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INTERVIEWS

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The Jewel Spears Brooker Interview: T.S. Eliot explained by a great scholar and professor of literature

Jewel Spears Brooker is an internationally renowned leading scholar of modernist poet and critic T. S. Eliot. She is Professor Emerita of Literature at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. She has published 11 books, most of them about Eliot. In this interview we talk about her latest book *T.S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination*.

T.S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination is a study of the literary training path of one of the most important poets of the twentieth century. It was published in 2018. Prof. Brooker retraces Eliot's various philosophical and literary progress and sheds new light on his literary career. Prof. Brooker argues that Eliot's philosophical beginnings constitute a shaping force in his poetry, and this is manifest in his constant search for a solution to the conflict between mind and body. Jewel Brooker's new study of Eliot is very enlightening in part because it reveals how much Eliot was inspired by his contemporaries.

It was particularly inspiring to reflect on the way in which Prof. Brooker weaves together the life and literary career of T. S. Eliot. She is a leading scholar in Eliot studies and in the Eliot revival, which is evident from the passion with which she talks about her object of study and research. It was an honor to be able to interview her and to find out a bit more about her approach. Talking to Jewel Brooker has given me a lot. She encouraged me to go deeper in the study of literature, which is a great passion of mine.

Reading your book *T. S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination*, one can notice that you have a deep passion for Eliot in general and in a specific way for his works and his journey through literature and philosophy. How did your passion for Eliot begin? How did it develop?

I started reading Eliot when I was younger than you are, actually. I fell in love with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and other Eliot poems. I was a mother with

two small children and I did not have a job, but in the summers, I was able to visit archives and do archival research. One of the things that I discovered very quickly was this treasure trove of philosophical papers, written by Eliot as a graduate student, that no one had ever seen and I gained permission from Mrs. Eliot to read them. They helped me understand the importance of epistemology. I saw from those papers that very early on Eliot was struggling with the problem of knowledge and also with a religious inclination, a desire to know things that one can only know by intuition. So, over the years, reading his work, I came to understand more and more his mindset and the way he thought, and I could see that there are really two Eliots. There is a tension between these two sides of Eliot and it is a tension that we all have. I can see him working this out in his poetry and in his prose, both illuminated by the background in philosophy. So in a way, I was fortunate not to have a job in those days, so I could leave my children with my husband in the summer and go to Harvard and copy those papers. So the first part of my book has to do with those papers. What I tried to do is to make something that is fairly complicated in language, but not in concept, simple and understandable to my best students. My ideal audience is always my best students.

What is the event that enabled Eliot to deal with his material “as an artist”?

As you know, Eliot is famous as an impersonal poet; this doctrine of impersonality is one strain of Eliot which was picked up and emphasized by critics over the years. If you read his prose carefully, he emphasizes that all art, especially poetry, begins with the personal; it begins in feeling, and then it moves from feeling to reason. The big events that shaped his life were his education and, I think, his mixed feelings about sexuality early on. When he was a student at Oxford he was still a virgin; he said that when he was walking the streets of London, sometimes he would see prostitutes standing in the doorway. The desire pushed him towards them but refinement pushed him back. This was in 1915. Within a few months, with the encouragement of Ezra Pound, he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood, a marriage that

brought neither of them happiness. So I would say that the conflict of refinement and desire, the conflict of action and thought, the disappointment in this marriage, all of these were important for his career. Then, also, he was influenced by the fact that he was marooned in England during the war, and he was marooned also in this marriage. Moreover, he was separated from his family, and by the time the war ended, his family had only experienced the war from afar. So they had theories about the war, because America was not in the war until April 1917. But he was signing checks in the bank while bombs were falling, his brother-in-law was seriously injured, and many of his friends were killed. So the rupture with his family has to do in part with the difference of experiencing the war. He was very attached to his parents and he wanted to succeed in order to prove to them that he had not made a mess of his life, but his father died before he could do that. An important aspect of my understanding of Eliot has to do with his "exilic imagination", an imagination shaped by the experience of exile. Through the 1920s, he wanted to return to America, but he could not. His marriage fell apart, but he had achieved tremendous success with "The Waste Land" -- also tremendous controversy, but at least he was famous.

How did the French Symbolist poets influence Eliot and which type of connection there was between Eliot and Baudelaire?

Regarding Baudelaire, I think that with him it was primarily the images of the city. Eliot wrote three essays on Baudelaire. Baudelaire enabled Eliot to see the material that was in front of him, such as, for example, street life, dirt, trash, human suffering. Though evil, all of these could blossom into their own type of beauty, "The Flowers of Evil". Later on, in the 1950s, in an essay on Dante, he said that the most important thing to him about Baudelaire was his specific images. Another thing that was very important about Baudelaire has to do with Eliot's moral imagination. Baudelaire was a blasphemer. In the 1920s, in defending him and his poetry, Eliot came to see that the Baudelaire's blasphemy was really something anchored in belief. Because if you

do not believe, there is no possibility you can blaspheme. It is only someone who has a belief who can blaspheme.

The other Symbolists, such as Laforgue, influenced Eliot in the emphasis on music. Because "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" as Walter Pater said. I think that it is the music of poetry that Eliot picked up and that we pick up in reading him. For example, in reading "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", there is rhythm, including the hesitation and pauses. In reading a poem like "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," there is the undercurrent beat created by the ticking of the clock and also by the footsteps of the walkers. Beyond that, there is the spontaneity of the rhapsody music. Another Symbolist who is very important to Eliot was Paul Valéry, but with him it was a slightly different influence, and it had to do more with the crisis in Europe in 1919-1920, at the end of the war. In that period Valéry published an essay in English on the crisis in Europe and in the world. One of the things that he argued was that modern literature is a literature of crisis and that in the war Europe had had a nervous breakdown, had lost its mind. Eliot referred to this essay several times and it was one of the essays that most influenced him. He became a friend of Valéry, he went to Paris and celebrated him. I would say that the influence of Symbolism, as in Baudelaire, has to do with the urban images, the moral formation, and the emphasis on music. On the other hand, the profound analysis of the crisis that modelled modern literature has to do with Valéry.

Regarding Eliot's early poems, why is the poem "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" considered more elegant in the dramatization of the conflict between mind and body than the other two poems "Prufrock" and "First Debate"?

The debate mode is a sort of natural mode for this split in Eliot. It is most clearly presented in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," but in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," you see the same debate. In "Prufrock," it is an interior debate, the debate between action and inaction, between thought and feeling, between mind and body. In "Portrait of a Lady" you have this distinction

between male and female, but actually this is not a portrait of a lady as much as the portrait of the speaker and of his divided feelings about the lady. Why does he visit the lady when he has extreme doubts? Desire draws him in and reason pulls him back. This push and pull is part of the music, part of the rhythm. Three of the great poems of 1909-1911 are conceived in terms of music -- "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Preludes," and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." This tension is in all of his poems, but it is more philosophically explicit in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night."

During the war period, Eliot shifted his focus to history, defining it as a reconstruction from a limited point of view, so something that is not objective. In your opinion, how did Eliot treat history in his post-war poems?

I think that it is important for most poets to start from where they are. As he says in *Little Gidding* "History is here and now in England". I think that his understanding of history was primarily inductive. That is where we get the mythical method, because not only London was bombed but all of western civilization seemed to be in ruins. Eliot did not write a lot about history in his published prose, but he meditated on it and wrote about it in poems like "The Hollow Men" and "The Waste Land". History is seen as something that seduces you but lets you down. The fact is that he lived in London during two world wars, and there seems to be an echo effect in his poetry of what is happening in history. "Gerontion" (1919) is a poem about history, described in these beautiful lines:

"After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. "

This is a very important passage on history and one of the ways to interpret it is that when you are in history, you do not really see history. You are seduced in all sorts of ways, and your response is inevitably subjective. This is the tension between the part and the whole. History is imagined in "Gerontion" as a house, but you cannot be in the house and still see the house. You can only see the house from the outside, but you can only know the house from the inside. So this tension between vision and knowledge is a very thoughtful response to history.

Eliot studied philosophy. He studied Bradley's thoughts and ideas. In what sense did Bradley's idealism strike Eliot as wishful thinking, "like the prayers of childhood"?

In a way, all idealism is wishful thinking, because idealism has to do with ideas, abstractions. One of the conflicts in Eliot and in the philosophy of the period is this conflict between idealism and realism. Bradley's idealism made a lot of sense to Eliot up to a point. In a way, Bradley also thought dualistically, his epistemology is based on experience and reality. Eliot rejected his ultimate conclusions but not his method and he accepted many of his ideas. One of the big ideas that he accepted had to do with "degrees of reality." The things that are most real, in a way, have to do with feelings and are subjective. This limited point of view, however, means what is seen is only partial. In another way, the things that are most real are objective and have to do with God's point of view. In this tension between idealism and realism, we can argue that Eliot was himself an idealist because he was always chasing something that was elusive, as all poets seem to do. But in another sense, and it is part of his greatness, he was a realist, whose eye was on the fragments before him.

In your book, at the beginning of every chapter and paragraph, there is a quote from Eliot. One of these sentences was "We do not know until the shell breaks what kind of egg we have been sitting on". What does it mean and how can it be related to the structure of "The Hollow Men"?

“We do not know until the shell breaks what kind of egg we have been sitting on.” This has to do with epistemology. You are involved in something, you are sitting on an egg, you are not sure what it is, but when the shell breaks, you understand it. This quote comes from Eliot’s lectures in Harvard in 1932-1933, in which he is talking about intention in poetry. This is something that I found in my own experiences quite true, that I do not know completely what I am going to say, until I try to say it. You are insightful to associate this with Eliot’s method of composition. The fragmented method of “The Hollow Men” is used also in other poems such as “The Waste Land” and “Ash-Wednesday”. It was only in writing that Eliot discovered what kind of egg he had been sitting on. This method of construction by putting fragments together has to do with illumination that comes in the process of doing things rather than beginning with a conclusion and then trying to fill in the blanks to make it work.

What kind of impact did Eliot’s conversion to the Anglican religion have on his poems?

I think that there was a profound impact, a swerve, but at the same time also continuity. With all great artists, you can recognize their thumb print and Eliot’s thumb print remains in his poems, so there is continuity. Interestingly, the personal becomes in a way more urgent, more overtly theological, but also more veiled in symbols. For example, “Ash-Wednesday” is perhaps his most symbolist poem, but at the same time it is highly personal as the first poem written after his conversion. Even though the method of putting fragments together remains, the fragments have a central reference point, a controlling faith, an emerging pattern. Also “Marina” was written after his conversion, and we can see in it the pattern of exile and homecoming. In a way, I think that he experienced his conversion as a sort of homecoming too. So, his conversion reinforced earlier patterns but also made for greater humility and for more spaces of mystery. In *Four Quartets* there are patterns,

but really no answers. There are a lot of questions that encourage you to think about the possibilities and so forth.

Would you like to add something else regarding the poem “The Waste Land”?

Already in the title there is a metaphor and an image that we can associate with myth. But for his first readers, it would have been an image of the western front and of the waste of the World War One. A waste land is a place in which nothing can grow. It is also a place in myth, if you think of Sophocles and the Oedipus myth, in which there is a connection between the rulers and the people. It is because Oedipus has violated the principles of life that his people are dying. I think that in a war context, the suffering, fragmentation and horror are related to the way they have been governed. Another thing is the emphasis on fragments that is something related to the war, not just material fragments but also spiritual and cultural fragments. One way to think about “The Waste Land” is what you would get if a bomb fall on a British museum. You would have all these fragments of art, culture and language. Then you would pick up the fragments and start imagining the wholes from which they came. You start putting things together, but they do not return as they were. There is a Japanese kind of pottery, called *kintsugi*, in which fragments are very important. It is the art of overcoming brokenness by imagining the original. When they put the fragments back together, they do not try to restore them as they were before; instead they emphasize the cracks by filling them with gold. So in this method, it is important to incorporate the damage into the new work of art, to allow the scars to be part of a new creation. I think that this is something illuminating in connection to the mythical method, because the poem consists of fragments but there is no attempt to bridge the fragments. The principle of this construction is parataxis, which means putting things side by side and giving voice to the cracks and brokenness.