

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



On Classical Studies

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A REFLECTION on classical studies, their purpose and prospects, will properly start from Wolf's definition of classic philology as the study of man's nature as it has become manifest in the Greeks.¹

The conception sounds strangely anachronistic today, because it has been overtaken by the two closely related processes of the fragmentation of science through specialization and the deculturation of Western society. Philology has become linguistics; and the man who manifested his nature in the Greek language has become the subject-matter of specialized histories of politics, literature, art, political ideas, economics, myth, religion, philosophy, and science. Classical studies are reduced to enclaves in vast institutions of higher learning in which the study of man's nature does not rank high in the concerns of man. This fragmentation, as well as the institutional reduction, however, are not sensed as a catastrophe, because the "climate of opinion" has changed in the two hundred years since Wolf's definition.

The public interest has shifted from the nature of man to the nature of nature and to the prospects of domination its exploration opened; and the loss of interest even turned to hatred when the nature of man proved to be resistant to the changes dreamed up by intellectuals who want to add the lordship of society and history to the mastery of nature. The alliance of indifference and hatred, both inspired by *libido dominandi*, has created the climate that is not favorable to an institutionalized study of the nature of man, whether in its Greek or any other manifestation. The protagonists of the Western deculturation process are firmly established in our universities.

Still, the end of the world has not come. For "climates of opinion," though they last longer than anyone but their libidinous profiteers would care, do not last forever. The phrase was coined by Joseph Glanvill (1638-1680); it has received new currency, when Alfred N. Whitehead resumed it in his *Science and the Modern World* (1925); and, following the initiative of Whitehead,

the changes of this modern climate ever since the seventeenth century have become the subject of Basil Willey's perceptive and extensive *Background* studies, beginning in 1934. Through Whitehead's, as well as through other initiatives, we know by now what the problem is; Whitehead has stated it flatly: "Modern philosophy has been ruined." More explicitly I would say: The Life of Reason, the ineluctable condition of personal and social order, has been destroyed. However, though these statements are true, one must distinguish between the climate of opinion and the nature of man. The climate of our universities certainly is hostile to the Life of Reason, but not every man is agreeable to have his nature deformed by the "climate" or, as it is sometimes called, the "age." There are always young men with enough spiritual instinct to resist the efforts of "educators" who pressure for "adjustment." Hence, the climate is not static; through the emotionally determined constellation of opinions of the moment there is always at work the resistance of man's nature to the climate. The insight into this dynamics underlies the studies of Willey. As a matter of fact, neither the changes in the climate from indifference to hostility, nor the concomitant waning of institutional support for the Life of Reason, nor the fanatically accelerated destruction of the universities since the Second World War, could prevent the problem of the climate from being recognized, articulated, and explored in the light of our consciousness of human nature. The reflections in which we are engaged here and now are as much a fact in the contemporary situation as the notorious "climate." The freedom of thought is coming to life again, when the "climate of opinion" is no longer a massive social reality imposing participation in its partisan struggles, but is forced into the position of a

pathological deformation of existence, to be explored by the criteria of reason.

This is the setting in which the question of classical studies must be placed. On the one hand, there is a powerful climate of opinion in our universities opposed to accord them any function at all, because classical studies inevitably represent the nature of man as it has become manifest in the Greeks. On the other hand, there are undeniable symptoms of the climate cracking up and the nature of man undeformed reasserting itself. If this movement toward a restoration of reason should gain sufficient momentum to affect the institutional level, classical studies would become an important factor in the process of education. I shall reflect on the two points in this order—though some disorder may creep in as we are dealing not with alternatives belonging to the past but with an on-going process.

THE EFFORT of the Greeks to arrive at an understanding of their humanity has culminated in the Platonic-Aristotelian creation of philosophy as the science of the nature of man. Even more than with the Sophistic of their times the results are in conflict with the contemporary climate of opinion. I shall enumerate some principal points of disagreement:

1. *Classic*: There is a nature of man, a definite structure of existence that puts limits on perfectibility.
Modern: The nature of man can be changed, either through historical evolution or through revolutionary action, so that a perfect realm of freedom can be established in history.
2. *Classic*: Philosophy is the endeavor to advance from opinion (*doxa*) about the order of man and society to science (*episteme*); the philosopher is not a philodoxer.

Modern: No science in such matters is possible, only opinion; everybody is entitled to his opinions; we have a pluralist society.

3. *Classic*: Society is man written large.
Modern: Man is society written small.
4. *Classic*: Man exists in erotic tension toward the divine ground of his existence.
Modern: He doesn't; for I don't; and I'm the measure of man.
5. *Classic*: Man is disturbed by the question of the ground; by nature he is a questioner (*aporein*) and seeker (*zeitein*) for the whence, the where to, and the why of his existence; he will raise the question: Why is there something, why not nothing?
Modern: Such questions are otiose (Comte); don't ask them, be a socialist man (Marx); questions to which the sciences of world-immanent things can give no answer are senseless, they are *Scheinprobleme* (neopositivism).
6. *Classic*: The feeling of existential unrest, the desire to know, the feeling of being moved to question, the questioning and seeking itself, the direction of the questioning toward the ground that moves to be sought, the recognition of the divine ground as the mover, are the experiential complex, the *pathos*, in which the reality of divine-human participation (*metalepsis*) becomes luminous. The exploration of the metalectic reality, of the Platonic *metaxy*, as well as the articulation of the exploratory action through language symbols, in Plato's case of his Myths, are the central concern of the philosopher's efforts.
Modern: The modern responses to this central issue change with the "climate of opinion."

In Locke the metalectic reality and its

noetic analysis is transformed into the acceptance of certain "common opinions" which still bear an intelligible relation to the experience from which they derive. The reduction of reality to opinion, however, is not deliberate; Locke is already so deeply involved in the climate of opinion that his awareness for the destruction of philosophy through the transition from *episteme* to *doxa* is dulled. Cf. Willey's presentation of the Lockean case.

Hegel, on the contrary, is acutely aware of what he is doing when he replaces the metalectic reality of Plato and Aristotle by his state of alienation as the experiential basis for the construction of his speculative system. He makes it explicitly his program to overcome philosophy by the dialectics of a self-reflective alienated consciousness.

In the twentieth century, the "climate of opinion" has advanced to the tactics of the "silent treatment." In a case like Sartre's, metalectic reality is simply ignored. Existence has the character of meaningless *facticité*; its endowment with meaning is left to the free choice of man. The choice of a meaning for existence falls with preference on the opinion of totalitarian regimes who engage in mass-murder, like the Stalinist; the preference has been elaborated with particular care by Merleau-Ponty. The tactics of the "silent treatment," especially employed after the Second World War by the "liberation rabble," however, make it difficult to decide in individual cases, whether the counterposition to metalectic reality is deliberate, or whether the *libido dominandi* is running amok in a climate of opinion that is taken for granted, without questioning, as ultimate reality. On the whole, I have the impression, that the consciousness of a counterposition is distinctly less alive

than it still was at the time of Hegel. Philosophical illiteracy has progressed so far that the experiential core of philosophizing has disappeared below the horizon and is not even recognized as such when it appears in philosophers like Bergson. The deculturation process has eclipsed it so thoroughly by opinion that sometimes one hesitates to speak even of an indifference toward it.

7. *Classic*: Education is the art of *perigoge*, of turning around (Plato). *Modern*: Education is the art of adjusting people so solidly to the climate of opinion prevalent at the time that they feel no "desire to know." Education is the art of preventing people from acquiring the knowledge that would enable them to articulate the questions of existence. Education is the art of pressuring young people into a state of alienation that will result in either quiet despair or aggressive militancy.
8. *Classic*: The process in which metaleptic reality becomes conscious and noetically articulate is the process in which the nature of man becomes luminous to itself as the life of reason. Man is the *zoon noun echon*. *Modern*: Reason is instrumental reason. There is no such thing as a noetic rationality of man.
9. *Classic*: Through the life of reason (*bios theoretikos*) man realizes his freedom. *Modern*: Plato and Aristotle were fascists. The life of reason is a fascist enterprise.

The enumeration is not even remotely exhaustive. Everybody can supplement it with juicy items gleaned from opinion literature and the mass media, from conversations with colleagues and students. Still, they make it clear what Whitehead meant when he stated that modern philosophy has

been ruined. Moreover, the conflicts have been formulated in such a manner that the character of the grotesque attaching to the deformation of humanity through the climate of opinion becomes visible. The grotesque, however, must not be confused with the comic or the humorous. The seriousness of the matter will be best understood, if one visions the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes and the gas chambers of Auschwitz in which the grotesqueness of opinion becomes the murderous reality of action.

THE CLIMATE of opinion is unfavorable to classical studies; and the institutional power of its representatives in the universities, the mass media, and the foundations must not be underrated. Nevertheless, cracks in the establishment become noticeable. In particular, the international student revolt has been an eye-opener. Even the spiritually and intellectually underprivileged who live by the bread of opinion alone, have become aware that something is wrong with our institutions of higher learning, though they do not quite know what. Could it be perhaps the professors and not the war in Vietnam? With grim amusement have I watched the discomfiture of assorted leftist professors in Frankfurt and Berlin when their students turned against them, because the professors did not go along when their "critical theory" (a euphemism for irrational, nihilistic opining) was translated by the students into uncritical violence; and the same spectacle is provided in America by the liberal professors who suddenly become conservative, when a life-time of strenuous effort to ruin the minds of one generation of students after another has at last borne fruit and the minds are really ruined. An incident from my own teaching practice will illuminate the critical point: In the mid-60's I gave a course in classical politics at

a major university. All went well as long as the students believed they were offered the customary fare of information on Plato's "opinions." An uproar ensued, when they found out that philosophy of politics was to be taken seriously as a science. The idea that some propositions concerning the order of man and society were to be accepted as true, others to be rejected as false, came as a shock; they had never heard of such a thing before. A few actually walked out of the course; but the majority, I am glad to report, stayed on, they became enchanted by Plato, and at the end they profusely expressed their gratitude to have at last learned of an alternative to the drivel of opinions they were routinely fed. But I do not want to go more deeply into this aspect of the matter. It will be sufficient to state that the students have good reasons to revolt; and if the reasons they actually advance are bad, one should remember that the educational institutions have cut them off from the life of reason so effectively that they cannot even articulate the causes of their legitimate unrest.

By the irrational violence of the attack, the revolt could expose the flabbiness and emptiness of the institutionalized climate and its personnel, but one should not expect the life of reason to emerge from the confrontation of two vacua. More important than the spectacular events is the quiet erosion of the climate through the historical sciences. The nature of man can be deformed by the dominant opinions—the other day I heard a well-intentioned but helpless colleague cry out in anguish: Our world is fragmented!—but it is indestructible and finds ways to reassert itself. The metaleptic reality that is brushed aside as stuff and nonsense, if it claims in public to be the primary concern of man, has deviously crept in again under the respectable cover of comparative religion, comparative literature, the history of art, the science of

the myth, the history of philosophy, intellectual history, the exploration of primitive symbolisms in ethnography and anthropology, the study of ancient civilizations, archeology, and pre-history, of Hinduism, Islam, and the Far East, of Hellenistic mystery religions, the Qumran texts, and Gnosticism, of early Christianity and the Christian Middle-Ages, and last not least by classical studies. In the cultural history of Western society, the splendid advance of the historical sciences has become the underground of the great *resistance* to the climate of opinion. In everyone of the fields enumerated, we find the men who devote their life to it, because here they find the spiritual integrity and wholeness of existence which on the dominant level of the universities has been destroyed. No critical attack on the insanity of the "Age" can be more devastating than the plain fact that men who respect their own humanity, and want to cultivate it as they should, must become refugees to the Megalithicum, or Siberian shamanism, or Coptic Papyri, to the petroglyphs in the caves of the Ile-de-France, or to the symbolisms of African tribes, in order to find a spiritual home and the life of reason. Moreover, this underground has become the refuge not only for scholars but also for the more sensitive students, as one can ascertain by browsing for an hour in a college book-store; the nature of man asserts itself, even if these poor fellows, deprived of proper guidance, grope for support in such exotica as the I-Ching.

Under the historical cover, thus, the substantive knowledge concerning the nature of man is present in our universities. Thanks to the phantastic enlargement of the historical horizon in time and space that has occurred in the present century, this knowledge has even become more comprehensive and penetrating than at any other time in the history of our universi-

ties. At the same time it has become more easily accessible to everybody—I have only to compare the difficulties of access in the 20's, when I was a student, with the present plethora of paperbacks. This formidable presence, however, is slow to develop into a formative force in our institutions of higher learning. One of the reasons for this odd state of things will become apparent from an incident, a few years ago, at a conference on comparative religion: One of the participants broke the great taboo and flatly put it to his *confrères* that the subject-matter they were treating was irrelevant by the standards of opinion to which most of them seemed to adhere; sooner or later they would have to make up their mind whether the science of comparative religion was an occupational therapy for persons otherwise unemployable, or whether it was a pursuit of the truth of existence which its subject-matter substantively contained; one could not forever explore "religious phenomena," and pretend to their importance, without unreservedly professing that man's search for the divine ground of his existence, as well as the revelatory presence of God in the motivation of the search, constituted his humanity; in brief, he confronted them with the question of truth implied in their admirable achievements as historians. Not everybody present was pleased by such tactlessness. The historical cover, thus, is a sensible device as long as it secures a degree of freedom for the life of reason in institutions which are dominated by an essentially totalitarian climate, but it is in danger of becoming itself a part of the climate, as this incident shows, if the cover is used to sterilize the content and preventing it from becoming effective in our society. The cover will then degenerate into the ideology of historical positivism.

THE ADVANCE of the historical sciences

concerning the nature of man in its various manifestations has arrived at a critical juncture: In retrospect from a future historical position, will it be the massive basis for a restoration of the life of reason? or will it be an interesting last gasp of reason, exhaled by little men who did not have the courage of their convictions, before the totalitarian climate strangled it off for a long time to come?

Assuming the first alternative to be realized, classical studies will have an important function in the process, for in its Greek manifestation man's nature has achieved the luminosity of noetic consciousness and developed the symbols for its self-interpretation. The Greek differentiation of reason in existence has set critical standards for the exploration of consciousness behind which nobody is permitted to fall back. This achievement, however, is not a possession forever, something like a precious heirloom to be handed on to later generations, but a paradigmatic action to be explored in order to be continued under the conditions of our time. But at this point I must stop, for the great question how that is to be done cannot be answered by jotting down a program; concrete action itself would be necessary; and as the Greek manifestation of man's nature covered the range of a civilization, that feat cannot be performed here and now. Hence, I shall conclude these reflections with the designation of two general areas in which no major advance of science beyond its present state seems possible without recourse to, and continuation of, the Greek noetic effort.

1. If anything is characteristic of the present state of the historical sciences, it is the discrepancy between the mountains of material information and the poverty of their theoretical penetration. Whenever I have to touch on problems of the primitive myth or the imperial symbolism of Egypt,

of Israelite prophetism, Jewish apocalypse, or Christian gospels, of Plato's historical consciousness compared with that of Deutero-Isaiah, of the Polybian ecumenic consciousness compared with that of Mani, of magic or hermetism, and so forth, I am impressed by the philosophical and text-critical work done on the sources but feel frustrated because so little work is done to relate the phenomena of this class to the structure of consciousness in the sense of noetic analysis.

2. One of the great achievements of the Greek struggle, both against the older myth and the Sophistic climate of opinion, for

insight into the order of man's existence is the exploration of existential deformation and its varieties. Again, very little is done to explore this achievement, to develop it further, and to apply it to the modern phenomena of existential deformation. We do not even have a good study on "alienation," though this very topical subject ought to stir up any classical scholar to voice what he has to say about it on the basis of the sources he knows best.

¹Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824) created the science of "philology." The work on which his fame still rests is the *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795).