

50 CRITICS DISCUSS

T.S. Eliot

(1888-1964)

“I was jolly well right about Eliot. He has sent in the best poem I have yet had or seen from an American. PRAY GOD IT MAY BE NOT A SINGLE AND UNIQUE SUCCESS. He has taken it back to get it ready for the press and you shall have it in a few days.... He is the only American I know of who has made what I can call adequate preparation for writing. He has actually trained himself and modernized himself *on his own*.”

Ezra Pound

Letter to Harriet Monroe, Editor of *Poetry*
(30 September 1914)

“The most exciting of those early introductions, after Lindsay and Sandburg, was that of a young Missourian in London, T. S. Eliot, whose ‘Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ printed in June, 1915, although an extraordinarily finished product to begin with, was his first appearance as a poet. The previous September Eliot had called on Pound, who wrote me (enthusiastically for him)... When ‘Prufrock’ reached us via our Foreign Correspondent [Pound], its opening lines...nearly took our breath away. Here indeed was modern sophistication dealing with the tag ends of overworldly cosmopolitanism.”

Harriet Monroe

Editor, *Poetry*

recalling 1914 in *Autobiography*

“By technique we...mean one thing: the alert hatred of normality which, through the lips of a tactile and cohesive adventure, asserts that nobody in general and some one in particular is incorrigibly and actually alive. This some one is, it would seem, the extremely great artist: or, he who prefers above everything the unique dimension of intensity, which it amuses him to substitute in us for the comforting and comfortable furniture of reality. If we examine the means through which this substitution is allowed by Mr. Eliot to happen in his reader, we find that they include: a vocabulary almost brutally tuned to attain distinction; an extraordinarily tight orchestration of the shapes of sound; the delicate and careful murderings—almost invariably interpreted, internally as well as terminally, through near-rhyme and rhyme—of established tempos by oral rhythms.”

e. e. cummings

Dial

(June 1920) 783

“It is true his poems seem the products of a constricted emotional experience and that he appears to have drawn rather heavily on books for the heat he could not derive from life. There is a certain grudging margin, to be sure, about all that Mr. Eliot writes—as if he were compensating himself for his limitations by a peevish assumption of superiority. But it is the very acuteness of his suffering from this starvation which gives such poignancy to his art. And, as I say, Mr. Eliot is a poet—that is, he feels intensely and with distinction and speaks naturally in beautiful verse—so that, no matter within what walls he lives, he belongs to the divine company....These drops, though they be wrung from flint, are none the less authentic crystals.”

Edmund Wilson

Dial

(December 1922) 615

“The writer of ‘The Waste Land’ and the other poems of that period appeals to us as one struck to the heart by the confusion and purposelessness and wastefulness of the world about him.... And to that world his verse will be held up as a ruthlessly faithful mirror. The confusion of life will be reflected in the

obscurity of language.... And now against this lyric prophet of chaos must be set the critic who will judge the world from the creed of the classicist, the royalist, and the Anglo-Catholic.... I think...that a sensitive mind cannot read 'Ash Wednesday' without an uneasy perception of something fundamentally amiss in employing for an experience born of Anglo-Catholic faith a metrical form and a freakishness of punctuation suitable for the presentation of life regarded as without form and void.... He is a leader and a very influential leader. Our difficulty is that he seems to be leading us in two directions at once."

Paul Elmer More
Saturday Review
(12 November 1932) 235

"In *Ulysses* [1922] we have, in many ways, a resemblance less to other novels than to contemporary poems—Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, and Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' and 'The Waste Land.'...In America too, even before the war, Mr. Eliot was making a most effective use of this mingling of tones, a la Jules Laforgue, this pointing of the mean and the futile with allusions to the fine and the classic; for example, in 'Sweeney and the Nightingales' and 'Portrait of a Lady.' In 'The Waste Land' he has erected it into a system."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 423, 528

"Eliot not only follows the classical dogma because he cherishes classicism; he follows it also because he cherishes dogma....He loses much by being fastidious. He loses much by having no humor whatever, but he is capable of something else by having splendid wit. And the presence of wit and the absence of humor in Eliot argue his possession of great intellect and egoism, his lack of humanity, his lack of modesty and unself-consciousness. He rests with those men who have chosen to see life distantly, from a single vantage-point; and had he, in the absence of warmth and sinew, a great intensity, he might possess permanent value for us.... But he is not intense, he is merely correct."

Louis Kronenberger
Nation
(17 April 1935) 453

"When Eliot stood isolated and dispossessed amid the ruins of a familiar universe, every nerve and sensation quivered with its own life. The antennae of his intelligence were alive with nervous vitality. This resulted in images and allegories of great focal sharpness. In more recent years, approaching a stranger territory, this grip on identity is no longer held, and with its relaxation the nervous sensibility of his diction and cadence has lessened. He writes either a more relaxed and speculative verse, or a sort of argument which attempts to extend his intellectual problems beyond their own limits. He has become a poet of more public qualities, of religious responsibilities, and even (in 'The Rock') of social concerns. These have entailed a change from a style of cryptic historical reference and erudition to one of dialectic lucidity, or even of popular simplification."

Morton Dauwen Zabel
Southern Review
(Summer 1936) 170

"Eliot's own opinions are not merely related to his poetry. They qualify his whole critical attitude, and they make him to some extent a preacher. His aim as a writer has been to be a traditionalist: the tradition which he has adopted, being derived from the Church, has also sociological and educative implications. It is his object to show that the application of these principles in social life is as just as it is correct to apply them to literature. He seems to feel that unless he can prove this, he is, in his work, an individualist: not a traditionalist radically connected with the historic process: but isolated, original, personal, in the same sense that he is writing about his own beliefs, which are 'home-made,' and so make him eccentric and different from the people around him."

Stephen Spender
The Destructive Element
(Houghton 1936) 164-65

“If there is a metaphysical distinction between the poetry and the prose of T. S. Eliot, it is this: that in the former he is skeptical of his own knowledge of truth, and in the latter he is indicating the path along which he hopes to find it. In his poetry he sees things through a glass darkly; in the prose he is proclaiming the truth that will make us free. Both these activities, however, are offshoots of a unified intelligence, of a man who is singularly whole in his conception of the dignity and importance of his art. There is no real divergence between his theory and practice, no matter how lucid he may contrive to make his criticism, or how obscure his poetry.”

A. C. Patridge
T.S. Eliot
(Pretoria 1937) 3

“T.S. Eliot is probably the most widely respected literary figure of our time; he is known primarily as the leader of the intellectual reaction against the romanticism of which he began his career as a disciple.... Eliot is a theorist who has repeatedly contradicted himself on every important issue that he has touched, and he has dealt in some fashion with most of the important literary issues of our time....

Pound’s *Cantos* are poems of reverie and so likewise are most of Eliot’s poems: reverie proceeds by the random association of daydream, and possesses a minimum of rational coherence; in fact, in the form it takes in the stream-of-consciousness novel, it is frequently defended because of the sense of immediacy it produces, the assumption being that this is the way people really think....The theory and influence of Eliot...seem to me the most dangerous and nearly the least defensible of our time.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow, 1937-47) 460,491,501

“He will soon make ordinary drama look cheap because of its lack of metaphysical interest, just as he had part in making the ordinary shallow poetry of twenty years ago look the same way, and for the same reason.... On the realistic level, Mr. Eliot is superb in his mastery of characterization (both the satiric and the sympathetic), handling of plot sequence, exposition of background through dialogue, and, I imagine, such other techniques as belong to an oral form like drama. It is comforting to thin that an intellectual, so strict and unconceding that he has been accused of living in a tower, has picked up without any fuss the knack for close structural effects of drama.”

John Crowe Ransom
Poetry
(August 1939) 264-66

“It is to him, together with Ezra Pound, that we can trace the awareness of the urban scene, the employment of anti-poetic imagery, conversational rhythms, cinematic transitions and close-ups, which make contemporary verse deserve the adjective. And even the most vigorous and provocative of the younger men have not shown an ‘auditory imagination’ equal to Eliot’s....What his ‘feeling for syllable and rhythm’ has brought back, in its curious workings, has been chiefly a sense of disorder, of frustration and waste, an intimate and horrifying vision of death.”

Babette Deutsch
American Scholar
(Winter 1939) 30

“Thomas Stearns Eliot...was to define better than any other single poet the period between the wars... With ‘The Waste Land’ (1922) Eliot became the leading poet of his generation. The work won him the two-thousand dollar *Dial* prize, and when it was reprinted in America the critics recognized Eliot as the poet who best summed up the disillusionment of a postwar generation and, what is more, made clear in his social symbols the sterility of our civilization. Although the more conservative critics objected to the voluminous footnotes, the psychoanalysis, and the use of mythology, Eliot in this poem—even in the title—named and mapped the emotional geography of most of the writers between the two world wars. ‘The Waste Land’ was soon widely translated and has influenced French and Spanish literature...”

In keeping with his naturalization as a British subject in 1927, Eliot became a professed, ardent Anglo-Catholic.... Already he had disappointed those who had seen in him the leader of the lost generation; a close reading of 'The Waste Land' itself indicated his horror of a skeptical and commercial world. Once again he led the way, this time away from the Waste Land and toward religion. His later poetry is devoted entirely to the theme of repentance, in which one sees the intellectual man reaching toward, if never quite achieving, spiritual rest in a traditional faith.

It was clear that Eliot meant seriously his declaration of classicism in literature; but this was scarcely a new stand. He had always shown an interest in the classical models of form, balance, symmetry, intellectuality, and restraint, and even in college had been strongly sympathetic toward the ideals of Harvard's Irving Babbitt....Despite his devoted interpretation of the neoclassical in English literature, it could nevertheless be argued that there is much of romanticism in Eliot's nostalgia for the past, since for him the past, at least as it is to be found in libraries, is the Golden Age."

George K. Anderson & Eda Lou Walton
This Generation: A Selection of British and American Literature from 1914 to the Present
(Scott, Foresman 1939-49) 228-29

"Eliot, in brief, has surrendered to the acedia which Baudelaire was able to judge; Eliot suffers from the delusion that he is judging it when he is merely exhibiting it. He has loosely thrown together a collection of disparate and fragmentary principles which fall roughly into two contradictory groups, the romantic on the one hand and the other the classical and Christian; and being unaware of his own contradictions, he is able to make a virtue of what appears to be private spiritual laziness; he is able to enjoy at one and the same time the pleasure of indulgence and the dignity of disapproval."

Yvor Winters
Kenyon Review
(Spring 1941) 238

"His first volume of criticism, *The Sacred Wood* (1920), emphasized the importance of tradition, and through further critical work he was partly responsible for a revival of interest in Donne and Dryden, in whom he found a fusion of thought and feeling that gave a unified sensibility to their poetry. For Lancelot Andrews (1928) showed that in the Church of England he found the symbol and expression of meaningful form and discipline that he judged necessary to adequate fulfillment of his own life and service to letters.... Not only was his poetry in harmony with his critical standards, but it also showed his understanding and skillful use of the works of earlier authors in the presentation of his ideas.

His first volume of verse, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) had a tone of flippant despair, but he employed the rhythms and technique of ironic contrast of some of the French Symbolists in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and other poems. A second volume, *Poems* (1920), contained a brilliant series of quatrains, including 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales,' 'Sweeney Erect,' 'The Hippopotamus,' and 'Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service,' in which he further indicated that he felt life to be ignoble, sordid, or stultifying, while it had once been otherwise, using the figure of Sweeney, among others, to show this. In this volume he also displayed the inanity of modern life in 'Gerontion,' and he reached the fullness of his poetic expression during this period of despair in 'The Waste Land' (1922)."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"A conviction of the increasing barrenness of the whole postwar [WWI]experience seized writers everywhere as the twenties ran out and international panic and war lent a new significance to the sickness of the Western world. One saw the drift to some new affirmation—often any positive affirmation—in the frantic haste with which writers turned to the New Humanists and Marxism. Anglo-Catholicism and Thomism, social credit and even Fascism. T. S. Eliot's famous declaration of principles in the forward to *For Lancelot Andrews* had long since shown which way the wind was blowing. Writers might follow the path of Moscow rather than of Lambeth, but the wasteland was now a battlefield....

The present vogue of American literature really began in the 1930's, when American displaced Europe in the affections of our writers. This was a reaction to the moral eclipse of Europe in that frightful decade and a reflection of the new confidence at home under the New Deal. When European socialism succumbed to Hitler and Russian communism made a bargain with him, something like the profound despair at the breakup of the European tradition that Eliot had communicated in 'The Waste Land' was not felt in circles that had not followed Eliot to the foot of the cross."

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds
(Doubleday/Anchor 1942, 1956) 219,407

"Eliot seldom involves himself steadily with the world about him. Instead he makes brief and startling sallies into the world and hence his poetry sometimes strikes us either as a discontinuous anthology of images or as an imitation of involuted psychological or biological processes which remain purely verbal.... Another result of this nervous intermittence is that Eliot's criticism of other poets—such as Donne, Marvell, or Dryden—makes the excellence of their poetry depend too much on their surprising success in image-making and too little on their steady sense of life. Eliot tends to give us what is occasional and spasmodic in a poet, rather than the poet's normal excellence."

Richard Chase
Kenyon Review
(Spring 1945) 220-21

"His growing preoccupation with literary tradition as a necessary sustenance for mature art led him to settle in England. What he valued in tradition was represented by such a line of poet-critics as Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge, and Arnold, and he had found in his America, outside the special climate of the university, no living interest in any such succession.

His first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), displayed a poetic orientation all his own. His chief masters were the Jacobean metaphysical poets and the French symbolists, not so unlikely a starting point for an American poet as might appear, since a taste for Donne and Herbert had been deeply rooted in New England from Emerson through Emily Dickinson, and Baudleaire and his followers had been inspired by Poe. The witty and ironic conversational tones of Eliot's earliest poems are most akin, among the symbolists, to Laforgue, but a graver spirit than Laforgue's can already be discerned beneath the surface of what seemed to most of its first readers to be a mocking *vers de societie*. The epigraph to 'Prufrock' was taken from Dante, about whom Pound had been enthusiastic. But their divergence of interest in this master was the same as it was regarding Henry James. In both cases Pound was primarily occupied with pointing out the technical excellences. Eliot penetrated more deeply into the meaning of the texts. His predominant interest is suggested in his remark that James' 'real progenitor' is Hawthorne, and that the essential quality common to both these Americans is their 'profound sensitiveness to good and evil.'

A much firmer critic than Pound, Eliot was to teach, through both his verse and his prose, a way of seeing and feeling to a younger generation. Pound may first have stimulated him to realize that the authors of the past and present should be judged with equal eyes, that a sense of the past is not 'of what is dead, but of what is already living.' But Eliot's ethical values gave him far more insight into the meaning of history, just as his projection of spiritual struggles endowed his monologues with a dramatic tension quite missing in Pound. As a result his Prufrock, Sweeney, and Gerontion, sparsely drawn as they were, became some of the most living characters of their time. Prufrock, the fastidious and futile middle-aged product of the genteel tradition, and Sweeney, the tough Irishman 'assured of certain certainties,' are Eliot's chief response to the decadent Boston he knew as a young man, when the gulf between Back Bay and the common life of the South End was so great as to cause him to say that the former's 'society' was 'quite uncivilized, but refined beyond the point of civilization.'"

F. O. Matthiessen
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1340-41

"With Eliot, the emphasis is on form. His essays on various Elizabethan dramatists, for example, are not concerned with the full-length rounded estimate, but with close technical annotation of detail.... It must not

be forgotten that the symbolist movement has its roots in the work of the most thoroughly conscious artist in American poetry before Eliot, Edgar Poe; and that, therefore, Eliot's taste for Baudelaire and Laforgue as well as for Poe, the wheel has simply come full circle....He once remarked to me both of his sustained distaste for Emerson, and of the fact that he had never read Miss Dickinson....as Ezra Pound has remarked, it was Henry James, as well as Conrad, who taught them both 'that poetry ought to be as well written as prose.'...And what is even more significant, Eliot has perceived that James's 'real progenitor' was Hawthorne, that he cannot be understood without Hawthorne, that the essential strain common to them both was 'their indifference to religious dogma at the same time as their exceptional awareness of spiritual reality...

It would be glib to say that in 'The Waste Land' and 'The Hollow Men' Eliot wrote his *Inferno*, and that since then his poems represent various stages of passing through a *Purgatorio*; still such a remark may possibly illuminate both his aims and achievement....Similarities between Eliot's technical devices and those of Donne have been observed: the conversational ronte, the vocabulary at once colloquial and surprisingly strange—both of these a product of Eliot's belief in the relation of poetry to actual speech, and paralleling his use of 'non-poetic' material; the rapid association of ideas which demands alert agility from the reader; the irregular verse and difficult sentence structure as a part of fidelity to thought and feeling; and, especially, the flash of wit which results from the shock of such unexpected contrasts. But actually the manner in which sudden transitions are made in Eliot's verse owes much more to the method of the French symbolists. I. A. Richards has spoken of 'The Waste Land' as 'a music of ideas,' a phrase which suggests Eliot's particular attraction to Laforgue....Eliot wants to suggest in the rhythms of his verse the movement of thought in a living mind, and thus to communicate the exact pattern of his meaning not so much by logical structure as by emotional suggestion....

Use of such widely divergent details in a single poem indicates the special problem of the contemporary artist. Faced with so great a range of knowledge as a part of the modern consciousness, he can bring it to satisfactory expression in one of two ways, either by expansion or compression.... Joyce chose the first alternative for *Ulysses* and devoted more than a quarter of a million words to revealing the complexity involved in the passage of a single ordinary day....Eliot concentrated an interpretation of a whole condition of society into slightly over four hundred lines....

The reconciliation of opposites is as fundamental to Eliot as it was to Heraclitus. Only thus can he envisage a resolution of man's whole being. The 'heart of light' that he glimpsed in the opening movement of 'Burnt Norton' is at the opposite pole from the *Heart of Darkness* from which he took the epigraph for 'The Hollow Men.' Essential evil still constitutes more of Eliot's subject matter than essential good, but the magnificent orchestration of his themes has prepared for that paradisaical glimpse at the close, and thereby makes it no decorative allusion, but an integrated climax to the content no less than to the form. Such spiritual release and reconciliation are the chief reality for which he strives in a world that has seemed to him increasingly threatened with new dark ages."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Achievement of T.S. Eliot
(Oxford 1947) 195

"T.S. Eliot's contribution to the new criticism has been chiefly, as John Crowe Ransom once phrased it, 'the recovery of old criticism.' His influence in this direction has been very great, and although it is hard to tell how much of this is the influence of the criticism itself and how much is respect for his authority as one of the foremost living poets, Eliot is undoubtedly our chief spokesman for a critical viewpoint that can be roughly called 'traditional.'...Eliot believes that criticism functions as a service to the reader of poetry and has spoken of the 'preposterous assumption' that it is an autotelic activity. He sees the reader-service as dual, one function 'the elucidation of art and the correction of taste,' the other 'to bring the poet back to life.' The 'tools' of the critic, with which he performs these functions, are 'comparison and analysis,' and the end of criticism is to establish a 'tradition,' a continuity, between present literature and taste and the literature of the past....

Eliot's tradition is highly exclusive. It seeks out the classic and excludes the romantic, and by 'romantic' Eliot means a great many writers he does not like: the classic is 'complete,' 'adult,' and 'orderly' where the

romantic is 'fragmentary,' 'immature,' and 'chaotic.'...This is not quite the same as dismissing the nineteenth century *in toto*, as Pound did (contrary to popular opinion, and unlike the much more consistent classicist Pound, Eliot tends to praise the poetry of Milton, Blake, Keats, and Tennyson and dislikes that of Pope), but Eliot in general sees his task as the substitution of his 'tradition' for theirs.... Eliot carries a good share of the weight of tradition in his criticism by his prose style. It is formal, reserved, eloquent without ever becoming shrill, and at once highly stylized and transparently clear; and eighteenth-century style larded with twentieth-century terminology....

The chief fault of Eliot's tradition lies in its omissions... He has dealt with few Americans of any period....Despite F. O. Matthiessen's noble effort, in *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, to place him in the American tradition—Puritanism, Dante scholarship at Harvard, similarity of theme and manner to Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, and James—Eliot seems almost entirely blind to the American tradition, if not in flight from it....little imaginative prose of any sort. In Eliot's tradition there is seemingly no room for Homer, Villon, Goethe, Cervantes, or any of the great masters of the novel except James....Eliot has constantly refused to study or even define the terms he uses... One of the reasons for these contradictions is a trick Eliot undoubtedly learned from Pound, of proposing theories he doesn't himself believe, just to hear the roar....

A rewarding way to study Eliot's work is to annotate his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' which was first printed in 1917 and which after more than a quarter of a century is still his most important essay and the key to all his later work....Edmund Wilson...has discussed Eliot as the very type of the unhistorical critic, one who treats all literature as though it coexisted simultaneously, comparing and judging it by absolute standards, in a temporal vacuum. John Crowe Ransom, on the other hand, chose Eliot as his example of 'The Historical Critic' in *The New Criticism*, pointing out that Eliot 'uses his historical studies for the sake of literary understanding.' Obviously, the two parties in the controversy are using 'historical' in two different senses: Wilson meaning the use of contextual or relative criteria, Ransom (and apparently Eliot himself) meaning historical knowledge or awareness of the past.... Here are a number of Eliot's key ideas. 'Order' later became 'orthodoxy,' just as 'disorder' became 'heterodoxy' or 'heresy'; the idea of 'altering' past literature became a whole body of critical work aimed at revising the history of literature to emphasize 'tradition'."

Stanley Edgar Hyman

The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism
(Random House/Vintage 1947-61) 54, 56-63

"The most famous and influential poet of the post-war period has been Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-) who, born in America embraced English citizenship in 1927. The story of his progress from disdainful desperation to spiritual peace within the Anglican fold can be traced with such precision in his poetry that almost it appears to have been patterned beforehand. There may seem to be nothing in common between the creator of Prufrock, Burbank, Bleistein, and Sweeney and the theologian who has been a mainstay of the Malvern Conference, but it is possible to follow each step along this pilgrim road. The journey starts with the poems collected in *Prufrock and other Observations* (1917).

In many of these the barrenness of the present is contrasted with the fruitfulness of the past. There is an apparent casualness in weaving together banal modern allusions and literary references which widen the vista and embrace tradition. With a boldness that at once attracted attention, imagery was drawn from things hitherto regarded as 'unpoetic'—coffee-spoons, and trouser-cuffs, and an etherized patient; but recourse was also had to allusive quotations that demanded for their comprehension a certain amount of specialized scholarship. In style the modern and the traditional were fused into a new synthesis: on the one hand, there is an indebtedness to Ezra Pound and the Imagists and to certain French poets, particularly Tristan Corbiere and Jules Laforgue; and on the other, there is the use of simple, inherited verse forms, especially the quatrain, and blank verse modeled upon that of Webster and Middleton.

The contemporary is set in the frame of a long tradition...In a bare, dry, satiric tone he makes his statements without qualification, expressing with seeming flippancy his contempt for vulgarity. Modern types are characterized, or rather caricatured, in such poems as the 'Portrait of a Lady'; and the vulgarity of *l'homme sensuel moyen* is exposed in the poems on Prufrock, Sweeney, and the tourists in Venice. Eliot's

early success was not the reward of his occasional profundities but of his witty and blasé unmasking of shallowness. His essential qualities of austerity and precision in the use of words, of novelty in rhythms and cadences, and of intensity of observation were present in these first poems. But already there was an attempt to generalize about life on the basis of a narrow, academic, almost cloistered existence. The poem 'Gerontion'—'thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season'—is the connecting link between the early poems and 'The Waste Land' (1922). This most famous of modern poems is not merely, as is sometimes said, a picture of the spiritual and moral vacuity of the post-war period.... The present fades into the past and the past into the present. The remote is near. The 'Waste Land' is the fallen nature of humanity....

Often mistaking his personal predilections for principles of universal validity, Eliot has, by the pontifical assurance of his manner, imposed his tastes and opinions upon his following. But no other modern critic has so thoroughly ploughed the old fields of literature, bringing forth new fruit by forcing even his opponents to subject inherited values to new scrutiny. *Homage to John Dryden* (1924) and *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) exhibit characteristic lines of thought and feeling. *Dante* (1929) is Eliot's profoundest piece of criticism and *After Strange Gods* (1931) his most arrogant."

Samuel C. Chew
A Literary History of England
ed. Albert C. Baugh
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1948) 1585-87

"In spite of everything, Eliot *has*, in his critical essays, said many of the things that most needed to be said in our time. He has documented with appropriate *dicta* the final ebb of the romantic movement, the reversal of the trend which saw poetry as the expression of the poet's unique personality, the rediscovery of the glories of the metaphysical poets, and the parallel reintroduction into English and American poetry of wit *and* passion. In some of his best essays—those on Dante, for example—he is often rearranging (as Mario Praz has shown) the ideas of Ezra Pound or others; in some of his worst, he is merely perverse or pigheaded or exhibitionistic. But his critical ideas are in themselves full of interest and excitement, and have become part of the intellectual atmosphere of our time."

David Daisches
Yale Review
(Spring 1949) 466-67

"As in Eliot's 'Preludes,' the images do more than accumulate or cluster; they move qualitatively and suggestively, in implicit order.... A companion effort to define the terrors and responsibilities of secularization is that of James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* appeared in the year of 'The Waste Land' (1922). But Joyce and Eliot move in quite different directions: Eliot toward a re-assertion and a recharging of the traditional dogmas, Joyce toward a secular replacement of them. These extremes of difference can be seen in the last major works of the two men: Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Eliot's *Four Quartets*."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 203, 343

"Eliot sees the happiest future for art under the influence of a new controlling factor. He calls this 'the mythical method' and he sees it as a way by which the artist can give shape and significance to the chaotic material of contemporary life. He can set the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy' in opposition to the pattern of a different vision; he can 'manipulate a parallel' with the world of myth.... Myth... leads us back to ultimate mysteries... The mythical method is the presentation of experience in symbolic form, the earliest and still the most direct and immediate form of human expression....

There was an anonymous source of vitality diffused throughout the universe and in himself, which he objectified in dramatic symbols and so made operative in human experience. His myths were fabulous fictions which revealed psychic facts... The myth vouched for the 'magic' that was alive in the universe... Modern anthropology sees all religion and all art springing and growing from this primitive root of symbolic transformation.... Just as tradition is the inherited wisdom of the race consciously expressed, so [Carl] Jung envisages the collective unconscious as the *unconscious* inherited wisdom of the race.... To get

back to Eliot's review of *Ulysses* [*The Dial*, November 1923], it was not any special symbolic *content* that he was discussing there, but the mythical *method*; myth as illustrating the direct presentation of experience in symbolic form. He was emphasizing Joyce's use of this to manipulate a parallel between past and present. Eliot himself does that specifically in 'The Waste Land,' but he had been using the method in its general meaning long before. The recognition of sensuous symbolism as the richest form of human perception, and its ordering into pattern as the basis of poetic technique, had been from the beginning his whole theory and practice of poetry...."

Elizabeth Drew
T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry
(Scribner's 1949) 2-5, 9, 14-15

"To my notion T.S. Eliot is the greatest of all literary critics....Eliot's merit lies almost equally in his ability to raise the pertinent problems and in the fineness of his taste. He gave himself a rule of cogency early on and he has had the strength of mind to obey it without evasion. This is the first critic of whom we can feel sure that the most important question will always be answered—namely, how successful as art is the work of art in hand? Eliot is no philosopher of aesthetics or criticism; he is both more and less than that: his critical practice demonstrates the right principles in action and we recognize them by their fruits rather than their definition."

Clement Greenberg
Nation
(9 December 1950) 531

"What is it that marks these plays off from the commercial drama, and from previous plays in verse or even in prose, and forces us to classify them as poetic drama? There is, first, their mixture of high seriousness in poetry and human colloquial speech, both in prose and verse. There is the tone of liveliness and intensity. There is the action on more than one level, the perpetual parable or allegory, and there is, finally, the startling variety of elements derived from every conceivable theatrical activity past and present. In short, there is a wider theatrical equipment harnessed to a deeper poetical purpose."

J. Isaacs
An Assessment of Twentieth-Century Literature
(Secker 1951) 142-43

"Eliot's mind, let us say, is a mind of contrasts which sharpen rather than soften the longer they are weighed. It is the last mind which, in this century, one would have expected to enter the Church in a lay capacity. The worldliness of its prose weapons, its security of posture, its wit, its ability for penetrating doubt and destructive definition, its eye for startling fact and talent for nailing it down in flight, hardly go with what we think of today as English or American religious feeling.... However that may be, within the Church or not, Mr. Eliot's mind has preserved its worldly qualities. His prose reflections remain elegant, hard (and in a sense easy—as in manners), controlled, urbane (without the dissimulation associated with ecclesiastical urbanity), and fool-proof."

R. P. Blackmur
Language as Gesture
(Harcourt 1952) 176-77

"The rich store of childhood treasure which is contained within Eliot's poetry, and more particularly, within his imagery, is obvious to any reader. The repetition of the same small group of images in poem after poem, from the early Jamesian ironies to the time of the later 'Quartets,' the recurrence of the curling smoke of evening, of stairs and windows and doors, of the hidden bird and the pool, the children's voices and the garden, the music and the thunder: these things by themselves argue that such images have a personal origin and a deep personal significance. It is this habitual use of optical 'constants,' that imparts to Eliot's work its characteristic quality of seeming to be less a collection of single pieces than one continuing poem in permanent process of revision."

S. Musgrove
T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman
(New Zealand 1952) 11

“During the 1920’s and early 1930’s, Eliot was more influential than any other poet or critic writing in English. His ‘The Waste Land’ (1922) set the style for a whole generation of younger poets. His essays—especially ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921), ‘Andrew Marvell’ (1921), and ‘John Dryden’ (1922)—altered the current of literary criticism. At a time when the influence of the nineteenth century was still dominant, Eliot brushed that century aside, a little contemptuously, and sought standards in an earlier tradition, particularly that of the seventeenth century... [He] wrought a revolution in critical taste....

Owing largely to Eliot’s influence, the ‘metaphysical’ became a mark of excellence, and English and American poets were reappraised in the light of this new standard. Many idols were shattered: Tennyson and even Keats suffered. John Donne became the pattern of the perfect poet; almost everyone could quote Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’; Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson—nineteenth-century poets who wrote ‘metaphysical’ poetry—were raised to a new eminence. In the essays of Eliot and others (notably John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, R. P. Blackmur, and Yvor Winters), the metaphysical produced a body of criticism which is remarkable for its close analysis of the relation of structure and style to content [New Criticism].

Eliot’s influence waned somewhat after 1930. His famous announcement that he had become ‘an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics’ presented difficulties to many of his admirers... The decay of Protestantism, Eliot believed, was the most significant and the most tragic fact in modern history.... But Eliot ultimately transcends political and religious questions and literary theories, for he is preeminently a poet. In poetry, he strived for, and achieved, the utmost condensation.”

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1039-40

“T.S. Eliot, like other poets, has suffered as much from his admirers as from his detractors. But the consequence for him has been an extraordinary ambiguity of opinion. As poet and critic he has been divided between novelty and tradition, both hailed and damned as exotic or academic. Indeed, these effects have not been exempt from confusion, for he has been thought to be at once too traditional and too novel, expressing trite matter in eccentric form....

The common reader, however, will be wiser to regard Eliot as a poet who makes demands upon his audience similar to those made by some older English poets, modified indeed by other influences and another age. To place his poetry beside Browning’s *Men and Women* is to understand Ezra Pound’s remark that ‘the form of these poems is the most vital form of that period’.... His literary background is perhaps best summarized by the three periods of ‘metaphysical’ poetry which he has distinguished: Medieval school of Cavalcanti or Dante; Renaissance school of Donne; Modern school of Baudelaire or Laforgue....

On the basis of imagery the poems of the first volume [*Prufrock and Other Observations*] fall into two groups: that of commonplace imagery worked up to uncommon intensity, intensified by emotional selection; and that of esoteric imagery transforming common life, again under the compulsion of feeling. Or one might divide them into imagist poems, and poems of dramatic imagism, which develop complicated rather than simple feelings. Another way of putting it is to say that in one group we find static perception; no change of feeling in the perceiver, though his feeling may be emphasized by an opposite feeling; in the other we find dynamic perception: change of feeling or conflict of feeling in the perceiver. The latter type produces the more difficult poems....

Eliot from the first draws upon musical analogy... He leaves out connections and transitions, but this is true only in a grammatical sense. If he omits the grammatical signs of connection and order, he preserves the psychological or poetic signs.... His ‘logic of imagery’ does not mean incoherence but connection by a common principle or a series of probable associations; that is, associations which involve inference of some kind or belong to a pattern of experience. It means connecting by analogy, implicit relations, or a frame of allusion.”

George Williamson
A Reader’s Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis

(Farrar, Staus/Noonday 1953) 13-14, 25, 54, 78

“More than one critic has remarked that in Eliot the over-all organization of the poem as a whole is not lyrical in any recognizable and traditional way; nor is the poem organized in terms of narrative; nor is it dramatic in the literal theatrical sense; and it is certainly not logical, argumentative, or expository.... Where poets in the past would have used a logical, emotional, dramatic, or narrative basis for the transition from part to part, Eliot uses some one of these kinds of transition freely and alternatively and without committing himself to any one of them or to any systematic succession of them; or he omits the connection between one passage and the next, one part and the part which succeeds it....The characteristic over-all organization of the poem—of which ‘The Waste Land’ is the vividest example—can be called, for lack of a better phrase, that of sibilant (or subliminal) listening.”

Delmore Schwartz
Poetry
(January 1955) 236-37

“Thomas Stearns Eliot is almost universally considered the most important poet to appear since the First World War in either his native United States or his adopted land of England. In attitude, technique, and statement his poems have established themselves as the most subtle and searching evocations of the harsh dissonances in modern life and of the need for a revitalized tradition.... Eliot was interested in posing sharp antitheses, in placing in juxtaposition the most disparate experiences. Like the conceits of the metaphysical poets, the bold and sudden contrasts in Eliot’s images were intended to afford what he calls a direct sensuous apprehension of thought.’ Even more than most poets, Eliot stresses the ‘auditory imagination,’ demanding of his readers what he describes as a ‘feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought.’ The major employment of these beliefs and techniques is in ‘The Waste Land,’ which was edited by Ezra Pound before it was published in 1922....Aristocratic and authoritarian in his social views, Eliot is generally recognized as the leading man of letters in contemporary English literature, distinguished alike for his criticism and poetry.”

James D. Hart & Clarence Gohdes, eds.
America’s Literature
(Holt 1955) 889-90

“An exponent of conservatism and tradition in literature, politics and religion, he has been anything but traditional in his technical innovations and his experiments with the uses of language and form in his poetry. The frame of his thought is conservative; but the picture within the frame can be said to come close, sometimes, to the art experiments of painters as different as Dali and Picasso. Indeed, there are paintings by Dali of timeless bent clock faces against waste desert spaces that remind one of Eliot’s principal symbols—time that merges past and present in a world that is a waste land.

Eliot, however, considers himself as ‘classicist in literature’ and this he is to the extent that he is a 20th-century rational man whose intellect presides over his emotions. Moreover, his inner world is policed by a New England heritage, retransplanted to Old England, where Eliot has developed a firm belief in an aristocratic order of society and in Anglo-Catholicism. Behind these seeming paradoxes is a man who has renovated poetry and redirected criticism to fundamentals and notably to a close and searching reading of a given text. As a poet, Eliot was deeply influenced by French symbolism, by James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and by his friend Ezra Pound. His most celebrated poem, ‘The Waste Land,’ which marked a veritable revolution in modern English poetry, derives much from the Joycean experiments in rendering consciousness—particularly in the way in which the mind latches on to seemingly unrelated observations, an object, a sensation, a series of experiences, and pulls them together into a whole.

Eliot’s poetry is generally considered ‘difficult’ in its use of sequences of images and symbols that the reader must himself try to bring into some essential relationship in his own mind. It is, moreover, filled with borrowings of lines and phrases from poets and prose writers past and present. Much criticism of Eliot has been of the ‘hunt the quotation’ kind—attempts to run down the source of the lines or phrases of other poets he has integrated into his poems.

To understand Eliot's poetry two fundamental concepts must be grasped: the first is that his poetry is a kind of continuous and complex stream of thought, a conglomeration of memories in which what we have experienced in the past is constantly merging with our experience of the moment. Once we have read any poet, some of his lines may become part of our personal experience. We often quote him to ourselves, we derive a repeated emotion or series of emotions from the sequence of words he has set down. And so Eliot quotes writers to himself in his poetry, mulls over their images and phrases, like so many possessions in the jewel box—or some will say the cluttered attic—of his mind. This leads to the second concept: we must grasp Eliot's obsession with the problem of time, which characterizes the work of so many contemporary writers, among them Joyce, Proust, Mann, and...Faulkner....

In criticism, Eliot has provided for the present generation a reinterpretation of certain writers. He has made critical readjustments which are inevitable in the light of our world, the peculiar bent of his own mind, and the special formation of his own tastes. He has rendered homage to Dryden and examined Baudelaire and the French Symbolists; he has attacked Milton and exalted Donne; he has brought about a rereading of Dante. And in the theater he has reasserted the force of poetry on the stage. During the past three decades he has written some 500 pieces of criticism—essays, reviews, broadcasts, lectures. Central to his criticism has been an attempt always to discuss the experience of reading a given writer, and the sharpening of critical perceptions upon this experience...Eliot's theory of poetic drama is that the play must be a 'musical pattern' which intensifies the action and the resultant emotion. He warns against allowing 'bursts of poetry' to be a substitute for action."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, Ed.
The Reader's Companion to World Literature
(New American Library-Mentor/Dryden 1956) 145-47

"T. S. Eliot appeared in Paris, now and then, from London where he cut the cord that bound him to his American past.... T. S. Eliot exercised a singular power over the minds of writers in his time—the poet of 'The Waste Land,' the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'...That Eliot felt he was 'living in a dying civilization'...was enough in itself to explain his vogue when so many had thrown up the sponge and surrendered all faith in humanity and all hope of the future. Still, Eliot had a distinct position and a positive personality in a day of confusion, hesitation, evasion and doubt, while he had the cosmopolitan tone that a deprovincialized world required, with its anthropological interest and its love of erudition. He restored the respect for learning in the minds of writers who had gone in for a shallow 'self-expression.' When all values, finally, were at risk in a world of idol-smashers, when many of the young were deliberately striving to turn themselves into barbarians, he reaffirmed the transcendent importance of tradition....

It was only logical that Eliot should have ignored the tradition of the country in which he had grown up. To this, in fact, he seemed to be actively hostile. He spoke of his aversion to Whitman's form and much of his matter, and he called Emerson's essays 'an encumbrance,' although Emerson and Whitman spoke for the only American tradition that had ever affected the outer world."

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America
(Dutton 1956) 236-37

"His excellence has been generally recognized ever since his first major poem, 'The Waste Land,' appeared in 1922. However, he always remained a controversial figure. He was regarded almost with reverence by a coterie of critics; his own literary criticism has been influential, especially in its support of that form of poetry which employs intellectual discipline and cultural memory in preference to more accessible and more sensuous images and emotional suggestions. Eliot has been criticized for 'unnecessary obscurity' or for 'authoritarian severity'; but numerous other genuine poets of idea are instrumentally more complex, and his intellectual severity draws interest by its systematic traditionalism. Of his craftsmanship, his integrity, and his power, however, there has been little doubt....

The degree to which fusion and concentration of intellect, feeling, and experience were achieved was Eliot's criterion for judging a poem. Such ideas he developed in other essays which have been influential in promoting the intrinsic analysis of poetry....His later poetry took a positive turn toward faith in life, in

strong contrast with the desperation of 'The Waste Land.' This was demonstrated by 'Ash Wednesday,' a poem of mystical conflict between faith and doubt, beautiful in its language if difficult in its symbolism.... *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), a poetic tragedy on the betrayal of Thomas a Becket, has been successfully performed and is a drama of impressive spiritual power.... Few men of letters have been more fully honored in their own day than T. S. Eliot, and even those who strongly disagree with him seemed content with his selection for the Nobel Prize in 1948."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature 2, 3rd edition
(Norton 1956-67) 1265-68

"Some such conception of the Image...animates much of the best writing between Coleridge and Blake at the outset and Pound and Eliot in our own time.... This is not to deny Hulme's importance or his centrality, which I think has to be affirmed in spite of Pound's rejection of him, and although Eliot was not much affected by him until his posthumous period of influence began with the publication of *Speculations* in 1924.... That poets and critics so diverse in personality as Pound, Hulme, Yeats and Eliot, should all have made such similar incursions into Symbolist historiography is testimony to the great pressure the idea of the Image has exerted in the formative phase of modern poetic. Mr. Eliot's attempt, distinguished from the others by the accident of his personal concerns in theology, is not essentially different from them. It has only been more successful, partly because of his prestige and persuasive force, partly perhaps because of the growing scholarly tendency to medievalise the Renaissance... The fact remains that Mr. Eliot's is the version that has had wide currency....

The essays in which he proposed his theory represent a most fruitful and effective refinement of the Symbolist doctrine, yielding far more than Symons's, for instance, similar though they are in essentials. To attack his position has usually seemed to mean as assault on what most people are content to regard as the main tradition of modern verse.... It is no use saying that Mr. [Yvor] Winters has simply misunderstood; he knows very well what Eliot means, as he shows when he traces Eliot's theory of necessary disorder in modern art to Romantic doctrines of organic form, and speaks of 'The Waste Land' and *The Cantos* as belonging to the art of reverie. He understands the roots of these poems, and even goes so far as to call Pound 'a sensibility without a mind'.... At the linguistic level Mr. Eliot has that precision of strange outline that all Symbolists require; nothing is more memorable in his verse than the immediate sense of exactness communicated, the impression of great resources of language delicately employed, and infinite flexibility of rhythm."

Frank Kermode
The Romantic Image
(1957; Random House/Vintage 1964) 44, 120, 145, 150-51, 163

"Beginning around 1909 as an avant-garde poet whose esoteric work was read only by a small circle of cognoscenti, Eliot has through the years acquired popular prestige until a 1954 *Life* article could describe him as 'the world's most distinguished living poet.' His acceptance parallels the gradual acceptance of modern poetry by the public... His poetry, beginning with 'Prufrock and Other Observations' (1917) and continuing through the dramas of the post-1945 era, shows a definite progression in content as well as in technique. Four periods may be roughly distinguished in this long poetic career.

Eliot's first published poems (1909-17), while not lacking in originality, were strongly derivative; they were influenced in technique by Imagism, by the dramatic monologue of Browning, by Elizabethan drama, and by the work of the French impressionist poet Jules Laforgue (1860-87)... With "the Waste Land" (1922) a new period begins; Eliot, still influenced by Pound in technique, now began to develop a more personal religious and ethical system, marked by an increasing interest in the English metaphysical poets... and Oriental religions. and a fascination with anthropological mythology... The trend from dramatic to philosophical poetry continues in the third period (1930-40), which is dominated by the serious and theological 'Ash Wednesday'; and it finds its climax in the fourth period, beginning with *Four Quartets* in 1943 and continuing through the two dramas *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*....

By 1950 Eliot had arrived at a philosophical position comparable to that of his contemporaries Huxley and Waugh: rejection of Western materialism combined with an eclectic spiritualism including elements of Oriental and Occidental religions. Eliot himself, in an unpublished lecture, has distinguished three periods of 'metaphysical poetry' in world literature which have produced work of superlative quality: the Medieval (school of Dante and Cavalcanti); the Renaissance (school of Donne); and the Modern (school of Baudelaire and Laforgue). To these might be added the Contemporary: the school of Eliot and the younger poets who have taken him as their model....examining his work as a whole, a number of dominant characteristics or tendencies may be described:

- (1) Eliot has a strong feeling for the PAST, especially for the literary and religious traditions of the past. It is probably this attitude which has led him to abandon the relatively new American culture for the more traditional society of Britain. In his poetry the tendency takes the form of an interest in myths and ancient religions, as well as a preoccupation with obscure and difficult literary allusions. To Eliot the past is not something dead which is studied in books, but a memory vigorously manifested in present events; in his view mythology transcends time. He is fond of introducing figures from ancient Greece, such as Tiresias, into modern settings, or of drawing parallels between contemporary and archetypical situations. His interest in the work of Jung and Frazer is connected to this tendency.
- (2) Eliot is fascinated with SYMBOLS, especially the mental symbols the psychiatrist and anthropologist Carl Jung calls archetypes. Archetypes or primordial images are symbolic concepts common to all mankind which relate to problems of man's natural or social environment; they are frequently concerned with fertility fetishes or with man's erotic nature. Much of Eliot's poetry presupposes a knowledge of these theories, and is therefore fully meaningful only after reading Jung, Frazer, and other authors.
- (3) A political conservative, Eliot is anti-democratic on intellectual grounds; i.e., he feels little kinship with the unlettered masses and believes the important forces of society to lie in the educated, the talented, and the aristocratic. His apotheosis of heroism in *Coriolan* has led his critics to accuse him of a sort of pro-fascism, but this is unfair. A more judicious statement is Eliot's own in the 1928 introduction to *For Lancelot Andrews*, where he describes himself as 'an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics.'
- (4) Eliot, especially in his earlier poems (before 1930), often portrays inadequate characters who feel a sense of their own impotence and the banality of their lives, who seek to rebel in an heroic fashion against their situations, but who generally fail through half-measures. This recurring theme is sometimes called the PRUFROCK motif...but it occurs frequently elsewhere. Eliot finds this personality symptomatic of the plight of modern man in the broader sense; in "the Waste Land" the concept is depersonalized and pervades the entire poem.
- (5) In his poetic technique Eliot takes his departure from the Imagists and from Ezra Pound, although from this starting point he evolved constantly toward a more personal and more original style. His use of free verse, his snatches of conversation, and the generally disjointed appearance of his verse resemble Imagism, while his copious allusions, his juxtapositions of ancient and modern, and the fact that he writes consciously for a small group of erudite readers show his kinship to Pound.... A...review well summarized the character of his earlier poetry when it described it as having 'two marks of "modernist" work, the liveliness that comes from topicality and the difficulty that comes from intellectual abstruseness.'

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 479-82

"What most critics of Mr. Eliot's plays seem to ignore is that he is writing a new kind of drama. Whereas most plays appeal to the passions—pity, terror, the glamour of love—or to the intellect, or would stir out zeal for political reform, his plays are based on an appeal to the conscience, or the consciousness of self. Here in this person, he says in effect, guilty of this or that; how far are you, dear spectator, in the like

case? Our response comes from a different center. That is why some people do not applaud his plays; nobody likes to be made to think about his weakness, his failures, or his sins. Not that many of us have committed crimes: but then crimes, as we are told in this play (*The Elder Statesman*) are in relation to the law, sins in relation to the sinner....In all the plays about conscience, from Sophocles to Ibsen, we are detached spectators....Here, however, we are forced to ask ourselves: 'Have I never run away from myself? Have I never tried to blot out incidents from my past?'

Bonamy Dobree
Sewanee Review
(Winter 1959) 109-10

"The name of Joyce is as inextricably associated with modern prose as is the name of Eliot with modern verse, or that of Picasso with modern art...T. S. Eliot, writing in the *Athenaeum* for July 4, 1919, about a new book of Yeats, remarked, 'Crudity and egoism' are 'justified by exploitation to the point of greatness, in the later work of Mr. James Joyce.'...Joyce made no pretense of being indulgent towards other writers, and quizzed McAlmon dreamily, 'Do you think Eliot or Pound has any real importance?'...The imagery of 'The Waste Land'...suited Joyce's mood, and he sent Miss Weaver a parody...He defended its technique or form [*Finnegans Wake*] in terms of music, insisting not on the union of the arts—although that seems to be implied—but on the importance of sound and rhythm, and the indivisibility of meaning from form, an idea which has become a commonplace in the critical assessment of Eliot's later verse...."

Richard Ellmann
James Joyce
(1959; Oxford 1965) 2, 456, 528, 583, 716

"While Eliot sprang, as it were, a full-fledged modern from the halls of Harvard, Pound remained for many years in a dim pre-Raphaelite realm...The first meeting of the new brotherhood, which was never given a name, took place on March 25th [1909]. Hulme expounded his ideas: romanticism was dying, if not already dead. 'We shall not get any new efflorescence of verse until we get a new technique, a new convention, to turn ourselves loose in.' He foretold Eliot: 'I prophesy that a period of dry, hard, classical verse is coming.' He distinguished between vague Victorian emotions and the transference of experience from poet to reader: 'Images in verse are not merely decorations, but the very essence of an intuitive language.'...1910...'As for the future [Pound wrote], Les Imagistes, the descendents of the forgotten school of 1909, have that in their keeping.'

They had it for almost a decade, even after the classicist Eliot came along. The real future—the future that was to count—was to belong to Eliot and his followers. It was, of course, an Eliot profoundly influenced by Pound...The fact is that the basic English line, which is an iambic line, cannot be changed; it can only be varied, and this all the good poets have done, from Chaucer to Eliot."

Charles Norman
Ezra Pound
(Macmillan 1960) 40, 47, 83, 94

"The history of Eliot's poetry before his major achievement, 'The Waste Land' (1922) is the history of a technique, a technique which would make possible the restoration of the idea of man as the creature, not the creator of his world....[Neoclassicism replaces Romanticism]. Most important here are the Sweeney poems and the kind they exemplify: hyperallusive, written in a quatrain imitated from Gautier, with a diction modeled after Laforgue's; in a tone recalling Donne's; and intended to carry over some of the disciplined rigor and inclusiveness of sensibility of all the poets whose work they echo. The Eliot of the Sweeney poems...is the poet of the unification (following upon the dissociation) of the modern sensibility."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 298-99

"The importance of Eliot's poetry in shaping the development of 20th-century Anglo-American literature can scarcely be exaggerated, especially that of 'The Waste Land,' which is thought by many critics to be his best poem. His influence spread quickly in the 1920's and has not diminished; his best poems have been

the chief instruments in popularizing among writers the techniques of symbolism, the desiderata of control and precision in the use of language, the notion of poetic form as a dynamically mobile structure; even Eliot's personal style—a concise diction, a dry irony, the use of descending cadences—has been widely imitated and occasionally parodied.

The early poems, including 'The Waste Land' and 'The Hollow Men,' may be broadly characterized as negative, *i.e.*, deriving their chief motifs from a critical and sharply ironic appraisal of the positivistic elements in modern western culture, although this is countered by a steadily deepening emphasis on the values to be sought in tradition, spiritual awareness, conservatism, and responsibility to history. Beginning with 'Ash Wednesday' Eliot's poetry has been more pointedly affirmative and appears to have been intended as a conscious contribution to the Anglo-Catholic literature of faith. Throughout all the poetry certain recurrent symbolic themes are apparent: sexuality, childhood, the rose and other tokens of Christianity, and—rather surprisingly in a poetry whose total impression is of an almost exclusive urbanity—images of nature, especially birds...

Eliot's criticism is an indispensable adjunct to his poetry, and neither can be fully appreciated without the other....The essay called 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' has acquired particular prominence, is widely quoted, praised, and attacked, and is standard fare in many university courses....In his historical, philosophical, and religious essays he has argued brilliantly for the conservative tradition and for the restoration of the unified religio-aesthetic society which he believes to have existed in England before the advent of the rationalistic delusions [of the 18th century]....

Eliot's interest in the theater has been active lifelong, and has proceeded chiefly in the direction of restoring the verse drama to a place of practical esteem in the modern stage repertoire....Eliot has said...that he believes the chief problem of the verse drama today is the proper adaptation of verse technique to the modern naturalistic stage: verse drama must acquire the same 'realism' as prose drama in the presentation of scenes from ordinary life. His later plays have moved progressively in this direction, retaining a loosely metrical verse pattern but venturing into essentially Ibsenian modes of dealing with contemporary society....

Although Eliot's poems and critical theories were among the foremost instruments in discrediting the shallow gentility of post-Victorianism, Eliot himself, in both his writing and his public character, has affected an older and perhaps in some respects sterner gentility which has deeply colored intellectual life in the 20th century. In his public appearances Eliot often presents himself as a mildly clerical English man of leisure, devoted to punctilious and circumscribed entertainments and to a rather exacting decorum. That is a pose...this aspect of Eliot's artistic personality, prissiness not devoid of mock-humility and dogmatism, has sometimes aroused his antagonists to a pitch far exceeding polite controversy. Actually, although in general Eliot has been the most admired Anglo-American writer of the 20th century, from the beginning he has provoked strong opposition, and historians may eventually conclude that the most important responses to his work have been the counteractions—not only of the men of his own generation (*e.g.*, William Carlos Williams) who have chosen different paths, but of leading poets in succeeding generations who have sought, usually in a friendly way, to reverse the force of his influence: the names of W.H. Auden and Dylan Thomas come prominently to mind.

Eliot remains the undisputed dean of English letters, however, and possesses extraordinary power in the literary world. He has used his power wisely on the whole, has written many reviews and introductions to help worthy young authors and to right imbalances in the reputations of the past.... His career has been a programmatic search for sources, a backtracking through time and distance in pursuit of origins and the tradition stemming from them...His whole work is a poetic fiction with deep historical roots, devoted to establishing a poetic character, or *persona*, of great but definable complexity—the man of spirit in an antagonistic world. Undoubtedly Eliot's public manner of comportment is an extension of this mask. The mass of printed discussion surrounding Eliot and his work is enormous."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“Eliot derives from the French symbolists and the British metaphysicals...To the extent that he liked earlier American writers, he most admired Hawthorne, with ‘the hard coldness of the genuine artist,’ and James, whom he once called ‘a metaphysical novelist.’...In Eliot’s first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), the tone is satirical...one catches the deeply paradoxical sense of the late Elizabethans and metaphysicals, with great concern for the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ that the neoclassical and romantic moods had brought. Also, there is an element of Poundian imagism, though some of this anticipated the meeting with Pound. In ‘Portrait of a Lady’ (by its title alone) and in ‘Prufrock’ (which Harriet Monroe thought too Jamesian) appear the ranging sensibility of Henry James with its careful strategy in point of view....

Impressive as ‘Gerontion’ is, ‘The Waste Land’ constitutes Eliot’s great work, the culmination of his poems of the previous three volumes, and the poem that permeated the culture of the period between the two wars as no other work of literature. It remains Eliot’s supreme statement and his most triumphant display of method. ‘I wrote “The Waste Land” simply to relieve my own feelings,” he commented retrospectively in 1947. But the poem voiced the feelings of an entire generation as well. In the seven years between ‘Prufrock’ and ‘The Waste Land’ Eliot had emerged from the obscurity of a graduate student, teacher...and employee at Lloyd’s Bank, to become the most talked about poet in the 1920’s...

The differences between the earlier and the later poetry are difficult to attribute to Eliot’s conversion. *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939) makes public humorous verse that Eliot had been writing for a long time. But in the serious poetry there is a marked change of style that may owe to the shift in allegiance from Donne to Dante. ‘The language after “Ash Wednesday,” Hugh Kenner has written, ‘is characteristically open, even tranquil, its aim a ritual translucency, its lapses into facility and small talk.’ Certainly the idiom and rhythm of *The Four Quartets* (published separately, 1936-1942) belongs to a different order from that of the earlier Eliot. But these four poems, more broadly philosophical than the insistent dogmatism of the poems immediately preceding, show Eliot at a point when he was preparing to suggest that poetry ‘might have much to learn from Milton’s extended verse structure’ and should begin to ‘avoid the danger of a servitude to colloquial speech and to current jargon.’....

The younger Eliot had turned into the older Eliot, recipient of the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize in 1947, highly conscious of the place he holds in literary history and unwilling to identify himself with literary parties. Thus in ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’ he expressed bewilderment that he has ever been associated with the New Criticism, in which he unquestionably has played a leading role. Of his many contributions to the New Criticism, the two most notable are the concepts of the ‘objective correlative’ and ‘dissociation of sensibility.’ The first he named and defined in his essay on *Hamlet* (1919)...

Under one term or another criticism in the twentieth century, whether the New Criticism or not, has used this testing of a work of literature by the total effect of its action and objects. ‘Dissociation of sensibility’ has also had significance insofar as the metaphysical poets have replaced the romantic poets as the literary standard. In 1920 Eliot first used the term when he wrote about Donne and his contemporaries...Thus this concept points to the intense awareness of the need for unity in a work of art—a unity that arises out of discordance and comprehends polarities but that ultimately assumes the identity of feeling and thought as the metaphysical poets realized it.”

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 679-81

“In the attenuated romantic tradition of the Georgian poets who were active when he settled in London, in their quietly meditative pastoralism, faded exoticism, or self-consciously realistic descriptions of urban life, he saw an exhausted poetic mode being employed, with no verbal excitement or original craftsmanship. He sought to make poetry more subtle, more suggestive, and at the same time more precise. He had learned from the Imagists the necessity of clear and precise images, and he learned, too, from T. E. Hulme and from his early supporter and adviser Ezra Pound to fear romantic softness and to regard the poetic medium rather than the poet’s personality as the important factor.

At the same time, the 'hard, dry' images advocated by Hulme were not enough for him; he wanted wit, allusiveness, irony. He saw in the metaphysical poets how wit and passion could be combined, and he saw in the French Symbolists how an image could be both absolutely precise in what it referred to physically and at the same time endlessly suggestive in the meanings it set up because of its relationship to other images. The combination of precision, symbolic suggestion, and ironic mockery in the poetry of the late 19th century poet Jules Laforgue attracted and influenced him...

One side of Eliot's poetic genius is, in one sense of the word, romantic. The Symbolist influence on his imagery, his interest in evocative and the suggestive...and such recurring images as the hyacinth girl and the rose garden, all show what could be called a romantic element in his poetry. But it is combined with a dry ironic allusiveness, a play of wit, and a colloquial element, which are not normally found in poets of the romantic tradition. Eliot's real novelty—and the cause of much bewilderment when his poems first appeared—was his deliberate elimination of all merely connective and transitional passages, his building up of the total pattern of meaning through the immediate juxtaposition of images without overt explanation of what they are doing, together with his use of oblique references to other works of literature (some of them quite obscure to most contemporary readers).

'Prufrock' presents a symbolic landscape where the meaning emerges from the mutual interaction of the images, and that meaning is enlarged by echoes, often ironic, of Hesiod and Dante and Shakespeare. 'The Waste Land' is a series of scenes and images with no author's voice intervening to tell us where we are, but with the implications developed through multiple contrasts and through analogies with older literary works often referred to in a distorted quotation or half-concealed allusion....

In a culture where there is no longer any assurance on the part of the poet that his public has a common cultural heritage, a common knowledge of works of the past, Eliot felt it necessary to build up his own body of references. It is this which marks the difference between Eliot's use of earlier literature and, say, Milton's. Both poets are difficult to the modern reader, who needs editorial assistance in recognizing and understanding many of the allusions—but Milton was drawing on a body of knowledge common to educated men in his day. Nevertheless, this aspect of Eliot can be exaggerated...even a reader ignorant of most of the literary allusions can often get the 'feel' of the poem and achieve some understanding of what it says....After his formal acceptance of Anglican Christianity we find a penitential note in much of his verse, a state of quiet searching for spiritual peace, with considerable allusion to Biblical, liturgical, and mystical religious literature and to Dante....The mocking irony, the savage humor, the deliberately startling juxtaposition of the sordid and the romantic, give way in these later poems to a quieter poetic idiom, often still completely allusive but never deliberately shocking....

His conservative and even authoritarian habit of mind has alienated some who admire—and some whose own poetry has been much influenced by—his poetry.... But there is no disagreement on his importance as one of the great renovators of the English poetic dialect, whose influence on a whole generation of poets, critics, and intellectuals generally was enormous."

David Daiches
The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 2, 4th edition
(Norton 1962-79) 2256-58

"Discussions of the two poets [Pound and Eliot] usually center on what they share—their common rejection of the trend of our culture toward religious and cultural pluralism, secularism, and technology; their common nostalgia for apparently more heroic and ordered ages; their search for moral or religious authority. Eliot's description of contemporary Europe in his early review of Joyce's *Ulysses* might well have been written by Pound—the present scene, Eliot thought, presented only an 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy.'...

The purpose of the poet's search was to find a way out of the same 'spiritual darkness of the modern mind' that had oppressed Robinson and Frost....Yeats created a spiritualistic myth of his own, Pound sought an accommodation with naturalism in the Tao, Stevens tried to be content with a merely 'fictive' order; Eliot accepted the religion of his forefathers....American poetry has room for an Eliot and a Williams too. Late Williams and late Eliot approached each other, coming from opposite directions....

Eliot's career exhibits continual re-formations of the poet, and so of the poetry, continual efforts to 'raise himself above himself,' using poetry as the 'purchase' by which he could move his life; and that Pound's career exhibits nothing of the kind....The shape of his career as a whole begins to look more like a journey-quest than like a pilgrimage....he announced with an air of bravado that he was a Classicist in literature, a Royalist in politics, and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. To most of his friends and associates, and to even more of the intellectuals of the time who were neither poets nor expatriates, all three positions seemed equally 'impossible.'...

Eliot's journey-quest—the quest for salvation—is not simply to be *inferred* from the poems; a good deal of the time it is the subject of them. Once we have noticed how visible the poet is behind the *personae*, it becomes clear that describing the poet's journey in metaphysical terms...gives us only about half the truth. The other half is the personal search for integration and fulfillment, the search for a new self to hold the new beliefs and experience the believed-in-values. From this point of view the word 'redemption' is ore appropriate than 'salvation'; for the old self cannot be 'saved' so long as it cannot love. And it cannot love so long as it objectifies all is experience. How can this self be re-formed, redeemed? That question, and not the revealed emptiness of the lady, is the real subject of 'Portrait of a Lady,' the earliest of the major poems....

He may have gotten the idea for writing this way [using the "mythic method"] when he read the early chapters of *Ulysses* in 1917. If so—and it seems probable—then those like [Karl] Shapiro who are now so angrily damning Eliot for his 'method of the library' should damn Joyce instead....Eliot was a master craftsman, but those who don't like his ideas and attitudes and don't share his emotions feel that they must resist him all the harder for this, much as one would resist the very eloquent spokesman for racism or war....Or as Williams once said, in the discussion after a talk, 'Unfortunately, Eliot is a great master of technique, but I can't read him with any pleasure.' For Williams, Eliot's craftsmanship was unfortunate because it was dedicated to purposes Williams did not like and expressed ideas and emotions he could not share....

There is generally a wide discrepancy between Eliot's prose and his verse. There is nothing even remotely 'classic' about the verse, for example, in any of that word's several possible meanings, even in the early years in which Eliot was recommending 'classic' poetry in his essays and calling himself a 'classicist.'...The doctrines 'behind' Four Quartets are Anglo-Catholic, which is to say, in philosophic terms, essentialist; but the poem itself can be better explicated in the terms provided by the religious Existentialists than it can be by Catholic dogma, which it does not contradict, but does not depend on for its effect, either. Eliot's dogmas are in his prose, not in his poetry.

The poems helped to bring an age to self-awareness—and so in a sense, to create the age they reflected and expressed. But they also transcend the age, as they transcend the dogmas of Eliot's prose. They named what had been nameless—and so only dimly known—and what they named, they brought to consciousness. Only by misreading could Karl Shapiro turn 'Portrait of a Lady' to his purposes, to bolster his case against a poet he admittedly hates. Less angry and biased readers—readers who have no reason to feel threatened by Eliot—will continue to see that poem for the magnificent achievement in testing points of view it is. A bored and weary sophistication is no longer a fashionable pose among young intellectuals, but so long as there remains any reason for a thoughtful and sensitive person to feel emptiness and alienation, 'Prufrock' will continue to speak to us. Every age is in some degree, when we look at it from the vantage point of high expectation, a waste land, where love fails and hope dwindles, and the springs of growth seem to have dried up.

The best poems of any period survive radical shifts in taste and point of view, but criticism is more vulnerable. Eliot was the period's most influential critic by far; whole schools of practicing critics took their cue from his most undeveloped metaphors, his off-handed observations, his hinted preferences. But a new generation is irritated and throw off by the tone, which combines the pontifical and the casual; and the opinions and points of view themselves now seem wrong a good deal of the time, as indeed Eliot confessed they did to *him* in his later years. The critical pieces most likely to last...are the early essays...like 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and 'The Music of Poetry'....The later essays are wiser but less original....

In the aftermath of a poetic period in which from Imagist theory on through the Ideogramic method and the Impersonal and Autotelic theory of art, the poet as *person* was denied any responsible role in his poetry...Eliot's early theory and early manner caught on and helped to create an age in poetry, but he himself left early Modernism behind to turn to other manners, other theories, other tasks. His own personality did develop, and, despite his theory, it is the 'informing principle' of his work at all times. 'Self-criticism and endless experiment' characterize his career. Behind the masks of the early work, and in the undisguised personal voice of the later poems, we sense a man who was not always wise, or always charitable, and who felt impelled to react against the spirit of the age in many ways that no longer seem necessary, but who was immensely intelligent, very sensitive, and continuously self-critical."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 409-10, 414-18, 422-27

"Ezra [Pound] lent Ernest [Hemingway] a copy of T. S. Eliot's new poem, 'The Waste Land,' which had greatly profited by Pound's editorial advice. Ernest was unable to take it seriously, though he echoed it once after watching the antics of a pair of cats on a green table in the hotel garden. 'The big cat gets on the small cat,' he wrote. 'Sweeney on Mrs. Porter.'...Another [poem], in Ernest's worst vein of raillery, was called 'The Lady Poets with Foot Notes,' possibly as a left-handed satire on Eliot's use of footnotes in 'The Waste Land.'...Ernest was...hard on T. S. Eliot, whom he persisted in calling 'The Major.' He alluded superciliously to the 'heavy uncut pages of Eliot's quarterly,' the *Criterion*. When Joseph Conrad died and Ford [Madox Ford] got together a special Conrad supplement for the *transatlantic*, Ernest went out of his way to remark in print that if he could bring Conrad back to life 'by grinding Mr. Eliot into a fine dry powder and sprinkling that powder over Conrad's grave in Canterbury,' he would 'leave for London early tomorrow morning with a sausage-grinder'."

Carlos Baker
Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story
(Scribner's 1969) 107, 134-35

"Although Eliot deferred to Yeats as 'the greatest poet' of his time, he was himself the most famous. A man of keen intellect, capable of developing a philosophical position as well as a new rhythm and intonation, trained in classics, fluent in French and German, Eliot was better equipped than any other poet to bring verse fully into the twentieth century. As James Joyce remarked of him in a notebook, he abolished the idea of poetry for ladies. In discrediting many of his predecessors, in choosing with the utmost fastidiousness what he needed and wanted from the literary tradition in several languages, Eliot gave modern literature one of its most distinctive idioms....

When ['The Waste Land'] was published in 1922, it gave Eliot his central position in modern poetry. No one has been able to encompass so much material with so much dexterity, or to express the ennui and the horror of so many aspects of the modern world. Though the poem was made up of fragments, they were like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which might be joined if certain spiritual conditions were met. In this way, Eliot's attitude towards fragmentation was different from Pound's—Eliot saw a necessity for recomposing the world, while Pound thought it might remain in fragments and still have a paradisaical aspect which the poet could elicit. In other words, Pound accepted discontinuity as the only way in which the world could be regarded, while Eliot rejected it and looked for a seamless world. He began to find it in Christianity: after 'The Waste Land' he wrote 'The Hollow Men,' 'Ash-Wednesday,' and other poems which are stages on the way towards conversion and away from secularism. His last important poems, *The Four Quartets*, constitute the achievement of his spiritual quest....

He became the principal figure in English letters...Eliot's eminence became, in fact, a hazard to young poets like Hart Crane, who felt that their fundamental aesthetic problem was not to write like him....He [believed] poetry could carry considerable intellectual as well as emotional content, and that it might be, and, as he thought, in the modern world had to be, exceedingly complex in expression. In his early work Eliot heaped ironies upon each other, yoking—as Dr. Johnson said metaphysical poets in the seventeenth century did—heterogeneous ideas together by violence. His principal models were Laforgue and Corbiere. He dealt almost exclusively with decadent enervated people, yet in all his technical devices revealed a

violent, innovative energy. He combined a precise and often formal outward manner with an inner writhing, bound together by wit. The theme which pervades all his work is...love. Prufrock never sings his love song to a woman; Gerontion (a later hero) finds himself similarly impotent before God; then follows Eliot's laborious and agonized progress, in his own person, towards a higher love."

Richard Ellmann & Robert O'Clair, eds.
The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry
(Norton 1973) 445-49

"T. S. Eliot was arguably the most important English poet and critic of the twentieth century...His long poem 'The Waste Land' (1922) helped to crystallize the sense of spiritual desolation, social chaos and failure of linguistic nerve that became widespread in the West, especially in the aftermath of the First World War, and thus to define some fundamental aspects of literary modernism's pervasive negativity and pessimism. Certain phrases from his essays—'dissociation of sensibility' (to define the seventeenth-century break he alleged had occurred in 'the English mind'), 'objective correlative' (coined to help explain *Hamlet's* failure)—quickly passed (to Eliot's embarrassment) into the common stock of critical phraseology...It was to Eliot as editor and publisher, as much as to his work as poet and critic, that the definition of modernist poetry in English is owed...A writer must have a living relation to the tradition, he argued, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'...He deplores the dissociation of sensibility, the breaking of the tradition, and yet pronounces the likelihood 'that poets in our civilization as it exists at present, must be difficult...'"

Valentine Cunningham
Makers of Modern Culture
ed. Justin Wintle
(Facts on File/Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981) 153-54

"'The Waste Land,' its couplets so cavalierly slashed by Pound, and 'Prufrock' before it, showed the effectiveness of rhyme that comes and goes, like a ghost behind the arras, as Eliot said of metre—'to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse.' Formal correctness has so long ceased to be required of poets that those who adhere to it are viewed as eccentrics... Her heroines [Gayle Jones] are unable to respond, and, as T. S. Eliot pointed out in connection with *Hamlet*, 'an inability is hard to objectify.'...Like T. S. Eliot, [Isaiah] Berlin is a master of what Barthes designates as 'paralypse'—'the rhetorical figure that consists in stating what one is not going to say.'...[Barthes's] essays on classic French texts are as startling and as fresh as any reconsiderations since Hulme, Pound, and Eliot gave European literature their once-over...Whereas the multilingual erudition of Eliot and Pound was part of a worldwide search for an authenticity that would help make the native language and tradition new, Borges's erudition...is a parody of erudition."

John Updike
Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism
(Random House/Vintage 1984) 468, 534, 587, 592, 780

"The young Eliot never wrote better than in 'Prufrock,' 'Gerontion,' 'The Waste Land,' 'The Hollow Men.' He was to show himself sublimely eloquent in the poem leading to his conversion, 'Ash Wednesday,' and in the *Four Quartets* that closed his career with so many golden utterances....Like Stravinsky, Eliot knew how to jar the reader with a force that made connection with the reader's own life.... Eliot grasped, and was appalled by, [Henry] Adams's preoccupation with self. This preoccupation haunted Eliot emotionally: the prisoner in his cell was to declare the highest aim of literature an escape from emotions and personality; escape from the self became the great theme of a religious striving that was more striving and cultural piety than it was belief."

Alfred Kazin
An American Procession
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 17-18, 15

"T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land,' like Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself,' changed the course of American literary history. Eliot's long poem, published in 1922, consolidated the despair felt throughout Europe after World War I and thus spoke for the collapse of a whole culture. Its fragments of civilization

seemed like the rubbish heap of history. But it was the exquisite musicality of the poem, its instantly memorable lines, that made it haunt the literary imagination....

Eliot's sensibility sometimes seems, to use Ezra Pound's term, a 'vortex' into which the whole of modern culture was absorbed. Even as an undergraduate, Eliot adopted the irony and ennui of the French poets Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue, whom he had discovered through Arthur Symons's influential book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' the French influence is brilliantly crossed with a Tennysonian music and a Browningsque dramatic monologue. Eliot's surrealism, combining the etherized patient, the catlike fog, the butt-ends of days, and the impaled Prufrock wriggling on the wall, a something altogether new in American poetry, far from the inert Imagism of Amy Lowell and equally far from the pieties of the nineteenth-century 'fireside poets.'

Prufrock and Other Observations (1917) is, like Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* (1923) and Marianne Moore's *Observations* (1924), one of the landmarks of American modernism. It was followed rapidly by *Gerontion* (1919), *Poems* (1920), and *Poems 1909-1925*, which contained 'The Waste Land.' These books remain Eliot's chief poetic achievement. In them we see Eliot's most striking lyric invention, a play of voices deployed almost as instruments in an orchestra, as he drew into lyric the vocal theatricality he had found in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.... Escaping from 'personality' (the lyric self of the conventional lyric speaker), Eliot found freedom in multiplying his poetic voices, both in 'The Waste Land' and in his later plays. At the same time, Eliot was becoming the most brilliant literary critic in English since Coleridge....

Eliot's essays took up polemical positions in the service of his own theory of poetry, projecting his own 'dissociation of sensibility' back into the post-metaphysical poets, defending the macabre extremes of tension in the Jacobeans, and (after his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927) arguing for the glories of Anglican literature (Lancelot Andrewes, George Herbert). Eliot's most influential essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' published in *The Sacred Wood*, repudiates both the avant-garde conviction that modern poetry should break utterly from the past and the Wordsworthian definition of poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquility.' It argues that the modern poet cannot succeed without a profound incorporation of the literature of the past. It argues as well that the poet must therefore escape from individual personality and emotion in composing poetry. In turning away from biographical and historical information and toward language and style in his essays on individual poets (Milton, Herbert), Eliot gave new direction to the practice of literary criticism. The so-called New Criticism, advocated in England by I. A. Richards and in the United States by such followers of Eliot as Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, brought a new sophistication, after the manner of Eliot, to the analysis of poetry.

Eliot's valuing of complexity, irony, and paradox, his powerful sense of the unity of a literary work, and his conviction that the work provided an 'objective correlative' for the state of mind of its creator pervaded his critical writing in the 1920s....[He] remained in many ways a Victorian intellectual preoccupied with the dissolution of social consensus and Christian belief, was pained by the increasing democratization of society and the increasing secularism of education. Both of these, he thought, entailed the loss of the fabric of common culture he believed indispensable to literature and government alike....

He is indubitably the greatest writer of modern free verse in America and the greatest of our literary critics, a man whose taste set the taste of his era. Eliot's conviction that he was witnessing the death of culture, conveyed most powerfully in his myths of historical decline, gripped his first auditors. More skeptical readers may believe his later ironic statement that 'The Waste Land' represented merely 'a personal grudge,' a catastrophe of the inner life rather than of the life of civilization. Those readers will see it as one of the great lyrics of a crisis in consciousness, an American long poem to be ranked with Milton's 'Lycidas' and Wordsworth's 'Ode: On the Intimations of Immortality' as a comprehensive account of the human predicament."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1635-38

“Between the Harvard Poets and the next cohesive literary group at Harvard, the members of the Harvard Poetry Society, four major modernist poets—Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and Conrad Aiken—attended the university. They studied under many of the same professors as the Harvard Poets—for example, Frost, Eliot, and Aiken all took courses from Santayana, while Stevens met him early in his Harvard career and visited him frequently. Yet they would eventually develop poetic aesthetics that differed from those of their predecessors in questioning established assumptions about how we know reality. More important, despite some early cross-influence between Eliot and Aiken, each of these poets developed his aesthetic by himself, and the results are as different as they are similar....None found his mature voice at Harvard, and each might have found it without having been there....T. S. Eliot was never more than respectful in his assessments of any of his undergraduate professors.”

Karen L. Rood, ed.
American Literary Almanac: From 1608 to the Present
(Bruccoli Clark Layman 1988) 71, 77

“Ultimately, the strongest force in keeping him abroad was his growing reputation in literary London, a reputation enhanced by the publication of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and *Poems* (1920). He also had begun to establish himself as a critic...With the publication of “The Waste Land” in 1922, he achieved the status he was to hold for the next two decades as the most influential poet and critic writing in English....

Although some early readers were confused, even outraged, by Eliot’s fracture of accepted poetic conventions, ‘Prufrock’ is now recognized as the first full-fledged modernist poem, adding to the traditions of symbolism and imagism the principle of aggregation of images, thus freeing the reader’s imagination within the space of the poem. ‘Prufrock’ is remarkable not only as an individual imaginative experience expressed with ‘magical rightness,’ but also for its historical significance. In it, Eliot may be said to have invented modernism [Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound would protest]. The poem is also noteworthy in foreshadowing the principal elements of the figure in the tapestry of Eliot’s total work...These themes and techniques are even more superbly evident in ‘The Waste Land’...one of the greatest, if not the greatest achievement of the modernist movement.”

Sam S. Baskett
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1299-1300

Michael Hollister (2021)