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978-0-521-87785-5 - Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf
Gabrielle McIntire

Excerpt

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WRITING TIME

I am now & then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident – say the fall of a flower – might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist – nor time either.

Virginia Woolf, *Diary*, 23 November 1926¹

This notion of Time embodied, of years past but not separated from us, it was now my intention to emphasize as strongly as possible in my work.

Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*²

To write of memory, time, and desire in early twentieth-century literature is to touch the place where modernism's intense concerns with its historicity and belatedness converge with the versions of temporalities and sexualities it was articulating; it is to investigate the sustained provocation of a modernist predisposition to think of the past through the language of sensuality and eros. T. S. Eliot's now well-known lines from the opening of *The Waste Land*, "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain,"³ capture an agonizingly raw protestation within the modernist project, offering one of those rare moments when a poetic conceit happens to express a key dilemma of the time. Eliot's terms forcefully conjoin the incommensurate temporal pulls of memory and desire while highlighting the "cruel[ty]" of such a mixing: memory is intrinsically backward looking – it casts its gaze to what is sealed off "in time," even as it insists that the rules of temporality and closure are unpredictable – while desire pushes to the future for its realization. In Eliot's poem, "April is the cruellest month" because it links what are

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otherwise potently disparate (birth and death, “Memory and desire,” “dull roots” and “spring rain”) through a sudden revolution of the earth’s cycles. Fragmented psychic time meets “natural” cyclic time, and in so doing confronts the enduring enigmas of (re)birth, eros, fertility, and death. The tension in this yoking of memory and desire, I want to suggest, marks a highly charged and productive entanglement between anteriority and eros that persistently haunts modernist fiction and poetry on both sides of the Atlantic.

Modernism, Memory, and Desire focuses on the poetic, fictional, critical, and autobiographical texts of T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf to argue that despite political, gender, religious, and national differences, and notwithstanding critical tendencies that for decades read their work as asexual and practically disembodied, representing the past was for both a sensuous endeavor that repeatedly turned to the erotic and the corporeal for some of its most authentic elaborations. That is, I want to propose that for Eliot and Woolf memory is always already invested and intertwined with writing sexuality, the body, and desire. Undoubtedly the mixing of memory and desire is in itself not specific to the modernist age. What is deeply singular, though, are the “new” ways modernist writers rendered and returned to the (convoluted) paradox involved in this “mixing.” In the modernity specific to the modernism of roughly 1890–1945,⁴ avant-garde writers found themselves open to exploring a newly psychoanalytic body and psyche (replete with drives, desires, and an unconscious), in conjunction with shifting global and national politics, emancipatory (and queered) gender and sexual identifications, rapidly changing technologies, and a post-Nietzschean, post-Darwinian secularized skepticism. All of this contributed to a new aesthetic uninhibitedness, and to new registers for addressing what it means to inscribe remembrance and history. To write of time during the modernist era was to write of a quickly shifting world, to write the mutable and the vanishing; it was simultaneously to create a new time and to celebrate, mourn, and eulogize the passing of the old.

The choice to pair Eliot and Woolf is unusual. Eliot’s conservatism and (late) religiosity have seemed to make his corpus incompatible with the work of a feminist, atheist, and avowedly leftist writer like Virginia Woolf. Indeed, Woolf and Eliot have never before been placed side by side, in dyadic conjunction, in a book-length study. Their work and their lives, though, reveal some striking proximities. Woolf and Eliot were almost exact contemporaries (born in 1882 and 1888, respectively), professional supporters of each other’s work (Woolf’s Hogarth Press, for

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example, published Eliot's second volume of poetry, *Poems*, in 1919, when he was still a relatively unknown poet, and Woolf herself set type for the Hogarth Press's 1923 edition of *The Waste Land*), and close friends for over twenty years. In 1936, in an astonishing letter to Woolf's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, Woolf even expresses that she felt an erotic attraction to T. S. Eliot. Turning to the *memory* of a visit with Eliot through which to convey her desires, Woolf writes: "I had a visit, long long ago from Tom Eliot, whom I love, or could have loved, had we both been in the prime and not in the sere; how necessary do you think copulation is to friendship? At what point does 'love' become sexual?"⁵ We have little other evidence of the eros of Woolf and Eliot's relation, but evidently their connection held some form of sexual charge, and I offer this as a delightful biographical fragment that supplements the contiguities in their thinking about the past. They each separately fashion a poetics of memory where translating one's experience of remembrance and historicity to textuality – what I will be calling *writing time* – occurs by concurrently exploring the erotic and the sensual. Further, just as Sigmund Freud proposes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) that we think of the psyche's mnemonic layering as analogous to palimpsestic, architectural remains and ruins, both writers stress that time and experience leave *material* and *retrievable* traces – not just in the mind and body but also in the physicality and designs of topography that we are then called upon to interpret. Both are far more present to each other's thinking and writing than we have yet imagined, and their texts offer deeply compelling instantiations of a modernist condensation of the bind between memory and desire. This study, then, considers especially what kinds of work memory does in Woolf and Eliot's literary experiments; how memory is constructed vis-à-vis sexual and textual forms of desire; what kinds of ethics Eliot and Woolf were developing around sites of memory and desire; and, where and why memory fails.

In Djuna Barnes's 1937 novel, *Nightwood*, Baron Felix announces that "To pay homage to our past is the only gesture that also includes the future."⁶ Such a statement testifies to the profound complexity and convolution of a modernist predilection to express a time consciousness that looks backward *and* forward with equal, if ambivalent, intensity, all the while commemorating *and* rehabilitating the past as a necessary ingredient required to "make it new," as Ezra Pound notoriously commanded. Pushing toward imagined futures through reconfiguring memory and history was central to so many modernist projects, ranging from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922),

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Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1930–69), William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels, and Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27), to name only a few era-defining texts whose authors found themselves compelled to turn to the past as their material, inspiration, and source. This was not simply because they were writing historical novels, or setting their poems in distant times. While their efforts evoke past ages, and make wide use of intertextual pastiche, for the most part modernist writers set their texts within a temporal frame that corresponds roughly with what they themselves had experienced. They shattered formal constraints, destabilized generic conventions, and relentlessly commented – both implicitly and explicitly – on the social, cultural, and political structures of their epoch.

There has, in fact, been an ongoing (albeit quiet) battle regarding modernism's relation to the past. Indeed, part of modernism's critical inheritance has involved a decades-long disavowal of its historical dimensions, along with repeated insistences that modernist aims and ideologies signify apolitical and overly aestheticized disavowals of previous work and culture – a turning away from the past in order to “make it new.” Leo Bersani, Gregory Jay, Charles Altieri, Hayden White, and Paul de Man, for example, have each insisted on the modernist tendency to *revoke* history. Hayden White famously argues in 1978 that modernists possessed a “hostility towards history,” rejected “historical consciousness,” and held the “belief that the past was *only* a burden”;⁷ in his 1990 study, while discussing distinctly *modernist* writers (Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, and Friedrich Nietzsche, and specifically Eliot and Joyce in this instance), Leo Bersani claims that “the modern” of a “modernistic modernity” “retains an incomparable aura: that of being spiritually stranded, uniquely special in its radical break with traditional values and modes of consciousness”;⁸ in 1992, when Gregory Jay tries to distill what critics mean when they speak of “Modernism as a coherent event,” one of the six features he outlines as its “distinguishing characteristics” is “a sense of rupture from the past,”⁹ and in 1995 Charles Altieri stresses modernism's “antihistoricism.”¹⁰ Nicholas Andrew Miller has more recently noted that “Within certain strains of literary and cultural criticism, ‘modernism’ has come to be synonymous with a willful, even adolescent, ignorance of historical continuity in the pursuit of formal and stylistic innovation for its own sake” (2002).¹¹

By contrast, a number of other critics – including Susan Stanford Friedman, Ronald Bush, Peter Fritzsche, Elena Gualtieri, Lawrence

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Rainey, John Whittier-Ferguson, and James Longenbach, to name only a few – have directly contested arguments for modernist antagonisms to the past. Two decades ago James Longenbach pronounced that “It has long been apparent that the work of Eliot and Pound grows from an active interest in history.”¹² Eliot, after all, makes some of his most influential critical pronouncements in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). Longenbach goes on, though, to point out that critics have focused preeminently on *literary* histories in Eliot and Pound’s “poems including history,” while “the question of the nature of their historicism itself has gone unanswered”;¹³ I would argue that this remains largely true today. Susan Stanford Friedman suggests in 1993 that “it is not the erasure of history but its insistent return as nightmare and desire which marks modernity’s stance toward stories of the past,”¹⁴ while Lawrence Rainey proposes in 2005 that “The modernists were obsessed with history. They mourned it and damned it, contested it as tenaciously as Jacob wrestling with the image of God.”¹⁵ Clearly this is contested territory, and we can still assert, more generally, that questions about a “modernist” relation to historicity and memory continue to be underexplored.

In this book I want to think of modernism’s looking to the past as both a return *and* a departure, involving marked historiographical commitments to thinking the relations between memory, time, desire, and subjectivity, where present and past time are dialogically and endlessly engaged in a rearranging of the past’s significations. Eliot and Woolf played with the vagaries of recollection, but still proposed that the past remains a fundamentally vital, retrievable, reinscribable, and often *pleasurable* residue. As Henri Bergson argues, “Our past . . . necessarily and automatically conserves itself. It survives completely whole . . . the past makes body with the present and creates with it without ceasing.”¹⁶ Evoking a bodily and material vitality of the past, where sensation and desire are at the core of memory’s inscription and then return, the past always leaves its mark and it is up to the operations of chance and desire to determine which fragments will re-emerge as memory.

Both Eliot and Woolf render recollection not simply as a nostalgic, sentimental revisitation of lost time, but as the potent and ineluctable condition of possibility for writing the present. They disclose a passionate cathexis to the past’s abiding presence in part by affirming the past’s profound temporal *and* spatial proximity – and even contiguity – with the present. The rupture between then and now, and the hiatal ground that such a break engenders, is acknowledged, but traversed and

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repaired – sometimes in a single gesture. In 1930 Eliot writes, “The new years walk, restoring / Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem / The time.”¹⁷ Both writers are compelled to repeat tropes of resuscitating, restoring, and even redeeming the past, while they reveal that such efforts never signify simple mimesis or reification. The fecund work of revisitation they trace means that if history (personal, literary, cultural, and political) is severed from the present, then the cut is only partial. The connectivity that remains leaves both the room and the desire to reconstitute and reclaim the past through its most intimate signs.

What I am describing is also not just the stance of the melancholic, where, if we follow Freud’s 1917 proposals, melancholia develops through a failure to recognize and release an attachment to a beloved object-choice after a traumatic loss, involving “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale.”¹⁸ We certainly find elements of melancholia in some of Eliot and Woolf’s dispositions to the past, but I want to insist that their engagement with the problem of anteriority is more nuanced than this, involving pleasures and pains, attachments and renunciations, and, above all, a recognition of the still-*becoming* life of the past within the present’s only partial fullness. Their affective attachments to the past are distinct from both the sentimentality of a pure nostalgia unable to release its melancholic commitments, and from those of a transcendental idealization of past time. While recent trauma studies have focused preeminently on mourning and melancholia as modern and postmodern modes of memory, I want to propose that Eliot and Woolf’s projects open up a different mnemonic record. The past in their work is a cherished, if occasionally dangerous, material that is urgently required to flesh out – sometimes in a flash – the fragile and fleeting (almost absent) fullness of the present. We find a palpable thematization of attempts to accept that, like a beloved Other, the past *cannot give itself to us* once and for all, no matter how much we might desire such a fantastic resolution. Much of their writing is driven by what it might mean to reapproach this kind of temporal alterity. For, memory, like an Other, manifests a separate and ongoing *coming-into-being* that demands a ceaseless reopening to the work of its translation and transfiguration.

For Eliot and Woolf the past also insists on a multiple rather than a singular hermeneutics. From Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to Woolf’s *Orlando*, the past is always agitated with a slightly alienating current of the now, and simultaneously confronted with the (relatively)

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limited temporal domain of the present. Eliot and Woolf may refuse dis-attachment to the past, but they do so by recognizing a *good enough* accessibility to what remains. They each write out a past that can never be mastered, that is always ajar, and open to both reinscription and reexperience – open to the supplement of a perpetual (re)turn that would find in the past an always new object to confront. To remain connected to the past so that it does not become, as in Proust’s closing vision of *Swann’s Way*, a “fugitive” – a lost image in flight without a place in the present – is, I argue, one of the principle desires in Eliot and Woolf’s oeuvre.

I divide the book into roughly two halves – the first I devote to T. S. Eliot, and the second to Virginia Woolf – to investigate, by juxtaposition, the startling correspondences in their renderings of mnemonic consciousness. In considering Eliot, I trace figures of sex, women, queerness, and desire in relation to historicity and remembrance in his canonical writings as well as in a series of bawdy poems that are still only partially published and have received very little critical notice. Nevertheless, it appears that Eliot composed this extensive body of pornotropic work over roughly fifty years. While these “Columbo and Bolo” verses may at first seem determinately at odds with Eliot’s major poetry and essays, I propose instead that they illuminate – in a kind of hyperbolic relief – Eliot’s persistent recourse to presenting the past through lenses of eros and desire. They reveal some of the excesses of his poetic imagination and ask us to take on the burden of their provocation.

After a first chapter in which I investigate the complicated signs and motivations of these poems, I turn to instances from Eliot’s pre-conversion (pre-1927) published poems and essays – from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” to “Gerontion,” “Portrait of a Lady,” “Preludes,” “Hysteria,” *The Waste Land*, and “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” among other pieces – where he conjoins memory with its sensual designations. As David Chinitz endeavors to do in *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*,¹⁹ part of my task is to continue the work of exposing an “other” Eliot who reads very much against the grain of the asexual, straight, conservative, rigidly Anglo-Catholic, white, prudish “high” modernist “T. S. Eliot” we rather problematically still too often have come to “inherit” – to borrow a term Eliot disdains in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”²⁰ The Eliot I want to explore is sexy, dangerous, and crucially *uneven* in his investments and pronouncements.

I juxtapose these reflections on Eliot with a focus on Virginia Woolf by considering her similar explorations of the eros and desires implicit

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in thinking history and memory. While Woolf's poetics and metaphors of corporeality and sexuality are still surprisingly underexplored in criticism, I suggest that some of Woolf's most erotic expositions occur in conjunction with her representations of recollection.²¹ I emphasize her own preoccupations with rewriting and revisiting the eros of the past while she offers critiques of the political, cultural, and personal climates of her present. Indeed, I want to urge us to think of Woolf not only as a major modernist writer and feminist critic, but also as a complicated thinker of memory and history. To understand her better we would do well to place her ruminations on the past in dialogue with those of some of her immediate precursors and contemporaries like Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust, Walter Benjamin, and Friedrich Nietzsche – some of whom she engaged with directly, and all of whom offer serendipitous illuminations. To this end I read Woolf unconventionally as a thinker of memory and history, and take up her contentions that we pay more attention to how the ostensibly three-dimensional spatiality of “the physical” is permeated and ridden with history. By considering *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *Between the Acts* (1941), “A Sketch of the Past” (1941), and her diaries, letters, and essays, and by placing personal memory in relation to more properly “historical” markers such as the Great War, colonialism, and the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis, I argue that Woolf discloses an intricate theory of writing the past that not only demands an ethics of remembering as necessary to modern subjectivity, but which evokes an ardent devotion to the past's materiality. Woolf repeatedly makes the (re)turn to memory emblematic of a kind of fertile desire, in part because memory stands as a replete ground of citation to which one is recalled to work through material from the past as a kind of palpable putty that is often sufficiently under the control of the conscious mind to be pleasurable.

Finally, I ask how Eliot, Woolf, and other modernists viewed and experienced historical, calendrical, personal, and epiphanic time. How did they articulate the time of memory? How does writing (the signification of the letter) help engender the abstract cohesiveness of a historical or remembered actuality? How is time bounded by language and language bounded by (and bonded to) time? How does time touch the modern(ist) subject? The coupling of memory and desire links what is past to the desires of the present, and always involves at least a double yoking, putting pressure on what Bergson sees as the distinction between the objective fact of time (*temps*) and its subjective experience (*durée*). Woolf and Eliot evince self-conscious historicizing gestures, eroticize

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reminiscence and its contents, and relentlessly approach the Otherness of “lost time,” expressing a conviction that through memory firmly lodged in the body the most vital aspects of time remain undispersed. As in Julia Kristeva’s reading of Proust, we find here “a new form of temporality” which “gives an X-ray image of memory, bringing to light its painful yet rapturous dependence on the senses . . . time is to be psychic time, and consequently the factor which determines our bodily life.”²² In this way, “mixing / Memory and desire” is done not by foregrounding a fear of their contamination, but with an almost lustful impulse to have reminiscence correspond with its sensual corollaries, all the while exposing the unrest between these figures. A palpable desire exists in Eliot and Woolf’s work to *know* the heterogeneousness of the past. This represents not a repulsion from history, but a welcoming of its alterity as fundamentally (re)cognizable and desirable. What we find then is a copulative relation: to remember *is* to desire; to desire *is* to remember. This study considers the ways in which memory and history pressed themselves upon the minds of two exemplary figures who wrote under modernism’s conditions – making time for writing, and in the process, writing time.

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CHAPTER I

*An unexpected beginning: sex, race,
and history in T. S. Eliot's Columbo
and Bolo poems*

I keep my countenance,
I remain self-possessed
Except when a street-piano, mechanical and tired
Reiterates some worn-out common song
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden
Recalling things that other people have desired.
Are these ideas right or wrong?

T. S. Eliot, "Portrait of a Lady"¹

One day Columbo and the queen
They fell into a quarrel
Columbo showed his disrespect
By farting in a barrel.
The queen she called him horse's ass
And "dirty Spanish loafer"
They terminated the affair
By fucking on the sofa.

T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*²

One of the most striking instances of T. S. Eliot's mixing of memory and desire occurs in his rendering of the history, legacy, and cultural memory of early European colonial expansion. In the period from 1909 to 1922 when Eliot was writing and publishing poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," "Preludes," and *The Waste Land* – poems that firmly established his reputation as one of the major poets of the century – he was simultaneously composing a long cycle of intensely sexual, bawdy, pornotropic, and satirical verse that has only recently come to light.³ Centered on the seafaring adventures of an explorer named "Columbo" (Eliot uses an Italianate version of Christopher Columbus's name) and his encounters with two native