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Eliot Agonistes: Betwixt Poetry, Philosophy, and the Harvard Option

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Abstract

During Eliot's six-year pursuit of a doctorate in philosophy at Harvard, he was privately ridiculing such mentors as F. H. Bradley, Henri Bergson, Josiah Royce, and Irving Babbitt, most notably in his journal, *The March Hare*. The crucial issue was their promotion of "the Absolute" (sometimes called "the ground of being)," a concept that Eliot found unable to cope with the sufferings relating to sex and death that are hugely prominent in Eliot's poetry. Despite these misgivings, he continued his studies in philosophy, earned his doctorate from Harvard, and received an offer to teach the subject there. He kept that offer dangling until his literary career prospered and he could throw Harvard away. Later, his conversion to Christianity, not philosophy, solved the naturalistic problems of sex (he avowed chastity) and death (he believed in the supernatural). Eventually, he taught literature, not philosophy, at Harvard.

Keywords

Poetry, Philosophy, Harvard, The Absolute, Naturalism, Immortality

1. Philosophy: "Entirely a Bergsonian"

During his early twenties, T. S. Eliot embarked on a double career marked by mutual conflict. After completing his undergraduate studies, he stayed on at Harvard to pursue a Master's degree in English, which he obtained in June, 1910. A crucial turning point in his intellectual life then came about when he wangled support from his father for a year in Paris to study at the Sorbonne. Though his major interest was the city itself, he chose to attend lectures by the eminent philosopher Henri Bergson, which so impressed him that he changed his focus from a doctorate in literature to a doctorate in philosophy. (Matthews, 1973: p. 33) His enthusiasm even led him to give a copy of Bergson's *Introduction to a New*

Philosophy to his mother for Christmas in 1912. (Ackroyd, 1984: p. 20) Later, looking back, he recalled that he was "entirely a Bergsonian" at that time, a man who had experienced a "conversion to Bergsonism." Presumably, what Eliot found in Bergsonism was a pathway to a meaningful life through participation in the Life Force ("elan vital"), meaningful time ("duree"), and—Eliot recalled—an "exciting promise of immortality." (Eliot, 1996: pp. 411-413)

On his return to Harvard in October, 1911, Eliot seemed to thrive in his new discipline. He was appointed Assistant in Philosophy in 1912, teaching the subject to undergraduates, and became President of the University Philosophical Club a year later, a group made up largely of graduate students. In June, 1913, he bought a copy of *Appearance and Reality*, by Francis Herbert Bradley, who was widely regarded at that time, according to the Eliot scholar Jewel Spears Brooker, as "the greatest living philosopher." (Brooker, 1979: p. 146) His correspondence with his mentors at Harvard displayed ongoing zeal for his subject. In November 1914, he filled a letter to Professor J. H. Woods with chitchat about his studies at Oxford—the *Posterior Analytics*, the *de Anima* course, the Teubner text—and concluded with a statement of vocational purpose: "For anyone who is going to teach the Oxford discipline is admirable." (Eliot, 1988: p. 68) By April, 1916, when he completed his dissertation on Bradley's work, he had a career in prospect as a professor in the Harvard department of philosophy. (Ackroyd, 1984: p. 48)

For Eliot, a key idea promoted by his philosophical mentors, including Bergson, Bradley, and Harvard professors Josiah Royce and Irving Babbitt was the concept of "the Absolute," spelled with a capital A. Traditionally associated with the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, the Absolute has been defined as "the sum of all being, actual and potential" or "the ground of being." Apprehending the Absolute, according to Bergson, is a quasi-mystical process: "intuition attains the absolute." (Ackroyd, 1984: p. 41) Josiah Royce, Eliot's teacher at Harvard, equated the Absolute with God, while F. H. Bradley, the subject of Eliot's dissertation, ventured precepts such as "We can find no province of the world so low but the Absolute inhabits it." (Gordon, 1977: p. 50)

Despite his affinity with these Idealist thinkers, especially Bradley, the dialectically-minded Eliot was also susceptible to the "New Realism," which, he recalled in 1935, had been "animated by a missionary zeal against the Hegelian Idealism that was the orthodox doctrine of the philosophical departments of American universities at the time." (Eliot, 1988: p. xxi) The New Realism was "anti-religious," Eliot noted, and "scientific," and much influenced by the atheist professors George Santayana and Bertrand Russell. "All this was to the good," Eliot claimed (in the early 1910s). But in his other career it wasn't.

2. Counterpoint: The Poetry of Naturalism

During the years when he immersed himself in philosophy, 1910-1916, Eliot simultaneously launched his other career as a Modernist poet. In his poems the governing world-view was neither Hegelian Idealism nor the New Realism, but

rather naturalism, the idea implicit in science that nature is all that exists: there is no supernature. Accordingly, sex and death, the governing realities of (animate) nature, became paramount themes in Eliot's verse. Sex and death—the front door and back door of the world, Faulkner called them--decree that the two prime imperatives of all life on earth, from plants and animals to microbes, are to survive (versus death now) and to reproduce (versus death long term). Philosophy could not cope with either door.

For Eliot, the problem with sex, the world's front door, was not merely the loneliness and alienation of "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," nor even the animalistic exploitation of women in the Sweeney poems and elsewhere. The problem was the lack of any better source of a meaningful life than "Birth, and copulation, and death," as Sweeney declares in "Fragment of an Agon": "That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all,/Birth, and copulation, and death." Likewise, after describing sexual intercourse in *The Waste Land* (Section V)--"My friend, blood shaking my heart/The awful daring of a moment's surrender"—he adds the crushing note that life offers no better source of meaning: "By this, and this only, we have existed." Despite its supreme significance, Eliot goes on to say, sexuality is excised from the story of a man's life for fear of scandal—from his obituary, his diary ("memories draped by the beneficent spider"), and his will ("seals broken by the lean solicitor").

Clandestine or not, however, sexuality remains dominant. In "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," its dominance reaches a blasphemous level when the sacred Word of God—the Word that is God—is supplanted by its naturalistic equivalent: "Polyphiloprogenitive/....In the beginning was the Word." Roughly translated as "loves to copulate with many," this word signifies the role of sexuality as the only true source of life. For Eliot personally, sexuality evoked problems involving possible impotence (linked to his double hernia), involuntary celibacy on account of an invalid wife, and the cuckoldry perpetrated by his mentor, Bertrand Russell. It is worth noting that Russell's tryst with Vivienne left him—Russell--so filled with revulsion as to say "Such people as I am should not be left to live." (Seymour-Jones, 2001: p. 193)

So much for sex, the world's front door. Concerning death, the world's back door, Eliot scattered memento mori in abundance across his early poems. In "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," a mere twisted branch brings death to mind, "As if the world gave up/The secret of its skeleton,/Stiff and white." And in "Whispers of Immortality," it is not only John Donne and John Webster but T. S. Eliot who

> ...was much possessed by death
> And saw the skull beneath the skin;
> And breastless creatures underground
> Lean backward with a lipless grin.

The only whisper of immortality in the poem is sex, embodied in the prostitute Grishkin who sends the intellectuals in the poem scattering like monkeys

getting a whiff of jaguar.

As these poems imply, the problem with philosophy was that it had no credible answer to the chief dilemma of naturalism, how to cope with sex and death. Certainly the Absolute offered little succor. Again and again, Eliot singled out the Absolute for ridicule in his poems, dating all the way back to his first term of graduate study. In the January, 1910 issue of the student magazine, *The Harvard Advocate*, he entertained his fellow students with "Spleen," a satirical take on church-goers of a Sunday morning. Here the last stanza depicts "Life, a little bald and gray," waiting "hat and gloves in hand,/... On the doorstep of the Absolute." In "Conversation Galante" the common-sense realism of the woman makes her "the eternal enemy of the absolute," in contrast to the wildly imaginative intellect of the poem's speaker. In "Clownesque" the clownish speaker is "First born child of the absolute" (Eliot, 1996: p. 35). In "Paysage Triste" museum-going ladies "fade beyond the Roman statuary/... Towards the unconscious, the ineffable, the absolute." (Eliot, 1996: p. 53). In "First Debate between the Body and Soul" an "Absolute! complete idealist" is asked to "Assist me to the pure idea--/Regarding nature without love or fear" (Eliot, 1996: p. 65) And, most pointedly, an untitled poem depicts life as

> ... a geometric net
> And in the middle, like a syphilitic spider
> The Absolute sits waiting, till we get
> All tangled up and end ourselves inside her.
> (Eliot, 1996: p. 71)

There are times, in *The March Hare*, when Eliot spoofs his mentors more overtly, as in a poem about the Zodiac where Bergson's "elan vital" is the target: "And Pegasus the winged horse/Explained the scheme of Vital Force." (Eliot, 1996: p. 72) In another untitled poem he took aim at F. H. Bradley's discourse on Appearances: "Appearances, appearances, he said,/I have searched the world through dialectic ways/... And always find the same unvaried/Intolerable interminable maze." (Eliot, 1996: p. 75) As early as January, 1915, a year before his finished his dissertation, he disclosed his waning zeal for philosophy to Professor J. H. Wood, his mentor at Harvard: "I find satisfaction only in the historical aspect of philosophy." Under this rubric he notably includes the "Bradleian metaphysic." What he now admired in Bradley was only his style—"an arid and highly sensitive eloquence (no English philosopher has ever written finer English)." (Eliot, 1996: pp. 411-413) That first adjective, "arid," is very telling. And, looking back decades later to "the time when I was myself a student of philosophy," he called philosophy a blind alley, adding a note of exceedingly faint praise: "it is, after all, worth exploring a blind alley, if only to discover that it *is* blind." (Eliot, 1996: p. 194)

3. The Triumph of "Superstition"

So philosophy, no longer a pathway to a meaningful life, led instead to an empty

bag containing a phantom entity stamped with the phrase "the Absolute." His mentors were charlatans: Henri Bergson's "exciting promise of immortality,'" Eliot said, had proved "meretricious." (Eliot, 1996: p. 413) Irving Babbitt had misled Eliot "and others who had followed him hungrily to the end and had found no hay in the stable." (Eliot, 1964: p. 426) As for F. H. Bradley, his work proposes "the question... not whether the soul is immortal, but whether... it may be said to exist here and now." (Eliot, 1996: p. 413) By the end of "Whispers of Immortality," composed between 1915-1918, philosophy had morphed into mere "Abstract Entities," hapless against the coercive power of sex (Grishkin) and unable to offer the comfort he most needed, a credible promise of personal immortality to shore against the Burial of the Dead:

> And even the Abstract Entities
> Circumambulate her [Grishkin's] charm;
> But our lot crawls between dry ribs
> To keep our metaphysics warm.

Because philosophy could not keep his metaphysics warm—that is, offer a credible Whisper of Immortality--Eliot turned next to anthropology, studying *The Golden Bough* and Hindu/Buddhist scripture along with other ancient or primitive religions. But whereas his instructors—Sir James Frazer and Professor Irving Babbitt—regarded their subject with scientific detachment, Eliot used it as a an oddly personal critique of philosophy. It is one thing to defend ancient religions from demotion to mere "illusion" and "superstition"; it is quite another to demand that philosophy endorse "illusion" and "superstition" as valid descriptions of reality. In February 1914 Eliot did just that, using a graduate seminar to criticize all theories of knowledge that fail to "treat illusion as real." (Gordon, 1977: p. 58) Also in 1914 he declared "I only question whether we could live without superstition." (Eliot, 1996: p. 105) He was on his way to an outlook beyond both philosophy and naturalism

The change came about in a strikingly roundabout, if not surreptitious, fashion. In his poetry, It began with "Preludes" (circa 1910-1911), where he assembled some typically naturalistic images—"grimy scraps," "withered leaves," "muddy feet," "a blackened street"—which are counterposed against the "illusion" of something better: "The notion of some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing" (which would eventually turn out to be Christ). He then crushed his own religious desire with a blast of self-ridicule--"Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh"—and reverted to naturalistic reality: "The worlds revolve like ancient women/Gathering fuel in vacant lots." Circa 1914 he poured his religious hunger into four unpublished, intensely felt poems: "After the turning," "I am the Resurrection and the Life," "The Love Song of Saint Sebastian," and "The Death of Saint Narcissus" (the 2nd Century Christian martyr, not the figure of Greek legend). These poems, in Lyndall Gordon's analysis, "signal Eliot's liberation from the studied paths of philosophy, his willingness to give rein to strange intuitions and images." (Gordon, 1977: p. 59) While dutifully

writing seminar papers on Aristotle and Kant, Eliot's invested his true passion in his private study of St. Theresa, Dame Julian of Norwich, St. John of the Cross, Jacob Boehme and other purveyors of "illusion" and "superstition."

For Eliot, the central "illusion" in all instances was the specific belief that the supernatural is real, making personal immortality conceivable. After 1916 it took Eliot another decade to resolve his own doubts about the matter, passing through his denial of the supernatural in "Gerontion" ("I have no ghosts"), his reversal of the Easter message in *The Waste Land*, Part V ("He who was living is now dead"), and—for the last time—his dismissal of his own religious desire ("the supplication of a dead man's hand," "Lips that would...Form prayers") as "a whimper" at the end of *The Hollow Men*. In 1928, a year after his conversion, he laid out the crucial binary:

> Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them....There is no avoiding that dilemma: you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist....If you remove... all that the belief in the supernatural has given to man, you can view him finally as no more than an extremely clever, adaptable, and mischievous little animal. (Eliot, 1964: p. 433)

By 1935, in "Religion and Literature," the detachment of a philosopher had vanished entirely from Eliot's thinking. It was a time for prophetic thunder: "What I do wish to affirm is that the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life...." (Eliot, 1964: p. 352) For Eliot, modern philosophy had gone over to Secularism, if not outright atheism, while "illusion" had assumed the potency that Robert Penn Warren ascribed to it in an essay on Joseph Conrad: "... the last wisdom is for man to realize that... the illusion is necessary, is infinitely precious, is the mark of his human achievement, and is, in the end, his only truth." (Warren, 1958: p. 45)

For some of Eliot's admirers, It may seem regrettable that his new creed included staunch belief in the medieval version of hell, whereby the Justice of God requires sinners to suffer horrible tortures for eternity. As early as 1917, a decade before his official conversion, he said: "... the medieval world, insisting on the eternity of punishment, expressed something nearer the truth." (Eliot, 1996: p. 277) That same year, writing to Ezra Pound, he put himself in the infernal line of fire: "I am afraid of the life after death." (Gordon, 1988: p. 37) In 1928, a year after his conversion, he praised Dante for "what is certainly the central idea of the Divine Comedy, the idea of Justice." When Paul Elmore More sent a letter questioning the equating of hell with God's justice, Eliot sent back a strong rebuke: "I am really shocked at your assertion that God did not make hell. It seems to me that you have lapsed into Humanitarianism.... Is your God Santa Claus?" (Eliot, 1996: p. 281) As late as 1952, after a quarter-century of Christian practice, Eliot still felt vulnerable, bursting out to his friend Mary Trevelyan, "I believe in hell,

yes, I do. I live in constant fear of it myself." (Seymour-Jones, 2001: p. 588) The biographer Peter Ackroyd came to the conclusion that "at the centre of [Eliot's] faith was the belief in, and fear of, hell." (Ackroyd, 1984: p. 181) Whether at the center or not, Eliot expressly preferred a lifelong fear of hell to seeing himself naturalistically as merely a clever, adaptable, and mischievous little animal.

4. Finessing the Harvard Option

In a letter to his mentor J. H. Woods in July, 1915, Eliot admitted his weakening commitment to philosophy and gave some plausible reasons for it, including his recent marriage to a seriously ill bride and his hope of making a literary career in London. But he never told Woods his deepest reason—that philosophy had become, in his poems, not only a meaningless enterprise but a target of ridicule. Nonetheless, he kept his options open. In September, 2015, he wrote to Woods that "I want to keep as closely in touch with the [Philosophy] department as I can." (Eliot, 1988: pp. 116-117) And in March 1916 he informed Woods that his dissertation on F. H. Bradley was on its way to the department at Harvard, which approved it "without the least hesitation." (Eliot, 1988: p. xxiii)

Given his growing distaste for philosophy, it may seem strange that he kept open a prospective career teaching the subject. In retrospect, it appears that the job at Harvard was Plan B--the only alternative, if he failed in England, to nothing at all. And failure was a lively prospect. Up to mid-1917 he had published only one poem, "Prufrock," with a handful of other (decidedly minor) poems in the offing. So he kept Harvard in his back pocket and, after his prospects brightened with the publication of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), *Poems* (1919), and *The Sacred Wood* (1920), he threw Harvard away. By then Harvard had become the pleading supplicant to Eliot's ascendant celebrity. Professor Woods sounds a note of pathos as he copes with a sense of futility:

> 17 March 1920
> Dear Eliot:
> The time of year for new appointments in the Department is upon us. In spite of what you told me last summer I cannot help lingering over my regret that I cannot think of you. In any case I should be delighted to have a word from you, and especially if there is even a slight change in your plans. It is quite an unworthy thought to tell you that members of the Faculty receive half as much again as ever before. (Eliot, 1988: p. 372)

If, indeed, Eliot had failed in England and taken the job at Harvard, it is easy to surmise a probable outcome. He very likely would have converted his subject into the philosophy of religion, with a special focus on Christianity and a subsection on heresy. As it happened, he converted his poetry into an oeuvre with that basic thrust, using his essential poetry plus his plays and essays to propagate his version of the Christian faith. Meanwhile, the road not taken evoked the sense of a narrow escape. Writing to Ezra Pound in 1922, Eliot credited his wife for saving his true destiny: "... it must be remembered that she kept me from returning

to America where I should have become a professor and probably never written another line of poetry." (Eliot, 1988: p. 598)

When Eliot finally did teach at Harvard in 1932-1933, he assumed the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry, in which he preceded Robert Frost by two years. His overall subject was The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, for which he gave lectures covering the span from "The Time of Elizabeth" to "The Modern Mind." Philosophers, mainly those of religious bent such as Heraclitus, Augustine, and Kierkegaard, did appear in his oeuvre from time to time, but only when adjunctive to his poems and cultural criticism. In the end, for Eliot and Harvard alike, the philosophy option was a job well lost. Poetry won out over Philosophy, and, in an uncommon twist, it was Harvard who had to meet Eliot's needs in its revised job offer.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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