

THE ART OF
T. S. ELIOT

By

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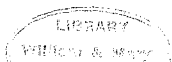
PREFACE

THE ORIGIN of this book is an article which appeared first as 'The Recent Poetry of T. S. Eliot' in *New Writing and Daylight* (Summer 1942). It was revised and enlarged to include a study of *Little Gidding* for *Penguin New Writing* (No. 29, 1946), and for inclusion in *T. S. Eliot: A Study of his Writings by Several Hands* edited by Mr B. Rajan (1947). I am grateful to the editors: Mr John Lehmann and Mr Rajan, and to the publishers: The Hogarth Press Ltd, Penguin Books Ltd and Dennis Dobson Ltd for permission to use portions of these articles in the second and final chapters.

The more immediate source is a short course of lectures delivered in the University of Oxford in the spring of 1948. For these lectures and for the writing of this book I did not re-read any of Mr Eliot's critics, but it will be plain that I owe much, even if no definite reference is made, to what I have learnt from them in the past. I should like to make here a general acknowledgment to Professor F. O. Matthiessen and Dr F. R. Leavis in particular, who many years ago helped me to a better understanding of Mr Eliot's work. I hope they will accept this expression of gratitude in place of specific acknowledgments of agreement or disagreement. The critic to whom I owe most, however, is Mr Eliot himself, whose criticism I have drawn on largely to interpret his poetry, and have had in mind even where no direct quotation is made. I have to thank Mr Eliot and Messrs Faber and Faber Ltd for permission to quote from his poetry and prose.

I should like to express my gratitude to Dr Janet Spens for stimulus and encouragement, and to Mrs Duncan-Jones of the University of Birmingham for discussions going back

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over many years, and particularly for helping me towards an understanding of *Asb Wednesday*. My greatest debt is to Mr John Hayward who first suggested I should write this book and has been most generous in his assistance in both large and small matters.

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CHAPTER VII

THE APPROACH TO THE MEANING

And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.

The Dry Salvages

'After sharpe shoures', quod Pees 'moste shene is the sonne;
Is no weder warmer than after watery cloudes.
Ne no loue leuere ne leuer frendes,
Than after werre and wo whan Loue and Pees be maistres.
Was neuere werre in this worlde ne wykkednesse so kene,
That ne Loue, and hym luste to laughynge ne broughte,
And Pees thorw pacience alle perilles stopped . . .
For impossible is no thyng to hym that is almyghty.'

Piers Plowman, B xviii

But that his care conserveth
As Time, so all Time's honours too,
Regarding still what heaven should do
And not what earth deserveth.

BEN JONSON:

The Golden Age Restored

THE discovery, symbolized by the waking from sleep of the old king Pericles in *Marina*, which the chorus makes in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and which Harry makes in *The Family Reunion*, is given to us without the use of myth or narrative in *Four Quartets*, by means of various images, and by changes in the rhythms of the poetry. This discovery, which is at the heart of each of the four poems, can be described in different terms in each poem, but essentially all four poems are one poem, and the central discovery of each is the same discovery. The growth of the subject throughout the poem is a growth in the apprehension of its significance. As the significance is appreciated more fully, the experience itself becomes more tangible, and the world in which it takes place gains in richness and reality.

THE APPROACH TO THE MEANING

Each of the four poems takes its title from a place, and the experience of each is expressed in imagery which arises from a deeply felt sense of place and time. In *Burnt Norton*, as has been said, the place has no particular associations. The time has no particular significance either; it is any summer afternoon. East Coker is a Somersetshire village, from which in the seventeenth century Andrew Eliot set out for the New World. The poet is staying there in the late summer, and his mind is full of the thought of his family and ancestors. The Dry Salvages are a group of rocky islands off the coast of Massachusetts, part of the landscape of the poet's childhood, and part of the new experience of his ancestors after they had crossed the seas. This poem is not about a place visited, but a place once lived in, remembered with the peculiar vividness with which we remember the landscape of our childhood. Little Gidding, on the other hand, has historic not personal associations. It is a village in Huntingdonshire to which Nicholas Ferrar and his family retired in order to lead a common life of devotion. It is visited by the poet on a winter's afternoon. He goes there to pray in the chapel.

Burnt Norton is a land-locked poem; its whole feeling is enclosed. It builds up by suggestion rather than statement a picture of a house and formal garden, and of a way of life which is social and civilized. The picture gradually given is of shrubbery and alley-walk, rose-garden, box-edgings, and a pool. There are sunflowers in the borders and clematis hanging from the wall and clipped yews. The references to dust on a bowl of rose-leaves, to a Chinese jar, and to the music of the violin give the same impression of a way of life that is cultured and refined. The image used at the climax of the children laughing among the leaves of the garden is an image of human happiness, of 'la douceur de la vie'. It has been suggested to me that the setting of the

poem and the image of the laughing hidden children may have been caught from Rudyard Kipling's story *They*. The children in that story are both 'what might have been and what has been', appearing to those who have lost their children in the house of a blind woman who has never borne a child.

The poem opens with a meditation on the relation of past, present and future, and on the persistence in memory of what might have been as well as of what has been. The first image that occurs is of footfalls that

echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.

What the purpose of such memories is the poet cannot say; they disturb the 'dust on a bowl of rose-leaves', stirring something dead and buried in the present. The garden also is full of echoes, and in the garden what might have been and what has been, for a moment, are. In stillness, silence and light, what never was, and what was, is, for a space, real; the dream of innocent human happiness is felt again as truth. Then the moment passes. The bird's call, which had been an invitation, becomes a warning: 'Go, go, go, said the bird.'

The second movement opens with a passage of great poetic beauty, in which the unity of experience is conveyed by the juxtaposition of contraries. This passage is not susceptible of too close analysis. Its opening line: 'Garlic and sapphires in the mud', inspired by Mallarmé's jewel imagery,¹ is an image of the variety contained in a single sense impression: the soft and the hard, vegetable and

¹ Mr Eliot seems to have had in mind two phrases of Mallarmé: 'Tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux' from the poem 'M'introduire dans ton histoire', and 'bavant boue et rubis' from the sonnet 'Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire'.

mineral, the living and growing and the petrified and glittering, the common and the precious, the scented and the scentless. The 'trilling wire in the blood', the nervous tingling in our veins, runs on below old wounds, healed and not healed, and the movement within our bodies, which are ever in flux, is akin to the movement we perceive among the stars, drifting in the milky way like the atoms of Democritus, and to the flow of summer sap in the trees. We are at the same time aware of the dance of light upon the leaves from above, and of the pursuit of boar by boarhound below, and of this same pursuit and flight among the stars. At once all is flux, yet all is pattern; and from the thought of pattern the poet turns to think of how we apprehend pattern: from a point. This 'still point' is the theme of the second half of the movement, where the relation of stillness and movement, of the moment that is not in time and of living in time, is considered. We come back at the close to memory with which the meditation began.¹

In the third movement there is an abrupt change. We have left the garden and the images of nature for a world which is in every way different. The first paragraph reminds us of *The Waste Land's* vision of the crowd flowing over London Bridge, the slaves of time, each one imprisoned in his own solitude. Here we are in the twilight world of the London Tube. This image of passengers is central to *Four Quartets*; it occurs at this point in each of the first three poems. At this first use of the image we are shown travelers borne along in what is neither daylight nor darkness, their 'time-ridden faces' 'filled with fancies and empty of meaning'. Passing from one station to another, they find no meaning in the present, it is only a stop between where

¹ I believe the passage beginning 'At the still point of the turning world' owes something to the description of the magical dance of the Tarot figures in *The Greater Trumps* by Charles Williams.