T.S. ELIOT

The Use of Poetry & The Use of Criticism

THE USE OF POETRY AND THE USE OF CRITICISM

STUDIES IN THE RELATION OF CRITICISM TO POETRY IN ENGLAND

T. S. ELIOT

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TO THE MEMORY OF

CHARLES WHIBLEY

TO WHOM I PROMISED A BETTER BOOK

PREFACE TO THE EDITION OF 1964

IT is said that Yeats had more than enough of *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* as his anthology piece. In my youth *La Figlia Che Piange* was favoured as the most innocuous of my poems, but in later years I have been more fairly represented (though I should be glad to hear no more of a bang and a whimper). But with my essays I have not been so fortunate. Just as any student of contemporary literature, putting pen to paper about my criticism, is certain to pass an examination on it if he alludes to the 'dissociation of sensibility' and the 'objective correlative', so every anthologist wishing to include a sample of my essays will choose *Tradition and the Individual Talent*—perhaps the most juvenile and certainly the first to appear in print.

I reprint *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* in the faint hope that one of these lectures may be taken instead of *Tradition and the Individual Talent* by some anthologist of the future. That, the best known of my essays, appeared in 1917, when I had taken over the assistant-editorship of *The Egoist* on Richard Aldington's being called up for military service, and before I had been asked to contribute to any other periodical. The lectures which compose the present book were written during the winter of 1932–33. I had been honoured with appointment to the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship

at Harvard—a position offered annually to some man of letters, American or European, for the period of one year. I did not find leisure to prepare the lectures until I arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the autumn of 1932, and so they had to be composed, under considerable pressure, during the period of my residence there. Nevertheless, after re-reading them twice, I found to my surprise that I was still prepared to accept them as a statement of my critical position.

My earliest critical essays, dating from a period when I was somewhat under the influence of Ezra Pound's enthusiasm for Remy de Gourmont, came to seem to me the product of immaturity—though I do not repudiate 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' The eight lectures in this volume, in spite of the fact that some of them were written in the course of delivering the series, seem to me still valid. At least, I am ashamed neither of the style nor of the matter. Not having looked at them for many years, I found them, after two readings, acceptable enough for me to hope that republication in the present form may justify itself.

As for the opening paragraph of the first lecture, I should explain that the United States were at that moment on the eve of the presidential election which brought Franklin D. Roosevelt his first term of office.

T.S.E.

1963

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INTRODUCTION

November 4th, 1932

THE whole country is now excited by the political campaign, and in a condition of irrational emotion. The best of the prospect is that a reorganisation of parties seems not unlikely as an indirect result of the present contest between the Republicans and the Democrats. . . . But any radical change is not to be hoped for."

These words occur in a letter written by Charles Eliot Norton on September 24th, 1876. The present lectures will have no concern with politics; I have begun with a political quotation only as a reminder of the varied interests of the scholar and humanist whom this foundation commemorates. The lecturer on such a foundation is fortunate who can feel, as I do, sympathy and admiration for the man whose memory the lectures are intended to keep living. Charles Eliot Norton had the moral and spiritual qualities, of a stoic kind, which are possible without the benefits of revealed religion; and the mental gifts which are possible without genius. To do the useful thing, to say the courageous thing, to contemplate the beautiful thing: that is enough for one man's life. Few men have known better than he how to give just place to the claims of the public and of the private life; few men have had better opportunity, few of those having the opportunity have availed themselves of it better than he. The usual politician, the

man of public affairs, is rarely able to go to the "public place" without assuming the "public face": Norton always preserved his privacy. And living as he did in a non-Christian society, and in a world which, as he saw it on both sides of the Atlantic, showed signs of decay, he maintained the standards of the humanity and humanism that he knew. He was able, even at an early age, to look upon the passing order without regret, and towards the coming order without hope. In a letter of December 1869 he speaks more strongly and more comprehensively than in that which I have quoted:

> The future is very dark in Europe, and to me it looks as if we were entering upon a period quite new in history, — one in which the questions on which parties will divide, and from which outbreak after outbreak of passion and violence will arise, will not longer be political but immediately social. . . . Whether our period of economic enterprise, unlimited competition, and unrestrained individualism, is the highest stage of human progress is to me very doubtful; and sometimes, when I see the existing conditions of European (to say nothing of American) social order, bad as they are for the mass alike of upper and lower classes, I wonder whether our civilisation can maintain itself against the forces which are banding together for the destruction of many of the institutions in which it is embodied, or whether we are not to have another period of decline, fall, and ruin and revival, like that of the first thirteen hundred years of our era. It would not grieve me much to know that this were to be the case. No man who knows what society at the present day really is, but must agree that it is not worth preserving on its present basis.[1]

[1] My quotations from Norton's letters are taken from the *Life and Letters of Charles Eliot Norton* (Houghton, Mifflin: 2 vols.).

These are words to which many who approach contemporary problems with more dogmatic assumptions than Norton's can give assent. Yet for him the permanent importance of literature if not of dogma was a fixed point. The people which ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric; the people which ceases to produce literature ceases to move in thought and sensibility. The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility.

In these lectures I have to deal as much or more with criticism of poetry as with poetry itself; and my subject is not merely the relation of criticism to poetry, if by that we assume that we know already what poetry is, and does, and is for. Indeed, a good part of criticism has consisted simply in the pursuit of answers to these questions. Let me start with the supposition that we do not know what poetry is, or what it does or ought to do, or of what use it is; and try to find out, in examining the relation of poetry and criticism, what the use of both of them is. We may even discover that we have no very clear idea of what *use* is; at any rate we had better not assume that we know.

I shall not begin with any general definition of what is and what is not poetry, or any discussion of whether poetry need be always in verse, or any consideration of the difference between the poetry-verse antithesis and the poetry-prose antithesis. Criticism, however,

may be separated from the beginning not into two kinds, but according to two tendencies. I assume that criticism is that department of thought which either seeks to find out what poetry is, what its use is, what desires it satisfies, why it is written and why read, or recited; or which, making some conscious or unconscious assumption that we do know these things, assesses actual poetry. We may find that good criticism has other designs than these; but these are the ones which it is allowed to profess. Criticism, of course, never does find out what poetry is, in the sense of arriving at an adequate definition; but I do not know of what use such a definition would be if it were found. Nor can criticism ever arrive at any final appraisal of poetry. But there are these two theoretical limits of criticism: at one of which we attempt to answer the question "what is poetry?" and at the other "is this a good poem?" No theoretic ingenuity will suffice to answer the second question, because no theory can amount to much which is not founded upon a direct experience of good poetry; but on the other hand our direct experience of poetry involves a good deal of generalising activity.

The two questions, which represent the most abstract formulation of what is far from being an abstract activity, imply each other. The critic who remains worth reading has asked, if he has only imperfectly answered, both questions. Aristotle, in what we possess of his writings upon poetry, does, I think, quicken our appreciation of the Greek tragic dramatists; Coleridge, in his defence of the poetry of Words-

worth, is led into generalisations about poetry which are of the greatest interest; and Wordsworth, in his explanation of his own poetry, makes assertions about the nature of poetry which, if excessive, have a wider bearing than even he may have realised. Mr. I. A. Richards, who ought to know, if anyone does, what equipment the scientific critic needs, tells us that "both a passionate knowledge of poetry and a capacity for dispassionate psychological analysis" are required. Mr. Richards, like every serious critic of poetry, is a serious moralist as well. His ethics, or theory of value, is one which I cannot accept; or rather, I cannot accept any such theory which is erected upon purely individual-psychological foundations. But his psychology of the poetic experience is based upon his own experience of poetry, as truly as his theory of value arises out of his psychology. You may be dissatisfied with his philosophical conclusions but still believe (as I do) in his discriminating taste in poetry. But if on the other hand you had no faith in the critic's ability to tell a good poem from a bad one, you would put little reliance upon the validity of his theories. In order to analyse the enjoyment and appreciation of a good poem, the critic must have experienced the enjoyment, and he must convince us of his taste. For the experience of enjoying a bad poem while thinking it is a good one is very different from that of enjoying a good poem.

We do expect the critic who theorises to know a good poem when he sees it. It is not always true that a person who knows a good poem when he sees it can

tell us why it is a good poem. The experience of poetry, like any other experience, is only partially translatable into words; to begin with, as Mr. Richards says, "it is never what a poem *says* that matters, but what it *is*." And we know that some people who are inarticulate, and cannot say why they like a poem, may have deeper and more discriminating sensibility than some others who can talk glibly about it; we must remember too that poetry is not written simply to provide material for conversation. Even the most accomplished of critics can, in the end, only point to the poetry which seems to him to be the real thing. Nevertheless, our talking about poetry is a part of, an extension of, our experience of it; and as a good deal of thinking has gone to the making of poetry, so a good deal may well go to the study of it. The rudiment of criticism is the ability to select a good poem and reject a bad poem; and its most severe test is of its ability to select a good *new* poem, to respond properly to a new situation. The experience of poetry, as it develops in the conscious and mature person, is not merely the sum of the experiences of good poems. Education in poetry requires an organisation of these experiences. There is not one of us who is born with, or who suddenly acquires at puberty or later, an infallible discrimination and taste. The person whose experience is limited is always liable to be taken in by the sham or the adulterate article; and we see generation after generation of untrained readers being taken in by the sham and the adulterate in its own time — indeed preferring them, for they are more easily as-

similable than the genuine article. Yet a very large number of people, I believe, have the native capacity for enjoying *some* good poetry: how much, or how many degrees of capacity may profitably be distinguished, is not part of my present purpose to enquire. It is only the exceptional reader, certainly, who in the course of time comes to classify and compare his experiences, to see one in the light of others; and who, as his poetic experiences multiply, will be able to understand each more accurately. The element of enjoyment is enlarged into appreciation, which brings a more intellectual addition to the original intensity of feeling. It is a second stage in our understanding of poetry when we no longer merely select and reject, but organise. We may even speak of a third stage, one of reorganisation; a stage at which a person already educated in poetry meets with something new in his own time, and finds a new pattern of poetry arranging itself in consequence.

This pattern, which we form in our own minds out of our own reading of poetry that we have enjoyed, is a kind of answer, which we make each for himself, to the question "what is poetry?" At the first stage we find out what poetry is by reading it and enjoying some of what we read; at a later stage our perception of the resemblances and differences between what we read for the first time and what we have already enjoyed itself contributes to our enjoyment. We learn what poetry is — if we ever learn — from reading it; but one might say that we should not be able to recognise poetry in particular unless we had an innate idea

of poetry in general. At any rate, the question "what is poetry?" issues quite naturally from our experience of poems. Even, therefore, although we may admit that few forms of intellectual activity seem to have less to show for themselves, in the course of history, in the way of books worth reading, than does criticism, it would appear that criticism, like any philosophica- activity, is inevitable and requires no justificationl To ask "what is poetry?" is to posit the critical function.

I suppose that to many people the thought must have occurred, that at some periods when great poetry was written there was no written criticism; and that in some periods in which much criticism has been written the quality of the poetry has been inferior. This fact has suggested an antithesis between the critical and the creative, between critical ages and creative ages; and it is sometimes thought that criticism flourishes most at times when creative vigour is in defect. It is with such a prejudice in mind that people have coupled with "critical ages" the adjective "Alexandrian." Several gross assumptions underlie this prejudice, including a confusion between several different things, and between works of very different quality, included under "criticism." I am using the term "criticism" throughout these lectures, as I hope you will discover, with a pretty narrow extension. I have no desire to extenuate the vices of the vast number of books which pass by that designation, or to flatter the lazy habit of substituting, for a careful study of the texts, the assimilation of other peo-