

Michael Silk, Ingo Gildenhard, Rosemary Barrow,
The Classical Tradition: Art, Literature, Thought

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Abstract

Review of Silk, Michael, Ingo Gildenhard, Rosemary Barrow. *The Classical Tradition: Art, Literature, Thought*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. Print.

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What are the Greeks and Romans for us, and what are we for the Greeks and for the Romans? The theme of the classical presence in Western culture has been at the centre of scholarly debate for about two decades. However, as Philip Hardie stated in a famous review of *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, Charles Martindale's reception theory motto – «meaning is always realized at the point of reception» – has become a kind of mantra (Hardie 240). What is, then, the best way of defining the influence of the ancient world on subsequent ages, «reception» or «tradition»? This problem has already been debated in Simon Goldhill's *Who Needs Greek?* (2002), and in two recent Blackwell Companions – *Classical Tradition* (2007) and *Classical Receptions* (2008); undeniably, the most successful definition is now «reception», even if this choice is not unproblematic. In fact, it seems to imply «a relatively weak or passive mode of acceptance or recognition» (Silk 12). Isn't this what reception theorists said about «tradition»? This simple remark implies the fact that the two terms do not have a precise distinction in most of contemporary scholarship.

If Lorna Hardwick defined reception as «the artistic or intellectual processes involved in selecting, imitating or adapting ancient works» (*Reception Studies* 5), *The Classical Tradition* chooses other directions. Michael Silk, Ingo Gildenhard, and Rosemary Barrow focus attention on phenomena that clearly are visible only on a long period and not in a specific point in time. The need for an analysis of big pictures and schemes is essential, even against a widespread postmodern suspicion about the possibility of writing history itself. Using of the concept of «tradition» is then inevitable. 'Reception' seems not criticized on a theoretical level, but as inadequate for the purpose of the book. Clearly what 'reception' is less suitable for is trace the *Nachleben* of texts which had a limited readership in antiquity, but an extraordinary influence on postclassical literature and thought. Well known examples are *On the Sublime*, which from Kant to Lyotard and beyond has had an endless impact on aesthetic theories, and *De Architectura* by Vitruvius, which has had a dynamics of discontinuous appraisal and decline, from the Renaissance to the 20th century.

Without being a new Companion, *The Classical Tradition* shows the ambition of becoming a point of reference, thanks to its exploration of a remarkable variety of themes, periods, and artistic forms – written texts, visual arts and music, discourse about politics, aesthetics and literary criticism. It draws its strength from a fruitful collaboration of scholars from different disciplines: Classics, Comparative Literature, Art History. It aims at being «a rereading of a formative aspect of Western culture itself, and, thus, a rereading, however partial, of Western culture itself in the perspective of the classical» (Silk ix). The authors are able to write a most readable book that has the merit to summarize the topic of the afterlife of antiquity with a variety not common in other books on the same subject. The emphasis on architecture, and not only on visual arts, and the references to political and aesthetic thought are most welcome.

What are, then, the potentialities and limits of this work?

The volume is organized in five sections – Overview, Archetypes, The Imaginary, Making a Difference, Contrasts and Comparisons. The first part covers almost half of the book, and is arranged both in chronological and thematic order, and explores the meaning and strategies of preservation of the classical tradition: history of education and of classical scholarship, the role of Latin and Greek in forging national identities, the filtered modalities of looking at the past in museums. The other four parts follow a thematic order, focusing on specific cross-temporal topics, such as the concept of heroism, the images of the *Urbs aeterna*, the new appraisal of antiquity in museums, and a reflection on the choice and possibility of either a contemplative or active life through a bold ‘parallel life’ of Machiavelli and Wagner (§31 Ideas and Action). Surely these four thematic parts give the reader the opportunity to explore unexpected comparisons of artistic forms. Trying to summarize great questions in a limited number of pages, the first part traces an impressive overview of the main general phenomena connected with the theme of the afterlife of Greece and Rome, and could be useful as a specialized introduction to the topic. In fact, if one wants to have an outline of the classical tradition as a whole, this is actually an essay to have ready on the shelf. However, sometimes it could leave the professional scholar unsatisfied – mainly if not English. Most of the secondary sources are in English, and a substantial amount of foreign bibliography – on a few topics, the most important part – is left out.

It is clearly impossible to explore the impact of one phenomenon everywhere, anytime, in every discipline, mostly when that phenomenon itself is a 2000 year-long-set of intertwined relationships of continuity and discontinuity. The authors, then, choose to limit the field to England, France, Germany, and Italy, with a particular attention to English literature when dealing with literary texts. This choice partly confirms Alessandro Barchiesi’s alarm that the study of the legacy of Greece and Rome is doomed to become a monolingualistic, English language field of investigation only (Barchiesi 202) . In a period of globalization, the choice not to aspire to a world literature horizon is quite arguable (many of the most interesting studies of the afterlife of classical literature take into consideration postcolonial theory). However, if it is true that the Greco-Roman world has with the Western civilization a relationship hardly present in other cultures, arguable is the choice to exclude from the survey literatures such as the Spanish, Greek, Turkish, Russian. This would have been useful for the general reader to understand what kind of hybrid the classical legacy can become when getting in contact with a foreign substratum. Most of not-English 20th century literature is widely unexplored in the essays in the volume (see in particular §35 Poetry). This is quite eloquent about the ideological approach of most of recent English scholarship:

concentrating on English language literature(s) only because of their audience. Engagements with antiquity such as Heiner Müller's and Dario Fo's are left apart (the latter would have been perfectly appropriate in the chapter on the afterlife of popular culture); Pasolini and Christa Wolf – perhaps the two contemporary European intellectuals with a ground-breaking approach to Hellenism – are quoted only once.

What the authors seem to be doing is try to clearly delimitate the field: this is both the strength and the weakness of *The Classical Tradition*: on the one hand, it gives a comprehensive view of continuity and discontinuity across a long period of time, but on the other, it follows the easy part of the afterlife of Greece and Rome. In fact it takes into consideration the periods usually dealt with in essays on the afterlife of the Classics: Western Middle Ages, Italian Renaissance, French Classicism, Weimar Greek Humanism, English 19th century Hellenism, with a few references to Post-modern classicism. But what about the periods in which the tradition takes hidden paths, in which we find no direct mention of classical elements, and no forms of direct *imitatio* or *aemulatio*? Does this mean that the 'tradition' has withered? This question is mostly left unanswered.

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