

Title	The virtuosity of T. S. Eliot
Sub Title	
Author	西脇, 順三郎(Nishiwaki, Junzaburo)
Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	1968
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.25, (1968. 3) ,p.1- 5
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	英語英文学・独語独文学特集
Genre	Journal Article
URL	<a href="https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-00250001-0001">https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-00250001-0001</a>

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# The Virtuosity of T.S. Eliot\*

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One must admit that introducing a poet like T. S. Eliot is no easy matter. So here I shall content myself with describing my personal feelings about what he has done as a poet and critic. Yet I keep wondering wherein lies his real merit in poetry, and always I remain baffled: perhaps the blinding splendours that have greeted him conceal his true worth from the mind's eye.

If there was any one man of letters who could compare with Eliot, he was, I think, Goethe who, however late, brought the European Renaissance into modern Germany, and founded its national literature on European tradition. In much the same way, Eliot tried to bring the European Renaissance into American literature, where he really belongs, though he was legally a Britisher. In the English setting he set forth his literature and gusto on his English tradition, and that in the most progressive modernist way which seems to have broken with the Anglo-Saxon and American tradition.

What is surprising is that T. S. Eliot set up a second Renaissance in England, a remarkable achievement indeed. Probably for this, Eliot was awarded the Order of Merit. His success might have been hailed

\* The Author is greatly obliged to Prof. Masao Hirai and to the Kenkyu-sha Publishing Company for permission to reprint this article.

as it were, as the advent of a second Erasmus, the Dutch humanist, who actually did start the English Renaissance in a flourishing way. This is what T. S. Eliot was, Eliot in glory.

Now Eliot in Poetry. But what has he done for the poets? It is fairly certain that he has had great influence almost all over the world, nearly through the first half of the twentieth century. In this sense he was most certainly a great poet; nobody will deny it.

But, as everybody knows, the critics of this poet are divided into two classes, almost mechanically pro and con, some praising to the skies, some debasing to the earth. And the moderate critics generally seem to me to have fallen between two stools, but I find that Mr. John Frederick Nims, Eliot's friend and an American modernist poet, in *The Saturday Review*, is interestingly moderate and in a sense quite right in saying, "A great poet, yes. But a moderately great one." I think that a good moderate critic, as this critic says, would quite agree that Eliot was "more writer than poet, more *man of letters* than writer." This critic is, it seems, only very severe in the disguise of moderation.

What I should like to speak about is not the problem of greatness, but what and how much he has done for the development of modern poetry.

He has certainly created a new way of writing poetry. However, this most significant art of poetry so many major American and English poets, we know, have been disparaging so furiously that they seem to have denied the poet any greatness and originality. And yet, curiously enough, I can appreciate his theory of poetry as great art; its structure, if analysed, most significantly, fascinates me, and I cannot help thinking of him as a great poet, at least in the sense that he must have a marvellous gift for relishing a genuine gusto in poetry, which is, I think, a type of the monist reality, beyond subject and object,

beyond good and evil.

For a long time I had been in two minds as to whether he was great or not. Then quite recently I stumbled on the presumption that he was really a great virtuoso in the art of poetry. I found for myself the key to Eliot as a poet; now it does not matter whether he was a great poet or not. He was, in terms of a college dictionary, "one who has a cultivated appreciation of artistic excellence," or, so to speak, a great taster of good wines, as an unfriendly critic might say. This is however not a lowering in estimation, but an enhancing instead. To quote Wordsworth, "every author as far as he is *great* and at the same time *original*, has had the power of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed." So must Eliot be enjoyed by his *virtuosity*. Eliot created certainly a unique taste, even though some poets and non-poets may find it 'bad taste,' almost nauseating at the worst.

It is quite plain that without being aware of his theory of poetry and his gusto one cannot like his poems much. And one can see that most of the 'symboliste' poets were certainly *virtuosos* like Baudelaire or Mallarmé; I think, to be sure, 'modernism' in painting as well as poetry originated from virtuosity, for instance, in the case of Matisse, or Picasso.

In my experience the soul of every art must be virtuosity, without which the artist cannot possibly do good work. Virtuosity, I think, is particularly the integrity of 'modern art.'

But very few poets and non-poets go to his poetry for virtuosity, and so many of them go to Eliot's poems for their Christian faith, philosophy, theology, and even culture.

It is very nearly certain that in the criticism of poetry and painting nowadays one does not often use virtuosity as a critical instrument. This is a very insidious tendency at the present moment. Eliot him-

self outlawed it from the society of criticism, and oddly enough, he could not be fully appreciated without this instrument. Eliot seems to have liked Remy de Gourmont whose criticism, however, was typically that of a virtuoso.

In his poetry and criticism as well, there has been a memorable change from virtuosity to high seriousness. He says in the preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*: "Poetry is a superior amusement: I do not mean an amusement for superior people. I call it an amusement, an amusement *pour distraire les honnêtes gens*." He was, when young, vitally influenced by the French symbolist poets and critics who were all virtuosos, and traces of a virtuoso remain detected or manifest even in *Four Quartets*, which is certainly Eliot's 'Confession,' partly his 'apologia pro vita sua.'

Last but not least, his theory of poetry itself is a work of art worked out by a great virtuoso... He describes the poet's mind as "a 'receptacle' for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together." And also he expounds a poem as a medium "in which impressions and experiences combine in *peculiar* and *unexpected* ways." All these things are nothing but an elaboration of Shelley's definition of poetry. Shelley says in his *Defence of Poetry*: "it (poetry) awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the *receptacle* of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought." How marvellously the old puts on a new modern face suddenly in the hands of Eliot!

From his theory of *impersonality* (which is in fact a time-honoured, important point in classicism) it follows that Eliot distinguishes between art or structural emotion and the emotion one feels in life, and that he also insists upon "objective correlatives."

And from his earliest poems there have been in the structure of a poem a dramatic element and a choreographical arrangement of scenes and all that. All these, I think, come from his love of the theatre and the Russian Ballets, and probably from the poems of Browning and Laforgue, and the music of Stravinsky.

In the structure of his poem there is preeminently his theory of 'tradition' from which he profusely draws quotations without quotation-marks, and makes allusions and parodies. These elements may well be only an overflow of his passionate love of literature in general.

More interestingly, it is worth noticing that he was the first to use the 'stream of consciousness' style, it can be said, before James Joyce, and he also gave a modern new meaning to free verse and common speech.

In making use of every idea and method of contemporary significance which he could appreciate, Eliot was a great poet of virtuosity, and all his life wrote not for the common reader, but for the poets and critics and even for the scholars; and so nearly all criticism of him came from those muses and masters.