

研究ノート

## Seeking after the shadow of Auschwitz in Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*

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T. S. Eliot published *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (Referred to in what follows as *Notes*) in 1948, 3 years after the end of World War II. In this work he deals with the issue of the unity of European culture from the view point of a man of letters, and he reviews the common tradition of Christianity which has been a mainstay of European culture.

Eliot, speaking as a Christian poet, goes so far as to say that “Only a Christian culture could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, from his point of view, it would not be too much to say that if Christianity goes, the whole of European culture goes.<sup>2</sup> Many people take it for granted that the Western world derives its significance from the combined heritage of the Greek and Roman classics and the Bible.

The reader of Eliot's *Notes*, might get the impression that Eliot has a Eurocentric view of life; Eliot assumes that European culture, owing to Christianity, has a central role to play in human civilization. However, can European culture, in which the highest form of humanism led the Nazi regime to the systematic murder of 6 million Jews,<sup>3</sup> play this important role?

Another great commentator of the twentieth century, George Steiner, draws attention to the barbarism which has long indwelt the heart of European culture under the name of high human ideals.<sup>4</sup> Steiner was born in Paris as an Austrian Jew and was educated in a lycée there until the beginning of World War II. Thanks to his father's foresight, he escaped from the hands of the Nazis to the safety of America, but at the cost of losing his parents in Auschwitz. This tragic experience gives him a harsh view of European culture.

Indeed, Steiner's *Language and Silence* (1967) contains many essays which

might stand as the antithesis of Eliot's view of European culture. The collection opens with his description of the madness which has lain hidden in the abyss of European civilization. Steiner begins :

...My own consciousness is possessed by the eruption of barbarism in modern Europe ; by the mass murder of the Jews and by the destruction under Nazism and Stalinism of what I try to define in some of these essays as the particular genius of "Central European humanism." I do not claim for this hideousness any singular privilege ; but this is the crisis of rational, humane expectation which has shaped my own life and with which I am most directly concerned.

The blackness of it did not spring up in the Gobi Desert or the rain forests of the Amazon. It rose from within, and from the core of European civilization. The cry of the murdered sounded in earshot of the universities ; the sadism went on a street away from the theaters and museums.<sup>5</sup>

As the passage above shows, Steiner is denouncing a focal evil in European civilization which has long been concealed from the public consciousness. Steiner goes on to discuss how the dedication to high human ideals triggered the Holocaust in the concentration camps.

In the passage below he argues that intellectuals with the mask of human literacy were turning a blind eye to the murders committed by the Nazi regime in those years.

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? Moreover, it is not only the case that the es-

established media of civilization—the universities, the arts, the book world—failed to offer adequate resistance to political bestiality; they often rose to welcome it and to give it ceremony and apologia. Why? What are the links, as yet scarcely understood, between the mental, psychological habits of high literacy and the temptations of the inhuman? Does some great boredom and surfeit of abstraction grow up inside literate civilization preparing it for the release of barbarism? <sup>6</sup>

The reader might be shocked to hear that some officials of the Nazi regime enjoyed reading Goethe or Rilke with the awareness of intellectuals who have brilliant human literacy, even while perpetrating systematic murder in concentration camps. Steiner urges us, then, to reconsider the idea that culture makes mankind humane.

The passage above illustrates how closely high literacy and barbarism are linked together. One might say that Steiner is trying to denounce a Christian society in which so many people in the central part of Europe shut their eyes to such an act of barbarism as the Holocaust.

It is obvious that the force of Steiner's argument is aimed, among other things, at Eliot's idea of Christian culture. As a matter of fact, Eliot sets Christian culture at the core of European civilization :

To our Christian heritage we owe many things beside religious faith. Through it we trace the evolution of our arts, through it we have our conception of Roman Law which has done so much to shape the Western World, through it we have our conceptions of private and public morality. And through it we have our common standards of literature, in the literatures of Greece and Rome. The Western world has its unity in this heritage, in Christianity and in the ancient civilization of Greece, Rome and Israel, from which owing to two thousand years of Christianity, we trace our descent.<sup>7</sup>

Steiner denounces Eliot's *Notes* in that Eliot does not show any sense of self-reproach; he does not share a sense of grief with those who lost their fel

lows in the systematic murder. However, the reader has to be careful not to misunderstand Eliot's true intention in this work.

Eliot wrote his *Notes* to present to the public his standpoints as a Christian poet. If the reader follows carefully through Eliot's *Notes*, he will clearly recognize that Eliot's simple concern is to make the public know how much European culture owes to Christianity in every sphere of intellectual life. Thus, the discerning reader will realize that Steiner's criticism is off the point, because it is clear that Eliot did not write his *Notes* to comment on the systematic murders of the Nazi regime. The following passage will illustrate what "culture" means to Eliot :

The dominant force in creating a common culture between peoples each of which has its distinct culture, is religion. Please do not, at this point, make a mistake in anticipating my meaning. This is not a religious talk, and I am not setting out to convert anybody. I am simply stating a fact. I am not so much concerned with the communion of Christian believers today ; I am talking about the common tradition of Christianity which has made Europe what it is, and about the common cultural elements which this common Christianity has brought with it. If Asia were converted to Christianity tomorrow, it would not thereby become a part of Europe. It is in Christianity that our arts have developed ; it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have—until recently—been rooted. It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance.<sup>8</sup>

The careful reader will gather here that Eliot is indicating the linkage between culture and religion, which is vital in order to keep European civilization from splitting apart. The following remark in the *Notes* is important for anyone wishing to know Eliot's idea of culture.

We may go further and ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, of a people are not different aspects of the same thing : the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the

Seeking after the shadow of Auschwitz in Eliot's Notes towards the Definition of Culture religion of a people.<sup>9</sup>

What Steiner argues is that Eliot does not significantly refer to the culture of non-Christian nations. However, the reader must be careful to remember that Eliot was trying to discuss culture from the viewpoint of a Christian poet in his *Notes*; he maintains his committed stance in which to consider this broad topic of culture. Eliot clarifies his stand as follows:

...I discuss Christian matters, that is because I am particularly concerned with Christian culture, with the Western World, with Europe, and with England.<sup>10</sup>

The reader should not conclude from this that Eliot wishes to exclude non-Christians and non-Europeans from the field of possible discussion. It can be seen from the passage below that Eliot does not intentionally refer to non-European culture in isolation:

...when I speak of the unity of European culture, I do not want to give the impression that I regard European culture as something cut off from every other. The frontiers of culture are not, and should not be, closed. But history makes a difference. Those countries which share the most history, are the most important to each other, with respect to their future literature. We have our common classics, of Greece and Rome; we have a common classics even in our several translations of the Bible.<sup>11</sup>

This passage clearly shows if discerningly read, why Steiner's view of Eliot as paying too little attention to non-Christian society is off the point. It can be said that Eliot tries here to generalize his views of culture and religion, to apply them also to non-European society. This is clearly so in the following passage:

...all we can do is to try to keep in mind that whatever we do will af-

fect 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.<sup>12</sup>

If the reader reads the passage carefully, he will realize that Eliot defends the rights of each and every other culture, which should be treated equally with one's own. One might guess that "the deliberate destruction of another culture as a whole is an irreparable wrong" refers to the Holocaust; Eliot might be expressing a sense of deep regret for what Europeans did in the very recent past. It might also be said that the phrase, "to treat human beings like animals" represents Eliot's harsh denunciation of the Nazi death camps.

We are not sure how far Eliot as a poet was influenced by the idea that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."<sup>13</sup> Poets, novelists and essayists have been reluctant to attempt direct representations of the Holocaust; for to write about the Holocaust means to reduce aesthetic pleasure to nothing through the all-too vivid memory of those who were murdered.<sup>14</sup>

As the Holocaust is an isolated case in human history in terms of its origin and cause, one is led to consider whether it is necessary for writers to attempt direct representation of the Holocaust when they discuss European culture in general. Common sense tells us that an isolated event in history cannot be treated as a common example like any other. If Eliot does not refer much to the happenings in Auschwitz, this does not depreciate the value of his *Notes*, because what Eliot has to say broadly about culture can be applied to all cultures in general.

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Notes

- 1 . T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London : Faber and Faber, 1948), p. 122.
- 2 . Ibid.
- 3 . Gerald Graff, *Literature against itself* (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 31.
- 4 . Ibid.
- 5 . George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (N.Y. : Atheneum, 1967), pp. viii-ix.
- 6 . Ibid., pp. ix-x.
- 7 . Eliot, pp. 122-123.
- 8 . Ibid., p. 122.
- 9 . Ibid., p. 28.
10. Ibid., pp. 68-69.
11. Ibid., pp. 113-114.
12. Ibid., p. 65.
13. Edward Alexander, *The Holocaust and the War of Ideas* (New Brunswick, New Jersey : Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 4.
14. Ibid.