

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 4 (1988)

**Artikel:** Eliot and the mass  
**Autor:** Carey, John  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99863>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 30.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Eliot and the Mass

John Carey

The context in which we should read T.S.Eliot's work is, I would suggest, a particular historical and sociological one. It is a context determined by the major historical event of the 19th century, namely, the rise of mass civilization. This was an event to which intellectuals were almost universally hostile. Mass civilization drove the intellectual into isolation, and so, in effect, created the intellectual as a distinct and oppositional being.

A classic intellectual account of this historical event is the work called *The Revolt of the Masses* by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. When Eliot began the *Criterion*, Ortega y Gasset was, it is worth remembering, one writer he invited to contribute.<sup>1</sup> The revolt of the masses is, in Ortega y Gasset's account, primarily a demographic event. From the time European history begins in the 6th century, up to 1800 — a period of twelve centuries — Europe did not, he points out, succeed in reaching a population of more than 180 millions. But from 1800 to 1914 the population of Europe rose from 180 to 460 millions. In these three generations, he admonishes, Europe has produced "a gigantic mass of humanity which, launched like a torrent over the historic area, has inundated it."<sup>2</sup> This image of the mass as a tide or flood became a common feature of the early 20th-century intellectual's moral scenario, and is found in Eliot, as we shall see.

The revolt of the masses had various results. The most evident was overcrowding, which transformed people into pollution. Ortega y Gasset

<sup>1</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *T.S.Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984) 124.

<sup>2</sup> Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932) 54.

deplores the phenomenon of the crowd at length. Another result was the assumption by the masses of political power, with the emergence of Socialism and Communism. Then again there was the new phenomenon of mass literacy, and of mass culture. In England, the Education Acts of the later 19th century produced for the first time a huge literate public, and to cater for it mass circulation newspapers came into existence in the 1890s. For the intellectual, mass culture presented a new threat, because it was a self-sustaining, alternative system of thought and language which excluded the intellectual and so made him redundant.

The intellectual response to this was complex and various. One achievement of mass culture was to create Nietzsche in reaction to itself. Mass civilization represented for Nietzsche the triumph of slave morality and the dwarfing of man into a herd animal. This collective degeneration could be countered only by the emergence of ruthless supermen. The immense popularity of Nietzsche's philosophy among writers and artists in the final decade of the 19th century suggests the consternation which the appearance of the masses aroused.

Another intellectual reaction to the mass was the science of eugenics, a term coined by Francis Galton in the 1880s. The Eugenics Society, founded in 1926, hoped that by the sterilization of inferior breeds, and by offering incentives to superior people to propagate, the danger of degeneration inherent in the mass might be avoided. Among writers, both W. B. Yeats and Aldous Huxley joined the Eugenics Society. Eliot's line in *Gerontion* about the Jew who was "Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp" suggests an attachment of importance to good breeding which would have been readily understood in eugenic circles.

In addition to Nietzsche and eugenics, another phenomenon created in reaction to mass culture was modernist art and literature. The essence of these was that they were created by and for intellectuals, and deliberately inaccessible to the masses.

But, in England at any rate, though intellectuals were hostile to the masses, they also had a bad conscience about them, since the masses represented the oppressed and the deprived. They were both the barbarian hordes and the meek that would inherit the earth. The social guilt intellectuals felt over this led many of them to compensate for their own relative opulence by adopting leftist political views in the early 20th century. Another way in which English intellectuals coped with the problem of the mass was to produce imaginary versions of mass man which

were aesthetically acceptable, as the mass itself was not. These cosmetic versions of the mass include Conrad's sterling British seamen, E. M. Forster's warm-blooded Italian peasants, D. H. Lawrence's dark-souled Mexican Indians, and George Orwell's heroic coalminers.

T. S. Eliot responds to the problem differently from any English writer. English writers all feel social guilt. Eliot, the American, does not. The contrast is most apparent if we compare him with Orwell. For Orwell, the consciousness of being privileged — different from the mass — was a perpetual shame and aggravation. It dominated his thought both in politics and aesthetics. But it does not seem to have worried Eliot at all. Apparently he accepted it as perfectly natural. He grew up in a family of St Louis aristocrats, who were both successful industrialists and seriously religious people — unitarians. Perhaps Eliot's religious training inclined him to accept his elevation above the mass as righteous and inevitable. Accepting it in this way did not, of course, prevent him from regarding the mass as a threat. He was a lifelong anti-democrat, and he chose to exile himself from America partly because he saw it as the cradle of democracy. In *After Strange Gods* he attacked contemporary American civilization as "worm-eaten with Liberalism," overrun by "foreign races" and "free-thinking Jews."<sup>3</sup> We can detect here traces of the myth of racial purity which fear of the polluting mass gave rise to.

Eliot attempted to turn himself into an Englishman because England represented monarchy and traditionalism. He had been attracted, as a student in Paris, to the proto-Fascist Charles Maurras and his Action Française movement, which championed classicism, Catholicism and monarchy. In a circular intended to win new subscribers for the *Criterion* in 1924, Eliot explained that the magazine stood for "pure Toryism" and reaction against "suburban democracy."<sup>4</sup> The word "suburban" — a keyword in the early 20th-century English cultural debate — signals here, as it usually does, the intellectual's fear and dislike of the middle and lower-middle class, the new mass, which was literate but non-intellectual or anti-intellectual ("philistine," in intellectual terminology), and so threatened the intellectual's status.

<sup>3</sup> *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933) 13, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ackroyd, p. 143.

It is specifically the education of the masses that disconcerts Eliot. An illiterate mob, or even a mass which had received elementary education and no more, would be no threat. But an educated (or, as the intellectual would have it "semi-educated" mass) can set up its own values and culture in opposition to the intellectual's. The spread of education is thus to be deplored, from an intellectual viewpoint, and Eliot repeatedly regrets it in his essays. There are too many books published, he complains: it is one of the evil effects of democracy. His essay "Modern Education and the Classics" (1932) suggests that the numbers receiving higher education in England and America should be drastically cut, to about a third of those currently receiving it. Ideally, Eliot suggests, there should be a revival of the monastic teaching orders. Education should return to the cloister where it could flourish uncontaminated by "the deluge of barbarism outside." By comparison his essay on "Marie Lloyd" expresses approval of the English lower class, which he imagines as a cheerful, uneducated, cockney music-hall throng. It is the middle-classes — the educated or semi-educated — that Eliot identifies as the threat. They are "morally corrupt" — defiled by the cinema and radio, that is, by the mass media which the intellectual saw as drowning his own voice.

In Eliot's early poems we can detect the presence of the mass as an imaginative construct in opposition to the poet, the sensitive individual. The mass is multiple, and addicted to newsprint. In "Preludes" the individual soul is "trampled" by "insistent feet," and "evening newspapers." It confronts "eyes/Assured of certain certainties." The suggestion is that the mass experiences knowledge as crude convictions (compare the house agent's clerk's "assurance" in *The Waste Land*), which are alien to the vague, rarified areas where the soul has its being. This contrast between the definiteness of the mass and the vagueness of the individual is basic to Eliot's perception of reality as evidenced in the poems.

The mass is also conceived of as insensitive. The poet in "Preludes," with his superior feelings, declares himself moved by the notion of "some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing." He defiantly addresses some other person who is not moved at all: "Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh." This invention of a fancied unsympathetic hearer, a representative of mass man, vulgar and derisive, the antithesis of the poet, matches the polarity set up in other poems. In "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," the two figures are judged by their sensitivity (or insensitivity) to culture of the traditional "Baedeker" variety (as opposed to

mass culture, which for Burbank would be uncultured). When the philistine Bleistein looks at a Canaletto:

A lustreless protrusive eye  
Stares from the protozoic slime.

It is as if the painting were viewed by some prehistoric creature just emerging into consciousness.

The deadness of Bleistein's eye links with other images in the early poems that suggest "soulless" mechanization — a standard complaint about the age of mass culture among followers of Ruskin and Morris. "I could see nothing behind that child's eye," sighs the poet disapprovingly in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," about a child who slips out its hand and pockets a toy from the pavement. The implication is that there was nothing behind the eye to see — no "soul" — rather than that the poet was himself dim-sighted. The child's hand is "automatic" (like the "automatic hand" of the typist switching on her mechanical gramaphone-music in *The Waste Land*). It is a mere clockwork mechanism, like the toy it pockets — not really human, like the poet.

The assimilation of the child to clockwork also links with Eliot's habitual association of the mass with clock-time which is "public" time. Here, of course, he was drawing on Bergson's time theory, adopted by other modernist writers such as Joyce and Woolf. Bergson, whose lectures Eliot attended in Paris, distinguishes between clock time, which is linear, scientific, and measured, and *durée*, or time as the individual apprehends it, which is amorphous and irregular, fusing past, present and future in the stream of consciousness. When the barman calls "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" at the end of Part 2 of *The Waste Land*, it shows public time breaking in on the poem's wandering, personal associations. For the same Bergsonian reason, in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," the street lamp, a public light-fitting, keeps enunciating the public time:

Half-past one,  
The street-lamp sputtered. . .  
Half-past two,  
The street-lamp said.

It punctuates with its definite public announcements the vague, blurred memories of the poem's speaker.

The situation of the vague individual threatened by public certainties is the subject, too, of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Prufrock, a sensitive soul, fears public exposure. He dreads the eyes of the other people which (like the eyes "Assured of certain certainties" in "Preludes") operate in the self-confident world of fact, and "fix you in a formulated phrase." These defining, classifying eyes will, he fears, drag him from the warm bath of vagueness in which he floats. He will be "formulated, sprawling on a pin," like a scientific specimen.

Vagueness is what constitutes the individual, within the ethos of Eliot's early poetry. Hence it is impossible for the individual to express himself precisely. When Prufrock tries to describe the memories which go to make up his being — "the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets" — he breaks off despairingly, because they cannot survive being translated into the public currency of language. "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" The vagueness of the inexpressible is inseparable from the privacy of the individual as Eliot depicts it.

The opposition between the sensitive speaker and the cruel world in "Prufrock" is similar to that in "Preludes" and "Rhapsody," but there is also a difference: in "Prufrock" the sensitive individual is, to a degree, ridiculed. His anxiety about his bald patch or about the advisability of eating peaches is designedly comic. This means that the problem of confronting the crude world is, in "Prufrock," managed more deviously than in "Preludes" or "Rhapsody." The sensitive poetic voice ridicules itself, and so avoids confrontation with the insensitive mass. It shields itself with irony — implying, even, that it might be on the side of the mass: it might join the laughers. Because the poem incites both sympathy and mockery with respect to its speaker, the reader cannot easily settle for one or the other. So the definiteness which Prufrock fears is avoided: the poem cannot be fixed in a formulated phrase, but remains equivocal.

Because "Prufrock" incorporates ridicule of itself, forestalling the ridicule of the unsympathetic, who might wipe their hands across their mouths and laugh, it renders itself less vulnerable. This was a tactic of concern to Eliot. It was one feature he admired in the metaphysical poets. Metaphysical wit involved, he suggests in his essay on Marvell, "a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible."<sup>5</sup> Hence the metaphysicals avoided

<sup>5</sup> T.S.Eliot, *Selected Essays*, Third Edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 303.

having a single attitude towards their subject matter, which would have made them formulable, and so vulnerable to ridicule. "Prufrock" learns from their example.

The poem also practises evasion by being indefinite. Just as the reader cannot comfortably locate the poem's voice within a single attitude, so he cannot be sure what its subject is or what happens in it. Who are the "you" and "I" at the poem's start ("Let us go then, you and I")? Are they Prufrock's two selves? Is he looking at a reflection in a mirror before going out? And what is he going out for? Is it a proposal of marriage that he contemplates? Does he ever get to the room where the mysterious women come and go talking of Michelangelo? These famous unanswerable questions in "Prufrock" have generated so much debate only because critics have mistaken them for answerable questions, whereas the poem withholds the information which would be necessary for formulating answers. Commentators have exercised their ingenuity in making up plausible scenarios into which, with a little squeezing, the words of the poem can be fitted. But explications of this kind are beside the point. They miss (and, absurdly, try to remove) the poem's vital indefiniteness. The fact that we cannot be sure what it is about is essential to what it is about. It is the source of the vagueness basic to both the poem and the character Prufrock (poem and character being, of course, coterminous in this case).

Vagueness is an achievement of the language. Linguistic dislocations render the poem's phrasing enigmatic. Though the words seem to convey a meaning, it is not what the context seems to require. Minor parts of speech like prepositions are tampered with, to effect this withdrawal from meaning in an unapparent, undercover way. For example:

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo

"In" is very odd with "come and go." We should expect people to come and go to and from a room. Coming and going in it suggests something curious, as if they were pacing to and fro across it. But if they were doing this, why were they? These unobtrusive derangements of syntax remove the poem from comprehensibility, while seeming to leave it within the area of meaningful discourse. The enterprise is one of evasion. Instead of a sequence of events, we are given the appearance of a narrative which dissolves when we try to grasp it. Though it embodies ridicule of privacy and evasion, the poem is private and evasive itself. It successfully evolves a style that avoids just those naked confrontations that Prufrock fears.

Studying "Prufrock" allows us to see that Eliot solves the problem of the intellectual and the mass in a different way from other 20th-century writers. Other writers — Conrad or Forster or Lawrence or Orwell — try to solve it by reconstituting the mass in a form that will make it more imaginatively acceptable to the intellectual. Eliot, however, makes no imaginative effort to salvage the mass at all. Apparently it is for him beyond redemption. Instead he reprocesses the other half of the equation, the individual. He saves the individual from confrontation with the mass by dispersing or eliminating him — concealing him within the evasions of a dislocated poetic style. There is no longer a fixed, enunciating centre of self identifiable behind a poem like "Prufrock," no longer an opinionated poetic originator with whom we can take issue. There is not even a fictional situation in which we can be sure someone is involved. Insofar as reliable communication goes, the poem has largely disappeared.

Poems that disappear in this way are often poignantly emotional, but we can no longer allocate the emotion to a fixed source or reasons. The old idea of the individual writer expressing feelings in relation to an experience that we are allowed to share, has gone. Eliot's most extreme example of the disappearing poem is probably *La Figlia Che Piange* ("The Girl who Weeps") of 1916. It is a poem no one forgets, yet it is impossible to say what it is supposed to be about. It starts in the imperative, with the speaker issuing commands to someone, apparently a woman:

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair —  
 Lean on a garden urn —  
 Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair —  
 Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise —  
 Fling them to the ground and turn  
 With a fugitive resentment in your eyes. . .

After this, the grammatical mood changes to the past conditional:

So I would have had him leave,  
 So I would have had her stand and grieve.

It seems, then, that no one did the things alluded to in the opening lines. No one did stand on the highest pavement of the stair, or lean on a garden urn, and so on. These were just the speaker's wishful thinking: dramatic gestures he would like to have seen. What the "him" and the "her" did do, and who the "him" and "her" were, we cannot say. The poem breaks into the

indicative mood, purporting to give information about something that actually happened (or is imagined as actually happening) only with the third section:

She turned away. . .

After this brief allusion to the actual event, outside his own head, the speaker returns to his inner cogitations. He tells us how this mysterious "she" compelled his imagination for many days:

Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.

But whether this is how she was, or how he imagined her (how she "compelled" his imagination), we can only guess. He wonders how "they" (the unidentified "him" and "her") should have come to be together. If they had not come together, he says:

I should have lost a gesture and a pose.

Presumably this means the gesture and pose of the couple as they parted, which, of course, the poet has not told us about. All he has told us about is the gesture and pose he imagined ("would have had"). The last two lines of the poem attribute momentous significance to what the speaker has seen and thought:

Sometimes these cogitations still amaze  
The troubled midnight and the noon's repose.

But why whatever it is the poet saw should occasion such profound disturbance is unexplained. Eliot's friend John Hayward is reported as saying that the poem was not about a living girl but an expression of regret about a grave monument Eliot had looked for in a museum in North Italy, but had failed to find. For those who wish to incorporate that tentative explanation into their reading of the poem, it must add to the sense of loss and distance. But really the eagerness with which readers clutch at these straws from outside the text is proof of the emptiness and devastation, the obliteration of known signifiers, that Eliot has wrought inside his poem. It is a poem of loss, of absence, and it absents itself. Just as "Prufrock" is both evasive and about its speaker's evasiveness, so *La Figlia Che Piange* is

about being at a distance, about departing, and it departs — puts itself irretrievably into a space beyond our knowledge. It conveys intense emotional involvement, but removes all clues as to what that involvement involved. It is vague, and it troubles because of its vagueness. Our access to the individual is obstructed — which is to say that the individual is, by means of vagueness and evasion, rescued from us, the mass. The individual is dispersed, eliminated, leaving only tantalising traces of where he has been, echoes and unattached voices.

This liberation of the individual from poetry and of poetry from the individual occupies Eliot as a critic too. "Poetry," he emphasises in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."<sup>6</sup> This aesthetic theory allows the poet to remain unknown, inviolate. It seems to have been a counterpart of the extreme reserve he showed in life. To acquaintances, he seemed to exist within a carefully constructed shell. His theory of artistic impersonality elevates this remoteness into an artistic principle, almost a duty. In the *Athenaeum* he wrote of the true coldness of the real artist. He found the masses abhorrent. In crowded London, he told Strachey, he felt he was living among termites.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of being cold and impersonal attracted Eliot, too, because he linked belief in "personality" with the newspaper-gorged masses. His essay on Dante derides the appetite for confessions and personal self-exposure typical of the modern world. The age of Dante, he suggests, was superior, because people cared about souls, not personalities.<sup>8</sup> The rise of "personality" as an idea was also, in Eliot's view, an effect of democracy. The democrat privileged his personality, his inner voice, above the constraints of tradition and authority. This was a feature of the Protestant ethic that offended Eliot. In "Thoughts After Lambeth"<sup>9</sup> he declares that the church ought to be able to oblige its communicants to take advice on important matters like birth control. The individual conscience is no reliable guide. Trusting one's inner voice was likely to lead, Eliot suspected, not only to sin but to vulgar, lower-class sin. There is a curious outburst in his essay "The Function of Criticism," where he is ridiculing

<sup>6</sup> *Selected Essays*, p. 21

<sup>7</sup> Ackroyd, pp. 88, 96.

<sup>8</sup> *Selected Essays*, p. 72

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 374-5

Middleton Murry for saying that it is characteristic of the English to depend, in the last resort, on the inner voice. In fact, Eliot insists:

The possessors of the inner voice ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear and lust.<sup>10</sup>

The overtones of class feeling are unmistakable here. Evidently Eliot's football fans are travelling third class. And to Swansea! They cannot even choose a metropolitan venue for their degraded amusement. Eliot's belief that football affords opportunities for vanity, fear and lust suggests a rather over-optimistic notion of the game's pleasures. But his intent is clear. He aims to discredit the inner voice by equating it with the gross diversions of the mass.

Now there is evidently some contradiction in Eliot's thought on this subject. If the members of the mass are really individuals, listening to their inner voices, then how come they are a mass? Conversely, since Eliot's poetry values individual privacy and private intuition so much, why does he condemn members of the mass for valuing these attributes? Eliot sees the difficulty, and faces it in the essay "Religion and Literature." The mass, he explains there, is not really composed of individuals, it just thinks it is:

Liberals are convinced that only by what is called unrestrained individualism will truth ever emerge. . . If the mass of contemporary authors were really individualists. . . each with his separate vision, and if the mass of the contemporary public were really a mass of *individuals* there might be something to be said for this attitude. But this is not, and never has been, and never will be. It is not only that the reading individual today (or at any day) is not enough an individual to be able to absorb all the "views of life" of all the authors pressed upon us by the publishers' advertisements and the reviewers, and to be able to arrive at wisdom by considering one against another. It is that the contemporary authors are not individuals enough either. It is not that the world of separate individuals of the liberal democrat is undesirable; it is simply that this world does not exist. For the reader of contemporary literature is not, like the reader of the established great literature of all time, exposing himself to the influence of divers and contradictory personalities: he is exposing himself to a mass movement of writers who, each of them, think that they have something individually to offer, but are really all working together in the same direction. . . Individualistic democracy has come to high tide: and it is more difficult today to be an individual than it ever was before.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Selected Essays*, p. 27

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 397-8

It is hardly necessary to point out at length the weaknesses of Eliot's argument here. What he offers, indeed, is not argument but prejudice, resorting to the water-imagery (the mass as "tide") with which 20th-century intellectuals dramatized their demographic fears. Eliot's notion that there is such a thing as "the established great literature of all time" is plainly questionable, and his suggestion that the reader of this literature would expose himself to "divers and contradictory personalities" runs counter to his repeated insistence that the writer does not express his personality in literature. But it is less important to watch Eliot's argument collapsing than to identify the dilemma he faces. He finds himself having to claim that individuality is both good and bad. Modern individualistic democracy is bad, and bad precisely because it makes it harder to be an individual, which is good. Eliot's attack on the inner voice inevitably carries this weight of self-contradiction. Clearly he is eminently individualistic himself, and his poetry, as in *La Figlia Che Piange*, is the poetry of the inner voice. It refuses to relate itself to the external world even to that limited degree that would allow us to see what is being talked about. So at its crudest Eliot's argument reduces itself to the contention that individuality is bad for other people, but good for him. When pursued by others it produces the democratic mass, with its bewildering, insatiable freedoms, generating the "chaos" of the modern world. But when pursued by an intellectual, like Eliot, individuality is not just proper but necessary, endowing him with that distinction from the mass on which his status as an intellectual depends.

I have argued that in his poetry Eliot avoids the confrontation of the individual and the mass by concealing the individual behind the uncertainties and dislocations of his poetic style. The result is, of course, itself highly individual. The newness and obscurity of Eliot's poetry outraged the reading public and conservative critics. Eliot had the satisfaction of scandalizing the mass, while preventing the mass from understanding what it was being scandalized by.

In Eliot's prose, different though complementary tactics are adopted, and I should like briefly to trace what these are. The prose-Eliot espouses conformist, anti-individualist views, but does so in a manner that is provocatively nonconformist and so individualist. He is perversely isolationist, announcing his allegiance to traditions such as monarchy and classicism which he knows will segregate him from other moderns and

progressives. His religion (he joined the Anglican Church in 1927) is also exclusivist, because although it entails loyalty to a traditional church, he is aware that for a modern intellectual such loyalty can only appear scandalously eccentric. He does not wish to think of religion as popular. The role he envisages for himself is that of the lonely torch-bearer, keeping the faith alive through the coming dark age.

Another isolationist posture is that of the profound scholar. Eliot's recondite references seem to imply large resources of erudition. In fact he was by no means erudite, and he confessed to Richard Aldington that these tactics were a kind of bluff. He quotes Greek in his essays, as if he were familiar with the language, but one of his colleagues at Lloyd's Bank recalls that when they had a competition to see who could recite the Greek alphabet, Eliot was unable to complete it. Peter Ackroyd seems to be right when he says that Eliot's essays are really performances or dramatic monologues, no less rigorously worked up than the poetry.<sup>12</sup> The difference is that in the poetry the disguise consists of the elimination of personality; in the essays it consists of the assumption of a dominating presence.

An insistent element in the prose-Eliot which contrasts with the poetic-Eliot is the prose-Eliot's attack on vagueness and championing of precision. He associates vagueness with the newspaper-reading masses — "persons whose minds," he remarks witheringly in his "Lancelot Andrewes" essay, "are habituated to feed on the vague jargon of our time."<sup>13</sup> The poet must, he asserts, deal in precise emotion, as opposed to the vague emotiveness of the Victorians. In support of this, he develops in his essay on *Hamlet* his doctrine of the objective correlative. As a piece of literary theory this must strike us nowadays as, at best, naif. Eliot's idea is that the way to express emotion in art is to find an objective correlative, that is, a situation or chain of events which will be a "formula" for that particular emotion, such that when the situation or chain of events is repeated the emotion is immediately evoked.<sup>14</sup> The analogy seems to be mechanical, like dialing the right number to get a particular line. How you could possibly check that different readers were receiving the same emotion; or what, given the differences in human make-up, it could possibly mean to claim that they were all having the same emotion; and

<sup>12</sup> Ackroyd, pp. 78, 106

<sup>13</sup> *Selected Essays*, p. 347

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 145

how you could compare audience reaction with the artist's original emotion, whatever that might be, are problems Eliot gives no signs of having considered. Like much of his criticism, the theory of the objective correlative is a piece of elaborate fantasy. But the important thing, in context, is that it sounds precise and scientific, borrowing the word "formula" from chemical usage. A scientific air is part of the prose-Eliot's campaign for removing vagueness from art, and making it precise and impersonal. In a famous passage from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" he argues that in its depersonalization true art approaches the condition of science. The artist is never personally involved in its creation at all. He is a "catalyst," resembling "a bit of finely filiated platinum. . . introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide," which form, in the presence of platinum, sulphurous acid.<sup>15</sup>

The prose-Eliot's invocation of science, which strives to reduce experience to the calculable, sounds ominously like the crude public accountability that Prufrock feared — the eyes that would fix him in a formulated phrase, like a scientific specimen. The different roles which scientific analogy plays in the two cases — ally for the prose-Eliot, enemy for the poet — help to define for us the antagonism between Eliot's critical and creative voices. The critical voice, positive, arbitrary, personal, demands precision and praises convention and tradition. The poetic voice is vague, poignantly emotional, detached from any recognizable points of reference, unconventional and original. But these two voices represent, I have argued, alternative ways of managing the modern confrontation of the intellectual and the mass. The poetic voice evades; the prose voice asserts its superiority.

Finally, the rift between the two voices when occupied with the same piece of source material can be illustrated if we compare a passage from *Ash Wednesday* (1930) with the conclusion of Eliot's essay "Thoughts After Lambeth" (1931). Both passages use St Paul's advice from Ephesians 5.15 about "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil." The prose Eliot writes:

The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Selected Essays*, pp. 17-18

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 387

This is the voice of Eliot the churchwarden, complacently albeit humbly assured that he belongs to a righteous minority, and watching the masses rush to their destruction from the secure precincts of the parish vestry meeting and the *Christian News Letter*. Compare with that voice, the use of the same phrase from St Paul in *Ash Wednesday* Part IV, where the poet is describing the sacred lady to whom much of the poem is addressed:

White light folded, sheathed about her, folded.  
The new years walk, restoring  
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring  
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem  
The time. Redeem  
The unread vision in the higher dream  
While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.

Generations of critics have ground out more or less (usually less) cogent explanations of the unicorns and the hearse, but the line with its uncertain evocation of Dante, persists in its function of evading definition and maintaining suggestive vagueness. This vagueness permeates the whole poem. We cannot tell who the Lady celebrated is, though she, too, mistily recalls Dante.

The vagueness combines with an extremely emotional, even sentimental mood. The light seen "Through a bright cloud of tears" might come from the happy ending of a Victorian novel, though the poet's difficult, modernistic style distracts attention from this soft centre. The vagueness and the emotiveness of the lines are essentially linked, and this is characteristic of Eliot's emotion in the poetry. It is the poignancy of the vague that he summons up, the associations of the vague with the lost, the distant, the never-to-be-recovered, the achingly inexpressible. Another moving example is the famous "What seas what shores what grey rocks. . ." passage at the start of "Marina," where the unanswered and unanswerable questions place the scenes being spoken of beyond our knowledge, while surrounding them with sad remoteness. This wavering, tear-dimmed plangency would be extremely embarrassing to the dry churchwarden of "Thoughts After Lambeth," but it is a persistent note in Eliot's poetry. Often it seems to relate to scenes we know from the biographies to have belonged to Eliot's youth, like his memories of smells and noises of the sea from sailing holidays off the New England coast. But

often we cannot locate the emotion, or attach it to a known recipient. We seem, like the speaker of "Portrait of A Lady," to be "Recalling things that other people have desired," but the poetry deliberately withholds from us who those other people might be.

This functional vagueness persists in the poetry to the end, but is commoner in the early Eliot. The churchwarden gradually prevailed. In *Four Quartets* the passages of metrical preaching and the Christian didactic aim are far removed from the evasiveness that marks the poetry of the early and middle years. It seems from the *Waste Land* manuscript that if it had not been for Ezra Pound's intervention that poem would have already shown the more assertive direction in which Eliot was to move. It is notably in relation to Eliot's contempt for the masses that we find Pound deleting the personal voice. The episode between the typist and the house agent's clerk — degraded specimens of mass-culture — is longer and shriller in the manuscript than in the finished poem. The lovers are "crawling bugs"; the clerk has hair "thick with grease and thick with scurf." Pound crossed out these insults and wrote "Too easy" and "Personal" in the margin. Another disgruntled anti-mass passage about London's "swarming life," "burrowing in brick and stone and steel," is deleted by Pound, who writes "B—ll—s" in the margin.<sup>17</sup> By excising these nakedly antagonistic reactions to the mass Pound helped to preserve in *The Waste Land* the evasiveness and anonymity of the earlier poetry. The nature of the passages he deleted supports the idea that there was a causal link between the poetry's privacy and the context of the masses — their numerousness, their vulgarity, their power — a context that bears upon and moulds all 20th-century intellectuals, including ourselves.

<sup>17</sup> T.S.Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, edited by Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1971) 31, 43, 45.