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GENIUS RECOGNISED

T. S. Eliot and the Order of Merit

T. S. ELIOT is now a member of the British Order of Merit. The most exclusive company in the world, in respect to achievement in action and thought, receives one who by general consent has been the most important new poet working in English and the most potent influence in poetry during the last generation. To realise the full significance of this honour it is necessary to understand first just what the Order of Merit is. There are various ways of recognising literary worth. Macaulay and Tennyson were raised to the peerage. Many writers have been knighted. Others have been made Companions of Honour, a distinction created 30 years ago. The latest Companion is Victoria Sackville-West, and we may attribute her admission as much to her long poem *The Land* as to her novels. But above everything is the Order of Merit. Had Macaulay and Tennyson lived in the 20th Century, they would certainly have been given this honour, and probably nothing would have been said about a peerage.

A British statesman once remarked of the highest and most prized British order of chivalry, The Garter, that there was "no damned nonsense of merit" about it. The only thing that counts for the Order of Merit is merit. The Order was founded in 1902 (with a maximum of 24 members), and the story is that it arose from the wish of King Edward VII. to do something for G. F. Watts, the veteran painter, and Watts's refusal to take a title. However that may be, it was a very happy idea to create a real aristocracy of genius and high talent, and guard its door. The standard set at the outset has been carefully maintained. Now and then some scientist or scholar is appointed of whom even the educated public knows little or nothing. That is to say, popular recognition is not an essential. T. S. Eliot enters a company which, in the field of letters, has included Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, John Masefield, John Galsworthy, James Bryce, James Frazer, and G. M. Trevelyan.

ELIOT'S personal history as well as his achievements give this honour a special interest. Thomas Stearns Eliot,

I believe, is the first person born and bred American to enter the Order. He was born in Missouri 59 years ago of a family well known in New England for its public service and intellectual pursuits. It was natural that Harvard should be his University. He specialised in philosophy. Study in Paris followed; then more work at Harvard, including a lectureship in philosophy; then a travelling fellowship, which took him to Germany and Oxford. In England he taught, wrote, edited magazines, worked in a bank, and became a director of the publishing house of Faber and Faber. When, in 1932, he went back to Harvard for a year as Professor of Poetry, he had been away from his country for 18 years. One thinks of that novelist of two worlds, Henry James, and the resemblance is closer than might be supposed. Eliot greatly admires Henry James. During the first World War, at the close of his life, Henry James became a British subject as a gesture of gratitude and affection. Eliot took this step in 1927 as, in the words of a biographer, "a result of his growing interest in the English Church and State."

Meanwhile *The Waste Land* and other poems had appeared. Bonamy Dobree, a critic of recognised standing, has said that 1922, the year of *The Waste Land*, will prove as important in the history of the development of English poetry as 1798 when Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*. Eliot introduced something like a revolution into English poetry, but neither in social life, politics, nor literature, was he a revolutionist. He was, and is, a traditionalist. He goes back to the English mystics of the 17th Century, but he brought a new kind of imagination and technique to the writing of poetry, or extended old techniques. In particular he demanded for a poet the right to explore any situation and use any terms. "No part of life should be barred from poetry." This was the development of an old principle. Hence some of Eliot's lines best known to the public describe "commonplace" things in "commonplace" language. "The winter evening settles down with smell of steaks in passageways."

When lovely woman stoops to folly and Paces about her room again alone, She smooths her hair with automatic hand And puts a record on the gramophone.

But with this went imagination of a high order, deep subtlety, a new employment of words, and lyrical beauty, backed by a scholar's erudition. Eliot was a difficult poet. He demanded knowledge and intellectual co-operation from the reader. He was highly allusive. He himself furnishes explanatory notes to *The Waste Land*. It is significant that the quotation-dedication in front of *The Waste Land* is in three non-English languages—Latin, Greek and Italian. To a considerable extent Eliot was a coterie poet, and he gave an impetus to coterie writing. His disciples tended to think of poetry as something for a circle smaller and more select than the restricted public to which poetry normally appeals.

YOUNG poets were influenced by Eliot for two reasons. They responded to his principle that a poet should write about anything in any way he chose. This fitted in with the trend towards lack of restraint. And much of Eliot's poetry was a penetrating satire of a society that, in his view, had lost its



Man at work

"GOODNESS, I've got a busy day ahead of me. Often wonder why somebody doesn't put up a 'Man at work' sign when I'm around. I certainly use up heaps of energy building sandcastles and digging holes to catch crabs in. Gosh, it beats me what a fellow would do without that morning Weetbix to keep his strength up. In fact, now I come to think of it, I could do with a fistful of Weetbix'n honey right now. Hi, mummie!"

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