

Thomas Stearns Eliot

Reading assignment: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “The Magi,” “Little Gidding,” and the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

“We do not imitate; we are changed; and our work is the work of the changed man; we have not borrowed, we have been quickened, and we become bearers of a tradition.”¹

1. Eliot an American searching for an identity: leaving home.

- a. Born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri (father was founder of Washington University in St. Louis, which would have been called “Eliot University” save for his father's modesty). The presence of the Mississippi gave Eliot a lifelong fascination with water: “I think that the river is a strong brown god. . .”
- b. Parents were of Puritan ancestry and temperament and family spent summers in New England, which profoundly affected Tom (7th of 7 children).
- c. An “originating” Puritan Eliot emigrated from East Coker, Somerset in the 17th century when the commonwealth period ended and Puritans were no longer welcome in British society. Eliot later returns to East Coker “where prayer has been valid” to confirm his own - ironically Anglican - religious conversion in *Four Quartets*.
- d. Eliot left America for England early in life and never looked back. He became a naturalized British citizen and converted to Anglicanism. He viewed this not as a rejection of his American origins, but as a return to family origins - to the location of his Puritan ancestors.
 - i. Many American writers of Eliot's period, seeking a broader artistic circle and a more vibrant cultural life, left the US for similar reasons: Pound left Montana; Henry James left New York; Edith Wharton left Rhode Island; Ernest Hemingway left. . .etc.

2. Eliot finding a life work

- a. Eliot educated at Harvard, Oxford; begins writing dissertation, but drops out of school to devote himself to writing poetry.
 - i. Eliot's education exacerbated (encouraged?) his tendency to intellectualize; heightened his fear of emotion.
 - ii. His education, even more importantly, made him aware of the powerful tradition of European literary achievement: the voices of “the dead that speak through the living.”
 - iii. Philosophy taught him to detach himself from his emotions and write about them analytically but did not give him a “philosophy of life.”
 - iv. Eliot dropped out of graduate school because of war; refused to return to US; married Vivian Heigh-Wood, who was mentally unstable. It was a miserable

¹“From Reflections on Contemporary Poetry.”

marriage as they were both totally neurotic.

- b. Eliot employed nearly all his life at “day jobs”, first teaching, then banking, then editorial work at Faber and Faber.
 - i. Found teaching draining: “this most exacting and exhausting of professions leaves little time and energy over, for those who have the ability to teach, and whose conscience demands of them, for the benefit of their pupils.”
 - ii. Found bank work soothing: “I know from experience that working in a bank [full-time, with only two weeks off per year] was a rest cure compared to teaching in a school.”
 - iii. The daily grind of a nonintellectual job appears to have helped him organize his time and collect his thoughts and energies, the better to “practise and perfect himself in writing.”

3. **Eliot and the Problem of Emotion**

- a. “Tradition” is not so much about the poetic tradition as about the poet's attempt to use poetry to escape or detach from emotional states that have become so overwhelming that they threaten his identity as well as his art. The essay begins by talking about tradition, but ends by talking about emotion - an interesting transition.

In Section I:

- i. Poets must embrace tradition - see themselves as constituted by it, as echoes of it, with elements of newness, but part of an onward flow that is always changing but never improving
- ii. As poets evolve new works, those new works actually change the tradition from which they emerge - can you think of examples of how a new artwork changed your perception of artistic tradition?
- iii. Poet must subordinate self to the “mind of Europe.”

In Section II:

- iv. Poetry, not the poet, becomes the focus of the article.
- v. The poet is a passive catalyst, a medium through which forces pass and “poetry” concentrates and refracts.
- vi. Though Eliot distinguishes “emotions” from “feelings,” no one has been able to sort out the difference he's getting at - perhaps an indication of his confusion. Basically, he seems to argue that “emotions” have an objective correlative (q.v.) and can create important impressions, while feelings are vague, freewheeling, impressive, and not aesthetically useful.

Near/In Section III:

- vii. Eliot paints himself into a corner with the famous admission that one function of art is to allow the artist to detach the self from emotions and “personality” - that individual life is a nightmare:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

4. Eliot's first aesthetic solution to the problem of emotion: objectify emotion as “the objective correlative.”

- a. derived from influence of Pound and European philosophical and intellectual traditions; the objective correlative.
- b. The Imagist Manifesto (1913):
 - i. Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective.
 - ii. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
 - iii. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.
- c. Eliot formulates what he calls the objective correlative - the object or behavior that somehow perfectly represents an emotion. (Hamlet and His Problems).

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

5. Prufrock and the Crusade Against Emotion, Traditional Masculinity, and Connection

- a. Sending up the carpe diem tradition of the “let's have sex” poem, Eliot recognizes his position in literary history by rebelling against a poetic tradition that valorizes the sentiment “the grave's a fine and private place/But none, I think, do there embrace.”
- b. Prufrock, instead of “forcing the moment to its crisis,” gives us a love song about his own inadequacy. He:
 - i. is beset by an “overwhelming question” that cannot be articulated directly
 - ii. cannot initiate (“how should I begin?” “How can I presume?”)
 - iii. sees the natural world as polluted and disgusting (yellow fog)
 - iv. sees the human-made world as equally prosaic and disgusting (apartments, tea ritual)
 - v. outdoes Hamlet in debating with himself endlessly
 - (1) wonders repeatedly is it “worth it” - “do I dare/Disturb the universe?”
 - (2) compares himself unfavorably with heroes (“I am no prophet”; “I am not Prince Hamlet” - but Polonius), not Lazarus, not John the Baptist, not Michelangelo of whom the women speak.
 - vi. cannot make himself understood (she says twice “that is not what I meant at all”)
 - vii. is physically ugly, aging, ridiculous (balding, obsessing about trousers, think; describes self as would-be crab, an insect pinned to the wall,
 - viii. The mermaids - mythical seductive females - have been singing to each other, not to him - but he lingers underwater to hear them. Instead of drowning there

with the mermaids and Prufrock, however, WE are drowned when WE wake to HUMAN voices.

- c. The epigraph translates/paraphrases “I’m going to tell you because you won’t return to the world of the living to repeat this tale to others.” Implies that our descent into this world is fatal - like his.