

On the Shoulders of Giants: Progress and Perspectives in Latin Studies

Gian Biagio Conte

Cornelius Nepos tells us that when Cato talked of wars, he did not mention the generals' names, but stuck to events without ever glorifying the protagonists. He saw the military exploits themselves as important and not the pride they might inspire in noblemen who were often more concerned with their personal merit than the glory of the Roman people. However, he made a few exceptions to this rule, which, precisely because they were rare, made the individual selected appear more brilliant. I shall do likewise. I intend to present a survey that will give a full account of the body of knowledge that has been consolidated between the end of the war and today. I shall deliberately give more emphasis to general trends than to specific results, highlighting the overall picture rather than individuals as such. But, as I have indicated, I shall break my rule occasionally to point to the birth of a new idea or to show how cooperative work developed out of an individual's vision.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany gave classical studies two complementary tasks that were to become the discipline's two essential foci. The first was to establish the historical nature of the subject and so to proceed in accordance with the methods of historical research; the second was to insist that, despite the subdivision into philology, archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, mythology that was required for classification purposes, these specialisms were intimately complementary, hence it was necessary to refer to the essentially unitary subject, *Altertumswissenschaft*.

As a fundamentally historical discipline, *Altertumswissenschaft* found its philosophical credo in German-style historicism. Man (in contrast to nature) was defined as a historical being and thus history became not only the result of his actions but also the object of his awareness. So the knowing subject and the object to be known were identified. Understanding Antiquity historically meant seeing it as a particular and unique manifestation of mind, but also as a moment in a continuous temporal process with successive historical outcomes, thus forming a teleological chain.

Building on the research that Droysen set down in his tome on methodology (*Grundriss der Historik*, 1867), the second half of the nineteenth century had laid solid foundations for the so-called 'human' sciences and in particular had promoted the development of ancillary sciences such as philology in particular, whether 'formal' or 'real'. Philology soon became the key discipline in historiographic studies and rapidly developed to extremely sophisticated and rigorous levels of research. It was assisted in this by minor specialized disciplines, which quickly refined their techniques of documentary analysis and became virtually independent fields as far as scientific and academic practice was concerned: epigraphy, papyrology, textual criticism (ecdotics), metrics, paleography.

Historiography, which was now subject to the methods of philology, took on the task of specifying in as much detail as possible the individual features of the phenomena before it. Philology and its ancillary fields offered historiography the methodological model of a discipline focused on the study of the 'exceptional' and the unique unrepeated event, on which it was nevertheless possible to impose a system of rules of investigation capable of claiming to be 'scientific', insofar as they met certain standards of rigour and precision.

In this century, more or less at the time of the great upheaval caused by the Second World War, historicism lost its status as the pre-eminent philosophical doctrine (although its thinking was to live on in existentialist philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, etc). Only Italian historicism continued into the post-war period owing to Gramsci's posthumous popularity; it took on a Marxist, anti-speculative, anti-teleological character, on the face of it opposed to Croce's idealist philosophy but in fact tending to preserve various of its essential theses such as the historicity of the real and the largely historico-individualist nature of study of the human world. Latin literary studies, in France as well as in Italy, learnt from this and applied it to the understanding of the culture of the Julian and Augustan periods. And it was also the inspiration for sociological research attempting to define the situation of intellectuals in relation to the political authorities in the republican and imperial era.

In the Anglo-American world, exiles who had been forced to flee Nazi Germany (among them Edward Fraenkel at Oxford and Hermann Fränkel in the American universities) imported German philological experience and combined it with English empiricism, which was traditionally hostile to philosophical abstractions (be they idealist or historicist). There emerged a school that assimilated the best of German philology while remaining relatively proof against ideological complications.

The most conspicuous and productive shift in critical perspective for the study of the Greco-Roman world took place in the years after the Second World War in open opposition to the dominant historicism. Basing its arguments on the philosophical principles of structuralism, it claimed epistemological primacy for the synchronic over the diachronic. Arising out of the field of linguistics, structuralism subsequently spread to the human sciences. Anthropology and literary criticism applied to the texts of classical Antiquity emerged from this experience radically changed. I think it is important to emphasise the decisive role of the impact of structuralism on classical studies in that they were exposed to methods that were relatively stable, and that solid critical practice (in the positivist or more generically empiricist mode) had refined over time and then established as a core body of techniques and instruments.

Despite their atavistic suspicion of major innovations, classical studies, which had hitherto followed an age-old tradition, were over the next fifty years to feel the influence of structuralism and semiology, which transformed not only the *methods of investigation* into the classical world but also and more particularly the *interpretation* of it. Thus a new anthropological and literary criticism took hold. Enriched and strengthened by recent acquisitions it was in a position to take advantage as well of the great lesson of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth and give classical studies a new stimulus by changing the terms and tightening up the aims of a research that had now perfected its methods of analysis.

Rejecting historicism, humanism and existentialism, structuralism, supported by semiology – which gave it its philosophical basis to the extent that it claimed to be a

general theory of culture – replaced the primacy of history, man, the subjectivity of consciousness and the individual with the primacy of *structure*. Instead of trying to understand social and cultural phenomena from *within*, by reconstructing their historical character through the conscious and potentially free actions of individuals, the new critical approach preferred to discover from *without* the systematic and constant relationships (or structures) existing between cultural phenomena, and thus attempted to establish the often unconscious limits that determine the individual's actions. According to these principles a cultural product does not possess any basic elements that are uniquely perceptible at an isolated stage outside the system of relationships existing between them. The relationship logically precedes its terms, *form anticipates content*.

With this approach there cannot be any 'hermeneutic circle', any special internal understanding of the people of the past available to people living today; human beings are no longer eminently historical creatures, and history is not an essentially human reality. The subject is only the product of the impersonal linguistic-symbolic order by means of which communication is made possible. Individuals are merely the point of intersection of the structures that pass through them and determine them. So we end up with a kind of anti-humanist, anti-historical 'philosophy with no subject', that has taken up an extremely polemical stance in relation to most philosophical thought from the early part of the century.

All this upheaval could not help but produce a profusion of theoretical work in literature and more generally the human sciences. I would like to mention anthropology in particular. The theoretical debate turned out to be momentous and maybe even excessive, because not only did it seem necessary to invent a new method for dealing with the products of literature and culture, but what had appeared well-established and irreplaceable in the earlier critical tradition also had to be retrieved and reformulated. Classical studies, with a tradition of work that was worthy of admiration in its rigour and the richness of its experience, managed to withstand the impact of structuralism and semiology by pointing to their own indisputably robust techniques – techniques that were resistant to the whims of fashion yet open to improvement. Classical studies drew on this critical apparatus to obtain fresh stimulus in order to give their research a form that was less rhetorical and so less academic, less edifying and so less ideological, in short more concrete.

The notion of structure gives a new value to concepts previously defined as form and system. The structure that suggests itself as an explanatory (and in some ways simplifying) model of the real does not itself belong to the field of reality. It presents itself as a bundle of invariable elements linked together by a meaningful connection; the aim of research is then to identify certain constants, which take on meaning precisely because they are able to endure despite differences and changes.

It is clear from this approach that *permanent features* were bound to have greater importance than *changes*. So it was not surprising if research in classical literature, and Latin literature in particular, focused on the search for models, understood not only in the traditional sense of examples that are imitated and transformed, but more specifically as lasting cultural and linguistic codes capable of generating literary texts. Indeed structuralism led to a kind of 'fetishization' of the literary text as a finite, immobile structure, describable in its systematic relationships. From this there flowed a whole string of papers concerned with demonstrating the organic texture of Latin poetic works, and how their

constituent parts fitted together and produced cohesion: a sort of formal analysis that, starting from new principles, reworked and improved on the glorious tradition of stylistic criticism inspired by Spitzer (I refer in particular to Spitzer's most recent work).

The risk was (and since the risk existed, errors of interpretation inevitably occurred) that the text, and more especially the poetic text, might be completely autonomous in its meaning, and so sacrifice its full 'textuality', which was also created by the cultural context. The chief danger was that the text might lose the 'immediacy' of communication in action, might in fact no longer be living words addressed to an audience able to share in the author's culture. Structuralist literary criticism, which was admirable because it provided classical philology with sophisticated tools for formal *description*, nevertheless neglected the dynamic interpretation of the ancient culture and simply offered a static morphology. Literary texts were often treated like marvellous butterflies, frozen and lifeless.

In order to avoid this error, numerous and substantial correctives have been applied, in the light of critical experience of literary semiology and cultural semiotics. As a result Greek and Latin literary history was approached as the dynamic history of literary codification. The concept of imitation, which is crucial to classical literature, becomes the basic premise of communication and culture: each new text is a transformation of an earlier model, to which it is linked in close correspondence. Thus literary genres have become important as the models underlying literary works, able to generate whole families of texts that are inter-related both diachronically and synchronically. Literary genres are no longer, as they were in the positivist approach, like recipes applied mechanically by writers, but become signposts. They are boundaries of meaning and language within which the texts themselves are composed and differentiated and call to each other. Literary genres are then discourse forms, kinds of grammars shared by writers and readers: they guide composition and decoding, they are the primary vehicles of communication. Being themselves texts and, so to speak, metatexts, they are the point of articulation for the great body of literary tradition and ensure its continuity while at the same time promoting non-stop development and change.

In this context the literary canon accepted by schools and universities was bound to change. The move away from the old criticism with its 'neohumanist' leanings towards the New Criticism of the 1950s was above all a reaction against the overemphasis given by the Romantics to the person of the creator, but also a rebellion against the intervention of the critics' personal feelings. Eliot's essay *Tradition and Individual Talent* can be seen as representative. With him there grew up the ideal of the poet as impersonal element in a depersonalized entity called Literature or Literary Tradition. Classical and especially Latin studies enthusiastically welcomed this notion, which was widely accepted in the Anglo-American world. Indeed Latin literature, precisely because it is largely descended from Greek literature, realized that as a result it could define its own originality more explicitly. Latin philologists grasped more clearly the idea that originality does not exist outside culture, that it is not a primary unconditioned state, as the Romantics would have it, but is always the fruit of an active process of appropriation, re-elaboration and transformation of models: culture inexorably claims the first and most original creative act. And so it was understood that true originality is not a quality of a text that has nothing in common with an earlier one, but everything that cannot be reduced to similarities even though it is validated and conditioned by them.

These ideas eventually weakened the concept of the 'creative subject' and gave the text the central place, promoting it to the level of true object of literary study. In the most stimulating work on Latin literature the space given over to the writer's biographical details is becoming smaller and smaller in favour of a developing critical theory focusing on the *persona*, the mask assumed by writers to transform themselves into a constituent of the construction of the text. The writer, as the external producer of the text, no longer appears in the text as an empirical reality, but as a 'character' acting out a role internal to the literary discourse. Work on Catullus and Horace (but also on the Archaic Greek lyric) has greatly benefited from this type of approach.

Of course Eliot would turn in his grave if he could check on the similarities between his belief in the impersonality of the creative process and certain recent, even very recent, critical trends that talk of 'the death of the author'. The structuralist and post-structuralist critics of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the deconstructionists and followers of reader response theory, still have some points of contact with the criticism 'focused on the text' that was dear to New Criticism, but have abandoned the idea (which was fundamental for the New Critics) that there is a centre of reference for interpretation, a stable literary history, a clear separation between the author and the interpreter, between the text and the reader, between the word and its meaning in the world outside the text. Literature – instead of being seen as a transparent window on to reality or as the expression of the thoughts, feelings and experiences of a real person – is viewed by these critics as a construction of signs that refers essentially to itself and its own meaning process.

Some have said that this critical upheaval has been brought about by the theoretical debate of recent years. Perhaps there has been a proliferation of abstract propositions and chatter, but the crisis cannot be the result of too much theory; I would even be tempted to invert the statement and suggest that the excess of theory is a symptom of crisis. I am utterly convinced that theoretical discussion – although controversial – will bring about further clarification. The body of knowledge built up through the critical work of the giants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is still today an object lesson in concrete philology and a unique example of the application of critical reason. Classical studies can, in my view, act as an incentive and stand as a model for the whole of historical and literary studies. In the last fifty years refinement of historical research methods has meant that interpretations of the past have been consolidated, sometimes even proved wrong through the use of rigorous methods developed over centuries of critical work.

I have already stated that in the light of new critical directions the literary canon has changed. It could hardly be otherwise. With experience analysis has led us to understand the literary reasons for texts, forms and styles that the prejudices of classicism had ignored or condemned. And so fields of interest have grown and expanded into other increasingly wider areas. The critical approach to canonical authors such as Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Horace and Ovid has been transformed: new complexities have emerged from texts that had been trapped somewhat arbitrarily in simplistic schemas; the cultural and artistic reasons behind a certain literature, which had been sacrificed on the altar of classicism, have at last been understood. Quite early on (at the turn of the century) Alexandrinism and Hellenism, dismissed by classicism, had been rescued (the papyrologists' contribution turned out to be crucial for this effort). It was the task of the second half of this century to re-evaluate and reintegrate Latin literary culture of the imperial age and even more so of Late Antiquity.

It is worth noting that the progress achieved in the study of classical Antiquity over the last fifty years stems from the interest in its later period, roughly from the third to the sixth century, which is usually labelled 'Late Antiquity' (*Spätantike*, *antiquité tardive*). This interest was initially stimulated by archaeology and linguistics, but its influence spread to the realm of literature. It was an art historian working on ancient art, Aloys Regel, who coined the epithet *spätromisch* (Late Roman) at the turn of the century: starting from new hunches about the material found in the cemeteries of the Late Empire Danube *limes*, he suggested an original interpretation of imperial Roman architecture. And the linguists Löfstedt, Schrijnen and Christine Mohrmann were responsible for discovering the specific characteristics of *Spätlatein* (Late Latin).

In the literary field the opinion of so-called 'late' Antiquity was until recently extremely critical. Montesquieu and Gibbon had imposed their prejudice derived from eighteenth century philosophy (which was anticlerical and anti-Christian), had labelled it an age of decline and even included this word in the title of their books. And so the Late Empire (whose name not only indicates a chronological position but also has a negative connotation) seemed – as far as literary, linguistic and artistic creation was concerned – like a long twilight. Rigidity – a form of 'resistance', so to speak – which at that time characterized the theory and practice of literary genres, was widely seen as proof of impotence, a clear symptom of a fatalistic cultural decay. It was many years before we understood that, on the contrary, it was an expression of the determination to preserve and restore. We are fully aware of that now. Indeed criticism was able to show that this attachment to the splendours of the past was the greatest aspiration of the age. Remaining faithful to the formal requirements of a vanished culture was felt to be the best chance of ensuring that Roman values survived. School instilled in all Latin-language *litterati* from adolescence respect for the system of codified literary genres and fidelity to traditional forms. In literature, as well as in the figurative arts, novices were required to observe this fidelity in order to combat the danger of disintegration, and also in order to have a feeling of solidarity regardless of personal religious choices, a feeling of being united in common spirituality. It was a way as well of fascinating the barbarians who were preparing to inherit this great pagan tradition.

I must now conclude and I shall do so by recalling that the most significant change in classical studies over the last half-century is that the humanist position (which I will dare to classify as comfortable) has finally been abandoned, a position that wished to see ancient culture as close to us because it was 'classical'. On the contrary the belief has gained ground that, though there is continuity between Greco-Latin and modern culture, henceforth the link that binds us is weaker. Rather it is *alterity* that now seems obvious, the alterity of a past world that still conditions the present but whose culture can no longer have immediacy.

The enormous progress made in anthropological research has in recent decades had an effect on classical studies and altered their outlook. The British school with Fraser and the so-called 'ritualists' from Cambridge (J.E. Harrison, F.M. Cornford, G. Murray, A.B. Cook) had already dabbled in anthropological research in the area of Hellenic religious phenomena and more recently obtained significant results as regards ancient psychology. Here mention must be made of the critical work of Dodds and Finley. But it is without doubt the French school that has brought us the most suggestive innovations, starting with L. Gernet, who was followed by J.-P. Vernant, not forgetting of course Ignace

Meyerson and his experiments in hybridization with historical psychology. They turned plain anthropology into a historical anthropology that was applied to the study of the variation over time in certain basic socio-cultural concepts (value, law, time, religion). With Vernant and his school the field of study has recently widened to include the explanation of other notions and psychological functions (the person, work, space) and has also and more especially concentrated on the Greek character of myth. These same veins have hitherto proved much less productive as far as the Roman world is concerned. Historical anthropology and social psychology are currently attempting to focus on the myths on which Latin civilization was based, as well as the kinship relations and social structures of Rome. On to linguistic and literary interest (Emile Benvéniste's model is the prime one for these critical experiments) is being grafted a curiosity about the symbolic imaginary that pervades Latin culture.

Although the clinical background to the current state of classical studies does not really indicate a prosperous situation, it nevertheless shows a healthy and lively discipline, which is entirely satisfactory: the prospects for research are excellent and justify quiet optimism. *Dis non invitis*.

Gian Biagio Conte

University of Pisa

(translated from the French by Jean Burrell)