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T. S. Eliot and Modernity

LOUIS MENAND

MODERNISM is a reaction against the modern. This definition does not meet the case of every work of literature or criticism we call modernist, but it meets the case of T. S. Eliot at least as well as any other generalization; and no generalization about modernism can afford to make an exception of Eliot. For Eliot became a major figure in a culture whose leading tendencies he had devoted his career to disparaging. He might have done so as a critic honored for his isolation, as the representative of an adversarial position, a countermodern. But he became instead (after struggles for acceptance now a little underrated) a paragon of the establishment. And the paradox is even more complete; for Eliot's greatest influence on twentieth-century culture was felt in, and transmitted through, an institution that is a monument to all the modern values he most despised—the university. Eliot never courted the academy; he took the opportunity, on various occasions, of insulting it. But the modern academy, at a crucial moment in its history, made an icon of Eliot. And this suggests that the answer to the question of Eliot's success is likely to be found not simply in what he had to say but also in the institutional needs his writing was able to serve.

I

Modernism is a reaction against the modern. The definition derives from one of the earliest considerations of the subject, Horace Kallen's article on "Modernism" in the 1933 edition of the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (though Kallen was trying to explain the difference between modern and modernist painting and does not seem to have had literature in mind). It

sounds paradoxical, and with good reason. For "modernism," taken as the name of a movement in twentieth-century Anglo-American writing, looks like a variant of "modern," which is a common term for a phase of Western culture some (like Kallen) say began with Rousseau, or, more broadly, with Descartes, or, more broadly still, with the Renaissance. And there is a point of view from which modernist writing is simply a version of modern writing, a point of view from which modernism looks perfectly continuous with romanticism and humanism—even in its attempts to parody, to disparage, to critique, or to replace those traditions.

This point of view accommodates Eliot quite comfortably. He belongs to the modern tradition partly by temperament: he made a show, in his criticism, of depreciating writers to whom he clearly owed a good deal of his voice as a poet and his principles as a critic. But he is a modern by fate as well. He could hardly have hoped to make himself the exception to the conditions he analyzed with such mordant disapproval; and when Eliot criticized modern life for its lack of a coherent moral ground and for the idiosyncratic and makeshift value systems it produced to compensate for that inadequacy, he did so in the name of doctrines—"royalism," to take a notorious example—whose idiosyncrasies are, to say the least, fairly pronounced. Eliot built his castle out of the stones he found lying around the yard of modernity, just as Wordsworth, Emerson, Arnold, and Pater had built theirs.

There is a second ambiguity in the definition of modernism as a reaction against the modern, and this one also fits Eliot's case. When someone refers, in the way Kallen does, to "the modern," we are likely to ask, "The modern which?" For we are accustomed to drawing a distinction between modern art and literature, on the one hand, and modern life—the political, social, and economic conditions of modernity—on the other. We think of the first as the antagonist of the second: modern life runs along its track of disenchantment and demystification, and modern art and literature assess the damage. But this is a distinction Eliot always refused to recognize, and that refusal is the defining characteristic of his thought. It is what separates

him in the end from the nineteenth-century critics with whom he otherwise shares so much, and it constitutes the proper grounds for calling him a reactionary. Eliot considered modern society and modern art and literature to be aspects of the same condition. A few writers seemed to him to have achieved a critical position within the culture of modernity—Flaubert, Baudelaire, Henry James. But Eliot identified the main stream of modern culture as romanticism, and he regarded romanticism as the secret friend and abettor of all the tendencies of modern life he most deplored: liberalism, secularism, laissez-faire.

Eliot began his career, however, by isolating the domain of literary values from the domains of philosophy, politics, and religion. Convinced that extraliterary interests had intruded upon and adulterated literature and literary criticism, Eliot advanced a strategy that was itself intended as an act of cultural criticism. His earliest essays and reviews; his first volume of criticism, *The Sacred Wood* (1920); and the three essays on seventeenth-century poetry published in 1921—"John Dryden," "Andrew Marvell," and "The Metaphysical Poets"—are guided by the principle, as Eliot later expressed it, that "when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing."¹

By 1924, though, when the essays on seventeenth-century poetry were reprinted by the Hogarth Press as *Homage to John Dryden*, Eliot had come to regard this sort of formalist criticism as not entirely adequate to the sorts of judgments he now wanted to make. "I have long felt that the poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even much of that of inferior inspiration, possesses an elegance and a dignity absent from the popular and pretentious verse of the Romantic Poets and their successors," he declared in the introduction to *Homage to John Dryden*. Now dissatisfied with the essays he had written three years earlier, he explained that "To have argued this claim persuasively would have led me indirectly into considerations of politics, education, and theology which I no longer care to ap-

¹T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 2d ed. (London: Methuen, 1928), p. viii.

proach in this way.”² And in 1928, in the preface to the second edition of *The Sacred Wood*, he announced that “poetry . . . certainly has something to do with morals, and with religion, and even with politics perhaps,” and thus the consideration of “poetry as poetry” constituted merely “a point from which to start.”³ After *Homage to John Dryden*, then, Eliot’s literary criticism—collected in *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), *Dante* (1929), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *Elizabethan Essays* (1934), *Essays Ancient and Modern* (1936), *On Poetry and Poets* (1957), and *To Criticize the Critic* (1965)—was complemented by the much broader sociological criticism of modernity mounted in *After Strange Gods* (1934), *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). Eliot took the modern world as a totality, and his critique, though it was not systematic or even in every respect consistent, was undertaken in the spirit of a total critique.

For most readers, Eliot’s criticism is embodied in what was arguably the most influential work of literary criticism in the English-speaking world during the middle third of the twentieth century, the *Selected Essays* (1932; new edition, 1950). But the grand edifice of the *Selected Essays* has tended to block our view of the extent to which Eliot was, in his ordinary practice as a critic, a controversialist. He had a journalistic nose for opportunity. He sensed, usually before his contemporaries did, when reputations that seemed established had become moribund and when systems of value that seemed intact had lost their cogency. He brought to these occasions “solutions” which were not really original, except in the sense that they sometimes represented a fresh synthesis or an unexpected application of ideas already current. His strongest suit as a critic was not originality or argumentative power but skepticism. He could sustain (like Joyce, whose work he admired but with whom he otherwise had little in common) an attitude of seeing through everything, including the attitude of seeing through everything. This is far too corrosive an attitude to inform an effective social criticism;

²Eliot, preface to *Homage to John Dryden* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), p. 9.

³Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, p. viii.

and Eliot's social criticism, although it was regarded by some of his admirers with pious respect during the period of its author's greatest renown, attracted few disciples. But the skepticism did underwrite a famously successful literary criticism.

II

The great puzzle of Eliot's literary criticism, as it must be for any self-proclaimed formalism, is the relation between (as Eliot himself often termed it) poetry and belief. Writers have views of various types—philosophical, political, religious, psychological—and what they write reflects those views in various ways. No matter how disciplined we are about concentrating our critical attention on the form rather than the content of a literary work—on the way the language is organized rather than on the “messages” it might be “communicating”—it is impossible, or at least highly unnatural, to reach a judgment that is unaffected by the degree of our personal assent for what we understand the writer to believe. Some of Eliot's adherents, particularly the American New Critics and, in England, I. A. Richards and his student William Empson, tried to finesse this problem by developing an aesthetic that took a good poem to be one in which the “views” or “beliefs” expressed in it, in effect, cancel each other out—thus the well-known critical lexicon of “irony,” “paradox,” and “ambiguity,” all of which name techniques for neutralizing content. But Eliot did not adopt this vocabulary. He was himself, after all, a poet with rather highly developed beliefs of his own; and so he attempted to approach the dilemma head-on.

“It happens now and then,” Eliot wrote in an essay on Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in 1936, “that a poet by some strange accident expresses the mood of his generation, at the same time that he is expressing a mood of his own which is quite remote from that of his generation.”⁴ It is hard to miss Eliot's personal identification here with the author of a long elegiac poem constructed of scraps of lyric patched together to form a kind of

⁴Eliot, “In Memoriam,” in *Selected Essays*, new ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950), p. 291.

diary of the soul—the whole enterprise invested with pathos because once the poem has been taken to the public's heart, it is no longer understood. And, in fact, what Eliot said about Tennyson in 1936 was essentially an echo of a complaint he had made on his own behalf five years before: "when I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation,' which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention."⁵

The chief approving critic Eliot had in mind here was I. A. Richards—one of many writers (Herbert Read was another) who must often have thought they were following Eliot's lead only to find him later adducing their work as a cautionary example of critical error. In an article in the *Criterion* which became a chapter of *Science and Poetry* (1926), Richards had cited the author of *The Waste Land* as a poet who had succeeded in "effecting a complete separation between his poetry and *all* beliefs."⁶ He cast his statement as praise; but Eliot understood it a little differently, and in "A Note on Poetry and Belief" (1927), in *The Enemy*, he responded by asserting that "I cannot see that poetry can ever be separated from something which I should call belief, and to which I cannot see any reason for refusing the name of belief, unless we are to reshuffle names altogether."⁷ But it takes only a little reshuffling to see the corner Richards had backed Eliot into; for if we call a "belief" an "idea"—that is, a consciously held view about the nature or the meaning of experience—we run straight into the tangle of ideology that Eliot's own poetic criticism, by considering "poetry as poetry, and not another thing," had been designed to avoid.

One way to defuse the "views" in a poem is to accord an idea, poetically expressed, the same status as an image or a feeling. This was the basis for Eliot's famous celebration of the metaphysical poets in 1921: "A thought to Donne was an experience;

⁵Eliot, "Thoughts after Lambeth," in *Selected Essays*, p. 324.

⁶I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry*, 2d ed. (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., 1935), p. 70.

⁷Eliot, "A Note on Poetry and Belief," *Enemy* 1 (January 1927): 16.

it modified his sensibility.”⁸ The poet is the receptor, rather than the originator, of thought. He or she has nothing invested in the idea; it is only part of the materials the world has furnished out of which a poem can be shaped. Eliot’s application of the principle to Henry James is similarly famous: “He had a mind so fine that no Idea could violate it.”⁹

This is a standard that makes it easy to disapprove of the kind of sub-philosophical “rumination” that Eliot accused Tennyson and Browning of in “The Metaphysical Poets.” But the standard also runs two dangers. The first is that it makes the poet a magpie, a mere connoisseur of sensation; and this is essentially what Eliot later, in 1926, labeled Donne and Laforgue when he delivered the Clark lectures on “The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry” at Cambridge University. Those poets had begun to seem too indiscriminately receptive for Eliot’s tastes. The second danger is that the critic will have no grounds for rating a poem put together with attractive ideas above a poem put together with inferior ones. Perfect allegiance to the world view that informs the poem is obviously too strict a requirement; it is, in fact, counterinstinctual, since every reader admires works that express a range of views much wider than his or her own. Many people who are not medieval Christians, or Christians at all, consider themselves fully appreciative readers of Dante. On the other hand, there must be an opening for the critic to reject a poem solely because its views *are* unacceptable; for, again, a reader’s beliefs do occasionally conflict with a writer’s to an extent that makes appreciation difficult or impossible. Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* are a case in point: they are, to many readers, movingly written, but they also happen to be an unapologetic elegy for Italian fascism.

In trying to discover the line that separates a legitimate from an illegitimate introduction of belief into the terms of aesthetic judgment, Eliot was continually drawn to a comparison between Dante and Shakespeare—which is to say, very broadly

⁸Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” in *Selected Essays*, p. 247.

⁹Eliot, “In Memory of Henry James,” *Egoist* 5 (January 1918): 2.

speaking, between a premodern and a modern literary sensibility. An essay on Dante closes *The Sacred Wood*. It follows an essay on William Blake, and the point of the juxtaposition—between a poet for whom philosophy was part of the ambience of his time and a poet who was compelled to fabricate a kind of homemade mythological system of his own (a poet who, in Arnold's phrase, which Eliot quoted approvingly elsewhere in *The Sacred Wood*, "did not know enough")—is obvious. "Dante, more than any other poet, has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy, not as a theory (in the modern and not the Greek sense of that word) or as his own comment or reflection, but in terms of something *perceived*," Eliot argued.¹⁰ The proper companion to "Dante" in *The Sacred Wood*, though, is not the essay on Blake; it is the essay on "Hamlet and His Problems." For there Eliot is explicit about the correspondence between form and the source of its content. In writing *Hamlet*, he says, Shakespeare was influenced by ideas he had picked up from reading Montaigne, but he lacked a sufficiently sensuous relation with them to turn them into art.

Still, Eliot was quite clear that Shakespeare's error could not have been helped by more thinking on his part. For Shakespeare's "business," Eliot wrote in 1925, "was to write plays, not to think."¹¹ It was just Shakespeare's bad luck, Eliot continued two years later in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," to live in "a period of dissolution and chaos." In such a time, "any emotional attitude which seems to give a man something firm . . . is eagerly taken up"; so that Shakespeare breathed an air that mixed "the Senecan attitude of Pride, the Montaigne attitude of Skepticism, and the Machiavelli attitude of Cynicism"—all combining to produce "the Elizabethan individualism."¹² Such a hybrid mix would not do as a world view, but that cannot, Eliot insisted, count against Shakespeare's poetry. And he proceeded to draw, once again, a comparison with Dante:

¹⁰Eliot, "Dante," in *The Sacred Wood*, p. 170.

¹¹Eliot, "Shakespeare and Montaigne," *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 December 1925, p. 895.

¹²Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," in *Selected Essays*, p. 112.

The difference between Shakespeare and Dante is that Dante had one coherent system of thought behind him; but that was just his luck, and from the point of view of the poetry is an irrelevant accident. It happened that at Dante's time thought was orderly and strong and beautiful. . . . Dante's poetry receives a boost which in a sense it does not merit, from the fact that the thought behind it is the thought of a man as great and lovely as Dante himself, St. Thomas. The thought behind Shakespeare is of men far inferior to Shakespeare himself. . . . It does not make Dante a greater poet, or mean that we can learn more from Dante than from Shakespeare.¹³

This looks at first like a promising way around the problem of poetry and belief, but there are several difficulties, beginning with the question of whether Dante was not so great and lovely in the first place because, in fact, he had read Aquinas. There is, as well, a suspicion that Shakespeare's greatness is in some way connected to his having, though without producing a normative system of his own, demonstrated the inadequacy of the world view of "Elizabethan individualism"—which, unless incoherent systems naturally criticize themselves, surely counts as praise for what Shakespeare "thought."

Eliot repeated his formula for dissociating poetry from ideology in "Second Thoughts about Humanism" (1928): "if you deprecate Shakespeare for his lower view of life, then you have issued out of literary criticism into social criticism. . . . I prefer the culture which produced Dante to the culture which produced Shakespeare; but I would not say that Dante was the greater poet, or even that he had the profounder mind."¹⁴ The requirement that readers draw a hard distinction between Dante the man and Dante the poet Eliot would state explicitly in a little book on the poet issued a year later. "If you can read poetry as poetry," he wrote there, "you will 'believe' in Dante's theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey; that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief." But when Eliot reached the question of how we are to weigh the poetic value of Dante's beliefs, he made an appeal that his own criteria

¹³Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," p. 116.

¹⁴Eliot, "Second Thoughts about Humanism," in *Selected Essays*, p. 435.

would seem to have ruled out of bounds: "Goethe always arouses in me a strong sentiment of disbelief in what he believes: Dante does not."¹⁵ "Dante the man," in short, returns.

There are, then, belief systems to which even a formalist may object, and the problem is to define the threshold of acceptability in a sufficiently general and neutral way. Eliot attempted this task in his Norton lectures, delivered at Harvard University and published in 1933 as *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. In the lecture on Keats and Shelley, he proposed the following guideline:

When the doctrine, theory, belief, or "view of life" presented in a poem is one which the mind of the reader can accept as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience, it interposes no obstacle to the reader's enjoyment, whether it be one that he accept or deny, approve or deprecate. When it is one which the reader rejects as childish or feeble [as in Shelley's case], it may, for a reader of well-developed mind, set an almost complete check.¹⁶

But this calls for a standard of disinterestedness that might have given even Matthew Arnold pause; for it assumes that it is possible to separate our notion of "the facts of experience" from our particular "view of life."

When Eliot listed the world views he considered intellectually legitimate, it turned out that he could name only two. "Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above," he argued in "Second Thoughts about Humanism"; "you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist."¹⁷ And in "Modern Education and the Classics" (1932): "There are two and only two finally tenable hypotheses about life: the Catholic and the materialistic."¹⁸ Intellectually, the position is perfectly respectable. The trouble with it is that neither the world view of pure supernatu-

¹⁵Eliot, "Dante," in *Selected Essays*, p. 219.

¹⁶Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 96.

¹⁷Eliot, "Second Thoughts about Humanism," p. 433.

¹⁸Eliot, "Modern Education and the Classics," in *Selected Essays*, p. 458.

ralism nor the world view of pure materialism has any place in it for literature.

The weakness in Eliot's analysis of the problem of poetry and belief was, ultimately, its refusal to acknowledge that poetry itself constitutes a belief system. Modern literature embodies a set of values—not simply formal or aesthetic values—that emerged at least partly from the desire to find some middle ground between Eliot's two intellectually acceptable extremisms. Those values are not any more consistent than the values of, say, all of modern religion taken together or all of modern philosophy. But they are not imported from philosophy or religion. They are values expressed through literature—through “the tradition” as it was understood, and as Arnold, for example, tried to interpret it, in the nineteenth century. This is the real significance of Eliot's formalism, and it returns us to the center of his thought: the isolation of “poetry as poetry” as the proper object of criticism was intended as a judgment against not the form but the values of modern literature. As the first gesture in an antimodern reaction, though, Eliot's critical formalism removed the grounds for further ideological criticism. Having ruled “extraliterary” interests out of the court of critical judgment, he was compelled to build, in effect, another courtroom.

III

“I believe,” Eliot wrote in “The Idea of a Literary Review,” published as a kind of manifesto in the *New Criterion* in 1926, “that the modern tendency is toward something which, for want of a better name, we may call classicism. . . . There is a tendency—discernible even in art—toward a higher and clearer conception of Reason, and a more severe and serene control of the emotions by Reason.”¹⁹ He went on to name six books that seemed to him to exemplify this tendency: Charles Maurras's *L'Avenir de l'intelligence* (1905); Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* (1907); Julian Benda's *Belphégor* (1918); T. E. Hulme's *Speculations* (1924); Jacques Maritain's *Réflexions sur*

¹⁹Eliot, “The Idea of a Literary Review,” *New Criterion* 4 (January 1926): 5.

l'intelligence (1924); and Irving Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership* (1925).

It is not easy to extract a common doctrine from the books on this list. *Speculations*, to take the most egregious example, collects writings across Hulme's entire career, from essays written under the influence of Henri Bergson ("Bergson's Theory of Art," "The Philosophy of Intensive Manifolds") to essays written, later on, under the influence of Wilhelm Worringer, and in conscious reaction against Bergsonism ("Modern Art and Its Philosophy," "Humanism and the Religious Attitude"). But the list certainly identifies a discrete cluster of thought. There is even a kind of clubbiness about it: Sorel's book had been translated into English by Hulme in 1916, and his introduction to the translation appears in an appendix to *Speculations*, a posthumous collection edited by Herbert Read, one of Eliot's assistants at the *Criterion*; Maritain, a *Criterion* contributor, was associated with Maurras and the Action Française as one of the founders and editors of the movement's *Revue universelle*, begun in 1920; when Benda's book was translated into English, a few years after Eliot's article appeared, the introduction was written by Babbitt, who had been one of Eliot's teachers at Harvard; and it was Babbitt who had first interested Eliot in *L'Avenir de l'intelligence*, which Eliot bought and read in 1910 or 1911, during his year in Paris. Eliot's catalogue of defining works of "classical" tendency was not, in other words, an index of recent enthusiasms. These are books that had, over fifteen years, informed his political and sociological view of modern life.

It is clear enough that "classicism," as Eliot used the word in referring to the group of writers he had selected, is simply a name for the reaction against modern liberal thought. That reactionary spirit is almost the only common denominator of Maurras's fascism, Sorel's socialism, Maritain's Thomism, Babbitt's humanism, and Hulme's antihumanism; and it makes "classicism" into an essentially negative concept. The "classicist" is in favor of any of those things the liberal is supposed to imagine modern society can get along without: hierarchy, faith, the higher (as opposed to utilitarian) rationality, the authority of tradition, the sentiment of place. Eliot betrays the influence of

this line of thought most overtly not, as many commentators seem to assume, in his criticism but in his poetry. The images of social and cultural decadence that saturate the poetry of *The Waste Land* are often connected to images of women and of Jews; readers of the antimodern tracts *Belphégor* and *L'Avenir de l'intelligence* will have little difficulty recognizing the associations. In Eliot's literary criticism, though, the whole complex of "classical" social and political views tended to fade, as it were, into the woodwork. Eliot's judgments of particular writers, and to some extent his general scheme of literary history, coincided with the "classicist" criticism of modernity; but the correspondence was almost never made explicit, and Eliot generally discouraged readers from drawing larger cultural lessons from his critical opinions (one of the reasons he sometimes seems to have gone out of his way to confound his followers by reversing his judgments of some writers).

Although he dedicated the 1929 volume on Dante to Maurras, for example, and although it is evident that his admiration for Dante reflected a social and religious preference as well as a literary one, Eliot was careful to insure that his critical standards for appreciating Dante were literary ones. To take another example, Eliot's disparagement of Milton in "The Metaphysical Poets" and "A Note on the Verse of John Milton" (1936) was presumably politically motivated, but the argument was directed to poetic technique—formalist neutral ground. The theory of the "dissociation of sensibility," which Eliot used to depreciate nineteenth-century British poetry, can be seen to belong (as Eliot himself acknowledged in his second Milton essay) to a larger view of English political and religious history involving the consequences of the English Civil War; but Eliot never named a particular source for the dissociation of sensibility, and subsequent critics who have taken up Eliot's notion have felt free to blame it on an assortment of causes, including Baconian science, Cartesian philosophy, and the rise of capitalism. And finally, although the doctrine of impersonality and the valorization of tradition may take on an extraliterary significance in the context of the "classical" view, extraliterary values were not made part of the discussion in the essay in which

those terms appeared, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919).

Why didn't Eliot tie his literary criticism up to his social criticism of modernity? Because he rejected the position—as he saw it, the specifically modern position—that literature can have a socially redemptive function. Eliot agreed with Arnold that the progress of modernity entailed the collapse of traditional institutions of moral authority—the church and the hereditary aristocracy—but he did not believe that literature could be called upon to fill the gap, that "poetry will save us." "[I]t is like saying that the wall-paper will save us when the walls have crumbled"²⁰ was his response when Richards echoed Arnold's line in *Science and Poetry*. The notion that literature could be successfully endowed with a political, moral, or religious function led to what he regarded as the central failing of modern thought, the confusion of genres: poetry tried to be philosophy, literary criticism tried to be moral or political criticism, the aesthetic experience proposed itself as a substitute for the religious experience (and, of course, conversely: philosophy became literary or transcendentalist, religion became aestheticized or reform-minded, and so forth). "By showing where moral truth and the genuine supernatural are situate," Maritain wrote in *Art et Scholastique* (1920), "religion saves poetry from the absurdity of believing itself destined to transform ethics and life: saves it from overweening arrogance." Eliot quoted the sentence in his chapter on "The Modern Mind" in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* and added: "This seems to me to be putting the finger on the great weakness of much poetry and criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."²¹

Thus Eliot's insistence on treating poetry "as poetry" and on developing a critical vocabulary that does not borrow its terms from nonliterary genres. Even after he had, in the mid 1920s, embarked on the task of formulating an ethical supplement to his literary criticism, Eliot persisted in citing his formalist principle. The thought of Samuel Johnson, whom he had quoted as

²⁰Eliot, "Literature, Science, and Dogma," *Dial* 82 (March 1927): 243.

²¹Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 137.

an exemplary critic in the introduction to *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, remained his touchstone. Neoclassical criticism of Johnson's type, Eliot wrote in "Experiment in Criticism" (1929),

recognized literature as literature, and not another thing. . . . [I]f you compare the criticism of those two centuries [the seventeenth and eighteenth] with that of the nineteenth, you will see that the latter does not take this simple truth wholly for granted. Literature is often treated by the critic rather as a means for eliciting truth or acquiring knowledge. . . . If you read carefully the famous epilogue in Pater's *Studies in the Renaissance* you will see that 'art for art's sake' means nothing less than art as a substitute for everything else, and as a purveyor of emotions and sensations which belong to life rather than to art. . . . I think we should return again and again to the critical writings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to remind ourselves of that simple truth that literature is primarily literature, a means of refined and intellectual pleasure.²²

In "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956), one of his last major essays, Eliot virtually reiterated sections of "Experiment in Criticism"; and his appeal, this time in an argument against the excessive use of scholarship in criticism, was to the same standard: "We can . . . ask about any writing which is offered to us as literary criticism, is it aimed towards understanding and enjoyment? If it is not, it may still be a legitimate and useful activity; but it is to be judged as a contribution to psychology, or sociology, or logic, or pedagogy, or some other pursuit—and is to be judged by specialists, not by men of letters."²³

The divorce of literary criticism from moral criticism, on the one hand, and from historical, philological, and other forms of human-scientific investigation, on the other, is the chief reason for Eliot's success and influence as a critic. Most obviously, it enabled critics who held different political or religious views to use Eliot's critical terms without having to resort to ideological disclaimers. Anyone can speak of an "objective correlative," the critical term introduced in the essay on *Hamlet*; you are not

²²Eliot, "Experiment in Criticism," *Bookman* 70 (November 1929): 226–27.

²³Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), p. 130.

thereby obliged to believe that modern skepticism is insufficient as a world view, because Eliot never made the connection between the technical formula and antimodern ideology explicit. But Eliot's brand of formalism was successful for another reason as well: it answered a peculiarly modern need to make literary criticism an autonomous discipline. In reacting against what he took to be one of the principal errors of modern thought, Eliot made his own considerable contribution to the culture of modernity.

IV

The research university was a creation of the late nineteenth century. It accompanied, and was itself a product of, a social phenomenon we can identify as the professionalization of occupation. The modern professions—medicine, engineering, architecture, the law, and many others—first took the form they have today in the second half of the nineteenth century, when, in response to a host of social and economic pressures, “qualifying associations” and accrediting agencies came into being to help distinguish certified practitioners from amateurs, dilettantes, and other unqualified types. The university constituted an answer to this development in two respects. First, by training and conferring degrees upon future members of the professions, it became a certifying institution itself. And, second, it organized knowledge and its specialists by discipline—that is, by academic department—and assumed a virtual monopoly over the business of producing scholars.

“What a tremendous question it is—what shall I be? When a man answers that question he not only determines his sphere of usefulness in this world, he also decides in what *direction* his own mind shall be developed. The different professions are not different roads converging to the same end; they are different roads, which starting from the same point *diverge* forever, for all we know.”²⁴ In 1854 a distant cousin of T. S. Eliot's made

²⁴Charles W. Eliot, quoted by Burton J. Bledstein, in *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), p. 159.

that observation in a letter to a friend; it bore fruit almost thirty years later when, as president of Harvard, Charles William Eliot, the cousin, instituted the first elective system in higher education. Enabling undergraduates to create their own programs of instruction by permitting them to choose from a variety of specialized offerings seems to reflect a belief in a broad educational mission; in fact, Eliot's elective system was intended to lead in the opposite direction. Its purpose was to induce students to "track" early in their college education—to select for themselves the sequence of courses that would lead them into their careers of choice. President Eliot was not a proponent of general education; he was a proponent of specialization.

If students were to be trained to become specialists, Eliot and the other founders of the modern research university argued, they should be trained by specialists. It therefore became necessary to produce specialists whose speciality was the education of future specialists; and in 1890, seven years after the elective system went into effect at Harvard College, Eliot created the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, modeled on the graduate program at Johns Hopkins, which had been founded in 1876 and was the first such program in the United States. The occupation of scholarship thus became professionalized; and existing associations of scholars were transformed from large, informally regulated groups operating under a general rubric to smaller associations of specialists. The American Social Science Association, for example, was founded in 1865 for amateur students of the human sciences. In the 1880s, with the advent of the research university, it broke up rapidly into smaller, independent associations: modern language scholars (1883), historians (1884), economists (1885), church historians (1888), folklorists (1888), and political scientists (1889)—all university-based organizations of academic professionals. As an occupational class, professors organized themselves professionally in 1915 as the American Association of University Professors.

A field of knowledge in the research university system faced two requirements: first, it must constitute an independent area

of study with a clearly delineated subject matter and methodology; and, second, it must be able to present itself as a “hard” discipline—that is, as an area of study in which, following the model of the natural sciences, advances can be measured. Literary criticism, defined as the evaluation and appreciation of works of literature, has a hard time qualifying as an academic discipline under these criteria, and in America, the first university English professors—and the first members of the Modern Language Association—were philologists. The campaign to establish literary criticism as a legitimate academic activity (as distinct from literary history, textual studies, and other more obviously scholarly pursuits) was a long one, not fully successful until the 1940s. So that during the first half of this century, the individual with a critical interest in literature who was employed by a university confronted a challenge that has no precedent in the history of talk about writing: he or (less commonly) she was required to conceive of literary criticism as an autonomous discipline with some claim to contributing to the accumulation and progress of knowledge. Literary criticism had to become, in other words, the sort of business one could reasonably practice within the structure of an academic department.

It is easy to see, therefore, why Eliot’s literary criticism appealed particularly to young academics, such as Richards, F. R. Leavis, and F. O. Matthiessen, and to young critics who would eventually be drawn into the academy, such as Richard Blackmur and the group whose example is paradigmatic in the institutional history of twentieth-century criticism, the American New Critics. For Eliot’s criticism recognized literature as an object of study on its own terms, independent of other “departments” of knowledge and intellectual endeavor; it was anti-impressionistic and scientific-sounding; it had the look of being theoretical rather than journalistic or belletristic. It seemed a deliberate departure from the sort of appreciatory and unapologetically subjective criticism the turn-of-the-century man and woman of letters produced, and it was thus an ideal model for an academic literary criticism.

But there is another wrinkle in the narrative. The same social

forces that produced an ever-expanding population of college students bound for the high-status professions also exerted a nonutilitarian demand on the academy. Introduced to the world of the arts, greater and greater numbers of people in the later nineteenth century began to look to experts to help them discriminate among the products available for their consumption. Consider, for example, the title of a book published in 1871 by Noah Porter: *Books and Reading: Or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?*² The title may seem the literary equivalent of a blunt instrument; but the year the book appeared, its author was made president of Yale. Charles William Eliot's own "Five-Foot Book-Shelf," the Harvard Classics, was addressed to the same nonspecialist audience. The university, having created a new class of accredited intellectual experts, was offering to service the population at large by producing useful guides to culture.

The obvious question was, Why not integrate the appreciation of culture into the vocational training provided by the modern college? And there occurred, in the first decade of the twentieth century, a reaction, largely on behalf of what its champions referred to as "liberal culture," against the professionalization of scholarship and the utilitarian approach to education that characterized the first stage of the research university. This reaction produced, among other protests, William James's "The Ph.D. Octopus" (1903), deploring the requirement of a doctoral degree for college teachers; Irving Babbitt's *Literature and the American College* (1908), an attack on "relevance"; John Jay Chapman's "The Harvard Classics and Harvard" (1909), which complained that Harvard was being run as a business; and Thorstein Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* (published in 1918 but mostly written before 1910), which accused modern university presidents—the "captains of erudition," as Veblen called them—of corporatism. The reaction also led to Eliot's replacement as president of Harvard in 1910 by A. Lawrence Lowell, an event that was regarded as a victory for the partisans of "liberal culture."

Thus there emerged for the modern university a dual mission: it trains (for material success), but it also liberalizes (for

intellectual or spiritual betterment). This liberalizing function provided an obvious point of entry for literary criticism into the academic world—as Leavis, for example, would argue persistently in England. The role played by the man or woman of letters might be played (though possibly on a higher plane of scholarship and seriousness) by the college professor. Still, no matter how sophisticated the practice of introducing people to the appreciation of literature might become, it had to be adapted to the new institutional requirements. Literary criticism had to become a *Fach*. And here, too, Eliot proved a useful figure.

The American New Critics were the first real winners in the battle to achieve an institutional standing for literary criticism, and, being the victors, they got to write its history. This they accomplished in two landmark works published in the 1950s, René Wellek's *History of Modern Criticism*, the first volume of which appeared in 1955, and William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks's *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957). Those works established a form that would persist in the academy long after the New Criticism had been rendered obsolete by (among other things) the institutional imperative that new knowledge in a field always drives out old knowledge: they made the history of criticism an intellectual history rather than a social history—a history of ideas rather than a history of institutions.

The author of a history of literary criticism needs to establish two principles that might seem self-evident but, in the years of criticism's academic marginality, were not. The first is that there is such a thing as literary criticism; the second is that, assuming there is such a thing, it has a history. The argument against the existence of literary criticism is a version of the argument that literature is not an independent object of study; and in the early years of the modern university, the question was open enough for George Saintsbury to note, in the final volume of his *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe*, completed in 1904, that friends had questioned the point of his enterprise by asking whether literature was something one could talk about on its own. Saintsbury asserted his belief that it was; but his real answer was the work he had produced. For one proof that liter-

ature can be discussed as an autonomous discourse is the history of efforts to discuss it that way.

The consequence of this form of argument is that criticism becomes indispensable to the academic recognition of literature. There is a sense, in other words, in which the establishment of literature as a field was not a precondition for the establishment of literary criticism as a discriminable area of endeavor but in which, instead, literary criticism was a precondition for the existence of "literature." Literature was such a field because people since Plato had isolated it for discussion. A history of criticism like Wellek's therefore offered to solve the literature professor's most fundamental problem: it was a witness on behalf of his or her claim to equal standing with the historian and the physicist in the intellectual structure of the modern research university. A history of criticism was one kind of proof that "literature" was not an invention of the academy.

A counterargument remained to be dealt with. Of course there have always been people who have talked about poetry, this argument ran; but most of those people were poets, and they were naturally interested in explaining and justifying the kind of poetry they were writing. It may be that there is such a thing as literary criticism, but it is largely practical and ad hoc. This complaint required a two-part response. Saintsbury's *History of Criticism*, Wellek wrote in the preface to the first volume of his own history, is "admirable in its sweep and still readable because of the liveliness of the author's exposition and style; . . . but [it] seems to me seriously vitiated by its professed lack of interest in questions of theory and aesthetics."²⁵ To answer the charge that literary criticism belongs to the history of taste rather than the history of ideas, it was necessary that critics be considered not as practitioners or propagandists but as theorists. "It should be frankly recognized," Wellek wrote elsewhere in the first volume, "that the history of criticism is a topic which has its own inherent interest, even without relation to the history or practice of writing: it is simply a branch of the history of ideas which is only in loose relationship with the actual litera-

²⁵René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950, Volume One: The Later Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. vi.

ture produced at the time.”²⁶ A primary purpose of academic histories of criticism is, therefore, to isolate the history of criticism from the history of literature (and from the history of any other kind of writing) in the interests of making criticism a discipline and not simply a method.

The second response to the charge that literary criticism is merely practical and ad hoc is that criticism is more than that precisely because it has a history. And here the academic historian of criticism was required to establish not only that criticism hangs together but that the history of criticism is a series of texts that leads directly to his or her own. We write, explained Wimsatt and Brooks in the introduction to the *Short History*, in the belief that there is “continuity and intelligibility in the history of literary argument. . . . Literary problems occur not just because history produces them, but because literature is a thing of such and such a sort, showing such and such a relation to the history of human experience.” In defense of this claim, they produced an analogy that has since become familiar in academic criticism: the person who regards criticism as ad hoc because times and practices change is like “the student who, having difficulties with a Latin or German reading examination, is content to put down a translation that does not make sense.” Criticism, in other words, is like a language: all specific critical utterances are made coherent by the existence of underlying principles. And at the deepest part of that deep structure is literature itself. “We have tried,” Wimsatt and Brooks continued, “to sketch a view of how the several literary genre conceptions dominant in several ages—dramatic, epistolary, heroic, burlesque, and lyric—will if studied carefully open up not so many diverse views into multiplicity and chaos but so many complementary insights into the one deeply rooted and perennial human truth which is the poetic principle.”²⁷

Literary criticism, then, demonstrates both coherence and continuity, attributes that qualify it as an independent academic discourse. To tap its perquisites, however, the twentieth-century

²⁶Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*, p. 7.

²⁷William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. vii, ix-x.

academic critic must take his or her place at the end of a long line of thinkers reaching back to Aristotle—even though the kind of work the academic critic does is highly determined by the requirements of an institution that is not only new to the history of literature and criticism but that was not designed with the production of anything like literary criticism in mind. Thus Wimsatt and Brooks mentioned the emergence of the modern university only to disparage historical scholarship; they noted with asperity that it was not until 1950 that the Modern Language Association voted to add the word “criticism” to its constitutional statement of purpose. Criticism proper floats free of the institutions in which it is produced. And so the fact that the critic is a university professor is irrelevant for Wimsatt and Brooks (though evidently not in the case of, say, Lovejoy or Bateson, scholar-critics the New Critic was happy to marginalize). Wellek’s *History* began with a discussion of Kant which led, six volumes later, to a chapter on Wimsatt, as though there were an essentially unmediated continuity between the activities of the two. In the standard academic history or anthology of literary criticism, the academic critic is traced back to poet-critics—to Coleridge and Dryden and Horace—or to philosophers of aesthetics—to Nietzsche and Kant and Aristotle. The figure to whom the academic critic is never traced back, and who virtually never appears, is the turn-of-the-century journalistic man or woman of letters—the true functional precursor of the academic critic.

Historically Eliot stands between the first academic critics—Richards, Empson, Leavis, the New Critics—and the whole sequence of nonacademic critics stretching back to Kant, and from Kant back to Plato. In the academic critics’ effort to situate themselves within a history of criticism, to construct a genealogy that extends prior to the formation of the modern university, Eliot is, in effect, the link. His criticism is understood to develop *out of* the criticism of Pater and Arnold (either in reaction to it, according to Blackmur, or by drawing Arnoldian concerns into the twentieth century, as Matthiessen thought) and to develop *into* the academic criticism of Wimsatt and Brooks (and, theoretically, beyond).

Eliot acquires, therefore, a fairly monumental significance.

Wellek's chapter on him (first published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1956 and then reprinted, unaltered, in the sixth volume of the *History* in 1986) began with these words: "T. S. Eliot is by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world."

His influence on the taste of his time is most conspicuous: he has done more than anybody else to promote the shift of sensibility away from the taste of the "Georgians" and to reevaluate the major periods and figures of the history of English poetry. He reacted most strongly against romanticism, he criticized Milton and the Miltonic tradition, he exalted Dante, and Jacobean dramatists, the metaphysical poets, Dryden, and the French symbolists as "*the* tradition" of great poetry. But Eliot is at least equally important for his theory of poetry, which buttresses this new taste and which is much more coherent and systematic than most commentators and Eliot himself have allowed. His concept of "impersonal poetry," his description of the creative process, which demands a "unified sensibility," and should end in an "objective correlative," his justification of "tradition," his scheme of the history of English poetry as a process which led to the "dissociation" of an originally unified sensibility, his emphasis on the "perfection of common speech" as the language of poetry, his discussion of the relationship between ideas and poetry under the term "belief"—all these are crucial critical matters for which Eliot found memorable formulas, if not always convincing solutions.²⁸

It is Eliot the theorist who is important here, since it is the concepts rather than the program that matter to the academic historian. Eliot the practicing poet and literary journalist has disappeared from the discussion.

For his part, Eliot always insisted that his own criticism *was* ad hoc, that it was formulated principally to support the kind of writing he and his friends were doing, and that technical-sounding terms like "objective correlative" were simply what he called, in "To Criticize the Critic" (1961), "conceptual symbols for emotional preferences."²⁹ Moreover, as he often stressed—notably in "The Frontiers of Criticism," in which he specifically

²⁸Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950, Volume Five: English Criticism, 1900–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 176.

²⁹Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic: Eight Essays on Literature and Education* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), p. 19.

disclaimed any resemblance to the academic New Critics—his criticism was almost entirely occasional. Though he once or twice announced studies “in preparation,” he produced only two book-length works of literary criticism, and both were lecture series: *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) and *After Strange Gods* (1934). The second book is an exercise in the moral criticism of literature, and it was essentially dropped from the canon of Eliot’s works by his academic champions. The argument of the first book is reflected in its emphatically antitheoretical title: a universal theory of poetry is impossible. “I have no general theory of my own,” Eliot wrote in the conclusion; “but on the other hand I would not appear to dismiss the views of others with the indifference which the practitioner may be supposed to feel towards those who theorise about his craft. It is reasonable, I feel, to be on guard against views which claim too much for poetry, as well as to protest against those which claim too little; to recognize a number of uses for poetry, without admitting that poetry must always and everywhere be subservient to any one of them.”³⁰

Eliot was, in fact, skeptical of the value of teaching literature in any form, historical or appreciatory. His rejection of Arnold’s belief that poetry might serve a socially redemptive function included a rejection of Arnold’s suggestion that the introduction to literature might constitute the core of modern higher education. As for the idea that the study of literature might assist in the development of “mental discipline,” an idea central to Richards’s arguments on behalf of poetry, Eliot ascribed it in 1932 to the educational philosophy of liberalism, a philosophy that was, he thought, “committed to the folly of pretending that one subject is as good as another for study.”³¹ Of the various false Eliots that have emerged from his academic reception, the Eliot who believed in the socially exalting power of high culture is one of the falsest. Social and personal exaltation might be required for the perfection of taste, but that condition could only be approached, in Eliot’s view, by other means. Assigning to lit-

³⁰Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 143.

³¹Eliot, “Modern Education and the Classics,” p. 457.

erature the role of social leavener was one of modernity's greatest errors.

Eliot was a man of letters, a writer of criticism that was mostly occasional and journalistic. His critical principles were consistent because they occupied a carefully defined space within a broader critique of modernity—not because they corresponded to some truth about the literary object as a thing in itself. But Eliot stands precisely at that historical intersection where non-professional literary criticism gives way to university-based literary criticism; and thus, willingly or not, he was of service. No doubt there were professors who sympathized completely with the assault Eliot had mounted on modernity and who championed him for that reason. But there were many more who simply found Eliot ideally suited to the business of giving academic criticism a plausible past and who found it remarkably easy to separate Eliot's criticism of modern society from his criticism of poetry. They found it easy, of course, because that was exactly the way Eliot had designed it. But it was almost certainly not the fate he had contemplated. That he is no longer crucial to the academic critic's self-definition is not due to any renewed appreciation of his writing; but it is a favor to his memory nonetheless.

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