

Acceptance Speech

When I began to think of what I should say to you this evening, I wished only to express very simply my appreciation of the high honour which the Swedish Academy has thought fit to confer upon me. But to do this adequately proved no simple task: my business is with words, yet the words were beyond my command. Merely to indicate that I was aware of having received the highest international honour that can be bestowed upon a man of letters, would be only to say what everyone knows already. To profess my own unworthiness would be to cast doubt upon the wisdom of the Academy; to praise the Academy might suggest that I, as a literary critic, approved the recognition given to myself as a poet. May I therefore ask that it be taken for granted, that I experienced, on learning of this award to myself, all the normal emotions of exaltation and vanity that any human being might be expected to feel at such a moment, with enjoyment of the flattery, and exasperation at the inconvenience, of being turned overnight into a public figure? Were the Nobel Award similar in kind to any other award, and merely higher in degree, I might still try to find words of appreciation: but since it is different in kind from any other, the expression of one's feelings calls for resources which language cannot supply.

I must therefore try to express myself in an indirect way, by putting before you my own interpretation of the significance of the Nobel Prize in Literature. If this were simply the recognition of merit, or of the fact that an author's reputation has passed the boundaries of his own country and his own language, we could say that hardly any one of us at any time is, more than others, worthy of being so distinguished. But I find in the Nobel Award something more and something different from such recognition. It seems to me more the election of an individual, chosen from time to time from one nation or another, and selected by something like an act of grace, to fill a peculiar role and to become a peculiar symbol. A ceremony takes place, by which a

man is suddenly endowed with some function which he did not fill before. So the question is not whether he was worthy to be so singled out, but whether he can perform the function which you have assigned to him: the function of serving as a representative, so far as any man can be of thing of far greater importance than the value of what he himself has written. Poetry is usually considered the most local of all the arts. Painting, sculpture, architecture, music, can be enjoyed by all who see or hear. But language, especially the language of poetry, is a different matter.

Poetry, it might seem, separates peoples instead of uniting them.

But on the other hand we must remember, that while language constitutes a barrier, poetry itself gives us a reason for trying to overcome the barrier. To enjoy poetry belonging to another language, is to enjoy an understanding of the people to whom that language belongs, an understanding we can get in no other way. We may think also of the history of poetry in Europe, and of the great influence that the poetry of one language can exert on another; we must remember the immense debt of every considerable poet to poets of other languages than his own; we may reflect that the poetry of every country and every language would decline and perish, were it not nourished by poetry in foreign tongues. When a poet speaks to his own people, the voices of all the poets of other languages who have influenced him are speaking also. And at the same time he himself is speaking to younger poets of other languages, and these poets will convey something of his vision of life and something of the spirit of his people, to their own. Partly through his influence on other poets, partly through translation, which must be also a kind of recreation of his poems by other poets, partly through readers of his language who are not themselves poets, the poet can contribute toward understanding between peoples. In the work of every poet there will certainly be much that can only appeal to those who inhabit the same region, or speak the same language, as the poet. But nevertheless there is a meaning to the

phrase «the poetry of Europe», and even to the word «poetry» the world over. I think that in poetry people of different countries and different languages - though it be apparently only through a small minority in any one country - acquire an understanding of each other which, however partial, is still essential. And I take the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature, when it is given to a poet, to be primarily an assertion of the supra-national value of poetry. To make that affirmation, it is necessary from time to time to designate a poet: and I stand before you, not on my own merits, but as a symbol, for a time, of the significance of poetry.

Prior to the acceptance, Gustaf Hellström of the Swedish Academy made these remarks:

«Humility is also the characteristic which you, Mr. Eliot, have come to regard as man's virtue. At first it did not appear that this would be the final result of your visions and your acuity of thought. Born in the Middle West, where the pioneer mentality was still alive, brought up in Boston, the stronghold of Puritan tradition, you came to Europe in your youth and were there confronted with the pre-war type of civilization in the Old World: the Europe of Edward VII, Kaiser Wilhelm, the Third Republic, and The Merry Widow. This contact was a shock to you, the expression of which you brought to perfection in *The Waste Land*, in which the confusion and vulgarity of the civilization became the object of your scathing criticism. But beneath that criticism there lay profound and painful disillusionment, and out of this disillusionment there grew forth a feeling of sympathy, and out of that sympathy was born a growing urge to rescue from the ruins of the confusion the fragments from which order and stability might be restored. The position you have long held in modern literature provokes a comparison with that occupied by Sigmund Freud, a quarter of a century earlier, within the field of

psychic medicine. If a comparison might be permitted, the novelty of the therapy which he introduced with psychoanalysis would match the revolutionary form in which you have clothed your message. But the path of comparison could be followed still further. For Freud the most profound cause of the confusion lay in the Unbehagen in der Kultur of modern man. In his opinion there must be sought a collective and individual balance, which should constantly take into account man's primitive instincts. You, Mr. Eliot, are of the opposite opinion. For you the salvation of man lies in the preservation of the cultural tradition, which, in our more mature years, lives with greater vigour within us than does primitiveness, and which we must preserve if chaos is to be avoided. Tradition is not a dead load which we drag along with us, and which in our youthful desire for freedom we seek to throw off. It is the soil in which the seeds of coming harvests are to be sown, and from which future harvests will be garnered. As a poet you have, Mr. Eliot, for decades, exercised a greater influence on your contemporaries and younger fellow writers than perhaps anyone else of our time.»

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