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James Morrison
Claremont McKenna College

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THE PREFACE AS CRITICISM: T. S. ELIOT ON *NIGHTWOOD*

By James E. Morrison

LATE IN HIS CAREER, while he was an editor at Faber and Faber, T. S. Eliot wrote three prefaces for books by other writers. The books were Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood,* David Jones's *In Parenthesis,* and Wyndham Lewis's *One-Way Song* — each in its own way an anomaly, each stubbornly unassimilable to the paradigms of the modernism with which Eliot was, though he regularly disavowed the association, so closely linked. Though these three works illustrate many of the stylistic innovations of literary modernism, they also exemplify a kind of neo-classicism that may have appealed to Eliot, but which guaranteed the marginality of these books to the many versions of modernism that critics of the time were busily constructing. Eliot's introductions yield, then, the double spectacle of Eliot's zealously asserting this neo-classicism, as when he notes an "Elizabethan" strain in *Nightwood,* and, at the same time, trying to smuggle these anomalies into the ill-defined fold of the modernist canon, as when he compares Jones's work to that of Pound, Joyce, and himself.

Eliot's prefatory remarks are, however, not merely of historical interest, for they demonstrate his tactics not just as the wary custodian of a literary movement but also as a practical critic. In Eliot's introductions, which seem intended both to legitimize and to scrutinize the books to which they are appended, may be found some of the most suggestive articulations of his thought during his later years. If we take as a test-case his introduction to *Nightwood,* the most complex preface of the three, we see that Eliot finds in Barnes's novel the theme of self-consciousness, the very theme that had occupied so much of Eliot's own work since "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), and which recurred with urgent regularity throughout his career. Eliot's prefaces provide not so much examinations

of the books they introduce — for indeed, Eliot effaces his function as "introducer," claiming in each case that the book needs no introduction — as reflections of his preoccupations as they emerge in indirect dialogue with the work of another. Before turning to an examination of the narrative rhetoric of *Nightwood* and of Eliot's interpretation of it, I will trace the evolution of the problem of self-consciousness in the critic's work. His discovery of the problem in Barnes's novel illuminates, even culminates, that evolution.

I

Eliot's position as the high-priest of English modernism is undisputed, even if Eliot himself disowned the title. In literary history, Eliot's identification with the modernist movement is so complete that the progression of his own career is often equated with that of the movement as a whole. More to the point, the contradictions presumably inherent in Eliot's theory and practice are frequently perceived as the very contradictions of modernism. From this perspective, the point at which those contradictions emerge most fully is taken to be the point at which modernism gives way to "post-modernism," the point at which Eliot finally forsakes poetry altogether in favor of verse-drama.[1]

Eliot's early writings are closely associated with the effort to establish an "autotelic" status for poetry, while his later writings are often seen as an attempt to reinsert the already sacralized poem into the social world, the world of political action and pragmatic usefulness, from which it had been carefully separated. The traditional understanding of this shift in Eliot's thinking is, in part, just. Eliot's early essays collected in *The Sacred Wood* methodically detach poetry from its contemporaneous social milieu as well as from the ideas and experiences of the

[1]Recently, Louis Menand proposes to trace the permutations of Modernism itself through examining Eliot's career (*Discovering Modernism* [New York: Oxford UP, 1987]).

poet as an individual. Claiming to "halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism"[2] toward which such an aesthetic, it is implied, inexorably leads, the Eliot of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" declares the conceptual independence of the poetic object from both its creator's personality and its immediate historical circumstances. Although Eliot proposes to install practical guidelines for a "historical" criticism of poetry, his program results in the enclosure of literary history, and insists upon the dependence of poetry upon that history alone. The poet, in Eliot's system, emerges in a direct and unidirectional line of descent from his predecessors (the male pronoun is Eliot's), and is most recognizable not by way of his original ideas and immediate experiences but by way of his formal assent to tradition, of his "consciousness of the past" (52), and significantly, of his development of this consciousness throughout his career.

Eliot seeks to restore to poetry an integrity denied it, he argues, by a diffuse body of criticism. In the preface to a second edition of *The Sacred Wood* (issued in 1928), we see Eliot's practices in introducing his own work, simultaneously meditating on the book to follow and positing a set of guidelines (like the footnotes to *The Waste Land*) to forestall misreading. Eliot admonishes the misguided critics who have taught us to think of poetry as something other than what it is, who have denied the elemental autonomy Eliot hopes to return to it:

> It will not do to talk of "emotion recollected in tranquillity," which is only one poet's account of his recollection of his own methods; or to call it "a criticism of life," than which no phrase can sound more frigid to anyone who has felt the full surprise and elevation of a new experience of poetry. And certainly poetry is not the inculcation of morals, or the direction of politics; and no more is it religion or the equivalent of religion, except by some monstrous abuse of words. And certainly poetry is something over and above, and something quite different from, a collection of psychological data about the minds

[2] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1972) 59. Hereafter cited in text.

> of poets, or about the history of an epoch; for we could not take it even as that unless we had assigned to it a value merely as poetry. (ix)

Eliot attacks the Romantic (at least, Wordsworthian) conception of poetry as well as Matthew Arnold's stern revisions of that conception, even while restating an alternative version of the sacralization of poetry which one can trace in English criticism from Shelley to Arnold. Eliot professes to rescue poetry from the Arnoldian dominion of religion, but he simultaneously closes off poetry from all encroaching domains. This act implies an exaltation of poetry which necessitates the resurgence of the sacred in Eliot's own rhetoric. It is not so much Eliot's attention to poetic form that distinguishes *The Sacred Wood;* rather, it is the tension between the mystical and the desacralizing impulses of the essays, as well as the attendant implication that poetry can do at once everything and nothing, that marks *The Sacred Wood* as a definitively modernist work of criticism.

II

Eliot himself acknowledged the shift in the focus of his criticism in the preface to the reissued edition of *The Sacred Wood.* Significantly, Eliot chose to leave the book itself wholly unrevised, in spite of that frank acknowledgment. Admitting the influence of Remy de Gourmont which underlies his quest for the autotelic poem in *The Sacred Wood,* Eliot goes on to say that he does not disown that influence "by having passed on to another problem not touched upon in this book: that of the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and other times" (vii). The book is, he writes, "logically as well as chronologically the beginning" (vii) of his work in criticism, yet the point of the preface is not to suggest how the shift in Eliot's concerns may be reconciled with *The Sacred Wood;* still less is it to demonstrate how that shift is relevant to the evolution of Eliot's criticism. Rather, Eliot takes the opportunity in the preface to regret "faults of style" (vii) and to refuse coolly to repudiate the ideas

outlined in *The Sacred Wood*. Similarly, in Eliot's "updated" preface to *Nightwood* composed in 1949, twelve years after his initial introduction, Eliot refuses to revise what he evidently regards as errors of the spirit in the earlier preface. Instead, he lets that preface stand, merely attaching a post-script to it, inviting the reader to pay close attention to the "immaturity" of the preface.

The trajectory from *The Sacred Wood* to Eliot's later work is, Eliot writes, not so much "a change or reversal of opinions, as an expansion or development of interests" (vii). Thus does Eliot reject a tradition of criticism which finds the various ideological conversions in his progress so radical as to segment his career hopelessly. The strategies of Eliot's prefaces suggest an acceptance of the potential for evolution in a poetic career. Instead of "revising" seeming contradictions out of existence, Eliot reflects upon those contradictions, and emphasizes them, in his prefaces. Eliot's own criticism is marked by his ability to see an author whole: even more than the invention of the autotelic status of poetry, English criticism has inherited from Eliot a refined style of reading an author through the entire body of his work.[3] Moreover, Eliot's essays contain numerous passages which correct, with sullen patience, errors of response legitimized by a critical tradition that has failed to take into account the poet's complete progress, the poet's entire development from beginning to end.

Eliot's sense of the poet's corpus as finished, organic, with each of its individual moments interacting with all the others to produce an ultimate impression, extends from his concept of tradition as a preexistent monolith, closed off from even seemingly parallel forces, which itself determines what can become part of it and what cannot. When Eliot calls the extinction of the individual poet's ego a prerequisite for poetic production, he is really confronting the problem of how an unfinished consciousness, a finite mind not yet at its end, takes a place within

[3]In an essay on "John Ford," for example, Eliot suggests that the "whole of Shakespeare's work is *one* poem" (*Selected Essays* [London: Faber, 1934] 21).

a closed, finished system like the kind of tradition Eliot constructs. The self-consciousness of the finished artifact, which creates wholeness and poetic closure, is achieved at the cost of the individual self: "What happens [to the poet] is a continual surrender of himself *as he is at the moment* to something more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (52-53, emphasis mine). The problem of the extinction of the poet's ego, of the surrender of the self by the artist to either a continuum of tradition or to the work of art itself, must be discussed more fully since this idea is precisely what, despite his objections, defines Eliot as modernist in his critical thought. Placing "Tradition and the Individual Talent" beside his much later essay "From Poe to Valéry" (1949) shows the development of Eliot's thought from involvement with the question of the self-consciousness of the poet to the closely related question of the self-consciousness of the poem.

In his earlier essay, the escape from consciousness of the self in the writing of poetry is perceived not as a threatening loss of identity, a symbolic death, but as a form of liberation:

> There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal.' Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (58)

Eliot's strategy here is meant, in part, to deny the Romantic conception of poetry as a product of unrestrained emotion and active memory, as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" in the wake of "emotions recollected in tranquillity." Those "feelings," he insists, are made up entirely of verbal constructs, and the tranquillity, if it exists at all, is that of the effortlessness of memory's part in poetic production:

> [The act of writing poetry] is a concentration . . . of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not 'recollected,' and they finally unite in an atmosphere that is tranquil only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. (58)

Eliot does not deny that the experiences of the poet enter the poem; rather, he denies the active component of poetic production that would permit the easy passage of experience into the poem in some practical way, so that these experiences would be specifically recognizable *as experiences* even after they had become part of the poem. For Eliot, the transformative power of poetry is ubiquitous; indeed, poetry is a demiurgical continuum which preexists and determines the individual poems that comprise it: the composition of a poem is not, a proclamation of the place of that poem *within* tradition, but a welcome surrender to what the continuum demands. It is clear, then, that Eliot's closure of the categories of "tradition" and "individual talent," the indelible lines of demarcation he draws between them, is a way of denying the claims of self-consciousness. The individual talent need have no hostility toward tradition because the meaning it extorts from him originates in some domain other than that of the self. Thus, far from being a stressful conflict, the interaction of the individual talent with tradition, as Eliot sees it, frees the former from the burden of self-consciousness.

In "From Poe to Valéry," Eliot links the problem of self-consciousness to that of the subject matter of the poem. While continuing to deny the necessity of the reader's "belief" in the truth or untruth of the statements which make up the content of the poem, Eliot states that *pure poetry,* Valéry's *la poesie pure,* is, for him, "a goal that can never be reached, because I think that poetry is only poetry so long as it preserves some 'impurity' in this sense: that is to say, so long as the subject

matter is valued for its own sake."[4] In the work of Valéry, whom Eliot calls "the most self-conscious of all poets," the subject matter, according to Eliot, is only a means to the end of the poem. At the same time, the real poetic questions raised by Valéry are not about the finished product but about the *process* of finishing it. As Eliot puts it, writing of Valéry's thoughts on Poe, "It does not matter whether 'The Philosophy of composition' is a hoax . . . what matters is that it suggested to Valéry a method and an occupation — that of observing himself write" (341).

Eliot points out that the "increasing self-consciousness" he finds in Valéry is really "increasing consciousness of language" (339). In drawing this crucial distinction, Eliot recognizes the paradox of literary self-consciousness which occupies his thought during the last stage of his career: while it claims, as a literary strategy, to reveal sources of truth by exposing the discontinuity between language and reality, literary self-consciousness, even while proclaiming that language can only explore itself, can only *reveal* itself. Its presumably triumphant exposure of the impossibility of the language/reality binarism is, Eliot suggests, just another kind of falsity. Literary self-consciousness does not, by challenging the lie of language's access to reality, thereby circumvent the problem and gain some genuine access to reality; rather, it gains access only to the structures that it has itself specifically installed so that it may apprehend them. Thus, the self-consciousness of the artistic text is linked, for Eliot, to the self-consciousness of its author: "[I]t is a tenable hypothesis," writes Eliot, "that this advance of self-consciousness, the extreme awareness of and concern for language which we find in Valéry, is something which must ultimately break down, owing to an increasing strain against which the human mind and nerves will rebel" (342).

[4] T. S. Eliot, "From Poe to Valery," *The Hudson Review* 2 (1949): 327-42; here, p. 340. Hereafter cited in text.

III

That Eliot should be so moved, then, by *Nightwood,* a novel about the artist's alienation from her audience, is significant in light of the fact that Eliot had begun a transition spurred by that problem from poetic form to verse drama. This movement was heralded as early as *The Sacred Wood.* There, in the essay "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," Eliot grants to poetic drama a theoretical immediacy in relation to its audience which poetry, apparently, cannot hope to achieve. Moreover, the question of the artist's relationship to the audience becomes, in Eliot's late work, inseparable from the problem of self-consciousness. Since Eliot was taking up these problems in his own lyric of summation, *Four Quartets,* at the time he composed his preface to Barnes's novel, it is not surprising that his preface speaks so emphatically of the problem of self-consciousness.

The rhetoric of *Four Quartets* has, to be sure, much in common with that of *Nightwood*: both works are concerned with summation, with—one might say—eschatology, and both question the modes of representation they deal in. The gargoyle imagery of Last Things that pervades *Nightwood* differs from the austere posture of the speaker of the *Quartets,* but that speaker is, in his serene way, poised on the brink of ultimacy as surely as are the characters of *Nightwood,* with their hopeless operatic gestures: " 'Every hour is my last,' " cries Nora Flood, one of those characters who continues to long for the gaudy ministrations of Dr. O'Connor even after they have shown themselves to be nothing but useless artifice--" 'and one can't live one's last hour all one's life.' "[5] (Cf. *Four Quartets,* "And the time of death is every moment," "The Dry Salvages.")

Nightwood is suspicious of narrative rhetoric just as *Four Quartets* is suspicious of poetic rhetoric. The speaker of the *Quartets* is endlessly critical of his own phrasing, as when, in "East Coker," he stops in mid-line to offer an analysis of his own

[5]T. S. Eliot, introduction, *Nightwood,* by Djuna Barnes (New York: New Directions, 1961) 134. Hereafter cited in text.

poetic technique: "A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion . . ." (l. 69). The two works, indeed, share a sense of history as itself an imaginative construct, a function of the concept of the self. History ranges over time and space, the frontiers the self must conquer. In a late disquisition, in *Nightwood,* on memory and history, O'Connor remarks, "In time everything is possible and in space everything forgivable" (126-27). Narrative and poetic rhetoric, with their trading in on experience and their artificial forms, betray history.[6]

In at least one sense, *Nightwood* finds itself at the center of a modernist tradition: it is, like Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), or James Purdy's *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), the story of a disparate community which struggles to unify itself around the figure of the impotent artist. The miscible lovers of *Nightwood* circulate around the renegade Dr. O'Connor, whose obsessive monologues become more intricate and more "beautiful" as they become ever further removed from the usable advice O'Connor simply cannot offer. O'Connor preaches a histrionic gospel of self-extinction which echoes some of Eliot's early precepts: the dilemma of the characters is that they have no one who will tell their stories and thus make sense of them; the dilemma of the doctor is that he is acutely aware of this lack, but virulently suspicious of the rhetoric of narrative as a mode of self-creation. " 'I have a narrative,' " O'Connor taunts Nora, " 'but you will be put to it to find it' " (97). The doctor's first words on his initial appearance in the novel question the power of stories to create experience: " 'We may all be nature's noblemen . . . but think of the stories that do not amount to much' " (15).

Yet O'Connor is trapped in the arduous fictions he spins, and feels himself subject to the misinterpretations of a wayward,

[6]Reflecting on the same problems, Ronald Bush views the conclusions Eliot finally drew about poetic rhetoric this way: "If the poem, like the self, is condemned never to reach wholeness or stillness, if it exists in a state of continuous becoming, if 'the word by itself,' like each successive act of choice, 'has absolute value,' then literature is always in play and closure is always self-conscious and arbitrary." *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983) 178-79.

disinterested audience. " 'Oh, God, I'm tired of this tirade' " (90), he moans, but goes on with it anyway, interrupting himself a little later to ask, " 'And must I, perchance, like careful writers, guard myself against the conclusions of my readers?' " (94). The "readers" who surround O'Connor, though they take inexplicable comfort from his tirades, remain indifferent to him. They lack the commitment to him that any act of interpretation, or misinterpretation, would require. When at the end of the novel O'Connor has entirely repudiated his offices as doctor, artist, and priest, he reverts to the story-telling he has called into question throughout the novel. In a sleazy bar in the company of an affable defrocked priest, O'Connor rants, " 'May they all be damned! The people in my life who have made my life miserable, coming to me to learn of degradation and the night. . . . Oh, it's a grand bad story, and who says I'm a betrayer? I say, tell the story of the world to the world!' " (161).

The point at which O'Connor contemptuously reenters story-making is also the point at which whatever hope of redemption *Nightwood* may have appeared to offer is lost. At this impasse, it becomes clear that O'Connor's perverse nobility throughout the novel has been in his refusal of the story-making impulse, his refusal to forge the stories his readers delude themselves into believing will redeem them. His assent to story-making is, then, an acceptance of the doom which his prior refusal of that impulse has held at bay, and the last of his prophecies forthwith proves true:

> "For Christ's sake," he said, and his voice was a whimper. "Now that you have all heard what you wanted to hear, can't you let me loose now, let me go? I've not only lived my life for nothing but I've told it for nothing – abominable among the filthy people – I know, it's all over, everything's over, and nobody knows it but me – drunk as a fiddler's bitch – lasted too long –" He tried to get to his feet, gave it up. "Now," he said, "the end – mark my words – now *nothing, but wrath and weeping.*" (166)

The return to narrative hurries eschatology into being.

The last chapter of *Nightwood* depicts the wordless reunion of the lovers, Nora and Robin, in an empty church, a parody of the redemption whose possibility O'Connor has just discarded. Robin encounters a stray dog at the altar and embraces it in a semblance of, at once, wild conflict and tranquil union. Robin has, from the start, embodied the ideal of animalism O'Connor has sought; introducing her, the narrator remarks, "Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human" (37). O'Connor places the condition of being an animal—of pure consciousness, free of the reflexivity associated with narrative—in opposition to that of being fettered by reflexivity: " 'Have I been simple like an animal, God, or have I been thinking?' " (132). O'Connor's bitter instruction in the penultimate chapter—" 'To think is to be sick' " (158)—is the culmination of his earlier observation: " 'To be utterly innocent would be to be utterly unknown, especially to oneself' " (138).

As Robin wrestles with the dog, she and Nora confront each other silently, and on this tableau, stranded on the threshold of metamorphosis, trapped between irreconcilability and the closure enforced by narrative principles, the novel freezes. In fact, this tableau is a fulfillment of O'Connor's earlier prophecy: " 'Nora will leave that girl someday, but though those two are buried at opposite ends of the earth, one dog will find them both' " (106). Thus, the chapter may be read either as the ironic vindication of O'Connor's failed offices, or as the reversion of the characters to their obsessions in the wake of O'Connor's unforgiving withdrawal.

If Eliot had offered an interpretation of this scene, it would likely have been closer to the first of the two I suggest, for it is entirely with O'Connor that Eliot's sympathies as a reader lie. That Eliot offers no such interpretation of the one scene in the novel, surely, that seems predicated on interpretation signifies his preoccupation with O'Connor's plight. Eliot sees O'Connor's tragedy not as that of an artist caught in the paradox of recog-

nizing that the solution—in this case, fiction—to a society's ills will signal its end, but, much more simply, as "revulsion against the strain of squeezing himself dry for other people, and getting no sustenance in return" (xiii).

Eliot sees the problem as that of the self-conscious artist, and the "strain" Eliot identifies as causing his eventual breakdown, which "sends him raving at the end" (xiii), is not far removed from the "strain" which Eliot predicts in "From Poe to Valéry" must cause the breakdown of all forms of self-consciousness. In the preface to *Nightwood,* Eliot perceives the impulse to self-consciousness as the product of the demands of a needy and unworthy audience, and he regards that impulse, as in the later essay, as an initially noble but ultimately fruitless one.

Interpreting the chapter "Watchman, What of the Night?" Eliot sees O'Connor as, in fact, trying mightily to perform the function he renounces, with apparent justice in Eliot's view, at the end of the novel: "When Nora comes to visit [O'Connor] in the night he perceives at once that the only thing he can do for her . . . the only way to 'save the situation'—is to talk torrentially, even though she hardly takes in anything he says, but reverts again and again to her obsession" (xiii). It is just as plausible to read O'Connor's tirade in that chapter, however, as motivated by the desperate wish to "save the situation" as it is to read it as an expression of O'Connor's sheer contempt for Nora.

But what if Nora had "taken in" what O'Connor says? Eliot himself has already defined O'Connor's monologues as proof of his "helpless power among the helpless" (xiii), so that even if those monologues are not "dictated by indifference to other human beings, but on the contrary by a hypersensitive awareness of them" (xiii), that self-consciousness remains trapped in the declamatory artifice necessary to it: O'Connor can no more stop creating his complicated monologues than he can say something immediate and true about the circumstances of his benighted audience. O'Connor's tapestries of words are marked

by waspish concealment rather than by unyielding revelation; his characterization of the Bible as the "Book of Concealment" (132) is a moment of *self*-recognition. If the monologue in the "Watchman, What of the Night?" chapter offers solace or advice to Nora, it does so only indirectly: its ethical message is refracted in the mirror of fictional procedures, a mirror which reflects neither the rage of Caliban nor his indifference but only another mirror, and Nora's transgression, according to Eliot, is her failure to interpret, to help those procedures to break out of themselves.