

Culture Matters!

April 25, 2015

From Friday evening, May 1st, to Sunday mid-day, May 3rd, there will be held here in Queen of Martyrs House, Broadstairs, another seminar by Dr. David White, as last year on Charles Dickens, so this year on T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), another giant of English literature with a direct connection to this corner of England. It was in an open-air pavilion overlooking Margate beach about five miles north of Broadstairs that between October and November of 1921 the world famous Anglo-American poet broke a writing-block and composed some 50 lines of the third of five parts of the most influential poem of the 20th century, at any rate in the English language, *The Wasteland* (1922).

The poem is a brilliant portrait of the nothingness in men's hearts and minds in the wake of World War I (1914–1918). In *The Wasteland* Eliot forged a new fragmentary way of writing poetry that captured the broken spiritual condition of modern man. By his broad and deep grasp of the artistic masterpieces from the past, notably Dante and Shakespeare, Eliot was able to give shape to the spiritual poverty of today. For instance in the six lines of the poem which are clearly connected to Margate, one of three working-class girls tells how she gave away her honour, for nothing, and to highlight the emptiness of the lives of all three maidens, their words are framed within fragments from the song of the three Rhine maidens who open and close the cosmic vision of Wagner's epic *Ring of the Nibelungs*.

Emptiness and nothingness. Why on earth should Catholics bother with such depressing authors? Salvation is by Our Lord Jesus Christ, not by culture, especially not by nihilistic culture. A particular answer concerns T S Eliot. A general answer concerns all "culture," defined as those stories,

pictures and music with which all men of all ages cannot help furnishing and forming their hearts and minds.

As for T S Eliot, he himself soon dismissed *The Wasteland* as "rhythmic grumbling," and a few years later he became a member of the Church of England. He had given brilliant expression to modern nothingness, but he did not wallow in it. He went on to write a number of plays and especially the long poem of the *Four Quartets*, which are by no means nihilistic, and about which Dr White, who loves Eliot, will also be talking in *Broadstairs* in a few days' time. Having grappled honestly with the problem, Eliot came up with no ostrich solution, like countless Catholics that have fallen for Vatican II.

For indeed culture in general is to religion (or irreligion) like the suburbs of a city are to the city centre. And just as a military general with the task of defending a city would be most foolish to leave the suburbs to be occupied by the enemy, so any Catholic concerned for his religion cannot be indifferent to the stories, pictures and music which are moulding the souls all around him. Of course religion (or irreligion) is central to a man's life, compared with which "culture" is peripheral, because men's culture is, deep down, a spin-off from their relation with their God. Nevertheless culture and religion interact. For instance, were so many Catholics not under the spell of "The Sound of Music," would they so easily have fallen for Vatican II? Or had the present leaders of the Society of St Pius X, by contrasting Catholic culture and modern anti-culture, grasped the depth of the modern problem, would they be now so intent on getting back under the perpetrators of Vatican II? Culture can matter like Heaven and Hell!

Kyrie eleison.