Journal of Philosophy and Linguistics
Research Article Peer-review, Open Access

Classical Traditions in European and Eastern Modern Literature: Image, Motif, Plot (Based on the Works of W. Faulkner, A. Camus, and Kh. Dostmuhammad)

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Abstract: The article offers a comparative analysis of the forms in which classical antiquity is revived in twentieth-century European and Eastern prose at the levels of image, motif and plot. Its central argument is that classical heritage is not repeated in modern literature but changes its function, and that the direction of this change depends on whether the tradition arrived by direct inheritance or by mediated transmission.

Keywords: classical tradition, modern literature, mythological image, plot archetype, motif of fate, reception, mediated transmission, comparative literature, Faulkner, Camus, Khurshid Dostmuhammad.

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INTRODUCTION

Recourse to classical antiquity is so widespread in twentieth-century literature that it is usually perceived not as a distinct phenomenon but as the general background of the age. Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Sartre's *The Flies* were all produced within a few decades and each transposes an ancient plot onto new material. Such density cannot be accidental and raises a question: why did the modernist period in particular turn so sharply to the classical inheritance [1].

The customary answer rests on the notion of cultural crisis–after the First World War the European mind lost its foundation and sought the vanished wholeness in ancient culture. This explanation is partly correct, yet it passes over an important aspect: a modern writer may turn to an ancient plot not in order to restore it but in order to argue against it. These two directions, restoration and dispute, determine the fate of classical tradition in modern literature, and the balance between them differs from author to author [2].

To perceive this difference it is useful to compare authors who worked in three distinct cultural situations. For William Faulkner the classical inheritance arrived directly, through the tradition of classical education in the American South; for Albert Camus it came doubly, through the French school and through North Africa, that is through the Mediterranean space itself; for Khurshid Dostmuhammad it arrived by an entirely different route, through the assimilation of Greek philosophy by the Eastern Renaissance, that is in mediated form. These three routes cause the same material to function in three different ways [3].

The most conspicuous trace of classical tradition in Faulkner's work is contained in the title of *As I Lay Dying*. The phrase is taken from the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, from the words spoken by Agamemnon to Odysseus in the kingdom of the dead, where the murdered king complains of his wife's betrayal. The choice of title casts a shadow over the whole content of the novel: the funeral journey of Addie Bundren is read not as an ordinary family event but as a journey to the realm of the dead, a modern form of the katabasis scheme. The crossing of the flooded river, the passage through fire, the trials connected with the decay of the corpse–this sequence reproduces the structure of the ancient journey plot [4].

Faulkner's principal connection with classical tradition nonetheless lies deeper than the title and appears in the very conception of fate. In the Yoknapatawpha narratives the motif of the family curse, of ancestral guilt descending upon later generations, recurs consistently, and this motif is the central construction of Greek tragedy. The decline of the Compson family, the destruction of the Sutpen line, the forbidden closeness between brother and sister, self-annihilation–all reproduce a structure familiar from the history of the house of Atreus or of Labdacus. The difference is that in Faulkner the source of guilt is not the will of the gods but historical reality: slavery and the moral debt it created [5].

METHODOLOGY

This very substitution reveals the first form in which the classical inheritance is altered in modern literature: the tragic structure is preserved while its metaphysical foundation is replaced by a historical one. History stands in the place of moira, yet the impossibility of mastering it and its inevitable leading of the hero to ruin remain unchanged. In this sense Faulkner does not break the ancient structure but fills it with a new cause, and a modern form of tragedy results.

Camus's attitude differs fundamentally, and the difference is stated openly in the title of one of his principal works. *The Myth of Sisyphus* does not restore the ancient image but disputes with it. In the traditional interpretation Sisyphus is a sinner condemned to eternal and meaningless punishment, an emblem of divine judgement. Camus reads the same situation in reverse: if the punishment is eternal and escape impossible, then the single point of freedom remains in the attitude taken towards that condition, and Sisyphus's descent from the hill becomes his conscious, unhumiliated step. The closing sentence of the essay gathers the whole meaning of this rereading: one must imagine Sisyphus happy.

RESULTS

The literary mechanism of such rereading is worth noting. Camus does not alter the plot–Sisyphus still carries the stone upward and the stone still rolls down–he merely shifts the point of narration. Where the ancient text views the event from the side of the gods, Camus shows it from within the hero, and the same action thereby acquires an entirely different meaning. This device is characteristic of modern literature, in which what is altered is not the myth itself but the vantage point from which it is regarded [6].

Classical tradition is present in Camus's work in a further and much broader form, expressed in his conception of the Mediterranean. In the essay *Helen's Exile* he charges modern European thought with having lost the Greek sense of measure: for the Greek any excess was a crime, whereas the modern mind regards the limitless as a virtue [7]. The notion of southern thought in *The Rebel* continues the same idea. Here the classical inheritance is received not as plot or image but as a principle of measure, and it constitutes the ethical foundation of Camus's poetics [8].

In the novel *The Plague* the ancient model reappears at the level of plot. An epidemic engulfing a city, the disappearance of all social distinctions before it, the gradual transformation of public consciousness–this scheme is familiar from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and from Thucydides' description of the plague at Athens [9]. The difference lies once more in causation: in the ancient text the plague is divine punishment and the search for its cause sets the plot in motion, whereas in Camus the plague possesses no meaning whatever, and it is precisely its meaninglessness that puts the characters to the test [10].

The question of classical tradition in the work of Khurshid Dostmuhammad is posed differently, and the difference arises from the cultural situation itself. For Uzbek literature the Greek inheritance is not a

direct paternal legacy: it arrived through the Eastern Renaissance, through the assimilation of Aristotle and Plato by Farabi and Ibn Sina. This mediation carries an important consequence: what was received consisted of philosophical concepts rather than mythological images. The Eastern thinker took logic and the conception of reason from Aristotle and the world of ideas from Plato, yet the figures of Sisyphus or Oedipus did not pass along this route [11].

For this reason classical tradition appears in Dostmuhammad's prose not in the recognisable form of plot or name, as in Faulkner or Camus, but in the form of a structure of thought. His novel *Ibn Mughanni* places at its centre the figure of the artist and the responsibility attaching to talent, while in the novel *Bozor* the space of the marketplace is constructed as a model of the world. In both cases the work is organised around a concept rather than around an event, and this manner of construction belongs to the tradition of philosophical dialogue, which traces back in the end to Greek sources [12].

DISCUSSION

Distinguishing this difference across the levels of image, motif and plot sharpens the analysis. At the level of image, classical figures are directly recognisable in Faulkner and Camus–the traces of Agamemnon, Sisyphus, Caligula and Prometheus stand openly in the text. In Dostmuhammad such figures are absent and in their place stand images of the Eastern tradition–the dervish, the musician, the seeker–yet their function within the text proves close to that of the classical hero: they too test a boundary, and through that test the possibilities of the human being are measured [13].

At the level of motif the three authors display the greatest commonality. Resistance to fate, the futility of labour, equality before death, the burden of a father's legacy–all these motifs occur in each body of work and belong to the common fund of ancient literature. This is an expected result, since the motif is a more mobile unit than the plot, crosses cultural boundaries more easily and does not alter its shape in a new context [14].

At the level of plot the difference is greatest. Faulkner transposes the ancient plot scheme in its entirety–journey, curse, the ruin of a line. Camus preserves the plot while altering its interpretation. Dostmuhammad does not employ ancient plots at all, and his texts rest on the structure of the Eastern narrative tradition, the classical inheritance participating only at the level of concept. Mediated transmission thus proves to have carried across the philosophical layer without carrying the layer of plot [15].

This observation leads to a more general conclusion for comparative literature. The route by which a tradition is received determines in advance which of its layers will migrate: direct inheritance transmits every layer–image, motif and plot–whereas mediated transmission selects, and generally transmits the most abstract layer, that of concept and manner of thought. Searching for Greek names is therefore fruitless in the study of classical tradition in Eastern modern literature, and analysis must be directed at the intellectual structure of the text.

Viewing all three authors on a single plane discloses a further common feature. Each turns to the classical inheritance in order to seek an answer to the central question of his own age, and that question is the same for all three: what is the position of the human being before a power he cannot control. Faulkner gives a tragic answer–ruin is inevitable, yet dignity is preserved in the form of resistance to it. Camus gives a rebellious answer–meaninglessness is acknowledged, yet what follows from it is consciousness rather than submission. Dostmuhammad gives an ethical answer–the choice lies within, in the intention and responsibility of the person.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, classical tradition operates in modern literature not as a return to the past but as a language for posing a present question, and for this reason it appears each time in altered form. Faulkner fills the ancient tragic structure with historical causation, Camus preserves the ancient image while loading it with a contrary meaning, and Dostmuhammad unites the philosophical layer transmitted through mediated

tradition with the form of Eastern narrative. In all three cases the classical inheritance remains an instrument rather than a source, and its vitality in modern literature lies precisely in this adaptability.

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