T.S. Eliot and the Critique of Liberalism

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Are you aware that the more serious thinkers among us are used . . . to regard the spirit of Liberalism as the characteristic of the destined Antichrist?

—John Henry Newman (1841)

Excerpt for fragments, the critique of modern liberalism has not been written. It cannot be otherwise. Our experience of liberalism, whether at this point of cruel history it is that of a moribund liberalism or of a meta-liberalism, remains dynamic. We can record the cumulative effects of the process, its inclusive progressions, but we can hardly determine its complete and final ending. We shall have to be content with the fragments that contain the substance of the critique of modern liberalism. Julien Benda, José Ortega y Gasset, and Nicolas Berdyaev on the Continent, T. E. Hulme and Christopher Dawson in England, Irving Babbitt and Reinhold Niebuhr in the United States—it is to writers like these that we need to turn in order to compile such a critique. Unquestionably, the name of Thomas Stearns Eliot figures prominently in this hierarchic list despite the fact that his social writings now seem to be read only by literary scholars. They are largely dismissed, except to be ridiculed or damned, by most critics and cultural historians. Yet Eliot's contribution to the critique of modern liberalism is considerable. That his contribution has been misunderstood and misrepresented as an example of "right-wing millenialism," reflects not upon the quality of Eliot's thought but rather upon twentieth-century intellectuals who, as Benda once pointed out, do not have enough moral stamina to carry the weight of their culture.

Modern man has still to acquire those high items of civilization that Eliot admired in Virgil's world, a "more civilized world of dignity, reason and order." Eliot was thoroughly aware of the dominance of those forces leading to the decline of Western culture. "The forces of deterioration are a large crawling mass," he says, "and the forces of development half a dozen men." From the beginning he knew on which side of the cultural argument he belonged. That is, he refused to accept indiscriminately the view that cultural change is the law of life—a view that liberal ideologues have stoutly defended. This view epitomized for Eliot precisely the heresy that leads to cultural breakdown. "The heretic," he insists, "whether he call himself fascist, or communist, or democrat or rationalist always has low ideals and great expectations." Eliot chose to resist the liberal doctrine no less than the liberal trend that he saw ascendant in the world. He made his choice knowing its alienating consequences. "What Machiavelli did not see about human nature is the myth of human goodness which for liberal..."
thought replaces the belief in Divine Grace,” Eliot writes in those tough and unflinching terms that liberals have neither forgotten nor forgiven.

In essence, liberalism was for Eliot a temper and an attitude and a habit of mind culminating in a particular ethos of response to the human condition. He did not approach liberalism as a specifying ideology or dialectic in the way that, say, an aristocratic liberal like Bertrand Russell or a reform liberal like John Dewey did. Instead, he saw the crisis of liberalism largely from a religious and a poetic sensibility, not from a scientific and statistical perspective. His assessment of liberalism, though “disinterested” in delineating defined valuations—the disinterestedness of a “steady impersonal passionless observation of human nature”—was moral and not programmatic or administrative. Not the principles of liberalism so much as the pattern—the shaping forms, curves, and colors—that liberalism took in civilization were what concerned Eliot. “For the question of questions,” he says in “The Literature of Politics” (1955), “which no political philosophy can escape, and by the right answer to which all political thinking must in the end be judged, is simply this: What is Man? what is his misery and what his greatness? and what, finally, his destiny?”

Eliot’s response to liberalism must be seen not in the special and limiting framework of the unity or the continuity of his thought per se, its development to be plotted, indexed, and aggregated, but in its totality, in what Eliot himself speaks of as “one’s total harvest of thinking, feeling, living and observing human beings.” What Eliot thought and said and wrote emerged from a profoundly reflective process: determining, contemplating, discerning, judging. In his critique of liberalism he employed no Alexandrian theological design: He did not set out to write a contra Haereticos. As a poet-critic, not a man of action, Eliot in his cultural opinions was not concerned with the political attainment of influence or with the goal of effecting an immediate change in human affairs. When Eliot says that he belongs to “the pre-political area” rather than to the political, he particularizes further “the stratum down to which any sound political thinking must push its roots, and from which it must derive its nourishment.” Such an area encompasses ethics and, in the end, theology.

Eternal rather than pragmatic principles inform Eliot’s assessment of liberalism. To say that Eliot’s writings on liberalism bear the imprint of a religious philosophy is to say that in these he discloses an apocalyptic bent, for he sees that modern man lives in an apocalyptic time in which an internal judgment of history reveals itself. Within the strict, measured Bradleyan economy and scrupulosity of his pronouncements, there is everpresent a vatic energy that makes one aware of Eliot’s judgmental view of man’s destiny in the historical process. Against what he sees as liberalism’s relativism he posits the absolute; against its meliorism he asserts the tragic element; against its naturalism he upholds the supernatural; against its secularism he places the Incarnation. For Eliot, then, liberalism is a creed equateable with the collapse not only of “ancient edifices” but also of spiritual values and certitudes. Such a creed, with its methodological proclivity and its scientific image of man, leads to the kind of devaluation, or desacralization, that, Eliot felt, negates order and confounds moral law and spiritual authority. As such, liberalism “is a movement not so much defined by its end, as by its starting point; away from, rather than towards, something.”

What some of Eliot’s critics mistake for lifelessness and escapism—a “liberal conservative” like Peter Viereck speaks of
Eliot's advocacy of "an artificial clerical unity" as being a symptom of the Waste Land in "its self-hate"—is actually a diagnostic exploration of the most serious problems confronting Western culture. It is the writer's task, Eliot declares in his essay "The Man of Letters and the Future of Europe" (1945), to speak out on issues affecting the fate of one's country, particularly its "cultural map," and "to take a longer view than either the politician or the local patriot." And what "the man of letters" should guard against, according to Eliot, is what he associated with the technologico-Benthamite liberal view and what he saw crystallizing even more explosively at the end of World War II: "... the idea of peace is more likely to be associated with the idea of efficiency—that is, with whatever can be planned."

For Eliot the crisis of liberalism was tied inseparably to the greater crisis of culture. The methodology of liberalism had become the ontological substance, as discriminating standards of inclusion and exclusion were neglected or dissolved in the name of social-political expedience. Nor did he fail to see that in its acceptance of instrumentalism the liberal mind in time surrendered to the technic spirit and ultimately, too, to the principle of an organized social order: "Not the least of the effects of industrialism is that we become mechanized in mind, and consequently attempt to provide solutions in terms of engineering, for problems which are essentially problems of life." Political and economic thinkers who embrace the idea of social engineering disregard cultural consequences; only "the man of letters is better qualified to foresee them, and to perceive their seriousness." The qualitative aspects of cultural life had to be upheld against a state of mind that measures all things by number and linear extension and that expects human and social perfection to emerge from the historical process. Eighteenth-century rationalism, nineteenth-centuryutilitarianism, and twentieth-century collectivism embodied for Eliot an evolving historic, secular process contributing to overcentralization and uprootedness, the two most rife conditions of this century's cultural malady. Eliot's rejection of liberalism as "the wave of the future" was total and incontrovertible.

From the standpoint of clarity and rhetorical economy, John Dewey's Liberalism and Social Action has classical standing for its espousal of liberalism in its history, its theory and doctrine, its problems and its promise. From the standpoint of connection with Eliot's indictment of liberalism, it also has the remarkable coincidence of advantage of containing Dewey's Page-Barbour Foundation lectures, given at the University of Virginia and published in 1935. The publication of these lectures came a year after Eliot's own Page-Barbour lectures appeared under the title After Strange Gods, in which Eliot bluntly stated his position: "In a society like ours, worm-eaten with Liberalism, the only thing possible for a person with convictions is to state a point of view and leave it at that." No indication is found anywhere in Liberalism and Social Action that Dewey was attempting to answer any of Eliot's charges, though the first two sentences of Dewey's book must inevitably place Eliot in the hostile camp: "Liberalism has long been accustomed to onslaughts proceeding from those who oppose social change. It has long been treated as an enemy by those who wish to maintain the status quo." In any event these two books present the two sides of a great debate. There could have been no more appropriate or intellectually respectable spokesmen for their opposing judgments about value in Western civilization.

Now, nearly forty years later, Dewey's arguments have a timely ring, nowhere bet-
ter heard than in his declaration that "If radicalism be defined as perception of need for radical change, then today any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed." Much of the New Left ideology of the contemporary period is both a continuation and a variation of Dewey's theme, but it often lacks either his devotion to liberty or his courage of honesty. The difference between Dewey and his successors is the difference between true and false liberals, between, in Irving Babbitt's apt expression, a "spiritual athlete" and "cosmic loafers."

"Organized social planning," Dewey repeatedly emphasizes, "is now the sole method of social action by which liberalism can realize its professed aims." A gradualistic, nonviolent combination of "organized intelligence," of "scientific method," and of "technological application," we are told, will topple the old morality and bring about a social order that frees man from the coercion and oppression of a dead past and prepares him for a place in the "great society." Conquer material wants and deprivations, runs the all too familiar argument, and spiritual rehabilitation of man is inevitable. Dewey's portrayal of liberalism speaks volumes about the historical promise of a "new deal" to be reached in the twentieth century:

Flux does not have to be created. But it does have to be directed. It has to be so controlled that it will move to some end in accordance with the principles of life, since life itself is development. Liberalism is committed to an end that is at once enduring and flexible: the liberation of individuals so that realization of their capacities may be the law of life. It is committed to the use of freed intelligence as the method of direct change. In any case, civilization is faced with the problem of uniting the changes that are going on into a coherent pattern of social organization. The liberal spirit is marked by its own picture of the pattern that is required: a social organization that will make possible effective liberty and opportunity for personal growth in mind and spirit in all individuals. Its present need is recognition that established material security is prerequisite of the ends which it cherished, so that, the basis of life being secure, individuals may actively share in the wealth of cultural resources that now exist and may contribute, each in his own way, to their further enrichment.

If these are the words of a philosopher of a continent, of the New World, and if, incidentally, they underline the perennial but parochial dream of an "American Eden" (for "We are," Dewey said, "a new body and a new spirit in the world"), they also have the implicit, the reminding and representative, power of summarizing so much that missionary technic liberalism, regardless of time and place, prescribes. And it is this prescriptiveness of liberalism that Dewey, no less than earlier political moderns as, say, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Jeremy Bentham, enshrined in his writings. Apostles of the liberal spirit all, they refused to be intimidated by the more strenuous concept of human limitation and fallibility. Dewey accepted what is modern in human civilization: the belief in change, in social organization, in the "law" of progress, in the planned human will. "The task is to go on," he proclaims, "and not backward, until the method of intelligence and experimental control is the rule in social relations and social directions." Regardless of the insight and wisdom of its lessons, the historical past, Dewey maintained, was nothing as compared with the new scientific method that merely needed cooperative, experimental application. "That history in being a process of change generates change not only in details but also in the method of directing social change": this was something
that could not be overlooked, he insisted. Indeed, this was the revealed fact of the modern world and of which he became one of its prophets of acceptance, leading him to posit a recurring question that in recent years has been the subject of acerbic debate between Dr. F. R. Leavis and Lord Snow: "And what is scientific technology save a large-scale demonstration of organized intelligence in action?"

Eliot's vision of the historical process was the vision of a Weltdichter unafraid to see the world as it exists both in and between illusion and disillusion. In this vision Eliot possessed the poetic insight that Dewey and his liberal precursors and successors have lacked and that makes the difference between the creative and the technic minds so startling. "But the essential advantage of a poet," we hear Eliot saying, "is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal; it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror and the glory." Combining what he calls "a Catholic heritage, and a Puritanical temperament" and affirming the requirements of "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action," Eliot may have given a picture of the death-motive in life, the loathing and horror of life. And yet, as Eliot stresses, "the hatred of life is an important phase—even, if you like, a mystical experience—in life itself." His diagnostic truths resulted precisely from his possessing a préoccupation morale; his poetic vision of life could hardly sanction the blank kind of empiricism found in the legacy of Charles Sanders Peirce, that "truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit toward which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief."

Reverence for what Eliot calls "permanent truths about man and God and life and death,"—the "permanent things" that Bentham derided as "nonsense on stilts,"—is at the center of After Strange Gods. Seen together, Eliot's book and Dewey's Liberalism and Social Action present the quarrel between the pronouncement of tradition and the proclamation of revolt. After Strange Gods can be interpreted as a condemnation of the intellectual revolution that Dewey's thought crystallized. (In After Strange Gods Eliot pointed to China as "a country of tradition"—"until the missionaries initiated her into Western thought, and so blazed a path for John Dewey.") What Eliot condemns is the spirit of indulgence that pervades liberalism. The results of such a softness bring decay of cultural standards. Assuming "the role of moralist," Eliot stresses that what he has to say is not undertaken as "exercises in literary criticism." Rather, he is concerned with developing "certain ideas in illustration of which I have drawn upon the work of some of the few modern writers whose work I know." In delineating these ideas Eliot employs moral criteria, for he believes that "the struggle of our time [is] to concentrate, not to dissipate; to renew our association with traditional wisdom; to re-establish a vital connexion between the individual and the race; the struggle, in a word, against Liberalism."

After Strange Gods has been attacked as the most offensive of Eliot's social-religious writings. Typically critics charge that the book is "full of inverted psychology and perverted sociology," a "defeatist" example of "neo-scholastic" reversion to "dogmatic theology" and "ecclesiastical orthodoxy." Eliot was aware of this reaction to his book, which, after two printings, he did not permit to be reissued. "I regarded the tone of much of its contents as much too violent and sweeping; some of my assertions I should qualify and some I should withdraw," he declared in 1960. Yet, although he may no longer have agreed with certain of his opinions in After Strange Gods, he
did not repudiate their essence. In the development of a writer's thought later qualifications must not be equated with outright rejection of earlier views. In this connection, it is interesting to note that John Hayward edited, "with the author's approval," a selection of Eliot's critical writings under the title *Points of View*, published in 1941 by Eliot's own firm of Faber and Faber. "Designed as an introduction to the author's work in prose," the book contains representative passages, from a single paragraph to a complete essay, from Eliot's writings published between 1917 and 1939. Two passages from *After Strange Gods* are included: the first under the caption "'Romantic' and 'Classic,'" and the second under the caption "Thomas Hardy."

With all its problematic history *After Strange Gods* remains a valuable clue to Eliot's critique of liberalism. His misgivings about the book, curiously blending humility and irony, resulted from literary considerations, not from basic theses. In applying "the standard of orthodoxy to contemporary literature," Eliot focuses on some of the writings of Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, Thomas Hardy, and D. H. Lawrence. In these he detects "deviations from the inherited wisdom of the race," that is, a denial or neglect of "a living and central tradition"; an extreme individualism in views; an absence of moral principles stemming from growing disenchantment with the validity of religious tradition as maintained and refined by the supervision of orthodoxy. Poets and novelists have become "promoters of personality," who claim that for a man to achieve his "sincerity" he should "be himself." Such a view of personality is, for Eliot, an example of "heresy," which he couples, as a consequence and concomitant, with the glorification of personality: "... the unregenerate personality, partly self-deceived and partly irresponsible, and because of its freedom, terribly limited by prejudice and self-conceit, capable of much good or great mischief according to the natural goodness or impurity of man: and we are all, naturally, impure." What Eliot was attacking was the "organizing" ethos of liberalism, as proclaimed by Dewey, and its optimist ideal of personality, as defined by another liberal oracle, L. T. Hobhouse, who wrote in 1911: "Liberalism is the belief that society can safely be founded on this self-directing power of personality, that it is only on this formulation that a true community can be built. ..."

From his condemnation of the liberal view of personality Eliot never deviated. Whatever regrets he later expressed came not from the substance of his traditionalist convictions but rather from the form in which he presented them. Thus Eliot acknowledged "errors of judgment" and "errors of tone: the occasional note of arrogance, of vehemence, of cocksureness or rudeness." No doubt Eliot remembered his infamous statement in *After Strange Gods* that "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable." Whatever the insinuations, usually from critics who fail to distinguish between dogma and prejudice, Eliot's anti-Judaism was not anti-Semitism. For a Christian to be racist and to hate Jews, he later said, is forbidden—"is a sin"; and no other modern poet has been more aware of sin. It is enough to assert in Eliot's defense that his was a kind of Christian anti-Judaism that is not opposed to the Old Testament but to Talmudic-rabbinic Judaism, which developed after the Jews' refusal to accept Christ.

Eliot no doubt also remembered the travesty of his attack on D. H. Lawrence in *After Strange Gods*:

The man's vision is spiritual, but spiritually sick. ... I fear that Law-
rence's work may appeal, not to those who are well and able to discriminate, but to the sick and debile and confused; and will appeal not to what remains of health in them, but to their sickness.

Above all Eliot had towards the end of his life reappraised some of his hard-line Bloomsbury valuations of Lawrence. Lawrence and Eliot were, at least in their critical overview of the dialectic of liberalism, of the same party without, it seems, knowing it, though as Eliot does say, "it matters a good deal in what name we condemn it." Lawrence's critique of liberalism nevertheless has its echoes in Eliot:

... they want an outward system of nullity, which they call peace and goodwill, so that in their own souls they can be independent little gods, referred nowhere and to nothing, little mortal Absolutes, secure from question. That is at the back of all Liberalism, Fabianism and democracy. It stinks. It is the will of the louse.

"When morals cease to be a matter of tradition and orthodoxy—that is, of the habits of the community formulated, corrected, and elevated by the continuous thought and direction of the Church—and when each man is to elaborate his own, then personality becomes a thing of alarming importance": to this thesis Eliot was to return again and again. If his use of Lawrence was a tactical error in the struggle against liberalism, there were other writers who could better illustrate the pitfalls of liberalism. Could Eliot have had this in mind in permitting the long paragraph on Thomas Hardy, from After Strange Gods, to reappear in Points of View? Hardy, he charges, is an example of a writer living "in an age of unsettled beliefs and enfeebled tradition" with no loyalty to any metaphysics or tradition; a writer extremely self-absorbed in his novels, in which most of his characters come alive only "in their emotional paroxysms": "This extreme emotionalism seems to me a symptom of decadence; it is a cardinal point of faith in a romantic age, to believe that there is something admirable in violent emotion for its own sake, whatever the emotion or whatever its object." Hardy exemplifies a form of what Eliot found to be the same indiscipline that his Harvard mentor Irving Babbitt and the other New Humanists equated with the absence of the "inner check upon the expansion of natural impulse." In circumscribing Hardy from this angle of criticism Eliot surely had in mind the limitations of the liberal doctrine; the ultimate as opposed to the scientific fact that, as Eliot wrote of Hardy's rendered "personal view of life" (which, he said, referring at the same time to liberalism, "is merely part of the whole movement of several centuries towards the aggrandisement and exploitation of personality"), "unless there is moral resistance and conflict there is no meaning."

That man should be free to regulate his own moral progress: such constituted the climate of relativism that was at the core of Eliot's critique of a flourishing liberalism. The liberal view that morals are a kind of humanistic science and that, in consequence, as the liberal ideologue would have it, "for the rational man, the world begins anew each moment," led to "a spirit of excessive tolerance" that, Eliot believed, "is to be depreciated." Whatever reservations Eliot was to have about the tone of After Strange Gods or about the harshness of its opinions as he came to see them, he was never to repudiate the social and religious perspectives he delineated in his "primer of modern heresy." His preoccupation with "orthodoxy of sensibility and with the sense of tradition" was to remain pivotal. Without this sense of tradition—
“all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of ‘the same people living in the same place’”—instability and moral debilitation are inevitable. Eliot stamped his moral perspectives with “a definite and theological standpoint,” that is, with a clear-cut and present Christian metaphysics insofar as he says in his essay “Francis Herbert Bradley” (1927), “Morality and religion are not the same thing, but they cannot beyond a certain point be treated separately.” Eliot’s critique of liberalism could hardly be more explicit in all of its developing and informing referents in After Strange Gods than in these words:

If you do away with this [moral] struggle, and maintain that by tolerance, benevolence, inoffensiveness and a redistribution or increase of purchasing power . . . the world will be as good as anyone could require, then you must expect human beings to become more and more vaporous.

In liberalism Eliot discerned the quintessence of another form of secularism, another of the seductive “philosophies without revelation,” springing from “titanism, or the attempt to build a purely human world without reliance upon grace.” Liberalism was to underline a contemporary example “of the permanent force of the world against which the spirit must always struggle,” as Eliot expresses it in an acute but neglected essay which he contributed in 1937 to a symposium entitled Revelation, edited by John Baillie and Hugh Martin. As always in his probing of secular philosophies, he returned to the moral element, or, better, to the absence of “the possibility of that frightful discovery of morality.” In facing the données of liberalism, for example, those of Bertrand Russell’s “enervate gospel of happiness,” he unfailingly castigated the liberals’ contention that only in the adventure of unrestrained experience will truth ever emerge. Such a conviction he associated with what he believed to be the constitutives of modernism, “newness and crudeness, impatience, inflexibility in one respect and fluidity in another, and irresponsibility and lack of wisdom.” Ultimately he saw that the promise of liberalism was mecha

istic, part of the great, secular experiment conspiring “to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality.” In his major prose writings appearing after 1934, Eliot continued to answer the “liberal-minded,” who, as he put it in his essay “Religion and Literature” (1935), “are convinced that if everybody says what he thinks, and does what he likes, things will somehow, by some automatic compensation and adjustment, come right in the end.”

That this conviction is untenable is a subject of Eliot’s The Idea of a Christian Society (1939). After Strange Gods offended readers because of its demarcation, from an overtly Christian position, of “the organisation of values, and a direction of religious thought which must proceed to a criticism of political and economic systems.” The judgmental tone of this book is no less severe than that of After Strange Gods. So relentless and uncompromising is it, that the book infuriated liberal critics, especially, and predictably, one of Dewey’s disciples, who denounced its tractarian stance as “a vulturous idea decked out in dove’s words.” But there could be no relenting tone, no easy choice of tactics or of tact. In The Idea of a Christian Society, consisting of lectures delivered at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in March 1939, Eliot said exactly what he thought about the nature, end, and function of social order at almost exactly the time when Winston Churchill was warning the House of Commons, “The danger is now very near
dark, bitter waters... are rising fast on every side.” It was a time of history, even of a judgment upon history, that, as Eliot said in his conclusion, provoked “a doubt of the validity of a civilisation,” made already more anguishing for “many persons who, like myself, were deeply shaken by the events of September 1938, in a way from which one does not recover; persons to whom that month brought a profound realisation of a general plight.” And in an appended note dated September 6, 1939, Eliot wrote that the whole of *The Idea of a Christian Society* “was completed before it was known we should be at war.” He emphasizes, however, that since the possibility of war was always present in his mind, he has only two additional observations to make: “first, that the alignment of forces which has now revealed itself should bring more clearly to our consciousness the alternative of Christianity or paganism; and, second, that we cannot afford to defer our constructive thinking to the conclusion of hostility—a moment when... good counsel is liable to be obscured.”

Here, too, Eliot continued his examination of the environment of modern society that, as he had written in *After Strange Gods*, was hostile to faith and produced few individuals “capable of being injured by blasphemy.” A modern society without the “assurance of first principles” becomes either like the United States religiously “neutral” or like Soviet Russia “pagan.” Eliot was unbending in his distrust of “secular reformers,” whose reforms merely generalize man and impose a mechanistic psychology over moral philosophy. His quarrel with an emergent modernism therefore was a quarrel precisely with the liberal concept of the evolution of morals in direct relation to the concrete results of social action. This legislative view, as it might be called, signified for Eliot moral flabbiness. “But because Christian morals are based on fixed beliefs which cannot change,” he writes, “they also are essentially unchanging: while the beliefs and in consequence the morality of the secular world can change from individual to individual, or from generation to generation, or from nation to nation.” The image of Eliot as an “anxious pilgrim” rather than an intrepid explorer is no doubt understandable in any appraisal of *The Idea of a Christian Society*. But for Eliot the impelling idea of human exploration always had its limits; indeed, the whole of Eliot’s poetic and critical achievement, in principle and in intent, ultimately affirms sacral limits, that is, knowing when to stop in reverence before the “burning bush,” or as Eliot phrases it: “For only in humility, charity and purity—and most of all perhaps humility—can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without which human operations are vain.”

Eliot’s remarks on liberalism in *The Idea of a Christian Society* were made in the course of his envisaging the end to which “the community of Christians” must be directed, “a society in which the natural end of man—virtue and well-being in community—is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end—beatitude—for those who have eyes to see it.” Indubitably the religious attitude that he affirmed was set against the secular attitude and, more specifically, against the liberalism that he saw permeating men’s minds and affecting their attitude towards life. His treatment here of liberalism is brief but devastating. There is no doubt that he had given long and careful thought to the subject, that he knew its magnitude, that he had to speak his mind on the subject clearly and categorically, for the record, for history. Eliot also knew full well the intricate power of the enemy and the evil of which it is capable: “It [liberalism] is a necessary nega-
tive element; when I have said the worst of it, that worst comes only to this, that a negative element made to serve the purpose of a positive is objectionable." The historical role of liberalism in the neutralization and paganization of modern society cannot go unchallenged or unpunished, Eliot seemed to be saying. Consequently, the section that he devoted to liberalism has such a concentrated power of thought, of controlled scorn, such care of expression and confidence of view, that it sounds like the bursting of a rocket in a war of faiths. No better example of Eliot's pronouncements against liberalism can be found than in this passage:

By destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness rather than wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified, by fostering a motion of getting on to which the alternative is a hopeless apathy, Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanised or brutalised which is a desperate remedy for its chaos.

At the same time Eliot prophetically pointed out that liberal attitudes were disappearing, inasmuch as the sphere of private life which liberalism traditionally defends was being steadily diminished. For out of liberalism, he noted, come philosophies that deny it, as we move "from Liberalism to its apparent end of authoritarian democracy." Liberalism signified for Eliot the legacy of disorder, "and not the permanent value of the negative element," which he saw as essential to cultural growth and maturity, an integral aspect of what he later labeled "internal cultural bickering." With critical liberalism, as it might be termed, Eliot disagreed, but for him this disagreement was a dimension vitally important to an emerging "definition of culture." He was too much the creative genius to discredit dialectical tension. Still, Eliot was to take a long view of things, to make his judgments and choices according to his concept of "last things," according to what he regarded as the needful return to an assurance of "first principles." Only these could overcome and transcend that "liberalised or negative condition of society [which] must either proceed into a gradual decline of which we can see no end, or . . . reform itself into a positive shape which is likely to be effectively secular." For Eliot there was a third possibility, "that of a positive Christian society." For him the dogma of "the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life" was irrevocable. Christian theology provided Eliot with precisely the answers to why things are wrong in the world: "What is right enters the realm of the expedient and is contingent upon place and time, the degree of culture, the temperament of a people. But the Church can say what is always and everywhere wrong." He refused to accept what the secular mind speaks of as the urgent need for "greater plasticity and bolder exploration of human possibilities." Eliot sought for permanent answers to ultimate questions.

Man's possibility for evil, as Eliot underlined in The Idea of a Christian Society, was unlimited; hence, the problem of man was the problem of motives and of law. Eliot could not accept the secularist's view that politics, being, to use a phrase, "the art of the possible," especially when embodied in the highest forms of intellect and governance, was superior to the prior creation of a temper of mind in people equipping them to see and know "what is wrong—morally wrong—and why it is wrong." Eliot affirmed the teleological priority of Christian doctrine. Hence, the year 1939,
which for W. H. Auden brought to an end "a low dishonest decade," for Eliot marked the epochal crisis of modernism in all of its ramifications. The war embodied for Eliot the most brutalizing consequences of the liberal spirit, in short, the modern offshoots of secularism either as the neutralization or the paganization of civilization, or as both. In holding to such a view he resolutely opposed what John Dewey espoused as modern man's need "to translate the word 'natural' into 'moral.'" The Idea of a Christian Society was to contain Eliot's answer to the liberal concept of human nature; in it he included his world-view. This view was hardly optimistic, but historical developments since 1939 (let alone since 1914, that penultimate year of crisis) validate what liberal critics denigrate as Eliot's "peculiar gloom." Dewey's belief that "the future of democracy is allied with the spread of the scientific attitude" cannot but be tinged today with a more deepening irony, as Eliot had foreseen.

Dewey's Freedom and Culture appeared in the same year as did Eliot's The Idea of a Christian Society. The earlier debate now continued as the crisis of 1939 emerged. No other two books could more sharply focus on increasingly opposing viewpoints. The positions stated and defended, in terms of each writer's special sense of historical crisis, are irreconcilable. For Eliot the crisis of history and the problem of man conjoined in the need of "the perpetual message of the Church: to affirm, to teach and to apply, true theology." For Dewey the crisis instanced the basic failures of modern society to subscribe more fully and boldly to the "scientific attitude" and to the belief in the infinite adaptability of human nature. Neither man's corruptiveness nor man's avarice, which Eliot called "the dominant vice of our time," contained explanations for Dewey. It was not a matter of the tragic outlook but rather of man not plumbing his capacity and exploring his possibilities, to use the liberal's terminology. Employing the logic of argumentation that makes Eliot's critique of liberalism all the more understandable in its antithesis, Dewey surveyed the crisis of his time in terms of the surviving relics of coercion instead of cohesion. The threat to the cause of democratic freedom, Dewey observed, lay not in the existence of totalitarian states but in man's own attitudes and within man's institutions: "A culture which permits science to destroy traditional values but which distrusts its power to create new ones is a culture which is destroying itself." Invoking the liberal's faith, Dewey was to stress in Freedom and Culture that no problem was too big nor crisis too overpowering if only man confronted it "with all the resources provided by collective intelligence operating in co-operative action."

Eliot's concept of the modern cultural situation is closely tied to his indictment of the liberal ethos, particularly its pragmatism, with its pluralistic, indeterministic, and melioristic habits of thought. Democratic liberalism presented Eliot with no theory or standards for the growth and survival of culture. "A democracy in which everybody had an equal opportunity in everything would be oppressive for the conscientious and licentious for the rest," he observes coldly in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (1948), his sequel to The Idea of a Christian Society. He is still assaying, though on a broader level, the consequences of the liberal outlook. Here, too, his pronouncements remain consistently critical. Secularism is the enemy. "Culture . . . is of divine origin and must perish among people who lose belief in a supernatural world," he warns. Eliot marks his cultural views in irrevocably religious contexts insofar as, he claims, one cannot escape the religious point of view, "because
in the end one either believes or disbelieves." For him culture is "the incarnation... of the religion of a people"; "what is part of our culture is also part of our lived religion"; "the formation of a religion is also the formation of a culture."
The informing religious tone in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture is one of reverence: the reverence that Richard M. Weaver epitomizes in his Visions of Order (1964) when he writes: "While culture is not a worship and should not be made a worship, it is a kind of orienting of the mind toward a mood, a reverence for the spirit on secular occasions."

Although Eliot retains an inherent concern with the process of de-Christianization, his chief concern in this book is with religious values in their cultural meaning. (There is some truth to Father Walter J. Ong's observation that "Eliot's writings are often concerned with 'religion' but seldom explicitly with Christ.") Eliot no doubt recognizes in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture the expansion of the irreligious and anti-religious tempers in the modern world. World War II, "a period of unparalleled destructiveness," must be seen as the background against which he defends his religious concept of culture. If this book discloses a certain and pronounced hesitancy, even an imprecision of definition and of critical application, and if it lacks that force of assurance found in The Idea of a Christian Society, these weaknesses must be viewed against the backdrop of the war. The question that now plagued Eliot more than ever was: Had not the world since 1939 moved beyond chaos, into the zero-zone in which, as Samuel Beckett has said, there is an absolute absence of the absolute? If Eliot had had, through Prufrock and Sweeney, his vision of horror, he now understood it in its most radical implications. A tormented note of defensiveness was the communicated consequence of such an experience, and its scars were visible. Fear, too, was a feeling that Eliot revealed here, leading to almost agonized supplication:

If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes. Then you must start painfully again, and you cannot put on a new culture ready made. You must wait for the grass to grow to feed the sheep to give the wool out of which your new coat will be made. You must pass through many centuries of barbarism. . . . But we can at least try to save something of those goods of which we are the common trustees: the legacy of Greece, Rome and Israel, and the legacy of Europe throughout the last 2,000 years. In a world which has seen such material devastation as ours, these spiritual possessions are also in imminent peril.

The problem of culture and religion, of "the whole way of life," had grown immensely difficult, as Eliot showed. The conflict between social tradition, as the maintenance and transmission of standards of culture, and the common standards enforced by the decrees of social planners and of politicians was moving towards a secular victory. In the aftermath, Eliot also saw the religious decline against which he was fighting. Again, the seductiveness of liberal theory was all too evident. Common standards result in "common faith," to use the title of John Dewey's credo published in 1934. "A body of beliefs and practices," Dewey says, "that are apart from the common and natural relations of mankind must . . . weaken and sap the force of the possibilities inherent in such relations. Here lies one aspect of the emancipation of the religious from religion." The allurements of such a liberal dictum were (and are) no doubt mighty for the masses that naturally dislike "historic encumbrances" and succumb to the miracle of technics. Eliot's recognition of the cultural power of

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these “new methods of inquiry and reflection,” as “the final arbiter of all questions of fact, existence, and intellectual assent,” to use Dewey’s own words, is inherent in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture. The metaphysical essences of a transcendent “otherness” and otherworldliness, Eliot could hardly escape noticing, were jeopardized by a world in which a religious concept of culture would increasingly fall victim to the radical metaphysics of liberal doctrine, the metaphysical pluralism that one authority describes as follows: “There can be no ultimate system, for each new system must like all others be limited by its categories and hence must take its place in an infinite series” (Henry Alonzo Myers, Systematic Pluralism, 1961).

The purpose and function of education also figure prominently in Eliot’s critique of liberalism. Liberalism, he stresses in his essay “Modern Education and the Classics” (1932), along with exciting a “superficial curiosity? has fallaciously tried to equalize subjects of study. Radicalism, the offspring of liberalism, has proceeded “to organize the ‘vital issues,’ and reject what is not vital.” As a result, liberal concepts of education, as of politics, have led to the steady decline of standards. “In a negative liberal society,” Eliot observes in The Idea of a Christian Society, “you have no agreement as to there being any body of knowledge which any educated person should have acquired at any particular stage: the idea of wisdom disappears, and you get sporadic and unrelated experimentation.” The question of education is tied to the principles of order. To think of education in terms merely of adapting it to a changed and changing world is to ignore what must remain the inviolable “permanent principles of education.” Education is not to be measured pragmatically or scientifically, “dominated by the idea of getting on” as “many ardent reforming spirits” believe. “A high average of general education is perhaps less necessary for a civil society than is a respect for learning.” Eliot writes in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture. His view of the close relationship between education and culture is evident: If “culture can never be wholly conscious . . . it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background to our planning.” Such a truth for Eliot more specifically accentuates “the delusion that the maladies of the modern world can be put right by a system of education.” It underlines also the commensurate truth that in education, as in culture, “one thing to avoid is a universalised planning; one thing to ascertain is the limits of the plannable.”

No less than other aspects of modern life, education, Eliot believed, was stamped by a secularist liberalism. In his essay in Revelation he writes:

The whole tendency of education (in the widest sense—the influence playing on the common mind in the forms of “enlightenment”) has been for a very long time to form minds more and more adapted to secularism. . . .

Such a liberalism can appeal to only the “experiential test,” and not to the permanencies of order, of unity, and of wisdom. “What happens in our thinking about education is, of course, only a special instance of what happens to human consciousness,” Eliot told his audience in his lectures on “The Aims of Education” at the University of Chicago in November 1950. At the heart of his criticism here, as elsewhere, was Eliot’s distrust of changes that have external, material ends. Educational reforms, albeit humane, lack centrality of the kind that can neither “change the will of those who worship false gods” nor “sustain an entire society.” Such reforms, as the products of liberal theory, remain unfinished, for their success is socially oriented and de-
rivative, fostering surrogates that also create new perils:

The restoration of a kind of order in people's private lives . . . when it is made in the name of a social purpose only, furthers the reduction of men to machines, and is the opposite from the development of their humanity.

Eliot never wavered in his belief that liberalism contains the kind of secular faith that conceives of the evils of the world as external to man. He rejected the liberal view of the human condition. He refused, in short, to subscribe to the scientific concepts of the future of man, precisely that "new age" which John Dewey saw as inseparable from scientific knowledge as the paradigm of all reliable knowledge. Eliot readily admitted that his approach to education was "orthodox." It was, in other words, metaphysical and theological. "There are two and only two finally tenable hypotheses about life: the Catholic and the materialistic," he writes in "Modern Education and the Classics." There were, then, limitations and retributions that no scientific liberalism could ever overcome. These limits were, whatever the temptations of liberal doctrine, implicit in the very fabric of life. No liberal educational theorist, he maintained, could afford to ignore the insoluble contradictions that Simone Weil, whom Eliot admired, saw "afflicting" the human condition. Eliot saw fit to quote from Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace* in "The Aims of Education":

Our life is impossibility, absurdity. Everything that we will is contradicted by the conditions or by the consequences attached to it. That is because we are ourselves contradiction, being merely creatures. . . .

The key word to much of Eliot's critique of liberalism is found in these words.

Eliot considered education a cultural rather than a social phenomenon. His concern was always with cultural health achieved through standards, a concern informed by this statement in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*: "For it is an essential condition of the preservation of the quality of culture of the minority, that it should continue to be a minority culture." In holding such a view, and especially in the attendant indictment of modern collectivist social theory, of "mass-culture," Eliot continued his conflict with liberalism and specifically with the liberal educational views propounded by John Dewey, who once more helps provide a positive frame of reference in historical antithesis. "One needs the enemy," Eliot writes in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. "So, within limits, the friction, not only between individuals but between groups, seems quite necessary for civilisation. The universality of irritation is the best assurance of peace." It is Dewey, of course, who in the twentieth century has presented the liberal philosophy of education at its best. But it was not just a philosophy of education but a philosophy of ideals, the major ideal being Dewey's conception of education as an agency of social adjustment, one in which the individual's "privacy of reflective self-consciousness," as it has been put, is notoriously expendable. As a liberal ideologue of education, Dewey resisted any "externally imposed ends." All values, he argues in his influential *Democracy and Education* (1916), a work that Walter Lippmann hailed as expressing "the best hope of liberal men," come from experience and not from contemplation. All distinctions, moreover, are social. All matters of moral significance and discrimination are derived solely from the relations between man and man and not from what lies within man. To the question What is education?, Dewey therefore replies: "It is the reconstruction or reorganization of ex-
perience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.

Such a reply obviously was a liberal fallacy that Eliot connected with the spread of the materialistic view and ends. The Deweyan view sought for "the wrong things." Inherent in his rejection of such a view was Eliot’s belief that it was not only "wrong" but also abstract. He writes in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*:

> Education in the modern sense implies a disintegrated society, in which it has come to be assumed that there must be one measure of education according to which everyone is educated simply more or less. Hence *Education* has become an abstraction.

Eliot thought that a proper system of education should “unify the active and the contemplative, action and speculation, politics and the arts.” For Dewey—for the liberal—this approach signified the kind of philosophical dualism that was unprogressive. Education, Dewey stipulates in “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897), which he was to refine and enlarge upon in his later educational work, “is a process of living and not a preparation for future living”; “is the fundamental method of social progress and reform”; is “the art of thus giving shape to human powers and adapting them to social service... the supreme art.” Such testaments incorporate the liberal creed. They also signalize the unfortunate fact that “we have always new problems, and the old ones in new forms,” as Eliot observes in “The Aims of Education.” He could hardly have been more right or the Deweyan liberals more wrong in their dismissal of Eliot’s thinking on education (his reflections—for he distrusted conclusions) as having only “an antiquarian interest.” Eliot’s picture of higher education in America in the early thirties, as he paints it in “Modern Education and the Classics,” could not be more prophetic of the contemporary plight:

> And when you have sunk so much money in plant and equipment, when you have a very large (though not always well-paid) staff of men who are mostly married and have a few children, when you are turning out from your graduate schools more and more men who have been trained to become teachers in other universities, and who will probably want to marry and have children too; when your whole national system of higher education is designed for an age of expansion, for a country which is going indefinitely to increase its population, grow rich, and build more universities—then you will find it very difficult to retract.

That there were forces in the late 1920’s fighting the manifold consequences of the liberal doctrine of endless experiment and expansion Eliot was fully aware. He particularly applauded the New Humanism of Irving Babbitt and his disciples for its diagnosis of the ills of the modern world, arising, at least in one major respect, from what Babbitt termed the liberal theory of “free temperamental expansion.” Eliot shared with Babbitt a distrust of the liberal pragmatists and other philosophers. No less than the humanists was he critical of monistic postulates, and no less did he seek for what a humanist like Norman Foerster called the “principles of order and construction” to help contain “the tumult of the times disconsolate.” But no less than they did Eliot insist on what Babbitt himself termed “a careful determination of boundaries.” If, therefore, Eliot joined the humanists in opposing what the latter spoke of as the gospel of Occidental “naturism,” he could not overlook their lack of a Christian standard or their voluntary alienation from a central spiritual tradi-
tion. For the humanists the struggle against liberalism had to rely on the staying power and persuasiveness of "ethical will." Humanism was essentially a nonreligious philosophy, though nobler in its aspirations as it stood against the materialism and the "naturism" of a profane age. This humanism, Foerster writes in "Humanism and Religion" (in The Forum, September 1929), "attracts persons who are content to be human, but not worldlings." It provided, as both mediator and reconciler, an alternative to "the ideal of the religious man" by offering "the ideal of the civilized man." Its roots, Foerster stressed, were Hellenic, pre-Christian:

... the choice of the humanist is that vision of a proportioned totality, that selective comprehensiveness, that just relation of the planes of life which was more nearly attained in the Greece of Pericles than any subsequent time or place.

Despite his support of humanism, Eliot found its forms, ancient and modern, inadequate, just another "attempt to devise a philosophy of life without a metaphysics." In his essay "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt" (1927) Eliot centers on the "obscurities" of humanism, resulting from its primary failure to accept any dogma except that of human reason. The humanist, by suppressing the divine element as the revelation of the supernatural, was left with the ever corruptible human element. Humanism is "sporadic" and "impure"—"merely the state of mind of a few persons in a few places at a few times"—rather than, in irreversible historical contexts, "continuous" and "constructive" like Christianity. To be sure, humanism is, Eliot confesses in "Second Thoughts About Humanism" (1928), "necessary for the criticism of social life and social theories, political life and political theories." But the battle against liberalism, against the chaos of the modern world, needed, Eliot believed, more than the positive and exclusive things that humanism offered, i.e., "breadth, tolerance, equilibrium and sanity." Here Eliot was as critical of Babbitt's humanism as he was of Matthew Arnold's philosophy of culture (he, in fact, believed Arnold to be a fore-runner of humanism). In both positions he condemned the great élan towards usurping the place of revealed religion. By no means did Eliot reject either the virtues or the values of humanism, but these, too, he was careful to define in the priority of their appropriateness. He writes in "Religion Without Humanism," an essay he contributed to Norman Foerster's Humanism and America (1930):

Without humanism both religion and science tend to become other than themselves, and without religion and science—without emotional and intellectual discipline—humanism tends to shrink into an atrophied caricature of itself.

Only what Jacques Maritain calls "humanisme intégral," humanism with a "metaphysics of transcendence," was to embody for Eliot a genuine spiritual ally in the war against liberalism. Singleness of vision and not a choice of vision was what mattered in the end. Certainly, the humanists did proffer wisdom against the liberals' "gospel of mediocrity," words Eliot used in writing about Bertrand Russell's The Conquest of Happiness. "But wisdom is one thing without Christian wisdom, and another thing with it," Eliot writes in his essay "The Christian Conception of Education" (1941); "and there is a sense in which wisdom that is not Christian turns to folly." To repeat, Eliot insisted always on defining and ordering priorities. Humanism, under the circumstances, was a positive but secondary view of life. It was as admirable as it was effectual in combating liberal fallacies, particularly in education. In this same essay Eliot singles out for praise Dr. Leavis' statement that "the
problem of producing the ‘educated man’—
the man of humane culture who is equipped
to be intelligent and responsible about the
problems of contemporary civilization—
becomes that of realizing the Idea of a
University in practical dispositions ap-
propriate to the modern world.” But Eliot
is careful to pose questions about the think-
ing behind such a humane culture. That is
to say, humane culture by itself is not
enough, it becomes an anthropocentric
cul-de-sac. The ideals of humanism can
never be consummate insofar as humanist
“alternatives” and “auxiliaries” to religion
fail in the long run. As G. K. Chesterton
was to observe: “Humanism may try to
pick up the pieces; but can it stick them
together? Where is the cement which made
religion corporate and popular, which can
prevent it falling to pieces in a debris of in-
dividualistic tastes and degrees?” To such
questions Eliot gave unequivocal answer:

It [humanism] can only appeal to a
small number of superior individuals;
it can help them to recognize what is
wrong, but it cannot provide them with
the power to influence the mass of
mankind and to bring about what is
right. It can appeal to those people who
have already the humanists’ feelings
and desires; but it cannot change the
will of those who worship false gods. It
is powerless against the drifting desires
or torrential passions which turn by turn
provide the motive force for the mass
of natural men.

Liberal critics will continue to dismiss
Eliot’s contribution to the critique of
modern liberalism. The charge that Eliot’s
socio-cultural views are “irrelevant” will
continue to be broadcast. Nor does there
seem to be any setup in the derision of
Eliot’s “elitist politics.” (Nor at the same
time is there any real attempt to grapple
with the substance of Eliot’s belief that
“The pursuit of politics is incompatible
with a strict attention to exact meanings on
all occasions.”) For the most part critics
will continue to be curiously one-sided in
their evaluation of Eliot’s quarrel with
liberalism, though such evaluation accords
fully with the long-standing refusal of
liberalism to see that man belongs to two
planes of being and that man’s rights can-
not be separated from his responsibilities.

Philip Rahv, the founding co-editor of
Partisan Review, reflects this one-sided
critical reaction (that too often sets a party-
line judgment) when he writes of Eliot:
“His commitment to orthodox beliefs must
have answered an irresistible inner de-
mand of his nature for a discipline to shore
him up against chaos. . . . In this sense it
was no more than an anodyne.” There is
nothing wrong with society, we are told by
such pundits, that the “organizational im-
pulse” will not solve. John Dewey, in his
ninetieth year, uttered a common liberal
sentiment when he declared that “the one
thing of prime importance today is devel-
opment of methods of scientific inquiry to
supply us with the humane or moral knowl-
edge now conspicuously lacking.” Yet,
Dewey’s valedictory, no less than Rahv’s
clinical judgment, is as one-sided as the
Benthamism that, as John Stuart
Mill
writes, “can teach the means of organizing
and regulating the merely business part of
the social arrangements.”

The events of time must render the final
verdict. But it is clear by now that in his
social criticism Eliot has become one of the
great modern prophets. He saw not only in-
to but beyond liberalism. Eliot, it has been
said, “has the ‘uncynical disillusion’ of a
tempered religious sensibility.” This con-
stitutes no shortcoming in his vision. What
makes Eliot’s thought so forceful is his abil-
ity to size up the human situation with a
prophetic sensibility that is missing in the
liberal mentality. “If liberalism,” Lionel
Trilling reminds us, “has a single desperate
weakness, it is an inadequacy of imagination: liberalism is always being surprised.” Eliot’s was a vision of unromanticized compassion, and in this compassion lay that endurance and serenity of ordered thought leading to the kind of thinking that forms the following observation in “The Aims of Education”:

And so long as we are capable of resenting control, and of being shocked by other people’s private lives, we are still human. We are, at least, recognizing that man is something more than merely a social animal; that there should be limitations to social control. And by being shocked (when it is something more than a prejudice that is shocked) we are recognizing, however dimly, that there is some law of behaviour which is something more than a duty to the State.

Toughness of thought is a characteristic of Eliot’s social criticism. This toughness was a quintessential principle of order needed to resist some of the consequences of liberalism that Eliot detected especially in the nineteenth century and about some of which he writes in his essay “Arnold and Pater” (1930): “The dissolution of thought in that age, the isolation of art, philosophy, religion, ethics and literature, is interrupted by various chimerical attempts to effect imperfect syntheses.” This “dissolution,” Eliot saw, remained unchecked, the enemy as combative as ever. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, lecturing at Cambridge University in 1934, exhibited the kind of scorn that has greeted Eliot’s views. Eliot’s concept of liberalism, he said, “is anything which questions dogma: which dogma, to be right dogma, is the priestly utterance of a particular offset of a particular branch of a historically fissiparous Church.” Sir Arthur went on to give his own estimate of liberalism, which, he claimed, “reveals itself rather as Tradi-

tion itself, throughout Literature (which is Thought worth setting down and recording) the organic spirit persisting, aërating, preserving, the liberties our ancestors won and we inherit.” But surely the voice of liberalism heard here is the sentimental voice of the world. And the world, Eliot stated, “The world insists upon being right. It insists upon being virtuous. It is right, it is virtuous, it is damned.”

“It seems to me,” Eliot wrote to Herbert Read in 1924, “that at the present time we need more dogma, and that one ought to have as precise and clear a creed as possible, when one thinks at all . . .” If, in time, Eliot did change his mind about some of his literary valuations, he did not alter his social views. To the end he remained critical of the process of de-Christianization, as well as of dehumanization, that he connected with liberalism. And to the end he believed that history, despite the deep contradictions and mysteries of human existence, has spiritual meaning. His social criticism marks him essentially as a man of wisdom, not, like John Dewey, a man of influence. “To be understood by a few intelligent people,” Eliot said, “is all the influence a man requires.” His quarrel with liberalism was moral; it must be seen as a creative quarrel that raised disturbing conceptual questions. Only a few liberals have been willing to read Eliot and to answer his questions with the sense of responsibility demanded of any scrutiny of ultimate issues that affect not only the structure of life but, more important, man’s inner life. Certainly it is true that Eliot spoke as a conservative in his social criticism; yet he endowed his conservatism with a creativeness exceptional in its discriminations. Even if this conservatism, to use here John Stuart Mill’s words regarding Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “were an absurdity, it is well calculated to drive out a hundred absurdities worse than itself.”