

Literature Insights

T. S. Eliot

‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ and *The Waste Land*

by C. J. Ackerley

*‘He do the police
in different
voices’*

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A Note on the Author

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*And I am accustomed to more documentation;
I like to know where writers get their ideas from...*

—Charles Augustus Conybeare,
The Carlton Club, Liverpool.¹

¹ Otherwise T. S. Eliot, writing in *The Egoist* (December 1917).

Part 1: Before *The Waste Land*

1.1 Eliot's Life and Works

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St Louis on 26 September 1888. His father, Henry Ware Eliot, a successful businessman and an executive of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company, married in 1860 Charlotte Champe Stearns, a woman with literary intentions who wrote a biography of Eliot's grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot and a dramatic poem about Savonarola. The family had New England and Unitarian connections (both are manifest in Eliot's early writing). The young Tom Eliot was schooled at Smith Academy, St Louis, and the Milton Academy, Massachusetts, before enrolling at Harvard in 1906, where he took his Master's degree (1910) in philosophy. That year he began the 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', which remained published until 1915. In 1911 Eliot went to the Sorbonne, Paris, where he met a young Frenchman named Jean Verdenal; then he returned to Harvard where he studied Sanskrit and furthered his love of French poetry as he began a doctoral dissertation on F. H. Bradley, author of *Appearance and Reality*, a text that exercised considerable influence on his thought. In 1914, Eliot was awarded the Sheldon Fellowship in philosophy, which gave him a year in England. He visited Marburg, Germany, that summer, but the outbreak of war forced him back to Merton College, Oxford, where he continued his studies before making three crucial decisions (each encouraged by Ezra Pound): to forsake philosophy for poetry; to marry Vivien Haigh-Wood; and to settle in England.

Each proved momentous: Eliot would become the spokesman for the disillusion of a post-War generation; the marriage to Vivien would be a defining feature of his life, her neuralgia, insomnia and menstrual problems meeting his highly-strung consciousness and sexual fastidiousness; and he would become a quintessentially English voice and the most respected poet of his age. Partly in reaction to his marriage Eliot began to seek his personal and cultural consolation in Christianity, finally becoming, in his words, 'classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in

religion'.¹ These matters found expression in *The Waste Land*; it remains a moot (but crucial) question as to how obvious or latent that expression might be.

Eliot's position in the years leading up to that poem was precarious. Because of the war, he was unable to defend his Harvard thesis. To support his new life he took a position, first, as a teacher at High Wycombe Grammar School and later (March 1917) as a clerk at Lloyds Bank, where he remained until 1925, resisting Pound's well-intentioned but impractical intentions of 'rescuing' him from that fate. Like Wallace Stevens, Eliot preferred to combine his vocation as a poet with a sedentary job. In 1922 he founded *The Criterion*, a conservative cultural periodical that was from 1925 sponsored by the publishing firm of Faber & Gwyer (soon Faber & Faber), which Eliot joined that year and of which he eventually became a director.

Eliot's new life is not the subject of this study, yet the difficult years between 'Prufrock' and *The Waste Land* were the matrix out of which his later writing was born. 'The Hollow Men' and 'Ash-Wednesday' trace the trajectory of his increasing attraction to the religious life, as reflected in his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927 and his abandonment of Vivien in the early 1930s, a decision that haunted him like the memory of a sojourn in hell,² no matter how he might justify it privately in terms of an Aeneas who must abandon his Dido to fulfil a greater spiritual duty. The public vindication of the religious vocation resides less in the controversial and intolerant essays of the 1930s on religion, culture and literature than the verse drama from *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) to *The Elder Statesman* (1953) and the poetry that many consider his masterpiece, the *Four Quartets* (1935–42).

1.2 Reading Eliot

If Eliot's critical standing has had its ups and downs and has recently settled with less than the gilt-edged status it once enjoyed, 'Prufrock' is as fresh today as when it was first written, and, for better or worse, *The Waste Land* remains the celebrated poem of its age, occupying a position similar to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (fiction) and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (drama), as a text that may be venerated, despised, rejected or enjoyed, but not ignored. Eliot expressed exasperation at its fame, more than once dismissing it as a piece of rhythmical grumbling; but the poem consolidated the revolution in poetry that he and Pound had initiated, making him in effect the arbiter of elegance of his age and placing him at the centre of London literary society, much as

1 T. S. Eliot, Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (London: Faber & Faber, 1928), 7.

2 Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's New Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.

Matthew Arnold had been in his.

Even so, the ways of reading Eliot's poetry remain unsettled. Is *The Waste Land*, for instance, a Modernist text, to be read according to the cultural principles of its own age and/or Eliot's own critical, musical and aesthetic principles? Or is it better approached from a post-Derridean perspective, affirming the dialogic imagination and permissive meaning? A Modernist (centripetal) reading might stress coherence, seeking the unity of a fragmented discourse, a voice behind the different voices; a post-Modernist (centrifugal) reading could celebrate the diversity of tone and voice, the impulse to fragmentation and a tradition in tatters. And if Eliot finally reconciled these antithetical impulses in his vision of a Christian society, what does that imply for us? Equally, should *The Waste Land* be read strictly in its own terms (whatever those are), or as a prelude to the works that follow but were not then conceived? The poem in isolation seems one thing; but read as an interrupted pilgrimage towards the new life (as Lyndall Gordon has defined Eliot's impulse towards Anglicanism) it appears as something else. And there remains the vexed question of personality: Eliot's poetry embodies a central paradox, that of the author's insistence on poetic impersonality even as his verse encapsulates the most harrowing personal feelings and presents the most agonizing images of the individual mind.

The critical tradition reflects these dilemmas. The poem was at first typically seen as powerful but incoherent, yet the accompanying notes suggested a 'plan'. New Critics, such as Cleanth Brooks, stressed its structural, thematic and poetic integrity, and (their lasting legacy) insisted on high standards of close reading even as they celebrated its allusive and ambiguous qualities. But as New Criticism faded, new paradigms (structuralist, post-structuralist, New Historicist, deconstructive, feminist, psycho-analytic) offered different readings that stress 'absences', 'ruptures' and 'discontinuities'. In his excellent survey of this process, Lawrence Rainey concludes that the demise of critical consensus about the poem means that today, more than ever, questions of coherence are open to fresh interrogation.³

To be sure, Eliot when writing the early poems could not have imagined the intense scrutiny that they would receive, and there is thus in his later critical writing an element of defence against too much prying into the personal life behind the verse. Eliot retained a deep wish for privacy. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), he insisted on the rigorous separation of the man who suffers from the mind that creates; and eight years later, in 'The Stoicism of Seneca' (1927), he argued that

3 Lawrence Rainey, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), 19.

the poet's business is 'to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange'. Eliot's insistence on impersonality has discouraged many readers from seeing the poem in personal terms; equally, some biographical readings fail to distinguish between events in Eliot's life and their representation in his poetry.

One must take a stand. In what follows I attempt to reconcile the key issues of coherence/discontinuity and impersonal/personal with an approach to the purpose that seeks order (yet admits chaos) by reading it in much the way that 'Prufrock' might be read, as a dramatic monologue. That is, I seek a middle ground between seeing the poetry as essentially impersonal and/or regarding it as an 'exorcism of the demons';⁴ and I do so by relating the imagery not to the referential world but to an implied speaker or mediator. This is easily done with 'Prufrock' and 'Portrait of a Lady' where the influence of Robert Browning is discernible if interiorised (as in the fiction of Henry James); and 'Gerontion', where the persona is identified. *The Waste Land*, infinitely more complex in its orchestration, may yet be seen as a dramatic poem that evokes from the outset a depressed state of mind and follows it through the stages of a partial recovery. In other words, I assume for *The Waste Land* as for the other poems a coherent structure of discourse, with a central consciousness uniting the various parts; in what follows I refer to this construct as 'the protagonist' or 'the poet' (as distinct from Eliot himself), and unlike some commentators I do not identify that consciousness with Tiresias. If this is an essentially modernist perspective, emphasising a mediating awareness rather than a fragmented vision, I can only affirm the need for such visions and revisions in a post-post-Modernist age. And there is a pragmatic purpose in so doing: even if my reader finally disagrees (as many will) with this emphasis, the fiction of coherence at least offers a framework to permit a close scrutiny of the particulars of the poem and the allusive and musical qualities that (on any reading) are its constitutive elements.

Question: does the definition of the poem as 'dramatic' resolve the oppositions noted: the 'personal' vs 'impersonal' and the 'centrifugal' vs 'centripetal' readings? Is the 'dramatic' a genuine critical option, or a structure of convenience?

4 James E. Miller, Jr., *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (University Park & London: Pennsylvania University State Press, 1977) is an extreme instance of the tendency to reduce Eliot's poetry to a travesty of his life.

1.3 The Music of Ideas

One disconcerting element of Eliot's early poetry is his elimination of connective and transitional passages, so that the poetry moves not by narrative continuity but by the 'music of ideas', or the juxtaposition of image and phrase to assert patterns and relationships not immediately apparent. Another technique is allusion; in his early works Eliot draws on not only the central works of a Western tradition in ruins but a range of personal and esoteric sources, the public and the private mingled in a new and complex manner. In Sheridan's *The Critic* (I.i), the finest passages of the would-be writer, Sir Fretful Plagiary, 'lie on the surface like lumps of marl upon a barren moor, encumbering what it is not in their power to fertilize'; the challenge to Eliot's reader is to appreciate how the poetry arises from the process of fertilisation as the past is made to enrich the present, however complex that relation might be.

In his essay 'Matthew Arnold' (1927), Eliot affirmed the primacy of the auditory imagination, 'the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word'; but I would stress his immediate insistence that such an imagination 'works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense.'⁵ That is, from the relationship between words and the contexts from which they derive. Eliot's method is essentially allusive and, as Grover Smith has tartly observed, to argue that the poem provides so much without the allusions that one doesn't therefore require them is like saying that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is so magnificent that one might as well close one eye to look at it.⁶ There are differences of degree between conscious allusion and indeterminate echo, but, as a reading of Marie Larisch's *My Past* and Hermann Hesse's *Blick ins Chaos* will show, to anticipate two examples, awareness of context can make a qualitative difference to not only the appreciation of a line but to the hidden music of the entire poem. In a later essay, 'The Three Voices of Poetry',⁷ Eliot argued that 'The attempt to explain the poem by tracing it back to its origins will distract attention from the poem'; this may be countered by the claim that if allusion is the device through which the reader is directed to the central concerns of the poem, then the more we understand the better placed we are to respond. This is not to make the mistake of what Eliot in 'The Frontiers of Criticism' called confusing explanation for understanding,⁸ but rather to affirm the

5 T. S. Eliot, 'Matthew Arnold', in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), 118–19.

6 Grover Smith, *The Waste Land* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 147.

7 T. S. Eliot, 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (1953), in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), 99.

8 T. S. Eliot, 'The Frontiers of Criticism' (1956), in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), 109.

kind of comment that might enhance such understanding.

In his 1986 study of Modernism, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot*, C.K. Stead argues with reference to the sailor's song from *Tristan und Isolde* that the quotation 'works' in the sense that it conveys a range of feeling even to a young reader who knows nothing of Wagner, and who is consequently unmoved by such echoes:⁹

So if the full richness of the opening music of Wagner's opera is called up at this point, with all its promise of an intense and disastrous love, that is perhaps a bonus for the reader, but not, I think, quite part of what should be called the primary experience. It is a secondary resonance. And in fact in terms of the Symbolist poetics (which are operating here) such a quotation may be said to work more purely the less that is known about it. To the innocent reader who knows no German and nothing of Wagner, it is a magical incantation, the words *and their context* creating their own reality. And this innocence is lost, it is replaced by intellectual, and what might be called secondary emotional, recognitions. But it would be wrong to argue that the reader who knows more feels more, or experiences more fully.

Stead is one of Eliot's better readers, and yet this evocation of a magical incantation is almost a travesty of Eliot's contention in 'Dante' (1929) that genuine poetry can communicate before it is properly understood. Ezra Pound defined the Image for all time as that which presents an intellectual *and* emotional complex (my italics) in an instant of time; the separation of the intellectual from the emotional is thus an unwarranted dissociation of sensibility. The reader with the deeper love and knowledge of Wagner (other things being equal) should have the richer primary experience. True, readers ignorant of allusions have 'felt' something of their power and emotion; and, yes, knowledge without feeling is arid; yet allusions are not simply incantatory, since through them the poet (and so the reader) may penetrate to the deeper roots of feeling and consciousness, which, the more perfectly understood, may be the more intensely felt. And much needs to be known about *The Waste Land*, an Imagist epic about the same length as *Paradise Lost*, but with its images condensed instead of expanded. The challenge is that of reading 'Prufrock' and *The Waste Land* in the best Imagist way, with intellect and emotion combined.

Question: can *The Waste Land* (433 lines) really be described both as an epic (like *Paradise Lost*, in twelve vast books) and an Imagist poem (typically, a few lines)?

9 C. K. Stead, *Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 96.

Part 2: ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’

2.1 ‘Prufrock’

‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ was written in 1910, completed in 1911 (in Munich), and published in *Poetry* (Chicago) in 1915, at the insistence of Ezra Pound who cajoled Harriet Monroe and the reluctant editors of an advanced journal to accept this piece by an unknown author, however odd it might seem. Such reluctance seems curious today, with ‘Prufrock’ one of the best-loved poems of its age. After almost a century it retains the freshness and vigour (equally, the weariness and ennui) of when it was written. Yet ‘Prufrock’ was radical. To Pound’s amazement, Eliot had ‘modernised’ himself without help (that is, from Pound). His reading of the French Symbolists and English Metaphysicals (LaFontaine and Gautier, Donne and Marvell), begun at Harvard with help from Arthur Symonds’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1906), had honed the hard dry edge of wit, allusion and irony that would characterize his later writing. He had thrown down the gauntlet to the Romantics and Georgians who were working in an exhausted poetic vein. By returning to the tradition Eliot had, Pound affirmed, ‘made it new’.

The poem depicts the agony of inadequacy, an agony arising less from the fact of Prufrock’s inadequacy than his consciousness thereof. The title is a miniature portrait: a surname suggestive of prudes, prunes and prisms, with a touch of prissiness; a forename unusual among the Boston Brahmins; the two preceded by an initial (not ‘Alfred J.’ but ‘J. Alfred’), as if to assert that he is somebody different, someone who matters, someone who might sing—a love-song?? Like Hiawatha??? The name echoes the Prufrock-Littau furniture dealers in St. Louis; Eliot thought this possible, but did not recall the association.

‘Prufrock’ begins with six lines from Dante’s *Inferno* XXVII.61–66, translatable thus: ‘If I thought my answer were to one who could ever return to the world, this flame should shake no more; but since, if what I hear be true, none did ever return above from this depth, without fear of infamy I answer thee.’ These are the words to Dante of Guido da Montefeltro, trapped for fraudulent counsel within a living flame that trembles even as he speaks. The epigraph frames the action: one trapped in hell,

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