

Thomas Mann, fending off eulogy, rendered a service when he said, "Praise will never subdue skepticism." We fail in some degree—and know that we do, if we are competent; but can prevail; and the following attributes, applied by a London journal to Victor Gollancz, the author and publisher, I adopt as a prescription: we can in the end prevail, if our attachment to art is sufficiently deep; "unpriggish, subtle, perceptive, and consuming."<sup>6</sup>

1958

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T. S. ELIOT  
(1888–1965)

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Thomas Stearns Eliot was born the seventh child of Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Champe Stearns Eliot in St. Louis, Missouri, where his father was a prominent executive in the Hydraulic Press Brick Company. His grandfather, the Reverend William Greenleaf Eliot, had settled in St. Louis in 1834, eventually founding Washington University. A poet and biographer, Charlotte Eliot was highly influential in the development of her son's literary sensibilities. The family summered in Maine and Massachusetts, and at seventeen Eliot went east to Milton Academy. He entered Harvard in 1906, where his distant cousin, Charles William Eliot, was then president of the university. After taking his degree in 1909, Eliot began graduate studies in philosophy at Harvard. By then he had encountered his teacher Irving Babbitt's dislike of Romanticism, and also, in 1908, he read Arthur Symonds's highly influential study of late nineteenth-century French poetry, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*—a book that profoundly affected his own aesthetic. He had written poetry since childhood with his mother's approval, but now the work took new directions. He wrote his first masterpiece, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," while still at Harvard in 1910.

That same year, having earned his master's degree, Eliot went to the Sorbonne in Paris. There he heard the lectures of philosopher Henri Bergson on personality. Upon returning to Harvard, Eliot began his dissertation on the philosopher F. H. Bradley, author of *Appearance and Reality*. He was also studying modern poetry and learning Sanskrit. Although Eliot's attitude toward religion was skeptical at this point, he objected to the way the Harvard Philosophy Department distanced itself from religious studies. Eliot was already a serious student of comparative religions. He was also taking dancing lessons to compensate for his intense shyness with women. After a year's assistantship at Harvard, Eliot obtained a fellowship to travel and study in Europe. He intended to go to Germany, but the outbreak of World War I forced him instead to take up studies at Oxford.

At the time, the London literary scene was full of vitality and ferment. Ford Madox Ford was editing and writing; Years held forth in his *salon*, where he was visited by young poets like Ezra Pound and Robert Frost. In September 1914, Eliot met Pound in London. Pound, who had already

6. *The Observer*, March 11, 1956.

been at the forefront of the London poetry scene for several years, quickly saw that Eliot had "modernized himself on his own." By early 1915, Eliot doubted that he wanted an academic career in philosophy. Work on his dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, had been completed, but increasingly Eliot thought of himself as a poet and man of letters. The dissertation concerned knowledge as a "relational" phenomenon, the difficulty of communication between people, the desire to comprehend an absolute and the problem of doing so in a context of skepticism. These ideas were foundational for his future poetry and criticism.

Everything in Eliot's life came to a climax in the spring of 1915: the war, which kept him in England and eventually killed his friend Jean Verdenal, his parents' desire that he pursue an academic career, the cauldron of literary London, and even his relations with women. Although he had been in love with a young American, Emily Hale, he suddenly married an Englishwoman, Vivien Haigh-Wood, whom he hardly knew. Eliot had decided against America and his parents' wishes, and his precipitous marriage seemed partly an effort to affirm his choice.

That same month, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" appeared in *Poetry* in Chicago; it was easily the strongest and most indelible poem in the issue, but also the strangest. A kind of interior monologue, suggestive of dream journeys and multiple anxieties, its allusiveness, apparent disconnection, and defiance of easy interpretation were utterly new. The first issue of the journal *BLAST* contained Eliot's "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." His poetic career was launched.

Vivien was a vivacious, talented woman, but already so beset with nervous disorders that friends would soon refer to her as an "invalid." To support her, Eliot tried teaching at various schools, then in 1917 took a job as a clerk in the Colonial and Foreign Department at Lloyds Bank. At the same time, he was working several hours a night on book reviews, essays, and poems. *Prufrock and Other Observations* appeared in 1917, *Poems* two years later. Both Eliot and Pound had begun to feel that contemporary *vers libre* was enervated and experimented with writing sharply ironic poems in rhymed quatrains. Again the work was densely allusive and violently disjunctive, requiring both real erudition and careful attention on the part of readers. In 1919 Eliot's father died without having seen his son since before the war, and Eliot now had to bear some responsibility for his mother as well, even while he kept up his productive literary life. He published his first book of criticism, *The Sacred Wood*, in 1920. Three essays stand out in that collection. In one, "The Perfect Critic," he concludes that "the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person." In another, "Hamlet and His Problems," Eliot coined the term "objective correlative":

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion.

Finally, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he developed a theory of impersonal poetry not unlike Keats's image of the poet as chameleon. Eliot would later refine or disavow this doctrine of impersonality, but its

influence on the next two generations of poets cannot be overstated, and to some degree it lies at the heart of what would come to be known as the New Criticism.

For Eliot, however, this literary self-denial may have arisen from his increasingly traumatic personal life. His marriage to Vivien was troubled by her poor health and his uncompromising fastidiousness. To meet expenses, he worked himself into a state of exhaustion. He spent six days a week at Lloyds while also reviewing books and composing in fragments his disturbing poem *The Waste Land*—a poem that expresses his vision of a complete breakdown in human communications and sexuality. Eliot suffered his own breakdown in 1921 and was advised to take a holiday, which he began at Margate and continued in Lausanne, Switzerland, with a course of psychiatric treatment. There he quickly wrote the final section of his poem and sought the opinion of Pound, who had moved to Paris after the war. Pound's editing of *The Waste Land* is legendary. As he wrote to Eliot in December, "The thing now runs from April . . . to shantih without break. That is 19 pages, and let us say the longest poem in the English language. Don't try to bust all records by prolonging it three pages further." With typical humor Pound concluded, "Compliment, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies. . . ."

*The Waste Land* was published in 1922, the same year as Joyce's *Ulysses*. Eliot's poem was notable not only for its difficulty and allusiveness (or "mythic method")—two qualities he had identified in Joyce—but also for its extraordinary compression. Critics differed on whether it was a collage of distinct voices or a kind of disturbed dramatic monologue. In either case, the poem eventually engendered as much critical commentary as any modern work of art. Eliot himself seemed almost embarrassed by the scholarly attention paid *The Waste Land* and is later reported to have said, "To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling." In 1922 Eliot had also begun to edit the *Criterion*, an important journal, and in 1925 he left banking to join the publishing firm of Faber and Faber, where he worked for the rest of his life. Between his poetry, his criticism, and his editing he had become one of the most significant and powerful literary figures in the world.

During the 1920s, Eliot experienced a growing religious faith, and in 1927 he received baptism in the Anglican Church, although he kept his conversion private for a year. In 1927 he also became a British subject. One can trace these developments in poems such as "The Hollow Men" (1925), "Journey of the Magi" (1928), and "Ash-Wednesday" (1930), and also in his essays collected in *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), where he openly proclaimed himself "classical in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion."

In 1932 Eliot separated from his wife, who was soon hospitalized for mental illness. The scrupulously religious Eliot never divorced her and remained celibate until after her death in 1947. He collected more essays in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933). In 1935 he saw his first major play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, produced. Eliot was a pioneer of modern poetic drama, and four other plays would follow, including *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *The Cocktail Party* (1950). During World War II Eliot wrote a series of religious meditations in a quasi-musical form based

on the structure of the classical string quartet. Each of the four resulting poems, *East Coker* (1940), *Burnt Norton* (1941), *The Dry Salvages* (1941), and *Little Gidding* (1942), was named after a place with deep personal significance to the author. After being published as separate chapbooks, they were collected as *Four Quartets* (1944) and constitute Eliot's last major poetic work. In these probing Christian poems the author examines intersections of the secular and sacred worlds and meditates on the relation between time and eternity. He is also concerned with personal failures and whether art can or will prove redemptive in the context of sin. Eliot sees religious questing as "exploration" that will not end in the explorer's lifetime. There would be other books, but Eliot's major work was finished by the end of World War II. In 1948 he won the Nobel Prize, and thereafter he became more and more the literary eminence.

Eliot's prose from the mid-1930s was sometimes disturbing in its shift from literary criticism to conservative cultural criticism. The lectures he published in *After Strange Gods* (1934) contained several anti-Semitic remarks that created controversy among critics and readers. The controversy led Eliot to suppress the book, which has never been reprinted. Decades after his death, however, those passages along with several unflattering depictions of Jews in the early poetry led to a heated debate about the extent of Eliot's anti-Semitism. Some critics have also objected to the obsession with authority that characterizes *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1940) and *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture* (1949).

Eliot was long sustained by his work, but toward the end of his life he was granted some personal happiness. In 1957 he married his secretary, Valerie Fletcher, who would later publish a posthumous edition of *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound* (1971), and Eliot's letters. She would also see the popular success that had eluded him when his collection of light verse, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), provided the lyrics for what became the longest running musical in history, Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Cats*.

As a poet Eliot was famous for the difficulty of his poetry, a position that made him uneasy as time wore on. But Eliot had equal impact as a literary critic. Although his reputation has been seriously and repeatedly challenged in recent years, he remains the most influential American poet-critic of the twentieth century. He left behind certain phrases and formulations that have proved extremely helpful in critical discussion—about the impersonality of art, the nature of verse form, the uses of allusion, and the structure of verse drama. He helped formulate a canon of literature that would reign for two or more generations, including the metaphysical poets like Donne, but also Dante, Dryden, Yeats, Tennyson, and Kipling. Perhaps most importantly, his criticism was written in lucid prose that could be understood by anyone with an interest in literature.

Of the two essays collected below, "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917) surveys what was already the dominant formal trend of twentieth-century poetry—the wholesale abandonment of metrical verse—and warns poets that free verse may not be so easy as it seems. Eliot defines free verse, or *vers libre* in the French, mostly by what it lacks, but he finds that a "ghost of meter" still pulses in some examples of it. Eliot's celebrated essay, "Tradition

and the Individual Talent" from *The Sacred Wood* (1920), is frequently invoked but often misunderstood. This short essay offers a radical revision of the concept of literary tradition, which Eliot presents not as a fixed collection of literary masterpieces but as a dynamic and unstable arrangement transformed by every major new work.



## REFLECTIONS ON VERS LIBRE

*Ceux qui possèdent leur vers libre y tiennent:  
on n'abandonne que le vers libre.*

DUHAMEL ET VILDRAC

A lady, renowned in her small circle for the accuracy of her stop-press information of literature, complains to me of a growing pococurantism. "Since the Russians came in I can read nothing else. I have finished Dostoevski, and I do not know what to do." I suggested that the great Russian was an admirer of Dickens, and that she also might find that author readable. "But Dickens is a sentimentalist; Dostoevski is a realist." I reflected on the amours of Sonia and Rashkolnikov, but forbore to press the point, and I proposed *It Is Never too Late to Mend*. "But one cannot read the Victorians at all!" While I was extracting the virtues of the proposition that Dostoevski is a Christian, while Charles Reade is merely pious, she added that she could no longer read any verse but *vers libre*.

It is assumed that *vers libre* exists. It is assumed that *vers libre* is a school; that it consists of certain theories; that its group or groups of theorists will either revolutionize or demoralize poetry if their attack upon the iambic pentameter meets with any success. *Vers libre* does not exist, and it is time that this preposterous fiction followed the *élan vital*\* and the eighty thousand Russians into oblivion.

When a theory of art passes it is usually found that a goat's worth of art has been bought with a million of advertisement. The theory which sold the wares may be quite false, or it may be confused and incapable of elucidation, or it may never have existed. A mythical revolution will have taken place and produced a few works of art which perhaps would be even better if still less of the revolutionary theories clung to them. In modern society such revolutions are almost inevitable. An artist, happens upon a method, perhaps quite unreflectingly, which is new in the sense that it is essentially different from that of the second-rate people about him, and different in everything but essentials from that of any of his great predecessors. The novelty meets with neglect; neglect provokes attack; and attack demands a theory. In an ideal state of society one might imagine the good New growing naturally out of the good Old, without the need for polemic and theory; this would be a society with a living tradition. In a sluggish society, as actual societies are, tradition is ever lapsing into superstition, and the violent stimulus of novelty is required. This is bad for the artist and his school, who may become circumscribed by their theory and narrowed by their polemic; but the artist can always console himself for his errors in his old age by considering that if he had not fought nothing would have been accomplished.

Originally published in *New Statesman* 8 (3 Mar. 1917): 518–19. Collected in *Selected Prose* (London: Penguin, 1953).

\**élan vital*: life force

*Vers libre* has not even the excuse of a polemic; it is a battle-cry of freedom, and there is no freedom in art. And as the so-called *vers libre* which is good is anything but "free", it can better be defended under some other label. Particular types of *vers libre* may be supported on the choice of content, or on the method of handling the content. I am aware that many writers of *vers libre* have introduced such innovations, and that the novelty of their choice and manipulation of material is confused—if not in their own minds, in the minds of many of their readers—with the novelty of the form. But I am not here concerned with imagism, which is a theory about the use of material; I am only concerned with the theory of the verse-form in which imagism is cast. If *vers libre* is a genuine verse-form it will have a positive definition. And I can define it only in negatives: (1) absence of pattern, (2) absence of rhyme, (3) absence of meter.

The third of these qualities is easily disposed of. What sort of a line that would be which would not scan at all I cannot say. Even in the popular American magazines, whose verse columns are now largely given over to *vers libre*, the lines are usually explicable in terms of prosody. Any line can be divided into feet and accents. The simpler meters are a repetition of one combination, perhaps a long and a short, or a short and a long syllable, five times repeated. There is, however, no reason why, within the single line, there should be any repetition; why there should not be lines (as there are) divisible only into feet of different types. How can the grammatical exercise of scansion make a line of this sort more intelligible? Only by isolating elements which occur in other lines, and the sole purpose of doing this is the production of a similar effect elsewhere. But repetition of effect is a question of pattern. Scansion tells us very little. It is probable that there is not much to be gained by an elaborate system of prosody, but the erudite complexities of Swinburnian meter. With Swinburne, once the trick is perceived and the scholarship appreciated, the effect is somewhat diminished. When the unexpectedness, due to the unfamiliarity of the meters to English ears, wears off and is understood, one ceases to look for what one does not find in Swinburne; the inexplicable line with the music which can never be recaptured in other words. Swinburne mastered his technique, which is a great deal, but he did not master it to the extent of being able to take liberties with it, which is everything. If anything promising for English poetry is hidden in the meters of Swinburne, it probably lies far beyond the point to which Swinburne has developed them. But the most interesting verse which has yet been written in our language has been done either by taking a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse.

I have in mind two passages of contemporary verse<sup>1</sup> which would be called *vers libre*. Both of them I quote because of their beauty:

Once, in finesse of fiddles found I ecstasy,  
In the flash of gold heels on the hard pavement.  
Now see I

That warmth's the very stuff of poesy.

Oh, God, make small

The old star-eaten blanket of the sky,

That I may fold it round me and in comfort lie.

This is a complete poem. The other is part of a much longer poem:

There shut up in his castle, Tairiran's,  
She who had nor ears nor tongue save in her hands,  
Gone—ah, gone—untouched, unreachable—  
She who could never live save through one person,  
She who could never speak save to one person,  
And all the rest of her a shifting change,  
A broken bundle of mirrors . . .

It is obvious that the charm of these lines could not be, without the constant suggestion and the skillful evasion of iambic pentameter.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, and especially in the verse of John Webster, who was in some ways a more cunning technician than Shakespeare, one finds the same constant evasion and recognition of regularity. Webster is much freer than Shakespeare, and that his fault is not negligence is evidenced by the fact that it is often at moments of the highest intensity that his verse acquires this freedom. That there is also carelessness I do not deny, but the irregularity of carelessness can be at once detected from the irregularity of deliberation. (In *The White Devil* Brachiano dying, and Cornelia mad, deliberately rupture the bonds of pentameter.)

I recover, like a spent taper, for a flash  
and instantly go out.

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.

You have cause to love me, I did enter you in my heart  
Before you would vouchsafe to call for the keys.

This is a vain poetry: but I pray you tell me  
If there were proposed me, wisdom, riches, and beauty,  
In three several young men, which should I choose?

These are not lines of carelessness. The irregularity is further enhanced by the use of short lines and the breaking up of lines in dialogue, which alters the quantities. And there are many lines in the drama of this time which are spoiled by regular accentuation.

I loved this woman in spite of my heart. (*The Changeling*)  
I would have these herbs grow up in his grave. (*The White Devil*)  
Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman . . . (*The Duchess of Malft*)

The general charge of decadence cannot be preferred. Tourneur and Shirley, who I think will be conceded to have touched nearly the bottom of the decline of tragedy, are much more regular than Webster or Middleton. Tourneur will polish off a fair line of iambs even at the cost of amputating a preposition from its substantive, and in the *Atheist's Tragedy* he has a final "of" in two lines out of five together. We may therefore formulate as follows: the ghost of some simple meter should lurk behind the arras in even the "freest" verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or, freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation.

Not to have perceived the simple truth that some artificial limitation is necessary except in moments of the first intensity is, I believe, a capital error of even so distinguished a talent as that of Mr. E. L. Masters. The *Spoon River Anthology* is

1. The first is "The Embankment," by T. E. Hulme. The second is a fragment from Pound's "Near Pergord."

not material of the first intensity; it is reflective, not immediate; its author is a moralist, rather than an observer. His material is so near to the material of Crabbe that one wonders why he should have used a different form. Crabbe is, on the whole, the more intense of the two; he is keen, direct, and unsparing. His material is prosaic, not in the sense that it would have been better done in prose, but in the sense of requiring a simple and rather rigid verse-form and this Crabbe has given it. Mr. Masters requires a more rigid verse-form than either of the two contemporary poets quoted above, and his epitaphs suffer from the lack of it.

So much for meter. There is no escape from meter; there is only mastery. But while there obviously is escape from rhyme, the *vers libres* are by no means the first out of the cave.

The boughs of the trees  
Are twisted  
By many bafflings;  
Twisted are  
The small-leaved boughs.  
But the shadow of them  
Is not the shadow of the mast head  
Nor of the torn sails.

When the white dawn first  
Through the rough fir-planks  
Of my hut, by the chestnuts,  
Up at the valley-head,  
Came breaking, Goddess,  
I sprang up, I threw round me  
My dappled fawn-skin . . .

Except for the more human touch in the second of these extracts a hasty observer would hardly realize that the first is by a contemporary,<sup>2</sup> and the second by Matthew Arnold.

I do not minimize the services of modern poets in exploiting the possibilities of rhymeless verse. They prove the strength of a Movement, the utility of a Theory. What neither Blake nor Arnold could do alone is being done in our time. "Blank verse" is the only accepted rhymeless verse in English—the inevitable iambic pentameter. The English ear is (or was) more sensitive to the music of the verse and less dependent upon the recurrence of identical sounds in this meter than in any other. There is no campaign against rhyme. But it is possible that excessive devotion to rhyme has thickened the modern ear. The rejection of rhyme is not a leap at facility; on the contrary, it imposes a much severer strain upon the language. When the comforting echo of rhyme is removed, success or failure in the choice of words, in the sentence structure, in the order, is at once more apparent. Rhyme removed, the poet is at once held up to the standards of prose. Rhyme removed, much ethereal music leaps up from the word, music which has hitherto chirped unnoticed in the expanse of prose. Any rhyme forbidden, many Shagpats were unwigged.

And this liberation from rhyme might be as well a liberation of rhyme. Freed from its exacting task of supporting lame verse, it could be applied with greater

effect where it is most needed. There are often passages in an unrhymed poem where rhyme is wanted for some special effect, for a sudden tightening-up, for a cumulative insistence, or for an abrupt change of mood. But formal rhymed verse will certainly not lose its place. We only need the coming of a Satirist—no man of genius is rarer—to prove that the heroic couplet has lost none of its edge since Dryden and Pope laid it down. As for the sonnet I am not so sure. But the decay of intricate formal patterns has nothing to do with the advent of *vers libre*. It had set in long before. Only in a closely-knit and homogeneous society, where many men are at work on the same problems, such a society as those which produced the Greek chorus, the Elizabethan lyric, and the Troubadour canzone, will the development of such forms ever be carried to perfection. And as for *vers libre*, we conclude that it is not defined by absence of pattern or absence of rhyme, for other verse is without these; that it is not defined by non-existence of meter, since even the *worst* verse can be scanned; and we conclude that the division between Conservative Verse and *vers libre* does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos.



1917

## TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT

In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to "the tradition" or to "a tradition"; at most, we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of So-and-so is "traditional" or even "too traditional." Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in a phrase of censure. If otherwise, it is vaguely approbative, with the implication, as to the work approved, of some pleasing archaeological reconstruction. You can hardly make the word agreeable to English ears without this comfortable reference to the reassuring science of archaeology.

Certainly the word is not likely to appear in our appreciations of living or dead writers. Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius. We know, or think we know, from the enormous mass of critical writing that has appeared in the French language the critical method or habit of the French; we only conclude (we are such unconscious people) that the French are "more critical" than we, and sometimes even plume ourselves a little with the fact, as if the French were the less spontaneous. Perhaps they are; but we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism. One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles any one else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate

2. From H.D.'s "Hermes of the Ways."

predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity.

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.

In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other. To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity. We say: it appears to conform, and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual, and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other.

To proceed to a more intelligible exposition of the relation of the poet to the past: he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon one preferred period. The first course is inadmissible, the second is an important experience of youth, and the third is a pleasant and highly desirable supplement. The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. Perhaps not even an improvement from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the extent which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery. But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.

Some one said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know.

I am alive to a usual objection to what is clearly part of my program for the *métier* of poetry. The objection is that the doctrine requires a ridiculous amount of erudition (pedantry), a claim which can be rejected by appeal to the lives of poets in any pantheon. It will even be affirmed that much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility. While, however, we persist in believing that a poet ought to know as much as will not encroach upon his necessary receptivity and necessary laziness, it is not desirable to confine knowledge to whatever can be put into a useful shape for examinations, drawing-rooms, or the still more pretentious modes of publicity. Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum. What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.

II

Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. If we attend to the confused cries of the newspaper critics and the

*suavitas* of popular repetition that follows, we shall hear the names of poets in great numbers; if we seek not Blue-book knowledge but the enjoyment of poetry, and ask for a poem, we shall seldom find it. I have tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. And I hinted, by an analogy, that the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of "personality," not being necessarily more interesting, or having "more to say," but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.

The analogy was that of the catalyist. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyist, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings. The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art. It may be formed out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several; and various feelings, inhering for the writer in particular words or phrases or images, may be added to compose the final result. Or great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever: composed out of feelings solely. Canto XV of the *Inferno* (Brunetto Latini) is a working up of the emotion evident in the situation; but the effect, though single as that of any work of art, is obtained by considerable complexity of detail. The last quatrain gives an image, a feeling attaching to an image, which "came," which did not develop simply out of what precedes, but which was probably in suspension in the poet's mind until the proper combination arrived for it to add itself to. The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.

If you compare several representative passages of the greatest poetry you see how great is the variety of types of combination, and also how completely any semi-ethical criterion of "sublimity" misses the mark. For it is not the "greatness," the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts. The episode of Paolo and Francesca employs a definite emotion, but the intensity of the poetry is something quite different from whatever intensity in the supposed experience it may give the impression of. It is no more intense, furthermore, than Canto XXVI, the voyage of Ulysses, which has not the direct dependence upon an emotion. Great variety is possible in the process of transmutation of emotion: the murder of Agamemnon, or the agony of Othello, gives an artistic effect apparently closer to a possible original than the scenes from Dante. In the *Agamemnon*,

the artistic emotion approximates to the emotion of an actual spectator; in *Othello* to the emotion of the protagonist himself. But the difference between art and the event is always absolute; the combination which is the murder of Agamemnon is probably as complex as that which is the voyage of Ulysses. In either case there has been a fusion of elements. The ode of Keats contains a number of feelings which have nothing particular to do with the nightingale, but which the nightingale, partly, perhaps, because of its attractive name, and partly because of its reputation, served to bring together.

The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.

I will quote a passage which is unfamiliar enough to be regarded with fresh attention in the light—or darkness—of these observations:

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself  
For doating on her beauty, though her death  
Shall be revenged after no common action.  
Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours  
For thee? For thee does she undo herself?  
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships  
For the poor benefit of a bewildering minute?  
Why does yon fellow falsify highways,  
And put his life between the judge's lips,  
To refine such a thing—keeps horse and men  
To bear their valours for her? . . .

In this passage (as is evident if it is taken in its context) there is a combination of positive and negative emotions: an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it. This balance of contrasted emotion is in the dramatic situation to which the speech is pertinent, but that situation alone is inadequate to it. This is, so to speak, the structural emotion, provided by the drama. But the whole effect, the dominant tone, is due to the fact that a number of floating feelings, having an affinity to this emotion by no means superficially evident, have combined with it to give us a new art emotion.

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently,

we must believe that “emotion recollected in tranquillity” is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not “recollected,” and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is “tranquil” only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him “personal.” Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

III

ὁ δὲ νόος ἴσως θεϊότερον τι καὶ ἀπροθές ἔσται.<sup>1</sup>

This essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry. To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad. There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is an expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.

1920

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LOUISE BOGAN

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(1897–1970)

Born in Livermore Falls, Maine, Louise Bogan (pronounced Bogán) grew up buffeted by the storms of her parents' troubled marriage. Her father, Daniel Bogan, served as a foreman of various New England mills, and the family moved frequently, living in hotels and boarding houses in Milton, New Hampshire, from 1901 to 1904, Ballardvale, Massachusetts, from 1904 to 1909, and Roxbury, near Boston, after 1909. Her mother, May Shields Bogan, engaged in extramarital affairs, which led to several prolonged disappearances from the family. Considering the effects of these disruptions in the autobiographical writings collected in *Journey Around My Room* (1980), Bogan admitted that in childhood she became “the semblance of a girl, in which some desires and illusions had been early assassinated: shot dead.”

The skepticism about love and the preoccupation with romantic betrayal that characterize Bogan's poetry, as well as the severe depressions that afflicted her during adulthood, were likely engendered during these difficult years.

In her education, however, Bogan found a haven against disorder. She attended a convent school from 1906 to 1908 and then studied at the prestigious Girls' Latin School in Boston, where she received a superb classical education and began to write poetry. After a year at Boston University, she was offered a scholarship to Radcliffe, but chose instead to marry Curt Alexander, a German native who was a corporal in the U.S. army. When the United States declared war, Alexander was shipped to Panama in April 1917. Bogan, who was four months pregnant, joined him there in May and gave birth to a daughter in October. Miserable in Panama and disillusioned with her marriage, she returned to Massachusetts with the baby a year later. After a brief rapprochement with Alexander, she left him in 1919 and moved to Manhattan, entrusting her daughter to her parents. Her husband's death in 1920 from pneumonia made Bogan eligible for widow's benefits, which, along with work at Brentano's Bookstore and the New York Public Library, gave her the financial security to concentrate on poetry.

In New York, Bogan soon forged friendships with writers who helped her embark on a literary career. Her poems appeared in journals such as *Poetry*, *Others*, and the *Measure*, and in 1923 she published her first book, *Body of This Death*. The following year, at the urging of Edmund Wilson,

1. Aristotle, “On the Soul”: “Surely the mind is divine and not subject to outside impressions.”