

The Classical Association Annual Conference: panel on Education for Sustainability

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On Thursday 8th April, 2010 Dr. Arran Stibbe, Ecolinguist and Senior Lecturer in English Language at the University of Gloucestershire, and Dr. Timothy Saunders, Lecturer and Researcher in Classical and British Studies at the University of Tromsø, Norway, gave presentations at a special panel on Education for Sustainability in Classics chaired by Catherine Steel of the Higher Education Academy HSC Subject Centre.

In his presentation, *Skills for a Changing World: Sustainability Literacy*, Dr. Stibbe described the fundamental role of education for sustainability in helping students prepare for the changing conditions of the 21st century, in particular the decline in the availability of cheap fossil fuels, ecosystem degradation and climate instability. He argued that transition and adaptation skills, as well as a reconsideration of values and identity is necessary to help prepare students to become effective social actors in “the post fossil fuels age”. Dr. Stibbe described how current education systems underpin industrial societies committed to unsustainable economic growth, and that the inevitable reduction in the capacity of the Earth to support human life as the end of the age of cheap fossil fuels comes will force societies, cultures and education systems to change dramatically. Sustainability literacy skills such as creativity, systems thinking, Ecocriticism, ecological intelligence and economic awareness will play an important role in helping students to build the communities and societies of the future in more sustainable ways, environmentally, socially and economically.

Dr Stibbe outlined several ways that Classics education can contribute to sustainability literacy. In particular, the study of the flourishing, decline and fall of previous civilisations can help prepare students for the imminent decline of industrial civilisation, raising important issues about both what happens when a way of life is no longer possible in the conditions of the world, and what needs to be preserved for the future. Another aspect is that the civilisations of Graeco-Roman antiquity existed before widely available, cheap fossil fuels, so there may be lessons to be learned in terms of the forms of technologies used in classical times and the social arrangements used to survive and thrive without fossil fuels. Of course, there are ethical issues about some forms of social arrangements such as slavery, and consideration of slave economies and equivalent exploitative economies in a globalised world can lead to both ethical and economic awareness. Above all, learning about the way that political, economic, and cultural systems interacted with the physical ecosystems that support life in classical times, and the consequences of this interaction, could help students gain the kind of ecological perspective that is essential in examining current predicaments.

Perhaps even more fundamental is the ability to interrogate classical thought to discover ways of thinking which have been inherited by industrial civilisation and underpin an unsustainable society. These ways of thinking need to be exposed and adapted or moved beyond, and perhaps there are ideas within classical thought that could help contribute to a more sustainable society. Catherine Steel commented that modern reflections on sustainability and consumerism seem to have points of contact with Roman anxiety about luxury - even though Roman writers who deal with the subject frame their anxieties in moral rather than economic or environmental terms. Luxury poses a threat to Roman society because it is a challenge to the virtuous behaviour of individuals - particularly Roman men, whose *virtus* - literally, 'manliness' - is threatened by the effeminising potential of rare and choice food, drink, sex and clothes. Lavish building projects undermine the normal order of the world - sea becomes land and building materials are transported across the Mediterranean to provide new and startling effects. A reaction to the threat of luxury can be seen in

both Epicureanism and Stoicism, which urge their adherents to free themselves from dependence on excessive consumerism.

Under the title of *EcoClassics*, Timothy Saunders outlined a number of ways in which thinking about sustainability might be applied to classical studies. Using as his examples the common characterisation of Homer and epic poetry as the sea, the representation of the Roman state as a farm, and the late 18th century German idea that to approach antiquity is analogous to approaching the natural world, Dr Saunders illustrated the tendency of classical culture to represent itself, and to be represented, in terms derived from nature. From this, he argued that both historical and contemporary understandings of the relationship between humankind and the environment have reflected in the past, and continue to inflect in the present and future, our understanding of our relationship towards antiquity. Within this context, contemporary concerns about ecology and sustainability become especially relevant. The consequence of any future interaction between classical studies on the one side and thinking about sustainability on the other, moreover, is likely to be mutually beneficial. From the perspective of the former, a new field of 'EcoClassics' can offer innovative ways of organising and addressing both classical antiquity and its tradition, whilst also helping the subject remain sustainable and relevant in modern-day society and education. What classical studies can in turn contribute to current thinking about ecology and sustainability, meanwhile, is a broader range of historical and cultural contexts, and a different set of paradigms for conceptualising and evaluating the interrelationship between, and mutual impact of, nature, culture and society.

A brief panel such as this could only scratch the surface of the potential of Classics education to contribute to helping students prepare for life in the 21st century. There is a very clear conclusion, however, and that is that classics does have enormous potential to contribute to education for sustainability and it is well worth exploring this area further.

Full notes and slides from Timothy Saunders' talk are included overleaf.

Timothy Saunders, University of Tromsø

Summary of the paper delivered at the UK Classical Association conference in Cardiff on April 8th, as part of the CSC-sponsored panel on sustainability

In my paper, I tried to suggest that there were several reasons for believing that the theme of sustainability could prove to be a valuable and productive one for classical studies.

Why the theme of sustainability could be a productive and valuable one for classical studies

A focus on nature is appropriate for classical studies because **there is a long tradition of using nature and the natural world to represent classical culture and its reception**

In particular, this tradition **connects up our *changing* understanding of antiquity with our *changing* understanding of the natural world**

[Slide 1]

In the first place, the theme of sustainability invites us to look again at nature and the natural world. This is an especially appropriate topic for classicists, not least because nature and the natural world have long been used to represent both classical culture itself and its subsequent reception.

Obvious examples of this include:

Representations of Classical Antiquity and the Classical Tradition in terms of the Natural World

- Homer and epic poetry as the sea



- The Roman state as a Roman farm



- Antiquity and modernity as nature and artifice



[Slide 2]

As the first and third of these examples testify nature has often served, both in classical antiquity itself and in classical studies, to structure and represent the interaction between the present and the past. An encounter with the ancient past, in other words, has commonly been characterised as an encounter with the natural world.

Virgil's well-known phrase *itur in antiquam siluam* and its re-use by his 20th century editor, for instance, illustrates very effectively how the same single, and seemingly simple, interaction with nature can serve to represent not only modernity's encounter with classical antiquity, but also a classical Roman encounter with its antiquity:

Going into an ancient wood

The phrase *itur in antiquam siluam* is used by Virgil in the *Aeneid* (6.179) to signal

- the going of the Trojans into a wood to find material for the funeral pyre of their companion Misenus
- his own venturing into the thickets of ancient cultural tradition to find material for his poem

It is also reused by Virgil's modern editor, Roger Mynors, at the very start of his edition to signal

- the dense forest of secondary literature through which he himself has had to pass in order to produce that edition

[Slide 3]

What all three of the examples given in slide 2 also highlight is how this tradition of representing antiquity in terms of the natural world connects up our understanding of the ancient Greeks and Romans with our understanding of nature.

Or, to be more precise, it establishes some kind of correlation between our *changing* understanding of antiquity and our *changing* understanding of nature:

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[Slide 4]

And it is the mobile character of this relationship – I am tempted to say the ‘evolutionary’ or ‘organic’ character of this relationship, but that would perhaps prejudice things too much – between our understanding of antiquity on the one hand and our understanding of nature on the other that dictates that any environmentally-inflected approach to classical studies should engage with as many different conceptions of nature as possible, including such modern notions as ‘ecology’ and ‘sustainability’.

After all, on each occasion on which this practice of representing an encounter with antiquity as an encounter with the natural world is brought into play, different historical understandings of the relationship between humans and their environment interact with – whether by reflecting or producing – different understandings of the ancient world.

I have tried to illustrate this in the table below by selecting two conceptions of nature from two periods of time and by indicating how these run parallel to (not to put it any more strongly than that) two different conceptions of antiquity and two different assumptions about what happens when modern people, modern ideas and so on try to project themselves into that world:

Two views of nature and antiquity

	Germany 1790s	21st century ecological thinking
View of nature	pristine, static, frozen, inaccessible	hybrid, evolving, responsive & relational
Aesthetic figure	framed painting	network or web
View of antiquity	complete, finite, closed off, irreproducible	alive, unfinished, persisting, interrelated, shifting
Effect of modernity's encounter with antiquity	re-enforces the boundary between us and them. To introduce modern ideas and interests into the classical world is to destroy that world.	mutually sustaining: each influences and alters the other through their ongoing interrelationship

[Slide 5]

In the left hand column, I have summarised ideas about antiquity and nature that were coming to the fore in Germany in the 1790s (these summaries are based primarily upon the essays 'On Naive and Sentimental Poetry' by Friedrich Schiller and 'On the Study of Greek Poetry' by Friedrich Schlegel).

In the right hand column, I have outlined the kinds of ideas about antiquity and nature that are likely to emerge from a more contemporary, ecological interpretation of those two things.

I would prefer to leave it an open question for now, though, whether in any given case it is the critic's understanding of nature that determines his or her understanding of antiquity; whether it is the other way around; or whether the two interact in an entirely mutual relationship to produce the readings they do whenever the encounter with antiquity is staged as an encounter with nature.

In any case, there would appear to be a close correlation between the ideas about nature that each tradition supports and its ideas about antiquity.

It does not seem surprising, for instance, that the view of nature as pristine, static and fragile, whose aesthetic analogue is commonly that of a framed painting with a clear dividing line between what is inside and what is outside, should accord with a view of antiquity as something finite, complete, closed off, and irreproducible; nor is it surprising that both these conceptions contribute to the idea that just as a pristine, static and fragile place in nature is liable to fracture and lose its true nature if

an alien body, such as a human being, intrudes upon it, so too is antiquity liable to fracture and lose its true nature whenever an alien body, such as a modern interpreter with modern presuppositions and interests, begins to interact with it.

By the same token, just as modern-day ecological thinking promotes a different way of thinking about nature, so too does it promise to offer a different way of describing the effect of the encounter between ancient societies and cultures on the one hand and their modern counterparts on the other.

An ecological construction of antiquity, I would suggest, would not think of it as something pristine, complete or fixed, for instance, but as something alive, evolving and capable of adaptation and change; something that is responsive to, rather than wrecked by, the introduction of alien, non-native elements such as modern ideas, modern perceptions and modern interests.

Now there is obviously a fair bit of metaphysics behind all this, so I have provided in slide 6 two quotations that I hope give these speculations some support.

The first comes from Ernst Haeckel's much-cited definition of 'ecology', which he produced when he coined the term in 1866.¹

The second is a more recent attempt to adapt this definition to describe cultural processes.²

Ecology and Ecocriticism

In 1866, Ernst Hæckel coined the term 'ecology' and defined it as:

the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature – the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment; including, above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact – in a word, ecology is the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions for the struggle for existence.

In 1996, Bonnie Marranca, like others before and since, sought to extend Hæckel's definition to contemplate the world of a work as an environment linked to a cultural (aesthetic) system. **She proceeded to argue that** texts themselves are always alive in the world, finding new life in the way they are absorbed into the works of artists through the ages and in the subjectivity of each reader/spectator. A text, then, can be considered as an organism, and a collective of texts, images or sounds an ecosystem.

[Slide 6]

¹ In his book *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*.

² Bonnie Marranca (1996) *Ecologies of Theater: Essays at the Century Turning*, John Hopkins University Press. Page xiv.

What I have illustrated so far is just one area in which the theme of sustainability can give a new focus and momentum to the study of classical culture and its reception.

There are, however, many others and in slide 7 I have given three broad structural reasons why a focus on sustainability and environmental thinking could be of considerable benefit to both teaching and research in classical studies.



[Slide 7]

In slide 8, meanwhile, I have suggested what the field of EcoClassics might look like and have listed some of the key questions that teaching and research in this area might address:

EcoClassics



[Slide 8]

This all indicates what the theme of sustainability might be able to offer to the study of antiquity and the classical tradition, but it is also worth asking what classical studies might in turn be able to give back to the important and growing field of sustainability.

One obvious answer is that classical studies is especially well-placed to help historicise and contextualise the notion of sustainability and that this in turn can enable it variously to critique, develop and support this notion, both as an idea and through its implementation in social practice.

Sustainability is itself a shifting concept that is liable to change through history and according to context. A set of practices that is sustainable in one context may not be in another, depending on the different economic, intellectual and social environments in which it finds itself.

If it is indeed the case that the ecological understanding of nature and antiquity outlined in slide 6 really is the more sustainable one for Classics to adopt today – and that this is in part at least because it promises to help sustain the subject, and even perhaps aid its survival, by embedding it still further into some of the key ideological, political and financial environments of our time (some of which I have pointed towards in slide 7) – then this does not in itself mean it would have been equally sustainable in 1790s Germany.

Or, for that matter, in ancient Greece or Rome.

Sustainability, as I just said, is a shifting concept that is liable to change through history and according to context. And when it comes to the ability to provide a range of historical and other contexts, this is clearly an area in which classical studies can make a distinctive and important contribution to this evolving field.