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The Politics
of T.S. Eliot

By Russell Kirk



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THE POLITICS OF T.S. ELIOT

by Russell Kirk

One hundred years ago, Thomas Stearns Eliot was born into an intelligently conservative family in St. Louis. His grandfather, a Unitarian minister and a man of mark, founded the Church of the Messiah and Washington University; the Eliots of St. Louis were Republican reformers, active in good causes, pillars of order.

If one visits St. Louis today and searches for Eliot's birthplace, one is oppressed by a sense of the vanity of human wishes. The Eliot house vanished long ago; the Church of the Messiah, too, vanished long ago; the whole quarter, once elegant, where the Eliots lived is devastated and depopulated. No memorial to the great poet of the 20th century stands in the city where he was born. Nor in London, except for the memorial stone in Westminster Abbey, does one encounter any visible trace of Eliot, who never owned a house. The expectation of change, in the 20th century, has been greater than the expectation of continuity, nearly everywhere. And the permanent things, as Eliot called them — those enduring truths and ways of life and standards of order — are awash in the flood of sensual appetite and ideological passion. As Eliot expressed this phenomenon of decadence, referring to standards of education, in his book *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, we are “destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanised caravans.”

From his youth, Eliot took up the defense of the permanent things, with some boldness. A great innovator in poetry, he became a great conservative in morals and politics, so that my book on conservative thought begins with Burke and ends with Eliot. At no time in his life was he afflicted by political radicalism. After a decade of residence in London, he announced that he was a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion. “I am aware that the second term is at present without definition,” he wrote, “and easily lends itself to what is almost worse than clap-trap, I mean temperate conservatism....” He would have despised the current American political label “moderate”: the Conservative Party of England was not nearly conservative enough for T.S. Eliot.

Affirming Tradition. In 1922, poor and overworked in London, he founded a magazine, *The Criterion*, which endured until January 1939 when Europe was about to erupt. The magazine was intended to work among the educated classes of Europe “an affirmation and development of tradition,” as opposed to the dissemination of Marxism and other ideologies among the intelligentsia. Also, though not quite avowedly, the review was meant to work a political resurrection, touching often upon political theory and institutions. Its circulation never exceeded 800 copies. George Orwell would have liked to buy it, but lacked the purchase price — yet it published the writing of men and women of very high talent, and the bound volumes of this periodical remain worth reading earnestly, if need be to the exclusion of any magazine of our own day.

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In Eliot's editorial "Commentaries" in that magazine will be found many shrewd or wise observations about politics -- short pieces never reprinted. In such observations he impartially scourged the leaders of all political factions in Britain -- with the partial exception of Stanley Baldwin, because Baldwin was something of a classical scholar as well as an honest man. Although a high Tory in English political tradition, he never participated in the action of the Conservative Party -- except, late in life, to lecture to the London Conservative Union, in 1955, concerning which memorable lecture, more presently.

Two of Eliot's slim books are concerned in part with political questions: *The Idea of a Christian Society*, published just after the Second World War, and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, published when socialism had descended upon Britain shortly after that war. Eliot wrote one political or quasi-political poem, *Coriolan*. I have reprinted in *The Portable Conservative Reader* his succinct, mordant remarks on Marxist critics of literature. Other Eliot observations on politics may be found in certain of his literary essays, notably those on William Bramhall, Charles Whibley, and Machiavelli.

Now this may seem, bibliographically, rather a slight bulk of literary production to justify Eliot's eminence as a leader of conservative opinion. Permit me, then, to explain why Eliot is so much read, and so much respected, by men and women attached to the "permanent things."

Thinkers and Actors. In his lecture on "The Literature of Politics," published in his collection *To Criticize the Critic*, Eliot refers to an essay by your servant, in which I mentioned, as American conservative thinkers, Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt, Bernard Iddings Bell, and Robert Nisbet -- none of whom had plunged into the hurly-burly of practical politics. Eliot comments upon this separation of serious political writing from political action,

This is not a very healthy state of affairs, unless the views of such writers become more widely diffused and translated, modified, adapted, even adulterated, into action. It seems to me that in a healthy society, there will be a gradation of types between thought and action; at one extreme the detached contemplative, the critical mind which is concerned with the discovery of truth, not with its promulgation and still less with its translation into action, and at the other extreme, the N.C.O. of politics, the man who in spite of relative indifference to general ideas, is equipped with native good sense, right feeling and character, supported by discipline and education. Between these two extremes there is room for several varieties and several kinds of political thinking; but there should be no breach of continuity between them.

A little later in the same lecture, Eliot adds, "To go more directly to the point, a political tradition in which the doctrinaire dominates the man of action, and a tradition in which political philosophy is formulated or re-codified to suit the requirements and justify the conduct of a ruling clique, may be equally disastrous."

Penetrating to the Core. Eliot concludes his lecture by remarking that he is not concerned with those temporary writers of alleged influence, "or with those publicists who have impressed their names upon the public by catching the morning tide, and rowing very fast in the direction in which the current was flowing." Rather, he says "there should always

be a few writers preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter, in trying to arrive at the truth and to set it forth, without too much hope, without ambition to alter the immediate course of affairs and without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue."

Now Eliot was himself one of those few writers, alluded to by him, who have endeavored to get at the political truth, or a more general truth in which political order is involved, and to set it forth: men of talent who labor intellectually in what Eliot called the "pre-political" area. Eliot's moral imagination, his broad learning, and his poetic talents enabled him indeed to penetrate to the core of the matter, when he touched upon the civil social order and that order's relationships to a transcendent order. Conservatively inclined people on either side of the Atlantic, and farther afield than that, therefore often turn to Eliot's prose, and not infrequently to his verse, for light. In short, Eliot's seminal mind, with its keen perceptions -- Eliot's armed vision -- opened the way for seekers after intellectual order and moral order and social order to penetrate beyond the cant and slogan of the hour.

Slamming Shaw. For when Eliot in his writings touches upon Hobbes, or Freud, or Marx, or Mannheim, or Shaw, or H.G. Wells, he punctures balloons as deftly as, two centuries earlier, did a very different man of letters, David Hume. Take, for instance, another passage from his lecture on the literature of politics. Eliot remarks that sometimes one is tempted to suspect "that the profounder and wiser the man, the less likely is his influence to be discernible." Then he goes on to give a tremendous knock to George Bernard Shaw:

Yet the immediate influence of -- shall we say -- Mr. Bernard Shaw in the period of his most potent influence, I suppose, at the beginning of this century, must have been more appreciable, and more widely diffused, than that of much finer minds; and one is compelled to admire a man of such verbal agility as not only to conceal from his readers and audiences the shallowness of his own thought, but to persuade them that in admiring his work they were giving evidence of their own intelligence as well. I do not say that Shaw could have succeeded alone, without the more plodding and laborious minds with which he associated himself; but by persuading low-brows that they were high-brows, and that high-brows must be socialists, he contributed greatly to the prestige of socialism. But between the influence of a Bernard Shaw or an H.G. Wells, and the influence of a Coleridge or a Newman, I can conceive no common scale of measurement.

What Eliot gives us is not the posturing glibness of Shaw, but wisdom after the mode of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Henry Newman. Incidentally, or accidentally, by showing that a famous innovating poet could reject ideology -- socialist, communist, or fascist ideology -- Eliot contributed greatly to the prestige of conservatism, in the better sense of that abused word.

Saving the World from Suicide. Now in remarking that Eliot was pre-political in the sense that he concerned himself principally with ultimate questions, I do not mean that he took little thought for the political exigencies in his era. On the contrary, Eliot was most earnestly, and sorrowfully, concerned with the disasters and the grim prospects of our bent world. His commentaries in *The Criterion* often bore directly on political questions and men of the hour; and indeed a fundamental purpose of his review was to save the world

from suicide through joining together writers and public men of intelligence, in Britain, Europe, and America.

Aspiring Toward a Healthy Democracy. During the years when we met occasionally and exchanged lengthy letters, he was possessed of a good knowledge of practical politics in the United States -- always thinking of himself as an American -- as well as a lively familiarity with matters of state in Britain and the Continent. During the 1950s though alarmed at educational follies in Britain and America, he was not so depressed by public affairs as he had been while editing *The Criterion*, between the World Wars. In December 1928, Eliot published in his magazine his essay "The Literature of Fascism" -- which he rejected, along with the literature of Communism. "A new school of political thought is needed," he wrote, "which might learn from political thought abroad, but not from political practice. Both Russian communism and Italian fascism seem to me to have died as political ideas, in becoming political facts." He was no enthusiast for an abstract democracy, an ideology of democratism; but a healthy democracy, rooted in old institutions, he aspired to restore. He continued in his article on Fascism,

It is one thing to say what is sadly certain, that democratic government has been watered down to almost nothing....But it is another thing to ridicule the idea of democracy....A real democracy is always a restricted democracy, and can only flourish with some limitation by hereditary rights and responsibilities....The modern question as popularly put is: 'democracy is dead, what is to replace it?' whereas it should be: 'the frame of democracy has been destroyed; how can we, out of the materials at hand, build anew structure in which democracy can live?'

Eleven years later, in his little book *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot exhorted liberals and socialists, as war with the Axis powers was imminent, that "The term 'democracy'...does not contain enough positive content to stand alone against the forces that you dislike -- it can easily be transformed by them. If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin."

Question of Questions. For behind the virulent ideologies -- substitutes for religion -- in the 20th century, behind the feeble politics of liberalism, behind the ineffectuality of conservatives, Eliot perceived, lay a refusal to admit ethics and theology to political thinking. As he would conclude his lecture on the literature of politics in 1957: "For the question of questions, which no political philosophy can escape, and by the right answer to which all political thinking must in the end be judged, is simply this: What is Man? what are his limitations? what is his misery and what his greatness? and what, finally, his destiny?"

I need hardly remark to you, ladies and gentlemen, that such principles of politics provoked wrath and ridicule among the intelligentsia of Bloomsbury in Eliot's time -- even though Eliot's overwhelming reputation as a poet and the strength of his personality somewhat muted outcries against his Toryism. In recent years, most critics have endeavored to ignore Eliot's politics altogether as irrelevant; while some have reproached him venomously as an enemy of democracy and equality of condition.

It is mildly amusing to find Eliot denounced for his Christian faith and his "feudalist" politics by tenured professors of English, some of them enjoying salaries in excess of one hundred thousand dollars, comforted and cosseted by serried ranks of word-processor

operators and go-fers, amply provided with funds for travel and somewhat dubious "research," generously pensioned when they retire from their occasional teaching of a seminar or two -- these scholars and gentlemen who preach egalitarian doctrines; these unimaginative pedants who, should a socialist regime ever come to this land, would be mightily reduced in their circumstances and privileges. Eliot was hard pressed for money until late years; and when at length he was awarded the Nobel Prize, the only substantial sum received by him in a lifetime, he was promptly deprived of the lion's share of it by the Inland Revenue.

The Pope of Russell Square, as some called him, from his little office at the firm of Faber and Faber -- where I called upon him occasionally in the 1950s -- looked down with some contempt upon the crowd of literati of the Left, some of them political simpletons, others unscrupulous opportunists. All that could be said for the London crowd was that they were less silly than the Manhattan crowd of writers or would-be-writers; as Eliot put it, "The worst form of expatriation for an American writer is residence in New York City." It is so still.

New York Intellectuals. "It is natural, and not necessarily convincing," he wrote mordantly in 1933 in the pages of *The Criterion*, "to find young intellectuals in New York turning to communism, and turning their communism to literary account. The literary profession is not only, in all countries, overcrowded and underpaid...it has much ado to maintain its dignity as a profession at all." Marxism might provide the aspiring writer with both a new creed and an assured income. "It is not always easy, of course, in the ebullitions of a new movement, to distinguish the man who has received the living word from the man whose access of energy is the result of being relieved of the necessity of thinking for himself. Men who have stopped thinking make a powerful force. There are obvious inducements, besides that -- never wholly absent -- of simple conversion, to entice the man of letters into political and social theory which he then employs to revive his sinking fires and rehabilitate his profession."

Eliot lifelong refused to run with these hounds; he subscribed his name to no ideological protests and manifestos; he rejected root and branch British socialism, not to speak of communism, fascism, and Naziism (which Hannah Arendt calls "an ideology in embryo"). But this repudiation of collectivist ideology aside, to what political convictions, realistically speaking, did Eliot adhere? Did his politics consist merely of negotiations?

Not at all. There are two aspects, or perhaps jurisdictions, of Eliot's practical politics: his British views, and his American views. Permit me first to say something about his American politics, that being the briefer subject.

Rooted in New England. Eliot wrote to me once that the America for which his family stood had ended with the defeat of John Quincy Adams by Andrew Jackson in the presidential contest of 1828. (Eliot's distant kinsman Henry Adams made a similar observation.) So one may say that the politics of the Eliot family had been very like the politics of their kinfolk of the Adams family: Federalist so long as a Federalist party cohered, suspicious of leveling democracy, austere moral, rooted in the culture of New England. These political views and habits were transferred by William Greenleaf Eliot, T.S. Eliot's grandfather, to Missouri. If I may take the liberty of quoting from my own works, a paragraph from my book about Eliot is pertinent here:

The political exemplar of Eliot's youth had been a gentleman as real to the St. Louis boy as if he still had sat at the head of the dining table on Locust Street: the grandfather he never actually saw, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, 'the nineteenth-century descendant of Chaucer's parson.' That grandfather had been a Christian hero -- and a pillar of the visible community, a reforming conservative, as well as a buttress of the community of souls. In St. Louis he had reformed the schools; founded the university; become the apostle of gradual emancipation of the slaves, the champion of national union, the leader in a dozen other turbulent causes of reform -- but always in the light of the permanent things....His grandfather's notion of perfectibility, and some others beliefs (among them the grandfather's zeal for prohibiting strong drink), T.S. Eliot would discard; and yet a grandfather like that must weigh more lifelong, for an adherent of Tradition, than all the political metaphysicians in the books.

I having been blessed with a grandfather rather like Eliot's, we got on well when we talked about American politics, Eliot and I. Eliot's profession of royalism, by the way, signified mostly that he supported the English throne, having become a British subject, and that he approved of long-established monarchies elsewhere -- such of them as had survived the tooth of time and the frenzy of revolutionaries that had followed hard upon both World Wars. He had not the faintest intention of saddling the United States with a monarch, any more than had his ancestor John Adams (who, nevertheless, had been accused of just such a design): in America, a royal house would have been an unnatural and untenable imposition.

Little on America's Politics. Eliot having written next to nothing about America's practical politics, it is unnecessary here to go farther into his American views, except to remark in passing that he entertained a low opinion of Franklin Roosevelt and a good opinion of the elder Senator Robert Taft. He sympathized strongly with the group called the Southern Agrarians, and among them was well acquainted with Allen Tate, a frequent contributor to *The Criterion*; he had been influenced by the conservative political convictions of Irving Babbitt (his Harvard mentor) and Paul Elmer More, the chief humanist critics; he shared their misgivings as to the tendencies of the American democracy, but proposed no alteration of the constitutional framework; so far as he touched upon American remedies, his hope lay in the restoration of learning -- a subject he discussed at some length in a series of lectures at the University of Chicago during 1950. (These "Aims of Education" lectures are included in his collection *To Criticize the Critic*.)

A journal published by the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, *Measure*, published Eliot's lectures on education shortly after their delivery. Robert Hutchins, then chancellor of the University of Chicago, published in a following number of *Measure* a rather sharp rejoinder, in which Hutchins said, among other things, that "the only difference between Edmund Burke and T.S. Eliot is that Eliot is a democrat and Burke was not." When next in Chicago, Eliot found himself at a party in his honor with Robert Hutchins as a guest. Seeking Hutchins out, Eliot inquired of him, in his accustomed very civil manner, "Dr. Hutchins, I am grateful for your trouble in commenting upon my lectures on education; but I am puzzled by your remark about Burke and me. I never have called myself a democrat; and I suppose that Burke in his age, was more of a democrat than I am in my age. So could you tell me what you meant?"

"But Mr. Hutchins turned his back and walked away. Why did he do that, Dr. Kirk?"

"Because he never had read Burke," I replied. "Hutchins once signed his name to an article attacking Burke that was published in *The Thomist*; but the article was written entirely by someone else; and that is all that Hutchins knows about Burke. You had unveiled his abysmal ignorance of much."

Like many other people in universities, Robert Hutchins was an egalitarian democrat in theory and an exacting autocrat in practice. Eliot had a talent for vexing such people.

Consistent Tory. As for English politics, Eliot was a consistent Tory, rather than a regular Conservative. (The two partisan labels are not identical: Disraeli thought of changing the party's name back to Tory, after Peel had made it the Conservative party; but Metternich, in exile, dissuaded Disraeli.) Toryism means loyalty to King and Church; the Tories are bound up with the Church of England -- and, at least in times past, with the squirearchy, the smaller landed proprietors. So it was with Eliot: he had declared himself a royalist (though, for that matter, nine out of ten English subjects approve of the royal family); he was a most devout communicant of the Church of England and for some years a churchwarden in London; and he believed that the class of the old county families of England supplied the nation with leaders, in many walks of life, who ought not be supplanted by an elite, an alleged meritocracy.

Yet the political thinkers and leaders he most admired included the great Whig Edmund Burke -- whose name appears more frequently in Eliot's lectures after, on his decision, Faber and Faber published my book *The Conservative Mind*. Both in his early essay on Charles Whibley and his late lecture on the literature of politics, Eliot comments on four political writers, masters of literary style, who clearly have influenced his own views: Bolingbroke, Burke, Coleridge, and Disraeli. (In his essay on Whibley, he mentions also Lord Halifax.) Eliot's political thought, in considerable part, is descended from those great conservatives; it more nearly approximates that of Coleridge, whom Eliot recognizes as "a man of my own type."

Conservative Hollow Man. So there is nothing very exotic about Eliot's political principles: they are bound up with English history, the English constitution, and the great divines of the Church of England. Those very principles dissuaded him from praising the Conservative Party of his day. In June 1929, when MacDonald and Labour won the general election, forcing out of office Baldwin's Conservative government (even though the Conservatives had obtained a plurality of the popular vote) Eliot found that the new Lib-Lab cabinet had not one new idea among them. What might be done, in an hour when fascists and communists grew in influence among the intellectuals and among the mass of voters? He wrote in *The Criterion*:

This is of course a great opportunity -- for the Conservative Party, an opportunity which we are quite sure it will fail to seize. It is the opportunity of thinking in leisure, and of appreciating the efforts of private persons who have committed some thinking already. The Labour Party is a capitalist party in the sense that it is living on the reputation of thinking done by the Fabians of a generation ago....The Conservative Party has a great opportunity in the fact that within the memory of no living man under sixty, has it acknowledged any contact with intelligence. It has, what no other political party at present

enjoys, a complete mental vacuum: a vacancy that might be filled with anything, even with something valuable.

The leaders of the Conservatives were Hollow Men. Eliot feared that the political and social institutions of Britain were giving way; that feeble politicians, belligerent trade unions, a cumbersome bureaucracy, an apathetic public, a Church that no longer held meaning for most English people, an obsession with getting and spending -- these phenomena and circumstances were eroding irrevocably the England that Eliot had come to love. For the most part, Eliot's vaticinations would be justified by subsequent events.

Seeking to Retain a Humane Society. Like my friend Wilhelm R othou, ladies and gentlemen, and do likewise. You will find therein, for one thing, a demolition of Karl Mannheim's proposals for a planned society -- indeed, for universal planning. "For one thing to avoid is a *universalized* planning," Eliot writes; "one thing to ascertain is the limits of the plannable."

Probably Eliot would have said, if asked, that the most important passage in this last slim book of his is one concerned with the dependence of our culture, or of any culture, upon religious belief. Here is that passage, in part:

I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian Faith. And I am convinced of that, not merely because I am a Christian myself, but as a student of social biology. If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes. Then you must start painfully again, and you cannot put on a new culture ready made. You must wait for the grass to grow to feed the sheep to give the wool out of which your new coat will be made. You must pass through many centuries of barbarism. We should not live to see the new culture, nor would our great-great-great-grandchildren; and if we did, not one of us would be happy in it.

Continued Decay. Since Eliot's death, many unhappy choices have been made in Britain, and the decay that he lamented has continued apace, in several ways -- though not in all. The deliberate lowering of intellectual standards in British schools and universities, and formal protestations of disbelief by eminent bishops and archbishops, have been among those dismaying phenomena. Yet it is not possible, Eliot instructs us, to measure the long-run influence of a poet or a philosopher. In the fullness of time, perhaps it will be found that Eliot sowed better than he knew, and that his political and cultural writings will endure along with his great poems and bear some fruit. We must be very patient, said Eliot, awaiting the dissolution liberalism and the recovery of tradition.

My friend Eliot did not expect to turn back the clock by any social or literary magic; nor did he fancy that we would be pleased by the result, even were it possible; for we all are creatures of the age into which we have been born. As he expressed this hard truth in "Little Gidding" --

*We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.*

Reading Eliot will not tell us how to balance the federal budget and reduce the national debt -- even though the poet of *The Waste Land* was a banker for some years. But his poetry tells us much about the human condition, in its splendor and its misery; and his prose

makes us acutely aware of the permanent things. I knew Eliot somewhat during his later years, and understand him better now that his ashes lie in the medieval church of East Coker. For, as Eliot wrote, also in "Little Gidding" --

*And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with the fire beyond the
language of the living.*

