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T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Literary Tradition

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound significantly influenced modernist poetry through publishing their respective poetic works as well as editing and promoting the work of fellow modernists and inspiring developments in 20th century Anglophone literary criticism like New Criticism. However, despite both poets' prominence in Anglo-American modernist poetry, their shared interest in situating their works in literary tradition, and with special emphasis on the classical tradition, through erudite allusion distinguishes their understanding of "modernism" from that of other Anglo-American modernists like William Carlos Williams and Virginia Woolf. This article approaches Eliot's and Pound's participation in Anglo-American literary modernist movement and their reception of literary tradition in different ways. The first section compares the non-literary prose of some Anglo-American modernist poets and writers alongside Eliot's and Pound's own prose to show exactly where other Anglo-American modernists disagree with and diverge from those particular aesthetic principles shared by Eliot and Pound. The second section attempts to provide an explanation for why Eliot and Pound have such a desire to fit themselves into literary tradition, suggesting that understanding both poets as believing in a structuralism about meaning accounts best for why reception and reproduction are fundamental features of their respective work.

Keywords: Literature, Classics, Classical Reception, Modernism, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound

The Place of Eliot and Pound in Anglo-American Literary Modernism

Literary modernism is an important era of literary activity that is difficult to describe due to the existence of several distinct strains of modernist writing, each subscribing to distinct sets of aesthetic principles. One trait that holds for much of modernist literature is that works tend to “plunge[]’ the reader into a confusing and difficult mental landscape which cannot be immediately understood” (Childs 4). Modernist texts are known for their difficulty and experimentation with language, form, and content--qualities that are generally attributed to modernists’ attempts to represent the chaos and disorder of modernity. T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound are perhaps the most notable poets and theorists of Anglo-American modernist poetry as they “revolutionized Anglo-American poetry, arguing that traditional poetic forms and themes could no longer encapsulate the experience of the modern world” (Beasley 1). Eliot and Pound significantly influenced modernist poetry through publishing their respective works as well as editing and promoting the work of fellow modernists along with inspiring certain developments in 20th century Anglophone literary criticism like the school of New Criticism. Their status as central writers of early Anglo-American modernist literature is indisputable, as they were not only famous poets in their lifetimes but still subject to a great deal of scholarly criticism and analysis. Along with writers such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Virginia Woolf, Eliot and Pound are the foremost examples of modernist literature in the English-speaking world.

Although modernist literature had many practitioners whose aesthetic principles originated from a desire to distinguish themselves and their work from older literary forms unable to contend with contemporary concerns, Eliot and Pound are exceptions to this generalization. Recent scholarship, particularly in the fields of classical reception studies and comparative literature, has demonstrated the importance of the notion of aesthetic continuity and

the reception of previous literary traditions in the oeuvres of Eliot and Pound. Adam Goldwyn takes the decision to change the epigraph of *The Waste Land* from the final lines of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to a passage from the Roman author Petronius' *Satyricon* as suggestive of "both Pound's and Eliot's perspectives on the aesthetics and craft of poetry in the modern world, their relationship with one another, their identities as authors and authorial personae and, as importantly, their reception of the (Classical) past" (54). The layers of intertextual reference in the excerpt taken from the *Satyricon*, as well as in the brief "*il miglior fabbro*" following the excerpt, a line of praise originally given by Dante for the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel, "mimics in miniature the polyglot and allusive style of *The Waste Land* and Pound's own later modernist epic *The Cantos*" (Goldwyn 56). It is apparent that the very first elements of *The Waste Land* explicitly and deliberately announce the poem's classical heritage and also situate the work in a tradition of conscious intertextuality, erudite allusion, and transformation of received stories and tropes. From the editorial exchanges had between Eliot and Pound one can further conclude that their considerations of literary tradition, reception, and how best to place oneself along the course of historical and aesthetic development were important facets of both of their poetics.

But while the notion of "modernity" in this critical moment of Eliot's and Pound's careers comes from recognizing, internalizing, and even self-consciously reproducing elements of past literary works in ways that can speak about the modern day, other Anglo-American modernist poets and writers conceive of their work as having different principles and different aims. There is a notable divide between Eliot and Pound and a great deal of other modernists who reject the drives to incorporate oneself into literary history and openly receive past traditions. This article consists of two sections, each approaching Eliot's and Pound's

participation in Anglo-American literary modernist movement and their reception of literary tradition in different ways. The first section compares the non-literary prose of some Anglo-American modernist poets and writers alongside Eliot's and Pound's own prose to show exactly where other Anglo-American modernists disagree with and diverge from those particular aesthetic principles shared by Eliot and Pound. Broadly speaking, other Anglo-American modernist poets and writers fit quite comfortably into the characterization of modernism as a "breaking away" from tradition, and especially from the classical tradition, yet the concepts and ideas expressed in the poetic and critical work of Eliot and Pound do not accord with this conception of modernism. The second section attempts to provide an explanation for why Eliot and Pound have such a desire to fit themselves into literary tradition. Despite Eliot's famous insistence on the poet's "impersonality" and the reader's need to focus on the poetry instead of its source, both he and Pound are products of deeply contingent occurrences and happenings, of layers of historical development that have resulted in these two poets' styles and shared consciousness of their place in history. Eliot's relationship with New Criticism, a school of literary criticism generally opposed to historical criticism, is considered and then complicated by showing how a New Critical approach to Eliot's poetry fails to capture the significance of his allusions. In light of this tension between New Criticism and Eliot's and Pound's unavoidable intertextuality, the two poets' shared interest in literary tradition, as evidenced most clearly in their reception of classical literature, might be best understood as following from a form of literary structuralism that extends into social and political life.

Rejecting and Accepting Tradition in Anglo-American Literary Modernism

Eliot and Pound were not only influential through their poetry and poetics, but also in editing the works of other writers and being prominent voices in various modernist movements.

Of the two, Pound was especially significant to the development of literary modernism as a set of aesthetically principled and complex movements for his involvement in such distinct strains as Imagism and Vorticism among others. Although it is self-evident that Anglo-American modernist poets, writers, and movements disagreed on technique and what topically can be considered “modern,” the collective categorization of such a diverse range of figures and works into the same historical group can still obscure the deep contentions Anglo-American modernists had with each other. A brief look into the non-literary prose of some Anglo-American modernists can illustrate what some of those differences about the conception of modernity and what counts as modern poetry are. By such a comparison one can understand what makes the modernism of Eliot and Pound distinct from other forms of Anglo-American literary modernism.

In his 1948 talk “The Poem as a Field of Action” William Carlos Williams argues that modern poetry has been burdened by its reliance on received poetic structures and forms and advocates instead for “a revolution in the conception of the poetic foot” (281). Williams wanted “not only to disengage the elements of a measure but to seek ... a new measure or a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past” (283). Einstein’s discoveries about relativity in the physical world, for Williams, dissolves the notion of a trans-historical “measure,” whether that refers to poetic meter or other abstract theoretical concepts. In place of a trans-historical measure for poetry or other purposes he proposes we create new structures fit uniquely for the concerns of modernity. Williams focuses on the need to cultivate modern language in poetry that reflects the development in the English spoken in his contemporary United States. According to Williams, a new poetic language and structure can only be formed from discoveries taken:

[F]rom what we *hear* in America. Not, that is, from a study of the classics, not even the American “Classics” —the *dead* classics which—may I remind you, we have *never heard* as living speech. No one has or can *hear* them as they were written any more than we can *hear* Greek today. (290)

In this same talk Williams disparages Eliot’s approach to writing poetry, asserting that he himself and those who agree with him “are in a different phase—a new language—[they] are making the mass in which some other later Eliot will dig” (285). Williams presents Eliot and those who follow his example as mere “extractors of genius,” or poets who reproduce the great works of older poets while contributing little to the development of new poetic language (285). Emphasizing that his own position “is *not* that of Mr. Eliot,” Williams serves as a good representative of Anglo-American literary modernists who see tradition as something to be rejected and disagree with the form of intertextuality found in many works by Eliot and by extension Pound (285).

Not only do Anglo-American poets like Williams find fault with Eliot’s and Pound’s styles of poetry, but some Anglo-American novelists like Virginia Woolf have their issues with Eliot and Pound as well. Woolf, recalling a dinner she had with Eliot in which he read a version of *The Waste Land*, recorded “[w]hat connects [the poem] together, I’m not so sure. ... One was left, however, with some strong emotion” (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 178). Though Woolf seems to have appreciated Eliot’s complicated intertextual poem, she elsewhere does not appear to share Eliot’s belief that an author should be situated in literary history bearing an appreciation of that place relative to the whole of literary tradition. With the first sentence of “On Not Knowing Greek,” an essay included in her 1925 collection *The Common Reader*, Woolf decries

the project of learning Ancient Greek for the discontinuity between ancient Hellenes and modern Anglophones:

For it is vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we should be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys, since we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition. (39)

Woolf finds that such a “breach of tradition” makes ancient Greek works unpalatable to the modern Anglophone ear. She compares the emotional content of ancient and modern literature when asserting “[i]n six pages of Proust we can find more complicated and varied emotions than in the whole of the *Electra*” (“On Not Knowing Greek” 44). In Woolf’s view the only virtue of *Electra*’s style is that it conveys “heroism itself ... [and] fidelity itself” through its characters (“On Not Knowing Greek” 44). Sophocles’ characters represent “the way in which everybody has always behaved,” but although this makes Sophocles’ characters easy to understand, the archetypes drawn from the Greek playwrights and adapted by later writers such as Chaucer are “the varieties of the human species” as opposed to merely being “the originals” (“On Not Knowing Greek” 44). Having been raised a modern English speaker and having cultivated literary sensibilities in this context, Woolf finds the drive to learn foreign tongues and develop taste for distant classical or traditional literary works derisible.

In stark contrast to the views expressed by Williams and Woolf, a desire to be situated in literary tradition as identified by Goldwyn can be found in Eliot’s and Pound’s prose. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Eliot describes the general stance of Anglophone critics in the early 20th century as being that the most “original” authors are often the best, that critics

“dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors” (40). However, Eliot believes this attitude toward the appreciation of literature to be incorrect, maintaining instead that “if we approach a poet without his prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 40). Throughout the article Eliot posits concepts which help to explain his own attitude to literary history and poetic innovation, including the need for a “historical sense ... of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 41). The final section of the article, beginning with a quotation from Aristotle in the original Greek, distinguishes between those who believe that poetry is for expressing “sincere emotion,” which here perhaps means sentimentality, those who “appreciate technical excellence” in poetry, and finally those that esteem “*significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 49).

Like Eliot, Pound published his own articles that discuss how a poet should go about writing poetry early in his career, his most prominent being “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste.” The brief work serves as a guide to writing Imagist poetry and makes prescriptions on what not to do as an Imagist poet, while also giving glimpses throughout into some of the more enduring components of Pound’s poetics. Pound describes the process of learning to write poetry by using analogies to other disciplines, with one such analogy being that of scientist learning how to conduct science. He states that a novice scientist “does not expect to be acclaimed as a great scientist until he has *discovered* something,” and discovery can only take place after “learning what has been discovered already” (“A Few Don’t’s by an Imagiste” 204). In a similar manner to

Pound, Eliot makes his own analogy to science in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” comparing the relationship between poet and poetry to “the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide” (44). The platinum is not a reagent in this reaction, but a catalyst, and the already-present elements in the chamber react in the presence of platinum to produce a new substance. Akin to platinum, Eliot sees the poet as a fundamentally unchanging and “impersonal” participant in the process of creating poetry, which in his view is the recombination of basic poetic emotions into new arrangements, and this conception of the poetic process appears rather similar to Pound’s own following his analogy to the novice scientist.

Eliot and Pound, in direct contrast with Williams and Woolf, make prescriptions for those interested in writing poetry to understand the works which precede them throughout history and to utilize elements of poetry that existed prior to themselves. By cultivating a historical sense and learning from the literary discoveries of the past, one receives past traditions and is equipped with the proper tools and knowledge to innovate thereon. For both poets, rejecting literary tradition is inconceivable, as a poet would be lost without a tradition to both appreciate and to motivate further development.

Eliot, Pound, Structure, and Meaning

As covered above, Eliot argues that a poet should recognize their place in literary history, and only through a process of conscious study and contextualization could a poet become a part of literary tradition while contributing something new. But an aspect of Eliot’s essay that complicates his prescriptions for poets is his assertion that “[t]he emotion of art is impersonal” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 49). From his analogy to chemistry Eliot seems to take the emotion of art to be an objective and empirical component of the work itself. Rejecting more

romantic or transcendental approaches to the meaning of poetry, Eliot writes “[t]his essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 49). It appears in Eliot’s view that the discernable and communicable parts of a work are what evoke a work’s emotions, and that participating in criticism involves developing an objective view of what could be called a poem’s dispositional contents instead of its abstract or non-observable qualities.

One can see how Eliot’s notion of impersonality inspires the claims to objectivity and empiricism found in New Criticism, a 20th century American school of literary criticism which “concentrate[ed] on the verbal complexities and ambiguities of short poems considered as self-sufficient objects without attention to their origins or effects” (Baldick 170). One of the purported virtues of New Criticism was that, while following the methods set forth by its theorists, a reader of poetry “need only look at the ‘work itself’” to comprehend the significance of a text (Amiran 6). Through adopting the critical principles of figures such as I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, and John Crowe Ransom “[c]riticism becomes objective, empirical, and systematic, a scientific discipline in its own right, impervious to the demands of patriots, moralists, Marxists, or philologists, just as physics is” (Amiran 7). However, despite the claims to objectivity and empiricism made by canonical New Critics, literary scholar Minda Rae Amiran identifies numerous complications within New Criticism, including the metaphorical and unspecific manner by which theorists wrote about how literary devices “complicate” a poem and how a poem can be both “mute” in its not making assertions about the world and yet still be entirely a construction of language taken from experiences in the world. Amiran notes regarding the relationship between language and representation that “[t]o some extent, our ideas of

coherence must come from our experience of the world, even in works such as *Alice in Wonderland* that create a world of their own” (19). On account of these theoretical paradoxes and other historical developments, New Criticism is no longer the dominant school of literary criticism in the Anglophone world, though it has had an enduring impact on literary pedagogy.

Although Eliot was a significant influence for the New Critics, Eliot’s own thoughts on literature and the poet as expressed in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” do not seem to directly entail a support for New Criticism and its paradoxes. Eliot’s notion of impersonality might be better understood as the acknowledgement of that which is outside of the self, of both the aesthetic universals and the aesthetic particulars appearing throughout the course of literary history. Following Eliot’s and Pound’s scientific metaphors for poetic creativity, one receives most of the words that one uses, and one must observe language and experiment with words in order to accurately employ language. Most words are not one’s own creations but are instead the products of a continuous series of receptions and reproductions. This understanding of impersonality does not correspond to the objectivity and empiricism of New Criticism, and some important principles of New Criticism seem unequipped to engage with Eliot’s poetry, for one can hardly claim that his works are “poems in themselves.” *The Waste Land* means little without its intertextuality, as the poem is strewn so completely with allusions that the significance of even a small collection of lines cannot be comprehended without understanding the allusions made and then attempting to find the intention behind the allusions. Few readers would know what to make of “laquearia” in line 92 without footnotes or a discussion in a critical edition (*The Waste Land* 8), as context provides little information to suggest what the word means and would not suggest that the word is a reference to the *Aeneid* to someone without an education in Latin and classical literature. To try to understand *The Waste Land* in the way New Critics generally

promote, to treat the work as a “self-sufficient object” and to analyze the poem’s internal structure without reference to the world, or to present it to readers without further information or context as I. A. Richards did with his students in *Practical Criticism*, would be to miss entirely the significance of *The Waste Land*’s allusions. The poem is written to be read within a particular context, not abstracted from its place in history.

What might capture well Eliot’s and Pound’s motivations for their literary reception and deep interest in enmeshing themselves in literary tradition while still composing innovative poetry is that their thinking on literature and the creative process is *structuralist* in spirit. One might compare both poets’ thoughts on where the significance of poetry comes from to the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. The “governing notion” of Lévi-Strauss’ *La Pensée Sauvage* is, as described by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “that the universe of conceptual tools available to the savage¹ is closed and he must make do with it to build whatever cultural forms he builds” (352). In a similar vein Eliot states that “[t]he business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 48), such ordinary emotions made known from a deliberate study of older works. Speaking directly to the reader of poetry Eliot declares “[y]ou cannot value [the poet] alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 41). According to Eliot, the study of poetics is not just empirical, as the New Critics believed, but it is also fundamentally *relational* and *contingent*, since the poetic emotions that have existed from the earliest poems must be revealed through comparison and from how these emotions have been arranged throughout literary history. The basic emotions of poetry constitute

¹ “Savage” and the related French adjective “sauvage” are politically-charged and offensive terms no longer used in academic anthropology to discuss indigenous societies and their cultural forms. Appearances of both words in this text only occur in reference to the title of Lévi-Strauss’ book and in quotes from Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

a closed system, and much work must be done by the aspiring poet to determine how to both receive tradition as well as develop past what has already been composed. Pound's own analogy between learning science and learning to write poetry seems to present poetry as a closed system as well, in that the discoveries of other scientists are their own and come from their own rearrangements of basic physical substances. Geertz further summarizes Lévi-Strauss' theory of meaning-making derived from his studies of indigenous societies so:

Savages build models of reality—of the natural world, of the self, of society. But they do so not as modern scientists do by integrating abstract propositions into a framework of formal theory ... but by ordering perceived particulars into immediately intelligible wholes. The science of the concrete arranges directly sensed realities ... These become structural models representing the underlying order of reality as it were analogically.

(352)

Although works such as *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* are by no means “immediately intelligible wholes,” they are indeed collages of different images drawn from the stock of global literary tradition which, in particular arrangements, convey a complex of feeling and meaning. Pound begins “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste” by describing the essential feature of Imagist poetry as the “Image,” or “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (200). On comparison Pound perhaps would have appreciated the similarity between Lévi-Strauss' conclusions and his own concept of the Image. Eliot's relational understanding of meaning in poetry resulted in poetry which gathers allusions to different literary traditions in different languages in condensed space, a single line of his poetry often needing a great deal of prose to demonstrate its effect. For Eliot and Pound, meaning emerges from verse in a moment of clarity that comes from drawing together all the distinct concepts and

images in a poem, and this requires understanding the whole system of meaning and relations that exists within the poem and outside of the poem.

Considering the poetic theories of Eliot and Pound to be in essence structuralist may account for both poets' concerns about the state of contemporary culture and politics. Some of the desperation over the decline of culture and the confusion produced by modernity found in *The Waste Land*, "The Hollow Men," and elsewhere in Eliot's poetry can be attributed to his concerns about our lack of understanding of tradition. Without situating one's thought against the received wisdom and values of one's forbearers, one is unable to find meaning in modernity. And from his study of an eclectic mix of thinkers, most notably the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, Pound developed a holistic theory of culture that identifies the origins of the aesthetic principles of a particular work to the non-aesthetic practices of a society. In *Guide to Kulchur*, an expansive prose work whose topics range across contemporary literature, aesthetic history, politics, and philosophy, Pound attempts to collect and organize principles for what he terms "the New Learning or the New Paideuma" (27). The *paideuma*,² which he elsewhere describes as "the dominant or germinal complex of ideas of a given epoch and of a people" (Sansone and Pound 80), must be carefully guarded and protected in order to produce the best outcomes for culture. Pound's view of the relationship between society and aesthetic principles, which takes aesthetic works and their principles of composition to be emergent features of social and political arrangements, appears to be structuralist in essence.

Conclusion

² Pound borrows his term *paideuma* from *παιδεύμα*, an Ancient Greek word meaning a "thing taught, [or the] subject of instruction" (Liddell and Scott). That the *paideuma* is something that must be carefully taught and controlled is made clear in *Guide to Kulchur* where Pound considers his work "notes for a totalitarian treatise" (27). His *Guide to Kulchur* is "totalitarian" because of his belief that culture and the arts must be defended from certain practices, in particular "usury," which can cause both to corrupt and worsen.

Many modernist poets and writers, not just Eliot and Pound but also James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, H. D., Hermann Broch, and C. P. Cavafy, wrote works which experimented with written style while simultaneously grappling with literary tradition. These and other modernists produced works which take inspiration from ancient Greek and Roman literature, enriching and complicating their works by innovating while also looking backwards and participating in the millennia-spanning reception of the classical world. To understand these authors' prose and poetry as best as possible a reader must also understand their numerous allusions, in the process creating a mental network of meaning extending out from the individual work that contextualizes the work itself. Modernists of this sort, who would perhaps have agreed with some of the principles of Eliot's and Pound's criticism and poetic theory covered above, do not see modernism as a breaking away from tradition like Williams and Woolf. Their work and motivations for writing in the ways they do may instead originate from a shared structuralism about meaning, which takes participating in tradition to be a necessary meaning-making process of reception and reproduction of literary forms, tropes, and content.

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