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Martin Litchfield West, OM, FBA

Few classical scholars of any generation have matched the extraordinary talent of Martin West, who died suddenly on 13th July 2015. Astonishingly prolific and wide-ranging in his publications, West combined acute philological skill with a profound understanding of the contexts of ancient Greek literature. His first love was the archaic epic poetry of Hesiod and Homer; but his expertise in Greek fragmentary epic and lyric, and in tragedy, was also unsurpassed. Indeed, scarcely any period or genre of ancient Greek poetry escaped his critical eye.

West was a superlative editor who showed a formidable mastery of language and metre, restoring the often corrupt manuscripts of ancient texts through countless palmary emendations; as a commentator on Greek poetry he deployed a dizzying range of parallels to illuminate recalcitrant passages. But West's editorial work was only ever part of his engagement with the ancient world. In his first book, an edition, with commentary, of Hesiod's *Theogony* (1966), he showed the earliest signs of his interest in the relationship between Greek poetry and the literature of the ancient near east. This line of investigation was taken further in *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (1971), before reaching its culmination in perhaps his single most important work, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (1997). He was much concerned, too, with the Indo-European heritage of Greek poetry, a subject which he explored in *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007). Between them, these two hugely ambitious monographs in effect situate Greek poetry in space and time.

Never afraid to argue for controversial positions (he dated the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* after the poems of Hesiod, denying that the author of either epic was called Homer) and utterly detached from the vagaries of scholarly fashion (literary theory rose and fell, and he carried on regardless), West was unique among classical scholars the world over for the sheer magnitude of his achievement and the respect in which he was held. His own conception of scholarship was not complicated, nor did it need to be. As he put it in his speech on accepting the International Balzan Prize for Classical Antiquity in 2000, «there are objective underlying facts, to which every construction must relate... [But] a fact is of little interest except in relation to other facts. Finding the most meaningful relationships is the great challenge, in scholarship as in life»¹.

Martin Litchfield West was born in Hampton, Middlesex on 23rd September 1937, the son of Maurice West, a civil engineer specialising in water projects, and Catherine West, a domestic science teacher. He was educated at St Paul's School, where he was taught by the legendary Classics masters W.W. Cruickshank and E.P.C. Cotter, and where he developed interests in cricket and astronomy that he would pursue throughout his life. He came up to Balliol in 1955, when the Tutor for Admissions was the eminent classicist Kenneth Dover. Like Housman before him, he failed to obtain first-class honours in Literae Humaniores ('Greats') when he took finals in 1959; Housman failed outright, West at least managed a second. His doc-

¹ West 2007, xxviii.

toral thesis was supervised by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, the newly-appointed Regius Professor of Greek. Lloyd-Jones would later modestly say that West's ability was so exceptional that the only thing he could do for him was to introduce him to German scholars, such as Reinhold Merkelbach, with whom he fruitfully collaborated in work on Hesiod and Archilochus.

But the dominant influence on him was that of Eduard Fraenkel, whose flight to Oxford from Nazi persecution in the 1930s had had such a deep impact on classical studies there thanks to his weekly seminar on Greek and Latin texts. «Here», West wrote, «we saw German philology in action; we felt it reverberate through us as Fraenkel patrolled the room behind our chairs, discoursing in forceful accents. As he spoke of his old teachers and past colleagues – Leo and Norden, Wilamowitz and Wackernagel – it was like an *apparition de l'Église éternelle*. We knew, and could not doubt, that this was what Classical Scholarship was, and that it was for us to learn to carry it on»². It was at Fraenkel's seminar that he met Stephanie Pickard, later Fellow Librarian of Hertford College and herself a distinguished classicist, whom he married; together they had two children, Rachel and Robert. The preface to West's Teubner edition of Aeschylus (1990) ends with a moving invocation of Fraenkel's spirit, as West addresses him in the words used by Orestes to call upon his dead father Agamemnon.

After holding the Woodhouse Fellowship at St John's, in 1963 West was appointed to a Tutorial Fellowship at University College. The publication of his thesis in 1966 was followed by further work on Hesiod, including an edition, with commentary, of Hesiod's *Works and Days* in 1974, a book which prompted one reviewer to observe that «Hesiod himself would surely have been the first to acclaim with gratitude this rich granary of learning, the fruits of so many labours and days»³. In 1973 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, aged only thirty-five, at the time the second-youngest scholar ever (after the papyrologist, Bernard Grenfell) to be so honoured; the following year he was translated to the chair of Greek at Bedford College at the University of London. When Lloyd-Jones retired in 1989 West was not chosen to succeed him as Regius Professor; two years later, however, he was elected to a Senior Research Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, a position which he found more congenial than the Regius chair would doubtless have been. Free to concentrate on research, West began the intensive learning of ancient near eastern languages that led to *The East Face of Helicon*, a volume which he dedicated to the College, his 'alma noverca' or 'nourishing stepmother'.

The last two decades of his life saw a renewed engagement with epic poetry. He published editions of the *Iliad* (1998-2000) and *Odyssey* (which he was completing at the time of his death), and of the Epic Cycle (2003), and several major monographs; articles on newly-discovered works by Archilochus and Sappho brought their poetry to life as no-one else could. In addition to the Balzan Prize, he received the British Academy's Kenyon Medal for Classical Studies (2002), a *Festschrift* from pupils and colleagues for his seventieth birthday (2007), honorary doctorates from the Universities of Cyprus (2008) and Urbino (2011), and the Order of Merit (2014). The distinction of that last award in particular cannot be understated.

² *Ibid.* XXI.

³ Richardson 1979, 171.

The Order contains only twenty-four members at any time, and is the personal gift of Her Majesty the Queen; previous classicists who have held it include Sir Richard Jebb, Gilbert Murray, and Sir Ronald Syme. His collected papers appeared in three volumes under the title *Hellenica. Selected Papers on Greek Literature and Thought* (2011-13).

No great conversationalist, he was once described in a reference as ‘taciturn in seven ancient languages’; but his complete lack of pomposity made him agreeable company. The titles of some of his papers – ‘Grated cheese fit for heroes’, ‘Seventeen distorted mirrors in Plato’ – reveal a delight in the absurd that was almost child-like. The preface to one of his books is particularly memorable:

My interest in the subject goes back to my second year as an undergraduate, when, browsing in J. U. Powell’s corpus of fragments of Hellenistic verse, *Collectanea Alexandrina*, I was surprised to come upon several pages of music. They revealed themselves to be transcriptions of the two Delphic Paeans which are our most substantial specimen of ancient melody. I committed one of them to memory, and the next spring, when I went to Greece for the first time, on arriving at Delphi I sang it at the top of my voice in the ruins of the sanctuary where it had had its première 2,084 springs previously. My two travelling companions distanced themselves somewhat. A little later, as we examined the stone on which the text is inscribed, one of them stumbled against it, and it nearly crashed from its mooring and shattered. (I married her all the same.)⁴

This sense of mischief made him a memorable Lord Mallard at All Souls, responsible for the twice-yearly delivery of the Mallard Song, on which he published a monograph. But he was also a committed Dean of Visiting Fellows, and an unfailingly encouraging source of advice to younger classicists there. He remained an active member of the College community after his retirement in 2004, as an Emeritus and (from 2014) an Honorary Fellow, the latter a particularly rare mark of esteem within that College.

Like Fraenkel, West had few research students, though the list of those whose work he did supervise includes several distinguished scholars: Adrian Hollis, Nicholas Richardson, Stephen Instone, Ben Henry, Jane Lightfoot. His influence was disseminated chiefly through his publications, of which he produced considerably more than five hundred; this includes more than thirty books, virtually all of which remain fundamental⁵. Like the great deeds of the heroes commemorated in the epics that he edited, the scale of his scholarly achievement will not easily be surpassed by posterity.

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⁴ West 1992, v.

⁵ A full list up to c. 2006 can be found in Finglass – Collard – Richardson 2007, XXIX-LVI.

Patrick J. Finglass

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