

# Discovering Modernism

T. S. Eliot and His Context

Second Edition

LOUIS MENAND



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SECOND EDITION

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To Emmy

*Nie wird es zu hoch besungen  
Retterin des Gatten sein.*

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## Discovering Modernism

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# Introduction

This is a book about some of the things that happened to the reputation of literature in the early years of this century—about why some writers found it necessary to try to preserve literature's values by transforming them, and about the ironies of that enterprise. More particularly, it is an account of the way in which one writer, T. S. Eliot, took advantage of a moment of cultural change, and of some of the consequences of his opportunism.

How does literature change without ceasing to be literature? Philosophically, the question belongs to a famous class of unanswerables. But like many problems of identity—as when we wish to become better persons by being more true to ourselves—it is no less consequential for being metaphysically indeterminable; and at certain moments in literary history, the problem of how to make literature different without losing all the advantages conferred by the title of “literature” seems to present itself to a whole generation of writers as a matter of genuine practical urgency. These moments are naturally of special interest to the cultural historian, since they promise to tell us something about the mechanisms by which art adapts itself to circumstance.

T. S. Eliot began his career at a time when it appeared to many of his contemporaries that literary values had somehow lost their authority, that literature had become the victim of its own reputation. To those writers who imagined themselves to be its fomenters, this crisis no doubt seemed in the beginning only the sort of calculated disruption

that is likely to attend any major turn of literary generation. The modernists engaged in a good deal of shouting against the nineteenth century and, as we have become increasingly aware, at the same time did their best in various ways to live up to the nineteenth century's cultural standards. But the crisis was not a controlled one. The cultural values the modernists hoped would in the last event give them direction were discovered to have lost their powers—and not by modernism's doing—beyond repairing. Eliot was an avant-gardist, but he was also a critic of avant-garde aspirations, and he grasped the particular fatality of modernism's predicament with (to borrow one of his own praise words) a clairvoyance that is even now a little disquieting.

After having enjoyed for many years a starring role in most versions of the story of twentieth-century culture—even when he played the villain, his intentions seemed unambiguous—Eliot has become something of a tough case for the literary historian. The more carefully his career is looked at these days, the more uncertain it is just where his importance lies. Part of the problem is that now that Eliot's own "tradition" has—as all self-proclaimed and self-justifying traditions eventually must—come to seem factitious, it is hard to know to what cultural genealogy he might in fact plausibly be said to belong. He had (as it is now common to point out) a problematic relation, not at all purely antagonistic, to the cultural values of the nineteenth century; but he had a problematic relation, not at all perfectly sympathetic, to many of the values of twentieth-century modernism as well.<sup>1</sup> It is often impossible to tell which direction he is pointing in; he seems at some moments to be the conservator of a certain tradition of literary values and at others to be the analyst of their exhaustion—a confusion exacerbated by his habit of portraying himself in his poetry as history's victim and then prescribing his own cure in his criticism.

There are many ways of trying to account for Eliot's ambivalence; it is my suggestion that we learn something about how literature preserves its identity, and how literary fortune is made, if we think of that ambivalence as deliberate. The genius of Eliot's literary strategy might be characterized as the genius of a weak pragmatism. Eliot first established his authority as a cultural figure not by an exertion of personal will, but by borrowing strength from the very forces that militated against him. He turned a crisis in the reputation of literature to literature's advantage. In describing this strategy in operation, I hope

I have been able to capture something of the complexity of its motivation and the ambiguity of its consequences. Eliot reinscribed the received set of literary values with a modernist surface; and one of the interests his writing therefore has for us is that the nineteenth-century cultural values he made such a show of discrediting can be read, so to speak, beneath the modernist ones he made a show of declaring. But it was also characteristic of Eliot's temperament that he was drawn to ideas and devices whose authority had become suspect, and it was not a small part of his achievement to have made of the anachronistic and the disreputable a kind of fashion.

The Eliot of my book is the poet and critic, and his problems are cultural ones. Eliot the man has become, since the publication of Valerie Eliot's edition of *The Waste Land* in 1971, a valuable ingredient in our revised understanding of the work, and it has seemed important to try to get to know him.<sup>2</sup> I have tried to get to know him and have been helped in doing so by recent biographically informed studies; but though I have not prohibited him from making an occasional appearance in my discussion, I have tried to avoid giving Eliot the man much explanatory work to do.

This is not simply because of a feeling which anyone who has attempted to analyze Eliot's writings for his character will know—the feeling that the moment you think you have psyched Eliot out is likely to be the moment Eliot has succeeded in psyching you out. Nor is it because, as even many of his contemporaries felt, Eliot's personality was a tissue of deliberate disguise: “when you steal up & try to catch hold of him,” a casual acquaintance wrote after meeting Eliot in London in 1914, “off he goes like a sand-eel & begins twirling again a few yards further on.”<sup>3</sup> For personality is like that, and Eliot's was not, I think, uniquely inscrutable; it only made inscrutability a feature of its surface. Nor is my approach dictated in any way by the doctrine of impersonality, since I understand that doctrine to have derived from a common nineteenth-century way of claiming for one's work sincerity of a particularly exalted kind. It is guided by the assumption that to the extent that Eliot did want to reveal his inner life in his work, he could only have done so by using the literary conventions that indicated to readers of his day that he was being sincere; and it is in part the circumstance that when Eliot entered the literary scene those conventions were in the process of being reformulated that gives his writings their special interest. My argument, in short, is that when Eliot

the man—now that our revised conception has helped to give him an identity distinct from the movement with which he was for so long associated—is put back into his historical moment, we can discover for Eliot the writer a new sort of consequentiality.

Arguments about Eliot's proper place in the scheme of literary history tend to turn on the way his irony is read. Though it is now often taken to have been of the self-lacerating kind, the symptom of a belated Romanticism-in-spite-of-itself, Eliot's irony was, of course, to an earlier generation the sign of his "classicism" and "maturity." In trying to rescue Eliot from a certain style of biographical revisionism, I have not wanted to resurrect the exponent of an unremitting high-mindedness. Nor have I wanted to propose some new kind of theoretical coherence for Eliot's work. The Eliot who figured for many years as the champion of high culture can certainly be shown to exist; he has been put together many times. If in my discussion this Eliot seems somewhat neglected, it is in part because I do not quite believe in him. But it is also in part because as soon as Eliot is shown to have had a program for literature, he is transformed from a writer whose peculiar mix of skepticism and opportunism gives to much of his work the look of an indirect but implacable critique of literary values, into another conventional apologist for poetry, proposing aesthetic "solutions" to metaphysical "problems." Eliot's irony seems to me to have been, in his early years and within the limits of what irony alone is capable of, an instrument of wonderful lucidity and force, and always at the service of the interests of the moment. When Eliot built a poem from a series of literary allusions, or when he maintained that the artist must be a professional, or when he proposed to consider poetry as poetry and not another thing, or even when he championed the virtues of tradition, he was not, in my view, formulating a coherent cultural program; he was exploiting a contemporary cultural condition. And if we want to understand what the poetic figure of allusion, or the idea of tradition, or the motto "poetry as poetry" meant to Eliot, and why his readers found the use he made of those things persuasive, we need to understand them not as they make sense to us, but historically. We cannot, that is, explain what made modernism work by looking at modernist writing solely in the context of a literary ideology created by modernism itself. Insofar as Eliot can be said in the first phase of his career to help us to understand the nature of literary change in the

modernist period, it is because we have not burdened him with the requirement of consistency that goes with having a prescriptive system. When such a system begins to emerge, as of course it does dramatically in the later years, Eliot's irony takes on a rather different complexion.

At the same time, I have tried to resist the temptation to make the younger Eliot into our contemporary. The traditional defense of literature as a special way of knowing has been displaced in our time by its defense as a subverter of established forms of knowledge, a kind of writing that, without imposing a new normative structure on us, disrupts conventional habits of perception and the ideological assumptions those habits are understood to enforce. We like to dwell on this destabilizing property of literary writing as though it were in itself enough to explain literature's value to us, and as though it did not carry with it ideological baggage of its own. In emphasizing the skeptical side of Eliot's relation to a certain tradition of literary values, I do not mean to ascribe to him such a postmodernist ethic. I like to imagine that it would have seemed to him, in one of his moods at any rate, only another way for culture to insinuate itself into our confidence, to encourage our belief that art is on our side against the paradigms of organized thought. But Eliot had other moods, too, and it is not the least valuable lesson of his career that having a keener and more unforgiving sense of irony than any of his contemporaries did not save him from committing himself, on many literary and extraliterary matters, to judgments that seem to ratify the socializing aspects of culture's authority in some of their most self-aggrandizing forms.

This study is organized around a series of issues that seem to me especially illustrative of the difficulties modernism faced in the period 1910–1922, and especially revealing of Eliot's characteristic manner of responding to those difficulties. I have tried, in the case of each issue discussed, to locate a point in literary history where the cultural solutions of the nineteenth century can be observed becoming the cultural problems of the twentieth, a point where some feature of the received reputation of literature seemed to require rehabilitation. And I have made an effort, in describing these areas of trouble, to distinguish between the problems modernist writers invented their aesthetic solutions for and the problems they invented to explain their solu-



tions—that is, to tell the story of the modernist episode in literary history without relying entirely on modernism's own account of what makes it interesting.

My argument generally is that if some of the familiar features of literary modernism are viewed against the background of certain aesthetic and social issues whose relevance is not usually made explicit in the writings of the modernists themselves, we may find it worthwhile at least to qualify some of our conventional ways of characterizing modernism. In particular, it seems to me that the habit of talking about modernist poetics as an effort to achieve some sort of transcendental epistemology—to “break through” to the object—misses, to the extent that it induces us to try to evaluate the success of that enterprise, some of the interesting features of modernist writing by getting caught up in a discussion whose terms are essentially without meaningful reference. It is certainly true that talk of, for instance, a “language of intuition that would hand over sensations bodily” (T. E. Hulme's phrase) was a part of the announced program of various avant-garde movements in the modernist period. But this was hardly a new ambition for writers to proclaim, and therefore hardly definitive of modernism. And, as I hope I have been able to demonstrate in the chapters that make up the first part of this book, it is certainly not an ambition with which it makes sense to associate Eliot.

It has also been customary to speak of (and often to denigrate) literary modernism as a formalist ideology, one whose distinctive features can be explained as reactive against, rather than reflective of, the “modern world” and its values. This responds, to be sure, to a notable aspect of modernist rhetoric; but again, I think it is a habit of thinking that has become lazy. It is often said, for purposes of explaining modernist formalism, that the modern world is “chaotic” or “formless” or “without values”—characterizations one still hears today in defenses of high-culture art. These are not terms that, even as part of a background generalization, seem to me to explain very much. The early twentieth century was a period, particularly in England, of social change which, because it involved a long-deferred coming to terms with economic realities, was of an unusually unsettling kind. But it was therefore not a period *without* values so much as a period with *too many* values. In some respects, modernism can be seen as an effort to adapt the vocabulary used to describe literature to changing ways of measuring the social value and prestige of different kinds of work, and to do

so without at the same time losing the advantages literature enjoyed as a "traditional" field of endeavor. I have tried to suggest, in the second part of this book, how this strategy of adaptation, which did indeed produce an aesthetically formalist ideology, might be understood as a reflection of "worldly" values.

Eliot is the protagonist of the story I have tried to tell, but because this is not only a story about Eliot, its treatment of his work is selective. And while each chapter offers a completed argument, the discussions recall and (though not inconsistently, I hope) rewrite each other at various points. What I have been most interested in is how Eliot did it—how he managed, on the basis of only a few poems and critical essays and in a relatively short amount of time, to capture the central ideological ground of an entire literary period—and I have therefore wanted to suggest that certain devices in Eliot's poetry and certain formulations in his criticism were particularly effective because they managed to respond to a number of different problems simultaneously.

There is, finally, a kind of distortion which I think is unavoidable in a study of this kind but which is worth mentioning here at the start. Literary history, as I conceive it, is an effort to say reasonable things about relations among writers in the face of the fact that for the writers involved the relations were never merely reasonable. Writers are compelled to deal not with their predecessors, but with their predecessors' reputations, which is a very different thing, and much more difficult for us to describe. If in the pages that follow the nineteenth century tends to figure as a kind of ghost, taking on an exaggerated authority and uttering impossible demands, it is not because that is how I imagine the nineteenth century to have been, but because that is the way ghosts are, and the way the nineteenth century must have appeared to Eliot when he set out in 1910 or so to confront the idea of literature.

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I

# The Literary Object

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# 1

## Literary Honesty

On what authority does art make its claim on the emotions of its audience? Many people today are likely to think this question not worth asking, for the simple reason that it seems unanswerable. But it is, of course, one of the leading questions in a long line of aesthetic theory-making—a very long line if we think of Plato as its originator—and that succeeding generations of artists and critics have agreed that the question was a useful one to ask and disagreed about what the right answer might look like is one of the reasons art has a history. For the question is not merely academic; each time it is answered differently every work of art presents a new face. What had been trusted begins to seem fickle or ingratiating, and what had been avoided as affected or perverse is suddenly valued for its authenticity.

To say that good art is good because it offers a just representation of general nature, or because it imitates the universal process of being, or because it preserves the best that has been thought and said, is to suggest a distinction between art that is legitimate and art that is not. We may feel that we are better off without such a distinction; but having no agreed upon criterion for a judgment of this kind makes the business of explaining why the art we value should be worth more to anyone but ourselves than the art we despise especially problematic. The task of finding respectable reasons for the legitimacy of a certain kind of art—or, for the matter can be put the other way around, the task of making an art better suited to contemporary notions of the

legitimate—was one writers in the modernist period thought it important to undertake. For it seemed to them that many of the traditional arguments for the legitimacy of good art were no longer adequate and that much of the art conventionally thought good was founded on a specious authority. The modernist effort to establish a better kind of theory for a better kind of art involved, for reasons this book attempts to make clear, difficulties of an especially aggravated kind. It was T. S. Eliot's characteristic practice as a poet to find ways of transforming some of those difficulties into literary opportunities.

Any effort begun in the realm of theory to establish the basis for art's authority runs into difficulties as soon as it reaches the realm of practice, and none of the theoretical arguments offered by the nineteenth century generated more intricate textual ironies than the argument that a work of art exerts a claim on its audience to the extent that it is the genuine and uncompromised expression of the inner life of the artist who produced it. "What the audience demands of the artist—really demands, in its unconscious desire—and what the artist thinks it ought to be given turns out to be the same thing . . . the sentiment of being," is the way Lionel Trilling puts it in his brief history of two of the argument's key terms, *Sincerity and Authenticity*.<sup>1</sup> In Trilling's account, this notion gradually achieves, in the course of its evolution since the late eighteenth century, a crippling hegemony over the concept of aesthetic value, and ultimately over the concept of the subject itself; and twentieth-century applications of the standard of truth-to-self often are expressed in terms of severe moral astringency. Thus, for instance, Harold Rosenberg on Abstract Expressionism, which Rosenberg called Action Painting and which operated out of one of the most stridently individualistic sets of artistic conventions ever devised: "Art as action rests on the enormous assumption that the artist accepts as real only that which he is in the process of creating. . . . The test of any of the new paintings is its seriousness—and the test of its seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist's total effort to make over his experience."<sup>2</sup>

The postmodernist will want to know just how sincerity of this order is to be measured, and how the genuine act of self-expression is to be distinguished from the factitious one. The critical issue is, of course, deeply embedded in the tradition of Romanticism. It is fully present in Longinus's treatise: if sublimity is the echo of a great soul,

how is it that one can learn techniques for creating it? Or, to look at the matter from the point of view of the audience, how are we to recognize a work of art without some received notion of the artistic? The case of Abstract Expressionism, coming late in the history of Romanticism, poses the issue rather bluntly and, so to speak, nonnegotiable; but the literature of the nineteenth century provides many subtler instances of the contradictions inherent in the standard of sincerity, and the emergence of a feeling that some of those contradictions could no longer be tolerated is part of the background of Eliot's early poetry.

Though he later learned he had been mistaken, Tennyson thought that the stanza form he used for *In Memoriam* was his own invention.<sup>3</sup> An octosyllabic quatrain with an a-b-b-a rhyme scheme is not an obvious choice for an elegy running to over three thousand lines, but Tennyson no doubt had many reasons for thinking it a good one. He may have felt that it exerted a desirable restriction on moods that threatened to run first to emotional and later to meditative excess; he may have thought of its repetitiveness as a formal echo of the repetitiveness of the poem's memories and memories of memories; he may have considered the form congenial because of its suitability to his particular stylistic strengths, because of the close work it called for with meter and rhyme. But the stanza's originality must have been important to Tennyson for a different sort of reason: it was to be the signature on his memorial to his friend, the emblem of the poem's private significance and the pledge of the poet's sincerity. A conventional form would imply conventional feelings; it might suggest what Tennyson was surely anxious (for the success of his poem depended on it) never to suggest—that Hallam's death was not an event in the history of Tennyson's soul but the occasion for a successful poem.

It was a characteristic practice of T. S. Eliot to sign his poems with traces of the signatures of other writers, which is one among many reasons why it is not surprising to find an echo of the *In Memoriam* stanza in the first of the series of urban landscape poems Eliot began to write in the fall of 1909. "First Caprice in North Cambridge" opens with an a-b-b-a quatrain reminiscent of Tennyson's:

A street-piano, garrulous and frail;  
The yellow evening flung against the panes  
Of dirty windows: and the distant strains  
Of children's voices, ended in a wail.<sup>4</sup>