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## **T.S. Eliot and the Rise of the Poet-Critic**

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T.S. Eliot (1888, St. Louis, –1965)

- U of Harvard: B.A. in Philosophy (1909)  
doctoral studies at Sorbonne and Harvard,  
1909-14, Oxford, 1914; PhD on F.H. Bradley (never defended)
- Moves to London (1914, British citizenship and conversion to  
Anglicanism in 1927)
- Poet, playwright, critic, editor (eventually director at Faber &  
Faber); influential to modernist aesthetic and formalist  
criticism (i.e. the so-called new criticism)
- Major works: ***Prufrock*** (1915);  
***The Waste Land*** (1922),  
Major essays: “**Tradition and the Individual Talent**”, Hamlet  
and his Problems” (1919), The Metaphysical Poets (1921)  
Key concepts:  
“tradition,” “objective correlative”  
“dissociation of sensibility”  
“impersonality”



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## Why Modernism?



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### Checklist of terms:

*Difficulty and unfamiliarity?*

*Experimentalism* (breaking of traditional forms)?

*Subjectivity?* (dreamscapes, surrealism rather than empirical facts)?

*Abstraction?* (non-representational)?

*Dissonance?* (offensive themes or “ugliness”, fragment and montage)?

*Avant-garde self-reflexivity?* (audience awareness of history of art and criticism)?



*Improvisation 27 (Garden of Love II)* by Vassily Kandinsky. Source: [Wikipedia](#), CC0.



3rd replica of *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, 1964, galerie Schwarz. Source: [Wikipedia](#), Public Domain.

## Two important “grand narratives” of Modernism



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### Formalist narratives (internal)

*Modern art as highly evolved pure form*

“All art constantly aspires to the condition of music” (Walter Pater)

Kantianism (“disinterested” art)

Negative:  
Modernist abstraction  
as loss of aesthetic  
substance

Positive:  
Modernist  
complexity as  
cultural progress

### External narratives

*Modern art as symptom or symbolic expression of larger socio-cultural shifts*

“[I]n or about December, 1910, human character changed.” (Virginia Woolf)

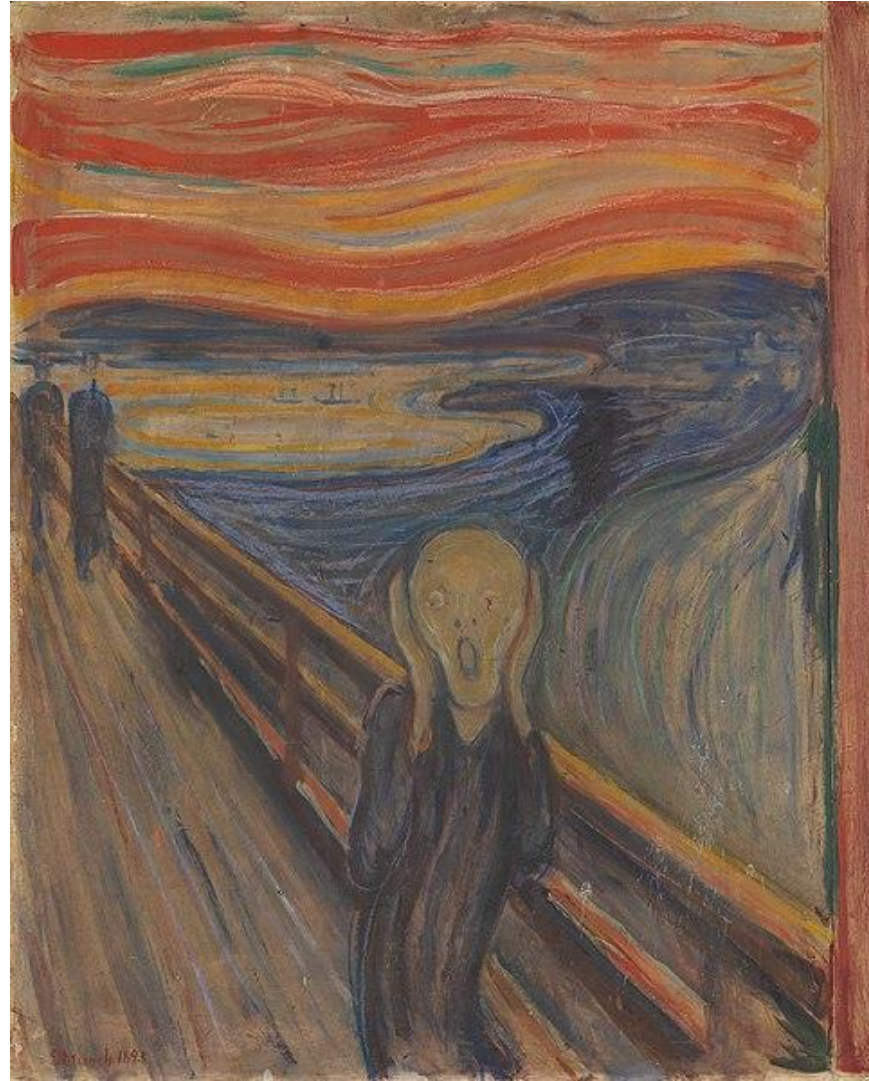
Hegelian/Marxist (art as sensuous embodiment of the conditions)

Negative:  
Modernist  
dissonance as  
symptom of  
alienation

Positive:  
Modernist reflexivity  
as symptom of cultural  
depth

Edvard Munch (1863–1944)  
The Scream (1893)

Source: [Wikipedia](#), Public Domain.



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Guiding themselves [...] by a notion of purity derived from the example of music, the avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity [...] for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. [...] The purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count.

(Clement Greenberg, (1909-1994),  
“Towards a Newer Laocoon” [1940],  
Harrison/Wood 566).



Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock painting  
in his studio in East Hampton, New York, 1950.  
Source: [Wikipedia](#), Fair use.

## **Formalist Breakthrough**



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**[T]he material ‘languages’ of  
Greenberg’s oil paint, the tangible  
gesturality required by canvas and  
the ‘painterly’ surface lend the  
concept of the autonomous work of  
art a certain dramatic content**

Fredric Jameson,  
*A Singular Modernity* (2011)

## Abstraction and Modernist Poetics



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1. “A poem should not mean / But be  
(Archibald McLeish, “Ars Poetica”).

A recurring whiteness like  
The face of stone pleasure, urging forward as  
Nostrils what only meant dust.  
(John Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*, 1977)

### 2. “Spatial Form” (Joseph Frank, 1945)

“Joyce cannot be read— he can only be re-read. A knowledge of the whole is essential to an understanding of any part”

Spatial reading:

- a) reading for architectural depth
- b) reading for intertextual connection

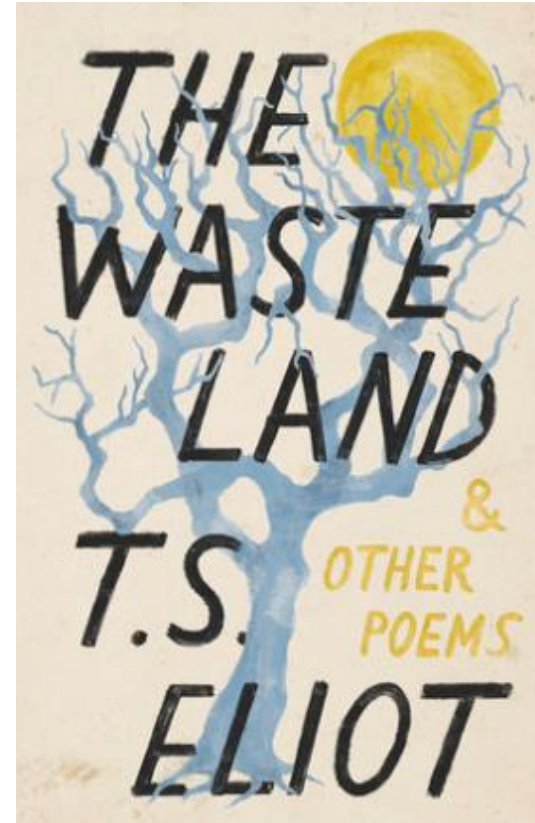
Scholarly reading has always been spatial



## Eliot's Influence

[The Waste Land resembles a] music of ideas [...] arranged, not that they [it] may tell us something, but that [its] effects in us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude and produce a peculiar liberation of the will

I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London, 1926)



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Then out of the blue *The Dial* gave us *The Waste Land* and all our hilarity ended. It wiped out our world as if an Atom bomb was dropped on it, [and it] set me back twenty years”

(William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography*, 1967).



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“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

LET us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table; [...]

## Objectivism, Objective Correlative



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The evening,  
spread out  
against the sky

(tenor)

is like

(simile)

a patient etherized  
upon a table

(vehicle)

Paralysis? Lethargie? Sickness?  
(ground)

A dense interplay of **direct perceptions standing toward one another as planes in an abstract painting.**

(Charles Altieri, "The Objectivist Tradition" Paralysis)?

## Eliot and the Objectivist Tradition



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The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative";

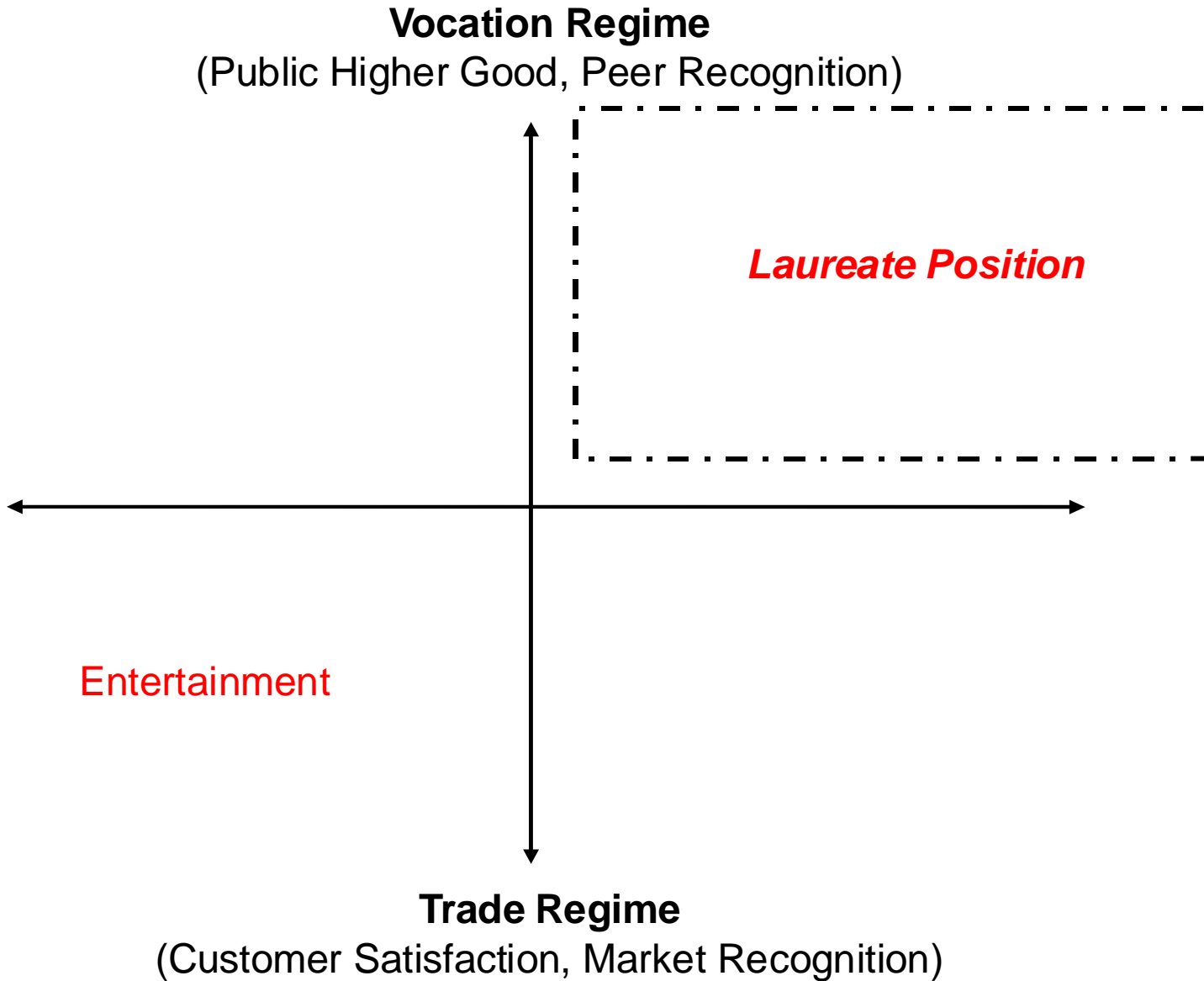
(TS Eliot, "*Hamlet and His Problems*", 1919/21)

“dissociation of sensibility”

For John Donne “a thought” could still be “an experience” that “modified his sensibility.” “Tennyson and Browning,” by contrast, “are poets, and they think,” but they cannot “feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose”

(“*The Metaphysical Poets*”, 1921)

**Communal Regime**  
(Standardization, Convention, Tradition)

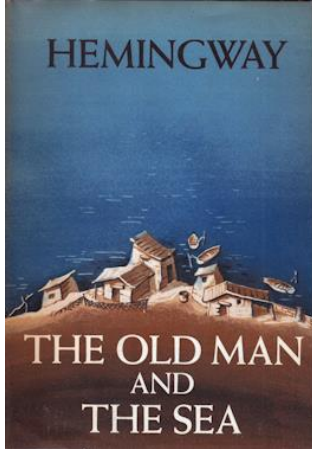


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**Singularity Regime**  
(Innovation, Uniqueness, Abnormality)

**Communal Regime**

(Standardization, Convention, Tradition)



**Vocation Regime**  
(Public Higher Good, Peer Recognition)

*Laureate Position*

Avand-gardization,  
(Scholastic Networks)



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**Singularity Regime**  
(Innovation, Uniqueness, Abnormality)

Culture moyenne  
(Mid-Cult, Middlebrow)

Entertainment

**Trade Regime**  
(Customer Satisfaction, Market Recognition)

## Market Sheltered Support Systems



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**1830-1900** Indirect Print-Market Subsidies, Full-Time Authorship, High Output, Split Portfolio  
(e.g. Dickens, George Eliot, Longfellow, Henry James)

**1900-1945** Rentier Patronage (The Little Magazine), Part-Time Authorship, Low Output  
(e.g. Joyce, Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Djuna Barnes, Faulkner)

## TS. Eliot (1888-1965)

“I felt that the constant turning out of “copy” for a weekly paper would exhaust me for genuine creative work. It would never be my first interest, any more than finance is. Finance I can get away from at the end of the day; but review writing would stay by me; I should always be toiling to make my work better than it need be for ephemeral reading. [...]

As is it, I occupy rather a privileged position. [...] My social position is quite as good as it would be as editor of a paper. I only write what I want to – *now* – and everyone knows that anything I write is good. I can influence London opinion and English literature in a better way [...]. There is a small and select public which regards me as the best living critic, as well as the best living poet, in England [...]. I really think that I have far more influence on English letters than any other American has ever had, unless it be Henry James.

(Eliot, “To His Mother”, 29 March 1919).



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Thomas Stearns Eliot  
by Lady Ottoline Morrell  
(1934).

Source: [Wikipedia](#),  
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## Eliot and the Concept of “Tradition”

Tradition [...] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which [...] compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. [...]. What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career. What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. [...]

T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920)



## Poet-Critics: Knowledge

“The English poetry [in the romantic period],’ he [Arnold] says in his essay on The Function of Criticism [1865], ‘with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, **did not know enough.**’ We should be right too, I think, if we added that Carlyle, Ruskin, Tennyson, Browning, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, **had not enough wisdom.** Their culture was not always well-rounded; their knowledge of the human soul was often partial and often shallow. [...]

After the prophetic frenzies of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, [Arnold] seems to come to us saying: ‘This poetry is very fine, it is opulent and careless, it is sometimes profound, it is highly original; but you will never establish and maintain a tradition if you go on in this haphazard way. There are minor virtues which have flourished better at other times and in other countries: these you must give heed to, these you must apply, in your poetry, in your prose, in your conversation and your way of living; else you condemn yourselves to enjoy only fitful and transient bursts of literary brilliance, and you will never, as a people, a nation, a race, have a fully formed tradition and personality”

(Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1993, 104)



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## The Poet as a Chemist

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. [...] It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.

T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920)

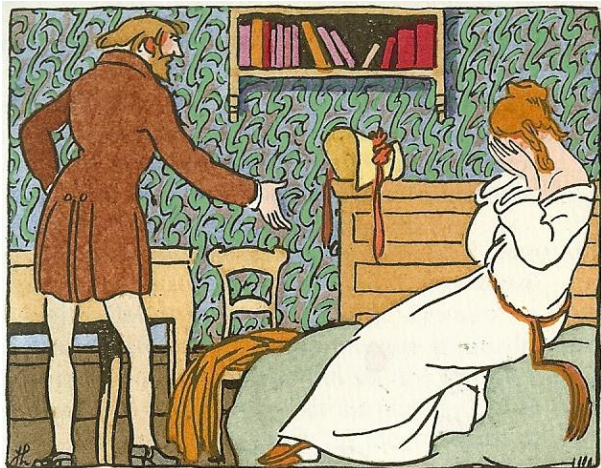


Illustration by Joseph Hémard from *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, Paris, 1921.  
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“Tradition”



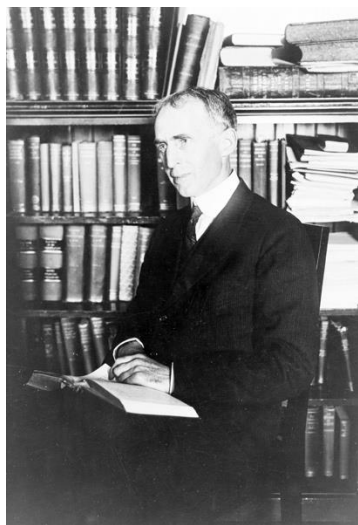
(TS Eliot, 1888-1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot by Lady Ottoline Morrell (1934).  
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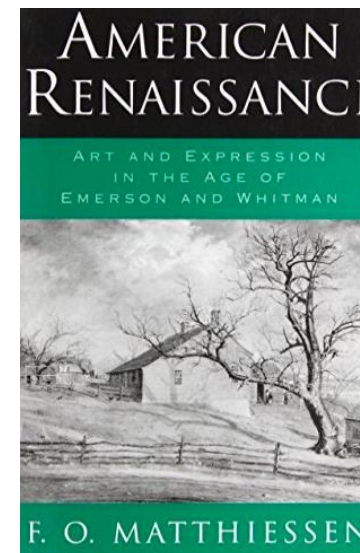
Gentleman writers,  
newspaper critics

The scholar-connoisseur

Charles Austin Beard in 1917.  
Source: [Wikipedia](#),  
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A “living tradition”



Academic historians or linguists



## Eliot and the Concept of “Living Tradition”

[W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted

T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920)

“The best that has been thought and known in the world”

(Matthew Arnold 1869/1993)



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## Poet-Critics and the Academicization of Criticism

Poetry was criticism's way into the university, a form of knowledge through which New Critics like [Allen Tate] established their authority without advanced degrees, against the resistance of historical scholars. [...] [But at the same time] criticism was *poetry's* way into the university, too. The hyphenated form poet-critic expressed an addition, a further development: it indicated a poet with the capacity not only to write poems but to reflect on them, to write about them, and to teach them.

(Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane and Allen Tate*, 1993, 27-8)

## Tradition in *The Waste Land* (1922)

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.  
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee  
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.  
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.  
And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,  
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,  
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
In the mountains, there you feel free.  
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.



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## Intertextuality

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
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Whan that aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
Tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(so priketh hem nature in hir corages);  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,

Geoffrey Chaucer, "Prologue" *Canterbury Tales* (late  
14th century)



## *The Waste Land*

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.



Mythical narrative consciousness:  
Blind “seer” Tiresias (androgynous), “melts”  
from one character to the next (“I Tiresias,  
though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
Old man with wrinkled breast”)

Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920):  
grail legend (heathen fertility myth): wounded  
“Fisher King,” ruling a desolated country,  
suffering from infertility (hence: waste land). To redeem King and his  
waste land, Grail quester must ask a  
sympathetic question (“What ails you?”)



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Dante: Waste land as the modern inferno (life that is  
death)

James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), study of religion and  
fertility  
cults (modernization  
as loss of cults,  
resulting in spiritual  
emptiness.

Hence: spring as renewal  
of life,  
winter as state  
of hibernation  
lilac symbolism

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee  
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.  
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.  
And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,  
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,  
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
In the mountains, there you feel free.  
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter..

Historial allusion:  
Narrative voice of  
Countess Marie  
Larisch  
(niece of  
Empress Sissi).

Known for her  
connection with the  
double suicide of arch-  
duke Rudolf and his  
mistress (1889)

(1913): Marie's  
memoir: *My Past*



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What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Book of Ezekiel: "Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me"

God's reaction to Israelite idolatry: 'and your images shall be broken'

Book of Isaiah: "A man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land"

Dust imagery



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*Frisch weht der Wind / Der Heimat zu  
Mein Irisch Kind / Wo weilest du?*

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;  
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'

-Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, Looking into  
the heart of light, the silence.

*Oed' und leer das Meer.*

Richard Wagner, *Tristan  
und Isolde* (1865)

→ Liebestod

Third act: Wounded Tristan  
waiting in vain for Isolde

Fertility symbol

Speaker unable to speak  
(Grail legend)

[...] Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled.  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.  
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying, "Stetson!"  
"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
"That corpse you planted laste year in your garden,  
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
"Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
"Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
"You! Hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, -- mon frère

Baudelaire quotation:  
Opening poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*:  
"Au lecteur" (1857).  
(The reader is just as guilty?)

Dog as symbol of the  
sciences?

Dante's exclamation from the  
Gates of Hell, in the Inferno.

Dante's words upon seeing  
those who died without  
Baptism, in the first circle of  
hell (or Limbo)

First Punic War (206 BC):  
past and present are one

Buried god of fertility rites  
to "sprout" and continue  
the life cycle

quotation from Webster's  
*White Devil* (1612): Cornelia  
buries her son;

Digging up corpse of the  
buried god stops life cycle;  
dog image: Anubis who  
oversaw passage of souls



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## Impersonality in “Gerontion” (1920)

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,  
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.  
I was neither at the hot gates  
Nor fought in the warm rain  
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a  
cutlass, Bitten by flies, fought. (“Gerontion”)



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## Pound's Revision of the *Waste Land*

Highbury bore me. Highbury's children  
Played under green trees and in the dusty Park.  
We/Mine were humble people and conservative  
As neither the rich nor the working class know.  
My father had a small business, somewhere in  
the city  
A small business, an anxious business, whi[ch]  
provided  
The house in Highbury, and three weeks in Shanklin.  
Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew  
Undid me.

Highbury bore me.  
Richmond and Kew  
Undid me.



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## The scholar-connoisseur



(TS Eliot, 1888-1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot by Lady Ottoline Morrell (1934). Source: [Wikipedia](#), Public Domain.

## The ideology-critic

(Edward Said, 1935-2003)

Edward Said in Sevilla in 2002.  
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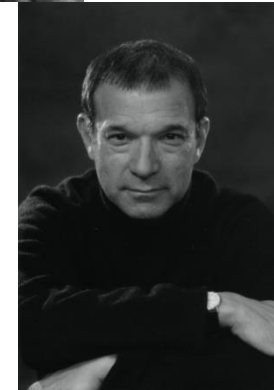


(Fredric Jameson, 1934-2024)

Fredric Jameson, Porto Alegre.  
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## The ethnographer

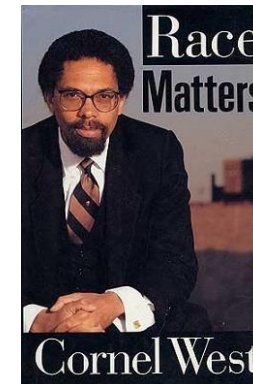
(Stephen Greenblatt, 1943-)



Stephen Greenblatt in 2004.  
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## The organic intellectual (identity politics)

(Cornel West, 1953-)



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