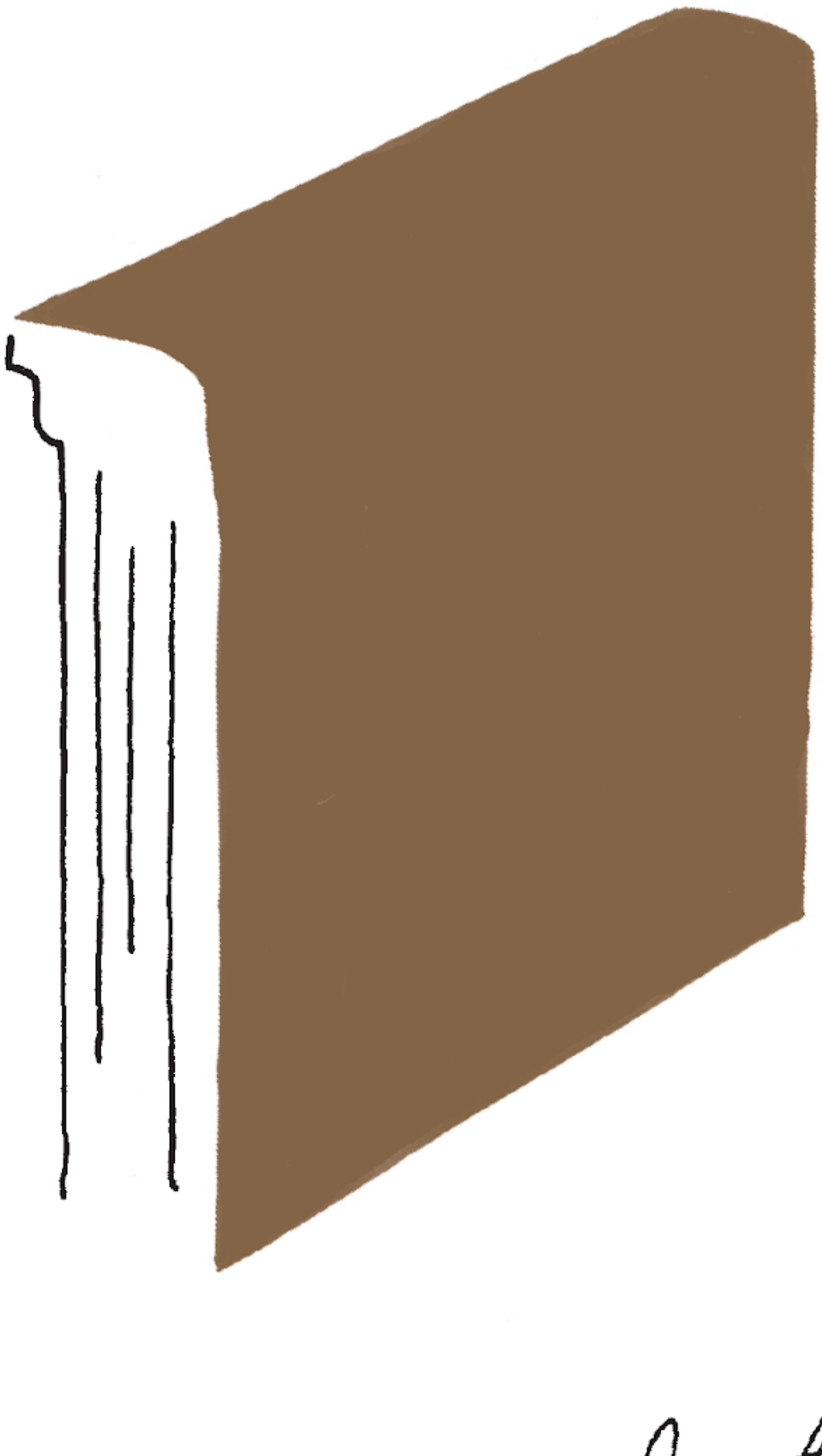
Calvino



Why Read the Classics?

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ITALO CALVINO

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Contents

Translator's Introduction

Eleven of the thirty-six essays in this book have appeared in English before.[1] The justification for retranslating those eleven pieces stems from the desire to provide an integral English version that corresponds exactly to the important posthumous anthology *Perché leggere i classici* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991). That volume represents a personal collection of essays on Calvino's classics, selected in consultation with the author's widow, and based on material that the author had set aside for some such future publication. Calvino's English readers now not only have access to a substantial and coherent sample of his literary criticism but can also gain an insight into what amounts to his personal canon of great classics. Some of the essays appearing here for the first time in English translation will be of particular interest to Calvino's readers in the Anglo-American world: no fewer than seven of them deal with major authors of texts in English (Defoe, Dickens, Conrad, Stevenson, Twain, James, Hemingway), while others contain substantial references to writers such as Sterne (Diderot), Shakespeare (Ortes), Dickens (Balzac) and Kipling (Hemingway).

One of several other insights that this collection offers is the omnivorous nature of Calvino's tastes in reading. Apart from the seven essays on texts in English, Italian literature naturally enjoys pride of place with ten essays, but there are no fewer than nine devoted to French works, four to classical authors from the ancient world, and two each to Russian and Hispanic writers.

The volume also provides an idea of how one of the twentieth century's greatest fiction writers developed as a literary critic, starting with early essays from his militant Communist period in the 1950s (on Conrad,

Hemingway, Defoe, Pasternak), covering his prolific and varied literary interests in the 1970s (English, Russian, French and Greco-Roman writers), right down to some of his final and finest essays written in the 1980s. The essays chart the development of an increasingly sophisticated literary critic, who was anything but provincial in his literary tastes: on the evidence of these essays, even if he had not become an internationally renowned fiction writer, Calvino would have been one of the most interesting essayists and critics of the twentieth century.

Why Read the Classics? also mirrors the fiction writer's own creative evolution, from neorealist to postmodernist, from Conrad and Hemingway to Queneau and Borges. Right from the outset he was particularly interested in literature in English: Stevenson and Kipling had been favourite authors in his childhood, and his university thesis on Conrad (completed while he was writing his first novel, in 1946–47) was a precocious study of the ideas, characters and style of the author of *Lord Jim*. As a writer of neorealist fiction, he was naturally deeply indebted to Hemingway, so it is no surprise to find that these two authors are the subjects of the earliest essays in this collection. During the 1950s, as his own fiction shifts from neorealism towards fantasy, Calvino moves away from twentieth-century authors: the essay on *Robinson Crusoe* is almost exactly contemporary with his longest, and most 'Robinsonian' novel, *The Baron in the Trees* (1957), and many of the episodes highlighted in Calvino's essay on Defoe resurface intertextually in his novel.

The 1963 essay on Gadda was written just at the time when a new literary avant-garde emerged in Italy which also had a profound effect on Calvino. Gadda's sense of the complexity of the world suited perfectly the mood of the author, who at that stage was turning his back on traditional realist fiction and embarking on the cosmicomical tales that were to confirm his international reputation as a major fantasist. These cosmic interests are reflected in the essays on Cyrano and Galileo: the latter, Calvino claimed in a famous polemic in the 1960s, was one of the most important Italian prosewriters ever.

Many of the 1970s essays in this collection are introductions to novellas or long short stories by authors such as James, Twain, Tolstoy, Stevenson and Balzac. This was part of an attractive initiative undertaken by Calvino in those years, the series he launched with Einaudi entitled 'Centopagine'. He always held a high aesthetic regard for brief texts (of no more than one hundred pages) which avoided the complexity and length of the novel. His

often declared admiration for eighteenth-century Enlightenment values is reflected in the essays on Diderot, Voltaire and Ortes, while his enthusiasm for classic nineteenth-century fiction is evident in the substantial contributions on Stendhal and Flaubert, and in the detailed analysis of *Our Mutual Friend*, which displays particular sensitivity to Dickens' style and to the comparative efficacy of rival Italian translations of the novel.

One final trend also evident here is worth noting: in the 1970s and 1980s not only does Calvino turn back to Italian classics such as Ariosto, but he also rereads a number of ancient texts, such as Homer, Xenophon, Ovid and Pliny. His creative writing in this period is also informed by this new aspiration towards classical qualities: in the central section of *Invisible Cities*, for instance, the city of Baucis explicitly recalls the myth in the central book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, discussed at length in the essay in this volume. Similarly the central definition of Pliny in the 1982 essay ('the measured movement of [Pliny's] prose . . . is enlivened by his admiration for everything that exists and his respect for the infinite diversity of all phenomena') throws interesting light on the creative work Calvino was composing at this same time: in one sense *Mr Palomar* (1983) is a modern, or post-modern, Pliny, its smooth prose encompassing his interest in all flora and fauna. Calvino's appetite for French literature also embraces contemporary writers such as Ponge and Queneau, the essay on the latter reflecting the Italian author's interest in that innovative blend of literature and mathematics that was characteristic of the French author and his friends in the OULIPO (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle); while Ponge's defamiliarisation of quotidian objects echoes Mr Palomar's attempt to see the universe with fresh eyes, whether it be waves on a beach, the sky at night, or the blades of grass in a lawn. The collection as a whole thus offers a kind of rear view into the everyday workshop of a great creative writer: what Calvino read was often metamorphosed creatively, intertextually, into what Calvino wrote.

Despite the variety of texts discussed here, and their suggestion of the author's evolution, there are important constants. There is an extraordinary consistency in his appreciation of those works that celebrate the practicality and nobility of human labour, a line that Calvino traces from Xenophon to Defoe and Voltaire before reaching Conrad and Hemingway. On the stylistic side, these essays demonstrate how Calvino consistently appreciated the five literary qualities that he regarded as essential for the next millennium: lightness (Cyrano, Diderot, Borges), rapidity (Ovid, Voltaire),

precision (Pliny, Ariosto, Galileo, Cardano, Ortes, Montale), visibility (Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert), multiplicity or potential literature (Borges, Queneau). Perhaps, then, a further definition of what a classic is could be added to the fourteen definitions put forward in the elegant title essay, 'Why Read the Classics?': 'A classic is a work which (like each of Calvino's texts) retains a consciousness of its own modernity without ceasing to be aware of other classic works of the past.'

Any quotations from non-English original texts about which Calvino is writing are my own translations, either based on the original 'classic' text or on the translation used by Calvino. Given the wide-ranging nature of these essays I have of course been helped by a number of experts to whom I here express my deep gratitude: Catriona Kelly, Howard Miles, Jonny Patrick, Christopher Robinson, Nicoletta Simborowski, Ron Truman.

Christ Church, Oxford — Martin McLaughlin

Notes

1. They appeared in Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine. Essays*, translated by Patrick Creagh (London: Secker and Warburg, 1987), with the following titles: 'Why Read the Classics?'; 'The Odysseys Within *The Odyssey*'; 'Ovid and Universal Contiguity'; 'Man, the Sky, and the Elephant'; 'The Structure of *Orlando Furioso*'; 'Cyrano on the Moon'; '*Candide*: an Essay on Velocity'; 'The City as Protagonist in Balzac'; 'Stendhal's Knowledge of the "Milky Way" '; 'Guide to *The Charterhouse of Parma* for the Use of New Readers'; 'Montale's Rock'.

Preface

In a letter dated 27 September 1961 Italo Calvino wrote to Niccolò Gallo: 'As for collecting essays as occasional and disparate as my own, one should really wait until the author is either dead or at least in advanced old age.'

Despite this, Calvino did begin to collect his non-fiction in 1980, with the volume *Una pietra sopra* (*Closing the Door*), followed in 1984 by *Collezione di sabbia* (*Collection of Sand*). Subsequently he authorised for his overseas readership a selection which was the English, American and French equivalent of *Una pietra sopra*, but which was not identical to the Italian original: it included the essays on Homer, Pliny, Ariosto, Balzac, Stendhal and Montale, as well as the title essay of the present volume. Later still he modified some of the titles of these essays – and in one case, the article on Ovid, he added another page which he left in manuscript form – with a view to publishing them in a subsequent Italian collection.

In this volume the reader will find most of the essays and articles by Calvino on 'his' classics: the writers, poets and scientific authors who had meant most to him, at different stages of his life. In the case of twentieth-century authors, priority has been given to the essays on those writers and poets whom Calvino held in particular esteem.

Esther Calvino

Why Read the Classics?

Let us begin by putting forward some definitions.

1. *The classics are those books about which you usually hear people saying: 'I'm rereading . . .', never 'I'm reading . . .'*

At least this is the case with those people whom one presumes are 'well read'; it does not apply to the young, since they are at an age when their contact with the world, and with the classics which are part of that world, is important precisely because it is their first such contact.

The iterative prefix 're-' in front of the verb 'read' can represent a small act of hypocrisy on the part of people ashamed to admit they have not read a famous book. To reassure them, all one need do is to point out that however wide-ranging any person's formative reading may be, there will always be an enormous number of fundamental works that one has not read.

Put up your hand anyone who has read the whole of Herodotus and Thucydides. And what about Saint-Simon? and Cardinal Retz? Even the great cycles of nineteenth-century novels are more often mentioned than read. In France they start to read Balzac at school, and judging by the number of editions in circulation people apparently continue to read him long after the end of their schooldays. But if there were an official survey on Balzac's popularity in Italy, I am afraid he would figure very low down the list. Fans of Dickens in Italy are a small elite who whenever they meet start to reminisce about characters and episodes as though talking of people they actually knew. When Michel Butor was teaching in the United States a number of years ago, he became so tired of people asking him about

Émile Zola, whom he had never read, that he made up his mind to read the whole cycle of Rougon-Macquart novels. He discovered that it was entirely different from how he had imagined it: it turned out to be a fabulous, mythological genealogy and cosmogony, which he then described in a brilliant article.

What this shows is that reading a great work for the first time when one is fully adult is an extraordinary pleasure, one which is very different (though it is impossible to say whether more or less pleasurable) from reading it in one's youth. Youth endows every reading, as it does every experience, with a unique flavour and significance, whereas at a mature age one appreciates (or should appreciate) many more details, levels and meanings. We can therefore try out this other formulation of our definition:

2. *The classics are those books which constitute a treasured experience for those who have read and loved them; but they remain just as rich an experience for those who reserve the chance to read them for when they are in the best condition to enjoy them.*

For the fact is that the reading we do when young can often be of little value because we are impatient, cannot concentrate, lack expertise in how to read, or because we lack experience of life. This youthful reading can be (perhaps at the same time) literally formative in that it gives a form or shape to our future experiences, providing them with models, ways of dealing with them, terms of comparison, schemes for categorising them, scales of value, paradigms of beauty: all things which continue to operate in us even when we remember little or nothing about the book we read when young. When we reread the book in our maturity, we then rediscover these constants which by now form part of our inner mechanisms though we have forgotten where they came from. There is a particular potency in the work which can be forgotten in itself but which leaves its seed behind in us. The definition which we can now give is this:

3. *The classics are books which exercise a particular influence, both when they imprint themselves on our imagination as unforgettable, and when they hide in the layers of memory disguised as the individual's or the collective unconscious.*

For this reason there ought to be a time in one's adult life which is dedicated to rediscovering the most important readings of our youth. Even if the books remain the same (though they too change, in the light of an

altered historical perspective), we certainly have changed, and this later encounter is therefore completely new.

Consequently, whether one uses the verb 'to read' or the verb 'to reread' is not really so important. We could in fact say:

4. *A classic is a book which with each rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading.*

5. *A classic is a book which even when we read it for the first time gives the sense of rereading something we have read before.*

Definition 4 above can be considered a corollary of this one:

6. *A classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers.*

Whereas definition 5 suggests a more elaborate formulation, such as this:

7. *The classics are those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed.*

This applies both to ancient and modern classics. If I read *The Odyssey*, I read Homer's text but I cannot forget all the things that Ulysses' adventures have come to mean in the course of the centuries, and I cannot help wondering whether these meanings were implicit in the original text or if they are later accretions, deformations or expansions of it. If I read Kafka, I find myself approving or rejecting the legitimacy of the adjective 'Kafkaesque' which we hear constantly being used to refer to just about anything. If I read Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* or Dostoevsky's *The Devils* I cannot help reflecting on how the characters in these books have continued to be reincarnated right down to our own times.

Reading a classic must also surprise us, when we compare it to the image we previously had of it. That is why we can never recommend enough a first-hand reading of the text itself, avoiding as far as possible secondary bibliography, commentaries, and other interpretations. Schools and universities should hammer home the idea that no book which discusses another book can ever say more than the original book under discussion; yet they actually do everything to make students believe the opposite. There is a reversal of values here which is very widespread, which means that the introduction, critical apparatus, and bibliography are used like a smoke-screen to conceal what the text has to say and what it can only say if it is left

to speak without intermediaries who claim to know more than the text itself. We can conclude, therefore, that:

8. *A classic is a work which constantly generates a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it, but which always shakes the particles off.*

A classic does not necessarily teach us something that we did not know already; sometimes we discover in a classic something which we had always known (or had always thought we knew) but did not realise that the classic text had said it first (or that the idea was connected with that text in a particular way). And this discovery is also a very gratifying surprise, as is always the case when we learn the source of an idea, or its connection with a text, or who said it first. From all this we could derive a definition like this:

9. *Classics are books which, the more we think we know them through hearsay, the more original, unexpected, and innovative we find them when we actually read them.*

Of course this happens when a classic text 'works' as a classic, that is when it establishes a personal relationship with the reader. If there is no spark, the exercise is pointless: it is no use reading classics out of a sense of duty or respect, we should only read them for love. Except at school: school has to teach you to know, whether you like it or not, a certain number of classics amongst which (or by using them as a benchmark) you will later recognise 'your' own classics. School is obliged to provide you with the tools to enable you to make your own choice; but the only choices which count are those which you take after or outside any schooling.

It is only during unenforced reading that you will come across the book which will become 'your' book. I know an excellent art historian, an enormously well-read man, who out of all the volumes he has read is fondest of all of *The Pickwick Papers*, quoting lines from Dickens' book during any discussion, and relating every event in his life to episodes in Pickwick. Gradually he himself, the universe and its real philosophy have all taken the form of *The Pickwick Papers* in a process of total identification. If we go down this road we arrive at an idea of a classic which is very lofty and demanding:

10. *A classic is the term given to any book which comes to represent the whole universe, a book on a par with ancient talismans.*

A definition such as this brings us close to the idea of the total book, of the kind dreamt of by Mallarmé. But a classic can also establish an equally powerful relationship not of identity but of opposition or antithesis. All of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thoughts and actions are dear to me, but they all arouse in me an irrepressible urge to contradict, criticise and argue with him. Of course this is connected with the fact that I find his personality so uncongenial to my temperament, but if that were all, I would simply avoid reading him; whereas in fact I cannot help regarding him as one of my authors. What I will say, then, is this:

11. *'Your' classic is a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it.*

I do not believe I need justify my use of the term 'classic' which makes no distinction in terms of antiquity, style or authority. (For the history of all these meanings of the term, there is an exhaustive entry on 'Classico' by Franco Fortini in the *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, vol. III.) For the sake of my argument here, what distinguishes a classic is perhaps only a kind of resonance we perceive emanating either from an ancient or a modern work, but one which has its own place in a cultural continuum. We could say:

12. *A classic is a work that comes before other classics; but those who have read other classics first immediately recognise its place in the genealogy of classic works.*

At this point I can no longer postpone the crucial problem of how to relate the reading of classics to the reading of all the other texts which are not classics. This is a problem which is linked to questions like: 'Why read the classics instead of reading works which will give us a deeper understanding of our own times?' and 'Where can we find the time and the ease of mind to read the classics, inundated as we are by the flood of printed material about the present?'

Of course, hypothetically the lucky reader may exist who can dedicate the 'reading time' of his or her days solely to Lucretius, Lucian, Montaigne, Erasmus, Quevedo, Marlowe, the *Discourse on Method*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Coleridge, Ruskin, Proust and Valéry, with the occasional sortie into Murasaki or the Icelandic Sagas. And presumably that person can do all this without having to write reviews of the latest reprint, submit articles in the pursuit of a university chair, or send in work for a publisher with an

imminent deadline. For this regime to continue without any contamination, the lucky person would have to avoid reading the newspapers, and never be tempted by the latest novel or the most recent sociological survey. But it remains to be seen to what extent such rigour could be justified or even found useful. The contemporary world may be banal and stultifying, but it is always the context in which we have to place ourselves to look either backwards or forwards. In order to read the classics, you have to establish where exactly you are reading them 'from', otherwise both the reader and the text tend to drift in a timeless haze. So what we can say is that the person who derives maximum benefit from a reading of the classics is the one who skilfully alternates classic readings with calibrated doses of contemporary material. And this does not necessarily presuppose someone with a harmonious inner calm: it could also be the result of an impatient, nervy temperament, of someone constantly irritated and dissatisfied.

Perhaps the ideal would be to hear the present as a noise outside our window, warning us of the traffic jams and weather changes outside, while we continue to follow the discourse of the classics which resounds clearly and articulately inside our room. But it is already an achievement for most people to hear the classics as a distant echo, outside the room which is pervaded by the present as if it were a television set on at full volume. We should therefore add:

13. *A classic is a work which relegates the noise of the present to a background hum, which at the same time the classics cannot exist without.*

14. *A classic is a work which persists as background noise even when a present that is totally incompatible with it holds sway.*

The fact remains that reading the classics seems to be at odds with our pace of life, which does not tolerate long stretches of time, or the space for humanist *otium*; and also with the eclecticism of our culture which would never be able to draw up a catalogue of classic works to suit our own times.

Instead these were exactly the conditions of Leopardi's life: living in his father's castle (his 'paterno ostello'), he was able to pursue his cult of Greek and Latin antiquity with his father Monaldo's formidable library, to which he added the entirety of Italian literature up to that time, and all of French literature except for novels and the most recently published works, which were relegated to its margins, for the comfort of his sister ('your Stendhal' is how he talked of the French novelist to Paolina). Giacomo satisfied even

his keenest scientific and historical enthusiasms with texts that were never exactly 'up to date', reading about the habits of birds in Buffon, about Frederik Ruysch's mummies in Fontenelle, and Columbus' travels in Robertson.

Today a classical education like that enjoyed by the young Leopardi is unthinkable, particularly as the library of his father Count Monaldo has disintegrated. Disintegrated both in the sense that the old titles have been decimated, and in that the new ones have proliferated in all modern literatures and cultures. All that can be done is for each one of us to invent our own ideal library of our classics; and I would say that one half of it should consist of books we have read and that have meant something for us, and the other half of books which we intend to read and which we suppose might mean something to us. We should also leave a section of empty spaces for surprises and chance discoveries.

I notice that Leopardi is the only name from Italian literature that I have cited. This is the effect of the disintegration of the library. Now I ought to rewrite the whole article making it quite clear that the classics help us understand who we are and the point we have reached, and that consequently Italian classics are indispensable to us Italians in order to compare them with foreign classics, and foreign classics are equally indispensable so that we can measure them against Italian classics.

After that I should really rewrite it a third time, so that people do not believe that the classics must be read because they serve some purpose. The only reason that can be adduced in their favour is that reading the classics is always better than not reading them.

And if anyone objects that they are not worth all that effort, I will cite Cioran (not a classic, at least not yet, but a contemporary thinker who is only now being translated into Italian): 'While the hemlock was being prepared, Socrates was learning a melody on the flute. "What use will that be to you?", he was asked. "At least I will learn this melody before I die."'

[1981]

The Odysseys Within *The Odyssey*

How many Odysseys does *The Odyssey* contain? The Telemachia at the beginning of the poem is really the search for a story that does not exist, the story that will become *The Odyssey*. The bard Phemius in Ithaca's palace already knows the *nostoi* (poems of return from Troy) of the other heroes. There is only one he does not know: the *nostos* of his own king; that is why Penelope does not want to hear him sing any more. And Telemachus sets off in search of this story and heads for the Greek veterans of the Trojan war: if he can get hold of the story, whether it has a happy or sad ending, Ithaca will at last emerge from the disordered, timeless, lawless situation in which it has languished for so many years.

Like all veterans, Nestor and Menelaus have lots to tell; but not the tale that Telemachus is looking for. At least until Menelaus comes out with his tale of fantastic adventure: after disguising himself as a seal, he captured 'the old man of the sea', Proteus of the thousand metamorphoses, and forced him to tell him both the past and the future. Proteus certainly already knew *The Odyssey* inside out: he starts narrating the adventures of Ulysses from the very point at which Homer starts, with the hero on Calypso's island; then he stops. At that point Homer can take over and provide the rest of the tale.

When he arrives at the court of the Phaeacians, Ulysses listens to a blind bard just like Homer who is singing the adventures of Ulysses; the hero bursts into tears; then he decides to start narrating himself. In his own account, he journeys as far as Hades to interrogate Tiresias, and Tiresias tells him the rest of his story. Then Ulysses meets the singing Sirens: what are they singing? Once more *The Odyssey*, possibly identical to the poem we

are reading, possibly very different. This 'story of Ulysses' return' already exists even before the return has been completed: it predates the actual events it narrates. Already in the Telemachia section we encounter the expressions 'to think of the return', 'to speak of the return'. Zeus did not 'think of the return' of the Atrides, Agamemnon and Menelaus (3. 160); Menelaus asks Proteus' daughter to 'tell [him] the story of the return' (4. 379) and she explains how to force her father to tell him (390), so that Menelaus can capture Proteus and ask him: 'Tell me how I can return over the sea teeming with fish?' (470).

The return must be sought out and thought of and remembered: the danger is that it can be forgotten before it even happens. In fact one of the first stops in the voyage recounted by Ulysses, amongst the Lotus-eaters, carries the risk of memory loss after eating the sweet fruit of the lotus. That the danger of forgetting should occur at the beginning of Ulysses' journey rather than at the end might seem odd. But if after coming through so many trials, and having borne so many afflictions Ulysses had then forgotten everything, his loss would have been even greater: he would not have derived any experience from his sufferings, or any lesson from what he lived through.

But on closer examination, this risk of forgetfulness is one which is threatened several times in books 9–12: first in the invitation of the Lotus-eaters, then in Circe's drugs, then again in the Sirens' song. On each occasion Ulysses must take care, if he does not want to forget in an instant . . . Forget what? The Trojan War? The siege? The Trojan horse? No: his home, his return voyage, the whole point of his journey. The expression used by Homer on these occasions is 'to forget the return'.

Ulysses must not forget the road he has to travel, the shape of his destiny: in short, he must not forget *The Odyssey*. But even the bard who composes an improvised poem, or the rhapsode who recites from memory sections of poems that have already been sung by others, must not forget if they want to 'tell of the return'; for someone who sings poems without the support of a written text, 'to forget' is the most negative verb in existence; and for them 'to forget the return' means forgetting the epic poems called *nostoi*, the highlight of their repertoire.

On this theme of 'forgetting the future', I wrote a few thoughts some years ago (in the *Corriere della sera*, 10 August 1975) which ended: 'What Ulysses saves from the power of the lotus, from Circe's drugs, and from the Sirens' song, is not just the past or the future. Memory truly counts – for an

individual, a society, a culture – only if it holds together the imprint of the past and the plan for the future, if it allows one to do things without forgetting what one wanted to do, and to become without ceasing to be, to be without ceasing to become.'

That article of mine elicited a response by Edoardo Sanguineti in *Paese sera* (now in his *Giornalino 1973–1975*, Turin: Einaudi, 1976), followed by a succession of further responses from each of us. Sanguineti objected in these terms:

> *We must not forget that Ulysses' journey is not a voyage out but a return journey. So we need to ask ourselves for a moment, just what kind of future is he facing? In fact the future that Ulysses is looking to is also in reality his past. Ulysses overcomes the seduction of a Regression because he is heading full tilt towards a Restoration.*
>
> *Of course one day, out of spite, the real Ulysses, great Ulysses, became the Ulysses of his Last Journey, for whom the future is not at all a kind of past, but rather the Realisation of a Prophecy – or even the realisation of a Utopia. Whereas Homer's Ulysses reaches a destination which is the recovery of his past as a present: his wisdom is Repetition, and this can be recognised by the Scar which he bears and which marks him forever.*

In reply to Sanguineti I pointed out (in the *Corriere della sera*, 14 October 1975) that 'in the language of myth, as in that of folktales and popular romances, every enterprise which restores justice, rights wrongs, and rescues people from poverty, is usually represented as the restoration of an ideal order belonging to the past; the desirability of a future that we must conquer is thus guaranteed by the memory of a past we have lost'.

If we examine folktales, we shall see that they present two types of social transformation, both with a happy ending: either from riches to rags then back to riches again; or simply from rags to riches. In the first type it is the prince who because of some misfortune is reduced to being a swineherd or some other lowly person, only to recover his royal status in the end; in the second type there is usually a youth who is born with nothing, a shepherd or peasant, someone who maybe even lacks courage as well, but who either through his own resources or helped by magic beings manages to marry the princess and become king.

The same schemes apply to fables with female protagonists: in the first kind the girl falls from a royal or at least privileged condition to being poor

through a stepmother's or stepsisters' jealousy (like Snow White and Cinderella respectively), until a prince falls in love with her and returns her to the top of the social ladder; in the second type there is a real shepherdess or country girl who overcomes all the disadvantages of her humble origins and ends up marrying royalty.

You might think that it is the second type of folktale that articulates most directly the popular desire for a reversal of roles and of individual destinies in society, while those of the first kind filter them into a more attenuated form, as the restoration of a hypothetical preceding order. But on closer reflection, the extraordinary fortunes of the shepherd or shepherdess reflect merely a consolatory miracle or dream, which will be broadly taken up by popular romances. Whereas the misfortunes of the prince or the queen connect the idea of poverty with the idea of *rights that have been trampled on*, of an injustice that must be avenged. In other words this second kind of tale establishes (on the level of fantasy, where abstract ideas can take the form of archetypal figures) something that will become a fundamental point for the whole social conscience of the modern age, from the French Revolution onwards.

In the collective unconscious the prince in pauper's clothing is the proof that every pauper is in reality a prince whose throne has been usurped and who has to reconquer his kingdom. Ulysses or Guerin Meschino or Robin Hood are kings or sons of kings or noble knights overtaken by misfortune who, when they eventually triumph over their enemies, will restore a just society in which their true identity will be recognised.

But is this still the same identity as before? The Ulysses who returns to Ithaca as an old beggar whom nobody recognises is maybe not the same person as the Ulysses who set out for Troy. It was no accident that he had saved his own life by changing his name to Nobody. The only one who instantly recognises him unprompted is his dog Argos, as if to suggest that the continuity of the individual is only evident in signs recognisable by an animal's eye.

For his old nurse the proof of Ulysses' identity is the scar made by a boar's tusk, for his wife it is the secret of the marriage bed made from the root of an olive tree, for his father it is a list of fruit trees: all signs that have nothing to do with the kingly, but rather link him with a hunter, a carpenter, a gardener. On top of these signs there is his physical prowess and his ruthless attack on his enemies; and above all the evidence of the

favour of the gods, which is what convinces even Telemachus, though only by an act of faith.

Conversely the unrecognisable Ulysses, on awakening in Ithaca, does not recognise his homeland. Athena herself has to intervene to reassure him that Ithaca really is Ithaca. There is a general identity crisis in the second half of *The Odyssey*. Only the tale guarantees that the characters and the places are the same characters and places as before. But even the tale changes. The story that Ulysses tells first to the shepherd Eumaeus, then to his rival Antinous and Penelope herself, is another, completely different Odyssey: it is a tale of wanderings which have brought the fictitious character which he pretends to be from Crete all the way to Ithaca, a tale of shipwrecks and pirates which is much more credible than the one Ulysses himself had told the King of the Phaeacians. Who is to say that this tale is not the real Odyssey? But this new Odyssey leads on to another Odyssey still: on his travels the Cretan wanderer had met Ulysses. What we have here then is Ulysses telling a tale about Ulysses wandering through countries where the real *Odyssey*, the one we regard as genuine, never says he wandered.

That Ulysses is a great mystifier is something that is well known long before *The Odyssey*. Was he not the person who came up with the famous trick of the Trojan horse? And at the beginning of *The Odyssey*, the first mentions of him occur in two flashbacks about the Trojan war narrated one after another by Helen and Menelaus: and they are two tales of deception. In the first he steals into the besieged city in disguise and carries out a slaughter; in the second he is inside the horse with his comrades and manages to prevent Helen from forcing them to speak and thus to reveal their presence.

(In both episodes Ulysses encounters Helen, first as an ally who is an accomplice in his disguise, but in the second she is an enemy, who impersonates the voices of the Achaeans' wives in a bid to get them to betray their presence. Helen's role is thus contradictory, but it always involves deception. By the same token Penelope too is presented as a deceiver, in her stratagem with the tapestry; Penelope's tapestry is a stratagem which is symmetrical to the Trojan horse, and which like the latter is a product of manual skill and counterfeit: thus the two qualities which distinguish Ulysses are also characteristic of his wife.)

If Ulysses is a deceiver, the whole tale he tells the King of the Phaeacians could be a tissue of lies. In fact these maritime adventures of his, packed

into four central books of *The Odyssey*, and containing a rapid series of encounters with fantastic beings (which appear in the folktales of all countries and epochs: the ogre Polyphemus, the four winds trapped in the wineskin, Circe's spells, the Sirens and sea-monsters) contrast with the rest of the poem, which is dominated by more serious tones, psychological tension, and the exciting climax that leads towards the conclusion: Ulysses' recovery of his kingdom and his wife from the clutches of the Suitors. Even in these other parts we find motifs common to folktales, such as Penelope's tapestry and the contest to shoot the bow, but we are closer to modern criteria of realism and verisimilitude: supernatural interventions here are limited to the appearance of the Olympian deities, and even they are usually concealed in human guise.

However, we must remember that these same adventures (notably the one with the Cyclops Polyphemus) are evoked in other parts of the poem. So Homer himself confirms their authenticity; not only that, but even the gods discuss them on Mount Olympus. Nor should we forget that Menelaus too, in the Telemachia, recounts a story (the encounter with the old man of the sea) of the same folktale-type as those narrated by Ulysses. All we can do is to attribute this diversity of fantasy styles to that fusion of traditions of different origin which were handed down by the ancient bards and came together in Homer's poem. The most archaic level of narrative would thus be in Ulysses' first-person account of his adventures.

Most archaic? According to Alfred Heubeck the opposite might have been the case. (See Omero, *Odissea*, Libri I–IV, introduction by Alfred Heubeck, text and commentary by Stephanie West (Milan: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla/Mondadori, 1981).)

Ulysses had always been an epic hero, even before *The Odyssey* (and also before *The Iliad*), and epic heroes, such as Achilles and Hector in *The Iliad*, do not have folktale adventures of that type with monsters and magic spells. But the author of *The Odyssey* has to have Ulysses absent from home for ten years: as far as his family and former comrades in arms are concerned he has vanished and can no longer be found. To do this he has to make him disappear from the known world, to cross over into another geographical space, into a world beyond the human one, into the Beyond (not for nothing do his travels culminate in a visit to the Underworld). For this voyage beyond the bounds of the epic the author of *The Odyssey* turns to traditions (which certainly are more archaic) such as the deeds of Jason and the Argonauts.

So the novelty of *The Odyssey* resides in having an epic hero like Ulysses pitted against 'witches and giants, monsters and eaters of men', that is in situations that belong to a more archaic kind of saga, whose roots are to be found 'in the world of ancient fable, and even in the world of primitive magic and Shamans'.

It is in this that the author of *The Odyssey* shows us, according to Heubeck, his true modernity, which makes him seem close to us, even our contemporary: if traditionally the epic hero had been a paradigm of aristocratic, military virtues, Ulysses is all these things but in addition he is the man who withstands the harshest of experiences, labours, pain, solitude. 'Certainly he too carries his audience into a mythical world of dreams, but this dream world becomes at the same time the mirror image of the real world in which we all live and which is pervaded by need and anguish, terror and pain, and in which man is immersed without escape.'

In this same volume Stephanie West, though she starts from entirely different premisses from Heubeck, ventures a hypothesis that would appear to confirm his argument: the hypothesis that there was an alternative *Odyssey*, another journey of return, preceding Homer's. Homer (or whoever the author of *The Odyssey* was), she argues, finding this tale of voyages too thin and pointless, replaced it with the fabulous adventures, but preserved traces of the earlier version in the account of the disguised Cretan. And in fact in the opening lines there is one verse which ought to epitomise the whole of the poem: 'He saw the cities and came to know the thoughts of many men.' What cities? What thoughts? This line seems to apply more to the voyages of the false Cretan . . .

However, as soon as Penelope has identified her husband in the bedroom which he has now repossessed, Ulysses starts talking again of the Cyclops, the Sirens . . . Perhaps *The Odyssey* is the myth of all voyages? Perhaps for Ulysses-Homer the distinction between truth and falsehood did not exist; he simply recounted the same experience now in the language of reality, now in the language of myth, just as for us even today each journey we undertake, big or small, is still an *Odyssey*.

[1983]

Xenophon's *Anabasis*

Reading Xenophon's *Anabasis* today is the nearest thing to watching an old war documentary which is repeated every so often on television or on video. The same fascination that we experience when watching the black and white of a faded film, with its rather crude contrasts of light and shade and speeded-up movements, emerges almost spontaneously from passages such as this:

> *They completed another fifteen parasangs in three days, every day through deep snow. The third day was particularly terrible, because of the North wind blowing against them as they marched: it raged all over the area, destroying everything and freezing their bodies . . . During the march, in order to defend their eyes from the glare of the snow, the soldiers put something black in front of them: against the danger of frostbite the most useful remedy was to keep moving the feet, never staying still and especially removing one's boots at night . . . A group of soldiers, who had been left behind because of these difficulties, saw not far off, in a valley in the middle of the snow-covered plain, a dark pool: melted snow, they thought. In fact the snow had melted there, but because of a spring of natural water, which rose nearby, sending vapours up to the sky.*

But it is difficult to quote from Xenophon: what really counts is the never-ending succession of visual details and action. It is difficult to locate a passage which epitomises entirely the pleasing variety of the text. Maybe this one, from two pages before:

> *Some Greeks, who had moved away from the camp, reported having seen in the distance what looked like a massive army, and many fires lit in the night. When they heard this, the commanders thought it unsafe to remain bivouacked in separate quarters, and once more made the soldiers regroup. The soldiers then all camped together again, especially as the weather seemed to be improving. But unfortunately, during the night so much snow fell that it covered the men's armour, the animals, and the men themselves huddled on the ground: the animals' limbs were so stiff with the cold that they could not stand up; the men delayed before standing up because the unmelted snow lying on their bodies was a source of heat. Then Xenophon bravely got up, stripped and started to chop wood with an axe; seeing his example, one of the men got up, took the axe from his hand and continued with the chopping; others got up and lit a fire; and all of them greased their bodies, not with oil, but with unguents found in the local village, an oil made from sesame-seeds, bitter almonds and turpentine, and lard. There was also a perfumed oil made of the same substances.*

The rapid shift from one visual representation to another, and from those to an anecdote, and from there again on to a description of exotic customs: this is the texture of the backdrop to a continuous explosion of exciting adventures, of unforeseen obstacles blocking the way of the itinerant army. Every obstacle is overcome, usually, by some piece of cunning on Xenophon's part: every fortified city that has to be captured, every enemy that takes the field to oppose the Greeks in open battle, every fjord to be crossed, every bit of bad weather – all of these require a piece of brilliance, a flash of genius, some cleverly thought-out stratagem on the part of this narrator-protagonist-mercenary leader. On occasions Xenophon appears to be one of those heroes from children's comics, who in every episode manage to survive against impossible odds; in fact, just as in those children's comics, there are often two protagonists in each episode: the two rival officers, Xenophon and Cheirisophus, the Athenian and the Spartan, and Xenophon's solution is always the more astute, generous and decisive one.

On its own the subject matter of *The Anabasis* would have been ideally suited to a picaresque or mock-heroic tale: ten thousand Greek mercenaries are hired under false pretences by a Persian prince, Cyrus the Younger, for an expedition into the hinterland of Asia Minor, whose real aim was to oust Cyrus' brother, Artaxerxes II; but they are defeated at the battle of Cunaxa, and now leaderless and far from their native land, they have to find a way

back home amidst very hostile peoples. All they want is to go back home, but everything they do constitutes a public menace: there are ten thousand of them, armed, but without food, so wherever they go they ravage and destroy the land like a swarm of locusts, and carry in their wake a huge following of women.

But Xenophon was not the type of writer either to be tempted by the heroic style of the epic or to have a taste for the grim and grotesque aspects of a situation such as that. His is a precise record written by an army officer, a kind of log-book containing all the distances covered, geographical reference points and details of the vegetable and animal resources, as well as a review of the various diplomatic, strategic and logistical problems and their respective solutions.

The account is interspersed with 'official statements' from high command, and speeches by Xenophon either to the troops or to foreign ambassadors. My classroom memory of these rhetorical excerpts was one of great boredom but I think I was wrong. The secret in reading *The Anabasis* is not to skip anything, to follow everything point by point. In each of those speeches there is a political problem, regarding either foreign policy (the attempts to establish diplomatic relations with the princes and leaders of the territories through which the Greeks have to pass) or internal politics (the discussions between the Greek leaders, with the predictable rivalry between Athenians and Spartans etc.). And since the work was written as a polemic against other generals, about the responsibilities of each person in managing that retreat, then this background of overt or merely covert polemic can only be elicited from those rhetorical pages.

As an action writer Xenophon is a model. If we compare him with the contemporary writer who is his nearest equivalent – Col. T. E. Lawrence – we see how the skill of the English writer consists in surrounding events and images with an aura of aesthetic and even ethical wonder that lies like a palimpsest beneath the factual surface of the prose; whereas in the Greek there is nothing beneath the exactness and dryness of the narration: the austere military virtues mean nothing other than austere military virtues.

Of course there is a kind of pathos in *The Anabasis*: it is the anxiety of the soldiers to return home, the bewilderment of being in a foreign land, the effort not to get separated, because as long as they are still together they carry their own country within them. This struggle of an army to return home after being led to defeat in a war that was not of their making and then left to their own devices, a struggle which is now only to carve out a

way home away from their former allies and former enemies, all of this makes *The Anabasis* similar to one strand in recent Italian literature: the memoirs written by Italian Alpini troops on their retreat from Russia. This analogy is no recent discovery: as far back as 1953 Elio Vittorini, launching what was to be a classic of this type of literature, *Il sergente nella neve* (*The Sergeant in the Snow*) by Mario Rigoni Stern, defined it as 'a little *Anabasis* in dialect'. And in fact, the chapters about the retreat through the snow from Xenophon's *Anabasis* (the source of the passages quoted above) are full of episodes which could have been taken entirely from Rigoni Stern's book.

One characteristic of Rigoni Stern and of the best Italian writing on the retreat from the Russian front is that the narrator-protagonist is a fine soldier, just as Xenophon was, and he discusses military action with competence and commitment. For them, as for Xenophon, in the general collapse of the more pompous ambitions, military virtues go back to being virtues of practicality and solidarity against which can be measured the ability of each man to be useful not only to himself but also to the others. (It is worth recalling here Nuto Revelli's *La guerra dei poveri* (*The War Declared by the Poor*) for the passion and frenzy of the disillusioned officer; as well as another fine book, unjustly forgotten, *I lunghi fucili* (*The Long Rifles*) by Cristoforo M. Negri.)

But the analogies stop there. The memoirs of the Alpini stem from the clash between an Italy that was now humble and had come to its senses, and the madness and massacres of all-out war. In the memoirs of a general from the fifth century BC, the contrast is between the role of locust-like parasites to which the Greek army of mercenaries had been reduced and the exercise of the classical virtues – philosophical, civic, military virtues – which Xenophon and his men try to adapt to these new circumstances. And in the event this contrast has none of the heart-rending tragedy of Rigoni Stern's book: Xenophon seems to be sure of having succeeded in reconciling the two extremes. Man can be reduced to a locust but can apply to this condition of locust a code of discipline and decorum – in a word, 'style' – and consider himself satisfied; man is capable of not even discussing for a minute the fact that he is a locust but only the best way of being one. In Xenophon we find already delineated, with all its limitations, the modern ethic of perfect technical efficiency, of 'being up to the job', of 'doing your job well' quite independently of what value is put on one's actions in terms of universal morals. I continue to call this ethic modern

because it was modern when I was young, and it was the lesson we derived from so many American films, as well as from Hemingway's novels, and I was caught between adherence to this totally 'technical', 'pragmatic' ethic, and awareness of the void that lay beneath it. But even today, when it seems so different from the spirit of our times, I find that it did have its positive aspects.

Xenophon has the great merit, in moral terms, of never mystifying or idealising his or his men's position. If he often displays an aloofness or aversion towards 'barbarian' customs, it must also be said that 'colonialist' hypocrisy is completely foreign to him. He is aware of being at the head of a horde of parasites in a foreign land, and that the 'barbarian' peoples whose lands they have invaded are in the right not his men. In his exhortations to his soldiers he never fails to remind them of their enemies' rights: 'You have to bear in mind something else. Our enemies will have time to rob us, and will have good reason for ambushing us since we are occupying their property . . .' In this attempt to give a certain 'style' or rule to this parasitical movement of greedy and violent men amidst the mountains and plains of Anatolia resides all his dignity: not tragic dignity, but rather a limited dignity, fundamentally a bourgeois dignity. We know that one can easily succeed in endowing the basest actions with style and dignity, even when they are not dictated as these were by a state of necessity. The Greek army, creeping through the mountain heights and fjords amidst constant ambushes and attacks, no longer able to distinguish just to what extent it is a victim or an oppressor, and surrounded even in the most chilling massacres of its men by the supreme hostility of indifference or fortune, inspires in the reader an almost symbolic anguish which perhaps only we today can understand.

[1978]

Ovid and Universal Contiguity

> *In the high heavens there is a roadway, which can be seen when the sky is clear. It is called the Milky Way, and it is famous for its whiteness. Here the gods pass by on their way to the palace of the great Thunderer. On the right and left sides of the road, with their doors open, stand the entrance halls of the nobler gods, always filled with crowds. The more plebeian deities live scattered about elsewhere. The more powerful and famous gods have settled their own household gods here, giving directly onto the road (. . . a fronte potentes / caelicolae clarique suos posuere penates). If the comparison did not seem irreverent, I would say that this place is the Palatine area of the mighty heavens.*

This is Ovid at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*, introducing us to the world of the celestial gods. He begins by bringing us so close to that world as to make it identical to the Rome of his day in terms of its urban topography, its class divisions, its local customs (the *clientes* calling in every day), and even in terms of religion: the gods themselves have their own Penates in the houses they inhabit, which means that the lords of the heavens and the earth in turn pay homage to their own little domestic gods.

Providing such a close-up does not necessarily mean diminishing or ironising: this is a universe in which space is densely packed with forms which constantly swap size and nature, while the flow of time is continually filled by a proliferation of tales and cycles of tales. Earthly forms and stories repeat heavenly ones, but both intertwine around each other in a double spiral. This contiguity between gods and humans – who are related to the gods and are the objects of their compulsive desires – is one of the