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Jeremy Noel-Tod

A History of Difficulty: On Cambridge Poetry

I should have turned back at Milton Keynes.

IN ONE CORNER OF OXFORD, I have not been forgiven for coming to Cambridge. I learnt this when I wrote a review last year in the *Times Literary Supplement* praising the poetry of Michael Haslam. My former tutor, Craig Raine—who, as editor of *Areté* magazine, gave me my break in the reviewing business—could stand it no longer.

“Haslam, I think it is fair to say, is school of J.H. Prynne,” he wrote in an editorial referring to me as “late of this parish”. And, as Raine has made clear elsewhere, the school of J.H. Prynne needs to be put on special measures. Introducing his selection of T.S. Eliot’s poetry to *Guardian* readers last year, Raine wrote that High Modernism’s reputation for “difficulty” has

spawned a postmodern poetic school led by JH Prynne whose purpose is to be difficult—emulatively difficult. (Not difficult to be difficult, actually.)

Spawned in some estaminet of Cambridge, the school of Prynne squats on Raine’s window sill, spoiling the view. Eliot, Raine protests, could describe things—birds, bees, the yellow soles of feet—in a way that is “easy to appreciate”. The “thin Cambridge stuff,” on the other hand (to return to the Haslam editorial) attempts to appear “purged, rigorous and purified” of such pleasures, but is “obviously” “minor” in its inability to give readers something to hang on their walls.¹

¹ Craig Raine, ‘Descriptive Decadence,’ *Areté* 27 (Winter, 2008), pp. 154–155 and ‘All Jokes Aside,’ *Guardian*, March 11, 2008 [Great Poets of the Twentieth Century series].

The *Areté* review of my review concluded with an emergency quotation in case of relapse:

T.S. Eliot, in *On [sic] the Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, cited T.E. Hulme with approval: “The great aim is accurate, precise and definite description. The first thing to realise is how extraordinarily difficult this is...’

There can hardly be a more perfect instance of “minor” poetry than the five short poems that comprise *The Complete Poetical Works of T.E. Hulme*. Raine overlooks this awkward fact in his desire to make Hulme’s words seem Eliot’s recipe for great poetry. But the great poet’s “approval” of Hulme in *The Use of the Poetry and the Use of Criticism* is qualified by the following:

This is, we must remark at once, not a general theory of poetry, but an assertion of the claims of a particular kind of poetry for the writer’s own time. It may serve to remind us how various are the kinds of poetry, and how variously poetry may appeal to different minds and generations equally qualified to appreciate it.²

I think it is fair to say that Craig Raine has not read much Prynne or Haslam. The ‘Cambridge School’ label, however, enables such a critic to dismiss a whole poetic culture more various than his own, with its envious eye on the reading public of the realist novel, and its simplistic notion of “difficulty” as a historical phenomenon (“Wordsworth’s simplicity in Lyrical Ballads had its own contemporary opacity,” Raine writes, as though all were clear now). Although there can be no doubt that Prynne’s extraordinary career as a poet, critic and teacher makes him the *éminence grise* of the following essays on post-war poetry in Cambridge, he did not build a school single-handedly on fens, bogs and dons. For almost a century, literary critics in Cambridge have

² T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), new edition (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 149.

assumed a generous enthusiasm as the necessary precondition of any “general theory” of poetry able to encompass Eliot’s assertion, in “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), that modern poets “must be *difficult*”.³

Eliot, we should not forget, was the original Cambridge poet. Any number of first encounters with the poetry of Prynne (or another) are foreshadowed by I.A. Richards’ account of first looking into Eliot’s 1920 volume, *Ara Vos Prec*:

I remember sunlight on those large, fine pages and a breathless exhilaration as I came away with it—unable NOT to read it in the Market Place after happening on it in Galloway & Porter’s bookshop—spreading the resplendent thing open: lost in wonder and strangeness and delight.

Richards had recently been appointed as a lecturer in the newly-created English Tripos, and soon set off to London with the intention of springing Eliot from his job at Lloyd’s Bank and “annexing him to Cambridge”. The poet—who had not yet written *The Waste Land*—declined the offer, and would be vindicated by the influence he achieved for himself as a critic and editor outside the academy. Eliot’s success as a poet, though, might not have been what it was had he not had the support of a young academic department—a whole generation younger than that at Oxford—who “thought of teaching English Literature as very Heaven”.⁴ Richards’ echo of Wordsworth’s lines on the French Revolution are only half ironic: with the appearance of *The Waste Land*, he and others were inspired to perform the rearrangement of Eng Lit’s monuments that Eliot had described as the necessary consequence of “really new” poetry in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919).⁵

The connection between poetry in Cambridge and the High Modernist

³ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 118.

⁴ I.A. Richards, ‘On T.S.E.’, in Allen Tate (ed.), T.S. Eliot: *The Man and His Work* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967) pp. 7–15.

⁵ *Selected Prose*, p. 23.

moment, then, was not emulative but generative. The second edition of Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1926) featured an appendix on 'The Poetry of T.S. Eliot', which argued for "difficulty" as a distinguishing quality of great poetry:

The truth is that very much of the best poetry is necessarily ambiguous in its immediate effect. Even the most careful and responsive reader must reread and do hard work before the poem forms itself clearly and unambiguously in his mind. An original poem, as much as a new branch of mathematics, compels the mind which receives it to grow, and this takes time.⁶

Richards was soon supervising his ideal reader in the form of William Empson, author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), and later (in response to Eliot's blind spot on Milton) of these words:

We could not use language as we do, and above all we could not use it as babies, unless we were always floating in a general willingness to make sense of it; all the more then, to try to make a printed page mean something good is only fair.⁷

Empson's noble sentiment is of course vulnerable to the boots of the I-refute-it-thus brigade, who are inclined to dismiss the difficult text with a single kick—and Cambridge poetry has suffered whole football teams of Dr Johnsons on this score. But Richards and Empson, with their *Principles* and *Types*, also embody a strongly empiricist tendency in Cambridge criticism, which approaches the making of meaning as an informed testing of texts: a practical criticism. Difficulty is not appreciated for its own sake (if it even could be) but for the quality of intellectual attention that it fosters, which may be comparable with that of poetry written in a quite different style. So, Eliot's arrival

6 I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 2nd edition (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1926), p. 291.

7 William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 28.

stimulated F.R. Leavis of Downing College to write *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), a book which offers appreciations of both Eliot and Edward Thomas as poets working at the contemporary “edge of consciousness.”⁸ After the Second World War, Donald Davie pursued a similar lateral engagement when he argued that Thomas Hardy had in fact been “the most far-reaching influence” on British poetry since 1922. Rather than narrowing the canon by this claim, however, Davie used it to give a helpfully critical readings of J.H. Prynne’s early work, noting—for example—that “the structuring principle of this poetry, which makes it difficult (sometimes too difficult), is the unemphasised but radical demands it makes upon English etymologies.”⁹

Davie had been at Gonville and Caius in the early 1960s, where he knew Prynne, who followed him to a Fellowship in English at the same college. Prynne’s life’s work in radically philological poetry and criticism has been concerned with testing that distinction between “difficult” and “too difficult” against the alternative concept of “resistance”. “Resistance,” he wrote in the small magazine *Prospect* in 1961, is the quality that the imagination recognises as “the palpable texture of human affairs,” and from which “we derive our most powerful and sustaining sense of the world, in all its complex variousness” (the I-refute-it-thus gang might like to try kicking that stone for a while before they go back to the poems).¹⁰ The generative force of resistance—and the resultant human texture—is also a way in which we can understand the importance of Prynne’s work to almost all the poets and critics in this new Cambridge magazine. Like Eliot before him, he has set an example which cannot be dismissed by any serious reader of poetry, but equally cannot be passively assimilated. As Michael Haslam has written (though I deliberately didn’t mention it in my TLS review) he is a “wayward Prynneite.”¹¹ But so, too, in his encouragement of other poetries, and in his own marked

8 F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1930), new edition (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), p. 69

9 Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 115.

10 J.H. Prynne, ‘Resistance and Difficulty’, *Prospect* 5 (1962), pp. 26–30, see p. 30.

11 Michael Haslam, *A Whole Bauble* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 260.

changes of manner, has Prynne himself been. This collection of essays, then, is not the story of a 'school', but an introduction to an intellectual tradition—on which Wittgenstein has been only one of many local influences—concerned with poetry as a way of speaking about the world which apprehends all the difficulties of speaking about the world. To return to T.E. Hulme, himself a Cambridge man:

The great aim is accurate, precise and definite description. The first thing is to recognise how extraordinarily difficult this is. It is no mere matter of carefulness; you have to use language, and language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise—that which is common to you, me and everybody. But each man sees a little differently, and to get out clearly and exactly what he does see, he must have a terrific struggle with language.¹²

¹² T.E. Hulme, 'Romanticism and Classicism,' in *Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Fyfield, 1998), p. 78.

Author Info

Jeremy Noel-Tod studied English Literature at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and is a Lecturer in the School of English and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. He reviews poetry for the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Daily Telegraph*, and is the editor of Landfill Press.

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