

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-