

RESPONSE TO JOSINE BLOK

Martin Bernal

Department of Government/ Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University

'Terwijl ik mijn werk aan de openbaarheid prijsgeef, bekruipt mij de vrees, dat velen, ondanks al den arbeid, die erin steekt, het een onvolledig gedocumenteerde improvisatie zullen achten. Het is nu eenmaal het lot van hem, die cultuurproblemen behandelen wil, zich telkens te moeten wagen op velerlei gebied, dat hij niet genoegzaam beheerscht. Alle tekorten aan kennis eerst nog aanvullen was voor mij buitengesloten, en met het verantwoorden van elk detail door een verwijzing heb ik het mij gemakkelijk gemaakt. Het werd voor mij schrijven of niet schrijven. Van iets wat mij zeer ter harte ging. Dus heb ik geschreven.' Johan Huizinga, Introduction to *Homo Ludens*, 1938.¹

Josine Blok's critical essay² is intelligent, erudite and penetrating. She has pointed out several serious gaps and misinterpretations in my treatment of Karl Otfried Müller. Nevertheless, her criticisms do not affect my overall assessment of his work and its significance. Thus, where the author believes that my errors destroy my case, I see her criticisms as providing it with depth and subtlety.

When I first heard Dr. Blok's paper at the Leiden 1996 conference, I experienced a powerful mixture of emotions, intense alarm combined with equally intense interest. The alarm came from the fact that unlike virtually all previous critics, apart from Robert Palter, she had found some serious flaws in my study of historiography.³ The interest came from the

© 1997 Martin Bernal

¹Quoted by Frans van Coetsem, 1988, *Loan Phonology and Two Transfer Types in: Language Contact*, Dordrecht and Providence RI, Foris Publications, p. xvi.

²Josine H. Blok, 'Proof and persuasion in *Black Athena I: The case of K.O. Müller*' (this volume), cf. shorter version of her text: 'Proof and Persuasion in *Black Athena: The Case of K.O. Müller*', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57 (1996): 705-724. My response is based on both versions, my quotations on the version appearing in the present volume.

³For Palter's criticism see his 'Eighteenth century historiography in *Black Athena*' in: Mary Lefkowitz and Guy Rogers, eds., *Black Athena revisited*, Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1996, pp. 349-402.

additional depth and complexity she brought to a topic that I had treated very superficially.

My fundamental disagreement with her paper is with the implication of the beginning of its title 'Proof and Persuasion...' and the words in the last sentence of the conclusion 'decency in proof.' I am convinced that 'proof' is unattainable not merely in ancient history but also in modern historiography. In neither subject will there ever be a final word based on 'proof'. There is always room for further interpretation. All we can hope for is competitive plausibility or persuasion. That is not to say that I am a complete relativist and that 'anything goes.' If I were not convinced that there are better and worse approximations of the past, I should never have written *Black Athena*.

Chr. Meiners

Josine Blok's paper is largely concerned with my treatment of K.O. Müller. Before coming to the details of this case, however, she criticises my discussion of C. Meiners and the historiographical method of 'source criticism.' She argues on chronological grounds that the method is generally attributed to

'philologists of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, instead of this rather obscure philosopher-anthropologist who had nothing to do with it.'

In *Black Athena I* made it clear that Meiners had not developed the theory *ex nihilo*. I wrote:

'Between 1770 and 1810 Meiners developed the earlier concept of the 'genius of the age' into an academic theory of *Zeitgeist*. Possibly unaware of Vico's earlier work along these lines, Meiners argued that each age and place had a special mentality determined by its situation and institutions.'⁴

Her description of Meiners as 'a rather obscure philosopher anthropologist,' is puzzling. As my implacable foe Robert Palter recognises, Meiners was a central and well known member of the Göttingen community.⁵ For instance, in 1787, the chemist and radical Thomas Beddoes wrote a 'Memorial' to the librarian of the Bodleian library in Oxford deploring its failure to acquire 'the important Continental works' by 'Haller, Meiners and Heyne.'⁶ The brilliant Swiss anatomist

⁴*Black Athena I*, p. 217.

⁵See Palter p. 380.

⁶Thomas Beddoes, 'A Memorial concerning the state of the Bodleian Library... by the Chemical Reader' cited and quoted in E.S. Shaffer, 1975, '*Kubla Khan*' and the 'Fall of Jerusalem': *The mythological school in biblical literature and secular literature 1770-1880*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 29-30.

Albrecht Haller had dominated natural science at Göttingen during the middle of the century but he had died ten years earlier in 1777. Thus, in a period in which Blumenbach, Michaelis, Eichhorn, Schlotzer, Gatterer, and Spittler were all flourishing there, the Englishman saw Meiners and Heyne as the two outstanding living Göttingen scholars.⁷ Meiners cannot and should not be excluded from any historical assessment of Göttingen or for that matter Germany as a whole.

More to the point, Palter sees what Josine Blok does not, that the reason I portrayed Meiners as the central figure in the development of source criticism was not because of his posthumous recognition by the Nazis but because I relied heavily on the secondary works of Lucien Braun and L. Marino who said that he was.⁸

Josine Blok condemns me for not realising that Meiners believed in the African origin of mankind and because

Bernal also neglects to say that Meiners worked in the Ancient Model, taking the Egyptians — and the Jews, Meiners also notes — to be an ‘original people’ who developed out of barbarism by their own efforts, in contrast to ‘mixed peoples’ like the Greeks’.

I was not aware of either of these facts but the latter is precisely what I should have expected from someone working before the onset of the Aryan Model in the 1820s. As to ‘source criticism,’ Robert Palter made a more nuanced attack on my position than Josine Blok. He quotes me as having written that these procedures:

‘do seem essential to a historian as opposed to a chronicler: it is inevitable that one should give different weight to different sources.’ [Palter then paraphrases my words] The trouble comes when certain sources are neglected or rejected as being inconsistent with the spirit of the age; in this manner [Palter returns to direct quotation] ‘the historian can impose almost any pattern he chooses.’⁹

Palter continues:

‘One may agree with Bernal that the introduction of a subjectively defined or intuitively grasped ‘spirit of the age’ is open to abuse.’ (p. 384)¹⁰

⁷J.C. Gatterer (1727-1799) Professor of History, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), Johann David Michaelis (1746-1791) and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752- 1827), occupied the chair of philosophy (in succession) and both wrote biblical commentaries, August Ludwig Schlözer, historian and writer (1735-1809) and Ludvig Timotheus Spittler, historian and writer (1752-1810).

⁸L. Braun, 1973, *Histoire de l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris: Ophrys, pp. 165-167; and L. Marino, 1975, *I Maestri della Germania: Göttingen 1770-1820*, Turin: Einaudi, pp. 103-112; Palter p. 383.

⁹*Black Athena I*, p. 218; Lefkowitz and Guy Rogers, p. 384.

¹⁰Palter, with characteristic scrupulousness, cites the respectable scholar P. Casini as making ‘a closely related complaint’ to mine in readings of Newton. (p. 401, n. 71).

In other words, we concur that source criticism is important but the choice of historical texts to be selected or rejected is seldom, if ever, innocent. Where we differ, is on the example he gives of the method's productive use, that one should be 'suspicious of an "expanding" tradition of texts in which the later ones claim to know more about a certain event than the earlier ones'.¹¹ I believe that we should treat all historical material with caution if not scepticism. However, what appears to be elaboration of earlier sources may in fact be the result of the 'later' writers' having had other texts or oral traditions at their disposal. Specifically, the idea that the only sources available in Hellenistic or Roman times were those that are still extant today is obviously absurd.¹²

K.O. Müller: Disagreements with Dr. Blok

Some of Dr. Blok's criticisms of my treatment of Müller seem unwarranted. For a trivial instance, she objects to my citing the observation made by E. Curtius that Müller's thesis on the island of Aegina resembled the local history of Osnabrück written by the Romantic conservative Justus Möser. Her grounds for the objection are that Möser's book had been published in 1768 while Müller's thesis was not completed until 1817. In a footnote, she concedes that a revised edition appeared in 1780, but even without this, there is no reason to suppose that books and the traditions they represent have a time limit on their effectiveness. For example, my treatment of Winckelmann written in the early 1980s was heavily influenced by E. M. Butler's *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* which had been published almost 50 years earlier in 1935.

More seriously, Josine Blok claims that I maintain that

'the Ancient Model fell because of racism.'

What I state many times, is that in the early 19th century, racism was only one of many factors behind the shift from the Ancient to the Aryan Models. I maintain that the Christian reaction to Egyptophil Free Masonry, attempts to find a middle way between revolution and reaction, Romanticism, the paradigm of progress and positivism were all influential in this transformation.¹³

Although I see racism and the notion of progress as growing intellectual trends in the 18th and 19th centuries I do not as Dr. Blok

¹¹Palter, p. 384.

¹²For a good treatment of the mistakes that can be following the method advocated by the source critics and Palter see: Frederick Ahl and Hannah Roisman, 1996, *The Odyssey Re-Formed*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, esp. pp. 17-23.

¹³See *Black Athena I*, pp. 281-336.

supposes see the two as indissolubly linked. Indeed I argue that Blumenbach's classification of human races was based on Buffon's scheme for natural history of 'degeneration.'¹⁴

At a more fundamental level, Dr. Blok exaggerates the extent to which I separate 'internalist' and 'externalist' forces on scientific or scholarly developments and she completely misunderstands me to say the 'internalist' forces are good and 'externalist' ones bad. As I try to make clear, 'externalist' forces are neutral in themselves. They can be either good or bad according to our contemporary standards. They are, however, inevitable, because science and scholarship are the products of scientists and scholars who live in societies. Thus science and scholarship are socially embedded, though as scientists and scholars-sometimes helped by internalist forces they can partially transcend their environments.

Significant errors

Dr. Blok calls attention to factual errors in my treatment of K.O. Müller. What is more, as she rightly points out, this is particularly disturbing because I portray Müller as having played a central role in the destruction of the 'Ancient Model.' Most of my mistakes result from my failure to read Müller's correspondence, which has been published. Dr. Blok has demonstrated from this, that while I had insisted on his hostility to Ancient Egypt and had found no trace of his having been interested in it, it was clear that Müller had been enthusiastic about Egyptology and Champollion's decipherment.

Even more important, where I had claimed that Müller was anti-Semitic, a close reading of his correspondence and a study of the treatment of its publication in the 20th century reveals convincingly that he was no more anti-Semitic than his contemporaries and possibly less so.

Dr. Blok attributes my failure to refer to the correspondence to my 'political' desire to condemn the 'Aryan Model' as deriving from racism and anti-Semitism.¹⁵ Here as elsewhere, I believe she overestimates my villainy and underestimates my incompetence. Looking back at the reasons for my failure to consult the correspondence and other writings I find two factors involved, neither of them creditable. Firstly, for a long time I focused my attention on Bartholdt Niebuhr because I was convinced that it had been he, who had led the attack on the Ancient Model. He was the leading ancient historian in the critical decade 1820-1830, and he was a

¹⁴*Black Athena I*, p. 219.

¹⁵See her belief mentioned above that I had selected Meiners as the inventor of 'Source Criticism' in order to link the historical method to the Nazis.

racist and a romantic positivist. Nevertheless, when, at a late stage in my research, I read the lectures that Niebuhr gave towards the end of his life, I found that he had explicitly defended the Ancient Model against 'Wolf's' refusal to admit Greek relations with and early dependence on 'the Eastern Nations'.¹⁶

The second reason for my failure to consult his letters, was that while the correspondence of Niebuhr and Bunsen has been translated into English, Müller's has not. As I read German with much more difficulty than English, it was laziness at a stage when I was hoping to complete my work and here I must appeal to Huizinga's justification of the necessity of short cuts for anyone working on broad range synthetic study.

Why did I assume that Müller was uninterested in or hostile to Egypt? It was because in the published works that I had read, he never referred to Champollion's decipherment and he condemned the Egyptians as 'xenophobic and bigoted.'¹⁷ In fact, Dr. Blok condemns me for failing to unearth further evidence of his contempt for the Egyptians in a lecture 'On the alleged Egyptian origins of Greek art.'¹⁸ As she points out, Müller saw Egyptian art as inferior to Greek art, not for Winckelmann's reason that Egypt was lower on an evolutionary scale, but for a Herderian one that it was the product of a qualitatively different and, according to Müller, inferior people.

As I tried to show, Müller's enthusiasm for the Greeks and disdain for the Egyptians, was a product of the *Zeitgeist* after 1815. However, the systematic nature of his passionate attack on the traditions of colonisation of Greece, led him further to challenge — though with slightly more caution — the legends of Phoenician colonisation. In this, he was ahead of his time. That is why he was praised as a pioneer by the notoriously anti-Semitic Julius Beloch at the end of the 19th century and by Rhys Carpenter working during the apogee of anti-Semitism in the 1920s and 30s.¹⁹ It was because of the support of these later scholars, his pioneering attack on the notion Phoenician colonisation, and my misunderstanding of the complex passage she quotes that I mistakenly assumed he was anti-Semitic. I apologise to his shade on this issue. Dr. Blok accuses me of

¹⁶*Black Athena I*, p. 306.

¹⁷K.O. Müller, 1820, *Orchomenos und die Minyer*, Breslau, p. 113; *Black Athena I*, p. 312.

¹⁸K. O. Müller, 1820, 'Ueber den angeblichen ägyptischen Ursprung der griechischen Kunst,' *Kunstblatt, Beiblatt zum Morgenblatt* (1820) no. 79, printed in: *Karl Otfried Müllers kleine deutsche Schriften ed. Eduard Müller*, vol. 2. Breslau: J. Max, 1848, pp. 523-527.

¹⁹See Momigliano, A.D., 'Julius Beloch', trans. T.J. Cornell, pp. 97-120 in: G.W. Bowersock and T.J. Cornell, 1994, eds, *A.D. Momigliano: Studies on modern scholarship*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 115-116.

underrating Müller's breadth of scholarship and in particular his history of Antioch which required some knowledge of Arabic. I plead guilty to the particular charge but not to the general one; I wrote in *Black Athena I*:

'Müller's scholarly range was prodigious. He was able to round out philology in the approved new manner, and as well as producing a major work on the Etruscans he wrote voluminously on ancient art and archaeology.'²⁰

Dr. Blok also accuses me of having exaggerated Müller's romanticism. All in all, the warmth with which the secondary sources praise Müller as a Romantic, fits very well with his own published works. There is his insistence on the autochthony of Greek culture and his most famous work *The Dorians* was described by the historian of Classics, Rudolf Pfeiffer as:

'more an impressive hymn on the excellence of everything Doric than a narration of history.'²¹

While Dr. Blok has revealed the sloppiness of my scholarship, I do not believe that it affects my assessment of Müller's role in the destruction of the Ancient Model. There is no doubt that he vehemently attacked not only the legends of the colonisation of Greece from the South East but he also fiercely rejected ancient traditions and descriptions of early cultic and cultural contact between the Aegean and the rest of the East Mediterranean. This denial was set in a Romantic framework, in which ethnicity and the virtues and vigour of the Dorians coming from the north played an important part. Müller also used the Kantian language of *Wissenschaft* or 'science' to dismiss all earlier scholarship on Greek origins, and required 'proof' of anyone who challenged his isolationism.

While Dr. Blok is able to show that Müller's work was criticised during his lifetime, there is equally no doubt that it was also highly regarded and very influential. It is true that Niebuhr only mentioned Wolf in his defence of the Ancient Model, but Wolf's major work *Prolegomena ad Homerum* had appeared in 1795 and he had died in 1824, five years before Niebuhr's lectures. It would therefore seem plausible to suppose that the latter was also considering Wolf's follower Müller.²² Similarly, I do not see who, apart from Wolf and Müller, could have been on Connop Thirlwall's mind when he wrote in 1835 of the recent historians who with:

'no little boldness...venture(d)...to throw out a doubt as to the truth of an opinion (the Ancient Model) sanctioned by such authority and by prescription of such a long

²⁰*Black Athena I*, p. 309.

²¹Pfeiffer, R., 1976, *History of classical scholarship 1300-1850*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 187.

²²For the complex direct and indirect relationship between Wolf and Müller, see *Black Athena I*, p. 308.

Conclusion

To my mind, the key passage in Josine Blok’s paper is:

‘My aim is not just to clear Müller’s name of Bernal’s accusations, and far less to criticise Bernal’s views (...) by presenting a ‘true’ reading of Müller instead. (...) The main reason is that not Müller is the subject of the present article, but Bernal’s use of this evidence. Thus focusing on this pivotal case I want to clarify why *Black Athena* conveys Bernal’s political views but cannot be regarded as acceptable history.’

We disagree profoundly on the issue of the relationship of politics to scholarship. I, like the majority of historians, do not believe in the possibility of an a-political history. Sometimes as in the case of coherent historians such as Gibbon, Mitford, Grote, Motley or Beloch the political and/ or religious agenda is obvious, among less coherent ones like Thirlwall or Bury it is more obscure but even obscurity can serve a political purpose. In any event, the charge that my political and other views have affected my writing of history is undoubtedly true but not in itself damning.

Interestingly she does not mention in this passage the actual basis of her paper, the more dangerous charges against my sloppiness and failure to read all the relevant texts. There is no doubt that I should have done much better and that I have no right to be right. However, that does not answer the question of whether or not my general conclusions about K. O. Müller are in fact correct. Here, I believe, Dr. Blok’s refusal to ‘present... a “true” reading of Müller’ is significant. It is interesting to note that her fellow specialist in 19th century German Classical studies Suzanne L. Marchand joins Josine Blok in deploring my reliance ‘almost exclusively on secondary sources’ but declares:

‘Martin Bernal is undoubtedly right in underlining Müller’s role in the narrowing of classical scholarship in the mid-nineteenth century.’

She continues:

‘His mistake, however, is to attribute this narrowing exclusively to “racism” rather than to a similarly fateful combination of cultural nationalism, philological scepticism, institutionalized philhellenism *and* the beginnings of racialist thought.’²⁴

²³Thirlwall, C., 1835-1844, *A history of Greece*, London: Longman, 8 vols, I. p. 63.

²⁴Suzanne L. Marchand, 1996, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and phil-*

In the introduction I refer to 'the intensity of [Müller's] racism...'²⁵ However, the word does not appear in the pages devoted to him in the text, which are in fact concerned precisely with the: 'cultural nationalism, philological scepticism, [and] institutionalized philhellenism' to which Suzanne Marchand refers. Thus although she clearly does not want to be contaminated by too close contact with my work, I can see no difference at all between our positions.

Does Josine Blok share Suzanne Marchand's assessment of Müller? Her text does not give any indication one way or the other, but if she does it would explain her reluctance to state her views on the overall significance of Müller's work.

If this is the case, it would place her paper among the many that have deplored my methods while accepting my conclusions.²⁶ See for instance the conclusion of a critical essay by the historian of Victorian Classics Frank Turner:

'In summary, I would note that in many respects Professor Bernal and I disagree relatively little in our conclusions. Both of us see a conservative character in the Victorian classical enterprise. Both of us see nineteenth century social and political concerns largely determining the direction of classical scholarship. Where we differ is the manner in which we reach those conclusions. Professor Bernal discerns larger ideological sweeps that escape my discernment and I believe that of many intellectual historians. I would prefer a more particularistic approach which seeks to understand the twists and turns of the lace before asserting the character of the larger pattern.'²⁷

I am convinced that far from being mutually exclusive or damaging, the two types of historiography are not merely complementary but are necessary for each other. The broad generalist depends completely on the work of specialists. Equally, however, the specialist cannot study her or his field as a *tabula rasa*. To be coherent, she or he has to have larger schemes to work within or react against.

Another angle of this approach to my work is epitomised in the review

hellenism in Germany, 1750-1970, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 44. She lays similar charges against me and Edward Said in the introduction, p. xxii. Josine Blok thanks Suzanne Marchand at the beginning of her paper.

²⁵*Black Athena I*, p. 33. I go on to refer to his 'anti-Semitism' which I now withdraw unreservedly, see above.

²⁶A minor example of this can be seen in her criticism of my statement that A. Momigliano had not written on K. O. Müller, whereas in fact he had published an article on him, while I was writing *Black Athena I*. Despite this omission she agrees with my general conclusion reached on the basis of Momigliano's other writings, stating that this 'is an excellent example of Momigliano's tendency to "stress the rational aspects of his discipline".'

²⁷Frank Turner, 1989, 'Black Athena, a Dissent', in: M. Myerowitz Levine & J. Peradotto, eds., *The challenge of Black Athena*, *Arethusa* special Issue, (Fall 1989), pp. 97-110, p. 108.

of *Black Athena II* in which the anonymous reviewer stated

‘Bernal has the alarming habit of being right for the wrong reasons.’²⁸

To my mind the key word here is ‘habit.’ If my unorthodox conclusions were right once or twice it could be attributed to dumb luck. However, if I have a *habit* of being correct without having mastered what is normally considered to be the requisite historical detail, the simplest explanation is that I am, in fact, accurately ‘discerning larger ideological [and historical] sweeps.’

Josine Blok states in her conclusion:

‘There are today few ancient historians who do not deplore the former Hellenomania of classical studies. In particular the Eurocentrism and its frequent racism, the impact of which increased in the second half of the nineteenth century until far into the twentieth century (...). The search for different approaches including a systematic interest in the interconnections between Greece, Egypt and the Near East, has now been going on for several decades.’

The last sentence is disingenuous. The dismissive treatment of scholars such as Cyrus Gordon, Michael Astour, George Bass and Patricia Bikai who proposed such interconnections in the 1960s and 1970s indicates that the openness essentially only came about in the 1980s when I was preparing *Black Athena*.²⁹

‘Eurocentrism’ is a very recent term and I felt very daring when I invented the word ‘Hellenomania.’ I have no doubt that Josine Blok believes passionately in the motto of her paper *non tali auxilio*; the trouble is she has received such help already.

In the introduction to *Black Athena I*, I wrote that my scholarly purpose was:

‘to open up new areas of research to women and men with far better qualifications than I have.’³⁰

Dr. Blok’s paper is the sort of thing I had in mind.

²⁸Anonymous Reviewer, [Review of *Black Athena II*], *Antiquity*, 65.249 (12/1991) p. 981.

²⁹For vivid descriptions of this treatment, see George Bass, and Patricia Bikai ‘Responses’, in: M. Myerowitz Levine & J. Peradotto, eds., *The challenge of Black Athena*, *Arethusa* special Issue, (Fall 1989): 111-114.

³⁰*Black Athena I*, p. 73.