

RIGOUR AND CREATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores some of the phases of intellectual history discussed in Constanze Güthenke's book *Feeling and Classical Philology* (Cambridge, 2020): the links between early nineteenth century liberalism and the scoping of ancient history as a field of scholarly investigation; the formative moment in which the classical world began to lose its paradigmatic role; the connections between this new approach and the establishment of a developing bourgeois culture; the crisis of historicism; and the interdisciplinary paradigm that Wilamowitz sought to assert.*

KEYWORDS

Altertumswissenschaft, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Gustav Droysen, August Böckh, historicism, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Stefan George

In her important book Constanze Güthenke convincingly shows “that the energies and structures of ‘feeling’ were an instrumental part of the self-perception of German classical scholarship and its programmatic thinking in the long nineteenth century” (p. 2). She rightly insists “that the use of a language and rhetoric of feeling and of desire had strong continuities in the hermeneutic and disciplinary profile of Classics” and “that German scholarship articulated its relationship with the classical, and especially the classical Greek past, as a quasi-personal relationship with a personified entity” (*ibid.*). It goes without saying that we should all be deeply grateful to Constanze for having written this illuminating book, which is an important contribution to the history of *Altertumswissenschaft* in Germany. At the same time, she offers “some suggestions for reframing the classical scenes of instruction and of understanding” (p. 20), which are most welcome. Following her acute observations, I would like to emphasize six points which may corroborate and differentiate her argument. It should be said in advance that I am primarily concerned with the historical setting of “German scholarship” in the 19th century.

(i) A bourgeois antiquity

In her first chapter, Constanze concentrates on the period around 1800. She demonstrates that intellectuals like Friedrich August Wolf, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Johann Georg Herder were of paramount importance for the genesis of *Altertumswissenschaft*.

Already in the middle of the 18th century Greek antiquity had been rediscovered. Greece became the foremost object of productive intellectual reception. At the same time, the elitist vision of classical culture associated with nobility began to end. The ancients were no longer timeless models but historicized paradigms for *Wissenschaft*, literature and the arts. The new German image of antiquity Constanze describes was characterised by a latent tension between classical aesthetics and enlightening historicism and shifted between the canonization of an idealized image of Greek antiquity, on the one hand, and recognition of its interconnection with other cultures, on the other. These categories can be found in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt. The aristocratic pupil of Christian Gottlob Heyne made it possible for the hitherto aristocratic veneration of the classics to become a field of research with a sound epistemological basis, and enabled the academic study of antiquity to ascend to a common leading discipline, which shaped lastingly the values and the curriculum of the class we call the bourgeoisie (*Bürgertum*). One could argue that in early 19th-century Germany antiquity as a historiographical construct and an idealized timeless projection contributed considerably to the cultural homogenization of the bourgeoisie and the constitution of a middle-class mentality.

Following Herder, Humboldt developed the term “individuality” in his studies on the ancient world. From the French Revolution he deduced that in certain historical situations everything depends on individual abilities. The politician who seeks to change the world for the better has to create conditions that allow these abilities to develop freely. The historian, however, has to recognize and portray the individual abilities in their particular specific manifestation in the past epoch. The historical search for individuality has to be directed towards generality, which manifests itself in the actions of individual people, as well as in the language, nation and state. This understanding of individuality emancipated the individual, who now was no longer subordinate to a collective, but was understood in his exceptionality as a constituting part of generality. But at the same time, it was essential (to quote Constanze) “for the discursive codification of emotions and of closeness” (p. 19).

Every single person required individual rights and personal freedom, if he wanted to develop his talents and strive successfully for the appropriation of the world. Humboldt’s demand to raise the individual to be

independent, proactive and responsible for himself presupposed individual rights and personal freedom and was directed at the state, which was the only institution able to guarantee these rights and this freedom. Humboldt's image of antiquity served to construct and legitimize his idea of a modern state that guaranteed and promoted education, freedom, and individuality. The study of antiquity had therefore a contemporary, eminently political and cultural dimension. The ancient examples explained the necessity to connect, in the present, bourgeois involvement and patriotism with the ideal of individual autonomy. Only such a state could be so strong to allow its citizens personal and institutional freedom and end the rule of one person over another. Freedom, in Humboldt's words, is "the necessary condition without which even the most soulful duty is not able to produce salutary effects".¹ The concept of a politically active citizen and the model of a bourgeois society that shaped the 19th century discourse on liberalism, oriented themselves towards the ideal projection of political activity in the Greek city-states and the Roman Republic.

(ii) Historiography and the creative imagination of the historian

Constanze illustrates an epistemic development that historicized Greek antiquity and relativized its normative function. Over the course of the 19th century, the ideals of *Altertumswissenschaft* and education drifted apart. In later years, Humboldt for instance not only concentrated on researching the ancient world, but also pursued universal historical objectives, at first intending to confirm the uniqueness of the Greek national character by drawing comparisons, and later without any explicit reference to the exceptionality of European antiquity. In his late linguistic studies, he distanced himself from any cultural hierarchy that privileged European antiquity.

August Böckh and Johann Gustav Droysen continued resolutely on the path set out by Heyne, Wolf and Humboldt, at the end of which came the realization that the ancient world was only one epoch among others. The significance of their contribution, which initially made the Greeks its primary focus, cannot be underestimated when considering the development of a modern conception of history and its epistemic methodology. In a speech to the Berlin Academy held in 1821 and entitled "On the Task of the Historian" (*Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers*), Humboldt advocated a historiography which brought to an end the mere

¹ Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Ideen zu einem Versuch die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen", in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. i, Berlin 1903, p. 118.

enumeration of facts and stressed the powers of the mind and the imagination. These powers, he argued, were vital to successfully discovering the internal coherence of history and the laws of historical development. Humboldt addressed the ideas that structure history and make a fabric out of the material of facts. Ideas are, by their nature, “outside the circle of finitude”; and they prevail in and dominate world history “in all their parts”.² So it is the task of the historian, with his ability to imagine (*Ahndungsvermögen*) and his gift of deduction (*Verknüpfungsgabe*),³ to uncover the transcendent ideas as the driving forces of history and to describe their effect in the immanence. “The duty of the historian, in his ultimate, but simplest resolution, is to portray the striving of an idea to win existence in reality.”⁴ In the transition from enlightened historiography to historicism, Humboldt did not construct the unity of the past by portraying past events, but by describing ideas that the historian extracts from these events. The creative imagination of the historian was no longer stigmatised, but rather became the true condition of the possibility of historical discoveries.

The exclusive competence — and task — of historiography was to “enlighten the present about its future and therefore, about the historical moment to which it belongs and which it has to do justice to”.⁵ The citizen could, and had to, learn from antiquity how to exercise political and social responsibility. Historical reflection, which had its origin in Greek antiquity, thus became a central aspect of bourgeois culture. And it was part of the individualized formation of the self (*Selbstbildung*), which historically shaped the modes of expressing emotions and feelings.

(iii) A retrospective utopia

The study of ancient, especially Greek, history in 19th-century Germany established new understandings of education and *Wissenschaft*, but also of nation, state and society. Interpretations of the present and the past were closely interlinked. The present was not appraised on the grounds of antiquity. On the contrary, a utopian vision of the ancient past, constituted in the present, was projected back onto the past. Authors like Wolf, Schleiermacher, Schlegel and Humboldt, cited by Constanze, did

² Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers”, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. iv, Berlin 1905, p. 51–52.

³ *Ibid.* 37.

⁴ *Ibid.* 56.

⁵ Cf. Ulrich Muhlack, “Johann Gustav Droysen: Das Recht der Geschichte”, in: Sabine Freitag (ed.), *Die 48er*, Munich 1998, p. 263–276, at 276.

not propagate a timeless model that was to be imitated, but imagined an ideal place, the examination of which was meant to help overcome the *status quo*. And sometimes this examination was a very personal and emotional process.

The bourgeois conception of history, the rise of *Altertumswissenschaft*, and the establishment of a theory of historical hermeneutics aiding the creation of bourgeois identity had their origin in the study of antiquity. Greece (and to a lesser extent also Rome) was a pivotal point of reference and comparison for the definition of education, which was seminal to bourgeois society as a permanent process of self-perfection, for the description of the relationship between freedom and education, for the link between individual, society, and state, and finally for the discussion of the principles of social organisation and structure. In the end, the German idea of the cultural nation was developed through the dialogue with Greek antiquity.

(iv) Neohumanist education in the 19th century

Constanze questions the standard narrative that an increasingly professionalized and institutionalized “scientific philology” and the idealized Neohumanist notion of *Bildung* were drifting apart (cf. p. 125f.). She wants to show that philology in its self-descriptions still tried to keep those poles together, *especially* through maintaining a rhetoric of philological feeling (p. 19). Her argument is compelling, but I would still emphasize the hiatus between rhetoric and reality.

The image of the Greeks supported the productive comparison between modernity and classical antiquity. Wolf, Schleiermacher, Schlegel, Humboldt, Böckh and others advocated no unified and affirmative position regarding antiquity. Normativity and historicity characterised their vision of the past. Their evocations of antiquity were critical of society and of contemporary issues. The absolutist world was to be overcome for good and bourgeois social forms were to be realised. Education was the basis for a comprehensive renewal of state and society; the identity of modern man was based on education.

I have argued elsewhere that Humboldt’s ideal of antiquity constituted the foundation for the study of the Classics in the context of educational reforms that sustained 19th-century bourgeois culture.⁶ But the

⁶ Cf. Stefan Rebenich, “The Making of a Bourgeois Antiquity — Wilhelm von Humboldt and Greek History”, in: Alexandra Lianeri (ed.), *The Western Time of Ancient History: Historiographical Encounters with the Greek and Roman Past*, Cambridge 2011, p. 119–137.

emancipatory potential of Humboldt's image of antiquity quickly dissipated: it was feared that young people, by showing enthusiasm for Greek antiquity, could infect themselves with republican ideas. In addition, there was competition from research into Germanic culture and the Middle Ages, inspired by romanticism.

Neohumanist education not only offered an idea of freedom that was juxtaposed to the constraints of state and society; it also advocated taking refuge in a form of inwardness, which counteracted the bourgeois faith in progress, and intensified the dichotomy between culture and economy. Throughout the shaping of the German empire, an increasingly superficial concept of education came to be the basis of authoritarian institutions, which applied drill and routine to grammar schools. In the class society of the 19th century, the content of education no longer mattered. What was important was the use of specific educational methods that could be used as effective instruments of exclusion. In universities, classical education was triumphant and transformed Graeco-Roman antiquity into an absolute power — with a diminishing interest in the Middle East and a neglect of the history of early Christianity.

At the same time, the historicization of antiquity marked the end of the idealized vision of the ancients. Humboldt and his contemporaries never left any doubt as to their conviction that Greek culture is the basis of a humanist education. Such a normative conception of antiquity was alien to the methodically professionalised study of antiquity, whose modern realism destroyed the special position of the Greeks upon which the German bourgeois intellectual had come to rely. After the mid-19th century, individual scholars, mostly academic outsiders such as Friedrich Nietzsche, opposed the established forms of classical education. They criticized a *Wissenschaft* of antiquity that only amassed highly specialised knowledge and tried, alluding to Humboldt, to preserve European antiquity as a normative model that was intended to have an educational function.

(v) The crisis of historicism

The age of historicism brought about internal differentiation and specialization. Ancient history split from both universal history and philology. Archaeology was founded as an independent discipline. However, this development was not without opposition. Initially, Gottfried Hermann, Karl Lachmann, Immanuel Bekker and Friedrich Ritschl voiced their general criticism of the rather broad scope of classical philology as defined by Böckh (cf. chapter 4, p. 113–128). The conflict between the “philology of words” (*Wortphilologie*) and the “philology of objects”

(*Sachphilologie*) was ignited by a fundamental difference in their understanding of language. While “Wortphilologen” propagated the concept of a formal science focussing on linguistic aspects, “Sachphilologen” felt responsible for the “totality of facts” (*Totalität der Tatsachen*). The dispute about the *cognitio totius antiquitatis* would continue throughout the history of classical studies under the sign of historicism.

Efforts to develop an epistemology and a universal methodology died down after the 1840s. Classical scholars increasingly confined themselves to the highly specialized operations of source criticism and hermeneutic understanding. Formidable results were in fact achieved in this area. Amazing cooperative enterprises — *corpora, monumenta* and *thesauri* — made the legacy of the ancient word accessible and set the standard for other fields. An analytical empiricism proudly raised its head. Belief in progress and scientific optimism were the characteristic features of professionalized classical studies at universities and academies. The exemplary work of Theodor Mommsen institutionalized the philological method for historical studies. It followed his programmatic call, “to organize the archives of the past” (*die Archive der Vergangenheit zu ordnen*). Activity within the field of classical studies rose to an almost industrial scale and impressively confirmed the effectiveness of the historical-critical method. Heuristics and interpretation, however, were drifting apart, and the scholar became a labourer and carter (*Kärrner*). This function of the researcher was established in academic practice by Theodor Mommsen before Max Weber legitimized it in theory. The author of the *Römische Geschichte* (3 vols., Leipzig–Berlin, 1854–1856), which reflected the political experience of the 1848 Revolution, would later declare that the historian was an artist rather than a scholar. The rapid historicization of classical studies necessarily resulted in a departure from the earlier normative and aestheticizing perspective.

As in other disciplines, a sense of crisis also spread through the various fields of classical studies at the end of the 19th and early in the 20th centuries. Critical voices denounced a science that in their eyes only produced epigones and was in danger of fragmentation. Jacob Burckhardt’s and Friedrich Nietzsche’s influence, in conjunction with older concepts, led to discussions about the problem of the relativism of values and the correlation between science and life. Critics were severely questioning the legitimacy of a classical discipline that saw its purpose in positivist productivity, and whose self-declared scientific approach undermined the normative function of antiquity. Calls for comprehensive reconstruction and contemporary synthesis grew louder. Within classical studies itself, Hermann Usener outlined the new model of a comparative type of cultural studies that was to advance from historical facts to

insights of universal validity (cf. Constanze's remarks on Usener, p. 122–125), while Eduard Meyer presented ancient history as an integral part of universal history. In numerous publications, classical scholars sought to entrench antiquity as a relevant medium of education and to give clear guidance to a society shaken by political, social and cultural changes. And yet, scholarship was in fact barely affected by the 'crisis of historicism'. An abundance of dissertations in classical studies remained dedicated exclusively to source criticism. The scientific community continued to applaud hyperspecialized work on texts and monuments.

(vi) Plato, Wilamowitz and Stefan George's circle

Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (cf. chapter 6, p. 162–193) tried to preserve antiquity as an interdisciplinary ideal and, through the conception of overarching, all-encompassing *classical* studies, to overcome its fracturing into discrete disciplines.

Constanze stresses “structural similarities and continuities” between Wilamowitz and Stefan George and his circle (p. 178–179). The George-circle had also announced its opposition to relativism and pluralism of values.⁷ There was agreement with Nietzsche's view that the role of history was to serve life. In the crisis of historicism there was a campaign against philological pedantry and philosophical hair-splitting. Plato was required to polemicize against established academia and to call for a comprehensive reform of education. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff was the first to get caught in the critical cross-fire. The aim of the George-circle was to grasp the foreignness of the past, in contrast to the historicist position of Wilamowitz. This despite the fact that Wilamowitz too had attempted to overcome the neo-classicizing vision of the Greeks, and had repeatedly demanded that philology must seek the cultural inheritance of Greco-Roman antiquity as a whole, heathen as well as Christian: *cognitio totius antiquitatis*. There were also similarities in their approach to Plato: Wilamowitz argued for the authenticity of the famous seventh letter and defended it as a genuine document for Plato's life and works. Moreover, in his two-volume biography of Plato, which appeared in 1919, Wilamowitz celebrated the unequal nature of humans as well as an elitist model of the state. Arnaldo Momigliano has already observed that “[Wilamowitz's] Plato anticipates that of Stefan George's

⁷ Cf. Stefan Rebenich, “May a Ray from Hellas Shine upon Us’: Plato in the George-Circle”, in: Helen Roche and Kyriakos Demetriou (eds), *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, Leiden 2018, p. 178–204.

students [...] in being a *Führer*".⁸ But the George-circle's invective against Wilamowitz, which became a point of cultural dogma, obscures the influence which the Berlin Hellenist, whose writings received a great deal of attention, did in fact exert on the circle.

The fight between George and Wilamowitz about the "correct" vision of antiquity and Plato, fanned not least by the vanity of both parties, went back a long way. The young Wilamowitz had polemicized fiercely against Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, and later against George himself, in luscious satires which poked fun at his "banality of impotence" (*Mausegrau der Impotenz*).⁹ The poet's followers paid him back in the same coin. Wilamowitz's Plato monograph was called a "popular romance for old spinsters" (*Marlittbuch für alte Jungfern*) and "Plato for maids" (*Platon für Dienstmädchen*).¹⁰ "Wilamops" had failed to grasp the heroic element in Plato's thought, and had merely sought the modern world in the Athens of the 5th century BC.¹¹ In fact, the Protestant *Junker* considered every state to be based upon order; "the official of the Platonic state is an academically-trained soldier or a militarily-trained man of academia. Healthy is the state that is ruled by such officials."¹² In their attack on Wilamowitz, the George-acolytes distanced themselves not only from the historical methods of university philology, but also more generally from the Protestant establishment, which equated Athens and Prussia, and continued to dream of the splendour of the Attic Empire even during the crisis of the Weimar Republic.

The rebellion of the avant-garde in the 1920s shocked the self-appointed custodians of the old system to the core. An example is Hans Leisegang's shrill attack on the contemporary interpretation of Plato in the George-circle. He speaks of a throng of pretty sentences, of the gnostic violation of Plato, of inadequate knowledge of the language, and finally

⁸ "[I]l suo Platone anticipa quello degli allievi di Stefan George [...] nell'essere un Führer": A. Momigliano, "Premesse per una discussione su Wilamowitz" [1973], in: id., *Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*, vol. i, Rome 1980, p. 337–349, at p. 348.

⁹ Cf. Ulrich K. Goldschmidt, "Wilamowitz and the 'George-Kreis'. New Documents", in: W.M. Calder III et al. (eds), *Wilamowitz nach 50 Jahren*, Darmstadt 1985, p. 583–612, at p. 587–588 (cf. id., *Studies in Comparison*, New York 1989, p. 125–162).

¹⁰ Wolters, *Stefan George und die Blätter für die Kunst. Deutsche Geistesgeschichte ab 1890*, Berlin 1930, p. 487. E. Marlitt was the pseudonym of Eugenie John (1825–1887), author of popular novels for a largely female audience.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

¹² Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Platon*, vol. i: *Leben und Werke*, vol. ii: *Beilagen und Textkritik*, Berlin 1919 (1920²; vol. i: 1948⁴; vol. ii: 1962³), vol. i, p. 38–39.

complains of the “rigid seriousness”, the “hollow pathos” and the “arduously acquired aristocratic nature of George’s neo-Romantic disciples, who take themselves so immensely seriously, as if the rehabilitation of Western culture depended on them alone”. All this is incompatible with the “amicable cheerfulness of the born aristocrat” Plato.¹³ Others spoke of “orgies of irrationalism”,¹⁴ and Wilamowitz — who had already prevented Friedrich Gundolf from being called to a chair in Berlin in 1920 — failed the *Habilitation* of Kurt Hildebrandt, an ardent admirer of Stefan George, at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität eight years later.

The established philologists’ view of themselves as distinct, however, was just as unconvincing as the outsider role so cherished by the George-circle. In fact, it would be an error to suppose that such anathemas could have prevented the reception of the avant-garde interpretation of Plato in the *Altertumswissenschaften*. In the 1920s, the old Wilamowitz looked on helplessly as his best students defected to the opposing camp, as Paul Friedländer, Werner Jaeger, and Karl Reinhardt (to name only three) returned to the central elements of the George-circle’s Plato interpretation for their conception of modern research into antiquity. A revealing piece of evidence comes from Paul Friedländer himself, dating from 1921, which its first editor, William M. Calder III, aptly described as “The Credo of a New Generation”. It is a document of emancipation: “Had I not surrendered myself to you so strongly before, the separation would not be so painful”. Friedländer owed his liberation from his once so overpowering, now forcibly retired professor to Nietzsche, Jacob Burckhardt, Heinrich Wölfflin, and finally to Stefan George: Nietzsche had influenced Friedländer’s view of life from an early stage and increasingly as the years went by, and had particularly helped him shape his opinion on history; Burckhardt and Wölfflin, who placed entirely new demands on the comprehension of a work, and George, who in recent years had brought about “the greatest disruption and the most forceful redistribution of all powers”.¹⁵ Thus, in Friedländer’s Los Angeles office, a photo of George hung next to one of Wilamowitz.

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¹³ Hans Leisegang, *Die Platondeutung der Gegenwart*, Karlsruhe 1929, p. 153–154.

¹⁴ Richard Harder, “Review of Franz Josef Brecht. *Plato und der George-Kreis*, Leipzig, 1929”, in: *DLZ* 5, 1930, p. 972–982, at p. 975.

¹⁵ Cf. William M. Calder III and Bernhard Huß (eds), “*The Wilamowitz in Me*”. *100 Letters between Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Paul Friedländer (1904–1931)*, Los Angeles 1999, p. 143.