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Citation for published version (APA):

Van Steen, G. A. H. (2019). Can Modern Greek Encounters Help Classics Go Global and Become More Inclusive? *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 149(2, Supplement), 227-234.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/742084>

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“Who thought that he could change the world ...”: Can Modern Greek Studies Help Classics Go Global and Become More Inclusive?

Gonda Van Steen, Koraes Chair of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature, Department of Classics, and Director, Centre for Hellenic Studies, King’s College London

In 2018, I moved to King’s College London, where I joined the Department of Classics and Centre for Hellenic Studies. Prior to this transatlantic move, I had spent 28 years in departments of Classics in the United States and had seen the worlds and workings of private as well as public institutions of American higher education. The word that captures the transition best is the word “impact”—and impact that is inclusive and global in its focus. Where, when, how, and why do the Classics have impact? **Inclusive impact? And, significantly for me, do postclassical through Modern Greek Studies open up paths to secure, enhance, or even validate that impact? Can postclassical through Modern Greek Studies carry messages back to the field of Classics about how to think differently about inclusivity and a global outlook? My answer is yes, and allow me to explain below. Also, this quest for impact (rather than the US concept of “relevance”) is the part of British academia that I expect to travel west, providing a counterweight to the many aspects of the academic world in the United Kingdom that I recognize as direct or indirect results of US trends traveling eastwards. Brexit permitting, that is ...**

Impact is a guiding concept in light of the REF of 2021. **Welcome to an entirely new institutional vocabulary.** But we classicists are quick learners: REF stands for Research Excellence Framework (<https://www.ref.ac.uk/>).¹ The last UK-wide REF was conducted in

¹ The REF’s official website lists the following objectives:

The funding bodies’ shared policy aim for research assessment is to secure the continuation of a world-class, dynamic and responsive research base across the full

2014; the next ones are scheduled for 2021 and 2028. In these seven-year cycles, one thing is certain: the impact that our research projects, sorry “outputs,” has become increasingly more important. Department and research funding depend on it, as does academic prestige. Most importantly, impressive rankings and the ensuing funding streams allow departments to hire junior colleagues in the field in an increasingly demanding and difficult job market. That result alone makes the whole, complex exercise worthwhile and adds a very personal dimension to what could otherwise be perceived as a quantitative exercise.

But having impact is not just about reaching farther spatially or digging deeper into society and culture. Having impact, before demonstrating or producing evidence of impact, is and should be about changing attitudes and behaviors, to truly think more inclusively and more globally-minded. And here is where our field of Classics, and established academic environments altogether, still have a lot of work to do—where *we* have a lot to accomplish still. The ugly occurrence of a race-related incident at the 2019 professional meeting of the classicists and archaeologists in San Diego, held under the auspices of the Society for Classical Studies (SCS) and Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), tells us that we ourselves might well need to be counted among the hoped-for beneficiaries of life-altering impact for the betterment of society—and that we have not yet reached the best ways, contents or methods, to deliver such formative results. Reactions have been fast and furious, but have they been

academic spectrum within UK higher education. We expect that this will be achieved through the threefold purpose of the REF:

- To provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment.
- To provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the HE sector and for public information.
- To inform the selective allocation of funding for research.

transformative? The Society itself, as well as the affected department and colleagues promptly responded with a public statement:²

Over the past weekend at the national meeting of our major scholarly society, a member of this department was subjected to a racist verbal attack in a public forum. I write as chair to deplore and refute the sentiments directed against him and to commit our department to working to eliminate the conditions that make such incidents possible in the professional lives of colleagues in our, or any other, academic discipline.

—Andrew Feldherr

Helen Lovatt, Professor of Classics at the University of Nottingham, UK, rightly noted that racial discrimination tends to be more global than its solution(s). Her statement is particularly apt in light of the upcoming FIEC and Classical Association conference, to be held in London in early July of 2019 (<http://www.fiec2019.org/>):

We . . . deplore the racism that continues within our field, implicit and explicit, every day; it is our responsibility as Classicists to challenge our discipline’s racist history and the structural inequalities that persist today within Classics and academia more broadly. None of these problems are confined by national borders, and the UK community, including our organisations, has a long way to go in reckoning with their manifestations in our own country.

The joint statement issued by UK classical societies and posted on the FIEC /CA 2019 conference website is equally explicit:

² More information may be derived from the careful reading of <https://classicalstudies.org/node/31569>, a blog post by Sarah Bond dated 18 January 2019 and entitled “Blog: A Roundup of Reports, Reactions, and Reflections After the SCS Annual Meeting.” More reactions have since been added to this blog post and some have appeared elsewhere, all indicative of the fact that the last word on this issue has not been spoken or written yet.

Each of our associations and societies is committed to making Classics accessible to all. If we fail to do that our discipline is impoverished. Anyone whose words or actions make others feel excluded on grounds of their identity or race does not speak for UK Classics. We are committed to rejecting racist attitudes, and hope profoundly that members of minority groups will participate in Classics in increasing numbers in the future.

—Professor Roy Gibson, Chair of Council of the Classical Association

Professor Judith Mossman, President of the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies

Professor Tim Cornell, President of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies

But the bigger question is, what will be left of the statement, the good intentions, the incident's own and very damaging impact, by the time future professional meetings of the classicists come around?

In our evolving academic and international environment and as representatives of our field, we need to think harder about how to position ourselves better to have genuine and inclusive impact, even if we find ourselves sometimes doing mere damage control or just surviving. Our focus will have to be on institutional challenges as much as on intellectual inquiries. Many of us are struggling to learn how to navigate the changing institutional frameworks of the Humanities, of Classics Departments, Departments of Modern and Classical Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Departments of Mediterranean Studies, of International Studies, etc. Our universities are undergoing major administrative and structural consolidations in addition to curricular “streamlining,” and Classics undergraduate and graduate programs may get lost in the shuffle.

In Modern Greek Studies, itself housed in perhaps the broadest possible range of institutional departments and centers (such as Centers for Hellenic Studies), we were given an

(unasked for) head-start in navigating shifting institutional bases and portfolio “simplifications.” We have been forced to justify our existence for a much longer period of time now than the field of Classics has. We have learned, admittedly through trial and error, that to be inclusive is the only path forward: more than in Classics, the field of Modern Greek Studies has always been in danger of being relegated to Ethnic Studies or Area Studies, at best, and has thus been subject to shifting geopolitical priorities. We have come to recognize that mastering the language (not only Modern Greek but also the language of perceived cultural difference) means a lot, but it is not an exclusive key to belonging to the field. Writing as neohellenist now (and should I really have to switch hats?), the field of Modern Greek Studies can bring that hands-on knowledge and those negotiation skills back to the realm of Classics, which was, for the longest time, not subjected to similar disciplinary or existential threats. The good news is that threats and challenges of any kind have been known to hone strategies for impact and expansion by way of inclusivity. The field of Classics stands to benefit from looking for new allies and from pursuing new strategies, resourced externally as well as galvanized internally. Our focus may need to turn more regularly also to sheer practical or managerial recommendations and, yes, basic and fair rules for departmental survival and for dealing with challenges such as: teaching Classics in an era when enrollments in language courses and programs are shrinking in general; navigating technology-driven distance learning in language education; creating still personable history and culture classes that attract students from beyond our general student demographics; the possibilities and pitfalls of mass online and perhaps too “light” classical civilization courses; the Classics’ ongoing relationships with other disciplines and the oft-repeated temptation to perceive those fields as auxiliary to the all-encompassing and presumably more established sphere of Classics.

The field of Modern Greek Studies, or of Hellenic Studies if placed into a longer temporal spectrum, has plenty to offer when it comes to pondering strategies for survival and for

increasing impact and inclusivity. The field has been remarkably enduring and creatively idiosyncratic. It has also succeeded in the fraught business first of becoming, then of remaining itself. This steadiness in time, space, and quality has, nonetheless, often faced the threat of expansionist job descriptions that imply that any classicist with a tourist-type knowledge of Modern Greek or today's Greece can handle the teaching of the continuity aspect—of course—of Greek culture, the organization of the school's study abroad trips to Greece and thus of real-life engagement with the country and content of study, and even the relationships with the local and donor communities, which certainly appreciate even a courtesy knowledge of Modern Greek. About continuity, then, neohellenists themselves and those with a classical training and knowledge of the Byzantine millennium, especially, have actually been deconstructing continuities, even as they see value in topics of classical reception, again serving the mission of impact-driving and diversity-focused education. Indeed, the few scholars who have branched out from Classics to Byzantine and/or Modern Greek Studies have made critiquing the kinds of notions of Greek continuity that underpin a new kind of Greek nationalism central to their academic careers.

Impact is, however, less about research or process and all about change: what has really changed? Which changes can be affected first? Are the changes that are affected most easily or too easily still a measure of impact? **Modern Greek Studies** may well become Classics' best ally in the common mission of working change on larger publics, via lectures and events that draw in not necessarily the practitioners who are already in the field, but also those with the power or the potential to change public opinion or policy. Impact is, therefore, about significance as well as reach, about the longitudinal extent and the density and diversity of beneficiaries, about breadth, range, and multiplicity. Impact seeks many more and qualitatively stronger links between universities and local communities, in the hope that consistent understanding and action will forever replace incidents. The ideal environment of higher and

other education will house a community of engaged research professionals, who go about change with interdisciplinary and collaborative research methods and versatile teaching skills. The results will translate into larger public benefits, and some of the derived intellectual as well as communal benefits will return back to the researcher. Inclusive impact, even when inspired by the strategies at work in other disciplines, will then succeed in opening up creative spaces for enhanced and diverse public engagement, for exciting and thoughtful debate, consistent action, and ultimately changed behaviors. If that ideal is, for now, perhaps still a little too far out, there is still the brave refusal to give up when the buy-in from colleagues, administrators, students, or community members does not come about.

The Modern Greek poet and lyricist Nikos Gatsos (1911-1992), who tackled the problems of evil and injustice in many of his poems and songs, found the right words for the latter stance. Also, he conjured up a vast Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern landscape populated by peoples with long, intertwined histories and cultures, who had been living in close contact with each other and in proximity with nature and its challenges. This multi-ethnic landscape is one of famine, poverty, and uneven power relations but also one of solidarity across rank or religion, captured in a message that the preserved classical corpus has failed to express but that Modern Greek literature has dared to espouse. Gatsos's other world and world of others, crystallized in his poetic song known as "Goodnight, Kemal," does not belong to the Middle East, Classics, or even to Modern Greek Studies. Rather, Gatsos presents a nonnational hero, a Kemal without last name or proper territory, struggling to overcome economic and class divisions, which, more than borders and dogma, tear at harmony, happiness and at having impact.³ Gatsos's lyrics are infused with elements derived from Modern Greek folk poetry;

³ Gatsos's lyrics were put to a hauntingly beautiful musical score by another famous Modern Greek contemporary, the composer Manos Hatzidakis (1925-1994), who had launched earlier versions of related songs and compositions. It was in the lyrics of Gatsos, however, that the Greek version of this ballad-like song found its most persuasive expression, here provided in my own English translation.

they speak to melancholy, futility, and sacrifice at large but also to as yet unrewarded moral courage. They offer an apt reflection on—and pose a productive challenge to—today’s struggles in the Middle Eastern and Greek worlds, and in our attempt to study and teach them most inclusively:

Now listen to the story of Kemal,
a young prince from the East,
a descendant of Sinbad the Sailor,
who thought that he could change the world.
But bitter is the will of Allah,
and dark are the souls of men ...

Once upon a time in a place in the East,
the aqueduct was empty, the water stagnant.
In Mosul, in Basrah, by the old date palm,
are now bitterly crying the children of the desert.
But a young man from a royal clan and family
hears of this sorrow and heads over there.
The Bedouins look at him with sadness in their eyes,
but he swears by Allah that times will change.

Once the mighty learn of the young man’s fearlessness,
they go after him like fierce wolves and lions.

From the Tigris to the Euphrates, from earth to heaven,
they chase the renegade, try to catch him alive.
They pounce upon him, the hordes, like dogs in hot pursuit,
and they drag him to the caliph, to have the noose put around his neck.
That morning, the young man drank black honey, black milk,
before breathing his last on the gallows.

With two old camels and a red steed,
the prophet awaits him by the gates of paradise.
Now they walk hand in hand, clouds surrounding them,
while the star of Damascus keeps them company.
After a month, after a year, they see Allah enthroned before them,
who, from up high, tells the foolish Sinbad:
“You vanquished rebel, the times do not change:
it is with fire and the knife, always, that the world moves on.”

Goodnight, Kemal, this world will never change.

Goodnight ...

(Καλονύχτα, Κεμάλ, αυτός ο κόσμος δεν θα αλλάξει ποτέ.

Καλονύχτα ...)

