

CHAPTER 21

French poetry

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Among the many tributes that Eliot paid to the Baudelairean tradition in French poetry throughout his career, there is none more eloquent than the one he gave in 1933, in his third and final Turnbull Lecture. Speaking in particular of Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière, he extends his acknowledgements to other poets:

I know that when I first came across these French poets, some twenty-three years ago, it was a personal enlightenment such as I can hardly communicate. I felt for the first time in contact with a tradition, for the first time, that I had, so to speak, some backing by the dead, and at the same time that I had something to say that might be new and relevant. I doubt whether, without the men I have mentioned – Baudelaire, Corbière, Verlaine, Laforgue, Mallarmé, Rimbaud – I should have been able to write poetry at all. (*VMP*, 287)

Shortly afterwards he declares roundly: ‘The ultimate purpose, the ultimate value, of the poet’s work is religious’ (*VMP*, 288). It is no accident that this declaration should follow so close upon the naming of his different French masters. True, the wider context is philosophical and/or metaphysical poetry, and the overarching figure is Dante, but it is in reference to the French (and to something he often referred to as the ‘French mind’)¹ that Eliot so often, implicitly or explicitly, came to define his own choices on moral and aesthetic matters. Beyond the technical accomplishments he took from them is a particular idea of civilisation, and a state of mind – in a word, a *self-consciousness* – that fascinated him, in its different applications, his whole life. When we try to describe the French context for Eliot, we find ourselves coming close to the very quick of his life and art. For it was a French poet who first changed him, as he testified in 1919: ‘from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person’ (*IMH*, 399). In his ‘romantic’ Parisian year of 1910/11, Eliot was nourished by different intellectual currents, and, equally importantly, by a close friendship with a young French poet, Jean Verdenal, who shared his passion for

Laforque and his interest in Henri Bergson (see [Chapter 3](#) above). But if French thought as such became subsumed in other currents, his interest in French poetry and poetics remained with him always; it was the context that provided the most astringent intellectual and spiritual forum for advanced debate about the nature of his art. The lessons of Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry in particular, whether they commanded his assent, or, equally crucial, his disagreement, provided the set of propositions that stimulated him or piqued him into the creative responses that are central to his later poetry.

It is Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) who stands at the wellhead – he who, as Eliot remarked in 1930, ‘gave to French poets as generously as he borrowed from English and American poets’ (*SE*, 425). But he gave also to English and American poets – and to European ones. The shock of recognition that rippled outward from the lines ‘Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves / Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant’ [‘Swarming city, city full of dreams, where ghosts in broad daylight accost the passer-by’] caught Eliot, who remarked in 1950: ‘I knew what *that* meant, because I had lived it before I knew that I wanted to turn it into verse on my own account’ (*IMH*, 390). The same lines are behind the haunted opening pages of Rainer Maria Rilke’s young man arriving in Paris, as recorded in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. But in his 1930 introduction to a translation of the *Journaux intimes*, with Eliot a recent convert to Christianity, it is once more matters of faith and belief that concern him. It comes as no surprise that he alights upon Baudelaire’s great curse on nineteenth-century progress, quoting almost triumphantly his definition of civilisation as ‘la diminution des traces du péché originel’ [‘diminution of the traces of original sin’] (*SE*, 430) as his clinching argument at the end of the essay. As so often, he is using his model to refine his own position, and Baudelaire here shores up his own beliefs. What counts for Eliot is no longer the Baudelaire of ‘Les Litanies de Satan’, but the less ostentatious, more deeply disturbing poet of ‘L’Ennemi’, with its apprehension of *fallenness*, of ‘Le Rançon’, with its evocation of a terrible day of judgement, of the death wish in ‘Brumes et Pluies’, and, at the other end of the scale, something that resembles the feeling of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, in the great idealising poems to Mme Sabatier, ‘Le Flambeau vivant’ and ‘L’Aube spirituelle’.

Eliot, so keen on literary genealogy, recognised that Baudelaire begat Laforque. It is worthwhile retracing Eliot’s first encounter with Arthur Symons’s study *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) as an undergraduate at Harvard University in 1908. There is the chapter on Paul

Verlaine – the unbuttoned, torrid, lachrymose, childlike musical genius – and there is the chapter on Mallarmé, the priestly theorist of exquisite refinement. Between them comes the chapter on Laforgue, the pale, perfectly composed, impeccably detached, ironic young man – a spectator at the *comédie humaine* – yet, sickly and under sentence of death, valetudinarian almost, controlled, disciplined, despairing. Laforgue, who defers to the German metaphysician Eduard von Hartmann's *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, would have been happy with Sigmund Freud's vocabulary of the nature of love. He would have approved of the sentence 'It is generally much harder to convince an idealist that his libido is inappropriately located than it is to convince the uncomplicated sort who has remained modest in his expectations'; or this, which puts the matter succinctly: 'sexual over-valuation of an object constitutes an idealisation of that object'.² Laforgue, like Freud, was a keen student of 'libidinal drives'.

As for Eliot, whose memory was prodigious – his friends dubbed him 'the elephant' – he never seems to have forgotten a phrase. In this case, Symons's description of Laforgue – 'He composes love-poems hat in hand'³ – burned its way into his consciousness. That hat reappears in 'Portrait of a Lady': 'I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends / For what she has said to me?' (*CPP*, 20). Everywhere his poems bear the trace marks of his reading. For example, 'Spleen' (written as an undergraduate before his year in Paris), is as much Laforgue as Symons's portrait of Laforgue:

And Life, a little bald and gray,
Languid, fastidious, and bland,
Waits, hat and gloves in hand,
Punctilious of tie and suit
(Somewhat impatient of delay)
On the doorstep of the Absolute. (*CPP*, 603)

Where Symons is waylaid, in his account, by the sulphurous decor of Satanism, the suggestive veils and the twilights, Eliot sees more clearly. In his 1926 Clark Lectures, he diagnoses Laforgue's malady and suggests a cure, in terms so richly suggestive they are worth pausing over. The remarks reveal both the drama of identification he feels for this French 'elder brother' (the shock of recognition) and the need (by this time) to leave him behind. His appreciation of Laforgue, Eliot seems to be saying, must finally be understood in the light of his appreciation of Dante:

Only Laforgue is in revolt, not in acceptance; he is at once the sentimentalist day-dreaming over the *jeune fille* at the piano with her geraniums, and the

behaviourist inspecting her reflexes. What he wants, you see, is either a *Vita Nuova* to justify, dignify and integrate his sentiments toward the *jeune fille* in a system of the universe, or else some system of thought which shall keep a place [for and] even enhance these feelings and at the same time enable him to *feel* as intensely the abstract world. On the one hand he was fascinated by Miss Leah Lee, the English governess, and on the other hand by the Kantian pseudo-Buddhism of Schopenhauer and Hartmann. (VMP, 216)

This is extraordinary criticism, of the kind poets write best, because Eliot feels his subject as keenly as he feels his own life – the drama of identification is patent. Informed by an urgent need to understand, Eliot appears to know Laforgue and his needs better than Laforgue himself. When in 1883 the young French poet, bored with the constant *politesse* required of him as Reader to the Empress Augusta in Berlin, breaks out into the completely new vein of *Les Complaintes*, he explained in a letter to his sister Marie that he had abandoned the inflated eloquence of his philosophical poems in favour of a new style, ‘more fantastic and “clownesque” with only one end in view: ‘faire de l’original à tout prix’ [‘to make something new at all cost’].⁴ The early poems, collected under the lachrymose title *Le Sanglot de la terre*, are decidedly less original exercises in sub-Baudelairean spleen, an almost comic litany of anguish, insomnia, nostalgia, desolation and infinite resignation. We do not need to share Laforgue’s own deferential view of his newfangled *Complaintes*, and as Eliot well saw, the desolation in them is, if anything, more piquant, because disguised.

The French poet’s fondness for abstraction; the existence of the flesh and blood *jeune fille* and the chaos of feeling she provokes; the need for a system of the universe; this was also the young Eliot’s predicament during his year in Paris, and indeed before that, in Boston, where he had the experience that found its synthesis (thanks to Laforgue) in ‘Portrait of a Lady’. There are instants of existential anguish in the early draft poems, later published posthumously in *Inventions of the March Hare*, quite as tortured by the sterilities of philosophical categories as anything in Laforgue:

Appearances appearances he said,
I have searched the world through dialectic ways;
I have questioned restless nights and torpid days,
And followed every by-way where it lead;
And always find the same unvaried
Intolerable interminable maze. (IMH, 75)

Or take the acutely distressed, solipsistic piece, beginning ‘Do I know how I feel? Do I know what I think?’, which articulates a disabling, neurasthenic self-consciousness, similar to one of Laforgue’s early unpublished

poems entitled simply 'Suis-je?'. Here, the poet makes a frenzied appeal to the 'sereine Loi' ['serene Law'] to indicate to him that he exists: 'Il faut pourtant presser ce mot! Oui, suis-je, suis-je? / Ce corps renouvelé chaque jour est-il mien?' ['It is necessary nevertheless to press this word! Yes, am I? am I? Is this body renewed everyday mine?']. In Eliot's poem, significantly, there is the sense of something beyond, ungraspable, 'which should be firm but slips, just at my finger tips' (*IMH*, 80).

These drafts were too vulnerable, too subjective, and knowing this Eliot never published them. It becomes clear that the great successes of the early period, notably 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'Portrait of a Lady', depend on the brilliantly prolonged amalgam of satire – delivered with a Laforguean *politesse* – and queasy subjective unease. But in the end Laforgue's banter is shriller, lighter in touch than Eliot's, his performance briefer and smarter. Eliot's approach is prowlingly catlike, his moral and philosophical insinuations are more drawn out and worried at; like the Prufrockian fog, they envelope and they suffocate. But the admiringly percipient comment of Symons, 'It is an art of the nerves, this art of Laforgue', fingers exactly the quality that unites him with Eliot.⁵

The other major French influence that Eliot underwent at this crucially receptive stage was that of Tristan Corbière, the tortured, tubercular, diminutive Breton poet. Verlaine paid him the signal honour of including him among *Les Poètes maudits* ['accursed poets'] and Ezra Pound, too, treasured him as one of the 'hard' in French poetry: 'since Gautier, Corbière has been hard, not with a glaze or parian finish, but hard like weather-bit granite'.⁶ But Eliot prized him less for his seascapes or his major poems such as 'La Rapsode foraine' – which he quotes approvingly for its startling imagery – than for his love poems. Like Laforgue, Corbière was chiefly a love poet of a very acerbic, perverse kind. Woman, Laforgue's 'mammifère à chignon' ['mammal with hair in a bun'] is hailed in *Les Amours jaunes* as 'la Bête féroce' ['the ferocious beast'], and Corbière is snide about 'l'odeur de femme' which Eliot imported into the 'female smells' (*CPP*, 25) of 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' and the deleted misogynistic Popean pastiche of *The Waste Land* manuscript. Eliot shared these violently divided feelings: sexual unease is the taproot of his early work. Trying for the umpteenth time to define his particular notion of 'metaphysical poetry', Eliot says it comes about 'when you have a philosophy exerting its influence, not directly through belief, but indirectly through feeling and behaviour, upon the minute particulars of a poet's daily life, his quotidian mind, *primarily perhaps his way of love-making*, but also any activity' (*VMP* 294; my emphasis). Quite as much as

Laforgue, Corbière is a poet of the nerves, of attack and parry, of dramatisation and staccato wit. It is Corbière who is behind the most important of Eliot's own poems in French – the astonishing 'Dans le restaurant'. But in this poem Eliot goes beyond either Laforgue or Corbière, for hidden within it – it is easy to miss – is a moment of vision, something resembling ecstasy, that occurred in the waiter's childhood:

Je la chatouillais, pour la faire rire.
J'éprouvais un instant de puissance et de délire.

[I was tickling her, to make her laugh.
I experienced a moment of power and delirium.] (CPP, 51)

This is the moment that is picked up, and magnified, in the 'hyacinth garden' (CPP, 62) interlude in *The Waste Land* – the blessed, irrecoverable moment from which that poem exfoliates.

Eliot worked hard to shed the pervasive influence of Laforgue, and he did so by turning deliberately to two other French poets – Corbière, as we have seen, and Théophile Gautier, whose *Émaux et Camées*, which came with a glowing recommendation from Pound, was the inspiration for the 'hard' quatrain poems in *Poems* (1920). These quatrain poems, though clear in outline, by no means deliver a clear semantic content – the ambiguities and dislocations go far beyond Gautier, and indeed threaten to overflow the vehicle. Gautier was not perhaps the happiest of influences – there is evidence of forcing, and an unmistakable frigidity about these poems. Earlier, in 1917, Eliot was actually writing poems in French, almost exclusively, including an accomplished sonnet in homage, entitled 'Tristan Corbière'. Pound reported to James Joyce that Eliot 'has burst out into scurrilous french [*sic*] during the past few weeks'.⁷ In a 1959 interview with the *Paris Review*, Eliot himself explained the phenomenon deferentially:

I hadn't written anything for some time and was rather desperate. I started writing a few things in French and found I *could*, at that period. I think it was that when I was writing in French, I didn't take the poems so seriously ... I wasn't so worried about not being able to write ... I think it was just something that helped me get started again. (IMH, 291)

Along with Baudelaire, the two French geniuses to preside over Eliot's early 'art of the nerves' – Laforgue and Corbière – liberated him both in terms of form and content. Gautier and minor figures such as Laurent Tailhade helped focus his satire in (deceptively) clear-cut form. Other figures crowd to the fore, and an exhaustive account of Eliot's French

influences in poetry, especially early on, would have to include the cosmopolitan sophistications of Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars and Valéry Larbaud, Paul Claudel's mighty verse and his theological passion, and also Saint John Perse, whose long poem *Anabase* Eliot translated in 1930. But the second major engagement for Eliot with the French tradition, and the Symbolist movement in particular, occurs in the latter part of his career. The presiding geniuses here are Stéphane Mallarmé and his disciple Paul Valéry. And in this process of contextualisation, we cannot but mention the *grands absents*: Eliot was almost wholly indifferent to the overwhelmingly dominant movement of the interwar period in France, Surrealism. Instead, he sided with Valéry, who was also baffled by the apparent arbitrariness and lack of literary constraint or formal discipline (as he conceived it) of André Breton's avant-garde movement. Eliot's sideswipes were offered at the time of his religious conversion, and the highly moral nature of his enquiry meant he had little time for experimentation such as automatic writing. For Eliot at this time, this was a pursuit 'after strange gods', and one that opened a veritable Pandora's Box of unconscious horrors of the type he had struggled with but in an attempt not merely to entertain them, but (to recall the words of his 1926 Clark Lectures) to 'dignify' and 'justify' them 'in a system of the universe'.

It was *self-consciousness*, not unconsciousness, that Eliot came to prize, and in particular, the self-consciousness that Mallarmé, supremely, embodied in his life as well as his art, and that Valéry expounded more discursively. Self-consciousness in the composition of a poem means essentially a 'knowledge of what one is doing', the process of reflexivity by which the poem itself bears the trace of that knowledge. While the more pressing ontological questions had been, so to speak, settled by Eliot's formal adherence to Christian mysteries, the status of language, the role of the word in relation to the Word, became burning issues. Eliot's encounter with Symbolist and post-Symbolist poetics led him to confront (and debate) major questions, like the means and ends of the poem, the role of the writing subject, the nature of poetic language and its relation to speech, the place of abstract thought in poetry, the effects of syntax and structure on propositional meaning, and in what way exactly does poetry aspire to the condition of music?

The 'French context' here is actually complicated by that displaced European, Edgar Allan Poe, whose extraordinary 'career' in France is one of literature's curiosities. Eliot's 1948 lecture at Washington's Library of Congress, 'From Poe to Valéry', may help us to focus upon this tradition.

It is chiefly Poe's essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' that riveted the attention of the young Valéry. The quality or otherwise of Poe's piece on his poem 'The Raven' is less important. As Eliot sees it, it is Valéry's response that fascinates, and how he himself came to adopt an attitude of extreme self-consciousness, combined with an exacerbated scepticism, in his poetry and in his poetics. Always a debunker of the mysterious, or the miraculous, whether in theology, philosophy or poetry, Valéry liked to scandalise by saying that he would prefer to write a second-rate poem, while remaining conscious of every linguistic and formal choice, than write a masterpiece 'dictated' by some external power. Of inspiration, he also remarked, deflatingly, that the spirit blows not precisely where it will, but *what* it can to *whom* it can. A poem is a 'machine' that sets up the poetic emotion in the reader; or else it is a mechanism to elicit the larynx of the reader, and so on. These are provocative quips and *trouvailles* from a writer who wrote 'la bêtise n'est pas mon fort' ['stupidity is not my strong point'] in the opening sentence of his text about a man who is all head, *Monsieur Teste*.

Valéry also disappointed believers in the absolute form of a poem, by publishing different versions of the same sonnet and apparently according them equal status. This raises the question of the importance of subject matter, which is the one that most engaged Eliot. 'We must be careful', he writes, 'to avoid saying that the subject matter becomes "less important"'. It has rather a different kind of importance: it is important as *means*: the *end* is the poem. The subject exists for the poem, not the poem for the subject' (*TCC*, 39). A little earlier, Eliot explores the question of *la poésie pure*, which was a wraith raised by Valéry's comment about 'poésie à l'état pur' ['poetry in the pure state'] and magnified by a poetry-loving cleric, the Abbé Henri Bremond, into a full-blown if wrong-headed theory. In fact, the abbé's contention, not very controversial, was that a current passed through certain lines of poetry that galvanised the reader, in a way that could not be explained semantically or rationally. This notion, and Valéry's later comments, represent the tail end of *l'art pour l'art* [art for art's sake], the movement largely promulgated in France by Gautier and Baudelaire, both of whom agreed that poetry should have only collateral relations with 'truth' as conceived in any religious, philosophical or moral mode. Poetry was no longer to be historical or didactic. Mallarmé implied much the same thing when he wrote in *Crise de vers* that 'narrer, enseigner, meme décrire' ['to narrate, to instruct, even to describe'] was no longer part of the poet's brief. The poet was to serve 'l'intellectuelle parole à son apogée' ['intellectual language at its peak'] and to *suggest* rather than to describe in

any naturalistic, novelistic fashion. Syntactic ambiguity was axiomatic. Mallarmé idealised language itself, and his celebrated flower, understood as a phonetic sign, with no physical attributes and to be found in no bouquet, was itself the heart of the mystery, for it is conjured out of nothing in our minds by the simple utterance of the word.

In a later refinement, Valéry gave a fresh definition of *la poésie pure*, assimilating it to music, which is pure *expressiveness*, rather than expression, since music has no fixed semantic lexicon (see Chapter 14 above). He imagined a poetry that would have no prose content, in which the relation between meanings would be like a system of harmonics in music, a poetry in which 'la transmutation des pensées les unes dans les autres paraîtrait plus important que toute pensée, où le jeu des figures contiendrait la réalité du sujet' ['the transmutation of thoughts into other ones would seem to be more important than any thought, where the interplay of tropes contains the reality of the subject'].⁸ It may be that Wallace Stevens's 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds' is the closest we have in English to a poem of this kind, a virtuoso, purely tonal exercise, in which the content is negligible and merely the means. Eliot, predictably, had serious reservations about these wilder shores of French theorising. Yet responding to the implications of *la poésie pure*, Eliot arbitrates between two extreme positions thus: 'An aesthetic which merely contradicted it would not do. To insist on the all-importance of subject-matter, to insist that the poet should be spontaneous and irreflective, that he should depend upon inspiration and neglect technique, would be a lapse from what is in any case a highly civilised attitude to a barbarous one' (*TCC*, 41).

The poetics of Valéry, and in particular Mallarmé, have momentous implications that have suffused philosophical enquiry into language and continue to do so in the age of postmodernism. To say that Eliot took the measure of at least some of these implications is already to say a good deal. It was Mallarmé who refocused the analogy of poetry with music, turning attention away from the superficial level of phonetic 'musicality' to questions of structure or leitmotif. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943) uses parataxis, modulation of tonal register and recurrent image clusters that accrue semantic richness at each repetition, much in the manner of chamber music. Mallarmé's attempt to 'transcribe a constellation' – Valéry's description of his master's radically experimental poem 'Un coup de dés' – finds no immediate echo in Eliot, although the whole tenor of the passage 'Words move, music moves / Only in time' (*CPP*, 175) needs to be read in terms of the division Symbolist theorists set up between speech (as a tool of everyday communication) and the incantatory poetic

parole that continually resuscitates in our memory and on our tongue. Valéry went so far as to suggest that poetry was a language *within* a language. Eliot again corrects him by insisting that the language of poetry must remain rooted and take as its reference the way a poet's contemporaries speak. Even more far-reaching is the passage in 'East Coker' when Eliot, after writing a passage of Mallarméan opacity, demeans it:

That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter. (*CPP*, 179)

Those last five words constitute the moment when Eliot takes his leave of Mallarméan poetics: for Mallarmé, it is inconceivable that the poetry should not matter, since to an atheist like himself there *is* no salvation outside of the word. Eliot, however, had to leave his French masters at this point. They had given him a voice, they had given him a poetic technique to borrow and a poetic theory to ponder. In the end it was only Dante, the poet of the word and the Word, who could take him further.

NOTES

1. See, for example, 'The Lesson of Baudelaire', *Tyro* (spring 1921), 4.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), pp. 23–4.
3. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1908) (New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 304.
4. Jules Laforgue, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. J-L. Debauxe et al. (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1986), p. 821.
5. Symons, *Symbolist Movement in Literature*, p. 303.
6. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 288.
7. *Pound/Joyce*, ed. Forrest Read (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), p. 112.
8. Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 146.