

AFTERWORD

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST RECEIVED

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What might be the future reception of our receptions of the past? This special issue began as a transatlantic interdisciplinary dialogue about classical reception, and it has developed dialogically, not only in pairing papers but in pursuing a dialogic model for classical reception studies: a critical activity that must involve explicit reflection on the act of reception itself. Instead of taking the transmission of tradition as something self-evident, reception studies should examine its own practice as well. Each paper incorporates self-reflection in its argument and joins in an exchange with another essay. The collection thus explores the always-contested nature of the field.

Through their different disciplinary, epistemological, and textual preoccupations, the contributors converge at an understanding of classical reception studies that moves beyond traditional hermeneutics and philological empiricism, and in general finds the single approach (be it realism or positivism, psychoanalysis or narratology) inadequate for the investigation of complex processes. Here, reception is not understood as discovery or reconstruction of a heritage, as passive acceptance or creative appropriation of a legacy. Its study is moving beyond the universalist conception of timeless monuments and the historicist idea of timely masterpieces.

The contributors believe in historicizing modern issues through a double reading: they explore both how modernity has hosted the past and how modernity itself has shaped our understanding of the past. For example, in the specific case of the political, they show how it is strongly informed by ancient thought and also conditions the reading of that thought. Modes of classical reception affect political ideas and practices, while at the same time such ideas and practices affect modes of classical reception: instead of pursuing influence or intertextuality, classical reception studies is driven by this very reciprocity.

Forms of reciprocity attract much attention in this issue, as contributors explore the mutual operations of continuity and discontinuity, stability and instability, preservation and destruction, freedom and oppression, individuality and collectivity, presence and representation, and much more. Their analyses exemplify interstitial thinking as they focus on what lies in between conventional polarities. Instead of describing fixed objects, they explore unstable texts, discontinuous practices, performative contingencies, fault lines of rationalization, and irregularities of canonization. Ultimately, this approach attempts to take advantage of the mutuality between theory and practice. By doing *and* conceptualizing classical reception at the same time, these papers propose that classical reception studies can operate in the interstices of theory and practice, refusing to identify with either. To put it in different terms, reception as self-reflexive practice becomes theory.

This collective exploration of different functions of reciprocity in the operations of the political leads classical reception studies into the counter-politics of complicity and resistance. If power mechanisms are both authoritative and unstable, and if cultural exercises are simultaneously hegemonic and antihegemonic, then the omnipotence of reception and the potential for resisting it coexist. Yet, this does not trap the field into a vicious circle. The past makes possible questions occluded by the present. Through the defamiliarizing challenge of conversing with a historically alien antiquity, the past is mobilized to create a new future.

The papers at hand show forcefully that the best way to avoid epistemologies of identity and difference is to remain attentive to the reciprocity of receptivity that operates between those involved in reception, and thus to explore what conditions reception and at the same time what reception conditions. In this regard, the Greeks, who for the last ten centuries have been negotiating the mutuality between Hellenism and modernity, offer a paradigmatic case—they reveal all the middle forms of mixing that go under “middlesex,” Jeffrey Eugenides’ myth of three Greek generations in America. The Greeks have been doing classical reception studies all along, not because of what or where they are but because of how they have been engaged through historical contingency in Hellenic (self-)fashioning. (That also made them the first post-Romans, which they still acknowledge by calling

themselves *Romioi*.) Their constitutively interstitial position makes them a promising topic for the kind of interstitial thinking practiced throughout this issue.

An interest in the Greeks of modernity would be a challenge for classical reception studies since they have been excluded from its tradition. Western Hellenism silenced the Greeks to make sure that they could not contaminate classic ideals. With very few exceptions, its major advocates believed that any modern could become classical except the modern Greeks. As a result, the ancients are still understood in terms set by thinkers like Lukács, Benjamin, Arendt, Strauss, and Adorno, for whom a Greek was a subject of contention with Heidegger rather than a living human being (despite all the Greeks they had met). The only Greek allowed to speak on the Acropolis is a good-hearted whore in *Never on Sunday* who cannot even figure out *Medea's* conclusion. (Greeks are absent even from most of the bibliographies of this issue.) Classical reception studies can expose the mechanisms of racialization and temporalization operating in classicizing regimes by exploring the modern un-Greeking of Hellenism. Two decades of scholarship on modern Greek classical reception have already opened several paths.¹

Such an exploration would require a certain reorientation, as these papers suggest. To date, classical reception studies remains largely interpretive. Its hermeneutic origins are apparent in its predilection for close reading. Thus, textual explications prevail while genealogies of institutions, sites, discourses, and disciplines remain relatively few. However, as the conservative evolution of poststructuralist textualism has shown, interpretation always runs the risk of being assimilated into traditional scholarship as another refined descendant of philology and literary criticism: in the end, the strategies of reading can discipline anything into text. This issue warns against such a cooptation.

These papers have incorporated from the start an explicit consideration of the mutuality of reception and the reciprocity of reflection. By engaging in direct and indirect dialogues, they eschewed pure theory or application, favoring instead a scholarly praxis that sees reception as an active intervention and the classical as an ideological regime of the political. These dialogues suggest a host of new ways of thinking about aspects of classical reception, such as the connections between interpretation and interactivity, freedom and happiness,

textual transmission and state power, genre and domination, objecthood and constitution, staging and performing, the cognitive and the aesthetic, affect and desire, logos and patriarchy, myth and history, founding and sacrifice, learning and identity, culture and citizenship, the Roman archive and fantasy, Hellenism and Enlightenment. Individually and collectively, contributors have pressed very hard for the kind of rigor that renews our commitment to the future of the past received.

Note

1. A list of books might include Lambropoulos's *Literature as National Institution* (1988), Ricks's *The Shade of Homer* (1989), Jurdanis's *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture* (1991), Leontis's *Topographies of Hellenism* (1995), Gourgouris's *Dream Nation* (1996), Mackridge's edited collection *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry* (1996), van Steen's *Venom in Verse* (2000), Constantinidis's *Modern Greek Theatre* (2001), Yalouris's *The Acropolis* (2001), Alexiou's *After Antiquity* (2002), Calotychos's *Modern Greece* (2003), Jeffreys's *Eastern Questions* (2005), Hamilakis's *The Nation and Its Ruins* (2007), and Damaskos and Plantzos's edited volume *A Singular Antiquity* (2008).