



Self-canonizing critics: T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee

Shane Moran

To cite this article: Shane Moran (1994) Self-canonizing critics: T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 10:3-4, 373-399, DOI: [10.1080/02564719408530090](https://doi.org/10.1080/02564719408530090)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564719408530090>



Published online: 06 Jul 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 37



View related articles [↗](#)

Self-Canonizing Critics: T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee

Shane Moran

Summary

I attempt to place Eliot's theory of the classic and of culture into historical context in order to show that Coetzee's recent concern with these issues uncritically repeats elements of a conservative aesthetic ideology. This ideology proposes a view of history that has political implications, and highlighting it allows us to glimpse the presuppositions that must be negotiated if literary history is to approach its subject without pre-empting it.

Opsomming

Ek probeer om Eliot se teorie oor die "Klassieke" literêre teks en oor kultuur in historiese konteks te plaas, met die doel om aan te toon dat Coetzee se onlangse bemoëienis met hierdie kwessies 'n onkritiese herhaling is van elemente uit 'n konserwatiewe estetiese ideologie. Hierdie ideologie het ten doel 'n siening van geskiedenis met politieke implikasies, en deur daarop te fokus, gee dit ons insig in die voorveronderstelling wat ter diskussie kan, indien literatuurgeskiedenis sy onderwerp wil benader sonder om dit vooruit te loop.

According to Homi Bhabha, to draw attention to the colonial margin is to begin the process of deconstructing the strategies of discriminatory power. I would like to test the following proposition by considering the problem of the "classic":

It is there, in the colonial margin, that the culture of the west reveals its "différance", its limit-text, as its practice of authority displays an ambivalence that is one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power - whether racist or sexist, peripheral or metropolitan.

(Bhabha 1986: 148)

It is more than a convention that, when referring to a "classic" writer, we mean more than the inclusion of that author in a recent publication of a series of "classics". The term "classic" derives from the extension of the term "*classicus*" (the highest of Rome's propertied classes) to the best of the poets characterized as first class and tax-paying rather than proletarian.

What both we and the publisher mean by "classic" may not exactly coincide, but there is undoubtedly a shared invocation of a tradition as the repository of previous and present discernment guaranteeing "our" cultural heritage in the form of a selective and inclusive canon. This canonizing of classics leads Gillian Rose to ask the following:

Why has the tradition not trusted itself to think without such towering "authorities" and "masters", without attributing the content and matter of the tradition to the writing of geni - instead of learning from it what thinking might be and how individuality, whether outstanding or not, is to be identified?

(Rose 1992: 6)

Such texts and their authors are at once representative, and at the same time exemplary of that tradition they inform/transcend via a privileged order of time and history. Perhaps in this reading/writing that is literary history we should not expect a narrative of circumstantial evidence, "a fully managed narrative replete with incident, characters, and things, with speech and silence, and the connection of all the circumstances over time" (Walsh 1990: 662). Rather as Edward Said (1993: 78) notes, "one must not minimize the inventive excavations required in this work", and the literary historian confronts these twin imperatives of creativity and historical consciousness. Writing literary history, as in writing any history, must negotiate the temptation of inserting order where there is discontinuity; the demands of cognition are often satisfied by unity rather than disjunction. In the context of literary history this can lead to a homogenizing notion of culture that swallows actual historical contexts. All too often the following question of morality and justice passes unheard by the literary historian:

To what degree has culture collaborated in the worst excesses of the State, from its imperial wars and colonial settlements to its self-justifying institutions of antihuman repression, racial hatred, economic and behavioral manipulation?

(Said 1991: 177)

The two examples of literary history I focus on, Eliot and Coetzee, are linked by South African history. Eliot literally underwrites colonialism while Coetzee writes as a product of colonialism, and yet any potential conflict resolves into a shared sense of affinity on Coetzee's part. The South African author draws attention to the colonial margin only to neutralize it.

I

According to one critic, T.S. Eliot "in effect changed our perspective on English literary history" (Stead 1977: 172). Eliot claims, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), that "the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (in Kermode 1975: 38). Traditionally, from Dante to Eliot and beyond, Virgil has been seen as the classic of empire and the type of all classics, exemplifying the ability of a classic to transcend history and be relevant today. Writing in his *History and Value* of the timeless order essential to Eliot's idea of the canon whereby "the whole of the literature of Europe ... has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order", Frank Kermode notes the following:

Here the canon is used in the service of an order which can be discerned in history but actually transcends it, and makes everything timeless and modern.

(Kermode 1988: 116)

What Kermode calls "the ghost of canonicity haunts even [those] iconoclasts" who attack the bias of the canon:

There is no escaping it: if we want the monuments, the documents we value, we must preserve them in spite of their evil associations, and find ways of showing that their value somehow persists in our changed world.

(Kermode 1988: 117)

The canon, then, consists of exemplary or classic texts that shape the past by "predetermining value" (Kermode 1988: 117); the canonical texts reflect presuppositions about the value of a past which they enforce: "So canons are complicit with power; and canons are useful in that they enable us to handle otherwise unmanageable historical deposits" (1988: 115).¹ According to Giles Gunn, canons are also complicit with consensus:

In summary, then, our writers help form what can be called our mind insofar as they produce what can be called a classic To do this, to be sure, is to do something not in a physical sense but in a symbolic one. Our classics create us, or better, create a common mind among us, not because of anything they say about our experience but because of the light they cast it in.

(Gunn 1979: 174)

And also for Elizabeth Deeds Ermath (1983: 24-25) in the case of "realistic fiction", consensus contains and diffuses crisis, stabilising identity;

"consensus unifies time and rationalizes consciousness". In *Forms of Attention*, originally delivered as the The Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, in honour of the literary historian Rene Wellek, Kermode writes: "Opinion is the great canon-maker, and you can't have privileged insiders without creating outsiders, apocrypha Continuity of attention and interpretation, denied to them, is reserved for the canonical":

To be inside the canon is to be protected from wear and tear, to be credited with indefinitely large numbers of possible internal relations and secrets, to be treated as a heterocosm, a miniature Torah.

(Kermode 1985: 74, 90)

Demurring from the judgement of Paul de Man that a canon has its status from the value of its constituents, Kermode (1985: 91) wonders if "the truth must, at least in part, be the other way round", that is, the constituents of the canon deriving their status from the status of the canon. This is an important point since it calls for an examination of the type of history that canonical texts are thought to confirm, and which, in turn, provides the criteria for the selection of those classic texts. That is, texts *constitutive* of a tradition, of a history, texts that are taken to support that same tradition and continuity, also fit into, rather than simply transcend, those same traditions. Writing of *Moby Dick* as a classic, Gunn enunciates the criteria of the classic:

Thus Melville's classic does all the things a classic should do: expresses what is latent in the cultural metaphysics of its time, simultaneously challenges its underlying assumptions, and, in the process, alters our way of thinking about such things - not by supplying us with new subjects to think about but by rearranging the components of the thinkable into new patterns of meaning and significance.

(Gunn 1979: 173-4)

Melville is interesting in this connection because he made his own appeal for a distinctively American literary canon. "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850) was written in the context of a self-conscious literary nationalism, affirming the need for a distinctively American literature and citing Hawthorne as the exponent of Americanness in literature. Peter Bellis remarks that "Hawthorne and His Mosses" "shows Melville to be fully aware of the process of literary canonization, a willing participant in the construction of American literary history" (Bellis 1990: 608). The classic texts allowed into the canon are intimately intertwined with national history and identity. What is often forgotten is that Melville abandoned this call for a national literature in the context of what he saw as the fratricidal Civil War.

According to Pope, "Who lasts a century can have no flaw [I] hold that Wit a Classic, good in law" (*Imitations of Horace*). From the *querreles* of the Ancients and the Moderns, Saint-Beauve's "'Qu' est-ce qu' un classique" (1850), and Eliot's "What is a Classic?" (1945) - all have addressed in different ways the essential continuity afforded by the classic; that there were classics was never in doubt, disputation centred, and still centres, upon the likely candidates - Roman for Saint-Beauve and Eliot, Greek for Arnold. It is hardly coincidental that the classic is invariably a classic of empire, an empire that transcends the provinciality of various nationalisms and national canons. A wry Eliot wrote to Ford Madox Ford in 1924:

I am all for empires, especially the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and I deplore the outburst of artificial nationalities ... all over the world.

(Kermode 1975: 15)

Kermode notes that

the empire is the paradigm of the classic: a perpetuity, a transcendent entity, however remote its provinces, however extraordinary its temporal vicissitudes.

(Kermode 1975: 28)

But how far is this empire from the "artificial nationalities" disdained by Eliot? How far does the extolling of empires disguise a refined cultural nationalism or a not so disguised Eurocentrism that has more often than not expressed its nationalisms in imperial adventures?

It seems to me that even if one asserts the qualities of a "modern classic" over the old "imperial classic", as Kermode does, and yet leaves unexamined the presuppositions of historical continuity (a sort of classical history that goes hand in hand with both kinds of classics), then one risks repeating the imperial presuppositions of the "imperial classics". This essay aims to question the category of the classic and, more importantly, I propose to examine in more detail Eliot's notion of the "imperial classic", and Kermode's and Coetzee's readings of Eliot.

II

In his book *The Classic*, Kermode (1975) offers a subtle and fascinating study of the nature and history of the classic. Kermode's book is itself, in an evaluative sense of the word, a classic of modern literary criticism insofar as it meticulously examines the link between the notion of the classic and the Christian "invent[ion] of a new propagandist historiography"

(Kermode 1975: 29). But this does not mean that the classic absolutely transcends its history, and attention to the original context of composition and delivery of the lectures that constitute *The Classic* reveals Kermode's complicity with the memorial process constitutive of the classic. It seems to me that Kermode's argument is constricted and muted around the question of history itself. This reserve may be traced to the context of the lectures that make up the book: The T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures delivered at the University of Kent in 1973. Eliot delivered his 1944 encomium on Virgil as The Presidential Address to the Virgil Society, and Kermode advanced his argument under the scholarly auspices of "the Master of Eliot College", benefitting from "the handsome resources of the Baker Library" (Kermode 1975: Preface). I don't want to suggest that either author fundamentally tailored his arguments to his audience or that he essentially said anything different from what he sincerely thought. But such venues, and the acceptance of invitations to address such venues, do not automatically invite iconoclastic dissent; the views of the audience can be anticipated, and the audience in its turn anticipates approval on behalf of the lecturer for the existence of such an audience gathered together to commemorate and honour, in Kermode's case, T.S. Eliot.² Commemorative addresses have their own protocols, and criticizing the commemorated is not one of them. I will argue that the constriction of Kermode's reading of Eliot elides, or sequesters, the problem of historical context.

This seems to be a part of Kermode's neutral attitude to empires which typically, but not always, colonize and subject or otherwise flex their imperious muscle. Indeed colonization and subjection are erased from Kermode's attention to the "imperial classic", "the universalist or imperialist classic" (Kermode 1975: 28). This in turn is linked, I believe, to the marginalization of Eliot's own Americanness, and that as an American (or as a British citizen) he speaks with the voice of empire; to his positioning within an imperial America that ruthlessly imposed its imperial and genocidal will upon the original inhabitants of North America. American imperialism proceeded under the guise of Manifest Destiny, which gave an elected duty to carry Christian civilization to new frontiers, and drew its sense of impetus from the perceived failure of Europe to fulfil its destiny. So, in a sense, American Manifest Destiny was but a continuation of the destiny of civilization abnegation by Europe. Eurocentrism is not incommensurable with the American imperial mission, and when Eliot (1945) praises European literature over American or other provincial literature what is never doubted is the primacy of the imperial, Christian civilization that includes Americans in "all the peoples of Europe". To perceive this unity is to distinguish "the contingent [from] the essential, the ephemeral [from] the

permanent" (in Kermode 1975: 129). Eliot certainly does not endorse or otherwise privilege American literary culture or imperial destiny. In fact, he denies the possibility of American (and British) literature: "there can only be one English literature", he writes in 1924 but, reports Kermode, on the evidence of "American Literature and the American Language" in *To Criticize the Critic* (1965), appears to have changed his mind (Kermode 1975: 15). Indeed, Eliot has little sympathy with what George Lichtheim (1971: 57) sees as America's "liberal imperialism - the imperialism of progress".³ Eliot (1948: 92) suspects that "American economic expansion may be also, in its way, the cause of disintegration of cultures which it touches". However, in the context in which Eliot is writing, how far can we take seriously his lauding of empire and his critique of America? To what degree does the first absorb, rechannel, or negate the second? After all, in the mid 1940s the post World War II imperial aspirations of America are just taking shape and it may prove not to be a bad form of empire. So, to laud empire but criticize the American version is only to disapprove, then, of that empire's progress so far and not to damn it entirely.

Eliot's (1948) approved Kipling's imperialism, his enthusiasm for empire and his belief that the claims of the classic are tied to empire, more precisely the Holy Roman Empire, as the "main stream of culture" and civilization seems politically or ideologically charged in a way not registered by Kermode. Writing from within the honorific space accorded Eliot both in England and America, the poet is also writing from the ideological centre of a colonial and imperial power, that in the mid 1940s already saw itself as the bastion of freedom and civilization (those twins of culture), and was in the process of exercising its imperial will in the formation of a Manichean Cold War hegemony. It is certainly true that Eliot defended the British Empire from

the most vehement criticism, or abuse, of British imperialism [that] often comes from representatives of societies which practise a different form of imperialism - that is to say, of expansion which brings material benefits and extends the influence of culture.

(Eliot 1948: 92)

If "American economic expansion may be also, in its way, the cause of disintegration of cultures which it touches" (1948: 92), this economic imperialism is lamentable not as imperialism but as economic; in other words for Eliot, imperialism can be free of economic determinates, and British imperialism has been less determined by economic expansion than American imperialism. Eliot appears to overlook the fact that the British imperialism served the needs of British nationalism, as did the subsequent process of

decolonization. Kermode fails to examine this peculiar understanding of imperialism.

If Eliot's privileging Roman Catholicism would appear to block his contribution to American imperialism one need only consider the fine balance between privileging the Roman Catholic Church over the Roman Empire, and privileging the Empire over the Church; the two seem indissoluble, and what the Holy Roman Empire ultimately signifies for Eliot is Christianity, and empire is the Christian empire. Christian empire as opposed to what? To non-Christian or pagan empires? Like the communist Russian Empire, perhaps?⁴ Empires are ideologically constructed as oppositional, because the Caesars "needed an ideology to legitimize their rule" they founded the notion of *imperium*, and by the eighth century the Holy Roman Empire had its enemy in Islam (Lichtheim 1971: 19, 25). If Eliot was "for all empires" it seems unlikely that he was for all empires equally. There can only be one genuine empire at a time, only one authentic "tradition", one continuum, in which "talent" can act as the historical agent of renovation. Virgil, who was not a Christian, is the absolute classic for a complex of reasons but primarily because of the Christianized Roman imperial expansion which Virgil was taken to have prophesized. Perhaps, as Coetzee (1993: 10) suggests, Eliot saw himself as a type of modern Virgil, prophesying the glorious empire to come and of which he could as yet have no clear conception.

It is unclear which comes first for Eliot, the violence of imperialism or the blessings of high art, but what is certain is that they justify each other. In Kermode's account violence is simply erased, just as Eliot himself erased the violence not only of Roman and American imperialism, but also that which attended Germany's recent imperial aspirations. Kermode lets all of this pass, and simply points to the "enormous discrepancies between this mystique of Empire and the facts of imperial history" (1975: 28). He fails to make the connection between this mystique of empire and its results as the facts of imperial history; without the mystique of empire there would be no facts of empire. It is not the discrepancy between the ideal of empire and its bloody reality so much as the contribution of the ideal to the bloody facts of empire that matter. If Kermode is perceptive in tracing the invention of a "new propagandist historiography" by Christian lawyers concerned to legitimate their emperors' claims to divine authority without the mediation of the pope, he is less than perceptive of Eliot's own propagandist aesthetics that implicitly validates imperialist expansion as the crucible of civilization.⁵

III

In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948: 65) Eliot discusses imperialism, one of the "several types of culture relation between one nation and the different kinds of foreign area", with reference to "the peculiar case of India" where the "benefits of British rule will soon be lost, but the ill effects of the disturbance of a native culture by an alien one will remain".⁶ In a gesture to pluralism he writes that

we can also learn to respect every other culture as a whole, however inferior to our own it may appear, and however justly we may disapprove of some features of it: the deliberate destruction of another culture as a whole is an irreparable wrong, almost as evil as to treat human beings like animals.

(Eliot 1948: 65)

However, he concedes that in practice

there is the *colonial* problem, and the *colonisation* problem: it is a pity that the word "colony" has had to do duty for two quite different meanings [T]he colonial problem is that of the relation between an indigenous native culture and a foreign culture, when a higher foreign culture has been imposed, often by force, upon a lower.

(Eliot 1948: 63)

The "colonial problem", then, seems the negative result of the often violent subjugation of an indigenous native culture by a higher foreign culture. The "colonisation problem", on the other hand, "arises from migration" in which originally "it was a whole tribe, or at least a wholly representative part of it, that moved together. Therefore, it was a total culture that moved" (Eliot 1948: 63). Modern migrations consist of people who have "never represented the whole of the culture of the country from which they came, or they have represented it in quite different proportions", and this leads to "peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture clash ... between the areas populated by colonisation, and the countries of Europe from which the migrants came" (1948: 63-5). This is then a European colonial problem created by European colonization.

The difference

between colonisation by mass migration (as in the early movements westwards across Europe) and colonisation by certain elements separating themselves from a culture which remains at home (as in the colonisation of the Dominions and the Americas)

(Eliot 1948: 75)

is really no difference at all: in both cases Eliot erases the economic exploitation of colonization. By eventually presenting the differences as between various forms of colonization, the imposition "by force" of the colonizer's culture upon the culture of the colonized is merged into a broader colonization as "migration" in which a reciprocal cultural transference is envisaged. The "force" of the colonizer becomes the inevitability of "migration", a movement of a whole or part of a culture from its "home". Of course, from the point of view of the colonized distinctions between whole or part are irrelevant anyway; the colonized know that the colonizers as a whole share the common goal of economically exploiting the colonized, and any cultural interaction is merely a part or a by-product of this strategy of exploitation.

Eliot's (1948) attempt to separate the imposition by the colonizer upon the colonized of his own culture from seemingly inevitable or natural migrations aims to avoid confronting colonialism itself as violent expropriation and forced domination. The economic motive is elided by the naturalizing term "migration". Force is acknowledged and then circumvented; we should not "linger too long upon perplexities so far beyond our measure". Eliot advises us to

give our attention to the question of unity and diversity within the limited area that we know best, and within which we have the most frequent opportunities for right action, that we can combat the hopelessness that invades us, when we linger too long upon perplexities so far beyond our measure.

(Eliot 1948: 65)

This part of the European tradition that is colonialism, "our" legacy, is simply not worth thinking about, it will only invade us with hopelessness when we linger too long upon perplexities so far beyond our measure. It is surely significant that between "What is a Classic?" (1945) and *Notes* (1948) Eliot was in fact moved to linger upon these perplexities and to offer "a few remarks on the cultural effects of empire" (1948: 90). Defending British imperial rule in India, Eliot (1948: 91) points to the "religious failure" that prevented "complete cultural assimilation" of the "native". But the failure of the British Empire should not be taken as the inevitable failure of all empires:

To point to the damage that has been done to native cultures in the process of imperial expansion is by no means an indictment of empire itself, as the advocates of imperial dissolution are only too apt to infer.

(Eliot 1948: 91)

Eliot (1948: 92) attacks these "anti-imperialist liberals" as "complacent believers in the superiority of Western civilization" who advocate leaving "them [natives] to stew in the broth which we have brewed for them". It is the duty of the colonizer to not abandon the colonized, to remain a colonizer despite the burden of hopelessness that he shoulders. He speaks for the colonizer to audiences of fellow-colonizers, and this in itself indicates the role of the post-colonial (post 1794) American as the new imperial power. The anti-colonial rhetoric of the colonial Americans, which served to justify their own transcontinental colonization of North America, has been supplanted by Eliot with the imperial rhetoric of white European supremacy. While this rhetoric favours British and European literary culture over that of America, it never questions, and only serves to validate, the superiority of European culture; the endorsement of white supremacy returns to America via Europe to endorse the imperialism of western civilization. If traditionally the Roman "*imperium* [has] signified moral as well as military superiority over cowardly Orientals and uncouth Germans" (Lichtheim 1971: 17), then perhaps the American *imperium* is not so hard to recognize. To criticize as Eliot does the American literary canon, and the artificial nationalisms of which Americanness is a part, is not to dissent from the "imperial path, from which, in two centuries, [America] has never swerved" (Lichtheim 1971: 57). Lichtheim argues that

imperialism as a movement - or, one prefers, as an ideology - latched on to nationalism because no other popular base was available. But this statement can also be turned around: nationalism transformed itself into imperialism wherever the opportunity offered.

(Lichtheim 1971: 81-82)

If Eliot were to endorse nationalism over imperialism he would not, in the context in which he pronounced it, have substantially undermined the security of so called first-world, north Atlantic, supremacy dominated by the national interest of the United States.

Since America represents, or rather dominates, the west, at least in economic and military terms, arguing for the supremacy of western civilization and European culture serves to legitimate, albeit by a circuitous and devious route, North American supremacy. This is as true now as it was in 1944-48. Perversely, relegating American literary culture and American economic imperialism merely makes possible the acknowledgement of America's supremacy.⁷ In the wake of World War II Eliot's own imperial impulse - which is consonant with America's Cold War rhetoric - needs this disguise partly because his elitist snobbery makes him unwilling to endorse American cultural supremacy, and because such an endorsement is in a

sense inevitable in view of his own taste for empires. American imperialism is not the kind of empire he would have chosen, but at least it is an empire which, as an empire, tends towards the production and maintenance of "a homogeneous general culture" (1948: 66); an adjunct to the "unity of European culture" admittedly, but still tributary to the "blood-stream" of civilization. This dissembling of imperial, nationalistic supremacy beneath benevolent claims for universality links the rhetoric of America's Manifest Destiny to the moralising rhetoric of the Cold War, and persists today in American claims to be the rightful arbiters of the New World Order. What these American supremacist rhetorics share in common with other imperialisms is a claim to a pre-eminent historical continuity and moral selfrighteousness. Commenting on the nationalist/imperialist aspirations of post-revolutionary France, Lichtheim remarks on the connection between moral universalism and ideology:

Paradoxically, it was that very universalism which became the ideological instrument of expansionist policies - "ideological" in the sense that their sponsors were taken in by their own rhetoric. Cynicism crept in at a later date, when the prophets of empire no longer took their public professions quite seriously.

(Lichtheim 1971: 82)

The provision of this presupposition of universalism, historical integrity and identity is part of the burden of the classic.

According to Kermode, genres and their classic forms are evaluated on the basis of "admiration for a power that can preserve history as an integrated whole", "that permanence which all believers in the classic desire to find amidst change" (1975: 18, 19):

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.

(Kermode 1975: 15-16)

Homi Bhabha agrees that "produced in this way, both literature and history, as well as the history of literature, enable a perspective of essential order, coherence, culmination and Culture" (1984: 94). This history is itself a narrative construct that affirms and is affirmed by classic textual deposits organically sedimented as the kernel or core of identity beneath apparent and real change. Threatening this narrative with the imperative of the present is a characteristic of the historical context labelled "modernity", "our" historical context, and it signals the contemporary sense of the lack

of continuity in history. This sense of contemporary crisis lies behind Eliot's lament for the "destroying [of] our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanised caravans" (1948: 108).

The constitutive ambiguity characteristic of modern classics means, as Kermode remarks, "that the text is under the absolute control of no thinking subject, or that it is not a message from one mind to another" (Kermode 1975: 140). This "modern version of the classic" is the one Kermode favours over the "imperial classic" because it is "necessarily tolerant of change and plurality whereas the older, regarding most forms of pluralism as heretical, holds fast to the time-transcending idea of Empire" (Kermode 1975: 140). Although there is still critical debate - and the sparking of such debate is often what causes us to value such texts - there is a broadly assumed aura of authorization about the place, the classic niche, of such problematical and challenging texts. One such author of this "modern version of the classic" might be J.M. Coetzee.⁸ Like Eliot, Coetzee is also a critic and theorist of literature - see his *White Writing* (1988) and *Doubling the Point* (1992) - and I propose in conclusion to consider one example of his critical discourse. Both writers "speak" with that authority that arouses Gillian Rose's suspicion.

IV

J.M. Coetzee (1993) has recently written about Eliot's "What is a Classic?", attempting once again to answer that question while trying to distance himself from Eliot's ideological baggage. This essay was originally written for the 1992-93 programme of the Symposium on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy at Michigan State University. He draws attention to the fact that he is addressing "a cosmopolitan audience" (Coetzee 1993: 14). The South African author positions himself as what Eliot would call a "provincial", that is, as a colonial. Moreover, Coetzee does not consider the address of 1944 to be "one of Eliot's best pieces of criticism" (Coetzee 1993: 7). Does Coetzee's positioning of himself as provincial to what he sees as Eliot's rhetoric of metropolitan and Eurocentric imperialism avoid the pitfalls I have traced in Eliot's discussion of the classic? Or does the example of Coetzee contradict Bhabha's optimism in the value of the colonial margin for mounting a counter-discourse to colonial hegemony; does the South African intellectual have a better chance of revealing the mechanisms of power and oppression than his metropolitan counterpart? Or is there an aesthetic ideology at work in both the metropole and the

provinces that can be glimpsed around the question "What is a Classic?"? Does this aesthetic ideology preclude any privileged participation by the provincial intellectual in Edward Said's project?:

We must therefore read the great canonical texts, and perhaps the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, within an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented ... in such works.

(Coetzee 1993: 78)

Having noted Eliot's elision of reference to the war that formed the historical context of his address, and the poet's "clear awareness that the ending of World War II must bring with it a new cultural order, with new opportunities and new threats", Coetzee notes the following:

What struck me when I reread Eliot's lecture in preparation for today'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, honouring a European poet to a European audience.

(Coetzee 1993: 8)

Coetzee distinguishes between a reading "from the inside" which would see Eliot's attempting to affirm the *Aenid* as a classic "in allegorical terms: as a book that will bear the weight of having read into it a meaning for Eliot's own age", and a reading "from the outside" (1993: 10). As part of a critical and "unsympathetic" extrinsic reading of Eliot, he argues that the poet "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" (1993: 10-11). Coetzee proposes to "interrogate these alternative readings - the transcendental-poetic and the socio-cultural" via an autobiographical anecdote about his discovery of Bach "one Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955, when I was fifteen years old ... mooning around our back garden in the suburbs of Cape Town" (1993: 12-13). This autobiographical moment links Coetzee implicitly to Eliot, who for Coetzee was not the master of "*impersonality*", but rather the author of poetry that is "astonishingly personal, not to say autobiographical" (p. 9).⁹ Both Coetzee and Eliot use literary history to give their own version of artistic practice and status.

Back in the suburbs of Cape Town the young Coetzee is "undergoing the impact of *the classic*", an experience that "I can only describe by analogy as incarnation":

What did Bach give me? He gave me, so to speak, the idea of form The revelation in the garden was a key even 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 sceptical way, invoking the kinds of question that are asked about culture and cultural ideals by contemporary cultural analysis 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? (Coetzee 1993: 13-14)

I want to defer consideration of the nature of the gift between J.S. and J.M. in order to pick up on Coetzee's attempt to negotiate the transcendental-poetic and the socio-cultural.

Dismissing "facile notions of the classic as timeless", Coetzee asserts that "Bach the classic was historically constituted ... by identifiable historical forces and within a specific historical context" (1993: 15). Attempting to avoid "a helpless kind of relativism" (p. 17) he asks the following: "What, if anything, is left of the classic after the classic has been historicized, that may still claim to speak across the ages?" This question leads to another: "Is being spoken to across the ages a notion that we can entertain today only in bad faith?" (p. 18). To this latter question Coetzee "aspire[s] to give the answer No, and to therefore see what can be rescued from the idea of the classic" (p. 18). After admitting the necessity of a "fully historical account of Bach-reception" (p. 18), and rejecting any "idealist justification of 'value in itself', or trying to isolate some quality, some essence of the classic" (p. 19), Coetzee justifies his "No":

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.

(Coetzee 1993: 20)

This community of intelligences assures the classic of its value as a classic; the scrutiny of hundreds of thousands intelligences, hundreds of thousands of fellow human beings countersign the classic.¹⁰ Coetzee makes no mention of the role of specialist and the institutionalization of the intellectual that gives some intelligences more say than others in determining what is of value.¹¹ The economic and ideological context of intellectual culture and academic standardization is simply ignored. The transcendence of the classic, whereby if it can no longer be said to transcend time and history it can still be said to speak across the ages, is facilitated by the universality of human intelligence.¹² Doubtless, in return the classics function as a yardstick by which we are to discern true intelligence in fellow human beings.

Appreciation of classics signals intelligence (once the word would have been "taste" or Eliot's "discernment"), and classics are distinguished by their intelligence: one wonders which element of this self-congratulatory circle came first. The invulnerability and vacuity of this circle enable Coetzee to declare the immortality of the classic. The "testings" of intelligence become the essence of the classic whereby the classic defines itself by surviving:

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 a classic.
(Coetzee 1993: 20)

This gesture to critical pluralism rests upon the idealizing, essentialist claim that the classic defines itself - that is, that critics and academics, judging in ideologically saturated contexts and according to professional, institutional, and pedagogical imperatives, do not in fact define what a classic is. Even while it appeals to the pragmatic sounding criteria of "surviving", which implies a quietistic and uncritical acceptance of what does survive and echoes Eliot's (1948: 59) notion of the "survival of culture", as if what does survive is thereby better, this survival is part of the self-definition of the classic. Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" suggests a less triumphalist perspective:

There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.
(Benjamin 1969: 256)

According to Coetzee self-definition, survival transcends barbaric history which is simply the medium of self-realization. The self that is thus defined and canonized as normative is the imperious and voracious, universalizing self of the west. The classic is granted an autonomous, organic momentum; in the classic gesture of ideology, what is historically constructed is naturalized as beyond time. This is nothing less than the elevation of the classic as a genus to the status of the ideal. It marks a return on Coetzee's part, under the guise of liberal pluralism,¹³ to the idealization of form: the gift between J.S. and J.M is "the idea[l] of form".¹⁴ The transcendence of the form of the aesthetic object assures its canonization and elevation beyond the contamination of ideological discourse. This is the most conservative and powerful aesthetic ideology linking Eliot and Coetzee.¹⁵

It is hardly necessary to note here the classic imperial gesture of erasing

difference and specificity and elevating into a universal what is historical. To paraphrase Bhabha, it seems that Coetzee, like Eliot, concedes too much to one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power; namely the ahistorical universalizing of Eurocentric cultural products (Virgil for Eliot, Bach for Coetzee), and the imperious self-assertion of their legitimacy for all humanity. Critics at the margins are no less complicitous with this ideological ruse than critics at the metropole. In this case the empire writes back affectionately. One wonders about the voices that Coetzee's ears are not attuned to across the ages; those voices that were and are violently silenced in the name of western pre-eminence. In conclusion, I would like to end on a historical note by picking up the biographical thread.

In 1950 Eliot visited South Africa and returned again in 1954 for his health. A fellow passenger of Eliot's, the South African, Sam Kahn, writing in *Advance*, January 14, 1954, leaves the following testimony:

The poet T.S. Eliot and I were once fellow travellers on the Edinburgh Castle from Southampton to Cape Town Eliot has proclaimed himself a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. His classicism he soaked up in his youth like a sheet of blotting paper - blotting paper steeped in European culture; his royalism is a snobbish way of ignoring decaying society, an escape from bad smelling reality to the rose-gardens of fairyland; his Anglo-Catholicism is class interest masked in a pretension of high moral purpose with no spark of feeling for the poor or oppressed, with no essential respect for humanity. So what is more natural than that he should find his spiritual homes in the capitals of the Vatican's and Britain's Empires and spin mystical aristocratic cobwebs about the brains of his readers.

(Kahn 1954)¹⁶

Kahn continues his blistering attack on Eliot's sympathy for Fascism, his anti-Semitism, etc., and concludes on a tellingly provincial note:

T.S. Eliot's views are those adopted and being applied by Dr. Verwoerd and Dr. Eiselen. Has poetry become the opium of the people?

(Kahn 1954)

Coetzee's attempt to recover Eliot by seeing him as an outsider, "using Eliot the provincial as a pattern and figure of myself" (1993: 14), amounts to figuratively moving the poet to the colonial margins when in fact Eliot did visit the margins. History is more disturbing than Coetzee's sentimental rhetorical gesture suggests. Eliot came not as a marginalized provincial but as a representative of cultural imperialism and racism. Rather than transporting Eliot to the margins, Coetzee's self-consciously marginal voice from

the margins faithfully echoes the imperious address of the metropole. When he writes that the irony of criticism is that it ensures the survival of the classic he calls criticism "one of the instruments of the cunning of history" (1993: 20). But beyond criticism, and the literary history in which it is embedded, history displays a barbarous cunning overlooked by even the most acute literary intelligences.

The South African author repeats uncritically the essentials of an aesthetic ideology that has gone hand in hand with colonialism and imperialism.¹⁷ To write self-consciously as a colonial provincial without critically negotiating this forming element of the colonial context is to fall into autobiographical myopia. More seriously, it is also to fall into intellectual complicity with the ruse of ideology; dissembling economic exploitation beneath cultural superiority.

My second quotation is from another disappointed reader and comes from the Letters to the Editor page of the *U.C. Tattle*, 1940, and is signed "Brutally your, BRUTUS". The writer is concerned to rib the "Literary Society of this University" for "the last meeting on T.S. Eliot [which] achieved the massive audience of twelve". The ascerbic writer asks a pointed question still unanswered today: "Surely in Cape Town there are critics competent to deal with T.S. Eliot and Co.? (*U.S. Tattle* 1940).¹⁸

Not all South Africans have welcomed Eliot as warmly as J.M. Coetzee, even if today their voices still struggle to be heard. I finish abruptly in the hope of allowing these other South African voices to resonate beyond the sequestered academic context of this essay.

Notes

1. See John Guillory (1983) for an analysis of Eliot's ideological aims. See also Roger Kojeky, *T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism* (1971) and Pamela McCallum, *Literature and Method: Towards a Critique of I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis* (1983).
2. In Eliot's case the community of sensibilities includes Virgil and by implication the Virgil Society which has as its purpose the commemorative honouring of Virgil. Eliot appeals to solidarity with his audience, having praised Virgil for his "maturity" and "delicacy of feeling", on the basis of their shared "discernment" (another quality of "genius"):

To attempt to demonstrate the maturity of language of Virgil is, on the present occasion, a superfluous task: many of you could perform it better than I, and I think that we should all be in accord.

(Eliot 1945: 124)

Eliot's use of the inclusive pronoun merits closer attention, not simply because of its frequency which seems to signal not so much a stylistic formality, but rather an anxiety regarding his audience as community: every "we" excludes a "they". Eliot's "we" probably includes "all the peoples of Europe" joined by "European civilization":

The blood-stream of European literature is Latin and Greek - not as two systems of circulation, but one, for it is through Rome that our parentage in Greece must be traced.

(Eliot 1945: 128, 130)

3. "America's conversion to economic liberalism occurred only after the United States had become the world's leading industrial producer and was on the way to becoming its leading exporter as well - in part at least at the expense of the British. History has an odd way of repeating itself." (Lichtheim 1971: 53). See Lichtheim on "the British Empire and its American successor" (p. 42).
4. "The newest type of imperialism, that of Russia, is probably the most ingenious, and the best calculated to flourish according to the temper of the present age. The Russian Empire appears to be sedulous to avoid the weaknesses of the empires which have preceded it: it is at the same time more ruthless and more careful of the vanity of subject peoples. The official doctrine is one of complete racial equality - an appearance easier for Russia to preserve in Asia, because of the oriental cast of the Russian mind and because of the backwardness of Russian development according to western standards" (Eliot 1948: 92-3).
5. This must be qualified by noting Eliot's stress on the balance in the ideal unity of a people:
Excess of unity may be due to barbarism and may lead to tyranny; excess of division may be due to decadence and may also lead to tyranny: either excess will prevent further development in culture.

(Eliot 1948: 50)

The stress on "the unity of European culture" is counterbalanced by the belief that "the frontiers of culture are not, and should not be, closed. But history makes a difference"; "every literature must have some sources which are peculiarly its own, deep in its own history" (Eliot 1948: 114, 113). The conflict of cultures, like the conflict of classes, is held to be "profitable to society":

I do not approve the extermination of the enemy: the policy of exterminating or, as is barbarously said, liquidating enemies, is one of the most alarming developments of modern war and peace, from the point of view of those who desire the survival of culture. *One needs the enemy.*

(Eliot 1948: 59)

There is greater utility in not exterminating the enemy; liquidation is simply not profitable to society, a society which by definition excludes "the enemy" who is to be judged according to "our" needs, and has no claim beyond what "we" perceive as their utility.

6. In this respect Eliot seems less approving of British imperialism in India than Karl Marx: "England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating - the annihilation of [the] old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia" (*Capital*, vol. 3, quoted in Lichtheim (1971: 137). In his review of Eliot's *Notes*, George Orwell discusses class rather than imperialism: see "Culture and Classes", *Observer*, 28 November, 1948: 4 (Reprinted in Clarke: 1990). As we shall see, although Coetzee draws attention to his own status as marginal-provincial-peripheral-post-colonial writer he does not mention Eliot's treatment of imperial colonialism. He mentions *Notes* in a footnote, commenting only that it was written in response to Karl Mannheim's *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*. Eliot is presented by Coetzee as opposing Mannheim's theory of non-class based elites. Here Coetzee seems to be following William M. Chace's account of Mannheim and Eliot in his *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot* (1975). Such a summary treatment overlooks the historical fact that both Eliot and Mannheim were in agreement about the need for elites. This should not come as a surprise since Eliot was a charter member of a group called the Moot, a loose organization of Christian intellectuals over which Mannheim presided (see North 1991). Chace's apology for Eliot sees Eliot locked into an oscillating fascination and transcendence of politics, and ultimately "everything political is absorbed, only to become no more than ephemerally political No ideological position can be formed amidst such darkness" (Chace 1975: 192-3).
7. Raymond Williams makes a similar point in his acute discussion of Eliot in *Culture and Society 1780-1950*:

For what is quite clear in the new conservatism (and this makes it very different from the, and much inferior to, the conservatism of a Coleridge or a Burke) is that a genuine theoretical objection to the principle and the effects of an "atomized", individualist society is combined, and has to be combined, with adherence to the principles of an economic system which is based on just this "atomized", individualist view. The "free economy" which is the central tenet of contemporary conservatism not only contradicts the social principles which Eliot advances (if it were only this one could say merely that he is an unorthodox conservative), but also, and this is the real confusion, is the only available method of ordering society to the maintenance of those interests and institutions on which Eliot believes his values to depend. Against the actual and powerful programme for the maintenance of social classes, and against the industrial capitalism which actually maintains the divisions that he endorses, the occasional observation, however deeply felt, on the immortality [*sic*] of exploitation or usury seems, indeed, a feeble velleity.

(Clarke 1990: 155)

Herbert Read, however, takes the opposite view and defends modernist writers, including Eliot, from Sir Charles Snow's accusation of a tendency to Fascism (Read 1963: 180-1). In 1935 Dmitry S. Mirsky traced the paths by which the British intelligentsia came to fascism: "The literary and artistic section go by

way of 'classicism' which amounts' ... in artistic life, to the supremacy of form over content" (*The Intelligensia of Great Britain*, quoted in Chace 1975: 138). Beyond this any doubts about the propensity of Eliot's work to feed into assertions of America's pre-eminence must account for its susceptibility to F.O. Matthiessen's construction of the American literary canon: see his *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (1935; revised 1947 & 1958), and the monumental *American Renaissance* (1941) in which Eliot plays a pivotal role in the definition of American literature.

8. Derek Attridge (1992) argues for the transformative canonical value of Coetzee's work.
9. This view of Eliot's poetry has a history: on September 5, 1922, Edmund Wilson, editor of *Vanity Fair* and *The New Republic*, wrote to the American poet John Peale Bishop about a remarkable poem that was "almost the cry of a man on the verge of insanity". After the publication of the *Waste Land* Bishop had dinner with Pound who confirmed the angst of his friend "Tears" Eliot. In a later essay that appeared in *The Dial*, December 1922, Wilson shifted his interpretation away from the personal to a version of the poet as controlling master of his meaning. In a fascinating historicization of Eliot, Ronald Bush observes that this shift accomplished Wilson's "institutional charge"; the proprietors of *The Dial* had brought it with the express intention of, as they put it, making the American spirit "count in the great world of art and affairs" (Bush 1991: 194). See also Bush's trenchant criticism of Terry Eagleton's demonizing of Eliot and modernism in his *Criticism and Ideology* (1975). A more extended discussion would show how my criticism of Eliot's aesthetic ideology attempts to avoid Eagleton's historical and conceptual oversimplifications both here and in his more recent *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990).
10. This prescription is very close to Leo Tolstoy's *What is Art?* with its image of a well-trained elite of "the best members of society" legislating what is best. It has definite pedagogical consequences and fails to acknowledge Schiller's worries about the conflict between the intellectual and the aesthetic approaches to education (see the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* 1795). This elitism descends from Plato's outline for the education of the "guardians". Music forms the second stage in Plato's curriculum which stresses the close connection between moral and aesthetic judgement. To be able to dance and sing well is thought essential to the elite guardian (*Republic* III(B3)). There is a long tradition of considering music as the highest of the arts; Susan K. Langer (1953: 126) argues that the essence of music is "the semblance of *organic* movement, the illusion of an indivisible whole". The most powerful formulation of this view is to be found in *Philosophy of Fine Art* where the ideal nature of music, in opposition to its material aspect, is held to be essential:
 In tone music forsakes the element of external form and its sensuous visibility, and requires for the apprehension of its results another organ of

sense, namely hearing [that] is, in fact, still more ideal than sight [because it] receives the result of that ideal vibration of material substance, without placing itself in a practical relation towards the objects, a result by means of which it is no longer the material object in its repose, but the first example of the more ideal activity of the soul itself which is apprehended.

(Hegel 1920: 341)

Hegel's classic formulation of the ideality of music (Hegel has Beethoven in mind) stresses the ideal of form and "the negation of externality". Now, this association of form with essential interiority is envisaged by Hegel in autobiographical terms that "corresponds to the ideal personal life" that is also "wholly abstract" (1920: 342). I don't think that it is accidental that Coetzee's autobiographical mode centres around a musical experience since, according to Hegel, music has "direct contact with the most intimate ideality of conscious life. It is more than any other the art of the soul, and is immediately addressed to that" (p. 343). Put bluntly, this aesthetic privileging of music has a history, a history that stresses ideality over materiality, interiority over exteriority. In Greek mythology Orpheus and his music represent the higher intellectual and redemptive powers. Gestures to historicization and the socio-cultural apart, the very subjects of Coetzee's reverie - his self and music - serve to dissolve history into ideality. The autobiographical mode intersects with the classical (that is, here Platonic) motif of education as anamnesis or recollection: see Socrates and his pupil in the *Theatetus*, and Coetzee's pathos-laden account of childhood and recollection - "We ... must look at the past with a cruel enough eye" - in his interview with David Attwell (*Current Writing* 3, 1991). See also Werner Jaeger's account of the Greek ideal of education, *Paideia. The Ideals of Greek Culture* (1945). However, Hegel's notion of interiority (*Erinnerung*: the power of active, living memory) does not repeat this central element of the tradition uncritically: see Paul de Man's argument for linking Hegel's aesthetic theory to the writings of Kant, Walter Benjamin, Lukacs, Althusser, and Adorno - all of whom reject, contra conservative aesthetics, "any valorization of aesthetic categories at the expense of intellectual rigor or political action, or any claim for the autonomy of aesthetic experience as a self-enclosed, self-reflexive totality" (De Man 1983: 141). It would be interesting to compare Adorno's conception of music in his *Aesthetic Theory* with Coetzee's; I suspect that for both music represents language, or an ideal conception of language. Comparison with Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's valuation of music is also intriguing. In more immediate terms Coetzee's aesthetic recalls Addison's defence of the Neo-Classical ideal of the "artful genius" as one of those who have "formed themselves by rules, and submitted the greatness of their natural talents to the corrections and restraints of art" (*The Spectator* 16, September 3, 1711). As with Eliot, Coetzee mixes the Neo-Classical deference to tradition with gestures to the innateness of genius proposed by Edward Young in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759). Young proposed Shakespeare as a natural and intuitive genius and this notion of genius was taken up in the German debate by Hamann and his disciple Herder, and became essential to the

main current of *Sturm und Drang* which returned, via Coleridge, to form English Romanticism. The parallel between South African debates on the role of art and eighteenth-century German debates (Lessing, Hamann, Herder) about the need for a distinctively national literature still awaits exploration. From the Aristotelian notion of inner form or *entelechy*, through Shaftesbury and onto Goethe - the history of this debate remains unnoted today. Despite Coetzee's disclaimer that "we have long got beyond the ahistorical idea of Bach as a creature of lonely genius" (1993: 23), it is clear that his aesthetic is, like all aesthetics, entwined with the long and complex debate around genius. This is not an academic point divorced from real consequences; this debate was the medium in which our educational and pedagogical assumptions were formulated.

11. For more on the institutional context and the institutionalization of the role of the intellectual see Peter Uwe Hohendahl (1982). 'The reader will note that the discourses of Eliot, Coetzee and Kermode originated in institutional addresses. Eliot's *Notes* (1948) originated in addresses to German intellectuals. Are such academic venues the places where Coetzee's "hundreds of thousand of intelligences" incubate?

12. Coetzee's aesthetic resembles Sir Joshua Reynolds's recommendation to young artists:

That those models, which have passed through the approbation of the ages, should be considered by them as perfect and infallible guides; as subjects for their imitation, not their criticism.

(Herbert Read 1963: 104)

Later, in the essay "Civilization and the Sense of Quality", Read claims that "virtue in art is shown by its survival value"; "there is an ideal aesthetic scale of values, just as there is an ideal scale of moral values; and by the measure of this scale all civilizations are given their due rank" (1963: 172). See also Read's attack on "the present nihilistic phase of art" in *The Origins of Form in Art* (1965). Reynolds saw the purpose of his *Discourses* to the students of the Royal Academy as being to condition them "against that false opinion, but too prevalent among artists, of the imaginary powers of native genius, and its sufficiency in great works" (1774: *Discourse VI*).

13. Coetzee's gesture recalls what Chandra Talpade Mohanty terms the "ideologies of pluralism" prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s (Mohanty 1990: 186).
14. According to Kant's third *Critique* moral judgement and aesthetic judgement share the same form; form is related to universality and claims to universality are integral to imperial claims *per se*. However, this priority of form is considerably complicated by the sublime which, as the highest aesthetic experience, is what disrupts the finality of form, letting the object appear in its formlessness. Simply to privilege aesthetic form as Coetzee does is a conser-

vative reading of aesthetics; one that forgets De Man's observation, in relation to Kant, that

aesthetic theory is critical philosophy to a second degree. It critically examines the possibility and the modalities of political discourse and political action ... truly productive political thought is accessible only by way of critical aesthetic theory.

(De Man 1983: 140)

According to Jacques Derrida, "form" translates several Greek terms, including *eidos* and *morphe* which suggest the priority of ideal or form over material or content. Material or content thereby becomes the medium of form's realisation, and so form entails abstraction and presence:

All the concepts by means of which *eidos* or *morphe* have been translated refer to the theme of *presence in general*. Form is presence itself. Formality is whatever aspect of the thing in general presents itself, lets itself be seen, gives itself to be thought.

(Derrida 1982: 158)

David Theo Goldberg sees formalism as the denial of contextuality and links it specifically to the "moral formalism of modernity [that] fails to recognize the series of exclusions upon which the state of modernity is constituted" (Goldberg 1993: 39). In this sense Goldberg sees formalism as linked to generalization and to an insistence on "Reason's universality to the exclusion of its historical or cultural particularity": "In this denial or refusal, 'universalist' Reason veils its capacity to dominate, to repress, and to exclude" (p. 119). Coetzee's ahistorical "intelligences" sound very close to this imperial Reason. In literary terms, formalism is associated with ahistoricism. "Form" suggests organic unity, self-sufficiency, autonomy, integration, totality, identity. Paul de Man notes that the metaphor of the analogy between language and the living organism "links, especially by way of I.A. Richards and Whitehead, the structural formalism of the New Critics to the 'organic' imagination so dear to Coleridge" and other nineteenth-century thinkers (1983a: 27-8). See Terry Eagleton (1984: 103) on "the social and aesthetic organicism of the Romantic Humanist tradition".

15. For Kant, aesthetic judgement is reflexive as opposed to determinate but not in the sense of "self-definition" which suggests a totalizing self-identity and cyclical return, a teleology of self-contained development. "Self-definition" is closer to self-reflection in the sense used by German Idealism and Romanticism. Rodolphe Gasché (1986) argues that the German Idealists, principally Schiller and Schelling, distorted the Kantian notion of reflection which Hegel attempted to rescue.
16. For Eliot's reservations regarding Fascism see his "The Literature of Fascism", *Criterion* 8 (1928: 288-290): "I am all the more suspicious of Fascism as a panacea because I fail so far to find in it any important element, beyond this comparable feeling that we shall be benevolently ordered about, which was already in existence."

17. For a complex and challenging reading of Eliot's conservatism alongside Luckács's revolutionism, and how both are intertwined at the root of modernism, see Michael North (1991).
18. I would like to thank David Johnson for uncovering these testimonies to the South African reception of Eliot.

References

- Attridge, Derek
1992 Oppressive Silence: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of the Canon. Lawrence, Karen (ed.) *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Canons*. Urbana: University of Chicago Press, pp. 212-238.
- Bellis, Peter J.
1990 *Israel Potter: Autobiography as History as Fiction*. *American Literary History*: 2(4): 607-626.
- Benjamin, Walter
1969 *Illuminations*, translated by Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt.
- Bhabha, Homi K.
1984 Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism. In: Frank Gloversmith (ed.) *The Theory of Reading*. Sussex: Harvester, pp. 93-122.
1986 The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism. In: Barker, F.; Hulme, P.; Iversen, J. & Loxley, D. (eds) *Literature, Politics and Theory*. Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-84. New York: Methuen, pp. 148-172.
- Bush, Ronald
1991 T.S. Eliot and Modernism in the Present Time. In: Bush, Ronald (ed.) *T.S. Eliot: The Modernist in History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 191-204.
- Chace, William M.
1975 *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Clarke, Graham
1990 *T.S. Eliot: Critical Assessments IV*. London: Christopher Helm.
- Coetzee, J.M.
1993 What is a Classic? *Current Writing* 5(2): 7-24.
- De Man, Paul
1983 Hegel On the Sublime. In: Krupnick, Mark (ed.) *Displacement: Derrida and After*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 139-152.

- 1983a *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Fiction* (2nd edition). London: Methuen.
- Derrida, Jacques
1982 *Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language. Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass. Brighton: Harvester, pp. 157-173.
- Eagleton, Terry
[1975] 1984 *Criticism and Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Eliot, T.S.
1919 *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. In: Frank Kermode (ed.) *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. London: Faber & Faber (1975), pp. 37-44.
1945 *What is a Classic?* In: Frank Kermode (ed.) *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. London: Faber & Faber (1975), pp. 115-131.
1948 *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Ermath, Elizabeth Deeds
1983 *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Gaschè, Rodolphe
1986 *The Taint of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Goldberg, David Theo
1993 *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gunn, Giles
1979 *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Guillory, John
1983 *The Ideology of Canon-formation: T.S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks. Critical Inquiry* 10: 173-198.
- Hegel, G.W.F.
1920 *The Philosophy of Fine Art III*, translated by F.P.B. Osmaston. London: G. Bell & Sons.
- Hohendahl, Peter Uwe
1982 *The Institution of Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kermode, Frank
1975 *The Classic*. London: Faber & Faber.
1985 *Forms of Attention*. The Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1988 *History and Value*. The Clarendon Lectures and the Northcliffe Lectures. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Kermode, Frank (ed.)
1975 *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Kojecky, Roger
1971 *T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism*. London: Faber & Faber.

- Langer, Susan K.
1953 *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Lichtheim, George
1971 *Imperialism*. London: Allen Lane.
- McCallum, Pamela
1983 *Literature and Method: Towards a Critique of I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade
1990 On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s. *Cultural Critique* 14: 179-208.
- North, Michael
1991 Eliot, Lukács, and the Politics of Modernism. In: Bush, Ronald (ed.) *T.S. Eliot: The Modernist in History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 167-189.
- Read, Herbert
1963 *To Hell With Culture and Other Essays*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rose, Gillian
1992 *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Said, Edward
1991 *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. London: Vintage.
1993 *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Stead, C.K.
[1977] 1990 Eliot, Arnold and the English Poetic Tradition. Reprinted in: Graham Clarke (ed.) *T.S. Eliot: Critical Assessments IV*. London: Christopher Helm, pp. 172-189.
- U.S. Tattle
1940 "Brutally your, BRUTUS". Letters to the Ed. *U.S. Tattle*, June 7.
- Walsh, Alexander
1990 Burke and Bentham on the Narrative Potential of Circumstantial Evidence. *New Literary History* 21(3): 607-627.