

T. S. ELIOT

by

E. E. CUMMINGS

THE somewhat recently published Poems is an accurate and uncorpulent collection of instupidities. Between the negative and flabby and ponderous and little bellowings of those multitudinous contemporaries who are obstinately always "unconventional" or else "modern" at the expense of being (what is most difficult) alive, Mr. T. S. Eliot inserts the positive and deep beauty of his skilful and immediate violins . . . the result is at least thrilling.

He has done the trick for us before. In one of the was it two Blasts skilfully occurred, more than successfully framed by much soundness noise, the Rhapsody and Preludes. In one of the God knows nobody knows how many there will be Others, startlingly enshrined in a good deal of noiseless sound Prufrock and Portrait of a Lady carefully happened. But "this slim little volume" as a reviewer might say achieves a far more forceful presentation, since it competes with and defeats not mere blasters and differentists but rò ě-s and origens and all that is Windily and Otherwise ener-vate and talkative.

Some Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe are, to a student of Mr. T. S., unnecessarily illuminating:

" . . . this style which secures its emphasis by always hesitating on the edge of caricature at the right moment . . .

. . . this intense and serious and indubitably great poetry, which, like some great painting and sculpture, attains its effects by something not unlike caricature."

Even without this somewhat mighty hint, this something which for all its slipperyness is after all a door-knob to be grasped by anyone who wishes to enter the "some great" Art-Parlours, ourselves might have constructed a possibly logical development from Preludes and Rhapsody on a Windy Night along J. Alfred and Portrait up the two Sweeneys to let us say The Hippopotamus. We

might have been disgracefully inspired to the extent of projecting as arithmetical, not to say dull, a classification of Eliot as that of Picasso by the author of certain rudimentary and not even ecclesiastical nonsense entitled *The Caliph's Design*. But (it is an enormous but) our so doing necessarily would have proved worthless, precisely for the reason that before an Eliot we become alive or intense as we become intense or alive before a Cézanne or a Lachaise: or since, as always in the case of superficial because vertical analysis, to attempt the boxing and labeling of genius is to involve in something inescapably rectilinear—a formula, for example—not the artist but the “critic.”

However, we have a better reason. The last word on caricature was spoken as far back as 1913. “My dear it’s all so perfectly ridiculous” remarked to an elderly Boston woman an elderly woman of Boston, as the twain made their noticeably irrevocable exeunt from that most colossal of all circusses, the (then in Boston) International. “My dear if some of the pictures didn’t look like something it wouldn’t be so amusing” observed, on the threshold, the e.B.w., adding “I should hate to have my portrait painted by any of those ‘artists’!” “They’ll never make a statue of *me*” stated with polyphiloprogenitive conviction the e.w.o.B.

“Sway in the wind like a field of ripe corn.”

Says Mr. Eliot.

In the case of Poems, to state frankly and briefly what we like may be as good a way as another of exhibiting our numerous “critical” incapacities. We like first, to speak from an altogether personal standpoint, that any and all attempts to lasso Mr. Eliot with the Vorticist emblem have signally failed. That Mr. E. Pound (with whose Caesarlike refusal of the kingly crown we are entirely familiar) may not have coiled the rope whose fatal noose has, over a few unfortunate Britons, excludingly rather than includingly settled, makes little or no difference since the hand which threw the lariat and the bronc’ which threw the steers alike belong to him. Be it said of this peppy gentleman that, insofar as he is responsible for possibly one-half of the most alive poetry and prob-

T. S. ELIOT

ably all of the least intense prose committed, during the last few years, in the American and English languages, he merits something beyond the incoherent abuse and inchoate adoration which have become his daily breakfast-food—merits in fact the doffing of many kelleys; that insofar as he is one of history's greatest advertisers he is an extraordinarily useful bore, much like a rivetter which whatever you may say asserts the progress of a skyscraper; whereas that insofar as he is responsible for the overpasting of an at least attractive manifesto, "Ezra Pound," with an at least pedantic war-cry, "Vorticism," he deserves to be drawn and quartered by the incomparably trite brush of the great and the only and the Wyndham and the Lewis—if only as an adjectival garnish to that nounlike effigy of our hero by his friend The Hieratic Buster. Let us therefore mention the fact, For it seems to us worthy of notice—that at no moment do T. S. Eliot and E. P. propaganda simultaneously inhabit our consciousness.

Second, we like that not any of Poems' fifty-one pages fails to impress us with an overwhelming sense of technique. By technique we do not mean a great many things, including: anything static, a school, a noun, a slogan, a formula, These Three For Instant Beauty, Ars Est Celare, Hasn't Scratched Yet, Professor Woodberry, Grape Nuts. By technique we do mean one thing: the alert hatred of normality which, through the lips of a tactile and cohesive adventure, asserts that nobody in general and some one in particular is incorrigibly and actually alive. This some one is, it would seem, the extremely great artist: or, he who prefers above everything and within everything the unique dimension of intensity, which it amuses him to substitute in us for the comforting and comfortable furniture of reality. If we examine the means through which this substitution is allowed by Mr. Eliot to happen in his reader, we find that they include: a vocabulary almost brutally tuned to attain distinctness; an extraordinarily tight orchestration of the shapes of sound; the delicate and careful murderings—almost invariably interpreted, internally as well as terminally, through near-rhyme and rhyme—of established tempos by oral rhythms. Here is an example of Eliot's tuning:

T. S. ELIOT

“Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
 Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
 The zebra stripes along his jaw
 Swelling to maculate giraffe.”

Here is a specimen of his compact orchestration:

“I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
 When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.”

Here is Eliot himself directing the exquisitely and thoroughly built thing:

“His laughter was submarine and profound
 Like the old man of the sea’s
 Hidden under coral islands
 Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in
 the green silence,
 Dropping from fingers of surf.”

To come to our final like, which it must be admitted is also our largest—we like that no however cautiously attempted dissection of Mr. T. S.’s sensitivity begins to touch a few certain lines whereby become big and blundering and totally unskilful our altogether unnecessary fingers:

“The lamp hummed:
 ‘Regard the moon,
 La lune ne garde aucune rancune,
 She winks a feeble eye,
 She smiles into corners.
 She smooths the hair of the grass.
 The moon has lost her memory.

T. S. ELIOT

A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
Her hand twists a paper rose,"

At the risk of being jeered for an "uncritical" remark we mention that this is one of the few huge fragilities before which comment is disgusting.

E. E. CUMMINGS

OldMagazineArticles.com