

# In Memoriam M. L. West

(23 September 1937 – 13 July 2015)

---



The unexpected death at the age of 77 of Martin West, the greatest classicist of his generation, has left a hole in the world of scholarship and philology. It also leaves me, as I know it does many others, with a sense of personal loss. West was a presence in my life and thinking since I first encountered him 37 years ago, and over the past 15 years we interacted regularly regarding matters that were central to both our interests, not least ancient Greek music. All who were colleagues will have their own memories, and here I offer a few mainly personal thoughts and reminiscences.

I first met Martin West in 1978, when I was studying music in London. I had just spent much of the summer working slowly through his magnificent recently-published commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days* (following his similarly masterful commentary on *Theogony*). My prospective Oxford tutor Nicholas Richardson had invited me to a Classics event in London, and in the break introduced me to his former doctoral supervisor: 'This is Martin West'. I goggled at the sprightly figure, who looked nothing like the grey-haired sage that I imagined must have written the magisterial works I already held in awe. 'You're not *the* Martin West?' I said. A worried look crossed his face: 'That depends on who *the* Martin West is', he said, with characteristic precision. 'The author of *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* and the commentaries on Hesiod,' I said. He brightened up: 'Yes, that's me.' 'But you look so young', I exclaimed. 'Well, I *am* quite young,' he retorted cheerfully. 'How old should I look?' I was flushed with embarrassment, but he was unperturbed and had a twinkle in his eye.

Decades later I recounted to him the tale of that first meeting. He had no memory of it, and chuckled with relish. But I seldom spoke to him without saying something that made me feel as gauche as I did on that occasion. I was far from the only person who felt like this. West's shy reserve and habit of waiting and thinking before responding to any question, even trivial ones, has been well documented. It was said that he was a man of few words in seven ancient languages, and his reticence was bound to cause anxiety to many of his interlocutors. But on informal occasions I found him to be forthcoming and witty about matters great and small. I also found that he was kind and supportive to students, and of those of whose scholarship he approved. While he could sometimes appear sharp and unforgiving about others' work, this was mainly because of his desire for precision and unvarnished accuracy. I first discovered this when, as a doctoral researcher, I submitted an article to *Classical Quarterly* in 1996 ('How the dithyramb got its shape'). It presented the solution to a long-standing problem in Greek musical history, one of the subjects in which West had become an acknowledged world expert following the publication of his superbly helpful book *Ancient Greek Music* in 1992. I had disputed and augmented some of his

assertions in my article, but had also indulged *en passant* in some dubious speculation. When the anonymous referee's report came back to me, my heart fell because it appeared to be a page of blunt dismissals of some of my less robust suggestions. My supervisor Richard Janko recognised West's style, and I initially assumed that his catalogue of my evident folly would disqualify the piece from publication. However, the page was headed by the brief sentence 'This is an important and original article and should be published in some form'. The journal's editor assured me that from the hand of this referee that was a strong recommendation. In the event I was immensely grateful to have the benefit of West's unparalleled knowledge of the subject in revising the piece.

Before the article's publication I was invited to present the argument to over a dozen eminent scholars including West himself at an Oxford Seminar. When the audience were invited to ask questions, there was a long silence; it felt as if all present were waiting for Martin to cast the first stone. He was scrutinising my handout, and eventually looked up and announced to all and sundry 'This is absolutely right'. There was an audible reaction — intakes of breath and murmurs of surprise — to this pronouncement; to have West's unqualified endorsement was a rare and wonderful thing. A similar thing happened at a colloquium on ancient music in 2013, at which Stefan Hagel presented an astoundingly clever paper applying statistical methods to the singing of Pindar. At the end of the paper West unhesitatingly observed 'Well of course this is brilliant', to a similar audible reaction.

West's reputation as a stern critic was reinforced by the stringent tone of some of his reviews and critical comments. He dismissed three poststructuralist scholars in print with the witty but searing characterisation of them as 'a curious tricolour...the Raw, the Cooked, and the Half-baked'; and he expressed exasperation at a distinguished Professor's failure to distinguish 'oral' from 'orally composed' poetry in a review which ended with the extraordinarily patronising comment, unacceptable from the pen of any other reviewer, that the latter 'really must try to get his capacious head round the difference'. On more than one occasion I felt personally chastened by his disapproval. In a review for the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* he heavily criticised a book that I had been asked to referee for publication, ending with the chilling sentence 'OUP were badly advised in this case'. When at a conference in 2014 I noted that a number of features of the Seikilos Song (e.g. its four-bar structure) had made me wonder if it was an accomplished modern forgery, I received a sharply reproving email from West ('out of the question'), ending with the words 'you should rather question your own presuppositions about Greek music'.

I once posted West an offprint from my home in London, and received a note of thanks in which he wrote, à propos of nothing much, 'I was curious to see your home address; a former girlfriend of mine lived on the same street.' In *Ancient Greek Music*, he muses about the difficulty of translating *aulētris*, the term used for a female player of the *aulos* and standardly translated 'flute-girl'. The traditional translation 'flute' is misleading since *auloi* were pipes with double reeds; and the performers were experienced entertainers rather than young girls. He offers 'pipe' and 'shawm' for the instrument, and adds 'I have found no very satisfactory solution to the girl problem.' Whatever the underlying point of this humorous double entendre, I more than once witnessed his ability

to charm young women, as he surely did in the case of his kind and clever wife Stephanie, whose first visit to Delphi with him he cheerfully recalls in the Preface of the book. While examining the stone bearing the text of the Delphic Paeon she had stumbled into the priceless object: 'it nearly crashed from its moorings and shattered. (I married her all the same.)' Once at coffee during a conference at Oxford I introduced him to a young colleague from another place. 'You look like the kind of person who would enjoy studying X', he said to her, naming a relatively obscure ancient poet. She gasped with astonishment: 'My doctoral thesis is about X!' He kept up the appearance of sage clairvoyance for a minute or two, before admitting that he had remembered her name and research topic from the list of delegates. But by his humorous subterfuge he had broken the ice immediately, and the conversation flowed.

On one occasion I casually remarked that he must have published hundreds of articles and at least a dozen books. He looked at me quizzically: 'Thirty-three books to date', he corrected me. It's a reminder of what a scholarly phenomenon he was; and for many classicists his work will long serve as an invaluable resource and a benchmark of scholarly rigour. A Festschrift in his honour appeared in 2007 under the title *Hesperos* (Greek for 'West'), and the shock of hearing of his death brought to my mind Callimachus's lovely epigram on Heraclitus, the first couplet of which I adapted in honour of West-Hesperos:

εἶπέ τις, Ἑσπερε δῖε, τεδὸν μόρον, ἐς δέ με δάκρυ  
ἤγαγεν, ἐμνήσθην δ'ὡς ἄρ' ἔγραψας ἄλις.

Translated in the style of William Johnson Cory, this means:

*They told me, brilliant M.L. West,  
They told me you were dead;  
They brought me bitter news to hear  
And bitter tears to shed.*

*I wept as I remembered  
How much you'd writ of yore,  
Sufficient for a lifetime.  
And now you'll write no more.*

**Armand D'Angour**

[armand.dangour@jesus.ox.ac.uk](mailto:armand.dangour@jesus.ox.ac.uk)