

T. S. ELIOT IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY **JASON HARDING**



CAMBRIDGE

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Abbreviations

ASG	<i>After Strange Gods</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 1934.
Brooker	<i>T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews</i> , ed. Jewel Spears Brooker. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
CFQ	<i>The Composition of 'Four Quartets'</i> , ed. Helen Gardner. London: Faber & Faber, 1978.
CPP	<i>The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 1969.
E&A	<i>Eeldrop and Appleplex</i> . Tunbridge Wells: Foundling Press, 1992.
EAM	<i>Essays Ancient & Modern</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 1936.
FLA	<i>For Lancelot Andrewes</i> . London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928.
ICS	<i>The Idea of a Christian Society</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 1939.
IMH	<i>Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917</i> , ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Faber & Faber, 1996.
KEPB	<i>Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 1964.
L1	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot</i> , vol. 1, 1898–1922. Revised edition, ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.
L2	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot</i> , vol. 11, 1923–1925, ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.
NTDC	<i>Notes Towards the Definition of Culture</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 1948.
OPP	<i>On Poetry and Poets</i> . London: Faber & Faber, 1957.
SE	<i>Selected Essays</i> . Third enlarged edition. London: Faber & Faber, 1951.
Southam	<i>A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot</i> by B. C. Southam. Fourth edition. London: Faber & Faber, 1981.
SP	<i>Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot</i> , ed. Frank Kermode. London: Faber & Faber, 1975.

- SW* *The Sacred Wood*. Second edition. London: Methuen, 1928.
TCC *To Criticize the Critic*. London: Faber & Faber, 1965.
UPUC *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. Second edition.
 London: Faber & Faber, 1964.
VMP *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard.
 London: Faber & Faber, 1993.
WLF *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original
 Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot. London: Faber & Faber, 1971.

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Introduction

Jason Harding

T. S. Eliot's work demands contextual commentary. The celebrated obliquities of his poetry are extraordinary. Studded with allusions, echoes and parallels to previous poets, these poems revel in a dislocated syntax which wilfully abstains from logical articulation. Similarly, his prose is habitually densely layered, making continual play with source materials and canvassing, in intricate and nuanced detail, a multitude of contemporary literary, cultural, social, economic, philosophical, theological and political issues that have now, for the most part, receded dimly into the past. In truth, his voluminous outpouring of poems, essays and books from 1905 until his death in 1965 cannot be divorced from the circumstances of their immediate composition and reception. The sheer erudition required to take full measure of Eliot's corpus can erect a formidable barrier between him and new readers. For this reason, a vast secondary criticism has grown up to expound and explicate this difficult, often provoking, work. However, for four decades after Eliot's death, a large amount of important archive material was routinely closed to researchers. We are now at the dawn of a new era in Eliot scholarship. The projected appearance of textually accurate and contextually annotated authorised critical editions of Eliot's prose, poetry, letters and plays will undoubtedly transform the landscape of Eliot studies. This collection, too, takes its place as a timely contribution to an exciting reassessment of Eliot's life and works, offering a valuable resource for scholars, teachers, students and general readers alike.

T. S. Eliot in Context is carefully designed to provide an authoritative and coherent examination of those 'contexts' deemed essential to the fullest understanding and appreciation of Eliot's work. It explores a broad range of subjects relating to his life, work and career; key literary, intellectual, social and historical contexts; as well as the critical reception of his works. Great pains have been taken to ensure that each chapter is clear, precise and succinct. Although written by a team of experts who have done

original research in their respective fields, this is not a collection dictated solely by the needs of academic specialists. Those readers looking for adjudications on what Professor X has said about Professor Y and Professor Z will be mostly disappointed. And yet, taken together, these chapters provide an up-to-date engagement with current developments in Eliot scholarship, and also with the wider terrain of Modernist Studies. Each chapter is self-contained and can be profitably read on its own, but it is hoped that the aggregation of chapters and sections builds into a comprehensive, composite portrait of one of the twentieth century's pre-eminent men of letters.

Contributors have been permitted some latitude in establishing the 'context' addressed in their chapter: this has led to a fascinating array of approaches, even, on occasions, to fruitful differences of opinion. Debate and disagreement is an essential ingredient in the ongoing conversation about Eliot's achievement and reputation. While consciously avoiding stage-managed controversy, *T. S. Eliot in Context* fully acknowledges the forthright expression of informed opinion. Some chapters present biographical and historical information known only to specialist scholars, others subtly reweave contextual material that has previously been examined by numerous commentators. In every case, as Anne Stillman rightly points out, the critic-as-guide must display wise tact in the course of their exposition and elucidation, encompassing a due respect for the enigma of what cannot be known or stated in bold declarative terms. This book is certainly not intended as a short cut or a substitute for reading and thinking about Eliot's writings; rather, our ambition is to stimulate further individual responses, sharpening critical appreciation and thereby enhancing the pleasure of encountering Eliot's texts. As Martin Dodsworth observes, after the critics have had their say, there is always more to be said about a body of work so inexhaustibly rich and challenging as T. S. Eliot's oeuvre.

T. S. Eliot in Context is organised into five sections. Part One, 'Life', might be seen as turning upon Eliot's gnomic statement – with Henry James in view – that it is 'the consummation of an American to become, not an Englishman, but a European'.¹ A recent BBC *Agenda* documentary has amply demonstrated the complex facets of this public, if extremely private, man. He was a scion of the New England intellectual aristocracy. In the early nineteenth century, his paternal grandfather transplanted an educational fervour mixed with religious duty to the Midwestern frontier, where Eliot grew up in a maternal environment dominated by the example of this illustrious patriarch. After an education at genteel

Harvard, touring its seedier environs, he was irresistibly drawn to Paris at a particularly crucial stage in his intellectual formation, and then to London, where he settled into the conventions of middle-class sobriety by day – as a teacher at private schools, City banker, ultimately a gentlemanly publisher – albeit indulging his mildly bohemian tastes after working hours. In time, he came to articulate mythologies betokening a strong desire to belong to imagined communities – to an ‘Englishness’ founded on an ideal of class-based and religio-cultural stability, and to the larger geographical and spiritual fraternity embodied by an undissociated ‘mind of Europe’. That this lifelong advocate of the ‘unity of European culture’ lived through two ruinous European wars culminating in a Communist iron curtain drawn over half of the Continent is an inescapable context for revisiting these ideals. Part Two, ‘Forms’, brings us closer to Eliot’s public roles. As an intellectual, he was a combative pundit equipped with a suave but imposing rhetorical armoury (deploying a corrosive irony). He was a publisher who worked in a climate of heavy censorship and a prolific literary journalist who appeared regularly in a remarkable variety of periodicals. Upon founding his own critical review, the *Criterion*, he commissioned regular bulletins on the latest innovations in the visual arts, theatre, dance, music and radio broadcasting. His work as a successful dramatist and as a BBC broadcaster in particular, unsettles misleading accounts of Eliot as an aloof ‘Modernist’ (a term he never embraced). By contrast, the chapters in this section reveal a more complicated picture of a man who continuously reached out to diverse audiences in search of a common culture.

‘Modernism’ is not a term that appears in the chapter titles of the section characterised as ‘Literary Cross-Currents’. Since Eliot’s distinction lies primarily in his achievement as a poet, secondarily in his influence as a critic, his polemical (somewhat opportunistic) re-evaluation of the literary canon is located quite properly at the heart of this collection. These fresh chapters significantly revise standard accounts of Eliot’s literary borrowings and his critical prejudices. Above all, they demonstrate the dynamic ways in which Eliot’s confrontation with ‘tradition’ is manifested in his poetry. A recurrent theme is the exploration of how his prodigious reading is put to excellent use – quite deliberately, though at times issuing through subterranean layers – in the combustible furnace of his transformative imagination. His compulsion to search the literary past for those elements that could be made to speak to the present is not patient scholarship, but the work of a poetic practitioner. It goes hand in hand with an acute, if abruptly dismissive, awareness of his difference from

contemporaries; some of these were erstwhile fellow travellers, others antagonists who formed the whetstone on which he sharpened his own razor-sharp literary self-consciousness. This section sifts literary history, uncovering fertile allusions in Eliot's idiosyncratic readings of Shakespeare, Dante and the Classics. Moreover, by resituating this intense engagement with the literature of the past not only among trends in the scholarship and criticism of the day but also in the light of his own instrumental aesthetic goals, these chapters reinfect received knowledge: Eliot's penchant for seventeenth-century and French symbolist varieties of metaphysical 'wit', for instance, was tempered by a sense of their extravagance or narcissistic limitations; just as his fastidious recoil from Romantic self-revelation and from sub-Romantic forms of Georgian pastoralism did not prevent him from acknowledging a profound debt to the practice and theory of individual Romantic poets, or from sponsoring as editor and publisher a number of 'Georgian' poets. This ambivalence in his literary relations is also apparent in his dialogues with his friend Ezra Pound and with his Bloomsbury acquaintances, as in the respectful distance he maintained from the most advanced cadres of the European avant-garde.

Part Four, 'Politics, Society and Culture', tackles head-on several controversial subjects. These chapters remind us that if Eliot's values and beliefs are not ones that are commonly held in high regard today, they were sophisticated responses to specific socio-cultural conditions, as well as to extreme political and economic crises. What emerges from this section are the continuities and transitions in Eliot's thought, rather than sudden reversals or conversions. While hostile critics have latched on to Eliot's occasionally unguarded or intolerant public pronouncements, these chapters reveal the degree of scepticism, at times radical, with which he held a point of view. From his earliest exposure to the competing theories of positivism, pragmatism and relativism during his undergraduate and graduate studies in philosophy, social science and natural science, Eliot was impressed by a need to impose social order on metaphysical and epistemological flux. His commitment to the Anglican Church identified that branch of it which cherished exacting ritual observance without entailing submission to the dogma of papal infallibility. The right-wing conservatism of his political convictions and his regrettably condescending remarks about (free-thinking) Jews and women are investigated here in chapters which combine sensitivity and empathy with a tough-minded willingness to judge those aspects which are unpalatable. Finally, Part Five re-examines Eliot's critical reception: from the polarised