

A Different T.S. Eliot

Edward Mendelson
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Three new books make it possible to see more deeply than before into Eliot's inner life

Reviewed:**Young Eliot: From St. Louis to The Waste Land**

by Robert Crawford
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 493 pp., \$35.00

The Poems of T.S. Eliot, Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems

edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue
Johns Hopkins University Press, 1,311 pp., \$44.95

The Poems of T.S. Eliot, Volume II: Practical Cats and Further Verses

edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue
Johns Hopkins University Press, 667 pp., \$39.95

1.

For much of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot's pronouncements on literature and culture had the force of a royal command. "In the seventeenth century," he wrote, "a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered." Probably no such separation of thought from feeling ever occurred, but sober historians analyzed it as if were as real as the Industrial Revolution. "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion," Eliot wrote, "but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." Two generations of critics worked to do his bidding by banishing from the canon poets like Shelley whom Eliot had judged insufficiently impersonal.

Eliot's prose borrowed its sober and severe authority from the intensity and power of his poetry. His long poems *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943), like many of his shorter ones, evoked a synthesizing vision of public and private disorder: the emotional and erotic failures of individual persons and the chaotic anomie of contemporary Europe, individuals and societies both thirsty for life-giving waters, both waiting for the transforming commandments that, in *The Waste Land*, "the thunder said." No other modern writer had his power to portray, simultaneously and in sharp focus, the disasters of both the inner world and the outer one.

When Eliot died in 1965 much of his authority died with him. Academic and journalistic opinion agreed that he had hoped public disorder could be resolved by imposing the kind of order favored by authoritarians; that, as a WASP from an old New England family, he felt superior to Jews and other outsiders to the high culture he embodied; that he held repugnant attitudes about women and sex. His detractors wrote entire books setting out the evidence against him, while his defenders replied with books that denied the evidence or explained it away.

Robert Crawford's *Young Eliot*, the first volume of a two-part biography, and *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, edited and massively annotated by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, make it possible to see more deeply than before into Eliot's inner life, to perceive its order and complexity in new ways, and to recognize that his detractors and his defenders were responding to attitudes that Eliot condemned in himself and to beliefs that his poems simultaneously expressed and rebuked.

2.

The first sixteen years of Eliot's life, from his birth in St. Louis in 1888 until the year he attended Milton Academy near Boston before entering Harvard, are almost entirely undocumented. All that survive are two letters and a few numbers of a handwritten family magazine he began when he was eleven. More convincingly than earlier biographies, *Young Eliot* fills in the blanks by identifying books and events from Eliot's childhood that he later transformed into poetry. The disastrous St. Louis cyclone of 1896, for example, gave him the apocalyptic imagery heralding *The Waste Land's* "damp gust/Bringing rain."

Other phrases in the poem had roots in Eliot's prep school reading: James Russell Lowell's "the river's shroud" became Eliot's "the river's tent." Eliot got his adult reputation for vast learning from the dazzling variety of quotations in *The Waste Land*. Crawford notes that many of these were remembered from one of his required school texts, Francis Palgrave's anthology *The Golden Treasury*.

A voice in *The Waste Land* greets someone on a London street as "Stetson," as if identifying him with his hat. Crawford reports that Eliot's mother belonged to a ladies' club addressed by a Mrs. Stetson. Eliot printed a poem under the pseudonym

Gus Krutzsch, a name that also appears in an early draft of *The Waste Land*; one of Eliot's St. Louis schoolmates was named August R. Krutzsch.

Crawford explores Eliot's ambivalence toward his distinguished Anglo-American family, which had also produced President Charles William Eliot of Harvard, who later kept urging him to take an academic post there. Eliot took pride in his manners and class, but felt alienated from his parents' earnest nineteenth-century piety. He was nostalgic about his English origins; the "dissociation of sensibility," some readers observed, coincided with the Eliots' ancestors' voluntary uprooting from England to America. But he also felt a lifelong *nostalgie de la boue*, starting with stories he wrote about hobos in his family magazine, later in his half-appalled fascination with the violent world of Boston Irish boxers and barkeeps in his "Sweeney" poems and the tough-guy milieu of his unfinished play *Sweeney Agonistes*.

Crawford reports that Eliot was a graceful dancer and expert sailor but was self-conscious about his protuberant ears and a congenital hernia that required him to wear a truss. He asked himself in *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), "Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?" (He was around forty at the time.) The children of a friend had "nicknamed him 'The Eagle' because of the size of his nose." His poetry tended to portray the human body as separate parts, not as a whole. From "Preludes": "all the hands"; "yellow soles of feet"; "short square fingers"; "eyes/Assured of certain certainties." From "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase"; "Arms that are braceleted and white and bare." From *The Waste Land*: "Exploring hands encounter no defence"; "My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart/Under my feet." Even his image of primitive unconsciousness in "Prufrock"—"I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas"—was an evocation of body parts, not something whole like W.B. Yeats's chestnut tree that will not divide into "the leaf, the blossom or the bole." And in *The Waste Land* his image of wished-for erotic satisfaction was another collage of body parts: "your heart would have responded/Gaily, when invited, beating obedient/To controlling hands."

The young Eliot concealed his physical anxieties with the obscene heartiness of his comic (or would-be comic) verses about King Bolo and his queen, which he sent first to laddish college friends, later to connoisseurs of scatological bawdry like Ezra Pound.

Crawford writes reverently of Eliot's poetry and critical prose; but he adds critical distancing comments whenever he detects "a hint of misogyny or homophobia," as if to reassure censorious readers that he shares their sense of the moral urgency of scolding dead people.

At Harvard Eliot loafed through his first year, was placed on academic probation, and only became serious about his classes when he began studying ancient and modern philosophy and languages. Shortly before he graduated, he wrote a two-stanza poem, "Silence," which he never published, about an experience "for which we waited," one that overwhelms his consciousness of everything else. The second stanza reads:

*This is the ultimate hour
When life is justified.
The seas of experience
That were so broad and deep,
So immediate and steep,
Are suddenly still.
You may say what you will,
At such peace I am terrified.
There is nothing else beside.*

Crawford suggests that this was prompted by Eliot's recent hospitalization for scarlet fever, and describes it merely as a poem that "registers emotional disturbance" about something "fearful." But the poem describes a moment of religious awe, a terrifying vision of the peace that passeth understanding. Eliot recalled it in the moments of visionary intensity in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*:

*my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light.*

W.H. Auden, drawing inferences from the poetry, told friends that Eliot had mystical visions of which he never spoke. (W.B. Yeats never had one, Auden added, but talked about them all the time.) Between 1911 and 1914, when Eliot was a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard, reading Buddhist and Hindu scriptures, he focused increasingly on religions more visionary and demanding than his parents' Unitarianism, more committed to a reality that was otherworldly and absolute.

Crawford records with subtle sympathy Eliot's failed love for his Boston contemporary Emily Hale, "intelligent, vulnerable, strictly brought up and defensively 'proper.'" Eliot was devastated when he made his feelings clear and she gave him no possibility of hope—although in fact she was secretly in love with him, and remained so all her life. Eliot seems to have addressed her, also secretly, in lines in *The Waste Land* that recalled his inner surrender to her: "My friend, blood shaking my heart/The awful daring of a moment's surrender..." The notes in the new *Poems of T.S. Eliot* record Eliot's correction of a French translation from "Mon ami" to "Mon amie," triple-underlining the feminizing "e."

Eliot left America for England in 1914, and ignored pleas for his return sent by his family and the Harvard philosophy department. In 1915, in a state of erotic despair, and apparently still a virgin, he impulsively married the flirtatious, neurotic Vivien Haigh-Wood, and descended into a miserably entangling marriage, "sexually awkward" (as Crawford reports) for both, constantly shaken by medical and psychological crises. Eliot seems to have suffered from recurring impotence; Vivien had an affair with Bertrand Russell. The crises culminated in Eliot's mental breakdown in 1921—"entering the whirlpool," in *The Waste Land's* phrase—followed by a tentative, half-achieved sense of renewal and recovery. He asked near the end of *The Waste Land*, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" Eliot spent the next few decades—in *Four Quartets* and his books *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948)—trying to imagine what that order might be like.

3.

Shortly after the Munich Agreement of September 1938, when Britain and France capitulated to Hitler's territorial demands in Central Europe, Eliot wrote in *The Idea of a Christian Society*:

I believe that there must be many persons who, like myself, were deeply shaken by the events of September 1938, in a way from which one does not recover; persons to whom that month brought a profounder realization of a general plight.... The feeling which was new and unexpected was a feeling of humiliation, which seemed to demand an act of personal contrition, of humility, repentance and amendment; what had happened was something in which one was deeply implicated and responsible.

He was repenting personally for the civilization that had given him his early advantages and in which he had now become a literary eminence:

It was not...a criticism of the government, but a doubt of the validity of a civilization. We could not match conviction with conviction, we had no ideas with which we could either meet or oppose the ideas opposed to us. Was our society, which had always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?

This is not the language of a fascist sympathizer. Eliot was mistaken for one because he publicly doubted the value of democracy, but his doubts were focused on its inability to give a moral and intellectual answer to the force-worship of the dictators:

The term “democracy,” as I have said again and again, does not contain enough positive content to stand alone against the forces that you [readers] dislike—it can easily be transformed by them. If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin.

In the world of practical politics, a choice between God and the dictators seems impossibly stark, but Eliot, as always in his political writings, was thinking of the opposed societies of blessed and damned souls in Dante’s *Commedia*, who made an equally stark choice between an ascent through Purgatory to Paradise and a descent into the prison-state of Hell.

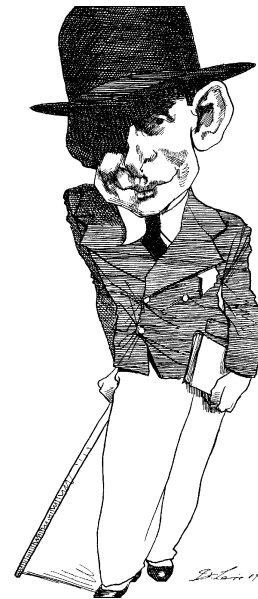
Whatever flaws he found in democracy, Eliot never imagined that any traditional, hierarchical political system knew any better how to “have God.” “To identify any particular form of government with Christianity,” he wrote, “is a dangerous error: for it confounds the permanent with the transitory, the absolute with the contingent.” Some years earlier, Eliot told Bertrand Russell that he wanted to write about “Authority and Reverence,” about some form of religious authority that did not rely on discredited political systems: “There is something beneath Authority in its historical forms which needs to be asserted clearly without reasserting...forms of political and religious organization which have become impossible.” He wrote in an essay: “The ideas of authority, of hierarchy, of discipline and order, applied inappropriately in the temporal sphere, may

lead us into some error of absolutism or impossible theocracy.”

Eliot’s detractors cite his praise for Charles Maurras, whose Action Française movement was monarchist, nationalist, and thuggishly anti-Semitic. Crawford quotes Eliot addressing Maurras in a letter as “Cher Maître”; but two hundred pages later, he quotes Eliot warning English readers against Maurras’s “intemperate and fanatical spirit” in his campaign to protect French culture against foreign influences.

Crawford makes no comment on this apparent contradiction, but the solution to it may be found in Eliot’s syllabus for an adult education course he taught on modern French literature. Under Maurras’s name and the name of his early ally Pierre Lasserre, the syllabus briefly characterizes their work: “Their reaction [to democracy] fundamentally sound, but marked by extreme violence and intolerance.” Eliot made an absolute distinction between, on the one hand, the faults and frailties of democracy and, on the other, the “extreme violence” and “fanatical spirit” of every political movement that sought to overturn it. Eliot said almost nothing about the democratic traditions of equality and rights because he thought real equality was possible only in a society built on the conviction that every soul is equal before God, and individual rights could be fulfilled only in a society like Dante’s Paradise where everyone can say, freely and gratefully, “In His will is our peace.”

Eliot made careful use of his patrician manners to advance his career, but his poems kept insisting that his social superiority left him just as distant as anyone else from the remote Absolute that, after his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927, he called God. The section titled “A Game of a Chess” in *The Waste Land* portrays the emotionally sterile upper-class marriage of a scarcely disguised nervous Vivien and silent Eliot in an expensively decorated drawing room, followed by a monologue in a pub about the degraded marriage of a lower-class couple named Albert and Lil. The point is that the two marriages are equally sterile, that the social status and artistic refinement that Eliot tried to value in himself were futile



T. S. Eliot; drawing by David Levine
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defenses against his humiliating sense of spiritual failure.

In the same way, a poem that almost everyone reads as a statement of anti-Semitic disdain, “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar,” is Eliot’s rebuke against his own pharisaical fantasy that an educated WASP is somehow closer to God than even the coarsest caricature that he could imagine of a Jew. Cigar-smoking Bleistein is a mere congeries of body parts and cultures: “A saggy bending of the knees/And elbows, with the palms turned out,/Chicago Semite Viennese.” Yet the WASP Burbank—Eliot’s self-portrait—has nothing better to claim for himself: he gets culture secondhand from a Baedeker guidebook (Eliot wrote careful notes in his own Baedekers); he is sexually impotent (“the God Hercules/Had left him”) when seduced by the diseased Princess Volupine (Vivien in aristocratic disguise), with her “blue-nailed, phthisic hand”; and he is reduced to passive aesthetic nostalgia at “Time’s ruins.”

The degree to which a writer shares the prejudices of his family, his class, and his culture is less telling than the degree to which he is ashamed of them. Ezra Pound was defiantly unashamed of his prejudices. Eliot was more than ashamed: he was penitential. His poems are elliptical confessions of attitudes that he knew he must reject, although he also knew that, in Montaigne’s words, “we cannot rid ourselves of that which we condemn.” This may help to explain why he continued to reprint “Burbank” and “Gerontion”—another disguised self-portrait of someone spiritually sterile who imagines himself superior to “the Jew”—despite objections from readers and reviewers; he refused to withdraw what was in effect a penitential confession because other people disapproved of the faults he had confessed.

Around 1951, at a London reading with Eliot and many other poets in attendance, one of the writers on the program, Emanuel Litvinoff, recited a poem denouncing Eliot’s anti-Semitism: “I am not one accepted in your parish/Bleistein is my relative.” Other poets shouted in Eliot’s defense. Meanwhile, an observer remembered, “Eliot leaned forward, his head in his hands, muttering over and over, ‘It’s a good poem, it’s a good poem.’”

A rebarbative phrase about Jews in his 1934 book of lectures, *After Strange Gods*, later became notorious, and had nothing penitential about it. Eliot was imagining what a society committed to tradition

might be like, and, as always in his social speculations, made no practical suggestions. “Serious difficulties” faced any effort to revive or establish a tradition: “It does not so much matter at present whether any measures put forward are practical, as whether the aim is a good aim, and the alternatives intolerable.” His imaginary traditional society would be unified in the way that real societies are not, with “homogeneity of race and a fundamental equality.” What is important, he said, “is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.”

Eliot wrote *After Strange Gods* for an American lecture series in May 1933, and later told Isaiah Berlin that he would never have printed the sentence about free-thinking Jews had he “been aware of what was going to happen, indeed had already begun, in Germany.... I still do not understand why the word ‘race’ occurs in the sentence, because my emphasis was on the adjective *free-thinking*.” Again writing “theoretically” about an imaginary parallel universe shaped only by tradition and theology, he told Berlin:

Theoretically, the only proper consummation is that all Jews should become Catholic Christians [i.e., members of a universal church, not necessarily the Roman one]. The trouble is, that this ought to have happened long ago: partly because of the stiff neckedness of your people; and largely [*Eliot's footnote: Perhaps chiefly! The apportionment is not immediately relevant*] because of the misbehaviour of those who called themselves Christians, this did not happen.

When *After Strange Gods* appeared in 1934, Auden, whose politics were practical, not imaginary, wrote to Eliot: “Some of the general remarks...rather shocked me, because if they are put into practice, and it seems quite likely [they will be], would produce a world in which neither I nor you I think would like to live.” As early as 1940, years before the book became the subject of public controversy, Eliot wrote to a friend that it was “largely drivel,” written to avoid bankruptcy. He never allowed any of it to be reprinted.

Crawford quotes a letter written to Eliot by his mother, Charlotte Eliot: “It is very bad in me, but I have an instinctive antipathy to Jews, just as I have to certain animals.” Crawford plausibly infers that “anti-Semitism was a prejudice substantially unspoken in the Eliots’ St. Louis household, but indisputably present.” Yet the simple statement of Charlotte’s

Unitarian conscience, “It is very bad,” was the hidden theme of the poems in which Eliot simultaneously disdained Jews and confessed his own absolute spiritual failure.

In 1934, Eliot separated from Vivien; she had become increasingly unbalanced, and in 1938 was confined by her brother to an asylum where she died in 1947. (Despite rumors to the contrary, Eliot took no part in the commitment procedure.) After the separation, Eliot continued his normal working life as a director at the publishing firm of Faber & Faber while privately withdrawing into penitent asceticism. At 6:30 every morning he knelt on the stone floor of a local church. In the flat he shared with his bibliophile friend John Hayward, the brightly painted rooms at the front were Hayward’s, while Eliot took the dark rooms at the back. His bedroom was lit with one bare bulb, and an ebony crucifix hung on the wall above his bed.

Eliot’s sense of personal implication in the failures of his civilization seems to have arisen from the same deep source that gave him his unique double vision of personal and social disorder in *The Waste Land*. At the heart of his thought and feeling was an unspoken conviction that he, like the society in which he lived, had failed to become what he ought to be, something cohesive and whole, that with all his authority and fame, he lacked a unified personal self. In the same way that his civilization seemed “a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries,” he seemed to himself—as he said in the title of a poem about himself that he wrote in French—a “Mélange Adultère de Tout.” His body was a set of disparate parts, his mind a disordered mixture of cultures, eras, classes, and languages, “fragments I have shored against my ruins.” In *Four Quartets* the soul he meets in a modern version of Purgatory—described in Dantesque stanzas—is not a unique individual soul like everyone in Dante, but a figure “Both one and many” with “The eyes of a familiar compound ghost.” He asked in “Gerontion,” “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” Without a self that could be forgiven, Eliot could not imagine forgiveness.

All the fragmentary selves—his own and others’—were in desperate need of the purgatorial fire that might anneal them each into something whole. Dante’s last glimpse of Arnaut Daniel in Purgatory recurs in *The Waste Land*: “Poi s’ascese nel foco che gli affina” (Then he hid himself in the refining fire). Eliot wrote in *After Strange Gods*:

It is in fact in moments of moral and spiritual struggle depending upon spiritual sanctions...that men and women come nearest to being real. If you do away with this struggle, and maintain that by tolerance, benevolence, inoffensiveness and a redistribution or increase of purchasing power, combined with a devotion, on the part of an élite, to Art, the world will be as good as anyone could require, then you must expect human beings to become more and more vapourous.

4.

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot wrote that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates." He wrote in the same essay that a poet must have "a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."

Robert Crawford's biography honors the Eliot who suffered by showing, contrary to his self-negating wish, how inseparable he was from the mind that created. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, in their astonishingly rich notes on Eliot's sources in English and French poetry and much else, honor the Eliot who, as they implicitly portray him, perceived the whole of European literature in a simultaneous order.

The Poems of T.S. Eliot prints all of Eliot's published and unpublished verse, including his obscene limericks and the rhymed addresses he wrote on postcards and envelopes, together with a thousand pages of densely printed commentary and four hundred pages of textual apparatus. The text and notes have been beautifully produced by Faber & Faber for the edition published in America by Johns Hopkins, but the edition is awkwardly divided into two volumes instead of taking its logical shape as three volumes, one each for the poems, the commentary, and the lists of textual variants.

An edition like this one, in which one page of verse exfoliates into as many as a dozen pages of commentary, evokes thoughts of extravagant editorial follies like the one parodied by Vladimir Nabokov in *Pale Fire*. In fact, Ricks and McCue are models of editorial discretion who let Eliot annotate himself. Their notes include, in addition to Eliot's sources, extensive quotations from his prose and verse. The

editors annotate “a moment’s surrender” in *The Waste Land* with, among other things, a sentence from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”

The new edition includes five previously unknown poems that Eliot wrote to his second wife, Valerie Fletcher, whom he married in 1957, when he was sixty-eight and she was thirty. She had been his secretary at Faber & Faber, and, in a near recurrence of his failed relation with Emily Hale, he seems to have been the last person in the firm to realize that she was in love with him. In Eliot’s last play, *The Elder Statesman* (1959), old Lord Claverton finds in his daughter’s love “the peace that ensues upon contrition.” Her forgiveness has given him reality: “It’s the real you I love,” she says.

Eliot’s poems to Valerie include one in praise of her breasts, celebrating their varying shapes when she stands or lies on her back or side; another in which his fingers move from her nipple to her navel and beyond; a limerick about “a nice girl named Valeria/Who has a delicious posterior”; and a poem about their lovemaking:

*I love a tall girl. When we lie in bed
She on her back and I stretched upon her,
And our middle parts are busy with each other,
My toes play with her toes and my tongue with her tongue,
And all the parts are happy. Because she is a tall girl.*

He and his wife are still, as he was in earlier years, congeries of body parts, but some of those parts, “busy with each other,” have become the instruments of love.

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