

112 QUOTATIONS



T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

T.S. Eliot is the most influential poet of the 20th century, wrote the most influential poem of the century in “The Waste Land” (1922), became the most influential critic of the century, and established objective New Criticism as the prevailing approach to literary study until 1970. More than any other American he embodies elite Modernism. Essentially he was a Neoclassical poet, yet paradoxically he revolutionized the art with innovative Modernist techniques and forms. Eliot used radical methods to defend the traditions of western culture in a losing battle against the decadent forces culminating in Postmodernism—the ethos of the spiritual Waste Land—going so far in reaction as to become a British royalist and Anglo-Catholic. His life was a struggle to redeem himself from guilt—no longer a popular concept. He is a religious poet in an atheistic secular age. He even looks foreign and antiquated in vested business suit and dangling watch chain, with slicked hair and a dour waspish face, like a British banker in the Victorian Age. Nevertheless, his “The Waste Land” and his “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” will be studied forever, his aesthetic standards are timeless, and his most influential critical concepts remain useful—in particular dissociation of sensibility, the objective correlative, and the mythic method.

ORDER OF TOPICS: home, youth, education, his poetry is American, early verse, aspiration, real and ideal, experience, knowledge, truths, western civilization, the soul, “The Waste Land,” popular culture, human nature, feelings, women, Romanticism, conservatism, life, *Four Quartets*, literature, literature and religion, archetypal art, creativity, transcendence, the poet today, bad writers, writing plays, tradition and the individual talent, argument for canon of classics, objective correlative, dissociation of sensibility, mythic method, historical sense, poetic method, obscurity, the meaning of a poem, Nobel Prize, old age, death, immortality:

HOME

In my beginning is my end.

Home is where one starts from.

Where there is no temple there shall be no homes.

St. Louis affected me more deeply than any other environment has ever done.

YOUTH

I began I think about the age of fourteen, under the inspiration of Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam*, to write a number of very gloomy and atheistical and despairing quatrains in the same style, which fortunately I suppressed completely.

[I combine] a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament.

EDUCATION

When I was sent to school in New England I lost my southern accent without ever acquiring the accent of the native Bostonian.

I hate university towns and university people. Oxford is pretty, but I don't like to be dead.

HIS POETRY IS AMERICAN

I'd say that my poetry has obviously more in common with my distinguished contemporaries in America than with anything being written in my generation in England. That I'm sure of.

It 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.

EARLY VERSE

I think it was rather an advantage not having any living poets in England or America in whom one took any particular interest.

There was really nothing except the people of the nineties who had all died of drink or suicide or one thing or another.

My early vers libre, of course, was started under the endeavor to practice the same form as Laforgue. This meant merely rhyming lines of irregular length, with the rhymes coming in irregular places. It wasn't quite so libre as much verse, especially the sort which Ezra called Amygism.

ASPIRATION

Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.

If you aren't in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?

REAL AND IDEAL

It is only in the world of objects that we have time and space and selves.

There is no absolute point of view from which real and ideal can be finally separated and labeled.

Humankind cannot bear very much reality.

EXPERIENCE

Our difficulties of the moment must always be dealt with somehow, but our permanent difficulties are difficulties of every moment.

Every experience is a paradox in that it means to be absolute, and yet is relative; in that it somehow always goes beyond itself and yet never escapes itself.

KNOWLEDGE

There is no method but to be very intelligent.

Knowledge is invariably a matter of degree: you cannot put your finger upon even the simplest datum and say this we know.

A toothache, or a violent passion, is not necessarily diminished by our knowledge of its causes, its character, its importance or insignificance.

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

We know too much, and are convinced of too little.

TRUTHS

All significant truths are private truths. As they become public they cease to become truths; they become facts, or at best, part of the public character; or at worst, catchwords.

WESTERN CIVILIZATION

I believe that the choice before us is the formation of a new Christian culture [or] the acceptance of a pagan one.

THE SOUL

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing.

The soul is so far from being a monad that we have not only to interpret other souls to ourself but to interpret ourself to ourself.

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

“The Waste Land” (1922)

Pound said, It’s no use trying to do something that somebody else has done as well as it can be done. Do something different.

For Ezra Pound / *il miglior fabbro*. [the better craftsman]

An editor should tell the author that his writing is better than it is. Not a lot better, a little better.

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail Legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge). Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston’s book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do.... To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*... Anyone who is acquainted with these works will immediately recognize in the poem certain references to the vegetation ceremonies.

The collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism [Buddah and St. Augustine], as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident.

In “The Waste Land,” I wasn’t even bothering whether I understood what I was saying.

POPULAR CULTURE

Business today consists in persuading crowds.

Television is a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

HUMAN NATURE

Half of the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don't mean to do harm. But the harm does not interest them.

O Lord, deliver me from the man of excellent intention and impure heart: for the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.

FEELINGS

I have turned myself into a machine...in order not to feel—*but it has killed V.* Must I kill her or myself?

It is obvious that we can no more explain a passion to a person who has never experienced it than we can explain light to the blind.

If you desire to drain to the dregs the fullest cup of scorn and hatred that a fellow human being can pour out for you, let a young mother hear you call dear baby "it."

People to whom nothing has ever happened cannot understand the unimportance of events.

WOMEN

"That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all. "

I am very dependent upon women (I mean female society).

In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.

To her [wife Vivien] the marriage brought no happiness. To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came "The Waste Land."

ROMANTICISM

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.

The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason.

CONSERVATISM

Those of us who find ourselves supporting...Classicism believe that men cannot get on without giving allegiance to something outside themselves.

Poetry should help, not only to refine the language of the time, but to prevent it from changing too rapidly.

It's not wise to violate rules until you know how to observe them.

Four Quartets (1943)

By the time of the *Four Quartets*, I couldn't have written in the style of "The Waste Land."

LITERATURE

Our high respect for a well read person is praise enough for literature.

The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.

Art never improves, but...the material of art is never quite the same.

LITERATURE AND RELIGION

Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion.

If we learn to read poetry properly, the poet never persuades us to believe anything... What we learn from Dante, or the Bhagavad-Gita, or any other religious poetry is what it *feels* like to believe that religion.

ARCHETYPAL ART

The artist, I believe, is more primitive, as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries; his experience is deeper than civilization, and he only uses the phenomena of civilization in expressing it.

Poetry may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves.

What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality.

CREATIVITY

Anxiety is the hand maiden of creativity.

I found that three hours a day is about all I can do of actual composing.

It is a commonplace that some forms of illness are extremely favorable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition. A piece of writing meditated, apparently without progress, for months or years, may suddenly take shape and word; and in this state long passages may be produced which require little or no retouch...he to whom this happens assuredly has the sensation of being a vehicle rather than a maker. [characteristic of writers in a transcendental mode of consciousness, such as Jonathan Edwards and Black Elk.]

It's strange that words are so inadequate. Yet, like the asthmatic struggling for breath, so the lover must struggle for words.

In expressing what other people feel he is also changing the feeling by making it more conscious; he is making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves. But he is not merely a more conscious person than the others; he is also individually different

from other people and from other poets too, and can make his readers share consciously in new feelings which they had not experienced before.

The last thing one discovers in composing a work is what to put first.

TRANSCENDENCE

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

THE POET TODAY

Any poet, if he is to survive beyond his 25th year, must alter; he must seek new literary influences; he will have different emotions to express.

I don't think good poetry can be produced in a kind of political attempt to overthrow some existing form. I think it just supercedes.

The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all.

As things are, and as fundamentally they must always be, poetry is not a career, but a mug's game. No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written: He may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing.

BAD WRITERS

Some editors are failed writers, but so are most writers.

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal.

The poet who is really 'derivative' is the poet who mistakes literature for life, and very often the reason why he makes this mistake is that—he has not read enough.

The bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious.

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.

And they write innumerable books; being too vain and distracted for silence: seeking every one after his own elevation, and dodging his emptiness.

WRITING PLAYS

I am no longer very much interested in my own theories about poetic drama.

Playwriting gets into your blood and you can't stop it. At least not until the producers or the public tell you to.

A play should give you something to think about. When I see a play and understand it the first time, then I know it can't be much good.

I wanted to get to learn the technique of the theater so well that I could then forget about it. I always feel it's not wise to violate rules til you know how to observe them.

The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre. In a play of Shakespeare you get several levels of significance. For the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the character and conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually. And I do not believe that the classification of audience is so clear-cut as this; but rather that the sensitiveness of every auditor is acted upon by all these elements at once, though in different degrees of consciousness.

Later I thought that in *The Family Reunion* I was giving so much attention to the versification that I neglected the structure of the play. I think *The Family Reunion* is still the best of my plays in the way of poetry, although it's not very well constructed.

My greatest trouble is getting the curtain up and down.

TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT

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.

ARGUMENT FOR A CANON OF CLASSICS

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.

We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919)

It is part of the business of the critic...to see literature steadily and to see it whole; and this is eminently to see it not as consecrated by time, but to see it beyond time; to see the best work of our time and the best work of twenty-five hundred years ago with the same eyes. Introduction, *The Sacred Wood* (1920)

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... "*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. "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921)

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.... "*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. *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. *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. *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. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) 144

NOBEL PRIZE

The Nobel is a ticket to one's own funeral. No one has ever done anything after he got it.

OLD AGE

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

I grow old.... I grow old.... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

I don't believe one grows older. I think that what happens early on in life is that at a certain age one stands still and stagnates.

There is not a more repulsive spectacle than an old man who will not forsake the world, which has already forsaken him.

This is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but a whimper.

Let's not be narrow, nasty, and negative.

You are the music while the music lasts.

DEATH

I had seen birth and death but had thought they were different.

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

IMMORTALITY

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from "T.S. Eliot, *The Art of Poetry*" (1959)
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