

**EZRA POUND  
& T. S. ELIOT**

*A LECTURE*

BY

**RICHARD ALDINGTON**

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE.

THE ensuing pages were put together about fifteen years ago as part of a series of lectures given at an Eastern American University. On the first day I was surprised to see that a habited nun was among the audience. By the merest chance I had in my script something in praise of the "ancient Catholic culture of Europe." Next day I had a row of nuns, who in their heavy clothes had to sit and listen to my prosing during a heat wave. One of the lectures—it may have been this one—was given in an official temperature of 98.9°. Why these religious came to listen to me instead of saving their souls I could never make out. Perhaps it was a penance. Anyway they were almost disconcertingly attentive and, I hope, not scandalised. They may have been. By that time I had long ago discovered that university lecture audiences know little and care less about literature, especially poetry. Of course, there is usually somebody who is anxious to get up and tell the room how many *umlauts* there are in Goethe's *Faust*, and somebody else who is a perfect lead-mine of information about the private lives of Wordsworth's maternal grandparents. But poetry . . . no. So to make the time pass I thought I might at least be a little light-hearted, even if it was at the expense of Two Great Poets of the age. Of course it won't do them any harm, and simply shows me up for what I am. At one time in my life I was considerably impressed by their writings, and then with growing experience came eventually to a point of view different from theirs. In that mood of independence I worked for some years to produce an anthology of English and American poetry, which to date has sold about 130,000 copies. I really owe them a considerable debt.

*Christmas 1953.*

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# EZRA POUND *and* T. S. ELIOT

by

RICHARD ALDINGTON

POETS of other epochs have had various kinds of audience for their works. Sometimes they were sung by minstrels before intoxicated warriors eager for praise or in the presence of mediaeval nobles who were themselves poets. In ancient Athens poets captured the drama when it was a religious ceremonial, and again in Renaissance Europe when it was the reverse. Many of the world's sacred books were composed by poets, while others sang ballads for the gross mobility. But the *reading* of poetry, especially new poetry, cannot have been widespread until about the beginning of the 19th century when poetry suddenly became commercially profitable—at least in England. Scott received 3000 gold guineas and upwards for his verse narratives. Byron, who at first took nothing for his poems, eventually received about £25,000 for his copyrights. During his vogue Tennyson is said to have earned about £4,000 a year from his poems. Kipling (I have been told) received over £10,000 in royalties on the American sales of his poems.

These are glittering statistics, but their day is over. It is true that some middle-class families of the backward sort still keep up the tradition that there should be some volumes of poetry about the house, but they mostly confine themselves to poets who were popular fifty or a hundred years ago and seldom waste money on contemporary poets—as their grandfathers and great-grandfathers evidently did. Whether the fault is with the poets or with the public I shall not attempt to determine. But the fact is that very, very few con-

temporary poets can hope for anything but modest sales unless they are killed in a war which needs advertising or are given the unique boost of being chosen as The Book of the Month.

Without dogmatizing, and as a purely personal impression, I should say that the audience of most poets today might reasonably be divided into the following classes, which I arrange in an ascending order of numerical importance :

- (1) Reviewers.
- (2) Other poets.
- (3) Readers of specialist journals devoted to poetry.
- (4) Professors of English and their more or less reluctant students.

The last class is so much larger and more important than the others that they need not be considered ; for, if every student of English were sufficiently enthusiastic to buy the poems of the contemporaries he is supposed to study, most of them would be able to look Eddy Guest in the eye without flinching. Unhappily this requisite for the sale of contemporary poets in large numbers does not exist.

This abandonment of the fireside and the maiden's bower for the lecture room, of the family circle for the student, has had mixed results. Since bourgeois prejudices need no longer be so timidly respected, there has been a welcome latitude of choice in both subject and expression. Since the young are really very sentimental, they dislike the expression of sentiment in the books they read—they don't mind religion but they can't stand love. Again they enjoy the idea of political violence. When Communism was fashionable among undergraduates, it was touching to see how many poets hastened to acquire the temporary religious faith of their potential audience. Indeed, with the seemingly praiseworthy object of keeping in touch with their only readers, some of them even became professors—which is surely what stylists call "the acid test," which turns blue poets red.

A bitter Irishman once said that Pound and Eliot are not so much poets *manqués* as professors *manqués*. This is quite unfair. Neither Eliot nor Pound is a poet *manqué*, and both would like to give the impression that if they chose they could be very successful professors.

Unlike most poets, Eliot is not only a competent but a brilliant lecturer. Pound, on the other hand, relies chiefly on a faulty memory, an almost non-existent power of improvisation and a cough.

Another result of this almost exclusive limitation of new poetry to university audiences is worth noting because it is peculiarly germane to the two writers under discussion—I refer to the fact that contemporary poets have to pretend either that they are immensely over-educated or that they have scarcely been educated at all. The reason is obvious. Everybody at a university is in a state of partial education, some indeed being almost half-educated; and according to the reaction set up in the mind of the student, education is either very important or very repulsive. To persons in this abnormal state of mind there would be nothing startling, nothing interesting, in a moderate and sensible use of a moderate and sensible education. To attract attention and to secure the suffrage of one of the two rival parties, the serious poet feels he must pretend either that he has scarcely read any books or that he has read practically all the kulchur books in the world.

We need not for the moment consider any further the poets who so disingenuously lay claim to the flattering distinction of universal ignorance, since the two poets on our operating table today evidently belong to the class who would at any rate prefer to be considered vastly over-educated. What is new about this is the self-conscious attitude, the feeling of superiority because of a comparative over-education, which after all is the essence of "highbrowism." But the phenomenon of the over-educated poet is not wholly new in our literature—for if a man happens to be both learned and a poet the accident cannot be avoided. The cases of Milton and Ben Jonson will at once occur to you. An even more perfect specimen for our purpose is the former Dean of St. Paul's, Dr. John Donne. Now, most of us can enjoy Donne's poetry more or less, but if we want to understand all his tropes, his allusions to Schoolmen and Fathers of the Church and utterly obsolete pseudo-scientists, we shall have to do a lot of mugging up of learned notes. To be forced to look up notes is a serious handicap to anyone's pleasure in reading poetry, even with the plausible excuse that the author has been

dead for three hundred years. But to publish a poem oneself with an apparatus of learned notes looks a little bit like pedantry. It is an ostentation, not so much of profound learning, as of the desire to appear learned.

Let us examine the case of Ezra Pound. Clearly there are a number of highly important and difficult subjects on which he considers himself entitled to hold forth with authority. He is for instance a master of musical theory and practice, as is proved by his treatise on George Antheil and his own operatic compositions. The science or prejudice of political economy, which has perplexed so many minds and led to so much bloodshed, holds no secrets for him ; and he has published a treatise on the subject which (I am told) has a large circulation in Alberta, Canada. From the literatures of the world Ezra Pound has selected just those authors we ought to read and has recommended them with exquisite urbanity. In his book *The Spirit of Romance*—or at least in that smaller part of it which is not occupied by prose translations of Dante taken from Dent's *Temple Classics*—he deals authoritatively with the poetry of Spain, Provence, Portugal, France and Italy, with a valuable excursus on the neo-Latin poetry of the Italians. His *Cathay* is translated from the Chinese ; and his *Propertius*, it is said, from the Latin. He has translated Arnaut Daniel from the Provençal and Guido Cavalcanti from the Italian. When these four works are subtracted from what it seems appropriate to call *Poundii Opera Omnia* (in verse or what might be) there is a considerable reduction in bulk. But, as Oscar Wilde told us, works of art are not measured by their area. On the other hand, although translation is a perfectly honourable if underpaid occupation and has occupied the leisure of other men of genius, it can hardly be taken into account when estimating a poet's contribution to *original* poetry. True, such universally read works as Pope's Homer and Fitzgerald's Omar have attained almost the fame of originals, partly or even chiefly because they are so unlike what they profess to translate. But though Pound has also, consciously or unconsciously, adopted this method he does not yet appear to have achieved an equivalent success. Perhaps time is needed for full justice to be done.

What remains after making these considerable reductions in bulk? At the outset of course we shall meet with the Cantos, or have them thrust upon us. I once listened to an eminent scholar discoursing on the (lost) pre-Christian sacrificial hymns of the ancient Armenians which he described as "probably obscene and certainly nonsensical," adding negligently, "like Ezra Pound's Cantos." This is one of those would-be witticisms of the learned which are certainly unfair yet one can hardly deny that the Cantos are at once chaotic and violent. Possibly the Cantos have a plan, but I have never found anyone who could tell me clearly what it is. The Author told me that Dante wrote the Divine Comedy, Balzac wrote the Human Comedy, and he (Pound) was writing the . . . I can't for the life of me remember what Comedy—it was not the Comedy of Errors? Certainly these pages include lapses into lucidity, flashes—alas! too brief—of real beauty, like the haphazard glitterings of a broken mirror. But do they justify one in urging the young, who might be more amusingly employed, to give the golden hours of youth to such a production? Can fragmentary and disconnected and rare excellencies make a great poem? The proper place for Pound's Cantos is in D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature*, unless indeed it fits better into his *Calamities of Authors*.

This limits our search for Pound, as original poet, to the single volume of collected short poems from which we have already deducted *Cathay*. And when we examine these poems attentively, what do we discover but the significant fact that a considerable number are translations or close adaptations of other poets. There are eight from Heine and six from the Greek anthology, while others are translated from Charles d'Orléans, Bertrand de Born, Propertius, du Bellay, Leopardi, the anonymous Seafarer, and so forth. Moreover, a much larger group of these poems is paraphrased or imitated from or based on the poems of other writers without acknowledgement or, at best, with only slight and indirect hints of derivation. On running over the book again I find this list of poets imitated: W. B. Yeats, Cino da Pistoia, Robert Browning, Bertrand de Born, François Villon, Dante, Pierre Vidal, Arnaut de Marvail, A. E. Housman, Catullus, Sappho, Albert Samain, Ibycus, Théophile Gautier, Walt Whitman, several Chinese Poets,

*Sumer is i-cumen in*, Voltaire, mediaeval poets of Provence, numerous modern French Symbolistes, Ronsard and Edmund Waller.

The names in the last sentence are noted down in the order in which they appear in the book, and doubtless a scholarly person would detect others which I have missed, though these seem more than enough. I am forced to add that I am quite unable to detect any principle, critical or otherwise, governing Pound's choice, or any coherent plan or meaning. On the contrary, the more one studies it the more the book displays little or nothing but a haphazard, desultory, disconnected reading in so many literatures that only a super-highbrow could be an expert in them all. The book is a junk-shop of more or less spurious artistic curios, or like one of those Munich exhibitions of modern German art where with astonishment and regret you behold the most singular and unfortunate blending of styles and influences—a Buddha executed in a style somewhere between Benvenuto Cellini and primitive African sculpture, or a painting labelled "Night Club" in which the influence of El Greco struggles with those of Rubens and the Magdalenian cave paintings at Altamira.

The effect of ill-digested scholarship on the fine arts has usually been unfortunate, and explains, though it does not justify, the recoil of artists to infantilism and false naïveté; and this is true also of poetry. What is the point of this tasteless hodge-podge, which has no root in life or human experience, except to show off a spurious erudition? Can it really be considered a contribution to modern poetry? And what a *snobisme de parvenu littéraire!* The only quality common to most of the poets imitated by Pound is their comparative rarity—they are all outside or on the fringe of the usual courses in English literature.

There is indeed much merit in making available for English and American readers such rare and difficult poets as Arnaut Daniel and Guido Cavalcanti, but they must not be foisted on the world as substitutes for the main current of European poetry. It is a perversity, a disguise for impotence; and the effort to impress the unwary while concealing the lack of creative power through this parade of out-of-the-way learning is only too obvious as soon as you begin to reflect. The intention as much as the deed betrays



the charlatan. When we find that so many of Pound's allegedly original poems are in fact based almost wholly on the work of other, chiefly little known poets, the natural impulse is to ask what he really has to say for himself, what new contribution, if any, has he made to our literature? I am not objecting to the scholarly poet, and as I have tried to show in another of these lectures, almost every good poet builds to some extent on his predecessors, but is it unjust to feel that a poet so wholly parasitic except for odd phrases and a few uninspired pieces of the Lustra kind must be comparatively negligible? It is one thing to raise a new palace of art on the foundations laid by the major poets; it is quite another thing to put up a row of huts with materials filched from their ruins.

May I put before you just one example of Pound's parasitism on an old poem? For the purpose I have chosen a poem which also inspired the Elizabethan, Thomas Campion, which gives us the opportunity for a double comparison. The original is a fragment from one of the elegies of Propertius, in which he beseeches the gods of the Underworld not to take to themselves his sick mistress. It is one of the minor masterpieces of Latin poetry, and just sufficiently off the worn trail of university classical study to be not wholly hackneyed. Characteristic of Pound's slap-dash methods is that he gives the wrong number and book of the elegy, that he evidently used an obsolete text since he reads "Thebae" for "Phoebi," and apparently mistook an ablative for a nominative in the first line of the ten he paraphrased or rather translated.

Probably most of you will remember Campion's poem, which has as its title the first words of the original, *Vobiscum est Iope*:

"When thou must home to shades of underground,  
And there arrived, a new admired guest,  
The beauteous spirits do engirt thee round,  
White Iope, blithe Helen and the rest,  
To hear the stories of thy finish'd love  
From that smooth tongue whose music hell can move;  
Then wilt thou speak of banqueting delights,  
Of masques and revels which sweet youth did make,  
Of tourneys and great challenges of knights,  
And all those triumphs for thy beauty's sake:  
When thou hast told these honours done to thee,  
Then tell, O tell, how thou didst murder me."

Except for the idea of his mistress being with other beautiful women in the underworld, this poem of Campion's owes little enough to Propertius, as the following bald prose version of the relevant lines will show:

"By thy clemency let her remain with us, Persephone, and do not be harsher, O husband of Persephone. There are so many thousands of beautiful women in the Underworld; let there be one at least on earth above! With you is Iope, with you white Tyro, with you is Europa and the impure Pasiphae; and all the beauties of old Troy and of Achaia, of the ruined kingdoms of Phoebus and Priam, and those who were numbered in Rome, all are dead; the greedy fire had them all."

Here is Pound's version:

"Here let thy clemency, Persephone, hold firm,  
Do thou, Pluto, bring here no greater harshness.  
So many thousand beauties are gone down to Avernus,  
Ye might let one remain above with us.

With you is Iope, with you the white-gleaming Tyro," etc.

The most ardent disciple of Pound could scarcely claim that the Latin poet's thought is given a new turn, as it was so charmingly by Campion, who owes few of his words to the original. And while Pound is almost painfully literal, we can hardly claim that he has improved on the Latin. And yet I can't help feeling that this little piece is the work of a poet. There is a grace in the rhythm and choice of language which puts it above the average attempt to reproduce the classics in English. At any rate I would urge on Pound's behalf that his words do suggest that the original is poetry; which cannot be said, for instance, of most of the translations in the Loeb classics, however scholarly they may be.

On the same page with the fragment from Propertius there appears a short poem with the Italian title, *Ballatetta*, which runs thus:

"The golden sunlight for an helm she beareth  
Who hath my heart in jurisdiction.  
In wild-wood never fawn nor fallow fareth  
So silent light; no gossamer is spun  
So delicate as she is, when the sun  
Drives the clear emeralds from the bended grasses  
Lest they should parch too swiftly, where she passes."

No original for the poem is admitted, and I am not able to state that one exists. Yet if it is not an actual translation of some minor poem of the school of Petrarch it is obviously inspired by that school, and it is not wholly unlike some of the derivative Elizabethan poems. Such exaggerated and time-worn conceits as the lady's hair being like sunlight, her tread like a deer's, herself light as gossamer, her feet searing the grass with desire—all these suggest some minor Italian. True, the conceit of the dew drops as emeralds is less hackneyed but then it is wholly untrue, as anyone will admit who has seen dew on grass. The hackneyed "diamond" is much nearer the fact.

The alliterative line :

" In wild-wood never fawn nor fallow fareth . . . "

would have charmed an Elizabethan Euphuist. Yet, once again, this little piece suggests that we have here a real poet hidden under rubbish hills of affectations and pretentiousness. Pound is really at his best in the penumbra of speech, where his reader is left just a little uncertain what the poet really meant to say and yet cannot help feeling that something rather beautiful has been said. One must never blame a poet for failing to live up to his poetic creed, and almost needless to say this is contrary to Pound's frenzied insistence that poetry must be "precise." As Plato long ago discovered, poets are not to be relied upon when they try to theorise about their methods, and it is always safer to attribute their happier results to divine inspiration.

In saying this I have particularly in mind a short poem of Pound's which I have always admired. It is rather mysteriously headed by the word "Doria" in Greek capitals. If this means anything it means "Doric" in the feminine singular and possibly is addressed to some particular person and intended to suggest a mood of Doric austerity.

" Be in me as the eternal moods  
of the bleak wind, and not  
As transient things are—  
gaiety of flowers.  
Have me in the strong loneliness  
of sunless cliffs," etc.

I am not entirely certain what the poet meant us to understand by his words, because the construction is elliptic, and at least two of the verbs, far from being "precise," are very vague indeed. But the language is beautiful and does suggest a mood of grave and dignified austerity, as of an unusually inspired oracle.

The adjectives "grave" and "dignified" hardly apply to those poems by Pound which he calls *Lustra*. They seem to be the least derivative of his short poems and show a sharp break with his earlier Pre-Raphaelite work, in that they are usually so loose in construction as to be indistinguishable from very ordinary prose, while they also abandon that grace of rhythm and language which is so pleasant in his early poems. These *Lustra* are marred by affectations and a pointless violence which seems to spring rather from petulance and impatience than from any intense indignation. Some of them are trivial beyond belief :

" A Cake of Soap  
See how it gleams in the sun  
Like the cheek of a Chesterton."

Almost anybody could have composed that, but most people would have refrained from publishing it, since there could be no motive for publication beyond a faint hope of annoying the two writers. The next poem begins : " Come, my songs, let us speak of perfection " ; and considering the context the reader is left wondering what, if anything, the poet means by " perfection."

If these *Lustra* were meant to be comments on actual life, in reaction from the literary echoes of Pound's previous work, they cannot be much praised for accurate observation. In one of them the poet, condescendingly using the royal or editorial " we," gracefully remarks :

" we were not exasperated with women,  
for the female is ductile."

which shows either an outrageous optimism or a very considerable lack of knowledge of post-Victorian females. Yet, in spite of his *Lustra*, Pound in 1919 did recapture his grace of language and rhythm in a poem which is not wholly original since it is based on Waller's

“Go, lovely rose,  
Tell her that wastes her time and me . . .”

which is in sharp but pleasant contrast to what goes immediately before. Here it is :

“Go, dumb-born book . . .”

By the way, for years I had thought the composite adjective “Dumb-born” was Pound’s invention. *Pereant qui nostra . . .* I found it only the other day in a sonnet of Michael Drayton. But to the poem :

“Go, dumb-born book,  
Tell her that sang me once that song of Lawes:  
Hadst thou but song  
As thou hast subjects known,  
Then were there cause in thee that should condone  
Even my faults that heavy upon me lie,  
And build her glories their longevity,” etc.

The combination of the Trecento canzone with Waller is made with much skill and taste, and the modern application is altogether graceful.

W. B. Yeats and his wife once dined with me at my hotel in Rapallo. Spaghetti was served, and a long thin lock of Yeats’s hair got into the corner of his mouth, while the rest of us watched with silent awe his efforts to swallow a bit of his own hair instead of the pasta. Giving up this hopeless task in dudgeon he suddenly turned to me and said in a deep voice:

“How do you account for Ezra?”

A startling but rhetorical question, for he at once went on to say how mysterious it was that a man who was “so distinguished” in most of his poems except *Lustra* should in real life be often so uncouth, so jarring. I left it a mystery, but only the other day I was telling this little anecdote to a young friend who asked:

“You mean to say neither of you knew the answer?”

“Yes.”

“Why, it’s perfectly simple. In real life Pound is himself—in his best poems he’s always someone else.”

Fortunately, I do not have to tackle the problem of Pound’s prose, though I must say I think he might have found a more attractive model than the Katzenjammer Twins.

At the risk of making a digression, though it is really strictly relevant to the matter in hand, I should like to put before you an observation which often occurred to me while I was re-reading the poets for the purpose of these lectures. One of the most original traits in poetry of the last century and a half is the ability to bring the reader directly into contact with the poet's own unique experience of the non-urban world. Some aspect of the natural world outside streets and suburbs unexpectedly encountered has been felt so vividly and expressed so sincerely that we pass beyond poetry as a beautiful arrangement of words to poetry as a communion of vital experience. A moment of time, a complex of lovely sensation lighted with thought, have been miraculously salvaged from the wreck of the past and kept intact for us.

In giving examples it is best to keep to what is best known. Everybody knows the passage in *The Prelude* where the young man rows out on the lake at night, and, as he rows, gradually a vast black mountain looms into his vision and seems to move slowly up the sky and finally to dominate the whole landscape. The experience is conveyed in words without literary prestige or pastiche, and that moment of distant time becomes part of our own lives. Less intensely Shelley's experience by the sea at Naples on a certain day in December 1818 is our own. There is no trick about it, but perhaps there is something a little mysterious. It seems to come spontaneously and almost unconsciously when an exceptionally sensitive person has been so deeply moved that a moment of time passes into a music of words which can evoke a similar though fainter response in others year after year. It is exactly the opposite of the slick laborious reporting of Zola which is the unacknowledged parent of social realism. Among the poets I have to discuss in these lectures, D. H. Lawrence and to a less extent H. D. have this gift of experiencing the non-human world, this ecstasy of things untouched by man. Eliot and Pound, on the other hand, are essentially poets of the library and of the town. I doubt if from his poems you would gather, what I from experience know to be the fact, that Eliot is very sensitive to the attraction of the non-human world. Yet in his poems and still more in Pound's I doubt if one would find a single original observation of non-

urban Nature, whereas they abound in Lawrence's poems. Of course I must not be understood to speak categorically, no doubt there are some instances to the contrary; but, upon the whole, with Eliot and Pound it is almost invariably a matter of literary reminiscence or urban phenomena or those secondary and abstract experiences of Nature which are now common property.

On the other hand they abound in fragmentary experiences of things urban and of social contacts, but as a rule how dim, how insignificant! Thus Pound feels there is sufficient excuse for a poem in the heart-shaking fact that an old gentleman "with beautiful manners" referred to Mrs. Humphrey Ward as "the great Mary" and added "Mr. Pound is shocked." (In Edwardian days the belly was politely called "the little Mary.") Again he has a poem about a very old lady who told him a pointless anecdote about Robert Browning, and remembered James Russell Lowell.

Eliot is far too clever in his dry calculating way ever to be trivial with Pound's almost endearing spontaneity of silliness. He is far too accomplished a trick-writer. As a rule when he introduces his urban trivialities, as he so frequently does, he is careful to place them in immediate contrast with some would-be profound remark, a trick he learned from one of his early admirations in verse, Jules Laforgue :

" Un couchant des Cosmogonies !  
Ah ! que la vie est quotidienne . . . "

Of course Eliot was quite right to admire Laforgue—he is a very nice poet indeed—but the formula of Eliot's irony is implicit in those two lines with their arbitrary juxtaposing of the grandiose and the trivial, or of the ideal and the squalid. Thus in one of his own French poems Eliot says:

" J'erre toujours de-ci, de-là  
A divers coups de tra là là  
De Damas jusqu'à Omaha."

It is young work—now, I think suppressed—and one must be tender to it, but there at the very outset you have Eliot's painfully literary quality and at the same time the determination to be as painfully "modern" and unromantic. Like Pound he is all

literary reminiscence. The first line evokes Verlaine's dead leaf . . .

“ Et je m'en vais  
Au vent mauvais  
Qui m'emporte  
Deçà, delà,  
Parcille à la  
Feuille mort.”

The second line recalls Arthur Rimbaud, and in the third line we have the sneering link up of “romantic” Damascus with Omaha which, in Carl Sandburg's words, “sweats to get the world a breakfast.” Even the title is from Laforgue.

Let us look at another early poem, that on the trivial subject of the youth who every evening brings his cousin Harriet her copy of the Boston Evening Transcript. What is the significance of the poem? None, except that this amateur newsboy turns out to be a very superior person wearily on nodding terms with the Duc de la Rochefoucauld. All that has any quality in the poems comes from Rochefoucauld. Again, we have the poem about Miss Nancy Elicott of New England who rode to hounds and smoked and danced, and her aunts were troubled. As the reader begins to wonder why he is presented with this Lustra-like social triviality, the words suddenly soar:

“ Upon the shelves kept watch  
Matthew and Waldo, guardians of the faith,  
The army of unalterable law.”

The dignified familiarity with Arnold and Emerson should not be overlooked, but the essential point to note is that the whole poem is quite insignificant except for the last line to which it obviously works up. This line has been much admired and quoted, and with reason; but it happens to be by George Meredith.

It does not seem possible to avoid the conclusion that Eliot is an intellectual snob appealing to an intellectually snobbish audience, in the sure and certain hope that if the poems were endorsed by the influential pundits nobody would dare to point out their essential sterility, their often trifling content, and above all that abuse of the unacknowledged quotation whereby Eliot became credited with what was not his—which is Poundism in another form. His trick



of violent contrast is skilfully used to flatter a special audience by bringing together the extremely high-brow and the extremely low-brow. This may be seen in *The Waste Land* as well as in most of the shorter poems. As a matter of fact, it is hardly correct to speak of *The Waste Land* as one poem. In his notes Eliot speaks of "the plan of this poem," but it is so tenuous as to be invisible except to the eye of faith, and repeated readings have not convinced me that it is anything more than five unrelated fragments of a poem.

Let us open *The Waste Land* in the middle of the second fragment, called *A Game of Chess*. At once we come upon an unacknowledged quotation from one of Ariel's songs in *The Tempest*: "Those are pearls that were his eyes." This line of poetry has no perceptible relation to the surrounding lines by Eliot but that of contrast. But here we have the high-brow "note," followed at once by the low-brow: ". . . that Shakespeherian rag." This is followed by a little dialogue between two neurasthenics which already gives a hint of Eliot's genuine dramatic gifts. Again we come on the violent obvious contrast. Three and a half lines about the pathetic though empty lives of the idle rich pass with no transitional link to an again dramatically skilful scene in a London pub—two drunken cockney women gabbling of false teeth and a husband returned from the war and the miseries of child-birth, while the chucker-out advantageously fills five lines by repeating five times at intervals the ritual "Hurry up, please, it's time." As a final trick and return, as it were, to the high-brow dominant, the fragment ends with the usual unacknowledged quotation—which at last unquestionably is poetry if only from the association—in this case Ophelia's "Good night, sweet ladies."

This obvious trick of gross alternating contrasts, so lacking in spontaneity, so *controués*, is sadly like the "art" of the minor musical composer who having little or no melodic invention tries to conceal the fact and to excite attention and applause by sudden and unmotivated transitions from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* and back again. It is something like a rationed Belshazzar's feast.

The next fragment starts off with a fine piece of preciousness:

"The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank."

I like that—it is a genuine piece of observation, not very original, to be sure, but true of the Thames backwater in autumn. But then within a few lines we have unacknowledged quotations or misquotations from Edmund Spenser (thrice repeated), the Bible, Shakespeare, and Paul Verlaine. The Verlaine line is from the Parsifal sonnet:

“ Et O ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole,”

which at one time was virtually *conspué* because of the heretical hiatus which is now considered a beauty. If you can accept the hiatus it is certainly a lovely line, but all Eliot can do with it, is to smear it by linking it to an obscene Australian marching song about Mrs. Porter who washed her dirty daughter in soda water—yet another quotation and another high-low-brow contrast.

I would not have you think that the unacknowledged quotation in modern poems should be entirely avoided, though I think Eliot's abuse of it has now made avoidance essential. Sparingly used, especially with a line everybody knew, it was an effective and legitimate device—though of course that begs the question of what “everybody” knows. And there can be no objection to a witty parody of the hackneyed second-rate line. I would go further, and say there may be occasions when the modern poet might legitimately use an unacknowledged quotation longer than a single line. But it is surely an abuse of public credulity when we find “critics” gravely admiring the profound and esoteric significance of a whole page of Murder in the Cathedral which is lifted without quotation marks from the Sherlock Holmes detective story, The Musgrave Ritual. (What on earth has this to do with Becket unless as a modern “duc dame”?) But when the unacknowledged quotation is abused as often as it is by Eliot it becomes a monotonous and at length annoying trick. An original writer should be able to express his thoughts in his own words and not always have to filch from his predecessors. And equally objectionable is the unacknowledged quotation of a really fine line among a number of quite undistinguished lines by the author, presumably to give the unsuspecting reader a vague impression that he is reading poetry, after all. Where it is necessary to make a special effect the

quotations are multiplied. Thus, at the end of *The Waste Land* we have Gérard de Nerval's "Le Prince d'Acquitaine à la tour abolie" mixed up with Swinburne and Dante! If you imagine that all readers of Eliot are perfectly aware of these transfers you greatly over-estimate their knowledge of poetry.

What is astonishing is that people who are supposed to know English and French poetry—and indeed European and classical poetry too—give Eliot credit for originality, when we might almost say that what is original in his poetry is not good, and what is good is not original. Turn to the section of his *Collected Poems*, headed *Ash Wednesday*. It begins thus:

" Because I do not hope to turn again  
Because I do not hope  
Because I do not hope to turn "

—lines, one would say, which required no particular gift to discover, and indeed fringe the ridiculous. But suddenly the fourth line soars into real poetry:

"Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope . . ."

which is taken, unacknowledged, from Shakespeare's sonnets. Having thus trapped the unwary reader into the sensation that he is reading poetry Eliot descends to the impressively platitudinous statement :

" Because I know that time is always time  
And place is always and only place " !

Who ever doubted it ?

As a matter of principle, it is unfair to quote against a poet his own critical pronouncements, but in one of his early and admirable critical essays Eliot made the striking phrase " the pernicious effect of emotion." I forget what point he was trying to make, no doubt a perfectly valid one, but I have often wondered that a poet should sincerely believe that emotion is " pernicious." So far as emotion in poetry is concerned I should say that the statement is falsified by nearly all great poetry since the ancient Egyptian Love Songs, the epics of Babylon, Homer, and the Hebrew Prophets. Frankly I think the reason for this strange statement is that Eliot himself is extremely deficient in capacity for feeling emotions unless they are

those of disgust, despair and suicidal impulse, which in real life has resulted in the *hara-kari* of Anglicanism.

Again, one cannot criticise a poet's work on the basis of what he chooses as an epigraph, but one can legitimately quote it as evidence of his state of mind, of the clue he wishes to give. Now the epigraph to *The Waste Land* is veiled in the obscurity of a learned language—or rather two learned languages—along with a dedication half-English and half-Italian, quoted from Dante who, I think, is the only Italian poet Eliot ever quotes. This epigraph is quoted from the *Satyricon* of Petronius, which dates from the time of Nero, and runs thus :

“ For with my own eyes at Cumae I saw the Sibyl hanging in a bottle, and when the boys said to her: ‘ What do you want, Sibyl ? ’ she replied: ‘ I want to die.’ ”

In the original the quotation is in Latin except for “ I want to die ” which is in Greek—and so Eliot quotes it. But adding this epigraph to the poem itself are we not justified in saying that *The Waste Land* is the expression of Eliot's disgust with life and his wish to be rid of it ? Perhaps the fact is irrelevant, but exactly that quotation from Petronius, in English, is to be found in the American edition of D. G. Rossetti's poems.

This tragical impulse to self-destruction infects Eliot's attitude to sexual love, though possibly there may be a certain amount of intellectual snobbery in despising an “ emotion ” which however “ pernicious ” has inspired so much of the best poetry. Apart from two really beautiful poems, which significantly are poems of renunciation, I think I am right in saying that Eliot never touches the theme of sexual love except in disparagement and mockery. This may be the result of an excess of sensibility and delicacy (pernicious emotion again !) but whatever the reason here are the facts.

In the original edition of *Ara vus Prec* (Provençal for *Je vous en prie !*) there was an English poem which Eliot later suppressed while retaining a shorter version in demotic French. This poem as it originally stood described a honeymoon couple in bed at Ravenna. They are hot and sweating and bitten by fleas. Only three miles off is Saint Apollinare in Classe, the great Byzantine church with its superb mosaics. The miseries of the couple are to be prolonged

from Padua to Milan, where they will find Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper and—a cheap restaurant. What the wife thought we are not told, but the husband's mind dwells on tips as he makes out their budget. Still, he remembers there is Saint Apollinare, "one of God's old unused factories." "O miserable condition of Humanity!" Was that all? It is the last degradation of the useless high-brow's self-disgust. Sometimes it becomes comical, as in this about the moon:

"A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,  
Her hand twists a paper rose,  
That smells of dust and Eau de Cologne,  
She is alone  
With all the old nocturnal smells."

Even the moon exposed to unpleasant "smells." It is such an exaggeration of disgust one laughs involuntarily. And is there not the pathos of involuntary confession in these words?

"I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:  
How should I use them for your closer contact?"

How indeed? But then: "Lucretia Borgia shall be my bride." She will certainly not be Griskin:

"Uncorseted, her friendly bust  
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss."

How absurd! Let us overlook the unlikely young woman in Sweeney Among the Nightingales who tries to sit on the man's knee, falls drunkenly to the floor, yawns and pulls up her stocking; and come back to The Waste Land, to the stenographer awaiting her young man (who naturally is "carbuncular") with a divan piled with "stockings, slippers, camisoles and stays"—one doesn't quite see why. Then comes the inevitable unacknowledged quotation, from Oliver Goldsmith this time:

"When lovely woman stoops to folly, and  
Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone . . ."

an almost puerile destructiveness and disgust. Perhaps the final touch of anti-sexual perversion comes when Eliot contrives to parody

one of Dante's most moving lines of tragical pathos and to give it an obscene twist. The pathetic lament of Madonna Pia, mingled with a reminiscence of the epitaph on Duns Scotus becomes:

“ Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew  
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees  
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.”

After that the only thing for us all to do now is to go home and commit suicide as painfully as possible.

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