

T. S. ELIOT AND HIS CONCEPT OF CULTURE

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I

In the Preface to the 1962 edition of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* which was originally published in 1948, Eliot stated his intention of reviewing his social criticism in the same way as he had surveyed his literary criticism in "To Criticize the Critic": "I have lately had the occasion to review my literary criticism over forty years and account for developments and changes of opinion, and I propose one day to submit my social criticism to the same examination." (*NDC*, p.7)¹ He continued: "For as a man matures, and acquires greater experience of the world, the years may be expected to bring about even greater changes in his views on social and political matters than in his tastes and opinions in the field of literature."² Thus he admitted that age and experience had created greater changes in his social and political ideas than in his literary ones. This announcement was written about four years before his death. However, he would not have the occasion to fulfil his intention and his own review of his social criticism remains only in a world of speculation. It would have contained an account of the development of his social ideas.

It is generally agreed that Eliot's social criticism began in 1934, with *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, though he never allowed it to be published. However, we notice that the scope of his criticism was enlarged about the time when *For Lancelot Andrewes* was published in 1928. This change or development was undoubtedly connected with his acceptance of Anglo-Catholicism and his adoption of British nationality which took place in 1927. We are surprised to find that he wrote in the Preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Woods: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* that "poetry certainly has something to do with morals, and with religion, and even with politics perhaps, though we cannot say what."³ After 1930 he concentrated on political, social, and religious criticism: "Thoughts after Lambeth" (1931), which dealt with the Lambeth Conference of the Church of England; *After Strange Gods* (1934); *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939); and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). It is difficult for us to imagine that Eliot, who had advocated the criticism of poetry "as poetry and not another thing"⁴, would ever come to write social criticism. However, in 1963 Raymond Williams, one of the finest British social critics took Eliot's work very seriously and stated that "Eliot is a serious social critic, and must be taken seriously, no matter whether one agrees with him or not."⁵

The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature whose second edition was published in 1961, entitled the new chapter "The Age of T.S. Eliot" "after the

great Anglo-American writer who is admitted to be both the leading poet and the leading critic of the period c.1920-60.”⁶ In the revised Third Edition (1970) the title “The Age of T.S. Eliot” for the last chapter was retained, and it was written that “the name of Eliot is even more appropriate than it was in 1960, now that we have decided to include the literature of his native country as well as the literature of the country of his adoption.”⁷ However, that age passed.

Eliot’s reputation as a social critic had been getting worse since his death (1965). It says in the Preface of *T.S. Eliot at the Turn of the Century* (1994) that “In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it became increasingly clear that Eliot’s status as a major poet, and as a leading twentieth century cultural and intellectual personage, was far from assured. The brief flurry of scholarly activity that occurred in connection with the centenary of the poet’s birth left no palpable sense of direction. Academic publishers seemed increasingly reluctant to handle comprehensive scholarly studies of Eliot’s work, and in various literary journals “Eliot bashing” was suddenly much in evidence.”⁸ Peter Dale Scott writes in “The Social Critic and his Discontents”, in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (1994) that “Few of those who admire Eliot have done so for his social and political criticism. Usually this prose has been used to elucidate difficult poems, or ignored altogether, or seen as gratuitously problematic, and a hindrance to the survival of Eliot’s reputation.”⁹ In 1995 Kenneth Asher stated in the Introduction to *T.S. Eliot and Ideology* that “The past decade has seen Eliot’s reputation recede to its lowest ebb of the century.”¹⁰ But for those who continue to be captivated by him, the social criticism cannot be ignored, for it is an integral part of his intellectual development.

In this study I am not going to trace the development of Eliot’s social criticism. However, when I dealt with the concept of tradition in my previous paper, I realized that I should have some knowledge of Eliot’s concept of culture in order to understand his concept of tradition better. His statements on the nature of culture are spread throughout his critical writings, but we have a full statement of his theory of culture in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. I am going to concentrate primarily on this book, to try to define and analyze the concept of culture from a variety of viewpoints and in particular to try to understand the relationship between culture and religion. The approach I use in dealing with this book is one which involves numerous and lengthy quotations from his work, because it seems to me that quotation is preferable to paraphrase, as paraphrase may distort the meaning of what the author wants to say, and lose the feeling and atmosphere of what the author implies.

II

Since 1942, when he finished “Little Gidding”, the last of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot had written nothing. He had tried to write a short prose book on the nature of culture which he had been contemplating since the middle of the Second World

War. At the beginning of 1943 he had published a series of four articles in the *New English Weekly* under the title "Notes Towards a Definition of Culture". During the winter of 1943-44 he conducted a seminar under the title "Towards the Definition of a Culture". These four articles, together with the seminar eventually developed into the book of 1948.

When *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* was published, Herbert Read wrote a review of it. He stated that "The award of the Nobel Prize to T.S. Eliot coincided with the publication of a new book by him--not a book of poems or of literary criticism but of what would usually be called 'sociology'. It is not the first book of this kind that Mr. Eliot has published--*Thoughts after Lambeth*, and *The Idea of a Christian Society* also deal with social issues, and, in general, even in his poetry, he is constantly aware of the problems that distress our age....The title of his new book is precise--*Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, not a systematic treatise in the manner of a German or an American sociologist, not a claim to completeness or finality. Nevertheless, the argument is closely reasoned, and if we could understand it, not one of its hundred pages can safely be omitted....At the end of our reading we are more conscious of what culture is not rather than of what it is."¹¹

This account is rather discouraging for someone like me who is to try to understand and challenge what Eliot means by culture. But Herbert Read suggests that first of all, I should not expect a systematic summary of Eliot's social criticism. Second, he is not writing this book from a political or sociological point of view, but from the point of view of a man of letters. Finally, we have to try to understand his concept of culture on the assumption that as he says, "We can assert with some confidence that our own period is one of decline; that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago; and that the evidence of this decline is visible in every department of human activity."¹²

We think we know what culture means, until we are asked to define it, when we find we can't give a clear answer. Nobody seems to know exactly what it means. We say culture includes such things as art and architecture, music and literature, and so on. It is so much a part of us that we take it for granted and we use it quite often in our ordinary speech as if we understood it. Even F. R. Leavis wrote that "When, for example, having started by saying that culture has always been in minority keeping, I am asked what I mean by culture, I might (and do) refer to *Culture and Anarchy*; but I know that something more is required."¹³ Leavis confessed later in the same book that "I do not suppose myself to have produced a tight definition."¹⁴ At any rate we find it very difficult to define what culture is.

At the outset of the Introduction to *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* Eliot states that his purpose in writing this book was to help to define the word culture. The reason why he thought the word culture needs to be defined was that it had been used and misused so much that he became concerned about it. Eliot quotes several examples of how the word culture is used. Among them there

is Article I from the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, the purpose of which is defined as follows:

1. To develop and maintain mutual understanding and appreciation of the life and culture, the arts, the humanities, and the sciences of the peoples of the world, as a basis for effective international organisation and world peace.
2. To co-operate in extending and in making available to all peoples for the service of common human needs the world's full body of knowledge and culture, and in assuring its contribution to the economic stability, political security, and general well-being of the peoples of the world. (*NDC*, p.14)

He quotes examples to call attention to the word culture and to try to find out what this one word means. We had better keep in mind that, generally speaking, there are two ways of using this word: one is a kind of synecdoche, when we have in mind one of the elements or manifestations of culture--such as art; the other is a kind of emotional anaesthetic, that is, unfeeling, unemotional. Eliot explained the 'anaesthetic' use as follows: "The use of the word culture, by those who have not...pondered deeply on the meaning of the word before employing it." (*NDC*, p. 14)

At the beginning of the first chapter of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* Eliot attempts to distinguish three senses of culture. Then he tries to expose the essential relation of culture to religion. He says: "The first important assertion is that no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion: according to the point of view of the observer, the culture will appear to be the product of the religion, or the religion the product of the culture." (*NDC*, p. 15). In the next three chapters he discusses three important conditions for culture. The first of these is an organic structure, such as will foster the hereditary transmission of culture within a society; and this requires the persistence of social classes. The second condition is that a culture should be analysable geographically into local cultures: this raises the problem of regionalism. The third is "the balance of unity and diversity in religion--that is, universality of doctrine with particularity of cult and devotion," (*NDC*, p. 15). Later Eliot explains a process in which "as a religion divides into sects, and these sects develop from generation to generation, a variety of cultures will be propagated." (*NDC*, p.16). In the remaining two chapters he attempts to disentangle culture from politics and education.

III

In the first chapter Eliot states that there are three senses of culture. They are the culture of an individual, the culture of a group or class, and the culture of a whole society. But he says that these three are interdependent and it is from the third of them that we get the full idea of culture: "It is a part of my thesis that the

culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class, and that the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs. Therefore it is the culture of the society that is fundamental" (*NDC*, p. 21). Since the culture of the society is fundamental, the other two cultures derive from it. Therefore, we should first examine the meaning of the term culture in relation to the whole society.

When Eliot comes to define the culture of a society he calls it the way of life of that whole society. The general or anthropological sense of the word culture which was used by E. B. Tylor in the title of his book *Primitive Culture* has been used independently of the first two senses. Eliot says that men of letters and moralists have usually discussed culture in the first two senses, and especially the first without relation to the third sense. He refers to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. He says that "Arnold is concerned primarily with the individual and the perfection at which he should aim." (*NDC*, p. 22). Arnold classifies the English people into three categories: "Barbarians, Philistines, Populace", but he only criticises these classes and does not go on to the next stage, that is, he does not consider what should be the proper function or perfection of each class. Arnold concentrates on the perfection of the individual. But the notion of perfection should take all three senses of culture into consideration. Eliot points out that Arnold failed to take account of another way in which we use the word 'culture' besides the three already mentioned. He says:

There are several kinds of attainment which we may have in mind in different contexts. We may be thinking of refinement of manners--or *urbanity* and *civility*: if so, we shall think first of a social class, and of the superior individual as representative of the best of that class. We may be thinking of *learning* and a close acquaintance with the accumulated wisdom of the past: if so, our man of culture is the scholar. We may be thinking of *philosophy* in the widest sense--an interest in, and some ability to manipulate, abstract ideas: if so, we may mean the intellectual (recognising the fact that this term is now used very loosely, to comprehend many persons not conspicuous for strength of intellect). Or we may be thinking of the *arts*: if so, we mean the artist and the amateur or dilettante. (*NDC*, pp.22-23)

Thus Eliot also regards the component parts of the culture of a society as (1) urbanity or civility, by which he means high standard of manners; (2) learning, by which he means wisdom and knowledge of the past; (3) philosophy in the widest sense; and (4) the arts.

But we must keep in mind that whatever important contributions a person makes to culture, that does not necessarily mean that he is a 'cultured' person. Eliot says that "no perfection in any one of them, to the exclusion of the others, can confer culture on anybody. We know that good manners, without education, intellect or sensibility to the arts, tends towards mere automatism; that learning without good manners or sensibility is pedantry; that intellectual ability without

more human attributes is admirable only in the same way as the brilliance of a child chess prodigy; and that the arts without intellectual context are vanity" (*NDC*, p. 23). This does not mean that there is no use speaking of the culture of an individual, or of a group or class. It means that "the culture of the individual cannot be isolated from that of the group, and that the culture of the group cannot be abstracted from that of the whole society" (*NDC*, p. 24). Therefore the notion of perfection should take all three senses of culture into account at the same time.

In more primitive societies the people share several aspects of culture. Eliot gives a specific example of "The Dyak who spends the better part of a season in shaping, carving and painting his barque of the peculiar design required for the annual ritual of head-hunting, is exercising several cultural activities at once--of art and religion, as well as of amphibious warfare" (*NDC*, p. 24). But in more complex societies we see the emergence of several cultural levels; that is, the culture of the class or group. The upper class tend to become representative of the literary, artistic and higher levels of culture, because members of the upper class have the time, leisure and money to pay attention to these things. However, as Eliot says that "some disintegration of the classes in which culture is, or should be, most highly developed, has already taken place in western society--as well as some cultural separation between one level of society and another" (*NDC*, p. 26), the levels of culture in the whole society may become entirely separated and then the culture disintegrates. As Eliot says that "Cultural disintegration may ensue upon cultural specialisation: and it is the most radical disintegration that a society can suffer" (*NDC*, p. 26), a society can suffer nothing more serious and more difficult to repair than cultural disintegration. Religion is introduced at this point.

As Eliot has asserted in the Introduction that "no culture has appeared or developed except together with religion," he tries very hard to define this togetherness of religion and culture. He refers to Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* again and points out that "The facile assumption of a relationship between culture and religion is perhaps the most fundamental weakness of Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold gives the impression that Culture (as he uses the term) is something more comprehensive than religion; that the latter is no more than a necessary element, supplying ethical formation and some emotional colour, to culture which is the ultimate value" (*NDC*, p. 28). Thus Arnold has made a mistake of assuming that culture is something more comprehensive than religion; that is, in Arnold's concept of culture, religion is a part of culture which is the whole. Likewise, Eliot thinks that we must avoid the error of regarding religion and culture as two separate things between which there is a relation; and the alternative error of identifying religion and culture: "the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people" (*NDC*, p.28).

Culture depends on the development of religion; and the preservation and maintenance of religion depends on the preservation and maintenance of culture:

“To judge a work of art by artistic or by religious standards, to judge a religion by religious or artistic standards should come in the end to the same thing: though it is an end at which no individual can arrive” (*NDC*, p. 30). Culture and religion are at the same time identical and separate: identical in the way that “we can see a religion as the whole way of life of a people, from birth to grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture,” (*NDC*, p. 31) and separate, because the culture “includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar” (*NDC*, p. 31). Eliot means by culture the way of life of a people and he claims that culture, in this sense, is inseparable from religion which is also the way of life of a people. Eliot holds that “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” (*NDC*, p. 31).

Eliot states that “The way of looking at culture and religion which I have been trying to adumbrate is so difficult that I am not sure I grasp it myself except in flashes, or that I comprehend all its implications” (*NDC*, p. 30). What interests me here is that Eliot is completely honest about the difficulties he faces. He contradicts himself: he thinks at one time that culture cannot be preserved, extended and developed without religion, and on another occasion he admits that “culture may linger on, and indeed produce some of its most brilliant artistic and other successes after the religious faith has fallen into decay” (*NDC*, p. 30). He concludes the first chapter by saying that “any religion, while it lasts, and on its own level, gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair” (*NDC*, p. 34).

IV

Then Eliot proceeds to the theory of class. He writes:

among the more primitive societies, the higher types exhibit more marked differentiations of function amongst their members than the lower types. At a higher stage still, we find that some functions are more honoured than others, and this division promotes the development of classes, in which higher honour and higher privilege are accorded, not merely to the person as functionary but as a member of the class. And the class itself possesses a function, that of maintaining that part of the total culture of the society which pertains to that class. We have to try to keep in mind, that in a healthy society this maintenance of a particular level of culture is to the benefit, not merely of the class which maintains it, but of the society as a whole. Awareness of this fact will prevent us from supposing that culture of a ‘higher’ class is something superfluous to society as a whole, or to the majority, and from supposing that it is something which ought to be shared equally by all other classes. (*NDC*, p. 35)

Here Eliot discusses the levels of culture and the nature of class and then he discusses the distinction between class and an elite. Eliot says that “it is generally supposed that class, in any sense which maintains associations of the past, will disappear,” (*NDC*, p. 36) to be replaced by elites: “Those groups, formed of individuals apt for powers of government and administration, will direct the public life of the nation; the individuals composing them will be spoken of as ‘leaders’ ” (*NDC*, p. 36). He thinks that the doctrine of elites implies a radical transformation of society. The doctrine of elites also “implies a good deal more than the rectification of such injustice. It posits an atomic view of society” (*NDC*, p. 37). Eliot’s objections to Dr. Mannheim’s theory of elites can be summarized in the sentence “it posits an atomic view of society,” because Eliot believes society to be organic. The word ‘atomic’ is the opposite of the word ‘organic’. Dr. Mannheim considers that society is a conglomeration of social atoms. As we have seen before, Eliot regards organic, growing structure as one of the essential conditions for the growth and survival of culture. He emphasizes the organic wholeness of a society’s culture. Eliot says that Dr. Mannheim’s description of culture is different from that given by him. Eliot quotes Dr. Mannheim: “A sociological investigation of culture in liberal society must begin with the life of those who create culture, i. e. the intelligentsia and their position within society as a whole” (*NDC*, p. 37). Whereas, for Dr. Mannheim culture is created by the intelligentsia, for Eliot “a ‘culture’ is conceived as the creation of the society as a whole: being, from another aspect, that which makes it a society. It is not the creation of any one part of that society” (*NDC*, p. 37).

Eliot speaks not only of aspects of culture but of levels of culture, and he assumes a vertically extended model of a whole culture which consists of several levels which interact harmoniously. 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 cyclic process, which affects the whole organic culture.

Eliot then proceeds to the problem of the transmission of culture by the elite and by class from one generation to the next. He argues that although the elites in a class society are usually drawn from the importance of “a structure of society in which there will be, from top to bottom, a continuous gradation of cultural levels: it is important to remember that we should not consider the upper levels as possessing more culture than the lower, but as representing a more conscious culture and a greater specialisation of culture. I incline to believe that no true democracy can maintain itself unless it contains these different levels of culture” (*NDC*, p. 48). He also refers to the importance of cultural transmission: “If we agree that the primary vehicle for the transmission of culture is the family, and if we agree that in a more highly civilised society there must be different levels of culture, then it follows that to ensure the transmission of the culture of these

different levels there must be groups of families persisting, from generation to generation, each in the same way of life" (*NDC*, p. 48).

V

From the defence of class Eliot moves to unity and diversity of regions. He says that "a people should be neither too united nor too divided, if its culture is to flourish. Excess of unity may be due to barbarism and may lead to tyranny; excess of division may be due to decadence and may also lead to tyranny, either excess will prevent further development in culture" (*NDC*, p. 50). The unity with which he is concerned here is "the kind and degree of unity desirable in a country which is at peace with other countries" (*NDC*, p. 51). He says that the unity with which he is concerned with must be largely unconscious and therefore it can be approached through diversities. The diversity he is dealing with is diversity of region. Because he thinks that "It is important that a man should feel himself to be, not merely a citizen of a particular nation, but a citizen of a particular part of his country, with local loyalties. These, like loyalty to class, arise out of loyalty to the family" (*NDC*, p. 52). He thinks that just as there should be the development of culture by class, there should also be the development of culture by region, which involves loyalties to a particular place.

He contends that "each area should have its characteristic culture, which should also harmonise with, and enrich, the cultures of the neighbouring areas" (*NDC*, p. 54). For example, he refers to the particular constellation of cultures in the British Isles, which he calls satellite cultures. By satellite culture he means that which "preserves its language, but which is so closely associated with, and dependent upon, another, that not only certain classes of the population, but all of them, have to be bilingual" (*NDC*, p. 54). He goes on to observe that "a true satellite culture is one which, for geographical and other reasons, has a permanent relation to a stronger one" (*NDC*, p. 54). He believes that it is of great advantage for English culture to be constantly influenced by Scottish, Irish and Welsh cultures. In Eliot's opinion, if it is to flourish, a national culture should be a constellation of cultures, the constituents of which benefit each other and benefit the whole. Then it follows that the Welsh, Scottish, and Irish cultures enrich English culture and are enriched by it. Eliot thinks that the regions are in a way parallel to social classes. He then suggests that "both class and region, by dividing the inhabitants of a country into two different kinds of groups, lead to a conflict favourable to creativeness and progress. And ...these are only two of an indefinite number of conflicts and jealousies which should be profitable to society. Indeed, the more the better" (*NDC*, p. 59).

Eliot refers to Italy and Germany during wartime and says that "In Italy and in Germany, we have seen that a unity with politico-economic aims, imposed violently and too rapidly, had unfortunate effects upon both nations. Their cultures had developed in the course of a history of extreme, and extremely

sub-divided regionalism" (*NDC*, p. 59-60). Eliot evaluates the idea of conflict within a nation more positively. At individual and group levels, he says that "The majority of men commonly dislike foreigners, and are easily inflamed against them; and it is not possible for the majority to know much about foreign peoples. A nation which has gradations of class seems to me, other things being equal, likely to be more tolerant and pacific than one which is not so organised" (*NDC*, p. 60). He sees a national culture to be "the resultant of an indefinite number of local cultures which, when themselves analysed, are composed of still smaller local cultures. Ideally, each village, and of course more visibly the larger towns, should have each its peculiar character" (*NDC*, p.60). There is a passage which impressed me a lot and which I would like to quote here: "We can also learn to respect every other culture as a whole, however inferior to our own it may appear, or however justly we may disapprove of some features of it: the deliberate destruction of another culture as a whole is an irreparable wrong, almost as evil as to treat human beings like animals...." (*NDC*, p. 65).

VI

Eliot moves from regional and geographical unity and diversity of culture to unity and diversity of religion. He is particularly concerned with Christian culture, with the Western World, with Europe, and with England. He tries to contemplate his problems not from the point of view of a Christian apologist, but from the point of view of a sociologist. He holds the view that the religions which are most likely to continue to stimulate culture are those which are capable of being accepted by peoples of different cultures, that is, those which have the greatest universality. He is concerned with Christianity, in particular with the relation of Catholicism and Protestantism in Europe and the diversity of sects within Protestantism. Eliot says that "We must take note of whatever injury appears to have been done to European culture, and to the culture of any of Europe, by division into sects. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that many of the most remarkable achievements of culture have been made since the sixteenth century, in conditions of diversity" (*NDC*, pp. 70-71).

In the Western World, the main cultural tradition has been that which corresponds to the Church of Rome. It is generally admitted that the Western tradition has been Latin, and Latin means Rome. From this point of view, the separation of Northern Europe, and of England in particular from Rome, means a diversion from the main stream of culture. Since Eliot is writing from a sociological rather than a theological point of view, he avoids making a judgement about the significance of this diversion. At this point Eliot introduces the term sub-culture to represent the culture which is connected with the area of a divided part of Christendom. He warns us not to assume that a sub-culture means an inferior culture. In England, the main cultural tradition has been Anglican for several centuries. Roman Catholics are in a more central European tradition

than are Anglicans. However, because the main tradition of England has been Anglican, Roman Catholics are in another aspect further from the tradition than are Protestant dissenters. Protestant Dissent is, in relation to Anglicanism, a congeries of sub-cultures. Anglicanism constitutes a sub-culture of the European tradition of Latin Europe and the Protestant sects constitute secondary sub-cultures. By Protestant dissenters Eliot means those bodies which recognise each other as "the Free Churches", together with the Society of Friends. Eliot says that "As in the relation between the social classes, and as in the relation of the several regions of a country to each other and to the central power, it would seem that a constant struggle between the centripetal and the centrifugal forces is desirable. For without the struggle no balance can be maintained" (*NDC*, p. 82). Thus Eliot contends that the ideal situation for the main culture, the sub-culture, and the secondary sub-culture is a constant struggle between the centripetal and centrifugal forces.

The conclusion which Eliot comes to from the sociologist's point of view is as follows:

Christendom should be one...But within that unity there should be an endless conflict between ideas---for it is only by the struggle against constantly appearing false ideas that the truth is enlarged and clarified, and in the conflict with heresy that orthodoxy is developed to meet the needs of the time...The local temperament must express its particularity in its form of Christianity, and so must the social stratum, so that the culture proper to each area and each class may flourish; but there must also be a force holding these areas and these classes together. (*NDC*, p. 82)

VII

In his analysis of the relationship of culture to politics, Eliot states that culture attracts the attention of men of politics, because culture is recognized both as an instrument of policy, and as something socially desirable which it is the business of the State to promote. We not only hear from political quarters that cultural relations between nations are of great importance, but we also find that bureaux are founded, and officials appointed, for the specific purpose of dealing with these relations which are supposed to promote international friendship. Eliot says that although "culture has become, in some sense, a department of politics," there is also "the fact that at other periods politics has been an activity pursued within a culture, and between representatives of different cultures" (*NDC*, p. 83). What Eliot is trying to do here is to indicate the place of politics within a culture united and divided in the ways he has considered so far.

In a stratified society, he says:

public affairs would be a responsibility not equally borne: a greater responsibility would be inherited by those who inherited special advantages, and in whom self-interest, and interest for the sake of their families... should cohere with public spirit. The governing

elite, of the nation as a whole, would consist of those whose responsibility was inherited with their affluence and position, and whose forces were constantly increased and often led, by rising individuals of exceptional talents. (*NDC*, p 84)

Eliot points out that modern political thought is inextricably linked with economics and with sociology so that it has become the “queen of the sciences”. Leon Trotsky’s essay, *Literature and Revolution*, of which an English translation appeared in 1925, is an important document that has made us more politically culture-conscious. It is “the role of Mother Russia to contribute not merely ideas and political forms, but a total way of life for the rest of the world” (*NDC*, p. 89). This consciousness has led us to study the relations of imperial powers and subject peoples with a new attention. In controlling people in colonies, the imperial nations have become increasingly aware of the importance of cultural differences. For example, Germany used culture-consciousness “as a means of uniting a nation against other nations” (*NDC*, p. 90).

As for Britain’s rule of India, some of the early rulers tried to adjust themselves to the mentality of the people they governed. However, later rulers brought to India the advantages of western culture. The “superiority of western political and social organisation, of English education, of English justice, of western enlightenment and science” (*NDC*, p. 90) seemed to them so self-evident that they thought it would be sufficient to introduce these things. They did not intend to eradicate the native culture, or to impose their own culture on the native, but in the process broke up “the native culture on its highest level, without penetrating the mass” (*NDC*, p. 91). Britain had a choice between two alternatives, that is, between the imposition of external rule and cultural assimilation. Eliot contends that “The failure to arrive at the latter is a religious failure” (*NDC*, p. 91). As the British did not realize the importance of religion in the formation of their own culture, they could not recognize its importance in the preservation of the native culture.

However, Eliot says that we should not conclude that “the damage that has been done to native cultures in the process of imperial expansion is ... an indictment of empire itself” (*NDC*, p. 91). Eliot points out the dangers which arise from the awareness that our culture is not in good health and we must try to do something to improve its condition. The dangers are not yet consciously political. Eliot states that “This consciousness has transformed the problem of education, by either identifying culture with education, or turning to education as the one instrument for improving our culture” (*NDC*, p. 93). In the end he warns us not to slip into the assumption that “culture can be planned.” Eliot contends that “Culture can never be wholly conscious--there is always more to it than we are conscious of; and it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background of all our planning” (*NDC*, p. 94).

VIII

In his analysis of the relationship of culture to education, Eliot examines various assumptions about education. The first assumption is that before any discussion of education is begun the purpose of education must be stated. This is different from defining the word education. Eliot quotes the Oxford English Dictionary in which the definition of education is: (1) “the process of bringing up (young persons); (2) “the systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young (and, by extension, to adults) in preparation for the work of life”; and (3) “culture or development of powers, formation of character” (*NDC*, p. 95).

Eliot says that while the dictionary tells you only what you know, those who try to state the purpose of education are either defining what they believe the unconscious purpose of education to be or formulating their opinions about what the purpose of education should be. He quotes *The Churches Survey Their Task*, in which the purpose of education is stated as the transmission of culture:

Education is the process by which the community seeks to open its life to all the individuals within it and enable them to take their part in it . It attempts to pass on to them its culture, including the standards by which it would have them live. Where that culture is regarded as final, the attempt is made to impose it on younger minds. Where it is viewed as a stage in development, younger minds are trained both to receive it and to criticise and improve upon it.

This culture is composed of various elements. It runs from rudimentary skills and knowledge up to the interpretation of the universe and of man, by which the community lives.... (*NDC*, p. 96)

Eliot says that the word culture has not been defined but it is likely to be limited to what can be transmitted by education.

Other accounts of the purpose of education are ‘a full democracy’, ‘the reconciliation of individual uniqueness with social unity’, and ‘happiness’ (*NDC*, p. 96-97). For example, Eliot quotes Herbert Read who says in a pamphlet called “The Education of Free Men” that he knows no better definition of the aims of education than that of William Godwin: “the true object of education...is the generation of happiness”. Eliot quotes the White Paper which heralded the Education Act: “The Government’s purpose ... is to secure for children a happier childhood and a better start in life”. Eliot comments that happiness is often associated with the full development of personality. Eliot says that Dr. C. E. M. Joad holds the view that education has a number of ends and Eliot finds him very sensible. Among these Dr. Joad lists three in *About Education* which Eliot quotes:

1. To enable a boy or girl to earn his or her living....
2. To equip him to play his part as the citizen of a democracy.
3. To enable him to develop all the latent powers and faculties of his nature and so enjoy a good life. (*NDC*, p. 98)

Eliot points out that each of these purposes needs some qualification. For example, the development of a person's 'peculiar gifts' might destroy his ability to earn a living; education for citizenship in a democracy is not an essential purpose but a pragmatic one, which could be applied not only by a democratic society but also by a despotic one; and finally the development of all the latent powers and faculties of one's nature is too much to hope for. Eliot laments the recent tendency for education to be used as an instrument for the realisation of social ideas. He suggests the acquisition of knowledge, the satisfaction of curiosity, and respect for learning as the purpose of education.

Eliot proceeds to three other assumptions: that education makes people happier, that everyone wants education, and that education should be organised so as to give equality of opportunity. It is by no means self-evident that the educated person is happier than the uneducated, although the uneducated may believe that more education would have made him or her happier. But education above the level of one's abilities and strength can produce unhappiness. Moreover, education is a strain. So, if education was imposed upon everyone, many would be hostile towards it. Eliot says that "A high average of general education is perhaps less necessary for a civil society than is a respect for learning" (*NDC*, p. 100).

It follows from what Eliot has said earlier about classes and elites, that "education should help to preserve the class and to select the élite" (*NDC*, p. 100). He contends that "the exceptional individual should have the opportunity to elevate himself in the social scale and attain a position in which he can exercise his talents to the greatest benefit to himself and of society" (*NDC*, pp. 100-101). On the other hand, the ideal of an educational system which would automatically sort out everyone according to his native capacities would not be attainable in practice, for such a system would disorganise society, "by substituting for classes, élites of brains" (*NDC*, p. 101). Any educational system, as long as it aims at a complete adjustment between education and society, would tend both "to restrict education to what will lead to success in the world, and to restrict success in the world to those persons who have been good pupils of the system" (*NDC*, p. 101).

As for the dogma of equal opportunity which is the most influential of all, giving everyone as much education as possible is desirable as an ideal which can only be fully realised when the institution of the family is no longer respected, and when parental control and responsibility passes to the State. That is to say, if we admit that "we have arrived at a stage at which the family is irresponsible, or incompetent, or helpless; at which parents cannot train their children properly; and at which many parents cannot afford to feed them properly, and would not know how to feed them, even if they had the means, in that case education must become involved in that difficult situation. As long as we mean by education everything that goes to form the good individual in a good society, there won't be much problem, but when we come to mean by 'education' that limited system of

instruction which the Ministry of Education controls, or aims to control, the remedy is manifestly and ludicrously inadequate" (*NDC*, p. 106). As we have seen earlier in *The Churches Survey Their Task*, the definition of the purpose of education is "the process by which the community attempts to pass on to all its members its culture, including the standards by which it would have them live". But culture does not mean what is passed on by the schools. For the schools can transmit only a part of culture.

People tend to think of culture as group culture exclusively, the culture of the cultured classes and elites. People tend to think of the humble part of society as having culture only in so far as it participates in this superior and more conscious culture. Eliot thinks that it is a mistake "to make everyone share in the appreciation of the fruits of the more conscious part of culture" (*NDC*, p. 106), for "it is an essential condition of the preservation of the quality of the culture of the minority, that it should continue to be a minority culture" (*NDC*, p. 107). F. R. Leavis says in "Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture" that "culture has always been in minority keeping....In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends."¹⁴ George Orwell has rightly pointed out that "The essence of his argument is that the highest levels of culture have been gained only by small groups of people--either social groups or regional groups--who have been able to perfect their traditions over long periods of time."¹⁶

As Eliot speaks of the tendency of politics to dominate culture, instead of keeping to its place within a culture, he also points out that there is a danger that education will dominate culture instead of keeping its place within a culture. Eliot states that "culture cannot altogether be brought to consciousness; and the culture of which we are wholly conscious is never the whole of culture" (*NDC*, p. 107). So, the result is that the more education takes the responsibility on itself, the more systematically will it betray culture. Eliot contends that we should not impose culture upon the young, for we know that whether education can foster or improve culture or not, education can surely debase culture. "For there is no doubt that in our headlong rush to educate everybody, we are lowering our standards, and more and more abandoning the study of those subjects by which the essentials of our culture--of that part of it which is transmissible by education--are transmitted" (*NDC*, p. 108). However he knows what he has been talking about is considered "only as an incidental flourish to relieve the feelings of the writer and perhaps of a few of his more sympathetic readers" (*NDC*, p. 108).

So, he concludes that his study has been directed at the meaning of the word culture; so that everyone should at least pause to examine what this word means to him or her before using it.

IX

When Eliot published *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* in 1948, he

added as an appendix the English text of three broadcast talks on the unity of European culture addressed to Germany just after World War II, in which there is a very helpful and significant account of culture, and which was originally printed in 1946 under the title "Die Einheit der Europaeischen Kultur". He explains the term culture here much more clearly than anywhere else. Eliot states that like democracy, the term culture is that which needs to be not only defined, but illustrated, almost every time we use it. He says :

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 anatomised, 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. (*NDC*, p.120)

Eliot is here using the meaning of culture in the anthropological sense which is connected with the whole way of life of a community, and which is more than the sum of its visible aspects. Raymond Williams points out the importance of Eliot's adoption of the meaning of culture as a whole way of life and goes on to say : "The sense of culture as a whole way of life has been most marked in twentieth-century anthropology and sociology, and Eliot, like the rest of us, has been at least casually influenced by these disciplines. The sense depends, in fact, on the literary tradition. The development of social anthropology has tended to inherit and substantiate the ways of looking at a society and a common life which had earlier been wrought out from general experience of industrialism. The emphasis on a whole way of life is continuous from Coleridge and Carlyle, but what was a personal assertion of value has become a general intellectual method."¹⁷ Williams, like Eliot, is insistent that culture is a question of a whole way of life. Bernard Bergonzi points out that "Although *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* is an uneven and sometimes contradictory book, it is an important example of the kind of socio-cultural criticism regularly produced by British men of letters since the early nineteenth century, and it has proved fruitful in its influence on other writers in the same tradition, notably Raymond Williams."¹⁸

Getting back to the definition of culture in the appendix, Eliot says a man is more than an assemblage of the various constituent parts of his body, a man has a soul which has commonly been regarded as an entity distinct from the body, the spiritual part of man in contrast to the purely physical. Eliot believes that "if this supernatural is suppressed (I avoid the word spiritual because it can mean anything) the dualism of man and nature collapses at once. Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them. Either

everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above.”¹⁹ In Eliot’s idea of society, the dominant power which is equivalent to spiritual realities, is religion, and it is religion that makes culture more than a collection of different things. Religion is within culture and it is superior to it.

As we have seen earlier, Eliot calls the culture of a people the incarnation of the religion of a people. A people’s culture is an incarnation of the religion, of a people. A people’s culture is an incarnation of its religion, for religion too is a way of life. In Eliot’s concept of culture, religion and culture have the kind of relationship represented in Christianity by the Incarnation. Eliot uses this expression to indicate that religion and culture are so closely associated that he could not find the appropriate phrase to express the relation between the two. So he comes to a painful conclusion that “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” (*NDC*, p.31).

Eliot’s concept of religion-culture as the whole way of life of a people had been anticipated in the theory of tradition in *After Strange Gods*, in which Eliot observes: “What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of the same people living in the same place.”²⁰ However, Northrop Frye points out that “religion cannot be identical with culture, except in the City of Gods or in a very primitive society.”²¹ Christopher Dawson also notes that “Eliot made needless difficulties for himself precisely because he refused to regard culture and religion as separate entities, however closely related in particular situations.”²² Thus Eliot complicates the relationship between religion and culture still further.

Eliot contradicts himself. For example, on the one hand, he says that culture cannot be preserved, extended and developed in the absence of religion, and on the other, he says that a culture may linger on, and indeed produce some of its most brilliant artistic and other successes after the religious faith has fallen into decay. Eliot says in other places that the primary vehicle for the transmission of culture is the family and he says that in a more highly civilised society there must be different levels of culture. Then he concludes that only by maintaining class privilege can culture be transmitted from generation to generation. Eliot insists that groups of families must persist each in the same way of life. George Orwell expresses sympathy for Eliot’s concern about the disappearance of the higher classes which would be replaced by élites. All the same Orwell criticises Eliot by saying that “Yet one continues to have, throughout his book, the feeling that there is something wrong, and that he himself is aware of it. The fact that class privilege, like slavery, has somehow ceased to be defensible. It conflicts with

certain moral assumptions which Mr. Eliot appears to share, although intellectually he may be in disagreement with them.”²³

As Hugh Kenner says in his review of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* that “Such a book cannot be paraphrased, nor can a passage be paraphrased, any more than *Four Quartets*”,²⁴ I could be justified in employing such numerous and lengthy quotations in dealing with this book. *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* is more difficult to assess than any other of Eliot’s prose work. The essence of his argument is not clear. Because his religious faith is more important to him than anything else, I thought his contention would be that we could have no culture without Christianity. However, he ends up by saying that “It would merely prove that any religion, while it lasts, and on its own level, gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair.” Eliot as sociologist confused me extremely. I was one of those who had not pondered deeply the meaning of the word culture before using it. Even after reading the book, I am “more conscious of what culture is not rather than of what it is,” as Herbert Read points out. I am relieved to find that Hugh Kenner comments that “The proper reviewer for this book would be Jacques Maritain, whose insight, terminology, and authority might do much to expose the fact that Mr. Eliot is a considerable metaphysician, who has been nourished during his long career by an intuition of being describable only in metaphysical terms. Lacking such qualifications, one may more modestly work towards a similar end by reviewing Mr. Eliot’s reviewers.”²⁵

* * I would like to thank my colleague Mr. William Green for his aid in the preparation of this manuscript.

NOTES

1. All quotations from T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* are taken from the Faber edition (London: Faber & Faber, 1962).
2. *Ibid.*
3. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Woods: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967), p. x.
4. *Ibid.*, p. viii.
5. Raymond Williams, “T. S. Eliot”, *In Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London, 1958). This quotation is taken from “T. S. Eliot”, *T. S. Eliot: Critical Assessments*. Edited. by Graham Clarke, Vol. IV (London: Christopher Helm), p. 147.
6. George Sampson, Ed., *The Concise History of English Literature*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge; Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. xii.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Marianne Thormahlen, Ed., *T. S. Eliot at the Turn of the Century* (Sweden: Lund Univ. Press, 1994), p. 9.
9. A. David Moody, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), p. xiii.
10. Kenneth Asher, *T. S. Eliot and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press), p. 1.

11. Herbert Read, "Mr. Eliot's New Book," *T. S. Eliot: Critical Assessments*, p. 42.
12. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (henceforward NDC) p. 19.
13. F. R. Leavis, "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture," *Education and the University* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), p. 143.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
16. George Orwell, "Culture and Classes," *T. S. Eliot: Critical Assessments*, Vol. IV, p. 39.
17. Williams, *Critical Assessments, Vol. IV.*, p. 148.
18. Bernard Bergonzi, *T. S. Eliot* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 162.
19. T. S. Eliot, "Second Thoughts about Humanism," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), P. 485.
20. T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 18. Eliot further says in *After Strange Gods*, : "I hold--in summing up--that a tradition is rather a way of feeling and acting which characterises a group throughout generations: and that it must largely be, or that many of the elements in it must be, unconscious; whereas the maintenance of orthodoxy is a matter which calls for the exercise of all our conscious intelligence. The two will therefore considerably complement each other" (*After Strange Gods*, p. 29), or "Tradition may be conceived as a byproduct of right living, not to be aimed at directly. It is of the blood, so to speak, rather than of brain; it is the means by which the vitality of the past enriches the life of the present. In the co-operation of both is the reconciliation of thought and feeling" (*After Strange Gods*, p. 30). Bernard Bergonzi comments on *After Strange Gods* that "The book shows the development of tradition in Eliot's thought from purely literary concept of 1919 to a fairly complex affair with wide cultural implications. Insofar as he sees tradition as the familiar and inherited way of life of a settled and localized community with a strong sense of the past..., he is describing something which is anthropologically familiar." (Bergonzi, p. 121)
21. Northrop Frye, *T. S. Eliot: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 15.
22. Quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, *T. S. Eliot*, p 159.
23. Orwell, *T. S. Eliot: Critical Assessments, Vol. IV.*, p. 40.
24. Hugh Kenner, *T. S. Eliot, Critical Assessments, Vol. IV.*, p. 51.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 46.