

LIDIA VIANU

T.S. ELIOT



**AN AUTHOR
FOR ALL SEASONS**



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I. T.S. ELIOT AND THE DIGNITY OF CULTURE

A long line of innovating poets, playwrights and literary critics seem to have followed in T.S. Eliot's footsteps. Had he thought of his posterity, he may have shrunk away from it as he did in the end with himself, his own statements and earlier moods. Eliot undoubtedly did innovate some things in poetry and literary criticism. Yet, essentially, his way of thinking was not exactly of the innovating type. It bore the deep imprint of Eliot's early partly German rigid philosophical training. It also bore the imprint of the sceptical mobility of Bradley, on whose philosophical work Eliot wrote his never defended dissertation.

In *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1948), for instance, Eliot's ideas proceed tamely and cautiously. Even the aggressivity of his earlier volumes of literary criticism hides a stern wish to preserve, to conform, to worship the existing culture. His cultured poetry, his poetic Esperanto of echoes coming from all ages did no less, as a matter of fact. He had a life-long obsession with the unity of European culture. He admitted that his work, in its 'sources' and 'emotional springs' came 'from America' (Paris Review, 1959). But he also wrote the following:

Younger generations can hardly realise the intellectual desert of England and America during the first decade and more of this century. In the English desert, to be sure, flourished a few tall and handsome cactuses, as well as James and Conrad (for whom the climate, in contrast to their own, was relatively favourable); in America the desert extended *à perte de vue*, without the least prospect of even desert vegetables. The predominance of Paris was incontestable.

He mentioned the names of Anatole France, Rémy de Gourmont, Lévy-Bruhl, Bergson. He concluded by saying:

... an atmosphere of diverse opinions seems to me on the whole favourable to the maturing of the individual.



(*A Commentary*, 'Criterion', 1934)

In the light of the previous statement it is easy to understand Eliot's veneration for European culture. In 1918 (*Henry James: The Hawthorne Aspect*) he plainly wrote:

It is the final perfection, the perfection, the consummation of the American to become, not an Englishman, but a European – something which no born European, no person of any European nationality can become.

Eliot touched upon this topic time and again. The Nobel Prize for Literature awarded to him in 1948 confirmed him as a citizen of world literature.

Authors like George Steiner have accused Eliot of not taking direct and active part in contemporary history. While the horrors of the second World War were taking place, Eliot was investigating the meanings of the word culture, or at least so his essay began:

I have observed with great anxiety the career of this word culture during the past six or seven years ...
(1948)

From the despair of the war to the despair of words. From the face of a broken Europe to the dispersing meanings of its once common culture, now forcibly smashed to pieces. Eliot's political unrest wears the robe of language. The verbal insecurity he so often complains of is an indirect expression of his sadness at seeing the culture of Europe deteriorating. The literary review Eliot edited between the two world wars (*The Criterion*) made his concern with European cultural solidarity and dignity very obvious:

The Criterion aims at the examination of first principles in criticism, at the valuation of new, and the re-valuation of old works of literature according to principles, and the illustration of these principles in creative writing. It aims at the affirmation and development of tradition. It aims at the determination of the value of literature to other humane pursuits. It aims at the assertion of order and discipline in literary taste.

(Quoted by H. Howarth, *Figures behind T.S. Eliot*)

Eliot was adept at a free circulation of ideas inside a common European culture. His poems tried to illustrate the need for a free exchange of ideas, of images. Much of world literature survives in Eliot's innovation: cultured poetry. He loved to quote from all possible authors and various languages. He actually managed to melt them together. He was by no means insensible to the disasters of the war. The literary review he himself edited had to disappear when World War II broke out because, Eliot said, in Europe intellectual frontiers had begun to appear. He was dreaming of an international intellectual brotherhood. He hated exacerbated nationalistic opinions and provincialism in literature.

He did not ignore the fact that any work of art must by all means be particular and national first of all. But it must also have an eye wide open to the horizon of the



whole of world literature. In his poetry and essays, Eliot constantly fought narrow-mindedness and provincial aggressivity. He worshipped spiritual peace among countries. He hated intellectual wars, barriers set for the imagination. His veneration for the freedom and dignity of culture, his firm belief in the power of the mind to bring together the beings on this earth make him our very close contemporary. The dignity of culture, Eliot felt, must be preserved at all costs, at all times, for all seasons.

II. AN AGE OF IMPRECISION (ORDER DENIED)

The early years of our century were a restless age. They were haunted by the urge to innovate, yet also afflicted with bitter dissatisfaction with the consequences of each innovation in turn. A mistrustfully innovating age, we may call it. Its mood was innovating. Its brain was however realistic enough to keep radical reversals at arm's length. When our century was only beginning, Virginia Woolf remarked that the ever more complicated machinery which the age was (and is) producing would not necessarily imply an improvement of the literary mind as well. The author of *The Waves* would be turning in her grave if she heard any of the more technically minded literary critics intimate that the better we build, the better we write.

On the contrary, she keenly sensed that, in such a fickle age, literature could not be spared the anxiety, the dread of possible failure. A failure caused by the very restlessness of the age; an age whose literature, at the peril of its own life, would not stay still. Whose words, as Eliot so memorably put it in one of his *Quartets*, 'strain/ Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,/ Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,/ Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/ Will not stay still' (*Burnt Norton*).

From a literary point of view, the first decade of this century of ours, which is now drawing to an end, opened an era of imprecision both in fiction and poetry. It would be risky to point at the exact writer who set up this gunpowder plot which was meant to blow up that beautiful (though apparent) precision, that obvious clarity which had been queen of most previous literary works. Fact is that sometime around 1922, when both Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* were published, accompanied by Virginia Woolf's novels (this is to name only very few of the literary rejuvenators), a distaste for previous ways of writing books had already spread among



European writers of literature. It was like a very violent catching disease. All arts (and sciences) had it almost at the same time. Some have not yet even wholly recovered from its side-effects. It must have been as if writers were taking in this innovating zest together with the air they breathed, and could not help letting it oxygenate their minds.

As for the readers of this literature, that was an altogether different story. They got lost in the mazes of novelty, cursed freely and some (more and more of them as time went by) finally managed to find their way out. They were coming out victoriously but (should we confess that?) exhausted. Literary critics themselves were not spared this grumbling disarray. Eliot was ruthlessly charged at. The critics' guns were repeatedly aimed at him (until even as late as the 1960's) and they used picturesquely shaped bullets filled with venom.

Charles Powell, for instance, hurried to let everyone know there and then (no time lost) that *The Waste Land* was nothing more than just as much 'waste paper'. An anonymous reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* slyly remarked that the poem existed largely in the state of 'notes'. He was obviously mocking at the bulky set of pages, which at first Eliot did not mean to print at the end of his poem at all. As the poet confessed much later (in a volume of posthumous essays, *To Criticize the Critic*), these notes had appeared only for printing purposes: he had been asked to enlarge the size of his poem so that it might constitute a volume by itself.

These famous *Notes* explain most of the sources of the quotations from other (innumerable) authors freely used by Eliot in his own text. He later admitted, in fact, that he was sorry for having sent literary researchers on a 'wild goose chase'. No philosophical or any other kind of explanation in other terms than those of the poem itself could make any difference to the understanding of *The Waste Land*. These *Notes*, Eliot repeated, could safely be ignored. It is perfectly true that those *Notes* could not exactly clarify the poem as some may have expected. Eliot made a point of defacing every borrowed word. He made those words fit into his own text, become his own, as it were. The original contexts and meanings were not only ignored but, most often than not, ironically contradicted.

On the other hand, these *Notes* have a peculiar innovating importance. They are the Magna Charta of cultured poetry. A poetry which was treacherously humming tunes of literary memories, echoes of other works, other minds, other times – in such a way as to focus their light on their shadowy sides, thus enhancing ambiguity, their main poetic resource. Now, when the above mentioned reviewer protested against the lack of clarity in Eliot's poems, he blamed it on the fact that to him the whole poem looked like a bunch of disconnected and unfinished notes.

He was indirectly and unconsciously acknowledging the very birth of this associative, cultured (though not bookish, as the critic might have intimated) poetry. A poetry which inaugurated a long line (that still pursues its echoing tune) of book-loving, or rather (like Proust) memory-loving poets. A tradition of remembrance of books past. The reviewer meant that Eliot's poem was fragmentary, unfinished, lacking all connecting explanations, full of stifled voices which breathlessly spat out incoherent little stories. It was strewn with ugly, disgusting images. In short, the poem in question was no more than a heap of raw material. It consisted of merely random notes which the author alone was able to decipher or enjoy.



To the reading public, this reviewer intimated, the text could only end by being an utter disappointment. He plainly added that Eliot's poem almost reached the 'limits of coherency'. It was hardly intelligible, if at all. Readers were warned they would hardly find it worth while wasting their time on *The Waste Land*.

The violation of a previously established sense of coherency (verbal, logical, narrative, etc.) seemed the feat of a literary outlaw. Eliot defined it as 'dislocating language' into his meaning. Among others, the dislocation exasperated F.L. Lucas as well. The latter wailed in an essay that there had always been a sense in punctuation, in the order of words, in the clarity and the serene sky of orderly poetic utterances. All these once used to be like a brotherly hand the poet stretched out to his readers. Eliot shamelessly defied the reader's peace of mind by refusing to offer him this old type of comforting verbal precision. F.L. Lucas' anger was on the loose. He thundered:

'Shantih' is equivalent to the 'Peace that passeth understanding' – which in this case it certainly does. All this is very difficult; as Dr. Jonson said under similar circumstances, 'I would it were impossible'.

Lucas' indignation is also aroused by another so-called innovation of Eliot's. Other 'innovators' had practised it in their day, as a matter of fact. More recent poets still fiercely hold on to it. The device in question is Eliot's use of the defiantly nonpoetic. Although he was not the first to do it, Eliot tried and successfully managed to discredit the poetic adornments, the peace of poetry. He chose the unusual and the unexpected: ugly city-scapes, disgusting images of muddy pools, dirty dry bones, slimy rats, whatever he could think of that was most horrifying, even terrifying. This must be the reason why F.L. Lucas hopelessly concluded:

the borrowed jewels he has set in his head do not make Mr. Eliot's toad the more prepossessing.

The Waste Land was called many names in its time, from the hoax of the century to the sacred cow of (his) contemporary literature. A dejected journalist even loudly complained that it was an unforgivable mistake for English literature to have harboured this 'over-educated' American who would have made everyone happier by staying with doors bolted, back in his own home-town, 'in Louisville, or wherever he came from'. Going along the same line, Humbert Wolfe finds in Eliot a poet who cannot write poetry because 'spiritually and intellectually he is muscle-bound'.

It must be fairly obvious by now how weird this (to us no longer unusual) idea of cultured poetry, of bookish echoes floating freely in a poet's lines was at the time. It simply could not be separated from that of plagiarism. It was consequently despised as such. Eliot's writings, then, with their unabashed intention to irritate, to disgust (even in his criticism and drama) and their numberless borrowings (echoes of other works) could not fail to stir the spirit to rebel. Which is precisely what Eliot meant to do. He must have sensed that rage would be followed by curiosity, then by approval. Not all his readers, as a matter of fact, indicted him from at first. Joyce, for instance, noted briefly (for himself, though):



Eliot ends idea of poetry for ladies.

Good-bye comfortable, sweet directness. Welcome inaccessible imprecision. An advertisement of this poetry should read: 'Applicants need guessing ability'. Eliot felt that he had to pull down the old precincts of poetry and build the tower of the poem all over again. His architecture may have looked monstrous at first. Gradually the on-lookers must have grown used to it and even felt like exploring its interior. The same happened with James Joyce. This may be one of the reasons why Joyce so promptly approved of Eliot. His short, well-meaning parody to *The Waste Land* is both congenial and entertaining:

Rouen is the rainiest place getting
 Inside all impermeables, wetting
 Damp marrow in drenched bones.
 Midwinter soused us coming over Le Mans
 Our inn at Niort was the Grape of Burgundy
 But the winepress of the Lord thundered
 over that grape of Burgundy
 And we left in a hurgundy.
 (Hurry up, Joyce, it's time!)

(James Joyce, *Occasional Poems*)

On reading the first chapters of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf had predicted it would be the masterpiece of the age. Funny to think that, once finished, she labelled it as a glorious catastrophe. The fact that she disliked it is hard to account for. Her own novels, the same as Joyce's, smash the narrative (the plot) into pieces. Many other writers in England and on the Continent were doing just the same. They all refused to picture an orderly personality, a well-rounded and clearly unfurled character. These non-traditional novelists still had a narrative in mind, though. Neither had the characters deserted these narratives. Only the writers would not surrender their meaning to the readers for free. The authors refused to reveal their plotting. They made it very difficult for the reader to suspect there might be a plan behind the texture.

Those readers had to sweat in order to get at the inner pattern, because such authors broke all mirrors that might betray their presence. They suppressed all clear order: of words in a sentence, of moments in time, of parts of the narrative. The subject came in between the predicate and the adverbial. The future was known long before the past had been revealed. The end of the story was announced from its very first pages. Was it, people were wondering, a really new way of illuminating experience? Or just an inability to equal a Tennyson, a Dickens or a Galsworthy in clarity, in order, in accessibility?

What more can we say except that the unpredictable fascination of this piecemeal literature looks like the spirit which has been conjured out of its abode, the safe bottle? He cannot be squeezed back into it. Not for a while, that is; until a trick against him has been found. So, for the time being, this wicked yet exhilarating spirit being at large, readers look in vain for explanations in the text. All clarifying link, all that was orderly and all that we had been trained to expect has been thrown



overboard. Here we are then, enclosed ourselves in the legendary bottle, our minds floating and floating over the waves sent out by a ‘heap of broken images’ (*The Waste Land*, I). The waves of a text which looks, at least at first, like an incoherent, incomprehensible mass of incidents, of words.

What reason on earth can an author invoke for writing a piece of literature that (he suspects) might fail to be understood? Does a writer willfully sever his ties with his readers? Or is there some underground pact with the reader still working, but only in the dark? In this age of imprecision we are talking about, the denial of obvious coherence, the denial of order can be exposed. An underground road may indeed be found, that leads to the core of the work and reaches there the old unities (of plot, of character, of time) untouched.

Eliot, for one, felt that a coherent, largely explanatory poem was far too long. The same as his literary friend and early adviser, Ezra Pound, Eliot was possessed by a verbal impatience. It so happened that impeccable, orderly sentences made him feel unbearably restless. For the same reason, because of the same impatience, Virginia Woolf violently refused to be associated with Galsworthy’s predictable flow of plots, characters, incidents. It seemed to these (now dead) innovators that the precious narrative order had become an ineffective convention. They felt urged to replace it by a more noticeable (which meant opposed) manner. Of course the denial of one convention might very well (actually did) turn into another convention itself before long.

The Stream-of-Consciousness technique could not escape this fate. It began as a shockingly concentrated device, both in fiction and poetry. Eliot dropped the explanatory lines between images. Joyce created a character out of amalgamated bits of tomorrow, yesterday, today. Literature (like all other arts) fell desperately in love with disorder. What was the meaning of the name they gave it, the Stream-of-Consciousness technique? In her volume of essays, *Modern Fiction* (1919, *The Common Reader*), Virginia Woolf advanced the idea that life had long before begun to leak out of her predecessors’ flawless narratives. The novel could, it was even imperative that it should be reshaped. Her view of this change sprang from what she called a new need for verisimilitude. Why should we feel compelled, she wondered, to construct a believable plot, a believable character, a believable world? Life itself is not believable, it is most often felt to be disorderly and absurd. Why not restrict this verisimilitude, in order to convey exactly the writer’s own experience?

The author’s deep belief in what he is saying ought to be enough for the reader. In this way all of them (Virginia Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, etc.) allowed us to share their inner landscape, provided we took it as a secret. It was obvious that this inner world mirrored the outer. Virginia Woolf was perceptive enough to realise that verisimilitude could not be banished from literature without leaving it empty handed. Verisimilitude was merely interiorized and, consequently, it became somewhat less accessible.

Life, Virginia Woolf explained, was neither coherent, nor symmetrical, nor orderly (those were her very words). She perceived life as a ‘luminous halo’ (see Joyce’s idea of ‘epiphany’), which could not be approximated by orderly chronology or by an explanatory sequence of thoughts. The theory of relativity had, as can be seen, its literary counterpart. The feeling of disbelief, of uncertainty, which resulted in growing interiorization of the narrative, was the mark of the age. From Virginia



Woolf's impressionistic, therefore imprecise manner we may conclude that the knife of clarity and firm story-telling was at the moment dulled. She meant to arouse the reader's anxiety by pointing at him a freshly sharpened edge.

In fact, this stream-of-consciousness, this approximation of the workings of a mind laid bare in front of our eyes implies a very precise, ruthless tyranny of the reader by the author. Dickens did his best to lure us into pursuing the exciting stories of his characters' lives. Joyce's insufficient stories do not entreat; they abruptly toss and turn our understanding, claiming at the same time that they free us from the servitude of order. The effort we must make to piece up his hints and bits (which may seem, but are not amalgamated at random) shows that we are not in the least free. On the contrary, we are enslaved. We cannot find our peace of mind until we have stolen from the author an order, a plan (more intricate than a Dickens or a Thackeray had ever dreamt of) that has been willfully hidden.

An enthralled reader roams through the maze of this thrilling disorder. When the reader has finally managed to leave the disorder behind, he has the late realization that it all amounts, in fact, to an order concealed.

'Do not dictate to your author', Virginia Woolf demanded; 'try to become him'. Quite an interesting experiment, the one she suggested in her essay *How Should One Read A Book?* If we are to understand a piece of literature thoroughly, she said there, we ought first to try our hand at writing ourselves, and see what it felt like to produce something orderly and believable.

Why not start by merely remembering some incident we once experienced? Several details that accompanied it will presently come to our mind: two people talking, a tree swaying in the wind, a street lamp... We feel that all these together make up a whole. Yet, when we start narrating it, suddenly its wholeness is lost. Its meaning, which we felt to be coherent, breaks into a myriad contradictory sensations.

Thus, indirectly, she admitted that the ordering force of the 19th century writers failed those of the 20th. It may not have died, but it certainly changed its ways. As Virginia Woolf warned us, 'facts' (mere chronology, the evolution of incidents from cause to effect) had become the lowest stage of a narrative. The plain story was no longer sufficient, she meant.

These once innovating novelists seemed to need a salutary complication of the whole thing: a more abstract narrative pattern, a more intricate one. In short, they preferred a contorted story, willfully turned upside down. Eliot, too, amalgamated his super-ambiguous words into puzzling images. Then he also openly urged us to take them in like music, to let them find their own way to our minds, to take our time before we actually began to think.

Can a poem really be enjoyed before it has been understood, as he once declared? Or was this statement of Eliot's rather a defense than an explanation of his whirling, confusing poem? The same defensive statement was made by Virginia Woolf. She prompted her readers to 'wait for the dust of reading to settle'. She also advised the author himself to let the atoms of life fall upon his mind, and preserve in his writings the random air of this chance fall. These impatient writers needed very patient readers, as it seems.

All the theories ever forwarded by various representatives of this age which waved the banner of the stream-of-consciousness technique amount to an appeal to the reader to slow down his reading and ponder over the fragile flow of the narrative.



The literary movement (innovation) as such could not have lasted for too long: it was too much of a good thing, as they say. The writers involved in it delude their readers that they are actually taking part in a do-it-yourself story. By urging the reader to solve the puzzle of a (pre-arranged) fragmentary, elliptical sequence of images of incidents, such writers have in fact a much stronger hold over the reader's mind than any previous author ever had. These are demanding writers.

The reader may have chosen to ignore Dickens' too moralizing and bossy, direct intrusions into the narrative. But when the writer professes to be absent, to efface himself totally in order to offer you the naked mind of his characters (who are supposed to be real, to be life itself), whom can you oppose? The trick was efficient for as long as it lasted. It brought a certain seriousness into the mood of the reader: it made the idea of a hardworking reading imperative. It would not do to read *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses* on a trip or a little while before falling asleep. They upset your thoughts. They tamper with your feelings, making them hopelessly restless. Your mind is ill at ease, because of the strain put on it.

All these stream-of-consciousness works require a meditative reading at the end of which, Virginia Woolf assures us, the narrative will float like oil in water to the surface of our minds, towards the explicit area of our understanding. We shall then realize that this explicit area of our consciousness is not the only one that we can use. This implicit narrative wholeness will not come as a gift to us, and we shall never feel inclined to take it for granted. Quite the reverse: constantly deprived of the explicit flow of the story, we shall have to fight to the bitter end, until we have pieced up every random detail, every chance word. Only then shall we feel that we do not leave the novel or the poem empty handed. Then we shall have caught up with the author, compelling him to come out of his hiding and meet us.

It can therefore be concluded that, even when the author cannot be seen with the naked eye, the author can be found. Even in the absence of explicit story-telling, the narrative survives. A more complicated architecture of the poem or novel will by no means turn it into a failure. When precision and order are defeated, the taste of life can still be suggested by a device of disorderly imprecision. An imprecision which is, in fact, only apparently accidental. It is, in truth, an elaborate disorganization which has infinite planning behind it. The canvas behind the painting is easily detectable. To make a wicked remark, we may sometimes even notice that the canvas is not even used for the first time, since the new image preserves traces of old shapes, old tricks that have not been allowed to die. For Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Eliot and the others, splitting their text implied making it more intriguing, more appealing, more exciting: giving it another kind of suspense. Yet, now that we have found out what a firm narrative iron hand in a glove of velvet imprecision this stream-of-consciousness is, we may well exclaim with victorious satisfaction: Order is dead, long live order!

As has been seen so far, the planning of a work cannot disappear, in fiction or poetry. It may try to hide and seem absent, thus appealing to us to appreciate it more, by going in search of it. They were right, those stream-of-consciousness writers: an intriguing absence goes a longer way. It is more effective than a presence we have become so much used to that we go past without noticing it any more, as we sometimes go on our daily way home and yet can never remember the houses we keep seeing. Not until a new one is built, and then suddenly we grow aware of the whole landscape being changed. Like any other literary fashion, therefore, this awareness of



the fragility and inefficiency (at the time) of the traditional narrative enriched the literary landscape: it imposed the short lived reign of a more intricate order (apparently disorder) and a more elliptical precision (apparently imprecision).

The readers felt challenged. Their effort to adapt to the change was great, and at times they did not feel rewarded after making it. The old sight seemed more appealing to them, especially when the complication became too complicated, so to say. Virginia Woolf herself did not fail to notice (having Joyce in mind, not herself, though) that a literature made up of various bits of words, bits of stories, bits of sense, runs the risk of falling ill with confusion and uncertainty. It was not unlikely that some readers at some point, might abandon it.

The narrative convention of imprecision, of disorder could not have lasted longer than it did, because it would have ended by becoming more demanding and less rewarding than the explicit narrative devices that preceded it. The implicit narrative, as well as poetic ambiguity were both a kind of implicit clarity. They were bound to be exposed some day. There was no question of a 'free' or 'creative' reading. The readers were ruthlessly harnessed to an invisible cart (the author's mind), and they did not take long to rebel.

It looks now as if the delight of telling an uncomplicated story and the enchantment of crystal-clear poems had returned. A reaction against another literary reaction, and so the chain will continue to grow. It may even be that we now live in an age of over-simplified precision and order, a kind of (again apparent) total lack of literary convention. Each goes his own way. No matter how things stand with us now at the beginning of a third millennium, no matter what changes the following years may bring, what false yet enthralling discoveries, nobody will ever be able to write or read again as if Joyce's, or Eliot's, or Virginia Woolf's voyages away from clarity and accessibility had never existed. Our minds have been enriched by them, the same as the horizon of science was extended by the idea of universal relativity.

Once back from the lotus land of enticing complications, let us hope we shall not be of those who may feel that the defiance of precision and order was a literary dead end. We must not be fooled by difficulty. In a good piece of literature nothing is ever made without the author's hope to be understood, without a plan (which may be visible or invisible at first sight). A plan is a sign of order, of precision, of desire for clarity. Therefore, even when talking about this age of imprecision and denied order that Joyce, Eliot and Woolf belonged to, we may safely rejoice: Clarity is dead, long live Clarity.

III. 'MY DAYS AND WAYS'

(ELIOT AND HIS TIME, ELIOT ON HIS TIME)



T.S. Eliot has been commented upon, either praised or blamed, in a lot more books than he ever wrote himself. Many well-known critics have brought to life the excellence of his theatre, poetry and criticism. Equally well-known critics have violently reacted against him, formulating picturesque accusations. All these accusations reveal the bewilderment of most readers in front of a poet, playwright and critic who refuses to be direct.

Eliot's most fertile and efficient mood is that of dissent, of questioning disbelief, of cunning uncertainty. As a critic, he has a denying frame of mind. His best essays start with the spotting of an error made by another critic, or essayist or poet. Eliot restates this error in a variety of ironically serious approximations which end by bordering on the absurd.

Finally, this vein of humour, which whispers secretly to the reader that disagreement is perfectly entitled and that the critic himself is on the reader's side, produces as its last utterance a question, and systematically leaves it unanswered. The 'Gioconda' smile which Wyndham Lewis noticed on Eliot's face extends to all his writings. It makes them enigmatical, open to both approval and disapproval, unimpaired by either of them.

A presentation of adverse reactions to Eliot's work (most of them contemporary with him, a few only belonging to the time after his death) may prove a good introduction to a discussion of Eliot. A list of faults, generously drawn by various critics, will gratify the reader's wish to protest against the puzzling effect of Eliot's poems, against the ambiguity of his criticism: in a word, against his so often mentioned bookishness and difficulty.

*

As preliminary information, some data of Eliot's life and a selective chronology of his works against the background of early and middle 20th century literature might prove useful. Especially if we remember Eliot's opinion that the most useful thing a critic can do to facilitate the understanding of a poem is to provide the reader with factual information of any kind.

THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT was born on September 26th, 1888 (under the sign of Libra, the Scales) in America, the town of St. Louis, Missouri, at 2635 Locust Street. The house he was born in has since been replaced by a new industrial building. St. Louis was at the time an industrial city in the centre of the United States.

His father, Henry Ware Eliot, was president of a brickmaking company. He died in 1919, when Eliot was thirty-one. His mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns, was engaged in social work such as the reform of prisons for women and of the courts of juveniles. She also wrote poems, some of which Eliot later published with respect. The cordwainer Andrew Eliot, T.S. Eliot's ancestor on his father's side, emigrated to America, New England (Massachusetts, Bay Colony) in 1668, from East Coker, Somerset, England. Eliot's grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, left New England for St. Louis in 1834. He was a minister of the Unitarian Church. The Eliots were



Unitarians, a Protestant sect which apparently originated in Poland and Hungary in the 17th century and reached England in the 18th century.

The name of the sect was due to the fact that they reacted against the Trinitarian view of God and believed in his single personality. William Greenleaf Eliot was the strong character of the family. He established a Unitarian Church in St. Louis. He campaigned against slavery. He founded Washington University in St. Louis. When T.S. Eliot was born, therefore, as the seventh and last child of a 45-year-old mother and a 47-year-old father, he could by no means have been said to come out of an anonymous family.

Two years before Eliot, in 1886, Ezra Pound had been born. In 1888, Katherine Mansfield, Vivienne Haigh-Wood (Eliot's first wife) and Eugene O'Neil were born as well. Edward Lear and Matthew Arnold died. In 1888, books by Walt Whitman and Henry James were being published. Between 1888-1892, novels by Mark Twain, poems by Emily Dickinson and Melville appeared in print. In 1889, Conrad Aiken and Waldo David Frank were born. In 1890, Katherine Anne Porter. In 1891, Herman Melville died. In 1892, Archibald MacLeish and Pearl Buck were born. During the same year Whitman died. In England Browning and Hopkins died in 1889, Tennyson in 1892.

About the aspect of St. Louis in 1892, Theodore Dreiser wrote the following:

Never in my life had I seen such old buildings, all brick and crowded together... Their interior seemed so dark, so redolent of old-time life. The streets also appeared old-fashioned with their cobblestones, their twists and turns and the very little space that lay between the curbs.

Until 1905, when Eliot turned seventeen, he lived in St. Louis. He spent his summers in New England, where, in 1897, Henry Ware Eliot had built a house at Eastern Point, near Gloucester. The place was not far from Cape Ann, off which there were three rocks known as The Dry Salvages. While there, Eliot learned a great deal about sailing. Before 1906, he attended the Smith Academy and the Milton Academy. He began writing as early as 1905.

In *The Eliot Family and St. Louis* (printed in an appendix to 'American Literature and the American Language', June 1953, Washington University Studies), we find Eliot's own memories of his native town:

As I spent the first sixteen years of my life in St. Louis, it is evident that St. Louis affected me more deeply than any other environment has done. These sixteen years were spent in a house at 2635 Locust street, since demolished. This house stood on a large piece of land which had belonged to my grandfather, on which there had been Negro quarters in his time (...) The river also made a deep impression on me; and it was a great treat to be taken down to Eads Bridge in flood time (...)

And I feel there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those who have not. Of course my people were Northerners and New Englanders, and of course I spent many years out of



America altogether; but Missouri and the Mississippi have made a deeper impression on me than any other part of the world.

In *The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet* (printed in 'Daedalus', 1960), Eliot also added:

... for nine months of the year my scenery was almost exclusively urban, and a good deal of it seedily, drably urban at that. My urban imagery was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed.

As for the summer house and the sea, here is one more quotation which strongly smells of the *Four Quartets*:

... it was not until years of maturity that I perceived that I myself had always been a New Englander in the South West, and a South Westerner in New England... In New England I missed the long dark river, the ailanthus trees, the flaming cardinal birds, the high limestone bluffs where we searched for fossil shell-fish; in Missouri I missed the fir trees, the bay and the goldenrod, the song-sparrows, the red granite and the blue sea of Massachusetts.

(Eliot's *Preface* to Edgar A. Mowrer's *This American World*, 1928).

Between 1892-1905, in America appeared essays and poems by George Santayana, poems and novels by Stephen Crane, novels by Upton Sinclair and Mark Twain, essays by William James, poems by Edward Arlington Robinson, novels by Henry James, Dreiser, Jack London, Frank Norris, poems by Willa Cather, essays by Paul Elmer More. In 1894, e.e. cummings was born. In 1895, Edmund Wilson. In 1896, John Dos Passos, Robert Sherwood and Scott Fitzgerald were born. In 1897, Th. Wilder and Faulkner. In 1898, Hemingway. In 1899, Hart Crane. In England, in 1896, William Morris died. In 1900, Ruskin. Shaw and Wilde published several plays. Joseph Conrad wrote *Lord Jim*.

In 1906, Eliot entered Harvard and remained there until 1910. He took his B.A. in 1909, and his M.A. in 1910. He published some poems in the *Harvard Advocate*. Remembering Eliot's first three years at Harvard, William Chase Greene wrote:

He was recognized as able and witty; not influential at the time; rather aloof and silent; I used to tell him he reminded me of a smiling and quizzical figure of Buddha.

While at Harvard, Eliot attended a large number of courses of his own choice: Greek, Latin, French, German, English and comparative literatures; Santayana's history of modern philosophy; Irving Babbitt's lectures. He was introduced to Dante and John Donne. In 1908, he read Arthur Symons' book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which introduced him to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Corbière, Laforgue. In an interview about his first acquaintance with French symbolism, Eliot stated, in *La France Libre*, in 1944, that if he had not discovered Baudelaire and all his



descendants, he would not have been able to write. The main influence acknowledged was Laforgue, about whom he wrote:

Laforgue was the first to teach me the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech.

1909-1910, Eliot wrote *Conversation Galante* (poem)

Preludes I and II (poems)

Portrait of a Lady (poem)

began *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (poem)

In 1910, Eliot graduated and went to Paris, where he stayed from October 1910 until July 1911. He attended lectures at the Sorbonne. He met Alain Fournier, who made him read Claudel and Gide, and introduced him to Rivi re. He also went to hear Bergson at Coll ge de France.

1910, *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* (poem)

Prelude III (poem)

In August 1911, Eliot went to Munich. There he met Hofmannstahl.

1911, finished *Prufrock*

In 1911, Eliot entered the graduate philosophy school at Harvard. Besides a basic course in philosophy, he pursued Indian and Sanskrit literature and philosophy. He also took boxing lessons. In 1913, he was made an assistant in philosophy at Harvard. He began to work on his dissertation on a contemporary English philosopher, F.H. Bradley. In 1914, he left for Germany, to study at the University of Marburg. When the First World War began, he went to England, Merton College, Oxford, having been given a Sheldon Travelling Fellowship to study Aristotle for a year under Harold Joachim, until 1915. In September 1914, he met Ezra Pound, who wrote in a letter about him:

... I was jolly well right about Eliot. He has sent in the best poem I have yet had or seen from an American. Pray God it be not a single and unique success (...) He is the only American I know of who has made what I can call adequate preparation for writing. He has actually trained himself and modernized himself on his own.

1914, *Aunt Helen* (poem)

Morning at the Window (poem)

The Boston Evening Transcript (poem)

Cousin Nancy (poem)

Mr. Apollinax (poem)

Hysteria (poem)

In 1908, Ezra Pound had left America for Italy. During the same year the Imagist group of poetry came into being in London. In 1909, Ezra Pound arrived in London. During the same year, Gertrude Stein, who lived in Paris, wrote *Three Lives*. In 1910, Mark Twain died. In 1912, Harriet Monroe brought out the magazine *Poetry* in Chicago. In 1913, Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg published their poems. In 1914,



Tennessee Williams was born. In England D.H. Lawrence published *Sons and Lovers* in 1913.

In 1915, short of money, Eliot took a job as a school teacher. He taught French, Latin, mathematics, drawing, swimming, geography, history and baseball at High Wycombe, then at Highgate Junior School. In a letter to John Quinn (New York lawyer, patron and art collector to whom Eliot later presented the manuscript of *The Waste Land*), dated 12th August 1915, Pound was writing about Eliot:

He has more entrails than might appear from his quiet exterior, I think.

On June 26th 1915 (as appears in the Hampstead Register Office),

T.S. Eliot, Bachelor, 26, and Vivienne Haigh-Wood, 27, were married.

Between 1914-1915, therefore, four major events occurred in Eliot's life. First, he came to England and remained there for the rest of his life. Second, he abandoned both his studies of philosophy and his prospects of becoming a professional philosopher in his native country. He finished and actually sent his dissertation on Bradley to Harvard, in 1916. Yet he never returned there to defend it and take his doctor's degree. Third, he became acquainted with Ezra Pound, his most important literary friend, who influenced both his literary criticism and his poetic strategy. Pound found the first publisher for Eliot's poems and introduced Eliot to other writers such as Wyndham Lewis, Ford Madox Ford, Yeats and Joyce. And, last though not least, he married his first wife. She was to die in 1947, in a mental home. Here is how a biographer of Eliot, Lyndall Gordon, describes her, in *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford University Press, 1977):

Vivienne Haigh-Wood was a few months older than Eliot; when they met, both were twenty-six. She was, at the time, a governess with a Cambridge family, but was interested in the arts. Her father, whom she loved, was a painter; she herself painted and studied ballet and, later, wrote poetry and prose sketches (...) She was attractive to men, but evidently not the kind of woman a gentleman would like to introduce to his mother. Eliot, silent and shy, was touched by her free manner, her lavish temperament, and her downright opinions...

A year later, Eliot said that he had been through 'the most awful nightmare of anxiety that the mind of man could conceive'. But his inborn emotional laziness must have needed that, since he hurried to add that he had 'lived through material for a score of long poems'. Can he already have been on his way to *The Waste Land*? He also stated:

... she has been ready to sacrifice everything for me (...) She has everything to give that I want, and she gives it. I owe her everything.

Lyndall Gordon also tells us that



... Eliot's friends remembered a chic and literate woman who became, through illness, too hysterical and bothersome to be endured.

June 1915, *Prufrock* was published.

In 1916, Eliot's main occupations were teaching and book reviewing. As to his teaching, he wrote in a letter:

... all I wanted to do was write poetry, and teaching seemed to take up less time than everything else, but that was a delusion (...) To hold the class's attention you must project your personality on them, and some people enjoy doing that; I couldn't, it took too much out of me.

In the meanwhile, Eliot kept writing. *The Waste Land* must have indeed been in progress even if Eliot himself may have been unaware of the fact. The poem was issued only in 1922, but seemed to have been composed over a very long span of time. Concerning his manner of composition, Eliot wrote to Conrad Aiken in August 1916:

Composing on the typewriter, I find that I am sloughing off all my long sentences which I used to dote upon. Short, staccato, like modern French prose. The typewriter makes for lucidity, but I am not sure that it encourages subtlety.

These lines show that Eliot had already discovered the secret of good criticism, of that kind of criticism which is a piece of literature in itself: the short sentence, the obvious yet slyly indirect meaning. A misleading accessibility, in short.

In September 1916, in a letter to his brother, Eliot complains of an intense fear that he might already have lost his poetic energy, that he will never again be able to write anything worth reading:

I often feel that J.A.P. is a swan-song, but I never mention the fact.

This fear of forthcoming poetic dryness was a lifelong affliction with Eliot. In 1947, in *On Poetry: An Address* (Concord Academy, Massachusetts), he restated it at large:

I have always been haunted by one or the other of two doubts. The first is, that nothing I have written is really of permanent value: and that makes it hard to believe in what one wants to do next. Neither one's inner feelings, nor public approval, is satisfactory assurance: for some men have been enthusiastic about their own poetry and nobody has agreed with them; and other men have been acclaimed as great poets, and ridiculed by a later generation. But the second doubt is still more distressing. I sometimes feel that some, at least, of what I have written, is very good, but that I shall never again write anything good. Some imp always whispers to me, as I am struggling to get down to any new piece of work, that this is going to be lamentably bad, and that I won't know it.



At least three times during my life, and for periods of some duration, I have been convinced that I shall never again be able to write anything worth reading. And perhaps this time it is true.

In the summer of 1916, Eliot became acquainted with Clive Bell and, through him, with Roger Fry, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, Ottoline Morrell, Aldous Huxley, Middleton Murry. Lyndall Gordon informs us that, among those English writers, Eliot

... remained an outsider. They did not feel at ease with him. His feeling for the conventional and his prim manners were not particularly endearing. His ostentatious learning (partly effrontery, he later admitted) did not impress.

Aldous Huxley met Eliot in December 1916, and he hurried to describe him in a letter to Julian Huxley, using words to the same effect:

... just a Europeanized American, overwhelmingly cultured, talking about French literature in the most uninspired fashion imaginable.

Lytton Strachey described Eliot as

... rather ill and rather American; altogether not quite gay enough ... But by no means to be sniffed at.

As to Virginia Woolf, Lyndall Gordon infers again that she

... rather liked him – his formidable air entertained her – but he remained peripheral to her life and, for a while in the early twenties, his self-pity became a bit tiresome. She did not look forward to his visits and used to sigh over him in her diary: O dear, Eliot on the phone again. The Woolfs and the Bells coped with Eliot's punctiliousness by treating him as a family joke. They found him deliciously comic. 'Come to dinner', Virginia would write to her brother-in-law. 'Eliot will be there in a fourpiece suit'.

In 1917, Eliot gave up teaching and entered the foreign department of Lloyds Bank, which he left in 1925. World War I was drawing to an end. Eliot has been accused of ignoring his contemporary historical events, yet here he is, writing about the war in a letter to his father:

... everyone's individual lives are so swallowed up in the one great tragedy that one almost ceases to have personal experiences or emotions (...) I have a lot of things to write about if the time ever comes when people will attend to them.

1917, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (first volume of poems)

Ezra Pound, His Metric and Poetry (essay of literary criticism)

1919, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (essay)

Gerontion (poem)



1920, *Poems* (second volume of poetry)

The Sacred Wood (first volume of essays on literary criticism)

In 1921, Eliot wrote a draft of *The Waste Land*, which he sent to Ezra Pound. The latter suggested various changes, thus playing quite an important part in giving the poem its presently known form. Eliot's editorship of *The Criterion* began in October 1922, and was to continue until 1939.

In February 1921, while Eliot's most controversial long poem was being completed, Virginia Woolf happened to write in her diary the poet's following remark:

The critics say I am learned and cold. The truth is I am neither.

1922, October, *The Waste Land* (published at the same time with Joyce's *Ulysses*)

1924, *Four Elizabethan Dramatists* (essays)

1926, *Fragment of a Prologue*

1927, *Fragment of an Agon* (united with the previous poem in *Sweeney Agonistes*, 1932)

1927, *Journey of the Magi* (poem)

1927, *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca* (essay)

In 1927, Eliot became a British citizen and was confirmed in the Church of England. Yet, he once confessed that, besides his 'Catholic cast of mind', he also possessed a 'Calvinistic heritage and a Puritanic temperament' (*On Poetry and Poets*). In 1928, in a letter to Herbert Read, he wrote:

Some day I want to write an essay about the point of view of an American who wasn't an American, because he was born in the South and went to school in New England as a small boy with a nigger drawl, but who wasn't a southerner in the South because his people were northerners in a border state and looked down on all southerners and Virginians, and who so was never anything anywhere and who therefore felt himself to be more Frenchman than American and more an Englishman than a Frenchman and yet felt that the USA up to a hundred years ago was a family extension.

Stephen Spender, undergraduate in 1928, remembered that, at the time, contemporary writers seemed to fall into three categories. First, there were the writers generally approved of, who were rather remote from the young generation. These were the Georgian poets, the novelists praised by *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times*. Second came the experimentalists, who were trying to be new at all costs: Gertrude Stein, Edith Sitwell, e.e. cummings. Third, the writers concerned with the very acute 'problem of living in a history which though real was extremely difficult to apprehend': Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, Eliot.

1927, December, *Salutation* (poem, part II of *Ash-Wednesday*)

1928, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (essay)



- 1928, *Perch'io non spero* (poem, part I of *Ash-Wednesday*)
 A Song for Simeon (poem)
 1929, *Som de l'escalina* (poem, part III of *Ash-Wednesday*)
 Dante (essay)
 Animula (poem)
 1930, *Ash-Wednesday* (poem)
 Marina (poem)
 1931, October, *Triumphal March* (poem)
 Difficulties of a Statesman (poem)

In 1932, Eliot returned to America for a short while, to lecture at Harvard and Virginia.

- 1932, *Selected Essays 1917-1932*
 1933, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (essays)
 1934, *After Strange Gods* (essay)
 1934, *The Rock* (poetic choruses meant to be broadcast)

In February 1933, Eliot left his wife. This painful decision is indirectly conveyed by the mood of *Ash-Wednesday*, a poem completed not long before, but elaborated during the long period while Eliot could not make up his mind whether it was right to do it. He never divorced his wife until she died, but refused to see her again, no matter how hard she tried to reach him. In 1934, he wrote in a letter:

I don't think my poetry is any good: not *The Rock* anyway, it isn't; nothing but a brilliant future behind me. What is one to do?

- 1934, *Elizabethan Essays*
 1935, *Murder in the Cathedral* (first play)
 Burnt Norton (first *Quartet*)
 1936, *Essays Ancient and Modern*
 1939, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (volume of essays on culture and society)
 The Family Reunion (second play)
 Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (volume of poems)

In 1939, Eliot closed his literary review, *The Criterion*. He became director at the publishing house Faber and Faber.

- 1940, *East Coker* (second *Quartet*)
 1941, February, *The Dry Salvages* (third *Quartet*)
 1942, October, *Little Gidding* (fourth *Quartet*)

In 1947, Eliot's first wife died in a mental asylum. In 1948, Eliot was awarded the Order of Merit and the NOBEL PRIZE for literature.

- 1948, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (volume of essays)



From Poe to Valéry (essay)
 1950, *The Cocktail Party* (third play)
Poems Written in Early Youth, printed.
 1955, *The Confidential Clerk* (fourth play)
 1957, *On Poetry and Poets* (volume of essays)

In January 1957, Eliot married Valerie Fletcher.

1959, *The Elder Statesman* (last play)
 1964, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*
 (Eliot's youthful dissertation, published by his wife)
 1963, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*
 1962, *Collected Plays*

Eliot died in London, on January 4th, 1965. Ezra Pound's *Valediction* (For T.S.E., 'Sewanee Review', 1966) was:

Let him rest in peace. I can only repeat, but with the urgency of 50 years ago:
 READ HIM.

1965, *To Criticize the Critic* (posthumous volume of essays)

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These few biographical data can hardly offer an image of Eliot's life. His opinion was that a critic

... must be at liberty to study such material as his curiosity leads him to investigate, as long as the victim is dead and the laws of libel cannot be invoked to stop him. Nor is there any reason why biographies of poets should not be written. They are very useful. Any critic seriously concerned with a man's work should be expected to know something about the man's life.

Several biographies of Eliot have been written. It seems easier, though, to reach Eliot by reading memories recorded by people who knew him, as well as the jokes uttered by or about him.

Virginia Woolf, for instance, commenting on some violent scenes in Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, wickedly remarked:

If you are as anaemic as Tom, there is a glory in blood.

I.A. Richards described him as 'utterly and perfectly banklike, as composed and cautious as a cat'.

Herbert Read remembers:

... he would recommend caution – caution in showing one's hand too soon, caution in speech and correspondence, caution in the small exchanges of



literary life. ‘Always’, he would say, ‘acknowledge the gift of a book before there has been time to read it: if you wait, you have to commit yourself to an opinion’. Another of his rules was: ‘Never contribute to the first number of a periodical – wait to see what company you are going to keep’.

The same Herbert Read remembers that Eliot was ‘a townsman by preference, and never at ease in the country’. That he did not like to travel. That towards the end of his life ‘he became just a little pontifical, and would refer to his own writings in a tone of voice that was a shade too solemn. He would use expressions like ‘Valéry, Yeats and I...’ That ‘one always had a slight uneasiness in his presence, fearing that he might at any moment assume the judicial robes’. That he was ‘profoundly learned, profoundly poetic, profoundly spiritual’. That he had moods of gaiety and moods of great depression. That ‘he had a streak of hypochondria, and was addicted to pills and potions’. That ‘he made a fetish of umbrellas. He had them specially made with enormous handles, with the excuse that no one would take such an umbrella from a cloakroom by mistake’. That ‘he relished good food and beer, but his specialty was cheese’. Who knows how many of these ‘that he...’ have some, or any, truth in them?

Stephen Spender remembers that, in 1929, when *Ash-Wednesday* had just been published, during a meeting at the Oxford poetry Club, an undergraduate asked Eliot:

Please, Sir, What do you mean by the line: ‘Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree’?’ Eliot stared back for a while and replied, ‘I mean ‘Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree’.

Eliot’s sense of humour peeps out of a few sentences he uttered about Auden. He stated that Auden was not a scholar, and his argument followed:

I was reading an *Introduction* by him to a selection of Tennyson’s poems, in which he says that Tennyson is the stupidest poet in the language. Now if Auden had been a scholar he’d have been able to think of some stupider poets.

Robert Giroux remembers telling Eliot that most editors were failed writers, to which Eliot promptly replied, ‘Perhaps, but so are most writers’. He also remembers the only time that Eliot met Carl Sandburg:

‘Just look at him!’ Sandburg said to me, pointing at Eliot. ‘Look at that man’s face – the suffering, and the pain’. By this time Eliot was wearing a great big grin. Sandburg continued, ‘You can’t hold him responsible for the poets and critics who ride on his coat-tails!’ With that, he walked out of the office and I realized that one of the great literary encounters of our time had occurred, and as far as I knew Eliot had not uttered a single word.

Lyndall Gordon says that

People who met Eliot casually were charmed by his fine manners and modest silence, but those on whose friendship he relied saw a man constantly on the



verge of a breakdown, peevish and complaining, oppressed by self-pity, weakened by weariness, and preoccupied with fears of poverty.

At a large London party, when a guest remarked, 'Very interesting', Eliot hastened to rejoin, 'Yes. If one can see the full horror of it'.

Such humorous incidents, jokes, personal memories about Eliot are numerous. They spice the image of the poet, but do not make it any clearer. T.S. Eliot, the man who was born in 1888 and died at 77, in 1965, remains as enigmatic as ever. Maybe because he himself intended us to know next to nothing. Maybe, too, because, as Valéry once said, for a biography to convey the essence of a man, the biographer ought to be able to describe each day of the man's life knowing as little about tomorrow as, at the time, the man in question knew himself.

Valéry intimates that a life must not be read backwards, beginning with the end and ending with the beginning. It so happened that Eliot's life did seem to unfurl backwards. Yet, besides what can be found in his works, for the time being we are not likely to learn very much more.

*

The revolt aroused by Eliot's ambiguity of tone, of mood, of poetic manner, the discontent of his contemporaries might be, in a way, his best (though indirect) presentation. It all started, more or less, with the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922. Among the first, Amy Lowell declared: 'I think it is a piece of tripe'. F.L. Lucas mocked at the *Notes* to the poem (which Eliot himself discredited later), by saying:

... a poem that has to be explained in notes is not unlike a picture with 'This is a dog' inscribed beneath.

Arnold Bennett asked Eliot whether these notes were 'a lark or serious'. A critic named N.P. Dawson felt certain that the poem would be greatly enjoyed in Prohibition America, since, it seemed to him,

The dirge is doubtless 'Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum', and the lament is 'oh how dry I am!'

Twenty years later, Yvor Winters still thought that

Eliot, in dealing with debased and stupid material, felt himself obligated to seek his form in this matter: the result is confusion and journalistic reproduction of detail.

It seems that Eliot's subject matter – his taste for irritating, disgusting sadnesses and concealed, base tragedies, the same as his elliptical expression of them (which alone could avoid melodrama) were slow in appealing to readers accustomed



to milder, genteel poetic idioms. Many early reviews of *The Waste Land* amply (often comically) prove it. Charles Powell states:

The thing is a mad medley. It has a plan, because its author says so: and presumably it has some meaning, because he speaks of its symbolism; but meaning, plan, and intention alike are massed behind a smoke-screen of anthropological and literary erudition, and only the pundit, the pedant, or the clairvoyant will be in the least aware of them. Dr Frazer and Miss J.L. Weston are freely and admittedly his creditors, and the bulk of the poem is under an enormously composite and cosmopolitan mortgage; to Spenser, Shakespeare, Webster, Kyd, Middleton, Milton, Marvell, Goldsmith, Ezekiel, Buddha, Virgil, Ovid, Dante, St. Augustine, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and others. Lines of German, French and Italian are thrown in at will or whim; so, too, are solos from nightingales, cocks, hermit-thrushes, and Ophelia (...) For the rest one can only say that if Mr Eliot had been pleased to write in demotic English *The Waste Land* might not have been, as it just is to all but anthropologists and literati, so much waste paper.

Few critics, if any, would dream today of dismissing *The Waste Land* as waste paper. We are no longer shocked by its bookish allusions, its elliptical lines and triviality. In a way, Eliot's poetry has become traditional. We find nothing uncommon in this cultural poetry of violent sadness.

An anonymous reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* makes somewhat milder remarks. He finds Eliot to be 'a dandy of the choicest phrase', and is consequently shocked by 'blatancies like 'the young man carbuncular'', which must have irritated his sense of decency in a poem. He also notices that, in *The Waste Land*, Eliot borrows more lines than he creates, and states that the poem exists 'in the greater part in the state of notes'.

He quotes as totally unsatisfactory the last stanza of the poem, which is regarded today as a masterful classic of allusiveness, of cultured, poetry. He accuses Eliot of 'walking very near the limits of coherency'. But, he ends up,

... it is the finest horses which have the most tender mouths, and some unsympathetic tug has sent Mr Eliot's gift awry. When he recovers control we shall expect his poetry to have gained in variety and strength from this ambitious experiment.

The poetry written afterwards by Eliot himself and his followers proved the contrary. It can hardly be said to have recovered from that 'ambitious' experiment. It assimilated it so well that the very concept of poetic imagination was changed, intellectualized. Echoes of other poems, lines that bring the music of other minds provide in more recent poetry a nostalgia previously induced by picturesque landscapes and adorned imagery. The difference between pre- and post- Eliot poetic taste is made obvious by F.L. Lucas' review: 'Among the maggots that breed in the corruption of poetry one of the commonest is the bookworm', he said.

He then spoke of 'that Professorenpoesie which finds in literature the inspiration that life gives no more, which replaces depth by muddiness, beauty by



echoes, passion by necrophily’. To attempt an intelligible interpretation of the poem was felt by Lucas to be a sure way of making oneself downright ridiculous, unless one had ‘the common modern gift of judging poetry without knowing what it means’. His taste for logical, clear, tame syntax in a poem was badly hurt by Eliot’s roundabout, twisted, ‘dislocated’ language. Lucas clearly stated it:

The punctuation largely disappears in the latter part of the poem –whether this be subtlety or accident, it is impossible to say. ‘Shantih’ is equivalent to the ‘Peace that passeth understanding’ – which in this case it certainly does. All this is very difficult; as Dr Johnson said under similar circumstances, ‘I would it were impossible’.

Lucas concluded that

perhaps this unhappy composition should have been left to sink itself, as the borrowed jewels he has set in his head do not make Mr Eliot’s toad the more prepossessing.

Yvor Winters, in 1943, still accused Eliot’s cultural poetry of being if not still-born, at least definitely short-lived:

The method is that of a man who is unable to deal with his subject, and resorts to the rough approximation of quotation; it is the method of the New England farmer who meets every situation in life with a saw from *Poor Richard*; it betokens the death of mind and of the sensibility alike.

In 1937, the American novelist Thomas Wolfe published *The Web and the Rock* (The Sun Dial Press, New York). One of his characters, an American writer himself, Mr. Malone by name, voices a hearty dislike of Eliot. Here are his very words (p.529):

‘Not bad’, he cried chokingly, ‘when compared to the backwoods bilge of Mr. Sinclair Lewis! Not bad when compared to the niggling nuances of that neurotic New Englander from Missouri, Mr. T.S. Eliot, who, after baffling an all-too-willing world for years by the production of such incomprehensible nonsense as *The Waste Land* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and gaining for himself a reputation for perfectly enormous erudition among the aesthetes of Kalamazoo by the production of verses in dog-Latin and rondels in bastard French that any convent schoolgirl would be ashamed to acknowledge as her own, has now, my friends, turned prophet, priest and political revolutionary, and is at the present moment engaged in stunning the entire voting population of that agnostic republic known as the British Isles with the information that he – God save the mark! – Mr. Eliot from Missouri, has become a Royalist! A Royalist, if you please’, choked Mr. Malone, ‘and an Anglo-Catholic! ... Why, the news must have a struck terror to the heart of every Laborite in England! The foundations of British atheism are imperiled! ... If the great Mr. Eliot continues to affront the political and religious beliefs of



every true-blue Englishman in this way, God knows what we can expect next, but we must be prepared for anything!

Even forty years later some people think the same. In 1960, Karl Shapiro firmly declared:

The very worst passages are those which are merely quotes (...) *The Waste Land* (...) is one of the curiosities of English literature (...) ... hoax or not, it was very shortly made the sacred cow of modern poetry and the object of more pious literary nonsense than any modern work save the *Cantos* of Pound (...) It is, in fact, not a form at all but a negative version of form.

Aldous Huxley himself ridiculed the poem by seeing in it

... a great operation that is never performed; powerful lights are brought into focus, anaesthetics and assistants are posted, the instruments are prepared. Finally the surgeon arrives and opens his bag – but closes it again and goes off.

Joyce wrote a well-meaning parody, which has already been quoted. It implicitly acknowledges the originality of Eliot's idiom. There is no spite in it, no taste for polemic.

In 1945, a book called *The Joyous Pilgrimage* published opinions of contemporaries about poets, collected by Ian Donnelly, a New Zealand journalist. One novelist, whose name is not given, joylessly asserts that

... Eliot is definitely a bad influence. He is donnish, pedantic, cold. He is an example of the over-educated American (...) It would have been better for contemporary English literature if Eliot had stayed in Louisville, or wherever he came from.

Another contemporary, Humbert Wolfe, sounds just as grim and final:

Eliot is a poet who cannot write poetry. He has a great mind, but spiritually and intellectually, he is muscle-bound.

The poet Edmund Blunden (I almost spelt 'Blunder', by mistake) whimpers in a similar, joyless mood:

I don't know why Eliot should feel so badly about things. There is no reason why he should have to write in that 'I-cannot-be-gay' manner. He did not have to go through the war.

Eliot did not fight in the war indeed, though it was not for lack of trying. He had tried to enlist, as a matter of fact, and had been rejected on medical grounds. However that may be, honest criticism, as Eliot himself started, is supposed to be directed at the poetry not against the poet.

The above quoted heated, hasty assertions are rather pieces of slander than of criticism. They evince a taste for drastic verdicts, a false courage of saying no to what



the mass of readers had already said yes, an alarming lack of understanding for poetry other than conventional. Most of all, these angry (young and older) men turn out to be the kind of critics who like to shake their fists at literature rather than enjoy it. Critics more involved in denying whatever they could lay their minds on, than in literary criticism proper.

Even the *Oxford Dictionary of English Literature* (1939) characterizes Eliot in the same misleading way:

His free verse forms and his individualistic and often obscurely allusive writings have exercised a profound influence on modern and younger poets.

Another falsifying piece of literary criticism concerning Eliot's work is the simplification of his despair from a sociological point of view, attempted in the *History of English Literature* (1956) by Anixt (a Russian survey of British literature, actually a handbook of communist wilful, even artful, misinterpretation of capitalist texts). The author calls Eliot 'the leader of reactionary contemporary literature' and accuses the poet of writing 'decadent' poems, meant to bewilder the 'bourgeois readers' by their false anger against a society which in fact Eliot approves of. Of course, Anixt will not allow himself to be mystified. He alertly perceives in Eliot the 'ideologist of the lost generation'. Eliot's poems are pervaded by unforgivable 'cynical nihilism'. His essays are as reactionary as his poems, Anixt states. Eliot aims at belittling what is really valuable in English literature:

He considers *Hamlet* to be a failure; Dryden and Pope were, in Eliot's opinion, better poets than Byron.

The misunderstanding of Eliot's work is, in this short chapter, complete.

As late as 1962, a *Literature of England* by Eric Gillett still has a tinge of malice in its superficiality:

Always sincere, often obscure, sometimes arid, Eliot certainly expressed the intellectual mood of the moment, but he was essentially a writer of verse who was of the intelligentsia. His unquestionable sincerity gained a hearing for his verses, some of which are allusive and often pompously and unintelligibly annotated (...) He is not a natural, instinctive singer but a literary poet whose music is scanty, austere, and very occasionally lovely.

Indeed, 'lovely' would hardly be an appropriate description of Eliot's gravity.

A master of invective against Eliot was A.C. Ward (*20th Century English Literature, 1901-1960*). He began by announcing that in 1922, upon the publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, 'literature left the highroad of communication and retreated into an esoteric fastness', which led to the critic's embarking upon 'textual detective work'. His point of view is that 'nothing is so disturbing in poetry as incomprehensibility'. He feels Eliot's imagination to be 'anaemic and chill'. In an epilogue to *Modern English Literature* (1944), Ward minutely accounts for his dissatisfaction with Eliot. Most of the statements are impressionistic. They have an air of having been written on the spur of the moment. They also convey Ward's own sour



mood and grim nature, and have little to do with literature proper. He too, maintains that Eliot's literary influence was 'disastrous'. As disastrous as Shakespeare's, he says. English dramatists needed three centuries to 'work Shakespeare out of their system'. Ward feels it impossible to foretell how long the 'purgation' of Eliot from poetry, drama and criticism might take. He fervently hopes that, in case the opinion that *The Waste Land* was 'the hoax of the century' is correct, then

Eliot's shadow will endure little longer than the span of his own life, but if, on the other hand, succeeding generations accept him as an intellectual giant, the outlook is bleak.

None of Ward's fears have come true. We do not concentrate upon Eliot's philosophy more than on his creation. Yet he survives, and has not maimed his poetic followers. He has very effectively spurred them into being different. Ward's sentences have a melodramatic, Byronic halo about them. He complains about the 'irony of the Eliot revolution', which released English poetic drama from the rule of Shakespearean blank verse 'only to clamp upon it the stranglehold of Eliotian free verse'. Eliot's poetry is described as running 'round and round a closed inner circle, taking on mentally conditioned passengers at the several stations'.

Ward's resources of venom (and superficiality) are inexhaustible. Eliot's gift for coining critical concepts in quotable phrases (which many critics may have envied him) is ruthlessly charged at. Ward ejaculates:

To quote Eliot became, as it were, a ritual genuflection to a world oracle.

Eliot's life experience is questioned as well, and the conclusion is:

... what remains to be determined by future inquiries is whether Eliot's waste land and hollow men were discoveries or inventions.

When the turn of Eliot's poetical strategy comes, we learn that Eliot's attraction among younger poets was an 'anti-technical' one. That in Eliot originated a generation of 'new metaphysicals', who wanted only to 'mask their feebleness of imagination and poverty of thought' in their 'pseudo-scholarly' writings. Erich Kästner, a German novelist and poet (who wrote *Emil and the Detectives*), is also quoted with a statement about Eliot's play *The Family Reunion*. The words discredit, in fact, the German writer's own ability to understand English literature. Here they are (1959):

As soon as the triviality looked like becoming so thick that you could cut it with a knife (which was continually happening) one of the characters would tell the other in an elegiac voice: 'You cannot understand me'. Or 'I cannot explain it to you'. Or 'Even if I did try to explain you wouldn't understand ...' And that always saved the situation for the time being. Because the audience then thought: This must be a most profound and significant play. Not even the actors know what it is about.



Lawrence Durrell, in *Clea (Alexandria Quartet)*, has a character (the writer Pursewarden) speak of Eliot's gravity, too. Only he does it in far from disparaging terms:

Eliot puts a cool chloroform pad upon a spirit too tightly braced by the information it has gathered. His honesty of measure and his resolute bravery to return to the headman's axe is a challenge to us all; but where is the smile? He induces awkward sprains at a moment when we are trying to dance! He has chosen greyness rather than light, and he shares his portion with Rembrandt.

Another witty (though unfair) statement, this time mocking at Eliot's criticism, comes from one of his (not very inspired) biographers, T.S. Matthews:

His attempts (if they were genuine attempts) to explain his own poetic practice leave most of us in a state of enlightened mystification. Take the famous – the notorious – 'objective correlative'. This hideous phrase, it will have to be admitted, was coined by Eliot himself. What on earth does it mean? Well, as nearly as you can put it into plain, unscrunched English, it means a verbal image that works on the reader the same way it worked on the writer.

When the 'objective correlative' does work, it's like hitting the jackpot on a fruit machine: three white leopards in a row, lady. This can only happen when the reader sees and takes in all the references Eliot has used. If the reader gets some references but not all of them, it's like seeing two white leopards but not three: a partial picture and no jackpot. If the reader fails to recognize any references at all, he still has the pleasure of the slight exercise of pulling the lever and hearing and seeing the smooth whirring blur of a cunningly contrived mechanism.

These superficial, disparaging judgments have been listed only to gratify a certain taste for revolt in Eliot's reader, and then infirm it altogether. Eliot may be a difficult poet. Yet, should an experienced reader be discouraged by the mere thought of it? How was it possible, though, that, more than any of his contemporaries, Eliot managed to gather round his head so much mockery and parody? That a writer like Richard Aldington, for instance, should feel prompted to devise a character who was supposed to stand for Eliot himself and whose very first words, when he was nearly three, were, 'Mother, why precisely does the refrigerator drip?' – words which, as a matter of fact, mimic to some extent Eliot's manner of speech?

Part of the answer might be found in Eliot's own critical and poetic strategy. The critics who thus blamed him must have assumed, whether they were aware of it or not, Eliot's own disparaging mood: the consistency which he shows in disparaging himself, his characters, the writers he examines. Eliot gave them the cue, and they gladly took it. He seemed to beg slapping by turning the other cheek. The false humility and apparent aggressivity in his works were taken by most critics at their face value, which was an unwise thing to do. Eliot is essentially a writer of the understatement.

The largest part of the answer lies in the fact that Eliot's poetry changed more than the practice of writing poetry. It brought about a revolution in the reading of a



poem. A concentrated poetry, in which ‘links’ (from connecting and explanatory words to elements of narrative continuity) are ‘suppressed’, will require a similar concentration in the reading. If it is true that any individual piece of literature suggests its own appropriate way of being read, Eliot brought along his own logic of reading poetry. Virginia Woolf was trying to introduce this new gymnastics of strained, concentrated reading in the novel. She advised:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they flow ...

She thus claimed another kind of order for the early 20th century novel. An implicit order, as opposed to the explicit narrative of the Victorians. She preached the apparently disorderly narrative: breaking real chronology and allowing the mind to advance by random associations. Stream of consciousness, this pattern was called. Readers revolted against her interrupted narratives which, at best, had an inferred continuity. The act of reading was strenuous, and left one breathless.

The same revolt was experienced by readers against Eliot’s devices of breaking the continuity, the fluency of the poem. In *Introduction to St. John Perse* (whose *Anabasis* he translated from French into English) Eliot explained:

Any obscurity of the poem, on first readings, is due to the suppression of ‘links in the chain’, or explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence or to the love of the cryptogram. The justification of such abbreviation of method is that the sequence of images coincides and concentrates into one intense impression of barbaric civilization. The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced.

For a while, somewhat later though, there was some agitation among critics round the idea of ‘active’, ‘creative’ reading. The reader was supposed to take part in creating the secrets of the poem. This poem was like an iceberg, and the reading of it had to plunge underwater to see it whole. Gradually, everybody came to understand that a new way of reading had emerged.

An inventive reader was born. The transition from the helpless traditional reader, who only knew what the author told him, to a more independent, more energetic reader, who furnishes the work with his own associations, was slow and painful. But, if today we can read a poem, with an eye to what has not been directly uttered, if we now like to endow even the older texts with a richness of the understatement, we must remember that this curiosity, this ability, to see more, to look deeper into the scaffold of a work, to search in words for more than just their face value, have been made possible by Eliot too.



POETRY

1. COHERENCE IN FRAGMENTARINESS

Eliot's breathless poems have an air of fragmentariness. They seem to be made of pieces forcibly joined together. Transitions between one fragment and the other are violently abrupt. The poet's mind jumps from association to association, until the objects and lives described grow vague and fade unnoticed. The real stage of the poem becomes merged with the poet's mind. Eliot's poems replace reality by a mental landscape: a stream of consciousness wherein each thought is the story of one real object and all thoughts are gathered into one mood which gives coherence to the poem. Eliot's poetry is an indirect one. Its unity of mood can only be inferred from various narrative signs: several incidents which can be fused into an elliptical story, recurrent motifs that suggest a common narrative. As a rule, the voices in Eliot's poem are all supported by an implicit narrative scaffold, whose secrecy makes us reluctant to unveil it as well.

*

THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK is a character's dialogue with himself, a dramatic monologue. Prufrock recalls disparate past experiences, which burst into his present. From their apparently odd order and their effect on his present mood, we can infer the whole story of Prufrock's life. The poem has two basic landscapes. It takes place in the two worlds at once. One is the city-scape we all know; in there, past, present and future are monotonously alike and hopeless. The other is an ideal space, 'the chambers of the sea', where there is no past, no present, no future, only the fairy-tale peace of the ever after.

The real Prufrock walks down a half-deserted street at the time when the evening 'is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table'. A sense of illness, even of impending death, pervades the town, its streets, its houses, its sky and gutters, animals and inhabitants alike. In cheap hotels, unknown people spend 'restless' nights. In 'sawdust restaurants', only the oyster-shells are left, dead traces of what once was sea-life. The streets follow one another 'like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent', menacing to lead the passers-by to an 'overwhelming' question,



which everybody takes pains to avoid. A question that may deal either with life, or with death, who knows. Prufrock himself does not want to hear it, so he takes refuge in the companionship of an unseen creature, whom he entreats:

Let us go then, you and I ...

but

Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit.

There is a helplessness in Prufrock's fear of the overwhelming question, which goes very well together with the sense of illness, of agonizing life that oppresses the whole poem. The objects are stirred to life, personified only to suggest unhealthiness. The fog is yellow, and it lazily 'rubs its back upon the window-panes', pushing hard, as if trying to invade the rooms with its pallor. The smoke is yellow, too, and it also pushes against the window-panes, rubbing its 'muzzle' on them. Then it slowly 'slides' over the whole street, floats upon the dirty water of the 'pools that stand in drains', allows itself to be blackened by the soot that 'falls from chimneys', and thus, pale and pitch-like, slips by the terrace, leaps suddenly, as if trying to take the house by surprise, then curls and falls asleep about the walls: a threatening, poisonous air that people must breathe.

Prufrock himself seems stifled by a secret, gnawing illness. He haggardly speaks of his effort to 'prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet'. Weakness causes his hands to shake while he has to live through innumerable 'works and days'. They are hands which can do nothing more than 'lift and drop' a question (the overwhelming question?) on a plate. A weakness invades his soul, which 'murders' and 'creates' little more than 'a hundred indecisions', 'a hundred visions and revisions'. A soul that pushes everything as far from it as possible by merely whispering, 'There will be time, there will be time'. In short, it is a very unsteady, shaky Prufrock that goes about his 'toast and tea' in a room besieged from outside by unbreathable smoke and fog.

Objects and beings (more specifically women) become aggressive. The only exception is that 'you' of the poem, unseen and only three times briefly mentioned. In her (his) vicinity, the afternoon and evening fall asleep 'peacefully', stroked by 'long fingers'. The day grows tired and quiet. Time itself is hidden inside a veil, while the day of the poem leaves reality, making for the dream. All the other inhabitants of the poem are painfully alive, and irreversibly waste their lives on trifles. In the room, Prufrock obsessively repeats,

the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

At the top of the staircase, which Prufrock feels he is going to descend very soon, 'they' look critically at the 'bald spot' in the middle of his hair, at his 'thin' (which means old, withered) arms and legs. They contemplate his growing old as if unaware of their own lives leaking out, of the fact that they themselves will have to



descend the stairs sooner or later, to experience the same feeling of loss which leaves Prufrock powerless, inert.

Other people's hands are said to have 'measured out' Prufrock's life with 'coffee spoons'. He has heard voices 'dying', and seen autumn itself die along with them. Other eyes have fixed him, pinned him against a wall, where he 'sprawled' and 'wriggled' on a pin. Anyway, he describes his helplessness when it is much too late to change it, when all that he can finally do is to 'spit out' the 'butt-ends' of his 'days and ways'. Braceleted or bare arms, 'downed with light brown hair' (reminiscent, how much, of John Donne), and the perfume of dresses have made him 'digress', lose his way: they have prevented him from forcing the moment to its 'crisis'. Retrospectively he remembers he has 'wept and fasted, wept and prayed', but to no effect. He still had to see his slightly bald head severed from his body by those inimical hands, and brought in 'upon a platter', to be seen by those inimical faces. In short, he has seen the 'eternal Footman' (time) hold his coat, ushering him in and out, and 'snicker'. The only feeling left inside him was that he was 'afraid'.

Victimizing strangers gather round Prufrock at a remarkable speed. He feels they pin him to a wall, they cut off his head. He feels he is not far from being like Lazarus, who returns from the dead and is received with as much indifference as if the death he experienced were 'no great matter'. He feels drowned among cups, marmalade, porcelain, ices, spoons, cakes, toast and tea, skirts, shawls, pillows, novels, walls, windows and the mechanical female prattle about Michelangelo. His loneliness benumbs him. He is feeble and has lost all appetite for the life spent in a room (in the company of females). He reiterates his helplessness in meaningless self-questionings: 'Do I dare / Disturb the universe?', 'how should I presume?', 'And how should I begin?', 'Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?' His life seems to have been squeezed off. He feels he is very far from the strength of prince Hamlet. He can only obey the flow of time, and he does so inertly. He contemplates his own powerlessness and whispers:

I grow old ... I grow old ...

He finds nothing else to do about that, except to wear the bottoms of his trousers ridiculously 'rolled'.

The largest part of the poem is haunted by this sad helplessness of a doomed being. The story of Prufrock's real life is a tale of failure. The poem is rather a loveless, than a love song of J. Alfred Prufrock. No song sung at all, as a matter of fact. Not by the hero, anyway. Yet, this real sense of frustration and failure is not the only feeling aroused by the poem.

There exists a parallel world, a parallel mood, a parallel aspiration, which is never uttered, but secretly accompanies all these sad, unfulfilled moments. Prufrock himself complains of an inability to express what lies at the core of his life. He first entreats, 'do not ask, 'What is it?'. Then he complains, 'how should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?', and 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!' He is sure that, instead of making his visit to a room wherein 'the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo', he would have preferred to be 'a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas'. He is afraid that the mermaids, the women of the sea, will never sing to him. Their song would certainly



be different from the empty talks in rooms, among teas and ices. It would be the only song (unreal) in the poem, as a matter of fact.

The end of the poem abruptly reveals that, while all the episodes of loneliness in rooms and among real people have been projected 'in patterns upon a screen', a mysterious couple ('we') have been lingering far away from the true town, 'in the chambers of the sea'. All through the poem, this unuttered sea-dream has dogged each moment of unfulfilment, until it now finally seems to have gathered enough strength to become visible. Only Eliot is not the kind of poet to live in a dream. All his dreams (rather few, as a matter of fact) turn out to be uninhabitable, in the end. So, the end of Prufrock's loveless whispering is an unambiguously, painfully true menace. He warns that his dream will endure only

Till human voices wake us and we drown.

*

In *PORTRAIT OF A LADY* the music of words is as carefully arranged as in *Prufrock*. The rugged tune of *The Waste Land* is not yet in sight. The narrative thread, on the other hand, is somewhat more obvious. The poem is no longer the story of a life. It relates a short-lived relationship between the speaker (a young man) and a middle-aged woman who talks nostalgically about her 'spring'. The same as *Prufrock*, this poem reveals two worlds, two meanings: one real and one unreal, unuttered, only guessed at. The unuttered, hidden landscape is, this time, grim. It binds together all the real episodes, the same as in *Prufrock*, only it has nothing to do with an aspiration. It is a fierce menace. *Prufrock* is the poem of a secret wish. *Portrait of a Lady* is the poem of an inexpressible fear. Both are too intense and personal to be directly stated, and both are, because of that, stifled.

The poem begins on a December afternoon, still, smoky and foggy (the feeling is not new for Eliot), in a woman's room. From the very first lines, the image of the woman is associated with premonitions of death. She has lit only four candles, so the room is 'darkened'. To the hero of the poem, instead of intimate (as it was meant to be), the atmosphere of this room looks like Juliet's tomb. They have been to a concert, and the woman speaks of Chopin's soul being 'resurrected' in the interpretation of his music. The second part of the poem takes place during the following spring, presumably. 'Lilacs are in bloom', and she 'twists one in her fingers while she talks'.

The woman speaks of life that flows, and, all along, she herself keeps fingering a dead flower. The romantic effect of her pose is missed. In the eyes of the (really young) man she is lecturing, she looks grotesque. Spring makes her remember her past 'buried life'. However, she claims that she feels 'at peace' and 'youthful, after all', that is in spite of her advancing age. She feels as if she were on the edge of a precipice, and professes to know for sure that, 'across the gulf', the young man in the poem holds out his hand to reach her. She describes herself as someone at 'her journey's end'. The poem ends on an October night. The young man has come to say good bye before going abroad. She asks him when he will return, then sadly muses (as a warning, in a way):



But our beginnings never know our ends!

All through the poem, she has obsessively repeated the word ‘friendship’. In the end, it seems that she has not got what she wanted. She feels frustrated because this ‘friendship’ has remained a mere word, and she concludes (in two lines whose obvious rhyme is devastatingly ironical):

For everybody said so, all our friends,
They all were sure our feelings would relate
So closely! I myself can hardly understand.
We must leave it now fate.
You will write, at any rate.
Perhaps it is not too late.

The same ironical effect of the noisy rhyme was used in *Prufrock* (‘the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo’). The poet’s intention was as bitter there as it is here. Some rhymes, thus, turn into poison in Eliot’s early poetry.

Although by this time the woman in the poem has grown into the very image of imminent death, paradoxically, the person who really speaks of death, who seems to experience its horror in advance, is the young man. His mood develops from mere irritation to disturbing panic. At first, he merely notices the artificiality of the woman’s behaviour. He seems to see through her, to understand exactly what she wants from him. He even feels guilty as if he had already refused what in fact she will never dare ask. Eliot’s poem, again, is not the story of a failed love affair. There is a hidden meaning to it that goes a long way beyond love, beyond ‘friendship’, beyond all words, beyond life itself as a matter of fact.

At first, the young man feels a ‘tom-tom’ absurdly ‘hammering’ in his mind, while the woman tells him how much her friends mean to her. The predictability of the rhymes in the lines she utters renders them even more ridiculously artificial, unbelievable:

You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,
And how, how rare and strange it is, to find
In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends,
(For indeed I do not love it ... you knew? you are not blind!
How keen you are!)
To find a friend ...

The young man runs away from the woman’s high-browed remarks by breathing deeply (‘Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance’) repeatedly, and he takes refuge in opposite, common-place acts: admiring monuments, discussing recent events, correcting his watch by the public clock (a symbol of time that Eliot never abandons), drinking his beer. Next, his awkward feeling is accompanied by a smile. The woman slowly twists the dead lilac stalk in her hand and is lecturing him on life with the same embarrassingly childish rhymes:



Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
 What life is, you who hold it in your hands; (...)
 You let it flow from you, you let it flow,
 And youth is cruel, and has no remorse
 And smiles at situations which it cannot see .

The young man smiles ‘of course’, and refuses to see the tragedy behind the woman’s words. Her voice ‘returns like an insistent out-of-tune / Of a broken violin’, driving him mad. He imagines himself seated in a park, reading the ‘comics or the sporting page’, paying more attention to a countess who ‘goes upon the stage’ or to a bank defaulter’s confession than to the real woman in front of him. He feels guilty, although he does not see clearly why, and his smile grows heavier and heavier until, towards the end of the poem, when he comes to announce his departure, he feels as if he had mounted the stairs on his ‘hands and knees’. He also feels like one who has just seen his own smiling face in a mirror, and the image looked frighteningly unfamiliar to him. Like the grin of a skeleton, almost. His self-possession ‘gutters’, he feels ‘in the dark’.

The woman has gradually dragged him out of his easy going irritation, into a deep fear. He is unable to do or say anything about it. An unseen pressure weighs him down. He wriggles:

And I must borrow every changing shape
 To find expression ... dance, dance
 Like a dancing bear,
 Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.
 Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance –

He imagines that she wants him to write letters to her so that, if she should die ‘some afternoon’, he might find himself ‘sitting pen in hand’, writing to no one. Stretching his hand towards the dreaded beyond. Feelings of loneliness, of fugitive time, of deep uncertainty burst in upon him. The inexpressible significance of the poem lies in this very horror finally inspired to the young man by what the woman (whose portrait he will never be able to draw) was the first to see. Eliot tries to stifle the dread by ending jokingly:

Now that we talk of dying –
 And should I have the right to smile?

Nevertheless, the image of the woman has been replaced by that of death. A portrait of a lady?...

*

The question above sounds rather like a dirge. The menacing approach of death, of the unknown is also the kernel of *AUNT HELEN*. Miss Helen Slingsby, the ‘maiden aunt’ of the narrator, lived in a small house ‘near a fashionable square’, together with her four servants. The only thing we learn about her is that, when she



died, ‘there was silence in heaven’. The poem does not follow her into death, as *Portrait of a Lady* seemed to try. It is a disillusioned record of how the living react, of how little they see and understand, of how death in its mystery fails to affect them. The servants’ appetite for life is even greater after the old lady’s death. The undertaker wipes his feet with an expert gesture on entering her shuttered room. His attitude seems to imply that he did this many times before, and may be doing it for a long time still; that he has witnessed many people’s deaths and has almost come to feel eternal, as if death were going to spare him. His only reaction to it is:

He was aware that this sort of thing had occurred before.

The Dresden clock goes on ticking on the mantelpiece (image which becomes an impressive symbol in Eliot’s play *The Family Reunion*). The dogs are given even more food than before; they are ‘handsomely provided for’. Only the parrot dies shortly afterwards. The footman (not the eternal Footman in *Prufrock*) is seen sitting upon the dining-table, holding the housemaid on his knees. Life goes on, described in trivial, grotesque details, unaware of what lies beyond its boundary.

The same violently noticed separation between the living and the dead is recorded in a strikingly similar poem by Ezra Pound:

This old lady,
Who was ‘so old that she was an atheist’,
Is now surrounded
By six candles and a crucifix,
While the second wife of a nephew
Makes hay with things in her house.
(*The Social Order*, II)

Using the same pretext – the death of a relative –, the Romanian poet Mircea Ivănescu fuses the two worlds with a pity and sympathy for both living and dead that Eliot hardly ever dared to show:

After the funeral, once
back in those tiny rooms, the old woman hurried to bed
(look, the narrator thought to himself, how very much
like the witticism of a certain Frenchman who’d always know
what to do next and who’d say:
‘when I’m at a loss what to do, I just go to bed’).
The men sat down all round the table – however
they took some more time in taking out the plum-brandly – now
they were merely sitting, quiet – tired maybe – on those chairs
thinking of what to say first.
An aunt, not too old to be elegant, rubbed her back against
the stove soon –
the stove was a spot which, when later the room
grew less and less warm, was bound to be envied
by all the others – some lingered about



(*Cold in Here*, in the volume *Lines*, 1968)

*

He concentrates his attention ‘with careful subtlety to this end’, but the poem gives no intimation of hope. The moment is finally lost, and, after a long line of similar moments, he may find himself an old waiter with shaky hands, waiting upon other people who grow old.

*

LA FIGLIA CHE PIANGE is a poem whose narrative basis may be inferred from Eliot’s subtle use of grammatical moods and tenses. It begins with a request in the imperative:

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair –
Lean on a garden urn –
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair –

The image of a forsaken girl is called up, leaning on a garden urn, in full sunlight, clasping a bunch of flowers with an air of ‘pained surprise’. The imperative seems to prolong, almost to immortalize her gesture. Then, suddenly, she flings the flowers to the ground, turns with a ‘fugitive resentment’ in her eyes, and the stanza ends with the same caressing, timeless imperative that begs prolongation:

But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

The second stanza plunges the serene certainty of the first into the improbable night of a past conditional:

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve ...

The poem is one of the very few images of a loved (a lovable) woman Eliot ever produced. The image is not a firm one. This past conditional intimates that reality must have been different: without flowers, without the woman’s pain, without sunlight, without beauty. The speaker talks about the pain of an imaginary parting. It would have been as if the soul had left the body ‘torn and bruised’, as if the very mind had deserted the body it had used. It would have ended in suppressed pain, in a ‘light and deft’ way, ‘Simple and faithless as a smile and a shake of the hand’. The pain would have stirred the man’s sensibility, enriched his life with a theatrical emotion. The Past Tense of the last stanza replaces, contradicts the sunlit image of the first by simply stating:

She turned away.

The ‘pained surprise’ was not real, then, not shared by the girl. Which may mean it simply did not exist. The pain must have belonged to the speaker only. As he says, her back turned and stepping away (forsaking and not forsaken) in the autumn weather, she ‘compelled’ his imagination ‘many days and many hours’. He is left with a memory that will be taken up in *The Waste Land* (part I) as the hyacinth girl:



Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.

This statue-like image (reminiscent of Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*) is the main point of the poem. All the other lines are speculations massed around it. For a short while, the speaker wonders what would have happened if this parting image had not occurred, if the two had remained together. The answer – a poet's answer – is prompt:

I should have lost a gesture and a pose.

The end of the story is, therefore, the point where the poetic narrative starts. Eliot usually weaves his poems from the last moment backwards. It was the same in *Aunt Helen* and in *Prufrock*, and it will be true for many of the narrative kernels in *The Waste Land*. The same as Robert Browning, though with less obvious narrative pleasure, Eliot chooses a moment of crisis, because his poetry thrives on sadness, pain, hopelessness. The Past Tense melts into the Present, and the past pain becomes the present poem:

Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
The troubled midnight and the noon's repose.

The same as *Prufrock*, the poem is rather a discreet meditation on love than a love poem. We feel that the poet's interest in the emotion itself is stronger than the lover's interest in a beloved woman.

*

An abject story can be inferred from *SWEENEY ERECT*. The scene is set in mythological colours: a 'cavernous waste shore', 'yelping seas', 'insurgent gales' stirred by Aeolus, Ariadne's tangled hair. Two contemporary characters, a man and a woman, are elliptically put side by side with 'Nausicaa and Polypheme'. Sweeney, 'broad-bottomed, pink from nape to base', is shaving. A woman tosses in the bed with a 'gesture of ourang-outang'. The sheets are 'in steam'. The woman looks remarkably uninviting, a

withered root of knots of hair
Slitted below and gashed with eyes,

an

oval O cropped out with teeth.

She 'straightens out from heel to hip', pushes the framework of the bed, claws at the pillow slip. Sweeney pays no attention. He



knows the female temperament,

so he peacefully ‘wipes the suds around his face’. To him, she is the ‘epileptic on the bed’, who shrieks, curves backward and clutches at her sides while he, undisturbed, ‘tests the razor on his leg’. This squalid image of a loveless pair recurs quite often in Eliot’s early poetry (*Burbank with a Baedeker*, *Sweeney among the Nightingales*, especially *The Waste Land*). Eliot – would it be fair to him to say so? – refuses to see the world as beautiful.

He directs his poetry towards the shocking effects of disgusting realities. He replaces the poetic romance by the description of trivial details that surround it. He willfully withdraws his sensibility, and leaves his characters alone with their senses. The epileptic’s hysteria, reproved by the ‘ladies of the corridor’ and by ‘Mrs. Turner’ herself, who thinks that this ‘lack of taste’ does the ‘house’ no good, is ended by a certain Doris’ appearance. She comes into the room ‘towelled from the bath’ and ‘padding on broad feet’, bringing ‘sal volatile’ and brandy to the woman in distress. Doris, the same as Sweeney, is a recurrent character of whom we have not heard the last yet.

The poem is an exercise in creating a disgusting atmosphere. Gentleness and sweetness of approach are withdrawn. Eliot braces himself up, he refuses to commiserate. His early criticism states that his early poetry is in search of that already famous ‘impersonality’ of his. The strategy is in fact a half-successful attempt to hide his vulnerability under an appearance of sniffing detachment.

*

The same poetry of disgust, of withdrawn pleasure in life (which culminates in *The Waste Land*) is illustrated by the poem in French *LA LUNE DE MIEL*. Two young people spend their honeymoon travelling about Europe in summer. They are described at night, while being bitten by ‘two hundred’ bugs, scratching themselves furiously, with swollen legs and a smell about them that strongly reminds of a bitch. They are surrounded by the art of France and Italy, by cathedrals and Byzantine forms, but Eliot speaks mostly of their ‘misery’. They look for cheap restaurants, their main care is not to spend too much money. Thus, presenting love stories from which love is absent, Eliot builds a story, but withdraws the meaning. This narrative with suppressed meaning is the first stage of a process which, before long, will lead to the suppression of the narrative itself. After *The Waste Land*, the narrative becomes more abstract, rather symbolical (in *Ash-Wednesday*), and is left out altogether in the *Four Quartets*.

*

DANS LE RESTAURANT is another rough poem with the air of an exercise. Like the previous, it has nothing to offer except the search for a device that was at the time only guessed by Eliot, not yet found. A waiter (waiters and footmen seem to haunt Eliot’s imagination), in a restaurant, scratches his fingers, talks French and, in



the meanwhile, spits in the narrator's soup. The waiter tells the story of an incident with a little girl and a dog, something that happened when he was barely seven years old. The implications are grimly and precociously sexual.

The narrator feels inclined to send this waiter to wash off his wrinkles and take the mud off his 'skull'. The poem leaves us with a taste of dirt. Besides, like all Eliot's poems in French, it lacks the verbal inventivity known from the poet's use of English. His French is well mastered, but tame and uninteresting. At some time in his life, he confessed that in his youth he had contemplated the idea of settling down in Paris and writing in French. It would have been an uninspired choice for the Eliot we know, no matter how proud he may have felt of his mastery of French. The final stanza of *Dans le Restaurant* was later translated into English, a little modified and became part IV of *The Waste Land*:

Phlébas, le Phénicien, pendant quinze jours noyé,
Oubliait les cris des mouettes et la houle de Cornouaille,
Et les profits et les pertes, et la cargaison d'étain:
Un courant de sous-mer l'emporta très loin,
Le repassant aux étapes de sa vie antérieure.
Figurez-vous donc, c'était un sort pénible;
Cependant, ce fut jadis un bel homme, de haute taille.

In between this French poem and its English variant of *Death by Water*, a miracle seems to have been wrought. A device found. After years of writing and writing bits of poetry which the poet never lost sight of, Eliot had at last lighted upon *The Waste Land*.

*

It may prove interesting to notice that all Eliot's poems which have no narrative pattern are obscure, very hard to understand. He is at his best when he starts telling a story, or describing its consequences. Usually, the story itself is only half present. It must be guessed from a character's enigmatical words. Narrative devices are thus fused with dramatic devices, and behind them a consistent lyrical mood unifies the lines. The best illustration of this technique is *THE WASTE LAND*. It can be considered Eliot's novel, because it is made up of numberless incidents which reveal a crowd of characters, and because these incidents and characters flow into one another, pointing to a common conclusion.

The first part of the poem, *THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD*, consists of four episodes, which concentrate on a mingled image of life and death. In the volumes of 1917 and 1920, the characters kept trying to run away from something that menaced their lives, from the hideous progress of life into death. One must admit that it takes a very young man to speak so insistently and insolently about death. Prufrock was dreaming of leaving the room and the town, in order to take refuge in an ideal world at the bottom of the sea. The young man in *Portrait of a Lady* believed he was



drawing the lady's unattractive portrait, while in fact he was sketching the very image of death.

When he realized what he was doing, he suddenly withdrew in fear, and left the portrait unfinished. All the other poems are races towards a protective shelter. Races prompted by a deep fear. There is in all of them a fear of death which goes hand in hand with the secret hope that it can be postponed. In *The Waste Land*, the need for refuge is forgotten because no hope follows it. For a while, life dejectedly shares the same house with death.

The first episode mixes 'memory and desire', 'dull roots with spring rain'. Living lilacs grow out of the dead land in April, the 'cruellest' of months, because it stirs a 'little' life out of the 'dead' land to which it shall sometime return. Summer is not far away. With a 'shower of rain', it surprises two people who are walking in the 'Hofgarten' (Munich), talking. Only the words of one of them, the woman, are heard. Her name is Marie. The garden they are roaming through, the same as this name of Mary are recurrent motifs. They are used by Eliot to the subtle end of unifying the poem by making us remember its scattered reiterated images and piece them together. This Marie, for instance, is German. She is the first of a long line of feminine images that appear in the poem, and together with which she must be interpreted. There is, therefore, a maze of associations between all the words of this poem. It gives the poem a musical sense of both suspense and continuity. The name Marie turns up again in the name of a church, Saint Mary Woolnoth, mentioned in the last episode of this first part. Such imperfect recurrences of words and images are a newly found device of coherence used by Eliot.

Marie's words bring back a childhood memory:

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.

This memory of the mountains, together with the garden the two characters are crossing, foretells the final place described by the poem: a 'decayed hole in the mountains', where the grass is 'singing' and 'tumbled graves' surround an 'empty chapel'. They foreshadow the unfulfilled promise of rain in part V.

The concluding line of this memory,

In the mountains, there you feel free,

implies, by indirect opposition, that the woman who speaks has not felt free ever since. That her feeling of freedom has been lost. When she describes herself in the present as reading 'much of the night' and going south in the winter, she creates the image of someone who has lost the peace of nights and the courage to face the cold heights of the mountains. Only retrospectively does she enjoy the past moment of freedom on a sled in the mountains. At the time it was actually happening, she was only frightened. It looks as if she were enjoying too late what she did not understand when it could be had. The woman's confession leaves a taste of sad loss, of unuttered



regret, of frustration because time has elapsed and neither can the childhood fear be changed, nor the mature longing for life wasted be appeased.

The second episode is Biblically addressed to the ‘son of man’: form of address in which the reader is by all means included. It is the first warning that the silent hero, the anxious witness of all the episodes staged by the poem, is one of us. The last line of *The Burial of the Dead*, taken from Baudelaire,

You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!

supports the idea. *The Waste Land* can therefore be read as the story of a coherent life told fragmentarily (in good stream-of-consciousness tradition), which is generalized into the image of everybody’s fate. This silent witness of the poem, who wears numberless masks, who hardly ever speaks and most often just listens to other people’s experiences (which may very well be his own too), is called to come ‘under the shadow of this red rock’. He is urged to leave the ‘heap of broken images, where the sun beats’ (sunlight: Eliot’s chameleonic obsession), and where there is no sound of water. His travel across the Waste Land must soon begin.

Since we know that the last point of this travel is the chapel in the mountains, we may infer that the red rock (later used by Eliot as a suggestion of the church) foretells it. The whole poem, this entire description of a waste land, may be seen as a heap of broken images. A collection of fragments, of episodes which the hero leaves behind step by step. Yet, this is not the poem of an escape. Nor is it the poem of a change from waste to fertility. It is merely the story of a travel towards the Thames, then along the Thames towards a larger river, then along a larger and a larger river still, up to its merging with the sea. Reaching the sea (one more image that obsessed Eliot for a lifetime), the hero does not take refuge in it. He simply sits down on the seashore and looks back.

For the time being, Eliot’s hero is only just starting. Childhood has barely been mentioned, when this impersonal Biblical voice foretells not the future of one man alone, but the fate of humanity at large:

... 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.

John Donne, with his *Lecture upon the Shadow*, is of course (here and elsewhere) an old acquaintance of T.S. Eliot’s. Not that it matters very much. The moods of the two poets are totally opposed. As far as Eliot is concerned, ‘fear’ is indeed going to be the main mood of all the human faces in the poem. Fear is the unavoidable burden of the peregrinating hero who intensely feels he is nothing more than a handful of ‘dust’ (see Evelyn Waugh’s novel thus entitled, which is one landmark in the appreciation of Eliot’s work).

After the woman’s memory of lost childhood, time passes quickly. The hero himself remembers his lost adolescent love. We hear the voice of a ‘hyacinth girl’ telling him:



You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl.

It is her way of confessing that her love was essential to her life. Her words are introduced by a fragment in German from Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*. A mere song sung by a sailor, about the girl he loves and who is not with him. Ironically chosen, this fragment shows that Tristan's story can be replaced with a lot of far less heroic incidents, which Eliot is determined to do. These words are followed by the girl's words, then the hero's own confession, present only as a flash back, a thought, a 'remembrance of things past':

– 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.

His memory of the girl,

your arms full, and your hair wet,

is a repetition of the image in *La Figlia Che Piange*, where it appeared as

Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.

This time, with a firmer hand, Eliot has left out the unnecessary details (flowers), and has given up repeating words. The result is a more general image, with more numerous meanings, which the following parts of the poem will elicit. Ambiguity has been discovered by the indirect poet Eliot. 'Wet', for instance, could be associated with various images of insufficient water. Water that existed once and is now unable to appease the torturing sensation of thirst, which pervades the whole poem. The hero remembers that the experience of the hyacinth garden left him between life and death: a mood stirred in Eliot by any beginning, such as the birth of life in spring, in April, that 'cruellest' month.

At a time of intense emotion, the man, who only now confesses his loss, 'could not speak', and his eyes 'failed'; he knew nothing, he felt he was drowning in light and silence. This is one of the very few descriptions of intense love by Eliot. As usual with him, it can be intense only because it is remembered long after it was lost. The last line of the fragment (from the same *Tristan and Isolde*) confirms the loss. It describes the wide, empty sea, which brings no sign of Isolde to dying Tristan.

After two confessions of wasted childhood and youth, the famous 'clairvoyante', Madame Sosostris, tells somebody's, presumably the hero's, future. She talks about characters who actually turn up now and then, as the main hero crosses the poem. The hero's own card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor, appears in *Death by Water*, and is associated with a line from Shakespeare's *Tempest*:

Those are pearls that were his eyes.



This line gives a new meaning to death; it describes it, like Shakespeare, as a

sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

Belladonna, the lady of the 'rocks' and of 'situations', appears in part II. The one-eyed merchant turns up as Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, in part III. 'Death by water' actually occurs, though it is not seen as an end: it implies a transformation of one kind of life into another (from eye to pearl). This attempt of looking upon death as a gate open towards another land did not exist in the previous poems. As a real hope, it fails to convince in *The Waste Land*. It will fail in *Ash-Wednesday* again, then it will be enlarged upon, in the *Four Quartets*.

The last episode, the same as the first, sees death and life hideously coexisting. London comes very close to the atmosphere of Dante's *Inferno*, out of which Eliot even borrows a few words:

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 ...

Time itself hums an air of death: the church Saint Mary Woolnoth keeps (guards / announces) the hours with a 'dead' sound on the stroke of nine (the 'final' hour for those who work in offices and 'flow' to their jobs in the morning). The same as John Donne, Eliot uses images of death to extend his sense of life.

He rejects what is beautiful when he writes his poems, and prefers to see beyond the glamour, to discover the 'boredom, the horror and the glory'. Which implies that he enlarges, he urges his poetry into what used to be considered non-poetic. The disturbing unease aroused by the image of a corpse that was planted in a garden and has begun to sprout, even bloom, is indeed more intense than Tennyson's meditations on death. The feeling of disgust associated with the corpse is pushed even farther:

O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!

Eliot has an uncommonly vivid imagination when it comes to coining images suggestive of death. The poem abounds in bones, violent deaths (the sailor's death by water, the nightingale's death after the rape – although they are rather changes than deaths), dead bodies, etc. The first part ends as it had begun. The blooming corpse has the same meaning as the dead land breeding lilacs. When Baudelaire's line turns up, we have the feeling that the circle of life has closed. That there is no end to its revolving and no escape (for the heroes of the poem, for us, for anybody) from the cyclical revival, which announces an unavoidable new end. Life breeds death. That is how Eliot felt about it.



The second part, *A GAME OF CHESS*, opens with the description of a room engulfed by artificiality and oppressive history. A woman is seated in what might have once been Cleopatra's 'burnished throne'. Two golden cupids (lifeless image of once living love) watch her from the frame of a heavy mirror. 'Sevenbranched candelabra' pour light over the scene. The woman's repelling artificiality is generously displayed: jewels in satin cases, 'strange synthetic' (Eliot never had the strength of rejecting an alliteration) perfumes in unstoppered vials of ivory and coloured glass surround her. Above the mantel, a 'sylvan' scene is encarved:

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced.

The mythological legend hinted at (the rape of Philomel by Tereus and her consequent change into a nightingale, while her sister Procné became a swallow) must be included among the gloomy sex affairs seen by Eliot in this poem with disgust, and reproached for their animality, their lack of feeling. The men and women involved in such relationships are emptied of their souls, dehumanized. Funny to think that the 'objective correlatives' (so to say) of the soul are not human beings here, but rather the objects that surround them. Everything (the land, the corpses, the sea, the river, the ground) is alive, except man.

In Eliot's early poems, too, the objects were personified, humanized, while human beings barely survived. In *The Waste Land*, people almost become inanimate; they lose all their human attributes, and are exhibited merely to be stared at, as if they had become distasteful objects. Such is the 'barbarous king' who raped Philomel. In the following episodes, his descendants are Lil's demobbed husband, the young man carbuncular, the 'loitering heirs of City directors'. The cry of the nightingale has not died yet. It is still pursued and heard by contemporary 'dirty' ears. History merges with the present.

Besides this sad story of humiliation, other 'stumps of time' are told upon the walls as well,

Leaning out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.

Inside this room stifled by 'staring forms' of the past, a woman is brushing her hair. Her absurd, meaningless words are left unanswered. They sometimes alternate with the hero's silent and dejected thoughts. This whole second part exhales a sense of emptiness, of futility, of uselessness. While the woman talks incoherently, the man cannot help thinking of death. She shouts neurotically. He feels:

... we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

He also dreamingly remembers the fortune teller's words, about a death by water:

I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.



When she speaks of ‘tomorrow’, all he can think of is:

... We shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

The lidless eyes suggest the image of a skull. The knock upon the door might be connected with an unseen companion mentioned in the last part. It is also reminiscent of death, of that ‘fear in a handful of dust’, introduced in part I.

Lil, the woman whose story is told by a female friend of hers in the following episode, is even more closely connected with the act of dying. She is not even present on the stage. A silent witness learns about her husband Albert having been four years in the army (presumably World War I, but also, very possibly, in the navy). Lil is only 31, but she looks ‘antique’. She has five children, nearly ‘died’ of the fifth and has just ‘brought off’ the sixth. She has killed an unborn life, that is. As for her other accomplishments, she is toothless and joyless. Her female friend describes her without the least trace of pity:

Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you.
And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said.
Oh is there, she said. Something o’ that, I said.
Then I’ll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.

Lil’s story ends abruptly, with an intimation that its narrator actually undertook some of Lil’s marital obligations. As the question suggests:

What you get married for if you don’t want children?

While this story is being told in vulgar, uneducated English, a voice (the innkeeper’s) keeps shouting impatiently:

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Written in capital letters, devoid of punctuation or any explanatory sentence, the prompting has several meanings. The most obvious would be that it is time for the pub to be closed. Another one ought to be connected with the last line of part II, vaguely taken from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night,
good night.



Ophelia's madness is hinted at, here. It might foretell the end of the poem, when the protagonist himself seems to experience it, as he concludes (in Thomas Kyd's words, this time):

... Hieronymo's mad againe.

This peculiar emotional and intellectual confusion called 'madness' may also be a faint biographical echo. We know now that *The Waste Land* was written over a long span of years. Eliot concentrated his whole youth in it. The poem was completed after his first, hasty marriage. Wearied and wasted, Eliot took leave from his bank job and went to Switzerland (Lausanne) in 1921. He consulted a psychiatrist, and stayed there for about six weeks, alone. In a letter to Richard Aldington (November 6, 1921), he wrote that the state of his nerves was due

not to overwork but to an aboulie and emotional
derangement which has been a lifelong affliction. Nothing
wrong with my mind.

It is not real madness, then, that the poem is about. Together with 'ITS TIME', this 'good night, ladies' also suggests that the condition of woman is here emptied of any meaning and has reached a grim end.

After life seen as a burial of dead wishes, then as a mechanic dry game of chess, the third part, *THE FIRE SERMON* follows. The dissatisfaction of the hero is here at its highest. The city where the poem takes place is likened to Carthage, the town that must by all means be destroyed. At the end of this part, the protagonist is 'plucked out' of his previous life,

burning burning burning burning.

His gasping, desperate cry at the moment he is supposed to leave is most intensely personal:

O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest
burning

As a matter of fact, he seems desperately unwilling to change residence. Yet, he will indomitably follow along the Thames, then farther, along the Ganga, up to the sea.

This first fragment describes the river Thames. Summer (which may also mean the summer of life) is ended. Even its empty signs have disappeared. There are no more empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends or 'other testimony of summer nights'. The 'nymphs' and their friends, 'the loitering heirs of City directors', are departed. The last leaves sink into the wet bank. April, the cruellest month, is buried again. One cycle of life is over. Winter is again on the point of covering earth in 'forgetful snow'.



As winter draws near, the courage, the inner strength of the hero decreases. He had begun by shouting (You! hypocrite lecteur!); now his voice gradually dies down. He has lived through the losses of childhood, of youth in the hyacinth garden, of maturity wasted on a sterile game of chess, but now something in him gradually gives way. He seems to have come to a point where he cannot stand his misshapen life any longer. In a Biblical way, 'by the waters of Leman' (lake in Lausanne), he sits down and weeps. Then he addresses the river which is guiding him:

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.

As he turns his back on the town, the scenes behind him wither faster and faster away. The images of decay in this part of the poem become unbearable. A rat is seen creeping through the vegetation, 'dragging its slimy belly on the bank', while the narrator fishes in a dull canal on a winter evening, 'round behind the gashouse'. He will be fishing again at the end of the poem. Only there he will be fishing (killing life) in the sea. The 'arid plain' will, however, be behind him. For the time being, he is only beginning to cross it.

Thoughts of decaying life (death) mingle with repelling images of decayed love. The protagonist muses upon

... the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.
White bodies naked on the low damp ground
And bones cast in a little low garret,
Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.

At his back he hears what he has already left behind him: the sound of 'horns and motors' which bring Sweeney to Mrs. Porter and her daughter, who 'wash their feet in soda water'. The above mentioned incident occurs in spring (the cruellest month?). A line from Verlaine's *Parsifal* reminds us both of the sense of freedom in childhood, high up in the mountains, and of Lil's undesired children:

Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Children's hidden faces are one more recurrent obsession of Eliot's. Their gravity stands in strong contrast with the obvious reality. The soiled voice of the raped Philomel follows this line. It also brings along an air of dirty sex, of human deterioration.

In Part III, Tiresias appears. In connection with this Tiresias, Eliot explains in the *Notes* what he considers to be the sense of unity, of coherence in the poem:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.

He explains that all characters melt into one another, until there are only two main figures left: that of man and that of woman. Then these last two mingle into a unique



sensibility, which may as well bear the name of Tiresias, and which claims to appropriate all the experiences related by the poem. Ezra Pound had noticed from at first that *The Waste Land* had a strong emotional unity. He did not wait for Eliot's *Notes* to tell him that. Neither need we rely upon them, since they may only leave us, to use Eliot's own words, in a state of enlightened mystification.

Anyway, in *The Fire Sermon*, 'throbbing between two lives', having 'foresuffered all', Tiresias sees and remembers (for all of us) the most devastatingly sordid scenes of the poem. He is one more device by means of which Eliot generalizes his meaning, besides the poetic Esperanto of quotations (cultured poetry) which he dotes upon, and besides many other tricks. Eliot now reminds us, by evoking Tiresias, that the poem deals with the past, present and future fate of mankind at large, our own included.

An unshaven Smyrna merchant (Mr. Eugenides) invites someone insidiously for a weekend at the Metropole (a luxury hotel in Brighton). A typist and a 'young man carbuncular' meet in a poor room, at the 'violet' hour, when the 'human engine' withdraws within the blind walls of home. The typist's room is full of food in tins and a disorderly heap of underwear items minutely listed. The young, self-assured house agent clerk has his meal with the woman. When

The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.

After which he gropes his way down the 'unlit' stairs. The woman is inert all the time. She merely thinks to herself:

Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.

A single line quoted from Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* acts upon the whole incident as a devouring fire, which reduces to ashes whatever is human. As usual, Eliot quotes irreverently. Which means that he delights in reversing the meaning of the original context, as if he were mocking at it (as he mocked at the very titles of his own previous poems). He treats all authors he borrows from (except Shakespeare, maybe) with bitter irony. Because of this estranging irony, the words Eliot hums from his literary memory are no longer somebody else's words. They become Eliot's own. As an illustration, here is Goldsmith's original context (p. 123):

When lovely woman stoops to folly,
And finds, too late, that men betray,
What charm can soothe the melancholy,
What art can wash her guilt away?
The only art her guilt to cover,
To hide her shame from every eye,



To give repentance to her lover,
And wring his bosom – is to die.

No question of feeling or melodramatic victims in Eliot's text:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone.

The tears are done away with, replaced by a grin. Yet, behind Eliot's heavy humour, we do feel the protagonist's despair that now to him all real women seem to be dead. Only something of the past seems still to survive. The hero, then, remembers (from Shakespeare again):

This music crept by me upon the waters.

He glances at Queen Victoria Street, which is close to the Thames, then at Lower Thames Street, near London Bridge. To think of all the towers and bridges that end by crumbling in this poem... He sees the Thames sweating oil and tar and hears Wagner's tragic cry of the Rhine daughters. The Thames has its daughters as well, but in front of their doomed fate an unreal, lost (crumbled, too) image is unfurled. The love of 'Elizabeth and Leicester' floats on the river when it flows by Greenwich House, where Queen Elizabeth was born and where she entertained the Earl of Leicester. After this past light, the voices of the Thames' daughters follow. They feel they have been 'undone'. They find their hearts 'under' their feet. They expect nothing.

The decay of love and humanity has reached the utmost limit. A cry dies into a faint, remote whisper, and the hero is afraid he might burn up together with doomed Carthage. Painful as that may be, he is however unwilling to be plucked out: 'O Lord Thou pluckest me out'. He is 'burning'. From the despair in his voice, we easily infer that he would rather burn together with the world he lives in, than leave it. Far from being a hopeful, visionary poet, Eliot is a withdrawing spirit, who fears his own wishes.

DEATH BY WATER (part IV) explores that 'sea change' Shakespeare described in *The Tempest*, in connection with the line 'Those are pearls that were his eyes'. Phlebas the Phoenician died a fortnight ago. He entered the 'whirlpool'. Currents under sea pick his bones clean. These very bones may become pearls some day. He rises and falls, led by the sea. In the meantime, the same as the protagonist of the poem, he re-enacts his experiences of youth and old age. Another direct address, similar to that taken from Baudelaire ('You! hypocrite lecteur!'), reminds the reader that Phlebas is one of us, that his way is our way, it being the way of all flesh.



This is the mood which opens the last part of the poem, *WHAT THE THUNDER SAID*. After the sight of ‘sweaty faces’, after gardens, stony places, agony, shouting and crying,

He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying ...

Nothing can be changed in the order of things. Time has stamped upon the world the evil called death. Children inherit it from their parents. Once born, there is nothing left for living beings to do in Eliot’s world but to begin the process of dying. This is one of the reasons why children are an awkward presence in the poem.

The hero seems to have left the city. While he is crossing the ‘arid plain’, echoes of his past life crowd in upon his mind. He crosses a space of rock without water, a ‘sandy road’ winding among mountains. He feels trapped in a ‘dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit’. The image is reminiscent of Robert Browning’s *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. Close to the protagonist’s side, a dark, hooded face glides, insubstantial like the air itself. The question

... who is that on the other side of you?

remains unanswered. Guessed ‘ahead up the white road’, wrapt in a brown mantle, the mysterious companion remains unknown, as it happened in part II, with the author of the menacing ‘knock upon the door’. Seen from outside, from a distance, the world looks as if it had been lifted and tossed, turned upside down. Sounds are heard ‘high in the air’. Now the city is laid ‘over the mountains’.

A softening feeling of unreality steals into what has been so far perceived as piercingly real. No more prostitutes, no more incoherent Ladies of situations, no more soiled Thames daughters, disabused typists, or young men carbuncular. People have become immaterial. They ‘swarm’ in ghostly hordes, all hooded, stumbling over endless, cracked plains. Out of ‘Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London’, only falling towers are left. All the existing cities are far, far away. They keep cracking, reforming, then bursting again, endlessly repeating the cycle of life and death, out of which the hero was on the point of being ‘plucked’. Now he merely endeavours to see them as ‘unreal’.

Improbable images, terrifying, as if picked out of a Gothic novel, hover over this unreal ground, unreal cities, unreal life. A woman fiddles ‘whisper’ music on the long strings of her black hair drawn out tight. In the corpse-like, violet light (which reminds of the hour when ‘the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk’), bats with baby faces (children again, and as awkward a presence as ever) crawl head downward down blackened walls. The hours are no longer kept by Saint Mary Woolnoth, with a ‘dead’ sound on the final stroke of nine. The towers which ought to keep the time are only images of lost towers, seen upside down in the air, heard tolling bells reminiscent of withered realities, of the once foretold ‘burial of the dead’.

The insistent repetition of images (a life long habit with Eliot) lends additional coherence to the poem. As if really buried, voices sing from deep below, ‘out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells’. This immaterial landscape of what once was and is no more (but may be again) is pervaded by a sound high in the air: a ‘murmur of



maternal lamentation' (interesting recurrence of the consonant 'm'), which was never heard as such (sympathetic) in real life. A sadness of failed human beings, failed men, failed women, failed mothers moreover, is brought into the poem to counterbalance the previous feeling of disgust.

On the very spot where the dead were buried, where their dry bones which can harm no one lie under 'tumbled' graves, the silent traveller finds a chapel in a 'decayed hole among the mountains'. A cock sings on its roof. Will it bring rain? A new life might sprout in what was once a waste land. Whether it will be (as *Death by Water* envisaged) a more precious kind of life, or whether it will be the same life in which every birth is a premonition of death, the traveller does not know. He is at a loss. Clouds are seen, damp gusts are felt, the sound of the thunder is heard. Yet the rain cannot come. Water and fertility are in *The Waste Land* a promise never fulfilled.

The Thames was left behind long ago. Ganga is now in sight, meandering through the jungle which is 'crouched, humped in silence'. Black clouds of (unreal) storm are gathered far away, over the holy mountain of Himavant (in the Himalaya range). The place looks like 'England and nowhere', as the *Quartets* later put it. The hero fails to describe the land. It is as if he were heading for the edge of the Earth, where he could sit undecided on the shore, dangling his feet in the waters of a primordial sea, and look back upon his arid life with painless indifference.

This arid life, Eliot repeatedly stated, did not in the least symbolize the dismay of a whole generation. He made very clear assertions against this type of generalizations which literary critics of *The Waste Land* resorted to. First, he cut it short ironically:

When I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention. (1931)

Later, in 1947, he claimed to have written this long disputed and decoded poem only to 'relieve' his own feelings, and consequently it came out as a piece of 'rhythmical grumbling'. These two sentences are as enigmatical as a third one:

In *The Waste Land* I wasn't even bothering whether I understood what I was saying. (1959)

Whatever the truth may have been, the hero of the poem is still on his way. His guide is now the Thunder (the promise of rain). The rain will only be granted if the commands of the Thunder are obeyed. The first one is 'Datta' (give). It speaks of affectionate warmth, of true love, of feelings that can fill one's soul. The Thunder means that the only reality of life is the 'moment's surrender' in love for another human being. Nothing else but real feelings can fill our 'empty rooms' and fortify the human being, help it steadily face the prospect of certain death. The hero confesses he has not obeyed this first command. He complains:

The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract



By this, and this only, we have existed ...

The same as the 'murmur of maternal lamentation', the real emotional surrender to another human being was totally absent (either missed or discredited) in the former parts of the poem. So far, all the characters have been wrapped, hooded in dry loneliness.

The second command of the Thunder is a sequel to the first: 'Dayadhvam' (sympathize). It suggests that the feeling of loneliness can be annihilated if shared with somebody else. The Thunder first taught the hero to say,

My fried, blood shaking my heart ...

Instead of that, the hero thinks of a key to his 'prison'. Thinking of that key, he confirms the existence of his solitary cell. The first command was inviting and lenient. The second is perceived as neutre, and the protagonist does not seem very eager to follow it. Even worse than this, the third command has already been disobeyed. It is remembered in the Past Conditional, after who knows how long a time since it was first ignored. The Thunder says, 'Damyata' (control). It offers the impossible image of tender hands that protect a loved soul from the feeling of the waste land, from the burial of the dead, from the trial of being burnt together with what must be wrecked by passing time. An image in the Past Tense introduces this lost brotherhood of souls:

... The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar.

This third command can no longer be followed. It belongs to Eliot's favourite grammatical mood, the might have been:

... your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient,
To controlling hands

As the commands of the Thunder will not / cannot be obeyed, the hero must resign himself to the punishment of living without rain. The torturing thirst that has haunted him all through the poem is not quenched: now or ever. The silent traveller is exhausted. He sits fishing upon the seashore (hoping to catch a magic sign of sea life?), with the arid plain behind him. A heap of words escaped from other authors assault his mind. He neglects their spring: they are made to express his own plight. The Biblical 'Shall I at least set my lands in order' is the hero's first glance backwards: his first admission that the waste land cannot be escaped, because there is nowhere else to go. The discovery shatters him. He feels his strength crumble, and can only mumble helplessly:

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down.

What refuge can he look for? One place is falling down. Another is burning ('Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina' – Dante). Another is far too high ('O swallow



swallow’ – Tennyson), he can hardly hope to reach it (‘Quando fiam uti chelidon’ – *Pervigilium Veneris*, anonymous Latin poem). He must live with what he has, like ‘Le Prince d’Acquitaine la Tour abolie’ (Gérard de Nerval). The protagonist’s only gesture is to shore (in a former variant to ‘spell’) these ‘fragments’ of feelings and thoughts against his ‘ruins’. He will pretend he understands, pretend that he can bravely go on. He even shouts with assumed confidence:

Why then Ile fit you
(Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*).

But the shout falters, and before long he stammers helplessly:

Hieronymo’s mad againe.

The last six words,

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih

seem to be the dying whisper of the poem. Shantih, the ‘peace that passeth understanding’, is begged for. Can it be granted? Will it ever be? No visible peace, no thirst-quenching water, no hope for this inhabitant of the waste land. He must live with the awareness of defeat. Defeat of life, loss of love. *The Waste Land* is therefore a heap of fragments (fragmentariness is its technique, indeed) which convey a coherent aspiration towards ... who knows what?

2. MISREADINGS OF ELIOT’S

OVER- AND UNDER-STATEMENTS

(Faltering between Believing and Wishful Thinking)



For quite a while, it used to be taken for granted that Eliot was a religious (even fervently religious) man, who had broken off with the Unitarian background of his American childhood and adolescence, and had chosen to worship the Anglican God instead. Various biographies, numberless witnesses testify to the fact that, at least beginning with the time he was 40, he would go to church early every morning. In 1928, he himself wrote in his *Preface to For Lancelot Andrewes*:

The general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion.

If he himself had made it that clear, why should anyone have taken the trouble of questioning the assertion? Together with the man's religious sensibility, the religiosity of his poetry was also taken for granted. Some decades later, in *To Criticize the Critic* (1965), Eliot somehow discredited his statement of 1928 as being too final, too self-assured. The words seemed to him to be no longer a felicitous description of his state of mind, either at the time when they had actually been written, or at the time of their later re-appraisal.

There is no denying that Eliot really felt attracted by something in the religious ritual. Was it because of the religious mood proper, or just because of the dramatization of that state of mind in a way both acutely physical and yet essentially metaphysical? Or was it because of the never exhausted ability to produce a rapid, vivid and shattering impression, which the picturesque words of the Bible excel in? Some biographer recalls that once, towards the end of Eliot's life, the writer was appointed on a committee that was supposed to revise the text of the Bible and make it more understandable to younger (and less cultivated) audiences. Eliot was the only person there who indomitably opposed any change whatever. He behaved as if each word of the Bible were sacred to him. There is no denying that his poetry abounds in echoes. Yet, we shall never know the real meaning of Eliot's (once) professed religiosity. The only thing left of it are his words: his poems, his essays and some of his plays.

It is no secret that practically all the critical works on Eliot, written over a long span of years, some older, some quite recent, have treated Eliot's religiosity with at least religious (if not fervently religious) respect. The man says he believes in God. How can the critic ignore the statement? If a critic tried to be more imaginative, would he not be frightened out of it by the scrutinizing frown of Eliot's ghost at spotting an imaginative critic – imagine! – busy at fumbling his way through his own (Eliot's) work? It might be reminded here, with due irony of course, that Eliot's own name, Thomas, had a hint at irreverent questioning in it. It sends our thoughts directly to the doubting Thomas of the New Testament, who used to say he would never believe in Christ's resurrection until he could hold some palpable proof of it in his hand. The sacred text says that God's son showed himself to doubting Thomas and asked: 'Look, here are my wounds, can you deny feeling them?' Doubting Thomas is afterwards said to have abandoned his doubting mood and become an apostle: a man who preached to the world what he had previously doubted. I am afraid this happy end is not the case of Eliot at all. His words speak for themselves. What made me start



in pursuit of Eliot's disbelieving mood was that Eliot's is a highly ambiguous poetry, whose main weapon is the understatement.

The question is, therefore, when one finds over-statements in an avaricious, elliptical poet's work, should one take them for granted? Is his clarity our own? Do we mean the same things when we use the same words? With this question in mind (a question indeed: no intention of producing out of a cap the unexpected image of Eliot the atheist), I have attempted here some willful mis-readings of Eliot's religious over-statements. I have been trying to decide whether, after years of reading and re-reading Eliot's poems, instead of merely darting out 'here is a religious poet', it would be more accurate to say, here is a poet and a man faltering between belief and the need to believe, between belief and wishful thinking.

*

GERONTION (1920) is the first of the poems I have chosen to mis-read, so to say. Or rather, to read in a different way from the bulk of criticism known to me so far, which never fails to see in this poem an indictment of man's wickedness, coming from an irritable (but mainly in the right) God. The whole poem is the monologue of a 'little old man' (Gerontion), interspersed (Eliot's favourite resource) with the most unexpected quotations. To native English speakers, most of these echoes are fairly recognizable.

The motto comes from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (act III, scene 1). Someone who knows Shakespeare's play (and knows it well, as a result of repeated readings, with deeply imprinted memories of some felicitous phrases) may recognize in it the moment when a condemned man is told that life is not really worth living and that, besides, it is never actually ours to handle as we wish. Life just flits away as insubstantially as a dream. From this very motto, therefore, the downward, descending mood that reigns over Eliot's sensibility is introduced. That life is a trap, because most often than not it turns against the being who thinks himself its owner, is Eliot's most recurrent complaint.

The first 15-line stanza, easily separable from the next, owing to the total lack of explanatory links between images, describes, indeed, a very old and feeble man. It is typical of Eliot to delight in paradoxes at every level. This old man's feebleness is rendered by means of shockingly violent images. The contrast is rather awkward. The first two lines come from a *Life of Edward FitzGerald* by A.C. Benson.

A long list of critics have been busy tracing these bookish echoes, to no disadvantage to the poem whatever. The quoted lines state plainly that the speaker is some old man who longs for rain. We must be suspicious of this lack of ambiguity, knowing that Eliot's clarity is one of emotion, and much less of its 'verbal equivalent'. It must not be forgotten that, but for Ezra Pound, who strongly advised against it, Eliot would have placed *Gerontion* as a prelude to *The Waste Land*. Anyway, the rain never arrives in either of the poems. Now, a critic's job (in spite of Eliot's repeated refutations of the fact) is to sift the work he writes about through the magic sieve of his impressions and words. He might also put the work to the test of various methods, on condition he does not become the slave of any. A piece of criticism on Eliot's poetry is, therefore, meant to allow the critic to be seen behind it.



That is why it seems quite strange that such a number of Eliot's critics have so far been busily employed in mathematically ('coolly' and 'impersonally') detecting the 'symbols', the hidden cipher of some (I think) undecodable images.

Eliot's power, the power of a man who so often used the associative tune of bookish echoes, is to suggest, not to hide. He shuns explanations (in his criticism he repeatedly says so), because he wants his poems to be caressingly guessed at, not exposed pitilessly under broad daylight. There is an obvious secrecy about Eliot's poems, which he hates to see violated. The images of this first stanza of *Gerontion* are, then, rather suggestive of, than equal to a certain explainable, definable or definite meaning. As Eliot so often repeated, poetry can only be felt if it is not explained.

Virginia Woolf expected of the 'modern mind' to allow each moment / experience to fall and impress it at random. She thus replaced the chronologically coherent narrative by a non-chronological, associative (therefore fragmentary) story. It was a mixture of future, past and present moments, joined on an emotional and subjective basis. She was interested in a sequence that takes place rather in the soul of her heroes than in the impersonal flow of incidents that besiege them. In the same way, Eliot would like his readers, on first reading his poems, to allow their impressions to pervade their hearts before their minds have had the time to order them. He feels that the heart has always a passport to penetrate into the realm of poetry, unless the mind (which might spoil the magic) accompanies it.

This is the reason why his images are suggestive, and die when decoded into bare thoughts. They appeal to the emotions. They are meant to move rather than set the readers thinking. They count on the reader's following Eliot's own habit of associative feeling, more than arouse the reader's associative thinking. You read a line and suddenly you feel as if you were in two (three, four, even more) places at once. This willed disorder and ambiguity gives Eliot's poetic world the magic coordinates of a nowhere land. Every object, every word, every line, every apparently clear image is highly elusive.

The feeble little old man of the first stanza lives in a world which may look like a magic carpet. We see it flying here and there, inside and outside what we call reality. It was the age of relativity, and Eliot did his best to push this narrow reality farther than the boundaries of our prejudices. We find ourselves now above, then suddenly underground. Images of mysterious anger (Gerontion's? God's?) surround the old man. He never valiantly fought in a war, he says. He never reached the 'hot gates' (more suggestive words than Thermopylae).

These gates seem to be opening towards who knows what hell, where he ought to have once struggled, dragging his feet through marshes, heaving a 'cutlass', bitten by flies. An image smelling half of Dante, half of Eliot's own taste for disgusting mud, horrifying insects and impotence.

This powerless and self-despising old man lives in a 'decayed' house (reminding us, indeed, of the 'decayed' chapel in part V of *The Waste Land*). A strange abode, over whose roof there is a field, where at night a goat is heard coughing. Why a goat? Too many have tried to find a hidden meaning there. The goat is surrounded by 'rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds'. Among other things, Eliot always was (Lawrence Durrell was right) a poet of the uncomfortable, the uninhabitable, the unthinkable and the most unpleasant. A denying poet, besides being a gloomy one, in short. There is a slightly ridiculous old woman in this house, too.



She sneezes in the evening (before the goat coughs at night). She cleans the kitchen, cooks supper, pokes the feeble fire that will not give warmth. There is here a touch of clumsy irony, which Eliot often uses to an ambiguous purpose. He either means to make us laugh (which he does not), or to sympathize, as if we were in front of someone who has a natural infirmity, which may look ridiculous but it would not do for us to laugh at that.

This misplaced irony makes us feel thoroughly uncomfortable in the chilly space which, but for a window that is mentioned, might very well be a tomb under a field. As for the window, a 'Jew' (identified by some as Christ) who owns the house (man's body, maybe) is squatting on the window sill, as if lying in ambush. A sense of impotence, of discomfort, of life decayed, of menacing death approaching, all these besiege the old man. He feels bereft, a 'dull head among windy spaces'. Monotonous, this use of only two lyrical registers in this poem: powerlessness (the hazy head), and the cold, which makes shiver a body that is slowly deserted by its life.

The second stanza turns abruptly to an apparently different topic. The hiatus that we feel here is only at the level of words. The logic, the understatement of the poem, goes on along its firm way, it is never abandoned or interrupted. These suggested statements, because of the verbally elliptical aspect of the poem, are ambiguous. Saying less, Eliot suggests more. Like an oracle, he utters understatements which, when over-stated for the sake of explanation, reveal a richness of interpretations.

Their merit lies in this very duplicity, which allows the reader to choose whatever meaning seems more suitable to his own disposition. It is not difficult at all to interpret this stanza in the spirit. It starts with the reproaching line, 'Signs are taken for wonders'. The line is followed by the image of a guilty man, who is unable to believe in anything above or different from him, unless he touches, he strokes the metaphysical with his hands. Which, of course, is impossible. Therefore, the second line describes

The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness.

The situation sounds desperate. Man is consequently doomed to fail. In the 'juvencence' (word coined by Eliot to replace the Latin 'juvenescence'), that is, the birth of the year (Christmas), Christ is born, and to what end? If we go along this accusing line, we shall interpret the 'depraved May' as the time of Easter. It is then that we see around 'dogwood' (the wood Christ's cross was made of) and 'flowering judas' (name that reminds of Christ's being fatally betrayed). Centuries after his crucifixion, Christ seems to be born over and over again, only to die at Easter endlessly, and to be 'eaten', 'divided', 'drunk' during the yearly religious service. The people he once came to help did not, still do not need him. They prefer the 'sign'. Christ's sacrifice was wasted and the failure is man's, not Christ's. Man goes to church and ignores its essence.

Several names of various nationalities are mentioned: Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist, Fräulein von Kulp. Together with the lines addressed directly to the reader, they generalize the meaning of the poem, including into it humanity at large. Eliot describes them all in meaningless, again clumsily ridiculous and intensely



displeasing postures. One walks all night to and fro in the adjoining room (a sense of guilt prevents him from sleeping?). Another bows (that is all he can do) among miracles of art (paintings by Titian). A woman shifts the candles (out of a sense of fear?). Another woman's name (Kulp) is directly suggestive of guilt. What is the use of all these disparate images forcibly massed together? To lead to a conclusion: human beings are mere 'vacant shuttles' that 'weave the wind'. Gerontion too is, like them (powerless because unable to reach God?),

an old man in a draughty house
Under a windy knob.

Disquieting, again, this image of life entombed before it has actually ceased to breathe.

The anger of the first stanza is continued in the second. It does not seem to restrict itself to only the sense. A few words plainly discourage the religious interpretation:

In the juvenescence of the year
Came Christ the tiger.

Why the tiger? Can the word have been used only to remind us of Blake's poem? Is it just another bookish echo, meant to create a mental melody? We might even ignore it, if it did not appear in the fourth stanza again:

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last...

This third stanza, in between the above-mentioned lines, seems to make things very much clearer. It describes man's utter powerlessness. 'History', with its maze of 'passages', 'corridors' and 'issues', is deceptive. What man seems to be granted is in fact out of his reach. The fulfillment of a wish or hope comes either too early, when one is unable to enjoy it properly, or too late, when the wish (like a lover's passion) is dead. Human hunger (what for?) is thus never unappeased. Four times the imperative 'think!' ('now', then 'at last') is uttered: think of what? The last line speaks of human tragedy and of human 'tears', but:

These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

Wrath is now named aloud. A certain tree (easily recognizable – the apple tree that man craved for, God denied, man stole and we all know what followed) bears it. Of course, this wrath can belong to the God who chased man out of Paradise. But the tears, would they be his, too? The stanza abounds in images of victimized human beings. Why then shouldn't Eliot's tree rather bear the wrath of a man who was the victim of divine punishment, and whose tears and anger are openly directed against that vengeful God? The first line makes it even more final:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?



Of course, the Bible often wonders whether God can ever forgive man. Only we are not compelled to do the same. Now man knows (has been warned by this very poem) how utterly lonely and helpless he is in this wide universe. Can then God (or whatever other name the creator of this world may bear) be forgiven for pushing him over the brink of the precipice? For having made man mortal, for having (by destroying for him the existence of a real Paradise) created death? ‘The tiger springs in the new year’, Eliot says. ‘Us he devours’.

The image of a solitary human being, unwillingly mortal, and therefore full of anger against sky and earth, emerges from this stanza. And, in a way, taking into account the intense sense of tragedy the poem creates, God or religion may very well have nothing to do with it. What Gerontion really speaks of is his own, his mortal condition, which he has to go through alone. No second character is really allowed even to speak of it. This is first and foremost the monologue of a man who feels he is alone in the world. God, to this dying man, is just another word, another absence.

The fourth stanza lends certainty to this inference. In a ‘rented house’ (a suggestive image for the perishable human body), the speaker is slowly ‘stiffening’. Remarkable, this gift Eliot always had of challenging what his every fibre feared most. In all his works, he looks like a fighter who duels with the sense of death. He puts on a mask of undaunted belief in life, although he dimly realizes that, while fencing, he is being driven with his back against the last fatal wall, where he will finally be stabbed to death.

This is where the violence of his images comes from. The courage of his harsh, shameless words is, in spite of their blinding clarity, an understatement of reticent regret, of a silent but intense sense of loss. That is why feebleness is paradoxically rendered in this poem by means of aggressive snapshots. A temperamental shyness reduced Eliot to wearing a hideous mask. Maybe we should remember here again that he once firmly denied being either learned or cold?

The speaker’s protracted dying is described with sickening minuteness. He has lost his ‘passion’, ‘sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch’. Gerontion argues with someone who has pushed him away, with somebody absent from the poem, as a matter of fact. At this stage, it would be too little to say that the dying old man is merely dissatisfied with his condition.

Wrath against the injustice he feels is being done to him pervades every single word he spits out. The whole stanza is a howl of despair, which the end of the poem tries to soften by means of a touch of irony. But this irony is so clumsy, crude and distasteful that, instead of being softened, the sense of tragedy is downright intensified. Some of the images are variations along the line,

Excite the membrane when the sense has cooled.

Others are more palatable flashes of a gull whirled by the wind, of white feathers (its own?) fallen in the snow, of (again violent) winds, windy straits, killing Gulfs, of the fatal Horn and the Trades. Everything ends where it had begun, in a ‘sleepy corner’, where the thoughts of this old man, of his ‘dry brain in a dry season’, are merely ‘tenants’ of a house. Something, whether it is life, or the whole world, or just our memory of this poem, is going to end for good and all. So, what *Gerontion* manages to convey (leaving aside scholarly or bookish investigation) is a poignant



sense of disappearance. Rather than call this a religious poem, we ought to see in it the regret that everything (God is, in fact, already absent) is bound to disintegrate. We ought to sense in it, first and last, Eliot's intense fear of a lifeless universe, his horror of the dark.

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ASH-WEDNESDAY (1930) is, in the religious ritual, the day when the fast (six weeks) before Easter (Christ's resurrection) begins. On this day, in church, the priest dips his thumb in ashes, marks the sign of the cross on the believer's forehead and intones: 'Remember, man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return'. Numberless associations can and have been made between the ashes in the title and the 'burning' often mentioned in the course of the poem. Innumerable arguments support a religious interpretation of the six parts. The most obvious of them all is the religious tone of every line, the many and very picturesque words clearly traceable to the Bible. God is absent again. He is mentioned only to be entreated, or rather as an empty hope, because the poem is very far from being a prayer. The hero of this poem seems in fact unable to believe in the effect of any prayer at all. Mary, too, is recalled, in name only.

Eliot's own images, fanciful landscapes, colours or paradoxical words give a certain poetic reality to the two. The more often these two silent metaphysical shadows are invoked, the less palpable they grow. It is not either God or the Virgin that the poem is about, in spite of the numberless quotations from Dante, which have prompted so many critics to decide so. *Ash-Wednesday* is the partial story of a life. Someone unwillingly goes ahead through it. Someone whose last form of expression, whose last conclusion, in the terms of the poem, is a 'cry'.

The so-called misreading of this poem is equivalent to doubting all Eliot's over-statements and making recourse to his understatements. It implies paying more attention to what Eliot does not say than to his actual utterances. This treacherous reading is made possible by the ambiguity of some key lines, most of them quoted directly from the Bible. This ambiguity is usually due to some willful omission of words, and to (again willful) deficient (or rather absent) punctuation. It is easy to ignore this ambiguity, and consequently imagine that the whole poem is just a prayer, an openly expressed wish to join Divinity in thought or in being. But the interest of the poem lies, as a matter of fact, in the very reversal of this mood.

Part I begins with a line taken (via Ezra Pound, it seems) from the Italian poet Cavalcanti:

Because I do not hope to turn again.

It seems that it is precisely this irreversibility of passing years that Eliot would like to contradict, to exorcise out of his body, by uttering it so clearly. The real, unuttered meaning of this line is its opposite: the ardent hope of the poet that he may never reach the point where he would have to admit there is no going back. He indirectly voices his desire that he might never find himself his back against the fatal wall, the



last of all walls. Eliot's poetry is incredibly inventive in creating such final obstacles. Eliot refuses here to leave the realm of his life and go beyond, where there is only 'what is not' (to use a favourite paradox of his), just nothingness, void, disintegration, dark. This strategy of coyly flirting with the undesirable, thus temporarily discrediting it, is what could be called Eliot's wishful thinking.

Part I of *Ash-Wednesday* abounds in gracefully dejected images. It is written in the first person. This was the device that best suited Eliot, since his really good poems are first person monologues or meditations. The poem has a tone of subdued and at the same time subversive renunciation. A line from *Sonnet XXIX* by Shakespeare ('Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope') supports the mood. Eliot uses literary echoes here as a trick meant to bully his readers into agreeing to whatever is being said. If other authors, and even such well-known authors too (like Shakespeare, Cavalcanti, Dante, etc.), have experienced this mood, it can hardly be false or feigned. It must be true, and its sadness is genuine.

A gymnastics of renunciation is being practised here, even in the slow cadence imposed on each line, in strong contrast with the restless, breathless race of words in *The Waste Land*. Some lines are here like a soothing intake of air. They do not manage to silence the turmoil that we feel is going on undecieved, unimpaired by such wishful thinking, deep down in those areas of Eliot's mind which are never exposed to light. These points of hidden darkness, the poet's true self, flash into some chameleonic (ambiguous) understatements from time to time, understatements which enclose, therefore, the precious diamonds of each poem.

An aged eagle no longer sees any use in stretching its wings in the effort to fly, now that, as we have been told, there is no hope to turn to the 'vanished power of the usual reign'. That eagle claims to have lost the feeling of confident strength, of time at hand, of life worth living, of (once probably thought everlasting) youth. The speaker tries to bring himself to give up hope, to give up striving or mourning for what has been lost. His falsely firm negatives (I do not, I no longer ...) or weak, unanswerable questions (why should I? ...) might look like resignation.

Combined with the negatives (I do not hope to turn again), against which obviously the speaker's mind painfully rebels, the rhetorical questions create a poignant sense of loss. We see here somebody who fears he may never know again 'the infirm glory of the positive hour'. These few words offer a splendid definition of careless youth, that thinks itself untouchable, impossible to be marred by age, imperishable in fact. The more negatives this speaker's mind masses together, the better we feel how rending his so youthful revolt, his incredulity, even his refusal to accept an end are:

Because I cannot drink

There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again.

A more abstract argument is then brought forth in the third stanza. 'Time is always time' for each of us. Yet, there is, for each of us, one place and one time that cannot be repeated ('I cannot hope to turn again'). Consequently the speaker decides that, things being as they are (impossible to be either kept forever or at least recovered), he is utterly powerless. What is left for him to do except to rejoice? Now,



Eliot is not exactly a rejoicing poet. We know that from everything he has written. He knows it himself, since the third stanza puts it so clearly:

Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice.

It follows that we shall witness Eliot's mind trying its hardest to 'construct' something that should help him forget his sorrow, his resentment against the way of all flesh. His mind will, for a while, try to 'rejoice': find something (here or beyond?) that may make the rest of his life bearable. Now is the time to remember that Eliot was no older than forty-two when *Ash-Wednesday* was printed. We cannot deal with it, then, as a subterfuge of old age, but rather as the result of a certain type of sensibility that may have been born old, in a way. A sensibility particularly aware of lost (never future) years, particularly afraid of waiting, because waiting (and wishing – no matter what for) was to him a parade of lost moments, all drowned forever into what was to come no more. Generalizing on this sense of the irretrievably lost, we might say that Eliot is a poet who thrives on ends. His sensibility is set quivering by a reversed feeling of nevermore. Eliot loves uttering aloud these ends because he feels that only by making a clean breast of the whole thing can he safely think away from them.

One way of cleverly killing the sense of loss is, in *Ash-Wednesday*, to address God and Mary. To name them only, because he hardly ever manages even to picture them. Words from the Bible are called to fill in the gaps. He prays to God to have 'mercy upon us'. He repeats with the Bible, 'May the judgment not be too heavy upon us'. What judgement? There is no metaphysical daring in these ritual words. The only world we perceive is the one here, not the one beyond. Beyond (meta) the physical there is merely the absence of God. It is down here, on earth, that the pain and the poetry are intensely felt. The wings of the eagle are no longer able to fly. They have become mere 'vans to beat the air'. A real master of self-pity, Eliot was. The very air down here is no longer breathable: it is now 'thoroughly small and dry'. Consequently the speaker prays to be granted something to make up for what he has been bereft of:

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

There is no rejoicing in God or a world beyond ours, so far. There is no sitting 'still' (alive), either. It is obvious that, unlike Yeats, Eliot cannot send his mind beyond death, ahead of his body, to find for him a place in Dante's Paradise. The ambiguity at the end of Part I strengthens Eliot's stubbornness to stay right where he is. No matter how often he may speak of beyond and after, Eliot is undoubtedly a poet of the here and now. The last lines of Part I come from the prayer *Ave Maria*, which in Latin goes as follows:

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum
Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.
Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Nunc, et in ora mortis nostre, Amen.



The line Eliot quotes,

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death,

is the most ambiguous line of Part I. The meaning of the initial prayer was: Holy Mary, pray for us mortals and sinners, pray for us now and pray for us at the hour of our death, too.

The last but one line of the poem, with no punctuation whatever, can be read in two opposite ways. For a believer, the obvious meaning is the religious one: the concern with the world after death (pray for us, for our future life). The second meaning is the reverse of the first. It stubbornly sticks to life. It can be read using an imaginary comma after 'pray for us'. We meet, then, a speaker who confesses that, however much we may speak of Divinity, we are sinners (that is ignore it) now, and will still be so at the hour of our death.

The stress falls in that case on the here and now. The more negatives or rhetorical (disabused) questions concerning the present we hear, and the more numerous the words from the Bible invoked to rescue the speaker (who seems to feel his bones disintegrate with each passing moment), the less appealing his metaphysical thoughts become. The hero's only reality is the one denied, belittled, disparaged – yet unspeakably cherished. All the rest (God, prayers, Mary, even the hour of our death) are to him mere make believe.

Part II of *Ash-Wednesday* opens with an odd image of disintegration of a human body into what might be taken for after life, although it would be hard to do so if it were not for the mentioned names of God and the Virgin. Part I had stated that the speaker felt there was no going back or, to put it slightly differently, that he had lost something for good and all. In Part II, he behaves as if he had, in fact, lost his whole life. That is, he tries to address us as if from a time and land after death.

The poem is far from being the best of the series, partly because of its obscurity, rather dry and uninviting. It is true, Eliot used to commend a poet's being able to express his feelings in whatever shape (clear or obscure) he was able to produce. He often repeated that we must write as we can, and accept others' poems as we find them. The stress laid by him on the poetic effort, rather than on its results, will not help Eliot's case here.

It is this particular part of *Ash-Wednesday* that occasioned the well-known incident which has become a very telling joke. A student asked Eliot what he meant by the opening line ('Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree'). Eliot sternly answered: I meant precisely, 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree'. Now, we know Eliot's fury against any explanation of poetry in other words than the very words of the poem. His reply confirms it. In this poem he tries associating his words with those of the Bible, but this does not lend enough emotional support to his lines. The stories abound in juniper-trees and men that are having visions of God in their shade.



There are in this poem, too, other broken sentences which the Bible attributes to Christ, and which, to a believer, might suggest that world of after-being which Eliot never manages to imagine on his own. Disgusting images are of no help, either. The poem is supposed to be written after death, yet in the first person.

The speaker still speaks. But who is speaking, after all? The already introduced three white leopards sitting under a juniper tree are tired after having ‘fed to satiety’ on the speaker’s body,

my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull.

Bones only are left. It is the turn of God and the Lady to turn up. God merely asks, ‘Shall these bones live?’ After which the ‘dry’ bones start chirping and shining with ‘brightness’. Some kind of profound thought is mentioned as well, the Lady honouring the Virgin in ‘meditation’. Deed after which she, too, becomes invisible,

... is withdrawn
In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.

In short, these lifeless bones, which pray for forgetfulness (reminding us of ‘Teach us to sit still’, in Part I), find themselves in the middle of the desert, side by side with

My guts the strings of my eyes and the indigestible portions
Which the leopards reject,

hoping for some new life. Besides their vague hope, the main thing is that they go on speaking. They address us. What more proof of life could we expect?

There may be hidden meanings in these willfully distasteful lines. Numberless critics have hastened to decode them. Hundreds of stories from the Bible have been narrated, starting from the faintest association with one word of the poem or another. To me, these lines merely seem to attempt a resented, and therefore repelling, description of death, which is followed and, in a way, atoned for by the best approximation of an image of eternity in Eliot’s poetry.

They are in fact a set of images comparable to Yeats’ attempt at describing the eternal fire he sees burning in his *Byzantium*. These lines about ‘eternity’ try to conceive the inconceivable, to think of timelessness with a brain that can exist only in time, to speak of forever with a tongue that cannot bring itself to utter ‘nevermore’. The lines are based on the use of paradoxes, of self-contradictory statements. Yeats used the same device. He forced together thoughts and images which smelt a little of the daring conceits of the metaphysical poets. Here is Yeats’ description of the eternal fire:

Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame ...



Eliot makes more ample use of the paradox. He is here more imaginative, although it does not help him sound more convincing. The bones that are left of his body after their trip into death form a weird image. They sing of a Lady, one of the few female friendly characters in Eliot's poetry, presumably borrowed from Dante. This Lady is both 'calm and distressed', 'torn and most whole' (to be associated with the immaculate conception). She is also a 'rose' of both memory and forgetfulness. She is 'exhausted and life-giving', and so on. She can be found in a beautifully described Garden (the same obsession with gardens as in *The Waste Land*), which is:

End of the endless
Journey to no end
Conclusion of all that
Is inconclusible
Speech without word and
Word of no speech...

An ambiguous garden, where 'all love ends'. This may mean that the feeling of love (a most significant absence in Eliot's work) vanishes, is put an end to. Or, on the contrary, it may also mean that it is progressively intensified, until it ends in fulfillment. The ambiguity is caused by the verb to end, which may mean either to reach a conclusion, or to be fulfilled.

This touching attempt at uttering what a man will never comprehend, this understatement of powerlessness, is one more proof of Eliot's love for the character of the feeble victim. It is followed by another landscape, with a juniper tree and bones scattered, shining in the quiet of the desert. These bones claim:

We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other.

The reader is too abruptly hurled from that euphorical (because impossible, unreal, paradoxical) vision of forever into the disgusting scene of a tomb. Where is John Donne, to teach Eliot the poetry and joy of life that can be derived even from the description of a tomb? This reader, so violently handled, ends by believing very little of what is being said. The failure of the lines dealing with death serves in fact Eliot's purpose. It weakens our sense of an approaching end, it withers our fear of death.

As for the ambiguous lines which end this part, here they are:

...This is the land which ye
Shall divide by lot. And neither division nor unity
Matters. This is the land. We have our inheritance.

The story is well known: God promises land to his chosen people. But there is also in the Bible another, more widely known story: that of Adam and Eve. And it was not exactly a heavenly, fertile land that God gave them for an inheritance. That land was supposed to be a punishment, as a matter of fact. Part V even says something about those who are 'spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed'. The inheritance then (the ambiguous word of this part) may be taken as the promise a good Christian would see in it: God giving land to his chosen people.



But it may also be the consequence of Adam and Eve biting of the apple tree of life (love), and being driven into mortality as a punishment (*Gerontion* advanced the same idea), which alone would justify their hurry to spit out the withered apple seed. Here we are, then, almost on the point of concluding that God gave man death as an inheritance; a most undesired death. But Eliot's accusation is not that violent as yet. It is only the (as we shall soon find, reversible) trip into non-being that we resent. Yet, from now on, the poem steadily develops towards an accusing frame of mind.

Part III of *Ash-Wednesday* is a predictable return to the story of the speaker's life. It seems to be the most impressive of the six parts, although it might be rather difficult to point out the elements that make it so. Maybe the use of a conceit (life seen as similar to a winding flight of stairs) gives it a special obvious coherence. A coherence which Eliot usually conceals in his poetry, in his lines, that are breathlessly broken, meant to be tentatively rearranged.

It may also be because of the (mostly gloomy) clarity of every image. Or the almost total lack of literary echoes. A light air of concrete words which the poet does not invest with more than their plain meaning. A feeling of the associative load of bookish remembrances being taken off our backs. It is a concentrated and at the same time easily understood poem. It does not place us in the position (which Eliot himself indicated, though, of course, in connection with other poets' works) of a reader who must muster up his courage and be ready to plunge into an alien language. A language which he may never fully understand, not even when it actually pleases him.

The poem begins at the first turning of a second stair. Which means that a first stair and part of the second, too, have already been climbed. The flight of stairs is a favourite motif with Eliot. There is one in *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'*. Then there is another – climbed almost on all fours – in *Portrait of a Lady*. Another one is being dejectedly descended by a rapidly ageing man in *Prufrock*, and so on. This short enumeration is enough to plead in favour of Eliot's constantly using several obsessive images (gardens, stairs, bones ...), whose recurrence ends by giving his poems an air of something familiar, a taste of some magic potion that we have, at a certain time, come across before. These recurrent images hardly change their meaning from one poem to another. The stairs, for instance, are practically everywhere associated with the hero's age, with the ruthless passage of time. The association was tentative, rather inferred than plainly seen, in the previous poems. It is very clear now.

The hero of this third part, while climbing the second stair, suddenly turns to look back. The typical retrospective glance, premonitory of sorrow in Eliot's lyrical strategy. What the hero sees below there looks like a ghost of himself a while ago. 'The same shape', he says. The strange thing about this poem, if we do interpret it as a conceit (a description of human life by associating it to the image of the stairs), is that instead of beginning enthusiastically, instead of enjoying life while the hero is still young, his love of it comes much later. Too late in fact, when the top (the end) of the stairs is close by.

It is not so strange, though, if we remember that Eliot is particularly sensitive to sadness, that only pain spurs him into poetry. His sensibility trudges through a land of misfortunes and, as a rule, it looks back. Those backward glances are bewildering. When it is too late, when everything is lost Eliot's heroes regretfully discover the



beauty, the love, the joy that have been missed. These wished for things, seen only when they can no longer be had, rediscovered with the remorse that they have been foolishly wasted, make the exquisite pain complete. Eliot does not overlook one single trick to enhance his downward, depressing disposition.

What the hero of this third part (presumably the same as the hero of all the other parts of the poem) sees below is, therefore, his own image on the first stair, at the moment when he was only beginning to climb. It is a contorted, far from youthful image of a 'shape twisted on the banister'. A shape struggling hard for its right to climb, as if it were trying to push open some mysterious gates. Dante's spirit peeps from every fold of Eliot's poems. We can feel it here in the hellish air of the stairs, a fetid vapour, the hero says. Dante can also be detected in the 'devil of the stairs', (a very impressive, almost philosophical generalization Eliot makes of it), who wears 'the deceitful face of hope and despair'.

Whether this devil keeps the gates of a hell to come, pushing the hero back from future despair, or whether, on the contrary, he prompts the hero to start climbing, forcing hope upon his innocent soul, we cannot know. This is an instance of fertile ambiguity. It is not even important to find out for certain, since both hope and despair are taken together, as a 'deceitful face'. Neither of them, therefore, leads to the right place. This joyless climbing should remind us of the prayer in part I, which asked:

Teach us to care and not to care
teach us to sit still.

It can also be associated with Eliot's slowed-down plays, in which the heroes will not budge, afraid of making wishes, lest their very wishes should drown them in the despair of never getting what they expect. Here Eliot utters belated wishes. Wishes which come only when the time of their fulfillment is gone forever, and, at that stage, they are not even wishes any more, just nostalgic thoughts to embalm time. The lack of movement, the shy, quiet reticence, the apparent static air (which hides an intense torment of anxiety) of Eliot's poems comes from this belated wishful thinking.

The hero soon reaches 'the second turning of the second stair', and forgets about that 'twisting' below, he says. He forgets about the moment when the climbing began, or about whatever went before that time. But, as we shall see, his forgetfulness is short-lived. For the time being he still has a long way to climb, his strength still supports him. He can afford to leave his beginnings aside, and pretend to ignore everything. He seems to be all alone now. He sees no more faces around. No more hope and despair? That is a little hard to believe, especially because it is so emphatically stated. The devil of the stairs is out of our sight. Maybe because the second stair is so frighteningly dark that to the climbing hero it looks like an untimely tomb:

Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth drivelling beyond repair,
Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark.

Lawrence Durrell, in his short characterization of Eliot (*Alexandria Quartet*) was, after all, right to inquire: 'But where is the smile?'. Everything is dishearteningly serious.



The third stair is not far away. Its first turning rends the darkness with a 'slotted window, bellied like the fig's fruit'. Again, the man who has climbed this far halts to have a look around. He seems now to be looking beyond. This might imply to some a suggestion of after-life. It seems more convincing if taken as an intent realization that the beauties which suddenly flash into the hero's sight (and which could have been his once) are not beyond his life now, but merely beyond his reach, beyond his age.

The only luminous scene of his life is now revealed to the climber who cannot help gazing out of that last window, while climbing the last stair. He sees a 'hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene' in Maytime, and hears an 'antique flute', played by a 'broadbacked figure drest in blue and green'. Any interpretation of this flute-player is possible. Many have been concocted, in fact but to no effect. The importance of this enigmatic image in the last stanza is diminished by the immediately following lines:

Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
Lilac and brown hair.

These two short lines, reminiscent of the hyacinth girl (image of wasted love) in *The Waste Land*, bring an unexpected (therefore the more intense) participation of the speaker to his own story. So far, everything was retold in the Past Tense: the struggle with the deceitful devil of the first stair, the dejectedness of the second, even the first step taken up the third stair. Suddenly, the tense is changed to the Present. The narrator feels (how late) what he, in his stubbornness to fight this devil of hope and despair, has left and lost outside.

The possible image of a (once) young girl, a lilac stalk in her hand ('Blown hair is sweet'), looms far away. Could it be a memory of the time before the climbing had begun? The beginnings, then, are not at all dead. Forgetfulness was a transitory feat.

The outcome of this revelation is a late wish to be outside, and start it all over again, maybe never to climb these stairs at all, not any more. It breeds the need to postpone, to slow down the hero's rush up:

Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the third stair...

Distracted from its (as Part II called it) 'concentration' on the purpose of advancing, the hero's mind falters. The idea is rendered by the remarkable assonance 'stops and steps'. It suggests the desire to climb both up and back down. The mind stumbles. The emotions that seemed to have been given up in the darkness of the first and second stairs blow up with the halo and destructive power of a volcano. Instead of a man who, with all his might, had wanted to reach the top of the stair, we suddenly see in front of us someone inside whom everything is 'fading, fading'. He boasts of having defeated the deceitful devil of the stairs, of possessing now a strength 'beyond hope and despair', of being beyond human emotions.

But this, again, is (being so over-stated) just wishful thinking. His voice, when he announces the victory, falters. The human being, who at the beginning of the climbing was determined to struggle with himself until he had managed to attain what



The Waste Land might have called the ‘peace that passeth understanding’, is finally exposed. When the climbing draws to its end, he is still that frail being, full of despair now, because only hope has been lost. Like the Sibyl in the motto to *The Waste Land*, he finds himself the prisoner of endless despair. As to the religious interpretation, as to hope in the help of some God, very few signs of it survive, if at all.

Let us start by noticing that, in this third part of *Ash-Wednesday*, God has been totally absent again. He is only mentioned in the last lines, in a prayer uttered by a man who falteringly climbs this last of all stairs:

Lord, I am not worthy
 Lord, I am not worthy
 but speak the word only.

For an illustration of how Eliot used to deface the words of the Bible to his own purpose, I shall quote here the whole fragment (*Matthew*, 8) where these words come from:

And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him, and saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented. And Jesus saith unto him, I will come and heal him. The centurion answered and said, Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only and my servant shall be healed (...) And Jesus said unto the centurion, Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour.

It is a quotation which, if well-known and promptly remembered, will forbid any other interpretation than belief in Divinity. But the words Eliot chose to use out of the story are extremely ambiguous, like any last line of the six poems in *Ash-Wednesday*. Here the ambiguity is due to the willful omission of explanatory attributes. What is the hero not ‘worthy’ of, and what kind of ‘word’ would he like to hear uttered from above? As a rule, whatever word Eliot quotes from some other work loses its initial connotations, and is given a new coat. All borrowed words are borrowed so well by Eliot that, in fact, they simply become his own.

Not more than a few lines before, a weak voice was complaining of the slow advance, of those ‘stops and steps of the mind over the third stair’. The same voice tells us now that the man does not feel ‘worthy’ of reaching the top of the stairs any more. As a matter of fact, he would like to postpone belief, to postpone his reaching the place where his life would stop being his own. He definitely does not want to step over the threshold of death. The ‘word’ he would like to hear from above must be one to the effect that his wish to linger on this side of the world has been granted him. God is not to come any closer. He is required to stay there, far away, wherever he may be, and ‘speak the word only’. The slow passage from one image to another finally reveals the hero’s unwillingness to continue the natural course of his journey. His wishful thinking that ageing may be reverted clings to his very small (yet fervent) hope that death might avoid him, for the moment at least. The careful reserve of Eliot’s words supports the God-rejecting interpretation of the poem.



Part IV of *Ash-Wednesday* is an oasis of sunshine, serene sky, green fertility and appeasing water for the thirsty. It is troubled only here and there by short memories of a possible menace: the ‘garden god’, the yew trees (trees of the churchyard, signs of death), and the same weird word ‘unheard, unspoken’. Except the hero’s own final ambiguous exclamations (which become his own precisely because they mis-use, they reverse the religious meaning of the context they come from), nobody utters a sound. A friendly feminine presence moves among angelic colours of violet, blue, white, green, wearing ‘white light folded, sheathed about her, folded’. We do not know who she is. The poem itself is a question:

Who walked between the violet and the violet ...

This unknown, yet definitely benevolent, feminine shape is one of the few angelic descriptions of a woman in Eliot’s poetry. She makes ‘cool the dry rock’. She also makes ‘firm the sand’ (echoes of *The Waste Land* still haunt the landscape). She is the ‘silent sister’ (well found alliteration) ‘behind’ the garden god, existing together with that god ‘between the yews’. She has a ‘breathless flute’, and she speaks no word. But, in spite of her silence (which, in fact, suggests both the hero’s inability and his unwillingness to hear, to come near her), the land is redeemed to life by her mere presence. The fountain springs up, the springs are renewed, ‘made fresh’. The earth which the hero treads becomes a fruitful, though unfortunately delusive, oasis.

What makes this feeling of well-being seem delusive? Besides the slight menace of the unseen garden god, there are a few lines reminiscent of pain, coming from the *New Testament* (‘Mary’s colour’) and from Dante (they speak of ‘eternal dolour’). Eliot even quotes a wailing fragment from Dante, which he must have learned by heart. He openly confessed that he used to memorize texts from Dante even before actually knowing Italian at all. Several words belonging to the same Dantean text pop up here and there, in various other poems by Eliot. The lines in question consist in the speech made by a Provençal poet, Daniel Arnaut, whose excellence had been preached at length by Ezra Pound. It must be admitted that many of Ezra Pound’s findings and tastes deeply influenced Eliot’s less pioneering nature in criticism. The words that remind of Arnaut are ‘Sovegna vos’. They come from the following fragment, which has more than one word that sounds familiar to a reader of Eliot’s poems:

Jeu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan;
consiros vei la passada folos,
E vei jauzen lo jorn, que’esper denan.
Ara vos prec per aquella valor
que vos condus al som de l’escalina,
sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor.
Poi s’ascose nel foco che li affina.

(*Purgatorio*, 26)



The last four lines are quoted by Eliot himself in his *Notes to The Waste Land*. The English translation of the fragment is the following:

I am Arnaut who weeps and goes singing;
 I see in thought all the past folly
 And I see with joy the day
 for which I hope, before me.
 And so I pray you, by that virtue
 Which leads you to the topmost of the stair,
 be mindful, in due time, of my pain.
 Then he dived back into that fire which refines them.

The stair present here must have made the quotation even more appealing to Eliot. As for the two words quoted in Part IV, they can convey their full meaning only to someone who has the whole background in front of his eyes. Someone who knows Dante and maybe has even read Pound's bulky essay on Arnaut. The quoted words mean to say, 'remember my pain'. This time, the line requires initiation into a certain type of literature, not very widely read in the original. It needs a long explanation to be understood. Consequently, it arouses a faint dissatisfaction with the bookish tone of these words which, unless explained in footnotes, remain just an intriguing turn of an Italian, hardly ever heard, tune. In a similar way, the rather obscure image of the 'jewelled unicorns' drawn by a 'gilded hearse' seems to come from Dante again (possibly suggestive of the divine pageant accompanying the appearance of Beatrice). Frankly speaking, the explanation of all these bookish allusions should not take so long. Eliot did not manage to appropriate these borrowings. The device failed him. The cultured poetry which he wrote had its moments of weakness, of unrewarding obscurity.

Really important here are the suggestions of regretful wishes and pain, which, in time, lead to the last ambiguous line. The friendly feminine figure walks 'between sleep and waking'. Present sleep and future waking, or the other way round? We shall have to wait for the end to decide which is which. In spite of her refreshing influence, the hero cannot forget his despair, not even at the core of this paradisiacal vision. More than a vision, it is rather the sign of an invisible, unheard, remote and (as we have seen and shall see again) refused Paradise. The hero keeps whispering the imperative 'Redeem'. It comes after the statement that the years, the fiddles, the flutes are being borne away. It is repeated in various synonymous ways, such as 'restore', 'the new years', the new verse. Towards the end, the whisper becomes much more audible:

Redeem the time, redeem the dream ...

We can hardly fail to notice how the gloomy feeling of loss has managed to squeeze again into a poem initially meant to be an image of after-life blissful light. Redeem the time, it seems to say, now, when it is not too late yet. 'Think now', Gerontion was saying. The 'waking' of the first lines should be seen, I suppose, as belonging to the present, too. Redeem the time now, when life is still with us. Now, he prompts, before and not after:



Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew.

Excellent image of death, this last but one line. Here we are, again, watching Eliot advance like a crawfish, backwards, his eyes riveted on what could have been had, on what may have been had, anyway on what has eventually been lost. His steps lead him towards what he refuses to see. Walking backwards, he hopes to reach death unawares, maybe even slip past it without being forced to turn round and look it in the face. The aim of his paradisiacal images (few as they are) is to confirm this very faint hope that he might be spared awareness and experience of disintegration, of non-being. They tend to propitiate. The last line of this part, besides its stern religious interpretation, conveys the hero's devouring fear and faint hope. It is taken from another prayer, *Salve Regina*. In Latin, its end says:

Et Jesum, benedictum ventris tui, nobis post hoc exilium ostende.

Which in English would be, 'And, after this our exile, show us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus'. The beginning of the prayer speaks of 'Eve's exiled children', who in this vale of tears (the 'cloud of tears' in the poem), implore Mary's mercy, and ask for their exile on earth to be revoked by the sight, the birth of Jesus. From the broken presence of this prayer all over the poem, we can realize how much Eliot loved the language of his prayers. The words he quoted have only one, uncompromising meaning, which is rather far from the spirit of the prayer quoted. The prayer states: after this life of ours, which has been like an exile, give us the hope of a brighter future.

The mere lack of punctuation, as well as Eliot's habit of incomplete quotation (omission of the words which are basic for the original context, and whose absence modifies the initial meaning), give this last line a totally different meaning. If read with an imaginary comma ('And after this, our exile'), the words drastically reverse the appeasing hope of the prayer, changing it into a howl of despair. After 'this' (the wind shaking a thousand whispers from the yew, which implies man's death), nothing can come but an endless exile into lifelessness.

The hero draws a long breath, and almost feels like swallowing his words, still he utters them. He intimates that eternity, after-life or whatever image the *New Testament* may have created to diminish this fear of death, are only a long, undesired exile. If the oasis is to be had, it must be had while we can still touch it. All visions of after-life are therefore, here, either obscure or unconvincing, weak. Eliot did not take the trouble to enlarge upon them. On the other hand, the present images of fertility are as haunting to our ears (so used to Eliot's gloomy landscapes) as a will-o'-the-wisp. Which makes us remark, not for the first time, that Eliot is everywhere a poet of the here and now.

Part V concentrates more directly on the image of human lot, to which the hero himself belongs. It is true that it begins with a whole stanza dealing with the 'Word', capitalized, definitely reminiscent of the well known opening:



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

(*John*, 1)

We hear in this poem that the 'Word' is now lost, spent, unheard, even unspoken, a 'word without a word', yet a word

within
The world and for the world.

A resourceful assonance is found in such a line as

Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled.

A direct echo from the Bible could not have been absent. A line reminds us that 'the light shone in darkness'. Another line continues that this 'silent Word' is the centre of the world. These opening lines of Part V are all beautiful music. One does not have to try very hard to see their verbal association with the beautiful envisaging of the absolute beginning of the world. They might have been taken as an indictment of man's deplorable unwillingness to partake of Divinity (his only hope to become immortal again), if the rest of the poem had not been written. The Bible says that God's first word when he created the world was 'Light'. He ordered that light should surround his creation. Eliot's poem, too, mentions a few divine words, but they belong to Jesus (the *New Testament*), and constitute the ambiguous key lines of this fifth part. These words, a fragment from what is known as *The Good Friday Reproach*, come from the following context:

O my people, what have I done unto thee, or wherein have I wearied thee?
Testify against me. Because I brought thee forth from the land of Egypt, thou hast prepared a cross for thy Saviour...

Christ utters these words the night before his crucifixion, when the people gathered around him abuse him and hit him with stones. The *New Testament* as a piece of literature had a perfect command of this device which Eliot himself used: victimizing heroes in order to force the readers into full agreement to the idea that lurked behind them. This obviously pitiful self-description of Jesus (*Mica*, 3) is cut short by Eliot. First, he only remembers, 'O my people, what have I done unto thee', then, as a last line, just 'O my people'. The ambiguity of the quotation comes out clearly after a careful reading of the stanzas that describe the people addressed by Christ. That luminous Word of whoever created this world, the poem itself states, is now totally absent. The second stanza opens with a rhetorical question:

Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound?



As was to be expected, the answer is negative: ‘not here’. Some of the words seem to have been used merely for the sake of music or fluency, such as:

... Not here, there is not enough silence
Not on the sea or on the islands, not
On the mainland, in the desert, or the rainland ...

It must be admitted, though, that Eliot’s irregular, incomplete rhymes are enticing, even when the sense behind them is somewhat deficient. Some six years later, he was in fact to accuse Milton of this very deficiency, but that is another story and, anyway, Eliot’s slipping into empty words does not occur very often (in his good poems). On the contrary, he might often plead guilty of the opposite: of over-loading his words with too many side-meanings (cultured echoes) besides his own.

When the blurred shape of this ‘lost word’ is set aside, the kernel of the poem unfolds. The last three stanzas bring, in Eliot’s best gloomy apparel, the image of victimized man. Eliot speaks of people who walk in darkness, who can find no ‘place of grace’, who have no time to rejoice, who are torn

... between season and season, time and time, between
Hour and hour, word and word, power and power ...

It is true that these people ‘wait in darkness’ because they ‘avoid the face’ and ‘deny the voice’. But their so-called guilt does not sound the least bit as impressive as the violence of their utter innocence, frailty, powerlessness. A cosmic cold (instead of light) engulfs these people who ‘wait in darkness’, who (again, remarkable assonance, felt so by Eliot himself, since he repeated it) ‘chose and oppose’. People who are like ‘children at the gate’ of their dreamland, who would like to go in (‘will not go away’), but feel they will never be allowed to, and, consequently, as the line ends, they ‘cannot pray’. Of course, Eliot does not put things so plainly himself. He only masses together these stabbing images of human helplessness. From time to time he remembers man’s sense of guilt, and wonders:

Will the veiled sister between the slender
Yew trees pray for those who offend her.

But the very next line brings back his rending sympathy for those who ‘are terrified and cannot surrender’. This modal verb ‘can’, used in the negative all over the poem, together with other modals, such as ‘will not’, and with the simple negative present, or just negative adverbs in which the poem abounds, come to impress the reader more deeply than the initial affirmative statement of God’s well-meaning promise. When the two legendary figures (God and the silent sister) are mentioned, that is done under the hood of a question mark. Their relation to the ‘people’ of the poem is mentioned only in rhetorical questions, whose answer is provided by the negative strategy of the whole poem.

Everything is therefore denied: the presence of Divinity, the beauty of man’s life. The logical conclusion is that the former destroyed the latter. Every negative trick



is used. Besides the grammatical ones mentioned above, Eliot resorts to his favourite lexical habit: he repeatedly joins in pairs words that devour each other (chose and oppose, affirm and deny...). After this resourceful display of denials, the only question our mind formulates seems to be, Who is denied what and by whom?

When the ambiguous line, 'O my people, what have I done unto thee', first turns up, it may not be very obvious yet. The last stanza, however, leaves no doubt. These people, on whose shoulders the burden of whole volumes of religious literature has been heaped, find themselves in a 'last desert', mingled (in imagination only?) with a garden. They are 'spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed'. And then Christ's words come back to our mind, but in another mantle, since Eliot himself chose to omit the words that would have shown clearly that he was man's victim.

When we hear, 'O my people, what have I done unto thee', we cannot fail to detect the meaning Eliot infused in these words while he was making them, in this poem, his own. The divine character actually pleads guilty. He repents at seeing the fate he has prepared for the human being he meant to protect. The apple-seed (the beginning of mortality legendarily given by God to man) is now withered, and man spits it out. He is powerless to change his dissatisfactory lot. What is worse is that the divine character is equally powerless, so the poem ends with the disheartening echo, 'O my people'.

Part VI (the last) of *Ash-Wednesday* is the reverse of the first. Part I had begun by letting us know that, as there was no going back in time, no arresting it at least, something had to be built, upon which the hero might rejoice in future years, while he was forced to go his (abominable) way. Unwillingness breathed out of every word.

Each line which openly affirmed that the hero felt ready to give up past moments ('the infirm glory of the positive hour', 'the vanished power of the usual reign', 'the place where trees flower and springs flow') was merely a half-hearted renunciation, an understatement. Behind them, we could hardly fail to detect the hero's resentment. In an apparently blank voice, he was announcing that what was lost was lost. Inner agony lurked hidden deep inside his soul, never uttered. He had no choice besides heading for another land.

A different kind of being he was going to become. Someone who, after leaving life, was to inhabit what may be called (to use a bunch of irrelevant words, because Eliot failed to clothe them in images) eternity, timelessness, etc. This hero, therefore, sets out on a journey to the land of forever. Should we, psychoanalytically, notice here a child's wish that some things may never be lost? The second part actually tries to imagine the beginning of that journey with the moment of death. It only manages to leave us confused as to where the hero means to go. Describing the hero's 'forever' by paradoxical, self-devouring images ('end of the endless, conclusion of all that is inconclusible'), Eliot simply destroys his destination in our minds. Part III confirms our inclination towards doubting the reality of this journey. The hero suddenly forgets about death in the desert and whatever kind of future life was supposed to follow it, in order to linger at the top (end) of the stair of his own true life, uttering his ardent wish to go no farther than that.

Part IV is a mixed description of soothing visions, which makes us feel that there is an inner turmoil in the hero's heart to be appeased. Peace of mind does not



alight however, no matter what authorities in the matter (the *Bible*, the *New Testament*, Dante) may be invoked. The hero of the poem may have started hopefully (more or less, anyway) on a trip into after-death. Yet, on his way there, he finds out he simply does not want to experience death of the body, even if it promises a magnificent resurrection of the mind. In spite of the opening line of the poem ('I do not hope to turn again'), he finally discovers that he has mis-read himself.

The obligation to rejoice upon something still unknown, the desert where immortal shapes feed on humble mortal life, where the air destroys man's most precious possession (his living being, that can feel time), the Garden where all love ends, all these lead to the gloomy Part V. The hero reveals here that he has merely been flirting with the idea of leaving this world in order to approach Divinity. Dante is utterly forgotten. Eliot views himself as the victim of this Divinity, whose presence can only be felt from the fact that once, at the beginning of all times, of all worlds, of all life, it created death. In this context, the hero of the poem, who would have liked his life to last forever, but finds that a certain God has placed it under the sign of mortality, feels he has been wronged, and makes this very God a bearer of the guilt ('O my people, what have I done unto thee').

Consequently, Part VI reverses the direction of the whole poem. No more imagined divine forever. Even the well known opening line is changed. 'Because' becomes 'although I do not hope to turn again'. An 'although' which openly confesses the hero's unwillingness to go ahead. How could we now fail to sense that, instead of a brave going forward (such as Browning's *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*), this poem is a wavering retreat? Wishful thinking has been pushed from behind for a little space, but the hero's regret, resentment, revolt turn out to be much stronger. In spite of the fact that ('although') he may have wanted to face his fate imagining some kind of God, Eliot (who is his own hero, after all) appears again here to advance crab-like, blindly, his eyes riveted on the once foolishly wasted emotions, felt as desirable only now, that they have been lost for good and all.

His soul is numbed by the paralyzing fear that one fine day he may find himself his back against the final of all final walls. The whole poem is pervaded by the premonition of the pitiable powerlessness he will feel then. 'Do not go gentle into that good night', Dylan Thomas later said. Eliot indeed raged, raged madly at the loss of day. Part VI of *Ash-Wednesday* proves it amply. It speaks with impressive (and depressing) melancholy about this

brief transit where the dreams cross
The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying.

Here and there, echoes of his previous wishful-thinking forever turn up: 'Bless me father', 'blessed sister, holy mother', 'our peace in his will' (Dante) Although, he says, 'I do not wish to wish these things', the desire (and the pain) to live cannot be forgotten.

A beautiful image conveys Eliot's melancholy wish to step back rather than go ahead. He changes his image of the first part, where the wings of the aged eagle were useless, no longer good to fly, 'but merely vane to beat the air'. The air itself seemed then 'thoroughly small and dry'. That time of dissatisfaction, when his wishful thinking actually began, has now become desirable. Typical for Eliot, these



retrospective desires are another device to enhance the pain that the poem is meant to convey. No poem by Eliot (not even the few humorous or luminous ones) is ever light-hearted. Right now,

... though I do not wish to wish these things
From the window towards the granite shore
The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
Unbroken wings

Although and still may have been just an understatement. But the following stanza, the most personal and the most painfully touching in the whole poem, can leave no doubt as to the belated regret in this poem:

And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
And the weak spirit quickens to rebel
For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea-smell
Quickens to recover
The cry of quail and the whirling plover
And the blind eye creates
The empty forms between the ivory gates
And smell renews the salt savour of the sandy earth

Consummate minstrel of the pain of all ends, Eliot was undoubtedly, and that even in the poems of his youth. What else is left from *Ash-Wednesday* besides this slashing image of the 'time of tension between dying and birth'? Forgotten, the building of something imaginary upon which to rejoice. Feeble the voice which still moans,

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still ...

The rending truth is that (and here alliterations literally fly to Eliot's help) the 'lost heart' rejoices now, this being its only time of joy, although it is too late, because the things it rejoices in (lilac, sea voices, sea smell) are all lost. Loss is the unique topic of Eliot's sensibility. A monotonous poet, maybe, but the intensity of his sense of loss and the vividness of the images that convey it make up for the monotone of his soul.

The end of this final part is a whisper, ashamed of its own lack of belief. It moans about a sensation of solitude, which is crossed by dreams. Dreams of real misfortunes, rather than of future imaginary bliss. Even 'among these rocks', Eliot says, where 'the voices shaken from the yew-trees drift away' (dead or dying voices, then), here, where the yew, as a messenger of death, is his only company, the hero still prays ambiguously:

Suffer me not to be separated.



Separated from himself, rather than what the prayer the echo comes from might have implied (from God). When the final line of the poem is uttered,

And let my cry come unto Thee,

(again incompletely, therefore ambiguously quoted), we know for certain what this cry means to say. It is not a cry of belief, nor is it one of meek renunciation. The author of *Ash-Wednesday* crams into this last cry the bitter discontent of a poet for whom all joy was pain, all seasons winter, all beliefs a huge hoax. A poet whose falterings between believing and wishful thinking incite us to unveil his unuttered sense of failure and mis-read his over- and understatements until we have victoriously (though dejectedly) exposed them.

We must write our poetry as we can, and take it as we find it – this is what Eliot used to say. Can he have envisaged his being read by what Valéry called ‘un lecteur de bonne foi et de mauvaise volonté’, who would make havoc of all his over-statements, dive into his understatements and come up with a non-religious view of the apparently most religious part of his work?



3. THE HOLLOW POEMS: ELIOT EXPLICIT

There was a time, not long after he had written *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, when, in a letter to his brother, Eliot confessed his fear that he might never be able to write poetry again. The feeling must have endured all through his lifetime, this poetic panic that his creative resources might go dry. He did have, indeed, moments of poetic silence. A lyrical dumbness, during which he sometimes wrote criticism, drama or the *Choruses* from *THE ROCK* (1934), which we are going to discuss now. They come in between *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) and the first of the *Four Quartets* (1935). In another letter to Bonamy Dobrée, (July 1934) he complains again:

I don't think my poetry is any good: not *The Rock* anyway, it isn't; nothing but a brilliant future behind me. What is one to do?

It is hard, if not impossible, to know for certain what Eliot actually meant by this much too direct statement. Whenever self-disparaging directness is involved in his utterances, that is a sign of his so-called 'humility', which hides an exacerbated, though well mastered pride. Eliot was a man with an irreproachable intellectual and moral backbone. Whatever he may have said to the effect of belittling his gifts, he cannot ever have mistrusted his power over his words.

If, at times however, these words failed him, he must have been the first to sense it, which is the case with *The Rock*. It consists of a set of ten poems, meant to accompany a church pageant. It obeys the pre-imposed scenario of church history. In this religious project, Eliot was a mere guest. He was supposed to provide the words for a previously made pattern. What came out of this combination was a set of hollow poems, which look very much like Eliot's own image of *The Hollow Men*:



Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion ...

The lines look indeed like ‘headpieces’ filled with straw, strewn as they are with unconvincing words. They are uttered by a ‘dried’ voice, which quietly whispers echoes well-known from of old. The adjective ‘meaningless’ can by no means be part of the description, though, because unfortunately these *Choruses* have (to think that this could become a hindrance for a poet!) too much of a meaning, too obvious a moral in them. Because they have a thesis to impose, because they are so unambiguously moral, these poems are an unexpected (though not solitary) explicit interlude in Eliot’s ambiguous poetic creation. Their interest lies rather in their inessentials, especially in the images of the town and its inhabitants as seen by an urban poet. Whatever looked meaningful in *The Waste Land*, the non-poetic, disgusting images which built up Eliot’s peculiar poetic strain are here, with shyness, emptied of all weirdness. In *The Rock*, Eliot feels obliged to sound traditionally prophetic, and this costs him the life of the lines.

The clear vocabulary of the poem no longer sounds like an orchestra interspersed with most unusual instruments, producing the least pleasing (yet how enthralling) sounds. This vocabulary can easily be divided into a religious (restricted) section, and an urban one. No ambiguity, no dark holes, no precipices of interpretation, which used to make Eliot’s poems what he himself intended them to be: an interference area, inside which the meanings of author and readers clash to the point of breaking, and are thus multiplied endlessly.

Clarity is not Eliot’s stronghold. He used it here because the poems are meant to be largely accessible. He does so to his disadvantage as a poet. There are neither understatements nor over-statements here. All statements are wisely poised. This dutifulness to clarity kills the lyrical thrill. Here is a dull Eliot who, without realizing it, is in fact entering for the first time upon the stage, upon a dramatic career. A very intriguing one, too, since in a drama neither clarity nor ambiguity are of much help. In his five plays, Eliot had few theatrical devices ready at hand. He was bound to resort again to what he knew best, the weird music of his poetry.

The first poem of *The Rock* opens with a thrilling memory of *The Waste Land*, that ‘world of spring and autumn, birth and dying’. The recurrence of once loaded images is the only reason why *The Rock* survives, even though these images are here weak, hardly audible, defaced to the point of losing all Eliotian identity. While reading along, for the first time in Eliot’s work, we feel as if we were strolling down a trodden road. An air of familiarity lures us. We keep intercepting echoes of dust, of the desert, of the ‘endless cycle’ which affords no peace, of more and more meaningless noises. Echoes from *Gerontion* and *Ash-Wednesday* turn up. Remarkable lines, these (and so true for an artist of etymology like Joyce):

Where the word is unspoken
We build with new speech.

The tone is – unbelievable when we think of Eliot’s intellectual agility in being as tolerant as to prevent everyone from opposing him – not only disapproving, but downright reproving. Eliot actually shakes his forefinger at us. He used to delight



in mud, the slimy belly of rats and the like. Now, these are totally shunned. His favourite device, however, is still the combination of opposite, reciprocally devouring words such as:

Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.

Punctuation, which he used so sparingly (to the point of avarice) in his good poems, is exceedingly correct. No comma, no semi-colon or full stop is missing. What is more, exclamations and questions abound. We keep hearing O's, where's, I say. The structure of each sentence is flawless. No ellipses, no secret unuttered words, no enigmatical silences. A loud, sour voice endeavours to imitate the dignity of a sermon, and merely manages to intrigue (even irritate) us. The same as in his criticism, Eliot is here in a denying mood. Whatever image or word his mind happens to catch sight of, is followed by an announcement of its wickedness, falsity, uselessness. Here is an example:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Repetition does lend a certain music to the lines. In his better poems, Eliot never repeated a word without bringing up one more of its senses. Not supported by such variable meanings, repetitions create here quite an empty music, which we are in a hurry to overlook, to ignore.

Maybe it takes a believer to appreciate Eliot's *The Rock*. He used to say, in some of his critical essays, that a poet like Shelley failed because of his immature beliefs; because he was not able to separate his poetry from what he believed in. Eliot the critic seemed to think that belief (no matter which) is not essential to poetry. Could he have forgotten his own reticence as to moralizing poetry when he placed the usefulness of religion, church and God at the centre of *The Rock*?

Avoiding the central, moralizing theme (which was after all imposed on Eliot by the Church pageant for which he was asked to write the words), there is still some vigour to be dug out of these ten poems. In the first one, we discover a face of Eliot we hardly knew. The clarity, the sincerity of the lines reveal to us a little of Eliot himself versus the world he lived in. There is no concealing ambiguity or omission.

That might be, to a certain extent, one reason for our slight uneasiness when reading *The Rock*. All of a sudden, Eliot lets fall the numberless laces that veiled his shape, and we see him almost nude. Deafened by the loud monotone of his sermonizing, we cannot fail to sense a certain indecency in his words. His famous theory of concealed personality, of impersonality in art, is ignored. He has forgotten that the more a poet speaks, the less he conveys. Verbal avarice and emotional reticence are essential to a poetry like his, whose excellence lies in its enigmatic understatements, in its ambiguity.

A touching line like



Where is the life we have lost in living?

reminds us of Eliot's power to enthrall a reader. Unfortunately, it is drowned, literally annihilated by what goes before and after. A solitary sparkle cannot redeem the whole first stanza, full as it is of moaning exclamations, rhetorical questions, capitalizations, futile oppositions of words. At least it helps us notice an interesting turning point in Eliot's poetry: a wavering between I and we, a slow passage from painful emotional immediacy to a more poised, a more remote and meditative emotion, that of the *Quartets*.

'I journeyed to London', the 'I' of *The Rock* says, thus beginning his description of the 'timekept city'. What does he find there? To his taste, far too many restaurants, cars, picnics and people who refuse to have anything to do with churches, bells (where are the 'reminiscent bells' tolling in *The Waste Land*?) and vicars. A character called 'the Rock' loudly moans that shrines and churches are neglected. Man's rejection of religion, the speech implies, menaces to drag him back into a formerly known (and crossed) desert which may soon turn up again, in 'the tube-train next to you', or even in the human heart.

How can we help remembering the stubborn recurrence of these two images, rocks and deserts of sand, in poem after poem? 'Come in under the shadow of this red rock', 'the last desert between the last blue rocks', and so many other lines. Each slightly different (in colour, shape, context) from the previous, yet all of them firmly related in meaning. A meaning which cannot be rent open, stated in other words than Eliot's own. A meaning which can be felt but not re-stated.

A chorus of workmen comes in singing:

We build the meaning:
A Church for all
And a job for each
Each man to his work.

Their optimism is interrupted by a bitter image of the 'unemployed'. That one, at least, brings back some of Eliot's fertile sense of discontent:

No man has hired us
With pocketed hands
And lowered faces
We stand about in open places
And shiver in unlit rooms.

The anger of *Gerontion* is looming far away, like a lighthouse in the dark of night. It is stifled by the stern indignation of the second poem. The ruined house it describes is here the house of God, forgotten in the era of

... imperial expansion
Accompanied by industrial development.
Exporting iron, coal and cotton goods
And intellectual enlightenment



And everything, including capital
And several versions of the Word of God.

Gerontion's anger was really effective. This one sounds like a foreign idiom to our ears. Eliot may have done his best to plunge into contemporary reality and squeeze it in his lines undisguised. The result of his trying to approximate the reporter's view (so very fashionable in poetry nowadays) is a staggering idiom. We seem to hear someone speaking our own language (we recognize the landscape), but with a wildly comic, definitely unfamiliar accent. It leaves us unmoved. Then, the further we read, the more troubling it gets, in the sense that we feel troubled, ill at ease about our own reaction. The speaker's stern appeals trigger our suppressed laughter.

It may be our fault, in a way, if we fail to get the message of these poems. We are ill prepared to hear someone speak of sins like sloth, avarice, gluttony, pride, lechery, of repentance, of expiation and all that, in direct relation to ourselves. They sound all right in the literary context of the Bible, but to bring them into present life? Imagine that, like the chosen people of God, Londoners still have to build a 'Temple'? The feeling of growing solitude, of dispersed families, of each for himself and each one in his car is accurately noticed. Still, the indignant tone Eliot uses in mentioning these motorcars, intimating that they might be the deed of the devil on earth, makes us think of the religious frenzy of his Puritanical ancestors. He complains,

O miserable cities of designing men...

One line of the third part is, however, memorable. God speaks:

I have given you hearts, for reciprocal distrust.

It reminds us of Eliot's love for the anticlimax, which he used among other devices to create a sense of humorous surprise. He was fond of those unexpected remarks which bring about laughter. What follows here is unfortunately only unwillingly comic:

Many are engaged in writing books and printing them,
Many desire to see their names in print,
Many read nothing but the race reports.
Much is your reading, but not the Word of GOD,
Much is your building, but not the House of GOD.

The mistake Eliot made in this set of poems is one of words. A lexical mistake, we might say. He is betrayed (as he, himself, the same as Valéry, very often feared) by the quicksands of language. He chose ancient words to address people who no longer reacted to them. The Biblical anger contained in those words nowadays fails to frighten. It is regarded as an ancient historical fact.

Eliot based his effects in *The Rock* on words whose reality had vanished. It amounts in fact to saying that *The Rock* was written as if English were a dead



language. If, instead of relying upon a dull and dated scenario, Eliot had merely given way to his own contorted sensibility, the indignation that would have resulted might have equalled the rage of ageing in *Gerontion*, *Ash-Wednesday*, etc. As it is, he worked against the grain, against his own poetic nature. He tried to step aside from the mystery of ambiguity. He tried to force upon his readers a thesis which was far too rigid, too intolerant, too demanding. In short, it is this narrow-minded moralizing that ruined *The Rock*.

Eliot must have written this set of ten choruses at a time when he was not ready for a real poetic outburst. The proof is that, in writing *The Rock*, he used his memory (quoting himself, that is) rather than his creative energy. The lines are stuffed with images clearly traceable to his previous poems. For instance, houses are filled with 'a litter of Sunday newspapers' (beautiful memory of the 'sweet Thames', carrying along the garbage of the town). A goat climbs a street of scattered brick; no moving suggestion here of an entombed living being, over whose head, in *Gerontion*, a goat keeps coughing in the field at night. 'Godless' people do not love one another; 'My friend, blood shaking my heart', *The Waste Land* said.

The accusatory enumeration of novelties in all fields makes us shudder (with disgust), as if we were brought in front of the mediaeval Inquisition. Eliot has managed to create an anachronism. At the end of a fragment like the following, we simply feel like saying, 'E pur si muove':

Binding the earth and the water to your service,
Exploiting the seas and developing the mountains,
Dividing the stars into common and preferred,
Engaged in devising the perfect refrigerator,
Engaged in working out a rational morality,
Engaged in printing as many books as possible,
Plotting of happiness and flinging empty bottles,
Turning from your vacancy to fevered enthusiasm
For nation or race or what you call humanity ...

No doubt allowed as to the meaning. No right of appeal. No reply acceptable, unless perhaps a humble profession of guilt, which we may not feel quite ready to utter. But for the happy finding 'plotting of happiness' (a faint Shakespearian echo), we are honestly driven to wondering whether the whole thing must indeed be taken seriously. Is this the Eliot who advocated the non-poetic poetry? The one who once exclaimed, 'Cut off the poetry'? The lover of all city-scapes? The reticent man whose shyness in uttering a thought to its firm end brought such thrilling ambiguity into his poetry?

Something unaccountable happens in *The Rock*. Eliot's effective words (those with multiple meanings in his previous poems) fly to his aid, but the thing is done against the author's will. Or, at least, without his realizing it, since we find these once sparkling words depressingly impoverished and unconvincing here. There are in the poem the well-known fountain, and a town lying waste because consumed with fire, but their suggestiveness is stifled by a childish recounting of a forgotten religious story:



It is hard for those who have never known persecution,
 And who have never known a Christian,
 To believe these tales of Christian persecution.
 It is hard for those who live near a Bank
 To doubt the security of their money.
 It is hard for those who live near a Police Station
 To believe in the triumph of violence.
 Do you think that the Faith has conquered the World
 And that lions no longer need keepers?

Everything sounds, indeed, like a church tune, for which Eliot did his best to find suitable words. His fault was that he relied too much upon the effect of the provided tune, and his own lines came out limping. Or, rather, irritatingly uncompromising.

This pattern of *The Rock* is supposed to re-enact the history of the Church. Yet the poem on the whole does not look like a narrative at all. This may be another of Eliot's failures here, the fact that he was not able (like all his stream-of-consciousness contemporaries) to tell a story properly. His devices are all lyrical. He only suggests the incidents. He makes us peer at their halo, rather than actually see a pageant moving along. The implicit narrative, which was to be guessed at, pieced up from various bits of now and then, here, there or everywhere, does no good to this poem, although it suited perfectly some of the previous ones.

Critics have for a long time argued about Eliot's poems having or not a narrative coherence, about their being a unitary sequence or a heap of fragments lacking any logical order. Fact is that all of them were joined together by a peculiar Eliotian mood, which haunted them all. That mood (depressing, retreating, reticent, contorted and so on) is almost absent from *The Rock*. Emotionally speaking (and emotion is, in Eliot's option, the life of a poem), *The Rock* was a still-born piece of literature. As for the narrative, having no mood, no lyrical substance to support, it is, of course, safely absent.

The seventh part, for instance, retells the birth of the world. A few resourceful alliterations and assonances support the lines. Before God's creating life, for instance, there was 'waste and void', and 'darkness was upon the face of the deep'. These images have a certain thrilling halo, which is absent from another line with assonances, such as:

What does the world say, does the whole world stray in high-powered cars on
 a by-pass way?

There are some 'bells upturned' in one of the lines, complaining of man's neglecting the Church, and faintly reminding us of *The Waste Land*, with its

And upside down in air were towers
 Tolling reminiscent bells.

Yet a direct rhetorical question such as

Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?



makes us wonder where the exhilarating ambiguity we found in *Ash- Wednesday* can have vanished to. There is in this seventh part one fragment, a very abstract one, whose effect is based on a kind of prose-like conversational repetition. It foretells the tone of the *Quartets*, their main concern with emotionalizing the concept of time:

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,
 A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call
 history: transecting, bisecting the world of time,
 a moment in time but not like a moment of time,
 A moment in time but time was made through that moment:
 for without the meaning there is no time, and that
 moment of time gave the meaning.

The lines come quite close to the relaxed flow of the *Quartets*. Only the poised mastery of belief, disbelief and make-believe is not ripe yet.

The eighth part voices another accusation against ‘our age’, namely that it is an age of ‘moderate’ virtue and moderate vice. Indifference, no less than adversity to belief, makes Eliot charge at his modern readers in angry, reproving lines. Not even priests are spared. The ninth part (reminding us of *The Hippopotamus*) chides them for having changed the Church into a ‘House of Sorrow’, where

We must go between empty walls, quavering lowly, whispering faintly,
 Among a few flickering scattered lights.

Not sorrow but joy ought to be learned there, he insists. The joy of saints, he adds, which is unknown down here. Another indirect statement about the sadness of life, then? This joy, that is to be learned, cannot be expressed by means of our ‘slimy’ and ‘muddy’ words, or by the ‘sleet and hail of verbal imprecisions’. The merit of the just quoted words is that they foretell *East Coker*, with Eliot’s marvelous trip into the quicksands of language, into the insecurity of words, this fragile and treacherous poetic material. It is a statement of the same obsessive verbal insecurity that haunts Eliot’s criticism.

The closing poem is dedicated to an already verbalized Divinity, called ‘Light Invisible’, which again sounds like an introduction to the confident yet beliefless mood of the *Four Quartets*. We feel the birth in Eliot’s mind of a cosmic vision. A broad generosity of thought, which replaces the bickering Biblical words uttered by God. It is the best part of *The Rock* and, as if it were a sign of Eliot’s recapturing his inspiration, bookish echoes return. The image of our world, ‘confused and dark and disturbed by portents of fear’, reminds us of Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Another image, of the ‘bottom of the pit of the world’, has an air of both Dante and Milton about it. An ambiguous assonance comes as a pleasant surprise: the fierce



No longer explicit, these evocative images are no longer hollow. They come again very close to metaphysical conceits, in which the feeling is blended with a thought that lies concealed at the root of the poem. With the only amendment that, with Eliot (unlike John Donne), the emotional immediacy and the very words that convey it reflect a multiple thought which they enclose. Ambiguity reigns again. Nothing is certain any more. An image may send innumerable waves out at sea. We are told for instance that 'our gaze is submarine' (can we help remembering here Prufrock's dreamland, at the bottom of the sea?); that

Other memorable remarks on human lot can be successfully quoted. For instance, 'ecstasy is too much pain': words which bring back Eliot's favourite mood, so well illustrated by the image of painfully wasted love, the hyacinth girl, in *The Waste Land*. Another one, saying that we are

Therefore we thank Thee for our little light, that is dappled with shadow.
We thank Thee who hast moved us to building, to finding, to forming at the
ends of our fingers and beams of our eyes.
And when we have built an altar to the Invisible Light, we
may set thereon the little lights for which our bodily vision is made.
And we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light.
O Light Invisible, we give Thee thanks for Thy great glory!

not with a bang but a whimper.

It is a pity that this more mysteriously suggestive air comes too late to redeem the preceding poems, which seem to be bossing the reader to the point of the latter's revolt and rejection of what he reads. They are a blind alley in Eliot's creation, and Eliot realized it himself. It was not for him to cry out calling things by their name and dashing down undisguised thoughts like Whitman.

The Rock sounds as if, awkwardly (for both reader and writer), we had caught Eliot off his guard. He is an over-protective author who, when at his best, takes every precaution to conceal his meaning in rainbow words, loaded with ambiguity, alliterations, assonances, imperfectly melodious rhymes. Explicitness empties his lines of their haunting charm. Confronted with daring confessions, the innermost emotion tiptoes out of the words, leaving us and Eliot with a hollow poem in hand.

4. HUMOUR DESCENDING



The self-conscious, sullenly involved and all-fearing T.S. Eliot is far from being a solar poet. On the contrary, the sky of his earlier poems is most of the time overcast. Down below, somewhere in a dim light, preferably evening or night (which reminds one of the feeling in *Prufrock* that ‘the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherised upon a table’), shadows of former human beings race the reader into a hell of darkness. On their way there, maddened by the loss of light, these weird shadows gradually let their humanity fall from them like a useless shell. This happens to almost all the masks in Eliot’s earlier poetry and to all the characters of his plays. It disappears in the *Quartets*, though, because those later poems do not make use of masks any more.

Eliot’s characters – numberless voices stifled in his poems – hardly have any luminous joy. Apart from the hyacinth girl and the memory of the nightingale in *The Waste Land*, the forsaken girl in *La Figlia Che Piange*, the ‘lady of silences’ in *Ash-Wednesday* and the short poem *Marina*, female characters are painted in grim colours. Eliot seems even inclined to use pitch. In *Portrait of a Lady*, for instance, there is a woman who is too old for lust; she seems almost half dead, if we are to judge by the images piled about her. Her room looks like Juliet’s tomb, no matter how hard she may have tried to give it the intimate air propitious to a sentimental interlude. She speaks of resurrected souls. She sees life flowing from her interlocutor’s body as if she could X-ray him. She recalls her buried life (her youth) in Paris. She even says she has almost reached the end of her journey.

Her very last words recorded by the poem are: ‘Perhaps it is not too late’. There is a woman in *Hysteria*, too, and her mere laughter has the effect of an air-raid. Her throat turns into a dark cavern, which engulfs her male companion, and bruises him to death. Miss Nancy Ellicott (*Cousin Nancy*) breaks the hills by simply striding across them. Some Princess Volupine (*Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleinstein with a Cigar*) extends a ‘phthisic hand’, which is ‘meagre, blue-nailed’. In *Sweeney Erect*, Sweeney’s bed partner is no less than an epileptic, and her description is downward repelling:

This withered root of knots of hair
Slitted below and gashed with eyes,
This oval O cropped out with teeth:
The sickle motion from the thighs

Jackknifes upward at the knees
Then straightens out from heel to hip
Pushing the framework of the bed
And clawing at the pillow slip.

Whispers of Immortality introduces a certain Grishkin (once a well-known ballet dancer). Her ‘uncorseted’ and ‘friendly’ bust ‘gives promise of pneumatic bliss’. Yet, her ‘maisonette’ has a ‘rank feline smell’ all the same. Another woman ‘tears at the grapes with murderous paws’ (*Sweeney among the Nightingales*), and seems to be ‘in league’ with a female in a Spanish cape, who



Slips and pulls the table cloth
 Overturns a coffee-cup,
 Reorganised upon the floor
 She yawns and draws a stocking up.

The two volumes of poems that precede *The Waste Land* (1922), one being *Prufrock* (1917), the other *Poems – 1920*, abound in such sour descriptions. Few of the short poems are actually successful, besides *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *Portrait of a Lady*. Some of them are obscure, some have a certain appealing halo. Even those which do not look very intricate and can be understood, have about them an air of narrow clarity. The poems which require elaborate explanations (of mythological hints or cryptic word combinations) do not reward the hardworking researcher for his efforts, since the latter can never rest assured that his interpretation is faithful to the poet's (hazy) intention.

All these poems suffer from an insufficient transcription of the poet's sensibility. They are encumbered with an emptiness, which is not one of the poet's soul, but rather of his ability to turn into poetry what his emotional life provided him with. The same as *The Rock*, some of these are hollow poems. Only, this time, the cause of their hollowness is different. Eliot is practising in them the tricks that he is going to use in *The Waste Land*. An alliteration here, an assonance there, lively images, ideas concentrated in only one word (idea-words we might call them, such being the garden, the rock, the rain...) and two-word self-devouring compounds.

These exercises in concentration betray a still shaky hand, which quickly grows tired and stops short of reaching the vital point, that of transferring, of generalizing one of Eliot's private emotions into a memorable line. Narrow indeed these poems are; narrow and insufficient. Hardly meaningful, too, are the characters that inhabit them.

The situation changes in *The Waste Land*. Light is still absent. Consequently, the characters are overshadowed, mysterious. Yet, on their way down towards the poet's hell of misgivings and pain, they no longer shed their charm, they no longer vanish gradually from our minds, as the poem draws to its end. No less gloomy than most of Eliot's imagined beings, the faces with stifled voices which inhabit *The Waste Land* are meaningfully, unforgettably alive. Their pitch-like countenance has an explanation behind it, as *The Waste Land* is no longer an inconclusive exercise. It is a poem which finally conveys Eliot's most characteristic lyrical mood, that of a lightless life.

This life, however, is all his heroes have in this world, and to it they cling desperately. The more painful, the more desired. The awkwardness of the previous poems, which were written with an unsteady skill, is replaced by a deft poetic hand, heavy with words loaded with ambiguity. The merely jingling hollowness of the lines is replaced by a probing poetic heaviness, that Eliot discovers in *The Waste Land*, and which results in a mood of broad, dark, paralyzing despair.

This mood actually revealed a new land, discovered a new America for several generations of poets after Eliot. A despair which is this time amply accounted for: the poem leaves us in the end, as an after-explanation, with Eliot's personal feelings about the images we have passed through. We do not leave *The Waste Land* empty-handed. On the contrary, our sensibility can hardly bear such a heavy load. The previously



exercised verbal concentration (by omissions of explanatory connections between words) is enhanced by a concentration of sensibility. The volcano has burst forth. The poem sounds as if Eliot had crammed into it every emotion, every pain he ever experienced. His feelings go hand in hand with his words. No unnecessary obscurity is allowed. As the saying goes, the style is the man. We might add that the masterful use of words (accessible, though concentrated to the extreme) in *The Waste Land* is Eliot, Eliot at his best.

Since we started with the female characters, we may as well go on enumerating their representatives in *The Waste Land*, peeping at various signs of oppressive gloominess in them. Laughter does not come easily to Eliot. As a matter of fact, in his poetry it comes only once, in his delightful book on practical cats. Eliot's main poetic obsessions, although longing after a light humorous tone, always cast upon the poems the black veil of an all-invading sorrow.

There is, for instance, an episode written in quite a humorous approximation of how an illiterate English woman is supposed to talk. It is a story about a young mother, Lil (*A Game of Chess*). In lines spiced with grammar mistakes (from which the intellectual whereabouts of the speaker can easily be guessed), we learn that this Lil, mother of five children and a woman of only thirty-one, already looks 'antique'. Her husband is to come back home soon after four years in the army (the war, possibly the navy). Before leaving, he gave her money to have her teeth pulled out and get herself a 'nice set' of false teeth, because, he said, he could not bear to look at her. The essence of this image, the sordid life of a young woman whose youth is being wasted, drowned in triviality, is tragic.

But, since Eliot has learnt that holding out your hand openly begging for pity produces the opposite effect, he envelops tragedy into a glazed paper, painted with masks that may be laughed at. The result is his descending humour. A kind of joyless rejoicing, a tearful smile which never reaches the peal of laughter. His sensibility climbs backwardly down the stairs of feeling, and captures on the way both profundity and sadness, pulling along with it any humorous intention. The failure of humour enhances that sense of frustration which is Eliot's favourite mood.

Besides Lil, Eliot's waste land is populated with quite a number of other female waste lives. A certain Mrs. Porter and her daughter 'wash their feet in soda water'. A typist makes love almost without realizing the fact and concludes:

Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.

Some other unnamed girl raises her knees 'supine on the floor of a narrow canoe'. If *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* had not been written, we might have concluded from the rest of Eliot's poetry that he could only produce instances of abasing humour. People who once knew him stated that he did know how to tell a joke, and thoroughly enjoyed the telling of it himself. Then how come that humour is always so vulgar, so heavy and depressing, so humourless in fact, in most of his poetry?

The reason is that humour was the wrong music for the tragedies Eliot perceived. The result was shrill. Eliot's hope was that humour would conceal his own sad fragility and awkwardness. He tried to hide inside hopefully funny lines, as in a cupboard which was too short for him. At the end of each so-called joking fragment,



behind the wooden doors left ajar, we hear the ‘clatter and the chatter’ of dead bones within. Sadness is the skeleton in Eliot’s poetic cupboard.

The list of lost women is long. Amusement goes hand in hand with a concealed disparaging intention, which is another cause for the inadequacy of Eliot’s humour. Most of the female characters are indirectly accused of having chosen to empty, to waste their lives themselves. They willfully ignore the essential feeling of love. They are dry, as dry as the dead bones. In order to render them amusing, Eliot makes these women live only superficially. They are rather dead masks that mimic life. When Eliot’s presentation goes beyond such masks, tragic and unforgettable figures are born, such as the hyacinth girl, or the girl in *La Figlia Che Piange*.

Luckier than the women, the men are seldom discarded. On the contrary even, male characters are more often than not pitied, viewed with wailing sympathy. Sometimes, like the females, they are emptied of their humanity, and consequently mocked at. Such is the typist’s companion, the young man carbuncular in *The Waste Land*:

One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.

Another of the kind is the recurrent character called Sweeney. In *Sweeney Erect* for instance, while his bed partner is having an epileptic fit, the man does not even interrupt his shaving to turn round. He simply

knows the female temperament
And wipes the suds around his face.

Otherwise, the males are less of a grinning mask. They wear on their faces the sad smile of misgiving and powerlessness. Consequently, they are more meaningful. Sometimes they are even aggressed by the women and must run away to hide, are in bad need of a refuge. Such is the case of Prufrock, seen ‘pinned and wriggling on the wall’ (his ordeal is implicitly a feminine doing). He consequently wishes he had been

a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

The narrator in *Portrait of a Lady*, a young man who will not begin a love affair with an older woman, feels, on entering her flat, as if he had ‘mounted on his hands and knees’. Another man’s soul is ‘trampled by insistent feet’ (*Preludes*). Mr. Appolinax’s head is



rolling under a chair
Or grinning over a screen
With seaweed in his hair.

The confused gentleman in *Hysteria* feels imprisoned in his female-companion's throat, while she is laughing and laughing hysterically. Awkwardness and prophetic fear are the main features of Eliot's male heroes. In most of his poems, Eliot conjures up a masculine world stamped by isolation: a waste land wherein helpless, well meaning men are hunted to destruction by non-angelic, aggressive women. Quite the reverse of the generous ancient myth of Orpheus descending.

The loss of light (of emotion, of something essential to the joy of life) seems to begin in the very mind of all these contorted characters. They try to empty their thoughts, to leave something behind, to forget what was once too clearly seen. Prufrock, for instance, wonders, 'would it have been worth it, after all?' *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* advises, 'Sleep, prepare for life'. It sounds as if this light of life were guilty. The poems constantly acknowledge this sense of guilt. The guilt (or the revolt) of being alive, because from being alive all pains stem forth.

Tired with the pain of living, which makes them constantly run away, Eliot's characters would like, if possible, to sit still, motionless, mimicking (in a magical way) death. This is a trick which Eliot will never renounce, this apparent, self-imposed inertness of the mind and soul, which wears various masks: an awkward laughable countenance in his earlier poetry, then a sternly concentrated expression of renunciation and, finally, an air of beatitude attained, of peace of mind late acquired. They are all untrue, these appearances of sleepiness, of calm. In the non-solar atmosphere of this poet's world, storms blow endlessly, the cold is never tamed. More often than not, it is raging winter in Eliot's soul.

The heroes' untimely descent into death, their wilful jump into the dark terror is however made with clearly perceptible revolt against the fatality of night, which Eliot 'chose' but opposed, as it seems. His poems are an unwilling surrender. All of them follow a falling line. Grotesque, tragic, angelic masks tumble head over heels into a hell of pain. Sometimes, to relieve their torture, Eliot views them as ridiculous, lightly funny. For a short moment, while this fit of sweetening mockery lasts, the fall is suspended.

The reader can relax into a smile. Here and there, when least expected, a redeeming humour lights the sky of this non-solar poet. A sense of well-being, that descends on Eliot's traces, into his night, trying to pull him out towards the light of day, the same as Orpheus tried to recover his Eurydice. From behind the sombre clouds of discontent, short rays of mocking tenderness flash out, but are promptly extinguished. Such an example is a fragment uttered by Prufrock. The words bring the hero close to our sympathy by making him jest at his own gravity (in the manner of Shakespeare's Polonius):

No! I am not prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,



Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –
 Almost, at times, the Fool.

Such joking interludes are however rare. Eliot's sensibility can either passionately rage or passionately reprove. It only too seldom dances on the rope of jesting tenderness.

Lighter than the rest, is the tone of *THE HOLLOW MEN*, a poem made up out of bits left over from *The Waste Land*. Its broken, wavering meaning shows it:

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

They are still in 'death's dream kingdom', imagined kingdom, that is. All along the poem they 'foresuffer' (to use Tiresias' word) the horror of the 'final meeting' in 'death's other kingdom', the real one, allegedly. They utter their dismay by repeating fragments of the Lord's Prayer:

For Thine is the Kingdom
 For Thine is
 Life is
 For Thine is the

Between these two worlds or, as the poem goes,

Between the essence and the descent,

before the world is said to end

Not with a bang but a whimper,

these hollow men look and look at themselves, and what do they see?

Here we go round the prickly pear
 Prickly pear prickly pear
 Here we go round the prickly pear
 At five o'clock in the morning.

Eliot's humour is here neither bitter, nor reproofing. It is what humour should be: a serene mental hold on deep emotional turmoil. But that is a state of mind which Eliot, when dealing with his fellow-beings, cannot manage to experience for long.



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The motif of darkness translated from Robert Browning's *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*.

The motif of darkness, concrete rendered abstract, is a Desperado motif avant la lettre when we analyse it in Robert Browning's Victorian long poem *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, which is unanimously considered the forerunner of *The Waste Land*. An interior monologue, the poem, written in the first person, addresses the reader just like Eliot, who, half-shy, half-Desperado (intertextuality), resorted to Baudelaire in the line, 'You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable, — mon frère!'

The huge dark, timeless and pathless field Childe Roland crosses on his way to finding the reputed Dark Tower is as depressing as Eliot's five-part description of loveless cities, rooms and beings, but much more impetuous. In spite of the frightening sights Childe Roland encounters, in spite of the long line of dead people watching him from within a 'sheet of flame' to see his failure, he manages to become aware of the Dark Tower and makes his triumph known to the reader. Darkness, with Robert Browning is in fact the opposite of awareness (be it of death, nothing can scare the poet or his persona), and when Browning's hero blows his horn and ends the poem by telling everybody alive, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came*, we feel confident that the mind has won and we are safe, death has been defeated.

Just like Yeats, who was very much his follower, Browning feels that what can be contemplated by the mind is another country for life. The end has been smashed to tiny bits of darkness, and the light of inner energy and trust in the intellect is shining. Browning kills darkness before darkness has time to kill him.

With Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), a writer caught between tradition and the Stream-of-Consciousness and unaware of both, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is the core of the unknown subconscious, with all its horrors, which Eliot prolongs by quoting as a motto to his *Hollow Men*, 'Mistah Kurtz—he dead', and we remember that Kurtz bequeathed to the reader his ultimate truth: 'the horror! the horror!'

Though contemporary with Oscar Wilde, Joseph Conrad seems to belong to a totally different age, and it is the age foretold by Browning, actually, through the latter's use of dramatic monologue. Conrad's prose is earnestness itself. Some critics see in Conrad the best stylist of a language he only learnt when he was eighteen. His sentences convey the determination of a thinker who must make room for his thoughts, who feels stifled if he does not set free in words the world of his soul. It is a



world of solitude at sea, a space of inner mists, inner darkness, which we descry while going down the paths of experimental literature, which both Browning (*avant la lettre*) and Eliot did.

Without much ado, Joseph Conrad lands at last in the stream of consciousness. His heroes make confessions in the first person, then they are watched by other heroes and understood in various ways. A chain of images ensues, which makes us see there is no final truth about anyone, the text is left like a dark hole, sucking in all interpretations and gratifying none.

The author, who left native Poland at the age of fifteen, as a sailor on a French ship, confesses that he was adopted by the English language and, had this not happened, he may never have written anything at all. He is not the first displaced writer to be adopted by England (which shows that displacement does not begin with Postmodernism). He joins T.S. Eliot, Henry James, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, G.B. Shaw and many others.

As a grown up, he rejects the language of his unhappy childhood, a time which is another spot of darkness. Conrad's books never deal with childhood. His roots strike the English soil and go deep into it. He achieves a truly refined style, a halo of light, as opposed to his Polish burden, never uttered as such. His words are extraordinarily varied and many. The numerous books he read while a sailor lend all his sentences a music of earnest English literature. Well remembered echoes of Shakespeare steal into the pages of this stylist who has got estranged from his native tongue, who has tied himself so well to the mast of his adoptive language that no mermaid of memory can drag him back into the motherland of his soul and words. It is also the case of T.S. Eliot, for whom America and his childhood and youth are also absent from poetry. It is the turn of the past to lend meaning to the darkness.

A lot has been said about tradition and innovation in Conrad's novels. One thing is certain: he did want to change something, to revive the narrative. His changes look more like research than victory, though. Conrad is not eager to find tricks, although he does find some. What he ardently wishes for is new heroes, which is as much as to say that he values the truth (life) of the novel more than its surprising strategy. The same as Proust, Henry James, Joyce, Virginia Woolf and the rest, he lets us know (though with more unobtrusive gentleness) that the hero has ceased to exist, he has turned into a chamber full of mirrors.

Each mirror reflects just one feature or one age. It is up to us to connect them or let them flow at large. The author withdraws, but not completely. He watches us from a distance, careful lest he should be seen. We grope following his tracks, we wonder what he thinks of one character or another, and his work haunts us with this interrogative mood, which, again, is a face of darkness.

The true experimental novel had an air of enigmatic eloquence. Conrad's novel is silent, obstinately dark. The architecture of incidents is not complicated. The wish to see us at a loss (cherished by Browning and Eliot alike) is alien to Conrad. He merely gazes at his predecessors' works and tries to devise his own, different manner. That is why he begins by telling us the end of his plot, why he mixes up before and after, and often gives way to lyricism (symbols, long poetic descriptions). Laconic and lyrical, Joseph Conrad is a novelist adopted, even claimed by England, stream-of-consciousness and the *élite* of stylists.



Heart of Darkness is probably his best known short story. The implication of 'The horror! The horror!' by Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, conveys the oppressive burden of lyricism (read 'soul') of the narrative. Unlike Joyce and the rest, Conrad is very keen on protecting the dark core of his heroes' inner lives. He uses the character-narrator Marlow, who mediates the relationship reader-writer, concealing the author's withdrawal from the text.

Conrad refuses to be in direct touch with his heroes, he is unwilling to pass judgment. He leaves all verdicts and absence of light (darkness) to us, and the narrator invented by him does the same. The difference between tradition and innovation lies in a certain punctuation of the spirit: the traditional novel uses a full stop after the word *end*, while the new novel chooses the question mark, denying the end as such. Once we have finished reading a novel by Dickens, we feel banished from the narrative and we resent the bolted door. We feel like prowling round the work a little longer, we have been taken by surprise by our exile out of it. Our pride suggests that it could be rewarding if we could be the masters for a change, and prolong the plot.

Conrad teaches us both humility and strength. The work haunts us with its dark (unexplained) spots. We flee from it but we never feel free again. Is it the 'horror' of darkness (the substance of the work) that haunts us, or the writer's consistent interrogation (his manner of writing the work)? We may forget all incidents, but the feeling of unrest is forever with us. This is Conrad's lasting message: the horror that we are unable to understand, which is just the meaning that Browning attributed to his tower of darkness. Browning was a victor. Are we today?.. Darkness (to say nothing of obscurity) was the mood of most early 20th century prose writers, and nobody can deny that Conrad was earnestly in the dark in his mood and words.

In 1902, Conrad described his hero, Mr Kurtz, who died after communing with unspeakably dehumanizing rites in the dark jungle, as 'hollow at the core', which is the reason why he was swallowed by darkness, instead of mastering it, just as Conrad the writer masters the darkness of fiction writing. Shakespeare himself mentioned some 'hollow men' in *Julius Caesar*. In 1925, Eliot published his poem, *The Hollow Men*, which concludes, '*This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper*'.

The modernist poem, drastically innovated by Eliot, actually ends the idea of poetry. As Joyce mentioned in his diary, 'Eliot ends idea of poetry for ladies.' Hybridization builds a monster, amalgamating fiction, drama, essay, literary criticism into lyricism, and the poet turns against himself, eating at the tail of poetry. Taking from symbolists the love of the disgusting, Eliot overturns the poetic situation, investing with meaning whatever is most shockingly disagreeable. The poem is now '*the prickly pear*'.

Within the hollow men there is the darkness, the horror, the kingdom of death, the broken Lord's Prayer. Eliot the poet writes in and about darkness, and feels that an even greater darkness surrounds his very obscure world. Between reader and writer, between many other pairs of irreconcilable poles, 'Falls the Shadow.' If Browning is a victor, if Conrad is strong enough to look death in the face, Eliot chooses the whimper and makes poetry out of what is left after the feast of traditional poetry: aborted images, contorted meanings, and, moreover, understatement of oversized fears. All his images are depressingly ugly. We feel powerless while reading this poet whose



strength is his weakness, so to say. We share his confusion and the darkness of his imagination is welcoming.

Once we have followed him into the poem and learned how to fill in the blanks, we partake of the new status of the reader. Both Browning and Conrad kept company with a traditional reader (maybe Conrad attempted the beginning of a change). Eliot requires the reader to write the poem alongside with him. Darkness shared becomes intriguing and ends as a drug we can no longer do without. Could we go back to Dickens, and read texts that give us the meaning on a platter? We have become too complicated, too Postmodern, too Desperado for that. The clarity of writing and of reading is gone. We are left with the darkness of a self-consuming text.

The motif of darkness has obviously migrated from Browning's *Dark Tower*, through Conrad's ambiguous (both text and reading) *Heart of Darkness*, to Eliot's love of the dark text. Darkness is no longer a motif in a poem with Eliot. Darkness is the poem. Darkness is the poet and the reader. Darkness has swallowed the entire world, with literature in it, and... are we waiting for the bang or the whimper?

*

With cats as characters, instead of people, it is an altogether different matter. Unbelievable but true, the frowning Eliot can smile. He can forget his misgivings, his nightmares of a waste land inhabited by failed beings. He leaves aside his ambiguity, symbols, enigmatic quotations, unusual highbrow musicality, and chats about cats with joyfully rhythmical, cleverly rhymed friendliness:

The Rum Tum Tugger is a terrible bore:
When you let him in, then he wants to be out;
He's always on the wrong side of every door.
And as soon as he's at home, then he'd like to get about.
He likes to lie in the bureau drawer,
But he makes such a fuss if he can't get out.
Yes the Rum Tum Tugger is a Curious Cat –
And it isn't any use for you to doubt it:
For he will do
As he do do
And there's no doing anything about it!

OLD POSSUM'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL CATS is a carefree picture of the world seen through the eyes of a grown up, who tenderly watches a child who, in his turn, amazed and immensely amused, listens to tales about cats. Eliot's chronic discontent is replaced here by a parade of nonsensical, highly resourceful and entertaining cat-like thoughts. Eliot's humour opens unexpected doors. Language is no longer 'dislocated' into his meaning. No syntactic rule or lexical law is violated. Eliot's gravity having withdrawn, the words no longer (as *Burnt Norton* puts it) 'strain, crack, break, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision'. They are merely taken for granted.



Two things are revealed by these fifteen poems Eliot wrote about cats (creatures whom he was said to have been extremely fond of). First, that traditional rhyming comes to him amazingly easily. This rhyming ability could hardly have been inferred from his more serious poems, where his musicality is too intricate to be detected at once. Second, that he can actually laugh and make people laugh, by combining words in order to make up the most fantastic and suggestive names, or to surprise us with a wildly comic gesture. Take, for instance, the introductory poem on *The Naming of Cats*. It is not the idea that counts (as in his other poems), but the affectionately humorous surprise which each line contains. We learn here that a cat must have no less than three different names, out of which one must be

particular,
A name that's peculiar, and more dignified,
Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,
Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?

This name, as we are presently told, nobody can ever know, except the cat himself, so

When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
His ineffable effable
Effanineffable
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

Listening to the tape on which Eliot's voice was recorded reading all these poems, any doubt as to the genuineness of their light-hearted mood is dispelled. He obviously loved cats, and loved making fun of them. For the first (and only) time in his creation, his mood does not involve pain. A cat is to Eliot a creature of joy. The joy which he denied to human life he allows to the exploits of cats. Even if, at times, his funny lines grow too long and a little boring, the revelation of Eliot enjoying something in this life (even cats will do) is touching. A crowd of delightfully shrewd cats pass to and fro. Some with peculiarly suggestive names, others with a laughable, easily remembered line to accompany them.

There is, for instance, an old 'gumbie' cat, whose name is Jennyanydots, because

Her coat is of a tabby kind, with tiger stripes and leopard dots.

She may very well be the ancestor of quite a number of cartoons we know, in which the cats make friends with the mice. This particular Gumbie cat spends her nights taking care of the behaviour and manners of the mice, teaching them 'music, crochet and tatting', cooking for them, in hopes that a better diet might keep them quiet (the rhyme belongs to the poet again).

All those trifling lines end in irreproachable rhymes, and none of the rhyming words seems to have been used just for the sake of musicality. Each word has a



Yet, in his major poems he ignored those rules as completely as to intimate he had never even heard of them. He reshaped the poetic idiom to such an extent as to make the readers feel that traditional rhymes and rhythms could not convey the deep music of the soul. All those feline poems show another face of Eliot. They place him in the right light: that of a poet who refused to write traditional verse (although he was perfectly conversant with it) because he had devised a more suggestive poetic pattern for his age.

I have a Gumbie Cat in mind, her name is Jennyanydots;
Her equal would be hard to find, she likes the warm and sunny
spots.
All day she sits beside the hearth or in the sun or on my hat:
She sits and sits and sits and sits – and that’s what makes a Gumbie
Cat!

There is here again a sign of Eliot's love for opposition, which lies at the root of all his innovations. A man is sub-human, although Eliot toys with the idea that the same man may sometime reach beyond the human; only that is a distant and not really desired prospect. The cat, on the other hand, becomes a super-cat. She behaves like a being with an ability to think, to know the future, to plot. Because all Eliot's cats – and herein lies their fun and the source of Eliot's humour – are plotting cats, tricky, mysterious, self-assured and very dignified.

His manners and appearance did not calculate to please;
His coat was torn and seedy, he was baggy at the knees;
One ear was somewhat missing, no need to tell you why,
And he scowled upon a hostile world from one forbidding eye.

simply had to be reversed in order to be understood properly. Even here, chatting about cats, Eliot prompts the reader to misread his statements. The device he chooses here is the joke: a secret, which Eliot shares tacitly with his readers, that whatever he asserts must be taken precisely the other way round. Growltiger, for instance, terrifying as he is said to be, one peaceful summer night showed his ‘sentimental side’. The moment of his weakness was used by his foes (all the cats, especially those of foreign origin, whom he had ever mistreated) to attack him:

The ruthless foe pressed forward, in stubborn rank on rank;
Growltiger to his vast surprise was forced to walk the plank.
He who a hundred victims had driven to that drop,
At the end of all his crimes was forced to go ker-flip, ker-flop.

London, the highly symbolical stage crossed by the characters of *The Waste Land*, relaxes too. It is inhabited by picturesque adventurers, such as the ‘notorious couple of cats’ Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer. The very names of these cats induce a state of annoyed amusement. They are in turn ‘knockabout clowns, quick-change comedians, tight-rope walkers and acrobats’. Their home is in Victoria Grove, but they are ‘incurably given to rove’. We may very well find them, Eliot warns us, in Cornwall Gardens, in Launceston Palace and in Kensington Gardens. Their reputation is ‘extensive’. Their skills are no less. They are, to put it plainly, unashamed ‘cat-burglars’, experts at ‘smash and grab’. So,

If the area window was found ajar
And the basement looked like a field of war,
If a tile or two came loose on the roof,
Which presently ceased to be waterproof,
If the drawers were pulled out from the bedroom chests,
And you couldn’t find one of your winter vests,
Or after supper one of the girls
Suddenly missed her Woolworth pearls:
Then the family would say: ‘It’s that horrible cat!
It was Mungojerrie – or Rumpleteazer!’ – And most of the time
they left it at that.

Old age, Eliot’s stinging obsession in *Ash-Wednesday* (and all his other poems), is also contemplated with hardly suppressed laughter. Its image is Old Deuteronomy, whose name reminds us of course of Biblical times. Has the cat lived that long? Nobody knows:

Well of all ...
Things ... Can it be ... really! ... No! ... Yes! ...
Ho! hi!
Oh, my eye!
My sight may be failing, but yet I confess
I believe it is Old Deuteronomy!



This cat is in a way reassuring. It makes you feel life might be longer than you imagine. Old Deuteronomy himself (accidentally or not, he is a male) has so far lived ‘many lives in succession’. He has buried

nine wives

And more – I am tempted to say ninety-nine.

His welfare is carefully protected by everybody around. Is there any other poem in which we can find Eliot winking at death so confident of cheating it?

The parade goes on. The gallery of portraits includes Mr. Mistoffelees, a cat who, like the legendary Mephistopheles, has devilish powers. Eliot’s inventivity is inexhaustible. This particular ‘conjuring’ cat can perform any piece of magic he chooses. He can ‘creep through the tiniest crack’, he can ‘walk on the narrowest rail’. He is also the greatest expert at creating confusion. When you hear him purring by the fire, you may be sure he is in fact up on the roof, and this

... is incontestable proof
Of his singular magical powers:
And I have known the family to call
Him in from the garden for hours,
While he was asleep in the hall.
And not long ago this phenomenal Cat
Produced seven kittens right out of a hat!
And we all said: OH!
Well I never!
Did you ever
Know a Cat so clever
As Magical Mr. Mistoffelees!

Each cat has a peculiar look. One is black, another spotted, one has long whiskers. Macavity, the Mystery Cat

... is very tall and thin;
You would know him if you saw him, for his eyes are sunken in.
His brow is deeply lined with thought, his head is highly domed;
His coat is dusty from neglect, his whiskers are uncombed.
He sways his head from side to side, with movements like a snake;
And when you think he’s half asleep, he’s always wide awake.

This Macavity is not a mere burglar or pickpocket, like his milder peers. He is no less than the ‘Napoleon of crime’. He may be suspected of any possible mischief: stealing jewels (as well as milk), stifling some poor Pekinese (a ‘Heathen Chinese’ among dogs), breaking the greenhouse glass. Yet, this is not all that he can do. The disappearance of some Foreign Office Treaty or Admiralty plans might also be his doing. Eliot hurries to reassure us that Macavity never lacks an alibi. He even has ‘one or two to spare’, so his crimes will remain forever unknown. The very beginning of the poem introduces him as such:



Macavity's a Mystery Cat: he's called the Hidden Paw –
 For he's the master criminal who can defy the Law.
 He's the bafflement of Scotland Yard, the Flying Squad's despair:
 For when they reach the scene of crime – Macavity's not there!
 Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity,
 He's broken every human law, he breaks the law of gravity ...

How free Eliot is here from the chains that fetter his thoughts and sensibility in his more serious poems. Is it not hard to believe that the poet who wrote this wildly funny parody of human society is the same poet who reproved man so drastically in *The Rock*?

The pub (could it be the same pub where Lil's story was told in *The Waste Land*?) is the place where Gus, the Theatre Cat retells the story of his youth (no longer 'buried' in Paris). For a 'toothful' of gin, he willingly recalls the parts he once played:

I've played', so he says, 'every possible part,
 And I used to know seventy speeches by heart.
 I'd extemporize back-chat, I know how to gag,
 And I knew how to let the cat out of the bag ...

No longer in his prime, this Gus (whose real name is in fact Asparagus) can hardly scare the mice or the rats any more. His paws shake because of palsy, his coat is shabby, and he now lives on memories alone. But the poem is devoid of any sadness. Eliot was too busy for pain. He was having a good time.

Unless we see him here, in *Possum*, thoroughly enjoying himself, laughing whole-heartedly at his humanized cats, we are very much likely to miss the real taste of his humour. Influenced, maybe, by the sign Eliot was born under (Libra), his humour looks like a balance with two scales. One of them (the heaviest) is downward going. The other one, less widely known, is pushed by the former high up into a sky of affectionate laughter and well-being. As Eliot himself ends his delightful book on cats,

You now have learned enough to see
 The Cats are much like you and me
 And other people whom we find
 Possessed of various types of mind.
 For some are sane and some are mad
 And some are good and some are bad
 And some are better, some are worse –
 But all may be described in verse.

In short, this *Possum* book is like a carnival of words. Tongue in his cheek, Eliot mispronounces, invents or skips syllables, joins half-words. His serious poems squeeze meanings out of lexical and syntactical ambiguity. These lectures on the 'naming of cats' rely mostly on phonetic effects.



Technically speaking, Eliot's humour is here at its best. It settles at the superficial boundaries of the word, far from the heavy burden of the lexical and grammatical rainbow. It also settles at the frontiers of Eliot's sensibility, at a point where no bitter thought can reach and darken it. We have here a book of light verse for light reading, written in a light mood – but by a heavy, expert poetic hand.

Possum is, nevertheless, a short and strange interlude in Eliot's creation. After reading it, we perceive even more intensely the strained irony, the anxiety of the other poems, those poems which plunge headlong into the abyss of night. Eliot's beings, except cats of course, are prodigious at failing and growing old. At time, a touch of humour softens their harsh reality, but their progress downward cannot be stopped. This awareness of powerlessness pervades each word with sadness. Humour fights a hard battle with the tragic mood, such as in Eliot's own presentation of himself:

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
 With his features of clerical cut,
 And his brow so grim
 And his mouth so prim
 And his conversation so nicely
 Restricted to What Precisely
 And If and Perhaps and But.
 How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
 With a bobtail cur
 In a coat of fur
 And a propentine cat
 And a whopsical hat;
 How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
 (Whether his mouth be open or shut).
(Minor Poems)

The bright flashes will not last. What appeals to Eliot is the fall, not the ascent, the tragedy, not the comedy of life. While humming his joking lines, surrounded by dark terrors, the poet suddenly craves for more than jesting reassurement. Too early, he looks back, and sees the light he has been losing fast. Then his humour becomes utterly powerless to take him out of the dark hell of fear and pain. All it can do is, sometime later, to reappear and help him probe the darkness again.

The so-called humorous interludes in Eliot's poetry oppose its falling structure. Humour or irony cannot save the drowning beings. They are therefore merely frustrating. It is not in the power of jesting words to change the poet's falling sensibility into a soaring one. Of course, Eliot's humour keeps trying to drag dark despair into sunlit hope. And, of course, it fails. At most, maybe, it manages to go down to the very bottom. There is no question of coming up victorious. In short, Eliot's poems leave a taste of humour descending.





5. ELIOT IN HIDING

(Prying into What Was Not Meant to Be Published)

In 1950, when Eliot was sixty-two, John Hayward, his life-long friend, collected and printed twelve copies of some fourteen poems, written by Eliot between 1904 and 1910 (the ages of sixteen and twenty-two), while a student at Smith Academy, St. Louis, then at Harvard. The volume was privately printed by Albert Bonniers, in Stockholm. It was said to have been supervised by Eliot himself. To make it more generally available, Valerie Eliot, Eliot's second wife, published these poems again, two years after Eliot's death. In her *Note* to the volume, Valerie Eliot states:

These appear to be the only juvenilia of my husband that survive. At the age of nine or ten, he told me, he wrote a few little verses about the sadness of having to start school again every Monday morning. He gave them to his Mother and hoped that they had not been preserved.

Whatever Eliot may have thought about his poetic beginnings, fact is that these fourteen poems written 'in early youth' are a welcome addition to what we already know about him. The same as the *Possum* book on cats, they reveal an unbelievable mastery of rhyming verse, and an eye that loves beautiful, even romantic images. They reveal in fact the opposite of what we know from Eliot's major poems. All of a sudden, while reading them, it dawns upon us that Eliot was not actually, either at first or even later, a true lover of bones and decay.

As Eliot himself put it later, it was only the critics that deemed him to be learned and cold. In truth, he claimed, he was neither. Whether the French symbolists (especially Jules Laforgue) were the ones who taught him the trick of replacing his craving for harmonious, beautiful images by an appearance of hopelessness and cynicism, that we shall never know. Anyway, it would be a mistake to take lightly his own confessions in the matter. At one time he said that he owed a great deal to Arthur Symonds' book on French symbolists, because it helped him discover Jules Laforgue. He added that Laforgue had taught him the poetic 'possibilities' of his own idiom. At another time he repeated that, had he not known Laforgue's poetry, he might never have become the poet he was.

What do we know about Jules Laforgue? That he was born in Montevideo on August 16, 1860 and died in Paris, on August 20, 1887. Some of his books are: *Le Sanglot de la Terre*, *Les Complaintes*, *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune*, *Des Fleurs de Bonne Volonté*, *Le Concile Féerique*, *Derniers Vers*. All of them had been written



before T.S. Eliot was born. Leafing through Laforgue's poems we find disgusting and terrifying thoughts voluptuously exposed. A cat resembling a mysterious sphinx

Contemple, inquiet, de sa prunelle fantastique
Marcher à l'horizon la lune chlorotique
(*La Première Nuit*, in *Le Sanglot de la Terre*)

Nothing is seen with benevolence. We are thrown into a 'Paris-lupanar', among prostitutes walking 'sous le gaz blafard', who 'voguent, flairant de l'oeil un mâle de hasard'. No need to produce similar images out of Eliot's hat. We already know they exist in abundance. After a description of the scene in sickening colours, Laforgue switches on to a melodramatic view of death:

Je songe à tous les morts enterrés aujourd'hui.
Et je me figure être au fond du cimetière,
Et me mets à la place, en entrant dans leur bière,
De ceux qui vont passer là leur première nuit.

No such open statements of plaintive emotion are to be found in Eliot. Eliot is always safe down, in his hiding place. What he learnt from Laforgue (as well as from Donne, after all) must have been how to decorate the outer walls of his retreat with morbid images and a harshness of tone.

It is hard to hear a line like Laforgue's

Allez, vivants, lutez, pauvres futurs squelettes ...

without remembering the corpse planted in one of the *Waste Land* gardens. It is equally hard not to notice the difference in mood. Laforgue mocks at everything, including his own fear of death, which is thus weakened, rendered unreal. Eliot is no good at light mockery, except as far as cats are concerned. He takes himself seriously.

No matter how hard he endeavours to sound light-hearted, his lines come out grim and earnest. If at times he sounds clumsy and irritating, it is because neither humour nor irony suit him. His tone does not always match his mood. His is a poetry of opposition between feeling and words. An earnest poet like Eliot happened to come across Laforgue, and learned the persiflage of a mind utterly unlike his own. A poetic mixture of jesting words and gravity of idea was concocted. The idea seems to come in first, but the word is the real master of the poem. Thus, in Eliot's poetry, the idea strays behind the word.

Innumerable images in Laforgue's poems bear a twin-like resemblance to those of Eliot. In *Complainte Propitiatoire*, Laforgue mockingly uses fragments from the Lord's Prayer:

Que votre inconsciente Volonté
Soit faite dans l'Éternité.



Eliot's *Hollow Men* certainly comes to mind. Yet, who can fail to contrast Laforgue's *insouciance* to the oppressive feeling of guilt and revolt which accompanies Eliot's stammering use of the same words?

Shy Eliot must have learnt from Laforgue the courage to cry aloud names of hidden horrors, carefully avoided by previous poets. His predecessors had accustomed their readers to enjoying landscapes, villages, or the halo of towns. Eliot chose to dwell on dirty pools, pubs, prostitutes, unlit streets, cheap hotels. He forced new words into poetry, thus defying the reader, making him feel uncomfortable, though at home. He bequeathed a poetic treasure of irritating words to the generation of poets that came after him. He struggled with the unpoetic the same as poets who followed him forced us to extend our feelings over such words as atomic, nuclear, outer space. In conclusion, Eliot actually enriched the soul of his reader by enlarging apparently his vocabulary only. His deliberate orgy of horrors is meant to squeeze to the last drop the emotions of a shy man, who mustered up all his lexical ability to express them.

Looking upon the matter in this way, we can see indeed why Eliot felt he would never have become a poet if Laforgue had not crossed his path. Proofs of Eliot's being spurred into writing by Laforgue's bold words can easily be found. In *Complainte. A Notre-Dame des Soirs*, Laforgue speaks of 'Octobres malades', of 'lymphatiques parfums' and 'des longs couchants défunts'. Prufrock's evening, spread out against the sky like a 'patient etherised upon a table', is both like and unlike Laforgue's. The same thing happens with the moon. Laforgue sees

La lune en son halo ravagé n'est qu'un oeil
Mangé de mouches.

In *Complainte. De Cette Bonne Lune*, he even writes a line which Eliot borrows as such:

– Là, voyons, mam'zelle la Lune,
Ne gardons pas ainsi rancune ...

The borrowings are obviously superficial, because the words remind us of the mere sound of the other poet. The substance, the mood behind them is modified. If we press the idea further, then, the words themselves are in fact modified to suit Eliot's own emotion, that craves to be uttered out loud.

These borrowed words have a twofold value. They are first echoes, which give an air of Esperanto, of universal poetry to Eliot's verse. On the other hand, they become extremely personal. They use somebody else's face to utter what otherwise Eliot might have concealed. These echoes are faithful X-rays of Eliot in hiding.

Another striking resemblance between Laforgue (*Complainte des Nostalgies Préhistoriques*) and Eliot (*Prufrock*) comes ready at hand:

La nuit bruine sur les villes;
Se raser la masque, s'orner
D'un frac deuil, avec art dîner,
Puis, parmi des vierges débiles,
Prendre un air imbécile.



As poem after poem goes by, and similarities are spotted (less and less often as Eliot grows up), we come to realize that, after all, the French and the Anglo-American poet do have one thing in common.

That one thing is the understatement. Laforgue taught Eliot a comfortable pose. They both feel braver when they depict themselves as much colder and less attached to the world than they really are. Eliot loves to exaggerate, to abuse himself for being dull (in his criticism the trick is the same), because this makes him actually feel strong. Frankly speaking, both Eliot and Laforgue are very much aware of their inner strength. Their trick is to hide their pride by under-stating it. Yet, Laforgue often sympathizes with himself. Eliot's recurrent 'might have been' is less direct (more effective therefore) than Laforgue's 'complaintes' and sighs:

– Oh! qu'ils sont chers, les trains manqués
Où j'ai passé ma vie à faillir m'embarquer ...

Besides the defiant pose, Eliot also spotted in Laforgue a certain liking for the un-ended. This was to become Valéry's cult for the imperfect and the endless, for the process of writing rather than its result (the finished poem). The numberless 'ébauches', unfinished sketches and projects, which Valéry kept shaping and especially reshaping, are a proof of his positive hatred of a final, immovable work. Postpone the final stroke, keep the mind going at all costs, leave the poem open ...

Akin to this is Eliot's strategy as a poet and a literary critic. Nothing verbal is ever final with him, nothing is or can be stated for good and all. Every vision has a counterpart revision. A critical essay of his is a ballet of provisions, made just in case the only opinion forwarded were to be turned (by readers or author) upside down at some time. This trait was not borrowed from Laforgue, though. The keen awareness of relativity, of multiplicity belong to Eliot's own nature. He was always haunted by the panic that he was unable to grasp the many-sidedness of his own sensibility and thought.

One remedy to this loving fear of the endless in literature was, as far as Eliot is concerned, the attempt to oppose any length, to concentrate. If you cannot write everything, Eliot often said, then 'write as little as possible', and 'cut out the poetry'. So he told one of his biographers (T.S. Matthews). In the light of such words, we can understand why the bulk of his *Collected Poems* is small, and why he was not eager to enlarge it with youthful beginnings or variants, dead projects, thoughts that had failed. First, *POEMS WRITTEN IN EARLY YOUTH*, then, in 1971, *THE WASTE LAND, A FACSIMILE AND TRANSCRIPT OF THE ORIGINAL DRAFTS INCLUDING THE ANNOTATIONS OF EZRA POUND* (edited by Valerie Eliot as well) were printed. Here we are, prying, therefore, into what was not meant by Eliot to be published.

*

The youthful poems are far from being clumsy. The author's possible supervision of their first edition might be the cause. Anyway, compared to the



confusing *Waste Land*, *Ash-Wednesday* and the rest, they are a wonderful island with fair weather, sunshine and a clear sky. *A Fable for Feasters* has an air of unhindered naturalness about it. A smile is a smile. If you laugh, it is whole-heartedly.

Young Eliot reveals his great love of practical jokes, his undeniable gift of being funny. There is not one single line in the poem which fails to be humorous. It is true that deep down there is nothing to be found. Which proves that, if Eliot's humour later became heavy and uncomfortable, it was because it had started descending towards a more profound meaning. The later poems are probing poems, while these youthful lines show a poet who does not yet know his own whereabouts.

In the above mentioned *Fable*, the feasters are the monks of a monastery. Their life is merry. Their only grief is (clever irony) a messenger of the world beyond, which visits them under the guise of a ghost. Eliot's later treatment of religious themes (both mocking and fearful) is in the bud here. The poem starts as follows:

In England, long before that royal Mormon
King Henry VIII found out that monks were quacks,
And took their lands and money for the poor men,
And brought their abbeys tumbling at their backs ...

The aforesaid ghost, says the poet, may very well have been some sinner, once 'walled up for his crimes'. He now comes from the realm beyond death. It only manages to disturb the monks while they are having their 'merry times'. This theme of religion having lost its essential attribute of being a link between life and after-life amply appears in Eliot's later poetry. Here, the monastery, which has lost all divine powers, is mildly described. The monks are very far from leading a spiritual life, but there is no bitterness in Eliot's noticing it.

On the contrary, everything is taken lightly. When Christmas draws near, the Abbot decides something must be done about the nasty ghost. The Christmas meal must by no means be spoiled. The monks mean to relish at ease the good food of this earth, which, by the way, is described by young Eliot in quite a number of stanzas, meal after meal. No idea of the spiritual food their souls ought to crave for at the time of Christ's birth crosses their minds. No understatement. That was for Eliot a mature acquisition. Consequently, the Abbot brings 'relics from a Spanish saint' (image strongly reminiscent of John Donne's *The Relique*) to keep off the uninvited ghost. When the long list of tasty courses is ended, when the monks have drunk wine to their heart's desire, and are peacefully dozing their feet upon the table, well,

The lights began to burn distinctly blue,
As in ghost stories lights most always do.

In short, the ghost bursts into the room in spite of the relics, holy water, locks, bolts and whatever else has been used. It takes the Abbot 'roughly by the hair', and they both vanish up the chimney to an unknown fate. The concluding stanza foretells the later, bitterer Eliot:

But after this the monks grew most devout,
And lived on milk and breakfast food entirely;



Each morn from four to five one took a knout
 And flogged his mates 'till they grew good and friarly.
 Spirits from that time forth they did without,
 And lived the admiration of the Shire. We
 Got the veracious record of these doings
 From an old manuscript found in the ruins.

There seem to have been in Eliot more authors than one. As a character in one of his plays puts it, he was born with life for several poets, but one alone survived. Yet, it is a welcome respite to look at his might-have-been faces. One such face is revealed by *A Lyric* (with its less successful variant, *Song*). Valerie Eliot tells us:

These stanzas in imitation of Ben Jonson were done as a school exercise when he was sixteen. 'My English master, who had set his class the task of producing some verse, was much impressed and asked whether I had had some help from some elder person. Surprised, I assured him that they were wholly unaided'. They were printed in the school paper, *Smith Academy Record*, but he did not mention them to his family. 'Some time later the issue was shown to my Mother, and she remarked (we were walking along Beaumont street in St. Louis) that she thought them better than anything in verse she had ever written. I knew what her verse meant to her. We did not discuss the matter further'.

Whether the poem is good or bad, that is hard to decide. What strikes us is the fresh, bright look of the youth who stares at us from behind these old-fashioned lines:

If Time and Space, as Sages say,
 Are things which cannot be,
 The sun which does not feel decay
 No greater is than we.
 So why, Love, should we ever pray
 To live a century?
 The butterfly that lives a day
 Has lived eternity.

It does not matter that we find here a mixture of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, Matthew Arnold, and who knows what other poets. The interesting side of it is that it is not a piece of cultured poetry, although it is found to be under so many influences. Eliot's almost childishly naive voice comes through. He utters the word 'Love', a word which becomes taboo in his later creation. He paints here the youthful image of a man in love, using the later image of the hyacinth girl. A man, a boy rather, who gives her flowers which, it is true, will wither fast. But the boy urges her:

So let us haste to pluck anew
 No mourn to see them pine,
 And though our days of love be few



Yet let them be divine.

At Graduation 1905 is a more sophisticated poem, rather dry. It often sounds like Tennyson, the same Tennyson whom Eliot later disparaged:

Standing upon the shore of all we know
 We linger for a moment doubtfully,
 Then with a song upon our lips, sail we
 Across the harbor bar – no chart to show,
 No light to warn of rocks which lie below,
 But let us yet put forth courageously.

A short *Song* foretells the sadness of *La Figlia Che Piange*. Another poem, *Before Morning*, is more beautiful music of shallow words. Another *Song*, another ‘love’:

Whiter the flowers, Love, you hold,
 Then the white mist on the sea;
 Have you no brighter tropic flowers
 With scarlet life, for me?

Amazingly well rhymed, all these poems are. Amazingly mild their mood, too. A bitterer poem, *Nocturne*, hastens to put things right. Romeo and Juliet, ‘beneath a bored but courteous moon’, vacillate between ‘love forever?’ and ‘love next week?’, while ‘female readers all in tears are drowned’. Then, *Spleen* finally strikes a familiar note:

And Life, a little bold and gray,
 Languid, fastidious, and bland,
 Waits, hat and gloves in hand,
 Punctilious of tie and suit
 (Somewhat impatient of delay)
 On the doorstep of the Absolute.

The naive freshness was rather short-lived. Half of the poems written in ‘early youth’ already seem to have lost it. But the first few lyrics, with their clear eyes and open countenance, are enough to make us suspect that Eliot’s inner self cannot always have been frowning.

*

The one thing that Eliot never revised with an eye to ever having it published was the *Manuscript* of *The Waste Land*. The 54 leaves (1921-1922) were in fact lost, found in 1950, and finally edited in 1971, by Valerie Eliot. As we know, the final version of the poem had been worked upon by Ezra Pound. The publication of the *Manuscript* (there is no knowing whether this is the whole of it) with various



annotations belonging to Eliot, Pound and Eliot's first wife, reveals quite a number of poems that otherwise would never have become known.

To some of its readers, this manuscript has proved Pound's expert poetic hand ('il miglior fabbro', Eliot called him). To others it has suggested the reverse. The poem might have been clearer, more accessible, had Eliot not accepted the utmost concentration that Pound subjected it to. Anyway, it cannot be devoid of interest to have a glimpse at what Eliot originally had in mind to do.

First, as an epigraph to the poem, Eliot meant to use an excerpt from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The few sentences he chose describe the moment when Conrad's hero dies. One sentence wonders whether the man lived his life all over again during that 'supreme moment of complete knowledge'. It thus relates to Part IV (*Death by Water*) of the poem. The end of the quotation might have set the mood for the whole poem. The dying man, possibly reviewing his whole life, cries out: 'The horror! The horror!' Pound objected to this epigraph, and Eliot left it aside, but he did not wholly give it up. He later used another excerpt from the same story in *The Hollow Men*, a poem said to have been written out of bits left over from *The Waste Land*.

As the poem proceeds, we gradually realize that Eliot did not always take Pound's advice. Some of the lines were cut out by Eliot himself. Others were modified by Pound, but not all those changes were accepted as such by Eliot. The first part, for instance, was to have begun with a vulgar story of pubs and brothels, in which Eliot meant to imitate the speech of illiterate people. He dismissed the passage himself. The initial title of the whole poem was *He Do the Police in Different Voices*, words coming from Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*.

There is no knowing when and how Eliot decided upon the final title we all know. Part one stayed almost unchanged. Pound offered an alternative here and there. Eliot agreed to one, rejected the rest. Part two was hardly changed as well, in spite of Pound's objections. One omitted line is interesting, as a proof that we can take *The Waste Land* as the story of a unifying hero. The man whom a woman addresses in broken, neurotic lines suddenly thinks:

I remember

The hyacinth garden. Those are pearls that were his eyes, yes!

Several of Pound's suggestions are very reasonable. Here is Eliot's initial version of a confession of love:

And if I said 'I love you' should we breathe
Hear music, go a-hunting as before?
The hands relax, and the brush proceed?
Tomorrow when we open to the chambermaid
When we open the door
Could we address her or should we be afraid?
If it is terrible alone, it is sordid with one more.
If I said 'I do not love you' should we breathe
The hands relax, and the brush proceed?
How terrible that it should be the same!
In the morning, when they knock upon the door



We should say: This and this is what we need
 And if it rains, the closed carriage at four.
 We should play a game of chess
 The ivory men make company between us
 We should play a game of chess
 Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

It was too long, too explicit, too personal, and hardly relevant. With an eye to depth and concentration, Pound made Eliot cut it to only a few lines. Eliot's first wife also had a hand in some of the words. Of course, her changes are small, fragile. On the whole, Eliot appears from this manuscript to have been pretty firm, to have known what he wanted. He stubbornly stuck to his poetic instinct. Yet, Pound did teach him a lesson.

Part III, *The Fire Sermon*, was heavily modified by Pound. This time, Eliot obediently followed the former's instructions. Let us glance at a few of the passages left out. One of them is dishearteningly vulgar. A name in it (Fresca) was first mentioned in *Gerontion*:

Admonished by the sun's inclining ray,
 And swift approaches of the thievish day,
 The white-armed Fresca blinks, and yawns, and gapes,
 Aroused from dreams of love and pleasant rapes.
 Electric summons of the busy bell
 Brings brisk Amanda to destroy the spell;
 With coarsened hand, and hard plebeian tread,
 Who draws the curtain round the lacquered bed,
 Depositing thereby a polished tray
 Of soothing chocolate, or stimulating tea.

Leaving the bubbling beverage to cool,
 Fresca slips softly to the needful stool,
 Where the pathetic tale of Richardson
 Eases her labour till the deed is done.

No trace here of the peculiarly irregular music of words in the final version of *The Waste Land*. Eliot goes too far with his newly discovered courage of calling things by their true name. What followed and was left out is less sickening, but just as shallow. It reminds somehow of the uncomfortable atmosphere in *Portrait of a Lady*. The same Fresca writes a remarkably stupid letter, out of which we can infer she is in the position of a no longer young woman, who would still like to flirt:

My dear, how are you? I'm unwell today
 And have been, since I saw you at the play.
 I hope that nothing mars your gaity,
 And things go better with you, than with me.
 I went last night – more out of dull despair –
 To Lady Kleinwurm's party – who was there?



Oh, Lady Kleinwurm's monde – no one that mattered –
 Somebody sang, and Lady Kleinwurm chattered.
 What are you reading? anything that's new?
 I have a clever book by Giraudoux.
 Clever, I think, is all. I've much to say –
 But cannot say it – that is just my way –
 When shall we meet – tell me all your manoeuvres;
 And all about yourself and your new lovers –
 And when to Paris? I must make an end,
 My dear, believe me, your devoted friend.

No wonder Ezra Pound felt at once the discrepancy between the deeper meaning of the whole poem and the superfluous, empty passages, such as this one. The vulgar, disgusting descriptions of this Fresca (between Eliot and women, for a while at least, no love was lost) were out of place. On the one hand, they had no lyrical effect whatever. On the other hand, they lowered the literary standard of the whole poem, even if they exhibited a resourceful handling of rhythm and rhyme.

Besides these fits of would-be irony, there are in this third part several more personal lines, which reveal a little of Eliot's own feelings, such as:

London, the swarming life you kill and breed,
 Huddled between the concrete and the sky (...)
 London, your people is bound upon the wheel!

Pound sensed that such lines, though pleasant and interesting, were too direct to match the rest of the images. He thus gradually taught Eliot what Eliot later began boasting of: the air of impersonality that hovered about his lines. Eliot quickly learned that what was too direct and personal was to be mistrusted. He learned it so well that, in the *Quartets*, where he actually meant to be lyrically direct, he still speaks as if he were not there.

Out of a very long fourth part (*Death by Water*), only the short ending stanza is left. What else had Eliot put in there? A 'dignified' sailor with a 'gonorrhea', the Dry Salvages too, a line from Tennyson's *Ulysses*, the sailor's work at sea. Here is a flash of poetry lost among sterile lines:

On watch, I thought I saw in the fore cross-trees
 Three women leaning forward, with white hair
 Streaming behind, who sang above the wind
 A song that charmed my senses, while I was
 Frightened beyond fear, horrified past horror, calm,
 (Nothing was real) for, I thought, now, when
 I like, I can wake up and end the dream.

Echoes from Browning float vaguely about. It is in fact the story of a shipwreck, clumsily told, dull, rather boring. An amazingly correct and conscientious punctuation (which kills all ambiguity) makes it even more unbearably punctilious, so to say. The final image alone is concentrated enough: the dead Phoenician sailor



whose bones are ‘picked clean’ by the whirlpool. An image of death defeated, of eyes that have become pearls, of a being that has reached a more beautiful realm than life.

The fifth part seems to have been written all at once, and hardly changed afterwards. One of the changed lines is significant for Eliot’s awareness of the cultured poetry he initiated. It initially sounded:

These fragments I have spelt into my ruins.

Later replaced by ‘shored’, ‘spelt’ is closer to what Eliot did with the cultural echoes which he captured in his poem. The poet’s own hesitations are interesting towards the end. The last command of the Thunder sounded as follows:

DA
Damyata. The wind was fair and the boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar.
The sea was calm, and your heart responded obedient
Gaily, when invited, beating responsive
To controlling hands. I left without you.
Clasping empty hands I sit upon the shore
Fishing ...

It was intensely personal, but, by now, Eliot had learned from Pound his lesson of ‘impersonality’, which meant in fact rendering the substance of poetry more generally interesting than a private confession. He takes a distance, steps away from his own feelings, and the passage becomes (owing to the use of the Past Conditional in the version we know) more uncertain, more ambiguous, more indirect. Pound himself did not change a thing. He must have realised he had given Eliot what was in his power to give: a lesson of indirectness. He had taught Eliot how to write great (ambiguous and indirect) poetry.

V. LITERARY CRITICISM

1. ‘*VISIONS AND REVISIONS*’: A CRITICAL AGE FOR CRITICISM?



‘Criticism’, Eliot used to say, ‘is as inevitable as breathing’. We often talk about the literature we read, like Molière’s prose-speaking character, even before we have become aware of or decided on a particular critical line that we should like to follow. How far is such informal talk from a real criticism of the work? What is in fact the meaning, the use, the status of literary criticism?

The question has been debated in Europe for a long time now. It has originated hundreds of (apparently) different approaches. In the 1970s, for instance, Eliot’s belief that the poem existed ‘somewhere between the writer and the reader’ (*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*) came back to life in the work of the French critic Georges Poulet. The latter coined a wide range of formulas to explain the relationship between works and their readers, between reader and author. Eliot was well-known and somewhat disliked for his conviction that reading and writing were both a ‘sacrifice’ of personality, a kind of giving in.

Here is Georges Poulet, in 1971 (*The Critical Consciousness*), inventing picturesque phrases for the same reader’s surrender. Reading a book, he states, is ‘a way of stepping aside’, allowing innumerable alien words, images, ideas and the alien principle which breeds and houses them to step in and take your place. When we read, our self is ‘sequestered’, he says, ‘dispossessed’, ‘replaced’, turned into a witness, dominated, ‘ruled’, ‘transferred’, even ‘expropriated’ by the writer’s words. In Eliot’s phrasing,

you don’t really criticize any author to whom you have never
surrendered yourself.

(Letter to Stephen Spender, May 9, 1935)

The critical consciousness is seen by Georges Poulet as a chain of mental windows opening into one another. The reader must, at a first stage, open unconditionally in front of the author. He must follow the work without ‘mental reserve’, without the wish to defend the independence of his own appraisal, with full ‘adhesion’. He must ‘lend’ himself to a stranger, someone outside himself, who suddenly settles inside his brain, feeding on the reader’s innermost life. Poulet’s reader is at this stage a character haunted by creation, temporarily inhabited by it.

In its turn, the book itself must open just as wide. Valéry used to say,

A man has genius if he manages to make me feel I have some of it too.

Poulet speculates on how much the work is to depend upon the reader, in what way it can elicit the energy as well as the passivity, the active docility of a reader described by Valéry as ‘de bonne foi et de mauvaise volonté’. Poulet states that, before being read, the book is just another object, a heap of printed leaves, a lifeless realm. What differentiates a book from other material objects is the fact that it can only exist outside itself, in the reader’s mind. A book is a gift, a privilege to pry into a foreign brain. The author’s consciousness flings its gates wide open. A part of his personality, as Eliot puts it, is ‘extincted’ in the process of inviting the reader to step in and



inhabit, enliven it for a while. Diderot used to say very picturesquely, ‘My thoughts are my whores’; which Poulet interprets as, My thoughts can be thought by everybody else.

Both reader and writer are thus half dispossessed, half identified, and rely, depend upon each other. As Poulet says,

The ‘I’ who thinks in my mind while I read a book is the
‘I’ who writes this book.

There is no question of the real biography of the author when, while we are reading, ‘the person who wrote reveals himself or herself inside us’. Poulet maintains that no biography will ever help the understanding of literature. On the contrary, it is rather the work that leads to and elucidates the author’s real life. Here is the same idea, in Valéry’s words:

If you know everything about me, you know no more than a fable.

Such ideas have been current since the beginning of the 20th century. Out of them the attempts at ignoring the author in practical, structural, semantic, pragmatic and other kinds of criticism have arisen. Leavis for example wrote (*How to Teach Reading*) in 1932:

It should by continual insistence and varied exercise in analysis, be enforced that literature is made of words, and that everything worth saying in criticism of verse and prose can be related to judgments concerning particular arrangements of words on the page.

On which Eliot curtly commented:

Leavisitism finds literature living and leaves it dead.
(quoted by A.C. Ward, in *20th Century English Literature, 1901-1960*)

Poulet, on the other hand, sees the critic as the owner of a consciousness ‘in amazement’. An intellect incredulously contemplating that interference area (the work) created by the disappearance of walls, of barriers between the reader’s and the writer’s minds. Poulet sees the work, this common area placed by Eliot ‘somewhere between the critic and the writer’, as a space of identification of the critic with the author. Other critics whom Poulet discusses have hovered over it. Some have missed it. Mentioning Jacques Rivière, Jean-Pierre Richard, Maurice Blanchot, Jean Starobinsky, Marcel Raymond, Jean Rousset, Poulet speaks in turn of a criticism of complicity, another one of lucidity, of sympathetic criticism. But he hastens to specify that coming too close or going out too far away from the work, surveying it either too much emotionally involved or too lucidly withdrawn, lands the critic into failure. His theory is that criticism, at its best, is supposed to strike a delicate balance between two hypostases, both undesirable if taken separately:



communion lacking intellectualization and intellectualization lacking communion.

This is the well-known dilemma of the critic who must do his job in his mind and his heart, as ‘the whole man’ (Eliot’s words). It is also the line of Matthew Arnold’s reasoning. It might prove interesting to compare what Arnold was obsessed with in the 19th century (he died the very same year that Eliot was born), when criticism seemed to be toddling emotionally, to the turn of mind of an exquisite intellectual toe-dancer like Valéry who, in the 20th century, reached what Poulet calls a stage of ‘hyper-consciousness’.

Arnold’s attempts at defining and circumscribing criticism would not seem to go far at all to a critic like Valéry, whom the French prose-writer of Romanian origin Emil Cioran called a ‘galley-slave of nuances’ (*‘un galérien de la nuance’*). Arnold upheld that criticism must be a ‘free play of the mind’, ‘disinterested endeavour to learn, and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world’.

Valéry, at the other pole of the process, strove to register (like Poulet later) the thought thinking itself, the critical consciousness contemplating itself instead of a work of art. Arnold saw the work as firmly rooted in the ground of everyday life. Every little event could find a place in his so-called literary criticism. Valéry turned this world upside down, and viewed criticism as rooted solely in the mind. For both of them, the work of art is of secondary importance in the critical effort. As Eliot once ironically remarked,

‘The drum is being beaten, but the procession does not advance’.

Arnold was concerned with what criticism could and should do, with its ‘function’, that of creating a ‘current of true and living ideas’, of preparing, of ‘beckoning’ towards what he called an age of creativity. In his words:

... to have the sense of creativity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive, and it is not denied to criticism to have it; but then criticism must be sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge. Then it may have, in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and consciousness will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary, inadequate creation. And at some epochs no other creation is possible.

Still, in full measure, the sense of creative activity belongs only to genuine creation; in literature we must never forget that.

As far as Eliot was concerned, Arnold’s submission of criticism to the work was not forgotten. With Valéry, as with most of the French critics who followed or reacted against him, it is an altogether different matter. Criticism tends to grow independent. It turns upon itself, calls itself creative, scientific. It plunges into a re-evaluation, a new philosophy of creation, of language, of communication, of signs, of society, of the conscious and the subconscious. It uses the novel or the poem as a mere spur to think away from it. It does not support, it rivals the work of art. This is the critical hubris, the critic’s arrogance in the 1970^s.



Arnold's love for the 'free play of the mind' bears part of the responsibility for paving the way towards a sentence like Valéry's:

In my opinion the only genuine philosophy lies not in the objects of our meditation but in the very act and process of our thought.

(*Poésie et Pensée Abstraite*)

It is fascinating to watch the older, the newer, the no-longer-new criticism explain, define, button up and unbutton itself, close and open like a sensitive plant. The self-defining of this narcissistic criticism has progressively less and less in common with the piece of literature it starts from. More and more 'methods' are concocted, to be swiftly turned into what Valéry said they should never become: doctrines. To understand the statements of most such critics, the uninitiated must apply themselves to the study of their vocabulary as if it were a foreign, falsely friendly language.

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Thus surrounded by chameleonic, fashionable or outmoded critical idioms, Eliot followed steadily in Arnold's footsteps. He looked left and right, only to ridicule the short-lived critical fashions (impressionism, structuralism, 'leavisitism' and other -isms of the same kind) with fierce irony. His is a criticism based on practical common sense. His opinions are characterised by a cunning, at times unambiguous courage of saying no to the narrow veneration of one critical method alone. He did not discourage innovators. He stole the grain of salt in every critical finding, and turned back to his own frame of mind, discarding the rest. An experimenter, a modernist in poetry, Eliot is definitely a postmodern in his explicit criticism.

In his first book of criticism, *The Sacred Wood* (1920), Eliot published the essay *The Perfect Critic*. He starts by acknowledging Coleridge and Arnold as notable forerunners in critical matters. The subsequent image of 20th century critics is depicted by thirty-two-year-old Eliot with grinningly assumed bewilderment. He discerns two directions in English criticism: verbalism and impressionism. Both are ridiculed in the two parts of the essay.

Tongue in his cheek, Eliot first expresses his animosity against the impressionistic critic, typified by Arthur Symonds. The latter's book on French symbolism in literature was in fact a valuable introduction for Eliot to what he later called the indispensable preliminaries to finding out his peculiar manner, his original poetic voice. Impressionistic is a word always placed with mock respect between inverted commas, as if the word were too refined to have been devised by humble Eliot himself, as if Eliot felt a shyness in using it.

The impressionistic critic is described as a 'sensitive and cultivated mind', well furnished with a variety of just and keen 'impressions from all the arts and several languages'. His criticism, Eliot states, aims at creating impressions which must be shared by the reader. This is the weak point, which Eliot attacks violently. Symonds is quoted, with statements like:

Antony and Cleopatra is the most wonderful, I think, of all Shakespeare's plays.



Eliot's conclusion to those words is that, instead of producing an essay on a work of art, Symons sets about reenacting it. Everything that Symons does is blamed: retelling the plot, commenting on the characters' motives, using all the narrative threads stolen from the work, which any critic includes in his analysis, as a common language between him and the reader, and of which – by the way – Eliot's criticism is in bad need itself.

As far as the critic's impressions as a simple reader or, as Eliot puts it (rather ambiguously), his 'pure feelings' aroused by the work are concerned, Eliot does not object. It would be all right if this critic stopped short at the stage of feeling, of experiencing his impressions aroused by the work. But there would be no criticism written if the critic were to stop at the stage of reading.

Eliot's anger is kindled by what follows. He claims that, in the process of putting pen to paper, the impressionistic critic forgets his position of a mere reader. He strives to take the place of the author, to use the piece of literature examined as a rough material, to reshape it into something else, to build his critical book by chopping, rearranging, killing the work he deals with. Eliot, true follower of Arnold, is unwilling to tolerate that the real creator should be belittled or ignored. Criticism, in his view on literature, is to play second fiddle.

Eliot's verdict is that the impressionistic critic suffers from a 'mixed critical and creative reaction':

... the reading sometimes fecundates his emotions to produce something new which is not criticism, but is not the expulsion, the ejection, the birth of creativeness.

He is an incomplete artist, lacking an 'adequate outlet for the creative impulse', because of a 'defect of vitality or an obscure obstruction which prevents nature to take its course'. After making public this shameful deficiency, Eliot withdraws with a final blow. Swinburne (poet and critic, like Eliot himself) was an able poet, therefore an able critic, Eliot decides. Symons was neither. And a conclusion is drawn, which announces Eliot's life-long favourite obsession:

... the artist is (...) oftenest to be depended upon as critic.

Why? Because no critic who is a good poet or novelist himself will ever dream of belittling his creative gift. Because, in a good poet,

the circuit of impression and expression is complete,

leaving thus room in the man for neuter critical statements, not vitiated by unfulfilled creative aspirations.

The sore point of the second direction of English criticism noticed by Eliot at the turn of the century, diagnosed by him as a 'verbal disease', is its vague, so-called scientific vocabulary. The disease, we might say, has not been cured yet. Here is Eliot's accusation:



... if a phrase like ‘the most highly organized form of intellectual activity’ is the highest organisation of thought of which contemporary criticism, in a distinguished representative, is capable, then, we conclude, modern criticism is degenerate.

It is true that the sentence relies upon a conditional, but this is only a grammatical strategy to make the remark more palatable. We feel that Eliot hardly entertained any doubt as to what he was saying, that his anger against the English criticism of his time was deep rooted.

If, at first, he questioned the creating energy of the impressionistic critic, causing him to tumble headlong into the work and lie there, now he touches upon the delicate question of style. He allowed little freedom to the creative impulse of the critic’s sensibility, because, he said, it bred weak impressions, second-hand novelties, as long as the critic was not an artist as well. In point of style, Eliot’s long-cherished mood is that of verbal insecurity. He is poignantly aware that words do not have clear-cut meanings, that they tend to become ‘indefinite emotions’. They disarmingly change their meanings with each generation (if not even oftener than that). ‘What they have lost’, Eliot wails, ‘is definite, and what they have gained is indefinite’. Language is no safe ground to tread on.

The same as for Valéry, language is for Eliot a realm of quicksands. His essays abound in histories of words, etymologies, inventories of meanings for one and the same term. When he ceases probing his heart, Eliot delights in suspecting his words. This is in fact the suspense and charm of his prose. Nothing is with him ever certain.

The cause Eliot finds for this verbal insecurity is the following:

When there is so much to be known, when, there are so many fields of knowledge in which the same words are used with different meanings, when every one knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or not.

Paul Valéry had the same feeling when he imagined the human brain to be a grey mixture of confused words, sentences, pages, news and discoveries massed together, and when he warned us that, if we ever tried to take out one word alone and probe it too closely, tramp on it as if we were walking the plank, the word was bound to give way, to shed its meanings and plunge us into an abyss of confusion, of uncertainty. Eliot concludes, then, that the critic’s style must by no means be dogmatic:

The dogmatic critic, who lays down a rule, who affirms a value, has left his labour incomplete. Such statements may often be justifiable as a saving of time; but in matters of great importance the critic must not coerce, and he must not make judgments of worse or better. He must simply elucidate: the reader will form the correct judgment for himself.

A few things stand out clearly in this fragment. First, that criticism is in fact powerless. Its mission is to ‘elucidate’, not to judge. The word will be used by Eliot to the very last. At times, he tries to explain that by ‘elucidating’ a poem he means that



the critic must provide preliminary, factual information: explain historical circumstances, various meanings of less currently used words, and so on. Most often, the word is safely left unexplained, the same as other enigmatic favourites of Eliot's, like 'enjoyment', 'entertainment', 'pure feeling', etc. Second, that the only person entitled to forming a judgment is the reader.

The critic is thus driven out of that space of interference between the poet and his readers, which is the poem. As a common reader is indeed liable to form a judgement, but is quite unlikely to pass it in writing, the logical conclusion would be that Eliot does not look with exceeding benevolence upon the fruit of critical labour.

The end of the essay brings Eliot very close to Arnold. It deals with the 'free intelligence' of the good critic, who must not allow other emotions 'except those immediately provoked by a work of art' to peep from his essays. Against Coleridge's constant metaphysical interest, which jumped at any occasion for personal associations, Eliot warns:

Coleridge is apt to take leave of the data of criticism, and arouse the suspicion that he has been diverted into a metaphysical hare-and-hounds. His end does not always appear to be the return to the work of art with improved perception and intensified, because more conscious enjoyment; his centre of interest changes, his feelings are impure. In the derogatory sense he is more 'philosophic' than Aristotle. For everything that Aristotle says illuminates the literature which is the occasion for saying it; but Coleridge only now and then. It is one more instance of the pernicious effect of emotion.

An unuttered obsession steals out of such final verdicts, namely that nothing and no one is allowed to trespass the area between writer and reader. We must over and over again 'return to the work'. The criticism of the 1970s preaches the same creed, with the difference that it retraces its steps towards the author after having sown its wild oats elsewhere. Eliot never leaves the precincts of the work. His criticism is authorially authoritarian.

Last of all, after two types of criticism have been at length reprimanded, Eliot tentatively broaches upon what, in his view, literary criticism ought to be. He finds out that personal emotional involvement in the work, the same as its opposite, 'theoretical scaffolding' (a cold, intellectual, generalizing survey of the work), are both undesirable. The same as Georges Poulet, he tries to combine the two. He claims that criticism should be a 'development of sensibility' into a structure of generalizations.

Later, in the 1960s, he explained that all the generalizations he had ever produced had been a device of intellectually defending his own emotional preferences. He tries thus to strike a fragile balance inside himself, to walk the rope between feeling and thinking. It is true that (in opposition to Valéry) he strives after a balanced, half personal, half impersonal, both emotional and meditative critical approach. Yet, to use one of Yeats' metaphors, with Eliot the critic, all ladders finally go down to the 'rag and bone shop of the heart'.

It may be in many ways significant to point out that two imposing men of letters of this century – Paul Valéry and T.S. Eliot – were both poets, playwrights and



essayists at the same time. Though very much concerned with the fate of literature, each on his line stopped short of becoming a literary critic proper. Valéry's literary appraisals circumambulate his one and only intellectual passion: forcing his mind to watch itself at work, spying a judgment before it has been uttered, while it is still a thought thinking itself out. Eliot's essays leave the same exhilarating yet awkward feeling that they do not come of age, that they were born at a critical time for criticism.

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Swinburne, Arnold were also both poets and critics. Only their critical approach was faster, less self-questioning. There was less self-examination in their judgment of a work. Theirs was a criticism that followed shortcuts. Eliot, on the contrary, developed a strategy of delays, of backward glances, of visions and revisions. His essays usually start by enumerating what they are not going to undertake: a list of denied directions, of possible impulses nipped in the bud.

When the list of things Eliot is not going to say about one author or another has been exhausted, he pauses. He gasps for breath, and ends with a sigh and a warning. After so many mistaken interpretations (spotting other critics' errors is Eliot's most effective resource), there is only one hope left for literary criticism: to be undertaken (read: stifled) by the artists themselves.

In 1923, Eliot wrote the essay entitled *The Function of Criticism*. He tries there to push the analysis of his own critical effort as far as he can. The same as with Valéry, his critical theories, the definitions and laws he gives for criticism spring from self-examination. The difference lies in the fact that Valéry tiptoes towards his 'intellect', while Eliot professes to dive into his 'emotions'. Fact is that, in spite of Eliot's insistence that the critic is to concentrate on the work and nothing but the work, his criticism (the same as Valéry's) starts with the contemplation of himself in a mirror, under a microscope and stops there.

We learn more about Eliot the poet in Eliot's criticism, than about the other writers he deals with. His criticism, like that of numerous critics that followed him, feeds upon itself. To use one of Valéry's images, it resembles a serpent which continually devours its own tail, and, while we watch it coiling, swallowing itself, we cannot help wondering whether it will ever manage to bite off its own head.

In 1923, the function of criticism seems to Eliot to be a 'problem of order'. Literature itself seems to him to be an 'organic whole', in which, as we learn from another essay (*Tradition and the Individual Talent*, 1919), past, present and future works enter into complex reciprocal relations, modifying one another in all directions. Eliot thus alights upon his spectacular idea that a work written today can change in our minds the status of an older work, and that we must also have an eye open to such backward modifications coming from the future. Criticism is defined 'in this place' (Eliot dislikes final statements) as the

commentation and exposition of works of art by means of written words.

The aim of this assumption is to underline that criticism is not an 'autotelic activity'. Its end is

the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste.



Both qualifications are vague. Eliot often tries to dispel their dimness by sketching the histories of the words implied, by comparing his utterances to those of Arnold or more recent critics, or by providing concrete examples. Few of these attempts are successful. The reason of this failure lies in Eliot's inability to look upon another author with what he calls an 'impersonal' eye. In fact, when at his best, he reduces everything to himself. He is unable to filter, to 'comment' on a work of art without trying, in the process, to size his gift against the respective author's.

This may be one of the reasons why he systematically avoids dealing with the subject matter of novels or poems. He seems to be saving that for an implicit comparison with his own poems and plays, a comparison which the reader is tacitly invited to follow in his mind. In support of this hidden intention we may remember here that Eliot always maintained that a practitioner's criticism can only be understood in relation to his other works (poetry or prose).

It is a delicate question to ask how transparent a critic can become in the process of filtering, of sifting through himself a work of art. How he must handle his personality so as not to substitute himself to the author, yet to preserve his personal idiom. It partly springs from Arnold's, then Eliot's own insistence that the critic is expected to play second fiddle to the author. Georges Poulet is of another opinion. He says:

No criticism can possibly exist without a first stage at which the critic's intelligence steals inside the intelligence he examines and temporarily settles there ...

This identification, so much praised by Eliot too, is however seen by Poulet as the mere beginning of the critical act. The essence of the critical labour, as seen by Poulet, comes later, when the critic becomes aware of his own thoughts as distinct from those of the artist. Then, the critic withdraws from the work saying:

... my thoughts never fully identify with their object. My intelligence is on this side, not that one. It advances on its own: it sets the pace.

The literary critic's independence from the author analysed is even nowadays the most delicate area in matters of criticism. It is quite often mentioned, though hardly ever enlarged upon by Eliot. He talks about the need in the critic for independence of judgement, for 'impersonality', justness and freedom. Yet, he manages to avert our attention from the liberties the critic might take with the author. Here is an example:

... we perceive that criticism, far from being a simple and orderly field of beneficent activity, from which impostors can be readily ejected, is no better than a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators, who have not even arrived at the articulation of their differences. Here, one would suppose, was a place for quiet, co-operative labour. The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks – tares to which we are all subject – and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment. When



we find that quite the contrary prevails, we begin to suspect that the critic owes his livelihood to the violence and extremity of his opposition to other critics, or else to some trifling oddities of his own with which he contrives to season the opinions which men already hold, and which out of vanity they prefer to maintain. We are tempted to expel the lot.

Eliot even goes farther than that. He fiercely ridicules the ‘inner voice’ upon which Middleton Murry suggests that the good critic ought to depend for guidance. As a more desirable alternative, Eliot advances the need for ‘common principles’ and the ‘search for perfection’. In short, the supremacy of the work of art. When he reaches Matthew Arnold, he manages to submit criticism to creation in another subtle way:

Matthew Arnold distinguishes far too bluntly, it seems to me, between the two activities: he overlooks the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself. Probably, indeed, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour, the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative. I maintain even that the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism ...

He goes on to explain that ‘you cannot fuse creation with criticism as you can fuse criticism with creation’, because ‘criticism, by definition, is about something or other than itself’. So far, so good. But he promptly concludes: criticism can never be considered creative and the critic is not a creator of literature. In his opinion,

The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist.

Eliot’s infatuation with what he calls the criticism of practitioners prevented him from falling into the critical hubris of the 1970s. It preserved him from replacing criticism of a work by criticism of another piece of criticism. It was a theoretical limitation with felicitous practical advantages. Eliot had no patience with soaring philosophical generalizations, but possessed what he felt any critic ought to possess:

a very highly developed sense of fact.

He prided himself on ‘dealing with facts’, such as conditions of composition, genesis, to setting of a work. A critic like Poulet might feel humiliated when tasting the sour meal Eliot cooked for those who ventured to interpose between author and the common reader:

There is a large part of critical writing which consists in ‘interpreting’ an author, a work (...) It is difficult to confirm the ‘interpretation’ by external evidence. To anyone who is skilled in fact on this level there will be evidence enough. But who is to prove his own skill? And for every success in this type of writing there are thousands of impostures. Instead of insight, you get a



fiction. Your test is to apply it again and again to the original, with your view of the original to guide you. But there is no one to guarantee your competence, and once again we find ourselves in a dilemma.

Other critical devices are ridiculed as well. Comparison and analysis, for instance, ('the chief tools of the critic', Eliot states) are to be handled with utmost care, we are warned. The grim joke which follows this warning discourages us from using them altogether, as a matter of fact:

Comparison and analysis need only the cadavers on the table; but interpretation is always producing parts of the body from its pockets, and fixing them in place.

The subterfuge of facts cannot fail to remind us of Dickens' obtuse teacher in *Hard Times*. Especially when Eliot presses his point by declaring that 'facts cannot corrupt taste'. That this danger only comes from those who 'supply opinion'. The accusation is made in earnest, and it is unfair. So is his subsequent view of Coleridge:

... what is Coleridge's Hamlet: is it an honest inquiry as far as the data permit, or is it an attempt to present Coleridge in an attractive costume?

In his striving to stifle the critic as a rival of the author, Eliot goes as far as to approve of criticism being replaced by 'scholarship, even in its humblest forms'. His essay *The Function of Criticism* ends before it has actually begun. That is, it ends by denying literary criticism most of the functions that it might claim.

In the *Introduction to The Sacred Wood*, Eliot judges that

a moderate number of persons have been engaged in what is called 'critical' writing, but no conclusion is any more solidly established than it was in 1865.

What is worse, he remarks, ever since Arnold's time critics have constantly been 'tempted outside criticism'. It proves a lot more difficult for Eliot to state what criticism ought to be, than to surround it by forbidding signs. He manages to stutter that criticism is a 'department of thought' (*Introduction to The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1932). That it is expected to provide a 'reason for reading' (*Imperfect Critics*, 1920).

If the critic volunteers to go farther than that, Eliot checks his enthusiasm. He conjures up a devouring dragon called *The Frontiers of Criticism*, and he lets it loose to leap at whomever proceeds on a critical journey. This is Eliot's secret weapon, and it bears many other names too. In *The Age of Dryden*, 1932, he speaks of 'borderlines' and 'extremes' of criticism. Talking about how far criticism can go, Eliot has little generosity to spare. His avarice turns into liberality, however, as soon as he feels called upon to specify the roads that are forbidden to it. His resourcefulness in finding more and more no-entry streets for critics is remarkable:

Criticism of poetry moves between two extremes. On the one hand the critic may busy himself so much with the implications of a poem, or of one poet's work –



implications moral, social, religious or other – that the poetry becomes hardly more than a text for discourse (...)

Or if you stick too closely to the ‘poetry’ and adopt no attitude towards what the poet has to say, you will tend to evacuate it of all significance. And furthermore there is a philosophic borderline, which you must not transgress too far or too often, if you wish to preserve your standing as a critic, and are not prepared to present yourself as a philosopher, metaphysician, sociologist, or psychologist instead. Johnson, in these respects, is a type of critical integrity. Within his limitations, he is one of the greatest critics; and he is a great critic partly because he keeps within his limitations.

When dealing with other critics than himself, Eliot is therefore a careful observer of frontiers: of poetry, of criticism, of consciousness, of art Other critics’ words must go first through the Customs of Eliot’s mind. His own frontier, on the other hand, is pretty elastic. However far he goes, his allowed borderline will always be one step ahead. He will never find himself in danger of illegally crossing it unawares. The other critics are all outlaws. Each step they take is trespassing beyond the bounds. A critical essay might even be entitled *Eliot and the Outlaws*, since he so constantly has in mind frontiers to be guarded against trespassers. Eliot has trained his sight for spying outlawry in criticism. Whenever he is around, criticism meets us in the guise of a gate bearing the notice ‘No trespassing’.

Besides the multiple interdictions that Eliot heaps on the shoulders of most critics he examines, he has one more confusing mental habit. A habit which makes us feel he contributed to bringing about the suspicion that we live in an uncertain, critical age for criticism. His indecision as to how far criticism can go is accompanied by a professed unsteadiness of his judgments, by his passion for revisions. He makes a point of usually specifying the year of composition for each of his essays. He protests against his opinions being quoted as if they were atemporal. He is keenly aware that the passage of time changes both the creator and his creation. As a matter of fact, Eliot the critic seems to have experienced three distinct ages: apprenticeship by identification with another author, which later turns into the critic’s own egotistic vision of the same author, and is followed by an endless line of self-revisions. Most prefaces to his books of criticism illustrate one of these ages. Here is a fragment from the *Preface* to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*:

I discovered that what had happened in my own mind, in eight years, was not so much a change or reversal of opinions, as an expansion or development of interests. There are, it is true, faults of style which I regret; and especially I detect frequently a stiffness and an assumption of pontifical solemnity which may be tiresome to many readers ...

During the same year, we learn from his *Preface* to *For Lancelot Andrewes*:

The reader may be puzzled to know why I selected these articles and in this order. I wished to indicate certain lines of development, and to dissociate myself from certain conclusions which have been drawn from my volume of essays, *The Sacred Wood*.



Eliot is extremely sensitive to what may become dated in a critical approach. He delights in bringing his views up to date, in the same way that an adolescent earnestly watches the stages of his growing up. Reconsidering statements like,

Crashaw is, I believe, a much greater poet than he is usually supposed to be.
(*A Note on Richard Crashaw*, in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, 1928)

abound in his essays. When there is no outside utterance at hand to be reconsidered, Eliot feeds on his own previous opinions, which reminds us of his lines in *Prufrock*:

In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Here is a significant reconsideration of himself, in 1964 (*Preface* to the 1964 edition of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*):

It is said that Yeats had more than enough of *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* as his anthology piece. In my youth *La Figlia Che Piange* was favoured as the most innocuous of my poems, but in later years I have been more fairly represented (though I should be glad to hear no more of a bang and a whimper). But with my essays I have not been so fortunate. Just as any student of contemporary literature, putting pen to paper about my criticism, is certain to pass an examination on it if he alludes to the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ and the ‘objective correlative’, so every anthologist wishing to include a sample of my essays will choose *Tradition and the Individual Talent* – perhaps the most juvenile and certainly the first to appear in print.

(...) My earliest critical essays, dating from a period when I was somewhat under the influence of Ezra Pound’s enthusiasm for Remy de Gourmond, came to seem to me the product of immaturity ...

The essay *After Strange Gods*, 1934, opens in the same way. It announces that some statements in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* have become unsatisfactory, and Eliot is on the point of reformulating them. The *Preface* to his dissertation on Bradley (*Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*), published in 1964, fifty years after it had been written, reveals that seventy-six-years-old Eliot no longer understands or cares for the ‘academic philosophizing’, or even the terminology of that long essay.

The essay which gives Eliot’s self-revising the status of a critical method is *To Criticize the Critic*, 1961, written four years before the poet’s death. It summarizes Eliot’s evolution as a commentator of literature. He begins:

Of what use, or uses, is literary criticism, is a question worth asking again and again, even if we find no answer satisfactory. Criticism may be, what F.H. Bradley said of metaphysics, ‘the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but to find these reasons is no less an instinct’.



He explains that he means to examine his own criticism with a view to stimulating other critics ‘to make similar confessions’, namely to admit publicly

all those changes of attitude, taste, interest, and belief which the years bring to pass.

A critic must teach himself how to grow old. Eliot suggests thus a new task for criticism: that of keeping up with the ages of the critic, the task of constantly revising itself.

Several types of critics are described: the professional critic (also called the Super-Reviewer), the critic with gusto, the academic and the theoretical critic. At last, Eliot comes to his own group:

And finally we come to the critic whose criticism may be said to be a by-product of his creative activity. Particularly, the critic who is also a poet. Shall we say, the poet who has written some literary criticism?

Stealthily and unerringly, in only three apparently innocent sentences, criticism has been kicked to the back row. Poetry has emerged to the front. Eliot includes here Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, Dryden, Racine, Matthew Arnold and himself. In 1961, re-reading his own essays dating as far back as 1920, Eliot speaks of them with unassuming, affectionate irony:

There are, to be sure, statements with which I no longer agree; there are views which I maintain with less firmness of conviction than when I first expressed them, or which I maintain only with important reservations; there are statements the meaning of which I no longer understand. There may be areas in which my knowledge has increased; there are areas in which my knowledge has evaporated. (...) And there are some matters in which I have simply lost interest, so that, if asked whether I still hold the same belief, I could only say ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I don’t care’. There are errors of judgment, and, what I regret more, there are errors of tone: the occasional note of arrogance, of vehemence of cocksureness or rudeness, the braggadocio of the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter. Yet I must acknowledge my relationship to the man who made those statements, and in spite of all these exceptions, I continue to identify myself with the author.

Eliot pleads in favour of a new kind of coherence and consistency in a critic’s activity: the unity of personality. This unity of the critic’s self survives small changes or serious reversals of opinion, such as those to be found in Eliot’s two essays on Milton (1936, 1947). Hunting for contradictory statements in Eliot’s work is a fairly easy job, indeed. Yet, it turns out to be utterly unrewarding, since one smiling paragraph like the one above is enough to bewilder nagging hair-splitters. Defending the critic’s privilege to revise himself, Eliot welcomes contradictions. He looks on them with the benevolent eye of a man who was born in the age of relativity, and who keeps training his mind in such a way as to tolerate (or at least seem to do so) all ideas on earth.



Eliot attacks the image of the critic who feels that from the very first day of his career he has sketched the outline of his whole subsequent criticism, and the only thing left for him to do during the rest of his life will be to conform to it. He expresses his anger at seeing phrases of his youth quoted with no date attached to them, with no reminder to the reader of

the distance of time that separates the author when he wrote it from the author as he is today.

He even turns against the ‘quotable sentences’, which every critic dreams of coining, and for which Eliot himself had a remarkable gift. He feels that such memorable statements, which the readers remember long after the writer has outgrown them, ‘dog’ their author in an uncomfortable, even unfair way. They make him feel awkward about ever changing his views and contradicting his previous utterances.

One such formula, which he produced in 1928 without suspecting its future embarrassing fame, is a sentence from the *Preface to For Lancelot Andrewes*. He states there that he is a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. Thirty years later, he realizes that the term classicism and romanticism have lost their meaning for him, and that, if he were to state his beliefs again, his words would be totally different. Eliot ends his ‘exercise in self-examination’ with a sentence which best defines his critical approach:

... I hope that what I have said today may suggest reasons why, as the critic grows older, his critical writings may be less fired by enthusiasm, but informed by wider interest and, one hopes, by greater wisdom and humility.

Can his attitude really be called humility? To spot and denounce your own errors before (or even if) anyone else has had time to use them against you, is a gymnastics that Eliot loved to practise. He hated to be in the wrong. His tone in his essays coaxes the reader into agreeing, approving, smiling sympathetically, without reserve. Eliot did his best to avoid drowning in an age when literary criticism sinned by belittling the creator and magnifying, closely examining and diagnosing itself, instead. Eliot himself sins by excess of pride in the opposite direction. The critic in him is blindfolded by the poet. The author is almighty. If he happens to make errors, the only one allowed to punish, to revise them must be the same author himself. This is the Eliotian variant of the critical hubris: the intimation that whatever he states is just a link in the chain of a hundred visions and revisions which a minute will reverse.



2. ‘*WORD OF NO SPEECH*’: ELIOT AND HIS WORDS

End of the endless
Journey to no end
Conclusion of all that



Is inconclusive
 Speech without word and
 Word of no speech ...
 (*Ash-Wednesday, II*)

The paradox is Eliot's favourite device in matters of style. His works abound in such untrue statements, sentences ironically asserting something opposite to reality, joking falsehoods. Yet, quite often, the device gains in gravity. It becomes elliptical, concentrated into a sentence with no predicate, a juxtaposition of very few words. 'Word of no speech' is such an example of concentrated paradox. The effect of Eliot's concentrated paradoxes is to discredit, to weaken the reality of the words implied.

Whatever the material he holds in his hands may be, Eliot keeps fingering it distrustfully, peering beyond it. Therefore, since poetry is made up of words, the 'essence' of poetry (whatever that may be Eliot never ventures to explain) hides beyond mere written words, beyond commonly accepted meanings. He once spoke of a 'poetry beyond poetry', a poetry beyond language. His poetry never reaches that condition (fortunately). It is however heavily oppressed, often darkened by the uncertain, imprecise indirectness of a poet who swims against the current of language, a poet who mistrusts his words.

As Valéry wrote about Degas, Eliot is like a rider deeply mistrustful of his horses. A cloud of verbal insecurity hovers over his poetry and prose. Speaking about it, he says:

The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.
 (*The Metaphysical Poets*, 1921)

Eliot's poetry ignores the traditional arrangement of words in writing. Eliot seems to hold Valéry's opinion that the meaning and order of words, the syntax of a sentence are no more than a prejudice. A mental habit which, of course, should not be totally forgotten. It must be revived from time to time. Any change of poetic idiom, any 'dislocation' of language betokens a change in something mysterious that lies behind the word. At times, Eliot calls that unsafe area 'emotion', 'feeling', 'sensitivity'.

Eliot's feeling of verbal insecurity does not make him shy or reticent in using words. On the contrary, he uses them excessively, beyond their limit. He establishes complicated relationships among them. He has in his head a remarkable inventory of meanings, which he combines programmatically in unexpected ways. He has a taste for innovating the use of words, for loading them with astonishing associations, for placing objects and feelings precisely in the places where they do not belong. This taste veils both words and objects. All outlines appear blurred, imprecise, uncertain. Squeezing his words in unnatural paradoxes, Eliot makes them step over the threshold of speech into the realm of those words of no speech, the land of ambiguous poetry.

*



As early as 1920, in the essay *The Perfect Critic (The Sacred Wood)*, Eliot expressed his fear of words, his logophobia. He complained there that words were far from having definite meanings. That, on the contrary, they had the tendency of conveying vague and indefinite emotions. That, in the course of time, they were liable to change their meanings. That what they usually lost was definite, and what they gained remained 'indefinite'. This is the reason, why, in his prose writings, Eliot lacks belief in words. The effect of this verbal disbelief is dramatic. The instability of terms, which he feels everywhere, induces a feeling of intellectual isolation. Ideas no longer meet. Each mind follows its own track and, as a conclusion, Eliot the critic sighs cunningly: I do not know whether I understand the author's meaning ...

On the other hand, in his poetry, Eliot loads his words with the burden of ambiguity without giving a second thought to their frailty. Yet as far as other people's (especially literary critics') sentences are concerned, the words are not safe any longer, no conclusion can be final. After Eliot's etymological and semantic trips, all statements except his own are shattered. Any certainty uttered by another writer is a good starting point. Eliot's hobby is to pull it down, by inculcating a very certain lexical doubt.

Eliot's critical game of spotting the error, the weak points, the unsafe ground trodden by other minds is amply illustrated in his essay *Johnson As Critic and Poet*, 1944 (*On Poetry and Poets*). The essay aims at discussing Johnson's criticism of poetry in relation to Johnson's poetry. Eliot does so since he thinks that the criticism of any critic who, like himself, is a poet as well, can only be understood

in the light of the kind of poetry that he wrote himself.

As Eliot at a later date confessed, his own criticism was at its best when dealing with authors who influenced his poetic achievement. When he pushed the metaphysicals and the Elizabethans to the front, arousing a new taste for them, he was not prompted by the desire to re-orient the literary scene. His memorable phrases were careful introspections of a critic who was first of all interested in spying on his own poetic sensibility. The 'objective correlative', the 'dissociation of sensibility', his image of literary tradition, and other widely known issues of his criticism were, he says, no more than

conceptual symbols for emotional preferences.

They were mere abstractions (and we must remember how Eliot hated abstractions), originating in what he calls his concrete 'feeling of kinship' with certain poets. The critical impulse is in Eliot emotional. His theorizing, he said, was 'epiphenomenal' of his tastes. It sprang from the direct experience of those authors who had influenced his own writing. In *To Criticize the Critic*, 1961, he explains:

... thus, the emphasis on tradition came about, I believe, as a result of my reaction against the poetry, in the English language, of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and my passion for the poetry, both dramatic and



lyric, of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The ‘objective correlative’ in the essay on Hamlet may stand for my bias towards the more mature plays of Shakespeare – Timon, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus notably (...) And the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ may represent my devotion to Donne and the metaphysical poets, and my reaction against Milton.

He forgets here that any good critic always coins his own terms and, the more widely his terms are accepted, the better the critic is. A critic has the same duty as a poet towards his language. Eliot the critic felt so, and did it. His denial of youthful, well-coined concepts is only half fair.

A poet’s criticism, Eliot intimates, is a side-mirror of his poetic skill. In several other essays he suggests that this workshop criticism of a poet writing about his interest in other poets (whose poems he has beforehand turned to good account in his cultured poetry) is the right, the genuine, the only true criticism. The three greatest critics of poetry in English literature, Eliot decides, were Dryden, Coleridge and Johnson. The conclusion to be drawn is that the good critic of poetry must be a poet as well.

Following Eliot’s own suggestion that his generalisations are to be taken cautiously, as theories meant to illuminate the temperament of the poet, we may conclude that this image of the ‘perfect’ poet-critic is just another cap to fit Eliot. He himself was first and foremost a poet, and he did not want to see his poetry elbowed by others. Consequently, he resorts to wearing the critic’s mantle himself in order to lure the readers but discourage his commentators. He extols the experience of reading, but deeply mistrusts the intellectual verdicts of others, because those verdicts may be inimical.

There are two leading parts in Eliot’s criticism: the friendly poet-critic who knows best, and the hostile critic who is not a creator and who is steadily pushed by Eliot’s arguments beyond the frontiers of criticism.

An interesting distinction is made by Eliot between Dryden and Johnson. Along with it, another theory to fit Eliot’s practice is produced. Johnson’s criticism, he states, was less spectacular than Coleridge’s and Dryden’s, because Johnson was not the initiator of a new poetic movement. His critical view is therefore ‘retrospective’. Johnson does not defend his own innovating way of writing, like Dryden, like Eliot himself. He merely comes at the end of an age, and has an eye to its past. Dryden had to pave a new way, to begin another age, to win partisans for works which swerved from the past and led into a yet unknown future. Consequently, Johnson appreciated the refinement, rather than the ‘dislocation’ of language. In the 18th century, Eliot says,

Eccentricity or uncouthness was reprehensible: a poet was prized, not for his invention of an original form of speech, but by his contribution to a common language.

Johnson was proud of the common style his age had reached. Eliot spots here the 18th century critic’s first error: Johnson was liable to ignore good poetry which was not law-abiding, in favour of less interesting, ‘pedestrian’ poetry which conformed. This taste for conformity in Johnson’s criticism is labelled by Eliot as



‘obtuseness’. It arose, Eliot hurries to specify, from a ‘limited’ but by no means ‘defective’ sensibility. Johnson had a narrow range of interests, Eliot declares, but

we must not be narrow in accusing him of narrowness, or prejudiced in accusing him of prejudice.

Eliot’s accusations do not usually preserve their dignity to the last. Rather than press his denial until the poet or critic discussed has to kneel down and yield, Eliot steps back, leaving the last door unopened. He ends by stating that he has simply meant to ‘unsettle’ our minds, not to pit them against anybody’s ideas. The theory that emerges from Eliot’s tolerant view is that Johnson lacked the ‘historical sense’. Johnson lived in an age which had only recently reached maturity, and felt no need either to renew or to look back. In the neighbourhood of this theory, Eliot’s idea that a poet must fight in defence of his novelty becomes for the moment smaller and relative. Looking upon it disparagingly, Eliot meditates:

In a time like ours, in which novelty is often assumed to be the first requisite of poetry if it is to attract our attention, and in which the name of pioneer and innovator are among the titles most honoured, it is hard to apprehend this point of view.

Such agility, which closely borders on contradicting oneself, imposes a similar nimbleness on the mind of the reader of Eliot’s criticism.

The idea is followed by an indictment of the modern taste for the ‘exhilaratingly meaningless’, for non-conformity at all costs:

The modern inclination to put up with some degree of incoherence of sense, to be tolerant of poets who do not know themselves exactly what they are trying to say, so long as the verse sounds well and presents striking and unusual imagery.

Eliot distinguishes here between a poetry of sound and a poetry of sense, a poetry of incantation and one of meaning. Of the two, Eliot complains, the modern reader prefers the melodious raving with a feebler meaning, to the ‘intelligence and wisdom set forth in pedestrian measures’, that Johnson favoured. In between them, to settle the dispute, Eliot reveals a third kind of poetry,

which represents an attempt to extend the confines of the human consciousness and to report of things unknown, to express the inexpressible.

This seems to be, for Eliot, poetry proper. Yet, he withdraws without enlarging upon it, satisfied with having been able to squeeze in one of his favourite paradoxes: poetry proper (his own included) means to express the inexpressible.

Placed in this opposition with the early 20th century, Johnson is qualified as a critic who ‘forgave much to sense’, while a modern reader is rather inclined to forgive much to sound and image. Both directions are liable to exaggerate. This possible error provides Eliot with new reasons for dissatisfaction. Several other accusations follow.



Johnson is blamed for failing to apply his own critical standards, for making unreasonable assertions, for failing to understand the peculiarities of dramatic blank verse, for having no 'ear' for the music of poetry. Eliot illustrates these failings by quoting Johnson's opinions on the metaphysical, the Elizabethans, some sentimental poets and Milton.

The second part of the essay reveals Eliot's logophobia. First, he analyses rather grumblingly Johnson's poetry. He calls Johnson 'only a meditative poet', who does not have the 'gift of structure' necessary for a longer poem. He also calls him a 'moralist', whose indignation is feigned and therefore not convincing. He adds: 'Indignation may make poetry but it must be indignation recollected in tranquillity'. Eliot finds 'querulousness' in Johnson's indictment of the city of London. Johnson's moralizing generalizations look to Eliot untrue. Eliot disapproves of Johnson's 'disposition to the general'.

What follows is a discussion of some rules Johnson set for poetry. The meanings of Johnson's terms are examined: originality, edification, poetic diction, mannerism, eloquence, invention are discussed in Johnson's own, then in more recent contexts. Some of them have changed their original meaning. Originality, for instance, has become so important in our days, that Eliot feels it has pushed criticism into declining to an 'advertisement of preference'. Several terms which Johnson used have been lost. They are now either ridiculous or not understood any more.

Eliot discloses now his first care in studying another critic. It is that of establishing between himself and the other writer a kind of verbal compatibility. He says:

In judging the permanence of the principles of a critic belonging to an age very different from our own, we must constantly reinterpret his language according to our own situation.

The following reinterpretation is suggested for Johnson's term 'poetic diction':

To most people nowadays, I imagine, 'poetic diction' means an idiom and a choice of words which are out of date, and which perhaps were never very good at their best. If we are temperate, we mean the use of idiom and vocabulary borrowed from poets of a different generation, idiom and vocabulary no longer suitable for poetry. If we are extreme, we mean that this idiom and vocabulary were always bad, even when they were fresh. Wordsworth, in his Preface, says: 'there will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called <poetic diction>'. Johnson uses the term in a eulogistic sense.

In this way, drawing inventories of meanings, Eliot lingers over each word, summing it up. He has a marked taste for discovering the 'fluid terms' of a writer (*Andrew Marvell*), those words whose meaning alters with the age. His critical appraisals suffer from lexical apprehension.

The same as Valéry, Eliot faces language in the guise of a surgeon, who cleans his hands and tools before embarking upon an operation. After which, as Huxley remarked in connection with *The Waste Land*, nothing else happens. The operation is



not performed. The only thing done is, in Valéry's words, 'le nettoyage de la situation verbale' (*Poésie et Pensée Abstraite*). Very much concerned with starting properly, Eliot spends his energy on cleaning the area he is going to cross. At the moment the race ought to start, he is too tired to undertake it any more. He stops short, puts his pen aside, and bars his course with a full stop. This particular essay ends with the following warning:

... amongst the varieties of chaos in which we find ourselves immersed to-day, one is a chaos of language, in which there are discoverable no standards of writing, and an increasing indifference to etymology and the history of the use of words. And of the responsibility of our poets and our critics, for the preservation of the language, we need to be repeatedly reminded.

In criticism, Eliot has the feeling that all the words can get the critic into trouble. That is why most of his essays have the air of simply looking for a definition, of merely trying to circumscribe, to consolidate a term. He sees himself as a preserver of words. His critical ideas emerge from behind fascinating tales of lexical history. *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* ends with the following confession:

My enquiry, therefore, has been directed on the meaning of the word culture so that everyone should at least pause to examine what this words means to him in each particular context before using it.

Eliot brings to criticism the poet's dowry. He feels sure that composing poetry trains the mind to handle the wheel of words. He acts as a healer, a historian, a book-keeper of words. He enjoys every new change that can be nursed, fitted into place, recorded, explained. In support of this, a paragraph from the essay *Can 'Education' Be Defined?*, 1950 (*To Criticize the Critic*), may be quoted:

There is an obvious utility in acquainting ourselves with the history of important words, because without this understanding we are always reading modern meanings into the older texts of English literature (...) But besides the variations of meaning of the same word in the same place at different times, and the same time in different places, there is the still more important variation of meaning of the same word at the same time in the same place. Before proceeding farther, I want to suggest that this wobbliness of words is not something to be deplored. We should not try to pin a word down to one meaning, which it should have at all times, in all places, and for everybody. Of course there must be many words in a language which are relatively at least fixed always to one meaning (...) But there are also many words which must change their meaning, because it is their changes that keep a language alive, or rather, that indicate that the language is alive.

The whole essay turns round the elusiveness of words. Eliot discusses the confusions arising from the poor knowledge of all meanings of a word. He complains that, as the language ages, it becomes increasingly difficult for any two



people to use the same meaning of the same word at once. That is, we can hardly expect to understand the exact meaning of another's utterance.

This constant slipping away of language makes definitions very uncertain. Even the modest defining air of Eliot's essays turns out to be rather insecure. A definition, Eliot notices, involves the use of 'undefined defining terms'. No word is safe, all words have to be constantly revised. Between 'feelings' and their expression, the critic is drowned in the quicksands of language. The only life spared is that of the poet. Poetry fuses feelings and words into an unknown substance, that escapes all limitation so far devised by Eliot. Poetry breaks free of all restrictions. Good poetry, Eliot always said, goes beyond language, beyond everything, even beyond poetry.

In his judgments of other writers, Eliot's first care is to estimate how deeply they feel the insecurity of their words, how nimbly they can avoid the verbal whirls, how conversant they are with the meanings they use. There is such a close relationship between idea and word in Eliot's mind that he hardly ever dares to separate them. He feels that it is the style that makes the critic.

Abstractions which are not melted in the critic's own memorable phrases belong to philosophy, psychology, aesthetics: never to criticism. Unamuno used to say, 'I can only think with a pen in my hand'. Before discussing anyone's thoughts, Eliot, too, sizes their verbal body. He often says that we had better pay more attention to the 'breeding' of our poets, to their proficiency in the use of words, rather than to their ideas. Those ideas, Eliot suggests, may very well be borrowed. The task of the poet, Eliot stresses, demands 'immense resources of language' (*Dante*, 1950, in *Selected Prose*). This is the reason why Eliot's guide in his critical excursions is the verbal criterion. As early as 1928, in *Lancelot Andrewes*, he wrote admiringly:

Andrewes takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.

Eliot himself has in his head an inventory of meanings, which he uses as heavy artillery every time he starts defending a theory of his own, or questioning somebody else's statements. Verbal insecurity is mostly a trap for others. Eliot the critic is very careful to avoid it. So careful that, at times, he hardly states anything. He rather points at the misfortunes of the others. Eliot the poet, on the other hand, makes brilliant use of unsafe words, building out of slippery sounds the firm land of his ambiguous poetry.

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Eliot's treacherous words never betray him in his poetry, but they have misled quite a number of readers. Eliot never slows down the rhythm of his poems in order to explain his intentions. He does so, however, in his criticism. He races through his poems omitting all explanatory details, concentrating until his utterances become elliptical. This ambiguous juxtaposition of words, whose links with one another are rather guessed at than stated, may have simplified the composition of a poem for Eliot, but it has complicated immensely the practice of reading it.



In support of a way of reading adequate to his poems, Eliot suggests the idea that a poem can be ‘felt’ and ‘enjoyed’ before it is actually understood. In his *Conclusion to The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1933, he writes:

The more seasoned reader, he who has reached, in these matters, a state of greater purity, does not bother about understanding; not, at least, at first. I know that some of the poetry to which I am most devoted is poetry which I did not understand at first reading; some is poetry which I am not sure I understand yet: for instance Shakespeare’s.

Thirty years later, in 1962, he says something similar about *George Herbert*:

With the appreciation of Herbert’s poems, as with all poetry, enjoyment is the beginning as well as the end. We must enjoy the poetry before we attempt to penetrate the poet’s mind; we must enjoy it before we understand it, if the attempt to understand it is to be worth the trouble.

Somewhere else, Eliot imagines poetry to be a country which the reader’s soul can enter before that reader’s understanding actually has a passport in hand. This idea is closely related to Eliot’s favourite paradox: a poem is a ‘word of no speech’, it expresses the inexpressible. What the inexpressible really means, Eliot never bothers to explain. The ‘inexpressible’ is a sacred word with Eliot. So is the ‘purity’ of the feeling rendered, which he often invokes. They both finally convey that there is something lurking beyond common speech and common understanding. It sounds like a provocation, that we should fumble our way into that jungle of meanings and draw the ivory emotion out. Without naming it, of course: that indiscretion would dispel its charm for good and all.

The experience of reading or writing poetry is, for Eliot, a striving to go higher, deeper, farther away. In 1933, in a lecture delivered at New Haven, he said that he wanted to write a poetry

... which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked to its bare bones, a poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry. Poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem points at, and not on the poetry.

He wanted to get beyond poetry in the same way that Beethoven strove to get beyond music. The way to accomplish this was, for Eliot, to create a clarity of his own. This queer clarity was supposed to combine transparency with conspicuous meanings. He wanted a ‘transpicuous’ language, that should land the reader straight at the core of the poem. Valéry, too, thought that beauty was inexpressible, and that literature aimed at conveying, by means of words, the feeling that the words were insufficient. The same as Eliot, Valéry also felt that, with all the words at his disposal, the real poet, unless he created his private code (which required adequate understanding), was dumb. He said:



... il faut que le langage s'emploie à produire ce qui rend muet, exprime un mutisme.

(*Le Beau Est Négatif*)

Most of Eliot's ideas concerning the use of words in poetry are to be found in his *Conclusion to The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1933. As everywhere else, opinions on the poetic idiom are mingled with various others. The essay opens with the announcement that critical speculations, general theories of poetry may increase our understanding, but will add nothing to our enjoyment of a poem.

Therefore Eliot, who is first and foremost interested in the reader's emotional response to a poem, does not care to go too far from it, to generalize it into an abstract statement, like Valéry, like Poulet, like so many other contemporary critics. He suggests that theorizing about the nature and essence of poetry ('if there is any' – he says) belongs to the field of aesthetics (whose existence Valéry himself vehemently denied). Eliot even warns that the self-consciousness accompanying aesthetical studies might 'violate' the frontiers of consciousness.

Eliot claims that his interest in this respect is limited. He coyly confesses that he suffers from an 'incapacity for abstruse reasoning', because of which he has never produced an all-embracing theory of his own. The statement is comfortable for a critic like Eliot, whose criticism lives on self-questionings, self-contradictions, self-revisions. 'I have no general theory of my own' is a profession of faith which enables him to flirt with other people's theories, without lingering in any of the places he visits. Eliot feels free to prowl around any theory he comes across. He circumscribes and consolidates his position in criticism by invariably opposing whatever words come his way.

The essay continues with a discussion of the poet's mastery of words. He speaks without enthusiasm about the poetry of incantation, an outburst of words in the making of which the poet's planning plays an insignificant part. He does not venture to state that such 'mystical' inspiration as that which produces automatic writing is inappropriate to poetry. He even confesses that he himself has been visited by it several times:

To me it seems that at these moments, which are characterized by the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which press upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it, what happens is something negative: that is to say, not 'inspiration' as we commonly think of it, but the breaking down of strong habitual barriers – which tend to re-form very quickly. Some obstruction is momentarily whisked away. The accompanying feeling is less like what we know as positive pleasure, than a sudden relief from an intolerable burden.

This effortless creation requires a long period of 'incubation', Eliot says, and 'we do not know until the shell breaks what kind of egg we have been sitting on'.

It is the effortlessness that Eliot mistrusts. He is a true contemporary of Valéry, who venerated the intellectual effort. Valéry used to say that obstacles, poetic rigour and difficulties were like the sun of creation. Eliot also felt that, the more numerous the obstacles, the rules the poet invented for himself were, the better his poetry would emerge. Profound poetry, as far as Eliot and Valéry were concerned,



would not come as an unexpected gift. It could not be written without concentration. It was not granted to minds which did not strive to achieve it.

Bad poets, Eliot warns, are unconscious when they should be conscious. They alone can depend upon such ‘capricious releases’ as mystical inspiration. Good poets, Valéry also concludes, consciously cultivate every resource of their poetry.

Great poets, like Shakespeare or Dante, Eliot explains, may sometimes be surprised by the lines that come to them. Yet, most of the time, they are conscious that they load their words with all kinds of meanings and associations. Memories of past emotions, of books once read, of incidents experienced, flood their minds all at once and are concentrated in only one word. Such a word, Eliot suggests, can carry an even stronger intensity if the poet borrows it from another poet: if he ‘re-creates’ an image already ‘saturated’ by another sensibility. In fact, he says (*Reflections on Contemporary Poetry*, 1919), when a poet strongly appeals to another poet, there is no danger of imitation (plagiarism) involved:

We do not imitate, we are changed; and our work is the work of a changed man; we have not borrowed, we have been quickened, and we become bearers of a tradition.

This is one of the explanations devised by Eliot for the use of echoes from so many writers in his own poetry. It is his theory of the ‘reborn image’. He illustrates it with the example of an image he himself borrowed twice from Chapman, who, in his turn, had borrowed the same image from Seneca:

There is first the probability that this imagery had some personal saturation value, so to speak, for Seneca; another for Chapman, and another for myself (...) I suggest that what gives it such intensity as it has in each case is its saturation (...) with feelings too obscure for the authors even to know quite what they were.

Eliot is obviously interested in a poetry which extends the notion of clarity. He feels called upon to defend the ‘modern difficult poetry’. He endeavours to prove that there is a new kind of clarity in the associative vagueness which his contemporary writers impose upon words. He lists several reasons why a poem may be difficult. First, he speaks of

personal causes which make it impossible for a poet to express himself in any but an obscure way.

The statement itself is obscure. Eliot’s conclusion to it, namely that we should be glad that ‘the man has been able to express himself at all’, is far from convincing. A second cause of difficulty, Eliot continues, may be the critic’s dislike of novelty in literature. Eliot repeatedly imagines that ‘hostile’ critics enjoy finding new poets difficult. Eliot complains that such critics ridicule new poetry by calling it ‘silly’. The third reason he gives is a sequel to the second. Poetry may indeed seem difficult to a reader who has been warned that he will find it obscure. Because of the critic’s false



warning, the reader reacts in excess. He tries to prove that he is cleverer than the author. He turns the poem into a riddle, for the pleasure of solving it.

The first three observations describe the effect of so-called poetic difficulty. Eliot looks upon difficult poetry from the outside. Only the fourth reason he formulates makes recourse to the nature of difficult poetry, to the way in which it is written. The 'seasoned' reader, Eliot begins, does not bother about understanding when he first reads a poem. This new image of a reader who enjoys before he has realized what he is reading, is in keeping with what was new in the way of writing at the turn of the 20th century.

The novelty lies in the poet's consistently leaving out of the poem something that the reader is used to finding there. A 'kind of meaning', Eliot says, is willfully put aside, and its absence bewilders the reader. Eliot gets rid of that clarity which makes the paraphrase of the poem possible. He does so in the same way that experimental novelists tried to do away with that plot that could be retold, and the characters that could easily be summed up. Joyce's *Ulysses* cannot be retold in the form of a mere narrative.

In a similar way, Eliot's poems can hardly be paraphrased. There is always something behind chronology and incidents for Joyce. There is always something behind the clear meanings of words for Eliot. An undercurrent of half-suggested hints replace the traditional meaning which ought to feed on our understanding. The meaning of such a 'difficult' poem is, in fact, a group of tentative meanings. The clarity of a unique, consistent meaning is replaced by the uncertain ambiguity of numberless hints. The reader is prompted to take them all in at once, without stopping to question too hard any of them. Any questioning insistence upon one meaning alone would ruin the others, and the poem would wither.

In this new experience of reading, understanding is not totally replaced by enjoyment, as Eliot seems to imply. Understanding is as present as ever, and even with more effort than before. The reader is more dependent on the author when the latter produces understatements, than when the whole poem is one clear statement. Guessing is inciting. It involves more than the passive acceptance of a plain meaning. The modern poem is a simultaneity of meanings, an ambiguous understatement which points at a number of things at the same time. In this multiple meaning of the modern poem originates the multiple reading of it. Here is Eliot's own description of it:

The chief use of the 'meaning' of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be (for here again I am speaking of some kinds of poetry and not all) to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog. This is a normal situation of which I approve. But the minds of all poets do not work that way; some of them, assuming that there are other minds like their own, become impatient of this 'meaning' which seems superfluous, and perceive possibilities of intensity through its elimination. I am not asserting that this situation is ideal; only that we must write our poetry as we can, and take it as we find it. It may be that for some periods of society a more relaxed form of writing is right, and for others a more concentrated.



Eliot's theorising on difficult, ambiguous poetry does not go any further than stating that it exists. His main intention is to persuade us that such poetry deserves to be carefully read. In 1910, Valéry (*Cahier B, 1910*) was of a different opinion. He suspected that any artful maker of verse could simulate the depth of meaning, by means of verbal incoherence. He mistrusted obscurity, and was willing to part with the advantages of ambiguity, if they could not be had together with clarity. He used to say

something really profound is bound to be clear (la véritable profondeur est la limpide).

As for poems which resemble riddles, Valéry feels there is always the danger that the reader should give, in reading it, more than he really receives. The danger that the mere pleasure of solving the linguistic puzzle should replace the enjoyment of poetry proper. Yet we must not forget that, somewhere else, the same Valéry praises the re-creation of the poem into something unknown to the author. As a reader, he exclaims:

The real author is my own error of understanding! (C'est mon erreur qui est auteur!)

Eliot's opinions never sound so final. Whenever he generalizes on poetry, out of the corner of his eye he looks upon the 'sad ghost of Coleridge', beckoning to him from among the shadows. Because, Eliot once said,

poets only talk when they cannot sing.

In anything but poetry, Eliot is painfully aware that words are treacherous. His is a tentative style. His criticism is a lesson in intellectual nimbleness, a lesson of belief and disbelief in our own as well as in everybody else's statements: an initiation in the use of so many words of no speech.



3. THE QUICKSANDS OF CRITICISM: ISSUES AND APPROACHES

Eliot's critical strategy is one of tentative opposition. His disposition is ironical. His essays seem to be haunted by a mocking bird. Writing about Eliot's criticism (consisting mostly of reviews and lectures), Hugh Kenner (*The Invisible*



Poet, 1959) noticed that Eliot's tone was related to what the *Athenaeum* or *Egoist* readers expected a review to sound like. He called it a tone of 'deft buffoonery', a 'knowing mimicry of British weekly reviewing', a 'close and knowing mimicry of the respectable'. Eliot's arguments are 'steadily subversive', he said. They secretly cooperate with the reader's expectations. Eliot's cultivated 'blandness' yields a 'complex comic satisfaction'.

Eliot's critical procedure, Kenner stated, was to force his subject to expose himself. Eliot's essays have a 'rhetorical layout', which Kenner described as a

parody of official British literary discussion: its asperities, its pontification, its distinctions that do not distinguish, its vacuous ritual and familiar quotations and bathetic solemnities.

Indeed, Eliot usually starts by slyly turning the opinion he attacks into a piece of bad rhetoric. He relates it in laughable, superficial, hardly logical sentences. He thus throws a weakening light on the view which stirs him into formulating his own. His criticism is in constant search of such critical incentives. When he deplores the lack of an intellectual atmosphere (of a 'current of ideas', in Arnold's words), Eliot means, in fact, that his vitality as a critic depends upon the existence of ideas which can be ironically questioned and finally destroyed. He sets out, in his early criticism moreover, shouting 'delenda est'.

Eliot's favourite stylistic trick is the anticlimax. He loves to surprise the reader. His irony relies heavily on unexpected twists and turns of the mind. His critical progress is a picturesque succession of peaks, precipices and cunning springs that turn into waterfalls. This love for shock and surprise proves Eliot's wish to handle the reader's mind tyrannically. More often than not, he speaks with his tongue in his cheek. There is always something lurking unexpressed behind words, some menace laughingly hinted at. A fatal weapon in fact, which he wants us to guess and fear, and which at times he actually makes use of.

He has devised a consummate rhetoric of denial, which tiptoes from the innocent surprise to the furtive stab. He looks like a Mona Lisa of criticism. From wherever you look at him, you see him smile back. Only, you never can tell what at. His mind is at its best when pinching other minds. Affectionately, maybe, but pretty hard, nevertheless. It is impossible not to feel Eliot's smiling anger in his essays. His dramatic strategy in his literary criticism covers three acts: suspense, surprise, shock.

Eliot cultivates his enemies because he feeds on them. Like a bird of prey, he pounces on the right sentence to confute. His critical powers need to be stirred by a reason for contradiction. There are hundreds of denying formulas in his essays. He is an expert at variations in the negative: from negative conjunctions to negative adverbs, verbs in the negative, improbable moods and tenses, negative prefixes or suffixes, and words with negative meaning. No negative resource of the language is ignored. Of special interest, in this respect, is Eliot's eye for the 'might have been', which evinces in fact his joy at scolding what actually is, and praising what is not.

Thus armed with negatives, Eliot calls to attention every author he happens to be reading. He has a passion for critical rebuking. He often claims to have been 'struck' by, to be regretfully dissatisfied with an option. This is an euphuism for having spotted an error. The more sins he spies, the more lively and energetic he feels.



He reprimands, he shakes his forefinger reproachingly. If a painter were to draw him in his favourite pose, the painting ought to be entitled Eliot forbidding. Eliot has a gift for controversy, rather than exposition in criticism. We might say that, for him, in the beginning was the NO. Even his affirmations turn out to be the denial of a negative statement. His liking for warnings, for prophetic misgivings, devised in his criticism a rhetoric of the double No.

Eliot's essays advance lazily towards a final conclusion. His slow critical progress is meant to postpone understanding in order to annihilate in the reader any possible dissent. Eliot strives to keep other people's objections at bay. To do so, he must slow down the pace of his own critical reasoning. He hovers over the work, unwilling to unveil the mystery of its creation, to spear it with sharp critical lances. His love for the whole breeds a hatred for the critical plumber, who menaces the creator's designs by submitting them to the work of an alien mind. By claiming that the poet himself hardly knows his own meaning, and that the critics are even less qualified than the poet to discuss it.

Eliot protects the unfathomable mystery of creation from prying intruders. He formulates his rational refusal to unveil the mechanism of creation. He would rather talk about poetry in broad daylight, than follow the crooked paths of the creator's mind, which might lead into philosophy, psychology, aesthetics. He proposes a limited understanding, which aims at respectfully protecting the secret of the work.

Eliot often complains that the mass of readers suffer from intellectual prejudice and narrowness. He even sees himself as the solitary, resented apostle and restorer of a genuine approach to poetry. Rather than judge poetry, Eliot would have us 'feel' it, accept it unquestioningly. So, shortly after complaining of the reader's narrowness of mind, Eliot refuses to allow the same reader to broaden his view, draw aside from the poem and appraise, understand. The same is true for his criticism.

Whatever he may be stating, Eliot has an eye for what has not been uttered yet. He foresees all accusations, feels victimized beforehand. He defends his opinion before he has actually formulated it. He is not satisfied until every possible future objection has been nipped in the bud. He feels besieged by dissenters, and, if none happens to be around, Eliot himself formulates imaginary objections to his own ideas. He wishes to seem the only direct perceiver of some hidden depth. Therefore, he progressively restricts the group of privileged readers, until he is the only one left who (he claims) really understands. What he actually understands, that he will never divulge. Criticism, poetry and drama are all for Eliot, in the long run, words of no speech. His writings are pervaded by a rarely abandoned sense of secrecy.

Eliot recommends an emotional, intensely sympathetic reading. His advice is, Be on the creator's side. Criticism is, for him, like a stage, on which he wears the mask of the unbiassed, impersonal critic. Both Eliot's impersonality and its opposite, his aggressivity, are assumed. There is a blushing shyness in Eliot's fits of mockery, relieved only by the hope that, laughing at witticisms, the reader will not have time to notice the shaking hand and faltering voice behind the words. Eliot the critic is Eliot the pretender. His clever jokes conceal a bitter gravity. Prickly Eliot writes with his mouth pursed and a sour taste inside it.

Eliot is a good guide for those learning how to formulate private, self-centred judgments. His studies on various writers tend to forget their object and exhibit the personality of the critic. Very often, Eliot obliterates his subjects. He reduces all time



to the present, all writers to himself. He is a critic of the adjustable past, all-mighty present and protean future. He uses anachronisms methodically. Uprooting past visions, he fuses them with later moments, thus handling time unorthodoxically. As far as other authors are concerned, he hardly peers outside himself in order to re-enact their creations in his own mind. Any topic he deals with leads to Rome, that is to the exposition of his own experience in the matter. He feels he must be the only creator in view. Therefore, he is in constant need of saying 'I for one...' With Eliot criticism often looks like a do-it-yourself job. His criticism is, though not openly, over-personal.

There is in Eliot's essays an admitted inclination for the immediately apprehensible, a need for the concrete. Ideas are given bodies clothed in comparisons from the field of chemistry, geography, physics, geometry, even hunting. The mind of a poet is a thread of platinum, a critic is sent on a wild-goose or a hare-and-hound chase, criticism has frontiers and boundaries. These trips into visualisations are much like the objective correlatives that Eliot devised for his poetry (so similar to Joyce's *epiphanies* and to Virginia Woolf's image of life as a *luminous halo*): a humanization of abstract thoughts, a tool which intimates that Eliot meant his criticism to be experienced like a poem, emotionally rather than logically.

The tone of the essays is conversational: at times colloquial, often biting, always free of complication or confusion. His sentences are remarkably simple and clear, even when the ideas behind them grow tortuous and bushy. He gives you the feeling that you grasp something, but cannot see what precisely. In criticism, the verbal nature of Eliot's thoughts is more obvious than in his poems, where emotion veils the words. Reviewing and lecturing modified Eliot's diction. In his literary criticism, he has a discursive approach, a persuading strategy, a talkative defence.

Eliot's is a Janus faced criticism. Every statement is closely followed by an 'on the other hand ...' Every opinion has a twin brother. Eliot tries to tell more fortunes at once. Many of his statements devour one another, filing out of the essay before there has been time for the reader to touch them. Eliot's main concern is to be everywhere at the same time. He keeps spinning round, and achieves an acrobatic agility, which makes it impossible for anyone to pin him down. His defensive criticism defends itself by using this foreseeing air.

With Eliot, no critical opinion is safe. All his statements are tentative. They have to fight hard the quicksands of criticism. Everything is relative, both true and false, at the same time. He professes confusion. I don't know – he seems to say –, I am not sure, my opinion may soon change, my words may be badly chosen ... Instead of a conclusion, he leaves us holding a pair of imaginary scales (his sign in the Zodiac, by the way). The last tilt, the choice of only one face or aspect, will be caused by our own lack of balance, not his. For Eliot, there is no final conclusion, there is no last. His critical essay looks like a resourceful Santa Claus, bringing the most unexpected gifts. It is not easy, however, to induce the readers to grasp an absence. Eliot the critic, the same as Eliot the poet, tries to do it by emptying the words of their meaning. Like Valéry's serpent, which bites off its own tail, Eliot swallows his convictions as soon as he releases them. When a certainty is present, Eliot knows that it might stir in the reader the desire to refute it. But, when it is absent, the text conveys the critic's devout wish to possess it. An opinion which is half-absent may persuade better than one too obviously present. Eliot thus prefers writing a criticism of



absences. He uses a subtle strategy: false modesties, falsely humble mockeries ... His whole criticism can be regarded as a tentative understatement.

Eliot's pretext for questioning the statements he discusses is that one must have a tolerant eye for the variety of opinions which do not belong to us, precisely because all opinions are relative. Visions and revisions spring out of his mind continuously. His all-embracing generosity overlooks the fact that, in the process of accepting every view, he stifles the one he himself holds. It is an elementary truth of criticism that you cannot be either in two places or in two minds at once. Too many quicksands may discourage even the most valiant explorer from trespassing Eliot's critical land.

Eliot avoids committing himself to an opinion which might be contradicted by the reader. His lesson is one of elusiveness. He seems to advise: never utter a final yes, or it will presently be used against yourself. Neither is Eliot a synthetical critic. He has a good eye for the subtle details, for 'minor works' and neglected writers. His criticism is particularizing, it does not abound in general conclusions. His revisions are ingenious rather than systematic. He strolls through various ages and literatures, and from time to time uses a blind alley to take a rest. Then he goes back to the trodden highway of Shakespeare and Dante with refreshed spirit. His reversals are often tempests in a glass of water, charming acrobatics of marginal thoughts, put into masterful words. His is, in conclusion, a piecemeal criticism.

Eliot makes a detour from the common path of the transparent critic who trains himself in the trade of impersonality. He speaks a lot about impersonality, but to no avail. First, he avoids to identify himself with whatever author he examines. He steps aside, goes as far as his irony will lead him, and, at a safe distance, reduces everything to himself, draws again upon his own personality. He creates a new genre of impure criticism, which he calls workshop or practitioner's criticism. His gift for the memorable phrase moulds common ideas into impressive coinages. He is the creator of a critical style. Eliot may not be a literary critic proper, but the reputed issues, or rather the reputed formulas of his essays are numerous, and have had a large audience.

In *The Sacred Wood*, 1920, the essay *The Perfect Critic* diagnoses the disease of early 20th century criticism as 'verbalism' and 'impressionism'. The impressionistic critic is defined as a sensibility with mixed critical and creative reactions, an incomplete artist. The same essay discredits the dogmatic critic, who tries to 'coerce', to lay down rules, to make judgments of worse and better.

In *Imperfect Critics*, he states that criticism is first of all supposed to provide a reason for reading: to stimulate the taste for an author. He also speaks of 'sensuous thought': a formula that means to him 'thinking through the senses, or (...) the senses thinking'. The coinage implies a unity of sensibility and intellect, which will be enlarged upon in *The Metaphysical Poets*. The first requisites of a critic are here considered to be the critic's interest in his subject and his ability to communicate an interest in it. His main tools are supposed to be comparison and analysis.

Tradition and the Individual Talent explains that literature as a whole is a system, a certain order of works. The essay tries to define the place of the reader, writer and critic in this ideal order. Tradition is an all-embracing term. It includes a historical sense (a 'perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence', a 'sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal together'). Any writer must have the feeling



that all literature is contemporary to him, that all literature is a simultaneous order. Every poet must cohere, Eliot says. No poet can be valued alone. He must be judged by the standards of past literature. He must conform to the past. At the same time, the old must conform to what is new:

the past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.

Every new work modifies the pre-existing order. It alters the countenance of previous works. Eliot sees the ‘conscious’ present as an

awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.

In this light, erudition appears as a consciousness of the past. The poet, Eliot muses, must surrender himself to tradition. Somewhere else, he even says that a poet who borrows from other writers becomes a real bearer of tradition. The poet’s progress is described here as a

continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

The sentence that tradition requires surrender, depersonalization of the artist, has become a commonplace quotation, although its meaning is not any clearer now than it was in Eliot’s time.

Another well-known opinion expressed in this essay is:

Honest criticism (...) is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry.

A so-called ‘impersonal’ theory of poetry, of the creation of poetry follows. In order to make it clear, Eliot resorts to a comparison from the field of chemistry. The mind of the mature poet is like a filament of platinum introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide. The result is the appearance of a mixture, the sulphurous acid. Although the combination cannot take place if the platinum is not present, the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum. The platinum itself remains unaffected by the process. In the same way, the artist’s mind is a receptacle for feelings, phrases, images (the material of poetry) which it ‘digests’, it ‘transmutes’ into a work of art. The conclusion is that the poet ‘has not a personality to express, but a particular medium’. This medium of poetry concentrates, fuses, generalizes the personal emotions into a poem which has nothing to do with the individual life it springs from. Eliot holds that we must not look for the poet in the poem, as he will not be there. He states:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.

The essay concludes that the emotion of art is ‘impersonal’. It is a

significant emotion (...) which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet.



It is not for the first time that, behind such earnest critical theories, we feel emotional, intensely personal Eliot in hiding.

The essay *Hamlet and His Problems* includes the famous finding of the objective correlative:

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 the *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

Its pretext is Eliot's feeling that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure. The character's emotions are inexpressible, they exceed by far the ability of Shakespeare's words. These unuttered emotions are in excess of the facts. There is no adequate objective correlative, Eliot concludes, for Hamlet's feelings. Eliot even claims that Shakespeare himself may have ignored what was going on inside his own character's heart. Consequently, Shakespeare was not able to present Hamlet accurately. Eliot's argument is subtle:

Hamlet is up to the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him.

In the essay *Philip Massinger*, the question of poetic borrowings appears:

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion.

This theory explains Eliot's use of echoes from other writers in his poetry, and especially the fact that these echoes have hardly any connections left with their original context. Eliot uses them as if they were his own words, with an intensified meaning, though, because suggestive of several other meanings as well.

In *Dante*, we learn that philosophy is no more than an 'ingredient' of the poetic world. Eliot thought that a poet could borrow a philosophic system for his poetry. Poetry seemed to him to be better if it had a clear and 'tenable' philosophic pattern. The business of the poet is not to produce ideas, but to transmute them into poetry. It may follow that an analysis of poetry should not concentrate on the quality of its ideas, but on the emotions that lurk behind his words.



In the same essay, there is a sentence which explains why Eliot chose for his poetry a subject matter which to previous generations appeared totally unpoetic:

The contemplation of the horrid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty.

The *Preface to For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) contains Eliot's 'general point of view'. He calls himself a

classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion.

The same essay violently indicts early 20th century verbalism. Eliot speaks of a language of 'tergiversation'. He complains of the 'vague jargon' of his time, of the fact that people have a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing'. He hates the half-understood words, which are torn from their place in psychology, he says, or other 'half-formed' science, and used after having been emptied of all meaning.

The description of *Francis Herbert Bradley* seems to fit Eliot himself. Bradley, Eliot notices, assumed a

curious blend of humanity and irony, an attitude of extreme diffidence about his own work.

This modesty, Eliot insists, is real. Bradley appears to him to be a modest and sensitive man, whose main weapon was irony. Eliot's study of Bradley's polemical irony may have been a sort of apprenticeship. The same as Bradley before him, Eliot also was in the habit of

discomfiting an opponent with a sudden profession of ignorance, of inability to understand, or of incapacity for abstruse thought.

He also liked to turn a writer's device, even his tricks of speech, against their author. The effect of Eliot's essays is also very similar to the effect of Bradley's essays, in which Eliot notices that understanding is obscured by the numerous arguments, by the 'dust of (...) logical battles'.

Another remark which applies to Eliot as well is made in *The Humanism of Irving Babbitt*. Eliot notices there that it is 'proverbially easier to destroy than to construct'. Consequently, readers find it more agreeable to grasp destructive rather than constructive criticism. This may be an explanation to the fact that Eliot's picturesque oppositions were better taken notice of than his praising assents. His criticism is most vigorous when there is a rival ahead to be defeated, not a friend to be extolled. His essay on *Ezra Pound* is significant in this respect.

As he could not very well disparage Pound's poetry himself, Eliot resorts to a well-chosen list of unfavourable reviews, which he quotes at length. Eliot, the critic



who made no secret about not having a theory of his own, was not a constructive critic. He was unbelievably fond of harassing all final affirmations. His own affirmations are to be inferred from his denials. He secretly builds at night what he demolishes in broad daylight. His is a criticism of dissatisfaction.

The second essay on *Dante* (1929) opens with the question of the ‘discrepancy between enjoyment and understanding’. Eliot maintains that scholarship may ruin the experience of reading poetry. That a preliminary elaborate preparation of historical and biographical knowledge can operate as a barrier in the reading of a poem. Eliot confesses:

In my own experience of the appreciation of poetry I have always found that the less I knew about the poet and his work, before I began to read it, the better.

Rather than the effort to understand, Eliot trusts something he calls the ‘direct shock of poetic intensity’. This poetic intensity is meant to hit the reader. As he states in a famous sentence, ‘genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood’.

In the same essay, he speaks of a certain beauty of English poetic words, which lies in their ‘opacity’. They are ambiguous words, with numberless associations. He indirectly explains the difficulty of his own ambiguous lines, by saying:

... words have associations, and the groups of words in association have associations, which is a kind of local self-consciousness ...

His ambiguity conveys indeed the feeling of its being local and of progressively restricting its area, until it becomes confined to the poet’s own mind, the poet’s own associations, which an outsider can only guess and never fully spell out.

The act of reading is described with religious earnestness:

The experience of a poem is the experience of both a moment and of a lifetime. It is very much like our intenser experiences of other human beings. There is a first, or an early moment which is unique, of shock and surprise, even of terror (*Ego dominus tuus*); a moment which can never be forgotten, but which is never repeated integrally; and yet which would become destitute of significance if it did not survive in a larger whole of experience; which survives inside a deeper and calm feeling.

The disputed relation between philosophical belief and poetic assent also occurs in this essay. Eliot holds that, in reading poetry, we ‘suspend both belief and disbelief’. To his mind, in order to understand poetry, a ‘suspension of belief’ is necessary, a suspension of judgment. A poem has its own logic, which has nothing to do with understanding, Eliot decides. It is a logic of sensibility. A poem may very well borrow a system of ideas which turns out to be different from the reader’s opinions. For the reader, this will be of no consequence. Poetry, Eliot says, can, at best, offer only the ‘illusion of a view of life’ (*Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca*, 1927). What matters is the emotional grip in which the writer holds the



reader. Which proves that the newer poetry, the same as the stream-of-consciousness novel, requires the reader's deeper surrender, that it has increased the dependence of the reader upon the author.

There is a statement in *Dante* which defines Eliot's critical approach. He announces that his opinions on Dante are founded solely upon reading the latter's works. Which means that Eliot's opinions are the result of his introspection, of an analysis of his own experience of reading. That is why he holds that they cannot be either verified or refuted by scholars. Eliot firmly establishes the boundaries of his emotionally introspective criticism, by stating:

I mean to restrict my comments to the unprovable and the irrefutable.

In *Seneca in Elizabethan Translation*, 1927, (*Essays on Elizabethan Drama*, 1932), the use of quotations in a critical essay is discussed. To quote, Eliot says, is not the same as to formulate a critical statement. Yet, quotations are necessary to the critic because they are like baits offered to a possible reader, and did not Eliot state elsewhere that criticism was meant to supply a reason for reading?

The Function of Criticism, 1923, (*Selected Essays*, 1932) discusses the part played by criticism in creation proper. Creation turns out to be the highest fulfillment of all critical activity. The criticism of practitioners is then described as belonging to those writers whose critical activity is not all discharged in their work, and may try to use what is left of it in commenting on their own or other writers' works.

In *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921), the famous dissociation of sensibility is defined. The poets of the 17th century (John Donne in particular) are said to have effected a 'recreation of thought into feeling', and also to have achieved in their poetry a 'direct sensuous apprehension of thought'. The metaphysicals, Eliot further explains, possessed a

mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience.

They did not merely meditate on ideas poetically. Their unified sensibility managed to find the 'verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling'. It transmuted ideas into sensations. It transformed an observation into a 'state of mind'. The metaphysicals were 'intellectual' poets. After them, Eliot holds,

a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.

The merely 'reflective' poet, such as Tennyson and Browning, emerged. To John Donne, a thought was an experience which 'modified his sensibility'. Donne felt his thoughts 'as immediately as the odour of a rose'. With the later poets (especially, Eliot says, under the influence of Milton and Dryden), the language became more and more refined. The sensibility behind it, on the other hand, degenerated. It became more and more 'crude'. Poets no longer feel their thoughts, Eliot notices. They merely 'ruminate' them in their minds. An infusion of emotions seems imperative.



The question of the ‘emotional equivalent of thought’ appears in *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca*, (1927) as well. It must be related to the description of difficult poetry in *The Metaphysical Poets*. Eliot notices there an indestructible relation, a unity of the idea with the emotion and the word, which existed in the 17th century, and seems to him to have vanished afterward. He feels called upon to recapture it, to go back to the concentrated, ambiguous poetry of the metaphysicals. This is the reason he gives for the difficulty of contemporary poetry (his own included):

... it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. (...) The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning.

It seems to Eliot that the poet’s most important task is to load the words with thought and sensibility, to concentrate on the language, to turn it into a transparent medium for poetry.

The lectures in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) focus their interest on the nature of creation and criticism. The main idea expressed is that the experience of poetry is ‘only partially translatable into words’. The conclusion to the lectures comes full circle to the starting point of the introduction: namely, that poets should not concentrate on criticism but creation, unless they want to have the sad fate of Coleridge, who was deserted by poetry, and had to talk because he could no longer sing. A good critic, Eliot decides, can only point at the poetry that seems to him to be really good. There is nothing more for him to do. Thus, Eliot views criticism emotionally, as an extension of our experience of poetry. The main concern of the critic is supposed to be the poet’s use of language. Eliot says:

I wish that we might dispose more attention to the correctness of expression, to the clarity or obscurity, to the grammatical precision or inaccuracy, to the choice of words whether just or improper, exalted or vulgar, of our verse: in short to the good or bad breeding of our poets.

The *Introduction* defends the mystery of creation, by deciding that a poem ‘is not just either what the poet ‘planned’ or what the reader conceives’. The meaning of the poem cannot be stated in other words than those of the poem itself. No meaning, no ideas can be dissociated from the poet’s words. There is only the poem, which does not allow of any but its own terms. Eliot states:

If poetry is a form of ‘communication’, yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself, and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone into it. The poem’s existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader; it has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to ‘express’, or of his experience of writing it, or of the experience of the reader or of the writer as reader.



In *Matthew Arnold*, Eliot brings to life the ‘exhaustive’ critic, who is supposed to turn up every hundred years or so in order to rearrange the pattern of literary works, to review tradition in the light of the present. Revision is, thus, turned into a theory. Each new ‘master’ of criticism makes his own errors, which the following critic revises. ‘The longer the sequence of critics we have, the greater amount of correction is possible’, Eliot says, describing criticism as an unending line of visions and revisions. As for the theories concerning the act of communication in poetry, Eliot curtly settles the matter:

We can say that in poetry there is communication from writer to reader, but should not proceed from this to think of the poetry as being primarily the vehicle of communication. Communication may take place, but will explain nothing.

For Eliot, poetry is a whole in which words, feelings and ideas cannot be discussed separately. Eliot is not a dissociative mind. He is a Unitarian critic, so to say. He thinks the poem to be the fruit of ‘auditory’ imagination, which is a total feeling for sounds and rhythms. This auditory imagination goes beyond the conscious thoughts and feelings, beyond meanings. It endows the poetry we read with an energy impossible to be analysed when the experience of our reading the poem is over.

The essay *The Social Function of Poetry*, 1943 (*On Poetry and Poets*, 1957) states that poetry is the ‘vehicle of feeling’. This makes it local and national, untranslatable. We can however feel a poem written in a foreign language, even if we do not understand every word of it. As Eliot puts it,

... in poetry you can, now and then, penetrate into another country, so to speak, before your passport has been issued or your ticket taken.

The Music of Poetry (1942) deals, among others, with the mystery of creation. It must by no means be unravelled by the critic. In Eliot’s words,

If, as we are aware, only a part of the meaning can be conveyed by paraphrase, that is because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist.

The ambiguity of a poem is consequently explained as caused by the fact that the poem means more than ordinary speech usually communicates. The music of a word in a poem depends on its context then, on its relations to other words. Each poem must have this multiple pattern of sounds and meanings. The close relation between the poetic idiom and the language of conversation is also discussed. The music of poetry, Eliot explains, is latent in the common speech of the poet’s time. The directions of the evolution of poetic language seem to be two. One is to

explore the musical possibilities of an established convention of the relation of the idiom of verse to that of speech.



The other is to catch up with the changes in colloquial speech. These two directions make up a cyclical movement, which goes from musicalisation to innovation. Time and again, poetry has therefore to be recalled to speech. Eliot feels he is one of the poets able to readjust it.

What is Minor Poetry? (1944) looks upon the fluctuating ‘stock market’ of literary values, while *Poetry and Drama* (1951) discusses Eliot’s long cherished idea that the best medium for poetry is the theatre. *The Three Voices of Poetry* (1953) are: the poet talking to himself, the poet addressing an audience and the poet attempting to create a dramatic character.

The Frontiers of Criticism (1956) formulates the theory of Eliot’s workshop criticism. In connection with it, Eliot confesses that he fails to see any critical movement deriving from himself. His criticism, he hopes, offers not a method to be used, but a certain mood to be experienced:

The best of my literary criticism – apart from a few notorious phrases which have had a truly embarrassing success in the world – consists of essays on poets and poetic dramatists who had influenced me. It is a by-product of my private poetry-workshop; or a prolongation of the thinking that went into the formation of my own verse.

Eliot considers that his criticism has a meaning only if it is viewed in relation to his poetry, because this literary criticism supports, explains his poetry. He honestly admits this to be his limitation as a literary critic. As for the existence of adepts of his critical disposition, there he was wrong. In *To Criticize the Critic* (1961) (from the volume bearing the same title, printed posthumously in 1965), he states again:

I do not believe that my own criticism has had, or could have had, any influence whatever apart from my own poems.

Fact is, his criticism did have an influence. Like all influences in this field (see Roland Barthes, for instance), it was not a felicitous one. Yet, literary critics soon managed to struggle free from it, and criticism survived.

In *From Poe to Valéry* (1948), Eliot notices that Valéry takes an opposite direction to his own. He sees in Valéry a narcissistic intellectual:

... the penetration of the poetic by the introspective critical activity is carried to the limit by Valéry, the limit at which the latter begins to destroy the former.

This advance in self-consciousness seems to Eliot to be doomed. He foretells that ‘human mind and nerves will rebel’ against it.

The Classics and the Man of Letters (1942) speaks in favour of a ‘cultural unification in diversity’ of Europe. Among other devices, the echoes in Eliot’s poems (from Dante, Virgil, Baudelaire, Laforgue, Wagner, etc.) have this aim of creating a



common emotional language, a poetic Esperanto loaded with images of various nationalities.

The essay *Reflections on Vers Libre* (1917) states Eliot's life-long interest in poetic rigour. He once said (in his essay on Pound) that the poet should be so well trained in the art of making verse, that form should become an instinct for him. Eliot is one of the destroyers of 19th century poetic forms, but his poems are far from being formless. Eliot fought for a new rigour in poetry. He hated formlessness. The same as Valéry, he considers there is no freedom in art. Verses cannot be 'free'. The poet must devise his own poetic pattern, and conform to it. Eliot will not have any poet give up rhythm and rhyme. He advises poets to master those two so well as to be able to take liberties, to innovate them. The same as Valéry, Eliot feels that the poet must devise for himself some 'artificial limitation': a certain type of rhyme or metre, which will operate as an obstacle to his sensibility, forcing it to concentrate, heightening its intensity. There is no escape from metre, Eliot decides. There is only mastery:

... the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or, freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation.

Faced with the formless poetry of early 20th century, Eliot closed the matter by saying:

... the division between Conservative Verse and *vers libre* does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos.

In Eliot's early essays, the formulas that have had an 'embarrassing' fame are more numerous. After 1940, his statements are less self-assured. His personal theories are still interesting, subtle and numerous, but not so easily turned into common coin. As the previous enumeration has illustrated, when Eliot started revising himself, an air of uncertainty stole into his criticism, slowing down its ability of creating memorable phrases.

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'There are limits', Eliot says, 'exceeding which in one direction literary criticism ceases to be literary, and exceeding which in another it ceases to be criticism'. (*The Frontiers of Criticism*, 1956). Eliot never grows tired of thinking out dangers and uncertainties for the commentators of literature. All approaches seem to him to be dangerous. He sees literary criticism as unsafe as the quicksands. Eliot defines the critic's main task as 'the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste'.

The statement itself is in bad need of elucidation. Criticism, however, Eliot continues, can hardly be restricted to elucidating words and correcting the readers'



taste. Neither can it remain purely aesthetic. Social, historical, moral judgments (which abound in Eliot's essays) cannot be avoided. He meditates on the unsafe roads of criticism:

... you start with literary criticism, and however rigorous an aesthete you may be, you are over the frontier into something else sooner or later. The best you can do is to accept these conditions and know what you are doing when you do it. And, on the other hand, you must know how and when to retrace your steps. You must be very nimble.

The critical devices Eliot mentions here and there in various essays are, some of them, meant to reveal the critic's sensibility (impressionistic and workshop criticism); others face the reader (interpretation, scientific criticism, literary history, advertising criticism); finally, some of them bring the author of the work to the front (biographical criticism).

Impressionistic criticism, as a method which allows total freedom to the critic, is accused by Eliot of being a mixed critical and creative reaction. The impressionistic critic is, to Eliot's mind,

the most dangerous type of critic. The critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order, but which, through some weakness in creative power, exercises itself in criticism instead. (*Hamlet and His Problems*, 1920)

The case he builds against the impressionistic critic is interesting because it reveals Eliot the creator. He is satisfied with the poetic world he creates, and he rejects any prolongation of the creative effort in a work of criticism. His first care is to stress the experience of reading as the most important stage of the critical reaction. The reader must side with the author emotionally. Next, he detaches himself from the author, contemplating the work from a distance, organizing his impressions of the work in a pattern of his own. He might, then, feel the prompting to express this pattern of impressions. This is how literary criticism begins, as a continuation of the work of art in a critical utterance. The critic reacts to a work of art by adding another work to it. This is Eliot's main charge against criticism.

It is true that Eliot is not willing to deny the existence of critical works. He himself wrote so many of them. Yet, as he feels more at ease in poetry than in criticism, he makes a compromise. He describes the critical devices he uses in such a light as to seem less efficient than his poetic devices. In other words, Eliot the poet has a double, who is Eliot the critic. Whenever they are both in sight, Eliot feels guilty of duplicity. Then the two faces snap at each other, and the stronger (the poet) wins.

Consequently, in Eliot's opinion, the impressionistic critic has creative energies which he, as a critic, should never use. This critic, Eliot warns, is in danger of substituting his own impressions to the poetry which aroused them. Two charges might be brought against Eliot's verdict here. First, that the work as 'pure' work exists only in the author's mind. For the critic, for any reader, it becomes inevitably a mass of impressions. And second, what would be the interest of a critical work that would appear as a perfect copy of the piece of literature examined? Who would read



works of literary criticism, if they did not exhibit another personality besides the poet's?

It is obvious that accusing the impressionistic critic, Eliot the poet fights and defeats in an unfair combat Eliot the critic. The poet accuses the impressionistic critic (which Eliot was, after all) of being a failed writer, who prowls about other people's works in hopes of a miracle. This critic's secret wish is to steal from another work the creative energy he lacks, and this vain hope makes him react 'in excess'. Such a critic can hardly elucidate a work, Eliot complains. He can, in exchange, alter it, and Eliot greatly fears it might not be a change for the better.

As an alternative to impressionistic criticism (read 'the criticism of those who are not writers themselves'), which menaces to usurp the author, Eliot suggests workshop criticism, the practitioner's criticism. The poet plays there all parts at the same time. His professed aim is to strengthen his creative energy. A critic using this method writes about authors who have influenced his own literature. He can later leave the realm of criticism together with his impressions aroused by other works, and take refuge in his own art, melting his critical reaction in his own poetry or prose. The impressionistic critic is a sad character, doomed to waste his powers in the unsafe interference area between author and reader. The generalizations, the critical terms a poet coins when considering other poets, are in fact 'conceptual symbols for his emotional preferences'. In other words, the poet takes the liberty of being creative in criticism as well. These 'conceptual symbols' are, in a way, objective correlatives (to use another well known coinage) of his critical opinions.

All other forms of criticism besides the poet's own are contemplated with frowning distaste by Eliot. Interpretation is called the 'lemon-squeezer school of criticism'. An interpretation is unreliable if it comes from someone else than the poet himself. On the other hand, the poet can hardly utter his meaning outside the poem. Consequently, Eliot reduces the realm of interpretation to the experience of reading:

I suspect, in fact, that a good deal of the value of an interpretation is – that it should be my own interpretation (...) ... a valid interpretation, I believe, must be at the same time an interpretation of my own feelings when I read it.

As an alternative to interpretation, Eliot suggests that the critic had better offer the reader 'facts about a work – its conditions, its setting, its genesis', or do something (he does not specify what) to make the reader embrace the work in a friendly, unprejudiced way. If it ventures farther than that, interpretation may easily become an imposture. 'Instead of insight', Eliot claims, 'you get a fiction'.

Scientific criticism is even more angrily rejected. The danger, for those who read it, is to mistake explanation for understanding, to invent a puzzle for the pleasure of discovering a solution. More than the rest, scientific critics seem to Eliot to be

extracting something from their subject which is not fairly in it.

Valéry had once compared the same type of critic to a blind man who lectures admirably on colours.

Literary history is more mildly treated. Eliot's idea of tradition is well-known. Criticism is called upon, among other things, to supervise the literary stock exchange,



to initiate a long chain of revisions. Eliot imagines the ‘exhaustive’ critic, who adjusts the countenance of tradition. A commentator of Eliot’s criticism ironically remarked that Eliot devised this character in hopes that he himself might be assigned to play the part.

Valéry imagines another, more relaxed method of criticism, a kind of advertisement of the work. He speaks of a critic who should simply help the reader select what he should read. As motto for a library he suggests,

Plus élire que lire.

The critic-advocate of the work is not exactly supposed to act as a reader, but as the ‘witness’ of the reader. Eliot, too, dreams of reducing the critic’s role to that of a mere adviser. Eliot’s ideal critic ought to bring the author in front of the reader, and prepare somehow the reader to meet the work sympathetically. This dumb critic, who can only point, but does not pronounce judgment, is Eliot’s second favourite, after the poet-critic.

Biographical criticism, as an exposition of facts preliminary to the understanding of a work, is approved of by Eliot, on condition that the critic does not investigate the writer’s life in order to explain the work by its psychological origin. As can be noticed, no literary method of analysis is really safe. Each has some major disadvantage, which prompts Eliot to discourage the critics from using it. He remarks, for instance:

... a literary critic should have no emotions except those immediately provoked by a work of art.

After such a puritanical view of the critic’s dowry, it is no wonder that in Eliot’s realm, dumb and numb, the critic can hardly avoid being swallowed by the quicksands of criticism.

4. WORKSHOP CRITICISM: TOWARDS A HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE



Many of the theories Eliot formulated are debatable, and invite contradiction. His opinions on individual writers are subtler and more appealing than his speculations on the nature or use of poetry and criticism. The articles he cared to reprint in volumes deal with almost all the main ages of English poetry: the Elizabethans, the metaphysicals, neo-classicism, the preromantics and the romantics, the Victorians and a few contemporaries. Eliot's essays on the nature of poetry may however prove a good introduction to those trips through the whole of English literature, in which Eliot brought older ages back to life, and conversed with previous writers, with the feeling that the whole of English literature had a simultaneous order.

As early as 1917, in *Reflections on Vers Libre*, Eliot expresses his belief that 'there is no freedom in art'. Form is, as Valéry put it, 'une décision motivée'. 'Free' formlessness degrades art. The absence of pattern, of rhyme and of metre discredit poetry. One cannot take liberties with one's technique unless one has mastered it very well. It is true that a poet may waver between liberty and compulsion, but he cannot afford forgetting either. Eliot sees poetic creation as a 'contrast between fixity and flux', an 'unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse'. The form of a poem is something that must be constantly suggested and skillfully evaded. The technique of a poet, his choice of a form must play upon the readers' nerves. It must tempt them into recognizing one form, and then surprise them by liberties taken against that form. It must harass the readers' expectations.

A poet's technique must innovate the form he chooses. It must not totally conform to the same pattern all through the work. An innovating technique, like Eliot's own, is a 'constant evasion and recognition of regularity'. Irregular verse is not 'vers libre', since Eliot clearly distinguishes between the reprehensible irregularity of carelessness, and the fruitful irregularity of deliberation. Liberties taken with the technique produce an irregularity of form, but by no means the disappearance of form altogether. Eliot, whose poetry has been called innovating precisely because it takes so many liberties with all the previously known patterns, is an ardent partisan of rigour, of an 'artificial limitation', which he defines in the following way:

... the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or, freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation.

This self-imposed pattern is a 'rigid verse-form' which is, in turns, observed and disregarded, but must never be given up. As Eliot says,

There is no escape from metre; there is only mastery.

No line can be deprived of metre. With rhyme it is a different matter. Many poets have successfully exploited the possibilities of rhymeless verse. Their rejection of rhyme is not seen by Eliot as a sign of facility. On the contrary, he argues,

it imposes a much severer strain upon the language.



When rhyme is left aside, the poet must be a thousand times more careful in his choice and order of words. The lines become more vigorous when the regular music of rhyming words stops enveloping it. Intricate formal patterns have indeed lost their appeal. More recent poetry could not be in favour of heroic couplets, for instance. Eliot explains the disappearance of complicated poetic patterns by relating it to the state of society. A 'homogeneous' society, like the Greek or the Elizabethan, could carry to perfection the Greek chorus or the Elizabethan lyric. Those ages are dead. However, more recent times are far from having given up the idea of a pattern. Therefore, Eliot concludes, *vers libre* is a badly chosen name, since no poetry can be free from deliberate effort. In his words,

there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos.

Twenty-five years later, in 1942, Eliot published *The Music of Poetry*. The introductory paragraph is illustrative of those revisions generated by Eliot's feeling of uncertainty, of relativity:

I can never re-read any of my own prose writings without acute embarrassment: I shirk the task, and consequently may not take account of all the assertions to which I have at one time or another committed myself; I may often repeat what I have said before, and I may often contradict myself.

He then notices the poet's egotistic interest in the literature of the past, and discusses the criticism of practitioners. It seems to him that any poet who writes criticism is, in fact, interested in indirectly defining or defending his own verse. Rather than a judge of other works, he is more of an advocate. His criticism is liable to be partial and indirectly protective of his own work. The practitioner as critic is exempt from 'impersonality', it would seem.

The aim of this introduction is to foresee and destroy beforehand any possible objections to Eliot's theory, by announcing from the very beginning that there is no theory: that his generalizations are not general, because limited to his own experience. The first of these generalizations is the idea that the first stage in acquiring the poetic skill is the imitation of another poet's lines, rather than the 'analytical study of his metric'. A scholar may write detached and impartial criticism, in which he may discuss the quality of rhymes, the names of feet or meters, the rules of scansion. A poet will include in his criticism what can be useful to his own poetry. He will study one poet or another with the professed aim of producing some 'recognizable derivative' of the latter's poetry. The scholar's analysis is hardly useful to a poet since, Eliot states,

a study of anatomy will not teach you how to make a hen lay eggs.

Imitation, then, cannot be cold-blooded. It does not take place at the superficial level of the analysis of style, of prosody.

The idea of imitation is left aside at this point, and the essay focuses on the relation between the music of poetry and the language of conversation. It is not



uncommon with Eliot that an argument should turn out to have very little connection with the purpose of the essay. As Hugh Kenner pointed out, Eliot's essays

think something as he goes along, and while the last paragraph remembers the first, the first does not often foresee the last.

Eliot often stated that poetry

cannot afford to lose its contact with the changing language of common intercourse.

This idea is compelled to join the main theme of the essay, namely the music of poetry. In the meantime, Eliot deals with a number of other things. He makes subtle remarks which slow down his main idea with innumerable talkative delays.

Between brackets, Eliot explains that the meaning of a poem can elude paraphrase and interpretations, even if this poem is written in a clear language, which approximates that of plain conversation. There is nothing either subtle or new in the statement, as Eliot himself wisely remarks:

It is a commonplace to observe that the meaning of a poem may wholly escape paraphrase.

The adjustment of the poetic idiom to the spoken language, the 'immediacy of poetry to conversation', seems to Eliot to be a complicated process. It cannot be defined. Instead of the definition, Eliot offers the image of an unending line of changes, revisions, readjustments, repeated returns to common speech.

The statement that the music of poetry is 'latent in the common speech of its time' is soon abandoned, to be replaced by the problem of the choice of words in a poem. From the point of view of sound alone, Eliot doubts whether there are any 'beautiful' words at all. He is, however, certain of the existence of 'ugly' words. Those are

the words not fitted for the company in which they find themselves.

He sees the music of a word as a 'point of intersection' of its relations to its immediate context, to the general context of the poem, to other meanings it has had in other contexts, to all its possible associations. Every word is like an orchestra, and it is the poet's duty to know and make use of its richer or poorer 'allusiveness'. The music of poetry is therefore more than a music of sound. It is seen by Eliot as a musical pattern of primary and secondary, immediate and remote meanings.

This idea is followed by a view of poetry as a cyclical adventure of approaching, then leaving, then touching again the language of conversation. The task of the poet is, at some periods,

to explore the musical possibilities of an established convention of the relation of the idiom of verse to that of speech; at other periods, the task is to catch up



with the changes in colloquial speech, which are fundamentally changes in thought and sensibility.

Consequently, Eliot looks upon his age as a time which calls for a 'refreshment' of poetic diction, an age of innovators, rather than 'developers', an age of a revolution in language, an age of exploration.

The conclusion of the essay comes very near to the idea of *Reflections on Vers Libre*, namely that 'no verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job'. It seems to Eliot that 'a great deal of bad prose has been written under the name of free verse', since 1917. There is no possible liberation from form. Eliot is as much against this kind of poetry as when he was a young critic. There is no poetry without the 'artificial limitation' of form. Form may be destroyed and rebuilt, but Eliot considers that

any language, so long as it remains the same language, imposes its laws and restrictions and permits its own licence, dictates its own speech rhythms and sound patterns. And a language is always changing; its developments in vocabulary, in syntax, pronunciation and intonation – even, in the long run, its deterioration – must be accepted by the poet and made the best of. He in turn has the privilege of contributing to the development and maintaining the quality, the capacity of the language to express a wide range, and subtle gradation, of feeling and emotion; his task is both to respond to change and make it conscious, and to battle against degradation below the standards which he has learnt from the past. The liberties that he may take are for the sake of order.

The same concern with the relation between the poetic idiom and the language of conversation is the main theme of the essay *The Social Function of Poetry* (1943). Poetry is here described as having several functions: to afford enjoyment, to enlarge our consciousness and refine our sensibility, and also to preserve, extend and improve the language of the nation. Eliot thinks that the main duty of the poet is towards his language. The language of a people who stops producing poets is fast dying. The social function of poetry is to make its effects felt everywhere in the life of a nation. The idea is generous, though a trifle abstract and vaguely supported.

In almost every essay by Eliot, there is a generalization on poetry. His ideas are not numerous, and rather obsessive. His criticism becomes more relaxed and flexible when it deals with concrete subject-matter, with other poets' works. About *The Metaphysical Poets*, Eliot wrote in 1921, when an anthology of poems from Donne to Butler (*Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*) was edited with an introductory essay by Herbert J.C. Grierson. These poets seemed to Eliot to be more often invoked than actually read, at the time. Collected in one volume, they now had, he was saying, the power to 'provoke' criticism. Later, in 1961 (in *To Criticize the Critic*), Eliot remembers the essay in the following way:

The critic, however, cannot create a taste. I have sometimes been credited with starting the vogue for Donne and other metaphysical poets (...). But I did not



discover any of these poets. Coleridge and Browning in turn, admired Donne (...). In our own time, John Donne has lacked no publicity: Gosse's *Life and Letters*, in two volumes, appeared in 1899. I remember being introduced to Donne's poetry when I was a Freshman at Harvard by Professor Briggs, an ardent admirer; Grierson's edition of the Poems, in two volumes, was published in 1912; and it was Grierson's *Metaphysical Poetry*, sent me to review, that gave me my first occasion to write about Donne. I think that if I wrote well about the metaphysical poets, it was because they were poets who had inspired me. And if I can be said to have had any influence whatever in promoting a wider interest in them, it was simply because no previous poet who had praised these poets had been so deeply influenced by them as I had been. As the taste for my own poetry spread, so did the taste for the poets to whom I owed the greatest debt and about whom I had written. Their poetry, and mine, were congenial to that age. I sometimes wonder whether that age is not coming to an end.

Eliot states here another of his obsessions. Each poet-critic chooses to write about poets who can influence him most. In the same way, the criticism of each is prepared to look upon that part of past literature which is more akin to it. This seems to him to be the part played by the metaphysical poets during the first decades of the 20th century.

For every author he examines, Eliot draws a profile. For each of them he finds an explanatory little theory, whose final aim is to fix the author in our minds. The result of his efforts to define an author is a critical term of his own, which is coined, supported, explained by the whole essay. As far as John Donne's poetry is concerned, the use of conceit is discussed first. It is masterfully defined as an

elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it;

or

a development by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader.

He gives, as an example, John Donne's comparison of two lovers to a pair of compasses, in *A Valediction*. On the other hand, this elaboration, this development of a comparison to the furthest limit that a short poem can bear, is used side by side with devices for concentration, such as 'brief words and sudden contrasts', which Eliot calls a 'telescoping of images and multiplied associations'. Eliot treads safe ground here. All these devices are well-known to him. He himself used them in his highly allusive, highly concentrated poems. He himself wrote a kind of poetry whose major device was a variant of the metaphysical conceit: the objective correlative.

The language of the metaphysicals is seen by Eliot as being 'as a rule simple and pure', although the structure of their sentences is exactly the opposite. The complicated sentence structure seems to Eliot to spring from the fidelity of these poets to their thoughts and feelings. The famous idea of the later dissociation of sensibility



follows. It is continued in the essay on *Andrew Marvell* (1921), which proclaims John Donne to be ‘the inventor of an attitude, a system of feeling or of morals’.

Eliot explains that, because of this very unity of thought and feeling, Donne is difficult to analyse. He speaks about him as the inseparable ‘Donne and his shroud’. The same as in the previous essay, the metaphysicals are considered to be a natural continuation of the Elizabethans. Out of the style developed from Marlowe through Jonson, they chose to use ‘wit and magniloquence’. Wit is defined (‘tentatively’, Eliot specifies) as ‘a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace’. With Marvell, wit has the magic quality of renewing his themes, by creating a variety and a peculiar order of images. The strategy of wit is to change pleasant into astonishing images, within quite a limited space. Surprise, which seems to Eliot to be ‘the most important means of poetic effect since Homer’ (and which he largely used in his criticism as well), ends, thus, a succession of concentrated images. Marvell’s poems develop into surprise at a high speed. The idea is proved by text analysis on Marvell’s *Coy Mistress*.

Many of the lines Eliot quotes from various poets he examines turn up, either modified or unchanged, in his own poems. Such is

But at my back I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near ...,

which appears, easily recognizable, in *The Waste Land*, part III. Eliot’s relation with the poet discussed is relaxed, never worshipping, rather a rebuking one. The poet becomes the scaffold for the demonstration of an idea that Eliot has lighted upon in connection with him. When the characterization is over, instead of the poet’s profile, it is Eliot’s particular theory that looms very large ahead. The personality of the poet peeps only from behind Eliot’s main obsession.

In the case of Marvell, the title of the essay would have been more appropriate if it had contained the word ‘wit’. Wit is here another name for the unified sensibility, which was seen by Eliot as a quality of the metaphysicals. Eliot notices that, with Marvell, it is not merely combined with, but actually fused into the imagination. Marvell’s wit is more profound than just ‘witty fancy’, whose effect is simply ‘structural decoration of a serious idea’. Marvell’s wit is, in fact, sadder. It is a combination of ‘levity and seriousness (by which the seriousness is intensified)’.

After an amazing wealth of associations with the most various writers (Baudelaire, Laforgue, Donne, Jonson, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Cowley, Milton, Pope, Dryden, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Hardy, Yeats, La Fontaine, Gautier, Catullus, Horace, Homer, Propertius, Ovid, Gray, Collins, Coleridge, William Morris, Villon, Dante), we feel, at the end of the essay, as if we had accompanied Marvell on a stroll across all European literatures. Eliot is a remarkable comparatist.

When he says that the ‘perennial’ task of criticism is to bring poets back to life, he also has in mind, as the best method, the revival of a whole European literary mood. Marvell’s wit, Eliot states, existed in French, Latin and Elizabethan English literatures. It is, to Eliot’s mind, a ‘quality of a sophisticated literature’. It expanded to England a little before that famous dissociation of sensibility had set in, that is, ‘just at the moment before the English mind altered’. After Marvell, the sophistication



disappeared from the poets' sensibility, and became a meaningless complication of the language.

After the description of Marvell's commendable use of wit, Eliot cannot resist the temptation to find reason for dissatisfaction. He discovers clumsy, 'undesirable' images in *Upon Appleton House*. The cause of failure is the over-development of an 'absurd', 'misshapen' image. The conclusion to the essay is not more illuminating than the rest. Wit has not been defined, because with Eliot definitions are impossible. Marvell has been invoked and compared. Eliot sums up:

The quality which Marvell had, this modest and certainly impersonal virtue – whether we call it wit or reason, or even urbanity – we have patently failed to define. By whatever name we call it, and however we define that name, it is something precious and needed and apparently extinct; it is what should preserve the reputation of Marvell. C'était une belle âme, comme on ne fait plus à Londres.

In later essays, Eliot's criticism becomes more substantial than the mere suggestion of one memorable idea. Such is the case of *Milton I*, written in 1936. The theme of the essay is the 'damage' done by Milton to the English language. The demonstration is resourceful. The essay opens with the view of Milton as an 'antipathetic' man, 'unsatisfactory' from the moralist's point of view, the theologian's, the psychologist's or the philosopher's. Eliot looks upon what he calls Milton's greatness as upon a puzzle. He cannot make out what it consists in, he says. He is sensitive to Milton's faults, to the deterioration to which he subjected the language, to his 'bad influence' after which, as it seems to Eliot in 1936, English literature has not yet recovered.

The essay is ostensibly written for the eye of the 'ablest poetical practitioners' of Eliot's time, because it seems to Eliot that they alone can understand 'derogatory criticism' at its right value. Because they are the only ones who realize that it is more important for a poet to be good than great, and that, therefore, Eliot's view of Milton is not meant to expel Milton from the field of poetry altogether. The explanation Eliot finds for his image of Milton lies in Milton's blindness, related to his love of music.

Milton is seen by Eliot as a man whose sensuousness was 'withered early by book-learning, and whose gifts were naturally aural'. Blindness enabled Milton to concentrate on what he could do best: cultivate an 'artificial and conventional language', with no visual qualities, no innovations in the use of words. Milton's poetic effects are addressed mostly to the ear. He does not enrich the meaning of words. Milton's unimaginative use of words makes Eliot say that his predecessor uses English as if it were a dead language. A comparison is drawn here between Milton and Joyce. They both have

musical taste and abilities, (...) musical training, wide and curious knowledge, gift for acquiring languages, and remarkable powers of memory perhaps fortified by defective vision.



The difference lies in the fact that Joyce has, besides his auditory imagination, visual imagination as well. Milton, on the other hand, shows nothing that could look real. It seems to Eliot that Milton 'may be said never to have seen anything'. Joyce's later rhetorical style comes closer to Milton's concentration on sound. In 1936, they both look to Eliot like a 'blind alley for the future development of the language'.

Eliot's point is that Milton's poetry is dissociated into sound and meaning. Its 'inner meaning is separated from the surface'. It must be read either for the sound, or for the meaning. The two cannot be grasped at once, as they are in Shakespeare or in Dante.

With great poets, Eliot concludes, there is no 'interruption between the surface and the core'. Milton draws the reader into 'mazes of sound', and leaves him there. There is a division, a dissociation in him, between the thinker (the philosopher, the theologian) and the poet. Milton's concentration upon the auditory imagination is also liable to degenerate into a poetry that looks like a 'solemn game'. A fragment full of strange proper names and no meaning whatever is judiciously provided by Eliot, as illustration.

Once all these errors have been spotted and clustered round the only idea that Milton split Shakespeare's language into two, choosing the worst (non-conversational) direction, the essay ends. In 1947, *Milton II* appears, with the professed aim of correcting a previous error of judgment, because, as Eliot says,

no one can correct an error with better authority than the person who has been responsible for it.

The second essay views Milton from a more sympathetic point of view. Eliot forgets his previous statement that Milton was an 'unwholesome influence', and a good but not a great poet. He then sets out to prove that Milton is 'a great poet and one whom poets to-day might study with profit'. He mainly talks now of Milton's 'predicament', not of his mistakes. Milton's influence is no longer bad; it is merely strong. Eliot changes his mind concerning the damage done by Milton to the language. He now feels that Milton merely 'exhausted' one of its possibilities. That is, Milton made a great epic impossible for many generations of poets after him.

The theory devised by Eliot in order to correct his previous censure of Milton claims, on second thought, that Milton did not exhaust his direction forever. Poetry being a cyclical development, imitation of Milton may no longer be so harmful three hundred years after his death. Eliot's benevolence looks upon Milton from the point of view of a practitioner who has become willing to learn a new lesson in poetic technique.

Eliot seems to imply that his view has changed because he now leaves aside the critic's judgment and examines Milton from a fellow-creator's position. Eliot quotes himself saying earlier that Milton's technical influence was disastrous. He claims he is no longer 'prepared' to say that, and decides that the issue itself is of no importance whatever. The previous idea of a dissociation in Milton's sensibility has the same fate.

Both theories are so well revised that nothing is left of them. The question of style is brought up instead. Eliot discerns in Milton's poetry a style that does not rely upon common speech or prose; a style which does not aim at any direct



communication of meaning. This style is a ‘maximal, never the minimal, alteration of ordinary language’. The alteration of the language (no longer called damage or deterioration) is seen as a merit this time. Milton is looked upon as an innovator:

Every distortion of construction, the foreign idiom, the use of a word in a foreign way (...), every idiosyncrasy is a particular act of violence which Milton has been the first to commit. There is no cliché, no poetic diction in the derogatory sense, but a perpetual sequence of original acts of lawlessness.

By doing violence to the language, Milton joins the generation of modern difficult poets. Eliot’s theory has no more errors to spot, therefore no more memorable phrases are coined in this essay.

Milton is described as ‘the greatest of all eccentrics’. He creates his own rules for writing, and observes no previous ones. The fact that he invents his own poetic language, which is remote from ordinary speech, is now viewed as a quality. Another newly discovered quality is Milton’s sense of structure, seen in the pattern of his works and in his syntax. Eliot praises Milton for making the best use of his gifts, and perfectly concealing his weaknesses. For instance, Milton had

little interest in, or understanding of, individual human beings,

so he chose his subject matter accordingly. In a subtle way, Eliot now turns this limitation into an advantage:

In *Paradise Lost* he was not called upon for any of that understanding which comes from an affectionate observation of men and women. But such an interest in human beings was not required – indeed its absence was a necessary condition – for the creation of his figures of Adam and Eve. These are not a man and a woman such as any we know: if they were, they would not be Adam and Eve. They are the original Man and Woman, not types, but prototypes (...) Were they more particularized they would be false, and if Milton had been more interested in humanity, he could not have created them.

Milton’s power of visualisation is no longer seen as weak. Eliot mentions an imagery suggestive of ‘vast size, limitless space, abysmal depth, and light and darkness’, in *Paradise Lost*. The image of light in Eden even impresses Eliot more than everything else:

... the impression of light – a daylight and a starlight, a light of dawn and of dusk, the light which, remembered by a man in his blindness, has a supernatural glory unexperienced by men of normal vision.

Since Eliot’s theory on Milton is being totally revised and reversed, all the side-ideas have the same fate. It is a good thing, Eliot claims this time, that, in reading Milton, we are not expected to see anything clearly. Thus Milton suggests to us an original experience of literature. One in which



our sense of sight must be blurred, so that our hearing may become more acute.

The same as Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, Milton requires of the reader to readjust his apprehension, and pay more attention to sounds and words than to meanings or ideas.

As far as Milton's versification is concerned, Eliot considers its minimal unit to be the 'period, the sentence and still more the paragraph'. The length of these minimal utterances makes Milton's texts hardly analysable line by line. Milton's sense of structure in syntax (which was accused by Eliot in the former essay) gives a 'perfect and unique pattern' to every paragraph, to every larger 'musical unit'. In short, what was before confusion and harmful, artificial, conventional language, is now proof of poetic ability:

The peculiar feeling, almost a physical sensation of a breathless leap, communicated by Milton's long periods, and by his alone, is impossible to procure from rhymed verse. Indeed, this mastery is more conclusive evidence of his intellectual power, than is his grasp of any ideas that he borrowed or invented. To be able to control so many words at once is the token of a mind of most exceptional energy.

In a way, the second essay does not really contradict the first. Eliot enjoys to oppose and indict, yet he usually takes his time after having spotted an error. He examines more carefully, enlarges his rebuking into appreciation and, when he has gone far enough to face the author closely, his toughness gives way. He is unable to dismiss lightly any author whom he has examined deep enough. The reason Eliot gives for accusing Milton at first is that, when Eliot wrote that first essay, Milton was of no use to Eliot's contemporary poets, who tried to extend their poetry towards the non-poetic, both in language and subject matter. The reason he finds for revising that accusation is that, time having gone by, Eliot has come to see Milton as a master of 'freedom within form'. Milton teaches modern poets a lesson of 'justified irregularity', a lesson that can at last (in 1947) be safely and profitably studied.

In 1921, Eliot wrote his first essay on *Dryden*. John Dryden is seen as a successor of Marlowe and Ben Jonson, and the ancestor of 18th century poetry, even of Byron and then of Poe. Dryden's satires are examined, although Eliot considers Dryden to be much more than a satirist. Eliot praises the 'sustained display of surprise after surprise of wit from line to line', in *Mac Flecknoe*. He notices that Dryden constantly turns the ridiculous into poetry, by enhancing his object 'in a way contrary to expectation'. His method is close to parody. The grandeur that he attaches to his characters makes them laughable, but it does not belittle them. Dryden's poetic ability turns 'the small into the great, the prosaic into the poetic, the trivial into the magnificent'. Eliot discovers in him a true sense of creation when he remarks that Dryden creates the reality which he contemplates.

An interesting distinction is formulated between Dryden and Milton, concerning both writers' tendency to magnify:



The great advantage of Dryden over Milton is that while the former is always in control of his ascent, and can rise or fall at will (...), the latter has elected a perch from which he cannot afford to fall, and from which he is in danger of slipping.

The same as the essay on Dryden, the essay on *Blake* (1920) turns round one idea: Blake's isolation. Eliot notices in Blake a peculiar 'unpleasant' honesty, combined with a technical accomplishment. Early apprenticed to engraving, Blake seems to Eliot to have chosen to read only what was congenial to him. Blake was under no compulsion to acquire a literary education. Consequently, he could concentrate on what he was interested in, and Eliot thinks this to be the reason for the genuineness of Blake's lines. Instead of genuine, Eliot calls him 'innocent', which means not influenced by outside literary or social ambitions. His form, simplified and abstract, proves his solitary struggle against deadening 'education', against what Eliot calls 'the continuous deterioration of language'.

Blake is a solitary poet, who escaped the influence of 'parasitic opinion', of conformity to knowledge acquired. He is well educated in his art, but his mind is independent, 'unclouded by current opinions', eager to see the world with fresh eyes, and convey emotion in fresh words. As Eliot puts it,

He was naked and saw man naked, and from the centre of his own crystal.

This sincerity caused by isolation, this faithfulness of Blake's to his own mind and art, his pride of remaking the world with his own two hands had, however, one disadvantage which Eliot does not fail to spot. It is true that Blake's philosophy, visions, insight, technique are his own. But, being his own, they tend to become more important to him than the poems themselves. Blake has no humility in him. His ideas often stifle the poetic form, pushing his poetry towards a formlessness which Eliot abhorred. On the other hand, Blake's own ideas being so peculiar, so different from other people's, he comes very close to being an 'eccentric'. Eliot states that Dante's borrowed philosophy injured his work less than Blake's philosophy, which at times obliterates Blake's poetry. 'Blake's occasional marriages of poetry and philosophy', Eliot remarks, 'are not so felicitous'. Blake's fault is that, becoming too much concerned with his ideas, he ended by stripping them naked of the poetry we were led to expect.

Using Blake's 'home-made', Robinson-like philosophy as a pretext, Eliot develops an interesting theory on the lack of cultural continuity in England. He notices in Blake a 'meanness' of culture, manifested through his eccentricity. Blake's qualities (understanding of human nature, original sense of language, a 'gift of hallucinated vision') needed a sure 'framework of accepted and traditional ideas'. In that case, instead of focussing his interest upon creating his own philosophy, Blake would have paid more attention to his craft as a poet. He would have avoided the 'confusion of thought, emotion and vision', which appears in his poems. Blake lacks, Eliot concludes, the concentration which would have resulted from an inherited framework of mythology, theology and philosophy.



The aim of Eliot's essay on *Byron* (1937) is to open a line of critical revisions of Byron's poetry. As Eliot himself puts it, it is an 'attempt to start the ball rolling'. From the very beginning, Eliot (the author of a concentrated poetry, who only published one book of poetry and who collected in several volumes only a quarter of the essays he ever wrote) notices the bulk of Byron's poetry. It seems to him that this bulk is 'distressing' when compared to the quality of all Byron's lines. He sees there a particular way of looking upon poetry. Byron appears to him to be the messenger of a forgotten generation of poets, whose writing was extensive, rather than intense and 'distilled'.

Eliot also suggests as a possible image of Byron that of a 'touring tragedian'. He concludes that Byron's being 'so thorough-going an actor' provided him with his peculiar knowledge of the world, 'superficial' but 'accurate'. Eliot sees Byron as a man so much occupied with 'the figure he was cutting' that nothing else besides could have had any reality. Byron's interest was all absorbed by his own 'make-up', so to say, which Eliot defines as 'diabolism' or a 'sense of damnation'. His characters feed on Byron's own egotism and, as inconsistently as their author, they think of themselves as both supremely bad and supremely good.

If Byron's characters are rather artificial, static and monotonous, his narrative skill, on the other hand, seems to Eliot to be remarkable. Eliot, the same as his contemporaries, the experimental novelists, could not tell a story in plain words. He therefore cannot help admiring Byron's skill as a tale-teller. His tales have a simple plot, and his lines are well adapted to it. There is fluency and variation of verse in his narrative poems, and there is also a 'genius for divagation'. Eliot notices Byron's ability to digress from the story to the story-teller, and to use this self-centred narrative device in order to enhance our interest in the story itself. Eliot imagines that, while Byron was alive, the attraction of his personality must have acted upon readers like an 'enchantment'.

The plot of *The Giaour* is however retold by Eliot in a strange way, with questioning dissatisfaction. Eliot usually skips plots and characters, in order to prove his theories by analysis of an author's style. If he pays any attention to them, he does so in order to spot there actions that can be ridiculed, characters that can be unmasked. Byron is no exception. Eliot does not fail to find the weaknesses of his plot. The episodes of Byron's tale succeed one another in front of our bewildered eyes, like the carriages of a fast train:

A Christian, presumably Greek, has managed, by some means of which we are not told, to scrape acquaintance with a young woman who belonged to the harem, or was perhaps the favourite wife of a Moslem named Hassan. In the endeavour to escape with her Christian lover Leila is recaptured and killed; in due course the Christian with some of his friends ambushes and kills Hassan. We subsequently discover that the story of this vendetta – or part of it – is being told by the Giaour himself to an elderly priest, by way of making his confession. It is a singular kind of confession, because the Giaour seems anything but penitent, and makes quite clear that although he has sinned, it is not really by his own fault. (...) it is not altogether easy to discover what happened. (...) Not Joseph Conrad could be more roundabout. (...) Why a Greek of that period should have been so oppressed with remorse (although



wholly impenitent) for killing a Moslem in what he would have considered a fair fight, or why Leila should have been guilty in leaving a husband or master to whom she was presumably united without her consent, are questions that we cannot answer.

Eliot's tone is mocking. The narrative is found to be lacking in logic and clarity. Yet, Eliot turns the deficiency he has spotted into a merit. Byron's 'ingenuity' in story-telling troubles the reader by giving him less than he would like to know, by presenting unaccountable motives, confused feelings. Eliot thus praises Byron's use of 'suspense'.

Last but not least, Eliot could not have failed to discuss Byron's use of words. His verdict is that Byron

added nothing to the language, that he discovered nothing in the sounds, and developed nothing in the meaning, of individual words.

It seems to Eliot that Byron's work might just as well have been written by a foreigner; Byron develops no peculiar style. He writes in a 'dead or dying language'. His 'imperceptiveness' to the English word, which makes it necessary for him to use a great number of words 'before we become aware of him', accounts for his prolixity. His 'schoolboy command of the language' makes his lines sound commonplace and shallow.

The charges Eliot brings against Byron are not new to us, by now. Other writers were, in Eliot's eyes, guilty of the same things (see *Milton I*). The essay on Byron ends as it began, on a note of suspicion. We learn about Byron that

with all his bogus diabolism and his vanity of pretending to disreputability, he is genuinely superstitious and disreputable.

In the essay *Shelley and Keats* (1933), Eliot attempts to define Shelley's poetry. It seems to him from the very beginning that Shelley expects too many things from poetry. Shelley takes his ideas more seriously than Eliot would like, and, what is worse, these seem to Eliot to be ideas of adolescence. They are 'repellent' to Eliot, the same as Shelley the man, who was 'humourless, pedantic, self-centred'. When reading Shelley, Eliot has to make the effort of 'abating' his prejudices as best he can. He dislikes Shelley's enthusiasm for empty ideas, his 'passionate apprehension' of abstractions, because he finds them stored in a confused mind. Shelley's emotion, Eliot notices, was always and only stirred by such uninviting abstract thoughts.

Precision of images goes side by side with 'bad jingling'. His ideas are 'bolted' in his poems, but never fully assimilated. Eliot's theory concerning borrowed ideas in poetry turns up once again. It is important for a poem to adopt (rather than create) a belief that should not operate as an obstacle to the reader's enjoyment. A belief which the reader may understand, even if he cannot share it. Shelley did borrow ideas, but he 'muddled up' the ideas he used, he

dabbled in both philosophy and poetry and made no great success of either.



In Memoriam (1936) examines Tennyson's three qualities: 'abundance, variety, and complete competence'. Eliot appreciates Tennyson's lyrical resourcefulness, his variety of metrical accomplishment, his fine ear and knowledge of words and sounds. Yet, it does not take Eliot too long to find out Tennyson's limitation: the latter's taste for the descriptive and the picturesque, his inability to use a narrative. His *Ulysses*, for instance, is a static poem. If Tennyson had been able to tell a story, to involve real people in it, like Dante, his beliefs would have mattered less, because, Eliot remarks,

We can swallow the most antipathetic doctrines if we are given an exciting narrative.

When the narrative is absent, the poems are dull. It would be interesting to apply the idea to Eliot's own poems, *The Waste Land* in particular. We can infer from it that Eliot had a story in mind, that his poem has a narrative coherence, that it is not a collection of unrelated fragments, even if the narrative is hidden, under-stated. Tennyson's lack of a narrative is quite obvious in *Maud*. There, Eliot sees Tennyson trying to construct the 'semblance' of a dramatic situation. It lacks serenity, Eliot says. He reads in the poem evidence of emotional intensity, which attains no 'purgation', and therefore tends to become 'black melancholia'. The quality of Tennyson's emotions does not seem to be quite to Eliot's liking. *Maud*'s fury is 'shrill rather than deep'. The violence of the poem is 'feeble'.

The cause of this impression, Eliot advances, may be an 'error of form'. Tennyson's *Idylls* are all placed between lyricism and fiction. *Maud* is shipwrecked between lyricism and drama, without reaching any. *In Memoriam* is, to Eliot's mind, Tennyson's best achievement. He sees it as 'great' poetry, 'economical of words', displaying an emotional unity of confession. Eliot enjoys here Tennyson's tragic face, and talks with pleasure about religious despair in the poem. He finally calls Tennyson a 'great master of metric as well as of melancholia'. The alliteration in this utterance is not easily ignored.

Matthew Arnold (1933) wrote academic poetry that had little technical interest for Eliot. Yet, Arnold seems to him to be a poet to whom 'one readily returns' because, besides being a 'Professor of Poetry', he also has the gift of being intimate with his readers. His is a poetry of 'unrest, loneliness and dissatisfaction'. Eliot explains that Arnold lived during a period of false stability, which causes his tone to betray regret, loss of faith, instability, nostalgia. His poetry conveys a certain feeling of boredom, in connection with which Eliot formulates a well-known remark:

... the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory.

Swinburne as Poet (1920) writes a 'diffuse' poetry. Swinburne is no master of concentration, but here this turns out to be to his advantage. As Eliot puts it,



His diffuseness is one of his glories.

He has a genius for employing an amazing number of words in order to convey very few things. Yet, his poetry cannot be ‘condensed’ without being ruined. Although no stanza seems to be essential, none can be left out. For Swinburne’s sake, Eliot builds a theory of verbal totality. He considers that, for Swinburne, ‘the meaning and the sound are one thing’. Eliot means to say that Swinburne has a peculiar way of using, of ‘working’ the meaning of a word. He rejects concrete words. His emotion is general, and his lines convey it by ‘expansion’. Swinburne’s emotion is so close to the word that it seems to spring from words rather than the other way round. Eliot states, therefore, that the words are the object of Swinburne’s poetry.

Swinburne’s poetic idiom does not depend on any outside reality. It is a self-sufficient world. This independence of words brings a morbidity of language into Swinburne’s poetry. It seems to Eliot that language in a ‘healthy’ state should not be self-referential. It should rely upon an object, refer to something real outside itself. If, in Swinburne’s lines, there is no supporting object for the word, the meaning becomes merely the ‘hallucination’ of a meaning, and language looks uprooted, undernourished.

In writing about *Yeats* (1940), Eliot remarks the former’s ability ‘after becoming unquestionably the master, to remain always a contemporary’. When a poet reaches middle age, Eliot decides, he has three choices left: to give up writing, to repeat himself with virtuosity, or to ‘adapt’ himself to middle age, and think out a new manner of writing. The poetry of young Yeats, Eliot feels, hardly bears any obvious trace of emotional intensity. In looking for emotional involvement, Eliot realizes that he is contradicting his earlier theory of impersonal poetry, and feels bound to revise that too:

I have, in early essays, extolled what I called impersonality, in art, and it may seem that, in giving as a reason for superiority of Yeats’s later work the greater expression of personality in it, I am contradicting myself. It may be that I expressed myself badly, or that I had only an adolescent grasp of that idea – as I can never bear to reread my own prose writings, I am willing to leave the point unsettled ...

A new theory on impersonality follows. Yeats had, while young, the impersonality of the ‘mere skilful craftsman’. Later, he developed it into a ‘maturing’ impersonality, which turned intense personal experience into a ‘general symbol’. In other words, Eliot concludes, Yeats started as a craftsman, and ended as a poet.

Yeats’ later, intensely personal poetry is now to Eliot’s mind a triumph of the ‘freedom of speech’. Yeats’ early poems, those of the ‘Celtic twilight’, are poems of ‘confusion’. They give out too little, they lack ‘complete emotional expression’. Paradoxically, in becoming more personal, Yeats appears to Eliot to become more ‘universal’, more maturely ‘impersonal’. There is one interesting remark in Eliot’s theory, namely that Yeats is the poet of middle age, who had the ‘honesty and courage’ to face old age and adapt to it. Yeats’ later poetry did not lose its vigour.



Eliot even sees it growing younger with every year added to its author's age. Eliot is impressed by Yeats' insight into the psychology of old age, by Yeats' fearless revelations. He quotes with awe:

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attendance upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young:
What else have I to spur me into song?

Freedom of speech, honesty towards oneself, adaptation to one's advancing age are topics Eliot himself touched in his poems. He again resorts to workshop criticism to explain Yeats. The 'clarity, honesty and vigour' he praises in Yeats' later poetry are equally looked for by Eliot in his *Quartets*. The remark that Yeats 'was always lyric, even when dramatic' also holds good for Eliot himself. It appears to Eliot that Yeats the old man 'integrated', preserved Yeats the young man. In describing Yeats' poetry of old age, Eliot is in fact trying to come to terms with his own age, to relieve his painful feeling of loss, to re-discover poetry by adapting to passing years, to devise a new mood for his own work.

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The same as Yeats, Eliot was obsessed with the feeling that years and words flow by. In his essays, he devised delaying theories, which were supposed to help him overcome his basic rush-into-despair mood. Despite this bravery, despite his oracular tone of self-assurance, his memorable phrases convey a generous indecision. T.S. Eliot may be remembered rather as a critic of losses, than of battles won. He may have lived in a critical age for criticism. He was a critic of visions and revisions. He devised a mixed critical and creative literary genre entitled workshop criticism. The words which he uses in this genre, that speaks out of two heads, are fit to make up poems rather than essays. In his literary criticism, Eliot's words of no speech teach us to avoid taking for granted a term, a doctrine, a style. Every word is questionable and uncertain. So is every method, every fashion, every mind. All opinions are worth being uttered in a private style. Yet their author treats and teaches us to treat all styles with a broad sense of tolerant humour.



VI. BEHIND THE SCENES

(THE QUEST AND QUESTION PLAYS)

Quest and question plays, beyond doubt, Eliot's poetic dialogues actually are. Their main common feature is the scantiness of dramatic devices. Each play has a minimum number of characters. Even those few characters are hardly memorable; which means that the dramatic plot does not support them. Their words make up poems. Their actions are rather symbolic than believable, true. Eliot is more of a dramatist in his poems and essays, than in his plays. He knows how to set a poem so as to make us feel we are situated at the same time both in front and at the very centre of the stage.

There are innumerable and unforgettable characters in his poetry. In fact, there is hardly any poem in which lyrical Eliot does not wear several dramatic masks. He deeply enjoys staging himself. He also enjoys staging his ideas. He is a perfect stage manager of his critical arguments. His essays of literary criticism have a well-timed scenario. They unfurl their plot of critical appraisal in a very cunning way, gradually, without haste.

Both his poems and his literary criticism mean to take us by surprise. His plays fail to do so. The unpredictable poet and critic that was T.S. Eliot turns into a much too predictable playwright. It seems that, between 1935 and 1959 (while his five plays were written), his dramatic Ariel refused to obey him. However, his literary powers had not totally deserted his plays.

Of course, it is perfectly true: these plays are hardly stageable, because they lack the dramatic essentials. They are, in exchange, some of the most consummate readable plays ever written. Uttering them aloud almost spoils the charm of words. Reading them in the whisper of our mind, we cannot fail to perceive their poetic force. Each character is engaged in a lyrical quest of his most beautifully allusive and ambiguous words. Which, among other things, of course makes the plays rather questionable as such. Each plot is an open poem, a question left for our minds to rephrase, to think over and over, like a refrain hummed now and then, between bits of yesterday, of tomorrow, of today.

Eliot used, in his five plays, every lyrical device he could think of. It looks as if he had not dared be direct in his poetry, and is trying to make up for that powerlessness now. These plays are very much like long poems. While in his poetry Eliot was indirect at all costs, in his drama (the same as in his *Quartets*) he deftly discloses his thoughts and feelings in front of us. Direct quests and questions, then, these plays are.

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MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL (1935) uses history instead of a plot. As we know, once upon a time Thomas Becket (1118-1170) was raised by Richard II to the position of Lord Chancellor and then also head of the Catholic Church of England. The moment he had been appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, Becket refused to go on as Lord Chancellor, and turned against the king. He then seemed to have completely forgotten that, raising him from a very humble state, the king had made him his closest friend for a while, in his youth. From here on, the historical events can be interpreted in quite a number of ways. Fact is, Becket spent seven years in exile on the Continent, presumably plotting with the Pope against the authority of the English king.

Eliot's play begins with Becket's return to Canterbury. The play offers only one major event to be witnessed: Thomas Becket's assassination by the king's men, on December, 29, 1170. The rest we know from history again. Thomas Becket, the stubborn supporter of the Catholic Church in England (which was to become Anglican only centuries later, under Henry VIII), was sanctified in 1173. For a long time, pilgrimages were made to Becket's tomb yearly, on the 7th of July. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* give ample proof of that. Henry II, too, made such a pilgrimage, and had himself flogged there. This theatrical repentance made of the English king and even stronger monarch than he had been before Becket's death.

What does Eliot do with the meagre plot of his play? No historical play, to be sure. He once admitted that the Greek dramatic pattern appealed to him. The fact is obvious in all his five plays. Besides their earnestness (even when they make use of jesting words), there is always a chorus somewhere about. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, we even find several of them. One is that of the Canterbury women, another that of the Cathedral priests and still another is that of the four knights who kill the main (and only) hero. Aside all that, the audience become a chorus too, a chorus of minds that Eliot would have liked to sway to and fro.

A play ought to be a dance of the spectators' nerves, he once stated. This last chorus of spectators, however, is the least successful, because Eliot does not really have a dramatic hold on his audience. He is unable to sweep them off their feet. Somehow, each new incident is felt coming, and is 'foresuffered' at least one moment in advance. But the dramatic awkwardness is amply compensated by the poetry in the play. For the sake of the poet (whose Christian name, Thomas, is the same as his hero's), we eagerly put up with the dramatist.

The beauty of random quotations often delays the actual examination of Eliot's dramatic skill. The story we follow is a sequence of beautiful lines, rather than a chain of events. If we are to find the charm of Eliot's plays, then our only hope is to leave the stage as it is, and look for the poet behind the scenes.

The play opens with a chorus of women and priests, whose words remind us of almost every poem that Eliot wrote, from *Gerontion* to *The Rock* and the *Quartets*. The mood is uncertain, both bitter and mild. The author's hand is not firm at all. To 'wait' and 'witness' is an old occupation of Eliot's mind, and a rather poor alliteration at that. The dialogue, which implies that the lines must be uttered aloud, renders the tone even clumsy.

This introduction sounds artificial to the point of unreality, or of a mock-reality. Eliot sounds humorous without having meant it. 'The strain on the brain': a



wasted assonance. When Thomas himself puts in an appearance, he speaks in the words of the *Quartets* (written between 1935 and 1942). He mentions a 'wheel' which must 'turn and still / Be forever still'. Whatever he or the others say has an air of prophecy. This prophetic zest of every sentence uttered enhances the predictability of the whole play. It diminishes its chances of ever taking us by surprise. The plot, then, is not Eliot's main interest. His forte is still poetry, even though *Murder in the Cathedral* is supposed to belong to another genre. As the saying goes (no offence meant to *Ash-Wednesday*), can the leopard change his spots?

A chorus of four Tempters follows. They speak in turn, each bringing a proposition of what Becket finds to be a distasteful compromise. The first Tempter reminds Thomas of the good old times, when he was the king's friend, 'Old Tom, gay Tom, Becket of London'. The Tempter's invitation that Thomas should resume his old life, is rejected in a dignified voice. Thomas, who already has the feeling of sainthood in his bones, replies:

Only
The fool, fixed in his folly, may think
He can turn the wheel on which he turns.

Upon which, the king's friend leaves Becket 'to his fate'. A fate which, unfortunately, we all know beforehand. If Eliot did not choose to debunk or re-invent history, he might at least have clothed it in a more palatable lyrical mood.

The following Tempters, too, leave Becket to his fate, to his future assassination by the (again four) king's knights. One Tempter offers him back his old worldly, political power, but Becket refuses that too, on account of the fact that he, supreme and alone in England, keeps the 'keys / of heaven and hell'. The next Tempter claims to be a 'straightforward Englishman', to whom Becket recommends to 'proceed straight forward' (poor pun). The man offers a 'Norman' alliance with the barons, against the king. Thomas cries out in what he means to be a voice loaded with painfully repressed affection:

O Henry, O my king!

Then he informs the third Tempter that he trusts 'God alone'. But the attempt at persuasion is not left at that. Thomas confesses he had expected three Tempters only, yet a fourth one turns up. He encourages our hero to go on with his dignified stubbornness. His reward will be to 'rule from the tomb', surrounded by the 'glory of Saints'. Thomas admits having thought of that himself, which makes the fourth Tempter a mysterious character, an inhabitant of the hero's own mind. The thought of the glory of martyrdom seems to have brushed Becket, too, but, once uttered, he firmly rejects it. He wants a perfect purity of desire.

What his desire, his quest really consist in, that will remain a question to the very end. The same as in the other plays Eliot wrote. Do we know what the hero wants? Will his never revealed desire be fulfilled? Eliot's sense of fear leaves these plays open to many interpretations. Every hero is afraid of his own inner self. That is why he may not reach the end of his quest. Wishes are banished before they have been found. The future is a menacing precipice, enveloped in a concealing haze.



Anyway, Thomas finally states he will not ‘do the right deed for the wrong reason’, whatever the two may be. All the choruses so far mentioned are finally dismissed. He merely announces:

I know
 What yet remains to show you of my history
 Will seem to most of you at best futility,
 Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic,
 Arrogant passion of a fanatic.
 I know that history at all times draws
 The strangest consequence from remotest cause.

He then preaches in the Cathedral, on Christmas morning (1170), speaking of ‘peace to men of good will’. A peace that never descends on Eliot’s stage. His peaceless plays send us again behind the scenes, where Eliot the poet handles all the ropes of restlessness, agitating his poetic words. The Archbishop tries to illustrate this peace (‘that passeth understanding’?) by a definition of martyrdom:

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man’s will to become a ruler of men. A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to his ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.

Consummate purification of Thomas’ motifs. What a pity that, after all, this religious purity sounds so artificial in Eliot’s play. Was his own religious conversion more genuine? Was he really a fervent believer? It is not his work that will tell us. We shall always find in it the dramatic ritual of the church, the dramatic devices of a sermon. But the substance of belief, the metaphysical trip into God’s realm, well, that is an altogether different matter. Not to be pried into, unless we have more biographical evidence than at present.

Maybe part of the artificiality of Eliot’s first play also comes from the repetition of images we already know so well from his poems. How strange to think that a poet with so large a vocabulary at hand should have such a restricted store of images into which to combine those words over and over again. Seasons, earth, cityscapes, sea-objects ...

Among these reminiscent signs and forebodings, the murderers do not take long to appear. Becket is on the point of making ‘perfect his will’. The knights kill him. Then a touch of G.B. Shaw’s *Saint Joan* follows. The murderers suddenly turn to face the audience, and they justify their deed to the spectators directly. History becomes (as a *Quartet* put it) here and now. The stage was previously almost empty. Except Thomas Becket himself, the rest were unindividualized members of various choruses. Now, the stage is suddenly filled with familiar faces. We are all dragged in there by the knights’ speeches.



These speeches are far from being as witty as Shaw's. Their words are dull as a lawyer's. One thing must be noticed, though. They all support (like the modern thrillers) the image of the lovable criminal, harmless and naïve, absolutely 'disinterested', as they all say. One explains that they will be severely punished, since the king will never admit he really wanted the Archbishop out of the way. Another explains that it is natural for any spectator to take sides with the victim. The third speaks of Becket's having menaced the political unity from which England (the spectators included) benefits now. The fourth even suggests that, as a matter of fact, Becket must have been insane and committed suicide.

After this prosaic dialogue (which hardly fits into the poetic flow of this monologue-play), the last words belong to the priests' chorus, accompanied by the 'weak sad men, lost erring souls, homeless in earth or heaven'. So much about *Murder in the Cathedral*. No plot, no characters, hardly anything interesting revealed about Eliot's mind. A succession of poetic bits, written now and then. If there is anything impressive in this artificial long poem, then it is an emotional lurking behind the historical moment Eliot chose to illustrate: Becket's love and betrayal of the king. This earthly feeling, repressed in the play, is more convincing than Becket's professed loyalty to God.

As usual, Divinity is absent from Eliot's text. It is not accessible to the understanding of Thomas Becket himself, who dies his eyes riveted on the world beyond. A play of absences, then. Contrary to the classical French rules, the beautiful quest is hidden backstage, while the horror of the assassination takes place under our very eyes. A play abounding in poetic openings and, since it can hardly be staged, a question play, after all.

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THE FAMILY REUNION (1939) bears the same type of tongue-in-the-cheek title which most of Eliot's poems and plays use. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is anything but a love song. *The Portrait of a Lady* is rather a blank page, the shadow of a being who has ceased to exist. *Ash-Wednesday* is a stubborn refusal of ashes, of dust, of the way of all flesh. As far as this *Family Reunion* is concerned, Eliot does not contradict his likeness for indirectness. The title implies the opposite of what is going on in the play. The family described is never reunited. On the contrary, its final separation is ardently desired by the characters.

Written four years after Eliot's first so-called play, this one does have a plot and characters. Each of those has its weaknesses. The most intense, the most appealing passages are still the poetic ones. Nevertheless, something is going on. The Greek pattern behind the texture of 20th century incidents is and is not visible. In fact, the same as the bookish echoes in Eliot's poetry, it is there for those prepared to find it. What is the whole thing about? A family, of course. Four sisters (Amy, Agatha, Ivy and Violet), two brothers-in-law (Gerald and Charles, brothers of Amy's late husband), Amy's orphan niece, Mary, and Amy's eldest son, Harry. As for her other two sons, they never turn up.

In short, Amy, on the brink of death, wishes to bequeath the crown of the family to her eldest son, who comes on the occasion of her birthday. But the story is much more complicated than that. In the tradition of the Stream-of-Consciousness



technique, it is revealed in an apparently disorderly, non-chronological order. Eliot has learnt something of the art of dramatic suspense.

Piecing the fragments together, here is what actually happened before the play began. At one time in her youth, Amy got married. While she was pregnant with Harry, her husband was having an affair with her sister Agatha, and went so far as to plan on killing his legal wife. Agatha prevented the murder, which would have killed Harry as well. Two more sons were born, then the husband was disposed of after a while. He left for the Continent, and soon died there. Life went on for Amy and her household. Agatha devoted her life to Harry, as if he were her own son. Mary, the orphan niece, was meant by Amy to be Harry's future wife. We learn all those things disparately, from various memories of various characters. Fact is that, when the play begins, Amy is old and ill. Harry returns after seven years of incessant travels round the world, travels during which his wife (some other woman than the intended Mary) has died, swept off the deck of a ship, during a storm. Harry refuses to settle down and follow in his mother's footsteps. On his departure, she dies.

The actual plot is obviously poor. The richness of the play lies in its symbolism. Everything, from words to incidents and characters, has a hidden meaning. Let us examine a few of the names first. The most important is Wishwood, where Amy lives. A wood of wishes, Eliot means to say. It characterizes Amy's nature, and it reminds us of Eliot's old fear that any wish he makes may turn against him. Indeed, everything Amy wishes brings about her undoing. She wants a family and loses it. She wants Harry to feel bound to their home, and he is dragged away by his wife (a different one, again, from the one his mother had chosen for him), for no less than seven years. Amy is, in short, a very voluntary creature, who even manages to wish herself into death.

There is a character in the play, Harry's driver, Downing, who accompanied him all through his mysterious absence. The name begins with 'down', and seems to allude to Dante's very low *Inferno*. Indeed, Harry's absence seems to have been a hell of pain to him, from the few things we manage to learn. At one time he even says that he is afraid he himself might have pushed his wife off the deck. The pattern of his mother's unhappy marriage was, therefore, repeated with him. Eliot seems to whisper into our ear that the father's murderous designs were passed on to the son. Or, at least, Harry takes it like that when, during the play, he learns this previous story from Agatha herself.

As if to prove that, he suddenly becomes aware of the presence of the 'Eumenides', a sort of propitiating force, that used to accompany murderers in Greek mythology. He becomes aware of his father's guilt, and feels sure he has inherited it. He also becomes aware of his mother's wish to become a victim, and of her making him constantly feel guilty for what his father had done. Well, the pattern gets more and more complicated as the play unfurls. Finally, what matters is that Harry manages to escape the tragic pattern of guilt, by leaving Wishwood. What is the object of his quest, where does Eliot send him? Those remain unanswered questions.

Let us cast a glance at the poetry in the play. Unforgettable lines are included here. More than in *Murder in the Cathedral*, as a matter of fact. First, that suggestive pair, Amy and the clock. Life and time. She opens the play with what could constitute a poem in itself:



I have nothing to do but watch the days draw out,
 Now that I sit in the house from October to June,
 And the swallow comes too soon and the spring will be over
 And the cuckoo will be gone before I am out again.
 O Sun, that was once so warm, O Light that was taken for granted

When I was young and strong, and sun and light unsought for
 And the night unfeared and the day expected
 And clocks could be trusted, tomorrow assured
 And time would not stop in the dark!

When she dies, she shouts again: 'The clock has stopped in the dark!' But, before that, there is still some way to go. Her sisters and her brothers-in-law talk about their present world as best they can. Unanimously, they blame the younger generation for what has gone wrong. Their grumbling must have been meant by Eliot to sound humorous. Maybe, to some it really does. Agatha's remark puts an end to that, anyway. It foretells Harry's forthcoming revelation. She explains to all the others that Harry will meet his younger self at Wishwood again, and will have to come to terms with it. Especially because, she says,

When the loop in time comes – and it does not come for everybody –
 The hidden is revealed, and the spectres show themselves.

In *Murder in the Cathedral* we knew every incident beforehand. Here, Eliot does the opposite. He hides everything. Strange and hard to explain why, this mysteriousness is as artificial as the predictability of the previous play. Maybe because both are overdone. Because Eliot is not yet a firm master of his dramatic devices. On the other hand, *The Family Reunion* is still a play of absences: the absent characters are the most haunting ones. The king was the haunting shadow in *Murder*. Amy's husband and Harry's wife are the ghosts of this play.

Eliot does not yet plunge into reality. He envelops the incidents in fantasy. What we learn about Harry's dead wife is at first Amy's despising description. Her body was never found (Eliot's old obsession with the bottom of the sea). She may have been drunk at the time of her death, or she may even have committed suicide. She kept dragging Harry all over the world, only to prevent him from settling down in Wishwood. She was 'below' him, and pulled him down to her level. The conclusion may be wrong, yet a strong smell of Eliot's first marriage floats about these words. Amy is very harsh:

A restless shivering painted shadow
 In life, she is less than a shadow in death.

The same as in *Murder*, the opening scene is ominous. The chorus of sisters and other relatives feel like actors caught unawares by the raising of the curtain. Eliot preserves here the nightmarish halo of his major poems. Harry detects it as soon as he turns up. He complains he keeps seeing menacing, reproaching eyes, that watch him



all the time. Then, he interrupts this weird complaint to greet his mother and family. Reality is clumsily mixed with fantastic impulses.

The result is not at all convincing. Harry sounds rude and self-centered. The rest of the characters are like inert puppets, who hardly know what they are going to experience next. Once, a German writer mocked at the characters' recurrent statement: 'I do not understand', or 'You cannot understand me', or 'Nobody can ever understand'. If that is so, the German writer commented, then the whole thing must be very clever indeed, if the actors themselves are denied access to that very deep meaning. It is true that such lines often occur in Eliot's plays. Harry himself begins explaining his absence from home by using one:

... people to whom nothing has ever happened
Cannot understand the unimportance of events.

But the admission of inability to understand is not something to be mocked at. Eliot must have meant, by means of it, to suggest the existence of an inexpressible profundity. A depth which renders reality superficial, treacherous, empty. We detect here Eliot's poetic impulse of emptying real shapes, in order to fill them with his own gloomy inner shadows. Which is the case of all major characters in *The Family Reunion*, as well. Their outward fate is meaningless, unless the symbol Eliot attached to it has been decoded. The play is constantly dragged from the stage behind the scenes, from drama into poetry.

The whole play seems to proceed as a mere pretext for Harry, Agatha and Amy to declaim their various poems. Harry's is a poetry of the nightmare. He senses tragedy behind the commonplace. He does what somebody once remembered that Eliot remarked about a party he happened to be witnessing. Eliot had been asked, 'Isn't it wonderful?' He had replied: of course, if you can see the full horror of it. Here is the tone of Harry's very abrupt confession:

The sudden solitude in a crowded desert
In a thick smoke, many creatures moving
Without direction, for no direction
Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour –
Without purpose, and without principle of conduct
In flickering intervals of light and darkness;
The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling
And partial observation of one's own automatism
While the slow stain sinks deeper through the skin
Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone –
This is what matters, but it is unspeakable,
Untranslatable: I talk in general terms
Because the particular has no language. One thinks to escape
By violence, but one is still alone
In an over-crowded desert, jostled by ghosts.
It was only reversing the senseless direction
For a momentary rest on the burning wheel
That cloudless night in the Mid-Atlantic



When I pushed her over.

The lyrical mood is that of *The Waste Land*: teeming with repressed fears, which turn into monsters. The mind seems asleep, the nightmare of feelings gets the upperhand. When Eliot objected to Shakespeare's inability of keeping *Hamlet* (the character) in hand, he most certainly did not foresee he would make the same mistake in a play of his own. Harry is not mad, as the others suspect. He is the prisoner of his own titanic aspirations, fears and doubts. Eliot tries hard to give his character a helping hand.

To this purpose, he uses Agatha and Mary. All the others belong to the superficial world, while Harry is an inhabitant of hell. Amy's first care is to bring a doctor with a war-like name, Warburton. She thinks it insane of Harry to believe he has killed his own wife. Her brother-in law, inclined to take Harry's words for granted, tries questioning Downing, the possible witness.

Nothing much comes out of this investigation. Except that, from a dramatic point of view, it is carried out quite well. Eliot only gradually discloses the truth. He arouses our pleasure of being taken by surprise. The play is, therefore, stageable, with only one objection. The stageable scenes sound rather annoying, while the unstageable ones (the poetic parts) make the delight of the act, if you happen to be reading, not hearing them uttered aloud. *The Family Reunion* is still a readable play, more than a spectacle for the open stage.

When the two heroes, Harry and Mary meet, common memories of childhood inevitably turn up. The resemblance of their names, as a sign of Amy's wish to see them together, sounds somewhat clumsy. We learn that Agatha teaches at a college, and that, seven years before the time of the play, she advised Mary, her student then, to leave Wishwood and go on with her studies. Harry and Mary both remember the feeling of a sad childhood.

The reason for this sadness is not clear yet. Their only enchanting memory is that of a 'hollow tree in a wood by the river'. The two of them used to hide there in the evening, to 'raise the evil spirits'. Until, one summer, coming back home for holidays, they found the tree felled. Amy had had it replaced by a summer-house for the children to play in. They both remember the oppressive, stifling atmosphere of their childhood, but do not understand the real reason, that sense of guilt which seemed to run in the family blood.

In Mary's presence, for the first time, Harry realizes who the 'sleepless hunters' of his soul are. He sees those 'Eumenides' right outside the window. He tells them:

When I knew her I was not the same person.
I was not any person. Nothing that I did
Has to do with me. The accident of a dreaming moment...

If it is a description of Harry's marriage, it comes very close to a similar one in *The Waste Land*: 'the awful daring of a moment's surrender'. The atmosphere which envelops the whole family is artificial, shallow, as if drawn by an inexperienced hand. Yet, a few things in the play go deeper, reaching an autobiographical vein. There, Eliot is at his best, because, from behind the scenes, he sends out lyrical impulses. A



sentence uttered by the chorus of minor characters is a remarkable definition of the stream-of-consciousness technique:

And the past is about to happen, and the future was long since
settled.

And the wings of the future darken the past ...

Various other lines follow, a weird mixture of believable and ghastly words. A mixture of reality and fantasy, which is still too shapeless to stand upright on the stage.

The image of this partly reunited family is annoying. It is cold, puritanical, formal. There is no love lost between its members. None of them is lovable, as a matter of fact. They almost hate one another. The spectator withdraws in awe, but the story is pressed upon him. The 'truth' must be found out. Eliot will not give up the quest so easily. Why did Amy make all her children feel guilty? It is the turn of the vanished father to be remembered now. Harry keeps repeating generously to everyone: 'You cannot understand me'. To Agatha he says a little more:

What matters is the filthiness. I can clean my skin,
Purify my life, void my mind,
But always the filthiness, that lies a little deeper ...

Then Agatha decides to reveal to him the mystery of this so-called impurity, the source of the all-invading sense of guilt. She retells, in extremely indirect images, her love for Harry's father:

There are hours when there seems to be no past or future,
Only a present moment of pointed light
When you want to burn. When you stretch out your hand
To the flames. They only come once,
Thank God, that kind.

The memory of the hyacinth girl burns in Agatha's story. Only Agatha speaks of a mythological kind of 'sin'. She calls Harry the 'bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame', to expiate the sin of his father, of his ancestors. A love story has been turned by Eliot into a dooming deed. Harry now comes to terms with his Eumenides. He manages to understand his sense of guilt. His next move will, of course, be to escape it. All Eliot's plays are imaginary escapes from one mystery or another. As has been said, a quest that ends in a question mark. Harry's destination is not known. Not even to the poet, who is watching the show from back stage.

The only things we are allowed to learn, at the end of this mystery play, is, as Agatha puts it, that we live in a world of 'fugitives', and that Harry is in quest of another realm. 'On the other side of despair', he calls it. Other heroes of Eliot's writings do the same. The devil of the stairs in *Ash-Wednesday, III* leads the hero 'beyond hope and despair'. At least, there the hero turns back in revulsion from the sight. Here, Harry takes himself very much in earnest. So do Mary and Agatha,



women between the two worlds, whose only part is to push Harry towards escape. The play is, in conclusion, divided into two worlds. A real, displeasing one: that of Wishwood and its losses, its frustrated wishes. Most of the characters belong to it. They would all like to live there, perpetuating the unknown ‘curse’.

Agatha and Mary are not attached to it. Harry is the only one who rejects the world of Wishwood. His driver, Downing, follows him mechanically. Those who come closer to understanding the realm of escape are only those who, at some point in the story, manage to see the Eumenides. These insubstantial shapes (which have given a lot of trouble to the managers who have attempted to stage the play) are a kind of test. They keep the gate which opens onto another world, the world which Eliot did not manage to invent. A world and a meaning which are far behind the scenes, if anywhere. The quest and question in *The Family Reunion* are not within our reach.

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The other plays Eliot wrote are *The Cocktail Party* (1950), *The Confidential Clerk* (1955) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959). Their plots are increasingly more complicated, and more cunningly revealed. They are still deficient plays, but the deficiency does not arise from their lack of incidents. Several things actually take place on the stage. The plays are still overwhelmed by poetic memories, of course. Yet, these memories do not manage to make us sympathize with Eliot’s characters. Eliot is betrayed here by his inexperience concerning other people’s souls. An emotional deficiency of the characters, it might be called.

These last three plays have almost everything in common. First of all, they can be staged. Or, at least, they can be staged more easily than the other two. Then, they are all enveloped in the same highly aristocratic air, which is created half in jest and half in earnest. The *étiquette*, the dignified manners, even the wealthy background of the three families described were things Eliot himself must have worshipped (or at least his contemporaries say so). Lack of money, the consuming anxiety of earning a living by daily work are not mentioned. Eliot leaves aside his own experience in the matter. The plays, consequently, come out a little superficial and artificial.

On the other hand, there are innumerable humorous incidents which do not fail to trigger laughter. Irony, too, is used generously, often in the very names of the characters. A man who shows the possible way out towards some spiritual life is called Eggerson: the association with egg (preparation of a new being) is obvious. The daughter of a whore is called Lucasta Angel, and so on. The bits of poetry are less and less numerous. They are replaced by more realistic, sometimes agreeably comic dialogues. These are not dialogues which can outline a character, though. Hardly any character is truly alive. The heroes of these plays are shadowed by the obsessions of Eliot’s poetry. Eliot the poet still beckons us to follow him back stage. Sometimes he does so in memorable lines. Prufrock suddenly pops up in *COCKTAIL PARTY*, where we read:

... When you’ve dressed for a party
And are going downstairs, with everything about you
Arranged to support you in the role you have chosen,
Then sometimes, when you come to the bottom step



There is one step more than your feet expected
 And you come down with a jolt. Just for a moment
 You have the experience of being an object
 At the mercy of a malevolent staircase.
 Or, take a surgical operation.
 In consultation with the doctor and the surgeon,
 In going to bed in the nursing home,
 In talking to the matron, you are still the subject,
 The centre of reality. But, stretched on the table,
 You are a piece of furniture in a repair shop
 For those who surround you, the masked actors;
 All there is of you is your body
 And the 'you' is withdrawn ...

A frustrated sensibility drowning in fears lurks in a woman's description of her only moment of love (now lost, of course):

I abandoned the future before we began,
 And after that I lived in a present
 Where time was meaningless, a private world of ours ...

Again and again, the unfulfilment of the hyacinth garden is uttered in almost the same words used by Eliot when he first coined it. We cannot help noticing that, in these sad interludes, it is always the woman who is let down, while a male eye withdraws, haunted by a painful sense of guilt.

The rending pain of growing old is also reenacted:

... only since this morning
 I have met myself as a middle-aged man
 Beginning to know what it is to feel old.
 That is the worst moment, when you feel that you have lost
 The desire for all that was most desirable,
 Before you are contented with what you can desire;
 Before you know what is left to be desired;
 And you go on wishing that you could desire
 What desire has left behind.

There is a certain emotional laziness in Eliot's progress as a writer. He sticks to the obsessions of his youth, which were premature obsessions of old age. These early themes, however, build the image of a whole lifetime. Not being able ever to know anything or anyone for certain, ourselves included, is such a theme of all ages, for all seasons:

... we die to each other daily.
 What we know of other people
 Is only our memory of the moments
 During which we knew them. And they have changed since then.



To pretend that they and we are the same
Is a useful and convenient social convention
Which must sometimes be broken.

Joseph Conrad, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf amply broke that convention. The stream-of-consciousness novels broke the character into tiny reactions. They shook those reactions together, and then took them out one by one at random.

The dryness of life, the waste land of the soul is reiterated by a girl's complaint:

I seemed always on the verge of some wonderful experience
And then it never happened.

The man she thought had been in love with her replies:

There was a door
And I could not open it. I could not touch the handle.
Why could I not walk out of my prison?
What is hell? Hell is oneself,
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.

The inert young man who wasted the hyacinth garden experience is enclosed in these words. The young girl is left with the craving:

But even if I find my way out of the forest
I shall be left with the inconsolable memory
Of the treasure I went into the forest to find
And never found, and which was not there
And perhaps is not anywhere.

Soon after lost love, marriage is described, in somewhat milder terms than we remember from *The Waste Land*:

... They may remember
The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
Maintain themselves by the common routine,
Learn to avoid excessive expectation,
Become tolerant of themselves and others,
Giving and taking, in the usual actions
What there is to give and take. They do not repine;
Are contented with the morning that separates
And with the evening that brings together
For casual talk before the fire
Two people who know they do not understand each other,
Breeding children whom they do not understand



And who will never understand them.

Gerontion also reappears, for a short while, in a dying man's words:

It's like telling a man he mustn't run for trains
 When the last thing he wants is to take a train for anywhere.
 No, I've not the slightest longing for the life I've left –
 Only fear of the emptiness before me.
 If I had the energy to work myself to death
 How gladly would I face death! But waiting, simply waiting,
 With no desire to act, yet a loathing of inaction.
 A fear of the vacuum, and no desire to fill it.
 It's just like sitting in an empty waiting room
 In a railway station on a branch line,
 After the last train, after all the other passengers
 Have left, and the booking office is closed
 And the porters have gone. What am I waiting for
 In a cold and empty room before an empty grate?
 For no one. For nothing.

One thing Eliot certainly was not: emotionally inventive. Very direct these quoted excerpts must sound, to readers of Eliot's earlier poetry. We must keep in mind that these words are now uttered by characters who are supposed to be other than Eliot himself. The dramatic ambiguity and conciseness of the poems is abandoned. Eliot no longer hides behind half uttered thoughts. Instead of that, he is now beguiling us to follow him behind the scenes. Which means that writing these plays forces Eliot into finding other dramatic devices than those used in his poetry. A dialogue, an interrupted conversation, the use of a mask (character) to utter private feelings are all preliminaries of a play, not its substance.

Therefore, Eliot gradually learned how to resort to plot, suspense and so on. The stage manager with whom he collaborated from his first dramatic attempt (E. Martin Browne), and who staged Eliot's other plays, wrote a whole book about Eliot's dramatic apprenticeship. We must state from the very beginning that Eliot's dramatic findings have a strong taste of poetry about them. An amazingly steadfast character, this writer must have been, to stick to the same topics from youth to old age. Or rather, a man who saw his life slip from season to season, wishing ardently for improvement, but hoping for none. The same as his poetry, his plays are works of hope defeated, hope repressed, yet never ignored.

One dramatic finding Eliot amply made use of is to suggest by various means a parallel between modern times and the calamitous patterns of Greek tragedies. The power of destiny is visible in all his five plays. Something always remains unknown, unexplained. As if the heroes' fates had been settled somewhere above, and the heroes themselves had no access to the minds of ruthless gods. This acceptance of an unknown destiny, which is never revealed, makes Eliot's dramatic works look like question plays.

The same as a poem, they are left open to interpretation. Only, here, this open end weakens the dramatism, the quality of the play. The stage fades away every now



and then, while the characters, burdened by uncertainty, walk to and fro. The floor shakes a little. An earthquake may begin in this way. Or at least this is the fear Eliot's plays leave inside us. Eliot himself seems to have experienced this inner trembling of his characters (which often turns into shivering, by the way).

The fact is obvious if we examine his plots in succession. The first two are already known. In *Murder*, the archbishop is commended to us for his superhuman wish to dissolve into nothingness, to escape from the stage. In *The Family Reunion*, Harry, too, is pushed off the stage, only this time we see him leave in somewhat more realistic terms. As for the other three plots left, the need to leave the stage, the superhuman aspiration towards a world beyond, grows weaker and weaker, until it finally disappears. The last play (*The Elder Statesman*), the same as the *Quartets* in a way, sticks desperately to the wooden planks of the stage.

The proof that Eliot is becoming more of a dramatist as he goes on practising is the scarcity of poetic utterances in his later plays. *Murder* was steeped in poetry. *The Family Reunion* mixed poetry with half-real dialogues. *The Cocktail Party* is almost the last play in which the characters allow themselves to hum their fears poetically. Poetry is gradually stifled.

Together with a certain poetic dumbness of the plays, the characters' escape into something unthinkable (Eliot's belief in the beyond) also becomes more fragile. The poetry is replaced by symmetry, interruptions, coincidences. These devices become irritating in the long run. Yet, they are a welcome diversion from the poet who thought it was enough for him to put up a stage, feeling sure that any poem uttered there would, all by itself, turn into a play. Eliot is now trying hard to improve plots and characters by placing them in symmetrical positions.

The heroes keep taking one another's place, as if the stage were a merry-go-round. Still, their unexpected moves do not take us by surprise. We always feel they are doing something that has already been done before. At the same time, the plot is no longer unfurled directly, smoothly. Eliot places obstacles in front of the story he tells. When we are on the verge of finding out what is to happen next, another character pops up, and interrupts the flow of incidents for a while. The plot very closely resembles an obstacle race which leaves us gasping for breath, yet totally indifferent to what is going on.

Can it be, again, because these plays have a deeper deficiency, a restricted range of experiences to disclose? In short, should we infer that Eliot does not have as much to say here as in his major poems? Steadfast, monotonous, uninventive, these are harsh adjectives. Yet, they can hardly be avoided. An author for all seasons, as Eliot undoubtedly was, was bound to pass through the stage of the vacant soul.

Besides irritating interruptions and much too obvious symmetries (of moods, deeds, aspirations), coincidence is another dramatic device which Eliot cannot use to his advantage. People happen to be on stage when they are most necessary to the plot, and their sudden appearance is hardly believable. Eliot brings people together without thinking of life as it really flows. He means to write a play. Like a conscientious craftsman (not 'the better', unfortunately), he prepares all the necessary tools beforehand. He never lacks a nail; he never leaves an incident at the mercy of the 'absurd' flow of real life. An innovating poet wrote, as we can see, a set of incredibly traditional plays.



Because of the dramatic devices above mentioned, Eliot's last three plays are somewhat monotonous. Let us have a brief look at their plots. *The Cocktail Party* is the story of a married couple, Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne. The name Eliot finds for his characters are another explanation of their being so unlikable. Some have mockingly aristocratic names, which rank them among the snobs. Others, those privileged, have angelic names, familiar and endearing. They are Eliot's private messengers in the plays, and this private contact with the poet-playwright destroys them as characters.

More openly said, Eliot pampers his favourite heroes. Everything turns around these beings. Everything is done to please them, or to place a halo over their heads. They are never mocked at, while all the others are seen as little more than comic insects. The contrast between their earnestness and the irony Eliot uses against the rest is too strong. Such is the case of Celia Coplestone, in *The Cocktail Party*. The incidents, briefly rendered, are the following: Edward has an affair with Celia, and Lavinia with a young man, Peter Quilpe. The wife is the first to find out her husband's exploits. She is also the first to be hurt: Peter falls in love with Celia, so Lavinia feels abandoned. Celia, on the other hand, is firmly convinced that her love for Edward is the real thing. The cocktail announced by the title of the play does not take place on the stage at all.

Here is another instance of the way Eliot mocks at his own titles. He always chooses a title tongue in his cheek. On the night of the cocktail, Edward finds out that Lavinia has left him. We later learn that she has gone to see a psychiatrist, Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. This psychiatrist turns up at the cocktail, together with Alex (Alexander MacColgie Gibbs) and Julia (Mrs. Shuttletwaite). These three characters are (like Mary and Agatha, in *The Family Reunion*) a kind of intermediary puppets. They help Edward and Lavinia get together again. They teach them that a man and a woman cannot live together unless they learn to protect each other, at least in a superficial way.

The same three half-mysterious characters send Celia, as a missionary, to a place called Kinkanja. After a conflict between monkey-eating heathens and a minority of Christianized natives, Celia is crucified near an anthill. A horrifying death, which Eliot no longer dares present as a desirable escape. Thomas Becket's martyrdom and Harry's decision to expiate a hereditary curse (by following his Eumenides) were conceived in an intenser mood. Here, Celia is a mere possibility, a dubious (and not at all inviting) way out of life. Peter Quilpe goes to California, to enter the world of Hollywood. If it were not for Celia's suffering when she realizes the loss of Edward (or of her own feeling for Edward), the play would be very dry.

The stale marriage of Edward and Lavinia is discouraging. The licentious attitudes of husband and wife concerning their respective extra-marital affairs overtly remind us of Restoration comedy. With the difference that they do not manage to be comic. Anyway, the play ends before the actual *The Cocktail Party* is about to begin. Edward and Lavinia humour each other as best they can. Peter comes back to England to look for Celia again. He learns, together with the spectators, about her death. Julia, Alex and the doctor are off to another party. Another little saint is on her (or his) way to martyrdom, maybe?

The plot of *The Cocktail Party* is not particularly bright. Neither are the characters. All of them are self-centred. There is a certain craft of revealing a



personality by means of incident, which Eliot does not possess. Although so little happens, in fact, the plot looks intricate. The atmosphere is stifling. Interruptions and coincidences drive us mad. Each character is in quest for something, yet nobody finds anything.

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With *THE CONFIDENTIAL CLERK*, it is even worse. The first noticeable thing is that, in his last four plays, Eliot seems to have made a point of using the magic number seven for his major characters. The title is again contradicted by the plot of the play. One confidential clerk (Eggerson) retires. Sir Claude (Mulhammer) and his wife, Lady Elizabeth, decide to replace him.

So far, so good. The couple seem bearably happy, or at least happy in a dignified way. Each of them had one or more love affairs before their marriage. Consequently, Sir Claude has a daughter by a prostitute. The girl's name is Lucasta Angel. Lady Elizabeth accepts the girl with ill-will. She herself once gave birth to a boy, whom she afterwards entrusted to her lover. This former lover – a poet (Tony) – left the little boy in charge of some woman and went off to hunt and get himself killed by a rhinoceros in Tanganyika. In this way, Lady Elizabeth lost trace of her son. Eggerson, the former confidential clerk, is to be replaced by a certain Colby Simpkins. The latter is another of Sir Claude's natural children.

The existence of this one, Sir Claude does not dare confess to his bride, for fear of 'upsetting' her. It goes without saying that Sir Claude (fabulously rich, like most of Eliot's dramatic characters) amply provided for both of his children. As for these children, Lucasta is a kind of no-good girl, who loses one job after another, and likes posing as a vulgar, very daring young woman. She is engaged to B.K. (Barnabas Kaghan), a young man whom Sir Claude has promoted, and who is a 'jolly good fellow', always in good spirits and with a bright future ahead of him. Colby is the gloomiest of the young characters. His ideal was to have become an organist. He felt he was not good enough, and was afraid of the second-rate. Taking Sir Claude's advice, he comes to join him as his new confidential clerk.

At least three of Eliot's plays (*The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk*) discard the idea of family ties. Colby is ample proof of that. The moment she sees him and hears his story, Lady Elizabeth decides he is her lost son. The cause of her sudden revelation is that Colby was brought up by a certain Mrs. Guzzard from Teddington. Lady Elizabeth, who always forgets everything, suddenly remembers that Tony had once mentioned these names to her.

The association happens to be exact. However, Colby is not her son. Eliot stages a whole family battle round this 'disappointed' young musician. Here is the truth, as finally revealed, after due interruptions and coincidences: Mrs. Guzzard's sister (Sir Claude's mistress) died before her expected child was born. Mrs. Guzzard herself gave birth to Colby, at about the same time. Her husband (a second-rate organist) died soon after. Sir Claude took it for granted that Colby was his son, never asked for a birth certificate, and this clears Mrs. Guzzard of the charge of deception.

On the other hand, she did take Lady Elizabeth's son in charge, and kept him until his father's death, when the monthly payment ceased to come. After that, she entrusted him to a childless couple. Here comes the most striking coincidence in the



play. B.K., whom Lady Elizabeth despises (together with Lucasta) for his lack of dignified manners, turns out to be her son. Colby (unlike Harry before him) chooses not to resist the family curse. He decides to become a church organist after all, with prospects or further priesthood. Of course, the humorous statements, the clumsy or successful irony cannot be summarized. The play is perfectly readable and, by someone who means to know Eliot, it ought to be read. Especially for the feeling of agitation that dominates the stage, and which is another face of Eliot's inner unrest.

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This unrest gives way in Eliot's last play, *THE ELDER STATESMAN*, dedicated to his second wife, and written six years before Eliot died. The same as the *Quartets*, this play sounds like a swan song. Something reassuring steals into it and engages our sympathy. The plot no longer contradicts the title. No escape is mentioned. Everything takes place in front of our eyes, on the stage. To quote Eliot himself, when 'here and now' ought to have ceased to matter, he ends by discovering them. A backward process of sensibility, which, however, does not miss one single season of a man's life. The tragedy is that each season is discovered at the wrong time, so the experiencing sensibility can never be anything but frustrated.

The elder statesman in question is Lord Claverton, fatally ill. He dies under an oak-tree, at the end of the play. A little before his death, Charles (Hemington), his future son-in-law, just says to Monica, the Lord's daughter:

He's a very different man from the man he used to be.
It's as if he had passed through some door unseen by us
And had turned and was looking back at us
With a glance of farewell.

Innocent of her father's death, Monica listens to Charles' warm words of love:

Oh my dear,
I love you to the limits of speech and beyond.
It's strange that words are so inadequate.
Yet, like the asthmatic struggling for breath,
So the lover must struggle for words.

Direct as it is, the statement does not sound artificial, or out of place. Neither do the complications of the plot. The plot consists, in fact, merely of memories. The present is only filled by the elder statesman's death and his daughter's happiness. The rest are gloomy, guilty memories, which no longer affect anybody. As Monica says, these memories are ghosts that can easily be 'exorcised'. Eliot the exorcist? Eliot the sorcerer, who lets go of Ariel, and closes his eyes to look inside himself.

The peace of the play comes from the powerlessness of the past pains, past ghosts. Who are they? One is Federico Gomez, formerly Fred Culverwell, a poor friend of Lord Claverton's during the latter's Oxford days. He could easily spoil the image of the impeccable statesman, if he were to say that long ago, one night, while driving, the lord ran over the body of an old man and did not even stop. The old man



later turned out to have died before the accident, but the Lord's cowardice stayed, never to be washed away.

Later, Fred, a brilliant student, having learnt expensive tastes from his rich friend, forged a cheque and was imprisoned. On being released, he left for Central America (San Marco), where he later became fabulously rich himself. Another ghost is Mrs. Carghill, the former Maisie Montjoy, a music-hall singer. Again, the Lord's father, careful of his son's future, paid her off when his son had an affair with her, and she sued him for 'breach of promise'. As Claverton himself remarks, these two people remember two moments in his life when he was below the standards he had set for himself: two occasions on which he had run away. These two reappear some twenty years later, seeming to blackmail the lord, imposing their presence and memories upon him. They steal his son, Michael, who follows Gomez to San Marco, to make money. At first, the statesman is slightly upset. He very soon comes to ignore the past, though.

Life goes on, the play pines away slowly, between the death of the father and the happiness of the daughter. No question, no quest. A mere tired vacant stare. A disillusioned playwright who cannot have failed to realize that his plays had less of the seasons of literature in them than his poetry. The end of a lifetime, the end of a work. When *Prufrock* and numberless early writings spoke of imaginary, far-off death with such devastating bitterness, who would have thought real death would bring to Eliot's soul this warm and serene mood?



VII. *ELIOT MIS à NU* (THE SOOTHING QUARTETS)

Soothing is the first attribute that comes to mind in connection with Eliot's *FOUR QUARTETS*. Written between 1935 and 1942, they mark the end of Eliot's major poetic achievement, in 1942, when he must have been no more than 54 years old. Books of literary criticism, books of essays on culture and other topics, as well as theatre plays followed, but no more remarkable poem was to issue from his hand. The same as Shakespeare's *Tempest*, these *Quartets* look like a farewell to poetry. As far back as his youth, when *Prufrock* was published, Eliot was haunted by the fear that soon he would no longer be able to feel and write poetry. The 'sad ghost' of Coleridge often beckoned to him from afar. As a poet, Eliot was by no means prolific. So much greater his merit of creating, in quite a few great poems, an imaginary world which has haunted poetry ever since. If he has not got whole shelves of books to boast of, he is, in exchange, a consummate master of concentration and ambiguity.

We have seen Eliot sternly hiding behind various masks, in his previous poems. Strange, however, to think that he accepted the French translation of his *Waste Land* to be entitled *La Terre Mise à Nu*. We have seen him as an innovator, as a difficult poet, a magician of the understatement. The *Four Quartets* are his last feat of magic. It takes a mature, an experienced and also somewhat tired sensibility to really enjoy them. There is a certain fatigue in these lines. Eliot no longer strives to strive. He no longer devises masks of friends or wizards for himself. This time he is the wizard, the wizard of obvious words, and he is at peace with his fate.

This must be the reason why the quartets seem soothing: in them, a tired imagination is '*mise à nu*'. There is a poem by Yeats (*The Circus Animals' Desertion*) which describes a poetic mind, whose waterfall of imagined faces has tarried. 'All ladders', Yeats concludes there, 'go down to the rag and bone shop of the heart'. This is precisely what happens to Eliot in his *Quartets*. The effect is bewildering. On first reading Eliot, a young reader can hardly see the point of them. If, advancing in age, he ever goes back to Eliot and his *Quartets* again, he cannot fail to perceive their essential, their astonishing directness, so much in contrast with Eliot's previous indirect poems. A soothing directness, by means of which, for the second time in his career, Eliot taught following generations an innovating lesson of poetry.

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BURNT NORTON (1935) is a place which Eliot visited in the summer of 1934. He was paying a visit to Emily Hale, a friend of his young days. About their relationship little is known. Their letters are safely deposited in some American library, not to be opened, it seems, until the second decade of the third millennium. Could they contain a dazzling revelation? If so, Eliot would certainly have betrayed it in his work as well. But never mind the letters, never mind the unknown halo of Emily Hale. Fact is that, one summer, she took Eliot to see this Burnt Norton, a restored 18th century manor house. It was so called because, centuries before (in 1737), its first owner had set fire to the house and had been burnt up with it. At the time Eliot visited it, the house was empty. In the surroundings, there were wooded hills, lawns, and in the garden there were two dry pools. The author of *The Waste Land* (with its 'empty cisterns and exhausted wells') could hardly have failed to notice that detail. Consequently, the poem bathes in the imaginary water of these dry pools. Eliot quietly retraces his steps into a lost youth. No pain hardens his voice. Or, rather, it is pain transfigured: an exhausted soul, grateful for the remembrance of things past.

'Time' is a word often uttered. In spite of its abstractness, in spite of many high-brow lines, the quartet is sentimental. Its best definition is, indeed, Eliot 'mis à nu'. All time is reduced to the graspable present. What might have been, what has been, what has never been or will never come to pass, all these are dismissed as 'abstractions'. 'All time is eternally present', Eliot decides. Yet, the poet of wasted happiness and lost youth hastens to add: 'all time is unredeemable'. The line is whispered without despair, though. A haze of peace veils his eyes, he turns his eyes inside:

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
 But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves
I do not know.

Pain transfigured into peace, loss into silent resignation. A whispered *carpe diem* is the accompanying music. The tragic waste of the hyacinth garden, the young man's dark despair of failing again, the burden of the future are far behind. In these lines Eliot seems to fly, to float, to hover over his own life with a bodiless soul. Had he lost the fear of future pains, because he had lost the very desire for, the very sense of his future? One answer is beyond doubt: all his quartets are futureless poems.

How striking the difference is between the memories of lost youth here, and those in *Ash-Wednesday*. Eliot paces about this garden of maturity (the same obsessive garden of all his poems, yet how unlike them all), and hears 'other echoes'. Voices of birds, laughter of children, music of leaves: what a sweetened landscape, for the distonance-loving Eliot. 'Through the first gate', he steps into 'our first world': his and hers? The autumn heat, the 'unseen eyebeam crossed', the roses in full bloom. How far behind he has left the annoying female, who was twisting a lilac stalk in *Portrait of a Lady*.



Far behind, too, *La Figlia Che Piange* and the hyacinth girl, both drowned in the misery of their fully awakened emotion. A dulled well-being sweeps over this quartet. The dry concrete pool seems filled with water 'out of the sunlight'. Lotus flowers (flowers of forgetfulness in a forgetful poem) rise slowly to the imaginary surface. No horrors mentioned. No slimy rats, no skeletons in sea-waters, no lidless eyes. Remarkable, this new 'heart of light', born out of sun and no water. Light reminiscent of another 'heart of light, the silence', which in the hyacinth garden dries the young man's life and thoughts. If anything, then, these soothing *Quartets* are first and foremost poems of the mind. Emotion mastered, love reconsidered, sensibility dissected by serene thought.

This thought has the upper hand. No emotional turmoil will be allowed to menace the secluded smile of *Burnt Norton*. A cloud covers the sun, and the pool is a dry pool again, empty of wishes (past or present). A safe distance must be preserved:

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
 Cannot bear very much reality.
 Time past and time future
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present.

Could there be any secret behind Eliot's unexpected serenity? The essay on Yeats, of 1940, touches on the matter. Of course, few of Eliot's words (especially critical statements) can be taken for granted. Eliot states there that middle age leaves a writer quite few choices. He can either stop writing (unless he means to repeat what he has already written) or, if he is lucky, he may manage to 'adapt himself to middle age, and find a different way of working'. *Gerontion*, and even one of the *Quartets*, underline the tragedy of old age. Eliot's essay on Yeats reverses the idea, and finds that old age has its own emotions, which can be lived as intensely as those of youth. He consequently finds Yeats to be 'pre-eminently the poet of middle age'.

We can hardly say the same about Eliot himself. It is not middle age that he catches best. At the same time, there is something for and of every age in his work. Exquisitely painful poems of youth; self-contained poise of early maturity; the dark despair of a deteriorating body which, however, is mastered by the deep serenity of an experienced mind. His work is a realm for human spring, summer, autumn and winter. T.S. Eliot is an author for all seasons.

To come back to the late summer of *Burnt Norton*, the poem goes on with memories of youth silenced by the lullaby of elderly thoughts. There is a 'trilling wire in the blood', and this blood still sings below 'inveterate scars'. But the old wars are 'long forgotten', or, in Eliot's words, 'appeased'. A 'still' point is mentioned. It reminds of the prayer to the silent sister in *Ash-Wednesday*:

Teach us to care and not to care
 Teach us to sit still ...

We hear several words about a defeated 'partial horror', about the chains of a 'changing body' (how close to Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium* the image comes), about unnamed experiences which 'flesh cannot endure'. All painful moments are



annihilated when they are reconsidered. 'To be conscious', Eliot decides, 'is not to be in time'. The mind empties itself. The trick is not new to Eliot. Only, he uses it here much more openly. Nothing is left to pine for. He disinfects his sore soul when he says:

I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.

The philosophizing included in these *Four Quartets* has been (too) amply discussed. It is a major point, certainly, and it is well worth being examined. Yet, because of the same sentimental reasons that made me detect a sentimental Eliot in these poems, I shall leave sophisticated ideas aside, for a while. Words such as time, timeless, eternity and so on, mean nothing to beings who can never experience more than the quick passage of seconds. Besides, the emotional lines are always close at hand to be quoted. 'Here is a place of disaffection', one of them goes. The faces are 'strained time-ridden'. An image of *The Waste Land* suddenly returns, apparition of old times. 'Men and bits of paper', with 'unhealthy souls' inhabit this 'twittering world',

the gloomy hills of London,
Hampstead and Clerkenwell, Campden and Putney,
Highgate, Primrose and Ludgate.

The main space of *Burnt Norton* is, however, the 'still point of the turning world'. Imaginary or not, who cares? Fact is that deep below, at the bottom of the poem, stillness and restlessness coexist. They sadly go hand in hand, with Eliot inertly watching:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die.

He repeats, over and over again, that 'all is always now'. Yet, can he really have managed to forget 'the loud lament of the disconsolate chimera'? They are all present in a poem which, though vowed to forgetfulness (old ideal of *Ash-Wednesday*), has not yet forgotten everything. Stubborn memories of old pains and thrills enliven it:

Quick now, here, now, always –
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after ...

It is not only memories that hurt the poet, but also his struggle with the words which should express them. In *Burnt Norton*, serene as the tone may be, peace of mind is wishful thinking, and the poet's words reveal a restless mind trying its hand at relaxation, but ...

Words strain,



Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
 Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
 Will not stay still.

*

EAST COKER (1940), title of the second quartet, is the name of a Somersetshire village. In the 17th century, Andrew Eliot, the poet's remote ancestor who was living there, left England for the New World. Later in life, T.S. Eliot himself required that, at the time of his death, his body should be cremated, and the ashes buried at East Coker. Which his second wife dutifully accomplished.

With these two points, a beginning and an end, in mind, we shall soon perceive that the main theme, the key line of the poem is 'In my beginning is my end', reversed later into 'In my end is my beginning'. Even if this were to annoy the subtle researchers of Eliot's philosophical turn of mind in his *Quartets*, again I can hardly help noticing that *East Coker* is soothing, rustic and sentimental. Soothing, because no harshness of tone betrays panic. Rustic, because its images are comfortably close to the life of the soil, peasants, plants, animals. Sentimental, because Eliot seems once again to be in love with his own tone, his landscape, his acquired (self imposed) beatitude.

In 1940, when *East Coker* was written, Eliot may not have necessarily envisaged yet that, twenty-five years later, his ashes would actually be taken back to the native land of his paternal ancestor. The poem mixes death and life. Eliot writes it in a foretelling, blessing hand. The first images are surprisingly coherent and picturesque. Eliot wrote them at another stage than *The Waste Land*. Implicitly, they were meant to illustrate another season. We are in early autumn, here. Who would have expected of the city-loving Eliot these rich observations of village nature?

Certainly, the feeling that cements them like brick upon brick in the secluding wall of the poem does not betray Eliot's already known sensibility. But, this time, we actually see the succession, the explicit connections between one image and another. Houses, an open field, a factory, a by-pass, a field-mouse trotting, and winds breaking in through loosened panes. 'Houses live and die', we are told. The images replace one another constantly. It feels as if the ground itself were wheeling over and over, mixing

flesh, fur and faeces,
 Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.

A short moment of 'empty silence' arrests this mad succession of life and death. Somebody leans against a bank, while the open field is bathed in a golden light. It happens one unknown afternoon, not far from a pleasantly darkened 'deep lane / Shuttered with branches'. A van passes toward the village. The warm haze, almost



unreal (like a saintly aura) absorbs the sultry light. Evening is drawing near. In a fit of gothic disposition, Eliot advises: 'Wait for the early owl'.

The night that follows is described by Eliot under the influence of Germelshausen. At least this is what Eliot states in some letter. In the legend of that village, the Pope punished the people of a whole parish: they were neither to live, nor to die. They just sank alive under earth, and only once every hundred years were they allowed to come above and enjoy life for the space of a single day. This undeniably impressive waiting suited Eliot's mood. Utterly devoid of bitterness, it mixes now and after ('memory and desire', *The Waste Land* would have put it):

In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire.

A faint thought of Yeats' eternal flames (*Byzantium*) which 'cannot singe a sleeve' may pass across our minds. Only Eliot does not go the same way. No question of forever in this time-ridden poem. They do come to life, these sad living ghosts, but, in good Eliotian tradition, this life cannot help smelling of death:

Round and round the fire
Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,
Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
Lifting heavy feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
Mirth of those long since under earth
Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

A reassuring image of death, though. Death buried in an all-preserving earth. Another dawn, another day. The waters of the sea, wrinkled by wind at the break of day, are as benevolent as the earth. The poet fears no place, no time whatever. He merely whispers:

I am here
Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.

Soon afterwards, the second part of the quartet lets us know that the houses are all gone under the sea, the dancers under the hill. Winter is upon the land. Snow and the late November wind kill the creatures of the summer heat. Late roses are stifled by snow. Snowdrops writhe under the feet of the passers-by. For a short while, we are



back into the mood of *The Waste Land*: the ‘cruellest month’, the cruelty of all seasons, the cruelty of all ages. The bewilderment of human beings who will never learn how to welcome tomorrow. All through our lives we seem to be

... in a dark wood, in a bramble,
On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,
Risking enchantment.

There is no such thing as acquired experience, or old age wisdom:

The only thing we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

This second part does not sound serene. The ‘Long hoped calm, the autumnal serenity / And the wisdom of age’ are said to be a mere ‘receipt for deceit’ (masterly assonance). The least Eliot is able to do here is to milden his recurring restlessness by acknowledging that:

That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

And he leaves it at that. A death and life struggle with meanings, these *Quartets* indeed are. The ‘poetry’ in them does not seem to matter, at first sight. It does matter a lot, at the deeper level of the poet’s mood and spirit of innovation.

Following the more abstract third and fourth parts, the fifth resumes the same idea:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living.

Complication, then, is Eliot’s fear. The fear of not being able to understand, to reach the heart of light. This is, poetically, a fertile uncertainty. The words may stagger, but the poet’s hand is firm. He is basically daring and determined:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years –
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l’entre deux guerres* –
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating



In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
 Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
 By strength and submission, has already been discovered
 Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
 To emulate – but there is no competition –
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
 And found and lost again and again: and now under conditions
 That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
 For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

This long quotation reveals what Eliot had in mind when he mentioned the wisdom of 'humility'. A humility versus the word. Strange humility, that of a poet supported by the self-consciousness that he can master any word he chooses. Humility which is an understatement of poetic magic powers. This is, then, the beginning and the end, the theme of *East Coker*: Eliot's unshattered and loving belief in the WORD.

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The narrative intention, which could be detected in *The Waste Land*, can just as well be identified in the *Quartets*. *Burnt Norton* was the time of the 'first world' (first love), the memory of the 'ridiculous waste sad time'... *East Coker* sounded like a fortune teller's words: look at the wheel of fate, a beginning never comes without dragging behind it the end of a lifetime. *THE DRY SALVAGES* (1941) is the moment of mature pain, bravely experienced. In an essay published by *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (*The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet*) in 1960, Eliot confessed that his second quartet

begins where I began, with the Mississippi; and ends where I and my wife expect to end, at a parish church of a tiny village in Somerset.

On the wall of his tomb, in East Coker, the following lines were actually carved:

`in my beginning is my end`
 Of your charity
 pray for the repose
 of the soul of
 Thomas Stearns Eliot
 Poet
 26th September 1888 – 4th January 1965
 'in my end is my beginning'.

The pain in the third quartet is lacerating. The poet feels excruciated, and this is the reason why the third is the most humane, the most direct, the most appealing of the *Four Quartets*. Reticent Eliot comes out of his hiding, giving an account of his mature inner life. The spiritual burden placed upon it is heavier than Sisyphus himself



would have been able to push uphill. But the feeling of pain is Eliot's depth; without it, he invariably sounds superficial.

The way in which the soul makes visible its tragedy is interesting in this third quartet. *The Waste Land* and *Ash-Wednesday* were a frantic carnival of faces contorted by despair. *The Dry Salvages* is purged from dread. If there is anything as serene suffering, it is here that Eliot best approximates it.

These *Dry Salvages*, Eliot explains, are a mispronunciation of the French 'les trois sauvages'. They are a group of rocks with a lighthouse on them – a spot that must have brought about the death of many a ship and many a sailor. They rise near Cape Ann, Massachusetts – a place where Eliot used to spend his summers while a teenager. It is not for the first time that the dreamland of the sea bewitches Eliot's lines.

Prufrock wished he would live at the bottom of that mysterious and (he thought) reassuring world; he hated his own world of towns, rooms, aggressive females. The drowned Phoenician sailor in *The Waste Land* also undergoes the well-known Shakespearian change into a more precious and more enduring substance than life: 'those are pearls that were his eyes'. Eliot hardly wrote any poem without touching with his fingertips images of water, of the sea. So does *The Dry Salvages*. It openly states:

The river is within us, the sea is all about us.

The river is likened to a 'strong brown god'. It is menacing, 'sullen, untamed and intractable'. Bridges may solve the problem of crossing it in towns, but so much the worse for the city-dwellers if they forget about its hidden powers. One line unpleasantly reminds us of *The Rock*, when it speaks of townspeople as 'worshippers of the machine'. Eliot did not have it in him to denigrate urban landscapes. We learn later that water, the river, witnesses all human ages, all seasons of life; the nursery bedroom, the flowers in April, the grapes on the table in autumn, as well as the halo of the gaslight on winter nights. In *The Waste Land*, the river headed for the sea. We find here the same cruel, yet life-giving sea.

The images are picturesque, though marked by a heavy sadness. The sea eats the edge of the land: a feeling of universal solitude hovers about the words. Its beaches are littered with bones of starfish, horseshoe crab, and whales. The sand looks like a 'torn seine', which (resourceful assonance) 'tosses up our losses': a broken oar, rags of foreign dead men. In short, a gloomy image of the sea echoing lost voices. This is the image of a shipwreck, which Eliot would have liked to squeeze into *The Waste Land*, if Pound had not advised against it. Fear lurks nearby: yet, somehow we feel sure that, this time, Eliot will manage to hold it at bay.

He hurries to let us know: 'People change, and smile: but the agony abides'. Old scars are unveiled here and there: 'the calamitous (or last) annunciation', 'the bitter apple and the bite in the apple' (another interesting assonance, reminiscent of the 'wrath-bearing tree' in *Gerontion*, the 'withered apple-seed' in *Ash-Wednesday*, V), the 'prayer of the bone on the beach' (alliteration). The sign of this agony is the fatal group of rocks, *The Dry Salvages*. They embody the Biblical punishment uttered by God to Adam (*Genesis*, 3):



Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of the wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee saying, Thou shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life (...); In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.

Ash-Wednesday is not far behind. One thing, however, is changed, and this change makes all the difference. Eliot is no longer trying to terrify. He shuns away his anger and revolt. He tries to look resigned. He speaks of horrors in a blank voice. We do hear about wailings, withering, wreckage, unprayable prayers, failing powers, wastage, primitive terrors, and 'sudden fury'. We feel we are drifting together with the poem on the waves of a whimsical sea. Our life, like anybody's, is a 'drifting boat with a slow leakage'. The future, we are told, like the past, has 'no destination'.

If the substance of the images is the same, what has changed must be Eliot's poetic manner. Hope has deserted him. Wishful thinking has been replaced in the poems by hopeless thinking. Eliot's intelligence has taken a tamer course. He urges now:

Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers.

His tired sensibility means to show he has given up striving to catch a star. He has abandoned his dread of the future, hoping to adapt to another season of his life, a rather futureless age. The change from sickening to soothing is welcome, especially when it so masterfully renders the abstract in concrete terms:

... time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.
When the train starts, and the passengers are settled
To fruit, periodicals and business letters
(And those who saw them off have left the platform)
Their faces relax from grief into relief,
To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours.
Fare forward, travellers! not escaping from the past
Into different lives, or into any future;
You are not the same people who left the station
Or who will arrive at any terminus,
While the narrowing rails slide together behind you;
And on the deck of the drumming liner
Watching the furrow that widens behind you,
You shall not think 'the past is finished'
Or 'the future is before us'.
At nightfall, in the rigging and the aerial,
Is a voice descanting (though not to the ear,
The murmuring shell of time, and not in any language)
'Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging;
You are not those who saw the harbour
Receding, or those who will disembark.



Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind (...).

Eliot the literary critic repeatedly put aside from him 'flights of abstruse reasoning'. Of course, literary critics will go on dissecting the philosophy of the *Quartets*. Eliot's wish was that poetry should be felt before it was understood. This is one of the reasons why these *Quartets* should be handled carefully. We must learn to protect the fleeting feelings they delicately outline. Philosophy may have had a part in these poems, but only as a discipline of mind. The main thing is that these *Quartets* reveal something unique in Eliot's poetry: a warm directness.

This evidence of attachment to man and life in Eliot's creation can hardly be stressed enough. Reading these lines, we realize why Eliot hated those critics who called him learned and cold. The more the poet writes about indifference, peace of mind, 'detachment' and so on, the more attached he feels to everything. His former ties to the world were grumbling. He kept feeling hurt and howled out. This new attachment is spiteless; it is generous and warm. The warmth of a poet who hides in his poetry a heart for all seasons. In his own words, a

music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.

The end of the third quartet, poem of middle-age, in which sadness is cunningly overshadowed, sounds encouraging, in spite of, or just on account of mastered fears. It speaks of us all, we,

Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying;
We, content at the last
If our temporal reversion nourish
(Not too far from the yew-tree)
The life of significant soil.

Whether called humility, or directness, Eliot's mood is here a hymn to man's conquered fragility.

*

LITTLE GIDDING (1942) is the last of the *Quartets*. The title comes from the name of a village in Huntingdonshire. During the plague of 1625, this village became a kind of secluded religious ideal community. Man's fight against death by plague may have suggested to Eliot some sort of religious, spiritual access to the ever after. Consequently, the poem is rather abstract, or, in other words, fleshless. It speaks, for instance of the 'unimaginable zero summer'.



We are back in *Ash-Wednesday*, which tried to approximate eternity (the disappearance of all ends and deaths) by means of self-devouring images. We find in *Little Gidding*: ‘midwinter spring’, ‘a glare that is blindness’, ‘never and always’, ‘England and nowhere’, ‘the timeless moment’, ‘the recurrent end of the unending’, and so on. The fourth quartet tries to build the image of an untrue end. If you manage to visualize the idea of death in your mind, then death may sometime be defeated, who knows? Yeats used his imagination many times to the same effect. Browning too, if we think of his *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. A dark tower, which meant the end of one kind of life, but by no means the end of everything. This dark tower will catch up with the traveller anywhere, along whatever way he may be walking. It simply springs out of the depths, and swallows the bodies. The intellect survives. It survives – in Browning’s imagery – to blow the final sound of the horn, and tell the story. Eliot’s image looks very much the same. From wherever you come, he says, by whatever ‘route’, at whatever time of day, and wherever the mystery may overtake you, it will always be the same:

If you came this way
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion.

Eliot writes as if he had already experienced the jump, as if he were already inside the image he is building. Herein resides the novelty of this quartet. Eliot’s mind looks ahead into what he always dreaded, and his soul envelops the sight into a carefree mood. A poem for the last season. He actually sees himself beyond being. He has access to the world of the dead. He speaks to the ghost of his dead master:

So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another’s voice cry: ‘What! are you here?’
Although we were not. I was still the same,
Knowing myself yet being someone other –

The poet’s visionary mind splits into two: one half is sent ahead to witness the nightmarish vision, the other stays behind and watches the show with the contentment of the creator. This vision of death Eliot produces is in fact the best proof that his other half means to stay alive. The whole quartet becomes a sight of life exacerbated.

Eliot’s images come closer and closer to Yeats’ eternal fire in *Byzantium*. The same as with Yeats, the ghost that addresses Eliot gives him no clue, no encouragement as to what is to come. The apparition moves ‘in measure’, like a dancer in the flames. Last of all, it vanishes ‘on the blowing of the horn’. Eliot’s visionary half is left agape: his words are not any more convincing than Yeats’. Even the ghost’s terrifying description of the horrors of old age resembles Yeats’ words (‘fastened to this dying animal ...’). Some successful alliteration here and there reminds of Eliot’s skill (‘faces and places’). Quotations turn up again, and allusions to mythical times. A shirt of fire, which symbolizes love, some religious female’s visionary words, to the effect that



... all shall be well
And all manner of things shall be well.

We learn about some ‘gifts reserved for age’, such as:

First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse ...

Gerontion had already told us all this, which obsessed Eliot at thirty-two, as well as at fifty-four. The tone was rougher, more pathetic:

I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch ...

At the age of fifty-four, Eliot is no longer the young man who looks back (or ahead) in anger. He has become an author of all moods and for all seasons. He merely notices. His lack of rage cannot fail to impress, even deeper than the rhetorical winter of his young discontent.

The end of *East Coker* is – what else could it be called? – sweetly rending:

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

Somebody who knew Eliot, some younger acquaintance, once wrote that, towards the end of his life, Eliot had become a little too ‘pontifical’. By which he must have meant that Eliot was no longer the diffident young man, afraid he would not last through all the seasons of good literature. The remark may have had some truth in it. Eliot had matured since his first *Prufrock* volume, and he was entitled to this tone of benevolent self-assurance, which charms the more experienced reader of the *Quartets*.

Eliot’s newly acquired protective air makes us share without distaste his metaphysical visions in *Little Gidding*. The landscape is weird. Midwinter spring, unimaginable zero summer, ‘suspended in time between pole and tropic’. The day is ‘brightest with frost and fire’, ‘the brief sun flames on the ice’. In short, contraries are



reconciled. The mere thought of reconciliation is new for Eliot. *Ash-Wednesday* simply joined opposed, self-devouring words. It defied the reader.

Twelve years later, Eliot had learned how to propitiate his readers. He had broadened his own understanding, in order to have these contraries coexist. Which amounts to as much as saying that, by the time he wrote his last major poem, and at the time he was beginning his playwright's work, Eliot had finally found his way to hearts, to readers of all tastes, to minds of all seasons.

We follow him through *Little Gidding* without objecting at the half-understood lines. We believe him when he assures us that whatever it was we thought we have come for 'is only a shell, a husk of meaning'. We side with him, because he sides with us. He speaks of 'other places', 'which may just as well be the end of the world' ('the sea jaws', 'a dark lake', a desert, a city), yet we are not afraid, because he himself guides us without fear. After a season of hope, one of dread, and another of pain accepted, a season without hope, without dread, without pain has come. It is a season without emotional barriers, one of generous sensibility.

'Prayer' is recommended. We have reached this mysterious final point, Eliot informs us, not in order to 'verify', to instruct ourselves, to satisfy our curiosity or to imagine we shall have something unheard of to retell when we go back to the land left behind. There is no way back. This irreversibility was not accepted in *Ash-Wednesday*. That was the reason why all the imploring words there (pray for us, help us, teach us ...) were desperate prayers. The prayer Eliot mentions here is not really a supplication. It is a strong discipline of the soul. As he says,

... prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.

His life-long literary love, Dante, interferes again in his lines. As time goes by, Dante's echoed words change. First they can be detected in picturesque, hell-like images. Later, the same vision of after-death is accompanied by Dante's fearlessness, which Eliot previously 'chose but oppose'. Eliot still descends, but he no longer withdraws. He climbs down the ladder of language, into poetic depths which are so devoid of misgivings and shudder that, to a certain extent, they reassure their author himself.

These *Quartets* are soothing for the readers, but also for the man who wrote them while learning how to master his own hell. The poet finds a new belief in life. Even the dead seem to be more alive than the living. Eliot listens to them reverently:

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

They teach him that the seasons follow their course, that

... Last season's fruit is eaten
And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.



Words go by with their season and, the ghost insists, these consumed words must be forgotten and forgiven. The poet's fate is sad, as Eliot draws it here:

'For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.

Eliot's first major critical essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, was written in a different mood. It forced the words of 'next year' upon the words of years gone by. At that moment, Eliot found it natural that today should have its say. It was, for him, the season of certainty, youth and fight. He could not have foreseen, when *The Sacred Wood* was issued, that his work would experience first praise, then abuse, and that the two would alternate till the next millennium, even after that.

Fact is that, as his seasons followed one another, Eliot's aggressivity relented. His poetic energy did not weaken, it merely learned how to face the world. As shyness vanished, its grotesque masks were dismissed. Prospero was letting go of his Ariel. An air of affectionate freedom stole into the *Quartets*:

... This is the use of memory:
For liberation – not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

Faces and places, memories and hopes, all these vanish away, 'into another pattern'. What pattern? That of the 'end'. A false end, since it is in fact a beginning.

Why should we celebrate
These dead men more than the dying?

Whether this dying is really the beginning of another 'pattern', I must confess that I am not convinced. Eliot's words fail him here. But it is a superb failure, if we consider an image like the following:

... And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem is an epitaph.

Valéry dreaded such 'epitaphs', finished poems, finished projects. He was the more sceptical of the two. Paradoxically, however, or because of that very reason, he was the more prolific, as well.



Eliot proves in these liberated *Quartets* a certain virginity of thought. The submissive candour of a brain which has travelled far out, though not to the utmost (sterile) limits, like Valéry. Far enough to open all gates, and beckon us in. If we accept his invitation, which puts an end to the last quartet,

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.
 Through the unknown, remembered gate
 When the last of earth left to discover
 Is that which was the beginning;
 At the source of the longest river
 The voice of the hidden waterfall
 And the children in the apple-tree
 Not known, because not looked for
 But heard, half heard, in the stillness
 Between two waves of the sea.
 Quick now, here, now, always –
 A condition of complete simplicity
 (Costing no less than everything)...

For or against Eliot, several generations have already shared his first shyly aggressive, then wisely candid poetic moods. Some prefer the forceful grimness of Eliot's colder spring. Others enjoy reading Eliot's only outspoken love poem (*A Dedication to My Wife*, 1958), the last he ever wrote (or the last published). It first came out as an introduction to his last play:

To whom I owe the leaping delight
 That quickens my senses in our wakingtime
 And the rhythm that governs the repose of our sleepingtime,
 The breathing in unison
 Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other
 Who think the same thoughts without need of speech
 And babble the same speech without need of meaning.

No peevish winter wind shall chill
 No tropic sun shall wither
 The roses in the rose garden which is ours and ours only

But this dedication is for others to read:
 These are private words addressed to you in public.

Seven years after writing these lines, Eliot passed away. Time and literary tides have carried him up and down, but it hardly matters. His poetry survives. There is, among others, a mysterious reason for that: his crab-like backwardness. Quite a number of his poems must be misread, or read backwards. His sensibility advances



gradually from shyness to freedom. Tenderness, the core of Eliot's nature, comes out in the open at the very last. Here is a poet who lived his own life backwards.

Eliot was a poet whose endeavours to record all his ages in poetry left us with the theatrical image of a contorted life. A dramatist who showed more lyrical tenderness in his plays than in his early poems. A literary critic whose dramatic intelligence never had a moment of dull rest. A writer who has bewitched generations of readers, among whom, definitely, the author of this book. The reason? T.S. Eliot is and will always be AN AUTHOR FOR ALL SEASONS. At least I hope so.

T.S. ELIOT'S MAJOR WORKS

POETRY

Prufrock and Other Observations, 1917
The Waste Land, 1922
Ash-Wednesday, 1930
The Rock, 1934
Collected Poems 1909-1935, 1936
Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats, 1939
Four Quartets, 1944
 East Coker, 1940
 Burnt Norton, 1941
 The Dry Salvages, 1941
 Little Gidding, 1942
The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950, 1952
Collected Poems, 1909-1962, 1963

DRAMA

Murder in the Cathedral, 1935
The Family Reunion, 1939
The Cocktail Party, 1950
The Confidential Clerk, 1954
The Elder Statesman, 1959

LITERARY CRITICISM AND ESSAYS

The Sacred Wood, 1920
For Lancelot Andrewes, 1928
Dante, 1929



Selected Essays, 1932
The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, 1933
After Strange Gods, 1934
Elizabethan Essays, 1934
Essays Ancient and Modern, 1936
The Idea of a Christian Society, 1939
Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, 1948
On Poetry and Poets, 1957

DISSERTATION

Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley, 1964

POSTHUMOUS VOLUMES

To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings, 1965
Poems Written in Early Youth, 1967
The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot, 1969
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