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T.S. ELIOT AND THE SENSE OF HISTORY

Abstract: Eliot's deep interest in ideas about history began early and continued throughout his life. In his student days, he encountered the concepts of human pre-history put forward by early anthropologists such as Emile Durkheim and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. He studied under Josiah Royce and George Santayana, was aware of the historical writing of his distant relative Henry Adams. The paper also dwells at some length on Eliot's attitude to the "Whig historians" and the *Criterion*-group historians. As Eliot entered the Christian fold, his idea of history became that of the Bible and the Church. He followed St. Augustine, was deeply influenced by the British Catholic historian Christopher Dawson. As a Christian, Eliot rejected both progressive and regressive views of history as well as determinism in favor of a belief in free will, the doctrine of Original Sin and faith in Providence. Eliot's views involve a challenge to the secular view of history, and his key terms are based on his Christian vision: the "historical sense", in the meaning of an awareness of "tradition," which carries the truths of Revelation and the wisdom of the ages forward in time, adapting them somewhat to various times and cultures but remaining faithful to the essential truths, the "permanent things."

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, history, historical views, Christianity, *Criterion*, Christopher Dawson, Th.B. Macaulay.

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Т.С. ЭЛИОТ И ЧУВСТВО ИСТОРИИ

Аннотация: Глубокий интерес Элиота ко взглядам на историю проявился рано и сохранялся на протяжении всей его жизни. В студенческие годы он познакомился с концепциями предистории человечества, выдвинутыми ранними антропологами, такими как Эмиль Дюркгейм и Люсьен Леви-Брюль. Элиот учился у Джосайи Ройса и Джорджа Сантаяны, был знаком с историческими сочинениями своего дальнего родственника Генри Адамса. В статье также довольно подробно рассматривается отношение Элиота к «историкам-вигам» и историкам группы журнала *Criterion*. В качестве христианина Элиот стал рассматривать историю в русле библейских и церковных представлений. Он следовал за св. Августином, находился под сильным влиянием британского католического историка Кристофера Доусона и отвергал взгляды на историю как на прогресс или регресс, а также детерминистский подход в пользу веры в свободную волю, провидение и доктрину первородного греха. Взгляды Элиота бросают вызов светскому взгляду на историю, и ключевые термины, которыми он пользуется, основаны на его христианском видении: «историческое чувство», то есть осознание «традиции», которая передает из поколения в поколение Божественное Откровение и мудрость веков, с течением времени адаптируя их к различным временам и культурам, но сохраняя неизменными основные истины — «непреходящее».

Ключевые слова: Т.С. Элиот, история, взгляды на историю, христианство, *Criterion*, Кристофер Доусон, Т.Б. Маколей.

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Eliot's deep interest in ideas about history began early and continued throughout his life. In his student days, he encountered the concepts of human pre-history put forward by early anthropologists such as Emile Durkheim and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl [Crawford 2015: 147]. He studied under Josiah Royce, who was engaged in working out a philosophy of history and a philosophy of religion, and also under George Santayana, who published his five-volume book *The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress* in 1905 and 1906 [Crawford 2015: 132]. The young Eliot was also aware of the historical writing of his distant relative Henry Adams, who had published a monumental *History of the United States* (1801–1817); Eliot later reviewed his memoir, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907).¹ These and many other influences contributed to Eliot's understanding of history as articulated in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), where he writes that a mature poet must possess "the historical sense." In the years following that landmark essay, as Eliot entered the Christian fold, his idea of history became that of the Bible and the Church. He followed St. Augustine, and he was most deeply influenced by the British Catholic historian Christopher Dawson. His mature historical vision, expressed in *Four Quartets*, is, not surprisingly, Catholic. In this brief essay, I hope to begin to outline issues and texts that must be explored if we are to better understand Eliot's historiography.

As with his religious views, there is actually more continuity between Eliot's earlier and later historical ideas than we might suppose. Already in 1919 he sees history (at least literary and cultural history) as continuous, with more recent works drawing upon the traditional truths embodied in older ones. He implicitly contradicts thinkers such as Lévy-Bruhl who saw a radical shift in human thought between primitive people and their distant descendants, emphasizing that even the "rock drawing of the Magdallian draughtsmen" is not superannated as the European tradition passes into the future. He later writes,

I have said before
That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations—not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:
The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder toward the primitive terror.

(*Dry Salvages* II, 48–55)

Where an anthropologist such as Sir James Frazer explains ancient fertility cults in order to discredit them, Eliot affirms in *The Waste Land* their continuing relevance to modern life. The

¹ Eliot, Tomas Stearns. "A Sceptical Patrician," *Athenaeum* 4647 (23 May 1919): 361–362.

“*participation mystique*” (in Lévy-Bruhl’s terminology) of the primitive mind is seen by Eliot as being fulfilled in the sacramental theology of the contemporary Anglo-Catholic Church, in which the primitive rituals are still enacted: “The dripping blood our only drink, / The bloody flesh our only food” (*East Coker*, IV, 21–22). Thus one principle of Eliot’s historical sense is continuity.

Eliot partly defines his historical ideas negatively, by his disagreements with particular historians and schools of historiography. He rejects the regressive view of history, the notion that human culture is always and everywhere winding down into disaster. The exemplar of this school among modern historians is Oswald Spengler. He also rejects the opposite idea, the progressive view in which human society is improving constantly. Hegel’s historical philosophy is of this type, as is that of his unwanted child Marx. H.G. Wells stands out as a modern representative of this school. What the regressive historians and progressive historians have in common is a deterministic assumption; ironically, both Spengler and Wells base their theories on biological analogies. As a Christian, Eliot rejects determinism in favor of a belief in free will. He counters the doctrine of progressive optimism with the doctrine of Original Sin, and to regressive pessimism he opposes his faith in Providence.

Since Eliot does frequently bemoan the downward trend of contemporary culture, one might expect him to espouse a historical theory of disintegration, but that is not the case. He reacts, for instance, to a new French publication entitled *Les Derniers Jours* (*The Last Days*), in which the editor begins by proclaiming “*Tout est foutu*”—which may be translated “everything is rotten, or over, or ruined, or screwed.” Eliot responds,

But *The Criterion* cannot altogether accept so Spenglerish a point of view; it cannot assume as axiomatic the statement that *tout est foutu*. To assume that everything has changed, is changing, and must change, according to forces which are not human, and that all that a person who cares about the future must or can do is to *adapt himself* to the change, is a fatalism which is unacceptable. <...> If we are to be qualified as “neo-classicists,” we hope that “neo-classicism” may be allowed to comprise the idea that man is responsible, *morally* responsible, for his present and his immediate future. [Eliot CP II: 100]

Eliot seems to feel some sympathy for this French writer, but he will not accept the “fatalism” of the statement, and it is definitively dismissed as “Spenglerish.” He asserts that human history must be seen as the collective actions of morally responsible beings, possessed of free will and personal agency. They will often do wrong but sometimes do right.

Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* seemed prophetic in that it was published just at the end of the Great War, though mostly written before it. In a *Criterion* review, H.J. Massingham gives this summary:

Dr. Spengler's thesis is an extraordinary compound of metaphysic and morphology which claims to interpret world-history as a series of discontinuous time-cycles, distinctive in themselves, but unified in their invariable seasonable processes. ...cultures move on a four-seasonal orbit of progress and decay. ... The fox and the otter are quite different animals, exercising different functions in contrasted environments. But their parts are homologous and their life-cycles follow an identical course from birth to death. The same is true of human cultures.²

The analogy with animal life is central to Spengler's approach, and the biological term "morphology" is one he uses repeatedly. Massingham declares that "Spenglerism will not stand historical enquiry because it carries to extreme that process of building up a structure of world-history based on false analogies between biological cycles and the movements of ideas, between the mechanisms of plant-life and the records of human society." Massingham invokes the "verities of history," and like Eliot, emphasizes the free agency of human beings as the prime determinant of historical change: "It can safely be predicted that no perspective of world-history will ever see a genuine light which fails to study those verities as the reflections and consequences of human action and much more certainly of that human thought and emotion which all such action embodies."

In his "German Chronicle" in *The Criterion*, Max Rychner addresses the tendency of German thinkers in the early '30s to see everything as crisis:

This has been so ever since the War, when the formula contained in *The Decline of the West*, so long as it was believed to have an objective content, expressed most vividly the German attitude to life. ... Spengler's cultural pessimism shows the collapse of the belief in culture. ... Spengler's biology of history ... is written from the standpoint of death.³

Rychner also notes the historical optimism of the Marxists, for whom "the course of history has only one meaning: it is approaching the Golden Age." Like Eliot, he observes that what is left out of these deterministic theories is human agency; they arise "out of the unconscious impulse to decry as

² Massingham, H.J. "Review of *The Decline of the West: Perspectives of World History*, by Oswald Spengler." *Criterion* 9: 37 (July, 1930): 731–732.

³ Rychner, Max. "German Chronicle." *Criterion* 11: 45 (July, 1932): 705.

imperfect the really human activities, the being and becoming of the historical process ...” It is free will and the spiritual impulse that are erased in the deterministic theories, whether of progress or decline.

Geoffrey Tandy, in a *Criterion* review of another book by Spengler, quotes these words of his:

Faced as we are with this destiny, there is only one world-outlook that is worthy of us ... better a short life, full of deeds and glory, than a long life without content. ...to cherish any illusion whatever is deplorable. ... Only dreamers believe that there is a way out. Optimism is *cowardice*.⁴

Again, the response of the reviewer is a religious one: “I think that the challenge of Calvary answers the challenge of Spengler,” Tandy concludes.

In his preface to a book by Edgar Mowrer, Eliot writes, “It is evident that Mr. Mowrer has been affected by his reading of Spengler; but he is too reasonable to commit himself either to the pessimistic determinism of Spengler or the optimistic determinism of Wells and Shaw” [Eliot CP III: 492]. Let us turn next to that optimistic determinism.

Earlier than the progressive historians of the Wells type, there were the “Whig historians,” who put forward a view of English history which saw the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (which finally deposed the Stuarts and crowned William and Mary) as the turning point toward the modern world of constitutional democracy. This school of liberal historiography was critiqued by Herbert Butterfield in his 1931 book *The Whig Interpretation of History*. In a sympathetic review of the book for *The Criterion*, Kenneth Pickthorn writes,

Is not Whiggism in history precisely this authoritative attribution of the direction of human affairs to forces, irresistible arbitrary uplifting forces, which transcend nature and elude definition? Preternatural though these forces are, the human historian feels qualified to patronize and estimate them because his universe is the assumption that all their straining and stressing have tended to produce him. And so he slips into a dogmatic clericalism peculiarly tyrannical in that its shibboleths are frivolous and peculiarly provoking in that it has not the excuse of serving a god.⁵

⁴ Tandy, Geoffrey. “Review of *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, by Oswald Spengler, translated by C.F. Atkinson.” *Criterion* 12: 46 (October, 1932): 162.

⁵ Pickthorn, Kenneth. “Review of *The Whig Interpretation of History*, by H. Butterfield.” *Criterion* 11: 44 (April, 1932): 545.

Again, and not surprisingly, the criticism of *Criterion*-group historians is that this interpretation of history is deterministic, seeing English history driven by “irresistible arbitrary uplifting forces,” and it is teleological — but with a *telos* that is not the Kingdom of God but the triumph of the modern historian himself.

The leading exponent of Whig history was Thomas Babington Macaulay, whose *History of England from the Accession of James II*, published in the mid-nineteenth century, tends to read the events of the Glorious Revolution as leading to the Reform Act of 1832 and the great achievements of the Victorian age. Eliot is naturally critical of such an anti-traditionalist viewpoint. In a review of Winston Churchill’s biography of the Duke of Marlborough, he says, “I am quite willing to believe that Mr. Winston Churchill is an honest historian that Macaulay ...” [Eliot CP V: 3]. Elsewhere Eliot pronounces that “the style of Macaulay is an eighteenth-century style debased by journalistic exuberance and theatrical emotion . . . the remains of a fine style in the hands of a literary demagogue.” [Eliot CP II: 448]. This is mere sniping; he leaves it to Bonamy Dobrée to write a more expansive critique in an essay on Macaulay for the *Criterion*. Dobrée begins with a backhanded compliment to Macaulay:

It is exhilaratingly unsafe to read Macaulay for the detailed facts: you will almost certainly be misled. . . . you will be shown a William II as near a saint as king can be, and a James II more devilish than Satan; you will be led to suppose that Utopia is only a little further along the high Whig road, that Tories are all rascals . . . you will be told that ‘the history of England is emphatically the history of progress’; in fact that all has turned out for the best in the best of all possible national stories. But still, no amount of warning will prevent us from reading Macaulay, from being delighted, even enthralled, as we read.⁶

The reviewer acknowledges the power of Macaulay’s prose (recognized even in Eliot’s critique of his style) but satirizes the simplistic progressivism of his historical interpretation. He concludes by pointing out what has been lost in this progress:

In his faith that all had turned out for the best, it never seems to have entered his mind that the price paid for some of the boons time had brought his England might have been too heavily paid for; it certainly did not occur to him that a debt might be accumulating. No doubt the Revolution

⁶ Dobrée, Bonamy. “Macaulay.” *Criterion* 12: 49 (July, 1933): 593.

had to come; it is absurd at this date to repine at it, but the wound caused by the break in continuity has never been healed.⁷

It is precisely that “break in continuity” caused by even the most bloodless and glorious revolution that concerns the traditionalist. The progressive view of history had become the dominant idea, and Macaulay had much of the responsibility for that problematic shift. Another *Criterion* writer, Charles Smyth, says “It may sound unduly cynical, but the supreme service that Macaulay rendered to his Muse was to write a history that beat all records as a best-seller. He wrote for readers: and he was rewarded by reaching an unprecedented number of them.”⁸

H.G. Wells was a more recent writer of progressive history, and his *Outline of History* (published in 1920) was perhaps even more popular than Macaulay’s. (I have written previously about Wells, but the publication of Eliot’s *Prose* has brought to light additional information.) In 1935, Eliot writes, “In popularizing the belief in the future in a crude form we have, I think, a good deal for which to thank Mr. H.G. Wells. His superficial philosophy has had an extensive influence” [Eliot CP V: 196]. These words may serve as a gloss to these lines in *The Dry Salvages*:

It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy,
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.

I have previously proposed that this passage should be read with Wells’s history in mind, for Eliot emphasizes that Wells succeeded in “popularizing” a futuristic point of view, winning large numbers of readers over to his “superficial philosophy” of history, one based on evolutionary ideas.⁹ Eliot goes on to say, “What I object to is the complete dislocation of values,” and this dislocation is similar to what Dobrée speaks of as a “break in continuity” in the 17th century revolution touted by

⁷ Dobrée, Bonamy. “Macaulay.” *Criterion* 12: 49 (July, 1933): 604.

⁸ Smyth, Charles. “Review of *A Commentary on Macaulay’s History of England*, by Sir Charles Firth.” *Criterion* 18: 70 (October, 1938): 105.

⁹ See: “‘A People without History’: Eliot’s Critique of Evolutionary History.” in [Eliot 2015: 188–203]. Wells was attacked scornfully by Hilaire Belloc and humorously (but devastatingly) by G.K. Chesterton. Eliot enters the fray in a review of Belloc’s critique and Wells’s response, concluding that “Mr. Wells has not an historical mind; he has a prodigious gift of historical imagination, which is comparable to Carlyle’s, but this is quite a different gift from the understanding of history. *That* requires a degree of culture, civilization and maturity which Mr. Wells does not possess.”

Macaulay. (It is also reminiscent of the “dissociation of sensibility” Eliot associates with that century.) Eliot hastens to say that he thinks we should be concerned about the future, but at the same time,

It is important also that we should have just as much respect for ourselves; and remember that we, as human beings, are individually just as valuable as the men of the future. Mr. Wells seems to propagate a strange false humility of evolutionism: as the higher apes are to us, he says in effect, so are we to the men of the future; and as we regard our animal ancestors, whether apes, lemurs or opossums, so will they of the future regard us. This is, of course, the quite natural corollary of a naïf faith in perpetual evolution, combined with a denial of any sharp dividing line between the human and the animal: that is, a denial of the human soul [Eliot CP V: 196–97].

The modern populace, having half-consciously adopted progressive beliefs, are indeed, in the words of *Little Gidding*, “a people without history,” for in the biological evolutionary schema Wells has superimposed on human history, the past disappears in a miasma of error and superstition and only the future exists. Moreover, the scientific materialism of Wells denies the existence of any spiritual reality; it also denies that there is any fixed human nature or any unchanging natural law for human society. Thus biological determinism is used to justify a complete rupture with the wisdom of the past, with the historical sense, which is essentially an awareness of tradition. In response to the celebration of unending change in progressive history, Eliot asserts that “we must affirm the eternal against the transient”:

We are obviously at the end of an age, oppressed by the sense of corruption and decay, and fearful of the kinds of change which must come, since some change must. And since our minds must needs be filled with thought about the future, thought affecting our own action to-morrow perhaps, and our consciences disturbed by what we find about us and within us, it is all the more important to keep our heads, our sense of values; all the more important that we should hold fast to the things which were, and are, and shall be, world without end [Eliot CP V: 197].

Christian humanist historiography insists that some things — and those the most important things — do not change with the passing of time. They are what Eliot calls elsewhere “the permanent things.”

Having attempted to define Eliot’s historical sense negatively, in contrast to ideas with which he disagreed, I must conclude by trying very briefly to define his historiography positively. He begins from a recognition that Christianity, like Judaism, is a historical religion. The Biblical revelation lays

out a linear history of humanity: from Creation through the revelations to Abraham and Moses and the prophets to what is for Christians the central historical event, the Incarnation, and ending with the Apocalypse, the end of time itself. The definitive Christian view of history was worked out by St. Augustine in *The City of God*, where he describes an ongoing interplay between the City of Man, where people are motivated by self-interest, and the City of God, where they are motivated by love of God and love of neighbor. Of course no one belongs entirely to one city or the other: it is the shifting tensions between them that constitute history. The role of the Church in history is central, for, as Christopher Dawson says in an article on Augustine, “Certainly the Church is not the eternal City of God, but it is its organ and representative in the world”.¹⁰

Dawson was undoubtedly the historian who best expressed the conception of history that was Eliot’s, and he gives a concise summary of that idea in a 1938 essay “The Kingdom of God and History,” which he begins with the phrase so well known to us from Eliot’s most famous essay: “The development of a historical sense — a distinct consciousness of the essential characteristics of different ages and civilizations — is a relatively recent achievement; in fact it hardly existed before the nineteenth century.” (Surprisingly, he calls it a “product of the Romantic movement.”) But though the historical sense is recent development, Dawson argues, it has its roots in Christianity:

It is in fact through Christianity above all that man first acquired that sense of a unity and a purpose in history without which the spectacle of the unending change becomes meaningless and oppressive. ... As St. Augustine said, it is only by Christ the Straight Way that we are delivered from the nightmare of these eternal cycles which seem to exercise a strange fascination over the human mind in any age and clime.¹¹

Yet there is another key factor, for the historical sense “also owes much to humanism, which taught the European mind to study the achievements of ancient civilization and to value human nature for its own sake” [DWH 2002: 285]. Dawson’s (and Eliot’s) historiography is that of Christian humanism. Or perhaps we should specify Catholic Christian humanism, for both of them see the Reformation as a regrettable rupture. As Dawson puts it,

...if Christianity is the religion of the Incarnation, and if the Christian interpretation of history depends on the continuation and extension of the Incarnation in the life of the church,

¹⁰ Dawson, Christopher. “St. Augustine and the City of God” [DWH 2002: 335].

¹¹ Dawson, Christopher. “The Kingdom of God and History” [DWH 2002: 284–285].

Catholicism differs from other forms of Christianity in representing this incarnational principle in a fuller, more concrete, and more organic sense. ... the Catholic faith in the church is faith in a real historical society, not an invisible communion of saints. [DWH 2002: 297]

Dawson is clear that the Church is not perfect, is not the City of God, but it is the guardian of sacred tradition. He concludes that

...the recognition of this tradition as the organ of the Spirit of God in the world and the living witness to the supernatural action of God on humanity is central to the Catholic understanding and interpretation of history. But so tremendous a claim involves a challenge to the whole secular view of history which is tending to become the faith of the modern world [DWH 2002: 298].

Here we find ourselves hearing Eliot's key terms again: the "historical sense" is an awareness of "tradition," which carries the truths of Revelation and the wisdom of the ages forward in time, adapting them somewhat to various times and cultures but remaining faithful to the essential truths, the "permanent things".¹² From the deterministic viewpoint, "History may be servitude." But in the Christian vision "History may be freedom" (*Little Gidding* III).

Allow me to conclude with something Eliot said in 1917 review of a book by his respected Oxford professor, R.G. Collingwood, who claims that religion and philosophy are fundamentally the same thing. Eliot replies,

It is true that history and philosophy, as Mr. Collingwood contends, are interdependent. But philosophy depends upon the whole course of history, not upon any particular signal and unique facts; and its freedom of interpretation is limited only by its obligation to exclude nothing. Religion, on the other hand, or at least the Christian religion, depends upon one important fact. Philosophy may show, if it can, the meaning of the statement that Jesus was the son of God. But Christianity — orthodox Christianity — must base itself upon a unique fact: that Jesus was born of a virgin: a proposition which is either true or false, its terms having a fixed meaning [Eliot CP I: 556].

As he puts it poetically decades after, "The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation. This gift transforms not just one moment in time but all, so that each time and place is

¹² Eliot, Tomas Stearns. *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Faber: London, 1939: 97.

endowed with profound meaning, becoming “The point of intersection of the timeless / With time” (*The Dry Salvages*, V).

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