



Why Study Classics?

What we can all learn from other students of Classics

by Miguel Carvalho Abrantes

Why study Classics? There are many potential answers to this question, perhaps as many as there are students, and yet, strangely enough, very few modern works actually approach this subject, with Italo Calvino's initial chapters of *Why Read the Classics?* being a noteworthy example¹, while Elaine Pagels' *Why Religion? A Personal Story* (Ecco, reprint edn. 2020) presents the author's personal path to the study of Gnosticism.

I found myself contemplating this issue for multiple reasons. I am struggling with some health issues, and the fact that some of the academics who inspired me had recently retired or died made me further think about how little is known regarding what led them to the subject. When someone retires, or dies, that always leads to a significant loss of a learning opportunity.

Based on this premise, I decided to ask, through e-mail and a few online mailing lists related to Classics, some questions to professors, students and lovers of this area of knowledge from all around the world. But which questions would they be? For a brief moment, pause and consider this problem – if you could ask a very limited number of questions to other people, what would they be, and why?

I decided to start with the most basic question – “What led you to study Classics?” I felt this was a crucial one, because it was essentially a personal form of the inquiry that led me to all the other ones. More than asking, generally, what should lead a person to this area of study, I was interested in real examples, in hearing about why people had personally taken such pathway in their lives. The responses that follow complement the findings of the *Classics After the Classroom* project, reported on [elsewhere in this Bulletin](#).

I followed through by asking a second question – “What is the most unexpected thing you learned through your study in Classics?” Naturally, derived from the first one, the point was exploring the idea that although one can choose to study this area of knowledge, such choice is not as simple or direct as it could seem, since someone may be led on many surprising twists and turns. And that, naturally, led to a third question, “What impact did studying Classics have in your life?”

1 Although the author considers as “Classics” many exemplary and noteworthy books from Homer's time to our own, regarding works from the Classical Antiquity he presents as specially worth reading the *Odyssey*, Xenophon's *Anabasis*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*.

The final question was a more complex one – “If you could recommend a single book or article to other readers, what would it be, and why?” I didn’t ask specifically for a work related to Classics; instead, the purpose of this question was to allow people to give their own answer, and pass along what books they felt could be important to other readers.

Having compiled these four questions – a number I felt was neither too low nor too high, or else people would feel I was taking too much of their time – I started by attempting to ask them to people who had directly inspired me, and followed through by accepting the answers of other people all around the world. However, I felt that such procedure could also lead to biased answers, since some people felt sharing negative feedback publicly could have a negative impact on their careers, and so I allowed all respondents to be credited anonymously, if they so wished. Their answers are currently available in an ebook titled *Why Study Classics?: First-person Answers From Around the World* (ISBN: 9788834155653), and although there are many potential lessons to be learned from it, a small question remains – what did I, personally, learn from them?

The answers to the first question were undoubtedly the ones which fascinated me the most, as they showed that people interested in Classics came from many different paths of life, and had many different reasons to study it. From people seeking mere distraction from a serious disease, to mere coincidences, different people had whole different reasons for following their personal pathway. An aspect, however, particularly caught my eye – according to the content of many different answers, it seems that good teachers, great textbooks, and inspiration from a young age matter a lot. Although this idea may seem like a truism, it certainly shows that more effort should be placed in creating projects for younger audiences, and that manuals definitely have to be written taking into full account their audience. In fact, Zoja Pavlovskis-Petit’s partial answer perfectly captures this idea, with several other people voicing similar opinions:

I started learning Latin at the age of 10 as a child in Europe. It was unimaginatively taught, and my teachers expected their students to suffer through Latin as an unavoidable evil. When I came to the USA at the age of 14, I already knew enough Latin grammar to zoom through the secondary school courses in the subject; but now I enjoyed it! The textbooks had colourful pictures in them, and the reading material consisted of coherent stories, rather than separate sentences made up to illustrate grammatical points.

Regarding the answers to the second question, they perfectly showed how many unexpected things people can learn from Classics. They range from short ones:

“The myth of Sinis the Pine-bender”

“Texts and objects tell different stories”

“It is all unexpected, because there are few boundaries”

to potentially inspiring ones:

“That the Modern society should read the Classics more seriously – but not too seriously”

“A discipline that seems canonical and static is in fact wide-ranging and dynamic”

“The amount of uncanny parallels with modern life”

“I am more academically able than I thought I was”

“I offered a Classics club to 10 and 11 year olds at my daughter's school. I thought no-one would turn up. It was oversubscribed!”

along with some that were unexpected to me:

“How much obscene ancient poetry there is”

“Certain gender norms have not changed in 2500 years”

“The more I learned, the less I understood the ancient Greek World”

and some I expected to find:

“How so many words passed from ancient Greek and classical Latin into English”

“There are always new angles and approaches to everything that is worth the trouble”

“By studying the past you can understand the present”.

Overall, each person had their own specific answer, which shows the deep and wide appeal of Classics. At the same time, one cannot help but feel deeply inspired by the words of Joshua Littell, a PhD student at the University of Exeter:

The modern Classics community is exceptionally welcoming and positive. The amount of individuals studying subjects from across the discipline who have been given constructive and polite criticism, alongside affirming comments, has massively built my confidence as a researcher.

Regarding the impact of Classics in people's lives, in general it seems to have been a very positive one, in many different areas. However, not all of them shared that positivity, as these five opinions show us:

“A positive one concerning my mind. Not a brilliant one as my bank account is concerned. Euphemistically speaking.”

“I think it had a dualistic impact on my life. If it made it significantly better, through the words of all those authors I met across the years, at the same time it also led

me to an incessant look for answers, which would ultimately consume me like a burning flame.”

“I'm an enlightened intellectual now but I'm unemployed and live with my mum.”

“It became my profession, a very rewarding one (I don't mean financially).”

“The ancient world's diversity and experience has shaped the way I see the world – as a difficult and unfriendly place, full of altars but no gods.”

Although, as stressed above, opinions were overwhelming positive, these answers do present us with a less explored area of Classics, in which not everything is as profitable as one would imagine. But, realistically, that also happens in any other area of knowledge too, and deserves to be contrasted with the answer of Timothy Doran, an Associate Professor of Ancient History and Big History at California State University (USA):

[the study of Classics] gave a direction to an inchoate hairball of intellectual interests. It gave me a career. I now own two houses and am tenured in a university. I have been able to raise two children. I will have an acceptable retirement. And I have perennially fascinating things to study: not just the Greeks and Romans, but the peoples around them.

Finally, regarding books, unlike one would expect there appears to be no one specific primary text that most people would recommend to others. The Homeric Poems, along with the works of Plato, Ovid and Cicero, were mentioned more often than others, but one is left wondering if they were mentioned because they are usually studied in college, or if they are indeed studied in college due to their general popularity. Outside of those primary sources, E. R. Dodds' *The Greeks and the Irrational* was recommended thrice. But, perhaps most of all, one should stick to the opinion of Adrian Dumitru, Associated Lecturer at the University of Bucharest – “Reading the Classics has made me conclude that I could and should not recommend a single book, but many more others.”

Ultimately, and realistically, I feel that perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from other people involved in Classics is less about asking one particular question to everyone, regardless of what it may be, and more about learning how to listen to the unique beauty of this area of knowledge, through the many unexpected lessons each teacher, both ancient and contemporary, has to offer us, both through their written books and their spoken words.

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