

The Emergence of A New Professional Identity Among Modern Classicists: A Synthesis of Symbolic-Interactionist, Semiotic and Hermeneutic Perspectives

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Abstract

Over approximately the past half century classicists have been redefining themselves in far-reaching ways both as scholars and teachers. In essence, the study of ancient Greco-Roman civilization, including the surviving literary texts, the “classics” par excellence, is no longer governed by exclusively or even largely philological objectives leading to the establishment of the authentic ancient text and the correct authorial meaning thereof. Even those classicists who have not engaged in sustained reflection on the hermeneutical and methodological premises underlying their scholarship have not been left untouched by this development, the decisive impetus for which was pedagogical rather than occasioned by purely scholarly or philosophical motives.

After the Second World War, the classics had to be increasingly taught, especially in North America, to ‘Latin-less’ students who had not acquired the basics of at least one of two classical languages, Latin and ancient Greek, in their secondary school years. In what was surely the most drastic revamping of the classical curriculum at the university level since the Renaissance, the teaching of the “classics in translation” courses (as they were often dubbed, sometimes disparagingly) encouraged holistically—above all, socio-culturally—framed modes of enquiry which were also carried through into graduate studies and classical scholarship.

This new turn in teaching and scholarship accelerated a development which had already begun in the second half of the 19th century, when the emerging social sciences (sociology and anthropology in particular) began to interface with classical studies, and philological modes of scholarly enquiry were, in the work of some classicists, replaced by largely socio-culturally focused modes. Here the work of French and German scholars was especially innovative and was facilitated enormously by the establishment of the ancillary disciplines of scientific archaeology, epigraphy, and papyrology.

Far more complex and nuanced understandings of Greco-Roman antiquity have emerged in this process of scholarly refocusing and indeed transformation. These cannot be explained or even accurately described by means of a simply positivist-empirical epistemology which views progress in knowledge and understanding, also in the humanities and social sciences, in terms of the accumulation and organization of factual knowledge. Thomas Kuhn’s notion of paradigm shift provides a helpful corrective, but it is concerned primarily with the natural sciences. In any case, the Cartesian model of the subject (=e.g. classicist) : object (=e.g. Greco-Roman antiquity) relationship is inadequate. A more dynamic hermeneutic characterized by symbolic interactionist and semiotic perspectives views the individual classicist scholar-teacher, as well as the collectivity of classicists, as constantly constituting and reconstituting Greco-Roman civilization with new meanings, and in doing so, also fashioning and refashioning their own life-worlds, inclusively, of course, of their professional identities as classicists. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic of the “fusion of horizons” is helpful in our epistemological fleshing out, as it were, of the scholar’s engagement with the classical world, and fits well with symbolic-interactionist and semiotic perspectives. Indeed, the synthesis of perspectives I propose makes the idea of a classical tradition reaching from Greco-Roman antiquity into the present age especially meaningful, and makes for a highly visible and contemporary role for the classicist as an academic and intellectual in our culture.

Key Words: Semiotic, Hermeneutic, Modern Classicists

Classical studies has traditionally been a philological discipline primarily concerned with the establishment of the original Latin or Greek text and the correct interpretation thereof that would accurately represent the author’s meaning. As such it can trace its origins to the great scholarly enterprises of the Hellenistic and Roman periods of classical antiquity, when numerous editors and commentators labored to establish the correct texts of the pre-eminent literary works of the past and to equip them with new commentaries and other aids that would assist new generations to read these ‘classics’ with understanding and pleasure. Thus, scholars working at the great Library of Alexandria in the third century BCE produced the first critical editions of what the Greeks regarded as the wellspring of their literary heritage, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In the Latin-speaking world of the fourth century CE, Servius wrote his massive commentary on Vergil’s epic poem, the *Aeneid*, long cherished by the Romans as their supreme literary classic. During the

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intervening six centuries, nearly all the authors included in the established canons of Greek and Latin literature had been subjected to the process of critical scrutiny that lies behind the medieval manuscript tradition in which their works came to be transmitted to the West.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the discipline of classical studies, thanks to its interaction with the newly emerging social sciences such as sociology and ethnography, began to lose its almost its exclusively philological focus, and began, at least in some academic circles, to acquire the characteristics of a scholarship concerned most of all with social and cultural history. This transformation was a slow and gradual one, and did not significantly accelerate, especially in the English-speaking world, until well after the Second World War. Even so, today's classical scholarship and the teaching of the Greco-Roman classics at all levels of learning are radically different from what they were in the mid-nineteenth century. This paper will, first of all, offer a brief survey of this development from a basically historical perspective, but this will be only be the necessary preliminary to my contention that the vastly changed professional identity which has come to characterize the classicists of today in relation to their self-perception as scholars and teachers cannot be explained, in positivistic terms, as the inevitable result of the progressive accumulation of more knowledge about Greco-Roman antiquity over the past hundred and fifty years or so, but that it rests on a far more fundamental refashioning of the life-world of classicists as teachers and scholars, a transformative remaking of the classical scholar's experiencing and acting self that can be better described and explained in symbolic-interactionist and semiotic terms against the background of the vast socio-cultural changes that have taken place during this period, especially since the 1960's. Towards the end of my paper I will also draw on the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer in order to bring into focus the historical consciousness that the classicist certainly must cultivate.

After the innovative and productive Hellenistic and Roman periods, high-level classical philology was to lie dormant for almost a millennium. It began to flower again in all its glory in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and thanks to the splendid editorial, textual, and exegetical work accomplished during this age as well as the following seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—its dissemination, of course, enormously assisted by the invention of printing— it acquired new authority and prestige. Philological expertise was, in fact, reinforced in the course of the nineteenth century with the introduction of more refined editorial and text-analytical techniques, as practiced, for instance, in the new ancillary disciplines of paleography and codicology (the former being the study of the various styles of handwriting employed in ancient and medieval manuscripts, and the other being the scholarship of establishing the lines of descent that link different manuscripts across the ages as the result of the processes of copying and recopying). Until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, classical studies thus remained essentially conservative in its adherence to a philological model of scholarship focused on the canonical texts of Greco-Roman antiquity. In addition, the historical scholarship practiced by classicists remained faithful to the authoritative models of Greek and Roman historiography (above all, Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, and Tacitus), which had been concerned mainly with political and military history. (2)

The initial phase of the metamorphosis of classical studies into a species of social and cultural history took place during the second half of the nineteenth century, more and less concurrently with the emergence of the social sciences. This incipient transformation owed a great deal to the rise of epigraphy, papyrology, and scientific archaeology as important ancillary branches of classical scholarship. Epigraphy—the study of ancient inscriptions—expanded enormously the evidentiary basis for the study of the societies and cultures of Greco-Roman antiquity. For example, the documentation it provided for the familial and other social structures that existed in the Latin-speaking Roman half of the classical world over a period of several centuries was massive in quantity, and for the first time made in-depth, detailed social histories of this part and time-span of the Greco-Roman world possible. The monumental and still expanding collection of Latin inscriptions started by Theodor Mommsen in the mid-nineteenth century became the primary tool of this branch of classical scholarship. In her 1978 book, *Anthropology and the Greeks*, Sarah Humphreys goes so far as to say that “[b]y the late nineteenth century an ancient historian trained in the Mommsen standard in analyzing social institutions and political systems was, judged by the rigor of analysis and argument, a far better social scientist than any contemporary anthropologist.” (Humphreys, 18)

Papyrology—the scholarly study of ancient papyrus documents, huge caches of which have been excavated since the late 19th century, mainly from the hot, dry sands of Egypt—has also significantly contributed to the writing of the social history of the Greco-Roman world. While philologists have been rightly excited by the discoveries of fragmentary portions of long-lost works of Greek literature that were not preserved in the medieval manuscript tradition, classicists have also found, and continue to find, in the papyri a wealth of documentary evidence—in the form of, for instance, family and other private correspondence, contracts of all kinds, court records, petitions to government authorities, and even census reports—all of which permits the society, the culture and even the fabric of ordinary individuals' lives in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt to be reconstructed with a degree of detail and precision not possible for any other part or period of classical antiquity.

Of great importance, too, is the rise of scientific archaeology, which also belongs to the second half of the nineteenth century, and likewise had a major impact on classical studies. Whether it is the excavation of the settlements of Bronze Age Greece of the second millennium BCE or of the population centers, both urban and rural, of the Roman Empire, archaeology has fleshed out our understanding of the material living conditions of the Greco-Roman world with a thoroughness that the more traditional philological and historical disciplines could not even remotely approach. Over the past few decades, classical archaeology has also come to include a historically focused ecology studying such phenomena as deforestation, aridization, and climate change.

Ethnography created a very direct interface in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between classical studies and the emerging social sciences. In the English-speaking world, this synergy can be seen, above all, in the so-called Cambridge Ritualist School (also referred to as the Myth and Ritual School) represented by Francis Cornford, Jane Ellen Harrison, and Gilbert Murray. (Ackerman) These scholars sought to study the religion and mythology of the ancient Greeks and Romans from what one might call a sociology of religion's point of view. In their view, the crucial link between Greco-Roman religion and myth was ritual. They theorized that the basic impulse that generated the hegemonic traditional stories, or myths, of a pre-modern society came from the powerful hold exercised by religious ritual; the link between religious act, such as a sacrifice or consecration, and myth might have become obscured, but was it never completely obliterated by the story-tellers in their narrative reworking and embellishment of the ritual core-elements; and the task of the scholar was, therefore, to reconstruct the original ritual act or acts that lay deeply embedded in a traditional tale.

James Frazer, the well-known author of the monumental *The Golden Bough*, which exerted a considerable influence on twentieth century literature (Vickery)—we see it, for instance, in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*—may be regarded as a crucial precursor of the Cambridge Ritualists, for they accepted many of his mythical and religious archetypes, such as “The Spirit of the Corn” and the “Dying and Rising God.” However, the basis of Frazer's scholarship was entirely bookish, consisting of Greek and Roman literature and the surviving writings of other ancient cultures, later antiquarian compilations, folkish literature, and, last but not least, travelogues authored by western visitors to pre-modern societies. While the travelogues in particular furnished a kind of ethnography, this was often uncritical and even grossly biased, and thus, by modern social-science (especially anthropological) criteria, altogether deficient. It certainly stands at a far remove from any living, ‘hands-on’ ethnography. While Frazer showed himself to be out of touch with the emerging social sciences, the Cambridge Ritualists, by contrast, recognized the relevance of both contemporary psychology and ethnology for their work (Ackerman, 52-64), although they did not use these in a systematic manner. Harrison, in addition, did much of her earliest scholarly work on ancient Greek art, which brought her into close contact with the newly emerging discipline of scientific archaeology. (Beard, ch. 5)

In the French-speaking world of the twentieth century, a new kind of history of ideas which was closely attuned to cultural and social context was pioneered and applied to the study of the Greco-Roman world by Louis Gernet (1882-1964); for this reason, Humphreys does well to devote an entire chapter (ch. 3) to him. Gernet's early scholarly specialty was ancient Greek law, which by itself motivated his interest in the questions raised by the social sciences. The ideas of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss in particular had a major impact on his growth as a cultural historian; thus, among others, Gernet applied Mauss's triad

conceptualization and methodology of “morphologie sociale,” “physiologie des pratiques,” and “physiologie des représentations” in a most fruitful way to the history of Greek philosophy (Humphreys, 86-87). Working within this framework, he situated the origins of early Greek philosophy in shamanism and religious- mystic practice. It is an approach which is still resonant in Pierre Hadot’s, *What is ancient philosophy* (the English translation of *Qu’est-ce que c’est la philosophie antique?*) and his other works that foreground the individually and collectively practiced spirituality lying at the roots of many ancient philosophical schools. From this perspective, the philosophies of the Greeks and Romans were, first of all, forms of what the Greeks called *askesis* (the origin of our word, “ascetic”), literally “training” or “practice”); they were life- practices deeply embedded in the philosopher’s social and cultural environment, rather than simply different sets of ideas about the nature of reality.

In the classical scholarship in the English-speaking world of the past few decades, the influence of the social sciences has become quite visible. A few works which show the impact of contemporary anthropology are worth citing. In the first chapter, “Murderous Games,” of his 1983 collection, *Death and Renewal: Sociological Studies in Roman History, Volume 2*, Keith Hopkins laid, in my judgment, the foundation for all future studies for the gladiatorial games and beast spectacles of the Roman empire, demonstrating how these entertainments were the symbolically defining institution par excellence of the Roman *imperium*. It is a superb synthesis of historical and descriptive detail, on the one hand, and of sociological and political reflection, on the other, all of this informed by the author’s “hope of arousing the reader’s empathetic imagination.” (Hopkins, xiv). In his first footnote, Hopkins states: “I have been much influenced by C. Geertz’s brilliant essay, ‘Deep Play: notes on the Balinese cockfights’...Indeed, in some respects this chapter is written in direct imitation of that essay.” (Hopkins, 1) Geertz’s classical paper (Geertz, ch. 15) is, of course, lavishly illustrative of his famous technique of “thick description”—a term Geertz says he borrowed from the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle (Geertz, 6). Although as an historian Hopkins cannot replicate Geertz’s stance as an observer-anthropologist, as a stylist he has captured the spirit of “thick decription.” Indeed, what Geertz and Hopkins have above all in common is their literary artistry. In his *Ethnographic Imagination: Textual constructions of reality*, Paul Atkinson does well to point to Geertz as a persuasive illustration of his thesis that sociologists, especially those with a strong ethnographic orientation, may rightfully use literary and rhetorical techniques to convey their findings and arguments. (Atkinson, 139)

Next I cite David’s Cohen’s *Law, sexuality, and society: The enforcement of morals in classical Athens*. Cohen employs a comparative approach, drawing on the social-regulative practices in contemporary or near-contemporary Mediterranean societies, and utilizes Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* in order to show that a large part of the enforcement of sexual morality in classical Athens did not rely on a legal order which imposed its norms on society and coerced individuals into patterns of conformity or deviance; instead, the role played by social norms and collective representations lying outside the scope of legally enforceable prohibitions was far more fundamental and comprehensive. This insight is indeed fundamental to an understanding of all aspects of the ancient world.

Thirdly I cite is Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones’s monograph, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise: The Veiled Woman of Classical Greece*, which examines the practice of veiling of women in ancient Greece, a practice largely ignored or minimized by classicists reluctant to acknowledge the Otherness, so to speak, of ancient Greek society from the later West. Llewellyn-Jones not only documents this practice from a wide spectrum of ancient sources, both literary and iconic, but also illuminates it with parallels and analogies drawn from contemporary non-Western societies, and in doing so, draws abundantly upon modern ethnographic research. Thus, he, too, has ventured into comparative sociology and anthropology.

Let me offer a final and especially striking illustration of how today’s classical scholarship has been enriched by social-science perspectives. One of the most conspicuous characteristics of Greco-Roman civilization is its widespread acceptance of homosexuality, although to various degrees, depending on the specific society, and usually within clear social and legal demarcations. Its male intergenerational form, often referred by classicists as pederasty, was particularly common. In fact, in much of the ancient Greek world, especially during the late archaic and the classical periods, pederasty was so much institutionalized that its existence and practice were integral to the society and culture as a whole. Not surprisingly, in the later

Christian West, this fact was to meet for many centuries an utter incomprehension coupled with the most virulent reprobation. Classical scholarship, starting in Germany, did not begin to engage this fascinating aspect of Greek antiquity until well into the eighteenth century, and even then for a long time with the sexuality minimized. (Dynes). However, in the later nineteenth century the fruits of this scholarship started to enter a non-academic literature which was driven by unabashedly apologetic motives and was frank about the eroticism, as can be seen in John Addington Symonds's, *A Problem in Greek Ethics*.

Then, in a groundbreaking 1907 article, the German scholar, Erich Bethe, drawing extensively on the work contemporary or near-contemporary ethnographers, pointed to what he regarded as similarities in social-integrative functioning between the pederasty of the Dorian Greeks (represented, above all, by Sparta) and the intergenerational male homosexuality that flourished in New Guinea and other islands of the Melanesian South Pacific, where sexual relationships between teenage boys and older, not yet married males provided a crucial facilitation and rite of passage for the former into adulthood. It is not hard to imagine why the general reaction, a century ago, of German classicists to Bethe's venture into comparative anthropology was hostile (Percy, 32-33). The anti-homosexual prejudice is, of course, pretty well absent from contemporary classical scholarship, and, while scholars such as William Percy rightfully urge great caution in the use of the comparative-ethnographic approach (Percy, 17), Cohen and Llewellyn-Jones have demonstrated to my satisfaction that it (and indeed any form of comparative sociology) can yield genuine insights for the study of gender and sexuality in Greco-Roman antiquity.

This necessarily very brief and selective overview of the far-reaching changes in intellectual and methodological orientation that have taken place in classical scholarship since the later nineteenth century needs to be complemented by a look at the massive pedagogical shift in the teaching of the classics at the university level which occurred in the 1970's and 1980's. This transformation took place on a large scale first in Canada and the United States, but since the seventies it has made a worldwide impact. (3) The sixties and seventies saw huge drop— 76.8% between 1962 and 1976 in the United States, for which the most reliable figure are available—in the number of students taking Latin in high school; or to give a few absolute figures, whereas in 1972 over 700, 000 students were taking high school Latin, that figure was 150,000 in 1985 (there was actually an increase of 14.9% between 1976 and 1985). (Edmunds, xiv) Traditionally, high school Latin had fulfilled the language requirement stipulated by nearly all universities as part of their entrance requirements, and a large proportion of students graduating from secondary school with Latin would continue into at least one year of university-level Latin since a university-level language requirement was also a part of nearly all university degree programs. This situation changed drastically during the sixties and seventies. Classics departments saw enrolments in their first-year Latin courses (the students in which, of course, would have possessed high school matriculation in Latin) plummet. Enrolment in first-year university Latin had generally made up a large portion of overall course registration for classics departments; with the severe decline in enrolments, existing faculty complement at most universities could no longer be justified.

A far-reaching pedagogical rescue operation—if may put it this way—both practical but also, as it turned out, intellectually creative, was put into place, and saved classics as a university discipline with major undergraduate outreach, as opposed to its becoming a mainly graduate school-level specialty, like Ancient Egyptian or Assyrian. First-year Latin courses which required no previous knowledge of the language were introduced on a large scale; these pretty well replaced the old-style entrance courses. (Such elementary courses had existed for a long time already for the study of ancient Greek, which had never been widely taught in high school.) Put into place now were major and honors programs in classics with lower classical language requirements—sometimes in fact, in the case of the major, as opposed to the honors programs, with only minimal or no language requirements at all. For some time, the courses developed for these programs were typically designated as “classics in translation” courses, and were primarily literary in emphasis, focused as they were on the canonical works of Greek and Roman literature. However, courses on classical myth and ancient history also found their way quickly into the new curriculum. In fact, already before the pedagogical shift, many classics departments had been offering survey courses in ancient history which had no language requirements. The thematic range of the non-language classics courses and programs has expanded steadily over the past four decades, and with this expansion has come also increased intellectual sophistication outside the purely philological sphere of scholarship. The early “classics in translation” courses hastily put into place a few decades ago had often lacked engagement with contemporary trends in the social sciences,

historiography, and literary-critical theory and practice. The present author, who went through what was still a traditional, philologically oriented undergraduate and graduate classics program in the sixties and early seventies, obtaining his PhD in 1972, is a witness to the remarkable expansion of intellectual horizons that has taken place in classical studies since then.

Already in the late eighties, a collection of papers, *Classics: A Discipline and Profession in Crisis?* (Phyllis Culham and Lowell Edmunds, ed.), published under the auspices of the American Philological Association (the world's largest association of classicists, founded in 1879: the choice then of "Philological" for its name was surely significant), was able to offer a comprehensive assessment—despite the ominous ring of "crisis," guardedly positive, I think, in its ultimate thrust—of the new directions in taken by classicists in both their teaching and scholarship. The "crisis" at issue, in its inception at least, had been created by external forces which were beyond the control of individual scholars and academic institutions, but, it accelerated new directions for classical scholarship that hitherto had been registering only ever so slowly, and thus led to the most remarkable and creative revolution in classics-based teaching and scholarship since the Renaissance. Something like a paradigm shift, after the order of Thomas Kuhn's well known concept (Kuhn), although he applied it primarily to the natural sciences, was certainly at work here. Since the late eighties, the "new consensus" spoken of by Edmunds in his "Introduction" (Edmunds, xxvii) as being badly needed by classicists has been both clarified and broadened: philology, while still an indispensable component of classical scholarship—to which, I would strongly maintain, also the undergraduate students in our non-language classics programs should have some access—is not, by itself, even remotely sufficient for a truly contemporary understanding of the ancient Greek and Roman world; both in their teaching and their scholarship, the classicists of today must have what one might call a 'transdisciplinary' outlook which embraces the widest possible horizons of intellect and imagination. This realization has grown even stronger since 1989 among North American classicists, as is witnessed by the "Presidential Address" of Jeffrey Buller, president of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South. Here, among others, he emphasizes the crucial importance of "making connections among the disciplines" (Buller, 209) and consequently the urgent need to attract the contributions of non-classicist scholars to classicists' meetings and publications (Buller, 210)

With the "new consensus", it is inevitable that the classicist's ideational relationship with the Greco-Roman world has profoundly changed. Since the seventeenth century, and certainly since the Enlightenment, most classicists have, I suspect, understood, their practice of scholarship from the vantage point of a mostly unarticulated philosophy that lays a thin veneer of the epistemology of the rational ego, of which Descartes is the fountainhead in the modern West, over the larger block of the empiricist and positivist model for the acquisition of knowledge that we associate with Locke and Comte. However while the Cartesian model for knowledge, at least of the world accessible to human reason, is scientific after the mathematical-physical order, the rationalism of the eighteenth or nineteenth century classicist is that of common-sense logic. This is the tool whereby the classicist processes the data and information he can gather about the object of his study, namely Greco-Roman antiquity, which the traditional scholar views almost exclusively as being encapsulated in the literary texts that are recorded in the medieval manuscripts which have survived the ravages of time. Here is where the empiricist and positivist aspects of his conception of knowledge have their full play. The scholar's task is, first of all, to establish an authoritative text that reproduces as accurately as possible the words of the original author—the entire scholarly apparatus of paleography and codicology and textual emendation must be utilized here. Once an authoritative text has been established, the scholar in question (or some other scholar building on his work) may proceed to exegesis and commentary. All this scholarship is perceived to be objective and impartial. Esthetic and imaginative appreciation of the literary text may enter the scholar's ideational relationship with it, but such a response, as the great English Latinist and textual scholar, A.E. Housman (1859-1936)—who was also a notable and much-loved poet—insisted, must be scrupulously kept separate from the properly philological enterprise. (4) Strikingly, though, many an old-style philologist of the past at times allows an uncritical moralizing—usually reflecting the prejudices of his times—in the form of, at one extreme, idealization of the virtues of the ancients and, at the other, reprobation of their vices, to supplement his scientific philology.

Both the Cartesian and Lockean-Comtean models work with a rigidly bipolar epistemological model of the subject as the knower and the object as the known or to-be-known. Philosophically certainly, and even on the level of common-sense thinking, this subject-object formulation has long been recognized as inadequate, and I doubt, too, if many of today's classicists whether, consciously or unconsciously, still operate with it. It is much better recognized now that scholars and scientists, too, perform their work within the totality of their mental, social, and physical lives immersed in the world around them; and from this recognition springs a much clearer awareness of the multitude of the assumptions, biases, and interests, some truly fundamental, others more incidental, that scholars and scientists, too, bring into their professional lives and activities.

Already in the late nineteenth century, with his fundamental distinction between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, Wilhelm Dilthey had laid the foundations for a new epistemology that took better cognizance of the special nature of the humanities and social sciences. Since then, following in his footsteps during the twentieth century, the phenomenologists and their existentialist epigones staked out a philosophical enterprise to chart anew the complexity and depth of the human self and its *Lebenswelt*—to use the expressive concept first formulated by Gustav Husserl and then further elaborated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Their speculations and introspections, working with the so-called phenomenological reductions and reflections remain, in my judgment, problematic. The synergy of object and subject in human lived experience is overshadowed by the continuing dichotomous polarity of these two, so that, in the final analysis, the idea of the *Lebenswelt* functions only as an (admittedly) agreeable metaphor. Johan Vander Hoeven, writing from a Neo-Calvinist philosophical perspective more than forty years ago, well sums up the problem as follows: “Even the ‘life-world’...remains on the ‘objective’ side of the line, whereas the ‘lived experience’ of [author’s emphasis] this ‘world’ keeps to the ‘subjective’ side.” (Vander Hoeven, 68) Except in impressionistic (or, in Heidegger’s case, highly idiosyncratic poetic) terms, perceptive, even as brilliant, as these may be, the phenomenologists and the existentialist have not been able to capture adequately the complex processual nature of the self.

The philosophy of social thought called Symbolic Interaction and developed over the past century by George Herber Mead and Herbert Blumer has been more successful in this respect. The new theoretical foundations they laid for the social sciences moved these away from an excessive reliance on behaviorist and quantitative models of research towards qualitative methodologies that are able to capture the richness and complexity of human lived experience with rigor and precision. This far-reaching reorientation in the social sciences may be seen as part and parcel of a wider contemporary trend which aspires to abolish the virtual monopoly enjoyed by the natural sciences and their mathematical-physical *modi operandi* in the bestowal of authoritative meaning upon most, if not all, areas of human life; however, it does so without lapsing into the vitalism and irrationalism which have, unfortunately, become the hallmark of much postmodernist thought. The first and most fundamental axiom of Symbolic Interaction, as singled out by Robert Prus, is that “[h]uman group life is intersubjective” (Prus, 15). This and the remaining six axioms formulated by Prus—human group life is perspectival, (multi-perspectival), reflective, activity-based, negotiable, relational, and processual (Prus, 15-18)—have for many decades now served as the theoretical and methodological foundation for an ethnographically oriented sociology which has produced many penetrating studies of concrete social phenomena and institutions.

The intellectual revolution effected by Symbolic Interaction in the social sciences echoes what might called the ‘semiotic turn’ in contemporary thought. In his magisterial history of ideas, *Four Ages of Understanding: the First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, John Deely, taking his cue from the pragmatism (or rather pragmaticism, as he points out it should be termed; Deely, 625) and the “doctrine of the signs” of Charles Peirce, (Deely, 265ff.) offers a powerful argument for a reconstruction of meaning and meaningfulness which has more in common with the qualitative, sign-oriented (i.e. semiotic) construction of meaning that was characteristic of earlier ages such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, until it was overtaken by the Cartesian revolution of the seventeenth century. Deely is favorable to postmodernist thought insofar this rejects the narrow rationalism and positivism of earlier ages, and indeed in his conclusion hails Peirce as “the most charismatic writer introducing postmodernity,” (Deely, 742) , who held that “the highest grade of reality is only reached by signs.” (Peirce, as quoted by Deely, 742).

Norbert Wiley's *The Semiotic Self* may be said to put Deely's philosophical summons into action with its intricate charting of the dynamics of the human self and its *Lebenswelt* which discards the Cartesian as well as the empiricist-objectivist duality of subject and object. The concepts of internal conversation, reflexivity, and solidarity developed by Wiley in depth and detail are also helpful towards an appreciation of the complex identity—social identity as much as self-identity, professional or otherwise—that characterizes the modern classical scholar. Thus, Wiley's distinction, in his chapter on reflexivity between "reflexive acts" of the "first" and the "second order" (Wiley, ch. 4)—where he draws heavily on Mead as well as Peirce—might be useful for a more precise categorization of the different varieties of classical scholarship, ranging from the relatively straightforward transcription of a Latin or Greek text in a well produced medieval manuscript to the construction of a complex genealogy of *mentalités* for the entire Greco-Roman world. However, most important, as in the rest of his work, Wiley's epistemological scheme places these "acts," too, in the full context of human lived experience. Such a perspective precludes any rigidly unitary understanding of professional identity based on a narrowly circumscribed sphere of human activity.

I have sketched what I regard as the intellectual and scholarly reorientation which has profoundly altered the work that classicists now have to map out for themselves. But I have not even alluded to the enormous impact, both social and intellectual, made by the entrance of women into the classical academy over the past few decades. The rise of feminist-inspired scholarship in classical studies during the 1970's and 1980's is only a small part of this transformation; more important, I think—as can be seen, for instance, in the prominence of women in current classical archaeology—is the strong impetus they have lent to the development of classical studies along the lines of social and cultural history.

All this is not to suggest that it is only over the past few decades that the classicist's professional identity has become complicated. The 'old-fashioned' classical philologists (like the aforementioned A.E. Housman) of a hundred years ago also were complex human beings immersed in their own full *Lebenswelt*. Likewise, this is not to suggest that, after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, the ideational relationship cultivated by scholars and other members of the educated classes towards the world of Greco-Roman antiquity remained fairly stable through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the following centuries up until the past forty years or so. Pascale Hummel traces how the *mentalité* towards classical antiquity, even on the part of scholars interested only in the minutiae of textual scholarship, has undergone dramatic shifts over the past sixteen centuries, from the medieval attitude in the West that regarded the contemporary world as a continuation, albeit having been subjected to drastic social and political reordering, of the Roman Empire, to the idealizing construction of a normative classical antiquity with its Roman and Greek halves reunited (the Greek half having been virtually unknown during most of the Middle Ages); this was followed by the romantic and positivist permutations which culminated in the nineteenth century conception of what was called in German *Altertumswissenschaft*, a scientific scholarship whose preserve, so to speak, was classical antiquity—reflecting a thoroughly professionalized understanding, therefore, of the study of the Greco-Roman world.

In closing, I wish to offer some reflections on the special hermeneutic awareness required on the part of the 'ideal', theoretically and methodologically grounded classical scholar of today; for this person must cultivate a degree of historical consciousness that is not required of the typical ethnographer or any other kind of social scientist. There is a real challenge here for the contemporary classicist. I myself have been attracted for a long time to the idea of "the fusion of the horizons," developed by the well-known German philosopher of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 272ff.); for the classicist, this will involve the "present horizon" of his or her present situatedness making intimate contact, as it were, with the "horizon" presented by a literary text or a material artefact of Greco-Roman antiquity. If a "fusion of horizons" indeed takes place and is followed by a cumulative and integrated sequence of these over time, there will inevitably arise in the person a sense of "tradition," an all-important, even normative idea in Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Gadamer's conceptualization of "tradition" and the "fusion of horizons" is not without its epistemological problems. These have been ably discussed by Elizabeth E. Clark (Clark, 135-137). She notes, among others, Jacques Derrida's critique of "Gadamer's usual elision of writing and speech...characteristic of German hermeneutics." (Clark, 136), a critique which centers on this elision's "association with the phenomenological notion of a prereflective "lived experience," which Derrida deems a "metaphysical"

concept.” (Clark, 136-137). (Let me emphatically note here myself that I regard as completely absurd Derrida’s characterizing “prereflective lived experience” as “a metaphysical concept.”) Gadamer has tried to distinguish between the spoken word and the written text by investing the latter with esthetic qualities not possessed by the former, but this is not convincing. (Clark, 136). More basically, though, in my own judgment, “horizon” is an exceedingly fluid concept, since, as Gadamer himself admits, there are no such things as “horizons that are distinguished from one another.” (Gadamer, 273). For me, therefore, this word’s usefulness resides primarily at the level of metaphor. It obviously resonates with R.G. Collingwood’s famous insistence in the *The Idea of History* that the good historian must be able to achieve a special empathy with the past (Collingwood, 282-302), and this calls for an act of imagination as much as of scholarly interpretation. In any case, I agree with Gerald Bruns that Gadamer’s hermeneutics does not operate with a naive regard for tradition (as some has claimed) but instead foregrounds the imperative to shape within ourselves a truly formidable hermeneutical (and, therefore, also, historical) consciousness.

This is what Gadamer means when he says that the end of hermeneutic experience is not meaning or knowledge but openness, where openness, however, does not mean simply open-mindedness, tolerance for another’s views or the mutual indulgence of liberal pluralism but acknowledgment of what is alien and refractory to one’s categories. (Bruns, 210)

The classicist works within an exceedingly long continuous cultural tradition stretching from classical antiquity to the present, a tradition, moreover, that is multiform and polyphonic, so to speak, and which must not be imagined, as is well emphasized by Peter Burke in *Varieties of Cultural History*, (Burke, 188-189) as a more or less static cultural legacy or heritage but as a complex sequence of acts of reception, assimilation and transformation that was already being performed within the Greco-Roman world itself. This fact holds out rich possibilities of an engaged, rewarding scholarship for today’s classicists, who stand squarely within what is still often called ‘the classical tradition.’ Such a scholarship affords them, too, I would finally note, the role of “participant-observer,” which, Prus underlines, “adds an entirely different and vital dimension to the notion of observation” (Prus, 19) for the sociologist and ethnographer. In this important respect, then, the modern classicist can join hands with the social scientist. It is gratifying to see that the study of the classical tradition—whether it is that of the Middle Ages or that which still is very much present in our contemporary culture, as Simon Goldhill’s book, *Love, Sex, Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes our Lives*, has impressively demonstrated—has become, over the past few decades, an increasingly popular and esteemed field of enquiry in the classical scholarship of today.

Notes

1. Part of this article is based on a paper given at the Joint Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research and North Central Sociological Association Conference held in Pittsburgh in April 2005.

2. Because the study of ancient Greek and Roman history has traditionally been regarded as the preserve of classical philology, in the English-speaking world it has most often been housed in classics rather than history departments. The clash of conflicting expectations from the study of history between ‘traditional’ classicist-historians and ‘progressive’ non-classicist historians is discussed by Kurt Raaflaub, an eminent historian of ancient Greece, in a his article, “Between A Rock And A Hard Place: Reflections On The Role Of Ancient History In A Modern University.”

3. For interesting facts and figures on the declining enrolments in Latin at the pre-university levels of education in Germany since the 1960’s, see the article by Claudia Riess and Werner Riess. For the teaching of classics (i.e. Greco-Roman civilization) in general at these levels in European countries, see the collection of papers edited by John Bulwer.

4. Housman made an elegant statement of the principles underlying his work as a classical philologist in his “Introductory Lecture” at University College in London in 1892. (Housman, *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, 259-274). This was a public lecture, which was, of course, meant to have a popular appeal. Housman, therefore, sets the pursuit of classical philology in the context of the scientific enterprise and practice in general and also offers some thoughtful reflections on the esthetic appreciation of poetry. In his inaugural lecture marking his accession to the Chair of Latin at the University of Cambridge in 1911, he is even more definite about the dichotomy between philology and literary appreciation: “Scholarship, that study of the ancient literatures for which chairs of Greek and Latin are founded, is itself a department...not of literature but of science; and science ought to be scientific and ought not to be literary.” (302) Housman’s brilliant essay on the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), which is among his popular, non-philological writings (Housman, 277-295), shows that he could be a formidable literary critic, even by the standards of a much later age. All the same, the editor of the *Collected Poems and Selected Prose*, Christopher Rick, speaking in his “Introduction” of the “cordon sanitaire” Housman maintained between his work as a philologist and his accomplishments as a poet and connoisseur of poetry, notes that “[Housman] was grateful to his colleagues at Trinity College, Cambridge, for the kindness which they did him in never mentioning his poems.”

(Housman, 7) For great insight into Housman's complex personality, Norman Page's biography, which also is both frank and sensitive about his homosexuality, is highly recommended

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