CHAPTER 17

Classics

Hannah Sullivan

T. S. Eliot made repeated, polemical, and idiosyncratic use of the word 'classic' and its cognates 'classical' and 'classicism' in his prose writings. In the earlier part of his career, he tended to use the term not to refer to writing in Latin and Greek (the Classics) or even to canonical texts in a wider range of languages, but as a call to arms. In his critical lexicon of the 1910s and 1920s, 'classicism' meant writing that was intelligently organised, mature, well proportioned and impersonal rather than gushingly emotional, personal or vague; and the opposite of 'classicism' was 'romanticism'. Both terms are to be understood primarily as formal and stylistic rather than temporal distinctions. Andrew Marvell is a 'classic in a sense which [Thomas] Gray and [William] Collins are not' because of his sense of argumentative and aesthetic 'equipoise, a balance and proportion of tones' (*SE*, 302). Charles Baudelaire's poetry may superficially appear classical, but a subtle 'inner disorder' means that it has 'the external but not the internal form of classic art' (*SE*, 423–4).

In an essay on John Milton – the most classically educated and classicising of English poets – Eliot again withholds the label: his style is baroque, 'peculiar', and too divorced from common speech, 'it is a style of a language still in formation' (*OPP*, 58). The 1923 essay '*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth' may ostensibly be about James Joyce's use of Homeric myth to structure the chaos of modern life, but it is also a personal intervention in literary politics: 'I think that Mr Aldington and I are more or less agreed as to what we want in principle, and agreed to call it classicism' (*SP*, 176). Eliot admits in this essay that the question of how to achieve or even define classicism is more complex. By 1928, however, he was using his own term as part of a much broader statement of faith and belief, as if its meaning were transparent and historically stable. He declared in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* that he was 'classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion' (*FLA*, ix). But not everyone was convinced that Eliot had a right to appropriate the term.

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In 1926, John Middleton Murry reviewed Eliot alongside Virginia Woolf and decided that they were not really classicists: 'the classicism, if classicism there is, is of some novel and esoteric kind, and a classicism which is at once novel and esoteric would be a very queer classicism indeed'.[1]

Two honorary public lectures delivered during the 1940s gave Eliot the opportunity to reflect upon the gap between his own 'classicism' and the more conventional meanings of the word. What did his brand of classicism have to do with the Classics? He raised the question himself in the title of his 1944 presidential address to the Virgil Society, 'What is a Classic?' Speaking in front of an audience of Classical scholars, Eliot deftly promised to ignore the vexed 'literary politics' of the 'classic–romantic controversy' in order to focus on the literature of antiquity. He even picked out a Classical metaphor, asking Aeolus to keep the stormy winds of controversy 'in the bag' (*OPP*, 53–4). Two years earlier, Eliot had served as president of the Classical Association. In his less well-known address to that society, 'The Classics and the Man of Letters', he reflected more straightforwardly upon the relationship between classical studies and the contemporary 'man of letters'. But was Eliot a 'Classicist' in the conventional sense of the term, and if so, what kind of Classicist was he? His poetry and drama make extensive use of Latin and Greek texts, yet they rarely engage with the most canonical of ancient authors. Petronius, Seneca, the Palatine Anthology and the anonymous late Latin poem *The Vigil of Venus* figure as prominently in his early writings as Virgil or Homer.[2]

One might say that Eliot was an unclassical Classicist. He was certainly quick, in front of an audience of professional scholars, to confess that he was not a particularly good one: 'In my earlier years I obtained, partly by subtlety, partly by effrontery, and partly by accident, a reputation amongst the credulous for learning and scholarship, of which (having no further use for it) I have since tried to disembarrass myself' (*TCC*, 145). Eliot's awkwardness about parading 'learning and scholarship' in front of a gathering of academic Classicists is understandable, but this self-critique is also unduly harsh. Compared to many British men of his age and social class, his education in Latin and Greek had been relatively limited: he was not, like Leonard Woolf, a 'really first-class classical scholar'[3] when he left Milton Academy for Harvard at the age of 18. But that is only to say that Latin and Greek had never formed the main current of his extensive school and university education. His instruction had been more wide-ranging, and perhaps more pleasurable. He recalled: 'At school, I enjoyed very much reciting Homer or Virgil – in my own fashion. Perhaps I had

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some instinctive suspicion that nobody really knew how Greek ought to be pronounced, or what interweaving of Greek and native rhythms the Roman ear might appreciate in Virgil' (*OPP*, 27). As an undergraduate at Harvard, Eliot chose to take a wide range of courses in Latin and Greek, beginning with Greek prose composition and the 'Classics of Greek Literature' (including Aristophanes, Thucydides, Aeschylus and Sophocles) and finishing with more advanced courses on Latin poetry and 'The Roman Novel: Petronius and Apuleius'.

Eliot's graduate work in philosophy opened up a second, perhaps deeper engagement with Greek language and literature. In 1911 he took a course on Plato and other Greek philosophers at Harvard. He impressed Bertrand Russell in a course on symbolic logic by casually making a connection between the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus and the medieval French poet François Villon. When he arrived at Oxford in 1914, he attended lectures on Aristotle's *De Anima* and *Ethics*, and studied the *Posterior Analytics* with Harold Joachim. His letters from the period give a sense of the intensity of this encounter; in fact, it was through his studies with Joachim that Eliot claimed that he learned to write clear English prose.

This study of ancient philosophy emerges in unexpected places in both Eliot's prose and poetry. In the 1920 essay 'The Perfect Critic', he begins by summoning the spirit of the two great poet-critics of the nineteenth century, Coleridge and Arnold, before proceeding to identify two flaws in contemporary criticism: it tends either to the *faux* scientific (Eliot cites Sir Edmund Gosse's observation that poetry 'is the most highly organized form of intellectual activity' [*SW*, 1]) or to a lax impressionism. It is the second part of the essay that makes an unexpected turn. Eliot invites us to compare the imprecision of contemporary writing with 'the opening phrases of the *Posterior Analytics*', holding up Aristotle's pure, disinterested intelligence as 'an eternal example – not of laws, or even of method, for there is no method except to be very intelligent, but of intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition' (*SW*, 10–11). Six years later, he was to compare reading Lancelot Andrewes's precise, elucidating sermons to 'listening to a great Hellenist expounding a text of the *Posterior Analytics*: altering the punctuation, inserting or removing a comma or a semi-colon to make an obscure passage suddenly luminous' (*SE*, 347).

As a prose writer, Eliot took Aristotle as an example, but his poetry is more deeply engaged with earlier Greek thinkers. Platonic Idealism and the long philosophical tradition it spawned can be heard in the

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disappointed repetitions of the word 'absolute' in Eliot's earliest poetry. The undated poem 'Afternoon', for example, shows us a group of modern women, preciously 'interested in Assyrian art', gathering in the hall of the British Museum and ends as they fade away beyond the Roman statuary 'Towards the unconscious, the ineffable, the absolute' (*IMH*, 53). The original draft of *The Waste Land* thickened the resonances of the 'Unreal City' with a reference to Plato's *Republic*. The line 'Not here, O Glaucon, but in another world' (*WLF*, 30–1), which Pound scored out, points to the disjunction between a swarming, breeding, temporal city and an ideal timeless city. Eliot returns in *Four Quartets* to the philosophically puzzling relationship between different temporal moments, citing Heraclitus' Greek in the epigraph to 'Burnt Norton'. The form of this epigraph acknowledges the fractured and piecemeal state of Heraclitus' text, referring us to Hermann Diels's *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* [*Fragments of the Pre-Socratics*], first published in 1903. This epigraph might be read as an instance of the mock-scholarly 'subtlety or effrontery' that Eliot later confessed to in his lecture 'The Classics and the Man of Letters', but it is also an effective enactment of several key themes in the *Quartets*. In the first of the two fragments, Heraclitus complains: 'Although the word [*logos*] is common to all, most people live as if each of them had a private understanding of his own'. The second fragment is the gnomic statement: 'The way up and the way down are one and the same'.[4] In a poem centrally concerned with the shape of historical process – 'Neither movement from nor towards, / Neither ascent nor decline' (*CPP*, 173) – and with the failure of language adequately to represent that process – 'Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden' (*CPP*, 175) – Heraclitus' words, broken into fragments, filtered through a German edition and yet still insisting on the unity underlying apparent opposites, serve as a dubious exemplum.

By the appearance of 'Burnt Norton' in 1936, Eliot's Greek epigraphs had become something of a poetic trademark. The sophistication of their use as a framing device had also increased over time. In 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales' (1919), the epigraph from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* – translated literally as 'Alas, I am struck deep with a mortal blow' (Southam, 75) – functions primarily as a contrastive device and, as Vincent Sherry notes, 'the feeling of decline in the descent from the classical to the modern event is usual and conventional'.[5] In Aeschylus' play, Agamemnon returns victorious from the Trojan War to be murdered by his adulterous wife, Clytemnestra. Eliot's Sweeney, who appears not to have fought in the First World War, lounges like an ape

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in an urban dive. Only the nightingales, whose 'liquid siftings' (*CPP*, 57) break upon the night air at the end of the poem, provide a tenuous connection between the classical past and the sordid present. Other epigraphs in Eliot's *Poems* (1920) are drawn from equally remote sources. 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar' introduces an archaeological tour of Venice with an epigraph of astonishing density: quotations from Shakespeare, Théophile Gautier, Henry James, Robert Browning and John Marston are spliced together with an obscure Latin tag – '*nil nisi divinum stabile est; caetera fumus*' ['only the divine endures, the rest is smoke'] (*CPP*, 40) – discovered by Eliot in Venice on a painting of the martyrdom of St Sebastian by the fifteenth-century Italian master Andrea Mantegna.

For *The Waste Land*, Eliot originally chose the famous passage from Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* ending 'The horror! the horror!' and he relinquished it only reluctantly, at Pound's suggestion, before turning instead to a passage from the *Satyricon* by Petronius, a satire by a Roman writer from the first century AD.[6] In the epigraph from the *Satyricon*, the character Trimalchio reports in Greek the words spoken to the Sibyl hanging in a cage at Cumae – 'Sibyl, what do you want?' – and her reply – 'I want to die' (Southam, 84). The epigraph to 'Marina' (1930) juxtaposes a relatively familiar Shakespearean context with a perversely unfamiliar Classical reference. William Empson asked the poet Ronald Bottrall to identify the Latin epigraph: '*Quis hic locus, quae / regio, quae mundi plaga?*' ['What is this place, what country, what region of the world?'] (*CPP*, 109). He realised at once that 'if it's poetry it's very unclassical poetry' and was then able to suggest the source as Seneca's play *Hercules Furens*. The title of the poem and its last line, 'My daughter' (*CPP*, 110), allude to the joyful reuniting of father and lost daughter at the end of *Pericles*, but the Senecan allusion furnishes a hideous parallel: Hercules stumbles disorientated out of madness to discover that he has killed his wife and children. Eliot himself described the aesthetic pattern as 'a criss-cross between Pericles finding alive and Hercules finding dead – the two extremes of the recognition scene'.[7] Empson praised the balancing of comedy and tragedy, and commented: 'One could not grumble at the technique after seeing it achieve a success, though I think a modern edition should print *Hercules Furens* at the end of the Latin'.

The story of Hercules' madness was told and retold in antiquity, and Seneca's play is not the most obvious source. According to Empson, Eliot took some pleasure in the wilful obscurity of the quotation, informing him that 'Seneca isn't in the school syllabus, so all the classical men were

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caught out'.[8] Later, Eliot recalled that it was 'only an accident that I know Seneca better than I know Euripides',[9] implying, as he did in his 1942 presidential address to the Classical Association, that his own education in the Classics had been deficient. At the same time, Eliot's preference for Seneca over Euripides, or Ovidian over Homeric versions of myth in *The Waste Land*, might be understood as a consequence of his broader beliefs about literary tradition and inheritance. Seneca blends more delicately with the Shakespearean recognition scene because Shakespeare read Latin rather than Greek;[10] Hesiod told the story of Tiresias' sex change before Ovid, but Ovid was a far more important source for Medieval and Renaissance English writing.

In the first half of his career, Eliot's use of Latin and Greek texts in his own poetry can be viewed as consciously oppositional to nineteenth-century pieties about 'The Classics' as a repository of supreme value. Victorian and Edwardian scholars – even those, like A. E. Housman, who were fine poets themselves – saw a sharp disjunction between the literature of the past and present: a Classical education centred around a small number of texts of eternal value; modern literature was various, expanding, and ultimately ephemeral. In his early essays, Eliot argued for a more flexible, dialectic model of the relationship between 'tradition' and the 'individual talent'. He explained that a new work of art alters 'the *whole* existing order' and that a writer equipped with an 'historical sense' should be alert to the 'simultaneous existence' of 'the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer' (*SE*, 14) to the present day. He was not interested in Classical literature as unchangeable museum pieces, but as something that needed to be reinterpreted, retranslated and reordered by every subsequent generation. At the same time, he was aware that this argument depended for rhetorical effect on his own command of traditional linguistic skills. By making frequent, curt and even offhand reference to a wide range of Classical sources, Eliot's early poetry and prose suggest wide and deep reading, and casual facility with difficult linguistic material.

This synchronic historical sense animates Eliot's interest in translation, both as a past practice and as a contemporary one. In 'Euripides and Professor Murray' (1920), Eliot faulted Gilbert Murray's translations from the Greek, not for their inaccuracy but for their lazy archaism. The 'fluid haze' of nineteenth-century aestheticism in which Eliot felt Murray clothed his verse translations 'has simply interposed between Euripides and ourselves a barrier more impenetrable than the Greek language' (*SW*, 74–5). Echoing his reflections in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'

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(1919), Eliot warns that 'few persons realize that the Greek language and the Latin language, and, *therefore*, we say, the English language are within our lifetime passing through a critical period' (*SW*, 73). This was an opinion shared by other modernist writers, most notably Pound. His peculiar sequence 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' (1919) is a free adaptation, in a medley of styles, of selected passages from the Roman elegiac poet Sextus Propertius. The Chicago professor William Hale, who identified 'three-score errors', thought Pound 'incredibly ignorant of Latin' and begged him to 'lay aside the mask of erudition'.[11] In response, Pound accused Hale of being a 'perfect example of the spirit which keeps the classics "uninteresting"', adding that the mask of erudition 'is precisely what I have thrown on the dust heap'.[12]

By focusing on processes of translation, mediation and reception, Eliot and Pound simultaneously highlighted the gulf between antiquity and modernity, as well as some surprisingly immediate similarities. Their interest in the byways of classical literature – Propertius, Seneca, Petronius – served as a subtle corrective to the idealising Classicism of the nineteenth century. 'The Greek is no longer the awe-inspiring Belvedere of Winckelmann, Goethe, and Schopenhauer', wrote Eliot in his essay on Murray's translation of Euripides, 'and we realize better how different – not how much more Olympian – were the conditions of the Greek civilization from ours' (*SW*, 76). He was critical of contemporary writers who relied too unthinkingly on any one portion of the past, and, although he preferred H.D.'s translations of Euripides to Murray's, Eliot felt in her own poetry the Hellenism became monotonous and 'lacks vitality' (*LI*, 606). Changing political and social circumstances during and after the First World War helped to make these – initially aggressive and even eccentric arguments – canonical. The war itself had occasioned a flurry of poems written in a classically 'high' heroic vein, but the decidedly unheroic reality of trench warfare quickly exploded the language and sentiments of the classical past: Horace's martial tag 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' ['It is sweet and honourable to die for your country'] was now, according to Wilfred Owen, 'The old Lie'.[13] After the war, education in Classics in schools and universities began the process of slow decline that has continued until the present day. In 1917, Cambridge University established a course of study in English literature – one in which Eliot's work was quickly to assume a central position – as an alternative to the study of literature in Greek and Latin. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Professor of English at Cambridge, claimed the study of English literature would provide

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soldiers returning from the war with a 'language ready for the land they shall recreate and re-people'.[14]

To the extent that Eliot's early classicism was a strategic position, it was also a dispensable one. By the 1930s he was ready to discharge the term 'classicism' as the prime criterion of literary value and to engage more simply with Classical literature, particularly Greek drama. In the early 1920s he had praised the 'vital', popular, and collaborative music hall acts of Marie Lloyd, but found the audience for Murray's *Medea* 'serious and respectful and perhaps inclined to self-approval at having attended the performance of a Greek play' (*SE*, 59). As he began to compose his own poetic plays, Eliot wondered if Greek drama might provide a point of departure for a work that could function on two levels, appealing to 'members of the audience who "like poetry"', as well as to 'those who go for the play alone'. The unfinished and experimental drama *Sweeney Agonistes*, subtitled 'Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama' (*CPP*, 115) and prefaced with an epigraph from Aeschylus, develops the 'high'–'low' oscillation of the earlier poem 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales'. The framing of the play and its division into 'Fragment of a Prologue' and 'Fragment of an Agon' suggest a formal or structural link to Greek comedy, but the two parts might just as well have been titled 'I' and 'II'. In fact, an early draft of part I had an up-to-date American title 'Wanna Go Home Baby?'. The more important connection is to be found in Eliot's use of metre to suggest a ritual mythology. Intensive repetition and irregular stresses on simple words – 'Oh I *think* it's only a chill' (*CPP*, 116) – combined with abrupt stichomythia (dialogue in alternating lines of verse) and a quick background drumbeat, imply an archetypal pattern behind Sweeney's brutal story.

From the 1930s onwards, Eliot was fascinated by the possibility of a poetic drama that would be both serious and popular, and he experimented with various conventions and techniques drawn from Greek, Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre to achieve this aim (see Chapter 13 above). *Murder in the Cathedral*, performed at the Canterbury Festival in 1935, borrows from the ritual aspects of Athenian drama. The story of Thomas Becket's murder was so familiar to his audience that Eliot's presentation required little narrative explanation or creation of suspense; instead a chorus and groups of impersonal figures (the four tempters, the four knights) reflect on the great themes of Greek tragedy – the conflict between state and individual, civilisation and nature. *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949) take complete plot motifs as well as a structural and a ritual method from Greek drama. In 'Poetry and Drama'

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(1951), Eliot explained the source of these borrowings and also reflected rather negatively on their dramatic potential. Indicative of a broader failure 'to adjust the ancient with the modern', the appearance of Aeschylus' Furies in *The Family Reunion* looked like 'a still out of a Walt Disney film' (*OPP*, 84). In *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot was 'still inclined to go to a Greek dramatist for my theme' (*OPP*, 85), but he hid the source from the *Alcestis* of Euripides so thoroughly that it went unrecognised.

Eliot had begun by pressing the Classics into the service of willed obscurity and difficulty – visible in his offhand references, curt footnotes, unexplained Greek epigraphs, and neologisms. In the second half of his career, after his reception into the Anglican Church, he became more interested in a direct line of descent between past and present; his focus was no longer on history's 'cunning passages' (*CPP*, 38) and on lines of broken and indirect mediation, but on the importance of preserving some central texts from a shared cultural past. In 'What is a Classic?' he modified the dialectical argument of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' by placing Virgil – not those 'ruffians' Catullus and Propertius (*OPP*, 62) – 'at the centre of European civilization, in a position which no other poet can share or usurp' (*OPP*, 68). Following the argument of Theodor Haecker's *Virgil, Father of the West*, Eliot viewed Virgil, author of the messianic fourth *Eclogue* (taken by medieval commentators as a prophecy of the birth of Christ), as an *anima naturaliter Christiana* [naturally Christian soul] who smoothed the passage between the Roman Empire and the Holy Roman Empire.[15] In a 1951 BBC broadcast Eliot remarked of Virgil that, 'he makes a liaison between the old world and the new' (*OPP*, 123). Indeed, in *Four Quartets* he alluded more substantially to the *Aeneid* – passed through Dante and Tennyson – than he had in his earlier poetry. The haunting brevity of Eliot's description of Phlebas the Phoenician, 'a fortnight dead' (*CPP*, 71), in *The Waste Land* is indebted to the elliptical epigrams on dead sailors in the Palatine Anthology: death by water is something inexplicable and random. By contrast, his description in 'The Dry Salvages' of the 'ragged rock in the restless waters' (*CPP*, 187) is Virgilian in its calm acceptance of migration and dangerous voyages as historical necessities.

As the cultural prestige of what Eliot called 'our classical heritage' (*TCC*, 161) seemed on the wane, so he publicly championed the 'dependence of English literature upon the Latin and Greek literatures' (*TCC*, 159). His focus was now on the mainstream of Latin and Greek literature rather than on its Alexandrian or post-classical byways; the Classics became a model for a healthy future public culture rather than an elitist

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prod at complacent readers. In his social criticism of the 1940s, Eliot employed the Greek term *metoikos* [resident alien] as a nom-de-plume in response to a writer appearing under the Latin word *civis* [citizen], gesturing towards a small homogeneous society as a cultural ideal. The two public addresses he delivered during the Second World War – 'The Classics and the Man of Letters' and 'What is a Classic?' – are especially mournful in tone, pessimistic about the survival of the Classical tradition outside a small group of expert scholars. Without suggesting a purely reactionary return to the educational system of a previous generation, Eliot questions whether future readers, divorced from the literature of the Classical past, will have any 'common body of literary and historical knowledge' (*TCC*, 151). The very future of literature is at stake, for the old is necessary for clear-eyed discernment of the new, and experimental writing can quickly become 'eccentricity and even charlatanism' (*TCC*, 152) without a mooring in the classical. The dialectical argument of this essay is in some ways reminiscent of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', but it lacks the earlier essay's confidence. By 1942 he had started to wonder how long it would be before 'the connection between the classics and our own literature is completely broken' (*TCC*, 150–1) and what new literary era might then dawn. By a temporal quirk that he might have appreciated, Eliot the revolutionary modernist was now crying 'aprés moi, le déluge'.

NOTES

1. See John Middleton Murry, 'The "Classical" Revival', *Adelphi* (February 1926), 585–95.
2. Eliot recalled as an obstacle to his schoolboy enjoyment of the *Iliad* the 'irresponsible' behaviour of the gods, who were as 'devoid of public spirit' as the heroes, above all, the 'ruffian' Achilles (*OPP*, 124).
3. Victoria Glendinning, *Leonard Woolf* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 45.
4. *Heraclitus*, trans. Philip Wheelwright (Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 19, 90.
5. Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 194.
6. Cf. Eliot: 'we think more highly of Petronius than our grandfathers did' (*SW*, 77).
7. Quoted in Richard Abel, 'The Influence of St Jean Perse on T. S. Eliot', *Contemporary Literature* (spring 1973), 235.
8. See William Empson, 'Eliot and Politics', *T. S. Eliot Review* (fall 1975), 3–4.
9. Quoted in Abel, 'Influence of St Jean Perse', 235.

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10. Eliot discusses Seneca's influence on Elizabethan tragedy in his introduction to *Seneca: His Tenne Tragedies*, ed. Thomas Newton (London: Constable, 1927), pp. v–liv.
11. William Gardner Hale, 'Correspondence', *Poetry* (April 1919), 52.
12. *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907–1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber & Faber, 1950), p. 149.
13. Wilfred Owen, *Collected Poems*, ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto, 1963), p. 55.
14. See Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Reading* (Cambridge University Press, 1928).
15. Eliot praised Haecker's *Virgil, Father of the West* as 'an example of literary criticism given greater significance by theological interests' (*SE*, 388).

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