

**Miriam LEONARD**

**'The Uses of Reception': Derrida and the Historical Imperative**

This paper examines a particular methodological fault-line which has polarised reception studies within the classical academy. The 'textual' versus the 'historical' approach to the Classical Tradition underlies many of the most important questions facing classicists today.

Charles Martindale's celebration of the afterlife of classics *Redeeming the Text*, although distinctly heterodox in its conclusions, is paradigmatic of a branch of reception which sees the relationship between classical literature and its *Nachleben* as a dialogue between free-floating *texts*. Christopher Stray's study of the development of classics in the C19th and C20th *Classics Transformed*, on the other hand, is a masterful analysis of the academy *stricto sensu*, a narrative of curricula, examination papers and professorial appointments, of SCR anecdotes and fierce personal rivalries. But Stray pays little or no attention to the interpretations of antiquity which emerged from this turbulent institutional history. Conversely those who have devoted themselves to the textual reception of antiquity have given short-shrift to the historical dimension which Stray and others have insisted upon.

This paper maintains that these two perspectives can and *should* be performed side by side. It argues from an ethical/political perspective that the distance between past and present &ndash; in other words the historical dimension of reception &ndash; should be celebrated rather than erased in the encounter between modern reader and classical text. For it is precisely in this distance between antiquity and the present that a space for the political reading of (the) Classics is created.

It takes as its central example Derrida's reading of the *Antigone* in *Glas*. Or more precisely, Derrida's reading of Hegel's reading of the *Antigone*. Derrida shows how Antigone's exemplarity has become an ideological appropriation of the Hegelian text. Hegel's philhellenism, as Derrida reveals, is predicated on a radical anti-Semitism. Hegel's Greeks are in their very essence anti-Jews. Just as the exemplarity of Antigone becomes part of Hegel's political programme, so too Hegel's privileging of Greek culture is based on a violent ideological agenda.

In the Derridean reading, then, Hegel's textual appropriation of Sophocles cannot be kept separate from the political histories of antiquity and modernity. Even this most theoretically imbued of studies insists on the ethical and political imperative of remembering history in the encounter between modern reading and ancient text. This version is no more committed to predicating an 'original text' than even the most revisionist of literary histories, it rather reveals the necessity of coming clean about the ideological drive of the moment of reception. As such, Derrida's example has much to teach us classicists about the theoretical problems which arise from questioning the uses of reception.