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THE EUROPEAN RADIO BROADCASTS OF T. S. ELIOT

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It is perhaps not surprising that Eliot's long commitment to radio broadcasting has passed without critical comment.[1] Only a few of his broadcasts were recorded in a publicly available form, so that what once was "broadcast" has left little historical trace. However, scripts for many of the talks survive in the BBC Paper archive, and others may well be found among the papers held by the Eliot estate. Furthermore, many of Eliot's scripts were subsequently redacted and published in periodical form.[2] On the basis of this evidence, and the voluminous records of the BBC paper archive, we can reconstruct not only the shape but also much of the substance of Eliot's radio talks.

He began broadcasting in 1929 and, admitting one early hiatus of five years, continued virtually to the time of his death: a period of approximately thirty-five years. His broadcasts fall conveniently into four groups. In the first period, 1929-1931, Eliot delivered nineteen talks, all in multi-part series, and focused on literary topics such as "Tudor Prose" or "Seventeenth-Century Poetry" (both in six parts). In the second period, 1936-1939, Eliot's interest in radio seemed to decline, and he gave only six talks on various literary and community topics. But the outbreak of war gave rise to a new period of activity, and between 1940-1947 Eliot broadcast at least twenty-nine times. Eleven of these broadcasts were directed at European audiences. In this, the most important phase of his broadcasting activity, Eliot tended to speak about culture itself, and especially about the ultimate unity of European culture. By 1948, however, Eliot became involved with the BBC's new "Third Programme", a species of minority programming concerned primarily with matters artistic and intellectual. His interest in and loyalty to the Third Programme redirected his broadcasting activity, and while between

1948-1963 Eliot spoke over the air another twenty-nine times, only five of those broadcasts were for one of the BBC's European Services.[3]

In this regard, the history of Eliot's broadcast talks and readings reflects the larger history of the BBC —a history that Eliot actively helped shape.[4] Eliot's broadcasts to European and Asian (particularly Indian) audiences comprise a special chapter in his life. Before 1941, all of Eliot's broadcasts were made for one of the BBC's home services, beamed exclusively to Britain. That pattern changed dramatically with the outbreak of war, and within this change we can see Eliot working to redefine his personal sense of mission, as well as his pre-eminent role as what Americans might call today a "public intellectual". On 26 May 1941, Eliot gave a reading of "East Coker" for the "We Speak to India" programme of the BBC's Eastern Service. The reading was in fact the sixteenth instalment in a series optimistically (in that dire period of the war) called "Turning Over A New Leaf". This broadcast was Eliot's first reading of his own poetry over the air. That he chose to do for India what he had previously been unwilling to do for Britain is striking, and it was five years before he consented to a re-broadcast of the reading for the BBC Home Service West of England (17 March 1946). For all that Eliot had grown friendly with Zulfiqar Bokhari, Indian Programme Organiser for the BBC, his motivation seems less personal than —in the broadest of senses— "political". While doing his bit to help defeat fascism, Eliot was deeply concerned that this global conflict not destroy culture itself. He began broadcasting to Europe and India to reaffirm what he saw as the profound bond among those peoples sharing in the Western Tradition, to which he seems to have regarded India a party. Of course this project overlooks the subaltern condition of the sub-continent, subject to the British Empire. That it overlooks the extent to which literature and "culture" served the imperial powers as what Gauri Viswanathan (1989) has called "masks of conquest" is obvious. To focus on Eliot's broadcasts to Europe does not make such questions irrelevant. For the present, however, the significant consideration is that it was only under the pressure of world war that Eliot began broadcasting to the world beyond the shores of Britain.

After two more broadcasts to India on "Masterpieces of English Literature" in November 1941 and January 1942, Eliot recorded his first talk for Europe. Entitled "Poetry and the War", and broadcast for "Swedish News Talks", it was later published in the New York journal *Common Sense* (October 1942) as "T. S. Eliot on Poetry in Wartime". This short talk suggests the direction of Eliot's subsequent broadcasts to Europe. Addressing the various and sometimes clamorous calls for "war poetry", Eliot explained

why he thought such a question should not be asked. The issue, he felt, concerned not just the current war, "but all wars":

> While a poet, as a man, should be no less devoted to his country than other men, I distinguish between his duty as a man and his duty as a poet. His first duty as a poet is towards his native language, to preserve and to develop that language. As a man, he has the same duties as his fellow citizens; as a poet, his duty is to write the best poetry that he can, and thereby incidentally create something in which his people can take pride. And the artist who will do the most in this way for his own people, will be the artist great enough, like Shakespeare, to give something precious not only to his own country but to the whole of Europe.[5]

Here as elsewhere, Eliot struggled to rekindle or preserve the ability of his audience to imagine Europe as a "whole". He did not speak of Shakespeare, for example, as a "national" poet but as a *European* poet. His aim, even in the early days of the war, was to prepare the groundwork for a peace that could mean something more than the cessation of hostilities.

Within five weeks of that first talk, Eliot broadcast again to Sweden, this time offering a reading from his own poetry. For this, only the second reading of his poetry he had ever made, he chose works from the whole of his career up to that point: "Four Preludes", "Journey of the Magi", "Ash Wednesday" I and II, "Burial of the Dead", "Burnt Norton", and excerpts from "The Dry Salvages". Significantly, he did not read from "Little Gidding", and no part of what he read could be construed as "war poetry". The kind of broadcast-reading he declined to make to promote his career in peacetime he gave in war to exemplify the arguments he was making elsewhere about "culture".

No less interesting in terms of Eliot's choices is his next Swedish talk, of 30 December 1942, on "Rudyard Kipling".[6] Not surprisingly, Eliot acknowledged Kipling as more versifier than poet, but nevertheless recognized in his work the spark of something more: "while I speak of Kipling's work as verse and not as poetry, I am still able to speak of individual compositions as poems, and also to maintain that there is "poetry" in the "verse"". A similar qualification marked Eliot's comments on Kipling's role as an apologist for Empire, but as Eliot turned to this issue, his reflections took an unexpected turn, especially given the apparent obscurity of much of his own poetry. What Eliot said about Kipling's role as popular poet and writer reflects broadly on his own activities as a public

commentator on "culture", and more particularly on his activities as a BBC broadcaster:

> Kipling certainly thought of verse as well as prose as a medium for a public purpose; if we are to pass judgment upon his purpose we must try to set ourselves in the historical situations in which his various work was written; and whether our prejudice be favorable or antagonistic, we must not look at his observations of one historical situation from the point of view of a later period. Also we must consider his work as a whole. (1942: 154)

Eliot clearly thought of radio as "a medium for a public purpose", and approached his European broadcasts in terms best understood as a response to the global crisis. It is not immediately clear, however, why he should have imagined Kipling a subject attractive to a Swedish audience. In fact, the choice of topic is rather striking: Eliot began broadcasting to Europe at the same time as his India broadcasts, and to speak of Kipling to Sweden almost suggests a categorial confusion. The topic, however, returns him to the questions he addressed in his previous Swedish talk on poetry in wartime: the artist who will "do the most for his own people" will be the one, like Shakespeare, great enough "to give something precious not only to his own country but to the whole of Europe". Such an artist will not address the topical details of battle and war, but the more profound question of a nation's collective spirit —of its cultural health or disease. What, in Eliot's view, readers of Kipling miss is his turn, in the last part of his career, to that kind of profound attention: "In [Kipling's] later phase England, and a particular corner of England, becomes the center of his vision. He is more concerned with the problem of the soundness of the *core* of empire; this core is something older, more natural, and more permanent" (1942: 154). More permanent, that is, than shifting political frontiers.

In other words, Kipling, or at least the late Kipling, becomes for Eliot a cultural critic. His interest lay not in "civilization" in the abstract but in *a* civilization. It was for this reason that Eliot concluded that, whereas "we expect to have to defend a poet against the charge of obscurity; we have to defend Kipling against the charge of excessive lucidity". This defence implicitly explained Eliot's own purpose, both in the largest terms and in regard to speaking about Kipling to a Swedish audience.

In the next year and a half, Eliot made no European broadcasts, although in that time he broadcast twice to India, on Edgar Allen Poe and on James Joyce, and once for the BBC's programme "Calling All Students" on Dryden's tragedies. Then, on 4 June 1944, on the occasion of the liberation

of Rome by allied troops, Eliot again recorded a broadcast to India. This broadcast promised to be the most topical he had ever made, but what Eliot delivered proved instead to be in keeping with his talk on "Poetry and War". By June 1944, the tide of the war had turned unmistakably in the allies' favor, and the liberation of Rome might justifiably have been a cause for jubilation. The BBC producers who planned the broadcast certainly thought so, and the announcer gave the following introduction: "We present this evening two talks in honour of the liberation of Rome. For twenty years the Eternal City has lain under the fascist or the nazi yoke. Today it is free". The announcer then introduced Eliot, whom he presented as "one of the foremost English poets and critics of today, President of the Virgil Society and ex-President of the Classical Association, who will speak of the European debt to Roman literature".[7]

Eliot did just that: his four-minute talk betrays not the slightest note of jubilation, nor the most evanescent trace of triumphalism. On the contrary, he insisted on the spiritual kinship of all Europeans, and submitted, meditatively and with an eye to the future, that the bonds among Europeans had been forgotten in peace before they were broken in war. To reaffirm those bonds it behoves the victors of war not only to shoulder their debt but to do so with sorrow for the breach, and with humility and piety toward the legacy bestowed on all of us by the Roman writers.

It was doubtless a noble and philosophical gesture to insist on the cultural unity of Europe, but it is less certain why Eliot thought such a broadcast suitable for a south Asian audience. Indian support for the British empire, against the German or even the Japanese empire, was not always enthusiastic, but it is hard to see how Eliot's meditations on European unity could have impressed the anti-British resistance led by Mohandas Gandhi and the Indian National Congress. Particularly in view of Gandhi's rejection of western, mechanized civilization, Eliot's commitment to India remains one of the unstudied puzzles of modernist history. But when Eliot resumed making such appeals, and such arguments to Europe, they became striking in another way.

With one significant exception, an unusual broadcast to France in November 1944, he did not broadcast to Europe again until immediately after the war's end. In that broadcast, with the *Wehrmacht* retreating rapidly to the Rhine and the temporary set-back of the Battle of the Bulge three weeks in the future, Eliot spoke in French on "Intellectual Cooperation" for the BBC's French Service.[8] It was a harbinger of the important broadcasts to come. After one further Swedish broadcast (15 February 1945), these broadcasts launched what amounts to the last great critical project of Eliot's career: a

project that would culminate, though not end, with his book *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948).

In March 1946, Eliot made a three-part broadcast entitled "Reflections of an English Poet on European Culture".[9] He recorded the talks in German, for the BBC programme "Famous Contemporaries", and used his time at the microphone to press his vision of European unity —precisely that vision he had begun articulating in such broadcasts as "Poetry and the War", "Rudyard Kipling", and "The Liberation of Rome".

The plan for Eliot's series was simple: each talk would examine a different basis for the unity of European culture. In the first, he would discuss art; in the second, ideas; and in the third, the nature of culture. He began informally, striving for the kind of intimacy between speaker and listener that had always attracted him to radio.[10] He acknowledged that this talk was the first time that he had ever "addressed a German-speaking audience", whether in the form of a public lecture or of a radio broadcast, and proceeded to offer his credentials for taking on so vast a topic. Not least, he observed that English is a "composite" language, drawing on many sources and enjoying "constant possibilities of refreshment from its several centres: apart from the vocabulary, poems by Englishmen, Welshmen, Scots and Irishmen, all written in English, continue to show differences in their music".[11] From this local beginning, he went on to argue that, for Europe in general as for Britain in particular, "the frontiers of culture are not, and should not be, closed" (1968: 191).

The second talk focused on his years as editor of the *Criterion*, and offered his experience as an illustration of the failure of Europe in general. Eliot attributed the eventual failure of the *Criterion* to "the gradual closing of the mental frontiers of Europe" (194), and drew a distinct lesson:

> [A] universal concern with politics does not unite, it divides. It unites those politically minded folk who agree, across the frontiers of nations, against some other international group who hold opposed views. But it tends to destroy the cultural unity of Europe. (195)

Recognizing that such a judgment might seem naïve, Eliot allowed that politics affects culture, and in turn is affected by that culture. Nevertheless, speaking at last to the postwar moment, he charged that "nowadays we take too much interest in each other's domestic politics, and at the same time have very little contact with each other's culture" (196). This tendency, Eliot warned, could lead in either of two destructive directions. The first, the mistake of Hitler's Germany, regards all other cultures as inferior. The

second, the mistake of Stalinist Russia (though Eliot did not spell this out), would "lead toward the ideal of a world state in which there will, in the end, be only one uniform world culture" (196). Regarding either direction as a terrible error, Eliot presented what is in essence an Arnoldian compromise: he distinguished between "uniformity" and "unity", and between "organisation" and "organism". Politics pursues the first: poetry, or "culture", the second. The health of Europe requires, he counselled, both that "the culture of each country be unique", and also that "the different cultures should recognize their relationship to each other, so that each should be susceptible of influence from the others" (197).

This counsel led Eliot to the heart of his topic: "the distinction between the material organisation of Europe, and the spiritual organism of Europe" (197). The very distinction assumes Europe's profound cultural unity, and gestures both to establish the irrelevant profanity of political concerns, and to push aside the "material devastation" (202) of the previous fifteen years. It is unfortunate that we have no evidence of how Eliot's talks played to German audiences. Eliot's broadcasts were, by any accounting, made in virtually surreal circumstances. He spoke to a Germany under the military occupation of four nations, affirming all the while the fundamental unity of victors and vanquished. And yet Eliot would not have considered his talk as propaganda, not even "cultural propaganda" against potential Soviet aggression. In fact, he would almost certainly have maintained that his broadcasts contended with the propaganda of *any* political cause.

In this regard, it is useful to distinguish Eliot's radio broadcasts from those made by his sometime friend and often testy rival, Ezra Pound. Their broadcasting activities took very different forms. Pound broadcast for Minculpop, the Italian (fascist) Ministry of Popular Culture. After one talk in January 1935, he began recording talks regularly in early 1941. For the next two-and-a-half years he held onto the microphone as though it were a lifeline, with three or four of his broadcasts often airing in a single week. But, by July 1943 Pound's unfortunate involvement in the mass media was effectively over, and the regime for which he had been speaking destroyed.[12] Eliot's broadcasting activity, by contrast, was sustained over a period of thirty-five years, and he rarely broadcast twice in the same month.

Pound's and Eliot's approaches to the medium of radio differed no less dramatically. Pound delivered his talks in a cracker-barrel yankee accent, purporting to speak as one average man to the masses of average men. Eliot, however, never spoke down to his audience, but rather invited them to look up with him. And whereas Pound explicitly intended his broadcasts as a form of propaganda, Eliot explicitly eschewed propaganda in any immediate form.

Pound, although he did not speak directly to allied troops, explicitly challenged the purpose and even legitimacy of the Roosevelt administration. Eliot by contrast never spoke directly to political questions. And if Pound shared Eliot's concern with the preservation of Western culture, he rarely confined himself to literary discussions, or to claims about the unity of European literature. Pound's charge to his audience that "the supreme betrayal of Western civilization is manifest in the alliance with Russia" exemplifies the extent to which for him cultural issues immediately led to political or economic questions (Doob 1978: 268).[13]

These distinctions do not demonstrate that Eliot's talks were perfectly "disinterested" (to return to Arnold's shibboleth) or apolitical, but they do suggest that the politics of Eliot's broadcasts were mediated in fairly complex ways. Eliot's radio persona was judicious and gentle, conciliatory at a time when partisans on all sides were suspicious of conciliation in any form. Before the end of 1949, Eliot would speak to Europe on four additional occasions, one of which was a broadcast for the BBC's German Service: an introduction to a reading of his own "Journey of the Magi".[14] Thereafter, between 1950 and his death, he spoke over one of the BBC's European services only twice more, an abstention that was not matched by any general decline in his involvement in radio. For in that same period, he remained a stalwart supporter of the BBC in both word and deed, and a particular champion of the BBC's Third Programme. In other words, Eliot's turn to Europe can be identified with the particular project that he continued to develop through late 1949.

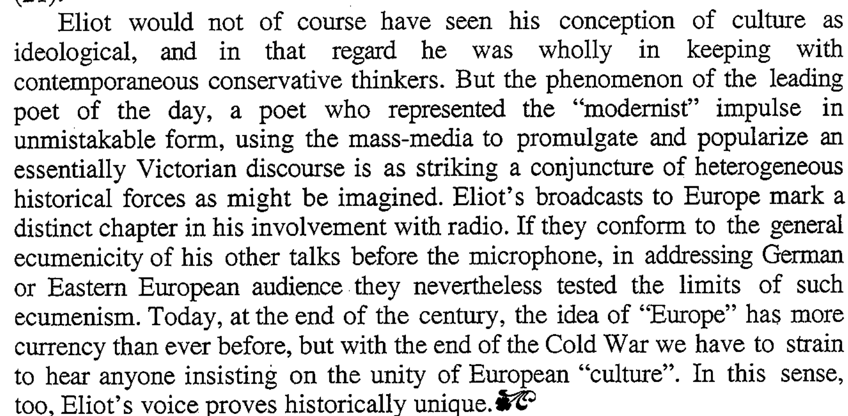
The last broadcast that Eliot recorded for a specifically European audience beyond the shores of Britain would also prove among the most important of his European broadcasts. Broadcast on 13 October 1953, the eleven-minute talk was called, simply, "Literature", and figured as the sixth part of a series by different speakers called "The Unity of European Culture".[15] The series of talks was sponsored by "the Central and Eastern European Commission", an "unofficial body composed of statesmen and public figures from the countries of Europe —the whole of Europe" (3). Whatever the composition of the whole body, it has to be said that the speakers in this series of broadcasts were exclusively English (if one includes the naturalized Eliot).

The commission's overt aim was "to bridge the gap between East and West, and to assert, even across the Iron Curtain, the essential unity of Europe, its civilisation and its culture" (3). Although this commission advocated "no war of liberation", it asserted that "the present boundaries of Europe are not permanent" (4). Ultimately, it hoped "to create a platform for the discussion of [Eastern Europe's] problems", so that "when the time of liberation comes, there will be a responsible and informed body of opinion able to help in the material, political and cultural reconstruction of [the] countries" behind the Iron Curtain (5).

In one sense, this commission provided an unlikely context for Eliot's talk, since he himself rejected political solutions to cultural problems, and generally eschewed speaking on political matters. He was not to depart from such a resolve in this talk, establishing very quickly that his position on "culture" remained profoundly Arnoldian:

> To me, the unity of European culture has always seemed a self-evident *necessity*; to me, the rapid circulation throughout Europe of the best that was being thought and written in each country of Europe has seemed as essential for the continued life of literature as is the function of breathing for the life of a human being. (19)

If anything, Eliot's tendency to represent culture by organicist analogies with the human body was growing ever more pronounced. He still emphasized the difference between unity and uniformity, and averred that such unity depended on differences among the several literatures of Europe. All the while, his implicit cautions against Soviet-style ideas of culture continued to drive his discussion. European unity "today" is, he maintained, threatened by "modern and erroneous conceptions of the Nature of Man —what we call ideologies" (21).



Eliot would not of course have seen his conception of culture as ideological, and in that regard he was wholly in keeping with contemporaneous conservative thinkers. But the phenomenon of the leading poet of the day, a poet who represented the "modernist" impulse in unmistakable form, using the mass-media to promulgate and popularize an essentially Victorian discourse is as striking a conjuncture of heterogeneous historical forces as might be imagined. Eliot's broadcasts to Europe mark a distinct chapter in his involvement with radio. If they conform to the general ecumenicity of his other talks before the microphone, in addressing German or Eastern European audience they nevertheless tested the limits of such ecumenism. Today, at the end of the century, the idea of "Europe" has more currency than ever before, but with the end of the Cold War we have to strain to hear anyone insisting on the unity of European "culture". In this sense, too, Eliot's voice proves historically unique.

NOTES

[1] I have discussed these broadcasts in two previous publications: ""This rather elusory broadcast technique": T. S. Eliot and the Genre of the Radio Talk". In *ANQ* 11.4 (Fall 1998): 32-42; "Eliot on the Air: "Culture" and the Challenges of Mass Communication". In Brooker, J. S. (ed.). 1999. *T. S. Eliot and the Turning World*. Houndmills: MacMillan. The latter volume also includes my "Checklist of the Radio Broadcasts of T. S. Eliot". The numbers of broadcasts cited in the sentences that follow are not yet definite: further research will likely turn up additional broadcasts, though not, I suspect, in any large number.

[2] These redactions are all included in Donald Gallup's *T. S. Eliot: A Bibliography*. For general accounts of the early history of the BBC, there are a handful of especially valuable sources: Asa Briggs' magisterial *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* remains the most complete study; Burton Paulu's *British Broadcasting: Radio and Television in the United Kingdom* offers a post-war perspective on the BBC that is useful for anyone interested in Eliot; so too does Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff's *A Social History of British Broadcasting. Vol. 1 1929-1939. Serving the Nation*; Edward Pawley's *BBC Engineering, 1922-72* offers details about how the changing technology of broadcasting changed the course of the service, details not available elsewhere.

[3] There may be additional broadcasts made for the national services of the various nations of western Europe. Apart from one broadcast for Irish radio, my research thus far has not encompassed more than the sound and paper archives of the BBC.

[4] Indeed, after WWII, Eliot became an outspoken champion of BBC practice, and urged it to resist the temptations of both television and American-style broadcasting. I discuss this aspect of Eliot's relations with the BBC in my essay in *T. S. Eliot and the Turning World.*

[5] I quote from the published version of this talk, *Common Sense* XI.10 (October 1942: 351); the Eliot estate currently withholds the right to quote from those of Eliot's scripts which survive in the paper archive of the BBC.

[6] Probably a version of "In Praise of Kipling's Verse", an essay that Eliot published in *Harper's* 184.1106 (July 1942: 149-157). The quotations that follow are from the *Harper's* essay.

[7] Typescript located in the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham. Allied troops entered Rome on 4 June 1944; Eliot pre-recorded his talk that very day, and it was broadcast at mid-day on the next, 5 June, on the "Purple Network" of the BBC Eastern Service. Eliot returned to some of the concerns of this broadcast, though reproducing next to nothing of its form, in a broadcast for the Third Programme of 9 September 1951 entitled "Vergil and the Christian World". That talk was slightly redacted and published in both the *Listener*, XLVI.1176 (13 September 1951) and in *Sewanee Review*, LXI.1 (January/ March 1953); it was later collected in Eliot's *On Poetry and Poets*. 1957. London: Faber & Faber.

[8] Eliot recorded this broadcast for the BBC series "Demi Heure du Soir", and it was broadcast on 8 November 1944.

[9] All three of these talks were later published, with English and German on facing pages, as *Die Einheit der Europäischen Kultur*. 1946. Berlin: Carl Habel Verlagsbuckhandlung. The second was first published in English in *Adelphi* XXIII.3 (April/ June 1947), and was later republished along with the first and the third talks as an appendix to *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, which first appeared in November 1948.

[10] The nature of Eliot's attraction to radio, and the peculiar strengths he regarded as belonging to a radio talk as opposed to a public lecture or a published essay, is the topic of my essay, ""This rather elusory broadcast technique": T. S. Eliot and the Genre of the Radio Talk". In *ANQ* 11.4 (Fall 1998): 32-42.

[11] Quoted from the appendix to *Christianity and Culture. Two Noted Books Complete in One Volume: The Idea of A Christian Society, and Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. 1968. New York: Harvest/ Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: 188. Page references to this volume are henceforth noted parenthetically.

[12] For a fuller account of Pound's broadcasts, see Carpenter (1988: 541-542 and 583-584). See also Heyman (1976: 149-151). Heyman notes that Pound made one broadcast for the so-called Salò Republic on 10 December 1943. Thereafter Pound continued to produce radio scripts for Minculpop until April 1945, but there is no evidence that any of these scripts were ever aired. Thanks to Jonathan Gill for reminding me of this dénouement to Pound's broadcasting "career". Most of Pound's radio talks have been collected in Doob (1978).

[13] From a broadcast of 4 April 1943.

[14] Prerecorded on 9 December 1948, the broadcast aired on Christmas day. The poem itself was read in German by actor Mathias Wieman.

[15] Eliot pre-recorded the talk on the previous day. The talk initially aired over the BBC's European Service, but was rebroadcast 2 February 1954 for the BBC's Third Programme. The entire series of broadcasts, including Eliot's, was published as a pamphlet in December 1953 by William Clowes & Sons, Ltd. My quotations come from the pamphlet. A recording of the talk is available for audition in the British Library National Sound Archive. The series comprised an

introductory talk by the Rt. Hon. Richard Law, P.C., M.P., who spoke to represent the purposes of the Central and Eastern European Commission; Christopher Dawson on religion; Denis Healey, M.P., on Socialism; Julian Amery, M.P., on political unity; Richard O'Sullivan, Q.C., on the legal tradition; T. S. Eliot on literature; and Sir David Kelly, G.C.M.G., on diplomacy.

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