

## T S Eliot - Readers on Writers 2 - by Hilary Elder

Those of you who've been on Facebook today will not be surprised to hear that I'm starting this with a confession and an apology. This talk will not be as prepared or as thorough as I'd hoped – nor, I suspect, will it be as helpful, or insightful as you had hoped. There are several reasons for this. Some are biographical – this talk is the last in a perfect storm of deadlines that has hit me over the weekend – on Saturday, I co-ran a study morning about weddings and the Song of Songs, on Monday my 4,000 word summative essay on Death and Dying was due in. I spent the whole day yesterday at Bede's World, shadowing a school visit and then meeting with the Head of Learning as part of a project I'm doing there. I know I should have planned my workload so that this wouldn't have been a problem – but I didn't – if you're kind you'll look on the bright side – at least there is a talk of sorts!

Some of my problems are temperamental. When I drew Eliot out of the hat, my heart did sink a bit. Having never seen *Cats*, what I knew about Eliot before preparing this was essentially four things:

- I read *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* as a child
- I know *The Journey of the Magi* well from a number of carol services
- and I know that Eliot is a towering, defining figure of English Literature from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, for his poetry (including verse drama), for his criticism and for his influential work as an editor at Faber and Faber
- I know he had an unhappy first marriage, about which there is now some debate as to the extent to which he was to blame.

As I've prepared for this, I can't say I've especially warmed to him. Partly as a result of this, I've panicked a bit and read more about him than I have of what he actually wrote, hoping that other commentators would give me a helpful way in – '*T.S.Eliot: a guide to the perplexed*' was a particularly attractively titled book that didn't entirely disappoint. Eliot would have both approved and disapproved of this. On the one hand, he thought that, with poetry, direct engagement by the reader was key: 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.' On the other, as we shall see, he believed that

poetry needed to be situated in its literary and cultural context – it is not just pure, free-flowing, unmediated expression.

My final problem is that I'm not exactly sure what my brief is – is it Eliot the poet, Eliot the critic, Eliot the giant and arbiter of twentieth century literary culture or Eliot the Anglican that you want to know about? And if it's Eliot the Anglican, do you want to know what he believed, what he contributed to Anglicanism, or what his personal faith journey was? I don't think I can give you proper answers to any of these, but what I may do – and in this I think I may be in company with Eliot himself - is to raise questions about the relationship between those things.

So, here's where I'm at now – and I wish I had world enough and time to pursue this all much further and get to know Eliot better, despite my continuing coolness. The most interesting questions raised by Eliot for me are relational. Probably the biggest of these - biggest in the sense most significant for us now - are two: the relationship between an author's personal experience and what he writes, and the relationship between literature, culture and religion.

Do we need a potted biography?

Eliot is a paradox. He was consciously in the vanguard of a new movement that changed what people thought poetry was in the twentieth century. He kicked over the traces of the now commonplace romantic ideal that poetry was essentially self-expression, and therefore that what made poetry good was a combination of how well the poet used language to express himself, and more importantly how good (exciting, true?) the thoughts and feelings were that he aimed to express. The romantic idea that the poet is a heroic genius who transcends society, flying above it to give sublime expression, was to Eliot anathema – and here, I think I'm with him. Eliot contributed importantly to kicking this idea into touch in literary criticism (though it persists in popular consciousness, and even Eliot knew there is some truth in it, and that poetry is, in important ways, intensely personal). In his own poetry, he sought not noble subjects, but wrote first about disillusioned old men (J Alfred Prufrock) and common folk whose existence is grubby and tainted. In his criticism, he claimed that the subject matter of a poem was immaterial to its quality – by which we might make the mistake of imagining he is claiming that form has more value than substance. But it wasn't quite that. He reclaimed the idea that poetry is part of cultural tradition, is a shared heritage that

individuals contribute to, but that for their contributions to be valuable, they need to transcend their individuality – but that does not mean that they do not use their experience to create their poetry, or that they should end up producing only things that we could all agree on – i.e. dull platitudes. It's more complicated than that!

Already, it's getting very difficult, and Eliot is famously difficult. I apologise – although it's his fault too! He didn't want to make it easy for us; it was far too important for that. Here are some quotes to give you an idea of the difficulty – these are Eliot being very lucid, and at the same time apparently contradictory:

'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.'

'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 is to want to escape from them.'

'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.'

So, Eliot was forward-looking, prophetic, missionary, in some aspects. He ushered in a new era of poetry, concerned with form, anti-heroic but very serious, determined that poetry was 'itself', not just versified politics, spirituality or religion. His recognition of the multiplicity and chaos inherent in individual existence has a postmodern feel, and with some generosity he extended this understanding to readers. He thought that poetry didn't just mean what the poet meant it to mean (sometimes it didn't even mean that) but a variety of interpretations could be valid, so long as readers were reading attentively. He recognised that human understanding is built in the personal experience and wider culture of the person in question, so that understanding is created in a complex web of networks of meaning and significance – something we would recognise as a post-modern idea.

Eliot was also, however, highly conservative. Perhaps the most famous statement of his own views is that he was 'an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics.' He, of course, later complained that this was taken out of context.

**Anglo-Catholic in religion.** Born into a leading Unitarian family, he rebelled against its utilitarian kind of faith. He studied mysticism of various kinds - including Buddhism and St John of the Cross - and felt that concepts such as original sin and hell were vital to understanding the human condition. Another famous and problematic quote, from his essay on Baudelaire in 1930:

'So far as we are human, what we do must either be evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least we exist.'

In 1927, very secretly, Eliot was baptized and then confirmed into the Anglican Church. He went public about it in 1928. We may wonder, why the secrecy. Here is a response from one of his friends and supporters, Virginia Woolf, in 1928:

"I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic believer in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God."

(She didn't actually cut him off forever).

Modern commentators find Eliot's religion difficult. They rationalise it as part of his desire to be part of the English establishment, or as a tool in his quest to keep chaos at bay by imposing order. There may be truth in these, but I don't think they take Eliot's religion seriously enough. It is certainly true that a Christian context is necessary for much of the poetry.

The reason why modern commentators find Eliot's religion difficult is because, like Woolf, they find in it a stumbling block to Eliot's status as a properly modern man. And in practical terms he seems to be King Canute here, rather than a trailblazer. At the exact moment when more and more people were abandoning Christianity, and the trend was starting that would lead to more and more English Literature students knowing less and less about the Christianity that is a key shaping factor in much of English literature, Eliot went the other way! And he contributed significantly to the development of English Literature as an academic discipline in such a way that it is possible to suggest it as an alternative to religion as a moral and spiritual guardian of culture.

The specific character of Eliot's religion was indeed conservative and Anglo-Catholic. He became a member of the Society of King Charles the Martyr, whose prime work is to recall the Church to an appreciation of the life and work of Saint Charles (canonized by the Church of England in 1660, but has since been removed from the Calendar of Saints).

I haven't managed to make an assessment of Eliot's influence on the Church of England as such. *Murder in the Cathedral*, his play about the murder of Thomas Becket, first performed in Canterbury Cathedral in 1935, is aimed at a churchgoing audience and communicates important things to such an audience. Eliot was a member of societies whose membership included influential Anglicans such as Archbishop Temple. Perhaps his most concrete contribution was as a member of the committee that produced the Revised Psalter in 1963, and I would like to have studied this more closely, for in this we should be able to see something of how he thought language could be useful to the body of worshipping Christians, and how he thought holy poetry might communicate to non-literary people.

**A Classicist in literature:** I think Eliot helped define the word 'classicist' as a counter-term to 'romantic'. What he means is that he believes literature should be not pure individualist self-expression but the personal emotions and experiences of the poet honed into an expression that is built on the previous writing of the poet's culture, and that may speak more than personally and make a contribution to the fabric of society, as it were, by binding people together in their recognition of what is written. Here we can see literature doing a similar social function to religion, and I think there is a blurring in Eliot here. I think the relationship between public and private in his writing and in his religion is a very difficult threshold for him to negotiate, and at the same time, absolutely crucial.

**A royalist in politics:** Eliot wrote not only on literature but also on politics, and his political convictions were born of his understanding of culture and society, which came from, among other places, extensive anthropological and sociological reading (e.g. Durkheim). These led him to rather despise democracy as too individualistic and ill-disciplined, while his experience led to an appreciation of the harm despots can do. The means of government he thought held out the best hope were, oddly, monarchy and socialism.

A word about the 'objective correlative': This is one of the most famous of Eliot's terms (though according to Wikipedia it was actually coined in 1840 by Washington Allston),

and it tries to capture how he thought poetry was able to communicate the truth between people who, inevitably, had not shared the same experience.

“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.’ [Hamlet and his problems, *The Sacred Wood*, 1921]

This is, essentially, a postmodern problem. If everything is relative, if there is no absolute truth – if ‘love’ or ‘green’ or ‘melancholy’ is experienced by each of us in a particular way, how can it be possible for us to communicate our experience with each other at all? With the collapse in the twentieth century of the notion of uniform absolute truth comes the threat of the descent into chaos – including the Babel nightmare of a different language for each person – with no common reference point. For Eliot, poetry, religion and political structures needed to provide that common reference point. They could not do so by coercion, nor could they do so without reference to personal experience, for without that, there would be nothing to communicate. But if personal experience is all we have, then we have no means of reference, or transference.

Eliot's response is both prophetic and reactionary. He strives for truth in writing at the same time as denying writing as self-expression; he accepts the possibility of multiple valid interpretations of a work at the same time as insisting on that work being placed into a cultural tradition that will determine how it is understood; he contributes to development and change in the literary tradition while wanting to stem the tide of decline that change is bringing.

So, back to my temporal and particular and very non-universal problems, and the reasons why I have not given Eliot and this talk the seriousness that I should have, and why I'm not sure whether he'd mind. There are important connections among all the things I've been doing. Looking at the Song of Songs and weddings, we explored connections between an ancient text that is part of both the religious and literary canons and modern (postmodern) weddings. How can an ancient, enigmatic text that nonetheless participates in a near-universal genre of poetry speak to modern couples? My funerals essay is about the effects of 'informed consumer choice' on Christian funerals, and so looks at how every grief is understood as unique and personal, and yet needs to be

understood and assimilated within a social context. For a minister, both of these are about how pastoral ministry is informed by and impacts upon theology; in what way does a theological underpinning help or hinder pastoral care? And to what extent do, or should, pastoral imperatives shape theological thinking? I don't think Eliot probably framed these questions in such practical ways as this; but he would recognise the difficulty and importance of relating individual and social, personal and universal, thought and feeling, crucial to the wellbeing of both individuals and the societies they live in. So I think he would have thought I was doing important (if low-level) work, and might have forgiven me for neglecting him, and even understood that if I'm grappling with the same problems as he, albeit in a different context, then I'm not quite neglecting him, but rather participating in the same ongoing discourse...

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Thomas Stearns Eliot September 26, 1888 <a href="#">St. Louis, Missouri</a>	
<b>Died</b>	January 4, 1965 (aged 76) London, England
<b>Occupation</b>	Poet, dramatist, literary critic, and editor
<b>Citizenship</b>	American by birth; British from 1927
<b>Education</b>	<a href="#">A.B.</a> in philosophy
<b>Alma mater</b>	<a href="#">Harvard University</a> <a href="#">Merton College, Oxford</a>
<b>Period</b>	1905–1965
<b>Literary movement</b>	<a href="#">Modernism</a>
<b>Notable work(s)</b>	<a href="#">The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock</a> (1915), <a href="#">The Waste Land</a> (1922), <a href="#">Four Quartets</a> (1944)

**Notable award(s)** [Nobel Prize in Literature](#) (1948), [Order of Merit](#) (1948)

**Spouse(s)** [Vivienne Haigh-Wood](#) (1915–1947); [Esmé Valerie Fletcher](#) (1957–death)

**Children** none