

Deadly Angelism

February 11, 2012

Discerning what made T.S.Eliot (1888–1965) “indisputably the greatest poet writing in English in the 20th century,” a conservative English writer of our own day, Roger Scruton, has some interesting things to suggest to Catholics hanging on to their Faith by their fingertips in these early years of the 21st century – briefly, in the pain is the solution! If we are being crucified by the world around us, that is the Cross we are meant to be carrying.

Eliot was in poetry an arch-modernist. As Scruton says, “He overthrew the 19th century in literature and inaugurated the age of free verse, alienation and experiment.” One may well question whether Eliot’s final combination of high culture and Anglicanism is a sufficient solution to the problems he was tackling, but who can deny that with his famous poem, the “Waste Land” of 1922, he blazed the trail for contemporary English poetry? The enormous influence of his poems demonstrated at least that Eliot had his finger on the pulse of the times. He is a modern man, and he tackled head on the problem of modern times, summed up by Scruton as “fragmentation, heresy and unbelief.”

However, the “Waste Land” could not be the masterpiece that it is if it did not make some sense out of the chaos. It is in fact a brilliant portrait in a mere 434 lines of the shattered European “civilisation” that emerged from the ruins of World War I (1914 -1918). And how did Eliot manage to do that? Because as Scruton says, Eliot the arch-modernist was also an arch-conservative. Eliot had soaked himself in the great poets of the past, notably Dante and Shakespeare, but also in more modern masters such as Baudelaire and Wagner, and it is clear from the “Waste Land” that it is Eliot’s grasp of the order of the past that enabled him to get a handle on the disorder of

the present.

Scruton comments that if then Eliot blew away the great romantic tradition of 19th century English poetry, it is because that romanticism no longer corresponded to the reality of his age. "He believed that his contemporaries' use of worn-out poetic diction and lilting rhythms betrayed a serious moral weakness: a failure to observe life as it really is, a failure to feel what must be felt towards the experience that is inescapably ours. And this failure is not confined, Eliot believed, to literature, but runs through the whole of modern life." The search for a new literary idiom on Eliot's part was therefore part of a larger search – "for the reality of modern experience."

Now have we not seen, and do we not see, the same "serious moral weakness" inside the Church? One may call "Fiftiesism" that weakness of the Church of the 1950's which was the direct father of the disaster of Vatican II in the 1960's. What was it if not a refusal to look squarely at the modern world for what it is? A pretence that everything was nice, and everybody was nice? A pretence that if I just wrap myself up in an angelist sentimentality, then the problems of the Church in the Revolutionary world will just float away? And what is now the pretence that Rome really wants Catholic Tradition if not the same essential refusal of modern reality? As Eliot taught us that sentimentality is the death of true poetry, so Archbishop Lefebvre showed us that it is the death of true Catholicism. The arch-conservative Archbishop was the truest of modern Catholics.

Catholics, today's reality may be crucifying us in any one of its many corrupt ways, but rejoice, again, says St Paul, rejoice, because in our own acceptance of our modern Cross today is our only salvation, and the only future for Catholicism

Kyrie eleison.