

T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide. By David E. Chinitz. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 264 pp. \$35.00 cloth; \$24.00 paper.

This is an impressive and important book. It peels off the mummifying bandages of received notions of T. S. Eliot as the high guardian of High Culture to reveal a vibrant, far more complex, interesting and human figure, a man who aspired for much of his career to the popularity and cultural importance of music-hall artist Marie Lloyd.

Chinitz advances his arguments about Eliot's lifelong engagements with popular culture through careful, considered scholarship and sensitive close reading. The book follows Eliot's career in a roughly chronological sequence, beginning in the first chapter with a consideration of Eliot's poetry through *The Waste Land* and ending in the sixth chapter with a discussion of Eliot's last, and in Chinitz's estimation, greatest poem, *Four Quartets*. But this very generous account of Eliot's career is savvy enough not to get bogged down in either strict chronology or the poetry. Chapter two looks at the criticism, specifically at Eliot's lifelong, if fitful, engagements with, and theorizing of, popular culture. Chapter three offers a sustained account of Eliot's 1922 essay on Marie Lloyd which, unlike previous critics, who view the essay "as an anomaly," Chinitz regards "as one key document in a long series that embody a genuine receptiveness to popular culture" (15). Throughout these early chapters, Chinitz maintains a steady gaze on Eliot's engagements with British and American popular culture, especially the latter. His discussion of the poetry in the first chapter, for example, shows that not only was Eliot a fan of American popular music (and an ardent participant in the dance craze), he brought his enthusiasm into his poetry thematically and formally. Eliot's characteristic cadences and rhythms are as profoundly informed, Chinitz tells us, by ragtime as by Jules Laforgue. The careful attention to previously overlooked or discounted texts and sources as well as to unexamined aspects of well-studied texts, pays off handsomely in the fourth and fifth chapters where Chinitz discusses, respectively, the fragmentary *Sweeney Agonistes* and the verse dramas of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Here the book makes its best contribution to Eliot studies, for if, as Chinitz shows, Eliot devoted over thirty years of his life to bridging rather than sustaining the cultural divide, then surely students of Eliot should pay close and careful attention to the plays, which Eliot envisioned as exactly the medium for a reintegration of culture and society.

The importance of this book lies not simply, however, in refocusing critical attention to aspects of Eliot's career generally, and strangely

overlooked—such as his thirty years' effort to revitalize verse drama as a popular form; it is also a model for bringing cultural studies to bear on Eliot and Eliot to bear on cultural studies. This last point seems especially astute. As Chinitz points out in his introduction, “Eliot was an enabling force” as the new discipline of cultural studies “took shape” under the influence of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel. This is not to say that Chinitz ever loses sight of Eliot's persistent and increasingly rigid political conservatism. Rather, he insists on Eliot's profound ambivalence, ambivalence that generated an undervalued complexity in both the man and his work. In a sense, and as the sixth chapter makes clear, Eliot embodied the cultural divide. He achieved his greatest popularity by playing to the hilt the prim and decorous “Mr. Eliot,” the very figure of Tradition. Chinitz thus finds Eliot partially to blame for his own mummification. But the greater part of the blame lies in the always “partial” view of Eliot by his critics, a view Chinitz enlarges considerably.

Chinitz himself admits that his account is not intended to be complete. The most glaring omission is that gender, of which Chinitz is “conscious of having said little” (17). And yet it begs to be addressed, not only because the cultural divide has been, at times, so emphatically gendered, but also because gender may be the deepest wellspring of Eliot's ambivalence. Thus, while Chinitz makes admirable sense of Eliot's (symbolic) refusal of the lute in favor of “jazz banjorine,” much more might be made of the fact that “Eliot's instrument of choice . . . was a diminutive, high-pitched member of [the banjo] family,” “the humblest available selection” (22). Similarly, much might be made of Eliot's desire to “be the Marie Lloyd of high-modernist literature” (95) rather than, say, its G. H. (“The Great”) MacDermott. The point seems urgent, given that “the murder of a woman” figures prominently as the theme of Eliot's “most daring and original work,” *Sweeney Agonistes*, and is “a crime that obsesses Eliot throughout his oeuvre” (106-7).

At the close of his introduction, Chinitz addresses, with characteristically modest wit, “the most important question of all . . . ‘How would Eliot have felt about *Cats*?’” (18). For me, the more important question raised by this book is, “How would Eliot have felt about rap?” The Eliot Chinitz debunks would have publicly deplored it in forceful yet measured terms (and privately in crude and probably racist terms). The Eliot Chinitz reveals to readers of his book would have registered a far more complex and uneasy ambivalence in public, while privately cribbing Eminem.

—Christina Hauck, Kansas State University