ALTERED STATES: CULTURAL PLURALISM AND PSYCHOSIS IN ANCIENT LITERARY RECEPTIONS

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One of the hallmarks of Greco-Roman literary studies over the last thirty years has been the emergence of reception studies. It is not, of course, that the traces of Greek and Roman precedents in the works of many post-antique literary writers, artists, architects and thinkers were previously obscure. Already one hundred years ago one could readily find works of classical scholarship with titles like *The Greek Romances in Elizabethan Prose Fiction*.[1] In such earlier studies, however, the emphasis was upon 'influence' and 'legacy': classical texts and artefacts were typically regarded as sources of enlightenment that were unilaterally formative. Modern readers, conversely, were viewed as 'debtors'.[2] After two world wars, the fall of European empires and decades of reckoning with disequilibria of race, religion and gender, however, the idea of the Greco-Roman tradition as a treasury of unalloyed civilized values has proven less convincing.[3] 'Reception studies' is more than a new name for an old phenomenon; it marks an entirely renegotiated relationship with the classical past. Rather than celebrating the allegedly inherent value of the Greco-Roman tradition, the

[1] Wolff 1912; cf. e.g. Chapman 1915. A study of the emergence and development of reception studies as a field would be of great interest.

[2] Cf. the early twentieth-century American series *Our Debt to Greece and Rome*. This metaphor is artfully deconstructed by Hanink 2017.

[3] The extent of Classics' own complicity in this history is of course widely debated, but it is hardly deniable that many have claimed an allegedly 'superior' Greco-Roman civilization as a pretext for various forms of supremacism. A 1926 review of Jane Harrison's *Mythology* (in the series mentioned in the previous note) begins by noting the common scholarly accusation levelled against her 'of taking excessive interest in the undoubtedly intriguing doings of peoples with dusky faces and woolly heads', but counters that 'she may now be acquitted without a stain upon her character'; for what the book under review shows is that 'whatever of savagery may have lingered round the Greek even at his highest development, the really interesting thing about him is not his savagery but his Hellenism' (Brooke 1926: 19).

'transmitting' culture, it locates the agency with the 'receiver', placing the emphasis upon the receiver's creativity and ethical responsibilities.[4] In particular, modern reception studies represent the meeting point between a theoretical emphasis (drawn from poststructuralism and postmodernism) on the equipollence of the 'copy' and the 'original' and a political imperative to expand not just access to classical literature but also the number of points of entry into the tradition(s). Twentieth- and twenty-first-century reception, in other words, has demonstrated that 'the classical tradition' is a global phenomenon that cuts (inconsistently, to be sure) across multiple demographics.[5]

At the same time as reception history has flourished, studies of classical literary texts 'themselves' have been revolutionized by related new methodologies. Scholarship on Hellenistic and Latin poetics in particular has been transformed by the embrace of intertextuality and allusion.[6] These terms have been used in notoriously variable ways. 'Allusion' is typically imagined in rather straightforward terms: thus *arma virumque*, to take the most familiar example in the whole of classical literature, alludes to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in a sophisticated capping gesture that marks Virgil's supersession of his Homeric models. 'Intertextuality' is sometimes used in a similar way; but in its most radical form, proposed by Julia Kristeva, it indicates an anti-authoritarian theoretical belief that no language is fully 'authored' by its speaker, that all utterances are always already borrowed from elsewhere.[7] 'Intertextuality' in classical literary studies, therefore, has often been taken to indicate something more acrophobically destabilizing than mere allusion: a sense that the text can be opened up to multiple different

[4] For an analysis of classicism in terms of time, value, and responsibility see Postclassicisms Collective 2020: 8–44.

[5] For recent discussion see Hall and Stead 2020: 8–12. There are many excellent studies exploring classical reception and gender (e.g. Stevenson 2005; Hurst 2006; Wyles and Hall 2016), race and nationality (Goff and Simpson 2007; Greenwood 2010; Mee and Foley 2011; Hall 2013; Jansen 2018). More generally on classical reception see Martindale and Thomas 2006; Hardwick and Stray 2008; Gildenhard, Silk, and Barrows 2013; Richardson 2019; Postclassicisms Collective 2020.

[6] Hinds 1998 is the best known general study of the phenomenon of intertextuality in classical poetics; see also Edmunds 2001. There are of course many studies of specific texts. On the theoretical varieties of intertextuality see Allen 2011.

[7] Kristeva 1980.

interpretations depending on which line of allusive filiation the reader chooses to follow.

These two intellectual developments – reception studies and intertextuality – are related, particularly via their poststructuralist ancestry; but they are not coterminous. In particular, the label 'reception studies' is almost always used in connection with analyses of post-antique readers of ancient texts, while 'intertextuality' is almost always employed, by classicists at any rate, of intra-antique relationships. This distinction risks giving the false impression that Greco-Roman antiquity was a unified, sealed cultural system sharply demarcated from later periods (and indeed, by implication, from neighbouring cultures).[8] This volume considers, amongst other things, what is at stake in this distinction. What happens if we think of ancient texts in terms of reception rather than intertextuality? In making this move we follow the lead of our honorand, Richard Hunter, who has pioneered the field of ancient reception studies.

The central implications of this reorientation, we contend, are threefold. First, the focus on reception prompts a greater focus on the wider contextual frames of the 'receiving' text. The emphasis is now less upon the 'meaning' of the text (and its deconstruction) than upon its materiality, its cultural baggage, the force of its political intervention. Reception suggests a more engaged, dynamically active process than intertextuality: texts and artefacts (both 'transmitters' and 'recipients') now signify emblematically as social documents, materially embedded in their cultures. Second, to speak of reception within classical antiquity breaks down any simplistic distinction between 'antiquity' and 'modernity', between classical and classicist. It reminds us that the 'classical' nature of Greco-Roman literature was already an ancient construction. 'Classical Athens', for example, was already a chimerical fiction in Hellenistic Alexandria (and arguably even already in fourth-century Athens). Finally, it insists that Greco-Roman literature was not simply a tradition 'handed down' within

[8] This explains some of the discomfort that scholars of antiquity have felt with Currie 2016's claim that Homeric poetry stands in an intertextual relationship with Near Eastern epic.

a monoculture, but subject to endless reinvention in the light of new cultural influences and new intermedial cross-pollinations.

This book collects essays about Greco-Roman practices and theories of reception. We begin by sketching a brief history of the ancient reception of Greek literature, and then proceed to identify where this volume's essays speak to these concerns. Clearly any attempt to recover an ancient 'reception theory' *per se* would be a fruitless enterprise. There are many ancient tracts of literary criticism, and some (like Plutarch's *De audiendis poetis*, most recently edited and commented on by Richard Hunter and Donald Russell)[9] directly address the question of how to read works of literature. Ancient literary criticism – a field that has been ploughed intensively by this volume's honorand – might just about be considered a form of reception theory.[10] But that is, ultimately, wishful thinking. No surviving *Ars recipiendi* as such exists, and none is ever likely to come to light for the simple reason that reception theory is (as we have said) the product of a particular set of late-modernist intellectual and political concerns.

Nevertheless, as Charles Martindale (one of the best known theorists of classical reception) has observed, all literary artists are also in a sense theoreticians of their relationships to the pre-existing tradition, even if only implicitly: every act of interpretation embodied in a receiving text presupposes an underlying methodological architecture.[11] Theory makes explicit what practice presupposes (just as practice exposes the risks, flaws and crises of theory). So while there is no overarching ancient 'reception theory' from antiquity, there are certainly a multitude of individual encounters that 'theorize' the act of reception. On the conventional model,[12] these acts of reception can be integrated into a linear narrative of seamless classicism. Greek literature begins with Homer, and to a lesser extent Hesiod, who appear to have been treated as Panhellenic poets from the start. Archaic lyric poets (the likes of Alcman, Sappho, Archilochus and Alcaeus)

[9] Hunter and Russell 2011.
[10] On ancient literary criticism see esp. Fuhrmann 1992; Ford 2002; Habib 2008; Hunter 2009a; Halliwell 2011.
[11] Martindale 1993: 53–4.
[12] E.g. Saïd and Trédé 1999; Taplin 2001; Whitmarsh 2004; Rutherford 2005.

were originally epichoric, but gained a 'classical' status through wider Panhellenic performance. From the sixth century, we begin to see the competitive identification of earlier poets, as the idea of the text as a fixed entity gains hold. From the fifth century we begin to see a more pronounced sense of a gulf between present and 'classical' (i.e. mythological) literary past, whether it is Pindar pronouncing himself sceptical about the Tantalus story,[13] the tragedians replaying heroic myth with dissonant democratic anachronisms, or the prose historians pronouncing themselves less gullible and more analytical than their verse forbears. Alexandria produced commentaries, scholia and textual scholarship, and thereby archived classicism. Rome, competing mimetically with the Hellenistic empires, produced drama and epics that moved between translation, emulation and aggressive supplantation of Greek models; and then developed its own classics, in the form of poets and historians umbilically linked to the time of Augustus, the 'classic' emperor. Then the Greek empire wrote back, finding new innovative resources in hyperclassicizing gestures that historically leapfrogged Rome and reinhabited the many worlds of the archaic and classical periods.

But such a model, however seductively familiar it might be, reflects a conception of literary tradition that does not embrace the disruptive challenge of reception, which always steers us away from homogenization and towards fragmentation. In particular, the conventional model reifies 'tradition' as though it were a genealogical line running through the entirety of classical literature; and it imagines cultural history as an organic teleology rather than as a series of wilful improvisations. The radicalism of reception as a methodology lies, as we have said, in its spotlighting of the disruptive agency of the receiving text, which becomes a mediator (in Latour's sense).[14] Every act of reception rewrites the story of its own filiation. Reception asks us to consider cultural history as non-inevitable, contingent, infinitely rewritable. For

[13] 'Son of Tantalus, of you I shall say, contrary to my predecessors . . .' (υἱὲ Ταντάλου, σὲ δ' ἀντία προτέρων φθέγξομαι, *Ol.* 1.37).

[14] 'An *intermediary*, in my vocabulary, is what transports meaning or force without transformation . . . *Mediators* transform, translate, modify and distort the meaning or the elements that they are supposed to carry' (Latour 2005: 39; emphasis original).

example, if you happen to be reading Ezekiel's *Exagōgē* (a Hellenistic tragedy, now surviving only in substantial fragments, that tells the biblical Exodus story) or even Lucian's *Podagra* (a paratragic parody from the second century CE, written by a Syrian from the borders of the Roman empire), then your sense of the 'story' of Greek tragedy, what it can do and what it is essentially about, will inevitably not be that of those who confine themselves to the fifth century BCE.[15] My choice here of examples that are both 'late' and 'marginal' to the conventional story of Hellenism is, of course, far from arbitrary. Reception emphasizes decentring, multiplicity: defiantly minoritarian, it reminds us of the many different stories that can potentially be told of past and present. (The 'altered states' of my title are political as well as psychological.) It is for this reason that the 'practice' of reception is 'theoretical': because every act of reception insists on its own radical singularity, and models its own radically singular relationship to the canon.

There are chronological patterns in this volume, and the sketch given above will be recognizable intermittently. But *Rezeptionsgeschichte* is – fundamentally – a disruptive story of necessary discontinuities. At one level, of course, to claim this is to make a virtue of the necessity of an edited volume. But it is more than this. Traditional, linear narratives of cultural succession – for all their indispensability if we are going to make sense of history – claim a diagrammatic simplicity that can never represent more than a censored simplification. As Franco Moretti has insisted,[16] we can never do the history of literature without recourse to metaphors (graphs, maps, trees), all of which present their own opportunities and risks. To approach cultural history through reception is to remind ourselves not just of the partiality of all such constructions but also of the metaphorical resources at our disposal.

These preliminaries done, let us sketch the outlines of a history of Greek literature through the lens of reception: this will serve both as a prolegomenon to a more fully discontinuous history of Greek literature that remains to be written and as a methodological

[15] On these texts as mediators of poetic tradition see Whitmarsh 2013.
[16] Moretti 2007.

framework within which to locate the chapters in this volume. Let us begin as ever with Homer, Greek literature's originary mirage: a cultural prime mover who, paradoxically, also marks the reception and gathering of centuries' worth of now-inaudible oral tradition. But let us begin not with Homer 'himself', but rather with what James Porter has called 'the very idea' of him.[17] Homer – as a marker of cultural primordiality – has always been a fantasy. Already in antiquity, 'Homer was himself felt as a strange loss, as grand and distant as Troy, and it was inevitable that he should assume mythic proportions'.[18] To follow in the footsteps of Homer, or indeed any subsequent 'literary classic', was inevitably to commit to a kind of cultural Stockholm syndrome: the desire to remain bound to the legacy counteracted the urge to break free. On the one hand, therefore, any canonical literary source could be invoked positively as a source of moral wisdom: one clear example is the citation of poetry in Athenian law-court speeches.[19] A Homeric quotation could always be relied on to add moral heft. But receiving a literary predecessor was often agonistic; the receiver was expected to improve, update or even reject. This could be aesthetic (as in Sappho's famous priamel, which disavows heroic epic:[20] 'Some say a host of cavalry, others of infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing (κάλλιστον) on the black earth; but I say it is whatsoever one loves', 16.1–4 Voigt). It could be argumentative, as in the rhetorical device of the *anaskeuē* or refutation ('Euripides says that . . . but I say that . . .'). It could be social, as in tragedy's reframing of Homeric modes of heroism within a democratic context.[21] But the most familiar form was ontological: a receiving text could claim to improve on the veracity of its predecessors.[22] When Hesiod's muses say that 'we know how to say many false things that are similar to genuine ones, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things', it is not exactly

[17] Porter 2002.
[18] Porter 2002: 62.
[19] Perlman 1964.
[20] Whether Sappho directly knew the texts we identify as 'Homer's', however, is uncertain.
[21] So, famously, Vernant 1990: 'Greek tragedy is strongly marked by . . . tension between myth and the forms of thought peculiar to the city' (43).
[22] On aspects of the development of the concept of fiction in the archaic period see Rösler 1980; Pratt 1993; Finkelberg 1998; Whitmarsh 2013: 11–34.

clear what his target is (Homeric poetry? Epichoric epic?), but it seems likely that underlying the claim is some kind of agonistic differentiation of Hesiodic from other kinds of poetry in terms of its truth value.[23] The picture becomes sharper with Xenophanes' rejection, in the mid-sixth century BCE, of Homer's and Hesiod's depictions of the gods as anthropomorphic projections.[24] Xenophanes presumed a gulf between a naïve past, in which Greeks knew only Greeks and therefore thought their gods looked like them, and a more worldly present that knows of Ethiopians and Thracians, and can therefore relativize. But this was not a rejection of poetry – he wrote in elegiac couplets himself – so much as a normative programme for a post-anthropomorphic poetic theology. For Xenophanes, mythological stories are 'fictions' (πλάσματα), to be rejected by a new age on theological and indeed moral grounds.[25] Similarly, Hecataeus, Herodotus and Thucydides claim to supplant their predecessors by offering more truthful accounts.[26]

This kind of competitive self-definition is a familiar feature of early Greek society: we might compare the tactics used by *soi-disant* professionals such as doctors, who exploited the rejection of others as quacks and 'root-cutters' to buttress their own credentials as authorities.[27] But within the literary tradition such competitive reception has a particular temporal dimension: it signals that the receiving context is culturally distinct from the transmitting one; that the passage of time has both allowed for new developments in thought and critical distance. Competitive classicism of this kind thus creates an implicit temporal rupture that splinters any model of linear cultural continuity. Ontological criticism of prior 'classics' does more than question their 'truth'; it also, in a sense, questions their very 'existence', at least as classics. It insists that reality is not grounded in the deep past, but rather a condition of presence and presenthood.

[23] Hes. *Theog.* 27–8.
[24] 'Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things that among men are sources of blame and censure: thieving, committing adultery, and deceiving each other' (Xenophanes fr. D8 Laks–Most; cf. D9–14).
[25] Fr. D59.21–2 Laks–Most.
[26] Moles 1991.
[27] Lloyd 1996.

This progressivist model shaped the response of Plato – arguably the first exponent of sustained literary theory – who proposed a new prose literature, which he called philosophy, which would be based not in (allegedly) spurious claims to divine revelation but in non-obfuscatory claims that could be defended in open debate. Plato paid particular attention to the forms and modes in which 'classical' (i.e. Homeric) literature was transmitted and might be reconceived: hence the *Republic*'s famous rewriting of the *Iliad* in direct ('homodiegetic') speech – which is to say, without 'dramatic' mimesis, the impersonation of voices that he found so objectionable (393d–394a). The paradox that Plato's own dialogues are formally mimetic, even dramatic, has long been noted;[28] is this irony? Hypocrisy? Self-deconstruction? The crucial point for our purpose is that for Plato the reception of Homer and the poetic tradition comes in the form of a hybrid of appropriation and rejection: on the one hand, he seeks to take over the mantle of 'educator of the Greeks'; on the other he retools, rejects and even expels the poets on grounds both ontological and ethical (like Xenophanes he objects to the depiction of divine criminality).

The *Poetics* of Aristotle (Plato's brilliantly rogue student) has a justifiably central role in modern histories of literary criticism, but it is worth remembering just what a strange text this is. His developmental history of tragedy is fundamentally a biologically derived story of acorn-to-oak teleology. In terms of tragedy, Aeschylus is the acorn, Sophocles the vigorous oak, and Euripides the withered trunk after dieback has struck. Aristotle's literary-historical teleology is both radically unconventional (in that it skewers any fantasy that 'earliest is best') and, at least at first sight, dispiritingly determinist. But literary history is not really at the heart of the *Poetics*; nor was Aristotle a thoroughgoing determinist. The past provided ways of thinking about the present, but not inflexible rules. For all its teleology, the *Poetics* is a formalist text, and formalism carries with it an uncanny, ahistorical untimeliness (expressed in the form of a pretension to universalism).[29] Racine, Corneille and the other French tragedians who took the *Poetics* as prescriptive were

[28] See e.g. McCabe 2008.
[29] Hall 1996 discusses Aristotle's striking uncoupling of tragic texts, even in performance, from the materialities, politics and ritual praxis of the theatre of Dionysus.

simply putting into practice Aristotle's own abstract formalism. For Aristotle, therefore, literary 'reception' is an active, creative process: when he tells us which techniques work and which do not, he means us to put these into practice, and make our own literary texts better (irrespective of where we sit in the teleological life cycle of any genre's maturation).

Aristotle's naturalism provides more than a metaphor for literary history. Exposing his own agonistic Oedipalism, Aristotle sets himself against Plato and argues that literary mimesis is a natural outgrowth of the human subject's most fundamental cognitive processes:

> Clearly, then, poetry is the result of two causes, both natural (φυσικαί).[30] For it is naturally instilled (σύμφυτον) in human beings from childhood to engage in mimesis. Indeed, what distinguishes the human animal from others is that it is the most mimetic of all, and it is through mimesis that one first learns about things. This is why all humans enjoy mimesis. (*Poet.* 1448b)

Aristotle is, however, not merely shadow-boxing with Plato (an act of reception that, incidentally, also serves to characterize his philosophical predecessor as a 'classic'). He is also shifting literary production out of the realm of pure technique (τέχνη), and into that of nature (φύσις). From one perspective, this constitutes a post-Platonic recuperation of poetry. But from another, Aristotle's challenge to poetry's cultural primacy in Greek society is more radical than anything Plato ever achieved. Poetry is, for sure, not morally bad, vulgar or deficient, as Plato thought; but nor can it ever aspire to the status of second-order reflexivity that philosophy claims. It is simply an extension of human nature, much as eating and sex are. (And we note that while Aristotle sees humans as distinctive in the *extent* of their embrace of mimesis, the fact of mimesis does not *per se* differentiate us from the beasts.) Aristotle's 'scientific' reception of the poetic tradition, then, also constitutes an implicitly competitive claim for philosophy's greater rationalism. Plato and Aristotle are not, therefore, engaging in dispassionate 'literary criticism'; they are, rather, intervening strategically, idiosyncratically and incoherently in a 'classical tradition' that is so overweening

[30] What the 'second cause' is has been much discussed: see the bibliography gathered at Tsitsiridis 2005: 435 n. 2.