# *Introduction*

*Jason Harding*

T. S. Eliot's work demands contextual commentary. The celebrated obliquities of his poetry are extraordinary. Studded with allusions, echoes and parallels to previous poets, these poems revel in a dislocated syntax which wilfully abstains from logical articulation. Similarly, his prose is habitually densely layered, making continual play with source materials and canvassing, in intricate and nuanced detail, a multitude of contemporary literary, cultural, social, economic, philosophical, theological and political issues that have now, for the most part, receded dimly into the past. In truth, his voluminous outpouring of poems, essays and books from 1905 until his death in 1965 cannot be divorced from the circumstances of their immediate composition and reception. The sheer erudition required to take full measure of Eliot's corpus can erect a formidable barrier between him and new readers. For this reason, a vast secondary criticism has grown up to expound and explicate this difficult, often provoking, work. However, for four decades after Eliot's death, a large amount of important archive material was routinely closed to researchers. We are now at the dawn of a new era in Eliot scholarship. The projected appearance of textually accurate and contextually annotated authorised critical editions of Eliot's prose, poetry, letters and plays will undoubtedly transform the landscape of Eliot studies. This collection, too, takes its place as a timely contribution to an exciting reassessment of Eliot's life and works, offering a valuable resource for scholars, teachers, students and general readers alike.

*T. S. Eliot in Context* is carefully designed to provide an authoritative and coherent examination of those 'contexts' deemed essential to the fullest understanding and appreciation of Eliot's work. It explores a broad range of subjects relating to his life, work and career; key literary, intellectual, social and historical contexts; as well as the critical reception of his works. Great pains have been taken to ensure that each chapter is clear, precise and succinct. Although written by a team of experts who have done

original research in their respective fields, this is not a collection dictated solely by the needs of academic specialists. Those readers looking for adjudications on what Professor X has said about Professor Y and Professor Z will be mostly disappointed. And yet, taken together, these chapters provide an up-to-date engagement with current developments in Eliot scholarship, and also with the wider terrain of Modernist Studies. Each chapter is self-contained and can be profitably read on its own, but it is hoped that the aggregation of chapters and sections builds into a comprehensive, composite portrait of one of the twentieth century's pre-eminent men of letters.

Contributors have been permitted some latitude in establishing the 'context' addressed in their chapter: this has led to a fascinating array of approaches, even, on occasions, to fruitful differences of opinion. Debate and disagreement is an essential ingredient in the ongoing conversation about Eliot's achievement and reputation. While consciously avoiding stage-managed controversy, *T. S. Eliot in Context* fully acknowledges the forthright expression of informed opinion. Some chapters present biographical and historical information known only to specialist scholars, others subtly reweave contextual material that has previously been examined by numerous commentators. In every case, as Anne Stillman rightly points out, the critic-as-guide must display wise tact in the course of their exposition and elucidation, encompassing a due respect for the enigma of what cannot be known or stated in bold declarative terms. This book is certainly not intended as a short cut or a substitute for reading and thinking about Eliot's writings; rather, our ambition is to stimulate further individual responses, sharpening critical appreciation and thereby enhancing the pleasure of encountering Eliot's texts. As Martin Dodsworth observes, after the critics have had their say, there is always more to be said about a body of work so inexhaustibly rich and challenging as T. S. Eliot's oeuvre.

*T. S. Eliot in Context* is organised into five sections. Part One, 'Life', might be seen as turning upon Eliot's gnomic statement – with Henry James in view – that it is 'the consummation of an American to become, not an Englishman, but a European'.[1] A recent BBC *Agenda* documentary has amply demonstrated the complex facets of this public, if extremely private, man. He was a scion of the New England intellectual aristocracy. In the early nineteenth century, his paternal grandfather transplanted an educational fervour mixed with religious duty to the Midwestern frontier, where Eliot grew up in a maternal environment dominated by the example of this illustrious patriarch. After an education at genteel

Harvard, touring its seedier environs, he was irresistibly drawn to Paris at a particularly crucial stage in his intellectual formation, and then to London, where he settled into the conventions of middle-class sobriety by day – as a teacher at private schools, City banker, ultimately a gentlemanly publisher – albeit indulging his mildly bohemian tastes after working hours. In time, he came to articulate mythologies betokening a strong desire to belong to imagined communities – to an 'Englishness' founded on an ideal of class-based and religio-cultural stability, and to the larger geographical and spiritual fraternity embodied by an undissociated 'mind of Europe'. That this lifelong advocate of the 'unity of European culture' lived through two ruinous European wars culminating in a Communist iron curtain drawn over half of the Continent is an inescapable context for revisiting these ideals. Part Two, 'Forms', brings us closer to Eliot's public roles. As an intellectual, he was a combative pundit equipped with a suave but imposing rhetorical armoury (deploying a corrosive irony). He was a publisher who worked in a climate of heavy censorship and a prolific literary journalist who appeared regularly in a remarkable variety of periodicals. Upon founding his own critical review, the *Criterion*, he commissioned regular bulletins on the latest innovations in the visual arts, theatre, dance, music and radio broadcasting. His work as a successful dramatist and as a BBC broadcaster in particular, unsettles misleading accounts of Eliot as an aloof 'Modernist' (a term he never embraced). By contrast, the chapters in this section reveal a more complicated picture of a man who continuously reached out to diverse audiences in search of a common culture.

'Modernism' is not a term that appears in the chapter titles of the section characterised as 'Literary Cross-Currents'. Since Eliot's distinction lies primarily in his achievement as a poet, secondarily in his influence as a critic, his polemical (somewhat opportunistic) re-evaluation of the literary canon is located quite properly at the heart of this collection. These fresh chapters significantly revise standard accounts of Eliot's literary borrowings and his critical prejudices. Above all, they demonstrate the dynamic ways in which Eliot's confrontation with 'tradition' is manifested in his poetry. A recurrent theme is the exploration of how his prodigious reading is put to excellent use – quite deliberately, though at times issuing through subterranean layers – in the combustible furnace of his transformative imagination. His compulsion to search the literary past for those elements that could be made to speak to the present is not patient scholarship, but the work of a poetic practitioner. It goes hand in hand with an acute, if abruptly dismissive, awareness of his difference from

contemporaries; some of these were erstwhile fellow travellers, others antagonists who formed the whetstone on which he sharpened his own razor-sharp literary self-consciousness. This section sifts literary history, uncovering fertile allusions in Eliot's idiosyncratic readings of Shakespeare, Dante and the Classics. Moreover, by resituating this intense engagement with the literature of the past not only among trends in the scholarship and criticism of the day but also in the light of his own instrumental aesthetic goals, these chapters reinflect received knowledge: Eliot's penchant for seventeenth-century and French symbolist varieties of metaphysical 'wit', for instance, was tempered by a sense of their extravagance or narcissistic limitations; just as his fastidious recoil from Romantic self-revelation and from sub-Romantic forms of Georgian pastoralism did not prevent him from acknowledging a profound debt to the practice and theory of individual Romantic poets, or from sponsoring as editor and publisher a number of 'Georgian' poets. This ambivalence in his literary relations is also apparent in his dialogues with his friend Ezra Pound and with his Bloomsbury acquaintances, as in the respectful distance he maintained from the most advanced cadres of the European avant-garde.

Part Four, 'Politics, Society and Culture', tackles head-on several controversial subjects. These chapters remind us that if Eliot's values and beliefs are not ones that are commonly held in high regard today, they were sophisticated responses to specific socio-cultural conditions, as well as to extreme political and economic crises. What emerges from this section are the continuities and transitions in Eliot's thought, rather than sudden reversals or conversions. While hostile critics have latched on to Eliot's occasionally unguarded or intolerant public pronouncements, these chapters reveal the degree of scepticism, at times radical, with which he held a point of view. From his earliest exposure to the competing theories of positivism, pragmatism and relativism during his undergraduate and graduate studies in philosophy, social science and natural science, Eliot was impressed by a need to impose social order on metaphysical and epistemological flux. His commitment to the Anglican Church identified that branch of it which cherished exacting ritual observance without entailing submission to the dogma of papal infallibility. The right-wing conservatism of his political convictions and his regrettably condescending remarks about (free-thinking) Jews and women are investigated here in chapters which combine sensitivity and empathy with a tough-minded willingness to judge those aspects which are unpalatable. Finally, Part Five re-examines Eliot's critical reception: from the polarised

response of contemporary reviewers to his slim volumes of poetry and prose, which prepared the ground for his later institutional canonisation, to the fascinating creative dialectic of admiration, rejection and emulous rivalry exhibited by contemporary and subsequent poets. The cold eye frequently cast on Eliot by younger generations of critics and scholars, keen to clear a new space on university syllabuses drawn up by his academic epigones, is viewed in this section in the broadest perspective of the evolution of English Studies from its beginnings to the present day. The closing chapter is a virtuoso meditation on the variegated legacies operative in contemporary literary criticism and cultural theory which take Eliot as their acknowledged or unacknowledged point of departure. If we sometimes like to believe that we know so much more, or know so much better, than the writers of the past, *T. S. Eliot in Context* offers compelling testimony announcing that Eliot himself, to quote his key essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', is still an indispensable part of 'that which we know' (*SE*, 16).

## NOTE

1. T. S. Eliot, 'In Memory of Henry James', *Egoist* (January 1918), 1.

PART ONE

# *Life*

CHAPTER 1

# *St Louis*

*Earl K. Holt III*

Home is where one starts from
(*CPP*, 182)

A writer's art, T. S. Eliot proposed, depends 'on the accumulated sensations of the first twenty-one years' of his life.[1] Born in St Louis on 26 September 1888, Eliot spent more than sixteen of his first twenty-one years there. Reminiscing about his early life on a visit to his birthplace in 1953, the poet said: 'I am very well satisfied with having been born in St Louis: in fact I think I was fortunate to have been born here, rather than in Boston, or New York, or London' (*TCC*, 45). Eliot had been invited to St Louis to address an audience gathered to celebrate the centenary of Washington University. The university had been co-founded by (and initially named after) his celebrated grandfather the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot. Acknowledging the profound and continuing influence of what he called his grandfather's 'law of Public Service', Eliot observed that 'it is no doubt owing to the impress of this law upon my infant mind that, like other members of my family, I have felt, ever since I passed beyond my early irresponsible years, an uncomfortable and very inconvenient obligation to serve upon committees'. Although his grandfather died a year before he was born, Eliot noted that 'as a child I thought of him as still the head of the family' (*TCC*, 44).

William Greenleaf Eliot came to St Louis in 1834 at the age of 23, shortly after graduating from Harvard Divinity School. He had been offered a year's board and lodging in St Louis by a small group of transplanted New England Unitarians. Before accepting their invitation, however, he had announced to a friend that he would 'remain and lay my ashes in the valley of the Mississippi'.[2] He kept that pledge, giving a lifetime's service to what on his arrival was little more than a frontier outpost, but which before his death had become the most populous city in the American Midwest. Under his leadership, the Unitarian Church of

the Messiah grew to be one of the largest and most influential in this rapidly growing city. His grandson remarked that the Unitarian Church, St Louis and Washington University represented to him 'the symbols of Religion, the Community, and Education', adding that it was 'a very good beginning for any child, to be brought up to reverence such institutions, and to be taught that personal and selfish aims should be subordinated to the general good which they represent' (*TCC*, 44).

Today, Unitarians do not think of themselves as evangelists, but William Greenleaf Eliot was proud to recall that he was ordained as an evangelist in Boston before setting out for what was then the American frontier. He personally initiated the founding of Unitarian churches along the Mississippi valley from New Orleans to Milwaukee. Many were financially supported by himself or by his congregation in St Louis. Evangelism in the city itself meant the creation and maintenance of institutions of charity, education and culture; some concerned with the alleviation of poverty or suffering, all designed to contribute to the moral and spiritual uplift of the community as a whole. The Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot acknowledged that St Louis was mainly populated by those who had come west to make money. The mission of his ministry was to increase not the material but the moral and spiritual capital of the community, and in so doing he proved himself to be ingenious in converting private wealth into endowments for institutions whose aims were for the common good. A noted businessman of the time commented that if he could have had the Reverend Eliot as a business partner, together they would have made the greatest fortune west of the Alleghenies. The influence of William Greenleaf Eliot's personal ministry and character was legendary. He is a notable example of what Daniel Howe has called 'The Unitarian Conscience'.[3] A memorial plaque commemorating him now hangs in Eliot Hall of the First Unitarian Church of St Louis. It reads: 'His best monument is to be found in the many educational and philanthropic institutions of St Louis to which he gave the disinterested labor of his life. The whole city was his parish and every soul needing him a parishioner.' Reflecting both his extreme personal modesty and his deep sense of Christian discipleship, at his request William Greenleaf Eliot's gravestone was inscribed simply with his name, the dates of his life (1811–87) and the words 'Looking Unto Jesus'.

T. S. Eliot, then, was born into the single most important family in the history of American Unitarianism. Collectively, the Eliots form a veritable *Who's Who* of Unitarian biography. Two of the poet's cousins, including his contemporary Frederick May Eliot, served as presidents of the

American Unitarian Association (their combined terms in office spanned almost half the twentieth century). Two of his uncles were prominent Unitarian ministers: one of them, Thomas Lamb Eliot, nearly duplicated in Portland, Oregon, the achievements of William Greenleaf Eliot in St Louis. Thomas Lamb Eliot's daughter married the Reverend Earl Morse Wilbur, a leading Unitarian historian and founder of the Starr King School for the Ministry, the Unitarian seminary in Berkeley, California. One of Thomas Lamb Eliot's sons, William Greenleaf Junior, became the minister of the same Portland church his father had served for over fifty years. The distinguished association of the Eliots with the Unitarian Church in America, as ministers and laity, male and female, could be extended almost indefinitely.

T. S. Eliot's father was not a minister. Henry Ware Eliot was born in 1843, the second of William Greenleaf Eliot's fourteen children (only five of whom survived to adulthood). It never occurred to the Reverend Eliot that any of his sons would not become clergymen and he expressed his disappointment at Henry's decision to go into business, angrily exclaiming that his son's education was wasted, 'except that it has made a man of you'.[4] Henry built a successful career, however, with the St Louis Hydraulic-Press Brick Company, rising to become president and chairman, thereby providing not only enough money to contribute generously as a philanthropist, but also to sustain the ambitions of a son who wanted to be a poet. He was aged 45 when Tom was born, his seventh and youngest child. There seems to have been a distance between them. It is not a caricature to see this separation as the natural estrangement between the businessman father and his artistically minded son. Henry died in 1919, just as his son was beginning to establish a reputation as a poet. Tom regretted that his father had died thinking he was wasting his life writing poetry.

Henry Ware Eliot had married Charlotte Champe Stearns in 1868. Charlotte was a Boston Unitarian of formidable intellectual and artistic abilities. She was a natural scholar who resented the educational restrictions placed on women in that era. She did, however, publish a large body of work, both poetry and prose, mostly in Unitarian periodicals. She understood her son's artistic talent and defended *The Waste Land* to bewildered family members, although she expressed the wish that 'with its suffering and struggle, it was an interim poem and would be followed by a poem of fulfilment'.[5] She was a leader of various social reform movements in St Louis and was active in women's organisations, in particular the Wednesday Club, which featured speakers on literary and cultural topics. It was the kind of social gathering to which women would

come and go talking, among other things, of Michelangelo. Aside from her somewhat unexceptional poetry, Charlotte wrote a detailed biography of William Greenleaf Eliot, which she dedicated to her children with the inscription 'Lest They Forget'. Her son Tom did not.

Eliot's decisions to join the Anglican Church and to adopt British citizenship in 1927 are among the most debated elements of his biography. It is clear he was abandoning the denominational faith of his Unitarian parents, grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts; yet he retained the spiritual and especially the moral imprint of this profound family legacy. In important respects, Eliot's baptism was less a repudiation of his religious past than a rebaptism and reconfirmation into the Christian heritage of his St Louis Unitarian family. The scholar and critic Grover Smith has observed:

> Eliot was nothing without his Unitarian upbringing – it was his salvation from philosophy, from Buddhism, and from the Church of Rome, and even in a curious way from Anglo-Catholicism as well. He could not be *quite* sceptical, *quite* godless, or *quite* authoritarian. So he moved through stages that brought him back to his grandfather's ideal of the exemplary life. This is hard to document, but I think the *Quartets* show it.[6]

In like fashion, the aspiring English man of letters never forgot that his roots were deeply planted in the soil of the American Midwest. In 1930, Eliot informed Marquis Childs of the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* that the first sixteen years of his life spent in St Louis beside the Mississippi River had 'affected me more deeply than any other environment has done'. He went on to say that in middle age these early impressions intensified; for example, the memory of taking photographs of a buffalo in Forest Park, of being taken as a child by his nursemaid to a Catholic church near his home, and of the steamboats on New Year's Day. Eliot concluded that 'there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those who have not'. In spite of the years he had spent outside of St Louis and outside of America altogether, Eliot claimed 'Missouri and the Mississippi have made a deeper impression on me than any other part of the world'.[7]

Eliot's first sixteen years were spent at 2635 Locust Street (long demolished), located just a few blocks from the Church of the Messiah, where he attended Sunday school and where two of his sisters were teachers. Behind the back garden of this boyhood home, concealed by a high brick wall, were the school grounds of Mary Institute, a preparatory school for young women, one of several St Louis institutions that had been