

T.S. Eliot: Culture and Anarchy

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The title of my talk today may strike some of you as curious, if not confused. One recognizes the name of the Nobel-prize-winning Anglo-American poet and critic, T.S. Eliot; one may recall also that, late in his career, he published a small book entitled *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1948). But the phrase, “Culture and Anarchy” belongs to a different author altogether. For, this is the title of Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold’s most famous prose work. In its pages, he proclaimed culture to be the “pursuit of perfection” over against the materialism of the Philistine industrialists then transforming the topography and demography of British life. A political liberal, Arnold saw that democracy would bring power to the masses, and so to them also England must bring culture if anarchy were not to follow in its place. A skeptic regarding what he called religious “dogma,” Arnold believed that most of life consisted of “conduct” or morality, that most of religion did as well, and that literature was at once the highest expression of religion and, not incidentally, the touchstone for all morality. Again, anticipating an age of mass democracy and mass unbelief, Arnold intimated culture would become a new religion for the West, providing us with the secular scripture required for social order if our civilization was to survive. One may no longer believe Genesis, said Arnold, but the great masses may gain calm, consolation, and a desire for perfection, while reading Milton’s *Paradise Lost* of a Sunday.¹

Arnold was not in his day, and is not now, alone in his unease regarding the social eruptions of the modern world. Many of us accept the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville that the movement toward an equality of social conditions appears inexorable, even if its precise form and consequences remain malleable and uncertain. Arnold concurred with Tocqueville and later

French thinkers of his day that not only equality before the law but Equality writ-large was inexorable, uncertain, and, finally, desirable.² Culture would be a civil religion everyone could accept and to which, therefore, everyone could conform: it required no fixed beliefs and, indeed, had no fixed end, but was a wide and endless pursuit of perfection, an ongoing journey through sweetness and light that would discipline the heart, order the multitude, would stave off, in a word, anarchy by infinitely deferring full confrontation with the indefinable, opaque, recessive, and slippery thing that Culture *actually* was.

Arnold, therefore, saw social transformation as unavoidable, equality as its desirable consequence, and culture as the vague but luminous solution to all its potential ills. As I shall suggest, his was a true bourgeois liberal position that has accumulated the verdigris of conservatism through the veneration of that word, “culture.” But, in hopes of wiping away that verdigris, my subject today is a poet and critic who is at once the heir and antithesis, the completion and negation, of Arnold’s Victorian project in defense of culture. No writer of the Twentieth Century so evidently took Arnold as a reference point and ancestor as did T.S. Eliot; no one could see with greater penetration that the cloudy masses of culture were a stop-gap where clear, definite ideas has once reigned and commanded belief. It would be Eliot’s arduous task as a critic to rehabilitate the terms Arnold had bandied with stiletto irony but inexact enthusiasm.

Culture, morality, religion, dogma, perfection: these were always on Arnold’s lips, but Eliot put them in the lexicon, appended with precise explanation. For Arnold, the words swirled together in hopes of enjoining the populace and the middle-class Philistines of mid-Century Britain to venerate “the best that had been thought and known in the world.”³ Eliot, in his prose, would set them apart, each in its own Petri dish, to discover what they meant and, more importantly, to

divulge what insincerities the Anglo-American world had been hiding from itself in hopes of avoiding the hard confrontation with truths it no longer believed but desperately required. Arnold was a late, decayed advocate of the compromised civil religions Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had variously formulated a century earlier—in Arnold’s case dogma, revelation, and belief were so attenuated he thought it natural to inscribe religion within culture as simply “the greatest and most important of the efforts by which the human race has manifested its impulse to perfect itself.”⁴ Eliot insisted that culture and civil religion were not weak, general beliefs everyone could accept in a skeptical age, but rather intellectual evasions that prevented us from encountering the truth. Our choice, as Eliot would write in myriad ways, was between philosophical naturalism or “supernaturalism,” between materialism or Catholicism; there was no middle way called “culture” only a banal evasiveness so called.

Writing in the decades after the First World War, Eliot saw clearly that the alternative the West faced in the Twentieth Century could not be culture or anarchy. For, culture as Arnold understood it, was a medicine to ameliorate social anarchy after a religious one had already disordered the human soul. The Eliot I shall sketch was one who followed in the tradition of Burke, Tocqueville, and Arnold in diagnosing the disorders of his age and in seeing the utility of something called civil religion or “culture.” But he saw also that the chaos of modern life was only secondarily one of hypertrophic urban slums, hyperactive printing presses, and endless circuits of highways. And the confusing of literature, morality, patriotism, and religion furthered the chaos rather than counteracted it. The visible anarchy of the times merely expressed one of the emotional life, and the confusion of the emotions of the individual person merely expressed an intellectual confusion. Culture, as Arnold understood it, was helpless to order the intellect, because intellectual confusion was, at last, the outcome of a confused theology. Eliot’s career as

a critic would be to trace down in thought our disorders until he reached their foundation in “a wrong attitude towards God.”⁵ His prose would, as I have said, define with pedantic care in order to clarify the errors in this modern attitude. But it is rightly as a poet that Eliot will be best remembered. For, in poems like *The Waste Land* (1922), he would represent our disorders within a poetic order that illuminated them. And his triumphal sequence of poems, *Four Quartets* (1935-1942), would realize Eliot’s ambition not simply to diagnose the ills of the age nor merely to prescribe a solution—as he had done in his prose—but to give to the benumbed and confused modern reader the experience of religious belief, grounded in an exact theology, in the form of a work of art. *Quartets* is a work that wishes at once to teach us what we do not know and how to feel a love that we may not have felt before—and to know and to love together in a unity at odds with an atomistic age lopped up on the chopping block of mass culture, and dissected by the scalpel of bureaucratic reason and technocratic specialization. Eliot thus did not merely measure the modern age with an acuity that transcended many great conservative thinkers; because of his work as a poet, he succeeded in giving us something the most brilliant political theory cannot, the experience of an order we require—and so seldom feel—in our lives, at the very root of our lives.

Conservative Conversions

Those who have seen a photograph of Thomas Sterns Eliot in early adulthood or slouching old age will affirm the wisdom of American poet, Ezra Pound, in assigning Eliot the nickname, “Possum.” When Eliot appeared in London in 1914—having been forced to give up his graduate research in Philosophy at Marburg with the onset of the First World War—he presented a decorous and reserved figure. In some respects, that reserve made also for a blank-slate. With the appearance of his first book of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, in

1917, a new note had been sounded in English poetry—and, to most, it rang as a menacing, radical, and revolutionary one. Arthur Waugh, the literary critic (and father of the future novelist, Evelyn), compared Eliot to a drunken helot “capable only of chastening the rising generation by his ignominious example.”⁶ Pound, having badgered editors for more than a year to publish Eliot, viewed him as a discovery and a prize to be paraded for shock and praise.⁷

More significant was the somewhat contrived sensation of *The Waste Land*, after its multiple publications in 1922 and 1923, a poem that seemed to admit for artistic representation every low and sordid aspect of a low and sordid post-War Europe. Conservative connoisseurs of literature found the poem a mess, a pretentious chaos, and several would seek to “debunk” Eliot’s radical genius by writing pamphlets demonstrating that more than one hundred of the poem’s four-hundred-thirty-four lines contained quotations from other literary texts. What was this new art that consisted less of writing than of citing?⁸ Younger poets, like the American Hart Crane, would embrace the chaos and the frank representations of modern life, allying themselves with the apparently radical project of Eliot’s poem, even as they disliked its no less apparent pessimism. For Crane, the Twentieth Century was the age of erecting bridges not of “fear in a handful of dust.” Nearly everyone was agreed in 1922, however, that Eliot was the quintessential modern poet and his work was a break with all things old.

Matters appeared only superficially different to the early readers of Eliot’s prose, which poured forth from his very modern typewriter in a stream of short, impersonal, and unadorned sentences from 1917 onward. In Eliot’s best known early essays, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “The Function of Criticism,” he spoke of tradition and classicism as desirable for art. The artist’s work did not express a personality or an emotion, but rather contributed to an “ideal order” of tradition above and hermetically sealed off from the vital interior world in which the

poet's heart was supposed to palpitate with feeling, according to the conventions of Romantic and late-Victorian poetry. In the latter essay, Eliot defined classicism specifically against romanticism; if the romantics judged the goodness of art by sincerity and strength of emotion, then the classicist judged it by some external, objective standard. What that standard was, Eliot did not fully clarify, but the point was made: the reigning conventions of literary London and the previous century were expired. While the readers of Tennyson had trusted his lines to express the poet's true feelings and approved him accordingly, Eliot demurred. In "The Function of Criticism," he instructed us, there "is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position."⁹

If such proclamations broke with the subjectivist and emotivist tendencies of respectable English culture, they nonetheless appeared radical in a rather familiar way. For, London in the twenties was still used to the commonplace of "art for art's sake" aestheticism, and Eliot's essays appeared merely to radicalize such aestheticism by, as it were, really meaning it. Aesthetes in the eighteen-nineties, such as W.B. Yeats and Oscar Wilde, had said much about "art for art's sake," but such talk was largely a pose; it bespoke a contempt for bourgeois morality, a parasitic need to shock the middle-brows with effeminate fawning over mildly sordid, entirely impractical, and world-weary forms of beauty. I am unsure as yet if we have a count of the total number of wee lyrics such poets composed in devotion to prostitutes, tobacco, and absinthe, but it surely came to more than anyone actually interested in art rather than self-expression and *succès du scandal* would tolerate. At first appearance, then, the world greeted Eliot's ideas of tradition and classicism as just a still-further-cutting-off of art from the bourgeois world; it would

no longer scandalize by inverting conventional morality because it would leave off reference to morality altogether, basking in its own hermetic self-reference.

In 1927, this apparently radical poetic modernist converted to Anglo-Catholicism. In the preface to his book of essays, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), he would declare that the point of view of the work as a whole “may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion.”¹⁰ The *Times Literary Supplement* promptly pronounced his death as intellectual leader of his generation.¹¹ Virginia Woolf, the novelist, Eliot’s occasional publisher, and a long-time friend, reacted similarly to the news. She confided to a friend:

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic believer in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.

We should ask, does Woolf’s shock owe more to the unanticipated and inexplicable conversion of Tom Eliot from experimental modernist poet to credulous Christian by the fireside, or to the four-piece-suit-banker reserve with which he had greeted every face he met in literary London? I hope to show the latter was the cause, and that Eliot’s conversion was the logical conclusion to a quest begun more than a decade earlier.

Eliot’s development cannot rightly be described in terms of a young radical poet disillusioning his fellow youth and then suddenly turning to Anglo-Catholic royalist on the cusp of middle age. If we take a more careful look, we shall see a born conservative, attached to certain austere traditions of previous ages, and yet one who saw clearly that those traditions had worn thin—they had grown conventional and insincere because no one had bothered to establish

convincingly why they were important, why they ought to be believed, and what further beliefs those traditions might entail.

Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888, to a family of distinguished and, by American standards, ancient name. Immigrating to America in 1667, the Eliot family included a line of ministers and prominent citizens in the early generations of New England; they intermarried with the family of John Quincy Adams, who is believed to have saved Eliot's ancestors from bankruptcy during the War of 1812.¹² Eliot's grandfather, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, had gone from Harvard Divinity School to establish the Unitarian Church of the Messiah, and subsequently, Washington University, in St. Louis, during the middle years of the Nineteenth Century. Reflecting on his grandfather close to the end of his own life, Eliot said that the ancestor's spirit issued almost divine commands long after his death. In particular,

the law of Public Service: it is no doubt owing to the impress of this law upon my infant mind that, like other members of my family, I have felt, ever since I passed beyond my early irresponsible years, an uncomfortable and very inconvenient obligation to serve upon committees.¹³

All Eliots felt obliged to service to the Unitarian Church, to St. Louis, and to Washington University, as Tom Eliot fondly recalled, concluding that these

were the symbols of Religion, the Community and Education: and I think it is a very good beginning for any child, to be brought up to reverence such institutions, and to be taught that personal and selfish aims should be subordinated to the general good which they represent.¹⁴

Some of us may find it hard to go behind the ecstatic, anti-intellectual, and by-and-large anti-social essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, or behind the more recent history of American

Unitarianism, which came in the middle decades of the last century to be associated with a relativist multiculturalism—in order to think back to a time when Unitarianism represented the adherence to an austere and elite Protestant morality by those who had ceased to believe in the Revelation which originally provided that morality. Eliot's family, including his siblings, proved exemplary of this tradition, dedicating themselves to a rational spirit of social reform and self-denial deferent to a Puritan tradition in whose God they had become, as it were, too rational to believe. Eliot sketched the family character aptly in 1932, when describing Charles Eliot Norton, in whose name he was delivering a series of lectures:

Norton had the moral and spiritual qualities, of a stoic kind, which are possible without the benefits of revealed religion; and the mental gifts which are possible without genius. To do the useful thing, to say the courageous thing, to contemplate the beautiful thing: that is enough for one man's life.¹⁵

The Boston Unitarian, whether studying in Cambridge, as did Eliot, or preaching in St. Louis, as had his grandfather, betokened modesty and propriety, refinement of civilization, if not profundity of culture.

The influences of Eliot's student days strengthened and modified the sense of reverence for institutions he inherited in the family line. At Harvard, he studied with George Santayana, who inculcated a comprehensive and beautiful synthesis of philosophy and poetry constructed upon what was, at bottom, a belief in materialism and the void. Santayana thus preserved a sense of order, goodness, and beauty segregated from truth—a preservation that allowed one to reverence the world and work of Dante without actually believing it. More importantly, Eliot studied with Irving Babbitt, an authority on Oriental religion, the founder of the new humanism, and author of *Literature and Democracy* (1908) and *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1918).¹⁶

Babbitt's admirable project was to make a defense of humanistic education and the life of contemplation in a post-Christian age that prized instrumental rationality over speculative reason, and which did not accept any authoritative vision of the True and the Good as the end of education. Babbitt rearticulated humanistic education as self-cultivation and self-discipline, as the gaining of control of oneself as well as the entering into a historical tradition of great minds. To him, Eliot owed his dislike of Romanticism, with its celebration of ecstatic interior life and unbalanced expression, and so, to him, Eliot also owed his advocacy of classicism.

Although Eliot encountered other complementary influences at Harvard, these would only deepen a constellation of interests that Santayana and Babbitt adequately represent: classicism, humanism, and poetic-philosophy echo strongly with the ideas of Eliot's we have already reviewed. Moreover, Babbitt's initiation into the mystical contemplation of the Oriental religions and philosophy, as well as Santayana's initiation into the Catholic supernatural totalities of Dante, provided touchstones that guided Eliot from skeptical patrician to Harvard humanist, and on to classical-modernist poet, until at last he felt impelled to take as binding Truth what his teachers had presented only for free study. Already, then, we can suggest that Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927 was from a stoic or humanist conservatism to one more profound—because indeed admitting to a foundation. It broke through genteel ideas of tradition, culture, and civil religion to the theological root of things.

Arnold's Substitutions

We must mention another name, however, to help explain the course of this development. Matthew Arnold. As my title teases, Eliot was always running up against Arnold in his writing with more evident ambivalence and a more competitive spirit than even that with which he

engaged Babbitt. In a poem about Boston society, “Cousin Nancy,” the books of Arnold and Ralph Waldo Emerson, “guardians of the faith” “kept watch” from the mantle.¹⁷ Arnold keeps watch from the keyhole of much of Eliot’s work. The Introduction to Eliot’s first collection of essays, *The Sacred Wood*, begins,

The faults and foibles of Matthew Arnold are no less evident to me now than twelve years ago, after my first admiration for him; but I hope that now, on re-reading some of his prose with more care, I can better appreciate his position. And what makes Arnold seem all the more remarkable is, that if he were our exact contemporary, he would find all his labour to perform again.¹⁸

We would not go too far to suggest that the problem Eliot worked out in the course of his career as a critic and poet was to discover why Arnold’s labor should be so admirable and yet remain to be done again. Arnold’s tendency to leave undefined his key terms—especially “culture”—was symptomatic of an attempt to understand those religious realities that seemed most under duress in the Victorian world in other terms that muddled rather than clarified meaning; Arnold’s intention was to make religion viable in an age of unbelief by equating it alternately with literature and morality, and by suggesting that it was part of a wider whole called “culture.” This had the effect of reducing different things to each other or, in Eliot’s signature phrase, of trying to make things “substitute” for one another.¹⁹ Perhaps consequent to Eliot’s graduate work on the English Idealist philosopher Francis Herbert Bradley, which was completed in 1916, Arnold soon began to appear in two roles in Eliot’s writing. He was the prototype of the critic, who sought to illuminate things as they were, despite the narrow materialism of modern times, badgering the philistine middle classes to aspire to a perfection he could not define; and yet he was also the prototypical “substituter” who, in reducing religion to

culture, drained the singularity out of it. We shall follow this trope of “substitution” in Eliot’s work from its earliest manifestations unto its last; in the process we shall see how that work came to grapple with the central crises of modern times that Arnold had tried and failed to solve with his civil religion of “culture.” In taking this course, it is worth observing that it will lead us to the same conclusions Eliot himself drew about his own work. We noted above that Eliot saw his early criticism as intended to define poetry as poetry, and not something else. In the 1928 edition to *The Sacred Wood*, he insisted that his mind during the previous decade had not gone through a “change or reversal of opinions” so much as “an expansion or development of interests.”²⁰ Because his early essays had successfully defined poetry, he felt now prepared to enter on an exploration of “the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its times and of other times.”²¹ Since “certainly poetry is not the inculcation of morals, or the direction of politics; and no more is it religion or an equivalent of religion, except by some monstrous abuse of words,” Eliot the Anglo-Catholic poet came to view his career as charged with understanding each of these things in themselves and in their relation. Thus, his post-conversion career did not reverse but rather developed his youthful conservative predilections, and youth and age alike were at once a redoing and correction of Arnold’s failed labors at culture.

Satirizing the Bourgeois Substitutes for Culture

Eliot’s first book of poems established him in a throne seldom occupied since the Eighteenth Century: as a wit, whose genre of choice was *vers de société*. Although published in London in 1917, and dedicated to a French soldier who died in the War, the book comprises mostly poems that depict the substitution of refinement for culture, decorum for depth, which characterized turn-of-the-century Boston society. “Portrait of a Lady” is an interior monologue,

recording the emasculated thoughts of a mute young man as he accompanies an aging woman to concerts, tea, and other respectable pastimes. Conventional demands for a romantic relationship between two young lovers Eliot refuses by showing us a sterile one, in which the woman has nothing to offer but continuous discussion of herself. Appropriately, in one tableau, she pauses mid-stream in her monologue to ask “But what have I, but what have I, my friend, / To give you, what can you receive from me?” She does not wait for his response, but continues, “Only the friendship and the sympathy / Of one about to reach her journey’s end.”²² There is no love in Boston, not even real friendship; its society as a whole seems adequately summed up in a dowager and her mute escort to the concert hall.

Less metaphorically, the poem “*The Boston Evening Transcript*” suggests that the evening paper substitutes in American life for real literature, real culture. The narrator in that poem picks up the paper and makes to deliver it to his Cousin Harriet, but turns as if to see an acidic vision in the dusk. He turns “Wearily, as one would turn to nod good-bye to Rochefoucauld, / If the street were time and he at the end of the street.”²³ La Rochefoucauld, the wit of Louis XIV’s reign, serves as a natural symbol for the high culture of the past compared to which modern mass culture and respectable Boston refinement are a charade. Eliot’s adaptation of a mode of poetry unthinkable to Arnold—witty satire—allowed him opportunity to critique society in verse, thus leaving open the door to an alternative it could not yet properly represent.

Eliot’s early essays, to which I referred above, served several functions in the context of this poetry. If one wishes to justify satire in an age sopping with sentimental poems on love and landscapes, one must establish that poetry does not express emotion, but rather offers an escape from it by primarily expressing only itself. But this led to a more profound observation. Literature and art in the late-Nineteenth Century had come to serve a very significant social

function; they were a source of exaggerated emotional experiences that the banal modern world in Boston or elsewhere could not offer. For the exhausted banker in his chair, a little Wordsworth could be taken almost medicinally. But the substitution of art for human experience, of romantic artifice for real romance, seemed a grotesque development to Eliot. A poem should be a poem; it cannot serve as a surrogate for love as the mute young man serves the dowager in “A Portrait of a Lady.” If poetry had come to serve as a consolation for the soul, as a tonic bringing feigned ecstasy, Eliot was correct to discern a strange amalgamation of emotion, art, and religion. As a character would put it in his “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,” “we know too much, and are convinced of too little. Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion.”²⁴ Refinement went all the way down. Culture was a counterfeit.

Modern Substitutes for Religious Belief

Eliot did not merely see through the pretenses of a society in fulfilling the office of London satirist; such observations naturally stirred into his philosophical studies as he worked at his dissertation on F.H. Bradley from 1914 to 1916 and, abandoning it undefended, turned to make ends meet in England, first as a school teacher then as a banker, all the while reviewing books on philosophy, science, and theology. Even in his shortest writings, the occasional book notices he composed for *The International Journal of Ethics*, Eliot shows himself aware of a deep conflict in modern life. Our everyday life has become materialist in character and utilitarian in aims; the various “substitutions” we turn to from time to time—above all literature—serve to give us the occasional scintilla of an unworldly idealism that makes man more than a beast and his feelings more than a twitch of nerves. This vacillation between the “real world,” as we often express it, and dreams derives from our unease with religious belief:

we find it easy to ignore, when inconvenient, and elusive, when most desired. In the journal mentioned above alone, I count twelve reviews Eliot wrote in just over a year, each of which is on a book that grapples with science and religion, theism and humanism. In one, on the liberal Protestant theologian Hastings Rashdall's *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics*, Eliot concludes that we come to see the author "taking up a position hardly different from Unitarianism."²⁵ Eliot does not intend to flatter the sound reason of his author, or approve familiar habits, but to chastise such efforts to make faith "easier" by substituting for it a residual middle class morality.

The context of such a statement is the appropriate one in which to address Eliot's two most acclaimed poems of the nineteen-twenties, *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men" (1925). Those of you who recall the poems will immediately apprehend that no short treatment can do justice to them, but we can make a handful of observations. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot builds upon the moribund refinements his early poems mocked to show us how seriously they threaten human happiness. The solitary married couple, whose failing efforts at conversation are dramatized in "A Game of Chess" (the second section of the poem), symbolize the loss of intimacy in the better-parts of modern society. They are alone together, the wife mad to be loved to the point of being unlovable, the husband receding into himself further with every passing moment. In the vignette that immediately follows, the poem moves us to a working-class English pub, where we learn of Lil, a woman whose fertility has been tested to the point of desperation by a husband, who in his brutishness could hardly rise even to the most modest levels of the uxorious. The middle-class couple appears so isolated they cannot imagine physical intimacy, while Lil and her husband are broken by the emptiness of their iterated physical union. The citizens of the modern world, Eliot suggests, are like bones broken off from a once complete

body, bones once en fleshed in an organic human community bound by love.²⁶ The source of this fragmentation Eliot traces to the modern attempt to substitute romantic love for the love of God, erasing two distinct realities by conflating them and, in the process, putting much too great a sanctifying pressure on quotidian intimacies.²⁷ In his Clark lectures, he would trace this tendency back to the Spanish mystics, particularly to Teresa of Avila, who tried to make the life of divine contemplation too psychological, to make it too much resemble the incommunicable, because entirely private, intimacy of man and woman.²⁸ The consequence of such conflation is that we lose the capacity to imagine religious belief in itself as we try to make romance its stand-in.

Thus, the emptiness of the figures in “The Hollow Men.” They are “stuffed” with straw rather than with real organs. They have given up qualities that should belong to real men, and so the heroic dead look back and,

Remember us—if at all—not as lost

Violent souls, but only

As the hollow men

The Stuffed men.²⁹

That is, modern man can no longer feel with the profundity that allows him to act independently and courageously; he can no longer aspire to the aristocratic self-assertion that, curiously, both Tocqueville and Nietzsche celebrated, precisely because he can no longer experience the complete belief exemplified in prayer. The poem peters out with the voices of the hollow men, attempting to purse their lips enough to recite the Our Father; but they cannot, so emptied of all moral and intellectual substance have they become.

Eliot spoke for all such men in his essay on F.H. Bradley. Addressing Bradley's mocking of Arnold's substitution of morality for religion, he quotes the philosopher's most satirical blow. "Is there a God?" Bradley asks of Arnold, to which he makes Arnold reply, "Oh, yes . . . Be virtuous, and as a rule you will be happy." But what about God?, we reply. "'That is God,' says Mr. Arnold; 'there is no deception, and what more do you want?'"³⁰ Eliot quotes Bradley answering the question thus:

I suppose we do want a good deal more. Most of us, certainly the public which Mr. Arnold addresses, want something they can worship; and they will not find that in a hypostatized copy-book heading, which is not much more adorable than 'Honesty is the best policy,' or 'Handsome is that handsome does,' or various other edifying maxims, which have not yet come to an apotheosis.³¹

Eliot would meditate long on this desire for something to worship. In his Norton lectures at Harvard in 1932-3, he would make a similar assault upon Arnold from the perspective of a poet and critic. Eliot said at that time,

For Arnold the best poetry supersedes both religion and philosophy. I have tried to indicate the results of this conjuring trick . . . that nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else; and if you find that you must do without something, such as religious faith or philosophic belief, then you must just do without it.³²

Such passages shed a rich corrective light upon Eliot's early reputation as a modernist aesthete. The famous assertions about the distinctness of poetry from emotion were not, as they had been taken, a radical aesthetic program but rather a program to distinguish and define matters carefully, even as we recognize that, in this world, all things tend to overlap and run into

one another in an uneven fashion. From the beginning, this effort regarding poetry gestured toward the arrival at a definition of religion, of faith. When he saw clearly how religion appeared when no longer clouded by terms like “culture,” “morality,” and “literature,” Eliot found something more substantial than these terms combined. Moreover, he saw that far from leaving this terminology in order to turn to the understanding of faith and theology, it was faith and theology that must serve as the foundation for our definition of everything else. In his essay on Bradley, he explains,

Morality and religion are not the same thing, but they cannot beyond a certain point be treated separately. A system of ethics, if thorough, is explicitly or implicitly a system of theology; and to attempt to erect a complete theory of ethics without a religion is none the less to adopt some particular attitude toward religion.³³

Eliot’s argument was never merely that religion ought to be granted a more prominent place in our public life—though he came to argue strongly for that, he saw its limitations as the classic manifestation of civil religion. Rather, his argument was that a theology always and already underpins all of our thought and, in failing to define those foundations properly, we had made an already confusing modern world unintelligible; we had made the real difficulties of religious faith impossible precisely because we no longer understood in what those difficulties consisted.

The Political Religions: The Substitutes of the 1930s

In the 1930s, with the advent of Statist, nationalist, communist, and fascist movements across Europe, Eliot was prepared to attack the oldest, most persistent, and most dangerous substitute for religion human hands have given us: the mutation of a civil religion into a political

religion of this world. The modern ideologies appeared as a much more efficacious substitute for religion than had culture, and they rushed in like a tide of blood to give what Christian hope could not.³⁴ Babbitt had diagnosed one version of this phenomenon in defending his New Humanism against mere “humanitarianism.” The former was a way of life, the latter a way of running someone else’s. But Eliot perceived a more multifaceted and severe threat. In his great essay “Religion and Literature,” Eliot argues, among other things, that there is little difference between the liberal world view of modern England and the Statist fascism of Italy; both are moralities of a kind, and both limit the foundation of morality and the importance of the human person to this world.³⁵

At this time, Eliot turned his poetic attentions from lyrics to verse drama; during an extended political crisis, a fully public form of art seemed imperative. *Murder in the Cathedral* stages the martyrdom of Thomas à Beckett, who overcomes the temptations of all the vanities of this world, from the inducements of power to those of virtuous self-regard, to maintain that the service of God is superior to all other allegiances. Encouraged to barter faith and politics, he refuses and is killed. Given that during these years the English were attempting religious or moral “rearmament” to face the threat of fascism abroad, Eliot’s witness to the uncompromising nature and absolute claims of Christian belief were, in the best sense, untimely.³⁶ British civil religion and “moral rearmament” would not do; for it made pretence of differences from fascism that were not real, it excited feelings while ignoring facts, it harnessed the real human need for faith but subordinated it to political ends. Late in the thirties, Eliot would outline his hopes for a Christian society specifically to deny the *bona fides* of civil religion. Outside of such a society, the role of the sincere Christian would follow the way of Beckett.

Faith and Feeling: *Four Quartets*

If religious belief really did transcend the substitutes for it that Arnoldian liberals, revolutionary communists, and Statist fascists proposed, then of what did it consist in itself? What was the love of God that surpassed all our analogous understandings? The knowledge that stood apart from sentiment? The foundation of culture frequently obscured from us precisely by the appearances of culture? Eliot saw answering these questions as vital if we were not to allow some hitherto unimagined substitute to rush in where faith and theology alone should tread. In his late essay, “The Social Function of Poetry,” he observed,

Much has been said everywhere about the decline of religious belief; not so much notice has been taken of the decline of religious sensibility. The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to *feel* towards God and man as they did. A belief in which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless.³⁷

For much of his career, Eliot’s poetry and prose had, in one sense, been uniformly critical. They had succeeded in pointing out what ought to be present in modern life—in human life—if man were not to be reducible to a beast. But even in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot had succeeded more at gesturing toward the demands of Christian life than in describing the contents of that life. Taking a deleted passage from that play for a starter, Eliot set to work writing what would become his greatest work, *Four Quartets*. The ambition of that poem was to provide the fullest account of the truly Christian life the modern world had yet seen. Having diagnosed the inadequacy of devotional poetry on several occasions, Eliot’s poetic sequence would avoid

them.³⁸ Rather than expressing a feeling, the poem provides us the dramatic moments as well as the full intellectual architecture of faith necessary for *us* to feel.

Named after English and American places, each of the poem's four installments locates the experience of faith at the nexus of human history and theological knowledge. In "Burnt Norton," set partly in the rose garden of an ancient English estate, we encounter a meditation on the opposition of time and eternity; the Unmoved mover who is God, and the temporal life that is always changing; the experience of the body and the knowledge of faith; and the impossible but real reconciliation of these things in Christ's Incarnation. "East Coker" is set in the Somerset village from which Eliot's ancestors had departed for America centuries earlier. There, we enter into the dark night of self-reflection and self-negation, where we learn to distinguish between the goods of this world and the Good Itself, between the earthly places where our life subsists and the boundless heaven that conditions it; and these reflections call us back to our beginning in innocence and humility, but also to our earthly beginning, the places where faith, love, custom, and ritual were first encountered.

Set in Cape Anne, Massachusetts and Eliot's native St. Louis, "The Dry Salvages" proceeds to an unsparing account of the everyday labor, endurance, and loss of human life. There, the repetition and tedium of labor, for which we can never be sure of reward, is shown as always entangled with the possibility of suffering and the certainty of death; grappling with nature, the human being may be tempted to promote natural forces into little gods and to attempt to gain power over them through superstitious habits. The poem dramatizes the surrender and the hope necessary if we are not to be deluded by the gods of this world and are to wait with patience for the cessation of our labors in the rest of eternity. That poem more than the others expresses the temptation to succumb to substitutes for Christian faith in modern or occult

technology precisely because of their immediate gratification and effectiveness. Eliot's masterpiece, "Little Gidding" draws the themes of these other poems into a unified whole. It re-describes the contemplation of eternity, the self-emptying of humility and repentance, the patience of toil and suffering, but draws them up to the life of devotion. The contemplatives of the Seventeenth-Century English community at Little Gidding, including priest and poet George Herbert, the mystic Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* echo through the poem, reminding us that the life of devotion to God is not a diminished one, simply deprived of the fruits of modern ingenuity and culture, but is itself a discipline of intricate difficulties and transformative richness. In Christian worship, in cult, are indeed the roots of all culture.

Eliot's late prose—particularly his *The Idea of a Christian Society*, and the essays on education—is perspicuous and pedantic in its efforts to explain the fundamental role of religion in human life. Like St. Augustine before him, Eliot appreciated that man could only know himself fully if he first knew God. What is man? and Who is my God? were only separate questions to the degree that the sun and its light are separate. But just explaining patiently why this should be—as Eliot's prose does—he knew to be an inadequate response to the far-gone conditions of modernity. *Four Quartets* was what he saw as necessary; there, Eliot did not describe and define so much as he presented. For those with the eyes of faith, the sequence is a great Christian poem of doctrine and devotion, but for those without, it may be the one artistic avenue by which they can come into experiential encounter with the fundamental questions of our humanity. "Little Gidding" concludes by calling us back into our first world, where we encounter not endless culture but the simple eternity of our ultimate origins:

At the source of the longest river

The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.³⁹

¹ See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings* (Stefan Collini, Ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and *Literature and Dogma* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1968).

² Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 215.

³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵ T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1976), 49.

⁶ Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books 2008), 15.

⁷ Lyndall Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1998), 98.

⁸ E.g., Arthur Davidson, *The Eliot Enigma: A Critical Examination of The Waste Land* (London: Davidson, 1956).

⁹ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 12-13.

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1929), vii.

¹¹ See, Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 315.

¹² Kirk, 19.

¹³ T.S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 44.

¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 3.

¹⁶ See, Kirk, 21-25.

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1980), 18.

¹⁸ Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, xi.

¹⁹ Arnold actually appears relatively late in the modern western tradition of reducing religion and theology, from Kant to Feuerbach—and continuing, of course, to the present day. The inevitable reference for this discussion is

Jewel Spears Brooker, "Substitutes for Religion in the Early Poetry of T.S. Eliot" in *Mastery and Escape* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 123-139. She implicates the young Eliot in the kind of substituting of which I accuse Arnold, and thus suggests that Eliot learned slowly to surrender the attempt to find a substitute for religion and finally to accept Anglo-Catholic Christianity. I would suggest this makes good drama. Eliot's religious studies were sophisticated enough from an early date for him to articulate the particularity of religion and to avoid this Arnoldian pitfall. My argument is that the effort to understand what poetry is in itself is bound up with the search for the nature of religion; that Eliot's who career is a project of definition or purification in this vein.

²⁰ Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, vii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 32.

²⁵ T.S. Eliot, Review of Hastings Rashdall's *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics*, *International Journal of Ethics* 27.1 (Oct., 1916), 112.

²⁶ This image is suggested by the "Tradition" essay, where Eliot observes "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (*Selected Essays* 4). *The Waste Land* depicts a world that has lost its organic communion with tradition from the perspective of one who retains that historical sense as a memory, but not as a felt experience. See also, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (Ed. Ronald Schuchard. San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1996), where Eliot criticizes Abraham Cowley's inadequate poetry thus: "He fails to make the Word Flesh, though he often makes it Bones" (61). Organic fullness and brokenness apply, in Eliot, to the artwork and to civilization.

²⁷ Eliot sometimes mocked "companionate marriage," and made a prescription for society that affirms the social distinction between human and divine love: "It would perhaps be more natural, as well as in better conformity with the Will of God, if there were more celibates and if those who were married had larger families" (*Christianity and Culture*, 48).

²⁸ See, T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 166-167.

²⁹ Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 56.

³⁰ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 364.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 365.

³² Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 106.

³³ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 367.

³⁴ See, "The Literature of Fascism," *Criterion* 8.31 (December 1928), 282.

³⁵ T.S. Eliot *Essays Ancient and Modern* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 114.

³⁶ See, Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, 46-47.

³⁷ T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 25.

³⁸ For Eliot on the limitations of devotional poetry, see *Essays Ancient and Modern*, 96-99; *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 167; *George Herbert* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1962), 21-22; and *On Poetry and Poets*, 45-46.

³⁹ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 145.