



Selected Essays

T.S. Eliot

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37 essays in an expanded edition of the author's major volume of criticism.

Selected Essays Details

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S says

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things.

Bob Mustin says

Eliot was born in the U.S., but following grad work at the Sorbonne and Oxford, Europe must have seemed more comfortable, because he stayed there for years. During these years, he began to make his mark as a poet, dramatist and literary critic. This book contains some of his most provocative literary critiques.

The book begins with Eliot's view of literary talent and the role of criticism. In these two essays, he seems to presage postmodernism in his view that the writer can't be extracted from his/her culture and literary traditions; nor can the writer thrive without the influence of subsequent criticism. Criticism to Eliot, then, is a traditional/cultural effort to direct the writer from creativity's blind spots, to shepherd the him/her into writing's traditions so as to allow the writing to touch ground there before extrapolating into literature's future.

Many of the essays following these early two concern his view of Elizabethan drama and the poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here, Eliot's tendency to prefer the traditions of the past, instead of the emerging ones, draw him as a complex figure – willingly trapped in the literary past but writing some of the most modern poetry of the twentieth century.

With his stay in England, his religious views took a conservative turn, from Unitarianism to the Church of England. Tradition surfaces here, too, in the book's final essays, in which he takes Irving Babbitt's humanistic views to task. Babbitt, who seemed to discard religion altogether as a valid human enterprise, dwelt on humanism as a secular substitute. Eliot's argument, while eloquently put, seems not to understand the evolution of secularism as a social phenomenon, preferring to see humanism (i.e., ethics, morality, et al) as secondary to the mysteries religious faith is determined to perpetuate.

But what of Eliot's writing? His is eloquent throughout, but his opinions, reflections, and arguments, while witty and full of life, seem longwinded – blather, for the most part. Still he can't escape the poet and dramatist within himself, and there's enough here to coach the aspiring poet to a higher level of accomplishment. For that reason alone, the book is worth the read.

Ke says

I would be lying if I said I was familiar with all the references made in this book. The fact is that Eliot is better read and knows more languages than I ever hope to achieve in this lifetime. Still, this book was really edifying.

Eric says

I love Eliot's poetry, especially *Four Quartets*, but I find that his criticism is just as present day to day for me. These essays offer an education. Without his finely appreciative advocacy it might have been years before I picked up Webster, Tourneur and Jonson. These essays are also great specimens of the English review-essay; as with James, Eliot's conquest of literary London was partly due to his mastery of the lofty, authoritative "we" of canonic criticism.

John Jr. says

As a poet and critic who was also a dramatist, Eliot occupied an unusual position among 20th-century English-language writers. His thoughts on earlier dramatists—who, we should recall, commonly wrote in verse—are useful for anyone encountering their work on stage or in print, and that's why I got hold of this collection, though it's important for other reasons as well. I'm dipping into it from time to time, as the occasion arises; for instance, I relied on it in assessing a production of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* in 2014.

Billie Pritchett says

I feel bad about giving T.S. Eliot's *Selected Essays* only two stars, since there are some terrific essays in here: for instance, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," "Hamlet and His Problems," "Dante," and the essays near the end on humanism. But try sitting through an essay on Cyril Tourneur or Philip Massinger and see if your patience isn't tried. What Eliot is trying to do with this book is lay out his idea of a poetic canon. To sum up Eliot, poetry has given birth to two great geniuses: Shakespeare and Dante. And then there's everyone else. Everyone else, though, is not too fun to read about.

Christopher Koch says

Its nice to finds opinionation with which one agrees so nicely written down.

Liam Guilar says

'You are a delusion, said roundly John Eglinton to Stephen. You have bought us all this way to show us a French triangle. Do you believe your own theory?
No, Stephen said promptly.' ('Ulysses', p.274.)

This book of essays is of historical value:, it offers an insight into what passed as non-academic literary

criticism in the first part of the 20th century. It has biographical value for anyone interested in the development of Thomas Eliot's career; where it is worth remembering that he was publically visible as a critic long before his public renown as a GREAT POET.

But literary criticism rarely ages well. It carries with it the assumptions of its own times, the traces of passionate debates now forgotten, and is mired in the state of knowledge then available.

Eliot's criticism is no different. In fact it's depressing to return to these after several years and see how empty they are. As the eloquent opinions of a well-read man, they have some interest. As a dinner guest or a companion in the taxi on the way home from the play, Eliot would have been witty and thought provoking, full of scintillating aphorisms. But written down, the witty turns of phrase, like the essays themselves, vaporize under scrutiny.

For example, it's difficult to imagine anyone studying 'Hamlet' today bothering with Eliot's famous essay, unless to take it as a model of how not to construct a convincing argument. It's not just the 'Hamlet' essay, but the whole book that is haunted by a fictional performance in a Dublin Library.

The difference is that the fictional Stephen is performing to entertain and impress his audience, but is still entertaining readers now.

As lasting commentary on writers or writing, Eliot's essays have the limited value of historically contingent opinions masquerading as objective facts.

bobbygw says

This is an outstanding selection of essays by T. S. Eliot, and a superb introduction and anthology of his literary/intellectual/cultural passions and pursuits. Understandably, he is still mostly known only for his poems - well, at least in schools, where he's taught in literature courses; usually and only the poems *The Waste Land*, and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (the latter being my favourite of his poems, transcending in quality and feeling his most famous, *The Waste Land*, not simply because it is far more accessible, but it is more from the heart, rather than the head, and there are more rewards to be gained by the marvellous riches of the metaphors and similes used).

The collection is the third and final revised edition whose contents only Eliot himself selected and it is most highly recommended to you, whether you dip in and out of the Sections and individual essays according to your particular interests, or read them all from cover to cover without changing course. I can guarantee that - if you are passionate about pre-20th century poetry, literature in general (especially English for the last two clauses here), criticism thereof, or the humanities in general, you will find much to engage and stimulate your mind and love for literature. While all of his essays demand your undivided attention as a close reader, because every sentence of his matters, rest assured that such dedication is more than rewarded by the learning, pleasure and insight you will gain from reading them. And, as with all truly great critics, his individual studies of writers compel you with passion and enthusiasm to read their works to which he refers.

For those interested in the specific content itself, the following goes into greater detail: This anthology is divided into seven sections: The first has two polemics, one on 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', the other - 'The Function of Criticism' (published in 1923) - was and remained for many decades a milestone in literary criticism, being regarded as of the first really modernist perspectives/approaches to it (though I feel

the 19th century poet and critic Matthew Arnold's criticism deserves much more recognition for being a strong advocate of modernist literature). This polemic radically differentiated itself from the Edwardian and Victorian literary criticism (save the caveat of Arnold's work!). Section II comprises essays on Euripides, Dramatic Poetry, Rhetoric and Poetic Drama, and a wonderful one on 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation'. Section III is one of the two largest (the other being VII), consisting of several essays. The third section is devoted to Elizabethan poets and dramatists and, within it, you will find beautifully written articles on Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, and 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca'.

Section IV is represented by a standalone essay, and deservedly so: on Dante. The greater part is, rightly, devoted to the Divine Comedy, and it is a truly marvellous, deeply researched and stimulating series of reflections, arguments and contextualisation (both culturally- and historically-situated); he also signposts the significance of Dante's earlier poem, written in his youth, The Vita Nuova, clearly showing you how 'some of [its] method and design, and explicitly the intentions, of the Divine Comedy are shown [...] help[ing] particularly towards understanding of the Comedy'. Inevitably, too, you want to rush to read or re-read Dante's great poems. As with Eliot's earlier essay on the functions of criticism, at the time of the publication of 'Dante' in 1929, it was also regarded as a landmark in Dante studies.

Section V is devoted to poets, and all the pieces are marvellous with compelling, insightful and appreciations of the Metaphysical Poets, besides individual ones on Swinburne, Tennyson (devoted to his poem, In Memoriam', while considering his others, Eliot argues that it is this one in which Tennyson finds 'full expression' and is 'unique' in his oeuvre); and brilliant ones on Marvell, Dryden - most especially - if you were ever put off by reading Dryden in the past, as I was, or are otherwise unfamiliar with his work, I assure you this essay will drive you with gusto to his poetry - and Blake.

Section VI strikes me as an odd bag and is the only one that doesn't seem to cohere as a group; essays on Lancelot Andrews and John Bramhall are, to my mind, not of much merit, and, worse, there's a tiresome 25 pages of reflection on the 1930 Report of the Lambeth Conference, famous at the time, about the issues within, state of and future considerations of the Church of England: unless you're a devoted theologian, or an absolute C. of E. enthusiast, its history and all, I just can't see how it would interest any one at all. But then Eliot redeems himself wonderfully well, by two stimulating essays: one on 'Religion and Literature', and a somewhat intellectually intimidating one - frankly, I think it the most such of all his essays herein - on Pascal's Pensees (and apologies to purists for the absence of the accent).

Most satisfying of them all, you arrive at Section VII, where you will be drawn into superb criticism on Baudelaire, The Humanism of Irving Babbitt, Second Thoughts about Humanism, and on the critics Arnold and Pater, besides two other essays, and an absolutely fantastic one on the multi-layered, complex relationship - both literary- and friendship-wise - on Wilkie Collins and Dickens.

Joyce says

for a good stretch this was an easy five star book, then in the back end eliot sinks into writing about writers about whom there is no concern anymore (how could such an immortal writer dedicate so much time to someone like swinburne?) in a way that says nothing to those unfamiliar with those writers, and religious and social criticism which is both wildly outdated and at best distasteful (at worst decisively reprehensible)

Diane says

Read the Hamlet and Shakespeare essays. Eliot can distill so much into a single sentence. Good lead-in to reading Montaigne, who he and others believe had a strong influence on Shakespeare.

Bryan Jones says

Eliot's brilliance is clearly on display, but this book is so esoteric that only the highest levels of literary scholars could possibly draw from it.

Kaleb Horton says

The man's critical faculties were machete sharp and scalpel precise. Every essay in here reads like the work of somebody with a desk full of papers who throws them all on the floor in one motion and starts from scratch. The craftsmanship and attack strategy is consistently illuminating. Reading his critical work is like watching fog dissipate.

A big chunk of this falls into hyper-specialized poetry and theater criticism that I have little use for, and religious writing that is specialized and speaks to a social climate about which I know very little, but the whole thing deserves to be scanned for structural insight. His observations about the role of critics and the problems of being a journalist would hold up anyplace.
