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Research Note: Classical Connections

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It has become a truism to describe Classics and its constituent fields of research and study as being ‘on the move’. The study of Greek and Roman antiquity including texts, visual sources and ideas is of global interest and interacts not only with cognate disciplines (such as literature, philosophy, history, art and architecture, translation studies and cultural studies) but also with the study of other ancient and modern classical traditions and civilisations, including (but not confined to) those of the Ancient Near -East, Africa China, India and Australasia.

The ‘move’ is not only spatial. These developments also have implications for concepts, taxonomies, methods of analysis and the theoretical frameworks used by scholars. Cultural and literary studies in general – including all aspects of classical studies - have been marked by a series of ‘turns’, shifts in the focus of enquiry and in the methods and critical frameworks used. Recent ‘turns’ include the translation turn, the cultural turn, the performative turn, the democratic turn, the postcolonial turn, the global turn and the existential turn (see further Hardwick 2025, 13-14). Moreover, students, creative practitioners and the wider public (such as visitors to museums, galleries, theatres and cinemas) have a variety of starting points from which they encounter Greek and Roman material. The public imagination (and some participants in non-classical disciplines) may have a ‘low intensity’ appreciation of Greek and Roman figures and myths – for example, recognising the names of Achilles, Zeus, Socrates, Pericles, and possibly of

Homer and Virgil, but without any detailed knowledge of texts and contexts or even appreciation of the differences between myth and history. On the negative side, this ‘low intensity’ cultural base may be hospitable to misleading and simplistic stereotypes but more positively it also has the potential to develop into a ‘high intensity’ awareness at times of increased exposure to the agency of Greek and Roman material. This is especially the case at times of intellectual and aesthetic curiosity and cultural and/or political crisis (Hardwick 2025, 15-16; Hardwick, Harrison and Vandiver 2024a, 25-26). Similar patterns of increasing awareness and critical interest may occur in the field of scholarship because of the developments in cross-disciplinary work, world literature, comparative literature, and in ‘critical’ studies of various kinds (including critical classical studies and critical race studies, see further Blouin and Akrigg 2025 with extensive bibliography)).

These trends have led to growing realisation that that traditional forms of Commentary created and used by scholars may no longer on their own be adequate to meet intellectual and practical requirements (Kraus and Stray 2016). Research into the history of scholarship has demonstrated not only that Commentaries are not neutral in terms of ideology and in witting and unwitting cultural bias (Stray 2018), but also that the material traditionally included in Commentaries may need to be augmented for scholars who are moving across disciplines and intellectual traditions, as well as for students and more general readers. In many cases Commentary users may have had prior classical encounters via mediating texts or arts forms. They may or may not have had substantial training in Greek and Latin and their modern languages of daily use may vary.

Recent examples of different kinds of Commentary include: ancient language with translation on facing page, such as the series published by Aris and Phillips (eg Hall 1996); the ancient text without translation but with key aspects discussed and translated in the Notes (eg Raeburn and Thomas 2011); modern language translation only, but the ancient text referenced in the Notes (eg J Harrison 1999); modern language translation with translator’s note indicating relationship both to the ancient text and to the literature of the modern language, with comment on the formal aspects of the ancient language and line references to both ancient and modern (Roberts 2012, xxxi-xxxiii); translation and theatrical performance commentary (Ewans 2022).

Increasingly, translators include comments on their approach to translation. For example, Emily Wilson's Translator's Note to her translations of Homer includes analysis of the ways in which choice of words in the receiving language can project back into the ancient text attitudes and assumptions that are alien to it and which inscribe the ancient text as an authentication of later values and perspectives (Wilson, 2017, 83-93).

The commentaries mentioned above respond to changes in the ways in which readers and spectators access Greek and Roman texts as well as to hermeneutic considerations.. Some of them cater in particular for users who do not have extensive knowledge of the ancient languages or of the languages of modern scholarship and/or are unfamiliar with the nuances of analysing translations. Key issues include the balance between the language of the ancient texts and that of the translator's own background, including his or her perceptions of the requirements of the target readers. All of the commentaries referenced above focus primarily on the ancient texts themselves, although with some acknowledgment of the role of subsequent literature, historiography, philosophy and lived experience in shaping how the ancient texts are read and interpreted. Hardwick 2023 discusses the roles and strategies of translators with different aims and approaches – the scholar translator, the poet translator, the dramaturg translator- and also comments on the interaction of scholarship and creativity in shaping the associated commentaries.

A further imperative has emerged from this combination of shifts in perspectives and usage. It is necessary to consider the specific kinds of Commentary which might be developed for scholars, students and general readers of NEW texts- texts that have been created through direct or indirect responses to and interactions with the ancient material. Reception Commentaries need to accord equal status to ancient and reception texts and to focus on HOW connections have been created by writers (who are also readers) as well as by scholars (who in their turn are also readers and writers). Such Commentaries also need to reflect and elucidate how readers might read 'backwards and forwards' in responding to and interpreting both ancient and modern in the light of each other.

That multi-faceted process explicitly and implicitly recognises that 'classical connections' may be made and activated in different ways (and in different sequences). Josephine Balmer put it succinctly when she commented on the agency of poetry in communicating connections without collapsing difference: Of course, Gallipoli is not

Tomis or vice versa. But between these two poles poetry can make its own connections' (Balmer 2009: xiv). Once literary receptions are perceived as agents in the construction of connections between ante-texts and subsequent readers (and, in turn, writers), analytic lenses are required that may go beyond direct allusion and intertextuality and be open to other types of connection.

Commentaries that go 'beyond intertextuality' do not underplay intertextuality (and its associated philology) as a reading and research framework. On the contrary they reinscribe its importance alongside and in interaction with other conceptual tools. For example, in a recently published study Stephen Hinds discussed the porousness of allusion, translation, reception and creativity through the concept of transliterality, demonstrating that attention to linguistic detail and broad interpretative parameters are mutually enhancing. He describes 'negotiation...at points of heuristic intersection between allusion, translation, and character by character transliteration'. Hinds' analysis refers to Greek/Latin interaction and the term he uses is 'cross-linguistic turn' which can equally well be adopted to include analysing connections between how modern languages use ancient texts (Hinds 2026, 5-6).

Making Connections:

It is in response to these theoretical and practical contexts that the Oxford University Press Series *Oxford Classical Reception Commentaries* has been developed. This is a substantial project to create and publish digitally and in print new kinds of commentary on key works in literatures in English that draw on and rework Greek and Roman material. The OCRC commentator is *both* a reader of Greek and Roman texts and their receptions *and* a reader of texts written in English and their antecedents. Therefore the commentator has to be able to envisage any of these categories as starting points for analysis (see Hardwick, Harrison and Vandiver 2024a vii-viii. On the multiple challenges faced by authors of commentaries, see Heslin 2016 and, with special reference to mediation and digital media, Michelakis 2020).

The capacity of poets and readers to ‘make connections’ provided the raw material for the commentaries on the poems included in the first OCRC publication *Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen: Classical Connections* (Hardwick, Harrison and Vandiver 2024a (scholarly edition) and 2024b, which is a shorter version). The chosen poets all died in the First World War and have since been regarded as ‘war poets’. However, their education, social class and access to classical material and the focus of their war poetry varied considerably, as did their formal techniques. The types of connection made by the different poets covered a range and intensity that required a ‘stretched’ taxonomy in order to analyse them.

A summary of the taxonomy developed in order to indicate the range of possible ‘connections’ with Greek and Latin texts in the poems of Brooke, Sorley, Rosenberg and Owen is given below (for more detailed discussion see Hardwick, Harrison and Vandiver 2024a: 12-18 and 2024b: 7-13) Different forms of agency come into play – some connections might be ‘seeded’ by the ancient author; some noticed and developed by subsequent writers; some brought or activated by readers of either or both texts. Not all categories of connection will be equally applicable to all authors – the differences and the reasons for these are illuminating and sometimes pose questions about how far an inclusive definition of ‘classical’ can be extended.

Allusion and Intertextuality:

Allusion

Historically, many classicists have adopted an approach to reading receptions of classical texts that is based on analysing allusions and their role in the relationships between different poems (ancient and modern). This approach usually privileges the ancient author and implies that the formal and lexical aspects of a poem ‘carry’ a meaning that was, in some sense intended, although scholars such as Stephen Hinds have emphasized that this type of analysis should not close down possibilities of pluralities of meaning (Hinds, 1998, ch. 2). Allusion-based approaches also privilege the skills, education and knowledge of the reader, who is expected to ‘pick up’ the allusions, whether they are openly signalled or whether they are subtly placed beneath the surface (or both).

Any allusion-based analysis has to operate with a number of possible relationships: direct allusion; allusion mediated through other texts and traditions (in the source language; in the language of the reception text; in other languages; through quotation

in the original language or in translation); indirect allusions, which can be seen as indirect either because they have travelled through multiple mediations and/or because they hang on a cultural emblem, rather than a specific literary text and therefore need to be recontextualised (for example, Achilles as hero; Dido as deserted lover; Aeneas as the founder of a new nation).

Intertextuality: Allusion that goes beyond the simple ‘name-dropping’ of a cultural figure or emblem is usually referred to as intertextuality, that is moving across and between texts. Intertextuality can also involve moving between ancient texts, mediating texts and texts that are less obviously classically orientated but which are part of the literary tradition of the new writer.

Reader-response theory, for its part, has extended the agency of the reader in making connections. Readers may bring to the poem echoes and interpretations that are grounded in other texts familiar to the reader but not necessarily known to the original writer (including texts which may have been produced later). For example, twenty-first century classicists would find it impossible to teach Horace *Odes* 3.2 without the intervention of Wilfred Owen’s poem First World War poem ‘Dulce et decorum est’.

Intratextuality refers to connections made by the poet either within a poem or between it and other texts in the writer’s oeuvre. Intratextuality often operates alongside intertextuality, enhancing the writer’s self-referentiality and highlighting *metalepsis*.

Those predominantly text-based connections imply a fairly detailed knowledge of the ancient texts by subsequent writers and their readers. The scholarship of classical receptions in public culture and across disciplines has had to enlarge this taxonomy. Here are some possibilities:

Affinities. Affinity contributes to connection. The writer helps readers to feel empathy for the text and for its antecedents, as well as for other readers, possibly through the use of familiar vernacular terms or situations. For example, Isaac Rosenberg discussed in his letters the affinity between Aeschylus and himself because as front-line soldiers both would have encountered lice (referred to by the Herald in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*).

Associations – the writer can build associative triggers into a poem to create for the reader a means of bridging ancient and modern; equally the reader can bring associations that are activated by contemporary language and situations. Sometimes associations imply parallel situations that cross times and places, such as war, death, love, loss. These provide motifs or tropes that recur in many literatures – for example the association between death in battle and the hanging motif of the poppy which has resonances in ancient and modern contexts and places. Homer's simile on the death of Gorgythion in *Iliad* 8 likens the young warrior's drooping head to that of a garden poppy bending under the weight of its own splendour and under the impact of rain. Homer's image was appropriated by later poets and resonated with the poppies in the fields of Flanders in the First World War that were in their turn assimilated into the iconography of Remembrance. Sometimes apparently disparate experiences can be brought into association by a metaphor, simile or key word that triggers an ongoing sequence of associations.

Associations of place are sometimes linked with the development of a sense of affinity. This is an important aspect of First World War poetry, especially by writers immersed in Greek literature. It is evident in the links drawn by soldiers voyaging to Gallipoli with places in the Homeric poems and their location in the Greek islands and on the Trojan plain. Modern readers may respond readily to such associations because of their own travel experiences.

Glancing- this is a term used to point to a brief encounter in which neither text is absorbed into the other, but they touch briefly, perhaps through a shared word or experience, and then go their separate ways, although readers' understanding of both may be affected. In creative terms, one analogy is with the tangent to a triangle – its velocity takes it away from the triangle but they nevertheless touch. Another analogy with glancing is with a sideways look that notices briefly but quickly resumes its main focus. In poetic terms, 'glancing' can imply an apparently off -the cuff- reference that also involves a subtle steer to the reader or listener to notice something that might otherwise have passed them by. So 'glancing' actually has effects on the poem, on the reader and even on the onward trajectory of the apparently extraneous partner which is deflected in the encounter. Alice Oswald's May Lecture 'Sidelong Glances' in her Oxford Professor of Poetry Series (27 May 2021) discussed how literature has 'a back door'. She identified aural and orality (often exemplified by subaltern groups such

as women and ethnically marginalised people), as rich sources of unexpected ways into a poem. Oswald's 'glancing' is a lateral and associative movement, allowing poetry to be made from a patchwork of remarks and voices, rather than relying on poetry being a link in a great chain of literary development. She used that technique in her 2011 work *Memorial* aimed to translate the atmosphere of the *Iliad* to give status to those killed who were not accorded an *aristeia* in Homer.

Ghosting – this term is used to point to traces of an ancient text that survive into the subsequent reception but lie dormant, lurking beneath the surface and the readers' understanding until they rise, perhaps only to recede again. More formally, many receptions of Greek and Roman poetry use literary devices such as *katabasis* (descent to the underworld) to activate these traces, both materially and metaphorically. Wilfred Owen's First World War poem 'Strange Meeting' is an example of both aspects, as in different ways is Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990).

Improvising and riffing – these are critical terms borrowed from music. They point to how a modern writer may take a theme or passage from an ancient author and work with it, exploring its creative possibilities and variations before returning to the base theme.

Trace is a critical term used in two senses, as a verb and as a noun. As a verb it denotes ways in which a critic investigates and maps how a writer works and how connections are made. As a noun it denotes how the critic, or a new writer, or a new reader, identifies 'traces' of other texts and of ways of looking that persist into the new work. These residual elements may seem disconnected but also provide raw material for making new connections and questioning assumed ones.

Metalepsis – *metalepsis* has been deployed as a concept in modern narratological scholarship to indicate how writers signal their own presence in the text and even directly highlight their intervention as narrators. Metalepsis is also a useful lens for examining the presence and direct interpretative agency of the author in classical receptions of poetry that are not confined to extended narrative. Sometimes the author appears in person, for instance Isaac Rosenberg in 'Break of Day in the Trenches'

implants himself and his perspective into the scene. However, *metalepsis* is not always indicated by the use of the first person 'I' - Christopher Logue in his *War Music* apostrophises, ie addresses the reader directly, as though he himself were a film director and in this way directs the reader's gaze and imagination (Logue 2015: 9). Once the reader is brought into a poem in this way they can themselves have a role in shaping how the story is perceived (see further Matzner and Trimble 202: ch.1)

Further publications in the *Oxford Classical Reception Commentaries* Series are in preparation, including print and digital editions of *Modern Irish Poets: Eavan Boland, Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley* (Alden, Cox, Hardwick and Harrison, forthcoming).

There will, naturally, be critical evaluation of the stretched taxonomies explored by the *OCRC* Series, and that debate should enhance future research and publications. Objections might include: claims that to focus on reception texts takes Commentaries outside the conventional parameters of Classics; arguments that too much emphasis might be placed on reader response at the expense of attention the integrity of the antetext (whether in terms of its formal qualities or even of alleged 'authorial intention'). Those arguments might be countered by pointing out that an 'antetext' for a particular writer or reader or scholar might not be the Greek or Roman source but a mediating text -for example, Dante in relation to Virgil or Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' in relation to Horace. Furthermore, the trajectories of reception are not always strictly chronological, nor is reading a text uni-directional. Put positively, the aim of a new-style Commentary could be to probe such 'thick' constellations of connections and to delve into the implications for Commentaries suggested by the 'deep classics' postulated in recent research (Butler 2016). Commentaries that employ stretched taxonomies also imply recognition of the positive aspects of 'working with' classical material and its receptions, translations and adaptations without losing sight of the fact that individual readers' sensibilities and perspectives may change and develop over time and context, as may wider socially-constructed knowledge bases that involve perceptions of a text and its images and figures. Importantly, the *OCRC* Series aims to exploit digital resources so that the ancient texts and paramaterial can be accessed online at the same time that scholars have in front of them the full text of the new work plus the *OCRC* commentary on the range of connections between the two.

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