

EDITORIAL

In the *Birth of tragedy*, Section 15, Nietzsche gives a remarkable description of the attitude of other nations towards the ancient Greeks: "Nearly every age and stage of culture has at some time or other sought with profound irritation to free itself from the Greeks, because in their presence everything one has achieved, though apparently quite original and sincerely admired, suddenly seemed to lose life and color and shriveled into a poor copy, even a caricature. And so time after time cordial anger erupts against this presumptuous little people that made bold for all time to designate everything not native as 'barbaric'. Who are they, one asks, who, though they display only an ephemeral historical splendor, ridiculously restricted institutions, a dubious excellence in their mores, and are marked by ugly vices, yet lay claim to that dignity and pre-eminence among peoples which characterize genius among the masses? Unfortunately one was not lucky enough to find the cup of hemlock with which one could simply dispose of such a character; for all the poison that envy, calumny and rancor created did not suffice to destroy that self-sufficient splendor" (translation by W. Kaufmann).

Although the Greeks are somewhat extravagantly praised, this passage suggests a profound truth, namely that adverse criticism of the Classics may also be interpreted as a form of praise. If the critics did not regard the Classics as influential, they would not have taken the trouble to attack them. The history of the classical tradition provides some interesting examples. From time to time vehement attacks were made on the Classics but the effects of these attacks were not always negative. Frequently the critics drew attention to one-sided or distorted interpretations of the classical heritage and thus helped to restore the balance. I mention only a few episodes.

The 17th century is usually considered the heyday of classicism, a period in which the literature of the Greeks and Romans was regarded as the model for all writers. But this picture is not quite correct. There was a very articulate group of writers who championed their own literature against the Classics. Towards the end of the century a lively debate about the relative merits of ancient and modern literature, generally known as "the battle of the books", took place. In this battle, according to G. Highet, the "moderns" gained a marked advantage. In the 18th century classicism nevertheless maintained its position of authority, but in the last quarter of the century the Romantic writers and critics rebelled against the restrictive rules derived from classical literature and demanded more freedom. In reality, however, they showed a more profound appreciation of the Classics than their predecessors; they only protested against the narrow-minded interpretation of classicistic critics.

The special case of dramatic criticism is very illuminating. In the 17th century Aristotle's *Poetics* was regarded as the Bible of dramatic theory, and all plays were judged according to the rules derived from it. This caused great difficulties for some dramatists, e.g. for Pierre Corneille whose critical writing on drama is "one long duel with Aristotle", as one critic described it. Today Aristotle is no longer regarded as authoritative but he remains influential. Even in the 20th century most books on dramatic theory begin with a discussion of Aristotle's views. As F.L. Lucas puts it: "We do not go back to Aristotle so much for the right answers as for the right questions". When Brecht developed a new theory of drama, he still thought it necessary to refute Aristotle and called his work "eine nicht-aristotelische Dramatik". And Charles Marowitz, in the introduction to his adaptation of *Hamlet*, criticizes modern theatre for being "in the marble clutches of Aristotle".

Viewed from this perspective, the recent "Afrocentric" criticism of the classical tradition can be seen in a more positive light. It has drawn attention to exaggerated claims made for the originality of Greek thinkers, but it also proves that in the 20th century the classical tradition is still a force to be reckoned with.

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