

Angelism – II

February 18, 2012

Alert readers of these “Comments” may have picked up on an apparent contradiction. On the one hand the “Comments” have repeatedly condemned anything modern in the arts (e.g. EC 114, 120, 144, 157, etc.). On the other hand last week the Anglo-American poet T.S.Eliot was called an “arch-modernist,” and praised for launching a new style of poetry more true to modern times, certainly chaotic.

As the “Comments” have often said, modernity in the arts is characterized by disharmony and ugliness, because modern man chooses more and more to live without or against the God who has planted order and beauty throughout his creation. This beauty and order are now so buried beneath the pomps and works of godless man that it is easy for artists to believe they are no longer there. If then their art is to be true to what they perceive of their surroundings and society, only an exceptional modern artist will convey anything of the divine order underlying the disordered surface of modern life. Most modern artists have given up on order and, like their customers, wallow in the disorder.

But Eliot was born and reared in the late 19th century when society was still relatively ordered, and he received in the USA a good classical education when only a few secret villains yet dreamt of replacing education with training in inhuman subjects. So Eliot may have had little or no access in his youth to true religion, but he was well introduced to its by-products since the Middle Ages, the classics of Western music and literature. Sensing and seeking in them an order missing around him, Eliot was thus able to grasp the deep-down disorder of the rising 20th century, a disorder which merely burst out in the first World War (1914–1918). Hence the “Waste Land” of 1922.

But in that poem he is far from wallowing in the disorder. On the contrary he clearly hates it, showing how empty it is of human warmth and value. So the "Waste Land" may bear little trace of Western religion, but it does finish on scraps of Eastern religion, and as Scruton says, Eliot was certainly tracking the religious depths of the problem. In fact a few years later Eliot nearly became a Catholic, but he was scared off by Pius XI's condemnation in 1926 of the "Action française," a condemnation in which he recognized more of the problem and not its solution. So out of gratitude to England for all it had given him of traditional order, he settled for a solution less than complete, combining Anglicanism with high culture, and a Rosary always in his pocket. However God does write straight with crooked lines. How many souls in search of order would have stayed away from Shakespeare or Eliot if they thought that either of them, by being fully Catholic, had answers only pre-fabricated, not true to life.

That is sad, but it is so. Now souls may well be deceiving themselves in one way or another if they shy away from Catholic authors or artists on the grounds that these are untrue to real life, but it is up to Catholics to give them no such excuse. Let us Catholics show by our example that we do not have minds made cosy by artificial solutions necessarily false to the depths of the modern problem. We are not angels, but earthy creatures invited to Heaven if we will pick up our modern cross and follow Our Lord Jesus Christ. Such followers can alone remake the Church, and the world!

Kyrie eleison.