

Meeting Mr. Eliot

Few writers have elicited more admiration or more antipathy than Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965). Many critics and fellow poets have assailed him as a stodgy traditionalist who denied any possibility of great modern verse. Just as many have hailed him for defining the modern poetic “sensibility.” Here, on the centennial of his birth, Frank McConnell reintroduces the Missouri-born expatriate who once said of himself, “How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!”

by Frank D. McConnell

The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature—a book as indispensable to a critic as a pocket calculator is to an engineer—honors only three writers by naming, in its chapter titles, an “Age” after them. There is an Age of Dryden, an Age of Johnson, and there is the last chapter, “The Age of T. S. Eliot: The Mid-Twentieth-Century Literature of the English-Speaking World.”

Chaucer, Milton, Pope, Dickens, and even Shakespeare are denied that eminence.

Samuel Hynes, in *The Auden Generation*, observes—as have other critics—that an extraordinary number of British and American novels and poems of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s contain phrases, images, or references from Eliot's poetry, particularly his most famous poem, *The Waste Land*. For any young writer born before, say, 1965—the year of Eliot's death—to speak of modern poetry is, inevitably, to speak of T. S. Eliot. His critical opinions shaped the taste of his century. His conservative politics were a subject of serious, even anguished, debate among intellectuals. And he himself was a permanently lionized, pontifical figure in all the universities of the Western world.

Yet for all the fame and influence, almost no other major poet is as difficult to *like*. No other major poet (Keats included) wrote so little poetry. And no other “modern” poet loathed almost everything characteristic of the modern world with more finely-honed hatred.

The man's reputation, in other words, is as paradoxical as the man himself was, and nearly as paradoxical as his best poetry. He was never shy about accepting the admiration or adulation of his followers, and would probably have greeted the news of his continuing presence in our imagina-



Painted in 1938, Wyndham Lewis's portrait of T. S. Eliot created a minor controversy in the British art world. The Royal Academy rejected the painting because of its unorthodox style; Augustus John, a distinguished artist in his own right, resigned from the Academy in protest.

tion with the prim, faintly ironic smile he displays in the jacket photo of his *Collected Poems*. Eileen Simpson, in her memoir *Poets in Their Youth* (1982), records a visit of Eliot's to a Princeton gathering of younger poets. It was during the late 1940s, and Eliot was well established as the Great Man of modern poetry.

"His manner," writes Simpson, "was as formal as his dress, the conservative dress of an English banker. Shyness had been disciplined into courtesy. On being introduced, he made an effort not to avert his eyes, as one felt he would have done as a young man." At the party, Simpson records, he downed numerous martinis, uttered a few gnomic judgments on other poets of his generation, especially W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, and then left. Was it arrogance or embarrassment? Maybe a great deal of both. After all, the poet, in an early exercise, describes himself this way:

With his features of clerical cut,
And his brow so grim
And his mouth so prim
And his conversation, so nicely
Restricted to What Precisely
And If and Perhaps and But.
How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!

How unpleasant indeed, and how necessary. During the decade preceding his death, and for many years after it, there were arguments that his criticism, once so influential, was actually a kind of snobbish, antiromantic obscurantism, and that his elegantly allusive formalist poetry was not really modern poetry at all but rather an ossified, academic fossil of Edwardian anxiety. Critics such as Northrop Frye, J. Hillis Miller, and Harold Bloom have expressed this unkind sentiment, as have poets from Allen Ginsberg to Robert Lowell. More recently, there has been a kind of T. S. Eliot rehabilitation movement, with books and articles, such as Eloise Hay's *T. S. Eliot's Negative Way* (1982), arguing strenuously that he was just as important to the formation of the modern poetic consciousness as his earlier admirers, including Ezra Pound, believed.

However much Eliot's stock vacillates in the literary marketplace, one fact remains constant: If we wish to understand this century, we must, sooner or later, meet Mr. Eliot. And of only a few other figures—Stravinsky, Joyce, Picasso—may that be said.

Life on the Mississippi

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on September 26, 1888, the last of seven children, in St. Louis, Missouri, a city then distinguished, as biographer Lyndall Gordon notes, "for the corruption of its businessmen, its inadequate sewers, and its sulphurous fumes." Eliot's father, Henry Ware Eliot, Sr., was at least an honest businessman, a brick manufacturer, though not a particularly successful one. Indeed, Henry never lived up to the accomplishments of his own father, a native New Englander and financial genius who abandoned the pursuit of wealth for the Unitarian ministry, and moved from Boston to St. Louis to tend to the spiritual needs of people living in what was then known as the frontier West. A founder of Washington University and a community leader, William Greenleaf Eliot gained wide renown in the pulpit; no less than Ralph Waldo Emerson, a fellow Unitarian, praised his sermons for their eloquence and strength. It was unquestionably from his grandfather that Eliot learned the value of subordinating one's personal and emotional life to the greater good of community and God—a demanding ideal for anyone to live by, but particularly demanding for a poet.

Unimposing as St. Louis was, T. S. Eliot harbored fond memories of his years there. Images of the brown, rolling Mississippi River appear even in his last great poem, *Four Quartets*. His family lived in an unfashionable neighborhood, but he was happy. Solitary and bookish, he spent a comfort-

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able childhood closely tended by his nurse, a devout Irish Catholic named Annie Dunne. Later he drew closer to his mother, Charlotte Champe, a morally impassioned woman who wrote didactic religious verse.

Eliot never lost touch with his ancestral New England roots; he summered in Cape Ann, Massachusetts, devoting hours to sailing and, at 16, he entered Milton Academy. One year later, he moved on to Harvard College. There he read the French symbolist poets of the late 19th and early 20th century—Mallarmé, Laforgue, Verlaine, and Rimbaud—whose dedication to the purity and the mystical power of language verged on religion. The later Eliot may have departed from their graceful agnosticism, but he never lost their fanaticism for the word.

A Disastrous Marriage

After a year of study in France in 1911, Eliot began graduate study at Harvard, focusing on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. Bradley (1846–1924) was one of the most original and brilliant of the post-Hegelian idealists. He maintained that only immediate, unitary (some would say “religious”) experience carried real truth, and that the fragmentary experience of daily life was at best a hint, at worst a bar, to that experience. The young Eliot who had been entranced by the French obsession with “pure language” would be an easy convert to this large-scale transformation of that myth onto the arena of consciousness itself. His research led him to Germany where, in 1914, his studies were cut off by the war. Instead of returning to Boston he went to England, where he worked at teaching and book reviewing and completed his thesis on Bradley. He also completed a poem. It changed his life.

He had been writing poetry at least since his early Harvard years, but in 1910 he started working on a longish lyric—or satiric—or *something* poem which he finally called “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” It may have been the result of his romance with the French ironists or of his fascination with the idealism of Bradley, or perhaps it was the expression of a profound diffidence he had felt in himself for years; finally, the cause does not matter. The first three lines of Prufrock’s “Love Song,” in their wit, concision, and bitterness, altered the possibilities of English verse in the 20th century:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table

No one had written poetry like this in a long time—at least not since Byron, maybe not since Pope. “Prufrock” was published in 1915. It established Eliot as one of the distinctive voices of the new age, in what was for him a fateful year in other ways also. For in 1915 he also lost his dear friend Jean Verdenal to the war. (The 1917 publication of *Prufrock and*



A photograph of Vivian Eliot, taken by the poet's brother, Henry Ware Eliot, Jr., in 1921. Some of Vivian's neurasthenic complaints seem to have found their way directly into Eliot's verse: "My nerves are bad . . . Yes, bad. Stay with me!" (The Waste Land)

Other Observations would be dedicated to him.) And finally, in June, he married Vivian Haigh-Wood, the sometime governess, sometime painter, sometime ballerina, whom he first met, says biographer Ronald Bush, "at an Oxford punting party."

The marriage was a disaster. Sickly, high-strung, cuttingly sarcastic, Vivian quickly exhausted Eliot's patience and slim financial reserves. They would eventually separate in 1933, but until then he lived in constant confrontation with the demon of his own impotence. Retreating further into his self-consciousness, he wrote a long, therapeutic poem about his doubts of masculinity. He called it, after a line from Dickens's *Great Expectations*, "He Do the Police in Different Voices." He showed it to his friend, the outrageous and dazzling American poet Ezra Pound, who suggested that he cut it before publishing. He did so. The poem appeared as *The Waste Land* in 1922 and cemented his reputation as *the* distinctive poet of his age.

Critics are fond of talking about the two phases of Eliot's career. In the first phase, runs the received wisdom, in poems like "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* and "The Hollow Men," he announces or, rather, incarnates the despair of intellectuals about Western civilization during and after the First World War. Gertrude Stein first dubbed these embittered young men "the lost generation," and a good number of them took *The Waste Land* (with such unforgettable lines as "We who were living are

now dying/With a little patience") as the anthem of their disaffection.

Then, having once revolutionized literary sensibility, Eliot re-revolutionized it and redefined himself as defender and arbiter of Christian culture or, as he called himself in his famous 1928 utterance, "royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion." The second phase was consolidated in his great religious poem of 1930, *Ash-Wednesday*—virtually *The Waste Land* turned inside out—and culminated in *Four Quartets* in 1943 and in the verse dramas of the later years, especially *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*.

That is the official version of his career, and like most official versions of anything, it is vastly less interesting and less complicated than what seems really to have been going on. The royalist Anglo-Catholic from St. Louis lived in London for 12 years before becoming a British subject in 1927. Why he abandoned the United States for England appears to be a mystery. A letter of 1919, addressed to his friend John Quinn, provides perhaps the most succinct answer: "You see, I settled [in England] in the face of strong family opposition, on the claim that I found the environment more favourable to the production of literature." In his heart, Eliot felt that the production of art was not a serious American endeavor, certainly not one that his grandfather would have approved of. To pursue anything so essentially focused on feelings and self, Eliot had to live abroad. So the tortured lyricist of cultural annihilation spent eight of his postwar years as a bank clerk and, from 1925 on, was a director in the influential publishing house of Faber & Gwyer (later Faber & Faber).

He was a complex and not very happy man, extraordinarily out of touch with his own age. Yet his own deep confusion mirrored his century's. Like most great writers, Eliot matters to us because he presents us with images of our pain. But he also discovers *modes* of pain the rest of us would not have been clever enough to find. And modes of redemption. Much of what we assume as "natural" in college literature classes is an indirect derivation from the very important things Eliot said about writing from one to three generations ago.

'All Literature Is Contemporaneous'

Here is Eliot as Grand Old Man, in a 1956 essay on "The Frontiers of Criticism":

"What matters most, let us say, in reading an ode of Sappho, is not that I should imagine myself to be an island Greek of twenty-five hundred years ago; what matters is the experience which is the same for all human beings of different centuries and languages capable of enjoying poetry, the spark which can leap across those 2,500 years."

What matters most for us in reading this passage is that its assumptions do not strike us as being even remotely unusual. After 60 and more years of dissemination in English-speaking high schools and universities, the "Eliotic" view of literature has achieved something like the certitude

of the Ptolemaic system before Galileo.

In fact, it is in its way Ptolemaic. It is "anthropocentric" in its assumption that the individual perceptions, intimations, and nuances of the critic are the ultimate authority for his judgments. And the system as a whole (the universe for Ptolemy, the universe of literature for Eliot) reflects or expresses something like a Grand Unified Theory of all its components. "All literature is contemporaneous," Eliot repeated frequently. And thanks largely to his influence, American and English universities have come to accept that dogma: To read Shakespeare and O'Neill together makes more sense than to read them in isolation.

A Continual Self-Sacrifice?

Indeed, Eliot can be seen to have nearly single-handedly forged the critical and historical consensus that is the 20th-century canon of major works. His admiration of John Donne and the "metaphysical" poets of the 17th century, for example, and his disapproval of the "immaturity" of Shelley's ideas, radically affected the respective prestige of those figures for at least 50 years.

If this makes Eliot sound like an intellectual bully, that is because he partly was. So were John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, and all the major critics in the Anglo-American critical tradition. But this elevation of "sensibility" is no *more* bullying than the formalist, antihumanist, and pseudo-scientific criticism emanating from Europe, which lately, in its French "deconstructionist" mode, has captured the hearts and minds of American academics.

Eliot's criticism and his poetry are the same act: the act of right perception. In a 1944 lecture on "Johnson as Critic and Poet," he advances this view, so much in the Anglo-American line and yet held with such special passion by him:

"I think that in studying the criticism of poetry, by a critic who is also a poet, we can only appreciate his criticism . . . in the light of the kind of poetry that he wrote himself."

That, again, is the Grand Old Man. Yet here is the desperate young man, 24 years earlier, saying the same thing, but at the top of his voice. He is describing what he thinks happens when a poet truly inserts himself into the literary tradition:

"What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."

That is from "Tradition and the Individual Talent," probably the most famous of all his essays, published two years before *The Waste Land*, in *The Sacred Wood*. It is important to notice that in his criticism, as in his poetry, the "early" Eliot, the Eliot of aridity and spiritual emptiness, is invariably drawn to the language of religious experience. His transformation into the "later" Eliot would actually be a movement from an idea of

literature as salvation to an idea of literature as a kind of eighth sacrament *leading to* salvation.

Consider the title of the essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The most important word in the title is *and*. It implies a subtle tension between the terms it connects. If the poet's career is a long voyage toward the "extinction of personality," it is because the poet's personality is somehow in conflict with the great tradition of which he seeks to be a part. So the poet takes on the heavy burden of being both creator and critic of his own creation as it relates to the legacy of the holy dead. Yale professor and critic Harold Bloom has referred to this dilemma as "the anxiety of influence," the writer's conviction that he can never equal his major influences. Bloom has elaborated the phrase into a crucial theory of literary inheritance. But Eliot holds the patent on the concept, at least for our century; indeed, he made himself its exemplary victim.

Not Really So Difficult

"Anxiety," in fact, may be the best word to describe the arc of his career. Like his friend and mentor, Ezra Pound, he was an American obsessed with the culture of Europe to which he was heir, and from which he felt himself excluded by the very fact of his Americanness. This special transatlantic anxiety of influence has afflicted American writers from Washington Irving through Nathaniel Hawthorne to Henry James. But Eliot makes that historical/cultural anxiety his own in a special intimate way. *The Sacred Wood* is the paradise of tradition and order that the poet seeks to enter. *The Waste Land* is where he lives, in the howling emptiness of his alienation, his conviction of inauthenticity.

They are really the same place, and out of their difference-within-identity Eliot weaves his identity as a critic, a poet, and a man.

The Waste Land, the poem that inscribed Eliot's name on his age, has been subjected to innumerable explications and has become virtually a paradigm of the "difficulty" of modern poetry. And it is difficult. As with all Eliot's poetry, your reading of it becomes richer the more familiar you are with the languages he uses, the densely-packed allusions to other works he invokes, the historical references that are part of his vision. But the difficulty can be overemphasized, can obscure the fact that the poem *is* a poem whose general feeling is accessible to any reader with ordinary intelligence and common sense. Consider its first lines:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.



*Eliot's plays are often dismissed as bloodless intellectual exercises, but the Broadway production of *The Cocktail Party* (1950), starring Alec Guinness (far left) and Irene Worth (fifth from right), ran 409 performances.*

You need not be a literary critic to know that April is not the cruellest month, that it is in fact the beginning of spring, and that only a deeply disturbed narrator would think it cruel. You—if you trust yourself as a reader—know from the first lines of the poem that you are dealing with an elaborate and sophisticated articulation of a special kind of despair, the despair of imaginative vacuity. If *The Sacred Wood* is a statement of aspiration by a young critic enamored of the literary tradition and its promise, *The Waste Land* is a frantic confession by a young poet that he feels himself, and his age, inadequate to receive the mantle of that great past.

One key to understanding *The Waste Land* is translating its Latin epigraph. It is from the *Satyricon* of Petronius, who wrote under the emperor Nero:

“For I once saw the Cumaean Sibyl with my own eyes, suspended in a jar, and when the little boys asked her, ‘Sibyl, what do you want’ she responded, ‘I want to die.’”

The Cumaean Sibyl, the great prophetess of classical mythology, was cursed with eternal life, but not eternal youth, becoming more shriveled year by year. And it is the image of this shriveled prophet, the impotent prophet, that Eliot wants us to bear in mind throughout the poem. Cultural history and personal biography here coincide: The poetic fire, or the sexual fire, of this dying civilization or this troubled young man are both exhausted to the point where all one can do is contemplate the emptiness of

the present in the shadow of the magnificence of what was. The style is “mock-heroic,” and writers from Petronius through Alexander Pope to Mel Brooks have used it, though none more brilliantly than Eliot.

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” says the speaker at the end of the poem. The fragments are not just the hut he builds for himself at the edge of the now-dead ocean; they are the myriad quotations, citations, and allusions—often without quotation marks—out of which *The Waste Land* is constructed. All we can do, in the grim world of this poem, is mumble over the splendid phrases of our fathers, knowing that we will never attain such glory. Tradition overwhelms the individual talent.

Perhaps no poet ever entered the major phase of his career with a more crippling sense of his own inadequacy. Certainly no poet won as many clear victories over that self-doubt as did he.

An important strategy for those victories was his conversion, in 1927, to the Church of England. It has been slyly observed that Eliot turned to faith not out of conviction but out of fear of the emptiness of life without faith. But this, after all, is a legitimate religious impulse. If faith born out of dread is not “real” faith, then we have to question not just Eliot but, among many others, St. Augustine and Martin Luther.

At any rate, *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), three years after his conversion, celebrates that event, if “celebrates” is the right word. The poem begins, not in joy but in resignation:

Because I do not hope to turn again
 Because I do not hope
 Because I do not hope to turn
 Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope
 I no longer strive to strive towards such things
 (Why should the agèd eagle stretch its wings?)

At 42, the shriveled prophet now imagines himself an agèd eagle, too tired for flight. Yet he makes subtle, important music out of that self-abnegating theme. The special despair of *The Waste Land* is still there, but transformed into a negative mysticism, a vision of what theologian Karl Rahner calls (in *The Practice of Faith*) “the unending desert of God’s silence.”

Eliot had found a Tradition which might, finally, redeem his own Individuality. But he was one of those people for whom “Peace” will always mean a more organized form of struggle. As unofficial spokesman for literary and religious orthodoxy, Eliot could appear pompous. His literary judgments became more arbitrary, more blithely ex cathedra than ever. In a 1936 essay, “Milton I,” he began with an astonishingly condescending observation: “While it must be admitted that Milton is a very great poet indeed, it is something of a puzzle to decide in what his greatness consists.” Even more ominously, in *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (1934) he attacked trends in modern thought in terms that could

and do seem disturbing, authoritarian, and anti-Semitic.

He cannot be absolved of these charges of short-sightedness or even of meanness. But it is important to remember that these fallings-off do not justify the devaluation of his work that set in after his death. For his gift did survive it all.

In 1943 Eliot published *Four Quartets*, his longest poem, his last major poem, and perhaps his richest and most controversial poem. There is nothing else in English quite like it. None of the fire or the allusive complexity of the early Eliot survives. The language is austere, meditative, even at times prosaic. Here are the opening lines of the first "Quartet," "Burnt Norton":

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

Compare that to any of the lines I have quoted from "Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, or *Ash-Wednesday* and you will see how strange, even for Eliot, this poetry is. There are four sections, titled enigmatically "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," "The Dry Salvages," and "Little Gidding," each individual section or "quartet" consisting of five sub-sections. The immediately apparent and strenuously maintained theme of the whole work is the relationship between time and memory, the self and the cosmos, the poet and the idea of God. Eliot attempts nothing less here than a fusion of the obsessions with poetry, theology, and metaphysics that defined the shape of his life. And each of the quartets explores the difficult interchange of self and soul under the sign of one of the ancient, pre-Aristotelian elements of the world. "Burnt Norton" is the book of air, of memory as entirely lyrical and disembodied; "East Coker" is the book of earth, of memory as embedded in the ongoing cycle of ordinary human life; "The Dry Salvages" is the book of water, of the eternal flux that is nature at its most threatening; and "Little Gidding" is the book of fire, of the Pentecostal element that Eliot hopes will crown the life of contemplation and imaginative/spiritual striving. Throughout the poem, the rose is a constant symbol of the evanescent beauty of this life, and the fire an image of the cleansing but also terrifying accession of grace. And the famous last lines of "Little Gidding" are perhaps the farthest reach of his visionary power. At the end the poet expects a moment of final union:

Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

It is poetry of a ferocious concentration on the *weight* of language, on a strict syntactical and metaphysical rigor. And recently, in the poetry of John Ashbery, Mark Strand, and A. R. Ammons, *Four Quartets* seems to have exerted an influence that its early readers would not have credited. William Carlos Williams heartily disliked this kind of poetry, and Wallace Stevens constructed an elegant rhetorical celebration of *this* life which can be read as one long anti-Eliotic position. The influential critic Donald Davie, in 1956, described *Four Quartets* as the magnificent dead end of a certain kind of self-conscious modernism. "Surely no poet," writes Davie, "can elaborate further this procedure . . ." But Ashbery, Ammons, and Strand, among others, indicate that the abstract ecstasy, the difficult but exhilarating reflexiveness of Eliot's voice, may not have been stilled yet. At any rate, in his hard victory over his freely admitted shortcomings, he remains the distinctive poet of his age. His problems are ours, and his solutions we must at least confront on our way to our own.

Let two voices summarize his presence. The first voice is that of William Empson, who wrote in 1948, "I do not know for certain how much of my own mind he invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him." The second voice is more measured:

"He was one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them. This is a very high position to assign to him: but I believe that it is one which is secure."

The second voice, of course, is that of Eliot himself, speaking in 1940 about the poet William Butler Yeats. He could just as easily have said the same of himself.