

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-06822-2 - Scrutiny: A Quarterly Review, XVII - 1950-51

Edited by L. C. Knights, H. A. Mason and F. R. Leavis

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Vol. XVII. No. 1

SPRING, 1950

SCRUTINY

A Quarterly Review

Edited by

L. C. KNIGHTS

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MR. ELIOT AND SOCIAL BIOLOGY¹

THE most gratifying thing about Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* is that it could be written at all. First of all, it dispels some of its own gloom. Eliot implies in various places that the England of 1948 shows a deterioration from 1900; he indicates nowhere, as far as I can discover, any belief that England shows an improvement in the same time. Yet it is a striking improvement that a great and influential writer can proceed to his diagnosis of social ills quietly assuming that everyone knows the ills to be there. In the second place, it is bound to have good effects along two important lines of modern thinking: the semantic and the agnostic. It will, to some extent, halt the vicious, disintegrating tendency of semantics to turn all discussion of meaning into mere ingenious exercises with words. No one capable of understanding the book could remain quite comfortable in the conviction that all questions in theology, morals, sociology, are games with words. The book also shows that a man, highly cultured, deeply aware of the strains and difficulties in our society, capable of quite unusual achievement in art and criticism—such a man can hold a definite religion (or, at least, appear to himself to hold a definite religion). Eliot here represents the point in intellectual history at which the agnostic can no longer flatter himself that the intelligent people are all on his side. The general excellences are those we have come to expect in Eliot's work—the illuminating *aperçus* on topics we had imagined to be exhausted, the re-calling of old but forgotten truths or obscured principles, the calm readiness to follow wherever truth beckons, the constant stimulus to bring our own intellects into free and flexible play.

At the same time, no one who has profited by Eliot's literary criticism is likely to feel quite satisfied with his 'social biology'. To offer any disparaging criticism of Eliot is unpleasantly like quarrelling with one's father. To think at all on culture is for so many of us to be conscious of a large debt to him; if we are able to define our disagreement with him, it is largely because he has supplied us with the critical apparatus necessary to such definition. *Notes*, however, provokes much more than mere disagreement—it points to the conclusion that his work is very uneven in significance. As will be indicated later on, the book lends itself to various interpretations; I am concerned, however (as Eliot would put it) not so much 'with extracting a meaning', but with defining one reader's disappointment with what is undoubtedly a weighty achievement from one of the foremost minds of the day.

¹This, coming from Ottawa, continues the symposium opened by G. H. Bantock in Vol. XVI, No. 1.

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For example, an essay of this sort hardly needs all the safeguards Eliot gives it: we find too often the kind of phrase which occurs on p. 48: 'I must constantly remind the reader of the limitations of my subject'. The total effect of these safeguards is to give the essay an unpleasant resemblance to a purely political speech in which all objections and criticisms are forestalled and the speaker commits himself as little as possible. His opening statement of aim: 'to help to define a word, the word *culture*' (p. 13) is an example of playing too safe. Hardly anyone knows better than Eliot that a good book on culture will be good very largely because it is something to argue over; one can hardly argue over the desire of any man that a particular word be defined in a particular way. The book is too long if he aims merely at lexicography; his purpose is too narrow if he avoids all 'outline of social or political philosophy'. Culture can hardly be discussed in this isolated way, since social philosophy is an attempt to be truly wise about the well-being of society—the very aim of Eliot at least in Chapter II (The Class and the Elite), and Chapter V (Culture and Politics).

As a general weakness, one may note the absence—the annoying, frustrating absence—of the very quality which has made Eliot's literary criticism so stimulating, so influential—the constant recurrence to the concrete case. Without particular illustrations it is difficult either to clarify general ideas or to control one's 'impressions personnelles' in such a way that they may be 'érigées en lois'. In culture as in literature the sensitive intelligent handling of the particular case is more important than any general consideration by itself.

The essay supplies us with evidence that, in the field of social biology, his mind is not the finely adjusted, delicately probing instrument it is in his criticism. On page 89, for example, he presents as distinctly modern the view that 'culture is regarded either as a negligible by-product which can be left to itself or as a department of life to be organized in accordance with the particular scheme we favour'. If the evidence to the contrary were not so overwhelming, one would be inclined to think that Eliot had never heard of Sparta, Augustus or Richelieu: the effort to 'organize culture' is very ancient, very persistent, and obviously it can be organized only in accordance with the scheme someone favours. We are left groping in unnecessary darkness on page 90: 'the differences between the several European nations in the past were not wide enough to make their peoples see their cultures as different to the point of conflict and incompatibility'. 'In the past' is much too vague for a discussion such as this; besides, at *no* time were the *peoples* conscious enough of their culture to be aware of compatibility or incompatibility. Cromwell, the St. Bartholomew massacre, the Roman proscriptions are all reminders that 'liquidating enemies' is not an 'alarming development of modern war' (p. 59). We have, of course, become more efficient at liquidating large numbers at once, but that is quite another matter. These are all small points; but if Eliot were to read his essay with the same powers of observation he brings to

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his reading of, say, Arnold, he would, I am sure, find many more.

This general impression may be reinforced by examining the particular kind of detachment from the practical sphere which is found throughout. The disinterested love of truth for its own sake, detachment from practical convenience to oneself or to one's side or party, this is so rare and so noble a quality that we must salute it and be grateful for it when we find it, especially when it spurs to action so fine a mind as Eliot's. But if we tend to seek only that part of truth which suits us, there is the opposite danger that the pursuit of truth can be detached to the point of an unhealthy aloofness.

For example, he seems to show no consciousness of many important factors which are having a visible effect on culture to-day. He neglects the inevitable impact of material, especially of economic, forces on society. His discussion of Regionalism in Chapter III seems to leave blandly out of account the statement on p. 121: 'in the world of the future, it looks as if every part of the world would affect every other part'. Rapid transport and easy communication which make Europe, in a definable sense, smaller than Wales was two hundred years ago; the constant assimilation which is going on within the English-speaking world; the need for a mobile force of workers with which to maintain activity in our productive machinery: such factors shift the whole basis for regional differentiation. There are needed also public policies which can be made plausible to the voters. (To note such needs is not necessarily to admire them: a doctor may have to give a patient stimulants which he knows to be harmful, but without which, for the moment, the patient cannot survive at all.) Similarly, he shows no recognition of the great changes in the forms of wealth which are basically modifying the relations of classes to each other. To put the point unkindly for the moment, as far as Eliot is concerned, *Culture and Environment* might never have been written.

There is a further unhealthy detachment from facts in the way he expresses his dislike of the dirty, the charlatan side of politics.² The evils of politics will continue as they are until sensitive, subtle and flexible minds like Eliot's go into politics; and, however remote the latter possibility may be, perhaps a 'little yeast might leaven the whole mass'. One may cite the footnote, p. 15:

'It is only fair to add, that when it comes to talking nonsense about culture, there is nothing to choose between politicians of one stripe or another. Had the election of 1945 brought the alternative party into power, we should have heard much the same pronouncements in the same circumstances. The pursuit of politics is incompatible with a strict attention to exact meanings on all occasions. The reader should therefore abstain from deriding either Mr. Atlee or the late regretted Miss Wilkinson'.

²Eliot *should* be among the first to see that these evils are particular forms of original sin, and need 'the divine much more than the physician', and much more than the detached observer.

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I find this unpleasantly reminiscent of the schoolboyish antics of Shaw, to whom the 'smart' saying is sometimes more important than fine precision. Eliot's facts may be readily admitted. But the language is distressingly loose, the emphases fall on the wrong places, and the implications are misleading. 'Talking nonsense about culture' is very self-assured for a writer who gives his book so tentative a title much of what Eliot says in this essay might perhaps provoke the same facile comment in the minds of politicians who have to try to do something in the practical field. 'Politicians of one stripe or another', and 'alternative party' are a weak, patronizing way of saying: 'A plague o' both your houses'; they imply some sort of understanding nod to the reader, flattering his intellectual snobbery, and indicating: 'Of course, you and I are above the dirty business of politics'. And it is surprising that a man who believes that in a healthy society

'public affairs would be a responsibility not equally borne a greater responsibility would be inherited by those who inherited special advantages, and in whom self-interest, and interest for the sake of their families (a "stake in the country") would cohere with public spirit'. (p. 84)

affirms also that the pursuit of politics is 'incompatible with a strict attention to exact meanings on all occasions'. *Thoughts After Lambeth*, if nothing else, should remind Eliot that no 'pursuit', not even that of the Anglican episcopacy, is compatible with a strict attention to exact meanings on all occasions. And having been so patronizing to the politicians, it is not surprising that he turns to patronizing the reader, and tells him when not to laugh.

The ideas and the attitudes suggested in the footnote just mentioned are, certainly, details; they are however symptoms of the peculiar barrenness which belong to the observer who is under no obligation to make practical decisions. We cannot indeed demand that a man refrain from criticizing till he demonstrates his practical ability to do better; the validity of Eliot's criticism of *Hamlet* is not at all affected by the inferiority of Eliot to Shakespeare as a playwright. But one can demand that, when he writes on politics, he shows us a sensitive grasp of the practical realities and complex difficulties in which any political decision is made. The footnote seems to indicate the beginnings of a new monasticism—prompted as the ancient Thebaid was by a conviction that 'all flesh is corrupt', and the good must 'keep themselves unspotted from the world'. What is needed to-day, however, is the monasticism not of the Thebaid but of Monte Cassino—the Benedictine flight from the world which was not only compatible with, but imperatively demanded, every possible effort from the monks to help an ailing world. There is no reason for a man of Eliot's prestige and achievement to hesitate about offering some notes towards the definition of a plan of action. He could, at least, be less embarrassingly brief on the 'ideals and obligations of universities' (p. 123). The universities

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are not merely opportunities for acquiring the 'unconscious background of all our planning' (p. 94); they are focal points for resistance to any engulfing barbarism. With all reverence to Eliot's tact and taste, one could dispense with his history of *The Criterion* to make room for more precise suggestions on what the universities might reasonably hope to do, and also (since Eliot knows the publishing business from the inside) on what the publishers might be expected to do.

There is the same undesirable aloofness in the concluding remark of Chapter V (p. 94):

'Thus we slip into the assumption that culture can be planned. Culture can never be wholly conscious—there is always more to it than we are conscious of; and it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background of all our planning'.

What he says here is either a truism or misleading. Surely he is hardly denying the elementary principle that the deep unconscious which modifies conscious choice and action is itself largely modified by conscious choice. Even if he has forgotten his Aristotle: 'What end a man considers worth pursuing depends on the character he has (deliberately) built', he can not have forgotten his Shakespeare:

Men's judgments
Are a parcel of their fortunes, and things outward
Do draw the inward quality after them,
To suffer all alike'.

The unconscious is hardly any more important in relation to culture than to good literary criticism; in both, what is now unconscious is embedded in the mind because it was for some time deliberately examined and held. Unless he attaches to *planned* some sense which he does not mention, Eliot is simply negating all the efforts of educators from *The Republic* to *Scrutiny* when he says baldly: 'Culture cannot be planned'. If, as he implies in several places, our society is in a crisis, we might apply to it what Napoleon said of a battle: any plan is better than none. As far as Eliot dissociates himself (as he has a right to) from the planners, the planning is bound to fall into the wrong hands, and something like Nazism or Stalinism is much more likely to emerge than culture.³

It may be the same wrong aloofness that draws him to the idea of 'constantly dining with the Opposition'. Such dining may result, and has resulted, in the blurring of all important distinctions among the parties, and the consequent reduction of Parliament to a friendly club where sham battles are staged on occasion to edify the un-

³It is another illustration of the slackness of Eliot's mind in certain sections that the orderly description of culture on p. 120 is phrased throughout in such a way as to fit either Nazism or Stalinism; some parts fit either of these better than they fit what many believe to be the traditional culture of the West.

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initiated. Genial readiness to mix with one's political enemies is one of the finest traits of English political life; but it can issue in the detachment from all convictions. The 'trahison des clercs' may take the form of prostituting intellect to practical politics or to popular vulgarity; it may take the form (more attractive to the fastidious mind) of refusing, with splendid dignity, to commit oneself to anything practical. If our culture is deteriorating as much as Eliot implies, whose hand is better fitted than his to halt the process, if only by offering us suggestions to argue over? Definitions, even if they run to one hundred and twenty-four pages, are hardly likely to defend the things which Eliot holds really valuable.

He seems to expect (and even to count on) a similar aloofness in the people who will be 'cultured' in the future. There is, I believe, a nest of false assumptions in the remark on p. 120.

'The culture of an artist or a philosopher is distinct from that of a mine worker or field labourer; the culture of a poet will be somewhat different from that of a politician; but in a healthy society these are all parts of the same culture'.

As far as one can judge from the past, these clear-cut distinctions are undesirable; in any society which could call itself 'healthy', some poets would be politicians, the politicians who could would be poets; mine workers would be philosophers, and some philosophers would work in mines. There is no means of knowing whether Eliot would call the England of the first half of the Seventeenth Century 'healthy', but surely the blending of occupations and interests in Ben Jonson, in Bunyan, in Milton, indicates that, while brick-laying, fighting, tinkering, politics are distinct things from poetry, the brick-layer, the tinker and the politician need not be distinct from the poet.

From the sociological point of view there are some further serious omissions and over-simplifications. It seems rather disingenuous to put so much reliance on the family to-day with nothing but the brief reference to *The Peckham Experiment* to indicate the problems and difficulties of the family. On the one hand he seems to take as a fact on which we can be easily agreed that we should (p. 104)

'do better to admit that we have arrived at a stage of civilization at which the family is irresponsible, or incompetent, or helpless; at which parents cannot be expected to train their children properly'.

Since he offers this seriously as better than 'congratulating ourselves when the school assumes another responsibility hitherto left⁴ to the

⁴Many sociologists would object to the word *left*; a number of the responsibilities Eliot has in mind were *left* to the parents simply in the sense that no one else bothered about them; the handling of these responsibilities is a complex matter for which parents have seldom received the necessary training.

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parents', it would not seem that he is speaking ironically. Yet (p. 43):

'the primary and the most important channel of transmission of culture is the family. . . . When I speak of the family, I have in mind a bond which embraces a long period of time: a piety towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote'.

He does not indicate how he expects the family to pass from what it is to what it should be; he does not indicate even one condition which is likely to bring the transition about; he offers nothing on the host of conditions which at present are working so powerfully against the family.

From a 'student of social biology' one would have expected some clarification of the distinction between *society* and the *state*. One of the most urgent (and one of the most difficult) problems in social biology is to allow the state all the power it needs to safeguard and foster all that may safely be entrusted to it, while not allowing it to absorb and control every form of communal or social activity. Except for the weakly-defined admiration for the family, and the fertile but undeveloped statement on the universities (p. 123), Eliot seems hardly to recognize the problem, much less to help us out of it. The question: What kind of institution is likely in the future to be strong enough to resist successfully the all-devouring state authority, this is the question to which Chapter V (*Culture and Politics*) suggests no answer. Eliot might, of course, plead that he is not pretending to account for all the necessary conditions for a flourishing culture. But, in the first place, this problem of state and society is really the concrete form of the general problem of individual and group or social culture; and besides, unless we find a means of making our modern Leviathan powerful enough without allowing it to subdue us all, the problems of Chapter V do not arise. The absence of such discussion has the effect of strengthening the general impression of remoteness which clings to so much of the essay; at practically no point does Eliot give the impression of a concrete situation firmly grasped by the writer and clearly presented to the reader. The few references he makes to actual situations are strangely timid and circumscribed.

The most serious omission is the lack of standards either stated or implied. Eliot is far too fine a critic not to know that social criticism, like literary criticism, implies the examination of the particular case in the light of the general consideration. As he puts it himself, for instance, in *The Use of Poetry* (p. 133), one cannot sensibly contemplate 'man's place in the perspective of time, unless one brings to its contemplation some belief that there is a sense and a meaning in the place of human history in the history of the world'. Yet in spite of keeping so aloof from the practical sphere, he suggests no general principle of discrimination among the various types of culture. This omission of judgments of value is all the more surprising in view of his previous remark:

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'if . . . you had no faith in the critic's ability to tell a good poem from a bad one, you would put little reliance upon the validity of his theories'. (*The Use of Poetry*, p. 17).

There is one point on which the Transatlantic reader particularly feels disappointment, and that is the lack of sympathetic reference to America. Eliot is, undoubtedly, entitled to his own opinion and his own conclusions; and there is no reason for turning an article such as the present into an *apologia* for the United States. But it is rather surprising that the two references to the United States (pp. 45, 92) fit so easily into a pattern of thinking which, superficial, misleading and rather mischievous, has become common in England in the last ten years. Eliot's few remarks can do no one any harm, and they can hardly be controverted. But the future of culture will depend to some extent on the degree in which England and the United States influence each other and pool their mental resources. Few Americans would deny that in such an exchange, England has more to offer than to receive. But if England is to be, as we may hope, the 'Athens of the future', there will be needed both a fuller recognition of the generosity (of mind and heart as well as purse) with which Americans handle their dealings with other peoples, and an appreciation of what is healthy and encouraging in the American spirit. If it is assumed as so many assume (I do not say Eliot himself) that the only developed instincts in the United States are the acquisitive and the sexual,⁵ that American scholarship, outside the sciences, is matter for amused contempt, that we must get along with the Americans since they have so much economic power, if these and similar assumptions are uppermost in the minds of Englishmen, then the fruitful co-operation between the two countries becomes impossible—to the detriment of each. One cannot help wishing that Eliot had given, as his special training and position enabled him to give, some positive leadership towards a fuller, more articulated understanding between the intelligent people of both countries. It is not the universities of Europe alone (*cf.* p. 125) which should have their 'common ideals and obligations'; to put it in the way least flattering to American sentiment, the universities of the United States have much to learn from those of England, and the latter have some obligations in the matter.

The English Government (Conservative, Coalition, Socialist) has for many years been aware of the importance of cultivating friendly relations with America, and of helping Americans to understand British points of view. It is important then that the channels of cultured exchange should be cleared of obstructions as much as possible. It is only the Beaverbrooks on the one side, and the McCormicks on the other, who imagine that the relations between the two countries can be thought of as clever begging by the English and noisy imperialism on the part of the Americans. It is much to

To those who have never lived in the United States, Dos Passos' *USA* can be very misleading.

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be regretted that the few words Eliot has said could be turned so easily to their own purposes by both the Beaverbrooks and the McCormicks. It is still more to be regretted that, in an essay which insists so much and so rightly on the inter-communion of cultural societies, he should give no indication of how the major economic force in the world is to be integrated more organically into the culture of the West. For few people are better fitted for this than Eliot. The Appendix on *The Unity of European Culture* was an admirable opportunity to express in terms of culture what is a commonplace in terms of diplomacy, that the borders of the United States lie in Europe; and from the cultural point of view, this is only another way of saying that Europe stretches to the Pacific. What Europe becomes in the next fifty years will depend to some extent on what Europe has helped America to become.

The least satisfactory section is that on religion. The whole chapter, *Unity and Diversity*, leaves us with only the cloudiest notions of what 'faith', 'theology', and 'religion' mean to Eliot. The chapter does indeed contain a refreshingly factual account of the development of the Church of England (p. 79); but he takes even more precautions than Hollywood to ensure that no mention of religion be offensive to anyone, with the result that he commits himself to nothing and appears to be convinced of nothing in particular. He seems also to forget that religion, like culture, lies largely in the unconscious part of one's mind; only an external concept of religion, limited to rites and professed creeds, could lead him to say that 'all Anglican and Free Church lay men are exposed to the same environment of a culture severed from religion' (p. 79). Surely he is aware that the British constitution, property laws, Socialist ideas and ideals, the whole concept of what a government is and what it is for, all these things are what they are largely through the Christianity embedded in them. Even on Eliot's own showing the phrase, *a culture severed from religion*, is inaccurate since

'an individual European may not believe that the Christian Faith, is true, and yet what he says, and makes, and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depend upon that culture for its meaning' (p. 122).

The vagueness of his terms becomes much more unsatisfactory when we come to such a pronouncement as: 'If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes' (p. 122). Eliot here seems to subscribe to a view which is just as much a matter of intellectual fashion to-day as the opposite was a hundred years ago. Eliot rightly deprecates the nineteenth-century view that religion does not matter; here, however, he attached more importance to religion than even Christopher Dawson. From the historical point of view it seems strange that a culture which produced a large number of its greatest works of art before the birth of Christ should become so dependent on Christianity that its vitality and fecundity must disappear if Christianity disappears.