ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Eliot, Hughes, and Problems of Poetic Difficulty

Will Staveley

August 2023

"We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult."
(T.S. Eliot)

The first thing to clarify in an evaluation of Eliot's quotation is that I will focus on poetry, not on poets - Eliot as a man was what we might call 'difficult', but any discussion of poets' personality would likely become speculative. Instead, Langston Hughes' poetry offers a useful counterpoint in helping to deconstruct what appears to be a simple statement regarding what is deemed difficult in poetry The 'difficult' techniques of allusion and polyvocality, as well as the focus on idealistic metaphysics and interpretive ambiguity introduced in *The Waste Land* were transformed from revolutionary disruption to modernist dogma through the poem's success. Hughes' preoccupation with the local rather than the total might place him in opposition to Eliot, in the 'easy' camp. However, his material focus by no means prevents him engaging with vocal instability, allusion or a final interpretive difficulty - instead it reframes such difficulties in a refreshingly non-Eliotic manner. So, while I do not necessarily disagree with Eliot's initial statement, the lens of high modernist aesthetics through which poetic difficulty has typically been interpreted since *The Waste Land* should be recognised as ideological, and ostensibly 'simple' poetry such as Hughes' should help to redefine and extend what poetic difficulty can be.

While the popularity and power of Eliot's poetry - as 'the most important influence in English poetry at the present time' (Armour 1955: 4) - has possibly entrenched its qualities as emblematic of all poetic difficulty, I wish to suggest that his is 'a peculiarly academic kind of difficulty' - one with serious merits, to be sure, but also by no means universal (Coyle 2009: 157). Focusing on *The Waste Land,* the principal formal enforcers of this difficulty are allusion and polyvocality. From the untranslated epigraph, itself 'a quotation from Petronius' fabrication of Encolpius' account of Trimalchio's presentation of Latin and Greek to Latin speakers', to the climactic ending which fits multiple allusions onto individual lines, the organisational principle of the poem is a wide-ranging and demanding saturation of knowledge (Brooker & Bentley

1992: 48). Tied to this is an idealistic preoccupation; ‘We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison’ typifies an approach more concerned with mental prisons than physical ones (*Waste Land* 413-414). Idealism is likewise apparent in the poem’s final turn towards religion, as well as the influence of Eliot’s dissertation thesis on Bradleian metaphysics and transcendental experience (B&B: 37-42), leading critics to receive it typically as ‘purely a music of ideas’ (Armour 1955: 5). The idealistic conclusion also embeds an unmistakable resistance to interpretation which is certainly difficult, and to which I will return at the end. Finally - and supported by the allusive technique - Eliot is overtly wedded to impersonality, arguing for a poetic engagement with tradition so that ‘the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously’. Two aspects of his argument hold particular interest here; first, that engagement with tradition requires ‘great labour’, helping to explain its difficulty and overall value, and second, that ‘Tradition’ comprises ‘the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer’ (Eliot 1919: 1-2). Without wishing to judge Eliot by this century’s standards, it is clear that critical terminology such as tradition and difficulty in his hands is loaded with significant Eurocentric ideology which Hughes’ differences help to deconstruct. Hughes’ general focus on the experiences of Black Harlem citizens might imply a kind of personal poetry which Eliot might class as easy in comparison, but his poem ‘Personal’ is hardly personal at all:

In an envelope marked:

Personal

God addressed me a letter.

In an envelope marked:

Personal

I have given my answer.

The poem withholds, is difficult; it may not refer obliquely to Hamlet or create an alter-ego named Prufrock, but here Hughes establishes an impersonality and ambiguity which aligns him with Eliot far more than a cursory impression might suggest.

All the same, Hughes also writes that ‘I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet"’ - something Hughes interprets as a desire ‘to be white’, encoding an indirect critique of Eliot’s impersonal slant. Accordingly Hughes’ poetry generally proceeds from the immediate, both formally engaging with an alternative black tradition, and focusing on the lives of ‘the low-down folks’ and their material conditions (*The Negro Artist* 1926: 1). Material reality is a sphere which Eliot’s intellectuality has a fraught relationship with, but generally serves to insulate from or create resistance to - such as the ‘fragments I have shored against my ruins’ (*Waste Land* 430). By contrast, Hughes is unafraid presenting ‘simply’ a truly difficult question: ‘What can a colored girl do / On the money from a white woman’s kitchen?’ Elsewhere Hughes is less direct; the already compressed ‘House rent to pay. / Gin on Saturday’ becomes the heavily paratactic ‘Babies and gin and church / and women and Sunday’ - employing formal technique not far from Eliot’s. ‘Ruby Brown’ also juxtaposes the life of the black subject with ‘the white men, / Habitués of the high shuttered houses’ (*Fine Clothes* 1927: 8-10). Not only does the language shift call into question the dichotomy of high and low enforcing race relations, but instead of Eliot’s wrenching together of disparate times, locations, voices, here Hughes presents the simultaneous, intimate and violent juxtaposition of race in American society. Once a reader accepts Hughes and Eliot are merely proceeding from different origins, similarities crop up everywhere: ‘Honey, I don’t know / Where I come from / Or where I go’ (*Fine Clothes* 10) is hardly semantically different to ‘What shall we do tomorrow? / What

shall we ever do?' (*Waste Land* 133-134*)*. The final section of 'A Game of Chess' and 'The Cat and The Saxophone' even share the capitalised intrusion of exterior noise into conversation; there is arguably a sense in which the enjambed overlap of voices in Hughes' poem makes it more difficult than Eliot's delineated attempt (*Weary Blues* 1926: 27). Again, the immediate focus of Hughes' poetry should not obscure a difficulty of technique which is in some cases similar to Eliot's.

While Eliot dipped into London cockney for this section, Hughes engagement with African-American vernacular is all over *Fine Clothes* - though its prominence by no means makes it his only mode, as the violent, discourse-shifting entrance of the white man in 'Mulatto' makes all too clear (22). Likewise, Hughes' formal allusiveness reflects an engagement with the traditions of African-Americans, 'on gospel songs, spirituals, jazz, and blues' (Bercovitch 2008: 317). More technically this entails call and response, stabs of exclamation, and an improvisational approach to meter, all apparent in 'Sinner' (*Fine Clothes* 17). But these are not just simply called up - 'The Weary Blues' counterpoints blues song with detached speaker to harness allusion and polyvocality in a typically Eliotic combination (*Weary Blues* 23). Rhythmically, Bercovitch identifies 'the two-syllable, two-stress repetitive pattern of 'Poem' as echo[ing] the rhythmical tom-toms of the mythical African drums', but more generally syncopated (here meaning displacing iambs) rhythm can be seen as a vehicle for African-American experience as the story of a displaced people (316). Arguably a further displacement occurs in that the form and rhythms of blues have been stripped of their music - an dislocation which mirrors the wrenching of Eliot's fragments from their original texts. In addition to Hughes' available allusive material, the relative lack of existing written culture for Hughes to allude to also helps us to understand that difficulty - if imagined in a limiting way - is

inherently inaccessible for poets not belonging to a certain class and culture. And, since such things as access to books in education and the colour of one's skin are material concerns, they help to further push Hughes' material focus into relevance concerning discussions of difficulty. Hughes' formal considerations involve allusion and experimentation which resist Eliot's narrow characterisation of engaging with tradition while employing the same difficulties of technique.

A potential argument against the difficulty of Hughes' poetry is that it nevertheless lacks the range of Eliot's, which includes the pub section and other 'low' culture passages (not to mention his popular later plays) alongside the intensive theology and philosophy of work like *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets.* For a start, such an argument disregards the variety existing within Hughes' black subject matter, particularly as symbols of difference to proscriptively white American culture: 'the so-called common element [...] are the majority [and] furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations' (*The Negro Artist* 1) Furthermore, 'before he was twenty-five and had published his first volume of poetry, Hughes had already traveled over half the globe', so his decision to focus on the lives of African-Americans by no means reflects a limitation in the poet's own experience or worldview (Bercovitch 2008: 312). Rather, the decision to focus on such subject matter instead transgresses against the post-1922 notion that poetry should be cosmopolitan, international and intensely allusive, in some sense making it *more* difficult than falling in line with Eliot's model - particularly when searching for publication as an African-American poet. This is even before we consider the outlying imagistic concision of 'Young Prostitute', the French Symbolism of 'Songs to the Dark Virgin', or the 'epic aesthetico-political statement' of 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' (Bercovitch 317). It is necessary to pin down Hughes' material preoccupations, but they are by no means the boundaries of his

poetics; the limiting face of standardized ‘difficulty’ cannot contain the variety, and thus difficulty and interest, of Hughes’ work.

Readers may accept this expansion of the notion of difficulty, but go on to argue that for Hughes it remains a difficulty of content, while Eliot’s *Waste Land* asks questions of its own art form, of interpretation itself, which elevate it to a summit of poetic difficulty. Not only does *The Waste Land* consist of ‘different voices caught in the act of interpretation’ (B&B: 45), but its conclusion impossibly in either the order of ‘Ile fit you’ or the ‘mad’ chaos of fragmentation (*Waste Land* 431). The final allusions are ‘symmetrically opposed pairs’ (B&B: 204), clamouring for ‘lands in order’ while felling towers and bridges, exalting song and poetry Hieronymo bites his own tongue out *(Waste Land* 425-431). This ambiguity has spurred research on such concepts as the ‘hermeneutical loop’ and internal/external interpretation; it is undeniably hard stuff (B&B). ‘The Waste Land is a poem *about* interpretation itself’ - surely nothing can be as difficult as that (Coyle: 167) However, in expressing such anxieties about interpretation and meaning, *The Waste Land’s* polysemicity is carried by a unifying mood of despair. ‘Even when we do not know precisely why he has chosen them, [allusions] are charged with a strange poignancy’ - ‘the intense emotion’ of despair which pervades Eliot’s poetry even at its most witholding (Wilson 1922: 613). ‘It is impossible’ not only to say what one means, by to interpret it too - yet the desperation the poetry is charged with is all too clear. (*Prufrock* 1915: 104) In some sense then, the overarching atmosphere of despair regardless of final interpretation undermines its unmistakable difficulty, makes the poetry easier to enter with a ‘central emotion to provide a key’ (Wilson 613).

By contrast, Hughes’ work engages with a doubleness of interpretation which he identifies in the Blues tradition; a ‘sadness’ ‘not softened with tears but hardened with [...]

absurd, incongruous laughter' (Bercovitch 322). Contextually, African-American experience contains several significant binaries: African/American, enslaved/freed, rural southern/urban northern, but perhaps most inclusively Locke's concepts of the 'Old Negro' and the 'New Negro'. The former 'had long become more of a myth than a man', while the latter reflected a generation 'vibrant with a new psychology' (Locke 1925: 1); the two concepts were thus intensely involved with interpretation, 'not only about how whites perceived blacks, but also deeply about how black folks saw themselves' (Westbrook 2020: 8-9). Likewise, in place of Eliotic external/internal theories of interpretation, Hughes was faced with the difficulty of navigating critical terrain where black critics called him 'the sewer dweller' for catering to white taste, while white critics interpreted the 'primitive naturalness' - or easiness - of Hughes' work (Bercovitch 312). The poetry consistently reflects this interpretive difficulty and twoness; 'They put ma body in de ground, /Ma soul went flyn' o' de town' (*Fine Clothes* 15). Performance and observation elide through the instability of voice in 'Dancers — God! / What dancers!', 'Jazz Band''s 'Play that thing / Mais Oui' (24-25), or the contents of what 'I heard that Negro sing' in 'The Weary Blues' (*Weary Blues* 23). The couplets of the blues form help to tie opposing qualities or valencies to the same sound, the same subject - as in 'I thought [she] was kind / She made me [...] almost lose ma mind', 'gold [...] cold' and 'disease [...] ease' (*Fine Clothes* 5-6). From the setting sun of *Fine Clothes'* first poem to the rising dawn of its last, binaries pervade the poetry, reflecting an elusive doubleness of emotional response where 'Tomorrow. . . . is darkness. Joy today!' (*Weary Blues* 32). More broadly, Hughes' frequent use of exclamations embodies this ambiguous emotional effect: 'O Blues!' combines the intense feeling of pain found in blues music with a passionate celebration of its emotional resonance and power (13). I believe Eliot's monotonous despair and Hughes' bipolar blues speak to their respective perceived

locations in a sterile, old tradition and the start of a new one; grounded respectively in the inescapable past and the uncertain future. And this uncertain future is effectively conveyed through the emotional ambiguity in Hughes work, an aspect sometimes lacking in Eliot's own difficult poetry and indicating further potentials for difficulty in writing.

Eliot's Nobel Prize for 'remarkable efforts as a trail-blazing pioneer of modern poetry', as well as his extensive critical writings themselves, indicate a figure influential not only within poetry but within the reception of it. Coyle argues that Eliot's is 'too often perceived as a peculiarly academic kind of difficulty', but recent poetic developments away from Eliotic principles of impersonality and 'literariness' cannot obscure the fact that his *particular* method has, for a time at least, been internalised as a benchmark of *all* literary difficulty (Coyle 157). Another totalising assessment - from a somewhat sympathetic critic more contemporary to the poets - was that Hughes' position in the 'vogue of Negro art' might nevertheless 'falsify' "genuine" values' (Bercovitch 312). But Hughes' poetry reminds us that there are other ways of presenting qualities such as allusion and ambiguity, that intellectualism is no more formidable than the material concerns of humans, and that difficulty comes in all shapes, forms, and colours. So, while there is nothing inherently wrong with Eliot's argument that poets 'must be difficult', care should be taken to ensure that difficulty resides not just in Eliot's waste land, but in the waste land of African-American experience, and infinite others.

Works Cited

Armour, Nelson. 'The Critics and the Waste Land, 1922–1949.' *English Studies*, vol. 36, 1955, pp. 1-15, https://doi.org/10.1080/00138385508596939. Accessed 01 November 2022.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. 'Langston Hughes: The Color of Modernism.' *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, 2008, pp. 311-342. https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521301091.016. Accessed 01 November 2022.

Brooker, J.S., & Bentley, Joseph. R*eading The Waste Land: Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation.* London: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

Coyle, Michael. 'Difficulty, Deferral, and Form in The Waste Land.' *A Companion to T.S. Eliot*, edited by David Chinitz, 2009, pp. 157-167. https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1002/9781444315738.ch13. Accessed 02 November 2022.

Eliot, T.S. 'The Waste Land.' *Poetry Foundation*, 1922, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land. Accessed 22 October 2022.

---. *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. 1919. http://socrates.acadiau.ca/courses/engl/rcunningham/Winter2020/engl5013_poetics/texts/eliot_tradition.pdf. Accessed 30 October 2022.

---. ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. *Poetry Foundation*, 1915, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock. Accessed 01 November 2022.

Hughes, Langston. ‘The Weary Blues’. *Wikisource*, 1926*,* https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Weary_Blues. Accessed 25 October 2022.

---. *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. 1926. http://faculty.wiu.edu/M-Cole/Racial-Mountain.pdf. Accessed 27 October 2022.

---. *Fine Clothes to the Jew.* 1927. https://scalar.lehigh.edu/african-american-poetry-a-digital-anthology/langston-hughes-fine-clothes-to-the-jew-1927-full-text. Accessed 27 October 2022.

---. ‘The Negro speaks of Rivers’. *Poetry Foundation*, 1921, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44428/the-negro-speaks-of-rivers. Accessed 27 October 2022.

---., 1929. ‘Personal’. *Poetry Nook*, 1929, https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/personal. Accessed 01 November 2022.

Locke, Alain. ‘Enter the New Negro.’ *Survey Graphic*, 1925, pp. 1-6. http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/migrations/text8/lockenewnegro.pdf. Accessed 01 November 2022.

Westbrook, Daniel. ‘Enrique Dussel and Alain Locke: A Project in Black Histories and Inter-American Philosophy of Liberation.’ *Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy*, 2020, pp. 1-13. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340256179_Enrique_Dussel_and_Alain_Locke_A_Project_in_Black_Histories_and_Inter-American_Philosophy_of_Liberation. Accessed 01 November 2022.

Wilson, Edmund. ‘The Poetry of Drouth.’ *Dial*, vol. 73, 1922, pp. 611-616. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1828875080?pq-origsite=primo&parentSessionId=o6ihRNqc9o9WAWLuGzq9jMDFLyC%2FPmm5CCHrBkr%2BBxc%3D. Accessed 26 October 2022.