

## “Inside His Idiom:” E. M. Forster’s T. S. Eliot

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**Abstract:** Counter to previous assumptions, relations between E.M. Forster and T.S. Eliot are important to an understanding of the work of each, and reshape our view of their period. These mutual influence relations also enable revised theories of literary influence to be proposed. The two writers shared privileged upbringings founded on nineteenth-century capitalism. The friendship of each with Virginia Woolf brought them into contact with one another and then, in the 1920s, they were linked by *The Criterion*, which Eliot edited. The article examines two pieces of prose by Forster on Eliot, one gathered into his first collection of essays, *Abinger Harvest* (1936) and the other into *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951). Over time, Forster came to see Eliot as self-deceiving and harmed by his attachment to conservative Christianity. If Eliot drew on Forster’s work it was early in his career, before *The Waste Land*. Forster and Eliot can be understood in social terms as mandarins of British culture in the mid-twentieth century. While Eliot seemed to pay little attention to Forster in later years, Forster’s career can be read as shadowed by Eliot’s.

### Keywords

Forster, E. M., Eliot, T. S., influence, mandarin, modernisms, secrecy, man of letters

### Literary Influence and Personal Relations

E. M. Forster and T. S. Eliot's relationship is commonly thought of as negligible. The view was encouraged by Forster's official biographer P. N. Furbank, whose account of the relationship has been influential. Standard introductions to Eliot (for example, Moody) make no mention of Forster. A study of their relationship opens up new aspects of both writers. It also contributes to a reinterpretation not only of the era in which both writers were directly in contact, from the 1920s to the 1950s, but a longer *durée* of modernity stretching back to the nineteenth-century origins of the prosperity in which Forster, in England, and Eliot, in the USA, were both raised. Since the 1980s, the so-called "new modernism studies" have reconceptualized modernism so that it crosses national borders and disciplinary lines, particularly those separating literature and the visual arts (Mao and Walkowitz; Brzezinski). In reconfiguring the relationship of Forster and Eliot this article uses not textual content or aesthetic intent as the fundamental determinants of what is modernism and what is not, but spatial and technological contexts. In my reading, modernisms are multiple aesthetic responses to shared aspects of writers' situations in particular geographic, social and economic environments. The article is also concerned to shift the emphasis in the studies of these writers, and especially Forster, onto the organization and rhetoric of their non-fictional prose collections, and public literary activity in the role of "man of letters."

Forster wrote two short pieces of non-fictional prose on Eliot in the genre of the book review. These are firstly the essay "T.S. Eliot" and secondly "Two Books by T.S. Eliot." He included an essay on Eliot in each of his two published collections of essays, *Abinger Harvest* (1936) and *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951), indicating that he felt the task of assessing Eliot to be an important one. While the article concentrates on the Forster-Eliot relationship, it does so secondarily in the interests of reappraising the essay collection as a genre of writing: as potentially what Rolf Lundén, examining the short story, calls a "composite."

The literary relationship charted here builds on but nuances and questions Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence. While they were known for achievements in different fields, both Forster and Eliot were active controversialists in non-fictional prose. Each exerted influence on the other and was also influenced by the other. Bloom views influence as a temporally linear relationship of predecessors and successors driven by "strong poets" who "make" poetic "history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (*Anxiety* 5). He confines himself to the influence of one poet on another, thus avoiding not only the complexities of flows of influence between near contemporaries such as Forster and Eliot but of influence relations crossing literary genre lines. Literary relations between Forster and Eliot, the understanding each had of the other, and their impacts on each

other's writing, are concealed behind a courteous, business-like veneer. They also contain an element of commentary by one upon the other which can be acted upon or ignored in future writings and revisions.

Forster and Eliot were never close. They tended to view one another with wary respect. They both established central positions in the high culture of Britain found in London publishing and broadcasting, and elite university common rooms, between the 1920s and the 1950s. Eliot and Forster met only occasionally, but had mutual friends and shared connections at Cambridge University in particular (see Harding, "Dickinson"). Eliot gave the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1926; Forster succeeded him a year later and the result was his very widely read *Aspects of the Novel*. The papers of both are now at King's College, Cambridge, Forster's through his own comprehensive bequest (King's became his literary executors) and Eliot via the friend with whom he lived between his first and second marriages, John Davy Hayward. In early critical essays such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot "entirely dehumanizes the process of artistic tradition," according to Anne Ardis (69). Using the "analogy [...] of the catalyst," taken from chemistry, Eliot argues that "the man who suffers" and "the mind which creates" (*Sacred Wood* 54) must be kept rigorously separate in order for successful art to result. Eliot's manifesto for impersonality has perhaps concealed his own connections with the Bloomsbury Group. The primary institution of this group was its Memoir Club. This existed to preserve recollections of personal relations between Group members, and accounts of lineage (Rosenbaum and Haule). Forster read long accounts of his own past to it in the 1940s (Finch, "Individual versus Collective?").

Helpful, perhaps, is the notion of the mandarin used by Jason Harding ("Dickinson" 27) in relation to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, whose biography Forster wrote as an act of corporate homage, and to I.A. Richards, a link between Dickinson and Eliot. Dickinson was Forster's personal mentor: they travelled to India together and later Forster held the role Furbank would, in turn, hold for him: that of official biographer, his respectful if slightly lifeless account of Dickinson coming out in 1934. Originally entering English at the end of the sixteenth century as a word for an upper-level civil servant in the bureaucracy of imperial China, the word "mandarin" was being used by the first decade of the twentieth century as a slangy, sarcastic term for their Whitehall equivalents in British government. In Harding's use it moves a step further from its origin to cover the *éminences grises* of Cambridge and the literary scene. Terry Eagleton, meanwhile, labels *The Criterion*, the literary journal Eliot founded in 1922 and edited until it folded in 1939, "mandarin Kulturkritik." Eliot claimed for the journal a position of "supreme disinterestedness," Eagleton writes. Writers identified as "mandarin" are in such

a reading artificially detached from the struggles of the world. And yet Eliot and Forster scholars have painstakingly shown that such works as *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets* and *A Passage to India* are powerfully worldly, containing as they do complex commentary on matters such as imperialism and the contradictory foundations of modern nation-states. The term “mandarin” is hard to avoid where relations between Eliot and Forster are concerned, but should be used with care.

There are important links between Forster’s major fiction, particularly *Howards End* (1910) and *A Passage to India* (1924), and Eliot’s major early-period poetry, particularly *The Waste Land* (1922). These writings all combine mysticism and a bleakness or blankness associated with modernity.

The presentation of London in *The Waste Land*, in turn, arguably owes a debt to Forster’s vision of the city in *Howards End*. In Bloom’s view, Forster and Eliot could be understood as “misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (*Anxiety* 5). Complexity is added to Bloom’s generational view of the tussles of poetic influence by the fact that Forster and Eliot were near-contemporaries. Although Forster was nine years older than Eliot there was an overlap several decades long in the writing careers of the two, and any relationship of influence between the two was clearly bipolar. It consisted in mutual accommodations, resistances and shifts. By the 1960s, Forster considered himself to have gone “beyond” Eliot, but in the 1930s his view of London, while he had known London long before he knew Eliot (Finch, *Forster and English Place* 222–98), was clearly indebted to Eliot’s. An examination of Forster and Eliot’s relations calls Bloom’s dialectic of influence, agonistic and gendered as male, into question. The two modernist writers’ mutual interplay of influence is more courteous and more “mandarin;” nuanced and homosocial; it goes back and forth between the participants in a manner recalling the university discussion group or seminar, or the peer review of written work.

Eliot himself worked out a unique sense of tradition and influence, particularly in prose written between the end of the First World War and the mid-1920s. This was expressed in the essay “The Perfect Critic,” which he presented at the opening of his hugely influential 1920 collection of criticism *The Sacred Wood*. In an artist, Eliot writes, the response to artworks experienced and felt intensely merged with a multitude of sensations and experiences gathered here and there, resulting in “the production of a new object which is no longer purely personal, because it is a work of art itself” (*Sacred Wood* 7). The source of this fusion is “a multitude of other suggestions from multitudinous experience.” In the early criticism collected as *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot maps influence relations and connections between lines of writers from the

past. He works to reassess the likes of Jonson, Massinger, Swinburne and even Dante by clearing away the dead wood of the nineteenth century. Perhaps this multitudinous quality should instead be sought in *The Waste Land*, in the poem's fragments of text from different languages, or Eliot's renderings there of the words of English people from different social classes.

### **The Literary Business, 1922-28**

The key year in relations between Forster and Eliot is 1929. In that year Forster published an evaluation of Eliot's work built around his view of *The Waste Land* and its reception. Following this, there was a brief exchange of letters between the two (Eliot *Letters* 4, 572–73), and then in 1930 a minor spat on the letters page of the *Nation and Atheneum* following the death of D.H. Lawrence (Furbank II.164). But personal relations between Eliot and Forster stretched back from 1929 at least as far as the *annus mirabilis* of Anglophone modernist literature, 1922. In her diary for 27 September of that year, Virginia Woolf wrote of the two as friends of hers if not of each other, Eliot as “Tom” and Forster as “Morgan:”

While Tom & I talked in the drawing room, Morgan wrote an article up here; or flitted through; humble, deprecating, chubby like a child; but very observant [...] Morgan became very familiar; anecdotic; simple, gossiping about friends & humming his little tunes; Tom asked him to contribute to the *Criterion*. (Woolf 203-204, qtd in Stape 47-48)

Woolf's diary entry hints at a hidden connection between Forster and Eliot in which each somehow explains the other. It points at the fact that the two were more alike than commonly thought. Both came from extremely privileged backgrounds which detached them from their surroundings and allowed them to assume superior positions. Both became insiders of the British establishment, yet had personal traits which alienated them from it. Equally, deep faultlines divide them.

Eliot's letters to Forster following the meeting between the two at Rodmell, the Woolfs' Sussex house, are at first courteous and even deferential; afterwards, from 1923 to 1927, Eliot becomes business-like. While the tone is cordial enough, these are not letters to a friend (Eliot *Letters* 2, 23, 338–39, 341, 576; *Letters* 3, 9–10). Forster was slightly evasive when Eliot recurrently pressed him for contributions to *The Criterion*. Eliot gathered a distinguished group of contributors in the first volume of *The Criterion*, including Forster, whose essay “Pan”

appeared in the journal in July 1923. Forster contributed again in 1926, appropriately with an essay on “The Novels of Virginia Woolf.” Apart from this his main connection with Eliot during these years was as an intermediary between the editor of *The Criterion* and the Alexandrian Greek poet Constantine Cavafy.<sup>1</sup>

### **“Difficulties,” Meredith and the “Younger Generation:” Forster’s 1929 essay**

Forster’s first essay on Eliot was initially published as “Some of Our Difficulties” in the *New York Herald Tribune* (12 May 1929) and in Britain as “T.S. Eliot and His Difficulties” in *Life and Letters* (June 1929 issue). The initial publication was as a review of Eliot’s *For Lancelot Andrewes* (*Abinger Harvest* 1996, 414). Collected in Forster’s 1936 collection of miscellaneous prose *Abinger Harvest* as simply “T.S. Eliot,” the review becomes an essay with a longer lifespan, appearing in a section simply entitled “Books,” which sits between Part I (“The Present”) and Part III (“The Past”). Part IV of *Abinger Harvest* is titled “The East” and develops Forster’s position in the 1930s as an India expert. Part V, standing apart from the rest of the book, is “The Abinger Pageant.” This is a pageant play presenting Forster’s local identification with a particular section of the county of Surrey, as the title suggests, but equally presenting an egalitarian political critique of that highly socially stratified zone of England which amounts to a critique of “his country” as a whole (anticipating “What I Believe”).

“Part II: Books” is a tour of literary modernity seen from Forster’s point of view. Writers covered include some who would later become part of the canon of modernism (Eliot, Proust, Woolf), together with others who seem more peripheral or even obscure but include the beginnings of a canon of homosexual writers (Ronald Firbank, Howard Overing Sturgis, Forrest Reid). Forster’s sense of modernity in literature reaches back over a century to Jane Austen: implicitly, he would not concur with a view in which it began with Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and Eliot. Compared to the Eliot of the 1920s, Forster is markedly less concerned with clarifying lines and relationships of influence, or with passing clear evaluative judgement on writers as part of a process of canon-forming.

Forster’s 1929 Eliot essay reads somewhat differently in its original context and in the 1936 collection, *Abinger Harvest*. The essay begins with the spatio-personal: in “the garden of a friend” in Egypt, “during the war,” i.e. WWI, when “while waiting for a tram in Cairo I sprained my ankle upon the asphalt pavement and was carried into the garden of a friend.”

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<sup>1</sup> See Forster’s letter to Eliot of 11 March 1924, *Selected Letters* 54–55 n.1.

There, Forster has the chance to catch up with modern literature. He reads Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *À Rebours*. "Oh, the relief of a world which lived for its sensations and ignored the will," proclaims Forster (*Abinger Harvest* 1996, 85). Forster then turns to "some poems which had come out in a sort of paperish volume from England," Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations*.

The opening of the Eliot essay contains several notes that recur in Forster's writing. The sprained ankle introduces physical pain; physical passivity ("I [...] was carried") is welcome and there is an oblique reference to a relationship between men ("a friend"). Seemingly light and ephemeral, the piece becomes a reflection on the place of war and inter-continental relations in the history of the twentieth century. The modernity of the "asphalt pavement" in a geographical area (Egypt) typically understood in an orientalist Romantic mode recalls moments in Forster's fiction in which commercial, time-bound, bathetic modernity comes into contact with the primeval and the non-human: *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, where the streets of a medieval Tuscan town are asphalted and the Italian romantic leader is the son of a dentist, for instance. In *Howards End*, comparably, the clerk Leonard Bast relates a walk at night through the Surrey Hills inspired by "culture," i.e., his readings of Victorian nature writers such as George Borrow, George Meredith, Richard Jefferies and Robert Louis Stevenson. The result, once gas lights and the Underground railway have been left behind, is an experience of the dawn as "only grey," but through the experience he "reached the destination," "the spirit" which led the writers of nature to write (*Howards End* 117–18).

Forster takes the view that Eliot's writing is indispensable to the times in which and for which they write, but he wonders why Eliot does things quite as he does. While any "difficulties" readers may have with "the little essay in *The Sacred Wood* entitled 'Hamlet and His Problems'" (*Abinger Harvest* 1976, 104), must be the reader's own, the same cannot be said for *The Waste Land*. Forster wonders why it is that, unlike Eliot the critic, Eliot the poet seems to view his readers as characterized by "incompetence and inattention" and asks for readers who are on "his level" (*Abinger Harvest*, 1996 86). Implicitly, Forster proposes a mode of reading that is kinder to the reader and less condescending. The key sentence, reminiscent of the two initial titles of the essay in place of the bland "T.S. Eliot" under which it appears in *Abinger Harvest*, is the following: "When there are difficulties, the fault is always ours." There are difficulties with Eliot, Forster means. Removing these difficulties from the title of the essay repositions of the piece on Eliot: no longer a piece of occasional, controversial prose; instead, an essay positioned as part of an essay collection, for consideration as part of Forster's collected works.

Forster wants more kindness and less discrimination. In the complex and difficult contemporary environment of the mid-1930s he seeks, through the essay composite of *Abinger Harvest*, to welcome readers to his way of seeing the world, to be a friendly guide for them. In the 1936 collection, particularly, he indicates that Eliot wants neither of these things. Feeling he cannot understand *The Waste Land* (implying perhaps that it cannot be understood or is not worth understanding) Forster turns to “the young:”

For Mr. Eliot’s work, particularly *The Waste Land*, has made a profound impression on them, and given them precisely the food they needed. And by “the young” I mean those men and women between the ages of eighteen and thirty whose opinions one most respects, and whose reactions one most admires. He is the most important author of their day, his influence is enormous, they are inside his idiom as the young of 1900s were inside George Meredith’s, they are far better qualified than their elders to expound him, and in certain directions they do expound him. (*Abinger Harvest* 1996, 87)

The last clause is the most opaque: what are the “directions” in which “the young [...] expound” Eliot? Perhaps the thought is of the very first fictions of Evelyn Waugh or the *Practical Criticism* of I. A. Richards as efforts to put Eliot’s thinking into action that emerge from a fuller understanding of Eliot’s work than is available to those, like Forster, who were already in their thirties when World War One broke out. Perhaps it has to do with Forster’s observations of personal networks and in university conversations. Indeed, in the late 1920s, Forster spent a considerable amount of time around Cambridge and particularly his old college, King’s. He also developed new connections with young writers.

After comparing Eliot’s position in the mid-1920s with that of George Meredith 25 years earlier, Forster asks “What is *The Waste Land* about?” He answers this question with more questions (“Who is the drowned sailor in it? What does the scrap-heap of quotations at the end signify?”), suggesting that Eliot aims to “lead” his readers “deeper into confusion,” to leave them “floundering” (*Abinger Harvest* 1976, 104–05). This slightly jealous-sounding critique of *The Waste Land* might seem naïve, or at best very preliminary, to a 2010s scholar coming to the essay from the “new modernist studies” (Mao and Walkowitz). But when Forster looks at Eliot and speaks of those born since the beginning of the century as being “inside his idiom”, he implicitly states that a series of modernities have already elapsed, rather than any single modernism in which Eliot would a key figure and Forster a doubtful or peripheral one. The arrangement of writers Forster presents in the “Books” section of *Abinger Harvest* takes a

deliberately wide-ranging and eclectic view of modernity: Jane Austen as not a period piece but a modern alongside Meredith and Eliot.

The link with Meredith also suggests that Forster is dismissive of Eliot's success: a mere vogue among the young. Forster begins the discussion of Meredith in *Aspects of the Novel* (89) by saying that the older writer "[...] is not the great name he was twenty or thirty years ago, when much of the universe and all Cambridge trembled." He goes on to suggest that he himself as a young man felt "depressed" by the idea that formulations of Meredith's could define the possibilities for his own identity. In the light of this, the comparison with Meredith in the Eliot essay, first written for publication only a year after *Aspects of the Novel*, reads like a prediction by Forster that Eliot, like Meredith, will prove a modish writer swiftly forgotten by posterity. Instead, Eliot's influence on English poetry and criticism throughout the twentieth century and beyond proved enormous. Scholarly interest in Meredith since the 1970s, meanwhile, has been negligible. Forster did not foresee in 1929 that Eliot would gain the role of arbiter of young poetic talent in the 1930s.

*Abinger Harvest* (1976, 6) crucially, is dedicated to Forster's "friends in a younger generation," a word that recalls the "present generation" of *Aspects of the Novel*, for whom Meredith's social critique is clumsy and outdated. The comparison between Eliot and Meredith may seem strange, but it is important in understanding Forster's view of Eliot. Forster's "friends in a younger generation" are named in the dedication of *Abinger Harvest*: rising writers, J. R. Ackerley, Christopher Isherwood and William Plomer, who come alongside R. J. Buckingham, the Metropolitan Police constable in London with whom Forster had a long-term relationship starting when they met at a Boat Race day party in 1930 given by Ackerley. Sexual awakening throbs subtly through *Abinger Harvest*, beside the tram and in the Cairo garden. It is present in the dedication which, like the short story "composite" of Lundén or the Genettian paratextual, is instrumental in bringing together the pieces gathered in the collection, presenting them as a unity. Following the appearance of the review, there was an exchange of letters between Forster and Eliot. Most tellingly, Eliot wrote to Forster on 10 August 1929 saying that "you exaggerate the importance of the War [...] *The Waste Land* might have been just the same without the War" (*Selected Letters* 4 573; Furbank II.328). Forster wrote back thanking Eliot warmly and taking back his statement in the essay that the First World War had given rise to *The Waste Land*. Still, he remarks, writing from a ship in the Red Sea on 9 September 1929, "but for the war, I shouldn't myself have had any preparation for the poem."

### **Thirties to Sixties: Forster against Eliot?**

Forster wrote his 1937 essay “E.M. Forster Looks at London” for a popular left-wing periodical. It was aimed at a very broad and not necessarily very “literary” audience. Forster collected it after the Second World War into *Two Cheers for Democracy* under the title “London is a Muddle.” The essay shows how Forster’s view of London has been transformed under Eliot’s influence. The sense is that to look at London now, in the reign of George VI, is to look through the lens of Eliot. In the essay, Forster draws his choice of sites to visit and examine as representative of London quite specifically from Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. First among these is the area of the City of London containing Thames Street and the church of St Magnus the Martyr, immediately north of London Bridge, an ancient commercial district. Secondly, Forster reflects on a drab, shabby, slum district, unimportant in itself, only mattering as one representative among others of the thick belt of such districts ringing central London, characterized by smoke, pubs and canals (it happens to be Islington, but it could as well be Paddington or Battersea). “London Is a Muddle” ends with a seven-line quote from Eliot.

On London, then, the influence flows between the two: Forster to Eliot from *Howards End* to *The Waste Land*; Eliot back to Forster from *The Waste Land* to Forster’s minor work “London Is a Muddle.” The latter, which began as Forster’s look at London, the city of his birth, explains it to those from outside, those who like him now come up to it by train (see Finch 2011a: 284–86). Forster revisits and reevaluates a city differently after Eliot’s work. This resembles the Eliotian reading of Shakespeare which works via the imperfections of earlier readings such as Coleridge’s of *Hamlet* (*Sacred Wood* 95–104; see Harding, “Eliot’s Shakespeare”). In the 1937 essay Forster (*Two Cheers* 359–64) shows a reverence for Eliot. But after the War, although the essay was retained in the 1951 collection, this would entirely vanish. During WWII the seeds of Forster’s later sceptical view of Eliot seem to have been sown. In a letter to James Kirkup of 6 May 1942 (see Furbank II.327–28), Forster said he was against Eliot “guarding himself” and his “reverence for pain.”

Following the 1929 review, Forster produced another assessment of Eliot and included this in his second selection of non-fictional prose, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (269–72). “Two Books by T.S. Eliot” is a long piece which was derived from two separate reviews; it comes in the longest section of the book, “The Arts in Action,” itself part of “What I Believe”, which also contain “Art in General” and “Places,” and within the latter, “London is a Muddle”. This section, Part 2 of the book, follows “The Second Darkness,” which contains some of Forster’s key essays from the late 1930s and early 1940s. “What I Believe” takes its title from a 1938 broadcast which became Forster’s best-known manifesto for his own position, “I would rather

betray my country than my friend.” By the time the war broke out, Forster had established himself as a voice of the democratic political Left in Britain: broadly tolerant, deeply anti-fascist but refusing the opposition within which to be anti-fascist meant being a supporter of the Soviet communism of Stalin. His pre-war writing thus paved the way for a period after WWII in which the likes of George Orwell and Forster would seem to have called a situation right that others on the Left got deeply wrong.

It is important to think about the place of these short pieces on Eliot in the larger wholes of the two essay collections, *Abinger Harvest* and *Two Cheers for Democracy*. Even in studies of short fiction the interplay between the individual story as narrative and the grouping in the larger collection remains understudied. Lundén’s notion of the “short story composite” as a more coherent, shaped and single-minded grouping than the short story collection, within which the individuality of the story is paramount, could be applied here, to develop the notion of an “essay composite” as a book of more tightly linked short non-fictional prose pieces than the essay collection. In *Abinger Harvest*, “Part II: Books” presented a version of modernity with, at its heart, today’s youth, the young people who matter, as being “inside” the “idiom” of Eliot just as their forerunners, Forster’s own generation, were in 1900 with Meredith. By contrast, “The Arts in Action” in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (146-316) is a more eclectic grouping taking up just under half of the book’s total length. Within it Forster gathers alongside emblematic figures of modernity (Woolf, Eliot, Gide, Cavafy, D’Annunzio, Tolstoy, William Barnes), writers who have essentially a personal importance for him: sometimes the link is a family one and the essay amounts to a homage (“Bishop Jebb,” “‘Snow’ Wedgwood,” “Henry Thornton:” Forster’s view of his more distinguished forebears grew cosier as he grew older), sometimes it has to do with his own sexual liberation (“Edward Carpenter”). Essays explicitly concerned with an individual writer are juxtaposed with those whose titles are more whimsical or enigmatic (“A Duke Remembers,” “In My Library”), or stand back to judge an era (“English Prose between 1918 and 1939”).

The second essay on Eliot itself is divided between an account of a piece of non-fictional prose, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), and an account of a play in verse, *The Cocktail Party* (1949). In covering the former, Forster chides Eliot for excessive caution when, instead of writing “for popular audiences” his efforts are “addressed to sophisticated and highly educated people,” perhaps the grown-ups whom the young of 1929 have become (*Two Cheers* 253). Forster separates Eliot the poet from Eliot the critic. Eliot the poet “has been awarded the highest possible honours, both in this country and abroad” (*Two Cheers* 254). In a faintly sarcastic piece of reverence, Forster suggests that Eliot is eager to receive public recognition

or craves a high social status in the manner of an embarrassing nouveau-riche. Eliot the critic, “increasingly theological,” according to Forster, “cannot be described” as “a convinced liberal:” (254) here, Forster unambiguously suggests modernity has left “Mr. Eliot,” his contemporary, behind.

The account given of *The Cocktail Party* is a separate short essay; in both essays Forster is profoundly skeptical about any reverence for the “spiritual.” Skilfully paraphrasing the action of the play, Forster suggests that he has found something suspicious, especially when he comes to Eliot’s character, Celia: she “has a sense of sin – not for anything specific, but a general sense, and she desires to ‘atone.’” Against Eliot’s heavy-handed spirituality Forster places secular values both aesthetic and ethical:

As for Celia, we hear that she has chosen the path of Devotion and Dedication, has become a nurse and a nun, and has perished agonizingly amongst savages. Here sufferings are dwelt on, are indeed gloated over, and no doubt this is consonant with the author’s religious outlook and with his “comedy.” But aesthetically the sufferings disturb the reader and distract him. The Christian ethic of atonement, which has been impending over his head since the end of the second act, comes down with too sudden a bump. He hears the doctor-priests analysing the successful martyrdom as they sip their drinks, and he wonders. (*Two Cheers* 255)

Forster was raised in Britain’s Establishment religion, that of the Church of England. He had clergy among his ancestors (notably his paternal grandfather, Charles Forster), who also included members of the “Clapham Sect,” an influential and wealthy group of Evangelical Anglican reformers active in the early nineteenth century. By early adulthood Forster himself had rejected Anglicanism and all organized religion entirely (Furbank I.62–3). But returning to his account of Eliot and Meredith, he was “inside” the “idiom” of the Church of England, and this has an impact on his view of Eliot the proselytiser. Forster accuses Eliot of producing a text in which “sufferings are dwelt on, indeed gloated over.” He seems to remember the pieties of his youth when he ascribes this to Eliot’s “religious outlook.” Writing to William Plomer on 27 May 1950, Forster (*Selected Letters* 241) describes *The Cocktail Party* in less restrained terms as “priest-ridden.” Finally, a connection between Forster’s spiky and idea-led comedy of manners in *Howards End* and Eliot’s in *The Cocktail Party* goes unmentioned by Forster. Julia Shuttlethwaite, a partly welcome guest of a subtly lower social level, calls to recover an umbrella, just as the “ill-fed boy” Leonard Bast, social inferior of the Schlegels, does in *Howards End* (*The Cocktail Party* 359; *Howards End* 32-42, 42).

The comparison between Forster and Eliot in terms of religion is interesting. Forster is often seen as a non-religious humanist, whereas Eliot is known as a zealous convert to a conservative form of Anglicanism. Eliot was raised in Unitarianism, coming to see this branch of New England Protestantism (formerly a denomination but in the twenty-first century constituted as a separate religion from Christianity) as, “a bland and insufficient heresy” (Ackroyd 17). In young adulthood, Forster and Eliot both lost the well-mannered, upper-middle-class religious faith in which they were raised. Peter Ackroyd goes on: “Unitarianism is earnest, intellectual, humanitarian, part of that high-minded ‘ethical culture’ which Eliot in later years distrusted and mocked.” Echoes of this humanitarian intellectualism can be heard in the public intellectual Forster was in the period between the 1930s and the 1950s. Perhaps Eliot also “distrusted and mocked” the views by such Liberals as Lionel Trilling whom Forster became associated with from the 1940s onwards. And yet the upbringing the two shared as privileged products of nineteenth-century industrial and financial capitalism is comparable just as their family customs of religious observance are. The latter cast new light on the post-religious positions later taken not only by Forster but also by Eliot (as a secular public intellectual, but also a propagandist for conservative religion).

The social world of Eliot’s post-World-War-Two *The Cocktail Party* seems chilly, mannered and portentous in contrast with that of Forster’s pre-World-War-One fiction. In Forster’s early writings, the experience of physical pain occurs frequently when implicit sexual relations between men are at stake, and pain even seems to have the mystical power to forge communion. In his first novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (135), following the climactic crash of a carriage in which a stolen baby is killed and the repressed English hero Philip Herriton injures his arm, the child’s Italian father, overcome with anger and grief, grasps Philip’s “broken elbow” and the two fight. Philip feels in his arm “the essence of pain” but anger subsides and Gino ends up nursing Philip with the warmed milk intended for the baby (137-39). By the 1940s, however, Forster seems, as the harshness of his judgements on Eliot shows, to have turned sharply against such associations between pain and the establishment of interpersonal connections. When Forster writes of Eliot’s “reverence for pain” he seems to think that Eliot is engaged in a deep and prolonged act of self-deception. Forster perhaps interpreted Eliot as a repressed or sublimated homosexual. If so, he could have seen facets of his own younger self in the Eliot whose work he read between the 1920s and the 1940s. For Forster, Eliot resembled someone he might himself have turned into, someone repressing his inner urges more violently than he ultimately did.

The war experience of the two provides a so-far unexplored field of comparison between

Forster and Eliot. World War Two brought both into contact with the realities of mutilation and mass death. Both were non-combatants in the conflict, Eliot was over 50 and Forster over 60 when the war broke out; both were physically in and around London throughout the Blitz, however. A rewarding comparison between Eliot's "Little Gidding" and the wartime entries in Forster's "Locked Journal" could, for example, be carried out. Related to this, the key moment in Forster's shifting view of Eliot would seem to be 1942, the period between the first and the second Blitz. This was the time of Forster's letter to Kirkup denouncing Eliot's "reverence for pain," when Forster and Eliot were both in London, deep in wartime with no end yet in sight. Forster ends both mini-essays in "Two Books by T.S. Eliot" by assessing Eliot as a writer of prose and verse that is not poetry (having in the first words of the piece put aside Eliot the poet, the chief subject of the 1929 essay). He sees Eliot, writing for the "sophisticated and highly educated," becoming "wary" and producing "cumbersome English" filled with "qualifications and precautions," in his non-fiction (*Two Cheers* 253); Eliot the playwright writes "beautifully and lucidly" in "a demure chatty verse form which seems to be like prose" (*Two Cheers* 253). Forster declares that he has read *The Cocktail Party*, not seen it performed, and ends with a speculation that qualifies his own very harsh verdict on the play's cruelty and religiosity: "On the stage, such diction may well carry all before it, and, reinforced by sound stagecraft, may place affairs in a less puzzling perspective" (*Two Cheers* 256). Forster's growing sense of disturbance about Eliot and his influence became amplified in his last decades. This change culminated in a comment Forster made in his *Commonplace Book* during the 1960s:

I feel now to be as far ahead of him [Eliot] as I was once behind. Always a distance – and a respectful one. How I dislike his homage to pain! What animal except the human could have excogitated it? Of course there's pain on and off through each individual life, and pain at the end of most lives. You can't shirk it and so on. But why should it be endorsed by the school-master and sanctioned by the priest until

The fire and the rose are one

when so much of it is caused by disease or by bullies? It is here that Eliot becomes unsatisfactory as a seer, as Coventry does as a shrine. That misfire-cathedral has given Christ a green face and the Angel of the Agony matches for legs. (Furbank II.328)

Eliot's later writing, for Forster, embodies some of the worst sides of the century. In the post-war environment, Eliot's symbol of mystical fusion carries overtones of the forces ("disease

[....] bullies”) which led the world to the edge of destruction and caused the deaths of tens of millions in the era of totalitarian dictatorships and the world war they provoked. Eliot was never actively a fascist, but his writing was susceptible to alignment with that of former associates such as Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound. Emanuel Litvinoff stood up in the same room as Eliot in 1950 and read his poem “To T.S. Eliot,” which accused Eliot of retaining anti-Semitic passages in his 1920s poems when they were republished after the Holocaust calling this “the snigger from behind the covers of history” (Litvinoff 195; Wright xxx). This specifically post-war analysis of Eliot, not without personal bitterness, also takes on new meaning when connected to the statements on Eliot in the 1929 review.

### **Conclusion: What Will Survive?**

Forster’s complicated relationship of influence with Eliot involved earlier accommodation, even submission, but later a sense of combat in which Forster seems to have felt that he ultimately triumphed. In the 1929 essay reprinted as “T.S. Eliot” in *Abinger Harvest*, Forster writes of the previous twelve years as “years in which Mr. Eliot has gone both beyond me and behind;” he writes of a “fragmentary sympathy” as remaining in his reading of the younger man (86). This points towards a fuller understanding of Forster’s career. Relations between the men were downplayed by Furbank when he reduced them to personal anecdotes. For example, the occasion in 1951 when both Eliot and Forster were guests at Harvard and, in the words of Ackroyd, “the students and teachers ignored the novelist and crowded round the poet” (285), has been retold from Furbank not only by Ackroyd but by a more recent biographer (Moffat). The effect of this anecdote is to pay Eliot a back-handed compliment: he may have been grander and more of a celebrity, Furbank suggests, but he seems vain and preening in contrast with the shabby figure of Forster on the sidelines, easily overlooked, ethically admirable precisely through his repeated acts of renunciation of literary stardom. Forster, of course, in his later years at King’s, was himself also a star. His fame associated him with his own alma mater, as Harvard claimed Eliot. And considering that in 1951 Eliot had only recently won the Nobel Prize, it is hardly surprising that an audience there should have fêted him. Furbank’s treatment of Forster’s relations with Eliot fits into a discourse of fraternal confidentiality: the job of the Apostolic appointed biographer is not only to reveal but also to conceal.

Eliot was not drawn to Forster in anything like the same way. But the London of *The Waste Land* has as one of its under-recognized key textual sources the London of *Howards End*. Perry Meisel (177) writes that *Howards End* anticipates the “stony rubbish” of *The Waste Land*. I

have argued elsewhere (*Forster and English Place* 260) that the characteristic of flux essential to London in Forster's novel is also the source of one strand of Eliot's poem. One speculative conclusion would be that Forster's influence on Eliot was greater than he himself admitted.

This article has shown some of the ways that, in the era of modernism, a writer such as Forster could redeploy non-fictional prose texts written as occasional pieces so that they could take on a more long-lasting meaning. Keeping his implications at an almost subliminal level, Forster suggested that Eliot could be both cruel and deceitful, and that this undermined his writing. Forster presented for his audience of "friends in a younger generation," themselves homosexual or bisexual as Buckingham, Isherwood and Plomer all were, a view of Eliot as something approaching a traitor. Equally, the public Forster advised a much broader audience, in broadcasts and in statements such as "What I Believe," to be kind and open-minded.

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