

Again, Culture

October 31, 2015

A reader of the 'Comments' questions again the value of non-Catholic culture when she attacks them for praising Wagner (EC 9) and T.S. Eliot (EC 406, 411). For her, T.S. Eliot is to be dismissed as a Protestant, while Wagner is a Jacobine devil in love with Buddhism, whose music is loaded with gnostic impurity. Now both Eliot and Wagner have their faults, grave faults when measured against the fullness of Catholic truth, as the 'Comments' mentioned above pointed out. But in our sick age they have their utility, which can be summed up in a few words, attributed to St Augustine: "All truth belongs to us Christians."

Eliot and Wagner both belong to yesteryear's "culture." Culture we will define for our purposes here as the stories, music and pictures that men of all ages need, to nourish their minds and hearts. Thus defined, culture reflects and reveals, it teaches and moulds. It reflects, because it is the product of some writer, musician or artist who had the talent to give expression to what was going on in the souls of his contemporaries. If it was popular in its time, it revealed part of what was going on in their souls, and if it has become a classic since, like Eliot and Wagner, that is because it reflects and reveals part of what goes on in the souls of men of all time. Thus Eliot from the very poverty of his Unitarian upbringing was enabled to draw his daunting portrait of modern man, while Wagner by a towering talent, aside from any buddhism or gnosticism, filled his operas with a wealth of true human psychology that thousands of commentators have not ceased to interpret since.

Culture also moulds and teaches, because the writer or musician or artist gives expression and form to movements, until then formless, in the minds and hearts of his contemporaries. Shelley called poets "the unacknowledged

legislators of the world." Elvis Presley and the Beatles had a huge influence on modern youth, for generations to come. Picasso almost created modern art, and thereby fashioned to a large extent how modern people visualise the world around them. These modern examples of the huge influence of literature, music and the arts on human beings are hardly rejoicing because modern man is so godless, and there is in him so little of value to be reflected or expressed, but the huge influence cannot be denied.

In brief, culture is based in, and issues from, men's souls. And the Catholic Church is in the business of saving men's souls. So how could it neglect culture? Its own writers have directed men's thoughts, and its artists and musicians have filled its churches with beauty to uplift men's souls to God ever since the Church began. Of course that is true for Catholic culture, somebody might object, but neither Eliot nor Wagner were Catholics. Then of what use can they be to the Church?

In man there are three things: grace, sin and nature. As coming from God, our basic nature can only be good, but as flawed by original sin it is weak and inclines to evil. Nature is like the battlefield of the war to eternity between grace and sin for the possession of that nature. Grace lifts it up and heals that nature. Sin pulls it down. Hence the never-ending war. Now Eliot and Wagner may have been lacking in grace, but they were given by God to be masters of nature. The Church is commander-in-chief on the side of saving souls. How could it fail to study the battlefield, and to draw all possible profit from the masters of nature, to know the souls of the time and to teach them?

Kyrie eleison.