

# T. S. ELIOT AMONG THE PROPHETS?

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MR. T. S. Eliot has swept the world of the drama by storm, and captured the enthusiastic approval of the theatrical critics. Whatever we may say about the sanity of the poet, we stand with hats off before the genius of the drama. As we read *The Murder in the Cathedral* we pause in amazement, like the astonished watcher of the heavens when the new star swims into his ken.

But to most of us Mr. Eliot is still known chiefly as the poet, incomprehensible and audacious, stimulating and baffling, *sui generis*. There is no use disguising the fact that he lacks lucidity, and is no master of the popular gifts. "Influential" is the adjective which his fervent admirers are wont to use in designating his peculiar qualities, and they are at pains to emphasise the fact that his influence is admitted by the entire body of the literary intelligentsia—those few in the million whom heaven has endowed with the power of penetration and responsiveness. And this is as it should be, for few modern authors have found the critics more severe and unsympathetic; on the other hand, few have won more profound admiration, verging on adoration, amongst those who boast that peculiar type of superiority complex that revels in the bizarre, the uncanny, the chaotic features that so frequently announce the advent of the true genius in the literary world. And Mr. Eliot's admirers do not hesitate to rank him with the Edisons and Marconis, the Wrights and the Einsteins of the century.

But where does the average man stand? We poor mortals to whom the gods have grudgingly conceded an apologetic portion of the inferiority complex—how are we to class this poet of a new order, and what word shall we use to designate his worth? When we attempt to weigh him in the critical balances, we discover that we possess no system of measures commensurate with his literary abilities. We seem to need a new scale of measures, if we are to express a true evaluation of his work. Even the recognition of a fourth dimension—if such superintelligible dimensions are recognisable in the world of literature—would not suffice, for Mr. Eliot seems to move in a world of fifth, and even sixth, dimensions when he pours forth his turbulent and torrential thoughts.

That he is a poet of remarkable gifts, that he is a critic almost above criticism, that he is a superb dramatist—this goes without saying. By common consent we hail him amongst the great and

the wise. *Damnetur qui neget!*—Yet we do not leap to extremes of adulation for the editor of the *Criterion* at first sight. Indeed, for most of us the process of transition from darkness to light with Mr. Eliot's works is a slow and painful one; the progress from blank astonishment to calm recognition is marked by much sad disillusioning. This must be so, for in the case of most of us the intellectual light burns dim, and we are compelled to crave indulgence when we speak out our mind concerning the works of the gods. Other men take to Mr. Eliot's style as ducks take to the water. They hail him as one who talks in the language which they use in everyday life—for instance when they talk to their wives over a badly cooked dinner, or when they want to escape a curtain lecture. Just as an accurately keyed chord of the piano will vibrate to the tuning fork struck at a distance, so their thoughts vibrate to the stimulus of this new musician of the world of bards and singers. No one can be surprised if our author finds a heterogeneous following amongst our university undergraduates; for there is something luringly fashionable in acclaiming a writer so original, unique, regardless of the traditions of the past that he seems a likely convert to the Communism which they blazon without understanding and the Bolshevism which they extol without observing. But those of us who love our poets only when their music awakens heavenly echoes in our hearts, and when their words arouse an answering thought in our weary minds, and when their meaning flashes bright with the light of inspiring ideals till they become friends and counsellors and we walk with them as worthy teachers on the pilgrimage of life—we must admit that our approach to any sincere apprehension of the aim and teaching of Mr. Eliot has been a hard experience. When first we summoned up courage sufficient to plunge into the dark and forbidding currents of the *Wasteland*, we emerged breathless and crept to our literary clothing shivering and chilled to the bone. Between our chattering teeth we mumbled and spluttered,—“Poetry! . . . Incoherent! . . . Good heavens deliver us!”—And after warming our chilled frame at the genial fire of our Tennyson and Browning, and restoring our retarded circulation by the kindly warmth of Chaucer and Shakespeare, we laid aside our copy of the *Wasteland* on the topmost shelf of our library, resolved to bury in oblivion an experience so painful.

But that is not the end. Some unkind and evil spirit of literature lured us back to the study, whispering that we were guilty of some crime against the deities of literature if we left the *Wasteland* to the dust and the spiders. Almost before we realised what the

tempting sprite was about, we had taken down the discarded volume and were deep in an attempt to give it a second reading. But, alas! the perusal was not encouraging. . . . We closed the book and cautiously felt our heads with gentle fingers. Were we losing our reason?—Who was the nearest brain-specialist to whom we could appeal to prove that it was still safe for the public to leave us outside of “Colney Hatch”?—And yet we found we could still correctly name the articles of furniture in the room, and intelligently read at least the title of the book in our hands. The idea dawns that perhaps Mr. Eliot is playing a joke with his readers all the time. He must be fooling us—and probably enjoying the fun of it. We call to mind the story of Jerome K. Jerome inviting his friends to supper and posing to them the riddle “Why is a mouse when it sings?” All through the evening they struggled with the problem, sometimes catching a gleam of light, and then again lapsing into the mists of perplexity. Thus the evening passed and the puzzled friends departed under the shadow of the mystery; but next morning one of them was found swathed in wet rags, with feet in cold water, inanely repeating the riddle—“Why is a mouse when it sings?”—and in infinite pity the poser of the question flashed forth the illuminating solution, “The higher the fewer!”—“Yes”, we exclaimed, “Mr. Eliot has joined hands with Jerome K. Jerome!”—And yet—and yet—we are still haunted by the fact that Mr. Eliot is a great editor, an acknowledged thinker and an earnest man. Surely he means something! We banish our hesitation as to the sincerity of his intent, and grope again for the light that has been denied to us so far. “There must be answer to our doubt,” as said our poet, “could our dark wisdom find it out.” And so we return to our study of the *Wasteland* with a determination to penetrate to the pure gold beneath the surface. We exclaim, “We won’t be beaten”; and slowly we grope through the pages a second time, losing our way time after time like the blind man in the forest, groping back again by sound and touch to the beaten track. We reach the end and sit aghast at our own dulness, till aroused from stupor by the entrance of a friend who blurts—“By Jove, I thought you were dead, you look so ghastly. What is it, old man?”—Sadly we hand the book to him, muttering the expressive explanation from Shakespeare, “Words, words, words!”—“What words?” he asks; and as we bear him an ancient grudge for once having stolen a first prize for which we were contending in literature, we let him begin to read. Anon he closes the book with a wry face and laying it softly down, remarks, “Yes, old man, I can understand you must

feel a bit queer,"—and slips quietly from the darkened study. As my mind has become a perfect blank, there is scope for familiar passages from my favorite authors to creep into the void, and I recollect what Macaulay once said about the colours in the Turkey carpet and the words in Mr. Montgomery's poems:—rightly disposed the colours might make a picture—rightly disposed the words might make poetry—but as the words then stood, they presented no picture of aught in heaven above, or earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth. "That's not quite a fair comparison!" we exclaim, suddenly flaring up in defence of the maligned poets, both Montgomery and Eliot, "for there are lines that even we can understand." And we put our finger on the curiously playful quotation about Mrs. Porter and her daughter washing their feet in soda water.

"Good heavens!", exclaimed the friend, who was listening behind the door,—but I silenced his irrelevant interruption of the pathetic soda-water lyric with an impatient gesture, and turned to another page where stood the arresting words—

Out of the window perilously spread  
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays...

"Please! don't. . .", he said, covering his eyes.

"But", I protested, "that's realism. You can see what that means, surely. Even if the soda-water lyric is second-hand, it is vivid and intelligible. A man who can use such phrases must mean something by his lines. We must have another try. . . ." However, he left me there; and I lay back thinking—knowing he would be lured back to the strange stuff, just as I had been. There was something in those pages you simply could not keep away from, when once you had tasted them. Of course Mr. Eliot had something on his mind, only he didn't know how to get it off—some real contribution to make the world of letters. Half ashamed, yet honestly, I had to admit I was being won over to the side of his apologists. Of course, I was prepared to stand up to Mr. Eliot to the face, if need be, and roundly accuse him of neglect of the first canons of literature, with its demand for clear thinking and lucid exposition; and I have never gone back upon that first belief that resulted from my awakening powers of appreciation. Obscurity of expression is no prerogative of the superior intelligence. Obscurantism is not the hall mark of genius. Somehow we cannot forgive Mr. Eliot for such glaring flaws in the work of a literary artist. Or is that the right word to use?—Does Mr. Eliot venture to pose as an artist at all?—He is, we believe, amongst the classicists

in literature; yet we have never discovered a classicist who did not hanker after the romantics, nor for that matter a romantic who did not hark back to the forsaken classicism. And Mr. Eliot, classicist though he would claim to be, allows himself as much scope as almost any romantic in his balance between nature and art. Art is often conspicuously lacking in the extraordinary verse, the obtrusive metre, the baffling syllables, the descent to a bathos of language which is neither poetry nor prose. But what use attempting to tutor an expert iconoclast like the author of the *Wasteland*?—He would scorn such presumption as would dare to re-edit his medium of expression—it would be a case of Rymer rewriting Shakespeare—and he would probably counter the attempt by declaring like the author of "Pauline"—

So I will sing on—fast as fancies come—  
Rudely—the verse being as the mood it paints. . .

So what right have we to interfere? If, indeed, that be Mr. Eliot's attitude—a challenge to all the earlier canons of literature—then we cannot but pass on; for the born Bolshevik in the world of letters will never brook interference from a sworn Fascist. And we verily believe that here we have hit upon the right explanation. Mr. Eliot must be an intellectual Bolshevik. Other of his critics, discerning and sympathetic in their attitude, have assigned other reasons for the eccentricities of the fascinating writer and tantalising thinker. In an excellent brochure upon our author, Mr. Thomas McGreevy has pushed back the explanation to Mr. Eliot's American ancestry and his New England tradition. When we read such an explanation, we wonder just what Mr. McGreevy means by the term "American". Does not the population of that resourceful continent consist of unholy elements almost as varied as the constituents of the witches' brew in Macbeth—although admittedly of more angelic ingredients? The term "American" may be identical with the superiority complex, or it may stand for the sons of the Puritans and the protagonists of Liberty; it may equally well denote these who blend the worship of God and Mammon. Anyhow, Mr. McGreevy declares that we cannot hope to explain such a phenomenon as Mr. T. S. Eliot without taking full cognisance of his American background; to which he adds that it must be remembered that Mr. Eliot is in hot revolt against his Puritan tradition, having tacitly assumed that the whole pack of earlier beliefs and conventionalities is in full cry on his traces, compelling him to flee *ventre à terre* into the wilderness, where a man may speak the thing he will without let or hindrance. This critic,

moreover, defends the seriousness of Mr. Eliot, declaring that it is manifestly unfair to treat him like a kind of inspired idiot, just because he is an American born and bred; and he would not even permit us to set down Mr. Eliot's peculiarities to an element of humour, for he is convinced that the Americans do not possess humour—only wit. (Americans, take note!—Shade of Mark Twain, spare us.)

But we are getting away from Mr. Eliot. We are persuaded that he is striving to express a much needed revolt against the conventionalities and formalities which our generation has inherited from a Puritanism of which the corpse has long ago been disinfected and decently buried. But why, then, should he recoil to the opposite extreme? Is there no *via media*? Is Mr. Eliot the negative electricity to which Puritanism is the positive? If so, we understand why he has turned his back on the land of his nativity, fleeing eastward in spite of the wise men who always journey west, that he may find refuge as a naturalised Englishman and a devout Anglo-Catholic. Mr. Eliot now swears by London rather than New York, he rejoices in the gently flowing Thames rather than in Riverside Drive. So it is from teeming London's central roar that he derives his impressions of a Wasteland—a life of strenuous, hopeless monotony—a life that at times is libertine and sordid—a life that may be characterised as soulless. This life, which we presume he considers typical of our post-war civilisation, he attempts to throw upon the screen in swiftly recurring pictures in his unique, Bolshevik manner which is so provocative. Every fresh reading of the *Wasteland* impresses us increasingly with the extraordinary vividness and variety of those images. The pity of it is that they often flock upon us with such rapidity that one blurs the other, while at times they seem miles apart, coming upon us with utter lack of coherence. But what a mind, what breadth of reading, what versatility of thought Mr. Eliot displays! Thoughts from the writers of all ages flock in upon him as he writes, till he practises an almost unconscious plagiarism. But he makes no effort to let us know why he has enchained these wandering ghosts from the literary past, and impressed them to do service for his hidden meanings. He leaves them to announce their own origin, or to pass unrecognised, while the reader puzzles his brain in the effort to fit them into the literary cross-word puzzle, crying to the crowding thoughts and quotations "One at a time, gentlemen, one at a time!" As their multi-tongued voices strike upon his ears, he knows that they must mean something; they fit in somewhere in the jig-saw of the poem. The pity of it is that there seems to be a hopeless tangle of Australian comedy with tags from the classics; voices from

the Rhinelands hob-nob with Milton and Beaudelaire, Webster fraternises with Ezekiel, and Verlaine stumbles on the heels of Ovid and Shakespeare. And when the poet has exhausted himself in his polyglot finale, he can but gasp out the long lost yearning of the Upanishad for "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih." Here the reader is in full sympathy with the spent poet in the longing for "Peace, perfect peace in this dark world of sin,"—yet he cannot help feeling that some ancient prophet would very wisely break in and declare that the author is speaking "Peace, peace, where there is no peace."

Can it be that after all we have missed the author's main contention, that the only hope for a distorted and enervated world lies in the saving grace of spirituality—an honest, unconventional, efficient spirituality? We have often felt inclined to castigate Mr. Eliot on the ground that his poems fail to teach us anything, that he has no gospel to preach, that he knows of no remedy, that he is merely a crude spirit of revolt, wholly negative, frigid from lack of positive teaching. We are partly convinced now that such a judgment was uncharitable. "Now I change my mind, and partly credit things that do presage."

We cannot find the whole of Mr. Eliot in the *Wasteland*, even though that extraordinary work be his masterpiece and the supreme expression of his genius. We can more easily understand the *Hippotamus*, although we judge its bitter criticism of the conventional Church to be bordering on blasphemy, and we think that here Mr. Eliot may be emerging from his earlier obscurantism and breathlessness (genuine Browningsesque features) as he continues to write. The fifteen years that have elapsed since his masterpiece appeared have given him time to exercise self-restraint and to profit by an ever-widening experience of men and movements. Perhaps, then, we should not be surprised if it is only slowly that we can enter into a full grasp of the meaning of his works. He is not alone amongst the gods of literature in having a right to plead for a suspended judgment and a withheld criticism until we have laboriously familiarised ourselves with the tantalising works we venture to analyse. In the world of music did not Stravinsky require the same indulgence before he won a universal appreciation? We must walk warily, and not spurn a work because it fails at the outset to comply with our revered canons of poetic art. We must beware lest we expose ourselves to the opprobrium which fell to Jeffreys of the *Edinburgh Review* and to all of that ilk, when they curtly dismiss a new school of thought with a wave of the hand and a "This will never do!" But, with a long suffering concession to the idiosyncrasies and involutions of our poet, we may even admit the reasonableness of the contention that we should read his great work

at least thrice before passing judgment—once to catch the rhythm with open ear, once to master the sense with mind intent, and once to appreciate the theme with eager intelligence. Certainly there is reason in this, and the demand is not wholly novel, as all readers of *Sordello* will admit. But to whom shall we go if we desire an interpreter for the work we are considering? Whence shall we derive a just penetration into his alluring works? He himself admits their difficulties and refers the reader for elucidation to certain writers from whom he derived suggestions. Were there to appear a master in literature who could speak as an authoritative interpreter, he would save many a student's soul from death and cover a multitude of literary sins. But there is nothing like personal delving into the depths of a baffling author with the determination to find out for oneself the gold buried in the bowels of the earth. And there is gold enough within these repellently attractive works to justify endless deep delving. On the whole, the works of Mr. Eliot are amongst the most significant and amazing products of an age worn and disillusioned by the great conflict that rent the nations and brought to them no adequate recompense. Time alone will show whether Mr. Eliot has founded a new school of poetic thought and style; but time will scarcely have power enough to erase such work from the annals of enduring literature.

After all, who are we to sit in judgment on the gifted and the great—and Mr. Eliot must be classed amongst such? Friends of the poet will assuredly rebuke us for derogatory remarks, saying "Well, anyhow you have done your utmost", but we are comforted by the knowledge that even the angels could not have done better. Whether we become enthusiastic admirers of the poet or decline to give him a place in our literary pantheon must be, like the spelling of the average, a matter of personal judgment. Some of us like music and others prefer jazz, some revel in dancing while others are transported by the fox trot, some prefer art to cubism, literature to dadaism, poetry to free verse. Well, let them choose! It is all a matter of taste. But when all has been said, we are prepared to rank Mr. Eliot amongst the most influential, most suggestive, most idiosyncratic writers of the twentieth century; and for an estimate of his genius and an explanation of his aims we shall always hark back to the *Wasteland*.

Very soon the curtain will ring up on the author's latest drama; and when the "Murder in the Cathedral" holds the stage, we venture to predict that in the audience there will be not only critics, but admirers, and that the verdict of one and all will swell into such a volume of approval as few writers for the stage have been accorded since the days of the great war.