T. S. Eliot: the passing of an age

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It has been forty years since T. S. Eliot saw in the social ethos of his contemporary world “A heap of broken images where the sun beats.” Barren and dry, the Wasteland was the sterile landscape of a world where values had been discarded and dreams were the empty remnants of futile hopes.

Success as a poet and tragedy as a man lie in the fact that the world of today fits cleanly into the world Eliot had seen then. During those years Eliot had written of a salvation grounded in the striving toward self-awareness and transcendental experience, which might deter the dominance of mass-mediocrity’s rush toward sterility and obscurity.

Past and Present

Against the pragmatism and the particular of the present moment he had held principle and permanence, recognizing the reality of change yet always penetrating to its roots, where he felt lay a reality beyond the flux of time.

Self-appointed as guardian of the best of the past, which he saw as the key to this permanent reality, he could not help but feel the futility of his task even as he staggered under its heavy burden. The traditional values of the past, of both vital importance and delicate frailty, were in his eyes being misunderstood and perverted by the present representatives of the past’s process into future.

The Way Beyond

From his early outcries against this perversion Eliot gradually progressed to the poetry of mysticism and inner peace, receding simultaneously and significantly from the public eye. In his early poetic accusations, he had made an age aware of itself, he had spoken with disgust and despair and the age had taken him to its hollow heart.

When he attempted to point the way beyond the Wasteland to the redemption of spirit, however, the world declined to follow. It is the tragedy of Eliot that we read “The Hollow Men,” with its despair, as social criticism and the “Four Quartets,” with their hope, as poetry; for beyond the intrinsic values of his art Eliot saw his responsibility to past and future society.

Although he refused to adjust to the values of the times, he did accept their mass culture, their a-religious character, and their materialistic goals as historical reality. It is this sense of historical change which gave him the motivation to render the values of the past pertinent to the needs of the present; yet it was his sense of tradition which was to make this impossible.

By reconciling the best in man’s history to man himself, Eliot was attempting to posit the End of man in a context intelligible to the present yet containing the tradition of the past. Eliot’s solution was to assert the unchanging questions confronting man, the choice between communion with the spiritual and permanent as it is manifested in time, and cocktails with the transient and particular nature of the immediately necessary.

Eliot and History

At this point, man’s history and Eliot’s hopes for it parted ways. The world of pragmatism

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and empty ideology, the world of today passed him by, poised on the brink of still more radical changes and breaks with a past whose immediate presence is one of horror and war.

The same integrity which caused Eliot continually to assert past values in the face of change was transformed in literature into a determination not to lower or trivially modify the standards of tradition, but rather to improve them by bringing them together in his own critical consciousness. By virtue of his individual genius and his combination of innovation with tradition, he has risen above his times to a place among the world’s great poets, himself a watershed in literary tradition.

New Poetry

Beginning with “Prufrock” and “The Wasteland,” he revolutionized the substance and form of poetry. The dominant position in modern poetry is his, where he is often praised and at times censured, but never ignored.

At his best Eliot continually strove to go beyond the poetry itself, to make his writings so transparent that they would be a vehicle to the thought and experience behind them, and to convey by poetic notes slightly off-key the feeling of an inexpressible norm which reached deep into the core of his later mysticism.

“The poetry is not important,” he writes in the “Four Quartets,” at such a moment when he is desperately trying to reach beyond the limitations of