

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF T.S. ELIOT

An Essay on the Nature

MATTHIESSEN

WITH A CHAPTER ON ELIOT

Third Edition



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This masterpiece of literary criticism by the late Professor Matthiessen, who taught at Harvard University for many years, was first published in 1935. A second edition, revised and enlarged, appeared in 1947 and included two new chapters on Eliot's plays written up to the war and on the *Four Quartets*.

For this new third edition, C. L. Barber has added a brief appreciation of Matthiessen and a long chapter covering the latest period of Eliot's work and a whole new stage of his development. In it he discusses Eliot's later criticism, written during the war and since, and his recent verse plays, *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Cocktail Party*. C. L. Barber has been a Professor of English at Amherst College.

'Matthiessen analyzes with clarity and perception . . . the musical structure underlying the *Four Quartets*.'

—*Saturday Review*

' . . . he covers every aspect of Eliot's work and thought, derivations and influence, with admirable thoroughness.'

—*The New Yorker*

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The Achievement of
T. S. ELIOT

AN ESSAY ON THE NATURE OF POETRY

F. O. MATTHIESSEN

With a chapter on Eliot's later work

by C. L. BARBER

Third Edition

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American Renaissance, 1941
Henry James: The Major Phase, 1944
The James Family, 1947
Theodore Dreiser, 1951
The Responsibilities of the Critic, Essays and Reviews
SELECTED BY JOHN RACKLIFFE, 1952

EDITOR OF

- Selected Poems by Herman Melville*, 1944
Stories of Writers and Artists by Henry James, 1944
Russell Cheney: A Record of His Work, 1946
The Notebooks of Henry James, IN COLLABORATION WITH
KENNETH B. MURDOCK, 1947
The Oxford Book of American Verse, 1950

For
KENNETH *and* LAURETTE MURDOCK

What does the mind enjoy in books? Either the style or nothing. But, someone says, what about the thought? The thought, that is the style, too.

CHARLES MAURRAS

We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy.

W. B. YEATS

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION (1935)

MY DOUBLE AIM in this essay is to evaluate Eliot's method and achievement as an artist, and in so doing to emphasize certain of the fundamental elements in the nature of poetry which are in danger of being obscured by the increasing tendency to treat poetry as a social document and to forget that it is an art. The most widespread error in contemporary criticism is to neglect form and to concern itself entirely with content. The romantic critic is generally not interested in the poet's work, but in finding the man behind it. The humanistic critic and the sociological critic have in common that both tend to ignore the evaluation of specific poems in their preoccupation with the ideological background from which the poems spring. All these concerns can have value in expert hands, but only if it is realized that they are not criticism of poetry. In combating the common error, my contention is that, although in the last analysis content and form are inseparable, a poem can be neither enjoyed nor understood unless the reader experiences all of its formal details, unless he allows the movement and pattern of its words to exercise their full charm over him before he attempts to say precisely what it is that the poem means. The most fatal approach to a poem is to focus merely on what it seems to state, to try to isolate its ideas from their context in order to approve or disapprove of them before having really grasped their implications in the poem itself. Consequently, my approach to Eliot's poetry, and to poetry generally, is through close attention to its technique. I agree with Mallarmé that 'poetry is not written with ideas, it is written with words,' as well as with the assertion that what matters is not what a poem says, but what it *is*. That does not mean that either the poem or the poet can be separated

from the society that produced them, or that a work of art does not inevitably both reflect and illuminate its age. Nor does it imply that a poet is necessarily lacking in ideas, or that the content of his work, the material he chooses to write about, and the interpretation he makes of it, is without cardinal significance in determining his relation to life and to the currents of thought in his time. But even that significance is obscured, if not distorted, by the criticism that pays heed solely to the poet's ideas and not to their expression, that turns the poet into a philosopher or a political theorist or a pamphleteer, that treats his work as a specimen of sociological evidence, and meanwhile neglects the one quality that gives his words their permanence, his quality as an artist.

In my evaluation of Eliot's poetry I have not been concerned with tracing the development of his thought, nor with his criticism except in so far as it throws light on his own poetical theory and practice, though the evolution both of his critical tenets and of his conception of the relation of the individual to society would make a good subject for another book. In order to give my book as close a unity as possible, I have consciously made an experiment in its organization. I have tried to write the whole as one connected essay, with each section closely interweaving with what goes before and what follows. Indeed, the division into chapters is simply a convenience, in order, through their titles, to stress some points that I am most interested in establishing. My desire for a sustained condensed effect has also caused me to make use of notes for some passages of more technical analysis, as well as for longer illustrations. These notes are intended to be integral elaborations of the text, but those readers who, like myself, are irritated at the distraction of being repeatedly referred to the back of the book, are asked to postpone that act at least until the end of each chapter. For unless the essay stands clearly on its own feet, without aid from the notes, it will not stand reading at all.

PREFACE TO THE 1947 EDITION

IN THE dozen years since I undertook this book much more criticism of Eliot has been written, most notably by Cleanth Brooks in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), and several other studies are now projected, including one by Delmore Schwartz. My own views of the poet have inevitably undergone some change, but though I may now see limitations of which I was not conscious in my first absorption in Eliot's earlier work, I am even more impressed by the contemplative depth in his subsequent production. My growing divergence from his view of life is that I believe that it is possible to accept the 'radical imperfection' of man, and yet to be a political radical as well, to be aware that no human society can be perfect, and yet to hold that the proposition that 'all men are created equal' demands dynamic adherence from a Christian no less than from a democrat. But the scope of my book remains what it was before. I have not written about Eliot's politics or religion except as they are expressed through his poetry.

If I were writing the book now, I doubt that I would use the same compressed method of presentation, and I should certainly not introduce so many notes. But those notes still seem useful for their original purpose of providing a running commentary on my sub-title, on my conception of 'the nature of poetry.' I have therefore left most of them untouched, and the only revisions of my earlier text are designed to simplify some of its more cumbersome sentences, in which, as I can now see, I was flagrantly thinking out my material as I wrote it.

The first six chapters are still meant to stand as a whole, as an estimate not so much of particular poems as of Eliot's poetic method. I have now added two chapters on his chief

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work of the past decade. That on his Quartets first appeared in *The Kenyon Review* (Spring 1943). That on his Plays has just been written.

F. O. M.

October 1946

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION (1958)

THIS BOOK has developed as Eliot has developed. The first six chapters, which the late F. O. Matthiessen published in 1935, are an essay on the nature of poetry as it had been re-defined by the literary revolution of which Eliot was a leader. In the next two chapters, published in 1947, Matthiessen dealt with the plays written up to the war and with the great new achievement of 1935-43, *Four Quartets*. The criticism written during the war and since, and the verse plays produced in 1949 and 1953, constitute a whole new stage of development, to which I have tried to do justice in the chapter which is added in this edition.

The book Matthiessen published in 1935, the first important book of a great American scholar and critic, grew out of his encounter with Eliot and Eliot's work when the poet was Norton lecturer at Harvard in 1932-33. Matthiessen had been reading Eliot's poetry with excitement and pleasure for some years, but he found himself launched on a book in 1933 because his realization of the scope of Eliot's achievement kept growing as his criticism, his lectures, his conversation, and his poetry illuminated each other. Matthiessen's method is to use Eliot's prose to define the qualities of his poetry, and his book quotes revealingly from the essays published in the various collections, from a wide range of still uncollected pieces, from unpublished lectures and notes, as well as, occasionally, from conversation. Quoting Eliot on Eliot can be a merely passive business, but Matthiessen is active: he is locating Eliot's achievement as well as describing it, and his essay has the vitality of discovery: a new major writer's position is just being made out and the whole landscape is being reordered in consequence. In writing about Eliot, he found for the first time an opportunity to express

many of his own interests in art and society. The observations about Eliot's American heritage, particularly his relation to Henry James and Hawthorne, anticipate much that was worked out at large in *American Renaissance* (1941), a book which has become, as Henry Nash Smith has observed, 'a landmark in the interpretation of our literature.' Many of the remarks on the place of suffering and tragic insight in Eliot's conception of poetry also point forward to Matthiessen's intensive work on James during the war, notably *Henry James: The Major Phase* (1944).

Matthiessen did not read or write in a departmental way. The political concerns characteristic of literary discussion in the thirties are reflected in his book, and it is remarkable how firmly he holds a balance based on a long and broad view. His own liberal-socialist convictions were opposite to Eliot's conservatism; but he was like Eliot in combining an unfailing respect for the integrity of works of art with a steady awareness of their complex involvement in the historical process. In following Eliot's thinking about art and culture, Matthiessen makes clear its range and organic unity as no other treatment that I know of has done; and he arrives also at some important statements of his own. The other thing that he does superlatively is to read passages from the poems. He does not provide a running commentary on the whole body of the work, a service that has since been performed with distinction by several other critics, notably Elizabeth Drew and George Williamson. Instead, his method is to illustrate general observations about features of Eliot's technique and sensibility by considering representative passages. In doing so, he keeps always a sense of the whole quality of the poetry, its roundness; and he is concerned with it both as an experience of beauty and as a human statement.

A critic's fundamental instrument is the whole of himself. Matthiessen was a person who strove for unity of being with

a heroic intensity. His suicide in 1950 came as a profound shock to his many friends and devoted students, as well as to the whole intellectual community; his death was felt as the defeat of a hero. Thirty-four contributors joined in a collective portrait edited by Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman and published first as a special issue of *The Monthly Review* and then as a book by Henry Schuman (New York, 1950). From the time when at Yale he united the roles of leading campus citizen and devoted student of the arts, to the last years when his day might include early morning work on his book on Dreiser, a seminar at Harvard on Henry James, a stormy committee session about university policy, and a convivial evening with Harry Bridges, his life embraced interests which are usually mutually exclusive. And his passionate and decisive temperament required a thoroughgoing commitment in every relation: in the History and Literature Department at Harvard, where he was the heart and soul of the board of tutors; in the affairs of Rhodes Scholars and his Yale honor society; in the publication with Professor Kenneth Murdock of *The Notebooks of Henry James*; in the financing of a non-Communist journal of socialist opinion, *The Monthly Review*; in the studies and the troubles of his students, many of whom became his friends; in following the work of the painter Russell Cheney, through whom he developed an informed taste in painting; in a religious life as a communicant in the Protestant Episcopal Church.

Matthiessen described his ideal of wholeness of life in writing about his experience while teaching abroad in 1947 at the Salzburg Seminar and in Prague. His richly human, well-written journal, *From the Heart of Europe*, was published just as the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia gave the lie to his generous hopes for a middle way there between West and East. The note which he left at his death, after speaking of exhaustion produced by severe depression, added

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in a final paragraph: 'How much the state of the world has to do with my state of mind I do not know. But as a Christian and a Socialist believing in international peace I find myself terribly depressed by the present tensions.' A number of editorials and statements in the press at the time of his death drew partisan morals by ascribing it entirely to his political concerns. What he himself wrote—his 'How much . . . I do not know'—shows that he preserved, even under the greatest stress, the dignity of his disciplined intelligence. Both his criticism and his political action were distinguished by the way he recognized the necessity of relating private and public experience while respecting the complexity of the relationships between them. One of the lines of poetry which Matthiessen made particularly meaningful to his students was the statement of Eliot's Becket that 'action is suffering and suffering is action.' His own action, in criticism, in politics, perhaps most effectively of all in his ever-generous teaching, involved suffering and so was informed with understanding and compassion. His nature was such that he had to suffer, and to act, violently. It often cost him a desperate effort, but until the end he managed to suffer and to act for others, for the subject in hand. The lasting value of his interpretation of Eliot reflects the resources for understanding which were won by living in this way.

C. L. BARBER

Amherst, Massachusetts
May, 1958

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS (1935)

I WANT to thank the subject of my essay not only for his generous permission to quote from some unpublished lectures, but also for the great benefit of conversation during his recent year at Harvard. I am also thankful that my first introduction to Eliot's poetry came through my friends, the poets Phelps Putnam and Maxwell Evarts Foster, who made me listen to it read aloud, thus enabling me to feel from the outset its lyric sound and movement, instead of letting me begin by losing the poetry in a tortuous effort to find a logical pattern in its unfamiliar structure. I am particularly indebted to my friend and colleague Theodore Spencer, with whom I have discussed these matters ever since our first meeting nine years ago. I am afraid that he will find here more than one of his remarks, unacknowledged, but I hope not garbled. I want also to thank Walter and Esther Houghton, Perry and Elizabeth Miller, Eleanor McLaughlin, Louis Hyde, Russell Cheney, W. Ellery Sedgwick, Harry Levin, and César Lombardi Barber, fellow discoverers. I am grateful to David W. Prall for having turned his trained eye on the last two chapters; and many pages have benefited from the vigorous onslaught of Russell Davenport, who takes exception to much that I have said here and elsewhere, or am likely to say in the future. Among other contemporary critics I am most conscious of my obligations to the work of I. A. Richards and Edmund Wilson, not simply for their own remarks on Eliot, but, more importantly, for stimulus and challenge during the past several years.

I want also to thank Harcourt, Brace and Company for permission to quote extensively from Eliot's work.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 26, 1888, the seventh and youngest child of Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Chauncy Stearns. The Eliot family, which is of Devonshire origin, goes back in America to Andrew Eliot (1627-1704), who, emigrating in middle life from East Coker, Somerset, was enrolled as a member of the First Church of Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1670. Apparently a cordwainer by trade, he was frequently chosen as Selectman, and finally as Town Clerk. He was a juror against the Salem witches at the same time that Hawthorne's ancestor was one of the judges who condemned them, but afterwards made a public recantation and greatly reproached himself for his delusion. The poet's direct ancestors were for several generations mainly merchants of Boston, though the Rev. Andrew Eliot, D.D. (1718-78), a strong Congregationalist and an enemy to Episcopalianism, was minister of the North Church, and was elected president of Harvard but declined to leave his congregation. The poet's grandfather, the Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, D.D. (1811-87), a second cousin of Charles William Eliot, had gone out to St. Louis directly after his graduation from the Harvard Divinity School in 1834, and had established the first Unitarian church in that city. A man of great activity in public service throughout a long career, he was a balanced but firm opponent of slavery, and was instrumental in keeping Missouri in the Union. He likewise founded and helped to build Washington University (which would have been called Eliot University except for his objection), and became its Chancellor in 1872. Among his extensive writings, which were mostly of an ethical and philanthropic nature, was a sermon on 'Suffering Considered as Discipline.' From his large

family of children two of his four sons entered the ministry; the youngest became a lawyer. His second son, Henry Ware Eliot (1841-1919), who was named after one of the foremost figures in New England Unitarianism, graduated from Washington University in 1863, and became connected with the Hydraulic Press Brick Company of St. Louis, of which he later was president. He was married in 1868 to Charlotte Chauncy Stearns (1843-1930), the daughter of a commission merchant and trader of Boston, and the descendant of Isaac Stearns, who had come out with John Winthrop in 1630 as one of the original settlers of the Bay Colony. The poet's mother was a woman of keen intellectual interests, whose published work comprised a full-length biography of her father-in-law and a dramatic poem on the life of Savonarola.

T. S. Eliot prepared for college at the Smith Academy in St. Louis (a department of Washington University), as his only brother had done eight years before him; and spent one final year at Milton. Entering Harvard in the autumn of 1906, he was thus in the same class with John Reed, Bronson Cutting, Stuart Chase, and Walter Lippmann. He was an editor of the undergraduate literary magazine, *The Harvard Advocate*, to which he contributed a few poems, was elected Class Odist, and belonged to various literary and social clubs. Among the members of the Harvard faculty those who most clearly left their influence upon him were Irving Babbitt and George Santayana. After completing his college course in three years Eliot continued his study of philosophy in the Harvard Graduate School. The year 1910-11 was spent in Paris, reading French literature and philosophy at the Sorbonne. He returned to America in the autumn of 1911, and passed the next three years again at Harvard, extending his study of metaphysics, logic, and psychology to include also Indic philology and Sanskrit. In the year 1913-14 he was appointed as an assistant in Philosophy at Harvard. At the end of that year he was awarded