

POETRY AND PLAIN SENSE

(A Note on the Poetic Method of T. S. Eliot)¹

The poetic method of Mr. T. S. Eliot consists in a delicate symbolization of Feeling, wide variations of Tone, a constant shift of Intention and an almost complete disregard for Plain Sense.² This method is effected by composing poems in eight languages or more and by making them into mosaics of quotation from other poets, some of them bad poets and others unknown to the general reader.

Many critics have thought that Mr. Eliot was not justified in his use of many languages, copious quotation, and disregard for Plain Sense. Most will agree that the only justification any poem can have is its success. If we read a composition and have the experience of poetry while or after reading it, that composition must to that extent and for that time be accepted as a poem. If we fail to have the experience; but others whom we respect as more gifted or sensitive than we are have it, the fault may be that our own critical preconceptions, our stock responses, inhibitions or sentimentalities interfere with that kind of apprehension which it is the business of poetry to stimulate and direct.³ These may be corrected by our own efforts or by the treatments of poetic doctors whose discussions, though tedious have at times been worth the trouble.

Ultimately the justification of any work of art depends upon its effects. As there are many levels of culture in the Western world, there are also many levels on which poetry may attain success. Some poems are successful because they depend on the simplest stock responses, preconceptions and sentimentalities of the simplest types of intelligence. Higher levels of intelligence will be shocked by these simplicities and will demand more complex, subtle, allusive and rapid

1. These pages constitute the first section of a monograph on "The Poetry of T. S. Eliot."

2. For full discussion of these terms, see I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (London 1929), Part III, pp. 179 ff. Although particular acknowledgement of help will be made wherever possible, so much of this paper is based on ideas thrown out by Mr. Richards, either in his publications or his conversation, that general acknowledgement here is both a duty and a pleasure.

3. The fact that a poem cannot always stimulate the experience of poetry for an individual reader, and the fact that any reader's experience with any poem varies greatly at various times in successive readings, and that poems sometimes acquire and sometimes lose power as they pass from one historical period to the next, may be significant in the general interpretation of the poetic experience. For brief discussion of this phenomenon, see the author's "Poetry in the Laboratory," Peking, 1929.

symbolization. It is in this way that the books our friends read give us useful information about their characters. Some of the people who fail to find the experience of poetry in Mr. Eliot's compositions, fail because they expect to find there the things which academic superstition or habit has taught them to look for. The attempt of these pages is to think about Mr. Eliot's poetry for the purpose of coming to conclusions about its method and the kind of illumination it throws upon the theory of literature.

1

The term Plain Sense as Mr. Richards uses it, refers, as I understand it, largely to the sense of the individual statements contained in a poem.¹ Mr. Richards has called these individual statements "pseudo-statements"—a term objected to by Mr. Murray on grounds which appear to be ethical. Perhaps the term fictive statement will cover the situation.

"When I have fears that I may cease to be" or
 "Much have I traveled in the realms of gold" or
 "My love is like a red, red, rose"

are examples of these fictive statements in which the sense is plain. In Mr. Eliot's poems, fictive statements in which the sense is clear are frequent. Examples,

"Let us go and make our visit"
 "In the room the women come and go
 Talking of Michelangelo."
 "In the juvenescence of the year
 Came Christ the tiger."

In other passages the Plain Sense of even the individual fictive statements is not clear. Thus, the passage which follows that last quoted is,

"In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,
 To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
 Among whispers: by Mr. Silvero
 With caressing hands, at Limoges
 Who walked all night in the next room:"

In Mr. Eliot's compositions the term Plain Sense must be expanded. In these the Plain Sense is to be found not only in the prose paraphrase of individual

1. He does at times expand this conception. ¹See *Practical Criticism*, pp. 190 ff.

fictive statements which are themselves frequently the barest prose, but also in a prose paraphrase of the composition as a whole: the plot, the argument or the story of it or the situation which it presents. The disregard of this kind of Plain Sense which results from the incoherence of individual fictive statements which in turn fail to create a larger fiction (plot, argument, story or presented situation) creates difficulties for most readers and for many critics.

A critic who admits that he is not able to present a prose paraphrase of a poem ("Tell us what it's about, what happens in it." "Give us the simplest, crudest key to it.") is lucky if he escape two charges, that of not being able to read English, of being, in fact illiterate; and worse, of critical insincerity, of pretending to find poetry in a composition which he cannot even paraphrase. The fact that few critics are insensitive to either of these charges may explain the general vagueness and airy pirouetting of their discussions about Mr. Eliot's methods.

For a good many thousands of years poets have been writing poems about something and have hung their poems on the peg of Plain Sense. If a poem is being written about a rose, the poet takes care to write it about a rose. The Plain Sense is plainly stated and the statements are obvious to botanists or amateurs of roses. A poem about a rose is not a poem because it is about a rose; it is a poem for entirely different reasons, some of which may appear if this article is read to its conclusion. The Plain Sense of a poem is frequently—particularly in lyric poems—of the slightest importance to the poem *as poetry*. The fact is that except for very brief periods and in very highly civilized societies—one thinks of the valley of the Rhone in the early thirteenth century—Plain Sense has always been available to the insensitive reader who has believed that he understood the poem when he mastered its syntax and was able to offer a prose paraphrase of it. Writers have dared to disregard the financial and social support of these insensitive readers and to insist that poetry should be made so difficult that it will be understood only by specialists and gentlemen (the connection of these terms is theirs, not mine) in Europe and in China only when the experience of poetry has come to occupy a position in opposition to the experience of life which is historically not its normal position. And in these periods the disregard for Plain Sense has more frequently been disastrous to the journeyman poet (that is the gifted writer who has neither talent nor genius for

poetry) than it has been helpful. For evidently when a writer has nothing to communicate but a little Plain Sense and refuses to communicate that, nothing at all remains for him, and his temporary success is built upon snobbism and other irrelevancies. This consideration should not be taken as an admission that Plain Sense is necessary to poetry. The failure of the many does not prove the incapacity of the few. Indeed the success of even one poet, raises the question as to the function of Plain Sense in the poetic experience.

Inasmuch as not all critics are entirely insensitive to poetry, some few have observed that if Shakespear's sonnets are read as plain descriptions of his friend, they are inaccurate; if read as compliments, they are in bad taste; therefore they must derive their poetic strength from other sources. These critics have insisted that poetry is emotion, that it can be felt about or tasted, but not thought about. This attitude was common long before Wordsworth siezed upon it, deprived it of Plain Sense and made it into a metaphor. This metaphor, (poetry is the overflow of emotion) which is a symbolisation of Feeling about poetry rather than a account of a process, and is thus itself of the nature of poetry, has partaken for some critics of the sanctions of truth. It has found its way into our text books and because some people feel uncomfortable in the presence of overflowing emotions it has, by its inadequacy, engendered a wrong attitude toward poetry and the poetic experience. Inasmuch as the observation of emotion has always been inadequate and the vocabulary for discussing it has at all times been vague and misleading, poetry and emotion have not been thought about properly. The sequence of propositions, stated crudely and simply was, in many instances, as follows: "Poetry is emotion. Emotion is not Plain Sense. That which is not Plain Sense cannot be understood. Therefore poetry cannot be understood. Therefore it is useless to think about poetry." Nor were the fallacies of this sequence made quite clear until Messers Ogden and Richards anatomised meaning in their *Meaning of Meaning* which was followed shortly by Mr. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism*.

The effects of this attitude have been most unfortunate. People who had the experience of poetry sought to attach the experience to values which to critics a hundred years hence¹ will, I suspect, appear grotesque. Others who

1. This raises significant questions which will be discussed in a later essay, "The Future of Nineteenth Century Literature".

had no grasp of poetry but spent their time in talking about it, made use of a defense mechanism which in face of a bad poem made use of the strange sequence, "Inasmuch as I think this composition is a good poem; inasmuch as poetry cannot be understood; you, who say it is a bad poem are less cultured than I." This assertion of social superiority which protected hollow men from an investigation of their own hollowness was effective in silencing earnest inquiry, particularly in class rooms where this kind of question might have been ventilated. In this connection the equation of taste with appreciation of literature offers ground for speculation. It is perhaps significant that the term "literary taste" was made popular in the late seventeenth century and became inextricably involved in the formulations of the romantic critics of the eighteenth century. Through all of its metamorphoses it maintained both its physiological and its aristocratic implications.

For these reasons and for many others which may not be enumerated here—not the least of which are our great ignorance as to the nature of the experience of poetry and the ambiguity of the terms which we are forced to use in explaining what we do know of the experience—the critic who insists that while the most important function of poetry is not the communication of ideas and yet that the appreciation of poetry is not "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" is likely to incur misunderstanding and to arouse resentment.

2

Much of Mr. Richards' *Practical Criticism* is devoted to analysis of the "four points of view from which. . . . articulate speech can be regarded." (p. 181). These four aspects he calls Sense, Feeling, Tone and Intention. He has shown with great skill how a misunderstanding of one of these aspects influences all four of them, how a misunderstanding of Sense for example, may change the Feeling, alter the Tone and shift the Intention. He has begun the analysis of Sense in poetry and its relation to the other aspects of interpretation. He says, (p. 186) "The statements which appear in poetry are there for the sake of their effects upon feelings, not for their own sakes. Hence to challenge their truth or to question whether they deserve serious attention as *statements claiming truth* is to mistake their function. The point is that many, if not most of the statements in poetry are there *as a means* to the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes, not as contributions to any body of doctrine of any type whatever."

This is very helpful and applies to statements, or to use his term, pseudo-statements of fact which are contained in any poem; it does not, however, apply with equal relevance to poems which like some of those by Mr. Eliot have no plain sense. Thus the two statements in the passage which follows in the light of Mr. Richards' statement offer little difficulty when taken as separate statements. (They are taken from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, one of the poems most illustrative of Mr. Eliot's method and most central to his thought).

"Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
 And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
 Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?
 I should have been a pair of ragged claws
 Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."

Neither of these statements, taken separately, need claim, for purposes of poetry, very serious attention as statements of truth. Perhaps only Mr. Eliot's biographer will care very much to learn whether as an actual historical fact Mr. Eliot walked at dusk through narrow streets. Whether or not as an actual fact he should have been a pair of ragged claws may be left to the mechanism of his Karma and the opinions of his enemies. The first, whether biographical or not, because it is in a poem, is to be regarded as a pseudo-statement, presenting a situation, or, if words may be regarded as substitutes for action, putting us in a situation which immediately arouses the appropriate feeling. (The way this Feeling branches and the implications it has in Mr. Eliot's other compositions will be discussed presently.)

The second statement is as direct a statement of Feeling as can be found in articulated language. (Compare, "Wipe your hand across your mouth and laugh" in "Preludes", p. 23; and the unarticulated expressions in "The Waste Land", "burning, burning, burning, burning," p. 129.)

Neither the Plain Sense nor the Feeling of either of these passages offers any difficulty when the passages are read separately; but when they are read together in sequence as they must be in the poem, they appear to have neither coherence nor relevance. Prufrock's feeling that he should have been a pair of ragged claws is so much more violent than the Feeling aroused by the walk at dusk through narrow streets that the two appear to have no connection. That the sequent feelings in traditional poetry are relevant is evident in any anthology.

And this may give a clue as to the function of the whole sense in the poetic experience. No matter how divergent are the feelings aroused by individual pseudo-statements, they gain relevance to each other in traditional poetry by reference to the plain sense of the poem as a whole. Thus, although it is of the greatest importance to remember that the statements in poetry are subordinated to the manipulations of Feeling (and one might add Tone and Intention) some of Mr. Eliot's compositions force us to examine a further condition of poetry in which the pseudo-statements are not so connected as to describe a situation which can integrate them or from which they sprang. And further if this central controlling situation is not described, presented or created by the coherency of the pseudo-statements, the task of the critic may be the task of creating the situation or of explaining its qualities and functions (in case they are not identical).

This raises difficulties of two kinds. In the first place, the critic's function when he deals with Mr. Eliot's poetry differs markedly from his function in dealing with traditional poetry. Usually one may assume that an intelligent reader is sufficiently literate to grasp the plain sense of the poem as a whole, and that the task of interpretation is to fit the individual pseudo-statements into the Plain Sense and particularly to assist in the adjustment to each other and to the Plain Sense of the elements of Feeling, Tone and Intention. Mr. Eliot's compositions require those of us who are interested in thinking about our experiences to suggest a situation which will harmonise for us the elements of poetry we find in his poems and they tempt us to formulate dangerous experimental hypotheses which will suggest the situations from which these elements were generated by the poet's experience. The second difficulty arises from the first. In traditional poetry the Plain Sense of the poem presents us with the situation which fixes the other elements of meaning. The situation, usually suggested by the title and first lines of the poem, sets the Feeling, Tone and Intention which, though they may change and develop are given a preliminary relevance and proportion which is useful to the reader when the variations become too great. But where this help is not given and where the poem has no Plain Sense, we are faced with a situation in which Tone, Feeling and Intention are not integrated or proportioned to each other, in which they are not fixed and in which each may continue its own way. That they should be entirely independent of each other is, of course, impossible: but the degrees to which they can be independent, can branch out

and complicate each other is strikingly illustrated in Mr. Eliot's greater poems. Indeed by the omission of Plain Sense Mr. Eliot has made a great technical contribution. He has improved his poetic economy. He has liberated Feeling, Tone and Intention and greatly enlarged the areas over which they are effective.

Mr. Eliot has various ways of manipulating the Plain Sense of the poem as a whole. In some compositions the sense is so plain that it is almost a prose statement and offers no difficulties whatever. Most of the poetry in "Aunt Helen" and "Cousin Nancy" derives from the irony in the situation they describe. "The Boston Evening Transcript" and "Conversation Galante" are somewhat more elusive as is "Hysteria" which is actually written in prose. Here the poetry arises in part from the situation described in the poems, but in part too from the poet's Feeling towards the situation as that Feeling is stated or symbolised by his actions. The small difficulties which arise in reading these poems are due to uncertainties about the author's Tone and Intention....uncertainties which the author himself may have felt and which need fuller discussion elsewhere—In Mr. Eliot's greater poems, "Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," "Gerontion" and "The Waste Land" the Plain Sense of the poem as a whole is to be deciphered only in the "Portrait." In the other three it is entirely disregarded. Neither the "Portrait" nor "Mr. Apollinax"—another of the lesser poems—need cause difficulty to those who are accustomed to traditional poetry if they remember that whatever there may be in these of poetry arises from the statement of a situation and the statement or symbolisation of the author's feelings toward the situation.

An example of explicit statement of Feeling is found in the third visit in the "Portrait" (p. 18):

"The October night comes down; returning as before
Except for a slight sensation of being ill at ease
I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees."

A symbolic statement of Feeling is the conclusion of the same visit where his irritation expresses itself as,

"And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression...dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,

Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.

Let us take the air in a tobacco trance." (pp. 19-20)

In "Mr. Apollinax" the Feeling is symbolised in a way which puts no difficulties in the way of Sense particularly if the poem be prefaced by "These are my impressions and Feelings about Mr. Apollinax", a statement which only a dull reader would need:

"When Mr. Apollinax visited the United States
His laughter tinkled among the teacups,
I thought of Fragilion, that shy figure among the birch-trees,
And Priapus in the shrubbery,
Gaping at the lady in the swing.
In the palace of Mrs. Phlaccus, at Professor Channing-Cheetahs
He laughed like an irresponsible foetus." (p. 31)

3

The reading of some of the other poems requires very close attention. In "Sweeney among the Nightingales" the first four lines are clear statements of a situation; the next six lines are statements or symbolizations of Feeling. Line 11 returns again to a description of a situation and this description continues with small elaborations of Feeling and Intention through line 34. The last six lines are again symbolizations of Feeling.

The scene is laid in some small tavern, presumably near the sea and certainly not far from a Convent of the Sacred Heart. The characters are Sweeney who appears frequently in Mr. Eliot's compositions and whom Mr. Eliot regards with some envy and much distrust and suspicion, two or more prostitutes—one of them is called Rachel and the other is the person in the Spanish cape, perhaps Dusty or Doris (see "Sweeney Erect"), a silent man in mocha brown, a waiter and a host. It is spring, for the wisteria are in blossom. The action is of the slightest. Sweeney spreads his knees, lets his arms hang down and laughs. (lines 1-4). The girl in the cape tries to sit on his lap, fails, falls to the floor. A waiter brings in fruit which Rachel eats. A man (the "man with heavy eyes" and perhaps the same as "the silent vertebrate in brown") leaves the room and looks back through the wisteria blossoms that hang over the window. He has one or several gold teeth. There is a murmur of voices as the host talks with some unknown person. The tone is that of an impersonal report, a fact which

may be seen to have significance later. The hints of Feeling in this portion of the poem are slight, confined in their more obvious forms to the phrases,

“Rachel.

Tears at the grapes with murderous claws”

and

“The silent vertebrate in brown.”

The evening as here described is not particularly interesting nor is it dull, it is not sordid nor is it inspiring. It is an evening got through with, an evening wasted.

The Plain Sense of this portion of the poem should offer no difficulties to the fairly literate reader, although, due to the precision with which Sweeney's laughter is described a surprisingly large number of readers fail to get the Plain Sense of the first four lines. If this is not grasped the sudden shift which comes in lines 5 to 10 will cause difficulties:

“The circles of the stormy moon

Slide westward toward the River Plate,

Death and the Raven drift above

And Sweeney guards the horned gate.

Gloomy Orion and the Dog

Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;

The person in the Spanish cape

Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees.”

The Plain Sense of these pseudo-statements is clear and the task of articulating them with the Plain Sense of the poem as a whole offers no difficulties. (The use of semicolon rather than period after “seas” is a clue to tone and intention and helps to prepare for what is to follow). The difficulties which several readers have experienced with this passage are due to the implications of the words, or to use Mr. Empson's rather dangerous term, their ambiguities. These words are not ambiguous in the sense that they obscure the Plain Sense of the poem, but rather in the sense that they are explosive with meanings, which are personal, historical, literary, and become entangled with the manipulations of Feeling, Tone and Intention. The lines swing from Plain Sense to Feeling for the greater emphasis on Feeling and are so laden that analysis is difficult without conscious effort and complete analysis is impossible without unlimited space.

It is a stormy night and the moon is reflected in the sea in circles which move westward. The storm clouds are black, they are like ravens, the symbols of death. They drift across the sky and Sweeney guards the horned gate, the gate, perhaps of "Death's dream kingdom," perhaps the gate of physical passion which leads to a life that Mr. Eliot appears to equate with death. The constellations of Orion and the Dog are hidden by the clouds. The sea is at low tide and at low tide too are all of those things associated with the sea by Mr. Eliot: Phlebas, the drowned man, death by water, defunctive music under sea and the like. There comes a momentary hush in the beating of the waves. In this setting the person in the Spanish cape tries to sit on Sweeney's knees and the poem proceeds to a description in the language and manner of prose of a wasted evening, in sharp contrast to the last six lines:

"The nightingales are singing near
The Convent of the sacred Heart,

And sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemnon cried aloud,
And let their liquid siftings fall
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud."

where Feeling again takes control of the poem to carry it to a magnificent conclusion, all the more splendid when we remember that Agamemnon the Greek hero was murdered by his adulterous wife and make the comparison between the hero Agamemnon and the dull vice of Sweeney and his companions.

The poetry of this composition does not derive from the presented situation, that is from the Feeling aroused by a prose paraphrase as it does in "Aunt Helen" nor from the author's own personal Feeling in a particular situation, ("Mr. Apollinax"). The poetry appears to derive from the irony which is in all human affairs, namely, in the first part of the poem, the contrast between the grandiose forces of nature ("the circles of the stormy moon", "gloomy Orion and the Dog" "hushed the shrunken seas") and the dull fornications of Sweeney and his companions. In the end of the poem it derives from the contrast between the death of the hero Agamemnon and the living death of Sweeney. This effect is strengthened by the use of a full language in lines 5 to 10 and 35 to 40 in contrast with the flat commonplace and unambiguous language of the rest of the poem.

This contrast appears to arouse very strong personal feelings in Mr. Eliot. It is one sketch of "The Waste Land" and is presented by frequent references to sexual symbolism, in this case not only the *locale* but also the contrast between the potency of Sweeney and the impotence of the dead hero.¹

The relation between Plain Sense and Feeling now becomes clear. The unlovely though not unloved Apeneck Sweeney (whom we know from other poems is pink from nape to base, knows the female temperament, is brought by horns and motors to Mrs. Porter in the spring), laughs, and the moon, the storm, the seas and the stars are given relevance to this laughter. While he amuses himself with Rachel and her companions the nightingales near the Convent of the Sacred Heart are singing the same song they sang when Agamemnon was dishonored and murdered by his adulterous wife. Here, as in traditional poetry, the function of Plain Sense is to integrate the factors of Feeling, Tone and Intention.

4

If the function of the Plain Sense of the poem as a whole is to order the elements of Tone, Feeling and Intention, if it is to give them a skeleton on which they may be draped, to present a situation in which they may range (even though that situation may be the universe as opposed to Apeneck Sweeney) it would seem probable that the mere existence of the skeleton or situation must limit the range of these factors of poetry. Much of the poetry of the past has died because the Plain Sense of the poem as a whole, that is the skeleton or situation which is not the poem but is useful in articulating the elements of poetry, has ceased to be of interest, that is, has ceased to function.² Inasmuch as poets confine themselves to a limited number of Feelings, the history of poetry has been the history of variations in Plain Sense. Situations which are new either by virtue of statement in the language of the day or by virtue of reference to situations common to the day, are used in the articulation of Tone and Feeling.

1. Compare "Sweeney Erect."

2. The amicable controversy about belief in poetry now being conducted by Messers Richards and Eliot which raises the question of how much of the pseudo-statements contained in poetry must we "believe" in order to "understand" (*vide*, perhaps, experience) the poetry seems to me to center about this historical fact. The controversy seems to involve the relation between Plain Sense and the other elements of poetry, a relation which the disputants appear to have passed over rather lightly.

Poets of all ages have attempted to rise above this limitation by the use of ambiguous language¹, that is by the use of statements which contain many implications in sense and feeling of which one or more are relevant to the Plain Sense but of which the others rise above the central situation, present conflicting or complementary situations, and by mechanisms which may be psychological, physiological or (as I think) both, give the reader an experience of immanent meaning, order his impulses and satisfy his needs.

The historical controversies over plain and poetic diction have grown out of this situation. Poetic diction has been used in those periods when it has been popular in an attempt to free tone and feeling from the limitations of plain sense and to increase the implications, the meanings, of words. (Du Bellay's *Défense* is a case in point.) More difficult, less direct, though apparently more satisfactory to poets of the present generation, is the attempt to use the language of everyday speech and to give it richness or increase its implications by various devices, such as the general rather than the specific epithet², the logically improper epithet³, and expansion of epithet into simile and metaphor. These devices give the words a weight of Feeling which is frequently carried at the expense of Plain Sense.

The clarity with which the Plain Sense needs to be stated if it is to perform its function will vary with different individuals according to the degrees of their literacy. The situation here does not differ greatly from situations met in any normal social intercourse. To some people an entire social situation with all of its implications can be conveyed by a hint, to others the situation will require complete and detailed explication. Some readers will be able to reproduce the Plain Sense of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" after a first or second reading, others will make out the Plain Sense only with the greatest difficulty. This suggests a further device whereby Feeling may be liberated from the Plain Sense of the poem as a whole. Plain Sense may be stated so allusively, it may be sketched with lines so fine, that apprehended immediately, though vaguely and

1. Cf. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, London 1930

2. "Feathered folk", "finny tribe" and the like. An interesting use of this device in modern prose is to be found in Captain Thomason's articles on J.E.B. Stuart: "the blue people" or "the grey people" with reference to certain detachments of the northern or southern armies. The article here referred to appeared in *Scribner's*, November, 1930.

3. Examples in Mr. Eliot's poems are frequent: "cruellest month", "forgetful snow", "dead land" "dull roots" and the like.

as a Feeling rather than as a communication, by the gifted reader it will escape the analysis of the semi-literate literalist. Poets who make use of this device must appeal to small and highly sophisticated audiences and they are forced to exist in the somewhat unhealthy atmosphere of The Cult. An example of this kind of manipulation is found in "Sweeney Erect" where the Plain Sense is so repugnant to the taste of Mrs. Grundy and arouses feelings of such power that, were it stated more explicitly than it is, the poet would have been deflected toward objectives which, we may assume, were of slight interest to him.

It thus appears that Plain Sense may be stated with various degrees of explicitness. In "Aunt Helen" Feeling is tied tight to the frame of Plain Sense. In "Mr. Apollinax" and parts of "The Portrait", Feeling, stated either symbolically or directly leaps over the limits of Plain Sense without blurring those limits. In "Sweeney Erect" and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," the Plain Sense is sketched with such delicacy that it offers considerable difficulties to inexperienced navigators.

A final attitude towards the Plain Sense of the whole, and the attitude Mr. Eliot assumes in "Prufrock", "Gerontion" and "The Waste Land" is to annihilate it completely. These poems grow directly out of a tonic emotion which defines itself in a series of fictive situations:

"Let us go then, you and I
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table. . . . etc."

pseudo statements;

"I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker"

direct statements of Feeling:

"To wonder 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?'"

or

"And in short I was afraid."

or symbolization of Feeling,

"I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."

This method requires extraordinary tact on the part of both poet and reader. The reader is required to shift his attention from the Plain Sense which he has

come to expect will regulate his feeling, direct his tone and explain the poet's intention, and is forced to apprehend Feeling which itself will articulate a series of images and statements. The implications of these, due to their juxtaposition, pile up upon each other, generate further Feeling and introduce other complexities until the pattern which results becomes too elaborate for analysis in any vocabulary at my command.

5

If this account of the function of the Plain Sense of the poem as a whole is adequate, it should assist in the interpretation of a poem like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". This poem seems to have grown out of an emotional state and to induce an emotional state which its progress succeeds in evacuating.

Even here a situation is suggested.

"Let us go then, you and I
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherised upon a table;

 Let us go and make our visit."

Presumably during the visit.

"In the room the women come and go
 Talking of Michelangelo."

Two and a half pages later,

"And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
 Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me."

But these hints are of the vaguest. They are presented and then dropped. They do much less than present an enveloping situation, they belong rather with the other symbolizations of Feeling which serve to iterate and direct the currents of emotion which the poem arouses. They are in function equivalent to the other symbolizations with which the Feeling is concerned.

The emotion which produced this poem is the same which has produced much if not all of Mr. Eliot's other work. It is so powerful in his experience that it causes him to demolish the limits of Plain Sense (for our greater enjoyment of poetry) it causes the rapid variations of tone observable in "Sweeney Erect" and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," it determines those perversions

and inversions of Intention found in the "Notes" to "The Waste Land" and found also in the return to the church by the author of "The Hippopotomus" and "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service." This emotion has two aspects. It seems to attach itself to some early and shattering experience and to express itself in symbols which are recurrent in Mr. Eliot's work and which when traced and schematised form a close though a very elaborate pattern. Not only is this personal emotion recurrent and generative in Mr. Eliot's compositions, it is directive in his thinking. It has generated the Waste Land in which Mr. Eliot appears to live, it explains his preoccupation with sex and particularly with adultery, and his horror of both, his interest in the fertility ceremonies of certain peoples, his identification of his experience with the legend of Parzival. It is sufficiently powerful to have set his character and by semantic expansion to have established itself and its symbolizations as a standard by which he judges his subsequent experiences.

To dismiss this as a juvenile fixation is to be much too objective about it. If it has something to do with "birth trauma", "Oedipus", "Electra" "inferiority" or any of those other metaphors which psychologists are forced to use because of the poverty of our vocabulary for the discussion of emotional states, it has as much and probably very little more to do with these than the early experiences of many people and most poets. A close reading of Dante—and it is significant that Mr. Eliot has recognised Dante as a kindred spirit—Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, indeed, any poet, will no doubt demonstrate the existence of fixations of this kind. And inasmuch as poets and artists generally are to be classified as neurotics, the differences between their behavior towards these fixations and ours is that the fixations tinge their views of the universe with more definite colors than ours do and that they are much more occupied with them than we are. Conversely, the difference between the poet and the dangerous or hospital case is that the poet periodically unburdens himself of his fixation by verbal symbolizations. These reduce the pressure the fixation exerts upon his behavior but do not destroy the fixation itself. This situation may explain the popularity among artistic people of such terms as "Art is expression," and the like and the fact that the annoyance they exhibit is quite out of proportion to its cause when well intentioned awkward critics attempt to analyse their artistic processes.

The diagnoses of these emotions, their etiologies, their prognoses, their clinical histories, their classifications by types may well be left to the psychologists. The critic should not be required to enter further into the intimacies of the poet's private life than the poet himself directs. And even when, as in the case of "Sweeney Erect" and "Lune de Miel" the poet takes us somewhat further than habit or common decency would lead us, we may, I think, accept the facts given without much inquiry as to their personal significance. The problem of interest to the critic then, is not the diagnosis of these fixations, but rather the methods whereby these fixations control the symbolizations of poetry; the mechanism of their expansion; and finally the processes whereby the symbols with which the poet relieves himself of the pressure of these fixations are adopted by readers to relieve themselves of the pressures exerted by their own rather different fixations. In other words, the critic is concerned with them in terms of "the theory of interpretation, the diagnosis of linguistic situations, systematic ambiguity, and the functions of complex symbols."¹

If this crude account of the relations between poetry and emotion is found to have any validity, the situation which we meet in "Prufrock" may be described roughly as follows: This poem grows out of an emotional state. It is not presented in the frame of a symbolic situation for although the symbolic situation would give the emotion greater unity and directness, it would also limit its spread and might very well give Mr. Eliot away to the psychologists. The presentation is by means of separate symbols ("pseudo-statements" and the like) which, incoherent from the point of view of Plain Sense, are, nevertheless, not only relevant to the emotion itself but contiguous to it, and by their clash serve to transform themselves from symbols of a personal emotion to symbols of a view of life.

6

The first person in this poem, the "I" who, for convenience will be referred to as Prufrock although it is clearly a segment of Mr. Eliot's own personality, is possessed of a secret or message which is the answer to a question ("an overwhelming question"; it will "disturb the universe" and has something to do with the "butt ends of my days and ways"). Yet he cannot make this communication which he feels is immanent in him. ("It is impossible to say just what I

1. I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, pp. 334-335.

mean"). After postponements ("And indeed there will be time"); after hesitations and fears ("To wonder 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?'"); after a sense of social inferiority is dismissed ("My necktie rich and modest but asserted by a simple pin"); and physical insufficiency ("They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!') (They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')"); after "decisions and revisions which a moment will reverse" and a digression on women and their power to paralyse him with "eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase", after facing all of these inhibitions he makes the attempt to communicate:

"Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirtsleeves leaning out of windows?."

But this attempt too fails, and although the lonely men, and the smoke that rises from their pipes, and their leaning out of windows in the evening appear to be closely connected with this emotion, the association exists, as Prufrock knows, for himself rather than for others. The failure of this attempt arouses a sense of terrible impotence, not unmixed with fear.

"I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas"

The next section of the poem is retrospective. The tenses change from the simple futurity of the first pages as "Shall I" and "Do I dare" to the conditional of "should I" and "would it have been worth it after all." The crisis arrived and although there was a spasm there was neither a flow nor a parturition. The emotion thus restrained suppurates and causes a living death.

"And would it have been worth it, after all,
.....
Would it have been worth while
.....
To say, 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all,
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all."

This living death is none the less bitter because it can, in this case, be traced to the frivolity of some Salome:

"Though I have seen my head—grown slightly bald—brought in upon a platter,

I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
 I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker
 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat and snicker,
 And in short, I was afraid."

Nor is the bitterness of this failure much helped when labeled as it is labeled for Prufrock and not for him only with the phrase "realization of my limitations," or "I am no prophet and here's no great matter" or

"No! I am not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be.
 Am an attendant lord, one that will do
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two
 Advise the Prince; no doubt an easy tool,
 Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed almost ridiculous
 Almost, at times, the Fool.
 I grow old. . . . I grow old. . . ."

The Plain Sense thus derived from a close reading of the poem is that the feeling which it is the business of the poem to present is disproportionate to the experience with which it is associated. It has something to do with "restless nights in one night cheap hotels" on the streets that lead you to the question you must not ask; it has something to do with lonely men leaning out of windows in the dusk, with the desertion of Ariadne by Theseus who goes to slay the monster (Sweeney Erect), with the wakening of the virginal Nausicaa who has been dreaming of her wedding and the bestial Polyphemus (Sweeney Erect); with the death of the prophet by the desire of Salome (Prufrock) and the death of the hero by the hand of the passionate and sinful Clytemnestra. The qualities of the experience are sexual and adulterous. But here again it is necessary to insist for the benefit of the too literal reader, that to inquire which possible adulteries Mr. Eliot might have been in a position to commit would be both impudent and impertinent. Obviously this feeling may arise from any number

of varied causes and may be symbolised both for poet and reader by sexual experiences, actual or imagined of an adulterous kind. The implications of the word "adultery" (mixture, faithlessness, degeneration) are so broad in their scope and so powerful in their effects that this word may become the symbol for feelings which are genetically of a very different order. Indeed much poetry generally thought to be erotic is erotic only in its pseudo-statements and in the lower ranges of the Feeling which grows out of these statements. The sexual experience is frequently used as a symbol to convey Feelings which are in the first instance not necessarily sexual. That sexual symbols in poetry may be not only symbols of Feeling but also records of biographical fact is obvious but irrelevant.

7

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" like much of Mr. Eliot's other work, seems to be an attempt to confess. It illustrates excellently the mechanism of the confessional mood when that mood penetrates art—as it frequently does—and the dangers risked by those students who attempt to trace biography in lyric poems. One of the qualities of confessional composition is that if the secret which bears down upon the poet is of importance to him he will not wish to confess it. He will need to get relief from it, but that relief will not come by open public proclamation. The confession which he offers in his poetry is a pseudo-confession, a compromise between the need to relieve himself of the weight of Feeling and the external forces whatever they may be which generated the Feeling in the first place and maintain it as a secret. For this reason we cannot come to any even partially adequate understanding of a poem without examining with some care Intention¹ and not only overt or conscious or expressed Intention but also the hidden Intention insofar as we can track it down. Thus if a poet should attempt to tell us all about a secret Feeling of the kind that inspired "Prufrock" and if the Feeling is of any importance to him, we may be quite certain that that part of his experience which makes the Feeling into an important secret will enter and prohibit confession. It will cause him to be at a loss as to how to begin ("Shall I say, I have gone at dusk. . . etc."); it will raise doubts of the value of the confession, its appropriate-

1. Intention is the fourth of Mr. Richard's aspects of interpretation. See *Practical Criticism*, pp. 179 ff.

ness ("Would it have been worth while?") and the capacity of others to understand its unique and overwhelming importance. This defense mechanism which is displayed in almost classical form in the poetry of Mr. Eliot causes the frustration which produces the living death of the last part of the poem and generates the Waste Land.

This Intention not to confess appears sometimes as an Intention to mislead the reader and is not always as obvious as it is in "Prufrock." Mr. Eliot's attempts to confess himself began as early as 1909 according to the title of his book (*Poems 1909-1925*) and culminated in "The Waste Land" which, if read closely and compared with the other poems in his book will be found to contain a reasonably clear statement. The pattern of the "Waste Land" is much more complex than the patterns of any of Mr. Eliot's other poems. Yet the completeness with which the secret is expressed in it may help to explain the famous "Notes" which, instead of clarifying the Plain Sense of the poem make it more obscure. Not only do many of the notes have little to do with the poem itself, but they serve to distract the attention of the reader from the poem to considerations which, if relevant are of slight importance. No one, I think, will find Mr. Eliot's statement accurate when he says that Miss Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much "better than my notes can do". Miss Weston's book does provide an important clue, as will be shown elsewhere, but it does not elucidate.

The use of many languages and the frequent citation from other authors are further instances of the way in which Intention disrupts Plain Sense. The fear to confess which checks the author's desire to confess directs the author's attention to the pseudo-confessions of other poets and the confession hides itself behind these symbols. When these tend to become too explicit the language changes and the confession hides itself in a strange tongue and when even here the confession is about to break through, Intention generates a change of tone and topic. This mechanism may be observed in "The Waste Land":

"Mein Irisch Kind
Wo weilest du?

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl."

—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth Garden,
 Your arms full, your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
 Od' und leer das Meer.

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
 Had a bad cold, nevertheless
 Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe
 With a wicked pack of cards”

The speed with which Intentions change their directions and disrupt the coherencies of Plain Sense and Tone indicate at once the existence of some mental disorder, some powerful Feeling which dominates the poet's experience. And as Mr. Eliot is probably unable to confess himself more clearly than he has in his poems, he would probably be unable to explain to us how far as a conscious artist he has made use of these incoherences and disruptions which when used by lesser men display the initiator. Indeed poets vary so largely “in their awareness of both of their inner technique and of the precise result they are endeavoring to achieve” that, although, an inquiry might elicit an answer that answer would not necessarily be true.

The fact is that Feeling can never be expressed directly, not even in music; and those expressions which appear to be most direct are really metaphorical. The classifications of Feelings provided by people who occupy themselves with that kind of thing, are never adequate to the range of Feeling, nor, and this may be of prime importance, have we any means of discovering how Feelings melt into each other and generate each other. Indeed the ambiguities of Feeling help us in grasping some of the ambiguities of words themselves, that is the verbal mechanism by which one word symbolising or stating a Feeling calls up another word symbolising or stating a related Feeling until by a chain of words the adumbration is complete and the Feeling is relieved. Obviously much traditional poetry arises directly out of the fictive situation which the poet presents and we can have some slight notion as to *what kind of Feeling* the poet is manipulating by formulating a prose paraphrase of his composition. For this reason too, the

prose paraphrase, the Plain Sense of the poem as a whole is not satisfactory as poetry for there the verbo-motor mechanism does not clarify the play of Feeling, its intonations, variations and ambiguities.

The ambiguities of Feeling may and frequently do have very wide range. A Feeling aroused by experiences of any kind at all may symbolise itself in terms of sexual experience (adultery, evil, sin, impotence) and may project itself as an interpretation of the universe which is described as adulterous evil, sinful and impotent. This Feeling which began by having very little to do with the enveloping universe may later come to be presented as an account of the universe, and further experiences such as meditation on this account of the universe may give further strength to the personal Feeling with which we began.

Two illustrations may serve to make clear the application of this process to "Prufrock". The dilemma of Prufrock might be taken as a symbol for the dilemma of all contemporary poets who feel that they have something to say of overwhelming importance, who find it impossible to say what they mean and are met by a universe which is indifferent to their confession. The panic which in the late Nineteenth century came over literary people expressed itself in a frantic search for either a subject matter which would interest the new social order which the industrial revolution was producing or a manner which would interest it. The Parnassians, the Symbolists and the *vers libristes* were interested in manner, the realists and naturalists were interested in matter. (That matter and manner are separable only with difficulty if ever is for the moment of slight importance. The names are theirs, not mine and indicate where in their own thinking the emphases fell).¹ They, like Prufrock, were faced by the problem of making their confessions relevant to the world they were living in. Prufrock's difficulty in making his statement, his humiliation at his failure and his doubts both as to the value of the statement and the ability of the world at large to understand it are symbolizations of the problem of the poet in industrialised and semi-literate cultures.

Although this is one of the implications (*cf.* Empson's "ambiguities" *sup. cit.*) it may not seem too remote if regarded from a slightly different point of view. Some poets seem to have the fortunate talent of hitting on the words,

1. "Matter" is clearly Sense, "Manner" is frequently Tone refracted by Intention.

phrases and themes which fit perfectly the moods and problems of their generation and historical period. Vergil, Milton, Goethe, each in his way interprets the moods of his age. They do this less by virtue of their ability as analysts than by virtue of genius and historical accident (a rare combination). These moods of the age are their own personal moods which produce in these poets persistent and personal irritation. As *Paradise Lost* is much more than the elaboration of a folk tale from the Bible and as the Paradise which Milton *Lost* expanded itself for him into much more than a pleasant garden, so *Faust* becomes symbolic of the weariness of the classical renaissance with its scholarly preoccupations and its search for a fuller and fresher method of self realization. But if *Faust* is symbolic of the transition from the Eighteenth to the Nineteenth Century, it was also for Goethe an expression of his own view of life, a view that thought and feeling should find a balance. That Goethe himself sought this balance between thinking and feeling is instructive in showing how a cultural crisis affected an individual poet; but that this desire for balance grew out of personal experiences, and was a justification for actions which otherwise could have been justified with difficulty is instructive in showing how Feeling generated by personal experiences can spread and color an interpretation of the world at large.

It would be frivolous to attempt to equate the poet Eliot with the poets just mentioned. They were mentioned because in these cases we have sufficient information to disclose the process which Mr. Richards analysis of the four aspects of interpretation permits us to understand. This process is, in brief: (1) Personal experience generates a Feeling, (2) This Feeling symbolises itself in terms of similar or contiguous experiences. (3) These experiences again arouse Feelings which are used in that kind of interpretation symbolization which we call "philosophy of life".

Perhaps a closer reading of the works of the dead masters of literature and an analysis of the functions of Plain Sense will show that the poetic method used by Mr. Eliot is not so radical as would at first appear. Clearly the Feeling which runs through all of Mr. Eliot's poems from "Prufrock" to "The Hollow Men", with all of its ambiguities and implications, with its influence on Sense, Tone and Intention, is neither the sole property of Mr. Eliot nor eccentric to the great tradition of poetry. One might well apply to the personality which created these poems words on which Mr. Eliot comments in his preface to a translation

of Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals*. "Il y a de tout, au cours de ces confidences, voire même l'aveu des faiblesses humaines et aussi l'appréhension d'une âme qui tour a tour se cherche, se dérobe et se dévoile avec une secrète horreur de soi-même."¹ Whether this is, as Mr. Eliot is reported to assert, a true form of "acedia arising from the unsuccessful struggle towards a spiritual life", or whether it arises from causes which the large, generous and ambiguous term, "struggle towards a spiritual life" hides from us, are questions which may be left for another discussion.

R. D. Jameson

1. Cf. review in *Times Literary Supplement*, Jan. 1, 1931, p. 8. The book reviewed is not available in Peking.