

Roger Scruton

T.S. Eliot as Conservative Mentor

T. S. Eliot was indisputably the greatest poet writing in English in the twentieth century. He was also the most revolutionary Anglophone literary critic since Samuel Johnson, and the most influential religious thinker in the Anglican tradition since the Wesleyan movement. His social and political vision is contained in all his writings, and has been absorbed and reabsorbed by generations of English and American readers, upon whom it exerts an almost mystical fascination—even when they are moved, as many are, to reject it. Without Eliot, the philosophy of Toryism would have lost all substance during the last century. And while not explicitly intending it, Eliot set this philosophy on a higher plane—intellectually, spiritually, and stylistically—than has ever been reached by the adherents of the socialist idea.

Eliot attempted to shape a philosophy for our times that would be richer and more true to the complexity of human needs than the free-market panaceas that have so often dominated the thinking of conservatives in government. He assigned a central place in his social thinking to high culture. He was a thorough traditionalist in his beliefs but an adventurous modernist in his art, holding artistic modernism and social traditionalism to be different facets of a common enterprise. Modernism in art was, for Eliot, an attempt to salvage and fortify a living

artistic tradition in the face of the corruption and decay of popular culture.

Eliot was born in St Louis, Missouri, in 1888, and educated at Harvard, the Sorbonne, and Merton College, Oxford, where he wrote a doctoral thesis on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley, whose Hegelian vision of society exerted a profound influence over him. He came, as did so many educated Americans of his generation, from a profoundly religious and public-spirited background, although his early poems suggest a bleak and despairing agnosticism, which he only gradually and painfully overcame. In 1914 he met Ezra Pound, who encouraged him to settle in England. He married during the following year, which also saw the publication of his first successful poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” This work, together with the other short poems that were published along with it as *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, profoundly altered the course of English literature. They were the first truly *modernist* works in English, although the most visible influences on their imagery and diction were not English but French—

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specifically, the *fin-de-siècle* irony of Laforgue, and the symbolism of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Verlaine. They were also social poems, concerned to express a prevailing collective mood, even when dressed in the words of a specific protagonist. The wartime generation *found* themselves in these poems, in a way that they had not found themselves in the pseudo-romantic literature of the Edwardian period.

Shortly afterwards Eliot published a book of essays, *The Sacred Wood*, which was to be as influential as the early poetry. In these essays, Eliot presented his new and exacting theory of the role of criticism, of the *necessity* for criticism if our literary culture is to survive. For Eliot, it is no accident that criticism and poetry so often come together in the same intelligence—as in his own case, and the case of Coleridge, whom he singled out as the finest of English critics. The critic, like the poet, is concerned to develop the “sensibility” of his reader—by which term Eliot meant a kind of intelligent observation of the human world. Critics do not abstract or generalize: they *look*, and record what they see. But in doing so, they also convey a sense of what *matters* in human experience, distinguishing the false from the genuine emotion. While Eliot was to spell out only gradually and obscurely over many years just what he meant by “sensibility,” his elevated conception of the critic’s role struck a chord in many of his readers. Furthermore, *The Sacred Wood* contained essays that were to revolutionize literary taste. The authoritative tone of these essays gave rise to the impression that the modern world was at last making itself heard in literature—and that its voice was T. S. Eliot’s.

The Sacred Wood turned the attention of the literary world to the “metaphysical” poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and to the Elizabethan dramatists—

the lesser predecessors and the heirs of Shakespeare, whose raw language, rich with the sensation of the thing described, provided a telling contrast to the sentimental sweetness that Eliot condemned in his immediate contemporaries. There is also an essay on Dante, discussing a question that was frequently to trouble Eliot—that of the relationship between poetry and belief. To what extent could one appreciate the poetry of the *Divine Comedy* while rejecting the doctrine that had inspired it? This question was a real one for Eliot, for several reasons.

Eliot was—like his fellow modernists and contemporaries, Ezra Pound and James Joyce—profoundly influenced by Dante, whose limpid verse-form, colloquial style, and solemn philosophy created a vision of the ideal in poetry. At the same time, he rejected the theological vision of the *Divine Comedy*—rejected it with a deep sense of loss. Yet in his own poetry the voice of Dante would constantly return, offering him turns of phrase, lightning flashes of thought, and—most of all—a vision of the modern world from a point of view outside it, a point of view irradiated by an experience of holiness (albeit an experience that he did not then share). And when Eliot did finally come to share in this vision, he wrote, in the last of the *Four Quartets*, the most brilliant of all imitations of Dante in English—an imitation which is something far finer than an imitation, in which the religious vision of Dante is transported and translated into the world of modern England.

One other essay in *The Sacred Wood* deserves mention—“Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in which Eliot introduces the term which best summarizes his contribution to the political consciousness of the twentieth century: *tradition*. In this essay Eliot argues that true originality is possible only within a tradition—and further, that

every tradition must be remade by the genuine artist, in the very act of creating something new. A tradition is a living thing, and just as each writer is judged in terms of those who went before, so does the meaning of the tradition change as new works are added to it. It was this literary idea of a living tradition that was gradually to permeate Eliot's thinking, and to form the core of his social and political philosophy.

Prufrock and *The Sacred Wood* already help us to understand the paradox of T. S. Eliot—that our greatest literary modernist should also be our greatest modern conservative. The man who overthrew the nineteenth century in literature and inaugurated the age of free verse, alienation, and experiment was also the man who, in 1928, was to describe himself as “classical in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion.” This seeming paradox contains a clue to Eliot's greatness as a social and political thinker. For Eliot recognized that it is precisely in modern conditions—conditions of fragmentation, heresy, and unbelief—that the conservative project acquires its sense. *Conservatism is itself a modernism*, and in this fact lies the secret of its success. What distinguishes Burke from the French revolutionaries is not his attachment to things past, but rather his desire to live fully in the concrete present, to understand the present in all its imperfections, and to accept the present as the only reality that is offered to us. Like Burke, Eliot recognized the distinction between a backward-looking nostalgia, which is but another form of modern sentimentality, and a genuine tradition, which grants us the courage and the vision with which to live in the modern world.

In 1922 Eliot founded *The Criterion*, a literary quarterly which he continued to edit until 1939, when he discontinued the journal under the pressure of “depression of

spirits” induced by “the present state of public affairs.” As the title of the journal suggests, the project was animated by Eliot's sense of the importance of criticism, and of the futility of modernist experiments when not informed by literary judgment and moral seriousness. The journal also contained social philosophy of a conservative persuasion—although Eliot preferred the word “classicism” as a description of its political outlook.

The Criterion was the forum in which much of our modernist literature was first published, including the poetry of Pound, Empson, Auden, and Spender. Its first issue contained the work which established Eliot himself as the greatest poet of his generation: *The Waste Land*. This poem seemed to its first readers to capture completely the disillusionment and emptiness that followed the hollow victory of the First World War—the conflict in which European civilization had committed suicide, just as Greek civilization had done in the Peloponnesian War. Yet the poem hardly mentioned the war, had none of the vivid imagery of battle that English readers knew from the works of Wilfrid Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and was choc-a-bloc with references to and quotations from a scholar's library. Its ostensible subject-matter was drawn from works of armchair anthropology—in particular, from Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a work which had also provided the title of *The Sacred Wood*.

The Waste Land was later republished with notes in which Eliot explained some of his references and allusions, such as that contained in the title, which alludes to the Fisher King of the Parsifal legend, and the waste land over which he presides, awaiting the hero who will ask the questions that will destroy winter's bleak enchantment and renew the world. The allegory of modern civilization contained in this reference to

the medieval fertility cults, and their literary transformation in Arthurian romance, was not lost on Eliot's readers. Nor was it the first time that these symbols and legends of medieval romance had been put to such a use—witness Wagner's *Parsifal*, to which Eliot refers obliquely, by quoting from Verlaine's poem.

Nevertheless, there was a peculiar poignancy in the very erudition of the poem, as though the whole of Western culture were being brought to bear on the desert landscape of the modern city in a last effort to encompass it, to internalize it, and to understand its meaning. The use of anthropological conceptions parallels Wagner's use of the Teutonic myths. (In *The Waste Land* there are more quotations from Wagner than from any other poet.) Eliot is invoking the religious worldview—and in particular the sense that life's renewal depends upon supernatural forces—but as a fact about human consciousness, rather than an item of religious belief. In this way, he was able to avail himself of religious ideas and imagery without committing himself to any religious belief. As he was rapidly discovering, without religious ideas the true condition of the modern world cannot be described. Only by describing modernity from a point of view outside of history can we grasp the extent of our spiritual loss.

After *The Waste Land* Eliot continued to write poetry inspired by the agonizing dissociation, as he saw it, between the sensibility of our culture and the available experience of the modern world. This phase of his development culminated in a profound Christian statement—the poem *Ash Wednesday*, in which he abandoned his anthropological manner and announced his conversion to the Anglo-Catholic faith. By now Eliot was ready to take up his own peculiar cross: the cross of *membership*. No longer playing the part of spiritual and political exile, he threw in his lot with the

tradition to which his favorite authors had belonged. He became a British citizen, joined the Anglican Church, and wrote his great verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral*. In a series of essays, he praised the writings of sixteenth-century Anglican divines and attacked the secular heresies of his time.

This phase of Eliot's development at length led to *After Strange Gods*, a “primer of modern heresy,” in which he expressed his conservative antipathy to secular doctrine. It was Eliot's first of several attempts at social philosophy, of which the two most famous are *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1940) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). Both these works are marked by a tentativeness and anxiety about the new condition of Europe, which make them far less clear guides to Eliot's vision than the great poem which he wrote at the same time, a poem which has been, for many of my generation, the essential account of our spiritual crisis—and the greatest message of hope that has been given to us. *Four Quartets* is a profound exploration of spiritual possibilities, in which the poet seeks and finds the vision outside time in which time and history are redeemed. It is a religious work, and at the same time a work of extraordinary lyric power, like the *Cimetière marin* of Valéry, but vastly more mature in its underlying philosophy.

Eliot's life began with a question: the question of modern life and its meaning. His literary work was a long, studious, and sincere attempt to provide an answer. In the course of this enterprise, Eliot re-shaped the English language, changed the forms of English verse, and produced some of the most memorable utterances in our literature. Although an impressive scholar, with a mastery of languages and literatures that he reveals but does not dwell upon in his writings, Eliot was also a man of the world. He worked first as a teacher, then in a

London bank, and then in the publishing house of Faber and Faber, which he made into the foremost publisher of poetry and criticism in its day. His unhappy first marriage did not impede his active participation in the literary life of London, over which he exerted an influence every bit as great as André Breton over the literary life of Paris.

His refusal, through all this, to adopt the mantle of the bohemian, to claim the tinsel crown of artist, or to mock the “bourgeois” lifestyle, sets him apart from the continental tradition which he otherwise did so much to promote. He realised that the true task of the artist in the modern world is one not of repudiation but of reconciliation. For Eliot, the artist inherits, in heightened and self-conscious form, the very same anxieties that are the stuff of ordinary experience. The poet who takes his words seriously is the voice of mankind, interceding for those who live around him, and gaining on their behalf the gift of consciousness with which to overcome the wretchedness of secular life. He too is an ordinary bourgeois, and his highest prize is to live unnoticed amidst those who know nothing of his art—as the saint may live unnoticed among those for whom he dies.

To find the roots of Eliot’s political thinking, we must go back to the modernism that found such striking expression in *The Waste Land*. English literature in the early part of the twentieth century was to a great extent captured by pre-modern imagery, by references to a form of life (such as we find in Thomas Hardy) that had vanished forever, and by verse forms which derived from the repertoire of romantic isolation. It had not

undergone that extraordinary education which Baudelaire and his successors had imposed upon the French—in which antiquated forms like the sonnet were wrenched free of their pastoral and religious connotations and fitted out with the language of the modern city, in order to convey the new and hallucinatory sense of an irreparable fault, whereby modern man is divided from all that has preceded him. Eliot’s admiration for Baudelaire arose from his desire to



T.S. Eliot, 1888-1965

write verse that was as true to the experience of the modern city as Baudelaire’s had been to the experience of Paris. Eliot also recognized in Baudelaire the new character of the religious impulse under the conditions of modern life: “The important fact about Baudelaire,” he wrote, “is that he was essentially a Christian, born out of his

due time, and a classicist, born out of his due time.”

Eliot’s indictment of the neo-romantic literature of his day was not merely a literary complaint. He believed that his contemporaries’ use of worn-out poetic diction and lilting rhythms betrayed a serious moral weakness: a failure to observe life as it really is, a failure to feel what must be felt towards the experience that is inescapably ours. And this failure is not confined, he believed, to literature, but runs through the whole of modern life. The search for a new literary idiom is therefore part of a larger search—for the reality of modern experience. Only then can we confront our situation and ask ourselves what should be done about it.

Eliot’s deep distrust of secular humanism—and of the socialist and democratic ideas of society which he believed to stem

from it—reflected his critique of the neo-romantics. The humanist, with his myth of man's goodness, is taking refuge in an easy falsehood. He is living in a world of make-believe, trying to avoid the real emotional cost of seeing things as they are. His vice is the vice of Edwardian and "Georgian" poetry—the vice of sentimentality, which causes us not merely to speak and write in clichés, but to *feel* in clichés too, lest we should be troubled by the truth of our condition. The task of the artistic modernist, as Eliot later expressed it, borrowing a phrase from Mallarmé, is "to purify the dialect of the tribe": that is, to find the words, rhythms, and artistic forms that would make contact again with our experience—not my experience, or yours, but *our* experience, the experience that unites us as living here and now. And it is only because he had captured this experience—in particular, in the bleak vision of *The Waste Land*—that Eliot was able to find a path to its meaning.

He summarizes his attitude to the everyday language of modern life and politics in his essay on the Anglican bishop Lancelot Andrewes, and it is worth quoting the passage in full:

To persons whose minds are habituated to feed on the vague jargon of our time, when we have a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing—when a word half-understood, torn from its place in some alien or half-formed science, as of psychology, conceals from both writer and reader the utter meaninglessness of a statement, when all dogma is in doubt except the dogmas of sciences of which we have read in the newspapers, when the language of theology itself, under the influence of an undisciplined mysticism of popular philosophy, tends to become a language of tergiversation—Andrewes may seem pedantic and verbose. It is only when we have saturated ourselves in his prose, followed the movement of his thought, that we find his examination of words terminating in the ecstasy of assent. Andrewes takes a word and derives the world from it.¹

For Eliot, words had begun to lose their precision—not in spite of science, but because of it; not in spite of the loss of true religious belief, but because of it; not in spite of the proliferation of technical terms, but because of it. Our modern ways of speaking no longer enable us to "take a word and derive the world from it": on the contrary, they veil the world, since they convey no lived response to it. They are mere counters in a game of cliché, designed to fill up the silence, to conceal the void which has come upon us as the old gods have departed from their haunts among us.

That is why modern ways of thinking are not, as a rule, orthodoxies, but *heresies*—a heresy being a truth that has been exaggerated into falsehood, a truth in which we have taken refuge, so to speak, investing in it all our unexamined anxieties and expecting from it answers to questions which we have not troubled ourselves to understand. In the philosophies that prevail in modern life—utilitarianism, pragmatism, behaviorism—we find that "words have a habit of changing their meaning...or else they are made, in a most ruthless and piratical manner, to walk the plank." The same is true, Eliot implies, whenever the humanist heresy takes over: whenever we treat man as God, and so believe that our thoughts and our words need be measured by no other standard but themselves.

Eliot was brought up in a democracy. He inherited that great fund of public spirit which is the gift of American democracy to the modern world, and the cause of so much ignorant hatred of America. But he was not a democrat in his sensibility. Eliot believed that culture could not be entrusted to the democratic process precisely because of the carelessness with words, this habit of unthinking cliché, which would always arise when every person is regarded as having an equal right to express himself. In *The Use of*

Poetry and the Use of Criticism he writes:

When the poet finds himself in an age in which there is no intellectual aristocracy, when power is in the hands of a class so democratized that while still a class it represents itself to be the whole nation; when the only alternatives seem to be to talk to a coterie or soliloquize, the difficulties of the poet and the necessity of criticism become greater.²

Hence, the critic has, for Eliot, an enhanced significance in the modern, democratic world. It is he who must act to restore what the aristocratic ideal of taste would have generated spontaneously—a language in which words are used with their full meaning and in order to show the world as it is. Those nurtured on empty sentiment have no weapons with which to deal with the reality of a God-forsaken world. They fall at once from sentimentality into cynicism, and so lose the power either to experience life or to live with its imperfection.

Eliot therefore perceived an enormous danger in the liberal and “scientific” humanism which was offered by the prophets of his day. This liberalism seemed to him to be the avatar of moral chaos, since it would permit any sentiment to flourish and would deaden all critical judgment with the idea of a democratic right to speak—which becomes, insensibly, a democratic right to feel. Although “human kind cannot bear very much reality”—as he expresses the point, first in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and then in *Four Quartets*—the purpose of a culture is to retain that elusive thing called “sensibility”: the habit of right feeling. Barbarism ensues not because people have lost their skills and scientific knowledge, nor is it averted by retaining those things; rather, barbarism comes through a loss of *culture*, since it is only through culture that the important realities can be truly perceived.

Eliot’s thought here is difficult to state precisely. And it is worth drawing a parallel

with a thinker whom he disliked: Friedrich Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, the crisis of modernity had come about because of the loss of the Christian faith. This loss of faith is the inevitable result of science and the growth of knowledge. At the same time, it is not possible for mankind really to live without faith; and for us, who have inherited all the habits and concepts of a Christian culture, that faith must be Christianity. Take away the faith, and you do not take away a body of doctrine only, nor do you leave a clear, uncluttered landscape in which man at last is visible for what he is. Rather, you take away the power to perceive other and more important truths, truths about our condition which cannot, without the benefit of faith, be properly confronted—such as the truth of our mortality.

The solution that Nietzsche impetuously embraced in this quandary was to deny the sovereignty of truth altogether—to say that “there are no truths”—and to build a philosophy of life on the ruins of both science and religion in the name of a purely aesthetic ideal. Eliot saw the absurdity of that response. Yet the paradox remains. The truths that mattered to Eliot are truths of feeling, truths about the *weight* of human life. Science does not make these truths more easily perceivable: on the contrary, it releases into the human psyche a flock of fantasies—liberalism, humanism, utilitarianism, and the rest—which distract it with the futile hope for a scientific morality. The result is a corruption of the very language of feeling, a decline from sensibility to sentimentality, and a veiling of the human world. The paradox, then, is this: the falsehoods of religious faith enable us to perceive the truths that matter. The truths of science, endowed with an absolute authority, hide the truths that matter, and make human reality imperceivable. Eliot’s solution to the paradox was compelled by the path that he had taken to its discovery—the

path of poetry, with the agonizing examples of poets whose precision, perception, and sincerity were the effects of Christian belief. The solution was to embrace the Christian faith—not, as Tertullian did, *because* of the paradox, but rather in spite of it.

This explains Eliot's growing conviction that culture and religion are in the last analysis indissoluble. The disease of sentimentality could be overcome, he believed, only by a high culture in which the work of purification was constantly carried on. This is the task of the critic and the artist, and it is a hard task:

And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there
is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been
discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one
cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now,
under conditions
That seem unpropitious....³

This work of purification is a dialogue across the generations with those who belong to the tradition: only the few can take part in it, while the mass of mankind stays below, assailed by those “undisciplined squads of emotion.” The high culture of the few is, however, a moral necessity for the many, for it permits human reality to *show itself*, and so to guide our conduct.

But why should the mass of mankind, lost as they are in bathos, “distracted from distraction by distraction,” be guided by “those who know” (to use Dante's pregnant phrase)? The answer must lie in religion, and in particular in the common language which a traditional religion bestows, both on the high culture of art and on the com-

mon culture of a people. Religion is the life-blood of a culture. It provides the store of symbols, stories and doctrines that enable us to communicate about our destiny. It forms, through the sacred texts and liturgies, the constant point to which the poet and the critic can return—the language alike of ordinary believers and of the poets who must confront the ever-new conditions of life in the aftermath of knowledge, of life in a fallen world.

For Eliot, however, religion in general, and the Christian religion in particular, should not be seen merely in Platonic terms as an attitude towards what is eternal and unchanging. The truth of our condition is that we are historical beings who find whatever consolation and knowledge is vouchsafed to us in time. The consolations of religion come to us in temporal costume, through institutions that are alive with the spirit of history. To rediscover our religion is not to rise free from the temporal order; it is not to deny history and corruption, in order to contemplate the timeless truths. On the contrary, it is to enter more deeply into history, so as to find in the merely transitory the mark and the sign of that which never passes away: it is to discover the “point of intersection of the timeless with time,” which is, according to *Four Quartets*, the occupation of the saint.

Thus there emerges the strangest and most compelling of parallels: that between the saint and martyr of *Murder in the Cathedral* and the meditating poet of *Four Quartets*. Just as the first brings, through his martyrdom, the light of eternity into the darkness of the people of Canterbury (represented as a chorus of women), so does the poet “redeem the time,” by finding in the stream of time those timeless moments that point beyond time. And the attempt by the poet to rediscover and belong to a tradition that will give sense and meaning to his language is one with the attempt to find a

tradition of belief, of behavior, and of historical allegiance, that will give sense and meaning to the community. The real significance of a religion lies less in the abstract doctrine than in the institutions which cause it to endure. It lies also in the sacraments and ceremonies, in which the eternal becomes present and what might have been coincides with what is.

For Eliot, therefore, conversion was not a matter merely of acknowledging the truth of Christ. It involved a conscious gesture of *belonging*, whereby he united his poetical labors with the perpetual labor of the Anglican church. For the Anglican church is peculiar in this: that it has never defined itself as “protestant,” that it has always sought to accept rather than protest against its inheritance, while embracing the daring belief that the truths of Christianity have been offered in a *local* form to the people of England. It is a church which takes its historical nature seriously, acknowledging that its duty is less to spread the gospel among mankind than to sanctify a specific community. And in order to fit itself for this role, the Anglican church has, through its divines and liturgists, shaped the English language according to the Christian message, while also bringing that message into the here and now of England. In “Little Gidding,” the last of the *Four Quartets*, the poet finds himself in the village retreat where an Anglican saint had retired to pray with his family. He conveys what to many is the eternal truth of the Anglican confession, in lines which are among the most famous that have ever been written in English:

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put
off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity

Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice
praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the lan-
guage of the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.⁴

Later, returning to this theme of communication with the dead—*our* dead—and referring to those brief moments of meaning which are the only sure gift of sensibility, Eliot completes the thought:

We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.
The moment of the rose and the moment of the
yew-tree
Are of equal duration. A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.⁵

Much has been written about “Little Gidding,” the atmosphere of which stays in the mind of every cultivated Englishman who reads it. What is important, however, is less the atmosphere of the poem than the thought which advances through it. For here Eliot achieves that for which he envies Dante—namely, a poetry of belief, in which belief and words are one, and in which the thought cannot be prized free from the controlled and beautiful language. Moreover, there is one influence throughout which is inescapable—the King James Bible, and the Anglican liturgy that grew alongside it. Without being consciously biblical, and while using only modern and colloquial English, Eliot endows his verse with the authority of liturgy, and with the resonance of faith.

These lines take us back to the core belief of modern conservatism, which Burke expressed in the following terms: Society, he wrote, is indeed a contract; but not a contract among the living only; rather, it is a partnership between the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. And, he argued, only those who listen to the dead are fit custodians of future generations. Eliot's complex theory of tradition gives sense and form to this idea. For he makes clear that the most important thing that future generations can inherit from us is our culture. Culture is the repository of an experience which is at once local and placeless, present and timeless, the experience of a community as sanctified by time. This we can pass on only if we too inherit it. Therefore, we must listen to the voices of the dead, and capture their meaning in those brief, elusive moments when "History is now and England." In a religious community, such moments are a part of everyday life. For us, in the modern world, religion and culture are both to be *gained* through a work of sacrifice. But it is a sacrifice upon which everything depends. Hence, by an extraordinary route, the modernist poet becomes the traditionalist priest: and the stylistic achievement of the first is one with the spiritual achievement of the second.

To many people, Eliot's theory of culture and tradition is too arduous, imposing an impossible duty upon the educated elite. To others, however, it has been a vital inspiration. For let us ask ourselves just what is required of "one who knows." Should he, in the modern world, devote himself like Sartre or Foucault to undermining the "structures" of bourgeois soci-

ety, to scoffing at manners and morals, and ruining the institutions upon which he depends for his exalted status? Should he play the part of a modern Socrates, questioning everything and affirming nothing? Should he go along with the mindless culture of play, the post-modernist fantasy world in which all is permitted since neither permission nor interdiction have any sense?

To answer yes to any of those questions is in effect to live by negation, to grant nothing to human life beyond the mockery of it. It is to inaugurate and endorse the new world of "transgression," a world which will not reproduce itself, since it will undermine the very motive which causes a society to reproduce. The conservative response to modernity is to embrace it, but to embrace it *critically*, in full consciousness that human achievements are rare and precarious, that we have no



God-given right to destroy our inheritance, but must always patiently submit to the voice of order and set an example of orderly living. The future of mankind, for the socialist, is simple: pull down the existing order, and allow the future to emerge. But it will not emerge, as we know. These philosophies of the "new world" are lies and delusions, products of a sentimentality which has veiled the facts of human nature.

We can do nothing unless we first amend ourselves. The task is to rediscover the world which made us, to see ourselves as part of something greater, which depends upon *us* for its survival—and which still can live in us, if we can achieve that "condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing not less than everything)," to which Eliot directs us.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Such is the conservative message for our time. It is a message beyond politics, a message of liturgical weight and authority. But it is a message which must be received, if humane and moderate politics is to remain a possibility.

1. *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber, 1970 [1929]), 20.

2. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1886 [1961]), 22.

3. *Four Quartets*, in T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 182.

4. *Four Quartets*, 192.

5. *Four Quartets*, 197.

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- Y **Bache Renshaw Fellowships** for doctoral study at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education provide tuition plus \$12,000.

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