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# A common view about the role of “élite” in Steiner and Eliot

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George Steiner discussed in *Bluebeard's Castle* that human literacy has declined in western society. It is a general fact that readers in the modern society don't have a genuine response to any classical literary works, because they can no longer relate to the subject matter. The readers have to rely on the detailed explanations of the critics in order to share the values or the worldviews with the writers of the classics.

Steiner's indication of the decline of literacy is very prudent in that college students don't have a common understanding of studying English literature at large; not all students have read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to participate in American literature class.

Thanks to the development of modern high-technologies, men of today can enjoy their daily lives in almost perfect contentment. However, it may also be true that we have lost something valuable which we regard as primordial feelings to read any literary works. Steiner clarifies the decline of literacy in his passage below:

The major part of Western literature, which has been for two thousand years and more so deliberately interactive, the work echoing, mirroring, alluding to previous works in the tradition, is now passing quickly out of reach. Like far galaxies bending over the horizon of invisibility, the bulk of English poetry, from Caxton's Ovid to Sweeney among the Nightingales, is now modulating from active presence into the inertness of scholarly conversation. Based, as it firmly is, on a deep, many-branched anatomy of classical and scriptural reference, expressed in a syntax and vocabulary of heightened tenor, the unbroken arc of English poetry, of reciprocal discourse that relates Chaucer and Spencer to Tennyson and to Eliot, is fading rapidly from the reach of natural reading.<sup>1</sup>

It is a regrettable fact that even university students in the department of English literature don't know how to respond properly to the poems written by great writers in western society. One might wonder how many students are aware of the literary allusions in Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.  
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee  
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.

At first readers should associate Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with the season of april in the poem. The april rain in the prologue has a joyous image unlike the image of april in *The Waste Land*. The deliberate reader realize that the poem is based on Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Frazer's *Golden Bough* as a motif. It is a matter of fact that readers can not fully appreciate Eliot's *The Waste Land* without knowing any of the above mentioned literary allusions.

However, the fact remains that not many readers today can respond properly to Eliot's poem. One might ask why such a lamentable situation has been brought about. Steiner looks back on the reason why readers do not respond properly to the classic literary works. Steiner explains:

. . . Absorbed in childhood, the Book of Common Prayer, the Lutheran hymnal and psalmody can not but have marked a broad compass of mental life with their exact, stylized articulateness and music of thought. Habits of communication and schooling, moreover, sprang directly from the concentration of memory. So much was learned and known *by heart* – a term beautifully apposite to the organic, inward presentness of meaning and spoken being within the individual spirit. The catastrophic decline of memorization in our own modern education and adult resources is one of the crucial, though as yet little understood, symptoms of an after-culture.<sup>2</sup>

Steiner discusses that readers today can no longer have a direct and genuine response towards poetry and art at large. Steiner also laments over the decline of literacy:

The situation is already on us. In the United States there have appeared versions of parts of the Bible and of Shakespeare in basic English and in strip-cartoon format. Some of these have circulated in the millions. The challenge they represent is serious and credible. It will not be brushed off. We are being asked to choose. Would we have something, at least, of the main legacy of our civilization made accessible to the general public of a modern, mass society? Or would we rather see the bulk of our literature, of our interior history, pass into the museum? The question can not be evaded by consoling references to paperback sales or to presentations of classic material – excellent as such presentations sometimes are – on the mass media.<sup>3</sup>

Educators in our country often lament that students do not read world literature at all to cultivate their general knowledge. They read some digest books, instead, to save their time to read. Such a lamentable situation robs them of reading habits well maintained in the past.

Regrettably, recent university students tend to read simplified versions of the famous classical literature, because they do not want to spend valuable time reading through classic works in lieu of their social life.

One might say that even great works of literature in the past turn to be a kind of information always stored in computers. It would be enough for youngsters to know how to find the information they seek in order to write papers. The following passage keenly appeals to our heartstrings:

. . . Already a dominant proportion of poetry, of religious thought, of art, has receded from personal immediacy into the keeping of the specialist. There it leads a kind of bizarre pseudo-life, proliferating its own inert environment of criticism (we read Eliot *on* Dante, not Dante), of editorial and textual exegesis, of narcissistic polemic. Never has there been a more hectic prodigality of specialized erudition – in literary studies, in

musicology, in art history, in criticism, and in that most Byzantine of genres, the criticism and theory of criticism. Never have the metalanguages of the custodians flourished more, or with more arrogant jargon, around the silence of live meaning.<sup>4</sup>

It is true, as Steiner laments, that some students of literature have turned their attention to the criticism of criticism since the rise of deconstructionism. In other words, they have struggled with the theory of criticism in place of reading the original texts of literature in detail. One might ask how many readers of today are aware of Eliot's "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" literary source. It reads:

APENECK SWEENEY spreads his knees  
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,  
The zebra stripes along his jaw  
Swelling to maculate giraffe.

Readers have to realize that Eliot kept in his mind the story of *Agamemnon* to write the poem. King Agamemnon after his triumphal return from the Trojan War was killed by his wife, Clytaemnestra. Eliot depicts "APENECK SWEENEY" as a person who behaves in a strange and stupid way in his contemporary society. It can be said that the poet tries to depict a pathetic Sweeney who had intercourse with a woman at night with some reference to the Greek myth.

Readers can not fully respond to Eliot's poem without any of the preunderstanding mentioned above. However, Steiner stresses the fact that it is almost impossible for the men of today to fully appreciate any literary works in the past. Steiner says:

Let us suppose that the Victorian public-school boy, the Gymnasiast or lycéen to whom the text of Homer, of Racine, of Goethe, offered natural purchase, were always but a small number, a conscious élite. Even if this was so, the case stands. Restricted as it may have been, that élite embodied the inheritance and dynamics of culture.<sup>5</sup>

Steiner and Eliot seem to share a common view about the role of élite in society; the role of élite is to maintain tradition and culture as a representative of western society. Steiner's words "a small number, a conscious élite" reminds us of Eliot's description in "The Class and Elite." Eliot says:

. . . in the past the repository of this culture has been *the* élite, the major part of which was drawn from the dominant class of the time, constituting the primary consumers of the work of thought and art produced by the minority numbers, who will have originated from various classes, including that class itself . . . . It is their function, in relation to the producers, to transmit the culture which they have inherited . . .<sup>6</sup>

It can be pointed out that we have to produce small bands of élite members who can maintain tradition and culture as cultured people in our era. One might say that a wholesome society is the one in which a small number of cultured people enlighten ordinary citizens. Steiner shares a view with Eliot concerning the transmission of culture in this respect. Steiner discusses:

. . . A culture "lived" is one that draws for continuous, indispensable sustenance on the great works of the past, on the truths and beauties achieved in the tradition . . . . To argue for order and classic values on a purely immanent, secular basis is, finally,

implausible. In stressing this point Eliot is justified . . . ?

Peter Ackroyd stresses that Eliot was a poet who insisted upon the nature and value of a tradition.<sup>8</sup> Steiner harshly discusses that the core of European culture should not be limited only to a certain religious sect such as Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Both Steiner and Eliot have a common view of crisis concerning the decline of human culture.

What the men of today can do is to cultivate an "élite" in order not to open the last door which leads into the ruin of human culture. If we open the last door, we humans have to face a very tragic and ruinous ending in human society. Now is the right time for us to open the pages of Eliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent" and Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle*. It is our duty to find some significant factors to restore a sound culture in our society. Only those who know the importance of culture and the tradition of the classics can save us from the chaos of our culture. By sharing a sense of crisis, we might see the light at the end of the tunnel.<sup>10</sup>

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#### Notes

1. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p.99.
2. Steiner, op.cit., p.107.
3. Steiner, op.cit., p.105.
4. Steiner, op.cit., pp.105-106.
5. Steiner, op. cit., p.109.
6. T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977), pp.114-115.
7. Steiner, op.cit., pp.87-88.
8. Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton,1984), p.335.
9. Steiner, op.cit., p.98.
10. Steiner, op.cit., p.140.