

High Modernism Revisited: Temur Kobakhidze's *T. S. Eliot and The Aesthetics of High Modernism*

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Abstract

Prof. T. Kobakhidze's recently published book *T. S. Eliot and the Aesthetics of High Modernism* is written with enviable literary taste and scholarly brilliance. In his comprehensive work, Prof. Kobakhidze places the discussion of T. S. Eliot's individual works in a broader context of high modernism. Within the extremely interesting time period, described as "a highly variegated literary background, consisting of a lot of significant and/or meager mini-movements united under the notion of 'modernism'" by Prof. Kobakhidze, he singles out T. Eliot as a major figure of Anglo-American literary modernism and the author giving a lot of headache to literary scholars and critics. Above all the author of the monograph fascinates us by his profound erudition and original vision of the diverse aspects of T. S. Eliot's writings in relation to high modernism. Discussing various issues from multidisciplinary perspective, he emphasizes neo-mythologism, 'reversion to myth'/modernistic renaissance of myth or mythic experiment as one of the dominant distinctive features of modernist literature; he also touches upon other important aspects of high modernism, accentuating its aspirations to reevaluate European cultural traditions. The book scrutinizes not only Eliot's famous masterpieces but his shorter and less known poems as well. It combines a broad research scope with deep insights—a rare combination, indeed. It is a great piece of Eliot criticism, a must-read for any serious Eliot scholar.

Keywords: European cultural traditions, high modernism, modernist mythmaking, narrative experiments, stylistic innovations

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*

T. S. Eliot, *The Rock* (1934)

Introduction

The devastations of World War I created a social trauma that lasted a generation. After the terror of World War I, rapid technological advances and radical changes were occurring in the industrial, social and political world. Women were becoming allowed to vote, new economic conditions of the emerging Industrialization of the Western world meant that people had more freedoms and educational opportunities. People were moving from working on the land (for landowners of the wealthy upper classes) to crowded industrial cities and these changes were to radically challenge the 'traditional' art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organization and daily life. The term 'Modernism' reflects the above changes but more specifically, it has come to define the ideology of the artistic movement of that time. "Make it new" wrote the poet Ezra Pound and these famous words reflect the modernist movements approach to the old ways, which they saw as obsolete. Beginning shortly before the war and continuing through the following decade, an astonishing variety of technically audacious works appeared. A community of artists, readers, viewers, editors, and cu-

rators created a receptive context encouraging ever more experimental work, including the move to abstraction in the fine arts (Wassily Kandinsky); the development of new cinematic styles (Sergei Eisenstein); the architectural revolution of Le Corbusier (modern materials in abstract forms); the twelve-tone technique of Schoenberg; and the experiments in narrative consciousness of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. This profusion has been called the "the last literary season of Western culture" (Moretti, 1983, p. 209). The Modernist movement broke away from traditions in thinking, society and art. A new era was starting.

High Modernism

A frequently noted aspect of modernist form is its fragmentation: the dissolution of continuity in speech, wholeness in the body, consecutiveness in narrative. The one-or two-

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lined lyrics of imagism, the abrupt focal shifts in the work of Gertrude Stein, the disintegration of the face in analytic cubism, the rapid editing in the cinema of Sergei Eisenstein, all present decomposing forms shorn of the usual contexts of meaning. 'Image', 'vortex', 'moment', 'epiphany' were some of the names given to these radiant fragments. A prominent concern then became the passage from these shorter forms, however resonant, toward more encompassing structures: longer poems, more capacious novels, larger paintings, more ambitious films and music. The later phase of modernism, usually referred to as 'High Modernism', which contains some of its most striking artifacts (Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Picasso's *Three Musicians*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eisenstein's *October*, Schoenberg's unfinished *Moses und Aron*), turns toward synthetic forms that might arrange fragments into broader patterns. The use of myth was a dominant resource for Joyce, Eliot, and Stravinsky; in Eliot's formulation, the mythic method gave a form of order that made "the modern world possible for art." Eisenstein's development of cinematic montage, the conceptual and metaphoric linking of separate images, was another manifestation of synthesis.

Thus, 'High modernism' is accepted shorthand for the core phase of literary modernism in the 1920s, when Eliot, Joyce, Pound, Woolf, Mann, Kafka, Proust, Gide, and others published pivotal works. While there is consensus about the term's meaning, the value and significance of the works it designates are highly contested. For advocates who helped establish its place in the canon, the works of high modernism mark the culmination of literature as high art, while other critics see them as elitist, inaccessible, patriarchal, imperialist, reactionary. Despite this wide range of judgments, all take for granted that high modernism's main features are formal innovation and detachment from history, society, and politics.

Useful distinctions have often been made between the high modernism of Yeats, Eliot, Rilke, Joyce, Proust, and Mann, deeply committed to the integrity of the artifact, and the "historical avant-garde" constituted by the socially active movements that questioned the coherence of art and its withdrawal from social life. Historically attentive scholarship has shown, however, that these are not rival camps or opposing sides of a cultural dyad. Within high modernism one finds both signs of radical indeterminacy in form and strong statements of social engagement. Ezra Pound's assertion that "the artists were the antennae of the race" represents a characteristic modernist demand, sometimes from the political right and sometimes from the left, for social change founded on the basis of revolutionary art. Similarly, within the avant-garde, one finds scenes of consolidation, where the discord resolves into determinate artifacts. The "avant-garde" and "high modernism" are best seen as moments within the conditions of cultural modernity: an ongoing dialectic between openness and undecidability, on the one hand, and formal integrity, on the other.

Right from the start Professor Temur Kobakhidze's monograph *T. S. Eliot and The Literary Aesthetics of High Modernism* undoubtedly overwhelms its readers with the aesthetic pleasure caused by travelling throughout the complex intellectual labyrinths the author apparently expe-

rienced himself while writing the book more acutely than its readers altogether. This is clearly felt in or between the lines and beyond. This is a book of truly kaleidoscopic range in which the ancient poets and Renaissance artists, the Vienna classics and Eliot's contemporaries, psychological and philosophical reflections, western and oriental religious/theological teachings including the Hindu and Buddhist wisdom alternate like shots. One needs decent preparation to read and evaluate the monograph, to say the least. Like Eliot's works, it challenges its readers' erudition and aesthetic taste.

It is no coincidence that from this extremely interesting time period, described as "a highly variegated literary background, consisting of a lot of significant or meager mini-movements united under the notion of 'modernism' "by Professor Kobakhidze (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 9-11), he focuses on T. Eliot as a major figure of Anglo-American literary modernism and the author giving a lot of headache to literary scholars and critics of all generations ever since. Above all the author fascinates us with his extraordinary erudition and original vision of the literary aesthetics of high modernism. Discussing various issues from multidisciplinary perspective, he emphasizes neo-mythologism, 'reversion to myth'/modernistic renaissance of myth or mythic experiment as one of the dominant distinctive features of modernist literature; he also touches upon other important aspects of high modernism, accentuating its aspirations to reevaluate European cultural traditions. As the author points out, "General ideas of reevaluation of the cultural heritage permeated the entire cultural atmosphere, even the air breathed in by the representatives of high modernism" (Kobakhidze, 2015, p. 16).

In the "Preface" the author correctly notes that the high modernism literature "is a serious puzzle for those who read for fun" (Kobakhidze, 2015, p. 21). To illustrate this mentions such complex modernist works as Pound's *Cantos*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *Trial*, Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. As Professor Kobakhidze puts it, "[this literature] certainly represents different levels of difficulty for different readers but it is a fact that texts of high modernism are not to amuse readers or help them kill time. It is a serious literature written for refined readers capable to experience elevated, intricate -nuanced aesthetic senses" (Kobakhidze, 2015, p. 21).

However, this does not mean that, Mr. Kobakhidze argues, modernist literature is exclusively 'elite' literature intended for the 'select' only. On the other hand, the modernists preferred to write in a complicated manner. T. Kobakhidze considers Eliot the kind of an author for whom poetry is "a music of ideas" and who creates special emotional and intellectual effects in his writings.

From the outset, the author clarifies that the book is aimed not at portraying Eliot 's all-encompassing creative portrait but presenting him as the leading figure of high modernism and identifying bonds between his works and western culture. How this goal is achieved-Kobakhidze entrusts this to the reader to judge.

Inside the Book

The book scrutinizes not only Eliot's famous masterpieces but his shorter and less known poems as well. The readers are given the opportunity to become familiar with the poem Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar, 1919) where the abundance of associations will make them quite confused if they are not properly qualified. However, in Chapter 2 (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 60-76) the author further looks at quite a different text by Eliot *The Hippopotamus* from the collection Poems 1920 which is less loaded with associations and addressing its sharp irony to the Catholic Church.

The scholar argues that skepticism and deep pessimism of the 1920s influenced Eliot's poetry. He defined the beginning of the last century and its 20s as "the epilogue" to one of the greatest periods in human history.

"The long process - the Renaissance humanism and its successor Enlightenment followed by the collapse and the decline of the once-lofty ideals of Romanticism - was going to its end; Victorian era - the period of propagating classical British liberalism and illusory social harmony - was in the past. At the threshold, there stood awaiting the epoch of *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, *Joyce's Ulysses* and *Kafka's Trial*" - remarks the author (Kobakhidze, 2015, p. 75).

In the following chapters the author discusses Eliot's poems *Sweeney among the Nightingales* and *Sweeney Erect*, both equally rich in intertextual associations. The author's convincingly argues that it is impossible for the reader to discover and comprehend them without special training. Mr. Kobakhidze points out that like most of Eliot's earlier poems, *Sweeney among the Nightingales* (1918) attracts attention by references to mythological plots and the contrast of modern situation with the mythological past. At a first blush, the mythological allusions of the poem are deprived of any specific associative connotation - this is how an unprepared reader would comprehend the poem, for whom the direct metaphoric connotation is of decisive importance. But in fact, Mr. Kobakhidze argues, the poem is 'emanating' internal tension, irony and grotesque and universalization of the specifically banal background is provided by means of associative recollection of diverse mythological plots (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 368-379).

Interpreting Mr. Eliot's *Sunday Morning Service* in the next chapter (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 116-136), the author emphasizes the grotesque-ironic, playful form as well as "Wit and high seriousness" inherited from the 17th century metaphysical poetry as the main characteristics of Eliot's earlier poetry. Along with the music, the readers' attention is attracted to the individual artists and paintings, poetic comments on which also constitute one of the peculiarities of Eliot's method.

The author explains the reasons for using these analogies by the poet. Eliot refers to the artists as diverse as Michelangelo, Umbrian fine arts of Quattro Cento era (Piero della Francesca), Pietro Perugino etc. In Mr. Kobakhidze's opinion, it is Perugino's fresco and not his painting on canvas that is referred to in the poem.

Chapter VI (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 137-161) is dedicated to the poem *Gerontion* which, as Kobakhidze claims, is a work of the unique value; Together with *The Waste Land* it has no equal in the poetry written in English. Among a lot of associations to the Gospels I would select the following as the most powerful:

Signs are taken for wonders. "We would see a sign!"
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness.

The scribes and Pharisees appealed to the Savior to send them a divine sign but as soon as they received one, they did not recognize it because of their lack of faith. In a word, as T. Kobakhidze argues, "skepticism, hypocrisy and lack of faith originate in vain erudition ('literacy') which has nothing to do with the true knowledge" (Kobakhidze, 2015, p. 150):

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The humanity, used to moral compromise and haughtiness, left the upward path to God, replacing 'knowledge' with 'information', thus making salvation unattainable.

Chapter VII is entirely dedicated to *The Waste Land* (Kobakhidze 2015, pp. 162-212). The author of the monograph undertakes the study the poem as one of the most important milestones of high modernism within the framework of modernistic renaissance of myth. He convincingly demonstrates that any scholar undertaking the study of myth in the twentieth century literature will inevitably find himself confronted with an intricate question of method implying a preliminary solution of theoretical problems and shifting the analysis of the individual works somewhat to the background. Establishing the standpoint gains relevance in the light of the countless multitude of studies on myth in virtually every area of the humanities. Kobakhidze further argues that it is essential to determine what myth is within the specific sphere of man's spiritual activity, without having a pretension to arrive at a universal definition. Hence, the definition of myth accepted in literary criticism should in the first place be oriented to literature as a concrete area of human spiritual endeavor. Myth in literature must be defined as a literary and not philosophical, psychological, ethnological, historical, cultural, or other phenomenon, thus enabling scholar to use it as a concrete term of literary scholarship or criticism.

For the further exploration of the nature of myth in the twentieth century literature Prof. Kobakhidze introduces differentiation between myth and what is widely known as "mythology". In his opinion, the subject of literary criticism is myth (transliteration of the Greek term "mythos" is also used sometimes), as fundamentally different from "the myths", or a mythology, which denotes a body of narrative motives created by ancient man, and reflecting his psychological world. These in their turn are reflected in ancient

Greek, Roman, Biblical, Buddhist, Scandinavian and other literary monuments. In other words, the term “mythology” implies, in the first place, fictional stories, motifs and images widely used in literature practically throughout the history of its existence. The term “myth”, however, denotes highly generalized patterns underlying many different (not only mythological) plots and images. Myth can also be described as potential plot (motif or image), existing only as an abstraction, a possibility, a model, or some form-creating principle driven for self-realization in a concrete literary work. Kobakhidze follows the lead of Northrop Frye who points out that “in literary criticism myth means ultimately mythos, a structural organizing principle of literary form” (Frye, 2000, p. 341). In his sense of mythoi, myths operate as basic plot forms which control all narrative discourse.

Kobakhidze uses this definition of myth, adopted as a conditional starting point, as a basis for analyzing *The Waste Land*. He discusses the essentials and functions of the so-called ‘mythic method’ first defined by T. S. Eliot in his seminal and often quoted essay *Ulysses, Order and Myth*.

This chapter is also concerned with structural and compositional principles, mythic allusions and associative parallels, stylistic devices and writing techniques employed in the poem. He demonstrates that complex mythic structure of *The Waste Land* is based on the Grail Legend adopted from Jessie L. Weston’s book *From Ritual to Romance* and ancient fertility rites borrowed from James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*;

This chapter also contains the study of religious and literary paradigms of *The Waste Land*, its major and additional paradigmatic associative plots. It demonstrates the ways in which Eliot’s highly selective and conscious use of myth is determined by the tendency of combining non-homogeneous associations, since the need for myth emerges when the writer decides to create a parody synthesis of several different plots and mythological motifs, several diverse imagery layers within the frames of a single artistic whole. One of the most important poetic functions of the myth is making this synthesis possible. Thus, mythos in *The Waste Land* is viewed by Temur Kobakhidze as basis for the whole construction, as a fundamental device bringing together all the elements and transforming them into an ordered system. Using the mythical underlying motif or pattern as a “bone structure” of his work enables Eliot to introduce into the text non-homogenous mythical and literary allusions and parallels. This mythical pattern, permeating the whole artistic structure, transforms them into an ordered aesthetic whole. Even the plot associations devoid of external mythical traits will be viewed as indispensable elements of the mythical structure. Thus, all allusions and parallels are, directly or indirectly, in an immediate or more remote way, subordinated to the basic mythical pattern, which is meant in the last analysis to act as a guiding principle towards which everything converges – establishing order in the characters’ random associations and universalizing values (Tskhvediani, 2006, p. 111).

Chapter VIII is dedicated to the *Hollow Men* (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 213-236). According to Kobakhidze, in this

poem Eliot demonstrates the full moral and physical paralysis and desolation of the mankind. The author notes that Eliot the first to reveal so forcefully a terrifying feeling of a stalemate produced by the degradation of values. The figures portrayed in the poem constitute the horde of morally neutral shadows who have done neither good nor bad in their lives. The world is ‘finite’ because it is morally neutral and tepid. In other words, “the world ends” because it is ethically neutral, “lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot”, but, on the other hand, it is “the recurrent end of the unending” (Kobakhidze, 2015, p. 236).

Chapter IX is dedicated to Eliot’s drama *Sweeney Agonistes or Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama* (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 237-261). It is an unfinished ‘melodrama’ written in the style of a vaudeville, containing comic –ironic elements and gloomy symbols at the same time. The author draws the reader’s attention to the repetitive rhythm of the work, which runs throughout the whole artistic fabric of the play, its rhythmic dialogue and the specific movements characteristic to music-hall or ‘minstrel show’. Kobakhidze offers the reader many interesting observations. The intonation structure of the dialogues easily leads the reader to the association with a simple jazz melody syncopated rhythm.

Chapter X is dedicated to *Journey of the Magi* (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 262-280). The author notes that the poem attracts our attention with its transition from the associative polyphony of *The Waste Land* to the emotionally charged monophony. Chapter XI (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 281-292) raises the theme of repentance and spiritual purification in *Ash Wednesday*. T. Kobakhidze points out that “in the last part of the poem there converge all the main motives and symbolic images” (Kobakhidze, 2015, pp. 290-291)

Professor Kobakhidze pays special attention to the literary adaptations of literary structures in Eliot’s works which has nothing to do with the traditional “euphony” of prose or verse. This phenomenon is one of the major poetic qualities of literary modernism. It is from this perspective that Kobakhidze views Ezra Pound’s (who was a music critic and composer himself) works, Aldous Huxley’s novel *Point Counter Point*, and Joyce’s *Ulysses* who depicts the simultaneousness of his characters’ actions through a polyphonic musical form.

Conclusion

The last chapter of the book is dedicated to Eliot’s *Four Quartets* which is viewed as a mythopoetic model of the universe.

Four Quartets is perceived by Kobakhidze as a complex compositional whole, a kind of Wagnerian ‘total artwork’. However, the musicality of *Four Quartets* lies in using musical devices for spatialization of time. ‘Four’, Kobakhidze argues, is a symbolic figure symbolizing earthly turmoil and the cycle of the universe as opposed to ‘Three’, designating the soul. The ‘music’ (‘Quartet’) associated with the ‘Four’ is

understood as the image of the cosmic order. Mythos and music are viewed as structural organizing principles of a literary form.

In the end the author of this genuinely interesting book returns to the symbolic schemes, abstract archetypes and symbolic numerals often exploited in poetry, music and arts as images or decorative elements but, above all, in order to create order out of chaos or, in other words, a mythopoetic model of the universe.

To conclude, Temur Kobakhidze is an internationally recognized Eliot scholar; it is not surprising that he combines a broad research scope with deep insights—a rare combination, indeed. It is a great piece of modernist studies and Eliot criticism, a must-read for any serious Eliot scholar.

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