# Eliot as Public Intellectual *5,367 words*

Was T. S. Eliot a public intellectual? If we are to avoid anachronism, no. The compound was not in common use when he died in 1965; the earliest *OED* citation is from the *New York Times* in 1967, and in *The Public Intellectual* (2002) Helen Small dates its currency to the Nineties in America, and the Noughties in Britain.[1] Moreover, as Stefan Collini has shown, "intellectual" as a noun did not enjoy a securely agreed usage in English in the early decades of the twentieth century – and it was a label that Eliot, at the heart of Anglophone intellectual life, actively resisted.[2] "Let quacks, empirics, dolts debate" (1953) – a piece of light verse inspired by a photograph of a cat on a park bench – is the only poem he published which invokes "intellectuals" as a category, and then with Noël-Coward-ish asperity: "Let intellectuals address / The latest Cultural Congress" (*Poems1* 311). The editors of the *Complete Prose* have, of course, employed the term in the now-familiar sense of someone preoccupied with ideas—e.g. "Eliot chastised himself for not being more useful as an intellectual" (*Prose5* xxv). But Eliot's dislike of the word invariably implied his anxiety about the modern atomisation of knowledge; the fact that the earliest *OED* citation dates from the mid-seventeenth century would have seemed darkly significant to the man who once proposed a never-written three-volume work on "the English Renaissance" called *The Disintegration of the Intellect* [*Prose2* 609]. Eliot's tribute to Allen Tate in 1959 suggests his alternative ideal:

> By avoiding the lethargy of the conservative, the flaccidity of the liberal, and the violence of the zealot, he succeeds in being a representative of the smallest of

---

[1] Helen Small, "Introduction," in *The Public Intellectual*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 1.
[2] Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 15-44.

> minorities, that of the intelligent who refuse to be described as "intellectuals." And what he has written, as a critic of society, is of much greater significance because of being said by a man who is also a good poet and a good critic of literature. (*Prose8* 362)

Those scare quotes whet "the ironic edge" (Collini) that *intellectual*, n., retained into the Sixties.[3] Eliot here characteristically insists on the value of social criticism when underwritten by literary activity. In one of his last public statements on a political matter – whether the United Kingdom should join the European Common Market – he replied to the editors of *Encounter* magazine:

> You seek to obtain the views of "writers, scholars, and intellectuals generally." I am neither a scholar nor an intellectual generally; but, as a writer, I believe that all that any member of these three categories can offer of value is a statement of his personal bias for or against our joining, prior to any consideration of the possible terms. (*Prose8* 529)

But if Eliot was not, by 1962, an "intellectual generally," who was? In 1928 he wrote of Julien Benda's post-Dreyfus polemic, *Le Trahison de clercs*, that "clercs" could only be "feebly" translated as "intellectuals" (*Prose3* 345).[4] Reprising a cadence of learned helplessness from the original phrasing of his final note to *The Waste Land* ("Shantih.... 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is a feeble translation of the content of this word"), Eliot makes clear that he regards the non-equivalence of French and English as a cultural shibboleth (*Poems2* 415). Yet over the course of the review he also argues, *contra* Benda, that "the regiment of the world" should not be given over "to those persons who have no interest in ideas whatever" – a position that implies the need for the category of "[public] intellectual," even as his verbal skepticism declines to name it.

---

[3] Collini, *Absent Minds*, 35–36.

[4] Eliot was reviewing the French text in 1927, but Richard Aldington, the English translator of Benda, agreed: "The word 'Clercs' … is defined by M. Benda as 'all those who speak to the world in a transcendental manner.' I do not know the English word for 'all those who speak to the world in a transcendental manner'" ().

"Clerisy" was the collective noun for intellectuals coined in the nineteenth century by Coleridge as "the learned of all denominations[,] … all the so called liberal arts and sciences, the possession and application of which constitute the civilization of a country, as well as the theological" (quoted in *Prose5* 740). In a 1944 paper for the Moot, the Christian sociological discussion group that met from 1938 to 1947, Eliot considered the contemporary definition of "the clerisy (if it exists)" (*Prose6* 553). But in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), he had already rejected Coleridge's word for proselytizing purposes, noting that the meaning of the term had been "somewhat voided by time" (*Prose5* 701). Instead, he advanced a speculative elite called the "Community of Christians" – as distinct from the "largely unconscious […] Christian Community" (*Prose5* 697) – which "would include some of those who are ordinarily spoken of, not always with flattering intention, as 'intellectuals'" (*Prose5* 703).

Coleridge's coinage arises from the cognate nature of "cleric" and "clerk" (and, indeed, "clerc"), which perhaps adds an extra knowing wink to the self-portrait of 1933: "How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot! / With his features of clerical cut" (*Poems1* 143). When pressed to say what he was, Eliot often took cover under the old-fashioned mantle of "man of letters" – most notoriously, when he declined to contribute to Nancy Cunard's *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* (1937) ("it is best that at least a few men of letters remain isolated"), a private reply that was nevertheless printed, under the arch heading "NEUTRAL?" (*Letters8* 783). As Agha Shahid Ali observes in his study of *The Criterion*, Eliot resisted what he saw as a trend in the early Thirties for literary periodical editors to declare political positions on “the great issues of the day”, while remaining deeply preoccupied with these issues.[5] In 1944, he wrote an article entitled “The Responsibility of the Man of Letters in the Cultural Restoration of Europe,” in which he defined this “man” as “the writer for whom his writing is primarily an art.” His responsibility, in other words, is to words. But – like the poet who described the latter *Four Quartets* (1943) as “patriotic poems” written under “war-time conditions” (*Poems1* 892) – the world will also concern him too:

> The man of letters is not, as a rule, exclusively engaged upon the production of works of art. He has other interests, like anybody else; interests which will, in all probability, exercise some influence upon the content and meaning of the works of art which he does produce. (*Prose6* 519)

Such statements self-consciously modify the severity of the author of *The Sacred Wood* (1920) and his rhetorical air of missionary forbearance: “The temptation, to any man who is interested in ideas and primarily in literature, to put literature into the corner until he cleaned up the whole country first, is almost irresistible” (*Prose2* 295). Eliot’s prime example of a poet-critic succumbing to this temptation was Matthew Arnold, who neglected to subcontract his social criticism to “some disciple … in an editorial position on a newspaper” (295). Again the shadow of self-portraiture falls across the page. From 1915, having decided to abandon a career as an academic philosopher and settle in England, Eliot put the intellectual range of his Harvard education to practical use with authoritative (albeit unsigned) book reviews ranging from Indian and French thought to social Darwinism and American education and politics. He also contributed pieces on religion and philosophy to academic journals. It was not until 1917, when his first book of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* appeared, that Eliot emerged as an identifiably

---

[5] Agha Shahid Ali, *T.S. Eliot as Editor* (UMI Research Press: Ann Arbor, 1986), 108–09.

*literary* critic, writing his first non-review article for *The New Statesman* ("Reflections on *Vers libre*"). Reporting back to his Harvard classmates that year, however, he mentioned only his philosophical and poetic publications. His early taste for social criticism was not exercised significantly again until after *The Waste Land* (*Prose1* 510), although it occasionally bubbles up as prophetic irony in the acidic cultural commentary of his "London Letters" (1921–22), most notably in the tribute to music-hall performer, Marie Lloyd. When *The Sacred Wood* deprecated Arnold for hunting "game outside of the literary preserve" (*Prose2* 295), therefore, Eliot was tacitly setting limits to his own most influential period of literary production.

From 1923, however, having embarked on his editorship of *The Criterion*, he began to chafe at his self-imposed aestheticism, and to develop a sense of himself as an "old-fashioned Tory" (*Letters2* 251). In 1928, as *The Sacred Wood* was reissued, Eliot felt that a status update was needed. Stung by the suggestion from his old tutor, Irving Babbitt, that he was being too secretive – a private intellectual – about his recent conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, he resolved, as Babbitt advised, to "come out into the open" (*Prose6* 187). The result was the notorious preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (1928), in which he tried to "disassociate myself from certain conclusions which have been drawn from … *The Sacred Wood*" with the statement that his "general point of view" was "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion." Declining to define these terms, Eliot instead pointed to "the small volumes which I have in preparation: *The School of Donne*; *The Outline of Royalism*; and *The Principles of Modern Heresy*" (*Prose3* 513). Readers of the *Complete Prose* looking for *The School of Donne* will find a first draft in Eliot's 1926 Clark Lectures at Cambridge, posthumously published as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (1993); *After Strange Gods* (1934), meanwhile, with its subtitle "A Primer of Modern Heresy," was the closest Eliot came to making good (or, in light of his decision to suppress it, bad) on the third title promised. Where, though, is the political wing of the trilogy, *The Outline of Royalism*?

As a political position in England in 1928, royalism, Eliot conceded, was "at present without definition" (*Prose3* 513). It never acquires one in the *Complete Prose*. But fishing for kings in these volumes is one way of tracing what Denis Donoghue calls the "essentially mythical" principle that informed Eliot's vision of social unity as a matter of symbol and ritual, just as it did the "mythical method" of *The Waste Land* (*Prose2* 479).[6] In Volume 1, the terms "royalism" and "intellectual" appear in the outline of his 1916 modern French literature extension lecture on "Royalism and Socialism," where – contrary to the more usual derogatory association of "intellectual" with the anti-Dreyfusard position in French politics – he applied it to, among others, Charles Maurras ("Besides the loyal band of traditional royalists there are several intellectuals who have been led to the royalist position largely as a protest against all the conditions in art and society which seemed to be due to the Revolution" [*Prose1* 473]). In Volume 2, covering the "Perfect Critic" years of 1919–1926, "royalism" appears only in the editorial apparatus – a marker of Eliot's suppression of his political views in his literary work at this time. But then, in Volume 3 (1927–1929), royalism enjoys a glorious restoration, particularly in the pages of the *Criterion*, as Eliot defends Maurras and his right-wing nationalist movement, the *Action Française*, following its condemnation by the Catholic church in 1926, and surveys "The Literature of Fascism" (1928) in an article which states his opposition to totalitarianism as an alternative to democracy, but also remarks: "Most of the concepts which might have attracted me in fascism I seem already to have found, in a more digestible form, in the work of Charles Maurras," whose ideas "have a closer applicability to England than those of fascism" (*Prose3* 547).

---

[6] Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 219–21.

His literary admirers were dismayed. The poet Thomas MacGreevy, in his 1931 study of Eliot, excoriated Maurras' ongoing royalism as the belief in "a prince at any price," a journalistic rehashing of "the theories of thirty years ago"; "it is unthinkable," he concluded, "that Eliot should follow the same road."[7] In the same year, Eliot's preoccupation with the relationship between literature and politics prompted the first parts of a new poetic sequence. If, as Evan Kindley has suggested, "Gerontion" (1920) – which was written around the same time as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) – can be read as a dramatic monologue on the burden of the poet-critic as a cultural administrator ("I an old man / A dull head among windy spaces" [*Poems1* 31]), the unfinished *Coriolan* (1931–32) can be heard as its weary sequel, in which the man of letters who has "come out into the open" about politics has bad dreams about Coriolanus, the reluctant consul of Shakespeare's Roman tragedy ("I a tired head among these heads" [*Poems1* 134]).[8] Ricks and McCue's notes to the *Poems* suggest that Eliot's inspiration for the crowd scene of the first part, "Triumphal March," was the political aftermath of the Great War and the subsequent rise of fascism in Europe. But the jolting switch to French in the final line also pointedly suggests a return to McGreevy's "theories of thirty years ago". "*Et les soldats faisaient la haie? ILS LA FAISAIENT*" ("And the soldiers lined the streets? THEY LINED THEM"), as Eliot noted, is a quotation, with added emphasis, from "an ironic description of the public funeral of a distinguished man of letters" by Maurras, in *L'Avenir de l'Intelligence* (1905) (*Poems1* 829). Eliot bought this book during his formative student year in Paris in 1911, and in his 1928 review of Benda summarized it as "a protest against conditions under which the intellectual, who should be occupied with intellectual matters purely, was forced to mix in the quarrels of the market place" (*Prose3* 348). The quoted line is attributed to a "fairly mediocre but representative" man of letters, who rhapsodizes "every time a member of the Republic of letters finds himself touched dead or alive by official honours" (*Poems1* 828-9). The irony of this spectacle, to a Royalist, is its debasement of ceremony through liberal democracy's confusion of elites.

---

[7] Thomas MacGreevy, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: A Study* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), 65–68

[8] Evan Kindley, *Poet-Critics and the Administration of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2017), 33–35.

"Triumphal March" was followed by "Difficulties of a Statesman," as the intellectual leader flounders among the banal centralized proceduralism of modern bureaucracy ("One secretary will do for several committees" [*Poems1* 133]). Both fragments of *Coriolan* were written in summer 1931. Together, they dramatize Eliot's admirers' reaction to the 1928 preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes,* as summarized in his first extended essay as an Anglican lay commentator, "Thoughts After Lambeth," published in March 1931:

> Somehow I had failed, and had admitted my failure; if not a lost leader, at least a lost sheep; what is more, I was a kind of traitor; and of those who were to find their way to the promised land beyond the waste one might drop a tear at my absence from the roll-call of the new saints. (*Prose4* 227)

The last line of "Difficulties of a Statesman" ("RESIGN RESIGN RESIGN") catches this note of betrayal, as those who once imagined *The Waste Land* would lead them to the Promised Land recant their former chant of "Shantih shantih shantih" (*Poems1* 135, 71). The "hopeful" conclusion that Eliot draws from his supposed apostasy recalls the Maurrasian mockery of "Triumphal March" and its day-tripping crowd on "the way to the temple" (*Poems1* 131). The literary establishment's rejection of his Christianity, he noted with a contrarian's satisfaction, meant that

> the orthodox faith of England is at last relieved from its burden of respectability. A new respectability has arisen to assume the burden; and those who would once have been considered intellectual vagrants are now pious pilgrims, cheerfully plodding the road from nowhere to nowhere, trolling their hymns, satisfied so long as they may be "on the march." (*Prose4* 227)

Eliot the rebel consul would further challenge the "respectable" orthodoxy of his audience with *After Strange Gods* (1934), which attempted ill-advisedly to take the criticism of modern literature into the court of theology, but is now chiefly remembered for the racist remark that, in a unified Christian society, "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable" (*Prose5* 20). These words – where "free-thinking" does the prejudicial work that Eliot's scare quotes around "intellectual" would do elsewhere – were central to the argument of Antony Julius's *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (1995).[9] The *Complete Prose* provides new evidence that Eliot also actively opposed the political reality of anti-Semitism: in 1953, he responded to a request for a statement (eventually published in 1963) condemning contemporary Soviet persecution of Jewish citizens. Anti-Semitism, he wrote, is

> a symptom of profound difficulty, disorder, and maladjustment in the economy and in the spiritual life of that nation; and is exploited by rulers as a desperate remedy which only aggravates, in the end, the malady of which it is a symptom…. [A]ny government which persecutes and stigmatizes any body of its own nationals – and most notably the Jews – will in the end have to pay the full penalty for so doing. (*Prose8* 550–51)

---

[9] 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), Chapter 5.

Full though this is, its detached political analysis echoes another exhibit in Julius's argument: Eliot's qualification of his condemnation of the anti-Jewish Laws of Vichy France with the remark that anti-Semitism "as a symptom the disorder of French society and politics for the last hundred and fifty years" was "a very different thing" to fascism (*Prose6* 180).[10] Unable to resist the flourish of ethnographic nuance again in 1953, Eliot – presumably thinking of the contemporary internecine violence that followed the end of the British Mandate in Palestine and the founding of Israel – distinguishes "true anti-Semitism … from anti-Semitism in Arab countries, which has much more of the nature of ordinary racial, nationalistic and religious conflict" (*Prose8* 550). It is hard to see what purpose these intellectual distinctions serve other than to assert the intellectual distinction of their author as he washes his hands with Haines, the English colonial apologist of *Ulysses*: "It seems history is to blame."[11]

Eliot told an émigré audience in London in 1945: "I am not a supporter of any race doctrine, certainly of no philosophy of race superiority and inferiority in the modern sense. It is not blood that I am interested in, but the transmission of *culture*" (*Prose6* 630).[12] But inherited "culture" is exactly how structures of thought, including racial prejudice, are transmitted: as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes, "Eliot's high culture of an Anglo-Catholic feudal tradition [is] suspiciously close […] to the racial doctrines of those born to rule." Eliot's defenders against Julius have often cried "guilt by association." But the evidence for innocence by disassociation is also wanting. As Louis Menand notes, Eliot's "intellectualized politics" led him to publish "Hommage à Charles

---

[10] Julius, 171–73.
[11] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922), ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 20. Compare Eliot's private defence of his "free-thinking" remark to J. V. Healey in 1940: "my view does not imply any prejudice on the ground of race, but merely a recognition of what seems to me an historical situation" (quoted in *Prose5* 50).
[12] Julius, 216–17.

Maurras" (1948) three years after the Frenchman had been imprisoned for Nazi collaboration; to this, the *Complete Prose* adds a personal "Message" to a memorial gathering in 1952, praising Maurras's early writings as "part of the heritage of all European peoples" (*Prose7* 774).[13]

Although Eliot remained loyal to his youthful estimate of Maurras, the reactionary glamour of "royalism" largely disappeared from his public prose after 1930. Privately, he admitted that as a theory it had "always been unformulated in my own mind" (*Letters6* 278). Instead, following his Certificate of Naturalization in 1927, he concentrated on establishing himself as a British public intellectual. Fittingly for a writer whose very name was an anagram of "litotes," Eliot shrank from rhetorical exuberance; contemplating Winston Churchill's prose, he remarked: "at the end of a period we seem to observe the author pause for the invariable burst of hand-clapping" [*Prose5* 4]). Nevertheless, Eliot's prose in the Thirties, like his poetic drama, reflects a shifting of tactics away from "minority journalism" and towards the influential self-fashioning he admired in H. G. Wells: "through being a popular entertainer, he found an opening as a prophet" (*Prose6* 11). In 1929, Eliot wrote to the newly founded BBC proposing a series of talks on "Six Types of Tudor Prose" – not the most obviously entertaining or popular topic, but chosen perhaps, as Michael Coyle suggests, for its resonant association with dynastic British history, and Eliot's own ancestral connection with the Tudor man of letters Sir Thomas Elyot.[14] In a repeat of his earlier progress from book reviewer to essayist, Eliot applied himself to mastering radio techniques with literary material, making the move to cultural commentator in 1932 for the series *The Modern Dilemma*, with four talks on "the possibility of a Christian society". By the end of the decade, these would become his first extended work of social criticism, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) – a book that is notably silent on the subject of royalism, despite the titular role of the British monarch as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Following the Abdication Crisis of 1936 Eliot had warned against reviving the eighteenth-century idea of a "Patriot King," who might become "a kind of Fascist King" (*Prose5* 453). Now, on the eve of war with Nazi Germany, he warned against confusing the idea of a Christian society with a potentially totalitarian "English National Religion", seeking instead the stable but dynamic relationship of authorities ("the Church in England to the Universal Church" [*Prose5* 726-7]) which was the liberal principle that informed his dialectical conservatism from the first (his earliest published review, on books about India, began: "Why is it that so many cultivated British officials in India persist in ignoring what the young and educated Indians of to-day are thinking [?]" [*Prose1* 390]).[15]

---

[13] Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2nd ed., 176.

[14] Michael Coyle, "'This rather elusory broadcast technique': T. S. Eliot and the Genre of the Radio Talk," *ANQ* 11, no. 4 (1998): 33.

A decade and a war later, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) would go even further in its tactical accommodation of a liberal idea Eliot had long deprecated in Matthew Arnold: "that Culture (as he uses the term) is something more comprehensive than religion" (*Prose7* 206; see also *Prose4* 183). In a famous passage, Eliot's second book of social criticism inverted Arnold's proposition to argue that culture is "*lived* religion" and includes "all the characteristic activities and interests of a people": his illustrative list runs from "Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August" via football, pubs, cheese, cabbage, and beetroot to nineteenth-century churches and "the music of Elgar" (*Prose7* 208-9). The first four are all British sporting fixtures associated with the Royal Family, while Elgar's "Land of Hope and Glory," from his *Coronation Ode* (1902), became a permanent part of the Last Night of the Proms when it was broadcast on BBC television for the first time in 1947.[16] Like the post-war British monarchy itself, Eliot's egalitarian, cabbages-and-kings list naturalizes royalism as the ritual annual framing of "everyday" national life, having moved over two decades from a reactionary to a quietist position.[17] As he wrote in the preface to the 1962 edition, "I should not now, for instance, call myself a 'royalist' *tout court*, as I once did: I would say that I am in favour of retaining the monarchy in every country in which a monarchy still exists" (*Prose7* 195).

---

[15] For a closely argued account of Eliot's "belief in the efficacy of intellectual discomfort" as the ethical principle underpinning "the apparent inconsistencies of his cultural prose", see Jason M. Coats, "'The Striving': Eliot's Difficult Ethics," *Modernist Cultures* 4, no. 1-2 (2009): 67–83.

Philip Larkin once quoted Eliot's evocative mélange of British (or rather, English) life in an essay on John Betjeman, suggesting that the "cultural inclusiveness" of Betjeman's popular poetic Englishness had more in common with Eliot than literary critics might believe.[18] The same might be said of Larkin's own poetry. In 1954, he wrote "Church Going," a poem which expresses an atheist's nostalgia for the community that empty church buildings once symbolized. The verbal parallels between the argument of the poem and Eliot's "The Value and Use of Cathedrals in England Today" (1952) are striking:

> There are, I am sure, people outside of the Church who would gladly see them preserved simply as ancient monuments of historical and artistic interest with turnstiles and admission charges (Eliot)

> … wondering, too,
> When churches fall completely out of use
> What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep

---

[16] "Why is 'Land of Hope and Glory' at the BBC Proms?," *Classical Music,* accessed June 14, 2021, https://www.classical-music.com/features/articles/last-night-proms-history.

[17] On the public appetite for "homely" stories about the Royal Family in this period, see Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), 111–12.

[18] Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982* (London: Faber, 1983), 218.

> A few cathedrals chronically on show (Larkin)

> The increasingly popular midnight corporate communion at Christmas (Eliot)

> Some Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
> Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh (Larkin)

> … as far as people do come, the cathedral has the responsibility of satisfying the best taste, correcting the imperfect, and educating that which is unformed (Eliot)

> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious,
> And gravitating with it to this ground,
> Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in (Larkin)[19]

Was Eliot's ephemeral talk to the Friends of Chichester Cathedral a source for "Church Going"? As a university librarian, Larkin was well placed to be aware of its publication in pamphlet form. The resemblance, however, more generally suggests how the pragmatic concerns of Eliot's cultural criticism – caricatured in 1956 by Bernard Bergonzi as those of a "shifty High Church pamphleteer" – informed a dominant tone of intellectual realism about the rituals of national life in post-war English literature.[20] Eliot was always anxious about being seen as too pragmatic, especially on religious matters ("what do we mean by the *use* of a cathedral? For the word *use* can be a very dangerous one to use" [*Prose7* 732]). But when his doctoral thesis was finally published in 1964, its conclusion made clear that this was an attitude he had brought into public life from the sphere of philosophy: "If I have insisted on the practical (pragmatic?) in the constitution and meaning of objects, it is because the practical is a practical metaphysic" (*Prose1* 381).

---

[19] *Prose7* 732–36; Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2003), 58–59.

[20] Bernard Bergonzi, "Truth and Dogma," *Nine* 4, no. 2 (April 1956): 37. Compare A. S. Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978) on the "cultural ecstasy" induced in one character by the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953: "Eliot had said, and she remembered, that the 'English unbeliever

From Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958) onwards, left-wing intellectuals have often dismissed Eliot's claim to be an *engagé* critic of post-war society on the grounds that his politics were a poet's atavistic fantasy: "this Anglo-Catholic classicist-royalist stuff you import from English and want to call sociology," as the academic protagonist of Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) snipes at a stubbornly conservative student.[21] But the *Complete Prose* shows repeatedly how practical Eliot was in the tactics he used to keep his metaphysics warm in the marketplace of ideas, as he moved between literary criticism, social criticism, drama, and poetry, insisting on the coherence of these activities even as their results appeared piecemeal. The leading "man of letters" of his generation was, first and last, a freelancer, writing to the moment even as he lifted his eyes to the eternal. And the activity that originally gave him his authority – his poetry – remained central to his vision, even after he had largely ceased writing it. Colin MacCabe has speculatively explained the scattered nature of Eliot's calls to unity:

---

conformed to the practices of Christianity on the occasions of birth, death, and the first venture into matrimony….' Now a whole Nation was conforming to an ancient national Christian rite" (242).

[21] *The History Man* (1975; repr. London: Arena, 1984), 137. Compare Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Theory* (London: NLB, 1976): "it is symptomatic of Eliot's political acumen that the regressive social utopianism of [*The Idea of a Christian Society*] should be offered to the world on the very eve of the Second World War" (147).

> Many books were mooted, but they always ended up as collections of essays or published lectures. My own suspicion is that Eliot never completed a book-length project because he would have had great difficulty in articulating his belief in a national language as the genuine spirit of a people other than in the elliptical and enigmatic fragments that we have scattered through his essays and poems. Had he done so it might have seemed easier to reconcile the democratic thrust of his poetry with his authoritarian and conservative politics.[22]

Eliot's "belief in a national language as the genuine spirit of a people" was essayed most ambitiously in the public lectures of the 1940s: for example, in "The Music of Poetry" (1942), with its astonishing claim that "at certain moments […] a word can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and a civilization" (*Prose6* 316), and also in the two versions of "The Social Function of Poetry" (1943/5) – the latter delivered in France shortly after VE Day – which propose that poetry's feeling for the collective life of words has a socially unifying function "at every level of education" (*Prose6* 440).

In the early 1960s, Eliot attempted to put these beliefs into action. His last sustained public campaign as a critic, conducted while serving on the committee overseeing the translation of *The Revised Psalter* (1963), was against the stylistic infelicities of the *New English Bible* (1961), which threatened to displace resonant cadences of the King James Version in England's churches. By taking up this cause, Eliot's intellectual mission once again curiously refashions the liberal prophecy of Matthew Arnold; specifically, Arnold's belief that "the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry", an idea which found practical application through the Victorian critic's 1872 edition of the KJV Book of Isaiah 40–66 for schoolchildren.[23] Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* – a newspaper with a much wider circulation than usual for his journalism – Eliot advocated for the socially harmonious uses of Jacobean cadence as ardently as his earliest essay in poetics, "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917), had extolled "the music which can never be recaptured in other words" (*Prose1* 513). Interviewed in 1945 on "the condition of man today," Eliot had expressed the view that "there is too much separation between town and country".[24] But the King James Version still bound them together:

---

[22] Colin MacCabe, *T. S. Eliot* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2006), 67.

> The Complete Oxford Dictionary says that "swine" is now "literary" but does not say that it is "obsolete." I presume, therefore, that in substituting "pigs" for "swine" the translators were trying to choose a word nearer to common speech, even if at the sacrifice of dignity.
>
> I should have thought, however, that the word "swine" would be understood, not only by countryfolk who may have heard of "swine fever," but even by the urban public, since it is still applied, I believe, to human beings as a term of abuse. (*Prose8* 531)

Do public intellectuals feed their pearls to pigs – as the *NEB* would have it – or cast them before swine? For Eliot, defying the proverb in his lifelong effort to sway the wide audience won by his verse with high-minded prose, it was an important distinction.

---

[23] Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry', in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1978), 241.

[24] J. P. Hodin, "T. S. Eliot on the Condition of Man Today," *Horizon* 12, no. 68 [July 1945]: 88.

**JEREMY NOEL-TOD**

[Thanks to John Haffenden, Thomas Karshan, Rachel Potter, and Matthew Taunton for intellectual friendship during the writing of this chapter.]