

# Must England's Beauty Perish?: The Literary Ruralism of the *Criterion*

Jeremy Diaper

From 1922-1939 T. S. Eliot edited the *Criterion*, a literary review which published a vast amount of essays and book reviews alongside Eliot's own Commentaries. The subject matter of its contents was significantly varied, ranging from Freud to the French Revolution, but often included discussion of philosophy, politics, classicism and religion. The general remit of the *Criterion*, then, as Eliot himself postulated, 'cannot be reduced to a creed of numbered capitals' (cited in Read, 20).

In the past forty years or so, the *Criterion* has been examined by a number of critics. John D. Margolis, for example, uses the *Criterion* to analyse Eliot's literary career and 'the evolution of his interests' (xiv). Margolis's focus remains on exploring Eliot's intellectual and literary growth, rather than on the *Criterion* intrinsically. Elsewhere, Jason Harding concentrates his attention primarily on the *Criterion*'s 'milieu of inter-war literary journalism' (2). Harding suggests that the nature of literary journalism, as opposed to book-publication, enabled Eliot to 'address and even, upon occasions, to shape the agenda of inter-war cultural criticism' (2). Other critics have been more comprehensive in their investigation of the *Criterion*. For instance, Agha Shahid Ali highlights how the decisions Eliot made as editor 'reveal his priorities' (12). Ali establishes that examining 'the contents of a journal are the only way of determining these priorities', and thus he scrutinizes the *Criterion* in considerable detail.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of previous investigations of the *Criterion*, however, have either sought to elucidate Eliot's role and influence as editor, or his evolution as a poet and literary critic. Undoubtedly, as Margolis points out, 'The personal imprint of Eliot's editorship is everywhere apparent' (35), and Eliot himself conceded as much when looking back upon his time as editor in the last issue of the *Criterion*: 'I am convinced that [*The Criterion*] is not the kind of review which can be taken up and continued by one editor after another. Another man might make something better of it, but he would have to make something very different' (C18, 269). Yet, in focusing almost exclusively on what the *Criterion* reveals about Eliot's own development and concerns, critics have disregarded some of the most significant dimensions of the literary review.

Thus, in this particular investigation of the *Criterion*, I shall turn attention away from its editor, and provide an examination of the literary ruralism present within its pages. In *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988), Valentine Cunningham notes that 'The *Criterion* became a kind of house journal for the spokesmen of post-war British ruralism: Williamson himself, H. J. Massingham, H. M. Tomlinson, G. M. Trevelyan, John Betjeman and T. F. Powys' (231). Despite Cunningham's percipient observation, any discussion of the literary review's rural concerns has been centred on T. S. Eliot's own opinions and perspectives. In *Romantic Moderns* (2010), for example, Alexandra Harris acknowledges that: 'Eliot... used the editorial pages in his journal, the *Criterion*, to comment provocatively on rural matters' (184). Most notably, T. S. Eliot's ruralist sensibility has been discussed extensively by Steve Ellis in *The English Eliot* (1991), which places the *Four Quartets* in the context of the 'landscape polemics' of the 1930-40s (93). Beyond a few brief citations of Eliot's Commentaries, though, the ruralism of the *Criterion* is entirely neglected. Even in my

own previous study of the *Criterion* where I touched upon the issue of ruralism, my focus was predominantly on its agricultural content in the specific context of organic husbandry in the 1930s-40s.<sup>ii</sup>

My examination in this article will focus on two ‘literary’ aspects of the *Criterion*. I shall consider the short stories and prose essays which engaged thematically with ruralism alongside the ‘Books of the Quarter’ section in which rural books were reviewed. In my use of the terms ‘rural’ and ‘ruralism’ throughout this essay, I am referring specifically to the presentation of rural England which frequently featured in a range of literature in the 1920s-40s. In this sense the ‘rural’ constitutes the villages, country towns, byroads, hedges, fields and other quintessentially aesthetic features of the English countryside. It also includes the countryside as a means for leisure and enjoyment, coupled with the growing concerns surrounding ribbon development and urban sprawl. Accordingly, I differ from previous historical accounts which have used the term ‘rural’ as synonymous with ‘agriculture’.

By exploring the texts in the *Criterion* which focused on the countryside, rather than agriculture and farming *per se*, I hope to illustrate how the journal reshapes our comprehension of the rural literature produced in the inter-war years. Furthermore, I shall also attempt to revise the previous critical perception of Eliot’s journal. Contrary to the sustained belief that its content became increasingly wearisome and uninspiring in the 1930s, I shall illustrate that there was an animated consideration of rural issues within its pages.

The familiar perception of the English countryside as a rural idyll is one which stems back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Martin Wiener has previously posited, it was from an increasing sense of unease surrounding industrialism and the rapid expansion of cities that the idealized notion of the rustic

emerged (47).<sup>iii</sup> By the late nineteenth century a ‘deep vein of rural nostalgia’ had become entrenched within the artistic sensibility (Bradbury, 46). In fact, even several decades of bleak agricultural depression and rural deterioration could not halt the bucolicism which would continue to flourish past the Second World War. From Batsford’s ‘Face of Britain’ series to the numerous volumes published by The Pilgrim’s Library, the idyllic depiction of rural England appeared in a wealth of literature, paintings and broadcasts.

In particular, there was a wave of writers who focused on the defining facets of village life. The following passage from J. C. Squire’s introduction to Edmund Blunden’s *The Face of England* was typical: ‘...every Englishman who has had anything of a country childhood can find his own early villages, inns, churches, flowers, birds’ eggs, gipsies, woodland fires, streams, ponds, fish, cattle...’ (vii).<sup>iv</sup> That these picturesque portraits of village life abounded in the literature of the 1920s-30s is, of course, well-established. However, the conspicuous presence of such rural literature in the *Criterion* has thus far been overlooked.

One of the earliest instances of such writing in the *Criterion* was Henry Williamson’s short story ‘The Village Inns’ published in 1928. ‘The Village Inns’ (which later appeared in *The Village Book* in 1930) offers a rustic depiction of the village of Georgeham and portrays friendly Saturday evenings spent drinking beer in the cosy and hospitable pub ‘The Rock House’. As the night draws on the mood becomes livelier and the regulars more boisterous, yet the convivial atmosphere remains. Indeed, a distinct sincerity is associated with an evening spent enjoying the ambiance of the village inn:

At nine o’clock the low-beamed room would be thick with men, their smoke and their dark clothes and their voices, the scrape and clump of iron-shod boots on the stone floor, and sudden laughter – real laughter, not the chuckles of subtle wit, but the bellows of plain humour. (C7, 135)

Williamson's representation of Georgeham – whose residents possess the 'natural courtesy and charm of the countryman' (130) – comes to embody the neighbourly and salubrious setting of rural England. T. F. Powys's short story entitled 'Gold' appeared not long after 'The Village Inns', in October 1929, and also painted a picture of reverent praise for simple country folk. Both of these stories by Powys and Williamson, then, should be seen alongside Francis Brett Young's *Portrait of a Village* (1937), C. Henry Warren's *England is a Village* (1940), and Edmund Blunden's *English Villages* (1941), as part of a continuous sequence of rural writings centred around the idealization of the village.

On first impressions the content of the *Criterion* might seem to reinforce the critical consensus regarding the journal and support Jed Esty's assertion in *A Shrinking Island* (2004):

T. S. Eliot's *Criterion* was among other things, the site of an unabashed school of nostalgic ruralists (including John Betjeman and T. F. Powys) who idealized the old green and sceptered isle. (42)

But, upon closer scrutiny of the *Criterion*, Esty's comment appears to be a rather sweeping generalization and one which requires critical consideration. By failing to elaborate upon this passing remark, Esty conveys an over-simplified impression that the journal's ruralism consisted merely of effusive nostalgia.

Of particular pertinence in this regard is *English Country Life in the Eighteenth Century* by Rosamond Bayne-Powell, which was reviewed in the *Criterion* in July 1935 by Charles Smyth. Bayne-Powell's book was, according to Smyth, a 'delicate and charming study' which described 'how the village lived, how it was administered, how it worked and amused itself, how it carried on the routine of everyday life' (C14, 657). In its glance back to rural life in a previous age, Bayne-Powell's book was in some ways characteristic of the period. It captured 'a pleasant

smiling rural England, full for the most part of prosperity and content' (Bayne-Powell, 4), and offered at length a charming depiction of England's rural splendour:

In the eighteenth century there was a feast of natural beauty, unspoiled by railways and factory chimneys. Quiet narrow roads wandered through woods and over commons. Forests, though they might have dwindled here and there owing to the demands of the iron smelters, often covered hundreds of acres. There were rolling downs, with clumps of broom and gorse, purple commons that stretched for many miles, lovely sea beaches, where the trees and flowers crept down to the sands, quiet and beautiful places, untouched by man and his hideous civilization. (ibid., 311)

At the same time, however, *English Country Life in the Eighteenth Century* differed significantly from much of the rural writing in this period. In direct contrast to the romanticized portraits of rural England, which waxed lyrical about village life and the traits of countrymen, Bayne-Powell sought to give a more matter-of-fact account of the way in which the countryside had changed since the eighteenth century. John Murray's advertisement for the book was eager to point out, therefore, that its objective was to examine 'how the village lived' but *without* 'the frills of artificial romance'.<sup>v</sup> Such was the prevalence of this 'artificial romance' that it even seeped into advertisements of the period. In a series of magazines in the late 1930s, for example, the Worthington brewery continued the idealized portrait of rural England within its advertising:

The men of the cities yearn for the things of the country... old turf, quiet valleys and abiding peace... To them in their canyons of stone and steel comes Worthington brewed in the age-long English tradition, redolent of the countryside, friendly, and shining clear as the English character itself.  
(*Illustrated London News* cited in Wiener, 76)

Whilst Worthington brewers traded off the well-worn clichés surrounding the 'character' of the countryman, Bayne-Powell dispelled many of these within the opening paragraph of her introduction: 'Countrymen, whether they were squires or peasants, farmers or parsons, were often brutal, boorish and ignorant' (ix). The *Criterion's* inclusion of *English Country Life in the Eighteenth Century* in its 'Books

of the Quarter' section, then, invites us to re-evaluate the previous assessments of the *Criterion* in the context of inter-war ruralism. It highlights that although saccharine reflections on the countryside were commonplace, there was a broader response to rural nostalgia. With reference to the popular publishers Batsford and Odhams, David Matless rightly asserted in *Landscape and Englishness* (1998) that 'it is perhaps too easy... to assume that such work was all of a nostalgic piece' and that even in 'self-consciously nostalgic literature we find variation' (64). Yet Bayne-Powell's book indicates that the 'variation' was more notable than even Matless has suggested.<sup>vi</sup> Through a re-evaluation of *The Criterion*, it will become clear that not all of the ruralist texts which featured in Eliot's journal looked through rose-tinted glasses towards the countryside: some actively sought to avoid the contemporary surge of idealization and provide a more "factual" account.

In contradistinction to Bayne-Powell's *English Country Life in the Eighteenth Century*, one of the most sentimental reflections upon the countryside in the 1930s was *The Face of England* by Edmund Blunden. This book was reviewed in the *Criterion* in January 1932, along with *London* by H. G. Corner and *The English Heritage Series*. Drawing comparison with another earlier book of sketches, entitled *England's Green and Pleasant Land*, the reviewer observed Blunden's early verse had suffered from being mawkish, and opined that in *The Face of England* this shortcoming emerged even more prominently: 'There is a sentimentality about Mr. Blunden's *Face of England* that is the tangible flaw in his early, and memorable, verses. But here instead of obtruding, slightly ominous, through a fine body, it is the body, and the inspiration of the book' (C11, 759). Tellingly, contrary to what Esty might lead us to believe, Blunden's nostalgic sentimentality was not met with approval: 'Mr. Blunden founds his sketches on happy memories; they are the

memories of a man of leisure in the country and the sugar accretions of the years render them unbearable to any sensitive palate' (759-60). By all accounts, then, Blunden's collection of sketches received a tepid review in the *Criterion*, and this indicates that Esty is misguided to imply the journal was merely the 'site of unabashed nostalgic ruralists'. The *Criterion* patently contained a wider variety of ruralist perspectives than has previously been acknowledged and this in turn affects our understanding of inter-war ruralism. At this stage it is worthwhile to consider further Blunden's text, as it points us towards other areas of dissimilarity within the rural literature of the period.

The central theme which recurs throughout *The Face of England* is that of the British landscape, and this is made apparent by J. C. Squire's introduction: 'this book might obviously have been written in another way, as a loving survey of the variety of English scenery...' (v). In many of Blunden's sketches there are detailed descriptions which outline the beauty of the countryside. Take, for example, the opening to 'The British School':

The meadows were white with rime-frost, the air was a canopy of paintings,  
purple and grey interpretations of what broad daylight calls the oak and sycamore,  
and a mysterious world just out of ascertainment let the sun hang suddenly on  
the bough of a tree... (24)

Throughout this particular sketch Blunden continues to portray vividly the picturesque nature of the English landscape with its 'constantly re-expressed treasure of roofs, and trees, and falling and rising grounds, grassland and ploughland...' (25). Of course, Blunden was not the only writer to associate 'Englishness' with the British landscape and it became a common trope in the work of rural writers of the 1930s. As John Stevenson lucidly summarizes: 'The landscape was the essential backdrop to many of the writings about the British character' (195).

Crucially, though, the *Criterion* reshapes our understanding of this commonly perceived relationship between Englishness and landscape. An examination of its pages reveals that whilst some *Criterion* contributors such as A. E. Housman endlessly eulogized the English scenery, other writers felt that the effects of excessive urbanization and industrialism had destroyed the British landscape on an almost irretrievable scale.<sup>vii</sup> D. H. Lawrence provides an interesting case in point. Lawrence's main association with the rural revivalism of this period is through Rolf Gardiner, who himself was connected with the rural networks of Eliot's journal. In October 1932, for example, Gardiner favourably reviewed Viscount Lymington's *Horn, Hoof and Corn* and perceived it as both 'far-sighted' and 'statesmanlike' (C12, 134). Nearly a decade before this review featured in the *Criterion*, Eliot had written to Gardiner to express interest in his journal *Youth* which, as David Ellis notes, visibly aspired towards the 'Lawrentian ideal' of 'harmony with nature' (308). From the years 1924 to 1928, Gardiner was in regular correspondence with Lawrence and referred to him as 'the torch bearer, the torch leader' of his adolescence (cited in Best, 14). According to Gardiner, Lawrence provided the main inspiration for his book *England Herself: Ventures in Rural Restoration*:

It was Lawrence whose brave and lonely adventure in consciousness confirmed and inspired much of the endeavour which led to the work described in this book. For not only was he an old soul with an ancestral memory of earlier civilizations, but he was an Englishman with a passionate love of his native land (10).

Both Gardiner and Lawrence communicated a sincere appreciation of the English landscape within their writings. Moreover, Lawrence also conveyed with pride a clear sense of his Englishness: 'I am English, and my Englishness is my very vision' (cited in Fernihough, 10). Yet he became disenchanted with England as it became increasingly urbanized: 'The real tragedy of England, as I see it, is the tragedy of

ugliness. The country is so lovely: the man-made England is so vile' (cited in Gardiner, *England Herself*, 10). As a consequence Lawrence wanted to eliminate what he saw as the 'mean and petty scrabble of paltry dwellings called "homes"' (ibid., 10-11). He called for a new beginning in which the landscape would be central to the way in which planning and development were undertaken:

... make an absolutely clear start. Do it place by place. Make a new England. Away with little homes. Away with scrabbling pettiness and paltriness. Look at the contours of the land, and build up from these with a sufficient nobility (*Phoenix*, 137-40).

Ultimately England came to personify for Lawrence the ruination caused by industrialism, and so he eventually rejected it in favour of Italy. In this sense, many of Lawrence's characters imitate his own chosen trajectory by moving away from their home country to Italy, as Simonetta de Filippis explains:

Like Lawrence, these characters abandon their original country, deadened by industrial civilisation, for unspoilt places where man and nature still respond to the sensual call and to the religion of the blood and the sun. Italy is therefore the place Lawrence and his characters choose as the first stage of their quest for a more authentic and vital way of life (105).

Focusing on an investigation of Lawrence's relevance to the *Criterion*, our main concern is with 'Flowery Tuscany', a series of four sketches written between February and April 1927, which depicted the Tuscan landscape in spring. The first three sketches were later published in the *Criterion* in October, November and December that same year.

Throughout 'Flowery Tuscany', Lawrence's delight is encapsulated in the panoramic views of the Italian landscape: 'Tuscany manages to remain so remote, and secretly smiling to itself in its many sleeves. There are so many hills popping up, and they take no notice of one another' (Part I, 305). He then proceeds to give an elaborate account of how the Tuscan hillsides were formed:

For centuries upon centuries man has been patiently modelling the surface of the Mediterranean countries, gently rounding the hills, and graduating the big slopes and the little slopes into the almost invisible levels of terraces [...] And it is the achieving of the peculiar Italian beauty which is so exquisitely natural, because man, feeling his way sensitively to the fruitfulness of the earth, has moulded the earth to his necessity without violating it. (ibid., 305-306)

His call for England to ‘Look at the contours of the land, and build up from these with a sufficient nobility’ is, Lawrence claims, clearly embodied in the design of the Tuscan landscape, where man has built in harmony with nature (*Phoenix*, 137-40). The Tuscan landscape thus affirms Lawrence’s earlier conviction: ‘Which shows that it *can* be done. Man *can* live on the earth and by the earth without disfiguring the earth’ (Part I, 306).

What is perhaps most striking about an examination of Lawrence’s ‘Flowery Tuscany’ is that when we look beyond its florid detail it has a decisive impact upon our cognizance of inter-war rural literature. Indeed, it illustrates that the British landscape was not always taken as an ideal or related to an insular notion of ‘Englishness’. In fact the cohesion and balance between man and nature which Lawrence sees in the majestic Tuscan hillsides is contrasted directly with England:

Yet spring returns, and on the terrace lips, and in the stony nooks between terraces, up rise the aconites, the crocuses, the narcissus and the asphodel, the inextinguishable wild tulips. There they are, for ever hanging on the precarious brink of an existence, but forever triumphant, never quite losing their footing. In England, in America, the flowers get rooted out, driven back. They become fugitive. But in the intensive cultivation of ancient Italian terraces, they dance round and hold their own. (ibid., 307)

Eliot’s inclusion of Lawrence, Gardiner and Williamson within the pages of his journal inevitably raises the issue of the broader political landscape of the *Criterion* and, in particular, its alleged proto-fascist sympathies. In the face of recent accusations that the journal had a fascist and anti-Semitic prejudice, Jason Harding justifiably stressed the need for ‘a sympathetic consideration of the journal’s

treatment of political affairs' (77).<sup>viii</sup> Nevertheless, the right-wing leanings of its rural contributors remain without question. In Henry Williamson's preface to the 1936 edition of *The Flax of Dream*, he explicitly indicated his sympathy with Hitler and saw fit to 'salute the man across the Rhine' (7). Williamson's Nazi sympathies were later reiterated in *Goodbye West Country*, where he acknowledged that the depiction of the life of William Maddison in *The Flax of Dream* was partly inspired by Hitler himself: 'Here at last is someone who has perceived the root causes of war in the unfilled human ego, and is striving to create a new, human-filled world' (*Flax of Dream* 7, cited in *West Country* 228).<sup>ix</sup>

The mutual fascination with a native rootedness, charismatic leadership and 'mythical philosophy of blood' which Lawrence and Gardiner shared also drew them dangerously close towards fascist ideology, and it was not without some justification that Bertrand Russell observed that Lawrence's ideas 'led straight to Auschwitz' (21-3). Gardiner himself indicated that 'one of the great clues to Lawrence's teaching' was in the idea that 'we could draw power from the earth' (cited in Nehls, 474) and praised *The Plumed Serpent* (arguably Lawrence's most patently proto-fascist leadership novel) as a 'wonderfully courageous essay' (*ibid.*, 122). Moreover, Gardiner's *World Without End* was not only dedicated to Lawrence but quoted ostensibly as a means 'to think out the course of action that must be taken somewhere' (*ibid.*):

In *The Plumed Serpent* we are given an allegory of the renewal of a sterile, stagnant people. We are shown how they are quickened out of their coma by life-giving action, symbols and words. How a few men and women dare to make themselves vehicles of the arcane powers. How they kindle again the flame of pristine belief and hope in the blood of men (*World Without End*, 36).<sup>x</sup>

That Eliot revealed to Gardiner in a letter of 1932 that *World Without End* was a book in which he took a 'warm interest' and evoked 'at many points... warm agreement',

signals that the ruralism of the *Criterion* cannot be completely distanced from right-wing politics (cited in Eliot and Haffenden, vol. 6, 165). As late as 1939, the year in which the final number of the *Criterion* was published, both Gardiner and Lymington met with Richard Darrè (Reich Minister for Nutrition and Agriculture and one of the main exponents of the 'Blood and Soil' ideology). In the spring of 1938 Lymington also personally met with Hitler in Berlin when delivering talks on his book *Famine in England*.<sup>xi</sup> Several months after this visit, in a letter of June 1938, Eliot wrote to Viscount Lymington to 'express' his 'enthusiasm' for *Famine in England* and to invite him to contribute an article to the *Criterion* (Hampshire Record Office, 15M84/F147/134). Thus, whilst Harding is correct to defend the *Criterion* against recent accounts which have 'willfully distort(ed)' the extent of the journal's fascist sympathies (77), it remains the case that a number of the *Criterion*'s ruralist writers were drawn beyond a parochial Englishness towards elements of the rural ideology of Nazi Germany.

A reassessment of the *Criterion*, then, reveals that under Eliot's editorship the journal did not seek to avoid the contentious issues or, for that matter, the controversial figures which were commonly associated with British ruralism. This is especially evident when investigating the 'Books of the Quarter' section, which indicates the extent to which the journal engaged with the prominent debates surrounding ruralism and the ardent discussion that ensued. Eliot informed Kenneth Pickthorn, in a letter of 2 June 1927, that 'The *Criterion* prides itself particularly on its reviews of books and I believe it is largely on account of these reviews that the *Criterion* is read, and by means of them that it acquires its influence' (cited in Eliot and Haffenden, vol. 3, 538). That the *Criterion* regularly reviewed a number of influential books which dealt with such contemporary issues as ribbon development,

town planning and the preservation of the countryside is significant in itself. But what is even more telling is the nature of the reviews themselves. By perusing these book reviews we can determine an aspect of the *Criterion* which has previously gone unnoticed and, in doing so, continue to challenge previous evaluations of the journal.

An exploration of the 'Books of the Quarter' section can be approached through the review of G. M. Trevelyan's *Must England's Beauty Perish?*, which was published in the journal in April 1929. Merlin Waterson has noted that Trevelyan's choice of title, *Must England's Beauty Perish?*, indicates that 'this was not to be a dry or academic treatise, but a passionate appeal for help to protect places which could continue to enrich the nation's life' (75). Significantly, the rural revivalists who featured in the *Criterion* were equally impassioned. One of the most distinctive features of the journal was the frequent use of its 'Books of the Quarter' section as a springboard from which reviewers could voice their own opinions on rural issues, and this was typically done at great length and with considerable vigour. This is clearly evidenced by the anonymous *Criterion* review of *Must England's Beauty Perish?* Describing Trevelyan's book as 'an extremely eloquent appeal for the National Trust' (C8, 558), the review went on to praise the Trust itself for being one of the few organizations defending rural Britain from those driven by motivations of greed and profit:

[...] this Trust and one or two devoted bands of brothers like it are positively the only public bodies who interpose between England's beauty and the pestilence that walketh by noon-day and that in a hundred years will have utterly destroyed it (ibid.).

Having extolled the virtues of the National Trust, the review suggested that the indifference of the government, coupled with the current economic system, had led

directly to the exploitation of the countryside by ‘the monster of commercialism and progress’ (ibid., 559):

England is being turned into a little hell of cheap-jackery, ugliness and noise because it pays to do so, and... government will not lift a finger to protect anything, however lovely or desirable or necessary for ‘the happiness and soul’s health’ of the whole people. (ibid., 558)

This same sense of fervour was equally apparent in A. J. Penty’s review of *Town and Countryside* by Thomas Sharp. In this review, which was published in the *Criterion* in July 1933, Penty bewailed the ruination brought on the English countryside by the intense increase in the development of towns since the First World War:

Our towns... suddenly burst, as it were, and spawned over the countryside with devastating effect, destroying in the process an appreciable part of the beauty of the land. Wherever we go within a hundred miles of London and fifty of our other big towns we are confronted by the new blend of ugliness compounded of bungalows, petrol pumps and concrete roads (C12, 689).<sup>51</sup>

Sharp himself detailed the vehement feelings that the ‘desecration of the countryside’ had stirred up within the past decade in the preface to *Town and Countryside*: ‘It is a question which causes anger – at times of a despairing kind – to all who have any feeling for the beauty of rural England’ (np). Penty’s review, alongside many of the contributions to the *Criterion*, continued this tone of wrathful indignation in its response to the spoliation of the English landscape: ‘... there is no doubt what is happening. The countryside is being destroyed by a generation of vandals who destroy because they have not the wit to create’ (C12, 689).

Importantly, the impassioned discussion of rural issues which took place in the ‘Books of the Quarter’ section has an appreciable impact upon how we should view Eliot’s journal in its later stages. There has been a mistaken tendency to assume that the final years of the *Criterion* were a failure and that reading through its contents

is a toilsome and unfruitful task. Ali, in *T. S. Eliot as Editor*, puts it rather dramatically as follows:

Solemnity (one can't really object to seriousness) often has no real energy behind it: it is formal, artificial, dull, the correct response at a funeral. And, if one may be allowed some melodrama, it seems that Eliot was presiding over a slow, painful death (116).

However, as the reviews of G. M. Trevelyan's *Must England's Beauty Perish?* and Thomas Sharp's *Town and Countryside* indicate, the discussion of rural issues in the *Criterion's* pages was far from dull. In fact, in many instances, the journal's sustained engagement with ruralism led directly to lively and fervent debate.

One such example is Viscount Lymington's review of R. G. Stapledon's *The Land: Now and Tomorrow* - which featured in the *Criterion* in April 1936. In this review, Lymington staunchly opposed Stapledon's vision of providing facilities for the urban worker, which was intended to ensure that they could find recreation and relaxation in rural surroundings. For Stapledon, the increasing enjoyment of walking, hiking and cycling among the urban-minded population was a positive sign: 'properly directed and abundantly assisted, herein lies the one gleam of hope for a nation that has lost touch with nature and with the land' (5).<sup>xiii</sup> Thus, Stapledon propounded that it was 'essential that the urban population should have sufficient opportunities on the one hand for recreation and exercise, and on the other for the simple enjoyment of the country' (8).

Lymington, however, attacked Stapledon's vision of a 'coefficient ruralicity for the nation', and sought to expose what he defined as 'dangerous and plausible nonsense'. Indeed, he condemned Stapledon's conception of ruralizing townsmen and suggested that it would 'destroy what remains of the spiritual inheritance of the country'. In particular, Lymington implied that Stapledon's plans for by-roads and a greater network of roadways and tracks would be especially perilous to the future of

the countryside. Such measures, according to Lymington, would simply speed up the town's encroachment upon rural areas: 'The false values of modern urban life would flow outwards, but the tiny stream of rural virtue flowing townwards must be inevitably swallowed up by the desert of substitute existence, which is modern industrialism and suburbia' (C15, 701).

The consideration of rural issues which took place in the *Criterion* clearly led to critical disagreement and this often erupted into fervid debate. For the most part the journal was characterized by openness towards diverse judgements and this can be seen specifically in relation to the rural viewpoints put forward in the literary review.

As Eliot stated a decade after its cessation:

The ideas with which you did not agree, the opinions which you could not accept, were as important to you as those which you found immediately acceptable. You examined them without hostility, and with the assurance that you could learn from them. In other words, we could take for granted an interest, a delight in ideas for their own sake, in the free play of intellect (*Definition of Culture*, 119).

In this article I have argued that although T. S. Eliot was centrally responsible for what appeared within the *Criterion*, its significance is not solely as his 'intellectual autobiography' (Margolis, 215). In moving our attention away from Eliot's role as editor, I have attempted to establish literary ruralism as one of the most distinctive features of the literary review's output from the late 1920s-30s. Eliot famously stated in the preface to a reissued edition of the *Criterion*: 'I think... that the... volumes of *The Criterion* constitute a valuable record of the thought of that period between two wars' (cited in Margolis, 34). More specifically, this article has illustrated that they constitute a 'valuable record' of the *ruralist* thought in the inter-war years. Indeed, the literary review lends important insights into this period and provides us with material with which to reconsider previous judgements. It enables us to see that in the mass of rural literature which was produced between the wars there was perhaps a wider

variety of approaches to the English countryside than has thus far been made apparent. Although there were evidently some nostalgic ruralists who featured in the journal, not all of the contributors were entirely misty-eyed in their outlook. Even when looking back to the golden age of the eighteenth century, some authors sought to provide a more 'accurate' account in the face of a wave of sentimentalism. A thorough investigation of the *Criterion* also leads us to reconsider some of the familiar ruralist tropes of the inter-war years. Here, also, we have seen that there is a greater sense of divergence in the way in which these central themes were presented. Although it was the British landscape which was most frequently seen in the populist and middle-brow texts of the period, such as H. V. Morton's *In Search of England* (1927) and Batsford's *The Legacy of England* (1935), in examining D. H. Lawrence's 'Flowery Tuscany' we have seen that the ruralists' concern with landscape looked beyond the English countryside to encompass foreign (and in this case superior) examples.

I have also illustrated that many of the eminent ruralists of this period used the *Criterion*'s 'Books of the Quarter' section as a vehicle to call ardently for the protection of England's beauty from despoliation. The prevailing view that Eliot's review ended with a whimper is thereby challenged; I suggest instead that its final years should be remembered for the heated and engaging debates which took place between several rural revivalists. In 1923, Eliot stated in a flyer that:

Every writer whose work appears in *The Criterion* is there because that writer represents something which THE CRITERION wishes to support; each contributor is a contributor to the formation of a design and the execution of a purpose (241).

It is, therefore, of major significance that figures such as C. Henry Warren, Edmund Blunden, R. G. Stapledon, G. M. Trevelyan, T. F. Powys, A. E. Housman and Henry Williamson featured within its pages. The 'design' and 'purpose' of the *Criterion*,

then, whilst wide-ranging in its breadth, provided a valuable rostrum for rural literature and ruralist writers of the 1930s. Consolidating the *Criterion*'s status as a rural chronicle ultimately alters both our understanding of the journal and its engagement with inter-war ruralism.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> In addition to Ali's thorough monograph there have been a number of notable accounts which shed considerable light on the *Criterion*. These include, for instance: Herbert Howarth, *Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 250-99; Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1971), 93-129; Denis Donoghue, 'Eliot and the *Criterion*', in *The Literary Criticism of T. S. Eliot: New Essays*, ed. by David Newton-de Molina (London: Athlone Press, 1977), 20-41.

<sup>ii</sup> Jeremy Diaper, 'The *Criterion*: an Inter-War Platform for Agricultural Discussion', *Agricultural History Review*, 61.2 (2013), 282-300. See also: Jeremy Diaper, "'In Conformity with Nature": T. S. Eliot's Religious Agrarianism', *Religion and Myth in T. S. Eliot's Poetry*, eds. by Scott Freer and Michael Bell (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016), 121-40.

<sup>iii</sup> See also: Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England from 1880-1914* (London: Quartet, 1982); Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880-1920*, eds. by Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 66-88.

<sup>iv</sup> See also, Frederick Cowle, *This is England* (London: Frederick Muller, 1946), 147; Thomas Burke, *The English and Their Country* (London: Longmans, 1943), 28; *The Beauty of Britain: A Pictorial Survey*, ed. by C. B. Ford (London: Batsford, 1935).

<sup>v</sup> This advertisement appears at the back of *English Country Life in the Eighteenth Century* under the heading 'A Selection of John Murray's Books'.

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example: Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, 42; John Stevenson, 'Countryside, Planning, and Civil Society in Britain 1926-1947', in *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions*, ed. by Jose Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 191-210; Stephan Kohl, 'Rural England: An Invention of the Motor Industries?', in *Landscape and Englishness*, eds. by Robert Burden and Stephan Kohl (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 195-201; Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, 169-93.

<sup>vii</sup> See, for example, A. E. Coppard's lush descriptions in 'The Field of Mustard' which was published in the *Criterion* in April 1925: 'behind them the slim trunks of beech, set in a sweet ruin of hoar and scattered leaf, and green briar nimbly fluttering, made a sort of palisade against the light of the open, which was grey, and a wide field of mustard which was yellow' (*The Field of Mustard: Tales by A. E. Coppard*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1926), 13.

<sup>viii</sup> See also Stan Smith, *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (New York: Harvester, 1994), 27; Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber, 1988), 57

<sup>ix</sup> For a detailed discussion of the fascist sympathies and ruralism of Henry Williamson, see: Dominic Head, *Modernity and the English Rural Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 35-45.

<sup>x</sup> For a thorough analysis of the influence of D. H. Lawrence on Rolf Gardiner, see: 'Introduction', in *Rolf Gardiner: Folk, Nature and Interwar Britain*, ed. by Matthew Jefferies and Mike Tyldesley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 4-8.

<sup>xi</sup> See: Matthew Jefferies, 'Rolf Gardiner and German Naturism', in *Rolf Gardiner: Folk, Nature and Culture in Interwar Britain*, 62; Malcolm Chase, 'This is no Claptrap, this is our Heritage', *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, eds. by Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 146; Earl of Portsmouth, *A Knot of Roots: An Autobiography* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1965), 160.

<sup>xii</sup> During the 1930s there was a rapid rise in the amount of people who participated in outdoor activities such as rambling and hiking. By the end of the 1930s there were approximately half a million hikers in England. See, Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures, England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 379.

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