

# Eliot on Culture

## by Bernard Bergonzi

During the nineteen-thirties T. S. Eliot steadily extended his interests as a literary critic to larger social and cultural questions; the process can be traced in *After Strange Gods*, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, and his editorials in *The Criterion*. This interest culminated in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, published in 1948. It is one of his strangest books, where profound insights are interwoven with the most superficial observations, and where seemingly firm statements are then qualified out of existence within a paragraph or so. The book's excessively tentative title is characteristic; Eliot says many interesting things about culture but he never succeeds in defining it. In principle, he is concerned with culture in the broad or anthropological sense, rather than the narrow or Arnoldian sense: that is to say, the whole way of life of a society, all its inherited manners, customs and styles of living, as opposed to 'the best that has been thought and said' and the cultivation of the fine arts. In practice, however, Eliot slides from one sense of culture to another in a quite disconcerting way. The anthropological use of the word is descriptive and value-free; any discernible form of social organization above the merely biological level will have its accompanying cultural modes, however odd they may seem to the observer. And as anthropologists have shown, seemingly primitive peoples can often produce very complicated cultural forms. So that when Eliot laments the decline of culture in the twentieth century and contemplates a possible future 'of which it will be possible to say that it will have *no culture*' he cannot be using the word in the anthropological sense, since if organized human life persists at all it is bound to have its accompanying cultural forms. Clearly, Eliot is here using the word in a more particular, value-bearing sense, which is closer to the Arnoldian usage.

Undoubtedly he is aware of the ambiguity, though the subtleties and circumlocutions of his prose do little to resolve it. Yet by examining certain passages one can conclude that Eliot is attempting to move towards a third sense of culture which will go beyond the other two. There is a helpful account in the Appendix to the *Notes*, which is a translation of three broadcasts on the Unity of European Culture addressed to Germany just after the war, where Eliot expresses himself more directly than elsewhere:

By 'culture', then, I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs, in their religion. But these things added together do not constitute the culture, though we often speak for convenience as if they did. These things are simply

the parts into which a culture can be anatomized, as a human body can. But just as a man is something more than an assemblage of the various constituent parts of his body, so a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs. These things all act upon each other, and fully to understand one you have to understand all.

Eliot is here using 'culture' in a holistic or organicist sense as something that pertains to the whole life of a community, and which is more than the sum of its visible aspects. As he says, a man is more than an assemblage of separate organs; the animating principle is what religion and metaphysics have traditionally regarded as the soul. In Eliot's model of society the animating power is religion, and it is this that makes culture more than a collection of disparate elements: he writes in Chapter I of his book of the culture of a people 'as an incarnation of its religion'. He uses this phrase to express the difficult and elusive idea that culture and religion exist with regard to each other in a way that is closer than anything expressed by the idea of 'relationship' and yet stops short of actual identity. He arrives at this point in an extraordinarily tortured paragraph:

And both 'religion' and 'culture', besides meaning different things from each other, should mean for the individual and for the group something towards which they strive, not merely something which they possess. Yet there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as the *whole way of life of a people*, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture. And at the same time we must recognize that when this identification is complete, it means in actual societies both an inferior culture and an inferior religion. A universal religion is at least potentially higher than one which any race or nation claims exclusively for itself; and a culture realizing a religion also realized in other cultures is at least potentially a higher culture than one which has a religion exclusively to itself. From one point of view we may identify: from another, we must separate.

Such a passage illustrates the frequent tendency in Eliot's prose for meanings to collapse and merge into each other as a result of excessive qualification, and which may, as Adrian Cunningham has suggested, have been a permanent legacy of the influence of Bradley (though the tendency was already implicit in Prufrock's complaint, 'It is impossible to say just what I mean'). Such a painful pursuit of meanings beyond meaning was much more convincingly carried out in the poetry of the *Quartets*. At the same time, we can observe some of the recurring configurations of Eliot's social thought; the idea of religion-culture (hyphenation, however clumsy, is the best way of indicating what Eliot wants to say) as the whole way of life of a people had been anticipated in the pervasive 'tradition' of *After Strange Gods* and the habitual, largely unconscious religious practice of the mass of the people in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. And Eliot's vague gesture towards a relation between a national and a

universal church was a return to one of the unresolved dilemmas of the latter book.

J. M. Cameron has justly complained that in *The Idea of a Christian Society* Eliot was confusing the sociological and the theological. In the *Notes* the emphasis is more clearly sociological, although in a very unspecific way, so that the religion which is incarnated in a people's culture does not necessarily have to be Christian. In so far as he is writing as a Christian, Eliot's concern with religion-culture causes him great difficulty in apprehending religion as transcendent, as something existing apart from its immanent manifestation in a particular society. It may be absurd that 'bishops are a part of English culture, and horses and dogs are a part of English religion but there it is: 'when we consider the problem of evangelization, of the development of a Christian society, we have reason to quail'. Christopher Dawson, who considerably influenced Eliot in the *Notes*, considered that he made needless difficulties for himself precisely because he refused to regard culture and religion as separate entities, however closely related in particular situations. Eliot's concept of culture as essentially religion-culture is what underlay his speculation about the possible disappearance of all culture, since he could not admit the existence of a wholly secular culture. Whether such cultures can really exist is a matter for anthropologists to pursue: I suspect that if Eliot had looked at the question from another angle he might have been unwilling to admit the possibility that a society could exist without religion. Indeed, in *The Idea of a Christian Society* he specifically attacks the totalitarian powers for setting up a pagan counter-religion. From a Christian point of view the Soviet Union is a quite irreligious society, yet it clearly has a genuine culture in the anthropological sense, and has a certain amount to show for itself culturally in the narrow Arnoldian sense. In Soviet culture, no doubt, the religious dimension is supplied by Marxist-Leninist ideology.

If Eliot's notion of culture as the incarnation of religion is not wholly intelligible, his account of the 'three senses of culture' is more readily discussed. The three senses are, respectively, the culture of the individual, the group and the whole society: the culture of the 'individual and to a lesser extent the group is partly a matter of deliberate self-cultivation and development, whereas the culture of the society is a whole way of life and the largely inherited and unconscious assumptions that govern it. In Eliot's ideal scheme of things—and his prescriptive intentions are apparent—these three aspects do not exist in mutual separation, but affect each other to the general good. Eliot speaks not merely of *aspects* but of *levels* of culture, and he projects a vertically extended model of a whole culture which consists of several levels harmoniously interacting. But the top levels are the most complicated and functionally differentiated, where 'high' or 'minority' culture is customarily produced and received;

lower down we have the less conscious levels of traditional and popular culture. But popular culture is beneficially affected by high culture, and vice versa, in a harmonious cycling process, which affects the whole organic culture. This model embodies, in a very abstract way, elements drawn from Eliot's writings about the theatre in which he describes the audience enjoying an Elizabethan play at different levels: at the lowest it could be appreciated for the excitement of the story, and above that for the interest of the characters and situation, and on the highest plane for its poetry and moral and philosophical profundities. At the same time, it would still be one audience watching one play. This scheme also recalls Eliot's outline in *The Idea of a Christian Society* of a community of believers whose belief would be for the most part traditional and instinctive and enacted in behaviour, together with a fairly small clerisy of conscious believers, who would be responsible for the spiritual and intellectual direction of the society.

What is new in the *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* is that Eliot gives this model a fairly specific sociological embodiment in terms of class levels. He projects a system of checks and balances; a measure of social mobility prevents the system from hardening into the fixities of a structure based on caste, though too much mobility would be disintegratory. The family is the primary channel for passing on culture, and a class system is valuable since it is based on inheritance and so preserves a certain continuity of values; élites based solely on merit and particular attainments are liable to be atomistic and not helpful to cultural transmission, and so need to be kept in check by an inherited class system. Much of this seems true; it is certainly the case that the family is the main channel of primary socialization, however important secondary influences may be at a later stage. It is for this reason that the social mobility derived from freedom of educational opportunity provides such frequent cases of cultural shock, as has been illustrated in many recent English novels and plays. Eliot anticipated by several years Michael Young's exposure of the evils of a pure meritocracy. Nevertheless, it is an excessively simple model which leaves out a vast amount of social reality. To quote Raymond Williams' study of the *Notes*:

In particular, the exclusion of the economic factor—of the tendency of function to turn into property—leaves the view of class narrow and misleading. Eliot seems always to have in mind, as the normal scheme of his thinking, a society which is at once more stable and more simple than any to which his discussion is likely to be relevant. (*Culture and Society*, London, 1958, p. 236.)

The notion that only a fairly small number of people in a society is capable of producing or advancing 'high' culture, in the sense of art or thought, and that probably not a very much larger number are genuinely—as opposed to conventionally—receiving it, seems to me not unreasonable, particularly if one also maintains that such high

culture must be related to the broader culture of the community, and not exist in isolation. What is less evident is that this minority can be placed in a hierarchical social model in the way that Eliot recommends: Matthew Arnold was, I think, being more realistic when he, too, saw English society divided into layers, but with the barbarians at the top and the philistines in the middle, neither of them being noticeable for their cultivation. As on earlier occasions, Eliot seems to be extrapolating from an idealizing outsider's view of English society.

In fact, Eliot does not absolutely need his metaphor of social levels. As Terry Eagleton has recently observed, there is a point in the book, when Eliot is discussing regionalism, where he remarks that 'a national culture, if it is to flourish, should be a constellation of cultures, the constituents of which, benefiting each other, benefit the whole'. The image of a constellation offers a 'horizontal' alternative to the 'vertical' image of levels used elsewhere; we would then have a differentiation of cultural functions without necessary subordination. This is, as Eagleton points out, the model projected by Raymond Williams in his own socio-cultural writings; Williams, like Eliot, is insistent that culture is a question of a whole way of life, and not merely the activities of an élite, though he writes from an ideological position diametrically opposed to Eliot's. In discussing regionalism Eliot also describes the socially creative role of conflict, which contrasts strikingly with the static image of hierarchical levels that he projects elsewhere in the book: in sociological terms a model of functional integration is briefly replaced by a conflict-based one, but Eliot does not follow up these implications.

Since I have examined passages where Eliot's meaning collapses in an unfortunate way, I should like also to refer to the wry and penetrating remarks that he often throws out in passing, as when he observes: 'A local speech on a local issue is likely to be more intelligible than one addressed to a whole nation, and we observe that the greatest muster of ambiguities and obscure generalities is usually to be found in speeches which are addressed to the whole world.' And there are some shrewd comments in the 'Notes on Education and Culture' which need to be pondered by educational progressives, however unacceptable they may find Eliot's basically élitist position; like, for instance, his insistence that socialization and self-development in education may often be in conflict, and that it does not necessarily ensure happiness:

to be educated above the level of those whose social habits and tastes one has inherited, may cause a division within a man which interferes with happiness; even though, when the individual is of superior intellect, it may bring him a fuller and more useful life.

Again, Eliot anticipated a common theme of recent literature. There is, too, a somewhat bitter wisdom in his reflection that 'it is possible that the desire for education is greater where there are difficulties

in the way of obtaining it—difficulties not insuperable but only to be surmounted at the cost of some sacrifice and privation’.

As so often in Eliot, the incidental illuminations and provocations are worth having, even if the larger argument remains shaky. *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* is, in its uneven and contradictory way, a significant work in a particular tradition of socio-cultural enquiry that English men of letters have been engaged in since the early nineteenth century. Although Eliot wrote from an idiosyncratically conservative position, that was only possible to one who came to English life as an outsider, no matter how thoroughly he assimilated himself, his book has been quietly influential among left-wing writers in the same tradition, particularly on Raymond Williams. In his own essay on Eliot, Williams sees him as Mill saw Coleridge, as an impressive adversary, who ‘is the natural means of rescuing from oblivion truths which Tories have forgotten, and which the prevailing schools of Liberalism never knew’.

## Calepin Rides Again: The French Scene by Louis Allen

### *Michel Butor and the return of Fourier*

Between the promoters of the present discontents and the revolutionaries of the heroic early nineteenth century there seems to be one great difference: the refusal of detailed prescription for the society of the future. Our world is to be violently overthrown, but when we enquire what is to replace it, the answers are usually expressed in terms of a vaguely existentialist adventure, an undefined project thrust into the future, where love and risk will combine to create the millennium.

Older Utopias were vastly more specific. In fact it was almost a diagnostic feature that they had to be: either to carry the reader’s narrative interest, as in More’s *Utopia* or Wells’s *The World of William Clissold* (a book my provincial 1930s childhood fed on avidly), or to permit the social scientist to roam untrammelled in the realms of gold because his real appetite was a true romantic one for the poetry rather than the mechanisms of a new society. One who attempted to combine both poetry and mechanism was Charles Fourier, a prolific writer who has recently been expensively reprinted, more, I should imagine, for his impact on surrealism than for any residual value he may possess as a social analyst. Fourier