

Lee Percy's Grammar of Our Civility offers an admirable account of the situation of classical studies in twenty-first-century America. Yet, living and teaching at the lower left-hand corner of the United States, I see things differently from those who work in the intellectual centers of the founding fathers, at schools and universities where the ecclesiastical foundations of the eighteenth-century once focused on training Protestant ministers, using the Hebrew Bible and Cicero as their basis for formation of citizen-leaders of an enlightened republic. My students come from families with mixed legacies, from Africa, Asia, from Southeast Asia and South Asia, from the Pacific Islands, from Latin America, Central America, Mexico, and indigenous American societies, as well as from Europe. They have their own heritages of civility and civilization. And I teach in a course that surveys the history of world civilizations, from prehistory to the present. In the quarter I teach on ancient civilizations, I teach not only ancient Greece and ancient Israel, but also Mesopotamia and Egypt, ancient India, and ancient China.

Percy's text, although a powerful diagnosis of what ails classical studies today, seems to me to offer a cure, making the study of ancient Greece and Rome once again the centerpiece of undergraduate education, that ignores all that the book itself argues. I will suggest that this proposal looks backward, to a time when classical studies was used as a gatekeeper for a ruling class that no longer exists in the same form, as Percy makes clear. Looking forward requires that we accept our place among a great range of civilities and civilizations, and that we no longer assume that we have privileged access to value, truth, and a superior form of civilization. Our students need to know their neighbors, to be cosmopolites, to read the Bhagavad-Gita as well as the Iliad, the Analects of Confucius as well as Sappho, to recognize that these other traditions have their importance in the new circumstances of the twenty-first century. I am not willing to argue that the west is best, that the perceived ideals of Western civilization should trump all else; this is ultimately a deeply conservative argument (duBois, Trojan Horses: Saving the Classics from Conservatives [New York, 2001]). Why should we insist on training all our students in Greek and Latin, to celebrate, for example, Athenian democracy, which excluded women, slaves and metics, even if we recognize these defects, while ignoring Ashoka's reign of tolerance in Buddhist India?

Much as I continued to be fascinated by ancient Greece, and to find endless satisfaction in writing, teaching, and thinking about the Greeks, I see no compelling reason why our students should privilege the Greeks and Romans above all others. I will argue that we should accept that ancient Greek and Roman civilization are part of global history, that they have had great influence on the development of Western civilization. But part of what is most interesting about current developments in classical studies is the contact between what were once seen as insular cultures and the rest of the world; I want to study the Hellenistic world, the complex negotiations among Pharaonic Egypt, the rest of Africa, the Maccabees, western Asia Minor, and Macedon, the societies of Asia Minor stretching to the Indus and beyond, the Silk routes, all that connects worlds once seen as separate.

Percy argues: "American Classics can become the type of intellectual praxis, a best way to think about the self in action and to educate American citizens in the negotiations of culture." (Percy, Grammar of Our Civility [Waco, Texas: 2005], 144) What is "a" best way? Why not study the Zhou dynasty in China, study Chinese, consider negotiating culture through another, radically different history? There are many "ways." I do not suggest that we should stop studying Greek and Latin, the Greeks and the Romans, especially through gender, class, colonization, slavery, ethnicity, but only that we see the Greeks and Romans as part of a world, a part that we treasure and know, but that has no magical power to civilize barbarians.