

The Classic as a Public Symbol

In 1984 five quality newspapers in five European countries — *Lire*, *El Pais*, *La Stampa*, *Die Zeit*, and *The Times*—made the playful experiment of establishing, beside the EEC, an ELC, an *European Literary Community*. They asked their readers for the names of the most important European writers. The results were clear: the French chose Shakespeare, the Spanish Shakespeare, the Italians Shakespeare, the Germans Shakespeare. Only the British preferred Dante — the rules of the poll barred the naming of writers from one's own country (Raddatz).

On the other hand, Alan Sinfield, in the collection *Political Shakespeare*, argues that we can as well forget the idea that there is a determinate entity we can call "a Shakespeare play" (Dollimore and Sinfield 130), that it rather depends on the perspective that is given privilege, a view that is as pertinent to Shakespeare as an author as it is to his plays. What, then, were the readers in five European countries referring to?

In answering this question we have to address the problem of Shakespeare's apparent timelessness and universality — the problem of the classic. The status of the classic has not been a popular subject of critical discussion lately.¹ The debate on canon-formation has, of course, been concerned with this problem; but it has focused on how literary texts are employed in exercising social power rather than on how literary works come to be accepted as being universally significant.

"Qu'est-ce qu'un classique?", "What is a Classic?" Ever since both Sainte-Beuve and T. S. Eliot asked it in the titles of essays of theirs, this question has occupied critics, even as the term *classic* has seemed to disintegrate into a number of only loosely connected meanings sharing the same etymology.²

1 The term *classic* has not, for example, made it into the Subject Index of the MLA International Bibliography so far.

2 The meaning of the term that is of particular interest here — including not only Greco-Roman authors, but also authors like Dante and Shakespeare — seems to go back to Sainte-Beuve, i.e., to a period when the models of culture could no longer be identified with the Greco-Roman ones. (Wellek 1057.58)

Eliot touches on the various meanings of the term at the beginning of his essay :

The word has, and will continue to have, several meanings in several contexts: I am concerned with one meaning in one context. In defining the term in this way, I do not bind myself, for the future, not to use the term in any of the other ways in which it has been used. If, for instance, I am discovered on some future occasion to be using the word 'classic' merely to mean a 'standard author' in any language — using it merely as an indication of the greatness, or of the permanence and importance of a writer in his own field, as when we speak of *The Fifth Form at St. Dominic's* as a classic of schoolboy fiction, or *Handley Cross* as a classic of the hunting field — no one should expect one to apologize. And there is a very interesting book called *A Guide to the Classics*, which tells you how to pick the Derby winner. On other occasions, I permit myself to mean by 'the classics,' either Latin and Greek literature *in toto*, or the greatest authors of those languages as the context indicates. And, finally, I think that the account of the classic which I propose to give here should remove it from the area of the anti-thesis between 'classic' and 'romantic' — a pair of terms belonging to literary politics. (53)³

Eliot seems to be suggesting that the word has no common core of meaning, at the same time he seems to be implying that it is only the various contexts in which the word appears that are responsible for the differences in meaning. This ambiguity, as I hope to show, can be explained by Eliot's specific approach to the problem of the 'classic.'

In every approach to literature the classic is defined differently according to the conceptual framework in which it is placed, and each definition leaves

³ The entry on classicism by W. B. Fleischmann in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* gives a similar, if more systematic account: "a definition of the term [classic] will be attempted here in the form of an analysis of its divergent and often contradictory meanings." Fleischmann then proceeds to "disentangle" (136) six different meanings of the terms *classic* and *classical*; he never arrives at a definition of the term covering them all.

A. "Great" or "First Class," the oldest meaning of the term, introduced by Aulus Gellius, in which the Roman distinction between "classicus" and "proletarius" is still present, and which also implies, therefore, that a "classic" is written for the few rather than the masses.

B. "What is Read in School," a meaning that became common in the Renaissance in Italy and France.

C. Greatest or Standard Works of literature or periods of eminent literary development.

D. Specifically Roman or Greek, a meaning including A., B., and C., as soon as Greek and Roman works of literature became standards of imitation. The imitation may both concern theme (D.1) and form (D.2).

E. The antithesis of Romanticism, a meaning introduced by Friedrich von Schlegel.

F. A period designation in literary history, comprising authors fitting definitions A. and B, and usually created from hindsight.

different problems unresolved.⁴ But there are also approaches that make the discussion of the classic difficult. Structuralist approaches, with two exceptions to which I shall turn later, have had little to say on the problem. This is not surprising, for both systematic and tactical reasons: To the extent that the problem of the classic involves history, criticism focusing on synchronic structures will find it difficult to say much about it. Moreover, recent critical theory has seen its task in showing discontinuities rather than traditions, in exposing and rejecting unstated critical assumptions rather than in accepting and elaborating them.

This interest in discontinuity has had a curious effect on thinking about the classics. Instead of being discarded, along with the critical notions — like organic unity — that seem to justify their privileged position, the classics have been extensively used by critics to illustrate the consequences of their

⁴ Marxist discussions of the classic have to deal with a passage in Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the so-called *Grundrisse*, which gives them complexities of their own. They are not discussed here, because history and historicism present a particularly urgent problem in the discussion of the classic and cannot be dealt with adequately here. Marx suggests that the art of the Greeks is still meaningful to us even though the social conditions have changed, because it is that of the childhood of our own culture (cp. 217). This is not a satisfactory answer, and the problem has remained notorious in Marxist criticism. Janet Wolff summarizes the positions taken as follows:

(i) the conditions are not so different, as we all share in the same history (Eagleton); (ii) Greek art represents an ideal, because Greek society was free, or because the Greeks in some sense represent the essence or childhood of humanity (Lifshitz; Marx himself); (iii) even though art originates in a particular period and society, it can be rediscovered and enjoyed by later periods and other societies in certain appropriate conditions (Hess); art by its very nature has the potential to transcend its origins, and communicate with people of any society (Fischer). (73-74; references 155)

Position (i) is also the one taken by Robert Weimann. His view shows the problem of historicism clearly. He writes about our problems in understanding Shakespeare in terms of a dialectic of historical values and modern evaluations:

It would be a grave mistake to overlook those many points of contact and identity, where, say, Shakespeare's Renaissance values can today be considered valid. This area of identity or interaction, however, is not simply given; it will be enlarged from a contemporary point of view that can conceive its own social direction as historical in the sense that it affirms both the revulsions and the links of contact between the past and the future. In the end this relationship involves asocial and a methodological position from which both the change and the continuity can be accepted as part of a meaningful movement in history. (53-54)

views. This has often resulted in what may be seen as the reinforcement of the old canon in a narrow, even an impoverished form.⁵

Here I propose to review three central discussions of the classic —by T. S. Eliot, Frank Kermode, and Hans Robert Jauss. I shall highlight the problems these discussions raise. Our goal is a general definition of the term 'classic,' a definition showing what all the meanings suggested by Eliot have in common.

T. S. Eliot's discussion of Virgil as a universal classic⁶ indicates both the problems and the possibilities of a definition that is based on the characteristics of a text. In the course of his lecture "What is a Classic?" Eliot cites "certain qualities which [he] should expect the classic to display" (54). The two most comprehensive among them are *maturity* and *inclusiveness*. Eliot's notion of maturity is broad.

If there is one word on which we can fix, which will suggest the maximum of what I mean by the term 'a classic,' it is the word *maturity*. ... A classic can only occur when a civilization is mature; when a language and a literature are mature; and it must be the work of a mature mind. It is the importance of that civilization and of that language, as well as the comprehensiveness of the mind of the individual poet, which gives the universality. (54-55)

Ideally, as with Virgil, the maturity of civilization, of language and literature, and of mind, are contemporaneous. This is a phenomenon, according to Eliot, notably absent from English literary history, where maturity in different areas has never coincided. With language it can be best observed in Augustan prose, where it shows itself in a *common style* (57).

By this I do not mean that the best writers are indistinguishable from each other. The essential and characteristic differences remain: it is not that the differences are less, but that they are more subtle and refined.... What we find, in a period of classic prose, is not a mere common convention of writing, like the common style of newspaper leader writers, but a community of taste. (57)

⁵ The concentration of recent critics on texts central to the tradition of the discipline — like *Oedipus* (presumably for its links with psychoanalysis), Balzac and Racine (Barthes), Corneille and Goethe (Jauss), great English novels (Iser), to name but a few— shows that they are good tacticians, however. As Popper (not their ally in most other cases) has pointed out, a theory, in order to be overthrown, has to be attacked at its very center.

There are important exceptions to this generalization: feminist criticism, which has consistently attempted to define a new canon—cp. the Virago Modern Classics series; also the study of Black, Native American and Third World literature.

⁶ Eliot distinguishes between the "universal classic" like Virgil, which is significant beyond its own language and literature (67), and "the classic which is only such in relation to the other literature in its own language, or according to the view of life of a particular period" (55).

It is interesting that Eliot, in trying to describe the characteristics of classic prose, introduces a sociological term (*community*). The term may be used metaphorically in this case, but social notions, clearly not metaphorical, occur again when he describes "comprehensiveness" (67).

The classic must, within its formal limitations, express the maximum possible of the whole range of feeling which represents the character of the people who speak that language. It will represent this at its best, and it will also have the widest appeal: among the people to which it belongs, it will find its response among all classes and conditions of men. (67)

The qualities of the classic serve us as a standard in judging works of literature: "Without the constant application of the classical measure we tend to become provincial" (69),⁷ a term that Eliot associates with immaturity and lack of balance (69).

There are three problems with Eliot's approach. The first concerns his view of history. This view is based on a position he had already formulated in his earlier essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "all existing monuments [of literature] form an ideal order among themselves" (*Selected Essays* 14) and are therefore co-present in a realm beyond history; we may not be ready to accept this idealist view. The second problem concerns the rigidity of the ideal order as it is presented in his essay on the classic. In the earlier essay he had assumed this order to be dynamic:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered, and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (14)

In "What is a Classic?" the system no longer appears to be open; rather it is organic and closed. The classic work of literature, by definition the most mature and comprehensive expression of a civilization, language, and mind, seems to have replaced the dynamic order among literary works. Eliot also assumes that languages have their inherent potentialities (which the classic fulfills with maximum success). This means that the classic exhausts the language (64-65; cp. also Lucy 12). After the classic, decline is inevitable.

The third problem concerns the definition of the qualities that the classic is expected to display. As Eliot is well aware, maturity and comprehensiveness are difficult to describe; a verbal definition seems to be impossible:

⁷ In "The Function of Criticism" Eliot accepts Middleton Murry's simple formula: "Catholicism stands for the principle of unquestioned spiritual authority outside the individual; that is also the principle of Classicism in literature." (*Selected Essays* 26)

To define *maturity* without assuming that the hearer already knows what it means, is almost impossible: let us say then, that if we are properly mature, as well as educated persons, we can recognize maturity in a civilization and in a literature, as we do in the other human beings who we encounter. To make the meaning of maturity really apprehensible — to the immature, is perhaps impossible. But if we are mature we either recognize maturity immediately, or come to know it an more intimate acquaintance. (55)

Eliot's admission is interesting because of the assumptions it makes explicit. The qualities of the classic cannot be perceived by everybody — a sociological problem therefore creeps into his definition. He takes for granted the existence of a single *élite*,⁸ one whose minds have the same characteristics as the classic — maturity and inclusiveness. He views the problem of the classic from within this group.

If we do not accept this premise, i. e., do not view ourselves as part of the *élite*, we may be inclined to turn the definition round and say that an *élite* is defined by the texts it accepts as classics.⁹

Frank Kermode, in his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures on *The Classic* (1973), takes up some of the points raised by Eliot's discussion and develops two of them in particular: first, the specific and unique role of Virgil, the Latin language and the Roman Empire — an assumption made by Eliot that he seems to share — and, secondly, the definition of the classic. In doing so he also places Eliot's approach and dissociates himself from it.¹⁰

Kermode gives a wide-ranging account of the reception of Virgil in European literature. Significantly, whereas Eliot calls Virgil a universal classic,

8 Shaw (76-77) quotes a passage from Arnold Bennett that makes the sociological aspect of the classic even more explicit:

A classic is a work which gives pleasure to the minority which is intensely and permanently interested in literature. It lives on because the minority eager to renew the Sensation of pleasure, is eternally curious and is therefore engaged in an eternal process of rediscovery. A Classic does not survive for any ethical reason. It does not survive because it conforms to certain canons, or because in neglect would kill it. It survives because it is a source of pleasure and because the passionate few can no more neglect it than the bee can neglect the flower. (The source is not indicated.)

9 The predicament in which Eliot finds himself is the same as that Stanley Fish describes in defining an "interpretive community":

The only "proof" of membership is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in die same community, someone who says what neither of us could ever prove to a third party: "we know." (*Is There a Text ...* 173)

10 Kermode has taken up questions of the canon, and thus of the classic, again in his Wellek Library Lectures *Forms of Attention* (published in 1985). As he takes essentially the same positions as in his earlier publication, I have based my argument on *The Classic*, because this makes it possible at least to suggest the dialogue in which Kermode engages Eliot. I shall refer to *Forms of Attention*, however, where appropriate.

Kermode calls him an imperial, even an imperialist classic, one based on the time-transcending idea of Empire. In offering this account he characterizes Eliot's position as imperialist and makes explicit the problem of history in the reception of the classic.

The doctrine of classic as model or criterion entails, in some form, the assumption that the ancient can be more or less immediately relevant and available, in a sense contemporaneous with modern — or anyway that its nature is such that it can, by strategies of accommodation, be made so. (15-16)

He shows how the problem posed by a loss of stability, whether it concerns the idea of Empire or the literary classic, can be solved with the help of

the method of accommodation, by which I mean any method by which the old document may be induced to signify what it cannot be said to have expressly stated. The chief instrument of accommodation is allegory, if we use the word in a sense wide enough to include prophecy (40).

Useful as Kermode's account is, it also presents new problems, especially in the neat distinction he makes between what the text expressly states and the reader's accommodation.¹¹ In the end, Kermode has to take recourse to the notion of "literary competence" (138), introduced from linguistics, which raises problems similar to those he has set out to solve.

This set of problems becomes urgent when, in his fourth lecture, Kermode sets out to present an alternative model of the classic, one that does not view the situation from within. This model is based on a more modest, Horatian definition of the classic as "a book that is read a long time after it was written" (117). It no longer makes the assumptions on which the imperial classic was based — that the work in itself has significance beyond time. One of the distinguishing features of a classic, according to the new, secularized definition, is

the coexistence in a single text of a plurality of significances from which, in the nature of human attentiveness, every reader misses some — and, in the nature of human individuality, prefers one (133).¹²

In this Kermode finds himself in agreement with French critics like Barthes and Derrida. As he says, paraphrasing Derrida: "The gap between text and

¹¹ In his earlier notion of literary tradition Eliot recognized the role of change. But instead of allowing for accommodation to new historical circumstances, he referred to adjustments that have to be made within the system after the arrival of a new work of literature.

¹² In *Forms of Attention* 62, Kermode refers to the "omnisignificance" that critics grant the canonical text.

meaning, in which the reader operates, is always present and always different in extent" (136).¹³

Kermode's alternative definition of the classic may look attractive, but it makes assumptions that must be questioned. Kermode posits some kind of timeless structure — though now it is open rather than closed, and passively yields to history rather than overcoming it.

Kermode, like Eliot, does not raise the question of the *relationship* between history and the classic. He takes the canon of classics for granted and does not discuss the question of how a work of literature becomes a classic.¹⁴ His definition seems to take it for granted that all literary works constantly undergo a process of re-reading, and that in the course of this some of them, those whose structure is not open enough for them to be accommodated to changing conditions, are eliminated from the canon. The establishment of a classic, however, is certainly not such an orderly process, its outcome determined by the text itself. There may be many works of literature as open to interpretation as those we accept as classics in Kermode's sense — as we might know if they were continually re-interpreted in the way classics are.

In offering his definition and taking the canon for granted Kermode neglects two crucial factors in the establishment of a classic. The reasons that first focus readers' attention on a particular work of literature, and thus make the process of re-interpretation possible, may be utterly fortuitous. They may be social or economic or political, in short what many critics would consider utterly "non-literary," and this both before and after publication.¹⁵

¹³ Kermode notes a strange difference in terminology between Barthes and himself:

It is true that authors try, or used to try, to close [this gap]; curiously enough Barthes reserves the term 'classic' for texts in which they more or less succeed, thus limiting plurality and offering the reader, save as accident prevents him, merely a product, a consumable. In fact what Barthes calls 'modern' is very close to what I am calling 'classic,' and what he calls 'classic' is very close to what I call 'dead.' (136)

This difference in terminology is easy to explain by the different cultures in which they are used (and the role of classicism in them), and by the different contexts in which the terms appear. In Barthes's case, the term "classic" is used in a critical debate, with Kermode in an attempt to define an elusive phenomenon. Kermode specifically refers to Barthes's *Critique et Vérité*, his answer to Raymond Picard's *Nouvelle Critique ou Nouvelle Imposture*, Barthes singles out three of Picard's terms for criticism: objectivity, taste, and clarity. The two latter he describes as the inheritance of the "siècle classique" (35).

¹⁴ In *Forms of Attention* Kermode discusses this question on the examples of Botticelli (1-31) and Donne (71-72). But his distinction between "opinion" and "knowledge" (67-93) seems to indicate that he takes for granted the existence of classics in a realm beyond time.

¹⁵ Mary Louise Pratt offers a good discussion of what makes readers read a book in the chapter "The Literary Process" in *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*.

More importantly, works of literature may impose their own frames of reference on their readers. What looks like openness and plurality of significance in a work of literature may simply prove that the work has been successful in controlling its readers. We are then no longer aware of the restrictions to which we have submitted ourselves.

This problem is squarely faced in Hans Robert Jauss's discussions of the classic, in his studies of literary history, starting with his essay "Literary history as a challenge to literary theory." In that piece Jauss develops a model of literary criticism that places literary judgment historically, as a dialogue between the works of literature and their audiences. This approach is based on Gadamer's hermeneutics, who in turn takes up Collingwood's thesis that one can understand a text only when one has understood the question to which it is an answer (Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* 29).¹⁶ Jauss tries to study the way in which a work of literature answers what he calls its first audience's "horizon of expectation" (*Erwartungshorizont*).¹⁷ He is confident that this "horizon of expectation" can be objectified by empirical means: "A literary work ... predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions" (23). Even where such signals are lacking,

the specific disposition toward a particular work that the author anticipated can also be arrived at through three generally predisposed factors: first, through familiar norms or the immanent poetics of the genre; second, through the implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical surroundings; and third, through the opposition between fiction and reality, between the poetic and the practical function of language, which is always available to the reflective reader [den reflektierenden Leser] during the reading as a possibility of comparison. (24)

Jauss claims here that the horizon of expectation can be derived from the text itself, or from literature as an autonomous system (in the Formalist sense). If this is so, then Collingwood's insight concerning the under-

¹⁶ Jauss is quoting Collingwood's criticism of historical objectivism from Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* 352, who in turn is referring to Collingwood's autobiography (German edition, *Denken*, 30 ff.)

¹⁷ Jauss returns to the notion of the horizon of expectation (a notion adopted *via* Gadamer from Husserl) time and again in his work, but as Holub shows, does not offer a clear definition. Holub concludes: "Horizon of expectation" would appear to refer to an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a "system of references" or a mind-set that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text (59).

standing of texts as answers to specific questions loses its validity; on the contrary, the answers themselves seem to provide the questions. They will only do this to those who can read the signals correctly (otherwise Jauss's project would be unnecessary). The question arises then who can judge the correctness of the readings; the appearance of the term "the reflective reader" suggests that we have landed in a spot very similar to Eliot's in defining "maturity" or Kermode's with "competence."

Jauss's approach, however, has great advantages over both Eliot's and Kermode's discussions of the classic: It attempts to place the work of literature in its historical context (though perhaps not radically enough) and it does not reduce the literary work to an open structure that (ideally) can be filled with a great number of meanings. Jauss rather sees the work of literature as a force. The horizon of expectations created by works of literature can also be changed by them. He stresses "the eminently formative function of literature" (40), a function that can be studied with the help of reception aesthetics.

Jauss uses the "horizon of expectation" in judging literature aesthetically:

The distance between the horizon of expectations and the work, between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experience and the "horizontal change" demanded by the reception of the new work, determines the artistic character of a literary work, according to an aesthetics of reception: to the degree that this distance decreases, and no turn toward the horizon of yet-unknown experience is demanded of the receiving consciousness, the closer the work comes to the sphere of "culinary" or entertainment art [*Unterhaltungskunst*]. (25)

This manner of defining the artistic character of a work of literature, with "defamiliarization" as its defining function, clearly shows the roots of Jauss's approach in Formalism, since newness is presented as an unquestioned value. Jauss is aware that this approach raises serious problems in determining the literary value of the classic. Because it displays familiar features the classic is placed in the same category as popular literature. Jauss tries to solve the problem by appealing to history.

If ... the artistic character of a work is to be measured by the aesthetic distance with which it opposes the expectations of its first audience, then it follows that this distance, at first experienced as a pleasing or alienating new perspective, can disappear for later readers, to the extent that the original negativity of the work has become self-evident and has itself entered into the horizon of future aesthetic experience, as a henceforth familiar expectation. The classical character of the so-called masterworks especially belongs to this second horizontal change; their beautiful form that has become self-evident, and their seemingly unquestionable "eternal meaning" bring them, according to an aesthetics of reception, danger-

ously dose to the irresistibly convincing and enjoyable "culinary" art, so that it requires a special effort to read them "against the grain" of the accustomed experience to catch sight of their artistic character once again. (26/26)

Jauss's suggestion for saving the classic from being mistaken for culinary literature raises more problems, however, than it solves. It is no longer the new work of literature that defamiliarizes traditional perception; rather the readers have to re-establish the distance between their horizon of expectation and the classic. This presupposes that they can manipulate their own horizon of expectations, or, in other words, that they can step outside it, something that questions the power of Jauss's model of literary history.

There is a further problem, one that we also found with Kermode's approach. How does the reader know to which works of literature the technique of "reading against the grain" should be applied? Clearly, previous knowledge is expected, knowledge based on other criteria than the artistic character of the works concerned. Thus we might even define a classic in this context as a work of literature that we are willing to read against the grain.

Both the assumption that readers should be able to manipulate their own horizons of expectation, and that they should know which texts to read against the grain, presupposes a notion of competence similar to those posited by Eliot and Kermode.

In order to deal with the problems raised by Jauss's approach to the classic, two of his assumptions have to be thrown overboard. The first is that of "defamiliarization" as constituting the literary work of art, the aesthetics of negativity. The second is that of an objectifiable horizon of expectation, valid for everybody in approaching a work of literature.

Unless we take for granted that unstructured perception is possible, we are bound to accept that any attempt to defamiliarize our view of things must be based on a different, i.e., anterior structure of perception. Any attempt to explode petrified structures cannot help, therefore, but introduce new ones. Even irony, the figure of thought based on denial, is based on the belief in the possibility of another structure of seeing things.¹⁸ We can go even farther and, referring to Collingwood once again, insist that Formalism actually stands the situation on its head, by turning the work of art into a question rather than accepting it as an answer. But old structures can only be questioned with the help of new ones. The work of literature therefore always provides answers, even though these may only consist in asking the *right* questions (as against the "wrong" ones suggested by the

¹⁸ I believe this is so, despite de Man's strenuous attempts to make irony self-sustaining. Cp. the case of satire, which presupposes the idea of a counter-world. I have discussed some implications of this claim in "Hudibras and the Problem of Satirical Distance."

structure of perception put into question). What Jauss calls the second horizontal change is nothing but proof that the work has succeeded in giving an answer. In other words, we can be sure that every work of literature is at least *read* as aspiring to be a classic.

As to the horizon of expectations: We have seen the difficulties of objectively deriving a horizon of expectation from the text. This does not mean that the notion is useless, but it becomes more difficult to handle. The horizon of expectation must be located in the minds of the readers; the study of literary texts alone cannot, therefore, be sufficient to determine it. We also have to accept that different groups of readers will have different horizons of expectation.¹⁹ Because of this, they also have their different classics. What Eliot describes as different uses of the word "classic" are, in fact, the classics of different groups.

In his later work Jauss has moved away from many of his early positions, in particular some that have been criticized here, and placed less emphasis on the notion of the horizon of expectation. He has, further, accepted pleasure as an important aspect of primary aesthetic experience." Discussing the "aesthetics of negativity" of Adorno, Jauss, in *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* emphasizes the links between the notions of autonomy and negativity and concludes that the function of pre-autonomous art, like heroic poetry, cannot be understood in terms of a simple opposition between negation and affirmation.

If one does not simply propose to deny the character of art to a literature of such indisputable social effect as heroic poetry, as Adorno's thesis would require, one must not start out by seeing and recognizing the social function of art in *negation* but in the *creation* of an objectively binding meaning. (17)²¹

The fact that Jauss specifically uses heroic poetry in order to place his earlier aesthetics of reception in a larger perspective is important, because in this larger perspective the autonomous work of art is seen as a special case arising in a specific historical situation. This specific situation is the one that can be

19 Indeed, it may be the *assumption* of various individuals that they share a common horizon of expectation that defines them as a group.

20 Ironically, he did so very soon after he had given the aesthetics of negativity such a powerful voice. Cp. his *Kleine Apologie der ästhetischen Erfahrung* (1972).

21 The German version of the sentence is even more emphatic:

... so muss man die gesellschaftliche Funktion der Kunst nicht von vornherein in der Negation, sondern auch und *zunächst* [italics mine] in der *Formierung* objektiv verpflichtenden Sinnes sehen und anerkennen." (41-42).

attributed to the literate work among the range of texts, a range dominated by oral texts.²²

Jauss concedes that his earlier aesthetics had not adequately dealt with the problem of aesthetic pleasure:

The reception aesthetics I have advocated since 1967 has so far dealt with this problem only in the case of popular literature or the change of horizon from the original negativity to pleasurable familiarity with the classics, but has otherwise presupposed aesthetic reflection as the basis of all reception and thus participated in the surprisingly unanimous ascesis that aesthetics imposed on itself vis-à-vis the primary aesthetic experience. (28-29)

Jauss does not, as we cannot expect him to do, work out the similarities between the pre-autonomous works of art he studies (works of heroic poetry) and those that first led him to discuss the problem of aesthetic pleasure (popular literature and the classic). However, the connection between the two is clear—they are works of one and the same category; what is different is the communities they serve.

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If a classic constitutes a horizon of expectation, as Jauss's definition implies, it does so, in terms of what has been said here, not as a text, but as something in people's minds. We can redefine the classic as *a work of literature that has left the book*; it has become a defining part of those people's minds to whom it is a classic.

A classic may be present in people's minds and their language in three forms. First, stories from it are perceived as useful in interpreting patterns of experience, e.g., Oedipus's or Telemachus's search for his father, the Trojan War, the foundation of Rome, Faust's quest for knowledge, Captain Ahab's struggle with the white whale, or, in Shakespeare, Petruchio domesticating Katherine, the deadly quarrel between the Montagues and the Capulets and its consequences, Macbeth's ambition leading to crime and disaster, Hamlet's hesitation to do a deed, etc.²³ Secondly, figures, reduced to their most striking traits, will be used in characterizing certain types of

22 Not surprisingly, Jauss' re-orientation has also focused his attention on problems that could not be raised in his earlier version of reception aesthetics, in particular the relationship between the hero and the recipient reader/listener ("Interaction Patterns of Identification with the Hero" is the title of a chapter in *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*)—a problematic that includes one raised by the study of oral poetry (the heavy hero as a role model).

23 As such they may achieve the Status of "archetypes" or of "basic stories," which gives them the strongest possible underpinning.

personality and behavior that can be found in one's surroundings, e.g., Don Quixote, Madame Bovary, Oblomov, or, again in Shakespeare, Falstaff, the cowardly glutton, Iago, the cold villain, Lady Macbeth, the recklessly ambitious woman, etc. It should be noted here that not only figures *in* the works, but authors themselves can acquire this status—Shakespeare, the creator of a world of characters. Thirdly, phrases and passages are quoted in conversation and in written texts for their perceptiveness or wit, like epigrams, or simply because they have become common usage (or formulae). Quotations, after all, are proverbs with an author. Their meaning need no longer be linked with their sources — as the phrase "a foregone conclusion" from *Othello* illustrates.²⁴ Recognizing the reference makes us take sides: We either feel ourselves to belong to the same community as those who have made it, or we feel excluded.²⁵

The third situation described is strikingly illustrated by dictionaries of quotation. The preface to *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, for example, states that people may rightly expect from such a dictionary "coverage of what they heard or saw quoted from all periods and places that impinged on their own conversation and culture" (iii). The title-page does not list the name of an editor — the dictionary is almost an anonymous work.²⁶ The material for the first edition was collected in the 1930's by people imbued with the history and culture of the first quarter of the century in Britain; most of them had attended public school and Oxford or Cambridge University and were well versed in "the literature of the ancient and the English-speaking worlds that was then read and studied at home, school, and university" (iii).

When the third edition, published in 1979, was prepared, the need was felt to revise the contents, and the process of doing this is instructive. There was a team of about twenty revisers, who decided by majority vote on adding new and dropping old material. It included editors, journalists, writers, representatives of Parliament and the professions, the universities, the Church, Whitehall, the City, and the British Museum (iv) — obviously

24 In the play (III. iii. 428) *foregone conclusion* refers to "previous sexual intercourse" between Cassio and Desdemona.

25 This is an effect described, with reference to quotations, in Bernard Darwin's preface to *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* — the rapt tone may be ascribed to in date (1941). He says about a speech by Churchill:

When the Prime Minister said that there were some lines that he deemed appropriate we sat up rigid, waiting in mingled pleasure and apprehension. How agreeable it would be if we were acquainted with them and approved the choice! How flat and disappointing should they be unknown to us" (xiii)

26 The people 'contributing' to the dictionary are listed only in the acknowledgments.

people chosen as being both influential and representative of British, or rather English, cultural life.

The sources listed as most frequently quoted are the Bible, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Milton, Johnson, Browning, Kipling, Dickens, Byron, Wordsworth — in that order.²⁷ This list largely supports the claim made here concerning the classics as works of literature present in people's minds.²⁸ It also raises additional questions, particularly about the relative absence, in comparison with poets, of prose writers from it. Quotations, like proverbs, have to be pithy and widely applicable — it is no surprise that Johnson appears first on the list among prose writers; formal reasons may favor poetry in this respect. If we were looking at characters and figures rather than phrases the list would probably look different.

The presence of phrases, figures and stories, often dissociated from their authors, in the minds of people forming a community is one of the characteristics of oral culture and its poetry. That is, we there hear stories that have mythical force, presenting heavy figures that serve as models of behavior, and doing it in language that tends to be formulaic and rich in proverbial expressions (Ong, *Presence* 204 and *Orality* 70). Taking into account the locus and the form of existence of the classic we can therefore reformulate our definition: *A classic is nothing but a work of literature that exists in oral versions, and as such defines the group that accepts it as significant.* The kind of timelessness and universality we ascribe to the classic is the one works in the oral tradition have: They are timeless and universal as models and patterns of meaning. As with traditional material in oral culture, originality in dealing with the classic is usually looked at with suspicion. Something else may be less obvious: Like poetry in an oral culture the classic only serves a restricted community, indeed helps to define it as different from others — a point to which I shall return.

There is one important point that distinguishes the literate classic from a work of oral poetry: The literate classic also exists in writing, and it is present in people's minds as worthwhile returning to in its written form. The text also claims universality and timelessness for itself—but they are of a different kind; they concern availability rather than social function. Literate classics therefore exist in two versions, linked with each other in complex interaction, versions that are both different and by definition the same. It is this double, oral and literate, existence of the literate classic that both

27 This sequence has not changed between the first and third editions, though the latter includes fewer quotations from poets, particularly from Wordsworth, and more from novelists.

28 A merely statistical procedure in determining a classic would, of course, be foolish.

makes possible and demands the process of continual re-reading and re-interpretation taken for granted by both Kermode and Jauss.

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Classics then are not *texts*; but what are they? As we are dealing with the oral dimension of cultures we find help in anthropology rather than history, in particular in the anthropology of the Manchester school (Max Gluckman, Victor Turner and their followers); especially their interest in public symbolism is useful. In the following I can only sketch answers to three questions that are of particular urgency in connection with my claim. How do classics live in people's minds? How do classics come into existence? And: What is the role of critics in the life of classics?

How do classics live in people's minds? Classics, no matter whether they are authors, works, or elements of them, are present in people's minds as *public symbols*, as part of the system of symbols in which a community recognizes itself, in other words, as part of what Durkheim called "public classification."²⁹

Symbols help to create and maintain communities. Members of a community recognize each other in the acceptance of the same symbols; flags are an obvious example. The etymology of the word *symbol* is instructive: It is derived from the Greek verb *symballein*, meaning 'to put together,' and the related noun *symbolon*, meaning 'mark', 'token,' or 'sign,' in particular a sign of recognition. This meaning is derived from the custom of offering a guest one half of a ring broken asunder; if many years later, two people met and the halves in their possession fitted each other they could recognize each other (Preminger 833).

Community, in the sense used here, is based on a "consciousness of kind,

the perception that "we" have a different set of obligations and rights when acting toward those perceived as part of "our" community than toward those who are seen as outside that community. (Gusfield 34)

In a modern pluralist society persons may therefore belong to different communities at the same time: they may be Shakespeareans, women, supporters of their local football team, Catholics, etc.

If classics *qua* public symbols help to define communities they cannot, by definition, be universal— they can only be viewed as such by those *inside* the community. Different groups are therefore bound to have different classics--

²⁹ The implications of public symbolism in different types of societies have been worked out by Mary Douglas in *Natural Symbols*, especially the reduced force of public symbolism in pluralist societies.

the close association between literature and nationalism is no coincidence. It is therefore of particular interest to see where conflicts arise in the use of public symbols. "Shakespeare," for example, has been shared as a symbol by communities that have considered themselves different from each other in many respects; they have therefore linked the symbol Shakespeare with different attributes — public symbolism of a hierarchically lower order, defining sub-communities, as it were. There used to be radical differences between Shakespeare, the man of the theater and Shakespeare, the philosopher and poet, reflecting the difference between the communities of stage and study. There is Shakespeare, "the great National Poet" (Dollimore/Sinfield 135), and a universal Shakespeare, based on an enlightened eighteenth century notion of man and of "Weltliteratur." There also used to be the difference between the English and the German Shakespeare. For long the two nations shared Shakespeare as a symbol of Germanic versus Romance, of Northern versus Southern art, of the Romantic versus the Classicist, but the shared symbol suffered a moment of crisis during the first world war, when the British and Germans were facing each other as enemies, and both sides questioned the right of the other to claim the symbol for itself.³⁰

The second question raised earlier was; *How do classics come into existence?* A persuasive model for describing how public symbols come into existence has been offered by Victor Turner, in his account of the symbolic processes associated with social change. Such processes begin by somebody breaching social structure — as represented by public symbolism — by publicly flouting norms: This will then become a symbol of dissidence. If the breach cannot immediately be closed again, it will tend to widen and "extend until it becomes coextensive with some dominant cleavage in the widest set of social relations to which the conflicting or antagonistic parties belong" (*Dramas* 38). The symbol of dissidence, no matter why the breach was first made, will be associated with the deepest rift in structure. The ensuing crisis can be overcome either by reintegration or schism; in both cases the symbol of dissidence is likely to become a symbol of solidarity.

The reasons that first focus an audience's attention on a work of literature as a breach of structure, may in some cases be utterly fortuitous; they may often be social, economic, political, in short what many critics would consider utterly "non-literary."³¹ The discussion of how Shakespeare became a

³⁰ The *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* shows how German critics and writers were claiming Shakespeare for their own case, and were offering him asylum, as it were, as a refugee from a country that had no true understanding for him.

³¹ In this context Kermode, in *Forms of Attention*, discusses the revival of interest in Botticelli (3-31) and in Donne (71-72).

classic, for example, which traditionally includes Shakespeare's role in displacing classicist rule poetics, should also refer to political changes in the eighteenth century, the rise of the bourgeoisie, of which the change in poetics is part.³²

Finally: *What is the role of critics in the life of the classic?* Critics, and in the case of Shakespeare, also actors and producers, have continued to offer new interpretations. In doing so, they have participated in a ritual — defined according to Edmund Leach, as non-incident repetition (520)— re-affirming Shakespeare and his plays as public symbols. They have done so by selecting Shakespeare rather than another author, by discussing *King Lear* rather than, say, *All's Well That Ends Well*. Each production, each piece of criticism, no matter, where its producer or author stands ideologically, no matter how hostile to received opinion it is, is an affirmation of the public symbol, and as such prolongs its life. The worst that could happen to Shakespeare and his works is total neglect.³³

What I have said so far, is, of course, only part of the truth: Just because Shakespeare and his works are powerful symbols in our community, they can become "a site of cultural struggle and change" (Dollimore/Sinfield 131). Producers and critics have also made use of them in trying to change public symbolism — which is no less legitimate than using Shakespeare and his plays to shore up traditional positions. By associating new material with them, by giving them different attributes (which I have characterized as lower-order public symbolism) critics and directors employ the prestige of the classic in the attempt to change public symbolism.

The collection *Political Shakespeare*, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, is a good example of such an attempt, and its pages offer many more: It shows how Shakespeare can be read in different ways (e.g. 137). It places openly ideological criticism, based on the equality of human beings, against other (less explicit, but no less ideological) views, in its survey of feminist criticism, even in quoting the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, taking Ulysses's degree-speech at face value (203).

³² An interesting parallel argument concerning the reception of Molière in France has been presented by Albanese. Molière became acknowledged as a spokesman of bourgeois values in France (240).

³³ The case of Edward Young, who dropped out of the canon in the middle of the nineteenth century, is instructive here.

Viewing Shakespeare the classic as a public symbol may help us to solve some awkward problems in the discussion of the classic; it may also be useful in overcoming the gap that has long existed in criticism between literature and social life, reproduced and preserved in the distinction between the text and the recipient.

The poll mentioned at the beginning now also appears in a different light: We can see that the term "European Literary Community" is more to the point than may appear at first sight. We can see why authors from one's own country had to be barred — the symbols of the national community might have been stronger than the European ones. We can, finally, see that those answering all belonged to the same community: the community of those reading "quality newspapers," the community of those to whom Literature (with a capital L), is something of value — i.e. a public symbol.

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