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# **T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922): Difficulty and the Canon of Modern Literature**

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Lecture Series  
Introduction to Literary Studies  
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WS 2015/16

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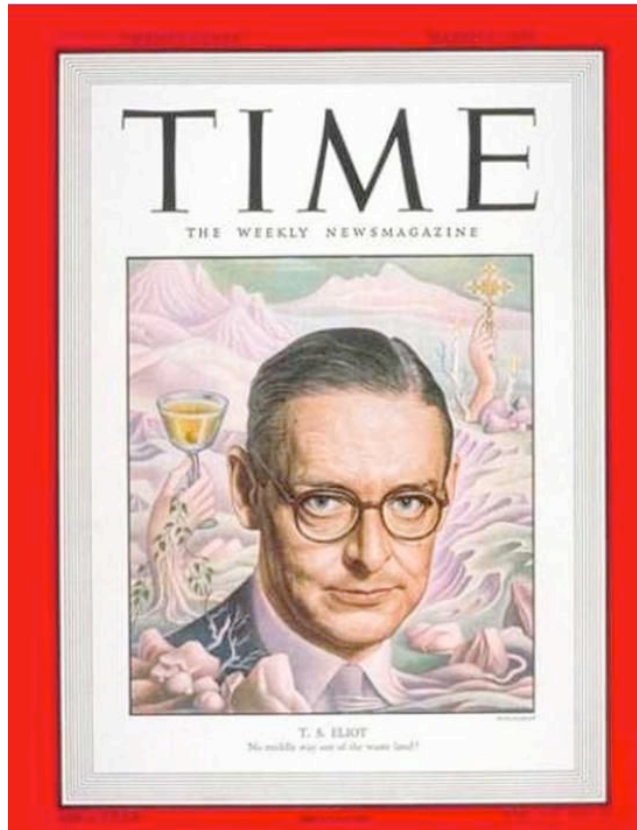
# Outline

- 1) T.S. Eliot, Life and Works
- 2) Reading *The Waste Land*
- 3) Difficulty and the Canon of Modern Literature





# 1) T.S. Eliot: Life and Works



March 6, 1950



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## Wikipedia (1)

Thomas Stearns Eliot OM (September 26, 1888 – January 4, 1965) was a publisher, playwright, literary and social critic and "arguably the most important English-language poet of the 20th century." Although he was born an American, he moved to the United Kingdom in 1914 (at age 25) and was naturalised as a British subject in 1927 at age 39.



## Wikipedia (2)

Eliot attracted widespread attention for his poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), which is seen as a masterpiece of the Modernist movement. It was followed by some of the best-known poems in the English language, including *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Hollow Men* (1925), *Ash Wednesday* (1930), and *Four Quartets* (1945). He is also known for his seven plays, particularly *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, "for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry."



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## Works (Poetry):

*Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917)

*Ara Vos Prec* (1920)

*The Waste Land* (1922)

*The Hollow Men* (1925)

*Ash-Wednesday* (1930)

*Collected Poems, 1909-1935* (1936)

*Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939)

*Four Quartets* (1943)

*Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (1963)

[+ verse drama]



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## Literary and Cultural Criticism:

“Reflections on *Vers Libre*” (1917)

*The Sacred Wood* (1920, 2nd ed. 1928),

including “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)

“Hamlet and His Problems” (1919)

“The Metaphysical Poets” (1921)

*Selected Essays* (1932, enlarged ed. 1951)

*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933)

*After Strange Gods* (1934)

*The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939)

*Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1949)

*On Poetry and Poets* (1957)

*To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (1965)



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## Influential theoretical concepts:

### a) ‘Impersonal Theory of Poetry’

(“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 1919)

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. [...] What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self- sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality [...] It is in this depersonalisation that art may be said to approach the condition of science. [...]





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I have tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggest the conception of poetry as a living whole of all poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. And I hinted [...] that the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of 'personality', not being necessarily more interesting, or having more to say, but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.



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The analogy was that of the catalyst. When [...] two gases [...] are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.



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→ Poetry transforms experience and passions into  
“significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the  
poem and not in the history of the poet”

## b) ‘Objective Correlative’

(“Hamlet and His Problems” 1919)

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, *a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events* which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.



### c) ‘Dissociation of Sensibility’

(Review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by H.J.C. Grierson 1921)

The difference [between the metaphysical poets and 19th century poets] is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne [...] and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought for Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. [...]



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We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were [...] In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered [...] [The metaphysical poets] were, at best, engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling. And this means both that they were more mature, and that they wear better, than later poets of certainly no less literary ability. [...]



[I]t appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning [...] Hence we get something which looks very much like the conceit – we get, in fact, a method curiously similar to that of the ‘metaphysical poets’, similar also in its use of obscure words and of simple phrasing. [...] May we not conclude, then, that [the metaphysical poets] are in the direct current of English poetry [...]



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## 2) Reading *The Waste Land*

T.S. Eliot, *Das öde Land*. Englisch und deutsch.  
Übertragen und mit einem Nachwort versehen  
von Norbert Hummelt. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp,  
2008.

Durs Grünbein, “Weshalb ‘The Waste Land’ das große,  
prophetische Poem unserer Zeit ist.”  
*ZEITLiteratur* 42 (Oktober 2008): 46-52.

Helen Vendler, “The *TIME* 100 – T.S. Eliot: Serious  
Poetry was about to be eclipsed by fiction. He  
provided the stark salvation of *The Waste Land*”  
(<http://www.time.com/time/time100/artists/profile/eliot.html>)



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## ***The Waste Land (1922)***

### **Epigraph (in Latin and Greek):**

For I once saw with my own eyes the Cumean Sybil hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, 'Sybil, what do you want?' she answered, 'I want to die'. (Petronius Arbiter, *Satyricon*, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE)

### **I. The Burial of the Dead**

APRIL is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.





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Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee  
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.  
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.  
And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,  
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,  
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
In the mountains, there you feel free.  
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.



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What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.



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*Frisch weht der Wind  
Der Heimat zu  
Mein Irisch Kind,  
Wo weilest du?*

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;

“They called me the hyacinth girl.”

—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not

Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,

Looking into the heart of light, the silence.

*Oed’ und leer das Meer.*



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Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante,  
Had a bad cold, nevertheless  
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,  
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,  
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,  
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)  
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,  
The lady of situations.  
Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,  
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,  
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,  
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find  
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.  
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.  
Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitane,  
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:  
One must be so careful these days.



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Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.  
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: "Stetson!  
"You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
"Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
"Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
"Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
"You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"



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## II. A Game of Chess

## III. The Fire Sermon

## IV. Death by Water

## V. What the Thunder Said

### Final section:

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

*[quotations from Italian, Latin and French works]*

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Datta [*Give*]. Dayadhvam [*Sympathise*]. Damyata [*Control*].

Shantih shantih shantih

*[the Peace which passeth understanding]*



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## Form?

- original title: ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’ (Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*)
- collage of voices and quotations which has to be deciphered on the basis of the implied readers’ encyclopedic knowledge of cultural history **or** with the help of annotations (cf., for example, the critical editions of *The Waste Land* or, more generally, B.C. Southam, *A Student’s Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*. London/Boston: Faber&Faber, 1968...).



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## Intertextuality:

James G. Frazer, Jessie L. Weston, Aldous Huxley, Charles Baudelaire, John Webster, Ovid, Gene Buck and Herman Ruby (That Shakespearian Rag) plus more popular culture sources of the day, Gotama Buddha, Edmund Spenser, Oliver Goldsmith, James Anthony Froude, St. Augustine, Sir Ernest Shackleton, Hermann Hesse, Thomas Kyd und William Shakespeare, and last but certainly not least *The King James Bible*, *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, und *Pervigilium Veneris*.





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## Text?

Various incarnations:

- a) original first editions 1922:
  - the poem without Eliot's notes in *The Criterion* (GB) and *The Dial* (US)
  - the poem with Eliot's notes published as a book (Boni and Livewright)
- b) the poem as part of the *Collected Poems* (1963ff.) with Eliot's notes
- c) critical editions (North 2001, Rainey 2005) running up to between 250 and 300 pages
- d) Facsimile-edition of the manuscripts including the legendary extensive cuts by Ezra Pound (ed. by Valerie Eliot 2003).



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- ➔ *The Waste Land* provides a fabric of voices and earlier texts which gets in the way of the readers' attempts to read 'through' the text for the reality 'behind' it or for a 'transcendental signified' in the traditional hermeneutical sense
  - ➔ various readings of *The Waste Land* have established a variety of dominant meanings:  
the decline and downfall of the West/of Europe, Eliot's personal crisis (in both cultural and private terms), the organisation of the text itself (intertextuality, intermediality, interculturality, ambiguity, ...)



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➔ not only the ‘content’, but also the texture of the *The Waste Land* is representative of the ‘Textual Condition’ (Jerome McGann) of the modern age

Cf. Christoph Reinfandt, “Reading the Waste Land: Textuality, Mediality, Modernity.” In: Hannes Bergthaller & Carsten Schinko, eds., *Addressing Modernity: Social Systems Theory and U.S. Cultures*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2011: 63-84.



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## 3) Difficulty and the Canon of Modern Literature

Which works are central to the canon of modern literature?

- a) Works which reflect the experience of modernity (loss of normative co-ordinates/meaning, alienation, ...) and/or modern reality itself (fragmentization, technology, ...)
  - > The *Waste Land* as a metaphor for modernity
- b) Works which reflect the medial conditions of modernity
  - > 'Texture' as a medium for turning opacity into (seeming) transparency (realism) or for acknowledging the intransparency of the modern textual condition
  - >> **the difficulty of modern literature**



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## Letter from Geoffrey Faber to T.S. Eliot, 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1927

(in: *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden. London: Faber&Faber, 2012: 707-710, 709f.)

I must apologize for throwing these critical crudities at you. Blame the weather, & and idle morning. But as I am in this reckless mood, I am going to indulge myself in a little criticism of you. I am like one of your truthful critics – Henry Warren – who confessed he couldn't understand you, but felt a tide of real bigness in your work. There are great chunks of your poetry of which I simply cannot make head or tail, hard as I have tried. Phrases & pictures flash up; the attitude defines itself & then loses



definition like a headland in drifting mist; the compulsion of your very personal rhythm carries one on and on. But often at the end of a poem, after perhaps a dozen readings, I am left wondering if I have chosen the right interpretation, out of perhaps 3 or 4 which seem equally probable – sometimes, even, at sea altogether. Am I exceptionally dense? I think not; because I am constantly on the defensive (for you) in this matter against intelligent & quick-witted friends. Are you conscious of your excessive obscurity? Is it an unavoidable element in your poetry? or is it deliberate? Do you, in that case, write only for the intuitively-gifted few? If so, why? Would either the thought behind your poetry, or the quality of its expression, be diminished



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by a greater effort on your part to meet the reader halfway?

I wish you could answer these questions for me. Meantime, writing now as a professional friend, rather than a critic, I should like to urge you to make the way a little plainer for the earnest reader. You have, as a poet, reached a curiously marked position in contemporary literature. It is the combination of your very modern-seeming obscurity, with sincerity & power, which has done this for you. But unless you now, having achieved your position, set yourself to write less obscurely, you will not go any further. You will remain in literary history – a sort of ossified specimen of genius destroyed by an impossible fashion, which itself created.



## How difficult should literature be (outside of university)?

- the debate about the winner of the Büchner-Preis 2012, Felicitas Hoppe as documented in Richard Kämmerlings und Tilman Krause, “Wie gut ist die Büchnerpreisträgerin?”  
*Welt am Sonntag* (20.5.2012)







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## Krause (dagegen):

Furchtbar lieb, was der guten Felicitas Hoppe jetzt alles bescheinigt wird: befreiende Fantasie, kunstvolles Vexierspiel mit Identitäten, eine originelle, artifizielle Poetik. Aber gerade wenn die Poetik gepriesen wird, ist ja meistens was faul. Da denkt man tunlichst an die Gastronomie. Wird in Frankreich ein Haus in die Kategorie "hotel de charme" geschoben, weiß man gleich: Ist alles sehr hübsch, aber die Heizung funktioniert nicht. Wasserrohrbruch jederzeit möglich.



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Übertragen auf die Literatur bedeutet das: Poetik ist das Rezept; entscheidend für die literarische Bedeutung einerseits, den Genuss des Lesers andererseits ist aber etwas anderes, nämlich das Gericht, das aufgrund des Rezepts entsteht und schließlich auf dem Teller liegt und verzehrt werden soll. Und die Gerichte, will sagen Bücher der Felicitas Hoppe mögen alles Mögliche sein: luftig, duftig, traumverloren, gegenwartsabstinent, postmodern, ironisch, was alles man ihnen zum Vorteil (aber natürlich auch zum Nachteil) auslegen kann - entscheidend jedoch will mir scheinen, dass sie nach nichts schmecken. Weil sie nichtssagend sind, und zwar im Wortsinn.



## **Kämmerlings (dafür):**

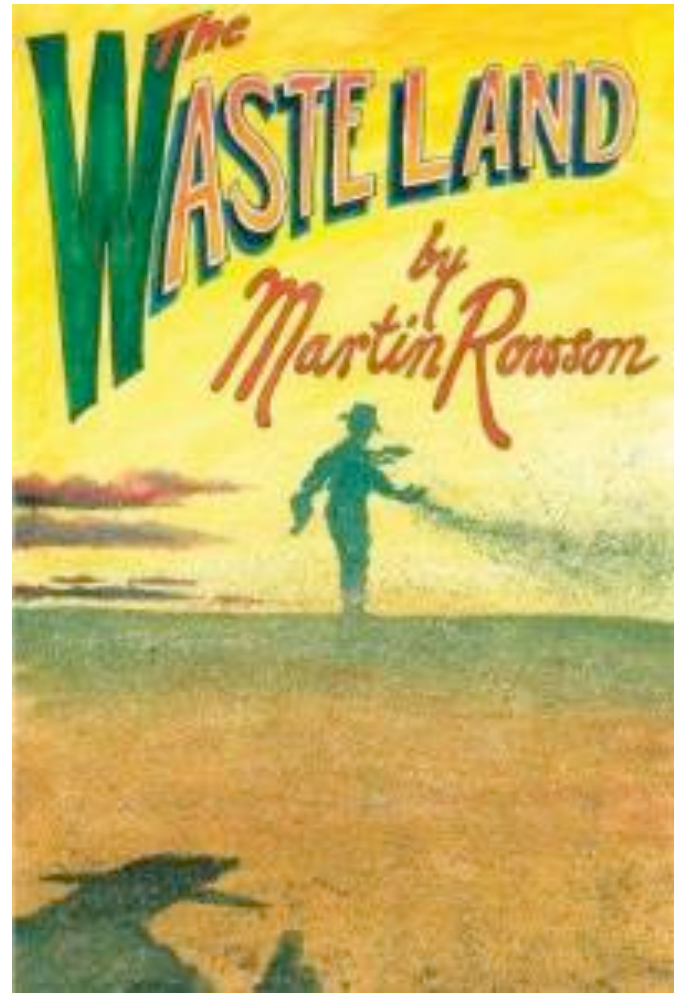
Dass Texte als Texturen zu begreifen sind, war ein Grundprinzip literarischer Avantgarde um 1900, das wieder in Vergessenheit zu gerät, wenn das Erzählen naturwüchsig aus der Ereignishaftigkeit, dem blanken, blutigen "Leben" hervorgehen soll. Die Welt aber kennt keine Handlungsstränge, sondern allenfalls Kausalitäten. Reflektierte und unkonventionelle (was ja nur heißt: nicht öde) literarische Formprinzipien zu fördern und auszuzeichnen gehört aber zur Hauptaufgabe einer "Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung", die weder einen anachronistischen Intellektuellentypus à la Grass und Walser oder Juli Zeh künstlich beatmen muss noch dem



Massenkompatiblen Preisgeld und Lorbeer hinterherwerfen sollte. Seit es den auf die Bestsellerliste schielenden Deutschen Buchpreis gibt, ist es noch wichtiger geworden, die echte Literatur vom "guten Buch" zu unterscheiden. Das hat der Büchnerpreis auch immer wieder gemacht, in den letzten Jahren vor allem mit Alexander Kluge, Brigitte Kronauer oder Reinhard Jirgl.



**Which canon do we want? (Who is we?)  
Who wants which canon?**





Thank  
you!