

ANALYSIS

“Gerontion” (1920)

T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“‘Gerontion,’ in 1919, marks a second crystallization and synthesis which lifts it entirely above the rank of the poems composed at about that time, such as ‘The Hippopotamus’ or ‘Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service’ which read as though they were the work of a much younger, less mature man.... The reader of ‘Gerontion’ had to learn how to supply the missing connectives.... The verse of ‘Gerontion’ reveals the fullest impression of Eliot’s mastery of the Jacobean dramatists....’ [Edward] Fitzgerald in his pathetic, charming, and impotent old age, pondering on the pessimism of Omar [Khayyam], and beating out the futility of his final years, may have crystallized in Eliot’s mind the situation...of “Gerontion”.’

He is not writing in his own person: The situation of Gerontion is even farther from his own than that of the middle-aged Prufrock had been when Eliot created him while still in his early twenties.... Eliot can project into the thoughts of Gerontion an expression of one of his most moving, recurrent themes: The horror of a life without faith, its disillusioned weariness of knowledge, its agonized slow drying up of the springs of emotion.... The mood of ‘Gerontion,’ which also recognizes the intimate relation of sex and religion, is not far from the tone of...Dante; but there is this distinction: In the reflections of the old man there is a full acceptance of suffering, but not the realization embodied in Eliot’s later poems that ‘the souls in purgatory suffer because they *wish to suffer*, for purgation’.”

F. O. Matthiessen

The Achievement of T. S. Eliot

(1935; Oxford/Galaxy 1959) 17, 59, 74, 99, 101, 132, 134, 193

“There is only one poem of any length in the 1920 volume, but it is one of Eliot’s most powerful, and one of his most obscure. It is impossible to read it without being deeply stirred by its strange drama and music, but to interpret the sequence of its imaginative logic is not easy, and there has to be a good deal of guesswork. The organization, however, is similar to that of ‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales’ in that there is the same antithesis between human life conceived in a framework of myth and the lack of all meaning in contemporary secularism. In ‘Gerontion,’ the general context of myth becomes specifically that of Christianity. The birth of Christ is conceived of as opening a new era, within which the cycle of civilization symbolized by Gerontion is very near its end.

Gerontion sees one aspect of Christ as the tiger, Blake’s embodiment of the creative fire and light in animal form, part of the order of nature, but he is as incapable of drawing any vitality from, or entering into any communion with, that elemental source of ‘juvencence’ as was Mr. Prufrock from the sea and its mermaids. Like Mr. Prufrock, he lays bare his psychological dilemma with merciless insight, but at the same time excuses himself from translating self-knowledge into any effort towards change. Indeed, like Mr. Prufrock, he feels above all the futility of struggle. All his acute activity of consciousness is in *perception*, and is not directed towards any solution. He supplies admirable reasons, indeed, for the impossibility of any solution. But his perceptions are far wider and deeper and more intense than those of Mr. Prufrock, and they operate in a different theatre...

It is a civilization founded on money values and secular rationalism, with no religious communion or human sense of community, a nightmare world of isolation and instability, of restless nervous and intellectual activity, emotional stagnation and spiritual drought. Gerontion (the name means little old man) is the shadowy symbol and spokesman of the sensitive intellectual in this world.... He has become contracted to nothing but ‘a dull head’... The whole vision is ‘thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season’; Gerontion has been driven by the parching trade winds steadily blowing in the same direction, into ‘a sleepy corner’; his house is peeling and decayed, and he ‘stiffens’ in it, passive and inert, ‘waiting for rain,’ surrounded both within and without by emblems of degradation.... His apologia moves back and forth from

historical revelation to cynical or impassioned analysis to embittered disgust to declamatory warning.... His only purpose is an attempt at self-vindication from his self-brought charge, and that he himself knows that his 'conclusion' is already irrevocable...

He points at once to the chief element in his failure: He has not *fought*.... His inert helpless old age is the result of a passive comfort-seeking indolence.... The civilization he represents is decayed.... As a result of not fighting for the values of a living tradition, the modern world is now 'owned' and enslaved by the only proliferating element in it, the international money power. The inhuman and sub-human quality of that power is suggested in the words *squats* and *spawned*. Then the landlord and the house, the owner and the civilization he owns, become one....an atmosphere of barrenness, torpor, mechanization and corruption, where even natural lust itself, the goat, is starved and unhealthy. The picture is completed by the figure of the woman. She is equally squalid. Instead of functioning as mother and helpmate, symbol of fertility and affections, she is the petty housekeeper with petty ailments...

Gerontion sums himself up as 'a dull head among windy spaces.' He is not a whole man, symbolic of a civilization ministering to body, mind and spirit. He has shrunk in an abstract intelligence, anchored to nothing stable, with no organic relationship between himself and a living culture.... The new paganism betrayed the tiger, bringing not communion but division.... Then the pathetic weakness of the innocent individual who will perish with the guilty, appears as the single gull, helplessly buffeting the wind and finally hurled by it downwards to the desolation of 'white feathers in the snow'... The Trades turn into the devouring tempest, and the Gulf claims the old man himself. The 'show' ends; Gerontion proposes no action which can prevent the inexorable end. He reveals his 'thoughts' to his fellow 'tenants' and leaves his warning with them. The final images of drought and sterility lead directly to the atmosphere of 'The Waste Land'."

Elizabeth Drew
T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry
(Scribner's 1949) 47-52, 57

"'Gerontion' begins with an epigraph from *Measure for Measure* (III:1) suggesting that neither youth nor age has any importance, since life is essentially illusion. The title signifies 'a little old man.' Again the contrast is that between a human life in a framework of tradition and spiritual kinship with the past and a bestial existence governed solely by the needs of the moment. The old man is a prisoner in contemporary society, a world obsessed with gain, ignorantly atheistic; and rotten from within. One of its chief qualities is instability, symbolized by the 'rented house' in which the old man lives. Heroism is dead; the old man admits that he did not fight at Thermopylae (the 'hot gates') or at any of the other battles of the ancient world against barbarism. He is 'waiting for rain' (the refreshing and life giving spiritual vitality that comes like rain from above) but instead is continually tormented by winds, symbol of modern restlessness and uncertainty.

Beginning with line 17 Christianity is introduced in contrast to contemporary avarice and vulgarity. In 11.54ff, beginning 'I that was near your heart,' Gerontion refers to the estrangement of modern man from the religion which sustained him up to the time of the Renaissance. The penultimate section (11.60ff) concludes that commercialism (the spider symbolizes the intricacy of modern finance) is likely to triumph permanently. Modern man, alienated from the spiritual forces which previously nourished him, is condemned to live in the 'rotting house' of his cosmopolitan and rootless society."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 486-87

"'Gerontion' (1920), which seems originally to have been intended to be part of 'The Waste Land,' is the first of Eliot's great poems in the mode he has made both his own and his culture's. Here Eliot begins to move from denial for the sake of denial to denial for the sake of affirmation. The mode is one in which the effect is to of creating but of being created. This is the basic style of the poem of the counter-current [to the Adamic mainstream of American poetry] and compares with that of, say, Emerson's poems as do the *Cantos* with *Song of Myself*.

In 'Gerontion,' as in 'Prufrock,' there is a delicately balanced portrayal of a protagonist against the backdrop of his world; still, he exists only in so far as he can 'use' the elements of that backdrop in composing his so wearily pathetic song of himself. As the poem develops, the backdrop comes to have much more substantiality than does he who places himself...against it. The form of the poem is set initially by the tension of protagonist against background and finally by the collapse of that tension, as the protagonist loses himself in the background. The title indicates that the modern ego is characteristically that of an old man (like Tiresias in 'The Waste Land'), living out his dry days, bravely allowing his sense of the past to tell him what he is and, in the telling, to overwhelm him....

In this poem Eliot comes to see that his problem, modern man's problem, is one of a history, his own, which man cannot forget. The cluttered memories which fill the old man's mind are fused into a single pattern because, adding up to his history, they define the single pattern of his life. We do not look for him to initiate his thoughts and work them through; he is his thoughts... Here, most clearly, the Adamic principle of nineteenth-century American poetry is foresworn; or rather, here Adam is taken to be modern man's ancestor in historical fact, not an ever-contemporary, ever-possible image after which he must model himself... This, as it has often been observed, was the lesson into which Henry Adams (whose work is alluded to in 'Gerontion') educated himself. He too came to believe that the American ego, like that of all modern men, was about to exhaust itself and its potential for creativity.... In 'Gerontion' the ego learns to submit itself to history, so to achieve a modicum of definition and understanding....

'The Waste Land' has become such an assured part of the twentieth-century consciousness, one of the major vehicles for its sensibility, that we easily forget the transformation it worked. Realizing some of the possibilities latent in 'Gerontion,' it in effect at once proposed and confirmed a new basic style so powerful that the older basic style, charged deeply with egocentrism, would no longer be viable unless it met the challenge Eliot put to it."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 299, 306

"The title of the poem comes from the Greek word *geron* which means 'an old man'; the narrator, 'an old man in a dry month,' reviews in a series of associative images his past inaction and present inability to take action. The poem expresses Eliot's sense of the world as a cultural and emotional wasteland, and desire for some kind of salvation. Technically the poem shows a development toward a symbolism; Eliot uses a tightly-packed, melodic free-verse line."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"This poem, which Eliot at one time wished to use as the prelude to 'The Waste Land,' heads his *Poems*, 1920 and represents his mature middle style. The method is not greatly different from 'Prufrock,' but the tone of *vers de societe* has been eliminated; the stylistic transitions and imitations are even more abrupt, the allusions and pastiche still more private and unsusceptible to 'public' explanation. In the arbitrariness of the poem there are a few forces that make for cohesion. A past is exposed and contemplated in a reverie; the reverie is proper to the fractured, spiritually moribund world of Europe immediately after the Great War. Eliot's preoccupation with the spiritual sterility of this world, which he saw as involved in a great doomed experiment in heresy, a suicidal separation from the past and from religion, achieves an expression which is as far as possible not an expression but a statement of all these things in a mysterious and arbitrary image.

Eliot believed that the man who suffers should be kept separate from the artist who creates, and by the same token divorced his 'thought' from his poetry; the 'thought' is nevertheless there, though in extraordinary disguises; and naturally it is the thought he had in his head at the time. Hence the echoes of his recent reading, the imitations of Jacobean dramatic verse, the use of Lancelot Andrewes's sermons, the presentation of the past as instantaneously there in the present, which is a condition expounded by Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' The modern idea of history as meaningless chaos, related to the view that all nature is a chaos on which only the mind of man imposes fictions of order, Eliot derived from *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918).

Gerontion, 'little old man,' is obviously in some ways the image of a moribund civilization. He is near death, like Cardinal Newman's protagonist in *The Dream of Gerontius*, and, it has rightly been said, shares some attributes with another modern man to whom Eliot gave his careful attention, the Kurtz of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, who said he was 'lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The corruption of European religion, culture, and sex are the topics here as in 'The Waste Land,' the method of which derives from 'Gerontion.' Eliot's prose deliberations, in his journal *The Criterion* and in many essays and lectures, are reflections in a different mode on the same subject."

Frank Kermode & John Hollander, eds.
Modern British Literature
(Oxford 1973) 468

Michael Hollister (2015)