

Poet, critic, dramatist, editor, Nobel laureate—Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was an uncompromising, prolific author whose writings in several genres held the attention of other writers and of a wide audience during his lifetime. Eliot had more influence on his “contemporaries and younger fellow writers than perhaps anyone else of our time,” as Gustaf Hellström of the Swedish Academy remarked in introducing Eliot when he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.¹ Hellström also compared Eliot’s effect on literature to the revolutionary impact of Sigmund Freud’s contribution to our understanding of the mind. The public recognition that he achieved during his lifetime is hard for us to imagine now. When Eliot lectured or read from his poetry while visiting the United States in the 1950s, the crowds were so large that some of the events were held in sports stadiums filled with thousands of people. The remarkable impression that Eliot produced was still strong when he died in 1965. It had arisen primarily because his poetry was permanently revolutionary in character and his essays insistently challenged and displaced dominant nineteenth-century views on literature and literary history. The literary canon changed, for example, after Eliot made a case for the modern relevance of John Donne and other Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century.

The Waste Land and “Tradition and the Individual Talent” may well be the most widely reprinted and discussed longer poem and literary essay of the twentieth century. When *The Waste Land* appeared in 1922, its revolutionary quality and its accomplished, memorable intensity turned Eliot overnight from a poet appreciated by the avant-garde into a writer widely recognized for his enigmatic, daunting, but also unforgettable, poetry. The poem becomes even more strangely memorable when we hear the unusual intonations that Eliot adopts on recordings. *The Waste Land* won a substantial cash prize from *The Dial*, the

journal that published it in the United States. Eliot's fame persisted when, over the next decades, he continued to write distinctive poetry that was widely read and soon widely taught, and to publish influential essays and verse dramas that drew audiences in London theatres. In addition, Eliot edited his own journal, *The Criterion*, for nearly twenty years, until ceasing publication when he knew that World War II was imminent. As an editor at Faber and Faber he had decisive influence on the selection of contemporary writers to be brought out by this major British publishing house. He helped, for instance, to keep Ezra Pound in print at Faber.

Eliot's poetry is experimental, intellectual, and not overtly personal. The intellectuality of the verse comes in part from his knowledge of philosophy. During his graduate studies at Harvard, Eliot wrote while living in England an accomplished doctoral dissertation on the British philosopher, F. H. Bradley, but he never returned to Harvard to defend the thesis and receive the degree. The decision not to return reflected the expense and danger of crossing the Atlantic during World War I, but the choice was also a determined break with his family and with a career in academic philosophy that awaited him in the United States. Instead, he remained in England to pursue his vocation as a poet and essayist. He admired Dante and Metaphysical poets as precursors whose poems were not personal, that is, not primarily and explicitly about the poet's emotions and feelings. Eliot objected to the tradition of British Romantic poetry, as it had developed by the early twentieth century into a debased popular preference for the subjective and the expressive.

Eliot advocated poetry that included and invited thinking about ideas, poetry that could overcome the dissociation of sensibility, the division of thought from feeling that he attributed to John Milton and Milton's Romantic descendants. His writing, however, is not poetry of ideas, narrowly speaking—not logical, philosophical argument in the form of discursive verse. Instead it is highly fragmented, elliptical, enigmatic, and allusive, often including jarring juxtapositions of dif-

ferent kinds of language and experiences. It yokes opposites, sometimes aggressively, in a modern version of Metaphysical poetry. Rather than being discursive and rational, Eliot's writing can be gothic and surreal, with many moments that seem a matter of chance, not of intelligible intention, in a way that bears comparison with Edgar Allan Poe and with Dada and its aftermath. Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte were his contemporaries, and Salvador Dalí and Samuel Beckett were only half a generation younger. They were his fellow travelers in producing strange, challenging work that makes a lasting impression but does not yield to easy explanations that emphasize the personal or the rational.

What is permanently revolutionary about Eliot's work? The diversity and multiplicity of the writing, both in form and in language, provide a large part of the answer. Eliot gives us no stable place to stand in responding to his career or to its individual parts. He was chameleonic and kaleidoscopic, a shape changer who could publish articles in academic philosophical journals, turn the dramatic monologue into a hardly recognizable fragmented modernist form, write self-less incantatory verse, create drawing-room comedies for the British stage, write children's poems about cats, and produce a long poetic sequence late in his career that is both musical and spiritual in its elaborate poetic translation of pre-Socratic philosophical fragments. It is not possible to reconcile the multiplicity into a single human being who was the writer.

Eliot's arguments about literature and the details of his poetic language also resist reduction to single perspectives. His perspectives are multiple and oscillating. Eliot's meditation on creativity in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" circles around the conundrum of the individual and the inheritance from the past, a conundrum that cannot be coherently simplified to either the person only or the historical only. It ambiguously and complexly involves both. The famous comparison, in "Prufrock"'s opening, of the evening to a patient anesthetized (we know not how fully) on a table is a prime example of his poetic language's complex, ambiguous, multiply suggestive qualities. The odd

comparison can take us in many directions, including ones that raise questions about the relation of nature to the human, about consciousness, and about the way the speaker, concerning whom we know little, thinks. Eliot's poetic language regularly challenges the stability of identity in his speakers and in us. His persistent dissolving of the *I* that many of us assume to be stable makes the poetry perpetually enigmatic and disconcerting. In *S/Z* Roland Barthes claims that literature always prevents the question *Who speaks?* from ever being answered. Eliot provides compelling evidence for this claim. If we do not know who or what speaks, we also do not know who or what is being addressed. It is ourselves who overwhelmingly come into unanswerable question in the mirror of Eliot's poetry.

After Eliot's death, there was a backlash in the academy against his work, and against literary modernism in general, as it was understood then. Modernist writers, with the exception of a few, such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, were demoted from the place of prominence that they had held, but no one else as drastically as Eliot. Lightning always strikes the tallest tree on the mountain most frequently. The strength of the belated negative reaction is a testament to Eliot's importance during his lifetime and an indication of his continuing, long-term significance. A new generation's adjustment in views about writing that have held sway for decades is normal. Eliot himself had participated aggressively in his own generation's rebuke of nineteenth-century precursors. The vehemence of the reversal in views about Eliot on the part of some scholars was, however, surprisingly strong. In the 1970s and 1980s, he was frequently assailed as reactionary (even fascist), anti-feminist, and anti-Semitic. For a time, at major literary conferences speakers sometimes included negative asides about Eliot even when they were dealing with subjects that did not involve his work. From the perspective of some who were affected by the social and sexual liberation that developed in the late 1960s, Eliot was a dead white European male to be exorcised, a conservative rather than a liberatory force.

Since the late 1990s, modernist studies have burgeoned, and revised descriptions of literary modernism have emerged along with changed historical and intellectual insights that help provide provisional answers to new questions. Within the revived attention to a literary modernism now more broadly defined than fifty years ago, Eliot is still a central figure, still a large presence, but on a larger canvas. More than half a century after Eliot's death, we are in a better position than either Eliot's contemporaries or those who immediately followed them in making meaningful, defensible sense of his remarkable writings.

Note

1. Hellström, Gustaf. Nobel Prize in Literature. Presentation Speech. http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1948/eliot-speech.html