

# What Is a Classic... for Children and Young Adults?

In the beginning of the history we wish to share here was Homer, soon joined by his sons and perhaps by his daughters, too. They proffered humankind the gift of Orpheus, the son of Apollo and the muse Calliope: the most precious heritage from the prehistorical, mythical chronotope, when time was not reckoned by human measure and the world was infinitely moldable. This gift has permitted each and every one of our kind—whether adult or child, whether living in Antiquity or today—to experience and to wield a divine power that enables us to shape the universe, even though its mythical moldability has long since vanished and the borders between reality and our imagination have been fixed. Yes, I mean the magic of the Word and storytelling.

This magic seems to have waned in comparison to its primordial force, for nobody, not even Homer himself, has succeeded in repeating the charms of Orpheus, who could rouse the stones and trees to dance, cause rivers to stop flowing, and tame savage beasts. In truth, however, this was not the most important emanation of the power of the Word (though it was certainly the most spectacular). The human mind invented many a way to deal with the physical world. But the crucial aspect of Orpheus's magic pertains to the immaterial sphere of our existence, one that still evades our perception and understanding. And this magic has survived as strong as it ever was in the beginning—and even before our history. Through the magic of the Word we have learnt to build our identity, to confer a deeper significance to the joys and sorrows of daily life, to catalyse a whole range of the emotions—both the good and the dangerous ones—touching our hearts. To this day we experience and use this magic. The passing of thousands of years and the progress in technological development are of no importance here.

## Our Mythical Childhood

The ancient demiurges of the Word travelled from house to house, weaving the stories of the Trojan War and the Returns (*nostoi*). They gathered the precious crumbs from Homer's table and prepared on such leaven dramas ever-compelling. They reached more and more boldly both for myths and history (in fact, as Heinrich Schliemann proved, in the case of the Trojan War, the border between these two realms may be rather permeable after all), and they reached for contemporary events as well. Thus did they create tales that would (try to) explain the meaning of life and attractively convey the values presumed universal.

All this resulted in beautiful, but at the same time painful lessons, like the one drawn from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which is vital for young readers, too—as will be demonstrated in the present volume.<sup>1</sup> This myth teaches us that each closeness bears within itself an unavoidable loss (even when the protagonist is the son of a god...), and this loss is the greater, the stronger the love is. But Orpheus's lesson also teaches us that, in spite of all, true closeness, if only for a very short time, is worth the terrible price of suffering which sooner or later will be experienced by those who remain on Earth longer than their loved ones.

All things change, as Ovid wrote in his *perpetuum carmen*, but nothing is extinguished. The aoidoi are no longer among us to pass on the primordial lessons of life, but we do have literature. Despite the negative view on the discovery of writing on the part of Plato's Socrates, literature began preserving the magic of the Word and the memory of universal values, owing to which every new generation (ours included) can feel and know them beyond time and space. And ever since Antiquity, the heirs of Homer—in each generation—have been taking up ancient threads and weaving them still deeper into the fabric of the world, tailoring them into new language and discourse forms, into new cultures. They have been introducing, removing, or modifying the primordial motifs (yet ever beholding their original core), in response to both the individual experiences each author has gone through during her or his physical and spiritual journey, as well as to the collective needs of the recipients of culture met along the way.

Indeed, the needs were high and ancient heritage remained attractive because of its potential to meet them. Hence the centuries-long admiration of the past and the conviction—present in scholarship until the 1960s—of its *influence* on subsequent epochs. However, there has never ever been a passive ingestion of the ancient heritage, but an active, at times even fiery dialogue with this tradition,<sup>2</sup> one that has consistently mirrored the social, political,

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1 See the chapter in this volume by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Orpheus and Eurydice: Reception of a Classical Myth in International Children's Literature."

2 The new "active" approach in scholarship was initiated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960); Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978; in German as *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, München: W. Fink Verlag, 1976); Hans Robert Jauss, *Die Theorie der Rezeption. Rückschau auf ihre unerkannte Vorgeschichte* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1987). However, the birth of reception studies should be linked to Tadeusz Zieliński's revolutionary methods in his monograph *Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig–Berlin: Teubner, 1929; ed. pr.—subsequently significantly expanded—1897).