

Agrégation

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T. S. Eliot

Collected Poems

1909-1962



Sous la direction de
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Beyond (Im)personality: T. S. Eliot's Life and Works

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T. S. Eliot did not want his biography written, and anyone writing an account of his life must put up with his imagined disapproval. When he asked his friend, John Hayward, to become his literary executor, he warned him that his task was “to suppress everything suppressable”. “I don’t want any biography written”, he insisted, “or any letters printed that I wrote prior to 1933, or any letters at all of any intimacy to anybody. In fact, I have a mania for posthumous privacy”.¹ Eliot’s belief that critics should not “pry into the biographies of men of letters” was not mere personal preference; it was bound up with his theory of poetics.² He once wrote that “the end of the enjoyment of poetry is a pure contemplation from which all the accidents of personal emotion are removed”.³ He would have agreed with W. B. Yeats that even though “the poet always writes of his personal life” to some extent, he cannot be reduced to the contingencies of his biography: “he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea”.⁴

In order to understand this aspect of Eliot’s poetics, the best place to turn is his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. This is one of Eliot’s best known and most contentious essays, first published in 1919, then as part of his first critical collection, *The Sacred Wood* (1920). It cemented Eliot’s reputation as a literary critic and has inspired and perplexed

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1. T. S. Eliot, Letter to John Hayward, 1st January 1936, in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 8, ed. John Haffenden, (London: Faber & Faber, 2019) [*Letters* 8], p. 800.
 2. T. S. Eliot, Letter to Emily Hale, 18th September 1963, <<https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/11243>>.
 3. T. S. Eliot, “The Perfect Critic” in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Faber, 1920, repr.1997), p. 12.
 4. W. B. Yeats, “A General Introduction to My Work” (1937), in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 5, ed. William H. O’Donnell (New York: Scribner, 1994), p. 204.

generations of poets and scholars ever since. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry has two aspects. He begins by exploring the poet's relation to the past, and in particular to dead authors. We are wrong, Eliot claims, to praise poets for what makes them original and individual, and to stress only their difference from the writers who came before them. The value of a poet cannot be assessed in isolation: "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone". His significance is a function of his relation to his predecessors. Hence, he must work to acquire what Eliot calls the "historical sense", which involves an acute awareness "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence". The past is not dead: it constantly affects the present. But this relation of influence is not unidirectional, and the present also has the power to modify the past. Each new work of art, when it enters the canon, alters the existing order, so that the past never remains static or unchanged. Awareness of this process is not something that comes naturally to the artist: he must take great pains to cultivate his sense of tradition and give it precedence over his own private feelings. The artist, Eliot writes, must go through "a continual extinction of personality".⁵

In order to explain what he means by this "extinction of personality", Eliot uses an analogy from chemistry. The poet must become a catalyst—in Eliot's example, a "shred of platinum"—which can effect dramatic chemical transformations while remaining itself "inert, neutral and unchanged".⁶ In this scenario, the artist is a mediator, allowing for various feelings to "enter into new combinations" and create the emotion of art. His business is not to cultivate a personality, but to facilitate this transformation while remaining unaffected. Therefore, Eliot insists, "the man who suffers" should be kept entirely distinct from "the mind which creates". For the purposes of writing poetry, the poet is not a human person made of flesh, bones and feelings, bound up in personal relations, but a humble catalyst.

One of the reasons why Eliot's argument is difficult to follow is that he goes on to introduce a number of other analogies. The mind of the poet is first a catalyst, then a stomach, working to "digest and transmute the passions which are its material", and then a "receptacle" for capturing and storing emotions.⁷ Finally it is described as a pressure chamber,

5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

in which various thoughts, images and feelings can be concentrated, fused, and transformed. Later in his critical career, Eliot suggested that "Tradition and the Individual Talent" relied on a "dubious analogy" and "an adolescent grasp of [the] idea", but he stood by his point.⁸ The core idea is that the poet's business is not to express a personality, but rather to serve as a "medium" allowing "impressions and experiences" to be mixed together "in peculiar and unexpected ways".⁹ Poetic emotion is not the same as the emotion experienced by the poet in real life: it has been transformed and transcended. Poetry, Eliot concludes, is not a "turning loose" of one's emotions or one's personality but "an escape" from them. "Of course," Eliot adds as an aside, "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things". This passing remark seems to throw a spanner in the works of Eliot's argument. Is the artist a dispassionate catalyst, detached and distinct from the feelings he uses for art, or is he desperately trying to escape the intensity of his private experience? The sense of contradiction or paradox is even stronger in Eliot's later criticism, where he turns to praising Yeats and Shakespeare for expressing "greater personalities" and using "intense and personal experience" in their works.¹⁰

According to David Moody, the problem stems from Eliot's choice of vocabulary, as the terms "objectivity" and "impersonality" are "more striking than precise". "There is a difficulty with the term 'impersonal,'" Moody explains, "in that it can seem to imply a cutting out of the personal". But in Eliot's poetics, "the personal does not cease to be personal when it achieves impersonal expression. It is rather intensified and verified".¹¹ One could argue that Eliot uses "personality" in two different ways: first the social, accidental personality that needs to be extinguished (the attachment to emotion as it is experienced in life); secondly, the "greater personality" which emerges from the poem, transformed and purified (the emotion recreated in art). In a similar vein, Jewel Spears Brooker describes Eliot's theory of poetic composition as one of "depersonalization

8. T. S. Eliot, "Yeats" (1940), in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, vol. 6, *The War Years, 1940-1946*, ed. David E. Chinitz & Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP) 2017 [Prose 6], p. 81.

9. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", p. 20.

10. T. S. Eliot, "Yeats", p. 81.

11. A. David Moody, *Tracing T. S. Eliot's Spirit: Essays on His Poetry and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 117.

followed by repersonalization”.¹² Impersonality is not an inert quality of the work, but rather a dialectical movement where the poet’s self is transcended to reach a higher form of expression. It is not an absence or denial of personality: it is, in Eliot’s own words, “the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art”.¹³ Therefore, the “man who suffers” and the “mind which creates” are not fully and irremediably separated, since the poet’s private emotions provide the raw material that is to be transmuted within the poem.

This process of transformation was not painless, and it was Eliot’s constant concern as a poet. The following account will attempt to trace in Eliot’s own life what he himself described as “the struggle—which alone constitutes life for a poet—to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal”.¹⁴

Early Youth in St. Louis

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on 26th September 1888 in St Louis, Missouri, the youngest of seven children. His father was an industrialist and his mother had been a schoolteacher before her marriage. The family’s dynastic roots were in New England, where the Eliots belonged to the traditional Bostonian upper class. T. S. Eliot’s grandfather, a Unitarian minister and prominent philanthropist, had settled in St Louis in 1836 and was a co-founder of Washington University. Lyndall Gordon points out that the Eliot family motto was “*tace and face*”: be silent and act. She adds: “it was their habit to silence emotion”.¹⁵

Although Eliot spent most of his adult life in England, he insisted that his poetry, “in its sources, in its emotional springs, [...] comes from America”.¹⁶ From early on in his life, Eliot’s imagination was divided between two places with two strikingly different landscapes. The “seedily, drably urban” cityscape of St Louis provided the background for many of his early poems, including the smoke and dusty streets of “Prufrock”; Eliot

12. Jewel Spears Brooker, *T. S. Eliot’s Dialectical Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2018), p. 84.

13. T. S. Eliot, “Philip Massinger” (1920) in *Selected Essays*, p. 217.

14. T. S. Eliot, “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca” (1927) in *Selected Essays*, p. 137.

15. Lyndall Gordon, *The Hyacinth Girl: T. S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse*, (London: Virago, 2022), p. 8-9.

16. Interview with T. S. Eliot, ed. George Plimpton, *Writers at Work* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 110.

was fascinated with the imposing presence of the Mississippi and his ear became attuned to the jazzy rhythms of ragtime.¹⁷ Eliot's urban imagery, as he would later confirm, "was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed".¹⁸ But another landscape imprinted itself upon his memory: that of the coast of New England. As a child, he would go on holiday every summer to Gloucester, Massachusetts, a fishing village north of Boston, where he spent his time bird watching, sailing, and playing among the rockpools. The New England seascape appears in poems like "Marina" (1930) and "The Dry Salvages" (1941), where it is often associated with a sense of nostalgia, serenity, and peacefulness. Because of this sense of dual attachment, Eliot never felt quite at home in either St Louis or New England: not quite Southern in the South, not quite Northern in the North. He felt particularly out of place when he moved to Massachusetts in 1905, aged 17, to Milton Academy in preparation for Harvard, with his Southern accent. Even though as an expatriate, Eliot would later adopt a carefully crafted anglicised accent, Caribbean poet Kamau Braithwaite claimed to recognise "the riddims of St Louis" in the "deadpan delivery" of Eliot's poetic recordings.¹⁹

Eliot's childhood was a happy one. And from an early age, he displayed a remarkable ear for language. His elder sister Ada remembered how, as a child, "[he] used to sound the rhythm of sentences without shaping words", and they would both converse in this made up dialect of intonations, sitting on the front stairs of their house on Locust Street.²⁰ However, Eliot also suffered from some early health issues. He wore a truss because of a congenital hernia and his mother fretted about the risk of injury if he participated in physical activities.²¹ Peter Ackroyd speculates that these early experiences contributed to Eliot's anxiety and desire for self-control in later life.²² These feelings, which permeate his early poems, would have been heightened by his Puritan education—his father believed that

17. T. S. Eliot "The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet", *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 89 (Spring 1960): 420-22, in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, vol. 8, *Still and Still Moving*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker & Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP) 2019 [Prose 8], p. 389.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Edward Kamau Braithwaite, *History of the Voice: Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 31.

20. T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1, 1898-1922 [*Letters I*], ed. Valerie Eliot & Hugh Haughton, Revised ed. John Haffenden (London: Faber & Faber, [1988] 2009) xxxvii.

21. Eliot wore a truss every day for most of his life (until his surgery at the age of 58).

22. Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 206.

syphilis was God's punishment for sin, and hoped that a cure would never be found, wondering if one should consider "emasculating" the youth to "keep them clean".²³

The Harvard Years

Eliot enrolled at Harvard in 1906. His undergraduate courses included Classics, History, Art history, Religion, German, French, and English literature. His professor of Comparative Literature was Irving Babbitt, whose anti-Romanticism and mistrust of emotional excess would be a lasting influence on Eliot's critical views. Babbitt criticised Romanticism's confusion and its "instinct to throw off [...] all limitations whatsoever", and set it against the value of classical discipline.²⁴ But Eliot also learned a lot outside of the classroom. In 1908, he stumbled upon Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, a book that would change his life. Here he encountered for the first time the poems of Jules Laforgue (1860-1887). He was mesmerised by Laforgue's style (playing with the tensions between intimacy and irony, idealism and deflation, seriousness and playfulness), by Laforgue's penchant for popular forms, slang and neologisms, and by his use of seedy urban life as a material for poetry. Eliot would later explain that Laforgue was "the first to teach me how to speak, to teach me the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech".²⁵ Many of the poems that he wrote at the time were pastiches of Laforgue. According to Peter Nicholls, "Laforgue offered Eliot both a style and a means of self-defence, transforming his own temperamental pessimism and social unease into the basis for irony".²⁶ Thus Eliot began to develop his poetic mask. He had several of his poems published in *The Advocate*, Harvard's Literary Magazine. He transcribed them in a notebook entitled *Inventions of the March Hare*, which remained unprinted during his lifetime but was published as an annotated edition by Christopher Ricks in 1996.²⁷ The poems in the notebook, which Gordon calls "undistinguished

23. James Edwin Miller, *T. S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet, 1888-1922* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 2001), p. 180.

24. Irving Babbitt, *The New Laokoön* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), p. 196.

25. T. S. Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me", in *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 126.

26. Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 180.

27. T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber & Faber, 1996).

poems about the world falling apart”, betray the immaturity of a young philosophy graduate student.²⁸ Their subject-matter includes body and soul dualism, the Absolute, and the ironic deflation of big ideas, explored using a host of clunky mixed metaphors.²⁹ They nonetheless function as a workshop for themes and motifs that Eliot would explore in his mature poems.

In 1910, Eliot sailed to France to spend a year in Paris. His mother was devastated. “I cannot bear to think of your being alone in Paris”, she wrote, “the very words give me a chill. I do not admire the French nation, and have less confidence in individuals of that race than in the English”.³⁰ But her son was determined to have his “romantic year”, and secretly dreamt of settling in Paris to become a francophone poet.³¹ He stayed in Pension Casaubon on the rue St Jacques, where he became friends with Jean Verdenal, a French medical student, to whom he would dedicate *The Waste Land* following Verdenal's death in the trenches.³²

Eliot took French lessons, studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, and attended Henri Bergson's lectures at the College de France, causing him to undergo a (then fashionable) “temporary conversion to Bergsonism”.³³ He also continued writing poems, including, most importantly, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. (Hereafter “Prufrock”). At the end of the year, however, he decided against the life of a French bohemian, and returned to Harvard to begin a doctorate in philosophy as a prelude to a career in academia. He studied Sanskrit, Indian Philosophy, and Buddhism, reading the texts he would draw upon to compose sections III and V of *The Waste Land*.

It was around this time that Eliot got to know Emily Hale, a young woman from a similar background, whom he had likely met when they were children. Hale wanted to be an actress. They acted in amateur plays together, and went to the opera with friends. Eliot fell in love with Hale, but he was shy, and, having no previous romantic experience,

28. Gordon, *The Hyacinth Girl*, p. 28.

29. For instance, “First Debate Between the Body and Soul” pictures “sensation” as the dirty fingerprint of a gigantic thumb on the soul.

30. Charlotte Champe Eliot, Letter to T. S. Eliot, 3rd April 1910, *Letters* 1, p. 12.

31. Interview with T. S. Eliot, ed. George Plimpton, p. 94.

32. The intensity of their friendship has given rise to some speculation over Eliot's sexuality.

33. T. S. Eliot, “A Sermon Preached in Magdalene College Chapel” (1948), in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, vol. 7, *A European Society, 1947-1953*, ed. Iman Javadi & Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2018) [*Prose* 7], p. 112.

was unsure how to behave. Before he left for Germany in 1914 to spend time studying philosophy in Marburg, he finally declared his feelings, but he did not make her a formal offer of marriage. She was taken by surprise and did not return his affections. Eliot's love for Hale and the feelings of loss and missed opportunity surrounding it would become one of the major emotional drives of his poetry. As a writer, Eliot both explores these emotions and keeps them at a distance. "Eliot is a great love poet", Robert Crawford writes, "but his sense repeatedly is of love frustrated, lost or gone wrong".³⁴ In "La Figlia Che Piange", written in 1912, a speaker dispassionately stages a scene of parting between two lovers, and ponders what could have been, but is more satisfied by the aesthetic potential of the scene than by the possibility of love.

An American in London

At the outbreak of the war, Eliot left Germany for England, where he continued his studies at Merton College, Oxford, focusing on the works of the British idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley. Eliot found Oxford stuffy and boring and craved the excitement of London. "Oxford is very pretty", he wrote in a letter to his Harvard friend Conrad Aiken "but I don't like to be dead".³⁵ In London, Eliot met Ezra Pound at Aiken's suggestion, and Aiken showed Pound the manuscript of "Prufrock". Pound was impressed and enthused by Eliot, who, he marvelled, had "actually trained himself *and* modernized himself *on his own*".³⁶ He wrote to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry*, a prominent literary magazine based in Chicago, to convince her to publish the poem. This meant a great deal to Eliot, who had begun to question his own talent as a poet, and he would later say that the encounter with Pound changed his life. The publication of "Prufrock" in *Poetry* (June 1915), which delighted the modernist literary scene, would be followed by that of "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" in the second issue of *BLAST*, Wyndham Lewis's iconoclastic Vorticist journal (July). Other poems published that year included "Portrait of a Lady" (September), "The Boston Evening Transcript", "Aunt Helen", and "Cousin Nancy" (October).

34. Robert Crawford, "TS Eliot: The Poet Who Conquered the World, 50 Years On", *The Guardian*: 10 January 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/10/from-tom-to-ts-eliot-world-poet>>.

35. T. S. Eliot, Letter to Conrad Aiken, 31st December 1914, *Letters 1*, p. 81.

36. Ronald Bush, *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), xii.

Monument de la poésie anglophone, pilier du modernisme et figure incontournable de la critique, T. S. Eliot reste, un siècle après la publication de son œuvre la plus connue, *The Waste Land* (1922), une des pierres angulaires de la littérature anglophone. La richesse et la complexité de son œuvre ont nourri un dialogue à travers les pays et les années, dont le foisonnement ne se dément toujours pas. Le défi pour celles et ceux qui tentent de le découvrir est alors double : il s'agit à la fois de s'immerger dans des textes d'une profondeur parfois labyrinthique, en résistant à la gêne et à la perplexité qui peuvent naître de ce périple, et de se retrouver dans un corpus secondaire immense, où chaque détail de l'œuvre peut mener à d'ardentes controverses. Néanmoins, le jeu en vaut la chandelle, pour la perspective sans égale qu'Eliot apporte sur une époque, littéraire autant qu'historique, de basculement dans la modernité, mais surtout pour l'expérience esthétique unique qui surgit de cette quête de sens toujours renouvelée.

Ce livre, destiné en premier lieu aux agrégatifs, offre une porte d'entrée dans l'univers de T. S. Eliot, à travers le prisme des poèmes du recueil *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, jusqu'aux *Unfinished Poems*. Il propose une approche panoramique, alliant des synthèses sur les points les plus importants de la vie et de l'œuvre d'Eliot, y compris sur l'intertexte inépuisable de ses poèmes, des réflexions élargies sur les problématiques critiques, génériques voire philosophiques que soulèvent ses textes, et des considérations pratiques, pour permettre d'entrer de façon autonome dans la lecture et l'analyse, en dépassant les obstacles qui ont valu à Eliot la réputation d'être un poète difficile. Car en définitive, l'important, pour quiconque cherche une véritable rencontre avec cette poésie, n'est pas d'accumuler le savoir acquis par les autres, mais de s'en armer pour entreprendre sa propre lecture.

