

**THE SACRED WOOD:
ESSAYS ON POETRY
AND CRITICISM**

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The sacred wood: essays on poetry and criticism by T. S. Eliot

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BY

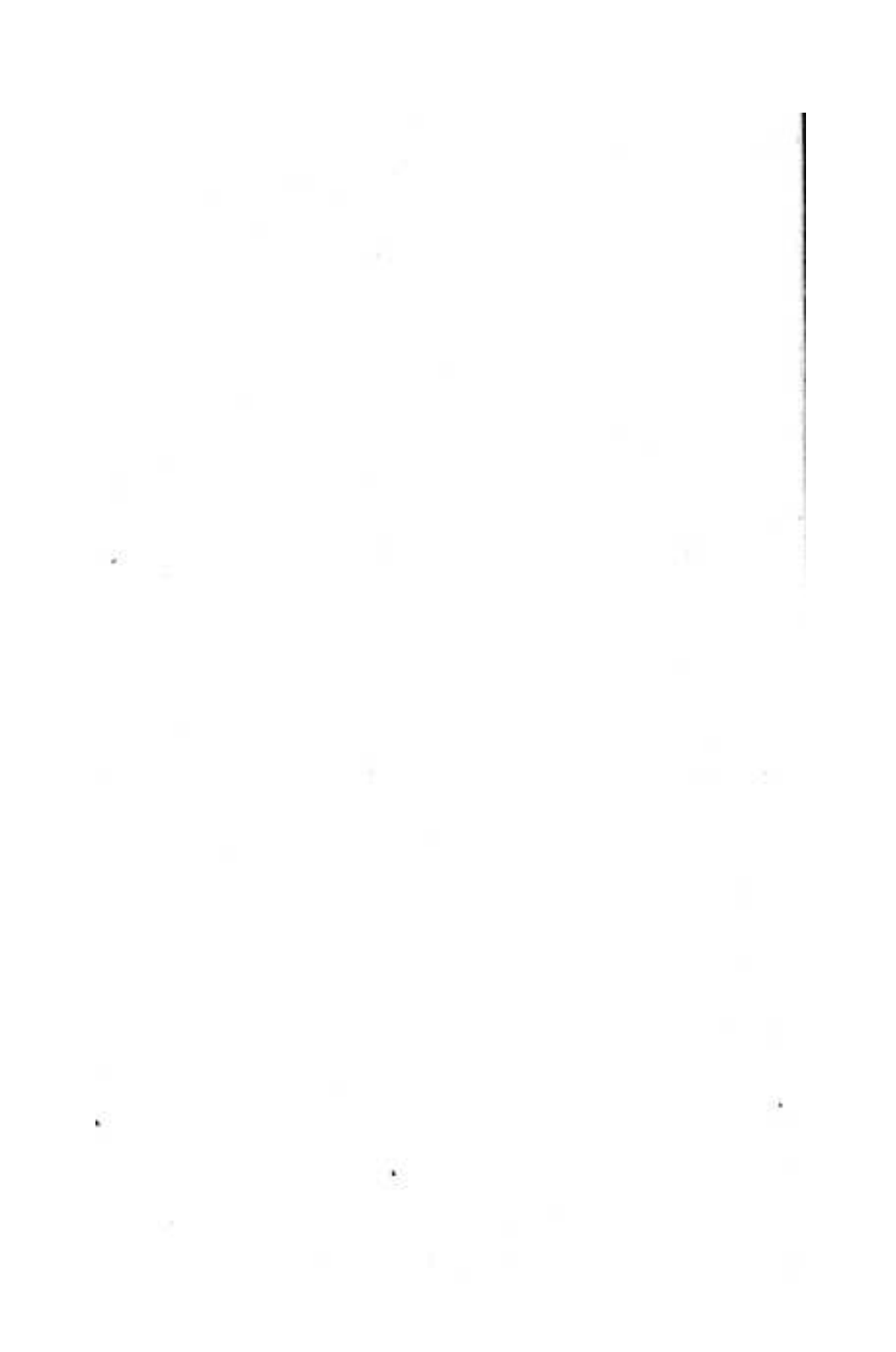
T. S. ELIOT



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1921

FOR
H. W. E.
"TACUIT ET FECIT"



CERTAIN of these essays appeared, in the same or a more primitive form, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Athenæum*, *Art and Letters*, and *The Egoist*. The author desires to express his obligation to the editors of these periodicals.

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INTRODUCTION

TO anyone who is at all capable of experiencing the pleasures of justice, it is gratifying to be able to make amends to a writer whom one has vaguely depreciated for some years. The faults and foibles of Matthew Arnold are no less evident to me now than twelve years ago, after my first admiration for him ; but I hope that now, on re-reading some of his prose with more care, I can better appreciate his position. And what makes Arnold seem all the more remarkable is, that if he were our exact contemporary, he would find all his labour to perform again. A moderate number of persons have engaged in what is called "critical" writing, but no conclusion is any more solidly established than it was in 1865. In the first essay in the first *Essays in Criticism* we read that

it has long seemed to me that the burst of creative activity in our literature, through the first quarter of this century, had about it in fact something premature ; and that from this cause its productions are doomed, most of them, in spite of the sanguine hopes which accompanied and do still accompany them, to prove

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hardly more lasting than the productions of far less splendid epochs. And this prematureness comes from its having proceeded without having its proper data, without sufficient material to work with. In other words, the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety.

This judgment of the Romantic Generation has not, so far as I know, ever been successfully controverted ; and it has not, so far as I know, ever made very much impression on popular opinion. Once a poet is accepted, his reputation is seldom disturbed, for better or worse. So little impression has Arnold's opinion made, that his statement will probably be as true of the first quarter of the twentieth century as it was of the nineteenth. A few sentences later, Arnold articulates the nature of the malady :

In the Greece of Pindar and Sophocles, in the England of Shakespeare, the poet lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power ; society was, in the fullest measure, permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive ; and this state of things is the true basis for the creative power's exercise, in this it finds its data, its materials, truly ready for its hand ; all the books and reading in the world are only valuable as they are helps to this.

At this point Arnold is indicating the centre of interest