

# The Poetry and Culture of T. S. Eliot

Raymond Southall

It is peculiarly significant that T.S. Eliot, whose standing as a poet is so dependent upon our appreciation of what it is to be modern, should have argued so successfully for the rehabilitation of Donne and that in doing this should have presented him as a poet of unified sensibility. Sometime after (or maybe about) the time of Donne, Eliot came to believe, a 'dissociation of sensibility' set in from which we have never recovered<sup>1</sup>. He claimed later that he was surprised that this phrase, 'dissociation of sensibility,' had attracted so much attention, but he was probably being coy<sup>2</sup>. The attention the phrase received expressed a deep concern for cultural collapse in the twentieth century far more than it revealed any widespread interest in the social and artistic psychology of the seventeenth century. That concern was certainly felt by Eliot and is central to his poetic achievement.

Yeats, who also felt that the social order was falling apart, observed in one of his poems that 'the centre cannot hold.'<sup>3</sup> That remark sums up the initial impression left by Eliot's poetry. Eliot's early and most important poetry seems to lack a central, unifying point of view. There is a vision evident in it, but it is a vision of the fragmentary character of modern life, which renders the poems themselves fragmentary. Indeed, his poetry repeatedly concentrates our attention upon fragments; it seems to record what one poem calls 'a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends' and to be made up of what another poem calls 'these fragments I have shored against my ruins.'<sup>4</sup> So that one's first recollection of Eliot's poems is impressionistic: the memory 'throws up high and dry A crowd of twisted things.' 'A heap of broken images'<sup>5</sup>. One remembers the poems as a patchwork of lines such as those which became so fashionable in the 'twenties and 'thirties:

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table . . . . . ('Prufrock')

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons . . . . .

This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper. ('The Hollow Men')

The impression created is that of clever but inconsequential conversation, pervaded by boredom, disillusionment and a general despair of modern life:

'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
'Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.  
'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
'I never know what you are thinking. Think.'  
(*'The Waste Land'* II, 111-4)

Those lines from *The Waste Land* illustrate what I mean by inconsequential conversation. A few lines later the same neurotic female character expresses the tedium which Eliot presents as typical of modern life:

'What shall I do now? What shall I do?  
'I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street  
'With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?  
'What shall we ever do?'

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.  
(II, 131-8)

Such lines, it might be argued, represent with a fair degree of accuracy the highly-strung and tedious existence of the idle rich. But Eliot's observation has nothing to do with class and Eliot makes this quite plain when he follows the passage just quoted with the conversation of working-class women in a pub:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—  
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,  
HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME  
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.  
He'll want to know what you done  
with that money he gave you  
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.  
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,  
He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.  
And no more can't I, and think of poor Albert,  
He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,  
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.  
Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.  
Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me  
a straight look. (II, 139-51)

The landlord's reminder that it is closing time, 'HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME,' is repeated several times later in this episode and serves to make the more general point that 'we' are in crisis. Apart from this admonition, however, all that the conversation in the pub adds to our view of the plight of

modern existence is the impression that working-class life is centered upon having a good time and false teeth. As we shall see later, the sordidness of this is typical of Eliot's view of working-class women in *The Waste Land* and it is caricatured later in this episode by references to child-bearing and abortion:

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.  
 (And her only thirty-one.)  
 I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,  
 It's them pills I took to bring it off, she said,  
 (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)  
 (II, 156-60)

The point that I wish to make is that despite its fragmented and episodic character, there are certain persistent attitudes in Eliot's poetry. I've already glanced at one or two of these and I suggest that it is these attitudes which shape and fashion Eliot's vision of modern life. This can be clearly seen in another of the female portraits in *The Waste Land*, the portrait of a typist.

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.  
 Out of the window perilously spread  
 Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays.  
 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)  
 Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays. . . .  
 He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
 A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare.  
 One of the low on whom assurance sits  
 As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.  
 The time is now propitious, as he guesses.  
 The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
 Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
 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 . . . .  
 Bestows one final patronising kiss,  
 And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . . . .  
 She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
 Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
 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.  
 (III, 222-56)

To begin with, Eliot creates an impression of the seediness of the typist's life—her breakfast things have been lying around all day, she eats out of tins, she wears combinations and her underwear is strewn upon the divan.

This continues a theme of *The Waste Land* already encountered in the scene of working-class women in the pub and the same theme is announced at the beginning of the section which contains the typist passage, in lines which allude to the river's

empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
Or other testimony of summer nights. (III, 5-7)

The seediness of the river, even if one misses the coy glance at contraceptives, is that of the life and interests of the working-class women in the pub and of the typist. So, having produced an impression of a sluttish typist and a grubby venue, Eliot proceeds to introduce her lover, 'the expected guest'. He is carbuncular, his face covered with unsightly lumps; a person of no importance, 'A *small* house agent's clerk,' 'one of the low,' with all the vulgar assurance of a self-made millionaire from the industrial north, where 'muck is brass.' To reinforce the distastefulness of the scene, then, Eliot employs crude snobbery. In fact, he brings together three snob attitudes to produce the impression of the young man: that of the bourgeois looking down on the lower orders: that of the old established bourgeois looking down on the *nouveaux riches*; and that of the southerner looking down on the northerner. What then follows is a description of the love-making of the lower orders: the typist, bored and indifferent, passively accepting her role as an object of male gratification—we are reminded of the conversation in the pub:

Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,  
What you get married for if you don't want children?

The young man is indifferent to her feelings, lustful, vain and finally patronising.

Having remarked a particular instance, I hardly need to draw attention to the general snobbery with which Eliot presents this entire episode. The typist herself is quite evidently 'one of the low', with the mentality of 'one of the low'—

Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass  
and

She smoothes her hair with *automatic* hand.

In short, she represents a low order of human life.

That the so-called 'lower orders' of society belong to a lower order of life is one of Eliot's most crippling prejudices. It leads him to an elitist attitude to politics and culture and steers him predictably towards fascism and the ultra-right. Like so many of the old school of fascists, Eliot was an anti-semite: Jews are also represented in the poetry as a lower order of life. The foulest expression of this is to be found in a poem of 1920, 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar':

But this or such was Bleistein's way:

A saggy bending of the knees  
 And elbows, with the palms turned out,  
 Chicago Semite Viennese.

A lustreless protrusive eye  
 Stares from the protozoic slime  
 At a perspective of Canaletto.  
 The smoky candle end of time

Declines. On the Rialto once.  
 The rats are underneath the piles.  
 The jew is underneath the lot.  
 Money in furs.

In another 1920 poem, 'Gerontion', Eliot writes,

My house is a decayed house,  
 And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,  
 Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp. . . .

The jew, to Eliot, is not born but 'spawned', a creature of 'the protozoic slime,' a creature lower than the rats.

Eliot later denied that he was anti-semitic, but when we consider the passages just quoted this appears an obvious lie. However, the lie is not quite as obvious as it seems: one needs to place Eliot's view of working-class women and jews in the context of his attitude towards the whole of the human community.

In Eliot's poetry, the human environment is persistently inhuman and squalid:

the cities hostile and towns unfriendly  
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices. . . .  
 ('Journey of the Magi')

faint smells of beer  
 From the sawdust-trampled street  
 With all its muddy feet that press  
 To early coffee-stands.  
 ('Preludes')

One thinks of all the hands  
 That are raising dingy shades  
 In a thousand furnished rooms.

a street piano, mechanical and tired  
 Reiterates some worn-out common song.  
 ('Portrait of a Lady')

The human environment in general has the same depressing character as the typist's room.

The human image, too, is not very different from that of the typist: here are a few representative examples of it as projected in Eliot's poetry.

Sitting along the bed's edge, where  
 You curled the papers from your hair.  
 Or clasped the yellow soles of feet

In the palms of both soiled hands. ('Preludes')

A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,  
Her hand twists a paper rose,  
That smells of dust and eau de Cologne. . . .  
(*Rhapsody on a Windy Night*)

an old man's mouth drivelling, beyond repair.  
(*Ash Wednesday III*)

I can connect  
Nothing with nothing  
The broken fingernails of dirty hands. (*The Waste Land, III*,  
301-3)

Eliot's frequent references to hands is particularly illuminating. The hands of man, the skills those hands have acquired, have created civilisation, have moulded human history and human personality. But how do they appear in Eliot? The hand of the typist is automatic, so is the hand of the child (as we'll see in a later quotation) and in the passages just quoted the hands are 'soiled hands' and 'dirty hands'. Although the image which haunts him is that of the soiled and automatic hand of the factory worker, it isn't as if Eliot is making any specific point about the frustration and destruction of human talents; he is simply presenting a composite portrait of modern man as though this expressed some fact of human nature.

Part of this composite portrait is his view of human consciousness, which is much the same in general as his view of the typist. The hand of a child pocketing a toy is as 'automatic' as that of the typist putting on a gramophone record and the child's mind is as blank as hers:

the hand of the child, automatic,  
Slipped out and pocketed a toy. . . .  
I could see nothing behind that child's eye.  
(*Rhapsody on a Windy Night*)

The observation is not limited to the typist and the child: according to Eliot, modern man is mindless:

And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen  
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about.  
(*East Coker*, III)

We are, in short, hollow men:

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! (*The Hollow Men*)

And there is:

Only a flicker  
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. . .  
 ('Burnt Norton,' III)

The typist in *The Waste Land*, therefore, is merely a local representative of modern humanity and the image of the jew merely an exaggeration of Eliot's general view of the mindless, squalid, sub-human condition of modern man. In short, Eliot's representations of working-class women and of jews is merely an expression of his contempt for modern mankind in general.

It is this contempt which gives unity to *The Waste Land* and shores up Eliot's fragmented vision of modern life. Contempt of this kind is part of the condition of modernism in literature, other ingredients of which are also evident in the poetry of Eliot, and although I haven't mentioned them they are worth mentioning, not only because they will fill out what I understand by 'modernism' but also because they will serve to dismiss the notion that these features of it are more recent, that they were introduced by writers such as Sartre and Beckett. We find them already in Eliot's poetry at the end of the First World War.

To begin with, complementing his vision of life as a squalid slum inhabited by mindless creatures is Eliot's vision of life as a hospital, torture chamber or madhouse. Much of his early imagery is a product of this view. The evening is:

Like a patient etherised upon a table. . . .

And

Midnight shakes the memory  
 As a madman shakes a dead geranium.  
 ('Rhapsody on a Windy Night')

In the poem *Sweeney Erect*, Sweeney:

Tests the razor on his leg  
 Waiting until the shriek subsides.  
 The epileptic on the bed  
 Curves backwards, clutching at her sides.

People who form an opinion of you at a glance are 'eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase'—

and when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
 When I am pinned and wriggling on a wall,  
 Then how should I begin? ('Prufrock')

In a later poem, *East Coker (IV)*, Eliot declares, 'The whole earth is our hospital,' but that is only part of his view. One is not pinned wriggling on a wall in a hospital; that suggests something far more horrible than a hospital ward.

As one reads through Eliot's poetry, it seems to indicate John Donne impressed the poet Eliot because he was aware of life as a kind of disease bearing us towards the graveyard, because (as Eliot puts it)

He knew the anguish of the marrow  
The ague of the skeleton;  
No contact possible to flesh  
Allayed the fever of the bone.  
(‘Whispers of Immortality’)

John Webster impressed him for a similar reason:

Webster was much possessed by death  
And saw the skull beneath the skin;  
And breastless creatures underground  
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

Daffodil bulbs instead of balls  
Stared from the sockets of the eyes!  
He knew that thought clings round dead limbs  
Tightening its lusts and luxuries.  
(Whispers of Immortality)

Eliot's own ‘thought clings round dead limbs’. In his poetry the earth is most commonly a charnel-house:

This is the dead land. . . .  
The supplication of a dead man's hand  
Under the twinkle of a fading star.  
(‘The Hollow Men’)

The conversation is not only of coffee spoons and bric-a-brac, but of corpses, bones and graves:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
(*The Waste Land I*, 71-2)

A current under the sea  
Picked his bones in whispers.  
(*The Waste Land*, IV, 315-6)

the grass is singing  
Over the tumbled graves. . . . (*The Waste Land*, V, 396-7)

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining. . .  
(‘Ash Wednesday,’ II)

Eliot sums up this strain in his poetry when he calls ‘Every poem an epitaph’ (‘Little Gidding,’ V).

Eliot's feelings about death are apparent if one compares them with his feelings about life. Modern life, as we've seen, is persistently represented as squalid, death, on the other hand, is persistently associated with a kind of pastoral world, with the sea and with gardens, daffodils, grass, trees, sprouting and blooming. Death is felt as fresh and clean. Ultimately Eliot is

on the side of death because it is a release from life, which he sees as dirty, shabby, horrible.

Finally, like all modernists, Eliot is obsessed with the inability to communicate. I suppose if one adopts the view that people are mindless, then communicating with them is bound to present difficulties, especially if one has a lot of clever things to tell them. There are, however, more fundamental reasons for the inarticulateness of modernism, but at present it is sufficient to remark that the obsession with the failure of human communication arises automatically from the loss of a sense of human community and that this in its turn is due to the increased deprivation and alienation of man in modern class society. In Eliot's early poetry the human voice is the voice of reality, awakening us from our dreams—

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. ('Prufrock')

Reality, however, threatens us with destruction—we awaken from our dreams only to drown. The voice of reality is unpleasant and harsh—

The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune  
Of a broken violin. . . .  
(*'Portrait of a Lady'*)

—a description of the human voice which reminds us of the nagging shrillness of the neurotic woman in *The Waste Land*:

'My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
'Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.  
'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?'

Here the voice is very much 'like the insistent out-of-tune of a broken violin.' The point, however, isn't merely that human communication is an offensive noise but that it is empty—the voices are

Singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells  
(*The Waste Land*, V, 386)

—and meaningless:

Our dried voices when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rat's feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar.  
(*'The Hollow Men'*)

That image of rat's feet over broken glass in a cellar sums up Eliot's attitude to human communication. It also expresses the meaninglessness, the squalor, the horror and the cruelty of the dungeon which to Eliot is modern life.

\* \* \*

T. S. Eliot's vision of modern life is by no means an entirely false one. Despite its occasional manic phases, life under capitalism is still as dreary for most people as it was in the naughty nineties and the gay twenties: the affluent middle class is bored and the working class has a struggle to earn a living; the ruling class is continuously worried that it's going to lose the wealth and power it has expropriated and the more worried it becomes the more corrupt and brutal it becomes. So that Eliot's poetry can be said to have a certain emotional truth. It represents very well the persistent depression to which western man is subject: social life under capitalism does appear squalid, brutal, meaningless. Poverty and brutality are two of the most persistent topics of investigation by television and the sense of the meaninglessness of it all was well captured a few years ago in the opening line of a popular song—'What's it all about, Alfie?'

What Eliot's poetry fails to make imaginatively available is any understanding of modern life, for understanding requires us to see life steadily and to see it whole and a poetry which is 'much possessed by death' cannot do this. What it does do is to help in the creation of a climate of pessimism and fear. This is not to say that Eliot does not *try* to make sense of modern life. Indeed, his whole career may be seen as a continuous but impossible attempt to do this and in this attempt his critical and social writings need to be seen as an extension of his poetry: they provide Eliot's own social analysis of the condition of life we find expressed in the poetry. Here Eliot directly confronts that disintegration of social life. Furthermore, he does so in a principled and historical manner—seeking to make historical sense of a whole culture in order to understand the reasons for its collapse. And if we consider his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* we can see more clearly why it was that Eliot's attempt to understand modern life was doomed to failure.

In the *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* Eliot presents culture as something which is to be found 'in the pattern of society as a whole', as 'the way of life of a particular people living together in one place', a way of life 'made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs, in their religion,' all of which interact with the result that to understand one you must understand them all.<sup>6</sup> However, Eliot goes on to say, it is impossible to understand a culture completely; either what you are trying to understand will be abstracted, in which case the essence escapes, 'or it is *lived*,' that is to say, you participate in it—'and in so far as it is *lived*, the student will tend to identify himself so completely with the people whom he studies, that he will lose the point of view from which it was worthwhile and possible to study it.' (p. 61) In short, Eliot's view of culture is that it is a total way of life which, in the nature of things, cannot become fully conscious.

Eliot's definition of culture, as I've already suggested, has a finite purpose: it is intended to help us to understand the present condition of social life as this has come about in the course of social development. His view of culture is essentially historical. How did the present state of cultural

affairs come about? 'It is obvious,' Eliot argues, 'that among the more primitive communities the several activities of culture are inextricably interwoven. The Dyak who spends the better part of a season in shaping, carving and painting his barque with the peculiar design required for the annual ritual of head-hunting, is exercising several cultural activities at once—of art and religion as well as of amphibious warfare.' (p. 21) Then, Eliot continues, 'As civilization becomes more complex, greater occupational specialisation takes place' (p. 21). With the emergence of a division of labor, 'the functions of individuals become hereditary' (p. 21) and eventually harden into class distinctions. And since the division of society into classes marks the appearance of differing ways of life (he goes on) 'we may expect the emergence of several cultural levels' and, in short, 'the culture of the class or group' presents itself. (p. 25) Each class then sets about maintaining its own special part of the total culture of society and, according to Eliot, this is to the benefit not only of the class itself but of society as a whole. This assertion, that the culture of each class is to the good of society as a whole, is of great importance to Eliot's analysis, for if one believes this then the culture of the upper class cannot be seen as something which should be shared by all. 'Error creeps in again and again,' he claims, 'through our tendency to think of culture as . . . the culture of the "cultured" classes and elites.' (p. 106) If we think of culture in that way, he maintains, then we begin 'to think of the humbler part of society as having culture only in so far as it participates in this superior and more conscious culture.' (p. 106) Furthermore, we then think of the masses as having no culture of their own and we therefore unwittingly 'encourage them to neglect or despise the culture which they should possess' and treat them like 'some innocent tribe of savages to whom we are impelled to deliver the true faith', that is, 'real' culture (p. 106) Furthermore, according to Eliot, 'to aim to make everyone share in the appreciation of the fruits of the more conscious part of culture is to adulterate and cheapen what you give.' (pp. 106-7) Why is this, one may ask? Because, answers Eliot, 'it is an essential condition of the preservation of the quality of the culture of the minority, that it should continue to be a minority culture.' (p. 107) And there are many, including many so-called progressives, who agree with Eliot's corollary, that 'A "mass culture" will always be a substitute-culture; and sooner or later the deception will become apparent to the more intelligent of those upon whom this culture has been palmed off.' (p. 107)

Having defined what he considers to be the social basis which is necessary to a healthy culture and a high civilization, Eliot turns to the present, in which (he suggests) this social basis is being destroyed. 'If I am not mistaken,' he observes, 'some disintegration of the classes in which culture is, or should be, most highly developed, has already taken place in western society—as well as some culture separation between one level of society and another.' (p. 26) What happens in the west, according to Eliot, is that the various activities of culture become isolated and are pursued by groups who have no communication with each other. The result is a deterioration of the higher, minority culture, which is a matter of concern not only to the class or group directly involved but to the whole people.

That the west is in the process of social and cultural disintegration echoes

the theme of *The Waste Land* and is in any case a commonplace: the right, left and centre are all in agreement on this. They disagree, of course, on the cause of this disintegration. It is, Eliot believes, our own fault that this has happened. We have, he argues, accepted it as 'a duty incumbent upon us, to bring about a classless society' and we are therefore moving in the direction of a meritocracy, a society composed of elites of talent, in which 'the only social distinction of rank will be between the elites and the rest of the community.' (p. 36) Indeed, as Eliot noted, this emergence and separation of elites already exists and is not altogether a bad thing—but neither, he hurries to add, is it altogether a good thing. He believes that 'a growing weakness of our culture has been the increasing isolation of elites from each other, so that the political, the philosophical, the artistic, the scientific, are separated to the great loss of each of them, not merely through the arrest of any general circulation of ideas, but through the lack of those contacts and mutual influences at a less conscious level, which are perhaps more important than ideas.' (p. 38)

According to Eliot, then, what happens when society gives rise to a meritocracy is that the various elites of talent do not share a body of general ideas, but, more importantly, they do not share a common social background. And Eliot places great emphasis upon social background as the essential vehicle of culture. He insists that 'the primary channel of transmission of culture is the family' and he maintains that 'no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree, of culture which he acquired from his early environment.' (p. 43) It is these culturally essential contacts, what I would call the class roots of culture, which Eliot sees as being destroyed by the growth of elites. In the western world, he remarks, the recruitment of elites becomes the primary function of education, and 'unless the child is classified, by the officials who will have the task of sorting him out, as being just like his father, he will be brought up on a different—not necessarily a better, because all will be equally good, but a different—social environment, and trained on what the official opinion of the moment considers to be "the genuinely democratic lines"' (p. 67) As a result, the elites 'will consist solely of individuals whose only common bond will be their professional interest: with no social cohesion, with no social continuity. They will be united only by a part, and that the most conscious part, of their personalities; they will meet like committees.' (p. 47) Education, therefore, is part of the disease of our culture and it is, in Eliot's words, a 'delusion that the maladies of the modern world can be put right by a system of instruction.' (p. 107)

Eliot's argument and his analysis are certainly very persuasive. He recognises, as C. P. Snow in his much publicised lecture on the two cultures did not, that in a class society the two cultures have a class basis: the division within culture is between the 'higher' and the 'lower' and not, as Snow maintained, between science and the humanities. Furthermore, Eliot recognises that the common cultures of the western countries are being increasingly debased and that the so-called 'higher' culture is fragmenting, a fragmentation we can see in *The Waste Land*. And finally, of course, Eliot understands that the condition of a culture is intimately dependent upon the structure of the society to which it belongs. All of which indicates that Eliot

has some notion of what might be involved in the collapse and disintegration of a culture. Nevertheless it is evident, I think, that his definition and analysis fail to provide any real understanding of the condition of modern life and merely rationalise a conservative nostalgia for a social system doomed to destruction.

The fundamental weaknesses of Eliot's case, as this is put forward in his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, all stem from a failure to recognise what makes up a total way of life. For although he is undoubtedly right in pointing out that, in its widest sense, *culture* does refer to the total way of life of a society, it is significant that he ignores what, for most people, makes up the major part of their lives and is the fundamental necessity of human existence, namely—work. It is true that he mentions the growth of 'occupational specialization' in primitive societies, that he sees this specialization becoming an hereditary function and eventually hardening into class distinction. The point, however, is that the division of labour is not seen by Eliot in terms of work but in terms of abstract *function*.

It is not surprising that Eliot shows no appreciation of work: his attitude to what, in the north of England, is called 'hard graft' (and so to working-class life, which is mainly hard graft) is evident in the distaste for dirty hands expressed in his poetry. Class prejudice often expresses itself hygienically and so as a quality of sensibility, as in Matt. Bramble's case in Smollet's *Humphry Clinker*. It is something of the sort, I suspect, which accounts for Eliot's preference for hereditary function.

The term *function* hides the fact that the essence of class society is property; it is not that some people inherit one job and others inherit a different one. A class society appears only when men can produce more than they need to keep them alive and when the surplus they produce can be expropriated by an individual or a group and so become property, which can then be passed on from generation to generation. In short, what distinguishes a class society from a pre-class society is not 'occupational specialization' but property—and, in particular, the ownership by one group in society of those who do the producing (such as we find under slavery and serfdom) or of the means by which production is carried on (such as we find under capitalism).

Let us consider one of the groups which, Eliot believes, has an hereditary function and whose function has produced a class distinction. The most obvious example is the aristocracy. It is true, of course, that the aristocrat does inherit his place in society. However, what is of importance, if we are concerned with his culture, his way of life, is that he also inherits estates and income. It is not his title nor his function (whatever that may be) but his ownership of land which is the basis of his way of life, as it was of his father's life and his grandfather's life before him. In other words, the culture which he inherits is locked up in the property which is handed on from generation to generation. Without this inheritance the aristocrat would be unable to maintain an aristocratic way of life. And the reason why the aristocracy has withered away, a withering away which Eliot considers a major cultural disaster, is quite simply that the aristocracy has no economic basis in modern society. Aristocratic property has ceased to be feudal property and has become capitalist property: the aristocrat now has to pay

wages and live off profits. He has become a businessman whose way of life and culture is governed by the economics of a capitalist society.

Once one comes down out of the theoretical clouds and looks at the material foundations of culture, it becomes quite evident that however highly one prizes what Eliot calls 'the higher culture', this higher culture lives off the so-called 'lower culture'. To put it bluntly, the ruling class owes its culture to the working class, which produces the means by which the 'superior' people live. It isn't simply that the ruling class lives by exploitation and would not have the money to buy books, pictures, run its houses, hold its social functions, breed racehorses, send its children to exclusive schools, if it had no working class to exploit. It is more than this. Books are produced by lumberjacks, papermakers, compositors, bookbinders—without their work the ruling class would have no books. Paintings are made by canvas makers, paint makers, brush makers—without their work the ruling class would have no paintings. The houses of the ruling class are made by bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, laborers, and they are run by servants—without their work the ruling class would have no houses, hold no social functions. Racehorses are bred, reared and cared for by breeders, stable hands, veterinary surgeons—without their work the ruling class would have no racehorses. Schools are built and maintained by working people; all school equipment—books, blackboards, scientific equipment, playing fields—is created by working people—without their work there would be no exclusive schools for the sons and daughters of the ruling class. In short, it is not only the means by which the ruling class gets its culture but the very culture itself which is produced by the dirty hands of the working class. When we look at a painting by Picasso we may say that Picasso *painted* it, but it was *produced* by Picasso and workers in several countries. The artist, whether painter, musician or writer, merely manipulates the instruments and materials created by others. When we consider the material foundations of art, as of culture in general, what we are confronted by is the enormous creativity of working people.

In the modern capitalist world that creativity is put to the service of private profit. The ruling class can only continue to maintain its way of life, 'its' culture, by maximising profits. In order to do this, it is necessary for industry and commerce to expand continually—not only globally, by capturing more and more overseas markets, but internally also, by penetrating every nook and cranny of daily life: no opportunity to commercialise life can be lost if profits are to be maintained. Commerce and industry, therefore, become the very life blood of modern existence, the common culture of capitalist society. The mass culture, which Eliot so rightly deplors, isn't the result of the rise of a meritocracy nor is it the outcome of an attempt to democratise culture, it is the result of the ever increasing commercialisation of our total way of life. One may deplore this, one may think it's a very bad thing, but one cannot do so if one accepts Eliot's point of view, because successful commercialisation is fundamental to the continued existence of class society in the twentieth century, and class society, according to Eliot, is fundamental to the existence of a healthy culture.

Eliot does, in fact, come to a clearer understanding of capitalist society in

a later pamphlet, *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Here he represents modern western society as based upon industry, commerce and finance, governed by a profit motive that leads to modern war. Its ideology is what he calls Liberalism, an ideology which destroys traditional social habits, breaks down collective consciousness into individual particles, allows the opinions of the most foolish, substitutes instruction for education, encourages cleverness rather than wisdom, fosters the notion of getting on in the world and prepares the way for its own negation, an artificial, mechanised and brutal control.<sup>8</sup> Its effect upon literature and the arts, he urges, is far worse than any censorship; it is 'the steady influence which operates silently in any mass society organised for profit, for the depression of standards of art and culture.' (p. 39)

Despite this insight, however, Eliot never really comes to a full understanding of modern life. He realises that western society is becoming increasingly squalid and brutalised and he also realises that it is fragmenting, that it is breaking up. Furthermore, he eventually becomes aware that these tendencies are produced by the economics of private profit, but he is incapable of going any further than this. He looks to the past for a better life, not to the future, and this is because he has no vision of modern life except that of life under capitalism and consequently what is missing in Eliot is any perception that his image of modern life under capitalism is one-sided. He sees what is negative and destructive within it, but he fails to see what is positive and constructive. Any appreciation of socialism, therefore, is quite beyond him.

In *The Waste Land*, as we have seen already, his working-class characters are as aimless as his upper-class characters; their lives are as pointless as the life of the neurotic, upper-class woman who asks 'What shall we ever do?' In his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, he fails to see the real distinction between what he calls 'the lower culture' (i.e. the culture of the working class) and 'the higher culture' (i.e. the culture of the ruling class): he considers that both are essential to a healthy culture. He believes this because he believes in the need for a class society. It is Eliot's case that the bad state of cultural affairs in the west is due to a misguided attempt to create a classless society. That he can believe this—that he can believe that capitalism is creating a classless society—is some indication of his ultimate failure to make sense of the modern world. He simply confuses the drive of modern capitalism to maximise profit—to create a mass market and a mass culture—with the real struggle to establish a classless society. In short, he has swallowed the propaganda of the system he detests: the spokesmen of capitalism continually claim that modern capitalism is creating a classless society. Indeed, some claim that it has already done so and the assertion that there are no classes in America and that classes are dying out in Britain is still heard from time to time. All of which is accepted by Eliot, although where it is usual to take pride in the so-called disappearance of classes in the west, he looks upon this as a modern tragedy. He is not aware that it is a lie.

The reason that Eliot fails to appreciate what is happening in the modern world is that he has no greater understanding of the working class than we find in his portraits of the typist and the women in the pub in *The Waste Land*. His working-class characters are as bovine as those of Orwell's

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>9</sup> He represents them as mindless, passive automata, going through the motions of social life like mechanical dolls. At the beginning of the typist passage, for instance, 'the human engine waits like a taxi throbbing waiting' and at the end of it the typist

smoothes her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone.

She herself is only identified by her mechanical 'function' and her response to the 'caresses' and 'assaults' of the 'young man carbuncular' are as indifferent as those of an automaton. Her culture (in the narrow sense of the word) is as mechanical as her 'occupational specialisation'; it is a 'mass culture', represented by 'a record on the gramophone' and requiring of the typist nothing more than an 'automatic hand'.

If one can make no more sense of the role of working-class people in a capitalist society than Eliot, then one's vision of the modern world will indeed be shrouded in gloom and one must turn to religion, I suppose, in despair. At its very best, however, religion can only accommodate itself to those forces which, under the hegemony of the working class, are engaged throughout the modern world in transforming those features of modern life which Eliot detests and are seeking to bring about a classless society which will not be governed by the lust for private profit nor pride itself upon a commercialised mass culture.

### Notes:

1. T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Essays*, London, 1963, p. 288.
2. T.S. Eliot, *Milton: Two Studies*, London, 1968, pp. 33-34.
3. 'The Second Coming'.
4. The text of Eliot's poems referred to throughout is that of *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London, 1965. 'Portrait of a Lady'; *The Waste Land*, V, 430.
5. 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night'; *The Waste Land*, I, 22.
6. T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, London, 1963, pp. 23, 120.
7. C. P. Snow, *The Two cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, (The Rede Lecture, 1959), Cambridge, 1962.
8. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, London, 1962, p. 16.
9. Eliot's 'proles' have a marked family resemblance to Orwell's. The reiterated concern of the unemployed in Choruses from 'The Rock' is that

There shall be one cigarette to two men,  
To two women one half pint of bitter  
Ale. . . .

What is really needed, I gather, is 'A church for all', where we, unlike the hippopotamus (which doesn't, incidentally, hunt) can be 'Wrapt in the old miasmal mist'.