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Edited by Jewel Spears Brooker

Excerpt

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PRUFROCK AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS
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PRUFROCK
AND
OTHER OBSERVATIONS

BY
T. S. ELIOT

THE EGOIST LTD
OAKLEY HOUSE, BLOOMSBURY STREET
LONDON
1917

Conrad Aiken.
“Esoteric Catholicity.”
Poetry Journal 5
(April 1916),
127–29.

[Review of *Catholic Anthology*]

As anthologies go nowadays, Mr. Pound’s *Catholic Anthology* is an interesting one.

[. . .]

Dull things there are, of course,—each critic will find his own—but for the present critic the *Catholic Anthology* seems worth while if only for the inclusion of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and the “Portrait of a Lady” by T. S. Eliot. These are remarkable. They are individual to a degree. Mr. Eliot uses free rhyme very effectively, often musically; and with the minimum of sacrifice to form conveys a maximum of atmosphere. Both poems are psychological character-studies, subtle to the verge of insoluble idiosyncrasy, introspective, self-gnawing. Those who are constitutionally afraid to analyze themselves, who do not think, who are not psychologically imaginative, will distrust and perhaps dislike them.

[. . .]

[A]ny anthology, which, like this, blows the horn of revolution in poetry, whether sound or unsound, is at the least certain to interest all poets, even the most conservative; and will, perhaps, be of value to them.

*Arthur Waugh.
“The New Poetry.”
Quarterly Review 226
(October 1916), 386.

[Review of *Catholic Anthology*]

Cleverness is, indeed, the pitfall of the New Poetry. There is no question about the ingenuity with which its varying moods are exploited, its elaborate symbolism evolved, and its sudden, disconcerting effects exploded upon the imagination. Swift, brilliant images break into the field of vision, scatter like rockets, and leave a trail of flying fire behind. But the general impression is momentary; there are moods and emotions, but no steady current of ideas behind them. Further, in their determination to surprise and even to puzzle at all costs, these young poets are continually forgetting that the first essence of poetry is beauty.

[. . .]

[T]he *Catholic Anthology* . . . apparently represents the very newest of all the new poetic movements of the day. This strange little volume bears upon its cover a geometrical device, suggesting that the material within holds the same relation to the art of poetry as the work of the Cubist school holds to the art of painting and design. The product of the volume is mainly American in origin, only one or two of the contributors being of indisputably English birth.

[. . .]

The reader will not have penetrated far . . . before he finds himself in the very stronghold of literary rebellion, if not of

anarchy. Mr. Orrick Johns may be allowed to speak for his colleagues, as well as for himself:

This is a song of youth,
 This is the cause of myself;
 I knew my father well and he was a
 fool . . .

[. . .]

And Mr. Ezra Pound takes up the parable in turn, in the same wooden prose, cut into battens:

Come, my songs, let us express our
 baser passions.
 Let us express our envy for the man
 with a steady job and no worry
 about the future.
 You are very idle, my songs . . .
 You will come to a very bad end.
 And I? I have gone half cracked.

It is not for his audience to contradict the poet, who for once may be allowed to pronounce his own literary epitaph. But this, it is to be noted, is the “poetry” that was to say nothing that might not be said “actually in life—under emotion,” the sort of emotion that settles down into the banality of a premature decrepitude:

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
 I shall wear the bottoms of my
 trousers rolled.
 Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare
 to eat a peach?
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and
 walk upon the beach.
 I have heard the mermaids singing,
 each to each.
 I do not think that they will sing to me.

Here, surely, is the reduction to absurdity of that school of literary license which, beginning with the declaration, “I knew my father well and he was a fool,” naturally proceeds to the convenient

assumption that everything which seemed wise and true to the father must inevitably be false and foolish to the son. Yet if the fruits of emancipation are to be recognized in the unmetrical, incoherent banalities of these literary “Cubists,” the state of Poetry is indeed threatened with anarchy which will end in something worse even than “red ruin and the breaking up of laws.” . . . [A] hint of warning may not be altogether out of place. It was a classic custom in the family hall, when the feast was at its height, to display a drunken slave among the sons of the household, to the end that they, being ashamed at the ignominious folly of his gesticulations, might determine never to be tempted into such a pitiable condition themselves. The custom had its advantages; for the wisdom of the younger generation was found to be fostered more surely by a single example than by a world of homily and precept.

*Ezra Pound.
 “Drunken Helots
 and Mr. Eliot.”
Egoist 4, no. 5
 (June 1917), 72–74.

Genius has I know not what peculiar property, its manifestations are various, but however diverse and dissimilar they may be, they have at least one property in common. It makes no difference in what art, in what mode, whether the most conservative, or the most ribald-revolutionary, or the most diffident; if in any land, or upon any floating deck over the ocean, or upon some newly contrapted craft in the aether, genius manifests itself, at once some elderly gentleman has a flux of bile from his liver; at once from the throne or the

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easy Cowperian sofa, or from the gutter, or from the economical press room there bursts a torrent of elderly words, splenetic, irrelevant, they form themselves instinctively into large phrases denouncing the inordinate product.

This peculiar kind of *rabbia* might almost be taken as the test of a work of art, mere talent seems incapable of exciting it. "You can't fool me, sir, you're a scoundrel," bawls the testy old gentleman.

Fortunately the days when "that very fiery particle" could be crushed out by the *Quarterly* are over, but it interests me, as an archaeologist, to note that the firm which no longer produces Byron, but rather memoirs, letters of the late Queen, etc., is still running a review, and that this review is still where it was in 1812, or whatever the year was; and that, not having an uneducated Keats to condemn, a certain Mr. Waugh is scolding about Mr. Eliot.

All I can find out, by asking questions concerning Mr. Waugh, is that he is "a very old chap," "a reviewer." From internal evidence we deduce that he is, like the rest of his generation of English *gens-de-lettres*, ignorant of Laforgue; of De Régnier's *Odelettes*; of his French contemporaries generally . . . This is by no means surprising. We are used to it from his "b'ilin'."

However, he outdoes himself, he calls Mr. Eliot a "drunken helot." So called they Anacreon in the days of his predecessors, but from the context in the *Quarterly* article I judge that Mr. Waugh does not intend the phrase as a compliment, he is trying to be abusive, and moreover, he in his limited way has succeeded.

Let us sample the works of the last "Drunken Helot." I shall call my next anthology "Drunken Helots" if I can find a dozen poems written half so well as the following: [quotation in full of "Conversation Galante."]

Our helot has a marvelous neatness. There is a comparable finesse in Laforgue's "Votre âme est affaire d'oculiste," but hardly in English verse.

Let us reconsider this drunkenness: [quotation in full of "La Figlia che Piange."]

And since when have helots taken to reading Dante and Marlowe? Since when have helots made a new music, a new refinement, a new method of turning old phrases into new by their aptness? However, the *Quarterly*, the century old, the venerable, the praeclarus, the voice of Gehova and Co., Sinai and 51A Albemarle Street, London, W.1, has pronounced this author a helot. They are all for an aristocracy made up of, possibly, Tennyson, Southey and Wordsworth, the flunkey, the dull and the duller. Let us sup with the helots. Or perhaps the good Waugh is a wag, perhaps he hears with the haspirate and wishes to pun on Mr. Heliot's name: a bright bit of syzygy.

I confess his type of mind puzzles me, there is no telling what he is up to.

I do not wish to misjudge him, this theory may be the correct one. You never can tell when old gentlemen grow facetious. He does not mention Mr. Eliot's name; he merely takes his lines and abuses them. The artful dodger, he didn't (*sotto voce* "he didn't want 'people' to know that Mr. Eliot was a poet").

The poem he chooses for malediction is the title poem, "Prufrock."

[Quotation of lines 49–72]

Let us leave the silly old Waugh. Mr. Eliot has made an advance on Browning. He has also made his *dramatis personae* contemporary and convincing. He has been an individual in his poems. I have read the contents of this book over and over, and with continued joy in the freshness, the humanity, the deep quiet culture. "I have tried to write of a few things that

really have moved me” is so far as I know, the sum of Mr. Eliot’s “poetic theory.” His practice has been a distinctive cadence, a personal modus of arrangement, remote origins in Elizabethan English and in the modern French masters, neither origin being sufficiently apparent to affect the personal quality. It is writing without pretense. Mr. Eliot at once takes rank with the five or six living poets whose English one can read with enjoyment.

[. . .]

The poetic mind leaps the gulf from the exterior world, the trivialities of Mr. Prufrock, diffident, ridiculous, in the drawing-room; Mr. Apollinax’s laughter “submarine and profound” transports him from the desiccated new-statesmanly atmosphere of Professor Channing-Cheetah’s. Mr. Eliot’s melody rushes out like the thought of Frigilion “among the birch-trees.” Mr. Waugh is my “bitten macaroon” at this festival.

**Times Literary Supplement* 805
 (21 June 1917), 299.

Mr. Eliot’s notion of poetry—he calls the “observations” poems—seems to be a purely analytical treatment, verging sometimes on the catalogue, of personal relations and environments, uninspired by any glimpse beyond them and untouched by any genuine rush of feeling. As, even on this basis, he remains frequently inarticulate, his “poems” will hardly be read by many with enjoyment. For the catalogue manner we may commend “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.”

[. . .]

Among other reminiscences which pass through the rhapsodist’s mind and which he thinks the public should know about, are “dust in crevices, / Smells of chestnuts in the streets, / And female smells in shuttered rooms, / And cigarettes in corridors / And cocktail smells in bars.”

The fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr. Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to anyone—even to himself. They certainly have no relation to “poetry,” and we only give an example because some of the pieces, he states, have appeared in a periodical which claims that word as its title.

**“Recent Verse.”
 Literary World* 83
 (5 July 1917), 107.

Mr. Eliot is one of those clever young men who find it amusing to pull the leg of a sober reviewer. We can imagine his saying to his friends: “See me have a lark out of the old fogies who don’t know a poem from a pea-shooter. I’ll just put down the first thing that comes into my head, and call it ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’ Of course it will be idiotic; but the fogies are sure to praise it, because when they don’t understand a thing and yet cannot hold their tongues they find safety in praise.” We once knew a clever musician who found a boisterous delight in playing that pathetic melody “Only a Jew” in two keys at once. At first the effect was amusing in its complete idiocy, but we cannot imagine that our friend would have been so foolish as to print the score. Among a few friends the man of genius is privileged to make a fool of himself. He is usually careful not to do so outside an intimate circle. Mr. Eliot has not the wisdom

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of youth. If the “Love Song” is neither witty nor amusing, the other poems are interesting experiments in the bizarre and violent. The subjects of the poems, the imagery, the rhythms have the willful outlandishness of the young revolutionary idea. We do not wish to appear patronizing, but we are certain that Mr. Eliot could do finer work on traditional lines. With him it seems to be a case of missing the effect by too much cleverness. All beauty has in it an element of strangeness, but here the strangeness overbalances the beauty.

E. P. [Ezra Pound].

“T. S. Eliot.”

Poetry: A Magazine of Verse 10 (August 1917),
264–71.

[. . .]

After much contemporary work that is merely factitious, much that is good in intention but impotently unfinished and incomplete, much whose flaws are due to sheer ignorance which a year's study or thought might have remedied, it is a comfort to come upon complete art, naive despite its intellectual subtlety, lacking all pretense.

It is quite safe to compare Mr. Eliot's work with anything written in French, English or American since the death of Jules Laforgue. The reader will find nothing better, and he will be extremely fortunate if he finds much half as good.

[. . .]

I should like the reader to note how complete is Mr. Eliot's depiction of our contemporary condition. He has not confined himself to genre nor to society por-

traiture. His “lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows” are as real as his ladies who “come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” His “one-night cheap hotels” are as much “there” as are his “four wax candles in the darkened room, / Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead, / An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb.” And, above all, there is no rhetoric, although there is Elizabethan reading in the background. Were I a French critic, skilled in their elaborate art of writing books about books, I should probably go to some length discussing Mr. Eliot's two sorts of metaphor: his wholly unrealizable, always apt, half ironic suggestion, and his precise realizable picture. It would be possible to point out his method of conveying a whole situation and half a character by three words of a quoted phrase; his constant aliveness, his mingling of very subtle observation with the unexpectedness of a backhanded cliché. It is, however, extremely dangerous to point out such devices. The method is Mr. Eliot's own, but as soon as one has reduced even a fragment of it to formula, someone else, not Mr. Eliot, someone else wholly lacking in his aptitudes, will at once try to make poetry by mimicking his external procedure. And this indefinite “someone” will, needless to say, make a botch of it.

For what the statement is worth, Mr. Eliot's work interests me more than that of any other poet now writing in English. The most interesting poems in Victorian English are Browning's *Men and Women*, or, if that statement is too absolute, let me contend that the form of these poems is the most vital form of that period of English, and that the poems written in that form are the least like each other in content. Antiquity gave us Ovid's *Heroides* and Theocritus' woman using magic. The form of Browning's *Men and Women* is more alive than the epistolary form of the *Heroides*. Browning included a certain

amount of ratiocination and of purely intellectual comment, and in just that proportion he lost intensity. Since Browning there have been very few good poems of this sort. Mr. Eliot has made two notable additions to the list. And he has placed his people in contemporary settings, which is much more difficult than to render them with mediaeval romantic trappings. If it is permitted to make comparison with a different art, let me say that he has used contemporary detail very much as Velázquez used contemporary detail in *Las Meninas*; the cold gray-green tones of the Spanish painter have, it seems to me, an emotional value not unlike the emotional value of Mr. Eliot's rhythms, and of his vocabulary.

James Joyce has written the best novel of my decade, and perhaps the best criticism of it has come from a Belgian who said, "All this is as true of my country as of Ireland." Eliot has a like ubiquity of application. Art does not avoid universals, it strikes at them all the harder in that it strikes through particulars. Eliot's work rests apart from that of the many new writers who have used the present freedoms to no advantage, who have gained no new precisions of language, and no variety in their cadence. His men in shirt-sleeves, and his society ladies, are not a local manifestation; they are the stuff of our modern world, and true of more countries than one. I would praise the work for its fine tone, its humanity, and its realism; for all good art is realism of one sort or another.

It is complained that Eliot is lacking in emotion. "La Figlia che Piange" is sufficient refutation to that rubbish.

If the reader wishes mastery of "regular form," the "Conversation Galante" is sufficient to show that symmetrical form is within Mr. Eliot's grasp. You will hardly find such neatness save in France; such modern neatness, save in Laforgue.

[. . .] [T]he supreme test of a book is that we should feel some unusual intelligence

working behind the words. By this test various other new books, that I have, or might have, beside me, go to pieces. The barrels of sham poetry that every decade and school and fashion produce, go to pieces. It is sometimes extremely difficult to find any other particular reason for their being so unsatisfactory. I have expressly written here not "intellect" but "intelligence." There is no intelligence without emotion. The emotion may be anterior or concurrent. There may be emotion without much intelligence, but this does not concern us.

Versification:

A conviction as to the rightness or wrongness of *vers libre* is no guarantee of a poet. I doubt if there is much use trying to classify the various kinds of *vers libre*, but there is an anarchy which may be vastly overdone; and there is a monotony of bad usage as tiresome as any typical eighteenth- or nineteenth-century flatness.

In a recent article Mr. Eliot contended [. . .] that good *vers libre* was little more than a skillful evasion of the better known English meters. [. . .] But he came nearer the fact when he wrote elsewhere: "No *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job."

[. . .]

On the other hand, I do not believe Chopin wrote to a metronome. There is undoubtedly a sense of music that takes count of the "shape" of the rhythm in a melody rather than of bar divisions, which came rather late in the history of written music and were certainly not the first or most important thing that musicians tried to record. The creation of such shapes is part of thematic invention. Some musicians have the faculty of invention, rhythmic, melodic. Likewise some poets.

[. . .]

Unless a man can put some thematic invention into *vers libre*, he would perhaps

do well to stick to “regular” meters, which have certain chances of being musical from their form, and certain other chances of being musical through his failure in fitting the form. In *vers libre* his sole musical chance lies in invention.

Mr. Eliot is one of the very few who have brought in a personal rhythm, an identifiable quality of sound as well as of style. And at any rate, his book is the best thing in poetry since . . . (for the sake of peace I will leave that date to the imagination). I have read most of the poems many times; I last read the whole book at breakfast time and from flimsy and grimy proof-sheets: I believe these are “test conditions.” Confound it, the fellow can write—we may as well sit up and take notice.

*“Shorter Notices.”
New Statesman 9
 (18 August 1917), 477.

Mr. Eliot may possibly give us the quintessence of twenty-first-century poetry. Certainly much of what he writes is unrecognizable as poetry at present, but it is all decidedly amusing; and it is only fair to say that he does not call these pieces poems. He calls them “observations,” and the description seems exact; for he has a keen eye as well as a sharp pen, and draws wittily whatever his capricious glance descends on. We do not pretend to follow the drift of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and therefore, instead of quoting from it, we present our readers with the following piece: [quotation in full of “The *Boston Evening Transcript*”]. This is Mr. Eliot’s highest flight, and we shall treasure it.

Conrad Aiken. “Divers Realists.” *Dial* 63
 (8 November 1917),
 453–55.

Mr. T. S. Eliot, whose book *Prufrock and Other Observations* is really hardly more than a pamphlet, is also a realist, but of a different sort. Like Mr. Gibson, Mr. Eliot is a psychologist; but his intuitions are keener; his technique subtler. For the two semi-narrative psychological portraits which form the greater and better part of his book, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and the “Portrait of a Lady,” one can have little but praise. This is psychological realism, but in a highly subjective or introspective vein; whereas Mr. Gibson, for example, gives us, in the third person, the reactions of an individual to a situation which is largely external (an accident, let us say), Mr. Eliot gives us, in the first person, the reactions of an individual to a situation for which to a large extent his own character is responsible. Such work is more purely autobiographic than the other—the field is narrowed, and the terms are idiosyncratic (sometimes almost blindly so). The dangers of such work are obvious: one must be certain that one’s mental character and idiom are sufficiently close to the norm to be comprehensible or significant. In this respect, Mr. Eliot is near the border-line. His temperament is peculiar, it is sometimes, as remarked heretofore, almost bafflingly peculiar, but on the whole it is the average hyper-aesthetic one with a good deal of introspective curiosity; it will puzzle many, it will delight a few. Mr. Eliot writes pungently and sharply, with an eye for unexpected and vivid details, and, particularly in the two longer poems and in the “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” he

shows himself to be an exceptionally acute technician. Such free rhyme as this, with irregular line lengths, is difficult to write well, and Mr. Eliot does it well enough to make one wonder whether such a form is not what the adorners of free verse will eventually have to come to. In the rest of Mr. Eliot's volume one finds the piquant and the trivial in about equal proportions.

May Sinclair.
 "Prufrock and
 Other Observations:
 A Criticism."
Little Review 4, no. 8
 (December 1917), 8–14.

So far I have seen two and only two reviews of Mr. Eliot's poems: one by Ezra Pound in the *Egoist*, one by an anonymous writer in the *New Statesman*. I learn from Mr. Pound's review that there is a third, by Mr. Arthur Waugh, in the *Quarterly*.

To Mr. Ezra Pound Mr. Eliot is a poet with genius as incontestable as the genius of Browning. To the anonymous one he is an insignificant phenomenon that may be appropriately disposed of among the "Shorter Notices." To Mr. Waugh, quoted by Mr. Pound, he is a "drunken Helot." I do not know what Mr. Pound would say to the anonymous one, but I can imagine. Anyhow, to him the *Quarterly* reviewer is "the silly old Waugh." And that is enough for Mr. Pound.

It ought to be enough for me. Of course I know that genius does inevitably provoke these outbursts of silliness. I know that Mr. Waugh is simply keeping up the good old manly traditions of the *Quarterly*, "so savage and tartarly," with its war-cry:

"'Ere's a stranger, let's 'eave 'arf a brick at 'im!" And though the behavior of the *New Statesman* puzzles me, since it has an editor who sometimes knows better, and really ought to have known better this time, still the *New Statesman* can also plead precedent. But when Mr. Waugh calls Mr. Eliot a "drunken Helot," it is clear that he thinks he is on the track of a tendency and is making a public example of Mr. Eliot. And when the anonymous one with every appearance of deliberation picks out his "*Boston Evening Transcript*," the one insignificant, the one negligible and trivial thing in a very serious volume, and assures us that it represents Mr. Eliot at his finest and his best, it is equally clear that we have to do with something more than mere journalistic misadventure. And I think it is something more than Mr. Eliot's genius that has terrified the *Quarterly* into exposing him in the full glare of publicity and the *New Statesman* into shoving him and his masterpieces away out of the public sight.

For "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and the "Portrait of a Lady" are masterpieces in the same sense and in the same degree as Browning's *Romances* and *Men and Women*; the "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" are masterpieces in a profounder sense and a greater degree than Henley's *London Voluntaries*; "La Figlia che Piange" is a masterpiece in its own sense and in its own degree. It is a unique masterpiece.

But Mr. Eliot is dangerous. Mr. Eliot is associated with an unpopular movement and with unpopular people. His "Preludes" and his "Rhapsody" appeared in *Blast*. They stood out from the experimental violences of *Blast* with an air of tranquil and triumphant achievement; but, no matter; it was in *Blast* that they appeared. That circumstance alone was disturbing to the comfortable respectability of Mr. Waugh and the *New Statesman*.