

CHAPTER 19

Seventeenth-century literature

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William Empson, an independent mind if such a thing ever existed, did not begrudge Eliot an odd honour. 'I do not propose', he wrote in 1948,

to try to judge or define the achievement of Eliot; indeed I feel, like most other verse writers of my generation, that I do not know for certain how much of my own mind he invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He has a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike an east wind.¹

Eliot himself was occasionally tossed by the wind of his own intellectual influence. In 1956 he acknowledged obliquely 'a few notorious phrases which have had a truly embarrassing success in the world' (*OPP*, 106) and in 1961 he disavowed with more aplomb his 'generalizations, and the phrases which have flourished, such as "dissociation of sensibility" and "objective correlative"':

They have been accepted, they have been rejected, they may soon go out of fashion completely: but they have served their turn as stimuli to the critical thinking of others. And literary criticism, as I hinted at the beginning, is an instinctive activity of the civilized mind. But I prophesy that if my phrases are given consideration, a century hence, it will be only in their historical context, by scholars interested in the mind of my generation. (*TCC*, 19)

Of this mind, Eliot might fairly be said (though he did not claim) to have invented quite a bit, being not only the greatest poet but also the finest critic of his generation. Empson hits the mark here: Eliot's influence is very like an east wind; it tends to be especially germinating. It also comes from a distinctive direction. For much of Eliot's influence on his own generation is due to the influence of another generation upon him. A good part of Eliot's thought, and the better part of his thinking, in poetry and prose, is rooted in the age stretching from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries.

Eliot immersed himself in the writers of the seventeenth century, those authors of drama, poetry and prose about whom he wrote some of his finest essays: Christopher Marlowe (1564–93); Ben Jonson (1572–1637); Shakespeare (1564–1616); Thomas Middleton (1580–1627); Cyril Tourneur (?–1626); Philip Massinger (1583–1640); John Ford (1586–1639?); John Webster (1578?–1638?); John Donne (1572–1631); Andrew Marvell (1621–78); Abraham Cowley (1618–67); Richard Crashaw (1612–48); Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626); Henry King (1592–1669) and John Bramhall (1594–1663).

Of this age Eliot was an expert, and his interest abiding. When John Middleton Murry proposed his name for the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, Eliot suggested the subject of the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century. In 1926, Eliot delivered eight lectures – one on the definition of metaphysical poetry, four on Donne, one each on Crashaw and Cowley, and a final lecture on the influence of metaphysical poetry on the nineteenth century – to a large and daunting audience, including Alfred North Whitehead, G. E. Moore, Sir James Frazer and A. E. Housman. (He delivered a condensed variation of these lectures at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland in 1933.) From their inception, Eliot had planned to turn the lectures into a book on ‘The School of Donne’, but having failed in 1926 to win a research fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, and never finding sufficient time to revise the lectures, he finally declined – perhaps put off by the reservations of the scholar Mario Praz – to publish them.² Nevertheless, Eliot’s desire to publish a book on Donne and the metaphysical poets persisted for the next thirty years, and he continued to find occasion to write and publish on the subject. In 1930, for instance, when asked to deliver a series of BBC radio talks (later printed in the *Listener*), Eliot again chose as his subject seventeenth-century poetry.

Stretching from roughly 1919 to 1934, Eliot’s most intense period of engagement with the literature of the seventeenth century also marks a period of his life when his criticism and creation flourished. Besides a series of brilliant essays, radio talks and lectures, numerous poems – including ‘Gerontion’, *The Waste Land*, ‘The Hollow Men’, *Sweeney Agonistes*, ‘Coriolan’, the Ariel Poems and *Ash-Wednesday* – emerged out of the influence of seventeenth-century literature. Eliot was particularly attentive to the minor writers of this time, being ever cautious to distinguish between influence that ‘can fecundate’ and imitation, ‘especially unconscious imitation’, that ‘can only sterilize’ (*TCC*, 18). This caveat accounts, in part, for Eliot’s relatively minimal critical attention to the

largest figure of the period, Shakespeare. A great writer like Shakespeare was, he postulated, more likely to be a source of imitation than influence. From minor writers, however, who now and then scaled small walls of perfection or made little innovations, or who impressed their age without dominating it, something could be gained by a later and greater writer such as Eliot. It is a testament to Eliot's rare gifts of judgement, genius and humility that he knew just what to take and exactly how to use it. Hence it was his distinctive bent towards the lesser and sometimes even little-known poets of this age that stirred him most. In 1961, Eliot remarked of Shakespeare's contemporaries that 'it was from these minor dramatists that I, in my own poetic formation, had learned my lessons' (*TCC*, 18).

Eliot's praise of seventeenth-century literature had a particular value bestowed by the fact that he was himself a practitioner, not a critic only but a 'poet who had praised' (*TCC*, 22). His praise was therefore both critical and creative. The great poet-critic of his own time, Eliot observed of these two casts of his mind that they were coterminous neighbours. 'The best of my *literary* criticism', he observed,

consists of essays on poets and poetic dramatists who had influenced me. It is a by-product of my private poetry-workshop; or a prolongation of the thinking that went into the formation of my own verse. In retrospect, I see that I wrote best about poets whose work had influenced my own, and with whose poetry I had become thoroughly familiar, long before I desired to write about them, or had found the occasion to do so. (*OPP*, 106)

A debt is owed to the perspicuity of Bruce Richmond, editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* from 1902 to 1937, for offering Eliot such occasions to turn his appreciation to criticism. Richmond invited Eliot to lunch on 29 September 1919, at the suggestion of Richard Aldington, a fellow poet and a regular contributor to the *TLS* who admired Eliot's essays in the *Egoist* and the *Athenaeum* (see [Chapter 10](#) above). After the meeting, Eliot was invited to contribute an occasional leading article. Writing to his mother to give her the news, Eliot remarked that Richmond's invitation was 'the highest honour possible in the critical world of literature' (*LI*, 404).

Richmond's first assignment for Eliot was a leading review of G. Gregory Smith's *Ben Jonson*. The article, entitled 'Ben Jonson', was published anonymously (the practice of the periodical at the time) on the front page of the *TLS* on 13 November 1919. It was combined with another piece on Jonson in *The Sacred Wood* (1920) and included with further alterations in *Selected Essays* (1932), where it remains one of Eliot's

central statements on poetic drama, addressing the relations of criticism to creation and erudition in poetry.³ Eliot begins the essay: 'The reputation of Jonson has been of the most deadly kind that can be compelled upon the memory of a great poet' (*SE*, 147). However, far from being stifled by the erudition attributed to him, Jonson 'behaved as the great creative mind that he was: he created his own world', a unique world that is not superficial but in which 'the superficies *is* the world' (*SE*, 156).

The *TLS* provided a rich soil, and this but the first flower. In a 1961 tribute to Richmond, Eliot remarked that 'nearly all of my essays on the drama of that period – perhaps all of my best ones – started as a suggestion by Richmond'. Eliot was grateful to Richmond for giving him occasions to extend the range of his knowledge of the literature of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Though books in a particular field were initially allotted to a designated contributor in order that he might become an expert, Richmond would afterwards endeavour to expand a reviewer's breadth. Eliot recalled:

once a writer was established among his reviewers and leader-writers, Richmond was ready to let him make excursions outside of the original area. Thus, a chance remark in conversation revealed that I was an ardent admirer of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, and I was at once commissioned to write the leader which appears among my collected essays.⁴

The 1926 essay on Andrewes – a seminal figure in the Anglican Church and a principal translator of the King James Bible – has an especial biographical interest, appearing shortly before Eliot's conversion to the Church of England in 1927. A year later, it opened the collection *For Lancelot Andrews: Essays on Style and Order*. The essay also has an especial critical curiosity, containing quotations from Andrewes's 1622 Nativity Sermon, which Eliot had earlier borrowed from in 'Gerontion' (1920)⁵ and from which he later 'lifted several lines' (*TCC*, 20) in 'Journey of the Magi' (1927), the first of his Ariel Poems.

This essay is evidence that Eliot's book reviewing – especially for the *TLS*, under the eagle eye of Richmond – contributed substantially to the development of his poetry as well as his criticism, sending him to peer into places he might not otherwise have looked. Between 1919 and 1934, Eliot contributed pieces to the *TLS* on early English satire, early English novels, John Lyly (1554–1606), Shakespeare and Montaigne, George Chapman (1559?–1634), Richard Edwards (1525–66), Robert Southwell (1561–95), Thomas Dekker (1572–1632), Richard Hooker (1554–1600) and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Along with this extensive book

reviewing, Eliot, whose attraction to Renaissance drama was already much in evidence in the epigraphs to his early poems – ‘Portrait of a Lady’ (taken from Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*), ‘Sweeney Erect’ (taken from Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy*) and ‘Gerontion’ (taken from Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*) – also reviewed a number of stage productions of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas performed in London between 1919 and 1922. Moreover, though his admiration of modern actors was less than robust, he paid (despite scant personal funds) to support such performances. Most notably, he belonged to the Phoenix Society, a London subscription theatre group devoted to performing minor or rarely staged verse dramas. On behalf of the Phoenix Society, Eliot sent a stern letter to the *Athenaeum* in 1920 appealing for additional subscribers.⁶

Although this voluminous reviewing contributed significantly to Eliot’s scholarship on the minor poetic dramatists and metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, his acquaintance with the figure of Donne had occurred much earlier, during his first year as an undergraduate at Harvard. Eliot remembered that ‘Professor Briggs used to read, with great persuasiveness and charm, verses of Donne to the Freshmen at Harvard’.⁷ It is apt that Eliot’s early impressions of Donne, whom he credited with enlarging ‘the possibilities of lyric verse as no other English poet has done’,⁸ were auditory, since this long-standing affinity inclines to the sound of Donne’s verse, especially what he called its ‘conversational tone’, which ‘makes one feel that Donne is himself speaking to you personally and familiarly, although speaking great poetry’.⁹ This speaking tone is audible in several of Donne’s openings; for instance, in ‘The Relique’ (a poem Eliot quoted often):

When my grave is broke up againe
 Some second ghest to entertaine,
 (For graves have learn’d that woman-head
 To be to more then one a Bed)
 And he that digs it, spies
 A bracelet of bright haire about the bone,
 Will he not let’us alone,
 And thinke that there a loving couple lies ...¹⁰

In 1917, Eliot remarked of these lines that ‘the feeling and the material symbol preserve exactly their proper proportions’.¹¹ By 1926 he had had some change of mind. Though continuing to admire the ‘famous line’ – ‘A bracelet of bright haire about the bone’ – as an ‘example of those things

said by Donne which could not have been put equally well otherwise', Eliot went on to rebuke the poem:

But the notion of the violation of the grave for 'entertaining' a 'second guest', and still more the analogy of the fickleness of graves with the fickleness of women, are of very doubtful value in this place. Still more, the reference to female wantonness, of doubtful taste in itself, is particularly out of place in a poem intended to celebrate an instance of reciprocal fidelity ... (*VMP*, 125)

Eliot gradually came to pepper his admiration for Donne with censure, his criticism becoming more severe as time went on. This slow semi-repudiation is already evident in the Clark Lectures, where Eliot dismantles Donne's poetry in his attempt to find out that hidden mystery, the source of sudden felicities that capture for a moment 'the pure instinctive clinging to any contact or memory of contact' (*VMP*, 126). Here one catches snatches of Eliot's verse commemoration of Donne, 'Who found no substitute for sense', in 'Whispers of Immortality':

He knew the anguish of the marrow
The ague of the skeleton;
No contact possible to flesh
Allayed the fever of the bone. (*CPP*, 52)

This clutches at the ear with its faint rhymes that make for a clinging contact between the lines, a contact whose tenuous grip belies a separation of expert from experience, the loss of a sense that once brought flesh and bone immediately to mind. A fissure that began in the seventeenth century and expanded into the Romantic period of the nineteenth century, this disjunction finally broke into a 'sadness' which, Eliot feelingly observed in 1930, 'is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them' (*SE*, 428).

The seventeenth century initiates this transition. Eliot sometimes finds in Donne a 'disappointed romanticism, the vexation of resignation at finding the world other than one wanted it to be' (*VMP*, 128). Hovering between the passionate and the reflective, Donne, Eliot asserted, is 'the great ruler of that borderland of fading and change' (*VMP*, 127). He was 'capable of experiencing and setting down many super-sensuous feelings, only these feelings are of a mind in chaos, not of a mind in order' (*VMP*, 133). Donne had sensual unity, but mental chaos; he could feel with his mind, but groped his way; he is 'imprisoned in the embrace of his own

feelings', but first made it possible to think in lyric verse; his 'immediate experience passes into thought', but it is 'far from attaining *belief*' (*VMP*, 133). No matter how Eliot tries to pin him down, Donne is always wriggling away.

However strange, Donne was not unique in his capabilities. Eliot found him, rather, in good company. Reflecting on Herbert Grierson's 1921 anthology *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, one of the most influential books he was ever assigned to review, Eliot was struck by a sixth sense that seemed to possess the mind of Donne's generation. This perception sparked his formulation of one of his most influential – though later disavowed – principles, the 'dissociation of sensibility'. Comparing Tennyson's 'The Two Voices' (1842) to a poem collected in Grierson's anthology, Lord Herbert of Cherbury's 'An Ode upon a Question moved, whether Love should continue for ever?' (1665), Eliot remarked:

The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. (*SE*, 287)

The 'dissociation of sensibility', the occurrence of which Eliot locates in the mid seventeenth century, was, he claims, a schism aggravated by the achievements of two of the century's giants, John Milton and John Dryden, who 'performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others' (*SE*, 288). Beneath this superficial brilliance lay a substratum of decay. So, Eliot notes that 'while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude' (*SE*, 288). The division Eliot describes is partly between ratiocination and reflection, between turning one's interests into poetry and meditating 'on them poetically' (*SE*, 288), as he accused both

Tennyson and Browning of doing. But it is also something else and other; it is the loss of a kind of sense he succeeds only in adumbrating, a sense whose presence is often felt in his poems, and even in the fumes of this formulation, where the intellect and the 'odour of a rose' mingle with the 'smell of cooking'. It is a faculty found in Donne at his best, an 'emotional power' that 'sees the thing as it is'.¹²

Likewise, Eliot's poems often operate on the tips of their senses, full (and sometimes consciously empty) of poignant smells and sounds and tastes, replete with physical and mental feelings. 'Gerontion', for instance, a poem infused with the seventeenth century, giveth sense even as it is taken away:

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
 To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
 I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
 How should I use them for your closer contact? (CPP, 38)

The first line alludes to Middleton's play *The Changeling*, where the villainous heroine Beatrice evokes the 'common sewer' and reminds us that through our senses once came another and equally pungent kind of thing, the common sense. Transforming with this deft allusion Beatrice's confession of decrepitude into Gerontion's accusation of decay, Eliot reminds us that the 'isolation of thought as an object of sense could hardly have been possible before the seventeenth century' (VMP, 133).

Eliot's perceptive recreation in the twentieth century of tactile mental sensings is perhaps his most important contribution to modern poetic practice and criticism: a subtle evocation of that penetrating intelligence which 'is the discernment of exactly what, and how much, we feel in any given situation'.¹³ Eliot sought to recover this sensibility from the dissociation that had destroyed it, first by dividing thought from feeling, and later through an exaltation of feeling that had its origins in Jean-Jacques Rousseau and spread widely throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eliot claimed that 'the two great currents of the nineteenth century – vague emotionality and apotheosis of science (realism) alike spring from Rousseau'.¹⁴ Eschewing these currents of Romanticism, Eliot was led back to the seventeenth century in a search for feeling minds, those which cogitated and amalgamated rather than ruminated and divided. This was not because he had failed to find such minds among

the nineteenth-century poets he grew up reading; but he found them less sensual and engrossing than the dazzling, devouring and absorbing mind of the seventeenth century. Eliot conceded that Tennyson 'had a brain (a large dull brain like a farmhouse clock) which saved him from triviality'.¹⁵ And in a sporting jab, he praised Henry James for carefully fencing off his civilised mind from the herds of ideas which 'run wild and pasture on the emotions'. According to Eliot, 'James's critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.'¹⁶ Tennyson was saved by a dull brain; James escaped by a fine mind. But neither quite possessed the quality of 'thinking with our feelings' with which Eliot credited the writers of the seventeenth century,¹⁷ who could 'devour any kind of experience' with their 'wit', a quality that Eliot described in his 1921 essay on Andrew Marvell as 'a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible, which we find as clearly in the greatest as in poets like Marvell' (*SE*, 303). Eliot noted: 'The seventeenth century sometimes seems for more than a moment to gather up and to digest into its art all the experience of the human mind which (from the same point of view) the later centuries seem to have been partly engaged in repudiating' (*SE*, 293).

Eliot therefore sought to reclaim in his own age a modern association of sensibility, one which recognised that 'there are some pretty complicated feelings in life, which are worth a little pains to express'.¹⁸ Such pains, as Eliot found in his study of seventeenth-century literature, were larger than little; they involved a great effort, in which the 'poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning' (*SE*, 289). This vigorous allusiveness is an aspect of Eliot's genius evident everywhere and evident equally in his criticism and his poetry. No one excelled Eliot in his felicitous choice of quotations, a gift that shows his own considerable powers of mind devouring all kinds of experience, including the expression of others' experience: Eliot's whole work is an impressive meeting of minds across the ages. It is also, equally impressively, a meeting of minds of the ages. For, occasioned by a concentration on the writers of the seventeenth century, Eliot achieved a remarkable reciprocity across time. The thoughts, feelings, senses, sights, smells and sounds that he inbreathed from that age, especially from its minor writers, inspired his invention of his own. The result is a marvellous, and true, recovery.

NOTES

1. William Empson, 'The Style of the Master', *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium*, ed. Richard March and Tambimuttu (London: Editions Poetry London, 1948), p. 35.
2. Eliot admired Praz, who initially criticised Eliot's Clark Lectures but subsequently encouraged him to publish them. They were posthumously published as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber & Faber, 1993).
3. On the revisions to 'Ben Jonson', see Christopher Ricks, *Decisions and Revisions in T. S. Eliot: The Panizzi Lectures 2002* (London: British Library and Faber & Faber, 2003), pp. 42–3.
4. 'Bruce Lyttelton Richmond', *Times Literary Supplement* (13 January 1961), 1. In the preface to the first edition of *Selected Essays*, Eliot thanked Richmond, 'without whose suggestions and encouragement the essays on Elizabethan dramatists would not have been written' (*SE*, 7).
5. 'Gerontion' also borrowed from Andrewes's 1618 Nativity Sermon (see Southam, 52–3).
6. See 'The Phoenix Society', *Athenaeum* (27 February 1920), 285.
7. 'Donne in our Time', *A Garland for John Donne*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
9. 'Rhyme and Reason: The Poetry of John Donne', *Listener* (19 March 1930), 503.
10. 'The Relique', *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Herbert Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), p. 21.
11. 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry [I]', *Egoist* (September 1917), 118.
12. *Ibid.*
13. 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry [III]', *Egoist* (November 1917), 151.
14. From Eliot's notes for a lecture entitled 'What is Romanticism?' in his Oxford University extension lectures on modern French literature. Quoted in Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 27.
15. 'Verse Pleasant and Unpleasant', *Egoist* (March 1918), 43.
16. 'In Memory of Henry James', *Egoist* (January 1918), 2.
17. *Ibid.*, 2.
18. 'The Post-Georgians', *Athenaeum* (11 April 1919), 171.