The Poet and His Politics: On *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot* by William M. Chace, and *The Real Foundations: Literature and Social Change* by David Craig

To speak dispassionately about so delicate a subject as the “political identities” of Pound and Eliot is, even 30 years after World War II, almost impossible. In 1972 Pound was denied the Emerson-Thoreau medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters on the grounds that, despite the genius of his poetry, his political and social views made it impossible to honor him with a humanistic award. Such a judgment may strike us as unnecessarily harsh, perhaps even quaintly absurd. But then we remember that on the other side of the fence we have voices like Sister Bernetta Quinn’s, an established Pound scholar who declared in her recent book, with reference to the poet’s notorious Rome broadcasts of 1941–43, “Pound attacked the Roosevelt administration, somewhat in the manner that more recent critics have assailed the policies of Johnson and Nixon”—an extraordinary statement that must send shivers down the spine of those of us who are alive today because Roosevelt fortunately did not listen to the likes of Ezra Pound.

Eliot’s political pronouncements have given rise to similar—if less violent—controversy. In an especially interesting chapter of *The Real Foundations, Literature and Social Change*, David Craig argues that the so-called trenchant satire of *The Waste Land* is frequently no more than nasty sarcasm, directed against lower-class persons who happen to need false teeth, eat food from tin cans, or, like “the young man carbuncular” who is only “A small house agent’s clerk,” suffer from acne. Far from being the “centrally wise diagnosis of ‘mass civilization’ and its ills” it is
generally claimed to be, The Waste Land, Craig suggests, is “primitivist” in its rejection of modern industrial society, a “defeatist” poem that “projects an almost despairing personal depression in the guise of an impersonal picture society.” Yet others—notably Russell Kirk and the makers of a recent BBC television special on Eliot, continue to view the poet as a gentle, kind, humane Christian, just short of being a saint, a voice in the wilderness preaching to the Philistines.

In such an emotionally charged atmosphere, the temptation is to do what the Bollingen Prize Committee did when it made its now notorious award to Pound for the Pisan Cantos in 1949—namely to insist that a man’s poetry is not to be judged by his politics. Thus in his well known study of the Cantos, Clark Emery says, “seen in their proper perspective in strict terms of literary criticism [Pound’s Fascist sympathies] are of minor importance. The critical evaluation of The Faerie Queene or of Paradise Lost does not hinge upon the anti-Catholicism or anti-monarchism of their authors.”

It is the great merit of William M. Chace’s book that he refuses to take this way out. Convinced that whatever one’s own political persuasions, one cannot understand the poetry of Pound and Eliot—both intensely political writers—without coming to terms with their political ideas, Chace proceeds to give us the most balanced, fair-minded, lucid exposition we have to date of these ideas, neatly avoiding the Scylla of polemic attack and the Charybdis of partisan whitewash. The Political Identities is, moreover, a model of conciseness: each poet gets roughly 100 pages, and within that short span Chace shows clearly what forces attracted both poets toward varieties of fascism, and what inconsistencies and sometimes sheer ignorance of fact colored their political thinking.
Thus Chace places the whole matter in a new perspective. His central argument is that Pound and Eliot were neither “uniquely political” nor “uniquely unwise in their views,” which were simply an extreme version of the views held by a large number of their contemporaries. Their rejection of democracy begins in their family situation, which Chace defines, especially in Pound’s case, as “nouveau-poor: refined, with pretensions of gentility, with a memory of rather better times, with little room for social mobility” and a consequent distrust of the “strangers”—particularly the Jews—who were displacing people like themselves “who could trace their American lineage back to the early years of the Republic.”

If family background is one major factor, a second is the literary milieu of high decadence into which Pound and Eliot were born. Their partisan activities, Chace argues, must be viewed “as an awkward emergence from the Symbolist quarantine,” the esthetic movement’s dictum that “the poet must shut his door to the world of streets and speeches.” Both Pound and Eliot began by insisting on the autonomy of poetry only to discover that the price the artist paid for divorcing his poetics from ethics was a painful isolation from his society. Both accordingly soon modified the purist stance of their celebrated early criticism and moved toward the position that poets should be the “unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

In Pound’s case the political doctrine was formulated as early as Patria Mia (1912), whose basic assumptions are two: 1) art is the best index of a nation’s strength, and 2) although nature is bountiful, modern industrial democracy weakens that synthesis of human resources in which alone art can flourish. At age 27, then, Pound already regarded the financial inequity that is inherent in capitalist
democracy as the cancer in the body of modern civilization and the root of human decay.

For a time, indeed, he flirted with Marxism, but, as Chace makes clear, Pound could never stomach an ideology that glorified the worker and advocated the overthrow of the class system, for by instinct he despised the masses and wanted to be a free individual with entrepreneurial literary energies that would transform the consciousness of the nation. If capitalism per se could not, then, be considered *The Enemy*, the answer was to put the blame on individual capitalists: the usurious Jewish financiers who had destroyed the very fabric of Jeffersonian Democracy. From this initial deep-seated prejudice against the Rothschilds, the “Jewspapers” and the New Deal of “Franklin Finklestein Roosevelt,” it was only a perfectly logical step to the hero-worship of Mussolini, that charismatic leader who would ostensibly provide the order and stability within which the artist could flourish. And soon Pound was declaring that history had been “keenly analyzed” in *Mein Kampf*.

The evolution of Eliot’s political thought is similar. Like Pound’s, Eliot’s politics is rooted in his own personal situation, his sense of alienation at post-war chaos and the seeming collapse of Western civilization. His notorious declaration of 1928 that his position was “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion” is seen by Chace, quite rightly I think, as a wholly negative statement: Eliot’s “classicism” was in fact a thinly disguised urge to withdraw from a distasteful democracy into a private universe of his own making, and his Anglo-Catholicism is best understood as a means of separating oneself from the masses. “The Church,” in Chace’s words, “signified not union, but separation,” and “Between the isolated Church . . . and the pagan world without, no contact exists or should exist.”
Accordingly—and here Eliot parts company with Pound—no secular ideology could ever be acceptable. Eliot’s aim was not to solve social problems but to show “how men failed to achieve a society in which certain religious values could be appreciated.”

The result of such a stance was *After Strange Gods* (1933), that embarrassing book Eliot chose not to reprint, in which he argued that in a proper society, “The population should be homogeneous . . . reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.” Criticism, then, became more and more the search for heretics, such as that “parvenu scientist” Freud or Karl Marx, the “Jewish economist” who had “inverted Hegel.” Ultimately Eliot could only retreat into his imaginary Christian society, a Utopia in which somehow the common people would let themselves be guided by the “Clerisy” of moral and ethical leaders as well as by the newly revived strong monastic orders.

What lesson can we draw from all this? David Craig would reply that it is only writers on the Left like Brecht and Sartre who have given us a convincing and realistic picture of modern industrial society. “The great novelist may not be interested in the social urgings behind ‘equality’ and the planning that it entails, but that doesn’t free him from the duty to present fairly—which in terms of his particular art means a *fully dramatic* treatment—the sorts of situation in which the ideas he is canvassing . . . actually arose.”

Craig’s attack on *The Waste Land* is impressive, but if Chace’s book teaches us anything it is that “The step from being authorities in poetry and criticism to thinking well of authoritarianism is the most important step Pound and Eliot took.”
It is almost hopelessly difficult for the poetic imagination to engage the intellectual complexity and deep contradictions of our political world. “Entry into the world of profound political consequence,” he concludes, “is as difficult for today’s liberal as it was for Pound and Eliot,” and indeed, “it is foolish to look to most of the writers of our time for political wisdom.”

But Chace’s argument that the political vision of both poets everywhere informs their poetic vision is less convincing. For if this political vision is misguided, inhumane, confused and sometimes downright evil, how can the poetry which it informs be, as Chace all along assumes it is, poetry of the first order?

Eliot’s poetry, in this respect, presents fewer problems than does Pound’s. Yeats’ shrewd observation that as “a New England Protestant by descent, there is little self-surrender in his [Eliot’s] personal relation to God and the soul,” is not cited by Chace but it could serve as an epigraph to his critique of Eliot’s later poetry. He considers 1930 a kind of turning point, arguing that in “Ash Wednesday,” the struggle toward the spiritual life is ultimately subordinated to a tired Olympian disdain for “those who walk among noise and deny the voice.” Moreover Chace questions Eliot’s declared intent of turning the theater into a communal enterprise: “His plays, the superficial appearance of Murder in the Cathedral notwithstanding, do not revive the spirit and the appeal of an Everyman. Still less do they cultivate, in the manner of a Shakespeare or even a Yeats, the latent aspirations, nationalistic or otherwise, of the people who might be watching them. They are a severely restricted drama.”

Here Chace puts his finger on precisely what is wrong with what is to my mind one of the most overrated plays of the century, Murder in the Cathedral. He
argues convincingly that the women of Canterbury who acts as chorus are presented as a lower order of being, capable of faith but not true perception: “For us, the poor there is no action, / But only to wait and to witness.” The capacity for religious understanding and salvation is, in other words, “subtly linked with social standing.” By the time of Four Quartets (1941), Eliot had swept away all ideology and politics from serious discussion. The world is pure folly devoid of sense. Depending on one’s point of view, Four Quartets is therefore the most Christian and perfect of modern poems, or an inert, static poem of withdrawal. Chace writes, “The cruel paradox of Four Quartets stems from the poet’s stubborn reliance upon words as the single instrument for evoking and substantiating faith, coupled with an equally strong conviction on his part that in this world, an un-Christian world doomed to internal decay, no labor and no zeal can matter very much.”

If one expects the later pseudo-comedies, which do little to redeem the poet’s early reputation, the rest, in Eliot’s case, is silence. Political withdrawal and poetic isolation do go hand in hand. Pound’s poetry is, however, quite another matter, and here I think Chace’s case is weaker. He argues that the Cantos are problematic because “Pound’s matter is often ill-served by his form.” Pound yearns for an all-encompassing ordering principle, yet his poetics demands a “phalanx of particulars,” discrete images and ideograms paratactically related and hence defying the very order the poet defines so eloquently in, say, Canto XIII: “If a man have not order within him / He can not spread order about him.” This is a very good point and Chace also makes clear that although Pound is always yearning for order, his politics, like his poetry, is built upon the isolation of particulars—individual scapegoats such as Metevsky or heroes such as Van Burten. But then Chace goes
on to suggest that the most successful cantos are those like XXXIII, in which a series of instructional examples from history neatly illustrate the central theme: that money is misused by bankers and monopolists. True, here “aesthetic form and didactic intent are united,” but I am not at all sure that this is a good thing. On the contrary I would argue that the best cantos are not those that provide clear-cut illustrations of Pound’s political ideas, but precisely the more disorderly ones like the first Pisan Canto (LXXIV). For Pound, unlike Eliot, is not a consistent poet. As early as “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” (1920), we find the most banal diatribes against war (“There died a myriad / And of the best . . . for an old bitch gone in the teeth, / For a botched civilization”) side by side with the charming, witty satire of “Yeux Glauques” and of that epitome of the “pickled foetuses” of the 90s, Monsieur Verog.

The truth is that Pound never did escape from the Decadent quarantine that Chace speaks of. His work is the living embodiment of dissociation of sensibility. For there are only two things that Pound really knew about: the world of art and the world of his own life. When he writes of Uncle William (Yeats) “dawdling around Notre Dame” or of Wyndham Lewis “out in the privvy” he is incomparable. When, on the other hand, he expounds on the noble currency reforms made by the Bürgomeister of Wörgl in the Tyrol he is, quite aside from being morally offensive, just plain silly.

Silliest of all, to my mind, are the great set pieces like “Pull down thy vanity . . .” (LXXXI), “Compleint, compleynt . . .” (XXX), and especially the famous Usura Canto (XLV). At the risk of offending all Pound devotees, I suggest that Canto XLV, that well worn anthology piece, is a very bad poem. Critics have raved about its metrical brilliance and the power of its lyrical condemnation of Usura, and even
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Thus, although Chace’s argument about the interrelationship of politics and poetry is entirely valid in the case of most poets, including Eliot, try as he may he cannot quite fit Pound into his scheme. For as Williams, Pound’s lifetime friend, put it, “I could never take [Pound] as a steady diet. Never. He was often brilliant but an ass.”
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