

# T. S. Elliot's conception of poetry

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T. S. ELIOT'S CONCEPTION OF POETRY<sup>1</sup>

Although the appearance of Eliot's poetry completely revolutionised the development of English Post-War verse, Eliot's *theory* of poetry is by no means revolutionary. He probably agrees with all that has been said on the subject by Plato and Horace and others down to Wordsworth and Coleridge. Thus, he, too, believes that the poet is born, not made; that to delight is the end of poetry; that the human soul is the chief subject for poetry, or, in the words of Pope, that

*The proper study of Mankind is Man.*

Moreover, like most critics, he holds that inspiration must be supplemented by unceasing labour and by the conscious elaboration of a technique of poetry.

Eliot appears to be reluctant about committing himself to any definite statement on the nature of poetry. He consistently adopts the viewpoint of the practitioner of verse rather than that of the theorist. There may be a touch of affectation in this attitude; but it may also be due to his profound scepticism with regard to such sciences as aesthetics and psychology. At any rate, he has always held himself rather aloof from the recent discussion on these subjects. He has great admiration for I. A. Richards who may be considered the most important

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<sup>1</sup> Conférence donnée à Lausanne le mercredi 25 février 1942 sous les auspices des Études de Lettres et dans le cadre de leurs conférences de mise au point.

member of the new school of scientific critics. Eliot admires his vast knowledge, the subtlety and severity of his method, but he regards with distrust the findings of the psycho-analysts in this field of research.

Considering Eliot's reluctance or, perhaps, inability to formulate a clear and coherent theory of poetry, it will be better for us to neglect, for the time being at least, such theoretical statements as there may be found in his writings, and to try to reconstruct his conception of poetry from an analysis of his own practice and his achievement as a poet.

Eliot's position may be generally described as conservative and even retrograde. In terms of literature it may be defined as a revolt against romanticism, and in terms of religion as a return to medieval or Catholic belief. Eliot is unable to consider literature and religion separately. The theory of «art for art's sake» appears to him so devoid of meaning that he does not even bother to disprove it. On the other hand, he dissents vehemently and extensively from any theory that attempts to put a substitute in the place of religion. Hence Eliot's objections against Matthew Arnold, against Irving Babbitt and the American Neo-Humanists, against the new paganism of D. H. Lawrence, and against Aldous Huxley and Bernard Shaw whom he calls «depressive life-forcers». He finds in their attempt to divorce literature from Christianity the origin of the modern perversion of art and letters, and he stigmatised this modern malady in the three lectures which he delivered in 1933 at the university of Virginia under the title of *After Strange Gods, A Primer of Modern Heresy*.

The key to Eliot's conception of poetry lies here. All the ideas of Eliot are determined by his belief; his idea of poetry is no exception. But the exact way in which the Christian faith influences Eliot's poetry and determines his aesthetic theory has often been misunderstood. *The Waste Land* is that poem of Eliot's in which the relations between art and religion are particularly involved and complex. Most critics agreed with I. A. Richards who said that in this poem Eliot had effected

« a complete severance between his poetry and all beliefs »<sup>1</sup>. Edwin Muir even went so far as to compare Eliot's attitude with that of Musset or Byron; he discovered in *The Waste Land* the typical weariness and disillusion of the Post-War period, which was a period of transition. There is a semblance of truth in this interpretation because the poem was composed several years before Eliot publicly announced his conversion to the Anglo-Catholic church. In reality however — and this is essential for an understanding of Eliot's conception of poetry — his religious position is very much the same before and after what is called, perhaps inexactly, his conversion. It is the position of a believer and a Christian. *The Waste Land* is the first long poem in which Eliot endeavoured to write verse inspired by a religious feeling. It is the first great example of the way in which Eliot thought that modern poetry could deal with a religious theme.

As this interpretation is more or less new, it may be as well to illustrate my meaning by a brief summary of the five sections into which the poem is divided. The first section, « The Burial of the Dead », shows the difficulty of any attempt to rouse the inhabitants of the waste land from their state of sin and depravity. The process of spiritual re-birth is described metaphorically as a cruel violation of the senses.

*April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers. (I, 1-7)*

The second section, « A Game of Chess », evokes the feeling of boredom, of *ennui*, the deathly weariness of the mind that characterises the apathetic state of a depraved soul.

<sup>1</sup> *Science and Poetry*, London, Kegan Paul, 1926. P. 64 n.

« *What shall we ever do ?* »

*The hot water at ten.*

*And if it rains, a closed car at four.*

*And we shall play a game of chess,*

*Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.*

(II, 134-8)

Then follows the terrible third section, « The Fire Sermon », with its savage accusation of Lust in the image of sterile sexual passion.

The fourth and fifth sections may be called the positive, affirmative part of the entire poem. The short section IV, entitled « Death by Water », suggests that physical death, the death of the senses, is the way to salvation, to real Life. The last section, « What the Thunder Said », marks the end of the drought and the falling of the fertilising rain. The three Sanscrit words, meaning « Give, sympathise, control », indicate the poet's conviction that the Christian virtues of love, humility, and discipline are the condition of deliverance from the curse.

I know that I have emphasised in this summary what may be called the prose meaning of the poem. But in a sense it is no exaggeration to say that *The Waste Land* is a didactic poem or a poetical sermon which culminates in the affirmation of the orthodox Christian doctrine of love, humility, and submission. But it *would* be an undue exaggeration to say that Eliot was using poetry as a vehicle for his Christian doctrines. On the contrary, what distinguishes *The Waste Land* from his more recent poems is that the poetry is more important than the doctrine, or rather that the poetry alone is important. The doctrine is regarded as something that is apprehended by the reader's intelligence only, not by his aesthetic sense.

To make clear this distinction between poetry and doctrine it may be useful to remember Eliot's criticism of the romantic poets. The most significant thing to be noticed is this : when Eliot defined his own position in literature as that of a classi-

cist<sup>1</sup> he was affirming his opposition, not to the romantic conception of the nature of poetry, but to the predominant romantic practice of poetry. He would certainly agree with Wordsworth's definition that.

The appropriate business of poetry... is to treat of things not as they *are*, but as they appear; not as they exist in themselves, but as they *seem* to exist to the *senses*, and to the *passions*.<sup>2</sup>

Nor would he find fault with this statement of Coleridge's that in every work of art

the conscious is so impressed upon the unconscious as to appear in it... He who combines the two is the man of genius; and for that reason he must partake of both. Hence there is in genius itself an unconscious activity; nay, that is the genius in the man of genius.<sup>3</sup>

A confirmation of this view may be found in the Introduction which Eliot wrote to the poems of Harold Monroe in 1933. There he says that a poem

is dictated, not by the idea — for there is no idea — but by the nature of that dark embryo within him [sc., the poet] which gradually takes on the form and speech of a poem. (p. XIII)

In theory, the romantic poets were right; but in practice they too often did not respect the sacred life of « that dark embryo » which grows in the unconscious mind of the poet. Eliot's fundamental objection against most romantic poetry is stated with force and precision in this maxim which he pronounced in one of his lectures on *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933):

A poet may borrow a philosophy or he may do without one. It is when he philosophises upon his own *poetic* insight that he is apt to go wrong. (p.99)

By way of illustration he quotes a sentence from I. A. Ri-

<sup>1</sup> For *Lancelot Andrewes*, 1928, ix.

<sup>2</sup> *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface*, 1815.

<sup>3</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Shawcross, ii. 258.

chard's essay on *Science and Poetry* (1926) which reads as follows :

To distinguish an intuition of an emotion from an intuition *by* it, is not always easy

to which Eliot adds this comment :

I believe that Wordsworth was inclined to the same error of which Mr. Richards finds Lawrence guilty.

The romantic poets degraded and violated their own poetic intuitions by using them as a mere framework for their ideas. It was the metaphysician in Coleridge who killed the poet in Coleridge. Of Shelley, Eliot remarks with mixed admiration and regret that he

seems to have had to a high degree the unusual faculty of passionate apprehension of abstract ideas.

(*The Use etc.*, p. 89)

It is rather curious to note that Eliot conceives the working of his own mind in an entirely different manner. He says :

My mind is too heavy and concrete for any flight of abstruse reasoning.

(*Ib.*, p. 77)

In *The Waste Land* Eliot tried to realise his conception of a poetry that is entirely free from philosophising upon poetical intuitions, a poetry uncontaminated by doctrine superadded to inspiration. In view of the hard fact that *The Waste Land* nevertheless does convey a definite message, namely the Christian doctrine, the question arises, in what manner do the poet's unconscious experiences grow into a logically coherent whole? In what manner does that dark embryo within the poet's mind turn into a full-grown rational being? How is it possible to write a didactic poem and at the same time to respect the sacredness of the primitive poetic insight?

The answer is clear: It is not possible. But Eliot's attempt to achieve this impossibility may best be explained by an investigation into his poetical method. I have chosen for detailed examination section IV of *The Waste Land* which is entitled « Death by Water ». It consists of the following ten lines :



*Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.*

*A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.*

*Gentile or Jew  
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.*

The method employed is that of contrast and identity. The first contrast to be noted is that between fire and water. The preceding section, « The Fire Sermon », dealt with sterile lust symbolised by fire. In this section, water is the symbol of salvation and life.

Another more subtle contrast is suggested by Eliot's note to line 218 of section III which reads :

...the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phœnician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples.

Following up this suggestion we are faced with the contrast of two kinds of death, the first of which is described in « The Fire Sermon » where the Prince of Naples speaks :

*A rat crept softly through the vegetation  
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank  
While I was fishing in the dull canal  
On a winter evening round behind the gas-house  
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck  
And on the king my father's death before him.  
White bodies naked on the low damp ground  
And bones cast in a little low dry garret,  
Rattled by the rat's foot only, year by year. (III, 187-95)*

This is obviously an image of the death of the soul, whether of the soul of summer bathers on the banks of the Thames (*White bodies naked on the low damp ground*) or, more literally,



the soul of a man or child whose bones are rotting concealed in a garret. It is the kind of death that seems most adequate to Eliot's conception of man living and dying without religious sanction.

The Phœnician Sailor dies the other kind of death. According to the anthropological work of Miss Jessie L. Weston to which Eliot refers the reader, the Syrian merchants were formerly the chief transmitters of the ancient fertility mysteries. The sailor's death by water is an act of salvation and redemption. The temporal world and the world of desires is left far behind and, to use Eliot's own words in *Burnt Norton*, the Sailor enters « the still point of the turning world ».

As to Eliot's play with identity I will point only to one example. Phlebas the Phœnician Sailor is identical with the Smyrna Merchant who appears in « The Fire Sermon ».

*Unreal City*

*Under the brown fog of a winter noon*

*Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant*

*Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants*

*C. i. f. London: documents at sight,*

*Asked me in demotic French*

*To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel*

*Followed by a weekend at the Metropole. (III, 207-14)*

The fundamental identity of Mr. Eugenides and the ancient Syrian merchants, represented by the drowned Phœnician Sailor, is symbolically expressed by the pun on « currants », that is, raisins, and « current », that is, a flow of water.

Examples of this play with contrasts and identities might be multiplied, but the principle has become clear enough for us to attempt to define the method by which Eliot hopes to express his poetical intuitions and at the same time to convey his Christian doctrine without interfering with the original aesthetic purity of those very intuitions.

If you will allow me to simplify the matter somewhat, Eliot's idea may be defined thus. Eliot's poetical intuitions are of

two kinds : intuitions of life and death according to the standards of the world, and intuitions of life and death according to Christian standards. These two fundamentally different kinds of insight are allowed to grow into the poem side by side. The poet does not choose between them, he does not suppress one kind for the sake of the other. For the poet images of sin and depravity are just as valuable as images of salvation and redemption. He does not care if he gives the impression that his vision of reality is full of contradictions and hopelessly complex and obscure. He is exclusively concerned with the poet's principal duty which is to give birth to that dark embryo within him.

But what of the Christian message ? you may ask. It may safely be assumed that when he wrote *The Waste Land* Eliot thought that the Christian doctrine could not be expressed adequately in the Christian terminology. That terminology had become too hackneyed, too much of a *cliché*, to be introduced into poetry. He thought it better to use the Buddhist terminology instead. But Eliot's avoidance of the Christian terminology has also another reason. He believed that the message of his poem could be apprehended in the reader's intelligence. He hoped, in fact, that the two contrasting kinds of poetical intuitions would be reconciled in the reader's mind through the working of the wit. By seizing the irony of those contrasts and identities the reader would inevitably discover the hidden meaning, the purpose, of the whole poem.

The matter may be explained perhaps more clearly with reference to the romantic theory of the Imagination. Eliot himself quotes approvingly Coleridge's famous definition of imagination as « that synthetic and magical power » which « reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities » <sup>1</sup>. It would appear that Eliot's imagination was unable to reconcile the discordant qualities of *The Waste Land*. If that poem has unity of purpose and emotion,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 79.

that unity is the work of the intellect rather than the imagination. But this intellectual unity lies outside the poem itself; it stands in the same relation to the poem as the Notes stand to the text.

Eliot's failure to bring about a complete unity of emotional and intellectual or didactic purpose is caused by his anti-romantic attitude, or rather by his will not to « philosophise about his own poetic insight ». There is much in this attitude that reminds one of Walter Pater and aestheticism generally. In fact, Eliot may be regarded in many respects as a late exponent of the aesthetic or decadent school of poetry. There is the same will to cultivate poetry for its own sake, to write a sort of pure or quintessential poetry, and to keep art free from the intrusion of extraneous matter. Art is an end in itself, it must never be degraded into an activity that serves a non-artistic purpose.

The self-sufficiency of poetry that is typical of aestheticism is the unspoken principle which underlies all Eliot's early theoretical writings. But it is hardly necessary to add that he interprets it in a way that is very different from, say, Oscar Wilde's interpretation in that well-known collection of critical essays entitled *Intentions*. Eliot's own form of aestheticism may best be studied in his article on *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, first published in 1917. The leading idea of Impersonality is there applied in two ways. First, Eliot maintains that the literary temperament of the poet should be subordinated to the rule of Tradition. Every new work of art must conform to tradition, and its aesthetic value is determined by its conformity. He writes :

What happens is a continual surrender of himself [sc. of the poet] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.<sup>1</sup>

In the second place, Eliot demands that the personal expe-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sacred Wood*, London, Methuen, 1932 (3rd ed.), p. 52.

rience of the poet should be subjected to the transforming power of the artistic mind. Just as there is an outward authority, namely the tradition of European literature since Homer, so there is also an inner authority which he calls « the mind of the poet ». And just as Tradition is opposed to the Individual Talent, « the mind which creates » is opposed to « the man who suffers ».

It is no misinterpretation of Eliot's theory to say that his conception of Tradition and his conception of the « artistic mind » are at bottom the same as the principle of Beauty that governed the theory of aestheticism in the latter quarter of the 19th century. There is, however, this difference: the cult of Beauty, as it was practised by the school of Walter Pater, is generally considered as a form of hedonism, as the search for a superior kind of pleasure. With Eliot, on the other hand, it appears rather as a kind of asceticism and self-denial, as a discipline of the soul rather than as the enjoyment of its faculty for experiencing voluptuous artistic emotions. Eliot considers the writing of poetry as one of the spiritual exercises with which the Christian chastises the senses and the passions.

Viewed from this angle, the failure of *The Waste Land* appears in a new light. In writing that poem Eliot had attempted the impossible. He had tried to express a very personal experience, namely the horror at the sight of man living far from God, in a manner that he considered rigidly impersonal, neutral, and objective. He tried to describe his emotions as if they were not his emotions at all. He pushed the abnegation of himself so far that the poem which he wrote finally destroys itself. You cannot express contradictory emotions without producing an effect of insincerity that is fatal to poetry. Poetry must be based on a principle of selection. In romantic poetry it is the ego, the individual character and temperament of the poet that governs the form and content of his work. In classical poetry, on the other hand, it is an impersonal principle of order that selects the poetical elements to be included in the poem. There is no third possibility. Eliot, however,

attempted the impossible feat of combining the two attitudes. Like a romantic poet he gave expression to the poetic intuitions as they sprang from his unconscious mind, and he took care not to press them into an order imposed, as it were, from outside. And like a classical poet he adopted an attitude of objectivity. By the use he made of ambiguity and irony, of contrasts and parallelisms, he hoped to suggest that there *is* an objective order underlying the apparent confusion of the spontaneous intuitions. As a result, *The Waste Land* is a puzzling and disconcerting poem. Eliot had set out to embrace the *whole* tradition of European literature, to create a synthesis of the romantic and the classic, to connect as many strands of literature as possible, but his achievement remains a remarkable and interesting experiment, nothing more.

Eliot must have felt this himself. He has not repeated the experiment of *The Waste Land*. A new attitude and a new style appears, first in *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), and with various modifications in his later poems, *Burnt Norton* (1935), *East Coker* (1940), and *Dry Salvages* (1941). The dominant principle in Eliot's conception of poetry is still that of impersonality, and he still considers the writing of poetry as an act of self-abnegation, a form of spiritual discipline. But his former belief in the sacredness of all poetic intuitions seems to be shaken. Poetic intuitions are, after all, only a special form of human knowledge, and human knowledge is fallible. Eliot's scepticism finds expression in these lines from *East Coker*:

...There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been. (II, 31-7)

This scepticism regarding the validity of poetic or any other kind of insight determines Eliot's later conception of poetry.

The cause of this new attitude must certainly be sought in the religious experiences of a mystical nature which Eliot tends to put before any other experience, poetic or otherwise. As a result, poetry generally loses its former prestige. It appears as a very imperfect means of attaining the end which alone is important to the man striving for religious perfection. The annihilation of personality in Tradition can only be a feeble image of the supreme act of self-extinction in the mystical union. This discontent with poetry is revealed in Eliot's more recent poems. In *Burnt Norton*, for instance, he accuses language generally of betraying his new sense of impersonality, or « stillness », as he calls it here :

...« *Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.* (V, 13-7)

But the most poignant lament about the hopelessness of the poet's endeavour occurs in section II of *East Coker*. This section contains that ecstatic poem about universal harmony, beginning

*What is the late November doing  
With the disturbance of the spring  
And creatures of the summer heat,  
And snowdrops writhing under feet  
And hollyhocks that aim too high  
Red into grey and tumble down  
Late roses filled with early snow ?... (II, 1-7)*

After these magnificent lines Eliot goes on :

*That was a way of putting it — not very satisfactory:  
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion.* (18-9)

In conclusion it appears that Eliot's idea of the nature of poetry has been considerably modified. He is still trying to invest his spontaneous poetic insight with objective validity.

His restless genius still urges him on to « the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings. » (*East Coker*, II, 20-1)

But his religious experience of supernatural beatitude makes him inclined to regard literature with greater tolerance than before. During his « aesthetic » period, that is, when he wrote the essay on *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and when he was a disciple of Ezra Pound and a member of the Imagist school of poetry, he would have considered it an unforgivable sin against the purity of art to write such a manifestly subjective and didactic poem as *Burnt Norton* or *East Coker*. They clearly violate the law of impersonality and artistic objectivity which he then held supreme. He, then, had thought it the poet's first duty to purify and transform « the man who suffers » by the action of « the mind which creates ». He had declared that

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.<sup>1</sup>

To-day, that militant anti-romanticism has not quite gone from Eliot's theory and practice. It may still be observed in certain sections of his latest poems and especially in his play *The Family Reunion* (1939). But it appears singularly tempered and modified. Eliot slowly feels his way towards a new kind of lyrical utterance. The style of his recent poems is more directly personal, more powerful too, than the style of any of his earlier poems, with the sole exception, perhaps, of *Ash-Wednesday*. By way of summing up it may be said that while Eliot's religious experience lowered his theoretical estimate of poetry, it favourably influenced the practice of his art. If Eliot should ever state again his convictions as to the nature and function of poetry, they may be expected to be considerably different from those he expounded in his early essay on *Tradition and the Individual Talent*.

Hans W. HÄUSERMANN.

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<sup>1</sup> *Selected Essays*, p. 21.