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Reinterpreting the Classics

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Cracks in the Marble of the Classic Form: The Problem of the Classical Today

CHARLES SEGAL

I

CLASSICAL LITERARY TEXTS, the major writings of ancient Greece and Rome, have had the dubious advantage of living through many centuries and being put to many different uses. The ancient literary critics already show a tendency to idealize, to find in their authors an almost stereotypic grandeur, nobility, serenity, symmetry, balance, elegance, charm, or the like. In the postclassical cultures, both of the West and of the Byzantine East, the ancient texts have served the purpose of embodying those values for later periods. They have helped to define models of survival of civilization, of humane, intelligent, sensitive, inquisitive, compassionate, affirmative, and sometimes hedonistic attitudes at times when civilization has broken down or fallen into ruder and narrower ways.

Over the long stretches of time when life was lived largely in villages or rather small, isolated communities, classical literature provided the major model for a complex and rich urban society.[1] The literature that developed in Athens in the fifth century B.C., then at Alexandria in the third century, and in Rome in the late republic and under the empire, provided the basis for the urban sensibility, with its combination of freedom, openmindedness, fascination with the unfamiliar, the bizarre, even the perverted, that eventually appears in the London and Paris of the poets and novelists from the seventeenth century to our own day. Direct historical influence aside, Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, for instance, stands in a line that goes back to Catullus's lyrics, Horace's *Odes*, Ovid's *Amores*, Propertius's *Elegies*, and behind them to Callimachus, Theocritus, and Herodas.

My main concern, however, is not the continuity of the classical so much as the changes that later ages made, and had to make, in their notion of the classical in order to draw from it the sustenance that they needed and to put it to the uses that they required. The process is already well under way in antiquity, as the Greek rhetoricians under the empire look back to the great writers of the classical period as "heroes," the embodiments of a spiritual and cultural greatness which their later descendants have lost.[2] For "Longinus," the author of the treatise *On the Sublime* in the early empire, as for a Victorian critic like Matthew Arnold, the literature of the remote past, protected and hallowed by its very antiquity, is the means of coming into contact with "great-souledness," *megalopsychia*. This, Longinus suggests, is a means of overcoming the pettiness, materialism, and hedonism of the present age. In his grandest paean to this expansiveness of spirit Longinus asks us to look up to the heavens and see the vastness of the universe into which we have been born as into a great theater (c. 35). Although he does not develop the analogy, the implication is that the great literature of the past is also a great theater, a theater of the spirit, as it were, in which we become the spectators of the grandeur that lies within us and to which we once more have access.

The identification of the heroic with the classical has had important consequences for the selection and evaluation of classical authors. It is instructive to compare the dignified Lateran statue of Sophocles now in the Vatican Museum with the risqué anecdotes about the great tragedian in Athenaeus. Both the ancient Greeks themselves and their modern interpreters feel a need to imagine their great writers as heroic figures.

The classicizing tradition tends to absorb and neutralize what the authors themselves may have intended to be outrageous, unconventional, disgusting, or counter-cultural. In the case of Archilochus and Aristophanes, for example, it takes a special effort to get these writers back to their pristine dirtiness.[3] The situation is especially difficult for archaic poetry, where, as in the case of Sappho, we have to deal not only with the stereotyping and romanticizing of a later time, but also with patterns of ritual behavior in a social institution quite unfamiliar to us: the grouping of young women in a kind of club known as a *thiasos*, a quasi-sacred association—devoted to the service of a deity such as Aphrodite—that probably helped the girls make the emotional adjustments to marriage.

It has taken a long time for scholars fully to accept the notion that Sappho was expressing emotional, and also physical, love for the young

women of whom and to whom she writes in the surviving fragments of her poetry. With its haunting combination of sacred rites, personal memories, the budding sensuality of early girlhood, the intensity of newly discovered areas of feelings, the poignancy of separation and hopeless farewells, this poetry does not easily fit into a classicizing mold. It presents the modern interpreter with a rather unfamiliar context of literary expression and leaves one on unsure ground for reconstructing the emotional tone, the level of seriousness, the balance between the personal and the generic, or between the individual and the mythical exemplum. It is not surprising, then, that Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker, in what has been called "the first scientific study of Sappho" (1816), went to great lengths to free her of any charge of sensual involvement with these girls. For Wilamowitz, almost exactly a century later, she is "a distinguished woman, wife and mother" ("eine vornehme Frau, Gattin und Mutter").[4]

This smoothing out of an ancient writer to acceptable levels of "classical" dignity can be illustrated from translations of Sappho's most famous poem (fragment 31, Lobel-Page). David Campbell's translation in the new Loeb Classical Library edition reads as follows:

> He seems as fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter. Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast. For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to be that I am little short of dying. But all can be endured, since . . . even a poor man . . .[5]

Even Boileau, who in his translation of Longinus well appreciated Sappho's effects and aims, is constrained by the conventions of *bienséance* to omit the sweating and to add "un nuage confus" ("a confused cloud") to the direct, very unconfused physical symptoms of the original.[6] A. J. Symonds's Victorian version is in some ways remarkably close to the original, but it too softens the stark effect of physical desire in the original.[7] A few lines will give the flavor:

> Peer of the gods he seemeth to me, the blissful
> Man who sits and gazes at thee before him
> Close beside thee sits, and in silence hears thee
> Silvery speaking,
> Laughing Love's low laughter. Oh this, this only

Stirs the troubled heart in my breast to tremble,
For should I but see thee a little moment,
Straight is my voice hushed . . .

"Silvery speaking" takes the place of the original's "sweetly speaking"; "stirs the troubled heart" replaces "has fluttered the heart" (*kardian eptoiaisen*). Symonds adds a "tingling" and "impalpable fire" where Sappho has only a "subtle fire" that "has run beneath the skin." Sappho's "desirable laughter" (line 5) has lost its specific erotic arousal (*himeroen*) and become "Laughing Love's low laughter." Open physical desire is thus transformed into a situation of worshipful love, begun in "silence" ("in silence hears thee," line 3) and ending with a "love trance" ("Caught by pains of menacing death, I falter, / Lost in the love trance").

Symonds elides another feature of this passage. In the background is probably the Homeric formula "equal to a god," which Symonds, however, absorbs into the classicizing "blissful." Sappho's use of a familiar and traditional epic phrase reminds us that we are dealing with a poetry where the boundary between the intensely personal and the conventional, between individual experience and the mythical model that informs it, is very different from anything in the personal love-lyric that we are familiar with from Romantic poetry, with its highly private, individual voice, or from post-Romantic poetry, with its inward, meditative quality. For Sappho and her contemporaries, the category of the personal remains in touch with social values and communal norms in a way that is hard for us to grasp, with our far greater division between the social and the private and our tendency to define the emotional in opposition to a highly rationalized society.

This text, like much of archaic Greek literature, is a good example of how the historical framework of a discipline can profoundly influence interpretation. The model for studying the development of the early Greek polis was the Renaissance city-state. The pioneering work of Jakob Burckhardt in both periods strengthened these analogies; and the influence of his monumental *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* heavily dominated continental scholarship in the tendency to see emerging individualism as the driving force for the early Greek city-state, as it was for the fifteenth-century Italian city. A work like Bruno Snell's influential *Discovery of the Mind* (trans. 1953) has popularized this idea in the Anglo-Saxon world. But a number of considerations make this individual-centered view of archaic lyric untenable, at least in the form in which it was originally propounded.

More recently recovered fragments, for instance, show how deeply rooted much of this poetry is in social and political institutions, like the symposia and factional groups. New fragments of Archilochus show us not just a determined individualist but a poet working with conventional mythical forms (like meeting the Muses), the adoption of a persona, and the use of stylized, traditional patterns of praise and insult in what may have been ritualized situations. In addition, studies of other "traditional" or preliterate societies now provide a wider range of models for the study of early Greek culture. Anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner, and Clifford Geertz have shown us how art forms may express deep mental and cultural patterns and how societies may include within highly ritualized and public expressions areas of experience that for us would be personal and secular. Within classical studies, for example, Claude Calame has traced the role of choral poetry in rites of passage, particularly as it bears on the expression of eroticism in the poems of Alcman; Eric Havelock and Bruno Gentili have studied the social functions of the performance; and Gregory Nagy has revealed traditional folk patterns of praise and blame in the poetry of Archilochus.[8]

Even athletic contests, which we think of as trials of individual strength and will, were for the ancient Greeks religious acts. The four great pan-Hellenic festivals, Olympian, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian, were founded as funeral celebrations and had sacrificial rituals at their center. The great poems that celebrated these victories, the Epinicia of Pindar and Bacchylides, give little joy to sports fans, for they pay sparse attention to the details of the victory. Instead, drawing parallels with myths about heroes like Achilles, Heracles, Jason, and Perseus, they stress the victor's ties to his clan and his homeland, place the athletic success into a fundamentally religious and moral context, and reflect on the limits of mortal life, the precariousness of good fortune, the transience of youth and happiness, the power of the gods, the envy of other men, and even the misfortune and shame of the losers.

II

This modern conception of the classical goes back to the humanist rediscovery of ancient civilization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and behind that to the ancient aristocratic conception of a leisured class whose primary concern is self-cultivation and participation in the public life of the community. Thus the ideals of decorum, dignity, calm, nobility, and simplicity that constitute the classical in art derive, at least in part, from the

values of an all-male aristocratic society, an educated class able to judge and select in accordance with a long-instilled sense of exclusiveness and excellence. From the literature of Greece and Rome the writers, painters, and sculptors of the Renaissance drew their belief that language is a source of knowledge and beauty rather than error and deception, that intelligent and refined discourse, including the symbolic language of music and the visual arts, unlocks the secrets of nature, and that knowledge and beauty belong together and illuminate one another. From the Renaissance to the eighteenth century these ideals became authoritative—especially through the influence of aristocratic models—because they fulfilled a need to define an ideal of high culture and an optimistic, elevated conception of human nature to which one could appeal—an ideal of education, of society, and of style.

Renaissance poets and artists go back to Homer and Hesiod in reasserting that the Muses of poetry and song are inspirers of wisdom as well as of art.[9] Here they are drawing on a cultural ideal strong in classical antiquity: the cooperation of the arts, sciences, and religion in a unitary conception of learning. Dante places the archetypal poet Orpheus with the moral philosophers Cicero and Seneca and also close to the scientists, mathematicians, and physicians: Dioscorides, Euclid, Ptolemy, Hippocrates, and Galen (*Inferno* 4.140–44). In Puttenham's *Arte of English Poetry* (1589) the poets are "the first Astronomers, Philosophers and Metaphysics . . . and Historiographers"; and Orpheus, the "first musitien," stands at their head. Even for Francis Bacon in his *De Sapientia Veterum* (*The Wisdom of the Ancients*, 1609) Orpheus may represent "universal philosophy" and can even personify "philosophy" through his mastery of "all harmony subdued" by which he "drew all things after him by sweet and gentle measures." Orpheus serves as the archetypal poet in that he combines the discovery of natural and divine mysteries with emotional depth and intensity, intellect, the arts, and love for his fellow men.

In times of change, uncertainty, confusion of values, and brutality, on the other hand, the ideal of the classical offers a reassuring image of the grand, the expansive, and the timeless. Wolfgang Schadewaldt is echoing Longinus when he speaks of "was Klassik einmal gewesen ist und immer sein wird."[10] Taking the Parthenon as his example, he finds its quality of the classic in a sense of peace, calm, fulfillment, a liberating simplicity that enables us to "remain ourselves" or "a restful fullness of inner happiness" ("eine ruhige Fülle inneren Glück," 16). Seriousness without heaviness, energy, a sense of well-being are some of the effects of the classic. "The classic is nobility of spiritual humanity, lifted to the law of form" (31). Such descriptions of

the classic, even by a learned and sensitive interpreter of ancient and modern literature, may seem more naive to us now than they would have when written in 1933.

Schadewaldt's description of the classical, however, is revealing on an important point. When he describes the classical as itself a harmony between opposing forces (ideal and real, rest and movement, unity and multiplicity, freedom and necessity, form and matter, and so on), he reveals it as a construct that needs an antithetical term to define it. The classical is then what exists when it is purified of this disruptive antithesis (rest versus movement, energy versus calm, symmetry versus exuberance); the classical is a term that defines by exclusion. It privileges one side of the antithesis, the "higher" and quieter value over the "lower" or noisier: Sophocles over Euripides, Horace over Juvenal, Pindar's soaring eagle over the chattering jackdaws that tradition associates with Bacchylides (Pindar, "Olympian" 2.87–89).[11]

Following its Kantian heritage, German scholarship earlier in the century tended to view the classical in terms of "nobility," grandeur, and moral absolutes. Anglo-Saxon scholarship, on the other hand, takes pride in the Greeks' decorum, sensibleness, logicality, truthfulness to life, that is, to a form of life that "we" can identify with without too much effort or strain of the imagination. One of the virtues admired in the classical, in other words, is a sense of familiarity. For recent continental scholarship, the feeling of the otherness produced by the Greeks is their most interesting quality. For writers like Walter Burkert and René Girard, the fascination of Greek culture lies not in serenity but in a starker confrontation with man's inherent capacity for violence. Marcel Detienne takes issue with the notion of Apollo as a god of serenity, light, order, and purity—made famous in the Belvedere Apollo of Winckelmann at the end of the eighteenth century. By delving into the less familiar rites of the god, Detienne would uncover an "immoderate taste, his passion for blood, knives, and butcher boys."[12] This Apollo is "the impudent murderer, the audacious cutthroat, stronger with each act of violence," "the only divine power represented in the vase-paintings with a butcher-knife or sacrificial knife raised above the head of one of his enemies." He is about as far as possible from the serene aestheticism that Winckelmann found in his Apollo. Instead, this Apollo sets us at "the extreme fragility of a cultural frontier between the blood-crime and the sacrificial meal."

The nineteenth-century view of classical serenity, however, remains strong in popular culture. The much televised opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, for example, show men and women in white robes carrying torches to

square stone altars with flames on them burning brightly as symbols of the noble cultivation of order, discipline, beauty, and strength. But the most important altars at the ancient Olympics were huge piles of ashes on which chunks of slaughtered animals were set, and near these the blood of the animals was poured into pits in the ground. As Walter Burkert has recently reminded us, the games not only have their origins in funeral rites, but also have ties to rather grisly myths of human sacrifice and filicide. Nor does one have to read very much behind the lines of Pindar's First "Olympian Ode" to see this.[13]

Even scholars of the Cambridge School, who pioneered the anthropological approach to Greek culture early in the century, remained ambivalent about the rude, primitive elements that they were uncovering—what Jane Harrison called the "barbarous devices of the Heathen"—and rejoiced in the extent to which the Greeks triumphed over their rude beginnings and purified their myths of primitive superstitions in an ever-upward progress. In this view the classical is the end result of an evolutionary process that purifies the violent and primitive from the earlier stages of culture. Thus, for Gilbert Murray, Homer's Achaeans are clean-spirited, idealistic, northern conquerors, uncontaminated by southern superstition, by the lower mental life of their conquered subjects, or by the debasing influence of women.[14] Such an approach to the classical derives from a combination of nineteenth-century notions of progress, the historicism then current in classical studies, and the anthropological fascination with the "primitive" elements in the tribal societies that were being studied for clues to the earlier phases of human social and mental development. There is even an unconscious trace of colonialism and racism, with its north/south, civilizing/savage antitheses. To quote Murray again, "The tradition of early Greece, vast and tangled in the wealth of varied beauty and ugliness as some South American forest, was left by the Homeric poets a much cleaner and colder thing than they found it" (144). The early Greek poets, then, figuratively recreate the pure, bracing atmosphere of the northern (European) climate in the midst of the steaming jungle forests that they found among the primitives whom they absorbed and civilized.

If we compare the imagery of Murray's passage with a passage by another writer also much concerned with classical Greece about the same time, we glimpse something of its mythicizing underpinnings:

> For the past several years Asiatic cholera had shown a strong tendency to spread. Its source was the hot, moist swamps of the delta of the Ganges, where it bred in the mephitic air of the primeval island-jungle, among whose bamboo thickets the tiger crouches, where life of every sort flourishes in the rankest abundance, and only man avoids the spot.

The author is Thomas Mann, describing the southern "disease" of desire and repressed longings that destroys the controlled purity of the northern artist, Von Aschenbach, in *Death in Venice*.[15] His Platonic ideals of intellectual beauty and discipline succumb to this chaos-inducing power from the remote, "primitive" jungles of the south.

The ease with which the classic acquires virtually mythic or archetypal value appears around the same time from W. B. Yeats's famous poem, "The Statues":

> . . . Greater than Pythagoras, for the men
> That with a mallet or a chisel modelled these
> Calculations that look but casual flesh, put down
> All Asiatic vague immensities,
> And not the banks of oars that swam upon
> The many-headed foam at Salamis.[16]

The artists who created the harmonious mathematical proportions of classical sculpture were the real victors over the real Persian threat to the West, namely the formlessness of Asian "immensity."

The legacy of nineteenth-century evolutionary historicism made it natural to discern a gradual cultural struggle that eventually brought the Homeric poems to the form in which we have them. Problems arise when what is an enabling fiction or myth for the poet and the novelist becomes a quasi-historical principle, conscious or not, for the scholar. The quotations from Gilbert Murray above show how easily historicizing could slip into an implicit ideologizing. Murray himself, with his interest in large social issues and his concern with such antinationalistic causes as the League of Nations, was far above such a degradation of the classical. Yet the possibility remained inherent in the emblematizing of the Greek classics, with their identification of reason with masculinity and their ethic of domination and aristocratic individualism, as the ideal forms from which and toward which the highest values of Western civilization evolve. Thus Wole Soyinka, in his 1986 Nobel lecture, bitterly suggests that the works of Hume, Hegel, Locke, Voltaire, and "an endless list" of others should appear in third-world libraries with a warning stamped on the flyleaf: "This work is dangerous for your racial self-esteem."[17]

Instead of exulting either in the progress of the human spirit rising from barbarism to civilization or in the grim picture of the continuing force of bloodlust, we can perhaps accept the dynamic aspect of the classical text: in this case, the uneven, precarious struggle between mercy and violence, compassionate breadth of view and savage vengefulness and hatred, as it is depicted in the last book of the *Iliad*. Achilles knows well that divine intervention has brought Priam to his tent. He has already agreed to ransom Hector's body. He intends to show mercy and to revere the "behests of Zeus" that are on the side of pity and compassion. He has the breadth of view that can see the connection between Peleus and Priam and can generalize on the human condition in the parable of the two jars and in the myth of Niobe. Even so, he knows his limits; he knows the force of passion that can rise up in his heart if he should see Priam lamenting over the body of Hector, Achilles' hated enemy; and he takes the necessary steps to avoid a scene whose emotional power he might not be able to resist, a scene that might sweep away all the barriers that he has, finally, succeeded in erecting between his passions of hatred and vengeance and his large understanding and generosity (*Iliad* 24.559–86).

On the other side, this struggle is balanced by a powerful, emotionally convincing contrast between the imaginative vision of Priam—encouraged by the message from Zeus, that Achilles might be able to rise to compassion for an old, bereaved man like his own father Peleus—and the invincible hatred of Hecuba. She is tied by the bonds of motherhood to the son to whom she has given birth. Deeply attached to the physicality of the body, she must have it beside her for the last, miserable solace of "joy in lamentation." Her passionate involvement with the body and its injuries makes her unable to bridge the gap between herself and the killer of Hector. While Priam is contemplating the possibility of crossing the no man's land between the two camps and can extend his vision's reach beyond the bitter hatreds to ask for a compassion such as Achilles would feel for his own father, Hecuba returns to the spirit of implacable, savage wrath and would repeat the fierce, hate-filled cannibalism with which Achilles threatened Hector in the heat of battle. Achilles wished that he could cut up Hector's body and eat it raw; Hecuba wishes that she could fasten her teeth in Achilles' liver and devour it (22.326 ff.; 24.208 ff.).

Murray's approach rightly calls attention to the historical reality behind the long process of the evolution of the Homeric poems. But a reading less involved in Greek culture's progress toward its "classical" form reveals

an ongoing spiritual drama rather than a finally achieved result, a conflict between powerfully opposing directions within human beings that remains as powerful for us today as it was for the original audience over two and a half millennia ago. It would be presumptuous to suggest that as great a Hellenist as Gilbert Murray was wrong, but one can at least point to a different orientation. Where he sought for evidence of progress in the evolution of the human spirit, we are perhaps more inclined to see a continuing struggle. For him the classical embodies a point of rest and attainment from which one can look back, with pride and relief, at the gory horrors that are now only remnants or traces in the noble poem we have. For us, the classical is itself the struggle, a precarious moment of vision of better things, but at the same time an impure vision, capable of being pressed into the service of cruelty, inhumanity, and subtle but nonetheless oppressive forms of barbarism. The virulent hatreds of Hecuba and Achilles in the *Iliad* are, alas, hardly relics of a superseded past, as this bit of an oral poem from the same part of the world, dictated to Milman Parry in 1934, reminds us:

> Ever did she curse all Bosnia:
> "By God, Bosnia, may you be
> struck by the plague!
> May the foxes bark in Bosnia,
> And all the women remain widows,
> Since Bosnia has no champion
> To challenge our enemy."[18]

If we glance from the end of the *Iliad* to the poet who is most commonly felt to embody classical humanism in the fifth century, namely Sophocles, we have a further basis to question Murray's notion of a progressive movement from barbarism and cruelty to enlightened humanism and cleanness of spirit. While Achilles and Priam can ultimately transcend the barriers of war's hatreds, divisiveness, and vengefulness, Sophocles' heroes, over three centuries later, draw their strength and some of their contemporary appeal from an intransigent refusal of just what Priam and Achilles, however precariously and momentarily, achieve. Ajax's triumph at the end of the Sophoclean play lies in his continuing force of resentment and anger. In the midst of his defeat as an outcast, criminal, and suicide, he is able to salvage a kind of moral victory, such as it is, by keeping his bitter enemy, Odysseus, from participating in his funeral rite—a rite which Odysseus has in fact brought about through his persuasiveness, compassion, and capacity for reasonable

compromise. But Ajax, not Odysseus, is the hero of this play. Similarly, in both the *Electra* and the *Philoctetes*, the hero's or heroine's power lies in refusing to compromise with his or her enemies and in retaining nearly to the end a fierce bitterness of hate.[19]

In Sophocles' last play, the aged Oedipus is honored by heroization from the gods—that is, he is marked out as some sort of cultural ideal. Yet he is completely unable to do what Priam and Achilles could do centuries before. He remains unchanged in his wrath against his sons. Despite the pleas of Antigone, he utters the terrible curses against them that send them to their deaths. He does nothing to stop the civil war in the city whose people he had pitied when he ruled them as king. This hero who could save his city from the supernatural afflictions of the Sphinx and the plague is unable to save it from the violence and self-destructive passions in the human heart, those incurable resentments that cloud the life of every Sophoclean hero. The comparison between Homer and Sophocles in this regard illustrates how simplistic it would be to argue for a straight line of upward moral evolution toward classical humanism and enlightenment.

III

It has been a basic assumption from classical times until recently that the value of art lies in its objective content, in what it has to "say" about its referent, be that the nature of man or the mystery of the divine or love or war, as these subjects are reflected in the specific events and behavior and personalities shown in the literary work. Modern theories, however, question the clear division between the discourse of the text and what it seeks to describe and the division between a separate subject confronting the otherness of an independent, autonomous object that is somehow "outside" the text. Instead, the very notion of the autonomous artwork emerges as itself a cultural construct. We know that the perceiving subject (the audience) constructs the work and participates in the process of bringing it into existence. The language of literary works too is seen not merely as a transparent glass to the reality of the external work, to "life," but as a web of conventions and traditions—some inherited and some created by the individual artist within the limits of certain norms—that structure our perceptions of the "life" presented in the work.

As Tzvetan Todorov points out in his *Poetics of Prose*, narrative fictions operate by creating problems, dissonance, or disequilibrium, and the essence of the work may lie as much in the experience of this dissonance as in any

final resolution.[20] Each interpretation will inevitably reinscribe this dissonance back into the text in some form or other, for each reception of the text constitutes a decision to perceive and highlight certain elements in the text and to exclude others. When we expose the principles behind that selection and exclusion, we become aware of the problem of assigning final meanings, and we reopen the text to its indeterminacies. We also open the work to its shifting status as an object of cognition rather than a closed, finished artifact.

The works we label as classical have generally been regarded as containing somewhat fewer such indeterminacies. The conventions of the classical tradition, in other words, tend toward greater fullness and explicitness in narrating an event. Homer, for example, not only gives us a detailed account of how Priam has his wagon yoked up to carry Hector's ransom to Achilles, but even mentions how the king lifts up the lids of the coffers that hold the treasure that he brings (*Iliad* 24. 228). Yet Homer is equally famous for his silences. In this same book there is the astonishing suddenness with which Achilles yields to Zeus's command, mediated by Thetis, and gives up Hector's body (24. 139 ff.).

One of the operative myths of the classicizing tradition of interpretation, with its roots in Aristotle's belief in universal ethical values, has been to seek for its works a privileged immunity from multiple meanings. As recent interpreters have pointed out, however, no such immunity is possible. Piero Pucci has called attention to the ambiguities of the gods' epiphanies in both Homeric epics, questioning the traditional classicizing notions of the transparency and "readability" of these famous texts.[21] Simon Goldhill has demonstrated once more the open-endedness of the closing scene of the *Oresteia*.[22] And Vergilian scholars continue to fight about the significance of the closing scene of the *Aeneid*.

The most admired plot in Western literature, that of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, now seems so far from absolute clarity that recent critics have propounded radically different views of its basic story.[23] Indeed, the questions about knowing the full story may be in fact the center of the play. The play, in other words, does not aim to give us all we ever wanted to know about Oedipus; it is itself an open, questioning structure, calling attention to the problem of how a complex structure of words can tell us about truth. It shows how easily memories, stories, versions of who we are and where we come from become distorted or confused by our failure, wilful or accidental, to hear the significant detail at the proper moment, and how leaky, selective and tinged by emotion are our apparently objective perceptions of

the world. It is impossible to disentangle the personal and moral crises from the epistemological and linguistic crises; and the play is as much "about" our faulty symbolic systems and sign systems as it is about patricide and incest.

To turn to another famous play, the so-called double burial of the *Antigone* is for many scholars merely a necessary stage device to get Antigone caught, a piece of plot machinery that the audience would not notice in the pace of the production onstage. To others it reveals the psychological fullness of Sophoclean characterization: Antigone has returned a second time because she knew that the body would be uncovered, or else because she did not have time before to pour the libations over the corpse, only to cover it with the thin sprinkling of dust, or else because she wanted to get caught and sacrifice her life to her brother and to her ideal of devotion to her family of origin. As in the case of the *Oedipus*, the issue of the mimetic coherence of the text has been displaced onto the psychology of character. We easily assume the hidden motives of characters, regarded as three-dimensional personalities, and deduce these from his or her actions, even though such motives are nowhere stated openly in the text.[24] Our heritage from the nineteenth-century novel makes it both easy and appealing to make this critical move. We seek total coherence of surface, and if we do not find it in the plot it must lie in the depth of characterization.[25]

I would not want either to underestimate the importance of mimetic coherence in Greek drama or to thin out the characterization of a Sophoclean protagonist. But the assumption of total coherence of surface is not an absolutely necessary one. There may be another reason for the gap in our understanding of the events around the burial during that mysterious night before the action proper of the play begins, one that would lead us to accept that dimension of uncertainty as a constituent element in the play. It moves from civic space to the numinous realm of divine action that Creon has so vehemently excluded from his polis, the realm under his control.

Such a reading admittedly only displaces the gap from character to theology. In my own reading of Sophocles, I would be happier with the theological than with the characterological explanation, for I think that this is a more appropriate area (given Sophocles' concern with the gods) for indeterminacies of this nature. My concern here, however, is that in idealizing classical Greek literature, we do not simplify it. It is in fact far more self-conscious of its representational conventions than interpreters under the spell of mimetic realism have allowed. Realism is itself a more complex, slippery quality than classical criticism has acknowledged.

In this area of criticism Euripides has been more fortunate (if that term may be so used) than his older contemporary. From his contemporary reader and critic, Aristophanes, to the present day, the cracks in his classical coherence have been duly observed, if not in fact poked into with relish. Never having occupied quite so lofty a throne of classical perfection, he has been allowed a wider range of deviation. Plays like the *Heracles*, *Helen*, *Bacchae*, or *Orestes* call attention so clamorously to their manipulation of illusion that critics, in one form or another, have been forced to come to terms with departures from mimetic realism and the possibility that the poet is writing with a more open-ended notion of meaning. Precisely because Euripides forces his audience to perceive the processes by which language, theatrical conventions, and symbolic forms like mythical narratives create meaning, he demonstrates how fictions may be received and understood in several different ways. When the audience itself is drawn into the process by which meaning emerges from a text, meaning becomes participatory and interactive rather than the passive reception of a definitive "message." The work takes on different kinds of significance as different facets of its constituent elements, different signifying conventions and possibilities of its sign system, come into view.

As our familiar classics cease to be the locus of a single stable meaning, the canon that constitutes the classical undergoes change. If the classical virtues of grandeur, calm, nobility, permanence, and simplicity are no longer exhibited by the works that we have been accustomed to call "classical," we become freer not only to respond to other qualities in these works but also to explore more sympathetically other works of antiquity or of other periods that had not been deemed worthy of close study. Psychological, anthropological, and feminist approaches to Greek and Latin literature, for example, have revealed new and interesting aspects of some generally neglected plays like Aeschylus's *Suppliants*, Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, or Euripides' two *Iphigeneias* and *Hecuba*. Narratology has brought fresh insight to the Greek and Roman novel, hitherto accorded only marginal status in the classical corpus. Focusing on myth-making and image-making in a decentered universe and with a decentered human subject has made us look again at late Augustan or post-Augustan works like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's tragedies, or Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*.

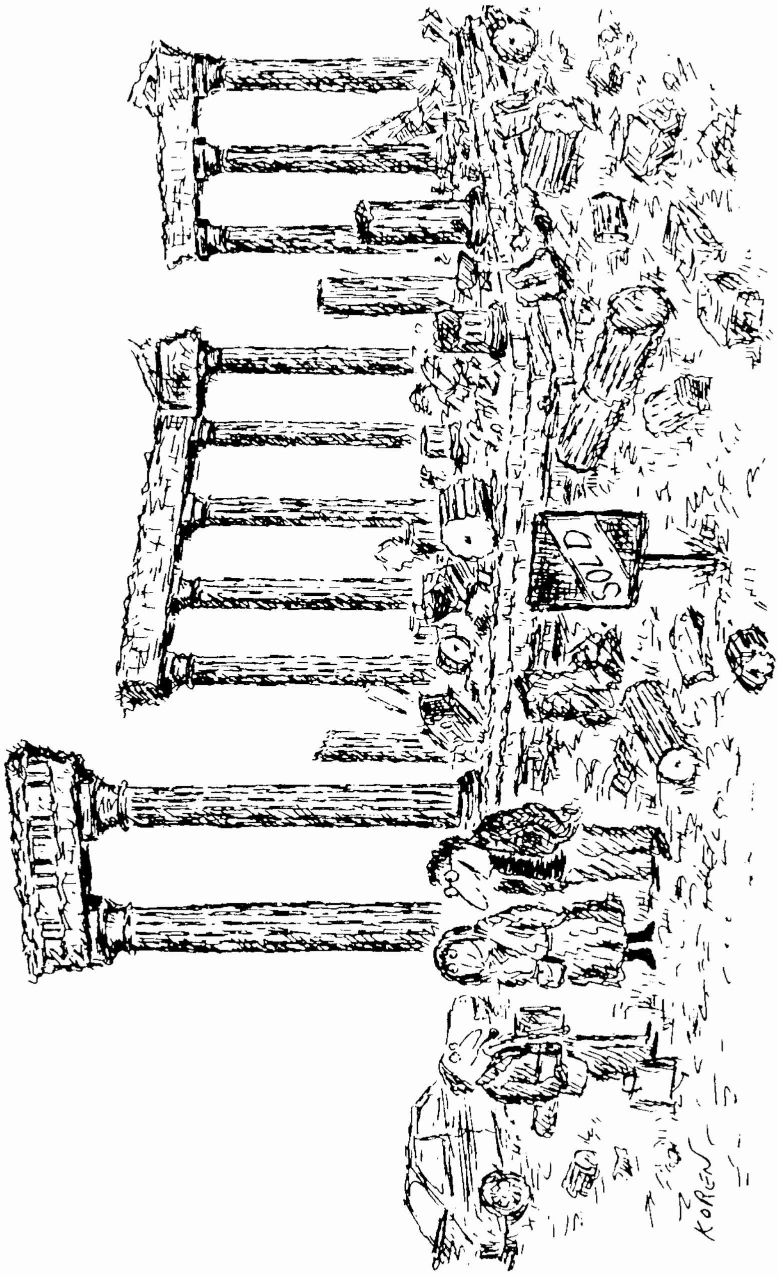
IV

For all our doubts about the classical, we probably cannot do without it as a basis of literary value. The idea of the classical helps stabilize literary

study by offering us a corpus of texts, plots, and styles that we can (and have to) use as the proving ground for most new views of literature. Every new literary theory, for instance, seems to have to tackle the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the *Poetics*. The classical texts have not only formed our basic notions of literary value, but are also complex and engaging enough to demand reinterpretation. Works like the *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *Bacchae*, or *Aeneid* bother us in a way important enough to make us want to push at the limits of their interpretability, and even to violate those limits—that is, to go beyond the meaning that the author is (historically) likely to have intended for his own time and place.

From this point of view, a possible working definition of the classical is a work that retains a living interpretability in times far beyond its own, a work that interests us enough to demand that we interpret it again. The basis of that interest lies at least in part in the profundity of human situations that these texts evoke for us, situations presented with a richness that we cannot easily exhaust or reduce, even by the most powerful schematizations of contemporary theory. In their paradoxically complex simplicity they point us back to the essential human questions—the meaning of life in the perspective of our mortality, the problems of injustice and suffering, our relation to the social and natural orders. One of the recurrent themes of Greek tragedy, for example, is the interconnectedness of all the parts of our experience and the sensitive ties between humans and the rhythms of nature that cannot be disregarded with impunity. And so the tragedies interweave issues of moral philosophy, epistemology, political science, sociology, theology and force us to confront their organic interrelation.

As the rate of change accelerates, as it will no doubt continue to do, the past becomes increasingly important as a means of keeping us in touch with our humanity, with the accumulated experience of the millennia of human thought, feelings, and capabilities that have preceded us. Homo sapiens, it has been observed, has been on this earth for the equivalent of only some 800 contemporary lifespans. Of those merely sixty belong to recorded history. Fewer than thirty belong to Christianity. We are only some three or four lifetimes from the start of the industrial revolution, and we have had the printed book for only some eight or nine lifetimes. Or, to look at our past a little differently, mankind has spent some 600 or 700 of our lifespans chipping away at flints in caves, and has had what we think of as a settled, civilized life (domesticated animals, agriculture, villages, pottery) for a mere 100 lifespans. Classical Greece is the furthest back we can go in a civilization



"Our goal is to modernize it but retain the historical flavor." Drawing by Koren; © 1987 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

and value-system close to our own, and so Greece provides a valuable point of reference both for what may be constant and what is subject to change in areas of familiar and important human behavior.

Our distance from ancient Greece, however, though valuable in one way, can lead to misleading inferences in another. The classical becomes not merely a source of myths, but a myth in itself, the myth of a civilization that attained a flourishing and sophisticated urban culture as high as our own but then disappeared completely from the face of the earth, except for its fragmentary writings and ruined temples. (Is there a warning for us here?) This is a civilization whose very essence has become for us the monument, with the ambivalence that the monument arouses in us. It is surrounded by an aura of unattainable greatness and the ineffable pathos of its loss. Such, for example, is the framing of the classical in a work like Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, itself an elegiac version of Vergilian pastoral, or in the empty villages of Keats's marble urn or in the distant marine mythology of Wordsworth's "aged Triton" or in the melancholy of Arnold's "Dover Beach" or the demythicized nature of Schiller's forests, now empty of Naiads and Oreads, in "Die Götter Griechenlands." Unlike these artists of the Romantic or post-Romantic period, however, we can no longer feel comfortable with the classical as a beautiful ideal that we reach toward in the richness of our image-life to fill the void of possible meaninglessness or to cover up the tawdry thinness of our prefabricated plastic world.

This mythicizing of the classical in our time is more likely to take a challenging or problematical form and to appear not as the noble Arcadian world of Poussin or the frozen beauty of Keats's Grecian urn or even as the demanding epiphany of numinous presence in Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," but rather as the fragmentary, vaguely threatening unreality of Seferis's marble statue in *Mythistorema 3*. Here the modern Greek poet's relation to his classical past takes the form of a dreamlike encounter with a massive marble head ("I woke with this marble head in my hands; / it exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to put it down") which tries unsuccessfully to speak and cannot even hold a stable shape as it slides from monumental solidity into oneiric metamorphosis:

> I look at the eyes: neither open nor closed
> I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak
> I hold the cheeks which have broken through the skin.
> I don't have any more strength.

> My hands disappear and come toward me
> mutilated.[26]

Of this more troubled classicizing, a poem by C. K. Williams called "One of the Muses," from the 1983 collection *Tar*, may serve as a contemporary American example. This poet's contact with his Muse takes place not in the radiant gold of Zeus's palace on Olympus where Hesiod's Muses, in the first detailed description that we have of them in Western literature, dance in a happy choir, nor even in such traditional places of inspiration as sacred mountains, holy woods, or fresh streams. Instead, the place of the meeting is a purely mental one, and the mood is one of meditative introspection, a monologic groping for experience that has no clear definition either in space or time. This Muse doesn't even have a name ("I will not grace you with a name . . . No need here for that much presence," section 1). The encounter shades off toward private memory in vaguely defined rooms, moves toward the labyrinthine inwardness of the brain itself, and finally dissolves into a slightly ironic, self-deprecating filminess of daydream, of self-conscious fictionality:

> . . . the shadowed off-sized rooms of which
> it amuses us to flip the doors of like a deck of cards, but also in the much more
> malleable
> mazy, convoluted matter of the psyche itself,
> especially the wounded psyche, especially the psyche stricken once with
> furrows of potential which are afterwards untenanted:
> voids, underminings to be buttressed with the webbiest filaments of
> day-to-dayness.
> (section 1)

As the poem continues to explore its past "yellowed with allusiveness," its "tiny theater in whose dim light one senses, fearfully, the contaminating powers of illusion" (section 2), we become less and less certain whether this is a Muse at all, or just a woman-lover, or "a wraith, a formula or intellection" (section 21), or whether she has become part of the poet's mental-erotic world, "not an artifact, not a net in which some winged thing protests or pines, but her, / completely fused now, inspiration, outcome: . . . / the tones themselves, the systems she wrought from the conflicting music of my conscience" (section 25).

Whatever the meaning of this elusive "muse," its evocation of the classical (along with the reference to "grace" in the poem's first line) creates a

shadowy dialogue between the luminous definiteness of the ancient world of communal and choral poetry and the isolated modern voice, drifting ever into evanescence and webby filaments and finally floating away into "sundering," "diminuendo," and "silence," the terms of the poem's last line. Though the classical Muse never surfaces in this work as more than a trace, her presence, as an evocation of the realm of a public, externalized, crystallized poetic discourse, gives the poet the freedom to explore his introspective muse without lapsing into utter privacy or solipsism.

V

The Euro-American reader can enjoy the ways in which such a poem indirectly revalidates the clarity of the classical tradition and the literary forms that make personal experience communicable with the grace and beauty over which the Muse presides. But our intense awareness today of non-European cultures opens a very different perspective on classic monumentalizing. As an example, I cite Soyinka's 1986 speech, already mentioned above. Soyinka quotes Leo Frobenius, the nineteenth-century ethnographer, admiring a Yoruba bronze in Africa: "Before us stood a head of marvelous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, encrusted with a patina of glorious dark green. This was, in very deed, the Olokun, Atlantic Africa's Poseidon." Soyinka goes on to cite Frobenius's statement of deep emotion as he contemplates this "remnant of the erstwhile Lord and Ruler of the Empire of Atlantis." So far we could be reading an account of a nineteenth-century explorer in Greece or Egypt, a Lord Elgin or a Shelley before his Ozymandias. But Frobenius goes on. He looks around at the Africans to whom the sculpture belongs and comments: "I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardian of so much loveliness."[27] Melancholy at the disappearance of a past grandeur is the appropriate response—vague, sweet sorrow mingled with reverence and respect—that we have learned to feel and express in the presence of the *classical* monument. Frobenius's sentence starts out that way: "I was moved to silent melancholy . . ." But then respect changes to condescension. Not all of the monuments of past greatness have been accorded the same privileged status as those of Greece and Rome. Even so, the Greeks on the Acropolis who watched Lord Elgin haul away the Parthenon sculptures might have felt some sympathy with the sense of victimage and dispossession that Soyinka expresses, vicariously, for the Yoruba.

As this passage—among many others—reminds us, the monumentality of the classic often exists as the scale against which the modern writer reads the meanness, degradation, and hypocrisies of his world. So Baudelaire, in his famous poem, "Le Cygne," can move from his subjective evocation of the nobly suffering Andromache ("Andromaque, je pense à vous") to the wretchedness of life in contemporary Paris, from the heroic war-widow of Homer, Euripides, and Vergil ("l'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve") to the mud, filth, and degradation of a blighted urban landscape which reduces all suffering to meanness. The captive Andromache, "vil bétail, sous la main du superbe Pyrrhus," is both an ancient parallel and a foil to the ignoble captivity of another sexual object of whom the poet "thinks," a contemporary woman who also looks back to a happier and freer past:

> Je pense à la négresse, amaigrie et phtisique,
> Piétinant dans la boue, et cherchant, l'oeil hagard,
> Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique
> Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard . . .

The Africa of the distant coconut palms may be "la superbe Afrique," but the image of the consumptive and haggard black woman in the mud of the northern fog has little of the sublimity that can still attach to the classicized suffering of Andromache, "sous la main du *superbe* Pyrrhus / auprès d'un tombeau vide *en extase courbée*; Veuve d'Hector *hélas*! et femme d'Hélénus" [my emphasis]. The realistic, modern image undermines and drains the classical vision of its monumentality; but it also gives to Baudelaire's portrait of urban misery and alienation an imaginative range in both time and space, a universality, and a weightiness that it would otherwise lack. The loss of personal place and dignity in the African woman's sick and emaciated body resonates both pathetically and sympathetically against the sense of history and politics in the Euripidean and Vergilian queen's journey from Troy to Epirus, with its themes of exile, the fall of cities and empires, and the change from royalty to enslavement.

As this last example shows, the works of classical antiquity will continue to have a privileged position just because of their historical place in Western culture and the unique temporal perspective that they provide on that culture, including the perspective on its racism. But as the values of our culture come under increasingly more strenuous examination, both because of the shrinking globe and because of the ways in which the development of Western rationality has come to threaten all life in all the cultures on our

planet, the classical roots of that culture will also need increasingly strenuous examination.

Our conception of the classical will remain vital and useful, and indeed indispensable, to our self-understanding, but only so long as we realize that its values of permanence, simplicity, unity, clarity, harmonious expression, grandeur of purpose and design exist in a dialectical relationship with change, complexity, and multiplicity. One of the difficulties of working with the classical today comes from our need to validate the stability of durable (if no longer eternal) literary values (and inevitably also ethical and cultural values) on the one hand while on the other coming to terms with all the powerful forces for change that have so accelerated in our time and will continue to accelerate in geometric proportion. To be involved with the classical is also, for our time, to be involved with the problems of change, relativism, subjectivity, and meaninglessness.

The classical, both of Graeco-Roman antiquity and of other periods, may resist time, but it also needs to be tested vigorously against the demands of time, the complex currents of its own historical circumstances, and the complex determinants in our own that lead us to seek it out, idealize it, examine it, redefine it, even at times deliberately reject or abandon it. That process of redefinition and reexamination is as essential a property of the classical as its more traditional and familiar features of stability and eternity.

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[1]This is true even of the later Byzantine Empire, and even of Byzantium itself, especially during the Moslem expansion in the ninth and tenth centuries: see G. L. Huxley, *Why Did the Byzantine Empire Not Fall to the Arabs?* Inaugural Lecture, Gennadius Library, American School of Classical Studies (Athens, 1986).

[2]See my essay, "Writer as Hero: The Heroic Ethos in Longinus, *On the Sublime*," in *Stemmata: Mélanges Offerts à Jules Labarbe* (Brussels, 1987), 207–19.

[3]See, for instance, J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

[4]U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Sappho und Simonides* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1913), 73; William M. Calder III, "F. G. Welcker's *Sapphobild* and its Reception in Wilamowitz," in *Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker, Werk und Wirkung*, ed. W. Calder, A. Köhnken, W. Kullmann, G. Pflug (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1986), 131–56, at 155; J. DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho 1546–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 218–20.

[5]D. A. Campbell, ed., *Greek Lyric* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1:79–81.

[6]"Un nuage confus se répand sur ma vue; / Je n'entends plus; je tombe en de douces langueurs: / Et, pâle, sans haleine, interdite, éperdue, / Un frisson me saisit; je tremble, je me meurs." On Boileau's translation see DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 85 f.; also her "Fictions of Sappho," *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1987), 798 ff.

[7]On Symonds and Sappho see DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 222–25.

[8]E. A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963); G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 222 ff.; C. Calame, *Les choeurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo & Bizzarri, 1977); B. Gentili, *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece*, trans. A. T. Cole (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

[9]In this paragraph I am drawing on my *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 168–71; see also J. Warden, "Orpheus and Ficino" in *Orpheus: The Metamorphosis of a Myth*, ed. J. Warden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 90 ff.; P. Vicari, "The Triumph of Art, The Triumph of Death," ibid., 225 f.; E. Sewell, *The Orphic Voice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 58 ff.

[10]In *Das Problem des Klassischen und die Antike*, ed. W. Jaeger (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1933), 15. Subsequent references in the text are to this volume.

[11]For discussion and criticism of the traditional associations see G. W. Most, "Pindar *O.* 2.83–90," *Classical Quarterly* 36 (1986), 304–16.

[12]This and the following quotations are from M. Detienne, *L'Écriture d'Orphée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 85–86; originally in "L'Apollon meutrier et les crimes de sang," *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 51 (1986), 7–17.

[13]W. Burkert, *Homo Necans*, trans. P. Bing (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 99 ff.; also G. Nagy, *Pindar's Homer* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 124 ff.

[14]G. Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, 4th ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1934), 142 ff.

[15]T. Mann, *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 63.

[16]W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 322.

[17]W. Soyinka, "Nobel Lecture 1986: This Past Must Address Its Present," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 102 (October, 1987), 771.

[18]From a song of the *guslar* Djemail Zogic of Novi Pazar, quoted by A. Lord, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 29.

[19] In the *Electra*, the heroine exults over the death of her mother and enjoys her cat-and-mouse entrapment of Aegisthus; but, at the end, she seems to want Orestes to get Aegisthus's execution over with as quickly as possible, whereas Orestes seems inclined to drag out the vengeance. On this issue at the end of the play, with a rather different view, see A. Machin, "Electre ou le triomphe maîtrisé," *Pallas* 37 (1991), 25–37, especially 32–34.

[20] T. Todorov, *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), 88–91.

[21] P. Pucci, "Epifanie testuali," *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica*, 3rd series, 3 (1985), 170–83; id., "Strategia epifanica e intertestualità nell secondo libro dell' *Iliade*," ibid., 6 (1988), 5–24; id., "Les figures de Métis dans l'*Odyssée*," *Métis* 1 (1986), 7–28.

[22] S. Goldhill, *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The "Oresteia"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[23] See, for example, F. Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), passim.

[24] See, for example, Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus*, 173 ff., on the Corinthian who brings the news of Polybus's death in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, or 171, on Oedipus himself who "really wants his fears [of being Laius' killer] confirmed, not set to rest. Like the Sphinx, Oedipus is challenging people to destroy him."

[25] For a good recent discussion of the question of characterization in Greek literature, see *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*, ed. C. Pelling (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1990), especially the balanced essay of P. E. Easterling, "Constructing Character in Greek Tragedy," 83–99, with the literature there cited.

[26] George Seferis, "Mythistorema 3," in *Collected Poems*, trans. and ed. E. Keeley and P. Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 6–7. For further discussion see my essay, "Orpheus, Agamemnon, and the Anxiety of Influence: Mythic Inter-texts in Seferis, *Mythistorema 3*," *Classical and Modern Literature* 9 (1989), 291–98.

[27] Soyinka, "Nobel Address," 769 f.

The Sexes in Hesiod

JAMES REDFIELD

THIS PAPER IS A READING of Hesiodic poetry as it participates in the ancient ideology of sexual difference. The current term for this group of issues is "gender," but I find this term confusing when speaking of a poet whose language exhibits gender as an aspect of its grammar—an aspect which itself has ideological implications. My aim here has been to clarify one ancient Greek way of thinking about the difference between the sexes, and also (and even more) to explore the way in which this difference is used as a way of thinking about other differences.

I. The Family of God

Hesiod in the *Theogony* gives an account of the universe in terms of genealogy; this device, employed worldwide in traditional cosmological poetry, has the effect (among others) of sexualizing the cosmos. A contrast (which in Greek is anyway latent in the grammatical gender of the terms) is dramatized between male and female powers, persons, and principles. Nature has an erotic history.

In the early stages of the cosmic story females predominate. First there is Chaos ("gap": grammatically neuter, but treated as female). Then comes Gaia ("earth": feminine and female), then Tartara ("jumble": a neuter plural meaning a place of confusion: it is not a person and is nobody's parent at this point; in line 822 it reappears as Tartaros, a masculine singular, and fathers a monster—although the line has been disputed). Fourth comes Eros, indisputably male, but nobody's parent. It seems that Eros has a role in *all* acts of generation. (Later [201] he becomes particular companion of Aphrodite.)

Chaos of herself, without any male, produces a brother and sister: Erebos, "dark," and Nyx, "night." These two couple and produce another pair: Aithēr, "bright sky," and Hemerē, "day." Day and night are both feminine in Greek; therefore they are supplemented by male names for the spheres of darkness