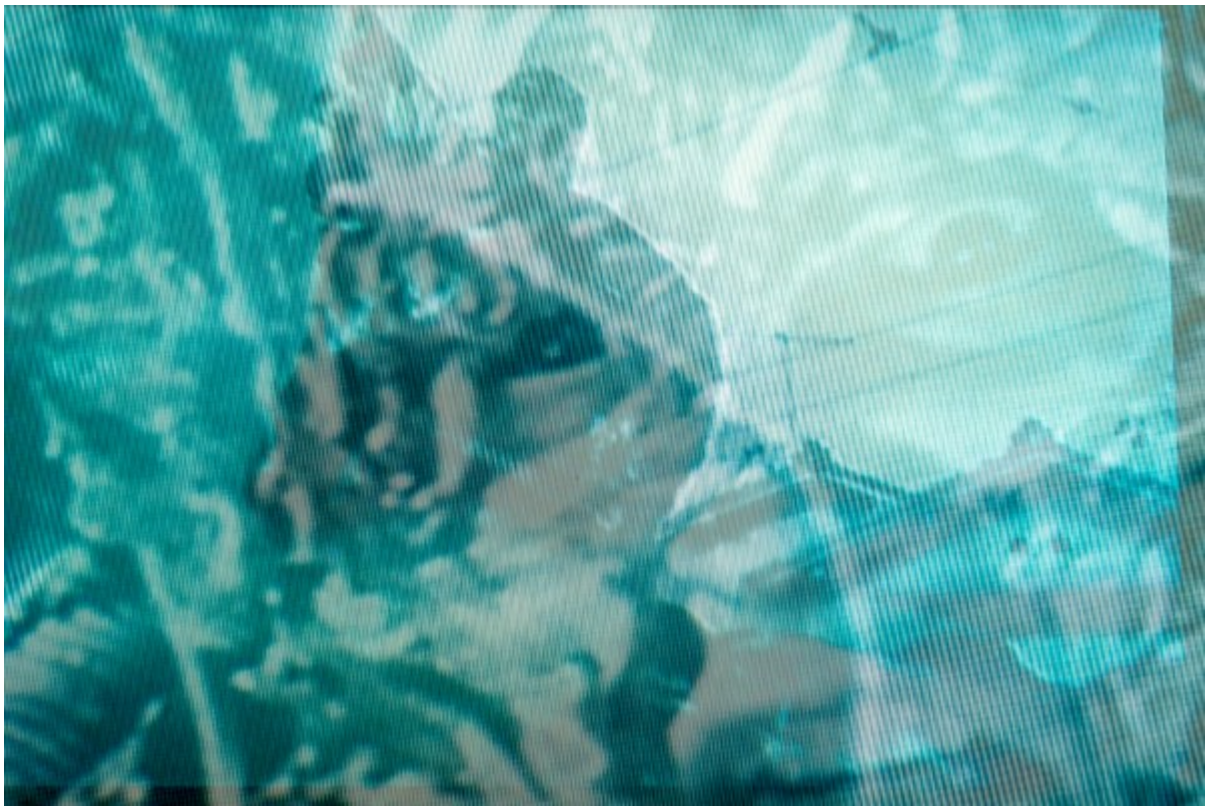
RECONSTRUCTING CLASSICS – VOICE



Part 2 of a review of *Confronting Classics*, by Mary Beard [Link].

Some tactics for challenging the orthodox monologue of academic Classical Studies and opening space to hear other voices.

What is Classical Studies about?

Mary Beard argues that Classics is not about ancient Greece and Rome at all, but about what happens in the gap between past and present. I would add the future. Scholars of ancient Greece and Rome don't represent the way things were. They fabricate, perform research, build knowledge, looking to the future.

This is such an important argument coming from an establishment academic – Dame of the British Empire, Professor at Cambridge University, Fellow of Newnham College, beloved of the Media, UK "national treasure".

In this pragmatic understanding of research as performance, I call again for a need to rebuild, to dismantle and reconstruct. The old accounts of antiquity are looking decidedly dodgy and compromised by their complicity in chauvinistic contemporary ideologies. Modern Classical Studies remain the offspring of nineteenth century imperialism and colonialism.

Voice – a critique

What might such reconstruction look like? In this post I will take up the subject of **voice** and suggest some ways that diverse and different voices in and through Classical antiquity might be sounded and heard.

I recognized the tone, timbre, standpoint of the kind of voice Mary Beard adopts as soon as I started reading her book. Such a voice has been with me all my academic career since I attended a most traditional grammar school in the 1970s. The curriculum I followed there would have satisfied any member of the leisured elite at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The book *Confronting Classics* is a collection of reviews written over a good number of years. They follow a formula. The outlines of a topic of interest are sketched (Alexander the Great, Caesar's assassination, emperors Caligula and Hadrian, Roman Britain). An author's fresh insights into the topic are given credit. Then Beard shows how she knows more than the author by pointing out omissions and inaccuracies. This is quite extraordinary; she *always* knows more. This voice is didactic, patronizing even. One better make sure one has delved into every nook and cranny of fact, otherwise fault will be found by the all knowing Professor.

Expertise is indeed to be valued. But this is a particular form of expertise that we need to question and doubt. This voice of authority is grounded in bodies of *factual* knowledge. There is no questioning of the framing of topics (biography predominates), no discussion of methodology or the many new approaches to antiquity that have come out of critical theory or archaeology. This voice belongs to a disciplinary field grounded in learning a canon of literary and textual works that one might talk about them in a certain way. Its college curricula are still so often dominated by the transmission of bodies of knowledge, where controversy lies in the impossible challenge of balancing knowledge of a specialized topic with a breadth of factual familiarity across more than a thousand years of history.

Sniping criticism: Beard is a sharp-shooting sniper. This voice delivers criticism from a position that is quite secure and even unassailable. Sniping is the mode of confrontation in Mary Beard's *Confronting Classics*. These reviews were all written for the New York Review of Books, the London Review of Books, the Times Literary Supplement (for which she is Classics editor), journals that you might justifiably associate with a cultural elite. You might disagree or contest her comments, but the chance of shooting back a response in these journals is zero. Best option – secure a sniper's nest for yourself.

Nevertheless those reviewed are quite established themselves and maybe we shouldn't be too concerned about *their* voice. But scan the list. Is it unfair or unrealistic to comment that they are not quite as diverse a selection as one might hope for? Little chance here of a different voice.

Beard clearly doesn't like some of these characters in Classics past and present, and doesn't hold back telling the reader, even though it can sound a little too personal, too *ad hominem*. She delivers, for example, a startling judgement of the works of R.G. Collingwood (died at 54 in 1943), claiming them to be overrated and a curious amalgam of philosophy and Roman archaeology. Beard puts this down to immaturity – he never managed to get over his undergraduate days at Oxford. In what is familiarly known as "Greats", the second half of a Classics degree program, Collingwood combined modern philosophy with Roman Archaeology, and both fields fascinated him for the rest of his life. Incoherently, according to Beard.

Some might find this witty, lively, entertaining, a window into the life of an "Oxbridge Don" engaging in far from dry academic debate with colleagues, some likable, some not, some smart, some needing a leg-up the tough intellectual slope to expertise in Classics. Even though such reviews might be written as if they were features of dynamic disciplinary debate, this is, I suggest, an exclusive monologue. It is inward looking and doesn't stray from completely conventional topics. Who, I ask, as a member myself of the international Classics community, actually cares about these debates?

Voice – the performance of research

Be clear that my comments here *are not actually about Mary Beard*. They are about *voice*, something that comes with a stage, a scenography, a dramaturgy, the acting out of a certain kind of academic position and authority. Voice is a key component

of the performance of research.

(Read the sympathetic profile of Mary Beard from Charlotte Higgins in the Guardian and assess how such a voice connects with personhood – [Link].)

Polyvocality

What of other voices?

I don't just mean the many voices from antiquity that have been subdued or lost, such as those of women, slaves, and all the others left out of most of the sources (written by elite men). Mary Beard has done a good deal in her academic career to help identify such voices as part of the growth of interest in social and cultural history over the last few decades. It is significant, however, that she sticks to the literary and epigraphical sources. She seems to have little awareness of the remarkable insights that can come from working with archaeological remains. And it is even more telling, for me, that we hear these marginal voices through the voice she uses, in a kind of ventriloquism.

What of voices that have quite different stagings, diverse standpoints, purposes, audiences? What of voices that are *confrontational*, that refuse to be accommodated, that are discordant? For surely history does not ring harmoniously.

A personal anecdote

Let me use a personal anecdote to indicate how such voices might be sounded and heard, and to what ends. It's an experience from when I was a graduate student hoping to make my way into an academic job.

First some background. My traditional schooling in Classical languages came because of a scholarship that took me from a working class family in a colliery and shipbuilding port in the NE of England to the old grammar school in the local big city. I went on to read archaeology and anthropology at university and then shifted eventually into an academic career. I was driven by a fascination with the extraordinary riches of a local Roman landscape at the edge of empire, in the north of England, Hadrian's Wall country. Growing up in this land involved intimate association, through archaeological remains, with the cultural expanse of classical antiquity that stretched from my back door across Europe and beyond.

From the outset voices jarred. That of academic classical scholarship, that of the amateur local historian and antiquarian, and the sharp political banter of the public houses in this heartland of labour party socialism, to name but three. I found the incongruences troublesome. My local experiences of past-in-present, of actuality, of the ghosts in the border landscapes of the NE of England, were almost entirely drowned out by the monotonous single voice I have been describing. This voice did not come naturally to me.

In this context, enthusiasm for the study of Classical antiquity led me to seek ways of making the voice less exclusive, more my own, and to be shared. How might Classical Studies be made more open? How might richer more nuanced multiple voices be sounded? The local antiquarian, the voices of complaint against academic monologue, and more. Polyvocality.

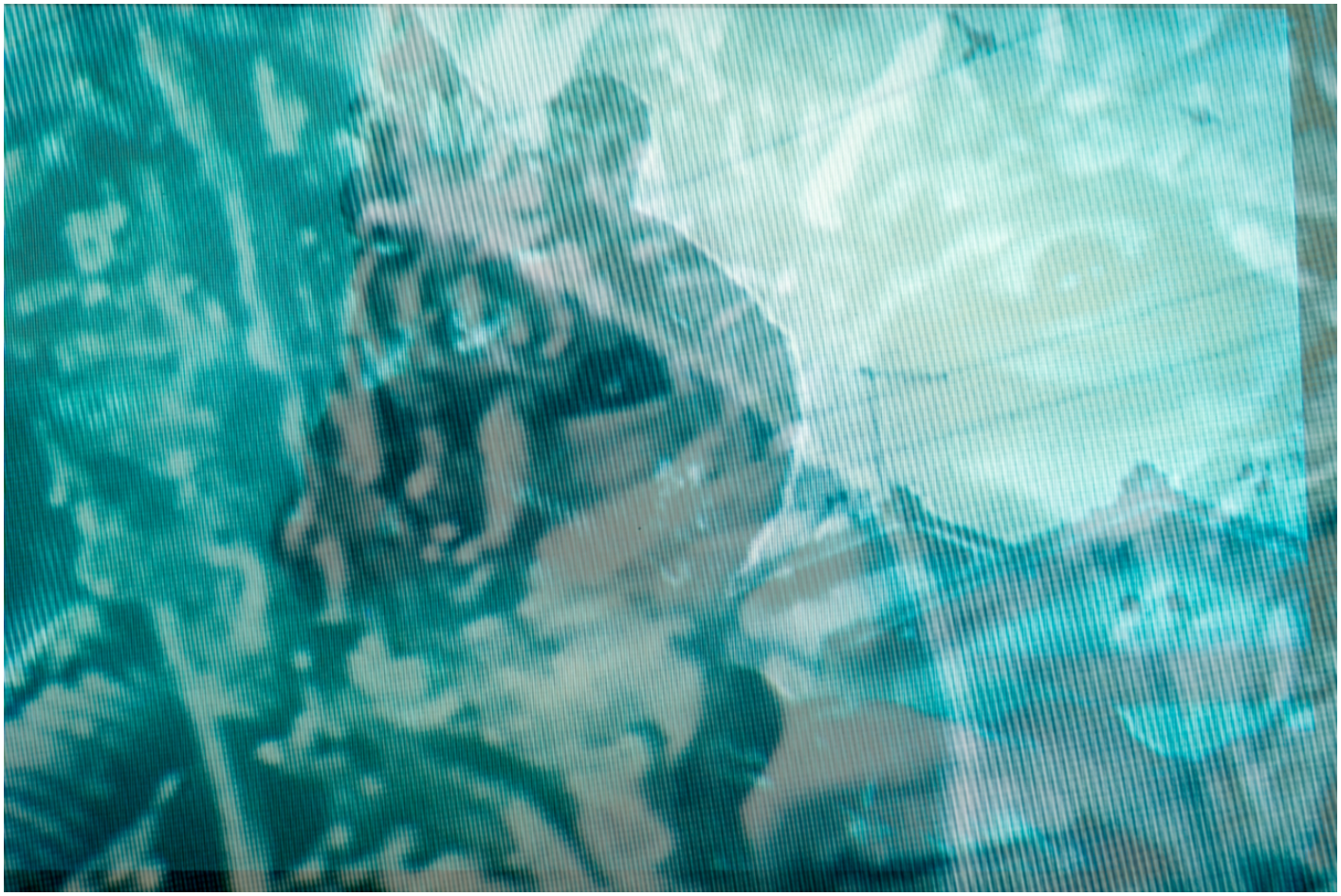
In search of answers I embraced critical theory in archaeology, radical student-centered skills-oriented pedagogy (teaching Classics in a high school) (see now a new book – [Link]), and then I pursued what I have come to call research creation [Link].

And now the anecdote. It was 1991. I was on a PhD program and received an invitation to share my research into ancient Corinthian ceramics at a conference at the University of Newcastle in the UK. This is the city where I had gone to school. I had come to know and admire the hosting department as a champion of new populist approaches to teaching and promoting Classical Studies. I liked what I interpreted as a commitment to reconstruction. I delivered a talk that I thought would appeal because it exemplified tactics that could, I proposed, help transform Classics, help deconstruct ideological formulae, open the stage to, yes, other voices.

Tactics – dissonance

I juxtaposed three scenarios that were unconnected by any causal or historical relationship. A scene with armored soldier hoplites, animals, birds, monsters and floral graphics on a Corinthian perfume jar made in the days of the early *polis*. A scene from Stanley Kubrik's film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) when US marines confront a Vietnamese teenage girl sniper in a ruined city. A scene from Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: Iron Man* (1989) involving the metamorphosis into monumental monster of a metal fetishist.

I attempted no comparison.



The tactic I used, and it has become a favorite, was a version of *katachresis*. Juxtapose abusively. A metaphor says this is that. Synechdoche says this is a part of that. Metonymy says this stands in for that. Katachresis isn't so easy going, and says you probably don't want to put these things together, but let's see what happens when you do. Katachresis nudges one to handle frictions and incongruities and look for patterns and connections that one had never anticipated before. Abuse what is accepted! Discordant katachresis is a kind of Brechtian *verfremdung*, making the familiar awkward and strange.

The particular frictions I was hoping to energize in this talk for a Classics audience concerned the personae (another useful term from performance) in the new bodies politic of the early Greek *poleis*. Soldier, citizen, farmer males in membership. And also contemporary gender and class positions in modernity, because these are implicit in any relationship between past and present. These connected with my interest in Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, their efforts to "deterritorialize" the secure ground of sovereign discourse (read "voice"), of

primary binaries (such as past and present, researcher and object of interest, facts and values, antiquity and modernity). I had been reading Klaus Theweleit's extraordinary Deleuzian account in his two volume *Male Fantasies* (1981) of the metaphors and imagery in the literatures and letters of the militaristic Freikorps in 1920s Germany. And then there were Antonin Artaud's expressions of dislocated corporeality *in extremis*, the body-without-organs.

Other dynamic components or structuring principles I have come to favor in katachresis are actualization and synchronicity. Actualization – the articulation of past-in-present. Synchronicity – the experience of meaningful connection, of alignments across time and space [Link]. Both involve making temporality and spatiality relative and irrational. Yes – then can also be now. Yes – here can also be there. Just imagine! Speculate!

(Grant Parker recently reminded me of Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha discussing katachresis as a disruptive option in the context of colonial, subaltern and post-colonial voices.)

How might such tactics deliver polyvocality? Primarily though interruption, disruption, opening space that other voices might be heard. We might seek personal voices of actual individuals, though here I am conceiving other voices as part of different performative discourses, to use some jargon, and as indicated above. In contrast to the voice I have been exploring through its particular manifestation in these writings by Mary Beard, one might include informal anecdote, personal reflection, an antiquarian chorography [Link], scholartistry [Link], a dialectical image, a deep map [Link], a spreadsheet, a story, *verfremdung*, and many other poetic options in research creation [Link]. What is actually expressed in such different voices is a pragmatic matter. It depends on rhetorical specifics in communities of interest. Who is speaking? On what grounds? To whom? For whom? To what end?

These were my ambitions back in 1991, and viewed now, of course, with hindsight.

Back to the conference in 1991. Several of the audience walked out. Conspicuously. Was it Peter Jones, professorial champion of a new Classics, who shook his bowed head in hands? There was an awkward silence and no questions. Brian Shefton, an old-school connoisseur, acknowledged that I seemed to know the Greek pottery, and corrected my Italian pronunciation.

I had made a critical mistake. This audience, for all the pretensions of the hosting institution to renew Classics, was not seeking new voices. As now, Classics seemed under threat as an academic field. In defending their old territory, they wanted to retain the old voice.

And so does Mary Beard. She plays the mischievous forthright sceptic and critic, “confronting Classics”, but the voice remains the same.

If we learn anything from the field of Science Studies it is surely that to understand knowledge we must address the conditions under which knowledge is fabricated. Included here are personal motivations, the adoption of persona and voice, what drives the will to know, institutions that provide the material infrastructures in the pragmatics of building knowledge. Such matters are part of

what I have described as the performance of research.

I have chosen to use a personal anecdote about the fragility of an early academic career deliberately to make these points about voice. These are not abstract academic issues. The matter of voice is about **interpellation**, one's personal induction into persona, scenography, dramaturgy (again, read Charlotte Higgins, albeit between the lines, on Mary Beard [Link]). The matter of voice is the matter of agency, one's capacity to voice, to be heard, to act, to make a difference. I have been lucky perhaps in my state sponsored social mobility offered through a "first generation" schooling experience. But there is also alienation, displacement in the return whence I departed, because so many remain without such voice and agency, disempowered.

Let me return to the acknowledgement I made of Mary Beard's case that Classics is not about the ancient past. Here we do well to recall again the suggestion of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their lament about rationalization (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 1947) –

> what is needed is not the preservation of the past, but the redemption of hope.

Yes – this is the matter of voice.

Mouth, teeth, head, eyes, body, statue, silhouette.

What other voices are there in Classics? I’ll explore this question in another post.