

T.S. Eliot:

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the labors of Hercules, as you probably remember, was to conquer the giant Antaeus. When he first attempted that job, Antaeus always won because, after the fashion of wrestlers, Antaeus was thrown to the ground by Hercules, and when he was thrown to the ground, he recovered new strength because the Earth was his mother. And coming in contact with his mother, she gave him renewed powers. It wasn't until Hercules learned that Antaeus could be conquered by being held in the air that Hercules was able to conquer Antaeus.

It's always seemed to me that that myth of Antaeus is an appropriate one for poetry. Every two or three generations or so, the poetry of a nation has to go back to its mother, the Earth, to come in contact with the spoken word and with the reality of speech. Mr. Eliot, for our generation, I think, has performed that service more clearly than anyone else. His first poems came at a time when the English language needed that new strengthening, that new preservation, that new reality, which his early poems gave it. And he has continued, of course, through his career of over 30 years, to deepen, to widen, and to enrich that first fresh and exciting dramatic insight to experience, which we found in those early poems of 1917.

When Mr. Eliot was here before in 1931 and '32, as Charles Eliot Norton professor of poetry, he also gave a small informal course on contemporary British literature, and I remember in that course, he wants to find the function of a poet as being to focus the word and practice the incantation. Seems to me an admirable definition, and I know no one who has practiced it better, who has focused the word and practiced the incantation more successfully than Mr. Eliot. I think we all agree that there's no doubt whatever that he is the first poet of our time, and it gives me a great deal of pleasure, on behalf of the Morris Gray Fund, to introduce you to him this afternoon.

[APPLAUSE]