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The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

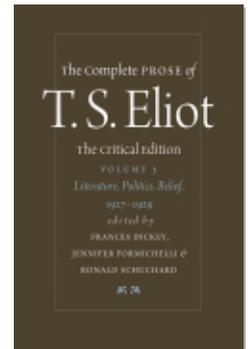
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The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

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Freud's Illusions

A review of *The Future of an Illusion*,

by Sigmund Freud, trans. W. D. Robson-Scott

International Psycho-analytical Library, No. 15.

London: Hogarth Press, 1928. Pp. 98.

The Criterion: A Literary Review, 8 (Dec 1928) 350-53

This is undoubtedly one of the most curious and interesting books of the season: Dr. Freud's brief summary of his views on the future of Religion. We can hardly qualify it by anything but negatives; it has little to do with the past or the present of religion, and nothing, so far as I can see, with its future. It is shrewd and yet stupid; the stupidity appears not so much in historical ignorance or lack of sympathy with the religious attitude, as in verbal vagueness and inability to reason. The book testifies to the fact that the genius of experimental science is not necessarily joined with the genius of logic or the generalizing power.¹

What we may call Dr. Freud's innocence breaks out almost on the first page:

Human culture – I mean by that all those respects in which human life has raised itself above animal conditions and in which it differs from the life of the beasts, and I disdain to separate culture and civilization – presents, as is well known, two aspects to the observer. It includes on the one hand all the knowledge and power that men have acquired in order to master the forces of nature and win resources from her for the satisfaction of human needs; and on the other hand it includes all the necessary arrangements whereby men's relations to each other, and in particular the distribution of the attainable riches, may be regulated. [8-9]

This appears to be by way of a definition; at any rate it is as near to a definition of "culture" as we get. It is oddly inadequate and even circular. Human culture is "all those respects" in which human life differs from brute life, we are told; but surely what we must first ask, to define human culture, is in what ways is the human different from the animal. Human culture then "includes" knowledge and power; we are left in doubt as to whether

“includes” means “equals” or perhaps means “depends upon.” Knowledge and power win resources from nature for the satisfaction of human needs: but what we want to know is precisely what are human needs, before we can know much about culture. Finally, human culture “includes” again what seems to mean political and economic organization. This does not get us very far; and if that is all there is to culture and civilization, culture and civilization do not amount to much. So far as culture means merely social organization, then Dr. Freud’s next remarks, on the necessity of defending culture against the individual, are quite just. But this leads him to the view that culture and civilization are always “imposed” upon the many by the few – which is only intelligible if we continue to restrict culture to the maintenance of law and order, and not altogether true at that. But we are helplessly bewildered on the next page (11) where we read that

one thought at first that the essence of culture lay in the conquest of nature for the means of supporting life, and in eliminating the dangers that threaten culture by the suitable distribution of these among mankind . . .

If one really thought that the essence of culture lay in eliminating the dangers that threaten culture, then there must be something very wrong with one’s reasoning powers. I can feel only stupefaction on reading such a course of argument. And throughout this first chapter, one has the impression that the truly cultured and civilized man is the highly efficient Policeman. Dr. Freud observes with a sigh that “probably a certain percentage of mankind . . . will always remain asocial” [14]. The word “asocial” has perhaps some deep psychological meaning beyond my comprehension; but it seems to me that some contributions have been made to what I call civilization by men who have been solitaries or rebels.

Dr. Freud’s baffling notion of culture keeps turning up. Later we hear that “it is the principal task of culture, its real *raison d’être*, to defend us against nature”; and again we are not told what is *us* and what is *nature* [26]. But “the preservation of mankind against nature” is “the great common task” [27]. Surely Dr. Freud has some shadowy personification of this angry goddess Nature at the back of his mind. I pass over a number of what seem to me merely the psychological terms which hide a vacuum, like “man’s super-ego,” which is “a special mental function” – in other words, another of Dr. Freud’s supernatural beings [18]. The principal thesis seems to be this: the enquiry is not concerned with the value of religious

doctrines as truth; but “psychologically considered” they are *illusions* [57]. The first part of this thesis must mean, if it means anything, that Freud is not concerned with the truth of religious ideas, or with the reality of religious “objects”; yet I fail to understand how they can be illusions in a “psychological” sense without being illusions pure and simple. Such a distinction between psychological truth and ordinary truth is much too fine for my reason to grasp. Indeed, I am not sure that it is not too fine even for Freud himself; for throughout the rest of the book he proceeds to treat religion as illusion in the ordinary sense, and as illusion which society is in the process of casting off.

But here another distinction appears, which seems to me still further to obfuscate the problem.

When I say that they (religious ideas) are illusions, I must define the meaning of the word. An illusion is not the same as an error, it is indeed not necessarily an error. Aristotle’s belief that vermin are evolved out of dung, to which ignorant people still cling, was an error. . . . It would be improper to call these errors illusions. On the other hand, it was an illusion on the part of Columbus that he had discovered a new sea-route to India. [53]

I have never mastered the philosophy of As If, and here my motherwit finds itself completely baffled.² Columbus was certainly “in error” in thinking that the West Indies were the East Indies; he was not in error in thinking that he had found a new route to India; but the combination of an error with a truth does not make an “illusion.” An excellent example of “illusion” seems to be at hand: it is an illusion for Freud to think that he has defined the term “illusion” when he says that an illusion is not the same as an error, indeed is not necessarily an error. A vegetable marrow is not the same as a pumpkin, indeed is not necessarily a pumpkin: but this would not strike Aristotle as being the definition of a vegetable marrow. Freud should have begun by a definition of definition. Presently illusion is treated as if it was anything that does not admit of proof (55). Of some religious doctrines (he does not say which) he says that “we may compare them” to delusions; but we are not told what is to be learnt by the comparison. He then palms off a few commonplaces like this:

The riddles of the universe only reveal themselves slowly to our enquiry, to many questions science can as yet give no answer; but scientific work is our only way to the knowledge of external reality. [55]

We are not told what is science, or what are the riddles of the universe. Yet in the end Dr. Freud re-echoes: "Science is no illusion" [98]. Thus dreams the wizard of the dream world. I have the impression that the real pundits of the real sciences, such as mathematical physics, are often less confident of anything than Freud is of everything. But it is naturally the adepts of the parvenu sciences, in their anxiety to affirm that their science really is a science, who make the most exaggerated claims for "science" as a whole. This is a strange book.

T. S. ELIOT

NOTES

1. In a letter to I. A. Richards of 9 Jan 1929, TSE wrote that Freud "is dealing with a subject to which his own knowledge is irrelevant. . . . [H]is chief difficulties in this book do not seem to me psychological errors at all but logical and epistemological" (*L4* 379).

2. In *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* [*The Philosophy of "As If"*] (1911, trans. 1924), Hans Vaihinger argued that because we cannot understand the underlying realities of the world, we construct fictional systems to explain the phenomena we encounter, acting "as if" the world matches our fictions.