

SYMPOSIUM ON MR. ELIOT'S 'NOTES' (III)¹

Mr. Eliot introduces his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* by citing the Oxford English Dictionary as follows:

Definition I. The setting of bounds;
limitation (rare)—1483.

One could, I think, put forward the theory that the second meaning is co-present with the first in the author's intention. One has at times the impression while reading this book that the intention is quite the reverse of Matthew Arnold's which was:

'to try and inquire . . . what culture really is, what good it can do, . . . I shall seek to find some plain grounds upon which a faith in culture . . . may rest securely.'²

One of the many impressions the book leaves is that of its sterility. It is as though Eliot were saying in a rather devious manner 'we are an uncultured and rotten society and there's nothing we can do about it'. From a rather more overt theological position perhaps, he might have followed this up and at least achieved the title of 'elegant Jeremiah'. This, however, he either could not or would not do.

I have said that this is one of the impressions because it is difficult to assess Eliot's attitude throughout. It is in fact the major difficulty that confronts anyone trying to write about his later prose works, to discover just how seriously Eliot takes himself or intends to be taken. *The Cocktail Party* is printed rather differently, but it can be included here for the sake of convenience. Of late one or two articles or features have come out with the tone 'T. S. Eliot is not only a poet but also . . .' and from *Time*³ we learn:

'He loves practical jokes. For years Eliot patronized a small store which specialized in exploding cigars, squirting buttonholes and soapy chocolates'.

This sort of humour gives us the clue to the wilful bad taste of 'The reader should therefore abstain from deriding . . . the late regretted Miss Wilkinson' as to the sub-title of *The Cocktail Party* and also, I think, to much more. Mr. Eliot appears to have written off the world as one of his own bad jokes but such an attitude being in fact impossible we find a resulting negative quality in his later prose that one is tempted to call Swiftian.

¹Previous contributions appeared in Vol. XVI, No. 1 and Vol. XVII, No. 1.

²*Culture and Anarchy*. Introduction.

³*Time*, March 6th, 1950.

No reviewer has, in my opinion, been able to talk about *Notes towards* without selecting particular subjects for discussion. This is, in itself, a major criticism since if anything at all positive is to emerge, such a selection is inevitable. The standards that are assumed for the purpose of one page of argument are explicitly rejected on the next or even by implication in the argument itself. We may cite as an example the treatment of Dr. C. E. M. Joad. The choice of Joad's views on education for what purports to be a serious discussion is itself a matter for wonder, but leaving that aside, the treatment is interesting.

To start with⁴ Dr. Joad is praised with what appears to be mock solemnity for maintaining the platitude that 'education has a number of ends!' Joad's propositions are then listed but it is found that while they all contain some truth 'each of them needs to be corrected by the others, it is possible that they all need to be adjusted to other purposes as well'. The propositions are in fact found to be pretty vapid and one is left wondering why they were considered in the first place. The criticism of them produces no alternatives except learning, knowledge and wisdom and by this point in the book one wants to know badly what Mr. Eliot means by the last term or how he would answer the question 'What shall we learn or teach?'. Finally, Dr. Joad is discovered in a Winchester garden. Dr. Joad's reaction to the scene and his subsequent reveries upon his life at Oxford are sufficiently caricatured for us to be aware of his limitations and also of the limitations of the life he admires. We are not then prepared for what follows:

'It seems strange, after these wistful reflections, that Dr. Joad should end his chapter by supporting a proposal . . . that the public schools should be taken over by the State and used as boarding schools to accommodate for two or three years, the intellectually abler secondary schoolboys . . . For the conditions over which he pronounces such a tearful valedictory were not brought about by equality of opportunity. They were not brought about either by mere privilege; but by the happy combination of privilege and opportunity, in the *blend* he so savours of which no Education Act will ever find the secret'.

We are left then to suppose that insofar as anything is meant by this 'blend' it is just the Thackeray-like romance which has previously been so adequately dealt with.

Mr. Eliot is in the habit of writing carefully and we cannot forget this when a habit so usefully employed before has now turned, apparently, vicious. This is the same sort of negative attitude revealed in the Milton lecture where the one or two tellingly adverse critical points, introduced by 'It might be said . . .', were not allowed to affect the main argument and in the published version relegated to foot-note status.

⁴Pages 97-8 and 101-2.

Apart, however, from these objections to manner and tone, why is it that the book fails to arouse any interest in those who are actively engaged in the study of society? Why, on the other hand does Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* remain the far more readable book? When we read Arnold we are not forced to be aware of the standards of the specialized disciplines upon whose field he touches. There is a reasonable degree of assumption disciplined by close attention to the subject at hand. As T. S. Eliot put it in his essay on Arnold and Pater:

'His (Arnold's) Culture survives better than his Conduct because it can better survive vagueness of definition . . . Culture has three aspects according as we look at it in *Culture and Anarchy*, in *Essays in Criticism*, or in the abstract. It is in the first of these two books that Culture shows to the best advantage. And the reason is clear: Culture there stands out against a background to which it is contrasted, a background of definite items of ignorance, vulgarity and prejudice . . . the book is perfect of its kind'.⁵

It does not at all affect our appreciation of Arnold's book that he should define culture in his Preface as:

'A pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know on all matters which most concern us the best which has been thought and said in the world'.

We read and pass on to his particular discussions for he has no pretensions to the scientific attitude or to its logic. On the other hand there are books which set out to arrive at conclusions about society in what is called a scientific spirit. Mr. Eliot has contrived to fall between these two. By professing to speak as a 'social biologist' and by his gesture to Mannheim who is not, after all, one of the least vulnerable figures in twentieth-century sociology, he makes us constantly aware of his own inadequacies and unawareness of the complexity of the problems he discusses. The specialist reader finding himself approached as such, is not prepared to pass over the loose judgments in which the book abounds. Especially is this the case where a preliminary analysis is being conducted and where the author is constantly claiming to make no such evaluations. We may consider a representative passage:

'I have suggested elsewhere that a society is in danger of disintegration when there is a lack of contact between people of different areas of activity—between the political, the scientific, the artistic, the philosophical and the religious minds. . . . The élite should be something different, something much more organically composed than a panel of bonzes, caciques and tycoons'.⁶

⁵*Selected Essays*, second edition, page 394.

⁶Page 84-5.

This, offered as a *true* generalization about society is quite inadequate. Whatever Mr. Eliot may mean by bonze, it is an evaluative term which has no place in an objective analysis. Does 'organic' here mean anything more than integrated? If not, all that is said is that when a society is disintegrated, it shouldn't be. Apart from this we must expect from a 'social biologist' a clearer definition than any social scientist has yet attempted of the word 'integration'.

Throughout the book there are many observations about our present condition, with which many people would agree. The agreement would not rest, however, upon any demonstrable scientific principle but upon the implicit value judgments associated with the words he uses.

The point arising here concerns the audience for which the book is intended. If Eliot is writing for those who agree with him substantially that there is something wrong with our society, then he has told them nothing new nor has he done anything that has not already been done so much better in his poetry. If on the other hand, and this I believe is the truth of the matter, he imagines himself to be addressing politicians, theologians, sociologists and students of education, the book defeats itself. The inadequacy of the scholarship prevents such readers from taking the book seriously and hence weakens the impact of those observations which are worth serious consideration.

It is difficult to associate this later Eliot with the author of the earlier critical essays. As we look through them now we can find many of the points considered in the present book dealt with far more succinctly and with an artist's interest and perceptiveness. Whether he was dealing with Marvell's intellectual background⁷ or trying to account for the thinness of Puritan mythology in Milton and Blake⁸ he gave an adequate account which furthermore provides valuable openings for the student of society. *Notes towards* gives no openings. It can only be of interest to those whose hopes were based upon Eliot's earlier promises.

Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice.

Now it seems that the earlier promise of faith has degenerated into wilful hopelessness which can only appear as a subtle complacency; for the sympathetic, a source of bewilderment.

D. F. Pocock.

⁷*Selected Essays*, second edition, page 294.

⁸*ibid*, page 321.

WHO ARE THE ENGLISH BAROQUE POETS ?

POETRY AND HUMANISM, by M. M. Mahood (Cape, 16/-).

Miss Mahood might well have called her book *Poetry and l'Humanisme intégral*, for she relies heavily on M. Maritain's principal exposition of his beliefs as a basis for her arguments. I have always found that book the least satisfactory of his more general works because of its turgidity (though perhaps this is the fault of the translator) and the enormous gaps between the various concepts he discusses and the actualities, historical and contemporary, which they are intended to sum up. Unfortunately it seems to me that Miss Mahood also tends to lose touch with the concrete details of some of her material and to lack a focussing literary-critical discipline. Her thesis is that English poets of the seventeenth century and their continental counterparts, and also artists in the other chief media, had achieved a spiritual and emotional re-integration after the Renaissance upheaval and the Mannerist depression; they contrived to combine faith in man and faith in matter with faith in God and faith in spirit. This is the essence of Baroque art of all kinds. Though it takes in the whole range of human experience, it is theocentric and consequently, however restless in appearance, ultimately assured and stable.

I feel that a certain weakness in Miss Mahood's critical apparatus begins to show itself when, for example, she writes:

'But without complete integrity of feeling, perfect artistic skill . . .' (p. 10).

as if the two could be considered separately. Later she implies that not only can one have great devotional poetry—Vaughan's—which is not perhaps in quite the first class as poetry (p. 295), a proposition one tentatively agrees to, but also that one can have great poetry on religious themes which is not great devotional poetry and even devotional verse which is irreligious (pp. 49 and 53). The exact relationship between devotional poetry and poetry is never explained, though there are some good passages on the differences between genuinely religious poetry and pietistic verse 'where writers say what they desire to feel' (pp. 10 and 22-23). Again though it is common knowledge that Milton was influenced by the seventeenth century Spenserians, it seems too much to claim that they created a new style, integrating Spenserian and Metaphysical elements, of which the exponents were, besides Milton who in any case early dispensed with Metaphysical wit altogether, Joseph Beaumont, Henry More and Crashaw (p. 171). I wonder why she does not include Marvell after Miss Bradbrook's and Miss Lloyd Thomas's