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Unravelling Eliot

“There is a kind of fun in unravelling the twists & obliquities of this remarkable man.” Virginia Woolf, diary entry on T. S. Eliot, 14 September 1925.

In 1927, T. S. Eliot told the Shakespeare Association: “About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong” (*CP3* 245). In this lecture, Eliot wittily disposes of several “up-to-date” Shakespeares proposed by contemporary critics. His gesture reveals an awareness of the difficulties of addressing a scholarly audience on the subject of the most studied author in the English language. Eliot’s approach to the canon was often marked by iconoclasm: *Hamlet* was judged “most certainly an artistic failure”; Milton “writes English like a dead language”; Shelley was “humourless, pedantic, self-centred”; Tennyson’s poetry is condescendingly placed as “beautiful but dull.”¹ These extravagant judgements are indicative of an anxiety about the potentially numbing dead weight of canonical reputations. For today’s readers of Eliot, seeking fresh interpretations of his work, the challenge that “we should from time to time change our minds” (*CP3* 245) is no less daunting than the position that confronted Eliot when he addressed the Shakespeare Association.

The relationship of an author’s life to his work is crucial in reassessing Eliot’s achievement as a poet, critic and dramatist but can require a certain amount of careful

unravelling or untangling of the received opinions that have shaped his reputation. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Eliot famously claims “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.” He advances an “Impersonal theory of poetry” (CP2 109, 108). However, many critics have ignored Eliot’s own separation of poet and poems. Ezra Pound contended that Eliot “arrived at the supreme Eminence among English critics largely through disguising himself as a corpse.”² Pound felt that Possum’s pontifical authority camouflaged the avant-garde affront to conventional taste represented by *The Waste Land*. By contrast, Helen Gardner’s *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (1949), a book which Eliot recommended as the best study of his poetry, placed the emphasis on *Four Quartets*, characterized as the work of a devout Anglican. In a discussion of Eliot’s later poetry, Gardner remarked: “Nobody can underrate the momentousness for any mature person of acceptance of all that membership of the Christian Church entails.”³ Hugh Kenner’s sophisticated study *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (1959) pondered the enigma of Eliot’s private life glimpsed through an anti-romantic theory. “He is the Invisible Poet in an age of systematized literary scrutiny” observed Kenner, as he traced a delicate effacement of personality in this formidably difficult poet, “the archetype of poetic impenetrability.”⁴ It is noteworthy that many subtle and influential exegetes of Eliot’s poetry – including Gardner and Kenner – have been Christians.

By the centenary of Eliot’s birth, Lyndall Gordon had confidently announced that: “The idea that Eliot’s poetry was rooted in private aspects of his life has now been accepted.” Gordon’s approach is predicated on what she characterizes as Eliot’s “insistent search for salvation . . . his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism.”⁵ She is less concerned with a conservative public figure than with the poet’s enduring fascination with mystical experience. The title of the second part of her biography, *Eliot’s New*

Life, alluding to Dante's *Vita Nuova* or new life, suggests the passing of a spiritual watershed when Eliot became a practising Christian. In the words of the King James Bible: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Although assiduously researched, Gordon's teleology of a spiritual pilgrimage, sketching the paradigm of Saint Augustine's exemplary self-reflexive narrative of spiritual autobiography, has not pleased all literary critics. In particular, Gordon's emphasis on Eliot's intimate friend Emily Hale, depicted as a Dantesque intercessor guiding him to a new life, provoked Frank Kermode to a rare fit of pique: "[Gordon's handling of all this], her religiose attitude to the facts, a sort of muckraking sublimity, affects her prose as well as her argument, and the whole pseudo-allegorical and hagiographical enterprise is vaguely disgusting, though I ought to add that it might seem just right to readers of different disposition."⁶

If there has always been an appetite for muckraking gossip about this most impersonal poet, who instructed his literary executrix not to facilitate the writing of any biography of him, there is scant evidence for it. Published volumes of Eliot's letters have disappointed reviewers by their quotidian character. In a 1933 lecture, Eliot said: "The desire to write a letter, to put down what you don't want anybody else to see but the person you are writing to, but which you do not want to be destroyed, but perhaps hope may be preserved for complete strangers to read, is ineradicable" (*CP4* 705). The guilty pleasure of spying a secret which was not intended for us, is rarely to be found reading Eliot's letters. John Haffenden has disputed Peter Ackroyd's claim that sifting through correspondence in the archives of worldwide research libraries for his 1984 biography had enabled him to discover "a coherence of personality and a consistency of aim."⁷ Haffenden countered: "letters may be used to

flatter self-esteem, to propound opinion, to influence and manipulate others; the notion that they are more honest and open than other forms of writing is plainly absurd.”⁸ Eliot’s letters must be interpreted with tact; they are no less rhetorical constructions than his other writings and cannot be straightforward evidence of the poet’s personal experience. Haffenden, as general editor of the *Letters of T. S. Eliot*, has revised his opinion of the significance of these missives, now “all the very best building blocks of a biography” (L5 xxxiii) and yet his earlier misgivings about the epistolary form should not be discarded. Eliot was a prolific but guarded letter writer. Subsequent published volumes of his letters are more likely to be supplementary than revelatory when it comes to the patient interpretation of an oeuvre that has been intensively discussed for a century. The opening up of Eliot’s correspondence with Emily Hale in 2020 will offer insights into the nature of their lengthy and tangled relationship, but love-letters, if they are such, will not provide a key to the linguistic or imaginative texture of the intricate, allusive poetics explored by Michael O’Neill’s chapter in this *Companion*.

In his 1927 Shakespeare lecture, Eliot spoke of the “struggle – which alone constitutes life for a poet – to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal” (CP3 253). In the searching analysis of *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1988), Christopher Ricks probed the occasions when Eliot failed to transmute personal prejudices – including anti-Semitism – into great poetry. Anthony Julius’s adversarial critique in *T. S. Eliot, anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (1995) was impatient with claims of impersonality when considering charges of anti-Semitism. The focus of Ronald Schuchard’s *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (1999), built on a painstaking examination of the extant archival record, was designed to place tendentious critiques stressing the

harmful effects of Eliot's life upon his work in a sympathetic biographical context. "In view of the swelling barrier reef of reductive and formulaic criticism," Schuchard laments, "we may never hear the low and high registers of despair and love, horror and vision; we may never awaken to the intersecting planes and voices of a life lived intensely in art."⁹ Robert Crawford, Eliot's most recent biographer, in attempting to take account of a mass of newly published material, offers a measured assessment of the value of biographer's role in providing "not a reductive explanation that undoes the mystery of an author's gift, but a form of artistic narrative that averts caricature and illuminates both poet and poetry."¹⁰

Eliot himself ridiculed critics who had "reconstructed" his personal biography "from passages which I got out of books, or which I invented out of nothing because they sounded well" and complained of then "having my biography invariably ignored in what I *did* write from personal experience" (CP3 246). In "The Perfect Critic" he reflected on the inextricable interrelations between literature and life: "For in an artist these suggestions made by a work of art, which are purely personal, become fused with a multitude of other suggestions from multitudinous experience, and result in the production of a new object which is no longer purely personal, because it is a work of art itself" (CP2 265). In "A Brief Introduction to the Method of Paul Valéry" (1924), Eliot framed these issues resonantly: "not our feelings, but the pattern which we make of our feelings, is the centre of value" (CP2 562). The inwardness of subjectivity then, endures to the extent that it is rendered in an achieved work of art. Analogous to the techniques of modern art, Eliot's poetic theory proposes an objectification of emotion through a dynamic transformation of personal feelings onto the plane of impersonal structural relations. While it is clear that the personae of the poet cannot be mapped straightforwardly onto the biographical details of Thomas Stearns Eliot, critics will

continue to unpick Eliot's advocacy of the detachment of his writing, "with only the technical experience preserved" (*LI* 212), as a mask for the strains of his personal life appearing in that work. This remains a contentious area. In what follows, I provide a biographical context for the succeeding chapters of this *Companion* but raise caveats that encourage an unravelling of overdetermined readings of the oeuvre.

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"A writer's art" Eliot suggested, "must be based on the accumulated sensations of the first twenty-one years" (*CPI* 616). Eliot's first twenty-one years were spent in the United States. Not many letters survive from these formative years and reconstruction of young Tom's emotional life is a fertile ground for conjecture. He was born in St. Louis in 1888 to parents in their mid-forties. The youngest child, he had one brother and five sisters, one of whom had died in infancy two years before he was born. His father Henry Ware Eliot was a successful businessman, who rose to be president of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company, which flourished as industrial St. Louis grew. His mother Charlotte Champe Stearns was a social welfare reformer who wrote religious verses. Strong-willed and protective of her youngest child, Charlotte had ambitions that were frustrated by her lack of a university education. She took a keener pleasure than her husband in the achievements of their literary son. In 1926, Eliot wrote an introduction to his mother's dramatic poem on the Florentine martyr Savonarola.

Born with a congenital double hernia and obliged to wear a truss, Eliot was bookish rather than sporty, a shy child, painfully self-conscious about his large ears. According to Crawford, he was a "mischievous but sometimes rather priggish little

boy.”¹¹ Eliot had a privileged, sheltered and relatively strict upbringing but he recalled his childhood in a predominantly female household as happy and he was devoted to his nurse, Annie Dunne, a Catholic Irish-American. The family house at 2635 Locust Street was situated close to African American communities and ragtime rhythms were an abiding memory. His paternal grandfather, the Revd William Greenleaf Eliot (who died a year before Tom was born) had supported the abolition of slavery. Charlotte’s biography of him, *William Greenleaf Eliot: Minister, Educator, Philanthropist* (1904), was dedicated to her children “Lest They Forget.” Eliot called him the family patriarch, a Moses-like figure. A Unitarian minister whose sense of religious duty drew him from Harvard Divinity School to the Midwest, Revd Eliot established the Church of the Messiah in St. Louis as well as three educational institutions in the city: Washington University; Mary Institute, a girl’s school; and its male counterpart, Smith Academy, where Eliot’s first steps as a literature student were promising rather than outstanding, although his graduation ode signalled an extra-academic promise. Summer months were spent on the New England coast – Henry had built a house overlooking Gloucester – where as a teenager Eliot enjoyed sailing a catboat (sea sounds and images permeate his poetry), clambering over granite rock-pools in search of crabs, and observing migratory birds. In 1902, Charlotte presented this avid amateur ornithologist with a cherished copy of Chapman’s *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*, cited in the notes to *The Waste Land*.

In 1905, as preparation for attending Harvard University, Eliot was sent to Milton Academy, a boarding school near Boston, where he pursued a “somewhat miscellaneous course” (*LI* 4) of studies and joined a social and cultural elite. In Unitarian Boston, he was more conscious of his ancestry among the New England Eliots (family relations included two US presidents, a president of Harvard, and an

intellectual aristocracy of New England writers, notably Hawthorne and Melville). The Eliots provided several leaders of the American Unitarian Church and belonged to the caste Oliver Wendell Holmes had christened the Boston Brahmins. Eliot later claimed he had been raised outside the Christian faith, since Unitarianism does not believe in the doctrine of the Incarnation. In a 1933 lecture at a Boston Unitarian church, he warned the congregation against a desire to “trim your ideals down to fit the behaviour of the nicest people” and of the dangers of a complacent self-conceit leading to “spiritual pride” (CP4 750). He distrusted the high-minded liberal humanitarianism of Unitarianism and rejected its optimism about social progress. In a review of *The Education of Henry Adams*, Eliot poured scorn on the intellectual scepticism that he labelled the “Boston doubt,” the product of an over-refined education. Cultivated and snobbish, Eliot’s family “looked down on all southerners and Virginians” (L4 138); in Boston he became conscious of his own Missouri accent. Crawford surmises that an outsider’s desire to ingratiate himself in this milieu was partly responsible for Eliot’s frat-boy taste for swapping ribald jokes with contemporaries, such as Howard Morris, who also graduated from Milton and roomed with Eliot at Harvard. Morris was a recipient of Eliot’s scatological and racist King Bolo verses.

At Harvard, Eliot, a well-mannered and well-dressed young man, was educated in the elective system introduced by President Charles W. Eliot, a distant relative. Eliot complained that this system led to “wide but disorderly reading, intense but confused thinking, and utter absence of background and balance and proportion” (L1 100). He took undergraduate courses in English and comparative literature, classics, modern languages, philosophy, history, politics, fine arts and science. In his senior year, Eliot applied himself assiduously. As Herbert Howarth has argued, Eliot’s

“debt to Harvard was considerable . . . he often fell back on memories of his Harvard classes.”¹² Dante Studies flourished at Harvard under Charles Grandgent, Professor of Romance Languages, stimulating Eliot’s endeavour to puzzle out Dante’s Italian in his 1909 Temple Classics edition, which contained a facing English translation. He read John Donne’s poetry as a freshman in Dean Briggs’s class, and in his fourth year he studied Elizabethan and Jacobean drama with G. P. Baker. Eliot pursued a master’s degree at Harvard specialising in literature and philosophy. Two of his teachers were inspirational and left an indelible mark on his development. Eliot took courses with George Santayana, whom he recalled as “a brilliant philosopher and man of letters” (CP4 55). He took a keen interest in Santayana’s reflections on the system-building of philosophical poetry. Irving Babbitt’s class on French literature was also germinal. It instilled in Eliot a lifelong advocacy of the order and authority of classicism over the individualism of romanticism. However, Eliot later rejected the ethical foundation of Babbitt’s “New Humanism” since it was insufficiently grounded in religious dogma.

In December 1908, Eliot borrowed from the Harvard Union Library Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* which, as Anne Stillman’s chapter suggests, had a profound effect on his experimentation with serio-comic masks. In Jules Laforgue, whom Symons described as a poet of the “nerves,” Eliot discovered a temperamental affinity.¹³ He sent off to Paris for the three volumes of Laforgue’s *Oeuvres Complètes*, which arrived in spring 1909. By 1910, Eliot had begun drafting poems in a notebook titled “Inventions of the March Hare” representing a clean break from the apprentice work he had published in the *Harvard Advocate*. He started to sketch fragments of the poems “Portrait of a Lady,” “Preludes” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Eliot learned from Laforgue’s wistful and ironic treatment of romantic ardour. He imitated the style and technique of the French poet’s innovations

in line length, rhythm and diction, but redirected his work towards American subjects, from urban squalor (“First Caprice in North Cambridge” and “Preludes in Roxbury”) to genteel high culture (the atmosphere of Adeline Moffat’s downtown Boston salon is conjured in “Portrait of a Lady”). “Inventions of the March Hare” reveals the first gestures of an astonishing breakthrough in twentieth-century poetry. The nervous hypersensitivity of these poems, with an undercurrent of sexual neurosis beneath the dandyish pose of detached urbane observation, is indebted to Laforgue’s example but, in those poems collected in 1917 in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, Eliot has recognisably found his own poetic voice. “Of Jules Laforgue,” he observed in an address acknowledging his debt to Dante, “I can say that he was the first to teach me how to speak, to teach me the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech” (*TCC* 125).

When Charlotte Eliot heard of her son’s plans to study French literature in Paris in the academic year 1910-11, the prospect filled her with trepidation. “I cannot bear to think of your being alone in Paris, the very words give me a chill,” she wrote to her son, adding: “I do not admire the French nation, and have less confidence in individuals of that race than in [the] English” (*L1* 12). Eliot overcame his parents’ objections and spent a year in the cosmopolitan Latin Quarter. This does not mean that he visited every exhibition, concert, theatre and café in the city. Although Paris was the world’s leading city of avant-garde activity in the years before World War One – the city of Picasso, Apollinaire and Stravinsky – aside from applying himself diligently to his academic studies in philosophy, sociology and psychology at the Sorbonne, he appears to have been (as his mother worried) quite lonely, spending evenings reading in French the novels of Dostoevsky and of Charles-Louis Philippe. Eliot recorded a “temporary conversion” to Henri Bergson’s philosophy of vitalism

following attendance at celebrated public lectures at the Collège de France, society events, but his later rejection of Bergson's anti-intellectualism was pronounced.¹⁴ The isolation of a visiting overseas student was mitigated by Eliot's friendship with his French tutor, Alain-Fournier, a novelist who was associated with the Parisian monthly magazine *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, and with a fellow lodger at his *pension*, Jean Verdenal, a medical student who was killed in battle in the Dardanelles in 1915. Eliot dedicated *Prufrock and Other Observations* to Verdenal: a mark of respect and of grief at his battlefield death, not as some critics have strangely contended evidence of a homosexual relationship.¹⁵ Eliot and Verdenal shared a passion for the operas of Richard Wagner and an interest in the extreme right-wing French nationalist Charles Maurras whose royalist (some historians have argued proto-fascist) Action Française movement clashed with police in streets close to Eliot's lodgings. Maurras's writings provided a blueprint for a reactionary political philosophy.

Eliot recalled that in his early twenties he was "very immature for my age, very timid, very inexperienced" (*LI* xix). In a letter to a fellow editor of the *Harvard Advocate*, Conrad Aiken, who was already married and a published poet, he confided that he had been unable to visit the brothels he read about in Philippe's novels: "One walks about the street with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches. I should be better off, I sometimes think, if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago: and indeed I still think sometimes that it would be well to do so before marriage" (*LI* 82). Gail McDonald's chapter sympathetically yet critically addresses Eliot's sexuality and his expressions of misogyny. Sexual anxiety was exacerbated by his father's fierce belief that syphilis was God's punishment. An American Puritan background exerted its transatlantic pull. Eliot later recalled that he had considered settling in Paris and writing poetry in

French, revealing doubts about his academic future at Harvard. Contemporary French poets, however, were no longer in tune with the purism of Symons's Symbolists and nothing came of this pipe dream.

On his return to America, Eliot delivered a paper as president of the Harvard Philosophical Club criticising Bergson's philosophical inconsistencies. Bergson's emphasis on intuition had found support from liberal Modernists within the Catholic Church but had excited vehement attacks from more conservative quarters. A central preoccupation of Eliot's graduate studies in philosophy at Harvard was the concern to reconcile religious beliefs with advances in science, addressing what Josiah Royce called in a 1913 book *The Problem of Christianity*. Eliot enrolled on Royce's seminar on scientific method in 1913-14. His student essay for Royce's seminar entitled "The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual" is a fascinating document. Eliot doubts there can be a science of religion and advances a sophisticated theory of interpretation that is more relativist than Royce's own idealist position in which self and community are forged by social acts of interpretation. The essay revealed Eliot's wide reading in cultural anthropology and the psychology of religion (notably, the rival theories of Sir James Frazer and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl). Together with seminars on metaphysics, ethics, and logic, Eliot took courses in Eastern philosophy with Charles Lanman and James Woods, which required him to study texts in Pali and Sanskrit, but which ultimately left him, looking back, "in a state of enlightened mystification" (ASG 40). Eliot also attended a class on "Schools of the Religious and Philosophical Thought of Japan, as compared with those of China and India," taught by a Japanese scholar, Masaharu Anesaki. The diversity and difficulty of these courses led Crawford to conclude: "No other major twentieth-century poet was so thoroughly and strenuously educated."¹⁶

In 1914 Eliot took up a Sheldon Travelling Fellowship to Merton College, Oxford, to study the philosophy of eminent British neo-idealist, F. H. Bradley, and also Aristotelean thought with Harold Joachim. The previous year Eliot had purchased Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (1893). Eliot rejected Bradley's Absolute as a postulate of his metaphysical system: in effect, an act of faith. Once his academic year at Oxford concluded in the summer of 1915, Eliot worked hard writing up his doctoral dissertation which was completed in April 1916. It was received in the Harvard Philosophy Department as the work of an expert, but due to the wartime dangers of crossing the Atlantic it was not defended at a viva voce. Eliot was never enthusiastic about his dissertation. He praised the grace of Bradley's expository prose style and repeated his maxim that philosophy was the finding of reasons to justify what one believes on instinct. However, in a 1915 letter to a Harvard acquaintance, Norbert Wiener, Eliot expressed grave reservations about his philosophical studies: "I took a piece of fairly technical philosophy for my thesis, and my relativism made me see so many sides to questions that I became hopelessly involved, and wrote a thesis perfectly unintelligible to anyone but myself." He also explained to Weiner that: "For me, as for Santayana, philosophy is chiefly literary criticism and conversation about life" (LI 89, 88). Disenchantment with the sterility of academic Oxford encouraged Eliot to rebel against his parents and mix among avant-garde poets and artists in London. He later suggested that a desire to escape from returning to the philosophy department at Harvard contributed to his precipitous decision to marry Vivien Haigh-Wood in June 1915 and to settle in London – against strong family disapproval – first as a teacher at private schools and then from March 1917 as an employee of Lloyds Bank.¹⁷

The technical aspects of Eliot's philosophical writings are examined in detail in Jewel Spears Brooker's chapter, but it is important to note here that it is unwise to ascribe a too systematic theoretical programme to his creative writing. Eliot was not, in Santayana's terms, a philosophical poet. He made a firm distinction between the two activities: "Without doubt, the effort of the philosopher proper, the man who is trying to deal with ideas in themselves, and the effort of the poet, who may be trying to *realize* ideas, cannot be carried on at the same time" (CP2 228). Eliot's training in philosophy, however, is evident in his early articles, essays and book reviews for the *International Journal of Ethics*, the *Monist*, the *New Statesman* and for the *Egoist*, an avant-garde magazine of literature and philosophy which Eliot joined as assistant editor in 1917. In the *Egoist*, Eliot reconceived the concept of a modernising tradition in contradistinction to the radical individualism promoted elsewhere in its pages by Dora Marsden and in dialogue with Pound's modernist aesthetics. The framework of Bradley's predilection for system and a coherence theory of truth have been discerned behind Eliot's doctrine of tradition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," published in the final two issues of the *Egoist* in 1919. The magisterial tone of this essay cloaks its subversive intent – an act of creative criticism that sought to demolish moribund pre-war literary standards.

In 1920, Eliot assembled a coherent selection of his literary journalism in *The Sacred Wood*, drawing on "longer and better" (LI 354) essays for the *Athenaeum*, an advanced weekly arts journal. He reprinted his criticism of the structural and the psychological weaknesses of *Hamlet* in which Shakespeare had apparently failed to find an "objective correlative" (CP2 125) to express Hamlet's emotions towards his mother. William Empson linked this striking assertion to Eliot's need to reconcile his family drama after the death of his father in January 1919, observing: "One ought to

have realised at the time that only some great personal distraction could account for so bizarre a judgement.”¹⁸ Eliot’s formulation of the objective correlative is allied to the attack on romantic theories of self-expression contained in his impersonal theory of poetry. Helen Thaventhiran’s chapter examines the rhetorical tactics of Eliot’s critical prose: his revaluations of particular works and elucidatory epitomes of well-chosen passages of poetry. *The Sacred Wood*, soon to be reinforced by a series of leading reviews for the *TLS*, collected as *Homage for John Dryden* in 1924, represented a thoroughgoing challenge to the London literary establishment, including thinly-veiled attacks on figures such as Sir Edmund Gosse. Eliot conceived of the thirteen essays in *The Sacred Wood* as “a single distinct blow” (*LI* 431) and the collection’s title, as commentators have noted, invokes the violent succession enacted by the priest of Nemi as retold in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. It is remarkable how Eliot followed Wordsworth’s injunction (to the original writer) to “create the taste by which he is to be realised” (Brooker xxii).

Eliot’s collection *Poems* was published by the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press in 1919. It was through Bertrand Russell, who, as a visiting professor, had taught Eliot at Harvard, that he gained an entrée into Ottoline Morrell’s Garsington set and to the Bloomsbury Group, with whom the Eliots’ relations were sometimes fractious. Due to the Eliots’ financial difficulties, Vivien stayed in Russell’s London flat. By 1917 they had begun an affair which Eliot is likely to have known about. Eliot later told Morrell, Russell’s ex-mistress, that he believed Russell “has done Evil.”¹⁹ There is a darkening of tone in the poems Eliot composed in the years 1917 to 1919. His satire is sharper and the invitations to prejudice are more sinister. “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar” is a poem redolent of sexual intrigue and an atmosphere of evil. Eliot described the poem as “intensely serious” (*LI* 441). Rick de Villiers’s chapter finds

sexual betrayal at the heart of the savage comedy of Eliot's quatrain poems (whose form was modelled on Gautier's *Émaux et Camées*). Anthony Julius is more troubled by the menace of anti-Semitism he detects in these poems. Eliot's state of mind was not sweetened by the effects of the war which he told E. M. Forster: "crippled me as it did everyone else; but me chiefly because it was something I was neither honestly in nor honestly out of" (*L4* 573). Vivien's brother, Maurice, passed on harrowing details of trench warfare. Unlike Russell and some of his Bloomsbury acquaintances, Eliot was not a pacifist but his protracted attempts to join the US military were fruitless. Complications over the situation of US nationals living in wartime Britain led this "resident alien" to take the first official steps (frequently interrupted) towards becoming a British citizen.

After the war, Eliot shared John Maynard Keynes's dismay at the peace treaty concluded at Versailles. He dealt with punitive German war reparations in his duties concerning foreign loans at Lloyds Bank. For Eliot this was a dispiriting period of illness, overwork, and a misery that bordered on despair. "Gerontion," the opening poem of *Ara Vos Prec* (1920), is a dramatic monologue spoken by an embittered little old man. It is no straightforward mask for self-expression; rather, as Peter Ackroyd has suggested: "there is an immediate sense of release into an expansive, elaborate and allusive mode of address."²⁰ "Gerontion" is saturated in Elizabethan and Jacobean rhetoric (Chapman, Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, Bishop Andrewes) which Eliot had studied intensively for his 1918 adult education class on Elizabethan literature, the foundation of his scholarship in this field. The nervous and turbulent energy of the lines, "I that was near your heart was removed therefrom / To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition" (*CPP* 38) adapts Beatrice's terrifying confession in Middleton's *The Changeling*, a tragic story of murder and sexual betrayal that Eliot described as "a

dispassionate exposure of fundamental passions, it is the tragedy of the not naturally bad but irresponsible and undeveloped nature, caught in the consequences of its own action” (CP3 123) and he expressed a haunted fascination with Jacobean drama’s “tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires” (CP2 156-57).

In 1921, Eliot embarked in earnest upon writing the long poem that became *The Waste Land*. He had typed up the first two sections during May, before work was interrupted by the summer visit of members of his family. After the prolonged tension of managing the testy relations between his elderly mother and chronically ill wife, Eliot suffered a nervous breakdown, taking three months of leave from the bank in the autumn. He spent a month at the seaside town of Margate (“On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing” [CPP 70]), where he drafted parts of section three before travelling to Lausanne on the shore of Lake Geneva or Lemman (“By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept” [CPP 67]) in Switzerland, where he underwent a rest cure at the sanatorium of the psychiatrist Dr. Roger Vittoz. Responding well, Eliot emerged from his debilitating self-diagnosed *aboulie* (or loss of will) to complete the apocalyptic closing section of *The Waste Land* in a burst of creativity. Eliot thought this was the finest part of the poem, later observing that “some forms of illness are extremely favourable . . . to artistic and literary composition” (CP4 200). In Paris in January 1922, Pound took his blue pencil to nineteen pages of drafts, removing three long narrative sections, pruning and polishing, and effectively giving the poem its final structure. It is the most remarkable collaboration between two major poets since Wordsworth and Coleridge laboured on *Lyrical Ballads*.

A forbiddingly erudite and angular poem, a fragmentary text full of allusion, parody and pastiche, *The Waste Land*, as Lawrence Rainey’s chapter shows, is built on the dislocations and recoveries of lexis and syntax. It was awarded the New York

Dial's lucrative \$2000 annual prize for modern literature, but it was received frostily by distinguished London critics. In the *London Mercury*, Sir John Squire complained "what is language but communication, or art but selection and arrangement" and he dismissed the poem as incoherent: "A grunt would serve equally well" (Brooker 115). On the other hand, Edmund Wilson, who wrote an insightful review for the *Dial*, was moved to remark: "we feel that he is speaking not only for a personal distress, but for the starvation of a whole civilization" (Brooker 86). That the poem was a *cri de coeur* is supported by Eliot's (otherwise misleading) reported comment that far from being an attempt to capture a widespread spirit of post-war disillusionment, the poem "was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life" (*WLF* 1). *The Waste Land*'s ghostly "Unreal City" (*CPP* 62), inhabited by Dante's souls in Limbo, transforms the real City of London, where Eliot's took lunchtime walks from his basement office at Lloyds to the peace of nearby churches. Eliot's most chilling retrospective statement on the poem was that his marriage brought no happiness but "the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*" (*LI* xix). The comment is suggestive in the light of those sections dramatizing failed sexual relationships. The jagged dialogue of the neurotic couple in "A Game of Chess" was admired by Vivien as "wonderful" and described by Pound as "photography" (*WLF* 10). Seamus Perry is correct to say that the transmutation of this poly-vocal multilingual poem (a modernist experiment to rival Joyce, Picasso and Stravinsky), transcends mere autobiography: "to interpret the poem merely as an expression of Eliot's local melancholy would be seriously to undersell the amplitude of the poem's ambition."²¹ Moreover, as Jim McCue says of the notes added to the first American book edition of *The Waste Land*: "Purporting to explain it, they complete it, complicate it and undermine it."²²

One biographer contends that Eliot's "relationship with Vivien lay behind the composition of what is arguably his major work, written between 1917 and 1930."²³ Vivien was certainly a valued commentator on the drafts of *The Waste Land*, even if she recoiled from the misogyny of her husband's Fresca couplets. Childless Vivien suggested the line "What you get married for if you don't want children" (*WLF* 14), which was incorporated into the published version of "A Game of Chess." The sexual politics of this section have been given a twist by the revelation offered by Eliot's second wife that it was Vivien who asked for a cryptic line "The ivory men make company between us" (*WLF* 12) to be left out (it was restored in 1960). Eliot thought that Vivien was a talented writer. Throughout 1924 and 1925 he supported his wife's pseudonymous career as an author of prose sketches, until a crushing rejection letter from Marianne Moore at the *Dial*, which sparked an apoplectic response from Eliot, contributed to the collapse of Vivien's confidence and an alarming downturn in her well-being. Her letters from this time indicate that her state of mind was tortured, unstable and morbid.

"The Hollow Men" sequence of 1925 represents the lowest ebb of Eliot's poetry with its flat pulse of utterance and arid desert imagery. In this year, Eliot told Middleton Murry that he had "made myself into a *machine* . . . in order to endure, in order not to feel" (*L2* 627), claiming he had done so to avoid destroying his partner. "The Hollow Men" appeared in *Poems 1909-1925*, which Eliot inscribed to Vivien as a collection "no one else will quite understand."²⁴ Although countless commentators have been willing to explain Tom and Vivien's unhappy marriage by fabricating links between a tissue of letters, rumours and fictional literature, the complexities of their domestic intimacies are beyond posthumous reconstruction from second-hand scraps or from correspondence (to repeat Haffenden's words) "used to flatter self-esteem, to

propound opinion, to influence and manipulate others.” Pondering Eliot’s marriage, Crawford warns us against the dangers of “advancing theories for which evidence is so slender.”²⁵ When Vivien’s biographer, Carole Seymour-Jones, writes, “It was the horror of Eliot’s life with Vivien which motivated him to write *Sweeney Agonistes*,” this highly experimental jazz-age drama is reduced in her reading to an “exposé of marital disconnectedness” in which Vivien appears as the prostitute Doris and Eliot performs the role of brutal and inarticulate Sweeney, who wants “to do a girl in.”²⁶ Anthony Cuda’s chapter in this *Companion* proposes a more nuanced reading of the labyrinthine entanglements of Eliot’s life in his verse drama.

Vivien’s prose fiction was published alongside work by Joyce, Woolf, Pound, Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, Huxley, and Lawrence in the *Criterion*, the small-circulation highbrow quarterly review launched by Eliot in 1922 with the financial backing of Lady Rothermere. Eliot later dated the beginning of his “adult life” to the foundation of the *Criterion* “and the development of relations with men of letters in the several countries of Europe.”²⁷ Eliot’s desire to strengthen a European ideal of “classicism” – “the European idea – the idea of a common culture of western Europe” (CP2 778) – led him to solicit contributions from major European authors: Hesse, Valéry, Proust, Pirandello. Eliot’s poetry took a back seat during the nerve-wracking period in which he established the *Criterion*’s phalanx of like-minded critics in literary London. Some of Eliot’s best critical articles, for example on the music-hall artiste Marie Lloyd and on the conventions of Elizabethan drama, date from the early years of the *Criterion*. An Arnoldian restatement of his critical position in the 1923 *Criterion* essay “The Function of Criticism” provoked a lengthy debate with John Middleton Murry, editor of the rival *Adelphi* magazine, on the respective claims of the traditions of classicism and romanticism. In spite of the sarcasm Eliot directed at the “Whiggery” of Murry’s

reliance on the “Inner Voice” (CP2 463), compounded by *ad hominem* barbs, in 1925 Murry generously recommended Eliot to succeed him as Cambridge Clark lecturer.

Eliot followed Murry’s Clark lectures on Keats and Shakespeare with a series of eight lectures on the nature of metaphysical poetry. He redefined his contentious theory of a “dissociation of sensibility” (CP2 380) rupturing thought from feeling in the poetry written after the English Civil War, by tracing the “disintegration of the intellect” (CP2 609) back to the thirteenth century. Dante and the *trecento* poets were Eliot’s chief exemplars of an undissociated sensibility. He scolded the exhibitionism that he found in the elaborate extended conceits in the poetry of Donne and Cowley. Private criticism of these lectures by Mario Praz discouraged Eliot from publishing them immediately as a book and the rejection of an over-ambitious research proposal on seventeenth-century culture, crafted for a research fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, was a measure of how this bold poet-critic was still viewed with suspicion by some established scholars, thereby frustrating hopes of an academic career in English literature. Fortunately, a conversation between Charles Whibley and Geoffrey Faber at All Souls led to Eliot being recruited as a director of the new publishing venture of Faber and Gwyer. He resigned from Lloyds Bank in the autumn of 1925.

In 1926, in the midst of one of Vivien’s bouts of suicidal despair, Eliot fell to his knees before Michelangelo’s Pietà in St Peter’s, Rome. This was an indication of a deepening attraction towards religion that eventually led to his baptism in June 1927 by his friend William Force Stead and his confirmation as an Anglican by the Bishop of Oxford. As Barry Spurr’s chapter points out, Eliot rejected the evangelical idea that he had been converted, preferring to see his religious belief not as a leap of faith but the gradual accumulation (echoing Newman’s words) of “powerful and concurrent” (CP4 300) reasons, in which doubt and scepticism played their part. Eliot informed

Stead that “nothing could be too ascetic” (*L4* 128) for him. Spurr explains that Eliot worshipped as an Anglo-Catholic deeply committed to the sacraments of penance and confession. In 1928, withdrawing further from Vivien, who often stayed for several weeks in a Paris sanatorium, Eliot took a vow of celibacy. He later confided to John Hayward that he had never slept with a woman to whom he felt any strong physical attraction. Challenged by Irving Babbitt to make a formal public statement of his religious and political position, Eliot announced an all-too-quotable credo in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrews* (1928): “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion” (*CP3* 513).

For Lancelot Andrews signalled a realignment of Eliot’s critical values, what he called in the 1928 preface to the second edition of *The Sacred Wood*, “not so much a change or reversal of opinions, as an expansion or development of interests” (*CP3* 413). This expansion was received with consternation by former admirers. In a review of *For Lancelot Andrews*, Jacob Bronowski bemoaned “the moments when [Eliot] is near becoming the intolerant cleric” (Brooker 149). Eliot used his editorials in the *Criterion* (acquired by Faber in 1927) to shield the magazine from accusations it was too “Frenchified” or that it actively promoted “a reactionary Latin philosophy” as “a repressive instrument of literary criticism.”²⁸ The *Criterion*’s antagonists had essays from Eliot’s Parisian acquaintances Maurras, Henri Massis and Jacques Maritain on their mind. Increasingly preoccupied by the problem of poetry and belief, he admired Maritain’s neo-Thomist aesthetics, advocating the primacy of the spiritual and a strict separation between poetry and religion, and detached himself from I. A. Richards’s influential interpretation of *The Waste Land* as a poem bereft of belief. Eliot defended Maurras against condemnation from the Vatican. He claimed that this atheist (who paid a politically motivated lip-service to French Catholicism) had drawn him closer

to faith. Eliot dedicated his 1929 study of Dante (the heart of his prose criticism) to Maurras and, in a *Criterion* symposium on Fascism and Communism, he said that he found Maurras's monarchism more palatable than Mussolini's Fascism. Eliot's own brand of Tory royalism attracted misunderstanding and hostility among fellow British political commentators (he had been naturalised as a citizen at the end of 1927).

If Eliot's post-Christian prose criticism witnessed a readjustment of values, it is an over-simplification, as Sarah Kennedy's chapter reveals, to gloss the poems Eliot composed in the years 1927 to 1931 as "conversion" poems. Those critics who read the Ariel poems as the solution to a dilemma should be mindful of Eliot's exasperated letter to Paul Elmer More, complaining that it is "rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself into an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey afoot" (*L4* 567). Eliot's Ariel poems dramatize the difficulties of faith. Christopher Ricks writes powerfully about these transitional poems. He is attentive to a redemptive suffering unlocked by profound Shakespearean allusions in "Marina" (1930), described as "the greatest of the between-poems, being the one where the energies of animosity are at once acknowledged to be substantial and believed to be so transcendable that they can 'become unsubstantial'."²⁹ Lyndall Gordon's biographical approach risks becoming an escape from poetry when she identifies a real person, Emily Hale, as the elusive "Lady of silences" (*CPP* 91) in *Ash-Wednesday*, "a dream of sexual purity" leading the poet towards faith; a figure that is "set against Vivien" (Eliot had dedicated the poem "To My Wife").³⁰ Yet when Eliot introduced Hale to his London acquaintances, she elicited acerbic comments in respect of a bossy "sergeant major" manner towards Eliot.³¹ It is doubtful whether Hale's voluminous correspondence with Eliot could certify Gordon's vision of her as an angelic lady of "silences" and it does appear

hyperbolic to liken Eliot's modest reunion with the middle-aged Hale as "a replay of Dante's reunion with Beatrice on the verge of Paradise."³²

After the death of his mother in 1929, Eliot's marriage deteriorated. Vivien's behaviour, affected by a cocktail of prescription drugs, became worryingly erratic, as testified by numerous contemporary reports. Richard Aldington's caustically satirical presentation of the Eliots' marriage in *Stepping Heavenward* (1931) caused the couple a great deal of distress. Eliot's best critical essays from this period reveal a lacerating self-scrutiny. For example, an introduction to Christopher Isherwood's translation of Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals* (1930) broods upon the vertiginous divide separating salvation from damnation and asserts that "recognition of the reality of Sin is a New Life" (CP4 100). His remarkable preface to a 1931 edition of Pascal's *Pensées* places the emphasis on Original Sin and strenuous, ascetic self-discipline as a stay against illness and suffering. He remained a prominent critic of seventeenth-century literature, teasing out in a series of leading *TLS* reviews the "personality" of major and minor dramatists of the age from the "pattern" of their oeuvres. However, Paul Elmer More, a Princeton theologian and close confidant, pondered in a review of Eliot's *Selected Essays* (1932) whether a clear division had opened up between "the older poet and the newer critic" (Brooker 216): that is, between the radical poet of *The Waste Land* and the Anglican moralist apparent in "Thoughts After Lambeth" (1931), in which Eliot denied that *The Waste Land* represented the disillusionment of a generation – "I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned" (CP4 145) – and offered conservative Christian opinions on birth control, youth movements, modern science and the calls for a reunion of Christian churches (Eliot satirised Evangelicals and Anglican Modernists).

In September 1932, Eliot travelled to the United States for the first time in seventeen years to take up the Norton professorship of poetry at Harvard. During nine months he delivered over forty public talks across America, the most significant of which were the eight Norton lectures on *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, which, in spite of hurried preparation, furnishes fascinating reflections on the conscious sources of his poetry (and on unconscious “depths of feeling into which we cannot peer” or “feelings too obscure for authors to know what they were” [CP4 786, 791]) as well as compelling, if combative, confrontations with the history of English literary criticism from the age of Shakespeare, through the Augustans and Romantics, to the modern avant-garde. In February 1933, in the middle of the Norton series, Eliot instructed his solicitors in London to draw up a Deed of Separation from Vivien. The stress of this irrevocable decision appears in his lecture on Shelley and Keats, where Eliot betrays an antipathy to Shelley’s advocacy of free love and calls him a “blackguard” (CP4 767). In a short preface to a posthumous collection of Harold Monro’s poetry, written at this time, Eliot declared: “the compensations for being a poet are grossly exaggerated; and they dwindle as one becomes older, and the shadows lengthen, and the solitude becomes harder to endure” (CP4 800). A few months later, Eliot told the graduating class at Milton Academy that if he could address his teenage self he would tell him: “See what a mess you have made of things” (CP4 820).

In his Harvard undergraduate course on contemporary English literature, Eliot displayed distaste for the representation of human sexuality in the novels of Hardy and Lawrence. He elaborated more fully on this topic in his May 1933 Page-Barbour lectures at Virginia University, published in 1934 as *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*. Herbert Read’s neo-romantic theory of the spontaneity of the poet’s

“personality” was included in a heresy appendix. Although, in Eliot’s view, heretics have a “profound insight, of some part of the truth” (ASG 24), reviewers were either shocked or amused by his strictures on the role of the devil in modern literature. Ezra Pound crossed swords with him on the subjects of religion, economics and ethics in the pages of the *New English Weekly*. The centrality of Christian orthodoxy to *After Strange Gods* occasioned a notorious, subsequently regretted, statement that, “reasons of race and religion combine to make any number of free-thinking Jews undesirable” (ASG 20). *After Strange Gods* anticipates the dogmatism of “Religion and Literature” (1935): “literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint” (SE 388).

Upon his return to London in 1933, Virginia Woolf noted in her diary that Eliot spoke with asperity about the failure of his marriage but in his forties “wants to live, to love.”³³ After residence in a series of temporary lodgings, Eliot settled in the presbytery of St Stephen’s Church, Kensington. The flamboyant vicar, the Revd Eric Cheetham, appointed him as the churchwarden. Although a Faber secretary in the mid-1930s recalled Eliot as “an unhappy man . . . crouched over his desk in an attic in Russell Square,”³⁴ his daily contact with authors and the jovial company of his fellow Faber directors, who held regular soirées at John Hayward’s Kensington flat in Bina Gardens, provided welcome respite. (Witty verses composed at these gatherings were privately published as *Noctes Binanianae* in 1937.) As a director of Faber, Eliot has been recognised for his “kindness, his active helpfulness to young writers.”³⁵ Another social circle was opened up by his commitment to the Church of England. Bishop George Bell encouraged Eliot to take an interest in the revival of religious drama, leading to commissions to write prose dialogue and verse choruses for a pageant play, *The Rock*, and, following that, *Murder in the Cathedral* for the Canterbury Festival.

Performances of these plays were attended by Vivien (who paid unannounced visits to Russell Square, where she was prevented from confronting her husband). Her diaries record that she was a supporter of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and that she was "very nearly insane already with the cruel pain of losing Tom."³⁶ In 1938, after she was discovered by the police wandering in a distraught and confused state, her brother Maurice sought medical approval to commit her to a London nursing home (where she died in 1947). It has been supposed that the "restless shivering painted shadow" (CPP 290) in *The Family Reunion* (1939) is Eliot's portrait of his wife. Seymour-Jones asserts that the guilt-ridden protagonist of this play, Harry, Lord Monchensey, is "patently Eliot."³⁷ But Ackroyd resists such a "banal identification of author and character" on the grounds that it is "at best hypothetical, since it implies that Eliot was unconsciously propelled towards some instinctual revelation of his own guilt and horror."³⁸ Eliot himself acknowledged a closer self-resemblance to Harry's uncle, Charles. Whatever the truth, Seymour-Jones's hypothesis requires more tact to convince doubters like Ackroyd that it could be seamlessly and illuminatingly woven into a literary appreciation of this play.

In a series of BBC radio broadcasts during the 1930s, Eliot established himself as a public intellectual, or as he told Paul Elmer More, "a new type of intellectual, combining the intellectual and the devotional" (L4 567). In "The Modern Dilemma" BBC series, Eliot spoke as an Anglican moralist attacking what he took to be the corrosive claims advanced by Communism, psychology and modern science. In 1931 his signed *Criterion* editorial "Commentaries" doubled in length to deal with political and economic crises. Eliot was dismissive of the National Coalition government and the materialist basis of party politics. He called for a reinvention of a modern Toryism based upon Christian principles. Although his *Criterion* editorials on major social and

political issues of the day (including the Abyssinian Crisis and the Spanish Civil War) exasperated contemporaries by their lack of political realism and a refusal to adopt a strident anti-Fascist line, Eliot did not favour a totalitarian dismantling of democracy. He was an opponent of the British government's appeasement of Hitler. The Munich agreement occasioned "a depression of spirits so different from any other experience of fifty years as to be a new emotion" and convinced him to close down the *Criterion* in a state of gloom at the destruction of European intellectual life. In his valedictory "Last Words," Eliot said that the *Criterion* "had brought me associations, friendships and acquaintances of inestimable value."³⁹ In a lecture series delivered at Cambridge in March 1939, collected as *The Idea of a Christian Society*, he espoused a critique of laissez-faire capitalism and unregulated industrialism, promoting an idea of a utopian Christian society that he had formulated in conversations with the Christendom Group of Christian sociologists: an embodiment of the "clerisy" that he hoped would provide cultural and spiritual leadership at this bleak historical moment.

On the outbreak of World War Two, Eliot was also an integral member of the ecumenical discussion group The Moot led by J. H. Oldham. In meetings of the Moot, Eliot stressed the importance for Britain of a hierarchical class-based religio-cultural stability, a rival theory to the German sociologist Karl Mannheim's intellectual elites. These wartime recommendations for post-war reconstruction were articulated in the *New English Weekly*, although by the time they were gathered in book form as *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), Eliot was completely out-of-step with the egalitarian spirit of the Labour Party's Welfare State. Aside from a patriotic selection of Rudyard Kipling's poetry, Eliot's war work involved BBC radio talks, lectures and addresses to learned societies. John Xiros Cooper's chapter rightly recalls that these talks were used to champion a common Latin-Christian culture, a European "unity"

he underscored in a series of radio broadcasts to occupied Germany in 1946. Eliot's connections with the British Council, whose mission to promote British culture and civilization abroad was conceived by its founders as a form of cultural propaganda, started during the war. In the spring of 1942, Eliot braved German U-boats as part of a British Council delegation to neutral Sweden. In 1947, he spoke in Italy on behalf of the British Council in the midst of a highly volatile Communist-backed general strike. Eliot's extensive work for the British Council was crucial in promoting his reputation globally. (Kamau Brathwaite testifies to first encountering Eliot through BBC radio broadcasts and not the literary texts.) Nor is this cultural diplomacy inconsequential when considering the Cold War context in which the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded in 1948 to this public anti-Communist.

It was Eliot's achievement as a poet, however, that justified the decision of the Swedish Academy. Eliot was convinced that *Four Quartets* (1943) set a crown upon a lifetime's achievement. The idea of a linked series of quartets emerged only after the wartime disruption of the London theatres. The principal themes of *Four Quartets* – meditations on time and memory, on visionary scenery, on beginnings and ends – are rehearsed in *Burnt Norton*. Steve Ellis notes that Eliot had visited Burnt Norton manor house with Hale, but his chapter is concerned with the purgatorial *via negativa* Eliot pursues in order to liberate himself from biographical and historical exigencies. The poet divests himself of worldly things in a humble embrace of the divine darkness of the “dark night of the soul”; it is an ascetic, inward struggle to apprehend a mystical “still point of the turning world” (*CPP* 175). Succeeding quartets mirror the anxious solitude of Eliot's wartime displacement, although the communal language of war does permeate passages of *East Coker* (1940) and *The Dry Salvages* (1941). His auditory imagination was quickened by memories of St. Louis and the New England

coast, illustrating his remark that “in its sources, in its emotional springs, [my poetry] comes from America.”⁴⁰ The culminating poem of the quartets, *Little Gidding* (1942), was polished by the exacting search for *le mot juste* conducted in correspondence with John Hayward (who was credited with “improvements of phrase and construction”⁴¹). Hayward made several improvements to the scene set during the London Blitz. Ricks reflects thrillingly on the encounter with the elusive and allusive “familiar compound ghost” (*CPP* 193), where Eliot’s experiences as an air-raid warden are transfigured in this inspired imitation of a canto from Dante.⁴² Yet critics who read the confession of guilt (“awareness / Of things ill done and done to others’ harm” [*CPP* 194]) as Eliot’s remorse for his treatment of Vivien, or for his anti-Semitism, must reckon with the allusion to a poem “Vacillation” by W. B. Yeats, the “dead master” (*CPP* 193) whom Eliot summoned in this haunting phantasmagoria.⁴³ It is understandable that critics detect an intense personal anguish beneath the meditative tone of *Four Quartets*, but the thematic patterns traced by the symbolist music of this spiralling poem, yearning after the mystic’s intersection with the timeless, transfigure private doubts into something rich and strange.

Stephen Spender summarises Eliot’s career after *Four Quartets* as follows: “The rest of his work was an epilogue, which was not without some interesting developments for the history of poetic drama, some authoritative lessons drawn from a lifetime of combining poetry with criticism, some revealing wisdom in remarks about society and culture, and something of the grace and urbanity of a ‘distinguished guest’ who rises at the end of a banquet.”⁴⁴ Certainly, unlike Yeats, Eliot did not write a resplendent poetry of old age and his late criticism – polite to the point of blandness – lacks the keen edge and vigour of his early polemics. In a packed American stadium in 1956, Eliot reflected on the limitations of professional academic criticism: “Perhaps

the form of criticism in which the danger of excessive reliance upon causal explanation is greatest is the critical biography, especially when the biographer supplements his knowledge of external facts with psychological conjectures about inner experience.” Eliot says that this is because “a critical biography of a writer is a delicate task in itself; and the critic or the biographer who, without being a trained and practising psychologist, brings to bear on his subject such analytical skill as he has acquired by reading books written by psychologists, may confuse the issues still further.” Instead, a proper understanding and enjoyment of literature arises from “the whole man, a man with convictions and principles, and of knowledge and experience of life” (*OPP* 111, 116). In guarding himself against the “causal explanation” of the psychobiographer’s lexicon of sublimation and transference and unconscious wishes, he is still reluctant to acknowledge the entanglements of the man who suffers and the mind that creates.

Eliot’s lecture on “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1953) dredges up fascinating psychological metaphors about the “obscure impulse” or “inert embryo” in the poet’s creative desire to relieve himself of a discomfort: “He is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief, or, to change the figure of speech, he is haunted by a demon.” Eliot goes on to say that “when the words are finally arranged in the right way – or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find – he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable” (*OPP* 98). This formulation recalls a 1931 letter in which Eliot writes movingly about “the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering” that he heard in Beethoven’s late quartets, adding “I should like to get something of that into verse once before I die” (*L5* 203).

As a playwright, the Broadway success of Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (1949) was stunning, but Kenneth Tynan's review of *The Elder Statesman* of (1958) was indicative of the winds of change emanating from a tempestuous tumult of Angry Young Men. Now a grand old man, an elder statesman, honoured by the Order of Merit, Eliot lived in dignified frugality after the war at Hayward's Chelsea mansion flat. In spite of some tetchy disagreements with his sharp-tongued flat-mate, Eliot was helped by Hayward (who was confined to a wheelchair by muscular dystrophy), to weather the shocks of the deaths of Vivien and his brother Henry. Hayward provided a buffer from the personal intrusions that accompany celebrity. In 1949, Eliot declined a proposal of marriage from a fellow parishioner at St Stephen's, Mary Trevelyan, explaining that he could not give his heart to another woman. It was, therefore, an unexpected blow to Hayward, Trevelyan, and Hale when in January 1957 Eliot decided to marry Valerie Fletcher, thirty-eight years his junior, and who since 1949 had been his secretary at Faber. For the remainder of his life, which was increasingly troubled by ill-health, including emphysema and irregular heartbeats, she was his loyal nurse and companion, then, following Eliot's death in 1965, the keeper of the flame. Valerie Eliot has probably done more than anyone else, as executrix and editor, to present the details of Eliot's life in dramatic chiaroscuro: from the darkness of his first marriage – "He felt he had paid too high a price to be a poet, that he had suffered too much" she remarked in an interview⁴⁵ – to the radiant glow of his second marriage to her: "*To whom I owe the leaping delight / That quickens my senses*" (CPP 522).

* * * *

“In my beginning is my end,” reads Eliot’s memorial plaque in St. Michael’s Church in East Coker, the Somerset village his ancestors had departed in the 1660s for the New World. The neatness of this self-crafted epitaph has emboldened biographers to impose the narrative of a spiritual pilgrimage across his life and work – an exemplary journey through evil and existential crisis, to humility and final Christian redemption. Gordon’s biographical uncovering of epiphanic “unattended” moments” (*CPP* 190) follows a schema of Augustinian conversion, even if her starring lady, Emily Hale, could recognise “mighty little of me in any poetry!”⁴⁶ Hagiography, as Aldington’s *Stepping Heavenward* noted with cruel relish, is conducted on an otherworldly plane. Other contemporaries had claimed to see through Eliot’s pose of Christian humility. New Yorker Edmund Wilson disparaged Anglican Eliot as a “completely artificial, or, rather a self-invented character” and, in the *New Yorker*, Cynthia Ozick disinterred “Eliot at 101” as a politically incorrect bogey-man: an “autocratic, inhibited, depressed, rather narrow-minded, and considerably bigoted fake Englishman.”⁴⁷ Her words will bemuse lovers of the boyish feline humour of *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939), which furnished the delightful lyrics for Andrew Lloyd Webber’s smash-hit musical *Cats*. As further tranches of archival material are released into the embattled arena of Eliot Studies, admirers and detractors alike will interpret them in the light of pre-existing arguments about his life and work. Reassessment of this subtle, oblique, at times perplexing poet, an acutely shy and fastidious man, will never cease to attract ardent explorers. In the original *Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (1994), Bernard Sharratt shrewdly observed: “the fact of the matter is that ‘T. S. Eliot’ is constructed and reconstructed according to the ways in which his work is received.”⁴⁸ Or, to put it another way: we should from time to time change our way of being wrong.

NOTES

¹ *CP2* 124; *OPP* 141; *CP4* 708; *SE* 332.

² Quoted in Stefan Collini, "Eliot Among the Intellectuals," *Essays in Criticism* (April 2002), p. 101.

³ Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Cresset Press, 1949), p. 103.

⁴ Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. ix.

⁵ Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's New Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. v.

⁶ Frank Kermode, *Bury Place Papers* (London: London Review of Books, 2009), p. 105.

⁷ Peter Ackroyd, "A Life Measured Out," *The Times* (15 September 1984), p. 8.

⁸ See John Haffenden, "Life over Literature; or, Whatever Happened to Critical Biography?" in *Writing the Lives of Writers*, eds. Warwick Gould and Thomas F. Staley (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 22.

⁹ Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 20.

¹⁰ Robert Crawford, *Young Eliot* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), p. 3.

¹¹ *Young Eliot*, p. 5.

¹² Herbert Howarth, *Notes on some figures behind T. S. Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 65.

¹³ "It is an art of the nerves, this art of Laforgue." Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 304.

¹⁴ See *A Sermon preached in Magdalene College Chapel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 5.

¹⁵ George Watson, who researched Jean Verdenal's life, dismisses the supposition that Eliot and Verdenal had a homosexual affair. Eliot vehemently denied the insinuation of homosexual feelings contained in John Peter's article, "A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*," *Essays in Criticism* (July 1952), pp. 242-66.

¹⁶ Crawford, *Young Eliot*, p. 172.

¹⁷ Eliot's letter to Polly Tandy of 9 September 1946 makes the connection between his marriage and abandoning a career in philosophy.

¹⁸ William Empson, *Using Biography* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 198.

¹⁹ Letter to Ottoline Morrell, 14 March 1933. Quoted in Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel*, p. 179.

²⁰ Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 93.

²¹ Seamus Perry, *The Connell Guide to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"* (London: Connell, 2014), p. 18.

²² Jim McCue, "Editing Eliot," *Essays in Criticism* (January 2006), p. 14.

²³ John Worthen, *T. S. Eliot: A Short Biography* (London: Haus, 2009), p. 2.

²⁴ Quoted in Robert Sencourt, *T. S. Eliot: A Memoir* (London: Garnstone Press, 1971), p. 12.

²⁵ Crawford, *Young Eliot*, p. 357.

²⁶ Carole Seymour-Jones, *Painted Shadow: A Life of Vivienne Eliot* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2001), p. 445.

²⁷ "Brief über Ernst Robert Curtius," *Freudesgabe für Ernst Robert Curtius*, ed. Max Rychner and Walter Boehlich (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1956), p. 26.

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- ²⁸ For details of these controversies, see Jason Harding, *The Criterion: Cultural Politics and Periodical Networks in Interwar Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 19, 59-61.
- ²⁹ Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 234.
- ³⁰ See Gordon, *Eliot's New Life*, pp. 146-90.
- ³¹ In 1935, Ottoline Morrell referred to "that *awful* American woman Miss Hale. She is like a sergeant major, quite intolerable." Quoted in Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage, 1998) p. 218.
- ³² Gordon, *Eliot's New Life*, p. 12.
- ³³ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 1931-1935*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), p. 178.
- ³⁴ Erica Schumacher (née Wright), letter to Jason Harding, 1 February 1999.
- ³⁵ Hugh Sykes Davies "Mistah Kurtz: He Dead" in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Allen Tate (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 355.
- ³⁶ Papers of Vivien Eliot's archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford. Quoted in Gordon, *An Imperfect Life*, p. 296.
- ³⁷ See Seymour-Jones, *Painted Shadow*, pp. 466-67.
- ³⁸ Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 246.
- ³⁹ "Last Words," *Criterion* (January 1939), 274-75.
- ⁴⁰ "The Art of Poetry I: T. S. Eliot" *Paris Review* (Spring-Summer 1959), p. 70.
- ⁴¹ *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 5.
- ⁴² See Christopher Ricks, *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell Under the Sign of Eliot and Pound* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 188-218.

⁴³ Eliot quotes the relevant lines from Yeats's "Vacillation" – "Things said or done / long years ago, / Or things I did not do or say / But thought that I might say or do, / Weigh me down, and not a day / But something is recalled, / My conscience or my vanity appalled" – in his Virginia lectures (ASG 46).

⁴⁴ Stephen Spender, *Eliot* (London: Fontana, 1975), p. 242.

⁴⁵ Valerie Eliot, interview in the *Observer* (20 February 1972). Quoted in Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 334.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Gordon, *An Imperfect Life*, p. 425.

⁴⁷ Wilson's remarks are quoted in Jeffrey Meyers, *Edmund Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 156. See Cynthia Ozick, "T. S. Eliot at 101," *New Yorker* (20 November 1989), pp. 119-54.

⁴⁸ Bernard Sharratt, "Eliot: Modernism, Postmodernism, and after," *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. A. D. Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 224.