

What Does A Classic Do?

Tapping the Powers of a Comparative Phenomenology of the Classic/al

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1. Variations on a Classical European Question

“What is a Classic?” This question sounds familiar. We might not remember right away what people have said about it, but it is a question that already implies answers. Not any particular one, but a clearly defined arena animated by forces engaged in Titan Wars of cosmic proportions: timeless authority versus historical coincidence or oblivion; the sanctioned canon versus the mere archive; universal relevance versus local parochialism; sanctioned school book text versus ephemeral entertainment tome and so forth. Unlike other big, unanswerable academic questions like “what is philosophy?,” the answer calls for revelations about personal tastes and values, confessions of our innermost cherished convictions. And readers would expect an author with *gravitas*, of a certain age and with a certain life experience, to take on this question. An authoritative author who can equal the authoritativeness of the subject matter. The question is archetypal and highly personal, calling for the autobiographical.

This is at least what three influential grapplings with the question that span the past one-and-a-half centuries have in common. All respondents were literary men of weight at the time, reaching out publicly on this important issue to their contemporaries. The French literary critic, scholar, and writer Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve was in his mid-forties when he published “Qu’est-ce qu’un classique?” in a newspaper column in October of 1850 and was a well-published poet and critic, who had just published his masterly study of the famed Cistercian abbey Port-Royal and its role in the intellectual and religious life of 17th century France. T. S. Eliot was in his mid-fifties and a magnet of literary life in London when in October of 1944 he delivered his presidential address to the Virgil Society on “What is a Classic?,” as German rockets were falling

on London. And J. M. Coetzee was in his early fifties, a celebrated South African novelist, critic, and academic decorated with numerous prizes, when he presented his own “What is a Classic. A Lecture” in 1991 to an audience in the Austrian city of Graz.

Their various answers could not have been more different. One of the most notable points in Sainte-Beuve’s column is that he promotes the concept of a “classic” of European vernacular – rather than classical Greco-Roman – literatures. This is particularly remarkable given his cult of Latinity, his distaste of popular and contemporary literature and his non-democratic views (Prendergast). Taking his readers back to the *locus classicus* of “classicus” as a term for canonical writers, the Latin erudite raconteur Aulus Gellius (2nd cent. CE), he states: “a writer of value and distinction, *classicus assiduusque scriptor*, a writer who is of account, has valuable property, and is not mistaken in the proletarian crowd.” (Sainte-Beuve 39). The Latin root of the word is socio-economic, referring to the land-owning classes of Roman society; it is patrician and anti-proletarian. Gellius applies it to works of publicly acknowledged worth and reputation, literally pieces of cultural capital. Eliot dismisses the European vernaculars and elevates Virgil’s *Aeneid* to the one and only universal classic, a metaphor for the pinnacle of European cultural history. For him, no works in any of the European vernacular traditions deserve the predicate of “universal classic.” Coetzee, visibly uncomfortable with any assumption of inherent timeless worth, finds the classic in the process of social and academic consensus building, in the fact that it has “passed the scrutiny of hundreds of thousands of intelligences before me, by hundreds of thousands of fellow human beings.” He thus clears space for the critic, like himself, who becomes not the foe, but producer of the classic by “interrogating” it (Coetzee 16).

Throughout their meandering reflections on the topic all three engage, with some *gravitas*, in personal confessions of sorts. For Sainte-Beuve, the classic is also biographical capital, accrued over a life time, that unfolds its full powers in a process of ageing, maturation, and ultimate fulfillment:

Blessed are those who read and reread, those who can follow freely follow their inclinations in their reading! There comes a time in life when – all journeys completed, all experiences made – there is nothing more palpably joyful than to study and reexamine the things we know, to truly savor what we feel, as if we see the people we love again and again: pure delights of the heart, of that taste of maturity. It is then that the word ‘classic’ acquires its true meaning... (Sainte-Beuve 54)

The classic becomes a tool to nurture the sublime maturity of the man of “good taste”; and a tonic against the vagaries of life, offering “a friendship which never deceives and could never fail us” (55). Eliot mentions Sainte-Beuve’s essay and says he doesn’t have it at hand – yet some of Eliot’s concepts seem to owe much to or at least resonate with the Frenchman’s. “Maturity,” both of the individual or a civilization and literature, is the backbone of Eliot’s vision. A language and literature need history behind them to *deserve the appearance* of the classic. What in Sainte-Beuve still resonates as a romantic *éloge* on the personal maturation with and through books, has by Eliot’s time become more of a desperate gasp of the waning 20th-century European *Bildungsbürgertum*.

Just how autobiographical and confessional Eliot’s lecture might actually be becomes clear in Coetzee’s merciless dissection of it. In contrast to Eliot’s lack of explicit engagement with Sainte-Beuve, much of Coetzee’s lecture is devoted to unveiling Eliot’s elevation of the *Aeneid* to the universal classic as an allegory of Eliot’s own life and his attempt to bolster his standing as an American who has made it in British letters and espouses a radically conservative political program of European unity (in 1944!), centered around the epitome of Europe’s Latin heritage and guarded by the Catholic Church. An attempt to be the prophet of this vision and remake his identity “in which a new and hitherto unsuspected paternity is asserted – a line of descent less from the Eliots of New England and/ or Somerset than from Virgil and Dante, or at least a line in which the Eliots are an eccentric offshoot of the great Virgil-Dante line” (Coetzee 6). In a “transcendental-poetic” reading Coetzee sees Eliot inserting himself into a venerable lineage, thereby appropriating the weight of the classic himself. In a “sociocultural” reading he sees Eliot’s essay as the “magical enterprise of a man trying to redefine the world around himself – America, Europe – rather than confronting the reality of his not-so-grand position as a man whose narrowly academic, Eurocentric education had prepared him for little else but life as a mandarin in one of the New England ivory towers” (7).

If the autobiographical and confessional are made visible in Eliot’s essay as a deeper allegorical structure, Coetzee makes an explicit personal memory into the capstone for theorizing his own idea of the classic. The date is summer of 1955, the place his Afrikaans family garden in the suburbs of Cape Town, the revelation are melodies from Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Well Tempered Clavier* drifting by. This was “the first time I was undergoing the impact of *the classic*” (9). His own rather

self-referential answer to the question of what a classic is – defined by generations of critics and academic professionals – emerges from his uncertainty about the nature of his fateful encounter with Bach: was it truly an impersonal aesthetic experience, “connecting” with Bach across the ages? Or motivated by ulterior motives, by his status as a postcolonial South African subject, a “symbolic election on my part of European high culture as a way out of a social and historical dead end” (15)? The belief in the *tested* classic allows Coetzee to move away from (colonial) universalist claims and closer to an institutional definition of the classic. It downplays the aesthetic charisma of the object and elevates those of us who are creating this charisma: the critics, commentators, scholars.

Coetzee’s analysis undoes the self-promoting halo of Eliot’s lecture – which, curiously, still maintains the status of a classic on the classic question despite its ensconced brand of Roman catholic imperialism that today is even more foreign to us than it already was in the middle of the 20th century. What is more, Coetzee’s essay carries the seed of undoing the question and the genre of “what is a classic?” as a whole. It becomes a potentially rotten, embarrassing question and he senses it: “Is being spoken to across the ages a notion that we can entertain today only in bad faith?” (13)

Indeed, in what form *can* and *should* the classic question still exist today? The question “What is a classic?” is in some ways a remnant of 19th century European intellectual life. In the 20th and 21st centuries, with the waning of the naturalized, *a priori* status of Greco-Roman classical literature and humanistic education in Western societies, the question has morphed into: “*why* read the classics?” In times of the global humanities crisis which hits historical research and scholars of the premodern world hardest, the value of classical literature and Classics has become debatable, rather than assumed. This is both liberating and devastating. It is a new global *condition des sciences humaines* that has inspired passionate defenses. They range from the convincingly tautological and nihilistic, in the face of the question’s weight as with Italo Calvino in “Why read the Classics:” “I should really rewrite it a third time, so that people do not believe that the classics must be read because they serve some purpose. The only reason that can be adduced in their favour is that reading the classics is always better than not reading them” (Calvino 9); all the way to the rousingly civic, as in Pierre Judet de La Combe’s *L’avenir des anciens. Oser lire les grecs et les latins* [The Future of the Ancients. Daring to Read the Greeks and Romans], where he solemnly invokes a “Right to Read”

and a “Right to History” (Judet de La Combe). The classic has become a world-wide challenge and the new *why* question is recognized as a new global genre beyond the 19th century European roots and limitations of the earlier *what* question. The *what* question arose in Europe increasingly during the nineteenth century when the previously only Greco-Roman definition of the “classic” was opened to works in European vernaculars and formal education in vernacular languages and literatures rather than just Greek and Latin came to be instituted in the newly developing general education systems. The *why* question, along with European concepts of what a “classic” is and why nations need them, has spread around the world. As with *Naze koten o benkyōsuru no ka* [*Why study the Classics?*], published in 2018 by the Japanese literary historian Maeda Masayuki, it is inspiring scholars around the world to take stock of their own literary heritage, in the climate of a pretty much global humanities crisis.

2. The “Comparable Classic” and the Classic Question for a New Age: What Does a Classic Do?

It is Italo Calvino’s answer to the *why* question that opens our eyes to a hitherto disregarded dimension of the classic question, namely the question of a “comparative” or “comparable classic.” Calvino first refreshes some of the previous answers to the *what* question: that classics are works to be reread (with special pleasure in maturity), that they are part of collective memory and the social subconscious. He also evokes the magic power of the classic, its mystic unity with the universe: “A classic is the term given to any book which comes to represent the whole universe, a book on a par with ancient talismans. A definition such as this brings us close to the idea of the total book, of the kind dreamt of by Mallarmé” (Calvino 6 f.). Or, inversely, its mysterious power to attract us, even if we resist it or dispute the author and his work. The evocation of the classic’s numinous powers, paired with the nihilism regarding the *why* question, already makes for a potent mixture. But the real punch-line appears in his sudden confession towards the end of the essay:

I notice that Leopardi is the only name from Italian literature that I have cited. This is the effect of the disintegration of the library. Now I ought to rewrite the whole article making it quite clear that the classics help us understand who we are and the point we have reached, and that consequently Italian classics are indispensable to us Italians in order to compare them with foreign

classics, and foreign classics are equally indispensable so that we can measure them against Italian classics. (9)

In a move that seems to blend lingering enlightenment worldliness with a new 19th-century colonial cosmopolitanism, Sainte-Beuve had added Confucius to a row of Europe's ancient sages and evokes "three Homers" who deserve more attention: Vālmiki, Vyāsa, and Ferdowsi, the respective authors of the grand Indian epics of the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, and the Persian epic "Book of Kings," *Shahnameh*. This is far ahead of Eliot, a century later, but the "foreigners" are still inferior and curiously caught in Christian-Pagan allegory as three "Oriental Magi" trailing after the unsurpassable god-like Homer (Sainte-Beuve 51). It is Calvino who for the first time transcends his own national literary filiation (or adopted cosmopolitan Latin tradition, in Eliot's case), urging us to compare our (Italian) classics with foreign ones.

The *what* question is hardly amenable to comparisons: precisely *what* makes Virgil's *Aeneid* or Dante's *Divine Comedy* a classic is too easily only discussed in the context of their respective literary traditions, even if in "universalized" fashion, as with Eliot. At this moment of a global flattening of historical consciousness and the ensuing retrenchment in classical studies, the *why* question can bring scholars and communities around the globe into a dialogue about the value and studies of their canons and strategies to support them (or not) and build them into the future. Yet, this is a question of the *compared* classic or *compared* field of Classics where scholars of Greek or Sanskrit, Classical Japanese, or Persian from their respective locales can strategize together about the challenges of the present moment for classical studies and their visions for the preservation or invigoration of their literary heritage. This is not yet the question of the *comparable* classic.

To make matters more complex, the academic study of classical literatures around the world today are challenged by political and religious instrumentalization, from the state-sponsored Confucius- and Classics fever of the PRC, to the at times violent zeal of Hindu fundamentalists in India. Promoting one's native classics has become a strategy for increasing both domestic reputation and global soft power. The Chinese government's efforts to promote the playwright Tang Xianzu (1550–1616) during the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's passing shows us the urgent desire of non-western cultures for "comparative recognition." On January 14, 2017, *The Economist* reported "*Shashibiya*, meet Tang Xianzu: How

China uses Shakespeare to promote its own bard.” It came in handy that Tang Xianzu died in the same year and happened to be a playwright – no matter that contemporaneity almost never makes for the best comparisons and no matter the fact that drama developed very late and was much less prestigious in the Chinese literary tradition, such that Tang Xianzu, accordingly, gets nowhere even close to being as canonical and influential as Shakespeare. But the Chinese government insisted, and the occasion inspired a lavish program of events and plays (like *Coriolanus* and *Du Liniang*, where Shakespeare’s Roman general encounters the romantic heroine from Tang Xianzu’s most famous play, *The Peony Pavilion*). There were even plans to build a replica of Shakespeare’s hometown, Stratford-upon-Avon, at Sanweng-upon-Min in Jiangxi Province. On a state visit to Britain in 2015 Xi Jinping had described Tang as the “Shakespeare of the East,” perhaps not quite realizing that this label was not just upgrading Tang in Western eyes, but actually also downgrading him by holding him to Western standards.

We might dismiss this as a tragicomic antic out of the bag of tricks of the PRC’s propaganda machine, but we would be wrong in considering this an isolated incident of limited relevance. In the early 21st century the “compared classic” is carrying two faces: it can unite us over the “why read the classics?” question and allow us to develop more global awareness of and strategies for preserving literary heritage under threat; but it can also generate anxious competitiveness and is (ab)used by governments or fundamentalist interest groups as tool of “nation branding” and populist identity building that is part of the rampant nationalisms that mark our historical moment.

Yet, Calvino was probably not thinking of the “compared classic” of “ours” and “their” classics. He seems to refer to the “comparable classic,” the classic (and academic discipline of Classical Studies) that allows us to grasp culturally distinctive traits of the other, and, not the least, our own literary tradition, when productively illuminated in the defamiliarizing light of other traditions. The “comparable classic” demands an entirely new question, beyond the *what* and *why*. Namely the question “What Does a Classic *Do*?” So far there has been surprisingly little debate around the classic and Classical Studies in full-fledged global terms, both geographically and historically.¹ The *what* question severely discourages

¹ Postcolonial perspectives on the classic, like Mukherjee (2013), are certainly important, but they are still constrained by Western concepts of the classic and their

global comparisons, because it typically focuses only on the works and concepts of one classical tradition. But we can transform it into a question of global scope and relevance by shifting the question from an ontological *what* or utilitarian *why* to a question of *doing*, a question of pragmatic action theory, which examines human behavior as purpose-oriented and action-driven. Examining *doing*, both of the classic and of its creators, of its readers, transmitters, contesters, opens a whole new world of questions hitherto hardly explored: what can we identify as *functions* of the classic – social, political, ethical, religious, psychological, aesthetic, philosophical, literary historical? How did *institutions* shape the creation, specific impact, transmission and transformation of the classic? How did these functions and institutions diverge in different regions and periods around the globe throughout history? How could we capture the phenomenon of the classic in the rich archive of the past five millennia of human historical experience on this planet? What are the benefits of studying these questions in comparative perspective and promoting comparative studies of the classical and of Classical Studies? And to what uses can we further put such a new field of global studies of the classic to inspire deeper cross-cultural understanding, empathy, tolerance, dialogue, and collaboration?

3. Semantic and Philosophical Paradoxes of the Classic/al

We can certainly define the meaning of the classical historically, as instantiated in particular works, periods, artistic styles or academic disciplines: Virgil's *Aeneid* is a "classic" of Latin (then European, then Western, then world) literature; the "classical period" of Japanese literature to which later ages would look back with nostalgia is the Heian Period (794–1185); Johann Sebastian Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier* is a collection of pieces of "classical (and, here it gets a bit more complicated, Baroque) music"; "Classical Studies" or "Classics" in the West is the study of Greco-Roman civilization and "classical antiquity" that unfolded in European cultural history. Reference works have typically defined and described the "classical" in its historical instantiations, which have

impact around the world. Pollock, Elman and Chang (2015) is a pioneering step towards thinking globally about philology, a practice related to the question of the classic.

reached wherever the Latin-derived term of *classicus* spread and was put to further use in new local contexts. Only if we try to conceptualize the term, historicizing it and allowing its meaning to transcend any particular time and place, do we realize how elusive and paradoxical it actually is.

English marks this bifurcation with the suffix “-al.” The “classical” refers typically to the historically instantiated: “classical archeology” (of Greco-Roman antiquity), or “classical works” of Spain’s Golden Age. The “classic,” in turn, carries conceptualized meaning: it is in principle empty of content, a relational linguistic function that contrasts another phenomenon with the “classic,” the originary, traditional, ideally realized and embodied, normative, typical: a “classic stage” of human evolution, “classic cars,” a “classic mistake,” or “that was just classic of him.” While the first, historically instantiated, meaning is strongly value-laden and emphasizes highest standards, values, and accomplishments, the referentially empty, conceptual, relative meaning is typically neutral and only points to the “typical” and “normative” of whatever is at stake: like a “classic” failure that certainly does not represent the pinnacle of accomplishments.

This bifurcation makes definition of *classicus* and its later European incarnations through a conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) less revealing and productive for our understanding what the “classic/al” is, than a conceptual history of “literature,” or even “the canon” would be. There is an interesting grey-area between the purely historically-instantiated and referential and the purely conceptually-relative and non-referential that allows us to locate the (or better “a”) classic/al in an evolutionary model. Whatever the time and place, we know what has to come before: the primitive, the primordial, the archaic. And we know what has to come after (and has done so in European cultural history, if not necessarily in others): the post-classical (such as Europe’s first instantiation of the post-classical: the Hellenistic), the medieval (of the three-step periodization template of Antiquity/Middle Ages/Modernity), the romantic (a 19th century reaction to early modern classicisms), or the modern (which, as the other book-end of our imagined trajectory from classical antiquity to “classical” modernity, is not an antonym but a correlative of sorts; see Damrosch).

Although methods of conceptual history are less helpful to the comparative study of the classic/al, the comparison of its respective etymological networks is more interesting and revealing. This essay takes its cues largely from the Western and the Eastern bookends of the Eurasian

continent: Europe and the regions that grew out of Romanization and Hellenization on the one end, and, on the other, East Asia's Sinographic Sphere, today's China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and all states, which historically relied on the Chinese writing system, scriptural and literary canons, and institutions of governance among others. The guiding metaphors of their respective etymological networks of the "classic" are strikingly different, with one drawing on socioeconomical imagery and the other evoking cosmological and political analogies.

Our Western, and by now global, hyperconcept of *classicus* was originally a socio-economical metaphor, referring to a person of the highest taxation category. Aulus Gellius (and his spokesman Fronto, to whom he attributes the expression of *scriptores classici* ("first class writers" in Gellius *Attic Nights*), seems to have transferred this expression metaphorically to writers and their works. Note that the supposedly comparable Greek term *enkrithentes* has a somewhat different meaning and, unlike its Latin counterpart, did not go viral in world history (Citroni 205–208). Instead, the Latin *classicus*, in Gellius's metaphorical use, was probably rediscovered in the 15th century and has now been adapted to most languages and cultures around the world. Socioeconomic metaphors have played a large role in the Latin conceptions of the workings of the human world: they also underlie the etymologies of "civilization" or "culture," concepts that are broadly related to the "classic." The citizen, "*civis*," of a city makes for *civilization*; and *culture* relies on agriculture and the cultivation of land, again bringing us to socioeconomic metaphors.

In contrast, the Chinese (and East Asian) concept of *jing* 經, a canonical work or authoritative scripture, described originally textile pattern, namely the warp, or the vertical threads on a loom and meant, by extension, "to regulate," "to govern," or the "normative" and "authoritative." During China's Warring States Period (481–221 BCE), the age of China's foundational philosophical masters, it was attached to works believed to have been compiled by Confucius and with the establishment of a State Academy in 124 BCE it came to refer to the sanctioned Five "Confucian" Classics that were part of its curriculum.² Much later it was applied to the scriptures and canons of other civilizations, such as the Bible (聖經 *Shengjing*) and the Koran (真經 *Zhenjing*). Like

² For a succinct introduction to the concept of the classic, *jing*, and the Chinese classical canons see Wilkinson 368–72.

the not unrelated concept of *wen* 文 (“pattern,” “human culture,” “L/letters,” “literature” etc.) it is a cosmological concept rooted in textile imagery. “Regulation” through the “warp” was tied to ideas of harmonic response between the heavens, the Son of Heaven (the emperor), and his realm and the people. *Wen* originally referred to patterned fur of animals or human body tattoos and is the center of the extended etymological network of “human pattern/culture” (*wenhua* 文化), “writing/characters” (*wenzi* 文字), “written texts” (*wenxian* 文獻), “literature” (*wenxue* 文學), “civilization” (*wenming* 文明), and “civility” (as antonym to *wu* 武 the “martial”). By the Han Dynasty the resonance between heavenly, earthly, and human “pattern” (*wen*) became a staple of political philosophy. If in the Latin etymological network of the classical is tied to socioeconomic relations in the city and community of citizens, its comparable East Asian etymological network is associated with cosmological and political order, and the place of humans and their civilizational skills within the extended scope of the cosmos.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries East Asian intellectuals began to coin thousands of new terms to absorb and digest Western knowledge. To render the terminologies of European arts and sciences, which they encountered during their monumental translation efforts of thousands of Western books into East Asian languages, they largely relied on the traditional terms of *jing* and *dian* 典 (canon, also in the form of *gudian* 古典 “ancient canon” e.g. of Buddhism or Confucianism) to translate *classicus* and vernacular European concepts of the classical. In Japanese and Korean, where directed phonetic transliteration of Western terms (rather than semantic translation) is way more common and successfully practiced than in Chinese, a two-pronged concept of the classic emerged. First, “*koten*” or “*kojŏn*” (the respective Japanese and Korean pronunciations of the Chinese *gudian*); or, second, *kurashikku* (クラシック) and *kŭllaeshik* (클래식) (the phonetic transcription of “classic” into Japanese and Korean, respectively). As we might expect, “*kurashikku*” or “*kŭlleshik*” music refers to Western classical music, using the phonetic transcription of the Western concept; while *koten* or *kojŏn* music (unless supplemented with the term “Western”) typically refers to traditional Japanese or Korean music. In Japanese and Korean the historical bifurcation of the concept of the classic/al, of the “native” versus the “Western-imported” cultural and artistic traditions, which occurred through the large-scale encounter with Western knowledge on the threshold of modernity, is much more clearly marked than in

Chinese, which uses the semantic translation of “*gudian*” for both native and foreign traditions.

Stepping away once more from particular etymologies and their global migration history, which are insufficient to comparatively grasp the phenomenon of the classic/al, let’s return to its conceptual thrust. Philosophically, the “classic/al” is a mercurial, paradoxical concept. It can be ontologically deceptive: classical values and norms generated by a particular cultural and historical constellation are too easily enshrined as timeless, existential truths – as it happens with Eliot’s elevation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* to the universal classic where the historically relative is made into an aesthetically absolute. Ethically, the concept of the classic/al is potentially divisive and exclusionist. Having “classics” is a form of cultural capital of “civilized nations” and thus, like other cultural capital such as “philosophy,” “technology,” or “science,” is often monopolized by hegemonic states at the expense of supposedly less civilized others. Epistemologically, the concept of the classic/al is easily circular. Any claims to the normative and prescriptive value of classical aesthetic programs, popular in neoclassicist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries, can only be derived from a deductive description of actual historical instances.

4. Comparative Phenomenology of the Classic/al

But this is not all. The semantic and philosophical paradoxes of the classic/al requires us to proceed with much caution and critical self-awareness in order to avoid simplifying definitions and skewed comparisons. But the single most hampering obstacle in developing comparative studies of the classic is the severe conceptual underdetermination of the “classic/al.” To make matters worse, it is paired with an engrossed cultural historical overdetermination. Conceptually, the classic is underdetermined in a spatial, temporal, and disciplinary sense. We need to leave the (treacherously) safe haven of conceptual history approaches and move away from the historical unfolding of the particular Latin term of *classicus* and its empirically traceable spread around the world by the 21st century, because it dramatically reduces the concept to a Greco-Roman-European-postcolonial phenomenon. Instead, we need to find functional comparanda, however complex but productive comparables, of classical phenomena and classicisms in other places and times. The challenge is that classicisms have occurred at least over the past three

millennia of human history and are ubiquitous. The earliest historical moment to which scholars have applied the concept of classicism (versus modernism) is the textual culture of Egypt's New Kingdom, during the latter part of the second millennium BCE; among the most recent applications is probably "classical modernism" (think anything from Mussolini's Fascist art to Le Corbusier, Franz Kafka or perhaps Arnold Schoenberg). If it can happen almost *everywhere anytime*, how can we meaningfully distinguish these phenomena, across time, space, media of cultural production, and disciplines of academic research? And how can we identify appropriate and productive comparanda in vastly different cultures? This is compounded by the temporal underdetermination of the "classic" and "classicisms." Turning our gaze from the cross-cultural and horizontal scope to the temporal and vertical development within a single tradition, waves of various "classicisms" typically come and go once the classical – a body of texts, a period, an aesthetical program, a canon of artists – has been established and becomes accepted and operative in specific institutions and communities. Distinguishing one wave from the next in concept and character is challenging and the suffix "neo-" gives us only one single step after an initial "classicism" and is often more confusing than helpful when considering macroregions, like Europe, whose cultures are distinct enough but develop in complex interaction with each other, though with significant divergences and time lags. For example, France's highpoint of "*classicisme*" (especially in literature) occurs in the 17th and early 18th century, followed in the later 18th and 19th centuries by "*néo-classicisme*," especially in art and the decorative arts. But in the German case, literary "*Klassik*" flourished only in the 19th century, and French "*néo-classicisme*" and "style Empire" in the decorative arts is in German only "*Klassizismus*," while "*Neoklassizismus*" is associated with a range of classicizing phenomena in the arts and culture of the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries. Thus, confusion arises both from schematic chronological counting – the tripartite "classical"/"classicist," "neoclassical/neoclassicist" etc. – and from the need to distinguish the classicizing waves in their specificity and rather different timelines within each tradition and across traditions within the same macroregion, not to mention the global scale.

Lastly, in disciplinary and academic terms, the "classical" and "classicism" appear basically throughout history and throughout the range of the arts and even sciences, but the nature, timing, and scholarly terminology, often rooted in long-standing historical

conventions, diverges vastly from discipline to discipline. This makes interdisciplinary dialogue on the subject of the “classical” confusing and frustrating. The spatial, temporal, and terminological ubiquity and thus underdetermination of the “classical” has led to a situation where specific historically-rooted terminologies have come to dominate our cultural historical understanding, which makes it harder to see similarities between classicizing phenomena. Augustan “Atticism,” “Renaissance,” “Enlightenment,” or, to venture further, Chinese Song-Dynasty (960–1279) “Neo-Confucianism” and Japanese Edo Period (1604–1868) “Native Studies” (*kokugaku* 国学), inspired by contemporary classicisms in Japanese Sinology (Japanese philological studies of China), all carry elements of “classicism.” But the historical terminology that has developed around them and has been picked up by modern scholars to typologize periods and intellectual and artistic developments has made them less recognizable as “classicisms.” This has discouraged bolder comparative research of the classic/al and of classicisms, which could bring to light intriguing similarities in their functional dynamic as well as illuminating differences, both within one tradition and across cultures.

The conceptual underdetermination is all the more tantalizing, because the “classical” is so overdetermined in cultural historical terms. Just as anybody yearns for classical canons, periods, writers and artist in order to lay claim to being a “civilization,” “classicisms,” in a very crude, populist conception, are cultural capital for legitimizing or creating traditions. This is visible in the popular and academic politics around the probably most coveted Western classicist movement, the “Renaissance.” It epitomizes crucial aspects of modern Western cultural identity and is considered a period that laid the foundations for Western humanism, for the scientific revolution and Western technological superiority, and for practices of critical, rational academic inquiry. Stephen Greenblatt’s award-winning bestseller *The Swerve. How the World Became Modern*, which masterfully unveils the far-reaching impact of the rediscovery during the Renaissance of Lucretius’s Latin philosophical epic *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*), illustrates the powerful aura that the concept of the “Renaissance” still exudes for us today. The concept of the Western “Renaissance” has a long history. In the fourteenth century Petrarch began to lament a *medium tempus* (what we call “the Dark Middle Ages”) and celebrated himself as restorer of antiquity.³ Leonardo Bruni

³ For a succinct account of the genesis of the concept see Rapp and Kraye (2010).

(1370–1444), who revived the study of Ancient Greek texts, Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1407–1457), who connected the humanist revival of classical Latin to the artistic revival of ancient classical art, and Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) whose radical religious and educational reform program empowered Greek and Hebrew, along with many other important figures, followed. The first person to treat the Renaissance as a historical period was Jules Michelet (1798–1874), who applied it to all of Europe, unlike his younger colleague, the Swiss scholar Jakob Burckhardt (1818–1897), who limited it to Italy and a supposed Italian *Zeitgeist* of the 15th and 16th centuries. Charles Homer Haskins's *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927) and Erwin Panofsky's "Renaissance and Renascences" (1944) catalyzed a powerful revolt against the idealized and Italophile myth of the Renaissance as "the discovery of the world and man," as Panofsky put it forcefully (Panofsky 1944, 201). Although Panofsky's essay both bolstered the existence of the Italian renaissance and of earlier, but distinct, previous medieval "Renaissances," it contributed significantly to problematizing the term, in particular in art history. Suddenly many more earlier "renaissances" were discovered: the Carolingian Renaissance under Charlemagne (8th and 9th centuries), the Ottonian renaissance of the 10th century that could for example boast the revival of Latin dramas produced for example, in the spirit of Terence, by canoness Roswitha of Gandersheim, and of course, most prominently, the Europe-wide flourishing of arts and sciences during the "12th century Renaissance." Even Byzantium, in whose cultural history accretion and emulation is far more important than reform and innovation – those fixtures of Western European cultural history – has now gained its share of recognized "Renaissances": the Theodosian (380–450) Justinianic (6th century), Macedonian (9th and 10th centuries), Comnenian (11th and 12th centuries), and also Palaeologan (13th and 14th centuries) "renaissances," before scholars flee the faltering Byzantine empire in the 14th and 15th centuries and catalyze the Italian Renaissance.

Thus the "Renaissance" came to be pushed back into the Medieval Period, even Late Antiquity. Nobody was seriously interested in pushing the Renaissance forward, showing how 14th and 15th century Italy was in fact still "medieval." Instead, everybody was trying to push it back in time to get a precious piece of "Renaissance-ness," unearthing ever earlier classical revivals in the medieval period. This is a clear sign of the powerful cultural capital associated with the "Renaissance" still today.

With all these challenges, how can we (and why should we) go from here in developing comparative studies of the classic/al on a global scale? Conceptual history approaches are of only limited value because of the sore underdetermination of the concept and because of the linguistic hegemony that the Western concept of *classicus* has exerted since the late 19th century, often distorting or even erasing indigenous concepts in languages and cultures around the globe. And, philosophically, we see that the concept of the classic is often involved in projects of power building and self-affirmation – of a nation, a religion, a canon, an aesthetic ideology, or an ego and its biography. Its philosophical paradoxality is precisely rooted in the absolutizing, ideological claims of promoters of the classic/al and in particular of classicisms in the face of their real-life relative, limited nature. This is both the dirty truth and the sublimity of the classical. But we can turn it to our advantage, when we study the classical in functional rather than face-value comparisons.

Three assumptions are central to such a functional comparative approach: the intentionality of the subjects (who produce, interpret, revive, propagate, research the classic/al), our ability to discern distinctive traits of a phenomenon (that allow us to recognize it as a comparable classical or classicizing phenomenon), and, lastly, an awareness of the effect of cross-cultural functional comparisons and their power to fundamentally expand our intellectual, spiritual, and emotional ways of being in the world. Put differently, and in terms inspired by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology that tries to capture the world as experienced through our first-person consciousness: first, human actions are always directed towards some goal and this, however complex, "intentionality" depends on the horizon of their particular cultural and historical moment, their *Lebenswelt* or "lifeworld"; second, to find the distinctive features of something we need to bracket our face-value, unreflected understanding of it (Husserl calls this "bracketing" *epoché* as part of the process of "phenomenological reduction") and tease out its distinguishing features – which will allow us to find substantial and productive rather than just random and superficial comparanda for the classic/al; and lastly, this comparative process produces distance to our current consciousness and "natürliche Einstellung," and allows us not just to learn something specifically new but to help our consciousness change, expand, and grow. Husserl's propositions of a "phenomenology" have been phenomenally productive in philosophy. Most of his work was not formally published in his lifetime but he pursues his topics in

the more intimate and stream-of-consciousness medium of extensive philosophical diaries (the posthumously published “Husserliana”). Entering his complex and fluid stream of philosophical theory building requires nothing short of a “phenomenology” in interpreting the great variety of Husserl’s ever-changing arguments, and this will keep academic philosophers busy. But what is more relevant here is the great breadth of disciplines, in particular in the empirical social and natural sciences, where phenomenology has turned from philosophy into method, informing anything from psychology and psychiatry to anthropology and physics. Husserl himself was interested in this purposeful appropriation into practical fields of study and his phenomenology is currently promoted as a method to apply even in nursing and midwifery education and research (Christensen et al.; though I have not checked, it seems less likely that this would happen to Descartes or Kant). Two aspects make phenomenology particularly attractive for the human and social sciences at this moment: first, academically, the urgent need for “translators” (as different from the conventional roles of the “specialists” and “generalists”) between scholars in different disciplines as well as in different area-studies-based fields; and, in the larger world, the challenges of global large-scale migrations that oblige us to develop cross-cultural understanding of people with very different cultural “classical” roots and backgrounds and to succeed in the difficult project of building functional “multicultural societies.” Put simply, for this we need people with the phenomenological ability to create comparisons and connections based on the recognition of distinguishing features and the critical reduction of non-essential or ideological “white noise” (Godina 52–53).

The comparative phenomenology of the classic/al I am proposing here is both a call for us to become better phenomenological “translators” across the many fields and disciplines that deal with the classic/al; and to recognize the urgent relevancy and ethical responsibility that comes with studying the classic/al in this historical moment. Concretely, a comparative phenomenology describes and discerns the way the classic/al has taken shape in concept and practice – as canons, periods, authors, artistic works, aesthetic styles, intellectual discourses – over the past five millennia of human history. This rich archive of documented human experience with the formation and transformation of traditions provides abundant data and source material for comparative assessment. It is a true treasure house, a virtual lab for conceptualizing significant differences and divergences across periods, cultures, artistic media and scholarly

disciplines, which understands the classical and subsequent waves of classicisms as a fundamental vector in the formation and development of cultures.

What does a Classic *do*? will be the fundamental question to capture a phenomenology of the classic/al and promote comparative studies of premodern worlds as an academic and ethic responsibility in an age of nationalist and religious fundamentalisms.

To capture a broad variety of phenomena it is good to avoid defining the “classic/al” through any particular culture or historical manifestation, but analyze it as a cultural function, a strategy of innovation based on claims to ideological, political, religious, artistic, aesthetic, literary, scholarly aspects of the past.

Back, again, to our guiding question: What Does a Classic *Do*? What are the most formative institutions that shape the varieties and development of the nature and concepts of the classic/al and of classicisms? First, and most fundamentally, educational systems are prime catalysts of canonization. What textbooks are used? How do they circulate in society? What is the social background and standing of teachers and who has access to education and can be a student? In what physical and institutional spaces do students learn? Based on what criteria are students selected, how is their learning assessed and how are educational institutions connected to particular professions and social prestige? Who are the money-providers and patrons of these institutions and what is their relationship to power and politics? Second, governments and organs of governance are prime brokers of classicizing movements. How have particular political and religious ideologies embraced by governments contributed to the formation and development of concepts and practices of the classic/al and of classicisms? How have political restoration movements mobilized the classic/al for their agenda? How do governments promote their classical cultural heritage to exert soft power, both domestically and globally? Or, especially today, how does governmental funding e.g. for translation of native classical works sponsored by non-Western governments into Western languages, impact the formation of new canons and tastes globally? Third, throughout much of world history, courts have played a prime role in literary production and aesthetic formation of taste through complex patronage systems, courtly institutions and the creation of a courtly literary class. They have been sites of power-legitimizing rituals and lavish occasions for legitimizing spectacles and popular entertainment. And, fourth, churches

have colluded and competed in this process, while being able to draw on deeper connections with lower classes beyond the elites, as they offer ritual and spiritual support for the main events in human life, such as birth, marriage, and death. Fifth, canon formation, genres and temporal layers of commentarial literature, and interpretive communities are all institutions of sorts, practices of textual culture, that contribute to the preservation, transmission, or recovery of texts and their elevation to authoritative or canonical status. Less visibly, but quite importantly, meta-reflections by post-classical writers about the nature and values of the classical is yet another institution of textual cultures. They might function as feed-back mechanisms, elaborating ideas of the unsurpassable classic and artistically sublime, while at the same time articulating symptoms of a “post-classical hang-over,” the struggle of later-born writers with their sense of inferiority towards unsurpassable classical models, in short, in Harold Bloom’s terms, with symptoms of “the anxiety of influence.” Other typical themes in meta-reflections on the concept of the classic/al include epigonism versus strategic iconoclasm, connoisseurship and antiquarianism (often as an alternative strategy of later-borns to evade anxiety and prove worthy of the classical through consummate expertise), or oblivion-and-sudden-rediscovery narratives.

How can we make this comparative phenomenology of the classical fruitful for both a deeper understanding of the diverse workings and functioning of classicizing phenomena in very particular moments and places of world history and for a deeper appreciation of the impact of these phenomena on human cultures, past, present, and future? Let’s parachute into a few case studies and see what new questions and potential insights could be gained by pursuing this project.

The earliest historical moment for which modern scholars have discerned the appearance of forms of “classicism” (versus modernism) is Ancient Egypt, in particular the “Ramesside Period” of the 19th and 20th Dynasties of the New Kingdom (1292 – 1077 BCE). During not even three centuries, after the (in)famous Amarna period and the trenchant reforms of the iconoclastic and supposedly “monotheistic” pharaoh Akhenaton, we see a brief flourishing of Late Egyptian literature, with a distinctive orthography and syntax, and largely confined to works in hieratic on papyrus. New vernacularizing writings appear and there is a characteristic linguistic variety in the diglossia between the “classical” and the newly emerging “modern” Late Egyptian. Unprecedented genres flourish, such as intensely sensual love poetry, narrative fiction (typically

one copy each, and almost exclusively on papyrus, indicating that they did not enter the later stream of tradition), and fictionalization of genres such as letters and official reports (Baines). This example inspires intriguing questions: does the “classical” typically emerge when distance to a contemporary “modern” is felt? What is the role of the emergence of vernacular writing styles for the classical and for classicisms? Does it typically emerge out of breaks of a long-standing high cultural tradition? What is the role of fiction for the concept of the classical and “modern”? And, in this particular case, what do we make of the unequal development of the “classical” in different areas of cultural production, namely the fact that Akhenaten’s iconoclastic art and provocative monotheistical ritualism was rejected right after his era, whereas the linguistic and literary impulses of the “modern” continued? And why, in this case, did “modernism” lose out so quickly?

A next classical moment happens, again, in Egypt, but this time it is a moment of long-lasting canon consolidation with a radically different phenomenology: the canonization of Homer and the Greek poets in Ptolemaic Alexandria. Unlike the “classicism” provoked by Late Egyptian “modernism,” we have here a form of transplant classicism intent on showcasing the very best of Greek culture in the wake of Alexander the Great’s conquest of Egypt and ensuing waves of Hellenization. Ptolemy I, Alexander’s friend and general, grew up at the Macedonian royal court of Alexander’s father Philip II, and later succeeded Alexander in Egypt. He was intent on showing the superiority of Greek culture, as he tried to recover as many territories of Alexander’s failed empire in his claim to Hellenistic successorship and ruled through the immigrant Greek upper class. To this purpose the early Ptolemies patronized a vibrant intellectual community around the *Mouseion* [museum], complete with the famous library of Alexandria. During the 140 years that Alexandria flourished (c. 285–145 BCE), court-sponsored scholars created new forms of textual scholarship: they compiled texts and sorted out forgeries, corrected mistakes from old scripts (e.g. the old Attic alphabet); corrected titles and speculated on dating issues; and they invented “critical signs,” such as Zenodotus of Ephesus’s “*obelos*,” which marked lines that were considered spurious interpolations. Their main goal of editing and explaining the poets led to the successive development of grammar (as systematized by Dionysius Thrax), of glossing and commentary composition, etymological study and literary criticism, as well as the scholarly compilation of a catalogue of the Alexandrian library by Callimachus (Dickey 3–6).

This case leads to a different set of questions: while Late Egyptian classicism and modernism seems to have only diffusely been tied to state institutions, the Alexandrian canonization of Greek literature and creation of European philology on Egyptian soil was catalyzed by court-sponsored scholarly institutions. What is the relationship between libraries, grammars, and the development of critical philological scholarship? Is the idea of a fixed “complete” canon of a given tradition – here Greek in Egypt – more easily catalyzed in “transplant classicisms” that unfold in a foreign environment, where the culturalist claim to a “canon” helped assert and preserve cultural identity? How specifically was the canonization of “classical Greek literature” and the emergence of philological scholarship impacted by the complex relationship between Egyptian traditions and Greek immigrant culture in the Alexandria at the time? Have we been paying enough attention to this?

Alexandrian classical grammarian scholarship becomes yet more complex when we see it in the light of Hellenistic literary production. The very scholars who created the classical Greek canon often produced hermetically erudite, sophisticated poetry – clearly postclassical or “modern,” as we could say, with Callimachus (ca. 305–240 BCE) being the most famous example. Latin literature, arguably, emerged as a local Hellenistic, post-classical literature, and this suddenly became an issue when during the first-century “Asianism,” a self-consciously elaborate, hyperbolic style associated with the Eastern Mediterranean, became something of an offensive term in oratorical and literary circles, as the opposite of the ideal of “Atticism,” the style of Greek oratory of classical Athens. Cicero, who himself was accused of the practice, makes us aware of this new Atticist “classicism” that came to flourish under Augustus (“*Asiatici*,” as referring to “orators from the East” appear in *De oratore* 3.43, but the polemics only unfolds in the dialogue *Brutus* (46 BCE)). This devaluation of Hellenistic “modern” eloquence was promoted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Seneca the Elder, and Quintilianus, all writers with classicizing agendas. Although “Asianism” remained popular in Rome – Hortensius was one practitioner in his time – the new movement of writing classicist Attic prose inspired “modern” “Neoteric literature” in Rome, such as Catullus’s. It is unclear whether the classicists’ movement started in Greece, but, as far as we can see from extant sources, it became a central debate in Roman literary culture in the later first century BCE. The attention then moved from Alexandria and Greek – textual editing and a mainly scholarly enterprise – to Rome

and Latin – literary production, meta-literary debates, and the creation of manuals for writing classicist prose and oratory.

While canonizing, post-classical, and reactive classicizing movements moved eccentrically through the Mediterranean in the wake of Hellenistic and Roman conquests and their demographic flows, canonizing and classicist movements developed, more centripetally, on the other end of the Eurasian continent at the court of Han China. The comparative study of the Roman and Han Chinese empires has recently become a vivid field of study and can provide a productive frame for exploring the relationship between classicism and empire building.⁴ The Qin and Han Dynasties (221 BCE–220 CE) unified several hegemonic states that during the latter part of the Zhou Dynasty (481–221 BCE) had engaged in constant internecine warfare and created a new, strongly centralized imperial system, which also led to the centralized management of books and knowledge production. Librarians of the Han imperial library did pioneering work in ordering and compiling the earlier fluid textual record, transcribing and standardizing scripts, composing prolific commentaries (both the glossing “chapter-and-verse” (*zhangju* 章句) commentaries and the more interpretive “explanatory commentaries (*xungu* 訓詁)), and engaging in textual critical debates about textual authenticity and forgeries (Connery 40–63).

Yet, empire building, canonization, and literary production intersected in very different ways. Just to raise one point for fruitful comparison, the institutional impact of empire on Roman scholarly and literary production and its classicizing tendencies is remarkably small in contrast to Han China. True, the ways in which early imperial ideology figured in the works of Augustan authors such as Virgil, Horace, or even Ovid – as the most famous exilic outcast of empire – has been a long-standing theme of debate. Yet, imperial institutions were central catalysts for canonizing and classicist movements in Han China. In 136 BCE, Emperor Wu of the Han founded an office of “Erudites” for the teaching and transmission of what became the initial Confucian “Five Classics” of the *Book of Changes*, *Book of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, and the chronicle *Spring and Autumn Annals*. In 124 BCE, this office became the State Academy. Court-sponsored schools would eventually become

⁴ See Dettenhofer (2006), Mutschler and Mittag (2008), Scheidel (2015), to name but a few.

the basis for the civil service examination system, which, basically, from the Tang (618–907) to the early 20th century, constituted the main road for tens of thousands of candidates to service in the state bureaucracy, not just in China, but also in neighboring Korea and Vietnam. The courtly competition over interpretation of the classics – also in the form of memorable staged court debates – became a fundamental part of political and institutional culture and contributed, by the latter half of the Han, to the formation of a “literati” class that came to characterize traditional Chinese, and in various forms East Asian, intellectual life from the 3rd century onward into the 20th century (Lu 2013). Exam success (or, frequently, the miseries of failure) and the intellectual networks that were rooted in joint study and success (or the need to deal with failure), collective drinking and poetry composition, the appreciation of poetry, calligraphy, of painting and music, and, by the Song Dynasty (960–1279), antiquarian connoisseurship, were all hallmarks of this culture of poet-scholar-officials, of “literati.” This social class simply has no obvious comparandum in Western cultural history and thus merits thorough comparative attention. The classical education that became the basis for recruitment into government office also required a different material stability of texts: a crucial event in late Han Classicism, reoccurring in later dynasties, was the carving of an authoritative version of the classical canon on stone slabs that were put up in the State Academy around 175 CE. Supposedly thousands of people came to copy the canonical text, creating a commotion and blocking the streets and alleys of the city (*Hou Hanshu* 1981).

Like “Atticism” in Rome, classicist writing styles of various colors emerged, debates over “older” and “more modern” texts and the issues of forgeries developed, but the functional anatomy and phenomenology of these early imperial canonizing and classicist movements in the Ancient Mediterranean and China differs greatly. Accordingly, the phenomenology of later waves of classicisms on the bookends of the Eurasian continent differs ever more significantly, because Chinese dynasties came and went, while the Roman Empire fell (in the 5th and, for the East, 15th centuries), giving way to a multi-state system of European monarchies. In China, the oldest continuous literary tradition, the various Tang Dynasty programs of “Reviving Antiquity” (*fugu* 復古), Song Dynasty nativist reactions against Buddhism and Daoism in the form of classicizing “Neo-Confucianism” with its creation of classical orthodoxy, Ming archaisms, Qing empirical classical scholarship and

classicist “Han learning,” or radical classicist reform programs for an embittered China beleaguered by Western imperialist powers around the turn of the twentieth century (as proposed for example by the Kang Youwei (1858–1927)), occurred largely within the linguistic parameters of Literary Chinese, premodern China’s official cosmopolitan written language. In contrast, the fall of the Roman empire spurred on the emergence of various European monarchies with their own vernacular written literatures. They acquired their own “classical periods” and “classical authors,” be it Dante or Petrarch for Italian, or Corneille or Racine for French. For China and the states in the traditional East Asian “Sinographic Sphere,” vernacular literatures were made into “national classics” only in the twentieth century, through various reformist or revolutionary agendas of intellectuals or governments. This modern myth of the “national classic” expressing a particular people’s “spirit” in the national vernacular language, inspired by 19th-century European romanticism and nationalisms, still dominates the national imagination and education systems in East Asia. It has propelled vernacular works such as Japan’s *The Tale of Genji*, the “world’s first novel” and a sprawling courtly tale spun around the irresistible and flawed male protagonist Genji, and, in Korea, *Hong Kiltong*, a tale of martial prowess of a hero from the class of disprivileged “secondary sons” of Chosŏn Korea’s literati elites, to the top of the canon and reading lists. This is somewhat justified for *Genji*, rather exceptionally, because it enjoyed the status of a classic through its role as a poetry composition manual and provided inspiration for a rich body of commentaries, adaptations, and satires since the 13th century. *Hong Kiltong* certainly had no status in the premodern canon of literary production, but was considered lowly fiction.

Korea, Japan, and Vietnam present particularly stimulating cases for a phenomenology of the classic/al and classicisms. During the first millennium CE, they all promoted state building on Chinese models of governance and their literary cultures are characterized by a distinctive biliteracy, with cosmopolitan Literary Chinese, or the transregional “Literary Sinitic,” blending into a large variety of vernacular inscription styles and genres (Kornicki; Denecke 45–56). In this environment, classicist movements often developed in symbiosis with a nativism that emphasized local needs and cultural sensibility.

Nativist scholars in 18th century Japan harked back to the great works of the Nara and Heian Periods (710–1185), and challenged sinological studies of the Chinese classics with a new form of “vernacular”

classicism: the study, commentary-production, and stylistic emulation of vernacular texts that was strongly empirically founded. The most challenging case in East Asia to study the classic/al and classicisms in depth might well be Korea, not the least because the vast majority of pre-15th-century sources is lost today and the vernacular literary tradition was much less advanced than in Japan. Korea never developed a full-fledged premodern form of classicism, comparable to that which 18th-century Japanese nativist scholars like Kamo no Mabuchi and Motoori no Norinaga spearheaded for vernacular Japanese. The reign of King Sejong (1418–1415) has some phenomenological features of a “classical period” of Korean culture. The feverish ordering and compilation of earlier textual records clearly constitutes a historic moment of canonization. It went along with the official invention and promulgation of a vernacular script, today’s *han’gŭl*, and the commissioning of official classicizing texts. These texts created on the one hand new, heavily Sinified written vernacular styles, but, on the other hand, grounded their philology, historical repertoire and awareness in Chinese texts, as can be seen with the *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (*Yongbiŏch’ŏnga* 龍飛御天歌): the first text written in the new vernacular script, it is a heavy-handed panegyrics of the ancestors and founders of the Chosŏn dynasty, glossed by a commentary in Literary Sinitic (which was probably more understandable at the time than the newly created, clumsily written vernacular), and argued through systematic juxtaposition of early Chinese and recent Korean history. Many of the signature texts of Sejong’s reign were propagated in the newly mobilized medium of moveable-type printing, making for a distinctive intersection of so many different, at times paradoxical, elements of “canonization,” “classicisms,” “vernacularization,” “print-based propagation and -popularization,” and a new historical consciousness.

When considering the European vernaculars, Germany constitutes a particularly thought-provoking case for a phenomenology of the classic/al. The classical periods of the vernacular literatures of both France and Germany are both strongly characterized by a creative appropriation of Europe’s Greco-Roman antiquity; this is much less the case for England’s Elizabethan literature or Spain’s literature of the “siglo d’oro.” As the latest “classical age” of the major Western European vernacular literatures, the Goethe-and-Schiller focused “Weimarer Klassik” and other 19th-century German classicisms occurred in an environment radically different from the centralistic 17th-century French classicisms. The German forms of

“Klassik” developed just as academic historicism, in the wake of Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, gripped Europe’s intellectual life; while modern archeology emerged and classical scholars like Karl Otfried Müller went on expeditions to examine the Greek archeological remains empirically; while Humboldtian humanism was developed, which became the foundation for modern universities in Germany and many places around the world: it contributed to the genesis of the basic humanistic disciplines – history, literature, Classics and philology, as well as “Oriental Studies,” ranging from Ancient Near Eastern studies as an auxiliary discipline for biblical studies, to the Arabic and Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese literary worlds, to comparative linguistics, and the comparative study of religions – which are still with us today. It unfolded against the background of vivid scientific exploration of other botanical, zoological, and cultural worlds, as exemplified by Alexander von Humboldt or Goethe. All these intersecting phenomena make 19th century German classicisms distinctive in the European context. It was a fulminantly cosmopolitan “foreignizing Klassik,” on many levels. Inspired by the early exploits of academic Oriental Studies, Goethe inhabited the poetic persona and genre spectrum of the 14th-century Arabic poet Hafiz and took it to new heights of German literature in his *West-östlicher Divan* (West–Eastern Diwan). (How unthinkable would it have been, for purely historical reasons, to have Dante or Racine write in a voice of cultural impersonation of any oriental literary tradition!). It is thus no surprise that “Weltliteratur,” a concept promoted, if not invented by Goethe, has been inspiring a new form of global literary studies, in particular in North America in the early 21st century: more specifically, the combination of “foreignizing classicism” with forms of cosmopolitanism still resonates with us and “World Literature Studies,” with all the debates this field has created, can provide inspiration for navigating the daunting challenges of socioeconomic globalization.

5. Outlook: Benefits and Challenges

A comparative historical phenomenology of the classic/al and of classicisms can help us understand broader patterns in the evolution of societies, past and present. When understood as processes of tradition formation, they become dramatically more important for our general understanding of cultures, past and present. Despite popular prejudices, neither the “classical” nor “Classics” is a dying breed, especially when

considered on a global scale. Comparative studies of the classic/al have tremendously timely critical potential to deal with some of the greatest challenges societies on this planet are currently facing: virulent nationalisms, political or religious fundamentalisms, postcolonial (or neocolonial) inequality, individual and collective traumas inflicted by war and violence and aggravated by failed reconciliation. It is true that classicist agendas have often been advanced for nativist or nationalist purposes, as Melanie Trede laments for example for Japanese art history (Trede). For scholars of classical languages, literatures and culture heritage, this is both a curse and an opportunity, in both good and bad senses. But we can face this challenge through critical comparative phenomenological examination: as scholars we can tap the powers of a comparative phenomenology of classical traditions on a global scale to build respect for differences, shoulder our responsibility to speak truth to power and criticize, or at least historicize, particular abuses of the classical tradition for incendiary populist politics or biased academic discourse.

The questions “What is a classic?” or “Why read the Classics?” became popular as, over the past one and a half centuries, the canonical standing of the West’s Greco-Roman heritage has been fading ever more quickly. They are signposts of fear, which reveal much about our increasing insecurity about the precise nature of the value of premodern worlds and classical cultures in today’s utilitarian capitalist societies. It is about time for a new question. “What does a Classic *Do*?” opens the door into a new world, where a combination of cross-cultural historical comparisons of tradition building and speaking out against fundamentalist abuses of classical heritage in today’s political culture around the globe, can show us the way into a less violent and divisive, and a more shared, empathetic, and cosmopolitan future.

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