

T. S. Eliot

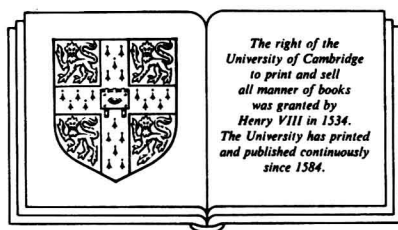
The Modernist in History

Edited by
Ronald Bush



T. S. Eliot: The Modernist in History

edited by
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In Memoriam
Raymond J. Bush

Acknowledgments

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Thanks are also due to the people who shepherded the essays into print. The enthusiasm of Albert Gelpi, the general editor of this series, meant a great deal. I am also grateful to Andrew Brown, whose shrewd critical eye guided the first stage of publication through a bramble of problems. And I could never have completed the book without the tolerance and encouragement of my wife, Marilyn, and my son, Charles.

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Introduction

In a landmark volume of 1965, Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson looked back at the heyday of modernism and announced the movement had “already passed into history.” Twenty years later that remark is no less true, but its implications have undergone a sea change. Ellmann and Feidelson looked forward to an extended “perspective in time” that would permit them the vantage they needed to see the past “in historical depth.” They expected that once we *knew* more, modernist writing would finally be explained by a context of historical facts and literary documents once obscured by literary polemic. And at least in part, they were right; sixty-some years after the publication of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, we do know a great deal more about what they called *The Modern Tradition*. Yet it is also true that in 1990 the productions of modernism look *different* from the way they did in 1965 – and not just because of a deepened perspective. Writing history involves not only facts but narratives, and

narratives imply a set of interests that color even the most closely packed set of facts. In the words of the historian Lynn Hunt, history must be understood as "an ongoing tension between stories that have been told and stories that might be told." And our reasons for telling ourselves the story of modernism in the fifties and sixties are not only different from the reasons that obtained in the twenties, they are also different from today's. To appropriate an important but little-known remark of Eliot's from the last essay in this book, history, like literature and all the humanities, "is always turned toward creation; the present only, keeps the past alive." Put another way: the pressure of present values shapes our knowledge of the past.

Which goes some way toward explaining the force behind the post-structuralist reevaluation of modernism, a push that began in the sixties and has gained influence year by year. Under its influence, the critic Richard Poirier, once a powerful proponent of modernist writing, now calls it a "snob's game." And just as striking, in the introduction to a book on modernist impersonality, Maud Ellmann, the daughter of one of the authors of *The Modern Tradition*, opposes the "democratic" readings of Marxist and post-structuralist critics to "Pound and Eliot's authoritarian alternatives." Given these statements and others, nothing could be clearer than that it is impossible in the postmodern 1990s to consider T. S. Eliot our contemporary.

Yet it is by no means evident that the present reassessment of Eliot need necessarily adhere to the contours suggested by the post-structuralists. Ideological competition in the present is no less intense than it ever was, and the post-structuralists, made giddy by their own theory, are sometimes less than assiduous historians. As I argue below, many of their assertions reproduce the simplifications of the politically conservative New Critics, who also blurred over Eliot's contradictions for their own political purposes. The history of modernism the nineties will produce is too important, I believe, for that pattern to be repeated. And so I present the essays in this book with some hope that they might keep a dialogue open. Far from consistent in approach, they have in common a commitment to the discipline of history. Continuing the best efforts of Richard Ellmann's generation, many of them take issue with Eliot's self-presentation and include documents

Eliot chose not to emphasize. Some press the limits of literary and intellectual history and enter areas of cultural practice, stressing the institutions of publishing and the social processes of gender formation. And all reevaluate Eliot with a self-conscious awareness of the pressure of the eighties, whether it concerns the plight current writers (where do we go from here, and which of our several Eliots will help us?) or women readers (what does this self-professed masculinist poetry have to do with us?) or denizens of the hotly contested waters of cultural politics (were modernism's social values consistent and were they inimical to liberal and radical visions of the future?).

Perhaps the easiest way to suggest the way the essays in this book help resituate Eliot is to begin with the essays on Eliot and women. Accused by Leavis and others of being against life, Eliot has lately been portrayed as more specifically misogynist, both in his life and his work. In part this has to do with reading Eliot's attitudes in an age more sensitive to women's concerns than his own and would apply to almost any male writer of his generation. But once one has decided to emphasize the way Eliot suppressed the voice of his first wife, it is relatively easy to connect this chauvinism with modernism's authoritarian poetics and flirtation with fascism. Still, what *were* Eliot's relations with women, and how, precisely, did he represent them? After careful study of a considerable body of unpublished material, Lyndall Gordon argues that, although sometimes unattractive, they were more complicated than either Eliot's proponents or detractors would assume. Moreover, as Carol Christ argues, the issue of voice in *The Waste Land*, at the center of current controversies about whether modernist works tend toward open or patriarchal structures, is not as simple as it looks. Yes, it is gender related, but the implications of gender for Eliot's voices, Christ maintains, are surprisingly unpredictable.

The contradictions that emerge in Eliot's representation of women also can be discovered in the composition of those centerpieces of the modernist project, *The Waste Land* and its related poems. Taking a biographical perspective and making use of manuscript evidence and uncollected prose, James Longenbach demonstrates that Eliot's quatrain poems in *Ara Vos Prec* are as shot through with ambivalence as *The Waste Land* itself. *Tours de*

force of formal clarity, these poems have been used to bolster endorsements of Eliot's technical mastery that shade into moral and political arguments. Yet their genesis shows a very different sort of impetus and suggests why they have inspired strong passions in their readers, ranging from collusion to disgust. Similarly John T. Mayer's essay investigates Eliot's attempts in 1910 and 1911 to organize fragments into a long poem and uncovers precisely those tensions recent criticism has discovered in *The Waste Land*: Eliot's poetry notebooks suggest one set of intentions leading toward a prophetic quest poem and the other pulling in the direction of skepticism and despair.

What philosophical tensions existed in Eliot's modernist innovations, however, were soon conditioned and complicated by the process of transmission and reception as his work entered his history and ours. And rarely has this part of the historical process been demonstrated with such particularity as in Lawrence Rainey's essay, "The Price of Modernism: Publishing *The Waste Land*." Looking at records of *The Dial* magazine transferred in 1988 to the Beinecke Library, Rainey discovers a pattern of expectations in letters between *The Dial*'s owners, Scofield Thayer and J. S. Watson, Jr., that focused the way *The Waste Land* was presented to the American audience. These expectations had everything to do with commercial considerations and help explain why the modernist idiom cornered the market. In Rainey's words, for Eliot, his supporters, and publishers, "the question of publishing [*The Waste Land*] did not necessarily mean an appreciation of its quality or sympathy with its substantive components . . . but an eagerness to position" the poem in the world of financial and ideological power.

The collection concludes with two essays that examine the aesthetic and philosophical contradictions of Eliot's modernism in political terms. Michael North observes the sometimes uncanny similarities between the shifting positions of Eliot and Georg Lukács and suggests that the fault lines of modernism were not very different from those of revolutionary socialism. "Modernist literature," he concludes, was "prevented from solidifying [into its most reactionary premises] precisely because it [could not] solve the political and cultural problems of modernism [i.e., modern life]. That it continues to try keeps it both modern and anti-

modern at the same time." My own effort examines the politics, literary and otherwise, that conditioned the writing of modernism's history in the thirties and the seventies and suggests what energies these stories left out.

But before this conclusion two essays appear that consider Eliot from a literary point of view and suggest how different Eliot as poet is from the way he first presented himself. Both A. Walton Litz and Alan Williamson address Eliot's mythic allusiveness, and both demonstrate that it serves more subtle purposes than Cleanth Brooks's "rehabilitation of a system of beliefs." Williamson argues that, in *The Waste Land* no less than in *Burnt Norton*, Eliot's transcultural allusions have to do with intrapsychic depth and the processes of psychological growth. And Litz rehearses the steady alteration of Eliot's allusive techniques and suggests that especially at the end of Eliot's career the practice was related to Eliot's personal need to yield himself "to a more pervasive appropriation of other voices, other personalities. . . ."

PART ONE

*Eliot's Women/
Women's Eliot*

Eliot and Women

LYNDALL GORDON

T. S. Eliot's first love, Emily Hale, saw him not as a mild English gentleman, old buffer of the clubs, or jolly joker, but as "a man of extremes."¹ This view does fit Eliot's poetry, which jolts us from visionary "hints and guesses,"² on the one hand, to horror, despair, and futility, on the other. The women in the poetry and plays emphasize this extreme pattern. Only in his final work, *The Elder Statesman* (1958), does Eliot present a woman who evokes, for the first time, at the very end of his career, ordinary human love. This coincides, of course, with Eliot's own discovery of human love through a happy second marriage to his secretary, Valerie Fletcher, in the last eight years of his life. This was the last of four quite different relationships with women who were all remarkable and who entered his work in different ways.

The first and most long-lasting tie was with a Bostonian called Emily Hale. Eliot declared his love for her before he left for Europe in 1914 but had no impression that his feelings were re-