



the PARIS REVIEW

THE ART OF POETRY NO. 1 T. S. ELIOT

The interview took place in New York, at the apartment of Mrs. Louis Henry Cohn, of House of Books, Ltd., who is a friend of Mr. and Mrs. Eliot. The bookcases of the attractive living room contain a remarkable collection of modern authors. On a wall near the entrance hangs a drawing of Mr. Eliot, done by his sister-in-law, Mrs. Henry Ware Eliot. An inscribed wedding photograph of the Eliots stands in a silver frame on a table. Mrs. Cohn and Mrs. Eliot sat on a sofa at one end of the room, while Mr. Eliot and the interviewer faced each other in the center. The microphone of a tape recorder lay on the floor between them.

Mr. Eliot looked particularly well. He was visiting the United States briefly on his way back to London from a holiday in Nassau. He was tanned, and he seemed to have put on weight in the three years since the interviewer had seen him. Altogether, he looked younger and seemed jollier. He frequently glanced at Mrs. Eliot during the interview, as if he were sharing with her an answer which he was not making.

The interviewer had talked with Mr. Eliot previously in London. The small office at Faber and Faber, a few flights above Russell Square, displays a gallery of photographs on its walls: here

is a large picture of Virginia Woolf, with an inset portrait of Pius XII; here are I. A. Richards, Paul Valéry, W. B. Yeats, Goethe, Marianne Moore, Charles Whibley, Djuna Barnes, and others. Many young poets have stared at the faces there, during a talk with Mr. Eliot. One of them has told a story that illustrates some of the unsuspected in Mr. Eliot's conversation. After an hour of serious literary discussion, Mr. Eliot paused to think if he had a final word of advice; the young poet, an American, was about to go up to Oxford as Mr. Eliot had done forty years before. Then, as gravely as if he were recommending salvation, Mr. Eliot advised the purchase of long woolen underwear because of Oxford's damp stone. Mr. Eliot is able to be avuncular while he is quite aware of comic disproportion between manner and message.

Similar combinations modified many of the comments that are reported here, and the ironies of gesture are invisible on the page. At times, actually, the interview moved from the ironic and the mildly comic to the hilarious. The tape is punctuated by the head-back boom-boom of Mr. Eliot's laughter, particularly in response to mention of his early derogation of Ezra Pound, and to a question about the unpublished, and one gathers improper, King Bolo poems of his Harvard days.

—Donald Hall, 1959

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps I can begin at the beginning. Do you remember the circumstances under which you began to write poetry in St. Louis when you were a boy?

T. S. ELIOT

I began I think about the age of fourteen, under the inspiration of Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam*, to write a number of very gloomy and atheistical and despairing quatrains in the same style, which

fortunately I suppressed completely—so completely that they don't exist. I never showed them to anybody. The first poem that shows is one which appeared first in the *Smith Academy Record*, and later in *The Harvard Advocate*, which was written as an exercise for my English teacher and was an imitation of Ben Jonson. He thought it very good for a boy of fifteen or sixteen. Then I wrote a few at Harvard, just enough to qualify for election to an editorship on *The Harvard Advocate*, which I enjoyed. Then I had an outburst during my junior and senior years. I became much more prolific, under the influence first of Baudelaire and then of Jules Laforgue, whom I discovered I think in my junior year at Harvard.

INTERVIEWER

Did anyone in particular introduce you to the French poets? Not Irving Babbitt, I suppose.

ELIOT

No, Babbitt would be the last person! The one poem that Babbitt always held up for admiration was Gray's *Elegy*. And that's a fine poem but I think this shows certain limitations on Babbitt's part, God bless him. I have advertised my source, I think; it's Arthur Symons's book on French poetry, which I came across in the Harvard Union. In those days the Harvard Union was a meeting place for any undergraduate who chose to belong to it. They had a very nice little library, like the libraries in many Harvard houses now. I liked his quotations and I went to a foreign bookshop somewhere in Boston (I've forgotten the name and I don't know whether it still exists) which specialized in French and German and other foreign books and found Laforgue, and other poets. I can't imagine why that bookshop should have had a few poets like Laforgue in stock. Goodness knows how long they'd had them or whether there were any other demands for them.

INTERVIEWER

When you were an undergraduate, were you aware of the

dominating presence of any older poets? Today the poet in his youth is writing in the age of Eliot and Pound and Stevens. Can you remember your own sense of the literary times? I wonder if your situation may not have been extremely different.

ELIOT

I think it was rather an advantage not having any living poets in England or America in whom one took any particular interest. I don't know what it would be like but I think it would be a rather troublesome distraction to have such a lot of dominating presences, as you call them, about. Fortunately we weren't bothered by each other.

INTERVIEWER

Were you aware of people like Hardy or Robinson at all?

ELIOT

I was slightly aware of Robinson because I read an article about him in *The Atlantic Monthly* that quoted some of his poems, and that wasn't my cup of tea at all. Hardy was hardly known to be a poet at that time. One read his novels, but his poetry only really became conspicuous to a later generation. Then there was Yeats, but it was the early Yeats. It was too much Celtic twilight for me. There was really nothing except the people of the nineties who had all died of drink or suicide or one thing or another.

INTERVIEWER

Did you and Conrad Aiken help each other with your poems when you were coeditors on the *Advocate*?

ELIOT

We were friends but I don't think we influenced each other at all. When it came to foreign writers, he was more interested in Italian and Spanish, and I was all for the French.

INTERVIEWER

Were there any other friends who read your poems and helped you?

ELIOT

Well, yes. There was a man who was a friend of my brother's, a man named Thomas H. Thomas who lived in Cambridge and who saw some of my poems in *The Harvard Advocate*. He wrote me a most enthusiastic letter and cheered me up. And I wish I had his letters still. I was very grateful to him for giving me that encouragement.

INTERVIEWER

I understand that it was Conrad Aiken who introduced you and your work to Pound.

ELIOT

Yes it was. Aiken was a very generous friend. He tried to place some of my poems in London, one summer when he was over, with Harold Monro and others. Nobody would think of publishing them. He brought them back to me. Then in 1914, I think, we were both in London in the summer. He said, "You go to Pound. Show him your poems." He thought Pound might like them. Aiken liked them, though they were very different from his.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember the circumstances of your first meeting with Pound?

ELIOT

I think I went to call on him first. I think I made a good impression, in his little triangular sitting room in Kensington. He said, "Send me your poems." And he wrote back, "This is as good as anything I've seen. Come around and have a talk about them." Then he pushed them on Harriet Monroe, which took a little time.

INTERVIEWER

In an article about your *Advocate* days, for the book in honor of your sixtieth birthday, Aiken quotes an early letter from England in which you refer to Pound's verse as "touchingly incompetent." I wonder when you changed your mind.

ELIOT

Hah! That was a bit brash, wasn't it? Pound's verse was first shown me by an editor of *The Harvard Advocate*, W. G. Tinckom-Fernandez, who was a crony of mine and Conrad Aiken's and the other Signet poets of the period. He showed me those little things of Elkin Mathews, *Exultations* and *Personae*. He said, "This is up your street; you ought to like this." Well, I didn't, really. It seemed to me rather fancy, old-fashioned, romantic stuff, cloak-and-dagger kind of stuff. I wasn't very much impressed by it. When I went to see Pound, I was not particularly an admirer of his work, and though I now regard the work I saw then as very accomplished, I am certain that in his later work is to be found the grand stuff.

INTERVIEWER

You have mentioned in print that Pound cut *The Waste Land* from a much larger poem into its present form. Were you benefited by his criticism of your poems in general? Did he cut other poems?

ELIOT

Yes. At that period, yes. He was a marvelous critic because he didn't try to turn you into an imitation of himself. He tried to see what you were trying to do.

INTERVIEWER

Have you helped to rewrite any of your friends' poems? Ezra Pound's, for instance?

ELIOT

I can't think of any instances. Of course I have made innumerable

suggestions on manuscripts of young poets in the last twenty-five years or so.

INTERVIEWER

Does the manuscript of the original, uncut *Waste Land* exist?

ELIOT

Don't ask me. That's one of the things I don't know. It's an unsolved mystery. I sold it to John Quinn. I also gave him a notebook of unpublished poems, because he had been kind to me in various affairs. That's the last I heard of them. Then he died and they didn't turn up at the sale.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of thing did Pound cut from *The Waste Land*? Did he cut whole sections?

ELIOT

Whole sections, yes. There was a long section about a shipwreck. I don't know what that had to do with anything else, but it was rather inspired by the Ulysses canto in *The Inferno*, I think. Then there was another section that was an imitation *Rape of the Lock*. Pound said, "It's no use trying to do something that somebody else has done as well as it can be done. Do something different."

INTERVIEWER

Did the excisions change the intellectual structure of the poem?

ELIOT

No. I think it was just as structureless, only in a more futile way, in the longer version.

INTERVIEWER

I have a question about the poem, which is related to its

composition. In *Thoughts after Lambeth* you denied the allegation of critics who said that you expressed “the disillusionment of a generation” in *The Waste Land*, or you denied that it was your intention. Now F. R. Leavis, I believe, has said that the poem exhibits no progression; yet on the other hand, more recent critics, writing after your later poetry, found *The Waste Land* Christian. I wonder if this was part of your intention.

ELIOT

No, it wasn't part of my conscious intention. I think that in *Thoughts after Lambeth*, I was speaking of intentions more in a negative than in a positive sense, to say what was not my intention. I wonder what an “intention” means! One wants to get something off one's chest. One doesn't know quite what it is that one wants to get off the chest until one's got it off. But I couldn't apply the word “intention” positively to any of my poems. Or to any poem.

INTERVIEWER

I have another question about you and Pound and your earlier career. I have read somewhere that you and Pound decided to write quatrains, in the late teens, because vers libre had gone far enough.

ELIOT

I think that's something Pound said. And the suggestion of writing quatrains was his. He put me onto *Emaux et Camées*.*

INTERVIEWER

I wonder about your ideas about the relation of form to subject. Would you then have chosen the form before you knew quite what you were going to write in it?

ELIOT

Yes, in a way. One studied originals. We studied Gautier's poems and then we thought, “Have I anything to say in which this

* Poems by Théophile Gautier.

he was exploring his own mind also. ^{His} The compositions in verse and in prose fiction to which I have just referred may I think be ignored, except for ^{such} the information ^{as} they can yield about their author; and his other writings, those concerned directly with theological, social or political matter, should be ~~considered~~ considered as by-products of a mind of which the primary activity was literary criticism.

I first met Middleton Murry by appointment at some meeting place whence he was to conduct me to his home for dinner and a discussion of his projects for The Athenaeum, a defunct weekly which was to be revived under his editorship. I had heard of him earlier, in the circle of Lady Ottoline Morrell where I had already met Katharine Mansfield on one occasion, but we had held no communication ^{before} until he wrote to ^{propose this} invite me to a meeting. I do not know what he had been told about me; what is important is that he had read (having had it brought to his attention ^{no doubt} at Garsington) my first volume of Verse, Prufrock, and that it was entirely because of ^{his} ~~his~~ ^{the impression this little book had made upon} ~~the verse~~ that he wished to ask me to become ^{his} Assistant Editor of ~~The Athenaeum~~ ^{under his} ~~him~~. Of my critical writings he knew nothing: I gave him some copies of The Egoist to enable him to judge of my abilities. It speaks of the man, however, that he had made up his mind that he wanted my help ^{in his editorial} ~~with this venture~~ ^{and} without having seen any criticism of mine, ~~and~~ ^{wholly on the strength of Prufrock.} After a good deal of hesitation I declined; and I think that I was wise to do so, and to remain for some years at my desk in the City. I did however become one of Murry's regular contributors, reviewing some book

form will be useful?” And we experimented. The form gave the impetus to the content.

INTERVIEWER

Why was vers libre the form you chose to use in your early poems?

ELIOT

My early vers libre, of course, was started under the endeavor to practice the same form as Laforgue. This meant merely rhyming lines of irregular length, with the rhymes coming in irregular places. It wasn't quite so libre as much vers, especially the sort which Ezra called “Amygism.”* Then, of course, there were things in the next phase which were freer, like “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.” I don't know whether I had any sort of model or practice in mind when I did that. It just came that way.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel, possibly, that you were writing against something, more than from any model? Against the poet laureate perhaps?

ELIOT

No, no, no. I don't think one was constantly trying to reject things, but just trying to find out what was right for oneself. One really ignored poet laureates as such, the Robert Bridges. I don't think good poetry can be produced in a kind of political attempt to overthrow some existing form. I think it just supersedes. People find a way in which they can say something. “I can't say it that way, what way can I find that will do?” One didn't really *bother* about the existing modes.

INTERVIEWER

I think it was after “Prufrock” and before “Gerontion” that you wrote the poems in French which appear in your *Collected*

* A reference to Amy Lowell

Poems. I wonder how you happened to write them. Have you written any since?

ELIOT

No, and I never shall. That was a very curious thing which I can't altogether explain. At that period I thought I'd dried up completely. 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, and that, not taking them seriously, I wasn't so worried about not being able to write. I did these things as a sort of tour de force to see what I could do. That went on for some months. The best of them have been printed. I must say that Ezra Pound went through them, and Edmond Dulac, a Frenchman we knew in London, helped with them a bit. We left out some, and I suppose they disappeared completely. Then I suddenly began writing in English again and lost all desire to go on with French. I think it was just something that helped me get started again.

INTERVIEWER

Did you think at all about becoming a French symbolist poet like the two Americans of the last century?

ELIOT

Stuart Merrill and Viélé-Griffin. I only did that during the romantic year I spent in Paris after Harvard. I had at that time the idea of giving up English and trying to settle down and scrape along in Paris and gradually write French. But it would have been a foolish idea even if I'd been much more bilingual than I ever was, because, for one thing, I don't think that one can be a bilingual poet. I don't know of any case in which a man wrote great or even fine poems equally well in two languages. I think one language must be the one you express yourself in, in poetry, and you've got

to give up the other for that purpose. And I think that the English language really has more resources in some respects than the French. I think, in other words, I've probably done better in English than I ever would have in French even if I'd become as proficient in French as the poets you mentioned.

INTERVIEWER

Can I ask you if you have any plans for poems now?

ELIOT

No, I haven't any plans for anything at the moment, except that I think I would like, having just got rid of *The Elder Statesman* (I only passed the final proofs just before we left London), to do a little prose writing of a critical sort. I never think more than one step ahead. Do I want to do another play or do I want to do more poems? I don't know until I find I want to do it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any unfinished poems that you look at occasionally?

ELIOT

I haven't much in that way, no. As a rule, with me an unfinished thing is a thing that might as well be rubbed out. It's better, if there's something good in it that I might make use of elsewhere, to leave it at the back of my mind than on paper in a drawer. If I leave it in a drawer it remains the same thing but if it's in the memory it becomes transformed into something else. As I have said before, *Burnt Norton* began with bits that had to be cut out of *Murder in the Cathedral*. I learned in *Murder in the Cathedral* that it's no use putting in nice lines that you think are good poetry if they don't get the action on at all. That was when Martin Browne was useful. He would say, "There are very nice lines here, but they've nothing to do with what's going on on stage."

INTERVIEWER

Are any of your minor poems actually sections cut out of longer works? There are two that sound like “The Hollow Men.”

ELIOT

Oh, those were the preliminary sketches. Those things were earlier. Others I published in periodicals but not in my collected poems. You don’t want to say the same thing twice in one book.

INTERVIEWER

You seem often to have written poems in sections. Did they begin as separate poems? I am thinking of “Ash Wednesday,” in particular.

ELIOT

Yes, like “The Hollow Men,” it originated out of separate poems. As I recall, one or two early drafts of parts of “Ash Wednesday” appeared in *Commerce* and elsewhere. Then gradually I came to see it as a sequence. That’s one way in which my mind does seem to have worked throughout the years poetically—doing things separately and then seeing the possibility of fusing them together, altering them, and making a kind of whole of them.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write anything now in the vein of *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* or *King Bolo*?

ELIOT

Those things do come from time to time! I keep a few notes of such verse, and there are one or two incomplete cats that probably will never be written. There’s one about a glamour cat. It turned out too sad. This would never do. I can’t make my children weep over a cat who’s gone wrong. She had a very questionable career, did this cat. It wouldn’t do for the audience of my previous volume of cats. I’ve never done any dogs. Of course dogs don’t seem to

lend themselves to verse quite so well, collectively, as cats. I may eventually do an enlarged edition of my cats. That's more likely than another volume. I did add one poem, which was originally done as an advertisement for Faber and Faber. It seemed to be fairly successful. Oh, yes, one wants to keep one's hand in, you know, in every type of poem, serious and frivolous and proper and improper. One doesn't want to lose one's skill.

INTERVIEWER

There's a good deal of interest now in the process of writing. I wonder if you could talk more about your actual habits in writing verse. I've heard you composed on the typewriter.

ELIOT

Partly on the typewriter. A great deal of my new play, *The Elder Statesman*, was produced in pencil and paper, very roughly. Then I typed it myself first before my wife got to work on it. In typing myself I make alterations, very considerable ones. But whether I write or type, composition of any length, a play for example, means for me regular hours, say ten to one. I found that three hours a day is about all I can do of actual composing. I could do polishing perhaps later. I sometimes found at first that I wanted to go on longer, but when I looked at the stuff the next day, what I'd done after the three hours were up was never satisfactory. It's much better to stop and think about something else quite different.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever write any of your nondramatic poems on schedule? Perhaps the *Four Quartets*?

ELIOT

Only "occasional" verse. The *Quartets* were not on schedule. Of course the first one was written in '35, but the three which were written during the war were more in fits and starts. In 1939 if there hadn't been a war I would probably have tried to write another play.

And I think it's a very good thing I didn't have the opportunity. From my personal point of view, the one good thing the war did was to prevent me from writing another play too soon. I saw some of the things that were wrong with *Family Reunion*, but I think it was much better that any possible play was blocked for five years or so to get up a head of steam. The form of the *Quartets* fitted in very nicely to the conditions under which I was writing, or could write at all. I could write them in sections and I didn't have to have quite the same continuity; it didn't matter if a day or two elapsed when I did not write, as they frequently did, while I did war jobs.

INTERVIEWER

We have been mentioning your plays without talking about them. In *Poetry and Drama* you talked about your first plays. I wonder if you could tell us something about your intentions in *The Elder Statesman*.

ELIOT

I said something, I think, in *Poetry and Drama* about my ideal aims, which I never expect fully to realize. I started, really, from *The Family Reunion*, because *Murder in the Cathedral* is a period piece and something out of the ordinary. It is written in rather a special language, as you do when you're dealing with another period. It didn't solve any of the problems I was interested in. Later I thought that in *The Family Reunion* I was giving so much attention to the versification that I neglected the structure of the play. I think *The Family Reunion* is still the best of my plays in the way of poetry, although it's not very well constructed.

In *The Cocktail Party* and again in *The Confidential Clerk*, I went further in the way of structure. *The Cocktail Party* wasn't altogether satisfactory in that respect. It sometimes happens, disconcertingly, at any rate with a practitioner like myself, that it isn't always the things constructed most according to plan that are the most successful. People criticized the third act of *The Cocktail Party* as being rather an epilogue, so in *The Confidential Clerk*

I wanted things to turn up in the third act which were fresh events. Of course, *The Confidential Clerk* was so well constructed in some ways that people thought it was just meant to be farce.

I wanted to get to learn the technique of the theater so well that I could then forget about it. I always feel it's not wise to violate rules until you know how to observe them.

I hope that *The Elder Statesman* goes further in getting more poetry in, at any rate, than *The Confidential Clerk* did. I don't feel that I've got to the point I aim at and I don't think I ever will, but I would like to feel I was getting a little nearer to it each time.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a Greek model behind *The Elder Statesman*?

ELIOT

The play in the background is the *Oedipus at Colonus*. But I wouldn't like to refer to my Greek originals as models. I have always regarded them more as points of departure. That was one of the weaknesses of *The Family Reunion*; it was rather too close to the *Eumenides*. I tried to follow my original too literally and in that way led to confusion by mixing pre-Christian and post-Christian attitudes about matters of conscience and sin and guilt.

So in the subsequent three I have tried to take the Greek myth as a sort of springboard, you see. After all, what one gets essential and permanent, I think, in the old plays, is a situation. You can take the situation, rethink it in modern terms, develop your own characters from it, and let another plot develop out of that. Actually you get further and further away from the original. *The Cocktail Party* had to do with Alcestis simply because the question arose in my mind, what would the life of Admetus and Alcestis be, after she'd come back from the dead; I mean if there'd been a break like that, it couldn't go on just as before. Those two people were the center of the thing when I started and the other characters only developed out of it. The character of Celia, who came to be

really the most important character in the play, was originally an appendage to a domestic situation.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still hold to the theory of levels in poetic drama (plot, character, diction, rhythm, meaning) which you put forward in 1932?

ELIOT

I am no longer very much interested in my own theories about poetic drama, especially those put forward before 1934. I have thought less about theories since I have given more time to writing for the theater.

INTERVIEWER

How does the writing of a play differ from the writing of poems?

ELIOT

I feel that they take quite different approaches. There is all the difference in the world between writing a play for an audience and writing a poem, in which you're writing primarily for yourself—although obviously you wouldn't be satisfied if the poem didn't mean something to other people afterward. With a poem you can say, "I got my feeling into words for myself. I now have the equivalent in words for that much of what I have felt." Also in a poem you're writing for your own voice, which is very important. You're thinking in terms of your own voice, whereas in a play from the beginning you have to realize that you're preparing something which is going into the hands of other people, unknown at the time you're writing it. Of course I won't say there aren't moments in a play when the two approaches may not converge, when I think ideally they *should*. Very often in Shakespeare they do, when he is writing a poem and thinking in terms of the theater and the actors and the audience all at once. And the two things are one. That's wonderful when you can get that. With me it only happens at odd moments.

INTERVIEWER

Have you tried at all to control the speaking of your verse by the actors? To make it seem more like verse?

ELIOT

I leave that primarily to the producer. The important thing is to have a producer who has the feeling of verse and who can guide them in just how emphatic to make the verse, just how far to depart from prose or how far to approach it. I only guide the actors if they ask me questions directly. Otherwise I think that they should get their advice through the producer. The important thing is to arrive at an agreement with him first, and then leave it to him.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that there's been a general tendency in your work, even in your poems, to move from a narrower to a larger audience?

ELIOT

I think that there are two elements in this. One is that I think that writing plays—that is, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*—made a difference to the writing of the *Four Quartets*. I think that it led to a greater simplification of language and to speaking in a way which is more like conversing with your reader. I see the later *Quartets* as being much simpler and easier to understand than *The Waste Land* and “Ash Wednesday.” Sometimes the thing I'm trying to say, the subject matter, may be difficult, but it seems to me that I'm saying it in a simpler way.

The other element that enters into it, I think, is just experience and maturity. I think that in the early poems it was a question of not being able to—of having more to say than one knew how to say, and having something one wanted to put into words and rhythm which one didn't have the command of words and rhythm to put in a way immediately apprehensible.

That type of obscurity comes when the poet is still at the stage of learning how to use language. You have to say the thing the

difficult way. The only alternative is not saying it at all, at that stage. By the time of the *Four Quartets*, I couldn't have written in the style of *The Waste Land*. In *The Waste Land*, I wasn't even bothering whether I understood what I was saying. These things, however, become easier to people with time. You get used to having *The Waste Land*, or *Ulysses*, about.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that the *Four Quartets* are your best work?

ELIOT

Yes, and I'd like to feel that they get better as they go on. The second is better than the first, the third is better than the second, and the fourth is the best of all. At any rate, that's the way I flatter myself.

INTERVIEWER

This is a very general question, but I wonder if you could give advice to a young poet about what disciplines or attitudes he might cultivate to improve his art.

ELIOT

I think it's awfully dangerous to give general advice. I think the best one can do for a young poet is to criticize in detail a particular poem of his. Argue it with him if necessary; give him your opinion, and if there are any generalizations to be made, let him do them himself. I've found that different people have different ways of working and things come to them in different ways. You're never sure when you're uttering a statement that's generally valid for all poets or when it's something that only applies to yourself. I think nothing is worse than to try to form people in your own image.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there's any possible generalization to be made

about the fact that all the better poets now, younger than you, seem to be teachers?

ELIOT

I don't know. I think the only generalization that can be made of any value will be one which will be made a generation later. All you can say at this point is that at different times there are different possibilities of making a living, or different limitations on making a living. Obviously a poet has got to find a way of making a living apart from his poetry. After all, artists do a great deal of teaching, and musicians too.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that the optimal career for a poet would involve no work at all but writing and reading?

ELIOT

No, I think that would be . . . —but there again one can only talk about oneself. It is very dangerous to give an optimal career for everybody, but I feel quite sure that if I'd started by having independent means, if I hadn't had to bother about earning a living and could have given all my time to poetry, it would have had a deadening influence on me.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

ELIOT

I think that for me it's been very useful to exercise other activities, such as working in a bank, or publishing even. And I think also that the difficulty of not having as much time as I would like has given me a greater pressure of concentration. I mean it has prevented me from writing too much. The danger, as a rule, of having nothing else to do is that one might write too much rather than

concentrating and perfecting smaller amounts. That would be *my* danger.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consciously attempt, now, to keep up with the poetry that is being written by young men in England and America?

ELIOT

I don't now, not with any conscientiousness. I did at one time when I was reading little reviews and looking out for new talent as a publisher. But as one gets older, one is not quite confident in one's own ability to distinguish new genius among younger men. You're always afraid that you are going as you have seen your elders go. At Faber and Faber now I have a younger colleague who reads poetry manuscripts. But even before that, when I came across new stuff that I thought had real merit, I would show it to younger friends whose critical judgment I trusted and get their opinion. But of course there is always the danger that there is merit where you don't see it. So I'd rather have younger people to look at things first. If they like it, they will show it to me, and see whether I like it too. When you get something that knocks over younger people of taste and judgment and older people as well, then that's likely to be something important. Sometimes there's a lot of resistance. I shouldn't like to feel that I was resisting, as my work was resisted when it was new, by people who thought that it was imposture of some kind or other.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that younger poets in general have repudiated the experimentalism of the early poetry of this century? Few poets now seem to be resisted the way you were resisted, but some older critics like Herbert Read believe that poetry after you has been a regression to outdated modes. When you talked about Milton the second time, you spoke of the function of poetry as a retarder of change, as well as a maker of change, in language.

ELIOT

Yes, I don't think you want a revolution every ten years.

INTERVIEWER

But is it possible to think that there has been a counterrevolution rather than an exploration of new possibilities?

ELIOT

No, I don't see anything that looks to me like a counterrevolution. After a period of getting away from the traditional forms, comes a period of curiosity in making new experiments with traditional forms. This can produce very good work if what has happened in between has made a difference: when it's not merely going back, but taking up an old form, which has been out of use for a time, and making something new with it. That is not counterrevolution. Nor does mere regression deserve the name. There is a tendency in some quarters to revert to Georgian scenery and sentiments; and among the public there are always people who prefer mediocrity, and when they get it, say, "What a relief! Here's some real poetry again." And there are also people who like poetry to be modern but for whom the really creative stuff is too strong—they need something diluted.

What seems to me the best of what I've seen in young poets is not reaction at all. I'm not going to mention any names, for I don't like to make public judgments about younger poets. The best stuff is a further development of a less revolutionary character than what appeared in earlier years of the century.

INTERVIEWER

I have some unrelated questions that I'd like to end with. In 1945 you wrote, "A poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him." And later you wrote, "The music of poetry, then, will be a music latent in the common speech of his time." After the second remark, you disparaged "standardized BBC English." Now isn't one of the changes of the

last fifty years, and perhaps even more of the last five years, the growing dominance of commercial speech through the means of communication? What you referred to as “BBC English” has become immensely more powerful through the ITA and BBC television, not to speak of CBS, NBC, and ABC. Does this development make the problem of the poet and his relationship to common speech more difficult?

ELIOT

You’ve raised a very good point there. I think you’re right, it does make it more difficult.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted *you* to make the point.

ELIOT

Yes, but you wanted the point to be *made*. So I’ll take the responsibility of making it: I do think that where you have these modern means of communication and means of imposing the speech and idioms of a small number on the mass of people at large, it does complicate the problem very much. I don’t know to what extent that goes for film speech, but obviously radio speech has done much more.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if there’s a possibility that what you mean by common speech will disappear.

ELIOT

That is a very gloomy prospect. But very likely indeed.

INTERVIEWER

Are there other problems for a writer in our time which are unique? Does the prospect of human annihilation have any particular effect on the poet?

ELIOT

I don't see why the prospect of human annihilation should affect the poet differently from men of other vocations. It will affect him as a human being, no doubt in proportion to his sensitiveness.

INTERVIEWER

Another unrelated question: I can see why a man's criticism is better for his being a practicing poet, better, although subject to his own prejudices. But do you feel that writing criticism has helped you as a poet?

ELIOT

In an indirect way it has helped me somehow as a poet—to put down in writing my critical valuation of the poets who have influenced me and whom I admire. It is merely making an influence more conscious and more articulate. It's been a rather natural impulse. I think probably my best critical essays are essays on the poets who had influenced me, so to speak, long before I thought of writing essays about them. They're of more value, probably, than any of my more generalized remarks.

INTERVIEWER

G. S. Fraser wonders, in an essay about the two of you, whether you ever met Yeats. From remarks in your talk about him, it would seem that you did. Could you tell us the circumstances?

ELIOT

Of course I had met Yeats many times. Yeats was always very gracious when one met him and had the art of treating younger writers as if they were his equals and contemporaries. I can't remember any one particular occasion.

INTERVIEWER

I have heard that you consider that your poetry belongs in the tradition of American literature. Could you tell us why?

ELIOT

I'd say that my poetry has obviously more in common with my distinguished contemporaries in America than with anything written in my generation in England. That I'm sure of.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there's a connection with the American past?

ELIOT

Yes, but I couldn't put it any more definitely than that, you see. It wouldn't be what it is, and I imagine it wouldn't be so good; putting it as modestly as I can, it wouldn't be what it is if I'd been born in England, and it wouldn't be what it is if I'd stayed in America. It's a combination of things. But in its sources, in its emotional springs, it comes from America.

INTERVIEWER

One last thing. Seventeen years ago you said, "No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written. He may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing." Do you feel the same now, at seventy?

ELIOT

There may be honest poets who do feel sure. I don't.

