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JOURNEYS INTO THE ANCIENT WORLD

**Classical Studies in New Zealand
New Directions Along Ancient Paths**

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of the requirements for the degree of**

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ABSTRACT

Ancient World Empowerment: Classical Studies in New Zealand

The post-X generation, bribed by the cool of hot branding, gives its lifeblood in sacrificial tribute to the global tycoon. Its ambassadors are compulsorily released into a labyrinth engineered by a corporate Daedalus, and stalked by a minotaur machined and designed by unit-production architects. Now however the children of post-X are mapping the co-ordinates and confronting the minotaur, finding ways to manipulate the maze and get through it, coming back to the light a transformed stronger human being. But the way is fraught.

In my twenty-three years as a full-time performance storyteller, I have walked the mythologic path. I tell epics, drawing members of the audience into the story to become goddesses, heroes and lovers. During that time the subject Classical Studies has undergone a phenomenal ascendancy in secondary schools and universities, amounting to a red shift : a windfall for an epic teller. Why has it become so magnetic to so many young people, when alongside is the technocyber utilitarian culture they are expected to be expert in, a culture which can exert control at the expense of individual freedoms.

The ancient world is simply hot. Reasons: it offers an iconography, self-insight, big ideas. In the *Odyssey*, passion and empowering experience through contact with men and women of strength and creative action. But there are further and swiftly-flowing undercurrents. I argue that by treading the stones of the ancient world, the youth generation is accessing an ancient, alternative universe. *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Matrix* movies both use mythic framework. Are the eighteen year olds of 2003 seeking a way through a socio-psychological matrix-labyrinth by using keys and threads gifted from the ancient world? Philosophers and kings and daring women from those times are causing excitement and expansion of consciousness amongst the young and their mentors. That world has perhaps provided them with magic talismans, translated into thought and inscribed on thread around a spool, and as we unwind this clew we are weaving a way through demons and labyrinth, also knowing love and rapture. These thoughts form the focus of this thesis.

PRELUDE

On a Greek winter's afternoon in 1994 I waited at a bus shelter on the road to Delphi. Its opaque sides allowed no opportunity to see if the bus was coming except by stepping out into the icy wind. We missed the bus once because of reluctance to face cold wind. I stood out in the wind unsheltered after that. It was from the Helicon and Parnassus - off the mountains, and reminded me that I was out in the elements. I discovered from the guidebook that this bus-stop stood by the legendary three crossroads where Oedipus slew his father, and in that waiting time I became extremely aware of 'thereness' in 'otherness'. The frisson : two chariots converged - the one bearing Laius to his son, the other taking us back to Delphi. The icy wind began to feel like the whip of Laius striking the face of Oedipus.

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My wife, Pamela, and I went to South America in 1990 when we met. It was the most romantic journey either of us had ever made. We have been on many journeys together, outer and inner, and writing a thesis is an inner journey but it is outward too and it impinges on family and friends. She has shared my dreams, put up with my raves, has appraised my prose and challenged my arguments, which has enormously helped, borne hard moments, and given me space and time to write. Mowed lawns while I read. Loved me even though. I thank her for all that. I also thank my beloved for laughing, and for the acquaintance with rapture. Thus to the goddess belongs the first flavour of the wine.

I would like to acknowledge a number of people who have walked with me on this journey. I love them all and consider that it confers blessings and honour upon me, this travelling vagabond, to break bread with them and have conversation with them and share some life and marvel together upon love, magic, life, the universe and everything.

Primarily and primally is Dr Joe Grixti who has supervised me through this thesis. He has encouraged creative ways with presenting ideas, showed me how to frame my thoughts, and has immensely furthered my understanding of fine scholarship. He guided me through the twilight zones, and nudged me back into action in the gentlest, wisest, lovingest ways possible. He inspired me to have faith in my own work and talents, and to bring my own authority into an area where I hold authority. For all these things, my heartfelt thanks.

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INTRODUCTION

What I Am

For twenty-three years I have lived the life of a travelling storyteller, historically the first New Zealander to make storytelling his full-time living. It is learning stories, to the marrow. It is promoting who you are, that you tell stories, that to sustain body and soul, the performer must be paid. Paid to tell stories! In early years one parent complained about this - 'We tell them stories at home'. Storytelling parents in Television and Playstation world diminished, but perhaps the wheel has begun to turn again. Quests and legends illumine our cultural and now physical landscape, as tour companies show people where *Lord of the Rings* all happens. Hercules is a television star. Warrior Princess Xena enthusiasts come to New Zealand, don ancient costumes, and ride on chariots along beaches. *Lord of the Rings* dominates the news, towering above all other considerations in the capital as I write. The quest and bold deeds have taken hold of an entire country's imaginative life. It is a time for storytellers.

I have studied Early Irish literature at Trinity College, Dublin, drinking deep from the wellsprings of the Celtic story heritage, sent on an Arts Council grant in 1993. As a busking storyteller, I have told stories from the *Decameron* at 2.00 am in King's Cross, Sydney. I have told Dreamtime stories in India. Irish wonder tales from the stages of festivals in Australia and New Zealand. Setting off at 4.00 am for remote spots. Putting up the backdrop at 8.00 am in a school hall, doing a couple of ninety minute sweat-flying performances, then follow-up workshops. Students learn techniques telling traditional stories, and how to tell their own. Then take down the Celtic backdrop and pack everything away again, drive on, sleep in my van at a rest- spot beneath the pines beside a lake, a billy of tea and porridge cooked over a burner at

dawn, watching Canadian geese skitter onto the water in mist. The next two nights at a university conference, lecturing and telling, then more school tours. Four weeks of all that. Then back home for another week. Then away again for three weeks.

Now I am writing about it, I am reflecting and asking myself questions about the journeys and loves, deaths and passions in my own life. How it happens, why and if it matters. I have found that stories provide significance. I am a practitioner, wordmaster of heath, hall and hearth, bard, poet-storyteller. This investigation is therefore interwoven with what I do and have done as a performing storyteller, and cannot be divorced from that.

What follows therefore is far more personal than most academic writing. It should be recalled however that academia takes its name from Plato's garden, bequeathed by the hero Akademos, and within this garden learning and discovery happened through spoken dialogues. If the spoken register and the narrative form assume stronger prominence than is usual in a work of this kind, it is because I am a storyteller trying to engage in scholarly discourse within the garden of Akademos.

Within those surroundings, I am talking about Classical Studies, which has become a passion for many students and teachers. I am investigating what fires up this passion, and other issues ignited from that passion, including:

- epic presence in current culture, and why myth matters
- classical vocabulary in popular culture
- interaction of youth with technology and classical texts
- Utilitaria and Arcadia, and the soul in education

Little investigation has been undertaken in New Zealand into how Classical Studies is affecting students. Kathryn Sutherland in her doctoral thesis *Does Teaching Matter?* :

reconceptualizing teaching, scholarship, and the PhD programme in New Zealand university English departments, (Massey University 1999) looks briefly at curriculum developments in NZ, including classical studies. But my motivating question, 'Why is Classical Studies doing so well?' is outside the range of her thesis.

Methodology

My approach was experiential and theoretical. I draw from long experience as a performing storyteller. I have dipped into journal jottings, fragmentary notes made after performances, and my unwritten recollections. I felt it essential too to acknowledge what others had thought and written about the storytelling art and the structure of narrative. To order the pathway and establish sign-posts I have engaged in reading and research to clarify my thinking, to have a conversation with other minds and to support some of what I contend.

I have looked outside libraries and my own performance, and have observed and analysed populist cinema culture, which resulted in the *Matrix* connection. *Lord of the Rings* might in content seem an obvious choice for an example of populist cinema which projects the epic theme. But *Lord of the Rings* could have threatened the original purpose of this thesis, which was to examine the effect of Classical Studies. The *Matrix* movies with their classical allusions and mythic structure offer a more pertinent example. Finally, I interviewed students and teachers studying and teaching Classical Studies. Schools were approached after Ethics Committee approval had been given. (See copy of Ethics Committee letter, November 6 2002, MUAHEC No. 02/067, plus Information Sheet, Consent Form, letters of approach, etc., contained in separate Appendices folder).

Teachers were interviewed separately from students. The approach was qualitative rather than quantitative, thus only six students and two teachers were chosen from just one school. The students chosen were ones who enjoyed the subject. Normal procedures were

followed, according to standards required by the Ethics Committee. There were two days of interviewing - one for the teachers, one for the students. The two teachers were interviewed in a classroom, the six students in a vacant office. In each case, the device used was a Walkman-size portable recorder, with microphone attachment. I transcribed the interviews myself. The voices from these interviews I have woven into the body of the work as part of a conversation, in which digression moves to discovery, and is itself the structure.

Arrangement of Chapters

Chapter One focusses on the renaissance of storytelling and the classics with an initial analysis of the appeal of Classical Studies. Chapter Two devolves upon performing the journey of the story with examples from Homer's *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, with allusions to other epics. This chapter also includes detailed descriptions of performances and how they operate, with especial reference to Homer's *Odyssey*.

Following this I have devoted Chapter Three to the profound life themes that arise in Classical Studies, including the nature of the monster, as the Cyclops is a favourite story. Hard on the heels of the monster treads the hero, in Chapter Four. Epics are built around heroic characters who also take centre stage in cinema and television. They account for much of the fascination that students have for Classical Studies. Chapter Five is a deliberation on the bewilderment within the post-modern condition, and a discussion of the interaction of young people with technology and the Classics. I have called this chapter *Minotaur and Thread*.

For a moment I return to 'the lost ones'. In New Zealand historical discourse there is a 'lost generation' of youth, about whom Christopher Pugsley for example expatiates in his *Gallipoli*. I contend there is a generation lost to a more abstract war - cyberspace and technology saturation versus prior heritage and hearthside culture. (I do not intend by this to position myself on the same platform as F.R Leavis, whose uncompromising stance on mass