Fame always wants to hang from the stars because they are so far removed; fame always wants to find safety. – Elias Canetti

What the seeker after fame finds attractive in the prospect of hanging from the stars are the conditions of distance and elevation. Far from being riven by two conflicting desires—for the renown conferred upon successful risk-takers and the safety secured through abstention from risk—fame is driven by a single-minded need for safety from the threats of dissolution and oblivion. If, ironically, such safety must be secured by assuming the precarious position of hanging from the stars, so be it.

In Canetti’s account, the fame seeker does not especially care what sort of person he enlists in serving his needs: “Fame is not fastidious about the lips which spread it. So long as there are mouths to reiterate the one name, it does not matter whose they are… The crowd which the seeker after fame envisages consists of shadows, that is, of creatures who do not even have to be alive so long as they are capable of one thing, which is to repeat his name” (Crowds and Power 396-397). The elevation of one person into a name necessitates the reduction of other persons to anonymous mouths without minds. In Canetti’s account, the achievement of fame marks the achievement of indifference to the particularity and lived experience of one’s fellow human beings. No one knows why the famous person is famous. He or she just is. In this understanding, fame does not follow from knowledge of another person’s achievements and some sense of admiration concerning them. The proof of fame is the death of feeling. It has nothing to do with knowing.

Given Canetti’s general understanding of fame, one is not especially surprised to discover his rather dim views of particular phenomena pertaining to fame and famous
persons. To his mind, the Beatlemania of the 1960s recalled nothing so much as the spectacle of crowds standing in front of a gallows, watching with “pleasure… the swinging back and forth of the corpses” (*Party in the Blitz* 66). But nothing in Canetti’s bitterly pejorative account of the noxiousness of all things related to fame matches his account of T.S. Eliot, whom he refers to as “that terribly famous man” (105). His fame registered as an enduring source of insult and injury to Canetti, who, in the course of marveling at the glories of English literature in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century is forced by the pressure of rapidly mounting fury and indignation to pause when he reaches the twentieth century. His pause is worth quoting from at length:

> But what happened in this century! I was living in England as its intellect decayed. I was witness to the fame of a T.S. Eliot. Is it possible for people ever to repent sufficiently of that? An American brings over a Frenchman from Paris, someone who died young (Laforgue), drools his self-loathing over him, lives quite literally as a bank clerk, while at the same time he criticizes and diminishes anything that was before, anything that has more stamina and sap than himself, permits himself to receive presents from his prodigal compatriot [Pound], who has the greatness and tenseness of a lunatic, and comes up with the end result: an impotency which he shares around with the whole country; he kowtows to any order that’s sufficiently venerable, tries to stifle any élan; a libertine of the void, a foothill of Hegel, a desecrator of Dante (to which circle would Dante have banished him?); thin lipped, cold hearted, prematurely old, unworthy of Blake or of Goethe or anything volcanic – his own lava cooled before it ever warmed – neither cat nor bird nor beetle, much less mole… armed with critical points instead of teeth… and finally exalted by a prize that – with the exception of Yeats – was bestowed upon none of those who would have deserved it…

> And I witnessed the fame of this miserable creature.  

[46-47]

The passage goes on a bit longer, concluding with Canetti’s grim remembrance of the fact that, as the years passed, he was forced to hear “more and more” about Eliot, “until finally there was nothing else” (47).

Canetti cites as the sources of his fury at Eliot’s fame two sets of problems, the first of which is mundane, and the second of which is mysterious. The most basic set of
problems with Eliot are thought to arise from “the ordering of his life”; especially offensive is the fact that he worked in a bank, held a position at a publishing house where he had authority over other poets, and wrote plays for money late in his career (50). The second set of problems pertains to his imputed responsibility for some sort of mysterious contagion of “impotency” which “he shares round with the entire country” (46), and the “enfeeblement” that “emanated” from him (48). How are these two complaints related?

In the first instance, Canetti’s critique implies that poets should be guided by something higher than the desire for ontological and material safety. What that something might be is not clear. He apparently views having a job at a bank (which he refers to as “agreeing to live the life of the bank clerk” [50]) as a consent to an existence centered around money, routine, and the like (and hence, vulgar security). The sources of the second complaint lie in much older notions of the threats posed by foreigners and persons of unusual powers. The ancient notion of the famous person as a (literally or ontologically) foreign source of life-sapping influences is the other side of the notion of such a person as the source of life-restoring or enhancing powers. We find, then, in Canetti, a distinctly modern critique of the poet as bourgeois and an atavistic critique of the poet as source of miasma bound up in one. What Eliot is “sharing around” with others, in his account, is the emotional “impotency” that Canetti associates with living as a bank clerk and writing plays for money. The medium through which he distributes this peculiarly modern miasma is fame.

Is there a morally blameless (or at least, non-toxic) version of fame, or is fame a zero-sum quantity, such that it can only be acquired at the cost of loss (or, as Canetti would have it, damage and injustice) to others? Here, I shall consider this question in the
context of a comparative discussion of Eliot and Canetti. I argue that their respective thoughts on alternatives to destructive sorts of fame -- may (at least in part) be understood with reference to their different views on judgment, with judgment being understood as a sorting mechanism for distinguishing relative value within sets of entities. After a brief (and necessarily incomplete) general consideration of judgment, desire, and renown, I shall proceed to a discussion of Canetti and Eliot in tandem—a discussion which the massive literature on Eliot lacks, as does the more modestly-sized corpus of criticism on Canetti.

Because Eliot and Canetti both view literary fame as an index of the moral and political health of large collectivities (variously represented as nations, peoples, and cultures) as well as that of associations and individuals, it may be useful to think about some of the different ways in which fame has been construed along these lines in several different moral and political philosophers.4

My discussion of Eliot is selective rather than comprehensive; I focus on a variety of passages from his critical prose.5 It is in his prose that Eliot seeks to make use of the power represented by his own renown to establish new normative standards by which readers are to make judgments about literary reputation.6 It should be noted that Eliot habitually uses the word “reputation” rather than renown, but since he is referring to the “reputation” of such figures as Shakespeare and Dante, he is clearly concerned with high and widespread repute, or, in other words, with renown, as well as with reputation on a smaller scale. Since Eliot views individual literary works in terms of the entire tradition of such works by persons written throughout history, his insistent concern with reputation is directed at the names of the dead as well as those of the living.
Desire, Judgment, and the Distribution of Honors

That fame, to a limited but significant extent, follows from – and depends upon – judgment might seem to be a fact so banal and obvious as to merit little remark, but in studies of fame, honor, renown and the like, it is perhaps not remarked upon quite enough. Many such studies tend to focus more on changing versions of the desire for fame, and the psychological and cultural implications of the manifestations of this desire (for fame-seekers, their followers, and the culture to which they belong) rather than the standards of collective judgment (both popular and elite) pertaining to renown. Yet in order for the desire for fame to take on different forms, as it has throughout history, and to translate into achieved fame, standards of judgment (both tacit and explicit) as to what are publicly acceptable desires have to change. Changes pertaining to the public acceptability of desire are not changes internal to desire itself.

External judgments as to the fitness of a given person for fame on the part of others who are in a position to grant it are the condition of fame, regardless of the merits and bases of such judgments. At least at the early stages of fame, persons other than the potential famous person have to judge that he or she is worthy of note on some level (which is different than judging that a person is worthy with respect to a particular set of actions, attributes, or skills). Someone has to come to know that a given person is possessed of uniquely valuable goods, relative to those possessed by his or her peers. That knowledge has to be of sufficient weight to influence a valuation; in turn, the person thusly valued rises in reputation and power. At some point, if that person is to become widely-renowned rather than simply well-regarded within his or her particular sphere, the judgment that he or she is worthy of note has to spread beyond his or her immediate
sphere of influence. This is merely to make the obvious point that the judgment of fame—unlike the desire for fame—is necessarily gradual and collective. Judgment about fame flows from pooling independent judgments; from that point forward, once pooled, the judgment of fame is taken as being sufficiently authoritative that the famous person can become famous for being famous. The judgment that a person merits fame may be individual. The work of maintaining the existence of famous people as famous people, however (through gossip, prizes, promotions, and various forms of media) is quite properly understood as being collective. What is required is not just mouths to repeat the name but also minds to make (or concur) with the assessment that is embedded in the phenomenon of fame.

What is entailed in the judgment that a given person merits the simultaneously concentrated and diffused attention and affective concern that we lavish upon the famous? Is there some distinctive quality to modern habits of judgment pertaining to renown? How do we come to know who should be famous and why? If we briefly review the history of Western thought on fame, we note that the question of how judgment may—or ought to—pertain to renown has consistently been a matter of contention and ambivalence rather than consensus.

For Aristotle, fame falls under the category of *timê*, which is most commonly translated as honor. *Timê* also pertains to renown, glory, and the desire for recognition. On the one hand, Aristotle takes pains to show that a concern for honor, rightly understood, is consistent with a concern for virtue. For instance, the courageous person “endures and performs actions for the sake of the noble” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1115b22-24), and honor is “what is noble” (1116a28). We are told that “honor is the prize of
virtue, and it is bestowed only on good men” (1123b35-1124a1). The bestowal of honor, then, follows from a preceding judgment as to what goodness is, who is in possession of it, and who is in a position to decide such matters. Aristotle suggests that a concern with honor is not inherently excessive and that it is consistent with moderation. Indeed, a proper (i.e. moderate) concern with honor is one of the characteristics of one of his most famous moral exemplars, the megalopsuchos, or, the magnanimous man: “the [magnanimous] man… is concerned with honors and dishonors most of all, and he will be moderately pleased by great honors bestowed upon him by virtuous men… As for honor paid to him by ordinary people… he will regard it as entirely unworthy” (1124a5-12). Concern for the judgment of “ordinary people” is external to megalopsuchia; but concern for the judgment of “virtuous men” appears to be part and parcel of the virtue itself. The question then becomes: who are the virtuous men? The notion of the good man who deserves public honors is not the product of democratic judgment; the dispositive judgment in such matters reflects an earlier selection of virtuous men who are fit to judge those of their peers who deserve to be singled out for special attention. But who is fit to make this precedent judgment other than the “virtuous men” themselves?

At the same time that Aristotle attempts to fuse honor to virtue through the cementing agent of the judgment of virtuous men, he raises serious questions about the nature of honor as a good. In his discussion of three different kinds of life that are thought to be good or to confer happiness, he notes that:

Men of culture and action seek a life of honor; for the end of political life is almost this. But this good appears rather superficial to be what is sought [i.e., the good or happiness]; for it is thought to depend upon those who bestow [honors] rather than those who receive honor, whereas we have a strong inner sense that the good is something which belongs to the man who possesses it and cannot be taken away from him easily. Further, men seem
to pursue honor in order to assure themselves that they are good; at least, they seek to be honored a) by men of prudence and b) among those who know them, and c) on the basis of superior virtue. Clearly then, virtue is superior to these other goods (1095b27-30).

Virtue is superior to honor for two reasons: first, because virtue, unlike honor, does not place the person who seeks honor in a position of dependence upon the judgment of those who are in a position to grant it; and second, because virtue is the good for the sake of which honor is sought. Virtues can, and Aristotle suggests, ultimately, should, exist entirely apart from the honors (such as fame and prizes) that are bestowed upon them. In its reliance on social knowledge that may be derived as much from rumor as from good judgment, rather than merit, honor can be based on lies and appearances. It is a matter of externalities. To the extent that it abstracts from the external good of honor (which means freedom from dependence upon the potentially faulty judgment and partial knowledge of people who grant it), ethical virtue can mimic the intellectual virtue proper to theoretical life and contemplative activity, which is described in the last book of the Ethics as “perfect happiness” (1178b8).  

Turning to Cicero’s On Duties, we find a less ambiguous and more didactic attempt to fuse virtue and achievement with the fame and grandeur to which they are suited. Cicero warns against desiring glory and prestigious positions of authority (such as military commands) as ends in themselves. Despite the problematic nature of the desire for and active pursuit of grandeur and fame, Cicero suggests that they are the fitting rewards of those who exercise virtue for the benefit of the state: “Those who have adapted themselves to great achievements in the service of the political community, lead lives more profitable to mankind, and more suited to grandeur and fame (28). Honor is still the prize of virtue bestowed on good men (as it was in Aristotle), but the definition of
goodness has been politicized, on the one hand (the laudable achievements are done in the service of a particular community) and translated into transpolitical terms, on the other. Persons who deserve grandeur and fame for their service of particular communities live lives “more profitable to mankind.” The desire for fame, however, represents a potential threat to justice: “…men are led most of all to being overwhelmed by forgetfulness of justice when they slip into desiring positions of command or honour or glory” (11). Cicero takes a suggestion of Aristotle and turns it into a precept, indicating that if fame is desired for itself, it threatens “forgetfulness of justice.” The remembrance of justice is the guide to judgment concerning fame – both in terms of judging one’s own desires (and regulating them) and in judging the fitness of others for fame.

My hasty survey of some few of the different understandings of the relationship between judgment and renown shall regrettably skip over Machiavelli (a figure whom Eliot respects, and Canetti generally dismisses) for reasons of length, and conclude with some observations about Hobbes (a figure for whom Eliot expresses disdain, and Canetti, respect). In Hobbes, what is honorable is merely a local instance and sign of power, which is indifferent to justice: “Honourable is whatsoever possession, action, or quality, is an argument and sign of power” (X: 37). On the appetitive level, the desire for honor and glory (which Machiavelli treated as a desire peculiar to the few) is swallowed up in the capacious and relentless desire for power, which extends to all: “in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death” (Leviathan XI: 2). Desire is democratized, but it is still differentiated. Hobbes notes that the desire for fame after death, like the desire for praise while one is still living, can “disposeth to laudable actions, such as please them
whose judgment they value” (XI: 6). The meaning of “laudable” here is defined not by the standard of the “good man,” nor by the standard of service to the community, or profit to mankind. Instead, it pertains only to what is seen as being laudable by those from whom the praise is sought (“them whose judgment they value”). The desire for praise or fame, then, aims at satisfying a particular standard of judgment, but the value of that judgment is determined by the preference of individual seeker.

**Moral Membership and Renown**

How do these issues of judgment, power, and the distribution of honor show up in Canetti and Eliot? Eliot believes that in modernity, the possibility still exists that fame may be rightly distributed in accordance with desert (which he defines partly in terms of moral virtue); he promotes a normative ideal of judgment suggesting as much. Canetti, however, thinks that fame is invariably fraught with moral peril (at best) and that judgment is “a disease” (297). Eliot indicates that “power and distinction” can be used to enhance life; for Canetti, power is bound up with death, and bounded by death (which is not to suggest the Canetti did not believe in the possibility of resistance to power). For Canetti, as I have already mentioned, fame represents the pursuit of power over an army of shadows (living or dead) that disguises itself as a desire for immortality. Judgment represents the pursuit of power that disguises itself as the desire for justice (which, in this case, would mean that the good should be objectively distinguished from the bad). His discussion of judgment begins with a description of what he calls a familiar pleasure, which is that “of pronouncing an unfavourable verdict”:

‘A bad book,’ someone says, or ‘a bad picture’; and he appears to be saying something objective. His face, however, betrays his enjoyment
of his words. The first version of his statement is misleading and it very
soon becomes more personal. ‘A bad writer’ or ‘a bad painter’ is what he
says next and it sounds as though he were saying ‘a bad man.’ We constantly
catch friends, strangers, and ourselves at this business of judgment, and
the pleasure in an unfavourable verdict is always unmistakable.

...  
In what does this pleasure consist? It consists in relegating something
to an inferior group, while presupposing a higher group to which we
ourselves belong. We exalt ourselves by abasing others....

It is the power of a judge which we arrogate to ourselves here... (296)

As long as one is commenting on a work of art, Canetti suggests, the fiction of objectivity
can be sustained. But the enjoyment coloring the face of the person making the comments
dispels the fiction that he is only judging the work, rather than its writer (or painter, as the
case may be), and that his judgment pertains to the writer qua writer rather than the writer
as a person. All judgment is personal and partial, on the one hand, and inescapably moral
on the other. The act of judging that a book or a painting is “bad” is essentially an attempt
to mark the person who wrote it as bad, and to figuratively expel him from the group of
the “good” to which the judge (i.e. the literary critic) belongs.\(^{13}\)

Here, it is not so much that Canetti suggests that literary judgment easily shades
off into moral judgment or entails moral judgment on some level; rather, literary
judgment is judgment pertaining to the goodness or wickedness (and hence, the essential
worthiness) of the person who wrote it. The pleasure experienced in rendering a negative
verdict upon a book or a writer is the pleasure entailed in denigrating a person: it is, thus,
“a cruel pleasure... There is no mercy in it...” (296). To pretend otherwise – to pretend to
objectivity -- is, Canetti suggests, to deny one’s own appetite for – and pleasure in –
cruelty. Canetti will have no traffic with an Eliotic notion of a distinction in the mind of
the critic between the man who suffers and the mind which creates, much less with
Enlightenment notions of critical detachment and moral impartiality.\(^{14}\)
Books are judged with a view towards including or excluding the person who wrote the book from an imagined moral community. To judge a book is to judge whether the person who created them is a good person or a bad person. At stake is always good and evil, and the judgment of good and evil, Canetti suggests, outside of the province of persons especially suited by reason of their moral and intellectual expertise to judge of it, is essentially cruel. He moves without a pause from the judgment that a book is “a bad book” and the writer “a bad man” to the badness of judgment itself. The affective experience of judgment (which entails feelings of pleasure and pain) is the significant measure of judgment and its moral cruelty; the fiction of objectivity and critical detachment is “misleading.” The pleasure felt by the critic who renders an unfavorable verdict is that of the presumed member of the favored group, and the pain of the writer who receives that verdict is that of someone who has suffered an attempt to expel him by force from the group. In rendering something as apparently innocuous as a judgment upon a given book or painting, we “arrogate to ourselves [the power of a judge]” and that power is, according to Canetti, anything but impartial: “For it is only in appearance that a judge stands between the two camps, on the borderline dividing good from evil. In fact, he invariably reckons himself among the good; his chief claim to his office is his unshakeable allegiance to the kingdom of the good…” (297).

Surprisingly, in the same gesture that he takes away from his figure of “the judge” any possibility of impartiality, he grants to “the judge” a specialized form of moral expertise: “his vast knowledge of good and bad derives from long practical experience” (297). The expertise possessed by Canetti’s updated version of the Aristotelian phronimos, however, cannot and should not be democratized: “judgment… is continually
usurped by those who are not judges, whom no-one has appointed and no-one in his senses would appoint to such an office” (297). Outside of the elite of judges possessed of special, prudential knowledge of good and evil, judgment appears not as a birthright of every rational person, but an illegitimately usurped privilege, and ultimately, a disease that signifies the disorder that follows (Canetti suggests) when people don’t stay within their appointed rank. He chooses to represent this disorder (which is most obviously a complaint about justice) as an illness: “Judgment is a disease and one of the most widespread; hardly anyone is immune from it” (297). Here, we are much closer to an understanding of Canetti’s worries about societal decay. On a normative level, the democratization of judgment is, of course, one of the central principles of modernity (despite the existence of structural, cultural, and institutional impediments that work against the application of this norm to practice). Canetti views the moral and intellectual exercise of judging good and evil not as a right, but a privilege, and, crucially, an honor.

The office of judge, he suggests, ought to follow from judges being appointed by persons who are “in [their] senses”; instead, non-experts have the effrontery to make such judgments even though no one “in his senses” would deem them worthy of it. To judge a person worthy of the exercise of judgment (regardless of whether that judgment pertains to the merits of a book or painting, on the one hand, or life and death, on the other) is to honor him or her. Canetti’s concern about the maldistribution of the power of judgment ultimately coincides with his concern about the maldistribution of honor (understood as a particular instance of power). To judge is to exercise power; to be honored is to be given power. Ironically, Canetti’s worries about the improper distribution of the power to render judgment (which he significantly expresses in political terms, referring to the
“office” of judge and its “usurpation” by non-judges) put him in the same camp as Eliot, albeit for very different reasons.

Canetti, unlike Eliot, does not believe in the possibility of “true judgment,” even as a normative ideal. There is then, not the slightest chance of a just distribution of honor and renown in accordance with right judgment. Fame has nothing to do with the judgment of spectators as to the particular merits, virtues or achievements of the potential candidate for fame; it is a matter of the perverse and tyrannical desire of the seeker after fame and the susceptibility to his fatal seduction by the people he seeks to reduce to an “army of shadows” (397) rather than a question of justice (in the sense of giving to each what is his or her due.) As the seeker after fame becomes more and more famous, and more and more “mouths” speak his name, he drops even the pretense of seduction: “As long as [the seeker after fame] continues to concern himself with the individuals to whom these mouths belong, as long as he woos, bribes, entices, or whips them on, he is not really famous (397). “Wooing” and “enticing” at least presume the fiction that the seeker after fame aims at the consent of his fans, if not their considered approbation, but true fame, Canetti suggests, aims not at willing seduction but at control over faceless mouths.

Both Canetti and Eliot characterize the moribund condition of the modern Anglophone world (which Eliot attributes to the habits of thought associated with liberalism, and Canetti to the habits of thought associated with Eliot) in terms of disintegration, debasement, and emotional disorder. Both of them view literary renown (and the media through which it is popularly transmitted) as being, in effect, a stage upon which this broader disorder is put on display and worked out. Both recur to the language of disease, rot, and the like to indicate their sense that the world was not just, as Eliot
suggested of the “whole earth” in “East Coker,” a hospital, but also a rapidly declining patient. There is some ambivalence as to whether the ailment is a primarily a matter of spiritual and moral death (in which case the remedy would be some sort of equivalent to resurrection or immortality) or a consequence of a corrigible error (in which case the remedy would lie in the slow and perhaps painful correction of defective judgment). Eliot suggests that the decay of the arts serves as a tip-off that a more radical ailment may be metastasizing beneath the skin:

their decay may always be taken as a symptom of some social ailment to be investigated… what is more insidious than any censorship is the steady influence which operates in any mass society organized for profit, for the depression of standards of art and culture. The increasing organization of advertisement and propaganda – or the influencing of masses of men by any means except through their intelligence – is all against them; and against them also is the disappearance of any class of people who recognize public and private responsibility of patronage of the best that is made and written… [T]he more serious authors have a limited and even provincial audience, and the more popular write for an illiterate and uncritical mob (Christianity and Culture 32).

The crucial issue here is the disappearance of an entire “class” who would be responsible for promoting the reputation of the best writers. Eliot holds out no hope whatsoever for the “illiterate and uncritical mob,” so the work of reform must aim at improving and expanding the “limited and provincial audience” for relatively serious authors. New criteria for determining the “best” are to be communicated through an appeal to their undeveloped faculties of critical judgment. The critic’s business is not to judge; but to provide the clarification of alternatives and criteria that allow for the exercise of good judgment on the part of his or her readers: “in matters of great importance the critic must not coerce, and he must not make judgments of worse and better. He must simply elucidate: the reader will form the correct judgment for himself” (“The Perfect Critic,”
For Eliot, the project of correcting judgment is collective; thus, he indicates that
the critic, in order to “justify his existence should endeavor to discipline his personal
prejudices and cranks… and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as
possible in pursuit of true judgment (“The Function of Criticism,” Selected Prose 69). In
other words, the critic must discipline his personal preferences in order to affirm his
membership in the “class of people who recognize public and private responsibility of
patronage of the best that is made and written.” Such membership is, in his account,
inescapably moral (and ultimately, theological and political) as well as intellectual or
literary. The class who transmits criteria for judging “the best” appears to bear a like
responsibility towards the good. Writers themselves, he suggests, offer up both good and
evil, and the critics who judge them should provide moral filtration. In his remarks
criticizing the influence of D.H. Lawrence, for example, Eliot comments that, “The
number of people in possession of any criteria for discriminating between good and evil
is very small; the number of the half-alive hungry for any form of spiritual experience…
is considerable. My own generation has not served them very well. Never has the printing
press been so busy, and never have such varieties of buncombe and false doctrine come
from it” (After Strange Gods 66-7). Without introduction or comment, he then presents a
passage from Ezekiel 13. Absent the supervision of orthodoxy (which is mediated
through moral experts), the confusion between good and evil will persist.

“True judgment,” then, does not mean exclusively literary judgment or private
judgment. Eliot explicitly insists upon the relevance of morality and theology (and, in a
less direct way, politics) to the determination of literary “greatness” and hence, to
reputation: “Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint… The ‘greatness’ of literature cannot be determined wholly by literary standards” (“Religion and Literature,” Selected Prose 97). The proper allotment of reputation for “greatness” (for individual works) and renown (for poets themselves), depends upon the possible existence of “true judgment” (which he elsewhere calls “just judgment” (“Thomas Middleton,” Selected Prose 189). Reputation, like praise is a matter of desert (and hence, of some sort of justice) for Eliot, and the assessment of desert, at least as far as literary art is concerned, is made through the exercise of judgment that is shaped by experts.18 Experts certify the legitimacy of the social knowledge on the basis of which fame is conferred upon some and denied to others.

Eliot holds out some hope that problems in the distribution of honors in the sphere of literature (which result in the power of renown being granted to undeserving writers and denied to the deserving) can be partially—but only partially—rectified by providing different criteria for judgment. While he expresses skepticism (and in his letters, outright cynicism) about the possibility of spreading “true judgment” outside of an extremely small elite, he devotes quite a bit of effort to upholding such judgment as a normative ideal. For Eliot, it is at least conceivable for excellence to be rightly judged, and for renown to reflect “true judgment,” or, as he might put it, for “honour” to be received in proportion to “attainments” (Letters 285). As Eliot indicates throughout his critical prose, such proportionality is exceedingly rare in the modern world, but not any the less attractive in normative terms for being so rare.
While Eliot defends a particular version of the concept of critical detachment, he pointedly tries to distinguish the critical attempt to provide normative collective standards for judgment from a nostalgic attempt to recover the past and to revive an uncritical faith in Enlightenment norms of impartiality. It should be noted that he does not evince an interest in critical judgments written in stone. In fact, Eliot suggests that large scale changes in critical judgment should be made regular (without being institutionalized): “From time to time, every hundred years or so, it is desirable that some critic should appear to review the past of our literature, and set the poets and poems in a new order” (“The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,” Selected Prose 86). He hastens to add that “This task is not one of revolution but readjustment” (86). As he suggests elsewhere, however, it is also one of resurrection.

Reputation, Immortality, and Judgment by the Dead

Reputation, in Eliot’s prose, while not the literary equivalent of life, is subject to death and susceptible to resurrection. The medium through which it is resurrected is judgment. Throughout his critical prose, reputation appears as the product of prior critical judgment; what was made by the critics of the past can be remade by critics of the present. Reputation generally appears in his critical prose as a malleable quantity susceptible to reform, except when it is an undeserved reputation, in which case it occasionally appears as a symptom of cultural disrepair. In his letters, Eliot gives canny practical advice to seekers of poetic renown on managing their careers in the hopes of achieving fame while they were still alive. For instance, in 1920, he advises John Rodker that: “The best thing from a practical point of view, is to become well known to the
review press through some volume or volumes which it can endure, before circulating [a proposal for something that was apparently so radical as to be unendurable]. If one specializes on this sort of work, the only hope of fame is posthumous” (*Letters* 383).

From the early years of his own career, Eliot was highly conscious of his reputation and the question of how he should go about preserving and expanding it. In 1919, he notes that, “My reputation is built on writing very little, but very good… I probably have more influence and power and distinction outside of the journalistic struggle” (283). In terms of his criticism, Eliot saw himself as a person whose reputation for “disinterested” judgment had brought him to the point that he had shaping power over the reputation of others. He is careful to distinguish his own position from that of someone who is well-known to the general public. Those who are in a good position to know, rather than people with varying degrees of knowledge or ignorance, know that he is good. They want to know him better. The point that he wants to stress is that he is renowned *among the renowned*:

I only write what I want to – now – and everyone knows that anything I do write is good. I can influence London opinion and English literature in a better way. I am known to be disinterested…. I am getting to be looked up to by people who are far better known to the general public than I. There is a small and select public which regards me as the best living critic, as well as the best living poet… I can have more than enough power to satisfy me. I really think that I have far more influence over English letters than any other American has ever had, unless it be Henry James. I know a great many people, but there are many more who would like to know me and I can remain isolated and detached (280).

Isolation and detachment were privileges that followed from his increasing renown. His influence over English letters was such that he was in a position to use his renown (both for critical judgment and poetry) to prompt the favorable judgment of writers chosen by him, as he pointedly and frequently did. In such a model of reputation,
the well-known elect those who are to be well-known as they were once themselves elected, with the effect that any renown on the part of those elected has its genealogy in a long chain of recognition, without any interference by unqualified parties.

Eliot’s active involvement in this process suggests his belief that not only can renown be rendered morally and intellectually harmless, but that it can potentially be a source of power to do good, since he viewed the repair of literature as a means of recovering not just the past, but the possibility of a just future. He was well aware that what was at stake, among other things, was power (of which he observed that he could have “more than enough” to satisfy himself). His power lies in the capacity to rank the knowledge of others concerning his reputation. He knows that they are right in their high valuation of him; that means that the power that they have given him is just. From the account that Eliot gives of it, he did not understand the exercise of his power as necessarily risking the infliction of some sort of harm upon others. Unlike Canetti, Eliot can conceive of an exercise of power that does not exact a moral cost, and may actually redound to one’s credit. Eliot and Canetti both see renown in terms of power, but for Eliot, power can be made to limit itself according to humanly chosen and maintained principles and standards, whereas for Canetti, power answers only to opposing powers.

Eliot’s practical view of reputation as a malleable quantity was coupled with an understanding that the process of managing reputation was a responsibility and privilege of power. It was not enough for Eliot himself to personally intervene on behalf of poets whom he favored. The more important use of his “power and distinction” was to communicate his standards of judgment to others who could, ideally, then use them to make judgments pertaining to reputation like to his own in terms of disinterestedness and
maturity. At points, he understood this task in much more dramatic and expansive terms, suggesting that it entailed reviving the dead in some sense (“Andrew Marvell,” Selected Prose, 161). In his essay on Marvell, Eliot goes so far as to indicate that the work of bringing a poet back to life is “the great, the perennial task of criticism” (161).

The tercentenary of [Marvell] deserves not only… celebration… but a little serious reflection on his writing. That is an act of piety, which is very different from the resurrection of a deceased reputation. Marvell has stood high for some years… His grave needs neither rose nor rue nor laurel; there is no imaginary justice to be done; we may think about him, if there be need for thinking, for our own benefit, not his. To bring the poet back to life – the great, the perennial task of criticism – is in this case to squeeze the drops of the essence of two or three poems; even confining ourselves to these, we may find some precious liquor unknown to the present age. Not to determine rank but to isolate this quality is the critical labour… the unknown quality of which we speak is probably a literary rather than a personal quality; or, more truly, that it is a quality of civilization, of a traditional habit of life… Marvell’s best verse is the product of European, that is to say Latin culture (161).

Here, Eliot distinguishes between the activity of resurrecting deceased reputations and that of bringing dead poets back to life. Marvell’s reputation, far from being deceased, is in relatively fine form – he is known to “numerous readers” by virtue of the inclusion of his poems in popular anthologies and thus, he is not languishing in need of the “imaginary justice” that the critic can provide (161). Yet, for all that, he still needs to be brought back to life, a task which Eliot associates not with determining rank, but with squeezing some precious, living essence out of his corpus. Now Eliot can hardly be viewed as having been indifferent to rank – he repeatedly takes pains to distinguish poets of the first rank from those of the second rank, etc. – but here he is concerned with something else: the “life” that is buried within a poem and that awaits not just discovery, but extraction. What is the nature of this mysterious life? Eliot rejects the notion that it is personal, and momentarily suggests that it is literary, but then settles on the thought that
“more truly… it is a quality of civilization, of a traditional habit of life” (161). Given that Marvell’s best verse is said to be “the product of European, that is to say Latin culture,” we may identify the “life” that is to be revived as that of cultural Latinity. What is being isolated and extracted is not just a “traditional habit of life” but, as Eliot’s allusions to Horace, Catullus, Propertius, and Ovid in his discussion of Marvell’s verse suggest, a “tradition” in the broader sense in which Eliot defines the term. When he cites Horace’s lines on “Pale death” from Carmina 1.4 with reference to Marvell, he notes that “a whole civilization lies in these lines” (163).

The points at which drops of liquid life may be found pooled in Marvell’s poetry, then, suggest the particular parts of a poet’s work that Eliot defines in a famous passage from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

…we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism. One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the particular essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors… we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality (Selected Prose 37-38).

In bringing the “essence” of Marvell back to life, then, the critic pulls all the dead poets who speak through him back up to the surface as well. The assertion of immortality is a joint labor, shared by the critic and the dead poets who speak through a given poet (if he is any good). The dead poets are active in the sense that they “assert their immortality” but their assertion (however loud it may be) can only be heard by those who have ears to
hear it. It can indirectly be asserted to those who lack the ears to hear it if they are willing to listen to someone in possession of such ears – who is, ideally, the critic. Yet in order for the critic to be read, as Eliot knew all too well, he had to be well-known, and optimally, beyond that, well-known to those who are well-known to the general public. Thus, if the assertion of immortality on the part of the dead poets was to be made audible beyond the sphere of persons in a position to hear it for themselves – the practical work of tending to one’s reputation and making it grow had to be tolerated. While the labor of self-promotion (and the promotion of protégées) was not the condition of the more specialized, rarified task of bringing poets back to life, it was certainly the condition for the wider promulgation of the assertion of immortality by the dead with which Eliot was concerned. In some sense, their continued existence (in terms of their capacity for the assertion of immortality) depended on his renown.

Eliot suggests that the dead need to remain alive not only for the sake of the readers who would otherwise be denied their voices, but for the poet himself, who (again, if he is any good) “will be aware… that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics” (39). Questions of literary immortality then, figure not only into questions of literary reputation, but also judgment. Literary reputation, for Eliot, is related to, but not identical with, literary immortality. What this means in terms of the experience of reading is as follows: Catullus, for example, is renowned, but he is not much read except by specialists, with the effect that when he asserts himself in the work of another poet, most people cannot hear his voice, which means that he is effectively dead to them. The dead
can assert themselves without ceasing, but, apart from individual readers who have
gained access to tradition on their own, they can be spoken of and heard in proportion to
the renown of the critic who writes of them and quotes them. Eliot was interested in
immortality and bringing essences back to life, but he was canny – and ambitious enough
– to know that his fame was the condition for making the voices of the dead heard to as
many potential “carriers” of tradition as possible.

What about Canetti? Like Eliot, he distinguishes fame from immortality. Unlike
Eliot, he views the assertion of immortality on the part of dead writers not in terms of
“assertion” at all, but of sacrifice and self-offering. This offering is not mediated through
judgment. He describes Stendhal, whom he views as the exemplar of the desire for
immortality, in the following terms:

Without pitying himself, he was content to write for a few, but he was
certain that in a hundred years he would be read by many. Nowhere in
modern times is a belief in literary immortality to be found in a clearer,
purer, and less pretentious form. What does a man mean who holds this belief? He means that he will still be here when everyone else who lived
at the same time is no longer here. It is not that he feels any animosity
toward the living as such: he does not try to get rid of them, nor harm
them in any way… He despises those who acquire false fame and would
despise himself too if he fought them with their weapons…

Killing in order to survive is meaningless to such a man, for it is not
now that he wants to survive. It is only in a hundred years that he will
enter the lists, when he is no longer alive and thus cannot kill. Then it
will be a question of work contending against work… The true rivalry,
one that matters, begins when the rivals are no longer there.

…whoever opens Stendhal will find him and also everything which
surrounded him; and he finds it here, in this life. Thus the dead offer
themselves as food for the living… It is a reversal of sacrifice to the
dead, which profits both dead and living. There is no more rancour
between them and the sting has been taken from survival (277-78).

The sting in survival that is taken away by the self-offering of the dead to the
living is power: “The moment of survival is the moment of power. Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead… All man’s desires for immortality contain something of this desire for survival… He wants to live longer than everyone else… when he is no longer there himself, then his name must continue” (227). Yet here, the envisioned offering has no aftertaste of loss or death. In giving themselves as “food for the living” the dead are not giving up anything. This is the blameless face of fame – an immortality in which no mortality is embedded. The “true rivalry” – which is between works rather than the persons who wrote them – is unmarred by the shadow of death that is power. As soon as one abstracts from rivalry between living human beings, the necessity of judgment and the threat of power disappear. Then, it is only a matter of “work contending against work,” with no mediators or judges. Such is Canetti’s agonistic imagination that even this relationship is represented as being one of contention, albeit without human pleasure in finding oneself alive and others dead. The contention of “works” takes the place of the competing chants of rival “names.”

For all that, the experience of literary immortality is not impersonal. Canetti suggests that whoever opens Stendhal finds not only him but “also everything which surrounded him.” How does this “food for the living” compare with the “precious liquor” that Eliot squeezes out of Marvell? For one thing, the “food for the living” is not extracted from the book by a specialist. The food for the living is just that – “for the living.” It is thought to be available to whoever opens Stendhal, regardless of their powers of judgment. Rather than “asserting” their immortality and presenting themselves as judges of the living, the dead return in silence to be consumed as sustenance.
Works Cited


----. *Christianity and Culture*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940.


----. “T.S. Eliot.” In *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Modernism and the...*


1 The Human Province, 75.
2 C.S. Lewis also complains about the fact that Eliot worked in a bank (although he cites the wrong bank) in a letter cited by Christopher Ricks in T.S. Eliot and Prejudice, 197-98. Ricks aptly describes the letter as “a scarred tissue of prejudicial incitements and excitements” (197).
3 We can perhaps infer Canetti’s normative ideal of the English poet by conceiving of a figure antithetical to Eliot. He would be (in no particular order) passionate to the point of being volcanic, full of self-love (as opposed to Eliot’s putative self-loathing), proud and courageous (in his refusal to court the venerable powers that be), thick-lipped, warm-hearted, young, averse to receiving presents from generous and mentally unstable compatriots, derisive of all things related to being a bank clerk, and not American.
4 On Eliot and political thought, see especially Asher’s discussion of Eliot and Charles Maurras, and the chapter on Eliot and conservatism in North (74-127).
5 Among general accounts of Eliot’s critical prose, that of Louis Menand is especially valuable. See in particular his essay on Eliot in The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, as well as his discussion of Eliot’s prose in Discovering Modernism, 122-163.
6 In After Strange Gods, Eliot suggests that “in one’s prose reflections one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse, one can only deal with actuality” (30). For an interesting study of modernism and celebrity, see Jaffe.
7 In his important book, The Frenzy of Renown, Leo Braudy discusses some questions related to judgment, but with a different focus than the one I am suggesting here. See Section Four of his book, in which he discusses “the artist, the writer, and the wise man as the judges of true fame” (18). See also the discussion of Wordsworth and the “judgment of the people” on 428-429.
8 As Stephen Salkever puts it, “The Nicomachean Ethics describes an ascent from less to more stable virtues or ways of life, starting with those which… exist within the horizon of honor as the highest good” (7). See also the excellent discussion of Aristotle’s critique of honor in Smith.
9 Cicero notes that such positions of “sometimes should be refused and sometimes even resigned.” (28).
10 On Hobbes and Canetti, see Honneth and also Armanon. Other figures who are especially relevant in this context (but not discussed here) are Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. On Nietzsche and Canetti, see Robertson. Late in his life, Canetti altered his previously dismissive opinion of Machiavelli. See Notes from Hampstead 8-9.
11Braudy suggests that Hobbes turns “classical honor into modern fame by removing any justification beyond an inner demand to be appreciated” (13), but this neglects his suggestion that the desire for
immortal fame, like that of praise, is informed not just by a desire to be appreciated, but a desire to be found worthy by the standards of “them whose judgment they value” (XI:6).

12 For a discussion of the negativity of Canetti’s concept of power, see Honneth, 78-82 and Marti. On power and death in Canetti, see Mack, 74-79.

13 Regrettably, Canetti does not develop his theory of critical judgment as a process of negotiating moral membership.

14 For an interesting comment on critical detachment, see Connolly, 35. On the literary implications of Enlightenment and nineteenth-century norms of critical detachment, see Anderson.

15 References to disorder and decay make frequent appearances even in Eliot’s informal discourse. For instance, in a letter to his friend Maxwell Bodenheim from 1921, speaks of “the placid smile of imbecility which splits the face of contemporary London, or more abstractly, the putrescence of English literature…” (Letters 431).

16 In an earlier letter, he represents the effort of attempting to prompt the popular exercise of intelligence as a sort of experiment: “I have… a certain persistent curiosity about the English and a desire to see whether they can ever be roused to anything like intellectual activity… (Letters 431).

17 David Rosen notes that “In his criticism Eliot is typically sparing of praise, yet undoubtedly his most frequent term of approval… is ‘mature.’” (135). For comments on Eliot’s notion of collective judgment, see Schusterman, 215-17.

18 For a sample of works, poets, and critics who “deserve” praise or recognition, see Selected Essays, 53, 156, 276, 355, and 361.

19 As Christopher Ricks points out, Eliot included his own judgments among those that stand to be corrected, and calls attention to the process of critical judgment itself: “Eliot as a critic is characterized not only by having been repeatedly moved to a later opinion, self-impelled to judge anew his own judgments as to some of the greatest writers, but also by openly discussing and pondering the process itself” (Decisions and Revisions 5).