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Unravelling Eliot

> There is a kind of fun in unravelling the twists & obliquities of this remarkable man.
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> Virginia Woolf, diary entry on T. S. Eliot, 14 September 1925.

In 1927, T. S. Eliot told the Shakespeare Association: "About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong" (*CP3* 245). In this lecture, Eliot wittily disposes of several "up-to-date" Shakespeares proposed by contemporary critics. His gesture reveals an awareness of the difficulties of addressing a scholarly audience on the subject of the most studied author in the English language. Eliot's approach to the canon was often marked by iconoclasm: *Hamlet* was judged "most certainly an artistic failure"; Milton "writes English like a dead language"; Shelley was "humourless, pedantic, self-centred"; Tennyson's poetry is condescendingly placed as "beautiful but dull."[1] These extravagant judgements are indicative of an anxiety about the potentially numbing dead weight of canonical reputations. For today's readers of Eliot, seeking fresh interpretations of his work, the challenge that "we should from time to time change our minds" (*CP3* 245) is no less daunting than the position that confronted Eliot when he addressed the Shakespeare Association.

The relationship of an author's life to his work is crucial in reassessing Eliot's achievement as a poet, critic and dramatist but can require a certain amount of careful unravelling or untangling of the received opinions that have shaped his reputation. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), Eliot famously claims "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates." He advances an "Impersonal theory of poetry" (*CP2* 109, 108). However, many critics have ignored Eliot's own separation of poet and poems. Ezra Pound contended that Eliot "arrived at the supreme Eminence among English critics largely through disguising himself as a corpse."[2] Pound felt that Possum's

pontifical authority camouflaged the avant-garde affront to conventional taste represented by *The Waste Land*. By contrast, Helen Gardner's *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (1949), a book which Eliot recommended as the best study of his poetry, placed the emphasis on *Four Quartets*, characterized as the work of a devout Anglican. In a discussion of Eliot's later poetry, Gardner remarked: "Nobody can underrate the momentousness for any mature person of acceptance of all that membership of the Christian Church entails."[3] Hugh Kenner's sophisticated study *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (1959) pondered the enigma of Eliot's private life glimpsed through an anti-romantic theory. "He is the Invisible Poet in an age of systematized literary scrutiny" observed Kenner, as he traced a delicate effacement of personality in this formidably difficult poet, "the archetype of poetic impenetrability."[4] It is noteworthy that many subtle and influential exegetes of Eliot's poetry – including Gardner and Kenner – have been Christians.

On the centenary of Eliot's birth, Lyndall Gordon confidently announced that: "The idea that Eliot's poetry was rooted in private aspects of his life has now been accepted." Gordon's approach is predicated on what she characterizes as Eliot's "insistent search for salvation … his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism."[5] She is less concerned with a conservative public figure than with the poet's enduring fascination with mystical experience. The title of the second part of her biography, *Eliot's New Life*, alluding to Dante's *Vita Nuova* or "new life," suggests the passing of a spiritual watershed when Eliot became a practising Christian. In the words of the King James Bible: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Although assiduously researched, Gordon's teleology of a spiritual pilgrimage, sketching the paradigm of Saint Augustine's exemplary self-reflexive narrative of spiritual autobiography, has not pleased all literary critics. In particular, Gordon's emphasis on Eliot's intimate friend Emily Hale, depicted as a Dantesque intercessor guiding him to a new life, provoked Frank Kermode to a rare fit of pique: "[Gordon's handling of all this], her religiose attitude to the facts, a sort of muckraking sublimity, affects her prose as well as her argument, and the whole pseudo-allegorical and hagiographical enterprise is vaguely disgusting, though I ought to add that it might seem just right to readers of different disposition."[6]

If there has always been an appetite for muckraking gossip about this most impersonal poet, who instructed his literary executrix not to facilitate the writing of any biography of him, there is scant evidence for it. Published volumes of Eliot's letters have disappointed reviewers by their quotidian character. In a 1933 lecture, Eliot said: "The desire to write a letter, to put down what you don't want anybody else to see but the person you are

writing to, but which you do not want to be destroyed, but perhaps hope may be preserved for complete strangers to read, is ineradicable" (*CP4* 847). The guilty pleasure of spying a secret which was not intended for us is rarely to be found reading Eliot's letters. John Haffenden has disputed Peter Ackroyd's claim that sifting through correspondence in the archives of worldwide research libraries for his 1984 biography had enabled him to discover "a coherence of personality and a consistency of aim."[7] Haffenden countered: "letters may be used to flatter self-esteem, to propound opinion, to influence and manipulate others; the notion that they are more honest and open than other forms of writing is plainly absurd."[8] Eliot's letters must be interpreted with tact; they are no less rhetorical constructions than his other writings and cannot be straightforward evidence of the poet's personal experience. Haffenden, as general editor of the *Letters of T. S. Eliot*, has revised his opinion of the significance of these missives, now "all the very best building blocks of a biography" (*L5* xxxiii) and yet his earlier misgivings about the epistolary form should not be discarded. Eliot was a prolific but guarded letter writer. Subsequent published volumes of his letters are more likely to be supplementary than revelatory when it comes to the patient interpretation of an oeuvre that has been intensively discussed for a century. The opening up of Eliot's correspondence with Emily Hale in 2020 will offer insights into the nature of their lengthy and tangled relationship, but love letters, if they are such, will not provide a key to the linguistic or imaginative texture of the intricate, allusive poetics explored by Michael O'Neill's chapter in this *Companion*.

In his 1927 Shakespeare lecture, Eliot spoke of the "struggle – which alone constitutes life for a poet – to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal" (*CP3* 253). In the searching analysis of *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1988), Christopher Ricks probed the occasions when Eliot failed to transmute personal prejudices – including anti-Semitism – into great poetry. Anthony Julius's adversarial critique in *T. S. Eliot, anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (1995) was impatient with claims of impersonality when considering charges of anti-Semitism. The focus of Ronald Schuchard's *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (1999), built on a painstaking examination of the extant archival record, was designed to place tendentious critiques stressing the harmful effects of Eliot's life on his work in a sympathetic biographical context. "In view of the swelling barrier reef of reductive and formulaic criticism," Schuchard laments, "we may never hear the low and high registers of despair and love, horror and vision; we may never awaken to the intersecting planes and voices of a life lived intensely in art."[9] Robert Crawford, Eliot's most recent biographer, in attempting

to take account of a mass of newly published material, offers a measured assessment of the value of biographer's role in providing "not a reductive explanation that undoes the mystery of an author's gift, but a form of artistic narrative that averts caricature and illuminates both poet and poetry."[10]

Eliot himself ridiculed critics who had "reconstructed" his personal biography "from passages which I got out of books, or which I invented out of nothing because they sounded well" and complained of then "having my biography invariably ignored in what I *did* write from personal experience" (*CP3* 246). In "The Perfect Critic" he reflected on the inextricable interrelations between literature and life: "For in an artist these suggestions made by a work of art, which are purely personal, become fused with a multitude of other suggestions from multitudinous experience, and result in the production of a new object which is no longer purely personal, because it is a work of art itself" (*CP2* 265). In "A Brief Introduction to the Method of Paul Valéry" (1924), Eliot framed these issues resonantly: "not our feelings, but the pattern which we make of our feelings, is the centre of value" (*CP2* 562). The inwardness of subjectivity, then, endures to the extent that it is rendered in an achieved work of art. Analogous to the techniques of modern art, Eliot's poetic theory proposes an objectification of emotion through a dynamic transformation of personal feelings onto the plane of impersonal structural relations. While it is clear that the personae of the poet cannot be mapped straightforwardly onto the biographical details of Thomas Stearns Eliot, critics will continue to unpick Eliot's advocacy of the detachment of his writing, "with only the technical experience preserved" (*L1* 212), as a mask for the strains of his personal life appearing in that work. This remains a contentious area. In what follows, I provide a biographical context for the succeeding chapters of this *Companion* but raise caveats that encourage an unravelling of overdetermined readings of the oeuvre.

"A writer's art" Eliot suggested, "must be based on the accumulated sensations of the first twenty-one years" (*CP1* 616). Eliot's first twenty-one years were spent in the United States. Not many letters survive from these formative years and reconstruction of young Tom's emotional life is a fertile ground for conjecture. He was born in St Louis in 1888 to parents in their mid-forties. The youngest child, he had one brother and five sisters, one of whom had died in infancy two years before he was born. His father Henry Ware Eliot was a successful businessman, who rose to be president of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company, which flourished as industrial St Louis grew. His mother Charlotte Champe Stearns was a social welfare reformer who wrote religious verses. Strong-willed and protective of her youngest child, Charlotte had ambitions that were frustrated by her lack of

a university education. She took a keener pleasure than her husband in the literary achievements of their son. In 1926, Eliot wrote an introduction to his mother's dramatic poem on the Florentine martyr Savonarola.

Born with a congenital double hernia and obliged to wear a truss, Eliot was bookish rather than sporty, a shy child who was painfully self-conscious about his large ears. According to Crawford, he was a "mischievous but sometimes rather priggish little boy."[11] Eliot had a privileged, sheltered and relatively strict upbringing, but he recalled his childhood in a predominantly female household as happy and he was devoted to his nurse, Annie Dunne, a Catholic Irish-American. The family house at 2635 Locust Street was situated close to African American communities and ragtime rhythms were an abiding memory. His paternal grandfather, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot (who died a year before Tom was born) had supported the abolition of slavery. Charlotte's biography of him, *William Greenleaf Eliot: Minister, Educator, Philanthropist* (1904), was dedicated to her children, "Lest They Forget." Eliot called him the family patriarch, a Moses-like figure. A Unitarian minister whose sense of religious duty drew him from Harvard Divinity School to the Midwest, Reverend Eliot established the Church of the Messiah in St Louis as well as three educational institutions in the city: Washington University; Mary Institute, a girls' school; and its male counterpart, Smith Academy, where Eliot's first steps as a literature student were promising rather than outstanding, although his graduation ode signalled an extra-academic promise. Summer months were spent on the New England coast – Henry had built a house overlooking Gloucester – where as a teenager Eliot enjoyed sailing a catboat (sea sounds and images permeate his poetry), clambering over granite rock-pools in search of crabs, and observing migratory birds. In 1902, Charlotte presented this avid amateur ornithologist with a cherished copy of Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*, cited in the notes to *The Waste Land*.

In 1905, as preparation for attending Harvard University, Eliot was sent to Milton Academy, a boarding school near Boston, where he pursued a "somewhat miscellaneous course" (*L1* 4) of studies and joined a social and cultural elite. In Unitarian Boston, he was more conscious of his ancestry among the New England Eliots (family relations included two U.S. presidents, a president of Harvard, and an intellectual aristocracy of New England writers, notably Hawthorne and Melville). The Eliots provided several leaders of the American Unitarian Church and belonged to the caste Oliver Wendell Holmes had christened the Boston Brahmins. Eliot later claimed he had been raised outside the Christian faith, since Unitarianism does not believe in the doctrine of the Incarnation. In a 1933 lecture at a Boston Unitarian church, he warned the congregation against a desire to "trim your ideals

down to fit the behavior of the nicest people" and of the dangers of a complacent self-conceit leading to "spiritual pride" (*CP4* 816). He distrusted the high-minded liberal humanitarianism of Unitarianism and rejected its optimism about social progress. In a review of *The Education of Henry Adams*, Eliot poured scorn on the intellectual scepticism that he labelled the "Boston doubt," the product of an over-refined education. Cultivated and snobbish, Eliot's family "looked down on all southerners and Virginians" (*L4* 138); in Boston he became conscious of his own Missouri accent. Crawford surmises that an outsider's desire to ingratiate himself in this milieu was partly responsible for Eliot's frat-boy taste for swapping ribald jokes with contemporaries, such as Howard Morris, who also graduated from Milton and roomed with Eliot at Harvard. Morris was a recipient of Eliot's obscene King Bolo verses.

At Harvard, Eliot, a well-mannered and well-dressed young man, was educated in the elective system introduced by President Charles W. Eliot, a distant relative. Eliot complained that this system led to "wide but disorderly reading, intense but confused thinking, and utter absence of background and balance and proportion" (*L1* 100). He took undergraduate courses in English and comparative literature, classics, modern languages, philosophy, history, politics, fine arts and science. In his senior year, Eliot applied himself assiduously. As Herbert Howarth has argued, Eliot's "debt to Harvard was considerable … he often fell back on memories of his Harvard classes."[12] Dante studies flourished at Harvard under Charles Grandgent, Professor of Romance Languages, stimulating Eliot's endeavour to puzzle out Dante's Italian in his 1909 Temple Classics edition, which contained a facing English translation. He read John Donne's poetry as a freshman in Dean Briggs's class, and in his fourth year he studied Elizabethan and Jacobean drama with G. P. Baker. Eliot pursued a master's degree at Harvard specialising in literature and philosophy. Two of his teachers were inspirational and left an indelible mark on his development. Eliot took courses with George Santayana, whom he recalled as "a brilliant philosopher and man of letters" (*CP4* 58). He took a keen interest in Santayana's reflections on the system-building of philosophical poetry. Irving Babbitt's class on French literature was also germinal. It instilled in Eliot a lifelong advocacy of the order and authority of classicism over the individualism of romanticism. However, Eliot later rejected the ethical foundation of Babbitt's "New Humanism" since it was insufficiently grounded in religious dogma.

In December 1908, Eliot borrowed from the Harvard Union Library Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* which, as Anne Stillman's chapter suggests, had a profound effect on his experimentation with serio-comic masks. In Jules Laforgue, whom Symons described as a

poet of the "nerves," Eliot discovered a temperamental affinity.[13] He sent off to Paris for the three volumes of Laforgue's *Oeuvres Complètes*, which arrived in spring 1909. By 1910, Eliot had begun drafting poems in a notebook titled "Inventions of the March Hare," representing a clean break from the apprentice work he had published in the *Harvard Advocate*. He started to sketch fragments of the poems "Portrait of a Lady," "Preludes" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Eliot learned from Laforgue's wistful and ironic treatment of romantic ardour. He imitated the style and technique of the French poet's innovations in line length, rhythm and diction, but redirected his work towards American subjects, from urban squalor ("First Caprice in North Cambridge" and "Prelude in Roxbury") to genteel high culture (the atmosphere of Adeline Moffat's downtown Boston salon is conjured in "Portrait of a Lady"). "Inventions of the March Hare" reveals the first gestures of an astonishing breakthrough in twentieth-century poetry. The nervous hypersensitivity of these poems, with an undercurrent of sexual neurosis beneath the dandyish pose of detached urbane observation, is indebted to Laforgue's example but, in those poems collected in 1917 in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, Eliot has recognisably found his own poetic voice. "Of Jules Laforgue," he observed in an address acknowledging his debt to Dante, "I can say that he was the first to teach me how to speak, to teach me the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech" (*TCC* 125).

When Charlotte Eliot heard of her son's plans to study French literature in Paris in the academic year 1910–11, the prospect filled her with trepidation. "I cannot bear to think of your being alone in Paris, the very words give me a chill," she wrote to her son, adding: "I do not admire the French nation, and have less confidence in individuals of that race than in [the] English" (*L1* 12). Eliot overcame his parents' objections and spent a year in the cosmopolitan Latin Quarter. This does not mean that he visited every exhibition, concert, theatre and café in the city. Although Paris was the world's leading city of avant-garde activity in the years before World War I – the city of Picasso, Apollinaire and Stravinsky – aside from applying himself diligently to his academic studies in philosophy, sociology and psychology at the Sorbonne, he appears to have been (as his mother worried) quite lonely, spending evenings reading in French the novels of Dostoevsky and Charles-Louis Philippe. Eliot recorded a "temporary conversion" to Henri Bergson's philosophy of vitalism following attendance at celebrated public lectures at the College de France, society events, but his later rejection of Bergson's anti-intellectualism was pronounced.[14] The isolation of a visiting overseas student was mitigated by Eliot's friendship with his French tutor, Alain-Fournier, a novelist who was associated with the Parisian monthly magazine *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, and with a fellow lodger at his

pension, Jean Verdenal, a medical student who was killed in battle in the Dardanelles in 1915. Eliot dedicated *Prufrock and Other Observations* to Verdenal: a mark of respect and of grief at his battlefield death, not as some critics have strangely contended evidence of a homosexual relationship.[15] Eliot and Verdenal shared a passion for the operas of Richard Wagner and an interest in the extreme right-wing French nationalist Charles Maurras whose royalist (some historians have argued proto-fascist) Action Française movement clashed with police in streets close to Eliot's lodgings. Maurras's writings provided a blueprint for a reactionary political philosophy.

Eliot recalled that in his early twenties he was "very immature for my age, very timid, very inexperienced" (*L1* xix). In a letter to a fellow editor of the *Harvard Advocate*, Conrad Aiken, who was already married and a published poet, he confided that he had been unable to visit the brothels he read about in Philippe's novels: "One walks about the street with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches. I should be better off, I sometimes think, if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago: and indeed I still think sometimes that it would be well to do so before marriage" (*L1* 82). Gail McDonald's chapter sympathetically yet critically addresses Eliot's sexuality and his expressions of misogyny. Sexual anxiety was exacerbated by his father's fierce belief that syphilis was God's punishment. An American Puritan background exerted its transatlantic pull. Eliot later recalled that he had considered settling in Paris and writing poetry in French, revealing doubts about his academic future at Harvard. Contemporary French poets, however, were no longer in tune with the aesthetics of Symons's Symbolists and nothing came of this pipe dream.

On his return to America, Eliot delivered a paper as president of the Harvard Philosophical Club criticising Bergson's philosophical inconsistencies. Bergson's emphasis on intuition had found support from liberal modernists within the Catholic Church but had excited vehement attacks from more conservative quarters. A central preoccupation of Eliot's graduate studies in philosophy at Harvard was the concern to reconcile religious beliefs with advances in science, addressing what Josiah Royce called in a 1913 book *The Problem of Christianity*. Eliot enrolled in Royce's seminar on scientific method in 1913–14. His student essay for Royce's seminar entitled "The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual" is a fascinating document. Eliot doubts there can be a science of religion and advances a sophisticated theory of interpretation that is more relativist than Royce's own idealist position in which self and community are forged by social acts of interpretation. The essay revealed Eliot's wide reading in cultural anthropology and the psychology of religion (notably, the rival theories of Sir James Frazer and Lucien

Lévy-Bruhl). Together with seminars on metaphysics, ethics and logic, Eliot took courses in Eastern philosophy with Charles Lanman and James Woods, which required him to study texts in Pali and Sanskrit, but which ultimately left him, looking back, "in a state of enlightened mystification" (*ASG* 40). Eliot also attended a class on "Schools of the Religious and Philosophical Thought of Japan, as compared with those of China and India," taught by a Japanese scholar, Masaharu Anesaki. The diversity and difficulty of these courses led Crawford to conclude: "No other major twentieth-century poet was so thoroughly and strenuously educated."[16]

In 1914 Eliot took up a Sheldon Travelling Fellowship to Merton College, Oxford, to study the work of the eminent British philosopher, F. H. Bradley, and also Aristotelean thought with Harold Joachim. The previous year Eliot had purchased Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (1893). Eliot rejected Bradley's Absolute as a postulate of his metaphysical system: in effect, an act of faith. Once his academic year at Oxford concluded in the summer of 1915, Eliot worked hard writing up his doctoral dissertation which was completed in April 1916. It was received in the Harvard Philosophy Department as the work of an expert, but due to the wartime dangers of crossing the Atlantic it was not defended at a viva voce. Eliot was never enthusiastic about his dissertation. He praised the grace of Bradley's expository prose style and repeated his maxim that philosophy was the finding of reasons to justify what one believes on instinct. However, in a 1915 letter to a Harvard acquaintance, Norbert Wiener, Eliot expressed grave reservations about his philosophical studies: "I took a piece of fairly technical philosophy for my thesis, and my relativism made me see so many sides to questions that I became hopelessly involved, and wrote a thesis perfectly unintelligible to anyone but myself." He also explained to Wiener that: "For *me*, as for Santayana, philosophy is chiefly literary criticism and conversation about life" (*L1* 89, 88). Disenchantment with the sterility of academic Oxford encouraged Eliot to rebel against his parents and mix among avant-garde poets and artists in London. He later suggested that a desire to escape from returning to the philosophy department at Harvard contributed to his precipitous decision to marry Vivien Haigh-Wood in June 1915 and to settle in London – against strong family disapproval – first as a teacher at private schools and then from March 1917 as an employee of Lloyds Bank.[17]

The technical aspects of Eliot's philosophical writings are examined in detail in Jewel Spears Brooker's chapter, but it is important to note here that it is unwise to ascribe a too systematic theoretical programme to his creative writing. Eliot was not, in Santayana's terms, a philosophical poet. He made a firm distinction between the two activities: "Without doubt, the effort of the philosopher proper, the man who is trying to deal with ideas in

themselves, and the effort of the poet, who may be trying to *realize* ideas, cannot be carried on at the same time" (*CP2* 228). Eliot's training in philosophy, however, is evident in his early articles, essays and book reviews for the *International Journal of Ethics*, the *Monist*, the *New Statesman* and for the *Egoist*, an avant-garde magazine of literature and philosophy which Eliot joined as assistant editor in 1917. In the *Egoist*, Eliot reconceived the concept of a modernising tradition in contradistinction to the radical individualism promoted elsewhere in its pages by Dora Marsden, and in dialogue with Pound's modernist aesthetics. The framework of Bradley's predilection for system and a coherence theory of truth have been discerned behind Eliot's doctrine of tradition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," published in the final two issues of the *Egoist* in 1919. The magisterial tone of this essay cloaks its subversive intent – an act of creative criticism that sought to demolish moribund pre-war literary standards.

In 1920, Eliot assembled a coherent selection of his literary journalism in *The Sacred Wood*, drawing on "longer and better" (*L1* 354) essays for the *Athenaeum*, an advanced weekly arts journal. He reprinted his criticism of the structural and the psychological weaknesses of *Hamlet* in which Shakespeare had apparently failed to find an "objective correlative" (*CP2* 125) to express Hamlet's emotions towards his mother. William Empson linked this striking assertion to Eliot's need to reconcile his own family drama after the death of his father in January 1919, observing: "One ought to have realised at the time that only some great personal distraction could account for so bizarre a judgement."[18] Eliot's formulation of the objective correlative is allied to the attack on romantic theories of self-expression contained in his impersonal theory of poetry. Helen Thaventhiran's chapter examines the rhetorical tactics of Eliot's critical prose: his revaluations of particular works and elucidatory epitomes of well-chosen passages of poetry. *The Sacred Wood*, soon to be reinforced by a series of leading reviews for the *TLS*, collected as *Homage for John Dryden* in 1924, represented a thoroughgoing challenge to the London literary establishment, including thinly veiled attacks on figures such as Sir Edmund Gosse. Eliot conceived of the thirteen essays in *The Sacred Wood* as "a single distinct blow" (*L1* 431) and the collection's title, as commentators have noted, invokes the violent succession enacted by the priest of Nemi as retold in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. It is remarkable how Eliot followed Wordsworth's injunction (to the original writer) to "create the taste by which he is to be realised" (Brooker xxii).

Eliot's collection *Poems* was published by the Woolfs' Hogarth Press in 1919. It was through Bertrand Russell, who, as a visiting professor, had taught Eliot at Harvard, that he gained an entrée into Ottoline Morrell's