T.S. Eliot: Poet and Critic as Historical Theorist

By Scott Weidner

Most people suppose that some people, because they enjoy the luxury of Christian sentiments and the excitement of Christian ritual, swallow or pretend to swallow incredible dogma. For some the process is exactly opposite. Rational assent may arrive late, intellectual conviction may come slowly, but they come inevitably without violence to honesty and nature. To put the sentiments in order is a later, and immensely difficult task: intellectual freedom is earlier and easier than complete spiritual freedom. <1>

-- Thomas Stearns Eliot <1>

Many writers, philosophers, and artists contribute theories to the field of history without intending to do so. Because most writers and philosophers write about the past at some point or another, and because artists do not create in a vacuum, but in the context of cultural tradition, they often develop ideas about why and how past events occurred as they did and postulate what might take place in the future. For example, historian Karl Lowith's *Meaning in History* examines the historical theories of Comte, Condorcet, Voltaire, Bossuet, Joachim, and Augustine, thinkers who probably never thought of themselves as historians in the formal sense.

Thomas Stearns Eliot, best known for writing "The Waste Land," which literature scholars still study and acknowledge as *the* poem of the twentieth century, also wrote literary criticism and cultural philosophies. In confronting the world and its past, present, and future in art and philosophy, Eliot developed an approach to history as complex and mature as any professional historian's. Like Vico and Toynbee, Eliot viewed history in terms of the development of cultures. Grounding himself in the absolute authority of Anglo-Catholic Christianity, Eliot posited religion as the source of all cultures, describing how these cultures develop through the dynamic interactions of unity and diversity, tradition and novelty, and individual perspective and cultural context. Unlike the Enlightenment historians and their heirs, he did not see progress as an escalating improvement in culture, but as the regeneration of cultural tradition. Like many thinkers of his time, Eliot believed Western culture was a fragmentary mess. He cited the decay of religion -- the source of culture -- and tradition -- the permanence of culture -- as the cause of cultural collapse. Though he believed this decay had proceeded too far to be easily reversed, he enjoined thinkers to adopt his theories and draw hope from the understanding they provided. And though Eliot was staunchly conservative in outlook and disposition, his focus on individual perspective made him one of the fathers of post-modem thought.

Born to a well-established Anglo-American family in 1888, Eliot confronted both the early twentieth century's frightening alienation and the collapse of the Western bourgeois synthesis. Western thought had replaced the Christian religion with a combination of capital, progress, and the reification of natural science and positive philosophy. The disaster of world war had proved to Eliot and thinkers like him that the stomping progress of technology and material wealth without a broader meaning or system of values was

bankrupt and hopeless. Since the Renaissance, philosophers had tried to fill the vacuum left by the abandonment of Christianity, but no system they could devise had the authority of traditional religion. Their faith gone and its substitute revealed as an ineffectual charlatan, the Europeans and Americans stumbled about in a shellshocked daze, desperately scrabbling for a foothold of hope and authority and able to find none. Eliot, who detailed this alienation in poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land," himself participated in this search, exploring the philosophy of Henri Bergson, Eros, aestheticism, humanism, idealism, and even Buddhism for doctrines to explain and repair the fragmentation of culture. <2>

Eliot's disposition and intellectual rigor required something more substantial to solve his inner conflicts; the philosophies were, no matter how urgently presented and grasped, wispy artificial constructs, and Eliot feared that Buddhism, though an admirable religion, could strip him of his identity as a Westerner. Five years after writing "The Waste Land," he found the stability he sought, converting to Anglicanism in 1927. As he had grown up in the Unitarian Church, a faith which watered down Christianity to make it amenable to Enlightenment thought, and which Eliot believed encouraged skepticism rather than belief, this conversion constituted a completely new belief system for Eliot. <3> It would shape everything he wrote, from poetry to drama to criticism, from that point onward. It would also provide the foundations of his cultural and historical theories.

From this religious basis, Eliot formulated the most basic tenet of his cultural theory, that religion and culture are essentially "related." <4> In fact, Eliot argued that "no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion: according to the point of view of the observer, the culture [appears] to be the product of the religion, or the religion the product of the culture." <5> They might be thought of as different aspects of the same thing; culture was "the incarnation of the religion of a people." <6> Civilizations which appeared to be secular or humanistic, such as ancient Greece and Rome, were actually religious cultures in decline. <7> Culture could not be preserved, extended, or developed in the absence of religion, nor could religion be preserved and maintained if culture was not. <8>

Eliot reached this connection between religion and culture because he lived in a time in which he saw people, including himself, wandering aimlessly in search of meaning, and because he was finally able to find meaning through Anglicanism. There is much evidence, however, that his conversion was not a conversion of passionate belief, but a conversion of will. Eliot had reached the end of his philosophical rope and so turned reluctantly but determinedly to the last available source of authority and meaning. His friend Virginia Woolf said of his conversion that "a corpse would seem to me more credible than he is." <9> E.M. Forster noted that he was "not a mystic. [His work] contains several well-turned compliments to religion and Divine Grace, but no trace of religious emotion He has not got it; what he seeks is not revelation, but stability." <10> This said more about the context of Eliot's Christianity and its importance to his cultural theory than it does about his belief itself; Eliot was certainly a sincere Christian who openly acknowledged the intellectualism of his conversion (note my opening quote). <11> He believed that, as Christianity did so for him, "any religion, while it lasts, and on

its own level, gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture, and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair." <12>

Culture, according to Eliot, began in primitive societies as a unified entity, then expanded and specialized, developing a dynamic relationship between its unity and diversity. The aspects of culture, which included religion, politics, science, and art, gradually became distinct from one another; the witch doctor and the king came to have different roles. As they diverged in interests and goals, these societal divisions struggled with one another for dominance, their competition pushing them to flower and prosper. <13> Despite this rivalry, no aspect of culture -- urbanity and civility, learning, philosophy, the arts, and so on -- could flourish independently of the others. Few definitions of culture included all of the attributes which might be considered, but no one of them alone could confer the wholeness of culture.<14>

Culture, out of necessity, had many other divisions. In one of his most controversial assertions, Eliot insisted that, for a culture to be transferred hereditarily, that culture must preserve its social classes. <15> Culture, to Eliot, was not some exalted holding of the upper classes, but the sum total of the activities of all classes. The upper classes merely preserved the more specialized and conscious domains of culture. Privilege rewarded the efforts of the upper classes, and familial love inspired them to pass this privilege and culture on to their children. <16> Eliot emphasized that he was not interested in the aristocracy as a ruling class so much as the specialized gradation of classes, in which the aristocracy played an important role.

How does the contemporary mind deal with Eliot's seeming endorsement of inequality? Well, to give him the benefit of the doubt, not all people are created equal. Many people have talents and gifts which set them apart from others; others may have deficiencies or handicaps which make them less competent or able than others. Eliot believed that "a democracy in which everybody had an equal responsibility in everything would be oppressive for the conscientious and licentious for the rest." <17> Perhaps this makes sense; the logical conclusion is a merit-based rule, is it not? Well, no, not for Eliot. He toyed with the idea of rule by an elite who rose to prestige and power by their abilities, but rejected it, worried that an elite would not have the social commonality and camaraderie that the classes would; he had not seen an elite system work. An elite system would also serve to disenfranchise the masses from their duties and privileges within society. Eliot did not reserve much sympathy for the unwashed masses, but they are almost as important to his system as the upper classes. <18> The unity of each class would facilitate the passing on of their cultural trusts to their posterity, and it took all of the classes working in tandem for the process to work.

Had Eliot ever experienced the essence of working class life and what it meant to work with his hands for a working class wage? Probably not. He never asserted that members of the upper class are better people than the masses, although his passions and upbringing suggested such chauvinism, but his theories reified the high classes' position in society and allowed for little or no social mobility. He spoke out against the "overeducation" of working people, believing it lowered overall standards of learning and was unnecessary.

<19> Only Marxists would argue hotly against Eliot in favor of a classless society, but Eliot should have been able to appreciate a society in which social mobility was possible, if not easy, and in which the best members of society could rise to positions of leadership. Despite the flawed execution of its ideals, the United States of America had always striven for such a society, and many European countries had followed suit by Eliot's time. Nevertheless, the class system was necessary to the unity and diversity in Eliot's cultural theory.

Eliot also looked for this dynamic in geographic regions within culture and in the religion of the culture. He believed that in a healthy culture, several regions surrounded a dominant central region. People in the central region had a nationalistic allegiance to the culture, while people living in the satellite regions balanced their loyalties between their region and the larger culture. The distinct character of the subculture then contributed a wider perspective and special flavor to the generally blander, less passionate central culture.

The friction between these regions bolstered creativity and kept the entire culture fresh. Imbalance-whether in the form of exaggerated regional conflict, which endangered the culture, or cultural uniformity, which threatened other cultures as the central culture sought new satellites-had to be vigorously avoided. Eliot cited the relationship between the regions of Great Britain-England, as a dominant nation, and Scotland and Wales, as satellites-as an example of regional unity and diversity. <20> Also important was unity and diversity within religion, which, religion being the lynchpin of culture, linked the other two aspects of unified diversity. Although the entirety of a culture should have subscribed to the same religious doctrines, sects and cults should have healthily varied by class and region as well as conviction. This way, the believer could follow his or her conscience regarding religious practice as an individual or as a member of a class or region. Sect and cult thus helped both the gradations of class and distinctions of regions have a voice in society. <21>

To Eliot, the prime mover of culture was the preservation of tradition in a constantly changing world. All of the aspects of culture he enumerated, but especially class, worked to maintain tradition and keep it fresh. Yes, the world changed, and culture expressed itself in new ways as time passed, but in order for these expressions to have structure and context, a body of the best past expressions and ways of life had to endure. Tradition was not a symptom of antiquarian stuffiness, but rather the preservation of something from the past for an appropriately timely use in the present. <22> This tradition, this canon of continuingly accepted expressions, periodically took in new material, new stimuli which kept it relevant to the present. This evolutionary development was not just a shift in quantity, but also in quality, as the new information changed the culture's perception of the older matter. <23> As Eliot described it:

the artist] must be aware that the mind of Europe [Western culture] -- the mind of his own country -- a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind-is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer,

or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen . . . the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show. <24>

In other words, what historians had over the makers of history was hindsight, the ability to understand the context of events and activities as was not possible while they were taking place. Tradition's purpose lay not in futile antiquarianism, but in improving the present, and by extension, the future. <25> If a teaching or tradition had no proper use or relevance to a contemporary culture, the culture

threw that teaching out. <26> Studying past cultures gave the present culture a different perspective by which it could become more selfaware through the contrast. <27> At the same time, cultural expression could not simply study the traditional canon, but had to constantly strive to build upon it. If the propagation of culture fell into decay, not only would there be no present culture, but the culture would lose touch with its past and lose all sense of being a culture. <28> A robust culture would apply its generational reflection of mercurially changing standards to the canon. Every new addition to tradition would change the contemporary perspective, giving the society a larger tradition than it had before, a new criterion of appreciation. <29> Each generation had a different interpretation of each work of culture which was appropriate to its time. <30> Eliot's was a progressive theory, not one of hope for steady and inevitable improvement, but one of regenerative utility.

If this view of tradition sounded very relativistic, it also provided a modicum of security, stability, and virtual absolutism. The community as a whole held a common perspective which acted as a grounding, a mortar, for the various individual perspectives within it. This communal prejudice provided a standard of "objectivity" that all within the culture accepted. <31> The preservation of the past and induction of new ideas in tradition served to enlarge this consensus, providing a greater field of objectivity. <32> Eliot felt that language was one of the prime detern-dners and vehicles of expression of a cultural world view; language defined a civilization's perspective. <33> He believed poets made their greatest contribution to their culture by expressing the inexpressible, expanding the language and thus the consciousness of their society. <34>

This communal background stood as the context for the experience of the individual in the world. Personal identity was very important to Eliot's personal concept and to his philosophy, and most of that identity came from the culture in which one had been raised and had learned to think. World view, culture, tradition-the individual learned all through his or her native society, and they composed much of what that person was. Hence Eliot's fear of losing his "Westernness," which kept him from converting to Buddhism. Language, the expression of culture, was another practice Eliot guarded fiercely:

One of the reasons for learning at least one foreign language well is that we acquire a kind of supplementary personality; one of the reasons for not acquiring a new language *instead* of our own is that most of us do not want to become a different person. <35>

Despite the need to preserve identity, the best way for an individual to recognize and understand identity was to explore other cultures and, especially, to cultivate aesthetic experience. Eliot believed the experience of art not only brought people greater joy, but also greater self-understanding:

It is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation. <36>

Art appreciation served to organize tastes, beliefs, and experiences into a whole, satisfying the human desire for unity and self-realization. It was "a fusion of what was not oneself with oneself," developing and becoming "more [one]self by becoming more not [one]self." <37> Reflexively, the self-awareness granted by the study of art facilitates the understanding of other aspects of art and culture the individual might encounter. <38>

This concept of the individual in relation to his or her culture and to the rest of the world served as a central point in Eliot's philosophy. Grounded in Anglican belief, Eliot insisted upon the imperfectability of humanity. No one could see with a perfect, holistic, unprejudiced, "God's-eye view." A human being who tried to see with such unstructured sight saw nothing at all. <39> However, though total objectivity was beyond reach, Eliot believed that tremendous empathy, effort, and understanding could make it possible to merge one's horizons with those of an artist or another human being, and thus broaden those horizons. <40>

Eliot also asserted the individual's role in bringing a perspective to a work of art. The standard for interpretation was not the intent of the artist , but rather the reading of the observer, who might be viewing the work from a much later perspective. <41> Moreover, that perspective was not just the worldview of the interpreter's culture, as discussed earlier, but a wholly unique, individual bias. <42> This focus on individual perspective, which approached relativism but had groundings in Eliot's beliefs in religion, local cultures, and traditions, made him one of the primary literary innovators toward post-modern thought.

Eliot's willingness to allow innovation within what appeared to be a very conservative scheme stemmed from his belief that a healthy culture depended on a balance between the old and the new. If many now interpret him as a stuffy reactionary, he only emphasized tradition so fervently because of the times in which he lived. <43> The rapid change of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries threatened to whisk away Western tradition in a Heraclitian hurricane. Eliot wanted to sound alarms to stop the rapid decay of tradition; temporary reification of that tradition seemed to him the best way to preserve it. Eliot's cultural theory was no absolute theory of history -- though he did have a scheme for what had happened and what should happen -- but rather a diagnosis of the modern malaise and a plan of action for how to deal with it.

Eliot's Anglicanism was, of course, the root of all of his theories. His Christianity did not sit well with many of his contemporaries, who uncomfortably dismissed it as a throwback to the Dark Ages. <44> In fact, his colleagues often made him feel like an outsider after his conversion. <45> Indeed, as already indicated, Eliot himself found the path to belief a tremendous struggle, but the Christian scheme which would provide the stability he sought would work no other way. <46> The alternatives, particularly secular humanism, provided no solace; its ethics comprised "a s stem of morals which seem[ed] to be founded on nothing but itself. <47> Religion seemed to him the much more viable alternative:

The religious habits of the race are still very strong, in all places, at all times, and for all people. There is no humanistic habit: humanism is, I think, merely the state of mind of a few persons in a few places at a few times. To exist at all, it is dependent upon some other attitude, for it is essentially critical -- I would even say parasitical. It has been and can still be, of great value; but it will never provide showers of partridges or abundance of manna for the chosen peoples. <48>

What particularly set Eliot apart from Enlightenment, humanistic, progressive thinkers was his fundamental belief that perfection was reserved for God. Humanity could improve itself, but there would always be an unattainable flawlessness that the race could look to as incentive to improve further. The Platonic absolute could be imagined but not won. <49> If Joachim and the Enlightenment thinkers he influenced predicted a perfected earth, Eliot could not be absolutely optimistic:

We have to remember that the Kingdom of Christ on earth will never be realised; we must remember that whatever reform or revolution we carry out, the result will always be a sordid travesty of what human society should be-though the world is never left wholly without glory. <50>

In the twentieth century, Western civilization was far from Eliot's cultural ideal. After his conversion, Eliot believed that the culture was falling apart not just for its abandonment of tradition, but also for its neglect of Christianity. According to his theory, the past two thousand years of European culture rested on the Christian foundation. Unfortunately, modernism and skepticism had eroded the Christian basis, and what Europe and America had left to them was a negative society which could not succeed either economically or spiritually. To Eliot, the options for endurance were to either establish a new Christian society, or enact a positive pagan society -- an idea which curdled Eliot's blood. <51> The new Christian society would not force belief on all those living within it, but would instead operate under rigorous Christian value systems under the custodianship of an elite called the Community of Christians. <52> Eliot noted that, in the situation in which he wrote, modern society was hostile to Christianity, promoting un-Christian aims; therefore, society would have to be re-organized to conform to Christianity. <53> Moreover, in the interests of promoting religion and tradition, a uniform system of education would be executed. <54> A National Church similar to the Church of England would exist in tandem with, but not controlling or under the control of, the state. <55>

Eliot's Christian society may appear to be a megalomaniacal projection of his own beliefs on the entire culture. Still, others have proposed utopias, and they, too, drew from their own beliefs and dreams. For Eliot, nothing else would suffice in what increasingly appeared to him to be a morally bankrupt and spiritually desperate society:

The number of people in possession of any criteria for discriminating between good and evil is very small; the number of the half-alive hungry for any form of spiritual experience, or what offers itself as spiritual experience, high or low, good or bad, is considerable. <56>

Significantly, Eliot put forward his proposal for a Christian society shortly after his England, his chosen homeland, abandoning principle in Eliot's eyes, knuckled under to Adolf Hitler in the crisis of September 1938. <57>

In essence, Thomas Stearns Eliot's theory of history was not concerned with wars or great political events and movements, nor was it a typical Enlightenment theory of progress. These it replaced with the monolithic flow of tradition, a tradition passed from generation to generation with an occasional infusion of novelty to keep it appropriate to the times. This dynamic combination posited a conservative tradition which kept itself fresh through the struggles and growth of its new artists and philosophers. It was Eliot's hope that such a firm tradition would save what he feared was otherwise a doomed culture. In short, his theory was that of a conservatively-minded critic and artist who was intently interested in laying out a future course for Western civilization.

Eliot died in 1965. What would he have thought of the student riots at Columbia University and what they said about the future of authority and tradition? What would he have thought about the youth cultures of the United States and Europe in the 1960s? What would he have thought of the spread of feminism, multiculturalism, and relativism? Of the decline of Christian practice and traditional moral values? All have called for an end to Western tradition. Needless to say, Christianity, abandoned in the West with an increasing sense of lethargy, has played little role in cultural preservation in the past half-century. Doubtless Eliot would pronounce his life's work and efforts a failure and say a prayer for the soul of Western culture. Still, despite the intellectual and moral difficulties contemporary life presents, a richer community demographic now contributes to our culture; more races, religions, and genders speak the peace of their fresh Eliotic perspectives to change culture as we know it and as Eliot knew it. These groups have found their voices both through religious cult (the non-violent Christian efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. come to mind), as Eliot might have predicted, and through allegiance to ideals which haven't proved nearly so insubstantial as Eliot thought. To Eliot, due to Western hegemony, Western civilization meant, by extension, world civilization. Now many other cultures play a much larger role in defining world civilization. If the postmodern world seems morally bankrupt, human beings are becoming increasingly accountable to one another; if society has not embraced Christianity as a panacea for aimlessness, each individual is learning to follow his or her own path rather than marching on a unified path in a group; distinct perspective no longer indicates aimlessness. Even if the currently subordinate state of tradition might disappoint Eliot, a

much more open, inclusive, and diverse human family, a unity in diversity he might have appreciated, will contribute to the tradition of tomorrow.

Notes

1 Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1952), p. 491.

2 Jewel Spears Brooker, ed., *The Placing of T. S. Eliot* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1988), p. 6.

3 Brooker, p. 16.

4 Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 87.

5 Ibid.

6 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 101.

7 Ibid.

8 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 102.

9 Burton Raffel, *T. S. Eliot* (New York: Continuum, 1991), p. 110.

10 Raffel, p. 111.

11 Raffel, p. 133.

12 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 108.

13 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 97.

14 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 95.

15 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 87.

16 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 121.

17 Ibid.

18 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 120.

19 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 178.

20 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 126.

21 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 156.

22 Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Frontiers of Culture* (lecture, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 19.

23 Lewis Freed, *T. S. Eliot: The Critic as Philosopher* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purclue University Press, 1979), p. 102.

24 Freed, pp. 101-2.

25 Richard Shusterman, *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 189.

26 Shusterman, p. 112.

27 Shusterman, p. 170.

28 Shusterman, p. 183.

29 Eliot, *Frontiers*, p. 4.

30 Eliot, *Frontiers*, p. 15.

31 Shusterman, p. 170.

32 Shusterman, p. 175.

33 Shusterman, p. 180.

34 Shusterman, p. 184.

35 Shusterman, p. 181.

36 Shusterman, p. 132.

37 Ibid.

38 Shusterman, p. 115.

39 Shusterman, p. 168.

40 Shusterman, p. 113.

41 Shusterman, p. 116.

42 Eliot, *Frontiers*, p. 16.

43 Shusterman, p. 182.

44 Brooker, p. 140.

45 Brooker, p. 11.

46 Brooker, p. 21.

47 Eliot, *Essays*, p. 485.

48 Eliot, *Essays*, p. 473.

49 Eliot, *Essays*, p. 490.

50 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 47.

51 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 10.

52 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 23.

53 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 27.

54 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 33.

55 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 41.

56 Brooker, p. 149.

57 Eliot, *Christianity*, p. 51.

Return to the 1992-3 Table of Contents