

T. S. Eliot

[E. E. Cummings]

The somewhat recently published Poems is an accurate and uncorpulent collection of instupidities. Between the negative and flabby and ponderous and little bellowings of those multitudinous contemporaries who are obstinately always “unconventional” or else “modern” at the expense of being (what is most difficult) alive, Mr. T.S. Eliot inserts the positive and deep beauty of his skilful and immediate violins . . . the result is at least thrilling.

He has done the trick for us before. In one of the was it two [Blasts](#) skilfully occurred, more than successfully framed by much soundless noise, the Rhapsody and Preludes. In one of the God knows nobody knows how many there will be *Others*, startlingly enshrined in a good deal of noiseless sound, Prufrock and Portrait of a Lady carefully happened.¹ But “this slim little volume” as a reviewer might say achieves a far more forceful presentation, since it competes with and defeats not mere blasters and differentists but τό év -s [“the one -s”] and origins and all that is Windily and Otherwise enervate and talkative.²

Some Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe are, to a student of Mr. T.S., unnecessarily illuminating:

“. . . this style which secures its emphasis by always hesitating on the edge of caricature at the right moment. [(93)]
 . . . this intense and serious and indubitably great poetry, which, like some great painting and sculpture, attains its effects by something not unlike caricature.” [(94)]

Even without this somewhat mighty hint, this something which for all its slipperiness is after all a doorknob to be [end page 25] grasped by anyone who wishes to enter the “some great” Art-Parlours, ourselves might have constructed a possibly logical development from Preludes and Rhapsody on a Windy Night along J. Alfred and Portrait up the [two Sweeneys](#) to let us say [The Hippopotamus](#). We might have been disgracefully inspired to the extent of projecting as arithmetical, not to say dull, a classification of Eliot

¹ Eliot’s “[Preludes](#)” and “[Rhapsody on a Windy Night](#)” appeared in the Vorticist journal [Blast](#) II (July, 1915); “[The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock](#)” was first published in [Poetry](#) 6.3 (June 1915); and “[Portrait of a Lady](#)” appeared in the little magazine [Others](#) (Sept. 1915).

² The last sentence of the paragraph alludes to the second stanza of Eliot’s poem “[Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service](#)”:

In the beginning was the Word.
 Superfetation of τό év,
 And at the mensual turn of time
 Produced enervate Origen.

“Superfetation” is the “formation or development of a second fetus when one is already present in the uterus,” while the Greek τό év means “the one.” Origen (185-254 AD) was a father of the church who castrated himself to avoid temptations of the flesh. The stanza, like some parts of the rest of the poem, pokes fun at Unitarianism: the original Word, one at the beginning, multiplied through time as one god became three persons within one God. This sort of multiple birth eventually produced the “enervate” (exhausted) and castrated Origen. Thus the original creative Word ends in a non-reproductive Origen.

as that of Picasso by the author of certain rudimentary and not even ecclesiastical nonsense entitled [The Caliph's Design](#).³ But (it is an enormous but) our so doing necessarily would have proved worthless, precisely for the reason that before an Eliot we become alive or intense as we become intense or alive before a Cezanne or a Lachaise: or since, as always in the case of superficial because vertical analysis, to attempt the boxing and labeling of genius is to involve in something inescapably rectilinear—a formula, for example—not the artist but the “critic.”

However, we have a better reason. The last word on caricature was spoken as far back as 1913. “My dear it’s all so perfectly ridiculous” remarked to an elderly Boston woman an elderly woman of Boston, as the twain made their noticeably irrevocable exeunt from that most colossal of all circuses, the ([then in Boston](#)) International.⁴ “My dear if some of the pictures didn’t look like something it wouldn’t be so amusing” observed, on the threshold, the e.B.w., adding “I should hate to have my portrait painted by any of those ‘artists’!” “They’ll never make a statue of *me*” stated with polyphiloprogenitive conviction the e.w.o.B,

“Sway in the wind like a field of ripe corn.”

Says Mr. Eliot.

In the case of Poems, to state frankly and briefly what we like may be as good a way as another of exhibiting our numerous “critical” incapacities. We like first, to speak from an altogether personal standpoint, that any and all attempts to lasso Mr. Eliot with the Vorticist emblem have signally failed. That Mr. E. Pound (with whose Caesarlike refusal of the kingly crown we are entirely familiar) may not have coiled the rope [end page 26] whose fatal noose has, over a few unfortunate Britons, excludingly rather than includingly settled, makes little or no difference since the hand which threw the lariat and the bronc’ which threw the steers alike belong to him. Be it said of this peppy gentleman that, insofar as he is responsible for possibly one-half of the most alive poetry and probably all of the least intense prose committed, during the last few years, in the American and English language, he merits something beyond the incoherent abuse and inchoate adoration which have become his daily breakfast food—merits in fact the doffing of many kelleys; that insofar as he is one of history’s greatest advertisers he is an extraordinarily useful bore, much like a riveter which whatever you may say assets the progress of a skyscraper; whereas that insofar as he is responsible for the overpasting of an at least attractive manifesto, “Ezra Pound,” with an at least pedantic war cry, “Vorticism,” he deserves to be drawn and quartered by the incomparably trite brush of the great and the only and the Wyndham and the Lewis—if only as an adjectival garnish to that nounlike effigy of our hero by his friend The Hieratic Buster.⁵ Let us therefore

³ *The Caliph's Design* (1919), a book of architectural theory by Wyndham Lewis.

⁴ Cummings alludes to the 1913 [Armory Show](#), whose proper title was the “International Exhibition of Modern Art.” This show introduced Americans for the first time to avant-garde and modernist art.

⁵ Vorticism was started at least in part as a way of promoting the new art of sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, whom Cummings refers to here as “The Hieratic Buster.” (Gaudier sculpted a large bust of Ezra Pound called [Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound](#).)

mention the fact, for it seems to us worthy of notice—that at no moment do T.S. Eliot and E.P. propaganda simultaneously inhabit our consciousness.

Second, we like that not any of Poems' fifty-one pages fails to impress us with an overwhelming sense of technique. By technique we do not mean a great many things, including: anything static, a school, a noun, a slogan, a formula: These Three For Instant Beauty, Ars Est Celare, Hasn't Scratched Yet, Professor Woodberry, Grape Nuts.⁶ By technique we do mean one thing: the alert hatred of normality which, through the lips of a tactile and cohesive adventure, asserts that nobody in general and some one in particular is incorrigibly and actually alive. This some one is, it would seem, the extremely great artist: or, he who prefers above everything and within everything the unique dimension of intensity, which it amuses him to substitute in us for the comforting and comfortable furniture of reality. If we examine the means through which this substitution is allowed by Mr. Eliot to happen in his reader, [end page 27] we find that they include a vocabulary almost brutally tuned to attain distinctness; an extraordinarily tight orchestration of the shapes of sound; the delicate and careful murderings—almost invariably interpreted, internally as well as terminally, through near-rhyme and rhyme—of established tempos by oral rhythms. Here is an example of Eliot's tuning:

“Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
The zebra stripes along his jaw
Swelling to maculate giraffe.”

Here is a specimen of his compact orchestration;

“I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.”

Here is Eliot himself directing the exquisitely and thoroughly built thing:

“His laughter was submarine and profound
Like the old man of the sea’s
Hidden under coral islands
Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the green silence,
Dropping from fingers of surf,”

⁶ In his 1919 campaign after WWI, presidential candidate Warren G. Harding called for a return to “normalcy.” EEC cites formulaic advertising slogans and a classical tag, *Ars est celare artem* [“Art is to conceal art”]. Professor George E. Woodberry published *Literary Essays* in 1920.

To come to our final like, which it must be admitted is also our largest—we like that no however cautiously attempted dissection of Mr. T.S.'s sensitivity begins to touch a few certain lines whereby become big and blundering and totally unskilful our altogether unnecessary fingers:

“The lamp hummed:
 ‘Regard the moon,
 La lune ne garde aucune rancune,
 She winks a feeble eye,
 She smiles into corners.
 She smoothes the hair of the grass.
 The moon has lost her memory.
 A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
 Her hand twists a paper rose,”

At the risk of being jeered for an “uncritical” remark we mention that this is one of the few huge fragilities before which comment is disgusting.

From *The Dial*, June 1920. [end page 29]

Works Cited

- Cummings, E. E. “[T. S. Eliot](#).” *The Dial* 68 (June 1920): 781-84. Rpt. in *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: October House, 1965. 25-29.
- Eliot, T. S. “Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe.” *Art & Letters* 4 (Autumn, 1919): 194-9. Rpt. *The Sacred Wood*. 1920. London: Methuen, 1960. 86-94.