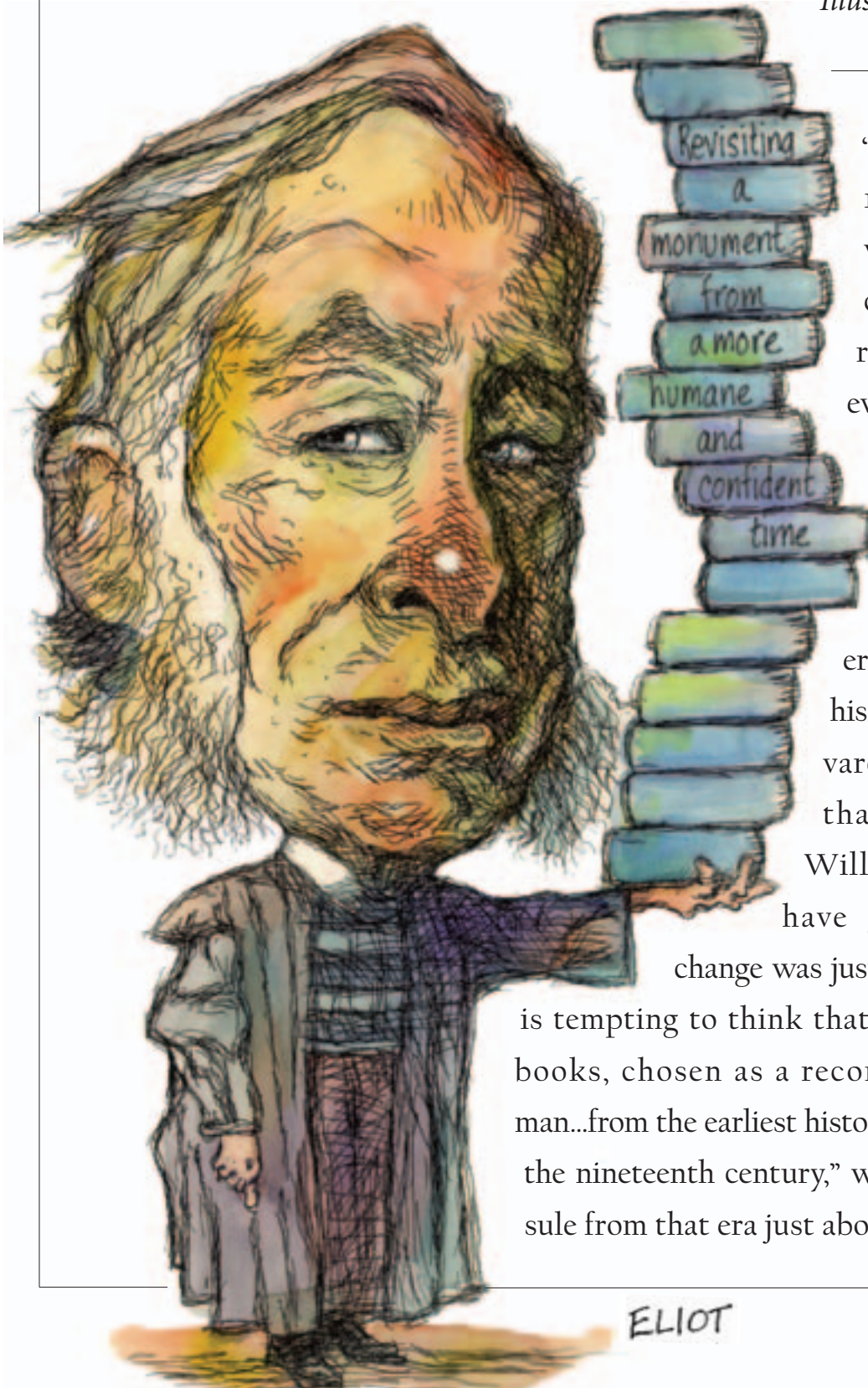


The “Five-foot Shelf” *Reconsidered*

by ADAM KIRSCH

Illustrations by Tom Mosser



“ON OR ABOUT DECEMBER, 1910,” Virginia Woolf wrote, “human character changed.” Woolf was not referring to a specific event so much as to a new cultural climate, a new way of looking at the world, that would become known as modernism. When he finished his introduction to the Harvard Classics in March of that same year, Charles William Eliot could hardly have guessed that such a change was just over the horizon. Yet it is tempting to think that his “five-foot shelf” of books, chosen as a record of the “progress of man...from the earliest historical times to the close of the nineteenth century,” was meant as a time capsule from that era just about to end. In 50 volumes

ELIOT



DARWIN

we have a record of what President Eliot's America, and his Harvard, thought best in their own heritage—a monument from a more humane and confident time. It is surprisingly easy, even today, to find a complete set of the Harvard Classics in good condition. At least one is usually for sale on eBay, the Internet auction site, for \$300 or so, a bargain at \$6 a book. The supply, from attics or private libraries around the country, seems endless—a tribute to the success of the publisher, P.F. Collier, who sold some 350,000 sets within 20 years of the series' initial publication.

In fact, though the series bears the Harvard name, it was a commercial enterprise from the beginning. In February 1909, Eliot was preparing to retire from the presidency of Harvard after 40 years. Two editors from Collier, Norman Hapgood and William Patten, had read a speech Eliot delivered to an audience of working men, in which he declared that a five-foot shelf of books could provide “a good substitute for a liberal education in youth to anyone who would read them with devotion, even if he could spare but fifteen minutes a day for reading.” Now they approached Eliot with a proposition: he would pick the titles to fill up that shelf, and Collier would publish them as a series.

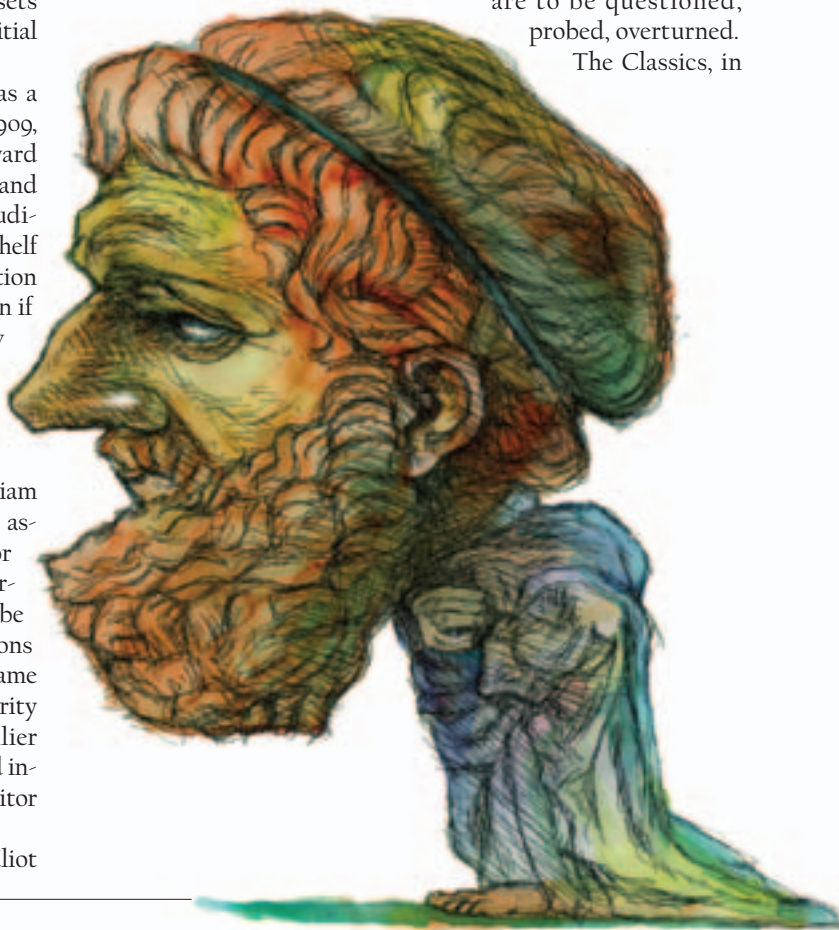
At their very first interview, Hapgood and Patten convinced Eliot to say yes. He enlisted professor of English William A. Neilson, later the president of Smith College, to act as his assistant, and secured the approval of the Board of Overseers for the series' name. Eliot and Neilson worked for a year, the former deciding “what should be included, and what should be excluded,” while the latter was responsible for “introductions and notes” and the “choice among different editions of the same work.” By the time publication began, in 1910, Eliot's celebrity had turned the series into a media event, and earned Collier valuable free publicity. The question of what the series should include and exclude called forth articles and letters to the editor across the country.

In his introduction to the series, dated March 10, 1910, Eliot

made it clear that the Harvard Classics were intended not as a museum display-case of the “world's best books,” but as a portable university. While the volumes are numbered in no particular order, he suggested that they could be approached as a set of six courses: “The History of Civilization,” “Religion and Philosophy,” “Education,” “Science,” “Politics,” and “Criticism of Literature and the Fine Arts.” But in a more profound sense, the lesson taught by the Harvard Classics is “Progress”—progress in each of these departments and in the moral quality of the human race as a whole. Eliot's introduction expresses complete faith in the “intermittent and irregular progress from barbarism to civilization,” “the upward tendency of the human race.”

Eliot's life was spent in the cultivation of that tendency. He built up Harvard into one of the world's great universities, vastly expanded its student body, course offerings, and faculty, and became a sort of public oracle on questions of education. He was one of the most effective evangelists for what the Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold called “sweetness and light.” Samuel Eliot Morison, in *Three Centuries of Harvard*, describes Eliot as a representative of “the best of his age—that forward-looking half-century before the World War, when democracy seemed capable of putting all crooked ways straight—the age of reason and of action, of accomplishment and of hope.”

But already in 1936, when Morison wrote, Eliot's variety of optimism seemed sadly obsolete. Today we are proudly alert to the blind spots in Victorian notions of culture and progress. Three thinkers whose names appear nowhere in the Harvard Classics—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—have taught us a new, more suspicious kind of reading, in which an author's motives are to be questioned, probed, overturned. The Classics, in



SOPHOCLES

particular, cry out for such questioning. The series is authorless—there is only an editor, conducting his chorus of texts. Yet the way those texts are selected and arranged speaks volumes—literally. To take an obvious example, the total exclusion of female authors would be impossible today; at the time, it would hardly have been noticed. But the series' more profound limitations can be found in its treatment of science, philosophy, and literature—the most interesting and substantial of Eliot's six "courses." In these areas, the Harvard Classics serve as an index to just how much the world really has changed since 1910.

PERHAPS THE MOST consequential difference between Eliot's time and our own has to do with science, a subject dear to Eliot, a chemist at MIT when he was called to the presidency of Harvard. In his inaugural lecture, he adamantly refused to make any choice between "mathematics or classics, science or metaphysics," and the series follows the same precept. It contains no textbooks; rather, in keeping with his policy of using unabridged original texts, Eliot included treatises in which major scientific discoveries were announced—Harvey on the circulation of the blood, Pasteur on the germ theory—or educational works by genuine scientists, like Faraday's *The Forces of Matter*. With laudable if excessive enthusiasm, Eliot gave two of his 50 volumes to Darwin, for *The Origin of Species* and *The Voyage of the Beagle*. And the volume of "Famous Prefaces" contains the forewords to Copernicus's *Revolutions of the Heavenly Bodies* and Newton's *Principia Mathematica*.

Clearly, this is not a basis for a complete scientific education, nor was it intended to be. The Classics provide something smaller but rarer—a humanistic appreciation of science. They bring to life a period when science was still, in William Harvey's phrase, a "department of the republic of letters." In our own time, we see science victorious, the acknowledged ruler of human destiny; in the Harvard Classics we find the more in-

ematics." But the trumpet-call is sounded by Francis Bacon, in the preface to his *Instauratio Magna*. Bacon denies "that the inquisition of nature is in any part interdicted and forbidden....the divine philosopher declares that 'it is

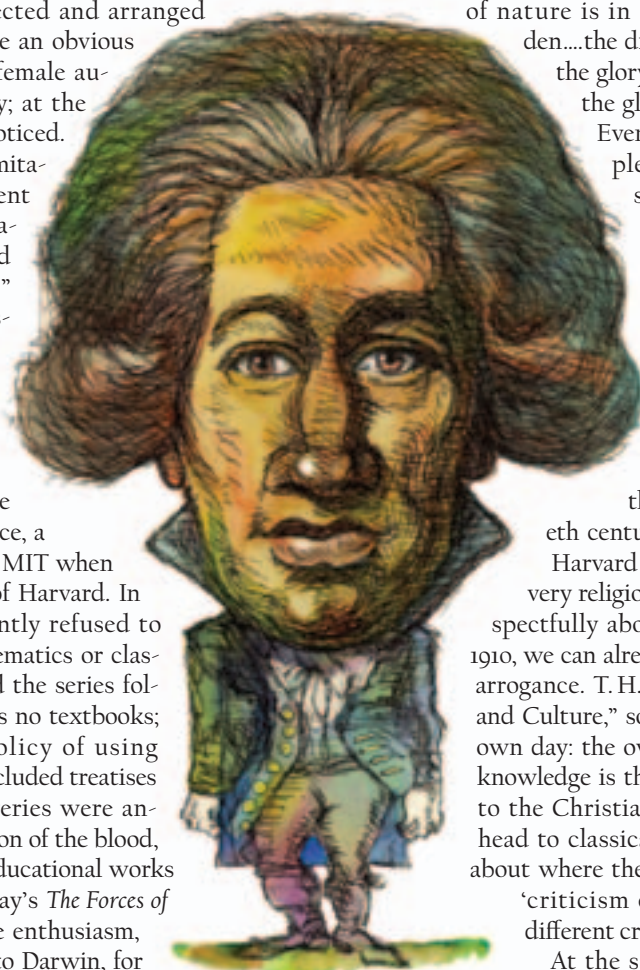
the glory of God to conceal a thing, but it is the glory of the King to find a thing out.'

Even as though the divine nature took pleasure in the innocent and kindly sport of children playing at hide and seek, and vouchsafed of his kindness and goodness to admit the human spirit for his playfellow at that game."

Bacon's confidence in the power of human reason is authorized by a touching faith that science and religion go hand in hand. This view of science, so different from the secular positivism of the twentieth century, can be found everywhere in the Harvard Classics. Newton and Faraday were very religious men, and even Darwin writes respectfully about the divine. Yet as we approach 1910, we can already see this confidence souring into arrogance. T. H. Huxley, in his 1880 essay "Science and Culture," sounds the more familiar note of our own day: the overweening certainty that scientific knowledge is the only knowledge. He condescends to the Christian Middle Ages, gives a pat on the head to classical education, but admits no doubt about where the future lies: the modern "scientific 'criticism of life' presents itself to us with different credentials from any other."

At the same time, the language of science was growing completely estranged from that of "the republic of letters." Already in 1910, Eliot writes that "it was hard to make up an adequate representation of the scientific thought of the nineteenth century," because "the discoverers' original papers...have naturally been expressed in technical language." And it is inconceivable that the scientific advances of the twentieth century could be represented by original documents. We are condemned to live in the age of C. P. Snow's "two cultures."

Even more important, we are no longer so certain that science is purely a benefit to mankind. The hideous evils of the twenti-



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spiring spectacle of science militant, the proud, embattled rationality that fought against ignorance and superstition for centuries.

We can hear this note already, though tentatively, in Copernicus, who resolves that "I should no longer through fear refuse to give out my work for the common benefit of students of Mathe-

eth century—world wars, concentration camps, atomic bombs—were made possible by technological advance; the banality of modern culture is a product of miraculous technologies: radio and television. And it remains to be seen whether the frenzy of industry will make the earth uninhabitable through pollution and despoliation. In power and self-regard, science

Eliot's Elect: *The Harvard Classics*, 1910

I: The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin; The Journal of John Woolman; Some Fruits of Solitude, by William Penn.

II: The Apology, Phædo, and Crito, by Plato; The Golden Sayings of Epictetus; The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius.

III: The Essays and The New Atlantis, by Francis Bacon; Areopagitica and Tractate on Education, by John Milton; Religio Medici, by Sir Thomas Browne.

IV: The Complete Poems of John Milton.

V: Essays and English Traits, by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

VI: The Poems of Robert Burns.

VII: The Confessions of Saint Augustine; The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis.

VIII: Nine Greek Dramas: Agamemnon, The Libation-Bearers, The Furies, and Prometheus Bound, by Æschylus; Œdipus the King and Antigone, by Sophocles; Hippolytus and The Bacchæ, by Euripides; The Frogs, by Aristophanes.

IX: The Letters and The Treatises on Friendship and Old Age of Cicero; The Letters of Pliny.

X: The Wealth of Nations, by Adam Smith.

XI: The Origin of Species, by Charles Darwin.

XII: Plutarch's Lives of Themistocles, Pericles, Aristides, Alcibiades, Coriolanus, Demosthenes, Cicero, Cæsar, and Antony.

XIII: The Æneid, by Virgil.

XIV: Don Quixote, by Cervantes.

XV: The Pilgrim's Progress, by John Bunyan; The Lives of Donne and Herbert, by Izaak Walton.

XVI: Stories from the Arabian Nights.

XVII: Folk-Lore and Fable: Æsop's Fables; Grimm's Household Tales; Tales from Hans Christian Andersen.

XVIII: Modern English Drama: All for Love, by John Dryden; The School for Scandal, by Richard Brinsley Sheridan; She Stoops to Conquer, by Oliver Goldsmith; The Cenci, by Percy Bysshe Shelley; A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, by Robert Browning; Manfred, by Lord Byron.

XIX: Faust, Hermann and Dorothea, and Egmont, by Goethe; Doctor Faustus, by Christopher Marlowe.

XX: The Divine Comedy, by Dante.

XXI: I Promessi Sposi, by Alessandro Manzoni.

XXII: The Odyssey of Homer.

XXIII: Two Years Before the Mast, by Richard Henry Dana Jr.

XXIV: Essays by Edmund Burke: On Taste; On the Sublime and Beautiful; Reflections on the French Revolution; A Letter to a Noble Lord.

XXV: Essay on Liberty and Autobiography, by John Stuart Mill; Inaugural Address as Lord Rector of Edinburgh University, Characteristics, and Essay on Scott, by Thomas Carlyle.

XXVI: Continental Drama: Calderon, Corneille, Lessing, Molière, Racine, Schiller.

XXVII: English Essays: Cowley, Swift, Johnson, Smith, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Hunt, Sidney, Jonson, Lamb, De Quincey, Addison, Steele, Defoe, Hume, Shelley, Macaulay.

XXVIII: English and American Essays: Thackeray, Newman, Ruskin, Freeman, Poe, Lowell, Arnold, Bagehot, Huxley, Stevenson, Thoreau, Channing.

XXIX: The Voyage of the Beagle, by Charles Darwin.

XXX: Scientific Papers—Chemistry, Physics, Astronomy: Faraday, Lord Kelvin, Geikie, Helmholtz, Newcomb.

XXXI: The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini.

XXXII: Essays—French, German, Italian: Montaigne, Renan, Schiller, Kant, Mazzini, Sainte-Beuve, Lessing.

XXXIII: Ancient and Elizabethan Voyages and Travels: Herodotus, Tacitus, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Sir Walter Raleigh.

XXXIV: Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Hobbes.

XXXV: Chronicle and Romance: Froissart, Malory, Holinshed.

XXXVI: Machiavelli, More, and Luther.

XXXVII: English Philosophers: Locke, Berkeley, Hume.

XXXVIII: Scientific Papers—Physiology, Medicine, Surgery: Paré, Harvey, Jenner, Holmes, Pasteur, Lister, Lyell.

XXXIX: Prefaces to Famous Books: Caxton, Raleigh, John Knox, Heminge and Condell, Fielding, Whitman, Spenser, Calvin, Bacon, Dryden, Johnson, Taine, Wordsworth, Copernicus, Goethe, Hugo, Newton.

XL, XLI, XLII: An Anthology of English Poetry (embracing upwards of 200 authors).

XLIII: American Historical Documents, containing 40 important documents, such as Cabot's Voyage, Columbus's Letter, First Charter of Virginia, Mayflower Compact, Cornwallis's Proposal of Surrender, Washington's First Inaugural, Monroe Doctrine, Lincoln's First Inaugural, Lincoln's Second Inaugural.

XLIV and XLV: Comparative Religions and Hymns.

XLVI and XLVII: Elizabethan Dramas: Shakespeare, Beaumont, Jonson, Fletcher, Webster, Dekker, Massinger.

XLVIII: Pascal's Thoughts, Letters, and Minor Works.

XLIX: Popular Epics and Sagas: English, French, Norse, Irish

L: Dr. Eliot's Introduction, the Index, and Reading Course.

continues to progress. But in moral terms, the Harvard Classics may have caught science at the peak of its Icarus flight, a height never to be regained.

IF TIME HAS MADE Eliot's notion of science seem doubtful, the limitations of the Harvard Classics in the area of philosophy must have been glaring even in 1910. Aristotle and Aquinas are entirely absent, thus leaving out the major intellectual influences of 1,500 years of Western history. Of modern philosophers, Leibniz and Hegel are absent; Descartes and Kant are each represented by a single short work. Only the English empiricists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are well-represented, and even here the choices are sometimes bewildering: Locke's *Some Thoughts on Education*, but not his major works on human understanding and on government; only one unrepresentative chapter of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Berkeley and Hume fare best of all, and Mill is almost excessively favored—Eliot makes room not just for *On Liberty* but for his *Autobiography*.

The common theme in these selections and omissions is a settled distrust of abstract thought; in every case, Eliot prefers autobiography to speculation. It is not clear whether this reflects the editor's own disbelief in the value of metaphysics, epistemology, and theology, or simply a doubt in the capacity of the reader to understand such subjects. (It is worth remembering that the major philosophical contribution of Eliot's Harvard was pragmatism,

the doctrine that whatever works, is right.) Whatever the reason, the idea of philosophy that one takes away from the Harvard

Classics is direly limited. The intellectual wonder that Plato called the origin of philosophy has little place here. Instead, the series uses philosophy to teach a particular manly ethic, a stoical toughness in the conduct of life.

In a good example of the power of context, the editors manage to make Plato himself seem merely a teacher of stoicism. Volume 2 contains three Platonic works—the *Apology*, the

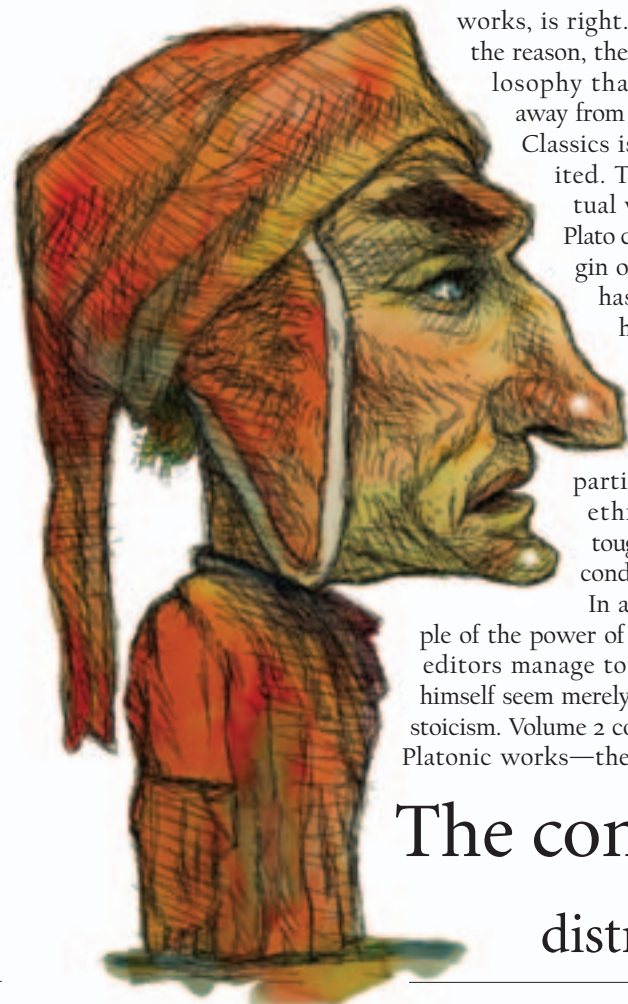


Crito, and the *Phaedo*—along with the aphorisms of Epictetus and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. Together, the Platonic dialogues tell the story of Socrates' martyrdom: his condemnation by the assembly of Athens, his refusal to flee judgment, and his resolute drinking of the hemlock. It is one of the great moral legends of the West, and certainly deserves a place in the series.

Yet by choosing only these works, and placing them alongside the much narrower stoicism of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, the series encourages us to read it simply as a legend—to make Socrates an example of heroism, while ignoring what he heroically defended. It is like reading the parts of the Gospels dealing with the Passion, and ignoring the Sermon on the Mount. How different Plato would appear if, instead of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, this volume contained the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*, with their teachings about love and politics. Then we could see beyond Socrates the symbol to Plato the philosopher.

But Eliot values philosophy when it tells a real story with practical applications, providing symbols of manliness on which readers of the Harvard Classics could pattern themselves. (In his excellent book *Manhood at Harvard*, Kim Townsend has shown that the

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rhetoric of manliness dominated Eliot's Harvard, from the classroom to the football field [see "The Manly Ideal," November-December 1966, page 25].) Thus Augustine's *Confessions* is present, but not his *City of God*. Locke on education is well worth reading—it is marvelous to see how he applies his theory of the association of ideas to the problem of getting a child to have regular bowel movements—but not at the expense of his treatises on government and psychology. And the radically disturbing thinkers of the nineteenth century—Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche—were either unknown or unwelcome to Eliot. One begins to suspect, perhaps unfairly, that his ideal work of philosophy is Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, included in the very first volume of the series: a book that shows a man overcoming obstacles, doing useful work, going to bed early, and rising healthy, wealthy, and wise.

FINALLY, THERE IS the question of literature. Many of the literary selections in the Harvard Classics are indisputable—no one would put together such a series without including the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*, and the plays of Shakespeare (though, in fact, Eliot selected only four of these). In the traditional genres of epic and verse drama, the Harvard Classics does an estimable job.

The problem begins in the eighteenth century, with the rise of the novel as the major literary form. Eliot stated quite reasonably that the series would include no fiction from the nineteenth century, "partly because of its great bulk, and partly because it is easily accessible." (This gap was partially remedied in 1917 when he edited a separate 20-volume supplement, the Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction—a worthy but conventional and very limited selection.) Yet the effect of eliminating the novel from the Harvard Classics, while including other kinds of fiction, is to severely unbalance the whole series.

Indeed, it seems that imaginative literature, as a category, did not seem entirely reputable to Eliot. Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare are classics and therefore inevitable; but wherever there is more leeway in the selection, the series tends to favor childish works of adventure and fantasy. The *Thousand and One Nights* and a volume of fairy tales are fine reading, but they have the effect of making the imagination seem a juvenile thing, a holiday from the serious business of life. Perhaps it is for a similar reason that Eliot includes the *Odyssey*, the picaresque story of travels and monsters, and omits the *Iliad*, the brutal chronicle of vanity, ambition, and war.

Similarly, when Eliot is enthusiastic about poems it is because they have what might be called "real-world applications." Poetry, like philosophy, is valued mainly as another vehicle of uplift and toughness; it is a record of humanity's "gradually developed ethical means of purifying [the] sentiments and controlling [the] passions." As he writes in his introduction, "the poems of John Milton and Robert Burns are given in full; because the works of these two very unlike poets contain social, religious and govern-

mental teachings of vital concern for modern democracies." But there is no volume for Chaucer, a far more democratic spirit than Milton, possibly because the *Canterbury Tales* offers fictional characters, not paraphrasable "teachings."

And what is genuinely vital in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is largely absent. The volume of "Modern English Drama" is composed largely of inert verse plays, such as Byron's *Manfred*, which were never intended for the stage; the only European novel in the series, rather inexplicably, is Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* (The Betrothed)—a selection chalked up to "the taste of his youth" by Eliot's biographer. There is something obviously

flawed about a criterion that admits Richard Henry Dana's moderately interesting memoir, *Two Years Before the Mast*, because it is "fact," but has no place for *Moby Dick*, because it is "fiction."

THUS IT IS in the field of literature that it becomes most tempting to play the game of re-editing the Harvard Classics. To replace Dana with Melville, Manzoni with Tolstoy, and "Modern English Drama" with Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov; to find room for Lawrence, Proust, Joyce, Mann, and Kafka—this would be the most important step toward updating the series for 2001. A new Harvard Classics would have to recognize that literature is a part of education, and perhaps the most important part.

But immediately, other corrections and additions spring to mind. In 1910, the series included Adam Smith; in 2001 we would have to add Karl Marx. We would doubtless keep *The Origin of Species*, but perhaps *The Voyage of the Beagle* could be replaced by a twentieth-century equivalent like J.D. Watson's *The Double Helix*. Freud would be indispensable—if not as the successor to Harvey and Jenner, then as the heir of Plato and Goethe. *Up from Slavery* would make a good replacement for the journals of the Quakers John Woolman and William Penn; Thoreau could share space in the volume now devoted to Emerson. The sententious Cicero could make room for the disillusioned Tacitus.

And so on, endlessly, until we have inflated the five-foot shelf to the size of Widener Library. It would hardly be worthwhile simply to point to what's missing from the Harvard Classics of 1910, since a Harvard Classics of 2001 would soon look just as inadequate. And perhaps it would be impossible, today, to present any group of books as an essential library, when the very idea of cultural authority is so bitterly disputed—in the university as well as outside it. President Eliot's "five-foot-shelf" survives, not as a definitive canon, but as an inspiring testimony to his faith in the possibility of democratic education without the loss of high standards. If we scrutinize it today for its shortcomings, we are only paying it the tribute of applying our own standards, the products of a darker and more skeptical age. ▽

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Your Harvard Classics

WHAT BOOKS WOULD YOU CHOOSE for a twenty-first century Harvard Classics? *Harvard Magazine* invites readers to submit lists of 10 books, excluding the following titles and authors, deemed likely consensus choices: Bible, *Tao Te Ching*, Bhagavad-Gita, Koran, Homer, Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Virgil, Dante, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Hobbes, Locke, Voltaire, Adam Smith, Goethe, Hegel, Darwin, Emerson, Thoreau, Marx, Freud, Einstein. Submit responses via our website, www.harvard-magazine.com, or by mail or e-mail. A future issue will report results of this informal survey.