When I was beginning my career as a writer in the late 1990s, I met an older literary critic who talked about “crushing” people with his negative reviews. He said it ironically, but still with a certain infectious glee—knowing it was exactly the kind of thing that creative writers accuse critics of thinking in secret. For a critic to take pleasure in crushing a writer or a book suggests that he is governed by aggression and envy thinly disguised as impartial judgment. The English critic Cyril Connolly seemed to substantiate this idea when he wrote that the function of the critic is to stand at the gates of Parnassus, where writers line up for admission to immortality, and as each one steps forward to bash him over the head with a club.

But mere spite could never motivate anyone to write lasting or truly interesting criticism—all it can produce is hatchet jobs, designed to demolish rather than to convince. (Indeed, who reads Connolly’s reviews now?) If I kindled, as a young writer, to the idea of crushing bad writing, it was more in the spirit of Voltaire’s battle cry against the Church, *écrasez l’infâme*—a kind of principled fury at the violation of literature. This idea notoriously appeals to young critics more than older ones, who almost always mellow into appreciation, for the same reason that all kinds of aggressive idealism appeal primarily to the young. They don’t yet know that mediocrity is not an aberration but the way of the world, nor do they have a sufficiently developed power of empathy to want to avoid hurting real individuals in the name of an abstract ideal.

Still, I continue to believe that any critic who wants to write something lasting—who believes that criticism can be a species of literature—must write partly out of aggression. Or perhaps a better word is animus, in the sense of a fixed intention, a partiality. Literary journalism describes and explains literature and ideas as they are—the way Edmund Wilson, a master journalist, explained modernism in *Axel’s Castle* and Marxism in *To the Finland Station*. Criticism tries to move literature and ideas in the direction of what should be.

He was the rare writer whose best essays were as significant
and influential as his best poems. Few critics in history have been more successful in that endeavor than T. S. Eliot, whose poetry and criticism worked in tandem to redefine the way the twentieth century thought about literature. He was the rare writer whose best essays were as significant and influential as his best poems. In the years following World War I, he produced a clutch of masterpieces in both genres: poems like “Gerontion” (1919) and The Waste Land (1922) alternated with essays like “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) and “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921). In his 1932 Norton Lectures at Harvard, Eliot took as his subject “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,” and the writers he focused on were almost all poet-critics, from John Dryden in the seventeenth century to Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth. That he himself was the latest, and perhaps greatest, member of this lineage was left implied, but by then it didn’t need to be stated outright.

The poet-critic has been an institution in English literature because usually only an artist has the stubborn animus, the conviction that art should be one way rather than another, that makes for interesting criticism. To write something new is to imply that the writing which already exists is insufficient. Of course, this can never be demonstrably true: there is always already more than enough literature to occupy any reader for a lifetime. Only an artist’s egotism, his certainty that he has something new to offer that the world should not be without, gives him the fruitfully skewed perspective on literature required to see it as deficient. Harold Bloom’s theory of “the anxiety of influence” gave formal statement to this agonistic element in all artistic ambition. “To imagine is to misinterpret,” Bloom writes, which means, among other things, to misinterpret all existing poetry to its own detriment in order to make room for something new.

Bloom’s own antagonism to Eliot has various literary and ideological sources, but the most important is just this expressive antagonism of the “descendant” for the “precursor.” For it was Eliot who first formulated this dialectic in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Characteristically, however, where Bloom describes the relationship between past and present in terms of anxiety and rivalry, Eliot emphasizes the mutual adjustment that brings both sides into harmony, or as he says, “conformity”:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervision of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

For Eliot, criticism is one of the means of effecting that adjustment. “The poetic critic is criticizing poetry in order to create poetry,” he writes, and it is certainly true that Eliot the critic helped to create the taste by which Eliot the poet was enjoyed, even though—or, better, precisely because—his work in the two genres was so different in tone and approach. The Waste Land famously baffled many of its first readers with its fragmented, allusive, chaotic voices; one critic (the father of the novelist Evelyn Waugh) called it the work of a “drunken helot.” It’s easy to condescend to such a reaction now, but it would be a mistake to discount the provocative, disruptive force that Eliot deliberately brought to bear in The Waste Land. The leading English
poets of the period were the so-called Georgians, who favored plain-spoken language and country settings—as, for instance, in Gordon Bottomley’s “The Ploughman”:

The seasons change, and then return;
Yet still, in blind unsparing ways,
However I may shrink or yearn,
The ploughman measures out my days.
His acre brought forth roots last year;
This year it bears the gleamy grain;
Next spring shall seedling grass appear:
Then roots and corn and grass again.

A reader schooled on verse like this—spoken straightforwardly by a single lyric voice, using ideas and imagery that would have been familiar to the Greek and Latin poets—could only have been discomfited to open The Waste Land and find lines like these:

I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
“Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?”

But

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—
It’s so elegant
So intelligent

At first sight, the disorganization here—the cross-cutting voices and mixed-up allusions spanning centuries—could well sound like a direct transcript of a disorganized mind. But the magisterial tone of Eliot’s criticism instantly dispels that possibility. Clearly, the writer of the essays is a person of intelligence and judgment, a writer who knows exactly what he is doing. It follows that what looks like chaos in his poetry must actually be a deliberately chosen difficulty whose function it is up to the reader to figure out.

In fact, Eliot argues in his criticism that difficulty is the only possible approach for a truly modern poet to take. In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” he made the case for the rehabilitation of that
school of seventeenth-century English poets, such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell, who had long been critically disdained for being artificial and over-intellectual. The subsequent course of English poetry had left their kind of writing behind, cultivating instead the sonorous rhetoric of Milton, the urbane balance of Pope, the rich fantasy of Keats and Shelley. It was Samuel Johnson who named this school “the metaphysical poets,” and he didn’t intend it as a compliment. “Their amplification had no limits; they left not only reason but fancy behind them, and produced combinations of confused magnificence that not only could not be credited, but could not be imagined,” Johnson wrote in his Lives of the Poets in 1779.

Almost a hundred and fifty years later, Eliot insists that the standard Johnsonian view of poetic history has things backwards. The metaphysicals were not a dead end, but instead the embodiment of an intellectual vitality that poetry needs to rediscover. If they appear strange and artificial, that is only because English readers have lost the expectation that a poet should appeal to the mind as well as the ear and the heart. Eliot’s essay concludes by drawing a direct line from the seventeenth century to the twentieth:

Poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

Clearly, this is a defense of the poetics of The Waste Land, which Eliot would publish the following year. Eliot here proposes what the American critic Yvor Winters later attacked as “the fallacy of imitative form”—the idea that expressing chaotic inner experience requires a chaotic arrangement of language. But it’s characteristic of Eliot that he finds an impeccably traditional warrant for the difficulty and complexity that, in his own verse, sounds so revolutionary. The drunken helot turns out to know much more about the history of poetry, and about the hidden resources of that history, than his opponents do.

Eliot wrestled, however, with the question that he imagined a reader would ask: why should someone capable of writing great poems choose to spend his time writing critical prose? Eliot wrote an enormous amount of criticism—his prose output exceeds his verse by at least ten to one—but he was never able to arrive at a satisfactory formulation of his motives. Certainly he is unwilling to argue that criticism can be written, like poetry, for its own sake—that it is, in his philosophical term, “autotelic,” an end in itself. His very reverence for poetry compelled him to see criticism as a lower form of writing, an adjunct to literature rather than literature itself. In this Eliot agreed with most literary opinion throughout history. No one has ever said of criticism what Keats said of poetry, that it should come as naturally as leaves to a tree. Criticism seems incapable of immediacy because it is always necessarily about something—about literature, whose direct relationship to life and language it can only envy.

Fifty years before Eliot wrestled with this problem, it had also troubled Matthew Arnold, a poet-
critic who was in many ways Eliot’s role model and, also, for that very reason, the frequent target of his sarcasm. When Eliot set himself to think about the purpose of criticism in a major early essay, “The Perfect Critic,” from 1920, he did so in dialogue with Arnold’s 1864 essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.”

The criticism of an artist “will be criticism, and not the satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish,” Eliot writes.

Arnold, like Eliot, worked at a demanding job—the nineteenth-century poet was a school inspector, the twentieth-century poet a bank clerk and publisher—and both produced comparatively little poetry. Yet they devoted much of their writing, especially as they grew older, to critical essays about literature, religion, and politics. When Arnold writes about the function of criticism, there is a certain note of apology. It’s all very well to suggest that a writer is better off focusing on creation than criticism, Arnold says, but what if one simply has a greater talent for criticism? “It is almost too much to expect of poor human nature, that a man capable of producing some effect in one line of literature, should, for the greater good of society, voluntarily doom himself to impotence and obscurity in another,” he writes, with barely concealed reference to himself.

While Arnold readily grants that “the critical power is of lower rank than the creative,” he goes on to mount a defense of the critic, especially in the context of nineteenth-century English literature. It is not open to writers in every age, he argues, to create works of genius. To reach the heights of Greek tragedy or Elizabethan drama a writer needs a healthy culture to provide him with the “elements” and “materials” of his work—above all, with vital and credible ideas. And this is where the critic comes in: it is up to the critic to “make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself” by distinguishing between what is genuine and what is inferior in the art and thought of his age.

In Victorian England, which Arnold saw as philistine and intellectually provincial, there was a wide field of activity for such a critic—not just in the sphere of literature, but in politics and society as well. “Life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it,” Arnold says. The implication is that, while he himself was born at the wrong time to become a great poet, he can at least contribute to the future flowering of poetry through his critical work. He concludes by comparing himself, with no little pathos, to Moses on Mount Nebo:

That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity.

Eliot’s early essay “The Perfect Critic” offers a rather different defense of criticism, arguing that it
is only the creative writer who can be an adequate literary critic. He makes this point by attacking two critics to whom he was, in fact, deeply indebted: Arnold, whom he dismisses in the essay’s first paragraph as “rather a propagandist for criticism than a critic,” and the British man of letters Arthur Symons. It was Symons whose book on French Symbolist poetry had first introduced Eliot the undergraduate to writers like Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière, who proved to be the keys that allowed him unlock the sound of modernism in his own work.

Eliot does pay tribute to that book, calling it an “introduction to wholly new feelings” and a “revelation.” But it served that purpose, Eliot says, only because he was not yet familiar with the poetry Symons was writing about. When it comes to more familiar material—for instance, Symons’s book on Shakespeare’s plays that Eliot is reviewing—the defects of his criticism become plain. These are the defects of what Eliot calls “impressionistic” criticism, an approach which ostensibly offers “the faithful record of the impressions, more numerous or more refined than our own, upon a mind more sensitive than our own.”

Though Eliot does not name him, it was Oscar Wilde who offered the classic formulation of this approach to criticism, in his 1890 essay “The Critic as Artist.” Here Wilde takes a paradoxical pleasure in overturning the conventional hierarchy that places creative writing above criticism. Wilde says that “the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation.” The critic makes art out of his experiences of art; criticism is “the record of one’s own soul” as it encounters great poems, paintings, or music. And since the purpose of art is nothing else than to provoke such impressions in its audience, one can say that the goal of art is to inspire criticism—a direct reversal of the usual belief that the goal of criticism is to increase our appreciation of art.

In taking issue with this idea, Eliot strikes at the weak point of impressionistic criticism, which is that the “art” it creates—the verbal record of an aesthetic experience—is never as good as the art that inspired that experience. In fact, Eliot argues, the more directly a critic attempts to turn his criticism into a work of art—to compete with the poem, play, or painting he is writing about—the more clearly he reveals that he is not capable of free artistic creation. With a critic like Symons, Eliot writes, “reading sometimes fecundates his emotions to produce something new which is not criticism, but is not the expulsion, the ejection, the birth of creativeness.” Impressionistic, aesthetic criticism, this metaphor suggests, is abortive, a miscarriage of the imagination; in such critics, there is “a defect of vitality or an obscure obstruction which prevents nature from taking its course.”

This metaphor suggests an explanation for why poets make the best critics of poetry: they are not trying to use prose for the aesthetic purposes that only poetry can achieve. The criticism of an artist “will be criticism, and not the satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish,” Eliot writes. He contrasts Symons with the poet Algernon Swinburne, whose poetry is hypnotically musical, but whose prose is clear and logical. Symons’s prose, Eliot notes, does not resemble Swinburne’s prose, but his verse, which leaves it betwixt and between—neither true poetry nor true criticism.
What true criticism sounds like, instead, Eliot shows by example. It is not woozily impressionistic but logical and argumentative, concerned above all with clear definitions. The epigraph to “The Perfect Critic” is taken from the French critic Remy de Gourmont, whom Eliot and Pound both admired: “Eriger en lois ses impressions personnelles, c’est le grand effort d’un homme s’il est sincère.” The goal of a “sincere” man is “to erect his personal impressions into laws”—a formulation Eliot returns to in the body of the essay. “The moment you try to put [aesthetic] impressions into words, you either begin to analyse and construct, to ‘ériger en lois,’ or you begin to create something else,” he writes.

Yet as the essay develops, it becomes clear that Eliot does not believe the critic should literally issue laws about how poetry should be written—the way the neoclassical critics of the seventeenth century did when they decreed that all dramas must observe the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action. “The dogmatic critic, who lays down a rule, who affirms a value, has left his labour incomplete,” Eliot writes; “a precept . . . is merely an unfinished analysis.” Issuing a blanket rule or prohibition incites defiance in the thoughtful reader. When a critic does his job properly, this defiance is outwitted; the critic’s insight into a particular work or author is so convincing that the reader “will form the correct judgment for himself.”

The goal of the critic is to impose his way of reading on his audience.

Of course, there is no objectively correct standard of judgment in literature; the act of judgment is a process that takes place in an individual human mind, rather than a permanent decree or canon declaring that one poet is better than another. What Eliot means by the “correct” judgment, then, is really the judgment that the critic wants the reader to adopt. The goal of the critic is to impose his way of reading on his audience, to make it seem so natural and inarguable that one has no choice but to follow it. This sounds authoritarian, and indeed Eliot’s critical voice is extremely commanding, issuing pronouncements as if they were self-evident and banishing dissent with sharp sarcasm.

But a way of reading is finally a way of thinking and experiencing. Poetry is a means of giving the reader access to the poet’s thoughts and experiences, but when a poet does this, we call it a gift: the poem is an offering of one mind to another, a way of breaching the individual’s usual painful isolation. When a critic does the same thing, his communication of consciousness tends to be called an imposition, even an act of arrogance, as though the critic wanted to commandeer the reader’s mind.

Eliot concludes “The Perfect Critic” by attacking “the torpid superstition that appreciation is one thing, and ‘intellectual’ criticism something else.” After all, the attempt to “analyse and construct,” to ‘ériger en lois,’ stems from the same root as the impulse to create a poem: both should be understood as responses to inner experience and attempts to share that experience. “The two directions of sensibility are complementary,” Eliot writes. Their difference stems from a difference
in form: the form of criticism is necessarily argumentative and forensic, seeking to control and define rather than to give and express.

But giving and controlling, Eliot suggests in *The Waste Land*, have the same root. In the last section of the poem, “What the Thunder Said,” the single syllable “DA” is interpreted as the beginning of different Sanskrit words: “datta” means “give” while “damyatta” means “control.” When I first read Eliot’s criticism, it was the desire for control—to reshape the world of literature according to the dictates of his own particular animus—that most impressed me and appealed to me. The young critic—and Eliot was at the beginning of his literary career when he wrote his most important essays—needs to express that animus as much as the poet needs to express his visions.

But control, in literature as in life, never lasts very long. Eliot’s lasted longer than most, two or three decades, but today it has vanished and may even work to his disadvantage as our more democratic republic of letters strongly resists the type of authority that he incarnated. What remains is what his criticism tries to give—a particular way of experiencing poetry that is, ultimately, inseparable from his own deepest needs and desires. Eliot’s affinity for complexity and difficulty, combined with his longing for order and discipline; his need for clear distinctions that allow each thing to be what it is and not something else; his love of the past and desire to be absorbed into it, so as to deflect the existential risk and terror of the present—all these qualities shine out from Eliot’s criticism as much as from his poetry, his thought about religion and politics, or indeed his biography. And it is this unity, this ability to impress his way of being on every form he touched, that marks Eliot as a great artist.

Adam Kirsch’s most recent book is *Who Wants to Be a Jewish Writer?: Essays* (Yale).