no guns'.[47] Are such things, it might be asked, their business? In a sense, yes. This pessimist might have done well to reflect that in fact the humanities can, and should, build bridges between nations, raise plentiful crops of ideas, cure the fevers of irrationalism, and, if pushed, point the gun of irrefutable argument and consensus. There have, it is true, been attempts, more often than not inept, to justify the classics in practical terms (see p.26 below); but in retreat humanists have more often tended, like so many Hellenistic intellectuals before them, to contract out, to avoid involvement, to live – as Epicurus advised[48] – unnoticed, their ideal, similarly, the negative *ataraxia*, or mere absence of upset.

Too many advocates of classics since the war have tended to speak with the unattractive voice of privilege in retreat, frothing on vaguely about law and order, faith in God (the relation of Athens and Jerusalem is, of course, an enormous problem in itself), the expression of values, or the spirit of man, while at the same time sneering (like Plato, like Seneca) at 'soulless technicians'

and new-style layabouts,[49] for whom culture has 'somewhat sinister aristocratic connections' and work, especially if they happened to be students, is 'figuratively as well as literally a four-letter Anglo-Saxon word'. The ideal, as for Archimedes, was a situation in which 'no utilitarian purpose or aim contaminated the purity of an unsullied intellectual life'.[50]

Like all ideals, this one has been much abused for sectarian purposes, and by scientists at least as much as by humanists. The claims of pure scholarship are too often advanced as a cover for ivory tower *ataraxia*. Snow's two cultures (content today, in all likelihood, to regard themselves as being in binary opposition, another fashionable state) will never value each other at their true worth until the cumulative, and ingrained, misapprehensions of over two millennia have been scraped away. Modernists must learn that they cannot jettison the past like so much trash: the result is liable to be a mindless orgy of trend-catching and anti-literacy, best typified by the appalling popularity, a decade or two ago, of the jargon-laden, hyped-up, and profoundly ahistorical works of Marshall McLuhan, designed to flatter just about all the prejudices of a TV generation in which functional illiteracy was already well advanced.[51] Egalitarianism should level up, not down.

On the other hand, scientists have every reason to resent cheap, ill-informed, and superior sneers at their approach to the life of the intellect: minds that can conceive the DNA double helix are not to be brushed aside so easily. Things have changed a good deal since Archimedes' day. At the same time this vast increase in the substance and complexity of our scientific knowledge does not alter the fact that a scientist's mode of perception tends to lack the historical perspective, the broadly human element, fundamental to a balanced view of civilisation. It would be ironic if a new prescriptive dogma, that of the scientific planner, were to replace the old discarded certainties of the Renaissance humanists. The stereotypes certainly do not make things easier. If modernists regard classicists as innocents clinging to an obsolete past and meaningless privileges, they themselves figure in the demonology of their opponents as robot technocrats, all brain and no heart, with a regrettable weakness for left-wing planned economies, and virtually deaf to the true voices of humanity. Still, I think Robert Ogilvie was probably right when he said that 'there can never be any prospect of a civilisation being centred on science',[52] on the grounds that 'however valuable a scientific education may be for the enrichment of the intellect and the comprehension of the material universe, it does not supply the substance in which men can find themselves and move themselves'. The consistent *de haut en bas* sniping at scientific attitudes by nervous or prejudiced humanists – totally unjustified in itself – makes it extremely hard to achieve consensus on so vital a concern. But consensus there must be: we are all in this together.

What, then, is the sum of the whole matter? The classical heritage is with us whether we like it or not. It is there in the language we use: it permeates our literature and art: its legacy remains operative in scientific areas as disparate as

pure mathematics, orthopaedic surgery, or the analysis of conic sections; it still, to an extraordinary degree, dominates our philosophical thinking. A fair proportion of tribal nonsense has been handed down, inevitably, along with the rare gifts: a geocentric, up-and-down, heaven-earth-and-hell cosmology; a theory of 'humours' that still encourages us to talk about people as sanguine, phlegmatic, or bilious; a complex astrological determinism which continues to surface, in a debased form, in the popular press, and has, equally, left its mark on the language: 'Men are still jovial, mercurial, or saturnine, talk of fortunate conjunctions of events, believe in unlucky numbers, and thank their stars.'[53]

Still, the educational monopoly enjoyed by the Renaissance humanists and their successors, which in the long run may be seen as the worst thing ever to befall the classical heritage, is, at last, broken. As Sir James Mountford stressed twenty years ago, in a Presidential address to the British Classical Association:[54] 'Gone are the days when all men who had claim to education and who in their various spheres moulded the current of events had a common background and training in the classics.' The discipline is back in the open marketplace where it belongs, to stand or fall on its own merits. Gone, too, one would like to believe, are those spacious justifications of elitism on pseudo-practical grounds: the classics as an unmatchable training for the mind, with Latin as the supremely logical language, the kind of thing that elicited (as early as 1938) a derisive comment from Louis MacNeice, himself an excellent (and professional) classical scholar: [55]

We learned that a gentleman never misplaces his accents,
    That nobody knows how to speak, much less how to write
English who has not hob-nobbed with the great-grandparents of English,
    That the boy on the Modern Side is merely a parasite
But the classical student is bred to the purple, his training in syntax
    Is also a training in thought
And even in morals; if called to the bar or the barracks
    He always will do what he ought.

Nor will it suffice today to retreat into pedantry for its own sake, to emulate Didymos Chalcenteros, the Elder Pliny, Browning's Grammarian, George Eliot's Mr Casaubon, or even the legendary English headmaster who is said to have told his class:[56] 'Boys, this term you are to have the privilege of reading the *Oedipus Coloneus* of Sophocles, a veritable treasure-house of grammatical peculiarities.'

This quintessentially Hellenistic attitude tempts me to conclude on something of a personal note. For some years now I have been occupied with the writing of a full-scale political, social, and cultural history of the Hellenistic Age, between Alexander's death in 323 and the abolition of the last Successor kingdom by Octavian in 31. As my research proceeded I found (to quote

from my introduction) that 'I could not help being struck, again and again, by an overpowering sense of *déjà vu*', and being fascinated by 'the ornate, indeed rococo, glass in which Alexandria, Antioch and Pergamon reflect contemporary fads, failings, and aspirations, from the urban malaise to religious fundamentalism, from Veblenism to *haute cuisine*, from funded scholarship and mandarin literature to a flourishing drop-out counter-culture, from political impotence in the individual to authoritarianism in government, from science perverted for military ends to illusionism for the masses, from spiritual solipsism on a private income to systematic extortion in pursuit of the materialistic and hence plutocratic dream'.

Quite apart from some jolting lessons to be learnt here about the constant elements in human nature (a very different thing from mankind's evolutionary acquisition of knowledge) – *déjà vu* on a truly cosmic scale – it is this depressingly familiar scenario, rather than the currently more popular Periclean myth, which remains, in essence, the legacy of the Graeco-Roman world. As such it was accepted until new winds of freedom blowing through Europe and America – somewhere between the Age of Enlightenment and the Romantic Revival – created a boom in the fifth-century Athenian democratic ideal, together with its great literature, art, and architecture. (No one in later antiquity, we may note, had ever thought of including the Parthenon among the canonical Seven Wonders.) Yet that ideal was, as we have seen, highly uncharacteristic of Greece, and soon lost in any effective sense; in Rome it never caught on at all. If we are to do better than Auden's hypothetical academics who 'read the *New Yorker*, trust in God, and take short views',[57] we need to know not only how the metamorphosis took place, and why, but what our own organic relationship to this past may be within the seamless evolution of historical time. We cannot escape reality by living wholly in the past: but equally we cannot afford to stunt our humanity and destroy our understanding by ignoring that past as irrelevant.

The rise of Western civilisation has been a slow, hard-won, and infinitely precarious process that took at least seven millennia to bring to its present less-than-perfect state, and which (since in all things it must fight, and hopefully tame, nature, the perpetual struggle of *nomos* against *physis*) can be more easily lost than is often supposed. A major symptom of intellectual malaise today, and one directly attributable to neglect of, even contempt for, the past, is a failure of critical and moral standards. As E.R. Dodds – a classical scholar with a highly tuned moral sense – reminded us in 1964, this is an age 'when educated men find it increasingly hard to distinguish good literature from bad, sense from nonsense, the difficult insights of the creative innovator from the sham insights of the charlatan on the make'.[58] Hence, perhaps, the iconoclastic urge to deconstruct the lot. We can all think of names to fit the categories.

A few years earlier, in 1953, Kathleen Nott published a devastating, though isolated, humanistic attack on new-style critical and philosophical

trends, reminding us, *inter alia* (p. 323), that a good deal of Greek science had been as much on the mark as modern cultural theories were off it, and that Aristarchus of Samos, whose heliocentric theory had been formulated long before Galileo or Copernicus, suffered, just as they did, from religious bigotry. Miss Nott's book was called, significantly, *The Emperor's Clothes*: its targets were just the kind of thing that Dodds had in mind, even if Dodds himself was less fiercely Lucretian in his attitude to religion. Not that the Graeco-Roman intellectual tradition (as should by now be very clear) offered any guarantees to a free world, either politically or socially: that authoritarian streak was far too pervasive. The Nazis had a field-day with Plato's prescriptive legislation in the *Republic* and the *Laws*[59], while Marxist dialectic found its roots not only in Hegel, but far further back, among pre-Socratic thinkers such as the enigmatic – and ultra-aristocratic – Herakleitos.[60]

On the other hand, the perspective and discipline offered by thinkers of unsurpassed subtlety and no technological interests, over two millennia ago, at least gave modern intellectuals a critical edge, inoculating them against mere mindless agitprop and sloganeering: against the visceral claptrap of killers with guns in their hands and stocking masks on their heads. Far from being a mere cultural luxury or intellectual game, the maintenance of our classical-humanist legacy, at the highest level, is a vital and, yes, entirely practical element in the never-ending struggle to hold off barbarous recidivism and the gut-law of the jungle. Neither ancient nor modern democracy has been so successful that we can afford to be complacent about their ultimate survival.

That is why over-emphasis on the purely literary or artistic worth of the legacy bequeathed to us, of immense importance though that is, can, I think, lead us unconsciously to undervalue its crucial role in what Eliot called, in *East Coker*, 'the fight to recover what has been lost/ and found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions/ that seem unpropitious'. Not all of us would subscribe to Eliot's uncompromising claim that the only serious reason to retain the classics is the promotion of Christianity (or even, indeed, that the two are ultimately compatible): the historical irony of that assertion should be appreciated today in Athens, Jerusalem, and (if it comes to that) Alexandria. But Dodds' reasons for keeping classics as a university subject are clear and cogent: 'Cut off the classics, and you cut off all scholarly understanding of medieval history, of Roman law, and of the development of Christianity: you sever the Romance languages from their source; you exclude all serious study of the major influences that have moulded English and French literature.'[61]

Every word in that bill of particulars rings true; but Dodds might have paused longer to ask himself just *why*, except on purely academic or aesthetic grounds, this loss of historical perspective was so undesirable. I have a horrific memory, from my days as an ex-service undergraduate at Cambridge, of reading an article [62] by that apostle of wet but privileged liberalism, Sir Harold Nicolson, arguing that 'the charm of the Greek and Latin language is

that they offer us a lovely irrelevance; that they provide an escape from the material values of the modern world'. It is true, as we have seen (and as Nicolson noted with relish), that some attempts at the time to claim practical relevance for classical studies were ill-grounded, indeed downright embarrassing. But I hope to have demonstrated in general – what the more detailed studies here assembled will confirm – that the active preservation of our ancestral heritage, and of the languages that enshrine it, is no mere cultural diversion, but a matter of the most vital and immediate concern to us all.