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GENEALOGICAL FANTASIES: T.S. ELIOT AND THE LIMITS OF INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

After reading Symons, a few months later Eliot read the complete poems of Laforgue and he became himself.

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Some Versions of Teleology

“It would be putting it too crudely to say,” wrote George Orwell in a 1942 review essay, “that every poet in our time must either die young, enter the Catholic Church, or join the Communist Party, but in fact the escape from the consciousness of futility is along those general lines.”¹ The occasion for providing this hypothesis about the fate of the poet in the modern world couldn’t have been more appropriate: the quotation is taken from a review of T.S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*, *East Coker*, and *The Dry Salvages*, the three poems which, along with *Little Gidding*, were about to become *Four Quartets*, a collection generally considered to be both the high point and the end point of Eliot’s post-conversion poetic career. In Orwell’s version of this teleology, there is a determined starting point and a development leading to a limited number of possible outcomes. “Consciousness of futility”, a sense of disappointment with a fallen civilization leads either to revolutionary zeal or to a retreat to conservatism. There are, of course, “other sects and other creeds besides the Catholic Church and the Communist Party, but it remains true that after a certain age one must either stop writing or dedicate oneself to some purpose not wholly aesthetic.”² On closer look, Orwell’s review essay seems to be simultaneously embracing two versions of Eliot’s evolution. One is the well known narrative about the development from the radical poet of *Prufrock* to the religious poet of *Four Quartets*, a change prompted by Eliot’s religious conversion. In the other version, Eliot follows the same path, yet what is usually interpreted as a consequence of a radical ideological break halfway through his career, for Orwell becomes little more than a natural step to which Eliot was already predisposed. The conservative ideology usually associated with Eliot’s later years is seen as a driving force behind even his earliest poetry: “a skepticism about democracy and a disbelief in ‘progress’

¹ *The Collected Journalism, Letters and Essays of George Orwell*, Volume II, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 239.

² *Ibid.*

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are an integral part of him; without it he could not have written a line of his works.”³

The critical language Orwell speaks may seem very remote and even obsolete, but the problems he addressed and the path he chose to take in resolving them are still with us. As Adrian Cunningham noted in an essay suggestively entitled “Continuity and Coherence in Eliot’s Religious Thought,” “almost every evaluation of Eliot’s work has at some point to consider the problems of continuity and discontinuity, consistency or inconsistency in his development.”⁴ Forty years that have passed since Cunningham’s essay was published did little to undermine his assessment. Even if we exclude literary biographies, such as Peter Ackroyd’s *T.S. Eliot*⁵, it is hard to escape the impression that studies of Eliot had an unusually strong tendency to be chronologically organized. From Frank Wilson’s *Six Essays on the Development of T.S. Eliot*, to the books of Stephen Spender, Bernard Bergonzi, John Margolis, and A. David Moody we are confronted with narratives that usually start at Harvard in the early years of the 20th century (or perhaps some years earlier with a discussion of New England Calvinism) and go on to determine, with some variation, both the starting coordinates of Eliot’s poetic career and the decisive intellectual influences he faced: the early discovery of Arthur Symons’ book on French Symbolism, the poetry of Jules Laforgue, Irving Babbitt’s humanism, soon to be augmented with the work of Charles Maurras, more or less mediated through T.E. Hulme.⁶

I do not wish to suggest that this biographical model is either futile or confined to Eliot. Yet I do believe that there is something peculiar about the necessity to speak about Eliot in a form of a biographical narrative, characterized, more often than not, by a strong sense of teleological development. As Cunningham suggested, such narratives always involve some shifts between claims of radical discontinuity and attempts to recognize continuous development⁷ and the teleological models oscillate between those offering a clear opposition between early and later Eliot, and the ones demonstrating how all the complex transformations can be explained by a single powerful driving force. Biography has its generic characteristics, and after all, there are only so many ways to construct a narrative of intellectual growth. Some versions of this development tend to put more emphasis on the path between the early and latter poetry: *The Waste Land* as (according to Eliot himself) the point of struggle, *Ash Wednesday* as the moment of conversion, and *Four Quartets* as the high point of Eliot’s religious poetry.⁸ As John Margolis writes:

The Waste Land was at once a criticism of society, a lament for the loss of faith, and a not-quite-successful attempt to recover such faith. Three years later, in “The Hollow Men”, the truncated passages from the *Lord’s Prayer*

³ Ibid., 242.

⁴ “Continuity and Coherence in Eliot’s Religious Thought,” *Eliot in Perspective: A Symposium*, ed. Graham Martin (London: Macmillan, 1970), 211.

⁵ Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984).

⁶ Frank Wilson *Six Essays on the Development of T.S. Eliot* (London: The Fortune Press, 1948); Stephen Spender, *Eliot* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1975); Bernard Bergonzi, *T.S. Eliot*, 2nd Edition, (London: MacMillan, 1978); John D. Margolis, *T.S. Eliot’s Intellectual Development 1922-1939* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972); A David Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁷ John Margolis, for instance, asks us to think of Eliot’s career in terms of “development” rather than “change”; Margolis, *T.S. Eliot’s Intellectual Development*, x.

⁸ See for instance, Bernard Bergonzi, *T.S. Eliot*, 111 ff.

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offered a more concrete sign of the wholeness toward which Eliot was aspiring. By 1927 the Magus in “Journey of the Magi” seemed to have achieved the goal.⁹

On the other hand, there is a version of teleology which, instead of emphasizing the development from despair to religious consolation, insists that Eliot simply followed to the final consequences the ideology which he adapted at the very beginning: if Eliot, did, in fact, pass through several phases, these phases were already inscribed in the ideological views he accepted very early on. A version of this argument can be found already in the work of Stephen Spender: “Eliot’s religious development seems to have passed through three stages, all derived from the logic implanted in him by Maurras, whom he referred to as ‘a kind of Virgil who led us to the door of the temple’.”¹⁰ In a somewhat more sophisticated account of Kenneth Asher, the tradition of French conservatism embodied in Charles Maurras provided “the specific framework of ideas that organized Eliot’s intellectual and artistic career.”¹¹ For Asher, the concept of ‘framework’ is clearly intended to serve as a substitution for more simplistic accounts that would reduce Eliot’s intellectual position to that of the ideologue of *Action Française* (whether Asher is entirely successful in this is another matter). According to Asher, from French reactionary politics Eliot inherited a set of propositions about the state of the contemporary world, including a comprehensive list of perils that plague modern civilization; this framework then directed Eliot’s attempts to negotiate his position within a distinctly British cultural context.¹²

What I wish to suggest for now is that this apparent necessity to map and reassess the path which leads from *Prufrock* to *Little Gidding* and from the *Sacred Wood* to *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* points to a never truly resolved difficulty in the heart of Eliot’s intellectual and poetic career. It seems to me that the “problem” of Eliot’s literary and intellectual biography is almost entirely generated by what is usually referred to as a contradiction between the formal radicalism of his poetry and his reactionary ideology. It is in order to resolve this problem that critics repeatedly had to offer different explanatory models for Eliot’s biography.

It is equally important to note that the evolution/rupture dilemma was to a significant extent produced by Eliot himself when in 1928 he proclaimed his political, religious and intellectual conversion. Eliot’s decision to describe his own point of view as “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion”¹³ very much set the scene and provided a powerful framework for subsequent debates. This statement didn’t go unchallenged, and even its author felt the need to clarify it later on. But precisely because it has been discussed both as the undisputed moment of change and as a simplistic assessment that needs to be questioned, this proclamation has retained the power to organize our narratives about Eliot. Yet its real importance is not confined to the fact that it announced Eliot’s ideological and religious stance. More importantly, it has closely tied the question of Eliot’s poetic transformation to the religious and ideological one. In fact, not only are literary concerns perceived as tied to ideological and religious preoccupations, but they are regularly

⁹ John Margolis, *T.S. Eliot’s Intellectual Development*, 68.

¹⁰ Stephen Spender, *Eliot*, 218.

¹¹ Kenneth Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, 161-162.

¹³ T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrews: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 7.

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viewed as subordinated to these preoccupations. Regardless of whether this is actually the case, it was again Eliot who made such a view possible. Some years after he announced his conversion, in an attempt to clarify the famous assertion from the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrews*, Eliot adds:

The facility with which this statement has been quoted has helped to reveal to me that as it stands the statement is injudicious. It may suggest that the three subjects are of equal importance to me, which is not so; it may suggest that I accept all three beliefs on the same grounds, which is not so; and it may suggest that I believe that they all hang together or fall together, which would be the most serious misunderstanding of all. That there are connexions for me I of course admit, but these illuminate my own mind rather than the external world; and I now see the danger of suggesting to outsiders that the Faith is a political principle or a literary fashion, and the sum of all a dramatic posture.¹⁴

This is a curious statement inasmuch as it apparently tries to disentangle the three aspects of Eliot's convictions. However, on closer look it seems that what Eliot is really trying to do is to emphasize the role of religious conviction as clearly more central to his beliefs than "a political principle or a literary fashion". But there are also other clues that suggest religious, political and literary are inseparable. In the introductory pages of both *For Lancelot Andrews* and *After Strange Gods* Eliot suggests projects that are in some ways both a continuation and a repudiation of the concerns and positions held in *The Sacred Wood* (and especially in that collection's most famous essay "Tradition and individual talent") in the early twenties: "I wished to indicate certain lines of development, and to dissociate myself from certain conclusions which have been drawn from my volume of essays, *The Sacred Wood*."¹⁵ In the beginning of *After Strange Gods* Eliot writes: "During the course of the subsequent fifteen years [since the publication of "Tradition and Individual Talent"] I have discovered, or had brought to my attention, some unsatisfactory phrasing and at least one more than doubtful analogy....The problem, naturally, does not seem to me so simple as it seemed then, nor could I treat it now as a purely literary one."¹⁶ The claim that, although dealing with literature, the lectures which comprise *After Strange Gods* are not "exercises in literary criticism"¹⁷ has already been made a few pages earlier. These two books, published respectively in 1928 and 1934, seem to suggest that the critical stance taken in *The Sacred Wood*, a stance widely associated with notions of impersonality and the autonomy of the literary text in relation to its creator, has become impossible for Eliot. If this is the case, then *For Lancelot Andrews* and *After Strange Gods* mark crucial points in the longer process of Eliot's transformation from an aestheticist with clear debts to French symbolism to a religious thinker incapable of conceiving anything as being strictly literary. As these passages show, Eliot seems to be responsible both for announcing a radical break and for trying to turn the apparent rupture into a matter of steady evolution.

But the problem of Eliot's transformations actually hides two different yet related difficulties. One is, of course, how we assess and account for a certain trajectory Eliot has

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 27-28.

¹⁵ *For Lancelot Andrews*, 7.

¹⁶ *After Strange Gods*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

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supposedly passed. The other is the relation between Eliot's critical writings and his poetry. Hannah Sullivan has expounded these difficulties with admirable clarity. According to her, there are two basic ways of dealing with the polarities of Eliot's literary career. "The first method has been to read diachronically, emphasizing that Eliot's political views are of late flowering, and of a later date than his best-known poetry. So, the 1928 pronouncement of classicism, royalism and of Anglo-Catholicism can be brushed away from a study of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', or *The Waste Land* as chronologically irrelevant."¹⁸ The other path is to "divide Eliot's work not by chronology, but by genre," thus allowing the critics to avoid the unpleasant question of contradiction between poetic radicalism and ideological conservatism.¹⁹ From this, Sullivan concludes: "Both methods of procedure seem to me to offer unsatisfactory answers: either because they attempt false dichotomies between 'early' and 'late', between politically neutral and politically explicit; or because they subsume Eliot the poet in Eliot the critic, leaving his most charged, and much of his most famous, work unexplained."²⁰ The problem Sullivan recognizes is twofold: on the one hand, powerful dichotomies seem to be simplistic, while on the other hand attempts at establishing coherence and continuity tend to privilege one aspect of Eliot's work over the other. Clearly, the very necessity to make the exclusions Sullivan refers to, demonstrates that different aspects of Eliot's activity are seen as mutually incompatible. Something similar could be said about the obsession with biography: it is precisely the apparent discrepancies that require for Eliot's work to be put in the context of a more or less persuasive narrative of change and development.

Rather than simply choose between more or less plausible versions of Eliot's intellectual biography, I wish to ask about the origins of our tendency to see Eliot's biography as a problem. It seems to me that our need to resolve the tension between reactionary and revolutionary in Eliot is largely due to the fact that we share certain notions about the relationship between modernist literary practice and ideology. The problem, I think, is also not in the sheer fact of Eliot embracing far-right politics. After all, the avant-garde has had a history of embracing both left and right ideologies—communism in the case of Russian Futurists, and at least some of the Surrealists, and fascism in the case of Marinetti or Pound. Besides, the link between some versions of modernist poetics and fascism is no longer a taboo. Part of the problem with Eliot is, I think, the fact that he was *not* a fascist. Despite his well documented anti-Semitism, disdain of liberalism, rejection of democracy, and despite clearly authoritarian aspects of his political writings, Eliot was, as Stephen Spender once noted, "in the strictest sense of the term, 'a reactionary.'"²¹ Intuitively at least, it seems much easier to link a straightforward fascist fascination with power, violence, and militarism of Marinetti with radical poetic practices, than it is to link Eliot's conservatism and his literary 'classicism' with such practices.

In order to cope with the widely discussed opposition between reactionary and revolutionary in Eliot, I wish to step away from the questions of Eliot's biography and explore some aspects of the wider cultural and intellectual context. By this I don't wish to suggest that all our problems will be resolved if we simply turn to Eliot's well documented

¹⁸ Hannah Sullivan, "But we must learn to take literature seriously": T. S. Eliot and the little magazines of modernism, 1917–1920," *Critical Quarterly* 46.2 (2004), 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹ Stephen Spender, *Eliot*, 215.

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intellectual sources such as Babbitt and Maurras. Rather, I am interested in understanding a particular feature that the works of authors closely associated with Eliot share with broader European intellectual situation, both on the left and the right. I am interested not only in particular claims Eliot may have adopted, but also in the question about the nature of the discourses he relies on. What kind of discourse is that of Charles Maurras, and what does it share with other significant practices both on the left and the right? If Maurras and *Action Française* form a crucial part of Eliot's immediate intellectual context, my question is what is this *context's context*? And again, I don't mean simply the immediate sources and predecessors of Maurras' thought. My assumption is that Maurras' rants about the state of contemporary France are symptomatic of a certain way of dealing with modernity and its origins, a way that was soon to be shared not only with large parts of the ideological right, but also with some significant figures on the left. I wish to displace the reactionary/revolutionary dilemma (at least temporarily) from the realm of biography to that of the broader cultural context. What kind of discursive economy are we dealing with, and how does the understanding of its dynamics help with understanding Eliot?

The Framework's Framework: The Root of All Evil

What is it that Max Horkheimer and *Action Française* have in common? More than one would normally assume. Jürgen Habermas famously described Bataille, Derrida and Foucault as “the young conservatives.”²² ‘Conservatism’ here clearly points towards what Habermas perceived as their rejection of modernity: “I fear that the ideas of antimodernity, together with an additional touch of premodernity, are becoming popular in the circles of alternative culture”²³. If “antimodernity” is to signify the anti-Enlightenment impulses of the intellectual left, then what Habermas suggested in 1980 is surely an understatement. In fact, *Enlightenment-bashing* has become not only a favorite discipline but one of the crucial ways in which the intellectual left defined itself starting, most likely, from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). When Horkheimer and Adorno undertook their comprehensive attack on the Enlightenment they just needed to appropriate the arguments that were already out there for at least a century. A narrative that sees the Enlightenment (with its troublesome insistence on the intertwined powers of individualism and universal reason) as the starting point of a development that will lead to the cataclysm of modernity has already been produced by French counter-revolutionary thought and perfected by the religious right from Dostoevsky to T.E. Hulme and Eliot himself.

As Kenneth Asher suggested, by the end of the 19th century, “the conservative position [in France] is made up of a loosely related series of fears: of the revolutionary spirit, liberalism, progress, democracy, Rousseau, capitalism, the Enlightenment, foreigners in general, and Jews in particular.”²⁴ French reactionary thought from de Maistre to Charles Maurras has apparently coped with two related tasks: first, to describe all the aspects of “corruption” and “decadence” of contemporary France, and, second, to determine their origins. Since de Maistre's *Considerations on France* (1797) this quest has for the most part

²² “Modernity versus Postmodernity”, *A Postmodern Reader*, Trans. Seyla Ben-Habib, Eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Ithaca: SUNY Press, 1993), 103.

²³ Ibid., 104.

²⁴ Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, 21.

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identified the Revolution and its ideological instigators, primarily Rousseau, as the point of origin for this dangerous development.²⁵ As Asher shows, there was some struggle to define the exact mechanisms of the Revolution's perilous influence. This is particularly true for the debates about the rationality and irrationality of the Revolution. It appears that for thinkers such as Ernest Renan and Hippolyte Taine in his later phase, the attack on the Revolution was very much following the usual paths of anti-Enlightenment argumentation, including hostility to individualism, materialism, and rationality.²⁶ Asher further points out that one of the most important moves Charles Maurras made when he appropriated this tradition in the last years of the nineteenth century was to displace the argument of reason. If traditionally the charge against the Enlightenment and the Revolution as its offspring was one of putting too much confidence in rationality rather than in divine wisdom (an assumption in the very root of de Maistre's position²⁷), Maurras' version of this teleology was to associate Rousseau's individualism with emotional exuberance rather than with excessive belief in reason.²⁸ This was precisely what enabled him to revert to a version of classicism/romanticism opposition which will be so crucial for Eliot.

That Eliot belongs to the same intellectual tradition is not among the newest discoveries of intellectual historians. An early reviewer of *For Lancelot Andrews* notes that Eliot is close to becoming something of an "intolerant cleric", and that his "religious preoccupation is as irritating as that of Mr. Maurras, and as irrelevant."²⁹ Six years later, a review of *After Strange Gods* called Eliot's understanding of tradition "the fruit of that grotesque misalliance in France at the beginning of the present century of American pragmatism and ultra-montane Catholicism", adding that "like his masters, Charles Maurras and Jacques Maritain, Mr. Eliot makes the mistake of protesting quite a little too much."³⁰ Finally, Orwell's assertion that Eliot is a victim of his own "negative Pétainism"³¹ is an unmistakable allusion to Maurras' collaborationist engagement.³²

²⁵ In an almost Aristotelian phrase, Maurras calls Rousseau "the formal cause of the Revolution"; Charles Maurras, *Réflexions sur la Révolution de 1789* (Paris: Les Iles d'Or, 1948), 37.

²⁶ See Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, 16-20.

²⁷ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, Trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3.

²⁸ Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, 23. Maurras quite explicitly relates the Revolution to an "intellectual regression" and "mental anarchy"; Charles Maurras, *Réflexions sur la Révolution de 1789*, 28. For a comprehensive account of Maurras' views, see also Eugen Weber, *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1962.

²⁹ An untitled review by J[acob] Bronowski, originally published in the *Cambridge Review* in November 1928, reprinted in *T.S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149.

³⁰ William Troy, "T. S. Eliot, Grand Inquisitor", *Nation* 138 (25 April 1934), reprinted in *T.S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*, 283.

³¹ *The Collected Journalism, Letters and Essays of George Orwell*, Volume II, 242.

³² I assume an objection could be raised that I am far too concerned with French reactionary thought, thus ignoring the role of English conservatism (and its own obsession with the French Revolution) in Eliot's formation as a religious conservative. Although I think that an examination of Eliot's links to the Burkean tradition of conservatism would be perfectly justified, there are several reasons why I believe that French intellectual history will prove to be particularly relevant for understanding Eliot's position. First, both Eliot and hostile reviewers of his work clearly emphasized the connection to Maurrasian tradition. More importantly, it seems to me that the very structure of Eliot's thought, with its amalgam of antisemitism, anti-rationalist, and anti-progressivist ideas owes something to the way French antisemitism was constituted

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Of course, with the exception of the 1916 lectures in which he traced the origin of Romanticism back to Rousseau (a move which closely mirrors Maurras)³³, Eliot was mostly concerned with restoration of lost order, rather than with the genealogy of the demise. Yet although he usually didn't spend too many words explaining the exact path of modern civilization, the project of his later essays is very much one of restoring something that was lost due to the modern world's insistence on secularization, individualism and liberalism.

Eliot's most powerful account of the genealogy of the "demise" is given in *East Coker*. As James Johnson Sweeney pointed out soon after the poem was published, its allusions to Sir Thomas Elyot and his *Governor* serve to underline Eliot's doubts about the course of post-Renaissance civilization: "Despite all the confidence in the intellectual progress of Sir Thomas Elyot's time, it is evident today, that the neo-classical, individualist approach of the Renaissance led to a mechanical view and a spiritual poverty and produced the cataclysm which has overwhelmed the present age."³⁴ Eliot leaves little doubt when he speaks of the "folly" rather than the "wisdom of old men"³⁵, which seems to be the consequence of their rejection of the founding principles of Christianity. Furthermore, he advocates the path of "dispossession", abandonment of "ecstasy", and "ignorance"³⁶, for, after all, empirical knowledge is problematic: "There is, it seems to us,/ At best, only a limited value/ In the knowledge derived from experience./ The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,/ For the pattern is new in every moment/ And every moment is a new and shocking/ Valuation of all we have been."

The decision to extend the genealogy of modernity provided in *East Coker* as far back as Renaissance humanism brings Eliot closer to T.E. Hulme than to Maurras. Hulme, of course, also drew on *Action Française*³⁷, and accepted a version of the classicism/romanticism opposition very close to that of Maurras³⁸, but while Maurras (for obvious reasons) focused on the Revolution and its immediate predecessors, Hulme was free to look further back. For both Hulme and Eliot, it is only the point of origin that somewhat differs, rather than the description of the menace. According to Hulme, "in spite of its extreme diversity, all philosophy since the Renaissance is the *same* philosophy."³⁹ One of the problems with the philosophical legacy of the Renaissance is its epistemological inadequacy, the attempt to apply the categories of "mathematical physics" to a realm of reality that cannot be adequately comprehended through these categories, thus producing a "mechanistic view of the world."⁴⁰ This account seems to be closely aligned with Eliot's view of the failure of "knowledge" to "impose a pattern". In essence, Hulme, like Eliot, seems to be subscribing to the views of the French right, while extending the speculation about the

during the nineteenth century. See Michel Winock, *La France et les Juifs: de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), and in particular Zeev Sternhell, *Ni Droite ni Gauche: l'idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris: Fayard 1987).

³³ Eliot's syllabus for this course was quoted at length in Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, 37-38.

³⁴ James Johnson Sweeney, "East Coker: A Reading", *Southern Review*, Spring 1941, Vol. vi, reprinted in *T. S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Vol. 2, Ed. Michael Grant (London: Routledge, 1997), 422.

³⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York – San Diego – London: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1991), 185.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁷ For a direct reference to Maurras, see for example: T.E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, Ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), 114.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

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origins of the crisis of modernity. For him, Romanticism remains inextricably tied to the Revolution, which means to Rousseau, individualism and the belief in progress⁴¹, but the peril of individualism is seen as a defining feature of the Renaissance.⁴² Romanticism is now simply one among the “bastard phenomena”⁴³ springing from the Renaissance *weltanschauung*.

Appropriations of a Genealogy

This waywardness of conservative thought’s attempts to capture the trajectory that led to what was perceived as the contemporary demise of civilization does not end with Maurras or Hulme, and more importantly, it doesn’t end with the right. The demise with which the left will soon be concerned is not the crisis of liberalism in the late 19th century, but rather the appearance of fascism in the first half of the 20th century. Yet the genealogical preoccupations will be remarkably similar. Even more importantly, the answers given, the dilemmas, and the point of departure of the historical developments analyzed, very much mirror some of the questions of the French reaction. Much of the leftist concern with the rise of fascism was organized around the questions about the role of reason or lack of thereof in the appearance of fascist ideology. And questions of rationality and subjectivity usually come together: “Reason,” writes Max Horkheimer, “in its proper sense of *logos* or *ratio*, has always been essentially related to the subject, its faculty of thinking.”⁴⁴ While Horkheimer writes the *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), Lukacs writes the *Destruction of Reason* (1952), Thomas Mann writes *Doctor Faustus* (1947) in which the rise of the avant-garde is intertwined with the rise of fascism, and both are seen as the reemergence of the same forces of irrationality and violence previously unleashed by Luther. Finally, Mann’s novel is an artistic counterpart to the effort simultaneously made by Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* to come to terms with the origins of the contemporary fall of Europe. All of these attempts have in common an interest in finding the roots of fascism in the Enlightenment, and all of them are trying to deal with the questions of both rationality and capitalism in the process.

In many ways, Lukacs on one side and Horkheimer and Adorno on the other represent two main versions of the Marxist genealogy of fascism. In Lukacs’ account, the path of modern irrationalism starts precisely with the attack on progress: “the departure from objectivity and rationality presents itself promptly and directly as a resolute stand against social progress.”⁴⁵ Along the same lines he contends that, “[modern irrationalism] constitutes a way from Schelling to Kierkegaard, and also the road from feudal reaction to the French Revolution to bourgeois hostility to progress.”⁴⁶ Following a predictable Marxist pattern, the rise of irrationalism for Lukacs corresponds to successive historical falls of aristocracy and bourgeoisie, only to leave the proletariat as the single class capable to bear the burden of progressive social change. It is also important to note that for Lukacs fascism

⁴¹ Ibid., 115-116.

⁴² Ibid., 59-60.

⁴³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 5.

⁴⁵ Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, Trans. Peter Palmer (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), 25.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.

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comes as a consequence rather than a counterpart of capitalism.

“Modern irrationalism” as Lukacs sees it, is a very wide concept encompassing anything from William James and Irving Babbitt to Bergson, with figures such as Heidegger and Spengler as its heroes, and also including the main current of reactionary French thought crucial for Eliot.⁴⁷ It is, therefore, no surprise that when he characterizes Bergson’s project as primarily an attempt to attack “the objectivity and scientific character of natural scientific knowledge”, Lukacs believes that he is revealing a symptom of a wider development:

The abstract and stark confrontation of rationality and irrationalist intuition reached its climax with Bergson, epistemologically speaking, in pre-war imperialism. What Mach still treated as purely epistemological and James developed into a general argumentation of subjective individual myths, Bergson presents as a coherent mythical and irrational world-picture.⁴⁸

As always, Lukacs is working through a clear opposition between subjective and objective, and rational and irrational, portraying capitalism’s path as a fall from objective rationality embodied in the natural sciences to subjectivist irrationality. When contrasted with the charges French reaction leveled against the Revolution, Lukacs’ objections to late capitalism look in some respect strikingly similar. In fact, Eliot’s own anti-romantic position, heavily indebted to French reactionaries, shares significant similarities with Lukacs’ claims. In the syllabus for his 1916 lectures on modern French literature he identifies among the characteristics of Rousseau’s thought “exaltation of the *personal* and *individual* above the *typical*”, as well as “emphasis upon *feeling* rather than *thought*”.⁴⁹ This is not to say that either Eliot or Maurras don’t encompass elements absent from Lukacs (such as belief in aristocracy and order), but there is a common tendency to account for a cataclysmic modernity by tracing the philosophies seen as irrationalist. The question of validity of the kind of interventions in intellectual history that both sides try to perform, and especially of the attempts to attach “irrationality” to one side of ideological spectrum, is not what I am primarily interested in here. It is not difficult to show that both sides are endowing the same thinkers and tendencies with contradictory qualities. This entire genealogical game is fully dependent on equating certain ideological stances with particular philosophical positions and aspects of social history. As we have seen, in these games rationality and irrationality can often switch places.

Yet the most important move in the game was made not by Lukacs, but by Adorno and Horkheimer. First, it should be noted that in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* irrationality is, once again, awarded a key role in the narrative. But in a remarkable move, estranging Horkheimer and Adorno from the positions such as those Lukacs has advocated for decades, reason, once again, becomes the culprit:

The multiplicity of forms reduced to position and arrangement, history to fact, things to matter...Formal logic was the high school of unification. It offered Enlightenment thinkers a schema for making the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, 38.

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world calculable...Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment anything that cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry.⁵⁰

This is a profoundly conservative argument and it is no surprise that Horkheimer and Adorno are quoting de Maistre's ridiculing of Bacon.⁵¹ But the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also includes another profound shift in argumentation: not only is Enlightenment "totalitarian", but its alleged flight from myth is in fact "mythical fear radicalized."⁵² What Horkheimer and Adorno are performing is a subversion of the standard Enlightenment narrative of individual liberation through the power of reason. It is clear, however, that that argument can be made only with some help of the traditional conservative distrust of exact science and instrumental reason. But Horkheimer and Adorno are facing another problem: their book is a response to the triumph of Nazism, and what they are writing should, by all accounts, be a genealogy of irrational evil. For Thomas Mann, whose *Faustus* seeks the answer to the same question, the contemporary cataclysm speaks of the reawakening of the forces of ancient barbarism. For Lukacs, even if destruction comes from within the bourgeois civilization, it comes from there simply because that civilization seems to be abandoning the paths of rationalism and materialism. But the answer of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is far more paradoxical: "The Horde, a term which doubtless is to be found in the Hitler Youth organization is not a relapse into old barbarism but the triumph of repressive *égalité*, the degeneration of the equality of rights into the wrong inflicted by equals."⁵³ The evil of fascism comes from the heart of Enlightenment rationality.

Consequences: The Limits of a Paradox

But what does it all have to do with Eliot? Why would the narrative of the appropriation of the right's anti-Enlightenment arguments by the left be of any relevance for Eliot's position? After all, Eliot's ideology was, for the most part, a straightforward case of Maurrasian conservatism, with strong authoritarian tendencies and a belief in a superior ideologically sound elite. There are some peculiarities to his position, such as a powerful anti-industrialist stance. In *The Idea of Christian Society*, Eliot not only questions "the hypertrophy of the motive of Profit into a social ideal" (a stance generally in line with the Maurrasian brand of conservatism), but also goes on to mention the "exploitation" of labor.⁵⁴ But is this enough to compare Eliot to Mann's Naphta?⁵⁵ In an insightful essay which seeks to understand "the relationship between aesthetic modernism and radical politics"⁵⁶ through a juxtaposition of Lukacs and Eliot, North rightfully points out the fact that Eliot once

⁵⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4-5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 26.

⁵⁵ A suggestion made by Michael North in "Eliot, Lukacs and the Politics of Modernism," *T.S. Eliot: The Modernist in History*, Ed. Ronald Bush (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 173.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

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described T. E. Hulme as “classical, reactionary, revolutionary.”⁵⁷ By doing so, Eliot demonstrated some awareness of the ideological proximity of reaction and revolution, and perhaps exposed some of the contradictions of his own beliefs. It would be very convenient to believe that Eliot’s ideology involves some complex amalgam of revolutionary and reactionary as does Mann’s fictional Naphta, or, that Eliot is somehow performing a complex and paradoxical intellectual act as do Horkheimer and Adorno. It would be convenient, but it probably wouldn’t be very accurate. Eliot’s ideology is, as Bernard Bergonzi once noted, somewhat dull, and not all that paradoxical. Consequently, if one is to look for the paradoxical relationship between modernity and anti-modernity in Eliot, one should probably step away from Eliot’s explicit ideological statements, and go back to the relationship between poetry and prose and early and later Eliot with which I started this essay. The paradoxical relation between reactionary and revolutionary is not primarily a feature of Eliot’s explicit ideology.

Yet although I disagree with North on this point, I do agree that in order to understand some of the paradoxes of Eliot’s literary career, it might be helpful to turn to Lukacs. With his simultaneous adherence to revolutionary politics and conservative aesthetics, Lukacs seems to be Eliot’s Marxist counterpart. During the famous German debate over expressionism, Ernst Bloch accused Lukacs of advocating a certain “permanent Neo-Classicism.”⁵⁸ Lukacs’ commitment to realism mirrors Eliot’s commitment to classicism, and the terms, in Lukacs’ case, are largely interchangeable. Realism is repeatedly described in terms of order, hierarchy and formal unity, while modernism is seen as plagued with “exaltation of subjectivity”⁵⁹, discontinuity, and even chaos.⁶⁰ It is hardly necessary to point out that Lukacs’ condemnation of modernism is a direct consequence of his own version of the genealogy of modernity. Although his debates about modernism precede the *Destruction of Reason*, it is clear that modernist literature’s abandonment of commitment to reality and totality is a symptom of the same perilous development he recognizes in the “bourgeois philosophy”.

On the other hand, even before his classicism became obvious in some of the essays of the *Sacred Wood* (1922), Eliot’s description of Rousseau in his 1916 course syllabus suggests not only hostility to a particular intellectual tradition, but also to a certain kind of art. As we have seen, where Lukacs speaks of “exaltation of subjectivity”, Eliot spoke of “exaltation of personal and individual”, and while Lukacs deplored the lack of formal coherence and excessive reliance on subjective experience in modernist writings, Eliot recognized “the depreciation of *form* in art, and glorification of *spontaneity*”⁶¹ as typical of Rousseau and everything that followed as his legacy. Subsequent insistence, in the *Sacred Wood*, on the “impersonality” of poetry, and the condemnation of Shakespeare for failing to produce an “objective correlative” in *Hamlet*, are symptomatic of an understanding of poetic creation that will become typical for Eliot.

Of course, Eliot’s classicism raises many more questions than Lukacs’, primarily

⁵⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁸ Ernst Bloch, “Discussing Expressionism”, in: Ernst Bloch, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso), 1992, 20.

⁵⁹ György Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 25.

⁶⁰ Georg Lukacs, “Realism in the Balance”, in: Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 28-59.

⁶¹ Quoted in Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, 38.

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because Eliot is, after all, a modernist poet. In order not to condemn modernist literary practices in principle, Eliot had to endow them with what he thought are positive literary values: he had to understand modernism as classicism. For Lukacs, the paradigmatic opposition is the one between Joyce and Thomas Mann, where *Ulysses* is seen as violating the firm hierarchical organization of realist form still present in Mann. For him, realism is characterized precisely by “a ‘hierarchy of significance’ in the situations and characters presented.”⁶² On the other hand, in “*Ulysses, Order, Myth*” (1923), originally published in *Dial*, Eliot repudiates precisely the view of Joyce as a “prophet of chaos”⁶³, and praises his “classicism”.⁶⁴ The famous account of the role of myth is very much along the same lines: “It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.”⁶⁵ *Ulysses* is, then, doubly classicist: it has a strict formal organization, and one which is achieved precisely through a firm link with the tradition.

How do we account for the proximity of Lukacs’ and Eliot’s aesthetic ideals? One answer would be to adopt an agnostic point of view and claim that the relationship between aesthetics and ideology is so unstable that almost any aesthetics can be advocated from the positions of any ideology. In a sense, such a conclusion would also lead to the disappearance of the initial question about reactionary and revolutionary in Eliot. If any ideology functions with any aesthetics, it becomes very hard to speak about a paradoxical relationship between the two. Quite a few examples could be produced to demonstrate this point. Marinetti espoused fascism, and even attained a prominent place in Italian fascist establishment, and yet the Nazis rejected him, along with the rest of “degenerate art”. Russian Futurists (along with other avant-garde artists), believed that they were the art of the Revolution, only to be rejected by the Soviet system in favor of far more traditional artistic forms.

Clearly enough, this leap into agnosticism is a good way to erase the question. What makes this move inadequate is the fact that, however unstable, the relationship between left and right ideological projects and different literary practices is being shaped within a distinct cultural context, and is inseparable from a particular discursive mode of what I called *genealogical fantasies*. If Lukacs ended up embracing an aesthetics which (in theory, at least) closely corresponds to some of the key features of Eliot’s classicism, he did so because, like Eliot, he derived his understanding of modernist literary form from a particular version of the genealogy of modernity. From Maurras, to Hulme, to Lukacs, to Eliot, to Mann, the question of artistic form is a political and ideological question. And the answer to it is inscribed in their respective understanding of the historical processes that shaped modernity. Even more importantly, these thinkers didn’t simply subscribe to the same mode of speculation; they also draw from the same pool of themes and oppositions, as if they all used the same deck of cards. However, the combination of classicism, monarchism, and Anglo-Catholicism, along with adherence to a modernist poetics is something more than a hand in the game, produced by the shuffling of cards: it is a product of a distinct series of intellectual choices, but choices that were made within a particular realm of possibilities.

This conclusion will not erase all the issues with Eliot’s biography. It remains difficult to deny that Eliot’s essays from the thirties and forties, unlike the ones he wrote in the early

⁶² Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, 34.

⁶³ *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 165.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

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twenties, are suggesting a rising commitment to a conservative ideology, and a diminishing interest in literary form. It would be equally difficult to deny the differences between *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. What I do wish to suggest, however, is that the perceived paradox of Eliot's career cannot be fully accounted for in biographical terms, no matter how persuasive some biographical accounts are. In a quotation with which I opened this essay, George Orwell suggested that Eliot's path was, after all, historically and psychologically plausible. This is not to say that the complexity of Eliot's position went unrecognized in its original context, or that it was considered natural. However, it seems to me that if there is a paradox in the relation between Eliot's ideology, his aesthetics, and his poetic practice, such a paradox is not only historically plausible, but historically conditioned. It was a particular discursive situation that made it possible to simultaneously adhere to the reactionary politics of *Action Française*, espouse aesthetic 'classicism' and write *The Waste Land*.