BOOK REVIEWS


Jain's research into Eliot's Harvard years is exhaustive. Not only does she meticulously cross reference Eliot's work with the work of the Harvard philosophers, but with Bergson, Aiken, Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas and Ricoeur. As a result, Eliot emerges as a pioneer in both the American and Continental traditions.

Jain begins by attending to Harvard's pedagogical commitments at the time of Eliot's attendance. In Chapter 1 she describes Eliot's relation to the Unitarianism of Harvard and his family. She demonstrates Eliot's rejection of a philosophy of progress maintained by such religious beliefs. Chapter 2 develops this interest by demonstrating how these beliefs are manifested by Charles Eliot's administration of the University (President of Harvard university, 1869-1909, cousin of T.S. Eliot's grandfather.) It briefly describes the events surrounding Eliot's marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood and Harvard's 1919 campaign to hire Eliot as a philosophy instructor. Jain concludes this chapter by describing Eliot's image in the philosophy department as an "attenuated Santayana," referring to Eliot's interest in aesthetic-hermeneutical questions and his dismissal of the recent developments in American philosophy.

The chapters that follow are more philosophically challenging and less biographical. They develop in detail the epistemological and metaphysical commitments of Babbit, Bergson, Santayana, "The Golden Age," Royce, James and Bradley. By comparing the texts of these thinkers to Eliot's philosophical writings, his notes and his poems, Jain invites us to consider how the rich philosophical debate at Harvard contributed to Eliot's poetry. She develops a negative image: we see Eliot's poetic "philosophy" by understanding the irresolvable problematics of his contemporaries. As she tells us, Eliot's early thought was preoccupied in demonstrating the flaws and errors that inevitably haunt the philosopher. For Eliot these flaws manifest a confusion regarding the relation of thought and feeling: the apparent desire - disguised as necessity - to either separate feeling from thought or to choose one at the expense of the other.

Jain's chapter on the 'Golden Age' of American philosophy places us directly in the melee of the debate between idealism and realism, science and theology. Jain does this by overwhelming us with the variety of positions thriving at Harvard. It becomes clear why Eliot found it necessary to depart the United States for Great Britain. Given the personalities that dominated
Harvard's philosophy department, it would be difficult (if not impossible) for him to escape the yoke of this genealogy. Yet, escaping Harvard's living legends was essential to Eliot's pursuit of the poetic life. This is very clear in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and may account for Eliot's consolation in poetry rather than philosophy. In it he notes: "poetry... is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality." Through such an escape it was Eliot's goal to express a kind of transcendental emotion: "[There are very few people who appreciate] emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet." Nonetheless, as the presence of Jain's book implies, Eliot remains haunted by his Harvard association and the personal history that he tried so vehemently to overcome in his writing.

One is tempted, given Jain's enlightening account, to reread Eliot's poems according to his years at Harvard. However, we should be wary in attributing an overarching system to Eliot's poetics. Indeed, Eliot's rejection of philosophy is a rejection of the task of "disentangling the riddling oracles of the world, to paragraph and punctuate them and insert the emphases." (88) As is implicit in Jain's account, Eliot is satisfied with encountering riddles and sacrificing the philosophy of progress characteristic of the 'Golden Age'. There is a final reason why the superiority of Jain's account threatens to undermine Eliot's view. Because her account is clear, concise and comprehensive, it is easy for us to forget that Eliot rejects Babbitt's concern with tradition, struggling with the "problem of the interpretation of history." Thus, in Eliot's terms, works like Jain's should be viewed as more of a contemporary narrative than an authoritative historical grounding. However, it is up to the reader to determine the import of reflecting upon the historical portrait of Eliot rendered by present circumstances.

Finally, this book provides an excellent window into the origins of American philosophy in the Harvard tradition. For the novice it is an invaluable introduction into the richness of the debates taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century. The more experienced reader will appreciate Jain's ability to provide brief yet thorough synopses of a variety of philosophers. In many cases, such a task yields superficial and fragmentary accounts of each thinker. However, the text remains untainted by personal presumption and thus navigates a diverse subject matter with surprising agility and economy.

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Present debates over the foundations of American thinking on individualism present an unfortunate and incorrect bifurcation of the roots of American thinking on liberty. This brief thesis by