



The Legacy of Eliot's Poetry

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I WOULD argue that we should by no means be sceptical about the legacy of Eliot's poetry, in the twenty-first century, for two reasons. First, scholarship about Eliot, so far from being moribund, is poised to enter the most exciting period in its history with the editing of the complete prose, and, after some delay, the continuing of the editing of the letters and, furthermore, with the prospect, at last, of the commissioning of an authorised biography. These works are bound to send readers back to the poetry (as well as the prose, of course) with invaluable additional information for enriching their appreciation, and keen to reinterpret the poetry in the light of this new information.

The second reason for my confidence in the revival of interest and appreciation of Eliot's poetry is more complex and less immediate in its imagined realisation. It is centred on the entire worldview and interpretation of human existence, the philosophy – which can best be called 'classical' – which is at the heart of Eliot's genius and his creativity, as a poet (as it was as a critic).

Eliot was born at precisely the right time, in literary history, to make what was in fact a revolutionary contribution to poetic practice and theory, in the decaying days of Romanticism and with all 'established things [being] shaken', as W.B. Yeats wrote, by the Great War:

In the third year of the War [Yeats continues, in these reflections on modern poetry in 1936] came the most revolutionary man in poetry during my lifetime... T.S. Eliot published his first book. [Yeats is referring to Prufrock and Other Observations, published in 1917. Several of the poems, we know, had been written some years before.] No romantic word or sound, nothing reminiscent, nothing in the least like the painting of Ricketts could be permitted henceforth.... Tristram and Isoult were not a more suitable theme than Paddington Railway Station. The past had deceived us: let us accept the worthless present.¹

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And while, contrastingly, by the time of Eliot's death, cultural circumstances could not have been less propitious for the perpetuation of his legacy, one does not need to be a Yeatsian or Eliotean Spenglerian to imagine that, in the cycles of cultural history, an antithetical worldview, critiquing the triple hegemony of Romanticism boiled down to subjectivity in literature, republicanism reduced to individuality in politics and liberal Protestantism shorn of doctrine in the cult of the 'inner voice', might yet recover that classical spirit and expression in literature of which Eliot is one of the most conspicuous and telling exponents in post-Enlightenment cultural history. The apparent failure of Modernism in poetry, after a half-century's dominance, in the persistence of an attenuated species of Romanticism in verse, from the 1960s, may not (and one certainly hopes it will not) be the end of the story.

The 'inner voice' is stigmatised by Eliot in 'The Function of Criticism' (in an Arnoldian effusion reminiscent of the tartness of the elder critic's *Culture and Anarchy*) where we're told that

*the possessors of the inner voice ride ten in a compartment to a football match in Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust.*²

People think it may be a swipe at football, or at the Welsh, or perhaps at popular culture in general. In fact, although implicitly, Eliot's reference is much more precise. In 1904, in Wales, there was the so-called Great Awakening – an extraordinary outburst of evangelical fervour which found even the minimally-ordered arrangements of Welsh chapel doctrine and worship inhibiting to the individual's spirit. Personal conversions and hymn-singing swept the countryside and, in 1905, when the Welsh played the New Zealand All Blacks at home and won, hymns were sung at the stadium, initiating the custom which continues to this day. Eliot's reference is precisely focused on that species of Protestantism which emphasised personal revelation and which characterised the Welsh Great Awakening. It is a Classical critique of Romantic individualism worked up into absolutist transcendentalism, and it is, thereby, also a Catholic critique of a variety of Protestant subjectivity, for as Marina Warner has written:

*for Catholicism, what is vitally important is the idea that authority does not lie within, it is not the inner voice but the outer voice....*³

In this matter, as in others, Catholicism and Classicism meet. Hence their dual appeal to Eliot.

What I am urging is that what will prove to be the vitally important and valued element in Eliot's enduring legacy will, ultimately, be found in the poetry and, precisely, in the poetry insofar as it may be seen to be possessed of classical qualities, which have much to do with order, or perhaps more precisely with ordering, the *sine qua non* of the classical aesthetic. It is that quality which Eliot famously praised in Joyce's *Ulysses* (in an essay published one year after *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*):

Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.... It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to have been conscious.... It is... a step towards making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form which Mr. Aldington so earnestly desires.⁴

The key words, here, are order, form and significance, as Eliot describes what he calls the 'mythical method', but which might also be described as epic or heroic.

A few years later, as an epigraph to the collection *For Lancelot Andrewes*, Eliot chose as an epigraph a prayer alluding to the Book of Revelation (2,5 and 3,2):

Thou, Lord, Who walkest in the midst of the golden candlesticks, remove not, we pray Thee, our candlestick out of its place, but set in order the things that are wanting among us, and strengthen those which remain, and are ready to die.

Order, again, is at the heart of this text – and the reason for Eliot's invocation is that disorder needs to be righted. The subtitle of the essays, moreover, is 'Essays on Style and Order'. Importantly, this is not order (or ordering) as an aesthetic value alone, but ordering of material – and of the ordering of society's and one's own disorder, in the process – for moral and spiritual reasons. This is what gives the aesthetic impulse significance. In Andrewes' prose, in his sermons (which, as everyone knows, Eliot drew upon in the opening lines of 'Journey of the Magi'), he finds 'ordonnance [arrangement and structure] and precision'.⁴ The discrimination which

Eliot makes, at the end of the essay on Andrewes, between Andrewes and the other great preacher of his age, John Donne, is very much to the point of what I will be arguing about Eliot's poetry and the legacy of its peculiar genius, and to the matter of ordering being an aesthetic expression of moral and spiritual qualities, in the classical mode.

Eliot contends that the danger of Donne's sermons – and he uses that powerful word, 'dangerous' – is that they may appeal to those 'who find in his sermons an indulgence of their sensibility'. Or they may appeal to 'those... fascinated by "personality" in the romantic sense of the word – for those who find in "personality" an ultimate value'. These are readers less likely to be drawn to the 'places higher than that of Donne' to which Andrewes' classical poetic prose takes us.⁵ The focus on 'personality' in the discussion of the appreciation of the sermons inevitably calls to mind what Eliot famously said of 'personality' and its malignant influence in the writing of poetry, a few years before.

A telling word in this passage is 'indulgence' and the focus, now, is the individual. Eliot praised Joyce, specifically, for the control, order, shape and significance which he gives, in his masterpiece, to contemporary history. But the classical temper is as strongly evident in the inclination (which I would argue is even more powerful in Eliot, and deriving from his own psychology) to bring that discipline of *ordonnance* and precision to expressions of personal experience. He was, as Craig Raine puts it, 'determined to cross-examine every careless claim to passion'.⁶ Romanticism's excess of emotion – not to mention decayed Romanticism's wallowing in it – was the focus of his sustained critique, his 'militant hatred of sentimentality'⁷ and of a society, as he described it in 1934, in *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, 'worm-eaten with Liberalism',⁸ the social expression of the inner voice.

In this matter there is a consistency in Eliot's approach, across the division of his life and work, into pre-Christian and Christian sections. The comments about Joyce were made in 1923, four years before Eliot's baptism and confirmation in the Church of England, while in 1928, a year after, in 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry', he indicated the completeness of his integration of his philosophy of order and its aesthetic dimension

into Anglican Catholic thought and practice:

*the consummation of the drama, the perfect and ideal drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass.... the only dramatic satisfaction that I now find is in a High Mass well performed. Have you not there everything necessary? And, indeed, if you consider the ritual of the Church during the cycle of the year, you have the complete drama represented. The Mass is a small drama, having all the unities; but in the Church year you have represented the full drama of creation.*⁹

The Aristotelian reference focuses, again, on the necessity for order. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argued that 'beauty depends on... order' and that a dramatic action must be whole and complete. In Eliot's application of the teaching, a human being's experience of life is aestheticised ('the full drama of creation') and fused with doctrinal and spiritual teaching in the centuries-old classical liturgical expression of Western Christian culture. Here, for him, was a compelling outer voice of the ages to which the inner voice of the individual must submit.

In two of Eliot's most quoted formulae, he declares (in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'), that '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', and then:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.

The rider to this is not always quoted, but it is the psychological *fons et origo* of his determination:

*But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.*¹⁰

There you have a *locus classicus*, indeed, of the classical temper – the commitment to transmute the personal into the impersonal; the subjective into the objective; ideally to create a work of art that, so far from being autobiographical, is autotelic. This, Eliot argues, in 'The Function of Criticism', is a principle he takes to be axiomatic.¹¹

My suggestion is that these very familiar declarations are pertinent to the appreciation of poetry as well as to the writing of it, and that the kind of appreciation which they encourage is itself of a classical kind,

and essential to the reading of Eliot's poetry. Only once, I think, does Eliot refer to this matter, when, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', he comments that 'the effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art'.¹² It is an unostentatious sentence, usually overlooked because of the gnomic utterances around it, but it would dispose of Romanticism.

Recent scholarship is revealing the extent to which Eliot's thought, in this matter central to his philosophy of poetry and of life, is indebted to T.E. Hulme, that neglected Modernist theorist, who was nonetheless at the centre of London's advanced intellectual milieu in the years leading up to the First World War (during which he was killed). Described by Eliot as 'classical, reactionary, and revolutionary', Hulme's work as poet, critic, philosopher, aesthete and political theorist is crucial to an understanding of Eliot's evolving position in these years, but especially his focus on the integration of theology and aesthetics and the stark opposition of that integration to the Romantic/Humanist paradigm then – and indeed, since (although in a debased form) – holding sway. Hulme had argued that 'the classical poet never forgets this finiteness, this limit of man'. So, there is 'always a holding back, a reservation' in the poet's expression.¹³ The principle of reserve is the antidote to self-aggrandisement and self-indulgence of the personality, for poet and – I would argue, having set this duality in motion – for reader. 'Even in the most imaginative flights', Hulme continues, the classical poet 'never flies away into the circumambient gas'.

Eliot was Hulme's 'greatest inheritor and later proponent' in advancing what Hulme called the 'classical view' of human nature.¹⁴ In an unsigned 'Commentary' in *The Criterion*, in 1924, Eliot said of him:

*he appears as a forerunner of a new attitude of mind, which should be the twentieth-century mind, if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own.*¹⁵

The prophecy did not materialise. Yet the Hulmean classical (and Catholic) critique of Romanticism is the *leitmotif* of Eliot's very being, as a man and a writer and the extent to which Eliot's legacy was (and is) potent in the twentieth century and beyond depends upon the extent to which that critique of Romanticism and the recovery and celebration of

the classical spirit will prevail.

Similarly, in reading his poetry, the propensity for self-indulgence is disciplined. One is not arguing that it is reprehensible for readers to want to find, in verse, in general, a reflection of themselves and their concerns to which they can respond. But so strong was the tendency, in modern human beings, Eliot and Hulme believed, to personalise and idealise essentially fallible human nature (it is not a coincidence that they both persistently urged belief in the doctrine of Original Sin) that the poetry most pertinent for speaking to the modern condition of such men and women was a poetry which, as Eliot says in a rare use of italics, embodied 'an expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet'¹⁶ – and we might legitimately add, I am arguing, 'not in the history of the reader' either.

With regard to reader-response to literature, Gerald Wilkes's warning, a few years ago, in *Studying Literature*, is not only generally salutary, but speaks of the contemporary sub-Romantic tendency to relate works of literature to the reader's experience and esteem them to the degree to which they speak of and to that experience:

a novel or a poem or a play is not just whatever we choose to make it... The work of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton and others... exhibits a range of experience and imagination which is greater than that of any individual reader who approaches it. The individual reader may have access to parts of it, but even these parts he may apprehend imperfectly, and much else will lie beyond his scope. His appropriate attitude is one of humility. He is not likely to extend his grasp of writers who lie beyond him by smothering their work with his own preoccupations, and overpowering their mind with his... [If] we read King Lear and encounter only ourselves, then we are not taking from it what it has to offer.... The collective mind (so to speak) of Chaucer and Shakespeare, Donne and Milton, George Eliot and Patrick White reduces us into near insignificance by comparison.¹⁷

'Humility', Eliot reflected in 'East Coker', 'is endless'. It is the '*significant* emotion' of the Classical temperament and the antithesis of the Romantic imagination's egotistical sublime.

In an exquisite poem, in Eliot's mid-career, 'Marina', of 1930, we see the classical qualities of Eliot's poetry clearly exemplified and find that

our reading of it responds to their fashioning of it. In terms of the poem's allusiveness, it is 'classical' in three ways, taking us back to what Eliot regarded as the golden age of English literature, the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, in the reference to the last act of Shakespeare's play, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (itself a classical subject), where the old king and his lost daughter (born at sea, hence her name, from Latin) are reunited, producing a rebirth of the old man, a miraculous 'recovery of hope despaired of': Marina, whom he had thought dead, 'seems the incarnation of a vision'.¹⁸ Eliot considered this recognition scene in *Pericles* to be one of the great moments in all literature.¹⁹ Then, the epigraph takes us back to the classical period itself, in the quotation from the Roman dramatist, Seneca, of the silver age of Latin literature, and his play, *Hercules Furens* (*The Madness of Hercules*): 'What place is this, what land, what quarter of the globe?' Indeed, three years before, in the essay 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' (1927), Eliot had speculated on the influence of Seneca on Elizabethan drama. Hercules speaks these words, returning to sanity, after in madness (induced by pride) he had killed his wife and children. He is about to recognise the horror of his behaviour. So, the title of 'Marina' (and the story it recalls), on one hand, and the epigraph to the poem (and its source), on the other, present an antithesis – Pericles has been miraculously blessed, while Hercules has incurred divine resentment.

The irony of the opening lines, of course, is that the speaker – a type of Pericles – uses a version of the language and cadence of the antithetical Hercules. A prosodic connection is thereby established in Eliot's favourite mode of incantation, moreover – that style of repetition, of almost liturgical chanting, which, for him came closest, to the music and 'magic' of verse. The punctuation, characteristically, is minimal:

*What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
What water lapping the bow
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
What images return
O my daughter.*

The classical procedure of ordering has begun. What is introduced in small, in 'Marina', in the juxtaposition of Pericles and Hercules, in title and epigraph, informs its larger discourse. That summoning of the redemptive

presence in the opening strophe (itself following upon the recollection of Hercules' diabolical crime), is contrasted, in the next eight lines, with the reality of several deadly sins (not only murder), given new force by Eliot in the physical immediacy of their presentation:

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning

Death

Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning

Death

Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning

Death

Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning

Death....

Yet, still, the incantatory rhythm is consistently maintained, in this litany-like catalogue, as the puzzle of the apparent indecorum of the yoking of Pericles and Hercules begins, challengingly, to be clarified for us. Both of these men are fathers, they are both of this world, sharing the moral and spiritual capacity for beatitude and sinfulness, for despair, consciousness of sin and the potential and desire for redemption.

For the speaker of the poem, in the moment of his vision, at his still point of the turning world, the elements of that evil dispensation have passed, momentarily, into the intangible dimension of a dream:

Are become insubstantial, reduced by a wind,

A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog

By this grace dissolved in place....

This intersection of the timeless with time, does, for that time, redeem the time, in language, in Leavis's phrase, that is 'unique and lovely'²⁰:

What is this face, less clear and clearer

The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger –

Given or lent? More distant than stars and nearer than eye

Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet

Under sleep, where all the waters meet.

We note the questioning, here, held in tension with the affirmation. There is that telling note of classical restraint, 'a holding back, a reservation', resisting any careless flight into 'the circumambient gas'.

Recurring, throughout Eliot's poetry, are *ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans*

la coupole (from Paul Verlaine: 'those children's voices singing in the dome' and recalled in the third section of *The Waste Land*); sometimes they are 'children in the apple-tree', a twofold evocation of innocence: of childhood and of the 'Garden where all love ends' (*Ash-Wednesday*); the return to 'our first world' (in 'Burnt Norton'), before the 'bitter apple and the bite in the apple' (of 'The Dry Salvages'). It is a recovery of Eliot's own first world – in fact, his earliest memory in life, hearing the innocent laughter of the unseen girls, playing in the schoolyard which was separated by a wall from his own yard in St Louis, Missouri. Poignantly, we find this first memory in his last major poem, 'Little Gidding', as the search for ultimate grace in place, in this great poet of the Incarnation, continues as a life-long quest:

*At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.*

It is *his* recognition scene and linked to Eliot's general teaching of the need to recover what 'has been lost / And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions / That seem unpropitious':

*Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning,
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy.*

(*'East Coker'*)

Eliot's several references to *ces voix d'enfants*, scattered through the poetry, encountered arbitrarily by us, enact, in that literary/aesthetic arbitrariness, the unbidden and unexpected epiphanies of the eternal in the midst of life, to which we must be alert and alive:

*Quick now, here, now, always –
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)...*

(*'Little Gidding'*)

We note that self-correction a few lines before: 'Heard, half-heard' in the last appearance in Eliot's poetry of those little girls' voices. It recalls Gerard Manley Hopkins (although no-one seems to have noticed it). It

is a theological correction and, again, it is in the context of the classical discipline of restraint, of the limit that must be placed on any experience in this world, even of superlative loveliness. The cadence is the same; the words are almost identical. In the last line of 'Hurrahing in Harvest', Hopkins corrects himself: carried away with the ecstasy of harvest-time, he imagines, romantically, that it might be possible for man to cast himself free of his earthly, sin-laden burden in that natural *joie de vivre*. God 'hurls' earth for him 'off under his feet'. But that cannot be, while we are still mortal. Hence the classical, Catholic correction: 'And hurls for him, O half hurls earths for him off under his feet'. 'Heard, half-heard'; 'hurls... half hurls'. The sounds of the language are almost identical. The thought is the same.

It is noteworthy how often Eliot uses that qualification 'half'. 'You are the music, / While the music lasts', he tells us in 'The Dry Salvages', but these are 'only hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses.... / The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation'.

So it is, in 'Marina', that the thesis of beatitude, the antithesis of the abiding evil, produces a synthesis of precarious, contingent resolution in the image of the sailing boat, the most personal moment in this ultimately impersonal poem, reminding us of the keen sailor of Eliot's youth in the wild Atlantic waters off the Massachusetts coast:

Bowsprit cracked with ice and paint cracked with heat.

I made this, I have forgotten

And remember.

The rigging weak and the canvas rotten

Between one June and another September.

Made this unknowing, half-conscious, unknown my own.

There is the fraction again: 'half-conscious'. It is a vessel for seafaring, that journey to the sea which, in the imagery of the poet Eliot most admired, Dante Alighieri, was synonymous with the movement to blessedness and to the blessed one, Beatrice, another Marina. No poet writes more beautifully of the sea and the spirit of the sea and seafaring than Eliot. But even that cherished experience is touched with mutability and a yearning to transcend it:

The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking.

*This form, this face, this life
Living to live in a world of time beyond me....*

The poetry modulates, incomparably, from these personal emotions into the significant universal emotion of the desire for the miraculous (not contained here, or ever contained in Eliot's poetry, within the poetry – as all human language, being imperfect, must reach into the silence beyond words):

*let me
Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.*

*What seas what shores what granite islands towards my timbers
And woodthrush calling through the fog
My daughter.*

Notes

- 1 'Modern Poetry: A Broadcast', in A Norman Jeffares, ed. *Yeats: Selected Criticism* (Macmillan, London, 1964), p. 245.
- 2 In *Selected Essays*, *op. cit.*, p.27.
- 3 In Jackie Bennett and Rosemary Forgan, eds, *Convent Girls* (Virago, London, 2003), p.196.
- 4 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', *The Dial*, November, 1923, in Frank Kermode, ed., *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (Faber and Faber, London, 1975), pp.177-8.
- 5 'Lancelot Andrewes', *For Lancelot Andrewes* (Faber and Faber, London, 1970), p.20.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 7 *Op. cit.*, p.40.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 9 Faber and Faber, London, 1934, p.13.
- 10 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry', in *Selected Essays*, *op. cit.*, pp.47-8.
- 11 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), in *Selected Essays*, *op. cit.*, pp.18, 21.
- 12 In *Selected Essays*, *op. cit.*, p.30.
- 13 In *Selected Essays*, *op. cit.*, p.18.
- 14 In C.D. Blanton, 'The Politics of Epochality: Antimonies of Original Sin', in *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*, eds Edward Comentale and Andrzej Gasiorek (Ashgate, Aldershot and Burlington, VA, 2006), p.197.
- 15 Todd Avery, "'Above Life": Hulme, Bloomsbury, and Two Trajectories of Ethical Anti-Humanism', in Comentale and Gasiorek, *op. cit.*, p.179.
- 16 Vol. II (7), 231.
- 17 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Essays*, *op. cit.*, p.22.
- 18 Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1985, p.5.
- 19 Grover Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974), p.131.
- 20 B.C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot* (Faber and Faber, London, 1974), 127.
- 21 'Introductory', *Nor Shall My Sword* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1972), p.15.