

**T.S. ELIOT  
AND THE  
ROMANTIC  
CRITICAL  
TRADITION**

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**EDWARD  
LOBB**

# T.S. Eliot and the Romantic Critical Tradition

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# Preface

Since revising the manuscript of this book in 1978, I have read a number of works which bear, directly or indirectly, on some of the topics I have discussed. Several of the essays in David Newton-de Molina's collection *The Literary Criticism of T. S. Eliot* (London: Athlone, 1977) deal specifically with issues raised in the following chapters. For reasons of space I have avoided repeating arguments or referring to any material not relevant to my immediate subject, but the reader should be aware that these essays are complementary to my own treatment of Eliot. Thus William Righter's 'The Philosophical Critic' is a necessary supplement to my discussion of Eliot's use of philosophical terms in Chapter 1 and Appendix B; C. K. Stead's 'Eliot, Arnold and the English Poetic Tradition' completes the picture of Eliot's relation to Arnold in Chapter 2; and Roger Sharrock's essay 'Eliot's "Tone"' should be read with my Chapter 3, 'Eliot as Rhetorician'. As the issue of Eliot's classicism falls into perspective, more attention has been given to his place in Romantic and post-Romantic tradition. A. Walton Litz's essay ' "That strange abstraction, "Nature" ": T. S. Eliot's Victorian Inheritance' in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (ed. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) is one example of good new work in this area – which, again, falls outside the limits of this study. In other instances, I have been scrupulous in acknowledging earlier work, perhaps to the point of obscuring what I believe to be genuinely new in my discussion of Eliot as a critic.

I am indebted to many people for their help. R. G. Harrison, formerly of the University of Toronto Schools, and Brian

Hennessey, C.S.B., of St Michael's College in the University of Toronto, introduced me to Eliot's shorter poems and *The Waste Land* respectively: to these men I owe my first enthusiasm for Eliot and my realization that teaching is an art. A. Walton Litz, another superb teacher, supervised my dissertation at Princeton and has provided me with invaluable help, advice, and moral support for the better part of a decade; my debt to him can be acknowledged but not repaid. Dame Helen Gardner shared, during an afternoon's conversation, both her memories of Eliot and some of the fruits of her long study of his work. Lyndall Gordon guided me through the early Eliot manuscripts in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. I am, finally, deeply grateful to Valerie Eliot for her kindness in allowing me to study her husband's unpublished manuscripts, for her interest in my project, and for her suggestions, corrections and encouragement.

A number of organizations have also assisted me. Doctoral fellowships from the Canada Council enabled me to complete my graduate education. The American Philosophical Society and the American Council of Learned Societies provided grants to cover expenses during summer research at King's College, Cambridge, in 1975, and the staff of the library at King's made working there a pleasure. The Canadian Federation for the Humanities provided criticism which enabled me to improve the manuscript substantively.

I am also indebted to my colleagues Dillon Johnston, Elizabeth Phillips, and Lee Potter, who read my first draft and made helpful suggestions; and to my student assistant, Ira Lackey, who checked the quotations and footnotes for accuracy. Most of all, I wish to thank my parents and the friends who helped me through difficult times – Madeleine Darte, John Meanwell, Gerald McKoy, Mary Jane Boland, John Tucker – and Ron Boyd, without whose help and support the book could not have been finished. In conclusion, I want to express my thanks to Stephen Brook and Angela Quinn of Routledge & Kegan Paul for their imperturbable helpfulness.

R.E.L.

Toronto

26 September 1979

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# Note on Abbreviations

Wherever possible, notes refer the reader to *Selected Essays* rather than the volumes in which the essays first appeared. The following abbreviations are used throughout the book:

SW	<i>The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism</i> , 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1928).
HJD	<i>Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on Poetry of the Seventeenth Century</i> (London: Hogarth Press, 1924).
FLA	<i>For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order</i> (London: Faber, 1970).
UPUC	<i>The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England</i> , 2nd ed. (London: Faber, 1964).
EAM	<i>Essays Ancient and Modern</i> (London: Faber, 1936).
SE	<i>Selected Essays</i> , 3rd ed. (London: Faber, 1951).
CPP	<i>The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950</i> (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952).
OPAP	<i>On Poetry and Poets</i> (London: Faber, 1957).
TCTC	<i>To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings</i> (London: Faber, 1965).

Full references to uncollected essays are given in the notes.



# Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Note on Abbreviations	xiii
Introduction	1
1 History and Poetry	11
2 Romantic Criticism and the Golden Age	60
3 Eliot as Rhetorician	93
Conclusion	135
Appendix A Eliot, Pound and Modernist Criticism	150
Appendix B Eliot and Philosophical Aesthetics	158
Notes	162
Index	189

# Introduction

En Amérique, professeur;  
En Angleterre, journaliste;  
C'est à grands pas et en sueur  
Que vous suivrez à peine ma piste.  
  'Mélange Adultère de Tout'

All critical judgments excite criticism.

T. S. Eliot, in a review<sup>1</sup>

In 1951, R. P. Blackmur wrote an essay for the *Kenyon Review* on T. S. Eliot's literary criticism. It was called 'In the Hope of Straightening Things Out', and it remains, decades later, among the best short treatments of Eliot as a critic.<sup>2</sup> The title of the essay, a phrase from Eliot's 'Dante' (1929), might stand as the motto of all serious criticism; but it often seems, particularly with Eliot, that we are as far from straightening things out as we have ever been. Eliot as a literary critic is unmistakably *there* – a formidable presence – but he is also remarkably elusive. We do not know him as we know I. A. Richards or Northrop Frye, both of whom have explained themselves at length. Eliot's relative reticence and his elliptical statements are, however, only part of the problem: a fog of academic commentary – called up, no doubt, by some protective goddess – has surrounded the criticism, and much discussion has unwittingly avoided the real issues altogether.

The confusion has existed almost from the beginning of Eliot's career as a literary critic. If, as some claim, Eliot stated all of his

major critical ideas in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), it can fairly be said that the reviews of that book established the questions with which subsequent discussion has dealt. That discussion has generated much more heat than light, but after sixty years it is possible to see which problems have been disposed of and which remain to be solved.

It was not clear in 1920, for example, that Eliot's criticism was 'a by-product of my private poetry-workshop', nor that he was 'implicitly defending the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote'.<sup>3</sup> A large part of Eliot's intention was to review the literary past in the light of present needs, as Dryden, Keats, and Arnold had done before him. Eliot had said in 1919 that 'the important critic is the person who is absorbed in the present problems of art', and it was perhaps inevitable that modernist criticism be as misunderstood as modernist poetry.<sup>4</sup> The reviewer, encountering one of Eliot's generalizations, too seldom saw it in relation to the present state of literature; he took it at face value, and often felt obliged to disagree.

A second problem was Eliot's style. The Preface to the second edition of *The Sacred Wood* (1928) acknowledged a 'stiffness and an assumption of pontifical solemnity which may be tiresome to many readers'. (SW vii) In 1961, reviewing his criticism as a whole, Eliot found 'errors of tone: the occasional note of arrogance, of vehemence, of cocksureness or rudeness, the braggadocio of the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter'.<sup>5</sup> The tone served, presumably, to protect statements which Eliot felt to be true but which were not easily demonstrable; it also served, less conveniently, to stimulate opposition. On a different level, there was the matter of Eliot's whimsy. As Eliot the banker took delight in looking as much like a City businessman as possible, so Eliot the critic delighted in assuming various critical masks. He was by turns solemnly obvious ('from the point of view of literature, the drama is only one among several poetic forms'), fastidious ('it is a question of some nicety to determine how much must be read of any particular poet'), or owlsh and avuncular.<sup>6</sup> As a result, it did not occur to the reviewers that the sneers at Meredith in *The Sacred Wood*, for example, were not to be taken too seriously. Sweetness and light and high seriousness were still the

touchstones of 'bellettristic' criticism; sarcasm and levity – aspects of what Bernard Bergonzi has called 'the supercilious urbanity of Eliot's manner' – were bound to be misunderstood.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, there were Eliot's inconsistencies. The critic, Eliot declares, 'must simply elucidate: the reader will form the correct judgment for himself'.<sup>8</sup> But *The Sacred Wood* is, as the *Times* critic noted, full of value judgments and opinion.<sup>9</sup> Eliot asserts that Swinburne 'is certainly right in putting Webster above Tourneur, Tourneur above Ford, and Ford above Shirley', and he mentions as matter of fact the 'degeneration [of blank verse] from Shakespeare to Milton'.<sup>10</sup> These are tenable opinions, but they are not simply elucidation, nor are they supported by argumentation or evidence. One could easily compile, as his opponents have done from time to time, a little anthology of similar contradictions between Eliot's expressed principles and his own practice.

These three 'problems' have largely taken care of themselves. We now take for granted, for example, that Eliot's criticism was, in part, written in defence of modernism; we likewise recognize the mixture of argument and rhetorical persuasion in the essays. Even the inconsistencies seem less important with the passage of time: complete consistency is a minor virtue, and we expect it of none but the dullest writers and critics. Furthermore, as M. C. Bradbrook has noted, the essays have the *essential* unity of any extended body of work – however various the statements, they are recognizably the products of a single mind and voice.<sup>11</sup>

One problem, however, remains obstinately unsolved. Eliot's view of literary history, and of the 'dissociation of sensibility' which functions as its Great Divide, is central to our understanding of his literary criticism. But on these, of all subjects, Eliot's reticence seems to have been almost compulsive. A few paragraphs of elusive argument in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) and fugitive comments in essays here and there were all one had to go on; the dissociation seemed to lie behind many of Eliot's pronouncements, but its exact relation to them remained mysterious. The sketchiness of the material prompted various attempts at reconstruction of the whole: the texts were gone over with rabbinical thoroughness by scholars and critics who could not agree on the meaning of these oracular fragments. Like the

blind wise men around the elephant, commentators came to various conclusions about the nature of the beast depending on the part of it they happened to touch.

The alternative was to ignore the elephant altogether, and we have had, as a result, commentators who speak as if Eliot's criticism involved no historical sense at all. This approach has the practical advantage of simplicity, and serves to locate Eliot in the modernist reaction against one kind of historical criticism, which is more comfortable with ideas than with literature – the kind of criticism which discusses Renaissance cosmology rather than the poem which employs it. It is true that Eliot rarely discusses the background of ideas behind a work, and he has been seen as an early 'new' critic. But his critique of Romanticism and his generalizations about various periods of literature clearly imply a specifically *literary* history, which focuses less on ideas than on the way in which those ideas are given literary form.

In 'Andrew Marvell' (1921), for example, Eliot compares Marvell's 'The Nymph and the Fawn' with Morris's 'Nymph's Song to Hylas', and argues that Marvell's poem is superior to Morris's. We seem to be in the realm of pure criticism and removed from historical considerations altogether, but Eliot argues throughout the essay in covertly historical terms. The comparison of Marvell and Morris is really a juxtaposition of ages, and the whole history of poetry is involved in Eliot's attempt to define a tradition of 'wit'; thirty-seven poets from classical to modern times are mentioned by name in the essay. When Eliot asserts that the 'alliance of levity and seriousness' which characterizes wit is a quality which 'expands in English literature just at the moment before the English mind altered', we look for elaboration and detail, but we look in vain.<sup>12</sup> Until recently, then, discussion of Eliot's criticism was hampered in one way or another by the historical problem: Eliot's ideas about literary history could neither be satisfactorily explained nor ignored. They seemed, like the metre in Eliot's description of free verse, 'to advance menacingly as we [dozed], and withdraw as we [roused]'.<sup>13</sup>

This situation has been changed radically by the recovery of Eliot's unpublished Clark Lectures, delivered in 1926. These lectures are discussed at length in Chapter 1, 'History and Poetry',

and they provide a much fuller picture of Eliot's developing view of literary history than we have had. There is, for example, a gap between the praise of Donne in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) and the strictures set forth in 'Lancelot Andrewes' (1926) and later essays which nothing in Eliot's published criticism quite fills. One possible explanation – the 'expansion or development of interests' which Eliot refers to in the 1928 Preface to *The Sacred Wood* – is usually taken as a covert reference to Eliot's conversion, which in turn is seen as evidence of his growing conservatism. But, as Lyndall Gordon has shown, Eliot's interest in religious and metaphysical questions was essentially defined during his career at Harvard: a dramatic particular change, such as his conversion, occurred against the background of long-standing concerns.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the revaluation of Donne represents both consistency and change in Eliot's thinking about literature. In setting the lectures against the background of Eliot's published criticism, I have tried to chronicle the development of Eliot's critique of Donne as closely as possible. In other ways, however, the lectures fit naturally into the context of Eliot's published criticism of the 1920s and 1930s, and provide a natural *entrée* to more general questions. I have consequently used the historiography of the lectures and the principles set forth in *Selected Essays* as glosses on each other when it seemed appropriate to do so. Eliot himself objected to critics who ignored the chronology of his writings; all quotations from Eliot are therefore dated in the text or in footnotes.

The lectures contain some ambiguities, as Eliot realized, but it seems pointless to raise objections – to interrupt – before the whole argument is set forth. I have tried to explain or amplify Eliot's more obscure points, and to fill in *lacunae* when they occur; parts of Chapter 1 may, as a result, sound more like advocacy of Eliot's ideas than simple exposition of them.

But the clarification of Eliot's ideas is only the first stage in our understanding of them. Eliot's version of literary history constitutes a kind of historical myth<sup>15</sup> which centres on the idea of a crisis in language (the dissociation of sensibility) and the diminished power of poetry in the ages following: it is the story of Eden applied to the secular history of literature. This literary myth

was first put forward by the Romantics, and Eliot's use of it – in his own way and for his own purposes, *mutatis mutandis* – suggests that there is a considerable Romantic heritage in Eliot's literary criticism.

The extent to which modernism as a whole was a revision or extension of Romanticism is still a matter of debate; the answers to the questions raised in that debate depend in large part upon how those protean 'isms' are defined. Eliot's dislike of Romanticism, and his sarcasms at the expense of the Romantic poets, are a matter of record. On the other hand, Eliot himself said that a poet in a Romantic age could be classical only in tendency,<sup>16</sup> and recent scholarship has revealed parts of Eliot's own relationship to Romantic tradition. Three important books have focused on the central, seemingly antithetical, figures of Yeats and Eliot, and found in each a continuation and modification of Romantic doctrine. Frank Kermode, in *Romantic Image* (1957), has dealt with the origins of the Symbolist concern with non-discursive images; C. K. Stead, in *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (1964), has discussed the modern poets' desire to reunite the roles of seer and public spokesman. More recently, George Bornstein has traced *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens*.<sup>17</sup> He has much of interest to say about Eliot's resistance to, and reconciliation with, Romanticism. All three critics (and one could list others) deal with Eliot's divided loyalties and the tension between his public classicism and his deep, often inarticulate, Romanticism.

The subject is nevertheless far from exhausted. Eliot's view of literary history is, as I shall argue in Chapter 2, basically Romantic in its nostalgia for a lost golden age: it reveals, in particular, a debt to three Romantic poet-critics (Keats, Wordsworth, and Arnold) which has never been properly analysed. Eliot's use of the Middle Ages as an argumentative 'image' likewise owes much to the Romantics and their Victorian successors. To note these affinities is not to diminish Eliot's originality in any way; as the author of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' knew, it is only in the acceptance and use of a living tradition that any real originality is possible.

The historical myth about language which Eliot adopts and

adapts in the Clark Lectures is important primarily to our understanding of his criticism of poetry, but it implies a theory of prose style as well. If the language we inherit is, for whatever reason, corrupt, it cannot be used for pure argument; rhetorical strategies become more important, particularly in the absence of shared beliefs. As John Holloway has shown in *The Victorian Sage*, argument undergoes fundamental and permanent changes during the nineteenth century. In the hands of writers as diverse as Coleridge and Arnold, Carlyle and Newman, the art of persuasion develops in new directions, largely because the ideas of these writers are not susceptible of reasoned argument in the usual sense of the term – a fact to which Eliot himself referred in several essays.

The study of Eliot's own style emerges naturally, then, from consideration of his view of language and the history of rhetoric. It is not surprising that Eliot shows his Romantic heritage in the style and strategy of his essays, in his very conception of how argument works. The rhetorical element in the prose has long been recognized, as I said earlier, and there is external evidence to show that Eliot was, as one would expect, fully aware of what he was doing. Despite these facts, no one has yet made a thorough rhetorical analysis of Eliot's literary criticism. Such an analysis need not be destructive: the aim should not be to prove that Eliot's essays are 'merely' rhetorical, but rather to analyse the art of Eliot's prose and to trace another of his links to the Romantic tradition.

Eliot's style can, without exaggeration, be compared to Johnson's or Ruskin's in rhetorical complexity. I cannot, obviously, claim to have analysed that style completely, but Chapter 3, 'Eliot as Rhetorician', is sufficiently detailed, I believe, to show the consistency between Eliot's myth of language and his practice of criticism. I have avoided traditional rhetorical terms, partly for simplicity's sake, but mostly because Eliot's usage does not fit the classical categories. Many of the examples I use are taken from Eliot's uncollected essays, which show his critical rhetoric at its most exuberant: I have tried to balance these with more moderate examples from the collected work. The number of examples in Chapter 3 may seem excessive, but it is necessary, I believe, to



show that real *patterns* of usage exist. The examples are, moreover, often delightful in themselves. Eliot's wit, his control of tone, the ways in which his argument ranges between pedantry and *sprezzatura* – all of these mark him as a master stylist. He is among our most serious critics, but he is almost never solemn.

It is appropriate, at this point, to indicate what this study does *not* do. It does not, for example, offer a general study of Eliot's criticism; it takes for granted a knowledge of the texts and of Eliot's opinions on a number of subjects. Similarly, I have not attempted to relate Eliot's criticism to his poetic and dramatic work. The unity of these chapters lies in their common concern with Eliot's place in the Romantic tradition of historiography and rhetorical persuasion, and the preservation of that unity involves certain limits of inquiry. In Eliot's criticism, as in Arnold's, there is a steady widening of perspective: as early as 1928, Eliot announced that he was concerned with 'the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and of other times'.<sup>18</sup> That same year, the polemical Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* made it clear that Eliot's literary position was tied up in his own mind with political and religious loyalties, that neo-classicism, royalism, and anglo-catholicism were somehow intimately related – were, perhaps, *sub specie aeternitatis*, aspects of a single whole. In fact, as more and more work on Eliot's thought appears, the parts of that thought seem more complex and the unity of the whole more impressive. Several studies have touched on this unity: Lyndall Gordon's book, for example, reveals much about the relation of Eliot's preoccupation with metaphysical issues to things as disparate as his dissertation, his early satiric poems, his first marriage and conversion.

We know that the lines which separate various kinds of critical activity are not always clearly drawn; Eliot himself obliterated most of them in *After Strange Gods* (1934), a farrago of literary, social, and religious criticism. Nevertheless, the lines of division are fairly clearly marked in the rest of Eliot's critical work, and, apart from a few remarks towards the end of Chapter 1 on the unity of Eliot's thought, I have avoided the temptation to write a grand synthesis of Eliot's work in literary, political, and religious criticism. Several recent studies have given us materials towards such a synthesis,