

INTRODUCTION



T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

T. S. Eliot is (1) the most definitive Modernist; (2) the dominant critic in American literary history; (3) wrote the most influential poem of the 20th century in “The Waste Land” (1922); (4) wrote another of the most taught poems ever in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1916); (5) wrote the most significant literary essay of the century in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919); (6) led the trend of objective literary analysis called New Criticism which established a canon of American literature; and (7) became influential as a critic for his concepts of literary tradition, the “mythic method,” the “objective correlative” and “dissociation of sensibility.” He is said to have rescued poetry from Victorianism. According to James Joyce, Eliot abolished the idea that poetry is for ladies. Beyond that, Eliot resisted the cultural forces later called Postmodernism, like a man climbing against an avalanche: “I believe that the choice before us is the formation of a new Christian culture [or] the acceptance of a pagan one.”

His early major poems are broadly representative of the modern mind in form and content. Then his poems beginning with “Ash Wednesday” (1930) become increasingly philosophical and religious, though not doctrinal. He is a modern Dante, except he does not advance a theology, not even in his later poems. Instead he tries to convey what it feels like to believe in a religion—that is, he tries to *evoke* a transcendent religious experience. He is a spiritual teacher, not a preacher. As one critic says, “Eliot’s dogmas are in his prose, not in his poetry.” “Prufrock” and “The Waste Land” are difficult in form, while his later poems are more difficult in thought, because the thought is unfamiliar to most readers.

OPPOSITION TO ELIOT

Eliot was opposed from the start because other poets such as William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane wanted to continue in the tradition of Walt Whitman rather than integrate American poetry with European traditions; and also because some Modernists were *holistic realists*—Frost, Williams, Hemingway—with aesthetics contrasting to those of Eliot and the *intellectual expressionists*. The early Eliot’s techniques were imitated widely by many poets and his vision reflected by some, such as Allen Tate. But other poets such as Karl Shapiro, W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas resented Eliot and protested what they considered the tyranny of his authority and influence. They felt intimidated and marginalized.

MODERNISTS Vs POSTMODERNISTS

Postmodern critics and poets after the 1960s disliked Eliot because he was (1) better educated than they were; (2) a Nobel Prize laureate securely established in international literary history; (3) more intellectually persuasive; (4) a lot more influential; (5) considered anti-Semitic for imagery as in “Gerontion” and for blaming economic problems in the 1920s on “international Jews” in banking; (6) conservative; and (7) religious, especially after 1927. For such reasons most of his writings have never even been published. His letters began to be collected and published in 2011, almost half a century after his death.

Modernism as a movement was an aesthetic revolt against decadent 19th century Romanticism, whereas 20th century Postmodernism, in the oscillating rhythm of cultural history, was a resurgence of Romanticism, this time as the cultural expression of millennial decadence: Eliot said “The romantic is deficient or undeveloped in his ability to distinguish between fact and fancy, whereas the classicist, or adult mind, is thoroughly realist—without illusions, without day-dreams, without hope, without bitterness, and with an abundant resignation.” Postmodernists also disliked Eliot for his (8) aesthetics of objectivity, impersonality and transcendence of self. After the 1970s, a period dominated by “identity politics,” most poets and leftist professors wanted to *express* and “empower” themselves—not transcend. Postmodernists such as the critic Stanley Fish openly hated Eliot as a symbol of all they set out to destroy.

BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born the youngest son of 6 surviving children in St. Louis, Missouri, where his grandfather, a minister, established the first Unitarian Church in the city and founded Washington University. “St. Louis affected me more deeply than any other environment has ever done.” His ancestor Andrew Eliot was one of the jurors against the Salem witches—and the accused innocents—at the time Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ancestor was an agent of the court that condemned them, one of the few who later made a public recantation. A great uncle of his grandmother Abigail Adams Eliot was the second President of the United States, John Adams. Eliot was also related to Henry Adams, the influential author of *The Education of Henry Adams: A Study in Twentieth-Century Multiplicity* (1918). Eliot’s mother was a social worker, an intellectual, a biographer, and a religious poet.

He grew up in a household of Unitarians within a transplanted New England tradition, influenced by Hawthorne and Henry James. He first began to write poetry at age 14 inspired by Omar Khayyam. He was so frail that at Milton prep school he was the only boy forbidden to play football or to swim in a nearby pond. He was conditioned to the skepticism of his Unitarian family, which gave him an intense awareness of the multiplicity of possibilities—like Henry Adams—inhibiting his ability to make decisions, a thematic motif in his poetry. Such people “want to do good, but they are predestined failures.” Later he described himself as combining “a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament.” And further, “The family guarded jealously its connections with New England; but it was not until years of maturity that I perceived that I myself had always been a New Englander in the South West, and a South Westerner in New England; when I was sent to school in New England I lost my southern accent without ever acquiring the accent of the native Bostonian.”

EDUCATION

T. S. Eliot entered Harvard in 1906 in the same class with John Reed, later a famous Communist and the only American buried in the Kremlin wall in Moscow. Also attending Harvard at the time were Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens and Conrad Aiken. Eliot edited the literary magazine *The Harvard Advocate*, to which he contributed a few poems that displayed a familiarity with modern poetic techniques and a growing disaffection toward those philistine aspects of American culture that had made expatriates of Washington Irving, Henry James, Ezra Pound and others.

Eliot was unimpressed by his professors except for Irving Babbitt, who hated Romanticism, and the philosopher Josiah Royce. The other poets were drawn to the philosopher and poet George Santayana, who ridiculed Eliot’s admiration for Dante by dismissing his religion as false. Eliot is thought to have written early drafts of “Prufrock” and “The Waste Land” while still an undergraduate. Pound later said that Eliot

made himself a modern poet “on his own!” This happened because he discovered *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) by Arthur Symons, introducing him to Laforgue, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Corbiere. He explained, “My own verse is, so far as I can judge, nearer to the original meaning of *vers libre* than is any of the other types: At least, the form in which I began to write, in 1908 or 1909, was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue together with the later Elizabethan drama; and I do not know anyone who started from exactly that point.”

After completing his coursework in 3 years he studied philosophy at the Harvard Graduate School, then spent the year 1910-11 reading philosophy and French literature at the Sorbonne in Paris, where Gertrude Stein had recently completed her experimental portrait “Picasso” (1909). There, at age 23, Eliot finished his earliest mature poem, one of the greatest in English, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Prufrock is a noncommittal modern male like Hawthorne’s Coverdale and Henry James’ John Marcher. The poem also shows the influence of James in developing point of view. In fact, Harriet Monroe the Editor of *Poetry* thought the poem “too Jamesian.”

Eliot returned to Harvard for 3 more years, extending his study of metaphysics, logic, psychology, Indic philology and Sanskrit. In 1913-14, while Pound published an anthology of Imagists in London, Eliot was a faculty assistant in philosophy at Harvard. A travelling fellowship took him over to Germany during the summer before the outbreak of World War I, by then fluent in both French and German. He was forced out of Germany by the war and spent that winter reading Greek philosophy at Oxford. The war prevented his return to Harvard for his final doctoral examinations. He had already completed his dissertation on the Idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley, but he never returned to defend it and take his degree. And his father never forgave him. “I hate university towns and university people,” Eliot said later. “Oxford is pretty, but I don’t like to be dead.”

CAREER

When the United States entered the war, Eliot tried to join the Navy but was rejected for poor health. He decided to remain in London because it was a better place to write. In London in 1914 he met Pound, who persuaded Harriet Monroe to publish “Prufrock” in *Poetry* in 1915. The same month that the poem appeared, he married a vivacious English governess, Vivien Haigh-Wood. Friends described him as under her spell. “I am very dependent upon women (I mean female society)...I came to persuade myself that I was in love with Vivien simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England.” Now with marital responsibilities, he taught at the Highgate School near London for a year—French, Latin, mathematics, geography, history, swimming and baseball. Quickly he changed careers. In 1917 the poet became a bank clerk at Lloyds in London, where he worked for 8 years. He made time to publish reviews in *The International Journal of Ethics*, essays on philosophy in *The Monist*, and other poems in the literary magazines of Pound and Wyndham Lewis.

Eliot’s career as a Modernist poet took off when Pound arranged for the publication of *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1916. In “Prufrock” Eliot used the stream-of-consciousness technique that would be developed by the fiction writers Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. Thereafter he reviewed books for periodicals including *Vanity Fair*, little magazines and philosophical journals. He published *Ezra Pound, His Metric and Poetry* in 1917 and became an assistant editor for Pound at his magazine *The Egoist* from 1917 to 1919. On a visit to Paris he met Joyce and Wyndham Lewis, who later painted a portrait of Eliot. He burst into prominence as a major critic as much as a poet with *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, which became the foundation of “New Criticism.” Soon that book and his collected poems of 1925 were handed out to entering freshmen by their classmates at Cambridge.

BREAKDOWN

Eliot’s father did not approve of his marriage any more than he did his choice of careers. Feeling that his son had wasted his life, he changed his will and died leaving Eliot only the income, not the capital, from his share of the estate. The marriage soon proved desperately unhappy—a torture for them both. The couple were both chronically ill and often depressed. She suffered from hypersensitivity, nervous agitation, headaches, neuralgia, insomnia and various obscure maladies, often psychosomatic. She was subject to frequent collapses. Eliot sank deep into depression after his father died and punished him for being a failure

in his will. Further traumatized by an emotional visit from his mother and sister, he had a nervous breakdown. He feared that his mental incapacity might be permanent and was advised by a neurologist to take three months leave from the bank. He travelled to Margate, Switzerland and underwent psychiatric treatment in Lausanne. Much of "The Waste Land" was roughly completed by 1921. While in recovery, he wrote final drafts of each part. Lines referring to a father's death may express personal guilt. The line "My nerves are bad tonight" is thought to derive from Vivien and the end of his marital expectations may underlie the opening, "April is the cruelest month."

"The Waste Land" (1922)

After treatment, he visited Pound in Paris and they pieced together the drafts. He entrusted Pound with editing and dedicated the poem to him as "the better craftsman." Then he founded *The Criterion* and published "The Waste Land" in his own literary magazine. Readers were shocked. Eliot violated all the conventions and the poem was radically original in form and techniques. No poet had ever compressed so many implications with so much dexterity before, nor expressed the ennui and horror of so many aspects of the modern world. The poem voiced the despair of people after the war had reduced much of Europe to a literal waste land and the fragmented style of the poem reflected the fragmentation of Europe, the collective sense of postwar chaos, the loss of faith and the sorrow of shattered lives and nations. The poem made a literary explosion. William Carlos Williams later compared it to an atom bomb. Ironically, the most conservative of the Modernists had produced the most revolutionary poem. "The Waste Land" became the poetic counterpart of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The Criterion (1922-39)

Confessing in a letter (1925), he expressed anguish and guilt over Vivien: "I have turned myself into a machine [beginning in 1915, shortly after his marriage]...in order to endure, in order not to feel—but *it has killed V...* Must I kill her or kill myself?" Vivien apologized to him in a letter from her nursing home in the same year: "I am sorry I tortured you and drove you mad. I had no notion until yesterday afternoon that I had done it. I have been simply raving mad." While continuing to edit *The Criterion*, he joined the publishing firm of Faber, becoming the principal literary figure in the English-speaking world—an anti-Romantic who insisted as a Neoclassicist and an agonized husband that poetry is "not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion."

In particular, his essays on *Ulysses* (1922) and on "The Metaphysical Poets" (1927) became lasting touchstones in literary criticism, advocating the "mythic method" as employed by Joyce (and by himself) and diagnosing "dissociation of sensibility" in the modern mind—as did Carl Jung—while holding up the 17th-century metaphysical poets as models of "unified sensibility." "The Hollow Men" (1925) continued the methods and moods of "The Waste Land," ending with lines that became famous: "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper." His work got translated into many languages and influenced poetry from Arabic and Japanese to Swahili. As an editor then a director of Faber he was in a position to publish and promote many other poets and to write influential introductions to books by Djuna Barnes, Marianne Moore and others.

At the age of 39, shocking everyone, Eliot became a British subject and joined the Anglican Church, declaring himself "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion." At the same time, he remained American: "My poetry has obviously more in common with my distinguished contemporaries in America than with anything written in my generation in England....Putting it as modestly as I can, [my work] wouldn't be what it is if I'd been born in England, and it wouldn't be what it is if I'd stayed in America. It's a combination of things. But in its sources, in its emotional springs, it comes from America." Making the point at a meeting of the board of directors of Faber and Faber one 4th of July, he contrived to explode a coal scuttle of firecrackers under the chairman's legs.

FAITH

Ash Wednesday (1930) renders the process of his conversion, an affirmation of faith structured like a mass, demonstrating that he succeeded in his quest and restored the waste land of his soul. With this poem his style became more sedate, musical and meditative. All his major poems represent stages in his spiritual

development, culminating in *Four Quartets* (1936-42), his religious masterwork, combining Neoclassical and musical aesthetics with an holistic transcendental vision.

Eliot separated from Vivien in 1933. "To her the marriage brought no happiness. To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came 'The Waste Land'." He suffered most of his life from guilt. Once at a cocktail party a woman asked him, "Don't you find this little gathering extraordinarily interesting?" More frank than Prufrock, he replied: "Yes, it is. If you concentrate on the essential horror of the thing." Deeply conflicted by his responsibilities, he arranged to have Vivien placed in a mental hospital in 1938. He wrote later that he was "deeply shaken by the events of September 1938...[the outbreak of World War II] that month brought a profounder realization of a general plight...a feeling of humiliation which seemed to demand an act of personal contrition, of humility, repentance and amendment; a doubt of the validity of a civilization...Was our society, which had always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies, and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?"

He edited *The Criterion* until 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II. Asked once whether he really thought a poet should write verse at least once a week, he said, "I had in mind Ezra Pound when I wrote that passage. Taking the question in general, I should say, in the case of many poets, that the most important thing for them is to write as little as possible." The current journal *The New Criterion* is a revival that counters the decadence of Postmodernism in all the arts.

AFTER WORLD WAR II

During the Blitz, the bombing raids conducted on London at night by the Nazis, Eliot served as an air raid warden. After the war, he lived for over 10 years in London with a disabled man in a wheelchair, an editor and reviewer suffering from muscular dystrophy. His American editor asked him over lunch in 1946 whether he agreed with the old view that most editors are failed writers. "Perhaps," Eliot replied. "But so are most writers." He believed that "An editor should tell the author his writing is better than it is. Not a lot better, a little better." Vivien died in her mental hospital in 1947. Eliot never visited her. Richard Aldington wrote a novel about characters based on Eliot and Vivien, *Stepping Heavenward* (1931), and in 1984 a play called *Tom and Viv* was produced, then adapted into a film in 1994. Eliot waited 10 years before marrying his secretary at Faber, Valerie Fletcher. They knew each other well, she was 32 and he was in his 70th year. This marriage proved to be a happy one.

"THE MOST DISTINGUISHED LIVING POET"

Wanting to restore verse drama to the modern stage repertoire, Eliot also wrote distinguished plays. All of them derive from ancient Greek prototypes, mostly comedies or plays with redemptive endings. *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), about the martyrdom of Thomas a Becket, achieved great success and was performed in both Britain and the United States—on Broadway. Three subsequent plays moved further toward Realism, retaining a loosely metrical verse pattern, exploring the difficulties of conscience in the amoral contemporary world and depicting modern society in the manner of Ibsen: *The Family Reunion* (1939), in which the protagonist suffers from the horrible illusion that he has killed his wife, *The Cocktail Party*—which won a Tony Award for Best Play in 1950--*The Confidential Clerk* (1954), and *The Elder Statesman* (1959). In 1948 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and in 1954 an article in *Life* magazine described Eliot as "the world's most distinguished living poet." An American publisher visiting the London firm of Faber and Faber once asked, "Was it Eliot's toilet I saw?"

Though in his formal appearances Eliot presented himself like a scholarly English gentleman, vested and fastidious, he sometimes contradicted expectations with a surprising vulgar remark for comic effect. To his adversaries he had the slick look of a banker and the personality of a snob. They saw him as prissy, dogmatic and cold. They considered his humility insincere. His poetry, to the contrary, is clearly sincere. No American since Hawthorne wrote with greater moral conviction or expressed more integrity in art. Eliot is one of the great religious poets. At the same time, he was a practical joker. As an editor for Faber &

Faber he contradicted the stereotype of himself by seating new authors in chairs with whoopee cushions. He surprised some with exploding cigars.

The artist Marie Laurencin met him at a party in London. "Eliot? Eliot the writer?" she exclaimed. "But they told me you were a woman!"

"No, I assure you," Eliot said. "The facts are the other way."

"But surely I can't be mistaken. I was given to understand you were a woman."

"No, no," Eliot replied patiently. "I have known myself for quite a long time, and I am convinced that I am not and never have been a woman."

"But aren't you George Eliot?"

DEATH

By the 1960s his health was failing from years of heavy smoking. He died of emphysema in London, was cremated and his ashes placed in the church of East Coker, the village from which his ancestors had emigrated to America. T. S. Eliot is commemorated on a large stone in the floor of the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey in London. He forbade a biography. Decades later, in addition to the revival of interest in Eliot represented by *Tom and Viv*, the popular Broadway musical *Cats* was adapted from his *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1930). Old Possum was Ezra Pound's nickname for Eliot.

Michael Hollister (2015)

ARGUMENT FOR A CANON OF CLASSICS

"No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities." Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919)

OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. If you examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence." Eliot, "*Hamlet*" (1919)

DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY

"The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinizelli, or Cino. *In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered*; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden....The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century, and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected. In one or two passages of Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, in the second *Hyperion*, there are traces of a struggle

toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated.” Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921) [italics added]

MYTHIC METHOD

“In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible in art.” Eliot, “*Ulysses*” (1923)

HISTORICAL SENSE

“This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.” Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1932) 6

POETIC METHOD

“The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous order.... Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1932) 4

OBSCURITY

“Any obscurity of the poem, on first readings, is due to the suppression of ‘links in the chain,’ or explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilization. The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced.... Such selection of a sequence of images and ideas has nothing chaotic about it. There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts. People who do not appreciate poetry always find it difficult to distinguish between order and chaos in the arrangement of images; and even those who are capable of appreciating poetry cannot depend upon first impressions.” Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1932) 248, 259

THE MEANING OF A POEM

“The chief use of the ‘meaning’ of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be (for here again I am speaking of some kinds of poetry and not all) to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog.” Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) 144

SHAPIRO AGAINST ELIOT (1960)

“Eliot is untouchable; he is Modern Literature incarnate and an institution unto himself. One is permitted to disagree with him on a point here or a doctrine there, but no more. The enemy at Eliot’s gate—practically everybody—searches his citadel for an opening and cannot find one. Eliot has long since anticipated every move; he and his men can prevent ingress or exit. Eliot resembles one of those mighty castles in Bavaria which are remarkably visible, famed for their unsightliness, and too expensive to tear down. Life goes on at the bottom; but *it* is always up there....

Eliot invented a Modern World which exists only in his version of it; this world is populated by Eliot's followers and is not a reality. The Eliot population consists of a handful of critics and professors and a few writers of Eliot's generation, though one would think, reading modern criticism and teaching from modern literary textbooks, that there really is a kingdom of Modern Poetry in which T. S. Eliot is the absolute monarch and Archbishop of Canterbury in one.... As most poets are not intellectuals and are the opposite, they are always stunned by the intellectual pretensions of Eliot and are at a loss to deal with them....

Eliot's reputation to a large extent is based upon the poems of this early period, and rightly so. 'Prufrock,' 'Portrait of a Lady,' 'Preludes,' and the 'Rhapsody' are among his best works. Of these 'Prufrock' is head and shoulders above the rest and is sufficient to justify Eliot's claim as one of the most gifted twentieth-century poets....The motivating force in Eliot's work is the search for the mystical center of experience. This search in his case has been fruitless and increasingly frustrating. Eliot's entire career is a history of his failure to penetrate the mystical consciousness....

The failure to achieve mystical consciousness (which indeed is one of the rarest achievements in mankind) drove Eliot back to metaphysics proper and to religion proper. This in my view is the great failure of Eliot. Eliot ends up as a poet of religion in the conventional sense of that term. And once having made the religious commitment he tried to visualize a religion-directed society; he thus becomes an official of the most conservative elements of society and a figurehead for all that is formalized and ritualized."

Karl Shapiro
In Defense of Ignorance
(Random House 1960) 35-60

POSTMODERNISM OVERTAKES ELIOT (1968)

"Eliot's best known poems have been analyzed and explicated to death, so that it is almost impossible to say anything about them without repeating what a half dozen critics have said and quarreling with a half a dozen others...The growing chorus of rejection of Eliot, especially when it comes from young poets whose work one may like, is an embarrassment...I do not wish to join the chorus, yet it is clear that Eliot *was* very wrong about many things, especially in his prose."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 423

INFLUENCE OF "THE WASTE LAND" (1922)

"There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country....Even the surface had been burned off the ground....A *kingfisher* flew up the stream. It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout. They were very satisfactory. As the shadow of the kingfisher move up the stream, a big trout shot upstream in a long angle, only his shadow marking the angle..." [Italics added; contrast myth of the Fisher King, water and shadows in "The Waste Land."]

Ernest Hemingway
"Big Two-Hearted River," *In Our Time*
(Scribner's 1925) 134

"The sun also riseth..." [Hemingway counters Eliot by quoting *Ecclesiastes* for the title of his novel about an impotent fisher-man in the post-WWI wasteland who attains psychological salvation by fishing for meaning and then by fighting the bull in the slang sense—implying that, in the larger context of Nature and eternity, Eliot's gloomy vision is bull. Hemingway's protagonist transcends his wound and his sterility through grace under pressure, like a brave matador fighting a bull. The title is a joke contrasting one man's impotence with all of Nature and implying that true manhood is not sexual but character in adapting to Nature, which is as much sunny as dark: The sun "rises" as well as going down.]

Hemingway
The Sun Also Rises (1926)

“This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air....But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg.” [See eye imagery in “The Waste Land.”]

F. Scott Fitzgerald
The Great Gatsby
(Scribner’s 1925) 23

“The edges of the trees burned with a pale violet light and their centers gradually turned from deep purple to black. The same violet piping, like a Neon tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, hump-backed hills and they were almost beautiful.” [Compare “The Waste Land”: “bats with baby faces in the violet light”]

Nathanael West
The Day of the Locust (1939)
(Penguin/Signet 1983) 23

“Upstage is a great flight of stairs that mount the ancient wall to a sort of archway that leads out into ‘Terra Incognita,’ as it is called in the play, a wasteland between the walled town and the distant perimeter of snow-topped mountains. Downstage right and left are a pair of arches which give entrance to dead-end streets.... Quixote raises his lance... Quixote goes through the arch with Kilroy.”

Tennessee Williams
Camino Real (1953)

“I was having a great time out here in the desert among the stones...And I believed there was something between the stones and me....The mountains were naked, and often snakelike in their forms, without trees, and you could see the clouds being born on the slopes....The rainy season had been very short; the streams were all dry and the bushes would burn if you touched a match to them....‘Hell, it looks like the original place. It must be older than the city of Ur...Rain isn’t likely. The season is over. You need water’.... ‘You are pensive, Henderson-Sungu.’...‘I wouldn’t agree to the death of my soul’.” [In this comic novel Bellow evokes T. S. Eliot, Willa Cather and Ernest Hemingway, who is identified with Africa in the popular mind and whose initials are the same as those of the protagonist Eugene Henderson.]

Saul Bellow
Henderson the Rain King
(Viking 1958)

“Thus was the world given T. S. Garp: born from a good nurse with a will of her own, and the seed of a ball turret gunner—his last shot.” [T. S. Garp is no T. S. Eliot but a straightforward regular guy--the son of a wounded veteran of the WWII wasteland--reduced to a scapegoat Prufrock by radical Feminists, whose fanatical disgust with men he personifies—to them he is vomit, or “garp.”]

John Irving
The World According to Garp
(1976; Pocket Books 1979) 31

Michael Hollister (2015)

