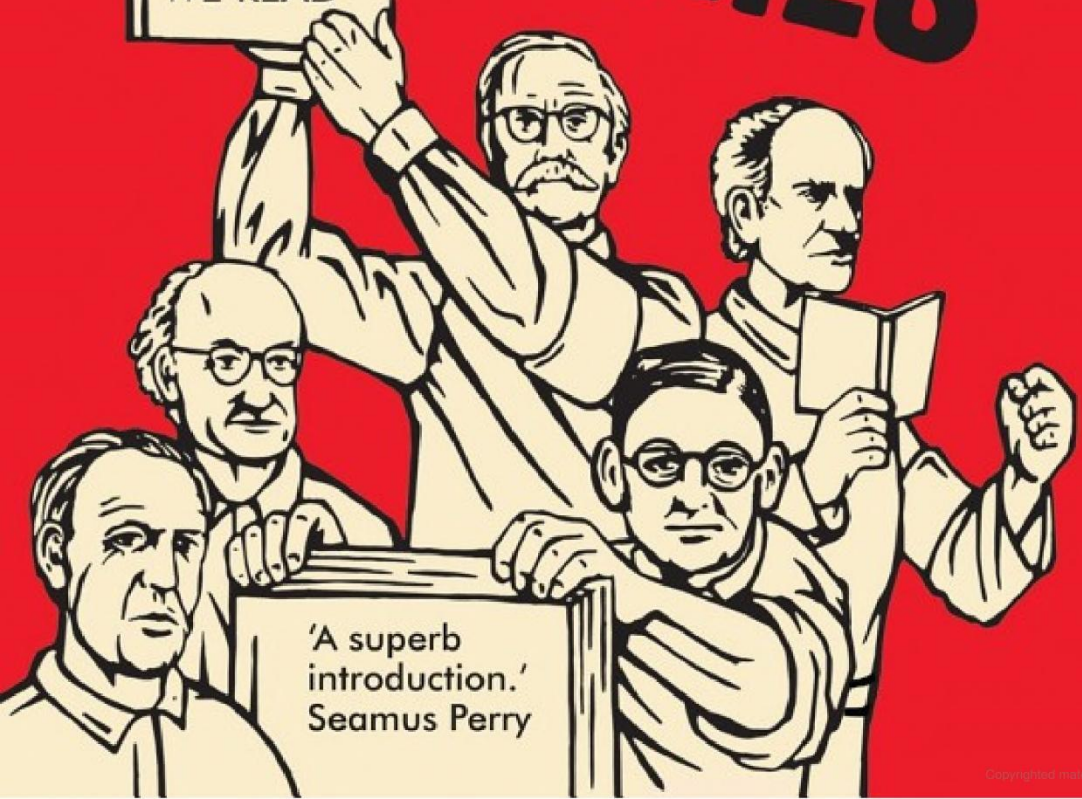
TERRY EAGLETON

CRITICAL REVOLUTION-ARIES

FIVE CRITICS WHO CHANGED THE WAY WE READ



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INTRODUCTION

The conviction underlying this book is that a vital tradition of literary criticism is in danger of being neglected. This is so to some extent even in academia, as well as in the wider literary world. If not many students of literature today are likely to be familiar with the work of, say, I.A. Richards or Raymond Williams, the same may well be true of some of their teachers. Yet the five critics discussed in this book rank among the most original and influential of modern times, which is why I have chosen them.

They also represent a specific intellectual formation, one of the most remarkable in twentieth-century Britain. All but one of them taught at the University of Cambridge. The exception is T.S. Eliot, yet Eliot had close connections with Cambridge, not least through his friend I.A. Richards, and as an informal consultant was a powerful influence on the shaping of English studies there. These men were part of what has been hailed as a critical revolution, one that transformed the academic study of literature and lent it a fresh centrality in Britain and beyond. Ironically, however, what one might call Cambridge English was never the orthodox creed of the Cambridge English Faculty. On the contrary, it was always a marginal, minority affair, though its combativeness and evangelical sense of mission lent it at times a presence disproportionate to its size. Despite this, the careers of Richards, Empson, Leavis and Williams were made possible in part by a radical reform of the Cambridge English course as far back as 1917, sidelining Anglo-Saxon and philology

for a course of study that was overwhelmingly modern, critical and literary (rather than linguistic) in orientation.

The new Cambridge course was entitled 'English Literature, Life and Thought' – the last two terms a couple of absurdly large abstractions, yet indicative of the fact that literature was to be studied in its social and intellectual context. There was also a cosmopolitan dimension to the course: the Tragedy paper in the final examinations encompassed such dramatists as Sophocles and Racine as well as Shakespeare, while the English Moralists paper included such honorary Englishmen as Plato, St Paul and Augustine, along with a host of other non-indigenous thinkers.

That the critical revolution should have its source in Cambridge, a university with a strong scientific pedigree and a record of openness to innovation, was not entirely accidental. There were other factors at work as well. Like British society in general, the culture of the university had been deeply shaken by the First World War, which seemed to herald a break with the past and the onset of a new era. There were ex-servicemen among the student body, while middle-class students on state or university scholarships were making their presence felt in an institution which had traditionally been dominated by the private schools and the upper classes. Only one of the critics portrayed in this book, William Empson, enjoyed such a privileged upbringing, as the son of a Yorkshire squire and a former pupil of Winchester College. The genteel amateurism of an older generation of upper-class literary scholars was under challenge from a new, rigorously analytical approach to literary works, of which I.A. Richards's method of 'practical criticism' was exemplary. This involved taking anonymous passages of prose or poetry, submitting them to tenaciously detailed scrutiny and passing judgement on their quality. Value was no longer simply a matter of taste; instead, it had to be vigorously argued for. There was a paper devoted to this practice in the final English exams, which included what was known as 'dating', or assigning an approximate date to a set of anonymous literary passages. Students today might be surprised to learn that dating several

times in quick succession was once compulsory for Cambridge English students.

Traditional literary scholarship had been largely insulated from society at large, whereas younger critics like Richards, F.R. Leavis and his partner Q.D. Leavis, who stemmed from less sheltered backgrounds, were more alive to the general culture, as well as more troubled by the place of literary studies within it. Leavis, the son of a shopkeeper, had lived through the trauma of the First World War. In a period of social and political turbulence in the wake of that conflict, English could either take the pressure of social change or consign itself to irrelevance. Opening it up also involved setting it in the context of other academic disciplines, which some of these pioneers knew at first hand. Richards came over to English from Mental and Moral Sciences, F.R. Leavis from History and William Empson from Mathematics. Q.D. Leavis took a keen interest in psychology and anthropology. Eliot wrote his doctoral thesis on philosophy, not literature. Several decades later, Raymond Williams was to move from literary criticism to cultural studies, a subject which he helped to invent.

The early years of the reformed English Faculty coincided with the heyday of literary modernism, and something of the boldness and bravura of that experiment was part of its ethos. The Cambridge of Richards and Leavis, for example, was also that of Malcolm Lowry, whose novel *Under the Volcano* is a late masterpiece of English modernism. The fact that world-class literature was being produced in English at the time seemed to conspire with the Faculty's focus on the present day, while the august figure of T.S. Eliot acted as a link between modernism and criticism. The two currents had a number of other features in common: both were tough-minded, impersonal, quick to detect sham emotion, conceptually ambitious and sensitively attuned to language. They also shared a certain elitism, as we shall see later in the case of criticism. Modernism was the product of a historical crisis, and so was the new critical work being undertaken at Cambridge. At its centre was the belief that the close reading of literary texts was a profoundly moral activity

which cut to the heart of modern civilisation. To define and evaluate qualities of language was to define and evaluate the quality of a whole way of life. As I.A. Richards put it, 'A decline in our sensitiveness and discrimination with words must be followed soon by a decline in the quality of our living also'.[1] One could take this remark as the motto of Cambridge English. To focus attentively on the words on the page may sound like an attempt to exclude larger concerns, but larger concerns are already implicit in it.

There is a problem with this argument. To what extent is verbal capability bound up with moral sensitivity? If the two are really as interwoven as Richards seems to suggest, does this imply that men and women who lack linguistic dexterity are insensitive and imperceptive in their everyday dealings? Are only the eloquent able to feel courage and compassion? Obviously not. It is not true that those who can produce coruscating commentaries on Rudyard Kipling or Angela Carter are invariably more subtle and discerning in daily life than the mass of humanity. In fact, the opposite has sometimes been claimed – that those who are deeply versed in the humanities may be displacing forms of feeling and attention which might more usefully be deployed in everyday affairs. 'Education sometimes cohabits with such barbarity, such cynicism, that you are filled with disgust', remarks the narrator of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*. Conversely, those whose vocabulary is less than Shakespearian in scope may be far more morally admirable than the silver-tongued.

To imagine a language, the Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, is to imagine a form of life. English studies dealt with qualities of language, and thus had a direct bearing on matters such as broadcasting, advertising, political propaganda, bureaucratic jargon and the nature of public discourse. As such, it offered an alternative to what it saw as opposing errors. One could tread the formalist path and treat literature as though it were an autonomous object, attending to its verbal strategies and devices; or one could take a broader view of the work, seeing it as an exploration of the human

condition or a commentary on civilisation. By taking the moral temperature of that civilisation in the language of the literary work, it was possible to move beyond both of these limited approaches. The critic needed to be vigilant to what was called 'the words on the page', renouncing the aesthetic waffle of an earlier age for a rigorously detailed analysis of tone, pace, pitch, mood, rhythm, grammar, syntax, texture and the like. What for other subjects was a taken-for-granted medium of inquiry was for criticism an object of inquiry in itself. Yet in the act of examining the words, the critic was also exploring the moral and historical context in which those words were rooted. Only by a delicate attentiveness to the words on the page could one grasp them as symptoms of the sickness or vitality of the civilisation from which they sprang.

By and large, Cambridge English represented a reaction to what seemed the impoverishment of both life and language in a commercial, utilitarian civilisation increasingly under the sway of film, radio, the popular press, advertising and popular fiction. Modernism, likewise, felt itself confronted by a drastic depletion of linguistic resources. Literary criticism was a way of diagnosing these social ills, but it could also pose a solution of sorts. Its task was to investigate the workings of a different form of discourse altogether, one which freed language from the purely instrumental ends to which a crass technological society had harnessed it. This discourse was known as literature, and it pointed to a different form of living – one in which language, persons, values and relationships could be treated as ends in themselves.

It followed that the literary critic bore responsibilities as grave as those of the priest, prophet or politician. He or she was no mere academic, but a monitor of the spiritual health of the modern age. Criticism had a vital moral and social function to perform, and it was precisely because of this that its textual analyses needed to be as scrupulous as they were. In this sense, the two distinctive keynotes of Cambridge English – practical criticism and a concern for the social and intellectual context of literature – were aspects of a single project. Far from being an

evasion of social responsibility, unpacking a metaphor or registering a shift of tone were actually exercises of it. Whether this was an absurd piece of self-aggrandisement, or a cogent justification of literary studies to those in thrall to science and technology, was a matter of heated dispute. It was not, one might note, a project particularly congenial to William Empson, who had no inclination to see the words on the page as symptoms of a way of life in urgent need of repair. Yet as the closest reader of all, he was a true member of the tribe.

Richards in particular saw the need to professionalise a subject which seemed to lack all intellectual discipline. As we shall see, he even tried to place English studies on a scientific basis. Impressionistic prattle was to be banished from the seminar room. Yet the strength of the new criticism lay in coupling technical expertise with a deep vein of moral humanism, the latter at its most evident in the work of Leavis. Cambridge English could thus draw on its tough new professionalism to counter the genteel amateurism of the old guard, while at the same time decrying fusty literary scholarship from the standpoint of a humane concern with the general culture. Tightly focused when faced with a literary work, yet prepared to pronounce on the moral quality of a whole culture, it promised to reap the best of both worlds.

Most literary critics, like most academics, hail from the middle class; but of the five figures discussed in this book, only one, I.A. Richards, fits this description. Even he began life as an outsider to English metropolitan culture, having grown up in the industrial north of England as the son of a man whose family hailed from the Gower peninsula in Wales. Eliot, who came from Missouri, was in American terms more upper-class than middle-class. William Empson hailed from the English gentry. F.R. Leavis was the lower-middle-class son of a provincial shopkeeper, while Raymond Williams grew up in Wales as the child of a railway worker. These were not socially typical intellectuals, a fact which is surely relevant to their eagerness to innovate, and (in the case of all but Eliot) their disdain for orthodoxy. Three of them (Eliot, Richards and Empson) also took a keen interest in

Eastern thought, which was among other things a sign of their critical stance towards Western civilisation.

It is also relevant to the link between Cambridge English and the literature of the period that all of these figures except one were creative writers. Eliot and Empson were major poets, Richards was a mediocre one, while Raymond Williams published several novels and wrote drama for television. Writing fiction was at least as important to him as literary criticism, and in the latter part of his career rather more so. In fact, he once described himself as 'a writer who also happened to be a professor'.[2] Only Leavis stuck to criticism, though even he considered writing a novel.[3] One might add that all of these men except for the rather cerebral Empson had an intensely physical sense of writing – of its involvement with breathing, the visceral regions, the nervous system and so on – which among other things may be a mark of critics who are writers themselves.

They were also public intellectuals rather than cloistered academics, though this applies rather less to Empson. At the same time, though Empson was somewhat less of a public figure than the others, he could hardly be described as cloistered. All of them had an ambiguous relationship to academia. Eliot, though much lauded in that sphere, was never part of it himself. Instead, he moved from being a hard-pressed freelance journalist, while also working as a teacher and a banker, into what was then the rather more relaxed milieu of publishing. Richards was a reluctant don who soon launched out into more ambitious terrain; Empson enjoyed scandalising the traditional scholarly mind with his racy prose and iconoclastic judgements; Leavis, as we shall see, specifically targeted the academic as the enemy; and Raymond Williams, who spent the first part of his teaching career in adult education, felt a deep alienation from Cambridge when he returned as a lecturer to the university where he had been a student. Of the five, only Leavis spent the whole of his career teaching in an English university.

The relation between speech and writing in the style of each of these authors is worth a passing comment. Empson writes

nonchalantly, in conversational, even garrulous style, while Eliot occasionally writes as though he is preaching in a particularly resonant cathedral. Richards's brisk, rather bloodless prose is quite distinct from the speaking voice; but the rhythms of that voice, with its pattern of emphasis and irregular stops and starts, sound through the tortuous syntax of F.R. Leavis, a writer who is constantly interrupting himself by inserting queries, sub-clauses, parentheses, recursions, afterthoughts and qualifications into his sentences. Like Empson, Leavis seems deliberately to avoid the formality of academic prose. Raymond Williams's abstract, ponderous style of writing might appear far removed from the living voice, but as those who knew him can testify, he spoke in much the same way as he wrote. Leavis writes as though he were speaking, while Williams spoke as though he were writing.

As the reader is about to discover, this book is not an act of homage to a pantheon of heroes. In fact, it is sometimes so critical of these figures that the reader might well wonder whether they are worthy of the stature assigned to them. The only way to find out is to read them. If I may end this Introduction on a personal note: I myself never met Eliot, but I knew a few people who did, some of whom recounted how he would hold forth at inconvenient length not about Dante or Baudelaire but about the various routes taken by London buses, of which he seemed to have a voluminous knowledge. I gazed with awe as a student on the slender figure of Richards at a Cambridge garden party, and sat in an English Faculty meeting in which Leavis denounced the idea of introducing a paper on the novel into the syllabus on the grounds that it took a term to read *Anna Karenina*. Before that, I had attended some of his lectures, though he was just on the point of retirement and his voice was weak, fading at times to an unintelligible drone in which his nasal Cambridge accent was still dimly audible. From time to time, however, the odd derogatory term would surface from his mumblings, like a jabbing finger: 'BBC', '*New Statesman*', 'C.P. Snow', 'British Council' and the like. At these carefully calculated cues, the well-drilled Leavisite devotees in the front

rows of the lecture theatre would send up a chorus of scoffing and snorting with Pavlovian predictability, while the rest of us would simply stare at our shoes and wait for it to stop. Empson had long since taken his leave of Cambridge, but some years later I was to hear him lecture in his extraordinarily contorted upper-class accent without once falling off the stage, a mishap to which he was particularly prone. Raymond Williams was my teacher, friend and political comrade. In this book, then, I look back across 60 years to a critical milieu which helped to form me, and to the later history of which I hope to have made some small contribution.

TE

1

T.S. ELIOT

For much of the twentieth century, the most revered, influential figure in English literary criticism was unquestionably T.S. Eliot. He was poet, critic, dramatist, essayist, editor, reviewer, publisher and public intellectual; and although he had rivals in some of these fields and superiors in others, none of them could match his authority as a whole. In an age when it was customary to add a title (Dr, Mrs, Mr and so on) to the names of people still living, Eliot was often referred to not as 'Mr T.S. Eliot' but simply as 'Mr Eliot', as though nobody could be dim-witted enough to be in doubt about which particular Eliot was intended. (At that time, the courtesy of a title could occasionally be extended to the dead: one of my teachers at Cambridge used to refer to the author of *Pride and Prejudice* as 'Miss Austen', though he did not insist on 'Mr Chaucer'.) Eliot's consecration as high priest of English letters was all the more remarkable given the outrage which had greeted his early work as a poet. In the words of one of his first champions, F.R. Leavis, he had been regarded as a 'literary Bolshevik', audaciously avant-garde and bafflingly opaque; yet by the early 1930s he was being hailed as the pre-eminent literary mind of his generation. His publicly proclaimed conversion to royalism, conservatism and Anglo-Catholicism in 1927 no doubt played some part in this shift of status. The more attracted he was to incense, the more his own reputation was wreathed in its fumes.

Like many of the leading writers and intellectuals of twentieth-century England, Thomas Stearns Eliot, as we have seen, was not in fact English. He was born in 1888 in St Louis, Missouri, the son of a family so patrician that they refused to use the term 'OK', and could trace their residence in America back over two hundred years. The Eliots were prominent among the intellectual aristocracy of the city, though Eliot's own father was a businessman. His grandfather had founded the local university, and championed an ideal of public service by which his grandson was to be deeply influenced. We shall see that the theme of self-surrender – of sacrificing one's own paltry ego to some higher cause – runs steadily throughout his work. The current of Christianity associated with the St Louis elite was Unitarianism, a moderate, high-brow form of religious faith at odds with the crude evangelical passions of the Puritan middle classes.

Yet the civilised, socially responsible class to which the Eliots belonged was being gradually displaced in the city by industrial and commercial forces, as a philistine middle class rose to power. The cultural leadership of the Eliots and their colleagues was in steep decline, as St Louis became flagrantly boss-ridden and corrupt. The Eliot who will later speak sourly of the 'dictatorship of finance' found himself an internal émigré in the place where he grew up, and would shortly become an exile in reality. (The poet whom he came to revere more than any other, Dante, grew up in the wealthy burgher class of Florence but rebelled against the city's increasingly powerful plutocracy and was finally driven into exile.) During Eliot's childhood, then, the ground was being laid for the clash between alternative forms of value which would mark his later thought: a trust in tradition versus a brash faith in progress, a belief in the corporate rather than the individualist, culture versus utility, order against anarchy, the surrender of the self against the unconstrained expression of it. Part of what he reacted against in his native country was too overpowering a sense of identity: the Puritan, self-fashioning, autonomous ego which underpinned the nation's industrial capitalism. In fact, it is not too much to claim that such individualism, in which the self acknowledges no fidelity to

a larger social or spiritual order, is Eliot's adversary from start to finish. Human beings cannot thrive, he maintains, without giving allegiance to something outside themselves. Those who feel no such loyalty to particular institutions might end up, like some Romantic poets, identifying instead with the cosmos; but 'a man does not join himself with the Universe so long as he has anything else to join himself with' (SE, p. 131).[1]

After studying at Harvard, Eliot abandoned his homeland for Paris and Oxford, and was persuaded to stay on in England by his friend, mentor and compatriot Ezra Pound. Like a number of other expatriate writers (Wilde, Conrad, Henry James, V.S. Naipaul, Tom Stoppard), he compensated for his status as an outsider by seeking to outdo the English Establishment at its own game. He worked in a London bank and later for the distinguished publishing house of Faber & Faber, and had connections with the Bloomsbury Group. In 1927, he sealed his loyalty to his adopted country by converting to the Church of England and professed himself a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. The divine right of kings was in his eyes a 'noble faith'. Truly to flourish, he maintained, meant being rooted in a single spot. 'To be human', he remarked, 'is to belong to a particular region of the earth' (OPP, p. 251). That the local and regional take priority over the national and international is a familiar article of conservative faith. 'On the whole', this refugee from St Louis to London shamelessly announced, 'it would appear to be for the best that the great majority of human beings should go on living in the place in which they were born' (NDC, p. 52).

Yet if he was something of a parody of a pukka Englishman, like Wilde and James, he nonetheless continued to feel like a foreigner in the English capital. Indeed, the former was partly a consequence of the latter. He remained to some extent a spirit 'unappeased and peregrine' (i.e. wandering), as he puts it in 'Little Gidding'; and one reason for the hostility to Jews in his early writings, over and above the casual, pervasive anti-Semitism of the time, may be because he saw in the stereotypical Jewish outcast and wanderer a monstrous image of himself. He

once used the pseudonym 'Metoikos', which is Greek for 'resident alien'. It is related to the word *métèques*, used of Jews by the French right-wing thinker Charles Maurras, whose work influenced Eliot considerably.

There was, however, some benefit to be reaped from living on the margins of Europe on a small island which was formally European but, like the United States, ethnically Anglo-Saxon. His compatriot Henry James, Eliot wrote, no doubt with himself in mind as well, was a European in the way that only a non-European could be. He meant, presumably, that the outsider is more likely to be conscious of the spirit and culture of a place as a whole than those brought up within it, who tend to take it for granted and to lack an overall view of it. So there were advantages to not being a native European, as well as not having grown up in provincial Britain. Eliot may have been a pin-striped London publisher: he was jocularly known as 'The Pope of Russell Square', which was where his publishing house, Faber & Faber, was located; but like many leading modernist artists he was nothing if not cosmopolitan, roaming freely in *The Waste Land* across a whole span of civilisations, appropriating chunks of them in order to cobble together a synthesis which suited his own spiritual needs. He was an unstable compound of bourgeois stuffiness and literary saboteur, moving between genteel Mayfair and bohemian Soho.

Eliot put to good use the instability of selfhood which his spiritual and then literal exile had brought him. It meant that he could 'decentre' himself all the more readily into literary tradition, the Anglican Church, a corporate culture, the resources of a collective mythology and what he liked to call the European mind. Like his friend James Joyce, he discovered that those who are strangers at home are able to belong more or less anywhere. As with many a modernist, his art was nourished by the fact that he was at once inside and outside the civilisation in which he settled. Perhaps a certain sexual ambiguity in his early years (he circulated some of his gay pornographic verse among a coterie of friends) reinforced this duality. In some ways, the alien can see more than the native: Eliot comments of Rudyard

Kipling, who spent part of his early life in India, that his experience of another country gave him an understanding of England that the English themselves would do well to heed. To *choose* a cultural allegiance, as Eliot did, signifies a deeper commitment than that of the average insider; yet at the same time the insiders have the edge over you, since – having the culture and tradition in their blood – they do not need to make a conscious issue out of it.

This matters particularly in England, where blood is traditionally considered to be thicker than intellect and custom more cherished than consciousness. The insider's problem is parochialism, while the outsider risks too rootless a lifestyle. Eliot resolves this dilemma by insisting that only by inhabiting a particular region of European culture can you gain access to the whole. Besides, émigré writers are able to mine the resources of a specific culture and heritage; but because they are also part-outsiders, they are released from the constraints of that form of life and are freer to wander, subvert and experiment. Joyce maintained that the source of his revolutionary art lay in the fact that he was not English, and something similar can be said of his champion T.S. Eliot.

For most moderately enlightened readers today, Eliot's social views range from the objectionable to the obnoxious. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), he portrays his ideal social order, which seems more rural than urban. There will be a culture of values and beliefs shared in common; but though society will thus constitute an organic unity, it will also be strictly stratified. There will be a governing elite, consisting of the traditional English rural class along with an intellectual coterie of men not entirely unlike Eliot himself. Elizabethan drama, he believes, is the product of such a common culture, distinguished as it is by 'a fundamental homogeneity of race, of sense of humour and sense of right and wrong' which includes dramatists and audiences alike (UPUC, p. 52). Like all authentic theatre, it is 'an organ for the expression of the consciousness of a people' (OPP, p. 307) – a people Eliot assumes to form a unity.

The task of the elite is to protect and disseminate the (largely Christian) values of the society as a whole. It is a vital undertaking, since if Christianity were to founder the whole of Western civilisation would collapse along with it. Yet since the mass of men and women are in Eliot's view incapable of what might properly be called thinking, their participation in the culture will be less conscious than that of their superiors. Instead, it will take the form of custom and tradition, myth and sentiment, ritual observances and spontaneous habits of feeling. All individuals will share in the same form of life, but they will share in it in different ways and at different levels of consciousness. The organic and the hierarchical can thus be reconciled. If the former is an alternative to liberal individualism, the latter is a bulwark against Bolshevism. Like the poet W.B. Yeats, with whom he was acquainted, Eliot is shrewd enough to perceive that elites must be rooted in the common life if they are to flourish. Otherwise their privileged status may prove their downfall. Their mission is to elaborate at a conscious level the values which for most people are a matter of habitual behaviour. The knowledge of the minority must be founded on the wisdom of the folk.

In this way, the two main senses of the term 'culture' – artistic and intellectual activity on the one hand, and the way of life of a whole people on the other – may be conveniently coupled. We shall see later that Eliot regards a poem in much the same way. It has a layer of conscious meaning, rather as a common culture has a minority whose task is to define and diffuse its values; but beneath this, and constantly animated by it, lies what one might call the poetic unconscious, that vast reservoir of forces and images which eludes all conscious articulation. The same may be said of Eliot's ideal theatre audience, which is likely to contain a small minority of patrons who understand what is spiritually afoot in his plays, a middle stratum of reasonably intelligent types who can glimpse something of their deeper meaning, and a mass of philistine groundlings (bankers, politicians, accountants and so on) who haven't a clue what is going on but who, like the Women of

Canterbury in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, may nevertheless respond to the meaning of the drama at some subliminal level. (The title *Murder in the Cathedral*, incidentally, may well be one of its author's impish jokes, as theatregoers flock to what promises to be an Agatha Christie-type whodunnit only to be confronted with an intellectually exacting drama notably short on action. A good many of Eliot's theatre audiences probably failed to realise that what they were hearing was couched in verse, an oversight which one imagines would not have troubled him in the least.)

The ideal, then, is a common but stratified culture; yet the social reality is very different. Like many of his fellow modernists, Eliot had little but contempt for most aspects of actual civilisation, with its godless materialism, worship of the machine, cult of utility, spiritual vacancy and bogus humanitarianism. In this, he is at one with F.R. Leavis, as we shall see later; but whereas Leavis's religion is in effect the philosophy of D.H. Lawrence, Eliot's is staunchly Anglo-Catholic. The love of man and woman, he remarks witheringly, is either made reasonable by a higher (i.e. divine) love, or else it is simply the coupling of animals. 'If you remove from the word "human" all that the belief in the supernatural has given to man', he warns, 'you can view him finally as no more than an extremely clever, adaptable and mischievous little animal' (SE, p. 485). He praises Machiavelli, of all rebarbative thinkers, for his low estimate of humanity, as well as for his promotion of order over liberty (FLA, pp. 46, 50). It is Eliot's conviction that the number of individuals in any generation capable of intellectual effort is very small. Indeed, he seems to derive a well-nigh erotic frisson from the phrase 'only a very few'. He would no doubt have been deeply rattled had the minuscule readership of his journal the *Criterion* shot up by 10 thousand overnight.

Most men and women, like the Hollow Men of Eliot's poem of that title, are too spiritually shallow even to be damned, which means that 'the possibility of damnation is so immense a relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform' (SE, p. 429). In a faithless age, the idea of hell is to his mind a considerable source of comfort. Writing in the age of

Auschwitz, he declares in the spirit of Charles Baudelaire that it is better to do evil than to do nothing. Evil people, as opposed to the merely immoral, are at least acquainted with higher spiritual realities, in however negative a fashion. Humanism overlooks what for Eliot is perhaps the most fundamental of all Christian dogmas: original sin. Humans are wretched creatures, and humility is consequently the greatest of Christian virtues. (For the Christian orthodoxy which Eliot is supposed to uphold, the greatest virtue is in fact charity, of which the other virtues are so many versions.) The Romantic faith in the potential infinitude of humanity is a dangerous illusion. So is the ideal of progress so zealously promulgated by the middle classes. Eliot's poetry is full of journeys either not undertaken, abandoned or ending in disenchantment. It would seem that history neither improves nor deteriorates. 'I do not mean that our times are particularly corrupt', he writes; 'all times are corrupt' (SE, p. 387). Yet it is clear elsewhere in his work that the modern era represents a drastic falling-off from the age of belief which preceded it. Like many a conservative thinker, Eliot equivocates between the view that things are getting steadily worse and the claim that they have been pretty appalling from the outset.

One must ensure that ordinary men and women do not receive too much education. The number of those in universities should be cut by a third. It is preferable for a small number of people to be highly cultivated, and for the rest to make do with some rudimentary learning, rather than that everyone should receive an inferior education. All education must ultimately take a religious form, and it may prove necessary to revive the monastic orders in order to preserve classical learning from the barbarism which lurks beyond the cloister. The whole of modern literature, including a certain 'Mrs Woolf', is tainted by the secular spirit. We must read according to Christian standards, a belief that modern literature disastrously rejects. Literary censorship, either of the communist or Roman Catholic kind, is in principle to be favoured. That a Catholic should feel a certain solidarity with communism is not surprising. Eliot reveals a grudging admiration for Marxism, a creed he politically detests,

precisely because it is as much an orthodoxy as Anglo-Catholicism.

This is one reason why he published a range of left-wing writers in his periodical the *Criterion*. In general, however, he has little admiration for diversity, and regards a liberal pluralist society which encourages contending viewpoints as less creditable than a culture which holds its beliefs in common. The struggle against liberalism, he declares, is the struggle to renew our sense of tradition and 'establish a vital connection between the individual and the race' (ASG, p. 48). It is, to do him justice, the human race, not simply the white-skinned sector of it, that he has in mind. Liberalism involves tolerance, while Eliot considers that 'the virtue of tolerance is greatly overestimated, and I have no objection to being called a bigot myself' (EAM, p. 129). He is presumably hoping to infuriate his antagonists, though he may also be speaking the truth.

One problem with running a conservative political journal is that conservatives of Eliot's stripe do not really regard their own beliefs as political. On the contrary, they see them as springing from certain unchanging principles which are not to be compromised by the vulgar realm of political utility. The *Criterion* was thus embarrassed from the outset by seeking to address an urgent political crisis in the 1920s and 1930s while apparently having little faith in politics. Rising above all strident partisanship, it sought to strike a dispassionate note. A literary review, Eliot insists, must avoid all social, political or theological bias. It is not clear how this Arnoldian disinterestedness is to be attained, short of drawing one's contributors from the ranks of the seraphim. Nor does it reflect the reality of Eliot's editorship of his journal, where he is often enough to be found nudge-winking a reviewer into assuming a certain attitude.[2] It is true that the publication took a relatively non-partisan line on the Spanish Civil War, an issue on which Eliot commends the kind of even-handedness recommended by Arjuna, hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*. A refusal to condemn Spanish fascism, however, is hardly to his credit, and he displayed no such impartiality when it came to the battle against communism.

He was also less than dispassionate about another Iberian fascist dictator, the Portuguese General Salazar, whom he blandly describes as 'a Christian at the head of a Christian country'.[3] Salazar's regime, he remarks, is to be praised as enlightened.

There is an oracular, supercilious tone to much of Eliot's prose. It suggests an hauteur curiously at odds with the self-doubting protagonist of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. Nor does it fit well with his early philosophical conviction that all knowledge springs from a specific standpoint, and that no valid judgement is more than approximately true. One might claim that *The Waste Land*, despite its climate of futility and fragmentation, has a similar if rather less resonant aura of authority about it. On what Olympian peak must the poet himself be standing to be capable of seeing so widely and deeply in a shattered world? And why is it that this standpoint cannot be included within the piece itself, but acts rather as its frame? Is the synoptic form of the poem at odds with its fragmented content? Eliot's lordly tone may be distasteful to a modern reader, but later in his career it began to strike him as objectionable as well. 'The occasional note of arrogance, of vehemence, of cocksureness or rudeness' in his earlier writings was, he confesses in a splendid phrase, 'the braggadocio of the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter' (TCC, p. 14), which is to say a stylistic compensation for personal insecurity. He also criticises the protagonist of his play *The Family Reunion* as an insufferable prig, and compares him unfavourably with the minor character of the chauffeur. Perhaps a new, more fulfilling, marriage helped to soothe his acerbic temper.

Even so, the majestic self-assurance of the early Eliot, or perhaps of his critical persona, is remarkable. He is a past master of the suavely malicious put-down. The critic George Saintsbury is 'an erudite and genial man with an insatiable appetite for the second-rate' (TCC, p. 12). 'Akenside [the eighteenth-century poet] never says anything worth saying, but what is not worth saying he says well' (OPP, p. 199). Some of Byron's verses 'are not too good for the school magazine' (OPP, p. 227). William Hazlitt, one of the greatest critics in the English

literary canon, is dismissed as 'undistinguished', a judgement doubtless influenced by the fact that he was an ardent political radical. Horace is 'somewhat plebeian' in comparison with Virgil (OPP, p. 63). D.H. Lawrence is provincial, snobbish, ill-educated and has 'an incapacity for what we ordinarily call thinking' (ASG, p. 58). If Eliot can be caustic, however, he also enjoys a spot of roguish teasing. Writing on nineteenth-century English poetry, he asks in typically mischievous spirit, 'What about Mrs Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, which I have never read, or that long poem by George Eliot of which I don't remember the name?' (OPP, p. 42). No doubt it is significant that both these works are by women. What may look at first glance like a humble confession of ignorance is probably a calculated put-down. It is sometimes hard to know how serious Eliot is intending to be, as when he dismisses literature as 'a form of superior amusement' (SW, p. viii).

The finest of all English political philosophers, Thomas Hobbes, is disdainfully dismissed as 'one of those extraordinary little upstarts whom the chaotic motions of the Renaissance tossed into an eminence which they hardly deserve and have never lost' (SE, p. 355). It is not inconceivable that this snapshot of Hobbes as a freakish lower-class parvenu in the world of polite letters may be related to Eliot's visceral aversion to his materialist philosophy. The lower classes of Eliot's own time 'ride ten to a compartment to a football match in Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust' (SE, p. 27). Words like 'television' are ugly either because of their 'foreignness or ill-breeding', though Eliot fails to make it clear to which of these contemptible categories the word 'television' belongs. There are vacuous generalisations which fail to make much sense, such as 'I believe the Chinese mind is very much nearer to the Anglo-Saxon than it is to the Indian' (ASG, p. 41). There is also a good deal of faux ignorance and sham humility, as Eliot feigns not to understand some statement whose meaning is blindingly obvious, or coyly regrets that his mind is too ponderous to grasp certain abstractions which he repudiates in any case. 'I have no general

theory of my own' (SE, p. 143), he declares. Others have theories; Eliot himself has beliefs, doctrines and convictions. Throughout his criticism, there is the shadowy sense of a poseur – of an author who may be less convinced of his own imperious proclamations than he sounds, who has a strategic eye to the effect of his rhetoric on an audience, and who can cobble together a persona to suit the occasion.

Rather less innocuous are some of his observations on culture and tradition. Lecturing at the University of Virginia in 1933, he informs his audience that the culture of the American South has been less industrialised and 'less invaded by foreign races' (ASG, p. 16), and is all the more robust for it. The population of the region is attractively homogeneous; there is no mention of the African-Americans whose enslaved ancestors laid the material foundations of the region he is gracing with his presence. If two or more cultures coexist, both become 'adulterate'. As if this were not disreputable enough, Eliot throws in what is perhaps his most odious observation of all, when he adds that 'reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable' (ASG, p. 20). He made no comment on the Holocaust.

By this point, the enlightened reader may well be wondering whether anything of value can be salvaged from this full-blooded reactionary. The answer is surely affirmative. For one thing, Eliot's elitism, anti-Semitism, class prejudice, demeaning estimate of humanity and indiscriminate distaste for modern civilisation are the stock in trade of the so-called *Kulturkritik* tradition which he inherits.[4] Many an eminent twentieth-century intellectual held views of this kind, and so did a sizeable proportion of the Western population of the time. This doesn't excuse their attitudes, but it helps to explain them. For another thing, such attitudes put Eliot at loggerheads with the liberal-capitalist ideology of his age. He is, in short, a radical of the right, like a large number of his fellow modernists. He believes in the importance of communal bonds, as much liberal ideology does not; he also rejects capitalism's greed, selfish individualism

and pursuit of material self-interest. 'The organisation of society on the principle of private profit', he writes, 'as well as public destruction, is leading both to the deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism, and so to the exhaustion of natural resources . . . a good deal of our material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly' (ICS, pp. 61–2). There is nothing here with which an ecologically minded socialist would disagree. His first published review, of a handful of books on India, is strongly anti-imperialist. He is hostile to a social order which exalts the solitary ego, and which jettisons the past as dead and done with. For his part, Eliot understands that the past is what we are mostly made of, and that to nullify it in the name of progress is to annihilate much that is precious. It is thus that he can write that by abandoning tradition, we loosen our grip on the present.

Radicals of the left may reject the inheritance to which Eliot pays homage, but this is not to suggest that they are opposed to tradition as such. It is rather that they embrace alternative lineages – that of the Levellers, Diggers, Jacobins, Chartists, Suffragettes, for example. 'We Marxists have always lived in tradition', observes Leon Trotsky in his *Literature and Revolution*. 'A society is poor indeed if it has nothing to live by but its own immediate and contemporary experience', writes Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society 1780–1950*.[5] The idea of tradition is by no means benighted in itself. It encompasses both the monarchy and the freedom to press for its abolition. If Trooping the Colour is traditional, so is the right to strike. In the modern age, Eliot protests, there is a provincialism not of space but of time, for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their turn and have now been scrapped – a viewpoint for which 'the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares' (OPP, p. 72). The Marxist Walter Benjamin would have heartily agreed, along with critics of the conversion of history into a readily consumable commodity known as 'heritage'. Eliot goes on to speak of 'our continued veneration for our ancestors' (OPP, p. 245); but in practice, as we shall see, his approach to the past is a

good deal more innovative and iconoclastic than such piety would suggest. 'Veneration' is not quite the word for his scathing assessment of Milton or most eighteenth-century verse.

Nor does Eliot accept the arid rationalism which underpins the modern order, with its indifference to kinship, affection, the body and the unconscious. Confronted with the creed that men and women are wholly self-determining, he insists instead on their finitude and fragility, an awareness of which belongs to the virtue of humility. Human beings are dependent on each other, as well as on some larger whole. For Eliot, as for D.H. Lawrence, we do not belong to ourselves. The idea that we can 'possess' our selves like a piece of property is a bourgeois fantasy. The attachment to a specific place which Eliot admires may have sinister overtones of blood and soil, but it also serves in our own time as a rebuke to global capitalism – to the jet-setting CEOs who feel at home only in an airport VIP lounge. A belief in social order need not be authoritarian; it may rather be an alternative to the anarchy of the marketplace. It may also be preferable to a liberal civilisation in which everyone may believe more or less what they want – but only because convictions don't matter much in any case, and because the idea of human solidarity has withered at the root.

In this sense, Eliot is as much a critic of the social orthodoxies of his day as, say, George Orwell or George Bernard Shaw. It is just that his critique is launched from the right rather than the left. It is true that the case smacks of self-contradiction, since in practice Eliot was a loyal servant of the very capitalism which fragments community, junks tradition and has scant regard for spirituality. The alternative in his eyes would be communism; and when he wonders aloud how he would choose between communism or fascism, he plumps for the latter. He regarded the Russian Revolution as the most momentous event of the First World War, and viewed the conflict between the Soviet Union and 'Latin' civilisation as a spiritual war between Asia and Europe. Yeats believed much the same. In fact, the battle against Bolshevism is high on the *Criterion*'s agenda.

Yet Eliot was by no means a fascist, even though his first wife became a Blackshirt or member of the British Union of Fascists. There are, to be sure, affinities between fascist ideology and Eliot's brand of conservatism, which is not to be equated with the tenets of today's Conservative Party. Both are elitist creeds; both are ready to sacrifice freedom to order, reject liberal democracy and economic individualism and exalt myth or custom over rational analysis. Yet conservatives like Eliot believe in the church, tradition, the monarchy, a decentralised society and a paternalist aristocracy, none of which is in the least congenial to fascism. Nor is the idea of social hierarchy, since fascism knows only one social distinction, that between the Leader and the people. Fascism regards itself as a revolutionary creed, whereas conservatism of course does not. Like all brands of nationalism, fascism is a thoroughly modern invention, despite its invocation of Nordic gods and ancient heroes. Conservatism has a lengthier pedigree.

Both brands of politics have a high regard for rural society; but whereas the Nazis spoke in demonic terms of blood and soil, the conservative thinks rather more angelically of village fetes and Morris dancers. The conservative is devoted to the family, the local community and civil society, while the fascist pays allegiance only to Leader, race and nation. Fascist societies glorify violence and are usually on a permanent military footing, which is not the case with conservative ones. They are run by a brutally authoritarian state, whereas Eliot's type of politics favours regionalism rather than centralism. In fact, it was fascism which helped to wind up the *Criterion* on the eve of the Second World War. It had become clear that the cultural equivalent of the Holy Roman Empire which the journal hoped to see re-established was yielding in Continental Europe to an altogether more sinister form of imperial power. The classical 'European mind', Eliot laments in the final edition of the journal, has disappeared from view, even though it was never clear how a periodical whose circulation probably never topped eight hundred was going to put it back on its feet.

Eliot is certainly an elitist, but we have seen already that elitism need not exclude a concern for the common people. This unabashed reactionary may have wanted to shut an alarmingly high number of students out of universities, but he also taught for some years in adult education, a largely left-wing project at the time. As far as moral values go, the number of those who can discriminate between good and evil is in Eliot's view very small; but he also holds that the company of those hungry for some kind of spiritual experience is very large. He speaks in an essay on Kipling, chronicler of life in India, of 'people of lower cultures', yet maintains that Kipling enriched the English language to the benefit of all, whether philosophers or railway porters. There must, he insists, be lines of communication between the poet and a wider public; and for poetry to work, the two must share a common background. Poetry, for this most mandarin of intellectuals, must be rooted in common speech and a common sensibility. It represents the most refined point of consciousness, and most intricate sensibility, of a whole community, not simply of an individual author. One needs a small vanguard of writers who are in advance of their time, but a vanguard is not to be confused with a coterie. A vanguard is in the service of a larger body marching behind it, which is hardly true of a coterie or clique. The changes it effects in language and sensibility, Eliot maintains, will eventually work their way through to the public as a whole – even, indirectly, to those who don't read poetry at all. This, at root, is the social function of poetry.

There are times when Eliot presses this case to the point of absurdity. He remarks in *On Poetry and Poets* that if Norwegians stopped writing poetry, which is to say ceased to perfect and enrich their own language and feelings, the consequences of this would eventually be felt by everyone on the planet. It would eventually affect even those who could not name a single poet, let alone a Norwegian one. If a nation fails to breed eminent writers, its language and sensibility will deteriorate to the detriment of the species as a whole. That the sensibility of Glaswegians would grow coarser because Norwegian poets they

have never heard of had given up writing is not the most plausible of propositions. Rather more persuasively, Eliot maintains that when language is in a healthy state, 'the great poet will have something to say to all his fellow countrymen at every level of education' (OPP, p. 9). In articulating the emotions of others, the writer also modifies them, rendering them more self-conscious and making his readers more finely aware of what they spontaneously feel. The poet 'discovers new variations of sensibility which can be appropriated by others' (OPP, p. 9). The perfect classic is one which will find a response 'among all classes and conditions of men' (OPP, p. 69). Its music is already latent in everyday speech. 'The poetry of a people', Eliot remarks, 'takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility' (UPUC, p. 15).

There is, then, a reciprocity between poet and populace, which is not the case with the coterie or cabal. The poet in Eliot's view wants to give pleasure to as large and diverse a mass of people as possible; and in seeking such popularity he or she aspires to the role of the music-hall comedian. Eliot took a keen interest in this brand of popular culture, and wrote an admiring essay on the legendary music-hall performer Marie Lloyd. The Elizabethan dramatists, he remarks, took a form of popular entertainment and plucked some matchless art from it, and music hall offers the modern writer a similar opportunity. A great many people, he insists, are able to reap some gratification from poetry. He also suggests in his mock-humble, archly provocative style that he himself would like an audience for his work which could neither read nor write. In quite what sense they would constitute an audience is left unclear. Maybe what he had in mind was his declaiming his verse to them, though anyone who has heard a recording of Eliot reading *The Waste Land* would be unlikely to rank this as among his more inspired achievements. It is not, however, as fatuous an idea as it may seem. We shall see later that Eliot regarded poetic communication as a largely unconscious affair, which is one reason why he is so blasé about the conscious meaning of a poem.

It follows that you do not need to be well educated to appreciate his work. In fact, your erudition might even constitute an obstacle to your enjoyment of it. Even so, words can only communicate unconsciously if you can read them in the first place.

In this sense, Eliot is less hidebound by his conservatism than one might expect. Nor is his attitude to tradition at all traditional. On the contrary, his reconstruction of the concept is one of his most renowned critical innovations, and the essay in which it is to be found, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', one of the most celebrated critical statements of the twentieth century. For such a youthful author, it is an astonishingly bold, authoritative piece of argument. It proposes what one might call a modernist notion of tradition, one which has broken with a linear, one-thing-after-another conception of literary history. The idea of tradition must be rescued from the middle-class delusion of progress, upward evolution and perpetual improvement; and if literature is a convenient means of challenging this self-satisfied ideology, it is partly because there is indeed no simple upward trek from Horace to Margaret Atwood. In Eliot's view, tradition is a two-way street. It works backwards as well as forwards, since the present alters the past just as much as the past gives birth to the present. The historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presentness. As so often with modernism, we are speaking of a form of spatialised time, so that a poet writes 'with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order' (SE, p. 14).

When a new piece of writing enters the literary canon, it retrospectively changes the relations between previous works, allowing us to view them in a new light. One may talk of the influence of Keats on Tennyson, but what, Eliot might ask, of the influence of Tennyson on Keats? He writes:

> The existing [literary] monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (SE, p. 15)

An example of this backward transformation can be found in F.R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry*, in which Eliot's own revolution in the writing of poetry allows Leavis to reassess Gerard Manley Hopkins as a proto-modernist rather than a somewhat freakish late Victorian. It is worth adding that Eliot's poetic practice combines the old and the new rather as his idea of tradition does. By being faithful to a certain hallowed moment of the past (roughly speaking, the period from Marlowe to Marvell), his work is able to disrupt the conventions of the present. One can read 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' as among other things an attempt to reclaim its author's avant-garde literary practice for a conservative poetics. What looks aberrant is in fact loyal to the legacy of the past, when viewed from a long way off.

The works of the past constitute a complete, coherent order; there is no concession that the literary canon might be marked by conflict and dissonance. Nothing is ever lacking from it; and though its internal relations are altered each time it offers houseroom to a new work, it then proceeds to unfold unperturbedly as an organic whole. In this sense, the tradition perpetuates itself by means of change, not in spite of it. Though it is in continual flux, it 'abandons nothing en route' (SE, p. 16) – though en route to what is a question worth posing, since Eliot's tradition, unlike the socialist movement or the Victorian vision of material progress, lacks any distinctive goal. It can never be wrong-footed by some outlandish new literary creation, since it simply reorganises itself in order to accommodate it. Innovation is co-opted rather than rebuffed. You cannot really break with

tradition, because this itself will turn out to be a move within it. It is a self-adjusting, self-unifying organism with its own autonomous life, and in this sense resembles an enormous work of art extended in time and space. Rather as Hegel's World Spirit works secretly in and through individuals who fondly imagine themselves to be self-determining, so the tradition uses writers as a cunning way of reproducing itself. They are the humble instruments of a mighty power whose depths they can never fathom, rather like religious believers in their relation to God. In fact, the idea of tradition is one of the modern period's many surrogates for the Almighty, a less secular version of whom Eliot will come to embrace some years after completing his 'Tradition' essay.

A way of writing, Eliot observes in *To Criticize the Critic*, can come to feel stale and shop-soiled, no longer responsive to contemporary modes of feeling, thought and speech, in which case a poetic revolution may prove essential. Such an upheaval is greeted at first with affront and disdain, but finally comes to be seen as vitalising rather than destructive, lending a fresh lease of life to the heritage it appears to undercut. Its legitimacy will finally be acknowledged, rather like that of property stolen many centuries ago. There are times when you need to deviate in order to stay in line. One test of a work's value, Eliot claims, is that it 'fits in' with what has gone before. Conformity is the decisive criterion. But how exactly does 'Prufrock' do that, however sophisticated one's sense of what counts as fitting in? Eliot commends Samuel Johnson's belief that innovation must remain within the bounds of propriety, but this may be one instance of a mismatch between his theory and his practice. 'Proper' is the last word one would use of his early poetry.

There is another problem as well. The entry of a newcomer into the tradition ensures that the past is kept alive; but if it does so by altering the values, proportions and relations of existing works, then this view of literary history opens the door to relativism. Eliot is rightly opposed to treating works of art in isolation; instead, they draw their significance from their place in a larger formation (tradition), and can be truly judged only by

extravagant and eccentric. D.H. Lawrence, who in Eliot's judgement lacks a richly sustaining culture, has no guidance except the 'inner light', and is spiritually sick. Even so, Eliot protests in the teeth of conventional prejudice that no writer was less of a sensualist. It is Lawrence's deviation from the main current, not his scandalous explorations of sexuality, which thrusts him into the outer darkness. (It will be left to F.R. Leavis to point out that the provincial, lower-middle-class culture from which Lawrence sprang was a good deal more fruitful than the loftily contemptuous Eliot will allow.) James Joyce, by contrast, is in Eliot's eyes the most orthodox of all contemporary authors. The fact that he is an avant-garde atheist whose work was banned as pornographic is less important than the fact that he draws on a stable structure of ideas derived from Aristotle and Aquinas. No doubt Eliot quietly relished the shock effect of ranking the author of Molly Bloom's steamy soliloquy alongside such classical worthies as Dante. Joyce's compatriot W.B. Yeats, whose lack of orthodox beliefs leads him astray into the swamps of 'folklore, occultism, mythology and symbolism, crystal-gazing and hermetic writings' (ASG, p. 45), receives no such accolade, even though in general Eliot has a high opinion of his work.

William Blake's writing 'has the unpleasantness of great poetry' (SE, p. 128); but as the work of a Dissenter it, too, falls outside an orthodox frame of reference and is forced to invent a quaint, homespun philosophy of its own. Blake is patronisingly compared to a man fashioning an ingenious piece of home-made furniture. The fact that he cannot rely on an established set of doctrines to do the work of belief for him means that he is too preoccupied with ideas. He, too, is afflicted in Eliot's view by a certain meagreness of culture, a charge which is no truer of him than it is of Lawrence. It is simply that Eliot cannot recognise either provincial nonconformism or metropolitan radicalism as genuine cultures. He finds a similar paucity of cultivation, linked once again to religious Dissent, in the work of John Milton, in whose Puritan mythology he discerns a certain thinness, and whose celestial and infernal regions in *Paradise Lost* he describes in an agreeable flourish as 'large but insufficiently

furnished apartments filled by heavy conversation' (SE, p. 321). Thomas Hardy is another author bereft of any objective system of beliefs. No doubt he is also too Godless, plebeian and socially progressive for Eliot's taste.

Eliot's desire to belong – to a church, tradition or social Establishment – is in part a result of his émigré status. It is not surprising that one should find such zeal for tradition in a disinherited poet who stems from a nation not remarkable for its reverence for the past. Tradition is among other things Eliot's revenge on the philistines of St Louis. Yet the immigrant artist, as we have seen, is also less likely to be constrained by a cultural heritage than those reared within it, and thus more ready to subject it to a scissors-and-paste job. In Eliot's critical essays, minor Jacobean dramatists are upgraded, the eighteenth century damned with faint praise and whole squadrons of Romantic and Victorian poets sent packing. Even Shakespeare is the target of some astringent judgements. There is also something rather un-English about this Anglophile's sheer intellectual ambitiousness – about the way he can speak in such grandly generalising terms of the 'European mind', or of European literature as forming an organic totality. Perhaps you need to come at the place from the outside to grasp Europe in this all-inclusive way. It is also typical of an outsider to idealise it so much. The claim that European literature constitutes an organic unity is surely as much a delusion as Eliot's insistence that one must read all of Shakespeare's plays in order to understand any one of them. He even suggests that *world* literature constitutes a unity, as improbable a case as claiming that the stars are meticulously arranged to spell out some momentous statement. In any case, the belief that unity is always a positive value is one of the more questionable assumptions of literary criticism, as well as one of the most enduring.

Tradition, then, turns out to be for the most part a matter of interpretation. It is a construct as much as a given; indeed, in the thought of F.H. Bradley, the line between the two is notably blurred. Poets must surrender their petty personalities to this

sovereign power, allowing it to speak through them; yet in doing so, there is a sense in which they are sacrificing themselves to their own creation, rather like those who immolate themselves before idols carved by their own hands. The notion of self-sacrifice also lies at the root of another of Eliot's renowned doctrines, the idea of impersonality. Roughly speaking, while the Romantic poet wants to express the self, Eliot wants to extinguish it. In this, he is at one with many of his fellow modernists. Poetry is not a matter of 'personality' but a question of escaping from it. To write is a matter of constant self-surrender. An author is no more than a 'finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations' (SE, p. 18). The more perfect the artist, the greater distinction there will be between 'the man who suffers and the mind which creates' (SE, p. 18). The difference between art, and the personal events or sentiments it may record, is absolute. Experiences which are vital to the author may play no part in their poetry, and what is important in the poetry may be of negligible significance in their life. The Victorian critic Matthew Arnold, Eliot comments, mistakenly focuses on the feelings of the poet rather than the feelings of the poem itself. Emotion for Eliot is to be found *in* the words of a poem, precisely configured there, rather than lurking somewhere behind them in the artist's heart or mind.

The literary work is thus in no sense a 'reflection' of the mind that contrives it. Some writers may have crude or simple emotions in real life but subtly nuanced ones in their art. Or their feelings may be too obscure and elusive for them to grasp at all fully. Eliot does not assume *à la* Descartes that we are transparent to ourselves. What matters is not to experience profound or original emotions but the intensity of the artistic process itself. Originality is for Eliot an overrated Romantic value, and whether there are any emotions as yet undiscovered is surely doubtful. By the time an experience has crystallised into a poem, it may differ so much from the author's initial state of mind as to be scarcely recognisable to him. Indeed, Eliot presses this case even further, claiming that what a poem

communicates does not exist outside the act of communication itself. It is as though the experience is constituted in the process of conveying it. Like those charismatic types moved to prophecy by the Holy Spirit, poets do not know what they have to say until they overhear themselves saying it.

The contrast with Romanticism could not be clearer. The poet for Eliot is not in the business of self-expression. Besides, Romantic poets are typically *agents* – active subjects who recreate the world by the power of their imagination. There is little place for such agency in Eliot's aesthetics, and no room for the creative imagination. Given the pious exaltation of this modest faculty in literary circles, this is an oversight to be welcomed. The Eliotic poet, by contrast with the strenuously self-making Romantic, is strikingly passive – 'a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together' (SE, p. 19). In a much cited passage from his path-breaking essay on the Metaphysical poets, Eliot speaks of the poet's mind as constituting new wholes out of experiences (falling in love, reading Spinoza, hearing the sound of the typewriter, smelling the dinner cooking) which for non-poetic minds are quite distinct. It is this capacity to fuse a range of diffuse sensations into a complex whole which distinguishes the poet, not the nature or value of the sensations themselves. Since this process nowhere engages conscious choice, there may be some unconscious significance in Eliot's choice of the name Spinoza here, a philosopher renowned for his implacable determinism. The poet's mind is like a catalyst in a chemical experiment: in fusing certain gases to form a compound, it remains neutral, inert and unaltered in itself.

There is a politics behind this poetics. Between the Romantics and the modernists lies a historic change in the whole notion of subjectivity. The Romantics lived through an age of industrial and political revolution, which called for free, self-determining individuals who could forge their own history; by the early twentieth century, with its faceless bureaucracies and

anonymous corporations, these men and women have become the passive subjects of a more impersonal civilisation. Yet in poetry, if not in society as a whole, it is an impersonality of which Eliot approves. It is an antidote to the Romantic fantasy that at the nub of the world lies a self which is potentially boundless in scope – a daydream typical of the United States on which Eliot turned his back, with its 'I can be anything I want to be' delusions of grandeur. As a conservative Christian, he regards human beings as limited, defective creatures, who can thrive only if they are rigorously disciplined. Order must be elevated over freedom, which is to say conservatism over liberalism. Rootedness is preferable to restless enterprise. Humility is a cure for the hubris of the modern self. Tradition, orthodoxy and convention must curb a wayward individualism which can see no further than its own selfish interests.

It is this individualism which Eliot has constantly in his sights, whether he calls it liberalism, Protestantism, Romanticism, Whiggery, humanism, freethinking, moral relativism, the cult of personality or the 'inner voice' of the solitary individual conscience. 'What is disastrous', he declares in *After Strange Gods*, 'is that the writer should deliberately give rein to his "individuality", that he should even cultivate his difference from others; and that his readers should cherish the author of genius, not in spite of his deviations from the inherited wisdom of the race, but because of them' (ASG, p. 33). One should note, however, that *After Strange Gods* is one of the most hard-line of all his critical writings, full of dyspeptic remarks like 'a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated' (ASG, p. 20) and (in what sounds more like a tone of regret than relief) 'social classes, as distinct from economic classes, hardly exist today' (ASG, p. 19). One commentator, hardly noted for his radicalism, describes the book as 'half-demented',[8] while Eliot himself remarked to William Empson that he was 'very sick in soul' when he wrote it.

We have seen already that as an émigré in Europe, in flight among other things from American Puritanism's too robust sense of self, Eliot was sceptical of the unified ego in its search to subjugate the world. In the form of the middle-class industrial

such inquiries. Both the form and content of literary works are bound up with their specific time and place.

This is not in his view to license a sociological criticism. Conservatives have commonly found sociology distasteful, and in Eliot's day a literary criticism which took it seriously would probably stem from the Marxist camp. Nor, he insists, should one overlook the eternal, imperishable elements in art. Even so, he speaks like any Marxist of Renaissance art as being shaped to its roots by the rise of a new social class, and claims that the function of poetry alters along with changes in society. So does the nature of wit, a faculty illustrated at its finest for Eliot by the work of the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell. A comment of his on the peculiar quality of Marvell's verse – 'a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace' (SE, p. 293) – has justly entered the collective literary consciousness. Wit he describes as a combination of levity and seriousness, the product of a mind rich in generations of experience. It is true that his historical approach to literature is alarmingly broad-brush: the so-called dissociation of sensibility, a doctrine we shall be looking at later, 'has something to do with the Civil War' (OPP, p. 173), a proposition which would be unlikely to swing one a place to read history at Harvard. Literature's fall from grace coincides with a conflict in which, in Eliot's opinion, the wrong side won. His historical commentary consists largely in a series of grandiose generalities, whereas his critical observations are for the most part delicate and precise. Witness, for example, his remark that 'Marlowe gets into blank verse the melody of Spenser, and he gets a new driving power by reinforcing the sentence period against the line period' (SE, p. 76). This is the comment of a master craftsman, not simply of an academic critic.

'Any radical change in poetic form', Eliot writes, 'is likely to be the symptom of some very much deeper change in society and the individual' (UPUC, p. 75). Poetic form is not simply 'aesthetic' but social and historical through and through. Raymond Williams, as we shall see later, argues just the same. Conventions in art reflect common agreements in society. Only in a close-knit, homogeneous society, Eliot claims, will you find

the development of intricate formal patterns, as a common set of values gives rise to certain parallels and symmetries. A literary form like the Shakespearian sonnet embodies a definitive way of thinking and feeling, and forms of thought and feeling are anchored in the social conditions of their time. A different metre represents a different mode of thought. Form and content are mutually determining.

It is an odd feature of Eliot's criticism that though as a classicist he advocates impersonality, he consistently places feeling at the centre of a poem, in the manner of the Romanticism of which he is so distrustful. 'What every poet starts from', he declares, 'is his own emotions' (SE, p. 137). It is hard to see how this is true of the *Iliad* or Pope's *Essay on Man*. Not all literature can be modelled on the lyric. It is just as doubtful that (as Eliot argues) Shakespeare's artistic evolution is based on his degree of emotional maturity at any given time, which supposedly determines his choice of theme, dramatic form and poetic technique. If the two cases (impersonality and the central role of feeling) can be reconciled, it is largely because the task of the poet is to impersonalise his or her emotions rather than lend them direct expression. 'The emotion of art', Eliot informs us, 'is impersonal' (SE, p. 22). Once the poet has found the appropriate words for his or her state of feeling, that emotional condition disappears, to be replaced by the poem itself. The poet is preoccupied with 'the struggle to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal' (SE, p. 137). (One wonders why it is agony the poet starts from, rather than, say, rancour or exuberance.) There is a hint of what Freud would call 'sublimation' here, as one's everyday tribulations are raised to a loftier level, and what is distressing in life becomes delectable in art. There is also a sense of the poem as a kind of therapy, or alternatively as a way of coping with one's feelings by evading them. Sublimation for Freud is a form of repression.

The philosopher Bradley also views states of consciousness as impersonal. (It is, incidentally, typical of the cordial climate of Oxford University that though Eliot worked on Bradley, who was

then still alive, at the philosopher's own small college, the two men never actually met. But this may be partly because Bradley was a nocturnal animal.) In Bradley's view, the subjective and objective are aspects of a single reality, with a notably fluid frontier between them. We can identify states of feelings only by reference to the objects with which they are bound up; and if this is so, then there is a sense in which our emotions and experiences are 'in' the world rather than simply in us. Conversely, objects are reducible to the relations between different states of consciousness. It is on this idea that Eliot draws for another of his celebrated doctrines, the so-called objective correlative. In an essay on *Hamlet* he writes:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (SE, p. 145)

Emotion finds its way into poetry only indirectly, crystallised in a set of external situations which act as code or shorthand for inner ones. Perhaps this is because spontaneous lyrical effusions would strike hard-boiled modern readers as embarrassingly naive, rather as a poem which explicitly tried to teach them something might seem objectionable. But it is also because poetry for Eliot, being an escape from personality, is necessarily a flight from feeling, not an outpouring of it. This is one reason why the concept of sincerity has little place in his criticism. There is also something rather English about the idea that one does not wear one's emotions on one's sleeve, and Eliot was English in almost everything except the fact that he was American.

Object and emotion are fused together in poetry, as they are in the work of Bradley. Yet for Bradley the relation between subject and object is an 'internal' or necessary one, whereas there is something slightly strange about Eliot's use of the

phrase '*which shall be* the formula of that particular emotion'. One might take it to suggest a somewhat arbitrary connection between subject and object – one which the poet legislates into existence, as though forging a special contract between himself and the reader. Yet it would be curious to say 'whenever you come across water imagery, think of envy'. There is a necessary rather than contingent link between most of our states of feeling and our 'external' speech or behaviour, so that (for example) we learn the concept of pain by becoming familiar with how people in pain typically speak and behave. If there were no such necessary relations – if everyone who was in a blind panic behaved quite differently from everyone else in the same state – it would be hard for small children to learn the language of feeling.

Eliot finds *Hamlet* an artistic failure because the hero's state of mind lacks an adequate objective correlative, which is a fancy way of saying that his spiritual torment seems to have no sufficient cause. His emotion is in excess of the facts as they appear. This, to be sure, is not an unusual situation: 'The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known' (SE, p. 146). In fact, for Sigmund Freud the name of this condition is desire, which is always in excess of any specific goal. Melancholy, Freud comments, is mourning without an object. One might even call this surplus subjectivity itself. It is not clear, however, why one cannot turn this situation to poetic advantage, rather than censure it as a literary defect. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', in which the speaker's feelings appear to lack a determinate cause or object, resisting all attempts to formulate them, might be thought a peculiarly fine example of it.

In general, however, Eliot prefers his subjects and objects to coalesce into seamless chunks of experience. For all his admiration for Baudelaire's work, he finds that 'the content of feeling (in it) is constantly bursting the receptacle' (SE, p. 424), so that the mismatch between subject and object becomes a fissure between content and form. Subjective emotion or experience represents the content of a work, while form is the

poet's way of crafting an impersonal object out of it. By contrast, F.H. Bradley's prose style is praised for being perfectly matched to the content of his thought, so that the philosopher's own writing is an example of what it argues for. In the prose of the early-modern cleric Lancelot Andrewes, the emotions are in Eliot's view wholly contained in and explained by the subjects on which the author meditates. Another aspect of this unity of form and content is that sound and sense in poetry must pull together, as in Eliot's view they conspicuously fail to do in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In truly accomplished poetry, the music is inseparable from the meaning, whereas in the grand Miltonic style the two seem to move at different levels.

'It may be, as I have read', Eliot writes in *On Poetry and Poets*, 'that there is a dramatic element in much of my early work' (OPP, p. 98). It is typical of his non-proprietorial stance to his own verse that he should pick up this fact from the critics, or at least that he should pretend to. (Once more, there is probably some puckish humour afoot here.) Critics can tell you what your poems are about, or what qualities they reveal. One reason why Eliot is so airily agnostic about what a poem means, including those he has written himself, is that he does not regard meaning as fundamental to poetry. He is, he confesses, devoted to a good deal of poetry which he doesn't fully understand, or which at first reading he didn't grasp at all. He was, for example, enchanted by reading Dante in the original even before he could understand Italian. Poetry can communicate before it is comprehended. Meaning in a poem, he declares in a wonderfully apposite image, is like the piece of meat the burglar throws to the house dog to keep it quiet while he goes about his stealthy business. The dog here is the reader and the burglar the poet; and the latter's task is to distract readers with some readily consumable meaning while he proceeds to raid their unconscious.

It is ironic that Eliot is often regarded as an 'intellectual' poet, no doubt because so many of his poems are difficult to decipher. But obscurity and intellectualism are not the same thing. Dylan Thomas is obscure, but his work is hardly packed

example, the scholarly business of tracking down allusions and explicating difficult passages. The Notes to *The Waste Land* purport to do just this, but it is now generally accepted that they are there mostly to fill in a few blank pages. Conscious meaning is not the issue – indeed, readers may well be understanding a poem at some unconscious level whether they know it or not. It is welcome news to the student who timorously opens Pound's *Cantos* or the poems of Paul Celan.

The idea of poetic impersonality is closely related to Eliot's self-declared classicism. Classicism is in general less subject-centred than Romanticism. The classic in Eliot's view is not in the first place the work of an individual genius. It is rather a piece of literary art which is resonant of a specific civilisation – one whose language gives voice to a particular culture and history at the peak of its maturity. The unique genius which produces it is not that of an individual author but the spirit of a particular age and a particular people. Virgil's greatness springs from his place in the history of the Roman Empire, as well as in the evolution of the Latin language. The classical work brings a national language to a point of perfection, and its ability to do so, ironically, is what makes its appeal so universal. If works of this kind transcend their historical moment, they do so by belonging to it so intimately. Eliot speaks of reading the ancient Greek poet Sappho and feeling the 'spark which can leap across those 2,500 years' (OPP, p. 131). A classical age is one of stability, shared belief, common standards and subtle shades of feeling. The world in Virgil's view is characterised by order, equipoise and civility, and so must be the poetry which portrays it. The closest English literature comes to a classical period is the eighteenth century, not least in the poetry of Alexander Pope; but the range of feeling of the age is too constricted for Eliot's taste, lacking the amplitude and versatility of the genuine classic. The period suggests a certain feebleness of spirit, and Eliot is notably lukewarm about even its most exemplary literary art.

There is, however, a problem here. A classical civilisation represents Eliot's social and cultural ideal, and the classical

author who moulds his mind most deeply is Dante. Yet though he produces a stunning pastiche of Dante's verse in a passage in *Four Quartets*, the influence is strictly limited when it comes to the composition of his own work. There are two reasons why this is so. If the classical work thrives on shared values and standards, the liberal pluralism which Eliot finds so displeasing in modern society means that there can be precious little of this. Poets can no longer assume that they and their readers share the same sensibility. There is no longer a community of meaning and belief. At the same time, if a classic is to capture the spirit of an entire civilisation, it must be in touch with its common life and language. Poetic discourse should not be identical with daily speech, but it should display the finest virtues of prose, which brings it close to the everyday. But to stay faithful to the common life and language of early twentieth-century Europe involves registering a sterility and spiritual devastation which is nearer to Baudelaire than to Dante. It is thus that Eliot announces that the modern poet must see not only the beauty and the glory but also the boredom and the horror of human existence.

For Eliot to be loyal to one criterion of a classic, then, is to flout certain others: order, balance, harmony, nobility and the like. It means producing a poetry marked by spiritual disorder, sordid imagery, broken rhythms, banal snatches of speech and barren inner landscapes. It was from Baudelaire, Eliot tells us, that he learned that the poet's business was to make poetry out of the unpoetical. Order and harmony can be hinted at only obliquely, either by dim allusion, ironic juxtaposition or (as in *The Waste Land*) through a mythological subtext which intimates the possibility of regeneration. Baudelaire, Eliot remarks, draws some of his most striking imagery from the common life, but at the same time makes that life gesture to something more than itself. It is a familiar strategy in his own early poetry. By presenting a situation in all its squalor, you can suggest the need to transcend it without having to spell out an alternative, which might demand a verse with too obvious designs on the reader. It is not until *Four Quartets* that this negative form of transcendence

sensibility' (SE, p. 275) than he is, say, in his cosmological beliefs or theological idiosyncrasies. In this sense, his criticism belongs to a body of twentieth-century writing, one which stretches from I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis and George Orwell to Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, which seeks to detect in the quality of language the quality of the civilisation from which it springs. It is a distinctively English preoccupation. Eliot's interest is not so much in what a poem says – indeed, he is often remarkably indifferent to what we normally call content – as with the 'structure of emotions' it embodies. We shall see later that the phrase 'structure of feeling' is central to the criticism of Raymond Williams, an adversary of Eliot in most other respects. What is at stake for both critics is not some shapeless sprawl of emotion but precisely organised patterns of feeling. It is a question of what Eliot calls a 'logic of sensibility' (SE, p. 269).

The home of feeling is language, at least when it comes to poetry. Language, writes Raymond Williams, 'is as much the record of the history of a people as political institutions and religions and philosophical modes'.[10] The task of the poet for Eliot is not quite to purify the language of the tribe, as Mallarmé proposes, but to preserve and enrich it so that it can offer a more sensitive, diverse range of tone and feeling. Language is like a living organism which is ceaselessly mutating as well as constantly being corroded, and the literary artist is engaged in an endless battle against this deterioration, as *Four Quartets* makes clear. One reason why a language declines as it evolves is because it offers only a limited range of literary possibilities, many of which will already have been exploited by past authors. Every modern writer is in this sense belated. So though language is the poet's medium, it is also his or her antagonist. At moments of seismic historical change, we need a form of speech which is 'struggling to digest and accept new objects, new feelings, new aspects, as, for instance, the prose of Mr James Joyce or the earlier Conrad' (SE, p. 327). In Eliot's own lifetime, the name of this upheaval is modernism, and only modesty forbids him from adding his own name to those of the authors he mentions. Yet though forms need to be broken and refashioned from time to

time, language imposes its own laws and limits on such transformations, determining speech rhythms and sound patterns in a way which restricts the possibilities of innovation. We are the servants of our discourse, not its masters; and the poet is simply the instrument by which it may be bequeathed by one generation to the next in the sprightliest possible shape.

The verse of the era from Marlowe to Marvell has in Eliot's eyes a subtlety and complexity which remains unmatched. From there, however, it has been downhill all the way – or at least all the way until we arrive at Eliot himself and a clutch of his modernist colleagues. All ages may be corrupt, but linguistically speaking some are more corrupt than others. Blank verse degenerates from Shakespeare to Milton, becoming less capable of expressing shades of sense and intricacies of feeling. Milton, with his outlandish Latinisms, tortuous syntax, ritualised verse forms, remoteness from everyday speech and lack of sensuous specificity, wreaks a degree of damage on the English language from which it has yet to recover. He is a 'Chinese Wall' which blocks off our return to a time when we could feel our thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. Once again, it is not inconceivable that Eliot's hostility to this Puritan regicide is bound up with a dislike of his revolutionary politics. Yet here, too, form predominates over content. By the time of John Dryden, so Eliot declares with a typically magisterial flourish, 'the mind and sensibility of England has altered' (UPUC, p. 22). There is a decline in vigour from the writings of Montaigne to the style of Hobbes, and from there to what Eliot sees as the desiccated prose of Gibbon and Voltaire. Language and affect, however, are not always so closely coupled: in the eighteenth century, poetic diction becomes more urbane but the feeling it registers grows cruder, so that with poets like Thomas Gray and William Collins a sophistication still evident in the language has faded from the sensibility.

We are speaking, in other words, of what is probably Eliot's best-known article of faith: the 'dissociation of sensibility'. The idea was seized upon so eagerly by other critics that Eliot came to profess himself both bored and embarrassed by it. It is a


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breadth of knowledge remarkable, and his sensibility light years removed from that of the thin-blooded, straitjacketed verse he encountered on first coming to London. He moved from Missouri to Mayfair, literary Bolshevik to national institution, in a drastic shift of allegiance and identity; yet it is hard to shake off the suspicion that in all these roles he was a consummate performer, who, like the music-hall stars he admired, never ceased to keep a canny eye on his effect on an audience, and who could always be relied upon to produce a stunning impersonation of himself.


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