CHAPTER THREE

CLASSICISM AND THE HUMANISTIC TRADITION

The notion of ‘classicism’ has been mentioned a number of times by now. In the present chapter we begin by broadly defining this concept (§3.1), subsequently show how it fits in the European humanistic tradition (§3.2) and then have a look at the main classicist values (§3.3). This provides for a general introduction to classicism and its characteristics. In the next chapters specific facets of classicism will be worked out: its philosophical stance, its cosmopolitanism, its cultural criticism and its aesthetic views.

3.1 A first acquaintance with classicism

In this section, a first acquaintance with classicism is made. We look at the way Eliot used this notion in his *Criterion*; dwell for a moment on the ways the term ‘classicism’ has been used; discuss the classicist conception of culture; introduce the main classicist values; and contrast the ‘cultural classicism’ that we are interested in to the ‘political classicism’ that is not the primary focus of our study.

3.1.1 Eliot on classicism

For a first idea of what was meant by the notion of classicism, we consult Eliot’s *Criterion* essay *The Idea of a Literary Review*. In it, he links the European mind of the *Criterion* to the notion of classicism. Eliot considers classicism to be both the common tendency of the *Criterion* authors and the modern tendency in general:

   I believe that the modern tendency is toward something which, for want of a better name, we may call classicism. (..) there is a tendency – discernable even in art – toward a higher and clearer conception of Reason, and a more severe and serene control of the emotions by Reason. If this ap-
Eliot then goes on to refer to six books that exemplify this tendency: *Réflexions sur la Violence* by G. Sorel; *L’Avenir de l’Intelligence* by C. Maurras; *Belphegor* by J. Benda; *Speculations* by T. Hulme; *Réflexions sur l’Intelligence* by J. Maritain, and *Democracy and Leadership* by I. Babbitt (one of Eliot’s teachers at Harvard, see §4.1.4). A couple of months later, *The Art of Being Ruled* by W. Lewis was added to the list.

As Eliot explains, the ‘common tendency’ of classicism was not meant as a ‘programme’, which would have the inevitable danger of becoming a straitjacket. In fact, the list of books mentioned above includes widely different views. For example, Maritain’s viewpoint is a neo-Thomist one, while Babbitt’s is a ‘New Humanist’ one (as discussed in §4.1.4). The fact that the common tendency was not a one-way road was stressed again by Eliot in a later commentary, where he states that the *Criterion* “was to exhibit, without narrow exclusiveness or sectarian enthusiasm, a common tendency which its contributors should illustrate by conformity or opposition.”

In a letter to the *Nation and Athenaeum*, Eliot again stresses the ‘unity in diversity’ of the *Criterion*: “The Criterion is not a ‘school’, but a meeting place for writers, some of whom, certainly, have much in common, but what they have in common is not theory or dogma.”

From the few lines quoted above, from the list of books mentioned and from the name of Eliot’s review we get a first impression of what classicism is about. Politically, it holds a recognition of the importance of order and authority. Intellectually, it consists of a firm belief in reason as opposed to emotion and in objective truths as opposed to subjective judgements. Aesthetically, it refers to a belief in first principles and standards of excellence and beauty in art and literature. In determining these standards, the cultural tradition plays an important role as a continuing example and source of inspiration. Classicism emphasizes the significance of a broad liberal education that transmits this cultural heritage. As Margolis summarizes: “Classicism (...) was the force that, preferring reason to sensation, stood to advance literature and preserve civilization.”

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2. *A Commentary*, *Criterion* Jun 1926 (4) pp. 419-20
3. *A Commentary*, *Criterion* May 1927 (5) p. 18