



1962

# The Critical Orientation of T. S. Eliot

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## Recommended Citation

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THE CRITICAL ORIENTATION OF T. S. ELIOT

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

January

1962

## LIFE

Sister Honora Remes was born in New Prague, Minnesota, March 23, 1937.

She was graduated from New Prague Public High School, June, 1954, and entered the Community of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, September, 1956, after one year at the College of St. Teresa, Winona, Minnesota.

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## PREFACE

In present form, the thesis aims to examine inductively Eliot's thought with regard to four basic aspects of literature: poetry, poet, poem, and [effect upon] audience. It is hoped that the evidence gathered on these points will indicate more objectively the emphasis upon the qualities of the poet in Eliot's theory of art, and will suggest its own conclusions. Eliot's work is here related to a type of criticism which may be called qualitative: it looks for certain select qualities in the poet's mind and sensibility and illustrates various traits of the poet by often quoting significant passages and by citing certain configurations of language from his work. The investigation, however, does not "prove" that Eliot is wholly a qualitative critic, or that he is any other type of critic. Rather, it aims to provide a synthesis of Eliot's critical thought according to these four aspects, and to discover, if possible, with which emphasis he is most concerned.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO ELIOT'S CRITICISM

Although Thomas Stearns Eliot has been, from the beginning of his critical career in 1917, associated with a movement later known as the "New Criticism," he is in certain respects anything but "new." In fact, his work has roots in a critical tradition which is more than two thousand years old. Yet he is today's critic as well. And one of the most fundamental concerns of this study is to assess the value of his work from a contemporary point of view. As a "New Critic," Eliot merges into a twentieth-century critical milieu which deserves careful consideration. For only by seeing his work in its historical and ideological context can its import be really understood and its orientation discerned. And so, with these goals in mind, a historical survey of the context of Eliot's work will be presented by way of introduction.

The "New Criticism," Eliot's most proximate critical milieu, is a movement which must be acknowledged as part of a broader one sometimes referred to as "Modern Criticism." This larger trend (which Eliot traces back to the French critic, Sainte-Beuve) appears to be chiefly characterized by the introduction of extra-literary disciplines such as psychology, biology, history, sociology, and so on, into the realm of criticism in order to elucidate the work of art. That many of these sciences have developed greatly in the past century and a half in the organization of theory abounding in such transferable terms as "evolution," "myth," apperzeption mass, the "sub-conscious dream-wish,"

etc., is a fact which has made their contribution to literature at once more vital and more dangerous, depending upon the discretion used by practicing literary critics. Earlier criticism, flourishing from the Renaissance through the neoclassical age, appears to have been confined to two general types:

(1) those "practical notes on the art of writing" evolved by poet-critics, and  
 (2) the professional criticism of those "Arbiters of taste," who consciously judged contemporary works as good or bad, according to the laws of good writing which came down from the theory of the ancients.<sup>1</sup> But with the nineteenth century's introduction of analogical criticism, i.e., that which interprets a given work in the light of certain non-literary propositions, the literary endeavor became more complex.

Actually, the assimilation into literary criticism of data from related fields--whether art be considered primarily mimetic, expressive, pragmatic, or anything else--is not unhealthy in itself. The new approach could ask in a more comprehensive way some old questions of literary criticism: "What is poetry?" "What makes a good poem?" "How does it come about?" "How does it affect the reader?" It could be, as Stanley Edgar Hyman says, "the organized use of non-literary technique and bodies of knowledge to obtain insights into literature."<sup>2</sup> Used with prudence, it would seem to be a valuable method.

But the investigations of "Modern Criticism" sometimes overstepped their rightful limits. Mme. de Staël's emphasis upon "reciprocal relationships

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<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, "Experiment in Criticism," Literary Opinion in America, ed. Morton D. Zabel (New York, 1937), pp. 12-13.

<sup>2</sup>The Armed Vision (New York, 1948), p. 3.



between literature and a society's law, manners, and religion," Sainte-Beuve's and Brunetiere's concern for historical and biographical data, and Matthew Arnold's ethical preoccupation--later found in More and Habbitt--were all explorations of a particular cause of literature carried farther than had ever before been attempted. These, while extending the possible avenues of approach to the field of literary criticism, sometimes lost sight of the fact that it was literary.

There appeared, however, in the first decade of the twentieth century, that reaction which has since acquired a reputation as the "New Criticism." Still in the process of development, the movement is perhaps too young to be thoroughly defined or evaluated. Descriptively, this new trend denotes a return to intensive critical analysis of text and a re-emphasis upon the stylistic or technical aspects of literature. Historical, social, and biographical implications are thus relegated to a subsidiary role.

As early as 1910, J. E. Spingarn employed the term new criticism as the title for a seminal essay. His was a call to arms against the extravagant dogmatism and impressionism of the nineteenth century. It advocated a "new criticism" which would fuse creative instinct with aesthetic judgment to effect a deeper sensitivity to the imaginative will of the artist.<sup>3</sup> Then, more than twenty years later, in 1941, John C. Ransom seems to have brought the word into popular use in his rather elaborate study called The New Criticism.

The movement which the term signifies has gained momentum and variety in time. Although the critics associated with its growth are by no means a

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<sup>3</sup>"The New Criticism," Criticism in America: Its Function and Status (New York, 1924), pp. 1-46.

homogeneous group, many have similar or at least related interests. In America, writers such as Allen Tate and J. C. Ransom, Cleanth Brooks and Robert P. Warren form the nucleus of the "Southern School." They have emphasized respectively the need for vital verbal "violence," a concern for the ontological primacy of the poem as an entity, the importance of paradox and dramatic contrast as evidenced in poetic imagery, and a concern for the traditional moral implications of poetry.<sup>4</sup> Their common bond seems to be an interest in the signifying power of language well used. The "New Criticism" claims, besides, other representatives of a more independent stature. Individuals such as I. A. Richards, especially interested in the role of literature in an accelerated world of science, Ivor Winters, scrutinizing the verbal and structural element of poetry, R. P. Blackmur, intent upon the connotative power of language--all have invested the movement with a multifaceted significance which cannot be easily generalized. One general objective, however, seems to be a demonstration of the peculiar nature of knowledge gained through literature, in contrast to that derived from science and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> William Van O'Connor's proposal that a designation more useful than "new" would be "analytic" criticism, also suggests the nature of their common ground.<sup>6</sup> For as Brooks testifies in his "Brief for the Defense," the movement is "very

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<sup>4</sup>Hyman, op. cit., pp. 92-94.

<sup>5</sup>William Van O'Connor, An Age of Criticism, 1900-1950 (Chicago, 1952), p. 169.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

much concerned with the characteristic structure of poetry. . .because it realizes that the way a thing is said determines what is said."<sup>7</sup> It aims "to find out what the poem says, as fully and as precisely as possible," while remembering that the total meaning of a thing depends first upon its being what it is. In short, for the New Critic, the poem is, above all else, a poem.

Now the concern for critical tools of "comparison and analysis" which Eliot has consistently shown, helps to account for his frequently being pictured as a type of herald of the "New Criticism." His first major collection of essays, the Sacred Wood (1920), was a manifesto of his desire that a balance be struck among the ethical, deterministic, impressionistic, and rhetorical leanings of various "Imperfect Critics." Eliot's "Perfect Critic" was one who could combine qualities that he found in the French critic, Rémy de Gourmont: a remarkable degree of "sensitiveness, erudition, sense of fact and sense of history and generalizing power."<sup>8</sup> He would be one who could bridge the gap, so to speak, between adventuresome souls like Anatole France and those who, after Boileau, would make the laws of poetry instead of finding them. Eliot's own critical program, writes Morton Zabel, was "an attempt to educate the exact and conscientious sensibility . . .through discipline in the ideal conditions and formal principles of art, and only then in the ulterior purposes which art may serve."<sup>9</sup> To what extent this was accomplished can be discerned only from

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<sup>7</sup>Cleanth Brooks, "The New Criticism, A Brief for the Defense," American Scholar, XIII (Summer 1944), 294-295.

<sup>8</sup>The Sacred Wood, (London, 1960), p. 14. N.B. This collection of essays, written before or during the year 1920, will be hereafter abbreviated as SW.

<sup>9</sup>Zabel, Literary Opinion in America, op. cit., p. xi.

a careful study of Eliot's criticism. Yet if, for the present, he be granted this aim, it is not difficult to understand why his name can be found explicitly or implicitly in almost any account of the "New Criticism."

It is this attempt to reassert the value of literature as a primarily aesthetic experience which links both Eliot and the movement in general to a long critical tradition. His twentieth-century respect for literature as literature has roots in the stylistic treatises of Aristotle and Longinus; it has a propensity for Sidney's faith in a poetry that could charm old men from chimney corners and young children from play, and even more affinity to the concerns of a neoclassic practitioner like Dryden. With Coleridge, Eliot shares an interest in the psychological aspects of the creative process; and like Wordsworth he is concerned with the relationship between conversation and poetic diction. Thus, it may be said that Eliot and other contemporary critics offer, in some respects, a good restatement of various aspects of that well-balanced criticism which has come down from every age since classical antiquity.

Eliot's work, however, is also conditioned by more proximate influences. A native of St. Louis, Missouri (born 1888), Eliot made his way to Harvard where he listened to Irving Babbitt and George Santayana and graduated in 1910.<sup>10</sup> Eliot's subsequent educational experience abroad, studying French literature and philosophy at the Sorbonne (1911) appears to have left its mark

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<sup>10</sup>These facts and other biographical data noted in this thesis have been principally compiled from the following sources:  
 Hugh Kenner, The Invisible Poet (New York, 1959).  
 Leonard Unger, T. S. Eliot (Minneapolis, Minn., 1961).

upon his criticism. He dates his contact with the French Symbolists back to these early years. Returning to Harvard, Eliot pursued graduate study in philosophy through 1911-1914, and began a dissertation on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley which was completed two years later. The year 1915 found him attending Marburg University in Germany as a Frederick Sheldon Travelling Fellow, listening to Professor Eucken as he pounded the table with unimaginable conviction exclaiming, "Was ist geist? Geist ist . . ."<sup>11</sup> With the outbreak of World War I, Eliot took refuge in England. There he attended Merton College, Oxford, and married Vivien Haigh-Wood in 1915. From this time on, England became the center of Eliot's affairs. He earned a living by such miscellaneous occupations as teaching at High Wycomb Grammar and Highgate Junior Schools, book reviewing for the International Journal of Ethics and the New Statesman, working in a foreign exchange department of Lloyd's Bank, acting as assistant editor of the Egoist (1917-1919), and assuming editorship of the Criterion for seventeen years (1922-1939). The early years in London afforded him opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with writers like Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, Richard Aldington, Virginia Woolf and Ford Madox Hueffer. They provided, in short, a rich background of literary and extra-literary experience with which to develop his thought. Moreover, Eliot's interest in Francis H. Bradley, has been profitably explored in the recent works of Kenner and Unger noted above, as also by Séan Lucy,<sup>12</sup> Bradley, a British philosopher noted for his dialectic and his repudiation of the

<sup>11</sup>"The Perfect Critic," SW, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Séan Lucy, T. S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition (New York, 1960). Cf. specifically: Kenner, op. cit., pp. 52 ff.

extremely utilitarian and sensationalistic trends in the tradition of empiricism, evolved an original variation from the Hegelian system of Absolute Idealism. Bradley's influential work, Appearance and Reality (1893), presents his famous theory of "the degrees of truth." Kenner and Unger suggest that the study of Bradlean philosophy may be a partial explanation for the quality of uncertain humility in his style, his explanation of the poet's apprehension of reality and the critic's of poetry, his desire that word achieve union with object, and in general, Eliot's whole awareness of the complexity of experience.

With regard to influence from the modern French critics, the frequency with which Eliot himself mentions them indicates his interest in their efforts toward responsible analysis. Eliot's definition of the critic's task is, in fact, an echo of de Gourmont's "Eriger en lois ses impressions personnelles, c'est le grand effort d'un homme s'il est sincère."<sup>13</sup> Gourmont's conception of style as the "specialization of sensibility"<sup>14</sup> called for a criticism which inquired into the work before generalizing about it, which would aspire "eriger en lois," only after an analysis conducted with no preconceived notions. The emphasis which Gourmont, Laforgue, Baudelaire, Valéry, and Gautier had placed upon approaching literature through the individual sensibility appears to have arrested Eliot's attention. Lucy suggests that Eliot found in these men a congenial "mood," a concentrated imagery capable of expressing it,

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<sup>13</sup>"The Perfect Critic," SW, p. 1: "To develop into laws one's personal impressions, that is the grand effort of a man if he is sincere."

<sup>14</sup>Van O'Connor, op. cit., pp. 67-68, quoting Gourmont. Primary source not indicated.

interesting rhythm and metre, and the vivifying influence of a foreign language.<sup>15</sup>

But the more immediate critical atmosphere in England made itself felt as well. That Eliot was greatly interested in Ezra Pound ever since they met in the fall of 1915 can be deduced from the quantity of essays which he devoted to Pound's work.<sup>16</sup> With Pound, Eliot appears to have shared a predilection for concrete diction. Both solicited a poetry in which there would be absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the interest of I. A. Richards (to whom Eliot attributes much of the "New Criticism") in the psychological implications and special usage of language in poetry is also relevant to Eliot's criticism: the efforts of both men have been toward an intensive, but balanced study of poetic style.<sup>18</sup> Eliot's preoccupation with artistic sensibility also has affinities to the Jamesian ideal of rendering "the implications of things," and with James's related counsel: "Try to be one of those people on whom nothing is lost!"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Lucy, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>16</sup>One book, two introductory prefaces, and a review concerning Pound are listed in the primary sources of the bibliography of this thesis.

<sup>17</sup>F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot, 3rd ed. enl. (New York, 1958), p. 61: Pound quoted; primary source not indicated.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Walter J. Bate, ed., Criticism, the Major Texts (New York, 1952), pp. 573-574.

<sup>19</sup>This observation concerning James's Art of Fiction is substantiated by M. C. Bradbrook in "The Critic and the Man of Letters," where she remarks upon Eliot's apparent indebtedness to the critical prefaces of James. Cf. T. S. Eliot, rev. ed. (London, 1951), p. 47.

But tracing affinities is at best a nebulous occupation; speculations about "influences" can often, for lack of substantial evidence, resolve themselves into the problem of whether the chicken or the egg came first. Innumerable persons and events have left their marks upon Eliot's criticism, and, it is neither possible, nor in this context desirable, to discern the effect of each.<sup>20</sup> But it would seem pertinent to note with S. E. Hyman that Eliot, in his highly derivative criticism, "has digested his influence so smoothly and with such little apparent effort that he seems almost a primary source."<sup>21</sup>

Eliot's critical stature is by no means a subject of unanimous consent. Negative reactions to the question of his value range from Ivor Winters' description of Eliot as an "extremely contradictory theorist . . . a literary determinist . . . and a historical relativist,"<sup>22</sup> to H. M. Jones's appraisal of his obscure, "deep, violet atmosphere" of style.<sup>23</sup> Allen Austin concludes that, as a practicing critic, "Eliot is weak in interpretation, rarely going beneath the surface of a poem to reveal its implication; he lacks the power of sustained analysis; and he is not dependable as a judge of whole works or of

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<sup>20</sup>Cf., for example, Herbert Howard, "T. S. Eliot's Criterion: The Editor and His Contributors," Comparative Literature, XI (Spring 1959), 97-110. He suggests the influence which Eliot's position as editor of the Criterion played in his development: "Eliot was constantly learning from his contributors, not borrowing from them but receptively absorbing and reconstituting what they suggested to him . . . he had extraordinary capacity for perceiving the power in another man's experience and extending himself to absorb it." (p. 109).

<sup>21</sup>The Armed Vision, op. cit., p. 97.

<sup>22</sup>The Function of Criticism, Problems and Exercises (Denver, Colo., 1957), p. 16.

<sup>23</sup>"The Legend of T. S. Eliot," Saturday Review of Literature, XIV (September 19, 1936), p. 13.



the complete work of any author."<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, evaluations such as Braybrooke's Symposium, M. Gargon's "Compliment," and parts of Ransom's work (cf. bibliography) enthusiastically remark Eliot's critical virtues. Still others, among whom are Northrop Frye, S. E. Hyman, and Edmund Wilson, find both cockle and wheat. While noting respectively that Eliot's method depends too much upon individual taste,<sup>25</sup> that his is "obviously the aesthetic of a suffering man,"<sup>26</sup> and that he is too adept at building literary "Houses-that-Jack-Built" which exact comparison with a great many poets to elucidate the work of any one,<sup>27</sup> each has concluded, nevertheless, that Eliot's contribution to criticism is great. Wilson, for example, in 1936, found his "occasional dogmatism" redeemed by an "ability to see beyond his own ideas, his willingness to admit the relative character of his own conclusions."<sup>28</sup> From all this, one may at least conclude that many complex factors enter into the evaluation of any critic, and that perhaps after all, there can be no such thing as a wholly "disinterested" judgment. The honest way seems simply to

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<sup>24</sup>"T. S. Eliot as a Literary Critic," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (New York University, 1956), pp. 136-137.

<sup>25</sup>Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, New Jersey, 1957) p. 18.

<sup>26</sup>Hyman, The Armed Vision, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

<sup>27</sup>"T. S. Eliot," Axel's Castle (New York, 1936), pp. 93-124.

<sup>28</sup>How far this opinion has been modified, the writer is at present unable to gauge. It appears that development of Wilson's characteristic sociological trend has modified his once favorable view of Eliot considerably. The situation is an interesting comment upon the fact that in dealing with two living critics, no final statement of their relative "positions" is possible.

begin by acknowledging the fact that all value judgment is to some degree dependent upon the perspective of the person judging, and then to work from that realization, through the tallying of many perspectives, toward the goal of objectivity. Principles may be demonstrated, but the practical application of them to literature in literary criticism is another thing, and a highly personal matter. One can, indeed, lead a man to the problem; but one cannot tell him how to think.

Indirect appraisals, after all, are most valuable when combined with a first-hand experience of the criticism. The basic approach to Eliot's work must be a thorough acquaintance with it. Thus a brief examination of the nature, quantity, topical divisions, and major premises of the essays will be here in order. In the first place it should be noted that Eliot's work has been most often occasional in nature. Lucy states that in the years 1917-1921, Eliot produced some seventy pieces of recorded prose, most of which originated in the form of book reviews.<sup>29</sup> His output appears to have reached its apex, however, in the years following; for another tabulation records 221 pieces of periodical publication in the years 1920-1932.<sup>30</sup> For the next decade (1932-1942)

<sup>29</sup>T. S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition, op. cit., pp. 94-123. Lucy suggests that conformity to the exacting demands of periodical literature is partially responsible for Eliot's stylistic compression, the generalities forced upward from the exigencies of some particular occasion, and the ironic sensitivity of tone which readers of the critical journals allegedly expect. The Athenaeum public was supposedly in need of periodical shaking from conservative lethargy, while the Egoist subscribers were to be held back by traditional reins. The point is, that what Eliot wrote and the way in which he wrote it, seems often to have been conditioned by the peculiar demands of occasional work.

<sup>30</sup>Mervyn Williamson, "Survey of T. S. Eliot's Literary Criticism, 1917-1956," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (University of Texas, 1958), p. 298.

only 144 are registered, and many of these are sociological and theological in content. This fact invites consideration of the topical divisions within the essays.

As Eliot's career passed through the latter 1920's, the nature of his criticism appears to have undergone modification. Lectures such as the Charles Eliot Norton series given at Harvard (1932-1933), prefaces, and introductory appraisals were more often used as the vehicle of communication and afforded opportunity for more systematic presentation of thought. Williamson suggests that in the later essays, not only is the "main theme" more discernible and analyzed more fully, but the conclusions are at once more definite, and more prone to admit the tentative nature of any human "conclusion."<sup>31</sup> With these points in mind, the criticism might be placed into three general categories which appear to receive successive emphasis with the progress of Eliot's career: (1) essays appraising a particular poet or elucidating a particular work, (2) those more concerned with the general nature of poetry and criticism, and (3) those which approach literature through the relative channels of its theoretical or sociological implications, or which primarily deal with "cultural" problems as such.

In the span of over forty years of active criticism, bounded by "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) and by On Poetry and Poets (1957), Eliot has made some apparently contradictory comments. He has repeated himself upon other occasions, and has also set down certain generalizations and maxims which invite quotation and which have been popularized out of their context.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 429.

To weigh such remarks, one might suggest that Eliot's method for appreciating the great poet be applied to his own work: for only by reading it as a whole can one arrive at a balanced idea of the individual tenets. In his introduction to Valéry's Art of Poetry, Eliot suggests the attitude he would wish to be taken toward his own occasional work:

I prefer to read critical essays in their original form, not reshaped at a later date into an artificial unity. Indeed, I regard repetitions and contradictions in a man's writing as valuable clues of the development of his thought. When I have, myself, occasion to write on some subject which I have treated in different circumstances in the past, I prefer to remain in ignorance of my opinion of twenty or thirty years ago, until I have committed to paper my opinion of today. Then, and not till then, I wish to refresh my memory. For if I find a contradiction, it is evidence that I have changed my mind; if there is a repetition, it is the best possible evidence that I am of the same mind as ever. An unconscious repetition may be evidence of one's firmest convictions, or of one's most abiding interests.<sup>32</sup>

Again, in a prefatory note to the 1950 edition of Selected Essays, Eliot admits not only a frequent "quarrel with my own opinions" arising from the fact that the essays were written over a span of years, but an even greater inclination to criticize the way in which those opinions were expressed: "As one grows older one may become less dogmatic and pragmatical; but there is no assurance that one becomes wiser; and it is even likely that one becomes less sensitive. And where I have adhered to the same opinions, many readers may prefer them in the form in which they were first expressed."<sup>33</sup>

Eliot has sometimes been criticized--and in some respects, it would seem,

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<sup>32</sup>"Introduction," The Art of Poetry, by Paul Valéry, trans. by Denise Follot (London, 1958), p. ix.

<sup>33</sup>1st pub. 1932, 3rd ed. enl. (New York, 1950). N.B. This volume will be henceforth abbreviated as SE.

rightly so--for the nebulous manner with which he uses terms such as "personality," "emotion," and "feeling" in his writings.<sup>34</sup>

"Rudyard Kipling," however, makes an apology: "where terminology is loose, where we have not the vocabulary for distinctions which we feel, our only precision is found in being aware of the imperfection of our tools, and of the different senses in which we are using the same words."<sup>35</sup> That indicates, at least, an awareness of the problem.

Eliot has certain attitudes which may also be noted, concerning the scope of the critical labor. To his mind, criticism is a process originating from any number of pertinent questions about literature. These, once asked, exert a centripetal force and draw to themselves more and more aspects of the whole concern. Accordingly, he writes:

To talk of poets as makers and as inspired does not get us very far, and this notion of inspiration need not be pressed for literalness; but it shows some perception of the question 'how does the making of poetry come about?' To talk vaguely of poets as philosophers does not get us very far either, but it is the simplest reply to the question: 'what is the content of poetry?' similarly with the account of poetry in its high moral purpose, the question of the relation of art and ethics appears; and finally, in the simple assertion that poetry gives high delight and adorns society is some awareness of the problems of the relation of the poem to the reader and the place of poetry in society. Once you have started you cannot stop.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Eliseo Vivas, "T. S. Eliot," Creation and Discovery, Essays in Criticism and Aesthetics (New York, 1955), pp. 13-50; for a good example of this view.

<sup>35</sup> On Poetry and Poets (London, 1957), p. 251. N.B. Hereafter, this volume will be abbreviated as OPP.

<sup>36</sup> "Apology for the Countess of Pembroke," 1932, Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, repr. (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), p. 50. N.B. Hereafter, this volume will be abbreviated as UPUC.

This view of the essential unity to which all the co-ordinates of literature finally converge seems a marked trait of Eliot's "dialectic." A conscious or unconscious effort towards balance and integration can be found in much of his composition. As for the ideal critic, he is simply a man who will "have something to say always about the art of a writer which will make our enjoyment of that writer more conscious and more intelligent."<sup>37</sup> It is not his business to coerce or to pronounce final judgment: "He must simply elucidate: the reader will form the correct judgment for himself."<sup>38</sup>

Despite a rhetorical tendency Eliot found in Swinburne's criticism, he nevertheless valued it in two respects. It had knowledge of the subject and a real interest in it. Thus, he wrote: "Critics are often interested--but not quite in the nominal subject, often in something a little beside the point; they are often learned--but not quite to the point either."<sup>39</sup> Both interest and knowledge, then, required direction to their proper end, the poem. Eliot had besides, a special respect for the practitioner's criticism, inasmuch as the best of it incorporated what he refers to repeatedly as a highly developed sense of "fact." Contrasting the critic who has this sense with the spirited ebullience of a certain member of the "Browning Study Circle," he adds: "It is merely that the practitioners have clarified and reduced to a state of fact all the feelings that the member can only enjoy in the nebulous form; the dry technique implies, for those who have mastered it,

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<sup>37</sup>"A Note on the American Critic," SW, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup>"Perfect Critic," SW, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup>"Swinburne as Critic," SW, p. 24.

all that the member thrills to; only that has been made into something precise, tractable, under control. That, at all events, is one reason for the value of the practitioner's criticism--he is dealing with his facts, and he can help us to do the same."<sup>40</sup>

Eliot's particular interest in Dryden as "the normal critic" is noteworthy; for the qualities which arrested Eliot illustrate the ideal to which he himself appears to aspire. He values Dryden for setting down carefully theories about the practice of his art, and for illustrating through his remarks about individual poets, his more direct concern for "the proper art of poetry."<sup>41</sup>

The field of criticism, then, Eliot briefly defines as "that department of thought which either seeks to find out what poetry is, what its use is, what desires it satisfies, why it is written and why read, or recited; or which, making some conscious or unconscious assumption that we do know these things, assesses actual poetry."<sup>42</sup> It is bounded by two signposts: (1) the speculative intellect asking, "What is poetry?" and (2) the aesthetic appreciation and judgment evaluating, "Is this a good poem?" Actually, neither of these questions is self-sufficient; each is asked and pursued for the sake of the other.

Eliot's criticism, quantitatively speaking, appears to be somewhat more occupied with the latter. Yet even his most concrete essays on particular

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<sup>40</sup>"Function of Criticism," 1923, SE, pp. 19-20.

<sup>41</sup>John Dryden, Poet, Dramatist, Critic (New York, 1932), pp. 62-63.

<sup>42</sup>"Introduction," UPUC, p. 16.

poets exhibit a generalizing activity which rarely loses sight of the larger concern. These essays, which explicate the works of individuals ranging from Virgil to Irving Babbitt, exemplify another recurring theme of his criticism. The critic's perennial concern should be, not so much to determine the poet's "rank," as to distill the quality which accounts for his present-day vigor: "to squeeze the drops of the essence of two or three poems; even confining ourselves to these, [that] we may find some precious liquor unknown to the present age."<sup>43</sup> Eliot's interest in the individual poet appears prompted by a desire to discover stylistic qualities of lasting value which may, in turn, effect an ever developing standard by which to measure poetry, and especially new poems. In this sense, his description of Ezra Pound at work is especially relevant. It is also applicable at home: "He does not say 'A., B., and C. are bad poets or novelists,' but rather, 'The work of X., Y., and Z. is in such and such respects the most important work in verse (or prose) since so and so!'"<sup>44</sup> Like Dr. Johnson's allegorical Lady of the Rambler, No. 3, Eliot's ideal critic has access to both sceptre and torch. And he also finds that under the circumstances (of literature, life, and human lore) the "unextinguishable torch, manufactured by Labour and lighted by Truth," is the proper instrument for his task.

In organizing Eliot's essays into a synthesis revolving upon the four fundamental approaches to literature--i.e., through consideration of poem,

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<sup>43</sup>"Andrew Marvell," 1921, SE, p. 251.

<sup>44</sup>Ezra Pound, His Metric and Poetry (New York, 1917), p. 21.



poetry, poet, and effect--the thesis does not primarily aim to pass judgment upon his critical "system." For critics, especially living ones, do not simply hold static positions. They move in orientations which are, to some degree, resilient. Rather, through a description of emphasis placed upon the poem in relation to "universe," "agent," and "audience," the attempt is to discover whether Eliot's essays have a discernible orientation towards any one aspect of art. The effort to explain the nature and worth of a poem by considering its artistic source, the means by which it becomes particular in form, and its effect upon an audience is not new; perhaps other categories could be found. But those chosen are comprehensive, and may be found with varying connotations in any critic's work. As M. H. Abrams remarks, each term "varies, both in meaning and functioning, according to the critical theory in which it occurs, the method of reasoning which the theorist characteristically uses, and the explicit or implicit 'world-view' of which these theories are an integral part."<sup>45</sup>

Schorer, Miles and McKenzie also employ this method in elucidating the contributions of various critics, noting that critics have traditionally discerned three "causes" of art: (1) art as imitation of nature, entailing the analysis of those structural qualities which are the means of this imitation, (2) art as expression, which investigates the artist's experience as matter for the poem, and (3) art as communication, in which the critic is most concerned with the end of the poem, as it functions to elicit a certain response from its audience.<sup>46</sup> Thus, an analysis of Eliot's criticism

<sup>45</sup>The Mirror and the Lamp (New York, 1953), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup>Mark Schorer, J. Miles, and G. McKenzie, eds., Criticism, the Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment, rev. ed. (New York, 1958), p. viii.

based upon the key points suggested above should provide at least negative evidence concerning his commitment to any one.

Since 1930, Eliot's critical theory has been much examined. Many of these investigations, however, are partially dated because of the fact that Eliot has since added to his critical oeuvre. Of the more recent studies which analyze Eliot's criticism per se--not tracing some theme such as tradition, or comparing Eliot with another critic--two should here be mentioned. Allen Austin's "T. S. Eliot as a Literary Critic" (1956) analyzes Eliot's critical standard of "intensity" in the poem thoroughly, but with what appears to be a somewhat unyielding view of Eliot's "double standard."<sup>47</sup> The other, Mervyn Williamson's "Survey of T. S. Eliot's Literary Criticism, 1917-1956" (1958)<sup>48</sup> is a well-balanced, historically organized inquiry into the development of Eliot's work, to discern its direction in the different stages of interest.

The plan of the present thesis, however, described above, is distinguished from either of these by the more fundamental concerns of its structure, and the particular conclusions which may arise therefrom. Its synthesis will be drawn primarily from Eliot's own literary criticism, while the opinions of other critics will be used for background reference. The views of Eliot presented below are offered, unless otherwise indicated, as characteristic of

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<sup>47</sup> Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, New York University.  
i.e., Eliot's method of judging the poem's literary quality through a discrimination of style and its greatness through "authoritative" application of orthodox values of tradition is criticized as being overly dependent upon standards extrinsic to the poem.

<sup>48</sup> Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Texas.

his thought. Those tenets have been stressed which appear to be found consistently in his work as a whole. Eliot will often be quoted directly. For despite the yawning Charybdis--incomplete digestion of the material--which threatens an extensive concentration upon text, this method would seem to be the best means to communicate Eliot's critical tone, as also to circumvent the Scylla of misleading paraphrase. Eliot's relationship with other critics of the past and present will be pointed out when such links appear significant. Many of the essays noted have been published in Eliot's collected works or as introductory notes to another author's work. However, some use is made of periodical sources, to supplement his more important "themes."

It is hoped that the "Conclusion" of this thesis will clarify the evidence offered throughout that Eliot's critical orientation is a qualitative one: because of his real concern for excellent aesthetic quality in the work itself and perhaps because of his own involvement in the writing of poetry, the bulk of his essays appears most concerned with those requisite qualities which the poet--as man and as artist--needs, to create the best possible poem. At present, however, one can only remark with Celia of the Cocktail Party, the humbling nature of all itineraries:

The destination cannot be described;  
 You will know very little until you get there;  
 You will journey blind. (Act II)

It now remains to discover what Eliot himself has said concerning poetry, poet, poem, and effect, and to let the conclusions come.

## CHAPTER II

### POETRY

The nature of poetry, a term traditionally used in English literature to designate the aesthetic word-imitation of an object, is perhaps the most basic concept towards which critical inquiry may be applied. In its broadest connotation, poetry refers not only to "poems" distinctive by their verse pattern, but to imaginative literature as a whole, including such genres as the novel, short story, and drama. To posit an answer to the essential "whatness" of any particular poem is to attempt a definition of poetry. Partial though its result may be, Eliot's inquiry into the subject is well worth investigating.

Generally considered, poetry is an activity which has been natural to man since the first movements of civilization. And Eliot, like others who have traced its manifestation into the realm of theory, has fastened upon certain conclusions which this chapter will describe. His answers to "What is poetry?" "How is it distinguished?" as well as his historical view of its development in tradition will be first described. Subsequent inquiry will be made into Eliot's standards for measuring literary value, and the implications these hold for the responsible critic.

It is well to note at the outset that the word poetry in Eliot's vocabulary has several different, if related, uses. Poetry may be considered (1) an art, (2) the consolidated result of this art, "all poems," and (3) a quality discernible in any particular instance of imaginative literature.

To begin with, then, Eliot has consistently dwelt upon the nature of poetry as an art, or skilled activity, having an aesthetic function. In this sense, poetry is "a means of communicating those direct feelings peculiar to art, which range from amusement to ecstasy; the first impression it should make is to the feelings of art, and the first questions it should excite are questions of art."<sup>1</sup> This statement, locating the cause of poetry midway between the shoals of extreme expressionistic and communicative theories, is in some respects what might be called an "affective" explanation of art. As distinguished from mere talk about an artist "expressing" or an audience "being impressed," its emphasis is upon "art feelings," and the reader's first response is properly directed toward "questions of art." Poetry is a skilled making of an object, Eliot remarks, in an effort to establish the importance of craftsmanship before effervescence: its process is analogous to the making of "an efficient engine."<sup>2</sup>

The effect of this conscious labor, however, differs considerably from the engine in its raison d'être; for its primary aim is aesthetic. Poetry, in this sense, is a uniquely right setting down of things as they are into the language of art. Eliot describes its scope in terms of a life-bound circle which cannot be trespassed without violating its nature; "on the one hand actual life is always the material, and on the other an abstraction from actual life is a necessary condition to the creation of a work of art."<sup>3</sup> From the

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<sup>1</sup>"A Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry," Chapbook, II (March 1920), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>"Four Elizabethan Dramatists," 1924, SE, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup>"Four Elizabethan Dramatists," Ibid., p. 93.

process there must emerge an ordered apprehension of the object imitated, which cannot be caught in the whirling vortex of work-a-day life.

Real poetry, for Eliot, has an enduring, significant vigor. It has for its general content "either a presentation of thought, or a presentation of feeling by a statement of events in human action or objects in the external world."<sup>4</sup> which, when fittingly set into form, has an unpredictable vitality. This is not the place to expand upon his concept of poetic subject matter, or res. It may, however, be noted from the above that while poetry's immediate object of imitation is human thought and feeling, the means of imitation is "a statement of events in human action or objects in the external world." In this partly "romantic", partly "classical" account of what poetry is to imitate, art neither expends its energy wholly upon a world unrelated to man, nor loses its character in the mental maze of a psycho-rapt poet. In sum, poetry appears in its first sense to be an act of creation resulting in something "new," which, while taking root from conscious craftsmanship and the imitation of "Nature" in all its human implications, results in a comment upon reality which "cannot be wholly explained by anything that went before."<sup>5</sup>

Poetry in another connotation, considered in the light of its result, is said by Eliot to consist of "everything written in verse"<sup>6</sup> which a sufficient number of the best minds have considered to be of lasting value. This definition, inseparable from his concept of literature as a tradition,

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<sup>4</sup>"The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," 1919, SW, pp. 64-65.

<sup>5</sup>"Frontiers of Criticism," 1956, OPP, p. 112.

<sup>6</sup>"The Modern Mind," 1933, UPUC, p. 139.

will be more fully considered under that aspect. One might recall, however, that this view of poetry has behind it such predecessors as Longinus, Reynolds, and in a sense, Arnold, whose standards also marched to the beat established by the best judges and works of succeeding generations.

Thirdly, poetry designates a certain quality or caliber of form and matter fused excellently, occurring within the poem, and "flashing forth" with something of the lightning-bolt power of an older word, sublimity. This quality Eliot discerns as being subject to considerable modification by the individual gifts of the particular poet. Voicing his concern for the kind of greatness manifested in Keat's critical Letters, rather than for its degree, Eliot cautions that poetry is the end-result of many complex elements: "People tend to believe that there is just some one essence of poetry, for which we can find the formula, and that poets can be ranged according to their possession of a greater or less quantity of this essence."<sup>7</sup> This quality can, it appears, not only be in parts of poems, where emotional intensity is highest,<sup>8</sup> but is sometimes sustained throughout long poems, and even found throughout the oeuvre of a poet like Shakespeare. From this, it seems that Eliot's quality poetry enjoys either a hardier capacity of endurance or a less rigorous test for detection than the Longinian sublime. It is, at any rate, a quality which may exist in either verse or prose (the first being distinguished by its

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<sup>7</sup>"Shelley and Keats," 1933, UPUC, p. 98.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Mervyn Williamson, op. cit., for a more extensive analysis of this observation, p. 554 f.

metrical form) whenever the subject-matter is exceptionally well informed.

Poetry, of course, has a purpose. This aspect will be treated more fully in Chapter V, "Effect of Poetry upon an Audience." It is necessary to touch upon it here, however, in order to grasp Eliot's concept of the nature of poetry. So, eliciting a perception of order in reality--without which vision man cannot long control his need to feel important--poetry leads the perceiver "to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation." It leaves man at the frontier of the supernatural, as it were, "to proceed towards a region where that guide can avail us no farther."<sup>9</sup> This clear differentiation between the humanizing role of poetry and the divinizing role of religion would seem to be present throughout Eliot's work; however, his concern for the matter appears more pronounced in the essays written toward the year 1930 and after (Cf. "Dante," 1929; "Arnold and Pater," 1930; "Shelley and Keats," 1933, and "Religion and Literature," 1935). For Eliot, then, poetry has remained a Virgilian type of attendant, aiming to induce "refined and intellectual pleasure."

This is no new contribution to poetic theory. Eliot shares the honors with seventeenth-and eighteenth-century predecessors such as Dryden and Johnson. They correspondingly owed a debt to Sidney's "delightful teaching," and he, in turn, had probably pondered the "inform or delight" clause of Horace's Art of Poetry. Quantitatively speaking, Eliot's criticism appears

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<sup>9</sup>"Poetry and Drama," 1959, OPP, p. 87.



to place more emphasis upon "delight." And in the light of his assumed task of criticizing the use of poetry as a vehicle for propaganda (as described in Chapter I) the subsidiary position given to "teach" is understandable. Upon occasion, however, the implied moral purpose is overtly clarified. Commenting upon "that happy age" of Dryden, he conjectures his own ideal: "The purpose of poetry and drama was to amuse; but it was to amuse properly; and the larger forms of poetry should have a moral significance; by exhibiting the thoughts and passions of man through lively image and melodious verse, to edify and to refine the reader and auditor."<sup>10</sup>

It had, moreover, power to inculcate attitudes. And in Eliot's view, that poetry was preferable which illustrated what he found in Dante, a "saner" attitude toward the perplexities of life.<sup>11</sup> If Eliot gives the aesthetic function of poetry much weight, he indicates as well, in an introduction to the Art of Poetry, its instrumental value. Valéry's syllogism, Poetry: Prose:: Dancing: Walking (or Running),<sup>12</sup> is dismissed. Poetry, in other words, cannot be finally distinguished from prose in terms of its end, i.e., "delightful teaching" vs. practical information. If it be granted that "delightful" prose is poetry, Eliot insists that no way remains by which to differentiate the two. His proffered solution is to use the intermediate term verse, to indicate that metrical "poetry" which may or may not rise to the refined quality of

<sup>10</sup> John Dryden, Poet, Dramatist, Critic, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

<sup>11</sup> "Preface to 1928 ed.," SW, p.x.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Valéry, The Art of Poetry, op. cit., p. xvi.

poetic excellence. In the last analysis, poetry is not to be defined by its aim; its worth is not wholly encompassed either by effects aesthetic or utilitarian. "Though the amount and the quality of the pleasure which any work of art has given since it came into existence is not irrelevant," writes Eliot, "still we never judge it by that; and we do not ask, after being greatly moved by the sight of a piece of architecture or the audition of a piece of music, 'What has been my benefit or profit from seeing this temple or hearing this music?'"<sup>13</sup> Poetry's power to amuse and edify comes, then, from an autotelic nature crying (like Hopkins' Sonnet #34), "what I do is me, for that I came." It exists as an entity, with at least logical priority to its being an influence. If in actual practice, this distinction is non-functional, it warrants consideration in the realm of theory.

Poetry as discerned is another matter. As each critic approaches the vast field of poetry from his own particular point of experience, bearing certain peculiar gifts and interests, and evolving for himself a specific route of travel, he may or may not acquire a knowledge of the entire field. From personal reading one organizes a kind of pattern which Eliot calls "poetry." It is a pattern peculiar to oneself, and is both the effect and the cause of "taste."<sup>14</sup> The present usage of this latter term, so popular in criticism, ought to be clarified from the start: In Eliot's sense, the word taste supposes "an organization of immediate experiences obtained in literature, which is individually modified in its shape by the points of concentration of

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<sup>13</sup>"Introduction," 1932, UPUC, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

our strongest feelings, the authors who have affected us most strongly and most deeply. It cannot be had without effort, and without it, all our likings remain insignificant accidents."<sup>15</sup> It is, in other words, the graded significance one gives to experienced poems, which placement is conditioned by individual needs and temperament and by the personal concept of "poetry," formulated from past experience. Individuals, moreover, may arrive at an appreciation of the same poems as good, or at a consensus of the alleged "good," by quite different routes of taste:

Even when two persons of taste like the same poetry, this poetry will be arranged in their minds in slightly different patterns; our individual taste in poetry bears the indelible traces of our individual lives with all their experience pleasurable and painful. We are apt either to shape a theory to cover the poetry that we find most moving, or--what is less excusable--to choose the poetry which illustrates the theory we want to hold . . . And it is not merely a matter of individual caprice. Each age demands different things from poetry, though its demands are modified, from time to time, by what some new poetry has given.<sup>16</sup>

This allowance for the importance of individual interests in the formation of personal taste, which is in turn modified by the general temper of the age, is ultimately a sensible platform for judging poetry. Controlling this view by a recognition of objective, developing standards, Eliot strikes what seems to be a via media between impressionism and authoritarianism. Outlining his "method of attack" upon poetry and criticism thereof, he writes:

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<sup>15</sup>"The Education of Taste," Athenaeum, June 27, 1919, 521.

<sup>16</sup>"The Modern Mind," UPUC, p. 141.

We can learn something about poetry simply by studying what people have thought about it at one period or another; without coming to the stultifying conclusion that there is nothing to be said but that opinion changes. Second, the study of criticism, not as a sequence of random conjectures, but as readaptation, may also help us to draw some conclusions as to what is permanent or eternal in poetry, and what is merely the expression of the spirit of an age, and by discovering what does change, and how, and why, we may become able to apprehend what does not change.<sup>17</sup>

One drawback to this position presents itself in the consideration that a fully developed standard would have to span a time like Marvell's "ten years before the flood . . . Till the conversion of the Jews." And in the meantime, all the "vegetable" critics must content themselves with knowing that, formulated as their standard of poetry may be for the present, it will in turn undergo correction by a succeeding generation, and that they themselves will be the means by which this correction comes. An alternative to this humbling acknowledgement is to deny that objective standards suffer change. As Newman once suggested, doctrinal "change" is a characteristic sign of life (the Development of Christian Doctrine) and it should be remembered that to admit growth does not necessarily impose upon the critic a relativistic mode of judgment. Change arises not from the standard but from the limited nature of human perspective.

These considerations may be summed up by saying that for Eliot, there is a "poetry"--rarely, if ever, discerned from the experience of any one person. And there are kinds of poetry which reveal themselves to the individual taste with more or less readiness. And a quirk perennial among critics is "the impression that they were talking about all poetry, when they were only talking

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"Introduction," UPUC, p. 27.

about the kind of poetry they liked."<sup>18</sup>

Viewed historically, "all poetry" is encompassed in Eliot's word tradition. It is a germinal whole, unfolding new facets of its essential nature each time a new poem is assimilated: "The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are re-adjusted; and this is the conformity between the old and the new."<sup>19</sup> According to Eliot, however, human and temporal limitations decree that the perfection properly belonging to the whole be achieved only by a "division of labor" process. This idea implies that each different era, when scrutinized as a whole, is found to pursue some specific literary excellence. The result is an intensive realization of some particular genre, or an emphasis upon a particular use of res or verba, which is achieved at the cost of some other possible development. The pendulum swings only in time, as it were. Thus he writes, "The sacrifice of some potentialities in order to realize others, is a condition of artistic creation, as it is a condition of life in general."<sup>20</sup> Only by comprehending both extremes of the pendulum's sweep can one appreciate the totality of tradition.

A second characteristic of tradition as developed in time is that it includes not only the great works, but also those minor poems which enhance

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<sup>18</sup>"A Review," Criterion, XIII (October, 1933), 151-154.

<sup>19</sup>"Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, *SW*, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup>"What is a Classic," 1944, *OPP*, p. 60.

and give a continuing significance to the major works. In fact, the masterpiece is not so regular a dispatch as the morning paper. Consequently, Eliot's idea that "secondary works" are needed to provide a setting or background of reference, which gives context to the occasional "great" deliveries, is logical. These minor works place the great poem and assure its contact with both greatness which has gone before and greatness which is yet to come. The continuity of tradition, Eliot's sine qua non of its greatness, depends much upon "that body of writing which is not necessarily read by posterity, but which plays a great part in forming the link between those writers who continue to be read."<sup>21</sup> Evolving from the efforts of many writers of many different ages, tradition continually reflects upon itself, as it were, re-evaluating its stock in the light of new acquisitions, yet projecting "old" works into vital context with the new, where they "assert their immortality" in contemporary form. Its movement is always toward integration. It might be questioned here whether Eliot's concept of poetry or tradition as a perfect whole is actually valid.<sup>22</sup> Our tradition perhaps lacks much in the way of possible excellence. Nevertheless, it is true that in poetry, as in any endeavor for excellence, the over-all direction is toward this perfection, though the horizon appears continually to recede.

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<sup>21</sup>The Classics and the Man of Letters (London, 1942), p. 8.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Seán Lucy, op. cit., "Introduction," for a development of this point. Lucy argues that Eliot has invalidly transferred the concept of Christian orthodoxy into the realm of literature.

Granted Eliot's concept of poetry as an art, a quality, and a traditional whole, how is its value to be judged? By what tools of measurement can its degree of excellence be recognized? Reduced to lowest terms, his standard as presented in "Religion and Literature," appears to resolve into an analysis of poetry by three basic criteria: Is it (1) a presentation of reality, (2) fittingly said, and (3) worth saying? Investigation of the first two, which are literary standards per se, will reveal whether the poem can stand by itself as literature, and thus claim a right to be included in "what we like." The third, Eliot presents as a means by which it is judged or not judged to be great literature--what, in the fullest sense, "we ought to like."<sup>23</sup> This two-fold method clearly involves a recognition of the traffic between literature and life, and gives both taste, and conformity to authorized literary and ethical norms a role in the act of judgment. But it is not an essential approach. The method, as explained by Eliot, springs rather from the particularly heterogeneous nature of accepted theological and ethical standards of modern times. Ideally, the literary standard proper to criticism would be applied to literature written within a commonly shared theological and moral tradition. But in the measure that the common realization of "What is Truth?" disintegrates, the critic must complete his evaluation of literary excellence by an application of those explicit standards of truth and morality which culminate in Christianity. "In ages like our own," Eliot writes--and his conclusion has some relevance to every age since Eden's--"the 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must

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<sup>23</sup>1935, SE, p. 353.

remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards."<sup>24</sup> Eliot holds that although there cannot and must not be a "Christian" poetry which isolates itself from "secular" developments, still, the Christian critic is bound to "maintain consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world." He adds: "So long as we are conscious of the gulf fixed between ourselves and the greater part of contemporary literature, we are more or less protected from being harmed by it and are in a position to extract from it what good it has to offer us."<sup>25</sup>

With regard to "testing" literature, an interesting similarity between Eliot and Longinus suggests itself. For Eliot, the worth of any particular piece of poetry appears to reside partially in the collation of favorable votes from "all those of respectable authority of different ages,"<sup>26</sup> and in its ability to attract "as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible."<sup>27</sup> Worthwhile poetry is, moreover, that to which "one readily returns."<sup>28</sup> The common criteria seem to be intensity and duration of enjoyment. Pronouncement

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<sup>24</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>26</sup> "Johnson as Critic and Poet," 1944, OPP, p. 189.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Austin Warren, "Literary Criticism," Literary Scholarship (Chapel Hill, 1941), p. 155: Warren supports this observation of Eliot's Longinian norm, quoting from On the Sublime: "But what is rightly great will bear close inspection, attracts us with an irresistible fascination and imprints itself deeply in our memories. Consider a passage fully and genuinely excellent only when it pleases all men in all ages."

<sup>28</sup> "Matthew Arnold," 1933, UPUC, p. 105.



of worth, then, is a verdict "which can only be slowly and cautiously applied" by fallible judges who successively affirm or correct the lucidity of their predecessors.<sup>29</sup> Artist and audience being limited in vision, their judgments will be necessarily interested ones, partially modified by their past experiences and present affinities. In this sense, there is "for each time, for each artist, a kind of alloy required to make the metal workable into art;" and each generation will be partial to its own.<sup>30</sup> Reality, like a tonic, is swallowed best in a pleasing concoction. In like manner, the most acceptable poetic form will vary with the special demands and appreciations of each age.

Confronted with the concrete work, however, the critic has a more detailed program of analysis. This will be described more specifically below in Eliot's concept of poem. For the present it is enough to note that besides this measurement from the "outside" by the standard of duration, and "by the standards of language and of something called poetry,"<sup>31</sup> each instance of poetry must be granted its own particular rules, formulated in part by the kind of poetry it is, and by its own peculiar "haecceitas," the outer reflection of what might be called the "instress" of the poem.

The good critic reads widely and discriminately, to steep himself in both the literature and the literary criticisms of the past, until a pattern or sense of "poetry" begins to form in his mind. The concept he perceives

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<sup>29</sup>"Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, SW, pp. 50-51.

<sup>30</sup>"Matthew Arnold," 1933, UPUC, p. 109.

<sup>31</sup>"Milton," 1936, OPP, p. 146.

is modified by individual taste, not necessarily into distortion, but into a more or less partial aspect. He approaches poetry, aware that moral, social, religious, and other implications do not constitute its right to be considered as such, but knowing as well that too myopic a concentration upon "pure" technique will delete from the experience all significance.<sup>32</sup> The critic's duty toward poetry is, in short, to admit his personal taste, to apply explicit literary standards formulated from tradition by the test of duration, and to frame these into perspective by the theological and ethical standards of Christianity. Finally, he must acknowledge that this, the best evaluation he can offer, is but a partial view of poetry, which will undergo development even "to the very edge of doom."

Having inquired into Eliot's concept of the general nature, purpose, and apprehension of poetry, developed and discerned historically as tradition, and into his standards for judging its literary and moral significance, it is now possible to proceed to Eliot's concept of the poet. Whether poetry be considered as an art of making, or as a quality, or as "all poems"--it presupposes a craftsman, or a qualifying agent whose technical skill and human sensibility combined, effect the poem. It is the poet who is, in this respect, responsible for the tradition of "all poems" called poetry, and who, in this capacity, holds a special position in Eliot's critical thought. This position will now be described.

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<sup>32</sup>"Dryden," 1932, UPUC, p. 64.

## CHAPTER III

### THE POET

Max Eastman's tongue-in-cheek observation that "the poet in history is divine, but the poet in the next room is a joke,"<sup>1</sup> is a succinct comment upon the fact that the artist has ever been something of an enigma to the practical world of affairs. The poet's essential role, how he fulfills it under what stimuli, and to what effect--such questions have intrigued not only the confirmed literary critic, but the man "in the next room" as well. As might be guessed, T. S. Eliot's interest in the formal excellence of poetry leads logically into a pronounced concern for the poet, whose qualities of response and technical skill largely determine the caliber of the poem. The poet's personality and craftsmanship--two words in Eliot's criticism which are often misunderstood<sup>2</sup>are, in short, decisive elements. Implicit in much of Eliot's dialectic is the old maxim, "Action follows being." And in his rather refreshing simplification, "the poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics, the bee makes honey, the spider secretes a filament;"<sup>3</sup> the maxim's application

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<sup>1</sup>Wilbur Schramm, "Imaginative Writing," Literary Scholarship, op. cit., p. 178. Primary source not given.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. F. R. Leavis, "T. S. Eliot's Stature as Critic, A Revaluation," Commentary, XXVI (November, 1958), 399-410. It describes Eliot's "impersonal theory" as "absolving the artist from the need to have lived" (p. 401).

<sup>3</sup>"Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," 1927, SE, p. 118.

to poetry is made direct. To form an idea of the poet's weight in Eliot's criticism is, then, the purpose of the chapter on hand. Eliot's mind on the nature of the poet, his qualifications, his job as poet, and his method of accomplishing it will be first examined. Subsequent attention will be given to the poet's relationship with himself, with the educational world at large, and with his audience. Explanations of why he writes, influences upon his development, and standards by which he is evaluated are to be studied in turn. The amount of consideration which Eliot has devoted to these aspects is alone indicative of their importance in his critical thought. At the end of this chapter, it will perhaps be easier to see why.

#### i. Nature of the Poet and His Role

What, then, is the poet? Various metaphors function throughout the essays which suggest an answer to this query. One of the most basic describes him as a responsible, "finely perfected medium" through which the turmoil of reality passes and is crystallized into the order of art.<sup>4</sup> As artist, the poet is a mediator, bridging the gap that properly separates poetry from the haphazard experiences of life and from his own subjective reactions to them. The concept personality is a drawback to Eliot's poet-as-medium, in the sense that it implies an assertion of merely individual feeling and thought, of personal interest too self-absorbed to transmit a statement of universal significance. Generally speaking, however, the word personality has unfortunately been used to imply everything from the basic dignity of an individuated intelligence and

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<sup>4</sup>"Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, SW, p. 53.

free will, to the means by which one can "win friends and influence people." It suffers in Eliot's criticism not only from this, but also from the fact that he himself employs the term in different senses at different times without overtly distinguishing its meaning.

The poet, at any rate, is not commissioned to express a "personality." Rather, like a straight-faced ambassador from reality, he presents a poem which is itself "a medium...in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways."<sup>5</sup> Sharpened by a constant effort toward detachment from the merely subjective, the poet functions almost as a prism through which experiences that would dazzle the naked eye are refracted into their proper colors, as it were, and so contemplated. Through the angles light passes ordered but unchanged. Moreover, while working into poetry a "mood" quite particular to himself, the poet may, like Tennyson, write a poem which is strangely expressive of some dominant temper of his age.<sup>6</sup> For just as a seer need not understand the import of his prophetic utterance, Eliot suggests that the writer of poetry may be in some measure an instrument recording "something which he does not wholly understand--or which he may even misinterpret when the inspiration has departed from him."<sup>7</sup> This reference to instrumentality is probably Eliot's closest affinity to Shelley's concept of the poet-prophet. Craftsmanship ordinarily has the preference. For him, a line exists which distinguishes the artist creating from the man enduring; and the more definitely

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>6</sup>"In Memoriam," 1936, SE, p. 288.

<sup>7</sup>"Virgil and the Christian world," 1951, OPP, p. 122.

it is drawn, the more allegedly perfect will be the art. The poet is like Caryll Houselander's "Reed of God," hollowed out and pierced with stops, and fitted for melody. But in Eliot's context, he must be the flute's player as well.

This consideration of the poet as medium is seminal to two other of Eliot's analogies, both of which appear in "Tradition of the Individual Talent." He is an omnivorous receptacle, "seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together." And he is also a catalyst, which, like the platinum shred, works quietly upon its material, transmuting this substance into a new composite, leaving no trace of itself in the effect, and remaining besides, "inert, neutral, and unchanged."<sup>8</sup> The latter simile, however, has certain limitations, for as Sean Lucy remarks, the poet's whole personality can be radically affected in the writing of a poem.<sup>9</sup>

But the importance of these analogies should not be over-emphasized. Figurative language of both critic and student aside, Eliot appears to define the poet in two fundamental concepts. He is a man, and he is an artist. And he is a particular one in each case. The poet's personality (i.e., character as man) gives significance to his work so that "it is Shakespeare chiefly that is the unity."<sup>10</sup> And by the same token, maturation of either the man or the artist will co-operate toward better art. An excerpt from an early essay on

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<sup>8</sup>"Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, SW, pp. 54-55.

<sup>9</sup>Lucy, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>10</sup>"Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," op. cit., p. 119.

Philip Massinger illustrates how interested Eliot could be in the proper role of personality in art, and why it is incorrect to classify his theory as wholly "impersonal."<sup>11</sup> Had Massinger been a greater man," he writes, "a man of more intellectual courage, the current of English literature immediately after him might have taken a different course. The defect is precisely a defect of personality. He is not, however, the only man of letters who, at the moment when a new view of life is wanted, has looked at life through the eyes of his predecessors, and only at manners through his own."<sup>12</sup> For the poet's personality--that is, character, or what Longinus might have called the habit of thinking high and feeling deep--is essential. "Personality," meaning a self-preoccupied assertion of personal interests and emotions, is dangerous. Apparent conflict among the essays seems to come from Eliot's ambiguous use of the same work, and his gradually increased emphasis upon the poet's moral responsibility, rather than from a volte-face of theory.

The poet, moreover, is a man of skill, Eliot's interest in both Poe and Valéry stems largely from the fact that both were intent upon the poet's technical role. Poe presents himself to the critic's eye, "not as a man inspired to utter at white-heat, and not as having any ethical or intellectual purpose, but as a craftsman."<sup>13</sup> Valéry too, invented a new conception of the poet

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. Allen Austin, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19: Making some excellent relationships between Eliot's theory of indirect expression of personality and nineteenth century "individualism," Austin notes that the grounds of Eliot's opposition to the Romantics is the kind of personality they expressed, i.e., one not restrained by an external authority.

<sup>12</sup>"Philip Massinger," SW, pp. 143-144.

<sup>13</sup>"A Dream Within a Dream," *op. cit.*, p. 243.

wherein "the tower of ivory has been fitted up as a laboratory . . . our picture of the poet is to be very like that of the austere, bespectacled man in a white coat, whose portrait appears in advertisements, weighing out or testing the drugs of which is compounded some medicine with an impressive name."<sup>14</sup> These he offers as extreme but stimulating orientations.

In one of the latest manifestations of his own mind on the subject, Eliot summarizes many previously stated views by identifying the poet as a sage, and points out greatness where "two gifts, that of wisdom and that of poetic speech, are found in the same man."<sup>15</sup> It is to this combination of human and artistic excellence that the name of "poet" is finally given. And if it might be predicted that such makers will one day inherit the earth, so also, Eliot finds that "poets of this kind . . . belong, not merely to their own people but to the world."<sup>16</sup> They are leaders in an "unconscious community"<sup>17</sup> of poets. And by surrendering themselves to a common endeavor--the edification of a literary tradition--they transmit through the ages that wisdom in fitting language which is poetry.

All the various qualities proper to Eliot's ideal poet may be expressed, it would seem, in the term poetic sensibility. Implying an especially keen mode of apprehension, of feeling, and of both of these at once, it is on one level, a human response, and on another, the synthetic technical power of the

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<sup>14</sup>"Introduction," The Art of Poetry, op. cit., pp. xix-xx.

<sup>15</sup>"Goethe as the Sage," 1955, OPP, p. 207.

<sup>16</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>17</sup>"The Function of Criticism," 1923, SE, p. 13.



artist working to set his "house" in order. It is the ability to think and feel honestly an experience, at once, as one thing, with reason lending a stabilizing significance to the sense impression, and with feeling permeating thought in the warmth of emotional energy. It presupposes a kaleidoscopic imagination which is constantly and unconsciously making relationships, as the "Metaphysical Poets" asserts, between such unpromising co-ordinates as the patter of a typewriter and the smell of cooking. It can store up the ten-year old's first impression of a sea anemone and use it to throw new light upon a present reading of Spinoza--and use both to write poetry. Moreover, corollaries for this basic attribute of the man manifest themselves in the technical qualities of the artist.<sup>18</sup>

First then, the poet has need of vision. Reacting to the extremely biological account of the origin of poetry, Eliot asserts that an undue interest in the poet's nerves may lead quickly to distortion: "If a writer sees truly--as far as he sees at all--then his heredity and nerves do not matter."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Eliot's concept of the "dissociation of sensibility" might briefly be described as the disintegration of poetic sensibility. He traces its decline from the Jacobean era to the present with somewhat invalid generality. It is true that predominant modes of thought may appear characteristic of an age. But these are by no means inevitable, and "sensibility" may be varied in as many ways as there are individuals thinking and feeling. Among the more interesting historical accounts of this term are: Lucy's T. S. Eliot and The Idea of Tradition, (op. cit., pp. 90-94), and the following article: Frank Kermode, "Dissociation of Sensibility," Kenyon Review, XIX (Spring, 1957), 169-194. Lucy's is a sympathetic outline, tantalizing, but almost too neat, which traces this "dissociation" successively through the Jacobean decline of morals, through ensuing ages of reason, emotion, and materialism. Kermode interprets the "dissociation" as rather a basic problem of Fallen Man. He writes: "The truth is that it is difficult to find a time when a roughly similar situation did not exist" (p. 174).

<sup>19</sup>"Baudelaire in our Time," For Lancelot Andrewes (New York, 1929) p. 96.

In another sense, however, the "nerves" do matter; for they too are part of the prosaic world into which the poet must look, and of which he writes. Commenting upon Racine and Donne, who allegedly espied a good deal more than the heart, he adds that "a poet must also look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."<sup>20</sup> In short, he will see the "heart" and life in general, in a properly limited context. The poet will possess ideally a gift for placing things, assigning to each its right value, so that he will never "expect more from life that it can give or more from human beings than they can give"; and will "look to death for what life cannot give."<sup>21</sup> His poetry is that of a man who, in the fullest sense of the saying, "knows his way about."

The poet's mode of feeling is also significant. One catches Eliot's idea of the type of emotion proper to the artist in a quotation he borrows from Pound: "The only kind of emotion worthy of a poet is the inspirational emotion which energizes and strengthens, and which is very remote from the everyday emotion of sloppiness and sentiment."<sup>22</sup> It must, in short, be a feeling integrated with thought. Donne--not to mention Marlowe, Webster, Tourneur, Shakespeare, and Sir John Davies--is singled out for the "way in which he feels an idea, almost as if it were something that he could touch and stroke."<sup>23</sup> This direction of the mind into sense apprehension Eliot views as a part of the

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<sup>20</sup>"The Metaphysical Poets," 1921, SE, p. 250.

<sup>21</sup>"Dante," 1929, SE, p. 235.

<sup>22</sup>"Ezra Pound, His Metric and Poetry," op. cit., p. 19. Primary source not given.

<sup>23</sup>"Donne in Our Time," 1931, A Garland for John Donne, ed. Theodore Spencer, repr. (Gloucester, Mass., 1958,) p. 12.

creative process which mysteriously alters the objects coming under its pall: "To contemplate an idea," he adds directly to the above observation on Donne, "to observe my emotion colour it, and to observe it colour my emotions, to play with it, instead of using it as a plain and simple meaning, brings often odd or beautiful objects to light, as a deep sea diver inspects the darting and crawling life of the depths." In "John Bramhall" Eliot further defines this aspect of poetic sensibility as "the sensitiveness necessary to record and bring to convergence . . . a number of fleeting but universal feelings."<sup>24</sup> Now if here, as well as elsewhere, Eliot appears to slight the role of thought, the problem seems to come from his reluctance to use this term to connote that integration he demands of the "poetic sensibility." He sometimes gives the word special punctuation to indicate a difference, as: "The poet who 'thinks' is merely the poet who can express the emotional equivalent of thought . . . while by 'thinking' I ital. mine mean something very different from anything that I find in Shakespeare."<sup>25</sup> Or again: "Kipling did not, even in the sense in which that activity can be ascribed to Wells, think: his aim, and his gift, is to make people see--for the first condition of understanding a foreign country is to smell it, as you smell India in Kim."<sup>26</sup> As is so often the case in critical debate, confusion arises from a lack of agreement upon what is meant by the basic term used. The problem arises in many of Eliot's psychological descriptions of the creative process, and the mental gymnastic required to distinguish

<sup>24</sup>For Lancelot Andrewes, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>25</sup>"Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>26</sup>"Rudyard Kipling," 1941, OPP, p. 247.

"think" from think appears disproportionate to the fundamental simplicity of his point: integration.

The poet who has this poetic sensibility, at any rate, is continually forming new wholes from his coagulated experience and setting them down into art. His response to life, in feeling and in thought, is open. He will, as Eliot said of Blake, manifest a "peculiar honesty, which, in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying."<sup>27</sup> And he will also, as a "Commentary" of 1933 described Hemingway, be intent to "tell the truth about his own feelings at the moment when they exist."<sup>28</sup>

Certain technical qualities result, moreover, from the translation of this poetic sensibility into art. Wit, that acclaimed "tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace,"<sup>29</sup> is one to which Eliot often returns. Defined more precisely, it becomes an intellectual breadth, something akin to Coleridge's concept of imagination, manifesting itself in language of propriety. It bespeaks balance, and "a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible."<sup>30</sup> To Eliot's mind, wit seems to stand for the integration of intellectual and emotional values implied in the "orthodox," or disciplined sensibility. A sort of "holy mirth," this quality is much wanted at present, and also, adds Eliot, "apparently extinct."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup>"Blake," SW, p. 151.

<sup>28</sup>Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 98, quoting Eliot in: "A Commentary" from The Criterion, 1933.

<sup>29</sup>Andrew Marvell, 1921, SE, p. 252.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>31</sup>"A Note on Two Odes of Cowley," Seventeenth Century Studies, op. cit., p. 242.

Another manifestation of sensibility at work in art is encompassed by Eliot's word originality. Briefly, it is the ability to make "an interesting variation of an old idiom,"<sup>32</sup> to respond with skill as well as sensitivity to the literary and moral stimuli of an age. Real originality is simply a development of what has come before, Eliot maintains. Thus, "if it is the right development it may appear in the end so inevitable that we almost come to the point of view of denying all 'original' virtue to the poet."<sup>33</sup> Eliot's truly original poet is one who, rather paradoxically, makes the minimal variation upon a conventional form, but to the greatest effect.<sup>34</sup>

Viewed from another respect, this sensibility gives rise to two special faculties of the imagination which the qualities of wit and originality presuppose. Visual imagination is one. As described in "Dante," it is a spontaneous habit of mind which prompts the poet to tell his ideas in clear, intense visual images that draw attention to whatever meaning the poem happens to have. Then, too, there is the auditory imagination. Basically, this appears to signify an ear for syllable and rhythm. It is responsible for those musical qualities of verse which Eliot finds so essential. Penetrating beyond the conscious levels of thought and feeling, and energizing the diction, "it works through meanings . . . and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>"Introduction," London, A Poem, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>33</sup>"Introduction," Ezra Pound, Selected Poems, op. cit., pp. x-xi.

<sup>34</sup>"Introduction," London, A Poem, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>35</sup>"Matthew Arnold," 1933, UPUC, pp. 118-119.

But what transforms these qualities of man and artist into artistic qualities is the actual writing of poetry. Eliot says much about the creative process, and generally characterizes it by an element of struggle. This observation is substantiated not only by "Tradition and the Individual Talent," but by other early essays as well. Perhaps it is a case of the younger critic being more closely occupied with the task of being a young poet. At any rate, the creation of a work of art is clearly defined as work: "a painful and unpleasant business; it is a sacrifice of the man to the work; it is a kind of death."<sup>36</sup> Because the poet, in making a poem, has a method uniquely his own, "general characteristics" of the writing of poetry can easily be overplayed. Eliot emphasizes this point a number of times; nevertheless, he believes that "there must also be something in common in the poetic process of all poets' minds."<sup>37</sup> And this is a propitious theory with which to begin a description of what happens when Eliot's poet sets to work.

Caught at its still point, the creative process precipitates from a situation which Eliot likens to the meeting of two lines upon an imaginary graph.

The poet's work bespeaks a convergence:

One of the lines . . . represents his conscious and continuous effort in technical excellence, that is, in continually developing his medium for the moment when he really has something to say. The other line is just his normal human course of experience . . . Now and then the two lines may converge at a high peak, so that we get a masterpiece. That is to say, an accumulation of experience has crystallized to form material of art, and years of work in technique have prepared an adequate medium; and

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<sup>36</sup>"Artists and Men of Genius," Athenaeum, June 25, 1920, 842.

<sup>37</sup>"Introduction," Art of Poetry, op. cit., p. xxi.

something results in which medium and material, form and content, are indistinguishable.<sup>38</sup>

He is the "well oiled fire engine,"<sup>39</sup> ready for action when the call comes. But this is the job done. What actually happens is not so easy to describe; and Eliot descends upon Arnold's "Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life," as being too glib. "We bring back very little from our rare descents," he asserts, "and that is not criticism."<sup>40</sup> In short, the poet's work asks not so much a large-scale evaluation as the reverence of a student before the vastness of truth which he can only partly grasp and tell.

The main work is always to make a transparent poem. This appears to be the crux of Eliot's insistence that the poet is not a philosopher, or anybody else, when he is writing well. "I believe that for a poet to be also a philosopher he would have to be virtually two men," he remarks; "I cannot think of any example of this thorough schizophrenia, nor can I see anything to be gained by it: the work is better performed inside two skulls than one."<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the poet cannot have his cake and eat it. The whole discussion apparently leads to the very real point that there is indeed needed in the poet, and in every "maker," something akin to what spiritual writers call "purity of intention."

One of the immediate aims of the creative effort as described by Eliot is similar to what Romantic critics liked to call "empathy." The poet is to make

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<sup>38</sup>"Introduction," Ezra Pound, Selected Poems, op. cit., p. xx.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. xviii.

<sup>40</sup>"Matthew Arnold," 1933, UPUC, p. 111.

<sup>41</sup>"Shelley and Keats," 1933, UPUC, pp. 98-99.

his audience "share consciously in new feelings which they had not experienced before."<sup>42</sup> In order to grasp Eliot's idea as distinguished from some of his nineteenth-century predecessors, here the words consciously and new are both important. For the goal is not to transmit purely sympathetic feelings divorced of logical discipline; nor is it the writer's feelings as such, which are being expressed. "Can we say that Shakespeare's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which Shakespeare feels estimable feelings, and because of the extraordinary power with which he makes us share them?" Eliot continues. And answering his own question, he concludes: "I enjoy Shakespeare's poetry to the full extent of my capacity for enjoying poetry; but I have not the slightest approach to certainty that I share Shakespeare's feelings." The proximate end of the work is rather to startle the reader "with something like the fascination of a high-powered microscope,"<sup>43</sup> into an awareness of what his life is.

Of the two ways traditionally used to explain the creative process, inspiration and conscious skill, Eliot emphasizes the second. The poet's method is critical, "the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing"; it is a "frightful toil."<sup>44</sup> And the tendency to bury this fact, which Eliot discerns in Mr. Middleton Murry, is "whiggery." That conscious effort is needed to arrive at a finished poem is a recurring theme in Eliot. But perhaps nowhere is it sounded with more trenchant wit than in the "Function of a Critic." Here one reads that it is a whiggery tendency:

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<sup>42</sup>"The Social Function of Poetry," 1945, OPP, p. 20.

<sup>43</sup>"Introduction," Selected Poems, Marianne Moore, New York, 1935, p. x.

<sup>44</sup>"The Function of Criticism," 1923, SE, p. 18.



to propound that the great artist is an unconscious artist, unconsciously inscribing on his banner the words Middle Through. Those of us who are Inner Deaf Mutes are, however, sometimes compensated by a humble conscience, which, though without oracular expertness, counsels us to do the best we can, reminds us that our compositions ought to be as free from defects as possible (to atone for their lack of inspiration) and, in short, makes us waste a good deal of time.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, to depend too heavily upon "inspiration"--upon what Valéry calls "le rêve"--is to shirk one's artistic responsibility, to balk before "the labor of smelting what may have been payable ore."<sup>46</sup> And for anyone who has toiled over even so mean a piece of literature as the "term paper," this is a consoling as well as an honest tenet.

But the labor must also be prudent. The poet needs to know well his strengths and weaknesses, and like a certain resourceful player to whom Eliot refers,<sup>47</sup> to maneuver his technique so that the weaker strokes are least exposed. He must be alert to the right things at the right times, and above all "he should have enough power of self-criticism to know where to stop."<sup>48</sup> Thus, if Eliot agrees with Valéry in this same essay, that "a poem is never finished," he qualifies the words well: "to me they mean that a poem is 'finished', or that I will never touch it again, when I am sure that I have exhausted my own resources, that the poem is good as I can make that poem. It may be a bad poem; but nothing that I can do will make it better." In a final stroke which may

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<sup>45</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>46</sup>"Introduction," Art of Poetry, op. cit., p. xii.

<sup>47</sup>"Johnson as Critic and Poet," 1944, OPP, p. 190.

<sup>48</sup>"Introduction," Art of Poetry, op. cit., pp. xii-xiii.

summarize his attitude toward the creative process, the perfectionist adds:

"Yet I cannot help thinking that, even if it is a good poem, I could have made a better poem of it--the same poem, but better--if I were a better poet." Such admissions are not harmful to the process of art.

ii. The Poet's Artistic Relationship  
to Himself, the World,  
and the "Audience"

But why does the poet write? What prompts his creative activity? These questions also have a distinct place in Eliot's thought concerning the poet. One might guess at the outset that his theory of artistic detachment would largely invalidate any expressionistic view of the poet as a "solitary night-ingale." Similarly, after perusing his rebuttal of Abbé Bremond's description of the poet as tormented to communicate, it seems clear that for Eliot at least, this theory leaves much unexplained:

And what is the experience that the poet is so bursting to communicate? By the time it has settled down into a poem it may be so different from the original experience as to be hardly recognizable. The 'experience' in question may be the result of a fusion of feelings so numerous, and ultimately so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed.<sup>49</sup>

What does seem to be Eliot's answer to the problem is contained in the negative concept relief. To begin with, his essays have consistently emphasized the fact that a poet writes first of all because at the time, it is the one thing he must do. With something of a flourish, Eliot describes the main reward, if

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<sup>49</sup>"The Modern Mind," 1933, UPUC, p. 138.

not motive of the creative process, as "that excitement, that joyful loss of self in the workmanship of art, that intense and transitory relief which comes at the moment of completion."<sup>50</sup> The "Three Voices of Poetry," moreover, one of Eliot's more recent essays, suggests that no matter what his genre, the poet is primarily trying to achieve clarity for himself. He must make certain that what he writes is the best possible expression of the order perceived: "The most bungling form of obscurity is that of the poet who has not been able to express himself to himself; the shoddiest form is found when the poet is trying to persuade himself that he has something to say when he hasn't."<sup>51</sup> Neither vagueness nor ambition, in other words, is much at home in creative work. When the poet tries too hard to write poetry (a fault Eliot perceived in Byron's "Between Two Worlds Life Hovers Like a Star,")<sup>52</sup> he obscures the poem in something like a pretentious cloud.

Eliot's idea that poetry originates from pressure, like the pearl secretion of some irritated oyster, is evident in the following remark: "To me it seems that at these moments, which are characterized by the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which presses 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 reform very quickly."<sup>53</sup> When poetic "steam"

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<sup>50</sup>"Matthew Arnold," 1933, UPUC, p. 108.

<sup>51</sup>"The Three Voices of Poetry," 1953, OPP, p. 99.

<sup>52</sup>"Byron," 1937, OPP, p. 199.

<sup>53</sup>"Conclusion," UPUC, p. 144.

has been channeled, so to speak, into constructive power, equilibrium temporarily ensues. This explanation is perhaps Eliot's closest connection to Plato's seminal theory of the poet as a "divine madman." He invites this relationship in a rather lengthy passage on the "haunted" man:

He does not know what he has to say until he has said it; and in the effort to say it he is not concerned with making other people understand anything. He is not concerned, at this stage, with other people at all: only with finding the right words or, anyhow, the least wrong words. He is not concerned whether anybody else will ever listen to them or not, or whether anybody else will ever understand them if he does. He is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief. He is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing; and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon. In other words again, he is going to all that trouble, not in order to communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort; and when the words are finally arranged in the right way--or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find--he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable. And then he can say to the poem: 'Go away! Find a place for yourself in a book--and don't expect me to take further interest in you.<sup>54</sup>

But where Plato sees "a light and airy thing," Eliot seems arrested by the burdensome weight of which he must first be relieved.

In the last analysis, the poet's motivation is of secondary importance in relation to the finished poem. Eliot appears to state his over-all attitude toward this matter in the "Modern Mind," writing: "I prefer not to define, or to test, poetry by means of speculations about its origins; you cannot find a sure test for poetry, a test by which you may distinguish between poetry and mere good verse, by reference to its putative antecedents in the mind of the

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<sup>54</sup>"The Three Voices of Poetry," 1953, OPP, p. 98.

poet."<sup>55</sup> Once the poem "breaks loose" of the poet's mind, as it were, it becomes a made object, and no longer belongs to its maker. A good poet means what he says; but he necessarily says more than he ever knew he meant. This would appear to be a sound approach, for the whole truth is actually too great for the conception of any one man.

Influences which enter into the formation of the poet receive a considerable amount of attention throughout the essays. The repercussions of the artist's learning, interests, consciousness of tradition, and of his place within it--all are aspects given preponderance therein. Eliot's emphasis upon each of these factors appears to flow naturally from his vision of the artist as a man with a vocation, and a single eye to pursue it. "The Arts insist that a man shall dispose of all that he has, even of his family tree, and follow art alone," writes the aspirant of 1919; for "they require that a man be . . . simply and solely himself."<sup>56</sup> Whatever it be, the proper training of the writer, should in fact promote a selfless craftsmanship sprung from an artist who, with Father Daniel Berrigan, S. J., understands each day "what it is to be a man" and what it is to be himself ("Each Day Writes"). This education of the poet, the "drawing out" of his talent, Eliot finds unique from the formation of other professional men for several reasons. Not only is the training less susceptible of precise determination, aimed at achieving a specified technique, but it is also handicapped by the sometimes reticent quality of true literary ability: "The true literary mind is likely to develop slowly;" he remarks, "it needs a more

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<sup>55</sup>1933, UPUC, p. 140.

<sup>56</sup>"A Romantic Patrician," Athenaeum, May, 1919, 266-267.

comprehensive and more varied diet, a more miscellaneous knowledge of facts, a greater experience of men and of other ideas, than the mind required for the practice of the other arts. It therefore presents a more baffling educational problem."<sup>57</sup> In fact, for each poet, the requirements and ideal conditions of education appear to vary with his gifts. What is important for all poets, Eliot concludes, is not so much the quantity of learning acquired, nor the time spent in acquiring it, nor the average "grade" achieved, but "the type of education within which his schooling falls," and his ability to assimilate the best of its tradition into an original poetic response. In this respect he comments upon the education of two specific poets: Shakespeare allegedly combined fragmentary and second-hand knowledge with the exceptionally good values of his society and turned both into poetry. Milton's learning, on the other hand, was "comprehensive and direct," and as such, essential to his peculiar greatness.<sup>58</sup> According to what Eliot saw in Blake, it is moreover necessary that the poet's education enable him to approach his work unfrightened, with attention fixed upon "exact statement"--to view the world unabashed, "from the centre of his own crystal."<sup>59</sup> And inasmuch as it may be said that art comes of sincerity, the above observations are true.

The interests of the poet is an aspect of the artistic formation treated in numerous essays such as "Modern Education and the Classics" (1932), the "Metaphysical Poets" (1921), and "Wordsworth and Coleridge" (1932). Compiled, Eliot's

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<sup>57</sup>"The Classics and the Man of Letters" (London, 1942), pp. 17-18.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., pp. 9-10.

<sup>59</sup>"Blake," SW, pp. 154-155.

opinions on the subject suggest that while the potential interests of the good poet are unlimited, and that it is part of his education to learn to be interested when he is not, he must turn these "co-curriculars" into poetry, or else let them alone.

With regard to formal education, certain subjects in the humanities curriculum receive special emphasis in Eliot's ideal course of studies. Because the writer must understand well the different purposes for which language has been used in the past, he must steep himself in history, logic, philosophy, and in at least one modern foreign language as well as the classics. Above all, he must study his own native language.<sup>60</sup> In order to know the limits of imaginative writing, his reading must be wide and deep. Eliot defines a "derivative" or trite artist as one who "mistakes literature for life, and very often the reason why he makes this mistake is that--he has not read enough."<sup>61</sup>

Particularly accentuated in the poet's education is his development of what Eliot calls by such related names as "the historical sense," "his necessary receptivity," and "consciousness of the main current"--all of which occur in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Now every man is of his age, inasmuch as he cannot help being born at a certain time. But for the poet to have a "sense of his age"--what Eliot ascribed to Shakespeare, Goethe, and Baudelaire--is another thing, and closely related to the above-mentioned "historical sense." For any one to be a poet after twenty-five (Eliot was at least thirty-one when he asserted this), he must work steadily to extend his powers of integration toward

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<sup>60</sup>The Classics and the Man of Letters, op. cit., pp. 20-21

<sup>61</sup>"Introduction," Ezra Pound, Selected Poems, op. cit., p. xi.

a "sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together."<sup>62</sup> In a word, he must learn to know his place in literary tradition. The contemporary poet, by means of his historical eye, sees the already written as past, it is true. But he also brings the poets of old up to date, as it were, informing their works with a significance "so lively that it shall be as present to us as the present."<sup>63</sup> By acquainting himself through reading with a variety of the best poets in literary tradition, the writer may sharpen his prudence and so better gauge the extent to which he can safely imitate any one of them.

From past works and poets there is certainly much to learn. Eliot treads cautiously over the subject of imitation, however, apparently fearful that the unique nature of style will be disregarded. For the art of poetry is special to each man, using language in the way he must. And the more particularly the imitated poet has modified the language by his own idiom, the more dangerous does the venture become. Accordingly, Eliot warns: "If you follow Dante without talent, you will at worst be pedestrian and flat; if you follow Shakespeare or Pope without talent, you will make an utter fool of yourself."<sup>64</sup> No matter who the studied poet, there is a certain point, or what Eliot prefers to call an "uncertain point," beyond which one man's meat, as it were, is only so for himself.

Concomitantly with the historical sense, Eliot names miscellaneous other

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<sup>62</sup>"Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, SW, p. 49.

<sup>63</sup>"Euripides and Professor Murray," 1920, SW, p. 77.

<sup>64</sup>"Dante," 1929, SE, p. 155.



factors which contribute to the formation of this "least abstract of men." Generally speaking, of course, there is no experience for the poet or for any other man, which is not at least potentially a learning experience. But Eliot singles out for special mention two in particular: the technical knowledge of musical form, helpful to the poet's sense of rhythm,<sup>65</sup> and also interestingly enough--"the habit of talking."<sup>66</sup> He notes that for a "living style," in prose or in verse, "the practice of conversation is invaluable," inasmuch as it requires and stimulates thought.

All these influences, in turn, contribute to what Eliot calls the "belief" of the poet. Compiling the uses of "belief" as found in essays such as "Dante" (1929), "Shelley and Keats" (1933), and as treated most fully in "Poetry and Propaganda" (1930), one finds that it refers to the poet's characteristic 'world-view,' or philosophy. Eliot's conclusion seems to be that from the poet's standpoint, "belief" must be not only mature, or true inasmuch as it fits into a larger truth, but must also be transformed into an aesthetic statement. The alternative is "propaganda."

And so the "Individual Talent" develops, sometimes by unconscious assimilation and sometimes by a more costly sweat. As the poet's sensibility is altered and refined by education, his technique also evolves. But it is not so definite a process as memorizing the multiplication tables; one must be content with vague realization that at any given time, it is simply taking place. The well-oriented poet has a single-minded understanding of the demands of art,

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<sup>65</sup>"The Music of Poetry," 1942, OPP, p. 38.

<sup>66</sup>"Charles Whibley," 1931, SE, pp. 446-447.

and is blessed with the right kind of formal and informal education. Accordingly, he values his place within literary tradition, and, in general, sees every experience as "grist" for poetic digestion. Having wholly lent himself to these influences with open mind and sensibility, he will be better disposed--provided his gifts are commensurate--to achieve that "abundance, variety, and complete competence,"<sup>67</sup> with which Eliot signs the great poet.

How then shall the poet be judged? Eliot's criteria may be summarized in his one sweeping requisition: "Analysis and comparison methodically, with sensitiveness, intelligence, curiosity, intensity of passion, and infinite knowledge: all these are necessary to the great critic."<sup>68</sup> Eliot also stresses the value of practical experience in the writing of poetry. This is especially evident in the respect he developed for the judgment of such poet-critics as Ben Jonson, Dryden, Samuel Johnson, and Coleridge. Describing "analysis and comparison" in figurative language, John Wain clarifies the import of Eliot's two-fold approach:

Historicity is the gearbox of Mr. Eliot's criticism, where creative sensibility is its engine. It is the thing that dictates at what speed the engine shall run, what kind of gradient it can tackle . . . His assessment of any writer is always concerned with establishing the exact point on the chart which that writer could be said to inhabit, and then asking, "How do things look from that point? What could the man be expected to see? What sort of task would he feel impelled to tackle?"<sup>69</sup>

While viewing Eliot's poet in historical context, then, one must at the same

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<sup>67</sup>"In Memoriam," 1936, SE, pp. 286-287.

<sup>68</sup>"Criticism in England," Athenaeum, June 13, 1919, 457.

<sup>69</sup>"A Walk in the Sacred Wood," London Magazine, V (January, 1958), 47.

time not hold him too rigidly to one's own private notions of what his work should be, or to the notions of one's time. The need for tolerance is a repeatedly sounded note: If he is, for example, "a small man making a good job," a poet may merit more respect than "a great man wasting his talent."<sup>70</sup> Thus before rashly diagnosing a case of obscurity, Eliot suggests it be remembered that "what he may have been trying to do, was to put something into words which could not be said in any other way, and therefore in a language which may be worth the trouble of learning."<sup>71</sup> And before complaining of the rhetorical poet "who addresses you as if you were a public meeting," one is asked to listen for moments when the poet is not speaking to an audience, but "merely allowing himself to be overheard."<sup>72</sup> In brief, an understanding of the artist's purpose, and a cooperative attitude therewith, are essential elements of truly analytic criticism.

Once into the study, however, what does one examine? By which qualities is the poet's worth to be distinguished? Eliot appears to accept a lead from Timber (published 1641) when he affirms in the "Age of Dryden" (1932), Jonson's threefold requirement: (1) "a goodness of natural wit," (2) "exercise of these parts and frequent," and (3) "Imitation, to be able to convert the

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<sup>70</sup>"A Note on Two Odes of Cowley," Seventeenth Century Studies, op. cit., p. 237.

<sup>71</sup>"The Music of Poetry," 1942, OPP, pp. 101-102.

<sup>72</sup>Loc. cit.

substances, or riches of another poet, to his own use."<sup>73</sup> In this classification is implied the "moral elevation just short of sublimity," ascribed to Johnson,<sup>74</sup> and also that propriety of expression which constitutes the "good breeding" of Eliot's poet. Elaborating upon the program for etiquette, he continues, "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 fulgar, of our verse."<sup>75</sup> Eliot's sympathy for what Maritain calls the poet's conception<sup>76</sup>--his concern to evaluate the unique excellence of each poet according to his artistic aim--far from lightening the critical labor, rather increases its challenge. Plenary indulgence is, in fact, never granted in the realm of poetic technique.

Eliot touches upon various other criteria which help to evaluate the poet. One of the more important is whether or not a "Unity" is discernible throughout "Amplitude" and "Abundance."<sup>77</sup> He finds it in the works of even such allegedly minor poets as Robert Herrick and George Herbert. The concept itself, as described in "What is Minor Poetry?" is an underlying pattern, delineating

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<sup>73</sup>Both Eliot and Jonson, however, have in Sidney a declared advocate of very similar requirements. The Defense of Poetry, published forty-six years before Timber notes that "so must the highest-flying wit have a Daedalus to guide him . . . [which] hath three wings to bear itself up into the air of due commendation: that is, Art, Imitation, and Exercise."

<sup>74</sup>"The Age of Dryden," 1932, UPUC, p. 63.

<sup>75</sup>"Introduction," UPUC, p. 25.

<sup>76</sup>Cf. Art and Scholasticism, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>77</sup>Three characteristics which Eliot ascribes to the "Great European" poets such as Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe. Cf. "Goethe as the Sage," 1955, OPP, pp. 211-214.

"something more in the whole than in the parts."<sup>78</sup> Integration is achieved through a positive, coordinated personality working with singleness of purpose.

Difficult to buttonhole, as it were, unity is tentatively defined in this same essay by the observation that "what each of them gives us is life itself, the World seen from a particular point of view of a particular European age and a particular man in that age." This particularity, however, in the great poet, paradoxically unfolds into a "Universality" ripened by wisdom. A practical examen suggestive of Eliot's whole approach is simply: (1) "Of which poets is it worthwhile to read the whole work?" (2) "Of which poets is it worth my while to read the whole?"<sup>79</sup>

Another gauge of the poet's worth is the grace with which he has, as Dryden would say, "done his robberies." Eliot writes:

One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better or at least 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. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time or alien in language, or diverse in interest.<sup>80</sup>

All poets borrow, but "the rub" lies in their knack of doing it well. In general, Eliot's method of evaluating the poet, displays what this student finds a healthy insistence upon first-hand experience as the most fundamentally reliable "proof of the pudding." When judging a contemporary poet, for example,

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<sup>78</sup>"What is Minor Poetry," 1944, OPP, p. 47.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>80</sup>"Philip Massinger," SW, p. 125.

to whose work the standard of duration as described in Chapter I cannot yet be applied, Eliot finds that the critic must depend much upon his own taste. He may analyze and compare; then he asks: "Has this poet something to say, a little different from what anyone has said before, and has he found, not only a different way of saying it, but the different way of saying it which expresses the difference in what he is saying?" In criticizing the living poet, Eliot concludes, questions of stature should not be raised. Rather we must be content with the inquiry, "Are they genuine?" and leave the rest for time to decide.<sup>81</sup>

And so Eliot's concept of all that is implied in poet evolves. It is evident that the above treatment cannot pretend to be the last word on the subject. That is one, perhaps, which will never be spoken until the last critic draws his breath. Nevertheless, this inquiry into Eliot's views concerning the nature of the poet, his role in the creative process, his immediate stimulus to write, the influences upon his development and the criteria for evaluating his work, has aimed to be a step forward in clarifying the general trend of his criticism. For although a critic's interest be centered in the unwieldy being of the poem, he cannot long fix his attention thereon, without taking also into consideration its maker. One might suggest again Eliot's affinity to Longinus in the emphasis which both place upon the necessity of a qualified maker: On the Sublime predicates five qualities of the good poet: great conceptions, vehement and inspired passion, duly formed figures, noble diction, and dignified and elevated composition. All have their counterparts in Eliot's scheme of a poetic sensibility responding to truth, and effecting that technical excellence

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<sup>81</sup>"what is Minor Poetry," 1942, OPP, pp. 50-51.

encompassed by the traditional word form. Eliot's equivalent of the first two of Longinus' requisites, which are directly found in the poet, have already been discussed. The last three, belonging rather to the work which the poet effects, will now be considered. For after all, a critic's interest must be duly bound up with his subject. "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed," Eliot concludes, "not upon the poet but upon the poetry."<sup>82</sup> The immediate concern of the critic is the poem.

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<sup>82</sup>"Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, SW, p. 53.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE POEM

"Yes," Old Possum affirms,

. . .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!<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the simplicity of these lines applies as well as anything Eliot has written to his concept of the poem as a wonderful, unpredictable, and stubbornly real entity, the antics of which can never be wholly "tamed." Having investigated Eliot's tenets concerning the nature of poetry as the art of making, and of the qualified poet who makes, it is now pertinent to examine his idea of poem, or the object made. The following chapter aims to describe this concept by searching out Eliot's views on the nature of poetic res and verba, the qualities proper to each, and the criteria for evaluating a concrete poem. It is hoped that the conclusion will both effect a better understanding of Eliot's approach to the poem and indicate in what sense it may be rightly said that his interest lies in the qualities of its matter and form.

A recurring theme throughout the essays of Eliot's long career is the insistence that a poem is a "new thing" which must be met upon its own ground, so to speak, and accepted like a person, for what it is. Deriving from the poet, and understood in terms of an audience, the poem is nevertheless

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<sup>1</sup>"The Rum Tum Tugger," 1939.



independent of both. From the creative process it evolves as a type of symbol of reality, which, as it takes form, becomes more than a mere synonym for those life-experiences from which it took rise. Rather, the poem represents an ordered and concentrated universalization of particular reality. It has a being, and hence a meaning all its own, which can be tuned in upon, as it were, from as many different stations of life as there are persons to listen. In effect, Eliot, like Wordsworth, defines the poem as an art-piece "the most philosophic of all writing"; its object is truth, "not individual and local, but general, and operative."<sup>2</sup> From the qualified poet, then, comes a lasting comment upon "nature" which rises above what Imlac once called numbering "the streaks of a tulip,"<sup>3</sup> and takes its place in the formal realm of art.

It is through this attitude towards the poem that Eliot's criticism is perhaps overtly related to his "new critic" contemporaries such as John C. Ransom and I. A. Richards. For their assertion that "it is never what a poem says that matters, but what it is,"<sup>4</sup> finds therein a confirmed advocate.

Eliot's emphasis on the formal qualities of art has been often remarked. But in reality, his concept of the poem as an integrated, organic whole, assigns a closely cooperative role to both matter and form and implies that a deficiency in the quality of either will result in bad art. It is true

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<sup>2</sup>"Wordsworth and Coleridge," 1932, UPUC, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Johnson's Rasselas, Chapter X, pub. 1759.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. "Introduction," UPUC, pp. 17-18. Eliot attributes this sentence to Richards.

that quantitatively speaking, the poem's formal characteristics are given preference throughout the essays. But considered as a whole, his criticism carefully balances attention between technique on the one hand, and on the other, the matter it presupposes. In a description of the part res plays in relation to the finished poem, Eliot writes, "We must be careful to avoid saying that the subject matter becomes 'less important.' It has rather a different kind of importance: it is important as means: the end is the poem. The subject exists for the poem, not the poem for the subject. A poem may employ several subjects, combining them in a particular way; and it may be meaningless to ask 'what is the subject of this poem?' From the union of several subjects there appears, not another subject, but the poem."<sup>5</sup> As has been suggested before, this view seems to offer a type of via media between the extremes of Arnold's "Poetry is capable of saving us" theory, and Pater's "Art for Art's sake."

The scope of the poetic res is, for Eliot, practically unlimited. In "Milton II," he reasserts an earlier declared tenet that "the subject-matter and the imagery of poetry should be extended to topics and objects related to the life of a modern man or woman and enjoins that even the "non-poetic," the apparently unmanageable be worked into the poem."<sup>6</sup> Compared with that predilection for the ethereal and the beautiful, so characteristic of much nineteenth-century criticism, this statement clearly offers a broader platform of action.

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<sup>5</sup>From Poe to Valéry, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

<sup>6</sup>1947, OPP, p. 182. The quotation is from "Milton II." He implies this same point in "Dryden" (1921), and "Wordsworth and Coleridge" (1932).

In a rebuttal of Arnold's observation that the poet's advantage is "to deal with a beautiful world," he reveals a view of res as being highly dependent upon the insight of the poet who perceives. Thus, "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."<sup>7</sup> Where the responsibility of finding a significant poetic topic rests, from this point of view, is evident.

Eliot would, then, agree with Hulme's Speculations<sup>8</sup> that a good poem can be fashioned even from "small dry things"--that its res can occur at any point in a gamut ranging from a lady's shoe to the starry heavens. The one thing necessary for both critics is simply that the chosen subject have clearly perceived relevance to contemporary man.

And only from the finished poem does this relevance emerge. "The material of a poem is only that material after the poem has been made," Eliot comments upon the practical inseparability of res and verba: "How far the seriousness is in the subject treated, how far in the treatment to which the poet subjects it, . . . we shall never agree upon with any poem that has ever been written."<sup>9</sup> The distinction between form and substance, and again between content and attitude assumed toward it by the poet, is in Eliot's view, elusive. Once caught up with form, the material undergoes a real transformation; like the freshly emerged butterfly, it has very little to show of its former accidentals.

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<sup>7</sup>"Matthew Arnold," 1933, UPUC, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. "Romanticism and Classicism" therein; published 1924.

<sup>9</sup>"Introduction," The Art of Poetry, op. cit., pp. xxiii-xxiv.

Much has been written about the relative importance of emotions, thought, and Aristotelian "action" in Eliot's concept of res, both by others and by the critic himself. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he clearly states that emotions and feelings --and ordinary ones --are the proper raw material of the poem. Yet it is evident from the rest of his criticism that these are viewed as part of a cyclic movement of human response in which emotion both results from thought and action, and in turn, gives rise to them. "All poetry may be said to start from the emotions experienced by human beings in their relations to themselves, to each other, to divine beings and to the world about them," Eliot elaborated almost three decades after his essay of 1919; "it is therefore concerned with thought and action which emotions bring about and out of which emotion arises."<sup>10</sup>

While this statement contains nothing contrary to the theory of the earlier manifesto, it appears to be a far more balanced expression of it. Through the years there has been much critical sparring between the alleged "Romantic" attitude that the poem's subject matter derives primarily from the thoughts and emotions of a poet, and the "Classical" position that res springs properly from the objective "world." Actually, both aspects are partial, and should cast light upon one another. Either carried too far results in error: the first in extreme sentimentalism, and the second, in a reportorial photography which may be implied by the modern word naturalism. The right subject of literature is, after all, an objective but experienced world, grasped in its significance to man. Eliot's idea of the poetic subject may thus be described as 'Romantic' insofar as it holds that the poem must spring from some felt

<sup>10</sup>  
From Poe to Valéry, op. cit., p. 24.

perception of significance, and "Classical" inasmuch as it stipulates that this can only proceed from a significant, objective reality.

Here may be mentioned the problem of "belief" which occurs in numerous essays.<sup>11</sup> Basically, it is a consideration of the role of "thought" in the poem, from the three-fold aspect of poet thinking, poem "meaning," and reader assimilating. The framework of Eliot's views concerning the matter appears as early as 1928 in his essay on Pound: "I confess that I am seldom interested in what he [Pound] is saying, but only in the way he says it. That does not mean that he is saying nothing; for ways of saying nothing are not interesting. Swinburne's form is uninteresting, because he is literally saying next to nothing, and unless you mean something with your words they will do nothing for you."<sup>12</sup> For Eliot, in short, if poetry is to elicit belief, it must embody both sincerity of conviction and aesthetic propriety of form.

A more elaborate investigation of the problem is offered in "Dante," which illustrates the correspondence of Eliot's theory of belief to that of I. A. Richards. Suggesting the uniquely emotional-intellectual appeal of poetry, Eliot writes: "if there is 'poetry,' then it must be possible to have full literary or poetic appreciation without sharing the beliefs of the poet."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>E.g. "A Note on Poetry and Belief," *Enemy*, I (January, 1927), 15-17; "Note to Section II of 'Dante,'" 1929, SE, pp. 229-231; and "Isolated Superiority," *Dial*, LXXXIV (February, 1928), pp. 4-7. The question seemed to occupy Eliot's attention most during the late 1920's and early 1930's. "Poetry and Propaganda," *Bookman*, LXX (February, 1930), pp. 595-602, appears to be the clearest statement of what some of the earlier essays seem to be thinking through to conclusion: i.e., that conscious or unconscious apprehension of some truth is necessary in order to enjoy the poem aesthetically.

<sup>12</sup>"Isolated Superiority," *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup>"Dante," *op. cit.*, pp. 229-230.

He adds, however, that while it is helpful to distinguish what the poet believes as man from what he writes as poet, it is dangerous to establish any rigid line between the two activities. For generally speaking, the poet does not, upon one occasion, sit down to the task of writing "sheer poetry," and at another time, decide to embody into his work a philosophical idea. If he is writing well, Eliot insists, the poet simply "means what he says."<sup>14</sup>

Pursuing the opposite hypothesis, i.e., that full poetic appreciation is impossible unless the reader shares the poet's belief, Eliot remarks two erroneous conclusions which flow from it: (1) that the amount of poetry which any one person can enjoy is very small, and (2) that the act of appreciation involved is quite an abstract function of the understanding, rather than a total aesthetic response. He notes, on the other hand, that "full" understanding probably implies so firm a committal toward a particular view of life that the reader considers this view the only one possible to those who understand it wholly. And in this limited sense Eliot admits that "full understanding" of a poem depends upon "full belief" in the view of life from which the poem took rise.<sup>15</sup> But complexities rooted in the various and interrelated modes of human response--emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, volitional, religious--are inherent in any realistic approach to the problem of belief. Eliot concludes his note on "Dante" with a concession:

Actually, one probably has more pleasure in the poetry when one shares the beliefs of the poet. On the other hand there is a distinct pleasure in enjoying poetry as poetry when one does not share the beliefs, analogous to the pleasure of "mastering" other

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>15</sup> Loc. Cit.

men's philosophical systems. It would appear that literary appreciation is an abstraction, and pure poetry a phantom; and that both in creation and enjoyment much always enters which is, from the point of view of "art," irrelevant.<sup>16</sup>

"Shelley and Keats," however, a lecture originally delivered at Harvard in 1935, considers an added complication. If thus far Eliot had conceived of two possible responses to the poet's view of life, at this point he is concerned with a third type of reaction which not only rejects the poet's view, but feels positively repelled by it. Speaking of his own attitude toward much of Shelley's work, Eliot admits not only a real annoyance at the poet's philosophy, but also at the "harsh and untunable"<sup>17</sup> way in which it is expressed. In Shelley's bad verse, writes Eliot, not only is one "all the more affronted by the ideas, the ideas which Shelley bolted whole and never assimilated, visible in the catchwords of creeds outworn, tyrants and priests," but so nettled by them that when Shelley is at his best--as, for example, in the concluding lines of Prometheus Unbound-- "we are unable to enjoy them fully."<sup>18</sup> This modification of the earlier statement in "Dante" would seem to indicate Eliot's growing caution in separating intellectual or religious "belief" from aesthetic appreciation of the poem. Positive or negative reactions to the "world-view" of a poem were not to be explained simply by the criterion of aesthetic form, a standard emphasized in the earlier essay on Pound. Analyzing reasons for his personal reaction to Shelley's poetry, Eliot does not attribute

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>17</sup> "Shelley and Keats," op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> Loc. cit.

the difficulty to prejudice or a "blind spot" in taste, or to the presentation of beliefs which he himself rejects, or even to any intention on Shelley's part to propagate doctrine through poetry. The explanation offered is this: "When the doctrine, theory, belief, or 'view of life' presented in a poem is one which the mind of the reader can accept as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience, it interposes no obstacle to the reader's enjoyment, whether it be one that he accept or deny, approve or deprecate. When it is one which the reader rejects as childish or feeble, it may, for a reader of well-developed mind, set up an almost complete check"<sup>19</sup> In making this statement, Eliot acknowledges his debt to Practical Criticism (1929) and supports Richards' emendation of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" concept.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout Eliot's essays dealing with the problem of belief one finds, then, a recurring awareness of the importance of both matter and form in determining the solution. And in "Poetry and Propaganda"(1930), Eliot notes that although the reader may find a poetic "view of life" which gives rise to great art more plausible than one which does not do so, he must, on the other hand, find the art valuable in itself before he can value the idea through the

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<sup>19</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>20</sup>Confronted with Coleridge's theory of "poetic faith" in the imaginative (Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIV), Richards notes in Practical Criticism, Part III, Chapter 7, "Doctrine in Poetry": "It is better to say that the question of belief or disbelief, in the intellectual sense, never arises when we are reading well. If unfortunately it does arise, either through the poet's fault or our own, we have for the moment ceased to be reading and have become astronomers, or theologians, or moralists, persons engaged in quite a different type of activity." Eliot quotes this remark in "Shelley and Keats," UPUC, pp. 95-96.



art.<sup>21</sup> In Eliot's overall view, it seems that both belief of the poet and belief of the reader have their proper relationships to the poem, as made, and as read. Yet the poem itself exists between the two, and what it says through form must be true objectively. So long as, and inasmuch as it is truth, fittingly expressed, the artist's "belief" is an integral part of the poem and need not be referred to by name. In short, if the poem is good, it is true. And the reader, on the other hand, has only to take from the poem what it gives. And inasmuch as his "belief" is true, it can assimilate the meaning of the poem, or submit to its larger vision.

Eliot's "problem" stems partially from his double apprehension that (1) the poem may be exploited as a vehicle for philosophical argument, and (2) that it may become a mere display of technical virtuosity having little or no significance. Thus he in turn commended Trotsky's common-sense distinction between art and propoganda for its awareness that "the material of the artist is not his beliefs as held, but his beliefs as felt,"<sup>22</sup> and found that Shelley's Epipsychidion was only "bad jingling" devoid of any proposition worthy of assent.<sup>23</sup> Thus the problem of belief in Eliot's criticism resolves itself at least potentially into a vision of the cooperative nature of res and verba. The poem is neither a band-wagon for ideological theory, nor a nonsensical incantation intent upon casting spells. If Eliot sees the poem as a preservative of "eternal matters," as he avers, he qualifies further, adding that "only good style in conjunction with permanently interesting content can preserve."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>"Poetry and Propaganda," Literary Opinion in America, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>22</sup>"The Modern Mind," 1933, UPUC, p. 136.

<sup>23</sup>"Shelley and Keats," op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>24</sup>"Charles Whibley," 1931, SE, p. 441.

Eliot's view of "interesting content," however, is modified by a related concern: "What is meant by 'good style'?" Actually, this is one aspect of a larger problem, the role of language within the poem. Eliot's concept of the poem as a made, aesthetically valuable entity which effects refined enjoyment in the reader, gives to poetic language an especially important function. It works, so to speak, as the middle term between poet and audience, as a symbol from which the poem's objectivity takes rise. The language used in the poem is ideally a means, a type of philosopher's stone, by which the particular may be transformed into universal significance.

Eliot as poet and critic was early aware of the difficulties inherent in the three-fold nature of verba as image, melody, and sign. In 1917 he wrote: "Words are perhaps the hardest of all material of art: for they must be used to express both visual beauty and beauty of sound, as well as communicating a grammatical statement."<sup>25</sup> The finished poem, then, must offer the three excellences at once, and each channeled through the same words. In this respect the "Naming of Cats"<sup>26</sup> as Eliot's poem comments, is indeed a "difficult matter." But his criticism is impregnated with a fascination for "the ineffable effable, effanineffable deep and inscrutable singular Name" of each reality, and for the adventure attached to approximating this name, in the writing of an actual poem. The chosen language of the poem represents, to his mind, a good but inadequate effort to image forth or imitate the objective res in the plentitude of what it really is. The Cat's "third name," however, remains a mystery, and a poem at best can only realize that it has not found out what this is, Eliot's role

<sup>25</sup> Ezra Pound, His Metric and Poetry, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Old Possum collection, 1939.

appears to be that of a perfectionist constantly working toward a union between word and object.

Style, then, is a particular employment of language within the poem through which the attempt at "naming" is carried on. Defined by Eliot, it encompasses three major elements of word usage: vocabulary, syntax, and order of thought. These aspects will be considered separately below. In brief, however, they treat of the what, how, and why of the poem's wording: what particular diction will be chosen, how it will be arranged, and to what composite effect the pattern will move.

Eliot views verba in a two-fold respect which is not without an element of paradox: flowing from an integrated personality, style always belongs to someone and is special to him. But the great poet, remarks Eliot, will have so developed his craft that, at his best, he is "writing transparently, so that our attention is directed to the object and not to the medium."<sup>27</sup> Its unique quality is to be almost invisible; it must never draw attention to itself. In this sense, style emerges, as Aristotle once suggested, as an artistic means to an humanistic end.

But what specifically has Eliot to say concerning poetic diction? What characteristics ideally belong to the vocabulary of a poem? A tenet most often asserted is that the verba possess the natural quality of contemporary speech and prose. The words chosen should be at the same time so distinctly right and yet so familiar that the reader can say, "That is how I should talk if I could talk poetry."<sup>28</sup> The poem then, should take its idiom from the living

<sup>27</sup>"Rudyard Kipling," 1941, OPP, p. 235.  
<sup>28</sup>"The Music of Poetry," 1942, OPP, p. 31.

language of every level of society.<sup>29</sup> And as each new generation modifies its usage thereof, poetic diction also adjusts, as it were, to keep in step. Enlarging upon Wordsworth's idea that the poem may well employ the language of the middle and lower classes of society, Eliot comments that "it is not the business of the poet to talk like any class of society, but like himself--rather better, we hope, than any actual class; though when any class of society happens to have the best word, phrase, or expletive for anything, then the poet is entitled to it."<sup>30</sup> Thus, the vocabulary of the poem will have a flexible quality. Diction, and the rhythm which courses through it, will vary according to the poet's receptivity to and incorporation of the best language usage about him. It is interesting to note that Eliot finds in this individual "ear" for diction and rhythm--taste modified by environment and temperament--one of the most deep-rooted causes for extreme differences in opinion among respectable critics.<sup>31</sup> Language that is "natural" to one generation, or time, or place, or character, he avers, may seem very artificial to critics reared under different circumstances.

Another quality consistently upheld is that of precision. He admired the poems of Dryden, Pope, Johnson, and Goldsmith for a straightforward employment of words. Johnson's London, for example, is suggested as a model for contemporary verse because of "the certainty, the ease, with which he hits the bull's eye every time."<sup>32</sup> This saying what is meant, directly, brings in its

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<sup>29</sup>"Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballads," 1800.

<sup>30</sup>"Wordsworth and Coleridge," 1932, UPUC, p. 72.

<sup>31</sup>"Johnson as Critic and Poet," 1944, OPP, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup>"Introduction," London, A Poem, op. cit., p. 17.

train other qualities valuable to Eliot, such as simplicity, freshness, austerity, urbanity, and almost inadvertently--the rightness of "musical phrase." This latter characteristic, the music of verse, he referred to as one of the lessons best taught by the poems of Milton. Musical quality is strongest, he remarked, in that poem which has "a definite meaning expressed in the properest words."<sup>33</sup>

In the search for Eliot's attitude toward the needed qualities of diction, the "Metaphysical Poets" is an especially fruitful essay. He suggests therein that right diction results from that "direct sensuous apprehension of thought" described above as "poetic sensibility." Accordingly, the words may be brief, but allusive. The figures may be sometimes ingeniously elaborated and sometimes condensed. The reader's mind will, at any rate, be induced into multiplied associations and surprised into a fresh understanding of something already well known.<sup>34</sup>

Syntax, too, has its role in the formation of style. Right phrasing or placement of words is, according to Eliot, a vital factor in determining their ultimate effect. Just as words of themselves have associations, he asserts, so much the more, "the groups of words in association have associations, which is a kind of local self-consciousness."<sup>35</sup> The significance which Eliot assigns to both vocabulary and syntax is perhaps best expressed in the parenthetical

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<sup>33</sup>"Milton II," 1947, OPP, p. 160.

<sup>34</sup>"The Metaphysical Poets," 1921, SE, pp. 243-246.

<sup>35</sup>"Dante," 1929, SE, p. 203.

conclusion of Little Gidding (first published as a separate piece of 1942).

What matters is the rightness of every phrase and sentence, in a poem

... (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)

And by this fitting disposal of well chosen words, comes to light Eliot's third aspect of style, that ordonnance, or logical arrangement of thought which might be called the controlling factor of the poem's over-all pattern.

On this point, some of the seventeenth-century Anglican divines especially hold Eliot's interest. John Bramhall is recognized for the excellence of his logical arrangement and "mastery of every fact relevant to a thesis."<sup>36</sup>

Lancelot Andrewes also receives notice for similar reasons. "It is only when we have saturated ourselves in his prose, followed the movement of his thought, that we find his examination of word [sic.] terminating in the ecstasy of assent," Eliot asserts; "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."<sup>37</sup>

Thus in theory are the three aspects of Eliot's concept of style analyzed. In the concrete poem, however, they merge and condition one another so that the excellence of one indirectly affects the quality of the others. And from the co-operation of all three comes that dominant rhythm, "the real pattern in the carpet," which is a harmony of thought, feeling, and vocabulary--and which can

<sup>36</sup> For Lancelot Andrewes, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

only be fully appreciated, Eliot adds--by reading the poem aloud.<sup>38</sup>

Here may be considered, because of its immediate relationship to style, a widely known and much debated concept in Eliot's critical theory, the "objective correlative." In his own words it is the finding of "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion [ to be expressed ] ; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.<sup>39</sup> Upon analysis, this term objective correlative is found to include three major aspects implied in the nature of verba: the "correlative" is (1) an outward expression, correlating the poet's inner emotional experience; (2) the new creation, a poem, objectified so that it stands upon its own two feet with regard to theme; and (3) the poem, as an image of life to which the reader can respond on the basis of his own store of insight. And for this reason the term has a certain amount of validity. There is, in fact, a general background of experience-word connotation which is shared by men as men, and especially by men reared in the same cultural tradition.

But perhaps the best way to examine summarily the strengths and weaknesses of this concept is to consider how it works in a concrete poem. Take, for example, this excerpt from "The Fire Sermon" of the Wasteland:<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>"Marianne Moore," Dial, LXXV (December 1923), 595.

<sup>39</sup>"Hamlet and His Problems," SW, p. 100.

<sup>40</sup>11.173-182.

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf  
 Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
 Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.  
 Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.  
 The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
 Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
 Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.  
 And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;  
 Departed, have left no addresses.  
 By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .

Now it would seem that the passage as a whole and each partial image therein, such as "The river's tent is broken," may be considered to function as an objective correlative. And undoubtedly there is an objective sense of barrenness, of spiritual dislocation, in its tone. Yet despite the relatively pointed imagery of this excerpt, to say that it conveys a hollow realization of, and anguish for, the stupidity of men who are so preoccupied that their thoughts and energies can lead to nothing more ultimate than cigarette ends, and who pass as the summer night, is a statement which could probably be modified into as many variations of theme as there are readers to respond. The "objective correlative," then, would seem to be rather the objectified expression of the subjective emotion, necessarily limited in its power to communicate objectively by the diversified nature of human experience. Eliot himself appears to take this stand when he writes: "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."<sup>41</sup>

To sum up, Eliot's verba--vocabulary, syntax, and order of thought--working upon a particular res, determines that over-all pattern of the poem, sometimes referred to as "structure." This total construction of the poem Eliot posits as

<sup>41</sup>"Introduction," UPUC, p. 30.



an important element of poetic composition.<sup>42</sup> Style, in a word, effects that organic form by which the content is known. And in a good poem, he implies, the form is so right that the question of rightness does not even occur. Thus he finds the term vers libre a misnomer: There is not, he writes, a strict verse and a free verse, but "only a mastery which comes of being so well trained that form is an instinct and can be adapted to the particular purpose in hand."<sup>43</sup> After all, the division of the poem into res and verba is an artificial dissection. The two aspects, content and form, are really inseparable; for only as an integrated whole can the poem be actually evaluated.

Eliot's standards for poetry have been discussed at length in Chapter I. Yet a fundamental consideration which he finds pertinent in approaching the concrete work of art might here be re-emphasized: each poem must be judged not only by the way in which it harmonizes with the rest of tradition, not only by the moral elevation of its res, or by the fitting variation upon a common style achieved in its verba, but by all of these fused together in the particular laws of the poem's own metaphysical being. The poet may be in one sense, an "unacknowledged legislator," but as Spingarn implied in 1910, his intention is directly relevant to the poem only "at the moment of the creative act."<sup>44</sup> The New Criticism's respect for the concrete poem's ontological reality is evidenced by Eliot, and may be discerned in the following evaluation of the "unities." Although Eliot's immediate concern here is for the drama, the principle of tolerance asserted may be validly extended to other genres as well.

<sup>42</sup>"Johnson as Poet and Critic," 1944, OPP, p. 181.

<sup>43</sup>Ezra Pound, His Metric and Poetry, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>44</sup>"The New Criticism," Criticism in America: Its Function and Status, op. cit. p. 25.

He reminds the critic with a theory: "The kind of literary law in which Aristotle was interested was not law that he laid down, but law that he discovered. The laws (not rules) of unity of place and time remain valid in that every play which observes them in so far as its material allows is in that respect and degree superior to plays which observe them less. I believe that in every good play in which they are not observed something is gained which we could not have if the laws were observed. This is not to establish another law. There is no other law possible."<sup>45</sup> In short, one looks well into the poem, and only then attempts to generalize about the laws of its excellence. And only after one has looked well into many poems can one attempt to speak of qualities proper to "poetry." Eliot, in this respect, appears to be a confirmed literary empiricist.

Because each poem has a unique mode of excellence in accordance with what it is, the critic who bends its peculiar laws to some preconceived "rule" of his own is not playing fair in the field of criticism. Confronted with a concrete poem, Eliot appears to say, the most fundamental means of appreciation is to allow it to speak for itself. And provided that this direct-contact approach be supplemented by his other criteria--through reverence for the objective standards formulated by noteworthy critics of literary tradition, and by Christianity--it appears to this student not only a respectable, but an ultimately practical explanation of how a poem may be actually evaluated.

"what matters, in short"--from Eliot's view--"is the whole poem":<sup>46</sup> It may

<sup>45</sup>"Apology for the Countess of Pembroke," 1932, UPUC, p. 45.

<sup>46</sup>"The Music of Poetry," 1942, OPP, p. 32.

be a "Rum Tum Tugger" that puzzles and beguiles; it may be the inadequate result of a "poor business." But as Little Gidding concludes, it is also an epitaph: the latest-come comment upon a long ancestry, which, almost instantaneously upon creation, catapults into absorption with the rest, and becomes a "beginning" for all those poems yet to come.

For if no man is an island, still less is the poem which speaks for all men.

## CHAPTER V

### THE EFFECT OF POETRY UPON AN AUDIENCE

Eliot's ideas of poetry as an aesthetic, skilled ordering of life, of the poet as a qualified maker, and of the poem determined by his qualifications, have been already considered in detail. There remains, however, a question which was implicit from the first: Cui bono? What, after all, is poetry for?

Since action follows being, the effects of poetry upon an audience are really implicit in the consideration of Eliot's concept of poetry (Chapter II). He has, however, touched upon this question directly, notably in "Poetry and Propaganda" (1930), "Religion and Literature" (1935), the "Writer as Artist" (1940), and the "Social Function of Poetry" (1943). This chapter proposes to synthesize the views expressed therein, and so to clarify Eliot's concept of the scope and impact of poetry's influence. His thoughts concerning the proximate effect of poetry as an integrating influence upon man will be first examined. Subsequent inquiry will center upon the social function of poetry in its far-reaching influence upon culture, through the refined employment of language. The chapter's conclusion should lead to a better insight into the aspirations which have motivated the critic's consistent interest in the role of language in poetry.

To begin with, Eliot distinguishes at least three ways in which the audience may "hear" a poem, by describing three different "voices" of poetry: voice one predominates in the poem when the audience overhears the poet, as it were, talking to himself; voice two sounds when the audience, large or small, is being directly and consciously addressed. Voice three is discovered indirectly when the audience is addressed through the limitations of one dramatic character speaking to another. And all three voices may, in varying degrees, be present at once, each enriching the other with its own peculiar overtones.<sup>1</sup>

What the voices communicate, Eliot says, is pleasure. But with a characteristic reserve toward involvement in aesthetics per se, he writes: "If you ask what kind of pleasure then I can only answer, the kind of pleasure that poetry gives."<sup>2</sup> With that, the philosophical aspect is, so to speak, tabled. The kind of pleasure given, however, is a necessary consideration. And fortunately, it can be inferred both from Eliot's occasional comments and also from the basic fact that "all things are received according to the mode of the receiver." In poetry, the effect is communicated to a human recipient empowered to feel, think, and will. Thus, whatever pleasure it gives will affect these faculties of man. When its effect is good, poetry will contribute to that ordered integration of emotion, thought, and choice which defines human perfection. Eliot's view invites comparison with

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<sup>1</sup>"The Three Voices of Poetry," 1953, OPP, pp. 89-102.

<sup>2</sup>"The Social Function of Poetry," 1943, OPP, p. 18.

I.A. Richards's proposal that poetry properly aims at the ordering of "impulse" toward the achievement of that sincere "accordance of our thoughts and feelings with reality."<sup>3</sup> Although Richards is more interested in the psychological implications of poetry, both he and Eliot suggest its power to effect "self-completion."<sup>4</sup> All this Eliot says more succinctly in an assertion that the purpose of poetry is to "amuse properly...to edify and refine."<sup>5</sup> Now, if man's proper amusement is that which adds to the refinement of his nature, as a sanction for, and clarified experience of reality, poetry must in some way contribute to this end.

Poetry, first of all, has a unique mode of communicating knowledge. Unlike other sciences, Eliot reminds Mr. Whitehead, its aim is not to give evidence but to persuade.<sup>6</sup> Its end is not an assertion or proof of truth, but a rendering truth "more fully real to us...making the Word Flesh."<sup>7</sup> Through excellent representation, it draws the reader into a fresh vision of the already familiar world, broadening his comprehension of it by the contrast of potentiality. Eliot, however, makes it clear that the imaginative knowledge gained should not be confused with that which comes of living. It is rather an enriching supplement to first-hand experience:

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<sup>3</sup>"Doctrine in Poetry," from Practical Criticism (1929), Part III, Ch. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>"Poetry and Drama," 1951, OPP, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup>"Poetry and Propaganda," 1930, Literary Opinion in America, pp. 29-30.

<sup>7</sup>"Ibid.", p. 37.

It is simply not true that works of fiction, prose, or verse, that is to say works depicting the actions, thoughts, and words and passions of imaginary human beings, directly extend our knowledge of life. Direct knowledge of life is knowledge directly in relation to ourselves, it is our knowledge of how people behave in general, of what they are like in general, in so far as that part of life in which we ourselves have participated gives us material for generalization. Knowledge of life obtained through fiction is only possible by another stage of self-consciousness. That is to say, it can only be a knowledge of other people's knowledge of life, not of life itself.<sup>8</sup>

Poetry, then, works to justify that which we have already experienced, and to prepare us for what we have not. It eases the burden of sensing more than one can understand, providing "intellectual sanction for feeling"; and justifying the truth through beauty, it effects an "aesthetic sanction for thought."<sup>9</sup> In a word, it entices man to face head-on the truth about himself, and about the objective world. Like an "imaginary burglar,"<sup>10</sup> it steals quietly into the reader's deepest feelings and thoughts. So met, his will may yield peacefully or sound the alarm; but it cannot remain unmoved.

All this amounts to Eliot's basic postulate that poetry is an aesthetic experience--and a serious one--which must ultimately have relevance to the whole of man's life. It begins as it were, with a jolt:

The experience of a poem is the experience both of 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 a calmer feeling.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>"Religion and Literature," 1935, SE, p. 349.

<sup>9</sup>"Poetry and Propaganda," 1930, op. cit., 38.

<sup>10</sup>"Conclusion," UPUC, 1933, p. 151.

<sup>11</sup>"Dante," 1929, S.E., p. 212.

The pure enjoyment of art for art's sake, from this point of view, appears clearly impracticable. Poetry, once read, becomes assimilated into all the rest of the experiences which form a man's life, fusing its significance with them, and casting new insight upon their entirety. The "seriousness"<sup>12</sup> of any particular work, then depends to some degree upon the nature of its content and form, but even more upon the extent to which it is incorporated into one's chosen approach to life. Not only do we tend to organize our taste for individual poems into some whole, Eliot asserts; we further translate the import of that whole into life significance: "we aim in the end at a theory of life, or a view of life, and so far as we are conscious, to terminate our enjoyment of the arts in a philosophy fused and completed in the impersonal and general, not extinguished, but enriched, expanded, developed, and more itself by becoming something not itself."<sup>13</sup> The poem personally perceived thus finds a full human significance by being weighed against an objective standard. This view, when applied to the Christian reader, measuring and fusing his apprehensions with the wholeness of revealed truth, would seem to be justified.

For Eliot, the scope of poetry's pleasurable influence extends over every aspect of human life--over man's aesthetic, intellectual, moral, and social commitments--and through these, into his commitment with God. One must remember, he suggests, that by its very nature, poetry presumes the

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<sup>12</sup>"Introduction," *Art of Poetry*, op. cit., p. xxiii.

<sup>13</sup>"Poetry and Propaganda," 1930, op. cit., p. 32.



right to total, noncompartmental influence: "The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not."<sup>14</sup> It is not the mind alone, then, nor the heart alone which gains from contact with poetry. As a power for good or evil, its impact is dynamic, often unfathomable, and is exerted directly as it is enjoyed. Poetry, because of its appeal to the mind and senses through beauty, is like a high-powered salesman, peculiarly equipped to induce man's will to its predetermined point.

In attempting to show what the poem could effect, Eliot draws a definite line between the business of literature and that of religion, and yet finds that they share some common ground in their mutual influence upon human behavior. It is for religion to impose a standard by which man could judge his behavior in the world according to the mind of Christ; and it is for poetry to offer an ordered insight into that world, to quiet the soul for grace. A partnership between the two is thus envisioned, but each maintains a distinct role therein. So long as the Christian recognizes his duty to evaluate the poem by standards of revealed truth, Eliot would say, he has much to gain even from literature which is not overtly Christian. Faith does, in fact, cast relevance upon all human truth. And it is for the will to regulate the effect of poetry by choosing to follow its light.

Thus far have been considered the effects of poetry upon man as an individual. However, it may be further noted that effects may be useful ones,

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<sup>14</sup>"Religion and Literature," 1935, SE, p. 348.

and that men exist as social beings. Eliot is quite aware of the social implications of poetry. He believes that the poet is normally conscious that his work has a social function, and naturally wishes its range to be as wide as possible--that his poetry be enjoyed and employed by "as large and various a number of people as possible."<sup>15</sup> This extension he effects through the medium of words.

And working with the language in its peculiar, colloquial energy, the poet uplifts, refines, and sharpens its communicative faculty. Commenting upon the effect of poetry upon culture, Eliot suggested in 1940 that the writer's office is to help to make language "a vehicle for civilized thought and feeling, to help to preserve, and to restore, precision in the use of words."<sup>16</sup> This is accomplished by a three-point program: (1) selecting for poetry those words and meanings which deserve to be kept, (2) rejecting those which are inaccurate or which have served their purpose, and (3) establishing from among the new words and idioms of current usage those which ought to be "fully licensed" and preserved.<sup>17</sup> In a word, the poet must stand for the right expressions used in right associations, in the right order and for the right end.

The power of communication will weaken, Eliot suggests, insofar as the general level of culture, intelligence and initiative declines, and inasmuch as it fails to produce men with "just that preoccupation with words which marks the writer as artist--a preoccupation with words which

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<sup>15</sup>"Introduction," 1932, pp. 31-32.

<sup>16</sup>"The Writer as Artist, Discussion between T.S. Eliot and Desmond Hawkins," Listener, XLIV (November 28, 1940), 774.

<sup>17</sup>Loc. cit.

is at the same time a concern with the exploration of subtleties of thought and feeling."<sup>18</sup> Thus viewed, the function of poetry is to build and sustain a powerful language which is, in turn, judged to be an important foundation stone of the nation's greatness. Ideally, the poet--collaborating with the academic professor, the judge, the scientist, the town mayor, the committee secretary, the student, and all those who care enough, as it were, to write the very best--will diffuse the influence of a more precise communication not only among the audience who read poetry as such, but among those who use the language for more prosaic ends.

Though Eliot's idea does not attempt so grand a vision as Tolstoy's ideal of Christian brotherhood,<sup>19</sup> nor so total a road-map as Arnold's "how to live" conception of art,<sup>20</sup> it assigns to the use of poetry an important social role: through its influence upon the matter and form of communication by the excellent use of language, poetry becomes a refining and educating influence upon each member of the society in which it thrives. This is a function more appropriate to art than that proposed by either Tolstoy or Arnold.

Poetry, then, for Eliot, has both an immediate and remote, tangible and intangible influence upon the maturation of a people, as individuals and as a society. It functions directly like Dante's Virgil, a trustworthy guide

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<sup>18</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> "What is Art?" 1898, Chapter X.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. "Wordsworth," first published, 1879.

in its own human realm, directing man's outlook upon the seemingly chaotic sorrows, sufferings and struggles of life to a point where he can find significance and hope. It can so open man's mind to the real, that he will feel moved to embrace it--though the actuating strength to do so comes finally from religion. Poetry disposes a man to see this, says Eliot in effect, and to choose. And secondly, it functions less perceptibly in society as a whole, like the tiny bit of leaven mixed into the batch, penetrating quietly into the most prosaic forms of communication and uplifting the whole cultural quality by its refining influence upon thought, sensibility, and expression. In a word, the right use of poetry makes for peace.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

...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: ...<sup>1</sup>

This thesis began with, and was developed upon, the suggestion that the contemporary criticism of T.S. Eliot is in some respects anything but "new" ---that what his essays offer to the student of literature are inquiries and answers which have been lost and "found and lost again and again." His concerns are, in fact, fundamental ones that have been pondered by critics from Aristotle's time to the present day. Thus, having examined his work in the light of the key terms poetry, poet, poem, and effect, it now remains to review the evidence gathered and to propose therefrom the nature of Eliot's critical orientation.

Three considerations, (1) Eliot's extensive remarks concerning the poet, synthesized in Chapter III, "The Poet," (2) the centripetal importance of Chapter IV, "The Poem," and (3) the close causal dependence of the latter upon the former already suggest an answer. For Eliot's central interest in

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<sup>1</sup>East Coker, V, from Four Quartets, first published as a separate piece in 1940.

the concrete artifact having a definitely qualified res and verba, leads logically to his great concern for the qualities of the artist. His attention fluctuates freely, then, between the theoretical poles of a dynamic, immediate poem, and its dynamizing agent, the poet. Yet, as is illustrated in The Sacred Wood, Selected Essays, and the Use of Poetry, the Use of Criticism, and On Poetry and Poets, Eliot's criticism seems to have a more pronounced tendency toward concentration upon the agent --probably intensified by his own experience as a poet.

This two-fold orientation toward poet and poem admits of convergence, however, when one recalls the intimate causal relationship existing between a qualified maker, and the work which he qualifies. To Eliot, the qualified poem is important as an aesthetic work which delightfully teaches; the qualified poet is significant as the agent upon whose innate and acquired traits of character, sensibility and skill, the excellence of the poem depends. The critical movement between both aspects seems motivated by a concern for aesthetic quality, or the specified, formal excellence of literature. From this attraction, moreover, and from his gradually increased emphasis upon cultural unity, flows naturally his interest in the excellent use of language as a means toward the refinement of expression and communication.

Eliot's essays have also expanded considerably upon the nature of poetry (as presented in Chapter II) as a skill, a lasting excellence of aesthetic quality, and as the entire tradition of all poems. Yet this interest in the properly theoretical is subordinate to and closely linked with the already noted concentration upon the poet-craftsman, and upon what

might be called Eliot's "first love" --inasmuch as it is the reason behind his pronounced concern for the poet --the formally qualified poem. Quantitatively speaking, it would seem that the smallest number of essays has been given to his idea of poetry's effect upon an audience. However, it may be gathered from Chapter V that his idea of poetry as (1) a delightful, yet serious aesthetic experience, necessarily integrated with the whole of human life, and (2) as a social influence upon the refinement of cultural communication, through the excellent use of language, recognizes both a powerful impact and a far-reaching use. An undercurrent in his earlier work, this concern for effect receives more overt attention after 1930.

Eliot's orientation, moreover, may also be clarified by considering its historical context. For literary critics have traditionally been identified according to some characteristic emphasis upon one or another of the causal aspects of the poem. Thus, Aristotle's interest in the art of making and in the formal means directed to that end, has earned the Poetics a reputation as formal criticism. Critics such as Sidney, Tolstoy, and Arnold, on the other hand, more concerned for the moral impact of the poem upon man (effect), have been designated as moral critics. And the trend of "Modern Criticism" toward the incorporation of extraneous sciences into literary criticism, as described in Chapter I, has produced critics of more or less balance whose approach may be signified by the term analogical. But the kind of criticism which appears most relevant to that of T.S. Eliot perhaps finds its prototype in the first century treatise, On the Sublime. The alleged author, it will be recalled, is Longinus. Because of his interest

in the quality of "sublimity" which effects that "transport" proper to great poetry and which depends much upon the trained stylistic skill of a poet humanly qualified by elevated thoughts and inspired passions, the Longinian approach is called qualitative.

New Eliot's affinity to this type of criticism is chiefly evidenced by three considerations: (1) his rather uncommon concentration upon the stylistic and tonal qualities (e.g. precision, allusiveness, order, and wit, sincerity, surprise, etc.) of the poem, described in Chapter IV, (2) his interest in those qualities implied in the term poetic sensibility (Chapter III) which enable the poet to perceive and feel genuinely, and (3) his idea of poetry as that refining, educational pleasure which draws a man out of himself (Chapter V), and which can only be judged by its enduring capacity to fit in with the whole of tradition--to please, as Longinus says, "all and always" (Chapter I).

This conclusion, however, warrants modification. For in the first place, it will be recalled that Eliot's work is but one example of qualitative criticism. He is preceded by others more or less occupied with the same concept of excellence as "the echo of a great soul," notably Samuel Johnson. Moreover, the validity of distinguishing the predominant concern of any critic, in terms of poetry, poet, poem, or effect, is necessarily limited by the real inseparability of the concepts. In criticism, as in the poem, they are inextricably bound up with one another. And lastly, the fact that Eliot's work is still very much a part of contemporary development limits, by even his own standards, this present-day perspective of his critical orientation.



In conclusion, Eliot's occasional essays appear to be a contribution to the literary criticism in the following respects: First, he has clarified the aesthetic nature of poetry by definitely emphasizing criticism as the "elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste,"<sup>2</sup> through analysis and comparison of the artifact as art. His work thus sounded as a much needed "voice" in the critical wilderness at the commencement of the twentieth century, pointing out the excesses of such predecessors as Sainte-Beuve, Arnold, and "inspired" Romantics, while acknowledging some-- though not all -- of their merits. Secondly, his concept of poetry as tradition has been (as have other terms such as "poetic sensibility," "objective correlative," etc.) a stimulating influence upon critical thought and one demanding prudence to discern wherein and to what extent it is tenable.

Eliot has also clarified the critical concept poem. His work is at once a refreshing comment upon the universal, autotelic nature of an artifact, and a justification for approaching it through the honest and sensitive application of "taste."

Yet this method of direct textual analysis is carefully balanced by a respect for the evaluations of other critics past and present, and for the role of Christian orthodoxy as a standard for measuring literary greatness. Moreover, his inquiry into qualities of style --more thorough than is found in most contemporary criticism --has promoted a healthy recognition of the difference between aesthetic, and life experience. It has also suggested the potentialities of proper language usage toward strengthening cultural rapport

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<sup>2</sup>"Function of Criticism," 1923, SE, p. 13.

within a society. Thus, even if one does not value the same rather select qualities of style which Eliot holds high, his basic attention to the formal characteristics of diction, syntax, and composition is worthy of note.

Finally, his criticism offers a sharpened awareness of literature from the aspect of poet. Eliot's focus upon the artistic and human qualifications of the poet has resulted in at least two valuable perceptions which are especially pertinent today: (1) that the poet's art is a conscious, responsible, trained skill which can be developed by continual exercise in the writing of verse and constant imaginative assimilation of experience, and (2) that his persuasive power depends much upon the wisdom and warmth of an integrated personality which is reflected in, and channeled through the poem. It is not to the poet that the alleged "impersonal" theory<sup>3</sup> finally applies: rather it bespeaks that quality of detachment which arises from the poetic sensibility of the artist co-operating with the duly formed personality of the man and which effects a poem of universal significance. Moreover, his concentration upon the creative process and the educational influences which may contribute to the formation of a qualified craftsman offers interesting --if not always applicable --suggestions to those who themselves aspire to write either prose or poetry well. His view embodies the experiential insight of one poet, and as such it has a particular wisdom. Thus, "so long as we check what he says by the kind of poetry he writes" (Eliot's principle for evaluating the art poetique of any practicing artist),<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, SW, pp. 53-56.

<sup>4</sup>"Introduction," From Poet to Valery, op. cit., p. 17.

his partial vision can be safely applied to poetic theory in general.

The work of Eliot is, then, characterized by an honesty and integrity of interest which searches out the reasons that best seem to explain his personal taste in poetry, and his experience as poet. In this respect, especially, his essays are a valuable contribution to that critical endeavor which he once described as the "discreet advertisement of good poetry."<sup>5</sup> Allen Tate's remark may here be applied to Eliot: "The permanent critics do not settle the question. They compel us to ask it again."<sup>6</sup> For Eliot, through a sincere concern for the qualities proper to the excellent poet and poem, has done much to stimulate the habit of "asking." His criticism is, in the necessary sense of the term, interested. Despite, or perhaps through its limitations, it generates enthusiasm to continue the effort toward real appreciation of the implications of literature, both as art, and as a trustworthy guide to that point of commitment wherein "His Will is our Peace." What is important for the critic, after all, is the genuineness of what East Cocker calls "only the trying" --that attempt to master his subject which is "a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure." And precisely because it is a new start, founded upon those of the past, and a different kind of failure, corrective for ventures to come, "the trying" of Eliot's criticism may be studied--and emulated--with profit. One may take from it much that is positively good. And, as the Quartet finally concludes: "The rest is not our business."

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<sup>5</sup>"A Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry," 1920, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>6</sup>"Longinus," Lectures in Criticism, op. cit., p. 70.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Sister Honora Remes, D. C. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 25, 1962  
Date

Martin J. Svojsic  
Signature of Adviser