YEATS AND/OR ELIOT:
THE CHOICE?

Several decades ago, when I was doing the things you then had to do in order to obtain a degree in English Literature, my contemporaries and I were offered a number of options within one of our compulsory examinations. The paper had originally (I think) been called 'Special Poets', though it was soon to change into 'Special Authors' (the better, presumably, to accommodate candidates shy of tackling verse); in my time, it had very recently undergone a perhaps more important change, by ceasing to require the study of a selected *pair* of poets – now, instead of (say) Wordsworth and Coleridge, Milton and Spenser, or Tennyson and Browning, one could devote oneself, if one chose, to a single one of the named (and, I need hardly say, exclusively male) list. The pairing which had just been decoupled in this way, and to which I devoted my poor attention all those years ago, was 'W.B. Yeats and/or T.S. Eliot': offered the choice between them (and I could still, as I remember, have chosen to study them in tandem), I opted for Yeats. This sounds like the most trivial of anecdotes, not to mention the most vain, and I give it here with a due sense of its slightness in the bigger scheme of things. But the choice itself, between Yeats and Eliot, which that undergraduate curriculum had incorporated, in its own minor and relatively unimportant way, was one that had – and, I think, still has – a proper critical bearing. Here, I want to venture as cautiously as I can into the different kinds of valuations and value-judgements – about the two poets, and about what poetry is (and is not) – that have gone into both comparisons between Yeats and Eliot and – just as significantly, in my view – the inability, the reluctance, or the failure to set the two writers in meaningful relation to one another.

It would be prudent to begin on the relatively solid ground of literary history, even though a critic's job is to get lift-off from that ground in the end. How did Yeats regard Eliot? What, really, did Eliot think of Yeats? Unsurprisingly, comprehensive and definite answers to these questions are impossible: the only evidence we have is of the written kind, and, like all literary evidence, it can point in more than one direction. However, the

outlines at least of the relation might be established uncontentiously: W.B. Yeats was the older and more famous poet, who was personally acquainted with T.S. Eliot from at least 1915, and in professional contact with him as the editor of *The Criterion* and an editor at Faber and Faber, in the 1920s and 30s. Yeats had a closer relationship with Eliot's friend, Ezra Pound; and of course the Yeats and Eliot circles had numerous points of intersection, notably in Bloomsbury. From time to time, each man went into print on the subject of the other: Yeats wrote about, and included, Eliot in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), while Eliot, who had reviewed work by Yeats in 1917, published his praise of the elder poet in a *Criterion* Commentary of 1935, and again in 1940, with his essay 'The Poetry of W.B. Yeats' (delivered that year as a lecture at the Abbey Theatre). More privately, there are occasional references of one poet to the other in their letters; but no substantial correspondence on anything other than business matters between the two seems to exist. All of this is as unsurprising as it is unspectacular; it suggests a largely respectful, though not an intense, relationship between literary men of different generations, and not the clash of irreconcilable titans.

Even so, there are important matters at issue between Yeats and Eliot, and these issues swirl around in the broader literary culture of their time. Generational difference accounts for some, but not all, of these: Yeats was able to take new ideas and idioms from younger writers, both Modernists like Pound and his contemporaries, and poets younger still; mischievously perhaps, he was inclined to praise the post-Eliot poetic generation in Britain – many of whom were published at Faber by Eliot – above Eliot himself. Other issues need to be noticed too: Yeats's Irishness as a poet, and the significance of this for the writing and understanding of poetry more generally, are matters that recur in Eliot's reading of the older man, and these continue to trouble the critical waters in the reception of his poetry. Questions of style are sometimes – but by no means always – distinct from this, and Eliot's initial engagements with the nature of Yeats's writing reveal how easily the issues of nationality and poetic texture can become entangled. Again, this has not been without consequence, or rather it is a part of a more general, and long-lasting, difficulty about Irish literature and those notions of 'tradition' which discriminate between central and peripheral models of culture. Yeats's standing at the time of his death, and in the decades following, combined – in a very volatile way –

the central with the peripheral: he was often accorded 'major' status as a poet, but declared eccentric as a thinker; he was seen as touched by modernism, but not essentially a modernist; he wrote magnificent poetry, but his style was fundamentally rhetorical in that magnificence; he belonged, in some sense, to English literature, but was encumbered with a strange (and maybe even obsolete) Irishness. This is a crude set of critical paradoxes, of course; but it can accommodate, just as crudely, T.S. Eliot as the normative figure against whom Yeats's deficiencies, or failures to fit, can be measured. Eliot ticks the boxes in such an exercise so well that it becomes easier to acknowledge him as (even if inadvertently) the author of the test: a poet whose route to 'major' status was aided by his reputation as a thinker, and one much concerned with various kinds of orthodoxy; a modernist by pedigree and practice; a poet whose style helped demolish prevailing modes of poetic rhetoric; and a figure close to the heart of English culture and power, unhampered there by his American patrician background.

It is true, though, that as well as being crude, such matrices might also seem badly out of date. Undoubtedly, literary critics have learned enough from cultural theory, and from politics, to treat models of centre and periphery with great caution. Further to this, questions of centrality faded away, to some degree, once definitions of literary canons began to wither on the vine, and canonicity itself (if it did not vanish altogether) became, by the mutual consent of nearly all those concerned in the academy, an invisible presence. We need to acknowledge, too, that Eliot's own reputation is not entirely what it was at the end of his life and in the years immediately afterwards, and that the sense of his centrality to modern poetry and criticism, which was so marked in American and European academe in the postwar decades of the twentieth century, is unlikely to be restored to the strength it had at its height. Nevertheless, both Yeats and Eliot look set to remain those things which we recognize as major poets; and questions of their mutual compatibility – if such questions really do exist, and if they can be framed without recourse to the narrowness of critical partisanship – are the proper business of readers of the poetry of the last hundred years.

Eliot's most important early criticism on Yeats comes in 1919, in a review of *The Cutting of an Agate* for *The Athenaeum*. The piece was not collected by Eliot, but it voices attitudes towards Yeats which some of his later, and more widely read, literary

judgements either change or considerably tone down. Reading the review, its context needs to be kept in mind: for a major London journal in 1919, Ireland is hardly a place to be treated affectionately, and both the Great War and the Anglo-Irish War are bound to be casting their shadows across any treatment there of Irish matters. The T.S. Eliot who writes this review is able to fit in to such a context tonally, and he is also ready to make much of contrasts between Ireland and England:

> Whatever Mr. Yeats's influences may have been, and however remote from his own the natures that have been exposed to it, Mr. Yeats has spent altogether a great deal of time in England and acquired here a degree of notoriety without being or becoming an Englishman. If there is a peculiar Irish genius, it ought to be discovered in him; and if we can reach any conclusions about him, they ought to illuminate our understanding of Irish Literature.

There is no hint here that Mr. Yeats had in fact spent more time in England than the reviewer had done, and the first-person plural – conventional enough in writing of this kind – is here solidly English in its implications. The talk of 'peculiar Irish genius' and 'Irish Literature' might have a belatedly Arnoldian resonance; but Eliot adds a catch all of his own when he remarks that 'the question even whether Irish literature exists is more manageable as a question of the form of existence enjoyed by Mr.Yeats.' This slippery turn in fact suggests the thrust of the review: that Yeats's work is the performance of a huge literary egoism, to which all considerations, whether of fact or of logic, are subordinate. Consistently, Eliot insists upon a national dimension to this: 'The difference,' he writes, 'between [Yeats's] world and ours is so complete as to seem almost a physiological variety, different nerves and senses,' concluding that 'It is, therefore, allowable to imagine that the difference is not only personal, but national.'

This 'national' 'difference' in Yeats provokes some of Eliot's most arch and condescending writing in the review. As often when Eliot is entering this mode, he makes a virtue out of definition and differentiation, as though the techniques of the philosophy seminar could be adapted in literary journalism for use in the stereotypes of prejudice:

> Mr. Yeats is not an eccentric. He eludes that kind of relationship to the comprehensible. Everywhere the difference is slight, but thorough. For when we say "not of this world," we do not point to another. […] When an Englishman explores the mysteries of the Cabala, one knows one's opinion of him, but Mr. Yeats on any subject is the cause of bewilderment and distress. […] Mr. Yeats's mind is a mind in some way independent of experience; and anything that occurs in that mind is of equal importance. It is a mind in which perception of fact, and feeling and thinking are all a little different from ours.

The review's title, 'An Alien Mind', sums up Eliot's perception very adequately; but it is not clear – it is, in fact, designedly unclear in Eliot's prose –whether this 'alien' quality is Irish or Yeatsian in nature. Prejudicial association (including, it's worth noticing, a Jewish dimension in 'the mysteries of the Cabala') is vital to Eliot's technique, and latent notions of ineffectual Irish self-absorption are there to be drawn upon, so that Eliot can assert that 'Mr. Yeats's dream is identical with Mr. Yeats's reality,' and that '*His* dream is a qualification or continuation of himself, and it is natural consequently that he should seek to circumscribe all art within this orbit.' Quoting isolated sentences from Yeats, Eliot is easily able to present statements that seem to lack logic, and to associate these with a national characteristic, as though the Irish Bull had been dressed up in the borrowed clothes of aestheticism:

> It is a style of Pater, with a trick of the eye and a hanging of the nether lip that come from across the Irish Channel, all the more seductive. Mr. Yeats sometimes appears, as a philosopher of aesthetics, incoherent. But all his observations are quite consistent with his personality, with his remoteness. His remoteness is not an escape from the world, for he is innocent of any world to escape from; his procedure is blameless, but he does not start where we do. His mind is, in fact, extreme in egoism, and, as often with egoism, remains a little crude; crude, indeed, as from its remoteness one would expect. There is something of this crudity, and much of this egoism, about what is called Irish Literature: the egoism

> which obstructs from facing, and the crudity which remains through not having had to face direct contacts.

A great deal might be said of this passage; but one aspect which demands attention is Eliot's readiness to make use of racial stereotyping to buttress his insistence on Yeats's isolation in egoism. In the Eliotic terms with which we may be more familiar, this is the charge (which he levelled also against Blake) that Yeats is cut off from tradition, in the toils of a home-made and second-order culture. The 'direct contacts' with Eliot's sense of tradition and modernity are impossible, either because Yeats is radically egotistic, or because he is Irish: perhaps (Eliot allows us to imagine) because these two conditions are essentially the same thing. Although Eliot – cunningly – makes sure to embed high praise for another Irish writer in the review, writing of how Joyce's 'mind is subtle, erudite, even massive' and 'operates within the medium, the superb current, of his feeling', the racial bias which the review adopts, or at least to which it adapts itself, is unmistakeable. Ending the piece, Eliot allows Yeats the damning praise in which, as a critic, he was particularly an expert:

> Very powerful feeling *is* crude; the fault of Mr. Yeats's is that it is crude without being powerful. The weakness of his prose is similar to that of his verse. The trouble is not that it is inconsistent, illogical or incoherent, but that the objects upon which it is directed are not fixed; as in his portraits of Synge and several other Irishmen, we do not seem to get the men themselves before us, but feelings of Mr. Yeats projected. It must always be granted that in verse at least Mr. Yeats's feeling is not simply crudeness and egoism, but that it has a positive, individual and permanent quality.

Everything said here is barbed; and, in 1919, it is also politically encoded. The problem with which this piece confronts us, as readers of Eliot, is how far the criticism is in earnest: how completely, in other words, are Eliot's views of Yeats to be found in the protective and self-promoting environment of this *Athenaeum* prose? His substantial essays from sixteen and twenty years later seem to tell a very different story; but the

troubling possibility remains that these, as much as the 1919 review, are exercises in a tone which, for one reason or another, Eliot felt was the required one.

Eliot and Yeats had met, in fact, some years before 1919. In a letter of 1915 to Isabella Stewart Gardner, Eliot reported back to Boston on his forays into London literary life: 'The last time I was here I had the pleasure of meeting Yeats: he is now in Ireland, I believe because a play of Lady Gregory's is coming to the Abbey. I am hoping for his return – he is a very agreeable talker.' Yeats would have been back in London from a stay in Sussex at Stone Cottage with Ezra Pound at the time of this meeting, and it is likely that Pound was its facilitator. In March 1917, Eliot wrote to his cousin Eleanor Hinkley of how 'I was at a gathering of a curious zoo of people known as the Omega Club, and was sitting on a mat (as is the custom in such circles) discussing psychical research with William Butler Yeats (the only thing he ever talks about, except Dublin gossip).' Hearing Yeats in conversation (or rather, perhaps, in monologue) is an experience that colours a short notice of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* written by Eliot for *The Egoist* in 1918:

> It is always a pleasure to hear Mr. Yeats talking, even when we cannot follow his argument through all its mazes. I think that I can understand the first part of the book […] in the second part, Anima Mundi, I am quite lost, or Mr. Yeats is lost to me, in some delicious soft mist as that in which Venus enwrapt her son. One is never weary of the voice, though the accents are strange; and as there is no one else living whom one would endure on the subject of gnomes, hobgoblins, and astral bodies we infer some very potent personal charm of Mr. Yeats's.

Those gnomes and hobgoblins aside (hobgoblins? gnomes? Can Eliot really have been listening all that closely?), Eliot's susceptibility to at least a measure of Yeatsian charm was being – however ironically or archly – given a public test-drive. In fact, when it came to personal interchange, the charm was to be exercised on both sides.

In 1922, Eliot was editing the *Criterion*, and in search of high-profile contributors; in a letter to Pound, who had evidently suggested Yeats as a potential name, he wrote that 'Of course I should be delighted to have a few poems of Yeats, but so far I have had to go

on the principle of asking people whom for one reason or another I felt pretty sure of getting, and as Yeats does not particularly like me, I believe, there appeared no reason why he should consent if I wrote to him direct.' Perhaps regretting the asperity of his *Athenaeum* piece, Eliot did even so manage to secure Yeats for *The Criterion* – and Yeats's 'weakness'-prone prose at that. Professional contact seems to have got their relationship off to a second start. At the end of 1922, Eliot thanked Ottoline Morrell (another valuable intermediary) for her help:

> I have been wanting to write and tell you that I wired to Yeats after hearing from you and consequently lunched with him at the Savile Club. I enjoyed seeing him immensely; I had not seen him for six or seven years and this was really the first time that I have ever talked to him for any length of time alone. He is really one of a very small number of people with whom one can talk profitably about poetry, and I found him altogether stimulating.

Evidently, things had changed in those six or seven years. Of course, Eliot's way of putting this when writing to someone like Ottoline Morrell will be different from his way of expressing himself to (say) Pound, but we have no reason to doubt at least the underlying sentiment of 'altogether stimulating', however stilted its tonal good manners may feel. The Savile Club lunch was indeed productive: Yeats was in the mood for talk and business, and seems to have been looking forward to the meeting. In fact, from his own letter to Lady Ottoline, it appears that Yeats had suggested she contact Eliot, whose *The Sacred Wood* he had been reading 'with substantial agreement for the most part'. After the lunch itself, Yeats wrote to his wife back in Dublin:

> Eliot has just lunched with me, & we have talked Joyce, poetry & the parallel dream for three hours & I have arranged to write my essay on Dante Designs for his "Criterion". […] I am charmed with Eliot & find that I have a reasonable liking for his "Sacred Wood." He told me a strange thing. Joyce is related through his mother to the Macsweeneys family, the hunger strikes family, & was stirred by the death of the Mayor of Cork to his first political interest or emotion.

So, Eliot was stimulated and Yeats was charmed by this entirely satisfactory encounter. While the conversation is not a million miles away from 'discussing psychical research and Dublin gossip,' it is obviously the kind of discussion in which both parties are now taking more interest. Yeats's admiration for *The Sacred Wood* will have eased things, and Eliot's likely suggestion that Yeats revisit his earlier work on Blake's designs for the *Divine Comedy* must have offered a useful bridge between the two men's interests. Joyce's significance in the exchange is one calculated to appeal to Yeats, combining as it does literature, current politics, and previously unsuspected family ties. The next month, when he returned to Dublin, Yeats found himself unable to undertake the Dante commission, but gave Eliot instead new material from *The Trembling of the Veil*, adding in his friendly letter the postscript, 'I find "The Waste Land" very beautiful, but here & there are passages I do not understand – four or five lines'. The compliment is an after-thought – but Yeats's after-thought *is* a compliment: there were worse things said about Eliot's new poem than this; and the comprehension strike-rate Yeats claims for himself is also, it must be said, much better than that achieved by many of that work's early readers.

Nine years later, Yeats had become the winner of the Nobel Prize and the author of *The Tower*, while Eliot had gone on to be the most intensely influential, and probably most talked-about, poet and critic of his generation; he had also become a member of the Anglican communion, and was the author of *For Lancelot Andrews* and *Ash-Wednesday*. While Yeats's period of continuing development in this time is usually (and rightly) seen as a deepening and expansion of his powers, the same period for Eliot is more problematic, and certainly more subject to critical disagreement. It was at this point, in 1931, that Chatto and Windus published a short book on Eliot as part of their 'Dolphin Books' series of essays, by the young Irishman Thomas MacGreevy. The book is not much read by Eliot scholars now (if it is read at all); and it would be hard to argue that they have lost much by this omission. But MacGreevy's study is of some interest in the development of Yeats's attitudes towards Eliot. Yeats, who had in fact written MacGreevy a letter of introduction to Eliot, was in this book a writer all too obviously under the spell of Yeats's prose; and one of the lessons to be drawn from a reading of *Thomas Stearns Eliot: A Study* is that Yeats's prose style, however imitable it may seem,

is better not imitated. MacGreevy's haughty prose, heavy with its own studied insouciance and affectation, often on tangents, and full of opinionated pronouncement that wants to be taken for *sprezzatura*, brings the prose manners of Pater, Wilde, and Yeats down to (far from mere) mannerisms. Yet, despite his own epigram of decades before, Yeats was in this case entirely inclined to praise one of his fleas. A fulsome letter to MacGreevy was dispatched; and it contained interesting signs of the way in which Yeats's thinking about Eliot was turning:

> I am entirely delighted with your essay on Eliot it is rambling, passionate, crabbed and lucid, and what could man ask for more? You have said things about passage after passage that I felt when I first read the poems without discovering fitting words. Your prose has a quality of momentum which has for some time been fading out of prose and verse alike, the lack of it even in fine passages of Eliot always chills me, his words remain separate, each well-chosen and rightly placed but groups of words do not run together until they are a new single word, all the great style of the past has this for its foundation. Eliot has lost it through an over deliberate pursuit of simplicity. A master of English, he insists upon speaking every word with the same care as if it were a foreign tongue. Pound, with all his faults, has a more spontaneous accent when at his best. There are other things in Eliot; perhaps if I had "The Waste Land" beside me I might have nothing but praise of him to write, but for the moment I set such passages as that you quote in page 28 beside remembered passages in Shakespeare. He is trying to be like him and his very effort makes him unlike, he is dancing among eggs.

Yeats's last image here is arresting and memorable; it shows, arguably, a far greater critical acuteness than anything manifested in his liking for MacGreevy's prose. And the critique of Eliot is not a shallow one: against the strength of *The Waste Land*, Yeats sees a diminution in the 'over deliberate pursuit of simplicity' of Eliot's more recent writing, 'speaking every word with the same care as if it were a foreign tongue'. The subject of 'An Alien Mind' is here responding to something in Eliot's writing which is itself alien, or at least alienated from the 'spontaneous accent' which Yeats desires. Eliot has, Yeats

sees, 'lost' something since 1922. Here, we have reached a point where there is still no critical consensus to which we can appeal, for the whole question of a possible decline in Eliot's writing from the later 1920s, and indeed a possible shrinkage and hardening in the quality of his thought, is not something on which Eliot's admirers are going to take the word of W.B. Yeats.

Nor, of course, should they; and nor should we; but the perception of a change for the worse in Eliot by 1931 is something which MacGreevy's book does offer, and Yeats in his letter is responding to this. On the very first page, MacGreevy calls the recently-published *Ash-Wednesday* 'a serious disappointment', and laments 'the distinct falling off in vigour and vividness, in pregnancy, suggestiveness of words, in technical adequacy to the subject' in this work. MacGreevy was not alone at the time in feeling disappointment with Eliot, and different, probably more consequential disappointments were felt by other young writers, who found ways of expressing this both creatively and critically in the 1930s. Where MacGreevy departs from such writers is in the Irish – or the Roman Catholic Irish – perspective which he is more than willing to bring to the whole question. From this angle, the move towards Christianity, which so unsettled or embarrassed young British poets in the 1930s, is much less significant that Eliot's aboriginal sins of Americanness and indelible aboriginal Protestantism. MacGreevy contrasts Eliot with Joyce:

> Mr. Joyce has more faith and more joy in existence than Mr. Eliot has. It is the difference between Catholic and puritanical Protestant training again […] It is unthinkable that he [Eliot] should retain anything of Satanic melancholy now that he is, if not at Rome, at least at All Saints, Margaret Street.

Doubtless, this kind of thing will have amused Yeats, whose sense of humour – and much else – was well-attuned to sectarian irony, and relished it. He might, perhaps, have been even more pleased by one of the tangents upon which MacGreevy launched himself, that of the anti-'Celticism' of smart literary circles in London, and Eliot's part in all this:

> He [Eliot] deserted New England for old England at a time when […] Mr. Yeats, the only great poet writing in English, was working on material that was un-English and un-American, and therefore somewhat aside from the main stream of influences that Mr. Eliot was likely to accept. It is little wonder therefore that he should have been infected with something of the glibness of his generation, that he should opine solemnly and condescendingly that Synge's survival as a 'European' writer was doubtful; and like one of those spiritual sons of Mr. Charles Ricketts, whose would-be bright chatter makes post-war literary society in England so intolerable, that Mr. Yeats's fairies and leprechauns are 'charming creatures in their native bogs'. I cannot remember that any of Mr. Yeats's fairies – they mostly belong to his boyish work of forty years or so ago – comes from a bog. […] On the whole, I am afraid that when he wrote that phrase, Mr. Eliot was merely making a concession to the fact that, some years ago, after Ireland had given British Jingoism a tolerably resounding *coup de poing sur le visage*, Ireland went out of fashion in London intellectual circles.

MacGreevy is surely not far off target here, at least for the Eliot of 1919, who had undoubtedly succumbed to 'glibness', albeit 'glibness' with high breeding and more than just an air of accomplishment. But if MacGreevy is alert to the superior racism in Eliot's tone, and that of 'London intellectual circles', he is not immune to racist overtones closer to home. At one point (and again, this must have added have added to Yeats's delight) MacGreevy indulges in a bit of root-tracing, exposing the hidden Ulsterman in his adversary: '[…] the most vociferous representatives of this thorough-going anti-Celtic fashion that set in afterwards were outlanders like Mr. St. John Ervine or semi-outlanders like Mr. Wyndham Lewis. (I believe that Mr. Lewis, if not a true-born Orangeman like Mr. Ervine, is partly of north of Ireland, 'planter,' origin – as is also, I think, Mr. Eliot.)' Scholars have yet to discover Eliot's ancestral inner Orangeman, but it's likely that MacGreevy is either misinformed or mischievous here; though Wyndham Lewis's mother was indeed partly Northern Irish, and this may appeal to contemporary practitioners of Irish Studies, who (perhaps inclined to a little racism-lite of their own)

may be glad of the opportunity to locate the author of books like *Hitler* in that uncapitalised 'north'.

By the 1930s, of course, issues of race were in the air; and Yeats was – rather to his cost – fully alive to these. Eliot too: the files of *The Criterion* bear witness to the currency which questions of racial character had in both political and cultural discussions at that time. The 1930s did see Eliot having recourse again to difficulties with Yeats's mysticism, and *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) includes some of the old archness: 'No one can read Mr. Yeats's *Autobiographies* and his earlier poetry without feeling that the author was trying to get as a poet something like the exaltation to be obtained, I believe, from hashisch or nitrous oxide.' Again, too, Eliot uses 'charm', though now with a new spin: 'Often the verse has an hypnotic charm; but you cannot take heaven by magic, especially if you are, like Mr. Yeats, a very sane person.' At the same time, Yeats's more recent poetry is registered, and its impact insisted upon: 'Then, by a great triumph of development, Mr.Yeats began to write and is still writing some of the most beautiful poetry in the language, some of the clearest, simplest, most direct.'

By 1935, Yeats had reached the age of seventy, and Eliot marked the occasion with a substantial leading article in *The Criterion*, which announced itself as 'not the place for a critical discussion of his work,' but 'for an appreciation of his services and an expression of gratitude'. The piece is certainly eloquent, and the terms of its praise are high; Eliot's concluding paragraph manages to prove a capacity for having reservations while – on Yeats at least, and on this occasion – stating none at all:

> Of the absolute greatness of any writer, men living in the same period can make only a crude guess. But it should be apparent at least that Mr. Yeats has been and is the greatest poet of his time. Thomas Hardy, who for a few years had all the cry, appears now, what he always was, a minor poet. I can think of no poet, not even among the very greatest, who has shown a longer period of development than Yeats. At no time was he less out-of-date than today, among men twenty and forty years his juniors. Development to this extent is not merely genius, it is character; and it sets a standard which his juniors should seek to emulate, without hoping to equal.

The Johnsonian sureness in construction disguises almost completely the fact that this paragraph has a tail, and that its tail has a sting: Hardy is appended as (what Yeats would have agreed he was) 'a minor poet,' but also as one who 'for a few years had all the cry'. Yet Eliot is saying – and in saying it, demonstrating – that it is Yeats who, in 1935, has 'all the cry' of reputation; he is 'the greatest poet of his time', but that time is a 'today' in which he is not 'out-of-date'. Underneath his praise that sounds like one Johnson (Samuel), Eliot is inverting another Jonson (Ben) on Shakespeare, or making it possible to imagine such an inversion: Yeats is not for all time, but for an age. Of course, this is not what Eliot is *saying* in his ringing prose; but it may be what the prose is saying under its breath.

Such, at any rate, would have to be the interpretation of a reader who believes that Eliot on Yeats in 1919 is the true Eliot, while Eliot on Yeats in 1935 is constrained by an official voice. But such a reader might also find points of continuity between the two Eliots, notably on the matter of race, nationality, and literature. By 1935, Eliot seems to believe in the possibility of an Irish Literature, though he claims that Yeats can have no good effect on it:

> In his *literary* Nationalism therefore, Mr. Yeats has performed a great service to the English language. His poetry, in his latest and greatest period, has tended to divest itself of the more superfluous stage properties of Ireland, and is perhaps all the more Irish for being unaffectedly so. […] His influence upon English poetry has been great and beneficial; upon Irish poetry it seems to have been almost disastrous. […] Ireland certainly owes Mr. Yeats a debt of gratitude, but no nation owes its great poets a debt of gratitude for their influence upon their immediate successors. England's gratitude to him is without this reservation, for his influence, wherever apparent, has been wholly salutary.

Eliot is in effect awarding Yeats a medal for services to *English* (explicitly not Irish) Literature – not a gesture calculated to please the Nationalism (literary or otherwise) which Eliot invokes. But earlier in the article, Eliot shows himself to be insistent on

national differentiation; and, troublingly, national differences shade into racial ones. Having said that 'the future vitality of English literature will depend very much upon the vitality of its parts, and their influence upon each other,' Eliot fails to leave things there:

> This point deserves a little elaboration. It is not a matter of indifference that poetry written by an Irishman, a Welshman, a Scot, an American or a Jew should be undistinguishable from that written by an Englishman: it is undesirable. The poetry of Isaac Rosenberg, for instance, does not only owe its distinction to its being Hebraic: but *because* it is Hebraic it is a contribution to English literature. For a Jewish poet to be able to write like a Jew, in western Europe and in a western European language, is almost a miracle; and for different reasons and in different degrees it is also difficult for the other people I have mentioned.

We might grant that Eliot's intentions here, so far as they can be gauged, are towards recommending what he sees as inclusiveness in 'English' literature; but they are sabotaged by his expression of them, not least in the true undesirability of that word 'undesirable', which sharpens 'not a matter of indifference' (and the word had already been employed by Eliot in *After Strange Gods* in now notorious relation to a society's quotient of 'free-thinking Jews'). In dealing with this most delicate of problems in Eliot's vocabulary and thought, many contexts of the 1930s are often invoked, both in accusation and mitigation; but this particular context, the praise of Yeats in 1935, might be added to them productively: might it even be Yeats, in some sense, whose example on Eliot here is being something other than 'salutary'?

When Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* appeared in 1936, Eliot was one of the natural inclusions who turned out to be included (with many of the war poets, including Rosenberg, being remarkable absentees). In his Introduction, Yeats found more to praise in Pound than in Eliot, casting Eliot as essentially a satirist: 'in describing this life that has lost heart his own art seems grey, cold, dry.' The comparison with Pope which is then made would be flattering, if it came from anyone other than Yeats (or almost anyone: 'I see Pope as Blake and Keats saw him'), and Yeats does appear to find merit in Eliot's nascent dramatic work, as well as detecting 'rhythmical animation' – of which

Eliot's earlier work had, apparently, been bereft – in *The Hollow Men* and *Ash-Wednesday* (Yeats includes the former). Again, 'change' in Eliot's work sets Yeats thinking of religion:

> Two or three of my friends attribute the change to an emotional enrichment from religion, but his religion compared to that of John Gray, Francis Thompson, Lionel Johnson in *The Dark Angel*, lacks all strong emotion; a New England Protestant by descent, there is little self-surrender in his personal relation to God and the soul.

Yeats enjoyed jokes on the subject of religion, and in the same year made the comic subtext of remarks like these on Eliot more explicit, in the preface to *The Ten Principal Upanishads* (published, indeed, by Faber and Faber):

> When I was young we talked much of tradition, and those emotional young men, Francis Thompson, Lionel Johnson, John Gray, found it in Christianity. But now that *The Golden Bough* has made Christianity look modern and fragmentary we study Confucius with Ezra Pound, or like T.S. Eliot find in Christianity a convenient symbolism for some older or newer thought, or say with Henry Airbubble [*the hero of W.J. Turner's 1935 comic novel,* Blow for Balloons], 'I am a member of the Church of England but not a Christian.'

On the subject of Eliot's religion, Yeats was no doubt influenced by the scepticism of Pound. 'Convenient symbolism' cannot have seemed close to the mark for Eliot himself – perhaps 'inconvenient' might actually have been better – but it is part of Yeats's reading of Eliot, and allied to the view that in his poetry 'little self-surrender' has in fact been going on. Yeats would hardly have disapproved; but he felt happy enough to point out the discrepancy between Eliot's professed position and his poetic practice.

Eliot's last major critical pronouncement on Yeats came after the Irish poet's death, when in 1940 he delivered the first annual Yeats lecture to the Friends of the Irish Academy, in no less resonant a venue than the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The lecture is

familiar now to Eliot's readers from its inclusion in *On Poetry and Poets* (1957) and *Selected Prose* (1953), and there is no need to summarize it here. However, certain things can be pointed out about the lecture and its relation to Eliot's past views of Yeats, as well as to views of Yeats taken up subsequently by Eliot's admirers. First, the element of national analysis present just five years before has been drastically reduced. Eliot is speaking first, of course, to an Irish audience, and is addressing it as a representative from an England at war (while DeValera's Eire is neutral). In such circumstances, diplomatic nuances are important, and Eliot's overall stance combines respectful praise with equally respectful self-distancing. It is not until the final paragraph, for instance, that Eliot concedes, 'To be able to praise, it is not necessary to feel complete agreement; and I do not dissimulate the fact that there are aspects of Yeats's thought and feeling which to myself are unsympathetic.' There is something of the polite bluntness of a cultural ambassador in Eliot's concession that 'The questions of difference, objection and protest arise in the field of doctrine, and these are vital questions.' But this is the last we will hear of them, since Eliot must move at this point to a conclusion. 'Doctrine' is certainly a point of difference between the poets, as Yeats was well aware; but Eliot may not mean here anything so specific as religious dogma, or rather his term 'doctrine' may include much more than religion alone, and stretch far out into the 'tradition' which, while he thought it was nourished by Yeats, was not – for national, doctrinal, and personal reasons – always quite Yeats's to command.

The Abbey lecture spends much time on Yeats's drama – decorously, given the setting – but also includes some significant ruminations on poetic development, and the difficulties facing the poet in middle age. Eliot, himself a middle-aged poet at 52 years of age, does not so much identify with Yeats's gift for stylistic change as stand in wonder at it; and the praise he accords some of the late work is (by his standards) unstinting. It would require exceptional scepticism to read Eliot's praise as guarded or double-edged (though, again, those who find in the 1919 Eliot his true opinions on Yeats are obliged either to do just this, or to read the praise as premeditated falsehood). But the basis of Eliot's wonderment is to do with time, and Yeats's ability to be so fully in a series of different times:

> Now, in theory, there is no reason why a poet's inspiration or material should fail, in middle age or at any time before senility. For a man who is capable of experience finds himself in a different world in every decade of his life; as he sees it with different eyes, the material of his art is continually renewed. But in fact, very few poets have shown this capacity of adaptation to the years. It requires, indeed, an exceptional honesty and courage to face the change. Most men either cling to the experiences of youth, so that their writing becomes an insincere mimicry of their earlier work, or they leave their passion behind, and write only from the head, with a hollow and wasted virtuosity. There is another and even worse temptation: that of becoming dignified, of becoming public figures with only a public existence – coat-racks hung with decorations and distinctions, doing, saying, and even thinking and feeling only what they believe the public expects of them. Yeats was not this sort of poet […] For the young can see him as a poet who in his work remained in the best sense always young, who even in one sense became young as he aged.

The passage is an important one, and is in its way an original, just, and very useful way of seeing Yeats. It is also, undoubtedly, charged with a certain anxiety about Eliot's own development, and the radical challenges posed for it by Yeats's example. Here is recognizably the poet of the second section of *Little Gidding*, whose encounter in the blitzed streets of London with the 'compound ghost' of a 'dead master' partly dramatizes Eliot's own compound encounters with Yeats, always – to some extent – 'An Alien Mind'. In one of that poem's many drafts, Eliot has the ghost say this:

> I also was engaged as you should know
> In the fight for language, both here, where I was tutored
> In the strength and weakness of the English phrase
>
> And elsewhere: when the political flame had dampened
> Another alien people with an archaic tongue
> Claimed me. I, and another, saved them

I spent my life in that unending fight
To give a people speech:
From which, by my example, you may learn.

'I, and another': Yeats and Joyce, both being proclaimed by Eliot the poet – as, with a different inflection, they had been projected by Eliot the critic – the saviours or creators of a nation's language. The 'unending fight/ To give a people speech' focuses much of the burden of Eliot's 1940 lecture; and the 'example' is spelled out there in daunting detail. In the special conditions of *Little Gidding* – special in their poetic intensity, and special also in their wartime urgency – '*literary* Nationalism' is anything but the subject of condescension.

And yet *Little Gidding* is also, effectively, at the end of Eliot's poetry. Those large questions of poetic development which he raised in regard to Yeats can be turned back uncomfortably on himself (and they were never comfortable questions to begin with). In other words, did something go wrong with Eliot during the later 1920s, from which his writing never recovered? And might the second part of *Little Gidding* even, in some way, know this to be the case? Or did Eliot, as his admirers maintained, deepen and mature into *Four Quartets* as the (albeit rather early) crown upon his lifetime's effort? With his work perfected in those poems, was Eliot free to go for the humanly and humanely attractive option of the 'perfection of the life'? There is, after all, surely no need to choose between these two things? And isn't (Eliot's admirers might go on to ask) Yeats's poem on that subject too much of a rhetorical strut? 'The intellect of man is forced to choose/ Perfection of the life, or of the work…': no, it isn't; and 'perfection' is, in any case, loose and presumptuous, typical of language that doesn't care, at some level, what it means, so long as it can make a splash.

It is easy to jeer at Yeats, and it is disingenuous to suggest that Eliot never indulged in such jeering himself. My own instinct is that Eliot's jeering is less authentic – more 'rhetorical', really – than his considered praise, or than the fructifying presence of Yeats at his strongest in some of Eliot's own most powerful poems. But there are good arguments (and good arguers) on the other side: and admirers, scholars, and critics of

Yeats are ill-advised to ignore these. One should insist – and insist, particularly, to Yeatsians – that Yeats, like any great poet, cannot be understood exclusively in his own terms, and that it is not the purpose of Yeats criticism to discover more and more about those terms, and proceed straightforwardly to apply them. Eliot's 1919 contention needs to remain contentious:

> Mr. Yeats's mind is a mind in some way independent of experience; and anything that occurs in that mind is of equal importance. It is a mind in which perception of fact, and feeling and thinking are all a little different from ours.

And this contention has not been without consequence. I have engaged with the question of Yeats's relation to 'fact' elsewhere, but I would not for a moment regard the whole debate as finished; rather, it has barely begun. And Yeats's most formidable critic on this score is also, as it happens, the best critic of poetry now living; any Yeatsian who thinks he or she can ignore Christopher Ricks has only a shaky grasp of the critical realities. Ricks on Eliot says much by implication about what Ricks on Yeats might be; and those rare moments in which Ricks does speak about Yeats are never exactly good news for the Irish poet. Of these, I cite just one: in a review of the letters of John Butler Yeats (which had, in Ezra Pound's Cuala selection, been reviewed very warmly – and without a word on the famous poetic son – by T.S. Eliot himself), Ricks quotes a powerful passage on a woman met by accident in New York, hiding from others, and only partly from herself, the dangerous sickness of her young child. Ricks tells us that 'Greatest of all, J.B. Yeats can bring you near to tears (not at all the same as the 'capacity for nervous weeping' which he diagnosed in Swinburne), and this at the suffering of a complete stranger.' The letter in question is written to W.B. Yeats, and after quoting the affecting passage, Ricks comments that 'Nothing in the poetry of the man who received this letter is to me as profoundly moving as that,' capping his observation with the possibility that 'John Butler Yeats may have been the greatest of all the greatly gifted family.'

Being profoundly moved by something is something entirely personal, and such private depths are inevitably inaccessible to much meaningful analysis: Ricks's 'to me' does, in fairness, acknowledge that much. But the judgement, and the observation, carry

an implication about the poet Yeats which derives from the Eliot of 1919: that there is a central, and fatal, inability to imagine other people, or to think beyond a self which does not itself 'think' in ways that are fully accessible to others. Poetic style that can be shown to be self-centredly 'rhetorical' serves this failing, making it into a sham strength. I do not believe I am seriously misrepresenting Ricks's views here, at least insofar as I can divine them from what he has written. Certainly, I can be sure that Ricks's T.S. Eliot, on whom he has written at length and with genius, makes good all of these Yeatsian deficiencies. If, ultimately for Ricks and for some critics in his debt, there is a choice to be made between Yeats and Eliot, then it is the combination of superior literary quality and greater ethical strength and consequent moral worth that makes Eliot the greater writer; which makes, indeed, Eliot a great poet and Yeats a something else thereby.

But this can be queried, and needs to be. I do not mean that we should set about Eliot in search of his ethical or moral failures, asking things no more sophisticated critically than 'What about this, then?' What has to be challenged is the implication of a necessary choice. Things here cannot be Either/Or; they have to be Both/And. I hope that the very preliminary sketch of the relevant literary history I have given here suggests something of the need for this; but the possible gains are not just in terms of that historical grounding. In his essay 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics', Geoffrey Hill – and it should be apparent at least that Hill was the greatest poet of his time – took a scrupulous (and daunting) measure of both Yeats and Eliot, comparing their abilities to absorb the pressures of their time in poetry. Hill's analysis of 'two of the strangest-sounding lines in twentieth-century poetry' – 'When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side/ What stalked through the Post Office?' – brilliantly demonstrates how ''The Statues' does more than commemorate the inchoate yet fully accoutred eros of Pearse's envisioning; Yeats intensifies it by rawly opposing to such a vision something of the obdurate mundanities of its conversion into fact.' Hill's discussion is too dense and detailed to yield to summary; but he does not admit that Yeats's poetry – at its best – is somehow impervious to 'fact'. Hill does detect a point of failure in the later Yeats, however; and he contrasts this with the point of failure in Eliot:

> Each in his own way, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, had fought for the intelligence of poetry within the civic domain in ways that should stand to us now as exemplary. Nonetheless, to have abandoned *Coriolan* and to have completed *The Rock* instead is indicative of a savage defeat. One reads Yeats's last poems and the introduction to *The Words upon the Window-pane* in a different spirit, with the sense that here was a battle much more narrowly lost. But it was lost, even so, and the poems of Yeats and Eliot which give momentary realization to Bradley's 'mere extraordinary fact' as something at once banal and tragic in implication have found few successors in post-war Britain.

The 'fight for the intelligence of poetry' is something we can understand only by reading a great deal of poetry, by a great many poets. There are more significant figures than we often imagine, and it is part of the job of critics to insist on these, and to be bringing neglected poets and poems to attention. But there are also essential figures, without whom that 'fight for intelligence' cannot be framed, understood, or continued. The challenge cannot be met without Yeats and Eliot – both of them. On that matter, it is necessary to insist, there is no choice.

`

*