

# Classical Reception Studies: Reconceptualizing the Study of the Classical Tradition

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*Abstract: The heritage of Greco-Roman antiquity is still deemed among the most powerful transcultural and transhistorical archives of the contemporary world. The various meanings which this ancient material has taken on in later contexts, both ancient and modern, is central to a research field that is nowadays called 'classical reception studies'. My paper examines the genealogy of this name by focussing on its different components: 'classical', 'reception' and 'studies'. I will argue that they are all attempts to revise the agenda of its ancestor named 'the classical tradition'. The latter mainly tried to reassert the enduring value of antiquity throughout Western history. Ever since the 1960s, the term 'reception' has become an important shorthand for the resistance within literary studies against such affirmative notions of tradition. Literary works are no longer seen to have an immanent value, but are time and again 'received' and '(re)appropriated' by new cultural communities. That is why the name 'classical receptions' was coined at the end of the 1990s, even though it was rashly criticized for overemphasizing the act of receiving and neglecting the appeal or lure of the ancient repertoire. This paper will argue that we can also look upon the term reception as a 'travelling concept' (Mieke Bal), a name that primordially seeks to institutionalize a new pedagogical community within and beyond classical studies. Its aim is to reorganize and refresh the study of 'the classical tradition' by adopting new methodological values that will also realign classical studies with the contemporary humanities. This perspective enables us to work towards a reappraisal of the notion of 'classical tradition', as the latter may come to epitomize the way in which certain cultural communities understand their indebtedness to the classical past.*

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## Introduction

“THE HERITAGE OF Greek and Roman antiquity is among the most powerful transcultural archives of the contemporary world.” It is with sentences of this kind that many contributions in the field of “classical reception studies” open. The sentence first of all indicates that “classical reception studies” is about the various forms, meanings and values which the material from the ancient Greek and Roman empires has taken on in later contexts. At the same time, such an opening sentence also expresses the widely felt need to first reassert or recollect that these classical cultures have greatly impacted upon various societies and individuals. This is certainly a familiar rhetorical strategy, yet one also senses a certain discomfort in this urgency to point time and again at the classical status of the research object before getting into it. Claiming that we all know or *ought to know* the importance of classical antiquity, feels like framing the research by an appeal to authority. It is undeniable that many cultures show traces of the classical past or of interactions with a certain image of it. This is especially the case when these cultures have been part of the

ancient empires or have been colonized by one of their self-proclaimed modern inheritors, such as France, Germany or Great Britain. Part of the current discomfort rather stems from the lingering scepticism about the authority of the classical today. Many European schools, for instance, no longer offer courses in Greek or Latin, nor do several universities. It has become a widespread conviction that our direct knowledge of the classical past – our ‘repertoire’ or ‘communicative memory’ – is gradually shrinking, although access to the knowledge of the classical past is no longer restricted to the elite and has perhaps never been more open than today. The problem perhaps is that it is no longer self-evident that the leading voices of our society – the popular politicians and public intellectuals, the celebrities of all kinds – have received a ‘classical’ education. At the same time, there are still many elements, stories, concepts and names in contemporary culture that explicitly and even more implicitly reference Greek or Roman antiquity. Even if the classical today is no longer perceived as reproducing the mindset and worldview of the elite with all its hegemonic, masculinist and racist implications, it is still present as a benchmark or a point of reference in shaping cultural and social matrices or, at least, in dressing their outlook. But when scholars merely rehearse the classical status of the ancient *sources*, like many of them do often against better judgment, they are unable to capture the manifold and complex cultural processes in which these ancient references are functioning. It is at this point that classical reception studies envisages to make a difference.

As a field of study classical reception studies is an only relatively new direction in the humanities. Research into the afterlife of antiquity has already been conducted by scholars of various disciplines, like art history, classical studies, comparative literature, legal history, intellectual history and philosophy. The field of ‘classical reception studies’ as such became institutionalized in the last decade with a range of new book series, academic journals, university programs and research institutes at universities worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Some of these institutes, however, hold on to the older name of this study, which is ‘the classical tradition’. In this article I will argue that the different components of the new name ‘classical reception studies’ are all careful attempts to revise the agenda of this ancestor. The term ‘reception’ has been an important shorthand for the resistance within literary studies against uncritical notions of tradition and the classical. From the viewpoint of reception studies, works of art are no longer perceived as possessing an immanent value, but are time and again ‘received’, ‘appropriated’ and ‘reproduced’ by new cultural communities and individuals. That is why the label ‘classical receptions’ was coined at the end of the 1990s in order to replace the older concept of ‘the classical tradition’. This nomenclature is still part of an ongoing debate in the field, as it is felt to be decisive for the way in which we give shape to and make sense of our relationship to the classical past. In what follows, I will subsequently discuss the labels ‘reception’,

<sup>1</sup> Excellent examples of this recent flourishing of classical reception studies are the *Classical Reception Studies Network*, based in the United Kingdom, and the *Australasian Classical Reception Studies Network*. There are copious initiatives outside the Anglophone world too, like the French Université de Toulouse II – Le Mirail, where researchers work together in the *Équipe de Recherche sur la Réception de l’Antiquité: Sources, Mémoire, Enjeux*; at the German Humboldt-Universität in Berlin there is the wide-ranging *Sonderforschungsbereich “Transformationen der Antike”*; and in the Netherlands the research school OIKOS has established since 2010 its own research group *Classical Receptions and Traditions*. Many university presses, such as Oxford University Press, Duckworth and Blackwell, have created separate series on classical reception studies. Along with existing journals such as *The International Journal of the Classical Tradition* and *Antike und Abendland*, new thematic journals have also been founded, like *Classical Receptions Journal* and *Anabases*. Along with the growing interest in academia, new publications and activities for a wider audience on our indebtedness to the ancients are burgeoning too.

‘studies’ and ‘the classical’ in order to point out how the dissensus between ‘tradition’ and ‘reception’ has been productive in reconceptualizing the field, but has also reinforced the unease with the classical as that which would be immanently valuable and timeless.

## Tradition versus Receptions

The importance of the new term ‘reception’ is generally explained by opposing it to ‘tradition’.<sup>2</sup> The latter notion became closely linked to this field of study by the standard work of the British classicist Gilbert Highet from 1949, entitled *The Classical Tradition*. The goal of his survey, as Highet put it himself, is to trace “the river of Greek and Roman influence”<sup>3</sup> in the canonical literatures of the West. The metaphor of the river (note the singular in the quotation) is cleverly used here to suggest the unity and the continuity of the classical tradition, implying that its ancient sources have continuously been watering our spiritual lands by means of its most privileged medium: literature. Tradition, as Highet also pointed out, refers to the Latin *tradere* which means ‘handing down to posterity’. The word ‘reception’, on the other hand, refers to the act of receiving. The focus is no longer on the lasting influence of the ancient source but on the different meanings, functions and forces an ancient element acquires at the moment of reception. Leading scholars in the field, like Charles Martindale and Lorna Hardwick, have motivated this shift from tradition to reception by referring to the concept of reception history as developed by the German medievalist Hans Robert Jauss at the end of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Classical reception studies would be the answer from classical studies to this paradigm in literary studies. For many reasons, I dare to call this genealogy *an invented tradition*, albeit a strategically significant one, as we shall see later on.<sup>5</sup> The first reason is that there have been no extensive dialogues with either the hermeneutical or the empirical branches of reception studies in the four decades separating Jauss from the rise of classical reception studies.<sup>6</sup> The second reason for speaking of an invented tradition is that long before Jauss’s coining of the concept, the term ‘reception’ was already in use as a syn-

<sup>2</sup> See Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 2-11; Charles Martindale, “Introduction: Thinking Through Reception,” in: Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Malden – Oxford – Victoria: Blackwell, 2006), 1-13; C.W. Marshall and George Kovacs (eds.), *Classics and Comics* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 541: “We have traced the river of Greek and Roman influence in literature from its first mingling with the life of modern Europe [...]”

<sup>4</sup> The main reference here is Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), especially his inaugural address from 1967, entitled “Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft.” Cf. Hardwick, o.c., 7 and Martindale, o.c., 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> See also James Porter, “Reception Studies: Future Prospects,” in: Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (eds.), *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Malden – Oxford – Chichester: Blackwell, 2008), 474: “Recourse to a theory that was developed as a general model of textual interpretation is really a move *faute de mieux*, governed more by metonymy (a similarity of names) than by point of reference.”

<sup>6</sup> The exception here is Martindale himself. He adopted Jauss’s notion of ‘a chain of receptions’ to indicate that the views of creative artists and scholars are always determined by previous work done on antiquity. See Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). However, the main inspiration of his work before this 1993 publication was T.S. Eliot’s philosophy of tradition instead of Jauss’s reception theory which is conspicuously absent as a reference in his earlier publications. See, for instance, Charles Martindale (ed.), *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. 2 (on T.S. Eliot). From the perspective of reception studies as a theoretical, historical and empirical paradigm in the humanities, there has not been any notable rapprochement with the classical tradition. This absence can be seen in, for instance, Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: a Critical Introduction* (London – New York: Methuen, 1984).

onym for ‘classical influences’, ‘classical heritage’ and the like. It was not unusual to speak of ‘the reception of Roman law in modern states’ or ‘the reception of Greek tragedy in later times’.<sup>7</sup> So if the term was readily available, why referring with such emphasis to literary theory when establishing this new name?

I would argue that there is an institutional reason for this. The classical tradition has for a very long time been conceived of as a shield for classicists to defend their study of the ancient sources. This brought about a dominant protocol in which the ancient source provided the lens through which later receptions were viewed and criticized. In order to widen this scope it appeared useful to hook onto paradigms from outside classical studies. The reason why we speak of ‘classical reception studies’ today – rather than, for example, ‘classical memory studies’ or ‘classical heritage studies’ – lies in the twofold opportunity of adopting an existing concept in classical studies and the theoretical humanities at once. The term ‘reception’ functions here as what Mieke Bal has called a ‘travelling concept’, a name that primordially seeks to institutionalize a new pedagogical community by opening up one’s field to concepts from neighbouring fields.<sup>8</sup> It is at this point that the reference to reception theory in the name ‘classical reception studies’ becomes truly effective. Its appeal is that it inspires to reorganize and to refresh the study of ‘the classical tradition’ by adopting new intellectual practices from the contemporary humanities.<sup>9</sup>

## ‘Studies’

An important player in the contemporary humanities which has gradually and almost unnoted filtered into the approach of classical reception studies is cultural studies. For this to happen, classical studies needed some decades of negotiating with a paradigm which at first sight called attention for its ‘other’,<sup>10</sup> that is to say, for the ‘*unclassical*’, non-canonical and ‘popular’ cultural practices. This was initially a considerable threat for Classics and the classical tradition which had already become a major point of contention in the ongoing

<sup>7</sup> For this use of the word ‘reception’ before the *Konstanzer Schule* (Jauss and Wolfgang Iser) conceptualized it in their own terms, see e.g. H. Bünemann, *Elias Schlegel und Wieland als Bearbeiter antiker Tragödien. Studie zur Rezeption der Antike im 18. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Eichblatt, 1928) and Ernst Levy, “Reflections on the First ‘Reception’ of Roman Law in Germanic States.” in: *The American Historical Review* (1942) 48.1: 20-29.

<sup>8</sup> See Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide* (Toronto – Buffalo – London: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> This is certainly not to say that the study of the classical world in general (i.e. classical studies or ‘Classics’, as I have been calling it) was by no means informed by the contemporary humanities. This is made perfectly clear by Salvatore Settis, *The Future of the ‘Classical’* (transl. Allan Cameron) (Cambridge – Malden: Polity, 2006), 13-14: “Contemporary culture and the science of antiquity are travelling at entirely different speeds [...]. The first perpetuates and shows a particular fondness for a melodious, faultless and unchallengeable image of ‘classicism’, whereas the second, at least in its most advanced manifestations, has chosen to examine its contradictions, variety and flaws, and uses comparative studies and historical anthropology to discover the multiplicity of cultures that coexisted within the ‘classical’ world, their reciprocal influences and relations, their exchanges with Eastern cultures, and the unexpected wealth of currents (in art, science, and thought) that were then losing out but contained potential and embryonic ideas we need to rediscover. [...] The question remains, however, as to whether we will be able to refer to the eventual outcome of this new scholarly approach as ‘the classical’.” An exemplary survey of the anthropological and theoretical turn in classical studies in France since the 1960s is provided by Nicole Loraux, Gregory Nagy and Laura Slatkin (eds.), *Postwar French Thought. Volume III. Antiquities* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> For how cultural studies relates to classical studies, see Karen Bassi and Peter Euben, “De-Classifying Hellenism: Untimely Mediations.”, in: *Parallax* 9.4 (2003): 1-7.

'culture wars'.<sup>11</sup> To many established scholars cultural studies was about leaving the canonical arts and their study aside and reorienting the humanities to the present. Cultural studies indeed defined itself as a distinctly modernist project, enlarging our understanding of culture by articulating and assessing the variety of cultural practices and the negotiations, forces and crises defining them.<sup>12</sup> Despite the initial lack of attention from cultural studies for the classics, their importance has been acknowledged more explicitly in recent years, which can be seen in the growing interest for the interaction between 'Great Texts' and popular culture. The same holds true for how Classics deals with cultural studies. It is no coincidence that Lorna Hardwick, a classicist and leading scholar in 'classical reception studies', operates from the Open University, where the British strand of cultural studies had obtained a firm footing.<sup>13</sup> Hardwick organised conferences like 'The Role of Greek Drama and Poetry in Crossing and Redefining Cultural Boundaries' (2002) and 'Greeks And Romans in the Buffyverse: Classical Threads in Fantasy and Science Fiction on Contemporary Television' (2004). She also supervised a project on 'Engagements with Greek drama and Homeric epic on BBC Radio in the 1940s and 1950s' (2004-2009). Study of the ancient afterlife is nowadays no longer restricted to the Western canonical arts and includes the various interactions with the classical past in everyday culture,<sup>14</sup> also in non-Western countries.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, there have always been scholars with an interest in this topic, but today they are institutionally no longer in the margins of classical studies nor in those of cultural studies. Their research now results in publications at prestigious university presses, like the very productive series 'Classical Presences' at Oxford University Press. The new label 'classical reception studies' helps to make visible that there are new areas being visited and that the field is delineated, strategically presenting itself as an independent kind of 'studies'. The function of the travelling concept 'reception' here is to indicate that new frameworks are being explored. This idea of travelling between areas of knowledge is crucial, as classical scholarship alone is no longer held to be sufficient to examine the moment of reception, even though the interdisciplinary

<sup>11</sup> This public debate turning the classics and the classical tradition into the prime example of conservatism can be seen in the many traditionalist bestsellers like Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) and Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (London: Duckworth, 1998). From the other side, Richard Keller Simon has tried to convince his peers in cultural studies to study 'the great tradition' in its relation to popular media like film and television instead of rigorously separating the two. See Richard Keller Simon, *Trash Culture: Popular Culture and the Great Tradition* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> See Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham–London: Duke University Press), 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Hall, for one, held a chair at this university from 1979 to 1997 after leaving the famous *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* at Birmingham University.

<sup>14</sup> See a.o. Kai Brodersen, *Crimina: die Antike im modernen Kriminalroman* (Frankfurt am Main: Verl. Antike, 2004); Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830-1960* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Artur A. Pomeroy, 'Then It Was Destroyed By the Volcano': *The Ancient World in Film and On Television* (London: Duckworth, 2008); Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin (eds.), *Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2009); Margaret Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> See a.o. Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson (eds.), *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie (eds.), *Classics in Post-colonial Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Emily Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Erin B. Mee and Helene Foley (eds.), *Antigone On the Contemporary World Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

nature of classical studies has traditionally attracted generalist scholars.<sup>16</sup> In sum, then, the label ‘studies’ in ‘classical reception studies’ points to a new range of approaches aspiring to conceptualize *the moment of reception* rather than deeming the reception a byproduct of the ancient sources. In so doing, the travelling concept ‘reception’ also makes us reconsider the position of Classics as a field of study and of the classics as a corpus or body of work within the humanities.

## The Classical

So finally, what about the classical in this discussion? Undeniably, the term has been negatively charged in the process of contesting ‘the classical tradition’.<sup>17</sup> In the name ‘classical reception studies’ the classical would now only denote the historical epochs of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, without any further appraisal or estimation.<sup>18</sup> One can seriously doubt whether ‘classical reception studies’ would exist without a minimal degree of classicity ascribed to or imposed by its object of study. It is at this point that the term ‘reception’ did meet some opposition, also from scholars well-versed in the theoretical humanities.<sup>19</sup> The term was criticized for both being too passive (that is to say, merely *receptive*) and neglecting the appeal or lure of the classical tradition in the moment of reception.<sup>20</sup> The criticism of passivity seems unfair to me, since the very concept of reception refers to an *interactional* model of engaging with the (classical) past. The second point, however, is worth considering. The reception paradigm as it has been developed in literary studies makes it difficult indeed to assess and to account for how certain classical elements may not be just part of a repository which the recipient activates but may also *impose themselves* in the process and have an enduring quality beyond the reach of individual subjects and cultural communities. Classical reception studies does not negate this dimension altogether, but by theoretically adhering to the Jaussian model the issue has been underaddressed. What I would like to add here is that the classical as a taxonomic concept does remain functional within the framework of classical

<sup>16</sup> Cf. David M. Schaps, *Handbook for Classical Research* (London – New York: Routledge, 2011), i: “One of the glories of the Greco-Roman classics [i.e. classical studies, *mdp*] is the opportunity that they give us to consider a great culture in its entirety; but our ability to do that depends on our ability to work comfortably with varied fields of scholarship.”

<sup>17</sup> This unease can be seen in the fact that the first introduction to classical reception studies from 2003 was simply entitled ‘reception studies’. Hardwick, who authored this guide, later added ‘classical’ to the name, for instance in her 2008 Blackwell companion. See n.18.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (eds.), *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Malden – Oxford – Chichester: Blackwell, 2008), 1: “We have used the word ‘classical’ in its specific sense of reference to Greek and Roman antiquity.”

<sup>19</sup> See a.o. Tim Whitmarsh, “True Histories: Lucian, Bakhtin, and the Pragmatics of Reception.” in: Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Malden – Oxford – Victoria: Blackwell, 2006), esp. 115; Felix Budelmann and Johannes Haubold, “Reception and Tradition.” in: Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (eds.), *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Malden – Oxford – Chichester: Blackwell-Wiley, 2008), 13-25. Just one year before the latter companion, Blackwell had published a companion to the classical tradition in which reception was presented under the aegis of the classical tradition as merely one kind of approach to the ancient afterlife. See Craig W. Kallendorf (ed.) *A Companion to the Classical Tradition* (Malden – Oxford – Chichester: Blackwell-Wiley, 2007). This move was poorly appreciated by the editors of the receptions companion, as they make clear in their introduction to the volume.

<sup>20</sup> See Simon Goldhill, *Who Needs Greek? Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 297: “‘Reception’ is too blunt, too *passive* a term for the dynamics of resistance and appropriation, recognition and self-aggrandisement that make up this drama of cultural identity.”

reception studies to the extent that it can account for the way in which recipients conceive of ancient material as enduring, authoritative or paradigmatic. This perspective makes it possible to work towards a reappraisal of the notion of ‘classical tradition’, as it may come to epitomize the way in which certain people understand their temporality, their indebtedness to the classical past and how they engage with history.

To conclude, what ‘classical reception studies’ and ‘the classical tradition’ have in common is a sort of *memory call*: they make us each in their own way aware of how people feel responsible (or not) for what has been, for what they do with it and for how it is defining them. How this will evolve in a globalizing world with a diminishing knowledge of the classical archives but with a growing standardisation of (mostly Western) cultural products is a concern that not only affects classicists but may raise the interest of all of us receiving the classical tradition in one way or another. Classical reception studies could become a fertile common ground – at least for those involved in the humanities – to start studying, understanding and perhaps also reconceptualizing how the ancient world and its heritage do or do not live on.

### About the Author

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After completing his dissertation entitled ‘Roland Barthes and the Greek Desire: Tragedy, Philosophy, Writing’ (University of Leuven, Belgium, 2008) De Pourcq joined the departments of Classics and Cultural Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen, where he became a postdoctoral researcher for the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (N.W.O.). His research explores the various receptions of the ancient Greek and Roman past in mainly twentieth-century and contemporary theory, theatre, film and literature.