

***T.S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination*, Jewel Spears Brooker
(Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018)**

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Literary criticism abounds in expositions of the dialectical imagination, which have helped to illuminate particular works, writers, movements and periods. There is no getting away from it, of course: the eternal return of dialectic demands, of each new generation of scholars, an appreciation of the prose, poetry and theory in relation to philosophy (among other subjects, such as history, psychology and religion); and therefore an understanding, in part, of the interdisciplinary nature of the field of English Literature. Moreover, while guided by critics to recognize, for instance, connections between notions of the imagination as a creative power and the dialectical mode, and how particular writers have waxed not only lyrical but essentially philosophical in their recourse to dialectic, scholars must inevitably come to terms with the thorny question of influence. In *The Anatomy of Influence* (2011), Harold Bloom argues that the “structure of literary influence is labyrinthine, not linear”. Quoting from Tolstoy’s letter to Nikolai Strakhov (dated

23 April 1876) Bloom seeks “to guide readers through some of the ‘endless labyrinth of linkages that makes up the ‘stuff of art’”.¹

When it comes to the arch-Modernist T.S. Eliot, then, it might have been expected that the question of influence, specifically regarding the origins and development of his dialectical imagination (and relativism, too, as it turns out), would naturally be thorny if not altogether, in Prufrockian parlance, overwhelming. Faced with the sheer extent of potential labyrinthine influence and linkages, it is a quite remarkable achievement that our guide Professor Brooker’s thesis, which is posited almost immediately on page 1 and subsequently refined into several elements and methodological approaches, becomes increasingly convincing and far-reaching as the superbly organized and detailed explication unfolds across a cogent Introduction and 11 engaging chapters, extending from the symbolical “swinging pendulum” to “the flaming rose”:

My thesis is that two of the principles that he absorbed in his graduate studies in philosophy became permanent features of his mind and art, grounding his quest for wholeness and

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 9.

underpinning most of his subsequent poetry. The first, at the heart of his work on F.H. Bradley and idealism, is that contradictions are best understood dialectically, by moving to perspectives that both include and transcend them. The second, basic in his work on James G. Frazer and the social sciences, is that no one truth is self-sufficient, that all truths exist in relation to other truths [...] Together or in tandem, these two principles – dialectic and relativism – constitute the basis of a continual reshaping of his imagination.²

By pinning Eliot’s absorption of these two principles to the “essential reference point” of his early immersion in philosophy, and proceeding to methodically and meticulously trace their recurrence across his oeuvre (including the literary criticism and “three blocks” of poetry, “each defined by a signature masterpiece – ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quartets*”), Brooker leads us in a variety of marvellously illuminating directions within the labyrinth, both brand-new and along trails blazed in her previous work.³ Her insightful treatment of thinkers such as (besides

² Jewel Spears Brooker, *T.S. Eliot’s Dialectical Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), 1-2.

³ *Ibid.*, 4;2.

Bradley and Frazer) Bergson, Descartes and Kant; theologians like Andrewes, Pascal, Augustine and Julian of Norwich; as well as literary figures such as the French Symbolists (via Symons, with excellent related attention to Gauguin), Conrad, Dostoevski, Shakespeare, Donne, Yeats and, in particular, Dante (not least in her brilliant concluding analysis of *Four Quartets*), ensures this book will be widely received as an indispensable companion guide to the coherence between the mind and art of Eliot. It is difficult to see how Brooker's demonstration, that in "various guises, the early formulations endured" in the bifurcated Eliot's subsequent work, can be superseded, unless perhaps the concept of dialectic is extended to instances of Othering by Eliot.⁴

Nevertheless, Brooker's thesis cannot but remain residually haunted by the shadowy reaches of the labyrinth. If there *is* a criticism to be levelled, it is that although we are presented with the impressive identification of two eminently plausible 'source of influence' instances impacting Eliot's oeuvre, the two philosophical principles he evidently absorbed are not expressly situated, in a sharply focused and

⁴ Ibid., 4.

comprehensive way, in relation to other comparable ideas, models and possible sources forming part of his labyrinthine literary heritage. Despite a crucial clarification that Eliot's "dialectical impulse predates his formal study of philosophy and persists long after he has abandoned thinking in philosophical terms", we are ultimately left largely unenlightened as to how his impulse might relate (or not) to various other notably dialectical and/or relativistic thinkers and literary figures lurking in the labyrinth who receive little to no attention.⁵ Of the former, examples include Heraclitus, Hegel (along with 'post-Hegel'), Nietzsche and Freud; and of the latter, Blake, Coleridge, Kipling, Pater, "Matthew and Waldo" as well as, among other contemporaries, Lewis.⁶ In light of Eliot describing himself as "classicist in literature", it is surprising his relation to the 'Classical-Romantic' dialectic is not explored in greater depth.⁷

It is advisable, therefore, that readers approach Brooker's latest book in the context of her previous work, where such avenues of potential enquiry within the labyrinth have received more attention (albeit in varying proportions). As Brooker

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems & Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 30.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), ix.

highlights in *Mastery and Escape* (1994), Eliot “maintained that a reader should spend at least as much time preparing to read a poem as a barrister spends preparing a brief”; and readers would certainly benefit from a measure of preparation in this case, and thus appreciating just how much thorny ground within the labyrinth Brooker has covered.⁸ Indeed, Brooker invites our participation: “The present study is offered as a contribution to a conversation with colleagues and readers based on decades of working with archival material and teaching Eliot’s writing in the context of literary and intellectual history.”⁹ Brooker’s latest contribution has also arrived at an opportune time of “the dawn of a renaissance in Eliot studies because the long-restricted archival material is now being published in critical editions”; and there is the opportunity to converse with her directly soon, at the T.S. Eliot International Summer School in London in July.¹⁰ To borrow from *The Family Reunion* (1939), the “circle of our understanding” of Eliot within the labyrinth is becoming, excitingly, a significantly less “restricted area”.¹¹

⁸ Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 9.

⁹ Jewel Spears Brooker, *T.S. Eliot’s Dialectical Imagination*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems & Plays*, 348.