

# Classics and the Uses of Reception

Edited by

Charles Martindale  
and  
Richard F. Thomas



## Classics and the Uses of Reception

## Classical Receptions

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# Introduction

## *Thinking Through Reception*

Charles Martindale

pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli

Terentianus Maurus, v.1286<sup>1</sup>

In *Redeeming the Text* (1993) I issued what was in effect a manifesto for the adoption of reception theory within the discipline of classics, a position at that time controversial.<sup>2</sup> Since then there has been a significant expansion of activities (including undergraduate and postgraduate courses) carried out under the banner of “reception,” particularly in the UK, and to a lesser extent in the USA where, for example, there are always reception panels at the annual conference of the American Philological Association (in continental Europe generally work so designated is more likely to be pursued outside departments of classics). One sign of the change of attitude was the decision by Cambridge University Press in the mid 1990s that Cambridge Companions to ancient authors should contain a substantial reception element.<sup>3</sup> Another was the addition of “reception,” in 2001, to the categories of work specified within classics in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which periodically grades the research of all university departments in the UK. Reception within classics encompasses all work concerned with postclassical material, much of which in other humanities departments might well be described under different rubrics: for example, history of scholarship, history

1 Quoted Schmidt (1985) 67.

2 Martindale (1993). That book is particularly indebted to 20th-century German hermeneutics, to Derrida, and to Eliot; I would now work with a genealogy for reception that goes back, through writers like Pater, to Kant’s great Critiques. For those who not only believe in originary meanings but also think they are easy of attainment, I would point out that my reading of *Redeeming the Text* differs in almost every case from the various other receptions of it in this book.

3 So far Easterling (1997); Martindale (1997a); Hardie (2002); Fowler (2004); Freudenburg (2005) – others are to follow.

of the book, film and media studies, performance history, translation studies, reader-response and personal voice criticism, postcolonial studies, medieval and Neo-Latin, and much else besides (the essays in this volume are designed to gesture towards the range of these pursuits, but it would have been impossible to cover them all, without sacrificing the focus on methodology).

Reception has thus helped to challenge the traditional idea of what “classics” is (something most classicists, including myself, simply took for granted 30, or even 20 years ago), prompting reflection on how the discipline has been constituted, variously and often amid dispute, over past centuries. It is not merely a matter of looking at what happened to classics after what we now like to call “late antiquity,” but of contesting the idea that classics is something fixed, whose boundaries can be shown, and whose essential nature we can understand on its own terms. Many classicists (though by no means necessarily the majority) are in consequence reasonably happy, if only to keep the discipline alive in some form, to work with an enlarged sense of what classics might be, no longer confined to the study of classical antiquity “in itself” – so that classics can include writing about *Paradise Lost*, or the mythological *poesie* of Titian, or the film *Gladiator*, or the iconography of fascism.<sup>4</sup> However, most Anglophone classicists (whatever they may claim) remain largely committed to fairly positivistic forms of historical inquiry, the attempt through the accumulation of supposedly factual data to establish the-past-as-it-really-was, of the kind I criticized in *Redeeming the Text*. To my thinking this commitment is mistaken. This is partly because such positivism is conceptually flawed for reasons some of which I hope will emerge in the course of this introduction. But it is partly also for pragmatic reasons because, given the overwhelmingly “presentist” character of the contemporary scene, a classics which overinvests in such historicist approaches may not attract tomorrow’s students, or achieve any wider cultural significance. Historical positivists also miss the opportunities for much fascinating work, including work that is historical in a wider sense. When I went to university in 1968, the “New Criticism” at least provided alternative protocols of reading to the then dominant combination of historicism and philology, but the New Criticism is now excoriated by all, leaving various forms of historicism, within classics at least, largely unassailed.

Although reception studies flourish, indeed in the UK constitute perhaps the fastest-growing area of the subject, there has been little discussion about the value of such work, and the weaknesses, or strengths, of particular methodologies used within it. Following an exploratory panel we organized at the meeting of the American Philological Association in 2003, Richard Thomas and I designed, through this book, to start a wider debate about the uses of reception within classics. To focus the discussion, we circulated among the contributors William Batstone’s “provocation,” the paper he delivered at the APA (placed first in the current collection), and met in Bristol to discuss the issues it raises and the different

4 So Beard and Henderson (1995).

models used by other contributors. After these two public events contributors exchanged and commented on each other's contributions in what was very much a collaborative research project. But there is no party line, no attempt to find a general "solution" to the problems involved. Instead, the reader will find a wide variety of approaches, perspectives, and demonstrations over the whole field currently constituted within the word "reception" (for reasons of space, and because it involves a partly different set of problems, we decided to exclude reception within antiquity, itself an important and fast-growing area of study<sup>5</sup>).

One symbolically important date for the student of reception is April 1967,<sup>6</sup> when Hans Robert Jauss delivered his inaugural lecture at the University of Constance, "What is and for what purpose does one study Literary History?," somewhat hubristically echoing the title of Schiller's inaugural at Jena in 1789, but substituting "literary" for Schiller's "universal." Jauss argued for a paradigm shift in literary interpretation which he called *Rezeptionsästhetik* (sometimes translated as "the poetics of reception").<sup>7</sup> It was to be one that would avoid the mistakes of Russian Formalism on the one hand (which paid insufficient attention to the sociology and historicity of literature) and of Marxism, with its grim historical determinism, on the other, while also building on their insights. The new model would acknowledge the historicity of texts, but also allow for the aesthetic response of readers in the present (any present of reading). It thus involved a significant turn to the reader (something which was to characterize a whole range of literary approaches over the remaining years of the century, for example the reader-response criticism associated with the American theorist, Stanley Fish<sup>8</sup>). A "text" – and here I am using the word in the extended poststructuralist sense, that could mean a painting, or a marriage ceremony, or a person, or a historical event – is never just "itself," appeals to that reified entity being mere rhetorical flag-waving; rather it is something that a reader reads, differently. Most versions of reception theory stress the mediated, situated, contingent (which of course does not mean the same as arbitrary) character of readings, and that includes our own readings quite as much as those of past centuries. There is no Archimedean point

5 See Hardwick (2003a) ch. 2; for a compelling example of such work see Graziosi (2002).

6 Jauss's lecture had an enormous influence in Germany, much less elsewhere. This helps to explain why Anglo-American classics has been so slow to respond to the challenge of reception theory, whereas other aspects of contemporary theory, poststructuralism in particular, had (in however limited a sense) their effect from the early 1980s.

7 See Robert Holub, "Reception Theory: School of Constance," in Selden (1995) 319–46, p. 320. The lecture was subsequently retitled "Literary History as a Provocation to Literary Scholarship," and under that title included in Jauss (1982a), ch 1. Holub (1984), in Methuen's New Accents series, remains the best introduction to reception in general. For an account (somewhat unsympathetic) of some of the difficulties in Jauss's (constantly shifting) position see Nauta (1994).

8 See for a general survey Selden (1995) chapters 9–13. Fish's seminal *Is There a Text in This Class?* was published in 1980, but its genesis goes further back.

from which we can arrive at a final, correct meaning for any text. In Jauss's own words, the meaning of a text involves "a convergence of the structure of the work and the structure of the interpretation which is ever to be achieved anew," and that meaning is "a yielded truth – and not a given one – that is realized in discussion and consensus with others."<sup>9</sup> Jauss's approach owes a great deal to the hermeneutics espoused by his teacher Hans-Georg Gadamer (himself a pupil of Heidegger). Modifying Gadamer's idea of the fusion of horizons of text and reader, Jauss speaks of "the horizon of expectation" of the text, "an intersubjective system or structure of expectations"<sup>10</sup> (membership of a genre would be an obvious example), which enters, and may substantially modify, the different "horizon of expectation" of the reader.

A clear consequence of all this for classicists is, in the words of Julia Gaisser, author of an exemplary study of the reception of Catullus in the Renaissance,<sup>11</sup> "the understanding that classical texts are not only moving but changing targets." We are not the direct inheritors of antiquity. As Gaisser colourfully puts it, such texts "are not teflon-coated baseballs hurtling through time and gazed up at uncomprehendingly by the natives of various times and places, until they reach *our* enlightened grasp; rather, they are pliable and sticky artifacts gripped, molded, and stamped with new meanings by every generation of readers, and they come to us irreversibly altered by their experience."<sup>12</sup> On this model the sharp distinction between antiquity itself and its reception over the centuries is dissolved. A particular historical moment does not limit the significance of a poem; indeed the same Roman reader might construe, say, an ode of Horace very differently at different historical junctures – texts mean differently in different situations. One objection to historicism thus becomes that it is not historical enough.<sup>13</sup> The complex chain of receptions has the effect that a work can operate across history obliquely in unexpected ways. The aesthetic critic Walter Pater gives an illuminating instance of operations of the kind in his essay on Michelangelo:

The old masters indeed are simpler; their characteristics are written larger, and are easier to read, than the analogues of them in all the mixed, confused productions of the modern mind. But when once we have succeeded in defining for ourselves

9 Segers (1979–80) 84, 86.

10 Holub in Selden (1995) 323.

11 Gaisser (1993).

12 Gaisser (2002) 387 (I would myself demur at Gaisser's totalizing "irreversibly" – the possible future of interpretation is never known).

13 So Bradshaw (1987) 96: "Even if we were so perverse as to want to read *Hamlet* as though Goethe and Mackenzie, Turgenev and Freud had never existed we still could not do so, any more than we can see what our grandparents saw in photographs of our parents as children – the intervening writers have shaped the sensibilities we bring to *Hamlet*. Trying . . . to cut out the intervening commentary by seeing the play in strictly 'Elizabethan terms' is *unhistorical* as well as aesthetically impossible."

those characteristics, and the law of their combination, we have acquired a standard or measure which helps us to put in its right place many a vagrant genius, many an unclassified talent, many precious though imperfect products of art. It is so with the components of the true character of Michelangelo. The strange interfusion of sweetness and strength is not to be found in those who claimed to be his followers; but it is found in many of those who worked before him, and in many others down to our own time, in William Blake, for instance, and Victor Hugo, who, though not of his school, and unaware, are his true sons, and help us to understand him, as he in turn interprets and justifies them.<sup>14</sup>

Such insights (could we call them “truths”?<sup>15</sup>) necessarily elude the positivist, but they can emerge, given a critic of Pater’s subtlety, from the practices of reception.

Given the stress, within reception, on the situatedness and mediated character of all readings, there is no necessary quarrel between reception and “history” (that most elusive of jargon terms) – though, for the reasons we have just seen, Jauss was hostile to what he called “dogmatic historicism and positivism.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed one value of reception is to bring to consciousness the factors that may have contributed to our responses to the texts of the past, factors of which we may well be “ignorant” but are not therefore “innocent”;<sup>17</sup> hence the importance of possessing reception histories for individual texts. A poem is, from one point of view, a social event in history, as is any public response to it. But we also need to avoid privileging history over the other element in Jauss’s model, the present moment in which the text is experienced, received, partly aesthetically (though that moment too is always potentially subject to historicization). If we respect both elements, our interpretations can become “critical,” self-aware, recognizing our self-implication, but they will not thereby (necessarily) stand forever. History, as Duncan Kennedy well puts it, “is as much about *eventuation* as it is about original context”; and he continues “that is what ‘Reception Studies’ seeks to capture, and what the model of historicism prevalent in classical studies, with its recuperation of the notion of ‘reception’ for an original audience, seeks to eschew.”<sup>18</sup>

My own view is that reception, on a Jaussian model, provides one intellectually coherent way of avoiding both crude presentism (“the reading that too peremptorily assimilates a text to contemporary concerns”<sup>19</sup>) and crude historicism. Antiquity and modernity, present and past, are always implicated in each other, always in dialogue – to understand either one, you need to think in terms of the

14 Pater (1980) 76.

15 They are not, of course, “facts.”

16 Segers (1979–80) 84.

17 I take my terminology from McGann (1985) 87 (McGann offers a spirited defense of what we might call “historicist” reception studies).

18 Kennedy (2001) 88.

19 Armstrong (2003) 29.

other. James Porter, arguing that classics “so far from being an outmoded pursuit” is “essential and vital,” observes that “modernity *requires* the study of antiquity for its self-definition: only so can it misrecognize itself in its own image of the past, that of a so-called classical antiquity.”<sup>20</sup> But that is only to give half of the picture, for the reverse is also true (moreover, to use the word “misrecognize” rather than “recognize” is to move too swiftly to a particular hermeneutic stance – we might prefer “(mis)recognize”). This is no new insight. In “We Philologists” (1875) Nietzsche writes, “This is the antinomy of philology: *antiquity* has in fact always been understood *from the perspective of the present* – and should the *present* now be understood *from the perspective of antiquity*?”<sup>21</sup> Charles Baudelaire, in what became a founding text for Modernism and theories of modernity, “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), sees antiquity and modernity as always interpenetrating, superimposed.<sup>22</sup> He starts by arguing that “beauty is always and inevitably of a double composition,” an eternal element, and “a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions.” The second element is the element of modernity, “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent.”<sup>23</sup> Baudelaire would almost certainly have recalled a passage about Pheidias’ building programme in Athens from Plutarch’s *Life of Pericles*:

So then the works arose, no less towering in their grandeur than inimitable in the grace of their outlines, since the workmen eagerly strove to surpass themselves in the beauty of their handicraft. And yet the most wonderful thing about them was the speed with which they rose . . . For this reason are the works of Pericles all the more to be wondered at; they were created in a short time for all time. Each one of them, in its beauty, was even then and at once antique; but in the freshness of its vigour it is, even to the present day, recent and newly wrought. Such is the bloom of perpetual newness, as it were, upon these works of his, which makes them ever to look untouched by time, as though the unfaltering breath of an ageless spirit had been infused into them.<sup>24</sup>

Thus from the moment of their creation the Parthenon sculptures were both old and new. But even in the work of the illustrator Constantin Guys, Baudelaire’s “painter of modern life” himself, whose rapidly executed sketches brilliantly

20 Porter (2003) 64.

21 Cited Porter (2000) 15.

22 Benjamin (1983) 87.

23 Baudelaire (1964) 3, 13. See also Benjamin (1983), ch. 3, “Modernism,” esp. 81 (“Modernity designates an epoch, but it also denotes the energies which are at work in this epoch to bring it close to antiquity”), 84 (though Benjamin underestimates the complexity of Baudelaire’s thought on these matters).

24 *Pericles*, ch. 13 (translation by Bernadotte Perrin, from the Loeb Plutarch, vol. 3); I am grateful to Jim Porter for drawing my attention to this passage.

caught (or should that be catch?) the fleeting contingencies and ephemera of the modern world, the eternal element necessarily enters in, because Guys drew, not directly from life, but from memory (and even if he had drawn from life, it would still have involved a mental image, an element of idealization, of the mediated), and, equally importantly, because the immediacy of the moment of modernity has been frozen in a finished work of art, destined to become itself antiquity to our modernity. As Baudelaire puts it, “for any ‘modernity’ to be worthy of one day taking its place as ‘antiquity,’ it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it.”<sup>25</sup>

The desire to experience, say, Homer in himself untouched by any taint of modernity is part of the pathology of many classicists, but it is a deluded desire (even were such a thing possible, it could not satisfy, for it would no longer be “we” who were reading Homer). Pater, himself a classicist but one well versed in literature and philosophy generally, makes the point with characteristic suavity in his review of the poems of William Morris (*Westminster Review*, 1868):

The composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us; to deduct from that experience, to obliterate any part of it, to come face to face with the people of a past age, as if the middle age, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century had not been, is as impossible as to become a little child, or enter again into the womb and be born. But though it is not possible to repress a single phase of that humanity, which, because we live and move and have our being in the life of humanity, makes us what we are; it is possible to isolate such a phase, to throw it into relief, to be divided against ourselves in zeal for it, as we may hark back to some choice space of our own individual life. We cannot conceive the age; we can conceive the element it has contributed to our culture; we can treat the subjects of the age bringing that into relief. Such an attitude towards Greece, aspiring to but never actually reaching its way of conceiving life, is what is possible for art.<sup>26</sup>

The religious language that saturates the passage suggests that Pater felt in full the lure of the idea of an originary experience (according to Christ, if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must become as little children), but he also knew the limits, and the advantages, of the possible. Accordingly he commends Morris, in his retelling of the old Greek stories, for eschewing a pastiche, and therefore fake, classicism in a merely antiquarian spirit, as well as, conversely, something that is “a disguised reflex of modern sentiment.” We cannot read Morris’s Greeks either as stock classical characters or as “just like us” in some vision of eternal

25 Baudelaire (1964) 13–14. For the whole argument see Prettejohn (2005) 102–9.

26 Pater (1868) 307. The essay, in shortened form and retitled “Aesthetic Poetry,” was included in the first (1889) edition of *Appreciations* (Pater (1913)). Throughout this section I am indebted to a lecture by Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Homer and Beauty in Victorian Art.”



human nature; instead the “early-ness” of Greek myth is interpreted through the earliest stirrings of the Renaissance in late medieval art and literature. By thus setting the medieval against the Hellenic Morris creates “a world in which the centaur and the ram with the fleece of gold are conceivable,” even if “anything in the way of an actual revival must always be impossible.”<sup>27</sup> The medievalism makes it evident that Morris’s project is neither “a mere reproduction”<sup>28</sup> nor one of unthinking modernization, erasing the difference between past and present. What we have in Morris is a kind of “double-distancing”<sup>29</sup> (like the multiple-distancing in the passage from Pater’s essay on Morris quoted above), and the friction between the various historical layers evoked allows the construal of our relationship to the past to be made in a sophisticated way.

For a classicism to be successful, in Pater’s terms, it needs to be significant in both its classical aspect and in its modern one, not to subsume either one into the other. Indeed modernity can be modern only insofar as it postdates or supersedes the past, the embedded traces of which are, indeed, the very proof of modernity. Thus Pater shows us we cannot have antiquity without modernity; such a view would give us a classics that does not belong merely to the past, but to the present and the future.<sup>30</sup> In general Pater’s thought is always dialectical in just this way. He is drawn to historicism, attracted by the absence within it of absolute values, the underlying relativism; but he also believes in the “House Beautiful,” as something that exists in the present and is (at least potentially) alive for us, not in the form of some coercive Western tradition but as a sodality of artists who communicate across the ages.<sup>31</sup> So Pater’s friend, the poet Swinburne, could communicate with his “brothers”<sup>32</sup> from other centuries:

27 Pater (1868) 300, 305, 307.

28 Pater (1868) 300.

29 I borrow this term from Michael Ann Holly, who used it in a response at the conference “‘Old Fancy or Modern Idea’?: Re-inventing the Renaissance in the 19th Century,” organized by the University of Plymouth Art History Research Group and held in the Victoria and Albert Museum, 10–11 September 2004.

30 Cf. Prettejohn (2002) 121, on the paintings of Alma-Tadema: “the naïveté is ours, if we believe that a representation of the past can magically conjure the represented era without any participation of the representing one, and even more so if we thought that our own conceptions of the Roman past were somehow more ‘objective’ than those of the Victorians.”

31 Pater (1913) 241: “that *House Beautiful*, which the creative minds of all generations – the artists and those who have treated life in the spirit of art – are always building together, for the refreshment of the human spirit” (from the Postscript). Pater anticipates, though in a much less authoritarian form, the arguments of T. S. Eliot’s famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), another key text for students of reception (Eliot (1951)).

32 His “sisters” too, among whom he numbered Sappho and Christina Rossetti.





historian B. G. Niebuhr called the *Lives* “a collection of silly anecdotes.”<sup>36</sup> Plutarch, it thus might seem, is exactly the kind of author who invites resuscitation through reception studies. Goldhill is primarily interested in what Plutarch shows us about being Greek in the Roman world, about cultural self-definition.<sup>37</sup> He does not seem to envisage the possibility that Plutarch could be truly alive again for us, other than as part of a purely historical inquiry. At one point he comments, “A modern reader *must* be bored by Plutarch”<sup>38</sup> – like so many of our current historicists Goldhill is, in his heart, a Hegelian, sharing Hegel’s belief in the relentless and progressive forward march of *Geist*. Goldhill concludes his discussion thus:

The title of this chapter posed the question “Why Save Plutarch?” not so that I can answer simply “because he is a good and interesting writer whose huge influence in pre-nineteenth-century Europe and America requires attention rather than ignoring, especially if writers of the stature of Rousseau, Shakespeare, Emerson are to be fully appreciated.” Rather, it is because this question opens up the issue of cultural value itself, and of our inevitable complicity with its construction.<sup>39</sup>

The trouble with this formulation is that, for such a purpose, countless other writers would do just as well. To my thinking Goldhill’s account ignores too much of what constitutes Plutarch’s special “virtue” (Pater’s word, in *The Renaissance*, for the unique aesthetic character of an artwork). As a result of that virtue, the distinctive quality of the *Lives* that held the imaginations of readers in the past, Plutarch at least once changed the world, as the scholar and literary critic Arthur Quiller-Couch, in a defense of the value of Greek, observed:

I warn my countrymen . . . that gracious as the old Greek spirit is, and, apt to be despised because it comes jingling no money in its pocket, using no art but intellectual persuasion, they had wiselier, if only for their skins’ sake, keep it a friend than exile or cage it. For, embodying the free spirit of man, it is bound to break out sooner or later, to re-invade . . . You may think this a fancy: but I warn you, it is no fancy. Twice the imprisoned spirit has broken loose upon Europe. The first time it slew over half of Europe an enthroned religion; the second time it slew an idea of monarchy. Its first access made, through the Renascence, a Reformation: its second made the French Revolution. And it made the French Revolution very largely (as any one who cares may assure himself by reading the memoirs of that time) by a simple translation of a Greek book – Plutarch’s *Lives*. Now Plutarch is not, as we estimate ancient authors, one of the first rank. A late Greek, you may call him, an ancient

36 I take all this fascinating information from Goldhill (2002) 246–7, 284.

37 Goldhill (2002) 261 and *passim*.

38 Goldhill (2002) 292.

39 Goldhill (2002) 293.

musical at close of day:

an easy garrulous tale-teller. That but weights the warning. If Plutarch, being such a man, could sway as he did the men who made the French Revolution, what will happen to our Church and State in the day when a Plato comes along to probe and test the foundations of both with his Socratic irony? Were this the last word I ever spoke, in my time here, I would bid any lover of compulsory “Natural Science” – our new tyranny – to beware that day.<sup>40</sup>

Quiller-Couch shares the dominant estimate of Plutarch of his time. But for some reader who dares break through the *Zeitgeist*, somewhere, who knows? Plutarch might yet change the world again. I fear too that, if we abandon a serious commitment to the value of the texts we choose for our attention and those of our students, we may end by trivializing reception within the discipline; already a classics student is far more likely to spend time analysing *Gladiator* than the *Commedia* of Dante. I find this trend worrying. This is not to decry the study of a wide range of cultural artefacts (there are many more good things in the world than the canon knows), and certainly not to criticize the study of film or even of popular culture. It is simply to say that we form ourselves by the company that we keep, and that in general material of high quality is better company for our intellects and hearts than the banal or the quotidian (often we use the latter, archly and somewhat cheaply, merely to celebrate our own cultural superiority). We need to believe in the value of what we do, and whatever we do we need to do it in full seriousness, not in any spirit of cynicism or condescension.

It is worth asking if the concept of “reception” today serves any useful purpose, now that the word’s power to provoke has largely subsided. Simon Goldhill thinks it “too blunt, too *passive* a term for the dynamics of resistance and appropriation, recognition and self-aggrandisement” that he sees in the cultural processes he explores.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps so, but it is worth remembering that reception was chosen, in place of words like “tradition” or “heritage,” precisely to stress the *active* role played by receivers. Reception can still serve the interests of a wider range of those receivers than classics has traditionally acknowledged, by recovering or rescuing diverse receptions. In that sense there could be said to be an egalitarian politics of reception. Lorna Hardwick talks of the power of such a classics to decolonize the mind<sup>42</sup> (though we should beware of complacency in that regard); certainly part of the potential virtue of reception is a commitment to pluralism. Yet we have to make choices amid the sheer diversity of the procedures and assumptions that reception embraces, or on occasion occludes. For some, reception is defined in terms of its postclassical subject matter, for others (including myself)

40 Quiller-Couch (1943) 192–3.

41 Goldhill (2002) 297; so too Hall (2004) 61.

42 Hardwick (2003a) 110.

it is a way of doing classics that is at odds with the positivism of much that is now labelled “reception.” I have argued throughout this introduction that reception involves the acknowledgement that the past and present are always implicated in each other. Others rather hope, through reception, to strip away accretions, and see antiquity for itself with greater clarity:

Although sharing with more familiar and traditional approaches to Classical scholarship a commitment to advancing collective understanding of Greek and Roman antiquity, this new approach is also quite distinct: it is set apart by its conviction that the ancient texts can only ever be truly understood in the social and cultural contexts which originally produced them if the layers of meaning which have become attached to them over the intervening centuries are systematically excavated and brought to consciousness . . . By considering how individual texts, authors, intellectual currents and historical periods have been “received” in diverse later contexts, this approach enhances the clarity with which texts can be seen when returned to their original producers, now separated, to an extent, from the anachronistic meanings imposed upon them.<sup>43</sup>

I have already given reasons against such an approach, and there are others. How could one ever know if one had truly stripped away all the layers of “anachronism” in this process of intellectual ascesis? And, even could one do so, what would be left might turn out to be rather evidently impoverished. If we strip away all “accretions,” we don’t get the “original truth” but something much more insubstantial (we need a method for “adding” something as well as acknowledging losses). We shall not, for example, find a “real” Sappho if by that we mean one for which there is convincing corroborating evidence from her own time (we have anyway only about 3 percent of what she wrote). We may sneer at Wilamowitz’s view that Sappho ran a girls’ school; but is a widespread current view that she created “a cohesive social group for women” any less transparently ideological?<sup>44</sup> Our self-implication is more than usually self-evident in such cases, and why should we seek to pretend otherwise? Whatever the case in Archaic Lesbos, the certainty is that Sappho is now a lesbian (as Emily Wilson wittily puts it, “it is only a slight exaggeration to say that Baudelaire, through Sappho, invented modern lesbianism, and Swinburne brought it to England”). Should we give up all this richness – in exchange for little or nothing?<sup>45</sup>

43 Rowe et al. (2003) 3; so too Hardwick (2003a) 3: “This kind of study has proved valuable in that it has enabled people to distinguish more readily between the ancient texts, ideas and values and those of the society that appropriated them.”

44 See Wilson (2004) 27–8 (the subsequent quotation is from p. 27).

45 For Sappho’s reception see, *inter alia*, DeJean (1989); Dubois (1995); Greene (1996); Prins (1999); Reynolds (2001); Reynolds (2003), though much still remains to be uncovered.

What's in a name? In the years to come people may, or they may not, find "reception" a useful label for certain scholarly activities. But the issues raised by Jauss's *Rezeptionsästhetik* will not readily go away. Two things above all I would have classics embrace: a relaxed, not to say imperialist, attitude towards what we may study as part of the subject, and a subtle and supple conception of the relationship between past and present, modern and ancient. Then classics could again have a leading role among the humanities, a classics neither merely antiquarian nor crudely presentist, a classics of the present certainly, but also, truly, of the future.

# I

## Provocation

### *The Point of Reception Theory*

William W. Batstone

All meaning is constituted or actualized at the point of reception.<sup>1</sup> This, the founding claim of reception study, seems hardly contestable. After all, what meaning is there that is not already a received meaning? As a result, reception study can include perspectives as diverse as those of the editors of this volume: the one finds in reception theory both the enrichment of meaning by the reception of the past and the liberation of meaning for the individual reader in the present;<sup>2</sup> the other finds in the practical history of Virgil's reception a distortion of Virgil's original vision and brings historicist and methodological tools to bear on that reception in order to correct our understanding.<sup>3</sup> Both approaches, however, seem to me to share a strong commitment to the subjectivity of the reader. Whether we are correcting the omissions and suppressions of readers like Goebbels and Dryden or imagining the redemption of the text in a reader who accepts her historicity, commits herself to the text, and finds the "Love that moves the sun and the other stars,"<sup>4</sup> we seem to have assumed something about reading and reception that can bear further discussion, and what we have assumed is the point of reception. And in doing this the project has, I believe, often betrayed the point of reception theory. In other words, the project has become yet another effort to place ourselves above rather than in the complexity of reading and writing.

My interest in reception theory, then, is in the point of reception and how we might think about it within the same postmodern discourses that have directed our attention away from the *mens auctoris* and the "text itself" toward the historicity and biases that constitute our being in the world and our access to understanding. I can only offer a brief outline of some of the considerations that

1 Martindale (1993) 3.

2 Martindale (1993).

3 Thomas (2001).

4 Martindale (1993) 106.