Multiculturalism and American Democracy

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Part IV

Multiculturalism and the Arts
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In October of 1944, as Allied forces were battling on the European mainland and German rockets were falling on London, Thomas Stearns Eliot, aged 56, 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 have made it difficult to get access to the books he needs 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 reargue a case Eliot had long been advancing: that the civilization of Western Europe is a single civilization, 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.* Each time this case was reargued, it was reargued 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 at first reading one might think. Furthermore, behind it is a clear awareness that the ending of World War II must bring
with it a new cultural order, with new opportunities and new threats. What struck me when I reread Eliot’s 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, honoring 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 reread 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. 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 it has not always been eager to embrace.

Rather than trace 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.

Why did Eliot “become” English? My sense is that at first the motives were complex: partly from Anglophilia, partly in solidarity with the English middle-class intelligentsia, partly as a protective disguise in which a certain shame 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 in which London identity, English identity, and Anglo-American identity were subsumed and transcended.

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 roots 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. Not only would he now claim for himself that sense of roots that is so important to his understanding of culture, but he had equipped himself with a theory of history that defined England and America as provinces of an eternal metropolis, Rome.
So one can understand how it is that in 1944 Eliot feels no need to present himself to the Virgil Society as an American talking to Englishmen. But how 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. So it is not surprising to discover, as we read the Virgil lecture, that it has a subtext concerning Eliot himself. But the figure of Eliot in the lecture is not in the first place Virgil, but Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's epic poem—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."

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." It is hard not to see here a covert reference to Eliot's own unhappy first marriage.

The element of what I would call compulsiveness—just the opposite of impersonality—that 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 point to 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—which 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 of 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 recharacterized as an Eliotic hero, Virgil is characterized 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”).

Of course I would be traducing Eliot if I created 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 civilization, and one originary classic of that Roman-Christian civilization. Nevertheless, while he does not go so far as to identify himself with the so-called adventist position 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 prophetic role.

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—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 program for Europe, a program opened up by the imminent end of hostilities and the prospect of reconstruction. Broadly stated, this would be a program 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 the principal supranational organization.

Continuing this reading from the outside, at a personal but still unsympathetic level, the Virgil lecture can be fitted into a decades-long program on Eliot’s part to redefine and resituate nationality in such a way that he, Eliot, cannot 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—which Eliot considered to be the home of the world’s major culture—within which the cultures of its constituent nations would belong only as parts of a greater whole.

This is not quite the program that would be followed by the new North Atlantic order that was to emerge after the war—the urgency for its own program came from events Eliot could not have foreseen in 1944—but it is highly compatible with that program. If Eliot got it wrong, it was by not foreseeing that the new order would be directed from Washington, not London and certainly not Rome. Looking further into the future, Eliot would of course have been disappointed by the form toward which western Europe in fact evolved—toward economic community but even more toward cultural homogeneity.

The process I have been describing, extrapolating from Eliot’s 1944 lecture, is one of the more spectacular examples 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 of 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. The high culture of the metropolis provides them with extraordinarily 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, such provincials blame their environment for not living up to art and take up residence, even live out their lives, in an art-realm. This is a provincial fate—Gustave Flaubert diagnosed it in Emma Bovary, subtitling his case study *Moeurs 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 over 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 that 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 sociocultural 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—redefining America, redefining Europe—rather than confronting the reality of his not-so-grand position, namely, that of a man whose highly academic and Eurocentric education had prepared him rather narrowly for life as a mandarin in one of the New England ivory towers.

I would like to interrogate these alternative readings—the transcendental-poetic and the sociocultural—further, and bring them closer to our own times, following an autobiographical path that may be methodologically risky but has the virtue of dramatizing 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 for me 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 name 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 afterward, or lost his/her taste for Bach, for I heard no more, though I listened intently.

I don't 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 Khachaturian'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 blander American popular music on the radio (heavy emphasis on George Melachrino and his Silver Strings), but it made no great impact on me.

What I am describing is middle-class musical culture of the Age of Eisenhower, as it was to be found in the ex-British colonies, colonies that were rapidly becoming cultural provinces of the United States. The so-called classical component of that musical culture may have been European in origin, but it was Europe mediated and in a sense orchestrated by the Boston Pops.

And then the afternoon in the garden, and the music of Bach, after which everything changed. A moment of revelation that I will not call Eliotic—that would insult the moments of revelation celebrated in Eliot's poetry—but that was of the greatest significance in my life nevertheless: for the first time I was undergoing the impact of the classic.

What did Bach give me? He gave me, so to speak, the idea of form. In Bach nothing is obscure, no single step that he takes is beyond imitation. Yet when the chain of sounds is realized in time, the building process ceases at a certain moment to be the mere linking of units; the units cohere as a higher-order object in a way that I can only describe by analogy as incarnation. Bach's music is not just the incarnation of certain musical ideas, but the incarnation of higher-order ideas of exposition, complication, and resolution that are more general than music. Bach thinks in music. Music thinks itself in Bach.
The revelation in the garden was a key event in my formation. Now I wish to interrogate that moment again, using as a framework both what I have been saying about Eliot—specifically, using Eliot the provincial as a pattern and figure of myself—and, in a more skeptical way, invoking the kinds of questions that contemporary cultural analysis asks about culture and cultural ideals.

The question I put to myself, somewhat crudely, is this: Is there some nonvacuous sense in which I can say that the spirit of Bach was speaking to me across the ages, across the seas, putting before me an ideal of form; or was what was really going on at that moment that I was symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of my class position in white South African society and ultimately out of what I must have felt, in whatever obscure and mystified terms, as the dead end of that society itself—a road that would culminate (again symbolically) with me writing an essay for a cosmopolitan audience on Bach, T. S. Eliot, and the question of the classic? In other words, was the experience what I understood it to be—a disinterested and in a sense impersonal aesthetic experience—or was it really the masked expression of a material interest?

This is a question of a kind that one would be deluded to think one could answer about oneself. Any autobiographical answer must be open to endless suspicion. But that does not mean it should not be asked; and asking it means asking it properly, in terms that are as clear and as full as possible. As part of the enterprise of asking the question clearly, let me therefore ask what I might mean when I talk of being spoken to by the classic across the ages.  

In two out of the three senses, Bach is a classic of music. Sense one: the classic is that which is not time-bound, which retains meaning for succeeding ages, which "lives." Sense two: a proportion of Bach's music belongs to what are loosely called "the classics," that part of European musical canon that is still widely played, if not particularly often or before particularly large audiences. The third sense, the sense that Bach does not satisfy, is that he does not belong to the revival of so-called classical values in European art starting in the second quarter of the eighteenth century.

Bach was not only too old, too old-fashioned, for the neoclassical movement: his intellectual affiliations and his whole musical orientation were toward a world that was in the process of passing from sight. In the popular and somewhat romanticized account, Bach, obscure enough in his own day and particularly in his later years, dropped entirely out of public con-
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consciousness after his death, and was resurrected only some eighty years later, mainly through the enthusiasm of Felix Mendelssohn. For several generations, in this popular account, Bach was hardly a classic at all: not only was he not neoclassical, but he spoke to no one across those generations. His music was not published; it was rarely played. He was part of music history, he was a name in a footnote in a book, that was all.¹⁸

It is this unclassical history of misunderstanding, obscurity, and silence, which if not exactly history as truth is history as one of the overlays of the historical record, that I wish to emphasize, since it calls into doubt facile notions of the classic as the timeless, as that which unproblematically speaks across all boundaries. Bach the classic was historically constituted, as I will remind you, constituted by identifiable historical forces and within a specific historical context. Only once we have acknowledged this point are we in a position to ask the more difficult questions: What, if any, are the limits to that historical relativization of the classic? What, if anything, is left of the classic after the classic has been historicized, that may still claim to speak across the ages?

In 1737, in the middle of the third and last phase of his professional life, Bach was the subject of an article in a leading musical journal. The article was by a one-time student of Bach’s named Johann Adolf Scheibe. In it, Scheibe attacked Bach’s music as “turgid and sophisticated” rather than “simple and natural,” as merely “sombre” when it meant to be “lofty,” and generally as marred by signs of “labour and . . . effort.”¹⁹

As much as it was an attack by youth upon age, Scheibe’s article was a manifesto for a new kind of music based on Enlightenment values of feeling and reason, dismissive of the intellectual heritage (scholastic) and the musical heritage (polyphonic) behind Bach’s music. In valuing melody above counterpoint, unity, simplicity, clarity, and decorum against architectonic complexity, and feeling above intellect, Scheibe speaks for the blossoming modern age and in effect makes Bach, and with Bach the whole polyphonic tradition, into the last gasp of the dead Middle Ages.

Scheibe’s stance may be polemical, but when we remember that Haydn was only a child of five in 1737 and Mozart not yet born, we must recognize that his sense of where history was going was accurate.²⁰ Scheibe’s verdict was the verdict of the age. By his last years Bach was a man of yesterday. What reputation he had was based on what he had written before he was forty.

All in all, then, it is not so much the case that Bach’s music was forgotten after his death as that it did not find a place in public awareness during
his lifetime. So if Bach before the Bach revival was a classic, he was not only an invisible classic but a dumb classic. He was marks on paper; he had no presence in society. He was not only not canonical, he was not public.

How, then, did Bach come into his own? Not, it must be said, via the quality of the music pure and simple, or at least not via the quality of that music until it was appropriately packaged and presented. The name and the music of Bach had first to become part of a cause, the cause of German nationalism rising in reaction to Napoleon and of the concomitant Protestant revival. The figure of Bach became one of the instruments through which German nationalism and Protestantism were promoted; reciprocally, in the name of Germany and Protestantism Bach was promoted as a classic; the whole enterprise being aided by the Romantic swing against rationalism and by enthusiasm for music as the one art privileged to speak directly from soul to soul.

The first book on Bach, published in 1802, tells much of the story. It was entitled The Life, Art and Works of J. S. Bach: For patriotic admirers of genuine musical art. In his introduction the author writes: “This great man . . . was a German. Be proud of him, German fatherland . . . . His works are an invaluable national patrimony with which no other nation has anything to be compared.” We find the same emphasis on the Germanness and even the Nordicness of Bach in later tributes. The figure and the music of Bach became part of the construction of Germany and even of the so-called Germanic race.

The turning point from obscurity to fame came with the oft-described performances of the St. Matthew Passion in Berlin in 1829, directed by Mendelssohn. But it would be naive to say that in these performances Bach returned to history on his own terms. Mendelssohn arranged Bach’s score not only in the light of the larger orchestral and choral forces at his command but also in the light of what had been going down well recently with Berlin audiences, audiences that had responded rapturously to the Romantic nationalism of Weber’s Der Freischütz. It was Berlin that called for repeat performances of the Matthew Passion. In Königsberg, Kant’s city and still a center of rationalism, by contrast, the Matthew Passion flopped, and the music was criticized as “out-of-date rubbish.”

I am not criticizing Mendelssohn’s performances for not being “the real Bach”—that will just land us in a metaphysical forest. The point I make is a simple and limited one: the Berlin performances, and indeed the whole Bach revival, were powerfully historical in ways that were largely invisible to the moving spirits behind them. Furthermore, one thing we can be certain of about our own understanding and performance of Bach, even—and per-
haps even particularly—when our intentions are of the purest, the most puristic, is that it is historically conditioned in ways invisible to us. And the same holds for the opinions about history and historical conditioning that I am expressing at this moment.

By saying this I do not mean to fall back into a helpless kind of relativism. The Romantic Bach was partly the product of men and women responding to unfamiliar music with a stunned overwhelmedness analogous to what I myself experienced in South Africa in 1955 and partly the product of a tide of communal feeling that found in Bach a vehicle for its own expression. Many strands of that feeling—its aesthetic emotionalism, its nationalistic fervor—are gone with the wind, and we no longer weave them into our performances of Bach. Scholarship since Mendelssohn's day has given us a different Bach, enabling us to see features of Bach invisible to the revivalist generation—for instance, the sophisticated Lutheran scholasticism within whose context he worked.  

Such recognitions constitute a real advance in historical understanding. Historical understanding is understanding of the past as a shaping force upon the present. Insofar as that shaping force is tangibly felt upon our lives, historical understanding is part of the present. Our historical being is part of our present. It is that part of our present—namely, the part that belongs to history—that we cannot fully understand, since it requires us to understand ourselves not only as objects of historical forces but as subjects of our own historical self-understanding.

It is in the context of paradox and impossibility I have been outlining that I ask myself the question: Am I far away enough from 1955, in time and in identity, to begin to understand my first relation to the classic—which is a relation to Bach—in a historical way? And what does it mean to say that I was being spoken to by a classic in 1955 when the self that is asking the questions acknowledges that the classic—to say nothing of the self—is historically constituted? As Bach for Mendelssohn's 1829 Berlin audience was an occasion to embody and, in memory and reperformance, to express aspirations, feelings, self-validations that we can identify, diagnose, give names to, place, even foresee the consequences of, what was Bach in South Africa in 1955, and in particular what was the nomination of Bach as the classic, the occasion for? If the notion of the classic as the timeless is undermined by a fully historical account of Bach-reception, then is the moment in the garden—the kind of moment that Eliot experienced, no doubt more mystically and more intensely, and turned into some of his greatest poetry—undermined as well?
Is being spoken to across the ages a notion that we can entertain today only in bad faith?

To answer this question, to which I aspire to give the answer no, and therefore to see what can be rescued of the idea of the classic, let me return to the story of Bach, to the half of the story that I have not yet told.

A simple question. If Bach was so obscure a composer, how did Mendelssohn know his music?

If we follow closely the fortunes of Bach's music after his death, attending not to the reputation of the composer but to actual performance, it begins to emerge that, though obscure, Bach was not quite as forgotten as the revivalist history would lead us to believe. Twenty years after his death, there was a circle of musicians in Berlin regularly performing his instrumental music in private, as a kind of esoteric recreation. The Austrian ambassador to Prussia was for years a member of this circle and on his departure took copies of Bach back to Vienna, where he held performances of Bach in his home. Mozart was part of his circle; Mozart made his own copies and studied the *Art of Fugue* closely. Haydn was also in the circle.

Thus a certain limited Bach tradition, which was not a Bach revival simply because continuity with Bach's own time was never broken, existed in Berlin and branched to Vienna, among professional musicians and serious amateurs, though it did not express itself in public performance.

As for the choral music, a fair amount of it was known to professionals like C. F. Zelter, director of the Berlin Singakademie. Zelter was a friend of Mendelssohn's father. It was at the Singakademie that the young Felix Mendelssohn first came across the choral music, and, against the general uncooperativeness of Zelter, who regarded the *Passions* as unperformable and of specialist interest only, had his own copy of the *Matthew Passion* made and plunged into the business of adapting it for performance.

I say of specialist (or professional) interest only. This is the point where parallels between literature and music, the literary classics and the musical classics, begin to break down, and where the institutions and practice of music emerge as perhaps healthier than the institutions and practice of literature. The musical profession has ways of keeping what it values alive that strike me as qualitatively different from the ways in which the institutions of literature keep submerged but valued writers alive.

Because becoming a musician, executant or composer, not only in the Western tradition but in other major traditions of the world, entails long
training and personal apprenticeship to a succession of teachers; because the
nature of the training entails repeated performance for the ears of others
and minute listening and practical criticism, together with memorization;
because a range of kinds of performance, from playing for one's teacher to
playing for one's class to varieties of public performance, has become insti­
tutionalized—for all of these reasons, it is possible to keep music alive and
indeed vital within professional circles while it is not part of public aware­
ness, even among educated people.

If there is anything that gives one confidence in the classic status of Bach,
it is the testing process that he has been through within the profession. Not
only did this provincial religious mystic outlast the Enlightenment turn
toward rationality and the metropolis, but also he survived what, for many
others, would have been the kiss of death, namely, being promoted during
the nineteenth-century revival as a great son of the German soil. And today,
every time a beginner stumbles through the first prelude of the "48," Bach
is being tested again, within the profession. Dare I suggest that the classic in
music is what emerges intact from this process of day-by-day testing?

The criterion of testing and survival is not just a minimal, pragmatic,
Horatian standard (Horace says, in effect, that if a work is still around a hun­
dred years after it was written, it must be a classic). It is a criterion that
expresses a certain confidence in the tradition of testing and a confidence
that professionals will not devote labor and attention, generation after gen­
eration, to sustaining pieces of music whose life functions have terminated.

It is this confidence that enables me to return to the autobiographical
moment at the center of this essay, and to the alternative analyses I proposed
of it, with a little more optimism. About my response to Bach in 1955, I
asked whether it was truly a response to some inherent quality in the music
and not in fact a symbolic election on my part of European high culture as
a way out of a social and historical dead end. It is of the essence of this skep­
tical questioning that the term Bach should stand simply as a counter for
European high culture, that Bach or Bach should have no value in himself
or itself—that the notion of "value in itself" should in fact be the object of
skeptical interrogation.

By not invoking any idealist justification of "value in itself" or trying to
isolate some quality, some essence of the classic, held in common by works
that survive the process of testing, I hope I have allowed the terms Bach and
the classic to emerge with a value of their own, even if that value is only in
the first place professional and in the second place social. Whether at the age
of fifteen I understood what I was getting into is beside the point: Bach is some kind of touchstone because he has passed the scrutiny of hundreds of thousands of intelligences before me, by hundreds of thousands of fellow human beings.

What does it mean in living terms to say that the classic is what survives? How does such a conception of the classic manifest itself in people's lives?

For the most serious answer to this question, we cannot do better than turn to the great poet of the classic in our own day, the Pole Zbigniew Herbert. To Herbert the opposite of the classic is not the Romantic but the barbarian; furthermore, classic versus barbarian is not so much an opposition as a confrontation. Herbert writes from the historical perspective of Poland, a country with an embattled Western culture caught between intermittently barbarous neighbors. It is not the possession of some essentialist quality that, in Herbert’s eyes, makes it possible for the classic to withstand the assault of barbarism. Rather, what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it, and therefore hold on to it at all costs—that is the classic.

So we arrive at a certain paradox. The classic defines itself by surviving. Therefore the interrogation of the classic, no matter how hostile, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed. For as long as the classic needs to be protected from attack, it can never prove itself classic.

One might even venture further along this road, to say that the function of criticism is defined by the classic: criticism is that which is duty bound to interrogate the classic. Thus the fear that the classic will not survive the decentering acts of criticism may be turned on its head: rather than being the foe of the classic, criticism, and indeed criticism of the most skeptical kind, may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival. Criticism may in that sense be one of the instruments of the cunning of history.

Notes

3. In a *Criterion* article of 1926, Eliot claims that Britain is part of “a common culture of Western Europe.” The question is, “Are there enough persons in Britain believing in that European culture, the Roman inheritance, believing in the place of Britain in that culture?” Two years later he assigns Britain a mediating role between Europe and the rest
of the world: "She is the only member of the European community that has established a genuine empire—that is to say, a world-wide empire as was the Roman empire—not only European but the connection between Europe and the rest of the world." Quoted in Gareth Reeves, T. S. Eliot: A Virgilian Poet (London: Macmillan, 1989), 111, 85. Reeves is rightly puzzled by the passing over of the French and other empires.

4. Eliot left Harvard to study in Germany, then moved to Oxford when the war broke out, then married an Englishwoman, then tried to return to Harvard to defend his doctoral dissertation (but the ship on which he had a berth did not sail), then tried to get a job in the U.S. Navy but failed, then—it seems—simply gave up trying, stayed in England, and eventually became a British subject. If the dice had fallen another way, it is not impossible to see him getting his Ph.D., taking up the professorship that awaited him at Harvard, and resuming his American life.


5. Eliot made no major public statement on his decision to leave the United States. However, in a 1928 letter to Herbert Read he did, somewhat plaintively, articulate his sense of rootlessness within the country of his birth: "Some day I want to write an essay about the point of view of an American who wasn't an American, because he was born in the South and went to school in New England as a small boy with a nigger drawl, but who wasn't a southerner in the South because his people were northerners in a border state and looked down on all southerners and Virginians, and who so was never anything anywhere and who therefore felt himself to be more a Frenchman than an American and more an Englishman than a Frenchman and yet felt that the U.S.A. up to a hundred years ago was a family extension." Quoted in Russell Kirk, Eliot and his Age (New York: Random House, 1971), 56.

Three years later, in the Criterion, he saw the plight of the American intellectual as follows: "The American intellectual of today has almost no chance of continuous development upon his own soil and in the environment which his ancestors, however humble, helped to form. He must be an expatriate: either to languish in a provincial university, or abroad, or, the most complete expatriation of all, in New York." Quoted in William M. Chace, The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 155. Eliot stresses, however, that this enforced deracination is more a feature of modern life than of specifically American circumstances.


8. WIC, 28, 32.

9. WIC, 21.

10. Reeves quotes the address of the Cumaean Sibyl to Aeneas (Aeneid VI. 93–94): "The
cause of all this Trojan woe is again an alien bride (coniunx hospita), again a foreign marriage." The alien brides who cause "Trojan woe" are Helen of Troy, Phoenician Dido, and Latin Lavinia. Reeves writes, "Is not at least a portion of Eliot's woe his marriage to Vivien, an Englishwoman, a coniunx hospita?" Reeves, 47.

I might add that Eliot's reading of the meeting of Dido and Aeneas in the Underworld is hard to understand. After Aeneas has addressed her, Dido

fixed her eyes on the ground.
Her features were not more stirred by his speech
Than if they were made of hard flint or Marpesian marble.
Then she flung herself off (sese corripuit) and fled back to the shadowy grove,
Still hostile [inimica].


11. WIC, 21. The degree of Eliot's conscious identification with Virgil and with Aeneas is further discussed in Reeves, 158–59.

12. In "Virgil and the Christian World" (1951), Eliot distinguishes Virgil's "conscious mind" from an aspect of his mind that remains discreetly unnamed but may be responding to higher direction. T. S. Eliot, _On Poetry and Poets_ (London: Faber, 1957), 129. See also Reeves, 102.


14. Western culture is "the highest culture that the world has ever known," wrote Eliot in 1948 (quoted in Chace, 203).

15. _Notes toward a Definition of Culture_, completed in 1948, is in effect a response to Karl Mannheim, who in _Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction_ argued that the problems of the industrial Europe of the future could be solved only by a shift to conscious social planning, and more generally by the encouragement of new modes of thought. Direction would have to be given by an elite that had transcended class constraints.

Eliot opposed social engineering, future planning, and _dirigisme_ in general. He foresaw that the cultivation of elites would foster class mobility and thereby transform society. It was better, he said, "that the great majority of human beings should go on living in the place where they were born." The self-consciousness Mannheim envisaged should remain a faculty of some form of aristocracy or presiding class. See Chace, 197.

Eliot's response to the moves toward European unity represented by the Hague conference of 1948 (which mooted the idea of a European Parliament) and the founding of the Council of Europe in 1949 is contained in a public letter of 1951, in which, distinguishing cultural questions from political decisions, he advocates a long-term effort to convince the people of Western Europe of their common culture and to conserve and cultivate regions, races, languages, each having a "vocation" in relation to the others. See

16. Goethe: “It is as if the eternal harmony were conversing with itself as it may have done in the bosom of God just before the creation of the world.” Quoted in Friedrich Blume, *Two Centuries of Bach*, trans. Stanley Godman (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 47.

17. I do not address the hypothetical question of whether I could have been “spoken to” by Bach if I had been not only a musical illiterate but a musical illiterate brought up in a non-Western cultural tradition. The answer is very likely no: the modalities and sonorities might have been too foreign, the rhythms too unarresting. On the other hand, one should not underestimate the seductive power of the exotic, particularly in so eclectic an age as ours.

18. Certain pieces did keep their place in specialized repertories—some of the motets, for instance, remained in the repertory of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, where Mozart heard “Singet dem Herrn” in 1789.


20. The historical sense of Bach’s musician sons Wilhelm Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emmanuel, and Johann Christian was accurate too: not only did they do nothing after their father’s death to promote his music or keep it alive, but they swiftly established themselves as leading exponents of the new music of reason and feeling.

During his later years in Leipzig Bach was regarded as what Blume calls “an intractable oddity, a sarcastic old fogey.” The authorities of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, where he was cantor, were all too visibly relieved when he died and they could hire a younger man more in tune with the times. Of his two most famous contemporaries, one (Telemann) expressed the verdict that Bach’s sons, particularly Carl Philipp Emmanuel, were his greatest gift to the world, while the other (Handel) took not the slightest notice of him. See Blume, 15–16, 23, 25–26.

21. The author was J. N. Forkel, director of music at Göttingen University. Quoted in Blume, 38.


23. As Blume points out, we have got beyond the ahistorical liberal idea of Bach as a creature of lonely genius fighting against the restrictions that church, dogma, family, and craft imposed on him—what he calls “Bach the restless titan.” We now recognize the tradition of mysticism he inherited; we can also recognize the uncomfortable and paradoxical coexistence in him of a certain resignation of the will (identified by Nietzsche) with a certain violence of temperament (identified by Dilthey). See Blume, 69, 72–73.