

skylark is *borewr byd*, the world's awakener; the waves are hoarse-tongued and curly-headed. There is a ground-bass of humour and aside, a candid joy in things; yet an edged irony is ever present awaiting its astringent moment. Much of this escapes translation, however dexterous, yet the English text points to a poetry that is full of subtlety and movement, with nothing that is hazy and sentimental. It is hard to quote from Dafydd, but one example of the translators' work may be given in order to show the extent of their achievement.

' A white seagull on the breast of the sea.
 Surely as perfect in beauty is she
 As the white snow or the whiter moon,
 A glove of the sea, gleaned from the sun.
 Proud and swift where she fishes and light
 Over the waves of the sea is her flight.
 O white, white bird, we will go, you and I,
 Your hand in my hand, the lily of the sea.'

Thinking of another poet, Dafydd had written :

' If some one could but find a key
 To unlock that chest, what wealth there would be
 Of music and warm-heartedness.'

English lovers of poetry should rise up and bless the name of Bell, father and son, for showing them where that key may be found.

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

THE OBSCURE POET

WHEN Oliver Goldsmith wrote *The Deserted Village* he made it perfectly clear, both by his title and the content of his poem, what he was intending to say. A great poet of to-day, Mr. T. S. Eliot, in writing *East Coker* and *Burnt Norton*, has not been so explicit either in his title or in his contents; few of his readers know Mr. Eliot well enough to realise the significance of these place-names in his own personal history; nor will they find it easy to elucidate all the references within the poems. The title of the third of the trilogy, *The Dry Salvages*, has been explained by a footnote, though there too the text is not easy to follow.

Recently¹ an attempt has been made to justify the obscurity of modern poetry, and especially Mr. Eliot's poetry, by maintaining that great poetry in all ages has been obscure, that it is only written for 'competent' readers and it not 'a mere pastime for the idle.' This is simply not true. Much of the great poetry of the past has been exquisite in its lucidity; many, perhaps, of the references are more obscure to us than they were to contemporaries; but the main themes of the great poems are as plain as their titles, an *Ode on a Grecian Urn*; *Paradise Lost*. These poems have formed in all civilized ages one of the very highest recreations to be enjoyed in human leisure; to deny that they are 'a mere pastime for the idle' is to misstate the problem. You do not earn your bread by reading poetry, and it can call for more intellectual effort than a detective story without rivalling a Torquemada cross-word puzzle.

It can be maintained, however, that the poet's task is, of its nature, obscure; and the higher the kind of poetry, the more difficult it will be. After all, it is the poet's task to show how

All things
Near or far,
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star.

The poet is called upon to investigate the deepest harmonies and realities of the universe and, by means other than those of the philosopher and the prose-writer, to make these truths, these realities, apprehended by the reader. Clearly, the deeper the poet pursues his purpose, the nearer he will approach the Supreme Reality which is, by definition, ineffable. He will at least be on the fringes of the Godhead. And in his three poems Mr. Eliot has indeed approached the supreme intellectual problems of reality; he has chosen to examine, to conjugate, the verb 'To Be.' It is a teasing problem even to state. I am not, I do not here exist, in the future; I do not exist in the past, either. I *am* only in the present moment; but the trouble is that that moment is always unseizable; Time Present is always flowing out of Time Future into the Past. The river of Time slips by ere we can grasp it. It is never the same river. I say 'this moment,' but as I utter the syllables the moment has gone. I can say 'now' but never really mean it. What do I mean, then,

¹ Martin Turnell; *The Tablet*, 11th and 18th July, 1942.

when I say 'I am'? I am neither in the past nor in the future: and the present does not appear to exist. How can I *be* anything at all? This is the question which, in these three poems, Mr. Eliot sets himself poetically to ask and answer.

'I am,' he says, 'in my beginning.' You cannot isolate a person at any time from his soil, his heredity, the material and spiritual elements that converge to form him. All that he comes from is what he is now. There is

a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.

Since man, then, is made for a purpose, he is made what he is in order to become what he shall be. 'In my beginning is my end.' But, since I *am* in my beginning, in my end, the end for which I am destined, I shall *be*.

This is the burden of *East Coker*. The same rare metaphysical atmosphere pervades *Burnt Norton*. A phrase, a song, a life, of which sequence in time is an essential property, can only be seen in entirety when the sequence is finished, the last note uttered, the last breath expired. It is only complete when it is over; only perfect when it has vanished.

Words move, music moves
Only in time, but that which is only living
Can only die.

And the poet goes on to challenge a rather damaging comparison with the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by comparing the perfection of a piece of music with that of 'a Chinese jar.' It is damaging because Keats has suggested this problem with such admirable clarity and such perfection of poetical form. 'Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought As doth eternity.' Mr. Eliot, indeed, feels his lack of clarity and humbly calls his poetic essay 'a raid on the inarticulate.'

The Dry Salvages completes and synthesizes the elements of the problem in a moving and noble fashion. The sound of a bell-buoy swinging in the sea-surges reminds Mr. Eliot of the Angelus ringing down the centuries with its *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*, its *hora mortis nostrae*, its *Verbum caro factum*. Every moment we are slipping from Time Future to Time Past; every second, then, we are in a measure ceasing to be; every moment is the hour of our death. Our one sure contact with reality, our one way of eventually being what we are designed to be, is by obedience to the

Divine Word. There is one point only where, once upon a time, Reality broke in upon our world of transitory appearances, when He Who Is became the Son of Mary. Here, in Him, are all the strands gathered up.

We have, then, no right to complain about the difficulty, the necessary obscurity, of so elevated a theme. It may, however, be noted that this theme only surrenders itself to the reader after a number of very careful examinations of the text. Nor do any number of readings reveal the meaning of some of the passages, the important 'ruined millionaire' passage in *East Coker*, for instance, or the lovely 'garden' passage in *Burnt Norton*. Were these obscurities necessary? Is it not the poet's duty to speak clearly, or as clearly as his poetic form allows, to his readers? 'To speak clearly' is tautology; is it not his duty to *speak*? Since he is not using the vehicle of prose his statement may lack the order, the exact explicitness, of that form of statement, but none the less the poet is still using the primary human form of intercourse, speech. The poet must be fully human. And, since he is not using the forms of prose, or its spirit, is it not the poet's duty to convey by the quasi-magic order of his rhythms the experience, the knowledge, which he does not convey by lucid articulation? Is not the poet failing who abandons both plain speech and the beauty, the order, of prosody? After all, the business of any author is, by definition, communication; not mystification. It is true that Mr. Eliot, when returning for a moment to traditional forms, speaks of 'an outmoded poetical fashion.' But it is Mr. Eliot himself, with his tremendous erudition and influence, who has very largely been responsible for outmoding it. Of whom is that a condemnation? And—a final question—though it is true that the greatest themes have a necessary obscurity about them, they can be stated in simple terms if they are thought of with clarity. Since speech is a property common to all men, to fail to make oneself clear to others is to suggest that one is not clear to oneself.

None the less, it would be silly to deny that Mr. Eliot is an immensely successful and influential poet and that his obscurity, arising partly from his subject matter, but mainly from his personal allusiveness, his assumption of a super-cultured personal intimacy, is a large element in his popularity. There is no doubt that a great number of modern readers prefer some kind of obscurity in poetry and are intrigued by the personal allusiveness of the poet; seek, in fact, the poet rather than the poetry. This is, perhaps, part of the tendency visible everywhere to-day to be more and more interested

in persons for their own sake, a tendency which is at its lowest in the trade of the gossip-columnist, is beneficially applied in the healing work of the psychologist, and is perhaps at its highest in the desire for union with the poet, artist or musician. For it is union that is required, the impression that the reader is in possession of the whole personality of the author, not merely of his communicated ideas. People are no longer content with a man at the Council-board or the dinner-table; they want him in bath and bedroom as well. The old union by means of mental concepts, spiritual and therefore interchangeable, no longer satisfies. The modern temper seeks a union more intimate, more solid, more wholly satisfying, than the spiritual exchanges provided by the intercourse of the intelligence. It hopes instinctively to find that union by a partly subconscious assimilation of the poet's, the musician's, the artist's self, through the obscure, loosely-organized rhythms of his work. Where lucidity might focus the mind upon a purely intellectual content, obscurity, vagueness, assonance, create the magnetic field in which two whole personalities can fuse. Hence the enormous modern interest in music where, of its nature, the artist's message to the listener must be at its least explicit, at its greatest speechless suggestiveness.

Why do we want this personal union? Why is there so much talk of 'solidarity' with others under the influence of theories communistic, materialistic, evolutionary? Why do we want a more than spiritual, intellectual, union? Can it be that we are all trying to be one Person? Is that the consummation that is being aimed at by our trying to know everything about everybody and to transcend the boundaries of language, race and culture? If that is so, it is a matter of profound significance. For in the end we shall only be saved by being incorporated in the Body of a Divine Person: 'for of him and by him and in him are all things: *per quem fecit et saecula.*' Somehow to us unthinkable, through one Person all things were made; somehow, in the end, the same Person is to gather up all things and restore them to the Father. There, perhaps, is the solution of the obscurity of the modern poet, the personal emphasis of the poet, the desire for solidarity with the poet. The human race seeks no longer for a Law but for a Lord; and it will find Him only in the Person who is Himself the Way, the Truth, the Life.

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