

Mr Eliot's subject this evening is: "To Criticize the Critic: A Retrospective View of my own Literary Criticism." But with Mr Eliot, as we all know, the retrospective is apt to prove prescriptive -- even, through no fault of his own prescriptive. So his studies in the literature of the past have helped to change our relation to the past, and in so doing have moulded the future. I have no notion where his retrospection of this evening will lead us, but I give odds that it will be far different from apologia or narcissistic self-scrutiny.

The retrospective nature of the title leads me to a piece of retrospection. I want to turn from the title, from the criticism, to the poetry. We have heard much, by way of praise and blame, of the density, the allusiveness, the difficulty of Mr Eliot's poetry. The library shelves groan with the weight of exegeses. Alas, we sometimes think, the tail has begun to wag the dog.

But let me look back to an earlier and more innocent time -- to November 1922. In that month the Waste Land appeared in the Dial Magazine. What now we tend to forget is that then there were no exegeses to tell you what the poem meant. But your heart told you, the tingling of your spine told you, your own mouth, framing the grand syllables, told you. Maybe, after all, you didn't know exactly what the poem meant, but you were young, and this poetry, you knew, was for the young, for you, for your time, your moment. You knew what was the most important thing to know -- here was indeed the voice of "il miglior fabbro."

This a poetry of despair, of the end, of the relaxed nerve -- so some of the old folks glumly warned you. You looked at them respectfully and knew that they were touched in the head. You knew that the inwardness of the poem was, strangely, joy and energy. Despair is, in fact, a particularly joyous and energizing subject to the young -- when through the magic of poetry, it speaks to the young of the pathos of their strength, the delicious tragedy of their confidence, the wisdom of their very foolish courage.

Well, time passed, the college courses were given, the official view was promulgated, the exegeses were written. Many of the exegeses were, in fact, written by those erstwhile boys who had once postured against the rubble of history and mouthed that energizing eloquence to the stars. So we must remind ourselves that the exegeses could have been written only because of the dangerous magic of that eloquence. And that old magic is still there, lurking primordiallly in the dark between the closed covers on the book shelf, as in a cave. Don't take down the book. Don't open it. It will get you again if you don't watch out!

One more thing. The age we have lived through will be known in the text books -- chilling thought -- by the name of our speaker tonight. He has given the age an idiom, a gesture, a pose, its key images. He has seemed, at times, to embody the very spirit of our age. But is that the most significant mark of his achievement?

No.

The most significant mark is that he has, at the same time,

stood outside the age. Just as the individual growing up in this age has been forced, in order to be himself, to struggle against the gifts which Mr Eliot had given him, so the age itself has been forced, by his inimical genius, to deepen the levels of its inward debate, to sharpen the terms of its most troubling dialectic. That genius has forced us, with particular severity, and regardless of particular opinions and dogmas, to look at the ambiguities of our age, and to struggle to live with them. Consider The Four Quartets. Who else, in that noisy and angry time, tried to define the anguish of the need for inner stillness?

It is now my happy privilege to present to you the man whom we might call the dearest enemy of our age.

Mr Eliot.