

T. S. Eliot, France,  
and the Mind  
of Europe



# T. S. Eliot, France, and the Mind of Europe

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Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-7738-7

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7738-1

*For my parents,  
Richard and Patricia Stayer*



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## PREFACE

# ELIOT AND FRANCE, FRANCE AND ELIOT

WILLIAM MARX

T. S. Eliot and France: *quel sujet!* Long after Edward J. H. Greene's *T. S. Eliot et la France* (1951), now a classic, and in the wake of Nancy Duvall Hargrove's recent *T. S. Eliot's Parisian Year* (2009), I am glad that Jayme Stayer and his collaborators have tackled the question once again in this book, for the relationship between Eliot and France is an inexhaustible subject. The French influence on Eliot's poetry and thought could not be underestimated in any way; it might even be one of the most intense and long-lasting love stories an English-speaking writer ever had with Baudelaire's country.

As far as Eliot and France go then, *ça suffit*. But what about France and Eliot? What I mean is: what about the way Eliot has been read in the country that influenced him so much? What level of understanding has the poet actually attained in his second literary homeland? Foreign literatures are specific systems more isolated from their neighbors than one might think, and Eliot's case can reveal the unformulated laws that govern these systems.

If the question must be asked in this way, it is because Eliot has not actually been read much in France. Very few books are published about him, and even more worrying, his own works are hardly known at all. If only they were easily available ... but they are not. You can find currently in French bookstores a bilingual paperback edition of Eliot's major poems (with a terribly inaccurate English text) and a children's edition of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. And that is all, however unbelievable such a scarcity may seem. His shorter poems, his plays, his criticism: none of them are available anymore.

Under these conditions it is hardly surprising that for the French, Eliot is but a name, respected if meaningless. A few years ago the French National Library organized a series of lectures on major literary figures of the twentieth century. Typically enough, among the English-speaking

writers you could find Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, and Pound, but not Eliot. This seems a sorry fate for an eminent writer who treasured French literature and who worked so hard to make it known in Britain and America.

Of course, one would not expect Eliot to enjoy in France the same status he has in English-speaking countries. But why hasn't he at least the same reputation he possesses in Italy, where new and good editions of his books are published regularly and where he is widely read?

The problem of Eliot's status in France is complex and is bound up with the problem of poetry in general. Since the time of Mallarmé, poetry has become less and less popular in France and is perceived as a plaything for connoisseurs. Achieving success and literary recognition is already a difficult task for a French poet, and still more for a foreigner: in France, where the formal approach to literature is so prevalent, the translation of poetry feels more like a betrayal than in any other country. These suspicions—of recondite verse and of translated poetry—explain in part why Eliot's contemporaries such as Joyce and Woolf are now largely recognized, while he himself remains in a dim light. He wrote poetry, and they published novels.

Moreover, Eliot's French publisher, Le Seuil, while prestigious enough, is not as famous for poetry as Gallimard: it can boast no easily recognizable poetry series, for example, which is a real drawback for marketing an already unmarketable genre. An Eliot volume in the famous *Pléiade* collection would do wonders for his reputation certainly, but that collection belongs to Gallimard, and besides, the copyrights would likely fetch a price much too high for the expected readership. It is a catch-22 born of the specific ecosystem that is French letters: the discrepancy between Eliot's second-rate position in France and his high reputation in the rest of the world is the very thing that will keep him from making any progress in the French publishing business, that is, unless Faber and Faber is willing to negotiate its terms with respect to the peculiarity of the French situation.

There is also an aesthetic barrier to cross: from the French point of view, surrealism, which eradicated everything in its way, dominates twentieth-century arts. The French do not always realize that in the 1920s and 30s, there were other ways of writing innovative poetry besides the surrealist way, and that English and American modernism was a particularly productive mode. Some knowledge of Eliot's contribution to world literature and to literary criticism would be most welcome for rectifying this distorted vision of modernity.

So Eliot's problem in France is closely related to the specificities of the history of French poetry. One question remains open nonetheless: why is Eliot's position in France weaker than Ezra Pound's, even though Pound was also a modernist poet? You could say, in the first place, that Eliot was not always lucky with his French friends. At the end of the war, they were either dead, like Paul Valéry; politically compromised because of their collaboration with Vichy France, like Ramon Fernandez, who died shortly afterwards; or marginalized in foreign countries, like Saint-John Perse. In the 1940s and 50s, the translators Henri Fluchère and Pierre Leyris proved to be excellent go-betweens, and they were helped along in their work by the aura of Eliot's Nobel Prize, but they now lack successors.

Paradoxical though it may seem, I do not think that Eliot has suffered much from his well-known reactionary stance. As long as a writer shows enough talent, French readers do not care about politics, for they use essentially formalist and aesthetic criteria. One example will suffice to illustrate this point. In the English-speaking world there was much talk recently about Eliot's anti-Semitism: books were written on the subject, the case was brought into the public arena and occupied *The Times Literary Supplement* for months and even years. In some respects, the case might be compared with Louis-Ferdinand Céline's. Yet, rightly or wrongly, French critics have always been prone to dissociate Céline's literary personality from his real one. However outrageous his anti-Semitic writings are, his central place in the French literary canon has never been seriously challenged. Thus, in 2004 and 2005, Céline's masterpiece *Journey to the End of the Night* featured prominently in the program of the national competitive examination designed to recruit the best high school teachers in literature (*agrégation*). English-speaking critics would find this unbelievable, for if Eliot's anti-Semitism had been one tenth as blatant as Céline's, they would not even take the trouble to argue about his case: Eliot would immediately be expelled from the canon, and the case would be closed. While the English literary canon is also a moral one, the French canon is more formalist.

In fact, the problem is more religious than political. This is the main difference between Eliot's and Pound's cases. Unlike the latter, Eliot's Christian faith serves as the ground for much of his work. This religious tenor explains, among other things, why he is more famous in Italy. Conversely, French culture is so anticlerical today that few Christian writers can avoid being sidelined, even the most innovative among them, like Joris-Karl Huysmans or Georges Bernanos. (Paul Claudel would probably be an exception, but as a general rule theater people have a soft spot for rituals or anything likely to inspire religious fervor on the stage.)

This dismissal has nothing to do with censure, at least not consciously; it is just that most French readers feel uncomfortable with a Christian theme or find it difficult to understand its meaning.

The problem of secularism is even more fundamental to Eliot's case, as it relates to the very idea of literature in France. Indeed, as shown by Marc Fumaroli in *Exercices de lecture: de Rabelais à Paul Valéry* (2006), the history of French literature from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may be summed up in the emergence of a secular power that gradually took the place of the Catholic Church, an evolution that was prepared by the success of the Gallican movement. The culmination of this evolution is, of course, the triumph of the "absolute literature" of the late nineteenth century, a literature that presented itself as a new form of religion: an aesthetic religion. Certainly, we find a similar pattern of evolution in other European countries. In England, for example, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater provide a very clear illustration of this shift away from religion and towards aestheticism. But it is in France, probably because of the trauma of the Gallican dispute, that literature reached its highest level of autonomy and was considered absolute and inviolable. It is worth noting that the French still live more or less under this ideological regime with all of its consequences, one of them being precisely the inability to conceive of a religious literature or a Christianity that could inform it.

In a system where literature plays the role of a new clerisy, pressing literature to Christian ends is seen as nothing less than a betrayal of the religion of literature, because literature is not supposed to worship anything other than itself. Since one cannot serve two masters at the same time, the concept of a Christian literature seems an inherent contradiction to the French mind. These two labels, Christianity and literature, have been antagonistic at least as far back as French writers have struggled against the authority of the Church. For a French reader, Christian writers can only be traitors at best, if not frauds. Since their work refers to a sacredness other than its own, they cannot be taken seriously as writers. The disapproval of any Christian literature has less to do with anticlericalism than with the French overvaluation of literature in the last two centuries. The specific problem encountered by the introduction of Eliot's work in French literary culture becomes clearer in this context: the religion of literature—to which Eliot was so strongly opposed—cannot tolerate the presence of a religious literature that would necessarily challenge its own foundations. The ultimate paradox, of course, is that Eliot himself was a great admirer of those French Symbolists who did so much to establish a new religion of literature. But what he admitted in foreign writers he could not accept at home—in Arnold, for instance.

So there is still much work to be done by Eliot scholars in France. If they propose new readings, if they provide appropriate editions and translations, and moreover, if they work for a paradigm shift in French literature, they might reasonably hope to overcome Eliot's handicap in France.

Is it any wonder, finally, that a poetry such as Eliot's, which questions more than any other the definition of culture, would reveal the crucial differences that separate literatures from each other? Attending to such divisions is the first step for any critic who wants to reconcile them.

## INTRODUCTION

### ELIOT AND FRANCE, ELIOT AND EUROPE

JAYME STAYER

In late 1910, when the young T. S. Eliot sailed across the Atlantic for a year of life and study in France, he was headed to a country whose poets had already deeply affected his sensibility. His short year in the country would change him even more decisively, as he swam in the artistic, philosophical, psychological and political currents of early-century Paris. That particular place and time was part of a larger Sargasso Sea of influences that Eliot later termed “the mind of Europe,” a geographical and historical entity with which he aligned himself and his poetics.

For scholars who have tracked influences on the poet, T. S. Eliot’s indebtedness to France has never been in dispute. But because Eliot’s year in Paris was so decisive for his development, mapping the contours of that influence has never been a simple matter. The first connection between Eliot and France was made moments after Eliot entered the public arena. In 1917, the same year that Eliot published his first slender volume, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, Ezra Pound was pointing out Eliot’s similarities to the French Symbolist Jules Laforgue (73). Since then, studies of French influences have fallen roughly into the two categories of source study and analysis. Of the source studies, there are countless monographs and articles that track the French influences not just on Eliot’s early work but on the whole of his output. Edward J. H. Greene’s *T. S. Eliot et la France* (1951) was the first book-length study of this kind. Grover Smith’s *T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays* (1956/1974) also ferreted out many French sources, but as Smith’s was a general study, it offered no summative account of French influence. Both a sourcebook and an analysis, Cyrena Pondrom’s *The Road from Paris* (1974) widened the frame of reference and corrected the prevailing assumption that Eliot and Pound had been the primary importers of French influence to the Anglophone world. Nancy Hargrove’s study, *T. S. Eliot’s Parisian Year* (2009), is the most recent entry in this category, bringing to life the Paris

of 1910-11 and documenting in exhaustive detail Eliot's potential engagements with French popular culture, literature, and music.

In addition to these source studies, a rich critical literature analyzes facets of Eliot's work as they relate to France. Some of the more widely noted works in this category include Kenneth Asher's *T. S. Eliot and Ideology* (1995), which derives Eliot's political aesthetic from Charles Maurras and the Action Française; John T. Mayer's *T. S. Eliot's Silent Voices* (1989), which explores the effect of French verse on Eliot's poetry; and Piers Gray's *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual and Poetic Development 1909-1922* (1982), which assesses the influence of English and French philosophy on Eliot's intellectual growth.

Since there is no understanding T. S. Eliot without measuring the impact of French culture on his development, our volume serves as both a centennial commemoration of Eliot's year in Paris and a reconsideration of the role of France, and more widely Europe, as they bore on his growth as an artist and critic. While this volume does not offer a singular, revisionist account of French and European influence in Eliot's work, it does take France as its center while reaching across national borders, revisiting familiar topoi, and opening up new veins of inquiry from unexpected sources and understudied phenomena.

The volume is divided into two overlapping sections. The first, "Eliot and France," focuses on French authors and trends that shaped Eliot as well as on the personal experiences in Paris that are legible in his artistic development. Much scholarship on Eliot and France has focused on Eliot's relationship to the nineteenth-century Symbolists and to the philosophy of Henri Bergson, and two of the essays here deepen and complicate those accepted narratives. Jean-Michel Rabaté's "Playing Possum: Symbolic Death and Symbolist Impotence in Eliot's French Heritage" offers a French context for Eliot's ideas about the artist's death of self and submission to a tradition. Jewel Spears Brooker's "Seduction and Disenchantment: Eliot in the Bergsonian World" reads the French philosopher through the lens of two separate critiques Eliot makes of Bergson—one in his poem "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and the other in his graduate philosophy essays. In its focus on Eliot's Paris poem "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," Charlotte Webb's "'Between the idea / And the reality': Hyperconsciousness in Eliot's Early Works" provides a thoughtful counterpoint to Brooker's analysis of that poem. Rather than focus on Bergson, Webb brings the psychoanalytic concept of hyperconsciousness to bear on the poem's negotiations between internal and external reality.



Nancy D. Hargrove's "Parisian Influences in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'" offers new discoveries of French sources for Eliot's famous poem. And my own "Eliot's Culture Shock: Imagining an Audience for the Paris Poems" offers a possible biographical impetus behind Eliot's poem "The Triumph of Bullshit" and places that odd blemish within the chronology of his rhetorical development as a poet. Michael Webster, in his "Cummings Rewrites Eliot," offers a way of seeing the styles and concerns of Eliot and E. E. Cummings—two poets who could hardly be more different from one another—in the context of their French inheritances.

This first section on Eliot and France also includes essays on French authors who either influenced or were influenced by Eliot. Three essays in particular break new ground: William Blissett's "T. S. Eliot, Gaston Bachelard, and the Element of Air" places Eliot and Bachelard together for the first time. Elisabeth Däumer's "T. S. Eliot, Jean Epstein, and the Physiology of Modern Poetry" follows up on a long-ignored aside in Eliot's canonical essay "Metaphysical Poets," thereby illuminating his early insistence on poetic difficulty and unraveling a number of mysteries surrounding his metaphors of technology and the nervous system. Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec's "T. S. Eliot and Charles Péguy" considers the overlooked influence of Péguy, especially in Eliot's religious works.

The second section of the volume, "Eliot and Europe," situates Eliot in a wider matrix of influences and aftereffects. Tomislav Brlek's "Eliot and Theory" offers a bracing assessment of—and correction to—the ways in which Anglo- and Francophone theory has distorted Eliot's theoretical preoccupations. Fabio Vericat's "It Sounds Like Writing to Me: Speech, the Auditory Imagination, and Eliot's Radio Broadcasts" speculates about the ways in which Eliot's commitment to radio broadcasts for the BBC challenged and transformed his poetics. Benjamin G. Lockerd's "'A people without history': Eliot's Critique of Evolutionary History" shows how Eliot's engagement with the Catholic historians Christopher Dawson and Hilaire Belloc enabled him to critique the popular historiographies of Herbert Spencer and H. G. Wells. Margery Palmer McCulloch's "'The Waste Land was made out of splinters': T. S. Eliot, Edwin Muir, and Contrasting European Influences" places Eliot's French inheritance against Muir's German influences and assesses their effects on competing versions of modernism. Joyce Wexler's contribution, "T. S. Eliot's Expressionist Angst," reconsiders "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a poem that for a hundred years has been considered *vrai français* in its sources; Wexler reads it instead as an *echt* expressionist poem, showing

how French neoclassicism and German expressionism were different aesthetic responses to the same modern anxieties.

\*       \*       \*

“To enjoy any French or German poetry,” Eliot opined, “I think one needs to have some sympathy with the French or German mind; Dante, none the less an Italian and a patriot, is first a European” (*SE* 239). With a leap and a bound, Eliot moves from France, Germany, and Italy to a notion of universality that is still provincially rooted in Europe. Eliot first offered the phrase “the mind of Europe” in his early essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). It is an idea that runs through his essays, is never clearly defined, and is often modified with equivocations. (A sketcher of ideas, Eliot did not have the scholar’s temperament for proving a theory in exhaustive, historical detail.) Even at its first appearance, the concept is fraught with instability:

[The poet] must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. (*SP* 39)

Married to his idea of the “historical sense” (*SP* 38), this developing mind of Europe is also, confusingly, the mind of the poet’s “own country.” In another essay, Eliot describes the Europe of Dante’s time as “mentally more united than we can now conceive,” but even that unity is clouded by “dissensions and dirtiness” (*SP* 207). Thus, the “mind of Europe” for Eliot was less an arbitrary imposition of order on a chaotic present than a historical ideal that was never fully realized. Even when Dante wrote—before the dissociation of sensibility had begun to unravel this supposed unity—Europe was never completely unified according to Eliot, only “more or less one” (*SP* 209). And when Eliot puffs the universality of Dante’s Italian for having been derived from the universal Latin, he hedges his bets by emphasizing the “localization” of Dante’s Florentine speech as cutting across national boundaries. The paradox of provincial universalism mirrors the complexities in all of Eliot’s work, the philosopher’s mind endlessly backtracking with an “If and Perhaps and But” (*CPP* 137).

While Florentine speech may have been the local springboard through which Dante achieved a supposed universality, it was the rhythms of

French and the culture of Paris that launched Eliot from his schoolboy studies of France into the broader culture of European languages and history. To understand Eliot's interest in European-ness, one might start with his familial roots in St. Louis and Boston, and with his constant sense of his own doubleness: the outsider status that made him feel first like an easterner in Missouri, then a southerner in Boston, an American in France, a *metic* in Britain, an Anglican within the Catholic tradition. Eliot's late-nineteenth-century education took European history and literature as its lodestar. Beginning at Smith Academy, his classical course included European history, Greek and Roman history, and intense study of the languages and literatures of Europe, including English, Latin, Greek, French, and German (see Stayer). A. David Moody has observed that the curriculum of Harvard University, where Eliot undertook multiple degrees, was more Eurocentric in its concerns than Oxford or Cambridge in the early twentieth century (62). Even so, it was while Eliot was at Harvard that the dominance of the Western tradition finally opened to Eastern religion and philosophy, studies in which he immersed himself seriously. But all of these preparatory engagements, slowly broadening the young Eliot, did not strike him as forcefully as the French influence did when it appeared, accidentally, outside of the classroom, when he stumbled across Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. This volume first introduced Eliot to the work of the French poet Jules Laforgue, a chance meeting that sparked a passionate intellectual kinship that made Eliot's own poetry come alive for the first time. France became Eliot's doorway to the European ideal, a "mind" both cultural and geographical where he would later make his home—though, tellingly, not on the continent, but on the outlying island of Britain.

That Eliot always expressed, as Patrick Query has argued, a "commitment to constituent cultural particularities" rather than (in Eliot's dismissive phrase) an "emotional summons to international brotherhood" does not make his appeal to European unity any less internationalist in its scope (Query 38). Nor was Eliot's urge to unify necessarily restricted to those whose politics were conservative or whose worldview was metaphysical. For example, Eliot's theories might be placed in such universalist movements or artistic collectives as the Bauhaus or Dadaism. These European movements expressed solidarity in internationalist terms—especially socialist ideology—and sought to break down barriers between artist and artisan in order to forge a new European mind. All of these contexts and theories take as their backdrop the Great War. Modernism was in large part the artistic response to that disaster, but certain strains of modernism (especially Bauhaus and Dadaism) explicitly rejected both expressionism

and impressionism as redolent of the nationalism and individualism that had led to the conflict in the first place. The near-futility of conceiving a unitary mind of Europe in the wake of that continent's catastrophic disintegration was an underdog project that Eliot relished for years.<sup>1</sup> As Moody has argued, Eliot "knew perfectly well that he was invoking an ideal conception which had little support in actuality. It was precisely because the mind of Europe did not exist in any practical form that it was necessary to invent it, or to reinvent it" (61).

While such universalizing metaphors as the "mind of Europe" are subject to critique, they cannot yet be discarded. However literary scholars and historians may complicate such tropes, the mind of Europe—the concept of a unified cultural ideal—is still a potent one in the contemporary political realm: the question of what it means to be European reverberates through political discussions, financial markets, diplomatic treaties, and national and international borders. For Eliot, the entryway into that broad, historical discussion was France, the first European culture he came to know intimately, and a country whose tutelage would enrich his exploration of other European traditions. Paris, in the intellectual and artistic ferment of the particular year of 1910-11, was the place where his alien eyes were trained on the present and the past, the country and the continent, the local and the universal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For extended analyses of the phrase "the mind of Europe"—its origin, meaning, and shelf life—see Query, Moody, Douglass, Cooper, and Vanheste.

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**PART I:**  
**ELIOT AND FRANCE**

## CHAPTER ONE

# PLAYING POSSUM: SYMBOLIC DEATH AND SYMBOLIST IMPOTENCE IN ELIOT'S FRENCH HERITAGE

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

What will happen if I live again? ... But the dilemma—to kill another person by being dead, or to kill them by being alive? Is it best to make oneself a machine, and kill them by not giving nourishment, or to be alive, and kill them by wanting something that one *cannot* get from that person?  
—T. S. Eliot (*L2* 627)

[A] not unrecent peep at Tears Eliot ... has mightily confirmed my negligible suspicion that be it never so humble there's no:Solly,after entertaining that hombra for 15 minutes you feel like taking out a patent for manipulating the dead  
—E. E. Cummings (*Letters* 178)

To situate Eliot in a French context, it helps to recognize him as participating in a late Symbolist tradition. Such a tradition had its own concept of the “death of the author” and saw this death as relayed by a living tradition. I would like to begin exploring this theme, which Eliot evokes in a passage from the Turnbull Lectures on Laforgue and Corbière: “when I first came across these French poets, some twenty-three years ago, it was a personal enlightenment such as I can hardly communicate. I felt for the first time in contact with a tradition, for the first time, that I had, so to speak, some backing by the dead, and at the same time that I had something to say that might be new and relevant” (*VMP* 287). The prudent qualification—“so to speak”—would not be necessary for readers of the earlier essays, or of some poems. In this lecture, we hear echoes from two other passages, two different regimes of utterance; the poetic: “I should be glad of another death,” as the closing of “Journey of the Magi” (*CPP* 104). Or the critical mode, this time from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “Someone said: ‘The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so



much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know" (*SP* 40). I will now try to provide a French context for Eliot's sense of a homology between his personal death and the collective death entailed by the idea of tradition.

In his exploration of tradition and death, Eliot revisits the ancient topos of dwarves—as the terminology then had it—who see better because they are sitting on the shoulders of giants. This idea had been formulated much earlier by Bernard de Chartres and reported by John of Salisbury: Bernard “used to compare us to [puny] dwarfs perched on the shoulder of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature” (Salisbury 167).<sup>1</sup> Yet the trope of giants who need to be alive in order to carry others on their backs will now underpin, for Eliot, a thanatopoeia according to which one makes a link between a dead poets society and the newer forms expressing the contemporary world. The authors Eliot mentions in his Turnbull Lectures include Baudelaire, Corbière, Verlaine, Laforgue, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Charles-Louis Philippe. Their significance derives from a comparison of respective worth among the dead, an idea that Eliot explains in an oft-quoted passage from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (*SP* 38).

This is the basic presupposition that I will examine: to become one with the dead, to identify with their language and their accumulated insights, implies that the creative individual merges with a collective mind before finding a way toward singular expression. In the French context, this tradition begins with Symbolism. Eliot sees Baudelaire as the initiator, but Mallarmé had the keener insight into his own death, and his plural “deaths” have been well studied by Leo Bersani in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*. Mallarmé writes to his friend Cazalis: “I am perfectly dead” (Mallarmé, *Correspondance* 342). The conceit, paradoxical as it sounds, sends us in the direction of a concept of writing that has been proposed by Jacques Derrida and that points to a critique of subjective identity. This idea was earlier developed by Jules Laforgue, as we see from “Dimanches” (III), a posthumous poem much admired by Eliot and quoted in the same Turnbull lecture:

Bref, j'allais me donner d'un "Je vous aime"  
 Quand je m'avisai non sans peine  
 Que d'abord je ne me possédais pas bien moi-même.

.....  
 Ainsi donc, pauvre, pâle et piètre individu  
 Qui ne croit à son Moi qu'à ses moments perdus,  
 Je vis s'effacer ma fiancée  
 Emportée par le cours des choses,  
 Telle l'épine voit s'effeuiller,  
 Sous prétexte de soir sa meilleure rose. (Laforgue 306)<sup>2</sup>

Eliot discovered Laforgue in Arthur Symons's book on the Symbolist movement. In the section on Mallarmé, Symons begins with the idea that the French poet was the acknowledged leader of the movement because he had posited an "absolute" in poetry:

Stéphane Mallarmé was one of those who love literature too much to write it except by fragments; in whom the desire for perfection brings its own defeat. With either more or less ambition he would have done more to achieve himself; he was always divided between an absolute aim at the absolute, that is, the unattainable, and a too logical disdain for the compromise by which, after all, literature is literature. (Symons 62)

The "absolute" is a term that Eliot later rethinks philosophically via Bradley, but he first embraces it via Symons on Mallarmé and Laforgue.

In Mallarmé's letters, we see the poet documenting an existential and intellectual crisis. In April 1866, he evokes a trip to Cannes that had allowed him to "dig down into verse" [*creuser le vers*] and reach his artistic breakthrough, but only after a dismal encounter with nothingness (*Correspondance* 297). A letter to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam describes the crisis: "my soul is destroyed. My thought has reached the point where it could think itself and has no strength at its disposal to evoke in a unique Nothingness the void disseminated in its porosity" (366). Yet even though he feels that he had "died," Mallarmé announces the "interior dream" of two parallel books, one on "Beauty" and the other on "sumptuous allegories of Nothingness." He can sense these books but feels impotent to write them: "Really, I am afraid to *begin* (although, it is true *Eternity* has scintillated in me and devoured any surviving notion of time) where our poor and sacred Baudelaire ended" (367). Then in 1869, an extraordinary series of letters are sent to various addressees, all dictated by Mallarmé to his wife because he was suffering from a writer's block akin to hysteria. His doctor had forbidden him to touch a pen. Maria's handwriting records her husband's words: "The first phase of my life is over. Consciousness, overburdened with shadows, wakes up slowly to shape a new man, and has to find again my dream after its creation. This will last a number of years during which I must relive the life of humanity since its childhood as it

becomes conscious of itself" (425). While this crisis of 1869 forces him to reject the literary program that had preceded it, the poet keeps promising new work to come. The metaphysical encounter with absolute Nothingness commemorated by Mallarmé's *Igitur* has been productive, and the poet accepts that he is just a *littérateur* and not a philosopher or a hero of the mind.

One can postulate a convergence among Mallarmé's letters, his few published poems, and the notes that he left for a never finished "Book."<sup>3</sup> Blanchot's *Livre à Venir* demonstrated that Mallarmé's own "Livre" could only be a future project. It had to remain "to come" and could not be defined, as the editor of Mallarmé's notes says, as a real possibility.<sup>4</sup> But the lost or vanishing Book may also have been realized elsewhere: in the letters themselves. This is the radical thesis set forward by Roger Dragonetti's book *Un fantôme dans le kiosque*. Dragonetti argues that Mallarmé's meditation on an absolute Book implied as a dialectical counterpart the contingent inscription of the author in the futile concerns of everyday life. It was from this lived life that a few postcards or occasional light verses would be sent to contemporaries. Mallarmé worked with a view to the social inscription of his writings, especially toward the end of his life, when he occupied himself with poems for anniversaries, banquets, commemorations, burials, all the rituals surrounding the busy life of a literary Master, much more than with the neo-Hegelian agenda presupposed by Blanchot. In *Les loisirs de la poste*, Mallarmé launched a new genre in which futility and ingenuity blend triumphantly. The addresses of his correspondents became pretexts for quatrains that the mailman had to decipher in order to deliver the message—and he always did! Such poems were indistinguishable from gifts for friends, as they were written on fans, fruits, packages of candies, tobacco or coffee. For lack of the absolute Book, poetry was condemned to fulfill the function of miniature decorations. Ornamentation appeared as the bourgeois rewriting of an ontological futility. The decision to invest in futility provides a solution to Mallarmé's contradictions: just as he was describing to his disciples the absolute task of a "Supreme Fiction," his real activity consisted in rhyming addresses. The death of the Hero—for which the notes for the Book elaborate several scenarios—was a demise that Mallarmé reserved for himself in a curious, self-fulfilling prophecy and that confirmed his inability to create a Book to which he pretended to have devoted his life.

Is it a coincidence, then, that Mallarmé died of a laryngeal spasm while struggling at last with the fantastic creation of the Book? His physical demise points to the inevitable "elocutionary disappearance" [*la*

*disparition élocutoire*] of a poet who vanishes into a pure language (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* 366). The lethal crisis which seized him is called in French by a name derived from English, *faux croup* (spasmodic croup): very nearly a *faux coup* or “false throw of the dice,” grabbing you in the throat, leading to the throes that parody Death’s final throw of the dice, Death as a dishonest croupier. Caught in this fatal, spastic throw, Mallarmé could be said to have died from the discrepancy between his sublime aspirations to the Book and the awareness that he would never fulfill them. Trapped between the radically new poetical language of the impossible Book and the daily practice of a new poetic language, we come quite close to the angel evoked by Walter Benjamin after Klee’s famous figure. Here, in Benjamin’s description of it, we see the poet meditating on history as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.” The storm blowing from Paradise, Benjamin says, “propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward” (259-60). When he died, Mallarmé was conscious that he left no legacy: no heir could take up the project. The last letter to his family, written between two seizures, stresses the desperate character of his position; alluding to the “half-centenarian heap of notes” that he alone could have deciphered or used, Mallarmé asks for their destruction: “Burn, therefore; there is no literary heritage there, my poor children.... Believe that it was to be very beautiful” (*Correspondance* 642). Mallarmé’s inheritance would thus exist in tension between the absolute Book and the futility of everyday life. The tension will only be resolved via a systematic practice of serial deaths leading to a renewal or rebirth of the subject.

But for Eliot, Mallarmé’s dead-serious dialectic was lacking a principle of supreme importance that Eliot found in two lesser poets, Corbière and Laforgue: irony. To explore how irony opens up this closed dialectic for Eliot, we must first make a detour through prose.

*Les lauriers sont coupés* (1887, translated as *The Bays Are Sere*), a slender novel by Edouard Dujardin, was the book that Joyce discovered in Paris in 1903 and later credited with having shown him the technique of interior monologue. This novel is important in our context because it opens a pathway between Symbolist poetry and modernist writing. What can be stressed, if we imagine that Eliot ever read the novel, is the mixture of irony, sexuality and musicality skillfully deployed by Dujardin. The opening paragraph zooms in on Daniel Prince, a young man who appears in the middle of a Paris crowd:

For from the chaos of appearances, amid periods and sites, in the illusion of things being begotten and born, one among the others, distinct from the

others, yet similar to the others, one the same and yet another, from the infinity of possible existences, I appear; ... Paris, on a bright evening of setting sun, the monotonous noises, the pale houses, the foliage of shadows; a milder evening; and the joy of being someone, of walking; the streets and multitudes, and, stretching far in the air, the sky; all around, Paris sings, and, in the haze of shapes perceived, softly it frames the idea. (Dujardin, *Bays* 3)

The slightly blurred and impressionistic passage evokes a diffuse unanimism of the big city. Dujardin's narrative technique is ideally suited to a subjective apprehension of everyday life in Paris.

Some technical difficulties, though, were hard to solve. The novel's first pages stick to one interior perspective, and so the physical progression of the main character cannot be described from the outside. Such problems are obvious, for example, in the scene in which Prince gropes his way up the stairs of a friend, a sort of Prufrockian confidant. Prince thinks:

Here's the house I have to go into, where I shall find someone; the house; the entrance to the hall; let us go in. Night is falling; the air is mild; there is a cheerfulness in the air. The staircase; the bottom steps. Supposing he's left early? he sometimes does; but I want to tell him about the day I've had. The first floor landing; the wide, well-lit staircase, the windows. I've confided in him, in this decent friend of mine, about my love affair. (Dujardin, *Bays* 3)

This may be clumsy writing, yet a certain rhythm emerges as the novel progresses. That rhythm is Wagnerian, and *The Bays Are Sere* was the first novel to translate a Wagnerian musicality into both its prose and structure. The editor of the influential *Revue wagnérienne* (1885 to 1888), Dujardin had introduced the music of Wagner to Mallarmé, whose *Mardis* he regularly attended, as did Arthur Symons. In one of the novel's street scenes, the tune of a barrel-organ is reproduced with its score as Prince leisurely strolls down a boulevard. Various types of music are mixed with his sexual excitement in a sequence of tumescence and detumescence. Innuendoes from popular tunes ("I love you more than my turkey-cocks") lead to the leitmotif of "love you more." The rather frenzied erotic fantasy is cut off with: "I've my lecture tomorrow" (Dujardin, *Bays* 47-49). Prince then surveys his diary and remembers love letters written to him by Léa d'Arsay in a recapitulation of their courtship. All these motives, intertwined graciously, are controlled by a pervasive irony.

Irony and eroticism are the two outstanding qualities of *The Bays Are Sere*. Prince is a delicate but by no means unsexed suitor of the cocotte Léa. We understand that she takes advantage of him by giving small

favors piece-meal, in return for which she gets sums of money from the young student who can barely make ends meet. The action is on the night of decision: Prince wants Léa to pay back in kind, or he will break up with her. The irony is that she seems quite willing to do so while he is embarrassed by romantic notions about purity. At one point, to put him at ease, she pretends to fall asleep in his arms, where Prince is overwhelmed by her sensuality: “it is her body’s perfume I can sense in the deep essence of the mingling flowers; yes, her woman’s being; and the profound mystery of her sex in love; lecherously, daemonically, when virile mastery of fleshly impulse surrenders to a kiss, thus the terrible, bitter, blanching ecstasy rises” (55). But in spite of this sexualized evocation of her body, Prince does not dare to take advantage of the situation. Instead, he falls asleep:

she sleeps; I feel sleep coming over me; I half close my eyes ... there ... her body; her breast swells and swells; and the sweet scent mingled ... fine April night ... in a while we’ll go for a ride ... the cool air ... we’re going to leave ... in a while ... the two candles ... there ... along the boulevards ... “love y’ more than m’ sheep” ... “love y’ more” (55)

He dozes in this way until he is woken up by Léa’s ironic taunt: “congratulations, my dear” (56).

Prince’s words always betray him; he is paralyzed by romantic clichés about love that hide petty calculations about the sums spent on her. When the call of flesh imposes itself, he says naively: “renunciations, goodbye to the renunciations, I want her!” (78). In the end, having given her all the money he had with him, Prince leaves without having decided whether to continue or break up. Léa’s “honor” is intact, but Prince thinks he’ll “to the woods no more,” a resolution which will last as long as the song. They do part: “gone for ever, the possibilities of love between us.... Pale and unforgettably beautiful, my friend stretches out her hand to me. // ‘Goodbye.’ // ‘Goodbye.’ // She gives a friendly smile; on her breasts the lights glimmer, blonde and nocturnal” (79). We glimpse Léa laughing at Prince’s delusion, which pushes us back to the beginning: the awkwardness and naiveté that characterized the style of the first pages can be blamed on Prince’s immaturity rather than on the author’s lack of art.

Mallarmé immediately acknowledged the novelty of Dujardin’s discovery. In a letter, he thanked him for the novel in 1888:

I can see you have set down a rapid and dancing mode of notation [*une mode de notation virevoltant et cursif*], whose sole aim, independent of large-scale literary structures, poetry or decoratively convoluted phraseology, is to express, without misapplication of the sublime means