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T.S. Eliot and Political Non-conformism: A Contextual Analysis of Eliot's Poetry and His Characterisation as a Conservative

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Abstract

The poet T.S. Eliot, in both scholarship and popular media, has long been characterised as a man of ideological conservatism and even Fascism. As a poet whose work, especially in the first half of the 20th century, was heavily influenced by the political and historical context surrounding him, Eliot's central ideology was far more nuanced than this consensus indicates. Through a close critical and comparative reading of the poems, 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock', 'Gerontion', 'Difficulties of a Statesman', and 'Triumphal March', Eliot's political non-conformism can be charted from the late 1910s to the early 1930s, a period in which Eliot created some of his most iconic works. Taking note of this trend of non-conformism, this paper finds that the true ideology of Eliot in the early 20th century was that of reactionism. In terms of Eliot's criticism of the liberal principle of self-determination, the paper finds that Eliot's nuanced critique of the negative effects the Treaty of Versailles had on the people of Europe was in part in reaction to the principle's contemporary popularity. Furthermore, the paper proposes that Eliot's perceived sympathy with Fascism stems from Eliot's reaction to a newly anti-Fascist shift in British public opinion in the 1930s. Overall, this paper proposes that Eliot has been thoroughly misrepresented as an icon of 20th-century Conservatism.

Introduction

There is a trend in both contemporary scholarship and popular publications to take for granted the political position of the poet T.S. Eliot – that is, the position of hard-line conservatism, and, at times, even fascism. These claims are often accompanied by, either implicitly or explicitly, an assumption of a singular, rightwards ‘shift’. This shift is usually positioned sometime around the close of the First World War. For example, many take Eliot’s staging of debates around European Fascism in *The Criterion* in the early 1930s as evidence for his sympathy with these views – indeed, even scholarship around Eliot’s unfinished ‘Coriolan’ sequence, written at the same time as these controversial articles, focuses mainly on the work’s fascist themes, and therefore Eliot’s own perceived Fascist sympathies.

This is perhaps made most explicit in the title of an article reviewing a biography of Eliot: ‘T.S. Eliot: Maverick Modernist to conservative Christian’.¹ Other articles less explicitly describe a radical shift in Eliot’s ideology – William Q Malcuit claims “Antiliberalism became...Eliot’s default political position,”² while a *New Yorker* article by Louis Menand holds the view that “[Eliot] came to hold political and religious views that were far to the right of most of his contemporaries.”³ Even publications ignoring the ‘shift’ narrative firmly agreed on Eliot’s conservatism – the *London Review of Books* implies it in an article titled ‘Nudge-Winking’: “It is not surprising, then, that Eliot...should at times be found looking on Fascism with qualified approval, or that he should have made some deplorably antisemitic comments. The problem with all such political strictures, however, is that conservatives do not regard their beliefs as political”⁴ with ‘conservatives’ indirectly referring to Eliot, and *The Guardian* claiming both that “He was...deeply disparaging about democracy”⁵ and “Eliot was far too clever a conservative to ally himself directly with Italian or German fascism.”⁶ Less popular sources, too, have accepted this view, with one article from *The Imaginative Conservative* simply titled ‘T.S. Eliot as a Conservative Mentor’.⁷

¹ A. Adams, ‘TS Eliot: Maverick modernist to conservative Christian,’ WhyNow Media, 28th June 2022.

² W.Q. Malcuit, ‘The Poetics of Political Failure; Eliot’s Antiliberalism in an American Context,’ *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 62, No. 1, March 2016.

³ L. Menand, ‘Practical Cat,’ *The New Yorker*, 12th September 2011.

⁴ T. Eagleton, ‘Nudge-Winking,’ *London Review of Books*, 19th September 2002.

⁵ K. Malik, ‘TS Eliot’s Waste Land was a barren place. But at least a spirit of optimism still prevailed,’ *The Guardian*, 30th October 2022.

⁶ R. Kaveney, ‘TS Eliot and the politics of culture,’ *The Guardian*, 28th April 2014.

⁷ R. Scruton, ‘TS Eliot as a Conservative Mentor,’ *The Imaginative Conservative*, November 2011.

While this consensus is, on the surface level, fairly accurate, it is also reductive. While it may be true that Eliot's views shifted to the right later in his life, these sources ignore a far more obvious character to Eliot's ideology – that of the radical reactionary. In *The Criterion*, April 1924, T.S. Eliot wrote of the critic T.E. Hulme as his personal ideal of the modern intellectual: “[Hulme was the] forerunner of a new attitude of mind, which should be the twentieth-century mind if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own. Hulme is classical, reactionary, and revolutionary; he is at the antipodes of the eclectic, tolerant, and democratic mind of the end of the last century.”⁸ This quote, in the years that followed, began increasingly to describe Eliot himself. One can extrapolate from this quotation that Eliot admired the attitude of the reactionary and the nonconformist – this paper proposes that Eliot did, in fact, embody this attitude in both literary and critical work, as his expressed political views continued to stray from the intellectual ‘norm’.

This paper analyses both Eliot's poetry and critical writing in historical and political contexts, revealing Eliot to be far more radical than the current consensus would believe. In order to establish this, the paper begins with a comparative analysis of two of Eliot's early poems: ‘Gerontion’ and ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’. The respective historical and political contexts of the poems produced a pronounced shift in style between the two – through which, this paper suggests, one begins to see a reactionary pattern forming in Eliot's work. Eliot's earlier poems are at times explicitly critical of popular early 20th-century principles such as self-determination; these criticisms, implicit and explicit, have often driven critics to cite the works out-of-context as being indicative of fascist or intolerant beliefs. However, by providing relevant news clippings and documents from the period, the paper demonstrates Eliot's attitude as one of insistent dissension rather than intolerance. The paper then moves on to discussing this pattern in more detail, including examples of Eliot's later poetry such as the unfinished ‘Coriolan’ sequence, and his critical work in *The Criterion*, paying particular attention to the way Eliot and his critics viewed his attitude towards Fascism. This paper considers the influence of popular social and political opinion on Eliot's early twentieth-century work, to re-open a discussion of what has been seen as a firmly established view of Eliot's ideology.

A Comparative Analysis of ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’ and ‘Gerontion’

⁸ T.S. Eliot, ‘A Commentary’, *The Criterion*, Faber & Faber, April 1924.

One of the earliest examples of Eliot as a reactionary is the marked difference between his pre-war and post-war poetry. In Eliot's pre-war poetry, he prizes intellectual liberalism and imagination, whereas post-war Eliot shifts towards grounded-ness, and directly criticises popular liberal ideas like European self-determination. 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock' is a reaction to antiquated poetic conventions: the poem is syntactically bold, its repeated, fragmented speeches and rambling metaphors contradicting poetic tradition (for which the poem was at the time heavily criticised.)⁹ The second poem, 'Gerontion', is also radical, but entirely different from 'Prufrock'. Where 'Prufrock' rambles, 'Gerontion' is brutally direct, and grounded in its imagery. The poem presents a criticism of post-war idealism and liberalism as Eliot makes barely disguised references to the Treaty of Versailles and Woodrow Wilson's ideal of self-determination for the people of Eastern and Central Europe. However, this example of reactionism is no less pronounced than in 'Prufrock', and the contrast between the two poems serves to highlight an underlying continuity in Eliot's ideology even as his poetry seems, on the surface, to metamorphose entirely.

Eliot wrote 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock' during his time at university, in 1911, before the First World War. The poem, eventually published in 1917, was radical for the time; reviews criticised a non-traditional approach in terms of form and structure. *Literary World* argued, "Mr Eliot could do finer work on traditional lines,"¹⁰ while the *New Statesman* stated, "Certainly much of what he writes is unrecognisable as poetry at present[.]"¹¹ This particular remark was supported by *The Times*' slightly patronising comment, "Mr Eliot's notion of poetry..."¹² The poem itself, considering content, as well as form, explores key ideas of liberalism: the freedom of the individual to self-actualise being the central conflict of the monologue.

In contrast, 'Gerontion', written in 1918 and published in 1920, differs from 'Prufrock' in both content and style. 'Gerontion' criticises popular ideas of self-determination and liberal attitudes in post-war Europe and shifts poetically to austerity (of metaphor and length). This poetic shift is important; it mirrors the shift in Eliot's ideology from liberalism to conservatism that critics have already agreed upon, providing a jumping-off point for the extrapolation of a further conservative trajectory.

⁹ 'Recent Verse,' *Literary World*, 83, 5 July 1917.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 'Shorter Notices,' *New Statesman*, 18 August 1917.

¹² Times Literary Supplement, 21 June 1917.

The shift in poetic style between ‘Prufrock’ and ‘Gerontion’ is immediately evident. Where in ‘Prufrock’ Eliot explores rhyme, repetition, and question, ‘Gerontion’ is as austere as its speaker. This can be seen even in the poem’s respective first lines: In ‘Prufrock’, the dynamic “Let us go, then, you and I” immediately encourages motion while ‘Gerontion’ is comparatively static in the opening statement “Here I am, an old man in a dry month”. Indeed, the motion of the text itself in the two poems creates contrast – in ‘Prufrock’, the text is almost self-perpetuating, with lines, ideas, and rhymes repeating over and over. In one section, Eliot plays with rhyme to evoke circular, constant motion. This can be seen in the creative use of rhyming couplets. One repetitive couplet is internalised within one line (““Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?””), while other more traditional couplets are placed in the middle of the stanza (as in the rhymes ‘stair/hair’ and ‘thin/chin/pin/thin’.) Even the use of rhyme itself in this section is repetitive, with the frenetic rhyme scheme ABBBCCCCBD.

The sequence of couplets beginning with “They will say...” is particularly circular in structure, enclosing a whole parenthetical sequence within the repeated word ‘thin’. Eliot’s narrator cannot make up his mind on what to return to or to move on from – he is in constant, frenetic motion. Repetition returns again and again, such as in the almost musical refrain of “there will be time” near the beginning of the poem. In fact, repetition like this is one of the poem’s greatest anchors – Prufrock is depicted through Eliot’s language as a man lost in ideas and motion, held to a recognisable ‘poetic form’ by Eliot’s anchoring repeated lines (such as ‘Do I dare,’ ‘In the room the women come and go,’ ‘There will be time,’ and ‘How should I presume.’) This can be contrasted with the static nature of the poem’s narrator.

‘Gerontion’ starts with a statement of stillness (as opposed to Prufrock’s dynamic “Let us go”) and this idea of the speaker as a static figure is perpetuated throughout the poem. This stillness can be most clearly seen when it is juxtaposed with the motion occurring around the speaker (the ‘windy spaces’, the ‘draughty house’, the ‘windy knob’.) The speaker himself ‘stiffens’ *among* a house of contrasting motion, through which bizarre figures are dynamized with verbs like ‘bow’, ‘turn’, and ‘shift’. Where ‘Prufrock’ is an exercise in moving through one’s surroundings, searching for meaning, ‘Gerontion’ observes an old man who acts as the sole static fixture in a world of chaotic and relentless motion.

The contrast between motion and stillness is clear in the two poems – in ‘Prufrock’, Eliot’s cat-like yellow fog combines ideas of

motion and openly fantastical imagery, both of which he excludes from the realist 'Gerontion'. Nature in 'Gerontion' is as static as its speaker, described in lists ("Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds"), whereas in 'Prufrock', the fog is *defined* by its motion ("The yellow fog...rubs its back...licked...lingered...slipped...made a sudden leap.") Furthermore, in 'Gerontion', Eliot shortens his clauses and uses caesura incredibly frequently. See, for example, stanza 4 of 'Gerontion', where Eliot divides three concurrent lines around a semicolon and two full stops, halting any sort of lyrical momentum in its tracks:

"Shifting the candles; Fräulein von Kulp
Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door. Vacant
shuttles
Weave the wind. I have no ghosts..."

The result of this abortion of momentum is a narrative that feels fragmented and slow – the poem seems to be moving behind the 'beat'. In 'Prufrock', Eliot interrupts himself with leading questions that serve to build on the momentum of the poem, whereas in 'Gerontion', ideas are simply cut off – often mid-line – and momentum is aborted.

Indeed, the use of questions in the two poems is another source of contrast. In 'Prufrock', the speaker is brimming with questions, while 'Gerontion' seems almost burnt out. The narrator of 'Gerontion's "dry brain in a dry season" carries a sense of infertility and intellectual drought – the speaker has only four questions to Prufrock's seventeen. Not only are questions in 'Prufrock' numerous, but they are used frequently in certain sections, creating dense chunks of question-filled text. (See, for example, the stanza that ends with two successive questions "And should I then presume?/And how should I begin?")

The broader contrast between the two poems in content and style becomes important when considering the poet himself. Here, Eliot's ideology shifts from urgent, liberal ideas of self-expression and self-actualisation in 'Prufrock' to cynicism, especially surrounding the post-war principle of self-determination in 'Gerontion'. Liberalism as an ideology, in terms of the focus on the individual, permeates 'Prufrock' in sections like the one above. Pre-war, *Prufrock* Eliot revolves around individual freedoms and desires, whereas post-war, *Gerontion* Eliot retroactively criticises this mode of thinking.

A Close Reading of 'Gerontion' in Relation to the Treaty of Versailles

Indeed, it is in ‘Gerontion’ that some of Eliot’s most nonconformist ideology shines through. The poem can be read without much strain as an extended criticism of the Treaty of Versailles and the ideal of self-determination lauded by most immediate post-war thinkers, such as the American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, who cited self-determination in an argument for further recognition of the African-American population. Self-determination in the Treaty of Versailles was one of American President Woodrow Wilson’s ideals for Europe, leading to the formation of ‘Frankenstein’ states like Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Poland – countries that combined disparate ethnic groups, especially in South-eastern Europe.¹³

A close reading of the poem is essential to understanding Eliot’s non-conformism here, to fully grasp the poetic shift this paper has detailed as reflective of Eliot’s radical reactionism. In the opening of the poem, Eliot’s attitude towards the state of post-war Europe is clearly one of disillusionment. The central conceit of the poem is the image of the “decayed house”, inhabited by an eclectic collection of residents (clearly an analogy for Europe as a continent made up of new states full of displaced individuals.) The origin of the “Jew squat[ting] on the windowsill” is confused: he was “spawned in...Antwerp”, “blistered in Brussels”, and “patched and peeled in London”. Eliot chooses his verbs carefully here to illustrate the Jew’s life as having been drawn across Europe in seemingly random lines, the passive recipient of continental whims, as he is passively “spawned”, “blistered”, and “peeled” by external forces.

It is Eliot’s implication that the post-war New European world has created this icon of displacement. Eliot mocks this, too, in his language, with his use of edgy plosives “**B**listered in **B**russels...**p**atched and **p**eeled” connoting disdain for the New European diaspora. This is not limited to the opening stanza but spread throughout the poem. In one stanza, Eliot addresses the supposedly muddled idea of internationalised Europe – a list of foreign names (“Hakagawa”, “Madame de Tornquist”, “Fräulein von Kulp”), originating from a vast geographical area, are forced into one small poetic space: the “decayed house.” There is a fascination in this image with the idea of Old Europe versus New Europe – “Hakagawa”, the East Asian foreign interloper in modern international relations, physically defers to the artistic culture of an older Europe: “bowing among the Titians”. Again, Eliot examines post-war Europe not through the popular, self-deterministic lens, but through one of confused surrealism.

¹³ L. Garcés, ‘The League of Nations’ Predicament in Southeastern Europe,’ *World Affairs*, Summer 1995, Vol. 158, No. 1.

This confusion climaxes in the penultimate stanza, where variety becomes a “wilderness” in the wake of the Treaty as the presumably European individuals “De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel” are forcibly uprooted and whirled beyond the constellations (specifically, “the circuit of the shuddering Bear”). Eliot’s deliberately violent word choices in these lines are disapproving – individuals are “whirled” and “fractured” rather than simply displaced. Eliot’s opinion is clear; he views the Treaty’s insistence on self-determination as a force of destruction, rather than a positive symbol of modern international relations. For an even more overt reference to Versailles, take the earlier section which refers to the negotiation of the Treaty. Eliot spells out the negotiation for the reader: in the line “these with a thousand small deliberations” Eliot imagines the negotiators ‘deliberating’ the articles and terms of the Treaty. These negotiators upset the Europeans affected by the Treaty by redesigning the international order¹⁴ (“excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled”) when the true violence of the war is over; Eliot articulates this as “the sense has cooled.” Eliot describes these negotiators as inciting upset with the introduction of “pungent sauces”, possibly referring to the post-war influx of foreign ethnic groups into new regions. The word “mirrors” is perhaps the most overt reference Eliot makes to Versailles, referring to the Hall of Mirrors where the Treaty was signed.

Returning to the idea of Eliot’s conservatism, many cite Eliot’s condemnation of ‘tolerance’ as evidence for a securely right-wing position – one critic claims: ‘In Eliot’s ideal society, tolerance is not seen as an especially good thing...Eliot was far too clever a conservative...’¹⁵ It is interesting to bring up here the deep empathy Eliot’s poem feels for the people of Eastern and Central Europe, particularly Germans being ‘punished’ for harm done – this seems almost the epitome of the ‘tolerance’ Eliot is seen to disapprove of.¹⁶ After all, Eliot’s criticism of the Treaty is not only ideological but emotional – ‘Gerontion’ taps into a sense of grief and loss felt by Europeans post-war with lines like “Tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.” This specific example is presumably in reference to German citizens suffering from the economic aftereffects of the Treaty on their country, the preceding “Virtues are forced upon us by our impudent crimes” suggestive of the reparative efforts made by penalising Germany in particular for damages done during the war.¹⁷ Loss in particular is given great focus in the poem, as

¹⁴ L. Garces, ‘The League of Nations’ Predicament in Southeastern Europe,’ p. 5.

¹⁵ R. Kaveney, ‘TS Eliot and the politics of culture,’ *The Guardian*, 28th April 2014.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ A.S. Hershey, ‘German Reparations,’ *The American Journal of International Law*, Jul. 1921, Vol. 15, No. 3.

Eliot's narrator laments both his loss of beauty and passion and all of his senses ("I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch.")

Small contradictions like this one between intolerance and empathy in Eliot's work seem to indicate less of a fixed ideological position, and instead a long-term effort to remain the model reactionary.

An Analysis of Contemporary Sources on the Post-WW I Principle of Self-determination

This sort of non-conformism can be seen when juxtaposing 'Gerontion's critical views of self-determination with common positive consensus at the time - an extract from *The Tablet*, December 1918, elevates the principle conspicuously: "Reduced to its final analysis the great war just closed was fought for the principle of self-determination."¹⁸ An issue of *The Baltimore Sun*, 16 Feb 1919, expresses universal approval for the principle: "Other statesmen also have remarked that the only safe and sane policy to follow for the future peace of the world is that of granting self-government to all peoples...That self-determination is a splendid thing, that a sound settlement of it is necessary for the future peace of the world, all agree."¹⁹

Before a more in-depth analysis, it is important to note that these two articles were published in America, and no doubt were at some level propaganda for Wilson's European political efforts. It is interesting to note how far Eliot's views diverge from these American papers even as an American immigrant – his criticism of the United States foreign policy in this situation implies a persistent cynical nonconformism in Eliot's views that would translate to his writing, both critical and literary.

The articles themselves, given their arguable status of American government propaganda, are fascinating for their glowing pictures of self-determination. *The Tablet* in particular revels in its assertion that "Self-determination triumphed, autocracy was defeated, the rule of the people won,"²⁰ framing the policy as an essential ingredient of modern democracy. Even the emphasis on 'self-determination' placed at the beginning of this tricolon frames *it*, above all else, as the purpose and victor of the 'Great War'. Perhaps the most interesting element of the text is the claim that "This country from its President down is pledged to

¹⁸ 'Self-Determination Week,' *The Tablet*, December 14, 1918.

¹⁹ *The Baltimore Sun*, 16 Feb 1919.

²⁰ Self-Determination Week,' *The Tablet*.

the dictum that nations have a right to govern themselves[.]”²¹ The text’s claim of a united American public in favour of self-determination is obviously contradicted in the American Eliot’s criticisms in ‘Gerontion’ discussed previously – Eliot is straying from the public consensus.

The extract from *The Baltimore Sun* is in many ways similar – but here, the opinion of the *British* public is introduced: “Lord Grey expressed the opinion of the British public in his statement that we shall struggle until...we have assured the free development...to their own genius of all the states, large and small[.]”²² Considering the nationality of Eliot, one could argue that by now Eliot saw himself as British, rather than American. In this case, Eliot’s nonconformism would be doubly confirmed in refusing to conform to the opinion of both British and American citizenry: “That self-determination is a splendid thing, that a sound settlement of it is necessary for the future peace of the world, all agree.”²³ In separating himself completely from this universal support of self-determination in ‘Gerontion’, Eliot demonstrates his reactionism.

Taking the caveat of American press bias into account, an alternative source can be referred to prove the popularity of self-determination. Below is an extract from W.E.B. Du Bois’ letter to Woodrow Wilson in 1918, using self-determination as an argument for acknowledging the fundamental rights of Black American citizens:

“Has this race not earned as much consideration as most of the smaller nations whose liberties and rights are to be safeguarded by international convention? In principle this is as much an international question as that of the Poles or the Yugo-Slaves who were comprised until recently within the Central Empires...”²⁴

W.E.B. Du Bois is an interesting figure to compare to Eliot – the two scholars are similarly regarded as titans in modern American thinking, but, as seen here, can come into intellectual conflict over major 20th-century issues. This letter touches several times on self-determination as a triumph of modern international relations, to argue its relevance to the American ‘race problem’. Du Bois looks at America as the international community in microcosm – if rights concerning “distinctive peoples” (such as the European “Poles [and] Yugoslavs”)²⁵

²¹ Ibid.

²² *The Baltimore Sun*, 16 Feb 1919.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, Letter to President Woodrow Wilson, November 1918.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

were a priority of American foreign policy, why should America not act on this principle domestically? All this to say, Du Bois' exemplification of self-determination suggests that he approved of the principle as an icon of liberal American thinking – it is, therefore, clear to observe Eliot's 'Gerontion' as the reactionary naysayer in response.

The Presentation of Fascism in Eliot's Critical Work and the Poems 'Triumphal March' and 'Difficulties of a Statesman'

An alternative example of Eliot's reactionism is his unpublished sequence of poems, titled 'Coriolan', written around the year 1931. 'Coriolan' contains two complete poems: 'Triumphal March' and 'Difficulties of a Statesman'. Both poems engage closely with fascist trappings and ideals, just as Fascism was beginning to become a source of wider political anxiety. Eliot courted the ideology in his poetry and in *The Criterion* – in 'Coriolan' it takes the form of mocking both a) 'communist' unity and groupthink and b) the League of Nations, as a body increasingly concerned in the 1930s with combatting rising fascist regimes in Central Europe. In fact, a contemporary *Foreign Affairs* article posited that 'Germany is under the influence of Hitler's revolutionary movement, Italy under that of the Fascist revolution... The more abnormal the situation of the chief members of the League, the more difficult it is for the League to function'²⁶

Some may claim this shift is not reactionary, and simply indicative of a change in personal ideologies; it is relevant here to point to Eliot's writing in the late 1920s concerning the rise of Fascism, which in this period became briefly popular among the Western intelligentsia:²⁷ Eliot himself stated that H.G. Wells and Wyndham Lewis were at the time inclining 'in the direction of some kind of fascism.'²⁸ In 'The Rise and Fall of British Fascism: Sir Oswald Mosely and the British Union of Fascists', Bret Rubin states: "In the late 1920s... fascism was often admired by the public... many pointed to emerging autocracies in Italy and Germany as powerful new examples of effective modern government."²⁹ Eliot criticised this trend in his *Criterion* article 'The Literature of Fascism': "I cannot share enthusiastically in this vigorous repudiation of 'democracy'... how can we, out of the materials at hand,

²⁶ E. Beneš, 'The League of Nations: Successes and Failures,' *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 1932, Vol. 11, No. 1.

²⁷ B. Rubin, "The Rise and Fall of British Fascism: Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists," *Intersections*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Autumn 2010.

²⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'A Commentary,' *The Criterion*, April 1929.

²⁹ B. Rubin, "The Rise and Fall of British Fascism: Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists."

build a new structure in which democracy can live?”³⁰ The article clearly demonstrates that Eliot has not, in fact, by the late 1920s, begun to shift rightwards towards authoritarian fascism as some may claim, but instead puts forward a strong defence of the democratic idea. Even in isolation, this article is somewhat non-conformist in Eliot’s anti-establishment desire to ‘build a new structure in which democracy can live.’³¹ However, what is most important in ‘The Literature of Fascism’ is the evidence it gives against the claim that the ‘Coriolan’ sequence was extrapolated from Eliot’s growing enthusiasm for Fascism as an ideology. In fact, the opposite is proven to be true – ‘Coriolan’ can therefore be maintained as a reactionary sequence, as Eliot’s perceived shift towards Fascism is underpinned by a far more influential shift: that of British public opinion.

In 1933, *The Guardian* published an article reading, “This year the school has met under the shadow of an international attack upon Liberalism more widespread and more dangerous than any since the war... To speak of a general breakdown of democracy is equivalent to saying that the free spirit of man has broken down. World Fascism is an unthinkable nightmare.”³² Eliot’s ‘Coriolan’ indeed contradicts early twentieth-century Liberal values, especially in ‘Difficulties of a Statesman’s’ blatant criticism of the peace-keeping body, the League of Nations. This can be most clearly seen in a section of the poem criticising the bureaucracy of the League, which lists exhaustively its comedic number of committees (Eliot lists the word six times in this short section.)

The criticism of the League of Nations Eliot makes in this section of the poem is multifaceted. He conveys absurdity through the repetition of bureaucratic language: “the consultative councils, the standing committees/committees and sub-committees.” Eliot is clearly mocking the League’s inefficient internal structure, which consisted of several humanitarian committees and commissions advising on areas like public health (“The Provisional Health Committee of the League has been called to the aid of the Opium Advisory Committee...³³) whose expansive work is criticised here as being inefficiently handled by the League’s small secretariat, in Eliot’s sly assertion that “One secretary will do for several committees.” Eliot uses this technique again in his repetition of “A commission is appointed,” perhaps to criticise the

³⁰ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Literature of Fascism,’ *The Criterion*, December 1928.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *The Guardian*, 1933.

³³ ‘Noxious Drugs and The League of Nations,’ *The British Medical Journal*, May 6, 1922, Vol. 1, pp. 728-729.

inefficiency of an organisation concerned more with the language of diplomacy than the practice of it. Eliot mocks the League not only in poetic content but also in structure. In the phrase “consultative councils”, Eliot’s repeated c’s and t’s create a soundscape of over-complication, almost reflecting the League’s own growing impotence due to its cumbersome internal structure in the 1930s. More interesting than this general structural criticism, however, is Eliot’s controversial attitude towards the League as a peacekeeping body: “A commission is appointed/to confer with a Volscian commission/About perpetual peace.” The tone is, again, mocking. Eliot (similarly to the technique used in ‘Gerontion’) uses the plosives in “perpetual peace” to criticise the idea. Eliot’s cynicism towards what he called the modern ‘tolerant’ system is clear.

The second poem in the ‘Coriolan’ sequence, ‘Triumphal March’, is far more concerned with visually Fascist trappings than the ideological alignment seen in ‘Difficulties of a Statesman’, where Eliot simply pitted himself against the ‘Liberal’ League of Nations. In ‘The Literary and Political Hinterland of T.S. Eliot’s *Coriolan*’, Steven Matthews emphasises the relevance of Ancient Rome as an icon of 20th century Fascism: “The ‘Authority and Tradition’ emanating from Rome through to the present day of the early 1930s had more unsettling implication at the point at which Eliot was writing the unfinished poems[.]”³⁴ Roman ‘Fascist’ iconography in the poem is anachronized, as Eliot lists confiscated German armaments from the Treaty of Versailles alongside ‘classical’ images:

“5,800,000 rifles and carbines,
102,000 machine guns,
28,000 trench mortars,
53,000 field and heavy guns,
...
Now they go up to the temple. Then the sacrifice.
Now come the virgins bearing urns...”

In this poem, the present becomes inextricable from the past as Eliot transforms his Roman protagonist into an anachronistic representation of the European Fascist dictator of the twentieth century. In fact, ‘Triumphal March’s anachronisms span the whole political spectrum, as Eliot uses the image of the faceless crowd to critique the near-blind unity Communism might espouse. Eliot uses the crowd’s

³⁴ S. Matthews, “‘You can see some eagles. And hear the trumpets’: The Literary and Political Hinterland of T.S. Eliot’s *Coriolan*,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Winter 2013.

unity as a political image in the lines ‘such a press of people/We hardly knew ourselves that day.’ This is repeated shortly after as Eliot’s speaker becomes uncaring of the difference between one large unit and a crowd made up of individuals in the line “So many waiting, how many waiting? what did it matter, on such a day?” Here, the Ego becomes obsolete, as the audience gives over to fusion. The crowd as individuals no longer ‘matter’ – in their mass and unity, individualism has been stripped and disregarded: “What did it matter?”

The Eliot in ‘Coriolan’ is the Eliot most fascinated by Fascism, at a global point of anxiety around it. A few years earlier, he had been the leading critic of the British intellectuals gripped by similar fascinations: “I cannot share enthusiastically in this vigorous repudiation of ‘democracy.’”³⁵ ‘Coriolan’ as an unpublished sequence is interesting from the snapshot viewpoint it gives the reader perhaps a less edited, more truthful Eliot. The poems are far more explicitly reactionary than ‘Prufrock’ was earlier, but are not essentially ‘different’ in their underlying ideology, as modern critics might claim. The poems simply reflect what has recurred throughout all of Eliot’s work, which he aptly describes himself in ‘The Literature of Fascism’: “This is one point on which intellectuals and populace, reactionaries and communists, the million-press and the revolutionary sheet, are more and more inclined to agree; and the danger is that when everyone agrees, we shall all get something worse than what we have already.”³⁶ Eliot has become here what he so admired in fellow critic T.E. Hulme: “classical, reactionary, and revolutionary.”³⁷ He, too, pushed himself continually to the “antipodes” of public opinion, as the ultimate twentieth-century contrarian.

Conclusion

Political undertones (and overtones) in T.S. Eliot’s early poetry have often driven critics to cite the works out-of-context as being indicative of fascist or ‘intolerant’ beliefs. However, through close literary analysis, examining Eliot’s poetry in literary and political contexts, Eliot’s ideology can be seen as far more nuanced than the modern consensus of simple conservatism. One marked piece of evidence for Eliot’s conservatism is his criticism of self-determination (as seen in ‘Gerontion’), which has been seen as both antiquated and intolerant. However, instead of conservatism, this critique can be seen to stem from both Eliot’s reaction to the principle’s widespread popularity

³⁵ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Literature of Fascism’

³⁶ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Literature of Fascism’

³⁷ T.S. Eliot, T.S. Eliot, ‘A Commentary,’ *The Criterion*, April 1924.

(among both popular society and fellow American intellectuals like Du Bois) and a keen recognition of the negative emotional and cultural effects the principle wrought on Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly, through close attention to shifts in public opinion during the early 1930s and Eliot's own telling critical work, one can see that what has long been labelled Eliot's 'fascination with Fascism' in reality reflected Eliot's non-conformist reaction to a newly anti-Fascist shift in British public opinion in the 1930s. These examples serve to highlight how easy it has been for both scholarship and popular media to assign to Eliot the label of 'Conservative', when 'intellectual non-conformist' would be far more accurate. Not only is it reductive to label Eliot as a symbol of 20th-century Conservatism, but patently untrue; Eliot consistently prioritised *radicalism* in his critical and poetic work throughout the early 20th century, using writing as a mechanism through which to productively challenge the public consensus. Through provoking ideological controversy, Eliot's work continues to inspire new political debate and discourse, allowing us as readers to fulfil the role of the reactionary.

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