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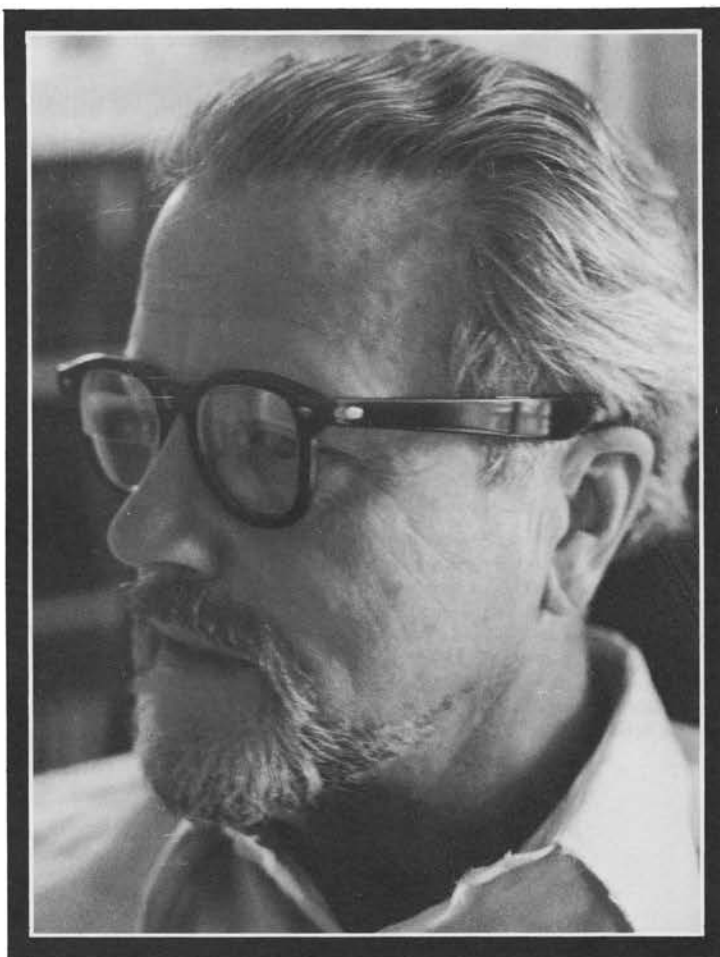
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George P. Elliott 1918-1980



# An Hour of Last Things:

*An Interview with George P. Elliott*

*Paul Archambault*

George P. Elliott, Professor Emeritus of English and Creative Writing at Syracuse University, died on May 3, 1980. Professor Elliott was a poet, novelist, and critic. He received his master's degree from the University of California and was awarded several grants and fellowships. Among his works were *Conversions* (essays), *From the Berkeley Hills* (poetry), *An Hour of Last Things* (short stories), and *Muriel* (a novel). Before coming to Syracuse, Professor Elliott taught at several institutions including St. Mary's College of California, Cornell, and the University of California, Berkeley. With the completion of the spring 1980 semester, Professor Elliott formally retired from his teaching position at Syracuse University. The interview published in this issue took place in January 1980.

**PAUL ARCHAMBAULT:** Professor Elliott, some elements of your life recur in many of your essays such as "The California Desert," "Youth on a Carob Plantation," and "Father." How important an influence on your development as a writer was the material you describe in these essays?

**GEORGE P. ELLIOTT:** I think living in the desert had a considerable influence, particularly since we had no money and I had no friends my own age. Nobody lived nearby, and I could not afford to visit people far away. I was thrown back on books and I read enormously—mostly books from the public library. As for my father, his influence on me as a writer was fairly strong. He was a very religious, unsocial, profoundly moral man; and because I couldn't have a normal adolescent social life, these qualities impressed themselves upon me very strongly indeed and have considerably modified what I have written.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** In one or two of your essays you have mentioned actually working on the carob plantation. Many of us, including myself, have never seen carobs. What do they look like?

**ELLIOTT:** They are simply trees, and they are used in semiarid areas for ornament. They bear a pod which is widely eaten in the eastern Mediterranean and supposedly is good for the health. That is why our plantation existed. It is one of those southern California fantasies that carobs would make everybody a great fortune; pure fantasy.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** I notice, Professor Elliott, that in many of your essays, especially those in two collections, *A Piece of Lettuce* and *Conversions*, you show immense concern for large philosophical problems. In the essay "Never Nothing" you were concerned with nihilism. In the title essay of *A Piece of Lettuce* you dealt with determinism and free will. What do you mean by nihilism?

**ELLIOTT:** It seems to me that the purest kind of nihilism tries to invert Christian values, to deny the existence of God and the existence of the good, to strive for nothingness. The true nihilist, the raging nihilist, is a disappointed Christian who in

revenge for discovering Christianity to be a fraud endlessly rages against religion and the spiritual life, against the good, trying to destroy it, trying to achieve nothing.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Can you think of literary examples of pure nihilists?

**ELLIOTT:** The strongest, in my view, is the Marquis de Sade. In contemporary times one of the very strongest is Jean Genet. There is always a built-in contradiction in a literary nihilist, however. If he is denying the value of everything, what is the value of writing? If he writes well and powerfully, obviously he is directly contradicting himself. A nihilist can never achieve what he is after, as in the physical universe one can never achieve absolute zero. The nihilist can only approach zero and rage at his inability to achieve it short of suicide. In this life, absolute zero cannot be achieved.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** How would you comment on philosophical movements such as existentialism, which postulate the nonexistence of God and the denial of specifically Christian values but then set up a personal set of values based on notions like freedom? Do you consider this to be in the nihilist tradition?

**ELLIOTT:** It's a way of escaping nihilism. Existentialists think that the promised goods are there. Rather than devote all their energy to hating and destruction, they make up goods of their own. That's quite a different thing from what the nihilists do, which is to assert that the only good is evil or the only good is nothing. Those who build a system based upon freedom of the will, or freedom of choice, or whatever else, are trying to establish a system that one can live by.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** You mention the Marquis de Sade as one of the most powerful examples of a pure nihilist; he happens to be eighteenth century in his education, a product of the ancien régime. Historically would you consider nihilism a product of the Enlightenment rather than a nineteenth-century phenomenon?

**ELLIOTT:** I think it is. Insofar as nihilism is a philosophy, or a pseudo- or antiphilosophy, it derives from the Enlightenment, from rationalism. The Marquis de Sade was a bad philosopher, but he was a philosopher and not stupid. He made it explicit that if being true to one's own nature is an absolute good, in a Rousseau-istic way, then tormenting and destroying others and perverting all the usual human goods is merely following the dictates of this philosophy, assuming it is one's nature to derive satisfaction from such activity. Furthermore, it seems to me that rationalism and the Enlightenment effectively, though not deliberately and not necessarily intentionally, undercut the foundations of Christianity and all religions; and that by so doing, they made possible the emotional attitude that formed the basis of the nihilism described in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Here the nihilist accepts nothing on authority whatever; he bows down to no higher power. The scientists say in their own proper bailiwick: Accept nothing on authority if it cannot be proved; accept something as true only if it *can* be proved. The

rationalists extended that attitude to the moral world, the spiritual, the political, and social worlds. And then everything changed; the result was nihilism. I think that Turgenev very accurately identified the emotional, moral center of true nihilism, which is accepting nothing on authority.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** We have talked about Nietzsche in past conversations, and as I recall you don't exactly share my admiration of some of his writings. You have reservations about him, and indeed I have too. It seems to me that one of the postulates of Nietzsche's philosophy is the death of God, on which he tries to erect a whole ethic—that of the aristocratic creator, the overman. I find certain moral categories in Nietzsche; noble and ignoble seem to replace good and evil. Would you consider Nietzsche a nihilist, or do you think this is, again, an attempt to escape nihilism?

**ELLIOTT:** I think it is an attempt to escape those consequences. He labored at it mightily and with enormous intelligence and imagination. But he was sufficiently caught up in the whole system of thought leading to nihilism that the efforts to escape it were impossible. He was mad for a long time; he died mad. It seems to me there is a connection between his enormous intellectual philosophical effort and his final collapse.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** To return to your own works, Professor Elliott, you have been described as a remarkable craftsman of language, a continuator of a great literary tradition rather than an innovator. Perhaps you feel that you have more in common with Henry James or Thomas Hardy than with, say, John Barth or James Joyce. Is this an accurate estimate?

**ELLIOTT:** Absolutely. Experiment for its own sake is for me an occasional pleasure, but only that. My deviations from the standard, the traditional, are never terribly radical.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Could you mention some of your works that you consider linguistically innovative or experimental?

**ELLIOTT:** Some of my poems, I think. To anyone who knows American poetry, it is clear that I have played with the language, but not radically. In one of my stories I use language that on the surface seems ordinary and unexceptionable, but beneath the surface it is doing four or five things that could only be called experimental or innovative. I never aim to do the verbal play, the linguistic innovation, or whatever, for its own sake alone. I always try to make it a part of something else; whereas the real innovators do it for the sake of the play itself.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** What would be an example of "something else"?

**ELLIOTT:** A way of expressing or suggesting something hidden about a character; a way of creating a mood in a reader which will help him to appreciate something subtle and hidden in the story itself. In just the fun of the hijinks John Barth is marvelous. He's a great acrobat. Frequently he is not saying anything in the world and doesn't intend to say anything. He's simply throwing words around in a way that's very fine.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Do you think that Joyce experimented with an ulterior purpose, as you have described?

**ELLIOTT:** Yes. But in my view, Joyce's most extreme experimentation in *Finnegans Wake* finally baffles me to the point that I don't bother to read it. Like almost all other literary people, I have read around in it. And I find that passages, particularly recorded passages of Joyce reading aloud, are fascinating. But I don't ever want to read the work any further; it leaves me out entirely. I don't know what he is doing.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Would you say that in *Ulysses*, an earlier work, the experimentation with language was telling us something about the characters?

**ELLIOTT:** Nearly always. *Ulysses* has a very elaborate structure, a structure that concerns human relationships. At its core it is traditional, if you talk about what you come away with concerning human relationships. You have recognizable and well-developed characters. Most, though not all, of the verbal play finally contributes to the structure of the whole; but some of the language seems to be playing simply for its own sake.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** To return to your own poems, some of them are deliberately erotic; for example, several poems in your new collection *Reaching*. Yet sexual descriptions seem relatively absent in your short stories and novels. Is this merely an impression of mine, or is this contrast intentional?

**ELLIOTT:** Oh, no, it's not just an impression. What I want to communicate in the poems is the sense of the erotic, which can be evoked by all sorts of methods. In a lyric poem the erotic will be there for its own sake, quite purely; whereas in a story, simply because the language is so much less intense, a description of erotic behavior is likely to distract the reader from what matters in the story, the relationships between the characters. So that I don't describe sexual behavior in very much detail there. But feelings, the delicacies of connection, of emotion, these I aim to make clear in a story.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** And one can do this better in the prose medium, in a story?

**ELLIOTT:** Yes.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** So what you are saying is that poetry, because of the intensity of language, lends itself to the evocation of more powerful erotic emotions; whereas the short story and the novel are more appropriate to the description of delicacy of feeling and connections of feeling.

**ELLIOTT:** Yes—and intricacies of relationships. That presents it exactly. Fiction which describes sexual behavior in such a way as to evoke erotic feeling nearly always descends into purple prose of the worst kind.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** D.H. Lawrence?

**ELLIOTT:** D.H. Lawrence, oh yes, just terrible. I have no taste for it. I much prefer the Jamesian method of leaving eroticism undescribed but evoked.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** *From the Berkeley Hills* seems to me your finest collection of poems. In reading it I have an almost physical sensation, time and again, that the poems were put together like a string quartet in five parts. Did you have a

musical model in mind in organizing these poems? Or perhaps a literary model, like a drama with a climax and a denouement?

**ELLIOTT:** More of a musical model. Theme and attitude determined whether I included a given short poem in the first, second, fourth, or fifth section. I meant this all to come together in the center section, with the long narrative poem “Fever and Chills.”

**ARCHAMBAULT:** “Fever and Chills” seems to me one of the best poems you have ever written. Do you agree with this?

**ELLIOTT:** I can’t say. I simply can’t say. Once I get a poem published and out there, I feel the way parents do about their children; one is better than the others in some respects, but .... The trouble is, “Fever and Chills” is half story and half poem.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** At one moment in this extraordinary dramatic poem, a man becomes the lover of his best friend’s wife. You depict the man in bed after making love, imagining himself as a bunch of atoms, an expansion coterminus with the universe, you might say. I have always been impressed by that extraordinarily surrealistic passage. I can think of none other like it in any literature, and I wonder whether at the time you had some sort of surrealistic experiment in mind.

**ELLIOTT:** No, insofar as it is surrealistic, it is so only in the way that a good many poetic images and passages were surrealistic before the term was ever invented. I was evoking a dreamlike image, a fantasy, which was connected with reality in irrational ways. I didn’t think of it as surrealistic. In fact, when you used the word, I was at first a little astonished; but then I realized that, yes, it was absolutely the right word.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** I have noticed that several characters in your short stories are Roman Catholic, some of them from religious orders like Brother Quintillian. Coming as you do from a Protestant background, have you been much influenced by Catholicism?

**ELLIOTT:** Yes, I have been enormously. For several years I taught at St. Mary’s, a Roman Catholic college. I taught a course in great books, and many of the texts were primarily Catholic—Augustine’s *Confessions*, for example. Dealing with the students, nearly all of them Catholic, and having friends among the faculty who were Catholic—I was *enormously* influenced. My mother was a Methodist and my father was a Quaker. I was raised on the Bible and on no ritual at all, or almost no ritual and almost no real theology. I found the richness and complexity and subtlety of Catholicism powerfully attractive, and I still do. Coming from the desert and Calvinism, which is a very desert-like religion, I felt an amplitude and a fullness in Catholicism that was tremendously rewarding.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Many of your stories deal with religious questions of the deepest and most general sort. *An Hour of Last Things*, the title of a collection as well as one of the stories in the collection, is a deeply religious statement. A number of your stories also deal with science fiction. “Into the Cone of Cold” is a sort of science fiction story that takes place in a Catholic college.



Do you find that these interests—science fiction, the preternatural, religion, the supernatural—somehow connect in your own imagination?

**ELLIOTT:** Oh, they sometimes do indeed. My dominant motive in writing fiction is realistic. But a great deal of what concerns me is not available to the realistic mode. One way to play with it is science fiction, which is usually but not entirely a form of rational pretend and not much more than that. But when I am concerned with matters which simply do not fit into a realistic story at all, one way to get at them without overtly importing angels and devils and other supernatural paraphernalia from religion is to use the strategies of science fiction. I've done it three or four times. The seed of "Into the Cone of Cold" was given to me by a Christian Brother, a professor of mathematics. He had the idea for this science fiction story and tried to write it up; but he couldn't, so he gave it to me.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** In this regard, you have written in one of your essays on Dante that a modern reader can still enter the world of the *Divine Comedy*, not as extended metaphor describing the human mind but as something true. Have I interpreted you correctly? How do you read Dante?

**ELLIOTT:** I read Dante as writing about something which is true. I follow the metaphor; obviously, in the poem, one is dealing with symbols and allegories and metaphors most of the time. One must be very naive indeed to read it any other way. But at some point it becomes something other than an analogy to what goes on in the human soul. The metaphor of physical light standing for God's grace and love is meant finally to become literal: physical light and spiritual light are exactly the same. Just as those two finally come together at the end of the *Divine Comedy*, so Dante's portrait of what is in the soul and what is out there finally become the same.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** You've written a moving essay in *Conversions* on Santa Sophia, the church in Istanbul, and you have also written a novel set in the ninth-century Byzantine Empire. I also know that you are fascinated by Byzantine historians like Procopius. How do you account for this exotic interest in Byzantium?

**ELLIOTT:** I know precisely where it started: with Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium." The next step came at St. Mary's College. My best friend there was Brother Robert; he still is a good friend. Brother Robert knew someone who was making mosaics based on the Byzantine style, and he took me to chapel and showed me some of those mosaics. I had never seen a real one before. I was greatly impressed. And then, with this interest stimulated by reading, I went to Ravenna and studied the three great Byzantine mosaic remains there. I was overwhelmed.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** You have also talked about your admiration for the Byzantine way of looking at the world, which you once described as looking at the world as *idea*, as something hierostatic. What does this have to teach those of us who have been taught to see reality in terms of energy and process?



**ELLIOTT:** I don't know what it has to teach us, but I do know why I value it so much. I am a creature of the modern world. I think in terms of democracy, energy, all of those things. But my temperament is such that when something is uniformly and almost unthinkingly held to be the case, to be the way one should see things, I automatically want to find another way to see them. I need relief from a tyranny imposed by a given world view. I know of no civilization more antithetical to ours than the Byzantine, and for that very reason I find it fascinating. Our way is all right, but their way was just as good. I wanted to find out about it.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** So in fact you admired that view of the world because it was radically different?

**ELLIOTT:** For that very reason. It's a way of correcting instead of immersing yourself, of sinking into the twentieth-century *Zeitgeist*.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Does a man of letters especially need this form of escapism—or do you consider this escapist?

**ELLIOTT:** I don't think it's escapist at all; I think it's vital. It's a way of staying alive. Yes indeed, I think a man of letters needs this kind of thing.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** In a number of your essays you take strong moral positions—for example, in "Fun at All Costs" and "A Piece of Lettuce," where you almost sound like you're preaching a sermon. Critics such as Benjamin DeMott have felt the need to defend your passionately conservative ethical or critical positions by arguing that it is a conservatism without prudery or self-righteousness. Do you consider yourself a conservative in your moral positions and in your literary criticism?

**ELLIOTT:** The term I apply to myself, since it is an oxymoron and seems useful, is *conservative liberal*. My moral scheme of things is conservative, yes. Simply to have a moral scheme of things, and to use it, is in itself quite conservative these days. Now I hope that I do not use it mechanically and automatically in the bad sense of conservative. As for my literary criticism, I do not think it is all that conservative. I neither am in love with experiment for its own sake nor against experiment for some other sake. I don't think there's a name for such a position.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** We all know T.S. Eliot's famous phrase about himself: "Royalist in politics, classicist in literature, Anglo-Catholic in religion." Do you think you would be able to formulate some sort of epigrammatic summary of yourself in this way?

**ELLIOTT:** I've thought about it, and I can't. Fundamental to my way of looking at the social world, and the world generally, is the fact that my father was a kind of yeoman. He was like a British freeman, and his regard for the great of the earth was not very high. I'm a democrat; I'm hopeless about giving orders, and I can't dictate so much as a letter. I'm a real, true democrat. At the same time, I don't think that's the only way to be at all. I think that the hierarchical aristocratic systems are in many respects far superior, but that's what I am. I am full of contradictions. A witty friend of mine summed me up by saying,

“Everybody knows that one should be a Socialist in ideas, a Democrat in politics, and a Republican in the way one lives. You seem to have scrambled these.”

**ARCHAMBAULT:** You have written tongue-in-cheek stories about social issues that some people take very seriously, for example, women’s lib and race relations. How have your readers reacted to stories like “Sandra,” in which the protagonist buys himself a woman slave; or “NRACP,” wherein the reader and the protagonist progressively learn that the final solution is being applied to American blacks?

**ELLIOTT:** Well, it’s clear that my irony and satire make a great many people uneasy when I’m dealing with very important matters. But, again, I think that if you can’t look at, say, women’s liberation or race relations with irony and complication, you’re liable to wind up writing mere propaganda of one kind or another.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Do you turn to satire as one way of avoiding the clichés on these issues?

**ELLIOTT:** Yes. For example, my motive for writing “Sandra” was a discussion with Brother Robert in which he pointed out what I had not yet discovered for myself—that Aristotle advocates the doctrine that there are natural slaves and natural masters. I had not come across this before. As I say, I’m a yeoman. At first I was shocked, and then I began thinking about it. By chance I had known a woman who had been in slavery for fifteen or twenty years. There’s a celebrated law case in California in which she was given her freedom. She was a good deal happier than most of the other forty-year-old women I knew. And I felt, well, things are not so simple as they seem to be. So I wrote “Sandra.” Well! All my woman friends were furious, except my wife. The story was rejected by seventeen magazines. It was so disliked by Martha Foley, who had been putting my stories in her anthologies, that she didn’t use any more of my stories for years. That was back in the fifties. By the seventies, when the women’s movement had become very solid, I deliberately read the story several times to mixed groups. And it is now a part of two feminist anthologies. It is getting very high praise from some women, who believe it accurately portrays the downtrodden state of women and the brutality of men. It has also been furiously attacked as being . . . well, some women simply won’t speak to me. But others think I’m marvelous for having perceived the truth—twenty-five years ahead of time.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** Have readers reacted to “NRACP”?

**ELLIOTT:** Yes. It was the first story I ever sold that provided enough money to go out to dinner on. So I invited Josephine Miles and some other friends out, but Josephine wouldn’t go. She would not dine on that story because she thought it was so bad, so wrong. Some people, of course, didn’t perceive that it was a satire. For example, an editor of a magazine in England who published the story wrote and asked me if there was such an agency as the NRACP—back in about ’49.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** I have a few final questions. Like many American writers, you are a professor of literature and live and

work in the university setting by choice. Do you consider this a good field for a writer? Isn't it a bit ivory-towerish?

**ELLIOTT:** Not at all. A modern university, or a big loose one like Syracuse, is not in the least like an ivory tower. A very good, small liberal arts college out in the country is an ivory tower. But here, the varieties of ambition and corruption and wickedness available to us seem to me to resemble real life very closely indeed. In addition, to be around people who are interested in the same things that one is interested in oneself is surely a good idea. I would hate to be an insurance company executive where none of my colleagues wanted to talk about the subjects that interest me. There are clear and unmistakable disadvantages to being a writer-teacher; of course, talking about writing all the time is finally a handicap.

**ARCHAMBAULT:** You have worked and written in New York and in a middle-sized city like Syracuse. Where do you work best?

**ELLIOTT:** I work best out in the country in solitude, undistracted by anything. I'm easily distracted. If I am in the country where there are no telephones or people around, I will work very hard. But I can't live like that for long. So what I do in Syracuse is avoid seeing anyone all morning and part of the afternoon; then a small city is fine. Everybody knows not to call me in the morning.