

“The Striving”: Eliot’s Difficult Ethics

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On one occasion I was having tea with Leonard and Virginia Woolf when Eliot was also a fellow guest. At their most “Bloomsbury-agnostic” they started needling him about his religious beliefs. “Tom, do you really go to church?” “Yes.” “Do you hand round the collection?” “Yes.” “Oh, really! What are your feelings when you pray?” They waited rather tensely for his answer to this question. Eliot leaned forward, bowed his head in that attitude which was itself one of prayer, and described the attempt to concentrate, to forget self, to attain union with God. The striving.

Stephen Spender, *T. S. Eliot*

I

T. S. Eliot made lay readers, literary critics, and, as my epigraph suggests, even close friends uncomfortable, driving them into a seldom occupied space between intellectual scepticism and orthodox discipline. In the account by Stephen Spender quoted above, the Woolfs pester Eliot into prayer, but the “striving” act with which he responds produces a squeamish tension in his antagonists. This act is designed to go beyond a witty riposte or a convincing intellectual argument. The Woolfs’ discomfort forces them to yield the moral superiority they had supposed their atheist scepticism granted them, for Eliot’s response changes the abstract exercise into a concrete demonstration of faith. The tea parlour momentarily becomes a place where prayer (at least once) has been valid.

I see this moment as emblematic for modernist scholars and historians, who are usually far more comfortable speaking of the cultural pessimism that Eliot and Virginia Woolf shared than of the faith which separated them. Most scholarship on Eliot deemphasizes his social criticism – the *Criterion* commentaries and the book-length *After Strange Gods* (1934), *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) – and concentrates on the firmer aesthetic ground of his poetry, drama, and literary criticism. Our collective unease has had the practical consequence of sequestering studies of Eliot’s cultural writings from studies of his literary works, and to some extent this habit reinstitutes the new critical preference for literature to the world it would re-envision and eschew. While Eliot’s aesthetic writings never explicitly require his readers to consider what it would take to reshape the real world so that it would more closely resemble his art, in his social criticism, by contrast, the cultural changes Eliot plans extend beyond the fictitious and into the politically efficacious. In the face of such potential horrors as programmatic anti-Semitism, forced relocation of ethnic populations, and moratoria on emigration and religious freedom, if the logical consequences of his political ideas are taken seriously, critics’ main recourse is triumphantly to note the wrongheaded organicism of Eliot’s assumptions and prejudices and thankfully to suggest that full implementation of those ideas would never have been possible due to his muddled thinking.

The critical disquiet with Eliot’s prose is partly a result of years of treating his poetry reverentially, and then finding that reverence burst by poststructuralist critiques of his self-positioning as aestheticist paragon, the representative and standard-bearer of a new critical privileging of high art at the expense of baser popular forms of cultural production. If we imagine this straw-man Eliot working so hard in his poetry to distance nascent, elitist modernism from Marie Lloyd’s music-hall performances, and from the parallel world of Lil and the barmaid in *The Waste Land*’s “A Game of Chess” section, it subsequently becomes difficult to contemplate an Eliot who might have wished to engage with actual people and to challenge England’s consensus on cultural policy. David Chinitz’s *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003) is, to my mind, the most representative example of the recent turn in the new modernist studies to examinations of the intersections between high and low culture.¹ Chinitz uncovers a “culturally elastic” Eliot who fought against aesthetic rarification as a “bourgeois perversion” and who embraced popular culture, especially the demographic appeal and political potential of church pageants and verse drama (6, 14). But such is the

strength of critical assumptions about the poet's elitism, that almost all of Chinitz's book is devoted to showing the extent of Eliot's engagement with low forms. The fruits of that engagement remain steadfastly aesthetic and implicit.

Other recent efforts to describe the political activities of Eliot's interwar years treat his prose as either a purposefully self-deflating retreat from the political, after a brief flirtation with demagoguery, or a completely failed attempt at cultural change. The former is the tack taken by Lucy McDiarmid and John Xiros Cooper, who read the *Four Quartets* as a primer for how to disassociate poetics from politics and how to school the postwar mandarin (Samuel Hynes's "Auden Generation") in dogmatic cultural neutrality. The latter position dates at least as far back as Michael North's reading of Eliot's "political aesthetic" and includes Jed Esty's excellent book *A Shrinking Island*, which contextualizes Eliot's social writings within a wider project of post-imperial cultural retrenchment, the deliberate projection of a defeated atmosphere of diminished horizons and explicitly failed or impossible goals.²

For both North and Esty, Eliot's interest in hypothetical cultural reorganization and his ultimate refusal to advance beyond theorizing cultural end-points into specific measures to enact his proposals smack of naïveté. They consider his organicism (a belief in culture as a living totality greater than the sum of its constituents) to be an obstacle to the success of his cultural project, since his reticence to theorize steps toward practical reform originates in his eschewal of, and pessimism about, the efficacy of radical cultural change. But to judge Eliot's methods in this way is to ignore his repeated protestations that ethics should take priority over politics, or to assume that his emphasis on this priority was meant to inoculate his diagnostic theories against any unintended violence that might occur during the enactment of his cultural prescriptions – for there was indeed nothing concrete to enact, only a vision of culture as Eliot would have had it. And in dismissing the ethical priority of his writings, the new modernist studies do not advance us farther than New Critical considerations of Eliot's politics by William Chace, John Margolis, Roger Kojecky, and Stephen Spender, all of which favour or reject Eliot's writings depending on whether or not they are sympathetic to his religious convictions and aims.³

I suggest that we focus instead on Eliot's ethics and consider as an emphatically positive stance his reticence to act until potential harm to any individual members of the organic system could be absolutely avoided. Jewel Spears Brooker has recently argued that Eliot's political scepticism is compatible with Emmanuel Levinas's unswerving prioritization of ethics, especially when one considers the rise of statist anti-Semitism in Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union that contextualizes both Eliot's and Levinas's thinking.⁴ Although I by no means wish to conflate the very different motives behind Eliot's and Levinas's ethical turns, I agree with Brooker that the historical contemporaneity of the two thinkers' turns to ethics in response to totalitarianism is instructive. Eliot's emphasis on the ethical coalesced during the lifespan of the *Criterion* (1922-39), throughout a series of considered public stances designed sometimes to provoke and sometimes to ward off political controversy. His promulgation of a "via media" of Anglican ecclesiasticism and Tory traditionalism meant insinuating himself between the polarized stances of literary partisans of the communist Left and the reactionary Right. Because of this, Eliot's political philosophy, often voiced only in reaction to an assault from one or other camp of adversaries, can often seem haphazard and incoherent. But as I will argue here, his emphasis on the difficult act of foregrounding ethics in all cultural decisions remains consistent and remarkably cogent.

A valorization of difficulty, scepticism, and intellection as such will not surprise readers of either "The Metaphysical Poets" or *The Waste Land*. But the difficulty Eliot employs in his cultural prose carries with it an expectation of efficacy that extends further than the familiar modernist touchstones of readerly participation in the meaning-making process or an eschewal of final agency for the text's utterance, conditioned as it is in the allusive fragments of so many other texts. Here, the difficulty of balancing desires and benefits with religious restrictions on means that invalidate ends creates a meditative delaying space that Eliot expects to carry the full weight and power of a conversion event. The apparent structural and thematic incoherence of his cultural proposals provokes readers into a discomfort, out of which, he hopes, will spring the appeal of religious mystery.

Many critics point to a contradiction between Eliot's organicist belief in culture as something left alone to cultivate itself, rather than as something imposed or created, and his plans for changing culture outright. He shows an obvious predilection for the Christian ends he would prefer to the liberal status quo, but he balks at all available means to carry out his plans, viewing them as insufficiently harmless.⁵ According to this line of thought, when Eliot insists that the Christian Society he advocates is a viable alternative to the communist and

fascist societies on behalf of which his pamphleteering adversaries were arguing, he elides the problem of imposing that Society onto the current state, and thus betrays his incoherence. But since the purported substitution project contains within it contradictory elements (for example, the tautological Community of Christians, a class of clerics and laity who must rise organically out of a culture whose classes they exist to create and to delineate), the process by which the Christian Society comes about is by no means the only uncomfortable stumbling block to his project. Eliot's *via media* is the message: the process by which one wraps one's mind around these manifold contradictions results in the uncomfortable tensions through which a miracle may occur. This is not meant to satisfy the rigorous-minded among cultural theorists – but this is only a problem if one assumes cultural theorists were his main rhetorical target in writing.

I suggest that we approach Eliot's cultural prose historically from a vantage point of provisional credulity in order to determine what he expected it to accomplish. Though he later treats his themes as if he had always believed strongly in them, and his prose reveals a consistent embrace of difficulty as a mode of perceiving and experiencing culture, his belated commitment to the priority of ethics in political theory leads to a dramatic shift in his use of abstraction from an early excuse to avoid political intervention to an eventual means of intervening. As I will show, Eliot's varying use of terms like abstraction, difficulty, and scepticism tends to occlude his shift in their practical applications; also unhelpful is the length of time spent on their development and their piecemeal elaboration in the *Criterion*. The combination of the priority he placed on Christian ethics, his intellectual scepticism, and his belief in the efficacy of intellectual discomfort (which he believed could convert those who had become dissatisfied with the dissonance of Anglican faith and Liberal politics to a newly fervent religious commitment) helps account for the apparent inconsistencies of his cultural prose. Eliot's characteristic method also suggests ways of contextualizing recurring tropes in his post-conversion poetry and drama that embody the positive religious associations he develops in his interwar writing.

II

In 1937, hoping to force a declaration from writers sympathetic to the Republic, Nancy Cunard sent out a questionnaire whose 148 responses were collected in the pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War*. The questionnaire aimed for individual declarations that would constitute a united popular front. There were only two options: for or against “Franco and Fascism”: “It is clear to many of us throughout the world that now, as certainly never before, we are determined or compelled, to take sides. The equivocal attitude, the Ivory Tower, the paradoxical, the ironic detachment, will no longer do”.⁶ Although its title makes clear that the questionnaire expected most respondents to be in favour of the Republic, even a pro-Fascist stance was implicitly preferred to one that eschewed sides altogether. Since the leading question made non-engagement impossible, those who wouldn't engage at all were grouped in a section labelled “Neutral?”

This section is where we find Eliot, characteristically laconic, terse, and economical: “While I am naturally sympathetic, I still feel convinced that it is best that at least a few men of letters should remain isolated, and take no part in these collective activities.”⁷ Striking in this response is how he sees it as part of an ongoing discussion: “still” sounds as if he is referring us to something he has already said before, which has not changed despite the call for its repetition. Also notable is his use and opposition of “isolated” and “collective.” His non-aligned stance is only isolated in the context of the 127 respondents in favour of the Republic. Each of the other authors had just as much chance to announce his or her particular reason for supporting Spain, yet Eliot lumps them all together into that “collective,” thereby making his individual position seem to be a lonely and embattled one. Perhaps his besieged tone results, as well, from the personal nature of what the pamphlet specifically targets as decidedly unsatisfactory. As the chief promulgator of “ironic detachment” since the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922; as the editor of the *Criterion* since the same year, which with its very name suggests an “Ivory Tower” vantage point from which the literary scene is surveyed to distinguish dross from diamonds; and as the self-anointed publicist for the Anglican “via media” or pragmatic alternative between left and right that the staff of *Left Review* would call “paradoxical,”⁸ Eliot might have seen much in the rhetorical impulse behind the questionnaire to render him defensive, cautious, and isolated.

Our record of Eliot's political thought as it appears in the *Criterion* derives from commentary on current events, cavils against competing periodicals, and rejoinders to questionnaires: nothing systematic. The history of his responses to solicitations like this one to take sides can often seem haphazard and reactionary. But as

the thirties progressed, Eliot discovered consistent themes to stress, and he developed constructive tactics to help him engage with his prose adversaries. In fact, we can read in his initially defensive posture and his unwillingness to compromise his artistic autonomy by committing to any political doctrine on the grounds of expediency the germ of his larger prose attempts at systematic coherent social theory in such works as *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). The political *via media* he espouses is never explicitly defined, except – in *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) – as something requiring “discipline and self-control [...] both imagination and a hold on reality,” with an energy level somewhere between “enthusiasm and apathy.”⁹ Eliot’s political philosophy begins as a defensive stance, and through a series of revisions emerges as an ethical demand for scepticism and slowly matured, thoroughly reasoned positions, rather than what he considered to be ideological simplifications.

Eliot’s attempt to disentangle himself from partisan commitment occurred as early as the July 1933 issue of the *Criterion*: “It seems to be the necessity of the moment – at least in America – for the editor of a literary periodical to explain exactly where that periodical stands on the great political and social issues of the day.”¹⁰ The “moment” in 1933 was the worldwide depression, which American periodicals had only lately experienced, but which European markets had toiled under since Germany’s economy had collapsed under the weight of the Versailles reparations scheme and subsequent inflation. The near-simultaneous ascent of both Roosevelt and Hitler to power in their respective countries offered an early example of collectivized alternatives, provoking much correspondence among sympathetic journalists. Although Eliot admitted that he had “not yet framed any manifesto against manifestoes,” he nevertheless proceeded to explain why the *Criterion* would take no stand upon the question of a secular New Deal:

A united group, we should have learned by now, acts, if we have patience, more surely than a large and miscellaneous group. There were equivocations about Humanism towards which no compromise could be extended; so there may be about some of the economic philosophies which aim at setting things right without moral discipline. Disguised as they are, veiled from common minds like mine, by the categories of their sacred science, any of them may belong in those utopias which take no account of human nature. But I believe that the study of ethics has priority over the study of politics, that this priority is something immutable which no famine or war can change; and that, even when a philosopher is expressly “not directly concerned” with ethics, yet his politics and economics will have some obscure ethical assumption, by which, if I could find it, I could judge them. (C 12:643-44)

This would not be the last time Eliot would issue complaints about the seeming compulsion to commit to a particular political position, but it does represent his characteristic method of opposing that compulsion.¹¹ The call to join a “large and miscellaneous group” has behind it the assumption that the more intellectuals support a certain proposition, the higher the likelihood that it is true or just. Eliot demurs: the larger the group, the more probable it is that those individuals’ qualms and “equivocations” must be squelched in favour of unified group statements and manifestos. The ideology of the fanatical cause therefore mystifies its secular dogma (into a “sacred science”) until its pronouncements are acceptable to the whole only because no one can scry the “obscure ethical assumption” that underpins this particular promised, but for Eliot impossible, utopia.

According to Eliot, the “obscure ethical assumption” involves a misappraisal of human nature: it substitutes an unrealistic teleology for the “moral discipline” that alone can hold self-destructive desire in check and keep cultures from devouring themselves. That is why “the study of ethics has priority over the study of politics,” and this priority ought to be “immutable” and inescapable in any theorizing of group dynamics: not only because the prerogatives and rights of the individual must be defended from the totalizing and simplifying whole, but because only ethics can provide a properly specific conception of human nature. Although he would elsewhere offer a more positively phrased and constructive account of the benefits of starting with the ethical and never losing sight of its rigours, in the pages of the *Criterion* Eliot confined himself to making clear his aversion to the dominant political theories of the interwar years through criticism of their oversimplification of the complexities of free will and human nature into mass dynamics. As he elaborates in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*:

The kind of political theory which has arisen in quite modern times is less concerned with human nature, which it is inclined to treat as something which can always be re-fashioned to fit whatever political form is regarded as most desirable. Its real data are impersonal forces which may have

originated in the conflict and combination of human wills but have come to supersede them. As a part of academic discipline for the young, it suffers from several drawbacks. It tends, of course, to form minds which will be set to think only in terms of impersonal and inhuman forces, and thereby to de-humanize its students. Being occupied with humanity only in the mass, it tends to separate itself from ethics; being occupied only with that recent period of history during which humanity can most easily be shown to have been ruled by impersonal forces, it reduces the proper study of mankind to the last two or three hundred years of man. It too often inculcates a belief in a future inflexibly determined and at the same time in a future which we are wholly free to shape as we like. Modern political thought, inextricably involved with economics and with sociology, preempts to itself the position of queen of the sciences. For the exact and experimental sciences are judged according to their utility, and are valued in so far as they produce results – either for making life more comfortable and less laborious, or for making it more precarious and ending it more quickly. (CC 163-64)

A socio-political theory that recognizes the primacy of ethics will restrain itself from imposing artificial ideology onto individuals (it will not “thereby de-humanize its students”). Thinking of the “other” mainly as a constituent of the “mass” leads directly to a tendency to think of the other in terms of her or his “utility,” the use she or he can be to the cause. Such a tendency results from a historical attitude that is best undermined by diagnosing its own historicity; making such theories into the fad of recent years prevents them from laying claim to ahistorical truth.

For Eliot, a commitment first and foremost to ethics when critically approaching the problems of the 1930s means laying bare the fundamental and *a priori* assumptions of any system so that the reader may judge whether it wrongs any individual along its way toward some implausible utopia. It seeks out and exposes contradictions within particular stances. It will not let itself be led toward action justified by its appearing less bad than some more deleterious alternative (Eliot preferred inventing a Christian Society over supporting Liberalism unqualifiedly against the threat of Fascism in 1939, for example). And it emphasizes the holistic outcome rather than some particular good that might result along the way, should that good occur at the expense of the individual. After his conversion to the Anglican Church in 1927, conceptions of the social good had a decidedly religious cast for Eliot, but he was open to “consonant” ancillary theories provided they did not contradict Christian ethics. His flirtation with C. H. Douglas’s theories of Social Credit (most recognizable in his poetry in the choruses to *The Rock* [1934]) represents a real engagement with radical responses to the economic crises of the thirties and direct governmental intervention.¹² His initial support for Maurras’s royalist *Action Française* ended only when that movement clearly diverged from Church teachings in its embrace of violent tactics.¹³ Action was not necessarily to be eschewed, but it could only be wholeheartedly advocated if it could be proven to be properly disciplined.

In this sense Eliot remained remarkably consistent in the adversaries he chose to pursue: he engaged with those who would encourage unpremeditated action. He opposed himself to the tactics of both fanatical Right and Left by interposing himself between their argumentative tendencies. Literary targets to the right of Eliot received criticism for their obsessive particularization and their unwillingness to think through the consequences of their proposals. For example, A. R. Orage’s Social Credit organ the *New English Weekly* featured frequent public disagreements between Eliot and Ezra Pound over the pertinence of religion to a monetary doctrine. In a letter dated May 3, 1934 (titled “Modern Heresies”), Eliot responded to Pound’s denunciation of *After Strange Gods* (for its distasteful righteousness and the way it distracted the attention away from the search for solutions to the Depression) by naming Pound a fanatic: “It is only a step from asserting (what appears to be true) that the economic problem must be solved if civilization is to survive, to asserting (what I dispute) that all other problems may be or ought to be neglected until the solution of the economic problem.”¹⁴ The progression in Pound’s thinking might have appeared to be logical, but Eliot saw it as a slippery slope into “complete Secularism,” and he suggested that any economic system unwilling to subsume itself under more expansive ethical prerogatives is unworthy of such single-minded devotion. Eliot’s passage continued: “The political alternatives which we are offered as alternatives to the present rotten state of affairs both seem to me wholly secular. The reason why I have been able to support the *New English Weekly* is that the doctrines it advocates do not appear to be necessarily and exclusively secular. The kind of fanaticism which Mr. Pound applies to economic reforms with which I am, in any case, in sympathy, and which he applies in a different sense to a religious institution of which I am a member, seems to me to degrade the former, and to leave the latter unaffected.”¹⁵

Meanwhile, those spokespersons for the Left with whom Eliot engaged tended to mystify the mechanism by which their theories would be put into action, and he criticized them for their unwieldy expansiveness. In the *Criterion* for April 1937, for example, he took on the concept of the “Popular Front” against Fascism that putatively included all Liberals, Socialists, and Communists who agreed that Fascist aggression must be stopped in Spain. While he admitted that the concept of a popular front was “seductive” and even “hypnotic,” he warned of the consequences of licensing such an ideology with power: “Those...who so far surrender principles as to join a Popular Front which is meaningless unless it is an extreme Left Front, will have only themselves to thank if they find that they have conjured up a spirit which will not go back into the bottle, and which will be an Unpopular Front” (C 16:474). More and more Eliot opposed himself to single-mindedness and obstinacy, the intolerant inability to be persuaded, and the self-delusion necessary to believe unequivocally that the end of an unethical teleological theory could ever justify barbaric means. As he formulated his position in the *Criterion* number of January 1937, the relative politics of particular positions didn’t matter as much as the extremity of their tone:

Political fanaticism in releasing generous passions will release evil ones too. Whichever side wins will not be the better for having to fight for its victory. The victory of the Right will be the victory of a secular Right, not of a spiritual Right, which is a very different thing; the victory of the Left will be the victory of the worst rather than the best features; and if it ends in something called Communism, that will be a travesty of the humanitarian ideals which have led so many people in that direction. (C 16:290)

Eliot anticipated that the pursuit of power would elevate the unscrupulous rather than the virtuous once the rule of law was jettisoned, however temporarily. Although he stipulated that the supporters of either the Left or of the Right might have had the best intentions, those most inclined and best equipped to act ethically could not guarantee that they would be able to control the political process. Those interested in a solution derived from and ruled by moral tenets, such as the ecclesiastically minded Eliot, had “especial reason for suspending judgment.”

Emphasis on the suspended judgment, the balanced mind, and the deferred decision emerged gradually in Eliot’s prose of the thirties as the consistent alternative to whichever hasty position he wanted to criticize. It may be, he commented in July 1936, that “it is almost impossible to say anything [...] without being misunderstood by one or both parties of *simplifiers*” (C 15:664), but the inevitable misunderstanding never prevented him from speaking critically whenever he noticed contradictions. Nor did it excuse him from grappling with both presented sides of the issue for as long as it took him to come to an informed conclusion. “The fact that a problem will certainly take a long time to solve, and that it will demand the attention of many minds for several generations” (CC 5) may be a positive thing rather than a detriment, so long as those minds can overcome their acquired impatience for immediate results. Such prolonged contemplation, apparently the only remedy to irresponsible brevity, may stretch our credulity, as it does when in the *Criterion* for January 1936 Eliot advised British neutrality in the Spanish Civil War through the guise of a prudent delay until more was known: “so long as we are not compelled in our own interest to take sides, I do not see why we should do so on insufficient knowledge; and even any eventual partisanship should be held with reservations, humility and misgiving” (C 15:290). But his concept of usefully prolonged deliberateness can also be traced as far back as April 1934, to a *Criterion* commentary on education, which Eliot believed should be liberal (by which he meant haphazard and leisurely), precisely because that would inure one to the onslaught of the fanatics:

Our occupation with immediate social, political, and economic issues to-day is a necessity, but a regrettable one; for it tends to abbreviate and confuse that period of adolescence in which a man is acquiring understanding by submitting himself, in a leisurely way, to one intellectual influence after another [...] an atmosphere of diverse opinions seems to me on the whole favourable to the maturing of the individual; because when he does come to a conclusion, he does so not by “taking a ticket,” but by making up his own mind. (C 13:452)

“Taking a ticket” means surrendering to the authority of one party or another, and submitting to external interpretations of events. This phrase appears repeatedly in the *Criterion* commentaries, always pejoratively, always with the horrified assurance that joining a party equates to cessation of independent thought. Eliot’s

stance on education also echoes his stated goal for the *Criterion* itself. In his “Last Words” retrospect in 1939 he reminded his readers that the *Criterion* had always meant to create a “forum” for showcasing diversity of international intellectual opinion, without requiring or standardizing any political editorial position.¹⁶ His journal was never meant to be didactic, but as time went on he increasingly saw its role as creating a safe space for authors to contribute thoughtfully, to disagree with each other with no threat of reprisal, and to preserve the autonomy of the creative mind against the barrage of denunciations from politically motivated thought.¹⁷

Against both the leisurely education and the intellectually autonomous literary forum stands not just the necessary “occupation with immediate [...] issues,” nor even the fanatical ideologues at the extreme fringes, but periodical journals committed to one or another ideology, which abet the quickening efforts of the unthinking partisans for whom they are written. Eliot might have prodded public officials to investigate and more fully understand the issues about which they made policies, but in so doing he felt himself increasingly at odds with a press at pains to simplify matters for their reading public. The only remedy appears to be “stubborn resistance” to this “international civil war of opposed ideas” (at least, that is how it struck Eliot in January 1937):

The present danger for us, as individuals in this country, is that the precarious balance of ideas in our heads may be upset by one or the other extreme view, according to our individual backgrounds and temperaments. As I have suggested, the greater part of the Press not only does nothing to restrain this disintegration, but actually tends to hasten it: by simplifying the issues in very different and very imperfectly understood countries, by resolving emotional tension in the minds of their readers by directing their sympathies all one way, and consequently encouraging mental sloth. (C 16:289)

“Emotional tension,” we sense from Eliot’s tone, ought to be savoured and made fruitful only after deliberate evaluation of the tension, not abridged or elided so as to ignore what created the tension in the first place. When one or the other side rushes to explain how current events can be mapped onto their ideologies, and even the press which reports those events thinks for the reader, the result is far removed from the balanced mindset Eliot favours. The citizen shifts from an independent critical agent into a member of a massed mob whose judgments and actions are determined by the mob’s leaders.¹⁸

By October 1938 Eliot was taking his distaste for “mental sloth” a step further, and was objecting to how the press increasingly schooled its public to expect more and easier solutions to problems that ought not be simplified: ‘Another characteristic of the type of mind which is doctrinaire without being truly philosophic, is to assume that *all* problems are soluble: which leads to the ignoring of those which are of such large compass as to appear to present insuperable difficulties. And here the simplifying theorist and the hand-to-mouth politician have a common ground against those who would like to look a little more widely and deeply, in the situation of the present, and a little further, in the prospect of the future’ (C 18:60). Hard choices would soon enough present themselves, and those that seemed to have no ready-made solution at hand would not, to the mind trained to expect “doctrinaire” ease rather than “insuperable difficulties,” seem worth considering at all. But obviously Eliot grouped himself, along with his *Criterion* readership, into the category of “those who like to look a little more widely and deeply,” and it is just these extremely difficult, insuperable problems for which he set himself up as a patient authority, having foresworn any easy solutions.

Alongside Eliot’s patient modelling of how readers might respond critically to a periodical situation in which most parties impeded critical thinking, he also developed during the thirties a corresponding set of theories detailing how a balanced citizen might act within culture. He prompted individual readers to inform themselves carefully as to the merits of a particular debate and to preserve as long as possible all of its sides in order to distinguish muddled thinking from clear thinking. Ideally, such readers ought then to be physically situated within a cultural structure set up along the same balanced and difficult lines he sought for the individual. Against the oversimplified conception of culture as the unnatural oppression of one class by another, Eliot responded by repeatedly theorizing a “natural” state of culture and society as one constituted by agonistic tension between opposed groups and ideas. A healthy culture, he insisted in *After Strange Gods*, is one in which the “taboos” within society are unconscious, habitual, and fully equal to the individual desires they prohibit (ASG 19). In his *Criterion* commentaries, again and again Eliot questioned the fundamental assumption that a classless society is preferable (for the creative artist, if not for all citizens) to a socially stratified one.¹⁹ In the *Idea of a Christian Society*, even while he was arguing for cultural “continuity and

coherence” through a unified, established Church, he qualified this coherence by suggesting that it resulted from “settled, but not rigid agreement” that there ought to be “positive distinctions” made between party and nation and between the educated and the uneducated, resulting in a distinct hierarchy of power and knowledge (CC 33). Most elaborately, in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, he defined culture as that which operates through the opposition of region and nation, class and elite, sect and cult, tradition and culture, with emphasis always on the balance between each opposition for felicitous functioning: “a people should be neither too united nor too divided, if its culture is to flourish. Excess of unity may be due to barbarism and may lead to tyranny; excess of division may be due to decadence and may also lead to tyranny: either excess will prevent further development in culture” (CC 123).

“Excess of division” is akin to the “excessive tolerance” Eliot warned against in *After Strange Gods*, an imbalance possible in both individual and culture that takes an unhealthy scepticism to an extreme of crippling inanition (ASG 20).²⁰ Although he had counselled caution in politics, he remained adamant that when one must eventually attempt some solution, the strength to take a decision is an urgent necessity. We can distill from his prose of the 1930s a consistent attempt to differentiate his own efforts at an abstract and improbable conclusion from that ironic detachment that would cite the difficulties attending a problem and then remain irresolute about what should be done.²¹ In all cases Eliot distinguished between the sceptical balanced-mindedness he preferred and the stasis fostered by ironic detachment. By scepticism, Eliot claimed, he did “not mean infidelity or destructiveness (still less the unbelief which is due to mental sloth) but the habit of examining evidence and the capacity for delayed decision. Scepticism is a highly civilized trait, though, when it declines into pyrrhonism, it is one of which civilization can die. Where scepticism is strength, pyrrhonism is weakness: for we need not only the strength to defer a decision, but the strength to make one” (CC 101-2).

The proximity of pyrrhonism and scepticism helps account for the savageness of Eliot’s animosity towards Liberalism, about which he voiced his contempt not only for its vapid ideology and its inability to stand for anything positive, but also for its historic unwillingness to confront Hitler’s aggression at the Munich Conference in 1938:

We could not match conviction with conviction, we had no ideas with which we could either meet or oppose the ideas opposed to us. Was our society, which had always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends? (CC 51)

In the absence of any “essential” ethical underpinning to public policy, the pursuance of self-interest seemed to have become a political doctrine that sought the path of least resistance and covered its lack of conviction with a complacent assurance of “superiority and rectitude.” Eliot defined the ideology of Liberalism (in both politics and religion) as a “progressive discarding of elements in historical Christianity which appear superfluous or obsolete, confounded with practices and abuses which are legitimate objects of attack” (CC 12). To Eliot the methodology of Liberalism was only destructive, only reactive, and since it had no definite end in mind, it ran the risk of dissipating into nothingness (“with nothing left to destroy [it] is left with nothing to uphold and with nowhere to go” [CC 13]). He criticized Liberalism for being “habit” rather than “philosophy”; a virulent “state of mind which [...] can become universal and infect opponents as well as defenders”; “something which tends to release energy rather than accumulate it, to relax rather than to fortify”; and, most ominously, “a tendency towards something very different from itself” (CC 12-13).

Eliot repeatedly emphasized the need for a new and different approach, since Liberalism risked being corralled by another more constructive ideology, or being manipulated until it served the interests of those it would oppose. It was not enough simply to be against Hitler and Mussolini. The activities of the “irresponsible anti-fascist, the patron of mass-meetings and manifestoes”, he warned in the October 1938 *Criterion*, “when exploited by a foreign press, are capable of nourishing abroad the very ideas which he so vehemently repudiates; they confuse the issues of real politics with misplaced religious fanaticism” (C 18:59). Nor was it enough to assert the certain good of “democracy” as that which distinguished English from German or Italian or Spanish culture, for “totalitarianism can retain the terms ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ and give them its own meaning: and its right to them is not so easily disproved as minds inflamed by passion suppose” (CC 15).²² In a commentary for the *New English Weekly* on October 5, 1939, one month after

Hitler’s invasion of Poland, Eliot seized on Liberalism as a necessary intermediate phase on the path toward the development of totalitarianism; having tied the two concepts together, he reflected that the “catchwords” of democracy and totalitarianism wouldn’t “serve the purpose today which the equivalent cries served in 1914,” and this in turn meant “not merely that we are trying to fight something positive with something negative, but that we are fighting with the weapon of an idea which may turn in our hands.”²³ Liberalism opens the door for totalitarianism because of its lack of constructiveness and its chaotic destructive impulse.

Enter the Christian Society, Eliot’s constructive yet resolutely hypothetical alternative to contemporary social and political theory. *The Idea of a Christian Society* involves the elaboration of a possible society, “not a society of saints, but of ordinary men, of men whose Christianity is communal before being individual” (CC 47). It requires, first of all, recharacterizing England in 1939 as a “Neutral Society” as opposed to the Pagan Societies of Germany and the Soviet Union and the hypothetical Christian Society of Eliot’s idea (CC 6), where the comparison clearly means for us to think of the Neutral Society as seeming as untenable as the “Neutral” responses of *Authors Take Sides*. When he asked whether his adopted country was a “Christian England,” he made clear that the phrase was only an expedient: “We mean only that we have a society in which no one is penalized for the *formal profession* of Christianity; but we conceal from ourselves the unpleasant knowledge of the real values by which we live” (CC 7). When faced with the economic crises of the 1930s, “the obvious secularist solution for muddle” in Britain and America “is to subordinate everything to political power,” which, if it involves “the subordination of the money-making interests to those of the nation as a whole [...] offers some immediate, though perhaps illusory relief” (CC 34). But the centralized role of the secular state in everyday life has the infelicitous effects of “the confinement of the clergy to a more and more restricted field of activity, the subduing of free intellectual speculation, and the debauching of the arts by political criteria.” Far better, Eliot argued, to consider a situation in which “you can get the proper harmony and tension, for the individual and for the community.”

In the Christian Society Eliot hypothesized, the nation would be governed by and for members of the same Church, according to Christian moral tenets. Having considered the nature of power and of human beings, he concluded that “it is obvious that the tendency of the State is toward expediency that may become cynical manipulation, the tendency of the people intellectual lethargy and superstition” (CC 28), a familiar though unproven formulation. So he provided for the policing of power by the “Community of Christians,” the “Church within the Church,” the “consciously and thoughtfully practicing Christians, especially those of intellectual and spiritual superiority” (CC 28). Though Eliot protested that his Community was to consist of “both clergy and laity,” and was to be “a body of indefinite outline” rather than an anointed theocratic assembly of bishops (CC 34), he never addressed how that Community would be established or decided or elected. As Lucy McDiarmid has noted, the small, exclusive circle indicated by the supposedly inclusive clergy *and* laity “sounds suspiciously like a plural of the first person.”²⁴

While I agree with McDiarmid’s suggestion that Eliot needed to position himself potentially in charge of the society he was reorganizing, his consistent equation of the struggles going on within the individual and those going on within society would seem to obviate our qualms about such self-aggrandizement. A religious tract such as this would be read by social thinkers just as likely to picture themselves a part of that exclusive circle. What may be harder to imagine is a bifurcated Eliot directing and controlling himself along with his potential community. Do not the scepticism and difficulty he clearly endorsed in contemporary life, which would probe and uncover the underpinnings of social order, interfere with the differentiated classes Eliot wanted to be unconscious and traditional? Michael North has also commented on the impossibility of distinguishing between the ruling part and the ruled whole: “The Community of Christians is [...] the Christian Community intensified, raised to a higher power. The Community of Christians is formed by the common culture it shares with the larger Community. It is a universal class acting out the aspirations of the whole, and as such it then turns and forms the larger culture as well. It directs that which has given it form. The situation is clearly circular.”²⁵ For North, Eliot’s conservative “political aesthetic” proceeds by relativizing contemporaneous values in order to affirm an unchanging, atemporal standard of truth. North’s study reveals the poet’s reliance on accepted, shared notions of what Christian morality looks like in order for the society to work at all, however hypothetically. If we accept *a priori* that Christians think first communally and second individually, then it might make sense to suppose that the Community of Christians could spring into existence along with the Christian Society.

But the *deus ex machina* of the Community of Christians, fraught and paradoxical and improbable though it may be, has two things in its favour which should make us question whether this contradiction is necessarily

an omission symptomatic of muddled, unsystematic thought. The first is that in the context of the 1930s periodical debates Eliot abhorred, the Community represents not the elision of the problem of competing constructive ideologies, but its supersession. Because the hypothetical Christians composing the Community constitute the ruling class: "It will be their identity of belief and aspiration, their background of a common system of education and common culture, which will enable them to influence and be influenced by each other, and collectively to form the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation" (CC 34). The Community would draw its strength from its commonality of belief and culture. If its members should disagree on policy, they would resolve their disagreement not by creating factions among themselves and intentionally exacerbating their disagreements, but by offering alternative yet consonant remedies consistent with Christian ethics.²⁶

Since Eliot's conception of class functions through the supposition of homogeneous groups opposed to one another, his Community, a class unto itself, could preserve its own "intellectual and spiritual superiority." It could therefore tend the intellectual and spiritual development of the rest of the culture (however inferior those people would necessarily be) without worrying about being besieged by competition, since the dogma of the Society would never allow non-Christians to foment alternate theories. The Community represents Eliot's attempt to right the historical severance of the "men of action" from the "men of thought" by combining the two elite groups and dissolving the "untenable" distinction between them (CC 159). That severance had resulted from democracy's habit of forcing leaders of separate factions into pitching their ideas as binary alternatives contingent on opposing the ideas of others, of "dining with the Opposition" on a daily basis.²⁷ The Christian Society would do away with that intellectually hazardous practice by eliminating democracy and opposition parties altogether.

The role of the Community of Christians within the Society they would police duplicates the efforts Eliot had been promulgating in the *Criterion* and the *New English Weekly* throughout the late thirties. By setting a rigorous standard for the rest of the Christian Society to follow, the Community antagonizes the divided society from a perspective of coherence and unity. Should the Society have somehow miraculously come into being, the difficulty of existing as a critical thinker amid the disharmonious and polarized 1930s would have been replicated within the complex structure of the new culture, whose communal mind would be divided into appetitive classes on the one hand and guardian classes, on the other (to borrow Plato's terms from *The Republic*). This strategically hierarchized Society would have the benefit of coherence and religious unity, despite the social divisions that Eliot considered to be unproblematic, unnecessary to resolve, and even "natural" (CC 92). More importantly, since the sacerdotal ruling class would involve the creative, intellectual laity as well as the ecclesiastical theocrats, Eliot's conceptual development of the Christian Society represents a fantasy in which a poet such as himself could join this laity and hold sway with his respected opinions, yet feel no pressure from orators, fanatics, and distasteful secular politics.

The second reason I regard the Christian Society's manifest contradictions as having been consciously left unresolved is Eliot's repeated protestations that his enterprise was purposefully abstract: the "Idea" of a Christian Society, not the thing itself. At the outset he declared his intention to address a "problem [that] will certainly take a long time to solve, and that [...] will demand the attention of many minds for several generations" (CC 5). He admitted that he had omitted plans for the enactment of his scheme: "I am not at this moment concerned with the means of bringing a Christian Society into existence; I am not even primarily concerned with making it appear desirable; but I am very much concerned with making clear its difference from the kind of society in which we are now living" (CC 6). Eliot's treatise begins to look more like a critical polemic against the evils of his day than a constructive plan for the increasingly indefinite future.

As I suggested at the start of this essay, Eliot's idealistic diffidence has been traced by some critics to his dissertation on F. H. Bradley, to a tendency toward unsystematic thought, and to a division in his political thinking between desire for organic order on the one hand and horror of centralized totalitarianism on the other.²⁸ His frequent warnings about the unforeseeable ends of radical change add to this impression, as do his repeated cavils about the importance of abstention before acting to ensure complete ethical rectitude in the act. As Eliot grumbled in the *Criterion* of January 1935, in any revolution:

You are certain of some change, but you cannot predict all the consequences. To say nothing of the possibility, to which we should all be wide awake, of revolutions being side-tracked, manipulated, exploited and degraded – even the *probability* that they will be – you cannot leave everything to even

the most perfect machine. At some point human nature, unchanged in its fundamental passions and weaknesses, will be handling the controls. (C 14:263-64)²⁹

Again, such a view depends on a fixed notion of “human nature,” just as the success of the Christian Society depends on the reliable righteousness of its progenitors. Jed Esty is right to note that by the time of the publication of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, after the Second World War, Eliot was reacting to revelations of Nazi atrocities, back-peddling on the authoritarianism of a Christian Society (even to the point of savaging his earlier idealism), and nearly repudiating the entire endeavour: “A class division of society planned by an absolute authority would be artificial and intolerable; a decentralization under central direction would be a contradiction; an ecclesiastical unity cannot be imposed in the hope that it will bring about unity of faith; and a religious diversity cultivated for its own sake would be absurd.”³⁰

But Esty’s observation merely leaves us with the same unresolved tension between ends and means with which I began this discussion. The fact that Eliot ultimately was content to leave the relation between particular and general and between individual and society as a resemblance rather than an identity is only a problem if we suspect that he planned to implement his “Idea” of a Christian society. The less ambitious, more reasonable answer for Eliot is to abjure the possibly unethical imposition of ecclesiasticism, but to imply that, in the abstract, a society in which the vast majority of individuals share a commitment to public policy based on religious virtue is preferable. But though *The Idea of a Christian Society* is a text whose author has “tried to restrict [his] ambition [...] to a social minimum” (CC 47), it remains one that attempts to be plausible in its diagnoses as well as in its solutions. The world of the Christian Society needs to be recognizably similar to England in 1939 if it is to have an impact on the political debates of the real world. The agents who bring about the change, as well as those who would live in and administer the Society, need to be recognizable people, not saints: “It is very easy for speculation on a possible Christian order in the future to tend to come to rest in a kind of apocalyptic vision of a golden age of virtue. But we have to remember that the Kingdom of Christ on earth will never be realized, and also that it is always being realized; we must remember that whatever reform or revolution we carry out, the result will always be a sordid travesty of what human society should be – though the world is never left wholly without glory” (CC 47). *The Idea of a Christian Society* provides a lens through which to recast contemporary events for its readers. The revolution may perhaps never occur; more importantly, the revolution is perhaps already occurring in the minds of those few, thoughtful, critical readers Eliot hopes to reach.

What critics diagnose as contradiction or paradox, Eliot would call religious mystery. What had bothered him most about political and religious Liberalism, after all, had been the “state of mind” that tended to reject and to destroy without summoning the will to substitute something else in its place. Eliot may have been powerless to enact a Christian Society, but his ability to influence a reader’s state of mind is another matter: “We need to know how to see the world as the Christian Fathers saw it; and the purpose of reascending to origins is that we should be able to return, with greater spiritual knowledge, to our own situation. We need to recover the sense of religious fear, so that it can be overcome with religious hope” (CC 49-50). The purpose of reading and thinking about an abstract society juxtaposed against our own is not only to contrast the one with the other but to provide a coherent frame of thought in the insuperably pressured milieu of 1939. The Christian Society need not exist in actuality for either “reascending to origins” or the subsequent “return, with greater spiritual knowledge” to be effected. The thought process of the one followed by the other offers a cleansing of sorts, as the reader’s mind contemplates the difficulty of “religious fear,” the recognized contradistinctions between the real and abstract worlds. If that recognition leads to mass “religious hope,” or even if it is limited to the individual scale of Eliot’s 1927 conversion, it will have been the suggestion prompted by an idea rather than the result of coercive force.

III

To read Eliot’s cultural prose sympathetically one does not have to share his Anglican faith, but one has to be willing to treat those who earnestly believe with credulity. The common critical assumption, consistent since Raymond Williams’s groundbreaking critique in *Culture and Society* (1958), is to diagnose Eliot’s ethical protestations against even the mere thought of imposing his scheme as a sanctimonious cover for having no idea how to put it into practice. This diagnosis privileges collective politics over individual appeal; there is

no evidence that mass conversion would be more pleasing to this poet than if only one soul should be shriven because of his writings, even if the Christian Society could only be brought about by the universal acclamation of millions of newly devout Anglicans. As his qualms about the Popular Front in 1937 demonstrate, Eliot had always been sceptical about the presumed justice of decisions imposed by a democratic majority onto an unwilling minority. At the same time, he was keenly aware that a solitary example could be more useful than a mass movement in representing just action. As I conclude, I will propose a reading of the type of exemplary figure Eliot proffers for his readers, to which he often returns in his post-conversional writings.

The first appearance of such a figure occurs, rather innocuously, in the January 1935 *Criterion* commentary in which Eliot briefly elegizes A. R. Orage. The former *New English Weekly* editor is praised, not necessarily for being right on religious issues dear to Eliot's heart, but for his capacity to balance alternatives and to abide with contradictions. Although Orage was often undisciplined, unorthodox, or simply wrong, he aggressively tackled complex issues: "No one could accuse Orage of the obscure mind to avoid, or the weak heart to refuse, any sacrifice that might lead to the real good" (C 14:262). Orage's propensity to think constantly and in an open-minded manner about both the "temporal" (Social Credit) and the "spiritual" (Gurdjieff's mysticism) led Eliot to speculate on the possible political effect on his journal now that the *New English Weekly's* editor was gone:

The danger, for those who start from the temporal end, is Utopianism; settle the problem of distribution – of wheat, coffee, aspirin or wireless sets – and all of the problems of evil will disappear. The danger, for those who start from the spiritual end, is Indifferentism; neglect the affairs of the world and save as many souls out of the wreckage as possible. Sudden in this difficulty, and in pity at our distress, appears no one but the divine Sophia. She tells us that we have to begin at both ends at once. She tells us that if we devote ourselves too unreservedly to particular economic remedies, we may only separate into minute and negligible chirping sects; sects which will have nothing in common except the unexamined values of contemporary barbarism. And she tells us, that if we devote our attention, as do some of our French friends, to *le spirituel*, we may attain only a feeble approximation to catholicism, and a feeble approximation to Guild Socialism. (C 14:262-63)

Caught between the equally problematic dangers of the temporal and spiritual extremes, between the irreconcilable, capitalized quick fixes of "Indifferentism" and "Utopianism," we create a situation in which our despondency conjures a divinity to rescue us. The "divine Sophia" arises "[s]udden out of our difficulty," out of the paradoxical confabulation of the two polar extremes, and speaks to that difficulty by teaching us how to tackle it. But she says nothing that Eliot's dismissive descriptions of both sides' extremities have not already implied, and she disappears as soon as she has finished agreeing with Eliot's and Orage's balanced-minded approach. She seems to have been summoned only for corroboration, but the name that gives her the authority to do so also alludes to the deceptive pseudo-rationality of Sophism. Her presence suggests that, knowing he had no way to prove his opinion, Eliot summoned a divinity to do it for him.

However, the fact that the Sophia appears while Eliot was thinking of his friend, who was in turn thinking of difficulty, suggests that Eliot was less concerned with solving Orage's temporal (political) problems, and more interested in showing how divinity may be found through his three emphases on the studied contemplation of totality, deliberate scepticism, and the earnest desire to act ethically. In foregrounding a seemingly unrelated thematic difficulty, only to trump that difficulty with an unheralded figure like the Sophia, Eliot creates the potential for conversion without showing his hand. The situation exists because of the difficulty, and his three characteristic recommendations for extricating oneself from that difficulty are altogether consonant with the same religious path.

In his essay "Religion and Literature" (1935), Eliot had admonished devotional poets for proselytizing from a "conscious and limited" perspective, which "deliberately and defiantly" proposed to save the fallen world, but in so doing reinforced the chasm between Christian and secular worldviews.³¹ By creating a figure like the Sophia, Eliot hoped to avoid false consciousness and to create a situation within which Christian ethics may be translated *en passant*, and which models the state of mind Eliot believed was most conducive to conversion. As he continued writing plays and the *Four Quartets* through World War Two, Eliot returned to similarly situated scenes of fraught intellection: Thomas a Becket's temptation and eventual success, not in avoiding martyrdom, but in doing the "right thing for the right reason" in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935);

Harry Monchensey’s tortured deliberation and eventual decision to leave Wishwood for a hermit’s existence in *The Family Reunion* (1939); the appearance of Sir Thomas Elyot in *East Coker* (1940), which bridges centuries to bring pagan and Christian marriage rites together in one English heritage; the dialogue between Krishna and double-minded Arjuna in *The Dry Salvages* (1941), who must steel himself to fight in a fratricidal defensive conflict despite his ethical qualms; and even the appearance of the “compound ghost” in *Little Gidding* (1944), who uneasily bridges the temporal and spiritual worlds to offer benediction to a benighted, Blitzed poet. All of these figures proceed from Eliot’s assumption that difficulty is spiritually efficacious, and they construct the ethical situations he would use to demonstrate the superiority of committed, religious life.

Notes

¹ For two other essay collections along these lines, see *Gender, Sexuality, and Desire in T. S. Eliot*, edited by Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), which brought queer and cultural theory to bear on the ivory tower, and *Bad Modernisms*, edited by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), which sought to emphasize the perverse and *outré* qualities of modernist experimentation. Mao and Walkowitz also recently contributed a review essay on the new modernist studies, which includes a remarkably thorough bibliography of “horizontally” inclusive studies of high and low modernisms (‘The Changing Profession: Modernist Studies,’ *PMLA* 123, no. 3 [May 2008]: 737-48).

² See Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³ Margolis and Spender were sympathetic to, although disquieted by, Eliot’s vociferousness; Chace argued in favour of Liberal tolerance; and Kojecky admitted he was in favour of Eliot’s cultural proposals because he shared the same faith. See John D. Margolis, *T. S. Eliot’s Intellectual Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Stephen Spender, *T. S. Eliot* (New York: Viking, 1975); William M. Chace, *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973); and Roger Kojecky, *T. S. Eliot’s Social Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971).

⁴ See Jewel Spears Brooker, ‘To Murder and Create: Ethics and Aesthetics in Levinas, Eliot, and Pound,’ in *Rethinking Modernism*, ed. Marianne Thormählen (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2003), 55-76. Brooker’s focus is the contemporaneous appearance of Eliot’s ‘From Poe to Valéry,’ the award of the 1948 Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound for the Pisan Cantos, and Levinas’s work on ethics after the Holocaust.

⁵ Eliot’s definition of organic culture appears in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*: “For if any definite conclusions emerge from this study one of them is surely this, that culture is the one thing that we cannot deliberately aim at. It is the product of a variety of more or less harmonious activities, each pursued for its own sake [...] Even if these conditions with which I am concerned, seem to the reader to represent desirable social aims, he must not leap to the conclusion that these aims can be fulfilled solely by deliberate organization...The point at which we can arrive, is the recognition that these conditions of culture are ‘natural’ to human beings; that although we can do little to encourage them, we can combat the intellectual errors and the emotional prejudices which stand in their way” (*Christianity and Culture* [henceforth *CC*] (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1976), 92).

⁶ Nancy Cunard, *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* (London: Left Review, n.d.), 1. Though Shari Benstock makes clear that Nancy Cunard conceived the project and wrote the questionnaire, *Authors Take Sides* appeared in London under the auspices of *Left Review* without sole editorial attribution (Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 421-22). The pamphlet listed twelve apparently coeval signatories, alphabetically – Aragon, W. H. Auden, José Bergamin, Jean Richard Bloch,

Nancy Cunard, Brian Howard, Heinrich Mann, Ivor Montagu, Pablo Neruda, Ramón Sender, Stephen Spender, and Tristan Tzara – in a show of group solidarity. As Valentine Cunningham notes, the ratio of for (127 responses) to against (5) is artificial, since no record of unpublished responses exists, either of attempted caveats (“Mightn’t Henry Green or John Cowper Powys or Anthony Powell have equivocated?”) or of a greater number of pro-Franco stands (“For their part, Graves and Laura Riding and Hillaire Belloc and Roy Campbell and Yeats would in all probability have been as unequivocally pro-Franco as the small handful the *Left Review* pamphlet allowed to speak for them”) (Cunningham, *British Writers of the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 438).

⁷ Compare Eliot’s terseness to the relative verbosity of Auden’s doxological response: “I support the Valencia government in Spain because its defeat by the forces of International Fascism would be a major disaster for Europe. It would make a European war more probable; and the spread of Fascist Ideology to countries as yet comparatively free from them, which would inevitably follow upon a Fascist victory in Spain, would create an atmosphere in which the creative artist and all who care for justice, liberty, and culture would find impossible to work or even exist” (Auden, *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* (London: Left Review, 1937), 3). Auden takes pains to link the plight of the man of letters to that of all citizens in the beleaguered democracies of Europe.

⁸ For Eliot’s public defense of regionalism, and his view that people ought to live where they were born because such localization breeds a recognizable culture, see Eliot, *After Strange Gods* [hereafter *ASG*] (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 18; and Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), in *CC* 125.

⁹ Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1929), 36.

¹⁰ Eliot, the *Criterion* [hereafter *C*], ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1966), 12:642.

¹¹ For example, this *Criterion* commentary from October 1936 at the start of the Spanish Civil War: “I would prefer to deal with questions that are soluble, and discuss subjects on which understanding is possible. But one is impelled, by the receipt of manifestoes to be signed by ‘artists and writers,’ as well as by scientists and other intellectual workers, to pursue reflexion on the subject of peace and war [. . .] Artists and writers are exhorted to efforts of various kinds in the cause of peace. So far, I have not been invited to sign any manifesto in favour of war; but I do not doubt that if a war broke out in which there appeared to be any reason for Britain’s participation, manifestoes to this effect would at once be offered for signature” (*C* 15:63). Here, as always, Eliot avoids delving into the relative merits of favouring or opposing the cause; he instead concentrates on the “efforts” required of artists in service of those causes.

¹² Kojecky summarizes Eliot’s early flirtation with and ultimate souring on Social Credit: “Originally it seemed to attract the attention of just such a group of people as Fabianism, and in France the *Action Française*, had done. It promised to be a center of thought and critical reassessment. It was distinct from Communism and Fascism. It found the means, in a weekly newspaper, to propagate its views. It was not only analytical but also constructive. It had the support of some noteworthy intellectuals. But it did not last and its practical experiments in Canada and elsewhere came to nothing. Eliot turned his attention to less secular circles” (*T. S. Eliot’s Social Criticism*, 85).

¹³ In the January 1934 *Criterion* Eliot notes the appeal and the difficulty of accepting the change prescribed by *Action Française* when trying to come up with a Christian social philosophy. Eliot first sets up “two paths which may be followed. You may confine yourself to investigating and defining those social theories and practices which the Christian may not accept, or you may elaborate a theory which aims to be consonant with Christianity, though it may not be in every respect logically derivable from those beliefs which are essential to faith and morals [...] The danger of the former kind of theory is that it may be so negative as to be no guide at all; the danger with the latter kind is that it may implicate the universal with the individual, the eternal with the transient: the theorist must be careful to keep matters distinct” (*C* 13:275).

¹⁴ Eliot, ‘Modern Heresies,’ *New English Weekly*, May 3, 1934: 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 71.

¹⁶ Eliot qualifies this mission by admitting that as time went on: “For myself, a right political philosophy came more and more to imply a right theology – and right economics a right ethics: leading to emphases which somewhat stretched the original framework of a literary review” (C 18:272).

¹⁷ In ‘Last Words’ in January 1939, Eliot clarified the neutral stance the *Criterion* provided, and prophesied the role the remaining little magazines would have to play for the creative faculty in the coming war: “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 public 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” (C 18:274).

¹⁸ Consider Eliot’s criticism of Winston Churchill’s biography *Marlborough* in the January 1934 *Criterion*: “The historical style, as developed by Mr. Churchill and others has one quality not shared with the literary or the philosophical: it is the style of a man accustomed to public speaking – to oratory, an art largely concerned with evoking stock emotional responses. It is sometimes maintained that practice in speech is excellent preparation for writing; this may be so, but the kinds of speaking and of writing must be taken into account; and furthermore no kind of speaking is without its dangers as well as its benefits. In a style formed by oratory, we must never expect intimacy; we must never expect the author to address us as individual readers, but always as members of a mob” (C 13:270).

¹⁹ For an example, consider his review of John Middleton Murry and John Macmurray’s *Marxism* in April 1935: “One does not need to believe that a society is more admirable because it is ‘classless’” (C 14:434).

²⁰ That line comes directly after Eliot’s infamous remark about “free-thinking Jews.” Trying to identify the bare minimum requirements for a coherent culture, Eliot skirts a fine intolerant line between desire for orthodoxy and racism: “The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any number of free-thinking Jews undesirable. There must be a proper balance between urban and rural, industrial and agricultural development. And a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated.” He later attempted to clarify this line by emphasizing that “free-thinking” unorthodoxy was to be deprecated rather than Jewish people as such (CC 144n2). But even in this later work he posits that every culture needs an enemy to focus itself against (CC 132-33). As Anthony Julius has pointed out, Jews as well as every other heterodox outsider would certainly fall into such an embattled camp in a Christian Society (*T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 164-65).

²¹ Take, for example, Eliot’s April 1933 review of Haakon Chevalier’s book *The Ironic Temper*, whose eponymous concept he distinguishes from that polemic irony “which is a permanent weapon for the sensitive civilized man”: “What we rebel against is neither the use of irony against definite men, institutions or abuses, nor is it the use [...] to express a *dédoublement* of the personality against which the subject struggles. It is the use of irony to give the appearance of a philosophy of life, as something final and not instrumental, that leaves us now indifferent; it seems to us an evasion of the difficulty of living, where it pretends to be a kind of solution of it. And the work built upon it comes to seem merely superfluous, an encumbrance, a luxury article produced for a public that has disappeared” (C 12:469).

²² Eliot often questioned the idea that democracy was a good in and of itself. In the October 1937 *Criterion*, for example, he ridiculed John Masefield's proposal to expand poetry readership ("poetry for the millions") because it seemed to be based on a principle of engorgement rather than selectivity: "The spectre of the old liberal panacea of more education for everybody lurks in the background [...] there should be a public for poetry. But what is important is not that this public should be large, but that it should be sensitive, critical and educated – conditions only possible for a small public" (C 17:85-86). In the *Idea of a Christian Society*, he admitted that, by calling for a stratification of education levels within English culture, he sounded "undemocratic" (CC 33); but he had begun that book by questioning whether the English political system had a valid claim to the term: "If anybody ever attacked democracy, I might discover what the word meant. Certainly there is a sense in which Britain and America are more democratic than Germany; but on the other hand, defenders of the totalitarian system can make out a plausible case for maintaining that what we have is not democracy, but financial oligarchy" (CC 11).

²³ Eliot, 'A Commentary,' *New English Weekly*, October 5, 1939: 331.

²⁴ See Lucy McDiarmid, *Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden Between the Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 29. W. A. Young, in a letter to the *New English Weekly*, also made this connection. After citing Eliot's grouping of readers by what they choose to read on the train, and admitting he has read H. G. Wells with relish while holding a third-class season-ticket, he admitted more: "I have not read Mr. Eliot, except his learned controversy with Mr. Reckitt in your columns. Which goes to show, doesn't it, that I am one of the railway public and not one of 'a small number of thinking people prepared for new dogma' (in Demant's phrase) whom Mr. Eliot teaches? Please will Mr. Eliot expand this paragraph about the readers who hold season-tickets and tell me whether, in order to stand up to the strain of reading him, I should exchange my season-ticket for a daily one, or travel by bus, or walk (I've no petrol for a car), or read him in bed? What does he advise?" (*New English Weekly*, February 15, 1940: 256).

²⁵ North, *Political Aesthetic*, 116.

²⁶ I am not implying that Eliot had no desire to create the Community, but only that the success of his intellectual and theoretical project does not hinge on making it a reality. There is evidence that he acted during World War Two in concert with a Christian group that may have been an approximation of his Idea, and that might have received more attention had it been successful in its aims. See Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London, Faber & Faber, 1978), 20.

²⁷ The full quotation follows: "The relation of the political elite – by which we mean the leading members of all the effective and recognized political groups: for the survival of a parliamentary system requires a constant *dining with the Opposition* – to the other elites would be put too crudely if described as communication between men of action and men of thought. It is rather a relation between men of different types of mind and different areas of thought and action. A sharp distinction between thought and action is no more tenable for the political than for the religious life, in which the contemplative must have his own activity, and the secular priest must not be wholly unpractised in meditation" (CC 159).

²⁸ For a reading of Eliot's influence by Bradley, see Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (London: Methuen, 1959), 40-41. See North, *Political Aesthetic*, 84 for a discussion of Eliot's lack of systematization. And see Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, 128 for a discussion of the qualitative difference between the two proleptic visions of *Idea* and *Notes*.

²⁹ This is a point about radical systemic social change, but even in small matters Eliot was willing to counsel caution before acting. See, for example, the April 1938 *Criterion* (17:478).

³⁰ Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, 92. For more on this point, see also 128.

³¹ Eliot, ‘Religion and Literature,’ in *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 100.