

# L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE  
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

2

ANNO XVIII 2010

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## DO WE NEED THE CLASSICS? THEORY AND PRACTICE OF FINDING A CANON

ARTURO CATTANEO

### *Life-long classics*

Let us begin with three episodes, far away in time and space and yet closely related to the theme of this paper.

On 17 June 1783 Samuel Johnson, better known in anthologies of English literature as Dr Johnson, suffered a paralytic stroke when he was alone at home. In a letter of 19 June 1783 to Mrs Thrale he has left us a remarkable account of what happened. Immediately after the stroke, Johnson says, he prayed to God for his mind to be spared, whatever might happen to his body. Then, to test his mind, he began to compose his prayer in Latin verse. Finally, scanning the lines he had just composed and finding they were not very good, he knew his mind was unimpaired. Only then did he feel somehow reassured (though he still had not recovered his voice) and managed to sleep.

On a similar occasion Lord Byron, struck by a fever so high that he feared it might endanger his mental powers, to make sure that he was still in possession of his mind began to recite the genealogies of the Byzantine Emperors, which he knew by heart from his classical readings. It was the spring of 1824: Byron was in Missolonghi, Greece, where he would die in a few weeks while fighting for the cause of Greek independence.

Nearly a century later, in the trenches of the western front in World War I, during the hardest and most inhuman battle ever fought in Europe, the British poet Robert Graves, his limbs and senses benumbed by unbearable cold, tried to keep both awake by composing Latin epigrams – which, as he gentlemanly puts in *Goodbye To All That*, was his way of “killing time” while waiting to kill or be killed.

These three episodes, involving different writers and taking place in different epochs, point to a common ideal: the belief, so deeply rooted as to become a sort of survival instinct, that the classics were not just the indispensable acquisition of any gentleman, but the test of all civilization and indeed of mental soundness. Gentlemen and writers, in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries turned to their classical upbringing not only in their time of leisure but in the most trying circumstances of life – even in the face of death.

*How the “Encyclopaedia Britannica” changed its mind about the classics*

These first considerations clearly indicate that in dealing with the classics we cannot avoid putting ourselves in a historical perspective. The notion of the classics, whether in Greek and Latin or in a vernacular language, has always been subjected to some degree of change and accommodation. Some seventy years ago the question mark in the title of this paper would have seemed either irrelevant or provocative, at least among the educational and cultural establishment – or, we may say, the establishment *tout court*. If we look at the entry ‘Classics’ in the XIII and XIV editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1927 and 1929 respectively), we are confronted first with two closely written pages, packed with information about “classical education” not only in England, Italy or France but also in Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, and the Latin American countries. There follow seven and a half pages on the classics, their civilizing influence, their history in ancient Greece and Rome, up to modern times – a thorough account studded with quotations from Greek and Latin authors.

Now let us turn to the 1980 edition of the *Britannica*. That *opus magnum* is now divided into *Macropaedia*, made up of the volumes with the longer and, one would presume, more important entries, and *Micropaedia*, where the more numerous and shorter entries are stacked. Now, in the *Macropaedia* there is no single entry devoted to the classics: we glide from “Clarendon, Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of” to “Classification, biological”. In the *Micropaedia*, on the other hand, we find:

“Classic (Skiing): see Nordic”

“classical ballet”

“Classical bath: see thermae”

“classical economics”

“classical education” – here we are at last, though only for a few short lines: “The study of anciently revered authors or of the language (or languages) in which they wrote. In Europe and countries settled by Europeans, this study of Latin and often of Greek authors long formed the core of the traditional school curriculum. In India, classical education has centred on the Vedas and Sanskrit; in China, it has been based on Confucian and other ancient writings”.

Then there follow a dozen or so more entries involving the term ‘classical’ or ‘classic’:

“classical literature, of ancient Greece and Rome...” (a few lines)

“classical mechanics”

“Classical period, in music, the era approximately from 1750 to 1820”

“Classical Symphony (1916-17), orchestral work by Sergey Prokofiev”

“Classical tragedy, French”

“classical car (automobile): see veteran car club”

“Classicism, in visual arts...” (a few lines)

“Classic of Changes (Chinese literature)”

“Classic of Filial Piety (Chinese literature)”

“Classic History (Chinese literature)”

“Classic of Poetry (Chinese literature)”

“Classic of the Yellow Court (early Taoist text)”

“Classic period, in Meso-American civilization, period from AD 100 to 900.”

We may note, in the first place, that in the course of little more than fifty years the idea of the classics as formulated in what is sometimes held to be the *summa* of Western knowledge changed dramatically. What used to be a single, fairly well-defined concept has been fragmented, pulverized into a host of definitions, most of which have nothing to do with the previously accepted idea of the classics. In the second place, even in a traditional entry like “classical education” cultures other than the European are brought in, thus tacitly undermining the old assumption that anything classical had to come out of Europe or, to quote the *Britannica*, “countries settled by Europeans”.

These first two remarks about the redefinition the term ‘classic’ has recently undergone, obvious as they are, point to new beliefs and needs of modern culture to which we shall come back later on. They may help us to assess what the classics represent for us in the dramatically changed conditions of the early twenty-first century. Changed conditions, moreover, which have been particularly dramatic for teachers and educators, since traditions are harder to die in schools and academia than perhaps anywhere else. Teachers in our time are under a double burden: they still feel they have to teach the classics in some way (and school programmes still expect them to do so, whether explicitly or implicitly); but they cannot help sharing the modern age’s uncertainties about what exactly a classic is, how we may recognize it, and how we may teach it.

Such a feeling of despondency is well illustrated by Ernst Cassirer in a work on this subject, *The Logic of the Humanities*:

The advance of culture continually presents men with new gifts; but the individual sees himself more and more cut off from the enjoyment of them. And what is the good of all this wealth which no single self can ever transmute into his own living possession? Instead of being liberated, is not the individual ego newly burdened by it? In such considerations we first encounter cultural pessimism in its sharpest and most radical formation... the ego no longer draws from culture the consciousness of its own power; it draws only the certainty of its impotence<sup>1</sup>.

In the face of such uncertainty, let us go further into our subject with the help of that revered humanistic, i.e. classical, instrument of knowledge and understanding: finding the etymology of a word. What did ‘classic’ mean in origin? How does that meaning affect our present view of a classic work of literature?

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in O.B. Hardison, jr., *Toward Freedom & Dignity – The Humanities and the Idea of Humanity*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London 1972, p. 29.

*The heyday of the classic ideal*

A certain practical quality has always been attached to the idea of the classic, despite the almost religious aura that has accrued to the notion in the course of time. The first documented use of the term is by Aulus Gellius, a second-century Latin writer. In his *Noctes Atticae* he opposes the *scriptor classicus* to the *scriptor proletarius*. The former is read by the higher (socially and culturally) class of readers; the latter by the lower classes (with an implication of the rabble). Another requisite – a certain distance in time for a work to become a classic – had been stated, less dogmatically but influentially, by Horace in his *Epistles* (which I give here in Pope's translation):

Who lasts a century can have no flaw,  
I hold that Wit a Classic, good in law (II, i, 55-56).

Three centuries after Gellius, by *classicus* was already meant a work of art that was read and studied as a model in the class-room. It was only in the sixteenth century, though, that the modern use of the term came into use. According to humanistic practice, classic were both writers and works from Greco-Roman times and writers and works of great excellence in any modern language. In the eighteenth century Thomas Warton, the author of the first history of English poetry, stated in his *Essay on the Poetry and Genius of Pope* that only three English poets could be included in the 'first class', that is qualify as 'classics': Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton.

Here we may pause to notice two things. First, Warton's choice of English classic authors answers the ancient requisites for inclusion among the classics: all the three writers set up as models by him (with the partial exception of Shakespeare) wrote for and were read by educated readers; all of them were distant enough in time to be set up as models. Secondly, Warton was creating a canon of literary excellence that, with a few additions and adjustments, continued to be held in the highest esteem and be taught in schools up to a few years ago – it still is in many cases.

It was for the fifty years 1780-1830, during which the quarrel between Romantics and Classicists raged throughout Europe, to establish once for all the concept of the classic as not just a work of the highest quality but also one that had a right to be included in the canon of a given literature and culture. The classic and the literary canon became two sides of the same coin, one that could be spent with absolute confidence in both academic circles and cultivated society. The breaking-down of the old canon and the desperate quest for a new one, or new ones, are only comparatively recent phenomena, to which we shall return later.

One thing is clear, historically. In the past, even a recent past, the idea of the classic was indissolubly linked to an aristocratic or hierarchic idea of literature, and this in its turn was reflected in society. Just as there were first-class writers and works, so there were first-class citizens. (I use these expressions and the definitions 'aristocratic' and 'hierarchic' in a technical sense, without modern political or ethical implications: that is,

in the sense of a society and culture that believed that there should be a hierarchy at all levels, including the literary one.) Literature and civilization were understood to be one and the same thing, not just because a great literature corresponded to a great civilization – the Athens of Pericles, The Rome of Augustus, the England of Elizabeth I, the France of Louis XIV, up to the British Empire of Queen Victoria – but also in the more specific sense that only great literature could form the ideal citizen, the ruler, the magistrate, the governor, the courtier, the prince.

The last three terms clearly point to Renaissance courtesy books, the treatises that in all Europe dealt with the education of those who would in time be part of the establishment (again, I use the word in its technical sense) and assume public or ruling positions. Works such as Thomas Elyot's *The Governor* (1534) and Thomas Hoby's *The Book of the Courtier* (1561), translated from Castiglione, set the educational standard for the English public schools of the next four centuries, just as John Colet's and John Lyly's Latin grammar, written for St Paul's School about 1510, became the standard manual for English grammar schools, later to become the legendary Eton grammar on which generation after generation of English students were grounded.

The core of the education given in such schools and, subsequently, in the universities was unmistakably classical and literary (one might say 'classically literary'), without exception. The belief in the classics and literature was less an aesthetic choice than an ethical and practical one. Strange as it may seem to us now, people did believe that one could not become a gentleman and take places of responsibility and command if one did not have a liberal education. In the Renaissance, a close study of Virgil was reputed essential in matters such as horsemanship, agriculture, war tactics, political and judicial oratory, the ruling of men in tribunals and political assemblies. The foundations of the British Commonwealth are literary and cultural, indeed philological if we bear in mind that the very word 'commonwealth' was moulded on the Latin *res publica* – a linguistic coinage much disputed in the sixteenth century, since it was believed that a wrong etymology would imply a wrong form of state<sup>2</sup>.

In the nineteenth century W.E. Gladstone, four-time Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, in his *Studies on Homer* observed that Homer should be carefully studied at the universities

for his theology, history, ethics, politics... for his never-ending lessons upon manners, arts and society". Gladstone makes his point even more specific when, in treating of the political institutions of ancient Greece, as shown in the poems of Homer, he maintains that they "supplied the essential germ, at least, of that form of constitution, on which the best governments of the continent of Europe have (two of them within the last quarter of a century) been modelled... This form has been eminently favoured in Christendom, in Europe and in England; and it has even survived the passage of the At-

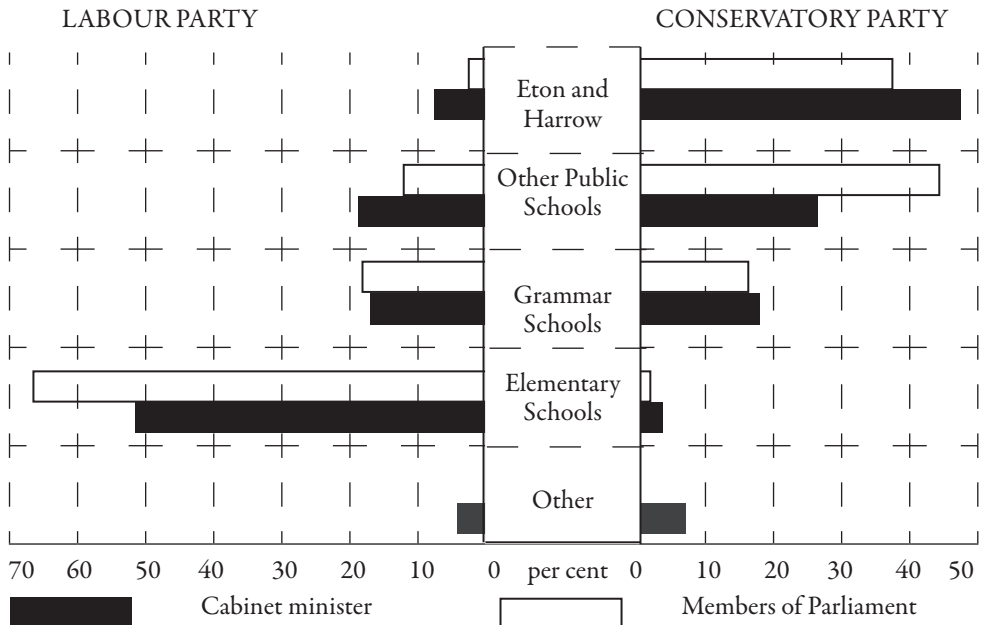
<sup>2</sup> On this point see A. Cattaneo, *Sir Thomas Elyot's "Book of the Governor" and the etymological awareness of things*, in *Early Modern English: Trends, Forms and Texts*, C. Nocera Avila – N. Pantaleo – D. Pezzini ed., Schena Editore, Fasano 1992, pp. 297-317.



lantic, and the transition, in the United States of America, to institutions which are not only republican but highly democratic<sup>3</sup>.

A list of the great politicians of the past who believed in the classics as an indispensable formative influence on man would be, in a sense, meaningless, because it would include almost every name. Napoleon, in his captivity at St. Helena, dedicated to Marchand his remarks on Caesar's *Commentaries*. Sir Winston Churchill, whose classical education had still been fundamentally the same as that of Elyot's governor, could make light of his Latin studies in his autobiography, in an age when classical values were already on the wane, but on them he founded and obviously modelled his public figure as an MP and Prime Minister, and to them he resorted for his famous war speeches. And when he set out to write his *History of World War II*, the "Moral of the Work" (classically, the work has a moral), which has pride of place at the beginning of each volume, reads as if it had been taken out of Elyot's *Governor*: "In War: Resolution. In Defeat: Defiance. In Victory: Magnanimity. In Peace: Goodwill".

Even in the first half of the twentieth century the close association, almost interdependence, that there used to be between a classical education and positions of power is surprising. Let us consider the table below, showing the educational background of British Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers in the years 1918-1955: well over 90% of MPs for the Conservatives came from Eton or Harrow or other public schools, and roughly the same percentage may be assigned to Cabinet Ministers. The percentage of Labour Cabinet Ministers coming from the same classical schools is lower (just short of 50%) but still relevant.



<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v.

Which means, in other words, that most British politicians up to 1955 had been bred in the classics. As far as I know, Mrs Thatcher was Britain's first Prime Minister to hold a degree in science.

As late as World War II an exemplary case of a man bred in the classics and called to the highest positions in the most dramatic time for his country was that of Oliver Franks. As Morris B. Abram, former President of Brandeis University, USA, recalled in a speech on the advantages of liberal education given at Davidson College:

At the outbreak of World War II, Oliver Franks, later Ambassador to the United States, was a tutor of moral philosophy at Queens College, Oxford. He was called from that post to become Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Supply – the head of British war production in industries. What qualified him for the position was not any special training; it was, rather, having the mind, character and ability to learn – in this case something as far afield from moral philosophy as the management of British industry<sup>4</sup>.

To sum up this point, in the words of the American scholar O.B. Hardison, jr.:

The most frequent explanation for liberal education, whether in the Renaissance or the twentieth century, is that it produces the ethical values and mental disciplines necessary for leadership [...] At its best, liberal education is an effort to live up to Plato's ideal in *The Laws*: 'If you want to know what is the good in general of education the answer is easy: education produces good men and good men act nobly'<sup>5</sup>.

### *The breaking-down of the canon*

Suddenly, things changed. Or, rather, not so suddenly. The gradual erosion of the classic ideal has been the steady work of the past two and a half or three centuries. As we know, forces as different as the industrial revolution, liberalism, democracy, the rise and subsequent fall of colonial empires, modern technology, a weakening of traditional moral and religious values, have all contributed to this in various forms and degrees. Within the scope of our specific area of interest, side by side with the classical, higher system of education that I have briefly sketched above, in the past two centuries another system has developed and spread. These 'new' schools, more modern and practically-oriented, have been growing in importance and numbers of attendance ever since their first appearance at the end of the eighteenth century, till they finally obtained an overwhelming victory over the older, classical schools.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in O.B. Hardison, *Toward Freedom & Dignity*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

It was, however, at about the turn of the nineteenth century that most people realized with a sudden shock that things had changed, or were changing. Suddenly, the concept and the ideal of the classic, of a liberal or humanistic education, of tradition at large, ceased to be taken for granted and tacitly revered. Not only were the classics attacked (but then often deviously used) by iconoclasts of all sorts, from Futurists and political revolutionaries to technological extremists. They were also being questioned by writers and thinkers who wanted to save them from the risk of extinction, in a deeply-felt attempt at fitting them to the modern age.

In France, the debate on the meaning of the classics involved such writers as Proust, Gide, Valéry. In Italy, in 1936 Benedetto Croce in an essay entitled *On Poetry* attacked academia for its betrayal of human values. In England, T.S. Eliot in his epoch-making essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1920) asked what talent was, concluding that it was the product of both individual genius and of a well-defined literary and cultural tradition. The gist of Eliot's argument was: there cannot be a great literature without a great tradition. This, of course, reminds us of F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948), an influential book on the same problem by another great critic who had already investigated the meaning of the literary tradition in such works as *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and *Reevaluation* (1936). It is important to note that for both Leavis and Eliot the question of the classics cannot be separated from that of education. In Eliot this became explicit in a series of essays – *Modern Education and the Classics* (1936), *The Classic and the Man of Letters* (1942), culminating in *What is a Classic?* (1945), whose subject matter and very title are telling.

Awareness of this change, which was a prelude to the decline of classical education, took various forms in the first half of the twentieth century. To me, few things are more typical of the loss of confidence in the classical heritage and the infallibility of the literary canon than the two prefaces written by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch for two successive editions of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. The first is dated 1900, the second 1939; but the intervening forty years seem four hundred, so much has the tone changed. In 1900 Quiller-Couch soars above the world of English literature like the God of creation, sweeping benevolent and patronising over the centuries and the seas: "Nor have I sought in these Islands only, but wheresoever the Muse has followed the tongue which among living tongues she most delights to honour". This is still not far from Gaunt's dying speech in *Richard II*, or Elizabethan eulogies on *The Excellency of the English Tongue*.

The 1939 preface is far less bold. Though it closes on a "note of valiancy – of the old Roman 'virtue' mated with cheerfulness" which the writer believes to be "indigenous, proper to our native spirit, and it will endure", the thoughts which the new edition of the anthology affords are really sad and the writer's effort to react to the present situation reads like an epitaph for the glories of yesteryear:

writing in 1939, I am at a loss what to do with a fashion of morose disparagement; of sneering at things long by catholic consent accounted beautiful; of scorning at 'Man's unconquerable mind' and hanging up (without benefit of laundry) our common humanity as a rag on a clothes-line. Be it allowed

that these present times are dark. Yet what are our poets of use – what are they *for* – if they cannot hearten the crew with auspices of daylight?

It may be some comfort to us to recall how modern artists and critics also suffered from the shock of recognition that most teachers have experienced in the past few decades: the shock of realizing that the tradition they were brought up in no longer holds good. Its accustomed means of reproducing itself (school system and programmes), its tools (texts chosen from an accepted canon), its very language are all gone, or severely questioned. W.H. Auden, writing the Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* in the 1930's, observed that since Milton a writer had to invent his or her own language and could not rely on a sympathetic audience, that is one that would feel linguistically and culturally at one with him/her. The observation pointed to a fact that at that time was perhaps not so obvious, though it is by now: the modern artist has to invent a language and, more often than not, a form in which to use it.

All the acknowledged masters of English Modernism – Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf – struggled hard to define their relation to the classics (again, Graeco-Roman as well as English). They all tried, in their different ways, to “make it new”, according to Pound's definition, that is to accommodate the past to a present that had changed beyond recognition. Pound significantly begins his modern epic in *The Cantos* with a vivid translation of a sixteenth-century Italian version of the *Odyssey*, taking Homer's epic as his starting point for a journey that takes him through many cultures, Western and Eastern as well as past and present. “All ages are contemporary”, as he writes in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910). Eliot too builds his best-known poem, *The Waste Land*, on conscious echoes and fragments salvaged from Latin, Italian, French, German, English, Provençal, Sanskrit traditions. Critics have often called this a ‘collage’. The definition, if technically correct, is somehow misleading when used in the present discourse, in that it stresses formal over ethical intentions. Eliot himself is careful to stress in the poem not so much the technical, in the sense of aesthetic, as the structural and even ethical aspects of his turning to so many different cultures, when he writes at the end: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins”.

The most interesting thing, for the purpose of this paper, is that not only do the works mentioned above – and others that we look upon as undoubted modern classics, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake*, or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves* – show their author's preoccupation, almost obsession, with giving their modern subject matter a new classic form; at the same time, these works bear in their very structure and language the mark of their author's and their age's uncertainties. They are tainted with doubt. They cannot be as authoritative as the works of Virgil, Dante, Spenser or Milton used to be: “the modern classic is not, like the book of God or the old book of Nature, or the old accommodated classic, of which the senses, though perhaps hidden, are fully determined, there in full before the interpreter. In the making of it the reader must take his share”<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> F. Kermode, *The Classic*, Harvard University Press, Chicago (Mass.)/London (England), 1983 p. 107.

The words just quoted are from Frank Kermode's *The Classic*, one of the most penetrating contemporary analyses of the relation of the classics of the past to those of the present, which takes T.S. Eliot *en route* with Virgil, Dante, Pope and twentieth-century works. A typical case examined by Kermode is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). (It is typical, I would add, for two reasons: in the first place, it was published in the year when in England Wordsworth died as a revered sage and the singer of English traditions, including the Anglican Church, and was succeeded as Poet Laureate – in itself, another classical heritage – by Alfred Tennyson; secondly, it came from the United States, that is from a culture that, for historical reasons, had to re-think its links with the past and old traditions in a much more urgent and cogent way than Europe.) In *The Scarlet Letter* the truth, or truths, therein contained are not inherent in the text but the responsibility of each reader. We proceed, Kermode observes, from truth, as in the old classics, to “shadowy types”: “the old contracts between signifier and signified, between the authoritative maker and the reader certain that there is a right interpretation, are boldly broken”<sup>7</sup>. Symbols are no longer universally accepted. In *The Scarlet Letter*,

is the forest what the text will allow us to believe, an emblem or type of the ‘moral wilderness’, or of pastoral sympathy, which it also proposes? What are we encouraged to make of the brook, the old tree? Of the Black Man, through whom nature is associated with the demonic? Is Chillingworth diabolical, or is that a naive opinion and what he himself, in a remarkable expression which, more than any other, tells us how Hawthorne must be read, calls a ‘typical illusion’?<sup>8</sup>

The gap, one might say the ‘chasm,’ between the old and the modern classic is clear. The modern classic cannot be, as the Bible or Virgil or Milton had been, a source of certain, unchanging truths handed down from one generation of readers to the next one:

This is why one cannot even try to read Hawthorne, that great inventor of American attitudes to the metropolitan past, as one is still urged to read Virgil. To say that the meaning of *The Scarlet Letter*, or of *The House of the Seven Gables*, is the meaning Hawthorne meant, is pointless; his texts, with all their varying, fading voices, their controlled lapses into possible inauthenticity, are meant as invitations to co-production on the part of the reader<sup>9</sup>.

And explicitly so, I would add. In the “Conclusion” to *The Scarlet Letter* we read, after various theories have been advanced by the narrator about the origin of the mysterious and awesome scarlet letter imprinted in the flesh of the adulterous priest, the Reverend Dimmesdale: “The reader may choose among these theories. We have thrown all the light

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

we could acquire upon the portent, and would gladly, now that it has done its office, erase its deep print out of our own brain, where long meditation has fixed it in very undesirable distinctness”<sup>10</sup>.

From the example of *The Scarlet Letter* we may draw a first conclusion about the difference between the old and the modern classic. The old classic needed to be accommodated from time to time to changed historical and cultural conditions and new formal needs: the Bible and Virgil, for instance, were read differently in the Middle Ages and in the seventeenth century. Similarly, Christian lore and the *Aeneid* could be reinterpreted by Dante and Milton in ways that were significantly different, and yet neither these works nor these authors would lose authority in the process. The modern classic, on the contrary, poses the problem of accommodation not only to an historical epoch but to every single reader, and this right from the beginning of its existence. That is, *inside* the text itself. Prufrock’s “decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” are emblematic of the modern text, with its “That is not what I meant at all; / That is not it, at all”, a statement ironically overturned a few lines below: “That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all”.

This typically modern attitude has had definite consequences not only on our appreciation of the classics and the classical tradition, but also on our school programmes and teaching methods. Writers and critics of the early and mid-twentieth century only anticipated what has become commonplace these days: the breaking up of the literary canon. In the past forty years or so in colleges and universities throughout the world the canon of English literature has been exploded, to let out many ‘untouchables’ and let in many much less famous writers of all races, nationalities, and creeds. This is recent history, with which we are all familiar. Distrust of the canon, however, has not taken away the desire of and search for what the canon used to stand for: stability, harmony, a reassuring sense of permanent truths and values. Lately we have witnessed several attempts at restoring the canon, or better still to propose new canons. The one most talked about was probably that of Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon* (1994), translated into several languages, Italian included (*Il Canone Occidentale*). Its reviews in Italian newspapers started a critical feud whose echoes are sometimes still heard. In trying to fix the canon for the new millennium, Bloom includes in his list 26 authors, from Dante to Beckett, beginning, however, with Shakespeare, who is the ideal central figure of this canon. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that besides other great authors such as Cervantes, Goethe, Proust and Joyce, Sigmund Freud is also included, the only non-creative writer to find a place in Bloom’s Olympus.

But what about the Greek and Latin classics, or the Bible, or Petrarch, Boccaccio and Chaucer, it was angrily asked from many critical quarters? And even if Bloom’s was meant to be a modern canon only (a decision which in itself would be quite a break away with tradition), why leave out Dostoevskij, Stendhal, Leopardi, Flaubert, or Ezra Pound? Great names from the world’s literatures were flung at Bloom in the way of enraged suggestions and emendations, in a crescendo that, as it turned out in the international press,

<sup>10</sup> N. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Dent, London 1971, p. 312.

looked like a throng of reading lists and campus syllabuses competing at which was the most vocally aggressive. We seemed to be back to Babel, with the confusion of the canons taking the place of the confusion of the languages.

### *Consumer's classicism*

We are faced with a paradox here. A typically modern one. The very term 'classic' which artists, critics and teachers seem to mistrust, or be afraid of, has triumphantly entered commercial language. Advertising today makes much of it, what with classic clothes, shoes, hand-bags, hair-styles, perfumes, jewels, furs, cars, technical equipments of all sorts, etc. We are flooded with a consumer's classicism that makes of every new song, book, film, a 'classic', whether past or modern (often labelled as "twentieth-century classic"), English, French, Italian or, more often than not, "a world's classic".

Such widespread use of the term by the (economically, socially and politically) strongest areas of modern societies should make us pause and reflect. One of the first remarks that come to mind is that the concept of the 'classic' may have lost much ground in certain quarters but its linguistic and conceptual appeal is still very strong in others. In other words, the needs and expectations raised or understood by the idea of the 'classic' seem to be real, so much so that the term and its connotations are still widely used to make us want, buy, and use things, often very sophisticated and costly. What these needs are has already been hinted at above, while treating of the classics in the old sense of the word: tradition, a feeling of trust and confidence in the object qualified by the term 'classic', a model to follow. It is easy to see how these qualities are also ideally suited to the modern commercial world, and it may be useful to pursue this point a little further and examine the qualities of the literary classic as pointed out by T.S. Eliot in *What is a Classic?* In the first place, Eliot does not distinguish a classic according to aesthetic excellence but rather to some qualities that have a practical value as they evidence its relation to both a past tradition and a living civilization. The main qualities he lists are:

'maturity' ("A classic can only occur when a civilization is mature; when a language and a literature are mature; and it must be the work of a mature mind [...] Maturity of mind: this needs history, and the consciousness of history"<sup>11</sup>);

'comprehensiveness' ("The classic must, within its formal limitations, express the maximum possible of the whole range of feeling which represents the character of the people who speak that language"<sup>12</sup>);

'universality' ("When a work of literature has, beyond this comprehensiveness in relation to its own language, an equal significance in relation to a number of foreign literatures, we may say that it has also *universality*"<sup>13</sup>);

'destiny' ("without the constant application of the classical measure, ... we tend to become provincial"<sup>14</sup>).

<sup>11</sup> *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Frank Kermode ed., Faber & Faber, London 1975, p. 116, p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

With a few variations, the characteristics listed by Eliot for the literary classic correspond to what the modern world has come to expect of the commercial classic: the latter needs a mature, that is opulent and conscious of itself, society; it also needs general agreement, to be highly representative of a given society and yet be able to be 'translated' to other societies, that is markets; finally, it must be as unchallengeable and unquestioned as destiny: its field of action is the "modern world-system" theorized by Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, in which economic factors operate within a space which is bigger than any controlled by whatever political entity.

It is clear that if the term 'classic' and its connotations can be applied in such a thorough way to the contemporary industrial and commercial systems it is precisely because these systems still presuppose the kind of hierarchic and aristocratic structure that once existed in the artistic and literary domains. It is in these domains only that we have moved away from the hierarchic model. The transition has been from an Aristocracy of the Letters towards the Republic, or Democracy, of the Letters, which, as the political terms used in the metaphor imply, can hardly have its models imposed from above. The simple yet difficult fact with which teachers and critics are now faced, though, is that the Republic of Letters may be very well in theory but in practice is terribly difficult to manage. All writers may be equal, but it inevitably turns out that some writers are more equal than others, or we tend to think so anyway.

*Pars construens: the classics and the past*

Let us now try to shift our subject towards a few 'practical' considerations. I am well aware that the *pars construens* is particularly difficult in the matter we are dealing with, since moving from theory to practice (especially educational practice) one only too often suffers from the shock of plunging from the harmonic world of ideas into the imperfect world of matter – and, of course, a purely Platonic position is what educators cannot afford to keep. One thing, at any rate, seems clear to many teachers: the absolute necessity to re-state, beyond the problem of the classic but also through it, the centrality of language and literature for every educational curriculum, even scientific ones.

In the first place, of great detriment not just to the prestige of the classics but also to their functional value has been the notion and, even more, the teaching of the classics as isolated artistic peaks, a notion fostered by the pseudo-romantic legend that genius comes from nature and not from education. This is wilfully to ignore the fundamental role that schools, the cultural environment, the influence of the classics of the past and the present have had on any writer of the first importance, be they Shakespeare, Coleridge, T.S. Eliot or Derek Walcott. F.R. Leavis stated this quite clearly in *Revaluation*, a few years after Eliot's lesson: "In dealing with individual poets the critic, whether explicitly or not, is dealing with tradition, for they live in it. And it is in them that tradition lives"<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> F.R. Leavis, *Revaluation*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1978, pp. 10-11.



To begin to do this in a class-room, a few well-placed hints may be sufficient, in most cases. We needn't follow all of Shakespeare's many and complex sources for *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Hamlet*, or *Antony and Cleopatra*. It may be enough, to begin with, to acquaint our students with the scene of the ball (a few lines) in *Romeo and Juliet's* most important source, the Italian novella by Matteo Maria Bandello; or with the essays by Montaigne that are behind Hamlet's monologues; or with Plutarch's portrait of Cleopatra borrowed by Shakespeare for his own description of the Egyptian queen (in the last two cases, again, only a few lines from the sources may be enough).

Complementary to the need to rebuild the idea of a connection between great writers throughout the ages (if the term 'tradition' seems untenable today, for whatever reason), is the need, and it is a primary one, not to limit that connection to literary texts alone. This implies some consideration of the historical background. Setting the work of art in its historical context cannot mean any longer to believe in one, unique, providential vision of history but rather, once the teleological vision of both history and literature has been discarded, to include in our educational programmes an awareness of the points of contact between literature and history – in the broad sense of politics, social life, economics, ideologies.

Like most needs, the ones just mentioned are the result of cultural conditioning. The teacher of literature these days is conditioned by the way in which the old notions of language and literature as stable systems have been questioned in the last century. Since Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique* (1906-1911) the one-way correspondence between things and words, or even abstract concepts and words, is no longer tenable, and various schools of criticism from Russian formalism to structuralism, post-structuralism, up to Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism have severely challenged the idea that there is a domain for literature alone. It is difficult today, if not misleading, to present literature as the autonomous province of aesthetic excellence. Literature and its greatest works, the classics, must become part of a discursive universe that includes other significant discursive practices: history, philosophy, politics, journalism, science, the cinema, advertising. These must, of course, remain subordinate to literature in teaching, as satellites to a bigger planet. The *trait d'union* has to be, inevitably, language as it appears in the written text.

Such an eclectic approach has, in my view, at least two great advantages. In the first place, it does away with the pseudo-romantic idea that art and literature are the occupation of an idle mind, that they have little to do with real life. This is a prejudice (which historically amounts to little less than a lie) that has weighed heavily on our curricula. The contrary, as we have seen, is true. Until recently literature and the classics were so important exactly because they had a real and obvious impact on the social and political organization of Western societies.

Secondly, to show how many points of contact there are between the great literature of an age and other discursive practices of the same age is to show how much the latter are indebted to the art of well speaking and writing. Our students are usually pleasantly surprised to find out that the verbal and rhetorical strategies that rule in advertising, mass communication and politics, as well as the narrative structures they find so entertaining in

contemporary films and TV serials, all derive to a greater or lesser extent from a time-honoured rhetorical and literary tradition. The classics, and literature and the arts in general, will never recover some of their past importance as long as teachers of literature and the arts will continue to ignore how much the modern world is indebted to them, even in disguised forms that would seem to be far away from the stereotype idea of the classics. It is a mistake that T.S. Eliot forcibly pointed out in his *Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), though there he was dealing with society at large and not with the specific problem of the classic: “The defenders of the present order fail to perceive either how far it is vestigial of a positive Christianity, or how far it has already advanced towards something else”<sup>16</sup>.

*Pars construens: the classics and the present*

So far we have insisted on the idea that the classic involves a sense of the past, overlooking or merely hinting at another corollary of the same problem: the classic also involves a deep awareness of the present (as Eliot said of tradition in his famous essay), a capacity to adjust to mutated conditions. In dealing with the classic, in fact, a contemporary perspective is essential, as Italo Calvino observes in *Perché leggere i classici*:

Per poter leggere i classici si deve pur stabilire ‘da dove’ li stai leggendo, altrimenti sia il libro che il lettore si perdono in una nuvola senza tempo. Ecco dunque che il massimo rendimento della lettura dei classici si ha da parte di chi ad essa sa alternare con sapiente dosaggio la lettura d’attualità. E questo non presume necessariamente una equilibrata calma interiore: può essere anche il frutto d’un nervosismo impaziente, d’una insoddisfazione sbuffante<sup>17</sup>.

A contemporary reading of the classics implies, on the teacher’s part, a degree of attention to their contemporary versions – which, in our day, often come through other media than the written word. Filmic and comic book versions of the classics especially deserve our attention. Al Pacino’s *Looking for Richard*, for example, however unconventional a version of *Richard III* – in fact, exactly because of its unconventionality – directly presents the audience with a few crucial questions that teachers have overlooked or simply ceased to ask themselves and their students: why do Shakespeare’s stories still hold us spell-bound though they are linguistically so difficult to understand, even for English-speaking people? Are they more difficult for young people? Is Shakespeare still felt to be “our contemporary”, as Jan Kott argued in a famous book in the 1960s? To me, and to the students I’ve worked with, *Looking for Richard*, built around such questions, was a more direct and lively introduction to Shakespeare’s history plays than most conventional BBC versions or even the original texts themselves, with all their difficulties.

<sup>16</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Faber & Faber, London 1954, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> I. Calvino, *Perché leggere i classici*, Mondadori, Milano 1995, p. 11.

Let us observe that this plunge into the contemporary fulfills two functions: one didactic and the other cultural and historical. Beginning with the first, it is clear that today's students are more familiar with visual narratives than with written ones. A few years ago, when interviewing Italian teenagers on behalf of the Levi's Jeans Company which wanted to test young Italians' reaction to a forthcoming TV spot, I was surprised to see how clever teenagers were at reading TV spots in terms of narrator and narratee, narrative functions, variants and invariants in apparently similar TV spots, and so on. That was pure narratology, though the young people interviewed would not know the technical terms quoted above nor what narratology was. But they could read a visual story much better than they did written stories at school. So, why not using these abilities and, starting from these, go back to Shakespeare or Dickens or Joyce and show the students where most of the narrative and linguistic structures they understand and enjoy so much on the screen come from: a three-thousand-years-old rhetorical and literary tradition.

But even setting aside the question of didactic convenience, it is an historical fact that in the past the classics, far from being revered and immutable icons, were always subjected to accommodation, and not unfrequently to distortions and travesties. In the romances of the Middle Ages Aeneas could ride through the streets of Alba Longa dressed and armed like a medieval knight, and young Lavinia let down her long tresses from a Gothic balcony, for the hero to climb up on, in true romance fashion. In England in the eighteenth century, as we know, Shakespeare's plays were performed in Augustan garb and tragedies like *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Othello* might be given a happy end. And in our own time we are well acquainted with rewritings of Shakespeare's plays that are a far cry from the original: Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, to give a familiar example, seen in this perspective is simply *Hamlet* revisited by the contemporary conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd. That the play was also successfully filmed and shown throughout the world is further testimony to the protean ability of the true classic to survive through different ages and different media.

Schools and universities should take advantage of such vitality and versatility. Why should teachers shy away from or indignantly turn down modern versions of Shakespeare's works in comic book format, if they can help the student to get close to the originals? Or brilliant science fiction renderings such as *The Forbidden Planet*, a very interesting film that turns the island of *The Tempest* into a planet in space, with Ariel becoming a robot? Or an extremely modern *Romeo and Juliet* such as Baz Luhrmann's film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), a daring and inventive screen version which keeps the original text but renders the play in a video-clip visual language familiar to young viewers: the scene is set in Verona Beach (a fictitious California town torn by racial conflicts), Juliet's house is a baroque Mexican-style mansion, and the balcony scene takes place around a swimming pool.

We really betray our classical heritage the moment we try to fix it in never-changing formulas. It was never so in the past. What we attain by the 'formulating attitude' is classicity in plaster, the kind of dead civilization nailed down by Ezra Pound in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920):

The "age demanded" chiefly a mould in plaster,  
 Made with no loss of time,  
 A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster  
 Or the "sculpture" of rhyme.

Memory of the past only counts if it keeps together the print of the past and the project for the future, to paraphrase Calvino on the classics.

*How do we recognize the classic?*

Even if we accept these premises, though, the question at this point is: how do we recognize the classics? (It may be significant that, unawares, we are using the words of hopeful expectation usually reserved to prophets or deities.) Especially in an age like ours in which, as Raymond Queneau already pointed out in the 1930s, we are flooded by an enormous mass of information which does not really become an integrant part of ourselves and does not identify with essential needs. Let us then hazard a working hypothesis: we recognize the classic by its language and formal qualities. (The hazard here refers to the difficulty today of believing in some kind of collective action, or at least in a common ground of agreement, not so much to the novelty or daringness of the hypothesis itself.)

If the ethical and social values of the classic are no longer tenable, with their formal qualities we may be on firmer (though not altogether firm) ground. Hegel in his *Aesthetic* could still give a definition of the classic which was mainly aesthetic – and, we may add, vaguely so for our teaching purposes: "We are used to calling classic in a general sense every work of art which is perfect, whatever symbolic or romantic character it may also have". Nearly a century later Marcel Proust, while fundamentally defending Hegel's definition, identified the classic by the notion of 'value'. The addition is significant. In a few years' time Ferdinand de Saussure would make current the linguistic concept of 'value', which stresses in a single element of language not just its own capacity but rather its relation to the other elements of the system to which it belongs. (Saussure's famous analogy is with chess, where the value of, say, a knight is given not just by what it can do on the chess-board but also by what it can do in relation to the other pieces.) The linguistic notion of value was soon taken up by literary critics, in a well-known chain that from the Russian formalists and the School of Prague leads to post World War II structuralism and semiotics. Whatever their differences all these schools of criticism stressed the existence of formal constants, binary oppositions and recurrent narrative patterns in a work of art. Needless to say, their analysis did not apply just to the classics (Propp's studies of Russian folk tales are a case in point) but it was fundamental in reminding students of literature that a work of art, especially of the highest class, is by no means the product of genial improvising, and that it is always rooted in rhetoric. A truth, as we have seen, well known to the old grammar schools but gradually abandoned in the twentieth century.

A formal approach to the classics, of course, does not have to pass exclusively through various kinds of structuralism, but that some kind of formalistic, technical approach is indispensable seems to me clear. It is all very well – to pose a didactic problem that most of us have had to cope with – to tell our students that Joyce’s *Ulysses* is written in a stream-of-consciousness technique and maybe show them specimens of it and comment on them, but unless this is done in a very thorough and convincing way the risk is that our students will come away from that with the idea that Joyce was a very eccentric writer and *Ulysses* a very eccentric book, both author and book having very little relevance to real life.

On the contrary, we know that *Ulysses* is deeply rooted in the cultural and literary past of Ireland and Europe and that it also describes with scientific precision the new turn of mind of modern man. Now, to bring out its ‘practical’ qualities – its project for the future, that is its relevance to the present, to continue Calvino’s metaphor – I believe we have to use a formalistic approach in at least one of three complementary directions: narratology; myth and anthropology; linguistics and rhetoric. Each of these has obvious and demonstrable links with both past and present, in fields other than the purely literary.

Let us briefly consider the linguistic and rhetorical approach and examine a typical (stylistically) short passage from *Ulysses*:

Grossbooted draymen rolled barrels dullthudding out of Prince’s stores and bumped them up on the brewery float. On the brewery float bumped dullthudding barrels rolled by grossbooted draymen out of Prince’s stores.

Once these words have been fully understood and their reading difficulties explained away, we may proceed to the more interesting part of the job. Far from being eccentric, or genially improvised, Joyce’s passage betrays a conscious and highly consummate use of rhetoric. Its basic structure, to begin with, is chiasmic: a cross pattern of the type  $A+B=B+A$ . Joyce’s elaborate chiasmus, moreover, goes by the name of antimetabole, as in this phrase from Shakespeare’s *Richard III*: “Since every Jack became a gentleman, / There’s many a gentle person made a Jack” (I, iii, 72-73). Also noticeable is the rhetorical figure of anadiplosis, the repetition of a word ending a clause or sentence at the beginning of the next, as in this other extract from *Richard III*: “...fearful commenting / Is leaden servitor to dull ‘delay’; / ‘Delay’ leads impotent and snail-paced beggary” (IV, iii, 52-53). Furthermore, Joyce’s two sentences have the same length (which means the same or a very similar rhythm) and thus form an isocolon; they have the same, though inverted, syntactical pattern and thus form a parison.

Now, the fundamental thing for a student is to realize that all of these rhetorical figures are not assembled to fill up the hundreds of pages of a long novel, they are not confined to the dream world of fiction alone. They are still widely used, alone or in combination, by contemporary kinds of language that are employed in practical matters and enjoy great prestige. Chiasmic patterns, isocolon, parison, to name a few, are crucial elements of the language of advertising, mass media and politics, from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address (“a government of the people, by the people, for the people”, where also ploc

is relevant, that is the repetition of a word, in an altered or more expressive sense, or for the sake of emphasis) to President Kennedy's "Do not ask what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country". Or, to give a contemporary American stock phrase with which all our students are familiar: "When the play gets tough, the tough get to play". We have only to skim through the pages of "Time" magazine, or "Newsweek", or "Vogue", to find similar examples by the dozens in headline after headline, slogan after slogan.

This brings us back to the passage from *Ulysses* quoted above. Behind it there lies the technical ability to say the same thing in elegant variation. Once again, this ability – very effective when it comes down to convincing an audience, whether to vote for a proposal or a political party, or to buy a product – was once common to public speakers, politicians and writers alike, all of whom learned it from classical books taught in classically-oriented schools. Let us look, as an example of this, at some of Erasmus of Rotterdam's hundred and eighty-five variations of the expression of pleasure at getting a letter:

"Your Letter has delighted me very much [...] In an unusually wonderful way your letter has delighted me [...] By your letter I have been greatly delighted [...] You would scarcely believe how greatly I have enjoyed what you wrote [...] Your letter has made me laden with joys", and so on. There isn't any real difference between Erasmus's and Joyce's use of *copia*. As J.B. Trapp comments on this point:

Joyce is at the same time using and parodying two of the commonest devices for rhetorical variation, amplification and onomatopoeia. Not that we have to be able to name the figures, as a Renaissance novice would have been asked to do, to take the point: rhetoric is the art of saying nothing by repetition as boring in its sameness and predictability as the repeated roll and rumble of the barrels<sup>18</sup>.

But the historical and cultural implications of Joyce's passage go well beyond simple parody: "All the same, Joyce had been at the same school as Erasmus and could assume that his readers had too. The moral is not that rhetoric is outdated but that it is inescapable"<sup>19</sup>.

Erasmus's *tour de force* is taken from his most famous book in the Renaissance: *De Copia*. "Copia" (literally, 'plenty') was the rhetorical word for the ability to say the same thing in many ways, each one of which would bring out a different shade of meaning. Such an ability in English came to be known as 'copy'. Hence, in advertising, a 'copy writer', who is the creative mind around which the world-system of advertising revolves. The practical, suatory implications of a classical training are at once obvious, however subtly disguised in the modern age.

<sup>18</sup> J.B. Trapp, *Rhetoric and the Renaissance*, in *Background to the English Renaissance*, A.G. Dickens et alii ed., Grey-Mills Publishing, London 1974, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

*The moral of the job*

Once we have made our students understand that the set of rules and formal patterns around which a classic is built have a practical value, a concrete side to them, there is hopefully a lesson to be gathered from this. Despite prejudices to the contrary, the classic who follows the rules is freer than the writer who improvises, who claims to be following personal inspiration only. As Raymond Queneau observed in 1938:

A totally false idea current these days is the equivalence implied between inspiration, exploration of the subconscious and liberation, between chance, automatism and freedom. Now, such an inspiration that consists in blindly following every impulse is really a kind of slavery. The classic writer who writes a tragedy following a certain set of rules which he knows is in fact freer than the poet who writes whatever passes through his mind, and who is slave to other rules which he totally ignores<sup>20</sup>.

Even ranting and raging must be done by the rules, if they have to be effective and not just violent or vulgar outbursts. Dr Faustus's famous first monologue, before he signs his agreement with the devil, draws its strength from its being founded on the university curricula of the day, just as his last speech, before he is finally damned, is a supreme example of how rhetorical figures can be used to highlight the dissolution of a great mind, its gradual loss of consistency and lucidity. Similarly, Byron's Manfred and Shelley's Prometheus, arch-romantic heroes in permanent revolt against the universe, acquire universal status not because of their infinite rage and energy, but because they channel their rage through exemplary sets of dramatic, rhetorical and linguistic patterns. And, among modern poets, Dylan Thomas strikes us so effectively in that most personal poem of his, *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, also because what he asks there of his dying father – to “rage, rage against the dying of the light” – is put in an extremely complex metrical form, the villanelle, which goes back to the Middle Ages and imposes an almost monastic discipline on its user.

The plain truth is, one is bound to be a rebel without a cause if one happens to be a rebel without words. A highly controversial modern Italian educator, Don Lorenzo Milani (whose theories should not be taken for gospel but whose serious involvement in educational problems cannot be questioned), used to tell his poor country students that as long as they knew only a thousand words, their masters would always have the upper hand of them, since they would know some ten thousand words. Much the same concept was expressed, in 1982, by Arthur Scargill, the leader of the British miners who two years later went on their longest and hardest strike against Mrs Thatcher's policy. In an interview given to the “Sunday Times”, Scargill said: “My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words”.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in I. Calvino, p. 276 (my translation from the Italian).

We may have forgotten it, or wanted to forget it, but historically such positions are not necessarily radical or marxist. They are rather modern echoes of a three-thousand-years-old classical project, revived by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanists and applied to European schools up to a few decades ago: to form, through the spoken and written word, the free man. The *artes liberales* were so called exactly because their end was to produce, in ancient Rome as in nineteenth-century Victorian England, free and independent citizens. Not only high birth and census gave access to these schools but also a quick mind and a disposition to learn. Why should we not try to do something similar in these culturally disheartening times of ours? Rescuing the classics from the wax museum to which they have partly been confined, also with the acquiescence of too complacent or timid teachers, might in the end prove far more important and rewarding than expressing a mere aesthetic preference for some books over others.