

## Introduction

This study attempts to approach Eliot's poetry in the spirit of his own remarks about his first reading of Dante, in his essay of 1929. He says there that he has always found an elaborate preparation of scholarly knowledge a barrier in approaching a poet's work; or that at least 'it is better to be spurred to acquire scholarship because you enjoy the poetry, than to suppose that you enjoy the poetry because you have acquired the scholarship' (*Selected Essays*, p. 237).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless he goes on to say that an initial response to the poetry will lead the reader naturally to want to know more and penetrate deeper: 'if from your first deciphering of it there comes now and then some direct shock of poetic intensity, nothing but laziness can deaden the desire for fuller and fuller knowledge' (p. 238). So the present study assumes that the reader will have read at least some of Eliot's poetry and that his or her interest has been sufficiently stimulated to want to look into it more deeply, to find some account of how the poems work on the reader, and to gain a more conscious understanding of the poems. It tries to give an account, that is, of what it is we enjoy in the poems, and of the significance of that enjoyment. At the same time it recognizes that Eliot's poetry is often complex and erudite, and that appreciation can be increased by 'fuller knowledge'; so it will seek to provide whatever elucidation of Eliot's literary echoes and allusions will contribute directly to an understanding of the poems, or guide the reader towards fuller exploration.

It could be said that there are two stages in an approach to Eliot's poetry. Neither is in the end separable from the other, and finally there is only one 'way of reading' the poems, which is the same as for all other poems. We immerse ourselves in their flow, attending with as much receptiveness as we can muster to the varied play of rhythm, imagery, tone and meaning, allowing the poems to register in us their moments of greater and lesser intensity, their guiding ideas, their appeal to our senses and to our intellect. But one can distinguish, if not separate, two kinds of attention we may give to them. The first and most important is

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the reading as I have described it; the second, ancillary to this, is the study of the poems that may involve, as well as close readings, the reading of Eliot's own notes and the reading of the 'sources' to which he directs us (in the case of *The Waste Land*), the reading of his own criticism, and finally others' criticism of his poetry. Needless to say this second kind of attention will only attract us if we have responded with enough interest to our first readings: in Eliot's words, 'if there comes now and then some direct shock of poetic intensity'. And the pursuit of more elusive 'meanings' is only worth while if it in turn leads back to that primary experience of the poems.

It may be worth beginning with these truisms because two kinds of reaction to the poems are not uncommon. The first, and possibly less harmful, one says that one should look at nothing but the poems, and that all exegetical commentary and explanation of allusions (including those in Eliot's own notes) is pedantic and obfuscatory. The second says that it is mainly (or even only) through an explanation of allusions and a tracing of sources that we can get at what a particular poem is 'about', can understand it. Both these reactions are misguided: the first because it is, to begin with, impossible as well as undesirable to read any poem without bringing to it one's knowledge of past literature and history of the world in general; and since this is so it is illogical to deny the usefulness of increasing our relevant knowledge. The second is misguided because it replaces the poem, and the effects which the poem achieves, by a tissue of references and meanings which may be constructed out of many of the materials which the poet himself used, but which loses sight of the poet's unique act of selection and creation. It also loses sight of the famous axiom that Eliot laid down in his 1929 essay on Dante: 'It is a test (a positive test, I do not assert that it is always valid negatively) that genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood' (*Selected Essays*, p. 238). He did not of course say that poetry was not *better* for being understood; indeed he goes on: 'The impression can be verified on fuller knowledge.' But just as the poet may begin (as Eliot himself said) with a rhythm or an image which precedes any conscious meaning or intention, so the reader may begin by responding to the rhythm or the image before being aware of anything that could strictly be called meaning.

On the question of meaning and of the supposed 'difficulty' of modern poetry, Eliot later wrote that this difficulty may be

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due to several reasons: there may be ‘personal causes’ which force the poet to express himself obscurely; the difficulty may be due to novelty; or it may be caused by the reader’s apprehension that the poem is going to be difficult, his desire to be clever or his fear of being taken in. ‘There is such a thing as stage fright, but what such readers have is pit or gallery fright’ (*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 151).<sup>2</sup> Or, finally, ‘the difficulty is caused by the author’s having left out something which the reader is used to finding; so that the reader, bewildered, gropes about for what is absent, and puzzles his head for a kind of ‘meaning’ which is not there and is not meant to be there’ (p. 151).

All these causes of difficulty or supposed difficulty are at work in much of Eliot’s poetry. The question of ‘personal causes’ we shall return to later; but for the moment the last two are worth bearing in mind. A reader should approach many of the poems without expecting too much readily graspable ‘meaning’ of the usual kind. This is still worth saying even today when we may be more used to obscurity in poetry, since there have also been various poetic reactions against Eliotic obscurity, and few poets have followed very closely Eliot’s method. The reader should also be ready for a technique of fragmentation, hiatus, lacunae, ‘the author’s having left out something’. The obscurity is not wilful, but is a means, among other things, of getting the reader to see reality from new angles and its elements in new juxtapositions. Above all, perhaps, there will often be surprising and initially baffling transitions. Leonard Woolf recorded in his autobiography that Virginia Woolf ‘once tackled [Eliot] about his poetry, and told him that “he wilfully concealed his transitions”’. He admitted this but said it was unnecessary to explain, explanation diluted facts . . . What he wanted was “to disturb externals”.’<sup>3</sup>

It follows from what I have said that the way to begin with Eliot’s poetry is with its ‘surface’, with the succession of images and dramatic scenes, with the musical rhythms, and what has been called the ‘musical organization’ of many of the longer poems, the pattern of recurring phrases and motifs that establishes a series of echoes and correspondences and begins to impress on the reader their connections and significances. What Eliot said about Tennyson in his essay of 1936 on *In Memoriam* is, in one aspect, remarkably suggestive and appropriate (more so than the view of Eliot as essentially an anti-romantic and ‘impersonal’ poet would lead one to believe) when applied to Eliot himself:

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Tennyson's surface, his technical accomplishment, is intimate with his depths: what we most quickly see about him is that which moves between the surface and the depths, that which is of slight importance. By looking innocently at the surface we are most likely to come to the depths, to the abyss of sorrow. (*Selected Essays*, p. 337)

It is perhaps not true that what moves in Eliot between the surface and the depths (if by that we mean his ideas, theories, beliefs) is of slight importance. Tennyson, for Eliot, was 'a mind almost wholly encrusted by parasitic opinion' and we cannot say that of Eliot. But still it is true in an important way that 'his surface, his technical accomplishment, is intimate with his depths'.

So I have tried in this study to concentrate always on the poetry itself with its wealth of immediate human suggestiveness as well as its more complex or hidden meanings. Eliot has perhaps sometimes suffered from being seen as one of the great progenitors of something called 'Modernism', which usually connotes a poetry which is especially abstruse, self-reflective, 'theoretical' and in various ways quite unlike any of the poetry that preceded it. 'Modernism' is not a term which Eliot uses in his own criticism, and I doubt if he would have approved of it. He would, of course, have agreed with Pound that modern poetry had to 'make it new'. 'The language which is more important to us,' he wrote in his essay on Swinburne (1920), 'is that which is struggling to digest and express new objects, new groups of objects, new feelings, and aspects . . .' (*Selected Essays*, p. 327). And in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) he asserted that, because of the complexity of modern civilization, modern poetry must be 'difficult': 'The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning' (p. 289). But he did not see modern poetry doing anything essentially different from what poetry had always done. And some of his theories, like that of poetic 'impersonality', although still, I suggest, important, have sometimes obscured the way in which his poetry can still be seen in a significant sense as 'personal', the expression of personal feeling. However much he is also a kind of conduit for the broad river (and the streams and tributaries) of the European tradition, and to some extent of traditions further afield, it is his personal experience and his poetic genius which direct them into new channels. It is the intimate contact with a unique human voice which is at the heart of the reader's experience of Eliot's poetry. What the voice says may be

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compounded of many elements – the poet is himself a kind of ‘compound ghost’ – but this does not abate that shock of recognition with which we encounter the distinctive note.

Eliot is first and foremost a great poet and after that a great critic, and he himself was fond of pointing out how closely (and perhaps indistinguishably) the ‘creative’ and the ‘critical’ interact. So although this is primarily a study of the poems, I have also tried to draw on Eliot’s criticism to illuminate his own poetry. This will involve looking both at his general ideas about poetry and at his criticism of individual poets, which latter he himself judged to contain the most valuable of his critical writing. As well as showing us the poets who most influenced his own poetry, examples from the particular criticism will also, I hope, give some idea of how Eliot changed and revitalized an understanding of the English poetic tradition, and can still provide unexpected insights into past poets. In his time Eliot revolutionized readers’ perceptions of Donne, Marvell, and the Metaphysical poets. That revolution has now long since been completed, but his criticism can still refresh, often unpredictably, our sense of poets as different as Johnson, Shelley, Tennyson and Kipling. He can challenge conventionally accepted valuations (‘There is more essential poetry in Turgenev’s “Sportsman’s Sketches”, even in translation, than in the whole of Thomas Browne or Walter Pater’) or make us think again about writers we had perhaps not taken seriously enough (like Poe, more intelligent ‘than Browne, than Pater, or even Ruskin’).<sup>4</sup> There will only be room for some of this achievement to emerge in this study, and it will arise particularly in relation to what Eliot wrote about early influences on his poetry (where poets like Edward Fitzgerald, James Thomson and John Davidson are cast for us in a new light). But the poetry itself has also, as well as its other powers and attractions, the power to make us re-read earlier poetry in a new way. The poetic style of the speech of the ‘familiar compound ghost’ in *Little Gidding II* with its powerful generalizations can, in conjunction with Eliot’s essay on Johnson, give us an awareness of the possibilities of a Johnsonian poetry; and the verse of ‘*Gerontion*’, as much as the critical essays, has enabled us to see the qualities of the verse of Middleton and Tourneur.

I have chosen to focus on the poems, and to make only passing mention of the plays, because it seems to me (as to many others) that Eliot’s essential achievement is contained in the

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former. The complete poems also form a remarkably coherent whole. They have that ‘continuous development from first to last’ which Eliot found in Shakespeare, and are ‘united by one significant, consistent and developing personality’ (*Selected Essays*, pp. 193 and 203). They are bound together by recurring motifs and preoccupations, images that echo earlier images and in that echo achieve a resonance and significance they would not entirely have on their own. The poems, for example, begin and end with a journey. ‘Let us go then, you and I’, are the opening words of the first poem of Eliot’s first volume, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’; and the last of *Four Quartets* begins its closing verse-paragraph:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>5</sup>

There is a sense in which those lines are true of a reading of Eliot’s poems: the experiences which are the subject of ‘Prufrock’, ‘Portrait of a Lady’ and other early poems are being continually revised in the later poems, and placed in a new perspective. The journey also proceeds through the intervening poems: from the walk in ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ and the ‘old man driven by the Trades’ in ‘Gerontion’, through the road to the chapel and the ‘hordes swarming / Over the endless plains’ in Part V of *The Waste Land*, to ‘Journey of the Magi’, the sea voyage in ‘Marina’, the return ‘down the passage which we did not take / . . . Into the rose garden’ in ‘Burnt Norton’, and the pilgrimage to Little Gidding. Ending as it does in ‘the middle way’ of ‘East Coker’ and the pilgrimage, the ghostly ‘patrol’, and the continued ‘exploration’ in ‘Little Gidding’, it can not unjustly be compared (though there are no exact correspondences) with Dante’s journey in *The Divine Comedy*.

In this pattern the plays have only a lesser part. Perhaps only *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932), *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1938) are really a part of it at all; and it is significant that several passages and images from the latter two find a more vivid life in *Four Quartets*. What makes the three plays a potential part of the ‘continuous development’ is above all their preoccupation with guilt and purgation through suffering. But the effort of projecting this subject into a medium which requires plot structure and the creation of characters

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independent of the author puts a strain on Eliot's artistic resources. For all the virtues of the plays, we feel for instance that Becket's martyrdom is partly a rather uneasy (artistically and morally perilous) analogy for processes going on inside the author; and the projection of personal problems and solutions into the character of Harry in *The Family Reunion* ends up by making him, as Eliot later said, 'an insufferable prig'.<sup>6</sup> The verse too, for all its accomplishments, particularly those of the choruses in *Murder in the Cathedral*, lacks the life and variety that Eliot found it possible to achieve in a form like that of *Four Quartets*. I have, however, included some discussion of the dramatic fragment *Sweeney Agonistes*, perhaps Eliot's best poetic drama. That does have a varied rhythmic life, and extraordinary accommodation of speech rhythms to those of verse without the rather flat intonations of the three- or four-stress lines of the later plays. It also has an urgency, and a touch of the melodramatic and the macabre, which give it some of the excitement of the poems before 1925. And in the figure of Sweeney, Eliot has created a character who has a distinct individuality quite different from that of the author, which yet seems to articulate some of the author's deepest fears and obsessions.<sup>7</sup> On the whole, however, this study will suggest that for all his dramatic powers, Eliot is essentially a poet of what he called 'the first voice', the voice of the poet himself (however disguised at times); a poet not primarily concerned with an audience (as Eliot thought the verse playwright must be) but one concerned to get something said, 'haunted by a demon', 'oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief' (*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 98).

I have said that Eliot can be seen as a 'compound ghost', a writer compounded out of many elements of the European tradition. But how far is he also, for us today, a 'master' as the ghost in 'Little Gidding' was for him? He is no longer the great eminence, *the* predominant presence in English poetry and culture, that he was in the middle years of this century. His politics have been much attacked,<sup>8</sup> his religious orthodoxy has not, it would seem, commanded any great following in the literary world. The influence of his poetry on other poets has always been rather elusive: after the first impact of his poetry in the twenties (when, it has been said, it was impossible to pick up a manuscript submitted by a young poet without finding the words 'dry', 'dust', 'desert' and the like on the first page) his

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deeper influence on outstanding poets is very often a matter of general professional example than of a direct stylistic kind. William Empson wrote: 'I do not know for certain how much of my own mind he invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He has a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike an east wind.'<sup>9</sup> And more recently Donald Davie has written of the profound general influence of Eliot on his own literary life.<sup>10</sup> Stylistically one can see traces in the early Auden, and most recently (and of a different kind) in Geoffrey Hill. But his poetic influence is more like Shakespeare's than Milton's, to the extent that his influence has been powerful but subterranean: there is no tradition of Eliotic verse as there was a tradition of Miltonic verse in the eighteenth century.

Finally, does his poetry have – and was it ever its most important function to have – a moral message for modern civilization: is Eliot a master in that sense? Or should we (and can we) detach Eliot's poetry from its 'philosophy' in the way that Arnold detached Wordsworth's twenty-nine years after the poet's death. The question of the part Eliot's beliefs play in his poetry, and the question of how much our response to his poetry depends on our response to his beliefs will be examined in the course of this study. But whatever our conclusions on this question, it seems certain that Eliot will retain his place, with W. B. Yeats, as one of the two greatest poets of the first half of this century, because of both the quality of his art and the predicament (and effort to overcome it) that his art presents.

## 1

## Aspects of the life of the poet

## I

In the sketch of the poet's life which follows, I have tried to select aspects which have some bearing on the poems. But in thinking about the connections between the life and the work (to use a convenient but not always sustainable distinction) it is worth bearing in mind the words of G. Wilson Knight, writing on Shakespeare's literary 'sources', and applying what he says broadly to biographical matters. The arguments from 'sources' and also 'intentions'

try to explain art in terms of causality, the most natural implement of intellect. Both fail empirically to explain anything essential whatever . . . the word 'source', that is, the origin whence the poetic reality flows, is a false metaphor . . . The 'source' of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, if we must indeed have a 'source' at all, is the transcendent erotic imagination of the poet. (*The Wheel of Fire*, p. 8)

If we apply these words to biographical matters, we may say similarly that we cannot trace any clear causal connection between particular circumstances and particular poems. There is always the element of imagination. Short of a complete knowledge of the psychic history of the poet (which would also presuppose a set of scientific psychological laws) we must be always moving in a world of speculation. And of course the question of biographical, and also literary, influences is only a secondary matter if what we are mainly seeking is a sharper impression and a clearer understanding of the poems. This chapter and the next, then, will seek simply to provide a brief context for the poems in the life of the poet which may here and there throw some light on the major poems or suggest certain intellectual connections and affiliations. Readers who are not especially interested in biographical matters and literary and intellectual influences, and who want to begin where the *Collected Poems* begin, with *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, can pass over this chapter and the next and begin with Chapter 3. Others, particularly if they are to some extent familiar with

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the poems already, may find moments of insight into the poems through a selective turning over of the soil out of which they grew.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St Louis, Missouri, on 26 September 1888. His father, Henry Ware Eliot, was a successful businessman, President of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company. His mother, Charlotte Champe Eliot (*née* Stearns), had been a teacher before her marriage, and was the author of a number of moral and didactic poems, many of them on religious subjects, such as *Savonarola*, a long poem about the fifteenth-century Florentine preacher. Eliot's paternal grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, had gone from Harvard Divinity School to St Louis, where he had founded the Unitarian Church and where he also helped to found Washington University and the Academy of Sciences. Further back among Eliot's ancestors was the Reverend Andrew Eliot from East Coker in Somerset, who emigrated to Salem, Massachusetts in the second half of the seventeenth century, and who is also believed to have officiated at the Salem witch trials, and, according to one source, to have 'had great mental affliction on that account in the residue of life'. But perhaps the most distinguished of the poet's early ancestors was Sir Thomas Elyot, writer and diplomat under Henry VIII, friend of Sir Thomas More, and the author of several works including *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531), a treatise on kingship. East Coker is, of course, the starting point for the second of *Four Quartets*; and in that same poem Eliot quotes the words of Sir Thomas Elyot in the passage on the vision of the rural marriage dance.

Eliot's ancestry, then, seems to have been characterized mainly by figures in public and ecclesiastical life, figures with a strong sense of public moral duty. Edmund Wilson has described Eliot as 'the Puritan turned artist',<sup>2</sup> and this element of puritan tradition does seem to have been particularly important in the formation of the man and the poet. Eliot once described himself as combining 'a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinistic heritage, and a Puritanical temperament' (*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 209). The Puritan tradition, in its older form, may have contributed to the sense of sin and guilt which is so notable a feature of many of his poems, to the moral and religious integrity of his work, and also to the sense of public responsibility which much of his writing on culture and society manifests. Eliot's great intellectual effort as a young man was to make himself a European