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# Reconsideration of the argument of culture between Eliot and Steiner

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Whose argument concerning European culture has been more fascinating from a global point of view, Eliot's or Steiner's ? It is regrettable to say that Eliot's *Notes on the Definition of Culture* does not seem to be interesting to the students of English literature these days. One might argue that the atmosphere of the global community has been chaotic since the September 11th attacks. It might be true to say that men of this century are searching for solutions to chaotic situations in Eliot's *Notes*. Eliot's sincere efforts to unify the European culture seem to make much sense even today from the viewpoint of lettered men. Few people refer to Eliot's views of culture, although Eliot's *Notes* was once a criterion when discussing culture in general.

The odds seem to be in favor of George Steiner's strong argument in *The Bluebeard's Castle*. Steiner discusses the title's true definition in the book, *Barbarie de l'ignorance*.

. . . le mythe fondamentale de ce livre de cette étude, c'est la question suivante: on peut ouvrir une porte après l'autre dans les sciences, dans les sciences humaines, pour essayer d'avancer. Y a-t-il une porte qu'il ne faut pas ouvrir? Est-ce qu'il y a au *libido sciendi* (autrement dit: cette soif de la connaissance humaine) à

cette chasse vers la nouveauté intellectuelle, spirituelle, des limites où le danger serait trop grand? C'est le mythe de Barbe-Bleue. Ses femmes ouvrent les portes l'une après l'autre, même la dernière qu'il leur avait dit de ne pas ouvrir (les femmes ont une curiosité merveilleuse!). Elles l'ouvrent et c'est la mort. Chaque fois c'est une nouvelle femme qui disparaît dans les bas-fonds du château. Je voulais faire appel à ce très beau mythe (qui, si vous le voulez, est lui-même une réflexion sur le jardin d'Éden, du fruit défendu), c'est une version de l'archétype d'une chose défendue: là où il ne faut pas aller. Il y a des milliers de contes d'enfants, de légendes qui braquent sur ce problème. Depuis que j'ai écrit ce livre, cette porte est encore plus proche, plus fascinante et plus menaçante . . . 1

Steiner talks about the myth of the Bluebeard's Castle, with which his contemporaries are fascinated. The maids in the castle open the gates one by one, but are told not to open the last gate; opening the last gates means death. Steiner only suggests that humans should not go beyond the last gate, because it would lead to their ultimate destruction. Steiner's interlocutor, Antoine Spire sums the matter up succinctly:

Ça signifie qu'au fond il y a un mystère à préserver. Pour toujours, à votre avis. Mystère de la vie, de la mort. Nous sommes donc un monde d'une extrême confusion. Parce que nous sommes ceux qui viennent "après": nous savons désormais que lire Goethe, ou Rilke, jouir d'un passage de Bach, de Schubert, c'est possible en même temps que l'on fait passer les hommes de la vie au trépas. Que cette transgression du principe de vie par le passage par la mort est quelque chose de dramatique et vous laisse penser, qu'un jour cette septième porte sera peut-être ouverte, que l'homme se croira tellement fort qu'il pourrait remplacer Dieu? 2

Spire keeps in mind the following passage of Steiner in *Language and Silence* in which he denounces the madness that has lain hidden in European culture.

We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding or that his ear is gross, is cant. In what way does this knowledge bear on literature and society, on the hope, grown almost axiomatic from the time of Plato to that of Matthew Arnold, that culture is a humanizing force, that the energies of spirit are transferable to those of conduct? 3

More than thirty years have passed since Steiner's *Language and Silence* was published. However, Steiner's harsh opinions toward the barbarism in European culture has never weakened. In other words, time has never healed his wounds. Steiner responds to Spire in the dialog with a harsh tone:

. . . Et lorsque surgit l'horreur ultime: les camps de la mort, les goulags, les grands massacres, deux guerres mondiales entre août 1914 et avril 1945: soixante-dix millions d'hommes, de femmes et d'enfants périssent en Europe. Soit dans les batailles, soit de faim, de déportation de tortures, dans les camps de la mort et les fours à gaz ! Inconcevable chiffre: un demi-million devant Verdun. Et ceci, au milieu de la plus haute culture! . . . Alors la première question, celle avec laquelle je lutte dans tous mes livres et dans tout mon enseignement, est très simple, c'est: pourquoi les humanités au sens le plus large du mot, pourquoi la raison dans les sciences ne nous ont-elles donné aucune protection devant l'inhumain? Pourquoi effectivement ( vous venez de le dire) est-ce qu'on peut jouer du Schubert le soir et aller faire son devoir au camp de concentration le matin ? Ni la grande lecture, ni la musique, ni l'art n'ont pu empêcher la barbarie totale. Et-il faut aller un pas plus loin: ils ont souvent été l'ornement de cette barbarie. 4

Steiner always revives memories of the Holocaust as if he were summoned to appear as a witness at court. The intellects may wonder how Eliot might have responded to Steiner's argument. The readers of Eliot's *Notes* might remember the following passage:

. . . all we can do is to try to keep in mind that whatever we do will affect our own culture or that of some other people. 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. 5

One might say that there is no denying the fact that Eliot discusses the issue of barbarism in European culture as no concerns of his; is this the best Eliot can do from the viewpoint of the High Church? It is an undeniable fact that Eliot's ambiguous stance about culture made Steiner articulate his pent-up feeling. Steiner argues:

The failure of Eliot's *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* to face the issue, indeed to allude to it in anything but an oddly condescending footnote, is acutely disturbing. How, only three years after the event, after the publication to the world of facts and pictures that have, surely, altered our sense of the limits of human behavior, was it possible to detail and plead for a Christian order when the Holocaust had put in question the very nature of Christianity and of its role in European history? 6

Steiner denounces Eliot's *Notes*, because Eliot does not seriously discuss the insanity of European culture. Steiner's testimony from the viewpoint of a Holocaust survivor sounds very convincing.

Monsieur Giesecking a joué du Debussy—il parait incomparable—on entendait les cris de ceux qui passaient dans les gares de Munich pour aller à Dachau. Au milieu du camp de Buchenwald et là, la fameuse Buche: l'arbre aimé de Goethe. C'est d'un symbolisme exemples se multiplient et se multiplient . . . 7

No one can respond to Steiner's testimonial argument: the momentum to argue comes to a sudden stop after facing Steiner's lively words. In

other words, our sense of critical thinking becomes numbed facing Steiner's harsh remark. However, lettered men must seriously consider the focal point proposed by Steiner in referring to Heidegger's manner of expression. The following passage illustrates how outstanding Heidegger's presence has been in French philosophy:

La philosophie française vit de cet homme (celle d'un Foucault, par exemple). C'est une question très intéressante que vous soulevez. Je veux essayer de vous répondre très précisément. J'ai un talisman dans ma vie, c'est la poésie de Paul Celan, ce talisman, pour moi, c'est la possibilité de la survie de la poésie après Auschwitz, etc. Celan—nous avons un exemplaire à Marburg, dans les archives (maintenant accessibles) met des notes en marge à chaque paragraphe de "Être et Temps" (qui était le plus grand livre). Il n'y aurait pas Celan sans le langage de Heidegger. . . . Le livre de Derrida n'est qu'une note liminaire à Heidegger, comme "L'Être et le Néant" de Sartre est une note liminaire à Heidegger. Où en serait la culture philosophique française sans ce géant? . . . le danger terrible était là: il n'y a aucune apologie du possible pour son silence, ce silence devant Celan même qui vient lui poser la question [d'Auschwitz]. Mais tout cela se passe à un niveau d'intensité de pensée, . . . de croyance à l'acte de la pensée sans quoi je ne conçois pas un progrès dans la philosophie. 8

Steiner's argument often focuses on the great writers' silence respecting the Holocaust. If we humans stop thinking critically of the unforgettable past, we fall into the abyss of chaos. Steiner's assertion sounds very persuasive in such an unstable society following the September 11th attacks.

Is it true that it is impossible to respond to Steiner's harsh argument in such a chaotic society? Does not Eliot's *Notes* encourage the restoration of the lost backbone of European culture? One might say that Eliot's *Notes* still has some meaning for men of today who desire to integrate the diverse human culture of this 21st century. Eliot states

his views concerning the European culture:

It is only when we imagine our culture as it ought to be, if our society were a really Christian society, that we can dare to speak of Christian culture as the highest culture; it is only by referring to all the phrases of this culture, which has been the culture of Europe, that we can affirm that it is the highest culture that the world has ever known. In comparing non-Christian peoples, we must be prepared to find that ours is in one respect or another inferior. 9

Eliot does not directly refer to the Holocaust, however, he reiterates that laymen as well as men of letters must put forth great efforts to make the Christian culture meaningful. It is humanity's obligation to scrutinize the European culture as well as the Christian culture, and examine how each one influences every aspect of their lives.

Eliot eventually goes into a detailed criticism of the prevalent European culture, although his *Notes* has suffered harsh criticism from Steiner's. One might say that both Eliot and Steiner have put forth great efforts in coming to grips with the European culture by fomenting a common ground of critical thinking. Men of today can lead a more meaningful way of life, if they enlighten the mind to critical thinking meditating on how vents of the past relate to this 21st century.

#### Notes

1. George Steiner Antoine Spire, *Barbarie de l'ignorance* (Latresne: Le Bord de L'Eau, 1998), p.36.
2. Ibid., p.37.

3. George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), pp. ix-x.
4. Steiner Spire, op. cit., pp. 37-38.
5. Steiner, op. cit., p.65.
6. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp.33-34.
7. Steiner Spire, op. cit., 38.
8. Ibid., pp56-57.
9. T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977), p.106.