

## Cultural Heritage in T. S. Eliot's *Criterion*

Junichi Saito

It has been generally admitted that Eliot's *Criterion*, in which his purposes was to draw European culture closer together, turned out to be a failure despite his strenuous efforts. *The Criterion* was issued from 1922 to 1939 with the help of European intellectuals. It can be said that Eliot tried to restore the sense of tradition which had been lost in European countries.<sup>1</sup> Eliot seems to have had an intention to make all the literatures of Europe a common heritage through the publication of *The Criterion*.

In his view, the sharing of the living voice of European intellectuals might have contributed, even if only in a small way, to preserving the unity of European culture that was on the brink of splitting into discrete fragments. Eliot discusses in "The Unity of European Culture" how he came to edit *The Criterion*:

In starting this review, I had the aim of bringing together the best in new thinking and new writing in its time, from all the countries of Europe that had anything to contribute to the common good. Of course it was designed primarily for English readers, and therefore all foreign contributions had to appear in an English translation. . . . So my review was an ordinary English periodical, only of international scope. I sought, therefore, first to find out who were the best writers, unknown or little known outside of their own country, whose work deserved to be known more widely.<sup>2</sup>

Eliot further points out the significance of a network of literary periodicals that

might be developed throughout Europe. The network would promote the live exchange of ideas and friendship among European intellectuals.

. . . the existence of such a network of independent reviews, at least one in every capital of Europe, is necessary for the transmission of ideas—and to make possible the circulation of ideas while they are still fresh. The editors of such reviews, and if possible the more regular contributors, should be able to get to know each other personally, to visit each other, to entertain each other, and to exchange ideas in conversation. In any case such periodical, of course, there must be much that will be of interest only to readers of its own nation and language. But their co-operation should continually stimulate that circulation of influence of thought and sensibility, between nation and nation in Europe, which fertilises and renovates from abroad the literature of each one of them. And through such co-operation, and the friendships between men of letters which ensue from it, should emerge into public view those works of literature which are not only of local, but of European significance.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, we can say that the phantom Eliot is trying to drive away is the narrow minded provincialism which hovered around in European countries. In a sense, Europeans shared a sense of common heritage based on the biblical tradition and the ancient Greek and Roman cultures, however, they did not like their indigenous cultures being blended with others. It can further be pointed out that the intellectuals in European countries put a high value on the pureness of their indigenous cultures. It would not be too much to argue that it was European's yearning for pure national cultures that had led to the First World War, which destroyed their common cultural heritage.

Eliot later discussed the effects of an insufficient common cultural background from a different viewpoint in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939):

You can not expect continuity and coherence in literature and the arts, unless you have a certain uniformity of culture, . . . I observed in America, that with a very high level of intelligence among undergraduates, progress was impeded

by the fact that one could never assume that any two, unless they had been at the same school under the influence of the same masters at the same moment, had studied the same subjects or read the same books, though the number of subjects in which they had been instructed was surprising. Even with a smaller amount of total information, it might have been better if they had read fewer, but the same books. In a negative liberal society you have no agreement as to there being any body of knowledge which any educated person should have acquired at any particular stage: the idea of wisdom disappears, and you get sporadic and unrelated experimentation.<sup>4</sup>

It might be said that the publication of the *Criterion* was an experiment to persuade the intellectuals in Europe to create a common stock of knowledge as Europeans. Denis Donoghue discusses Eliot's aim in the *Criterion* in the following terms:

Eliot's aim in the *Criterion* was to bring to bear upon the individual talent of his English readers and writers the force of tradition as manifested in 'the mind of Europe': the whole enterprise was conceived as an attack upon native provincialism. In August 1927 he welcomed 'the European Idea' and the diversity of its forms: it may include, he said, 'a meditation on the decay of European civilization by Paul Valéry, or a philosophy of history such as that of Oswald Spengler'...<sup>5</sup>

It would be safe to say that with the *Criterion* Eliot tried to do away with the insularity of English intellectuals in favor of a broader sharing in a European sense of culture. This is indicated by the following passage:

The first number of the *Criterion* will appear on October 15 as a quarterly review devoted to literature, the arts, and general ideas. The *Criterion* will not be a literary or artistic miscellany; it will have more in common with the critical quarterlies of a hundred years ago. Its contents will consist for the most part of a small number of essays longer and more considered than in reviews which appear at shorter intervals. The *Criterion* aims also at the

maintenance of international standards. In the belief that the intellectual life of Europe, like its economic life, depends upon communication and exchange, the *Criterion* will present in translation writing of foreign men of letters, whose works should be better known in England. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Besides the aim of sharing a European sense of culture, Eliot stressed the idea of the autonomy of literature, which would be a fundamental principle for the review's intellectual activities. In a sense, Eliot was seeking for some artistic representation of the realities of that time, while staying apart from political and social affairs. In the *Criterion*, then, we can find Eliot's idea of a literary review as an independent intellectual undertaking.

A literary review should maintain the application, in literature, of principles which have their consequences also in politics and in private conduct; and it should maintain them without tolerating any conclusion of the purposes of pure literature with the purposes of politics or ethics.

In the common mind all interests are confused, and each degraded by the confusion. And where they are confused, they can not be related; in the common mind any specialized activity is conceived as something isolated from life, an odious task or a pastime of mandarins. To maintain the autonomy, and the disinterestedness, of every human activity, and to perceive it in relation to every other, require a considerable discipline. It is the function of a literary review to maintain the autonomy and disinterestedness of literature, and at the same time to exhibit the relation of literature—not to 'life', as something contrasted to literature, but to all the other activities, which, together with literature, are the components of life.<sup>7</sup>

Eliot's purpose to maintain a cultural order within the autonomy of a literary review seems to have been successful in the earlier days of the *Criterion*. It can be supposed that Eliot had an ideal to restore what was lost through the First World War,<sup>8</sup> that is to say, a European sense of tradition.

Peter Ackroyd discusses why the *Criterion* did not finally come to represent

the common European identity.

... it seems always to have been Eliot's fate to espouse causes just at the point when they are about to disappear or to disintegrate. His notion of a European intellectual and cultural order, for example, was being asserted at a time when political events began to destroy the illusion of a common European identity. And so although his early contributors had come from the European tradition which preceded the Great War, by the early Thirties he had come to rely more and more upon British contributors. The expression of his own opinions had also become more predictable, with an aloofness from the contemporary political debate only matched by his constant call for spiritual and ethical principles to be introduced into that debate. As he said in a radio broadcast in 1946, the *Criterion* in later years 'tended to reflect a particular point of view rather than to illustrate a variety of views on that plane'. In its literary direction, also, the *Criterion* had lost its momentum. The magazine had started publication at a time when the work of Lewis, Joyce, Pound and Eliot himself was actively challenging the old standards and values of English literature culture. But it seemed, a generation later, that even the writers whom Eliot chose to publish—like W. H. Auden, George Barker or Vernon Watkins—had reverted to a more insular if not parochial tradition. All the ambitions and aspirations which had animated the *Criterion* in its first years had either been abandoned or destroyed. His own feeling of staleness as an editor had much to do with his disenchantment at the kind of culture with which he now had to deal.<sup>9</sup>

It is true that the concept of "art for art's sake" began to decline from the Thirties because of economic depression and the approaching fear of war. Many European intellectuals came to turn their attention to finding some political or economic recipe which could save ordinary people from the depths of chaos. This can be illustrated by Ackroyd's passage below.

From the mid-Twenties to the late Thirties, in fact, his contributions to the

*Criterion* were less conceived with literary or critical matters than with an analysis of the various claims of humanism, fascism and communism. Although he was not to announce until the issue of October 1933 that he approached public affairs as a 'moralist' rather than as an 'artist', there is no doubt that the original literary direction of the periodical was now of less importance to him than what he described as the 'problems of contemporary civilization'.<sup>10</sup>

One might say that in the end the philosophy of "genuine art for art's sake" could not stand apart from social events. Then, would it be fair to conclude that Eliot's editorship of the *Criterion* was a failure?

There is no doubt that Eliot was able to develop an outstanding human network through his editorship of the review. The fact that he first began to edit it to bring together the best possible knowledge of his British and European contemporaries would have been of significance in itself for him as an English intellectual. This can be gathered from Ackroyd's remark:

. . . at least in part he achieved his purpose of 'bringing together the best in new thinking and new writing in its time' and that, as he confessed in an interview, editing it had been 'one of the most important and rewarding' of all his activities.<sup>11</sup>

It may be that Eliot was able to demonstrate an ideal type of healthy culture through the distribution of the review.<sup>12</sup> It can certainly be argued that he warned his contemporaries that European society, based as it was on a sense of tradition, would perish if Europeans turned away from their Christian past; Eliot would have wished the people of his day to have a systematic way of viewing the threats of corruption in Western civilization. He discusses this in his "Last Words" in the *Criterion*.

For this immediate future, perhaps for a long way ahead, the continuity of culture may have to be maintained by a very small number of people indeed—

and these not necessarily the best equipped with worldly advantages. It will not be the large organs of opinion, or the old periodicals; it must be the small and obscure papers and reviews, those which hardly are read by anyone but their own contributors, that will keep critical thought alive, and encourage authors of original talent. I wish that a periodical could be sold like admission to a theatre, at a varying scale of prices; for just as the majority of the more critical and appreciative part of the public is often to be found in the cheaper seats, so I suspect that the price at which *The Criterion* has had to be published is prohibitive to most of the readers who are qualified to appreciate what is good in it, and to criticise what is faulty.<sup>13</sup>

Although the publication of the *Criterion* came to an end because of the approaching war, the best part of the common spiritual heritage, that is to say, the power to see things objectively and critically, may have remained alive through the friendships among the best of Europe's intellectuals. The exchange of opinions and views among this intellectual elite would have struck Eliot as an achievement of inestimable value.

## Notes

- 1 Loretta Lucido Johnson, *T. S. Eliot's "Criterion": 1922-1939* (Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1980), p.49.
- 2 T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company), pp.192-193.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp.193-194.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp.32-33.
- 5 David Newton-De Molina, ed., *The Literary Criticism of T. S. Eliot* (London: The Athlone Press, 1977), pp.22-23.
- 6 *Times Literary Supplement*, No.1074 (August 17, 1922), p.525. quoted in Loretta Lucido Johnson's *T. S. Eliot's "Criterion": 1922-1939*, pp.50-51.
- 7 Molina, *op.cit.*, p.21.
- 8 Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (Hamish Hamilton, 1984), pp.248-249.
- 9 Johnson, *op.cit.*, p.48.

- 10 Ackroyd, op.cit., p.170.
- 11 Ibid., p.248.
- 12 Ibid., p.250.
- 13 *The Criterion* (January, 1939), p.274.