"No home for him, no way": George P. Elliott's Religious Reversion from Modernism

B. W. Jorgensen
Brigham Young University

Kicking Some Modern Habits," the introductory essay in George P. Elliott's second and last essay collection, *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation* (1971), begins this way:

> Two centuries ago with the Enlightenment, there began a great age which boasted of its modernity and for which the name Modern seems to me as fitting as any other, for during this period Now and the New came to be worshiped as they had never been worshiped before. Modernism substituted science for religion, technology for magic, democracy for monarchy, change for tradition, and progress for salvation. It challenged all authorities, accepting only the few that could withstand the assaults of rational criticism; as a consequence, rebellion became more orthodox than obedience. God was the essence of what Modernism opposed: He is eternal; He is outside of nature and beyond understanding; He is a king who ought to be obeyed, for His commands are always right. (9)

The spiritual trajectory that brought Elliott to the point of making such a statement against Modernity and Modernism was as singular as any; yet it also evidences a counter current within Modernism—a "backward motion," in Robert Frost's words, "against the stream" (329)—that often goes unnoticed but that also belies easy generalities about the "nihilism" or "relativism" of twentieth-century American literature. There was a conflict, perhaps even an interdependence, of the modernist and the religious in Elliott's soul—a word he would have used in keen awareness of its unfashion but needing to name as truthfully as he could the "thing that chooses" ("Certain" 97)—that would not let him find a resting place in modernity.

"Singular" but not unique. One writer or intellectual reverting to—or in Elliott's case toward—religion in mid-twentieth-century America was not exactly front-page news; but he was not alone. In 1950 *Partisan Review* devoted space in four consecutive issues (Feb.–May) to "Religion and the Intellectuals: A Symposium," in which twenty-nine writers, critics, and thinkers responded to questions posed by editors William Phillips and Philip Rahv (and perhaps associate editors William Barrett and Delmore Schwartz). Elliott's literary career was just getting well launched in 1950 (one of his short stories first appeared in an annual award collection that year), and he did not take part in the "symposium," though he may have read at least some of it.[1] The three-paragraph "Editorial Statement" that, with five "queries" or open-ended "topics," prefaces the first two installments in the symposium takes note of "the new turn toward religion among intellectuals and the growing disfavor with which secular attitudes are now regarded in not a few circles that lay claim to the leadership of culture" (103). Speculating that "if the present tendency continues, the mid-century years may go down in history as the years of conversion and return," the statement also remarks on "how these puffs of the *Zeitgeist* catch up the intellectuals for a decade or so only to let them down just as abruptly into disillusion and frustration" (103–04).

---

[1] References in Elliott's essay "Who Is *We*?" indicate a broad awareness of New York intellectual culture from the late 40s on, including *Partisan Review* and several people associated with it. Later in his career Elliott attested his reluctance to take part in symposia ("Confessions" 143–47).

Statements by Barrett and Phillips bracket the symposium's last installment.[2] Reflecting on the "pandemonium of voices" and their "amazing dissonance," Barrett exclaims, "Talk about cultural pluralism! Well, we have it, and our problem may now be how to get beyond it. In a real Age of Faith a symposium like this could not have been held" (456). In such an age "everybody is religious as a simple spontaneous act of being" (456), and since the times then were manifestly not such an age, one should "not conclude too hastily that we shall shortly have a homogeneously religious life like that of the past" (457). Regarding America as "certainly the most irreligious civilization that has ever existed" (457), with its "masses . . . immersed in their gadgets" and "know[ing] nothing of the religious passion that once characterized the peasantries of Europe" (458), Barrett confesses his own "private religion" (459), his inability "to think of the world except as opening to the possibility of God," which he concedes was "very little" (460). Admitting his discomfort with "harboring a private religion . . . since religion is most valuable in human community, when alive in a whole people," Barrett concludes that

> one can only wait: the creative waiting in which one struggles to send one's roots deeper into life and reconquer for oneself, in the openness toward Being, the primitive simplicities that our civilization has almost entirely lost and without which life itself has no meaning—no, none at all. (461)

If Elliott might have found something of a kindred spirit in Barrett, he would have felt less fraternity with Phillips, who, giving himself the last word in the symposium, cannot "help seeing the turn to religion here [in America] as a sideshow"; though granting that his "native heathenism [had] cut [him] off from many varieties of religious experience," the revival strikes Phillips as "neither a genuinely literary nor religious movement" but, rather, "one symptom of a general breakdown of beliefs and values" that "raise[d] a lot of boring questions" (480). For him, "what we have now in America is not so much a turn toward religion as a turn toward religiosity," in which "many writers . . . are generally devoted to the 'new criticism,' to some theory of myth, and to the idea of tradition that stems from T. S. Eliot and his followers in this country"; and "the result so far . . . is not a religious literature but a religious attitude to literature, which is a reversal of the situation that produced the great religious art of the past" (481). With figures like Søren Kierkegaard and Georges Bernanos "remind[ing] us that neither the clerical nor the secular tradition has been able so far to lift human existence to a moral plane," Phillips remains unimpressed "by the new religiosity" as too "ready to dismiss scientific and naturalistic thinking as arid, schematic, and generally insensitive to the mysteries of literary and human existence" (482). Elliott might have felt constrained to accept many of Phillips's claims, including his distinction between religion and religiosity;[3] yet from his essays it seems clear that, for him at least, a reversion away from Modernism toward religion, or religiosity, was not a sideshow but the one show.[4]

---

[2] The editors seem originally to have intended just three installments. At the end of the second, a note announced that "the third and last" would "appear in the April issue" (256); but then a note at the end of the third said, "the concluding installment . . . will appear in the May issue" (339). The number or the length of responses might have obliged the fourth installment by overcrowding the April issue.

George Paul Elliott was born on June 16, 1918, in Knightstown, Indiana, and shared that birth date with his mother until "on the day I turned four a brother was born. This was no coincidence: it was an intrusion cheating me from sharing birthdays exclusively with my mother. I took refuge on Father's lap. I knew the hymn: God's eye was on the sparrow and I knew he thought of me" ("Piece" 247–48).[5]

---

[3] Of Henry James, Elliott remarks, "He likes religiose metaphors, and religiosity flourishes nowadays" ("Getting Away" 25).

[4] In the first installment of the symposium, John Dewey writes of a "reversion to moral attitudes and beliefs which intellectuals as a class had abandoned" and of "reversion to a position not long ago discarded" ("Religion" 129).

[5] June 16 is also Bloomsday, but in 1918 Bloomsday had happened to James Joyce but not yet fully to Mr. Leopold Bloom or to the world at large. Elliott regarded Joyce as "a romantic nihilist" of "heroic proportions" ("*Never*" 221)

That was the sort of event Elliott describes as "reach[ing the child] radiant with magical causes but not yet trapped in sufficient cause" (248). Elliott's mother was a churchgoing Methodist; his father "was that religious oxymoron, a gentle Calvinist—that is to say, a Quaker. He knew he could keep the murder in his heart from reaching his hands" ("Coming" 155). Later Elliott's father told him "that he had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan did not ride in Indiana in the Twenties; it was a sort of lodge. Nevertheless, he joined it, and the Klan it was" (156). Both father and mother "believed in ghosts. I was born in a haunted house, and before I was weaned, my parents moved from it: a man's snores often disturbed the peace of the attic at night and several times at dawn a woman's shriek drifted around the eaves" ("Brown" 32). Elliott's

> mother had the habit of denying unpleasantnesses. "Rise above it" was one of her maxims; and when that one didn't work, she had a second line of defense: "think nothing of it." She had been raised in town, the daughter of a school principal. But my father was a farmer and son of a farmer; he had shoveled too much manure to be able to think nothing of it, though he never deliberately subverted my mother's gentility. In me, the result of these attitudes was that I at once denied, pretended to deny, and exaggerated unpleasantnesses as they came along. (47–48)[6]

Elliott spent his tenth birthday "on a train—going to Southern California—Mother and I and my interloper of a brother, to whom I had grown accustomed. Father had gone ahead and built us a house in the desert" ("Piece" 255). For the next seven years the family "lived on a carob plantation not far from Riverside" ("Raymond" 59), in a

---

and elsewhere cited *Ulysses* (1922) as "the example of the highest" and as "perfectly communicat[ing] modernist attitudes" ("Science" 67).

[6] Elliott's last novel, the brief and austerely elegant *Muriel* (1972), might look to be loosely based on the lives and character of his parents, as it borrows many details from their lives that Elliott's essays record. Still, the novel is decidedly fiction, not family history.

California dream of prosperity that never came. The Depression came instead. Elliott describes Southern California folk like his parents as "refugees from the Protestant Midwest, [who] brought the forms with them" (61). His father

> had some odds and ends of theories about how the world was put together. He was sure God had done it, and he was pretty sure he'd done it in the year 4004 B.C. . . . He also believed and didn't believe that God was just and good, and had created the world out of loving kindness, and cherished each of us and every living thing. ("Brown" 31)

"The desert," Elliott writes, "is a good place to seek the truth, but hard on one [like his mother] whose passionate interest is in other people. It was a long time before I realized that, though my parents' qualities underlay my life like strata—emerging here, disappearing there—they did not often blend" ("Piece" 255).

When the adolescent Elliott became enamored of poetry, he "thought it hard not to be living among that Nature described by the poets [he] loved," especially "Shelley, my most adored," who "sent me to Plato" and "the ladder of love, which I resolved to climb. But I found most of the rungs missing, the rungs that should have been provided by Nature" ("Sky" 3–4). "The desert," he writes, "did not like us. Sometimes, especially at sunset, it was beautiful, but its beauty was not responsive in any way; it was just there; sometimes after supper we would sit on the porch and awe at it. Yet neither did the desert *dis*like us" (5). "The pathetic fallacy . . . was wholly absent here, and it transplanted badly" (5), so the young Elliott "substituted poetry for Plato's ladder, and got so [he] could run up it like a monkey up a palmtree and jump off the top step into a Palgrave posy of perfection" (6). "It seemed to" Elliott "at the time that all that really mattered was the realm where Truth was Beauty, God was the spirit of the Universe, and the quality of Mercy was not strained, and that my family and I alike were clayey beyond redemption" (6). He later judges that he might "in fact have grown toward Manichaeism—that desert-born heresy—shoving the Will for Good up among those sky-blue abstract nouns and concentrating the Will for Evil down in the carob plantation. But fortunately," among other things, "the clay of my family was yeastened not just with affection, which I dismissed as an analgesic, but also with a whiff of *agape*, about which my poets had not instructed me" (6).

One critical turning point in Elliott's life—or, rather, perhaps several—occurred about where some models of development would look for it, near age twelve or thirteen, the onrush of adolescence. At "twelve or so," his head was felt by a phrenologist: "This lad will earn his living with his brains" ("Brown" 32). That

> cleared my father's farmer conscience about letting me read as much as I wanted—that is to say, most of the time. With his second blessing, he cleared my conscience to go away to the university, when the time came, rather than get a job and help out at home. He said I might become a college professor. (32–33)

The reading had an impact. "The liberal spirit of the age started getting to [Elliott] through H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*," and he began "to see in [his] father the superstitiousness of religion, the illusions of Christianity; Mother was exempt from my suspicion because I saw that religious belief was the least of the reasons she went to church—as it was the greatest of the reasons Father stayed away" ("Piece" 254). "Here I was," he writes, "with a John Bunyan farmer for a father and a Queen Victoria housewife for a mother" ("*Never*" 216). The winter he was twelve, Elliott "had made friends with [his] first atheists, the Babcock brothers," boys in a family "a whole lot better mannered, more thoughtful, and more fun to play with than any of the lunks I'd met in Sunday school" (215). He was "especially perplexed by their calmness about" the nonexistence of God; in deference to his mother's view that "they were not nice people," he "quit stopping by their house on the way home from school, but I also quit going to Sunday school, unless Mother made an issue of it" (215).

The winter he was thirteen, a boy five years older than he approached him in a public library aisle where Elliott was "thumbing through a fat, blue book entitled *Adolescence*, extending [his] ignorance of sex," and asked him "whether God existed" (218). Elliott answered "yes of course," and the boy asked

> what made me think so. I said I didn't know. . . . What right did he have to ask me that question? Who was I to say whether the earth was round and God existed? I could not imagine that the world could exist without God to make it and keep it going. . . . It had also not occurred to me yet that God might not be good—evil was our doing, that seemed clear enough. (218–19)

Yet, he wrote, "Without knowing it, I was ready to hate Him and even to cry He did not exist. Instead, there chancing to be no nihilists about to tempt me, to authorize rage for me, I neither looked straight at the whole confusion I was in nor went away from it, but messed around, avoiding" (219).

But if it set him up for the modernist temptation of nihilism, the reading also led Elliott toward his literary vocation:

> While taking a deep, unsteady breath after reading *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the winter I was twelve, I realized that what I was going to do in life was to write stories and poems. Coleridge, not intending anything of the kind, expressing who cares what?, altered the way I breathed and moved. So, a few years later, did Kafka in *The Castle*, that unfinishable tale of incomplete connections. (223–24)

About this same time, Elliott's "parents spent $5.00 of their monthly income of $85.00 to buy [him] his first fountain pen" to write with ("Brown" 47), and one evening Elliott lost it down the hole of the outhouse. His father, muttering and stomping his feet, went out with a shovel, lantern, and lighted cigar and, after quite a while, came back "into the kitchen, the stub of the cigar still between his teeth, and plunked my rescued pen down on the table in front of me" (49). "Whatever in this world could I do after that," he asks, "but write":

> And how with that pen in hand—it lasted me for twenty years—could I ever be tempted to mire down in verbal rebelliousness?

> And after that, how—no matter what rigid theories I might let in—could I ever let the mineral of reason deposit itself in my mind, to the petrification in me of the moving branches of language? the sudden irregular foliage of intercourse everywhere? (49)

Elliott apparently continued into later adolescence his friendship with the atheist Babcock boys, for he mentions, around age sixteen, debating big questions with another boy: "when I was with him I was a pacifist, a socialist, and a rational atheist. But most of my free time I spent getting away from the chickens" ("Getting Away" 19). His first job was tending chickens for a neighboring farmer, and "being . . . *ab ovo*, a fantast" (29), he got away from the chickens by reading books, a lot of Tarzan books among others. He helped pay his tuition to Riverside Junior College by selling his blood "for twenty-five dollars a pint in hospitals" (22), where he continued his adolescent rebellion against his parents' Christianity. "Rationalism," he later writes,

> that's how I tried to start all over when adolescence and college began to ferment in me. Things should be stuck together with logic and high ideals; Shelley was my prophet of the sweet and reasonable world to come. A place for everything and everything in its place: the *Divine Comedy* I loved too, by omitting, as a rationalist must, half the main things. ("Brown" 33)

Later he saw through the defects of rationalism: "The rationalist Karamazov brother was Ivan, who went mad. The last book by H. G. Wells, my special mentor, was entitled *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. And the classical poet of reasonableness, Lucretius, killed himself in a fit of melancholy. All the same," Elliott writes, "rationalism I tried, being rebellious, ignorant, and cruel; that is to say, young":

> The main thing I rebelled against was my father's submission to a God who had put the world together irrationally, and for irrational reasons. Being unable to deny that my father existed, I denied that there was a God, or said if there was one that he was

> a sort of machine operator, the maker and winder of the cosmic clock, the World-Soul, Nobodaddy. (34)

Finishing at Riverside, he "left home to work [his] way through college [at Berkeley], not to return again except for visits. The world could be reasonable, and so could I":

> Flanked by Shelley, "the world's great age begins anew," and Poe, whose rationalization for writing purely irrational poetry was pure, and Swinburne, who would teach me how to change the lilies and languors of my parents' virtue for the roses and raptures of liberated vice, and James Branch Cabell, who came along for the ride, I would go forth and be a poet.
>
> But it turned out to be a tepid rebellion, and as for my mascots, those *fleurs de petit mal*, it was distressing how fast they faded on the page. (35)

At Berkeley, Elliott "matriculat[ed] up into literary criticism" ("Sky" 8)—the brand new New Criticism then reshaping literary studies from Louisiana State to Vanderbilt to Kenyon to Chicago to Stanford and Berkeley under the "luminous guidance" of Coleridgean "esemplastic Imagination [that] work[ed] through the poet to fashion out of intrinsically valueless materials a perfect work of art; a poem must be perfection. If there was anything the New Critics agreed on it was this, and I loved them all" (8). It may not be too much to say that at Berkeley in the late 1930s Elliott was baptized into the New Critical view of the literary work as "well-wrought urn," the view he later questions as "the masterpiece-or-nothing theory" of literary merit: "it is," he writes, "against life. It is literary Calvinism with a vengeance: a book is either one of the elect, and there aren't many of those, or one of the damned. But a man who is full of life is not so keen on this butchery of experience" ("Critic" 183).[7] Elliott's "own cantankerous experience that life refuses to be divorced from literature even as it refuses to succumb to it" ("Getting to Dante" 197) persuaded him, among other things, that "a novel is not just a work of art: it is, somehow, a work of life as well" ("Wonder" 70), and that "It is far better to enjoy *King Solomon's Mines* by H. Rider Haggard than to 'like' the *Aeneid* just because you think you ought to" ("Critic" 179).

---

[7] The eponymous narrator-protagonist of Elliott's second novel, *David Knudsen* (1962), majors in English at Berkeley in the late 1940s and experiences some of this same tension between New Critical literary formalism and

Beyond all New Critical articles of faith he may have subscribed to, Elliott remained an "unspecialized citizen" ("Fun" 227) and a "Common Reader" ("Critic" 171), who liked Sir Thomas Wyatt's "They Flee from Me" less for its debatable "perfection" in "organic unity" (its final couplet is a letdown) than for its

> content: I delight in imagining myself a nobleman into whose chamber women have stalked with naked feet (one in especial with arms long and small), who through his gentleness is forsaken by her in favor of newfangledness, and who perceives and withstands this with elegant irony. ("Sky" 10)

He persisted lifelong in this attitude—learned in part from milking an affectionate goat named Eva, who "instead of one large right tit . . . had two, a middle-sized one and a small one"—"that love, any sort of love, even of poetry, no matter what beautiful-true perfection it gets up to, forgets at its peril the nuzzling, butting, pie-eyed clay in which the foot of its ladder had better be secured" (15).

Neither the Enlightenment rationalism he had embraced in adolescence nor the New Critical literary theory he learned at Berkeley could account for some of the things Elliott most valued in the poems and novels he loved or for the things that mattered in the experiences he lived: "One of the disadvantages of living in the house that H. G. Wells built is that in it you can't read most of the great

---

his sense of "life" (20–27). Elliott mentions "a character based largely on myself in a novel" ("Person" 114), who might be David Knudsen but could also be a minor character in *Parktilden Village* (1958) or *In the World* (1965).

writers with thorough comprehension; some of them you can't read at all" ("Brown" 36). *King Lear* (1608), Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863–69)—all these and more would trouble the Enlightened rationalist and the New Critical organic perfectionist with their irrationality and imperfection and their refusal to disengage themselves from human life and from ideas that mattered apart from the works themselves; "alas, in reason's fatherless house there are not many mansions" (36)—and far too few for inconvenient, inorganic, artistic splendors.

Elliott seems to have learned from Wells and Edward Gibbon, for instance, about Byzantium:

> The first thing I learned about Byzantium was that the Enlightenment considered it one of the maddest blights of the Dark Ages: Christianity the enemy of civilization. At the time I learned this, I was young and eager to lapse from Protestantism, and my intellect thought itself very enlightened. ("Kicking" 11)

Years later, probably at Berkeley,

> The next thing I learned about it . . . was Yeats's two visionary poems. I did not understand "Byzantium," though I thought it a marvel, and "Sailing to Byzantium" inspired in me an intense, obscure awe of a sort that would make a Christian rejoice and a Gibbon wince. But not only was my intellect by then less enlightened than it had been; I was darkening all through, staining. (12)

About two decades later, a face-to-face—or face-to-icon—encounter with Byzantine mosaics seemed to confirm decisively Elliott's reversion from Modernism to Christianity.

Above all, it was Elliott's reading of Tolstoy that would not accommodate his narrow rationalism and his reductive sense of "realism" as (perhaps) the literary mode most congenial to a rational-scientific picture of the world. Although he had known "wonder" as a child, and the "amazement proper to the experience of all great art" ("Piece" 248), from age thirteen he had begun to see "more and more mediocrity" in the life he knew (251), particularly in his father (254–55). At Berkeley, Elliott

> acquired the notion that everything was subject to the rule of rigid and subtle law, equally society and the individual's psyche (no longer a soul). I accepted this as dogma liberating me from religion; everywhere I looked I was seeing squads of unalterable law; physics was metaphysics was truth; I knew all about the God I realistically did not believe in. On the other hand I saw the mediocrity of things as determined: the irrational was only the coincidental or the pathological, both of which could be accounted for rationally; all things were rationally ordered and hence were without wonder because wonder depends on the mystery of irrationality. (251)

He had "set [his] gaze sternly toward realism" ("Getting Away" 24), and "Realism," to him at the time he first read *War and Peace*, "was about a pigeon-chested little janitor, drunk because he was unemployed because of his race, scraping some dog shit off his shoe at a curb on a side street in Chicago. You could tell the truest truth because it was the ugliest" ("Piece" 258). Realism "meant facing the ugliest facts and creating more like them" (258). Against this dogmatic background, Tolstoy's "world was by no means reliable, in the way I demanded of realism. Unexpected events and irrational impulses were constantly disturbing both Tolstoy's characters and me the reader"; so Elliott "guarded [him]self from what the art said by denying that the art was good" (258).

But about the same time, while hitchhiking home for summer vacation from college in the spring he was nineteen, on an empty roadside gusted by the wind of passing semis Elliott had an experience of profound unreasoning "dread" at the absurdity and sheer uninterestingness of the world:

> I stood looking at my feet undecided whether to walk on. A cigarette butt scuttled on the edge of the road toward a grimy clump of dandelion and came to rest on it.

> Like a gas the suspicion began to seep into me that nothing in this law-abiding scene was interesting and that this scene was the world. I did not recognize this suspicion so much as sniff it. I knew that if the suspicion really became a part of me, that if I came to believe that nothing was interesting, nothing wonderful, I would no longer want to live. (252)

The moment resembles in a minor way the "vastation" that preceded the elder Henry James's embrace of Emmanuel Swedenborg (Lewis 53); or the similar attack of a "horrible fear of [his] own existence" (149) that William James reports pseudonymously in his lectures on "The Sick Soul" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902); or Tolstoy's state of mind on the verge of his religious conversion, when, though "happy and in good health," he felt "an aspiration of [his] whole being to get out of life" (qtd. in James 143).

In Elliott's case this moment of "freezing dread" did not lead ("Piece" 252)—at least not immediately—toward a religious conversion but seems to have been a clear first step in his reversion from Modernism: "I leapt out of that dread in the only direction I could go, toward the irrational. But I did not make a Kierkegaardian leap of faith; at any rate I did not land with both feet solidly in the Absolute"; rather, he had discovered first of all that "the tight fabric of things had holes in it. My relief was greater than my terror" (259).

This moment of relief from terror seems nearly to coincide, temporally and logically, with Elliott's discovery that Tolstoy in his great fiction "does not look at an event expecting it to fulfill the law. He looks with absolute interest at it itself. Mostly it abides by the laws—but also mostly it doesn't"; and thus "[s]omething wonderful shoots through, redeeming the ordinary" (267). He had found that

> *War and Peace* gives as powerful a suggestion of the living as a fixed art can do, and we know that any chance which entered into its creation is subject to its author's control. In that imagined world, which seems to be the daily world revealed and redeemed, the irrational ceaselessly appears: as an intrusion of the subconscious, as a creation of the human will, or as an inrushing

> of the unnamable. Even when it is this last—the unsymbolizable, the irrelevant, the voiding force, an intolerable anti-epiphany on the part of that which cannot be felt toward because it cannot be defined or named and but dimly approached through metaphors for nothing, the most dreadful, the altogether Other—even then we do not freeze with fear, we do not cease feeling. For we know that the lovers rejoin, just as the bullet shot through Petya's head, because Tolstoy's hand wrote the words, because his shaping imagination aimed the sentences. The love of Andre and Natasha, our love for them, our yearning for their coming back together, everyone's joy at their union: all are created by his chanceless words, and we rest secure in this knowledge. (269)

He also found that he could, as a devotee of the literary "traditionalism" Tolstoy represented, construct a sort of halfway shelter on his way out of Modernism:

> Perhaps a god causes [things in the universe that matter "to me, to every me"], the unnamed, unnamable god, but I have no way of knowing that he does or of imagining why; the effect on me is exactly the same as if they resulted from irregular mixtures of men's will, chance, and natural law. Either way, not having landed on the Absolute when I leaped, I live in the modern world: we create some of reality and some of the beautiful; holiness and virtue are nowhere but in us. No wonder that among us many who earlier would have been exegetes of the Word of God are now literary critics justifying the words of a writer. Of the supreme writers Tolstoy has been justified the least. He leaves little for an exegete to say. His words are so plain that they seem not to have been chosen and placed but to be a transparent medium through which we look at the world they say; and in the body of the novel his immanent will is as sure as was God's will when His eye was on the sparrow and I knew he thought of me. (269–70)

Through "the late '30s," Elliott kept himself "busy with socialist optimism, and liberal analysis, and tolerant repudiation of religion, and scientific opinion" ("Brown" 35). He took his BA in 1939 at Berkeley and his MA there in 1941 and married that same year. Exempted from the draft because he "suffered severe attacks of claustrophobia" ("Revolution" 172), he worked during the war as a shipfitter, a junior analyst for the War Labor Board, a reporter and photographer with the AFL *News* for the San Francisco Bay Area, a business agent for a labor union, occasionally a taxi driver, and for six months a real estate broker in Berkeley (Pack and Parini ix). The war "assisted" him

> to persevere in [his] lucid courses, for the wrong which seemed most monstrous, irrational, and visible of all wrongs was concentrated in the enemy: he had deliberately killed masses of innocent people. But after August of 1945, it ceased to be possible to ignore the fact that the same intolerable wrong was also part of our side. I was of our side; therefore it was part of me and I was my own enemy. . . . I began to be able to hear the prophets. ("Brown" 39–40)

"The prophets" started with Blake, and again the visionary Yeats, but included more. "As the world began coming apart," Elliott "discovered that it had come apart before a great many times. In *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus*, it was riven wide, as wide as poetry could grasp. In *Lear*, when at last I read it, it came apart appallingly, beyond the utmost reach of poetry: 'never, never, never, never, never'" (40).

From the prophet-poets of extremity, "who had been there before me and had returned to tell me of their dark journey in figures and symbols and strange structures," he learned that "chaos excited them and they knew the muck":

> You must start all over, they said in a thousand ways, you must change your life. But a lot of the time they were obviously mad; . . . so involved in structuring symbols to figure forth their world that they forgot to pay attention to the apparent part of it, the one we daily live in. . . . Yet whenever Blake, say, happened to glance out of his dream at the ordinary world, he was not only sane but wise. (41)

He "was saved from the occultism of [his] prophets . . . not through any wisdom but because of three illogicalities in [him]self": first, "the suspicion of mumbo-jumbo which I had left in me from scorning my father's superstitious odds and ends"; second, that he

> was a farmer's son: if it worked, there must be something to it, and science worked. In their fit realm, the works of reason were too worthy of respect for me to challenge. . . . Moreover, my main disenchantment was not with reason but with wholesale systematizing, and I had no desire to exchange an inadequate rational system for an inadequate irrational one. I was in the muck and I had to be in it, but it never occurred to me to pretend either that muck did not stink or that there was nothing else but muck. Dante called it Hell, and he got through it with the guidance of Virgil, who was a figure of Reason, and with the help of an angel; the point is, he did not want to go through Hell, but he did want to go to a place he could reach only after he had gone through Hell. (42–43)

His third reason for "avoid[ing] occultism and [taking] no joy in the muck was low, proud, and personal: there were too many already splashing around in the muck-cults, tempting me *Come on, this is the thing to do*" (43).

Elliott taught at St. Mary's College in Moraga, California, from 1947 to 1955, first as an instructor and then as an assistant professor of English. In 1955–56 he taught at Cornell, in 1957–60 at Barnard, in 1960–61 at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, in 1962 at Berkeley, and in 1962–63 again at St. Mary's. From 1963 until his death in New York City on May 3, 1980, just days after his last class, he taught at Syracuse as a professor of English and from 1978 to 1980 served as director of the writing program there. In those years, especially in the sixties and seventies, he conducted a public quarrel with the madness of Cold War America, with Modernity and Postmodernity in general, and with modern and postmodern literature in particular. His named antagonists, toward which his attitudes were seldom simply or reductively antagonistic, included democracy in its capacity to blur excellence and generate envy; the explosion of Fun in postwar America; sexual and other revolutions and the proliferation of pornography; Aestheticism and the Artist; science as the one true faith of Modernity, especially in its psychologizing manifestations; the great God Zeitgeist;[8] and nihilism.[9] What had begun to show him a way apart and out from these before his death were the literary traditionalism of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and others, the *Divine Comedy*, and the works of anonymous mosaicists he beheld in Byzantine churches —too much to cover in this essay, but some representative passages from Elliott's essays do sketch this last arc of his trajectory.

To start with the Cold War itself and more specifically with the Bomb, Elliott found "our ways of waging" war "worse than our reasons for going to war":

> The ways themselves challenge and overshadow and finally obliterate the reasons. Nothing could justify such abominations: I believe that we all feel this obscurely and refuse, in any effectual way, to look at it. Our United States used the Bomb, nobody else; our government is the one chiefly responsible for spreading radioactive particles over the world. *We had not thought we were capable of such evil.*
>
> And we don't know what to do about it. ("Fun" 228)

Humans' bewildered incapacity to confront (much less repent of) such monstrous evil in themselves seemed, to Elliott, the first cause of "our fun desperation" (227). The second, as he saw it, was "the dreadful social injustice which we are guilty of and benefit from, especially we white Americans and most especially we whose Christian ancestors came from Northern Europe" (228). Elliott means national injustices against Native Americans (as now called), Africans, "the Americans from south of us," Asians, and the poor. He writes that

---

[8] The Zeitgeist did get several nods (not all of them reverential) in the course of the *Partisan Review* Symposium from Phillips and Rahv ("Religion" 103, 237, 240, 480). Elliott may well have read the Symposium, or parts of it, but after all—the Zeitgeist being the Zeitgeist—the word was in the air; as Elliott himself put it, "Many do not heed Zeitgeist, but in New York it is hard not to. For American intellectuals, New York is the holy city of the cult, to which all go at least once to make a salaam or two and where many stay" ("Two" 31).

[9] For a useful discussion of Elliott's engagements with nihilism in his fiction, see Blanche H. Gelfant.

> the productive modes of our gaining our inconceivable wealth we ourselves think to be unscrupulous and unjust, and they are so lunatic that one of our reasons to give to the poor is that this will make our nation richer; and for this same bad-dream reason, to make ourselves the better off, we destroy, forbid, or hoard vast quantities of food, which food we know we should give to the hungry.
>
> We don't like it. We don't like to think about it. But we are so rich, so comfortable, so powerful.
>
> Circuses. Bread and circuses.
>
> Let's have us a ball.
>
> If we tickle each other expertly enough, maybe we can just quit thinking about the whole business. (229)

He concludes, "To be sure, having the kind of fun you have to doesn't hurt as much as finding out what's really wrong and doing something about it. But finally, to that grinning stupefaction, I prefer pain" (231).

The madness of Cold War America was highly visible to Elliott when he visited his parents' home in the late fifties and early sixties, and when he lived again in Berkeley in 1962–63. "Everyone expects lunacies in Southern California," he writes; "guessing what the next craze is going to be can be a game. This state at the brink of the country is so steep that change roars over it as over a rapids" ("Home" 237). For that reason among others, California, and particularly the Bay Area, were always Elliott's main literary territory. On one visit he "learned that the world had arranged things so that half the people in Southern California were making their living off the war to come" (237). When Federal Civil Defense officials urged American citizens to build fallout shelters, Elliott saw that

> [t]he main consequence of this advice was not so much actual shelters (few were built) as moral perplexity about what to do to someone trying to force his way into the safety of your hypothetical shelter in time of emergency. A priest of the largest church in the world, an upright pistol-Christian like most of the neighbors I'd ever had, assured the prospective denizens of shelters that they had the right to shoot an intruder. Jesus-Christians, and neighbor-lovers generally, demurred, but there were not then, as there never have been at any one time, enough of them to inconvenience the world much. (235)

Teaching at Berkeley in 1962, Elliott found that "the world saw to it that [Edward] Teller lived next door to me for a couple of years" (232). He "thought it enough that the world was threatening to blow me up, without its also forcing me to be neighbors with the man most zealous about bringing this to pass" (232). When students flocked to enroll in an introductory physics course Teller taught, "Here was the only man most of them had seen in the flesh who was working to get them killed, and all they cared about him was that he was an easy grader" (239). Teller had proposed, for national "defense," a plan to have trucks prowling the highway system of the United States carrying launch-ready atomic missiles. "That might not be so bad, you know," Elliott wryly remarks (243); "At least, with all those trucks roaming around loaded and ready to go off, there wouldn't be anything else worth worrying about" (243). He saw in the nuclear madness of the early sixties "a secret wish that I recognized: the wish for one trouble so big that they could give up trying to manage it" (244).

He had been living in Venice in 1961 at the time of the Berlin crisis, and "[w]hat from Venice had looked like other people's nightmares was now my nightmare too. I thought the world had finally done me in for sure" (244). The world had finally "deprived me of the power to laugh at it and began driving me crazy" (233). He recovered the power to laugh one afternoon on a Berkeley quad the next year:

> I happened to be standing by a student on the lawn when a flock of five fighter jets flew over in a V. We both watched them with open mouths, then glanced at one another and shook our heads. "Golly," he said, "doesn't it make you feel safe to have them up there?" I laughed. Without hating him, without thinking either of us insane, I laughed at the perfect, absolute, simple irony, and said no, it didn't make me feel safe to have them up there. (244)

Elliott knew that even though "[t]he famous inalienable error about happiness is proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence" ("Fun" 221); and thus "[h]appiness is an official U.S. product, all right" (223),

> To Sophocles and Blake, the world is unreasonable, and the gods meddle in our affairs as it pleases them, not as it pleases us. And Aristotle—who was like the Founding Fathers in that if a god should speak through his lips, his ears would refuse to hear more than human words, and the universe was as reasonable as he could make it—even Aristotle defined happiness not as a thing to be sought directly but as the result of a life lived in accordance with virtue and blessed with good fortune.
>
> If you live as you ought *and* if you're lucky, then the adjective "happy" may be applied to you. (222)

He could not countenance the reduction of "high art . . . to 'entertainment' even when, like *The Magic Flute*, it entertains. . . . On the other hand, if watching *This Is Your Life* is entertainment, then so is cutting up Siamese kittens with a dull pair of scissors" (226). So much for the "Fun You Have to Have," and why it has to be had in America under mushroom clouds: "Someone—I think it was St. Augustine—suggested an image of hell for the intellect: two mirrors facing each other in a gray void. We have improved on all that" (231).

The Bomb was an appalling triumph of scientific reason, technical ingenuity, and nearly inconceivable will to destruction, latently if not manifestly nihilistic. But the destructive will of science, which had supplanted both Christian religion and classical wisdom as the one true faith of Modernity, might be equally manifest in social science, in psychologizing.[10] "Wisdom is a spiritual quality," writes Elliott, "and if there is one thing for which false science has less use than another, it is spirit, spirituality, the soul; *psyche* is the word, for you can add *ology* to it and sound as though you know exactly what you are talking about" ("Coming" 150). As Elliott saw it, to psychological and motivational researchers who "conceive of a man's soul as something for them to take apart to see how it ticks," "a human mystery, even the most intimate mystery of love or artistic creation or religious faith, is a problem unsolved only because it has not yet been correctly stated" (150). He

> believe[d] that the drift of their present experimentation is towards self-consciousness without self-knowledge, and that this self-consciousness generates self-alienation . . . [and] further . . . that however interesting self-alienation may be to study, it is bad to bring about, that one should not bring it about no matter what one might learn from doing so. (154)

"Self-consciousness" of this kind, he felt, "is one sort of deafness to the word of God" (153); "Just as no man has the right to shoot into a crowd of schoolchildren, so no man has the right to unconnect us, to violate another's soul" (154). He ruminated on the fancy of an anthropologist studying his own "deplorable coming of age on the Carob Plantation in the Southern California desert," his adolescent attempt to lick his father in a fight: "one who had come to study me might have pried and probed till he learned what happened, but he never could have known what mattered unless he were told about it with words, aromatic, slippery words, unsolving and insoluble words" (154).

Always Elliott came back to words, to literature, to story-making, insufficient as that itself might be, endangered as it was by Aestheticism and the Modern cult of the Artist as priest of the great god Zeitgeist:

---

[10] Peter Hazen, the protagonist of Elliott's first novel, *Parktilden Village*, is a Berkeley sociologist studying motorcycle gangs.

> Literature brings knowledge and it may bring wisdom; it may even instruct in virtue; it has changed a man's life more than once; it may divert you from trouble a while like a game; it may untie your knots with laughter; it can purge you for a time of great dread; it has power if you will to elevate you to something like ecstasy. . . . [S]till it also produces delight, if only the delight of ordered thoughts and of language used well. Lovers are poets, and experience of literature is something like love: it quickens its lover to intense life, it is not everlasting but at the time it is of eternity, it is incalculably precious, its power is measured both by its delight and its anguish, it is there for all who want it, each makes it himself. It is everybody's language shaped with love. ("Critic" 189)

But such values in literature or in other arts were threatened by the Modern cult of Aestheticism and the Artist. Consider two instances, one visual, one literary. Elliott had a long interest in photography and photographers, and one of his ambiguous exemplars of the Artist was Edward Weston.[11] "Now that The Scientist has lost his capital letters and is becoming one of the boys, has joined the commissars, generals, executives, and engineers," Elliott writes, "the world may be in for a bad stretch during which The Artist is worshiped uncontended. What this means in effect is more and more beat bohemians, mescaline mystics, and self-regarding phonies"; Weston, no phony but "The Artist as photographer" ("Photographs" 101),

> took, and preserved with formidable consistency, the esthetic view of things; it was the form that counted, no matter what object embodied the form, whether the smooth back of a nude

---

[11] Weston briefly appears as a character in *David Knudsen* (33–35); the narrator-protagonist of that novel is a photographer, the son of a physicist who helped devise "a trigger mechanism for the atom bomb" (12) and was a victim of radiation sickness from the fallout of a Pacific H-bomb test (103).

> woman on pure sand or a slender, smooth-folded stone on pure sand; when he caught the face of a man in sudden action, he sought the moment of revelation, not because the truth would be revealed so much as because at that moment the face would make the most beautiful image. (102)

But as such,

> What a monster is The Artist—that is, a man who dedicates himself to constructing works of art, and who believes that a great work of art is the highest of all things made and that making one is the highest of all occupations. When The Artist has purged himself of vanity and doubt—like Joyce, like Edward Weston—then he is monstrous indeed, for then he is wholly justified. The religion of art is like Calvinism: in both, the elect are known by their works but are justified by their faith, by their very being. (100)

Elliott read in Weston's *Daybooks* (1961–1966) an account of one photograph Weston took of his mistress weeping and comments,

> To us who look at [this photograph] only as a picture in a book, its beauty is moving. But a chill seizes me to learn that at the moment when he might have consoled her, have wept with her, he instead took her picture. Why then? Because no model could have generated an expression of woe so genuine, so valuable for his art. Is this not the authentic monster's uncommuning coldness of heart?" (103)

For the Modern literary version of the Artist, Elliott asks the reader to consider Marcel Proust:

> Modernism produced no greater work than *Remembrance of Things Past*, and so long as the book is known Proust's name and personality will also be known and inquired into, as the type of Artist. Yet a marvel of the book is to make us understand, with sympathy and clarity, that Marcel's way and also his world were

> so wrong that nothing could rescue the man whole; he gave up being himself and became An Artist. Among other things, the profoundest Modern told us, *Don't be like me if you can help it.* Let us honor Proust for his terrible honesty, and then try something different—perhaps something old. ("Kicking" 11)

"Something old" would be traditionalism of the sort represented by two very different artists, Tolstoy and Van Gogh:

> Both of them elevated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into the ranks of important art, an error of judgment The Artist would be incapable of making. But they saw true art as efficacious in revealing the unknown or instructing to virtue, and the efficacy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been demonstrated unmistakably. They saw an artist as important, first as any man is important, then as he succeeds in making a work of art which creates a communion among those who admire it. They were concerned to save men, to help men save themselves. They despised The Artist, some of whose works they could not help admiring. ("Photographs" 100)

But farther back than these two, Elliott looked for models of Art in Dante and anonymous mosaicists. Reading Dante first in adolescence or college, he could love "the *Divine Comedy* . . . by omitting, as a rationalist must, half the main things" ("Brown" 33). But after a second reading, by the early sixties, he could no longer omit so much: "Dante's vision," he allows,

> is alien to the modern way of conceiving man's soul . . . according to which man has not an immortal soul but a mortal self. In Dante's time each several soul was a defined mystery known only by God, but known by him—whereas now each blurred self is an unbounded obscurity known by no one, not even by itself inspecting itself. ("Getting to Dante" 193–94)

An educated, irreligious Modern Common Reader, who held "to this modern view of the self," would "read Dante with no more than aesthetic pleasure. But you should know before you start that really to read this book is to risk changing your views, especially of your self, and to test your faith" (194).

Dante's pilgrim-self (or soul) had been "seeking for a way of life," and that, "*per se*, is not an esthetic endeavor at all" (195). For Elliott, after his second reading, "the *total experience* of Dante's poem" needed "the comprehension and sympathy which any work of literature must have to be experienced, but goes farther and needs the reader's belief and agreement as well" (197). He grants that every book did not "have to be read according to its author's intentions, but" his thesis is "that Dante's does if it is to be read well" (199). Thus,

> a convinced materialist, a hidebound skeptic, or a secure atheist—in a word, anyone who holds a disbelief so firmly that he is unwilling or unable to suspend it and who refuses sympathy to those with whom he disagrees—would not be able to read the *Divine Comedy* with much benefit; for, irked or repelled by much of what he understood of the poem, he could not experience it fully. (200)

"At any rate," he observes, so his experience taught him:

> when I thought Dante's teachings were mostly wrong or foolish, I liked the *Comedy* incomparably less than I do now that I think they are substantially right. He intends us to believe as he believed, not temporarily or for an esthetic pleasure, but because his faith is the one true faith; and this intention is impossible to ignore. He believes in God and in love as drawing us to God, in Adam's fall and in Christ's redemptive power; some readers can put these beliefs off, for the purpose of the poem, as conventional. (200)

Elliott could no longer put those beliefs off "as conventional," though to admit that in America in the sixties was to invite intellectual scandal. Minimally, Elliott writes,

> how anyone can read the *Comedy* without accepting Dante's beliefs about sin, I do not understand, for the heart of the poem

> is a vision of moral order. And by sin I do not mean crime or guilt, or the state of mind of one who has committed a crime or is guilty of he knows not what: I mean what the dictionary says of sin, a serious transgression of divine or moral law—a non-psychoanalytical, non-sociological matter because it assumes the law is *there* whether we like it or not, recognize it or not. (201)

"For anyone born into" the Modern world, "reared in it, in it now," as Elliott himself was, he admits that "Dante's full faith is impossible. But one of the ways out of this limbo of our own creation is to follow Dante as far as is possible" (202). "How far" this might be depends "on how willing you are to change your self and how well you read the poem" (202).

His "own experience with the poem," he witnesses, was "like [his] experience of many other works of art: it is not purely esthetic. . . . [T]o disentangle the moral teaching from [Dante's] poem and hold it separate while you read is an act of violence" (202–03). So Elliott's second reading of "Dante altered the way I see the world, as he may alter it again" (203):

> It is because of Dante's fictional account of his experiences in Hell and Purgatory, and their allegorical meanings, and also because of his explicit, paraphrasable analysis of sin in the *Purgatorio*, that I believe in a moral scheme of things according to which hypocrisy is more sinful than simple murder, sloth is graver than adultery, and all sin derives from love rather than from some external force of evil—that sinning consists, in fact, in the sinner's deluding himself that wrong love is right. It is largely because of the *Paradiso* that I believe that the highest conceivable, and also the highest possible, experience is mystical vision, an experience of which I have had only the dimmest apprehension once. I am grateful to Dante for having persuaded me of the truth of these beliefs, which, however, I believe not only because they are Dantean, poetic, mythic, viable, but because I am convinced they are true. (203–04)

Ending his essay on Dante, Elliott quotes from *Paradiso*, canto 4, when Dante is speaking to Beatrice:

> Therefore at the foot of the truth,
> like a sprout, questioning grows, which pushes us on
> from peak to peak toward the summit.

"Caveat lector" (205), he concludes. In the tercets before this one, which Elliott also quotes, Dante says,

> I see clearly how our mind
> is never satisfied unless the truth
> that includes all illumines it.
> Therein it rests, like a beast in its den
> when it reaches it, and it can—
> otherwise every desire would be in vain. (205)

Elliott's questioning mind seems never to have come to rest in that lair, though he might only reluctantly have said, with the Modernist Wallace Stevens echoing Dante, "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never" (247).

But what of "the highest possible experience," the "mystical vision, an experience of which I have had only the dimmest apprehension once"? The only published clues that "once" occurs are in Elliott's remarks on Byzantine mosaics. In 1961 he was in Venice, which he describes as "not in the world at all but . . . an illusion of reality off the northeast coast of Italy in the Adriatic Sea" ("Home" 234). Another "of the most famous" of such places, he continues, "is on a plain not far below Paris; there is a town on a hill in this plain, and at the top of this hill, surrounded by the quite ordinary town of Chartres, thousands and hundreds of thousands and millions of people have stepped out of the world into an illusion about how men can be connected with God" (234).[12] Was that the illusion that, as the Berlin crisis poised the planet on the edge of nuclear holocaust, "bewitched" Elliott in Venice and made "the actual world [seem] unreal, a dream, a very bad dream, not even my own bad dream but somebody else's, somebody else's nightmare" (234)? In Byzantine churches in Venice and Ravenna, where the exiled Dante spent the last few years of his life and finished *Paradiso*, Elliott "first glimpsed the Byzantium of the Byzantines themselves":

---

[12] In *David Knudsen*, the narrator recounts an experience at Chartres that may well be a version of Elliott's own (29–30).

> Sometimes mosaicists set tesserae at such angles that if you are too close you see pretty parts and if you are too far you see a bold but lifeless cartoon, whereas if you stand at the right place the separate rays of light converge in you and become a live image in you. So I have read, and it seems to me, when I am in those sacred buildings, that I am penetrated by what those mosaicists figured forth. The reality of Byzantium is what they imagined. ("Kicking" 12)

Perhaps in that year, or later in the decade but in any case before 1970, he had also visited Constantinople, where "St. Sophia, when I went into it and looked, came into me" (13).

Here is one account of that sort of looking, that beholding in which the beholder is as if beholding himself:

> High in the vaulted apse of a church, many smooth-faced bits of colored mineral have been fixed in such a way as to make an image that looks like a stiff young woman staring at you: not a particular woman, not even a possible woman, yet more like a woman than like anything else. What the mosaic projects is an artist's idea of a holy virgin, an idea nearly all the components of which were given him by others (including her name, the Mother of God), and his purpose in making the mosaic is to cause you, by contemplating that idea, to save your soul. The Byzantines believed: *Without feeling this idea and others like it you will perish.* (11)

Elliott was both attracted to Byzantium's vision of divine order and repelled by its rigidities; yet he was by the sixties less powerfully drawn to the energies and the "muck" or "mud" of Modernity. For him, "The aggressive questions" that moderns ask—"'How can things be arranged to suit us better? What can I do to change things?' [—] are potent questions, they inspire in me fear and trembling, but they are not the one I ask in the dark of night" (13).

That one, "That question," he "hear[d] rising about [him] on every side, disguised in a thousand ways—disguised because people hardly even know what the question is, so alien is it to the Modern language of problem setting and problem solving":

> Kafka knew the question and asked it over and over. . . . The form in which an Englishman three centuries ago told a tale of that question was this: "What shall I do to be saved?" The anguish with which Bunyan's Christian cried was pure as K's, but it could be, and finally was, relieved with an answer: progress for that pilgrim was the way toward a satisfying answer. In the Modern world, the question echoes, jumbles, fades; progress for the Enlightened is headed in another direction. A person who asks "What shall I do to be saved?" wishes both to act and to be acted upon; Modernism provides no home for him, no way. (12–13)

Byzantium as a home was not available, but its art, preserved by the modern world, could and still did envision a way.[13] The worst of the modern was "entropy. All energy is distributed uniformly, attraction and repulsion cancel out, there can be no movement. Its social form is that egalitarianism which is total democracy and the avowed goal of socialism: justice as equality" (13–14). Elliott's metaphor for "the Byzantine worst is catatonia. Idea controls matter absolutely, all things are ranked as they are supposed to be, there is no cause for movement. Its social form is that pyramidal bureaucracy which is the perfection of absolutist authority: justice as subordination" (14). Either way, the choice might look desperate, agonized.

---

[13] Elliott's last but never published novel, "Michael of Byzantium," offers evidence of his deep fascination with, and his large effort to imagine living in, that lost world.

Yet the balance tipped:

> at least in mosaic, [hierarchical art could] nevertheless incarnate great spiritual vitality which can come only from (or through) an artist.
>
> You stand in a church moving your gaze over a mosaic high on the vault across from you. It has been there a month, a century, twelve hundred years; no matter how long. It has changed, and seemingly can change, no more than can the laws of geometry in obedience to which it was composed, or the idea which explains the color of the background, or God the Father Whom the image represents. Yet, without moving, it acts upon and within you. As the light alters in intensity and quality, the picture continues to act on you, motionlessly various. To look at it is to participate in an action, is a rite of incarnation, is a way of taking communion. . . .
>
> I, a storyteller, a craftsman working in an art that needs and uses moving time, would have hated to be prisoned in the rigidities of Byzantinism. All the same, I prefer that stone system which could be used against itself to the mud nonsystem which I feel to be the threat of Modern progress toward homogenization. The best an artist can do with congealed mud, with plastic, is not good enough.
>
> I grew up in Modernism, and now, a straddler who does not know what the new world is going to be like, I imagine one which needs art to be and commissions artmakers to make it. . . . Needed, used, art has a chance of striving again for elegance, delight, celebration, beauty, as it has pretty much ceased to do in recent years but as it always does when not turned aside from its natural courses. (14–15)

Elliott's *Conversions* ends with the essay "*Never* Nothing," his witness against nihilism, which in many accounts, as in Irving Howe's representative one, is "the Central Preoccupation, the inner Demon, at the Heart of Modern Literature" (Howe 36).[14] Elliott observes,

[14] Elliott knew and used Howe's *Literary Modernism* (1967), referring to it in his essay "Two Good Novels and an Oversized God" and to Howe specifically as

> I see in nihilism the sufficient contour of the adversary. . . . [H]e can make disconnection seem desirable; he encourages us to it; he can arrange things so that cold hatred seems good and moving love impossible, so that falling out of communion takes no more than indifference but entering into communion is difficult and risky. He tempts me, and I fear him. ("*Never*" 212–13)

At the end of that essay he again, and movingly, invokes Dante:

> Dante has helped me, too, even as I am sure he has helped unnumbered thousands of others, even as Virgil helped him. . . . [After looking at Satan,] Dante took hold of Virgil, who "caught hold of the shaggy sides," clinging to Satan for a while because there was no other way to go beyond him, and when they had passed through dead center in a kind of parody of birth, they turned around so that what had been down now became up, what left now right. Then, right side up, they went away, leaving that dark cave, which will always be there and which they could do nothing about, their ears no longer ringing with the howls of those whom God had abandoned, those travesty-babies in that dead womb, and they climbed back up to the world of light, where the sun and the other stars shine unobscured, where communion is possible. (237–38)

"one of the best critics in the country, but also a true believer [in the Zeitgeist]—not quite a zealot and certainly not a fanatic: a true, but intelligent and, therefore, saddened believer," whose introduction to that collection "amount[ed] to a brief memorial to the [Modernist] movement now in decline" (31).

WORKS CITED

Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Lauren Binyon. *The Portable Dante*, edited by Paolo Milano, Viking, 1969, pp. 3–544.

"Editorial Statement." "Religion and the Intellectuals: A Symposium." *Partisan Review*, vol. 17, no. 2, Feb. 1950, pp. 103–05.

Elliott, George P. "A Brown Fountain Pen." *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 30–49.

———. "Certain Eternities." *From the Berkeley Hills: Poems*. Harper & Row, 1968, pp. 96–97.

———. "Coming of Age on the Carob Plantation." *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 142–60.

———. "Confessions of a Repentant Symposiast." *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation*. Dutton, 1971, pp. 143–47.

———. *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation*. Dutton, 1971.

———. "Critic and Common Reader." *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 171–89.

———. *David Knudsen*. Random House, 1962.

———. "Fun You Have to Have." *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 221–31.

———. "Getting Away from the Chickens." *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 16–29.

———. "Getting to Dante." *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 190–205.

———. "Home Again." *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 232–45.

———. *In the World*. Random House, 1965.

———. "Kicking Some Modern Habits." *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation*. Dutton, 1971, pp. 9–27.

———. “Michael of Byzantium.” N.d. MS. Olin Library, Washington U.

———. *Muriel*. Dutton, 1972.

———. “*Never* Nothing.” *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation*. Dutton, 1971, pp. 212–38.

———. *Parktilden Village*. Beacon, 1958.

———. “The Person of the Maker.” *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation*. Dutton, 1971, pp. 112–26.

———. “Photographs and Photographers.” *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 90–103.

———. “A Piece of Lettuce.” *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 246–70.

———. “Raymond Chandler.” *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 50–65.

———. “Revolution Instead.” *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation*. Dutton, 1971, pp. 172–211.

———. “Science and the Profession of Literature.” *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation*. Dutton, 1971, pp. 37–76.

———. “The Sky and a Goat.” *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 3–15.

———. “Two Good Novels and an Oversized God.” *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation*. Dutton, 1971, pp. 28–36.

———. “Who Is *We?*” *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 206–20.

———. “Wonder for *Huckleberry Finn*.” *A Piece of Lettuce: Personal Essays on Books, American Places, and Growing Up in a Strange Country*. Random House, 1964, pp. 66–89.

Frost, Robert. “West-Running Brook.” *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*. Holt, Rineholt, 1967, pp. 327–29.

Gelfant, Blanche H. “Beyond Nihilism: The Fiction of George P. Elliott.” *Hollins Critic*, vol. 5, no. 5, Dec. 1968, pp. 1–12.

Howe, Irving. *Literary Modernism*. Fawcett, 1967.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. 1902. *William James: Writings 1902–1910*. Library of America, 1987, pp. 1–477.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Shakespeare and Co., 1922.

Lewis, R. W. B. *The Jameses: A Family Narrative*. Farrar, Straus, 1991.

Pack, Robert, and Jay Parini. "About the Author." *A George P. Elliott Reader*. UP of New England, 1992, pp. ix–xii.

"Religion and the Intellectuals: A Symposium." *Partisan Review*, vol. 17, nos. 2–5, Feb.–May 1950, pp. 103–42, 215–56, 313–39, 456–83.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. 1608. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, Houghton Mifflin, 1974, pp. 1255–95.

Stevens, Wallace. "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard." *Collected Poems*. Knopf, 1954, p. 247.

Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. 1863–69, translated by Aylmer and Louise Maude, *War and Peace: Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism*, Norton, 1966, pp. 3–1351.

Wells, H. G. *The Outline of History*. Macmillan, 1920.

Weston, Edward. *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, edited by Nancy Newhall, George Eastman, 1961–1966.

Wyatt, Sir Thomas. "They Flee From Me." *Five Courtier Poets of The English Renaissance*, edited by Robert M. Bender. Washington Square, 1967, p. 28.