

Principles of Literary Study

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review: Eliot is hard

- ▶ it's hard: why?
 - ▶ many languages, many allusions
 - ▶ no continuous speaking situation
 - ▶ no “story”
- ▶ because (post-War) life is hard
 - ▶ no single frame works on its own (Bible? poetry? “civilization”?)
 - ▶ communication is a problem
 - ▶ relationships (esp. sexual) are a problem
 - ▶ orderly (seasonal/biological) development is blocked

so: what is to be done?

- ▶ invent an order/rite of renewal
 - ▶ running themes or *leitmotive*
 - ▶ Tarot but it comes true (“fear death by water”)
 - ▶ syncretism (“Shantih” = “peace which passeth understanding”)
 - ▶ “all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias”
- ▶ “awful daring of a moment’s surrender”
 - ▶ becoming passive isn’t all bad
 - ▶ but it can be pretty bad (“Tereu”)
 - ▶ still, may be the way out of masculine violence
 - ▶ and even the prison of the self

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 emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” pt. 2, *Egoist* 6, no. 5 (December 1919): 73. [Modernist Journals Project](#). (Part 1, from *Egoist* 6, no. 4, also available via [MJP](#).)

introduction exercise

(1) In Anne Bradstreet's poem "The Author to Her Book," the speaker criticizes her book: "I cast thee by as one unfit for light, / Thy visage was so irksome in my sight" (10–11). (2) Throughout the poem, the speaker explores the complicated relationship she has with her creative work through the use of metaphor. Specifically, the metaphor in question describes her relationship as an author to her book as the relationship between a highly critical mother and her child. (3) As an increasing number of people read the speaker's book, the speaker deprecates and attempts to "fix" it.

introduction exercise

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open forms

- ▶ poems making their own rules
 - ▶ look for organizing principles within the poem
- ▶ doesn't mean no form at all
 - ▶ “Lycidas”: rhyme (also: series of speakers)
 - ▶ Ramanujan's tercets
 - ▶ narrative progression in “Diving into the Wreck”
 - ▶ geographic survey in “An Octopus”
- ▶ a form for what resists being pinned down?
 - ▶ Moore: a glacier
 - ▶ Ammons: a shoreline

octopodal form

Quoted descriptions of scenery and of animals, of which the source is not given, have been taken from government pamphlets on our national parks.

Moore, notes to "An Octopus," 107.

the form of a walk: “Corsons Inlet”

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars,
 straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends
 of sight:

Rich's wreck

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way

We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
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What is Ramanujan made of?

- ▶ What defines the “I” who speaks in “Elements of Composition”?

formal alternatives

In the course of a casual conversation, he showed me the draft of a poem called 'Elements of Composition', which was then a single, long poem of a few hundred lines arranged in about twenty-five sections. It was a meditation on what we call the 'nature' of self and poetry, interspersed at various points with passages reflecting on certain 'epiphanic' moments in his life. I thought that it was a major poem... But Ramanujan was sure that his readers would misread it if he published it as it stood, because they would look in it for traces of earlier poems of a similar kind, from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to Eliot's *Four Quartets*. He also felt strongly that the formal and thematic unity asserted by the long poem contradicted one of his central insights in it, that his own 'truth is in fragments'.... When he prepared the final manuscript of *Second Sight*, Ramanujan broke up the poem into fourteen relatively short poems [of which "Elements" is one].

Vinay Dharwadker, [introduction](#) to *The Collected Poems*, xxxvii.

form

Two lines of 10 and/or 8 syllables followed by a 4–5 syllable, an expanded *kural* where the short lines allow you to clinch a thought, and run on.

AKR, Diary, May 14, 1984, qtd. in Guillermo Rodríguez, *When Mirrors Are Windows: A View of A.K. Ramanujan's Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 444–45, [Oxford Scholarship Online](#).

kural classical Tamil poetic form consisting of a four-foot line and a three-foot line, exemplified by the *Tirukkural*, a ca. 5th c. CE philosophical poem. (Wikipedia s.v. “[Kural \(poetic form\)](#)”)

- ▶ What language is English literature written in?

a distinctive relation to language

As we grew up, Sanskrit and English were our father tongues, and Tamil and Kannada our mother tongues. The father tongues distanced us from our mothers, from our own childhoods, and from our villages and many of our neighbors in the cowherd colony next door. And the mother tongues united us with them....

Sanskrit stood for the Indian past; English for colonial India and the West, which also served as a disruptive creative other that both alienated us from and revealed us (in its terms) to ourselves; and the mother tongues, the most comfortable and least conscious of all, for the world of women, playmates, children, and servants....Each had a literature that was unlike the others'. Each was an other to the others.

AKR, "Telling Tales," *Daedalus* 118, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 241–42.

Ramanujan writes from within English yet as if outside it.

Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 77.

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
being eaten.
("Elements of Composition")

And what eats is eaten,
and what's eaten, eats
in turn.
(*Taittirīya-Upanishad*, AKR's translation)

next

- ▶ Shahid, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, complete
 - ▶ choose one poem to re-read carefully
 - ▶ some of you will be called on
 - ▶ datta, dayadhvam, damyata; relax, yo