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THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT (1888-1965)

The death of T. S. Eliot on January 4 of this year ends the career of the most influential writer in English letters of the 20th century. Controversy about the nature and value of his achievements as poet and critic attended his whole productive life and it persists today. Few, however, will deny the profundity of the revolution in poetic practice and poetic taste initiated in 1917 by Prufrock and Other Observations. Three years later The Sacred Wood opened the long campaign which Eliot led against the decaying citadel of Romantic sensibility, a labor of demolition which he rightly believed essential to the continued vitality of English poetry. A revolution prolmulgated in the name of conservatism, it was and for many people remains a baffling one; and we have in all candor to say that it now seems rather less "conservative" and perhaps even less revolutionary than it appeared to readers forty years ago. Yet if today we know more about these things, it is also true, as he himself once observed of another, that Eliot is part of what we know.

There is no use, now or ever, in talking about any final judgment, which in the nature of the case must be illusory. But little judicial daring is needed to risk the conclusion that since John Dryden no poet-critic performed—or had to perform—a work of such farreaching innovation. Eliot's critical essays were the most challenging of his time. Of the greater legacy of his poetry no one can forsee posterity's evaluation. For the moment it is enough to say that, whatever changes in taste may supervene, Eliot will remain, with his great neoclassical predecessor, "one of those who have set standards for English verse which it is desperate to ignore."

E. R. M.