

T.S. Eliot and the 'mind of Europe'



T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

- Poet and critic.
- Born St Louis, Missouri into a prominent Unitarian family.
- Reads literature, philosophy and art history at Harvard (1906-1910).
Discovers French symbolism through Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*.
- Postgraduate studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne (1910) and Oxford (1914). Comes into contact with philosophers like Bergson and Russell.
Receives a PhD in philosophy from Harvard in 1916 for a thesis on the neo-Hegelian English philosopher F.H. Bradley.

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

- Stays on in England after World War One is declared. Hasty marriage to an English woman, Vivien Haigh-Wood – a disaster. Becomes involved in the London literary scene: starts a friendship and collaboration with his fellow American expatriate Ezra Pound (who calls him 'Old Possum') and contributes to avant-garde literary journals. Starts publishing poems:
- *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Poems* (1920, which includes some poems in French)
- *The Waste Land* (1922), which becomes the defining poem of post-war gloom and modernist fragmentation. The poem also follows a spell in therapy for a nervous breakdown. Online hypertext versions of the poem can be found at <https://wasteland.windingway.org/poem>; or <http://world.std.com/~raparker/exploring/thewasteland/explore.html> . For a recording by Eliot, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rpFBSO65P4> *The Waste Land* was translated into German (*Das wüste Land*) by Curtius in 1927.
- *The Hollow Men* (1925)

‘Mélange Adultère de Tout’ (*Poems* 1920)

EN Amérique, professeur;
En Angleterre, journaliste;
C’est à grands pas et en sueur
Que vous suivrez à peine ma piste.
En Yorkshire, conférencier; 5
A Londres, un peu banquier,
Vous me paierez bien la tête.
C’est à Paris que je me coiffe
Casque noir de jemenfoutiste.
En Allemagne, philosophe 10
Surexcité par Emporheben
Au grand air de Bergsteigleben;

J’erre toujours de-ci de-là
A divers coups de tra là là
De Damas jusqu’à Omaha. 15
Je célébrai mon jour de fête
Dans une oasis d’Afrique
Vêtu d’une peau de girafe.

On montrera mon cénotaphe
Aux côtes brûlantes de Mozambique. 20

From *The Waste Land*

Epigraph: “Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi
in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις;
respondebat illa: ἀποΘανεῖν θέλω.”

Ending:

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina

Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow

Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie

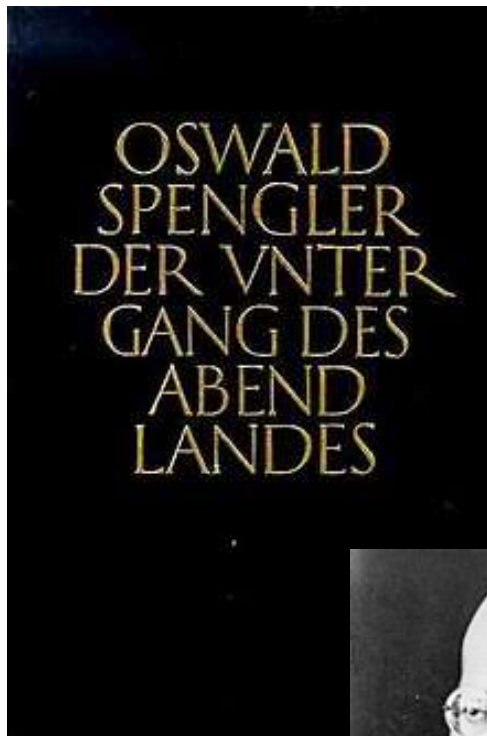
These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

The Waste Land and 'Kultur pessimismus'



Oswald Spengler on
The Decline of the West
(1918/1922)

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

- 1922. Becomes chief editor of *The Criterion*, one of the leading literary journals of the interwar period in England. Promotes links with major European writers and critics (Ortega y Gasset, Valéry Larbaud, Paul Valéry, Thomas Mann, Ernst Robert Curtius...). The journal is discontinued in 1939.
- 1928. Announces his conversion to Anglicanism and becomes a British citizen. Declares himself a “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, Anglo-catholic in religion” (Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*) – to the disappointment of radical / liberal modernists like Virginia Woolf, who had considered *The Waste Land* as a masterpiece. Shows interest in reactionary movements like the Action Française, but distances himself from fascism in the 1930s.
- Poetic output becomes more explicitly religious while retaining similarities with symbolist aesthetics: *Ash Wednesday* (1930), *Four Quartets* (1935-1942). Also writes verse drama (*Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*...) and light verse (*Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, the basis for Andrew Lloyd Weber's phenomenally successful West End musical *Cats*).

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

- Becomes director and poetry editor at Faber and Faber, the most prestigious imprint for poetry in England. The post earns him a reputation as the 'Pope of Russell Square'.
- Order of Merit, 1948. Nobel prize for literature, 1948. Second marriage, to his secretary.

Critical writings:

- occasional essays for various journals or lectures written throughout his career, collected in various editions (*The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot* was recently published by Johns Hopkins University Press and Faber and Faber – watch out to see if KU Leuven's subscription to Project Muse will give us digital access to it).
- religious, social and cultural criticism (e.g. *The Idea of a Christian Society*, 1948).

T.S. Eliot and Anglo-Saxon literary criticism

- exerted an indirect influence on the 'New Criticism' and supporters of 'close reading', mostly through his emphasis on impersonality. However, some of Eliot's pronouncements clearly go against New Critical principles, e.g.:

"Qua work of art, the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret, we can only criticize it according to standards, in comparison to other works of art, and for 'interpretation' the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not supposed to know" ('Hamlet and his Problems', 1919).

"The method is to take a well-known poem . . . without reference to the author or to his other work, analyse it stanza by stanza and line by line, and extract, squeeze, tease, press every drop of meaning out of it that one can. It might be called the lemon-squeezer school of criticism." ('The Frontiers of Criticism', 1956).

(this can be compared this with Curtius's critique of hermeneutics and 'philosophizing Literaturwissenschaft' in *ELLMA* p. 11)

T.S. Eliot and Anglo-Saxon literary criticism

- helped revive interest in English Augustan/classical writers (e.g. Dryden) at a time when Romantic lyricism was the dominant norm – cf. his claim that poetry is not ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ (‘Tradition’ 43), a definition used by the English Romantic William Wordsworth.
- generally condemned Romanticism in all its forms. Eliot’s critique of Romanticism arguably goes beyond aesthetics and extends to various Romantic ideologies.

T.S. Eliot and Anglo-Saxon literary criticism

- stressed the necessity of locating English literature within a broader European tradition defined by Latinity. “If everything derived from Rome were withdrawn – everything we have from Norman-French society, from the Church, from Humanism, from every channel direct and indirect, what would be left? A few Teutonic roots and husks. England is a ‘Latin’ country, and we ought not to have to go to France for our Latinity” (quoted by Curtius in *ELLMA*, 35).

T. S. Eliot and the 'mind of Europe'

-- On the American expatriate and the idea of 'Europe': "It is the final perfection, the consummation of an American to become, not an Englishman, but a European – something which no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become." (T.S. Eliot, 'In Memory of Henry James', 1918).

- On the World Wars and the fragmentation / decline of Europe:

"a heap of broken images", "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" (The Waste Land, 1922).

The Treaty of Versailles (1919), which reorganized Europe according to the principle of national self-determination championed by US President Woodrow Wilson, is mentioned in the essay on Dante: "the process of disintegration which for our generation culminates in that treaty began soon after Dante's time." ('Dante')

Europe before and after the Treaty of Versailles



T. S. Eliot and the 'mind of Europe'

1944:

“Europe is a whole (and still, in its progressive mutilation and disfigurement, the organism out of which any greater world harmony must develop)” (‘What is a Classic?’).

T.S. Eliot: questions

1. Eliot's "tradition" can only be obtained "by great labour", yet Eliot also dismisses accusations of "pedantry" ('Tradition'). How persuasive do you find these arguments?
2. Eliot's states that "poetry can communicate before it is understood" ('Dante')? What are the conditions under which poetry in an unfamiliar modern language can communicate? Eliot argues that "Dante easier for a foreigner" than Shakespeare, and that "we can come nearer to understanding [Dante] than a foreigner can come to understanding [Shakespeare or Molière or Sophocles]". What type of 'foreigner' does he have in mind? As most of you will be 'foreign' to Italian literature, do you feel included among the 'foreign' readers whom Eliot discusses?
3. Why does he exclude the classics from that type of experience? "I admit that such experience, solidified into a maxim, would be very difficult to apply in the study of Latin and Greek. But with authors of one's own speech, and even with some of those of other modern languages, the procedure is possible." ('Dante')

T.S. Eliot: questions

4. What explains Eliot's reluctance to call certain writers, even those he praises most like Dante or Virgil, 'greater' than others?
5. How is 'provincialism' defined by Eliot? Is his definition of provincialism the same as Kundera's? Why does Eliot call Goethe 'provincial' ('What is a Classic?')?
5. Was Eliot right in arguing that there is a provincialism of time as well as a provincialism of place, and that "we can all, all the peoples on the globe, be provincials together" ('What is a Classic?')? Is this a prescient critique of contemporary 'global' culture, or a reactionary complaint?
6. "No modern language could aspire to the universality of Latin, even though it came to be spoken by millions more than ever spoke Latin, and even though it came to be the universal means of communication between peoples of all tongues and all cultures" ('What is a Classic?'). What is specific and unique about the 'universality' of Latin according to Eliot? Is his argument that no modern language can share Latin's universality (still) persuasive?

T.S. Eliot: questions

7. How do Eliot's arguments about the importance of Latin and Greek ("the bloodstream of European literature") compare with those put forward in recent debates about the place of Latin and Greek in school curricula and the (ir)relevance or ideological bias of classics? Do his writings help perpetuate a view of " 'classics' as a fairytale Western origin story"? (

https://www.chronicle.com/article/if-classics-doesnt-change-let-it-burn?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in)

For other interventions in those debates, see e.g.:

<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/does-latin-have-a-future/> (Mary Beard)

<http://donaldclarkplanb.blogspot.com/2011/02/10-reasons-not-to-learn-latin.html> (Donald Clark)

<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/05/02/waarom-is-grieks-nog-relevant--bart-de-wever-en-co/>

Demulder, Bram. 'Gooi rosa, rosa, rosam niet in de prullenmand' De Standaard; 2013; Vol. 90; p. 45 (available through LIMO)

T.S. Eliot: questions

+ any other question you want to raise

Select bibliography

Anderson, Mark. 'La Restauration de la décadence: Curtius et T.S. Eliot' in *Ernst Robert Curtius et l'idée d'Europe*, eds. Jeanne Bem and André Guyaux. Paris: Champion, 1995.

Copley, J.H. 'The Politics of Friendship: T.S. Eliot in Germany through E.R. Curtius's Looking Glass' in *The International Reception of T. S. Eliot*, eds. Elisabeth Däumer and Shyamal Bagchee. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Hönnighausen, Lothar. 'Curtius, Eliot und der konservative Beitrag zum Modernismus' in *In Ihnen begegnet sich das Abendland: Bonner Vorträge zur Erinnerung an Ernst Robert Curtius*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Lange. Bonn: Bouvier, 1990.

Kojecky, Roger. *T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism*. London: Faber, 1971.

Moody, David A, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Uhlig, Claus. 'Tradition in Curtius and Eliot.' *Comparative Literature* 42.3 (1990): 193-207.