

THE ABIDING PRESENCE OF THE DEAD

WEEK 5: ELIOT

Key passages:

1. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' [...] represents a complete break with the nineteenth-century tradition and a new start. [...] The canons of the poetical are forgotten; the poet assumes the right to make use of any materials that seem to him significant. We have here, in short, poetry that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age.

F.R. Leavis. *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1961 [1932]). pp. 75-6.

2. Of all contemporary contributions to philosophy, Bergson's is the most precious Before him we were cogs and wheels in a vast and dead machine; now, if we wish it, we can help to write our own parts in the drama of creation.'

Will Durant: *The Story of Philosophy* (London: Simon & Schuster 1926)

3. 'Bergson creates the divide between the Enlightenment and the modern mentality... If the moderns did not have Bergson, they would have to invent him.'

Richard Lehan: *Literary Modernism and Beyond: The Extended Vision & the Realms of the Text* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State UP 2009, p.311)

4. [I]n contrast to the 'ecstatic' tendencies of some European modernisms, the Anglo-American version developed in part as a critique of modernity. Here the 'new' was a highly equivocal category, since cultural renovation was frequently projected as a return to the values of a previous age [...]. The modernism presided over by Pound and Eliot (one among several, but arguably still the hegemonic one) thus issued a call to order in the name of values which were explicitly anti-modern, though it did so by developing literary forms which were overtly modernist.

Peter Nicholls. *Modernisms: A Literary Guide.* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1995.) pp.166-7

5. Eliot, Pound and Lewis as North Americans in Britain; Joyce a 'Europeanised' Irishman –work cosmopolitan in both form and content, all highly attuned to the questions of cultural and linguistic belonging and /or displacement expressed in Eliot's essay:

There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living. ('Tradition ...')

- an elitist conception of 'true literature' detached from both politics and the miasma of popular culture (compare Mansfield in eg 'The Tiredness of Rosabel', 'Garden Party')
- renunciation of 'romanticism' in favour of 'classicism', a term with particular currency in the work of Eliot

6. 'The beginning of the twentieth century has witnessed a return to the ideals of classicism. These may be roughly characterized as form and restraint in art, discipline and authority in religion, centralization in government (either as socialism or monarchy). The classicist point of view has been defined as essentially a belief in Original Sin – the necessity for austere discipline.'

T.S. Eliot cited in Erik Svarny. *The Men of 1914': T.S. Eliot and early Modernism*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989: p.21.

7. '[I]t appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.'

T.S. Eliot. 'The Metaphysical Poets.' in *Selected Prose*. London: Penguin, 1953: pp.118-9

8. 'If it were desired to label in three words the most characteristic feature of Mr. Eliot's technique, this might be done by calling his poetry a 'music of ideas'. The ideas are of all kinds, abstract and concrete, general and particular, and, like the musician's phrases, they are arranged, not that they may tell us something, but that their effects in us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude and produce a peculiar liberation of the will. They are there to be responded to, not to be pondered or worked out.'

I.A. Richards. 'The Poetry of T.S. Eliot.' Peter Faulkner. Ed. *A Modernist Reader: Modernism in England 1910-1930*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1986: p. 151

9. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot celebrates the voices of the dead, but he comes to dread their verbal ambush in *The Waste Land*. In the essay he claimed that 'not only the best, but the most individual poetry' is that which is most haunted by its own precursors. Only thieves can truly be original. For any new creation gains its meaning in relation to the poems of the past, and writing is a voyage to the underworld, to commune with the phantasmal voices of the dead. Eliot published this essay immediately after World War 1...

Maud Ellmann *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) p.101