

T. S. Eliot

By GILBERT SELDES

THE poems and critical essays of T. S. Eliot have been known to a number of readers for six or seven years; small presses in England have issued one or two pamphlet-like books of poetry; in America the *Little Review* and the *Dial* have published both prose and verse. In 1920 he issued his collected "Poems," a volume of some sixty pages, through Knopf, and the following year the same publisher put forth "The Sacred Wood," a collection of fourteen essays devoted to two subjects, criticism and poetry. This year a volume no larger than the first, containing one long poem, is issued. The position, approaching eminence, which Mr. Eliot holds is obviously not to be explained in terms of bulk.

It is peculiarly difficult to write even the necessary journalism about Mr. Eliot. From its baser manifestation he is fortunately immune and his qualities do not lend themselves to trickery. The secret of his power (I will not say influence) as a critic is that he is interested in criticism and in the object of criticism, as a poet that he understands and practices the art of poetry. In the first of these he is exceptional, almost alone; in both, his work lies in the living tradition and outside the wilfulness of the moment. We are so far gone in the new movement that even to say that he practices aesthetic criticism and impersonal poetry will be confusing. I can only explain by distinguishing his work from others.

At the present moment criticism of literature is almost entirely criticism of the ideas expressed in literature; it is interested chiefly in morals, economics, sociology, or science. We can imagine a critic *circa* 1840 declaring that "Othello" is a bad play because men should not kill their wives; and the progress is not very great to 1922 when we are as likely as not to hear that it is a bad play because Desdemona is an outmoded kind of woman. To be sure the economic, sociological, and psychoanalytical interest has largely displaced the moral one, and critics (whether they say a book is good or bad) are inclined to judge the importance of a writer of fiction by the accuracy of his dream-interpretations or the soundness of his economic fundamentals. Their creative interest is in something apart from the art they are discussing; and what Mr. Eliot has done, with an attractive air of finality, is to indicate how irrelevant that interest is to the art of letters. He respects these imperfect critics in so far as they are good philosophers, moralists, or scientists; but he knows that in connection with letters they are the victims of impure desires (the poet *manqué* as critic) or of impure interests (the fanatical Single-taxer as critic). "But Aristotle," he says, "had none of these impure desires to satisfy; in whatever sphere of interest, he looked solely and steadfastly at the object; in his short and broken treatise he provides an eternal example—not of laws, or even of method, for there is no method except to be very intelligent, but of intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition." Again, more specifically, "The important critic is the person who is absorbed in the present problems of art, and who wishes to bring the forces of the past to bear upon the solution of these problems. If the critic considers Congreve, for instance, he will always have at the back of his mind the question: What has Congreve got that is pertinent to our dramatic art? Even if he is solely engaged in trying to understand Congreve, this will make all the difference: inasmuch as to understand anything is to understand from a point of view." Criticism, for Mr. Eliot, is the statement of the structures in which our perceptions, when we face a work of art, form themselves. He quotes Remy de Gourmont: "To erect his personal impressions into laws is the great effort of man if he is sincere."

The good critic, as I understand Mr. Eliot, will be concerned with the aesthetic problem of any given work of art; he will (I should add) not despise ideas, but if he is intelligent he will recognize their place in a work of art and he will certainly not dismiss as paradoxical nonsense Mr. Eliot's contention that his baffling escape from ideas

* *The Waste Land*. By T. S. Eliot. Boni and Liveright.

made Henry James the most intelligent man of his time. It is not an easy task to discover in each case what the aesthetic problem is; but that is the task, precisely, which every good critic of painting, let us say, is always compelled to attempt and which no critic of letters need attempt because he can always talk (profoundly, with the appearance of relevance, endlessly) about ideas. Mr. Eliot has accomplished the task several times, notably in his essay on "Hamlet," about which essay a small literature has already been produced. I have not space here to condense the substance of that or of the other critical essays—they are remarkably concise as they are—nor to do more than say that they are written with an extraordinary distinction in which clarity, precision, and nobility almost always escaping magniloquence, are the elements.

In turning to Mr. Eliot as poet I do not leave the critic behind since it is from his critical utterances that we derive the clue to his poetry. He says that the historical sense is indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet after the age of twenty-five, and follows this with a statement which cannot be too closely pondered by those who misunderstand tradition and by those who imagine that American letters stand outside of European letters and are to be judged by other standards:

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

This is only the beginning of "depersonalization." It continues:

What happens is a continual surrender of himself (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 . . . the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. . . . The intensity of the poetry is something quite different from whatever intensity in the supposed experience it may give the impression of. . . . Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality. . . .

And finally:

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. . . . The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. . . . Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of a personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

The significant emotion has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet; and recognition of this, Mr. Eliot indicates, is the true appreciation of poetry. Fortunately for the critic he has written one poem, "The Waste Land,"* to which one can apply his own standards. It develops, carries to conclusions, many things in his remarkable earlier work, in method and in thought. I have not that familiarity with the intricacies of French verse which could make it possible for me to affirm or deny the statement that technically he derives much from Jules Laforgue; if Remy de Gourmont's estimate of the latter be correct one can see definite points of similarity in the minds of the two poets:

His natural genius was made up of sensibility, irony, imagination, and clairvoyance; he chose to nourish it with positive knowledge (*connaissances positives*), with all philosophies and all literatures, with all the images of nature and of art; even the latest views of science seem to have been known to him. . . . It is literature entirely made new and unforeseen, disconcerting and giving the curious and rare sensation that one has never read anything like it before. . . .

A series of sardonic portraits—of people, places, things—each the distillation of a refined emotion, make up Mr. Eliot's "Poems." The deceptive simplicity of these poems in form and in style is exactly at the opposite extreme from false naivete; they are unpretentiously sophisticated, wicked, malicious, humorous, and with the distillation of emotion has gone a condensation of expression. In "The Waste Land" the seriousness of the theme is matched with

an intensity of expression in which all the earlier qualities are sublimated.

In essence "The Waste Land" says something which is not new: that life has become barren and sterile, that man is withering, impotent, and without assurance that the waters which made the land fruitful will ever rise again. (I need not say that "thoughtful" as the poem is, it does not "express an idea"; it deals with emotions, and ends precisely in that significant emotion, inherent in the poem, which Mr. Eliot has described.) The title, the plan, and much of the symbolism of the poem, the author tells us in his "Notes," were suggested by Miss Weston's remarkable book on the Grail legend, "From Ritual to Romance"; it is only indispensable to know that there exists the legend of a king rendered impotent, and his country sterile, both awaiting deliverance by a knight on his way to seek the Grail; it is interesting to know further that this is part of the Life or Fertility mysteries; but the poem is self-contained. It seems at first sight remarkably disconnected, confused, the emotion seems to disengage itself in spite of the objects and events chosen by the poet as their vehicle. The poem begins with a memory of summer showers, gaiety, joyful and perilous escapades; a moment later someone else is saying "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," and this is followed by the first lines of "Tristan und Isolde," and then again by a fleeting recollection of loveliness. The symbolism of the poem is introduced by means of the Tarot pack of cards; quotations, precise or dislocated, occur; gradually one discovers a rhythm of alternation between the visionary (so to name the memories of the past) and the actual, between the spoken and the unspoken thought. There are scraps, fragments; then sustained episodes; the poem culminates with the juxtaposition of the highest types of Eastern and Western asceticism, by means of allusions to St. Augustine and Buddha; and ends with a sour commentary on the injunctions "Give, sympathize, control" of the Upanishads, a commentary which reaches its conclusion in a pastiche recalling all that is despairing and disinherited in the memory of man.

A closer view of the poem does more than illuminate the difficulties; it reveals the hidden form of the work, indicates how each thing falls into place, and to the reader's surprise shows that the emotion which at first seemed to come in spite of the framework and the detail could not otherwise have been communicated. For the theme is not a distaste for life, nor is it a disillusion, a romantic pessimism of any kind. It is specifically concerned with the idea of the Waste Land—that the land *was* fruitful and now is not, that life had been rich, beautiful, assured, organized, lofty, and now is dragging itself out in a poverty-stricken and disrupted and ugly tedium, without health, and with no consolation in morality; there may remain for the poet the labor of poetry, but in the poem there remain only "these fragments I have shored against my ruins"—the broken glimpses of what was. The poem is not an argument and I can only add, to be fair, that it contains no romantic idealization of the past; one feels simply that even in the cruelty and madness which have left their record in history and in art, there was an intensity of life, a germination and fruitfulness, which are now gone, and that even the creative imagination, even hallucination and vision have atrophied, so that water shall never again be struck from a rock in the desert. Mr. Bertrand Russell has recently said that since the Renaissance the clock of Europe has been running down; without the feeling that it was once wound up, without the contrasting emotions as one looks at the past and at the present, "The Waste Land" would be a different poem, and the problem of the poet would have been solved in another way.

The present solution is in part by juxtaposition of opposites. We have a passage seemingly spoken by a slut, ending
Goonight, Bill. Goonight, Lou. Goonight, May. Goonight.
Ta ta. Goonight, goonight.

and then the ineffable

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

Conversely the turn is accomplished from nobility or beauty of utterance to

The sounds of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

And in the long passage where Tiresias, the central character of the poem, appears the method is at its height, for here is the coldest and unhappiest revelation of the assault of lust made in the terms of beauty:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
 Like a taxi throbbing waiting
 I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
 The typist home at tea-time, clears her breakfast, lights
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
 Out of the window perilously spread
 Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,
 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
 Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.
 I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
 Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
 I, too, awaited the expected guest.
 He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
 A small house-agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
 One of the low on whom assurance sits
 As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
 The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
 The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
 Endeavors to engage her in caresses
 Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
 Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
 Exploring hands encounter no defense;
 His vanity requires no response,
 And makes a welcome of indifference.
 (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
 Enacted on this same divan or bed;
 I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
 And walked among the lowest of the dead.)
 Bestows one final patronizing kiss,
 And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . .

It will be interesting for those who have knowledge of another great work of our time, Mr. Joyce's "Ulysses," to think of the two together. That "The Waste Land" is, in a sense, the inversion and the complement of "Ulysses" is at least tenable. We have in "Ulysses" the poet defeated, turning outward, savoring the ugliness which is no longer transmutable into beauty, and, in the end, homeless. We have in "The Waste Land" some indication of the inner life of such a poet. The contrast between the forms of these two works is not expressed in the recognition that one is among the longest and one among the shortest of works in its genre; the important thing is that in each the theme, once it is comprehended, is seen to have dictated the form. More important still, I fancy, is that each has expressed something of supreme relevance to our present life in the everlasting terms of art.

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