

COMPOSITION AS RECEPTION: AN ENGLISH VERSION OF CLASSICS

— CHRISTOPHER STRAY —

ABSTRACT

In eighteenth-century England, a long tradition of free composition in Latin gave way to translation of English texts into Latin or (especially) Greek. This new kind of ‘composition’ became popular in the reformed boarding (‘public’) schools and in the ancient universities; its social foundations lay in the new bourgeois groups thrown up by the industrial revolution, its cultural foundations in the rise of romantic Hellenism. The practice of this kind of composition became characteristic of the shared masculine world of the public schools, the universities, the London clubs and the Inns of Court. The varieties and development of this practice are surveyed, in the hope of encouraging further and more detailed analysis.

KEYWORDS

composition, reception, romantic Hellenism, Latin, Greek, disputations, translation, Oxford, Cambridge, public schools, metre, challenge, elites, industrial revolution, genre

This paper comes out of a project which can best be described as an attempt to construct a historical sociology of Classics.¹ This involves looking at Classics both as a cultural formation, a body of valued knowledge whose typical patterns of content and organisation vary over time, and as a social formation, occurring in specific social locations and taking on different organisational shapes in different historical contexts.² As a cultural formation, Classics draws on the symbolic potential of antiquity, which is realised by the action of social interests such as the concern to identify and legitimate the actions and

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was given at an Open University conference on the reception of classical texts, 3–4 January 1996. My thanks to the editors, James Clackson, Irene Peirano Garrison, and Chris Pelling for helpful comments.

² See C.A. Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities and Society in England 1830–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Stray, ‘The Glory and the Grandeur: John Clarke Stobart and the defence of high culture in a democratic age’, *History of Classical Scholarship* 1 (2019): 135–73; Stray, ‘The Politics of the Classical: language and authority in the nineteenth century’, *History of Classical Scholarship* 3 (2021): 267–94.

judgments made in the present. For example, in Victorian England, classical antiquity formed an important part of what has been called ‘the Victorian mirror of history’ — the use of the past, seen as a source of eternal value, to justify the present.³ Such practices were soon eroded by the distancing and relativising effects of historicism, but antiquity has continued to be used, though in different ways — from the classical invocations of Eliot and Pound to the postmodernist pick-and-mix of the late twentieth century. The social forms and location of Classics have also changed: most crucially, in the middle third of the century it became detached from the patterns of social solidarity, exclusion and hierarchy with which it had long been intimately connected. Its current curricular and institutional fragility coexists with a sense that antiquity is, once again though in new ways, good to think with.⁴

In this paper I want to look at an aspect of Victorian Classics, and to consider it both as an organised body of knowledge and as a social formation, entangled with processes of social solidarity and exclusion. My subject is the practice of composition: turning vernacular texts into Latin or Greek. Of less immediate concern, though related, is the translation of classical texts into the vernacular. And in any case the translation which interests me is not the grand literary enterprise which involves translating complete classical texts into English — Dryden’s Virgil, Pope’s Homer, Jowett’s Plato, for example. The many attempts to translate Horace in the nineteenth century come nearer my subject. In his 1957 Romanes lecture *On English Translation*, Ronald Knox discussed the accomplished translators:

a scholar here, a poet there, who thinks it is time he produced the absolutely perfect rendering of *Persicos odi* [...]. He works neither for fame not for reward; he has simply taken a bet with himself, as it were, that the thing can be done.⁵

The nineteenth-century history of Horatian translation in England is one of fits and starts, each well-received published translation prompting others to try their own hand.⁶ The Latin offered a challenge in itself, but

³ A.D. Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁴ The Postclassicisms Collective, *Postclassicisms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

⁵ R.A. Knox, *On English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

⁶ E.S. Leedham-Green, ‘The Cult of the Horatian Ode in the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Some Translations and Their Background’, DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1970.

so did other men's attempts to meet it. By the time of Knox's lecture, that community of classically educated men (for it was overwhelmingly male) no longer existed. What I want to do here is to outline briefly the historical location of these practices, their pedagogic backgrounds, and their social contexts. Then I will look at a few of the major published collections, and end by trying to summarise what the practice was all about.

The compositional tradition as a dominant feature of classical education and scholarship seems largely peculiar to England, though it has also been found in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. When Gilbert Murray first wrote to Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in 1894, he wrote in Greek, to show that he was a serious scholar. Wilamowitz replied in the same language, but asked that he might in future be allowed to revert to German.⁷ It would never have occurred to him to assert his standing by writing in Greek. It was in England alone that prowess in composition was so highly regarded — and Murray's compositional skills as an undergraduate played a large part in his appointment to the Regius Chair of Greek at Glasgow at the age of 23.⁸

Why England? There had of course been centuries of composition in Latin, less in Greek, here as in other countries. But it had been original composition, the making of verses by men, mostly, who were soaked in Latin and could often converse in it: a skill nurtured by the tradition of oral disputation in Oxford and Cambridge.⁹ This was becoming less common by the later seventeenth century, and in the following century the expansion of a polite, commercial, industrialising society brought

⁷ Wilamowitz to Murray, 12 Oct. 1894; Bodleian Library, Oxford, Murray papers, 3.216.

⁸ The Scottish university system, dominated by non-residential urban institutions attended by 'lads o'parts' (St Andrews being the exception), could to a degree be seen as a *pays de mission*. We are dealing here with what has been called 'internal colonialism', in which Oxbridge scholars were exported to Scottish classical chairs, as with Richard Jebb of Cambridge (1875–89) and Gilbert Murray of Oxford (1889–1908) at Glasgow.

⁹ This was weakened in Cambridge by the growth of mathematical examinations from the early eighteenth century, and then by the introduction of analytical (algebraic) mathematics in the early nineteenth. The oral disputations for the BA degree were abruptly terminated by the examiners in 1839. See J. Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment: Science, Religion and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); P.C. Enros, 'The Analytical Society (1812–1813): precursor to the renewal of Cambridge mathematics', *Historia Mathematica* 10 (1983): 24–47; Stray, 'From oral to written examination: Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin 1700–1914', *History of Universities* 20.2 (2003): 76–130; Stray, 'The early lives of Charles Babbage', in L.M. Verburgt and C.A. Stray, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Babbage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2025).

with it demands for more practical accomplishments — English, arithmetic, modern languages. But it is in the late eighteenth century that the practice of composition based on English originals seems to have taken off, to flourish through the following century.¹⁰ I suggest that this apparently useless exercise was in fact very useful: it demonstrated that its practitioners were gentlemen, at a time when traditional status markers derived from a rural-based social order were disintegrating. Its utility lay precisely in its inutility. The new society of bourgeois individuals emerged at much the same time as romanticism and Hellenism, and the timing is not coincidental. The freer, even wilder expanses of Greek language and literature represented a high-risk strategy for making sense of the world, at a time when the Latin-centred rhetorical theme-making of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was fading fast. The new social groups which emerged in the wake of the industrial revolution sent their sons to the decaying provincial grammar schools which in the late eighteenth century began to be reconstituted as boarding schools with a national catchment — hence the title ‘public [i.e. non-local] schools’. It was in the leaders of this sector, Rugby and Shrewsbury, that we find composition in Greek appearing. Walter Savage Landor in fact claimed that in the 1780s he and his peers at Rugby were the first schoolboys in England to have written in Greek.¹¹

The situation in Germany was very different: in the powerhouse of European classical scholarship, composition was hardly practised. For much of the first half of the nineteenth century, English scholars complained that they lagged behind their German counterparts. But though this led to complaints at the dominance of composition, most English classicists saw the practice as an aid to understanding Latin and Greek. Especially in the Cambridge tradition of ‘pure scholarship’, where minute linguistic accuracy was worshipped, sensitivity to the style of ancient authors was seen as intimately allied to the ability to compose in those styles. A contributor to a debate on verse composition in 1866 said of Benjamin Kennedy’s version of Tennyson’s ‘Flow down, cold rivulet’ that it was ‘the perfection of scholarship’.¹² The English original was Tennyson’s ‘A farewell’, which begins ‘Flow down, cold rivulet, to the sea,/ Thy tribute-wave deliver’. The poem was printed, with Kennedy’s

¹⁰ Stray, *Classics Transformed*, 68–74.

¹¹ S. Butler, *Life and Letters of Samuel Butler, 1790–1840* (London: John Murray, 1896), 1.10.

¹² The contributor was ‘C.W.G.’ [Charles Woide Goodhart]: see C.A. Stray, *Grinders and Grammars; A Victorian Controversy* (Reading: The Textbook Colloquium, 1995), 34–5.

translation, in the Shrewsbury anthology *Sabrinae corolla*.¹³ The influence of examinations also needs to be taken into account. The new age of bourgeois individualism, of self-made men rather than those who inherited positions, was also the age of examinations, which acted as a guarantor of quality much as pedigree had done with the nobility and gentry. As increasingly subtle systems of grading and marking were developed, it may be that such exercises as composition and translation were seen as peculiarly suitable for such testing, since they could be assessed by the equivalences of vocabulary and of syntactical and metrical units in a way that English essays and arguments could not.

In the public schools, boys were trained to write verses from an early age. The centrality of the practice is reflected in form names at some schools, as at Eton, where ‘Nonsense’ was followed by ‘Sense’. In the former, metrically correct lines were written which did not have to make any sense; in the following year, ‘full sense’ was added. This was for boys in their early teens, who would have spent already a year or two learning very little except their Latin grammar. But this itself was done from a book many of whose examples were in verse. Many such form names were abolished in the 1850s and 60s, but the practices continued, though not in such an all-encompassing way, until very late in the nineteenth century. At Eton a boy would be expected to show up verses to his tutor once a week. Most pupils of course struggled to assemble a patchwork of lines, with the help of a *gradus* which listed words suitable for different metrical values.¹⁴ Arthur Woollgar Verrall, Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge, acted for some years as an examiner for Eton scholarships, and he is on record as telling a friend that he always knew he would find the word *susurrus* used to fill in a metrical gap in Etonian compositions. Verrall commented at an Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board meeting, ‘did you ever see a copy of Eton verses without *susurrus*?’ Sure enough, he soon found the English ‘And universal silence reigned

¹³ In full, *Sabrinae corolla in hortulis regiae scholae Salopiensis contexuerunt tres viri floribus legendis* (London: G. Bell, 1850). This celebrated volume, which went into four editions (the last in 1890), was an anthology of verse compositions by former pupils at Shrewsbury School. In the second edition of 1859, the texts are on pp. 224–5; Kennedy’s version begins, ‘Rivule, ad pontum flue frigidaeque / Dulce vectigal dare perge lymphae’.

¹⁴ John Carey’s *Gradus ad Parnassum*, one of several books of that title, first published in 1824, was still in print in 1914. Another compositional aid was the ‘terminal dictionary’, which listed words in order of endings. Two examples were *Louisa’s Terminal Latin Dictionary* (1875) and *Louisa’s Terminal Greek Dictionary* (1878), written by ‘Mrs Grosvenor’ (presumably a pseudonym) and published in London by Simpkin Marshall. Both books were in use at Eton.

alone' translated as 'nullusque susurrus'.¹⁵ Some pupils would seek the help of their seniors, or of their more gifted peers. The young Richard Jebb's gift for composition was discovered very early in his Charterhouse career, when other boys would queue up to have their verses written by him.¹⁶ Occasionally a gifted teacher and apt pupils produced genuine achievement — one thinks of William Johnson (Cory) and his *Iophon*, in which real poetical gifts are expressed in a textbook of verse composition.¹⁷ But for the majority, it was no more than a burdensome routine.

At the universities, however, such skills were highly valued, as we have already seen in the case of Gilbert Murray. There were prestigious prizes to be won, as with the Ireland and Craven scholarships at Oxford and the Chancellor's Medal and Porson Prize at Cambridge; the winners recited their poems in public and the texts were printed.¹⁸ Some of the composers who won such honours were more at home in Latin and Greek than in English — for instance Charles Wordsworth, nephew of the poet William Wordsworth, of whom it was said that his Greek verses were remarkable, his English poems puerile. (The same was said later of Walter Headlam's verse.) Such men were idolised by their contemporaries and became the culture heroes of their generation. In characteristic Victorian fashion, they signed their compositions with initials, and became famous as TSE, RCJ, RS or K (Thomas Evans, Richard Jebb, Richard Shilleto, Benjamin Kennedy). This modified reticence is significant — it told the cognoscenti, as anonymity would not have done, who had written a particular piece. To share in the experience of assessing the composer's skill was to deploy interpretative skills acquired during a long drawn out process of education which writer and reader had in common, and in so doing to renew a relationship to both one's knowledge and one's peers.

At times, the integrative function of composition as a shared cultural form was manifested more explicitly. Where classically educated gentlemen gathered together, their shared knowledge of classical literature was often drawn on for play. One game was to cap quotations, and here Horace was a favourite source. In 1858, two Cambridge undergraduates,

¹⁵ A.W. Verrall, *Collected Literary Essays, Classical and Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), xcvi. The Board was established in 1873.

¹⁶ G.S. Davies, *Charterhouse in London* (London: John Murray, 1921), 285.

¹⁷ [W. Johnson], *Iophon: An Introduction to the Art of Writing Greek Iambic Verses, by the Writer of 'Nuces' and 'Lucretilis'* (London: Rivingtons, 1873).

¹⁸ In some cases, printed texts were collected, as in *Translations Which Have Obtained the Porson Prize in the University of Cambridge from the Year 1817. Third Edition, Continued to 1871* (Cambridge: E. Johnson, 1871).

Edward Bowen and his friend Henry Sidgwick, went on a walking tour of South Wales. At one point

something suggested a quotation from Horace, and that another, till we fell to an eager competition as to who could begin some stanza of the Ode that the other could not finish.¹⁹

Another was to issue and respond to compositional challenges. Sometimes the English to be turned would be a favourite passage from an English author. But often it would be chosen for its sheer ordinariness, to sharpen the challenge. Thus Thomas Evans, the ‘TSE’ mentioned above, was once asked to turn ‘How’s your conk, me old mate?’ into Greek iambs and did so immediately.²⁰ Another well-known challenge was made at a dinner party in Oxford in the 1840s, where a printed invitation to a municipal bridge committee meeting was turned into Latin by Benjamin Kennedy.²¹ Later on Temple Chevallier, professor of Mathematics at Durham, saw Kennedy’s composition and produced one of his own. Here again, one attempt provoked another. Later in the century, Richard Archer-Hind produced a Greek version of the foreword of a printed leaflet listing the stock of Horace Darwin’s scientific instrument shop in Cambridge.²² Another example comes from a remarkable corpus of compositions printed in a dozen volumes by Frederick Traherne Rickards, an Indian railway agent, in the 1890s and 1900s. Rickards set out to collect compositions from others, but he was also a keen composer himself, and among his own efforts is a Greek version of an article of the Indian postal code, giving regulations for addressing parcels. His collection provides a remarkable and exotic example of the life-long hold which the compositional bug could exert.²³

¹⁹ A. and E.M. Sidgwick, *Henry Sidgwick: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 26.

²⁰ Waite, *Latin and Greek Verse*, vii. Evans’s greatest achievement was his *Mathematogonia* (1839), a Greek epyllion inspired by Hesiod’s *Theogony* and motivated by the mathematical bar that prevented Evans from sitting the Classical Tripos in Cambridge. See C.A. Stray and C. Collard, ‘Classics strikes back: T.S. Evans’s *Mathematogonia*’, *Cambridge Classical Journal* 69 (2023): 1–33, and for the historical context, Stray, ‘The slaughter of 1841: Mathematics and Classics in early Victorian Cambridge’, *History of Universities* 35 (2022): 143–78.

²¹ F.D. How, *Six Great Schoolmasters* (London: Methuen, 1904), 121.

²² This was included in R.D. Archer-Hind’s *Translations into Greek Verse and Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905).

²³ Rickards assembled a 12-volume corpus of translations into Latin and Greek between 1893 and 1911. This is held, with related material, in Aberdeen University Library, Special Collections, MS 3168. See H. Picarda, ‘Rickards, Frederick Traherne’,

The ultimate challenge was provided by nonsense. Here the most famous examples are versions of Lewis Carroll. ‘Jabberwocky’ was turned into Greek soon after its appearance by Augustus Vansittart of Trinity College, Cambridge, and into Latin by H.D. Watson in the 1930s; Watson also tackled ‘The Hunting of the Snark’.²⁴ Henry Mason of Marlborough produced a Greek version of a nonsense passage, itself made up, by Samuel Foote in the eighteenth century, as a result of a challenge. Mason’s version is called *To phlattothrat* (from Aristophanes’ made-up word for empty verbiage at *Frogs* 1296). He also produced a Latin version of the Duchess’s song from *Alice in Wonderland*.²⁵

The historian Frank Turner has written of the thousands of volumes written by Victorian divines as the manifestation of a vast and alien geological stratum. The compositional tradition constitutes a substratum which is perhaps just as alien, part of the world of elite Victorian males that is unlikely to appear on the ideologically driven agenda of much contemporary research on culture and society. An adequate map of this substratum would require a history of the relative popularity of styles and authors, genres and metres, and also of the hierarchies of Latin and Greek, prose and verse. (Greek prose was usually seen as the hardest exercise: but the talented contemporary composer Colin Leach has awarded the palm to Latin prose.) One way to approach this corpus is to consider the way it was produced in the published collections associated with schools and universities. The rise of Eton to pre-eminence over Westminster in the mid-eighteenth century is probably the impulse behind the publication of *Musae Etonenses* in the 1750s.²⁶ This shift may

in R.B. Todd (ed.), *Dictionary of British Classical Scholars* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 2004), 818–19; Stray, *Classics Transformed*, 125–6.

²⁴ Vansittart’s version was printed for teaching purposes, and is headed ‘Trinity College lecture Room, March 15, 1872’. Surveys of this sub-genre appear in S. Goodacre, ‘The First Separate Edition of Jabberwocky’, *Jabberwocky: The Journal of the Lewis Carroll Society* 4 (1975): 33–6 and A.A. Imholtz, ‘The Haileybury Latin version of Lewis Carroll’s *Jabberwocky*’, *The Carrollian* 10 (2002): 57–61. Watson’s versions appeared in his *Jabberwocky, Father William, The Walrus & the Carpenter: More Latin Rhymes with English Renderings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1937). A translation of ‘Jabberwocky’ by ‘H.M.’ appeared in *Greece and Rome* 10 (1963): 37.

²⁵ See his *Compositions and Translations*, ed. H. H. West (London: C.J. Clay, 1903). This includes a memoir of Mason by R.C. Gilson, pp. v–vii.

²⁶ *Musae Etonenses* (London: Rivingtons, 1755). The Eton Latin grammar (*An Introduction to the Latin Tongue*) followed in 1758. For the Westminster–Eton shift, see M.L. Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain 1500–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 48. Clarke’s book remains a useful source of information on composition, a subject not to be found in R.H.A. Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) or F.M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian*

have promoted the generic preferences of Eton, notably for elegiac verse ('longs and shorts'). In the 1840s, an Eton master complained to a pupil,

If you do not take more pains, how can you ever expect to write good longs and shorts? If you cannot write good longs and shorts, how can you ever be a man of taste? If you are not a man of taste, how can you ever be of use in the world?²⁷

Nothing could evidence more directly the link between classical composition and the expectations of gentlemanly conduct.

From 1850 onwards, the four editions of *Sabrinae corolla* celebrated the great days of Shrewsbury as a classical school. Cambridge had Henry Drury's *arundines Cami* of 1841; also published there were Hubert Holden's *Foliorum silvulae* and *Foliorum centuriae*, which in four volumes, beginning in 1852, provided passages for translation into Latin and Greek prose and the several different kinds of verse. Oxford had Linwood's *Anthologia Oxoniensis* of 1846, whose preface laments that the practice of composition was no longer valued as highly as it once was.

This raises a methodological point, as does the Hertford Prize at Oxford, founded in 1834 to encourage what its benefactor thought to be a dying art. Collections of compositions may be not reflections of a living tradition, but interventions designed to resuscitate it.²⁸ The more general point is that the corpus needs to be studied as a collection of disparate material provoked by a variety of specific historical conjunctures. Holden's books, for example, index the pieces printed according to the examinations for which they had been set. The demands of teaching are also important, and some of the collections were produced to provide a corpus which would last a teacher a year while setting composition or translations several times a week. The selection of pieces is governed not just by perceived literary value, but by difficulty — in the case of teaching collections, graded difficulty.

Britain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). It is unfortunate that 'composition' does not occur in the index to his book: see e.g. pp. 55–6.

²⁷ L. Stephen, *Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen* (London: Smith, Elder, 1895), 81; cf. Clarke, *Classical Education*, 56. At Trinity College, Cambridge in the 1810s, the tall classical scholar James Bailey and his mathematical friend John Wright, who was hardly more than five feet tall, were referred to as 'Long Bailey and Short Wright': Stray, ed., *Student Life in Nineteenth-Century Cambridge: John Wright's Alma Mater [1827]* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2023), 118.

²⁸ A slightly earlier bequest, by John Ireland, Dean of Westminster (the Ireland Prize), seems to have been reflective rather than compensatory.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the tradition in its maturity combined with the custom of memorialising gentleman scholars to produce a sub-genre: the collected verses of an individual composer. Thus T. S. Evans's compositions were collected with a prefatory memoir in 1893; the same had already been done for C.S. Calverley.²⁹ Benjamin Kennedy and Montagu Butler both published their own retrospective collections with nostalgic prefaces.³⁰ H.A.J. Munro's compositions were collected and printed by him for circulation among his friends towards the end of his life.³¹ A detailed study of the role of composition in the later Victorian decades would have to consider its relationship to the aesthetic movement, and to the decline of Christian belief. In the compositions of such men as Richard Jebb and J.W. Mackail the influence of aestheticism is plain. Did this writing act as one of the many alternatives to religious belief? Montagu Butler, headmaster of Harrow and then Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, ended the preface to his collection by declaring that

The old habit of composing verses [...] has clung to me as a perfect companion, helping me [...] to keep in touch with the thoughts of the wise, the pious and the pure, and giving a kind of quiet unity to a life of some labours and many distractions.³²

The compositions in Butler's book begin with Latin elegiac versions of some of the Psalms; this is poetry as spilt religion. Butler's son remembered his father's devotion to the art of composition, and the exquisite pleasure he gained from a virtuoso turn of phrase. In his version of Matthew Prior's ode, 'And Venus to the Loves around / Remark'd how ill we all dissembled', Richard Jebb translated 'ill' by 'infabre'. Butler's son commented, '*Infabre* was sheer joy to him'; and added, 'These minutiae may seem unworthy of record, but they are given as examples of the kind of ingenuity, or perfection of technique, which he really appreciated.'³³

Butler's book appeared just before the outbreak of the First World War, marking the end of a century-long tradition. The war not only killed

²⁹ J. Waite, *Latin and Greek Verse; Verses and Translations by C.S.C.* (Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1862).

³⁰ B.H. Kennedy, *Between Whiles, or, Wayside Amusements of a Working Life* (London: G. Bell, 1877); H.M. Butler, *Some Leisure Hours of a Long Life: Translations into Greek, Latin and English Verse* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1914).

³¹ H.A.J. Munro, *Translations into Latin and Greek Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1884).

³² E. Graham, *The Harrow Life of H. M. Butler* (London: Longmans Green, 1920), 368.

³³ *Ibid.*, 372.

off potential composers, it also led to inflated printing costs which, combined with a reduced market for the genre, made publishers reluctant to accept such books. The archives of Blackwells and Heffers, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, are full of rejected proposals in the interwar years. In 1902, the *Classical Review* had printed translations of 'God save the King' in Greek and Latin, by W.G. Headlam and J.P. Postgate, to celebrate the accession of Edward VII, and its wartime editors, A.D. Godley and W.H.D. Rouse, were keen composers; but after they were removed in 1920, the increasingly professionalised policies of the journals squeezed such things out.

But it is in this period, just as when the Owl of Minerva was taking flight, that new kinds of playful composition began to appear. A well-known example from 1920 is the so-called fifth book of Horace's *Odes*, composed and translated into English by Rudyard Kipling and Charles Graves, with an introduction by A.D. Godley.³⁴ The *Translations Ancient and Modern* produced during the war by Maurice Baring were actually original prose pieces masquerading as versions of originals in other languages. These were reprinted in 1925, with the 'originals' newly composed by Ronald Knox, André Maurois, Prince Mirsky, and others.³⁵

The last major institutional collection, *Some Oxford Compositions*, appeared in 1949, but derives from an earlier period. In his preface, T.F. Higham explains that in the early 1920s, seven Oxford tutors began meeting, as he puts it, 'to reconstruct their scholarship' after the disruption of the Great War (note the choice of 'scholarship' to refer to compositional activity). They included Higham himself, Maurice Bowra, Maurice Platnauer, and John Denniston. Higham's preface is of special interest in that it attempts to provide what he calls 'a metaphysic of composition'. In doing so he was meeting a challenge laid down by H.W. Garrod's *Scholarship, its Meaning and Value*.³⁶ Garrod had declared that after the First World War, though he still took pleasure in textual criticism and composition, he 'began to doubt the morality of them'. Higham claimed that he and his colleagues had felt no such doubts; an indication, perhaps, of the continuing entrenchment of the subculture of

³⁴ Q. Horati Flacci Carminum librum quintum a Rudyardo Kipling et Carolo Graves, Anglice redditum et variorum notis adornatum ad fidem codicum mss., edidit Aluredus D. Godley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1920).

³⁵ *Translations Ancient and Modern* (London: Martin Secker, 1918; repr. London: William Heinemann, 1925). The collection had first been published in 1916 as *Translations found in a Commonplace Book*.

³⁶ H.W. Garrod, *Scholarship, its Meaning and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946).

the Oxford tutors, in a university which until after the Second World War remained dominated by collegiate feeling and the humanities.³⁷

In 1866, Frederic Farrar remarked that some American Indian languages were so near extinction that they had until recently been spoken only by a few aged parrots.³⁸ For parrots, read in this case professors — a few retired professors of Classics sending in short compositions to those classical magazines which were still willing to accept them. The internalised challenge described by Knox in 1957, in the last days of Compulsory Latin — the composer making a bet with himself — was by then a sign not of pervasive socialisation, but of its disappearance.

To sum up. The nineteenth-century compositional tradition can be seen as a gigantic glass bead game, a system of deep cultural play. But the freedom of play which it celebrated was also the freedom which belonged to a privileged group. Composition belonged to a set of shared experiences which united a largely male educated elite. It celebrated the power of classical literature to describe and organise experience. As such, it was doomed to be eroded by the historicism and the increasingly specialised scholarship of the later nineteenth century, which looked at antiquity with a colder eye and whose practitioners became mutually isolated by their highly focused interests.³⁹ As J.C. Stobart put it in 1911 in *The Glory that was Greece*, they were like miners digging shafts, secluded both from the general public on the surface and from one another.⁴⁰

I need hardly add that there is much more to say about the tradition; most obviously, we would need to conduct a historically sensitive exercise in content analysis to establish the patterns of genre, style, metre and so on. One fruit of such an enquiry, perhaps unexpectedly, might be the assembly of evidence for the history of canons of taste in both English and classical literature. The English texts chosen for translation constitute an indirect literary canon, though it is hard to believe that a deliberate

³⁷ J. Morrell, *Science at Oxford, 1914–1939: Transforming an Arts University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁸ F.W. Farrar, 'Language and ethnology', *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 4 (1866): 196–204, at p. 198.

³⁹ The colder eye was identified by D.B. Monro in his review of the first volume of the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*: he referred to 'the idea of science, which tends to put all the phenomena on the same level of interest'. Monro, *The Academy* 454, 15 Jan. 1881, 38. Cf. Stray, 'Brexit as banquet: A.E. Housman on the history of classical scholarship', *The Housman Society Journal* 45 (2017): 40–64.

⁴⁰ Stobart 1911, p.v.; cf. Stray, 'The Glory and the Grandeur' (n. 2).

campaign lies behind the choice of texts.⁴¹ Occasionally, they also constitute independent historical evidence. Let me close with an example, which also illustrates the incidental pleasures to be gained from studying the compositional tradition. The Indian railway agent F.T. Rickards, determined to practise his skills in writing conversational Greek, assembled his own dialogue in English before translating it. Here is a brief extract:

Hullo! I say, where have you been for the last two or three days?
We went out shooting at Finch's place about 30 miles from Agra
What kind of sport did you have?
We shot six head altogether.
Do you not shoot does?
No, it is unsportsmanlike...

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to identify a historical phenomenon, to explore its development, its varieties and its social and institutional contexts, in the hope of encouraging the further exploration of what was for long dismissed as (merely) the activity of dead white males. As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, the Victorian practice of classical composition had its origin in the social changes which followed the industrial revolution — class structure and patterns of educational provision — but also in cultural changes, notably the rise of romantic Hellenism and romanticism more generally. Such further exploration might, for example, focus on the attachment of compositional practices to specific institutions, and on the relative weight given to Latin vs Greek, to prose vs verse, and to particular literary genres and metrical forms.

Christopher Stray
Swansea University
C.A.Stray@Swansea.ac.uk

⁴¹ This is argued, to my mind unconvincingly, by M. Hofstetter, 'The Classical Tripos and the romantic movement at Cambridge', *History of Universities* 19 (2004): 221–39. In some cases, literary sources were specified for composition: for example, Shakespeare for the Porson Prize.