One of the most influential poets and critics of the twentieth century, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) revitalized and, in many important respects, redefined the nature of literary texts and traditions and the role of criticism in relation to them. In numerous essays and lectures, he argued that neither poetry nor criticism should be a genteel and belletristic enterprise; rather, the two work together analytically in the construction of literary history. This approach to the literary artifact, part of a larger modernist attempt to understand the role of the critic in relation to literature, enabled a number of critical methodologies, particularly the kinds of practical criticism and close reading favored by new critics like I. A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks.

Eliot was born in St Louis, Missouri, to a distinguished Massachusetts family that had been moved west by Eliot's grandfather William Greenleaf Eliot, who established the city's first Unitarian Church and served as president of Washington University. Eliot was an undergraduate at Harvard University, where he studied philosophy and literature under George Santayana, Josiah Royce, and the new humanist Irving Babbitt, and was also writing verse, under the strong influence of the French symbolist Jules Laforgue. After graduating, he traveled to Europe and attended Henri Bergson's lectures at the Sorbonne in 1910-11. He then spent a year at Merton College, Oxford University, in 1914, and completed his Harvard dissertation (though not his degree) on the British idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley in 1916. He finally settled in London, where he would spend most of his adult life, and took a job as a clerk at Lloyds Bank. In 1925, he would take an editorial position at Faber and Gwyer (later Faber and Faber) that he would continue (mostly in a directorial capacity) until his death.

In the 1910s and early 1920s, Eliot began to publish his poetry and criticism in London's vibrant yet contentious world of little magazines and literary reviews. Collaborating with his mentor and fellow American expatriate Ezra Pound, he began to shape his career as a poet-critic in the tradition of Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold. Like others in the modernist movement, particularly Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, Eliot critiqued the excesses of Romanticism, the chaotic and undisciplined state of contemporary criticism, and key Victorian and contemporary writers. He read the Provençal poets that Pound was translating, and he published on French authors such as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Jules Laforgue, whose work he had discovered through Arthur Symons's study *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). He was also at this time influenced by T. E. Hulme's neoclassicism and his arguments for restrained, "masculine" writing. Eliot's controversial valuation of figures like Laforgue and of "metaphysical poets" like John Donne, who were largely ignored by British readers, was not welcomed by members of London's critical establishment, especially J. C. Squire of the *London Mercury* and Edward Marsh, champion of the Georgian school of poets. Part provocateur, part antagonist, Eliot argued in numerous essays that the best English literature situated itself within a European context, and it was this larger context that Eliot sought to define and analyze in his critical essays.

Eliot's ideas about English literature and its role in a larger tradition were succinctly formulated in his essay "Tradition and the individual talent" (1919), in which he asserts that "No poet ... has his complete meaning alone," nor does any national literary tradition develop and flourish without the cooperative...
nourishment of its European neighbors (1975: 38). He believed that the mature poet’s mind must be

aware that the mind of Europe - the mind of his own country - a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind - is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. (Eliot 1975: 38)

Connected to this idea of tradition is the theory of “depersonalization,” according to which the expression of the poet’s personality is to be avoided in favor of a catalytic process. Eliot famously compared the poet to a piece of “filiated platinum … introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide”; the result, sulphurous acid, is formed only in the presence of the platinum and does not in any way alter the platinum. “The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum” (1975: 40-1).

Depersonalization, then, is a complex process of transforming one’s own affective response to the world into what Eliot called a “new art emotion” (43).

Over against Romantic theories of poetry, especially William Wordsworth’s, in which personal emotional experience occupies a central place, Eliot notes that “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion,” but rather “an escape from emotion” - though Eliot is quick to note that only one who has emotions can “know what it means to want to escape from these things” (43). Freed from the inhibiting limits of one’s own emotional life, the “truly great” poet’s task is to take an entirely new standpoint to tradition. The mature poet must acquire

[a] historical sense... [and] a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; 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 existence and composes a simultaneous order. (38)

Like Pound’s idea that “all ages are contemporaneous,” Eliot’s notion of the “presence” of the past not only revives and revises but also dramatically extends the critical sense of “tradition” across centuries and civilizations. Eliot thus implies that to be traditional is to be novel and original, not derivative or imitative, because poets must draw upon and reorder a host of literary monuments far beyond the workings of their own minds. That is to say, originality has more to do with one’s historical sense than with the expression of one’s singular personality. Eliot made his bold investment in “tradition” when many of his peers saw this notion as merely an allegiance either to one’s national predecessors or to ideals of “civilization” discredited by the Great War.

As “Tradition and the individual talent” indicates, Eliot sought to reform the English canon. In “The metaphysical poets” (1921), he expresses his preference for seventeenth-century poets like John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell over John Milton, Percy Shelley, and John Keats because the former were able to unify thought and feeling in their “critical poetry.” Since Milton, a “dissociation of sensibility set in, from which [English poets] have never recovered,” wherein thought and feeling became separated. This dissociation was most evident in the Romantic exaltation of emotion over intellect (Eliot 1975: 64). The problem becomes particularly acute by the time of Tennyson and Browning, who “do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience” (64). The metaphysical poets, Eliot writes, had minds

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that were capable of “devour [ing] any kind of experience” because no misguided poetic ego stood in
the way (64). Their works are thus superior, he concludes, because the best of them combine physical
and metaphysical environments into a single poetic whole, crafting the geographically local into the
philosophically universal.

The most controversial and infamous expression of this strand of Eliot’s thought appears in his essay
“Hamlet and his problems” (1919), in which he posits that “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events
... shall be the formula of [a] particular emotion” in a literary work (1975: 48). The essential emotional
state that an author wishes to convey through the text must be represented precisely by “external
facts, which must terminate in sensory experience,” not by the author’s or a character’s emotional
experience. This material expression of a mental state of affairs – reflected in language - Eliot calls a
work’s “objective correlative,” a term he borrows from the nineteenth-century American painter
Washington Allston. Eliot claims that both Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking speech and Macbeth's speech
upon learning of his wife's death display a “complete adequacy of the external to the emotion,” while
Hamlet is “dominated” and overwhelmed by an “excess of ... facts,” ideas, and feelings that remain
“inexpressible,” leaving the play an “artistic failure” (47-8). The work of art, Eliot once again suggests,
must be liberated from pure attachments to an author's or character's psyche in order to create an
aesthetic structure that is both internally consistent and capable of entering into the tradition in which
contemporary and traditional works “are measured by each other” (39).

Eliot’s own poetic works in many respects exemplify the principles of his critical theories, in some
cases precisely by demonstrating the very dissociation of sensibility that he condemned. His works
became the inspiration and starting point for new critics like I. A. Richards, whose Principles of Literary
Criticism (1924), published only two years after The Waste Land first appeared, includes an appendix
devoted to Eliot’s work. Poems like the antiheroic dramatic monologue “The Love Song of J. Alfred
Prufrock” (1915) and “Gerontion” (1920) reflect on the decay of European culture while at the same
time exemplifying his belief that the modern poet must become more “difficult, ... more and more
comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into
his meaning” (Eliot 1975: 65). Eliot’s The Waste Land published along with James Joyce’s Ulysses and
Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room in the annus mirabilis of modernism, 1922 – exemplifies the difficulty
of modern poetry, both in terms of its network of allusions and its innovative stylistic and formal
strategies. The poem transforms narratives of personal and cultural decline into a jarring, polyglot
assemblage of fragmented allusions, overlapping voices, and poetic contortions as Eliot - himself on
the verge of a nervous breakdown - allowed his mind to act (as he prescribed) as “a receptacle for
seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, [and] images” of a world brutalized and changed
utterly by World War I (1975: 41). Eliot’s later works are more philosophical and speculative - some say
withdrawn – and less stylistically radical. Four Quartets (1944), despite its merits, had little of the bold
experimentalism of “Prufrock” or The Waste Land. Its innovation lies in the poetic treatment of
mystical and philosophical ideas that offered an alternative to the clash of ideologies in an era of world
war.

One of Eliot’s most significant contributions to literary criticism was the founding in London in 1922 of
The Criterion, a literary periodical that he edited until 1939. The Waste Land was published
simultaneously in the inaugural issue of The Criterion and in the Dial (a US literary journal). Eliot used the
review to disseminate his cultural politics, to promote the criticism of like-minded thinkers on the
Continent, and to publish translations of new literature that he believed might “Europeanize” what he

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saw as an insular English national culture. By the mid-1920s, Eliot had begun to turn away from the Indic and Eastern philosophies that he had studied at Harvard and employed in the latter parts of *The Waste Land* and toward a worldview rooted in the history of the Church of England, in which he was confirmed in 1927. By the following year, he was able to declare himself a “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion” (Eliot 1928: 7). His religious commitments reflected an idea of Europe that in some of his works he appeared to mourn. He argued that Dante was the “universal” poet of a Catholic continent that over the centuries had broken down into the artificial nationalities of the modern era, as seen most violently in World War I. Nations had disrupted and fractured Europe's late medieval wholeness, Eliot believed, and a writer such as Blake, while an individual genius, was unable to write within the tradition that Eliot celebrated and mourned in his essays. Blake’s work thus remains inimitable, non-universal within an English culture insufficiently connected to a larger literary structure of the past and present. The essays in *Christianity and Culture*, especially “The unity of European culture,” examine this structure from a standpoint of cultural conservativism. His defense of and admiration for Charles Maurras, the French writer who co-founded the conservative review *L'Action française* and introduced fascism to France, fit within Eliot’s intellectual schema but also earned the poet much criticism from his colleagues. Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, and his poetry and criticism was a major influence on other poets and critics at least through the 1960s. His general theories of criticism and literature profoundly influenced British and American literary critics. His understanding of literary works as self-sufficient objects unconnected to the mind of the poet inspired the practical criticism of Richards and the cultural vision of critics like F. R. Leavis and William Empson. Since the 1960s, however, Eliot's reputation has suffered, in large measure because critics were unearthing new information about his political and cultural views, including most notoriously, anti-Semitism. Recent scholars have called into question the assumption that Eliot (and modernism generally) were apolitical. His “Europe” has been criticized as exclusivist and ethnocentric; his literary “tradition” includes no women or non-Europeans and few minorities; and his elitism would appear to exclude lower-class writers from study; all of this created a model for analyzing literature too provincial for our time. Eliot left scholars with paradoxes we now see as fundamental to the modernist sensibility: he was an avant-gardist who criticized the avant-garde and an innovative poet who was conservative, even reactionary, in his criticism. He also appeared to contradict his most important insights when suggesting on multiple occasions that *The Waste Land* should be read as nothing more than a biographical piece. To some extent, the paradoxes that define Eliot’s career are those of his era; and while contemporary critics find fault with his politics and cultural views, his fundamental critical insights, as well as his poetry, continue to exert a powerful influence on our conceptions of modernism and modernist poetry.

SEE ALSO: Anglo-American New Criticism; Arnold, Matthew; Auerbach, Erich; Brooks, Cleanth; Empson, William; Leavis, F. R.; Modernism; Modernist Aesthetics; Pound, Ezra; Richards, I. A.; Woolf, Virginia

**REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS**


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