



The critical revolution of T. S. Eliot

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FOUR years after the death of T. S. Eliot it is still not easy to assess that extraordinary and pervasive influence exercised on the literary mind of England, America and Europe over forty years by a sparse output of books and articles. To be sure, the 'modernism' of Eliot and Pound is no more an active movement in English poetry, but a phase of history; any revival since the war of modernist techniques and *vers libre* does not stem from that movement but represents a fresh exploration based on the study of the later Pound, William Carlos Williams and Lowell. A poet like Charles Tomlinson, clinging to a symbolist purity of structure and to the sophisticated long line and cadenced paragraph, is as interestingly out of place in the present generation as Henry Reed was in the previous one. The line of Eliot's critical thought is always drawn close to the predilections of his poetry. But even if we can look back on a finished achievement, in both his poetry and his criticism it is not one that lends itself easily to categories; to attempt to impose on it a theoretical pattern is to miss the whole tone of Eliot's mind, its fastidious sceptical touch and avoidance of premature dogmatic formulations. He disarmingly admits inconsistencies (in *The Music of Poetry*, for instance), but, in not subscribing to any general aesthetic theory, holds that such self-denial is a prerequisite of any true literary perception, since 'a system almost inevitably requires slight distortions and omissions'.¹

This essay is concerned not with extracting principles but with establishing the tone of Eliot's criticism. 'In my end is my beginning': it is necessary to go back to the germinal work, the essays collected in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), to find in a pure form the relation between what is said in his criticism and the authoritative personal tone; in this relation lies the secret of his compulsive success; to risk a generalization before coming to particular

¹ For *Lancelot Andrewes*, 1928, p. 58.

examples, one might say that the matter is that 'revaluation' within an accepted European pattern of reputations or concepts, which has subsequently become the stock method of literary inquiry in the Anglo-Saxon world, proliferating in thousands of articles. (The pace, of course, has now quickened: in 1966 *The Times* in its weekend review revalued the classic reputations of a decade ago.) The point about the revaluation is that although the opinion advanced may be novel or even revolutionary, the terms in which it is offered are those of public persuasion towards a shift of values within a recognized system. Thus there is a shock effect combined of trenchant orthodoxy and striking unorthodoxy: an acceptance of the traditional pre-eminence of Homer and Virgil will be found alongside the oblique disparagement of Milton. To describe it thus in terms of the effect on the reader may seem to be too hastily translating critical honesty and independence into purely rhetorical terms. However, the rhetorical element is important in these early essays. The quiet tone, precise but hedged with qualification, is the exact embodiment of the thought and a closer examination of it may lead us to look more closely at the thought (the emphatic precision where the very dryness is devastating extends even to the *obiter dicta*; one that I believe is genuine is a comment on the published progress of a certain theologian: 'If X's third book is to be half as good as his first, it will have to be three times as good as his second').

The influence both inside and outside the universities was felt very rapidly, as Mr George Watson has shown.¹ Eliot soon became the controlling mind behind both a distinctive school of criticism and the notable revival of criticism as such that has come about in our time. Mr James Reeves has recorded that when he went up to Cambridge in 1928 he was handed two books, *Poems 1909-1925* and *The Sacred Wood*, very much as 'the stranger who enters an Anglican church at service time is handed two books, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and *The Book of Common Prayer*'.²

In *The Sacred Wood* the ideas and style are already fully formed and the sense of speaking from an assured position is in the

¹ *Critical Quarterly*, vii, no. 4. Winter, 1965, pp. 328-37.

² *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium*, compiled by Richard March and Tambimuttu, 1948, p. 38.

young Eliot quite dauntingly middle-aged. Some critics, Coleridge for instance, give the sense of having begun an inquiry which has still a long way to run; the impression left by *The Sacred Wood* is that a completely honest and rigorous intellectual survey of the highest order has been carried out as it were off stage, and that what one is getting is not even a full report of the results, but simply the application of a few of the results, devastatingly and accurately, to certain current problems of literary value that have come in Eliot's way. The later essays do not develop this critical approach, and in them the stylistic impact is blurred rather than sharpened; they explain and extend certain features of the approach by moving further in the direction of an explicitly theological and sociological attitude to literature.

All the great English critics have been poets seeking to justify their own practice in poetry (F. R. Leavis is the outstanding exception). Eliot resembles Sidney, Dryden, Johnson and Wordsworth in this respect. To put it like this is perhaps to suggest too much that one activity was secondary to the other, that the criticism was a programme and the poetry a demonstration; better to say that the young Eliot's interest in what might be done in English poetry and how the language might be freshly used was at once so intense and so self-conscious that he was compelled both to write poems himself and to say what he was doing by implication in comment on works that appeared to him strikingly helpful, technically related to his own work, or strikingly illustrative of methods that seemed to him no longer profitable.

No clearly defined principles emerge from these essays: the tone is dry, ironic and cagey, as if full-blown theorizing is for fools: 'Poetry is a superior amusement: I do not mean an amusement for superior people. I call it an amusement . . . because if you call it anything else you are likely to call it something still more false'; 'the only cure for Romanticism is to analyse it'. There are no key phrases like Wordsworth's 'the real language of men', no wooing slogans like Arnold's 'the best that is known and thought in the world'. The manner is dry and reticent, and yet it is exciting because of a reserve of intellectual passion all the more impressive for being held back. And we feel that what is being held back is not so much a body of undeclared principles

as a bitterly acquired knowledge of the business of living, passion as well as intellect. It comes out in these words near the end of the essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things.' This is the inverted stance of the dandy who is too seriously involved in life to play with big ideas or big attitudes.

The impression gained from the tone predominates because in his handling of ideas Eliot is habitually cautious and evasive. In this he is the successor of Matthew Arnold, however temperamentally opposed the two may be. He describes Arnold as more a propagandist for criticism than a critic; to both the critical intelligence is not merely worthwhile but indispensable. They share a common aim: the defence of the rigorous intellectual analysis of artistic works in an England which is felt to be potentially hostile to such an approach. Philistinism in England is now quite dead and the cultural danger is the quite different one of skilful vulgarization with an eye to the market; but in 1920, sixty years after Arnold's fulminations, all the work was to do again. As Arnold had done, Eliot too in his later work moved towards a broader interest in the problems of culture and society. Both look at English attitudes ironically from a standpoint slightly withdrawn from English life. Arnold had taken the strain of the new learning of Europe in the early nineteenth century, German philosophy after Hegel and French positivism; he had made his pilgrimage to Paris. Eliot as a Europeanized American, more European than the Europeans, was prepared with his friend Ezra Pound, to lay siege to the literary capitals of the real Europe for the cause of an ideal Europe, a Europe of the mind.

A critical bridgehead had to be established in the face of the literary world; heterodox views had to be aired in such sacrosanct places as the review columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*. To make use of the title of a volume of Mr Leon Edel's life of Henry James, they laid deliberate siege to London, and London fell in the end, and after it the whole Anglo-Saxon literary and academic establishment. There were of course pockets of indignant resistance which remained to be mopped up at a late stage

of the campaign: Gavin Bone's donnish sneer at 'an American critic, a Mr Eliot' was published as late as 1942. To term Eliot's revaluation of current assumptions a revolution is not just to employ a loose word for any kind of major change in our view of literature: the essays of *The Sacred Wood* as they were published in *The Egoist* and *The Athenaeum* between 1917 and 1920 represent a deliberate seizure of power by a minority using infiltration rather than direct attack in the manner that Lenin and the Bolshevik leaders were using to seize power in the same years. Pound makes a remark in a letter which illustrates this sense of conspiracy; he is criticizing a rare failure of tone in an Eliot review where he had abandoned his habitual insinuation for a bludgeoning approach: 'That's not your style at all. You let *me* throw the bricks through the front window. You go in at the back door and take out the swag.'¹ The characteristic insinuating tone can be seen in the careful dropping of certain names on the margin of the main arguments of the essays. The disparaging references to Milton have become notorious, especially that to 'The Chinese wall' of his blank verse. The favourable references to Stendhal and the extremely hostile ones to Meredith might also be mentioned:

How astonishing it would be, if a man like Arnold had concerned himself with the art of the novel . . . had shown his contemporaries exactly why the author of *Amos Barton* is a more *serious* writer than Dickens, and why the author of *La Chartreuse de Parme* is more serious than either?

'The few people who talk intelligently about Stendhal and Flaubert and James' . . . 'the suspicion is in our breast that Mr Whibley might admire George Meredith'. 'The Charles Louis Philipps of English Literature are never done with, because there is no one to kill their reputations; we still hear that George Meredith is a master of prose, or even a profound philosopher'. These allusions, like those to the value of the experiments carried out in prose by Conrad and Joyce, are peripheral to the discussions of poetry which are the concern in the forefront of the essays. Faults and virtues are hinted at, but no full case, or even the suggestion of a critical case is made out; yet the allusions occur in the course of carefully reasoned arguments and therefore

¹ *Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. D. D. Page, 1950.

draw to themselves from the main argument some of its force and weight of judgement. Arnold had made the mistake, fatal in England, of arguing with his countrymen about religion before he had convinced them that his literary views were worth listening to; also he generalized too much, Eliot made neither of these mistakes. Instead he carried out a series of small-scale intellectual reassessments of particular writers so well that readers could fill in the gaps between these new landmarks for themselves, as one joins up the dots in a child's drawing-book, so that a whole new orientation of English literary tradition began to appear.

The stock assumptions which these reassessments were to undermine need not be summarized at length. They are lucidly analysed by Mr C. K. Stead in *The New Poetic* (1964). It is worth noticing, however, that though they derive from one strand of the late Romantic tradition, Eliot's critical thought follows on directly from another strand of the same tradition. Briefly, Eliot's criticism is directed against three sacred, no longer argued presuppositions of late nineteenth-century poetic mythology: first, the idea that only the genius, the great man, matters, and that he is solitary, owing nothing to the community of his fellows (Eliot calls this 'the perpetual heresy of English culture'). Arnold had talked in the same way of the folly of despising criticism as an activity of a lower order and of neglecting the need for a free current of ideas; Eliot follows Arnold's very phrasing closely, speaking of 'the rapid circulation of ideas'. He argues that we need second-order minds which are not the same as second-rate minds; the great man may be greater for a current of fresh ideas which only the second-order minds can maintain, and the poet who is less than great will certainly profit from that current. Here again the revolution has been accomplished, not of course entirely on account of Eliot's writings, but owing to impersonal pressures in our society and the advent of mass education. There is no lack now of second-order minds and our public arrangements are geared to the production of a great many more.

The second assumption, which is clearly linked with the first, is that the quality of a work of art is dependent on an unanalysable personal emotion which lies beyond intellectual discourse and which the beholder or audience shares with the artist. The third

assumption, which may seem superficially to be at odds with the second, is that poetry offers some form of uplift, consolation or philosophy or beautiful thoughts. A closer inspection will show us that the last two ideas really complement each other. If the poem as poem cannot be analysed, the ideas and moral attitudes that are taken up into it are at least detachable and give the critic something to talk about.

Eliot's criticism of all these presuppositions is that they draw the reader's attention away from the poetry itself to something else, the pleasant emotions generated in him by the poem, the interest of the personality he feels is being revealed to him, or some kind of ennobling statement about life which might range in value from a world-view to a Christmas-cracker motto. 'Honest criticism is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry.' All views are false which try to substitute something else for the poem. It is noticeable now that in arguing for the substantiality and indivisibility of poetry as a thing in itself Eliot is returning to the chief Romantic doctrine of poetic uniqueness in order to dismiss late aberrations of that doctrine. Thus on what I have crudely summarized as the second assumption to which he is hostile, his attitude is ambiguous: he holds with Coleridge and the Symbolists that the poem is an imaginative fusion reaching an effect that lies beyond personal associations and beyond the local or historical (lexical) meanings of words and phrases:

For the ordinary emotional person, experiencing a work of art, has a mixed critical and creative reaction. It is made up of comment and opinion, and also of new emotions which are vaguely applied to his own life. The sentimental person, in whom a work of art arouses all sorts of emotions which have nothing to do with that work of art whatever, but are accidents of personal association, is an incomplete artist. In the artist these suggestions . . . become fused with a multitude of other suggestions . . . and result in the production of a new object which is no longer personal.

The end of the enjoyment of poetry is a pure contemplation from which all the accidents of personal emotion are removed; thus we aim to see the object as it really is . . .

Here a view of the self-sufficiency of the art work which echoes symbolist theory is used to demolish the reliance of indefinable personal emotion derived from the same source.

In the first essays of *The Sacred Wood* Eliot describes 'The Perfect Critic' and then various contemporary 'Imperfect Critics'. All the latter are interested in something other than the poem as unique and independent object. Swinburne has taste and enthusiasm but stops short of analysing the special qualities which attract him. George Wyndham is a romantic aristocrat, and his intelligence is not sufficiently disinterested. In Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt the moralist precedes the critic of poetry. The good critic, on the other hand, is purely disinterested; there are not many specimens of him: Aristotle is one; Rémy de Gourmont is another (Eliot shares Arnold's predisposition to accept that they order these matters better in France).

The key words used in the passage characterizing the perfect critic are 'intelligence', 'feeling' and 'feelings', 'emotion', and 'sensitivity' (the latter less frequently). Combinations of these terms occur throughout the essays; they suggest that Eliot's hidden theory of poetry is based on a theory of human perception. In real life from moment to moment feeling (sensuous perception) and thought (reflection on it) come together in the continuous stream of consciousness, so that the poet looking faithfully at his experience can never separate thought and feeling (together they form his sensitivity); abstract thought comes later, after both the original experience and the fused thought resulting from it; so does emotion, for in Eliot's usage emotion is something that plays later about experience, not a part of it like the immediate feelings — it is both a luxury product and a stage on the road towards increasing indefiniteness. The followers of Hegel, for instance, 'have taken for granted that words have definite meanings, overlooking the tendency of words to become indefinite emotions'.

The classical severity of all this, the austere intellectual tone, is aimed at getting the critic away from emotions and personalities and abstract systems to the hard facts of real moments of perception. There is a paradox here: Eliot's intellectualism, his approval of the hard definite outline, as in the comedies of Ben Jonson or the novels of Stendhal, his distrust of the blurred emotion mediating between creation and the expression of personality which in his early period he detected in Meredith and

was later to condemn in Lawrence,¹ is directed to a conception of literature which is not intellectualistic, but which envisages a 'whole man' in whom thought, feeling and even muscular sensation may be blended; and in him also the final success of creation is not entirely under the control of the will: the good poet who has struggled for years to refine his technique may yet be surprised at what he finds himself saying. As in his poems, 'Mankind cannot bear very much reality', or 'You know and do not know what it is to act and suffer'.

Involuntary participation in a higher reality — this suggests the influence of Bradley, who also aspired to a form of thought which should be as direct as sensuous apprehension. Eliot's doctoral dissertation, 'Experience and Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley' was completed by 1916; Hugh Kenner and Kristian Smidt have drawn attention to Bradley as a more continuous influence than any poet who engaged Eliot's active interest. For Bradley sentience is primary for the understanding of reality, but for a complete understanding it must be transmuted:

. . . feeling and will must also be transmuted in this whole, into which thought has entered. Such a whole state would possess in a superior form that immediacy which we find (more or less) in feeling; and in this whole all divisions would be healed up. It would be experience entire, containing all elements in harmony.²

Eliot, like Bradley, can be elegantly dismissive of all facile solutions; he can combine scepticism about the possibility of human knowledge of reality with metaphysical depth in recognizing an ideal system behind appearances. Long before he associated himself with Christian belief and practice he demonstrated a belief in some ultimate understanding of experience — 'the notion of some infinitely gentle, Infinitely suffering thing'. The notion of understanding is transferred from the discursive reason to the creative perception of the artist. It was the liberal

¹ The chief indictment of Lawrence is in *After Strange Gods* (1934), pp. 58–61.

² F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, 1893, p. 172, quoted in Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, 1961, p. 163. Another phrase of Bradley from *The Principles of Logic*, 1883, 'a way of thinking in which the whole of reality was a system of its differences immanent in each difference', seems to bear directly on the treatment of moments of intense sensuous perception both in the early poems and the early essays.

illusion, condemned at Harvard by Irving Babbitt, in Paris by Charles Maurras and Lasserre, that man could hope to understand himself; his nature was discontinuous; thus the artist should cultivate impersonality to maintain the gap between 'the man who suffers and the mind which creates', and through the latter only understanding might come — but for others.

Intellectual precision is placed at the service of the primitive, the involuntary, the discontinuous and the immediate. The only good lines in the 'dreary sequence' of Drayton's sonnets in *Idea's Mirror* occur when he talks in terms of actuality:

Lastly, mine eyes amazedly have seen
Essex' great fall; Tyrone his peace to gain;
The quiet end of that long-living queen;
The king's fair entry, and our peace with Spain.

Salvation may be found through that 'bewildering minute', the contingent moment. Intelligence is not an abstract function set over against the senses and the emotions, but the effort of a sensibility to know itself. The passages in *The Sacred Wood* where the dry logic is relieved by a more emotive phrase are those that indicate the poet's power to look into the dark places of human life; such a phrase is 'looking into the Shadow' which evokes the difficulty of the life of reason. There may be in the phrase a mingled reminiscence of two titles of stories by Conrad — another explorer of the dimension of human life lying beyond the control of reason — *The Shadow Line* and *Heart of Darkness*; the latter provides an outstanding case of the split between conscious, personal, civilized intention and that assertion of the dark side of his nature which teaches man more about himself: 'Mistah Kurtz, he dead.'

The fullest statement of Eliot's view of the impersonal artist is found in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' which comes nearer than any of the other essays to a consistent formulation of ideas:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence: the historical

sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

The passages on the fusion of thought and feeling declare that only such 'felt thought' can do justice to the truth of individual moments of experience; in a similar manner, the historical sense which, though it is said to involve great labour, is clearly not the same as historical learning, can achieve a knowledge of the timeless through the understanding of particular historical moments.

Eliot's conception of tradition raises more difficulties than any other aspect of his view of literature. It is possible to see how it chimes in with his other ideas; it is especially helpful as a ballast for his view of the poet. If the poet is likely to be hamstrung by doctrinaire intentions, if even his attainment of greatness is a matter of hit and miss in particular historical circumstances, then it is necessary for the creator who must be so aware of imperfection to have an external standard: the impersonal artist takes his place in an impersonal order. It is equally easy to see that Eliot's 'simultaneous order' is not some vast extension of literary history at which literary historians can grind away linking up everything with influences and derivations. This is an aesthetic order. The past is altered by the present. By writing his early poems Eliot proved what Victorian clerical editors and others from Coleridge to Saintsbury had only amiably hinted, that Donne was a better poet and more at the centre of seventeenth-century tradition than had been generally accepted; at the same time Eliot's poetic talent was being directed by Donne and Laforgue. The difficulty begins when one starts to examine what a modern poet must actually do to fulfil Eliot's prescription. 'Great labour' — he must certainly read a lot, but how much? And what else must he do? What is the relation between the practical and the intuitive in the programme?

How are the less educated poets going to manage? Must one read Greek? The last essays in *The Sacred Wood* are on Blake and Dante respectively. Blake was a hard case for Eliot, Dante the

perfect case of a great poet profiting from tradition. It might be said that Dante's conception of an order, temporal and eternal, that he shared with Virgil and Statius as writers, comes nearer to Eliot's view than any other historical example. It might also be said that after forty years of Blake studies Eliot might more easily have been able to see Blake as a figure in a tradition, but it would not have been *the* tradition: Blake remains an obstinate nut to crack. The lifemanship of Eliot's own highbrow reviewer's learning with its casual references to the mimes of Herondas (recently published) is enough to daunt the beginner: 'the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.' Quite apart from the question of learning, the whole line of argument presumes that a high degree of self-consciousness is an advantage or even a necessity for the poet. There are some poems written in the twenties and thirties in which the poet appears to be asking the question, 'What would Donne-Eliot do here?' Ronald Bottrall, even Empson at times, seem to be deflected from the experience of the poem in this manner. We may suspect that the mind of Europe has had much to answer for, including the scanty output of some original talents.

The poet, Eliot says, must be aware of the main current, and this will not flow through the most distinguished historical reputations; art does not improve, but the material available to the artist alters as there becomes more to look back on: 'Someone said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know.' It is not clear here whether Eliot thinks the poet must always be in the position of having an increasingly large available past of thought and literature or whether this is a special crisis of the twentieth century. The latter seems more likely,¹ availability in a liberal, internationalized epoch in which cultural communication through both time and space has become highly organized and the 'imaginary museum' extended to all the arts. Eliot does not take much account of how in other periods poets might have been able to work with much less self-consciousness about the past. To be sure, he does show some recognition of this in the essay 'The Possibility of a Poetic Drama' where he discusses the

¹ Cf. the reference to Maritain on Picasso's 'fearful progress in self-consciousness' in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1933, p. 121.

value of a conventional form like the Elizabethan blank verse drama for the writer, especially the minor writer. If there is no tradition, he says here, we lose our hold on the present; if there is no established form, the writer has to waste time and energy in hammering out a home-made form for himself. This kind of do-it-yourself carpentry is attributed to Wordsworth and Browning; perhaps the limitations of Eliot's knowledge of Romantic and nineteenth-century poetry betray him here: Wordsworth was making something new out of the eighteenth-century treatise poem and literary ballad, and if the dramatic monologue was home-made by Browning, it was already a tradition by the time Pound wrote *In Périgord* and Eliot himself wrote *Prufrock*.

Eliot concludes that though the Elizabethan age was in all other fields 'crude, pedantic, loutish', in comparison with France or Italy, in the drama alone were subtlety, consciousness [we note the word] and even an intellectual power achieved. 'To have given into one's hands a crude form capable of indefinite refinement, and to be the person to see the possibilities — Shakespeare was very fortunate.' Eliot as always moves from the conception of literary judgement that would see a poet in terms of intrinsic quality to one in which he is seen profiting by intelligence from the luck of a given situation. The next sentence is revealing in a melancholy way when one thinks of the author's subsequent career in the theatre: 'And it is perhaps the craving for some *donnée* which draws us on towards the present mirage of poetic drama.'

In preaching the advantages of a dominant form Eliot is thinking out afresh a position of Arnold, how the age can help the writer, Sophocles or Shakespeare, who is without much book-learning. But Arnold would not have thought of finding the source of life and vitality in a literary form; his point was that in the Elizabethan age 'society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive'. Eliot knew more of sixteenth-century thought and, as we know from 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', did not find it particularly fresh.

As for the objection that his programme demands too much learning for the modern poet and will end by turning him into a pedant, Eliot finally evades a straight answer that would state what he expects the honest minor poet actually to do by declaring

'Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweet for it'. Shakespeare, we are told, got more essential history from Plutarch than he could have obtained from the whole British Museum Reading Room. So the nature of the consciousness of the past remains largely undefined, while what is being stressed is its value in taking the poet outside himself and so assisting him to depersonalize his art. Therefore the second section of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' comes round again to discussing the impersonality of the artist. The good poet is not a more interesting personality or a man who has more to say than others; what marks him off is that his mind is a more finely-perfected medium into which all kinds of different feelings are free to enter into new combinations:

... when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide... the two gases form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but the more perfect the artist the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates...

The chemical analogy admirably conveys the dry antiseptic tone, what might be called the scientific precision of the early Eliot manner (though it is often distinct from a logically precise argument) if he had not already classed scientists with stock-brokers and politicians as 'the sort of emotional people who pride themselves on being unemotional'.

Given the impersonality of the poet, there must be a binding agent other than emotion or personal intention to bring about the fusion of the various elements. This is the 'objective correlative'. The idea is developed in the essay 'Hamlet and his Problems':

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.

This is anticipated in 'Tradition and Individual Talent', written several months earlier in 1919 than the Hamlet essay, where we

are told that the nightingale in Keate's ode acts as focus for a number of feelings some of which may have nothing to do with it. Thus one is driven to conclude that the concept of the objective correlative originates in order to fill the gap which has been there described between the mind that suffers and the mind that creates, to obviate the impression of a complete stasis, the impersonal artist frozen in the impersonal order of tradition. But if the correlative is a set of objects, a situation or a chain of events, it still remains to be operated in some manner by the conscious mind: the dynamic of the creative process still retreats before the reader, and this is not surprising; not surprising in any attempt at a theory of poetry, but especially not in Eliot, when he starts from the recognition of the equation between a partial, contingent individual contribution and a varying measure of sheer good luck.

The example that Eliot goes on to give of his impersonal, but fully focussed, poetic success is a passage from Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*:

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
 For doting on her beauty, though her death
 Shall be revenged after no common action.
 Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
 For thee? For thee does she undo herself?

Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
 For the poor benefit of a bewildering minute?
 Why does yon fellow falsify highways,
 And put his life between the judge's lips,
 To refine such a thing — keeps horse and men
 To beat their valours for her? . . .

It may be thought that his detailed exposition of this example is less convincing than the general idea of a focus or correlative, and does not wholly explain his choice of this particular passage:

. . . there is a combination of positive and negative emotions: an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it. This balance of contrasted emotion is in the dramatic situation to which the speech is pertinent, but that situation alone is inadequate to it . . . the whole effect, the dominant tone, is due to the fact that a number of floating feelings, having an affinity to this emotion by no means superficially evident, have combined with it to give us a new art emotion . . .

In the dramatic situation of Vindice meditating over his mistress's skull it is surely to be expected that a range of feelings connected with the contradictions of sensual attraction, human vitality and the finality of death, will be brought together. If Eliot's 'floating feelings' imply logically irrelevant thoughts that are somehow disciplined to the central emotion, it is difficult to agree in this context. In fact he appears to be describing his own poetry in a manner that almost convinces us we can read Tourneur like that. The blend of emotion here, sensuality and death, a sensibility equally fascinated by the beautiful and the ugly, is what we are familiar with from Eliot's own early poems (the very rhythms of this passage are echoed in the middle section of *Gerontion*, also published in 1920). It is the nature of the feelings combined, not the intensity which brings about the fusion, that Eliot is saluting in Tourneur; in spite of his careful analysis there is a concealed standard of approval based on a personal affinity.

The essays on particular poets, Jonson, Marlowe, Massinger in *The Sacred Wood*, and the subsequent ones in *Elizabethan Essays*, carry out the programme already discussed. Certain points and curves are plotted along the line of that subterranean, unhistorical tradition which is the true one for the poet. As with Arnold's 'touchstones', the plotting of the graph can be highly personal. The same intelligence and complete control of subject displayed in the poems and in the theoretical essays are applied to substantiating the practice of complexity. Hence the rehabilitation of Donne and the Metaphysicals.

Thus the reviewer's judgements, the hints, the comments on style, form and metre, valid as so many of them still seem and the basis for so much of our thinking about poetry, may be traced to an extremely personal and special epistemology. Great poetry is complex and impersonal, because the isolated moments making up contingent experience are complex structures of feelings in which perceiving subject and objective outer world merge in an impersonal order.

The great achievement of these essays, not approached by earlier critics, even by Johnson or Coleridge, is to define the individual quality of writers by close attention to the language of their poetry. Paradoxically, in spite of the impersonal programme, it is 'Jonson' or 'Massinger' that Eliot seems to catch at for us,

not a rounded off single work. The poet creates language and is renewed by it. When Eliot stabilized his own poetic style he became a less exciting critic. *The Sacred Wood* records the growth of a poet's mind. Language, form and metre have more life than the individual intention. The individual struggle with them can produce both despair and joy. Later in the *Quartets* Eliot is still meditating on language: the struggle with words will be decided by a complex of cultural forces of which the poet cannot foresee the outcome, and the weariness and pessimism arising from this are described in *East Coker*:

every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
 Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
 For the thing one no longer has to say . . . And so each venture
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling
 Undisciplined squads of emotion.

But there is also the occasional happy reward of the poet, when the words come together and make a significant point on the line of tradition. Every such point, or poem, is an end for something, and a beginning for something and someone else:

The end is where we start from. And every phrase
 The sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
 Taking its place to support the others,
 The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
 An easy commerce of the old and the new,
 The common word exact without vulgarity,
 The formal word precise but not pedantic,
 The complete consort dancing together
 Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
 Every poem an epitaph.