

An account of Eliot's poetic development, from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' to Four Quartets, by Dr Hannah Sullivan of New College, Oxford.

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T. S. Eliot was the twentieth century's most acclaimed and innovative poet. He succeeded by writing poems obsessed with failure of all kinds: failure of knowledge, feeling, language, recollection, and sensation.

—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed ...

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 56)

In this and other respects, Eliot's success as a poet is paradoxical.

Another mystery is why he wrote so little. During the fifty years he lived in London, he published not much more than a hundred pages of 'major' new original poetry. He had finished drafts of the poems that would appear in Prufrock and Other Observations (1917) before arriving, many during the 1910–11 academic year, which he spent in Paris. But the final Collected Poems published in his lifetime (1962) is only a little over two hundred pages in length, with about a third of its contents labeled as 'minor', 'occasional', or 'unfinished'. No other major poet in English has worked so slowly – or been so easily dissatisfied. In a 1921 review of an edition of metaphysical poetry, Eliot ventured:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results.

This comment is sometimes read as self-justification for writing obscure, esoteric poetry – or even as a snub to the common reader. But Eliot was not trying to be unclear. He saw the 'great variety and complexity' of modernity as a fundamentally difficult thing – both to endure, and to write about.

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Eliot's lack of abundance was due, in part, to his almost ascetic desire never to repeat himself. At twenty-eight, he had already worried that 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' might be his 'swan song', an anxiety entirely consistent with Prufrock's own neurotic belatedness: 'I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker'. In the winter of 1922, as the world was just starting to puzzle over The Waste Land, it was already, for Eliot, 'a thing of the past' and he was 'feeling my

way toward a new form and style'. Given how exhausting *The Waste Land* had been, it would have been easier and more lucrative to do another poem in the same style. Instead he began work on an experimental 'jazz play', which he sent rather obsequiously to Arnold Bennett – one of Ezra Pound's literary enemies.

'East Coker', written in the darkest months of the Second World War, explains Eliot's idea of permanent literary revolution:

... and every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 191)

In its quiet and stubbornly prosaic way, this is a heroic statement of avant-garde poetics: a commitment to continue 'making it new' in the face of failure.

The poems in *Prufrock and Other Observations* are, as the title suggests, attempts to look in a new way. They specialize in aggressively realistic descriptions of urban landscapes, from the oyster shells on restaurant floors in 'Prufrock' to the woman clasping 'the yellow soles of feet / In the palms of both soiled hands' in 'Preludes'. At the same time, the figurative language is weird and inventive. These are the opening lines of 'Prufrock':

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 5)

Normally metaphors compare something unfamiliar to something we know better, but Eliot does the opposite, turning the natural phenomenon of the night sky into something that most of us have never seen: a patient etherized on an operating table. He also tracks the metaphor out in its more familiar direction, from natural source to man-made target, by reminding us that the synthetic medical product 'ether' is named after the Greek word for sky. The double-crossed metaphor is both sensually evocative and, in a more distanced way, intellectually pleasing. After *The Waste Land*, Eliot wrote about more denuded and sometimes less realistic landscapes. If metaphor is used at all, it is often strangely self-referential, like the description in 'Burnt Norton' of roses that 'had the look of flowers that are looked at'.

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Tonally, the early poetry is balanced between the realistic, lightly satirical mode of a Henry James novel and a kind of hysterical phantasmagoria. On the one hand we have the delicate comedy of Prufrock's mode of dress ('My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin') and the self-importance of the readers of 'The Boston Evening Transcript'; on the other, the disturbing metonymy of the 'muddy feet that press / To early coffee-stands' ('Preludes') and the strange description of housemaids' souls 'sprouting despondently at area gates' ('Morning at the Window'). And Eliot's speakers are prone to various kinds of perceptual disturbance, including losing track of their own observations. In the unpublished 'Afternoon', for example, we watch 'The ladies who are interested in Assyrian art' vanishing into the middle distance of the British Museum, 'As they fade beyond the Roman statuary / Like amateur comedians across a lawn'. The speaker of the prose poem 'Hysteria' begins, 'As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill', before cutting to the repeated, mild-mannered suggestion of a waiter, "If the lady and gentleman wish to take their tea in the garden ...". In the end it is unclear whether the hysteria is to be located in the observer or the woman he observes.

Eliot's second volume of poems was written after he had married and settled in London, during and immediately after the Great War. The landscape of Poems (1920) is at once more panoramic and more indefinite, volatile, and malign than the world of Prufrock and Other Observations. Gerontion is a much patchier, stranger speaker than Prufrock: more like a character in a Beckett play than a James novel. He introduces himself in the opening lines as 'an old man in a dry month, / Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain'. And then, for reasons that the poem leaves opaque, he moves into a higher register, a more rhetorical and puzzling kind of speech where syntax and line tug against each other. This passage is tinged with Jacobean flavour, both at the level of form and phrasing ('cunning passages'). It is enticingly suggestive, and quite inexplicable.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities ...

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 32)

'Gerontion' marked the beginning of an eighteen-month period of exceptional productivity. By December of 1921, Eliot had written a complete (long) draft

of The Waste Land and much of his best-known criticism, including ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and ‘The Perfect Critic’, and essays on Hamlet, Blake, Swinburne, and Dante. He had also published two books: Poems (1920) and The Sacred Wood (1921). Both are preoccupied with the relationship between the living and the dead, the new writer and his predecessors, and the relation of this grim moment in history to a scattering of others, like the battle at Thermopylae that the speaker of ‘Gerontion’ claims to have avoided (‘I was neither at the hot gates’).

In particular, Eliot is interested in what it might mean to abandon the idea that living and dead are opposite states of being. ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ ends with the call to live in ‘what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past’. And the opening section of The Waste Land, ‘The Burial of the Dead’, ends – despite its tonal morbidity – with the possibility that burial might be generative:

‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?’

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 57)

Eliot would never again write so much poetry so quickly. But in 1921, as he worked on the draft of The Waste Land, he complained to his friend Conrad Aiken about writing block. He felt that the material was ‘there and waiting’ in his mind and ought to be easy to transcribe. But ‘night after night, the hope proved illusory: the sharpened pencil lay untouched by the unused sheet of paper’. The image is poetic in a peculiarly Eliotic way. Like the typist in ‘The Fire Sermon’ who returns home ‘at the violet hour’ to food in tins and unsatisfying sex, Eliot figures himself as an automaton, unable to bring the poem to fruition and equally unable to bury it.

From the beginning, Eliot’s poems had been strangely empty and strangely full, cluttered with ontologically peculiar things, whims, half-possibilities: the peach that Prufrock contemplates; the smell of steaks in passageways in ‘Preludes’; the parting that the speaker of ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ seems to regret not having had.

Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.
And I wonder how they should have been together!

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 28)

The Waste Land takes this procedure a step further. Many of its most startling descriptions are, on closer inspection, acts of negative predication. At the beginning of ‘The Fire Sermon’, for example, the river bears no ‘empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends’. But the boundaries between real and unreal things are now more porous. In ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ it is clear that the ‘compelling’ romantic scene is actually a fantasy. But

how are we to interpret the double address to the city, real or unreal, at the end of 'The Fire Sermon'? The speaker is listening to a mandoline 'beside' a London pub, but he is also aware of a second sound, coming from 'within', 'where fishmen lounge at noon'.

O City city, I can sometimes hear
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
The pleasant whining of a mandoline
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 64)

According to Eliot's friend John Hayward, the poem is describing the buskers who play in Billingsgate fishmarket (Poems, Vol. I, p. 669). Eliot's unusually personal note also seems to locate us in contemporary London, where St Magnus the Martyr boasts 'one of the finest among Wren's interiors'. But the deliberately archaic 'fishmen' for 'fishermen', Latinate church name, exotic instrument, and 'Ionian' splendour also point somewhere beyond the drab reality of the public bar in Lower Thames Street. John Betjeman thought that Eliot must have visited the church after its restoration in the 1920s, when the drab Victorian interior was turned back into white and gold. But the restoration did not, in fact, begin until 1924, two years after publication. In that case, the speaker must be applying an imaginative filter, imposing an imagined seventeenth-century interior over the modern church. The draft bears out this line of thought. There we see Eliot putting the idea more explicitly, padding out the short line with two extra verbs: 'where the walls / Of Magnus Martyr stood, and stand, and hold'.

... the horror of The Waste Land is primarily perceptual.

The dramatic monologue – which presupposes a single speaker in a definite location – had already been pushed to its limits in 'Gerontion'. In The Waste Land, Eliot allows people, objects, and voices from different places and historical moments to 'melt' or fade into each other, often with no definite notation of the break point. At the same time, he doesn't entirely give up on the idea of a conducting consciousness. Eliot's note to line 218 says: 'What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem'. But the poem also positions Tiresias as a very strange kind of observer:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see ...

Because he is neither alive nor dead, Tiresias is able to attend equally to the real phenomenal city and a whole host of other possible cities, like Thebes – which, we presume, he has ‘seen’ in the same aloof way. He is far from being a constant presence in the poem, but he is completely central to it: we might even say that he shows other readers how to see modernity and antiquity side by side. In doing so, he shows us that the horror of *The Waste Land* is primarily perceptual. Eliot is not giving us dystopian fantasy, but a nightmarish way of looking at contemporary London.

By December 1921, Eliot had left London for a sanatorium in Lausanne. He had been suffering, he said, from a longstanding illness, and the present crisis was due less to overwork than to ‘an aboulie and emotional derangement that has been a lifelong affliction’. In other words, *The Waste Land* is not the poem that drove Eliot to a breakdown, but a well-organized dramatization of the cognitive and perceptual distortions that accompanied it. Characters melt together; voices sing out of empty cisterns; syntax breaks down; and referents (the archduke, Madame Sosostriis, Stetson) appear without the context needed to explain them. Taken as the workings of an individual mind, the poem would be floridly deranged. Taken as a series of quotations from an immense variety of cultural sources, it is an exciting, but ultimately chaotic, act of selective excerption. Eliot’s original title for the opening section, ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’, points to a third and more satisfying possibility: that a single voice is ‘doing’ the multiple voices, thereby beginning to manipulate them into aesthetic order.

Eliot’s later poetry turns a fascination with negative description into deliberate method. He had begun regular worship in the Church of England in the late 1920s, and the poetry from *Ash-Wednesday* onwards is clearly influenced by apophatic theology: the attempt to describe God by negation. This is not to say that the poetry is ‘religious’ in any conventional sense. In fact, Eliot was sceptical of the whole idea of religious or devotional poetry, professing himself horrified that *Ash-Wednesday* had been called ‘the finest religious poem in English since *Crawshaw*’ because ‘if it was, it wouldn’t be’. At the beginning of the poem he tells us explicitly, repetitively, that he has given up hope, concluding with a confusing string of clauses in apposition:

I renounce the blessed face
 And renounce the voice
 Because I cannot hope to turn again
 Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
 Upon which to rejoice

Whether this is a genuine commitment to the ascetic practice of the *via negativa* or something subtly sinful, or even heretical – self-dramatizing despair, Prufrock-like vacillation, disguised as religious feeling – is not entirely clear. The poem is more an invitation to think in theological terms than a definite piece of religious thought.

By ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925), Eliot seems determined to chasten the ear.

The poetry of this period also embraces negativity in certain linguistic, and formal ways. Eliot’s early poetry lures new readers with its enticing music, but this is now gone. We no longer get the pleasure of ‘sing’ modulating into ‘sang’ at the end of ‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales’, a poem in measured quatrains; or the zany Renaissance pastiche in ‘Gerontion’; or the pulsing short lines of ‘Preludes’, with their syncopated beats and unexpected rhymes:

And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 15)

By ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925), Eliot seems determined to chasten the ear. The short lines look, on the page, like the lines of ‘Preludes’, but the rhythmic energy has dissipated. Now we get ‘dried’ whispering voices, which

Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 81)

To a great extent, this effect relies on Eliot’s use of trochaic and other falling rhythms at the end of his lines. The opening of ‘The Cultivation of Christmas Trees’, for example, begins with a kind of mechanical disdain, spitting out the words ‘Christmas’ and ‘commercial’:

There are several attitudes towards Christmas,
Some of which we may disregard:
The social, the torpid, the patently commercial,
The rowdy (the pubs being open till midnight)

(Poems, Vol. I, p. 109)

In Four Quartets, the effect is magnified by Eliot’s use of longer lines, where two phrases with falling rhythms are combined:

For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

And, sometimes, it comes close to a tic, a nagging mannerism to which all other effects are sacrificed. The opening verse paragraph of 'The Dry Salvages', for example, has the following line endings: river, intractable, frontier, commerce, bridges, forgotten, implacable, reminder, unpropitiated, waiting, bedroom, dooryard, table, gaslight. Here it is hard to hear anything other than the – almost comically glum – effect of the dying fall.

Four Quartets began with a single poem, 'Burnt Norton', which Eliot completed just in time for it to appear in the 1935 Collected Poems. The other three quartets, written in war-time, are modeled on the same five-part formal pattern, with sections of philosophical or personal meditation broken up by lyric. The whole is far more carefully planned than Eliot's early poems; to some readers, the pattern has even seemed contrived. But perhaps this is part of the point. Rather than cutting between very different phenomena in a series of rapid montage shots, Eliot now asks us to see a single instance – a mystical moment, a point of stillness – from a variety of perspectives. In particular, the poetry asks us to see the tightly bound relations that exist between apparent opposites. This is the point of the Greek epigraph from Heraclitus that prefaces 'Burnt Norton': 'the way up and the way down are one and the same' (carefully referenced, unlike the dangling, suggestive Greek epigraph of 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales'). To explain it, the poem produces various examples: the Chinese jar moving in its stillness; an imaginary constellation where 'boarhound and the boar' are 'reconciled', fixed forever in their positions as hunter and hunted.

In a sense, Eliot's trajectory between *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* was the opposite of Picasso's. Cubism moved from a more austere analytic phase to the cluttered three-dimensional canvases of papier collé; Eliot moved from synthesis to analysis. Although we still get some bright sensual detail, such as 'the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard' ('The Dry Salvages') or 'the tattered arras woven with a silent motto' ('East Coker'), it is much less frequent. What we have instead is a formalization of principle. Although *Four Quartets* is his last poem, it is a good place for the new reader of Eliot to start.

The 'I' that appears in *Four Quartets* is more trustworthy and consistent than the speakers of the earlier poems. There is no dramatized frame to prevent us from identifying the speaker with Eliot himself. But it is still a somewhat impersonal voice, dependent on pasting together and replaying the voices of other writers. In 'East Coker', for example, the speaker is paraphrasing the Spanish mystic, Saint John of the Cross:

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
 You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
 In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

The difference is that Eliot's focus is now on carrying over the ideas of his source text, not simply exploiting the glitter of a verbal trace in his own poem. Nothing calls attention to the borrowing. Instead we have to face the thought experiment squarely. What is the way of ignorance, and how, or why, would we want to arrive at what we do not know? What does that really mean? And how does this abstract passage fit together with the more concrete examples given in the first section of 'East Coker'? First we are asked to imagine leaning against a bank, watching light falling across an open field while a van drives past. Then, in the next verse paragraph, we are told to imagine the very same open field filled with fifteenth-century peasants dancing around a bonfire. In *The Waste Land*, the past superimposed itself on the present without being asked, almost too easily. Now we are asked to do something more difficult by focusing deliberately on both at the same time, without blurring them. But the thought experiment produces discomfort, because simultaneous apprehension of the two states as separate is impossible. Eliot sets us, as it were, a series of spiritual and mental exercises – but he does not guarantee success.

More than any other twentieth-century poet, Eliot renders the experience of modernity in all its baffling complexity

Bertrand Russell, who was one of Eliot's philosophy teachers at Harvard, remarked that 'we know very little, and yet it is astonishing that we know so much'. In a sense, Eliot's poetry takes the opposite view. On one level, it knows a quite exhilarating range of things, from the rare Virgilian word *laquearia* to the look of the Mississippi at high tide. But it is also deeply skeptical about the value of its own knowledge. The speaker of 'East Coker' explains the problem as a kind of regress, where any knowledge that we have imposes false paradigms and interpretations on future data.

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.

More than any other twentieth-century poet, Eliot renders the experience of modernity in all its baffling complexity: the fragments of things we hear, half-hear, remember, or desire, or regret. But the poetry also dramatizes the failure of

attempts at understanding this complexity, from the windy rhetoric of 'Gerontion' to Madame Sosostri's tarot pack and the deliberate despair of Ash-Wednesday. Four Quartets asks us to attend, more penitently, to our own intellectual failures, prejudices, and limitations. Its consolation is the bracing, Socratic pleasure of honesty, where 'what you do not know is the only thing you know'.