CHAPTER 25

The avant-garde

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In October 1915, four months after Eliot's precipitous wedding to Vivien Haigh-Wood in a London registry office, Bertrand Russell wrote to the poet's mother, evidently trying to allay her fears about Eliot's marriage and career prospects:

> I have taken some pains to get to know his wife, who seems to me thoroughly nice, really anxious for his welfare . . . The chief sign of her influence that I have seen is that he is no longer attracted by the people who call themselves 'vorticists', and in that I think her influence is wholly to be applauded. (*L1*, 129–30)

Russell's remark was more prescient than he could have known: the year 1915 did prove to be a turning point in Eliot's outlook on poetry and poetics. The 'vorticists' to whom Russell alludes were members of a short-lived avant-garde group of poets and visual artists, led by Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound: the latter coined the term 'vortex' as the 'point of maximum energy, the radiant node or cluster . . . from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing'.[1] The Vorticist painters fused Cubist geometry with a Futurist emphasis on bodies and machines in motion: in the first issue of Lewis's *Blast* (July 1914), a 12-inch by 9-inch periodical whose texts were printed in oversize bold black type and bound in bright puce-coloured wrappers, England is 'blasted' for its allegiance to a stultified Victorian past, not to mention the country's cursed climate and other evils. *Blast* 1 contains Pound's 'Salutation the Third' ('Let us deride the smugness of the "Times": GUFFAW! . . .'), Lewis's Futurist-inspired abstract painting *Portrait of an Englishwoman* and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's elegantly curved, semi-abstract stone *Stags*.

Within two months of publication, the war intervened; indeed, the second number of *Blast* (July 1915) carried, under the headline 'MORT POUR LA PATRIE', the brief announcement of Gaudier-Brzeska's death, 'killed in a charge at Neuville St Vaast'. The sculptor was aged 23: his death came just a month after Eliot received the news of another friend

'mort pour la patrie', this time the French medical student Jean Verdenal, killed in action at Gallipoli. Ironically, the Eliot poems published in *Blast* 2 – 'Preludes' and 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' – date from the poet's year in Paris, 1910/11, when he made the acquaintance of Verdenal at the Pension Casaubon on the rue St Jacques. The arrangement to publish these poems in *Blast*, evidently at Pound's behest, had been made before Eliot received word of Verdenal's death: in April he wrote to Isabella Stewart Gardner in Boston that the second number of 'a certain infamous soi-disant quarterly called *Blast*' will 'contain a few things of my own' that might 'amuse you' (*L1*, 102). The reference is made casually, but in fact the *Blast* publication of four 'Preludes' and 'Rhapsody' marks Eliot's first appearance in print in England, indeed his first appearance in print anywhere other than the *Harvard Advocate*, where seven of his short early poems had appeared between 1907 and 1910.[2]

'Preludes' and 'Rhapsody' – lyrics whose graphic urban imagery carries strong emotional resonance – have little in common with the vituperative scorn, hyperbole and exuberance of Vorticist Lewis and Pound, much less with the hard-edge black and white abstract art of Christopher Nevinson or Edward Wadsworth. Indeed, Eliot's link to Vorticism and its Cubist-Futurist antecedents was largely negative: he adamantly opposed, as did Lewis and Pound, the poetry of the Edwardian establishment and its American counterpart. Again and again, in his later prose, Eliot recalls how hard it was to be a poet in the first decade of the twentieth century, given 'the absence of any masters in the previous generation whose work one could carry on' (*IMH*, 387). 'The young American poets, who came to London about that time [1910]', Eliot remarks, 'had left a country in which the status of poetry had fallen still lower than in England' (*IMH*, 388). Indeed, in 1946 Eliot explained:

> Whatever may have been the literary scene in America between the beginning of the century and the year 1914, it remains in my mind a complete blank. *I cannot remember the name of a single poet of that period whose work I read*: it was only in 1915, after I came to England, that I heard the name of Robert Frost. Undergraduates at Harvard in my time read the English poets of the '90s who were dead: that was as near as we could get to any living tradition. Certainly I cannot remember any English poet then alive who contributed to my own education. Yeats was well-known, of course; but to me, at least, Yeats did not appear, until after 1917, to be anything but a minor survivor of the '90s . . . The only recourse was to poetry of another age and to *poetry of another language*. (emphasis added)[3]

That language, of course, was French and the poetry in question is usually taken to be that of Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière, poets

Eliot himself regularly cites as having provided the initial impetus for his early poetry (see Chapter 21 above). The link has been well documented, as has Eliot's attendance, during his Paris period, at Henri Bergson's weekly philosophical lectures and his acquaintance with the writers Alain-Fournier and Jacques Rivière (see Chapter 3 above). Thus, when Eliot settled in London – or so the usual narrative has it – the newly forged relationship with the Imagist and Vorticist groups activated the French connection and led to Eliot's first contacts with such 'advanced' little magazines as Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, Dora Marsden's *Egoist* and *Blast*. Pound, to whom *The Waste Land* was to be dedicated, acted as go-between.

Certainly, it was through Pound's ministry that the young Eliot came to find at least a simulacrum of Paris excitement in the London literary world. 'I have just been to a cubist tea', he writes to his cousin Eleanor Hinkley in January 1915. 'There were two cubist painters, a futurist novelist, a vorticist poet and his wife, a cubist lady black-and-white artist, another cubist lady, and a retired army officer who has been living in the east end and studying Japanese . . . We discussed poetry, art, religion, and the war, all in quite an intelligent way, I thought' (*L1*, 84). Grateful to Pound for his support, Eliot tries to share his friend's interests, but his scepticism comes through:

> I have been reading some of your work lately. I enjoyed the article on the Vortex (please tell me who Kandinsky is). I distrust and detest Aesthetics when it cuts loose from the Object, and vapours in the void, but you have not done that. The closer one keeps to the Artist's discussion of his technique the better . . . There can be no contemplative easychair aesthetics, I think; only the aesthetics of the person who is about to do something. (*L1*, 94)

This is a revealing statement about Eliot's relation to the programmatic *isms* of the pre-war avant-garde. For all his sophisticated chatter about Cubist teas and Futurist novels, Eliot knew nothing of the Russian painter and writer on art Wassily Kandinsky, much less of the German Expressionists or the Russian Futurists, then at a high point of activity, culminating in Kasimir Malevich's *0–10* exhibition in St Petersburg, which featured the famed *Black Square*. There is no mention of the scandal of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), or the New York Armory Show of 1913. When, in April, Pound sends Eliot his first Vorticist manifesto, the latter objects, 'I think that a thing of [this] sort has to be written by one man, and cannot be made up like an Appropriation Bill to please the congressman from Louisiana and Dakotah' (*L1*, 103).

So much for what the founder of Italian Futurism, Filippo Marinetti, called 'l'arte di far manifesti', the art of making manifestos.

Inded, if Eliot's brief and tenuous association with Vorticism were his only link to the avant-garde, that connection would hardly be worth mentioning. By the time of his marriage, as Russell noted, Eliot was becoming bored with Vorticism. Charlotte Eliot must have been relieved. 'I cannot read Pound', she wrote to Russell: 'His articles seem over-strained, unnatural. As for the *Blast*, Mr Eliot [Henry Ware, the poet's father] remarked when he saw a copy he did not know there were enough lunatics in the world to support such a magazine' (*L1*, 144). The irony in this situation is that, even as Eliot was pulling away from the world of Futurist/Vorticist manifestos and Poundian claims to 'make it new', he had already produced during his Paris year his own avant-garde poems – poems actually much more 'advanced' than Pound's early dramatic monologues and short Imagist lyrics. But Eliot's radicalism went largely unnoticed because there was nothing programmatic about his new poetic, and he was never a member of a group or purveyor of an *ism*.

Recalling this crucial year half a century later, Eliot said: 'I had at that time the idea of giving up English and trying to settle down and scrape along in Paris and gradually write in French.'[4] No doubt, Paris marked an escape from the Puritanism of his St Louis and New England childhood (see Chapters 1 and 2 above). 'I cannot bear', his mother told him shortly before his departure, 'to think of you being alone in Paris ... I do not admire the French nation, and have less confidence in individuals of that race than in English' (*L1*, 12). Eliot obviously felt otherwise. His letters to his cousin Eleanor Hinkley are exuberant about the Paris spring, and he was evidently savouring Paris street life, theatres, outdoor festivals, with his new close friend Jean Verdenal. Most important, the new freedom provided new possibilities for the poetic enterprise. Consider what was actually being published in Britain and the United States in 1910. In London, a much admired poet was the Poet Laureate, William Watson:

> You in high places: you that drive the steeds
> Of Empire; you that say unto your hosts,
> 'Go thither', and they go; and from our coasts
> Bid sail the squadrons, and they sail, their deeds
> Shaking the world ...[5]

Generalising statement, stock phrase ('the steeds / Of Empire'), rhyming iambic pentameter stanzas, second-person address: this was the popular

poetry of imperialism. Its more intimate counterpart, in 'genteel tradition' America, was a poem like Sara Teasdale's 'Central Park at Dusk':

> Buildings above the leafless trees
> Loom high as castles in a dream,
> While one by one the lamps come out
> To thread the twilight with a gleam.
>
> There is no sign of leaf or bud,
> A hush is over everything –
> Silent as women wait for love,
> The world is waiting for the spring.

Again, sing-song metre and rhyme structure ('dream' / 'gleam'; 'everything' / 'spring'); more importantly, a recycling of a familiar poetic diction that allowed for no deviation: lamps, predictably enough, 'thread the twilight with a gleam'. And even the most distinguished American poet of 1910, Edward Arlington Robinson, couched his ironies in conventionalised Pre-Raphaelite imagery and flowing tetrameter rhyming stanzas, as in 'For a Dead Lady':

> No more with overflowing light
> Shall fill the eyes that now are faded,
> Nor shall another's fringe with night
> Their woman-hidden world as they did.
>
> No more shall I quiver down the days
> The flowing wonder of her ways,
> Whereof no language may requite
> The shifting and the many shaded.

Inversions ('No more shall'), archaisms ('Whereof'), vague description ('The flowing wonder of her ways'): these, it seems, were the staple of what was called 'poetry' in 1910. Even Pound's poems of this time resort, more often than not, to an archaic poetic diction.

Imagine what it must have been like, in this poetic environment, to come across a so-called 'Love Song' that begins:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table;
> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
> And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells . . . (*CPP*, 12)

The word 'avant-garde' is a military term: it refers to the front flank of the army, the daring foot soldiers that pave the way for the rest of the troops that follow. According to this definition, what anglophone poet is more avant-garde than the Eliot of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'? In France, it is true, Eliot had the example, not only of Laforgue and Corbière, but also of a much greater poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, whose lyric poetry and great visual experiment *Un Coup de dés* still look radical today. But Mallarmé made no attempt to be accessible to a wide audience, whereas the breakthrough of 'Prufrock' was – and remains – that it allows for colloquialism and popular culture as well as complex figures of speech and recondite allusion. The sound structure, moreover, enacts the poem's meaning. Take that opening line:

Lét ûs gó then | yóu ând Í

where the seven monosyllables, each one demanding at least some degree of stress and with a caesura after 'then', create a note of torpor, an inability to move, that is further accented by its pairing, via rhyme, with a second line, this time eleven syllables long and carrying at least six primary stresses –

Whên the évenîng is spréad oút agaínst the sk**y**

the line dragging along in a catatonic torpor that extends into the third line, which is even longer (twelve syllables) and markedly ungainly, what with the awkward shift from falling to rising rhythm in the second half:

Líke a pátient étherísed upón a táble

These delicate adjustments are not ones that Eliot could have derived from Laforgue, if for no other reason than French prosody, dependent as it is on quantity rather than stress, cannot produce such pronounced shifts in intensity and pitch. Note, for example, the way the fifth line – 'The muttering retreats' – provides an echo, as in a dark passageway, of the preceding representation of the 'half-deserted streets', an echo, incidentally, visual as well as aural, the fifth line providing a short response to its rhyming partner. And now the poem shifts ground and moves into a rhyming iambic pentameter couplet, whose dominant consonants are *s* (used twelve times) and *t* (used eight times), used in the most various combinations:

Of re*s*tless nigh*t*s in one-nigh*t* cheap ho*t*el*s*
And *s*awdu*st* resta*u*ran*t*s with oys*t*er *s*hell*s* (*CPP*, 12)

In this couplet not a single word could be altered: if, say, 'restless nights' were to be replaced by 'troubled evenings', the aural effect of these stunningly graphic lines would be wholly lost.

And this applies not only to aural effect but to semantic density. Gustave Flaubert's advocacy of *le mot juste* is the operative principle – a strong counterweight to such references as 'the flowing wonder of her ways'. Eliot's avant-garde invention – an invention that went much further than the precepts of Imagism or Futurism – was that the new poetry of the twentieth century, written on the typewriter to be both seen and heard, must pay attention to each and every word in a given poem. The oyster is an aphrodisiac; hence in Prufrock's etherised world there are only oyster *shells*; or again, 'rest' in the fifth line – with its pun on 'remainder' – finds an echo in the first syllable of '*rest*aurants' – an echo measuring the meaningless vacuum of Prufrock's daily round. And the 'sawdust' sets the stage for the 'soot that falls from chimneys' and the 'yellow smoke that slides along the street' (*CPP*, 13) in the second verse paragraph. Everything in this poem relates to everything else, even as the identity of the monologue's speaker is so fluid and evasive that it spills over into the external world, denying all demarcation between self and other. Indeed, the indeterminate pronouns – 'is', 'you', 'I' – coupled with the poem's abrupt tense and mood shifts, its juxtaposition of ordinary speech rhythms with passages in foreign languages, and the curiously contorted conceits like the comparison of evening sky to a 'patient etherised upon a table' make for an astonishingly dense verbal fabric. 'Etherised', for example, also connotes, as Stephen Spender noted, 'ethereal' – a more logical epithet for the evening sky, which is by definition, in motion, rather than 'etherised'.[6] Then again 'etherised' takes the reader right to Prufrock's final line: 'Till human voices wake us, and we drown' (*CPP*, 17).

How did the Eliot of 1910/11 write such an avant-garde poem – a poem that when it finally appeared in book form in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) was declared by the anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* to be 'untouched by any genuine rush of feeling' and 'frequently inarticulate'? 'His "poems"', predicated this reviewer, 'will hardly be read by many with enjoyment' (Brooker, 6). No doubt this was true: these poems were sufficiently advanced in conception, structure and in their use of graphic, even shocking, urban imagery, so as to turn off the literary establishment of 1917. Indeed, in later years Eliot would himself be hard put to explain what had produced his breakthrough. He only knew that Paris had something to do with it. Shortly after arriving in London in 1914, Eliot wrote to his old friend, the poet Conrad Aiken:

Pound has been *on n'est pas plus aimable* [kindness itself], and is going to print 'Prufrock' in *Poetry* and pay me for it. He wants me to bring out a vol. after the war. The devil of it is that *I have done nothing good since J. A[lfred] P[rufrock] and writhe in impotence* . . . Sometimes I think – if I could only get back to Paris. But I know I never will . . . I think now that all my good stuff was done before I had begun to worry – three years ago. (*L1*, 62–3; emphasis added)

Furthermore, he told Eleanor Hinkley: 'I don't think that I should ever feel at home in England, as I do for instance in France . . . I should always, I think, be aware of a certain sense of confinement in England, and repression' (*L1*, 66). The repression, it seems, has been dramatised in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', where the most ordinary action seems impossible to carry out: thus, 'Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?' (*CPP*, 16). In the 'Love Song', Prufrock's creator could at least stand back and treat the situation with irony; in his life, by contrast, there was little to smile about. As Eliot confided to Aiken in December 1914:

I have been going through one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a city . . . One walks about the street with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches. I should be better off, I sometimes think, if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago. (*L1*, 82)

Eliot was 26 when he made these references to 'nervous sexual attacks' and missed opportunities; the longing for an earlier still-innocent romance is palpable. That romance involved Verdenal, to whom Eliot dedicated *Prufrock and Other Observations*. For the 1925 edition, Eliot added to the dedication the words spoken by the Roman poet Statius, at the climax of Dante's *Purgatorio* XXI, to the shade of his beloved Virgil: 'Or puoi la quantitate / comprender dell'amor ch'a te mi scalda, / quando dismento nostra vanitate, / trattando l'ombre come cosa salda' ['Understand how great the love that burns in me for you, to make me forget our vanity and treat a shade as a solid thing'].

However oblique, this is a remarkable declaration on Eliot's part. It is reinforced by another comment, made ten years later in an editorial for the *Criterion*: 'I am willing to admit that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later . . . to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli'.[7] That friend was Verdenal, and Eliot's image immediately recalls the Hyacinth Garden in *The Waste Land*, in which the single flower, proffered to the poet-narrator, makes for a moment he cannot forget: 'I was neither / Living nor

dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence' (*CPP*, 62). The epiphany is recalled in part 5 of the poem as 'The awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract' (*CPP*, 74).

The avant-gardism of the poems Eliot began in Paris represents just such a moment of surrender. The carefree Eliot who wandered around the streets of Paris with Jean Verdenal was, as his letters indicate, curious about the lives of others – 'lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows' (*CPP*, 15) – even if he was not inclined to participate in avant-garde soirées or frequent the galleries. In London, the carefree life seemed impossible. If, as he told Aiken, petty worrying 'kills your inspiration', then '*tragic* suffering' would do 'exactly the reverse', for such suffering takes one out of oneself 'to look at one's life as if it were somebody's else' (*L1*, 63). About such suffering Eliot was soon to learn: by the time he wrote his quatrain poems published in *Poems* (1920) – most of them short, satiric third-person telescoped narratives – the avant-garde utopian phase of Eliot's career had culminated in the 'tragic suffering' of *The Waste Land* and in a new concern for what he called, in his most famous critical essay, the relationship between 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.'

All the more ironic, accordingly, that the most famous avant-gardist of the century, Marchel Duchamp, singled out Eliot's essay for praise in one of his own rare critical statements. The occasion was a round-table with a group of illustrious art historians at a Federation of the Arts meeting in 1957, and it was, so Eric Cameron tells us, 'the only time Duchamp ever quoted the opinion of a critic word for word':[8] 'T. S. Eliot, in his essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent", writes: "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material." '[9] The doctrine of poetic autonomy adumbrated here – and developed in Duchamp's essay – was to become the cornerstone of High Modernism, as distinct from the avant-gardist drive to equate art and life. But this distinction has always been more apparent than real. Like Eliot, Duchamp regarded the artist as medium and designed his readymades – for example, *The Bicycle Wheel* – so as to give them a life of their own, freed form all signs of the creator's touch. The artwork, so Eliot and Duchamp both believed, must speak for itself; it cannot be judged by the author's intention, which may, in any case, be only dimly understood: 'The progress of an artist is . . . a continual extinction of personality' (*SE*, 17).

But in his post-war public persona, the newly minted English Eliot had 'To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet' (*CPP*, 14). The avant-garde experimentation of the Paris years was a thing of the past. The editor of the *Criterion* who turned down for publication Gertrude Stein's 'Composition as Explanation' was no longer a Francophile avant-gardist. 'Now as to Paris', he writes to Wyndham Lewis in 1921, 'I can't feel that there is a great deal of hope in your going there permanently. Painting being so much more important in Paris, there are a great many more clever second-rate men there ... to distinguish oneself from. Then you know what ruthless and indefatigable sharpers Frenchmen are' (*LI*, 552). Paris the city of 'clever second-rate men'? Eliot had attained the Age of Prudence.

NOTES

1. Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916) (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp. 90–2.
2. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' appeared in *Poetry* (Chicago) at the same time as *Blast* 2.
3. 'Ezra Pound', *Poetry* (September 1946), 326.
4. 'The Art of Poetry, I: T. S. Eliot', *Paris Review* (spring/summer 1959), 56.
5. Quoted in C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p. 52.
6. For a discussion of these effects, see Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 19–28.
7. 'A Commentary', *Criterion* (April 1934), 452.
8. Eric Cameron quoted in *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry de Duve (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 1.
9. *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), p. 138.