



# THE LEGACY OF T.S. ELIOT

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To Catherine Runcie





# Introduction

FIFTY years ago, when Eliot was invited to give a lecture on 'The Frontiers of Criticism' at the University of Minnesota, the football stadium had to be booked to hold the 14,000 people who attended. The West End and Broadway successes of Eliot's fourth play, *The Cocktail Party*, in the earlier 1950s would have been unrepeatable twenty years later and are unimaginable now. In 1958, William Empson confessed that 'I do not know for certain how much of my own mind [Eliot] invented.... He is a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike the east wind'.<sup>1</sup> Once a commanding figure, in the poetry and literary criticism studied in undergraduate English courses, Eliot makes at best fitful, furtive appearances in such studies, now – and for a generation past.

It is a commonplace of literary history to note that the reputations of writers suffer a decline in the years following their deaths, which, in Eliot's case, came in 1965, a decade after 'The Frontiers of Criticism' lecture. No doubt most of those in the Minnesota stadium had come to see a cultural phenomenon that, for them, amounted to something remarkable – the poet of the century – rather than to learn about the frontiers which criticism had reached. So the decline of Eliot's reputation is also an expression of the changed nature of celebrity – to put it politely, its democratisation – in our time. Nobel laureates and members of the Order of Merit (both conferred upon Eliot in 1948) are unlikely to be lionised today. Certainly, no other poet since has enjoyed such a status and it is hard to imagine the circumstances recurring, in Western culture, where another would.

In the academy, the nose-dive in Eliot's reputation is linked both to the characteristics of the cultural upheavals of the 1960s – where any and every established reputation was scrutinised and, in many cases, debunked – and to the specific rejection of Eliot's particular legacy of thought and practice, as a poet, essayist and dramatist and, with it, that of High Modernism in general. As Roger Kimball has noted, the poet who





had declared himself in 1928 (in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes*) a 'classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion' had died, nearly forty years later, in a world which was demanding formless subjectivity in literature, egalitarianism in politics and no-church romanticism in religion. Moreover, it found in Eliot a subject for 'a swarm of fashionable grievances'.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, for many in the academy, to dissociate themselves from Eliot, in particular, was a sign of authenticity, of adherence to 'correct' contemporary orthodoxies. Today, there is not even the need to dissociate oneself from a poet, critic and social theorist who has long ceased to be canonical.

Yet, there are those scholars (even scholar-poets) who continue to make strenuous claims about the poet's enduring standing – Craig Raine comes to mind, for example, in several books, but particularly one study published in 2006, where he speaks of Eliot as 'the most influential and authoritative literary arbiter of the twentieth century' (not, we note, just the first half of the twentieth century), its 'most famous poet', and the author of various lines of 'the most beautiful poetry in English'.<sup>3</sup> But these are now minority views.

And it must be said that, for all the sustained attacks on Eliot's reputation and legacy (of which the veritable industry devoted to his alleged anti-Semitism may serve as an ongoing example), Eliot's presence has, nonetheless, a stubborn persistence, through the passage of his language into the common word-store of the West. I scarcely go through any week of reading without coming across some use, usually unacknowledged (indeed, perhaps unrecognised by their users), of one or other of his famous phrases, whether in the popular media or in academic writing: the 'wasteland' (usually as one word, often in the context of environmental concerns); 'not with a bang but a whimper' (and various varieties of this, with varying degrees of seriousness) to describe the ending of something; Prufrock's 'overwhelming question' or measuring out his life with coffee spoons; human kind not bearing very much reality, from 'Burnt Norton' and so on. A journalist writing a feature article on the succession of Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, to Tony Blair, as British Prime Minister, recalled the cabinet secretary's observation that



'likened the Chancellor to Macavity, the cat in T.S. Eliot's poem: whenever bad news had to be delivered, Brown was not there'.<sup>4</sup> More recently, in an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* about the results which children anxiously await each July regarding their entry into selective high schools, Joanna Mendelsohn chose (and varied) Eliot's arresting opening to *The Waste Land* to make her own arresting opening to her article: 'For children in sixth grade, July can be the cruellest month'.<sup>5</sup> Such references take it for granted that the audience will recognise the allusion. No other twentieth-century poet is so widely quoted and quotable. Then, one encounters references to other authors who have borrowed his phrases, such as Evelyn Waugh's *Handful of Dust* (from the first section of *The Waste Land*). And much more recently, another phrase from 'Prufrock', 'I have heard the mermaids singing', is the title of a 1988 film, a 2005 novel by Christopher Bollas and a 2006 painting by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and so on. A series on ABC-TV in 2008 was entitled *The Hollowmen*. These words and phrases have, indeed, become *les mots de la tribu*.

In more specifically literary-critical and literary-historical writing, F.R. Leavis's *The Common Pursuit* takes its title from Eliot's description of literary criticism as 'the common pursuit of true judgement',<sup>6</sup> while the 'objective correlative', the 'dissociation of sensibility' and the 'auditory imagination' – phrases which 'have had a success in the world astonishing to their author', Eliot once remarked<sup>7</sup> – continue to be chewed over, are unignorable. Telling assessments, such as Eliot's appreciation of Donne as a poet who would 'feel' his 'thought as immediately as the odour of a rose'<sup>8</sup> or of Henry James possessing 'a mind so fine that no idea could violate it'<sup>9</sup> or the subversive appreciation of *In Memoriam* as a poem which 'is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience...'<sup>10</sup> are customarily referred (if not deferred) to in ongoing readings of those writers and works. Perusing the new *Broadview Anthology of Renaissance and Early Seventeenth Century Literature* (published in 2006), I was startled to see the number of times Eliot's name cropped up, in this work of up-to-date scholarship, priding itself on its 'fresh approach', when making reference to the renewed appreciation, in the earlier twentieth century, of writers such

as Ben Jonson, John Donne, George Herbert and Andrew Marvell. We are told that Eliot was 'one of the first' to appreciate the appeal of Jonson's plain style to modern ears; that 'thanks... to the praise of T.S. Eliot... Donne's work moved again in the twentieth century to the center of the English poetic canon'; that, 'in the twentieth century Herbert rejoined the poetic canon when T.S. Eliot, in his influential 1921 essay "The Metaphysical Poets"... praised Herbert as one of the last poets to have consummated a true fusion of feeling and intellect'; and that Marvell's 'reputation was firmly re-established by T.S. Eliot, who championed him as one of the finest of the "metaphysical" poets'. Eliot's legacy, with regard to the study and appreciation of these great writers, is secure, denied by nobody and an extraordinary contribution to our literary culture. Similarly admirable was what he was able to achieve for modern poets, as a publisher at Faber and Faber, launching the work of so many of the generation of writers who were to follow him. 'No poet... in all history', Helen Gardner once observed, 'has been more aware of the contemporary situation or more generous in praise and encouragement of younger writers'.<sup>11</sup> That is a notable accolade from a scholar who was not given to hyperbole.

The essays in this collection began life as papers read to an international conference, which I convened, on 'The Legacy of T.S. Eliot', at the University of Sydney, in July 2007. Paper-givers were invited to address aspects of Eliot's legacy from today's perspective. The sheer range of submissions indicated the health and breadth of that legacy, worldwide. I have selected not only the best of the papers, but a selection which, taken together, conveys something of the range of Eliot's contribution and its impact in the various aspects of his career as poet, literary critic, editor, publisher and social and religious commentator.

In my essay on 'The Legacy of T.S. Eliot', I argue that the extent to which Eliot's legacy as a poet was (and is) potent in the twentieth-first century depends upon the extent to which his critique of Romanticism and the recovery and celebration of the classical spirit will prevail and I strive to show how a reading in accord with the principles of that spirit is appropriate to an understanding of 'Marina' and, indeed, is required by the very nature of the poem and of Eliot's poetry at large.

Then, Julian Murphet argues (in 'Eliot's Mechanism of Sensibility: poetic form and media change') that Eliot's legacy, in his poetry, is as a prophet (sometimes, indeed, a Jeremiah) of the major currents of twentieth-century cultural and technological change, of which the poet is 'a prescient and extraordinarily sensitive mediator'. So far from retreating into poetic purity, Eliot's language assumes positions at critical points of contact between mechanical mass media and the Enlightenment media it was replacing. The 'inner self' submits to the irresistible march of technical apparatus. Eliot's appropriation of the improprieties of modernity facilitate the survival of verse in the hostile new media ecology.

David Musgrave builds upon Max Nänny's identification (in 1985) of *The Waste Land* as a Menippean satire and explores its sources in Petronius' *Satyricon* and its embodiment of several features of the Menippean satire: the rhetorical figure of the enthymeme, the *topos* of the nekylia, or dialogue with the dead, and the fragmentariness of the work as read against a late Romantic background. He argues that by 'providing a slightly different context for reading *The Waste Land*, I hope to open new lines of inquiry into understanding the distinctive contribution made by Eliot's seminal modernist poem'.

Engaging with Eliot's most important specifically 'religious' poem, *Ash-Wednesday*, 1930, in the years after '*The Waste Land*' period concluded with 'The Hollow Men' (1925), Robin Grove queries the significance of the poet's Anglo-Catholicism in the appreciation of 'so troubled' a work, focusing rather on different conceptions of time which it expresses: secular and 'sacred' (or mythic time). He identifies Eliot's pursuit of a yearning for freedom from secular time from the beginning of his poetic career, diminishing the customary representation of a dichotomy between the secular and Christian writer. Yet, *Ash-Wednesday* has its own particular discourse; its 'great accomplishment... to suspend the mind between meanings', while also figuring a 'longing for what has been renounced', articulated in Eliot's 'most sensuous stretch of writing' (in the last section of the poem). The poem reveals the divided quality of Eliot's poetic persona – a persisting double presence which appears again in *Four Quartets* to which *Ash-Wednesday* is a 'faint prelude'.



At least as much of Eliot's attention and energy, in the period *l'entre deux guerres*, was devoted to his activities as a literary and social commentator, especially as the editor of *The Criterion*, as it was to writing poetry and verse-drama. Ian Campbell focuses on 'the editor, his collaborators and contributors', in a discussion of Eliot's editing and promotion of that journal in the years 1922 to 1939 and re-assesses the long-established idea of Eliot's autocratic dominance of *The Criterion* with reference to others associated with it and scrutinises the assumption that it presented a 'monolithic ideological stance'. Campbell looks closely at two numbers of the journal, from the beginning and end of the 1930s and also the association with 'the Criterion group' of Herbert Read and of Campbell's own relative, Arthur Wheen, the translator of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. What emerges is a fascinating insight into the complexity of the intellectual environment of this period and Eliot's response to it, especially in his 'Commentary' columns in the journal.

Taking us into the next period of Eliot's career and reputation, Sarah Kennedy considers the legacy of *Four Quartets*, with particular reference to the large body of critical analysis which has accrued around the poem since 1942 and asks 'why does Eliot remain such a problematic religious figure despite the broad cultural penetration' of his final masterwork? Similarly to Robin Grove, she discerns the complexity in his 'spirituality and mythic sensibility' and argues against confining his writing to a narrowly doctrinal interpretation. Eliot's traversing of 'a broad and changing metaphysical terrain in pursuit of an instinctive language of the soul... a complex fusion of immanence and transcendence, latent gnosticism and mantic fascination' may have much to do with the vitality of the ongoing legacy of *Four Quartets* and the stimulus to thought and commentary it has provided.

Contrastingly, Jonathan Baker explores the 'poetry of Incarnation' in Eliot's work, with reference to two other formidable Anglican poets of the twentieth century, both of whom were associated with Eliot in various ways – W.H. Auden and John Betjeman. The Anglicanism of the three was 'differently nuanced', but if we focus on *Four Quartets* and Auden's *For The Time Being* (also completed in 1942), 'the similarity of the subject



matter is striking'. Baker sets this Incarnational focus within the broader tradition of nineteenth-century Tractarianism and its legacy in later Anglo-Catholicism, to which all three poets adhered (Auden, of course, lapsing and then returning to the fold; Betjeman eclectically mixing Anglo-Catholicism with much broader Anglican sympathies). The Tractarians 'put the doctrine of the Incarnation firmly at the centre of the Christian faith', along with 'the call to penitence'. Baker traces these elements back to Eliot's pre-Christian poetry (such as 'Gerontion' and 'The Hollow Men'), but sees their intensification in such works as *Ash-Wednesday*. In *For The Time Being*, we see such central mysteries of the faith from 'the other side of the mirror'. Betjeman, Baker argues, is a lesser poet, but no less committed to the idea of the possibility of the Incarnation as the 'overwhelming question' of life.

The international influence of Eliot's ideas and artistry, from a comparatively early stage in the development of his reputation, is traced in the impact of his thought and poetry in Australia, prior to the Second World War, by Michael Ackland in his essay on the reception of Eliot's Modernism in the work of Australian poet, James McAuley and the Sydney Modernists. At school, in 1934, McAuley and fellow student and poet, Harold Stewart, had already begun imbibing Eliot's Modernist principles. Then, at Sydney University, McAuley wrote in the student literary magazine of the debt of 'our generation as a whole' to Eliot's work. These were radical views at the time – McAuley's praise and imitation of Eliot being countered, Ackland writes, with 'charges of willful obscurity, intellectual pomposity and shocking taste'. Yet

*Eliot's example had encouraged [McAuley and the other Sydney Modernists] to experiment with new verse forms and to delve into alien traditions, and had given them a cosmopolitan vantage-point from which to assess their own parochial country.*

Manju Jain, in her essay on what Eliot learnt from the new medium of cinema and how it made an impact on his theories of poetic unity and of the relationship between the fragment and the whole, places Eliot in the conjuncture between philosophy, cinema and poetry and describes





an 'aesthetics of transcendence' reflected in Eliot's preoccupation with questions of flux and stability and describes their relationship to cinematic moving images and their attempt, similarly, to capture 'the moment in and out of time' and how this can modulate to the spiritual realm. Eliot bequeaths an aesthetics of transcendence to later cinema, but also an aesthetics of violence (sexual and anti-feminist). Jain links the Modernism of Eliot and the post-modernist anxieties of Kubrick and Tarantino.

One of Eliot's most notorious interventions in literary criticism in the twentieth century was his revaluation of Milton's poetry, in two very influential, although contrasting essays (1936 and 1947), where he discusses Milton's influence on English poetry, in the course of revealing his own negative assessment of Milton's ideas and even his personality, and sustaining his critique of Milton's deficient visual imagination. Miltonist Beverley Sherry (in this year of the 400th anniversary of Milton's birth) describes and examines Eliot's legacy to Milton studies, reiterating Charles Williams's point that such bracing criticism put Miltonists on their mettle and, especially, encouraged them to return, precisely, to the poetry itself and test Eliot's claims against their own close readings. Especially, she invokes Eliot's emphasis on the sound of Milton's verse and charges Miltonists to recover an appreciation of this quality of 'central importance'. She demonstrates the value of this approach herself in a close reading of a famous passage from Book I of *Paradise Lost*.

If Milton was a bad influence on later poetry, according to Eliot, Eliot himself was a bad influence, according to Stephen McInerney, particularly in the kind of approach to the writing and appreciation of poetry which his own practice as poet and critic encouraged. In a challenging essay, McInerney questions what many of us would take for granted – the qualities of Eliot's poetry, its positive influence on succeeding writers, the legacy of his literary-critical contribution and the sheer delight we derive from reading him. Taking William Carlos Williams' criticism of *The Waste Land* as 'the great catastrophe to our letters' for his title, McInerney criticises Eliot's poetry for being 'dis-incarnational, full of unembodied concepts and abstractions'. He also enlists the criticisms of Yvor Winters and the Leavisite Karl Shapiro (who went so far as to regret that Eliot had



ever been born, given his poetry's nihilistic character) and the Australian poet, Robert Fitzgerald, who accused Eliot of wrecking poetry, having a 'hatred of life, and passion, and desire'. As with Eliot's criticisms of Milton, these criticisms will send many of us back to Eliot's poetry to assess their validity.

In contrast to the charge that Eliot's poetry has had negligible influence (or a bad influence, where it couldn't be ignored), Phil Ilton's survey of the 'quotable Eliot' reminds us that, at least in the domain of the impact of Eliot's poetry and prose on *les mots de la tribu* in our time, his legacy is as formidable as that of most poets we can name (from any age) and has added richly to our word-store. Telling and memorable locutions have permeated the language to the point where many are used without any knowledge of their source. It is ironic that a writer whose name is a byword for difficulty and elusiveness should have coined so many phrases which have taken their place in everyday parlance and popular journalism. It is yet another aspect of the complexity and enduring and pervasive qualities of Eliot's legacy which shows no signs of flagging.

The collection includes the address to the Conference which was kindly sent to us from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. Eliot, of course, was one of the best known and most influential of Anglican laymen in the twentieth century. Dr Williams' greeting indicates the significance of that aspect of Eliot's abiding legacy, although the extent to which the Anglicanism of today, liturgically and theologically, would win his allegiance, as it did so wholeheartedly and publicly in 1927 and for the rest of his life, is worth pondering.

I am grateful to all the contributors for, first, attending the conference (involving, in several cases, extensive overseas travel) and reading and discussing their papers and then for preparing them for publication. Without a generous benefaction from a distinguished medical graduate of the University of Sydney, Dr Iain Dunlop, the conference could not have taken place. All who took part owe him a profound debt of gratitude. I am also grateful for the support of the conference, both financial and collegial, which we received from the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Professor



Stephen Garton and from the Head of the School of Art, Letters and Media, Professor Geraldine Barnes. The enthusiasm and organisational ability of my co-convener, Associate Professor Vrasidas Karalis, Head of the Department of Modern Greek, was also invaluable. In preparing the papers for publication, I was fortunate indeed to have the research assistance, over several months, of Dr Helen Young who worked with intelligent efficiency to bring the diverse papers into a consistent form ready for presentation to the publisher.

The collection is dedicated, with respect and affection, to Dr Catherine Runcie, for many years a distinguished scholar and teacher in the Sydney University English Department and who, as the founding president of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics, made an important contribution to the intellectual life of the University and the wider community, which continues to bear fruit today.

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## Notes

- 1 In Introduction, Roger Kimball, 'A craving for reality: T.S. Eliot today', *The New Criterion* on-line: <http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/18/oct99/eliot.html>
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *T.S. Eliot* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006), pp.xi, 33.
- 4 James Button, 'I'll take it from here, thanks Tony', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23/24 June, 2007, 27.
- 5 'No sneering, parents, you know you'd do the same', 9 July, 2007, 13.
- 6 'The Function of Criticism', in *Selected Essays* (Faber and Faber, London, 1951), p.25.
- 7 'Milton II', in *Milton: Two Studies* (Faber and Faber, London, 1968), pp.33-4.
- 8 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays, op. cit.*, p.287.
- 9 'In Memory of Henry James'. Appearing first in England in 1918 in *The Egoist*, the essay was later reprinted in America in the *Little Review*.
- 10 'In Memoriam', in *Selected Essays, op. cit.*, p.336.
- 11 *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford University Press, London, 1963), p.11.

