On teaching Classics in Malawi

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He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth
Goethe

All that Greek manure under the green bananas
Derek Walcott, *Omeros*

People are often surprised that classics is taught in Malawi, and at first sight their surprise may seem justified. What is the point of teaching people about ancient Greek verbs or the plays of Aeschylus in a country where many people do not even have enough to eat? But the same questions could be asked about other subjects too. It is hard to see the immediate practical relevance to Malawi of studying eighteenth-century philosophy, quantum mechanics or European history. In fact the question of the relevance of studying classics is part of the broader question of what sort of education is valuable. If we follow the voices of those who argue that only training in business and technology is worthwhile, a large part of the curriculum of Chancellor College is redundant. On the other hand, if we believe in a broader, holistic form of education then classics is as defensible as other humanities subjects, and indeed closely linked to them.

Many attacks on classics spring from lack of understanding or misconceptions about the subject. For instance, it is sometimes asserted that classics consists merely of the teaching of dead languages; but in fact it is concerned with the study of all aspects of the civilisations of Greece and Rome: their literature, history, religion, philosophy, law, art, architecture and other areas. It is also sometimes objected that study of the cultures of Greece and Rome, though it may be interesting in itself, is of no relevance to a southern African country such as Malawi. Again, the objection is misguided. Greco-Roman civilisation is foundational to western culture, and so the study of classics is only irrelevant to Africa if the study of western culture and thought is irrelevant. Such a position would be hard to maintain in an institution such as Chancellor College, in which almost all the subjects studied are founded on western traditions and ideas - even if today there is, very rightly, debate about how Africans should deal with this legacy. Indeed, the

very idea of a university is one that has its roots in ancient Greece. The Academy of Plato, the Lyceum of Aristotle and the Museum at Alexandria are precursors of today's institutions of learning.

Classics has close links with subjects such as history, philosophy, theology, English and law. The writing of history as we understand it was invented by the Greeks; western philosophy began in Greece (the philosopher Whitehead once described the history of western philosophy as "footnotes to Plato"[1]); in literature, many genres were invented in Greece and Rome, and authors in all periods have looked back to ancient writers, either in references and allusions, or for the whole subject-matter and concepts of their work. Some knowledge of classical writers also helps in understanding the humanities To quote a famous classical scholar, E. R. Dodds "Cut off the classics, and you cut off all scholarly understanding of medieval history, of Roman law, and of the development of Christianity: you sever the Romance languages from their source; you exclude all serious study of the major influences that have moulded English and French literature"[2]

I shall illustrate this by giving some examples of the influence of Greece and Rome in later culture. This is too vast a subject to cover in any detail, so I shall simply give some examples, concentrating mainly on literature.[3] "Our modern world is in many ways a continuation of the world of Greece and Rome", writes Gilbert Highet at the start of his book *The Classical Tradition*[4], and this is hard to deny, at least for western culture. Western ways of thinking, institutions and art forms are all deeply indebted to these ancient cultures. After the collapse of the Greco-Roman world much ancient literature and knowledge was lost and Europe entered a period of relative ignorance and poverty. However, a great deal of knowledge was preserved and it was rediscovering classical civilisation that helped bring about the cultural revivals of the Middle Ages and then the Renaissance. After the eleventh century knowledge of Latin expanded and improved, though Greek remained largely unknown in western Europe. More Latin literature was read and made use of by writers. One of the most influential Roman authors at this time was the poet Ovid. One reason for this was the development of the ideal of romantic love; and Ovid was seen as an authority on the subject of love because of his love poems, especially the wittily didactic *Art of Love*. The marvellous stories told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* also appealed to the Middle Ages. One popular story was that of the unhappy lovers Pyramus and Thisbe, which was retold by many authors, including Chaucer, Boccaccio and Tasso, and by Shakespeare in the conclusion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[5] Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, made the Roman poet Virgil his guide through Hell and Purgatory; though as a Christian he indicated the limitations of pagan wisdom by having Virgil leave Dante at the gates of Paradise.

The Renaissance was sparked by a greater rediscovery of classical culture, and in particular of the Greek language and literature. As I have said, there was almost no knowledge of Greek in western Europe in the Middle Ages, but this knowledge was preserved in the Byzantine empire to the east. In the fourteenth century some Italian scholars began to learn Greek from Byzantine visitors. As the Turks approached Byzantium the number of emigrants to the west increased, and some brought with them manuscripts of Greek authors. This process was accelerated after the fall of Byzantium in 1453, and Italian scholars also began to search for more manuscripts in monastic libraries. This rediscovery of classical culture had an enormous impact on modern languages and literatures. Writers eagerly studied and learned from the great ancient writers, and were stimulated by them to produce their own masterpieces. Their style, their literary forms and the great storehouse of classical mythology all helped inspire writers. The genres of tragedy, comedy, epic, lyric, pastoral and satire all go back to Greece and Rome. Greco-Roman rhetorical devices were used by many, and can be seen at work in the speeches of later famous orators such as Abraham Lincoln.

I mention all this because it illustrates how study of the past is not irrelevant to later ages, but can inspire and stimulate them to produce creative work of their own. This does not mean that artists slavishly imitate the masterpieces of the past, but that contact with them enriches their own thought and style, and helps them produce works relevant to their own time and place. In spite of the decline in study of the classical languages, Greco-Roman literature and mythology continued to inspire artists and thinkers in the twentieth century, and still do so today. One of the greatest works of modern literature, James Joyce's *Ulysses,* shows its classical influence in its title. Joyce used the *Odyssey* to provide the basic structure of his vast work, with the various episodes loosely based on parts of the Greek epic. The central character, Leopold Bloom, represents Ulysses. He, like the Homeric hero, is a man who by prudence and endurance can overcome the dangers and disasters of life. Homer's Ulysses/Odysseus wanders far and wide for many years, while Bloom's adventures are confined to a single day in Dublin in 1904, but many of their qualities are the same. Both are resourceful middle-aged wanderers who make their way towards home and wife through trials and temptations. In spite of his various dreams and fancies, Bloom in the end returns to his wife and accepts his commonplace daily destiny[6]. This is one example of the results of a great modern writer interacting with the classical tradition; but there are many more. Other modernist writers liked to use figures from Greek mythology for various symbolic purposes, for instance the French symbolist poets Mallarmé (*L' après-midi d'un faune*) and Valéry (*La jeune Parque, La Pythie*). Parque is a French form of the Latin Parca, (*personified*) Fate, and the poem describes the emotions of a young Fate, symbolising the passage of a girl into womanhood. *La Pythie* refers to the

Pythia, the priestess of Apollo at the Delphic oracle, and describes the agonies of a woman mastered by the god's power within her. This symbolises the pangs of the creative artist, but also has clear sexual undertones.

T.S. Eliot's plays and poems are full of allusions to classical mythology, and his play *The Family Reunion* (1939) is based on the story of the House of Atreus, the subject of Aeschylus' *Oresteia.* Also based on this saga is Eugene O'Neill's trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). The same writer's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) transfers the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus to nineteenth-century New England. Several French playwrights were inspired by Greek myths: Jean Anouilh wrote dramas called *Antigone* and *Eurydice;* in the latter Orpheus is a cafe violinist, and Eurydice an actress. Jean Cocteau wrote *Orphée, Antigone* and *La machine infernale* (a version of the story of Oedipus). Jean Giraudoux wrote a witty play called *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu (The Trojan War Will Not Take Place)* in which Hector and Odysseus negotiate to avoid hostilities, but a drunken incident eventually sparks off the fated war. This was performed in 1935, and had obvious relevance to a time when war in Europe was already on the horizon[7]. A dramatic case of using a myth to portray the contemporary situation was Anouilh's *Antigone,* performed in occupied Paris in 1944. In this drama Antigone was clearly identified with the French resistance movement, and Creon represented the German authorities. The Germans allowed the performance because it allowed Creon as well as Antigone to state his case, presenting himself as a ruler who is trying to uphold law and order in the face of a fanatical resistance. Soon after this, in 1948, Bertolt Brecht produced a version of *Antigone* in which Creon represents Hitler, and Antigone the rising of the German people against Hitler which Brecht desired, but which never came to pass[8].

More recent writers continue to use classical themes. Derek Walcott's Caribbean epic *Omeros* (Greek for Homer) has many references to Homeric themes and characters in a story set largely on Walcott's home island of St. Lucia. Wole Soyinka wrote a version of Euripides' *Bacchae* (first staged in London in 1973) in which Dionysus becomes a third-world revolutionary, and is linked to the Yoruba deity Ogun. The Irish poet Seamus Heaney has written a version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* called *The Cure at Troy,* and one of the last works of the late Ted Hughes was a version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (and the same poet also not long before produced a work called *Tales from Ovid*). In Britain in recent years there has been a stream of productions of Greek drama, many using the plays to focus on contemporary events such as the Gulf War or the collapse of the Soviet Empire[9]. In a play called *The Island,* by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, two political prisoners on Robben Island improvise a production of Sophocles' *Antigone* for a prison play, "and discover that it is about *their* lives"[10].

This last point is the crucial one. Classical literature continues to be read and performed, and to inspire new creative works, because people continue to find it relevant to their own situations. In adapting myths to suit contemporary concerns, twentieth century writers are doing the same thing as the Greek playwrights did in the fifth century BC, when they adapted their myths to reflect on problems relevant to them in fifth century Athens. Of course writers will use the myths of their own culture in this way,[11] but the use of Greek myths in so many cultures over such a long period suggests that they have the power to speak to people in widely varying situations. A sign of any great literature is that it is able to transcend the original time and place in which it was written, and speak to people in different periods and cultures. It is a sign of the greatness of Aeschylus or Sophocles that they are able to speak to prisoners on Robben island or theatre-goers in modern London. I have concentrated on literature, but this is true in other fields too, and it would be possible to cite a vast number of paintings, musical works and films based on classical themes. It is a narrow-minded view to condemn subjects such as classics because they look to the past; this is to align oneself with the Philistine Henry Ford, who famously declared that "history is bunk". To ignore the past impoverishes the psyche, and cuts us off from the many lessons history can teach us. In the oft-quoted words of George Santayana, "To ignore the past is to be condemned to fulfil it"[12]. In the fifth century BC the historian Thucydides wrote: "It will be enough for me if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever."[13] Anyone who reads, say, Thucydides' account of the effects of civil war or the chilling Melian dialogue can hardly doubt that he succeeded in this ambition.

The classicist Peter Green argues eloquently that the classical legacy is valuable not only because of its literary and artistic worth, but for wider reasons.

> "The perspective and discipline offered by thinkers of unsurpassed subtlety and no technological interests, over two millennia ago, at least gave modern intellectuals a critical edge, inoculating them against mere mindless agitprop and sloganeering: against the visceral claptrap of killers with guns in their hands and stocking masks on their heads. Far from being a mere cultural luxury or intellectual game, the maintenance of our classical-humanist legacy, at the highest level, is a vital and, yes, entirely practical element in the never-ending struggle to hold off barbarous recidivism and the gut-law of the jungle. Neither ancient nor modern democracy has been so successful that we can afford to be complacent about their ultimate survival."[14]

Thus I have argued that the study of classics brings us into touch with literature and mythology that continues to inspire creative artists today, and with thinkers who can help us to develop our own moral and political ideas. This can apply to people of any culture, not just those in the west. Great literature and ideas have a universal value that is not restricted to one time or place, or one cultural tradition. Study of Greece and Rome in an African context cannot simply be dismissed as something only relevant to the west; this would only be valid if the whole western tradition were to be jettisoned, something I think few would see as possible or desirable. Of course in the post-colonial world classics, and the rest of the western legacy, needs to be scrutinised, but to dismiss it would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Classics has certainly played its part in cultural imperialism; indeed, with its perceived élitism and foundational role in western culture, it has often been a good symbol of European cultural arrogance.[15] The importance of classics to debates about Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism has been shown by Martin Bernal's book *Black Athena* and the reaction to it.[16] This book argues that nationalism and racism led historians studying ancient Greece to reject the ancient view that cultural diffusion from Egypt and the Levant in the second millennium BC played a key role in the development of Greek civilisation. There has been a flood of scholarly articles and books in response, as well as numerous articles and reviews in newspapers and magazines, and even television programmes. Many African-American organisations have welcomed the work enthusiastically, while many classical scholars and Egyptologists have been critical of Bernal's concepts and methodology. The sort of questions raised are: is it right for Afrocentric historiography to rewrite the past from an African perspective in an attempt to empower its readers with pride in what are reclaimed from European historiography as the glories of black cultural achievement? Or is one commentator right to object that "the ancient cultures of Africa and the Near East do not need to be the founders of the west to be worthy of global interest and study: they are intrinsically interesting"?[17]

Another topical debate is concerned with literary canons. Is it right for non-western cultures to study the canonical European classics, by authors sometimes referred to as Dead White European Males (DWEMS), or should they be focusing more on artists outside this canon? No works are more canonical than those of the great ancient writers such as Homer, Plato and Virgil, so again it can be seen that classics is at the heart of this debate. This is related to feminist concerns, and gender studies is another topical area in which classics has been the field of intensive study and debate. There is now an enormous scholarly literature on gender issues and the classics, women in the ancient world etc., and here again it can be seen that the study of the past is not just an academic hobby but something of great relevance to the challenges we face today.

There are many areas of classical studies that can be interesting and relevant to African students. The study of ancient religion reveals many parallels with African beliefs and rituals, and so can help Africans to a better understanding of their own religious traditions by placing them in a wider cultural framework. Similarly, ancient myths and oral traditions can profitably be compared to those of Africa. Greek drama, with its use of dance, masks and ritual, is of obvious interest. The Greeks were great political thinkers and experimenters, and were of course the inventors of democracy. In many Greek works there are debates about the nature of different political systems, and which is the best form of government. All this is naturally of interest in a country such as Malawi, which has recently become a multi-party democracy and is trying to grow in understanding of what democracy means.

If classical civilisation is worth studying, then it follows logically that the study of ancient Greek and Latin is also worthwhile. Studying works in translation can only ever be a poor second best to reading them in the original language. This is obviously true for great works of literature, but applies no less to works of history or philosophy. It is impossible to do any serious work on Plato or Aristotle without at least some knowledge of ancient Greek. We can never reach a deep understanding of any culture if we are ignorant of the language in which people spoke and wrote. This must be the primary reason for anyone to study Latin or Greek, but to learn these complex ancient languages is also a good form of linguistic training for anyone. This remains true, even if we have happily left behind the days in which learning ancient languages was seen as an unequalled form of mental discipline, and it was thought that civilisation would collapse if people were unable to conjugate Greek verbs. This sort of thing was derided by the poet Louis Macneice, who was himself a classical scholar:[18]

"We learned that a gentleman never misplaces his accents,
That nobody knows how to speak, much less how to write,
English who has not hob-nobbed with the great-grandparents of English,
That the boy on the modern side is merely a parasite
But the classical student is bred to the purple, his training in syntax is also a training in thought
And even in morals; if called to the bar or the barracks
He will always do what he ought."

Of course classical languages are also important for their influence on modern European languages. The Romance languages are direct descendants of Latin. English has a complex mixture of loan-words from various sources, but by far the largest proportion are of Latin or Greek derivation. It has been estimated that over three quarters of

English vocabulary, and fifty percent or more even of the 10,000 most common words we use, derive from Latin or Greek.[19]

It is easy to dismiss a subject as irrelevant, but the whole question of relevance is really a subjective one. Nobody can simply state that a particular subject is irrelevant to a culture, since somebody else may find that subject stimulating and rewarding - in which case for him or her it is relevant. The question of whether or not it is worth studying classics in Malawi is, as I suggested earlier, merely part of the wider question of what is worth studying. If we believe that literature, history, philosophy and religion are worth studying, then classics certainly has a role to play. But if we think that such subjects are a waste of time and resources in a poor country, then not only classics but all humanities subjects are under threat. For convenience we divide areas of study up into academic departments, but really such divisions are artificial. Is the study of Plato classics or philosophy? The only answer is both. Are Plato's dialogues literature or philosophy? Again the only answer is both, and Plato is studied in both literature and philosophy courses. Knowledge cannot really be divided up in this way. Humanities subjects are linked together, and classics is a central part of the western humanities tradition. If we believe that the purpose of a university education is to teach people to think, to expose them to great writers and thinkers and different cultures, then classics is certainly a subject that can do this. To ignore the classical tradition is to cut ourselves off from a full understanding of other subjects, to ignore the lessons of history and to cease to make use of a source that has inspired writers and thinkers for two millennia.

Notes

1. Whitehead (1978:39): "The safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato"
2. Dodds (1964) see p.13.
3. For surveys of classical influence, see Bush (1932, 1937); Highet (1949); Mayerson (1971); Seznec (1953); Stanford (1968). A useful brief outline is the last two chapters of Morford and Lenardon (1991).
4. Highet (1949) p.1
5. The plot of *Romeo and Juliet* (not original to Shakespeare) also seems inspired by Pyramus and Thisbe. In both stories the couples are divided by their parents' hatred, meet secretly and kill themselves due to a mistaken belief in each other's death.
6. For an analysis of Joyce's use of Homer in *Ulysses*, see Stanford (1968) pp.211-26
7. For further discussion of these works, see the books cited in n.3, and also Burian (1997).
8. See Knox (1984) 35-37.
9. See Macintosh (1997).
10. Burian (1997)
11. The prime example of the literary use of Malawian myths is in the work of Steve Chimombo; see e.g. Nazombe (1996).
12. Santayana (1905-6) vol.I ch.xii. This is frequently misquoted as "Those who do not understand history are doomed to repeat it".
13. Thucydides 1.22, trans. R. Warner
14. Green (1989) 29
15. See Bond and Gilliam (1994) 119-28
16. Bernal (1987, 1991). For responses, see Levine and Peradotto (1989); Levine (1992); Lefkowitz and Rogers (1996).
17. Unfortunately, Bernal's work has also been taken as support for their views by extreme Afrocentrists, who peddle such unfounded theories as that Socrates was black, or that Aristotle stole his philosophy from Egypt. Such theories have nothing to do with history, and everything to do with racial politics. See e.g. James (1989); Diop (1974, 1991); ben-Jochanan (1988). For a readable refutation of such ideas see Lefkowitz (1997).
18. MacNiece (1966) 125f.
19. Oldfather (1942) 33f.

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