

ANNA BUDZIAK
University of Wrocław

T.S. Eliot's Anti-Elitist View of Education

Abstract

Born into a family boasting eminent educators—William Greenleaf Eliot, founder of Washington University in St. Louis, and Charles William Eliot, famous Harvard President—T.S. Eliot joined the debate about schools and universities early on, in the era of the great educational reform leading to the development of the system of elective courses. He criticized the changes and the resulting decline of Classics, though his concern with the problem of education was never being purely theoretical. On the one hand, his own education was a product of the elective system, and he himself, as he complained, a “victim” of it. On the other hand, Eliot, for a while, was also a teacher: prior to working at Lloyds Bank, and before his professional and financial investment in Faber and Faber, he taught pupils in grammar schools and, as an extension lecturer under the auspices of Oxford University, evening classes to adults. His interest in educational issues continued over many years, assuming diverse forms—from writing on education to lecturing and giving opening addresses at universities, to recommending poetry books for pupils and asking practical questions about the accessibility of university accommodation for students from abroad. Nevertheless, he was criticized for seeming to oppose the equality of educational opportunity. This essay re-examines the ideas from Eliot’s “Notes towards the Definition of Culture” (1948) and “The Aims of Education” (the four lectures delivered in 1950 and included in “To Criticize the Critic” in 1965) in the context of his ephemeral prose writings, and it reconsiders the question of whether Eliot’s views on education did indeed represent exclusivist elitism.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, education, class, elite, social mobility, (anti-)egalitarianism

Theory and practice of education preoccupied Eliot from his first days in England and into the 1950s.¹ In his essays, lectures, commentaries and letters to editors, he repeatedly considered the problems of education

1 For Eliot’s complaint about the elective system, see the letter to his mother, Charlotte Stearns, of 3 February 1929 (Eliot 2013: 411). For the details of his employment as a teacher and for his syllabuses, see Schuchard (1974: 163–173). For the examples of Eliot’s practical involvement in matters related to education, see his “Students from Oversea. Scope of the Lord Mayor’s Fund, To the Editor of *The Times*” of 17 April 1950 (Eliot 2018: 471–472) and “Poetry and the Schools,” his contribution to a promotional broadside of The Poetry Book Society of 1956 (Eliot 2019: 117–118). All references to Eliot’s prose writings are to *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*— including the collected, uncollected, and

as connected with questions of culture, elites, and social mobility. Convinced of human fallibility—the influence of T. E. Hulme, and later, of Christian dogma—he expressed the views interpreted as typical for anti-progressivism in education. Further, well versed in F. H. Bradley’s holistic philosophy, he doubted the value of abstract thought, which, eventually, led to him being described as an educational sceptic (Reid 2010: 111–123). Additionally, he was accused by his critics of rejecting the ideal of the “equality of opportunity,”² the problem which proved especially controversial. His anti-egalitarianism—as expressed in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) and “Aims of Education” (1950)—was criticized by Kenneth Asher and also, Asher notes, “deserved[ly],” by Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton (1988: 915n32). According to Asher, Eliot was against equality in education *because* it would disrupt class stability, having introduced into the society “kaleidoscopically changing meritocracies” (Ibid.: 913). To counter this threat, Eliot proposed that the ideal society should be led by the upper class which—while benefiting from the education denied to other classes—would wield the political power on account of its members’ capacity to “generate and appreciate high culture” (Ibid.). Such characterization makes Eliot an elitist using education as a tool to freeze social mobility. However, Eliot was not against social mobility (indeed, he opposed class ossification). Neither was he anti-democratic,³ or elitist, in the realm of education.

Elites

In fact, the term “elite” as used by Eliot and its connection to the notion of class require re-examination. To a certain degree, Eliot’s views on the relationship of the class and the elite are influenced by his social background, which he himself described (in the May 1909 issue of the *Harvard Advocate*) as the “plebeian aristocracy” (qtd. in Soldo 1972: 369).⁴ It was “aristocracy” with a specifically American ring to the word,

unpublished pieces by Eliot—which, when the article was being prepared was available in its digital version, Project MUSE, Johns Hopkins University.

- 2 Eliot critiques the “equality of opportunity,” in general, in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (see Eliot 2018: 260–262), and also specifically in relation to Church education, in “Lambeth and Education: The Report Criticized” (1949) (see *ibid.*: 340–352).
- 3 Characteristically, in the late 1920’s, Eliot’s poetry, too, became more accessible to a broader audience. Indeed, in his Conclusion to Charles Norton Lectures of 1932-33 (published as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* in 1933), he described the composition of poetry as a “mug’s game” (2015: 691), which also reflects a radical transformation in his literary workshop, the one his critics noted with alarm, their shared opinion being that the high-modernist (and elitist) quality of his work got defused. Morton Dauwen Zabel thought that his tone had become “conciliatory” (1932: 337), and F. O. Matthiessen, that his poetry had fallen into a “decline” ([1935] 1958: 132). This transformation—or democratization—of Eliot’s poetry, however, was rightly identified and welcomed by the eminent modernist critic Peter Monroe Jack, when he observed that Eliot had “been a poet’s poet, and now he might very well be a people’s poet” (1936: 368). Jack appreciated the difficulty of writing first-rate poetry for the readers from beyond narrow circles of intellectual elites and the poet’s choice to increase his poetry’s appeal without slipping into condescension. It is significant that—although in his prose (in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*), Eliot criticized “a ‘mass-culture’” as “a substitute-culture” (2018: 265)—he did appreciate and enjoy popular culture. This latter aspect in his work is highlighted by Chinitz (2003) and Crawford (1987). Eliot’s view that poetry is “a game or amusement” is, characteristically, stressed by Shusterman (1988: 134), the modern pragmatist philosopher who wrote on Rap.
- 4 The word “aristocratic” is also used in Jayme Stayer’s account of Eliot’s education—from Lockwood school for the children of “the most prominent families” in St. Louis (2013: 623), to Smith Academy, “for the aristocratic boys” of the city (2013: 624), to Milton Academy, which Eliot revisited in 1948 to give a lecture, and wherein, on November 4, 1948, he received the

for Eliot's ancestor Andrew Eliott, who sailed from East Coker to America in 1699, was no aristocrat: he was a "respectable [. . .] 'corwinder', a leather worker or shoemaker" (Soldo 1972: 360). Speaking of this low-born "aristocracy," Eliot extended the label to Harvard students coming from wealthy families which descended from merchants and craftsmen, including "masons, builders, a tanner, a tailor and a maker of perukes" (Soldo 1972: 360), who did take "pride" in their work (Eliot qtd. in *ibid.*). Their work ethic accorded with the Unitarian ethos; the combination of the two resulted in the creation of an entrepreneurial, and increasingly intellectual, elite with a strong social conscience.⁵ Thus, the American type of elitism—which, Soldo says, was initially "present in the theology of the elect in Puritan New England" (1972: 369)—eventually, became a matter of talent, dedication and work, producing the upper class with its characteristic daily culture and leisure, ideals and taboos.

Heir to the unitarian tradition, T. S. Eliot, however, saw himself as belonging to the modern literary elite in a greater measure than to this stable conservative class. He was also a poet of the literary avant-garde (although he would be reluctant to admit it); and he may have expressed his divided position, in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, by describing the functions of the class and the elite as opposed: the class preserves the status quo, while the elite alters it. The responsibility of the class, Eliot says, is the continuation of culture, whereas the role of the elite is providing a critique of it—a conscious shaping of culture which the class may have inherited unconsciously. This is the task for the specialists. Thus, the elites are both critics and makers of culture; the classes, in turn, are the custodians. Whilst the elites, having excelled in a variety of fields, lead a nation towards the future, a class links it with the past (see Eliot 2018: 211, 216). Importantly, Eliot did not identify the elite with the empowered class. He was keenly aware of the disparity between the two groups, noting that "[t]he person who contributes to culture [. . .] is not always a 'cultured person'" (*Ibid.*: 202). And, it seems, the difference can be rendered in reverse since few members of any class would belong to the productive elite.

Culture, as Eliot describes it in his *Notes*, is "a *way of life*" (Eliot 2018: 216) providing the necessary social glue. It is not limited to so-called high culture—a matter of how people experience the most challenging art and pass down their knowledge of classics (*Ibid.*)—neither does it come from the above, from the elevated elites, for they do not simply create culture. (As noted above, they only co-create, examine, and review it (*Ibid.*: 212)). If culture is unifying, then, according to T. S. Eliot, the greatest of social ills is the opposite state—the atomisation of society (*Ibid.*). Such fragmentation, he believes, results from individualism, or more specifically, from the kind of individualism which isolates a person from their nearest environment, including a family which, Eliot emphasized, was a broad category comprising one's forefathers. One had to assume a responsibility for and towards one's ancestors and one's class (*Ibid.*: 216-17).

In the 1930s and 40s, in particular, Eliot was concerned that social isolation would make individuals easy prey to state ideologies, nationalistic and totalitarian. Notably, he started pondering the issues included in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* "towards the end of the Second World War"—the fact which he thought important to assert in the opening sentence of the 1962 Preface to this work (Eliot 2018: 194; see also *ibid.*: 278n1). Around the same time, in the letter sent to the editor of *The New English Weekly* of 4 March 1943, titled "Education for Culture," Eliot expressed his apprehension over a possible alienation of gifted individuals removed—as children with exceptional abilities—from their milieus in

news of being selected for the Nobel Prize in literature and, then, the school football cheer to commemorate the occasion (2013: 638).

5 For a discussion of Eliot's "elitism" as deriving from his awareness of his American ancestry, see Soldo (2013: 368–372).

order to be educated as elites (2017b: 363). This letter was written by Eliot referring, emphatically, to the problem of acculturation, rather than denying any person the right to education.

Social fragmentation, and the resulting vulnerability of individuals, Eliot claims in his *Notes*, could be further worsened by the lack of communication among different elites (see 2018: 213). Then, to him, the social order was not threatened by the mobility of talented individuals, but by a lack of interaction among the most reputable representatives of various fields—of politics, philosophy, art, and science. This could be redressed if the cultural capital of a single class, he thought, would serve as a platform for interaction. That is why he emphasised that a member of an elite group must, at the same time, be a member of a class (Ibid.: 216). There were two options to consider. If, on the one hand, a member of the elite came from the class with access to privileges, then, this person should retain a close contact with this class's culture; however, at the same time, this individual should be prepared to approach the values of his or her class critically. That was T. S. Eliot's plight: a member both of the intellectual elite and of the class of the American "aristocracy," he felt he had to preserve the link with his American ancestors, but—having assumed British citizenship and converted to Anglo-Catholicism—he also implicitly criticized his Unitarian American background. If, on the other hand, individuals entered various elites (artistic, political, business, academic, or scientific) having come from the non-privileged backgrounds—by way of their "individual pre-eminence"—they still needed to be attached to a class, or, in Eliot's words, "some class" (Ibid.: 217). Now, what makes Eliot look rearguard, reactionary, or conservative to his critics is his conjecture that, in the class society, "it is *likely* to be the dominant class that attracts this élite to itself" (ibid; my italics). But, in saying the above, Eliot also implies that the choice of the class to which the elite becomes attached is a matter of contingency, economic and historical. It is only most "likely" (rather than obvious) that the elites become attached to this class which can afford leisure and/ or supply patronage. Eliot does not make the connection of the dominant class and the elite an absolute rule. What he insists on is, first, that no elite should replace a class—which, in fact, makes Eliot an anti-elitist—and, second, that the elites should communicate within the realm of culture, that, at some point, they should have a shared "*way of life*."

Rather than replacing classes, then, elites should bring them together. Their members should constitute the group capable of transforming different classes into joint sets, as did Sir Lancelot Andrewes, Eliot's seventeenth-century master in style and morals. Indeed, in his Commentary for the April 1931 issue of *The Criterion*, Eliot seriously challenged his contemporaries' complacency about twentieth-century social mobility. He claimed that universities in the Elizabethan and Jacobean England were "far more democratic" than they were in his day, that schools promoted genuine talent and rewarded work rather than enforced mediocre education. Eliot makes his point by recalling the examples of William Laud, a son of a clothier, and Lancelot Andrewes, a son of a master of Trinity House (the institution presiding over sea-faring matters)—each of them, Eliot observes, "of humble origin," and each man, eventually, holding a position of great authority in church and state (2015: 257). The seventeenth-century democratic ideal of education, he says, consisted in "levelling up," not in "levelling down" (Ibid.). In effect, the Tudor and the Jacobean epochs, unlike the twentieth century, were the times of ascending talents rather than of condescending education.⁶ Andrewes and Laud, due to their eminence, became attached to the upper

6 In this Commentary (of April 1931), written not long before his Barbour-Page lectures (1933) were published as (his notorious) *After Strange Gods* (1934), Eliot expresses his sympathy with the Southern Agrarians and interest in Oswald

class (Andrewes preached before King James I, and was among those who worked on the King's Bible) without, however, entering the order of aristocracy.

In his conclusion to *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Eliot theorizes this kind of social arrangement by observing that the function of education is twofold: it is to safeguard the continuation of "the class" and to ensure that the most talented persons enter the elite (2018: 260) which, then, gravitates towards this class (assuming that such a single class exists, being prepared to make the selected "elite" feel at home). A syllogism appears to be at work. To Eliot, one role of education is the preservation of the class. The role of the class, in turn, is the preservation of culture. Hence education's aim is to maintain cultural continuity across the ages and across the whole of society. One of the threads which Eliot envisaged as providing this continuity was ethical. Thus, instead of producing a successful professional, a well-integrated citizen, and an individual fortunate in having realized her potential (Eliot thought such educational aims limited),⁷ education should concern itself with the ethical question of how to mould a good person, for instance, an economist who, while scanning abstract equations, would still keep in sight a toiling man (and, possibly, also a poet who had toiled in Lloyds Bank). Political economy, Eliot claims in his Commentary for *The Criterion* in January 1931, should not be a lore dissociated from the aim of the betterment of living (2015: 216). So, he calls for "another Ruskin" (Ibid: 214), yet not because he is nostalgic about medieval guilds, but because he sees the need for a model economist with a social conscience.

Educational Aims and Traps

In the course of the 1930s and 1940s, Eliot's views on education were shaped in the context of his faith and (as noted earlier) in the hope that education underpinned with ethics would help resist the lure of totalitarianism.⁸ His discourse on education includes words such as orthodoxy⁹ and holiness; and he puts his hope in independent schools run by the church. In his Commentaries (in *The Criterion: A Literary Review* in the 1930s) and letters sent to the editors (of *The Christian News-Letter*, *The Times Educational Supplement*, and *The New English Weekly* in the 1940s), he conceived of education as a haven

Mosely (the creator of the British Union of Fascists in 1932). However, he speaks about Mosley with deep scepticism, actually, being seriously concerned about the state of democracy.

- 7 Eliot's critical assessment of such specific educational aims, which he expressed in his ephemeral writings (including Commentary for *The Criterion* (October 1931) and "Education in a Christian Society: To the Editor of *The Christian News-Letter*" (March 1940) (see 2015: 355–6; 2017b: 19–21)), re-emerges after WWII—in his polemic with H. C. Dent, Herbert Read, F. C. Happold, and C. E. M. Joad—in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (see Eliot 2018: 256–9) and "The Aims of Education" (see Ibid.: 518–19). For a discussion of the latter, see Kirk ([1971] 2008).
- 8 As Eliot suggested in "The Problem of Education," published in *Harvard Advocate* in 1934 (see 2017a: 126–30) and openly stated in "Christian Belief: To the Editor of *The Times Educational Supplement*" of March 6, 1943 (see 2017b: 381).
- 9 In his post-conversion writings, when referring to "continuity" Eliot uses the word "orthodoxy" meaning an antidote to cultural dispersion. In this sense the word "orthodoxy" is used in his review, written for *The Criterion* (July 1931), of John Middleton Murry's *Son of a Woman*, wherein he observes that the aim of education is to expand one's "capacity for orthodoxy" and counter the "centrifugal impulse of heresy" (2015: 315). "Orthodoxy"—otherwise equivalent to the rigid dogma, the word that has amassed mostly negative connotations—to Eliot, denotes a set of rules enabling discussion rather than stifling it.

untainted by state ideologies. He believed its aim was to deepen one's wisdom¹⁰ (or, more precisely, to inculcate one with the need for a deeper understanding) and to encourage an individual's curiosity. He doubted, though, that education could further overall happiness and cautioned against what he saw as a disingenuous aspect of egalitarianism.

It is against Eliot's holistic ideal of education—as encouraging the development of good judgement, underlined with ethics, and uniting, rather than dividing, a society—that the charge of the elitist education as levelled at him should be reconsidered. In his essay “Modern Education and the Classics” (which started as a talk addressed to the members of the Classical Club of Harvard University in 1933 (2017a: 344n1)), Eliot is not against social mobility in itself, but against the reduction of education to a tool for increasing this mobility. He objects to an instrumental use of general education, which, he implies, would rarely create an egalitarian society. If those who must strive financially to enter universities see education solely as a means for raising their social position, then, their motivation is not social equality but the reverse of it—snobbishness. He plainly states that “[a]s soon as this precious motive of snobbery evaporates, the zest has gone out of education” (Ibid.: 337–338), possibly suggesting that, having climbed the ladder of education, the achievers flip over to the side of the privileged only to remain entrenched in this new advantageous position. That being the case, the ideal of “equality of opportunity” is used to maintain social inequality. On the other hand, Eliot discourages forcing education on those who show neither desire nor capacity for the studies which they can afford. If education for the leisure class is reduced to merely refining their tastes—the opportunity turned into an imposed standard—then, there is no shame in not being academically-inclined. Eliot observes, without a hint of irony, that, as long as they can enjoy sport and dance, those persons will be capable of spending their free time as agreeably as those who have received general education (Ibid.: 338). In “Modern Education and the Classics,” then, Eliot hardly denies education to those who cannot easily afford it; he is rather against reducing it to the badge of the class.

Further, treating education as a screen concealing social problems, Eliot insists in his prose writings, is as inadmissible as limiting it to a class shibboleth. If that happens, the ideal of the equality of educational opportunity—besides covering the desire for inequality—becomes deceitful towards those to whom it extends. Writing to the Editor of *The Christian News-Letter* (in March 1940) on “Education in a Christian Society,” he observes that the raising of school-leaving age is frequently implemented primarily in order to save children from neglectful families or from the exploitation by industrial capitalism (2017b: 23). He returns to this point, almost a decade later, in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, stressing that education used in this way only hinders the solution to the underlying problem (2018: 263), suggesting that using education to correct social ills becomes only a way to assuage a bad conscience and sweep difficulties under the university carpet, or else, that it is like putting a bandage on a missing limb, as this happens when education is used to hide youth unemployment, rather than to increase a person's employability.

A university degree turned into a bogus standard by which one's social standing is judged, Eliot indicates, creates discrimination under the cloak of equality. The problem, he observes in his “Modern Education and the Classics,” is not that everybody receives education, but that *almost* everybody receives it in a “diluted and adulterated form” (2017a: 337). In that, he repeats his earlier criticism of “education”

10 Eliot speaks of “wisdom” and of “Wisdom and Holiness.” See his “Catholicism and International Order” (1933) and “Education in a Christian Society: To the Editor of *The Christian News-Letter*” (March 1940) (2015: 535–6) (2017b: 20).

as watered down to the presentation of basic facts and offered to the greatest possible number of people, which he had expressed in his Commentary for the October 1933 issue of *The Criterion* (2015: 551–2), with the word “educating” (Ibid.: 551) put in inverted commas questioning its significance. This is ersatz education which Eliot condemns, a sign of disrespect towards those to whom it is given—an offense, for it gives a mere illusion of participation.

This sentiment had been with T. S. Eliot for years. In 1916, as a young poet writing his unpublished French review of H. D.’s translations from Euripides,¹¹ he deplored the decrease in the teaching of the classical languages in schools and universities (see Eliot 2014a: 502). But, at the same time, he also disapproved of offering readers unfamiliar with classical Greek the translations he thought unsatisfactory—those renderings of ancient works which he considered as neither adequate scholarship nor moving literature. This distinction between two types of translation—literary and scholarly—is crucial. Eliot highly praised the literary rendering of Euripides’ choruses by H. D. (despite the modernist abruptness of her style); and he indicated the golden standard of translation as scholarship in Edward Poste’s Aristotle and the accompanying commentary (which he used during his own studies). This distinction effectively served him in his scathing criticism of Gilbert Murray’s translations. To Eliot, Murray’s rendering of Euripides fell short of the literary standard because—as Eliot complained in his 1916 and 1920 reviews, “Autour d’une traduction d’Euripide” and “Euripides and Professor Murray” (2014a: 493; 2014b: 196–7)—his style was only an imitation of the Pre-Raphaelite sonorities. What’s more, according to him, Murray’s translation constituted inadequate scholarship, which (in 1916) Eliot described as “Euripides for the working-man, at a shilling the play [. . .]—an ideal of socialism and popular education—Greek without tears” (2014a: 493). On this account, Murray’s would be the translation as condescension, offering third-rank scholarship in the place of first-rate literature. It created only an illusion of easy-come scholarship in the place of true scholarship, the latter being a kind of learning which, Eliot believed, should be acquired through hard endeavour, with teachers showing regard for their students by expecting them to be capable of sustained effort. (Characteristically, in his later years, in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Eliot made a rather practical observation that nothing too easily obtained, hence, deemed undeserved, is respected (2018: 256–267, 260), to which one might add that anything that is forced upon is resisted.)

Thus, Eliot did not conceive of education to be elitist in the sense of being exclusivist. If the notions of class, elite and educational suitability—and the frequency with which they drop in his vocabulary—cause an uncomfortable feeling about his discourse being exclusivist, one should remember that his criticism of the “equality of opportunity” and egalitarianism—or, perhaps, only of uniformization—is in fact an invitation to reconsider these notions rather than to straightforwardly embrace, or downrightly reject, the ideas to which they refer. It is an invitation to re-examine the ideas and to find proper names for their implications (or, put differently, it is an invitation to call a spade a spade while respecting those of us who can properly wield the tool). When writing about education, culture and elites, Eliot was paring down meanings, rather than laying down principles. This attitude remains best visible in what he admitted providing his critical commentary on the section concerning education in the Lambeth Conference report in 1949, one year after his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* appeared in print. He openly declared that he was far from being adamant about his proposals regarding the questions of education: “I am mystified by these questions” (2018: 343), he said.

11 The reference is to “*Autour d’une traduction d’Euripide. On a Translation of Euripides: An unpublished review of a translation by H. D. of Euripides’ Choruses from Iphigeneia in Aulis,*” translated by John Morgenstern.

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