

Classics in the Modern World – a Democratic Turn? An International Research Collaboration

The Reception of Classical Texts Research Project at the Open University, UK is developing an international collaborative research initiative to investigate the notion of a ‘Democratic Turn’ in Classical receptions practice and research. A research conference will be held on 18-20th June 2010 at the Open University, Milton Keynes, UK. The aims will be to map and evaluate the conceptual parameters of a ‘Democratic Turn’, to analyse the critical practices of classical reception scholarship, to explore classical receptions in creative work (film, literature, theatre) and to assess the relationship between theory, practice and the wider world. We hope the discussions will lead to a more informed evaluation of the role of classics and classical receptions in the wider field of cultural change.

Since our international collaborators are from many continents we have approached the project in three stages. First of all we have invited expressions of interest and contribution of ideas from individual and group research projects. There has been a very strong response and a number of seminar and colloquia organisers have already contacted us to discuss how their work might feed into the conference (further enquiries are welcome; please e mail c.a.gillespie@open.ac.uk to get on the mailing list if you have not already done so).

Second, there will be an e mail seminar from October-December 2009 to take the discussion to the next stage. **Those who are interested in participating in Panels at the 2010 conference, acting as discussants and helping to prepare the intellectual ground in general are asked to send brief proposals to Carol Gillespie by September 10th 2009.** These proposals (maximum 1,000 words) should state the specific theme for your Panel, identify specific case studies and/or research questions that it will address and comment on their implications for the theme of the conference. These will be circulated on our e mail list and responses, suggestions and constructive criticisms will be invited and circulated. We hope that this will help participants to think through the implications of their own work and its relationship to the themes of the conference and also to identify possible Panel participants and other useful contacts outside their own institutions/national groups. We will then ask for formal proposals for Panels (closing date 31 December 2009). The organising committee will then finalise the conference programme and circulate it by the end of January 2010. This will allow plenty of time for Panel participants and discussants to liaise before presenting their papers.

Our aim is to ensure that the conference is more than the sum of its parts. We would like it to support the role of individual and group research as providers of a rigorous basis for promoting the discussion of over-arching questions. All sessions will be plenary and plenty of time for discussion will be built into the programme. The working language will be English. We expect that the conference itself will lead to a substantial publication and also hope that it will stimulate future collaborations. Researchers will be welcome to bring their research students and there will be a workshop for these students before the full conference begins, plus a work in progress session for them to make poster presentations on the final day.

Background to the idea of a ‘Democratic Turn’:

Classical texts, material culture and ideas seem in the last thirty or forty years to have become more widely and radically used and re-used among many groups and communities, irrespective of whether or not they have had a classical education of any kind. Furthermore, such rewritings and re-imaginings of classical material have frequently been used as part of the advocacy of liberation and emancipation or in social and political critique. Discussions about the relationship

between classical languages and the vernacular or the demotic continue, as do debates about whether ancient historiography and philosophy provide a usable basis for decision making today. Such contested appropriations are not new and there is a long history of examples in which classical referents have been used by all sides in struggles for power and in aesthetic debate.

The word 'Turn' (which has also been applied to cultural studies, translation studies or performance) usually signals a redressing of balances, a pendulum swinging away from perspectives that were thought to be too dominant. So a 'Democratic Turn' might be seen as turning the focus away from the association of classical texts and the study of antiquity with elite groups with the necessary education, wealth and leisure. However, the concept of 'Turn' can also indicate more persistent changes in perceptions of how texts are constituted and how meaning might be ascribed and transmitted. A 'Turn' might even imply lasting transformations of various kinds.

Then there are some important caveats. The word 'Democratic' carries contested meanings and resonances. Pluralism and diversity are not necessarily accompanied by democracy. Liberation movements are not necessarily 'democratic' either in intention or effect. 'Popular' or 'mass' cultural forms may be manipulative rather than enabling. There may be aspects of classical texts, material culture and ideas (and the accretions that they attract on the way) that transmit ideas that are far from democratic (even in some cases repulsive). What is being transplanted covertly or being received unknowingly? Above all, how and by whom can such processes be explained? What is involved in becoming a reflective reader, viewer, spectator or practitioner? Does a 'Democratic Turn' emphasise becoming a member of a deliberative community rather than a consumer or an adherent of a particular ideology?

The 2010 conference will provide a forum for vigorous review and debate of these and other knotty questions.

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