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The American Classics

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This presentation was given at the 224th Annual Meeting and 1891st Stated Meeting, held at the House of the Academy on May 11, 2005. At this meeting Alan Brinkley, Allan Nevins Professor of History and University Provost at Columbia University, also spoke. His remarks on civil liberties will appear in a forthcoming publication.

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I started thinking of writing a book called *The American Classics* in the autumn of 2003 when I taught a graduate course at New York University called, perhaps rather coyly, “Five

in American Literature.” The books I chose to teach, if they didn’t choose themselves, were *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Walden*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. I assumed that these were the American classics and that I didn’t need to make a case for reading them; they could be taken for granted, subject to the risk entailed by that status of their not being taken at all. I thought it would be worthwhile to discuss them with a group of graduate stu-

dents, on the understanding that they had read these books in high school and might welcome an occasion to read them again in a different moral and political setting and with different issues in view. A classic, I was content to think, is a book one reads at least twice. I needed all the information I could get about the presence of these books in American education and culture. I came to the United States in my middle years to take up an appointment at New York University, so I have not attended an American primary or secondary school, college or university. I

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wanted to discover what it meant that these five books have been accepted by American culture as the cardinal books. What does this acceptance say of the culture? How do American readers use them; in the service of what causes?

It is no offense to the students to report that they did not help me much to answer these questions. It turned out that none of the students had read all the books. Some of them had read one or two of them, but only in excerpts, two or three of the more agreeable chapters of *Walden*, the “Custom-House” chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, a few anthology poems from *Leaves of Grass*. When I pressed the matter, I was allowed to think that Ayn Rand had a more palpable presence in their high schools than Whitman or Melville. The students did not dispute that the five books are somehow privileged in American culture, but so are the heads on Mount Rushmore, stared at rather than otherwise appreciated. I gathered from the students that the five books had little provenance in their early education. *To Kill a Mockingbird* meant more to

them during those years.

So I couldn't – and can't – answer the questions I posed about the books and their bearing on American culture. I can only read them as they seem to me to ask to be read. To be read now, that is, at a time when “the violence without” – Stevens's phrase – makes it nearly impossible to exert “the violence within,” the force of intelligence and imagination, in response to it. What is the point of reading books at such a time, when reality is defined as military power, vengeance, “the war on terror,” “the spread of democracy,” and oil? But what else can one do but read books?

I have called these five books classics. The word is often used casually, seldom stringently. Casually, as in referring to a classic detective story, cookbook, or silent film; stringently, when we mark the boundary within which we intend using the word and fend off rival meanings. T. S. Eliot's use of the word is exemplary in this respect, though it may be contentious in other ways. In 1944 he gave the Presidential Address to the Virgil Society under the title “What Is a Classic?” He acknowledged that the word has “several meanings in several contexts,” while he claimed to be concerned with “one meaning in one context.” He used the word so strictly that, reading the printed lecture for the first time, you would wonder how he could find a single work to answer to his definition. A work is a classic, according to Eliot, only if three conditions are fully met: the manners of the civilization that it articulates must be mature, the language of that civilization must be mature, and the imagination of the particular writer must be mature. Eliot explained at length what he meant by “maturity,” mainly by associating the word with cognate words and phrases. Maturity is characterized by a balance between tradition and the individual talent: it depends on the ripeness of a language, “community of taste,” and possession of “a common style.” A common style “is one which makes us exclaim, not ‘this is a man of genius using the language’ but ‘this realizes the genius of the language.’” The marks of immaturity are provincialism, a limited range of sensibility, and eccentricity. A theory of the impersonality of the work of literature sustains Eliot's idea of the classic and of the maturity that characterizes it: what he fears is the willfulness of a writer who flouts the genius of the language. The three criteria are fulfilled, so far as European literature is in question, only in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The critical value of consider-

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ing these poems as classics is that they provide a criterion, they make us take seriously the question of critical evaluation when other poems and works of literature are in question. Eliot did not consider in that lecture, as he does in “The Dry Salvages,” the status of *Bhagavad-Gita* or any other work that may have classic force in cultures beyond Europe. For the time being, he is concerned only with Europe and with a strict designation of a classic in that context. In that sense, English literature does not contain a classic; nor does French. Goethe's poetry is a classic, but not what Eliot calls a *universal* classic:

We may speak justly enough of the poetry of Goethe as constituting a classic, because of the place which it occupies in its own language and literature. Yet, because of its partiality, of the impermanence of some of its content, and the germanism of the sensibility; because Goethe appears, to a foreign eye, limited by his age, by his language, and by his culture, so that he is unrepresentative of the whole European tradition, and, like our own nineteenth-century authors, a little provincial, we cannot call him a *universal* classic.¹

This entails a distinction “between the relative and the absolute classic,” between a work that, to become what it is, has had to exclude many possibilities of the language in which it is written and a work that has not had to make any such exclusion. The sacrifice of some potentialities of a language in order to realize others, Eliot says, “is a condition of artistic creation, as it is a condition of life, in general.” Nonetheless, a certain wholeness is possible in literature:

We may come to the conclusion, then, that the perfect classic must be one in which the whole genius of a people will be latent, if not all revealed; and that it can only appear in a language such that its whole genius can be present at once.

We must accordingly add, to our list of characteristics of the classic, that of *comprehensiveness*. 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.²

Eliot does not claim – it would be meaningless – that Virgil and Dante are the greatest poets, but that the *Aeneid* and *The Divine Comedy* are the works, within the European tradition, that embody most comprehensively the particular qualities of the classic.

“There is no classic in English,” Eliot says. Not that this is cause for tears: it is merely a statement that the particular relations among a people, a language, and a writer which constitute a classic are not to be found in any period of the English language. Eliot does not mention the American language in this lecture, but there is no reason to think that any work of American literature meets his three requirements of the classic. So if we speak of the American classics, as I do, we must use the word more liberally than Eliot does, and remind ourselves from time to time that our use of it is indeed concessive. This may guard us against overvaluing a work merely because it satisfies our social prejudices. It may also help us to understand why some books are privileged in a society and others are not.

It follows from Eliot's argument and the descriptions that accompany it that it is no longer possible to write a classic: the conditions can't be met. Eliot did not say this, but the classic is precisely and comprehensively what is no longer possible.³ Goethe exemplifies what was no longer possible even for Goethe. Provincialism is Eliot's word for the disability, as it was Matthew Arnold's word. The tone of the center, in Arnold's phrase, was not possible: there was no center. After the classics, there are only books, films, TV shows, and the Internet. The classics of American literature are by definition relative classics: there is no possibility of maturity, comprehensiveness, universality. But it may be useful to

2. Ibid., 69.

3. Cf. Slavoj Žižek, “Preface: Burning the Bridges,” in *The Žižek Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999), vii.

1. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), 69 – 70.

What distinguishes a classic, at least in a concessive sense of the word, is that, to use a phrase of Whitehead's that Frank Kermode has adapted, a classic is "patient of interpretation in terms of our interests."

change the terminology, not in the hope of removing the disability but of introducing another perspective. In *L'Être et l'événement* Alain Badiou distinguishes between the positivity of mere being and the actuality of events. A human life becomes an event when its action is radical or inaugural; it impels and enables everything that follows. The classics in American literature, relative classics as they are, are events, distinct from the mere being and succession of other books, good, bad, and mediocre. As events, they are privileged, even if the privilege is equivocal. What I mean by equivocal may be indicated by a linguistic point. Slavoj Žižek has remarked that the Russian language often has two words for what we Westerners would consider the same referent: one word designates the ordinary meaning, and the other a more ethically charged or 'absolute' use:

There is *istina*, the common notion of truth as adequacy to facts; and (usually capitalized) *Pravda*, the absolute Truth also designating the ethically committed ideal Order of the Good. There is *svoboda*, the ordinary freedom to do as we like within the existing social order; and *volja*, the more metaphysically charged absolute drive to follow one's will up to self-destruction. . . . There is *gosudarstvo*, the state in its ordinary administrative aspects; and *derzhava*, the State as the unique agency of absolute Power.⁴

Lionel Trilling's distinction between sincerity and authenticity comes into a similar context: sincerity is the ordinary decent practice of one's life; authenticity is a far more demanding criterion. The difference is hardly clear in a dim light: it arises only if you invoke the supreme perspective. A similar dis-

inction is operative in other languages, as between *tempus* and *aevum*, and between *futur* and *avenir*. But the situation is equivocal because one is, at any given moment, hovering between the ordinary meaning and the exalted or absolute meaning. Ordinary life is not respectful of absolutes, but there are some occasions – of crises, or even of anniversaries – when the higher question can't be put off.

Any one of the American classics is a cultural event, in Badiou's terms; it impels other events only less radical. And it is such an event, regardless of the aesthetic judgment one might make upon it. *Leaves of Grass* is an event, even though Quentin Anderson and (I suppose) other readers think it is a sinister book. The attitude a particular reader takes toward a classic may be reverent or impious. Reverent – here Žižek's note on the Russian language comes in – if the reader subscribes to the aura that surrounds the book, even among those who have not read it. Impious if the reader rejects every instance of aura precisely because he or she suspects the imputed force of radiance, as one might detest the State while continuing to obey traffic lights and pay one's taxes.

What distinguishes a classic, at least in a concessive sense of the word, is that, to use a phrase of Whitehead's that Frank Kermode has adapted, a classic is "patient of interpretation in terms of our interests." Kermode made much of the phrase in his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent, published as *The Classic* (1975). Whitehead had in mind that "Nature is patient of interpretation in terms of Laws which happen to interest us." The sentence comes in the chapter called "Cosmologies" in Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas*, where he considers various doctrines of the laws of Nature and concludes the chapter with a description of the Doctrine of Conventional Interpretation:

This doctrine certainly expresses the procedure by which free speculation passes into an interpretation of Nature. We elaborate a system of ideas, in detachment from any direct, detailed observation of matter of fact. For example, such detachment from detailed observation seems, on the surface, to be characteristic of Plato's *Dialogues*. They do not bear the aspect of patient induction from the facts. They are dominated by speculation and dialectics. Also Mathematics has developed, especially in recent years, by a speculative interest

in types of order, without any determination of particular entities illustrative of those types. But Nature has subsequently been interpreted in terms of such mathematical laws. The conclusion seems to be, that Nature is patient of interpretation in terms of Laws which happen to interest us.⁵

If we say, with Kermode, that a classic is patient of interpretation in terms of our interests, we impose a test not at all as severe as Eliot's. Kermode means that such a work persists through the many different interpretations of it:

I think there is a substance that prevails, however powerful the agents of change; that *King Lear*, underlying a thousand dispositions, subsists in change, prevailed by being patient of interpretation.⁶

It makes a difficulty that this is an essentialist argument, requiring a distinction between the work in its presumed essence and the force of manifold dispositions in which it is found from time to time and from person to person. It also implies that another work – it is a mark of its not being a classic – demands to be interpreted in a particular way and does not survive the rough magic of different interpretations. I think that is true. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not a classic: it asks to be read in a particular spirit. If you read it in a different spirit, it becomes an absurd book, though its historical impact in its time is still to be acknowledged. Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* is a robust novel, but you have to read it with a particular set of sympathies. If you don't, you'll find it sullen. Thoreau's *Walden* doesn't ask to be read in any special way. You don't need to subscribe to his ideology – his assumption that the nature to be found in Walden Pond and human nature ~~obey the same laws – to appreciate the book.~~ It is patient of whatever interpretive interests you bring to it. ■

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4. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), 80.

5. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 173 – 174.

6. Frank Kermode, *The Classic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 134.



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