

M. L. West and the British Philological Method

At a conference banquet in May 2009 I had the good fortune of sitting next to Martin West. As he was telling me about his early years at Oxford, he said:

- I finished my thesis in 1963 and my adviser was Professor Hugh Lloyd-Jones who taught me the British philological method.¹

Understandably, this piqued my curiosity. Thinking that this was my once in a lifetime opportunity to be initiated in one of the best kept secrets of classical philology, I immediately asked what the British philological method was. West answered:

- There isn't one: you just use whatever works best to solve the problem at hand.

Only after the dinner was over I realized that this witty remark must have had a hidden meaning: West apparently alluded, perhaps unconsciously, to Wilamowitz's comparison between philological method and the likewise nonexistent method of fishing²:

Aber diese gepriesene 'Philologische Methode' ... gibt es so wenig wie eine Methode, Fische zu fangen. Der Wal wird harpuniert, der Hering im Netz gefangen. Der Butt wird getreten³, der Lachs gespiesst, die Forelle geangelt. Wo bleibt da *die* Methode, Fische zu fangen?⁴

(Why, this prized "philological method"? There simply isn't any – any more than a method to catch fish. The whale is harpooned; the herring caught in a net; flounders are stomped upon; the salmon speared; the trout caught on a fly. Where do you find *the* method to catch fish?⁵)

In view of the important role famous exiles from Germany, many of whom were pupils of Wilamowitz, played in mid-20th century Oxford⁶, I find it rather likely that a version of these words was known to West and has inspired his joke.⁷

But the story does not end there. Wilamowitz was just as learned and witty as Martin West, and his words, too, had a hidden meaning: it seems fairly certain that Wilamowitz imitated Ovid's discourse on the lack of single method in winning the love of young girls (AA 1.763ff)⁸:

755	<i>Finiturus eram, sed sunt diversa puellis</i>	I was on the point of ending here; but let me add
	<i>Pectora: mille animos excipe mille modis [...]</i>	that women are things of many moods.
763	<i>Hi iaculo pisces, illi capiuntur ab hamis:</i>	These fish are caught with spears, those with hooks;
	<i>Hos cava contento retia fune trahunt.</i>	these ones are dragged with taut ropes in bulging nets
	<i>Nec tibi conveniet cunctos modus unus ad annos</i>	Do not let one method suit all.

Indeed:

you have to use whatever works best to solve the problem at hand, in scholarship as in life.

Notes:

¹ In Lloyd-Jones' own words: "I cannot claim to have done anything for Professor Martin West, who had a European reputation before completing the splendid commentary on Hesiod's *Theogony* which was his thesis" (H. Lloyd-Jones, *Greek in a Cold Climate* (London 1991) 232). Cf. West's own reminiscences of his work with Lloyd-Jones in "Zeus in Aeschylus," *Hellenica. Vol. 2: Lyric and Drama* (Oxford 2013) 175–6. Future historians of the discipline may note that Martin West also included Reinhold Merkelbach among his teachers and formative influences.

² Cited *apud* W. Schadewaldt, *Hellas und Hesperien: Gesammelte Schriften zur Antike und zur neuen Literatur*² (Zürich; Stuttgart 1970) vol. 2, p. 606–07.

³ For this seemingly strange practice see W. A. Schröder, “Der ‘getretene Butt’: Aelian und Wilamowitz,” *RhM* 133 (1990) 415–16.

⁴ An echo of Wilamowitz’s words may be detected in his student Giorgio Pasquali’s repeated assertion that there were no disciplines, just problems, e.g. “il linguista storico [...] come il filologo, non conosce discipline, ma problemi, e assalta i problemi da ogni parte e con tutti i mezzi possibili” (*Pagine stravaganti di un filologo*, ed. by C.F. Russo (Florence 1994) vol. 2, 218) or “io sono convinto che almeno nelle discipline dello spirito non esistano discipline severamente delimitate, ‘scomparti, Fächer, ma solo problemi che devono spesso essere affrontati contemporaneamente con metodi desunti dalle più varie discipline” (*Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* (Florence 1962²) xv).

⁵ Trans. W. M. Calder III, “Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff to Wolfgang Schadewaldt on the Classic,” *GRBS* 16 (1975) 452 (see also *U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff. Selected Correspondence. 1869–1931*, ed. by W. M. Calder III (Napoli 1983), 257–63).

⁶ “During the fifties Giorgio Pasquali, when asked what was the best German department of classical philology, replied “Oxford!”, with some truth” (H. Lloyd-Jones, review of *Altertumswissenschaft in den 20er Jahren. Neue Fragen und Impulse*, Stuttgart, 1995, *IJCT* 4 (1998) 609 (= *Further Academic Papers* (Oxford 2005) 312).

⁷ One may speculate that Wilamowitz’s words could become known to Oxford students from Eduard Fraenkel; on the latter see M. L. West, “Forward into the Past,” *Hesperos: Studies in Ancient Greek Poetry Presented to M. L. West on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by P. J. Finglass, C. Collard and N. J. Richardson (Oxford University Press, 2007) xxi. However, West may also just have gotten Wilamowitz’s quote from Calder’s treatment, cited above, n. 5.

⁸ The first person to signal the allusion in print, to my knowledge, was J. Mejer *apud* W. M. Calder III, “Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorff contra Eduard Meyer,” *Eduard Meyer: Leben und Leistung eines Universalhistorikers* (Leiden 1990) 65.