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A Certain Comparison

Lessing's and Eliot's Use of the *Poetics**

The comparison of Eliot's implicit use of the *Poetics* in his critical essays with Lessing's radical reinterpretation of the treatise in his critique of Neoclassical drama in *Hamburg Dramaturgy* shows that their views converge on *formal affectivism*, a concise formula for Aristotle's conception of tragedy. Their agreement on the nature and limits of aesthetic discourse, critical terminology, and drama far outweighs the divergence in their views of later classicisms, reinforcing the validity of Aristotle's criteria and their applicability to the verbal arts in different cultural milieux. But Eliot goes further than Lessing: he reinstates formal affectivism as the foundation of modern criticism by extending Aristotle's dramatic principles to poetry and to literary history. Eliot rehabilitates Aristotle in a post-Romantic age by using his principles to transcend earlier canons – the Romantic, Neoclassical, Renaissance, and classical – and concomitantly invents a modernist critical canon. To him the implications of misconceiving Aristotle's organicist aesthetics and object-centered criticism surpass aesthetic considerations per se. The *Poetics* informs his attempt to unify the European cultural tradition – its literature and its criticism – which, starting in ancient Greece, culminates in his paradoxical notion of an avant-garde classicist modernism.

What we really want, to solve aesthetic puzzlements, is certain comparisons – grouping together of certain cases.
(Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lectures on Aesthetics")

It has been argued that in the first half of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot was the most insistent defender of a new agenda of art and criticism. René Wellek, to quote one among many writers, saw him as "by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world"; it was only to be expected that for the

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next generation, Eliot assumed the status of dictator rather than liberator.¹ Despite these fluctuations in Eliot's fortunes, his task as a young critic was to introduce to the public his own works and those of his fellow-writers. Having discovered "that there is a significant relation between the best poetry and the best criticism of the same period,"² Eliot realized that the reception of avant-garde works depended on justifying them historically. My aim is to explore the apparent contradiction or "aesthetic puzzlement" in Eliot's agenda – seeing himself simultaneously as an avant-garde poet and a classicist – an Aristotelian classicist at that³ – by uncovering the Aristotelian principles that he adapted to modern criticism. To isolate these principles, I compare his use of the *Poetics* with G. E. Lessing's interpretation, which, by reclaiming the notion of *formal affectivism*, offsets Eliot's Aristotelian assumptions. Eliot, I conclude, unlike his eighteenth-century predecessor, extends the use of formal affectivism from tragic drama to both poetry and literary history, thereby defining the modernist agenda as the interdependence of avant-gardism and classicism – a necessary marriage of opposites.

On the Difference between Rules and Laws

As a critic and dramatist, G. E. Lessing was immersed in the debate between the Ancients and Moderns that dominated the intellectual life of his time. In this debate he sided with the Ancients, admitting only one modern dramatist – Shakespeare – into the classical canon. By examining current and earlier notions of drama against the *Poetics*, Lessing undermined them one by one and produced a wholly new reading of the *Poetics* in which Aristotle was purged of any vestige of Platonism. For Lessing, what Homer is to literature, Aristotle is to the understanding of Homer's world – the father of aesthetic discourse and its ultimate arbiter; the *Poetics*, he says,

1. René Wellek, "The Criticism of T. S. Eliot," quoted in Mario Praz, "T. S. Eliot as a Critic," in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, ed. Allen Tate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 262–276, p. 262; Delmore Schwartz, "The Literary Dictatorship of T. S. Eliot," *Partisan Review* (February 1949): 119–137. See also Donald Davie, "Eliot in One Poet's Life" *Mosaic* 6.1 (Fall 1972): 229–241.

2. T. S. Eliot, introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933, rpt., 1964), 13–36, p. 30; hereafter cited as *UPUC*.

3. T. S. Eliot, "Mr. Middleton Murry's Synthesis," *The Monthly Criterion* 6.4 (1927): 340–347, p. 346.

is “as infallible as the Elements of Euclid”; Aristotle is not a lawgiver, but the law (condition) itself.⁴

By wielding the conventional Neoclassical distinctions – civilized vs. barbarous, the beautiful *vs.* the ugly, talent *vs.* genius, and Greek *vs.* Roman – Lessing exposes common misconceptions of Aristotelian aesthetics that have led the public to accept as classical what is merely mediocre art. Neoclassicism, because it is enthralled with Reason, seeks to subsume Art under one universal Truth. In this Platonist order, the artist was not expected not seek the subject of art in ordinary experience, which would betoken particularism, but to copy classical masterpieces to attain artistic universalism. Art is seen as a subspecies of philosophy, and the objects of imitation are the ideas, the forms that can be transposed from one medium to another. According to Lessing the outcome of this reductive conception of art is the loss of originality and authenticity and, when these are lost, art cannot produce any affect. Methodically undermining the Neoclassical ideal expressed by his French contemporary Boileau – “Love reason then; and let whatever you write / Borrow from her its beauty, force, and light” – Lessing declares that it is not the light of reason that art seeks but the fire of emotion.

Lessing's critique of Neoclassicism – the attempt to copy classical models – is based on a radical reinterpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*: the aim of art is to produce beauty, for beauty appeals to the imagination and produces pleasure; this pleasure or aesthetic affect is not a demonstration of truth but is intrinsically meaningful. It is the product of a teleological conception of art – the interaction of parts bound by an inner logic to produce a unified whole. Lessing's classicist stance exposes the fault line of *neoclassicism* as the failure to distinguish between the two incompatible phases of classicism, the Greek and the Roman, underlying which he detects the graver fault of conflating Aristotle's aesthetics with Plato's metaphysics – which double failure fundamentally distorts Aristotle's conception of tragedy.

Like Lessing, Eliot found in Aristotle the voice of practical wisdom:

One must be firmly distrustful of accepting Aristotle in a canonical spirit; this is to lose *the whole living force* of him. He was primarily a man of not only remarkable but universal intelligence. . . . in whatever sphere of inter-

4. All parenthetical references are to this edition: G. E. Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1769), trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Dover, 1962), p. 263; hereafter cited as *HD*. Cf.: “The kind of literary law in which Aristotle was interested was not law that he laid down, but law that he discovered” (Eliot, “Apology for the Countess of Pembroke,” in *UPUC*, 37–52, p. 45).

est, he looked solely and steadfastly at the object; in his short and broken treatise he provides an eternal example—not of laws . . . but of intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition.⁵

What is striking here is the interdependence of “intelligence” and “analysis of sensation.” It is not ideas that are analyzed but sensations, and intelligence apprehends the object not as an intellectual problem but as an experiential process. Aristotle’s *Poetics* is an example of disinterested attention, where to be objective is to be true to one’s experience and to conduct “the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition” – an apt description of Eliot’s own critical method. The poet, and by implication any artist, struggles, Eliot says, “to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal.”⁶ What Eliot meant by “universal and impersonal” appears to be closely tied to his view of the European tradition, beginning in ancient Athens and culminating in modernism as the reaffirmation of Aristotelian aesthetics. He was convinced “that literature cannot be understood without going to the sources; sources which are often remote, difficult, and unintelligible unless one transcends the prejudices of ordinary literary taste.”⁷ And one of the more obscure sources Eliot had in mind were the works – mainly the *Poetics* – of Aristotle:

We need someone . . . to explain how vital a matter it is, if Aristotle may be said to have been a moral pilot of Europe, whether we shall or shall not drop that pilot. And we need a number of educated poets who shall at least have opinions about Greek drama, and whether it is or is not of any use to us.⁸

Lessing and Eliot, each in his own way, tried to revive Aristotle’s “whole living force.” While Lessing was motivated by the Neoclassical misapprehension of the *Poetics* (specifically of *mimesis* and *catharsis*), Eliot may be said to have adopted

5. T. S. Eliot, “The Perfect Critic,” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), 1–16, pp. 10–11 (my emphasis).

6. All parenthetical references are to this edition: T. S. Eliot, “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” in *Selected Essays*, 3d enl. ed. (1932; London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 126–140, p. 137; hereafter cited as *SE*.

7. T. S. Eliot, “The Beating of a Drum,” *The Nation and The Athenaeum* (October 1923): 11–12.

8. Eliot, “Euripides and Professor Murray,” in *SE*, 59–64, pp. 60–61.

Aristotle's manner of approaching objects in their particularity. Compared to Lessing's focused discussion of the *Poetics*, Eliot's Aristotelianism is more diffuse, extending to objects beyond the aesthetic, although the terms and method appear to derive from it. But what Eliot and Lessing more specifically share is an attitude: anti-metaphysical and skeptical; a method: empirical and comparative; and an aesthetics: formal affectivism. Their aim was to defend art as an autonomous activity, as neither the handmaid of philosophy and science in the Enlightenment model, nor the handmaid of social reform or a substitute for religion in the Romantic model. Eliot uses Aristotle to free aesthetics from the excesses of Romanticism in much the same way that Lessing used Aristotle to free it from the rationalistic excesses of Neoclassicism. To counteract these excesses, Lessing and Eliot try to redirect critical attention to the effects of concrete works of art, proposing aesthetics as the only defense of art against philosophy. Their comprehensive rereading of Aristotle is itself an Aristotelian move: to understand the function of an object one must grasp the context or discipline of which it is a part. "Aristotle," Lessing notes, "always requires to be interpreted through himself," and he advises anyone who reads the *Poetics* "to read the complete works of the philosopher from beginning to end. He will find explanations of *Poetics* where he least expects them, most especially must he study the books of *Rhetoric* and *Ethics*" (179).

Defending the *Poetics* is the Best Defense of Art

Lessing and Eliot, like Aristotle, initiate their defense by separating art from other disciplines. Aristotle grouped the fields of knowledge according to their function. He placed philosophy and science, the object of which is knowledge of first principles, in the theoretical sciences; and he placed politics, ethics, rhetoric, and economics – the aim of which is action – in the practical sciences; but art, that which involves 'making,' he placed in a category all on its own: the productive. Lessing and Eliot refuse to elevate art above or to lower it below its Aristotelian mid-position – ranging and mediating between philosophy (universal truths) and history (particular cases) – and like him they separate aesthetic experience from the kind of knowledge offered by other disciplines. "Poetry," Eliot maintains, "is not a substitute for philosophy or theology or religion . . . it has its own function. But as this function is not intellectual but emotional, it cannot be defined adequately in intellectual terms. We can say that it provides 'consolation.'"⁹

9. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," pp. 137–138.

Art “provides” something by eliciting an emotional response or inducing a state of mind. In proposing what art “gives” in answer to ‘what is art?’ Eliot aligns himself with the Aristotelian psychological value of art.¹⁰ And if neither philosophical nor theological terms will do, he implies that the terms best suited to aesthetic discourse are those that arise from the art object itself. In the same way, Lessing separates pleasure (art) from truth (philosophy) and exempts art from any overt social function, insisting that the “nature of the subject” should determine how it is to be studied.¹¹

Though the theoretical, practical, and productive disciplines are separable, they are linked by language. In his semantics, Aristotle always qualifies his terms in a given context. He does this throughout his works, and in the penultimate chapter of the *Poetics* turns it into a critical principle: apparent contradictions or errors of composition may be traced to changing uses of specific words. One example of this semantic adjustment is seen in his discussion of perhaps the most problematic pair of all, the ‘universal’ and ‘particular.’ ‘Universal’ is used in a non-metaphysical sense to describe the freedom of the poet to range beyond historically established facts for poetic ends and refers to the potentiality of tragedy to treat the probable rather than the factual. There is no reason to assume that because poetry can express probabilities (he uses the phrase “tends to”), Aristotle saw it as a subspecies of philosophy or that because history treats what actually happened, it lacks philosophical significance. The difference is one of degrees, arising from how each discipline conceives its subject. Thus, insofar as poetry realizes its potential to treat the probable, it is, he says, “a more philosophical and a higher thing than history” (9.1451b).¹²

But art, and especially poetry, also had to be defended in face of Plato’s suspicion of its medium, the poet’s verbal wizardry or his being a mere versifier lacking real knowledge. Aristotle’s answer is that art is not the imposition of form (e.g., beautiful words) on some previously detachable content (e.g., a historical fact). In the case of tragedy, the artist can only be the maker of plots, plot being the organic

10. Eliot rarely used the word ‘catharsis’ but often described the effect or ‘use’ of poetry. See the conclusion to *UPUC*, 143–156, p. 153; and “Poetry and Drama,” in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), 72–88, p. 87; hereafter cited as *OPP*.

11. All parenthetical references are to this edition: G. E. Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 14; 55–56; 51.

12. All parenthetical references to the *Poetics* are to this edition: S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, with a critical text and translation of the *Poetics* (1894), 4th ed. (New York: Dover, 1951).

unity of form and content, and the poet's aim is not to succeed as a rhetorician or to offer a lesson in philosophy but to affect the feelings of his audience. And because moving the audience is cathartic and healthy, according to Aristotle, affect is the end of tragedy. As the maker of plots, the poet deals with objects that are categorically different from those of the historian because his invented chains of events are connected by imaginative necessity: verbal compositions

will differ in structure from historical compositions, which of necessity present not a single action, but a single period, and all that happened within that period to one person or to many, little connected together as the events may be. (23.1459b)

Lessing, in much the same words, repeatedly emphasizes the teleological nature of drama:

For the dramatic poet is no historian, he does not relate to us what was once believed to have happened, but he really produces it again before our eyes, and produces it again not on account of mere historical truth but for a totally different and a nobler aim. Historical accuracy is not his aim, but only the means by which he hopes to attain his aim; *he wishes to delude us and touch our hearts through this delusion.* (32; my emphasis)¹³

History is for tragedy nothing but a storehouse of names. (63)

The distinction Lessing and Aristotle make is one of degrees of probability conceived as "inner necessity" (25.1461b). Aristotle famously says that the poet should prefer "probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities" (24.1460a), which becomes a criterion in dealing with various objections: "Things are censured either as impossible, or irrational, or morally hurtful, or contradictory, or contrary to artistic correctness" (25.1461b). And he goes on to suggest that the only real difficulties arise from errors in composition that the critic cannot justify.

Art is finally also separated from its maker, for it is primarily an activity that terminates in a made thing. Once made, the artist can have no further claims on it, nor should we seek its meaning by recourse to the artist's life and personality. Homer, for Aristotle,

admirable in all respects, has the special merit of being the only poet who rightly appreciates the part he should take himself. The poet should speak

13. Lessing repeats these points in *HD*, pp. 51–52; 56–64.

as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator. (24.1460a)

Lessing repeats this point: “I incline to believe that the real reason why we know so little of the person and the life of Homer is to be sought in the excellence of his poems” (103). And Eliot puts even greater emphasis on impersonality: “The emotion of art is impersonal,” the product of the combination of elements in the poem, arising from the poem, and not from the person who wrote it. His insistence that poetry is not the expression of emotion or of personality, but an escape from them negates the Romantic conception of art and biographical criticism.¹⁴

By separating art from history and philosophy, Aristotle founded a new discipline – aesthetics – with its own self-reflexive laws, and exhibited his unique analytic strategy of demarcating and ordering natural and human phenomena and undertaking their study in terms that are adequate to them. His philosophical procedure is rooted in conventionalism, which implies that those who accept his aesthetics are necessarily conventionalists. “We should reflect,” Lessing observes, “that all things in the world depend on custom and opinion” (44). Eliot, more succinctly, simply says: “Reality is a convention.”¹⁵ But Eliot is a radical skeptic, his relativism surpassing Lessing’s or Aristotle’s. This is partly because Aristotle was an ancient philosopher and Lessing a Neoclassical critic, whereas Eliot was a modern poet-critic with an interest in a multilayered history. It is Eliot’s historical sense that differentiates him from the other two, although, as I will argue, his historical sensibility appears to grow out of his Aristotelian approach.

Lessing’s Aristotelian stance is categorical: the test of authentic art is whether it produces an emotional effect, which he calls beauty. Eliot, a post-Romantic, changed his initially purist aesthetics to a more accommodating view: in itself the work of art

14. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *SE*, 13–22, p. 22. Eliot’s concept of tradition and “of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written” is complemented by his attack on subjectivity; the poet does not have “a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (20). In his introduction to *UPUC*, Eliot similarly denies the “subjective” ontology of the poem: “If poetry is a form of ‘communication,’ yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself, and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone into it” (30); this is so because, “the poem has its own existence, apart from us; it was there before us and will endure after us” (34).

15. T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 98.

has only an aesthetic aim, but as an object in the world it may have other uses.¹⁶ Although Aristotle says little directly about criticism, it seems reasonable to suggest that, given the interdependence of the universal and the particular in the concrete work of art, he saw aesthetic discourse as mediating between philosophy and history, bringing them into a relationship. The *Poetics*, *De anima*, and the *Rhetoric* are together a powerful retort to Plato's condemnation of art and artists. Aristotle's approach allows him to concentrate on a select number of tragedies by avoiding decontextualization and over-contextualization. He avoids the temptation to over-philosophize a work and deduce from it a set of ideas, which Lessing sees as the fundamental mistake of Neoclassicism, and he avoids the tendency to over-contextualize it by recourse to the biographical, sociological or religious aspects of the life and times of the artist, which Eliot sees as the perversion of Romanticism.¹⁷ For as would happen in a tug-of-war, either extreme may obliterate the art object itself. But if art is autonomous, it follows that the task of the critic is to deal with works of an established genre and to set forth their distinctive features by comparing them with other works/genres. Thus the questions the Aristotelian critic asks are: 'is this work well-made?' 'what is the effect of this work?' and, 'how does this work produce this effect?' Lessing and Eliot advocate an object-centered criticism with the aim of acknowledging what the artist has accomplished. For all three, the critic's main tool in surmising the nature, quality, and value of a given work is comparison with other works.

The "Essentials of Drama" and the Western Canon

The agreement between Lessing and Eliot on the aims of art and criticism provides the background for discussing their views of drama and specifically tragic drama,

16. For Eliot some distinctions are necessary, as they were for Aristotle: "It is essential that a work of art should be self-consistent, that an artist should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass: on the one hand actual life is always the material, and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life is a necessary condition to the creation of the work of art" ("Four Elizabethan Dramatists," in *SE*, 109–117, p. 111). Yet, as a modern skeptic, Eliot suggests that it would be wrong to isolate "poetry from everything else in the world" ("Shelley and Keats," in *UPUC*, 87–102, p. 98). Elsewhere he explains: "the 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards" ("Religion and Literature," in *SE*, 388–401, p. 388).

17. Eliot comments on the limitations of these "two extremes" in "The Age of Dryden," in *UPUC*, 53–66, p. 64.

which they regarded – as did Aristotle – as the highest form of verbal art. Apart from being critics, they were both dramatists for whom the *Poetics* was the foundational treatise on the “essentials of drama.”¹⁸

But beyond their personal motivations, Lessing’s and Eliot’s interpretation of Aristotelian aesthetics undermined, respectively, the Neoclassical and, more than a century later, the late Romantic and Victorian notions of “art as mimesis.” At their most extreme, both tendencies expressed an exclusivity – formalism (pure objectivity) and emotionalism (pure subjectivity) – the methodological weakness of which arose from a misapprehension of the Aristotelian principle of the organic “objecthood” of art. Lessing’s critique of mimesis resurfaces in Eliot’s critique of the relationship between tradition and originality, and together they may be seen to continue Aristotle’s critique of Platonism. A simple illustration of this continuity – which suggests a fundamental agreement on language, genre, criticism, and aesthetics – may be traced to Aristotle’s comments on metaphor. By saying that for the poet “the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances” (22.1459a),¹⁹ Aristotle subverts Plato’s concept of mimesis as the mere copying of a pre-existing object. His subversion centers on the ability of the poet to make “good metaphors” which externalize a resemblance – not an identity – between things; mimesis therefore entails a process of imaginative recreation that places things in a relationship. For Lessing the clash between Aristotelian and Platonist mimesis underlies the debate between the Ancients and Moderns; for Eliot, this clash assumes various guises – realism *vs.* symbolism, Romantic *vs.* classical – but derives mainly from the absence of a unified literary tradition, which lack his modern criticism attempted to address.

Lessing solves this problem (and along with it the Ancients-*vs.*-Moderns conflict) by distinguishing between two forms of mimesis. Negative mimesis, akin to literal translation, deals with the parts rather than the whole; it demands a slavish imitation of an original rather than an original creation, which is the product of Aristotelian mimesis: “that general imitation which is the very essence of his art, and whether his subject is a work of other arts or a work of nature, he creates as a gen-

18. Eliot, “The Beating of a Drum,” p. 12.

19. Aristotle discusses metaphor also in *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (London: Heinemann, 1926), 3.2.1405a. His view of metaphor derives from his theory of the soul, described in *De anima* as a series of interlocking functions in which the imagination has a central role.

ius.”²⁰ To illustrate this difference he compares Greek (genuine) with Roman (mediocre) art as presented in Homer’s and Virgil’s descriptions of Achilles’ shield. In Homer’s description, “we do not see the shield, but the divine master as he is making it” (*Laocoön*, 95); the shield “is the natural growth of its own fertile soil” (97). But Virgil’s shield is artificial, “an insertion, intended solely to flatter the national pride of the Romans” (96–97). The test of the former is not whether it is “a faithful realistic representation of a shield” (negative mimesis), but the intensity of its effect on the reader (transformative mimesis). Translation is therefore an inspired recreation as shown by Greek artists in their reproduction of scenes from Homer’s epics: “the fire of his enthusiasm kindled their own; they saw and felt as he did; and so their works became reproductions of Homer’s, not as a portrait is of its original, but as a son is a reproduction of his father – similar, but different” (118).

Eliot rarely used the word *mimesis*, as it carried a Platonist aura and was too close to naturalistic reproduction, one of the styles he was reacting against, although he used it for historically precise purposes when, for example, he praised certain Aristotelian aspects in the work of Wordsworth and of Dryden (to which point I shall return). But Eliot accepted Aristotle’s explanation of mimesis as the foundation of learning: “It is not from rules or by cold-blooded imitation of style, that we learn to write: we learn by imitation indeed, but by a deeper imitation than is achieved by analysis of style.”²¹ And Eliot’s “deeper imitation” bears a close resemblance to Lessing’s “positive” notion of mimesis.

Like Lessing, who regarded the theater as “the school of the moral world” (*HD*, 8), Eliot saw drama as the stylized reproduction of lived experience: “We are human beings, and in what are we more interested than in human action and human attitudes?”²² Both writers emphasized its unique importance and in effect endorsed Aristotle’s teleological definition of tragedy in chapter 6 of the *Poetics*:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament . . . in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (6.1449b)

Each of the six components of tragedy, which Aristotle then discusses – plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle – is an element in a hierarchy, but none

20. Lessing, *Laocoön*, p. 45.

21. Eliot, “The Music of Poetry,” in *OPP*, 26–38, p. 28.

22. Eliot, “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,” in *SE*, 43–58, p. 51.

operates in isolation. This hierarchical division functions as no more than an abstract approximation of the mechanism underlying a tragedy. Aristotle does not tell a writer how to write a tragedy, as some of his commentators have thought, but describes what a well-made tragedy tends to exhibit and why.

Lessing and Eliot accept Aristotle's general theory of tragedy, but dwell on particular aspects of it as a way of redressing the imbalances in the drama and literature of their respective times. Lessing's critique of French Neoclassical tragedy centers on the inadequacy of the subject and manner of imitation. If the subject is unworthy there can be no proper catharsis of pity and fear – the sole aim of classical tragedy. What Neoclassical tragedy conspicuously lacks is a conception of human action and character that warrants Aristotle's description of the subject of tragedy as "an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude." In *Hamburg Dramaturgy* Lessing examines, through the lenses of Aristotle's *Poetics*, numerous plays that were performed in the theater of which he was director, explaining why they fail dramatically. A tragedy that is non-cathartic (or a poem or painting that fail to produce a clear emotional effect, as he argues in *Laocoön*) is a contradiction in terms: at best it is mediocre and at worst unworthy of being called art.

Of the four leading Neoclassical French dramatists – Corneille, Molière, Racine, and Voltaire – it is Voltaire who is the chief object of Lessing's attack. Presented as the symbol of French vanity, Voltaire is criticized for his inability to grasp the essence of tragedy. French talent is contrasted with Shakespeare's genius, for it is "always and eternally Shakespeare who understood everything better than the French" (41–42). By comparing the ghost in *Hamlet* with its counterpart in *Semiramis*, Lessing exposes Voltaire's superficial notion of tragedy. Shakespeare's ghost is dramatically probable; it appears at night and, seen by no one but Hamlet, serves to characterize the protagonist: it is therefore "a natural occurrence" and "a real active personage." In *Semiramis*, the ghost appears in broad daylight and is seen by a group of people; it is no more than an artificial imposition. Rather than serving a dramatic purpose, it is merely a means to unravel the plot, the sole object of which is didactic (31–36).

But it is not only in rendering the supernatural that Voltaire fails; he fails, too, in his conception of love. By juxtaposing *Zaire* with *Romeo and Juliet*, Lessing bitterly unleashes his sarcasm: "Voltaire perfectly understands the – so to speak – official language of love; that is to say the language and the tone love employs when it desires to express itself with caution and dignity, when it would say nothing but what the prudish female sophist and the cold critic can justify" (41). Love, in Voltaire's play, is therefore rhetorical rather than dramatic. What Lessing never tires of show-

ing are the dramatic inanities of decorum in contrast with authentic human feeling, and the dramas he criticizes reinforce his view that “the only unpardonable fault of a tragic poet is this, that *he leaves us cold*; if he interests us he may do as he likes with the little mechanical rules” (45; my emphasis).

Because they misunderstood the purpose of tragedy, these French dramatists failed to grasp that the unity of time and place springs from the unity of action – “the first dramatic law of the ancients” (141).²³ The tendency to prefer superficial formal perfection to the essentially dramatic stems from the misconception of the teleology of tragedy, the awakening and releasing of pity and fear. But only characters who are better than us and who appear in “an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude” can ever arouse “high pathos” (199). Voltaire’s *Merope*, considered by some “one of the most perfect tragedies” (102), is a pale copy of the Italian version by Maffei (itself a subversive copy of the extinct original by Euripides), from which Voltaire borrowed “fable, plan and manner” (104) as well as the plot and the denouement (157). In a long detailed examination of these plays, their sources, and the commentaries on them, taking up more than a quarter of *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (102–60), Lessing delivers his *coup de grâce* to Neoclassical mediocrity. Applying the test of cathartic effect to Maffei’s and Voltaire’s tragedies, he demonstrates how they substitute decorum, artificial surprises, and artistic tricks, for the tragic conception of action and character, thereby perverting tragedy into romance.

Corneille, too, is shown to have misapprehended the nature of catharsis and to have understood only “the mechanical rules of dramatic art” (181). Lessing explains that Corneille read Aristotle after writing his plays, and then set about adjusting Aristotle to his own creations. What Corneille more specifically misunderstood was that pity and fear were aroused in the audience together, not sequentially or alone. Aristotle, Lessing argues, used ‘pity’ and ‘fear’ as relative terms but used ‘philanthropy’ to designate compassion devoid of fear for ourselves. Catharsis, in Lessing’s view, arouses and releases our own deepest fears:

It is the fear which arises for ourselves from the similarity of our position with that of the sufferer; it is the fear that the calamities impending over the sufferers might also befall ourselves; it is the fear that we ourselves might thus become objects of pity. In a word this fear is compassion referred back to ourselves. (179)

23. For Eliot’s criticism of the three unities, essentially the same as Lessing’s, see “Apology for the Countess of Pembroke,” pp. 42–48.

Tragedy, he says, is not supposed to release all the passions but only our pity and fear:

Pity and fear are those passions which we, not the acting personages, feel in tragedy; they are those passions through which the acting personages touch us, not those which draw upon them their own misfortunes. (191)

Lessing thus adheres to Aristotle's view that "each art ought to produce, not any chance pleasure, but the pleasure proper to it" (26.1462b), and that the proper pleasure of tragedy is to arouse our pity and fear and thereby to bring about their release (191–193; *Poetics*, 6.1449b).

His critique is uncompromising. At the end of *Hamburg Dramaturgy* he affirms that his investigation of "the essence of dramatic art" is true to its source: "I acknowledge it exactly as Aristotle deduced it from the countless masterpieces of the Greek stage" (263). His aim was to free German writers from their idolization of French dramatists:

No nation has more misapprehended the rules of ancient drama than the French. They have adopted as the essential some incidental remarks made by Aristotle about the most fitting external division of drama, and have so enfeebled the essential by all manner of limitations and interpretations, that nothing else could necessarily arise therefrom but works that remained far below the highest effect on which the philosopher had reckoned in his rules. (264)

The upshot of his interpretation was to release artists from their fixation on rules and decorum. Lessing's assumption throughout was that to understand the classics, one should recover the meaning of Aristotle's terms, for by turning him into a lawgiver, the whole force of his aesthetics was lost by being Platonized. The major French Neoclassical dramatists had failed to question their own philosophical bias, taking Reason as the sole arbiter of art, which explained their unpardonable arrogance in claiming that they had surpassed the Ancients. For Lessing neoclassicism is therefore a fake: one cannot copy the ancients; one can only discover their art anew.

* * *

Although more than a century and a half separates Eliot from Lessing, they had a common aim: Lessing tried to revive the unknown Aristotle in the Neoclassical context and Eliot to revive him in a post-Romantic age. Lessing's critique paved the way for Romanticism, which, like any self-conscious movement, ran its course, and it was

Eliot, along with other early modernists, who reacted against its excesses. In turning away from certain Romantic canons, Eliot used Aristotelian principles – as these had been interpreted by Lessing – to construct a modernist aesthetics. Viewed thus, Lessing and Eliot stand at the beginning and end of Romanticism, but despite this difference in historical context, their poetics are grounded in common Aristotelian principles.

Like Lessing before him, Eliot was disillusioned by the drama of his own time. If Lessing complained of French Neoclassical drama, Eliot's condemnation went further: "the European stage does not stimulate the imagination," he wrote in 1917.²⁴ If Lessing attacked the shallow psychology of Neoclassical drama, Eliot attacked the Romantic overrating of subjectivity. For Lessing, Neoclassical form was inflated; for Eliot, Romantic content. Both held firmly to the Aristotelian notion that to produce an aesthetic effect a dramatic work must function as a unified whole. But it was more than contemporary drama that Eliot found lacking. He saw in the absence of *poetic drama* a symptom of cultural decay, because only such drama could produce what Aristotle perhaps meant by catharsis and what Eliot recast as the moments of greatest intensity, when "we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express."²⁵ To bring about a modern classicism thus necessitated a return to poetic drama: the craving for poetic drama as the expression of intense feeling and of the fundamentals of human life cannot be satisfied by the tendency to realism of the contemporary stage, he explained.²⁶ If Lessing wanted to revive classical Greek tragedy by referring directly to Aristotle's *Poetics*, Eliot proposed to return to the matrix of drama – to ritual and dance, to what he called "religious form."

Drama as ritual could clearly not be revived without reducing the Romantic emphasis on subjectivity, expressed as the elevation of character above plot. Eliot's "objective correlative" demolishes in a single phrase the Romantic idolization of Hamlet and at the same time takes a fresh look at the play *Hamlet*.²⁷ The term is a further elaboration of the doctrine of impersonality and is closely allied to Aristotle's notion of plot and the function of art. To speak dispassionately of *Hamlet* was Eliot's way of furthering the separation from Romantic canons, which tended to seek artistic value

24. T. S. Eliot, "The Noh and the Image," *The Egoist* (August 1917): 102–103, p. 103.

25. Eliot, "Poetry and Drama," p. 87. Like Lessing, Eliot believed that as spectators we should be unconscious of the medium: the most intense moments would not lead us to escape from the world – "on the contrary, our own sordid, dreary daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured" (82); see also pp. 72, 75.

26. Eliot, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," p. 46.

27. Eliot, "Hamlet," p. 145.

in terms of *content*. Eliot's explanation of the play's failure points to Hamlet's characterization – the hero's emotional state is not fully realized – so the parts of the play do not combine into a necessary whole: "It would be hard to say in what the clarity and sharpness and simplicity of *Hamlet* consists."²⁸ By calling it "an artistic failure," Eliot was attempting to show that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry."²⁹ The choice of *Hamlet* allowed him to take a fresh look at what the Romantics saw as the supreme work of English drama and to correct their tendency to isolate character from its formal context. It was a means of reintroducing the Aristotelian notion of formal affectivism, for Eliot wanted a dramatic character, even a Hamlet, to be "interesting because it [the play] is a work of art."

Hamlet is one among several examples (notably *The Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*) of a divergence in critical judgment between Eliot and Lessing. For Lessing *Hamlet* was closer to Greek drama than anything written in his time, for it dealt with the substance of all great drama – with human conflicts.³⁰ The fact that both Eliot and Lessing referred to Shakespeare and Milton, Homer and Virgil, Dante and Goethe, though at times differing on these writers, suggests that disagreements do not necessarily imply a radical difference in aesthetic criteria; rather, it suggests that their ranking of past masterpieces was a way of correcting certain faults in the present. One way of reconciling their divergent critical opinions is to identify their use of a common precursor, and it is perhaps in this sense that Aristotle's *Poetics* – by providing a starting point and a common measure – binds their views into a single classicism.³¹

We may speak of this classicism as one insofar as an anti-Platonist Aristotelian aesthetics underlies Lessing's and Eliot's conception of art. However, Lessing's view of classicism is exclusive – the Greeks rather than the Romans – are the standard of all art, whereas Eliot's classicism is inclusive and historicist: the classical tradition as a whole is the standard. Compared to Lessing, and certainly to Aristotle, Eliot's ap-

28. Eliot, "Ben Jonson," in *SE*, 147–160, p. 152.

29. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," p. 17.

30. Jeffrey Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity*, p. 10; and "The Manufacture of Disagreement," *Common Knowledge* 2.2 (fall 1993): 122–134, p. 124.

31. Unlike Lessing, Eliot did not need to interpret Aristotle, for he had assimilated his method. If he betrays any emotion towards him it is one of professional jealousy, for Aristotle, he says, lived in a simpler world ("A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," pp. 43–44).

proach is more sensitive to literary history and historical context.³² Eliot's philosophical stance is also more skeptical than Lessing's. There are no longer just two points of view, one right and the other wrong, but multiple – even an infinite number of points of view: although a work of art should be approached aesthetically, other approaches are unavoidable because it is related in one way or another to everything else in the world. In aesthetics, Aristotle is the starting point but his categories are conventional, open to interpretation, and adaptable to changing contexts. Aristotle's authority does not derive from his “rules” but from his methodological assumptions, formulated as a set of simple terms with which to explore artistic phenomena. Eliot, I suggest, applies Aristotle's teleological aesthetics, as understood by Lessing, to poetry and to literary history, and it is this extension and diversification that cumulatively defines his modernist concept of the mind of Europe. But what Eliot affirms in his modernist classicism (not *neo-classicism*) is a continuity and development, stretching further back in time and enlarging the context from a national to a trans-cultural view of Western civilization that would have been incomprehensible to Lessing.

For Lessing there was one historical Athens and, except for Shakespeare, even the most imaginative work of later ages could never rise to its standard. For Eliot history is more complex, for our views of it also undergo change. So although there was only one historical Athens, its achievements could be kept alive in the present, and the fact that Aristotle gave us the “essentials of drama” meant that his terms could be adapted to new forms. Eliot, in contrast to Lessing, took from Aristotle a way of ordering and assimilating Europe's cultural past. While his essays are a record of the development of his individual taste, in their entirety they present “one of the most synthesizing minds of the twentieth century.”³³

“It is essential,” Eliot wrote in 1918, “that each generation should reappraise everything for itself,” for he believed that the creation of a modern literature required the critic to bring “the art of the past to bear upon the present, making it relevant to the actual generation through his own temperament.”³⁴ His aim was to forge vital links between the present and the past:

32. Ronald Schuchard argues that Eliot's teaching experience “was crucial in his development as a poet-critic. . . . [It] required him to articulate his developing critical concepts, to exercise his taste, and to reorder the poets of the English tradition into his own aesthetic and moral hierarchy” (“T. S. Eliot as an Extension Lecturer, 1916–1919,” *R.E.S.*, n.s., vol. 25, no. 98 [1974], pp. 302–303).

33. Schuchard, “Eliot as an Extension Lecturer,” p. 304.

34. T. S. Eliot, “Observations,” *The Egoist* (May 1918): 69–70, pp. 69–70.

It is part of the business of the critic to preserve tradition – where a good tradition exists. It is part of his business to see literature steadily and to see it whole; and this is eminently to see it *not* as consecrated by time, but to see it beyond time. To see the best work of our time and the best work of twenty-five hundred years ago with the same eyes.³⁵

To steadily see literature as a whole and see it “with the same eyes” or standards, Eliot had to adjust the ancient lenses of Aristotle to a post-Romantic age by discovering the historical continuity between Lessing’s Aristotelian emphases on dramatic affect and the Romantics’ emphasis on poetic imagination. He resolved the implicit contradiction in his stance as a *classicist avant-garde* poet-critic by developing a unique historical attitude that defined avant-garde works as contributions to a continuous tradition, to “literature as a whole.”

Restoring the Tradition

Tradition, for Eliot, was a conscious attitude to the past and a way of “affirming forgotten standards, rather than setting up new idols.”³⁶ He saw it as an effort of restoration which demanded the superposition and juxtaposition of past and present; his aim was to reconstitute literary history as a continuity, a teleology, which he described as “a digestion which can assimilate both Homer and Flaubert.”³⁷ *Tradition* was less a revision than an adjustment of the literary canon, in light of Eliot’s growing recognition that modernism, as Jeffrey Perl has argued, was a culmination of a historical process.³⁸ Eliot, according to this view, saw Romanticism as a form of classicism, but like all such general terms, these too required some adjustment. Because these terms – classicism, Neoclassicism, Romanticism and modernism – make up one intricate process of interdependent and overlapping aspects they are not easily distinguishable in Eliot’s criticism; but it is only by trying to follow his changing uses of them that we may apprehend his dual use of Aristotelian principles – their simultaneous extension to poetry and to literary history.

35. Eliot, “Introduction” to *The Sacred Wood*, pp. xv–xvi.

36. Eliot, “Wordsworth and Coleridge,” in *UPUC*, 67–86, p. 71.

37. Eliot, “Euripides and Professor Murray,” p. 63.

38. Jeffrey Perl, “Classicism, an Historical Explanation,” in *The Tradition of Return: The Implicit History of Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 58–111, esp. pp. 68–69.

Eliot, I suggest, sought to bring poetry back into drama and drama back into poetry as a way of recovering Aristotle's formal affectivism. As early as 1919 he asserted the essential identity of poetry and drama, saying that in contrast to Rostand's, Maeterlinck's dramatic work "in failing to be dramatic, fails also to be poetic." The separation of poetry from drama was "the ruin of modern drama," and about twenty years later, he stated simply – "the difference [between prose and verse in drama] is really not that great."³⁹ From his earliest pronouncements on poetry and drama, Eliot sought the "image" as the antidote to abstraction and used Music as the test of the ordered disposition of images and words – the unified structure – displayed in a poetic composition. In this, he may have been following Pater's formulation of what centuries before had been suggested by Aristotle:

Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance, and of all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character, which hardly fall short of the actual affects, as we know from our own experience, for in listening to such strains our souls undergo a change. The habit of feeling pleasure or pain at mere representations is not far removed from the same feeling about realities.⁴⁰

Eliot's formula for the inseparability of form and content became "the musical structure of the whole." "A play of Shakespeare," he observed, "is a very complex musical structure." Reading poetry is a training of the ear rather than the eye, he continued, softening his earlier emphasis on the visual image, for a poem had to appeal to both if it was to affect the reader: "if we are moved by a poem, it has meant something, perhaps something important, to us." The paradox of language was that "while poetry attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms, it remains, all the same, one person talking to another."⁴¹ By attending to the rhythmic movement of images as the medium of drama, Eliot was denaturalizing Aristotle's plot or action and adjusting it to a post-Romantic symbolist sensibility. Neither action nor recognition and reversal, its characteristic aspects, need be manifestations of physical movement (the 'mistake' of naturalism): action could be the

39. Eliot, " 'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama," in *SE*, 37–42, p. 41; "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," p. 110; "Poetry and Drama," p. 73, respectively.

40. Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8.1340a.

41. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," pp. 36, 30, 31, respectively. "The poet," according to Eliot, "is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist" (30).

manifestation of the movement of feeling and consciousness. By conceiving the origin of action in gesture, mime, and sound, he revived Aristotle's grounding of art as the direct presentation of "character, emotion, and action," "by rhythm, language, or 'harmony,' either singly or combined" (1.1447a).

In "The Three Voices of Poetry" Eliot similarly reaffirms Aristotle's conception of dramatic character in explaining why a "dramatic monologue cannot create a character. For character is created and made real only in an action, a communication between imaginary people."⁴² Unlike Lessing, who analyzes the dramatic adequacy of characters by measuring them by explicit Aristotelian criteria, Eliot did not need to justify Aristotle. What he wanted to justify was the use of a single criterion – the dramatic – for poetry.

Classicism ("affirming forgotten standards"), towards which the early modernists and their precursors turned, was characterized by "*form* and *restraint* in art."⁴³ It was a partial reaction against the two tendencies of Romanticism – realistic literature and unrestrained expression of emotion – both of which denied aesthetic distance and autonomy. The work of restoring the tradition necessitated a deliberate return to "our classical heritage," because only such a return could yield the standards by which to determine permanent value. *The Aeneid*, the consummate example of a classic, exhibited maturity, comprehensiveness, and universality, and Virgil stood "at the centre of European civilization, in a position which no other poet can share or usurp." Eliot was convinced that "the maintenance of the standard is . . . the defence of freedom against chaos." Art required traditional forms without which there would be no freedom, which "is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation."⁴⁴ Romantic excess was illusory precisely because it defied formal limits.

Romanticism derived from Rousseau, according to Eliot, and underlay the two mutually exclusive literary currents of nineteenth-century literature: the "escape

42. Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," in *OPP*, 89–102, p. 95.

43. T. S. Eliot, "A Commentary," *The Criterion* 2.7 (1924): 231–235; "The Idea of a Literary Review," *The New Criterion* 4.1 (1926): 1–6, p. 5; Schuchard, "Eliot as an Extension Lecturer," p. 165, respectively.

44. Eliot, "What is a Classic?" (1944), in *OPP*, 53–71, pp. 68, 70; and "Reflections on *Vers Libre*," in *TCC*, 183–189, p. 187, respectively. See also "Virgil and the Christian World" (1951), in *OPP*, 121–131; "Modern Education and the Classics" (1932), in *SE*, 507–516; and "The Classics and the Man of Letters" (1942), in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), 145–161; hereafter cited as *TCC*.

from the world of fact, and devotion to brute fact.”⁴⁵ The first implies the introversive escape from the world, from social realities and embodied experience to an idealized aestheticism (culminating in Symbolism) and, the other, an extroversive escape, a devotion to and inability to transcend physical existence (culminating in Naturalism).

Eliot used ‘romantic’ in different ways for different purposes. He sometimes used it in its negative connotation, as a synonym for the absence of what he associated with ‘classical’ – denoting immaturity and partiality – but he was aware that no writer was ever purely classical or purely romantic. The two were tendencies of a writer’s temperament and style and could be at variance with the general tendency of the given historical context: “We do not mean quite the same thing when we speak of a writer as romantic, as we do when we speak of a literary period as romantic.”⁴⁶ In the notes to his first two lecture series in 1916, Eliot used ‘classicism’ and ‘romanticism’ as historical tags, which definition he later said had the advantage of “never stretching their meaning beyond the acceptance of the intelligent reader.” As descriptive terms they could point to general period characteristics, but when applied to individual works, they lost their usefulness by distracting attention from looking “steadily for the intelligence and sensibility which each work of art contains.”⁴⁷

Eliot’s unique perception of history is already apparent in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” his most influential essay, where he redefined the ‘new.’ By disrupting the Romantic illusion of the unity of the poet’s life and work, by insisting that without the creation of other selves there is no drama, and that without drama there is no affect, Eliot was reinstating an Aristotelian aesthetics. He proposed two meanings for “tradition”: the common meaning, like Lessing’s negative mimesis, was to imitate one’s predecessors; but the more adequate meaning was to see the originality of a writer as a function of continuity with his predecessors. Thus for Eliot the “historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional” (14). “Culture,” he noted elsewhere, “is traditional, and loves novelty.”⁴⁸

45. Schuchard, “Eliot as an Extension Lecturer,” p. 165.

46. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), p. 26. Eliot makes the same point in “From Poe to Valéry,” in *TCC*, 27–42; and in “Baudelaire,” in *SE*, 419–430.

47. T. S. Eliot, “A French Romantic,” letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) (October 1920), p. 28.

48. T. S. Eliot, “London Letter,” *The Dial* (March 1921): 448–453, p. 451.

This essay manifests Eliot's typical skepticism: on the one hand, he rejects Romantic assumptions of art, calling for a return to classical forms; on the other, he insists on the continuity of tradition – of classical and Romantic poetics. In claiming in his later essay on Wordsworth and Coleridge that “in the matter of mimesis his [Wordsworth's use] is more deeply Aristotelian than some who have aimed at following Aristotle more closely,” Eliot was drawing attention to the interplay of traditional and innovative elements in a writer's style. Artistic criteria are said to provide a standard by which to determine that “any radical change in poetic form is likely to be the symptom of some very much deeper change in society and in the individual.”⁴⁹ Thus the recognition of change in terms of significant developments of style enables us to reconcile Eliot's praising of Wordsworth's use of mimesis, on the one hand, with his antipathy to Romantic descriptions of Nature and the elevation of the poet's personality, on the other.

Eliot found in Wordsworth's experiment (as Wordsworth called the *Lyrical Ballads*) a revival of lyric poetry, one of the lost strands of tradition. As Lessing had argued a few decades before Wordsworth, poets were expected to imitate past masterpieces. Wordsworth's originality was that he sought his subjects in “incidents from common life” and, more importantly from Eliot's perspective, attempted “to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men.”⁵⁰ Poetry swerved back to the life of ordinary people, and Eliot, himself a modern revolutionizer of poetry, understood precisely what “the fuss was all about.”

However, Eliot rejected Wordsworth's Romantic conception of the poet's social role. Wordsworth saw the poet as a specially endowed individual: “He is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love” (509). Eliot would have agreed that the poet deals with the fundamental realities of human experience, but his interest was in what the poet *makes* rather than in what he happens to think of them. He saw the historical irony in the Romantic rebellion against Neoclassicism: the terms had changed – nature replacing culture, ordinary language replacing formal decorum, feelings replacing ideas – but the new subject matter and freedom were potentially as dogmatic as the Neoclassical rules they had supplanted. So from Eliot's perspective, Wordsworth was

49. Eliot, “Wordsworth and Coleridge,” pp. 74–75.

50. All parenthetical references are to this edition: William Wordsworth, “Observations Prefixed to *Lyrical Ballads*” (1800), in *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3d ed. (New York: Norton, 1967), 498–518, p. 505.

“only saying in other words what Dryden had said, and fighting the battle which Dryden had fought.”⁵¹

But what Eliot appreciated selectively was the new Aristotelian note – the emphasis on poetic affect – in Wordsworth's aesthetics. Wordsworth's reference to Aristotle brings out the vestigial Platonism concealed in the shift from Neoclassical ideas to Romantic feeling:

Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that Poetry is *the most philosophic* of all writing: it is so: *its object is truth*, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature.

(508; my emphasis)

Here Wordsworth was retrieving Aristotle's notions of mimesis and affect: the imaginative reproduction of feelings and events that “do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves” (506–507). Lyric poetry clearly had cathartic potential – whereby the reader's understanding is “in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified” (502).

But Eliot also had to adjust the Romantic concept of the imagination in order to revive Aristotle's view of the imagination as embodied knowledge rather than as the escape to transcendent truth. He rejected Coleridge's division between the primary imagination and the fancy, so as to reintegrate the Romantic imagination with Dryden's Aristotelian definition of imagination, conceived as aspects of a single process of poetic invention. By analyzing the hidden hierarchy in Coleridge's distinction, whereby the imagination is the rarefied ability to reach transcendent heights and fancy the subordinate ability of merely playing with matter conserved in memory, Eliot saves Coleridge from altogether “drugging himself with metaphysics,”⁵² on the one hand, and realigns him with the critical tradition of his predecessor, Dryden, on the other. By doing so, Eliot could position past critics in one coherent literary tradition, while maintaining their novelty as a function of their traditionalism.

By isolating the Aristotelian elements in the poetics of the early Romantics, Eliot not only acknowledged their aims but deflated their Platonist concerns to promote a

51. Eliot, “Wordsworth and Coleridge,” p. 71.

52. Eliot, “Wordsworth and Coleridge,” p. 68.

modernist aesthetics and, what is more, to establish a continuity where a rupture had been posited. This continuity, as Perl has argued, conceptually connects Lessing's classicism with Romanticism by isolating certain strands of late Romanticism as a perversion of its earlier reaction to Neoclassical rationalism. Eliot's revision of literary history may be said to be a simultaneous correction of both Romantic *and* Neoclassical conceptions of art, and his notion of tradition, of "the mind of Europe," thus becomes an incremental historicist synthesis of various "lost strands" of art and criticism.

Eliot applied the same method and criteria to all writers he turned to, major and minor, from past and present, as becomes clear if we trace his uses of the key terms, 'romantic' and 'classical.' When 'romantic' was used to describe a turning away from the classical tradition it was derogatory; when it referred to writing that advanced the tradition by revitalizing lost strands or unexplored possibilities, 'romantic' had a positive meaning, becoming a variant of 'classical.' Similarly, he altered his initial use of 'classical' to accommodate what he found to be truly new in the style of the early modernists and their precursors. When it came to style, 'classical' was no longer the opposite of 'romantic': "classicism' is not an alternative to 'romanticism,' as of political parties. . . . it is the goal toward which all good literature strives, so far as it is good, according to the possibilities of its place and time."⁵³ To call a work 'classical' was tantamount to saying it had achieved a perfection of a kind, within the limits of time and place of the writer, and within the limits of the genre and its medium. This use differed from the Neoclassical use, in allowing for degrees of excellence, thus releasing artists from the compulsion of the (Neoclassical) Moderns to copy and outdo the Ancients; and it differed from the Romantics' definition of excellence, in shifting attention from the writer's subjectivity to the formal aspects of art. Eliot used 'classical' less as a correction of earlier misconceptions of the term than as a synthesis of earlier uses, incorporating old meanings with new emphases without giving up old associations. His careful appropriation of earlier uses enabled him to apply the term to the new experimental forms of writing of his fellow-modernists. Looking back over the five decades of writing criticism, he admitted that he was "implicitly defending the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote."⁵⁴

53. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 175–178, p. 176; hereafter cited as *SP*.

54. Eliot, "To Criticize the Critic," p. 16.

What Eliot meant by 'classical' and 'romantic' becomes somewhat clearer once we place his comments on classical writers alongside those on his contemporaries.⁵⁵ "James's critical genius," he says, "comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas. . . . He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." Again the emphasis falls on James's sensuous apprehension of ideas: "instead of thinking with our feelings . . . we corrupt our feelings with ideas . . . evading sensation and thought."⁵⁶ For Eliot, as for Lessing and Aristotle before him, the imagination is the poet's true stock-in-trade, images being the vehicles of strong affect and the very proof of the truly new work of art:

When a work of art no longer *terrifies* us we may know that we were mistaken, or that our senses are dulled: we ought still to find *Othello* or *Lear frightful*. But this *attractive terror* repels the majority of men; they seek the sense of ease which the sensitive man avoids, and only when they find it do they call anything 'beautiful' (my emphasis).⁵⁷

Similarly, in *Ulysses*, James Joyce had discovered the mythical method as an alternative to realistic narrative, which to Eliot was no less than "a scientific discovery": "Art has to create a new world, and a new world must have a new structure. Mr Joyce has succeeded, because he has very great constructive ability; and it is the structure which gives his later work its unique and solitary value."⁵⁸

The 'classical' qualities Eliot found in James and Joyce were comparable to those he found in Flaubert, Stendhal, and Baudelaire, whom he considered pre-eminently European. He used 'European' as the highest praise, along with 'catholic,' 'Latin,' 'traditional,' and 'universal' – all of which implied a vibrant relationship with the past, with Homer, Aeschylus, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare. Whereas Virgil provided him with the *criterion* for European literature, it was Dante who was Eliot's true mentor, from whom he drew "the lessons of craft, of speech and of exploration

55. Eliot comments on Valéry and Joyce: "Of both of these writers it may as cogently be said that they belong to a new age chiefly by representing, and perhaps precipitating, consummately in their different ways the close of the previous epoch. Classicism is in a sense reactionary, but it must be in a profounder sense revolutionary" ("A Commentary," pp. 231–232).

56. T. S. Eliot, "In Memory of Henry James," *The Egoist* (January 1918), 1–2, p. 2; a shorter version appears in *SP*, pp. 151–152.

57. T. S. Eliot, "Contemporanea," *The Egoist* (June–July 1918): 84–85, p. 84.

58. T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," p. 177; and "London Letter," *The Dial* (July 1921): 213–217, p. 216, respectively.

of sensibility.”⁵⁹ And in attempting to explain his devotion to Dante, Eliot reaffirmed the traditional as the mark of a writer’s greatness. It is because Dante built on the foundations of Aquinas and before him of Aristotle, lived when “Europe was still more or less one,” wrote a language that was “the perfection of a common language,” and used the allegorical method, “which was common and commonly understood throughout Europe,” that Eliot described him as the most universal, the most European.⁶⁰

So for Eliot ‘classical’ stood for the tendency of a writer’s style towards a dense unified complexity characterized by clarity of structure, clarity of image, and clarity of language. Dante represented the apogee of formal affectivism: “Dante’s is the most comprehensive, and the most *ordered* presentation of emotions that has ever been made. . . . [He] does not analyse the emotion so much as he exhibits its relation to other emotions.”⁶¹ This emphasis on the parts constituting a unified whole, we recall, is how Aristotle described plot, the soul of tragedy. But for a *modern* writer to be classical it was no longer enough to construct a perfect form; it required an awareness of past influences, a comprehensive knowledge of the classical heritage of Europe, which Eliot perceived as a single living tradition.

Although Eliot regarded his criticism as the workshop of his poetry, I have tried to delineate the historical order he constructed in response to the Romantic excesses that underlay “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.”⁶² His return to Aristotelian principles was instrumental in his attempt to rescue literature from this general trend: “The general effect in literature of the lack of any strong tradition is twofold: extreme individualism in views, and no accepted rules or opinions as to the limitations of the literary job.”⁶³

By “grouping together of certain cases” – Lessing’s and Eliot’s use of Aristotelian principles – I have tried to show that Eliot’s modernist classicism was an attempt to revive a “strong tradition” and to create a consensus on what literature could and could not do. Like Lessing before him, Eliot believed that without a strong critical tradition there could be no continuity and ultimately no great literature. This depended on going back to the Greek dramatists, which, in turn, entailed the rediscovery of their first critic and defender, Aristotle.

59. Eliot, “What Dante Means to Me,” in *TCC*, 125–135, pp. 127, 135.

60. Eliot, “Dante,” in *SE*, 237–27, pp. 242, 252, 242.

61. Eliot, “Dante,” in *The Sacred Wood*, 159–171, p. 168.

62. Eliot, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,” p. 177.

63. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, p. 32.