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THE CLASSICS IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY—  
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

It seems appropriate, at a time of fundamental change in South Africa, to look at the place of the Classics in this society. Focussing on a representative figure from the past, the paper reviews the life and work of the well-known South African Classicist, T.J. Haarhoff. It is suggested that his work (spanning four decades, c. 1920–1960) can serve as an inspiration and a warning to Classics in South Africa. Haarhoff was ahead of his time in insisting on a broad interdisciplinary approach to Classics; but there is in his work a contradiction between the broad humanism he advocates and an undercurrent of racism to be found in both his political and classical writings. The final section of the paper argues that in future efforts will have to be made to bring more Black students into Classics, and that the emphasis in the teaching of the subject will have to fall more on material in translation than on texts in the original Greek or Latin.

At a time of fundamental change in South Africa—when the country has its first democratic government and a new Constitution—it seems right to reflect on the place of the Classics in our society, on the role it has had in the past, has now, and may have in the future. This paper will not rehearse facts and figures concerning the numbers of candidates taking courses in Latin, Greek, Classical Civilization or Ancient History in South African schools and Universities; its intent is rather 'political', in the broad sense. Since the work of Michel Foucault, it is hardly possible to regard any discipline as purely 'academic'.<sup>1</sup> All disciplines, including Classics, are—implicitly or explicitly—involved in the relations of power that exist between different groups within a society. I believe it is important that we

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1. See especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, English transl., New York 1977.

see and recognize this, so that we can understand as clearly as possible the place of our subject in South African society.

## I

We would not be Classicists if we did not believe that we have something to gain by studying the past. So I should like to address my topic by first looking back at how it was dealt with by a significant Classicist of the earlier part of this century, a founder member and former Honorary President of the Classical Association of South Africa (CASA), Theodore Johannes Haarhoff. (It seems appropriate, too, to re-examine Haarhoff's work, since 'Multiculturalism in Antiquity', the theme of the 1997 CASA Conference, was one of his central concerns.) Part of the reason why I have chosen to concentrate on Haarhoff is that he was, in a sense, a representative figure. An excellent scholar, he was equally at home in Afrikaans and English, and he tried to harmonize and to bring together the best in the cultural and academic traditions of both groups. The description of Haarhoff's writings that follows will be critical in the sense that it will attempt to separate the good elements from the bad, to see what value and what warnings those writings may still hold for us. I shall give a fair amount of attention to Haarhoff's political views, and I make no apology for doing so, for the following reasons. Haarhoff himself made no distinction between his role as a Classicist and his role as citizen of South Africa. In his writings on Classical subjects he frequently commented on politics; and in his political writings he drew freely on the Classical world for comparison and contrast.

But first, a few words about the man.<sup>2</sup> T.J. Haarhoff was born the son of a Dutch Reformed minister in the Western Cape town of Paarl in 1892. In his own words, he was an 'Afrikaner of Afrikaans-Huguenot descent, whose family [had] lived in South Africa since about 1750.'<sup>3</sup> He received an excellent, cosmopolitan training in the Classics at the Universities of Berlin, Oxford and Amsterdam. The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, appointed Haarhoff to its Chair of Classics in 1922, and he

2. Strangely, the *South African Dictionary of National Biography* contains no entry on Haarhoff. My sources for his life are his own writings; a file 'T.J. Haarhoff' in the Macmillan Historical Collection of the African Studies Library of the University of Cape Town, which contains a few newspaper-cuttings on Haarhoff; A. Petrie, 'Professor T.J. Haarhoff—an appreciation', *A Class* 1 (1958) 9–13; and the brief sketch in Bruce K. Murray, *Wits, the Early years 1896–1939*, Johannesburg 1982, 146–8. Useful surveys of the teaching of the Classics in South Africa, which touch on the work of Haarhoff, include F. Smuts, 'Die Klassieke in Suid Afrika 1930–1976', *Akroterion* 21.4 (1976) 11–21; and W.J. Henderson, 'South Africa: Greek and Latin Philology', in G. Arrighetti *et al.* (edd.), *La philologia greca e latina nel secolo XX*, Pisa 1989, vol. 2, 823–51.
3. T.J. Haarhoff, *Race problems in South Africa. The Spiritual Principle and its Practical Application* (Burge memorial lecture, delivered to Westminster school, Nov. 1952, published as a 22-page pamphlet), London 1952, 3.

remained in the post for 35 years, until his retirement in 1957. Haarhoff played an active role in many spheres. He championed the cause of Afrikaans language and literature, and was a considerable poet in that language; he was a governor of the South African Broadcasting Corporation and a director of its journal, *Forum*; he was South African representative to UNESCO. The breadth of his scholarly interests is shown by the fact that he was at one time a lecturer in English at the University of Cape Town, and was offered the Chair of Afrikaans and Nederlands at the same university. He was also offered the Rectorship of the University College of the Orange Free State in 1944, but was forced to refuse, due to political opposition from the Nationalists and the Broederbond.<sup>4</sup> Haarhoff died in 1971.

A bibliography of Haarhoff's writings,<sup>5</sup> compiled in 1968, reveals the wide spectrum of his interests. Under headings ranging from 'Classics' to 'Racial and national co-operation' and 'Occult sciences' it lists several hundred items, including books, journal-, magazine- and newspaper-articles, and many poems.

Haarhoff describes his outlook on life as 'humanism which I have tried to link with the Holism that General Smuts found in the field of biology.'<sup>6</sup> Haarhoff in his writings constantly urges that we 'see things steadily and see them whole.' He deplores the compartmentalizing of our experience, and argues against narrow specialization in education. As far as the Ancient World was concerned, Haarhoff especially admired Vergil, for his ability to acknowledge the humble individual phenomenon while at the same time adopting a cosmic perspective.

In politics Haarhoff belonged to an 'old liberal Cape tradition',<sup>7</sup> and was through and through a Smuts man. He looked back with nostalgia to the period of coalition government which brought together English and Afrikaner interests: 'For six years, during the co-operation of Smuts and Herzog, there was a halcyon period of real South Africanism . . .'<sup>8</sup> In terms of the White politics of his time Haarhoff viewed himself as a moderate, as someone who tried to steer a middle course between the Scylla of apartheid ideology and the Charybdis of radical ideas of non-racialism—the latter, he believed, were fostered by European outsiders who come to South Africa

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4. See Murray (above, note 2) 147.

5. C.S. McCleery, *The Works of Theodore Johannes Haarhoff, a Bibliography* (typescript thesis for Diploma in Librarianship, University of the Witwatersrand), Johannesburg 1968.

6. Haarhoff (above, note 3) 3-4.

7. T.J. Haarhoff, *Why not be Friends? Natural Apartheid and Natural Friendliness in South Africa* (pamphlet, 20pp.), Central News Agency, n.d., but c. 1957, 11.

8. Haarhoff (above, note 3) 6.

'and tell . . . the natives that they have rights which in the normal course of events they would never have dreamed of claiming.'<sup>9</sup>

Haarhoff consistently viewed the South African situation in the light of the Ancient World. In his writings the English (in relation to the Afrikaners) become Greeks, perhaps at times aloof and arrogant, but sophisticated, urbane possessors of an old rich literary culture; while the Afrikaners become Romans, deeply rooted in the soil, shrewd, perhaps sometimes too stubborn and inflexible, but filled with the vigour and energy of a 'young' nation—Haarhoff is very fond of the metaphor—, the bearers of a language that has great potentialities as the instrument of a new literature.<sup>10</sup> Greek and Roman had combined to produce a new Greco-Roman culture, and Trojan and Italian in the *Aeneid* had put aside their enmity to create a new civilization:

So in South Africa if we follow the wisdom of Vergil, the traditions, both English and Dutch, will remain (hostility and contempt in the past have borne their bitter fruits) and, on the basis of the Voortrekker *virtus*, will grow a more comprehensive character that will be loyal, as *pietas* demands, to its particular language and culture, but will also share in a larger South Africanism. . .<sup>11</sup>

Haarhoff's version of Classical humanism, and his 'South Africanism', seem to me to combine great strengths and great weaknesses—from both of which, I think, we can learn something. On the positive side one cannot but feel sympathy for his deep and genuine love of Classical, Afrikaans, English and European culture, and for his tireless efforts to inspire this love in others. There is something admirable, too, in a broad humanism which refuses to draw rigid boundaries between different areas of study or of life:

More and more the neat compartments of earlier historians recede before the advances of archaeology and anthropology, and what was once an isolated fact is now seen to radiate affinities. In religion, as in art and literature, links are discovered that knit up former fragments. The linking up gives new meaning: something new is created.<sup>12</sup>

This insight led Haarhoff to oppose the sort of narrow concentration on language and grammar that still often passed for Classics in his day, and

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9. T.J. Haarhoff, *The Stranger at the Gate: Aspects of Exclusiveness and Cooperation in Ancient Greece and Rome, with some reference to Modern Times*, London 1938, 3.

10. See especially Haarhoff (above, note 9), section C.1 (pp. 294ff.), entitled 'Romans, Boers and Britons'; and T.J. Haarhoff, *Vergil in the Experience of South Africa*, Oxford 1931, *passim*.

11. Haarhoff (above, note 10) 53.

12. Haarhoff (above, note 9) 327.

to take a larger view of antiquity; it led him also to constantly draw parallels between the Ancient World and the Modern.

Politically, too, one can admire Haarhoff's idealism, his vision of a country in which people could maintain their own cultural traditions while being tolerant of those of others, yet at the same time remain committed to a broader South African identity.

But through all this run a number of flaws—many of them belonging to his class, time and place, but flaws nevertheless. Just as we can learn from Haarhoff's strengths, so we can learn, too, from his weaknesses. In the first place, Haarhoff is sometimes so keen to draw analogies between past and present that he almost seems to conflate the two, or he forces his analogies to the point of incoherence. One baulks at the notion that the Greeks were the first Voortrekkers and 'die eerste Protestante',<sup>13</sup> and at the concept of a 'Roman-Voortrekker matron'.<sup>14</sup> Within the space of a few pages of *Stranger at the Gate*,<sup>15</sup> the English, who had earlier been Greeks to the Afrikaners' Republican Romans, now become simple Romans over against the theoretical 'French-Greek' type; but then again the English with their Empire are said to be like the imperial Romans, and so on. Haarhoff does not hesitate to essentialize, to talk about 'the Greek', 'the Roman', 'the Afrikaner', 'the Bantu', 'the Englishman', as if he is talking about real, concrete entities. He hardly seems aware that essentializations such as these almost always mask political moves of some kind.

In Haarhoff's work we witness, too, the failure of liberal ideals to measure up to political reality. For example, in his little book, *Die Klassieke in Suid-Afrika*, published in 1931,<sup>16</sup> he defines the ideal of Classical *humanitas* in terms that we cannot but admire, as follows:

Hierdie begrip sluit in wellevendheid en belangstelling in jou medemens, nie alleen omdat hy aan dieselfde familie of ras of volk behoort nie, maar ook omdat hy saam met jou onderworpe is aan dieselfde menslike lot. Dit sluit in medelye en verbeeldingskrag . . . 'n waardering van kuns en wetenskap en lettere sonder goedkope generalisasies oor die kuns of wetenskap van een of ander volk.<sup>17</sup>

*This concept includes courtesy and interest in your fellow man, not only because he belongs to the same family, race, or people, but also because he is, together with you, subject to the same human condition. It includes sympathy and imaginative power . . . an appreciation of*

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13. T.J. Haarhoff, *Die Klassieke in Suid-Afrika*, Pretoria 1931, 10, 13.

14. Haarhoff (above, note 10) 65.

15. See pp. 294–300.

16. Above, note 13.

17. Haarhoff (above, note 13) 30–31.

*art, science and literature, without cheap generalizations about the art or science of other peoples.*

And again, elsewhere: 'To us in South Africa [Vergil] would say that it is well to cultivate individual custom and character ... but that we should also seek out the universal spirit that makes us fundamentally one with others.'<sup>18</sup> These are fine sentiments, but in practice Haarhoff limits their application to people of Western culture. He quotes Voltaire with approval to the effect that 'The real and greatest distinction is that between the Europeans and the rest of the world'; and he sums up and dismisses in a paragraph the achievements of China, India, Egypt and Babylon.<sup>19</sup> His book, *The Stranger at the Gate: Aspects of Exclusiveness and Co-operation in Ancient Greece and Rome, with some reference to Modern Times*, London 1938, is dedicated 'To the Spirit of Racial Co-operation'; but it becomes clear as we read that the races meant are only the English and the Afrikaner.

The failure of liberal principles is especially apparent in what Haarhoff has to say about relations between Blacks and Whites. It is noticeable that his views seemed to grow harsher as Black resistance to White domination increased over the decades. In 1931 he wrote:

The theory of Stoicism tolerated no race-prejudice and Roman practice was enlightened on this point. The colour-prejudice that afflicts our modern world was unknown to the Imperium Romanum. Terence, the African, became the intimate of Rome's highest society: race does not damage a man's candidature even for the purple in the later Roman Empire.<sup>20</sup>

But in relation to Black people in his own time and country, Haarhoff's attitude (like that, of course, of most of his White contemporaries—and not only in South Africa) remained, at best, purely paternalistic: 'the Bantu are still to a large extent at the child-stage, they must be treated as children that we love, and not as children that we hate—children who may make a great and lasting contribution to South Africa.'<sup>21</sup> (One reflects ironically that, when these words were published, in 1931, Nelson Mandela was 10 years old.) Haarhoff cites repeatedly in different works the case of Alexander the Great who 'too hastily ... made his officers marry Persian wives ...',<sup>22</sup> the moral of this being, 'So, if you treat a Bantu in a way

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18. Haarhoff (above, note 10) 120.

19. Haarhoff (above, note 13) 11–12.

20. Haarhoff (above, note 10) 36–37.

21. Haarhoff (above, note 9) 300.

22. Haarhoff (above, note 3) 18.

that is too much in advance of what he is used to, he may misunderstand you and do things that call for police intervention.’<sup>23</sup>

From his standpoint of paternalistic liberalism, Haarhoff consistently opposed orthodox apartheid doctrine. But in the 1950s he published two pamphlets on race relations: *Race problems in South Africa. The Spiritual Principle and its Practical Application*, containing the text of the Burge Memorial Lecture, delivered to Westminster school, in London, in 1952;<sup>24</sup> and *Why not be Friends? Natural Apartheid and Natural Friendliness in South Africa*<sup>25</sup>—which show how severely limited his position is. In both pamphlets Haarhoff adopts the same tactics. He early on characterizes ‘the Bantu’ as inferior—which then, later, justifies the conclusion that we must guide and control them. Thus he repeats the idea I quoted earlier, that the Romans respected the playwright Terence, though he was an ex-slave and an African; but now he adds: ‘But of course circumstances were different: there was no surrounding sea of barbarism to threaten the established tradition’<sup>26</sup> (as, presumably, there *is* in South Africa). On the same page he talks of ‘primitive institutions such as witchcraft and ritual murder ... savage acts of cruelty ... hostile and barbarous tribes.’ In the other pamphlet ‘ritual murders’ are again cited as characteristic of ‘the Bantu’, with the addition, ‘There is even the background of cannibalism in some cases.’<sup>27</sup> This sort of crude racist generalization leads inevitably to the conclusion that ‘there are wild and primitive elements in the Native that must be educated and controlled; but, if we claim a superior civilization, that is our task ...’<sup>28</sup> The use here of Classical and European culture for political purposes is quite clear: in Haarhoff’s view it is possession of this culture that marks out Whites as superior and justifies their ascendancy over Blacks.

Finally, it is unsurprising in a scholar of Haarhoff’s generation that his writings, for all their idealistic universalizing, in fact assume as the norm the values and experience of an upper class European male. The feelings, thoughts and aspirations of that large part of the ancient and modern population which consists of women, and of people of low status, hardly come under his consideration.

## II

What of Classics in South Africa now and in the future? I dislike talking

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23. *Ibid.*

24. Above, note 3.

25. Above, note 7.

26. Haarhoff (above, note 7) 3–4.

27. Haarhoff (above, note 3) 10.

28. Haarhoff (above, note 7) 9.

about 'the survival of the Classics'—we should rather think in terms of 'the contribution of the Classics' to the academic enterprise. As I said above, I believe that Haarhoff was right to argue against the compartmentalization of knowledge. The boundaries between academic disciplines are in the end artificial things, having more to do with finance, administration and—let us admit it—the maintaining of power over a certain area of expertise, than with any real divisions in the intelligible world. To take this point a bit further. In the future it is going to become ever more difficult for Classicists—or for any other professional group—to remain 'gatekeepers' of a particular area of knowledge. Electronic forms of communication, especially the Internet, are making it ever easier, for anyone who wants, to gain access to archives of documents, and to pictorial and written sources for the ancient world, and even to courses of instruction in the ancient languages. In my view these are excellent, extremely healthy developments; as scholars we should be committed to the widest possible spread of knowledge. But in this new situation academics, including Classicists, will need to become much more facilitators and encouragers of learning, rather than purveyors of a fixed body of knowledge.

While the Latin requirement for Law remained in force in South Africa over the past decades, it made sense for Classics Departments to spend a lot of time and resources on language teaching. Now that the requirement has gone, I believe our emphasis must change. We should still make every effort to keep the Greek and Latin majors on the curriculum; a few students with good knowledge of the languages will always be needed, especially as teachers of the Classics in the next generation. But we shall have to concentrate the largest part of our efforts on teaching the history, literature, mythology, philosophy and art of antiquity through the medium of modern languages—which entails a change of perspective. Many Classicists, although they already teach such cultural courses, believe their 'real' teaching is done in the language courses. I believe we need to move away from this mindset, and to acknowledge openly that the cultural courses are now our priority.

But this presents special challenges. As soon as we move away from teaching Classics in a primarily philological way, and towards teaching, for example, ancient literature as *literature*, or ancient mythology as *mythology*, we have to engage with what contemporary literary, anthropological or cultural theory has to say about these areas. And that means learning from and working in co-operation with our colleagues in other disciplines. In fact this is already happening: departmental boundaries are starting to become more fluid in South African Universities, which are beginning to create new structures, such as Schools and Programmes, to bring together scholars with related interests for purposes of teaching and research. There are considerable opportunities for Classicists here; and I am aware of participation already by my colleagues in cross-departmental programmes



of Drama, Law, Language Studies, Theology, Oral Studies, Art History and Literary Theory.

Finally, to revert to the larger political question of the place of Classics in contemporary and future South Africa. It is, I think, obvious that one of our primary goals now must be to attract Black students to our subject, and to ensure that some of these students go on to postgraduate study and eventually become professional Classicists. If we cannot do this, if Classics remains the preserve of a White enclave, then it is hard to see a future for the subject in South Africa. Clearly, we cannot promote our subject among the majority of people in this country by appealing, as Haarhoff did, to 'our' cultural heritage, or by even suggesting that Classics conveys some sort of badge of superiority. We may well adopt Haarhoff's ideal of *humanitas* as a concept which includes sympathetic fellow-feeling and imaginative identification with others. But the ideal must be extended to embrace *all* people—of whatever race or gender—and not just those more-or-less like ourselves. And it will have to include the notion that people of European culture, who have the Classics as part of their heritage, have as much to learn from those of other cultures as vice versa. This will also mean that we shall have to openly acknowledge the ambiguous role Classics has often played in education in the past, its use as a 'cultural weapon' to control those branded as inferior.<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion: it was most appropriate that the 1997 CASA conference programme included two papers on the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott,<sup>30</sup> since his work grapples with the very question that we in South Africa face, namely, what are the uses of the Classics in a Third World, post-colonial, country?<sup>31</sup> Throughout his poetic *oeuvre*, up to and including his great epic, *Omeros*, Walcott remains thoroughly ambivalent in his attitude. He and his contemporaries at school—'solemn Afro-Greeks eager for grades'<sup>32</sup>—were steeped in the Classics, and he constantly views his experience in the light of classical examples; yet just as constantly he casts

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29. Cf. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London 1994, 235: 'The Greek classics served the Italian, French, and English humanists without the troublesome interposition of actual Greeks. Texts by dead people were read, appreciated, and appropriated by people who imagined an ideal commonwealth . . . In modern times, however, thinking about cultural exchange involves thinking about domination and forcible appropriation: someone loses, someone gains.'
  30. C.A. Malan, '“All that Greek manure under the green bananas”: multicultural elements in Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros*'; and B. Van Zyl Smit, 'Derek Walcott's *The Odyssey*: a Stage Version—the Mediterranean meets the Caribbean'.
  31. See my article, 'Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and the Classics', *Akroterion* 41 (1996) 93–102.
  32. Derek Walcott, 'Homecoming: Anse La Raye', quoted from *Poems 1965–1980*, London 1992, 100.

doubt on the validity of those examples. To quote just one instance, from his 1976 collection, *Sea Grapes* (Walcott is referring to the Cyclops):

and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough  
from whose ground-swell the great hexameters come  
to finish up, as Caribbean surf.

The classics can console. But not enough.<sup>33</sup>

I would suggest that Walcott's loving, but at the same time sceptical and self-questioning relationship to the Classics would be an appropriate one for us, now, in South Africa.

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33. Derek Walcott, 'Sea Grapes', quoted from *Poems 1965-1980*, London 1992, 125.

# ACTA CLASSICA



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