

essays 1986 - 1999

J.M. Coetzee

STRANGER SHORES

Essays 1986-1999



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What Is a Classic? A Lecture

I

IN OCTOBER 1944, as Allied forces were battling on the European mainland and German rockets were falling on London, Thomas Stearns Eliot, aged fifty-six, gave his presidential address to the Virgil Society in London. In his lecture Eliot does not mention wartime circumstances, save for a single reference — oblique, understated, in his best British manner — to 'accidents of the present time' that had made it difficult to get access to the books he needed to prepare the lecture. It is a way of reminding his auditors that there is a perspective in which the war is only a hiccup, however massive, in the life of Europe.

The title of the lecture was 'What Is a Classic?' and its aim was to consolidate and re-argue a case Eliot had long been advancing: that the civilisation of Western Europe is a single civilisation, that its descent is from Rome via the Church of Rome and the Holy Roman Empire, and that its originary classic must therefore be the epic of Rome, Virgil's *Aeneid*.¹ Each time this case was re-argued, it was re-argued by a man of greater public authority, a man who by 1944, as poet, dramatist, critic, publisher and cultural commentator, could be said to dominate English letters. This man had targeted London as the metropolis of the English-speaking world,

and with a diffidence concealing ruthless singleness of purpose had made himself into the deliberately magisterial voice of that metropolis. Now he was arguing for Virgil as the dominant voice of metropolitan, imperial Rome and Rome, furthermore, imperial in transcendent ways that Virgil could not have been expected to understand.

'What Is a Classic?' is not one of Eliot's best pieces of criticism. The address *de haut en bas*, which in the 1920s he had used to such great effect to impose his personal predilections on the London world of letters, has become mannered. There is a tiredness to the prose, too. Nevertheless, the piece is never less than intelligent, and – once one begins to explore its background – more coherent than might appear at first reading. Furthermore, behind it is a clear awareness that the ending of the Second World War must bring with it a new cultural order, with new opportunities and new threats. What struck me when I reread Eliot's lecture in preparation for the present lecture, however, was the fact that nowhere does Eliot reflect on the fact of his own Americanness, or at least his American origins, and therefore on the somewhat odd angle at which he comes, honouring a European poet to a European audience.

I say 'European', but of course even the Europeanness of Eliot's British audience is an issue, as is the line of descent of English literature from the literature of Rome. For one of the writers Eliot claims not to have been able to re-read in preparation for his lecture is Sainte-Beuve, who in his lectures on Virgil claimed Virgil as 'the poet of all Latinity', of France and Spain and Italy but not of all Europe.² So Eliot's project of claiming a line of descent from Virgil has to start with claiming a fully European identity for Virgil; and also with asserting for England a European identity that has sometimes been begrudged it and that it has not always been eager to embrace.³

Rather than follow in detail the moves Eliot makes to link

Virgil's Rome to the England of the 1940s, let me ask how and why Eliot himself became English enough for the issue to matter to him.⁴

Why did Eliot 'become' English at all? My sense is that at first the motives were complex: partly anglophilia, partly solidarity with the English middle-class intelligentsia, partly as a protective disguise in which a certain embarrassment about American barbarousness may have figured, partly as a parody, from a man who enjoyed acting (passing as English is surely one of the most difficult acts to bring off). I would suspect that the inner logic was, first, residence in London (rather than England), then the assumption of a London social identity, then the specific chain of reflections on cultural identity that would eventually lead him to claim a European and *Roman* identity, under which London identity, English identity, and Anglo-American identity were subsumed and transcended.⁵

By 1944 the investment in this identity was total. Eliot was an Englishman, though, in his own mind at least, a Roman Englishman. He had just completed a cycle of poems in which he named his forebears and reclaimed as his own East Coker in Somersetshire, home of the Elyots. 'Home is where one starts from,' he writes. 'In my beginning is my end.' 'What you own is what you do not own' – or, to put it another way, what you do not own is what you own.⁶ Not only did he now assert that rootedness which is so important to his understanding of culture, but he had equipped himself with a theory of history in which England and America were defined as provinces of an eternal metropolis, Rome.

So one can see how it is that in 1944 Eliot feels no need to present himself to the Virgil Society as an outsider, an American talking to Englishmen. How then does he present himself?

For a poet who had such success, in his heyday, in importing the yardstick of impersonality into criticism, Eliot's poetry is astonishingly personal, not to say autobiographical.⁷ So it is not surprising

to discover, as we read the Virgil lecture, that it has a subtext and that subtext concerns Eliot himself. The figure of Eliot in the lecture is not, as we might expect, Virgil, but Aeneas, understood or even transformed in a particularly Eliotic way into a rather weary middle-aged man, who 'would have preferred to stop in Troy, but becomes an exile . . . exiled for a purpose greater than he can know, but which he recognises'. 'Not, in a human sense, a happy or successful man,' whose 'reward [is] hardly more than a narrow beachhead and a political marriage in a weary middle age: his youth interred.' (WIC, pp. 28, 28, 32)

From the major romantic episode of Aeneas's life, the affair with Queen Dido that ends with Dido's suicide, Eliot singles out for mention neither the high passion of the lovers nor Dido's *Liebestod* but what he calls the 'civilised manners' of the couple when they meet later in the Underworld, and the fact that 'Aeneas does not forgive himself . . . in spite of the fact that all that he has done has been in compliance with destiny' (*WIC*, p. 21). It is hard not to see a parallel between the story of the lovers as related by Eliot and the story of Eliot's own unhappy first marriage.⁸

The element of what I would call compulsiveness – just the opposite of impersonality – which makes Eliot articulate the story of Aeneas, in this lecture and before this audience, as an allegory of his own life is not my concern here. What I want to stress instead is that, in reading the *Aeneid* in this way, Eliot is not only using its fable of exile followed by home-founding – 'In my end is my beginning' – as the pattern of his own intercontinental migration – a migration that I do not call an odyssey precisely because Eliot is concerned to validate the destiny-inspired trajectory of Aeneas over the idle and ultimately circular wanderings of Odysseus – but is also appropriating the cultural weight of the epic to back himself.

Thus in the palimpsest Eliot sets before us, he, Eliot, is not only Virgil's dutiful (pius) Aeneas, who leaves the continent of his birth

to set up a beachhead in Europe (beachhead is a word one could not have used in October 1944 without evoking the landings in Normandy just a few months earlier, as well as the 1943 landings in Italy) but Aeneas's Virgil. If Aeneas is recharacterised as an Eliotic hero, Virgil is characterised as a rather Eliot-like 'learned author', whose task, as seen by Eliot, was that of 're-writing Latin poetry' (the phrase Eliot preferred for himself was 'purifying the dialect of the tribe') (WIC, p. 21).

Of course I would be traducing Eliot if I left the impression that in 1944 he was in any simple-minded way setting himself up as the reincarnation of Virgil. His theory of history, and his conception of the classic, are much too sophisticated for that. To Eliot, there can be only one Virgil because there is only one Christ, one Church, one Rome, one Western Christian civilisation, and one originary classic of that Roman-Christian civilisation. Nevertheless, while he does not go so far as to identify himself with the so-called adventist interpretation of the *Aeneid* – namely that Virgil prophesies a new Christian era – he does leave the door open to the suggestion that Virgil was being used by an agency greater than himself for a purpose of which he could not have been aware – that is, that in the greater pattern of European history he may have fulfilled a role that might be called prophetic.⁹

Read from the inside, Eliot's lecture is an attempt to reaffirm the *Aeneid* as a classic not just in Horatian terms – as a book that has lasted a long time (*est vetus atque probus, centum qui perfecit annos*) – but in allegorical terms: as a book that will bear the weight of having read into it a meaning for Eliot's own age. The meaning for Eliot's age includes not only the allegory of Aeneas the sad, long-suffering, middle-aged widower hero but the Virgil who appears in the *Four Quartets* as one element of the composite 'dead master' who speaks to fire-warden Eliot in the ruins of London, the poet without whom, even more than Dante, Eliot would not have

become himself. Read from the outside, and read unsympathetically, it is an attempt to give a certain historical backing to a radically conservative political programme for Europe, a programme opened up by the imminent end of hostilities and the challenge of reconstruction. Broadly stated, this would be a programme for a Europe of nation-states in which every effort would be made to keep people on the land, in which national cultures would be encouraged and an overall Christian character maintained – a Europe, in fact, in which the Catholic Church would be left as the principal supra-national organisation.

Continuing this reading from the outside, at a personal but still unsympathetic level, the Virgil lecture can be fitted into a decadeslong programme on Eliot's part to redefine and resituate nationality in such a way that he, Eliot, could not be sidelined as an eager American cultural *arriviste* lecturing the English and/or the Europeans about their heritage and trying to persuade them to live up to it – a stereotype into which Eliot's one-time collaborator Ezra Pound all too easily fell. At a more general level, the lecture is an attempt to claim a cultural-historical unity for Western European Christendom, including its provinces, within which the cultures of its constituent nations would belong only as parts of a greater whole.

This is not quite the programme that would be followed by the new North Atlantic order that was to emerge after the war – the urgency for that programme came from events Eliot could not have foreseen in 1944 – but is nevertheless highly compatible with it. Where Eliot went wrong was in failing to foresee that the new order would be directed from Washington, not London and certainly not Rome. Looking further ahead, Eliot would of course have been disappointed by the form towards which Western Europe in fact evolved – towards economic community but even more toward cultural homogeneity. ¹⁰

The process I have been describing, extrapolating from Eliot's 1944 lecture, is one of the most spectacular that occur to me of a writer attempting to make a new identity, claiming that identity not on the basis of immigration, settlement, residence, domestication, acculturation, as other people do, or not only by such means since Eliot with characteristic tenacity did all of the above – but by defining nationality to suit himself and then using all his accumulated cultural power to impose that definition on educated opinion, and by resituating nationality within a specific - in this case Catholic - brand of internationalism or cosmopolitanism, in terms of which he would emerge not as a Johnny-come-lately but as a pioneer and indeed a kind of prophet; a claiming of identity, furthermore, in which a new and hitherto unsuspected paternity is asserted - a line of descent less from the Eliots of New England and/or Somerset than from Virgil and Dante, or at least a line in which the Eliots are an eccentric offshoot of the great Virgil-Dante line.

'Born in a half-savage country, out of date,' Pound called his Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. The feeling of being out of date, of having been born into too late an epoch, or of surviving unnaturally beyond one's term, is all over Eliot's early poetry, from 'Prufrock' to 'Gerontion'. The attempt to understand this feeling or this fate, and indeed to give it meaning, is part of the enterprise of his poetry and criticism. This is a not uncommon sense of the self among colonials – whom Eliot subsumes under what he calls provincials – particularly young colonials struggling to match their inherited culture to their daily experience.

To such young people, the high culture of the metropolis may arrive in the form of powerful experiences which cannot, however, be embedded in their lives in any obvious way, and which seem therefore to have their existence in some transcendent realm. In extreme cases, they are led to blame their environment for not

living up to art and to take up residence in an art world. This is a provincial fate – Gustave Flaubert diagnosed it in Emma Bovary, subtitling his case study Mœurs de province – but particularly a colonial fate, for those colonials brought up in the culture of what is usually called the mother country but in this context deserves to be called the father country.

Eliot as a man and particularly as a young man was open to experience, both aesthetic and real life, to the point of being suggestible and even vulnerable. His poetry is in many ways a meditation on, and a struggling with, such experiences; in the process of making them into poetry, he makes himself over into a new person. The experiences are perhaps not of the order of religious experience, but they are of the same genre.

There are many ways of understanding a life's enterprise like Eliot's, among which I will isolate two. One, broadly sympathetic, is to treat these transcendental experiences as the subject's point of origin and read the entirety of the rest of the enterprise in their light. This is an approach which would take seriously the call from Virgil that seems to come to Eliot from across the centuries. It would trace the self-fashioning that takes place in the wake of that call as part of a lived poetic vocation. That is, it would read Eliot very much in his own framework, the framework he elected for himself when he defined tradition as an order you cannot escape, in which you may try to locate yourself, but in which your place gets to be defined, and continually redefined, by succeeding generations – an entirely transpersonal order, in fact.

The other (and broadly unsympathetic) way of understanding Eliot is the socio-cultural one I outlined a moment ago: of treating his efforts as the essentially magical enterprise of a man trying to redefine the world around himself – America, Europe – rather than confronting the reality of his not-so-grand position as a man whose narrowly academic, Eurocentric education had prepared him for

little else but life as a mandarin in one of the New England ivory towers.

II

I would like to interrogate these alternative readings – the transcendental-poetic and the socio-cultural – further, and bring them closer to our own times, following an autobiographical path that may be methodologically reckless but has the virtue of dramatising the issue.

One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955, when I was fifteen years old, I was mooning around our back garden in the suburbs of Cape Town, wondering what to do, boredom being the main problem of existence in those days, when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before.

What I was listening to was a recording of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, played on the harpsichord. I learned this title only some time later, when I had become more familiar with what, at the age of fifteen, I knew only – in a somewhat suspicious and even hostile teenage manner – as 'classical music'. The house next door had a transient student population; the student who was playing the Bach record must have moved out soon afterwards, or lost his/her taste for Bach, for I heard no more, though I listened intently.

I do not come from a musical family. There was no musical instruction offered at the schools I went to, nor would I have taken it if it had been offered: in the colonies classical music was sissy. I could identify Khatchaturian's 'Sabre Dance', the overture to Rossini's *William Tell*, Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Flight of the Bumble-Bee' – that was the level of my knowledge. At home we had no musical instrument, no record player. There was plenty of the