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WHY CLASSICS ENDURE

POR QUE OS CLÁSSICOS PERDURAM

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore why classics are designated as "classics" and why they continue to endure. I argue that classics are not merely relics of antiquity but living expressions of human wisdom that transcend time and culture. While rooted in the literary, philosophical, and artistic traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, classics persist because they contain universal truths about the human condition. The relevance of classics lies in their ability to serve as patterns for living—a *specimen vivendi*. I explain that literature and films function as contemporary channels for transmitting classical wisdom, enabling succeeding generations to encounter timeless and timely truths in accessible forms. Hence, their endurance depends on our commitment to preserve, practice, and reinterpret them in dialogue with the present.

Keywords: Classics, endure, wisdom, *specimen vivendi.*

Resumo: Neste artigo, exploro por que os clássicos são designados como «clássicos» e por que continuam a perdurar. Defendo que os clássicos não são meras relíquias da antiguidade, mas expressões vivas da sabedoria humana que transcendem o tempo e a cultura.

Embora enraizados nas tradições literárias, filosóficas e artísticas da Grécia e Roma antigas, os clássicos persistem porque contêm verdades universais sobre a condição humana. A relevância dos clássicos reside na sua capacidade de servir como padrões de vida — um *specimen vivendi*. Explico que a literatura e os filmes funcionam como canais contemporâneos para transmitir a sabedoria clássica, permitindo que as gerações seguintes encontrem verdades intemporais e oportunas em formas acessíveis. Portanto, a sua permanência depende do nosso compromisso em preservá-los, praticá-los e reinterpretá-los em diálogo com o presente.

Palavras-chave: Clássicos, perdurar, sabedoria, *specimen vivendi.*

It is no accident that "classics" are so called. Throughout history, specific persons and their works have been crowned with the laurel wreath—"canonized," as it were, by their admission to the canon of the great works of human civilization. The classics are "classic" because they stand the test of time, and this steadfast relevance is rooted in their ability to encapsulate universal truths about the human condition. Hence why classics are both *timeless* and *timely*—a double criterion that can hardly be said of other fields of learning. The classics are not only a passion for the stuff of ancient Greece and Rome, but contain the products of human genius that are preserved and passed on. It is entirely different from the mere fascination with antiquity, which might only breed a hollow interest in the things of time past—that is to say, classics should not be equated with antiquarianism.

The other extreme is to mindlessly apply "classics" to contemporary humanistic products—which we are seeing with ever greater frequency—ultimately opposing the original association of classics with antiquity. While qualifying some works as "classics" may risk diluting the acquaintance between classics and antiquity, expanding the term to include modern works allows us to explore how timeless

qualities persist in new forms. We often hear that such and such films, this and that book, or these authors are "contemporary classics" or, perhaps more unsettling for some, "twenty-first-century classics." No doubt the association between classics and antiquity is vital and this delicate situation is not without contention. Nevertheless, I believe that the dilution of the term "classics," contrary to intuition, is advantageous for communicating why classics are important. Diversifying "classics" to refer beyond the context of antiquity may prove successful in helping us identify the essential features that make them important. After all, works outside the scope of antiquity may still embody the wisdom sought there.

We cannot take for granted the way we use and apply "classics." Often it is said that classics refer to works that *endure*; that is why there is a canon of great works—tried and tested sources of wisdom. Such works are "canonized" because each generation has validated those products as faithful reflections of human life. There is a reason the classics endure, a reason why they continue to be highly regarded, and even venerated, by new generations. But how is this constructed, and why is there a canon of classical works in the first place? The easy way out is to discount it as a mere social construct—which is to some extent true. But beyond that, the works that form this canon stand out; they endure because they please in youth and sometimes even more intensely in senility.[1] And that makes it a classic.

Ever since experiencing the power of classics to move the mind and heart, to stir us to live with greater intensity, it has been my resolute belief that the classics invite us to live the good life, better yet, the beautiful life—or what the Greeks called *kalos*.[2] The study of classics is not so much about the study of "the world of ancient Greece and Rome." Granted, that is a big part of it. But more importantly,

1 College of Arts and Sciences 1995: 47; Newman 1962: 84.

2 Jaeger 1946: 4.

the classics constitute the pursuit of wisdom in and through the inexhaustible wells of wisdom which, for the most part, are found in the works of classical antiquity. It is one thing to study the ancient world, and another to *pursue wisdom* (in the fullest sense of *sophia* and *sapientia*) through the study of antiquity.[3]

We know this from the example of Shakespeare. His acquaintance with classics, according to T. S. Eliot, was achieved not by reading them in their original language but through the vernacular.[4] He may not have been an expert in Greek, but he was without a doubt an expert in drama, a genre that originated in ancient Greece. And centuries after Shakespeare, we still anticipate who might match his literary genius and penetrating insights into human life. We also know that Thomas Aquinas did not know the Greek language, and yet we have yet to see a mightier intellect to best his mastery of Aristotle's thought and other Greek philosophers.[5] The point is that classics are not simply about one's fluency in Latin or Greek, or knowledge of the ancient civilizations of the Western world, or the archaeological evidence in support of this or that literary or artistic theory. Rather, it is about the *wisdom* in those things—for as Seneca said, "wisdom does not reside in letters," but in how the contents and values from the classical world are used to inform our lives.[6]

Cicero is a fantastic testimony to advance this claim. He revered Greece for the intellectual patrimony bestowed on Rome, for it was largely on account of Greece's literary, historical, artistic, and philosophical brilliance that Rome was what she was.[7] The veneration that Cicero's Rome had for Greek learning is quite similar to the veneration

3 Cf. Newman 1962: 94.

4 Eliot 1970: 149.

5 Bloom 1987: 376.

6 Seneca 2015: 315.

7 Cicero 1931: 398-9.

we now give to what we identify as classics. Interestingly, Cicero remarked that Greek learning provided a *specimen humanitatis*, a pattern of humanity, a model of humanness—an aspect of classics that is wanting in serious consideration.[8] And if I may appropriate Cicero's eloquent summary of the power of classics to serve as a pattern of humanity, I should add more daringly that the classics are a *specimen vivendi*, a pattern for living, a model for how or how *not* to live.

Hence, the classics are not just a source for being *humanior*, "more human," or even *humanissimus*, "more highly humanized." Our potential to be "more" is predicated on the way we live life. And it is precisely the classics that reflect those works that are sensitized to helping us be more human. Hence, classics are not so much about antiquity *as such* or how classical sources of wisdom provide exemplars of humanity. It is more concerned with the study of the great civilizations that continue to flow through our veins: in our everyday speech, manner of living, social dealings, political organization, and culture and traditions. Ancient Greece and Rome live on, persist, and endure, not as an abstract concept—like *humanitas*—but as realities that continue to shape the here and now—and this is *vivendi*, living.

Since classics serve as patterns for living, we can see them likewise as a kind of "laboratory" where human life is tried in the most diverse circumstances, allowing us to taste vicariously certain experiences we would not have otherwise experienced. The classics show themselves as the best and most reliable "experiments" on human life. The history of ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, shows us the life and morals of those people which remain palpable today. In classical philosophy, we know from many examples that thoughts and words send ripples to the furthest centuries into the future—and this daunting realization urges us to be responsible for what we think and say. The same goes for archaeology, philology, and in a special way art

8 Cicero 1892: 18[2].

and literature, since they are more intense forms of experimentation. They experiment with human life, as it were, by creating imaginative representations of it as in novels and drama—and now in the art of the twenty-first century, film.

These humanistic genres of communication—novels and films—are the most potent vehicles for transmitting the relevance of classics in the contemporary world. It is easy to say what I have been saying about the classics as if they are an intangible reality with no bearing on life. But they do, and indeed they must have. Many things depend on the classics, and one of them is the humanities. The humanities, particularly literature (novels) and art (films), draw from classics to ensure that their content and values resonate in a new context, which ultimately makes timeless lessons accessible, and therefore timely, to contemporary audiences. Since ancient Greece, stories (the *mythos*) have been the adequate channel for transmitting truths about human life—and that is how the classics were passed on to the present. The most popular classics, it must be remembered, are those stories transmitted through generations.

I do not claim the classics consist simply of the literary and artistic works of antiquity. It is the whole of ancient Greece and Rome, from politics, culture, customs, agriculture, and governance—from the political system down to the tasks of ordinary life: these constitute "classics." Yet how can these be transmitted when knowledge is sought with increasing immediacy, where a few keystrokes will yield our desired results? In response to this situation, we turn to the humanities because handing down wisdom has been the great contribution of literature, and now film, as a channel for perpetuating and preserving classics. Literature creates narrative visions and films create visual narratives, and they both constitute an abbreviation—a drama, a story—of human life.[9] More, these humanistic modes are already sensitized to classics,

9 Marías 1996: 67.

for it was in the current of antiquity that such channels emerged, beginning with the epic poetry of Homer and the dramas of Aeschylus.

We must remember that the classics are the stage in which the greatest dramas of human life are performed, and the force of their truths continues to echo through the centuries. Love, strife, nobility, guilt, triumph, defeat, freedom, and duty, among others—these are the great ideas enshrined in the classics, and nowhere else are they best exemplified, and indeed embodied, than in the classics. They are—to recall Matthew Arnold's felicitous words—"the best that has been known and thought in the world."[10] It is in the canon of classical works, especially the literary and artistic products, that we witness the pursuit of authenticity and intensity.

The perennial relevance of classics is maximally expressed in the idea that they give wisdom for living. To be sure, there are a host of other reasons to justify classics in today's situation, but the most compelling ones have been highlighted. It is clear that the great works of the greatest minds of mankind *endure* and stand the test of time, and are therefore rightly crowned as classics. These classics are venerated, admired, and canonized across cultures and generations because they serve as a *specimen vivendi*. Classics should be further recognized, through the adequate humanistic channels of novels and films, as the most refined laboratories in which the drama of human life unfolds, for they have yielded the best experiments that issue wisdom that resonates in the minds and hearts of people of all ages. However, these ideals we identified about classics can only be achieved within the collaborative nature of preserving, perpetuating, practicing, and pursuing classics. Only when we continue to dialogue about what constitutes "the best that has been known and thought in the world" will the classics remain a testament to the brilliance of the human person and the dignity of the human condition.

10 Arnold 2018: 702.

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