

STANISŁAW STABRYŁA  
KRAKÓW

## THE CLASSICAL CULTURE IN THE MODERN WORLD

**SUMMARY:** The author discusses the impact of classical antiquity on the modern culture, particularly in Poland. He tried to point out that ill-considered and harmful educational reforms have reduced or even eliminated the classical education from the school system in Poland, as in several other countries. Now we are witnessing the decline and collapse of classical humanism. But on the other hand it is difficult to imagine that the viivifying stream of ancient culture would dry up finally in our times. We believe that our world of western civilization does not want and cannot renounce the values that have created and shaped the ancients.

**KEYWORDS:** classical antiquity, ancient culture, Greek and Roman civilization, classical tradition, classical education, classical languages, grammar schoolsClassical , classical gymnasium

The issue of the impact of antiquity on the modern culture is neither a new nor an original problem, but clearly gains relevance today. You do not need to convince anyone that the antiquity understood as the whole of the ancient Greco-Roman culture played a crucial role in the formation and development of European civilization. On the other hand, now increasingly fewer people know that we are the heirs to that ancient cultural heritage. It is undoubtedly the result of ill-considered and harmful educational reforms that have reduced or even eliminated the classical education from the school system in Poland, as in several

other countries.<sup>1</sup> The so-called “progressionists” for a long time have persuaded us that we are witnessing the decline and ultimate collapse of classical humanism, and that this is already happening before our eyes, while its supporters and followers are usually accused that the source of their enthusiasm for the ancient culture is the taste for anachronism, for which there should be no space neither in the modern educational system, nor in the social life. The classical humanism is often contrasted with knowledge areas such as mathematics, physics, computer science, astronomy and molecular biology, where no one complains that they can be or actually are anachronistic (Delanois 1980: 38ff.). But is it really so that classicism can not have anything to offer us and we must absolutely let him it die? It is true that the results of philological, historical, archaeological, linguistic research have no direct bearing on practice and are much less spectacular than the achievements of physics, biology and astronomy, and do not bring measurable financial gain, but they certainly contribute to the development of culture which is endangered by total stagnation.

Almost a hundred years ago, one of the greatest researchers of antiquity, Tadeusz Zieliński (1922: 107), said that the classical culture should not be a standard for contemporary culture, but a grain and inspiring factor stimulating its development. The first part of this often-cited claim may, however, raise doubts today, and even the opposition. Is it true that the antiquity and classical humanism can not be to our culture model or standard? It seems that the hierarchy of moral values created by Greek and Roman thinkers, modified by Christianity, constitutes an irremovable canon of ethics that has remained unshaken despite the passage of time or the modern “reformers”. The open question still remains, whether these Greek and Roman systems of values, proven over many centuries, should be a standard to which the modern society could refer, if it had not put up as a rule an expediency over unselfishness, profit above the law, comfort over devotion, greed over honesty. The same question can be put when it comes to the relation

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<sup>1</sup> The current situation of classical education in Poland against the background of the history of teaching Latin is described by A. W. Mikołajczak in the large monograph (Mikołajczak 2005). The European aspect of this issue discussed by F. Waquet (2004: 461ff.). Cf also Delanois 1980: 38ff.

of antiquity and classical humanism to many other areas of modern culture. The crisis of teaching classical languages and ancient culture in our school system at the secondary level badly affected the overall humanistic education. It turned out that even secondary school students have serious difficulties in understanding easy literary texts. Students of the humanities do not understand the common terms of Greek or Latin provenance, the simplest Latin expressions or sayings rooted in the Polish language, they show elementary deficiencies in the overall culture of the humanities. An even worse situation involves the oral and written ability of young people to express themselves on literary or historical matters or even on their own experiences. Sociologists and historians of culture for a long time have called attention of the educational authorities to the fact that it is a consequence of the elimination of the universal teaching of classical languages and ancient culture in middle and high schools which should prepare students in the field of humanistic culture. Uncritical preference of the science education, in particular computer science which is so fashionable in school programs today, at the expense of ancient languages and cultures leads to the harmful dehumanization of teaching content, and thus to the intellectual and emotional sterilization. The tyranny of modernity conceived as science and technology, the modernity which is completely contrary to the tradition of Polish schools, and the schools of Jesuits and Piarists in particular, inhibits the intellectual and moral development of the young people, bringing about an admiration for the technical progress, particularly mobile telephony and internet. It causes the snobbery and careerism, which is connected with the aversion to books and the written word in general, form attitudes directed at to “have” and not to “be” (Delanois 1980: 14).

Let us dwell for a moment on the problem of teaching classical languages, especially Latin, in our country. Polish culture, like the culture of many other European nations, from the very beginning drew from the rich Greco-Roman tradition which also exerted an influence on the Christian civilization. In order to understand how the European culture originated and developed over the course of centuries, including the culture of our nation, we need to know as far as possible the Greek and Roman civilization which, as we have seen, was its foundation and

main source (Stabryła 2007: 10). An important part was played here by the school as an institution whose mission is an education of successive generations in the broadest meaning.

Adopted in the nineteenth century by the partitioning states (Prussia, Austria and Russia), the classical model of grammar-school soon became a common type of secondary education in the annexed territories of Poland, obtaining approval and social prestige thanks to a very high standards of teaching (Mikołajczak 2005: 254). The situation of classical languages in the grammar schools was relatively worse under the Prussian occupation, except for the Poznań area, where dominated schools with Greek and Latin languages with full teaching program dominated. In the Russian partition in addition to the classic middle schools, which were the predominant type, some new types of real and trade schools were also established, in which instead of extending the teaching of Latin and Greek, the teaching of mathematics, the natural sciences and the modern languages. Finally, under Austrian occupation the dominant type of schools involved the eight-year classical gymnasium, where the base of the curriculum was associated with the classical languages and Greek and Roman culture. The grammar school graduates were undertaking successfully university studies, obtaining excellent results in all fields, from the humanities, medicine, biology, agriculture to the science and technology (Popiak 1990: *passim*).

When Poland regained its independence in 1918, the Greek and Latin languages occupied still a leading position in the programs of grammar schools (the classical gymnasiums) but they were reduced in humanistic secondary schools. The main task of grammar schools in the interwar period was to prepare the young people for university studies. The school education in the Second Republic was confined essentially to develop the intellectual abilities of students and to enable them to university or polytechnic studies. Secondary schools of classical or humanistic type gained a decisive advantage over the mathematical and scientific schools, but it was by no means difficult for their graduates to access all faculties of higher education and to achieve success (Popiak 1990: 205f.).

After the introduction of the so-called. "Jędrzejewicz's reforms" (the Act of March 11, 1932 [Dziennik Urzędowy 1932: poz. 32

„O ustroju szkolnictwa”) were initiated the fundamental changes in the system of Polish education were initiated. Then was established a six-year high school including a four-year grammar school (*gymnasium*) and a two-year secondary school (*liceum*) was established. In the new program of the grammar school teaching the Latin language was reduced as compared to the classical gymnasium;<sup>2</sup> the Greek language was removed. In the reformed secondary school (*liceum*) the Latin language was obligatory at the humanistic faculty beside the Polish language, the history and modern languages; at the classical faculty Greek and Latin were obligatory.

The main aim of teaching the classical languages in the reformed schools was to enable the pupils to understand the text that is read and to translate it into the Polish language in a communicative and correct form. Analysis of the content and form of a Greek or Latin text was to develop the efficiency of speaking in the native language, the ability to penetrate the content of the translated text, the sobriety and the correctness of thinking. When the students were studying the content of the translated text, they could become acquainted with the ancient culture, with its aesthetic and ethical values.

Let us ask, what is the current status of the teaching of languages and ancient culture in our country. To tell the truth, of the items that once formed the basis of humanistic education in Poland there subsisted only remains as the lessons of history, knowledge of culture, Polish language limited to the minimum and, in a few secondary schools, Latin language courses; in several Polish cities there are single classes (the so-called classical profile) with extended teaching of Latin and one or two hours a week of Greek. As a result, only a tiny percentage of secondary school students are taught the elements of Latin, the other students have to accept the fragmentary knowledge in the field of classical antiquity acquired in the lessons of history, language and learning about the Polish culture.

Now let us consider the real causes of the practical elimination of the knowledge of antiquity – both the classical languages and culture – or the causes of leaving it at the most rudimentary form in the Polish education system after 1945. It seems that it was due to a few reasons,

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<sup>2</sup> 3 and 1 1/2 years in the new gymnasium; 5 hours in the old gymnasium.

which can be broadly described as political and cultural. The communist authority imposed upon Poland by force, acting in accordance with the will of the Soviet principals considered that the classical culture and languages are a very strong link between our nation and the western civilization. The task of the contemporary educational authorities became to destroy the classical tradition in Poland as soon as possible, to separate us from the western culture and to cast us into the eastern barbarism. The construction of a new, pseudo-socialistic society modelled on the Soviet society required the decisive break with the culture of the “rotten West”; inclusive of the knowledge of classical antiquity, the Greek and Latin language. When considering a possibility of the resistance of the part of the Polish society educated in the pre-war classical and humanistic secondary schools or in the classes of secret teaching, at the time of the German occupation, the action of eliminating the classical languages and culture from our educational system was gradually carried out by the authorities. It started with the complete removal of the teaching the Greek language, and later, after the introduction of the so-called eleven-year secondary schools, the division into the humanistic and mathematical and natural faculties was abolished; only Latin remained in a reduced form as the language alternative to a modern western languages, i. e. the students who chose to learn the Latin language could not (sic!) attend the lessons of a modern language. According to the rules established by the Ministry of Education, only one third of the secondary school pupils could learn Latin. Gradually, however, the percentage of students receiving instruction in Latin as an optional language underwent a further reduction due to the successive educational reforms.

A factor that significantly contributed to the disastrous elimination of the Latin language from the Polish schools is associated with the introduction, already at the end of the 40s, in all types of schools in Poland of compulsory instruction in the Russian language which according to the conviction of the Warsaw educational authorities controlled by Moscow was an important instrument of the so-called “socialistic education” of the Polish young people, i.e. their russification. Fortunately, the effect turned out to be quite opposite. The Polish young people learned Russian very reluctantly, and the results were shamefully

bad in most schools, despite the efforts of relatively well-prepared teachers who were commonly considered, not always rightly, to be the russifiers. Anyway, imposing a general duty to learn Russian in the Polish schools became one of the formal factors of the gradual elimination of Latin. The educational authorities argued that in the school programs which were already overburdened there was no time for the Latin language in this situation, and they endeavoured under this pretext to reduce the number of pupils who wanted to choose the Latin language as an obligatory subject.

The successive factor which had an strong effect on the position of Latin and classical culture in the Polish educational system after World War II has been the fight against the Catholic Church in Poland, consistently pursued by the Warsaw government subordinated to the Soviet ideologists. The Warsaw authorities with the help of Russian advisers came to the conclusion that the knowledge of Latin and classical culture may encourage some young people to join the seminaries and religious orders, where a certain preparation in this area was demanded. This was, of course, one of the manifestations of open hostility of the communist authorities to Catholic clergy and the Church, which was the most serious obstacle to the total secularization of the Polish society and to the extirpation of the many hundred years old religious traditions of the Catholic nation, to the deprivation of Polish people of support in the faith of their forefathers, and consequently to the denationalization under the banner of the so-called socialistic internationalism. It was also a proof that the methods used in the fight against the Catholic Church were very primitive and senseless; but it was an amazing paradox that as hostile actions of the state increased, the Church grew stronger.

And what is the present state of teaching the classical languages and culture in the western countries.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, the best secondary schools offer the pupils to learn Latin or Latin and Greek: the English *grammar school*, the French and Belgian *lycée*, German, the Austrian, Swiss, Dutch, Scandinavian *gymnasium* (Bogaj 2003: 1059). In the Italian *liceo classico* during the first two-year cycle (*ginnasio*) Latin and Greek grammar and language is taught, in the second

<sup>3</sup> The European aspect of this issue is presented by F. Waquet (2004: 461ff.).

three-year cycle (*liceo*) – Latin language and literature. To a much greater extent the ancient Greek language and literature is taught in the Greek *klassiko lykeio*. Generally speaking, notwithstanding some limitations in the teaching of classical languages and culture introduced in the western countries in consequence of the various reforms in recent decades, the state of education in these subjects can be considered as satisfactory at last. Without a doubt, the future intellectual elites of these countries continue to receive full classical education, often deepened and expanded in further education on a higher level at the universities.

Meanwhile the Polish society has taken a keen interest in the ancient culture and the classical humanism from many decades. It is evidenced by the success of books, plays, films, TV series which are thematically connected with the classical antiquity. A special place is occupied here by the translations from classical languages, republications of great editions, often in the big publication series – the literary, historical, philosophical treatises, the Greek and Latin poetry and prose, which are still attractive for a large number of readers. Some years ago the two great series of translations from Greek and Latin achieved a remarkable success: “Masterpieces of Ancient Culture” and “The Ancient Library”, which include already more than forty new translations at a very high literary and scholarly level. An important position in today’s publishing market, both in Poland and in many other western countries, is occupied by the books for general readers and the belles lettres which refer to antiquity. The contemporary theater repertoire constantly returns to the ancient tragedies of Aischylos, Sophocles, Euripides, to the comedies of Aristophanes and Plautus. The modern theater with higher aspirations or artistic ambitions cannot simply do without these pieces. Films and TV series on ancient themes succeed in the so-called “viewership”, as e.g. the *Gladiator* which was recently aired in Poland or the known and popular TV series *Aeneid*, *The Odyssey*, *Trojan War* and recently presented *Rome*. Generally speaking, the visual arts constantly deal with antiquity, when they use the existing stage material, or they create new original script books on the basis of ancient, historical, mythological, literary themes. There is no doubt that at the root of this phenomenon is the undisputed universality of ancient culture, as it were increased in a globalized world civilization.



But let us try to look at some other aspects of the functioning of the classical culture in the modern world. The relative disappearance or the weakening of the role of the knowledge of antiquity in the universal consciousness does not mean that its functions have been significantly reduced or minimized in modern culture. On the contrary, as the number of people who received the full, thorough classical education decreases, the interest in the ancient world increases. This is due to the great extent to the development of global tourism which mainly involves the Mediterranean countries, first of all Greece and Italy, where both the great spiritual culture as well as the material one flourished in antiquity. The recognition of their historic monuments, the noble beauty and harmony of the surviving ancient buildings, mural paintings and sculptures stimulates a deeper interest in it, and even, in many cases, the studies in this realm. It must not be forgotten that our consciousness and sense of aesthetics have been shaped primarily according to models derived in one way or another from the ancient Hellas or Roma. One of the most frequently used and abused terms in contemporary political and social life is “democracy”, derived from the Greek, where this compound (*demos* – ‘people’ and *krateo* – ‘I rule’, ‘I reign’) signified a political system in which power belonged to the people. We are not interested here in the term itself, which was probably introduced by the Greek Sophists in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, and disseminated by Democritus and the critics of democracy – Plato and Aristotle. But democracy as a political ideal was invented in ancient Athens,<sup>4</sup> and continued in a modified form in Rome. Without doubt, both the concept itself as well as the main features of the political system was based on the power of the people according to the will of the majority of citizens. It warranted everyone the equal rights and political freedom, the ownership and management of the national wealth and the equal access to the culture and education. This ancient Greek notion has been used in a more or less modified form in various modern countries, also outside Europe and in the United States. Despite the different types of innovations and transformations the fundamental properties of democracy created in ancient Athens remain unchanged, because they represent the essence of this political system. Modern democracies must continually make a confrontation with the

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<sup>4</sup> The Athenian democracy was discussed by K. Kumaniecki (2003).

principles of Athenian democracy, which teaches us that the state cannot be anybody's property except the citizens, because it belongs to them, and not to any political party or coalition, which would appropriate it. The citizen must always be the measure and the starting point in democracy as well as the basis of the civic organization of common life (Srebrny 1984: 35f.). We are in a straight line the direct heirs of ancient Greece and Rome, which have designated and defined the role of the state in the collective life. Thus, we constantly need to refer to the political culture that was created by the Athenian democracy based on the individual liberty and equality of citizens.

Let us find another example of the impact of antiquity upon contemporary culture. One of the areas in which this effect is strongly marked involves pedagogy conceived as the theory of education closely connected with the educational practice. "The whole modern pedagogy has not afforded any higher ideals of education than those that were created by the classical antiquity, i.e. the Greek *kalokagathia*, which consisted in the fusion of beauty, physical perfection with the highest qualities of the spirit in the education of the young people, and the Roman *disciplina populi Romani* grounded on the education of the young Roman to a brave and well-disciplined citizen" – such were the words written in 1929 by the the world-renowned scholar latinist Gustaw Przychocki (1929: 9). To With these educational ideals one should be jointed combine the Greek *enkýklios paideia* – the general secondary education and the Roman *artes liberales* – definitively established by Varro in I century BC. The fact that in many of today's educational theories one may easily notice the primacy of the moral agent over the sensual one, the aesthetic and the spiritual over the physical one, seems to indicate clearly that it is the heritage of ancient *kalokagathia* and other educational ideals of antiquity, which were a direct continuation of the thought of the Hellenistic and later Roman and medieval, and finally the humanistic educational ideals of the Renaissance and Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

A branch of the ancient culture, whose influence on contemporary civilization could not be overestimated is certainly the Roman law,

<sup>5</sup> The Greek *kalokagathia* was discussed by H.-J. Marrou (1969: 82-85); cf. also Jaroszyński 2004: 444-447.

because its content was important to ensure freedom to the citizens thanks to the constant observance of the principles of equality (*aequitas*), honesty (*honestum*), justice (*iustitia*) and a general respect for the law. According to the Roman law theorists, a society in which these principles are not respected cannot survive, as the crisis or the collapse of the law leads to the loss of freedom and the birth of tyranny, that is, to use a contemporary word, to dictatorship; the Roman citizens retain the freedom, as they enjoy the protection of law and avoid ignoble deeds, not because they are forbidden and punishable, but because it is required by the dignity and justice. The basic principles and ideas of Roman law: “to live with dignity”, “to do no harm to another”, “to give everyone his due” are still relevant for the modern legislators and societies. Today’s legal codes against which citizens constantly levy reservations, should respect the principles of Roman morality, which together make up the ideal of *humanitas*, i.e. full approval of the human values and personality. The perfection of legal rules and institutions created by the Romans is the reason why they were and still are a practical model of the legislative systems of many nations (Stabryła 2007: 143). The Roman lawyers clearly formulated and determined established the most important legal concepts which are without doubt valid; they also learned to use them in specific cases. Twenty years ago an excellent expert in Roman law. professor Henryk Kupiszewski, rightly wrote the following: “It is a great school of legal thought, an important part of the historical and humanistic education [...] The inevitable process of consolidation of the world (i.e. globalization) has with its unifying idea chances of playing the role of an integrating element in bringing law function in the entire planet. It suggests a model of coexistence of the peoples in agreement with their rights, covering the entire population in one body” (Kupiszewski 1988: 215f.).<sup>6</sup>

Examples of the impact of antiquity upon other areas of contemporary culture can be multiplied almost indefinitely. One of them is certainly the language, or more precisely – the vast sphere of terminology. Thus, the modern languages, including Polish, are forced to resort to the lexical resources of ancient Latin and Greek, the so-called “dead languages”, in order to create the appropriate terms for concepts

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. also Söndel 1995: 47.

commonly used in the international circulation. Moreover, the number of those terms taken from the classical languages is growing in all areas of contemporary culture.

Having discussed the problem of terminology let us go to the problem of the relations between contemporary literature and antiquity. However, we do not mean here the phenomenon of copying ancient models in the literature, the imitation of the ancient poetic themes and themes by the modern writers. It seems that the more important matter is the classicist attitude of many contemporary writers who have a very strong sense of the persistence of tradition rooted in history. The classicist attitude is characterized by an intensified sense of historical continuity, the belief about a continuity of culture, implying *eo ipso* the tendency of writers to delve into the ancient theme, which includes not only the inspirational possibilities, but also the factors stimulating the creation of a specific, individual vision of the past. It seems that this double-inspiring and creative importance justifies borrowing from the ancient artists in the ancient philosophy, mythology, history, and art (Stabryła 1983: 41ff.). The ancient literature has traced the main routes of development of the modern literature, which in a sense is its continuation, if even if we merely take into account the fact that all important genres have had their models in antiquity.

As we close the superficial and by necessity vague remarks on the impact of the Greco-Roman antiquity upon the culture of the era of globalization, it must be emphasized that the cited examples have shown only fragments of an extremely broad question. In a concise paper it would be difficult to take into consideration many of its important aspects, such as the impact of the ancient philosophy, religion and political science, historiography, art,<sup>7</sup> architecture, drama, physical education and sport upon the culture of the modern society. Each of these areas is for us an inexhaustible source of ideas and creative impulses, the lack of which inhibits any development and progress. But let us ask why the tradition derived from Greece and Rome has been impressed forever in our culture. Perhaps it determined such virtues of the ancient culture as the deeply rooted cult of beauty, the desire for order and harmony, the passion for moderation and noble simplicity, the unselfish knowledge,

<sup>7</sup> The ancient influences on the Polish art discussed by L. Kalinowski (1995: 19-46).

the ability of setting morality above usefulness. If modern man and the man of future will want to save his humanity, to oppose the fast and progressive dehumanization of life in a global society, he will have to turn to the tradition, whose first and most important source and also the common homeland of all European cultures was ancient Greece. He will have to rediscover a sense of the Greek humanism (*philanthropía*), one of the most beautiful ideals that humanity has managed to develop throughout its history. The ancient culture understood as a set of main spiritual values produced by the Greek and Roman civilization performs its functions in the modern world – despite all the crises and retreats from its ideals – from the Middle Ages to the present day. It is hard to imagine that this vivifying stream of the ancient culture would dry up finally in our time, that its invigorating waters suddenly would stop and not flow to the times that are to come. The history, the whole past teaches that our world of western civilization does not want and cannot renounce the values that have created and shaped the ancients, it cannot break the thread linking itself with that world, which has long ago passed, but is still alive in the collective memory of Europe (Stabryła 1992: 178).

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