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# Eliot's unilingualism and Steiner's multilingualism in their discussion of culture

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Who would have been the greater man of letters in the 20th century — T. S. Eliot or George Steiner? One might argue that it depends on how you define the great man of letters. The fact remains that Eliot won the Nobel Peace Prize after World War II. However, it was George Steiner who scrutinized Eliot's *Notes* in a more sensitive attitude of mind than anybody has ever done before. Where does Steiner's sensitive critical view come from? This article deals with that question.

One might argue that Steiner managed to bring a sharp critical sense to what people of more mediocre sense of mind take for granted. Perhaps this is because Steiner is a multilingual critic who can switch from one language to another in his thinking process. Steiner discusses his multilingual background in an interview included in *Barbarie de l'ignorance*:

Interviewer (in what follows "I") : Votre père va refaire, reconstruire sa vie à Paris en y émigrant en 1924. Il va écrire dans le "Manchester Guardian". En fait, cette prescience de votre père et ensuite cette capacité linguistique extraordinaire de votre père qui est bien sûr dans un

monde germanophone—qui parle anglais pour un journal anglais—tout cela explique que vous soyez élevé de façon trilingue. . .

Steiner ( in what follows, “S”): Ma mère commençait une phrase dans une langue, la finissait dans une autre, sans s’en apercevoir. Elle aussi avait une oreille superbe, un français exquis. Cars, dans la culture viennoise, une des montées vers le bonheur d’une autre civilisation, c’était le français . . . Il ne faut jamais oublier le prestige, énorme, de la langue et de la littérature française à travers cette Europe centrale ! Aujourd’hui, dans l’anglo-américain quasi universel—nous en reparlerons—on oublie que c’était le français qui donnait l’accès à la sensibilité classique européenne. C’est en parlant français qu’on devenait—le mot est devenu très laid sous Hitler, mais c’est un très beau mot: cosmopolite.<sup>1</sup>

The above-quoted passage indicates that his multilingual parents had a great influence on Steiner’s intellectual development. In other words, Steiner was raised and disciplined under ideal circumstances to become a person of multiple perspectives. Steiner suggests in the interview that being multilingual provides a person with many thinking channels, a privilege which might be said to confer the liberty of human thought.

I: C’est là que vous avez appris qu’une langue qui s’apprend est une nouvelle liberté. Vous étiez donc trilingue, et dans un livre qui s’appelle “Après Babel”, vous avez voulu, au fond, rendre compte à la fois de la nécessité de ce plurilinguisme, et, en même temps, de la manière dont ça permettait de

pénétrer les psychologies de peuples différents.

S : C'est la plus grande des bonnes fortunes pour moi ! Chaque langue est une fenêtre sur un autre monde, sur un autre paysage, sur une autre structure de valeurs humaines. On doit à nouveau insister sur ce point: une certaine pédagogie psychologique, largement américaine, voudrait nous dire; "L'enfant multilingue risque la schizophrénie, risque des désordres mentaux." A mon sens, c'est totalement absurde ! Donner à un enfant une série de langues c'est donner à sa personnalité, tout d'abord, un sens très généralement humain. C'est-à-dire qu'il n'y a pas de monopole chauvin, ni national d'une seule formule humaine. Les littératures à sa portée, l'histoire d'une autre tradition, c'est essentiel !<sup>2</sup>

The passage indicates that Steiner acquired a borderless intellectual mode of thinking through his unique childhood experience. Steiner suggests that taking multilingualism as mental disorder sounds American, because Americans at large are monolingual; a multilingual mind lays the basis for enormous intellectual progress through the whole of life.

Eliot, in contrast, professed in his later stage of life that he remained loyal to the Anglophone tradition. He also asserts the preeminence of English for the purpose of writing poetry through a modest process of description.

It has often been claimed that English, of all the languages of modern Europe, is the richest for the purposes of writing poetry. I think that

this claim is justified. But please notice when I say “richest for the purposes of writing poetry” I have been careful in my words; I do not mean that England has produced the greatest poets, or the greatest amount of great poetry. . . . I simply say that the English language is the most remarkable medium for the poet to play with.<sup>3</sup>

One might argue that enthusiasm for a certain literature sometimes brings about an excessive reverence for a certain language for the production of literary works.

Compared with the multilingual figure of Steiner, Eliot can be called a unilingually based man of letters, though he certainly also had considerable knowledge of Greek and Latin as well as a number of modern European languages, most especially French and Italian.

The deliberate reader may remember the fact that Eliot always made much of English as the outstanding world language for articulating his thoughts and feelings. The following evocation of the virtues of English certainly seems a little jingoistic, from the viewpoint of Steiner:

. . . the richness of the English language for poetry is first of all in its variety of metrical elements. There is the rhythm of early Saxon verse, the rhythm of the Norman French, the rhythm of the Welsh, and also the influence of generations of study of Latin and Greek poetry. And even today, the English language enjoys constant possibilities of refreshment from its several centres. . . I have not taken the trouble to talk to you in order to praise my own language; my reason for discussing

it is that I think the reason why English is such a good language for poetry is that it is a composite from so many different European sources. As I have said, this does not imply that England must have produced the greatest poets. Art, as Goethe said, is in limitation: and a great poet is one who makes the most of the language that is given him. The truly great poet makes his language a great language.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that Eliot, from the viewpoint of Steiner, is confident in the surpassing advantages of English as a language for poetry. Steiner might have argued that Eliot always discusses European literature through the special filter of Anglophone culture.

In fact, Eliot later goes on to discuss what a great deal English literature owes to French traditions. Yet it seems even here that Eliot stresses the superiority of the Anglophone tradition in a way that lets the French tradition fade away as an example of past glory. Eliot modestly says:

... in the second half of the nineteenth century the greatest contribution to European poetry was certainly made in France. I refer to the tradition which starts with Baudelaire, and culminates in Paul Valéry. I venture to say that without this French tradition the work of three poets in other languages—and three very different from each other—I refer to W. B. Yeats, to Rainer Maria Rilke, and, if I may, to myself—would hardly be conceivable. And, so complicated are these literary influences, we must remember that this French movement itself owed a good deal to an American of Irish extraction: Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>5</sup>

Is it farfetched to argue that Eliot can not wholly put his ideas into perspective, when he discusses European culture at large, because—for all his cosmopolitanism—he is basically a unilingual literary critic. In contrast, Steiner, as a genuinely multilingual critic, is better placed to discuss the matter from a different viewpoint. As for French tradition, Steiner's presentation is more persuasive.

I : On peut dire qu'aujourd'hui ce mot a retrouvé toute sa valeur, toute sa beauté. Être cosmopolite, c'est finalement être vraiment citoyen du monde.

S : Ce qui était l'idéal des Lumières, et d'une certaine émancipation juive: la grande sortie historique du ghetto, le mouvement vers l'Occident et vers la liberté française, l'idéal de la Révolution française et les grands penseurs des Lumières.

Nous avons, je crois, sous la puissance anglo-américaine, un peu perdu notre sens de ce que c'était qu'être Européen à ce moment-là.<sup>6</sup>

Steiner's strong tone of voice seems to derive from his personal experience of losing his parents in the concentration camp. He mentions how French as a language of liberty helped emancipate the Jews from the ghettos. His statement rings true, because French can be thought of as a language for those who were oppressed under the Nazi regime. The following passage illustrates the respect.

. . . M. Hamel se mit à nous parler de la langue française, disant que c'était la plus belle langue du monde, la plus claire, la plus solide: qu'il fallait la garder entre nous et ne jamais l'oublier, parce que, quand un peuple tombe esclave, tant qu'il tient bien sa langue, c'est comme s'il tenait la clef de sa prison.

— Alphonse Daudet : *La Dernière Classe*

One might ask whether Eliot could really discuss this kind of matter from the viewpoint of the oppressed. Steiner might have been better able to understand the sufferings and pains at the concentration camps precisely because he was taught German by his father. The German the Jews heard at the concentration camps could have struck them as barbaric and overbearing. In other words, Steiner was trying to articulate the feelings of those who were oppressed by the false concept of the supreme race. This might have been possible because he could switch from one language to another when he wanted to think reflectively.

Although Eliot was a polyglot reader at least, he may not have realized his own limitations in being a unilingual critic when he discussed European culture. If he had had more multilingual viewpoints like Steiner's, Eliot's argument of European culture might have been more profound. However, it might also safely be said that such an argument does not devalue Eliot as a great Christian poet, because a large number of men of letters have owed a great deal to his idea of European culture.

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## Notes

- 1) George Steiner Antoine Spire, *Barbarie de l'ignorance* (Latresne, LE BORD DE L'EAU, 1998), p.11.
- 2) Ibid., p.12.
- 3) T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977), pp.187-188.
- 4) Ibid., pp.188-189.
- 5) Ibid., p.189.
- 6) Steiner Spire, op.cit., p.12.