

## On the way towards canon-formation: The case of T. S. Eliot

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The battles for the literary canon, numerous discussions and studies took place, as is well known, in the 1980s. It was then that adherents of neo-Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, queer and black studies, governed by Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche's methodological guidelines, turned on the literary canon – that accepted by academia and being reproduced by literature. They saw it as a mechanism of repression. It was then that Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994) emerged, constituting a fitting reply to the “resentment movement”.

Despite the fact that works under Bloom's discussion were meticulously selected, and that methodological setting was clearly defined (however loose and subjective it seemed to many), what the book did was problematizing the crisis of academia and putting it on the spot rather than providing any answers to the question about the canon. The problem of the restrictive canon and its necessity remains open to this day.

When we discuss the battle for the canon that took place in the 1980s but still echoes at the moment, we mainly deal with the academic community and the moment when the conflict of interests was distinct. In fact, there was a precedent in English-speaking intellectual society when numerous attempts to defend and rebuild the canon over the course of ideological, political, and even religious ardent debates were undertaken.

As early as in the first quarter of the 19th century, the amount of published literature increased dramatically and continued to do so at a frantic pace. A “battle” for readership started here: under the competitive climate, books became cheaper and thus more affordable for the wide audience. Literature gradually merged with periodicals and the very nature of reading changed – it becomes hasty and superficial. The ideals of the French revolution (*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*) were transformed into the idea of equality in the aesthetic realm: now the readers could rely on themselves, not on the elitist formulas of good taste. From the middle of the 19th century, the key cultural figures of the time – Sainte-Beuve, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater – consider such a situation to be dangerous and indicative of the major cultural decline. It was in this context that the first attempts were made to select high-quality literature, to designate norms of good taste, to establish a canon, to limit the literary flow. Art theorists start to analyze the causes of the decline of art, to develop methodological

foundations of the canon (by the beginning of the 20th century, those had become quite clear).

It is at this point that Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965), a poet and literary critic, appeared on the literary scene. After moving from the United States to England, he immediately got actively involved in literary life and began to develop the canon and principles of its selection. By the time he came to London, Eliot was a Harvard graduate, a supporter of Irving Babbitt and New Humanism who criticized Rousseau, the ideals of the French revolution, romanticism, and advocated adherence to the tradition (see Gunner 1985, 21–25; Howarth 1964, 130–133; Jain 1992, 42–43). Eliot, having moved to London, grew close to the Imagists Ezra Pound and Thomas E. Hulme, sharing their aesthetic views in many ways (Schwartz 1985, 50–68). In spite of their poetic radicalism, both Pound and Hulme were essentially revolutionary conservatives and attempted to delineate their own tradition, to build a canon relying on rigid methodological principles. But it was only Eliot who managed to create the canon that actually became influential and authoritative.

Eliot made a name as a literary critic and published a series of essays on the figures he considered the greatest in English literature: Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, John Donne, Andrew Marvell, John Milton, John Dryden, and Swinburne. He explicitly presented his conservative views in his flagship essays “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921) and “The Function of Criticism” (1923). Eliot primarily attacked academic literary criticism that took its shape under the influence of positivism with its scientific rigor and objectivity. This kind of criticism, earlier ridiculed by one of Eliot’s favorite prose texts, Henry James’s *The Aspern Papers* (1888), bracketed the reader and the individual perception out, and treated a literary work as an objective “reality”. In this way, it distributed ready-made ideas about literature. A literary work was seen as a product of circumstances or, more often, of individual talent and individual biography (Eliot 1961, 147). As a result, the history of literature came across as a set of weakly interconnected inert masterpieces composed in the past. Eliot’s other target was Victorian impressionistic criticism. Eliot considered its representatives – Walter Pater, Arthur Symons, Oscar Wilde, Algernon Swinburne – to be concerned not as much with the subject (text) as with analyzing their own impressions. Consequently, their experience remained self-sufficient and random, and could not be a basis for a canon.

In fact, the two directions represented the two irreconcilable elements – intellectual knowledge and sensory perception, and it was Eliot’s goal to reconcile them, to find a point where they could intersect, to work out a methodological approach and to build a new canon on this basis.

Eliot repeatedly notes that only those who are involved in the live process of creating literature, only those who do not only perceive someone else’s aesthetic experience but actually transform it in their own writing, can make opinions on literature in a substantial way (Craig 1982, 63). In fact, Eliot, following Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, claims that the mind of a critic is structurally equivalent to that of a poet (Meisel 1987, 73) and it is a poet who works as an agent of the cultural process. With

this idea Eliot is very close to Carlyle (Noel-Tod 2013, 477) That is why he preferred to get into a discussion with those literary theorists who were also poets, playwrights, or prose writers (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Swinburne) and not with representatives of academia. His methodological approach and mechanism of building the canon were based upon a distinctly anti-liberal way of thinking (Eliot 1963b, 29) and later it would grow into the criticism of humanism (482). He would describe his position with a formula borrowed from Charles Maurras: a Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics.

Eliot takes a stand against the concept of an autonomous, self-sufficient subject and believes that one must correlate oneself with common values in all spheres of spiritual life. In this kind of art, the major value is the tradition (see Buckley 1959, 93–94). Eliot attacks the common (mainly romantic) stereotype of a self-sufficient genius drawing inspiration exclusively from his or her personality. Strictly speaking, Eliot denies the importance of inspiration as a creative instinct:

For all I know, it may have much more significance for the psychologist's understanding of a particular poet, or of one poet in a certain phase, than it has for anyone's understanding of poetry. Some finer minds, indeed, may operate very differently; I cannot think of Shakespeare or Dante as having been dependent upon such capricious releases (1955, 145–146).

A true creative impulse, according to Eliot, would be not the *capricious release*, or the individual inspiration, but the *historical sense*. Here comes a flagship definition that Eliot provides for the creative act:

The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional (1963b, 14).

In this definition, Eliot articulates a paradox conservative in itself – the one he presented a few lines above: “Whereas we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best but the most individual part of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (14). The sense of history shapes a tradition that is everything but a set of texts to be blindly imitated (see Frye 1981, 26). The tradition unfolds in an individual impulse that pushes the artist to bring his work to life. That impulse is, in fact, the collective power of literary predecessors, and their voices are to be heard in the voice of the poet (see Craig 1982, 129–130). If one follows Eliot's logic, these voices can be recognized with the help of critical analysis that Eliot discussed in his essay “The Function of Criticism”:

And, as our instincts of tidiness imperatively command us not to leave to the haphazard of unconsciousness what we can attempt to do consciously, we are forced to conclude that what happens unconsciously we could bring about, and form into a purpose, if we made a conscious attempt (Eliot 1963b, 24).

The concept of *sense of history* as an impulse and its critical analysis explains the nature of the explicit intertextuality of Eliot's early works, in particular, of his poem *The Waste Land*. The finale of the first part of the poem ("The Burial of the Dead") constitutes a representation of a modern city as a kingdom of death:

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.  
(Eliot 1963a, 55)

Upon closer examination, however, the individual perception of London as of a dead city appears to be a chain of quotations following each other. Those are quotations from Charles Baudelaire's "Les Sept Vieillards" ("Unreal city"), and Dante's *Inferno* (III, 55–57: "I had not thought death had undone so many"; see Frye 1981, 51). Later on, Eliot would add two more quotations:

O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
(Eliot 1963a, 55)

You! hypocrite lecteur -mon semblable, -mon frère!  
(Eliot 1963a, 55)

The first one is from John Webster's tragedy *White Devil*, the second – from Baudelaire's poetical foreword to *Les Fleurs Du Mal*.

As is known, Eliot published the poem *The Waste Land* annotated – he actually indicated all the sources he borrowed his lines from, and this way, he articulated the analytical work he had carried out. He exposed how the modern view of a city as a kingdom of death was shaped, and, relatedly, how the modern urban text was formed – thanks to Dante, Webster, and Baudelaire. It is the voices of these poets that reveal themselves in that of the narrator.

This is the first aspect of Eliot's theory of impersonal writing – the one concerning the relationship of the poet with the preceding literary tradition. Another one is associated with the poet's relation to their work. Here, Eliot speaks up as a follower of Gustave Flaubert's impersonal theory as well as of the theorists of classicism with their concept of verisimilitude. When creating a fictional world, the poet must follow the logic of this very world (see Buckley 1959, 102; Craig 1982, 128), and not his or her own ideas and desires. Here, Eliot formulates his methodological apparatus, and it is in accordance with it that he would later create the canon. Among the poets and playwrights who stayed true to the world they created, with its integrity, he named Dante, Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, George Chapman (see Mat-

thews 2006, 22–43), the metaphysical poets (Donne, Marvell), and John Keats. Eliot's list of those who followed their own fancies and sacrificed the integrity of the text includes Milton, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and even Goethe. In their cases, the personal intrudes into the realm of the aesthetical. Eliot writes about Goethe: "With Goethe, for instance, I often feel too acutely 'this is what Goethe the man believed' instead of merely entering the world which Goethe has created [...]" (1963b, 258). From the same perspective he evaluates Shelley:

I find his ideas repellent; and the difficulty of separating Shelley from his ideas and beliefs is still greater than with Wordsworth. And the biographical interest which Shelley has always excited makes it difficult to read the poetry without remembering the man: and the man was humourless, pedantic, self-centered, and sometimes almost a blackguard (1955, 89).

It is essential that, when evaluating a writer, Eliot always keeps in mind the principle of unity of the text – that is to say, the harmony of its parts, and its self-sufficiency. Such unity is found by Eliot in works by Chapman, Shakespeare and the metaphysical poets. Eliot believes that this unity takes place when a poet obtains a certain worldview called "sensibility". The concept of sensibility constitutes another methodological foundation he draws on when creating the literary canon (see Schwartz 1985, 176–178). Sensibility, in his terms, is the poet's ability to bring together and synthesize all forms of experience. As he puts it:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes (Eliot 1963b, 287).

Sensibility is not identical to philosophical and/or religious beliefs. This is a kind of instinct that finds its expression in a form (see Gunner 1985, 49; Schwartz 1985, 179–180). It can be exemplified by the situation when an idea is felt like the smell of roses. This way, sensibility is something that supplies the unity of form and content. According to Eliot, Shakespeare and Joseph Conrad (see Thompson 1963, 4) did not have a powerful philosophy, but they obtained the sensibility under discussion.

Poets tend to obtain sensibility in epochs when a strong religious sentiment dominates in culture. It is exactly religion, that is to say, a universalized worldview, that empowers the poet to see the world simultaneously in its unity and its variety (Eliot 1961, 61). Eliot believes that such a religious sentiment was something that the poets of *dolce stil nuovo* and the metaphysical poets were endowed with. That is why they were more at ease with creating integral worlds. Later on, a process of dissociation of sensibility would start in English literature (1963b, 288). In 1921, while working on his essay "The Metaphysical Poets", Eliot associated this process with the figures of Milton and Dryden, and blamed them for the degradation of English poetry (288). Milton moves along the path of reflection and perfecting the form. His poetry introduces, ultimately, a separation of a form from content, and of emotions from ideas (see Eliot's essay "Milton I"). Milton's impact, as Eliot puts it, was "bad" and fatal:

There is more of Milton's influence in the badness of the bad verse in the eighteenth century than that of anybody's else [...] It is more serious, also if we affirm that Milton's bad influence may be traced much farther than upon bad poets; if we say that it was an influence against which we still have to struggle (1961, 138–139).

Milton's mistakes were exacerbated by Tennyson and Browning who led English poetry to a state of actual decay through further weakening the connection with the tradition.

Much later, Eliot would come to the realization that what actually caused dissociation of sensibility was not Milton's evil will but the Renaissance itself – as a worldview which placed the human being in the center of the universe, and brought the crisis of religious values (see Eliot 1961, 146–161). Here Eliot reproduces, to some extent, the methodology of John Ruskin, who associated the degradation of art forms with the decline of religious sentiment. According to Eliot, with the triumph of humanism and the extinction of religious sentiment, the possibility of synthesizing diverse experiences and achieving sensibility disappears. Even Shakespeare and his younger contemporaries appear to have been affected by this process. The task of a modern poet and intellectual is to comprehend these processes and try to resist them.

Then, Eliot lines up a number of canonical authors: Chaucer, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Shakespeare, Chapman, Ben Jonson, the metaphysical poets (John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Lord Herbert), Anglican theologians (Lancelot Andrewes, John Bramhall). Starting in the 18th century, the tradition was discontinued (being kept by chance in stand-alone texts) – to be resumed only by the efforts of Ezra Pound and the Imagists.

In his essays, Eliot mainly discusses national tradition. However, his methodology and evaluations claim to be universal, applicable to all world literature regardless of national trends. He assesses from the same perspective Bhagavad-Gita, Euripides, Seneca, Virgil, Goethe, Dante, Racine, Pascal, Baudelaire (see Morgenstern 2012, 164–165), and others. It is significant that national specificity and national spirit, concepts that were essential for romantics, did not interest him at all. Moreover, he rebelled against them. This can be seen in his controversy with John Middleton Murry (1889–1957) that unfolded in the essay “The Function of Criticism”. Murray, who wrote about romanticism, essentially continues the romantic aesthetics line when saying that the specificity of English national spirit is to rely on the inner voice. Accordingly, he considers romanticism (that is, based on this principle) to be an organic element of English literature. In fact, Murray reproduces the argument of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose famous essay “Self-Reliance” (1841) consistently conveyed this idea. Eliot hints in his essay that he cracked this source and claimed that such an approach could lead one to pantheism (and it is exactly what Emerson was up to). He objected to Murray as follows: “The question is, the first question, not what comes natural or what comes easy to us, but what is right?” (Eliot 1963b, 28). The “right” paradigm is the classical one that implies the presence of sensibility in a poetic text. However natural the path of literature may seem, it may well be wrong. It is this wrong path that English literature took in the 18th century – and

Eliot was busy making up for it, in particular, by re-emphasizing the discoveries of the Baroque poets.

Eliot believes that in such a situation, one can find the right path by turning to a “neighboring tradition”. That is exactly what young Eliot does after failing to find the right kind of poetry in English literature of the recent past. He takes the French symbolists Laforgue and Corbière as his mentors, seeing them as successors of the English Baroque: “Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière in many of his poems, are «nearer to the ‘school of Donne’ than any modern English poet»” (Eliot 1963b, 290). Such an approach, cosmopolitan and classicist in itself, would lead Eliot later to the idea of a dialogue of cultures – the one he would express in his work *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). Eliot would talk about the dialogue between cultures that should be constantly conducted in order to keep up with the canon. It was this goal that he set for himself when created the *Criterion* magazine that was to become a territory for such a dialogue.

Turning to a “neighboring” culture is inevitably associated with literary translation – a problem that Eliot repeatedly addressed in his essays as well (Frye 1981, 27). In *Criterion* he published contemporary translations of foreign poetry and translated Saint-John Perse’s poem “Anabase” (1924) into English himself. Eliot took up the problems of translation substantially since it was an important component of his concept of dialogue of cultures. As early as 1920, he published an essay “Euripides and Professor Murray”, in which he substantiated the need for translation as well as cautioned against possible mistakes that could arise in this field.

He reviewed the translation of Euripides’s *Medea* by the authoritative classical philologist Gilbert Murray. Eliot certainly did not have any reason to fault Murray for the lack of knowledge in Greek language and culture, especially taking into consideration the fact that the professor’s Harvard lectures at a certain point had had a considerable impact on Eliot’s own views on the nature of poetry. He still calls Murray “the most popular Hellenist of his time” and “the most conspicuous Greek propagandist of the day” (Eliot 1963b, 61). However, as Eliot’s analysis shows, Murray’s good command does not do much for the latter’s understanding of contemporaneity and the tasks of modern literature. The language structures used by Murray, according to Eliot the classicist who demands rigor, are loose and inexact. His version of Euripides turns the Greek brevity into the postromantic verbosity of William Morris and Swinburne: Murray always uses “two words where the Greek language requires one, and where the English language will provide him with one” (61). Wherever Euripides offers an emotion embodied in a concrete image, Murray’s version of it appears to be blurred to the fluid haze of Swinburne, so the poetical values offered by the original playwright get lost in translation. Eliot writes: “Greek poetry will never have the slightest vitalizing effect upon English poetry if it can only appear masquerading as a vulgar debasement of the eminently personal idiom of Swinburne” (61). According to Eliot, the concepts of ancient poetry are not taken into account partly because the translator, being a prominent scholar, was not an original poet but simply an imitator, an epigone, an insignificant follower of the Pre-Raphaelites. And the classics demand someone who has a feeling of modernity of a new poetical language, someone like

Pound. Whereas Euripides's original constitutes an essential part of the canon, it is not the case with Murray's translation. This translation lags far behind the tasks of modern literature that Eliot formulates.

Such criticism of a translation points to the fact that Eliot's concept of canon is far from a static scheme. Instead, it involves a poet and comes across as a dynamic system that is brought to life by the reader's responses. Nevertheless, Eliot recognized certain indisputably great figures including half-forgotten authors (Lancelot Andrewes, John Bramhall), and, in particular, the metaphysical poets. Eliot's ideas had a significant impact and determined, in many respects, the aesthetic position of the new criticism. In the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, disapproval of English romanticism and valorization of the Baroque came into fashion after the manner of Eliot. The Eliot canon stayed unquestioned until the 1950s, when the beatniks came onto the scene and attacked the "temple" of poetry erected by Eliot and his followers.

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T. S. Eliot. Canon. Tradition. Sensibility. Dissociation of sensibility. Translation.

The article presents an attempt to highlight the historical and cultural background of formation of Eliot's canon, as well as to analyze certain aesthetic paradigms that formed its basis (the theory of tradition, the conception of impersonal poetry, and the concept of "dissociation of sensibility"). In the article, the key figures belonging to the canon are mentioned, and the reasons for their canonization are identified. Particular attention is paid to Eliot's take on the problem of dialogue of cultures, and of acquisition of a foreign poetical tradition, as well as to the principles that, according to Eliot, should govern literary translation.

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