

MADDEN

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EN221

LITERARY THEORY
AND CRITICISM B

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET

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Assignment Topic: In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot writes of the need for an aspiring poet to have an "historical sense". This leads the poet to see the whole of European literature from Homer to his own time as having "a simultaneous existence" and Composing "a simultaneous order". This might seem an odd result of an historical sense, this accent on simultaneity. Can you explain the logic of Eliot's position?

Word Length: 3800 approx.

The "historical sense" of T.S. Eliot, as seen in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as investing a timelessness to literature, springs logically from his position as a poet, critic and scholar in revolt against the lingering Romanticism of the early part of this century. The fact that this was a fruitful and influential concept has, along with his other critical contributions, changed the landscape of criticism. The harshness and dogmatism found in Eliot's early critical work, born out of the polemic of the time, has been roundly criticised and was even a source of bewilderment to Eliot himself in his old age. ("The Frontiers of Criticism" 103) Despite this, his idea of an "historical sense" has a consistency through even his later writings and, outside his criticism, permeates his poetry. As a poet conspicuously open in revealing his sources, and allusive to the point of obsession, his criticism reveals a notion of influence built on his scholarly activities. The reading of literature involved is indeed an activity in which the temporal writings of the past become timeless, as they are read and kept alive in the present within a tradition. To the critic, Eliot's "historical sense" is the key to the sensibility which allows the evaluative imperative in criticism to aim at a universal validity. To the poet, it is the key to knowing "what is to be done". ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 22)

It is hard to escape the impression in his early works that when Eliot talks about what he is looking for in a critic, he paints a picture of someone rather like himself. Late in his life, Eliot described several kinds of critics, the "Professional Critic", the "Critic with Gusto", the "Academic and the Theoretical" and "the critic who is also a poet." ("To Criticize the Critic" 11-13) Here Eliot "shyly" classes himself as a poet-critic, in the usual self-deprecating style of his later writings. (13) He belongs in all those categories and the interplay between these roles impacts on his "historical sense". In "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot the critic throws down the gauntlet of "a ridiculous amount of erudition"(16) and implicitly Eliot the poet picks it up. To aim to be so immersed in the tradition is the behaviour of a classicist reacting against Romanticism. From a later perspective this could seem pompous and unattainable and it is likely that this was appreciated by Eliot. The older Eliot covers his tracks by denying scholarly achievement: In my earlier years I obtained, partly by subtlety, partly by effrontery, and partly by accident, a reputation amongst the credulous for learning and scholarship, of which (having no further use for it) I have since tried to disembarass myself. ("The Classics and the Man of Letters" 223)

To which Hyman retorts:

Eliot studied under Babbitt and Santayana at Harvard, did graduate work there in philosophy, read French literature and philosophy at the Sorbonne, read Greek philosophy at Oxford, and spent two years studying Sanscrit and Indic philology and one year studying Indian metaphysics...he reads five languages apart from English. (The Armed Vision 81)

The "credulous" are right. Eliot by any standards is a scholar, and one to whom the project of an "historical sense" which merges into the "mind of Europe"("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 16) becomes at least conceivable, especially to a young and enthusiastic writer.

If by Eliot's standards scholarly erudition is essential for the poet and the critic, he frequently in his early work avers to the superiority of the poet-critic. He argues that the

skill of "appreciating poetry is inseparable from the power of production". ("Modern Tendencies in Poetry", quoted in Bush 200) In rather more grandiose style he declaims: The writer of this essay once committed himself to the statement that "The poetic critic is criticising poetry in order to create poetry."... as sensibility is rare, unpopular, and desirable, it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person. ("The Perfect Critic" 58)

He takes this further in "The Function of Criticism" to suggest all poets necessarily are critics as they are constantly and necessarily involved in this task "in the work of creation itself" (30). He skirts close to dismissing critics who are not poets altogether, suggesting that as far as his own criticism of Milton was concerned "the only jury of judgment is that of the ablest poetical practitioners of my own time" ("Milton I" 139). A less controversial Eliot later notes the extent to which a poet, in his critical writings, "is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing." ("The Music of Poetry" 26) It would therefore appear that in his early writing there is the "Critic with Gusto" masquerading as the "Professional Critic". Eliot admitted as much in "To Criticize the Critic" saying "I have written best about writers who have influenced my own poetry" (20).

The category of "Critic with Gusto" suggested by the elderly Eliot is a role he performed himself as an advocate of unfashionable poets with whom he felt an affinity. His predilections are backed up by his scholarly reading which form the background to his creative modernist work. For the Eliot of "Tradition and the Individual Talent", "the *critical* project is indistinguishable from the *poetic* one" (Riquelme 1026, emphasis his). The modernist agenda is achieved through the sleight of hand called depersonalisation in which personal bias is simply not acknowledged in reaction to the extreme emphasis on individuality of the Romantics.

For a poet, the reaction against Romanticism begs the question of inspiration and creation. Eliot could characterise Romantic poets as "those who demand of poetry a day-dream, or a metamorphosis of their own feeble desires and lusts, or what they believe to

be 'intensity' of passion, ("Introductory Essay to 'London' and 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'", quoted in Maxwell 17) but they at least thought they knew where their inspiration came from.

My writings, in prose and verse, may or may not have surprised other people: but I know that they always, on first sight, surprise myself. I have often found that my most interesting or original ideas, when put into words and marshalled in final order, were ideas which I had not been aware of holding. ("Scylla and Charybdis" 5)

The suggestion that ideas arise unbidden is however no inner voice, a Romantic conception rejected vehemently in "The Function of Criticism", "the inner voice, in fact, sounds remarkably like ... 'doing as one likes'" (27).

On the surface the project of the scholar developing an "historical sense" may not be of great assistance in illuminating inspiration. In considering Virgil, Eliot writes, "if there is such a thing as inspiration — and we do go on using the word — then it is something which escapes historical research" ("Virgil and the Christian World" 123). Eliot attempts to separate inspiration from personality by analogies to illustrate its involuntary nature, derived from the rather dodgy catalytic chemistry of "Tradition and the Individual Talent", and excruciating recourse to the biological concepts of childbirth and secretion. (Chalker 200)

Being by nature involuntary, the writing of poetry must still spring from a background of knowledge of the craft of writing poetry and hence an ability to appreciate poetry. Eliot points out that "a poet cannot help being influenced, therefore he should subject himself to as many influences as possible" ("Tradition and the Practice of Poetry" 877). Elsewhere he outlines the development of a mature sensibility through the "passing infatuation" with a succession of poets in adolescence until by assessing these poets a "growing critical power which protects us from excessive possession by any one literary personality" develops. ("Religion and Literature" 394-5) He argues that wide reading doesn't lead to mere accumulation of impressions, but that these continually

acquired new impressions modify the perception of previously read works such that they "form themselves a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility" ("The Perfect Critic" 58). As this sensibility approaches its maximum width we arrive at a tradition.

The question of appropriate influence on the mythical and consecutively infatuated adolescent suggests a role for education in the development of a sensibility based on an "historical sense". Eliot propounded the view that :

If a classical education is the background for English literature in the past, we are justified affirming not merely that a good knowledge of Latin...should be expected of those who teach English literature, but that some knowledge of Latin should be expected of those who study it. ("The Classics and the Man of Letters" 228)

He goes on to develop an argument in which the education which he sees as disappearing, and which can now be confirmed to have evaporated, provided not only the background of the artists creating the poetry, but also of their initial audience whose ability "to accept what is good in the present when that is brought to their notice" preserves and disseminates the work to the "world at large" (230-1).

The "historical sense" also plays a part in what Eliot considered to be bad influences on poets. Just as wide reading over the range of poets is considered necessary, it is not sufficient to limit yourself to one era in literature, and especially the era of the present. While Eliot is at pains to suggest that current poetry is vital, he was after all publishing his own, wide reading must extend beyond that of contemporaries:

I should not trust the taste of anyone who never read any contemporary poetry, and I should certainly not trust the taste of anyone who read nothing else. ("What is Minor Poetry" 52)

The question of incorrect perception of history as an influence on values of literary worth is canvassed in his assessment of Virgil. He notes the presumably unintended appropriation by the early Church Fathers of a passage of Virgil as a prophecy of the coming of Christ. As appropriate as such a thought was to the mindset in which it

originated, it is either a miracle or a misunderstanding. Eliot elsewhere gives seal of "classic" to Virgil, ("What is a Classic?" 130) but nevertheless the misapprehension had the consequence of making Virgil considered suitable reading by the Church. This caused an oddly prominent place in Western tradition and has allowed Virgil to be a greater influence upon poets over the centuries. ("Virgil and The Christian World" 121) This adds the wrinkle of chance and misunderstanding to the "historical sense" and its influence on poetry. The fact that The Waste Land was based on Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance which contains a theory of the origin of the Grail myth which is seriously incomplete, in the opinion of more recent scholars (Loomis 279), could be also seen as a chance happening in which invalid history influences great poetry.

Another mode of incorrect influence occupied Eliot's mind in his consideration of Milton. His two major essays on the subject, the first in 1936 and the second in 1947, have been seen to be contradictory, in that his latter work reversed a previous assessment that Milton was a dangerous influence on young writers. Further, the earlier work says that Milton "may still be considered as having done damage to the English language from which it has not recovered" ("Milton I" 145). Milton's crime is to be outside the major current. As a poet critic Eliot asks "what *use* is the poetry of this poet to poets writing today?" ("Milton II" 147, Eliot's emphasis). The danger of Milton is the general problem that to be in thrall of "any one master" (150) is unhealthy and that his individual genius was divorced from the main current of Eliot's tradition. Having observed a split in English after Shakespeare into one style used by Milton and one used by Dryden, the lack of connection between conversational language and Milton is suggested to be unhealthy. ("Milton I" 142) Eliot basically "blames" Milton's influence for the Romantics and hence the detriment to the language which is still being repaired. ("Tradition and the Practice of Poetry" 877) That he rehabilitates Milton to the status of mostly harmless is not:
a recantation of my earlier opinion, but a development in view of
the fact that there was no longer any likelihood of his being

imitated, and that therefore he could be profitably studied. ("To Criticise the Critic" 24)

There is an apprehension concerning the influence of the previous generation on poets in Eliot's criticism ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 14), which is perhaps understandable considering his distaste for the Romantic era which preceded his, and a concern not to confuse classicism with antiquarianism and inheritance. (Jay, T.S.Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History 32) There is, however, a further depth to this springing from his standing as a writer. He recognises that certain poets remove the possibility of successfully attempting certain genres. "Milton made a great epic impossible for succeeding generations; Shakespeare made a great poetic drama impossible" ("Milton II" 150). Eliot suggested it was only chance that allowed him the luxury of his style of poetry as it could easily have been done a generation earlier and made "anything I had to say superfluous" ("Tradition and the Practice of Poetry" 878).

What does matter is the presence or absence, in the literary generation immediately previous to our own, of a poet of great originality and power. We are better off, in some respects, in the absence of any such powerful personality. (877)

"Better off" if you are a working poet. Cross pollination from earlier eras and foreign cultures where the distance allows the "historical sense" to organise the influence into a useful structure to writers is seen as healthier. (877)

Influence is then unavoidable, not to be merely from contemporary sources, nor from the preceding generation, not from one author, nor insensitive to the living language as expressed in the work of the living tradition. Eliot lists several things that tradition is not: "dogmatic beliefs", "immovable", "sentimental", and "standing still" (After Strange Gods 18-19, 26). As far as literature is concerned tradition is the "existing order" which is continually updated by the "introduction of the new (the really new) work of art" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 15). He is more explicit in "Tradition and the Practice of Poetry":

When a new form of poetry has run its course and matured, then it may come to appear as something which fully enters into the tradition while enlarging it. (879)

Eliot praises Pound for being just the kind of poet who understands and lives this ideal by "acquiring the entire past, and when the entire past is acquired, the constituents fall into place and the present is revealed" ("The Method of Mr. Pound" quoted in Longenbach 510).

In the realm of language the duty to tradition is to "first to preserve, and second to extend and improve," ("The Social Function of Poetry" 20) hence his annoyance with Milton. Eliot sees the great poet writing to enrich and extend the language by using it to convey and share new feelings. If the poet is not in the living tradition he cannot communicate his sensibility and he is relegated to "the merely eccentric or mad" (20).

A difficulty noted with Eliot's concept of a tradition is in its omissions. Amongst these it has been suggested that there is an absence of contemporary poets, any Americans, Chaucer, Homer, Celtic sources and novelists in general, in his tradition. (Hyman 75-6; Lucy 7) However, Eliot admired many contemporary writers especially Joyce, Lawrence and Yeats, and did write about them, but seems to have preferred to leave his contemporary criticism largely uncollected. He regarded American literature as one of the three distinctive literatures in the English language along with Irish and English, and noted suggestions that a particular American voice was present in his own writing which was shared by Poe and Whitman. ("Tradition and the Practice of Poetry" 880-1) There is a recognition of the importance of the second rank works and minor poetry in Eliot's criticism, which he approaches with no sense of belittlement ("What is Minor Poetry" 39), but these works are not going to warrant his attention for major critical essays. The absence of essays about an author or group of authors does not necessarily indicate a position in the outer. Commenting on why he had never written about the French poets of the late nineteenth century to whom he acknowledged a debt of influence, he said it was because "no one commissioned me to do so" ("To Criticise the

Critic" 22). His summary of English poetry into four periods "before the age of Shakespeare, that of Shakespeare, that of Dryden and Milton, and that of Wordsworth and Coleridge" ("Tradition and the Practice of Poetry" 877) and its preceding discussion touch on Chaucer and Skelton and other poets whom, to be sure, Eliot would regard as minor, but certainly worthy of a place in the tradition. Homer is certainly regarded as part of the framework as this is where Eliot commences his tradition, if not from the Magdalenian rock artists. ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 14,16) Celtic studies may not have been high in the priorities of his classical education but certainly figured in the background to his poetry, notably The Waste Land. (Moorman 134) Novels "require a somewhat different set of weights and pulleys from poetry" and their criticism is a "recent institution" with which Eliot declines to become involved. ("The Frontiers of Criticism" 107)

The more serious criticism is Eliot's own. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent", there is the claim that the poet "must be aware that the mind of Europe [is] much more important than his own private mind" (16). This rejection of any narrowness of perspective, any personal predilection is softened in the retreat over the years to the cover of being a mere poet critic. Calling this "workshop criticism", Eliot notes the limitation that "what has no relation to the poet's own work, or what is antipathetic to him, is outside of his competence" ("The Frontiers of Criticism" 107).

The development of Eliot's "historical sense" has been as intensively studied as every other aspect of his life and work. These influences are philosophical, literary and critical, and political. His studies in America under Bradley and Babbitt have been seen as crucial to his development. (Chalker 203; Bewley 306) More surprisingly, considering his reputation for overturning outmoded ideas, many of his concepts are in the tradition of Arnold, Pater and Wilde. (Ellis 291; Bergonzi 65) From his fellow writers, Yeats, Pound and Joyce, Eliot learned much about an "historical sense" in poetry. (Ellis 299) Politically, he has been characterised as the poetic equivalent of Burke and is certainly of

the school of organicist conservatives, the emphasis on tradition itself being an indication that he regarded current civilisation as degenerate. (O'Sullivan 134; Lucy 16,27)

Criticism implies an evaluation and the "historical sense" is the tool resorted to, with caution, as the means of evaluation. Having decided that "there are definite positions to be taken" ("The Function of Criticism" 27) and that "the rudiments of criticism is the ability to select a good poem and reject a bad poem," ("The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" 50) Eliot is required to give a basis for the decisions to be made. That this is a contentious area is well illustrated in that its exposition in the confident and superficially dogmatic "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is restrained and cautious in tone:

In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must be judged by the standards of the past ... fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true which can only be slowly and cautiously implied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity. (15)

As his emphasis on depersonalisation and hence any pretense of absolute objectivity wanes, this caution becomes greater, likening the uncertainty of poetic reputation over time to the vagaries of the stock market. ("What is Minor Poetry" 48) In the same address he backs away from any declaration of new poetry as great, a decision he will leave to time, (51) being content to look for "genuine poetry" (50).

As to the literature of the past, Eliot is happy to define the "classic" in literature in terms of the maturity of the civilisation, language, and individual mind.

We may expect the language to approach maturity at the moment when men have a critical sense of the past, a confidence in the present, and no conscious doubt of the future. ... The poet ... may still obtain stimulus from the hope of doing something that his predecessors have not done ... but, in retrospect, we can see that he is also the continuer of their traditions. ("What is a Classic?" 119)

The "historic sense" is contained in certain ancient poetic genres, for example the epic, saga and romance, as they were a means of transmitting the understanding of history of their time. They were vehicles for myths and Eliot seizes on the power in these motifs to give his poetry much of its power. Moorman sees "the mythmaker as primitive; he

sees no division between himself and the nature that exists outside himself" (127). He goes on to note the similarity in Eliot's description of the metaphysical poets ("The Metaphysical Poets" 287) with their unified sensibility and the perspective of the primitive man with his myths. It is as if the "something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne ... and the time of Tennyson," (287) the dissociation of sensibility, was a kind of fall from grace, which can be transcended by tapping into allusions to myths. Eliot applauded the use of myth by Joyce and propounded the "mythical method ... a step toward making the modern world possible for art." ("Ulysses, Order, and Myth" 178)

Whether it is in the spirit of his admiration for Sherlock Holmes or not, the notes provided with The Waste Land encourage detective work into the mythic substrate indicated. (Jay, T.S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History 138) The use of a myth as enigmatic as that of the Grail, which after all in its original form had no ending (Fiedler 154), has allowed interpretation to become virtually limitless beginning with ideas like the wasteland indicating the "psychological slump that took place immediately after the war" (C. Day Lewis 58) and leading to the poet being seen as the Grail quester (Jay, "Eliot's Poetics and the Fisher King." 28) and even the quest being Eliot's search for his repressed female nature. (Froula 253) The ideas of "self sacrifice" and "depersonalisation" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 17) have obvious parallels within ritual death and rebirth cycles in mythic material (Fedor 236). When this structure based on the Grail myth is added to by Christian myth, by way of Dante, ("Dante" 163) eastern influences, and bountiful literary motifs, there is an amalgam of the mind sets of wildly differing historical eras into the one present work. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," within which grail motifs are scattered though less obviously, (Rumble 95) the same technique of simultaneous evocation of the world of the present and an echo of an earlier time combines to accentuate the inability to ask the question and the failure of the quest. Maxwell notes:

This suggestive juxtaposition of past and present, of commonplace troubles with the singing of mermaids, of ideas, phrases, and scenes, of the hinted sympathy for the lonely men in shirt sleeves with the desire to escape to the sea-floor—all these fuse to communicate to the reader Prufrock's dilemma. (64)

The technique of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" ("Ulysses, Order and Myth" 177) which Eliot so admired in Joyce was a key technique for his own poetry and one in which he was influenced by Joyce's work. (Litz 255) The allusive technique is invested with immense power by Eliot as, when applied correctly, "a word can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and civilisation," ("The Music of Poetry" 33) its connections moving across cultural differences to the present across distances in geography and time.

Williamson argues that Eliot creates a "mythic time" in which "there is a kind of palimpsest, in which events participating in this meaning on different levels seem to place simultaneously" (154). This simultaneity is possible from a viewpoint of time derived from his "eclectic and sometimes idiosyncratic use of Christian, classical and Indian ideas" (Killingley 50). Using the Indian connection, Killingley explores Eliot's use of two perceptions of time, the "temporal and actual perspective in the flux of events in the phenomenal world, and ... a timeless eternal perspective outside mortal eventful time" (50). The opening stanza of "Burnt Norton" summarises an idea of time conscious of these resonances, not only suggesting that "all time is eternally present" (4) but further that "What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present." (9-10)

For Eliot, all time is contained in the present, all history is contained in the present, and all great literature lives in the work of the great living poet. Eliot is a great poet with the background as a scholar that is now necessary to have a sufficient grasp of the past to know what is really new and to be critical enough to know what is genuine. Eliot's idea of an "historical sense" is perfectly logical considering his understanding of time, his rejection of the Romantic notion of inspiration and his perspective as a poet critic.

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