

Introduction

How is a poem made? Where and how might we locate the moment of frisson in which something hitherto unapprehended springs into being? From what heights or depths, from what constellation of inner and outer worlds does it issue forth? Can it be sought after, or must it be bestowed? Despite the confounding nature of such enquiries, despite the impossibility of final answers, these are fundamental questions for poetry; even more so for the poet. Without the numinous intrusion of the originary, a poem cannot 'live'. Without access to some source of animating dissimilitude, the poet's literary offspring is stillborn, a *mimesis* without its own inner life. The new-sprung poetic vision is – uniquely – the *sine qua non* of literary creation. No other medium of human expression demands of its constrained and rudimentary materials such exquisite balance of novelty and precision: the uncanny perfection of shock and recognition.

In *Grammars of Creation* (2001), George Steiner considers the interplay between creation and invention ('those intimately cognate dualities') as the central polarity of what he suggestively terms 'grammars of generative imagining'.¹ Arguing that our experience of the world is read 'by the determining light of certain specific cognitive and innate categories',² Steiner intimates that the poet's imaginative location within the metaphoric matrices surrounding 'creation' and 'invention' dictates much of the intertwined form and meaning of the poet's work. The Latin terms *creare* (to beget) and *invenire* (to find) between them convene the epiphanic and the exploratory, the biological and the ambulatory. Invention's twin associations with materialism and fabulation have historically rendered it subordinate to creation in the hierarchy of literary endeavour, stretching back beyond the Romantic yearning for inspiration to the Platonic suspicion of imitation (for what is invention – Sidney's 'true feigning' – if not the fictionalisation of the phenomenal?). For Steiner, the uniquely resonant quality of the verb 'to create' stems from its typological source in 'cosmic origination', a derivation that lends to the idea of creation (even in

its debilitated post-Cartesian form) a 'bright ghostliness'.³ Yet a sense of spectral habitation also clings to 'invention', related as it is to ideas of precedence and encounter. To invent is, etymologically, 'to come upon' that which is pre-existent but unrealised. Invention is creation's shadow-side, an intrusion upon and revelation of the adumbrated. Shriven of its most immediate positivist associations, invention might valuably be seen as entailing a countermovement into the obscurity of the past, to shed a belated light on extant but undiscovered topographies.

The unsettling sense of recursion embedded within the texture of such a forward-looking verb makes 'invention' peculiarly apt as modernism's presiding creative grammar. Anxieties over questions of originality, source, and influence had a resurgence in the first decade of the twentieth century, as elements within British literary modernism sought to define themselves in opposition to the putatively Romantic narratives of isolate genius and spontaneous creation that were culturally ascendant during the nineteenth century. In *Original Copy* (2007), his study of plagiarism and originality in the nineteenth century, Robert Macfarlane rightly cautions against simple narratives tracing nineteenth-century ideas of literary originality back to the heroic self-representation of the Romantic poets. Drawing attention to the Romantic poets' allusiveness, social and political engagement, and personal ambivalence to questions of originality, Macfarlane calls on literary historians to be cognisant of the anomalous and the heterogeneous in their construction of intellectual and literary histories. With this caveat firmly in place, Macfarlane acknowledges that during the later part of the eighteenth century the topography of literary creativity was increasingly mapped via metaphors emphasising 'a movement of thought from in to out'.⁴ This description of an imaginative shift from reflection to emanation itself openly mirrors M. H. Abrams's classic typology of the constitutive metaphors of literary creation, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), which charts an inwards movement during the eighteenth century from external phenomena (mimesis) to internal sources (genius).⁵ By the end of the nineteenth century, late Victorian writers imagined their civilisation as waning and degenerate. The literary imagination of the early twentieth century grew directly out of this enervated *fin-de-siècle* world, with its sense of aesthetic depletion and fear of 'worn-out words'.⁶

Benighted by post-Romantic eschatologies and an historically justifiable sense of its own finality, Anglophone literary modernism eschewed grand claims to originality (Ezra Pound's injunction 'make it new!' tacitly admits this) and privileged the survivalist processes of salvage and reassembly. Macfarlane observes that 'modernism can profitably be read not as a

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movement preoccupied with newness, but instead as one obsessed with return, and ghosted by a sense of afterness.⁷ Recombinant theories of literary creation, when enacted as creative practice, are necessarily beleaguered by a sense of belatedness and multiplicity: they must invite in other voices as a condition of their functioning. They are, to borrow Auerbach's magnificent description of the mysterious, fragmentary Elohistic voice of the Pentateuch, 'fraught with background'.⁸ In addition to what Steiner terms those 'elected presences' whose voices are enlisted to create the collective fabric of the recombinant work,⁹ writers at the beginning of the twentieth century had also to contend with a heightened awareness of the dissembling nature of individual consciousness. Analysing the metaphysics of modernism, Michael Bell refers to the 'legacy of hermeneutic suspicion' engendered by Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche (each of whom 'turned human life into a fundamentally hermeneutic activity').¹⁰ Michael Levenson makes a similar observation on a wider plain when he observes that the 'inescapable forces of social modernisation were not simply ... the destabilising context of cultural Modernism; they penetrated the interior of artistic invention.'¹¹

Modernist anxieties as to the permeability and contingency of the artist's mind combined with an assimilationist theory of art to produce an obsessive and reflexive preoccupation with the processes of creation. Hence Pound's interest (following de Gourmont) in modalities of mind and apperception.¹² Hence, too, Eliot's interest in mystical states of consciousness and the creative potential of the 'primitive' mind.¹³ Pasternak wrote that as the most immediate experience of art is 'its coming into being', the greatest works of art are really telling of their own genesis.¹⁴ Modernism's metafictional self-examination foreshadows what Alistair Fowler calls the *poioumenon* of postmodernism: a reflexive and usually fragmentary text concerned with constructing its own process of creation.¹⁵ Subject to the pressures of the early twentieth century, the products of such desperate invention as Duchamp's *objets trouvés* and Eliot's 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' cannot help but strive towards articulation of the traumatic conditions of their creation.¹⁶ The means by which they do this – so runs the fundamental argument of this study – is metaphor, both subject and determinant of their narratives.

'Metaphor' draws its etymology from the processes of translation and transferral. The Greek 'meta' (over) combines with 'pherein' ('to carry, to bear') becoming *metaphora* ('to carry across, to transfer'). It is the *anima* of the transformation of experience into language, the means by which our 'irremediably linguistic' species negotiates what Steiner calls 'the

fundamental, generative collision between the elusive opacity of the word and the equally elusive but compelling clarity and evidence of things.¹⁷ Put more prosaically, metaphor provides a semantic and imaginative structure for speaking about the unnameable. An interest in the unspoken is at the heart of Eliot's poetics: as he wrote, his poetry was occupied with 'frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist'.¹⁸ Lakoff and Johnson's seminal study *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) claimed metaphor as the primary linguistic and conceptual means by which we achieve partial comprehension of things elusive in their totality.¹⁹ In arguing for metaphor's bedrock status in approaching 'fundamental logical, epistemological, and ontological issues central to any philosophical understanding of human experience', Johnson went so far as to suggest that we are 'possessed by metaphor'.²⁰ Thirty years later, metaphor's encompassing usefulness for understanding the rudiments of human thought is now recognised by neuroscience in relation to the processes of cognition. So the neuroscientist Walter Kintsch in 2008:

People are simply unwilling to be silent about what they cannot talk about – they use metaphor instead. [And] while [metaphor and literal comprehension] clearly differ in linguistic analysis, in terms of psychological processes their underlying continuity should be emphasised.²¹

Scientific insight into the deeply embedded function of metaphor as a cognitive system of structural mapping gives further credence to Steiner's provocative description (in *The Poetry of Thought*, 2011) of metaphor as a '*mysterium tremendum*': the spark that 'ignited abstract, disinterested thought' in pre-Socratic Greece or Ionia. For Steiner, metaphor *is* the poetry of thought:

It is not only language which is saturated with metaphor. It is our compulsion, our capacity to devise and examine alternative worlds, to construe logical and narrative possibilities beyond any empirical constraints.²²

Steiner's words echo T. S. Eliot's musing that metaphor 'is not something applied externally for the adornment of style, it is the life of style, of language'.²³ 'We are dependent upon metaphor for even the abstractest thinking', says Eliot,²⁴ foreshadowing the connection Steiner draws between metaphor and the abstract capabilities of the mind. These otherwise very different thinkers share an apprehension of the phenomenal vitality of metaphor as an animating principle: Steiner imagines metaphor as cosmic background noise, whispering the origins of the galaxy, and describes the pre-Socratic philosophers 'quarry[ing] language before it

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weakens into imagery'.²⁵ Eliot pronounces that 'the healthy metaphor adds to the strength of the language; it makes available *some of that physical source of energy upon which the life of language depends*'.²⁶

Perhaps as a consequence of carrying forward some trace of originary energy (its aura of incipience) metaphor is always dependent on that which precedes it. Its compound and accretive framing of referents relies on the 'something before' – the earlier and other – with which to relate. In this respect it is both constitutive of and reflective of the processes of literary creation. The creative tensions between likeness (inheritance) and unlikeness (variation) are typologically related to the likeness and unlikeness of metaphor. This is especially so when the cultural-imaginary context of literary production is agonisingly and obsessively aware of its own derivations. In his comprehensive study of metaphor, David Punter observes that in its inherent responsiveness to wide and overlapping cultural spheres metaphor is 'a site on which similarities and differences can be constructed and tested'.²⁷ Metaphor's protean and relational qualities allow it to interact with ideas and images from variant strains of cultural discourse. This, in turn, as Punter has it, 'brings something into being'.²⁸ Many theoretical models have been developed to explain and categorise the generative functioning of metaphor. Multiple attempts have been made to articulate its gestalt. Lakoff's 'structural mapping' and Hofstadter's 'isomorphism' are exemplary theoretical ways of characterising the processes of coherence, recognition and creation that metaphor convenes.²⁹

The Canadian poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky's concept of 'resonance' provides a subtle characterisation that seems to me to come closest, in its lyrical fluidity, to tracing the phenomenon it attempts to describe. For Zwicky, concerned with 'the deep epistemological structure' of 'thought whose *eros* is coherence' and whose 'characteristic formal properties ... are resonance and integrity', 'metaphor is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another'.³⁰

Metaphor is a species of understanding, a form of seeing-as: it has, we might say, flex. We see, simultaneously, similarities and dissimilarities.

In metaphor we experience a gestalt shift from one distinct intellectual and emotional complex to another 'in an instant of time'. A metaphor, then, is a meta-image. It is multiply resonant.³¹

Are we willing to ascribe to metaphor its full range of significance? To accept Eliot's formulation of metaphor as conduit for the energetic life of

language? If so, then seeking out the ‘bright ghostliness’ of Eliot’s work – giving attention to varying densities of its recombinant patternings – becomes a fundamental element of critical and aesthetic response, a form of participation. Not *what* but *according to which pattern*.

Eliot’s method as a poet, writes Hugh Kenner, ‘was to collect scraps of verse written at various times until he could see a way of fusing them; and the principle of fusion was apt to be that words cut loose from a specific context can assume strange scope and range’.³² Eliot wrote in 1921 that in contrast to the ‘chaotic, irregular, fragmentary’ nature of ordinary lived experience, the mind of the poet ‘is constantly amalgamating disparate experience . . . the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes’.³³ This method is most obviously associated with *The Waste Land* (1922), a poem famous for its fractured consciousness, and one that concludes by looking towards ‘these fragments I have shored against my ruins’ (*Prose* 171). The publication in 1971 of the facsimile drafts of the poem confirmed that the Grail/Vegetation God mythos – long held by some to be the key to the poem’s oblique structure – was a late-accrued veneer over a series of scraps and fragments. Less remarked upon is the fact that Eliot’s last major poetic works, the four poems of *Four Quartets*, are themselves something of an assemblage of fragments. ‘Burnt Norton’ (1936) arose from discarded pieces of Eliot’s verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). Eliot initially considered ‘Burnt Norton’ a stand-alone poem, and it was included as such in *Collected Poems 1909–1935* (1936). It was only during the composition of ‘East Coker’ (1940) that Eliot developed the extremely loose idea of a seasonal cycle of poems.³⁴ The *Four Quartets*, like the cycle of five short landscape poems Eliot had written between 1933 and 1934, reach back to the locations and sensations of childhood imagination. They play on the reader’s recollection of earlier poems while consciously re-examining the processes of their own composition. Kenner’s description of Eliot’s fragmentary compositional process helps account for the ambiguities and recurrences that are a marked collective feature of Eliot’s poetry. In a subtle process of accretion and metamorphosis, verse fragments, drawn from acute states of feeling as much as from minute social observation, are cut loose from their initial context and allowed to float free in what Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes have called the poet’s ‘rattle bag’,³⁵ altering and accruing until a transformative principle can be discerned that retrospectively tethers them together. Nothing is ever entirely new, nor is anything wholly left behind. The accretion of fragments is a

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defining characteristic of Eliot's critical method, too: his prose is replete with moments of fragmentary, aphoristic brilliance. Fragmentation seems to have had a deep psychological appeal for Eliot, too. He wrote in 1914, 'it's interesting to cut yourself to pieces once in a while, and wait to see if the fragments will sprout.'³⁶

All of this surely compels us to ask: what principles of transformation and integration are at play, and what makes them operative in the poet's imagination? Kenner's answer is that 'transmuted by a title's focus, all the observations written down at various times lose sight of their first bearings'.³⁷ The transmutation is both more comprehensive and more mysterious than Kenner seems willing to allow: a title alone cannot account for the strange musical echoings apparent in Eliot's poetry. To move from Kenner's topographical metaphor to a nautical one, Eliot's fragments slip their moorings and are taken by the currents. What these currents consist of, their sources and movements, is a key question in Eliot's poetics that has yet to be fully addressed.

Such a question, Eliot believed, occupies a perilous space at the limits of critical endeavour. In 'The Frontiers of Criticism' (1956) Eliot responded to an excavatory 1927 study, *The Road to Xanadu*, by the Coleridgean scholar John Livingston Lowes:³⁸

Lowes showed, once and for all, that poetic originality is largely an original way of assembling the most disparate and unlikely material to make a new whole. The demonstration is quite convincing, as evidence of how material is digested and transformed by poetic genius. No one, after reading this book could suppose that he understood *The Ancient Mariner* any better; nor was it in the least Dr. Lowes's intention to make the poem more intelligible as poetry. He was engaged on an investigation of process, an investigation which was, strictly speaking, beyond the frontier of literary criticism. How such material as those scraps of Coleridge's reading became transmuted into great poetry remains as much of a mystery as ever.³⁹

Eliot readily accepted that the process of accretion, assembly, and transmutation was largely an unconscious and unwilling one: 'Mr. Lowes has, I think, demonstrated the importance of instinctive and unconscious, as well as deliberate selection' (*UP* 78). It was not the sources or selection of the amassed scraps of reading that fascinated Eliot, but the mysterious creative forces that shaped their transmutation – forces that must ultimately remain untouched by scholarship.

This study attempts to get closer to the imaginative dynamics that transform an observation, feeling, or thought into recognisably poetic form by arguing for the centrality of metaphor as both outward sign and inward

determinant of these dynamics. It excludes the material processes of drafting, typing, collaboration, and proofing, which have been examined in detail by others.⁴⁰ Kenner, for example, situates Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and Beckett in the context of the increasingly mechanised world of the early twentieth century, suggesting that these writers drew on the ‘most salient feature’ of the world around them: ‘intelligence questing after what can be achieved by a patterned moving of elements in space’.⁴¹ I take as given the importance to Eliot’s poetry of the industrialised cityscape, and seek instead to understand the interior action of elements and patternings that Eliot drew on in the creation of his verse. Like Lowes’s, this is a study of literary process, although it does not follow Lowes’s source-driven method. It makes no attempt at a forensic analysis of the material sources of Eliot’s poetry, accepting the truth of Eliot’s observation that ‘if the reader knows too much about the crude material in the author’s mind, his own reaction may tend to become at best merely a kind of feeble image of the author’s feelings’.⁴² I am not concerned with the ‘crude material in the author’s mind’ transmuted into a poem, nor with the biographical sources of the ‘dark, *psychic material*’ whose appearance marked ‘the beginning of the process of composition’,⁴³ as Eliot would later characterise it, so much as with the dynamics through which this material is shaped.

In thinking about the imaginative genesis of poetic creation, we can draw a helpful distinction between the nascent ‘something unaccountable’, which cannot be quantified, and the metaphors through which the poet chooses – or is compelled – to think and speak of it. It is metaphor that provides glimpses of the abstract and the inapprehensible. This is not a study in the theory of metaphor,⁴⁴ but a study of Eliot’s metaphoric practice in his understanding of poetic creation. Turning the focus of our critical attention onto metaphoric pattern and process yields new insight into the reflective ontological forms of which poetry, as a medium of human experience, is made. This study is an attempt to engender such a turn.

Eliot thought a great deal about the internal alchemy of poetic creation or, as he put the question, ‘how does the making of poetry come about?’ (*UP* 50). Writing of Paul Valéry in 1958, he described ‘the puzzle of how poetry gets written’ as ‘insoluble’, adding that Valéry’s *art poétique* was ‘an obsessive preoccupation’.⁴⁵ Eliot was no less obsessed, although he resiled from setting out a theory of poetry except – typically – in fragmentary incidental form. Yet Eliot’s critical writings reveal much about his imagining of the creative process, as do the surviving drafts of his poems. These resources form the backdrop to my analysis of the poems themselves.

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The poems are analysed for the ways in which their rhythms and imagery bear witness to the dominant metaphors of the processes of their creation. My method involves consideration of the connections between Eliot's poetic and critical idioms, of the metaphors he imports from other fields, and of the resonances between Eliot's poetic vocabulary and those literary predecessors with whom he engaged in an oblique and sometimes fraught dialogue. Shakespeare and Henry James in particular seem to draw Eliot's eye in matters of the shaping spirit. The protean energies of the sixteenth-century playwright were a continual – if often unacknowledged – source of anxiety and fascination for Eliot. So, in turn, Shakespearean linguistic and imaginative forms of play around creation and recognition form an enlivening undersong to the work here undertaken.

This study builds up a gradual picture based on numerous works, in order to identify a general tendency towards recurrent metaphors of creation, and to draw out the presence in Eliot's poetry of a self-awareness and understanding of its own generation. The *Four Quartets* stand at the heart of this study, partly because their creation has undergone less scrutiny than Eliot's earlier poetry (much more has been written about the composition of *The Waste Land*). Scholarly interest is at present still focussed on the iconoclastic young poet (the 'literary bolshevik' as he later wryly noted)⁴⁶ more often than on the Eliot of the 1930s and beyond. Joseph Maddrey's 2009 study *The Making of T. S. Eliot*, for example, surveys Eliot's reading during his university studies, as well as the intellectual contexts for his writing in the 1920s, but concludes its analysis at 1930. Robert Crawford's *Young Eliot* (2015) is (unsurprisingly) similarly confined.⁴⁷ Such scrutiny as Eliot's later poems – *Four Quartets* in particular – have received tends not to find in them the consciousness of their own generation apparent in Eliot's earlier poetry or late drama.⁴⁸ Yet the *Quartets* are self-aware poems. They speak eloquently of the poet's struggles to find a new voice for things said before.

Eliot's poetic ruminating on the nature of the creative process gave rise to a series of recurrent imaginative principles that exert both opposing and uniting pressures on his poetry. The three examined clusters, around and across the borderlines between light and shadow, surface and depth, self and other, draw variously and interrelatedly on the contemporary languages of psychology, physics, and anthropology, situating Eliot within an early twentieth-century cultural and intellectual framework. The particular interest of Eliot's selective usage of these very different registers resides in his interweaving of modern understandings of the originary processes in the human and natural world with a poet's preoccupation with language,

a preoccupation that encompasses the voices of the literary past. In an address given in Boston during his lecturing trip to America in 1932–3, Eliot defined what he saw as the limits of his allusive method, arguing that a transplanted image must be sustained either by something akin to its originating impulse, whether borrowed or spontaneously present ('in the relation of word to flesh'), or by the agonistic energy of deliberate divergence (where 'the contrast is very much to the point').⁴⁹

Although my focus is on metaphor, rather than the looser category of allusive borrowing, I advance several propositions germane to Eliot's comments. First, that Eliot's poetry (and to a more limited extent in the present analysis, his critical prose) exhibits a working through of the mystery of poetic creation, although this is not to say that either the poetry or prose arrives at a stable or definitive understanding of how poetry comes to be.⁵⁰ Second, that in his concern to articulate the processes of poetic creation, Eliot has repeated recourse to certain clusters of imagery – the sea as a site of elemental transformation, stellar light and the entropy of 'vacant interstellar spaces', and the dark internal presence of an angel, or demon, in the poet's own occluded psyche – each of which operates dynamically as a portrayal of process and pattern of movements. Third, that Eliot derives much of the substance of his metaphors from others (Shakespeare, Henry James, Arthur Eddington, Alfred North Whitehead, Roger Vittoz, Ezra Pound, and quasi-Jungian psychology) whose purposes or 'feeling' may in certain contexts be closer to Eliot's than is immediately or superficially apparent.

Despite Eliot's careful critical distance from his Romantic predecessors, he instinctively uses an organic, Romantic language of submission to engulfing and transmuting natural forces in discerning the dynamics underlying his creativity. In his Norton lecture on Coleridgean Imagination, Eliot speaks of the processes of poetic creation in terms evoking geothermal force: A 'simple experience . . . might lie dormant in his mind for twenty years, and re-appear transformed in some verse-context charged with great imaginative pressure' (*UP* 79). In his essays, lectures, and articles, he variously imagined the processes of poetic creation as catalytic, biological, quasi-mystical, and even agricultural (the Shakespearean age of drama was 'a fertile field in which tares and fine wheat luxuriated') (*UP* 40), meditating on these analogies using the complementary means available to him in his parallel lives as poet and critic. The search for the right words to give form to the rude psychic material gave rise to the lines from 'Burnt Norton', 'Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden', where poetic language is imagined as the