

T. S. ELIOT: THE EARLY CAREER

THOMAS Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) was born in St. Louis. On both sides of his family he descended from old New England. His grandfather, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, founded the first Unitarian church in St. Louis and also Washington University. The ancestral sense of election and of mission still lingered in such genteel families of New England background, though the sense of election was transposed from the religious to the moral, social, and cultural spheres. A shy, bookish, bird-watching child, Eliot went to Smith Academy in St. Louis and Milton Academy in Massachusetts and spent summers on the Massachusetts coast near Gloucester. In 1906 he entered Harvard University; in 1911 he became a graduate student in philosophy. Not to name the teachers “of men illustrious for literature,” as Samuel Johnson remarked in his life of Addison, “is a kind of historical fraud, by which honest fame is injuriously diminished.” Among Eliot’s teachers were George Santayana, whose course in the “History of Modern Philosophy” began his deep immersion in that field, and Irving Babbitt, whose lectures on nineteenth-century French critics extolled “classical” reason and balance while bombarding “modern” liberalism, Romanticism, democracy, and emotional spontaneity. (Babbitt incidentally dazzled students with his one-upmanship in learned allu-

sions, an art Eliot subsequently mastered.) Bertrand Russell, briefly a guest professor at Harvard, recorded his impression of Eliot in letters to Lady Ottoline Morrell: “very well dressed and polished with manners of the finest Etonian type . . . ultracivilized, knows his classics very well, is familiar with all the French literature from Villon to Vildrach, and is altogether impeccable in his taste but has no vigour of life—or enthusiasm.” The date was 1914. Eliot, a twenty-six-year-old graduate student in philosophy, was about to leave on a Sheldon Fellowship for study in Germany and England. In another fifteen years he would conquer literary London, but this future was utterly undreamed-of, for he intended to become a university professor of philosophy.

Eliot’s demeanor, which he had achieved by this time, was not the least of his works of art and had much to do with his subsequent authority in the literary world. It changed somewhat as the years went by; in younger days he was relatively more elegant and occasionally waspish (some of his college friends called him “tsetse” alluding both to his initials and to the celebrated biting fly), and in later years he was more owlish, clerical, and benevolent. But till the end of his life one encountered on meeting him the sober three-piece suit, the “necktie rich and modest” like that of Prufrock, the black hair plastered down, the precise conversation in complete sentences, the unbending reserve, propriety, and courtesy. He amused some persons as an eccentric but he overawed more, arousing their insecurities. In short, he was formidable, though he could not have been so through his bearing alone. It was rather the combination of this with intellectual acuteness, force of character, disinterested purpose, moral intensity, and dangerousness—for one could be ambushed by a snub or a sneer—that gave him his personal ascendancy.

He had been reading and writing verse since his schooldays. (His first literary ventures were in childhood: compositions for the family to which the six-year-old signed his name “T. S. Eliot.”) His earliest taste in poetry was for Macaulay’s “Horatius,” Tennyson’s “Revenge,” Burns’s “Bannockburn,” and the like. With adolescence came the *Rubaiyat* and then Byron, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti, and Swinburne. Early in his college career he read Dante, puzzling out the Italian with the aid of a prose translation and memorizing long passages that especially delighted him. He was permanently impressed by the pre-

cision, economy, concreteness, and austerity of Dante's style. What he then thought of his religious view of life we do not know, except that he preferred the *Inferno* to the *Paradiso*, for he associated the latter with Pre-Raphaelite verse and with "cheerfulness, optimism, and hopefulness; and these words stood for a great deal of what one hated in the nineteenth century." Poetry, he then felt, could "find its material only *in* suffering." The poems he composed before 1909 are derivative exercises in various styles, especially the late-Victorian styles of England. In 1910 he wrote the college class ode, which is no better than most commencement odes. Yet at the same time he was working on "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

THE ENCOUNTER WITH LAFORGUE

In December 1908 a fateful moment occurred in the history of modern poetry. Reading Arthur Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (discussed in Chapter 3), Eliot was introduced to the writings of Jules Laforgue. He soon purchased the complete works of Laforgue, and the impact on his own poetry was radical. He acquired an ironic attitude and a new subject matter and style. Within a year he reached a much higher level of achievement. The momentum lasted for three years, as Eliot continued in this first period of creative breakthrough to develop along new lines the resources he had discovered. In 1909 he wrote "Nocturne," "Humoresque," "Spleen," and "Conversation Galante," four poems that are similar in some ways to Laforgue's; only the last was retained in his *Collected Poems*. In 1910 and 1911 came "Portrait of a Lady," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." They effected a total departure from the Victorian and Genteel tradition of English and American poetry; in fact, no other poet in England or the United States had written anything so arrestingly "modern." They were the finest poems written in the twentieth century up to that point by an American. These facts are the more remarkable when we remind ourselves that Eliot was only twenty-three in 1911 and that he had matured his talent in an independence hardly less than that of Robinson in Gardiner, Maine, or Robert Frost on his chicken farm. No one in his milieu could have suggested to Eliot this way of writing.

A literary departure of this rapidity and completeness cannot have been altogether unprepared. Eliot must have found in Laforgue a writer who, as he later put it, helped him to become aware of what he wanted to say himself. The poetry of Laforgue was—in one of its aspects—a rebellion against the late-Romantic style, the style Eliot had been practicing in his own early work. Laforgue's poetry was, in other words, not a completely new way of writing, for it was partly a negation of a familiar one. (Had it been merely new, perhaps Eliot would have found it neither so intriguing nor so easy to assimilate.) Laforgue exploited stock themes, images, attitudes, and emotions of late-Romantic poetry, but with the all-important difference that he exploited them with disbelief, that is, ironically. He conveyed his ironic vision through deliberate incongruities. If the lady in a moonlit scene waits for the tender, conventional vows, the Laforguean lover overflows with repartee; or, uttering the sentimental declaration, he falls into a too-brisk rhythm or a vocabulary strangely abstract and philosophical. As a consequence, where the late-Romantic lyric presented through the course of the poem an undeviating unity or gradual transition of mood, point of view, and style, Laforgue jolted readers with unpredictable alternation. Eliot was struck by Laforgue's use of the conversational, including social banality and slang. He "taught me," Eliot later said, "the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech." Laforgue also mixed in technical and abstruse terms in a continually surprising and witty way. Partly for these reasons he seemed the last word in the contemporary or modern, as Symons had pointed out: "The old cadences, the old eloquence, the ingenuous seriousness of poetry, are all banished. . . . Here, if ever, is modern verse." Where the late-Romantic lyric had been, at least by convention, an utterance of personal emotion, Laforgue occasionally constructed his lyrics as short, objectively dramatic scenes.

In later, usually oblique, recollections Eliot tried to explain what happened in his encounter with Laforgue, psychologically speaking. He suddenly acquired a coherent poetic identity, was "changed, metamorphosed almost, within a few weeks even, from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person." In other words, he integrated his own personality on the basis of Laforgue's. (Such identifications are liberating precisely because they evoke and organize only some elements of the personality,

while inhibiting others; they suppress conflicts and ambivalences. For the same reason such identifications may quickly give way to others, perhaps of a quite different tendency.) Moreover, Eliot suddenly felt himself to be the bearer of a tradition. The tradition would be not only that of Laforgue but of French symbolist and post-symbolist poetry in general. As the bearer of this alien tradition in an English-speaking context, Eliot might feel that possibilities of a new development were especially open to him. How clearly he saw this at the time cannot be known, but he modified Laforgue's methods from the start. He kept the conversational but dropped the medley diction; he created quasi-dramatic scenes far more effectively; and he combined the stylistic resources and emotions of Laforgue with those of other French poets, with the Jacobean dramatists of England, and with a wide range of other writers, including Browning, Symons, and Henry James. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," at the close of this three-year period, one can isolate aspects of characterization, imagery, and theme which might have come from Laforgue. The ensemble of the whole, however, is not only unlike Laforgue (or any other French or English poet) but is finer and more mature than anything Laforgue wrote.

If we ask why this liberating identification crystallized around Laforgue rather than some other poet, Eliot suggests that he read the "dead author" with a "feeling of profound kinship, or rather of a peculiar personal intimacy." Since Laforgue had been, by his own classification, a "lunar Pierrot," a sad clown from a dead world, the feeling of "personal intimacy" was remarkable in a poet of puritan-Unitarian background, with his bedrock seriousness and essentialism of character and his childhood inculcation in high-minded, conscientiously hopeful views of man and the universe. According to the literary categories of the time, Laforgue was a Decadent. Having read deeply in Schopenhauer and Hartmann, he felt the nothingness of existence. Behind the Pierrot mask he suffered the inevitable pain, which he met with an impeccable demeanor. "He has invented," Symons emphasized, "a new manner of being René or Werther: an inflexible politeness towards man, woman, and destiny." We cannot know just which aspects of Laforgue evoked Eliot's sense of "profound kinship," but perhaps his evasion of emotional commitment and his self-protective, intellectual irony should be

stressed. And even without a sense of personal kinship Eliot might have regarded the character portrayed in Laforgue's poetry as a case worth study; he reveals, Symons had pointed out, "the possibilities for art which come from the sickly modern being, with his clothes, his nerves: the mere fact that he flowers from the soil of his epoch."

ENGLAND AND MARRIAGE

For the next four years philosophy, strongly backed by prudence and the family, overcame Eliot's inclination to verse. He wrote his Ph.D. thesis on F. H. Bradley; it was mainly completed by the end of his year at Oxford in 1914-15. Meanwhile, in September 1914, he had called on Ezra Pound in London, Conrad Aiken, a college friend, having provided him with an introduction. "I think he has some sense," was Pound's impression, and after reading "Prufrock," added: "He has actually trained himself *and* modernized himself *on his own*." By the spring of 1915 Eliot was grumbling about an academic career. Roused perhaps by Pound's enthusiasm, he resumed writing poetry and composed "The *Boston Evening Transcript*," "Aunt Helen," and "Hysteria." The laughing lady in the last of these may have been Vivien Haigh-Wood, whom he married in June 1915. It was an impetuous step, for he had not known her long and he had no money.

Though Eliot could sometimes act recklessly, he could not do so heedlessly, that is, without knowing what the act might imply. To marry an Englishwoman under these circumstances meant that he was choosing poetry rather than philosophy and literary life in London rather than university teaching in the United States. What it may have further implied can only be guessed, but since in the inner landscape of Eliot's imagination "life" and "death" were dominant symbols, he probably perceived Vivien, marriage, poetry, loss of financial security, and the total risk involved in a literary career as a choice of "life," as opposed to the "death" of abstract philosophizing in a university niche. If "life" through the next year was in some respects "the most awful nightmare of anxiety that the mind of man could conceive," it was still better than the type of existence he had been expecting.

Seven months after marriage he wrote Aiken, "I have *lived* through material for a score of long poems in the last six months. An entirely different life from that I looked forward to two years ago. Cambridge [Massachusetts] seems to me a dull nightmare now."

The marriage that released him in so many ways also brought immense troubles. Vivien Eliot was vivacious and acutely sensitive, particularly in the arts. She was among the first and strongest appreciators of Eliot's poetry. In times of serious financial difficulty, when their problem was to get together enough money to live on, she encouraged him to go on writing. But she proved to be physically and psychologically unstable. She was afflicted with colitis, insomnia, depression, and hysteria and sometimes fell into rages. Aspects of their relationship may have been incorporated in *The Waste Land*. The passage, for example, that begins,

My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me,

and ends,

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

probably reflects her desperation and hysteria and also Eliot's apprehension and growing hopelessness in their life together. (Yet in the manuscript of the poem Vivien Eliot wrote beside these lines, "WONDERFUL. Yes, & wonderful. wonderful.") At times she required almost constant medical attention (Pound remarked in his coarse way that Eliot had to turn his home into a "madhouse"), and Eliot, honorable, responsible, and tender, looked after her as best he could. But her condition steadily worsened, and to the unremitting tension and emotional drain Eliot lived with were added feelings of self-accusation. Whether or not they were justified, they were inevitable in a sensitive man under the circumstances.

Meanwhile, he had to put bread on the table. In 1915 and 1916 he taught school, an occupation he remembered in later years with horror. Between 1916 and 1919 he also taught Extension Courses for the universities of Oxford and London and for the London County Council. In 1916 Eliot's subjects were Mod-

ern French Literature and Modern English Literature; in 1917, Victorian Literature. His teaching of Victorian literature may remind us that the influence of the Victorian poets on him was, ultimately, as important as that of the French symbolistes, though neither he nor his early admirers much acknowledged or, perhaps, were aware of the fact.

From 1917 to 1925 he had a job in Lloyds Bank in London, where he worked in a small office under the street. He could hear the thud of pedestrians overhead. He helped edit the *Egoist*. He rose mornings at 5 in order to spend a few hours writing before he was due at the bank at 9:15. In these circumstances he turned out the critical essays and reviews that eventually became celebrated. Occasionally he wrote poems. Four composed in 1918 may reveal something of his state of mind: "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," "Whispers of Immortality," "Dans le Restaurant," and "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service." Deliberately undercutting Romantic idealizations, these poems stare at man's emptiness, egoism, psychological fragmentation, and animality, their emotion barely controlled by ironic distance and strict form. Similar perceptions were present in earlier poems, but Eliot's revulsion is now more intensely expressed. Perhaps modern poetry can show no more devastating, though elegant, gesture of "jemenfoutisme" (to adapt Eliot's word from "Mélange adultère de tout") than the closing lines of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," where Eliot has bird droppings fall on the corpse of the classical, tragic Agamemnon.

Eliot and his works were gradually acquiring a reputation in the literary world. His first book of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), was admired by a small but select circle that included E. M. Forster, John Middleton Murry, and Leonard and Virginia Woolf. It seemed at the time a collection of satiric scenes and portraits, modern, urban, and immensely clever. Two more volumes added the poems in quatrains and "Gerontion" to his oeuvre, and in 1920 *The Sacred Wood* collected many of the critical essays and reviews he had been publishing in journals since 1916. It included such now-famous pieces as "Hamlet and his Problems," with its argument that emotion cannot be expressed directly but only through a circumstance, chain of events, or "objective correlative" that evokes the emotion, and "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which sums up

many of his central critical standpoints. The book quickly captured the interest of younger English critics and teachers of literature.

THE WASTE LAND

Eliot had *The Waste Land* in mind at least as early as 1919. But, what with other work and the turmoil of his life, he was unable to make headway with the poem until 1921. By May of that year it was "partly on paper." In late September, his health seriously threatened, he was ordered by a nerve specialist to "go away at once for three months quite alone." He went accordingly to Margate, then to a sanatorium in Lausanne. On this enforced vacation he finished *The Waste Land*, which he seems to have regarded at first as a sequence of poems rather than a single long work. In December he left the manuscript with Pound, who was then living in Paris, and Pound went blue-penciling through it, crossing out weaker words, phrases, lines, and sections. In the process Pound made it shorter and more continuously forceful, and he also left it even more disjunctive than it had originally been. The poem won the *Dial* award for 1922. It was published in the same year and eventually became the classic, and controversial, poem of the Modernist movement.

Several of the poems Eliot published before *The Waste Land* were minor masterpieces. Moreover, Eliot tended to perfect a style quickly and not use it again. Hence his first two volumes (in 1917 and 1920) contained a remarkable diversity of performance. The interior monologue of the timid and proper Prufrock was quite unlike the objective presentation of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," with its strange mingling of concrete particularity and symbolist vagueness, of sordid reality, recondite allusion, and elegantly strict form. This in turn differed widely from the self-analytic cerebration of "Gerontion," who was less a character than a historical phase of the European mind. Each of these poems was arrestingly "modern" in its own way, and each was imitated. But they were not so widely imitated as one might now suppose, and the main reason was the rapidity with which Eliot developed. Their impact was lost in that of *The Waste Land*. In Pound's eyes *The Waste Land* was "the justification of our

modern experiment, since 1900." In the eyes of more conservative poets and critics it was a "mad medley." For many a "new" poet in America it was a "piece of tripe" (the phrase is Amy Lowell's), parasitic on past styles, uprooted, formless, academic, anti-democratic, and defeatist. But for adolescent future poets it possessed to an unrivaled degree the prestige of the modern. Not that they understood it better than other readers, but they admired its technical boldness and defiance, the more so since it defied not only conservative taste but also the free-verse and Imagist conventions of the school that was then loudest in protesting its own modernity.

Because *The Waste Land* had a unique influence on the development of modern poetry it must be dwelt on here. And in order to gain the necessary space further comment on Eliot's verse before *The Waste Land* must be omitted. The earlier poetry was important, but *The Waste Land* immensely more so. Our purpose in discussing this much-scrutinized poem is not to offer another interpretation, commentary, or evaluation but to indicate why it came to be viewed as the chief example of the modern in poetry, so much so that Eliot was seen as the counterpart in poetry to Joyce, Picasso, Stravinski, and to other major creators of the Modernist revolution in their respective arts. One reason was Eliot's use of the modern city as setting. Precedents could be found in English, American, and French poetry of the last seventy-five years, notably in Baudelaire, and in some twentieth-century poetry, such as Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* (1916), not to mention Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). Nevertheless, no previous poem gave so vivid an impression of the contemporary, urban metropolis. In some sequences *The Waste Land* resembled an avant-garde documentary film; it explored the city and the lives of its inhabitants by juxtaposing images, scenes, fragments of conversation, and the like. The technique resembled cinematic montage, which was developed at about the same time, though Eliot did not learn his methods from films. We are present at a session with a fortune-teller, we are later in the boudoir of a wealthy, hysterical woman, then in a pub at closing time, and then beside a pub in Lower Thames Street, where we hear

The pleasant whining of a mandoline
And a clatter and a chatter from within

Where fishermen lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

Some of these sights are not unpleasant:

The barges drift
With the turning tide
Red sails
Wide
To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.

Others explore the literary uses of the disagreeable:

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 gashouse.

And some are not ugly but dolorous—for example, the half-visionary scene of the white-collar workers on their way to their jobs in the morning. They have come by train from the suburbs and walk from the railroad station across London Bridge to the financial district:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Eliot's achievement was not simply to present the city but to endow such scenes with imaginative intensity and suggestion; his images fuse, as he put it, "the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric." (He first learned, he said, the possibility of this fusion from Baudelaire.) The crowd flowing over London Bridge is a scene in contemporary London and in Dante's Limbo. (There are even verbal echoes of Dante.) Thus generalized and potentiated, Eliot's naturalistic report and interpretation of life in the city (which was also an interpretation of the life of man per se) was the most accessible and compelling aspect of the poem for its first readers. In a favorable review written in 1922 on commission for *The Dial*, Edmund Wilson warmed especially to this aspect of the poem: "All about us we are aware of nameless millions performing barren office routines, wearing down their

souls in interminable labours of which the products never bring them profit—people whose pleasures are so sordid and so feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains."

Because Eliot endowed his material with an almost visionary intensity, his poetry might from some points of view be thought "Romantic." But no reader in 1922 would have seen it this way. To dwell on the modern city, especially on the more sordid aspects of it, was to break dramatically with the Romantic tradition in poetry. The legacy of the great Romantic poets of England had created a persisting assumption that poetry would present nature or landscape. Hence, while throughout the nineteenth century cities spread and smokestacks multiplied, and while economists, sociologists, and moralists studied and debated the new phenomena, and while novelists such as Dickens (whom Eliot loved) rendered the clanging factories, the sooty fog, the crooked slum alleys and courtyards in flickering gaslight, the dust heaps and decaying houses—charging these images with intense feeling and evocative, symbolic meaning—poetry dwelt in vales and meads, locating itself in Camelot, Sicily, or anywhere that was far away or long before Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Chicago, or Pittsburgh. The Georgians had lately reconfirmed this tendency to the great pleasure of their many readers.

In addition, when the Romantic poets dwelt on evil and tragedy they used images that were not only imaginatively heightened but also agreeable. Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," for example, contains fatal sickness and anguish, but of a knight-at-arms on an enchanted hillside in late autumn, not a pajamaed patient dying amid instruments and tubes in a London hospital. Because *The Waste Land* broke the fixed association between verse and the agreeable, the beautiful, or the ideal, it seemed to many readers not merely un- but anti-poetic.

Quasi-naturalistic scenes of modern life dominate (though not exclusively) the first three of the poem's five parts. The fifth part includes, however, a long passage of a directly visionary kind, which presents the speaker walking with others, or with all mankind, amid dry and stony mountains, a wasteland. The passage recalls an earlier one in the first part of the poem, where also the speaker or speakers are gazing on the "stony rubbish" of a desert,

where the sun beats
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

When two things are given at the same time readers will associate them together if possible. It was easy to suppose, especially in view of the title, that the imagery of the city and that of the desert were intended to interpret each other, that the modern city was compared to an arid, sterile waste. By the logic of this metaphor, water became a symbol for whatever would save or rescue. If this seems obvious, it also begins to indicate why the poem perplexed almost all its early readers, including admirers: to an extraordinary degree it relied on symbols and their interrelations to convey its meanings. It was not the mere activation of symbols that puzzled. But even in the most densely symbolic works to which English and American readers were up to then accustomed—Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" or Melville's *Moby Dick* or James' *The Golden Bowl*—symbolism had been an element in a design that one apprehended primarily through other elements, especially plot and character.

The Waste Land struck readers as aggressively modern and bewildering because of what they did not find as well as what they found. It had no plot. There was no poet speaker to be identified with, as there was when reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Whitman, Tennyson, Yeats, or almost any other familiar poet of the last hundred and fifty years. Despite a strange footnote at the end of the poem about the role of Tiresias, the poem could not be taken as a dramatic monologue. Certainly it was not verse drama, though it contained quasidramatic vignettes.

My point is not simply that the poem could not be fitted into any known genre but that there seemed to be nothing—no narrative, meditation, flow of lyric emotion, characterization—which one could follow, thus "understanding" the poem. It began in a chantlike rhythm, the speakers seeming to lament the return of life in the spring:

Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

This was sustained for seven lines, and seemed to be continuing in the eighth line with "Summer surprised us." But suddenly an

altogether different voice was heard, that of a woman named Marie, who reminisced conversationally. After eleven lines this passage also ended suddenly, and one was, with no transition, elsewhere, listening to a completely different, faintly biblical voice; the speaker seemed to be gazing on a desert:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?

Thus in the first thirty lines of the poem there were three different, apparently unrelated blocks of poetry, with dissimilar speakers, rhythms, images, and associations; and the poem continued in the same pell-mell flow of heterogeneous fragments.

If readers were familiar with French symbolist poetry or with the recent poetry of Pound or with cubist painting or with stream-of-consciousness and depth psychology or with experiments in "point of view" in the modern novel, they felt they had a clue to the procedures of the poem. Not that the poem was closely similar to any of these prototypes, but they made it seem less unfamiliar. If the poem juxtaposed discontinuous fragments, the method, one might argue, released implications with a swiftness, density, and complex interaction no traditional technique could achieve. Or perhaps the fragments were not as separable as they seemed but evoked each other by irrational and subconscious associations. In either case, one thus asserted the profound meaningfulness, conscious or not, of the fragments—and especially of their multiple interrelations.

Even if single passages and juxtapositions could be explained and enjoyed on these or analogous grounds, there remained the question of the governing form of the whole. Admirers were challenged to account for their feeling of coherence in a poem without continuity of setting, style, speaking voice, or plot. The poem, they presently said, was organized like music. Of course no literary work can much resemble a musical composition, not even a composition of the later nineteenth century. The main use of the analogy was negative: it kept readers from looking for types of form and meaning they were not going to find. "Music" did not mean in this connection the sounds and rhythms but the sequence of emotions the poem created. In the sequence was a logic, it was asserted; the different phases of emotion interrelated to make a complex whole. Since an organization of emo-

tion could only be felt, not shown, the point could not be elaborated; but it was supported by a special feature of the poem—the repetition in separate contexts of the same or easily associated scenes, images, and allusions. Recurrent passages, for example, describe a desert. The fortune-teller warns her client to fear death by water; the poem returns three times in separate allusions to Ariel's song describing the drowned Alonso in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; it alludes also to the death by drowning of Ophelia in *Hamlet*; the fourth section of the poem pictures a drowned Phoenician floating in the sea.

Such recurring images and symbols could easily be described as "themes"; in the context of post-Wagnerian music they could be called leitmotifs. Thus it was possible to claim that *The Waste Land* was a poetic form on a new principle and that the principle was not simply the musical sequence and interrelations of emotions but the repetition and gradual interweaving of leitmotifs. As they return in a new context, they bring with them suggestions and associations from former contexts and become progressively denser nodes of connotation and feeling. At the same time, they further link the diverse passages and parts together. The literary use of the leitmotif was not unique to *The Waste Land*, but more than any other single source the poem called the attention of English-speaking readers to it. Once it was understood that works of literature could create a "web of themes," a musical "complex of relations" through the manipulation of "symbolically allusive" formulas (the phrases are Thomas Mann's, speaking of his *The Magic Mountain*), other writers tried their hands at it. The effect was noted and studied in authors, such as Dickens and Shakespeare, who had never heard of it themselves. All this helped Eliot to conceive more clearly what he had done in *The Waste Land*, and in the *Four Quartets* he carried the use of the leitmotif to its most complex development thus far in modern English and American poetry.

As they collect associations in different contexts, the leitmotifs gradually become symbols. Generally speaking, a writer may obtain an imagery of symbolic power in two different ways. Either he uses symbols previously established in literature, myth, occult lore, liturgy, and the like; or he transforms images into symbols within the context of his own work. Both methods are usually present. Fire was associated with lust long before *The Waste*

Land; the poem cites the Buddha's Fire Sermon and Augustine's *Confessions*. The symbolism of seasonal death and rebirth is age-old. But Eliot also created symbols by the incremental return to the same or closely similar images, as we see if we follow the associations that gradually gather in the poem around the imagery of water. Water is longed for if the protagonists are in a desert, yet feared lest they drown in it, and yet also—through allusions to Ariel's song—to drown may mean to be transformed in a process that is, as Ariel speaks of it, uncanny and ominous yet also strangely reassuring. Water is associated with sexual desire, and this throws still another implication into the fortune-teller's warning, "fear death by water." Assimilating such associations, we understand the mingled longing, fascination, and fear that water excites in the protagonists throughout the poem.

Death by drowning, furthermore, is one mode of the imagery of death and burial that also recurs throughout the poem. In the context of *The Waste Land* death does not mean only the extinction of life; the aimless, anxiety-ridden life of men and women in this urban wasteland is a living death. The Sibyl of the epigraph speaks for all the protagonists when, being asked, "Sibyl, what do you want?" she replies, "I want to die." But though she does not know it, her words may refer to death in a third sense, which haunts many of the protagonists of the poem, in which to die may mean to suffer a "sea-change," to receive a new being. Fearing death by water, the men and women in *The Waste Land* may fear their only hope.

THE "MYTHICAL METHOD"

In addition to quasi-naturalistic presentation and symbolism, *The Waste Land* conveyed meaning through a third dimension, the mythical. In the footnotes he included with the first publication of *The Waste Land* as a book, Eliot called particular attention to this:

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism . . . were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* . . . To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean [Sir James Frazer's] *The Golden Bough* . . . Anyone who

is acquainted with these works will immediately recognize in the poem certain references to vegetation ceremonies.

In *The Golden Bough* Frazer sought to demonstrate that apparently different myths may be traced back to the same underlying and original one. The myth Eliot especially had in mind is that which Frazer calls the myth of the dying and reviving god, especially as this myth was seized by Weston to interpret the medieval romances of the quest for the Holy Grail. According to Frazer, primitive men explained the annual death and resurrection of vegetation as "effects of the waxing or waning strength of divine beings, of gods and goddesses," as effects of "the marriage, the death, and the rebirth or revival of the gods." He also argued that the king was regarded as an incarnation of the fertility of the land; if he weakens or dies, the land becomes waste and returns again to fertility only when the king is healed or resurrected, either in his own person or in a successor. The ancient fertility myths were incorporated within Christianity—the vegetation king or deity was identified with the God of Christian faith—and, according to Miss Weston, the medieval romances of the Holy Grail blended these fertility myths surviving in the folk imagination with Christian materials. She called special attention to the figure of the Fisher King in many of the Grail romances (the fish, she said, is an ancient symbol of life); his land is arid and its people and animals are sterile because the king is (in different versions) dead, ailing, or impotent. If a questing knight can make his way through dangers to the Chapel Perilous, and there pass further trials, the king will be healed or restored. It is impossible in a few words to do justice to the complexity of Frazer's or Weston's argument or of Eliot's use of these sources. The point is that the poem alludes repeatedly to primitive vegetation myths and associates them with the Grail legends and the story of Jesus. In the underlying myth of the poem the land is a dry, wintry desert because the king is impotent or dead; if he is healed or resurrected spring will return, bringing the waters of life. The myth coalesces with the quasi-naturalistic description of the modern, urban world, which is the dry, sterile land.

If we ask to what extent these myths (or this myth) are actually in Eliot's poem, and important to it, the answers vary widely from reader to reader. The poem does not tell the myths as

stories but only alludes to them, and the allusions may lie inert for readers unfamiliar with Frazer and Weston. The allusions are conveyed in phrases—"that corpse you planted last year in your garden," "the king my father's death"—that convey meaning even if the reference to myth is not recognized. If readers without the anthropological lore may miss some of the nuances Eliot intended, his use of myth is not recognized. If Eliot's poem can excite ideas and feelings which are not so much derived from the poem as imposed upon it, but which modify interpretations of it. In the modern world it is possible to think at least the following things about myth: it is both a way of thinking and the object thought and in both aspects puts us in connection with the mentality of primitive man; mythical thought is different from scientific thought but valid within its own sphere; myth integrated primitive man with his natural environment, with his fellow men, with the past and the future, and with the divine and gave to man and his acts a significance lacking in a world deprived of myth; in the depths of the mind the mythical mentality persists in historical man to the present day, but we are rarely aware of it and most of us attribute little significance to it; because myth comes out of the depths of human nature and expresses them, to lose contact with it is to be alienated from powerful sources of emotional vitality; particular myths symbolize meanings of perennial psychological, moral, and religious validity, which cannot be adequately expressed in other terms. Readers strongly influenced by such assumptions usually find that *The Waste Land* implicitly attributes contemporary alienation and angst to the divorce of modern man from myth. From this point of view, the juxtaposition of present and past, which runs through the poem, generally compares that which once was fraught with mythical significance with its debased and meaningless counterpart in the modern world. This applies to the large, persisting "themes"—sexuality, death—and also to particular episodes or images, such as the Tarot pack, which was once invested with religious meaning but is now only a fortune-teller's prop.

Eliot shared some of these ideas about myth but on the whole he did not, in my opinion, believe or intend to suggest that human beings in earlier times were spiritually in better case than ourselves or that we could now recapture a vital relation to myth or in any way find our salvation through it (although he would not have argued against such interpretations of his poem, for he did not suppose a poet knew better than anyone else all that his poem might mean). It is, however, possible to be relatively precise in identifying what advantages he hoped to obtain from the use of myth. They are, in a broad sense of the term, formal and may be summed up as multiplicity of reference, depth, and shape.

Myth is story, fable; and even though Eliot does not tell the myths, his allusions to them introduce a plot or fable into the poem. When one knows the plot, one can vaguely integrate some of the episodes of the poem with it. The fable provides a third language, besides naturalistic presentation and symbolism, in which the state of affairs can be conceived; the story of the sick king and sterile land is a concrete and imaginative way of speaking of the condition of man. This story interrelates, substantiates, and nuances suggestions that are also made in other ways. The possibility of regeneration is already implied in the symbolism of the seasons and in the symbolic pattern woven through the poem by recurrent images of drowning ("death by water" may be a "sea-change"); the myth says plainly that the king may be healed, the fertility of the land restored. And the mythical background throws an additional meaning into many a particular line or phrase. When we read,

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

meaning is enriched if we recollect that at the season of planting in ancient Egypt, the priests of Osiris put effigies of the god in the earth. The effigies were made out of earth mixed with grain, and, says Frazer, "When these effigies were taken up again . . . the corn would be found to have sprouted from the body of Osiris, and this sprouting of the grain would be hailed as an omen, or rather as the cause, of the growth of the crops. The corn-god produced the corn from himself: He gave his own body to feed the people: he died that they might live."

To appreciate more fully why the "mythical method," as Eliot called it, appealed so strongly to him at this time, we must keep in mind his commitment to what he called "the historical sense." He did not believe that there was a value in exhibiting the past by itself; the past could have meaning only in relation to the present. But to dwell on the present in disconnection from the past is equally to drain it of significance. Instead, the past and present were to be united in one perspective. The past was to be brought to bear on the present, but not merely to invoke the past as a contrast or parallel, though this could be valuable. One had to live in the present, yet feel its continuity with the past; one had to perceive the past in the present. As Eliot put it in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the "historical sense" is

nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; 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 . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. . . . He must be aware that the mind of Europe . . . is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.

As an artist he sought a method that would incorporate the experience of men and women in the twentieth century within a larger whole of human experience throughout time.

In this connection, three of his prose pieces are particularly revealing; in all of them he testified at greater length to the impact on him of *The Golden Bough*, and in two of them he was reviewing works—Stravinski's *The Rite of Spring* and Joyce's *Ulysses*—which also introduced the mythical dimension into contemporary art and which may have helped suggest Eliot's own experiment in *The Waste Land*. *The Golden Bough*, he remarked in *Vanity Fair* in 1924, is "a work of no less importance for our own time than the complementary work of Freud—throwing its light on the obscurities of the soul from a different angle." Possibly, he went on, it is a work of "greater permanence" than Freud's, because the theories of Freud are debatable, whereas *The Golden Bough* "is a statement of fact which is not involved in the mainte-

nance or fall of any theory of the author's." The great achievement of Frazer was to disclose the mind of primitive man; he "extended the consciousness of the human mind into as dark a backward and abysm of time as has yet been explored"; he revealed, as Eliot put it in 1921 in his review of Stravinski, "that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation"—"vanished" only relatively speaking, since in some sense the primitive mind still survives in the "obscurities of the soul." To incorporate myth in a literary work was to invoke and represent important, ordinarily disregarded, dimensions of reality—and of a reality that is impersonal in relation to the poet. And to exhibit contemporary civilization while also descending through myth back deep into time and down into the psyche was to secure a context of enormous depth and imaginative power.

In a "London Letter" to the *Dial* of October 1921, Eliot reported his attendance at *The Rite of Spring*. The ballet amalgamated primitive vegetation or fertility rites, as they are represented in the dances, with contemporary reality, as it was heard in the music. Eliot felt no strong enthusiasm. More exactly, he was intrigued by the music but thought little of the dances. For the dances were too simply a pageant of primitive culture, and he "missed the sense of the present." The music, however, "did seem to transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music." The lesson enforced was, again, that "in art there should be interpenetration and metamorphosis."

When, in November 1923, Eliot reviewed *Ulysses* for the *Dial*, *The Waste Land* was already in print. Hence, as Eliot pointed out what artists could learn from *Ulysses*, he was pointing to what could be found in his own poem; possibly he was also suggesting what he himself owed to Joyce. (If we wish to reflect on the influence *Ulysses* may have exercised on Eliot, we should keep in mind that he had been reading the novel in manuscript installments since 1918.) He said the novel was "the most important expression which the present age has found" and that its "mythical method" was a breakthrough which other artists must exploit. The "mythical method" consisted in "manipulating a con-

tinuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity"—in this case the "parallel" of Odysseus and his adventures with Leopold Bloom and the incidents of his day in contemporary Dublin. It was "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." "Psychology . . . ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible a few years ago. Instead of narrative method we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible in art."

ALLUSION

When *The Waste Land* was published its mythical dimension did not excite as much interest as we might suppose. Eliot's references to myth seemed only additional examples of his allusiveness, and his use of allusions in the poem caused so much controversy that little attention was paid to his use of myth as a separate method or technique. Allusions in his early poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), had been relatively few and easy to follow: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet," says Prufrock, and no reader of Eliot was likely to be unfamiliar with Shakespeare. Typically "Eliotic" (as some critics put it) allusions appeared in the poems in quatrains he composed in 1918—"Sweeney Among the Nightingales" and "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service"—not long after he had read the first installment of *Ulysses*. In *The Waste Land* they were fully developed:

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow.

A few such cruxes might have passed as tolerable eccentricities, but there were not a few. The poem of 433 lines quoted or referred to at least thirty-seven other works of art, literature, or music—and to some of them several times. They were not necessarily familiar works; they included not only the Bible and Shakespeare, Virgil, Wagner, and Ovid but Baudelaire's "Les Sept Vieillards," Middleton's *A Game of Chess* and *Women Beware Women*, Webster's *The Devil's Law Case*, the Buddha's Fire

Sermon, Day's *Parliament of Bees*, Verlaine's *Parsifal*, Nerval's "El Desdichado," and so forth—and some of these back-to-back allusions were by means of quotations in Greek, Latin, German, French, Italian, and Sanskrit. As annotations piled up (in the wake of Eliot's own), it began to seem as though most of the poem might consist of echoes or quotations from other writers. Moreover, many of these allusions were presented by indirect means. Those who disliked Eliot's poetry found in them proof that he was not only pretentious and elitist but also without creative power, capable only of inorganic pastiche. Defenders were not usually wise in the arguments to which they resorted. They pointed out that other poets had been allusive; this, though true, was not candid, for in few poems throughout history had allusions come with such frequency and indirectness or referred to such obscure works or lacked to the same degree a context which interpreted them. Enthusiasts for the poem were sometimes tempted to let it be supposed that they easily recognized the allusions; whether or not Eliot's poem was pretentious, its admirers sometimes merited this criticism. It was also claimed that the allusions had their effect whether one recognized them or not, which was true only up to a point and occasionally. Though the debate had an important substance, it was conducted in defensive ways that contributed little. The truth is that Eliot's allusions generally require that the reader study and reflect. Whether the enhanced appreciation rewards the effort, one must decide for oneself, but one cannot have an opinion without having done the work.

Before Eliot made his impact on a whole generation, poets and readers were less likely to assume that modern poetry would be difficult. Robinson, Frost, Hardy, the Imagists, Masters, Sandburg, and the war poets seemed new and contemporary in technique and vision, yet their styles were not, on the whole, indirect, compressed, or obscure. The same thing might be said of Yeats if we consider only what he wrote up to about 1918. If we ask why the changed supposition of the next thirty years, during which the idiom of modern poetry was expected to be condensed and demanding, should be attributed more to Eliot than to other major poets, the answer lies in the extent to which *The Waste Land* was seen as the prototype of the "modern" in poetry.

Juxtaposition of apparently unrelated fragments, symbolism, myth, and allusion were components of an extraordinary compression of style. Juxtaposed fragments commented on each other, suggesting manifold, complex, and diverse implications. Through symbolism multifarious associations and connotations were evoked and complexly interwoven. The "mythical method" added levels of reference at every point. By allusion Eliot, like Joyce and Pound, brought another context to bear on his own, and the parallels and contrasts might offer a rich, indefinite "vista."

THE CONDITION OF MAN

Whether the poem is actually difficult depends on what one seeks to understand. Particular cruxes of interpretation cannot be decided but the vision of human nature and life is powerfully conveyed. Meanings are ambiguous, emotions ambivalent; the fragments do not make an ordered whole. But precisely this, the poem illustrates, is the human condition, or part of it. Men and women emerge and disappear; our encounters with them are brief and wholly external, for we apprehend them only as bits of speech overheard or gestures spotlighted. But this is the mode and extent of human contact in general, as the poem represents it. The protagonists in the poem are isolated from each other or they make part of a faceless crowd. When they speak there is no dialogue, for the other person, if one is present, does not reply. Whether we assume that the poem renders the stream of consciousness within a mind or that it presents modern civilization and culture by objective methods—it does both at the same time, but in many passages not quite either—it suggests that below the conscious levels of the mind and the ways of civilized life are the subconscious and primitive and that images from these spheres abide or well up suddenly, perhaps with deep significance. The personal and historical past lingers in fragmentary memories and visible reminders, which sharpen our sense of our present condition but suggest no way out of it. The individual mind and the civilization are on the edge of crack-up. Before the impending collapse there is passive waiting but no suggestion of will or even of wish. (At most the protagonists muse vaguely on what

might be wished.) At the conclusion of the poem a total disintegration is suggested in a jumble (or apparent jumble) of literary quotations.

Exhibiting what men and women see, hear, say, and feel, the poem conveys in one vignette after another the sickness of the human spirit. But also in its web of vignettes and allusions the poem involves many of the current hypotheses about the cause of this modern sickness, theories then common in intellectual circles. It did not argue about the impact of historical events or social institutions on the human psyche; it did not speculate concerning the effect of new anthropological, psychological, and scientific lore; but it was plainly relevant to such familiar generalizations that sought to explain how the human spirit had been wounded in modern times. Comparative religion and mythology, depth psychology, the World War, industrialized work, and urbanized life were concretely reflected in the poem, and so were the effects to which they were often said to have contributed—the weakening of identity and will, of religious faith and moral confidence, the feelings of apathy, loneliness, helplessness, rootlessness, and fear. Yet the panoramic range and inclusiveness of the poem, which only Eliot's fragmentary and elliptical juxtapositions could have achieved so powerfully in a brief work, held in one vision not only contemporary London and Europe but also human life stretching far back into time. The condition of man seen in the poem was felt to be contemporary and perennial, modern yet essentially the same in all times and places.

ELIOT'S CRITICISM

Eliot's reviews and critical essays—approximately a hundred of which were published between 1916 and 1925—were a shock for many of their readers. To some they were reviving. Eliot's essays portended the end of an era. They dismissed the Romantic and Victorian tradition in poetry still dominant in the Georgian milieu. Eliot's style of critical prose ostentatiously lacked enthusiasm and personal charm; it seemed low-keyed and astringent to readers accustomed to the literary essays of Symons, Chesterton, Saintsbury, Yeats, or Quiller-Couch. Nev-

ertheless, these exercises in analysis and discrimination strove for a finer precision than was usual in criticism at this time. Praise or blame was limited to aspects which were defined. Generalizations were illustrated by particular examples of verse. Conclusions were scrutinized and qualified. This intellectual conscientiousness made one feel that criticism must be more important than one had imagined. In fact, Eliot said, which writers are appreciated and why and how much are points of enormous significance. Of George Wyndham he was compelled to make the awful judgment that, "There is no conclusive evidence that he realized all the difference, the gulf of difference between" a line of Villon, which Eliot quotes, and Ronsard or du Bellay.

Poets were reminded that "the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil." Many a poet, reading these words, must have searched his troubled conscience, wondering whether his toil had been sufficiently "frightful."

Eliot gave a new style to literary criticism and he endowed critical intelligence with a greater responsibility for the health of civilization than was generally supposed, although in his high estimate of criticism, as in several other ways, his views recalled those of Matthew Arnold. Gradually his essays helped form a new taste. Poets whom neither the Edwardians and Georgians in England, nor the Genteel and New Poets in America especially admired—Villon, Donne, Dryden, Baudelaire, and Laforgue—appeared on everybody's reading list, and a type of poetry strongly influenced by Eliot and by these other exemplars became conventional and expected in the little magazines.

His essays were not polemical, but his attitudes and style as a critic were shaped to some degree by irritation with the literary milieu. Insisting on "the importance of intelligent criticism," he followed his old teacher, Irving Babbitt, in discovering little "intelligent criticism" in the English-speaking world, at least since the 1820s. Pound, to be sure, was "not to be diverted . . . from the essential literary problem" and was "always concerned with the work of art, never with incidental fancies," but he was hardly a critic of the first importance. His "brief and fugitive utterances" could not bear comparison with the sophistication, clarity, and cogency of the "French Intelligence," as exhibited, for

example, in Remy de Gourmont or Julien Benda. Otherwise, as one looked about in 1918 there was very little criticism to be admired in England or America. Symons had broken down and was, in any case, undesirably impressionist. Yeats was fantastic. Saintsbury, Wyndham, and Whibley were uncritical gourmandizers. P. E. More and Irving Babbitt were moralists without aesthetic sensitivity. Academic critics approached literature as though it were "an institution" like "Church and State." (Pound classified Eliot in this category: he bestowed "granite wreaths, leaden laurels" and exemplified "the 'English Department' universitaire attitude.") As for the manifesto and review-writing Imagists, free versifiers, neo-Whitmanians, and dispensers of "all-American propaganda," they were "*esprits ordinaires*." The age was cursed with a tolerance of imprecision, a tendency to confuse (from Eliot's point of view) aesthetic emotion with morality and religion, an inability to conceive a fruitful relation to the past.

Were Eliot coming on the scene as a young writer today, there is no reason to suppose he would view it with more pleasure. Perhaps he would be irritated at different points, and therefore stress slightly different values. But however much they were shaped negatively by his age, his critical essays largely reflected his own practical dilemmas as a writer. In fact they partly owed their enormous influence to their grasp of problems of art from the artist's standpoint. Other factors were their stimulating intelligence, the fame or notoriety of Eliot's poetry, and the temptations his essays offered to weaker sides of human nature. With their allusiveness, fastidiousness, picky precision, sophistication, and tough-mindedness the essays made it possible to feel that, in joining the party of Eliot, one identified oneself with the hard, acute, erudite, complex, mature, and elite as opposed to the soft, dim, bland, callow, and vulgar. According to the then prevalent senses of the terms, Eliot's line was neither Modernist nor reactionary, for he insisted that great art was always both new and traditional; nevertheless, his essays offered a basis for scorning (with some exceptions) most other schools, parties, or important figures in the contemporary scene—"new" poets, Georgians, conservatives, Futurists, Yeats, Hardy, Frost, and so forth. The opportunity was appealing, especially to the young, who did not feel themselves under attack.

His criticism paid the closest, most serious attention to the formal qualities of poetry. As he compared and analyzed poets, he noted whether they had a "bright, hard precision," a control, balance, and proportion, a succession of concentrated, concrete images, and a "perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations" (which evidences "a very high development of the senses"), for these were the qualities of idiom he usually admired, although he could show a surprising fondness for Kipling and Swinburne and at least once reminded himself that "our standards vary with every poet whom we consider." He gave the same scrutiny to versification, detailing how the rhythm of one poet resembled or contrasted with that of another and by what means the rhythms were created. In these respects his criticism was, for its time, unusually technical; the novelty, clarity, and pinpointing minuteness of these technical observations fascinated his readers and obtained an acceptance for his broader generalizations that was less rigorous than it otherwise might have been. Because his essays seemed to illustrate that "a patient examination of an artist's method and form . . . is exactly the surest way" to appreciate his "human value," they helped bring on the criticism by close analysis of formal qualities that became widespread in England and America.

In speaking of "form," Eliot often had in mind not so much particular formal qualities (Jonson's "natural," Milton's "artificial" syntax) as something close to the notion of a "genre." He thought of this as a system of conventions, including conventions of technique (blank verse, the soliloquy, the five-act structure), of character (the vice, the braggart soldier), of plot (the revenge tragedy), and of the interpretation of human nature and experience ("the handling of Fate and Death"). Where such a form or system of conventions exists, it will have been developed and organized through several generations and there will be an audience prepared to "respond in a predictable way" to the familiar stimuli. Eliot's chief example of such major form is the Elizabethan-Jacobean drama, though he also refers to the *Divine Comedy*, which depended, in his opinion, upon a similar orchestration of conventions in the Provençal and Tuscan poetry before Dante. In an age when such a system or form was established and available to writers as a framework, "how little"—this

is Eliot's point—Dante, Shakespeare, or any other poet was obliged to create for himself.

Because such a form exists before the writer uses it, his relation to it has a double aspect. On the one hand, he handles it in an individual way; on the other, he suppresses his own individuality by submitting to the requirements of the form. Such a writer might be compared to a medieval stone-carver; his work would not be mistaken for that of someone else but it is not self-expressive; it reflects his own skill, intelligence, and feeling, and yet it is also composed in accordance with (one might almost say *by*) conventions that have been handed down, and which he has for the most part no thought of challenging. The requirements of the form are not the same in each generation. For since the form has an objective identity and evolves through time by its own dynamic, the artist's task is conditioned by the phase of development it has reached. A major artist is characterized by a tact or intelligence which senses precisely what can and what cannot longer be done; he perceives the restrictions his age imposes, and in his hands they become opportunities. The presence or lack of such a form accounts for the greater literary achievement of some ages as compared with others; it is not that talent is sometimes more abundant, but less of it may be wasted. "No man can invent a form, create a taste for it, and perfect it too." In the "anarchy" of the modern world no major form is available to the writer, who is "obliged to consume vast energy in this pursuit of form" with no hope of achieving a "wholly satisfying result."

Eliot was plainly uttering his own complaint as a poet in the twentieth century; he was also striking out against fundamental premises of the Romantic view of poetry. He was far from sharing the Romantic reverence for the poet. Where Coleridge pondered with awe the "productive life-power of inspired genius," Eliot saw a toiling craftsman. Poetry was not individual self-expression, at least, it should not be. It was objective, impersonal construction. In its creative activity the mind of a poet, he explained in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," resembles a catalyst in a chemical process; it causes materials to combine but does not enter into or express itself in the resultant combination. "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," and "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates." A poet is not to be expected to hold original and profound thoughts on "Man, on Nature, and on Human Life" (the phrase is Wordsworth's). Eliot would argue that poetry is more likely to be successful to the extent that a poet echoes the "commonplaces" of his age, if there are any. His sharp trimming of Romantic attitudes is focused most provocatively in his opinion of literary conventions.

In the early part of this century the general mass of poetry was as tamely conventional as it usually is—perhaps more so. In theory, however, the conventional was hackneyed and out of touch with reality. (A "conventional" poet within the Romantic tradition is a self-contradiction, and magazine poets at the turn of the century must have assumed that the conventional was still the neoclassical and that to sound like Shelley, Wordsworth, or Keats was a gesture of freedom.) For Eliot the conventional was a positive element, and not only because it rescued the artist from the poverty of the merely individual, while also doing much of his work for him. The conventional was the necessary distortion of reality by which art sets itself at a distance and compels us to view it as art. His attitude contained much that recalled the aesthetes of the nineties. Art advanced in worth to the degree that it was strict with itself. "Artists are constantly impelled to invent new difficulties for themselves; cubism is not license, but an attempt to establish order." Of course distortion was not falsification; the purpose was to bring out the real, or aspects of it, more sharply. But between genuinely artistic representation and realistic transcription there was a difference *toto caelo*.

From this point of view, even the Elizabethan dramatists were part of the movement of "deterioration" which "culminated in Sir Arthur Pinero and in the present regimen of Europe." For they were unwilling to "accept any limitation and abide by it"; they did not lack a system of conventions, but in their greediness "for every sort of effect together," they lacked artistic clarity and discipline; there was "no firm principle of what is to be postulated as a convention and what is not." The error grew in later centuries, but it was characteristic of Eliot to find the first symptoms of decay very far back and precisely in the period and

genre of literature generally viewed as the greatest in English literary history. It was also characteristic that he postulated, as an example to be followed, a pre-Elizabethan drama. "In one play, *Everyman*, and perhaps in that one play only, we have a drama within the limitations of art; since Kyd, since *Arden of Feversham*, since *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, there has been no form to arrest, so to speak, the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind." Sometimes Eliot reminds one of Dr. Breisacher in Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, who thought that Hebrew religious feeling was already in decay in the time of David and Solomon.

Eliot's criticism pondered the relation that should pertain between the poetry of the present and of the past. It was a question that inevitably presented itself to a thoughtful mind at a time when the poetic milieu was divided, roughly speaking, between those who continued more or less in familiar modes and those who were seeking to write in entirely new ways, either because they felt that the traditional modes were played out or because they felt that in a new age and, in the case of American poets, a new country a vital poetry must reflect the current language and sensibility only—whatever smacked of the past thereby divorced itself from the present time and place. Eliot agreed that one could not simply continue in the conventions of the nineteenth century, as the work of the Georgians illustrated. Yet he did not think it either possible or desirable to throw off the past completely. For one thing, the notion was impractical. A poet must have models, standards, aims, and procedures. These are not innate and must be formed through contact with external influences; whatever auxiliary influences may derive from other forms of literature, from art, music, philosophy, and scientific lore, or from the audience, the main influence comes from the poems a poet reads. If he reads only contemporaries, his work will cultivate with diminishing hope the ground they have already worked over. He can go further and deeper by including the past, or by amalgamating native traditions with those of a foreign country.

There were also less immediately practical considerations. Arguing in a more or less idealist way, Eliot posited that there is

a "mind" of Europe. This mind alters as time passes, yet remains essentially the same. Similarly there is a "mind" of the nation: "We suppose a mind which is not only the English mind of one period with its prejudices of politics and fashions of taste, but which is greater, finer, more positive, more comprehensive than the mind of any period." This mind appears in the "organic whole" a "national literature" makes, for a "national literature" is not merely a "collection of the writings of individuals" but a "system" of works between which there is a relation. Whether or not a work belongs within this system or "tradition," or is eccentric to it, has nothing to do with the originality or genius of the individual writer. But it has a great deal to do with our sense of the depth, relevance, and permanent value of the work itself, for it is only "in relation to" such systems that "individual works of literary art, and the works of individual artists, have their significance."

Finally, there was the enormous influence of Eliot's premise that the poetry of a diverse and complex age such as the present must itself be complex, compressed, and ironical. He said this in many different ways, but perhaps the single most influential way was in connection with the English "metaphysical" poets of the early seventeenth century. His important essays on them were published in 1921, and republished in *Homage to John Dryden* (1924). The book assured Eliot's rank, at the age of thirty-six, as one of the foremost living critics. It is incorrect to suppose that Eliot alone revived interest in these poets, for they were by no means neglected before he wrote about them; but his essays made appreciation of them an "in" attitude. Moreover, his careful and repeated attempts to define the characteristic "wit" of the "metaphysical" poets stimulated modern poets to emulate it. Because of his praise of this wit as the evidence or product of a healthy state of "sensibility," it became in the minds of some critics a criterion by which all poetry should be judged. Thus, Eliot's essays did more than anything else to spark the Metaphysical Revival of the 1920s and 1930s.

Eliot reminded readers that he was recalling older meanings of the word "wit," when it implied not so much a mode of humor as intellectual power and quickness, especially as these manifest themselves in apt, unexpected combinations. In his essays wit

gradually came to mean an adequate complexity of response. For example, in a witty, or mature, person, emotion does not dislocate awareness; intelligence stays wakeful to judge or criticize feeling. The "ordinary man," Eliot explains, "falls in love, or reads Spinoza" (the affectation in this phrasing—the "ordinary man" reading Spinoza—made him wince in later years); and in the "ordinary man" these remain separate, disconnected experiences, but in a poet they interreact. Romantic and Victorian poets such as Shelley, Tennyson, and Browning resembled the "ordinary man" in this respect, for they could not, Eliot maintained, think and feel in the same moment or, as he better put it, they did "not feel their thought" immediately. A "dissociation of sensibility" was already setting in during the later seventeenth century, and from it "we have never recovered."

Trying further to define this lost wit, Eliot suggests that it was "a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace." Wit shows itself in an "alliance of levity and seriousness" by which "the seriousness is intensified"; it is not "cynicism," though it may "be confused with cynicism by the tender-minded," for it "implies a constant inspection and criticism of experience. It involves, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible."

Romantic and Victorian poetry was not only or always serious—far from it. Twentieth-century poetry has not always qualified its earnestness with irony or humor; and by "wit" Eliot did not mean verbal banter or joking. Nevertheless, in the "alliance of levity and seriousness" found in some mode and degree in much of our greater poetry, the element of levity has been more strongly emphasized in the twentieth century than it was in the hundred years before. One thinks of the country humor of Hardy—if Hardy was a twentieth-century poet—and of his sense for the grotesque. One thinks of the ironies of Housman, the humorous shrewdness and pathos of Robinson, the teasing evasiveness of Frost and Edward Thomas, the "Romantic" irony of de la Mare, the Georgian appreciation for the light touch, the accusing satire of the English war poets, the buffooneries, fopperies, and deliberate fantasticalities of the New York set. In this perspective Eliot's praise and emulation of "metaphysical wit" appear as part of a broader tendency.

LATER LIFE

In 1925 Eliot left Lloyds Bank and joined the publishing firm of Faber and Gwyer (later Faber and Faber), where he worked for the rest of his life. In 1932 he separated from his wife. His days were busy with editorial chores, with Church concerns, with writing and lecturing, and with the endless jobs a famous author cannot avoid. In 1948 he received the Nobel Prize for literature. In 1957 he married Valerie Fletcher, and very happily.

After 1932, when his *Selected Essays* gathered together what he considered the best of his critical pieces, he held an acknowledged authority in the literary world for which no comparison can be found in England or America unless one goes back to the later years of Samuel Johnson. Even Johnson was not so much regarded as an oracle on the literature of his own lifetime. Unless one still remembers or reads the literary discussions of twenty to forty years ago, one can now have no idea how frequently Eliot's sentences were quoted as sources of authority or points to dispute. He held this position more or less to the end of his life, conducting himself on his eminence with tact, dignity, and benevolence.

Throughout the 1920s Eliot was exploring a new world of thought and feeling in religion. At the age of twenty-one he had found himself strangely mirrored in the despairing pessimism of Laforgue. He had lived through growing emotional anxiety, depression, and guilt in his personal life during his early years in London and had sought and not found a belief or faith that would give a meaning to man's suffering. He had put his personally lived emotion into *The Waste Land*. Although the poem dwells on the meaningless and degraded life of man, it also evokes in thick allusion the religious faiths that may have given significance to life in other times and places—the pagan world, ancient Palestine and India, the centuries of Christian belief in Europe. Symbols of religious faith, even fragments of prayer, are present; they are not necessarily understood or, if understood, believed in, but they are very much in mind.

The steps of Eliot's religious conversion cannot be closely traced. As early as 1920 he was speaking appreciatively of Dante's *Paradiso*, against which he had harbored a prejudice ten years before. The *Paradiso* completes and explains, he said, the

horrible and disgusting episodes in the *Inferno*. Dante's world has a definite structure, one that articulates life totally and endows human character and action with moral and religious meaning. Eliot's study of Dante (who meant more to him than any other poet throughout his life) was one of the experiences that shaped his growing change of mind. *The Hollow Men* (1925), his next major poem after *The Waste Land*, descends further into emotional despair and paralysis, yet symbols of Christian hope are present in a more explicit way, as though despair were focused on Christianity as the only alternative. In 1926 he was reading sermons and other works of Anglican clerics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1927 he formally became a member of the Anglican Church. His poems and plays henceforth were written from within a Christian commitment. The finest of them, *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) and the *Four Quartets* (1943), deal with the struggle for faith in a person who has made such a commitment.

The same year that he was baptized Eliot became a naturalized English subject. England had been his home for twelve years; his wife, job, and friends were there. But these were not the only grounds of his gesture. The formal acts of baptism and naturalization expressed his resolve, at the age of thirty-nine, to make fundamental, deliberate, and final commitments, determining who he was and would be in the future. *Ash-Wednesday*, composed at this time, articulates his complex, ambivalent feeling at having decided; his emotional and spiritual struggle henceforth would be to live with the choices made:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgement not be too heavy upon us.

His new citizenship expressed Eliot's growing sympathy with English literary, historical, and religious traditions. He frequently noted that there was in English literature a succession of major poet-critics—Sydney, Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge, and Arnold—which was unique among the literatures of the world, and he derived a sense of his own possible role from these predecessors. Johnson and Coleridge had been lay champions of the church; Coleridge and Arnold had written works of social theory and criticism; Eliot was presently to emulate them. *The*

Idea of a Christian Society (1939) may be compared with Coleridge's *On the Constitution of Church and State*; *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1948) with Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. For twenty years Eliot had been studying the poets and dramatists of the seventeenth century. At first he had been intrigued by their versification, then by other qualities of style; gradually the question had deepened, and he had tried to conceive and describe the sensibility and vision that formed their style. Hence as throughout the 1920s he felt his way toward a religious commitment and conversion, the particular religion or church that held his imagination was Anglican—more exactly, an Anglo-Catholicism rooted in the English Renaissance—and when he was baptized in 1927, he felt himself to have become a “bearer” of this tradition. Remembering Eliot's earlier feeling of “profound kinship” or “peculiar personal intimacy” with Jules Laforgue, one may say that he was consolidating a second identification, though it was a complex, diffused identification with several writers rather than with one. In the seventeenth-century Anglican bishop Lancelot Andrews, for example, Eliot observed a man of “decorum and devotion” in his private life, who had a “passion for order” in religion and in prose. With his “breadth of culture” Andrews transcended English provinciality and spoke with “Continental antagonists” as an equal. His sermons are “not easy reading” for they are “peppered with allusion and quotation”; moreover, they do not satisfy the Romantic taste for personality and self-expression. Andrews' emotion “is not personal” but is “wholly contained in and explained by its object”; his “voice” is not merely that of a private individual but “the voice of a man who has a formed and visible church behind him.”

As the fascist and Communist dictatorships loomed abroad in the 1930s and class conflict intensified at home, Eliot wrote much on problems of social organization and politics. His position was conservative, in some statements radically so. It seemed the more conservative in the context of the 1930s, for his religious view of man's innate evil put him at a wide distance from contemporary, secular hopes of renovation through social institutions. The strictness of his moral and intellectual conscience made his politics somewhat impractical, as he himself recognized; in all parties and programs he saw inconsistency, danger, and wrong. He was, for example, against the dictators, but

democracy as it existed in England and America also excited his distaste.

He continued to write criticism (*Dante*, 1929; *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1933; and *On Poetry and Poets*, 1943, collecting his later essays). He edited *The Criterion*, a journal of literature and ideas which he founded in 1922 and which lasted until 1939. He attempted to develop a poetic drama that would be viable on the modern stage. *Sweeney Agonistes*, his first and most brilliant experiment, was left unfinished in the 1920s and published in 1932. It was followed by *The Rock* (1934), *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), and *The Family Reunion* (1939). In these plays the poetry is still compelling, but when, after a ten-year interval, he returned to the form in *The Cocktail Party* (1950), it was not. Though the play had considerable commercial success, it seems unlikely to last except as a curiosity in the career of a great poet. The same thing may be said of his two subsequent plays, *The Confidential Clerk* (1954) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959).

Between the early 1930s and 1942 Eliot composed the finest sequence of long poems yet written in the twentieth century, the *Four Quartets*. The first of these, *Burnt Norton*, grew out of lines not used in *Murder in the Cathedral* (just as *The Hollow Men* crystallized around bits left over from *The Waste Land*). The final three, *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages*, and *Little Gidding* developed out of the first and kept the same form. *The Four Quartets* are poetry of a widely different kind from *The Waste Land*. The dramatic vignettes of *The Waste Land* are absent, as is, for the most part, the urban scene. There is still allusion to past literature, still a fragmentary or, at least, disjunctive progression, but these features are less noticeable. It is still densely symbolic, even symbolist writing; the same or closely associated symbols—the fire, the rose—weave incrementally through the whole work. But it also employs a directly meditative and generalizing style not found in *The Waste Land*. It makes a poetic use of place as the subject or occasion of meditative reflection; in doing so it adopts a convention which has persisted in English poetry from the descriptive-meditative verse of the eighteenth century to the present day. The feeling of piety before past life and history, as they are embodied or brought to mind in the village of East Coker, for example, or in the chapel at Little Gidding, was also usual within this convention. Thus, the *Four Quartets* were a more traditional and accessible type of poetry than *The Waste Land*.

THE NEW YORK AVANT-GARDE STEVENS AND WILLIAMS TO THE EARLY 1920s AND MARIANNE MOORE

BETWEEN 1912 and 1922 poets and painters in New York City formed a thriving avant-garde. The dates are chosen to mark approximately the first phase of the Modernist movement, extending from the founding of *Poetry* magazine to the publication of *The Waste Land*. During this period there were numerous little magazines in and around New York: *Others*, *Rogue*, *Camera Work*, 291, *The Seven Arts*, *Broom*, *The Dial*. *The Little Review* moved from Chicago to New York in 1917. The New York poets were Alfred Kreymborg, Mina Loy, Maxwell Bodenheim, Orrick Johns, William Carlos Williams, Walter Conrad Arensberg, Donald Evans, Pitts Sanborn, Allen and Louise Norton, Wallace Stevens, Lola Ridge, and Marianne Moore. Thirty to forty years later, some of these New York poets were to become famous, but compared with Eliot, Pound, and H.D. in London, Amy Lowell and Robert Frost in New England, and Masters, Lindsay, and Sandburg in the Midwest, they all seemed of lesser significance in the 1910s.

Surveying the city in 1915, we may begin with nearby Grantwood in New Jersey. Here Alfred Kreymborg shared a three-room shack with two artist friends, Man Ray and Samuel Halpert. To this shack in 1913 came a parcel from London, wrapped in butcher's paper, containing the manuscript of