

Hollow men in a waste land

T.S. Eliot's perception of man, culture and economics

Jeroen Vanheste

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri in the United States. After finishing his studies at Harvard, he moved to Europe and lived in London for the rest of his life. He worked for a couple of years as a schoolteacher and between 1917 and 1925 for Lloyds Bank as a foreign account specialist. In 1925 he started working for the publishing firm Faber and Gwyer, later Faber and Faber, where he later became a director and remained until his death. However, more than in this professional career his heart was in his literary work. Eliot was an essayist, critic and playwright. Above all, he is known as the poet who wrote *The Waste Land* (1922), *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets* (1936-42). He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, 'for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry'¹. Furthermore, Eliot was the founder and editor of the *Criterion*, a literary and cultural review that was published between 1922 and 1939. By way of the *Criterion*, which had a cosmopolitan orientation, Eliot held relations with men of letters all over Europe, such as the German novelist and essayist Thomas Mann, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, the French philosopher and essayist Julien Benda and the Austrian poet, essayist and dramatist Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Over the years, Eliot became a central figure in the English literary life and maintained relations with such diverse writers and poets as W.B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Stephen Spender, Richard Aldington and W.H. Auden.

In the course of his life, there was a gradual shift in Eliot's work from literary criticism to social criticism and from poetry to playwriting. Partly related to this was the increasing role that religion played in his life, especially after his conversion to the Anglican Church in 1927. Eliot's main essays of social criticism are *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). However, in earlier work as well, such as his essays and his many editorial notes for the *Criterion*, Eliot exposed his views on literature and on culture as a whole.

During and after the Second World War, Eliot obtained the status of a cultural icon. His poem *East Coker*, one of the *Four Quartets*, was published in 1940 and heartened the English people, who read it as an expression of the conviction that their Christian and humanist values would stand the war. 12,000 copies were sold of the first publication, a highly unusual amount for a poem of its complexity. After the war, Eliot became a celebrity and media personality. Peter

¹ H. Frenz (ed.), *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967* (Amsterdam: Elsevier 1969) 430.

Ackroyd mentions in his biography a lecture Eliot delivered in 1956 at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where 14,000 people gathered in a baseball stadium to hear him speak about ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’.² However, after his death Eliot’s reputation quickly went downhill. From an icon of high culture and Christian values, he changed into an icon of elitism and conservatism. Even worse, he has been attacked for his supposedly anti-Semitism, misogyny and reactionary thought. This change in appreciation is directly related to a general change in the cultural climate, where high art has been increasingly criticized for its power politics by new approaches such as those of postcolonial and gender studies. ‘High art is dead’, thus Cynthia Ozick in 1989, ‘It is now our unsparing obligation to disclaim the reactionary Eliot.’³ Although several scholars have come to the defence of Eliot⁴, the general image of Eliot remains that of a conservative thinker with an outdated and antidemocratic idea of culture. In this paper however, we will argue that Eliot deserves our remaining interest for his poetry as well as for his views on man and culture. As we will see, the latter include views on economics. In fact, in Eliot’s view culture forms a whole where the social, political, economic and ethical cannot be separated. In what follows, we will discuss Eliot’s perception of man, culture and economics and see how he expressed these in his social and cultural criticism as well as in his poetry.

A normative perception of culture

In his review the *Criterion*, Eliot defended an approach towards culture that he referred to as *classicism*. In one of his editorial notices, he wrote:

I believe that the modern tendency is toward something which, for want of a better name, we may call classicism. [...] there is a tendency - discernable even in art - toward a higher and clearer conception of Reason, and a more severe and serene control of the emotions by Reason. If this approaches or even suggests the Greek ideal, so much the better: but it must inevitably be very different.⁵

In several of his contributions to the *Criterion*⁶ and in a number of essays, Eliot further explored his idea of classicism. Its main axioms are: reason as man’s highest faculty; the significance of historical sense and a living cultural tradition; and the recognition of standards of excellence and beauty. Classicism opposes to romanticism, which in Eliot’s view has subjectivism and emotionalism as its main characteristics. In his essay *The Function of Criticism*, Eliot wrote that ‘the

² P. Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Hamilton 1984) p. 317

³ C. Ozick, ‘T.S. Eliot at 101’, in: *New Yorker* (Nov 20, 1989) p. 119

⁴ Most well known is the work by Eliot scholar Ronald Schuchard.

⁵ ‘The Idea of a Literary Review’, *Criterion* Jan 1926 (4) p. 5

⁶ For example, *Criterion* Jun 1926 (4) pp. 419-420 and *Criterion* May 1927 (5) p. 18

difference [between classicism and romanticism] seems to me rather the difference between the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and the chaotic.⁷ The name of Eliot's periodical, the *Criterion*, in fact refers to the essence of classicism: the conviction that there are indeed (intellectual, aesthetic, ethical) criteria that transcend the subjectivity of the individual. These criteria are to be explored by using human reason and by considering the lessons taught by the cultural tradition.

Eliot's classicist conception of culture is a normative one in that it refers to an ideal that man should strive for. Here, culture is viewed as what Plato called *paideia*, what Cicero referred to as *cultura animi* and what Von Humboldt called *Bildung*: intellectual and moral self-fulfillment. Culture is 'a study of perfection', as Matthew Arnold famously wrote. This conception of culture considers the masterpieces of art and literature to be both the highest achievements of man and the examples we may learn from.

Historical sense and cultural continuity

In his influential essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), Eliot discussed the value he attaches to historical sense. It concerns a knowledge of one's cultural roots as these affect the present: 'the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence'⁸. Its implications for literature are obvious: an awareness of the literary tradition is essential for any writer, for true originality is only possible when one knows what came before and thus constitutes our culture:

[...] the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense [...] is what makes a writer traditional.⁹

But an awareness of the cultural tradition is not only essential to literature, it applies as well to European culture as a whole: 'the mind of Europe [...] is a mind which changes [...] this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*.'¹⁰ The essence of the conception of tradition as used by Eliot is thus one of cultural continuity. We find this idea in several of his essays as well as in his poetry. In *Dry Salvages*, the third of the *Four Quartets*, the present is described as 'The point of intersection of the timeless/With time', while in *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Quartets*, we find another evocation of continuity:

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber 1999) p. 26

⁸ *Selected Essays*, p. 14

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 15, 16

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.¹¹

It is easy to misunderstand Eliot's ideas by interpreting these as a plea for conformism to a fixed tradition. This, however, misses the point, since Eliot's conception of tradition stresses the ongoing dialogue between the present and the past, the constant search for a 'cultural synthesis' between past and present. Eliot's vision is one of tradition as well as renewal: 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present by the past', he writes in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*.¹² He always stresses the significance of the cultural tradition, but at the same time emphasizes the need for originality. Of course this is what the title of his essay refers to: what matters is tradition as well as the individual talent. In fact Eliot applied these ideas to his own poetry, which was both heavily dependent on the literary tradition and at the same time radically renewing in form. In his poems, the contemporary is related to ancient myths and works from the literary tradition. The myths and stories from the tradition tell us about what is universal and therefore eternally recurring in the human condition: experiences such as love, hate, jealousy, friendship, revengefulness, ambition, success, failure, birth, parent-child relationships, death. What happened once, will happen again, though perhaps in a different form. In *The Waste Land* for example, Dante's *Inferno* is put at one level with the inferno of modern city life. Myth, history and the contemporary are put on a simultaneous plane by the poet.

Eliot found that in his time, the notions of historical sense and cultural continuity were increasingly neglected. In a *Criterion* commentary in 1932, he wrote about 'our over-estimation of the importance of our own time', arguing that 'we are still over-valuing the changing and ignoring the permanent', and reproaching his time for its egocentricity: 'The notion that a past age or civilization may be great in itself [...] is completely alien to us. No age has been more ego-centric, so to speak, than our own'.¹³ The reproach that the past is being disowned appears as well from Eliot's poetry, as we see for example in the following lines from the *Dry Salvages* part of the *Four Quartets*, wherein Eliot relates the decline of historical sense to the scientific perception of time as evolution:

It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence -
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.¹⁴

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Harcourt Brace & Company 1989) pp. 189-190, 171

¹² *Selected Essays*, pp. 15, 16

¹³ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Oct 1932 (12) p. 75

¹⁴ *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 186

Classicism, humanism and the 'idea of Europe'

Eliot's classicism can be interpreted as a particular manifestation of European humanism.¹⁵ It was an expression of a general idea that is, according to Eliot, fundamental to European culture and that had seen previous expressions such as the humanism of the Greek city states (see the quotation above, in which Eliot says that his classicism might approach or suggest the Greek ideal), the religious humanism of Christian thinkers such as Erasmus, and the civic humanism of the French Enlightenment *philosophes*. In fact, Eliot connected his classicism with the 'European idea', the idea of a shared European tradition.¹⁶ In his editorial comment in the *Criterion* of August 1927, he wrote:

One of the ideas which characterizes our age may be called The European Idea. It is remarkable first because of the variety of its appearances [...] It is remarkable second in that it is primarily an appeal to reason rather than an emotional summons to international brotherhood. [...] It is a hopeful sign that a small number of intelligent persons are aware of the necessity to harmonize the interests, and therefore to harmonize first the ideas, of the civilized countries of Western Europe. We are beginning to hear mention of the reaffirmation of the European tradition. It will be helpful, certainly, if people will begin by believing that there is a European tradition; for they may then proceed to analyse its constituents in the various nations of Europe; and proceed finally to the further formation of such a tradition.¹⁷

For all their differences, the various (Greek, Christian, Enlightenment, 20th century) forms of the 'European idea' of humanism share some basic characteristics: a similar perception of man as a relatively autonomous being; a belief in reason as man's highest faculty; and a belief in the importance of cultural continuity. In his 1932 essay *Humanismus als Initiative* ('A Humanism of Initiative'), which Eliot considered 'one of the best and most reasonable expositions of a "humanist" attitude that I have ever read'¹⁸, the German scholar Ernst Robert Curtius claimed that although historical manifestations of humanism are mutable and conditioned by their time, together they form 'ein Wesensmerkmal des Europäismus' ('a distinguishing characteristic of Europeanness').¹⁹ Eliot was convinced that the unity of European culture is to be found in this cultural heritage of humanism. In *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, he said:

The Western World has its unity in this heritage, in Christianity and in the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome and Israel, from which, owing to two thousand years of Christianity, we trace our descent. I shall not elaborate this point. What I wish to say is, that this unity in the common elements of culture, throughout many centuries,

¹⁵ This view is expounded in J. Vanheste, *Guardians of the Humanist Legacy* (Leiden: Brill 2007)

¹⁶ See J. Vanheste, 'The Idea of Europe', in: J. Harding (ed.), *T.S. Eliot in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011) pp. 52-59

¹⁷ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Aug 1927 (6) pp. 97-98

¹⁸ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Oct 1932 (12) p. 74

¹⁹ E.R. Curtius, 'Humanismus als Initiative', in: H. Opperman (ed.), *Humanismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1970) p. 167

is the true bond between us. No political and economic organisation, however much goodwill it commands, can supply what this culture unity gives.²⁰

As a consequence of its cosmopolitan focus on the shared European cultural tradition, Eliot's classicism was opposed to nationalist thinking. 'England is a "Latin" country'²¹, Eliot wrote in the *Criterion*, rejecting the idea of a specifically English culture, and on another occasion he wrote, criticizing the Italian nationalist politics: 'The old Roman Empire is a European idea; the new Roman Empire is an Italian idea, and the two must be kept distinct.'²²

Eliot's increasing religiosity

Most scholars agree that there is a difference between the early Eliot of *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and *The Waste Land* and the later one that wrote the *Four Quartets* and *The Idea of a Christian Society*. This difference, which can be felt from Eliot's essays as well as from his poetry and plays, is not absolute but rather one of 'tradition and renewal': there is a basic continuity in his convictions. Already in his early poems, like *Gerontion* and *The Waste Land*, there is a religious undercurrent and themes like spiritual and religious aridity are a driving force. However, in spite of this continuity the changes in Eliot's poetry and social criticism are marked. After he joined the Church of England in 1927, Eliot's conception of humanism was increasingly imbued with Christianity. This estranged him from some of his more secularly oriented friends. According to Curtius, Eliot's literary, social and cultural criticism became less open and more dogmatic over the years.²³ And Ezra Pound wrote with his characteristic venom: 'In any case, let us lament the psychosis/Of all those who abandon the Muses for Moses'.²⁴ But although Eliot's secular classicism over the years increasingly evolved into a religious classicism, Eliot kept stressing the unity of European culture, rejecting nationalist divisions and striving for the reconstruction of this shared cultural heritage.

Eliot came to believe that we cannot do without religion and that 'there is an *absolute* to which Man can *never* attain.'²⁵ We cannot do without the supernatural, because otherwise there would be

²⁰ T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber 1972) p. 123

²¹ 'Notes', *Criterion* Oct 1923 (2) p. 104

²² 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Apr 1926 (4) p. 222

²³ E.R. Curtius, *Essays on European Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1973) p. xxiii

²⁴ P. Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot*, p. 172

²⁵ *Selected Essays*, p. 490

no answer to fundamental questions like ‘Where do all these morals come from?’²⁶ Still humanism remained an important strand of his thought. In his essay *Religion without Humanism* (1930), he states that culture, religion and humanism form an indivisible whole. On the one hand, ‘humanism is in the end futile without religion’, and on the other hand religion cannot do without humanism: ‘Without it [humanism], religion tends to become either a sentimental tune, or an emotional debauch; or in theology, a skeleton dance of fleshless dogmas, or in ecclesiasticism, a soulless political club.’²⁷ So Eliot did not reject humanism as such, but only naturalist and atheist forms of humanism. His secular humanism evolved into a Christian one.

Perception of man and human reason

At the heart of Eliot’s classicist cultural views there lies a perception of man that may be called humanistic. It rejects both the idea of the natural goodness of man (as expressed by, among others, Rousseau) and the view that man is bad by nature (as orthodox religious thinkers may state). Instead, man is considered to be partly open and undetermined. Man can become either good or bad through upbringing and intellectual and moral development. Man is thus ‘unfinished’: he has a potential for self-fulfillment. This potential comes from the highest faculty of man: his reason. However, this reason does not only consist of mere rationality or intelligence: it includes what Aristotle called *phronesis* (practical wisdom, prudence, reasonableness). *Phronesis* refers to capabilities that education and intelligence alone cannot achieve: what is needed as well in order to obtain practical wisdom are experience and habit-formation. Related to this concept of practical wisdom is the emphasis that Aristotle (and, with him, Eliot) puts on the social role of the individual in society.

As another aspect of Eliot’s perception of man, we mention his belief in the existence of a ‘human subject’ or ‘human ego’: the ‘I’ or personhood that is ours and that cannot be reduced to its physical and environmental properties. Man thus contains an element that transcends the material, biological and cultural elements, an element for which we are responsible: ‘man is responsible, *morally* responsible for his present and his immediate future’, Eliot wrote in a *Criterion* commentary.²⁸

This also explains his rejection of all (for example, Freudian, Nietzschean and scientific) theories that somehow try to reduce human behaviour to a determining factor, relativizing human values, free will and human responsibility. For example, in a 1927 essay Eliot criticized contemporary

²⁶ *Selected Essays*, p. 484

²⁷ N. Foerster (ed.), *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of Modern Civilisation* (Washington: Kennikat Press 1967) p. 105, 111

²⁸ ‘A Commentary’, *Criterion* June 1927 (5) p. 283

Freudian ‘mechanistic psychology’, rejecting the ‘modern theory [...] which would make value reside entirely in the degree of organization of natural impulses.’²⁹ In the same essay, he criticizes Hobbes for his ‘deterministic universe’ in which there is no room for human will:

Hobbes’s philosophy is not so much a philosophy as it is an adumbration of the universe of material atoms regulated by laws of motion which formed the scientific view of the world from Newton to Einstein. Hence there is quite naturally no place in Hobbes’s universe for the human will; what he failed to see is that there was no place in it for consciousness either, or for human beings.³⁰

We have seen above that Eliot’s classicism opposed to romanticist currents that challenged reason. But on the other hand, it as well rejected the opposite forces of scientific rationalism and positivism. The reason for this lies in a differing perception of man and of human reason. The Greek concept of human reason was a balanced one, consisting of both a theoretical and practical dimension, whereas science tended to hold a one-dimensional theoretical perception of reason. Furthermore, while Eliot’s humanism implies a sensibility for the transcendent element and the ‘mystery’ in man, the scientific perception of man is usually a materialist one. Because of these different perceptions of man and human reason, Eliot objected to all forms of scientism, naturalism, positivism, materialism, reductionism and determinism which claimed that only scientific knowledge can be real knowledge; that there is no essential difference between man and animals; that there is no such thing as the human ego or human free will; that the spiritual is a function of the material; that there can be no transcendence in human beings. Contemporary thinkers that advocated scientific rationalism, like Bertrand Russell, were therefore criticized by Eliot, for example in his review of Russell’s book *Why I am not a Christian*.³¹ Science ignores or even denies the transcendent element of mystery in man, which we cannot prove but which we know to be there: ‘A purely “scientific” philosophy ends by denying what we know to be true’, Eliot wrote in his 1927 essay *Francis Herbert Bradley*.³²

A synthetic, organic view of culture

Eliot’s conception of culture was a synthetic, organic one. Like his predecessors Coleridge and Arnold, Eliot found that literary criticism and social criticism cannot be separated. According to Eliot, culture is ‘a whole way of life’ in which art and literature are connected with other fields like politics, economics, education and science. ‘Civilization, not just art and literature, was his

²⁹ *Selected Essays*, p. 356

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ ‘Recent Books’, *Criterion* Aug 1927 (6) pp. 177-179

³² *Selected Essays*, p. 137

province', Kojecky says rightly,³³ and Chinitz mentions Eliot's strategy 'to relate literary phenomena to socioeconomic transformation'.³⁴ Vanheeswijck comments that Eliot's oeuvre can be considered as an endeavour to exceed the fragmentation of the modern world, in which there has been a complete separation of different fields of experience like art, literature, religion, science, economics and politics, and to seek anew a 'complete and undivided life'.³⁵ Indeed Eliot found that both the individual and the society as a whole suffer from fragmentation: 'the social, political, and economic sciences can do little, for they are attempting to produce the great society with an aggregation of human beings who are not units but merely bundles of incoherent impulses and beliefs', he wrote in *Religion without Humanism*.³⁶

Ultimately, Eliot found that all cultural fields are related to ethical issues and should not be studied without addressing ethical questions. 'I believe that the study of ethics has priority over the study of politics', he wrote in a *Criterion* Commentary,³⁷ and in a 1928 essay he said: 'You can never draw the line between aesthetic criticism and moral and social criticism [...] you cannot draw a line between criticism and metaphysics; you can start with literary criticism, and however rigorous an aesthete you may be, you are over the frontier into something else sooner or later.'³⁸ Ackroyd stresses the relation between the various aspects of culture as perceived by Eliot: he holds that at the centre of Eliot's concerns was 'the failure of Western civilization, and in particular the signal inability of liberal democracy to sustain moral or intellectual values'.³⁹ We should note that Eliot's efforts to reacquaint ethical truth with economic reality cannot be rejected as entirely naive or onworldly, for these were in fact rather timely and even prophetic. For example, his remarks quoted above were made in 1933 in the context of the consolidation of Hitler's power, a consolidation that partly became possible because those in power gave precedence to economic motives over ethical ones.

Eliot expressed his integrative vision of culture time and again in the *Criterion*, which was not limited to literary topics: many essays were published in areas such as philosophy, science, religion, economics and politics. In editorial commentaries, Eliot wrote that 'A literary review should maintain the application, in literature, of principles which have their consequences also in

³³ R. Kojecky, *T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber 1971) p. 222

³⁴ D. Chinitz, *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2003) p. 10

³⁵ G. Vanheeswijck, 'R.G. Collingwood, T.S. Eliot and the Romantic Tradition', in: *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* (3) 1996, pp. 76, 94

³⁶ *Humanism and America*, p. 112

³⁷ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* July 1933 (12) pp. 643-644

³⁸ *Selected Essays*, p. 55

³⁹ P. Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot*, p. 242

politics and in private conduct⁴⁰ and stressed that ‘in isolating the concept of literature, they [other literary magazines] destroy the life of literature’ and ‘Even the purest literature is alimeted from non-literary sources, and has non-literary consequences’.⁴¹ On another occasion, he wrote that the man of letters finds ‘that the study of his own subject leads him irresistibly to the study of the others’, giving as examples that ‘politics has become too serious a matter to be left to politicians’ and ‘now that psychology has invaded everything, and at the same time is rapidly transforming itself into biology and physics, how can we avoid such subjects, even if our only desire is to be able to ignore them?’⁴² When his regular contributor Frank Flint wrote in a 1927 letter ‘It seems the last degree of futility to be discussing art and aesthetic problems when Europe, in all probability, is being hustled [...] into a catastrophe’, Eliot replied:

I half agree [...] That is to say, I am not ready to admit that there is any time when it is wholly futile to discuss what you call aesthetic problems; but on the other hand it seems to me very much our business to link up these aesthetic problems with the others, the importance of which we are all agreed upon. [...] And I agree that in whatever direction you go nowadays you buck up in the end against economics and religion.⁴³

Eliot’s synthetic, organic conception of culture as ‘a whole way of life’ is related to his interest in anthropology, an interest that shows from his poems and essays as well as from the contents of the *Criterion*. Eliot learned from the anthropological research of his time that in many cultures and societies life, religion and art had always been interconnected. This confirmed his conviction that religion is not only a system of beliefs ‘but rather the sum total of the ritual, cultic, and related social practices of a given society’.⁴⁴ According to Chinitz, Eliot aimed to restore the relation between art and society. This way, the fragmentation and alienation of modern life could be redeemed:

What Eliot envisions, in other words, is a revolution in the relation between art and society along the lines of primitive communities in which art is a central and not a fringe activity - a regular part of the experience of life, closely connected with what people believe, with their community-building, and in short with their relationship to their world and to one another. [...] And the goal in view is not merely the rescue of art from irrelevance or dullness, but the simultaneous redemption of modern culture from the twin plagues of skepticism and alienation.⁴⁵

Related to Eliot’s organic conception of culture is his denial of any absolute split between popular culture and high culture. Eliot is known as a critic of popular culture and a priest of high

⁴⁰ ‘The Function of a Literary Review’, *Criterion* July 1923 (1) p. 421

⁴¹ ‘The Idea of a Literary Review’, *Criterion* Jan 1926 (4) pp. 3, 4

⁴² ‘A Commentary’, *Criterion* Nov 1927 (6) p. 386

⁴³ V. Eliot, J. Haffenden (ed.), *The Letters of T.S. Eliot. Volume 3: 1926-1927* (London: Faber & Faber 2012) p. 533

⁴⁴ Cited in: A. Moody (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994) p. 80

⁴⁵ *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, p. 80

and serious culture. At first sight, this indeed seems to be the case. Poems like *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* are complex and loaded with allusions to and quotations from canonical authors of Western literature such as Dante and Shakespeare. Still Eliot's attitude towards culture is more ambiguous than it looks like. Plays like *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *The Cocktail Party* (1950) were aimed at a large audience, and some of these were exceptionally successful. *The Cocktail Party* ran on Broadway for 409 and in London for 325 performances. Later, in 1952 and 1957, the play was broadcast on BBC television, the first time with 3.5 and the second time with 8 million spectators. According to David Chinitz, 'Eliot regarded it as the triumph of a lifetime.'⁴⁶ Furthermore, Eliot supplied the text (the *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, 1939) for what was later to become the most popular Broadway musical ever: *Cats*. Chinitz notes that Eliot over the years increasingly felt 'the responsibility of the writer to entertain, to excite the reader's interest'.⁴⁷

In so far as Eliot had objections against popular culture, these were directed against a phoney and prefabricated mass culture where the market and its consumerism and economic forces rule. In fact Eliot was intensely interested in what he considered to be authentic manifestations of popular culture, like the music hall (he greatly admired Marie Lloyd and wrote an essay about her after she died⁴⁸), vaudeville, boxing, comic strips and the Marx brothers. Furthermore, he much loved detective novels and reviewed several of these for the *Criterion*.

Education

Eliot's humanist perception of man explains the importance he attached to education as a means for fulfilling one's human potential. In this view, education is more than mere learning: it has to do with human development, both intellectual as well as social and moral. Humanistic 'liberal education' is not primarily focused on utility, as merely a function of the economic system, but is rather seen as a step in the process of forming a personality by acquiring knowledge, receptivity and a broadened attitude of mind. It is a training for 'wisdom and character'. In this process, the cultural tradition serves as an example: one of the tasks of education is the transmission of culture.

Eliot argued on several occasions that ethics should be at the basis of any education. 'Unless popular education is also moral education', he wrote in a *Criterion* commentary, 'it is merely

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 147, 70

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

⁴⁸ 'In Memoriam: Marie Lloyd', *Criterion* Jan 1923 (1) pp. 192-195

putting firearms into the hands of children'. For example, education in the field of economics 'is vain [...] so long as it is offered as a pure science unfettered by moral principles'.⁴⁹

To Eliot, the formative role of education as a step in the process of self-development was much more important than its utilitarian role as a preparation for exercising a profession. He believed that this type of all-round *Bildung* was gradually making way for utilitarian education and specialized knowledge directed at a particular profession. Hence his critique of contemporary education, where utilitarian programs directed at applied knowledge were gaining ground. For example, commenting on a *Sunday Times* article that pleaded for a modernization of the curriculum at Oxford, Eliot writes:

So the *Sunday Times* [...] asserts roundly that Oxford must be made more 'up to date'; 'less exclusively a pleasant backwater of the humanities and more a place where men and women can get a practical and efficient training for life in all its branches'. For life in all its branches! Not, you observe, for 'life'; the industrial society recognises nothing so unpractical as 'life'; 'life' is only for 'pleasant backwaters'. But for 'life in all its branches': that means training in 'efficiency', for one branch then only. It does not mean training in adaptability; but often training for an occupation which the victim may find already overoccupied by the time he is trained into readiness to occupy it. It does not mean training for the Good Life, it does not mean any training in the use of leisure, in appreciation and enjoyment; for not everybody is capable of profiting by such training. It means more and bigger buildings, Graduate Schools of Business Administration on the American model, and something for everybody except for those who want an education. But it would be a national disaster if the enrolment fell off: for Oxford and Cambridge are two of our biggest industries, known the world over; and what is manufactured in them matters less than that the looms of youth should be kept running at full time; rationalization and mass production must be applied; for it would be undemocratic to apply modern methods to motor cars and not apply them to men.⁵⁰

This quotation illustrates both Eliot's plea for a general education and his rejection of utilitarian teaching that can only be a 'half-education'.⁵¹ A liberal education is broad and non-utilitarian. Its starting point is the conviction that only intellectual breadth and balance can lead to a broadened attitude of mind and to wisdom, and that it is the task of any education to provide what F.R. Leavis called 'general intelligence':

It would be a pity if we overlooked the possibilities of education as a means of acquiring *wisdom*; if we belittled the acquisition of *knowledge* for the satisfaction of curiosity, without any further motive than the desire to know; and if we lost our respect for *learning*.⁵²

Because of this, a too early specialization was criticized by Eliot, who rejected education that is 'too minute and particular, the relation of which to the general business of living is not made evident'.⁵³

⁴⁹ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Jan 1931 (10) p. 309

⁵⁰ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Apr 1931 (10) p. 486

⁵¹ *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, p. 105

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 99

⁵³ *Selected Essays*, p. 512

Eliot was better acquainted with economics than most men of letters are. Between 1917 and 1925 he worked for the foreign section of Lloyd's Bank. This led him to study the classic economic texts on the 'science of money'.⁵⁴ After becoming head of the Intelligence Department in 1923, he wrote a number of articles in the bank's *Economic Review* on issues related to foreign trade movements. His position at Lloyd's Bank gave Eliot, who personally knew John Keynes and had read his *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, insight in the effects of the Versailles Treaty on the German and international economy. Furthermore, economic subjects were discussed quite regularly in the *Criterion*, where Eliot intended to provoke a public debate on the interactions between economy and culture as a whole. Like his friend and colleague-poet Ezra Pound, Eliot was interested in Major Douglas' personalist economics and its 'social credit' system that offered an alternative to what was perceived as the immoral commercialism and profiteering of the existing financial system.⁵⁵ But Eliot was no economist, so that his specifically economic views are of less interest to us than his general view of culture and the place of economics therein as he perceived it. As we have seen, Eliot held a synthetic view of culture in which he stressed the interrelations of its several parts. In his perception, domains like literature, art, politics, economics and religion cannot be completely separated. In fact, Eliot found it impossible to ignore economic issues when debating culture in general: 'We are compelled, to the extent of our abilities, to be amateur-economists', he said.⁵⁶ Conversely, he found that economists should not withdraw within their economic domain:

The trouble with the Science of Economics of to-day is that it appears in a form in which very few people, if any, can understand it. And in a democracy, it is essential that people should understand the matters upon which they are exhorted to make decisions [...] we need Economists who will not merely demand of us enough wit to appreciate their own intellectual brilliance, who will not aim to dazzle us by their technical accomplishments, but who can descend to show us the relation between the financial cures that they advocate and our simple human principles and convictions.⁵⁷

In the *Criterion*, Eliot sought to provoke a public debate about the interrelations between economics and culture. He particularly disliked the communist economics, which he characterized as 'mystic', 'a mixture, which may easily be a muddle, of economic theory, humanitarian enthusiasm, and religious fervour.'⁵⁸ He as well disapproved of the common

⁵⁴ *Letters* 1, pp. 193-195

⁵⁵ See A. Trexler, 'Economics', in: J. Harding (ed.), *T.S. Eliot in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011) pp. 275-284

⁵⁶ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Nov 1927 (6) p. 386

⁵⁷ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Jan 1931 (10) pp. 309-310

⁵⁸ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Apr 1932 (11) p. 467

haughtiness of economists who pretend their field to be a purely scientific one where no non-specialists may intrude. He found claims as to the scientific status of Economics to be completely unwarranted. Based on his own experiences at Lloyd's Bank, Eliot wrote:

I have served my own apprenticeship in the City; endeavoured to master the 'classics' of the subject; have written (or compiled) articles on Foreign Exchange which occasionally met with approval from my superiors; and I was never convinced that the authorities upon whom I drew, or the expert public which I addressed, understood the matter any better than I did myself – which is not at all. I concluded that there are some gracious natures, which have an instinct for making money (not necessarily for themselves) as the bee makes honey; that there are other sound conscientious natures which can faithfully carry out the innumerable details of an elaborate machine; but how the machine came to be, or what it was ultimately called into the world to accomplish – of that no one seemed to know more than I did, and they differed from myself chiefly in their unquestioning loyalty to it.⁵⁹

According to Eliot, economics is related to culture as a whole and furthermore to the religious and ethical domains as well: 'it should be clear that what I am concerned with here is [...] the organization of values [...] which must inevitably proceed to a criticism of political and economic systems.'⁶⁰ Economics, as politics, should derive from ethics and is related to views on culture as a whole. So in Eliot's interpretation of economics, he criticized the economic system in the light of Christian ethics.⁶¹ 'For myself (...) right economics more and more came to depend upon right ethics', he wrote in the *Criterion*,⁶² and on another occasion: 'in fact Economics is a science, in the humane sense; but it will never take its due place until it recognizes the superior 'scientific' authority of Ethics.'⁶³ And again: 'We are constantly being told that the economic problem cannot wait. It is equally true that the moral and spiritual problems cannot wait: they have already waited far too long.'⁶⁴

What Eliot criticized as well is the free-market thinking of 'accomplished economic specialists' that forget 'our simple human principles and convictions' in their 'unquestioning loyalty' to the world of finance.⁶⁵ The 'good life' consists of more than what can be expressed in economic parameters. For example, in a 1930 *Criterion* editorial comment, discussing the debates in politics en economics on 'the standard of living', Eliot suggests that a standard of living does not consist of economic values alone and says:

⁵⁹ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Jan 1931 (10) p. 310

⁶⁰ T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings* (London: Faber & Faber 1982) p. 42

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45

⁶² 'Last Words', *Criterion* Jan 1939 (18) p. 272

⁶³ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Jan 1931 (10) p. 311

⁶⁴ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* July 1933 (12) p. 647

⁶⁵ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Jan 1931 (10), p. 310

Are the ways in which he [the English workman] is better off ways in which it is *good* to be better off? [...] for the true 'standard of living', at all events, raises moral and spiritual, as well as economic questions; and suggests also the more humble answer that the British standard of living would be higher [...] if simple natural pleasures such as fresh air and country walks in fine weather, could be more usual, even if cinemas and wireless sets were more costly. As for the standard of living of the more affluent class, it seems at present to involve long weekends, and golf, tennis, and motoring on Sunday. The Roman empire left behind it at least a few ruined temples, aqueducts, and walls; one is sometimes inclined to wonder whether the British will leave, for the future archaeologists, anything better than the traces of innumerable golf courses, and a number of corroded fowling-pieces, scattered like primitive arrow-heads, over the desolate wastes of Scottish moors.⁶⁶

Criticism of materialism and consumerism

Eliot is considered to be a conservative thinker whose ideas about culture sometimes tend to be prescriptive and exclusionary. As an example of this we could mention his notion of a 'clerisy', a kind of intellectual elite consisting of 'those individuals who originate the dominant ideas, and alter the sensibility, of their time'.⁶⁷ But we do not need to share ideas like these in order to take an interest in Eliot's cultural diagnoses. His cultural criticism was directly related to the classicist and humanist ideas we discussed above. As we have seen, one of the humanist values cherished by Eliot was that of human reason, interpreted in an Aristotelean way, with its notion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Consequently, he criticized modern tendencies that implied a retreat from reason. As examples of the anti-intellectual tendencies of the time Eliot mentions its shallow materialism, its sensationalism and its focus on emotion rather than reason. He frequently complained about the decline of reason, as in a 1927 essay wherein he refers to 'a period of debility like our own'⁶⁸ and in his 1926 Clark Lectures where he speaks about the 'disintegration of the intellect'.⁶⁹ He directed this criticism in particular at the amusement industry and the mass press. The latter is providing 'rush-hour thought' for the 'Tube-reader'⁷⁰ while less and less is provided 'for those minds which are still capable of attention, thought and feeling'.⁷¹ But more than the mass press it is the cinema that contributes to the process of increasing shallowness and passivity. In the cinema, the mind of the modern city dweller 'is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and will receive, without giving, in [...] listless apathy'.⁷² In a *Criterion* commentary he wrote about the film industry:

⁶⁶ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Oct 1930 (10) p. 5

⁶⁷ *The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings*, p. 162

⁶⁸ *Selected Essays*, p. 359

⁶⁹ Quoted in: R. Schuchard, 'Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar: American Intellectuals, Anti-Semitism, and the Idea of Culture' in: *Modernism/Modernity* Vol. 10, No. 1 (2003) p. 12

⁷⁰ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* May 1927 (5) p. 189

⁷¹ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* June 1928 (7) p. 290

⁷² 'In Memoriam: Marie Lloyd', *Criterion* Jan 1923 (1) pp. 194-195

It is a question of what happens to the minds of the thousands of people who feast their eyes every night, when in a peculiarly passive state under the hypnotic influence of continuous music, upon films the great majority of which have been confected in studios of the Hollywood type.⁷³

More generally, Eliot's verdict of modern society was a rather gloomy one. He particularly resented the utilitarian and commercial way of thinking. Ours is a 'mass society organized for profit'⁷⁴, in which spiritual values are at a loss: 'the organization of society is wholly materialistic.'⁷⁵ We think science and technology are moving us forward, but in fact our materialist and utilitarian mindset make us pitiable:

The more highly industrialized the country, the more easily a materialistic philosophy will flourish in it, and the more deadly that philosophy will be. Britain has been highly industrialized longer than any other country. And the tendency of unlimited industrialism is to create bodies of men and women - of all classes - detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion⁷⁶.

Showing the backside of a highly technological society that is driven by economic forces, is a major theme in Eliot's work. In a *Criterion* essay Eliot mentions a book by W. Rivers in which the latter describes how the natives of the Melanesian archipelago lost their traditional culture when 'civilization' was forced upon them, and goes on to write:

When every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones, when every horse has been replaced by 100 cheap motor-cars, when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bedtime stories through a wireless receiver attached to its ears, when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilized world rapidly followed the fate of the Melanesians.⁷⁷

With respect to the backside of modern society, it is interesting to note that Eliot in his 1939 essay *The Idea of a Christian Society* also writes about 'a wrong attitude toward nature', referring to 'the exploitation of the earth, on a vast scale for two generations, for commercial profit: immediate benefits leading to dearth and desert'. Our 'progress' comes with a huge price: 'a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly [...] For a long enough time we have believed in nothing but the values arising in a mechanised, commercialised, urbanised way of life'.⁷⁸

⁷³ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Oct 1927 (6) p. 290

⁷⁴ *The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings*, p. 66

⁷⁵ 'A Commentary' Apr 1931 (10) p. 484

⁷⁶ *The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings*, p. 53

⁷⁷ 'In Memoriam: Marie Lloyd', *Criterion* Jan 1923 (1) pp. 194-195

⁷⁸ *The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings*, pp. 80, 81

Eliot lived in a time that saw many technological innovations: radio broadcasting was introduced, the cinema made its appearance, various household apparatuses made life easier and in 1927 Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic by plane. In science as well, major developments took place. Physics was changed by Einstein's theory of relativity, which was confirmed experimentally by observation of solar eclipses in 1919 and 1922. Microbiology opened up the way for the development of genetics and changed the interpretation of Darwinism and evolutionism.

Eliot was not hostile to scientific and technological progress as such. He acknowledged the positive aspects of new inventions: 'no one can deny that many are good in themselves if we know how to use them properly'.⁷⁹ However, what he did oppose to was the uncritical worship of science and technology and the superficial use of modern inventions: 'It is likely that too much importance is attached to the modern craving for luxury, comfort and recent inventions. The worst that can be said for these things is that they keep people's minds in a perpetual rapid distraction, like the daily press.'⁸⁰

The 'craving for luxury, comfort and inventions' of the materialist modern world was bad enough, but even worse was the other side of this coin: the fact that spiritual values were quickly declining. In one of his *Criterion* essays, Eliot quoted Irving Babbitt, one of his former teachers at Harvard, in this respect: 'What is disquieting about the present time is not so much its open and avowed materialism as what it takes to be its spirituality'.⁸¹ According to Eliot, one of the main problems was that society is not driven by true human desires and needs, but by the economic system: 'The material prosperity of modern civilization depends upon inducing people to buy what they do not want, and to want what they should not buy'.⁸²

What Eliot opposed to as well was the dogma of science, the arrogance of scientism and its belief that only science can render truth. Men like Russell, Shaw and Wells were criticized by him for their exaggerated confidence in science and technology.⁸³ Russell in particular was a man who for Eliot represented the arrogance and 'demagogy of science' as no other did. In a *Criterion* comment in 1924, he wrote:

The man of letters or the man of "culture" of the present time is far too easily impressed and overawed by scientific knowledge and ability; the aristocracy of culture has abdicated before the demagogy of science [...] the claims of the scientists are fortified by the cowardice of the men of letters.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Apr 1937 (16) p. 471

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ 'Mr. M. Murry's Synthesis', *Criterion* Oct 1927 (6) p. 340

⁸² 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Dec 1928 (8) p. 189

⁸³ 'The Idea of a Literary Review', *Criterion* Jan 1926 (4) p. 6

⁸⁴ 'A Commentary', *Criterion* Apr 1924 (2) p. 231

To Eliot, the rise of scientism, industrialism and materialism and the decline of spiritual values were strongly interrelated. On many occasions, he contrasted the technological advances and the spiritual decline of the times, for example wondering ‘how far it is possible for mankind to accept industrialization without spiritual harm’ and warning that ‘coal, iron and factories have altered the relation of man to his world [...] the Good and Happy Life is becoming less possible [...] the organization of society is wholly materialistic.’⁸⁵ Quite impressive are the final sentences of his 1939 essay *The Idea of a Christian Society*, where he writes how profoundly shaken he was by the events of September 1938 in Munich. What caused his distress ‘was not [...] a criticism of the government [...] but a doubt of the validity of a civilization’, a civilization that had no values left except materialist and economic ones:

Was our society [...] assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies, and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?⁸⁶

Europe as a spiritual waste land

Of course the theme of the spiritual aridity of the modern world can be found in Eliot’s poetry as well. His poems, essays, literary and cultural criticism in fact form an unseparable whole. In the early poem *Gerontion* (1919) we already find symbols like blindness, disintegration, sexual failure and infertility, all of these referring to the central theme of the spiritual poverty of modern life. In the poem, we meet Mr. Silvero, who collects valuable porcelain from Limoges and can’t sleep from fear that it is being stolen; Mr. Hakagawa, whose interest in Titian is phoney and merely formal; and those whose spiritual life consists of attending the spiritual seances delivered by the famous Mrs. De Tornquist. Sweeney, the protagonist of the poem *Sweeney among the Nightingales* (1918) and the unfinished play *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932), is a materialist of the most vulgar kind who summarizes his life philosophy as ‘birth, copulation and death’. Types like these are ‘hollow men’, as is indeed the title of Eliot’s 1925 poem *The Hollow Men*, which opens with the lines:

We are the hollow men
We are stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

⁸⁵ ‘A Commentary’, *Criterion* Apr 1931 (10) pp. 483-484

⁸⁶ *The Idea of a Christian Society and Other Writings*, p. 82

But most of all there is of course *The Waste Land* (1922), the epic poem that is generally regarded as the iconic image of the European postwar state of mind, an expression of the disillusionment over Western culture. Monumental in size (433 lines), revolutionary in language and form, using seven languages and varying rhythms and styles, loaded with citations and allusions to canonical works in world literature as well as to popular songs, the result is a collage that is as highly complex as it is intimidating. Still the major themes are quite obvious. The ‘waste land’ is not only the devastated Europe with millions of killed and innumerable of wounded and traumatized young men. It is also and above all the barren and sterile inner world of modern man who, after the decline of religion, has not yet found a new spiritual hold and tries to fill the spiritual vacuum of modern city life with work, money, technique and amusement. This theme of the spiritual desert of modern city life recurs everywhere in Eliot’s work, from his poems and plays to his essays and *Criterion* commentaries. For example, in *The Cocktail Party* (1949), one of Eliot’s plays, he uses the image of the cocktail party as a metaphor for social life in the city. There is no real contact or sincere interest in one another, only feigned friendship, superficial conversation and ‘networking’ aimed at self-interest. The loneliness of the city life and the lack of true human contact arises as well from *The Waste Land*. In the following fragment, a couple is bored and unable to escape the daily routine. The sterility of their marriage is symbolized by their playing a game of chess. ‘What shall we ever do?’, the woman asks, and the man thinks by himself:

The hot water at ten.
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess.
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.⁸⁷

A similar feeling of anguish and depression can be felt from the following lines, where a clerk and a secretary have cold, sterile sex at her place:

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in carresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.⁸⁸

Immediately afterwards he departs, leaving her alone:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass
Hardly aware of her departed lover;

⁸⁷ *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 65

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68

Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.'
When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand
And puts a record on the gramophone.⁸⁹

'April is the cruellest month', thus the opening line of *The Waste Land*. April is cruel because spring is unable to bring about new fertility in the empty and meaningless desert of modern city life. In the following lines this desolate city life is evoked by the image of clerks who drag themselves over London Bridge on their way to another day at the office:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.⁹⁰

This modern hell is linked with Dante's hell: the line 'I had not thought death had undone so many', is a literal quotation from the *Inferno*. In *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Four Quartets*, we find a similar fragment describing a scene in the underground:

Over the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by distraction
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
Tumid apathy with no concentration
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind
(..)
Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world
Internal darkness, deprivation⁹¹

Again, Dante is invoked: the line 'Descend lower, descend only' significantly refers to the moment in the *Inferno* where Virgil urges Dante to descend lower into the underworld.

Conclusion

Cultural criticism is of all times. Socrates blamed the young of his day for having bad manners and being only interested in luxury; 'O tempora, O mores!', Cicero famously exclaimed; 'Our fathers, viler than our grandfathers, begot us who are even viler, and we shall bring forth a progeny more degenerate still', thus Horace; Petrarch complained that he lived in a completely

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 69

⁹⁰ *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 62

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 174

uninteresting age; and Descartes grumbled about ‘this time of degeneracy’. There have always been complaints that things were better in the old days. So was Eliot simply singing the same old song of cultural pessimism? At times we might get the impression: for example when we read about the listless apathy of those in the cinema that feast their eyes under the hypnotic influence of continuous music and action that is too rapid for their brain to act upon. There is, however, another way to look at Eliot’s cultural criticism: by relating it to the classicist and humanist values we discussed above. By approaching Eliot as a European humanist, a different view of Eliot than the usual one is suggested. Ideas of culture as a whole and a living cultural tradition permeate his thinking and form the core of his social and cultural philosophy. Eliot’s views are built on a particular perception of man and human culture, a perception that leaves room for human agency and responsibility and holds in high regard human reason. He criticizes the degeneration of the Greek Aristotelean conception of reason, that consisted of both theoretical and practical reason (*phronesis*) into a one-dimensional and instrumental notion of reason, a reason at the service of utilitarian and economic goals. He stresses the importance of historical sense, cultural continuity and a broad liberal education. As a result of this perception of man and culture, he rejects a materialist and determinist perception of man, the worshiping of science and technology, and the use of utilitarian criteria in education.

In some respects, Eliot’s ideas about the interrelation between culture, religion and ethics may seem a bit unwordly, all the more so in the 21st century. In particular, we may have doubts over his attempt to reconcile the ethical with the economical. But as we have seen, the historical context in which Eliot expressed his ideas makes these rather noteworthy. Furthermore, there is more to Eliot’s cultural views than merely criticizing: positive ideals lay behind it. His was a philosophy that was more open to human needs than that of the standard-bearers of the free market. For example, his ideas about human development and his belief that man is a being that should aim to fulfill his potential, both intellectually and socially, imply a rejection of a life that is built around narrow utilitarian goals. It is for this reason that Eliot criticizes the ‘doctrine of progress’ and the ‘over-estimation of the importance of our own time’ in which both the values of our cultural past and those of our future are ignored.⁹² And Eliot goes on to explain what is the true status of economics:

What we can do towards the greatest material well-being of the greatest number is indeed of the utmost importance; but important only so long as we remember that the extent of our accomplishment can be only to remove obstacles in the way of individual self-improvement; such obstacles as want, insecurity, overwork and idleness.⁹³

⁹² T.S. Eliot, ‘A Commentary’, *Criterion* Oct 1932 (12) p.75

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 79